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Mourning in a New Land: Changing Asian Practices in Southern California

Karen Leonard

Death and the rituals surrounding it constitute an important cultural domain in all societies, and it is a particularly good domain to investigate when assessing the acculturation of Asian immigrants and refugees in southern California. Acculturation is the process of change in beliefs and practices that occurs when people of different cultures come into close and continuous contact. In the United States, the concept commonly denotes the acceptance of American customs by immigrant groups, although as we shall see acculturation is really a two-way process. Asian immigrants constitute a large and growing segment of the Orange County population, and we may examine one facet of their culture, death rituals, to see the processes of adaptation that are taking place.¹

The phrase "death rituals" conveys a Western sense of the finality of death, and I use it only for convenience. This article does not attempt to deal with beliefs, a far more complex subject, but Buddhists and Hindus believe in reincarnation—death in one life most often means rebirth in another. This means mourning for the present death but also a celebration because deserving souls go on to a higher step on the path to salvation (*nirvana* or *moksha*, escape from the cycle of rebirth and earthly suffering).

Since the rituals practiced at death are primarily for the living, they tell us a great deal about contemporary cultural beliefs and practices. Even if groups share common allegiance to a particular religion, for example Buddhism or Catholicism, death rituals vary from one ethnic or national origin to another. Because death rituals are most often performed for the older members of a community, they are extremely conservative aspects of their respective cultures and sensitive indicators of change.²

Different death rituals and changes in them provide an obvious measure of cultural difference and adaptations, although definition of an "American norm" is somewhat problematic. Death rituals in the United States differ greatly according to ethnic and national origin, but laws and land availability have produced some generalized requirements and practices. Death certificates and burial permits must be obtained. For health reasons, bodies must be prepared and disposed of by specialists who work in institutional settings (funeral homes or mortuaries, crematoriums) rather than by families in the home. Bodies and ashes cannot be buried on private land but only in licensed graveyards (or at sea, in the

case of ashes). Cemeteries provide individual plots roughly the size of a horizontal body and all plots are aligned in a standard formation. Despite these uniform practices, cemeteries themselves used to set aside areas by ethnic or religious affiliation: the Mexican Catholic section, the Japanese American section, and so on. Burial societies or families could purchase large plots and align all the graves differently if they liked. For example, Muslims could orient graves towards Mecca.³ Visiting the older areas of California cemeteries, one immediately notices the systematic variation in gravestones and their surroundings: the layout and plantings, the shapes, decorations, text, and often the language of the markers.

Asian immigrants have been coming to California since the Chinese prospectors for gold arrived in the 1850s. One of the functions of the village and district associations formed here by the Chinese was to send the bones of the goldminers home for burial; some early attempts to retrieve Chinese bodies from county burial grounds brought unwelcome attention from police and the press. When the Japanese came at the turn of the century, they formed local Japanese Associations, and the purchase of cemetery plots and cremation or burial of members was a major function. Several thousand Koreans arrived with the Japanese, many of them Christians who organized burial services and cemeteries through their churches. A similarly small group of pioneers from India arrived in the second and third decades of the twentieth century. Nearly all from the northwestern Punjab province, they drew attention to the Hindu and Sikh practice of cremation (then relatively rare in the United States). In the Imperial Valley in 1918, a group of Sikh farmers was told that bodies could be cremated in America, and they promptly prepared a bonfire for a deceased comrade, ready to do it themselves as in India.⁴ The Muslims from India's Punjab associations in northern California and in the Imperial Valley formed to purchase cemetery plots and hold burial services. Since all immigrants from India were termed "Hindus" in the early twentieth century, the resulting "Hindu plots" in Sacramento City Cemetery and in Evergreen Cemetery by El Centro had, of course, only Muslims buried in them!⁵

Asian immigration opened up again with the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Law,⁶ and the older Chinese, Korean, South Asian, and Filipino populations have increased greatly. Large new populations of Thai, Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians have arrived. As deaths

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occur among the new Asian immigrants, they must adapt immediately to the new ways of preparing and displaying the body of the deceased. In most of the countries of origin, the deceased was laid out at home by family members and kept there for many days (India was an exception). There is little choice of burial ground here, whereas in their countries of origin, ancestors often were buried on family land. There is a shortage of religious institutions and ritual specialists necessary to the traditional performance of death rituals. Institutions are being built and developed—the Hsi Lai Buddhist temple in Hacienda Heights, the Venkateshwara Hindu temple at Malibu—but Buddhist temples and Buddhist masters, monks, and nuns, as well as Hindu temples and priests are much scarcer than in Taiwan, Hong Kong, mainland China, or South Asia. Regulations concerning funerals and burials are even more strongly enforced now than in the early twentieth century, and recent standardizations promise to erase even the ethnic differences in graveyard appearance. Gravestones now must lie flat, it seems, and be of a standard size.⁷ Yet many ethnic customs and beliefs can be and are being maintained by individual and family effort.

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The death rituals characteristic of the Asian immigrant groups in Orange County and the changes that are occurring in those rituals show commonalities. But there are also sharp contrasts, stemming from the different timing of migrations and family establishment, the factors conditioning death rituals back in the home country, and community size, residential patterns, and class status here. And adaptation is not all on the part of the Asian Americans. Strikingly, some mortuaries and cemeteries in southern California are taking steps to accommodate Asian funeral and burial practices. The funeral business in the United States is depressed. Declining death rates and changing attitudes about spending on funerals make funeral operators eager for new customers. Large funerals are less frequent, as mobile American families have members scattered across the country. There is a trend from burials to lower-cost cremations. Seventeen percent of Americans who die are now cremated and the rate is rising; it is over 50 percent in San Diego.⁸ So mortuaries have incentives to accommodate the new Asian populations, with their large populations in California, their emphasis on family, and, in the case of most, a preference for burial rather than cremation.

Japanese Americans

Not surprisingly, the Japanese Americans, now of the third, fourth, and even fifth generations in California, have adapted most to American norms, although certain customs have been carefully preserved.⁹ Funeral and burial customs

are changing back in Japan, too, but some changes here clearly can be attributed to the American context. Most interesting is the move toward burial from cremation, in that it represents an earlier adaptation and runs counter to the current trend in the United States. In Japan, population density and land constraints had produced crowded burial conditions. Cremation was the universal practice, and the urns of ashes were crowded together in small family plots. Typically one large stone family marker covered many urns, perhaps with smaller individual wooden markers clustered closely around it. But in southern California, informants estimated that 50 percent of deceased Japanese Americans are buried. This trend was attributed to the influence of the dominant American cultural norm in decades past, to generational shifts from Buddhist to Christian religious affiliation, and to the availability of land for burial plots.

Specialized institutions for Japanese American funerals have developed in California, reflecting the length of Japanese settlement and the generally middle-class status of the community. There are Japanese-owned mortuaries and cemeteries with sections designed for Japanese Americans. Rose Hills in Whittier features a Cherry Blossom Garden, complete with Japanese garden, meditation house, and Shogun monument. There are also specialty shops furnishing altar decorations and other items needed in Buddhist funerals.¹⁰

Japanese American death rituals have changed significantly in content, setting, timing, and participants. In Japan in the past, the family prepared the body, washing and dressing it in a white kimono and packing it in a wooden coffin with money and straw sandals for its journey. Lanterns and black-and-white floral wreaths were set outside the home for all to see that a death had occurred there. The *otsuya*, passing the night together, when relatives and close friends sat up with the body in the home, was extremely important. This wake or “pillow service” was followed by a funeral the next day in the home or in a Buddhist temple. Embalming is still not common in Japan, so caskets were closed and there was no viewing of the body at funeral services, which were held quickly with cremations performed immediately afterward. The eldest son or son-in-law directed ceremonies, hiring funeral service staff to help with arrangements. Many people came to the funeral, offering flowers, incense, and envelopes of money to help with the funeral expenses. The cremation ceremony for family and close relatives followed immediately, held at the site (previously the graveyard, now a crematorium with the family waiting in the next room). After the cremation, family members used special chopsticks and picked bone fragments from the ashes to preserve in an urn, which was kept seven days in a temple or the home before the remains were divided and eventually buried. The cremation ceremony was followed by a luncheon reception in the home, with catering arranged for by funeral service staff. Meat could not be eaten until after the seventh-day memorial ceremony, and a thirty-fifth- or forty-ninth-day service in temple or home marked the end of some mourning prohibitions and the burial of the ashes.

Among Japanese Americans in contemporary California, these rituals have been modified but not abandoned. The body is taken immediately to a funeral home and prepared by

morticians. The "pillow service" is usually held at the mortuary, although relatives may still gather at the home that first night despite the absence of the body (remember, these rituals are for the living). Non-relatives tend to go only to the funeral.¹¹ Embalming is usually chosen and the funeral is held several days later in the funeral home; Christian and Buddhist ceremonies generally are performed in that setting. The casket is left open for viewing, a custom said to derive from early immigrant experience with careless American morticians who switched bodies, leaving families to mourn a stranger. White kimonos are seldom used for the deceased and mourners almost never wear the once-customary black kimonos. At the funeral, mourners close to the family still present the traditional money offerings, and meticulous records are kept of the amounts so that proportionate returns can be made later. A short cremation or burial service occurs the day after the funeral service, followed by a luncheon for the family and close relatives who attended. About half the time, the body is buried without being cremated. Burial is in an individual plot, one body to a plot and each with its own gravestone. Graves do not face the rising sun as in Japan but conform to cemetery alignments. Black was the traditional color for Buddhist gravestones, but black marble is expensive here and slate gray is used, with inscriptions in English rather than in Japanese or Japanese and English.

The timing of services, of burial, and of mourning observances has also undergone changes. In Japan an old six-day calendar was used to schedule the funeral, in conjunction with the modern, seven-day calendar, and certain days were avoided. Here, the six-day calendar is no longer used and funerals occur on formerly prohibited days. Funerals here tend to be in the evening, not the morning or afternoon, so that work and traffic conditions do not affect attendance. Cremation is done at the crematorium's convenience after the funeral, and there are no bone fragments left; many families leave the ashes at the mortuary or in a Buddhist temple rather than take them home. The period before burial of the ashes is standardized, with most Japanese Americans holding the burial on the forty-ninth day (and those who already buried the body holding a memorial service then). The mourning period is shorter, most notably the prohibition on marriages for family members which is now only one year or even forty-nine days, not three years. Japanese American descendants continue to visit and care for the gravestones themselves here, and Japanese American graves feature more fresh (rather than plastic) flowers and other evidences of frequent visitation than do adjacent graves.¹²

Gender roles have changed, with less importance placed on a male directing the financial and funeral arrangements for the family and less emphasis on the special status of a widow. Couples used to share a tombstone, and both names were carved in it at once. The surviving widow's name was filled with red ink, which was changed to white when she too died and was buried in the plot. This is still done sometimes,¹³ but as the Japanese American rate of outmarriage (marriage to others than Japanese Americans) rises along with the general divorce rate in California, such tombstones have become less common.¹⁴

One final interesting change in Japanese-American death rituals depends upon the provision of a service by another

Asian community here. The cremation or burial service is still followed by a reception luncheon for relatives and friends, but the catering arrangements are no longer made by the mortuary. Here, Japanese American families arrange for the meal themselves and almost always hold it at a Chinese restaurant. Chinese restaurants are preferred for their size, flexible scheduling, and inexpensive food.

South Asian Americans

The South Asian immigrants are prominent in Orange County, and they consist primarily of people from India and Pakistan. The Punjabi men who came in the 1910s and 1920s were agricultural workers not literate in English. Most were Sikhs who adapted to the use of electric crematoriums but had their ashes put in the Salton Sea or the Pacific Ocean off San Diego, local substitutes for India's sacred rivers. There were some Muslims, too, and their "Hindu plot" gravestones featured the Urdu script giving their names, the names of their fathers, and their villages of origin back in the Punjab. These gravestones were not directed at a California audience, and in most cases, the men's own children could not read them.¹⁵ Like the early Japanese tombstones inscribed only in Japanese, the gravestones reflected the relatively bounded ethnic community of the first immigrants.

The post-1965 South Asian immigrants are very different people. Well-educated in English, urban professionals from all over the subcontinent, they tend to be middle or upper class. The Hindus among them mail the ashes (a sample) back to India or send the urns with relatives travelling back so that the ashes can be deposited in the Ganges or another holy river rather than in California. Ganges water in sealed brass containers is available in Indian grocery stores for use in funerals, along with imported spices and other items. Despite the ability to preserve certain aspects of the death rituals, South Asian Hindus have made some important changes here.¹⁶ They too have moved from a home to a funeral-home setting. They continue to cremate their deceased but put the body in a casket for visitation and the funeral service. The body is usually in Western clothing (unless it is a woman who wore Indian dress here) and is fully made-up by the mortician. In India, caskets and make-up are not used. There, bodies are carried on simple stretchers or, sitting up, in wooden ladder-like carriers from the home to the cremation ground, and the cremation is held outside with only males present.

Gender is an important marker in South Asia; women are not present at the most important Hindu death ritual, the cremation. They are considered too weak or soft-hearted to observe this final ceremony, which traditionally included the breaking of the skull by the eldest son before the lighting of the funeral pyre (to let the soul escape, or to prevent the bursting of the skull during the cremation; this is seldom done now). In California, the cremation is not part of the service at all, and women do attend the services in the funeral homes, although men and women sit on opposite sides of the central aisle. Other gender differences, such as the lighting of the pyres of women from the feet and of men from the head, are eliminated by the new procedures. If it is a woman relative making the journey back to India, she will even be entrusted with taking ashes back and putting them in

the appropriate river.

Other changes involve the ritual specialists used, the rituals themselves, and the general shortening and convenient scheduling of the rituals. In India, death rituals vary by caste, and certain kinds of priests serve certain castes. Traditionally, these relationships were hereditary ones between families. While a Hindu family may have migrated here, few if any members of its traditional service families and castes accompany it, so there is a great shortage of appropriate ritual specialists like astrologers to set the timings and priests to perform the Sanskrit rites. One man who conducts many Hindu services in Orange County is a Long Beach motel owner who serves as a priest on the side. According to him, Hindu services here vary greatly, and the variation is not by caste but by family. Families are choosing to shorten the rituals, eliminate subsequent observances, and substitute for items not available locally. For example, whatever flowers have been sent by mourners are plucked to obtain petals to put in the coffin, whereas in India one specific flower had to be used.

Hindu families are even adapting funeral services to accommodate non-Hindu mourners. The inclusion of women may be partly due to this. In the case of the recent accidental death of one man very active in his California community, a Hindu ceremony was followed a few days later by a secular memorial service presided over by a Christian minister who had been a close friend of the deceased. A narrowly focused Hindu ceremony was not felt appropriate or meaningful for non-Hindus, so another separate ceremony was held.

Chinese Americans

The large new Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese communities in southern California have similar death rituals because of their common Confucian and Buddhist heritage, some of which were introduced in the discussion of the Japanese Americans. The Chinese, with their long historical presence in southern California, have mortuaries like the Chung Wah Mortuary in Los Angeles. Yet the large post-1965 infusion of new immigrants along the whole range of the class spectrum means that existing Chinese mortuaries and Buddhist temples are inadequate. Some southern California mortuaries have appointed Chinese American and other counselors to serve "Asian" clients, and many customs are carefully retained by the recent immigrants.¹⁷

All three communities mark the house in which a death has occurred. In Hong Kong and Taiwan, the family of the deceased hangs a paper lantern, a piece of white cloth, and flower wreaths outside the house to signal the death. In all three communities, the eldest son plays the major role in all arrangements and ceremonies. In China and Korea, families secured or produced a coffin, often before death, to show the dying person how much he was valued. In Vietnam, coffin shops provided coffins and helped with initial maintenance of the body and the final sealing of the coffin. The families provided flowers. (Typical white and black wreaths and black coffins were widely used to symbolize the death of democracy in Beijing in May and June of 1989). Dying at home was important, both for the dying person and the living, so people were taken home from hospitals for the final hours. For Chinese Buddhists, there was a three-day

prohibition on handling or preparing the body. Women prepared the body, stuffing all orifices with cotton and tying it down so it would lie flat and not push the lid up. The coffin was closed and never reopened (embalming was not done). The families set up altar or spirit tables with a picture of the deceased and incense, candles, and flowers. Paper Hades money and other paper items like cars and houses thought helpful in the afterlife are burned continuously for twenty-four hours, and lamps were kept alight for the same period to guide the soul. The body was kept at home for the funeral which was held three to forty-nine days after a death, and local people (in Korea, burial society members) helped with arrangements. Buddhist priests or Christian ministers officiated at the service (among poorer families the eldest son himself would officiate) and mourners gave money to the eldest son to help defray expenses. Mourners and the deceased wore white or beige garments; the men had black armbands and the women white cloth bows in their hair. Large, impressive funeral processions with loudly wailing mourners proceeded in the late afternoon from home to burial ground. Bodies were buried, not cremated, and the graves were covered by large mounds, the wealthier the family the bigger the mounds. In Korea, only wealthy families had tombstones. The location of the grave site was quite significant (mountain sites were highly valued in Korea), and geomancers helped locate the site and determine the correct depth of the grave. If bad luck followed a burial in Korea, the body might be moved to another site.

Here in California the body goes to a funeral home immediately and announcements of the death go out in the vernacular press and by mail and telephone. Many Chinese families do observe the three-day waiting period before preparing the body—mortuaries are willing to put the body in cold storage for this period—but in some cases this requires a court order (for example, when a death occurs in hospital). The body is washed—traditionally, Chinese eldest sons did this in flowing stream water, but here morticians do it with "symbolic" stream water. Then it is traditionally dressed, and rice (and sometimes silver or gold) is placed in the mouth, by morticians, not the eldest son. The spirit altar is set up in the funeral home, where mourners visit and the funeral is held.

For the Chinese, mourning customs have changed in relatively minor ways. Mourners bring flower wreaths with verses fastened to them rather than scrolls. Male mourners have modified the traditional marks of bereavement more than women, although few people wear white sackcloth garments here. Men no longer put pieces of black cloth on their shirts but simply wear black left armbands. Women continue to add pieces of black cloth to their clothing and put yarn flowers in their hair, with the color indicating their relationship to the deceased: for example, white for a man's wife and daughters and yellow for his granddaughters. The mourning period for these and other observances has been shortened so that family members engage in visits to friends and other social activities sooner than forty-nine to one hundred days after the death.

Buddhist ritual specialists still play large roles in Chinese death observances, both in the performance of rituals and as intermediaries between bereaved families and funeral homes. Sometimes funeral home counselors contact Buddhist

monks, sometimes Buddhist monks contact funeral homes on behalf of families. A mortuary counselor may fix the time of the service, or astrologers or monks may continue to do this. The traditional specialists also decree that people born on the day of death (according to the Chinese lunar calendar) cannot attend the funeral for fear they would join the deceased. The coffin is not left in the mortuary very long (perhaps only three days, certainly not forty-nine days) because of the expense. Monks and nuns set up an altar in the mortuary and chant and perform rituals. But a shortage of such ritual specialists, particularly of Buddhist masters who have longer training than ordinary monks and are preferred for these rituals in Hong Kong and Taiwan, means that the traditional forty-nine-day chanting period is not always observed by Chinese families in southern California. In one case, the chanting lasted only five hours.

The lack of Buddhist temples has led to other changes for the Chinese immigrants. Burial was cheaper in mainland China, and many buried their dead there. But Taiwanese and Hong Kong Chinese tended to cremate, and they kept the ashes in a pagoda on the Buddhist temple grounds so that the continuous chanting of the monks would help the soul. Since this kind of auspicious facility is not available here—the Hacienda Heights temple wanted to build a seven-story pagoda for this purpose but has been prohibited from doing so—some families bury the bodies instead. A wealthy immigrant family may ship the body of the deceased back to the ancestral graveyard, a practice among Koreans too.

Selection of the grave site was an important task for the eldest son and/or a Buddhist monk in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong; here, choices are confined to licensed cemeteries. Processions, on foot or in cars, from the home or mortuary to the grave site, were important public observances, with the eldest son leading and other male kin in order of precedence going ahead of the pallbearers and coffin. Final respects were paid at the grave, the coffin was buried, and mourners circumambulated the grave three times. A spirit table was set up with food and incense offerings. The processions are now like other funeral processions from mortuary to cemetery, but the other observances continue, and some California cemeteries have incinerators near the Chinese sections for the burning of paper money, favorite possessions, and clothing of the deceased. A banquet follows the burial. Tombstones continue to use Chinese in vertical inscriptions, with some recent use of horizontal inscriptions in both English and Chinese. The inscriptions mention the number of sons of the deceased, a continuing emphasis on the patrilineage. On subsequent grave visits, food and wine are offered.

Change has not been as marked for the Chinese as for the Japanese and South Asian Hindu immigrants. Important class distinctions among the Chinese are shown by the size of death announcements in the Chinese press, the amounts of money given out at funerals, the lavishness of the feast afterwards, the length of time a body is left in the mortuary, and the number of mourners at the funeral. But Chinese students interviewed at the University of California, Irvine, testified to a generational drift from Buddhism to Christianity which will inevitably alter these practices. Also, both Buddhist monks and counselors at funeral homes emphasized that each Chinese family makes its own decisions on

the procedures to be used for funerals. Village loyalties, extended lineages, or co-religionists no longer determine procedures. Future patterns of change in this large, heterogeneous group of recent Chinese immigrants remain to be seen.

Korean Americans

Most Koreans in southern California are post-1965 immigrants, and although as a group they are well-educated (in Korean), small business is their dominant occupation here.¹⁸ For both Christians and Buddhists among them, the death rituals were similar to those of the Chinese, but if anything, gender roles were more pronounced among Koreans than among the Chinese. At the moment of death, the sexes were segregated—no female could be present when a male died and vice versa. Only women could prepare the body, but women could never be funeral managers for the family. Only men could accompany the body up to the mountain burial sites. Children could not attend the funerals (for fear of spiritual damage). In the most extreme example of differential treatment, after a woman's fiancé died she was married to him in a wedding ceremony and was then treated as his widow. She lived with his parents and could not remarry.

The Koreans have made dramatic changes in their death rituals in southern California. Large numbers are still wanted at some funerals and there may be "purchased tears" to testify to a family's high status, but at others only family and very close friends attend. Funerals are scheduled on Saturday mornings for the convenience of working people. Bodies are embalmed and caskets are open. Mourners tend to wear black, although women may still wear white or beige clothing to the funeral. Children can visit the body and attend the service. A female family member may supervise the funeral arrangements, and there are female funeral directors in Korean mortuaries in Garden Grove. Women do not undergo marriages to dead fiancés. English and Korean are both used on most tombstones (which all can afford), and there are no mounds above the graves. Graves are never relocated.

Even the annual visits to the graves on the day of burial are being dropped. Those who do go visit on Memorial Day and offer flowers, not food and wine. As one businessman said, "Life here is too complicated to remember grandmother's burial date, much less to go to her grave on that day." He thought he might go on Memorial Day, but "the store is open then too!" Korean informants repeatedly stated that these changes in funeral and burial practices were implemented because they chose to make them. The "American ways" were more efficient, less time-consuming. The proportion of Christians among the Koreans is quite high, but that does not explain the readiness to make changes because Christians in Korea continue many of the traditional observances. In Korea, burial societies and families played the major roles; religious specialists and institutions were less involved. That fact, and the pattern of self-employment and hard work characteristic of the first generation of post-1965 immigrants (a generation that experienced downward mobility with respect to its educational level and occupations back in Korea), seem to explain the quick adaptations.



Existing building at Westminster Memorial Park, redesigned for use by the Orange County Vietnamese community.

WILLIAM BILLINGSLEY

Vietnamese Americans

The Vietnamese are the largest group of new Asians in southern California.¹⁹ The first wave came from Vietnam in 1975, when the U.S. lost the Vietnam war. The Vietnamese came as refugees, involuntary immigrants, although many were able to bring substantial resources with them and their educational level was higher than that of later waves of Southeast Asian refugees. Those with money developed business centers along Bolsa Avenue in Westminster, and Vietnamese ethnic enclaves are concentrated in Westminster and Garden Grove.

The Vietnamese in southern California, approximately half Buddhist and half Catholic, followed death rituals similar to those of the Chinese and Koreans. Vietnamese white mourning gowns called *ao dai* were worn by corpse and mourners alike, with slight differences in headpieces distinguishing direct from collateral descendants, and the gowns were burned two years later (three years for widows). The walk to the cemetery featured a monk and the eldest son preceding the coffin, the latter marching backward to show respect to the deceased. Both Buddhists and Catholics traditionally buried the body without cremation and burial was followed by a home reception, a very festive one with food and music to celebrate the soul's deliverance from earthly suffering and its ascent to heaven. Three years after the burial, Buddhists opened the grave to put the bones in a clean bottle and rebury them, to prevent total disintegration of the body. Families revisited the cemetery on the 49th and 100th days and held commemorative services, memorial masses in the case of the Catholics. On Thanh Minh day every March, family members visited cemeteries to pull weeds and offer flowers, candles and incense.

Vietnamese refugees experienced difficulties carrying out traditional mourning practices in their first few years here. Vietnamese families tried to use local mortuaries as they had used their homes. They wanted to stay with the deceased both day and night, guarding the body and receiving condolences, and they wanted cooking facilities so they could provide food for their visitors. Their heavy use of incense and candles struck other mortuary patrons as unsafe and

unsanitary, and their boisterous funeral celebrations (wealthier families hired bands or small orchestras) were objected to as noisy and inappropriate. They were not permitted to burn paper money at the grave site or to dig up the coffins after three years to retrieve and rebury the bones. Deaths brought confusion and trauma for Vietnamese mourners.

In 1979 the Vietnamese American Fellowship Association, a burial society with five thousand members, was organized and a delegation approached Westminster Memorial Park to request assistance in carrying out traditional Vietnamese funeral services.²⁰ One result was the hiring of a special Vietnamese-speaking "Asian family counselor" there, a person who effectively filled the eldest son's role as supervisor of observances. This person, who works not only at Westminster Memorial Park but also at the Peek Family Funeral Home, is a woman, Teresa Lung.²¹ Such accommodations have been followed by other mortuaries, so the Fellowship Association is no longer tied to one mortuary. Now Vietnamese families can and do stay at mortuaries for three



Grave marker at Westminster Memorial Park.

WILLIAM BILLINGSLEY

to seven days. One funeral home (Peek's) is proposing to build a separate hall, complete with kitchen, for Vietnamese funeral celebrations. The family counselors install altars, contact Buddhist monks and arrange for daily prayers, send obituaries to the Vietnamese press, and order purple and white flowers for the family. Family counselors can also recommend soothsayers who will advise the family whether the body should be buried facing east or west (the choice in one cemetery—in another cemetery all Vietnamese burials face west, toward Vietnam). There are few Buddhist officiants and temples here, so the help of counselors is essential and most Buddhist services are held in the funeral home. As the income and educational level of the community rises, temples and institutions are being developed.²² The Loma Vista cemetery in Fullerton already has a separate section catering to Vietnamese Buddhists, the Nghia-trang Vietnam, with a temple-like facade and a small temple with a statue of Buddha.

Despite their successful approach to mortuaries and the preservation of observances deemed essential, the Vietnam-

ese have made many changes. Some families are allowing body parts to be removed by the embalmer, and open caskets for viewing have become customary. Some Buddhists, disturbed because they cannot retrieve and rebury the bones, have turned to cremation and put the ashes in a temple (or send them to Vietnam) where prayers will soothe the spirits. Financial concerns strengthen this trend, since many Vietnamese refugees are relatively poor and cannot afford cemetery plots.²³ Financial limitations also may shorten a body's stay in the funeral home, despite the desirability of waiting for a more favorable date for burial, and the convenience for mourners helps set the time of the funeral service. The services are shorter and less elaborate, and taped prayers and music may replace the chanting of monks. Corpses and mourners increasingly wear black suits and dark dresses.

Just as class differences were marked by the scale and length of the various Asian death rituals in their homelands, class differences are evident in Asian death rituals in southern California. High socioeconomic status clearly enables some immigrants to continue traditional practices, while low status forces others to adopt new practices.

The traditional white *ao dai* looks like a lady's dress here, an informant explained, and only elderly women still wear it. Many people do not use the black arm and head bands and patches on clothing at funerals, much less for a year afterward. Donations to assist with expenses are sometimes given to the widow instead of to her eldest son, and widows observe mourning for only one year. The distinctions important in the march to the cemetery and the special prayer chanted during that march are obliterated by the use of cars and hearses. Vietnamese has been written in the Roman alphabet since the nineteenth century, but tombstones stood vertically in Vietnam with the name written from top to bottom. Here they are flat on the ground and horizontal, with the name written from left to right. When families visit graves on Thanh Minh day, there is no need to pull weeds, and many have stopped burning candles and incense; they only offer flowers. Some young Vietnamese Americans talk of discarding Buddhist practices in favor of "American" ones.

Conclusions

In the cases of all these Asian immigrant and refugee groups, family roles have been reduced and the importance of the mortuary has greatly increased. Mortuary staff prepare the body, provide caskets, notify the newspapers, and carry out the legal procedures and paperwork with government offices. Family counselors have replaced the

eldest son, particularly in the case of the Vietnamese, as planners and supervisors of procedures. They have even replaced religious specialists in some instances. The availability of embalming has meant changes in the ways bodies are prepared and displayed before burial, and there are changes in the colors and styles of mourning dress and the offerings to altars and graves. The relative inexpensiveness of cremation, combined in the case of the Vietnamese with a prohibition on the practice of reburial, has led some to change from burial to cremation. On the other hand, more land for cemetery plots encouraged the earlier Japanese immigrants to change from cremation to burial. For South Asian Hindus the changed cremation site has stimulated dramatic changes in gender roles, and women now attend the Sanskrit funeral ritual. Gender roles have changed in other groups as well, giving public and managerial roles to women and shortening the mourning observances for them (and eliminating Korean "widowed brides"). The role of religious specialists may remain the same, but they are fewer, and there are even fewer Buddhist and Hindu institutions to serve the large post-1965 communities. The newer groups employ part-time priests and monks and are busy raising funds and building temples. The Vietnamese, arriving suddenly as refugees in very large numbers, experienced the most severe problems as the first deaths occurred in the United States. They responded aggressively, organizing and asking existing mortuaries to assist them in the preservation of Vietnamese funeral traditions.

Just as class differences were marked by the scale and length of the various Asian death rituals in their homelands, class differences are evident in Asian death rituals in southern California. High socioeconomic status clearly enables some immigrants to continue traditional practices, while low status forces others to adopt new practices. But standardization, simplification, and abbreviation have served to diminish status markers in most of the Asian communities here. Community size and residential patterns also influence the retention or adaptation of death rituals. South Asian Hindus, a relatively small population with little residential clustering, vary their rituals on a family-by-family basis and can afford to maintain observances considered essential. The large Vietnamese ethnic enclave in Orange County has been able to win accommodations from local mortuaries despite its newness and relatively low socioeconomic and educational level. Yet the Koreans, again a large group densely settled in one area, have made sweeping changes which owe much to economic considerations but which they evaluate very positively in terms of "becoming American."

The boundaries between cultures, once thought relatively impermeable, are lessening in all these cases of changing Asian death rituals. Confusion over what is "traditional culture," what is "religious," and what is "American" blurs the choices and their rationalizations, particularly for younger members of all these communities (both students and informants). Clearly, Asian immigrants and refugees here will continue to make changes in their death rituals, and their perceptions of the "American norm" will help contribute to its evolution.

ENDNOTES

I thank Dr. Raja Jayaraman, Sociology, University of New England, Armidale, Australia, for his comments.

1. Members of my spring 1989 anthropological field research course on Asian immigrants and refugees in Orange County, 96 percent of them from the communities studied, looked closely at changing Asian funeral, burial, and cremation practices. Despite initial apprehension - "What a subject!" - and lack of experience with this kind of research, the students came up with interesting material. I have combined their material with some of my own for this exploratory comparative analysis of the changing death rituals of Asian Americans in Orange County. All interviews took place in May and June of 1989.

2. Terry Jordan, *Texas Graveyards: A Cultural Legacy* (Austin: University of Texas, 1982), makes these points in his introduction and goes on to illustrate them with material on American southerners, Mexicans, and Germans in Texas.

3. If a Muslim is buried in a regular section of a cemetery, two grave plots must be purchased to allow orientation towards Mecca.

4. *El Centro Progress*, 13 August 1918.

5. Author's observation of cemeteries and cemetery maps; interviews with cemetery managers, Sacramento and El Centro, 1981 and 1982.

6. Asian immigration was effectively ended by the 1917 "Barred Zone Act" and the 1924 National Origins Quota Act (although Filipinos came in the 1920s and 1930s as "nationals" exempted from those laws). See Harry H. L. Kitano and Roger Daniels, *Asian Americans: Emerging Minorities* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1988), 10-16 for a summary of U.S. immigration law.

7. Students were told by mortuary and cemetery officials that such a law has been in effect for about two decades.

8. Cemeteries Struggle to Stay Alive," *USA Today*, 19 January 1989, 1.

9. There are relatively few post-1965 Japanese immigrants. Informants for this portion of the article included John and Fumei Yamazaki (Los Angeles), Mary Ann Takemoto (Irvine), Akemi Kurokawa (Irvine), Kozo and Yoko Nakamura (Rancho Palos Verdes), Norio Hayakawa (Fukui Mortuary in Los Angeles), June Kawamura (Newport Beach), John Harris (Peek Family Colonial Funeral Home in Westminster), Robert and Mio Norgren (Los Angeles), Maki Maseba (Irvine), and Craig Matsubayashi (Los Angeles).

10. The Fukui Mortuary in Los Angeles and the Kofu-Do, Inc., specialty shop in Long Beach, owned by Mike Kamimoto, are examples. In the new Vietnamese, Chinese, Korean, and Hindu immigrant communities, a few basic funeral supplies are carried in ethnic grocery stores.

11. However, when one Nisei daughter, living in Newport Beach with her husband and children, tried to avoid going up to the family home in Los Angeles for the night after her mother's death, she was chastised by family friends and neighbors who insisted upon seeing her there.

12. Sachiko Nakamura and Tina Nguyen (Irvine). Cemeteries in Japan are just beginning to offer "perpetual care" services.

13. Tina Nguyen (Irvine).

14. Kitano and Daniels, *Asian Americans*, 176-178, for comparative rates of outmarriage. The Japanese (the highest) rate reached 60-63 percent in 1977 and 1979.

15. Many of the early Punjabi immigrants married Hispanic women and had large "Mexican-Hindu" families: see Karen Leonard, "Immigrant Punjabis in Early Twentieth-Century California," in *Social and Gender Boundaries in the United States*, ed. Sucheng Chan (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), 101-22; Karen Leonard, "Ethnicity Con-founded," in *Sikh History and Religion in the 20th Century*, ed. Joseph T. O'Connell, et al. (Toronto: S. Asian Studies: University of Toronto, 1988), 314-33; and Karen Leonard, "Pioneer Voices from California," in *The Sikh Diaspora* (Delhi: Manohar and South Asia Books, 1989), 120-39.

16. Informants for the following included Vinod Dave (Long Beach), Rasikh Parekh (Buena Park), Sujata Tewara (Irvine), and Rama K. Sharma (Huntington Beach).

17. Informants for the Chinese included Paul Lee and Jim Wong (Rose Hills, Pico Rivera), the Venerable Yi Sheng (Hsi Lai Buddhist Temple, Hacienda Heights), Teresa Lung (Westminster Memorial Park in Westminster), Rita Flores (Chinese Cemetery, Monterey), Richard Liao (Irvine), Lani Luu (El Toro), Janet Mach (Huntington Beach), Mr. Yun (Pierce Brothers Mortuary, North Hollywood), and Kenneth Mak (Los Angeles). For the Koreans, informants were James Kim (Korean Funeral Home, Los Angeles), Richard Kim (Irvine), Teresa Han (Garden Grove), Ji Chang (Costa Mesa), Cholm and Opi Chong (Anaheim), Hyun Kim (Redondo Beach), Andy Chao (Irvine), Rina Chong (Irvine), Dan Park (Santa Ana),

and Reverend John K. Lee (San Diego). For the Vietnamese, informants were Tau Cuong (Costa Mesa), the Venerable Thich Phap-Chau (Tru Tri Chua Phat Giao Vietnam temple in Garden Grove), Teresa Lung (Westminster Memorial Park in Westminster), the Venerable Thich Minh Man (Hae Quang Buddhist Temple in Westminster), Luan Nguyen (Anaheim), Mai Nguyen (Santa Ana), Chinh Lam (Irvine), John Harris (Peek Family Colonial Funeral Home in Westminster), Leslie Le (Fullerton), Duy and Lauren Phan (Fullerton), and Huong Le (Fullerton).

18. Kitano and Daniels, *Asian Americans*, 111-13; Ivan Light and Edna Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs: Koreans in Los Angeles, 1965-1982* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

19. Indochinese—Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians and Hmong—constitute the largest non-white group in Orange County. See William Gayk, "The Change in Numbers: Orange County's Past and Present Racial/Ethnic Composition," in *Second Lives*, ed. Valerie Smith and Michael Bigelow Dixon (Costa Mesa: South Coast Repertory, 1983), 19.

20. A continuation of the Vietnamese Fellowship Association back in Vietnam, this nonprofit organization gives financial and emotional support to the families of deceased Vietnamese regardless of religious or political beliefs. It charges a one-time admission fee and assesses \$1 each time a member dies; the contribution goes to the immediate family. In Vietnam, the association's support included mortuary services, but here it works with existing mortuaries.

21. Lung is active in the Vietnamese Catholic Church of Westminster and was a founder of the Vietnamese American Fellowship Association here.

22. The Tru Tri Chua Phat Giao Vietnam monastery/temple in Garden Grove is a two-bedroom home serving two-thousand families. Ancestral pictures with fruit and flower offerings hang in the temple and the Venerable Thich Phap-Chau earns income by praying for the dead. He hopes to raise money for a new one-million dollar temple for the site but is having difficulty with city codes. See *Los Angeles Times*, 17 June 1989.

23. The average cost of a funeral in the U.S. in 1988 was \$4,100 and local price lists indicate that they are at least that in Orange County, with the plot, marker, and grave fees making up about \$1,500 of the total: "Cemeteries Struggle to Stay Alive," 1.

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