

Chinese immigrants bring rich traditions

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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The Gold Rush brought many immigrants to California.

Due to an unstable political and economic situation in China, thousands of young Chinese men came to San Francisco, or Dai Fow - Big City, as they called it, to try their luck in the gold fields.

Most were young men who left their families back home. Driven by the hard conditions in their native country, many hoped to keep their families united with savings and earnings from working overseas and to eventually return to their native Chinese village.

After the end of the Gold Rush, these men went on to work for the railroads and eventually, in the orchard industry. One of them was Chan Tim who was born in the province of Canton in China in 1853.

Chan Tim came to America at age 18 and initially worked as a houseboy for the Hatch family in Suisun, but spent his later years in the orchard industry. He was one of the founders of the Chinese settlement "Big Camp" in Suisun Valley. Unlike most of his contemporaries, he was lucky enough to find his wife, Ding Shee, in San Francisco. Their children were the first Chinese children born in Suisun Valley.

In Chinese culture, status is measured by the number of descendants honoring an ancestor after his or her death. The duty to by sang, or "walk the mountain," as visiting the graves is also known, falls to the eldest son. For decades, early Chinese settlers in Solano County returned the ashes of their compatriots and family members to China, to be buried in the ancestral shrine.

Chan Tim died in 1923. He was initially buried in a cemetery near San Francisco, but later that year, the family decided to ship his remains back to his village in China. His eldest son, Youie, was to accompany his father's ashes.

As this was a long and expensive trip, the family felt that the journey should also serve another purpose. Roberta Tim Quan, Youie's daughter, recalls: "When my father was 26 years old, his mother sent him to China to find a wife. She wanted him to marry a woman who spoke Chinese. Youie paid a matchmaker to help him find the right wife. The matchmaker took him to nearby schools to look at the girls he might like to marry. My father saw Jennie Lee at school. She was 13 years old. He told the matchmaker

that he would marry her because he thought she was pretty.

“The matchmaker brought my father to Jennie’s home to meet her parents and talk about getting married. When my mother, Jennie, came home, she asked ‘Who is that stranger?’ She was told, ‘That man is going to be your husband.’ My parents were married in my mother’s village in China on Feb. 18, 1923.

“At that time, a wedding in China ended with a kind of parade, called a procession, of the bride and groom leaving the village. The bride always sat in a special ‘sedan’ chair and was carried by strong men through the dirt streets of her village. The groom often walked several miles with his guests.

“Since the bride was leaving her family forever, she might have felt sad, but she was told not to look back at her family and home. My mother was given a wedding present of a small mirror with a traveling case, so that she could watch her family in the mirror without looking back.”

After the wedding, Youie and Jenny returned to Suisun Valley to work in the orchards like Chan Tim and his family had before.

In time, the family realized that their roots were no longer in China but here in California. In the 1970s they decided to return Chan Tims’s ashes to America, to be buried in Rockville Cemetery, next to his wife, Ding Shee. Several other early Chinese pioneers also have found their last resting place in this lovely cemetery.

Each year, around April 4 or 5, the Ching Ming festival of honoring ancestors takes place at Rockville Cemetery, as it does at many Chinese cemeteries. Ching Ming rituals include weeding the grave, cleaning the headstone and replacing old flowers.

Paper money and incense are lit for the deceased to use in the afterlife.

Sets of wine cups, rice cups and chopsticks sit in front of the headstone. Food offerings, often including roast pig or chicken, including the head, which is later twisted off, hard-boiled eggs cut in half lengthwise with their shells attached, dim sum pastries and bowls of fruit are set out as an offering to the spirit of the deceased.

The head of the household will bow three times with a wine cup in his hand and then pour the wine on the ground in front of the headstone. Family members will take their turn and bow three times to pay their respect.

At the end of the ceremony, family and friends consume the food offerings as a token of good luck. Some families conclude the ceremony by lighting firecrackers to alert the

spirit of the deceased that the family has paid their respect.

The Vacaville Museum's new exhibit, "Solano Celebrates! Fairs, Festivals and Fun" explores the traditions around festivals such as the Ching Ming. The new exhibit will open April 21.

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