

The transformation of funerary landscape by the evolution of Chinese burials in Burnaby, BC

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In 1919, Burnaby, a suburb of Vancouver, opened its first cemetery, Ocean View Burial Park. It quickly became a favourite of locals due to its landscaped features and beautiful views. The park layout of the site provided for relaxing walks through what were touted as the most beautiful cemetery gardens in the country.

Per the racist mores of the day, any burials of persons of African and Asian ancestry were segregated to the Willow Section (originally called Mongolia), the furthest away from the main gates. Until 1945, when most plots in this section were used, over 100 individuals were buried there. Burials for both these cultural groups were then relegated to another far corner of the cemetery, behind what was to be an immense mausoleum.

The following decades saw the withdrawal of these divisive policies. Over the last 15 years, a major reversal in the presence of Chinese graves at Ocean View saw sections of upright markers appear in the predominantly Chinese sections. This created a major shift from the park-like lawn perspective that had been espoused by the cemetery's designers from the creation of the burial park.

At the same time, the Chinese community, now well established in the Lower Mainland, began reacting to the post-Chinese Revolution decree that prevented their remains from being returned to China for reburial with their ancestral graves. They did so by removing to Canada the cremated remains of their ancestors, for reburial at Ocean View. This created the need for new mausoleums to accommodate the increased volume of funerary urns. This again called upon the cemetery to adapt to their clients' new needs, by further modifying its landscape and architecture.

Almost at the same time, there arose the desire from the Chinese community to secure enclosed areas, similar to the family plots of Victorian cemeteries, where families could lie together in eternal rest. This led, at both Ocean View and Forest Lawn cemeteries in Burnaby, to the creation of "family estates", areas that are surrounded by low brick walls and gated with wrought-iron fences, established with the help of hired *feng shue* specialists who would ensure the desirability and acceptability of these plots.

This is the first time in these cemeteries where the desires of a single cultural group have brought on such significant changes in landscape, architecture and burial practices. My ongoing Masters thesis project at Simon Fraser University focuses on these transformations. I am also looking into the reasons why no Chinese graves from these cemeteries were ever returned to China, even when this tradition was common in North America, while hundreds of similar graves in Vancouver's Mountainview Cemetery were indeed disinterred by the Chinese Benevolent Society for return to China.

I am also exploring the change in the role of Chinese women in funerary processes, from their monopoly in this field back in China, to their absence from the process on Canada's west coast.