Chinese Immigrant Spiritual Practices in Montana, 1860s-1930s

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CHINESE IMMIGRANT SPIRITUAL PRACTICES IN MONTANA, 1860s-1930s

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
IN FULFILLMENT OF REQUIREMENTS FOR HI 499 HISTORY HONORS THESIS

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BY

BRIANA R. OSBON

CARROLL COLLEGE

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Abstract

Chinese immigrants began to arrive in the United States midway through the nineteenth century. Gradually, as mining opportunities began to open, the Chinese immigrants began to move eastward into the U.S. interior to places such as Montana. The purpose of this Thesis is to examine how Chinese immigrants maintained traditional Chinese spiritual practices and how those practices changed over time.

This study relies primarily relied on period newspaper accounts, critically analyzed to interpret how the Chinese immigrants maintained their traditions in Montana. The method employed to find the necessary primary sources involved a scouring of secondary sources to find relevant primary sources and the utilization of digitized Montana newspapers. In addition multiple visits were made to the Montana Historical Society and the Butte-Silverbow Public Archives. Secondary sources regarding traditional Chinese funeral traditions were used to analyze period newspaper accounts of Chinese funerals, celebrations, and religious temples.

Based on this analysis and the use of secondary sources, I have concluded that early Chinese immigrants maintained their spiritual traditions as a cultural link to China. As the Chinese immigrant population declined due to harsh laws and boycotts intended to drive the Chinese away, these traditions declined in Montana. In addition, there was a gradual shift from their traditional cultural practices to an adaptation of various western cultural practices, including some conversion to Christianity.
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Preface

When I decided to write a thesis, I had no inclination that I would end up researching about early Chinese immigrant spiritual practices. I did not initially intend to research this topic, but rather I stumbled upon this topic. After changing my mind multiple times and condensing very broad topics such as religion in Montana or Buddhism in Montana, I settled on researching the topic of spiritual practices of the Chinese immigrant communities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Though this was not my initial topic, I am grateful that I settled on this topic, as I have learned a great deal about a culturally unique community that is often overlooked in not only Montana history, but also United States history.

The Chinese immigrants trekked across the western United States seeking mining opportunities in the 1860s. As the Chinese immigrants settled into communities across the West, they brought with them traditional cultural practices that the majority of people living in the United States had never seen before. These practices would often be viewed as exotic by the people living in towns with Chinese communities. This is demonstrated in period newspaper articles. It is Montana newspaper articles about the Chinese immigrant communities, their funerals, festivals, and temples, that this study uses to develop an understanding of what practices the Chinese brought with them and how they continued to utilize their traditions in a new land. The Chinese immigrant community in Montana grew quickly and reached its zenith in 1890 at over two thousand, before gradually declining. The decline in population and gradual conversion of members of the community to Christianity led to the end of traditional Chinese practices in Montana.

There were many people who either directly or indirectly helped make this thesis possible and they deserve my acknowledgment and thanks. First, I want to thank the staff at the Silver-
Bow Public Archives in Butte, Montana. Thanks to their help I was able to examine and learn more about the Butte Chinatown. I additionally would like to thank Christopher Merritt, who has gone to great lengths to make information about Montana’s early Chinese immigrant population easily accessible to all interested and readily shared his dissertation and offered me advice. Then I wish to thank Dr. Gillian Glaes, who although she was not involved with my thesis process, she helped me tremendously in the History Department’s research methods class as I struggled to narrow my focus and find sources. Without her early guidance this paper would not look like it does today. I would also like to thank my friends, who throughout this process have always offered there loving support and been there for me when I needed a break. I wish to acknowledge in particular, my friend Scott, who always gave me loving words of encouragement when I was frustrated and would occasionally consent to helping me edit.

Additionally, I would like to thank my thesis readers, Dr. Barry Ferst and Dr. Janette Fregulia. Dr. Fregulia, who has served as my advisor for the last three and a half years, always offered her encouragement and willingness to help me with whatever I may have needed, especially while my thesis director was on sabbatical. Dr. Ferst always quickly reviewed my various thesis chapters and got them back to me as quickly as possible, giving critical recommendations that greatly improved the overall quality of my thesis. Then, of course, I must give thanks to my thesis director, Dr. Bob Swartout. When I finally settled on this topic, I was rather intimidated by having Dr. Swartout as my thesis director. This is a person who has researched and written about the Chinese experience in Montana; I cite him a number of times in my thesis. After I got over the initial intimidation, I realized that I could have no better thesis director than him. In addition, my fears were greatly unfounded. Dr. Swartout has offered me encouragement and tremendous advice as I continued to put together this thesis. He cooperated
with my hectic schedule, meeting with me in the evenings and offering me advice. Again, I would like to acknowledge all those involved with this process, those I mentioned and any I may have missed.
Chapter 1

Immigration and Spiritual Practices

Despite popular perception of a homogenous population, Montana has a long history of ethnic and religious diversity. Buddhism serves as an example of that diversity. The practice of Buddhism has occurred in Montana since its formal organization as a territory in 1864. Asian immigrant groups, such as the Chinese, brought to Montana their traditional spiritual practices; these practices included Buddhism and Daoism, and played an important role in these peoples’ lives. The Chinese immigrants were the first adherents of Buddhism in Montana. Buddhism and Daoism had an important role in the preservation and maintenance of traditional practices, but as Chinese immigrant populations assimilated and declined, Buddhist and Daoist practices began to disappear.

Throughout the existence of Buddhism, it has changed and intermingled with various culture groups’ traditions and pre-existing spiritual practices. As various immigrant groups entered the United States from Asia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they brought with them their cultural traditions and beliefs. Montana provides an interesting case study of religious traditions of the Chinese immigrants in the American West during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These traditions are demonstrated through various newspaper articles and anecdotal references. Although early Chinese immigrants in Montana left behind little documentation about their cultural practices, an analysis of period newspaper reports about funeral customs, celebrations and the religious temples will aid scholars in building an understanding of the Chinese immigrants’ unique culture in Montana.
Early Chinese Immigration to the United States

Primarily from the Guangdong province of China, the Chinese immigrated to the West Coast of the United States for a variety of socio-economic and political reasons beginning in the 1840s and 1850s. From 1849 to 1943 approximately half a million Chinese immigrants entered the United States. Initially, some Chinese were welcomed as a source of cheap and dependable labor in the railroad, agriculture, and mining industries, but as time passed they quickly began to face ferocious racism. By the 1850s foreign mining taxes and boycotts began to target the Chinese immigrants on the West Coast. This was a time of anti-immigration sentiment in the United States. Chinese immigrants were often targeted by the Know-Nothing Party. In the 1860s the Chinese immigrants began to move into the interior of the United States, pursuing new opportunities for mining. As this immigrant group moved eastward across the United States, they carried with them their cultural practices, particularly the practice of Buddhism.

Chinese in Montana

Gold strikes in 1862, near Grasshopper Creek brought the first major influx of miners to the Montana area and by 1865 the mining industry was at booming. This influx of population directly led to the formal organization of Montana as a territory in 1864. At the same time, the first Chinese pioneers began arriving in Montana. According to the 1870 census, the Chinese population was 1,949. The three counties with the largest populations were Lewis and Clark County, with a population of 677; Deer Lodge County, with a population of 774; and Madison County, with a population of 279. Counties with a large Chinese immigrant population developed into important communities and most likely established a local temple for traditional worship. Often the Chinese immigrant population was underestimated, Robert Swartout argues in his article, “From Kwangtung to Big Sky: The Chinese Experience in Frontier Montana,” that
the actual population was likely fifty percent higher than what was reported in the census. A congressional mining report published in 1870 estimated the Chinese population to be somewhere between 2,000 and 3,000. Based on these numbers it is obvious that the Chinese already had a presence and established communities in Montana before the 1870 census.

The first Chinese immigrants came with the opening of various mining opportunities sometime during 1862 in 1865. The first documentation of Chinese immigrants in Montana is 1865. Enough stayed and started laundries in Helena that a committee of ladies issued them a warning in the *Montana Radiator* in 1866, calling for a boycott of Chinese laundries. Major John Owen, responsible for establishing Fort Owen at present day Stevensville, notes that as early as 1867, a “Chinaman” was hired as a cook for the Fort. There was likely an influx of Chinese in 1869, based on this article which appeared in the *Helena Weekly Herald*:

> We notice by our Pacific coast and other exchanges that immigration from China is very large the present season, and that many of them are en route for Montana. The *Corinne Reporter*, of the 1st, has the following concerning them: “In our last three issues we have been called upon to mention the arrival of Chinamen. By the eastern band train yesterday seventeen more arrived. This makes fifty-eight within four days. They are stopping in Corinne for a few days and will probably proceed on their journey to Montana early the present week.”

From these examples it is clear that there was already an established and productive Chinese immigrant population in Montana. A number of different Chinese communities developed in Montana in towns such as Butte, Virginia City, Helena, and Missoula. Chinese immigrants remained connected culturally to China through their religious practices. Within these communities the temple served as an important religious and social institution.

**Chinese Spiritual Practices**

Chinese spiritual practices are a conglomeration of different religious traditions, woven together in an eclectic way. Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism came together in China,
forming traditional Chinese spiritual beliefs. Though these three paths seem to be different, they complement one another and the lifestyle of the Chinese, providing important spiritual and philosophical foundations for the Chinese communities in the United States. It is this eclectic religious tradition that the Chinese brought with them to the United States as immigrants.

Over centuries, many different tenets of Buddhism spread across Asia and were adapted by various culture groups. Buddhism is based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, also known as the Buddha. Siddhartha was born in approximately 483 B.C. in a city-state located in the Ganges river basin in present-day India. According to Buddhist teachings, Siddhartha at age twenty-nine became aware of human suffering and delved into a religious crisis as instigated by the Four Perceptions. From this point on Siddhartha decided to leave his inheritance and family to live his life as an ascetic to find an escape from human suffering. Siddhartha lived the life of an ascetic for a number of years; Siddhartha eventually rejected the ascetic practices and began to meditate under the Bodhi tree. While deep in meditation, he obtained enlightenment and became known as Buddha.

After obtaining enlightenment, Buddha began teaching the Four Noble Truths, or dharma. Central to Buddhism is the understanding that human life is suffering. “To live is to suffer”. Although there is the ability to feel happiness, it is transient. One must seek salvation in this life through the obtainment of Nirvana, or enlightenment. The Buddha continued to teach his message until his death; however, Buddhism was not established as a spiritual practice until the adaption of Buddhism as the state religion by Emperor Ashoka, ruler of the Mauryan Empire in northern India from 269-232 BC.

Emperor Ashoka worked to spread Buddhism beyond his empire through Buddhist missionaries. These missionaries spread Buddhism to various regions of Asia. Through
missionary work and as subsequent empires in Asia expanded and declined, Buddhism moved across the continent over the last two millennia. This westward movement led to the acceptance of Buddhism in many cultures. Each of these cultures integrated aspects of its traditional beliefs into the practice of Buddhism. There are three main traditions that the majority of Buddhist groups fall into. These are: Theravada, Mahayana, and Tibetan. Mahayana Buddhism is traditionally associated with China. Buddhism was first introduced to China in the first century CE. It is at this point that Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism began to become enmeshed.

Confucianism is based on the teachings of Confucius. From the practice of Confucianism comes a societal hierarchy and outlined moral expectations. Confucianism promoted the importance of patrilineal filial piety. In addition Confucianism and Daoism outlined ways in which one was expected to live their life. Since the twelfth century, Confucianism has gradually changed commonly referred to as Neo-Confucianism. This emerging tradition blends mystical elements with the teachings of Confucius and utilizes meditation.

Daoism has its origins in the early shamanistic cults of China, and the mystical philosophy of Laozi. The first historical mention of Laozi is found in the early classic book, the Chuang Tzu. According to this text, Laozi was a great Daoist master who at one point had met Confucius. The account is historically unverifiable. Daoism is considered to be uniquely Chinese in origin, but has never been the dominant spiritual practice. An important concept of Daoism is the yin and the yang, two interacting forces that provide the balance. Another central aspect to Daoism is the practice of ancestral rites, closely knitting it to Confucianism. Daoism has no central teachings, but rather espouses living in a simplistic, tranquil manner. The development of Daoism reinforced earlier traditions of communicating with spirits through writing and promoted the use of calligraphy.
Chinese immigrants brought to the United States their spiritual practices from China. Through these practices the immigrant population was able to remain connected to China and the families they left behind. With them came important cultural practices and celebrations, such as the Lunar New Year celebration, the Quingming festival, the hungry ghost festival, the establishment of temples, and many others.
Notes


3 The Know-Nothing Party is commonly affiliated with the Nativist movement of the 1840s and 50s in the United States. This movement was strongly opposed to immigration and particularly targeted the Irish on the East Coast and the Chinese on the West Coast.

4 Ibid., 21.


9 *Montana Post*, June 3, 1865, 2.


13 Swartout, 57.


16 Ibid., 47.

17 The first perception is an old man walking with a staff, the second perception is a man consumed with pain and disease, the third perception is the passing of a funeral procession, and finally the fourth perception is an ascetic walking down the road.


19 Asceticism is a lifestyle in which one chooses to live austerely, often in poverty, due to religious reasons.

20 Morris, 47.

21 Morris, 48.

22 The Four Noble Truths is central to Buddhist teachings and makes up the *dharma*, or cosmic truth. The Four Noble Truths are: The First Truth, nothing is permanent, life is transitory and everything is always changing; The Second Noble Truth, the delusion that attachments and material commodities create a happy life, without the understanding that these things are impermanent and insubstantial; The Third Truth, one must eliminate all desire and want; and the Fourth Truth in order to eventually gain Nirvana one must live a calm detached life.

23 Morris, 50.

24 Morris, 50.

25 Morris, 48.

26 Nigosian, 200.

27 Nigosian, 234.


29 Paper, 200.
30 Paper, 179.
31 Nigosian, 243.
33 Nigosian, 237.
34 Nigosian, 243.
35 Paper, 171.
Chapter 2

The Temple or Joss House

Its fittings are of the same order as all of the joss houses of the country. The hall is quite a large one, but it has one peculiarity—it has no seats or pews. The particular joss to whom the temple belongs is represented by a picture which is displayed on the altar, which is carefully trimmed with artificial flowers, gilt paper and Chinese mottoes and prayers. Ornamental lanterns of various kinds are strewn around the room in seeming disarray but everyone placed with some particular end view. An immense gong, drum and tom-toms form a part of the equipment of the place, and on the altar always a light is kept burning. This being one of the symbols of the religion. In still another quarter of the room is another never-failing light, which it is said is burned to keep devils away, for the Chinese have a belief that the evil spirit is always present. – “Queer Spots in and About Butte,” *The Anaconda Standard*, May 20, 1906, 9.

Though the temple played an important role in the Chinese community, there is little research done on the religious practices of the Chinese in Montana. Often the religion practiced in the temples by the Chinese was a blend of Daoist and Buddhist elements. These religious practices sometimes became known as “Chinese Popular religion.” When Chinese immigrants came to the United States they established temples, or as they were dubbed by Euro-American newspapers “joss houses.” This came from the incense that is continuously burned at the altar, called joss sticks. There are a few mentions about the temple, or joss house, in newspaper articles and a description comes from Butte native, sociologist Rose Hum Lee. The newspaper articles are written from the white American perspective and may reflect the prejudices of the times towards the Chinese immigrants and their practices. Temples were established in towns with a larger immigrant population, such as Missoula, Helena, Billings, Anaconda, Butte, and Virginia City. Accounts about the temples are few and scattered, despite their overall importance to the community. Through these scattered accounts, it is possible to begin an analysis of Chinese immigrant religious practices in Montana.
The temple in Virginia City was likely the first established in Montana. Chinese immigrants arrived in Virginia City because of opportunities in the placer mining industry of Alder Gulch. In Virginia City’s heyday the Chinese population was approximately 265 according to the 1880 census, but by the 1890 census the population had dropped to 155. The Chinese temple was built in the 1870s. Wiley Davis grew up in Virginia City, and he has been able to provide one of the rare firsthand accounts of the Chinese immigrant community. Davis lived in Virginia City while the temple was still in operation; he has written and delivered lectures about his observations. Davis speaks of the Chinese spiritual practices in a positive manner and provides an interesting account about the local temple. The Chinese temple was a two-story log building and the top floor was where the Chinese went to worship Buddha. According to Davis, “Upstairs was where they went to pray to their Buddha. As I remember, there was one in the center of the room and two on the north wall and a kneeling pad before each one, and a platform on stage for their orchestra which always played for their New Year’s services.” During the Chinese New Year’s celebration, many Chinese came from across the state to celebrate. According to Davis, “Every Chinamen went into the temple and prayed before the New Years was over. You were welcome to sit in the temple and watch and listen to them pray.” The orchestra that played consisted of four members: a horn player, a fiddle player, a cymbal player, and possibly someone playing the gong. In 1907 the final Chinese immigrants left Virginia City. Once the Chinese immigrants left, the temple fell into disrepair and eventually was destroyed. The accounts from Davis reveal that the Chinese immigrants in Virginia City still practiced aspects of traditional Buddhism.

One of the most important Chinatowns in the Rocky Mountain region existed in Butte. This community served as an important cultural center for the local Chinese immigrant
The Butte Chinatown not only catered to the local community, but also smaller groups of non-Chinese immigrant groups such as the Japanese, and functioned as the cultural center for the surrounding states. According to sociologist Rose Hum Lee, “The account books of one of Chinatown’s leading merchandise stores recorded sales to persons in Idaho, the Dakotas, Wyoming, and Minnesota.” This community became quite important to Chinese communities throughout the Rocky Mountain region. Despite this importance little is left of the original Butte Chinatown. The Mai Wah building, now home to the Mai Wah Society, and the Peking noodle parlor are some of the last remnants of Butte’s Chinese influence. The Mai Wah is operated as a museum, preserving artifacts devoted to the Chinese experience in Butte. The Chinese immigrant community of Butte established the longest running temple in Montana.

Butte

Newspaper stories published in 1954 and another in 1976 stated that in 1886 the first temple was built in Butte. However, a newspaper article in 1882 states, “The Chinese are building a new two-storied ‘Joss’ house on Galena street just west of Main” From this article it is obvious that the Chinese immigrants in Butte already had an established temple by 1882. A man by the name of Fun Gee is credited with building the first temple in 1877 near the junction of Maryland Avenue and Main Street. In May of 1938 the temple suffered from a blaze that left it dilapidated. According to a newspaper report sacred items were saved from the fire, “A joss house built before the turn of the century was destroyed but the revered idol of Buddha gracing a tiny upstairs ‘chapel’ was saved.” Rose Lee Hum also confirms that the sacred items were saved by the temple guardian, “The equipment, consisting of the Kwan Ti (Guan Yu) idol, his seal, black flags of war against evil spirits, incense urns, candlesticks and the bamboo fortune-telling paraphernalia, as well as josh sticks, candles, paper money, and oil lamps and
wick were removed by the guardian of the Temple to a building formerly used as a laundry. The temple is reported to have moved at least three times before it was finally demolished in December of 1945.

In sociologist Rose Hum Lee’s observations about temple practices in Butte, she mentions a number of different traditional Chinese beliefs, such as ancestor worship, but never mentions Buddhism or Daoism specifically. From the practices she describes one can infer that Buddhism and Daoism had a role in the spiritual beliefs of the Butte Chinese immigrants. Kwan Ti, or Guan Yu, a bodhisattva in the Buddhist tradition who guards the temple, serves as an example of this. In Buddhism Guan Yu is the protector of the dharma, and can be found in many Chinese Buddhist temples and is revered as a deity in Daoism. Lee describes divination, likely the I Ching, a Daoist practice: “He (temple guardian) interprets the sacred words of the oracle by consulting the Book of Sacred Revelations. The applicant piously shakes a circular bamboo tube filled with bamboo sticks, on which is written a number.”

When the Chinese community was large the temple was in constant operation. Lee also details some of the duties of the guardian of the temple, who performed various spiritual responsibilities, particularly paying homage to the deceased through yearly rituals. An interesting social division arose, much of which likely had to do with the issue of assimilation and is reflected in the religious practices and socio-economic status of the Chinese immigrants in Butte. Within the Butte community a Chinese Baptist Mission served as an important contrast to the traditional practices of the temple. This development followed the broader national trend of a gradual shift from Chinese traditional beliefs to Christianity. Often, Americans viewed Chinese traditional practices as proof that they could not assimilate into American culture. Through the adoption of Christianity, many Chinese immigrants hoped to better assimilate into American
culture. Many of those in the upper class of the Chinese community were Christian, such as well-known Chinese physician Huie Pock, who even spoke to audiences about the benefits of Christianity for the Chinese. Those who maintained traditional practices tended to be unskilled laborers. This lent a certain social element to spiritual practices in Butte. The Chinese Baptist Mission grew out of an English class conducted by the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) for the Chinese immigrants in 1892. The Chinese Baptist Mission was established in 1896, under the auspices of the First Baptist Church. In 1903, the Chinese Baptist Mission was identified as a separate entity in the Butte City Directory. Sunday services were conducted in Chinese, or translated to Chinese. After the National Origins Act of 1924 membership declined as the population declined. During the Great Depression the Baptist church ceased supporting the mission and it was left to the Chinese community to continue the mission until 1940. Though, there is no mention of the Chinese Mission in the Butte City Guide, published in 1937, there is mention of an unidentified Chinese religious institution. There is little information regarding the development of temples in other cities, but based on scattered mentions in the newspapers, Anaconda, Billings, Helena, and Missoula were home to temples at one time.

**Helena**

Large Chinese immigrant populations developed in Helena. In 1870, Helena was home to 641 Chinese immigrants. The total population of Helena was 3,100. The Chinese immigrant population comprised approximately twenty-one percent of Helena’s total population. According to an article published in 1888 in *The Northwest Magazine*, “Buddha has no shrine in Helena, no joss houses having been dedicated to his worship, but little effigies of the great prophet are met here and there and to these faithful followers probably offer their private
Figure 1. Only known photograph of the interior of the Butte temple. Photograph taken from “Chinatown in Butte was Bizarre, Colorful Scene,” *The Montana Standard, Diamond Jubilee Edition*, June 13, 1954.
Figure 2. The Butte temple in 1900. Photograph taken from “Queer Spots in and Around Butte,” *The Anaconda Standard*, May 20, 1900, 9.
Figure 3. Chinese Baptist Mission located at 24 W Mercury Street. Photograph taken from “Chinese Baptist Mission,” *The Anaconda Standard*, December 14, 1913.
supplications." In some instances the local temple was found within a store or private dwelling. This explanation of a temple possibly in a private residence or business seems more probable then no temple, especially considering the significant Chinese population. A newspaper article from 1926 reported, “Strains of odd music came from an upper story of an unknown building on Main Street last evening. At first this music was produced by the use of dishpans and drums and later by violins and harmonious instruments.” This could point to a possible temple. In addition a Chinese altar, reputedly may have come from the Helena temple, is a part of the Homeland Exhibit located at the Montana Historical Society. The Helena Chinatown was located near present-day Park Avenue and State Street at the bottom of Last Chance Gulch. In the 1970s urban renewal eradicated the remaining buildings from Chinatown. Little evidence of the once thriving Chinese community remains.

Anaconda, Missoula, Billings

Based on period newspaper accounts, it appears that Anaconda and Billings likely were home to temples, though very little is known about them. In Anaconda, the Chinese population in 1890 was 140. According to the 1900 census the population had dropped by 125 to a total of 15. The Chinese immigrant population in Anaconda supposedly had established a temple, but by 1902 the population had declined and the temple was no more. In Billings a temple was established sometime before 1904, as in September 1904 a fire was reported that started in the joss house and an adjoining noodle parlor that destroyed both buildings located at south Twenty-Sixth Street. Billings did not gain a significant Chinese population until the 1900s, when the population reached 84, so the temple that burnt down had likely been recently built. The temple was rebuilt at some point and is briefly mentioned in a report in 1911 about a Chinese man who committed suicide. Much more research needs to be done concerning the possibility
of a Chinese temple in these two communities. Missoula is another city that likely developed a temple, though even less seems to be known. The Chinese population in Missoula reached its peak sometime during the 1890s, as the population was 124 at the time of the 1890 census, but was already in decline by the 1900 census.⁴⁹ A temple was established prior to 1900, as an article from this time reports a Chinese celebration in Missoula that included a Chinese orchestra and the lighting of fireworks that lasted two days. This article goes on to mention that the Chinese took to the “joss house” where chanting and music could be heard.⁵⁰ There is mention of a temple in Missoula, in an article about a Chinese man by the name of Thomas Gogk; he actually died at the temple in Missoula.⁵¹ Prior to 1903, it is known that the temple in Missoula was located on West Front Street in an brick building.⁵² In addition, there was a Chinese cemetery in Missoula, but today it is covered by bungalow homes.⁵³ Funeral practices and the establishment of cemeteries served as an important practice in Chinese immigrant communities.

The establishment of the temple in various communities is just one example of how the early Chinese immigrants to Montana maintained spiritually and culturally connected to their homelands. Using newspaper accounts, it is possible to reconstruct some of the practices that the Chinese brought with them to Montana, particularly their funeral practices and celebrations. The newspapers often reported these practices with a prejudicial view, but they do provide interesting insights into the lives and culture of this immigrant group.
Notes

1 Daoism does not have systematic teachings, but rather focuses on the balancing of the two forces of nature, yin and yang. Daoism grew out of the philosophy of Lao Tzu and early shamanism.


3 Ibid.


6 Placer mining is the mining of alluvial deposits, for precious metals or gems. This is often done using hydraulics.


16 *The (Butte) Daily Miner*, July 1, 1882.


A bodhisattva means an enlightened one. Bodhisattva’s are usually beings who are preparing for the Buddhahood and want to help all sentient beings reach Buddhahood.


Swartout, 57.


Immigration Act of 1924 set quotas for the number of immigrants from each country allowed. The quota was decided as two percent of the total population of a countries immigrant community living in the United States in 1890. In addition this act forbade the immigration of any group that could not be naturalized. This law effectively ended Asian immigration.

35 Works Progress Administration, Butte City Guide (Butte, MT Works Progress Administration, 1937), 82.


39 Swartout, 55.

40 “Chinese Celebrate Strange Rites for Departed Celestial,” The Helena Independent, March 1, 1926.

41 Janet Sperry, email message to author, December 23, 2010; Amanda Streeter, email message to author, February 23, 2011.


45 “No Celebration Here: Chinese New Year will Pass Almost Unheeded,” The Anaconda Standard, February 7, 1902, 4.


50 “Had a Chinese Holiday: The Annual Rites were Dully Celebrated,” *The Anaconda Standard*, August 20, 1900, 10.


52 *The Anaconda Standard*, January 30, 1903, 14.

53 Merrit, 242.
Chapter 3
Festivals and Funeral Rites

Maintaining traditional celebrations and festivals was an important way for Chinese immigrants to remain spiritually connected to China. The Chinese New Year is probably the best known festival and is the most heavily documented in Montana. Newspapers reported on some of the festivities that went on, such as feasting, worshipping, and “fiery pyrotechnics.”\(^1\) In addition to the New Year, the Chinese immigrants celebrated a variety of different commemorations of varying importance, which were often not reported. There is evidence, however, of various other festivals practiced in Montana. The documentation of these other practices are scattered and provide little detail about the festival itself. What is available, however, allows one to begin analyzing the different pieces of the cultural practices that the Chinese immigrants brought with them to Montana. As the years passed and anti-immigration laws took hold, the Chinese population began to decline, leading to a disappearance in their rich cultural and spiritual practices.

**Festivals**

A newspaper article published on April 8, 1869, described the annual Chinese Josh Day. The article specifically mentions that the Chinese used this day to tend graves, burn incense, say prayers, and prepare an abundance of food.\(^2\) In Swartout’s article he uses this commentary as an example of the Chinese immigrants’ strong Confucian heritage.\(^3\) This festival was likely the Qingming festival, a traditional Chinese observation, which is one of three special occasions during the year where families visit tombs of the deceased to placate the ghosts and spirits.\(^4\) In the United States, because family members were rarely together, the observance of such traditions were usually maintained by four-clan associations\(^5\) or family associations.\(^6\) A report
about a Chinese festival in Virginia City describes similar practices, but is from a later date. “The Chinese residents of Virginia City have been feeding their dead this week. Experience has taught them that roast pig and chicken are more often appropriated by barbarian Caucasians then celestial Mongolians, and now the defunct disciples of Confucius are simply regaled with cold rice and whiskey, and a few candles to light them through the dark valley. Good enough for a dead Chinaman anyway.” While ancestor worship and the Chinese Confucian heritage played a role in the rituals mentioned specifically in the article, it is also important to note that April 8 is the day in which Mahayana Buddhists celebrate the flower festival, Hanamatsuri. This is one of the three most important festivals observed by Buddhists; it is the celebration of the birthday of Buddha. It seems unlikely that there would be no connection between the two. Even though the news article reports nothing beyond the graveside rituals, it is possible that this is another example of the weaving of various practices into one tradition.

Another important reverence festival that the Chinese immigrants brought with them to Montana was the Hungry Ghost festival. Just as they did during the Qingming festival, the Chinese were expected to tend the graves of the deceased and leave offerings at the graves to placate the hungry ghosts and spirits. Rose Hum Lee refers to this festival as “All Souls Day.” This festival took place later in the year than Qingming, in October. There are records of this festival occurring in Helena and Butte. In October of 1881, the Helena Independent reported that the Chinese were preparing food and drink for the dead. The article specifically stated that this was done once a year, however similar practices observed in April in observance of the Qingming festival have been documented. The next day, October 14, 1881, the Chinese immigrants held their festival and, as the newspaper reported, used the day to disinter ten graves.
The newspaper noted that the Chinese performed various rituals over and for the bones of the disinterred.\textsuperscript{11} The article reported:

The Chinamen who did the honors were dressed in long mantles of Celestial blue, which symbolize that place of rest where dead Chinese are supposed to be at peace. The bones were stored in a room about a block from the scene of festivity, and to this the blue-robed mourners went, where they performed some incantations over the bags of bones, burning mysterious powders and acting in an altogether extraordinary manner.\textsuperscript{12}

This description of Chinese immigrant practices demonstrates how little Euro-American reporters understood about Chinese customs. Reporters often treated Chinese practices as a spectacle and as exotic; for instance, in another section of this same article the reporters listed the food served: “The tables were set in the street and contained pork and mutton, roasted and raw; fruits, confectionery and other delicacies; dishes of stewed rats, mice, and sweets of a like nature, beside a number of mysterious dishes, the names of which it was impossible to learn.”\textsuperscript{13}

The second report of a festival in October again appeared in the \textit{Helena Independent}, but two years later. The article itself was actually taken from the \textit{(Butte) Miner}. This article reported that “Several wagon loads of roast pork, fowl, sweetmeats and other edibles were scattered upon the graves of defunct Mongolians at the cemetery, and Chinese candles, colored sticks, papers, etc., were burned at the graves, while hired mourners rent the air with weird lamentations.”\textsuperscript{14} This article specifically referred to the festival as the “Chinese penance day,” and indicated that day was when the Chinese atoned for their sins.\textsuperscript{15} In addition to this festival, Rose Hum Lee indicates that a number of other traditional Chinese festivals were practiced in Butte, such as the Dragon Boat festival and The Winter Solstice festival. Currently, there appears to be no known period newspaper accounts of these festivals, which is likely due to the fact that there celebration occurred indoors, away from the prying eyes of the surrounding community. Rose Hum Lee
specifically states that when the Dragon Boat Festival was observed in Butte it was done indoors.\textsuperscript{16} More research into this area could be completed to uncover period accounts of these other festivals in order to compare them to Lee’s statements about their practice in Butte. The festival with the most documentation and easily the most popular of traditional Chinese festivals was the Chinese New Year, also known as the Lunar New Year.

The Chinese New Year festival was the most heavily documented of all the Chinese immigrant traditions. The first documentation of this festival comes from an article published in the \textit{Montana Post}, 1869. This article attempted to explain to the readers some of the different practices that the Chinese immigrants observed:

The head of the family kneels in front of the table and burns incense to heaven and earth for past protection, favor and subsistence, and for a continuation of these blessings during the coming year. This ceremony concluded, the family give worship to the family gods and goddesses which is performed by means of rice and vegetables. This concluded, the family pay tokens of respect and remembrance to its deceased ancestors.\textsuperscript{17}

This article specifically stated that the Chinese immigrants in Helena would be celebrating the New Year and would welcome anyone who wanted to take part in the festivities.\textsuperscript{18} This is the earliest known documentation of this festival in Montana. The \textit{Montana Post}, published in Virginia City was Montana’s first newspaper and began printing in 1865. In addition to this article, there are many other reports across Montana about the Chinese observing the New Year, particularly in areas with large Chinese populations.\textsuperscript{19} In other places as the Chinese immigrant population declined, the tradition quickly faded. as the as was the case with Anaconda where reports stated that as early as 1902 the New Year was no longer celebrated.\textsuperscript{20} Moreover, as the Chinese immigrant population assimilated and converted to Christianity, some Chinese began to celebrate Christmas.
The Christian Chinese immigrants began to celebrate Christmas relatively early in Butte through the Chinese Baptist Mission. The *Anaconda Standard* reported provides a few examples of the incorporation of Christmas into Chinese observances. For example, the newspaper reported that at the Chinese Baptist Mission, the Chinese immigrants celebrated Christmas with a tree and presents.\(^2\) Later, the Chinese immigrants began to hold Christmas programs in Butte.\(^2\)

In addition to festivals, the Chinese brought with them traditional funeral practices. Period newspapers are full of varying reports of the funeral proceedings. Though these are sometimes described in a prejudicial manner, it is possible to analyze the funeral practices that the Chinese immigrants brought with them.

**Funerals and Cemeteries**

Funerals were often covered in the local newspapers. The newspapers would usually report the funerals in rather patronizing terms, at times referring to Chinese practices as heathen. These traditional practices were carried over from China and were often based on Buddhist concepts of the afterlife. In addition, aspects of Confucianism, especially ancestor reverence, was interlaced with Buddhist practices.\(^2\) Daoism also played an important role in the formation of funerary practices. Three essential aspects made-up the traditional Buddhist-Daoist funeral and each aspect had specific rituals. The first aspect of the funeral was the performance of pre-burial rituals. The second aspect of a traditional Buddhist-Daoist funeral was the funeral procession. They believed that moving the body to the cemetery was the most dangerous time for possible possession by spirits; and the third aspect of the funeral was the rituals performed at the cemetery.\(^2\) Though these aspects were all essential to the traditional Chinese funeral, the available newspaper documentation largely focused on the rituals performed at the cemetery. Traditional funerals would begin at the local temple, and would proceed to the cemetery. While
in route to the cemetery, the chief mourner, likely the temple guardian, would throw pieces of paper with holes cut in to them. Some of the reports noted that this was to confuse “devils” or “the evil one.” The purpose of this action was so that wondering spirits looking for a body to possess would have to crawl through each hole, before making it to the gravesite. The guardian of the temple was in charge of paying homage to the dead both during the funeral and through yearly ceremonies. In an account from the Butte Semi-Weekly Miner of a Chinese funeral, the reporter wrote, “The Joss worshiping, heathen ceremonies were performed over the dead.” This article also reported that once the funeral procession reached the grave site, more simple rites were performed. At the gravesite the coffins would be placed on a platform in the Chinese section of the cemetery and the final burial rites would be completed.

One of the rites performed during these funerals was the burning of paper money and the deceased’s clothing. Burning these items allowed the deceased to use them in the spirit world. Ritualistic burnings of this nature are commonly associated with the typical Buddhist funeral. A platform and ritual burner can still be seen in the Chinese cemetery today in Butte and a burner can still be seen in Helena. These served an important purpose in the funeral. When a platform was present, the casket of the deceased was placed upon it, and burnt offerings were made. This is demonstrated in an account of a funeral for two murdered Chinese in an issue of the Anaconda Standard “Then the Chinese divided into two squads and lined up on each side of the platform and sang a dirge. Some of the dead men’s clothes placed on a slab near the platform, were surrounded with punk and tapers, these were solemnly burned.” The placement of objects in the casket with the deceased and the placement of coins in the deceased’s mouth,
Image 4. This is the remains of the ritual burner and platform in the Chinese section of the Mount Moriah cemetery in Butte, MT. Photograph taken by the author October 12, 2010.
were other practices described in various newspaper accounts. This was to assist the spirit’s entrance into the spirit world and provide the spirit with objects to use after death. An important aspect of the Chinese funeral was the preparation of food offerings. In various accounts of funerals, a large feast was prepared and left at the grave site, along with a few other items. Chinese burial sites were sometimes vandalized by people seeking the funeral goods left by the procession. To deal with this issue, the food and other preparations began to be placed in the grave with the casket.

Rarely did these descriptions show signs of understanding the meaning behind the rituals performed. In one instance the newspaper article called for a legislative ban on the “heathen” rituals the reporter witnessed. An article describing the funeral of “China Mary” displayed a surprising knowledge of the rituals and their purposes “We have mentioned considerable Chinese money was burned at the house. At the grave, the clothing of the deceased was also burned, it being supposed that the ghost of the departed mortal is thus secured the use of the ghost of the departed clothing and the departed money in the next world.” The type of information found in this article was not typical of funeral descriptions. Usually, the rituals conducted were referred to as “simple rites.” This article noted above also mentioned every stage of the funeral rites, including briefly the rituals that were conducted prior to the funeral at the home, such as shutting the home up and the initial burning of paper money. This article was published in 1867, so possibly there was a greater interest in the practices of the Chinese at that time. Many Chinese immigrants hoped that after their death, there remains would be returned to China and their graves tended. Though some Chinese graves were disinterred in accordance to the final wishes of the deceased by the different companies and returned to China, many graves remain undisturbed throughout the state.
Central to traditional Chinese ancestor reverence was the caring for the graves of the deceased. American laws barring the entrance of Chinese women to the United States led to the creation of “bachelor societies” among many Chinese communities. Many of the Chinese immigrants who died in this country did not have relatives to tend their graves. Due to this, many Chinese immigrants hoped for exhumation and that their remains be sent to China for reburial. If the remains were removed to China, the immigrant could be assured that the proper traditional rituals would be performed and thus ensure a good afterlife. An article published in the newspaper, *New Northwest*, stated that after disinterment the Chinese immigrants scraped the flesh from the bones. The Chinese immigrant community that this article was specifically describing was located in the German Gulch mining district between Butte and Anaconda. The article explained that after scraping the flesh from the bones, the remains were and placed in boxes to be shipped to China.

Although many remains were sent back to China from Montana, a number of remains never left the state. There were confirmed Chinese burial sites in many communities, including Missoula, Helena, Butte, Phillipsburg, and Deer Lodge. Obviously, these are not the only communities that buried the dead, and it is known that while Chinese immigrants were working on the Northern Pacific Railroad, those workers who died were sometimes buried along the grade. Due to racism towards the Chinese immigrants, Chinese cemeteries were often established as segregated plots. In the case of Butte and Helena, these cemeteries were a part of the larger town cemetery and can still be seen today. The Chinese cemetery in Butte was located within Mount Moriah cemetery and was first established in 1889. The cemetery is broken up into blocks to make finding specific graves easier, and the current Chinese section is found at Block R, at the very back of the cemetery. Due to the practice of exhumation, there are only a
Figure 6. Headstone located in the Chinese section of Mount Moriah cemetery in Butte, MT. Photograph by the author October 2010.
Figure 7. Headstone found in China Row, located just outside of the fenced area of Forestvale cemetery Helena, MT. Photograph by the author November 2010.
Figure 8. Wind-swept China Row located just outside of Forestvale cemetery Helena, MT. It is difficult to distinguish the scattered headstones from the overgrown grass. Photograph by the author.
Few graves located in the Chinese cemetery.

The Chinese cemetery in Helena, known as China Row, was located just outside of the fenced off northwest corner of Forestvale Cemetery from 1890 to 1954. This cemetery served as final resting place for over 220 Chinese. These burial plots show little sign of disinterment.\textsuperscript{37} This unmaintained area provides evidence for the funerals once there. Scattered about are shards and various other artifacts. Forestvale Cemetery received funds to build its fence in 1988. The cemetery board purposely chose to exclude the Chinese section because it was viewed as an inactive part of the cemetery. Today there is a sign located just inside the fence of Forestvale that gives a brief description of China Row.

The Chinese immigrant community in Montana gradually declined after reaching its peak in the late nineteenth century. With this decline in population came a decline in the maintenance of traditional practices. Communities that were once large with established temples for began to close and festivals and funeral practices began to lose some of their elaborate ceremonies. In addition, the Chinese immigrant population that did remain was gradually assimilating into American culture and adapting western ways, such as the celebration of Christmas. The population decline, and conversion and assimilation of the remaining population, led to an overall decline in the traditional Chinese practices that were initially brought to Montana.
Chinese diaspora communities would often create clan societies in their new homes as a way to maintain traditions and provide support to one another. Often these clan societies were set up by immigrants from the same village or province. These clans would become responsible for making funeral arrangements and maintaining graves. In addition the clan associations would take responsibility for disinterring some remains to be sent back to China.


7 “Ah, Me! To be a Dead Chinaman if that is what they Feed ‘Em,” *Helena Independent*, April 12, 1932 taken from *The Madisonian*, April 5, 1877.

8 Nigosian, 197.


10 *Helena Independent*, October 13, 1881.


17 “Chinese New Year,” Montana Post, February 12, 1869, 8.

18 “Chinese New Year,” Montana Post, February 12, 1869, 8.


20 “No Celebration Here: Good Times of Chink gone,” Anaconda Standard, February 7, 1902, 4.


26 The Benton Weekly Record, June 1881; “Ancient Rites Performed when Sam Jong Tai, Chinese, is Laid to Rest,” Montana (Helena) Record-Herald, May 14, 1932, 6.


28 “Chinese Funeral: The Butte City Celestials Introduce their Heathen Rites and are Assisted by White Mongolians,” The Butte Semi-Weekly Miner, January 24, 1885.

29 “Chinese Funeral: The Butte City Celestials Introduce their Heathen Rites and are Assisted by White Mongolians,” The Butte Semi-Weekly Miner, January 24, 1885.

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34 “Chinese Funeral,” *Anaconda Standard*, January 4, 1897


37 Robinson, 48.


39 “Chinese Funeral: The Butte City Celestials Introduce their Heathen Rites and are Assisted by White Mongolians,” *The Butte Semi-Weekly Miner*, January 24, 1885.


44 Merritt, 241.

45 Merritt, 241.


47 Bik, 13.
Chapter 4

Conclusion

In 1870, Chinese immigrants made up ten percent of the Montana territory’s total population. Though at times the Chinese population would exceed the 1870 population of 1,949, the population would never make up as large of a percent of the total population and would gradually decline. The Chinese population began to decline in Montana for a number of different reasons, mainly resulting from immigration laws and boycotts. Many Chinese immigrants originally came to Montana due to mining opportunities, but in 1883 the Montana Territorial Supreme Court ruled that aliens ineligible for citizenship could not have mining claims. This was a direct result of racism towards the Chinese. Though the Chinese population reached its zenith in 1890, a total population of 2,532, the population would decline afterwards. By the 1900 census, a mere decade later the population had dropped by 739 to a total population of 1,739. Though the Chinese population in Montana did not face the violence that other Chinese faced in places, they did still face racism and boycotts. After the end of the placer mining era in Montana, many Chinese immigrants began to seek employment in other areas, such as laundries. Others became cooks or domestic servants, and some even began to operate their own stores and restaurants, such as Hum Fay and Huie Pock in Butte. The Chinese began to leave to seek job opportunities in urban areas with large Chinese immigrant populations, such as San Francisco and Portland.

As early as 1866 a boycott was called against Chinese laundries in Helena. In 1869 a law was passed that taxed laundries operated by males in Montana. This was to target Chinese operated laundries. Despite this unfair tax, Chinese laundries continued to grow, as did other Chinese-owned businesses. This would lead to additional boycotts in the late nineteenth century.
Boycotts of Chinese businesses in Montana were called a number of times in different cities throughout the state. In Butte several boycotts were led against the Chinese, first in 1884, then 1891-1892, and again in 1896-1897. During the 1890s the United States had significant economic issues, such as the crash of 1893, so economic hardships and anti-immigrant sentiments contributed greatly to the frequency of boycotts. The Butte boycott in 1896-1897 was so severe that it led to approximately three hundred fifty Chinese leaving Butte. Other members of the Chinese immigrant community, such as Huie Pock and Hum Fay, did choose to fight the boycott in the courts and ultimately the court ruled in their favor. But the economic damage had already been done to the community.

Another key factor that led to the decline of the Chinese population involved restrictive immigration laws. By 1882 approximately 300,000 Chinese immigrants had entered the United States. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 banned the immigration of Chinese laborers to the U.S. for ten years. This law was extended under the Geary Act in 1892 and when this act expired, another took its place effectively ending Chinese immigration until immigration reform in the 1960s. In addition, women immigrants were effectively barred from entering the country with the passage of the Page Law in 1875, which targeted prostitution, but was used to prevent many women from entering the country as immigrants. This would increase the already imbalanced sex ratio of the Chinese immigrant population, resulting in slow population growth through reproduction. As the Chinese population in Montana declined, Chinese spiritual practices in the state began to disappear.

The conversion of Chinese immigrants to Christianity affected the practice of traditional beliefs. Chinese immigrants began converting to Christianity for a number of different reasons by the 1900s. In the United States, many Chinese immigrant communities lacked institutional
support for the continued practice of Chinese spiritual traditions. This led to a gradual decline in traditional practices as early as the 1890s. Chinese immigrants additionally lacked religious leadership and had no centralized institution.\textsuperscript{148} In Montana many of the Chinese immigrants who converted to Christianity led calls for additional conversion in the Chinese communities.\textsuperscript{149} In addition schools were set up by churches to teach the Chinese immigrants English and also Christianity. Examples of this can be found in Butte through the Chinese Baptist Mission and in Helena, through schools operated by the Methodist Episcopal Church and another school operated by a Rev. R.B. Tobey.\textsuperscript{150} This combination of English teaching and Christianity would link the two together for many in the immigrant community. Through these enterprises more Chinese immigrants gradually adapted to American culture. These factors led to a decrease of Chinese cultural and spiritual practices in Montana.

The Chinese immigrant population had unique spiritual practices that played an important role in their lives. As Chinese immigrants declined and began to convert to Christianity, this led to a decline in Chinese spiritual practices. This culminated in the demolition of the Butte temple in the 1940s. Chinese traditions were present in Montana even before it was formerly organized as a territory, first arriving in the early 1860s. Throughout Montana in areas with significant Chinese immigrant populations, temples or joss houses were established and served as a focal point for the community. Although little is known about the practices that took place in the temple, what information is known demonstrates that Chinese religious practices combined a variety of different aspects of Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. A major limitation in researching Chinese religious practices is the lack of documentation from the Chinese perspective. The documentation of funerals in newspaper articles serves as an important source of Chinese religious practices in the nineteenth century. Through the analysis of these
items, it becomes apparent that the Chinese immigrant population incorporated a variety of practices into their daily religious practices. Though the traditional practices the Chinese brought with them to Montana have disappeared, remnants can still be seen at Chinese cemeteries and at the Mai Wah Society in Butte. These places serve as reminders of the unique ethical and cultural diversity of Montana and the American West.
Notes


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142Flaherty, 42.

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144Hing, 21.


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Secondary Resources


