Asian American Studies Praxis and the Educational Power of Boston’s Public Chinese Burial Grounds

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I think that Mount Hope has symbolized for many people how the Chinese have been treated here in America—ignored and relegated to the back, not cared for by others, not considered important to others...the community needs a place where they can honor their predecessors and their ancestors. By getting this memorial built, I feel that I am helping to honor my grandparents and other ancestors, and that we are helping people remember, and honor, their history. The most inspiring has been seeing how important this project is to various groups of people—the elders who remember those who are buried there, and the younger generation, who were born long after the people were buried in Mount Hope, but who are moved by what they see there.

—Deborah Dong, former CHSNE president and cochair of the Mount Hope Cemetery Chinese Immigrant Memorial Project

This article explores the educational significance of the historic Chinese immigrant burial grounds located within Mount Hope Cemetery—Boston’s public cemetery.1 Approximately 1,500 gravestones, most of which are marked principally with Chinese characters displaying names and village origins from Taishan (台山), are clustered in three contiguous sections near the cemetery’s southwestern edge.2 With stones showing years of death primarily from the 1930s through 1960s and years of birth dating back as early as the 1860s, the Mount Hope Chinese burial grounds constitute a site of deep social, cultural, historical, and spiritual meaning for Boston’s Chinese community. As such, it has represented a foundational motivation for establishing and sustaining the Chinese Historical Society of New England (CHSNE) during the past quarter century, while also serving as a signature focus of curriculum, pedagogy, and student- and community-engaged historical documentation led by the Asian American Studies Program at the University of Massachusetts Boston.3 Drawing on specific examples, this article introduces selected educational strategies that have engaged student, community, and public involvement with Mount Hope, ranging from ongoing field trips to documentary research and archival database digitization to video production and K–12 curriculum development.

Mount Hope Cemetery and Boston’s Chinese American History

Boston operates three public cemeteries for city residents, particularly those who cannot afford more expensive, private burials. Mount Hope is the largest of the city’s cemeteries with 125 acres that include burial plots for veterans since the Civil War and the oldest, most dense Chinese immigrant burial area in the New England region.

By 1900, funeral ceremonies connecting Boston Chinatown with Mount Hope Cemetery were already in active practice. In his authoritative article about the infamous immigration raid in Boston Chinatown on October 11, 1903—arguably the single most important date in Chinatown’s civic history—historian Scott Wong references front-page local newspaper coverage by the Boston Daily Globe and Boston Herald describing the opportunistic circumstances prior to the raid as a large funeral procession moved from Chinatown to Mount Hope Cemetery where three thousand community members gathered to witness and participate in the rituals and burial of Wong Yat Chong, a local laundry owner and member of Hip Sing Tong. Wong explains:

With a large number of Chinese from surrounding areas and an indeterminate number from other cities present in Chinatown, the evening of the funeral proved to be an opportune time to conduct a sweep of the community. A force of about fifty local police and over twenty federal and state authorities conducted the raid.4

Though serving as the backdrop to the more dramatic story of the immigration raid through which nearly 250 Chinese were arrested, Wong’s recounting of such detailed press coverage clarifies the significance of Mount Hope as a physical public space accessed and valued by Boston’s Chinese community as early as 1903.

Indeed, city records show significant purchase of “Chinese mortuary deeds” from 1912 through 1937, reflecting the spatial consolidation of the Chinese sections in the cemetery.5 The organized purchase and active sale of public cemetery plots within a particular section of the cemetery literally as well as symbolically grounded the racialized segregation of Boston’s Chinese immigrants after death. At the same time, this concentration of Chinese-owned burial plots ensured
continuing linguistic familiarity and cultural convenience for the Chinese community's traditional family associations and merchant leaders through the umbrella Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (中華公所), who mediated the burial arrangements on behalf of the deceased. Much like the dual reality of Boston Chinatown itself, the formation, development, and maintenance of Chinese burial grounds at Mount Hope represented both a reality of segregated racial inequality on public land, together with an undeniable sociocultural assertion of critical mass through a well-organized system for business transaction facilitated by a community structure of merchants and traditional, transnational regional- and clan-based associations. For those with access to such resources and networks, this also included a system of disinterment and trans-Pacific shipping of the bones of the deceased for family reclamation and reburial in ancestral settings.⁶

Maintaining the Chinese burial grounds in Boston became more difficult across the decades, however, due to both the declining role of the family associations for younger generations and the limited numbers of direct family relations caring for spirits and ancestors associated with the deceased. More importantly, though, the city's obvious neglect of the public cemetery's Chinese section mirrored the unequal levels of quality, care, and attention throughout the city's racially segregated streets, schools, and neighborhoods. By the 1980s, hundreds of the Chinese gravestones had eroded or been broken and displaced, due to vandalism and institutional disregard as well as the cumulative effects of harsh winter weather in Boston and the low-cost, poor quality of materials originally used for the stones. Motivated by the poor conditions and disgrace of the burial grounds, a core group of Chinatown leaders convened by Davis Woo and David S. Y. Wong initiated a modest but visionary effort in 1989 to reclaim the Chinese burial grounds as a community responsibility. Over time, they worked with the Boston Parks and Recreation Department to clean up broken bottles and trash littering the grounds. Misplaced tombstones were reset in their foundations and aluminum markers were installed to mark the correct locations of displaced gravestones. These grassroots, voluntary efforts became the genesis of the Chinese Historical Society of New England (CHSNE), which was officially founded in 1992 with the overarching mission to document, preserve, and promote the history of Chinese immigration and legacy in New England, and with the specific charge to restore the historic Chinese burial grounds at Boston's Mount Hope Cemetery.

CHSNE's role, first in addressing city and community neglect of the burial grounds and later in leading all aspects of a comprehensive campaign to design, finance, construct, and secure a contemporary-themed memorial site in honor of Boston's Chinese immigrants, is documented more fully in CHSNE newsletters and other publications.⁷ The public dedication of a new Chinese immigrant memorial site at the burial grounds during the "clear-bright" seasonal time of the Qingming Festival (清明节) in March 2007 stands as one of the signature moments for CHSNE and its community constituencies.⁸

CONNECTING BOSTON'S PUBLIC CEMETERY AND PUBLIC UNIVERSITY THROUGH ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES

Although the historical and cultural significance of the Chinese burial grounds at Mount Hope Cemetery have been most directly relevant to family members and local community associations, the educational power of the site has also been compelling, particularly through critical contributions by the Asian American Studies Program at the University of Massachusetts Boston—the city's public university. Innovative student- and community-centered curricular and pedagogical commitments in Asian American Studies at UMass Boston have been well documented in other publications throughout the past three decades.⁹ Overarching programmatic goals in Asian American Studies (AsAmSt) have included:

- Facilitating socioculturally responsive and academically relevant learning communities that support student persistence, mentoring, and connection at our urban, working-class, commuter university
- Documenting significant issues, needs, and interventions in local Asian American communities and on campus, recognizing that our own students and alumni are themselves members and participants within local neighborhoods, workplaces, and community-based institutions
- Building research and development capacities in local Asian American communities through connecting ethnic studies perspectives, interdisciplinary methodologies, and analytic frameworks with student and alumni diasporic social networks and cultural and linguistic knowledge
- Producing and preserving original collections of locally relevant source materials, such as oral histories, digital stories, spoken word performances, directories, maps, and photo, video, and print archives

Within this larger programmatic framework, defining how to engage educationally with the Chinese burial grounds at Mount Hope has been an important, long-term priority in Asian American Studies at UMass Boston, as the following examples illustrate.

INITIAL GROUNDWORK

Responding to the community mobilization by David Wong, Davis Woo, and the fledgling CHSNE to pay more attention to Mount Hope, students in the fall 1993 Boston's Asian
American Communities course made the initial AsAmSt field trip to walk among the 1,500 gravestones and burn incense to honor the pioneering generation of Boston's Chinese immigrants. After a period of collective ritual and reflection by the class, Sophia Nune—a second-wave refugee like many of her classmates taking Asian American Studies at UMass Boston in the early 1990s—had continued on her own, moving intently from stone to stone to offer incense and bow three times at each grave. When asked at the time what she was thinking during those moments, Sophia responded:

My mom was killed in Cambodia, you know, and I never had a chance to say goodbye. I don’t even know where she was buried. . . . I’m really glad we came here. It just helped me think about my mom, think about the past, you know. I didn’t expect it, but I really felt connected. You should bring the class here every year. I want to come again.  

Inspired by her urging, AsAmSt students, faculty, and alumni have faithfully returned for more than two decades through field trips, reflections, cleanup actions, and documentation projects. From the beginning, students like Sophia demonstrated that the city’s Chinese burial grounds could be a site not only for Chinese-centric respect. Furthermore, this curricular commitment to an immersive, experiential learning process conveyed not only historical and spiritual power but also visceral clarity about racial inequality on public land, and came to exemplify the “high impact practice” of our Asian American Studies “pedagogies of life and death” with various student profiles of immigrants, refugees, veterans, U.S.-born Asian Americans, and non-Asians.

ARCHIVAL DOCUMENTATION

During the next several years of “groundwork” in the 1990s, AsAmSt students not only continued to visit the site regularly but took greater direct responsibility for documentation and rectification. As they directly witnessed the sharp contrast between the careful landscaping of the cemetery’s other sections, where “clear, bright” gravestones honoring names such as Adams, Chadwick, and Weld were juxtaposed against the stark conditions of broken stones overgrown with weeds that obscured names such as 陈, 梅, and 余 in the Chinese sections, their collective motivation to pay respect grew, even though they had no direct family relations or responsibilities for which to care.

Following our first return field trip to Mount Hope without Sophia in spring 1994, students insisted on doing more. By summer 1994, after a thorough weeding and cleanup, one group of student volunteers—most of whom were themselves immigrant women from Hong Kong and Guangdong—assisted CHSNE leaders with the sitting of metal markers to reestablish the gridlines for individual burial plots based on cemetery records. A ground marker with the code E-R1-G18, for example, was placed in the ground to match with the paper record for cemetery section E, range 1, grave 18. For Davis Woo, who coordinated the process on behalf of CHSNE, seeing the volunteer group of Cantonese-speaking female students earnestly digging with shovels, trowels, and work gloves during a July heat wave confirmed the sincerity of our early efforts to do more than just reference Mount Hope from a distant classroom.

In fall 1994, a team of four advanced Asian American Studies students who had already participated in the spring 1994 field trip—one Japanese American, one Cambodian refugee, one Chinese Vietnamese refugee, and one Boston-born Chinese American—initiated a group research and development project to explore the stories and records associated with those who were buried at Mount Hope and had been largely neglected or forgotten. Given that this was years before the availability of computer-searchable databases or digitized city records, the four students made multiple visits to the city’s Vital Records Department to directly answer their question: who was buried in the Chinese sections at Mount Hope? Their findings, like hundreds of other original and important research projects coproduced by students and faculty in our Asian American Studies courses, have never been published or reported publicly. Through their diligence and community-centered motivation, however, they identified, by hand, city death certificates for a sample of 351 names matched with Mount Hope burial records—representing nearly one-fourth of the total 1,500 graves. In the process, they discovered the following:

- The most common family names of the deceased were Chin, Lee, Wong, and Yee.
- The most common home addresses were in Chinatown on Beach, Harrison, Hudson, and Tyler streets.
- Chinese was used as a race category until the late 1930s, while Yellow or Mongolian were also used.
- Over 75 percent (262 of 351) were born in China, 16 percent were born in California, and 4 percent were born in Massachusetts.
- Nearly all (344 of 351) were male; only 2 percent (7 of 351) were female.
- Nearly 70 percent (241 of 351) were married.
- Over 60 percent (212 of 351) were laundrymen, 19 percent were restaurant workers, and 4 percent were students.
- The mean age of death was fifty-eight.
- The largest-known cause of death was pulmonary tuberculosis (18 percent).

Through their original quantitative analysis of the sample death records, they revealed the preponderance of married, middle-aged, immigrant laundrymen buried at Mount Hope. Moreover, through their complementary qualitative inquiry, their final project paper concluded:

We have visited the gravesite several times. . . . It is in a very poor condition. Words such as Chino or Chink were found sprayed on the rocks. Tombs were moved out of the original place.
found one tomb lying in between two trees with words that cannot be identified at all. We saw tombs lying in all different directions. Since most of the buried did not have relatives here in Boston, there was nothing done to correct the problem. It is very sad to see the remaining tombs standing or lying around solely, sadly and without dignity.12

Like Sophia before them, the four members of this project group—Leroy, Tom, Saveth, and Kasey—also urged further educational engagement at Mount Hope, and were the first to propose the need for documentary video production as part of the preservation process.

ENGAGING ASAMST STUDENTS, YOUTH, AND TEACHERS

For the next dozen years, while CHSNE carried out its long-term community-based campaign to establish a Chinese immigrant memorial at the site, AsAmSt students, faculty, and alumni continued to make regular field trips to Mount Hope in conjunction with courses, projects, and community-service cleanups, particularly around the time of the Qingming Festival. Hundreds of individual students participated in these field trips and produced written reflections, such as the following by a Vietnamese American woman in 2002:

Walking through Mt. Hope cemetery and smelling the scent of the green grass, I can remember this image clearly. There was the Caucasian side, their gravestones were neatly mowed, pleasant to look at, and was very clean. But on the other hand there was this tiny spot where there was segregation with the Asians in a little corner. This was an unpleasant sight to look at. There were gravestones that were so small compared to the others, stones that were unreadable and unbearable to look at. Gravestones that have been broken off or chipped off. Grass that has been unmowed and untouched for days. Bits and pieces of scattered trash piled near the stones. Kids hanging where they’re not supposed to be. It seems like nobody cared. The flaw is that these are our ancestors who had to suffer through life. Yet they still do not rest in peace.13

In addition to the active, course-based participation of 1Mass Boston AsAmSt students, two other critical constituencies who frequently came on specifically targeted, educational field trips were high school students from metro Boston involved with the Coalition for Asian Pacific American Youth (CAPAY)—a pan-Asian youth leadership network established in 1993 and supported institutionally by the Asian American Studies Program following anti-Asian racial incidents in the Boston Public Schools—and K-12 teachers for professional development workshops. For the high school youth, the field trips represented a focused intervention to challenge the lack of Asian American Studies content in the public K-12 curriculum while connecting them directly with local Asian American history and community realities.14 Following a summer field trip to Mount Hope Cemetery in 2000, for example, Lily Chan, a 17-year old CAPAY youth, wrote this poem:

MT. HOPE
A deserted ground 
that no one wants
a waste of land
some spirits haunt
Forgotten corner
there lay the dead
of many Chinese
unwanted, unfed
Plants are growing
everywhere
a resting place
in need of care15

Two years later, following another summer field trip for CAPAY high school youth, Alexandra Chiu was one of several to articulate the awakened feelings of connecting her own cultural identity with history and social reality:

I had sooo many mixed feelings when I learned more and more about the place. I was sad because no one deserves to be given such a bad place when they die. Especially in Chinese culture, ancestors are really respected. The filth and the broken graves were horrifying. I was also angry that segregation could affect where you were placed when you died.16

Meanwhile, for the K-12 teachers, nearly all of whom were not Asian American themselves, the field trips similarly sought to challenge the lack of Asian American Studies content in the curriculum by providing examples, resources, and immersive experiences from local Asian American community history that well-intentioned practitioners could adapt for their own classroom instruction.17 In summer 2001, for example, a workshop for K-12 history and social studies teachers in Massachusetts on “Labor, Race, and Exclusion: The Early Chinese Community in Massachusetts” culminated with a field trip to Mount Hope. Participating teacher leader and trainer Sue Dargan noted at the time:

The visit to the cemetery left a lasting impression. First, it allowed me to feel the presence of the first members of Boston’s Chinese community. I could feel their isolation and despair. The burial site certainly leaves a clear indication of the status of this group of Americans. It is a visual reminder of the divisions in our country. I wanted to know more about the stories of each person buried there. . . . This visit reminds me of the cruelties of class and race in the United States. In death, our social order is still preserved. How can we develop any sense of unity in this country when some of our citizens are treated so disrespectfully?18

Despite their cultural, racial, generational, educational, and professional status differences, high school student Alexandra Chiu and highly trained teacher and educator Sue Dargan responded to their field trip experiences in much the same, humanistic way—suggesting that such learning was new and necessary for all parties, regardless of age or educational role. Similarly, Lily Chan’s poetic, seventeen-year-old voice was closely echoed by elementary school teacher Donna Maxwell, following her own July 2001 field trip:
MOUNT HOPE
In the weeds,
Chinese.
Gravestones all
leaning
randomly
like piano keys.
Their notes not synchronized,
the music ended
no one realized.19

By the mid-2000s, as the CHSNE-led campaign to construct the Chinese Immigrant Memorial at Mount Hope neared completion, community recognition of the site’s educational value and purpose—as facilitated by the Asian American Studies Program—had been widely embraced. At the formal public ceremony to dedicate the new memorial in March 2007—one week before Qingming—the campaign’s co-chairs, Bik Fung Ng and Deborah Dong, offered remarks and reflections on behalf of CHSNE. Following speeches by the city’s Director of Parks and Recreation and the president of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association—New England, Tinny Chan—a high school CAPAY youth leader—then spoke to the crowd of predominantly community elders, association leaders, and city officials about the importance of the younger generation’s participation:

Twelve high school students, including myself, visited Mt. Hope Cemetery [for the first time] while we were learning about the roles our ancestors played in starting a life for themselves and generations following them in America. I had been to cemeteries before, but never to one which had such a historical Asian American story behind it. It was a very different experience for me. I was never taught about Asian American history . . . I would like to thank everyone who contributed to the construction of the memorial. I would like to especially thank CHSNE, the community, and the city of Boston for their commitment to honoring the early generations of Asian Americans and finally giving a voice and name back to hundreds of Asian Americans who have been overlooked for decades.20

With the memorial project completed in spring 2007, the Asian American Studies Program, together with CAPAY, initiated a two-year educational project with CHSNE in order to continue involving youth with Mount Hope, and to more fully address Tinny’s fundamental critique of her own and her peers’ education in “never [being] taught about Asian American history.”

K-12 CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT
In fall 2007, CHSNE, AsAmSt, and CAPAY received funding from the national Save Our History (SOH) program of the cable television network The History Channel, which has the purpose of engaging young people in the preservation of their local history. The grant supported a core group of CAPAY youth and Asian American Studies undergraduates to develop leadership skills related to historical and intergenerational education by producing documentary resources and curricula focusing on Boston’s Chinese burial grounds.

Orientation and training activities during the projects first year included facilitating an Asian American history workshop about Mount Hope at CAPAY’s fall 2007 symposium attended by roughly one hundred Asian American high school students, followed by three field trips to Mount Hope for education and documentation. The core project team worked throughout the winter and spring, conducting interviews and reviewing archival documents and past photo/video footage. In spring 2008, project team members traveled to New York and Washington, D.C., where they met with staff members and volunteers of the Museum of Chinese in the Americas and the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Program to see the importance of Chinese American and Asian American historical preservation and interpretation done professionally for the public with institutionalized support. While in D.C., the project team was also able to visit the Chinese section of the George Washington Cemetery where the grounds were very well maintained—in sharp contrast to Mount Hope in Boston.

From this leadership development process, the video documentary team, led by Tri Quach, then produced specific educational resources for further use, including three five-minute video profiles based on the following themes:

- Student and youth involvement at Mount Hope Cemetery during the past decade
- History of the cemetery site and its significance to the Chinese community including the design, and community and cultural meanings of the immigrant memorial completed by CHSNE in 2007
- A portrait of one Chinese American young person (Jane Wai Lee) finding her grandfather’s grave at Mount Hope during a UMass Boston AsAmSt field trip

In addition, the curriculum resource team, led by Janet Hong Vo, also produced an educators’ guide developed specifically to support classroom use of the video products, based on six distinct lessons, each with related readings and activity suggestions:

- Lesson 1: Mount Hope Cemetery
- Lesson 2: Barriers and Passages
- Lesson 3: Boston’s Chinatown
- Lesson 4: Chinese Immigrant Memorial
- Lesson 5: Paper Sons
- Lesson 6: Chinese Americans Serving in the Military

With modest funding support, this collaborative project served to develop the leadership skills and sensibilities related to local community history for a core group of Asian American youth and Asian American Studies students. In assessing the project’s impact, a Vietnamese American student reflected:

I thought a lot about how much Mt. Hope Cemetery is significant to the field of Asian American Studies, and as a teaching
tool. There’s always discussion about oppression, racism, negligence, etc. and the condition of the cemetery and the history uncovered by CHSNE and community exposes the truth to us students. Not only as being an example of all of the above concepts, but as a way to challenge us and inspire us to think about what we can do as students and connect with what has already been done, to what we can possibly do. This made me think that we were going on beyond the step of exposing ourselves through simple observations. Instead, we are asked to take on an active and practical role in rebuilding the history of a community of early immigrants to the U.S.21

Indeed, through the production of new educational resources, including video documentary shorts and a K–12 curriculum resource guide, it extended the potential community and public impact of Mount Hope—making it possible to learn about the historical significance of Mount Hope without having to visit the site in person. Furthermore, it redefined the demand for more relevant Asian American Studies content in the curriculum by actually producing new materials rather than simply criticizing their absence. This generative perspective and process of creating new resources based on the educational value of Mount Hope also shaped the development of other projects, including a reinvestment in fresh groundwork on-site.

DIGITAL DATABASE DEVELOPMENT

While the SOH project unfolded, advanced Asian American Studies students directly reengaged with Mount Hope in fall 2007 through a series of painstaking visits to the three sections of the Chinese burial grounds (sections A, C, and E) in order to create new digital records for each gravestone. With the city’s official cemetery paper records in hand, students triangulated record by record, stone by stone, and plot by plot, confirming identities and noting discrepancies in location. When possible, they clarified or corrected the match between romanized English names in the cemetery files with the Chinese characters on the actual stones. Most importantly, for each plot, they produced a new record with name, plot location, other identifying information about the deceased from the stone, and digital photographs of the front and back of each stone. From their labor-intensive groundwork, the raw data for a new database in digital format were produced. Reflecting on the challenge and meaning of this hands-on process of archival reclamation and rectification, a Vietnamese American student wrote at length:

Many of the headstones were in complete Chinese, with information regarding which village that person was from. Roots were important to these people. But unless one can read Chinese and make an effort to read the headstones, it is so easy for that person to be overlooked and forgotten altogether. Thinking about it, if it had been one of my ancestors/family members who made their way to a foreign land to work and send money back home, having to deal with all the racial prejudices and disadvantage of being “foreign,” then dying here—buried in the back section of the cemetery with only a carved stone slab with all Vietnamese words that no one else can read, how would I feel? I realize that keeping our roots is not only something that we read about and intellectualize—it’s a culture that we maintain through practice, ritual, and application. We may not always get it right, in fact we may get it wrong a lot of the times, but it’s about our intentions and the conscious efforts we make to practice and learn. Honoring the dead is a tradition that we, the younger generation, have to consciously carry on through practice because our rituals in doing so are seen as so foreign, superstitious, and even backwards in America. In this kind of culture, it is so easy for our traditions to be literally wiped out.

When I uncovered many of the buried headstones, and in some case completely dig up them up, I wondered how long this person have been forgotten here. In order for their headstones to have fallen over and eventually be covered by dust and then a carpet of grass—it’s a long process that takes time. I wonder when the last time a living person had visited their grave, paid homage, or even thought about them. In many of these cases, we are one of the few people who paid attention to them in a long time…

Asian American Studies is not just an area of academic study in the classroom. It’s about the lives, histories, and stories of real people. It’s also about us and how their stories shape our lives and how we are a part in shaping this history together. We have to literally dig up a lot of our own stories and histories.22

Two years later, with the official cemetery records on paper realigned to match students’ gravestone-by-gravestone compilation of English and Chinese names and accompanying digital photographs, Laura Wai Ng—a uniquely skilled and dedicated graduate student in Historical Archaeology with an Asian American Studies focus at UMass Boston—took responsibility in 2010 and 2011 to create a searchable, relational database using FileMaker Pro. After completion and beta-testing, one copy of the full Mount Hope Chinese Burial Grounds digital database archive was donated to CHSNE and the original files are retained by the Asian American Studies Program at UMass Boston. Numerous private inquiries, usually from family descendants seeking information about a specific gravestone location that they wish to visit, have been successfully addressed since then.23

HONORING VETERANS

Other Asian American Studies commitments at Mount Hope continue as work in progress. For example, distinct from the digital database with searchable fields and available community access, a small but especially valuable archive of handwritten file cards has been protected privately for decades by a World War II veteran, William Seam Wong, one of the few surviving members of his generation.24 On his own without fanfare each year at the time of the Qingming Festival, Memorial Day, or Veterans Day, he had quietly placed small U.S. flags in front of several dozen gravestones at Mount Hope to honor their military service and sacrifice as U.S. veterans. Since many of the stones were chipped or eroded, and...
some had only Chinese characters to name the individual, it is impossible to identify or cross-reference the full roster of Chinese American veterans buried at Mount Hope without Seam Wong's file cards.

As noted earlier, the curriculum guide produced with SOH funding included a specific lesson on Chinese American military service. At the time of production in 2008, we had hoped to complete a video documentary about the stories of Chinese American veterans buried at Mount Hope, through the memories of Seam Wong, but his health condition that year did not allow him to participate—a reality that reflects the continuing urgency of doing community-based documentation with elders. We are hopeful, through our ongoing work with the American Legion Boston Chinatown Post 328, that the history of Boston's Chinese American veterans, including those buried at Mount Hope, will be more fully preserved and shared in the coming years, as the following vignette illustrates.²⁵

In fall 2009, Richard Sann, a second-generation Cambodian American student whose family came to Boston as second-wave refugees, was driving one of the lead cars of an eight-vehicle convoy with students from UMass Boston for an Asian American Studies field trip to Mount Hope Cemetery. Assigned as a lead driver because of his reliability and good road knowledge, Richard was laughing casually with those riding in his car until, after stopping at a red light and glancing across a particular intersection, his affect had turned serious, as if he had seen or remembered something troubling. After the light changed to green, Richard continued driving for the remainder of the short trip to the cemetery and its secluded Chinese section. Once there, familiar Asian American Studies rituals of incense-burning, story-sharing, historical connection, and reflection recurred, not unlike those that Sophia and her Asian American Studies classmates had offered fifteen years earlier during our very first course field trip to Mount Hope.

Richard's expression had shifted while stopped at the busy intersection where the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center had opened earlier in the year. As the largest mosque in New England, the Cultural Center's spectacular Islamic architecture, including a 140-foot minaret, had added a dramatic new view to Boston's urban streetscape. For Richard as a U.S. Marine Corps combat veteran who served in Iraq prior to his GI Bill–supported matriculation at UMass Boston, however, it was dramatic for a different reason. The experience of convoy-like driving with minarets in the distance was not new to him, and his brief flashback on the way to Mount Hope Cemetery represented a reminder of the long, seven-month deployment he had survived. After arriving, however, Richard also found an additional, unexpected connection amid the Chinese burial grounds where, interspersed among the 1,500 graves were individual stones with recognition of U.S. military service, primarily from the World War II era. Much in the same way that Sophia's offering of incense to the seemingly forsaken Chinese immigrant pioneers at Mount Hope had enabled her to reach her own mother, who had not been able to escape from the Khmer Rouge genocide, Richard was able to make his own direct connection to earlier generations of Asian American veterans resting in peace, each with legacies of military service and sacrifice that he also shared.²⁶

CONCLUSIONS

Boston's public cemetery embodies the profound historical, cultural, and spiritual meanings of Chinese immigrant burial grounds locally, nationally, and in other diasporic regions globally.²¹ These sites deserve respect, care, and continued attention not only by the small numbers of family members who take personal responsibility for their own ancestors but also because of their potential educational power, particularly when engaged over time by programmatic commitments to student- and community-centered documentation, teaching, and capacity-building in Asian American Studies.

Although much of the visible public interest in Mount Hope from the city and community culminated with the completion of CHSNE's Chinese Immigrant Memorial campaign in 2007, Asian American Studies students from UMass Boston have continued to participate directly in significant production, education, and database digitization projects as well as ongoing, course-based field trips ever since, just as individual families and family associations continue their own traditional practices of "mountain walking" (tí Shān) and "tomb sweeping" each year.²⁸ In the process, they have shown that the Chinese burial grounds are not only meaningful to older generations in Chinese communities. Indeed, as noted by one of the active Vietnamese American students involved with various Mount Hope activities in recent years:

Many of Boston's Asian American communities are still in their early stages of development, particularly the Southeast Asian communities. I can understand that these communities are so busy settling and establishing themselves that they are not looking to document their early experience. I think this will continue to happen as the older generations begin to age and think to preserve their history and presence in their respective communities, just like the CHSNE organization developed just a couple of decades ago. This leaves the question as to, How long do we have to wait before we begin to archive and collect the individual, immigrant, refugee, family and community histories? ... For example, there could be another organization parallel to the CHSNE, which could be for the Vietnamese, Cambodian, or just Southeast Asian communities of New England.

It is necessary to start all of this education and training when the younger generations are in high school or primary school. Including these histories into the curriculum is an accurate representation of the community. We can't leave it solely to the field of Asian American Studies, which is offered in higher education, as the main source of educating the Asian American youth about their family and community history.²⁹
If and when such important initiatives take root in our local Vietnamese or Cambodian communities, we will certainly do our share of fresh groundwork in Asian American Studies. At the same time, as Mount Hope Cemetery field trips and projects also continue into the foreseeable future, we still occasionally find areas of the Chinese sections marked by trash, weeds, animal feces, and graffiti. This regrettable reality of racialized segregation and after-death disrespect on public land compels us not only to reassert demands for city security and community care but also to further extend the proactive preservation and “clear, bright” educational praxis across generations that Asian American Studies has modeled in “walking the mountain” for more than two decades.

Figure 1. UMass Boston students Amanda Ung, Shih Shinke, Roxana Cheng, Sonny Le, and Vanessa Peralta preparing incense during a spring 2004 Asian American Studies field trip to the historic Chinese burial grounds at Mount Hope Cemetery in Boston. (Courtesy of Peter Nien-chu Kiang)

Figure 2. Harry Chin’s overturned gravestone photographed during an Asian American Studies field trip in September 2005, showing he was born in Taishan in 1882—the year that Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act. (Courtesy of Peter Nien-chu Kiang)

Figure 3. Evidence of Chinese American military service in the historic Chinese burial grounds at Mount Hope Cemetery in Boston, from an Asian American Studies field trip in April 2006. (Courtesy of Peter Nien-chu Kiang)
Figure 4. Boston Chinatown community leaders and elders at the public dedication of the new Chinese Immigrant Memorial at Mount Hope Cemetery, following nearly eighteen years of effort by the Chinese Historical Society of New England (CHSNE), on March 24, 2007. (Courtesy of Peter Nien-chu Kiang)

Figure 5. High school student Tinian Chan speaking on behalf of the Coalition for Asian Pacific American Youth (CAPAY) at the dedication of the Chinese Immigrant Memorial at Mount Hope Cemetery on March 24, 2007. (Courtesy of Peter Nien-chu Kiang)

Figure 6. UMass Boston Asian American Studies students, Chu Yu Huang and Judy Mai, on October 26, 2007, contributing to the field research process that enabled the production of a comprehensive digital database with bilingual, searchable information linked to nearly every gravestone, plot, and cemetery record associated with the Chinese burial grounds at Mount Hope Cemetery. (Courtesy of Peter Nien-chu Kiang)
Figure 7. Ironic conditions of care and isolation in the Chinese burial grounds, section A, at the time of the Qingming Festival in April 2011. (Courtesy of Peter Nien-chu Kiang)

Figure 8. UMass Boston Asian American Studies students Thomas Chan and Sharon Cheng offering incense in the Chinese burial grounds, section E, during a fall 2015 field trip, twenty-two years after the first field trip to Mount Hope by students taking the same course, Boston's Asian American Communities AsAmSt 423L. (Courtesy of Peter Nien-chu Kiang)
NOTES

2. For a map of the cemetery site, see www.chsne.org/PDFs/Mt_Hope_map_with%20highlights.pdf.
3. This article reflects more than two decades of collaborative work between the Asian American Studies Program at UMass Boston, the Chinese Historical Society of New England, and the Coalition for Asian Pacific American Youth, as well as the leadership contributions of numerous individuals, including Deborah Dong and Bik Fung Ng who cochaired the Mount Hope Cemetery Chinese Immigrant Memorial Project for CHSNE, Laura Ng who digitized the burial records while serving as a graduate student in Historical Archaeology and a teaching/research assistant in Asian American Studies at UMass Boston, and Janet Hong Vo who coordinated the Mount Hope Curriculum Education Project as an Americorps Vista staff in the Asian American Studies Program at UMass Boston. I led or directly participated in each of the examples referenced in this article, including course instruction and all field trip documentation.
6. For comparison of Boston with a contemporaneous Chinese burial ground site in Portland, Oregon, from the 1920s through the 1940s, see the well-documented 2009 film by Ivy Lin, "Come Together Home," http://ivilyinstoryteller.com/storytelling-in-film/come-together-home. An additional example from the same time period that illustrates the role of community associations in the process of shipping bones back to Hong Kong and China for reburial is highlighted in media reporting about the disinterment of some 800 deceased Chinese from Los Angeles cemetery graves in July 1937, coordinated by the local Ning Yung Association (寧總會) and officially assisted by the Chinese consulate in Los Angeles where, interestingly, my grandfather, Yi-zeng Kiang (江基審), served as consul from 1934 to 1937. For an example of press coverage, see "Chinese Dead Disinterred for Journey to Homeland," Los Angeles Times, July 8, 1937, A1-A2.
19. Ibid.
23. After completing her master's thesis in Historical Archaeology at UMass Boson, based on fieldwork at the Manzanar Japanese American incarceration site, Laura Ng entered the PhD program in anthropology at Stanford where she is focusing on the historical archaeology of the Chinese diaspora and developing a project researching historic Chinese American communities in the Owens Valley.
24. For a photo of William Seam Wong in uniform as a member of the 14th Air Service Group in 1943, see Wing-kai To and Chinese Historical Society of New England, Images of America, 97.
25. The historic role of American Legion Boston Chinatown Post 328 with leaders from World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War generations is significant, its contemporary revitalization with younger Asian American veteran leaders who served during the contemporary Iraq and Afghanistan era—including several who graduated from UMass Boston with academic concentrations in Asian American Studies and recently served in commander and vice-commander positions for the post—is a remarkable story that we continue to document. For
a photo of the founding installation and banquet of the post from 1945, see Wing-kai To and Chinese Historical Society of New England, Images of America, 104; for current Post 328 activities, see www.facebook.com/BostonChinatownPost328.


27. A global email listserv focusing on Chinese cemetery studies is accessible via https://lists.uidaho.edu/mailman/listinfo/chinese-cemetery-studies.
