This volume, edited by Sue Fawn Chung and Priscilla Wegars, contains a number of invaluable reports of archaeological findings on Chinese death-ritual practices in America in the 19th and 20th centuries. It looks at the migration history of the overseas Chinese from a special angle, and sheds new light on our understanding of the living culture — through studying the dead — of the early Chinese sojourners in the West.

The book contains an introduction and eight chapters which provide rare historical data on Chinese burials, funerary rites and grave objects as well as accounts of early Chinese migration. As the editors rightly claim, the book “survey[s] Chinese American funerary rituals and cemeteries from the late nineteenth century until the present in order to understand the importance of Chinese funerary rites and their transformation through time” (p. 1). It also investigates the meanings of death rituals and how funerary practices have continued to survive in an alien environment while being transformed through adaptation to the American ways of life. By looking into the changes of death practices, the editors suggest that Chinese Americans have demonstrated flexibility in resolving the tensions of assimilation by incorporating mainstream American culture into the Chinese heritage. A theme upheld by most of the chapters is that both the preservation of heritage and the transformation of traditional rituals regarding death have occurred in the living process of the Chinese diaspora.

Paul G. Chace in Chapter 2 describes the Cantonese rites of death and ghost-spirits in Marysville, California, where the Chinese population multiplied during the gold rush in the mid-19th century. The author notes that death practices among the Chinese were varied. While important and wealthy Chinese conducted elaborate death ceremonies with processions of hearses and wagons, others, like laborers or single men who migrated alone and had no families of their own in the US, could be interred without any ceremony.

As pointed out by a number of the authors, at times of meager family support, the deceased were taken care of by voluntary associations (huiguan), such as the Siyi Huiguan in Marysville (Chapter 2), the Guangzhou Huiguan in California (Chapter 8) and those in Oahu in Hawaii (Chapter 6). Apart from providing support in funerary matters, these associations also fought for the welfare of their fellow clansmen (tongxiang), such as in securing new burial land for the Chinese and engaging in other charity work. During the early sojourning years, many Chinese cherished the hope of returning to China for retirement. For those who
died in America, their body remains were often sent back to China. Sending bones back to China was another important function of the *huiguan*. Certainly, apart from organizing death rituals, these associations had a number of social and economic roles to play in the expansion and development of the Chinese communities in America.

The situation was similar in Hong Kong in the early 20th century. Many deceased paupers and poor families of the dead were assisted by charity organizations, such as the Tung Wah Group, which arranged and held the burials and funerals. The Tung Wah Group also established a number of simple funeral pavilions in various places in Hong Kong for poor families to conduct simple funerary rites before the burial. It also conducted numerous negotiations with the British colonial government over the issue of moving the Chinese cemeteries to remote areas to make room for urban development. One interesting point mentioned by Chung and Wegars is that many of the human remains from America were sent back to China through Hong Kong, and the Tung Wah Hospital played a supportive role in this matter.

Chapters 3 and 4 provide detailed archaeological data of excavated Chinese cemeteries in Virginiatown, California, and Carlin, Nevada. In analyzing the excavated grave objects, the authors have come to the conclusion that Chinese migrants were gradually changing their traditions and adopting the American style in clothing, hairstyle, and burial hardware. One prominent theme in most of the chapters is the adaptation and acculturation of the Chinese in the American environment. In terms of death rituals, the Chinese were employing American brass bands, holding funerary ceremonies in local undertaker chapels, adopting Christian funerals, engaging American ministers and morticians, and incorporating English grave markers. Wendy L. Rouse in Chapter 3 stresses that Chinese migrants were “flexible and adaptive even in death” (p. 104). Most authors have concluded that the Chinese in America gradually became acculturated; they were immigrants rather than sojourners (see Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7).

Another piece of evidence is the fact that since the early 20th century, the practice of shipping human bones back to China for reburial has diminished. This shows that by the mid-20th century, many Chinese in America had taken America as their adopted homeland. The shipment of human remains back to China was further discouraged in 1937 during the Japanese invasion of China. In 1949, with the establishment of the communist regime in China, such practice came to a halt completely. While this shows that Chinese sojourners have finally settled into American society, a reverse trend has taken place of removing ancestors’ remains from the family graves in China and sending them to America for “reunion” with the families. Rather than seeing this as evidence for Chinese settlement and assimilation, Roberta S. Greenwood in Chapter 8 argues that the new trend of moving ancestors from China to America indicates a need to reinforce the sense of