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## Ancient Chinese ritual comes to Oakland's Chapel of the Chimes

By: Mark Hedin  
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*Members of the Telegraph Avenue Minh Yueh Jin Shyh Buddhist Temple pay their respects at an altar set up as part of Ching Ming festivities at Chapel of the Chimes on Piedmont Avenue in Oakland on April 1, 2017.  
Photo by Mark Hedin/Bay Area News Group*

OAKLAND — Hundreds of firecrackers and the pounding of large Tanggu drums provided an unusual experience at the Chapel of the Chimes crematory and columbarium on April Fool's Day.

All that noise and commotion had a solemn purpose: It was part of Ching Ming, a custom thousands of years old in China, in which people honor and celebrate their deceased ancestors.

The lion dancers, accompanying firecrackers, drumming and cymbals arrived in a van full of students from the San Francisco chapter of the international [Yau Kung Moon](#) martial arts organization, including several visitors from Australia.

"We're Taoists, but Buddhism was and is a major part of Chinese culture. The lion is symbolic of bowing to deities. This is a celebration time to bring in the spirits and send good luck to the dead and celebrate with them. This is a big deal," said the group's leader, Norman Lau.

The firecrackers are about scaring away evil spirits, he said.

Five representatives of the Telegraph Avenue Minh Yueh Jiu Shyh Buddhist Temple had assembled two altars at Chapel of the Chimes, and blessed them with chanting, readings and music softly played on a small drum, wooden percussion instruments, bells, bowls and a small gong.

The five, Chinese immigrants, arranged offerings of incense, apples, water, oranges, buns, mushrooms and other food, including tofu renderings of shrimp and other seafood dishes, on the altars as a type of “sutra,” Hoang Truong said.

Ching Ming ceremonies traditionally coincide with spring planting, set at the 106th day after winter solstice, and at harvest time in the fall. So there will be another Ching Ming ceremony in September.

“Growing up in Western society, we lose our connection. This gives us a way to connect with our culture,” said Yau Kung Moon’s Johnny Leung, visiting from Australia.

“The whole family will gather together and go to the grave to clean it, bring flowers, gather together and talk,” Truong said. Given the brief time they have been in the country, with few graves to tend, such celebrations often are held at home or at temples, she said.

Truong tapped a small drum and chimed a bell at intervals in the chanting. She was accompanied by the group’s leader, Quang Truong, who chimed a small gong as he led the chanting from a position at the altar’s left side.

Across from him, Minh Truong kept a rhythm on the serrated scales of two wooden fish, called mokugyo or muyu. A few feet farther from the altar, at his right, Thanh Quach chanted and sounded a small set of cymbals. Opposite him, Tohoa Hong augmented her chanting with another small, brass percussion instrument.

“We are here to suffer. We try to cultivate ourselves to not come back to suffering,” Hoang Truong said.

She described various sutras, such as abstinence from killing, gambling, drinking, smoking and sexual misconduct. “If you make good karma, you might go to the Pure Land and become Buddha. We try, but it’s hard,” she said.

“Maybe they (Chapel of the Chimes) want more and more people to know the Chinese culture. There are a lot of Chinese here. This introduced our culture to the community,” Hoang Truong said.

“We serve quite a big Buddhist community,” said Chapel of the Chimes’ location manager David Madden, who helped organize the commemoration.

The five conducting the altar ceremonies were lay people, not monks, Hoang Truong said.

“This is a serene place, but we adapt to the traditions of the people who are there in that moment,” he said, while allowing that the day’s events may have been the loudest he had experienced there.