NOTES FOR A VISIT TO THE GOVERNMENT CEMETERY AT HAPPY VALLEY*  

CARL T. SMITH

The writer of an article entitled "Lest We Forget" published in the South China Morning Post 6 June 1913 describes the Colonial Cemetery as "an extremely beautiful spot, for all around is to be seen the rugged grandeur of nature's own handiwork; the free elemental play of stream and sky and mountain — a truly wonderful background, and a magnificent object lesson of the infinitude and vastness of things". The description might be viewed as a western counterpart of Chinese feng shui. Whether the site of the cemetery and its graves really conform to proper feng shui principles must be left to a qualified geomancer.

A Chinese view of the proper aspect of a cemetery was expressed by Mr. Lau Chu-pak, a leader of the Chinese community, in a discussion concerning cemeteries at a meeting of the Sanitary Board in 1909. He quoted Confucius as saying that burial places should not resemble pleasure gardens, rather they should be in harmony with those who weep and mourn. (Weekly Press 17 April 1909)

The first Protestant burial ground

The Colonial Cemetery — it is now called the Government Cemetery — in Happy Valley was opened in 1845. Previously Europeans were buried at a Protestant and a Roman Catholic Cemetery which adjoined each other in Wanchai. They were located on the slope of the hill above Queen's Road East extending upward to the vicinity of the present Kennedy Road, in the general area of the present Sun, Moon, Star and St. Francis Streets.

The earliest date of burial on the forty-eight monuments removed from the old Protestant Cemetery to the Colonial

* 15th March, 1984
Cemetery in 1889 is June 1841 and the latest date is January 1845.

After the new cemetery was opened, the old was allowed to fall into neglect. An article in the *China Mail* of 23 November 1865 calls public attention to the desecration of the abandoned cemetery. "Part of it", the writer says, "has been cut away for building lots, where now stand some tenantless houses, and day after day headstones are stolen by the Chinese to be refaced and sold to some newly-made mourners".

The remaining stones were removed in 1889 and the ground was sold for development. Upon a part of it Hong Kong's first electric power plant was built.

*The new cemetery at Happy Valley*

A large tract of land on the hill on the west side of Happy Valley was designated in 1845 as cemeteries for Protestants and Roman Catholics. St. Michael Cemetery, administered by the Roman Catholic Church, lies to the north of the Colonial Cemetery.

In the same year that the cemetery was opened a mortuary chapel was built. The cemetery was placed under the charge of the Colonial Chaplain, who kept a register of burials. Maintenance costs were borne by the Government as a part of the Ecclesiastical Establishment. The first burial record book begins in 1853 with grave number 807. By the end of the century the cemetery was placed under the jurisdiction of the newly created Sanitary Board.

There were complaints about the state of the cemetery in 1865. An article in the *China Mail* (23 November 1865) stated that it was nearly full. At the time there had been some 3,100 burials. The writer expressed the hope that "Happy Valley will ever be sacred to the dead, and that we never again behold in Hong Kong a graveyard desecrated and as filled as was that to the south of Queen's Road East by St. Francis Hospital". He made some suggestions "so that the Happy Valley Cemetery be
made an ornament and not a disfigurement”. He thought it not proper that the Colonial Chaplain had been turning his ponies loose to graze in the cemetery, though he had no complaint about the grounds-keeper, Mr. Donaldson, who kept things in order, reduced “over luxuriant foliage”, and in bare places planted trees and shrubs. He suggested that for a trifling cost the bare blank walls along the road could be made more ornamental. The south end of the cemetery, however, was unenclosed and, as far as he knew, unconsecrated. He suggested this portion, “rising in a rapid slope, could be greatly improved if it were grassed and flowering shrubs planted”. Even at the date covetous eyes were cast towards the proceeds from the races, “Could not the Race Committee spare a few dollars that flew so plentifully into its coffers, for the purpose of improving the appearance of the site of their annual sports. We have more than once suggested that the centre of the race course should be laid out and planted, but we should rather see the cemetery beautified and cared for”.

Colonial Cemetery Ordinances — the problem of Japanese and Chinese burials

The Public Health and Buildings Ordinance (No. 1 of 1903) included an article setting aside separate sections of the cemetery for special groups: naval and military commissioned officer, civil servants, residents of more than twenty-one years standing, residents of more than seven years standing, children and destitutes.

Several conditions remained that created dissatisfaction in sections of the community. One was the burning of joss sticks and the firing of crackers at graves of non-Christians. The other was the absence of what were considered proper sites for the burial of wealthy Chinese with resulting periodic requests for burial of such in the Colonial Cemetery. These issues came before the Sanitary Board in 1908-1909, and resulted in the Christian Cemetery Ordinance of 1909.

The joss stick and cracker problem was principally related to Japanese burials. The first Japanese burials were on terraces where their graves were intermingled with Christians. Later a
special section of the cemetery — somewhat isolated — had been set aside for the burial of Japanese. The Japanese had no cemetery of their own. When their numbers began to increase after the turn of the century, the practices associated with their graves created annoyance among expatriates who thought such customs were not appropriate in what they considered to be a cemetery set apart for the burial of Christians.

As the years passed some of the wealthy Chinese increasingly desired a proper place for the burial of their dead. There were cemeteries for the Chinese, but wealthy members of the community did not regard the conditions of burial in such as suitable to meet their needs. In 1901 the Cemeteries Committee of the Sanitary Board moved to set apart a piece of hillside between the Aberdeen Channel and Deep Water Bay for wealthy Chinese (China Mail, 12 July 1901). For some reason this site did not meet the needs of the group for whom it was intended, for in 1909 a correspondent to the Daily Press claimed that “The question of proper cemeteries for Chinese has not been approached courageously at all. The authorities for some reason or other seem afraid of it. When the better class of Chinese recently sought a burial ground for their dead, they learned that the Government did not approve of the site suggested at Pokfulam, but no reason was given. Surely the better class of Chinese, whom the Government wish to settle here, have some claims for consideration and respect.” (Weekly Press, 17 April 1909) Their cause was presented to the Sanitary Board by one of its Chinese members, Mr. Lau Chu-pak. In his view, “the better class of Chinese who had made Hong Kong their permanent home had not a decent cemetery in which to bury their dead, and the Chinese had no control on what were called Chinese Cemeteries. These cemeteries were simply tracts of barren land set apart by the Government for the burial of the Chinese dead of any class. The Government reserved the right of resuming the land and ordering the remains to be exhumed and buried anywhere else the Government might from time to time be pleased to direct”. (Weekly Press, 17 April 1909)

In February 1909 an application was made to the Sanitary Board by a wealthy Chinese to use some land near Inland Lot
1415 as a place for private burial. The Board appointed a committee to investigate (Weekly Press, 20 February 1909). It reported back to the Board in April with the opinion that it was not advisable for land to be disposed of for isolated detached cemeteries. By way of concession it recommended that, “If, however, any Chinese of affluent circumstances wishes to have space reserved as a private graveyard, remission might be given for an area to be so reserved, and railed off, whether in an existing Chinese cemetery or on land adjoining such a cemetery — at a rate of $2 per square foot, same as grave spaces in Class D of Chinese Cemeteries.” (Weekly Press, 3 April 1909).

But this arrangement did not fully satisfy those who wanted better accommodations for their dead. A satisfactory solution was finally arrived at in 1913 when land was set apart at Aberdeen (Aberdeen Inland Lot No. 78) for a permanent cemetery for Chinese permanently resident in the Colony. The cemetery was under the control of a Board of Management made up of recognised leaders of the Chinese community. These who had resided in the Colony for eight years, and had subscribed $100 — later increased to $500 — were entitled to graves, however, no more than four grave spaces were to be allotted for one coffin. Part of the problem of a satisfactory cemetery arrangement for wealthy Chinese was their wish to have a traditional horseshoe-shaped grave, a form which could use a great deal of space. The more area a grave included, the more important the person, and the greater the public statement of the wealth and position of the family.

In February 1909 the Sanitary Board considered an application from the son of a deceased Chief Interpreter of the Supreme Court for permission to exhume the body of his father that he might be reburied in 2 larger sites in the same cemetery along with 2 sons, and two of his wives, who were to be exhumed from the cemetery for Chinese at Mount Caroline.

This request added fuel to the fire which was burning over the presence of Japanese Buddhist graves among those of Christians. One of the European members of the Board protested “against allowing our cemetery to be used for re-interment of bodies from
Chinese Cemeteries”. The senior Chinese representative on the Board, Mr. Lau Chu-pak, was quick to detect any signs of racial discrimination. He asked if bodies from cemeteries other than Chinese could be re-buried in the cemetery.

The Board sent a letter to the Colonial Secretary in April requesting that Government should allot a piece of ground for burial of Buddhists. This could be done immediately, so it was proposed by the Governor in Council that a new ordinance be drafted to set aside the major part of the Colonial Cemetery for the burial of Christians only. In transmitting this decision to the Sanitary Board, the Colonial Secretary reminded the Board that the proclamation to the Chinese in 1841 by Captain Elliott had guaranteed the free practice of religion to all nations and creeds, and as the Buddhists — meaning the Japanese — had no place other than the Colonial Cemetery to bury their dead, he suggested that the Board suspend, for the time being, the enforcement of the bye-law regarding joss sticks and crackers.

The two Chinese representatives of the Board expressed their dissatisfaction with recent proposals by some members of the Board which they considered would make the cemetery exclusively European and Christian. Mr. Lau Chu-pak reminded the meeting that the cemetery was open to every resident of the Colony, irrespective of nationality and religion, though, he admitted it was probably originally intended for persons of the Protestant faith as there had been special cemeteries provided for Chinese, Muslims and Roman Catholics — he did not mention the Jews and Parsees which had their own cemeteries also. He looked back in history, saying that, “In the early days, when there was a Colonial Chaplain, what was more natural than that he should describe the cemetery at which he officiated as the Colonial Cemetery, meaning thereby the cemetery of the Colonial Church”, and he also acknowledged that the official Government Gazette had been referring to it as the Protestant Cemetery. In spite of the use of those names, Mr. Lau contended that the cemetery was a public one, as it was public property and maintained at public cost. He acknowledged that the general Chinese community did not use the cemetery. The Chinese who did, he said, were largely British born, British naturalized,
Christians or Eurasians. He expressed the opinion that such groups had given up their heritage — he himself was an ardent Confucian and promoted the building of the Confucian Hall in Sookunpoo. He sarcastically added that “as people had already been admitted into the European paradise on earth, he thought it was scarcely fair to debar them from using the passage to the European paradise in heaven”. (The Weekly Press, 17 April 1909)

The Hong Kong Telegraph took up the cause — Lau Chu-pak was one of its owners. Following the April meeting of the Sanitary Board in which Mr. Lau had expressed the opinions given above, it ran an editorial entitled “More Class Legislation in Hongkong”. The editorial linked the cemetery question with what the paper regarded as growing movement towards the enactment of class legislation. “The fact of the matter is that this sort of petty municipal legislation is all of a piece with the policy of the Government in reserving special lands for the bon ton of the Colony. First, they decreed that in life the Chinese should not live in the vicinity of the Peak and now in death the Chinese are not deemed fitting occupants of lairs in the public cemetery.” The editor asked for consideration for the Chinese who were seeking a better deal for their dead: “Fancy the outcry there would be among the elite if the remains of the deceased of their predecessors were subjected to removal at the whim and caprice of some insignificant official in a Government Department. That in itself should constitute a plea for the Chinese that they have a right of interment in the Colonial Cemetery.” Indeed, “the Colonial or Protestant — or whatever fancy name anybody might wish to call it — the public cemetery of Hong Kong is maintained out of the rates and taxes provided by the residents in the Colony. It is no more a private institution than the public gardens. No sect or body has a right to say that it has any particular claim on the domain, as far as we can make out, all have an equal right to interment”.

The Christian Cemetery Ordinance of 1909

The Government decided to draft legislation which would create separate sections in the cemetery where only those
professing the Christian religion could be buried and that such sections be consecrated. An area in an isolated part of the cemetery would be designated for the burial of non-Christians. The Ordinance set apart certain Crown Land to be used as a burial ground for persons professing the Christian religion and had its first reading in Legislative Council in November 1909.

There was some ambiguity between the title and the memorandum which accompanied the proposed bill. One spoke of the Colonial Cemetery, the other of the Protestant Cemetery. The original draft of the bill also excluded the burial of Roman Catholics. The Attorney General explained that they had been excluded because “The Church of Rome had been in possession for years of a portion of the English Cemetery.” A separate piece of ground under the administration of the Catholic Church was immediately to the north of the Colonial Cemetery.

As an explanation for the introduction of the Bill, the Governor told the Council, “I think everybody is aware of the fact that there has been a good deal of discussion at the Sanitary Board and elsewhere on the subject of Chinese interment in the Colonial Cemetery. The Colonial Cemetery, so far as I can ascertain from a study of the archives, has always been open to any person irrespective of race or creed. It has now been desired that there should be a certain portion set aside for Christian interment. The Bishop presented to me a joint request from the representatives of the Church of England and various denominations of the Colony that a portion of the Colonial Cemetery should be dedicated for Christian burial”. A member of the Council asked if Christians other than Protestants would be excluded, such as Nestorian and Armenian Christians. The Governor replied that this was an ecclesiastical problem which should be left to the ecclesiastical authorities. At a subsequent meeting of the Legislative Council the Governor stated that he had been approached privately regarding the situation of Roman Catholic who were Freemasons and who were not allowed to be buried in the Roman Catholic Cemetery. He consulted the Anglican Bishop who assured him there would be no difficulties regarding their burial in the proposed consecrated section of the cemetery. A question was asked if in the separation of sections
there were Christians buried in the portion designated for non-Christians, as, in the opinion of the questioner, "It is rather rough on the relatives to be buried in the non-Christian burial ground". His Excellency, The Governor, replied, "They won't be any worse off than they were before". (Hong Kong Hansard 1909, p. 79, 85-86, 142, 168)

The questioner reminded the Governor that he had said relatives, not bodies. With the introduction of the Ordinance the Hong Kong Telegraph again spoke out: "Here in Hong Kong there are a few persons who while still in the prime of life are prepared to work themselves into a miniature passion about the conditions under which they may finally return to that whence they came. Not only so, but they are determined to carry out their class prejudices beyond the tomb. Is it possible that there will be choice selections of land, and Ordinances, similar to that known as the Peak Reservation Ordinance, in heaven? Are the Chinese and Japanese to be relegated to the slums of paradise, while the "hupper suckles" [upper circles] loll and lounge on the grassy swards of the golden river, secure against intrusion by the vulgar rabble!"

The editor noted that Mr. Hewett in objecting to a distinction being made between residents of seven years' and of twenty years' residence had said, "We are all equal". Indeed, wrote the editor, "That is exactly what we have been contending, but we have a suspicion that Mr. Hewett really meant we are all equal where we are Europeans and that his remark did not apply to people of the Asiatic race. But he struck the root of the matter when he declared that all mortals are equal in the grave, for it is incredible to believe that all this pushing for precedence and squabbling for place will follow us to the next world". (Hong Kong Telegraph, 10 November 1909)

A dedication ceremony was held at the cemetery on 30 March 1910 by the Anglican Bishop assisted by clergy of other denominations. In his remarks before the act of consecration the Bishop set forth the reason for the ceremony. "A portion of this most beautiful cemetery has been for upwards of sixty years the burial place of the bodies of brave men and noble women and innocent
children who laid down their lives here, and according to their measure have served their country and built up the prosperity of this Colony. Their sacred bodies in themselves amply consecrated the original cemetery and made it holy ground in our estimation. For their hallowed resting place no further dedication was necessary. But recently large additions have been made to the ground and an Ordinance has been passed setting aside certain Crown Land for persons professing the Christian religion of whatever denomination". (Hong Kong Telegraph, 1 April 1910)