DEATHSPACE IN HONG KONG, GUANGZHOU AND SEOUL: A REVIEW OF RECENT RESEARCH, 1995-2001

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Abstract

This paper introduces and summarises nine published papers on deathspace (urban cemeteries and columbaria) in Hong Kong, in Guangzhou, and in Seoul. It includes a paper on feng shui co-written with C. S. Chow. One paper examines the non-material worlds of Hong Kong’s cemeteries, and identifies these as the worlds of the spirits, of feng shui, and of ritual time. Another focuses on grave furnishings, taking several graves as examples, including a symbolic grave (i.e. not containing remains). Case studies of four very different Hong Kong cemeteries are the topic of another paper. The architectural response to the need for buildings to contain ashes (cremains) is featured in a paper on Hong Kong’s columbaria. This paper also summarises the shift from coffin burial to cremation in Hong Kong from the 1960s. A further paper examines the heritage significance of Hong Kong’s urban cemeteries, interpreting this in terms of their being places of tribute, as well as being material forms of the historical and contemporary social fabric. An historical perspective is provided through a paper that traces how deceased Chinese sojourners were brought back from overseas to their ancestral places around the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Agendas shaping contemporary deathspace in Guangzhou are identified in another paper. Finally, in South Korea, the influence of traditional grave shapes on contemporary designs for graves to store ashes is noted, as well as the urgency of an official campaign to persuade citizens to consider cremation rather than coffin burial.

Keywords: Hong Kong, Guangzhou, Seoul, deathspace, cemeteries, columbaria, cremation, feng shui.
Introduction

The purpose of this short paper is to introduce the research that I have carried out since 1995 on deathspaces, first of all in Hong Kong and later in Guangzhou and Seoul. My interest in this topic arose from a visit that I made to Wo Hop Shek Cemetery at Chung Yeung, 1995. I had just arrived in Hong Kong to join my husband, David, for what was meant to be a year’s leave of absence from my position as a geographer at the University of New England in New South Wales, Australia. I needed to find a nice, tidy topic of research that I could undertake in a few months of field work while in Hong Kong.

We were taken aback by the festival mood at Wo Hop Shek. It was a sunny day. There were endless streams of cheerful family groups going up and down the steep road. Stalls selling flowers, food and sunhats, or marketing tombstones and urns, were staffed by smiling men and women. There was a strong but low key police presence. Clouds of pungent incense floated around the columbarium, and ash fluttered down, settling on our shoulders. Late in the afternoon, flames crackled somewhere out of sight up in the hills and a fire engine raced up the road. No-one seemed to mind our presence or even notice us except to offer an occasional courteous nod.

I realised that this was a unique manifestation of time-space and one I wanted to know a lot more about. Fortunately, my time in Hong Kong has not been limited to that first year! When you begin researching issues relating to death in Chinese culture, you go right to the heart of beliefs and customs. I feel fortunate that I chose such an intriguing and fundamentally important topic.

In the research I eventually undertook, I concentrated on Hong Kong’s municipal cemeteries, provided by public and private organisations, and not on rural graves and graveyards. This made sense because of my background as a geographer teaching on a degree programme in Urban and Regional Planning. There are sensitive and important issues involved in planning for the provision of space for the dead. As a geographer rather than an anthropologist, I have been more interested in broad spatial issues than in the practices associated with funerals and burial. However, this does not mean that I see place as a passive object. Indeed, place is dynamic: it is a context for the activities
of those who use it. Places, their layout and furnishings, and their
associated activities, are crammed with meanings that can be identified
and analysed for what they tell us about people’s beliefs. Thus, the
sociologist Anthony Giddens suggests that one way to look at place is
as a ‘locale’, a ‘setting for interaction’. Activities come and go, but
places remain, with the traces of what has happened there. And
meanwhile, the shaping of a place will continue, both in terms of the
physical qualities of that place and in its image in the minds of those
for whom it has some significance.

As a result of my visit to Wo Hop Shek, and subsequently to many
of the other urban cemeteries in Hong Kong, I wrote several papers
about Hong Kong’s urban cemeteries and columbaria. In 1999, curious
to know how fifty years of Communist rule had affected the spatial
manifestation of death in a metropolitan landscape in mainland China,
I extended my research to Guangzhou. And, equally curious to find out
how a modern East Asian society with an uninterrupted tradition of
Confucian beliefs and customs was coping with the expression of death
in the landscape, I also arranged to carry out associated research in
Seoul, South Korea.

I refer to each paper below. In the published versions, each has a
long list of references. These are a valuable dimension of the published
work, as they offer a sound starting point to those wanting to carry out
related research. These lists represent hours of leafing through back
issues of journals, combing bookshelves, following up other researchers’
reference lists, collecting newspaper cuttings (and, in one case,
employing a Chinese-speaking research assistant to access a Guangdong
evening paper on line), and using electronic search tools to search and
download. The website of the Korea Herald was especially useful. As
well, of course, I used - especially for theoretical approaches - articles
in recent issues of those professional journals to which I subscribe.
Very important were the occasional and invaluable recommendations
of ‘You had better get hold of this....’ from RAS members! Personal
introductions have helped, too.

In fact, several members of the Royal Asiatic Society (Hong Kong
Branch) have been consistently generous and encouraging since I began
this research, and I owe a lot to them. Dan Waters, James Hayes and
Patrick Hase have kindly read several of the papers listed below and
commented on them, though of course I must accept responsibility for their content! Dr. Chow Chun Shing (Eddie), a geographer at Hong Kong Baptist University, has been a research collaborator, patient listener, and untangler of confusions, throughout these last few years. My husband, David, has been my indefatigable fieldwork partner in Hong Kong and, for a week, in Guangzhou. I have been very fortunate that the David C. Lam Institute of Hong Kong Baptist University has extended to me the privilege of being Scholar in Residence for most of my extended periods in Hong Kong. Australian Research Council grants have underpinned some of the costs of the research.


Although only published in 2001, this was my first attempt to write about Hong Kong’s municipal cemeteries. The first draft was written in 1996. It took a long time to get it into print, partly no doubt because it was a sort of ‘personal working paper’ in which I tried to clarify for myself the non-material worlds that suffuse the material landscapes of cemeteries. These worlds are, I suggest, the world of the spirits, the world of *fengshui*, and the world of ritual time.

Chinese colleagues at Hong Kong Baptist University - personal friends as well as those working in related fields, such as Dr C.S. Chow - were really helpful in these early stages, and several attended a Social Science Faculty seminar that I gave in 1996. Clearly, they were astonished that a non-Chinese should be interested in Chinese matters of death. I owe much to their patience and courtesy, and in particular to invitations from three colleagues to accompany them to their family graves and columbaria. It was encouraging, too, when I presented an early version of this paper to the Hong Kong Anthropology Society, and also at the Centre for Advanced Studies at the National University of Singapore, in each case receiving useful feedback which indicated I was on reasonably appropriate lines in my thinking about these non-material worlds of the cemeteries.

This paper focuses on the material objects of cemeteries: grave forms and furnishings. We looked in some detail at a new private grave in Junk Bay Cemetery, at the grave in the Aberdeen Chinese Permanent Cemetery (CPC) of the founder of what is now a Hong Kong-based sub-lineage, at a columbarium niche in the CPC older columbarium in Cape Collinson Cemetery, at a symbolic grave, and finally at a charitable grave, the last two both in the Sandy Ridge Cemetery. We pointed out that in Chinese culture, death is regarded as polluting; and that landscapes of death are regarded as potentially powerful, and are avoided except at festivals or on other appropriate occasions.

The paper was written for the very specialised *Journal of the American Association for Gravestone Studies*. Americans have for decades been fascinated by gravestones. Is this because it’s a settler society, much of whose history is told in its graveyards and cemeteries? If so, it’s an interesting cultural contrast that there isn’t the same public acknowledgement of the contribution that graveyards and cemeteries make to clarifying the identity of Hong Kong as a community as there is to the parallel contribution that the same type of spaces make regarding the identity of American communities. In both places, those who now reside in cemeteries and columbaria are, for the most part, immigrants. Note that one of the USA’s most respected human geographers, Wilbur Zelinsky, has written a couple of well-quoted papers on American cemeteries.

Where Chinese grave forms are concerned, Eddie Chow made an unexpected find in a bookshop while preparing this paper: a book on the different types of grave shapes in southern China: Bin He, *Jiang Zhe Han Zu Sang Zong Wen Hua (The Death and Burial Culture of the Han Nationality in Jiangsu and Zhejiang)*, Beijing, 1995. The scarcity of such material implies that the Chinese awe of death may well be hindering research into a field that is potentially of deep cultural significance in Chinese society.


The decision in the late 1950s to encourage Hong Kong residents to consider cremation rather than coffin burial, and the gradual acceptance of the policy over the succeeding decades, is intriguing. Over ninety per cent of Hong Kongers are cremated now, if we include
cremation after a few years in a coffin grave. This paper concentrates on columbaria in municipal cemeteries in Hong Kong, and contrasts the conservative designs of the public sector with the more expressive solutions of private providers. It contains the statistics about numbers of 'cremains' stored in niche walls and columbaria that I had obtained from cemetery managers, whose co-operation was invaluable. The statistics should be regarded as indicative rather than precise.

Death has to be planned for as much as life. Storing the dead is a sensitive issue, for the family as well as the state. The worldwide story of columbaria through the ages is one waiting to be told, although sporadic information is to be found in the key texts on cemetery history such as James Curl’s *A Celebration of Death* (1993) and *Silent Cities* (K.T. Jackson and C.J. Vergara, 1989). Columbaria pose an intriguing challenge to contemporary architects and some of the resulting designs can make for striking and imposing contemporary landscape artefacts. Compared with cemeteries, columbaria are much more focused and inward looking. Cemeteries have the advantage of being outdoors, with all the distractions of the fresh air, the sky, distant views, maybe trees and even some landscaping - though this is rare in Hong Kong, an exception being sections of the Hong Kong Cemetery in Happy Valley. Landscaping was a fundamental part of the design of new private cemeteries that I visited in Guangzhou.

How will cyberspace supplement and perhaps supplant the material memorial space of cemeteries and columbaria? Cemetery managers I interviewed in Guangzhou were already thinking about this.


In this paper, I tried to break away from the straightforward description and painstaking attempt to understand the social and belief systems that underpin cemetery layout and ritual. I tried to capture a little of the contrasting landscapes, symbolisms and moods of four of Hong Kong’s cemeteries: Diamond Hill Urn Cemetery (1931); Aberdeen Chinese Permanent Cemetery (1915); sprawling Sandy Ridge Cemetery on the border with Guangdong Province (1950); and St. Raphael’s Roman Catholic Cemetery, Lai Chi Kok (1946).
I wrote (p. 35) that ‘Rather than religious beliefs, it is lineage and ancestral place that are affirmed in non-Christian Chinese cemeteries. In contrast, in Chinese Christian cemeteries, the dead are gathered not into a secular fold but into the fold of the Church, and their graves affirm a very different concept of the meaning of human existence’.


This paper isn’t about cemeteries but grew out of my efforts to understand them. I was infuriated with the dismissive attitudes of western academic geographers to fengshui, so we somewhat provocatively took one of the most influential French spatial theorists, Henri Lefebvre, and compared the spatial principles of fengshui with his ‘moments’ of spatiality. In 1995 or 1996 I’d gone on an RAS field trip to Wo Hang village in the NE New Territories with Patrick Hase. Clearly, that village was typical of countless hundreds of others in China. Patrick himself had written about it in R.G. Knapp’s *Chinese Landscapes: the Village as Place* (1992), which contains other detailed examples of the pervasive influence of fengshui on the siting and layout of villages. Clearly, one cannot begin to understand the landscapes of which such villages are part without an appreciation of fengshui. Dr. Chow and I gave a talk about this theoretical approach to analysing fengshui at an RAS meeting in 1999.

While we were developing this paper, James Hayes told us about the eighteenth century Korean Yi Chung-Hwan’s T’Aengniji: the Korean classic for choosing settlements, newly translated into English by I.C. Yoon (1998). This book describes the geography of Korea and accords prime consideration to fengshui. By a wonderful coincidence, the International Geographical Union met in South Korea in 2000. I went on a four-day post-conference field trip organised by a Korean cultural geographer who - to the bemusement of many non-Koreans on the trip, but to my great delight - spent a lot of time pointing out how fengshui had shaped human geography in the heartland of South Korea, Andong Province.

Teather, E.K. (1999). The Heritage Significance of Hong Kong’s Chinese Cemeteries, *Proceedings of International Forum UNESCO, University and Heritage*, Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia,
Hong Kong’s urban cemeteries are of considerable historical significance, despite only a handful of existing cemeteries being over a hundred years old. They house the remains of many who came to establish their sub-lineages in Hong Kong in the twentieth century, some willingly and some reluctantly. As Tim Ko said about the Aberdeen Chinese Permanent Cemetery when we were interviewed there by Annemarie Evans of RTHK in June 2002, “These graves represent a Who’s Who of early twentieth century Hong Kong!”

I look at Hong Kong’s Chinese cemeteries in this short paper as, first, places of tribute; secondly, as a material part of social history and of contemporary social fabric; thirdly, as a material form of ‘memory palace’; and finally as material representations of the geomantic relations between humans and their physical world, through fengshui. The crowds that pay respects at Ching Ming and Chung Yeung are reaffirming relations between the living and the dead, the spirit and material worlds, and humans and their cosmos.

I think consideration could be given to erecting explanatory plaques and publishing informative leaflets about Hong Kong’s urban cemeteries. Schoolteachers would find these invaluable. Are school field trips to cemeteries too much to expect in a Hong Kong where people are still wary, to put it mildly, of setting foot inside a cemetery except at funerals and the appropriate festival times? Cemeteries are packed with history and rich in the ancient symbols of Chinese culture - a unique resource, and readily accessible.


This paper traces the return to China of remains of nineteenth-century and early twentieth century Chinese sojourners from Australia and New Zealand, through the agencies of relatives, friends, Regional Associations and the Tung Wah Hospital. An early version of this paper was delivered at the conference The Chinese Heritage of Australian Federation in Melbourne in July 2000 and is currently being considered for inclusion in the book that is to result from this conference. It got what can almost be described as a rapturous reception by a seventy-strong, predominantly Australian-Chinese audience, who clearly felt I was telling a history that belonged to them.
The paper began as a collection of notes squirreled from all sorts of sources, and as other information arose it grew almost on its own. For example, when I was in New Zealand for some months teaching at the University of Canterbury in 2001, a postgraduate student popped a just-published newspaper article on my desk about a shipload of Chinese coffins that had foundered on its way to China in 1902. Maori villagers had buried some beached remains with due respect.

The house where I'd lived in Dunedin for ten years had been close to a big cemetery, but I'd lived there in ignorance of the fact that there were Chinese graves there. By 2001 I had met Les Wong, a Kiwi Chinese who has made it his business to restore those graves and other Chinese graves in cemeteries close to the old gold-mining centres of Central Otago. Dunedin's Dr James Ng, who came to Otago as a child from Guangdong Province, sent me in late 2001 a copy of an autobiographical article which vividly brought to life the familial links (and breaks in links between 1949 and 1979) between Chinese family members in New Zealand and their home villages in Guangdong. I have appreciated the encouragement of both Les and James.


This paper describes three agendas that are shaping contemporary deathscapes in Guangzhou: the modernist planning agenda, the market economy, and the Chinese Communist Party ideology and resistance to it. It develops the concept of deathscapes into deathspace, ‘a symbolic system that represents a stage in the ongoing process of conflict and compromise involving the traditional and the modern, the personal and political, and the sacred and the secular’.

Preparing for this research was quite a challenge and I can’t imagine how I ever thought I’d find out what I wanted to know. An introduction from James Hayes led to my meeting Dr. May Bo Chan, from the Department of History at Zhongshan University. This department generously hosted my second week in Guangzhou and invited me to give a seminar. Existing links between Hong Kong Baptist University and Zhongshan University were invaluable.

An enormous stroke of luck was finding a superb and energetic
interpreter, a Hong Kong Baptist University doctoral graduate, Professor Zhang Meifang, without whose help I wouldn’t have got very far. After lengthy negotiation with the bureaucratic hierarchy, officials in the Guangdong Provincial Government were most generous, both in offering me a lengthy interview and also a guided tour of important sites, including the new Funeral Centre, then just approaching completion. Lots of additional fieldwork was necessary too, of course, by bus, taxi and on foot in that dusty, confusing, reconstructing and ancient city.


In order to accomplish this piece of work, conceived of as another element in the pattern of deathspace in societies with a Confucian heritage, I asked Professor Hae Un Rii, Head of the Department of Geography at Dongguk University, Seoul, if she would like to collaborate. Her personal contacts and organisational skills were invaluable. I had hit on a hot topical issue, because a big public debate had just emerged in South Korea, reflecting concern in some government quarters about land lost to graves each year in this, the second most densely populated country in the world. Cremation is being strongly promoted but, unlike in Hong Kong in the 1970s, the public is strongly resisting official urges to consider cremation.

We found that the grass dome design of the ancient royal graves was influential on architectural responses to the need for columbaria. A small, space-saving family tomb has been devised to hold the ashes of up to twenty-four family members within a small, grass-covered dome. Although we came across several architect-designed columbaria, we were most impressed with an unusual and extraordinarily beautiful, newly opened, series of open-air niche walls winding gently down a wooded hillside. This serene site reduced my two young research assistants/interpreters to tears.

The public cemeteries that I visited are utterly different from those in Hong Kong. They were spacious and green, and some were incorporated into the system of walking trails around Seoul without, apparently, any fears relating to the spirit world.
Paying respects to the deceased in this deeply Confucian society is still a very important construct of time-space, with families streaming out of cities to return to patrilineal villages particularly at the lunar festival of Chusok. From family grave to columbarium, there is a progressive divorce from ancestral territory (the family graveyard in the patrilineal village) and from social context (lineage).

This study of South Korea concluded this cycle of research. I had hesitated to embark upon it, as I knew little about South Korea. I wanted to attempt it because I sensed that I would find there a continuation of ancient practices and associated deathspaces inherited from beliefs arising from Confucian traditions. Indeed, this turned out to be the case. Such a continuation had been impossible in mainland China, and it had been disrupted in Hong Kong because of the refugee origins of much of the Territory's population and because of the post Second World War transformation of its economy and land use. The research that examines the relationship between contemporary practices and spaces connected with death in South Korea, and their (possibly considerable) parallels in pre-modern China, remains to be carried out!