READING CHINESE GRAVESTONES

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It gives me great pleasure to share the heritage I took for granted and virtually ignored for a number of years. I used to think a cemetery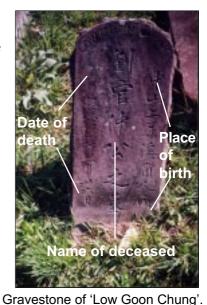 is for the dead, and we only go there to pay respect to the dead. Once a year around Qingming(Ching Ming) is more than I could bear. Now I go to Rookwood Cemetery in Sydney whenever I can, given the right weather, spending hours to record the inscriptions on the gravestones found in Section 3, Chinese Section, for reasons which are still not clear to me. Perhaps I realised that the information on the slabs of stones are invaluable to the future generations or that, because of the acceleration of erosion, if they are not recorded, they will vanish forever, or because no one wants to take up this macabre activity. Whatever the reasons, I will persist with it as long as my interest lasts.

> **QINGMING (CHING MING)** usually falls in early April. It is a time when families remember their ancestors. They visit ancestors' graves and provide offerings of food and wine. Traditionally this respect and concern for the well-being of the dead is believed to ensure the prosperity and health of the living.

What I want to do here is tell you about the most common examples of the gravestone inscriptions drawn from my observations in Rookwood cemetery and from the Chinese sections of cemeteries in regional New South Wales.

The writing

A Chinese gravestone usually has at least three columns of characters. The writing in the middle column tends to be larger than that on the side columns. The size of the writing indicates the relative importance of the information. The centre column, not surprisingly, gives the name of the deceased. Information about the date and place of birth and age of the deceased is usually inscribed on the right hand side (east) and the date and time of death is found on the left (west). Characters across the top usually give the district or province of birth. This pattern is not always followed especially with gravestones found overseas: the east (right) and west (left) pattern are not necessarily observed, although the centre is always reserved for the name of the deceased.

Gravestone of 'Low Goon Chung'.
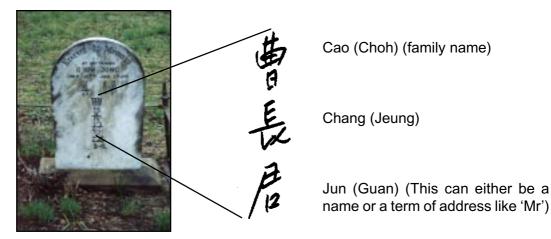(Appendix: Gravestone 3)

A note on transliteration

As the work I am doing is on Chinese gravestones in Australia dating mainly between 1900 and 1949, I include a Cantonese transliteration of proper names since Cantonese dialects were spoken by the majority of Chinese who were in Australia during this period. The Cantonese transliteration is enclosed in brackets following the pinyin. When a name is given in English, it is enclosed in inverted commas.
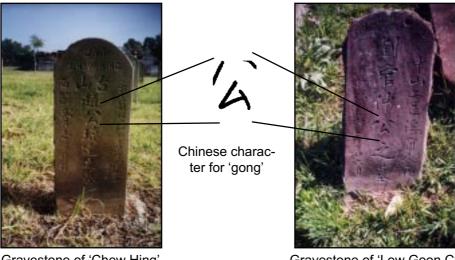
Name/s of the deceased

First, let us look at how we read and interpret the names in the middle column of characters.

Most gravestones have the family name first followed by the given names.

Cao (Choh) (family name)

Chang (Jeung)

Jun (Guan) (This can either be a name or a term of address like 'Mr')

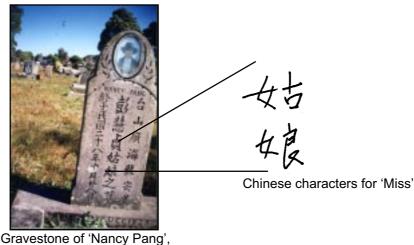Gravestone of 'Chow Jong'.
(Appendix: Gravestone 8)

Occasionally a character transliterated in pinyin and Cantonese as 'Gong' appears between the family name and the given names (as in the gravestone of 'Chew Hing' below). Sometimes 'Gong' comes after the family and given names (as in the gravestone of 'Low Goon Chung' below), and sometimes the word 'Gong' is not present and only the family name and given name/s. The word 'Gong' literally means maternal grandfather but it can be used as an honorific term attached to the name of the deceased irrespective of his age. However, it can only apply to a male.

Chinese character for 'gong'

Gravestone of 'Chew Hing',
(Appendix: Gravestone 2)

Gravestone of 'Low Goon Chung'.
(Appendix: Gravestone 3)

The name of a young unmarried female is sometimes preceded by the character for 'Miss' as in the gravestone of Nancy Pang:

姑娘

Chinese characters for 'Miss'

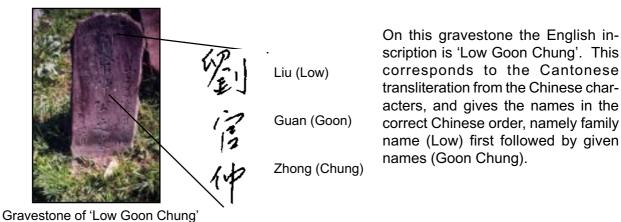Gravestone of 'Nancy Pang',
(Appendix: Gravestone 5)

Other characters often written after the name of the deceased are those translated as 'the grave of'. These terms are represented by one or two characters. For example:

之墓

'grave of'

墓

Gravestone of Peng Fu (Pang Fook).(Appendix: Gravestone 4)

Gravestone of 'Gee Hing'
(Appendix: Gravestone 1)

In regional NSW as well as in Rookwood, occasionally you can find some English words carved across the top of the gravestone. This may help to establish the names of the deceased if the Chinese characters are worn down or, indeed, to establish whether the English language version of the name corresponds to the Chinese. For example:

劉 Liu (Low)

宦 Guan (Goon)

仲 Zhong (Chung)

On this gravestone the English inscription is 'Low Goon Chung'. This corresponds to the Cantonese transliteration from the Chinese characters, and gives the names in the correct Chinese order, namely family name (Low) first followed by given names (Goon Chung).

Gravestone of 'Low Goon Chung'
(Appendix: Gravestone 3)

溫 Wen (Wen)

公 'gong'

林 Lin (Lum)

勝 Sheng (Sing)

之
墓 'grave of'

On this gravestone the English inscription is 'Willie Lum Sing'. A Cantonese transliteration of the Chinese characters tells us the deceased's name was 'Wen Lum Sing', with Wen being his family name. In this case, the family name disappeared in English, and his Chinese given names became his family name in English. Note also that in this inscription the honorific 'gong' comes immediately after the family name.

Gravestone of Willie Lum Sing,
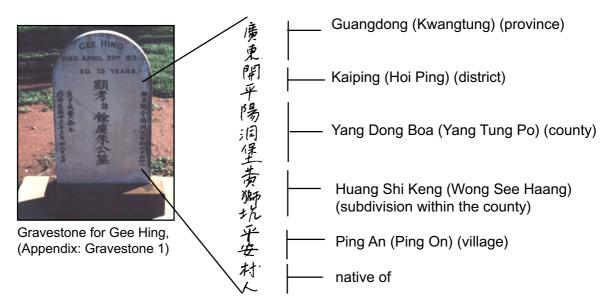(Appendix: Gravestone 6)

A more traditional way of inscribing the name of the deceased is shown on the gravestone of 'Gee Hing' below. The first two characters in the centre column are a term used by a son or daughter to address a father who is deceased. The third character is a possessive adjective meaning 'whose name' and is a character used mainly but not exclusively for the dead. The next two characters are the deceased's given names and his family name is the third last character.

顯
考 Indicates grave erected by a son or daughter for their father

諱 whose name

餘 Yu (Yue) - given name

慶 Qing (Hing) - given name

朱 Zhu (Chu) - family name

公 'Gong'

墓 'Grave of'

Gravestone for Gee Hing,
(Appendix: Gravestone 1)

Basically, if the Chinese inscriptions on a gravestone remain reasonably intact, the name of the deceased is in the middle column. Reading from top to bottom the family name comes first and then the given names (usually two characters). The other Chinese characters interspersed with these are honorific names (for example, 'gong'), and at the bottom of the column the Chinese characters for 'the grave of'. The sequence of characters can change with, for example, 'gong' coming after the family name or after all the names of the deceased or, as in the above gravestone of 'Gee Hing', with the names of the deceased in a different order. The reason Zhu (Chu) is recognised as the family name is because it is a common family name compared with the other characters. It is similar to reading an inscription in English with the name 'Sue Brown'. We know that the family name is 'Brown' and the given name 'Sue', no matter in what sequence the words are inscribed.

Place of birth

Details about the place of birth can be seen on either side of the middle column but most often on the right hand side. On some gravestones, there is quite a bit of detail. On others, the information is minimal. The gravestone of 'Gee Hing' below provides an example of a detailed record of the deceased's place of origin. The place names are listed from the largest geographically to the smallest. The usual ranking goes from province to district to county (and subdivisions within counties) to village.

Gravestone for Gee Hing,
(Appendix: Gravestone 1)

廣東開平陽洞堡黃獅坑平安村人

- Guangdong (Kwangtung) (province)
- Kaiping (Hoi Ping) (district)
- Yang Dong Boa (Yang Tung Po) (county)
- Huang Shi Keng (Wong See Haang) (subdivision within the county)
- Ping An (Ping On) (village)
- native of

The level of detail available from gravestones like that of 'Gee Hing' makes it possible to trace a deceased to his or her ancestral village. However, there can be difficulties in subsequently locating any units smaller than a district because, over time, many villages and counties in China have been subsumed into larger centres, some have disappeared, and there have been name changes. Sometimes the only way to establish the exact location is to visit the district archives in China armed with the Chinese characters available from gravestones.
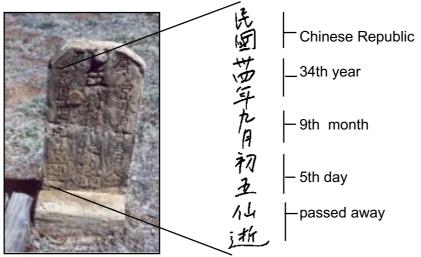
Dates of birth and death

The date of death is usually inscribed on gravestones although it can be either on the left or right of the middle column of characters. The date of birth is found less frequently. What is consistent is that,as you read Chinese from right to left, if there are two dates anywhere in the inscription, the first date on the right hand side is the birth date.

The birth and death dates are presented in Arabic numerals (1, 2, 3, etc) and/or Chinese numerals and different dating systems are used. The different dating systems are:

(a)   The Chinese Republic followed by a number either in Chinese or Arabic numerals. The Chinese Republic was established in 1911 hence, for example, the 10th year of the Chinese Republic is 1911 + 10 = 1921. (See Gravestone of Wu Shi Xhang (Ng Si Juen) following)

(b)   The 'nth' year in the reign of the Qing Emperor. The first two characters refer to the name of the Emperor, the following characters show the number of the year of Emperor's reign. It is necessary to know the year the Emperor came to the throne in order to calcuate the date. (See Gravestone of 'Gee Hing' following.)
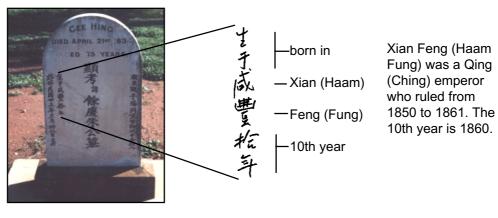
(c)   Two Chinese characters which indicate a year in the tradititional Chinese calendar. This calendar works in 60 year cycles and within each cycle, each year is assigned a name consisting of two characters. The first character refers to one of the ten Celestial Stems, the second to one of the twelve Terrestrial Branches.   These are the most difficult dates to interpret as the same two characters could indicate, for example, the years 1840, 1900 or 1960. (See gravestone of 'Willie Lum Sing' following.)

(d)   The dates in the western calendar written in Chinese numerals and writing and/or sometimes written in Arabic numerals and/or writing. (See gravestone of 'Low Goon Chung' following.)
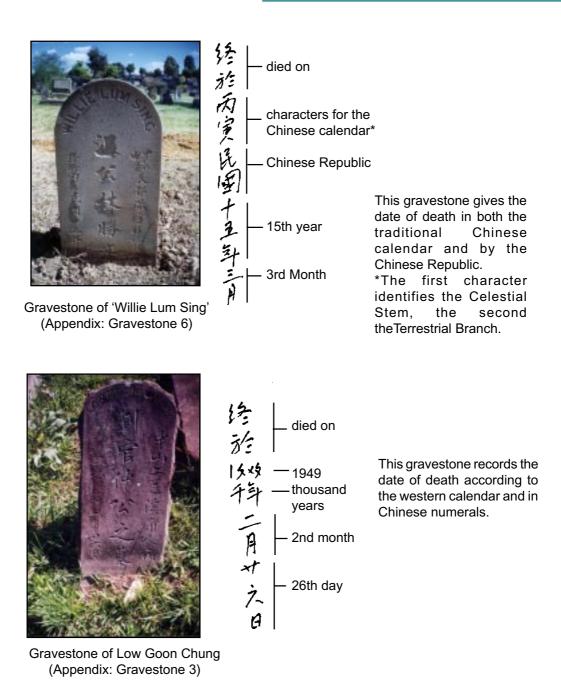
Examples:

民國 — Chinese Republic

卅四年 — 34th year

九月 — 9th month

初五 — 5th day

仙逝 — passed away

(ie. 5 September 1945)

Gravestone of Wu Shi Zang (Ng Si Juen). (Appendix: Gravestone 7)

生于 — born in

咸 — Xian (Haam)

豐 — Feng (Fung)

拾年 — 10th year

Xian Feng (Haam Fung) was a Qing (Ching) emperor who ruled from 1850 to 1861. The 10th year is 1860.

Gravestone of 'Gee Hing' (Appendix: Gravestone 1)

Gravestone of 'Willie Lum Sing'
(Appendix: Gravestone 6)

— died on

— characters for the
Chinese calendar*

— Chinese Republic

— 15th year

— 3rd Month

This gravestone gives the date of death in both the traditional Chinese calendar and by the Chinese Republic.
*The first character identifies the Celestial Stem, the second theTerrestrial Branch.

Gravestone of Low Goon Chung
(Appendix: Gravestone 3)

— died on

— 1949
— thousand years

— 2nd month

— 26th day

This gravestone records the date of death according to the western calendar and in Chinese numerals.

What do we learn from reading Chinese gravestones?

By reading the gravestones we can obviously get details about the names, birthplaces, dates of death and occasionally other information about the deceased. We can link family members, identify individuals who lived in particular localities, and trace further details through local newspaper and cemetery records. There is, however, much more. Here I only want to raise two of the possibilities.

• The discrepancies between the English version of an individual's name and the name in Chinese are indicative of what happened to Chinese names in Australia and other overseas destinations. First names became family names; English 'nicknames' replaced Chinese names for use among the English-speaking community; some names were changed completely. It consequently becomes very useful to have both the English and Chinese versions of the names used by the

deceased. The existence of different versions of the names also indicates that Chinese in Australia moved between two worlds: the sometimes hostile and certainly alien English-speaking communities and the world of their compatriots which linked back to China.

- Those gravestones in Australian cemeteries which contain more detailed information about the deceased's place of birth highlight the importance of the ancestral village for Chinese immigrants in 19th and early 20th century Australia. It also suggests that, like many of their compatriots, the deceased and/or those who organised the burial hoped that the bones would eventually be returned to the village of origin to be buried among ancestors.   Certainly, at Rookwood and throughout regional New South Wales there are accounts and records of exhumations of Chinese graves and the transporting of the bones back to China.

Conclusion

Reading, transliterating, translating and understanding the inscriptions on Chinese gravestones takes us a further step towards putting together a small number of the pieces in the jigsaw of the Chinese presence in Australia. Sadly, the older gravestones which are extant are often in a poor state of repair. With no or few descendants in Australia and isolated in the Chinese sections of cemeteries, the information on many of the gravestones is not being recorded.   Sometimes when it is recorded, the details noted down do not include a Cantonese transliteration and names become even further removed from familiar sounds and forms. It is with some urgency that we need to continue the work of photographing, transcribing, transliterating proper names (in both Cantonese and pinyin) and translating the details of extant Chinese gravestones across the country.

References and Further Reading:

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APPENDIX: SOME EXAMPLES OF CHINESE GRAVESTONES FROM ROOKWOOD CEMETERY AND FROM CEMETERIES IN REGIONAL NEW SOUTH WALES.

廣東開平陽洞堡黃獅坑平安村人

顯考諱餘慶朱公墓

生于咸豐拾年

終於民國廿三年三月初八未時

1: The English inscription reads: 'Gee Hing, died April 21st 1934, aged 75 years'. The Chinese characters tell us that the deceased's Chinese name was Zhu Yu Qing (Chu Yue Hing), he was born in 1861 in Ping An (Ping On) village, Huang Shi Keng (Wong See Hang) and Yang Dong Boa (Yang Tum Po) counties, Kaiping (Hoi Ping) district, Guangdong (Kwangtung) province. The gravestone was erected by the deceased's son or daughter.
(Condobolin Cemetery, NSW.)

車顛堡和豐里民國十一年

台山趙公瓊達之墓

西歷卅年福弐月畫号終於

2: The English inscription reads 'Chew Hing'. The Chinese characters tell us that the deceased's Chinese name was Zhao Qiong Da (Chiu King Tat) and that he came from He Feng Lane (War Fung Lane) in Che Long Bao (Che Long Bo), Taishan (Toishan). He died in the eleventh year of the Chinese republic, ie. 1922.
(Rookwood Cemetery, Sydney.)

中山二區溪角人氏

劉官仲公之墓

終於拾玖年二月廿六日

3: The English inscription reads 'Low Goon Chung'. The Chinese characters tell us that his name was Liu Guan Zhong (Low Goon Chung) and that he came from Xi Jiao (Kai Kok), Yi Gu (Yee Kui), Zhongshan (Chungshan). He died on 26th February 1949.
(Rookwood Cemetery, Sydney.)

番邑彭福之墓

終於民國十二年五月廿五日

四十一歲乃番禺石崗墟人氏

4: The Chinese inscription tells us that this is the grave of Peng Fu (Pang Fook) who came from Shi Gang Xu (Sheck Kwong Hui), Fanyu (Pun-yu), and that he died on the 25th day of the fifth month in the 12th year of the Chinese Republic (ie. 25 May 1924) at the age of 41.
(Rookwood Cemetery, Sydney.)

台山廣海龍安里

彭慧貞姑娘之墓

終于民國二十八年十月廿八日

5: The English inscription reads 'Nancy Pang'. The Chinese characters tell us that this is the grave of Miss Pang Hui Zhen (Pang Wai Jing) from Long An Lane (Loong On), Guang Hai (Kwong Hoi), Taishan (Toishan) who died on the 28th day of the 10th month of the 28th year of the Chinese Republic (ie. 28 October 1939.)
(Rookwood Cemetery, Sydney.)

中山縣良都深灣杉坑村人氏

溫公林勝之墓

終於丙寅民國十五年三月

6: The English inscription reads 'Willie Lum Sing'. The Chinese characters tell us that this is the grave of Wen Lin Sheng (Wen Lum Sing) from Sha Keng (Charm Hanng) village, Shen Wan (Sam Wan) county, Liang Dou (Leung Do) district in Zhongshan (Chungshan). He died in the 3rd month of the 15th year of the Chinese Republic (ie. March 1926).
(Rookwood Cemetery, Sydney.)

廣
東
台山斗洞成昌村人
伍時璜坟墓
民國卅四年九月初五仙逝

7: The Chinese inscription tells us that this is the grave of Wu Shi Zang (Ng Si (or See) Juen), of (Shing Cheung) village, Dou Dong (Dow Dong)county, Taishan (Toishan) distict, Guangdong (Kwantung) province who died on the 5th day of the 9th month in the 34th year of the Chinese Republic (ie. 5 September 1945).
(Parkes Cemetery, NSW.)

歸
善
曹長居之坟

8 : The English inscription reads: 'Erected in memory, by his friends, Chow Jong, died 20th Jan 1920'. The Chinese characters tell us that Chow Jong's Chinese name was Cao Chang (Choh Jeung) and that his place of origin was Kui Sen (Gwai Sinn).
(Armidale Cemetery, NSW)

安
邑
張碧波公墓

9: The English inscriptionn reads: 'In loving remembrance/ of/Thomas See/who departed this life/ May 17, 1905. Aged 70 years.' The Chinese characters tell us that his Chinese name was Zhang Bi Bo (Chang Bic Boh) and that he came from the An Yi (On Yup) district in China.
(Armidale Cemetery, NSW)