

CEMETERY STORIES





by Stephanie Cheng & Viola Yeh



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It is a fine, sunny day with a light breeze and Billy Tang Ka-Jau from the Society of Hong Kong History is leading a group of people who share an enthusiasm for the city's past through Happy Valley. He pushes open an old gate and enters a beautiful garden full of flowers. Among the foliage are fine examples of Victorian architecture and other historical monuments. The group carefully inspects the ornaments and engravings as they pass by and Tang helps them to uncover the forgotten stories buried in the Hong Kong Cemetery, which was built 135 years ago and has remained little altered since, save for the addition of graves.

For many Hong Kong people, Happy Valley is best-known for its racecourse. Few are aware that the area was first established as a cemetery for the burial of British soldiers during the colonial period. The British named the valley "Happy" because it was commonly believed that the deceased would go on to a better place in their afterlives.

There is a cluster of six cemeteries in Happy Valley, namely, south to north, the Jewish Cemetery, the Hindu Cemetery, the Parsee Cemetery, Hong Kong Cemetery, St. Michael's Catholic Cemetery, and the Muslim Cemetery.

The cemeteries in Hong Kong are rich in historical, cultural and aesthetic value. Visitors to cemeteries are not just limited to friends and family of the deceased. Historians and history-buffs, nature-lovers and artists are among the different groups who might explore cemeteries for different reasons.

The headstone of 1960s starlet Linda Lin Dai is striking for the lack of a portrait photograph. This is because members of Lin's family stopped replacing the portrait after it was repeatedly stolen by obsessive fans.

Other visitors also include amateur photographers who bring their models here to pose against the beautiful backdrops and study tours for those

eager to learn more about the culture of the city. Billy Tang regularly conducts guided cemetery tours for school and the public.

For Patricia Lim, the author of *Forgotten Souls: A Social History of the Hong Kong Cemetery*, the value of cemeteries lies in the art of observation and appreciation. "I think the value of graves is the fact that so much of the history lies open there for people to actually see," she says. "It reminds you of all sorts of people, the people who made Hong Kong home."

Where graves are placed, their size and their design reflect a lot about a community and the value of their people.

For instance, the graves of British soldiers have a similar design. There is a war grave commission in the UK that oversees the war graves of all Commonwealth soldiers of the former British Empire. The common design of graves in different corners

of the world emphasises the importance of discipline and uniformity.

The Jewish graves are European in design but bear the Star of David and Hebrew inscriptions. This suggests the community had strong European influences but still clung onto their heritage.

According to Professor Joseph Ting Sun-pao, an adjunct professor from the Department of History at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, the location and arrangement of different cemeteries reflect a sense of social status and influence.

Hong Kong Cemetery was originally meant for Caucasians in Hong Kong. It was built as a Christian cemetery for rich, significant people. War heroes and people with high social status were buried there. But not all those who were buried there were Christians. Individuals and relatively influential groups could also be deemed significant enough to be assigned a place, such as the Jews, and Parsees.

Climbing up the steep stairs to a quiet corner of the hill, a very different scene appears. This is an area with graves of a very different design, engraved with a different language. There are various reasons why these graves are located far away from the other cemeteries. One is cultural; it is a Japanese tradition to burn incense as an offering to the deceased, which might have disturbed westerners.

The Japanese graves also belong to people of a different social status. Those buried here are not necessarily rich or significant. Neither are they Christians. Most of those buried in the Japanese section were born into the Shinto religion and their graves indicate they had adopted Buddhism.

Historians believe most of them were prostitutes because they were all women from Kyushu who died at the age of 18 or 19 and were buried by other women. It is thought they served Japanese sailors who came to Hong Kong.

The stories of so many people who make up the city's history can be found at the Hong Kong Cemetery, from these forgotten young women who died far away from home to one of Hong Kong's most illustrious figures. Eurasian businessman and philanthropist Sir Robert Ho Tung Bosman became a Christian shortly before his death in order to secure a burial place at the Hong Kong Cemetery. His grave is located next to his wife's.

The cemeteries in Happy Valley are an open history book, every time you delve in you will find another story. **V**







Uniformly designed graves at the military cemetery.