



A Grave Situation: Burial Practices among the Chinese Diaspora in Queensland, Australia (ca.1870–1930)

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Abstract

Many nineteenth-century Chinese migrants to Pacific Rim countries died far from their home villages. Diverse approaches were adopted to mark graves, possibly anticipating the subsequent, culturally important, repatriation of their bones. This paper evaluates the morphology of grave markers from eight northeast Australian sites and considers reasons for the variations. Physical appraisal of each site was undertaken and, where they exist, cemetery records and allied documentation examined. In an unusual departure from the norm the inscriptions on most identified grave markers rarely indicate date of death. The seemingly meticulous attention to grave identification in some areas contrasts with others where markers are absent. This study indicates divergent approaches to identification and recording of individual graves over time and place. Rather than indicating full-fledged ethnogenesis, wherein Australian Chinese developed new cultural practices, these behaviors suggest that ca.1870–1930 was a transitional period, during which extant cultural processes were adapted to meet immediate needs.

Keywords Chinese diaspora · Australia · Death · Graves · Repatriation

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Burial practices, and the commemoration of the deceased, vary across the cultural divide and are influenced, primarily, by socioreligious attitudes to death, the oft debated concept of an afterlife and, on a less ethereal plane, to practicality and economics. The records afforded through grave markers including, as this paper will show, their absence provide wide ranging research potential. While the primary role of graves is to provide respectful places of interment, the manner in which they are

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presented provides widespread analytical opportunities for archaeologists, genealogists, landscape designers, historians, theologians, and taphophiles in general: for example, spatial issues, memorial morphology, inscriptions, and actual burial practices are of primary interest for archaeologists. It is those aspects that underlie discussion in this paper and, in particular, the diversity of grave markers of Chinese in Northeast Australia (the Gulf Country and Cape York) provides opportunity to examine burial practices of a significant immigrant community in a divergent, tropical environment (Fig. 1). It takes examples from eight randomly selected locations to evaluate records, grave marker morphology, stylistic change, and inscriptions. It will demonstrate that materials used for early and remote markers were opportunistically sourced but that, progressively, there was a gradual move toward using markers more familiar to those in European cemeteries: marble and granite headstones. It explores reasons why Chinese graves were marked with identification details in the first place, the physical form of the graves and their markers.

This paper focuses on the form and presence of grave markers as aspects of “grave goods” rather than on any interred material. It will be shown that systematic analysis of these more accessible elements, and even their absence, provides opportunity to enhance our understanding of a society’s evolution over time. The development of a “new society,” through the process of ethnogenesis, establishes distinctive cultural traits as a new culture evolves (Voss 2008). In the formative stages of ethnogenesis a process of adaptive cultural practices is identifiable by which, for an archaeologist at least, elements of material culture from one society progressively blend with another in a process motivated by both economic necessity and the desire to “fit” more comfortably with the dominant culture. For the sake of political stability, both groups may be unwittingly pressured to make changes or be seeking to move in a similar direction to “stabilize and transform their identities” (Voss 2008:12).

In this instance Chinese immigrants, primarily from sociogeographically distinct regions of southeast China, developed unique burial marker practices. They ranged from rudimentary etchings on locally available stone and even discarded flour drums in the early years of residency in northeast Queensland, Australia (1873–ca.1880), to working locally sourced sandstone by the late nineteenth century, before ultimately adopting marble and granite in styles more commonly found on European Australian graves in the early twentieth century and incorporating inscriptions in English, sometimes to the exclusion of Chinese script, with the family name relegated to second place.

Not only does that development reflect social circumstance and changing religious attitudes, but it also demonstrates, to varying degrees, the progressive nature of social change and the inherent search for “belonging” within a different cultural framework, although not necessarily, consciously envisaging the emergence of an identifiably new culture, as is the culmination in ethnogenesis. The adaptive cultural practices highlighted here reflect progressive variations of material culture that enabled Chinese migrants to sustain their intrinsic beliefs while drawing on selected material elements of the increasingly dominant European colonial culture for its sustenance. At that stage, Chinese living in Australia were taking tentative steps towards achieving a more harmonious cross-cultural relationship. The driving



Fig. 1 Northeast Queensland location map

force was a materials-related resourcefulness, coupled with a subconscious desire for increased acceptance in a racist environment, not a conscious desire for internal cultural change.

Arguably, ethnogenesis has eventuated over a longer period than that covered in this study, as Chinese Australians, and others who now consider themselves Australian — irrespective of their race — have developed a distinctive culture that differs

dramatically from that now considered as “Chinese culture.” The steps illustrated in this study are more appropriately considered to be the precursors of the formation of any distinctive culture and are more appropriately termed adaptive material culture processes. Those early adaptations do not, of themselves, create a new culture but better enable the underlying culture to sustain itself in a changing socioeconomic environment as it moves along the path of ethnogenesis.

Migrant culture, claims Byrne (2016: 2363), is often “cut off from the motherland, is expected to atrophy and become more performative than real.” The “atrophy” that affected Chinese migrants, particularly in issues of high cultural importance, such as the repatriation of human remains, occurred slowly as close links with the homeland decreased – particularly in respect of shipping – and was externalized through bureaucratic controls that imposed constraints on repatriation (Sinn 2013:293). Almost concurrently, grave markers evolved in sophistication. Such activity may also be understood as part of the atrophying process associated with the transition from sojourner to settler phases often attributed to the Chinese diaspora around the Pacific Rim whereby there was a gradual move from temporary residence by “fortune seekers,” particularly during the main Australian gold rush periods of the 1850s and 1870s, to those who subsequently saw opportunity for longer term economic benefits as permanent settlers (Rolls 1992, 1996).

Chinese Migration to Australia

The British “first fleet” arrived in Botany Bay, New South Wales, in January 1788 but determining who was the first Chinese migrant is fraught with risk. Some sources suggest it may have been Ahuto, who came to Australia as a free settler in 1803 (Su 2018:172), although Mak Sai Ying, from Guangzhou, who arrived as a free settler in 1818 and later became a hotelier, is more generally believed to be the first. The discovery of gold in New South Wales and Victoria in 1851 provided stimulus for a major influx of migrants, including Chinese from Hong Kong and Guangdong.

Population figures for Chinese in colonial Australia are likewise hotly debated but Su (2018:3) suggests 2,341 Chinese people were living in the Colony of Victoria in 1854. That figure had increased to 24,732 by 1861. Similar dramatic changes occurred in New South Wales over the same period and were almost entirely attributable to the discovery of gold. Twenty years later it was Queensland and the Northern Territory that experienced dramatic rises in Chinese population. Although gold had attracted attention in several locations, the most significant were the discoveries on the Palmer River, on Queensland’s Cape York Peninsula, and at Pine Creek in the Northern Territory in the 1870s. Populations escalated dramatically, with Kirkman (1984:55) indicating around 18,000 Chinese on the Palmer by 1877 (versus 2000 Europeans) and Jones (1997:112–114) documenting an 1888 peak Chinese population in the Northern Territory of 6122 (versus 1144 Europeans). While gold was a key stimulus it was not the focus for all migrants; a stereotypical image that has proven a challenge for archaeologists and historians to overcome in recent times (Low Choy et al. 2023:277). The boom of Chinese migrants in the Northern

Territory was in fact closely associated with railway construction. Opportunities in the pastoral industry as shepherds, cooks, gardeners, and retailers were quickly seized upon, once gold proved to be increasingly elusive.

Racism dogged the Chinese throughout the history of colonial Australia (1788–1901), with increasingly restrictive legislation being introduced by various Colonial Governments. It set the stage for the insidious “White Australia Policy,” introduced through the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901*, that was to remain in place until 1973. Movement in and out of Australia for those of Chinese heritage was tightly controlled, to say the least. Some returned to China. Many stayed and made remarkable contributions to their adopted country. Those less fortunate remained in rural townships, quietly contributing through their market gardens or shops.

Previous Studies

As Lawrence and Davies (2011:327) have noted “grave goods and cemeteries represent deliberate discard,” thus providing significant insight, in a systematic manner, to a society’s underlying beliefs. Research into death and burial within China itself attracted the attention of nineteenth-century Sinologists who, like Dr. Jan De Groot (1892), wrote extensively on complex national mortuary rituals. The divergence of funeral ceremonies in China and the development of appropriate grave markers, particularly among more influential members of society, is remarkable, as Xu et al. (2017:455) observe, with “the ‘archetype’ format of all Ming Dynasty and Qing Dynasty Imperial Tombs or Mausoleums, incorporating a sequence of archway, entrance gates, stone tablet, a bridge, long sacred walkway ... and the actual mound burial site.”

Many of the formative historical and archaeological analyses of Chinese migration to Pacific rim countries make little reference to death, or to rituals associated with dying (Yong 1977; Wegars 1993). In 1995 Ian Jack (1995:299) highlighted the lack of cemetery archaeology, noting the dearth of such studies across North America and Australasia. Vivian (1985), Ryan (1991), and McCarthy (1995) and Bell (1992), were among the Australian exceptions, all of whom to varying degrees, considered aspects of burial practice. It was not until 2005 that Wegars, in conjunction with Chung, subsequently produced a definitive volume (Chung and Wegars 2005) that laid critically important foundations. Despite this, few studies to date have focused on the material culture of grave markers per se, preferring instead to consider broader, social aspects of burial rituals or to focus on osteology and sub-surface grave goods (for example, Rouse 2005).

North American Studies

Pasacreta (2005:35) notes, in respect of North American studies, that “Grave markers were usually placed at the head of the burial. They ranged from simple wooden stakes to more permanent markers composed of metal, stone, or brick.” Similarly, Chung and Wegars (2005:133), specifically noted the existence of three bricks at

Carlin, Nevada, two of which were actually in the coffins. They suggest that, in one case, “the brick probably was placed near the headstone, which disappeared with the passage of time” (Chung and Wegars 2005:133). A similar practice was noted by Grainger (1921:30) among “western Chinese”: “When a wealthy man, or a great scholar dies, a brief account of his life is engraved on stone, and a second stone is used as a cover to preserve the inscription. These are placed at the coffin foot.” To the contrary, Merritt et al. (2012:679, 683) noted the burial of Chinese “in simple unmarked graves” and “shallow, rock-covered empty graves” near Ashleyville, Montana associated with the Northern Pacific Railroad construction in the 1880s, suggesting expediency may have played a key role in the interment process.

Australian Studies

Australian studies still lag in respect of evaluating funerary practices amongst Chinese immigrants and provide limited, if any, evaluation of physical grave markers. Two phases of research are identifiable, with the first relating to basic recording of sites associated with religion, death, and dying. Examples include Vivian’s work (1985) in northeast Tasmania, McCarthy and Bell (Bell 1992) in the Pine Creek goldfield, Northern Territory, and Grimwade (1990a) and Comber (1991) in the Palmer goldfield, Queensland in which the aims were broadly to develop site inventories, including cemeteries and isolated graves, and to consider broad management strategies rather than undertaking concerted analyses. These works are fortuitous and largely associated with development impact assessments but provide a useful foundation for further research.

A second phase is evident in which more focused analysis has evolved during the twenty-first century. Ah Ket (1999:58–65), provided an insight into religious practices in Sydney. Ryan (1991:9–11) made several pertinent comments in respect of burials in Western Australia, noting that the absence of sufficient kin often meant burials were low key events and in complete contrast to what might have been expected in China. Wilton’s *Golden Threads* (2004) was one of the first quality, general publications to provide a broad analysis of regional New South Wales Chinese cemeteries. Richards and McLean have embarked on assessment and evaluation of documentation relating to exhumation and repatriation in Queensland (McLean 2015; Richards 2016; Richards and McLean 2022). Wong Hoy’s (2009) focus on the Cooktown burning tower, stimulated, in part, by Abraham and Wegar’s (2005) international focus on burners drew further attention to the need for more comprehensive evaluation and documentation of similar stelae nationwide. Burke and Grimwade (2013) is one of the, unfortunately rare, examples where the so-called “gray literature”—unpublished consultancy reports—is actually subjected to analysis, although it was not specifically concerned with either grave markers or burials. Through oral histories and documentary records Robb’s (2019:37) focus on North Queensland Chinese families in her Doctoral dissertation drew together invaluable material on temples, exhumation, and repatriation in the family context. Grimwade’s (2023) preliminary consideration of the social interconnectivity of temples, pig ovens, burning

towers (*fa bou lou*) and grave markers among Chinese migrants in Queensland took a more nuanced view of the archeological resources.

The social spectrum could hardly be wider, reflected in a variety of burial forms from the expedient to the extravagant. In Australia, there are numerous references to Chinese dying and being abandoned by the roadside (Brown 1876; *Brisbane Courier* July 7 1898; *Cloncurry Advocate* June 24 1898; Ryan 1991:8), while others, particularly in the Palmer itself as will be shown, were given swift burials, probably near where they died. Elaborate funerals were also often documented in both Australian and New Zealand towns, following traditional mourning practices (*Gympie Times and Mary River Mining Gazette*, June 6 1903:5; Bradshaw, 2009), but there appear to be no accessible records of funerals in remoter regions of Australia. As a result, one is left wondering, in the absence also of any archaeological research, to what extent traditional burial practices played a role in the isolated valleys of the Palmer and similar locations.

The documented apparent abandonment of the deceased was, as pointed out elsewhere, possibly often a matter of necessity rather than blatant insensitivity (Grimwade 2023:309; Grimwade and Grimwade 2017:450). However, similar practices also occurred “in 1840s Hong Kong [where] the dying were often abandoned on hill-sides, in open spaces or in mat sheds” (Waters 1991:109). De Groot (1892:127) also details the associated practice of coffin storage, where coffined bodies were stored in fully enclosed structures, “sepulchral houses” or “funeral vaults,” in a corner of the family property pending burial at some future auspicious time or awaiting the death of a close relation to enable their burial together. Such practices may appear extraordinary to Western sensitivities, but they offer further diverse, credible, underlying cultural norms as reasons why bodies may have been abandoned at times and places where acceptable burial was not practical.

Racism was an ever-present concern for Asian immigrants and this was reflected in a network of repressive legislation, ranging from poll taxes for new arrivals to restrictions on work on recently discovered mines. Notwithstanding that, many rural communities relied on Chinese immigrants to sustain them with fresh vegetables (Fig. 2). Their roles in agriculture and as storekeepers and station cooks may have been overlooked in early historical narratives, but are, increasingly, more widely recognized (Low Choy 2023; Martin 2019; Robb 2019).

Although it was the goal of most Chinese to earn sufficient income to support their families in China, and eventually return there, many never achieved those ideals. They spent decades working in challenging environments, often living in indigent conditions and ultimately being buried in isolated graves or in the “Alien” sections of designated cemeteries. Those who died overseas did so in the hopes that their bones would eventually be returned to their home villages to be spiritually reunited with their ancestors. As Sinn (2013:265–266) has eloquently noted: “For the Chinese goldrushers, the urge to return to one’s native place was as strong a driving force as the ‘mania’ to leave nothing was more abhorred and feared than dying in a strange land, deprived of attendance from one’s family and becoming a hungry, lonely ghost, unfed and unclothed, drifting in limbo.” Repatriation was a complex process, however, requiring systematic collection of skeletal material after several years interment, thorough checking that all bones were present, and providing



Fig. 2 Immigrant Chinese were active in a range of industries including pineapple farming in the Cairns area. (Photo: Cairns Historical Society)

suitable transportation and intermediate storage facilities on the arduous route home (Sinn 2013; Williams 2018:112). For many, unfortunately, their dream of return remains unfulfilled.

Terminology

A *grave* is a human burial site, possibly enhanced by a mound of soil and rock, funerary items and/or a name marker. It may show signs of an exhumation.

A *cemetery* is an area gazetted by government in which it is legal to inter bodies. In some rural areas the term may, however, have been applied where multiple interments have occurred at a single location but without formal gazettal.

Alien sections were designated in some gazetted cemeteries for the burial of non-Christians. Often, by virtue of the make-up of the population of many regional towns, they were almost exclusively “Chinese cemeteries.” The nominated areas were usually the least favored areas: typically low-lying, and thus more flood prone or furthest from the entrance.

While the term demonstrates insensitivity in modern parlance, it was widely used in colonial and early post-colonial Australia. This concept of segregation of Christian and non-Christians in death is not unique to Australia. Abraham and Wegars (2005:162) have noted in Northwest United States: “Having a Chinese section in a cemetery already partitioned off for Catholics, Masons and Odd Fellows is not that unusual.”

Isolated or lone graves are burial places containing only a few bodies and are often remote from habitation.

Grave markers identify the presence of a grave and may have an inscription incorporated on, or in, them to identify the interred person. They are normally stone, metal, or wood and sited on or near a grave. With Chinese burials *headstone* should be avoided simply because they are sometimes *footstones*.

Cemetery registers are formal records identifying the deceased by name and may include additional personal information. There are increasing numbers of websites, like *Australian Cemeteries Index* and *Find a Grave*, which may also contain useful personal data of acceptable reliability.

Identification of Chinese graves is relatively straightforward, provided they have markers written in Chinese characters associated with them. Where cemetery registers exist, the presence of unmarked Chinese burials is confirmed with varying success rates. For example, "Place of birth" entries stating "Canton," "China," or "Hong Kong" or showing names with distinctive, poorly Romanized names, like "Ah Chong" or "Ah Wei," can safely be identified as Chinese. However, if a name has been badly misspelled or fully Anglicized, as with "Ah Chee" becoming "Archer," error can occur. Notwithstanding this, there are sufficient resources to provide acceptable research validity.

Northeast Queensland

The broad physical environment of northeast Australia is critical to understanding the diversity of markers and the spatial characteristics of such a vast and diverse region. Northeast Queensland incorporates about 930,000 km², exceeding that of France and marginally greater than the combined areas of the western seaboard states of the United States. Until the late nineteenth century the region was solely inhabited by Indigenous clans with strong association with their lands and upon which they sustained a generally peaceful co-existence with each other. Colonial invasion and settlement occurred progressively from the mid-nineteenth century, with those of European descent holding power, although, particularly in North Australia, it was Chinese migrants who were numerically dominant.

Mainland Northeast Australia lies entirely between the Tropic of Capricorn and the Equator and is affected by two main seasons: the wet season (summer) from about December to March and the dry season (winter) between April and November. Rainfall varies markedly, with parts of the eastern seaboard averaging up to 4000 mm/yr (Tully), 480 mm in inland western areas (Cloncurry), and 1029 mm on Cape York (Palmerville). Temperatures drop to around 0°C during mid-year but can climb well over 40°C during the wet season in inland areas. Coastal areas experience significantly milder temperatures year-round. The Great Dividing Range along the eastern seaboard also moderates local climate. The ranges climb steeply from the coast to a maximum height of 1622 m at Mount Bartle Frere, south of Cairns, while further west toward Burketown the terrain gradually dips to a mere 5.8 m above sea level.

Table 1 Data sources examined for this study

Cemetery	Information sources		
	Burial records	Physical site investigation	Other data sources
Atherton	Limited	Yes	Society of Australian Genealogists. Local library
Burketown	Yes	Yes	Local historical society
Cairns	No	Yes	Local historical society
Cloncurry	No	Yes	Local historical society
Cooktown	Limited	Yes	Local historical society
Croydon	Yes	Yes	Nil
Normanton	Yes	Yes	Nil
Palmer	Maytown cemetery only. No records of isolated graves	Yes	Burial records related only to Maytown Cemetery. Private collector records for isolated graves

Historically, colonial settlers moved overland from the south during the latter part of the nineteenth century, bringing with them sheep and cattle to graze the western plains while prospectors searched for minerals. Coastal settlements developed as a response to the need for ports to service the inland regions and with them came increased opportunity for development of timber and agricultural pursuits. Today, the eastern seaboard population is concentrated at Cairns, Mackay, and Townsville. Major inland centers include Mount Isa, and Normanton. West of the Great Divide the core industries are beef cattle, mining, and increasingly, tourism. The coast and eastern ranges provide excellent agricultural potential, with sugar, maize, and fruit the major products. Tourism also ranks highly due to proximity to the Great Barrier Reef.

Methodology

The raw data resources available in respect of the eight sites varied from physical evidence to documentary records and newspaper reports (Table 1 below).

In each of the cases discussed, cemetery records, where they exist, were initially analyzed and data that clearly identified Chinese burials extracted. Physical inspection of each cemetery was undertaken, systematically noting Chinese grave markers identified either by the existence of Chinese script, Romanized script, or Anglicized Chinese names. This process was necessarily modified in the Palmer goldfield, where lone graves are scattered across an extensive area. The majority of those graves were progressively documented during the period 1988 – 2010 in 24 archaeological reports (Burke and Grimwade 2013:128–130), most of which followed a standard system of documentation. By that time the markers had, fortuitously, been recorded and removed by third parties for “safe keeping” and in the selected examples it was possible to link actual sites to specific individuals.

Evidence of exhumations was derived from various sources, including cemetery records, archival records (where they existed) and physical evidence where it was considered that credible evidence existed. In the absence of any published translations the Chinese script has been translated by Ely Finch, a highly regarded translator, for consistency and accuracy.

Obviously, there are many other regional cemeteries in which Chinese were buried. Some can still be identified but have been omitted simply on account of space, while others lack confirmed physical or documentary evidence of any Chinese burials. Physical markers varied significantly and are discussed case by case in more detail below. Table 2 provides a summary of physical features at each place.

Case Studies

The cases discussed here share one common criterion: each contains positive evidence of Chinese burials established either by physical evidence of markers engraved with Chinese text or details clearly identifying Chinese ethnicity, or, in addition or alone, through documentary evidence by way of cemetery records. This in itself helps to highlight the diversity of burial practices among Chinese migrants through the study period, broadly 1870 to 1930. As an extreme example of divergent practices, in the Palmer goldfield considerable effort seems to have been placed on identifying individual burials, while regional centers, like Atherton and Cairns, appear to have been more frugal in physically identifying their deceased.

Atherton

Atherton is a service town on the Atherton Tablelands, 90 km southwest of Cairns, located 753 m above sea level. The town developed as a center for timber and agriculture in the 1880s and soon had a sizeable population of Chinese in the area who were engaged, initially in timber, and then in farming and market gardening. In the aftermath of the First World War many left the district when their leases were revoked in favor of resettling returned service personnel. Toward the end of the nineteenth century the district supported a Chinese population in excess of 1000, but little, other than the Temple of Hou Wang (built 1903) remains as physical evidence of their significant role in Atherton's development (Grimwade 1991) (Fig. 3).

Two cemeteries contain graves of Chinese migrants: Atherton Pioneer Cemetery and Rockley Road Cemetery but, despite the large population, relatively few early Chinese graves are identifiable at either site. Those buried in the latter cemetery fall outside the date range of this study as they are post 1930 interments. At the Pioneer Cemetery (1897–1927) Chinese were predominantly interred in the “Alien Section” which contains no marked graves. Among those known from archival sources to have been buried there are Ah Shue a 61-year-old laborer from the nearby village of Kairi who died, intestate, on April 22, 1911. Maize farmer Pon Sue drowned, also in 1911, near Atherton leaving behind a wife and two sons in China. The Clerk of Petty

Table 2 Summary of Grave Markers

Cemetery	Approx date range	Approx number of graves	Grave markers	Marking method	Evidence of exhumation
Atherton	1897–1927	158	Unmarked	n/a	No
Burketown	1866 – current	10	Unmarked	n/a	No
Cairns	1880–1947	180	Unmarked	n/a	No
Cloncurry	1913 – 1953	69	Most unmarked. Metal (pecked sheet). Western style marble	Pecked characters	No
Cooktown	1877 – 1930	297	Unmarked. Located in heavily revegetated area	n/a	Yes
Croydon	1889 – 1930	87	Local sandstone (10 extant marked). One exhumed sandstone grave from nearby property	Incised, generally well formed	Yes
Normanton	1887–1930	27	Sandstone (2 extant). Balance unmarked	Incised	No
Palmer	1873 to ca. 1885	213	Local shale rock, natural form but divergent sizes	Incised, diverse quality	Yes



Fig. 3 Hou Wang temple is the last of over 120 vernacular timber and iron temples in Australasia. (Photo: author)

Sessions noted that it was intended that his clothing was to be burned at the grave. Had a burning tower (*fa bou lou*) been available these items would have been burned within it to help the deceased in his journey in the after-life. In both cases the funerals were paid for by their countrymen (QSA 1911).

The Society of Australian Genealogists records 158 names of Chinese buried at the Pioneer Cemetery, culled from a variety of unidentified sources (Young 2005). Pon Sue is on that list but Ah Shue is not, and nor is anyone who died on or around April 1911. Such anomalies are not uncommon, as is evident with other case studies below. Theories may abound for such omissions—from clerical error to confusion over names, particularly with “false romanization,” or burial elsewhere in the district, both of which are unlikely in this instance. Within the main part of the cemetery is the grave of Margaret (Maggie) Lee Yan, who died October 1, 1918, aged 23 years, which also memorializes Charlie Lee Yan, who died August 30, 1926, aged 45. The latter is reputedly buried in an unmarked grave in the Alien Section (Price 2022 pers. comm.). The current grave marker for Margaret Lee Yan reflects a standard western style of the late twentieth century: a concrete slab overlaid with ceramic tiles and incorporating a low, upright headstone erected sometime between ca. 1975 and 1997: the stonemason’s label displays a pre-1997, six-figure telephone number introduced around 1975. Maggie’s grave was the focus of a traditional memorial ceremony associated with a family reunion in 2018 (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4 Offerings to the spirits of departed ancestors at Margaret Lee Yan's grave, Atherton, July 2018. (Photo: author)

Burketown

The port town of Burketown was established in 1865 to provide coastal shipping access for the pastoralists in northwest Queensland and the Barkly Tablelands of the Northern Territory. It suffered a checkered career, was abandoned in favor of Sweers Island when fever broke out in 1860s and, eventually, lost its importance as Normanton and Borroloola evolved. Chinese were once active in retailing, cooking, market gardening, and laboring. Many intermarried with local Indigenous residents and a proportion of the present population reflects a multiethnic background.

The cemetery has been in use since colonial settlement in 1865 and the Register of Burials since April 1866 identifies nine Chinese, all males, who died between March 1887 and 31 December 1930 — none after January 1901 (Burke Shire Council, 1866–1994) (Table 3).

None of these burials have extant grave markers, the absence of which can be attributed to several factors. If timber had been used, the frequent adverse weather conditions and termites would severely limit the prospects of survival. Because of Burketown's remoteness and the below average socioeconomic standards of local Chinese migrants elaborate stone markers would have been prohibitively expensive. The relative youthfulness of those who died is possibly a reflection on their incapacity to endure the harsh environment, but it would also suggest they had not been in the area long enough to have established close relationships among people who might have otherwise contributed to more permanent markers. It is noteworthy that six of the recorded deaths were under 40, tending to refute the erroneous, but long-held, claim that the Chinese were better suited to work in the tropics than Europeans (*Brisbane Courier* Nov. 10, 1880; Jones 1997:2).

Table 3 Burketown: Ages of Deceased at Death

Age at death	Number
20–29	2
30–39	3
40–49	1
50–59	1
60–69	2

Cairns

Cairns is the regional center for Far North Queensland and supports a diverse tourism industry, which has, since late last century, surpassed its former main industry of sugar cane production. Current population is 158,000, a far cry from the tiny town developed to serve as a port for the Hodgkinson goldfield in 1876 and later timber, tin mining, and agricultural pursuits in its hinterland. Chinese settlers in Cairns undertook diverse commercial and agricultural roles, particularly before the First World War. Some were engaged in boatbuilding (Gapps 2016:7–24) with others engaged in pioneering rice and litchee farming (Volkmar 2023). Many were enthusiastic supporters of local services, such as the hospital, and effusive in welcoming visiting dignitaries (Robb 2012:48–49). In Sachs Street (now Grafton St.) a prosperous Chinatown developed with at least two temples, a Chinese hospital, and numerous retail outlets. An early Cairns cemetery, now known as the McLeod Street Pioneer cemetery, operated between 1877 and 1949 (Fig. 5). A new cemetery was eventually opened on Anderson St., partly because of long standing concern that the high-water table often resulted in graves filling with water as they were being dug (Grimwade 1988, 1990b).

The cemetery had a designated “Alien Section” in which most of about 180 Chinese burials took place. None were identifiable when the first conservation management plan was undertaken in 1988 but subsequent archaeologically led metal detection and research by the Cairns Family History Society has enabled several to be identified and simple, engraved plaques placed over them. While research suggests a range of semiskilled occupations among those interred, one unmarked grave is that of Rev. Joseph Tear Tack (ca. 1848–1901), a Chinese



Fig. 5 McLeod Street Pioneer cemetery was the main Cairns cemetery for many years. The “Alien section” contained many Chinese graves few of which were marked. (Photo: author)

Christian missionary. Once again, various factors may have contributed to the absence of original markers. Termites and intense seasonal rainfall would have destroyed timber markers within a few years. For several decades of the mid-twentieth century the cemetery was neglected, hidden beneath chest high tropical grass and invasive trees (Grimwade 1988).

Cloncurry

Cloncurry developed around the copper deposits developed by Ernest Henry in the late 1860s and concurrent efforts by Roger Sheaffe to establish pastoral interests in the region (Hardy 1983:7). The Kalkadoon, traditional owners of the land, proved challenging opponents and soon gained a reputation for defending their land from colonial settlers (Hardy 1983:15). Gold provided a further impetus and by 1894 “the Cloncurry goldfield yielded in excess of 10,000 oz” (Hardy 1983:29). As the region developed so, too, did opportunities for Chinese gardeners, cooks, and retailers.

A separate Chinese cemetery was, officially, in use between 1913 and 1953, although it may have operated prior to 1913. Records of the Cloncurry and District Historical Society indicate the first Chinese burial in Cloncurry to be that of Tim Guee [sic] on March 27, 1887 at Chinaman’s Creek. A sign within the former Chinese Cemetery identifies 69 burials. Two graves have engraved markers: one sheetmetal and one marble. The former is pecked into a sheet of metal, probably a recycled flour drum. The inscription has been formed by a series of nail holes marking the centerline of each character. Such markers are rare, but examples have been found in the Palmer goldfield and at Pine Creek in the Northern Territory (Collections of Cooktown Historical Society; McCarthy 1995:199; McCarthy and Kostoglou 1986:44). The notable differences are that the Palmer goldfield example has characters formed by repeated blows of a chisel or similar, while the Pine Creek example has the outline of each character pecked with nail marks. In each case the date of death is notably absent. It is noteworthy that, despite extensive documentation of graves in the Interior Pacific Northwest of North America, Abraham and Wegars (2005:157) specifically commented on the absence of similar examples of pecked or otherwise incised sheetmetal markers. While not specifying the form of “metal grave markers” at Wild Horse Creek, British Columbia, Pasacreta (2005:192) states “the first phase of the overseas burial is marked by transient grave markers and composed of either wood or metal panels or squat cement slabs.”

The Cloncurry marker has been remounted in a red clay brick frame, which precludes accurate measurement, but is about 300 mm high by 80 mm wide (Fig. 6). It identifies Cheung (Jeung) See of Kwai Yap district (aka *Kwai Shin*, which name ceased to exist after the Republican era commenced) (Finch 2022a:5). While a death date is not present, that aspect alone indicates a date before 1912. This marker has been previously attributed to “Zhang (male)” by the Cloncurry and District Historical Society. As Finch has rightly noted, “For the non-Sinophone researcher, this disparity in the romanisation of names is a typical cause of confusion, and significantly complicates the business of reconciling English-language records that concern people of Chinese origin” (Finch 2023 pers. comm.).



Fig. 6 Metal grave marker, Cheung See, Cloncurry. (Photo: author)

The marble gravestone relates to Wong Yuk Leung from Po On district and was erected in the Spring of 1920 (Finch 2022a:7). The Cloncurry and District Historical Society records the interment as that of Liang (Leung) and Wang (Wong), wherein the surname has been transposed from the first name position to the Western style of surname last and the character translated as “Yuk,” possibly inadvertently, omitted from that translation: a further example of the confusing ad hoc romanization of Chinese text. The morphology itself reflects a notable tendency, by that period, to adopt grave markers that were more akin with those of contemporaneous European forms: a white marble, half-round, vertical headstone (Fig. 7).

Cooktown

Cooktown, one of northeast Queensland’s earliest colonial settlements, at the mouth of the Endeavour River, was where Lieutenant James Cook landed to repair his damaged ship, HM Bark *Endeavour*, in 1770. In 1873 it was permanently colonized as the port for the Palmer goldfield 120 km. At one stage ships were arriving direct from China with migrant workers, enthused by the prospects of striking it rich on one of the last of Australia’s goldrush foci. In its heyday the population exceeded 4000 but, in 2021, was 2826 (Grimwade 1995a, b:10).

The Cooktown cemetery has been in continuous use since at least 1877, with the impressive concrete burning tower (*fa bou lou*), built in 1886 with funds provided by the local Chinese business community, as a central feature (Wong Hoy 2009:44). The area around the burner was reputedly designated for Chinese burials, but is now heavily vegetated (Fig. 8).

Local tradition claims that all Chinese buried in Cooktown were subsequently exhumed. A Burial Register from January 1, 1877 to 1995 was extant in 1995, but records for the period 1872 to 1876 appear to have been lost (Grimwade 1995a, b:13); however, the Cooktown Historical Society has tabulated 99 exhumations from April 1879 to December 1930 and 290 burials (Cooktown Historical Society, 2022). There are no marked graves, but the idea that *all* were exhumed is a challenging concept and these data clearly contradict that folklore. The density of the vegetation is such that identifying exhumation depressions is particularly difficult and no systematic study has yet been attempted. One reburial was undertaken in 2009, when skeletal remains in a “burial urn,” a large stoneware storage jar, were interred near the burner after it was determined that repatriation was impractical. The records of the National Trust’s Cooktown Museum merely indicate the urn had been found on the Palmer goldfield and donated, possibly in the 1970s. A cairn marks the reburial site.

Croydon

Croydon is headquarters for a land-locked shire council of the same name covering 29,498 km², with most of the 300 residents living within the town itself. Open savanna woodland dominates the gently undulating landscape, making it invaluable cattle breeding country, despite the risk of seasonal floods and cyclones. Two



Fig. 7 Wong Yuk Leung's grave marker. (Photo: author)



Fig. 8 Cooktown burning towers and shrine. (Photo: author)

stockmen discovered reef gold near the town in 1883 and a goldfield was declared three years later. By 1887 around 7000 people lived in Croydon and its satellite townships, like the evocatively named Golden Gate, Station Creek, Gorge, and Tabletop.

Ten cemeteries were identified in 2000, two of which contain Chinese burials (Grimwade and Ginn 2000:17). The main cemetery contains about 1000 graves dating between 1889 and 1996 (Croydon Shire Council 1889–1989). Eighty-seven are of Chinese descent, who are mainly interred in the Alien Section of the main cemetery. Ten are marked by local sandstone in which are incised, in Chinese script, the deceased's names and villages of origin. There are a few other graves on which were placed plain sandstone rocks. In some cases standard cast iron plot markers are neatly driven into the ground, but their accuracy is dubious.

The graves in Croydon's main cemetery and one (Lee Kan) from an isolated, exhumed grave have been translated by Finch (2022b). It was hoped the translations would neatly correlate with the Burial Register. The truth proved far from that simplistic assumption. Only two, Wong Cheung/Wong Chong and Cheung Sin/Chong Sin, can be definitively cross referenced to the register, while three have multiple possibilities. The frustration of differences between actual names and those in official files again comes to the fore. The absence of dates on the markers makes cross referencing more challenging but it is unlikely the low correlation between markers and the official records means some Chinese deaths may have been undocumented, as the burial register appears to have been consistently maintained over many years.

All but one of the grave markers are associated with burials in the gazetted cemetery, so unauthorized burials are improbable. It is more likely that names were so heavily bastardized by bureaucrats that confirming connections between marked graves and the register are near impossible.

The grave markers of Wong Cheung and Cheung Sin show that they were erected by “devotees” in 1898/99. In fact, the register — while spelling their names as Wong Chong and Chong Sing — clearly indicates both men died in 1894 (Fig. 9). There is limited reason to suggest they may have had close association, beyond probably being Hakka, before arrival in Croydon: Wong Cheung was from Ha Tong village, Kwan Yap (aka Tung Kwun) district, and Chong Sing was from Cheung Shan, Kwai Yap (aka Kwai Shin) district (Finch 2022b). The markers were probably erected once funds were available to pay for them. Despite the absence of any other dates, several can, nonetheless, be approximated through Finch’s well-considered translations and his comments relating to name changes of places that occurred during the formative years of the Republic of China. They all point to a period around 1898 to 1911, when an unidentified Chinese stonemason was apparently active in Croydon. All but one of the inscriptions were certainly the work of a skilled artisan, although the marker for Cheng Tsung appears to be a cruder departure from the norm. That period is supported by the fact that six large pieces of sandstone were carved into lotus flower designs for use as structural supports in the second Croydon temple, opened in 1903 (Grimwade 2003:1). There was an earlier temple, dating around 1897, about which little is known, but it is possible “devotees” of those structures funded Wong Cheung and Cheung Sin’s markers.

Croydon has locally available sandstone which was primarily sourced for kerbing and for footbridge supports in the town area. Such resources close to town were advantageous for those producing grave markers. While sandstone, marble, and granite are generally preferred for such tasks, in Croydon’s case any argument about which to use is a non-event. It came down to the simple fact that sandstone was locally available. The weight of these grave markers is noteworthy. Assuming one third is buried for stability, those discussed here range between 39 and 98 kg: not the sort of weight to be shifted easily by one person. This is significant for several reasons. First, while there may well have been a Chinese sculptor/stonemason in Croydon, he would have needed both human assistants and equipment, if only to man-handle the rocks. Secondly, the community was sufficiently wealthy to support the work of a stonemason albeit, probably, part time. Third, transport of the stone from quarry to workshop to cemetery was not a concern as they were relatively close. Fourth, Chinese were legally excluded from direct employment in mining at the time Croydon was flourishing. Resident Chinese thus focused on other forms of employment and not, it seems, just as market gardeners, retailers, bakers or cooks.

Normanton

The former port town of Normanton, like Burketown, owes its origins to the need for coastal facilities to service its hinterland pastoral properties. While the Norman River is too shallow for modern shipping Normanton was once an important port



Fig. 9 Grave marker of Wong Cheung, Croydon. (Photo: author)

along colonial Queensland's coast that, nowadays, retains its focus as an administrative hub for this sparsely populated region. Many of the residents were Chinese engaged in work as cooks, storekeepers, and market gardeners.

The cemetery, 1.5 km south of town, was opened in about 1870 soon after the port was developed and contained 1200 burials by 2012. The burials register (to 2012) records 27 burials between 1887 and 1930 that are identifiable as Chinese. The age of 14 of the deceased is unknown, one was over 80 years, one was in their seventies, three in their sixties, two in their fifties, one in the forties, three in their thirties, and two died at six weeks (Carpentaria Shire Council 2012). The alien section at the rear of the cemetery contains Chinese burials from which two fragmented grave markers were retrieved in 2011, subsequently repaired and returned to site. The larger one, a natural piece of sandstone, indicates the grave of Tse Fo Sin from "the Se Yip district of Sun Ning/Llin Nen/Xinning. The speaker may therefore have been a speaker of the See Yip language (Fig. 10). 'Grave of Tie Fuo Llen of Llin Nen' thus presents as an alternative translation" (Finch 2022c:4). Finch also notes the presence of Hakka speakers in the Gulf Country, in which case the name would have been pronounced as Tsia Fo Sen. It is most likely the grave was actually that of Charlie Ah Sinn, who died October 29, 1902. The date on the stone refers to the erection date rather than the death date. In this case it was placed sometime between November 16, 1906 and February 12, 1907, being the "three winter months of the Chinese lunisolar calendar" (Finch 2022c:4). The smaller stone, although now repaired, lacks sufficient text to do more than indicate it relates to someone named "Ping" or "Bing" from an indecipherable village (Finch 2022c:5). Both these stones are more rudimentary in form than those at Croydon, 200 km east, but nonetheless suggest the same mason may have been involved. While evidence of dates is scant, there is reason to consider that the date range is, once again, around the first decade of the twentieth century.

Palmer

The Palmer goldfield, or colloquially, "The Palmer," was a major alluvial and reef gold district that rose to prominence between 1872 and 1884. It lies southwest of Cooktown: the entrepôt for most of the thousands who flocked there. Even today it is inaccessible and, for many, an inhospitable region of open savanna woodland cut by steep sided valleys in which are extensive seasonal streams feeding into either the North Palmer (the Left Branch) or the Palmer River itself (Right Branch): a landscape that, to the unknowing, belies its mineralogical values.

Kirkman has indicated that, by 1877, around 13,700 Chinese and 3000 Europeans were working the Palmer placer deposits/alluvials (Kirkman 1984:41). The townships they established — Maytown, Palmerville, Lukinville, Revolver Point, German Bar, and Byerstown — are now deserted. The current population is about 40, who mine the rugged gullies for alluvial gold or are engaged in beef cattle production.



Fig. 10 Grave marker of Tse Fo Sin, Normanton. (Photo: author)

While there is a gazetted cemetery at Maytown, most of the 213 Chinese graves recorded between 1989 and 2005 are scattered across what is now referred to as the Palmer Goldfield Resources Reserve, a portion only of the original goldfield (Burke and Grimwade 2013; Comber 1991; Grimwade 1990a, b). Thirty-three are single graves, 30 are in clusters of between two and five graves, and 55 in clusters of six to ten graves. Four sites include, respectively, 17, 21, 25 and 32 graves. The latter includes the Maytown cemetery and the, so-called “Chinese cemetery,” at German Bar, which was fenced off in the 1980s, but has at least one lone grave a short distance away.

The disproportionate number of isolated graves suggests that burials were effected quickly and opportunistically, probably from climatic expediency and also to minimize work delays. Similar situations have been noted in North America during construction of the Northern Pacific Railroad: “Many of the Chinese who died were buried in simple unmarked graves... to prevent slowing construction work and to allow for easier relocation and shipment to China” (Fullerton 1961; Heltterline 1984:33 both quoted in Merritt et al. 2012:675). In fact, if the long-term intent was reburial in China, they were probably marked initially as each body would need to be identified before exhumation.

Most Palmer graves were marked with a pile of rocks as “footstones” and an indeterminate number with rudimentary markers, usually of slate or shale, into which names and places of origin were inscribed in Chinese characters (Fig. 11). Placement of the marker at the foot of the grave is possibly a local variation, although Grainger (1921:30) noted a modified practice in China: “When a wealthy man, or a great scholar dies, a brief account of his life is engraved on stone and a second



Fig. 11 Grave marker of Wu Quan Bao (sic), Xin An district, Circa 1975 (Photo: Ern Stephens, Cairns Historical Society)

stone is used as a cover to preserve the inscription. These are placed in the grave at the coffin foot.” When mining had a resurgence on the Palmer in the 1980s these markers were progressively collected by two well-intentioned individuals, ostensibly to prevent ad hoc souveniring. In most cases the location of each grave was, fortuitously, documented and a white-painted, timber pole positioned nearby. Some of the original markers are now in the possession of the Cooktown Historical Society and the National Trust’s Cooktown Museum.

Chinese burials in the Palmer are identifiable as mounds about 1.8 to 2.4 m and around 800 mm wide. Rocks were piled around 200–250 mm high, apparently, above the feet. There have been no archaeological excavations to confirm this and one is, thus far, reliant on folklore and dubious “camp fire tales,” which also infer that shallow burials were the norm. This is consistent with practice reported elsewhere. Pasacreta (2005:68) for example, noted that shallow first burials were preferred in North America as they hastened decomposition. Shallow graves were also noted on the Northern Pacific Rail Road near Noxon, Montana (Merritt et al 2012:681). This would have been a significant attribute in expediting exhumation and repatriation for second burial.

While there may have been a larger population on the Palmer than in Croydon, no specialized stone-working skills were apparent among the markers examined for this project. Locally sourced stone was, again, preferred, and in this instance it was the local metamorphosed or fine volcanic rock capable of shearing to offer a flat face into which characters could be incised with relative ease. It was easily sourced across much of the region and, from personal experience, is easily split to form flat, workable surfaces. The stone grave markers held in museum collections are smaller and lighter than their Croydon counterparts (Fig. 12). Raw material could be readily sourced and carted to a specific site by one or two people at most. They have a weight range between 1.9 and 23.4 kg, with an approximate average weight of around 8 kg. With the widespread distribution of graves in the Palmer this has to have been an important consideration. While 213 graves were identified across a substantial area by Grimwade (1990a) and Comber (1991) in the early 1990s, all were by then depleted of their markers and it is feasible that additional graves have escaped documentation due to the terrain and vegetation—chest high grass for most of the time, which severely restricts ground visibility. Notwithstanding that, it suggests a strong desire to add identifying markers for future exhumation.

Finch (2018) translated nine markers for the Cooktown Historical Society, which were part of the collections made in the 1980s. Three markers do not identify the names of the deceased because pieces are missing or text is obscure. Six show the name, home town and district. Only in Lee Yun Fo’s case are both his home town and a death date shown— between June 11 and 12, 1876 (Finch 2018:8).

In commentary about the Palmer grave markers Finch (2018:3) confirms my broader research and noted the north’s propensity for brevity: “Victorian gold fields not infrequently record everything from the deceased’s date and hour of death to the full particulars of his native place, clearly and in fine calligraphy.” Personal observation suggests the same can be said of Tasmanian memorials.



Fig. 12 Grave marker of Kwok Fat, On Yap district, now in possession of Cooktown and District Historical Society. (Photo: author)

Discussion

It is evident that, across far north Queensland where stone grave markers were used, there was a reliance on locally sourced material. Unsurprisingly, there is no extant evidence that timber markers were widely used. That may well be because more durable materials were readily available and, thus, swiftly adopted or simply that environmental influences were ignored and, as a result, graves are no longer easily recognized. Chinese scribes, of varying expertise, undertook the engravings. The markers usually lack dates of death and any indication of age.

Within this random sample there was a remarkable divergence in the way in which Chinese burials were undertaken, however. The absence of some registers and the management, or lack thereof, of cemeteries once they were closed, adds further to this diversity. The earliest Chinese graves (Palmer and Croydon goldfields) were predominantly marked without dates of death, perhaps simply because they were intended merely as identifiers ahead of anticipated exhumation and repatriation. This omission is an intriguing divergence from the practices elsewhere and cannot be discounted as “just an oversight.” Similarly, Ng (1993:63) specifically notes the importance of Chinese inscriptions on New Zealand graves because, “Like the inscriptions of early European settlers, the stones tell of overseas origins *and dates*—name, Guangdong county, village, life span.” The consistent absence of dates in far north Queensland suggests other, unknown, factors were at work. One may also contemplate the possibility those undertaking the burials, particularly in remoter sites, like the Palmer, may have had no concept of the date of demise due to their isolated existence.

Name and hometown would have sufficed ahead of exhumation, because dates of death had little to do with the importance of returning remains to their ancestral lands, although it was the norm for bones to be retrieved after five to seven years in some areas, in which case a death date would have minimized any confusion regarding timing (Williams 2018:113). In Queensland, however, the legal requirement was far less. Richards (2016:82) notes, “the government advised the Police Magistrate in Cooktown that a body must be buried for twelve months before exhumation could occur.” I suggest the primary purpose of the earliest markers discussed here—those at Croydon and the Palmer goldfield—was therefore to identify name and hometown ahead of an anticipated exhumation and return of physical remains to China. In many instances those repatriations were never achieved.

The dedicated stonemasonry evident at Croydon and, to a lesser extent, at neighboring Normanton, is noteworthy, particularly given the rudimentary markers used in other cemeteries discussed in this paper. Were Croydon residents envisaging exhumation, but with more panache, given the availability of a stonemason and close proximity to better material? Documentary evidence shows that Croydon residents did exhume 16 bodies in 1907, 1913, and 1915.

The absence of markers in centers like Atherton and Cairns contrasts sharply when one considers the efforts taken in remote areas like the Palmer, and raise more questions than answers. The expectation is that graves would be better marked at

places where relative permanency of residency and prosperity existed. That is certainly not the case and one can only assume, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, that any markers may have been timber. During extensive conservation and restoration work of the Cairns cemetery in the 1990s overseen by the author, no evidence was noted that suggested graves had once been marked with any durable material. The Atherton cemetery has been subjected to numerous fires over the years, which would have eradicated above ground evidence of markers and no systematic archaeological work has been undertaken there. In the absence of any evidence to the contrary it is therefore reasonable to conclude the absence of markers is either a local cultural response or that markers are now absent due to nature induced decay, storms, wild fires, or even deliberate vandalism, as Ryan (1991:14) has noted in Western Australia.

The use not only of local stone but of sheetmetal as markers indicates significant resourcefulness, as the latter appears to have been used rarely, with only two known examples in the northeast and one in the Northern Territory. It is, of course, arguable that others may have succumbed to the tropical climate. It is unlikely the idea may have derived from the same source, as each uses a slightly different inscription technique.

Historically, the tendency has been to simply translate “Chinese text” into English. That is simplistic in extreme and often has resulted in the inappropriate use of Mandarin as the appropriate target language. To be truly meaningful text needs to be translated into Cantonese or Hakka etc., not Mandarin. It is confusing enough to have anomalies between grave markers and burial records but it is exacerbated by translations into “Chinese,” aka Mandarin, and often also Romanized inconsistently. It is further complicated by the propensity of Europeans, unskilled in Chinese languages and dialectic differences, to provide their own interpretation of a name in historical records.

The repatriation of remains continued as a goal for many years but became impracticable in 1949 for legislative reasons (Sinn 2013: 294) and because “The Chinese government no longer welcomes them; the country cannot afford the amount of land taken up by cemeteries.... so the government now advocates cremation, which troubles those with old beliefs, who fear that the fire will destroy their souls” (Rolls 1996:320). Notwithstanding that, it is reasonable that some recognition of ancient tradition in a modernized society is appropriate. Ancestor reverence was a fundamental tradition in China, although now modified by modern political ideologies.

In the case of the Palmer graves it is imperative that the markers that were collected with the best intention some 40 years ago are not detached from the, admittedly sometimes rudimentary, records of where they were located (Fig. 13). Arguably, collected gravestones, although totally out of context, do provide opportunity for revering the lives of many who might otherwise have died, forgotten, far from the land of their ancestors. It is an interesting philosophical debate beyond the scope of the current study. Ching Ming festival, in early April, provides an orthodox opportunity to revere the lives of those known and unknown Chinese pioneers. Confucian philosophies of revering the ancestors now fall on broader shoulders of others as the

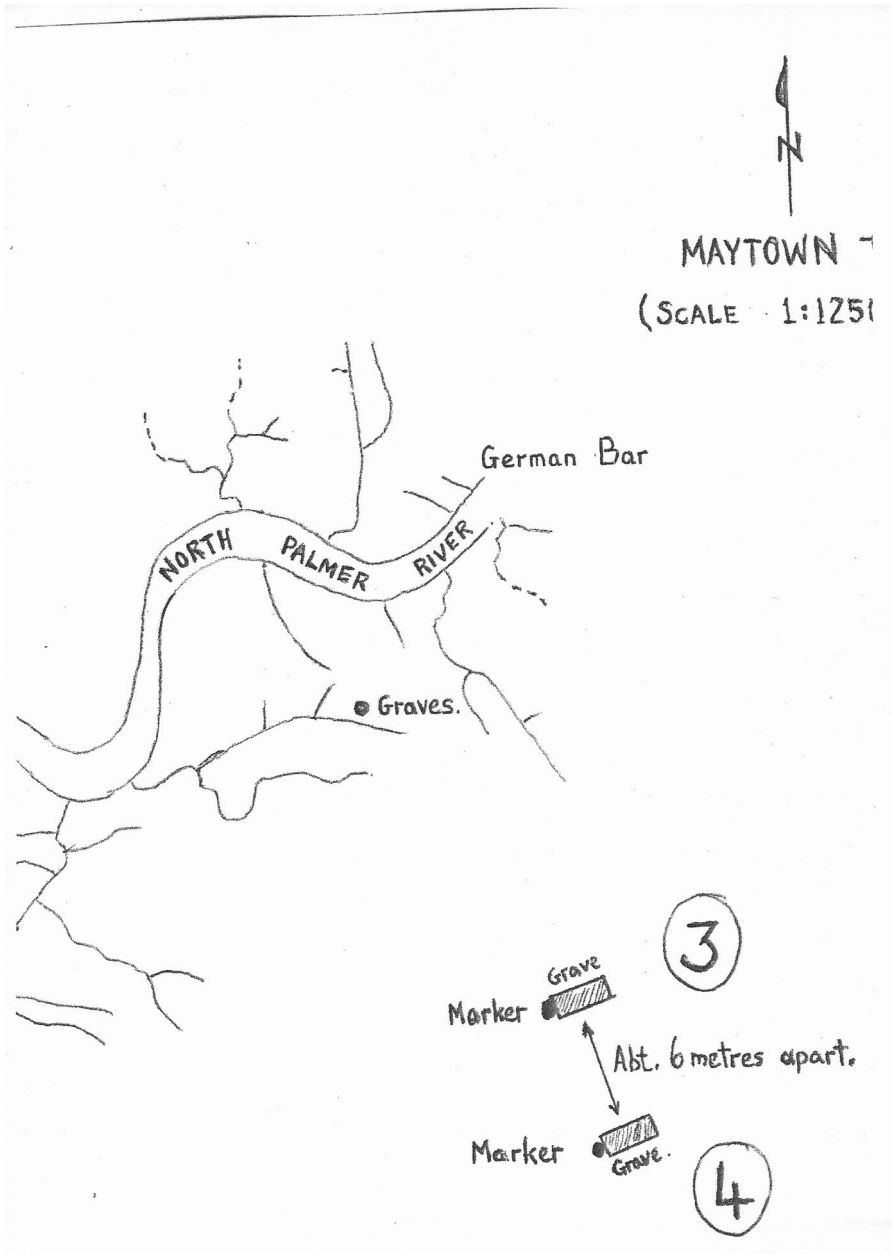


Fig. 13 Sketch map by J Skinner associated with Kwok Fat's grave (no 3). Identified as Grimwade's 1990a, b Site EN1003:3. (Photo: Cooktown and District Historical Society)

twenty-first century evolves and, as observed a few years ago at Atherton, is not yet a lost skill.

Observations relating to burials at other sites indicate that the twentieth century increasingly saw the emergence of further cultural change through the adoption of European-style grave stones, partly through a change in cultural foci (Sinn 2013:294). The period 1870 to ca.1930 clearly suggests that the initial, opportunistic utilization of local stone was showing signs of modification to make greater use of the resources available through the, by then, numerically more dominant European population. A process leading to identifiable ethnogenesis was certainly underway but a distinctive, new material culture was yet to fully emerge. An evaluation of data derived after 1930 would be an invaluable next step.

While repatriation is no longer feasible, archaeologists and historians are well placed to facilitate the continuation of reverence to the ancestors by their descendants and relations and to extend into more comprehensive analysis of burial patterns among the Chinese diaspora.

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