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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Inventing sacredness in a colonial city: a British garden cemetery in nineteenth-century Hong Kong

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Abstract

The Hong Kong Colonial Cemetery, established in 1845, served as both an exemplary burial space and a refuge from the 'degenerative' tropical urban environment for the British during the second half of the nineteenth century. This article argues that what constitutes the sacredness of the cemetery was not merely Christian values, but a mixture of personal emotional meanings and imperialist sentiments. The sacredness of the site during the nineteenth century also rested upon the exclusion of the Chinese 'other', even though such boundaries were often volatile due to the diverse and unfixed nature of the colonial community, and the rising influences of the Chinese elites.

Introduction

Strolling south from the towering skyscrapers and crowded streets of Wan Chai – the busiest commercial district on Hong Kong Island – one finds oneself in a much more tranquil area, Happy Valley, a rare piece of natural flatland on the island. On the eastern side of the valley lies a racecourse, a site familiar to many Hong Kong residents. On the western side, one finds not galloping horses but thousands of graves. From north to south are the Muslim Cemetery, Catholic Cemetery, Hong Kong Cemetery and Parsee Cemetery, with the garden-like Hong Kong Cemetery being the largest and serving as a significant green space. This cluster of cemeteries is seldom visited by people today. In a city where most residents cremate the dead, very few are buried here today. These resting places, neglected by most of the public, seem to belong to a bygone era.

These cemeteries have changed little since the nineteenth century. Despite the high pressure on land throughout the last century, the cemeteries remain an oasis in the island's concrete jungle. The Hong Kong Cemetery, known historically as the Protestant Cemetery or the Colonial Cemetery, was the model burial space of the colony. The cemetery has always been a refuge of tranquillity away from the hustle and bustle of the city. The fact that precious flatland was reserved for the dead immune from removal, or the fact that there were scarcely any Chinese burials in the

cemetery, reflected the colonial government's mentality in arranging and regulating space. The British had constructed the cemetery as a sacred site with rich meanings. But for whom was this sacred site designed? Who were represented by the site and who were excluded?

This article explores how the Hong Kong Colonial Cemetery was constructed as a sacred site of the colony and the layers of meanings that were attached to the place by the British.[1] Meticulous studies of the cemetery have been done before. Ken Nicolson studies it from a perspective of landscape and design, illustrating the cemetery's architectural roots and transformation throughout the years.[2] Patricia Lim's work tells a vivid social history of colonial Hong Kong through an in-depth study of many burials in the cemetery.[3] While I have occasionally visited the site and observed various tombstones and monuments there, my analysis in this article is much indebted to their groundwork, particularly Lim's study of each and every tombstone. To go beyond their works, my study seeks to investigate the meanings people associated with the site during the nineteenth century. How did these meanings differ from the ones given to concurrent popular garden cemeteries in Britain?

By focusing on the notion of 'sacredness', my work illustrates how the cemetery acquired its sacred status through its position and design and, more importantly, through the exclusion of 'the other' and the delegitimization of their space. The community that the cemetery represented and the boundaries that were established to make the place 'sacred' were, however, fundamentally ill-defined. This is related to the elusive nature of British national and imperial identity. Exploring such questions provides insight into not just the history of colonial Hong Kong but speaks to broader British imperial history. A 'sacred' burial site in the colonial urban context was culturally rooted in Britain, but was inseparable from the realities of British imperialism, and was ultimately subject to the hierarchies of imperialism and the constraints of the elusive British identity.

It is useful to define and historicize the idea of 'sacred' for this study. How far can we translate the notion of sacredness from one culture to another? Anthropologist Jane Hubert acknowledged the challenge of translating the word 'sacred' and the diversity of sacred sites across cultures; yet she identified 'concomitant concepts of separateness, respect and rules of behaviour' common to sacred sites in various cultures.[4] Peter Ucko pointed out that 'wherever sacredness is ascribed at any particular moment, powerful emotions and attitudes are involved'.[5] Such emotions and attitudes are crucial as they govern how people interact with a site. It is precisely such regulated interactions that render a site sacred. Hubert, David L. Carmichael and Brian Reeves highlighted that studying a sacred site involves not just looking at the site itself but understanding 'a whole range of rules and regulations regarding people's behaviour in relation to it'.[6] Rules and regulations act to protect sacred sites from transgression. The notion of transgression thus always exists as the antithesis of

[1]In this article, I use the generalized term 'British' to denote the white Britons living in Hong Kong during the nineteenth century, many of whom worked for or closely with the British colonial state.

[2]K. Nicolson, *A History and Tour of the Hong Kong Cemetery* (Hong Kong, 2010).

[3]P. Lim, *Forgotten Souls* (Hong Kong, 2011).

[4]J. Hubert, 'Sacred beliefs and beliefs of sacredness', in D. Carmichael *et al.* (eds.), *Sacred Sites, Sacred Places* (London, 1994), 11.

[5]P. Ucko, 'Foreword', in Carmichael *et al.* (eds.), *Sacred Sites*, xviii.

[6]D. Carmichael *et al.*, 'Introduction', in Carmichael *et al.* (eds.), *Sacred Sites*, 3.

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sacredness, as is illustrated throughout this article. Protecting sacred sites from transgression often implies excluding certain people. Sacred sites, therefore, are rarely open to all. They are based on exclusion: excluding people and influences that are deemed corrupting.

Traditionally, notions of sacredness and transgression were often tied to religion. This applies to English society. Hubert suggested that the concept of sacredness in English society tends to be limited to religious activity. She suggested that sacredness in the religious sense is normally separated from daily life. The associated sacred places – such as churches, chapels and cathedrals – are distinct and recognizable.[7] Historically, burial sites also belonged to this group of religious sacred places, since graveyards were usually adjacent to churches as part of the religious domain during the medieval and early modern period. Yet, since the early nineteenth century, burial sites gradually shifted from churchyards to garden cemeteries at the outskirts of cities, physically distant from the churches. This does not mean that garden cemeteries lost the sacredness that old churchyard burials possessed. Instead, they signified new secular meanings that partially replaced the traditional religious meaning of sacredness in the realm of death and mourning. Did cemeteries in a colonial context like Hong Kong echo such transformations in Britain? Did nationalism or imperialism provide such new secular meanings of sacredness? These questions will be explored in this article.

The study of the invention of sacredness, and specifically the construction of a sacred site, in colonial Hong Kong therefore enriches our understanding of colonialism and burial spaces in general. First, it demonstrates how the nineteenth-century transformation of burial spaces in Britain (the decline of traditional religious sacredness and rise of new secular meanings) was translated into a colonial context. Second, the notion of sacredness and its implied necessity to exclude speak to the colonial preoccupation with creating enclaves amid large 'alien' populations and maintaining racial distinctions. Finally, studying the Hong Kong Colonial Cemetery from the angle of constructing sacred meanings is a refreshing addition to the existing works on colonial cemeteries in the region, which are undoubtedly meticulous studies of individual burials but often lack in-depth reflection on the meanings of the sites in relation to the complex social dynamics of a colonial city.

British colonial cemeteries in the region in the *longue durée*

Before venturing into the story of the Hong Kong Colonial Cemetery, it is useful to place the cemetery into the longer history of British colonial cemeteries in Asia. The Hong Kong Colonial Cemetery was not the first cemetery set up by the British in the region. Prior to that, the British had already created organized cemetery spaces in Calcutta, Penang and Macau: the Park Street Cemetery in Calcutta (established in 1767), the Northam Road Cemetery in Penang (1786) and the Old Protestant Cemetery in Macau (1821). These predecessors to the Hong Kong Colonial Cemetery were all distinctive in their own ways and possessed slightly different meanings for the British to the Hong Kong Colonial Cemetery.

Prior to the mid- and late nineteenth century, when the Hong Kong Colonial Cemetery became an exclusive sacred space of the colony, the British held different

[7]Hubert, 'Sacred beliefs and beliefs of sacredness', 12.

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attitudes towards cemetery spaces in Asia. In fact, throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, cemeteries in the 'distant land' of Asia, both the native ones and the ones constructed by the British themselves were inspirations to the evolution of European cemeteries in the metropolitan context. Thomas Laqueur suggests that early modern Europeans were often in awe of the cemetery designs that they came across in the 'Orient'. Ottoman, Moghul and Chinese graveyards all provided an alternative to European Christian burial spaces. Early British colonists of the East India Company in India often incorporated elements of the Moghul imperial style in designing tombstones, as they sought to emulate the same level of grandeur.[8]

The Park Street Cemetery in Calcutta was one of the earliest European colonial cemeteries in the world. It was also one of the earliest non-denominational European cemeteries, in the sense that it was unlike medieval and early modern European graveyards that were adjacent to a church and belonged to a particular denomination. Inside the cemetery, without being tied to the constraints of a religious denomination, British colonists freely adopted Moghul and Hindu elements in designing their ostentatious tombs and monuments.[9] British colonists before the nineteenth century therefore sometimes welcomed non-European elements in their burial spaces. In the 'distant' colonial context, on the one hand, they could be free from the denominational constraints that to some extent still dominated Europe; on the other hand, they explored and adopted new 'exotic' styles. This fits with the narrative based on Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, that the pre-nineteenth-century European image of the 'Orient' was more of a romanticized one emphasizing exoticness, without downright denigration.[10] Unlike the second half of the nineteenth century, when the British were preoccupied with excluding 'the other' from their cemetery spaces, the pre-nineteenth-century colonial cemetery spaces could be a place of hybridity and experimentation in style.

Closer to Hong Kong, Penang's Northam Road Cemetery and Macau's Old Protestant Cemetery were very much comparable, albeit not identical, to the Hong Kong Colonial Cemetery.[11] Both cemeteries shared similarities with the Hong Kong Colonial Cemetery in the sense that they served as a refuge for the British both culturally and environmentally. These two cemeteries were designed to be more of an exclusively European space in an 'alienating' tropical environment. The Old Protestant Cemetery in Macau was created as a refuge by the British, not from a position of strength, but from a position of weakness.[12] British Protestant missionaries were excluded from burying their dead in the Portuguese colony on ecclesiastical grounds and they often came into conflict with the local Chinese when burying their dead

[8]T. Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton, 2015), 266–7.

[9]*Ibid.*, 269.

[10]According to Edward Said, 'Modern Orientalism' gained prominence in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, coinciding with the rapid European colonial expansion, particularly by the British and French, during the same period. The sense of Western cultural superiority was much hardened during this period, with political and institutional support. Orientalism was no longer simply a romanticized imagination, but a Western projection and will to govern over the Orient. E. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978), 41–3.

[11]For more information on the origin, development and design of these two cemeteries, as well as the study of the burials in these two cemeteries, see L. Ride, *An East India Company Cemetery: Protestant Burials in Macao* (Hong Kong, 1996); M. Langdon, *Epitaph: The Northam Road Protestant Cemetery, George Town, Penang* (Penang, 2017).

[12]Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead*, 270.

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outside of the city. Consequently, the East India Company intervened to establish a Protestant Cemetery.[13] The weaker position of the British in the region at this point contrasts with their confidence and power when they transformed the Hong Kong Colonial Cemetery into an exemplary burial space in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The Northam Road Cemetery in Penang and the Old Protestant Cemetery in Macau do not strictly follow the model Victorian garden design of the Hong Kong Colonial Cemetery during the late nineteenth century. The two cemeteries, however, were not simply utilitarian graveyards either, but green refuges with emotional and spiritual value. The Hong Kong Colonial Cemetery, which epitomized the mid- and late nineteenth-century Victorian garden cemetery, followed this trend of serving as a refuge. Beyond that, the more consolidated power and presence of British colonialism in Hong Kong also elevated the Colonial Cemetery into a sacred space.

Origin and development of the Colonial Cemetery

When the colony was first established, Hong Kong presented the British with opportunities of career and wealth, but also the risk of dying far away from home. As many soldiers and sailors succumbed to diseases, military graveyards were swiftly set up in 1841 soon after the colony's foundation. These graveyards were in a deplorable condition according to British travellers: coffins were exposed and sometimes even bones lay scattered on the ground.[14] Epidemic outbreaks repeatedly bedevilled the early colonial community, causing these graveyards to be filled up after a few years. The colonial government needed to find land on the island for a more proper burial site. Happy Valley (or Wong Nai Chung Valley), being a rare piece of flatland on the hilly island, was considered. The valley was originally planned to be the business centre of the colony. However, the place was severely hit by an epidemic in 1843 and the business development plan was abandoned.[15] The British later instead took over the paddy fields from the Chinese and used this piece of flat land for recreation and burial.[16] The foundation of a colonial sacred site after clearing Chinese settlements shows that Hong Kong Island was not a 'barren rock', as it was often characterized by the early British colonists. Christopher Cowell's study of urban construction during the first decade of colonial Hong Kong highlights the role of diseases in motivating aggressive land grabs by the colonial state which disempowered the vulnerable villagers.[17]

A cemetery was officially established in 1845. In the early years, it was usually referred to as the Protestant Cemetery, but it was commonly referred to as the Colonial Cemetery by the turn of the century, and is now simply known as the Hong Kong Cemetery. The lack of a uniform official name reflects the ambiguous nature of the cemetery. Unlike most nineteenth-century garden cemeteries in Britain, which were owned and managed by private companies, this cemetery was directly managed by the colonial state. In theory, it was a state public cemetery which did not restrict

[13]Ride, *An East India Company Cemetery*, 61–2.

[14]R. Fortune, *Three Years' Wanderings in the Northern Provinces of China* (London, 1847), 24–5.

[15]C. Cowell, 'The Hong Kong Fever of 1843: collective trauma and the reconfiguring of colonial space', *Modern Asian Studies*, 47 (2013), 338–41.

[16]Lim, *Forgotten Souls*, 5–8.

[17]C. Cowell, *Form Follows Fever: Malaria and the Construction of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong, 2024), xvi.

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burials to a specific religious community. In practice, the vast majority of the burials during the nineteenth century were Protestant (and, specifically, Anglican), as most British were Anglicans by default. This led to the cemetery being called the Protestant Cemetery or Anglican Cemetery. The site was sometimes called the English Cemetery as well, as it was seen as an 'English space' for Englishmen with its English garden design. The multiple names reflected the ill-defined nature of the cemetery: a secular state cemetery in name, yet religiously and culturally restrictive in reality. The dubious nature of the cemetery was contested at the turn of the century, as will be discussed later in this article. Among the wide range of names that have been historically used, I adopt 'Colonial Cemetery' in this article as this name best reflects the realities of the site during the nineteenth century.

Cemeteries for other foreign religious communities were soon established near the Colonial Cemetery: the Catholic Cemetery in 1848,[18] the Parsee Cemetery in 1852,[19] the Jewish Cemetery in 1857[20] and the Muslim Cemetery in *c.* 1867.[21] These cemeteries were smaller than the Colonial Cemetery and were situated on a terraced landscape. The Colonial Cemetery possessed the most favourable location, occupying most of the flatland. A cluster of cemeteries was formed at the western side of the valley and the whole foreign colonial community was catered for by the colonial state in the matter of burial. In contrast, Chinese burials across the colony were vulnerable to intervention and removal throughout the nineteenth century.

The consolidation of colonial burial spaces contrasted the delegitimization of the sacredness of Chinese burial spaces. However, not all Chinese sacred sites on the island were threatened by intervention and removal by the colonial state. Chinese temples were mostly left untouched. This included both pre-colonial temples established by villagers like the Tin Hau Temple in Causeway Bay and later urban temples established during the initial colonial years like the Man Mo Temple in Sheung Wan.[22] The colonial government acknowledged these temples as not only sites of worship but also focal points of the Chinese communities or clans where they managed their own affairs. Chinese graves across the island, however, were constantly under the threat of removal since the foundation of the colony. Colonial authorities ignored the fact that burial sites were as sacred as temples and shrines to the Chinese, even though the graves were also inviolable sites for ancestor worship, and uncovering or removing a burial was generally seen by the Chinese as a severe crime against the dead.[23] Unlike temples, Chinese graves across the island were often seen by colonial officials as occupying too much land and hindering urban development.[24]

[18]S. Ticozzi, *Historical Document of the Hong Kong Catholic Church* (Hong Kong, 1997), 12.

[19]T. Ko, 'A review of development of cemeteries in Hong Kong: 1841–1950', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch*, 41 (2001), 246.

[20]*Ibid.*

[21]*Hong Kong Government Gazette*, 25 May 1867, 181.

[22]The Tin Hou Temple was established in the eighteenth century by the Tai clan, www.discoverhongkong.com/us/interactive-map/tin-hau-temple-causeway-bay.html, accessed 26 Jun. 2024.

[23]For more on the aversion of the Chinese to uncovering and removing graves during the Qing period, see J. Snyder-Reinke, 'Afterlives of the dead: uncovering graves and mishandling corpses in nineteenth-century China', *Frontiers of History in China*, 11 (2016), 1–20.

[24]For example, William T. Mercer, colonial secretary of Hong Kong in the 1850s and 1860s, published a poem criticizing Chinese graves for occupying too much space across the colony, leaving no room for the living. W.T. Mercer, 'A string of Hong Kong sonnets – VII. The Chinaman's grave in the lonely hill side', in *Under the Peak or Jottings in Verse* (London, 1868), 6.

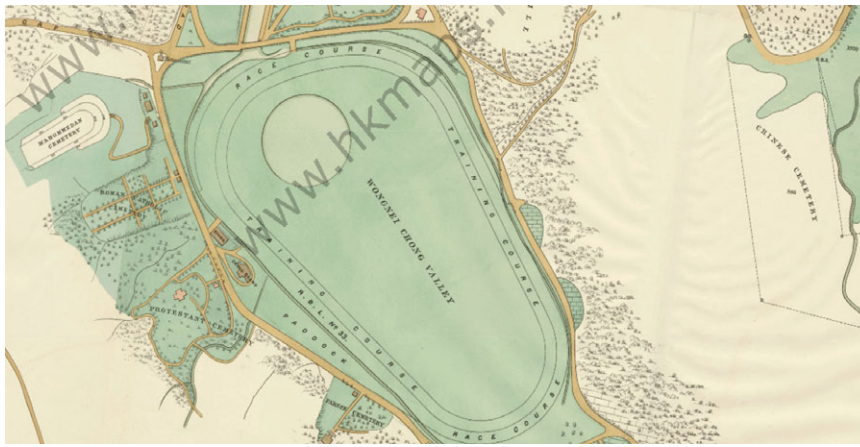

Figure 1. Map of Happy Valley in 1889 showing various cemeteries.
Source: Plan of the City of Victoria 1889, printed by Stanford's, The National Archives, UK. Accessed from *Hong Kong Historic Maps* www.hkmaps.hk/map.html?1889, accessed 26 June 2024.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, while the boundaries of the foreign colonial cemeteries on the western side of Happy Valley were reinforced and graves inside the cemeteries were protected, the existing Chinese burials scattered on the eastern side of the valley were authorized by the colonial state to become a Chinese cemetery in 1856.[25] But even inside this authorized Chinese burial ground, the graves were not protected as permanent but could be removed by the authorities at any time. According to the city map in 1889 shown above (Figure 1), various cemeteries at the western side of the valley were well established with roads and pavements, while the Chinese cemetery on the eastern side of the valley looked barren and its boundaries were artificially imposed. Today, the cluster of foreign colonial cemeteries still exists, while the Chinese graves on the other side of the valley have virtually all disappeared.

The design of the Colonial Cemetery was plain and simplistic in its first two decades. As shown in a sketch of the cemetery published in the *Illustrated London News* on 5 May 1866, simplistic tombstones huddled together on a grassland overlooking the racecourse on the other side of Happy Valley; there were no ostentatious monuments, nor was the site as carefully arranged as an elegant English garden.[26] Though the condition of the cemetery was better than the early military graveyards, it was far from what one would recognize as a garden cemetery. Soldiers and seamen still constituted most of the burials during those years, as the colony was yet to become prosperous, and a more settled colonial community had not yet developed. A visitor in around 1870 still described the cemetery as in a state of neglect. The visitor wrote to the *Hong Kong Daily Press*, complaining about the poor upkeep of the site:

> There has apparently never been any attempt at laying out the ground, and the graves are huddled along together on the hillside, the walks are very roughly

[25] *Hong Kong Government Gazette (1856)*, no. 71 [19 Jun. 1856].
[26] "The city of Victoria, Hong-Kong', *Illustrated London News*, 5 May 1866, 436.

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Figure 2. The Colonial Cemetery with a garden design in the 1880s.
Source: courtesy of Mr Ko Tim-keung.

> cut, the whole place overgrown with rank grass…many of the tombstones have sunk down on one side. In the principal walk I found a champagne bottle, and a little further on, lying on a grave, a broken gin bottle. Surely, Sir, the community is wealthy enough to keep 'God's Acre' in better order, and your magnificent public garden shows that there is no want of taste in the colony.[27]

'God's Acre' here meant the cemetery, while the visitor was likely referring to the Hong Kong Botanical Gardens when mentioning the 'magnificent public garden'. The Hong Kong Botanical Gardens were opened to the public in 1864. Here, the visitor expressed his dismay that although the colonial community was wealthy enough to open a magnificent public garden, it had failed to keep the cemetery in better shape. The contrast between the elegant public garden and the neglected cemetery was lamentable to the visitor. Such sentiments pushed the colonial government to invest more in the cemetery in the following years. As the colonial community was becoming more affluent, it could no longer tolerate a barren and neglected cemetery that conveyed a poor image of the colony and the empire. This motivated them to transform the site into an elegant garden cemetery. By the late nineteenth century, the site was essentially a carefully managed garden, neatly populated by remarkable monuments and tombstones (Figures 2 and 3). It was at this time that the 'sacredness' of the site reached its height in the minds of the British.

[27]'The state of the cemetery', *Hong Kong Daily Press*, 17 Jan. 1870.

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Figure 3. The Colonial Cemetery in the 1900s.
Source: Courtesy of Mr Ko Tim-Keung.

Sacred as an emotional sanctuary

As mentioned earlier, sacred sites involve powerful emotions. For a cemetery, they would be emotions surrounding death and mourning. Sites of burial must be separated from everyday life. They must be sanctuaries where 'pure' emotions can be nurtured without interruption and corruption. The Colonial Cemetery in the late nineteenth century acted as an emotional sanctuary for the colonial community, not just to mourn the dead, but also to reflect and recuperate.

To illustrate how the Hong Kong Colonial Cemetery served as an emotional sanctuary, an understanding of the Europeans' changing attitude towards death and the transformation of European burial sites during the nineteenth century is needed. In Western European cities, from the early nineteenth century, large cemeteries at the outskirts of cities gradually replaced crowded burial grounds in churchyards. Historians traditionally ascribed this shift in burial sites to sanitary as well as cultural factors. Recent historiography has, however, put more emphasis on cultural factors than sanitary factors. Laqueur suggests that although sanitary concern was definitely an issue during that time, the shift 'had little or nothing to do with scientific discoveries about health and disease and much to do with a revolution in cultural values and eschatology mapped in the realm of imagination'.[28] Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, poets like John Milton and philosophers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau started to provide a vision of the ideal naturalistic resting place for the dead.[29] By the late eighteenth century, Western Europeans had already established an imaginative alternative to the churchyard in burying the dead.[30] Through these imaginations, the cultural pioneers had paved the way for the popularization of spacious naturalistic cemeteries in the nineteenth century.

[28]Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead*, 214
[29]*Ibid.*, 238–60.
[30]*Ibid.*, 255.

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Aside from naturalistic landscapes, individualized burial was an essential feature of the garden cemetery in contrast to previous churchyard burial. This shift was tied to the changing attitude towards death. Historian Lawrence Stone suggested the concept of 'affective individualism', which implies 'the rise of familial attachment to a lover, child, spouse or parent' in the eighteenth century.[31] Philippe Ariès, whose monumental work on Western attitudes towards death spans a millennium, periodized the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Western Europe as 'death of the other'.[32] He suggested that since the late eighteenth century, there had been increasing emphasis on individuals' personal relationships with the deceased. Death was usually seen from the perspective of losing loved ones. Ariès' and Stone's periodization of Europeans' changing attitude could well be reflected in cemetery design.

Based on Ariès' and Stone's line of thought, archaeologist Sarah Tarlow suggests the emotional significance of an individualized burial in a spacious garden cemetery. Tarlow argues that, with the growing personal emotional attachment to the deceased, the deceased person became 'the centre of a web of relationships' and the dead body required special care from the loved ones; 'the bereaved commonly felt that the resting place of the body should be comfortable and attractive'.[33] The old churchyard burial ground, where the dead were buried closely together without much differentiation for individual identity, was deemed outdated and could not satisfy the desire of the living. Instead, it became paramount that the actual location of the dead should be 'visitable'.[34] Private ownership of a spacious burial plot guaranteed that the bereaved could visit the dead anytime, instead of passing all authority to the church in interring and often relocating the dead. Cultural and emotional factors were therefore at the forefront in prompting the transformation of burial sites. The sacredness of the garden cemetery in the nineteenth century did not just rest upon religious meanings, but was significantly tied to personal emotional meanings surrounding the lost loved ones.

The Hong Kong Colonial Cemetery by the late nineteenth century, just like garden cemeteries in Britain, was also designed to nurture such personal emotional meanings. It was designed to be a peaceful setting that enabled visitors to commiserate with the dead, as well as to reflect and recuperate away from the urban environment. Henry Knollys, an officer in the Royal Artillery, visited the cemetery in the 1880s and depicted it in his travel diary. His descriptions emphasized the tranquil environment where emotions could be nurtured:

> Emerging from the town, we suddenly arrive at that which is, perhaps, the most beautiful and the saddest acre in the British empire. The so-called 'Happy Valley', the English cemetery of Hong Kong. No natives are allowed inside, so, leaving our rickshaws at the gate, we pass into the peaceful solitary groves, the silence of which is unbroken, save by the joyful notes of many a singing-bird, and the splashing of a burn down the adjacent overhanging rocks…I would rather describe it as a carefully tended expanse of turf, with a pretty little chapel

[31]L. Stone, *The Past and the Present* (Boston, 1981), 247. Stone first put forward this concept in his earlier work: L. Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (London, 1977).

[32]P. Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. H. Weaver (New York, 1981), 409–558.

[33]S. Tarlow, 'Landscapes of memory: the nineteenth-century garden cemetery', *European Journal of Archaeology*, 3 (2000), 233.

[34]*Ibid.*, 232.

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> shaded with magnificent tropical trees, interspersed with beautifully flowering shrubs, and luxuriant foliage of every tint, where are scattered the graves of our countrymen whose sad fate has been to die far from the old folks at home.[35]

The tranquillity and naturalistic elements described by Knollys – peaceful solitary groves, unbroken silence, singing-birds, shade from tropical trees and luxuriant foliage – created the perfect environment for the living to think about the deceased. How did the British construct such an environment in a landscape foreign to them? First and foremost, the space had to be 'greened'. The Hong Kong Island had been perceived by the British as a 'barren rock'. Historian Robert Peckham suggests that the colonial state took up the project of greening the 'barren rock' through extensive afforestation during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This campaign of creating a 'natural' landscape across the island consolidated and naturalized colonial power.[36] Cultivating 'nature' was part of the modernizing mission, as urban development was seen not as against, but as inseparable from promoting the 'natural' landscape.[37] The transformation of the cemetery into a garden design was part of the colonial greening project. Considerable efforts were invested in planting, as the colonial urban planners had to select flora that suited the local environment. As reflected from Knollys' description of the 'magnificent tropical trees', the British wished to add an 'exotic' flavour by incorporating a wide variety of tropical plants.[38] These efforts coincided with the development of imperial knowledge of botany, as the British demonstrated great interest in studying flora across the region.[39]

With the ideal green space created for the dead, visitors were able to reflect upon the deceased. It was a shelter amid the 'barren landscape', protected from the tropical sun, which was regarded as a menace injurious to health. It was also a sanctuary away from urban life, which was deemed tiring and morally degenerating. The garden cemetery was therefore a space for the living to recuperate and reflect away from the tiring tropical urban life. It was only within such a serene environment that the British felt that they could cultivate 'pure' emotions in being with the dead. Alongside the perfect garden design, tombstones in the cemetery were individualized with more personal meanings. Nicolson observes that lines of poetry instead of scriptural verses were sometimes used as tombstone inscriptions in the Colonial Cemetery by the late nineteenth century. These poems were composed specifically for the deceased buried there.[40] Such inscriptions were not uniform with a single religious meaning but were personalized messages reflecting the life and personality of the deceased. These words engraved on stones provided additional emotional meanings to the site. Through reading or even touching these engraved words, visitors to the cemetery would cultivate emotions for the deceased whom they might or might not personally know.

[35]H. Knollys, *English Life in China* (London, 1885), 18.

[36]R. Peckham, 'Hygienic nature: afforestation and the greening of colonial Hong Kong', *Modern Asian Studies*, 29 (2015), 1177.

[37]*Ibid*., 1178.

[38]For more details on planting in the cemetery, see Nicolson, *A History and Tour of the Hong Kong Cemetery*, 37.

[39]For a study on the British botanical knowledge of the region, see F. Fan, *British Naturalists in Qing China* (Cambridge, MA, 2004).

[40]Ken Nicolson provides a few examples of poems that were inscribed on tombstones in the Hong Kong Cemetery. Nicolson, *A History and Tour of the Hong Kong Cemetery*, 34–5.

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Individualized tombstones thus enriched the site with more emotional meanings other than just religious sacredness.

If the cemetery was a sanctuary from the tropical urban environment, how was it different from other green spaces constructed by the British? How was the cemetery particularly sacred compared to other colonial green spaces? The Hong Kong Botanical Gardens in Mid-Levels overlooking Central was another major constructed green space during the nineteenth century. Prior to the garden transformation of the Colonial Cemetery, the Botanical Gardens had opened to the public in 1864 after much planning since the 1840s.[41] The Botanical Gardens were intended to showcase British imperial knowledge through exhibiting a wide variety of 'exotic' flora collected from the region. The public garden also acted as a 'civilizing space' to enforce proper behaviours and etiquettes, welcoming visitors to fulfil its civilizing mission. According to the proclamation issued in 1864, 'all respectable persons will be admitted', subject to a range of regulations forbidding walking on the grass, picking flowers, injuring any plants and more besides. The rules also specifically mentioned that 'Chinese mechanics and labourers will not be allowed to use the garden as a thoroughfare.'[42] The exclusion was not officially based on racial or cultural distinction but on class and 'decency'. 'All respectable persons' were welcomed. In other words, as long as one dressed and behaved according to a specific standard, whether Chinese or European, one could enjoy the public garden.

The same, however, could not be said for the Colonial Cemetery. The Colonial Cemetery was much more exclusive than the Botanical Gardens in admitting visitors. This shows that although both sites shared similarities as a recuperative tranquil space away from urban life, the garden cemetery had its unique status different from other colonial green space. It was a sacred site with strict boundaries, protected from 'transgression' from the outside. As mentioned earlier, sacred sites require and are often defined by boundaries and exclusion. To further understand the sacredness of the Colonial Cemetery, it is necessary to look in-depth into how boundaries were constructed for the cemetery to exclude others.

Maintaining sacredness through exclusion

While there were never official rules barring the Chinese from visiting or being buried in the cemetery, it was *de facto* an exclusively European space throughout the nineteenth century. Knollys made it clear that 'no natives are allowed inside' in the earlier passage. Up until the turn of the century, only a tiny number of Chinese were interred in the cemetery. These rare exceptions were wives and mistresses of Europeans. Lim identified that the first Chinese buried in the cemetery in 1891 was a woman married to a British police officer. Aside from this tiny exception of Chinese women directly related to Europeans through marriage, virtually no Chinese, living or dead, entered the site during the nineteenth century.

Indeed, a sacred site was by nature governed by regulation and exclusion, with only certain people deemed worthy of having access to it. In the European Christian tradition, the confines of a graveyard were based on the religious denomination. In

[41]D.A. Griffiths and S.P. Lau, 'The Hong Kong Botanical Gardens, a historical overview', *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 26 (1986), 62.

[42]'Government notification', *HKG Gazette*, 6 Aug. 1864, 273.

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the case of the Colonial Cemetery, such narrow religious restrictions did not apply, as the cemetery was legally a state public cemetery rather than a Protestant cemetery. The exclusion of the Chinese, therefore, was not simply based on religious grounds but broader racial and cultural factors. This argument can be further supported by the fact that a large Chinese Christian Cemetery was created in 1882 by the colonial state in Mount Davis at the western end of the island.[43] When the Chinese Christian population in the colony became sizeable, the government decided to create a separate burial space for them, instead of admitting a large number of Chinese Christians to be buried alongside European Christians.

To understand the rationale for this exclusion of Chinese, we can return to the writings of Henry Knollys. He depicted a colonial funeral procession passing through the Chinese neighbourhood to the cemetery:

> The red-turbaned Lascar gunners dragging the carriage in default of horses through the grotesquely built native streets, the crowd of ugly chattering Chinese, unmoved in their grinning materialism by the saddest strains of music and the most touching form of ceremonial, present additional features which almost make us feel as if we were taking part in some dream pageant. We reach the 'Happy Valley', and here we can shake off these vermin.[44]

Knollys regarded the cemetery as a site where the colonial funeral procession could 'shake off these vermin'. He expressed his disgust towards the behaviour of the Chinese when the colonial funeral procession passed through Chinese neighbourhoods. To him, European funeral processions were defined by the utmost solemnity, which the Chinese could never understand or feel, as the Chinese people were too materialistic and superficial. There are a few more passages in his travel diary where he depicted the Chinese funerary practices that he observed in Hong Kong as being ridiculous, insincere and driven by materialism.[45] He lamented that these funerary practices were utterly void of 'genuine' emotions and that the Chinese were incapable of cultivating feelings for the dead.[46] In contrast, European funerals carried out inside the Colonial Cemetery brought out the most genuine emotions for the dead as the site created the purest atmosphere. Knollys described such a military funeral carried out inside the cemetery:

> The coffin is borne on soldiers' shoulders through these beauteous groves of which I have already spoken; the long white procession winds slowly up the mountain side, standing out clear against the varied green and red dazzling tropical foliage; the three volleys are fired with an effect augmented by the echo; the drums beat the Point of War, 'Fall in, Quick March', and homewards to a lively tune…as an episode in real life no human ingenuity could devise a more extraordinarily impressive combination of sight, sound and circumstance.[47]

[43]'Government notification No. 354', *HKG Gazette*, 2 Sep. 1882, 728.

[44]Knollys, *English Life in China*, 54.

[45]The word 'materialism' in this article refers to the derogatory view of Chinese funerary practices as treasuring material possessions over 'genuine' emotional and spiritual meanings.

[46]Knollys, *English Life in China*, 14–15.

[47]*Ibid.*, 54.

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For Knollys, the perfect 'combination of sight, sound and circumstance' was enabled by the beautiful garden design, the distance between the cemetery and the crowded neighbourhoods, the standardized military funerary rituals and, very importantly, the exclusion of Chinese influences from the site.

Knollys' language seems particularly prejudicial and contemptuous towards the Chinese, but his desire to preserve the cemetery as a purely European space was by no means marginal. This exclusion was partially rooted in the perceived religious dichotomy of Christian versus 'pagan', as many British viewed Chinese funerary practices as pagan customs driven by materialism and superstitions. Beyond that, the exclusion should be understood as a broader move by the British to maintain the cultural purity and superiority of the site. The larger issue of segregation in colonial Hong Kong needs to be discussed here to provide a full picture.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the idea of 'enclavism' was always in the minds of the British when it came to the organization of living spaces in tropical or subtropical colonies. The colonial community normally chose to reside in hill stations as their enclaves. They believed that the cooler climate in places of higher altitude would be more suitable for European bodies. 'Enclavism' persisted into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries despite medical advancement. Peckham and David Pomfret argue that there were no straightforward shifts from 'enclavism' to public health interventionism during this period.[48] With the development of the germ theory of disease in the late nineteenth century, the native population, instead of just the tropical sun and environment, was seen as the major threat to the health of the Europeans. Europeans needed to be shielded from the potentially disease-ridden native bodies.

The most infamous example of such segregation in the name of health was the Peak Reservation Ordinance in 1904, when the colonial government officially legislated segregation. Throughout the nineteenth century, the Victoria Peak, the highest hill on the island, was a *de facto* European space as no Chinese except servants lived there. This residential segregation became official in 1904, as the ordinance formally barred the Chinese except servants from living at the Victoria Peak. The government cited health reasons in justifying the law, for reserving high altitude area for the Europeans as they were not accustomed to the heat, which could be highly injurious to their health. Yet, historians have suggested that the ordinance, with health justifications on the surface, had social segregation as its ultimate goal.[49] John Carroll suggests that with the rising economic influence of the Chinese elites, the colonial community sought to preserve the existing social hierarchy and their privileged status.[50] The law also aimed at reinforcing the British sense of community and identity in an alien environment.[51] The colonial community could be physically manifested through segregated living space: the Victoria Peak essentially became an English town with English-style villas, churches and clubhouses.

The ordinance showed that colonial discourse surrounding health – of shielding European bodies from tropical heat and native bodies – went hand in hand with the racial segregation that was intended to check the rising influences of the Chinese. In

[48]R. Peckham and D. Pomfret, *Imperial Contagions: Medicine, Hygiene, and Cultures of Planning in Asia* (Hong Kong, 2013), 4.

[49]J. Carroll, *Edge of Empires: Chinese Elites and British Colonials in Hong Kong* (Cambridge MA, 2009), 90.

[50]*Ibid.*, 91.

[51]*Ibid.*, 92.

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this regard, the Colonial Cemetery mirrored the colonial hill stations. The cemetery was similarly regarded as a sanitized and recuperative green space shielded from the tropical sun and 'native diseases'. Racial segregation therefore had extended from the realm of the living to the realm of the dead.

Beyond Hong Kong and further north, the exclusion of the Chinese from colonial burial spaces could be observed in other foreign settlements in China at that time. Christian Henriot suggests that the Chinese were prohibited from being buried inside the foreign settlements of Shanghai. Although the initial rule excluding Chinese residents from the foreign settlements was not enforced, the exclusion of Chinese burials in the foreign settlements was maintained.[52] The Municipal Council of the Shanghai International Settlement sometimes even acquired land outside the settlement for constructing Western cemeteries, expanding foreign colonial burial spaces into Chinese territory.[53] Whether in Shanghai, where Western powers had no official sovereignty, or in Hong Kong, where the British had complete sovereignty, foreign colonial burial spaces remained strictly exclusive.

'Imagined community': national or imperial?

This article has so far illustrated the sacredness of the cemetery in terms of its emotional value – through constructing a perfect environment that cultivated feelings related to the dead, as well as in terms of 'cultural purity' – through excluding the Chinese population and their 'corrupting' influences. Both suggest that the sacredness of the site was not merely based on a Christian identity, but other emotional and cultural factors. With the de-emphasis of a Christian (or specifically Protestant) identity, how did the British make use of secular political ideologies to enhance the sacredness of the site? Did the 'religion' of nationalism or imperialism fill the gap?

Laqueur suggests that nineteenth-century cemeteries in Western Europe could be seen as representing the 'imagined community' of the nation-state. Replacing the traditional parish graveyard that represented a restricted religious community, the modern national cemetery testified to a much broader community: the nation.[54] Benedict Anderson, the proponent of the concept 'imagined community', likewise discussed in his monumental work the relation between traditional religions, death and modern nationalism. He argued that modern ideologies, in contrast to traditional religions, were often silent on the existential questions of life and death.[55] As beliefs of paradise and salvation faded, there was a need for new meanings surrounding death; and according to Anderson, the nation-state filled this void, as a nation is constructed to have 'an immemorial past' and also a 'limitless future'.[56] Nation-states, possessing the myth of being eternal, provide new meanings to life and death. Anderson further suggested that cenotaphs and tombs of unknown soldiers are the most 'arresting

[52]C. Henriot, *Scythe and the City: A Social History of Death in Shanghai* (Stanford, 2016), 197.

[53]One example was the Bubbling Well Cemetery established in 1896; the cemetery was constructed initially in the Chinese territory, but the area would later be absorbed into the International Settlement as well. *Ibid.*, 200–1.

[54]Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead*, 212.

[55]B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 2006), 10.

[56]*Ibid.*, 11–12.

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emblem of modern culture of nationalism'.[57] Nameless individuals were commemorated collectively for and by the nation; the meaning of their deaths was defined by the 'eternal' nation.

Though there are no cenotaphs in the Colonial Cemetery of Hong Kong, the most conspicuous structures in the cemetery today are a few towering monuments, commemorating soldiers and early colonists. One of them commemorates the men of the 95th Regiment who fell in the summer of 1848. The inscriptions record that 9 sergeants, 8 corporals, 4 drummers, 67 privates, 4 women and 4 children of that regiment 'died of fever' in that summer; a second side of the monument recorded more deaths of men, women and children from other causes from 1847 to 1850; the third side marks that the column 'is erected by their comrades'.[58] A lofty column was similarly erected by fellow officers and men for the fallen of the 59th Regiment who died between 1849 and 1858. Specific names of a captain, lieutenants and surgeons of the regiment were marked. Other than that, the deaths of 21 sergeants, 11 corporals, 4 drummers, 466 privates, 36 women and 107 children were recorded namelessly.[59] A few other monuments commemorate soldiers and sailors who perished in naval engagement in the region. For instance, a column is dedicated to 20 men from HMS *Columbine*, who died in a naval engagement with pirates in 1849.[60]

The individuals commemorated in these memorials are mostly nameless. They were probably buried in communal graves or under a humble tombstone during the early colonial years when diseases were rampant and the mortality rate was staggeringly high. It was the surviving members of the regiments who later decided to erect such memorials for their fallen comrades. The memorials thus reflect camaraderie among the soldiers since they were initiated by fellow soldiers rather than by the colonial state in a top-down fashion. To later visitors by the late nineteenth century, these memorials told a melancholic history and enhanced the historical meaning of the site. Knollys discussed the deaths of the 95th Regiment as he read through the inscriptions. He lamented that these soldiers and sailors had sacrificed so much by 'faithfully carrying out dreary routine duty in a trying, depressing tropical climate at the antipodes'.[61] To British visitors like Knollys, the memory of these fallen men and women was not to be abandoned. Although many of the individual bodies and names were lost, the ostentatious monuments were erected to commemorate them as a collective, akin then to a cenotaph.

Yet, can the modern nationhood signified by cenotaphs and national cemeteries in the European metropolitan context simply be applied to a colonial context? As Laqueur suggests, a modern cemetery in Britain or other Western European countries was a symbol of a well-defined national identity – the dead in the cemetery, irrespective of their ethnic or religious background, irrespective of their professions or political affiliations, were all ultimately bodies of the nation. Did a cemetery that was outside of the British metropole at the far corner of the empire still represent a national identity?

Historians of Britain and its empire are familiar with the elusive nature of the British national identity. British identity, like most national identities, is a modern

[57]*Ibid.*, 9.
[58]Evidence from photographs of the monument. Courtesy of Bryan Seung.
[59]*Ibid.*
[60]Lim, *Forgotten Souls*, 257.
[61]Knollys, *English Life in China*, 19.

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invention that only came into being in recent centuries. It was evidently problematic when English, Scottish and Irish identities were discussed. Britishness and the British national identity were fundamentally entwined with the notion of empire.[62] War and imperial expansion helped shape the British identity – more Englishmen started to identify themselves as Britons during wars against Napoleonic France.[63] British national identity was further consolidated through the creation of the so-called 'Second' British empire, particularly during the colonization of India, as political elites saw that emphasizing the legitimacy of ruling India was vital for the legitimacy of the British state itself.[64] By the late nineteenth century, the British monarchy, which was central to the British national identity, was fundamentally tied to the idea and reality of the empire.[65]

In colonial Hong Kong, British identity was also unfixed. Vivian Kong's recent study of Britishness in early twentieth-century Hong Kong highlights the multiplicity of British identities in colonial Hong Kong, in which Britishness was shaped not just by race, but by legality, culture and sense of belonging. Her study further demonstrates how non-whites and non-Britons (those not from the British Isles) in the colony sought to claim their British identity.[66] The uncertain Britishness in colonial Hong Kong rendered creating a cemetery based on British national identity difficult.

As an Englishman, Knollys called the cemetery 'the English cemetery of Hong Kong', but also 'the most beautiful and the saddest acre in the British Empire'.[67] This precisely reflected his multiple identities in relation to country and empire, resulting in an elusive national identity. He was proud as an Englishman and regarded the cemetery as an English space. Yet, he also viewed the site in the broader context of the British empire, believing that the site had meanings to the empire. Some writings about cemetery gardening in newspapers likewise reflected the elusiveness and interchangeability of English, British national and British imperial identity. A commentator, presumably an Englishman, wrote an article published in the *Hong Kong Daily Press* in 1875, inviting readers to 'remember that England is the country of the rich, we may on the whole congratulate ourselves on surpassing the world in what may be called cemetery gardening'.[68] As an Englishman, the commentator was proud of cemetery gardening as reflecting a superior English culture. We can therefore see that some Englishmen still held on to the English cultural identity under the broader British identity.

Britons in Hong Kong, be they Scotsmen or Englishmen, were buried in the Colonial Cemetery side by side, showing their belonging to the British nation and empire simultaneously. Despite the English dominance, a significant number of

[62]There has been an abundance of works that discuss the construction of British identity in relation to the British empire from the early modern period to the late nineteenth century. B. Bradshaw and P. Roberts (eds.), *British Consciousness and Identity: The Making of Britain, 1533–1707* (Cambridge, 2010); D. Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 2010); A. Murdoch, *British History, 1660–1832: National Identity and Local Culture* (Basingstoke, 1998); P. Ward, *Britishness since 1870* (London, 2004); L. Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven, 2005).

[63]Murdoch, *British History*, 138.

[64]*Ibid*., 127–8.

[65]Ward, *Britishness since 1870*, 14.

[66]V. Kong, *Multiracial Britishness: Global Networks in Hong Kong, 1910–45* (Cambridge, 2024).

[67]Knollys, *English Life in China*, 18.

[68]'Continental cemeteries', *Hong Kong Daily Press*, 18 Jan. 1875.

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Scotsmen were also buried in the cemetery, as there was a visible Scottish presence in the colony due to their involvement in trade early on. A section of the cemetery was devoted to long-term permanent European residents during the late nineteenth century. Lim has identified that 25 of the 150 long-term residents buried in that section were Scotsmen.[69] The 59th Regiment and the 95th Regiment commemorated in the cemetery were both from England – the 59th from Nottinghamshire and the 95th from Derbyshire – but they were commemorated for the wider cause of British imperialism. Commemoration of deceased Englishmen and Scotsmen was therefore integrated into the wider rhetoric of British imperialism.

What about the many other foreigners buried in the cemetery? Substantial numbers of Protestant Europeans like Germans and Dutch were also buried in the cemetery. Among the aforementioned 150 long-term residents, 24 of them were Germans.[70] These continental Europeans could not represent the British nation, but were arguably part of the broader British imperial project as many of them contributed to the colony as businessmen or missionaries.[71] A considerable number of Americans, including ship captains, sailors and businessmen, were also buried in the cemetery throughout the nineteenth century.[72] What would surprise many is that quite a few Japanese were also buried in the cemetery during the nineteenth century. Lim has identified that there were Japanese burials in the cemetery from 1878. She suggests that the fact that the Japanese but not the Chinese were welcome to be buried in the cemetery during the nineteenth century reflects how the Japanese were regarded by the colonial government as a respected minority, and their relatively smaller number would not dominate the cemetery.[73]

Given that a considerable number of foreign nationals who were not British subjects were buried in the Colonial Cemetery during the nineteenth century, the 'imagined community' of the British nation, which garden cemeteries in the British metropole represented, cannot simply be copied into the colonial context of Hong Kong. The realities of imperialism – diverse sub-identities under different strata – rendered a national cemetery in colonial Hong Kong impossible. The Colonial Cemetery itself had therefore become a testament to a diverse colonial community of various nationalities rather than a unified national 'imagined community'. Nevertheless, this did not prevent secular political sacredness being celebrated in the Hong Kong Colonial Cemetery. Overtones of the imperial cause remained evident in the cemetery, as the monuments and columns commemorating the army and navy towered over the graves and became the most conspicuous structures in the cemetery. Here, soldiers and early colonists were commemorated for their sacrifice to the imperial cause, just as soldiers were being commemorated in Europe for their sacrifice to the nation.

Contesting sacredness from 'the other'

As the Colonial Cemetery did not represent a well-defined British nation, but a diverse and unfixed colonial community, the 'sacred' boundaries were challenged

[69]Lim, *Forgotten Souls*, 453.
[70]*Ibid.*, 453.
[71]*Ibid.*, 456–60.
[72]*Ibid.*, 235–41.
[73]*Ibid.*, 524.

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once the colonial hierarchy was under question. The Chinese population – 'the other' in the colony – had long been excluded from the site since its foundation. At the turn of century, when some Chinese elites in the colony were becoming increasingly influential, they were not content with this exclusion. Faced with the socio-economic influence of these Chinese elites, the British were forced to settle the issue of the ambiguous nature of the cemetery. Sacredness based on European cultural purity was at risk.

A few years before this debate on the admission to the Colonial Cemetery, a few Chinese or Eurasian elites had already started to request private burial grounds for themselves, demonstrating their desire to emulate the Europeans in the domain of burial. The most notable case was the Chiu Yuen Cemetery, also commonly known as the Eurasian Cemetery. The cemetery was created in 1897 under the initiative of Robert Ho-Tung. Born to a Dutch father and a Chinese mother, Ho-Tung worked as a comprador and was reputed to be the wealthiest man in the colony at the age of merely 35.[74] He and his brothers bought land from the government in Mount Davis to establish a Eurasian Cemetery.[75] Inside the cemetery, Eurasian or Chinese elites had considerable liberty to design large graves as they saw fit, which was not possible in state Chinese cemeteries under the regulations of the colonial authorities.

The Chinese and Eurasian elites made the clear statement that Hong Kong was their permanent home and they had the right to a decent burial in the colony as well. The exclusive nature of the Colonial Cemetery was no longer tolerable to them. A heated debate began when by-laws were enacted in December 1908 to ban the burning of joss sticks and the firing of crackers in the Colonial Cemetery.[76] The by-laws were met with strong opposition from Chinese members of the Sanitary Board. One member, Lau Chu Park, who was always vocal about the burial rights of the Chinese in the colony, challenged the rationale of the by-laws.[77] Yet, some British members of the Board, like Shelton Hooper, who was the author of the by-laws, staunchly defended their position, resulting in a heated debate concerning the fundamental nature of the cemetery.

Lau argued that 'the Colonial Cemetery, as its name implied, was open to every resident in the colony, irrespective of nationality or religion. It was maintained at the cost of the public and was a public property.'[78] At first, Lau presented his position as not representing the sectional interest of the Chinese elites, but instead putting forward an egalitarian doctrine that all residents in the colony were entitled to be buried there. He tactically adopted the position that there had never been any official segregation in the cemetery, claiming that 'during the last sixty years, strictly in accordance with British justice, there had never been any law or regulation contemplated to confine its use to people of any particular nationality or religious denomination'.[79] The by-law was therefore 'curtailing the privileges hitherto enjoyed by the Chinese and other fellow citizens'.[80] Despite the fact that informal segregation of cemetery spaces had always existed, he argued as if racial segregation had never

[74]S. Tsang, *A Modern History of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong, 2004), 49.
[75]'Government notification No. 522', *HKG Gazette*, 25 Nov. 1897, 1034.
[76]'Government notification No. 875', *HKG Gazette*, 4 Dec. 1908.
[77]*Hong Kong Weekly Press*, 20 Feb. 1909, 142.
[78]'Sanitary Board', *Hong Kong Weekly Press*, 17 Apr. 1909, 314.
[79]*Ibid.*
[80]*Ibid.*

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existed and presented the by-law as a regressive measure. However, following such rhetoric of egalitarian principles, Lau reverted to speaking for the elite Chinese group. He argued that

> the better class of Chinese who had made Hong Kong their permanent home had not a decent cemetery in which to bury their dead, and the Chinese had no control on what were called Chinese Cemeteries. Those cemeteries were simply tracts of barren land set apart by the Government for the burial of the Chinese dead of any class.[81]

He was speaking for the 'better class of Chinese' who saw Hong Kong as their permanent home, maintaining that these Chinese elites deserved a decent cemetery unlike the grass-roots 'ordinary' Chinese.

The debate reflected the social circumstances of that time. It was the same period when the colonial government was pushing for the Peak Reservation Ordinance. The rising influence of the Chinese elites prompted the British to enact laws for official segregation, which they previously had not needed to do. The British pushed for such laws to preserve the existing social hierarchy and their cultural purity. The banning of joss sticks and firecrackers specifically was meant to preserve religious sanctity as well as emotional and cultural purity. Two of the common rationales behind Chinese funerary practices were, firstly, maintaining an ongoing relation with the deceased through material offerings and, secondly, avoiding malignant spirits that were results of improper or lack of proper death rituals and burial.[82] Burning joss sticks was meant as an offering to the deceased so that the deceased could bless the living in return; firing crackers was meant to scare away malignant spirits during burial. Despite the necessity of such practices according to Chinese beliefs about the spiritual afterlife, these practices were perceived by European Christians as materialistic and paganistic, in opposition to Christian principles of not making offerings to any 'idols'. To the colonial community, the smell of joss sticks and the sound of firecrackers also threatened the cemetery's status as an emotional refuge, disturbing the perfect tranquillity of the site. Once again, the exclusion was not merely based on religious grounds, but also on emotional and cultural ones.

In the end, the colonial government offered certain concessions to the Chinese members of the Sanitary Board. Although the by-law still passed in the Sanitary Board meeting as the Chinese members were in a minority, the government later drafted the 'Christian Burial Ground Ordinance' to deal with the ambiguous nature of the cemetery.[83] The ordinance set parts of the Colonial Cemetery aside exclusively for Christian burials. Outside these areas, non-Christian burials and funerary practices were allowed. The by-law was then revised, with the burning of joss sticks and the firing of crackers only banned in the portion of the Colonial Cemetery set apart for Christian burials.[84] However, the portion set aside exclusively for Christian burials was in truth overwhelmingly the largest part of the cemetery. The non-Christian part, where Chinese or Japanese could carry out their funerary practices,

[81] *Ibid.*

[82] For more information on Chinese death practices from both an anthropological and historical point of view, see J. Watson and E. Rawski (eds.), *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China* (Berkeley, 1988).

[83] 'Government notification No. 727', *HKG Gazette*, 12 Nov. 1909, 922.

[84] 'Government notification No. 768', *HKG Gazette*, 3 Dec. 1909, 982.

was restricted to a small section. Still, despite the *de facto* Christian and European dominance, the colonial government had ultimately defined the cemetery as a public cemetery rather than a Protestant cemetery to settle the ambiguity.

This concession from the colonial government shows that the British ultimately could not avoid opening up their sacred burial space to the Chinese elites. Chinese elites like Lau argued that there was never formal segregation, and emphasized the state-sponsored public nature of the cemetery, to undermine its ethnic and religious exclusivity. Confronted with such arguments, unless the colonial government purposefully enacted new discriminatory laws (which they did for the Victoria Peak), they could not check the rising influence of the Chinese elites and had no choice but to open up the space. Yet, if the space were to be opened completely, with thousands of Chinese buried there, the cemetery would have ceased to be 'colonial'. Thus, the non-European burials only included a handful of Chinese elites and Japanese, which would not overturn the European Christian dominance.

Despite gaining concessions, the Chinese elites had no intention of dominating the Colonial Cemetery spatially. They did not push for more allocated space. Instead, they aimed for their own model cemetery that rivalled and emulated the colonial one. In 1911, 18 prominent Chinese petitioned for a permanent Chinese cemetery. Lau was again one of the advocates. They maintained that except for the Chinese Christian Cemetery, all the Chinese burial grounds in the colony were impermanent and the bodies buried were subjected to frequent removal.[85] The government approved the demand, and the Chinese Permanent Cemetery was established at Aberdeen, on the south-western side of Hong Kong Island, in 1913, financed by the Chinese elites themselves.[86]

While the Chinese elites had achieved significant socio-economic influence and obtained the legal grounds to be buried in the Colonial Cemetery, the vast majority of them chose not to be buried there. They had no intention of assimilating into the sacred colonial burial space. Instead, they aimed for their own decent burial space, establishing the Chinese Permanent Cemetery in 1913. Even though the segregation of living spaces in the colony gradually subsided in the mid- and late twentieth century, or at least in the legal sense as the Peak Reservation Ordinance was repealed in 1930, burial spaces in Hong Kong remained divided under this colonial versus Chinese dichotomy. This dichotomy was not based on religious differences, since large Chinese Christian cemeteries were continuously developed throughout Hong Kong rather than having Chinese Christians being buried in the Colonial Cemetery. Instead of simply being a Christian cemetery, the Colonial Cemetery largely remained an exclusive European enclave throughout the twentieth century.

Nicolson argues that the cemetery underwent gradual decline from the mid-twentieth century. He describes the cemetery today as 'deceptively neat and tidy', but notes that on a closer inspection, 'many of the memorials are dilapidated'.[87] The Hong Kong Cemetery, as it is called today, despite not being actively used, remains a quaint but somewhat neglected place. Its garden design is preserved but few visitors come to appreciate it. The cemetery, which once meant so much to the colonial community for its cultural and emotional meanings, now represents the bygone colonial era.

[85]*Colonial Office Original Correspondence: Hong Kong* (CO 129) / 391, 110.
[86]'Government notification No. 229', *HKG Gazette*, 25 Jul. 1913, No. 229, 312.
[87]Nicolson, *A History and Tour of the Hong Kong Cemetery*, 43.

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Conclusion

The Hong Kong Colonial Cemetery is a part of the long trajectory of development of British colonial cemeteries in the region. But the cemetery was also exceptional in its own way as its creation and development coincided with the emergence of Victorian garden cemeteries in the mid- and late nineteenth century. Compared to garden cemeteries in Britain, overseas colonial cemeteries were created in a new environment out of necessity, and they did not evolve from the precedent of the church graveyard. With less strict restrictions on religious denomination, the colonial cemeteries, most notably the Park Street Cemetery in Calcutta, allowed the British to have more liberty in exploring new styles and designs.

The Hong Kong Colonial Cemetery, unlike other earlier eighteenth-century colonial cemeteries, did not adopt any 'oriental' or 'native' elements in its design. Instead, the British accentuated the sacredness of the cemetery through maintaining its purely European style and excluding 'the other'. Such sacred meanings of the cemetery departed from the traditional Christian values in Europe that rested upon a single coherent religious community. In the Hong Kong Colonial Cemetery, Christianity undoubtedly still played a role in distinguishing the 'sacred' from the 'non-sacred', as a boundary was set in the early twentieth century to ensure Chinese rituals would not overwhelm the Christian-majority cemetery. But, more importantly, in the imperial context, the cemetery assumed new sacred values that were not based on religion. The space was overlaid with personal emotions and imperialist sentiments at the same time. It was a recuperative green space away from the 'degenerative' tropical urban environment. It was also an enclave shielded from the hostile 'natives' in both the sanitary and cultural sense.

The construction and the maintenance of the sacredness of the cemetery was closely entwined with the realities of imperialism and colonialism. The burials that the cemetery hosted signified the diversity of the colonial community and the ambiguity of British identity under imperialism. Differing from the 'imagined community' of a nation in the nineteenth-century European metropolitan context, the colonial community involved diverse and hierarchical sub-identities. Despite the diversity and arbitrariness within this imperial British identity, the Colonial Cemetery still evoked a form of secular sacredness through the narrative of sacrifice for the colony and the empire.

The sacredness of a site was based on defending its boundaries. When British identity was elusive and the confines of the colonial community were impermanent, the boundaries of the community's sacred burial space were challenged as well, as demonstrated when the Chinese elites demanded equal burial rights at the turn of the century. Ultimately, the emphasis on boundaries in maintaining the sacredness of the site reflected the defensive mentality adopted by the colonial community. The thoughtful upkeep of the garden cemetery, and the careful maintenance of its boundaries in constructing the emotional, cultural and political meanings of the site, should not simply be interpreted as the dominance of British imperial power in the Far East but, rather, as the clinging to a European colonial refuge in a vastly 'alienating' environment.

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