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Early Chinese Presence in Malaysia as Reflected by three Cemeteries (17th-19th c.)

Trois cimetières (XVII^e-XIX^e s.), reflets de l'ancienneté de la présence chinoise en Malaisie

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Early Chinese Presence in Malaysia as Reflected by three Cemeteries (17th-19th c.)

One of the important indicators of the existence of the Chinese community in Malaysia is the presence of cemeteries. These cemeteries, found in various locations, are like historical landmarks. By tracing the oldest graves they may be used to gauge the association between the Chinese with a particular locality. Such a consideration is important as the community was constantly required to justify and defend its long-standing presence in the country especially in the face of challenges from certain quarters of indigenous political groups which labelled the Chinese as *Pendatang*, or immigrants and questioned their claims to citizenship and political rights.² Thus, the idea of establishing the origins of Chinese cemeteries has been a recurrent theme in the activities of many Chinese organisations and individuals including those engaged in research. To date, several efforts are being carried out to document Chinese cemeteries, including their establishment, their actual condition, details of their size, and in some cases, the number of graves they contain. More recently, these activities have become more urgent in view of the decisions of several local governments to re-enter (or reclaim) the land allotted for burial sites where the land tenure of the cemeteries has come to an end.³

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2. This comment had been a point of contention often raised by certain groups who viewed the presence of the Chinese with less than friendly attitude, and has caused uneasiness amongst the latter. The issue surfaced once again recently and it elicited many reactions including those of prominent historians and later even the Prime Minister, to state that the Chinese were not *Pendatang*, but “Sons of Malaysia.” See *Malay Mail*, 2 October 2015 and 19 October 2015 and *The Star*, 3 June 2015 and 19 October 2015.

3. The case of the Chinese cemetery in Johor has increased this sense of urgency to document

If the study of cemeteries is considered important, the work produced thus far does not reflect the seriousness of the matter. Studies on the subject often have been selective and brief, often repetitive or reproductions of earlier works. Therefore, many of them do not help to answer some important questions which may be crucial for more comprehensive understanding of the development of cemeteries. One crucial question is, why does the earliest Chinese grave still in situ date back only to the early 17th century or later? If the links with China indeed date back to the era of the Ming voyages if not earlier, then what happened to the Chinese who passed away in Malacca? Where were they buried?

This article will set out to look at these questions by examining the three earliest cemeteries, namely, Bukit China in Malacca, Mount Erskine Guangdong (or Kuangtung) cemetery in Penang, and the Chinese cemetery of Terengganu. While the article may not be able to provide direct answers, it will hopefully raise additional questions for discussion.

Existing Literature

Wolfgang Franke and Chen Tieh Fan's magnum corpus on the Chinese epigraphic materials in Malaysia is one of the earliest attempts to record the various Chinese epigraphic sources found in Malaysia. It covers materials from temples, guilds, schools, other institutions, and cemeteries which are the main source of information. As regards cemeteries, the compendium provides background information on some of the major cemeteries including a selection of the oldest tombstones.⁴ As a pioneering work in this regard, Franke and Chen each wrote a very useful introduction which prepares the readers for a better understanding of the records found on tombstones (and other epigraphic materials). However, as the work was conceived as a corpus, further discussions on cemeteries were not pursued.

One of the earlier works produced by local researchers in 2000 emanated from the Federation of Chinese Associations of Malaysia 马来西亚中华大会堂总会.⁵ The work, coordinated by Fan Liyan 范立言, provides a brief overview of the various Chinese cemeteries in the country. Even though the work is by no means exhaustive, it offers some useful basic information on the

Chinese cemeteries. In this case, 3,400 Chinese graves from four Chinese cemeteries had to make way for the Pengerang Integrated Petroleum Complex. The graves will be relocated to a new site. See *Free Malaysia Today*, 20 November 2013; *The Star Online*, 18 April 2014 and *Zhongguo bao* 中国报 *China Press*, 7 March 2014.

4. Wolfgang Franke 傅吾康 & Chen Tieh Fan 陈铁凡, *Chinese Epigraphic Materials in Malaysia / Malaixiya huawen mingke cuibian* 马来西亚华文铭刻粹编, 3 vol., Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1983-1987.

5. Fan Liyan 范立言 (ed.), *Malaixiya huaren yishan ziliao huibian* 马来西亚华人义山资料汇编 / *Materials Pertaining to Chinese Cemeteries in Malaysia*, Kuala Lumpur: Malaixiya zhonghua dahutang zonghui, 2000.

early Chinese burial grounds and oldest and unique graves. Though the volume is small compared to that of Franke and Chen, it brought some information not found in the former. The volume also includes some material on Chinese burial customs as well as a discussion of the various laws that governed the administration of burial grounds and cemeteries.

Tan Ah Chai 陈亚才's compilation of a series of newspaper articles on the many issues pertaining to Chinese cemeteries in Malaysia is a very interesting yet important contribution. It provides perspectives on the ongoing debates relating to Chinese cemeteries in Malaysia at the time their existence was endangered.⁶ It deals with issues relating to the perils of losing burial grounds to development, insider stories on how certain graveyards were nearly lost to property developers; also included is a discussion on the long standing issue of Bukit China, Malacca.

More recently, Wong Wunbin 黄文斌 published a book on the Bukit China Cemetery, detailing a selection of the oldest graves said to cover the period 1614 to 1820.⁷ This is a commendable effort which saw the inclusion of the graves of six Capitans China, to be followed by selected graves from the Ming period to the time of the reign of Qing Emperor Jiaqing 嘉庆 (1796-1820); and finally, the communal graves of the various dialect groups or organisations. Wong's effort, which was partially funded by the Malaysian Ministry of Culture and Heritage, suggests that the earliest grave on Bukit China dates to "1614." If accepted, it would be the earliest date of a Chinese surviving tombstone in Malaysia.

Apart from the works by Franke and Chen, the Federation of Chinese Association, and Wong, other studies on Chinese cemeteries remain centred on contemporary issues, and tend to repeat earlier works without necessarily offering new information. There has been a strong emphasis on challenges faced by Chinese organisations out to preserve their cemeteries, especially in the face of the lure of commercial considerations to let go of their burial grounds in return for financial gains, and the need to defend the heritage value of the cemeteries. It must be pointed out that when most of the Chinese cemeteries were started in the past, they were usually situated in the outskirts of the urban areas. After so many decades and even centuries, in some places of rapid urbanisation these cemeteries are now located in the heart of the cities. Therefore, their lands cost considerably more thus the on-going debate on whether to sell (or redevelop) or to preserve, as well as exploring the question of alternate ways of burying the dead. The questions on the earlier graveyards and on the need to identify the earliest tombs were largely left unanswered.

6. Tan Ah Chai 陈亚才, *Liu hen yu yihen, Wenhua guji yu huaren yishan* 留痕与遗恨。文化古迹与华人义山 / *To preserve the roots or to regret. Cultural relics and cemeteries*, Kuala Lumpur: Dajiang shiye chubanshe / Mentor Publishing, 2000.

7. Wong Wunbin 黄文斌, *Maliujia sanbaoshan mubei jilu* 马六甲三宝山墓碑辑录 / *A Collection of Tombstone Inscriptions of Bukit China, Malacca (1614-1820)*, Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Chinese Research Centre, 2013.

The next three sections will look into the three oldest Chinese cemeteries in Malaysia, namely, Bukit China of Malacca, the Chinese cemeteries in Terengganu and Mount Erskine in Penang, each detailing a certain period in the formation of Chinese cemeteries in Malaysia.

Bukit China in Malacca

The Chinese cemetery on Bukit China is probably the oldest. Right in the heart of the Malacca City, it has been the subject of many academic (as well as political and commercial) interests. One of the recurrent questions has been whether or not it dates back to the time of the Malaccan Empire of the 15th and 16th centuries, when Chinese traders frequented the port. Where were they buried when they died in Malacca? We have no idea of this, perhaps on Bukit China? In his study of the voyages of Admiral Zheng He, especially the Ming ties with the Malaccan Sultanate, Geoff Wade suggested that there were Chinese military garrisons stationed in Malacca as well as several other strategic points on the Straits of Malacca, with the purpose of keeping the straits free from piracy and also from other threats. These garrisons were marked in an old Chinese map as *guanchang* 官厂, literally “depot,” and were in existence until the 1440s.⁸ The question would be whether those who died in Malacca were also buried on Bukit China. Perhaps, but there are no traces left. It is likely that their humble graves, without stone structures, did not survive the test of time.

There was also the legendary marriage between the sixth Malaccan Sultan, Mansur Syah (1456-1477) with a princess from China named Han Libao 汉丽宝. While the authenticity of this event remains unascertained, the fact that it was mentioned in the *Sejarah Melayu*, or “The Malay Annals,”⁹ captured the imagination of the public and historians alike. It was reported that the princess was accompanied by more than 500 men and women as her entourage, and perhaps it was through these men and women, when passing on, that the cemetery was established. The earliest surviving tombstones however, yielded a much later date, that of the 17th century. There could have been some tombs

8. Geoff Wade, “The Zheng He Voyages: A Reassessment,” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, LXXVIII: 1 (2005), p. 47; see also Geoff Wade, “Melaka in Ming Dynasty Texts,” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. LXX: 1 (1997), p. 49.

9. *Sejarah Melayu* or *Malay Annals*, also known as *Sulalatus Salatin* (Genealogy of Kings), is the literary and historical work on the history of the Malaccan sultanate. Attributed mainly to Tun Sri Lanang, the work was written around 1612. The arrival of the Princess Hang Li-Po (Han Libao) delegation is found in Chapter 15. See *Sejarah Melayu (The Malay Annals)*, Trans. John Leyden, Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2012, pp. 105-109. Leyden’s version was first published by Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown in 1821. In another version, translated and annotated by C.C. Brown, however, the story about Hang Li-Po and Bukit China is dealt with in the ninth chapter. See *Sejarah Melayu (The Malay Annals)*, MS Raffles 18, Trans. & Arran. Abdul Rahman Bin Ismail, Comp. Cheah Boon Kheng, Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 2009.

from earlier periods, perhaps even from the time of the Malaccan Empire. However, they are now lost to history.

No one knows when Bukit China was first used as a burial ground. A stone inscription set up in 1795 by the monk Kunshan 昆山, mentions that at the time the Baoshan ting 宝山亭, or funerary temple was established at the foot of the Bukit China Cemetery, there were already many graves on the hill. According to Kunshan, it was more than 60 years since burials had been carried out on the hill, and a temple was needed to shelter the devotees from rain during their annual visit.¹⁰ The earliest identified tomb however, predates even the sixty years mentioned by Kunshan by another 110 years. The husband and wife combined tomb of Huang Weihong 黄维弘 and his wife, Xie Shoujie 谢氏寿姐, was erected in the cyclical year *renxu* 壬戌 of the Ming dynasty arbitrarily equated to “1622.”¹¹ The tombstone was restored in 1933. Also from the 17th century is the tomb of Zheng Fangyang 郑芳扬, the first Capitan China of Malacca during the Dutch rule. His tomb was erected by his son, Zheng Wenxuan 郑文玄 in 1678. Another one is that of Li Weijing 李为经 (1614-1688) and his wife née Song 宋氏.¹² Li, who was the third Capitan of Malacca, along with the first two captains China, was also instrumental in the construction of the famous Cheng Hoon Teng (Qingyun ting) 清云亭 temple. Even though the grave (which is not the original one) has no information on the year it was first erected, it suffices to know that it dates to 1688.

The recent work by Wong Wunbin however, suggested that the earliest grave found on Bukit China dates to “1614,” eight years earlier than the tomb of Huang Weihong. This is the grave of a woman whose maiden name, *shi* 氏, is given as that of her place of origin, Brunei: Wenlaishi 汶来氏. (Plate 1) There are indeed in Malaysia as in Indonesia a certain number of tombs which were dedicated to native women who had married Chinese men.¹³ The grave was erected in the cyclical year [*jia*]*yin* [甲]寅 of the Ming dynasty, arbitrarily equated to “1614,” by the son of the deceased called Hong Shi 洪世.¹⁴ This tomb escaped the attention of Franke and Chen.

10. Franke & Chen Tieh Fan, *Chinese Epigraphic Materials in Malaysia*, I, p. 271.

11. Franke & Chen Tieh Fan, *Chinese Epigraphic Materials in Malaysia*, I, p. 367-369.

12. Li Weijing's life story was discussed in an article by Claudine Salmon, “Commemorating Chinese Merchant Benefactors in Malacca: The Case of Captain Li Weijing (1614-1688),” *Danjiang shixue* 淡江史学, 27 (2015), pp. 121-135.

13. For more detail see Salmon, “Women's Status as Reflected in Chinese Epitaphs from Insulinde (16th-20th Centuries),” *Archipel* 72 (2006), pp. 166-172.

14. The tomb was first reported in an article by D.K. Chng (Zhuang Qinyong) in 1998. See Zhuang Qinyong 庄钦永, “Maliujia, Xinjiapo huawen beiwen jilu 马六甲、新加坡华文碑文辑录 / A Collection of Epigraphical Materials from Malacca and Singapore,” *Minzuxue yanjiu ziliao huibian* 民族学研究所资料汇编, 12 (1998), p. 46. See also Wong Wunbin, *Maliujia sanbaoshan mubei jilu*, pp. 44-45.

If authenticated, these two tombs of “1614” and “1622,” would be among some of the earliest found in Southeast Asia. There is however, a need to consider their dates with caution. While it is tempting to set back the dates of the earliest Chinese graves to 1614 and 1622, one should not allow oneself to be blinded by the desire to find the most ancient tomb. Those two dates which are only given by two cyclical characters (a cycle comprising sixty years), without reference to any title of reign or *nianhao* 年号, the year [*jia*]yin could also be equated to 1674, and the cyclical year *renxu* 壬戌 to 1682. These two last dates coincide with the coming of Ming loyalists in Malacca after the fall of the dynasty, and this may also explain why these refugees could not use a Ming title reign anymore.

The question of the absence of other possible Ming Chinese tombs on Bukit China could perhaps be partly answered by the case of the Ming loyalist Li Weijing 李为经, who passed away in Malacca in 1688. The eulogy dedicated to Li by Lin Fangkai 林芳开 and thirty-six notables, mentioned that Li had purchased a plot of land in order to make a cemetery 捐金置地, 泽及幽冥.¹⁵ In the same way, the eulogy for Li’s son-in-law, Zeng Qilu 曾其祿 (1643-1718), also alludes to the fact that he spent money purchasing land (a hill) for Chinese burial 买山为之葬, hence a noble deed remembered by others.¹⁶ This suggests in both cases that the previous burial sites were already full. Similar situations took place in Batavia during the same period where Chinese community leaders had to purchase successive pieces of land from the Dutch Indies Company (VOC). It is likely that prior to the purchases of these burial grounds to the Dutch Company the Chinese were not bound by any regulations, and could bury their dead where they wanted. But traces of these graves have not yet been found.¹⁷

A Portuguese map attributed to the 17th century, detailing Malacca under Portuguese rule, provides reference to a place called “Buquet China” (i.e. Bukit China), to the northwest of Fort Santiago. The fact that the place was already named “Buquet China” suggests that there had been a Chinese burial ground even during Portuguese period. However, in the absence of concrete

15. Franke & Chen Tieh Fan, *Chinese Epigraphic Materials in Malaysia*, I, pp. 223-224.

16. Franke & Chen Tieh Fan, *Op. cit.*, I, pp. 228-230; See also Salmon, “Commemorating Chinese Merchant Benefactors in Malacca,” pp. 121-135.

17. Attempts to locate Dutch sources pertaining to such purchases have failed thus far. Reports from Malacca to the Dutch Governor General at Batavia also do not contain any such report. Radin Fernando suggests that it was probably because the issue was too trivial to warrant inclusion into the reports. The same could be applied to the earlier Portuguese era. I am grateful to Dr. Radin Fernando, formerly of Universiti Sains Malaysia & Professor Jorge Santos Alves of Universidad Catolica Portuguesa (Catholic University of Portugal) for generously sharing their knowledge and information on the Dutch and Portuguese sources.

Plate 1 – Grave of Wenlaishi. (Source: Wong Wunbin, *Maliujia sanbaoshan mubei jilu*, p. 45)

information, one can only speculate on such a possibility. The accompanying materials simply mention that the Chinese were concentrated in Kampong China, which corresponds to the present day old township.¹⁸

The absence of tombs from the Ming period could also be attributed to the broken links between the first Ming immigrants and those who came later after the fall of the dynasty. There is definitely a break of several decades between those who came during the Ming times and those who arrived after the establishment of the Manchu dynasty. Between the fall of Ming dynasty and the consolidation of the Manchus, Ming loyalists who settled abroad used either cyclical characters plus the name of the Ming dynasty, or the expression Long fei 龙飞, "The flying dragon" plus the year in cyclical characters to signify their refusal to use the reign year of the ruling Qing emperor. Several inscriptions in the Cheng Hoon Teng use this expression. By the 1720s, the inscriptions in the temple have been more or less adjusted to use the Qing Dynasty calendar. This signifies the fading out of the earlier group, and the mass arrival of Chinese whose loyalty was no longer Ming, but associated with the new Manchu Dynasty. This situation inevitably resulted in leaving the majority of the Ming era tombs unattended and not visited, and they eventually became dilapidated and disappeared.

Several inscriptions gave some mention to the poor state of upkeep of graves on Bukit China. An inscription of Daoguang 道光 11 (1831) states that donations have been collected in order to clear the cemetery of unwanted weeds and trees.¹⁹ Another inscription of Guangxu 光绪 14 (1888) mentioned the need for the trustees of the cemetery to raise money to clean up the cemetery, lest it be left to dilapidate, which would give the British authority reason for re-entering the cemetery to take over the land.²⁰ Once again, in 1924, the cemetery was reported to be in very poor shape and neglected. Weeds were everywhere, and had to be cleared. Again, there was an effort to raise money for the purpose.²¹ It is obvious that efforts to maintain the cemetery were a constant struggle for the trustees of the Cheng Hoon Teng (Qingyun ting) which also looked after the cemetery. Over time, there had been different committees with varying efficacy, hence the cemetery suffered from constant lack of supervision, and most important of all, records and funds. The records of the graves are said to have been destroyed during the

18. Luis Filipe F. Reis Thomaz, *Early Portuguese Malacca*, Macau: Macau Territorial Commission for the Commemorations of the Portuguese Discoveries and the Polytechnic Institute of Macau, 2000, p. 48. For the map, see the map of Settlement of Malacca in the beginning of the 17th century according to a sketch from the Declaração de Malaca, by Maniel Godinho de Erédia, in Thomaz, *Op. cit.*, Map. 5.

19. Franke & Chen Tieh Fan, *Chinese Epigraphic Materials in Malaysia*, I, pp. 275-276.

20. Franke & Chen Tieh Fan, *Op. cit.*, I, p. 278.

21. Franke & Chen Tieh Fan, *Op. cit.*, I, p. 283.

Japanese occupation. There were no limitations set for the burial period. Each grave was meant to last forever. Hence it is obvious that graves no longer visited would degenerate and enter a state of dilapidation and later disappear, leaving no sign of their existence.

While it is not possible to determine when Bukit China was first used by the Chinese to bury their dead, it is reasonable to suppose that there were already graves in existence on the hill before the establishment of the Cheng Hoon Teng circa 1673 by the Ming loyalists.²² This is in line with the usual practice of the Chinese who would bury their dead in different locations long before a cemetery could be regarded as “established.” Information prior to the coming of the Dutch was sketchy, and the fact that Malacca was in ruin at the time of its conquest further reinforces the view that information relating to Chinese burial in Malacca prior to the coming of the VOC was no longer available.

The three tombstones mentioned above are so far the earliest still in situ. The importance of this earliest cemetery is not confined to the fact that it was the oldest. Rather, it was the information found on the respective graves that provided us with invaluable information on the development of the Chinese community in Malacca, and the relationship the latter had with the local authorities. While Bukit China is no longer used as a cemetery, the site is a testimony of the continued existence of the Chinese community since at least the 17th century. Yet, the dates of the earliest tombs found in the cemetery do not tally with the existence of Chinese community in that city or its vicinity.

The work of Wolfgang Franke and Chen Tieh Fan on the discovery of a Chinese tomb in Brunei that predates even the Ming Dynasty, provides a clear evidence of the possibility of discovering earlier Chinese graves and even Chinese burial grounds in Malaysia earlier than 1614. The tombstone, that of a Chinese official who died while visiting Brunei, dated 1264, almost 350 years earlier than the earliest tomb in Malacca, was allegedly rediscovered when stones were collected from Kota Batu in 1933.²³ It is not excluded that other ancient tombstones may be rediscovered in connection with archaeological excavations or with the construction of new urban quarters.

Terengganu Bukit Datu Chinese Burial Places

There seemed to have been a gap between the “establishment” of the Bukit China cemetery and the next oldest Chinese cemetery in Malaysia, namely, the Mount Erskine Guangdong cemetery in Penang. This gap however, is a

22. Claudine Salmon, *Ming Loyalists in Southeast Asia as Perceived through Various Asian and European Records*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2014, p. 54.

23. Wolfgang Franke and Chen Tieh Fan, “A Chinese Tomb Inscription of A.D. 1264, Discovered Recently in Brunei: A Preliminary Report,” *The Brunei Museum Journal*, 5 (1973), pp. 91-99; Pengiran Karim bin Pengiran Haji Osman, “Further Notes on a Chinese Tombstone Inscription of A.D. 1264,” *Brunei Museum Journal*, 8: 1 (1993), p. 2.

reflection of the manner Chinese settlements were created in the country. The Chinese community on Penang Island was founded mainly after the coming of Captain Francis Light and his taking over of the island from the Sultan of Kedah in 1786. Therefore, the “establishment” of the Guangdong Cemetery with its earliest tombs dating back to 1795 should be acceptable as logical. However, Wang Yahao 王雅浩, in a report on the ancient graves and Chinese cemetery in Terengganu, provided some information on the possible existence of Ming tombs on Bukit Datu in Kuala Terengganu. According to Wang, when conducting exploratory work in that area in 1968, he noticed the existence of some ancient graves which were from the Ming period. However, when he began to carry out documentation work in 1996, those graves were no longer around as the area had made way for housing.²⁴

One could still find the grave of a certain Zhu Qiwu 朱栖梧 on Bukit Datu that dates to Qianlong *bingwu* 乾隆丙午 (1743).²⁵ This is so far the oldest known tombstone outside of Malacca. The existence of this epitaph along with what was lost earlier, demonstrates the importance of Terengganu in the sequence of the presence of Chinese settlements in Malaysia. It also shows how often places like Terengganu were neglected in the study of the Chinese in Malaysia. Two ancestral tablets placed in the family home of the Wang family in Jalan Kampong China further support this notion of Terengganu being an early location for the Chinese to land and to settle. The ancestral tablet of Wang Guoxiong (1733-1778) reads:²⁶

Tablet of our father Wang Guoxiong who was invited to take part in the official banquet²⁷
 Set up by his son Biguang
 Born in Yongzheng 11, year *guixiu* (1733)
 Died on the 26th day of the second month of Qianlong 43, year *wuxu* (1778)
 (Name of the burial place and geomantic location of the grave).

显考饮宾国雄王公之神主
 凡男碧光奉祀
 生於雍正十一年岁次癸丑生
 卒於乾隆四十三年岁次戊戌二月廿六日正寢而终
 葬在内班山地名武吉巴吁杯坐寅向申庚寅庚申口金

Also within the Wang family was the ancestral tablet of Mrs. Wang née Huang 王门黄氏, who was born in 1754 and passed away in 1806. The tablet was set up by her son, Biguang 碧光, and the place of burial was given as the

24. Wang Yahao 王雅浩, “Dengjialou de gumu ji huaren yishan 登嘉楼的古墓及华人义山 (Ancient Graves and Chinese Cemeteries in Terengganu),” in Fan Liyan (ed.) *Malaixiya huaren yishan ziliao huibian*, pp. 88-89.

25. Wang Yahao, *Op. cit.*, p. 89.

26. Franke & Chen Tieh Fan (eds.), *Chinese Epigraphic Materials in Malaysia*, III, pp. 1180-1181.

27. *Yinbin* or *xiangyinyinbin* 乡饮宾 was the title given to the old literati who had been invited to the official annual banquet given by the authorities at the district level.

same site as her husband's. The Wang family's information on the burial site suggests the existence of a very early Chinese cemetery in Kuala Terengganu. In addition, it also suggests that Terengganu's position at the north eastern part of the Peninsula, made it one of the entry points for Chinese traders who were plying their trade between southern China and the Malay Archipelago. Chinese presence in the state has been noticed by visitors such as Captain Alexander Hamilton, who visited Kuala Terengganu in 1719. According to the captain, there were more than 1,000 families in the town, half of them, Chinese, who were residing in "Trangano" (Terengganu).²⁸ A Dutch report also mentioned the sailing of two English ships from Malacca to Terengganu for trade in 1763, and their return the following year.²⁹ Indeed, it was reported that during the 18th century, there was no port comparable to that of Kuala Terengganu.³⁰

Wang Yahao's account of the existence of Ming tombs in 1968 could very well be corroborated by the fact that Kuala Terengganu was indeed a thriving port as demonstrated by the several travellers' accounts mentioned above. The loss of these tombs to modern development has denied us the possibility of firmly establishing the earliest possible Chinese tombstone in the state.

Mount Erskine Guangdong Cemetery

The next batch of early tombstones came from the Mount Erskine Guangdong and Tingzhou Prefecture (Fujian) Cemetery 广东暨汀州义山 in Penang. This is a rather strange combination. Normally, one would find GuangFu 广福 (Guangdong and Fujian) combined cemeteries in Malaysia, where the level of representation was at the provincial level. The Guangdong and Tingzhou representation was unequal as Guangdong is a province whereas Tingzhou was a prefecture. However, as there were many Hakkas 客家人 among those originated from Guangdong in early Penang, the Hakkas from Tingzhou (and Chaoan 潮安) also used this cemetery.³¹ However, the Tingzhou element was not present in the original stone inscription on the occasion of the building of a road and a bridge leading to the cemetery and of donations

28. Alexander Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies, Volume 2, Being the Observations and Remarks of Captain Alexander Hamilton, who spent his Time from the Year 1688 to 1723, Trading and Traveling by Sea and Land, to Most of the Countries and Islands of Commerce and Navigation, Between the Cape of Good Hope, and the Island of Japan*, Tennessee: General Books, 2010 [reprint], pp. 60-62.

29. Mark S. Francis, "Captain Joseph Jackson's Report on Trengganu, 1764," *Journal of the Historical Society of University of Malaya*, VIII (1969/1970), pp. 73-76.

30. Khoo Kay Kim, "Kuala Terengganu: Pusat Perdagangan Antarabangsa," in Abdullah Zakaria Ghazali, (ed.), *Terengganu: Dahulu dan Sekarang*, Kuala Lumpur: Persatuan Muzium Malaysia, 1985, p. 70.

31. See Franke & Chen Tieh Fan, *Chinese Epigraphic Materials in Malaysia*, II, p. 682.

made for this purpose. The stone is dated Jiaqing 嘉庆 6 (1801/1802).³² A new stone to commemorate the common grave of natives from all prefectures of Guangdong and Tingzhou, was erected in 1884. Judging from the three surviving earliest tombs, it is likely that the cemetery was established in the 1790s, or earlier. It must be remembered that Captain Francis Light first took over the island from the Sultan of Kedah in 1786. Prior to that there was no Chinese settlement on the island. The original name of the cemetery was Guangdong yizhong 广东义冢.

There are two tombstones from the late 18th and one from the early 19th century. The first is that of Zeng Tingxian 曾廷贤, who was from Xiangshan 香山, Guangzhou, dated Qianlong yimao 乾隆乙卯 (1795). The second, dated Jiaqing yuannian (1796), belonged to Wu Hao 吴浩, who was also from Xiangshan county, and his village was given as Cuiwei xiang 翠微乡. The third belonged to Li Yaliu 李亞六 of Jiayingzhou 嘉应州 (which means he was likely to be a Hakka) was dated Jiaqing 6 (1801/1802).³³ While these tombstones are few, they are still able to provide some useful information pertaining to the communities that were linked to these early Chinese cemeteries.

One curious question is the date for the establishment of the Hokkien Cemetery in Batu Lanchang. While the Mount Erskine Guangdong and Tingzhou Cemetery have been firmly established as dated from around 1790, the Hokkien cemetery in Batu Lanchang, Penang, could only trace its origin to 1805. It is inconceivable that the Hokkien cemetery should be established later than the Guangdong cemetery especially when some of the earliest Chinese immigrants were Hokkien from either Zhangzhou 漳州 or Quanzhou 泉州. Franke and Chen point out that prior to the Batu Lanchang cemetery, there was an earlier Hokkien cemetery in Ayer Itam Road. One may assume that when it was too crowded, the new one was opened in Batu Lanchang in 1805.³⁴ The cemetery was placed under the administration of the United Hokkien Association of Penang. It also has the graves of many notable earlier personalities including the first Capitan China, Gu Lihuan 辜礼欢 (1787-1826) and his wife, née Su.

The establishment of both the Mount Erskine Guangdong & Tingzhou cemetery and the Batu Lanchang (and earlier Ayer Itam Road) Hokkien cemetery, are accurate in relation to the earliest Chinese settlement on Penang Island. The discrepancy of the Guangdong preceding the Hokkien cemetery was more likely due to the fact that the original Hokkien cemetery in Ayer Itam Road did not survive.

32. Franke & Chen Tieh Fan, *Op. cit.*, II, pp. 687-689.

33. Franke & Chen Tieh Fan, *Op. cit.*, II, p. 685. All these stones came from China and they were used as ballast on the ships.

34. Franke & Chen Tieh Fan, *Op. cit.*, II, p. 713.

On important point to be gleaned from examining the two cemeteries is the existence in early Penang of Chinese from Guangdong province, including both Cantonese and Hakkas. This is contrary to the predominant Hokkien population of present day Penang.

Concluding Remarks

The links between the establishment of burial grounds and the beginning of Chinese presence in Malaysia is crucial in an environment that often demands evidence of the early and long-standing existence of the community in the country, to lay claim to political legitimacy. The three cemeteries examined at Bukit China Malacca, Kuala Terengganu, and Mount Erskine, represent some of the earliest Chinese graveyards in the country. However, it is clear that while many of the cemeteries were older than the earliest dated tombs found so far in their vicinity, many of the earliest tombs are perhaps no longer available having been lost to the passage of time. There are also possibilities of earlier burial grounds as well, but discontinued and abandoned.

One of the obvious reasons for the want of further information on early Chinese cemeteries is the absence of records on the subject. The administration of the Cheng Hoon Teng for instance, has to rely on epigraphic materials for most of its information on the Bukit China cemetery. Even the Portuguese and Dutch sources seem to have very little to offer in this regard. In Terengganu, most of the information was lost. Any reconstruction of the history of the Chinese community cannot rely too much on the cemeteries or surviving tombstones as most of the earlier ones were lost as well. The want of actual documentation has dampened efforts to pin-point the years in which the Chinese communities were established in each of these three early localities.

In examining the case in Kuala Terengganu, the eventuality of early tombs dating back to the Ming dynasty provides a new insight into the role of that port in the past; as well as its links with the Chinese community. This surely warrants further investigation.