



## Reading an old Chinese gravestone

Not all Chinese gravestones are the same but sufficient consistency does exist to allow non-Chinese readers to derive some significant information. Most gravestones will have at least three items of information: personal name, native place, and date of death and/or age at death. Very often this information is laid out in three columns with the name in the middle. However, there are always exceptions and variations!

### Points to remember:

- The burials in Australia are of Pearl River Delta people and they were not speakers of Mandarin. They spoke in Cantonese and other languages and dialects, and wrote in Literary Chinese, sometimes with their own languages mixed in. Pronunciation and some meanings of the written characters are therefore very different.
- All the characters will be full-form traditional ones, not those of post-1949 China (though some simplified forms were used along with other variant characters).
- Horizontal writing is usually but not always read right to left.
- Dates may be given in either Qing dynastic style, traditional Chinese calendar, Republic of China dating (begins in 1911) or the Western calendar, and sometimes in more than one of these.
- Districts of origin are rarely given in their full two-character form but as a single character following by 邑, which is a literary term for “district” (see list below).
- All pre-1949 graves will relate to the Pearl River Delta. Ignore apparent matches with random villages or places in other parts of China.
- There are always variations and exceptions.

### Things to look for:

公之墓 or sometimes just 公墓 – this means “the grave of Mr” and the three or perhaps two characters immediately above will be the personal name – family name first then personal name, though sometimes reversed. (Nearly always in the middle column.)

邑 – this means you are looking at the name of the district from which your person came, as identified by the single preceding character. (Sometimes the full name is written without the 邑 and perhaps with 縣 “district” added.) This information is often on the top, or sometimes in the right column. See Districts list below.

村 – this means “village” and the usually two characters beforehand will be the name of the village. (If it is present it may follow after the district 邑 name. Sometimes the village name is given without the 村 and sometimes an intermediate location is named.)

一, 二, 三, 四, 五, 六, 七, 八, 九, 十 – if you see any of these you are looking at a date. (Get someone to help you with this one. See below for four possibilities)



**Districts** 邑 yāp [Cantonese]/yip [See Yip language]/yì [Mandarin] ([Pearl River Delta map](#))

香邑 = 香山 Heung Shan/Hsiang Shan/Xiangshan (later Chungshan/Zhongshan 中山)

寧邑 = 新寧 Xinning/Sunning (later 臺山/台山 Taishan/Toishan)

開邑 = 開平 Kaiping/Hoi Ping

恩邑 = 恩平 Enping/Yanping

會邑 = 新會 Xinhui/Sunwui

增邑 = 增城 Zengcheng/Tsang Sing

東邑 = 東莞 Dongguan/Tung Guan

高邑 = 高要 Gao You/Gao Yao

安邑 = 寶安 Paoan/Bao'an (aka 新安 San On/Xin'an)

順邑 = 順德 Shunde/Sun Tak

番邑 = 番禺 Fan Yu/Panyu/Poon Yu

南海 Nanhai/Nam Hoi (not Hainan 海南 unless after WWII)

**Dating Examples:**

Chinese calendar may use 歲 - see [Ely Finch's the Sexagenary Cycle](#)

Qing dating means by year of Emperor's reign, most likely 同治 or 光緒

民國 = Republic of China. Add to 1911 to get date, e.g. Year 1 = 1912

Western date probably using four numbers beginning with 一八 or 一九 (18 or 19)

