Death, Identity, Discourse:

Cultural Research at the Margins of Experience

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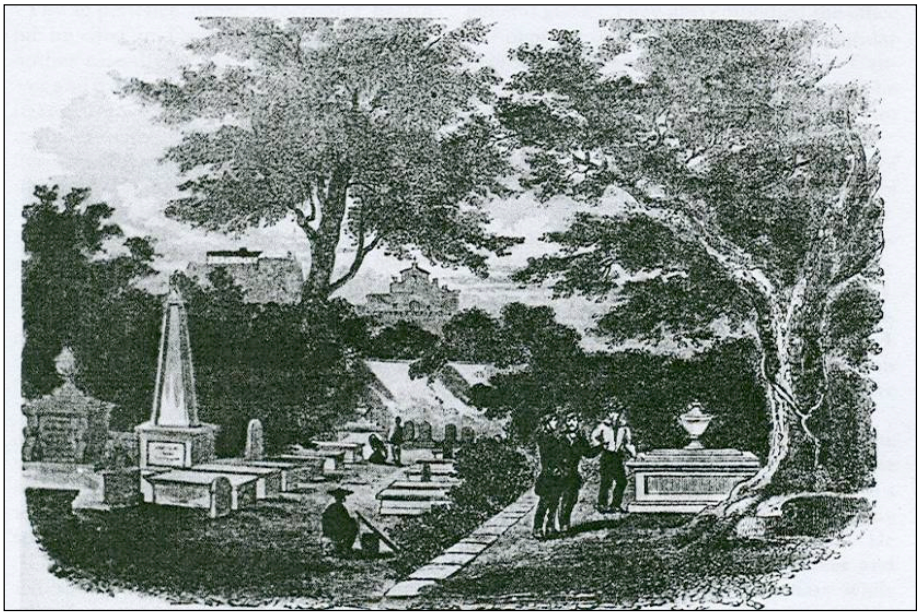
> [Culture] denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life. (Clifford Geertz)[1]

Introduction

In cultural studies when we speak of culture and of cultural identity we are most often referring to the investment made by social communities in the construction of common understandings. It is the perception that such understandings exist which enables persons to recognize and participate in shared choreographies of practice and belief, and for communities to become conscious of themselves and of their collective identity. The establishment and continued maintenance of a community's identity is therefore given realization through the social practices which its members enter into and the unspoken knowledge which they have of the roles which they are expected to perform. If as researchers we make the attempt to examine the significant steps which are involved in producing these choreographies, we find that we are studying an historical process in which certain types of practice are repeated over time and which, through their repetition, bestow upon a culture the specific modes of expression which come to be associated with it. According to Gramsci,[2] this historical process has deposited within us 'an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory'. To understand who we are then, our first responsibility must be to look for the evidence with which to make such an inventory. We could do this by examining, for example, a culture's art, literature and music, and the social meanings which these seem to encode, or we could undertake ethnographic studies, and record how observed aspects of social practice seem to make sense to the participants involved in them. We can also look for traces of cultural identity in television, in the mass media, and across the social classes, genders and sub-cultures of a society. In all of these phenomena it is the 'lived' expression of culture which tends to be the object of study – the experiential activities which are associated with *life* and *living* in one's culture and the world. Occupying the margins of experience are the cultural objects and practices of the cemetery deathspace – a place where time appears arrested, memory thwarts oblivion and belief is reaffirmed. In articulating these meanings cemeteries are inevitably bound up with the enculturation of the living. In the manner of Althusser,[3] we may say that

the cemetery interpellates the living by employing the dead to hail them; cemetery discourse is irreducibly ideological in this respect. In the cemetery the hailing of the living occurs by proxy, for the dead cannot truly hail; and so the markers of the dead, which are designed, made and inscribed by the living, undertake this purpose for us – they beckon to us as we pass calling, 'Hey, you there!', and demanding our attention.

A Protestant cemetery in China



The Old Protestant Cemetery in Macao, circa 1860. Courtesy of the Derwent Collection, Special Collections & Archives, Hong Kong Baptist University Library

While the property of hailing is a graveyard universal, the interest of this paper is centred upon a single cemetery. This was established in the Portuguese enclave of Macao[4] in South China in the early nineteenth century for the burial of foreigners. This was a small community consisting mainly of European and American traders, diplomats, seamen, military officials, missionaries, women and children. The Old Protestant Cemetery, as it is known, was open for use between 1821 and 1859 and during this time 164 persons were interred here. They included, amongst others, the Reverend Dr Robert Morrison (1782-1834), the first Protestant Missionary in China and translator of the Bible into Chinese, and George Chinnery (1774-1852), the noted portraitist and landscape painter. In this paper the role which this deathspace played in the lives of the community which it served is examined from a semiotic and linguistic perspective for the purpose of determining its salient systems of meaning – spatial, iconographic and inscribed.

Prior to the opening of the cemetery, when a person belonging to one of the 'barbarian' nations died, there were not many options available for disposing of the body. Either the deceased was buried at sea or a funeral party would be despatched to a nearby island in the

Pearl River delta, where the price of an oblong of ground would be negotiated and a burial ceremony performed. Over the years the bodies of thousands of foreigners, many the victims of malarial fever, cholera, and accidents aboard ship, were disposed of in this way. At Macao, foreign death created its own special difficulties. Until 1821 the Portuguese authorities did not recognize the rights of non-Catholics to burial in Macao. The reasoning was that Macao was a Catholic territory and only Catholics could be buried in Catholic soil. In practice this regulation was enforced only within the city walls. Followers of other religions and Christian denominations were permitted to bury their dead on the hillsides without, in the open area known as the *Campo*, between the northern city wall and the border with China.

In 1821, following intensive lobbying of the local Portuguese administration, the English East India Company was permitted to purchase a small plot of land within the city walls for the burial of Protestants, and Mrs Mary Morrison, the wife of the missionary Dr Robert Morrison, became the first person to be interred here. She was 29 and a cholera victim. Although the new burial ground was supposedly only to be for the use of East India Company employees and their dependents, it was soon opened to all Protestants regardless of their specific religious denomination or nationality. Over the years these included Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians and Quakers. Most of the cemetery's residents are either British or American, but there are also Dutch, French, German, Belgian, Swedish and Armenian graves.

Deathspace semiology

Deathspaces come in many shapes and sizes, but common to all of them are the markers which designate where persons have been buried. These in their symbolic design, shape and ornamentation are intended to convey certain types of meaning. Visitors to the Old Cemetery in Macao will notice that there is not a great deal of variation in the markers that have been erected. They are on the whole quite plain with ornamentation chiefly confined to a small number of distinctive motifs, most usually in the form of urns and symbolic devices upon tombs. It is noticeable, however, that there are no crosses or statues in the cemetery, and that none of the tombs display busts or likenesses of the deceased. Instead the visitor will find memorials of four main types: chest tombs, headstones, monuments and slabs.[5] The chest tomb is in the shape of a rectangular box. Chest tombs are made of granite and are usually inscribed on the top or sides. Some are surmounted by a funerary urn. The headstone is a flat ledger set into the ground so that it stands upright at the head of the grave. It will normally show the name of the deceased and that person's dates of birth and death. Many will have an

additional tribute and possibly some other information about the deceased's life. The monument tends to be taller than the other types of structure in the cemetery, and is usually characterized by the presence of a pillar, obelisk or column which rises vertically towards the sky. Some of these structures are also surmounted by funerary urns. More generally, the urn, obelisk, pillar and column are pagan symbols representing passage, fertility, regeneration and eternal life. The slab, as the name suggests, is a rectangle of stone laid flat upon the ground and inscribed upon the top.

Of the 161 memorials sited between 1821 and 1859, one hundred are chest tombs, forty four are headstones, eleven are monuments and six are slabs. The memorial structures are on the whole laid out linearly. This linearity is important. In Western meaning systems linearity is most usually associated with regularity, order and discipline, but in the confluence of belief systems in which this deathspace came into being an additional significance can be posited. This is that the cemetery's clean lines and regular layout would have stood in noticeable contrast with the perceived irrationalism of the Chinese practice of *fung shui* where, to the Western psyche, irregularity, disorder and ill-discipline were privileged over coherence.

> [I]f anyone wishes to see to what a howling wilderness of erratic dogmatism the human mind can arrive, when speculation usurps the place of science, and theories are reverenced equally with facts, let him endeavour to fathom even the elementary principles of that abyss of insane vagaries, the science of Fung-Shui. (Edwin Joshua Dukes. *Everyday Life in China*. London, 1885)[6]

According to the Western mind such practices were unscientific, and were also significant obstacles to Chinese enlightenment and redemption. Given the predominance of such beliefs, it is important to view the Old Cemetery as performing a role in countering the perceived irrationalism and godlessness of the Chinese, and by which the foreign community believed itself to be surrounded and assailed.

> With all their civilisation, still envy and malice, deceit and falsehood, to a boundless extent, pride and boasting, a selfish, ungenerous, scarcely honest prudence, and a cold metaphysical inhumanity, are the prevalent characteristics of the people of China. (Robert Morrison, 1835)[7]

All the more important, therefore, to attempt to recreate in custom and in appearance the conditions of one's home in the alien land. Hence the linearity of the cemetery's tombs. The linearity of the cemetery and the European-style appearance of its tombs helped to situate the cemetery ideologically in the West despite its actual location in the East. Graveyard scholars who are interested in the symbolism and iconography of nineteenth century graveyards have

focused very much upon the devices, motifs and structures of the high Victorian era – the doves, hands, willows, pillars, pyramids, obelisks, urns and statuary of the period, which in Britain and America only really came into their own after the 1840s. The Old Cemetery of Macao is much more notable for the deliberate understatedness of its memorials. There is not the same breadth of monumental styles for example, or of devices and motifs, as are to be found in the more archetypal Victorian cemeteries of London's *Highgate* or Paris's *Père Lachaise*. The main reason for the cemetery's understatedness was that being a Protestant deathspace in a supposedly Catholic land it pointedly rejected the symbols of Rome. This explains the complete absence of crosses, angels, images of Christ and associated 'papist' emblems on its tombs.

The most repeated symbol in the cemetery is the urn. As a symbol of death the urn seems a natural enough complement to any Western funerary scene were it not such an anachronism in the circumstances of the 1840s and 50s. Cremation, as a Christian mode of bodily disposal in the West, did not become an accepted practice until the end of the nineteenth century, and in some countries not until much later. In Protestant doctrine at the time the consummation of the body by fire was a pagan act and a threat to resurrection. Some religionists argued that the epitaph itself was pagan because it was responsible for memorial texts being produced which mimicked the shape of the urn. In practice, even amongst the most devout, the tendency was to err on the side of prolixity and 'urnness', and nearly every epitaph in the Old Cemetery is emblematic of this format.

Deathspace linguistics

Like the semiotic dimensions of the deathspace, the linguistic dimensions also represent systems of meaning. That is, the memorial inscriptions of the cemetery, in their wordings and grammatical structures, may be said to exhibit certain identity functions, or *dispositions*, which readers of them were expected to be able to recognize – about, for example, God, love, duty, friendship, life, death and so on. This expectation existed because the readers of the inscriptions were assumed to share them, and so in the act of recognizing the dispositions, they would also have been reaffirmed. A discourse analysis according to this model therefore involves an analysis of the lexical and grammatical themes of the cemetery's inscriptions and what these seem to reveal about this community's shared system of values and beliefs. For this analysis a web-based text-concordancing programme was employed to sort the inscriptions and produce a corpus.[8] This process was followed for all the memorial

inscriptions appearing on its tombs. Having done this, the concordance generated a corpus of 5782 words with 1410 different word types, including a small number of words in other languages. A critical discourse model of textual analysis was adopted for dealing with the data the concordance produced.[9] This utilizes the functional-linguistic categories of interpersonal and ideational meaning in identifying and interpreting the identity-functions of the inscriptions.[10] Interpersonal meaning is concerned with how the writer creates a relationship with the reader. Ideational meaning refers to shared assumptions about the world and the entities in it which are encoded in texts. In this analysis the ideational meanings of the inscriptions are the principal focus. The discussion of the memorials is also related to two aspects of textual interpretation: representative interpretation and, incorporated within the latter, social interpretation. The representative interpretation considers the key lexical and grammatical features which appear in the inscriptions; and the social interpretation the interpersonal and ideational meanings associated with them. The choices which have been made may be said to contribute to the impression which the cemetery as a text had upon its readers.

Three aspects of these choices have been focused upon: (i) the distribution and foregrounding of adjectives and nouns as content words denoting predominant values and beliefs; (ii) the distribution and foregrounding of verb forms denoting actions and changes of state; and (iii) the grammatical environments in which items appear. Together these suggest certain predispositions on the part of the memorialisers in respect of the messages which they wished to convey. For reasons of space it is only possible to give some brief indications of what the data reveal for these features.

Adjectives and nouns

Under adjectives and nouns items with three or more mentions were noted. These were then sorted into eight ideational themes of reference: *values and beliefs*; *time*; *place*; *relations*; *status*; *memorial structures*; *states of being and transition*; and *work*. These themes indicate certain preoccupations, for example with regard to the importance of personal status, and the place and nature of the deceased's work. Two prominent themes are 'states of being and transition', and 'values and beliefs'. Let us consider these in turn.

States of being and transition

States of being and transition, particularly in respect of death, are naturally a prominent theme. That said, the concept of death itself is much more common in verb form – for example, as 'died' (106 in English; 13 in other languages), than it is as an adjective or noun, i.e. 'dead' (3) or 'death' (3). 'Death' is included under the theme of 'states of being and transition', along with 'Life' (39), 'Remains' (13), 'Dead' (3), 'Illness' (3), and 'Mortal' (3). These items all have the quality of *passage* about them. Life passes to death – often as a result of illness, and mortality in its affinity to perishability represents the ephemeral nature of the human condition. Life, in other words, is temporary, but the cemetery's memorialisers wish the reader to be reminded that death is not final; the human soul, being immortal, migrates while the earthly body *remains* behind. The use of the noun 'Remains' (13) to refer to that which is left behind after the soul has departed is prominent within the inscriptions. An example is, 'Here lie the *remains* of Henry James Osborne, 4th son of Geo Osborne Esqur'. The effect of this type of usage is to reinforce and affirm the reader's belief in the afterlife. The textual function of 'Remains' is ideational; its purpose is to neutralize the threat which the corruption of the body presents to the soul after death, and to impress upon the reader the conviction that the true meaning of life lies beyond the body; that is, *outside* human existence.

Values and beliefs

The largest grouping amongst the adjectives and nouns are those which seem to indicate types of value and belief. These have been further classified according to three ideational subcategories – *Faith*, *Sentiment* and *Duty*, as these seem to be the principal ideational themes into which the dispositional lexis may be organized. *Faith* and *Sentiment* perhaps speak for themselves, so let us consider *Duty*.

Under the category of *duty* we find items which are suggestive of acts of personal sacrifice and commitment, for example in the interests one's faith, country or personal relations; the epitaphs of missionaries, military officers and wives are good examples. Here we find adjectives such as 'zealous', 'exemplary', 'fervent' and 'upright', and nouns such as 'service', 'labour', and 'conduct'. Memorial inscriptions which contain one or more lexical items in this category have the interpersonal effect of instructing the reader in the importance of hard work, commitment and devotion to a good greater than the self. Ideationally, lexis related to duty has the purpose of orienting the reader towards an approved model of social conduct in the progress of one's life. That it should, for instance, involve institutional loyalty and dedication,

and the setting of an example to others. This is particularly marked in the inscriptions of soldiers and wives.

IN MEMORY
OF ELIZABETH FEARON, WHOSE TRULY AMIABLE
DISPOSITION HAD ENDEARED HER TO ALL WHO KNEW
HER,
AND WHOSE CONDUCT AS A WIFE AND MOTHER
DURING AN
UNION OF
20 YEARS WAS MOST EXEMPLARY. THIS MONUMENT
IS ERECTED BY HER SORROWING HUSBAND
Llewelyn & Co
-
"THE LORD GAVE, AND THE LORD HATH TAKEN AWAY:
BLESSED BE HIS HOLY NAME."
-
BORN IN LONDON
22 OCTOBER 1794

DIED AT LINTIN
31 MARCH 1838

The accompanying inscription is from the tomb of Mrs Elizabeth Fearon. In Elizabeth's case the institution to which she devoted herself was that of marriage, which according to her memorial she excelled in both as a wife and as a mother. In the words of the inscription, '[Her] conduct … during an union of 20 years was most exemplary'. By this account Elizabeth, like many of the other women buried in the cemetery, is attributed with qualities which correspond to an ideal vision of wifely duty and with which readers of her memorial are being invited to concur. The conferral of attributes upon women and actions upon men is significantly marked in the cemetery epitaphs.

Verb forms

Within the category of verbal lexis the main focus of interest are the main verbs and how these seem to cue certain dispositional perspectives on the part of the reader, while also acting as a clue to the ideational preoccupations of the memorialisers. In relation to the grammatical environment, the focus is on the structural character of the inscriptions with reference to features such as agency and tense. Verbal lexis divides into six principal categories: active agency; passive agency; imperatives; truth claims and auxiliaries; modifiers; and present participles. It is not possible to deal with all of the categories here and so this discussion will concern itself only with indicating certain key features.

Active agency

By far the largest category in the verbal lexis involves usages where it is possible to identify a subject agent that is working on the main verb. In the following text samples, the verbs have been highlighted in addition to their subjects.

2259. the blessed REDEEMER during which period **HE completed** and **published** A DICTIONARY OF TH
2265. Testimony of his Worth AND THEIR REGRET. **HE died** in Macao Roads. September 9th 1823. *Aged*
2270. 14th January 1844 In the 31Year of his Age **HE lived** beloved and respected and **died** lamented by all
4519. LOVED BY ALL FOR HER INESTIMABLE WORTH **SHE DEPARTED** THIS LIFE ON THE 18TH.
5617. W. RIDDLES MASTER MARINER **WHO DEPARTED** THIS LIFE. AUGUST 21st, 1856, AGED 41
5659. infant son of ANTHONY S. AND HARRIET DANIELL **WHO died** at Macao MAY 15th 1836. AGED
5592. Canton August, 1st. 1834. Blessed are the dead **WHICH die** in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the

It is not surprising to find that a large number the subject references in the corpus are to the deceased, who when alive 'Devised', 'Devoted' and 'Executed', and now in death 'Lies', 'Sleeps' and 'Rests'. Less expected, is that references to women as subject agents of a main verb are confined to 'Departed' (2) and 'Died' (1). If participle 'ing' forms are included, women are also to be found 'anticipating [a mother's joy]', 'bearing [with her to the grave]' and 'believing [on her Saviour]' (sic). The first and second of these latter examples come from the tomb of Mary Morrison; the last from that of Mary Sutherland Clark (d. 1858). This lack of agency is in contrast to men who are given much more active roles in the inscriptions. Men, amongst other things, preach, assist, set up, complete, publish, devise, execute, command, extend and storm.

2257. of that truth which for so many years **HE** affectionately & faithfully **preached** to the HEATHEN.
2258. 1857, AGED 31 YEARS. **HE ASSISTED IN SETTING UP** THE FIRST MAGNETIC TELEGRAPH
2259. during which period **HE completed and published** A DICTIONARY OF THE CHINESE LANGUAGE,
2260. 12TH 1836 AET. 50 **HE devised and executed** for their law under instruction from his government
1476. MEMORY OF CAPTAIN WILLIAM MORGAN late **COMMANDING** the British Ship General Wood
1987. of twenty-seven years cheerfully spent in **EXTENDING** the Kingdom of the blessed REDEEMER,
4663. from the effects of a wound received while gallantly **STORMING** the enemy's battery at CANTON.

It might be argued that the reason for this difference is that there are fewer women than men in the cemetery – twenty seven if children are not counted. But a much more likely explanation is that the inscriptions simply reflect the social reality of the time, which was that outside marriage and motherhood women were not expected to have independent roles. This is also the reason why references to women in the inscriptions are almost wholly focused on their attributes as wives and as mothers rather than anything else.

Truth claims

All clausal grammatical structures encode some form of 'truth claim'. This means that the form of a verb which is chosen by a text producer is revealing of the text-producer's attitude towards the meaning content which a sentence or utterance articulates. For example, if the text producer says, 'Happy is he who dies in the Lord', this entails something different to, 'He is dying happily in the Lord'. The first tells us that the speaker considers that the action being

described is universally true. The second tells us that the action being described relates to some moments 'around now' and that the speaker expects the action to be a transient one. In descriptive grammars this property of language is sometimes referred to as 'aspect'.[11] Aspect is often related to notions of completion, routine, temporariness, activity and prediction in the selection of tenses, whether present, past or future. Aspects suggest an attitude towards truth on the part of the language user, who makes a choice between grammatical forms in order to express the meaning he or she wishes to convey. Aspects are each interpretations of reality from the perspective of the language user.

The aspects of the memorial inscriptions are of three main types: Proclamatory, Prophetic, and Universalizing. Proclamation is articulated through the present perfect tense in the passage, 'The Lord gave and the Lord *hath taken away*', where 'hath taken' operates as an act of news-giving or proclamation to the reader. Similarly, in the passage, 'their characters as deserving Seamen *have caused* the name of his Fellow sufferers to be inscribed on his tomb', this news-giving effect of the present perfect tense is evident again. Prophecy, on the other hand, is cued by means of the auxiliary 'Shall' in passages such as:

4513. FOR IF WE BE DEAD WITH HIM WE **SHALL** ALSO LIVE WITH HIM
4514. I know that whatsoever God doeth, it **SHALL** be for ever
4515. In a moment at the last trump,- The dead **SHALL** be raised incorruptible.
4516. THEY **SHALL** WALK WITH ME IN WHITE. Rev. 3. 4.

Universalizing claims can be found in inscriptions, such as 'Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord' and 'As for God his way is perfect'. It is the present simple form of the verb 'Be' which makes these claims universal. Universalizing truth claims are most commonly expressed through the present simple tense due, in part, to the cultural association which this tense has in English, and other European languages, with the articulation of truths in science and canonical law. This association makes the claims of the present simple tense, when it is used in this manner, difficult to contest because they are by definition unarguable.

Complementing verb and tense-based truths on the nominal side are 'exophoric' (i.e. referring outside) uses of the definite article '*the*' with nouns and noun phrases to refer to a known world, and to assumed ideational concepts, meanings and beliefs in that world. These include references to 'The Blessed Redeemer', 'The Lord', 'The Son of Man', 'The Father which is in Heaven', 'The Gospel', 'The Holy Scriptures', 'The Cross', 'The Dead', 'The Deceased', The

Honourable East India Company', 'The Empire of China', 'The China Seas', 'The Chinese Language', 'The Enemy' and 'The Heathen'.

Modifiers

The final category are the adverbial items which modify verb forms in clauses. As their name suggests, the purpose of modifiers is to modify the meaning of the items to which they are applied. In most cases the item is a verb form; for example, 'Suddenly Departed', 'Unhappily Perished', etc. In these two examples the adverbs tell us something additional about the acts of departing and perishing. But adverbs also modify adjectives and adjective-noun combinations as well. Elizabeth Fearon's tomb tells the reader that she had a 'truly amiable disposition'. In this phrase the adverb 'truly' modifies 'amiable disposition' by intensifying Mrs Fearon's amiability. In this intensifying effect there is the sense that we are gaining access to a higher order of amiableness, that is, to a purer, more concentrated, understanding of the term. In this example, the selection of 'truly' as the modifier particularly has this effect due to its association with absolutes – e.g. 'truly awful', 'truly delicious', etc. But this property is not only confined to 'truly', it is common to all intensifying adverbials. The movement of the adverbial towards purity in meaning is not unlike the migration of the soul towards salvation. Where the adverbial longs for the presence of pure meaning, the soul longs for the presence of the Redeemer. There is an appropriate symmetry in this which seems less than contingent.

Conclusion

This paper has been about the cultural patterns of meaning embodied in the human deathspace and the articulation of a methodology for analyzing them. More specifically it has been about processes of Western identity formation in a colonial outpost in South China in the early nineteenth century. Our route into this has been through a semiotic and linguistic account of the memorialisation and inscriptional practices of the community of foreigners that lived there. This has sought to demonstrate how, for this community, the Old Protestant Cemetery of Macao became a focal point for the local construction and maintenance of a Western sense of identity. The cemetery performed this role in two ways: through the culturally-didactic symbolism of its layout and of the memorial structures which were erected there, and through the ideological interpellation of visitors by means of the inscriptions upon its tombs. Deathspaces in the West may not have quite the same significance today as the Old Cemetery did for the foreign residents of Macao 150 years ago, but as places of arrested time, lived

memory, enculturation and belief, they still perform a similar role – particularly amongst those who are sensible to the refrain, 'Hey, you there!'.

Notes and references

[1] Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books Inc. (p. 89).
[2] Gramsci, A. (1988). *The Antonio Gramsci Reader*. London: Lawrence and Wishart. (p. 326).
[3] *See* Althusser, L. (1971). Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses. In *Lenin & Philosophy*. New York: Monthly Review Press. (pp. 127-86).
[4] The spelling of Macao is the Romanized version current in the nineteenth century. The modern day spelling is 'Macau'.
[5] *See* Ride, L., & Ride, M. (1996). *An East India Company Cemetery: Protestant Burials in Macao.* Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press. (pp. 71-3).
[6] Cited in March, A. L. (1968). An Appreciation of Chinese Geomancy. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 27(2). (p. 254).
[7] Memoir of the Rev. Robert Morrison. *Missionary Sermons*. Vol. 12. (1835). London: The London Missionary Society. (p. 71).
[8] *The Compleat Lexical Tutor* at http://132.208.224.131/
[9] *See* O'Regan, J. P. (2006). The Text as a Critical Object. *Critical Discourse Studies, 3*(1), 179-209.
[10] *See* Martin, J. R., & Rose, D. (2003). *Working with Discourse: Meaning Beyond the Clause*. London: Continuum.
[11] *See* Leech, G. & Svartik, J. (1994). *A Communicative Grammar of English* (2nd ed.). London: Longman.