

The Mystery of Manila's Octagonal Cemetery

While researching the Filipiniana archive (*Archivo General de Indios*) in Sevilla, Spain, Carmen Cano came across a plan for a cemetery. Dated 1898, the plan had laid hidden in the archive for nearly 100 years. What was unique about this cemetery, what caught Carmen's attention, was the plan's unusual shape -- an octagon. The cemetery plan also lacked the customary chapel or any reference to a nearby church.

Carmen contacted me with the following e-mail:

Dear Robert:

I found your web while I was looking for information about cemeteries in Manila. I write to you from Sevilla, Spain, where I'm doing an investigation about Manila in the nineteenth century. I found a cemetery plan dated 1898 in the Indian Archives, here in Sevilla. It's an unpublished document which I'm studying. So I need to know if this cemetery was built (because it could be only a plan), if it exists nowadays and where I can seek information about it. I would appreciate any information about this matter. The cemetery is easy to recognize because it has an octagonal shape.

Thank you,

Carmen

Historical Backdrop

The year the cemetery plan was submitted to the Spanish government in Manila, the authorities had already been for several years embroiled in sporadic but bitter fighting with Filipino insurgents. On April 25, 1898 the United States declared war on Spain and on May 1st Commodore Dewey captured Manila Bay. Under the leadership of Aguinaldo, the Filipino Nationalists laid siege on Manila with U.S. support. Without the protection of a navy, surrounded on all sides, the Spanish government surrendered to the U.S. on August 13th.

By the end of the year, the Spanish government and military left the islands taking with them many official documents which eventually were deposited in various libraries of Spain. Among those documents was the plan for the octagonal cemetery.

The century-old document proved a mystery. Was the cemetery ever built or was the plan lost in the confusion of war? If it was built, where is it located and is it still in existence? Lastly, why the unusual eight-sided shape?

Clues from the History of the Chinese in the Philippines

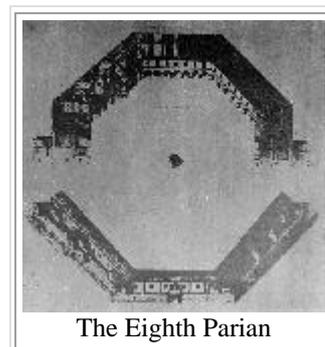
The proximity of the Philippine Islands to mainland China made contact with that expanding civilization inevitable. The Sung Annals of the 10th century mention the islands and record visits by Filipino explorers and traders to the mainland. No doubt the Chinese also ventured to the Philippines as traders and migrants seeking new land. There was an ancient Taoist belief about the existence of the "Isles of the Immortals" somewhere in the Eastern Sea. At least one expedition was sent to discover these islands where one could eat the abundant food of eternal youth. Could these mythical isles have been the Philippines?

Archaeological evidence suggest that groups from China had already settled in the Philippines during prehistory and most likely became assimilated with the native populations. When the Spanish arrived in Manila in 1571, they encountered Chinese merchant ships and a resident population of 150 Chinese. Asked where they came from they replied *seng-li* (or *xang lai*), meaning "we are traders" and thenceforth all Chinese were called "Sangleys" by the Spanish. It was with these traders that the Spanish developed the lucrative Manila galleon trade shipping Chinese silk, porcelain, spices, furniture, secular and religious jewelry and many other goods to Europe via Mexico. The Spanish called the galleons *nao de la China* or "ships of China."

Because of the economic importance of the traders, the Chinese were tolerated in Manila but mistrusted. As trade grew and the Chinese population increased eventually outnumbering the resident Spanish, the Spanish authority required all non-Christian Chinese to reside in a walled compound called the Parian beginning in 1582. The Parian became the commercial center of Manila with the many Chinese craftsmen providing their skilled services as shipbuilders, carpenters, sculptors, weavers, cobblers, bakers, food vendors, apothecaries, jewelers and much more.

A colony far from its homeland, the Spanish in Manila were subject to threats of attack from other empire-seeking European as well as Asian nations. Its proximity to mainland China and the attack by the Chinese warlord *Lim-Ah-Hong* (or *Lin Tao Kien*) in 1574, even though successfully repelled, only abetted the distrust of the Sangleys. The ongoing discrimination and repression led to a series of Chinese revolts in 1603, 1639, 1662, 1686 and 1762 with the invariable response of indiscriminate slaughter of thousands of innocent Chinese. Chroniclers noted that economic depression often followed the massacres because so much of the island's commerce depended on Chinese trade.

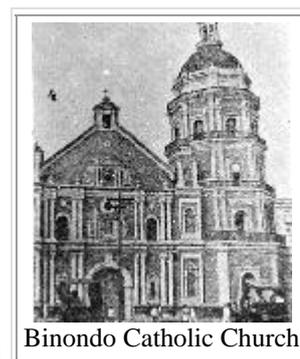
The location of the Parian moved from time to time and persisted until 1790. The second-to-last Parian was built across the Pasig River from the Spanish fortress called *Intramuros* and its layout was an interesting shape - it was an octagon.



The Mystery of the Octagon

Was there some relationship between the octagonal cemetery plan and the similarly shaped Parian of more than a hundred years earlier? The octagon figures prominently in Chinese architecture particularly in religious structures. When Buddhism arrived in China and melded with the already existing Taoist and Confucian beliefs, many temples and pagodas were built as places of worship. The round *stupas* of India were transformed into polygon-shaped pavilions and pagodas in China. I couldn't find a direct reference to the significance of the octagon but I believe it may be related to the Buddhist tenets of the "Eightfold Path Toward Enlightenment": right views and right aspiration; right speech, right conduct and right livelihood; right effort, right mindfulness and right contemplation. Over the centuries, the three beliefs borrowed freely from each other and the octagon became a feature of Taoist architecture as well.

When the Chinese came to the Philippines, they brought their religious beliefs and building skills with them. The eighth (and coincidentally shaped?) Parian is one example of the use of the octagon and the pagoda-like belfry of the Binondo church is yet another. Is the octagonal cemetery plan of 1898 another example of Chinese design?



The Chinese cemetery of Manila had already been founded in 1879. By this time the Chinese community was well organized with its own leader called the *Gobernadorcillo de Chino*. Any building plans probably still had to be submitted and approved by the Spanish government. Was the octagonal cemetery a planned extension of the existing Chinese cemetery or was it to be built in another part

of the city or in another city altogether? Maybe it wasn't Chinese at all. Or was the plan lost and forgotten in the turmoil of political upheaval?

The mystery remains for historical sleuths but the clues are intriguing.

MYSTERY SOLVED!

There are two Carmen Cano's of Seville -- mother and daughter with the same name. The younger Carmen originally contacted me while helping her mother who was researching the Philippine Archives. The date she provided for the plan was incorrect by 100 years and was actually 1797 according to the mother. And the shape may have been more circular than octagonal.

The cemetery was built in Paco in about 1820 to accommodate victims of a cholera epidemic. At the time, the cemetery's gate opened to the shore. Paco, which is now part of Manila, was a community just outside the walls of Intramuros the bastion of the Spanish rulers.

The cemetery played a part in history when it became the secret burial place of the martyred national hero Jose Rizal. His remains were later moved to the Rizal Monument at Luneta Park just up the road.

The cemetery has since become [Paco Park](#) and still retains its circular shape. It has a chapel popular for weddings. My conjecture that there may have been a Chinese influence in its design or construction remains in question. Immediately beside the park is the Paco Hong Giam Taoist Temple.

Here is the letter where the elder Carmen provided the clues:

Querido amigo:

Por fin, encontré donde estaba el cementerio. En el pueblo de Paco, que creo que ahora está incluido en Manila. De todas formas, el trabajo lo he enfocado hacia el cambio que se produce en las costumbres de enterramiento a partir del siglo XVIII, cambiando cementerios eclesiásticos por civiles.

El archivo de Indias está informatizado, pero Filipinas no tiene hecho desglose de las obras de arte. Figuraba bajo el epígrafe: Cementerios. Allí había tres planos: dos cementerios del año 1797, en la misma Manila, y el del pueblo de Paco.

El cementerio tiene muros curvos. Debe estar cercano al mar, porque una de sus puertas se abre a la playa. El plano no está firmado, pero figura en todos los libros de Historia del Arte como la mejor construcción neoclásica en Filipinas.

Un saludo afectuoso,
Carmen Rodríguez.

References:

- Anonymous, 1985. Historic Chinese Architecture, Qinghuayuan University, China.
- Go, Bon J. and T. Ang See, Ed., 1987. Heritage: The Pictorial History of the Chinese in the Philippines, Filipino-Chinese Heritage Committee, Manila, Philippines.
- Lyon, E., 1990. Track of the Manila Galleons. National Geographic Magazine, Vol. 178, No. 3, September.
- Smart, N., 1976. The Religious Experience of Mankind 2nd Edition. C. Scribners' Sons, New York.
- Zaide, G. F., 1949. Philippine Political and Cultural History Vol. I. Philippine Education Co., Manila.

Ref.: <http://www.aenet.org/philip/octagon.htm>