



## The Chinese Benevolent Association Limited

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### Gah San (Ching Ming) Ceremony and Rituals

Traditionally most Chinese, and especially the Hakka from Guangdong, take time out from their regular lives to pay respect to their ancestors on Ching Ming Jie, Mandarin for 清明節, “Tomb Sweeping Day” or literally “Pure Brightness Festival” referring to the start of Spring. It is celebrated on the first day of the 5<sup>th</sup> solar term of the traditional Chinese calendar, which on the western calendar is the 15<sup>th</sup> day after the spring equinox, so it always falls on 4-6 April. In Jamaica it is celebrated on the Sunday falling on or immediately after April 5<sup>th</sup>: it is important that the date be regulated so that the living relatives know when to congregate, and also that the spirits know when to expect them! It is pronounced Chin Min in Hakka, or more commonly called Gah San (掛山, literally “Adorn the Hills”, since for feng shui reasons the tombs were traditionally on the side of a hill with good views of a nearby body of water). Apparently wealthy citizens in China used to hold frequent extravagant and ostentatiously expensive ceremonies in honor of their ancestors. In 732 AD, the then Emperor sought to curb this practice by declaring that such respects could be formally paid only once a year, on Ching Ming, which focused and concentrated the practice ever since.

The responsibility to hang san, 行山, or “walk the mountain” i.e. to visit the cemetery to maintain the ancestor's graves, still falls to the eldest son, but the whole family should participate. It is an intimate, emotional and personal family affair, but also steeped in tradition. The festival is a time to reflect, and to honour and give thanks to our forefathers. In many regions the day culminates in a large feast to which the whole family is invited, and in that sense it is as much about connecting with the living family as it is with honoring the departed. Since it also falls shortly after the Spring Equinox, it is also associated with going outdoors, enjoying springtime, courtship, flying kites and planting trees.

Weeds are removed, the grass cut, and the tomb cleaned, swept or painted. These preparations (sow mu, 扫墓, meaning to “sweep the grave”) are undertaken before the offerings are placed on a temporary altar in front of the tomb. Two candles are lit and placed on either side of the altar (representing the balance of the ying and yang). Homage to the ancestors is given by family members present, in order of seniority, by respectfully bowing 3 times while holding lighted joss sticks in the right fist cupped in the left hand at chest height. This apparently is different from the Buddhist practice of holding the incense between the palms and holding the hands slightly above forehead height while bowing. This may be accompanied by prayers for the departed, and asking for blessings for the future. Little pieces of brown paper can be strewn about or pinned to the ground to signify that the dead have been cared for. Sometimes this is referred to as “thatching” the grave – symbolizing either a new roof, or a blanket to keep the ancestors warm at night.

The customary offerings are made up of red candles, incense, and specific dishes of food (in the Jamaican custom 3 dishes (三牲, sam sang): whole fried fish, whole boiled chicken and whole roast suckling pig). Elsewhere 5 dishes were used. An unblemished whole pig is more prestigious than cut-up pieces of pork. The chicken resembles a phoenix, which represents the Confucian virtues of loyalty, honesty, compassion and duty, and is sometimes carved on graves. Hence it is steamed with the head and legs attached to preserve the likeness. A red Chinese plum can be placed in its mouth to symbolize prosperity, wealth, and fertility. And since the head of the fish is regarded as a delicacy, it too should be offered to the ancestors. In addition, it is very important that the entire pig or chicken be cooked and presented – no trimming of the tail or “parson’s nose”. The emphasis and symbolism is on being intact, complete and in balance. The throat or stomach should not be cut, and the guts should be removed through the rear, with as little cutting of the body as possible. 3 bowls of rice with chopsticks, 3 cups of tea, and 3 glasses of liquor are offered, one for each of the so-called “Chinese Trinity”: Heaven, Earth, and Man (our ancestors).

Imitation “dead” or “Hell” money (ji chen, 纸钱), joss paper, flowers, firecrackers, sweets, fruit (especially oranges and tangerines whose names sound auspicious), cakes, their favorite snacks, even cigarettes if they liked smoking, can all be added. The act of burning items such as the imitation money makes them available to the ancestors on the other side, so in some countries people will burn paper models of houses, cars, computers, TV’s, etc. as well.

Burning incense (sow heong, 烧香) is believed to nourish the spirits. The other food offerings are left out for the ancestors to choose what they want. By tradition, before you remove them, e.g. for the rest of the family to eat, you should throw some red divining blocks to see whether the ancestors are finished. To be sure of a “Yes” answer to a question, one block must fall flat side up and the other flat side down, for 3 times in a row.

In very traditional areas, offerings are first made to Tu Ti Gung (土地公, “God of the Earth”) who guards the tomb, and frequently has a small tablet nearby, and additional plates of (less attractive) simple food or snacks are left out a short distance to the left of the tomb, so that any stray ghost or wandering spirit passing by will eat that and not bother the better food prepared for the ancestors.