PHOTO: TAIPEI TIMES

Tomb raider

While visiting relatives in Nantou County, Richard Hazeldine met his grandmother-in-law for the first time. She had been dead 18 years

BY **RICHARD HAZELDINE**
STAFF REPORTER

"Would you like to see my grandmother's remains being exhumed?" is not the sort of question you get asked often.

But this was the proposition my wife presented one sunny Sunday morning during a trip to my in-laws' home in Nantou County.

An opportunity to experience firsthand the "picking up the bones" (揀骨) ritual, for which the remains of an ancestor are removed from their resting place and packed into an ossuary in a second burial (二次葬), was not to be missed.

Memories of Indiana Jones movies — cavernous, snake-filled pits waiting to foil anyone foolish enough to disturb the dead — flashed through my mind.

Those images quickly evaporated, however, as we arrived at our destination, a gently sloping hill behind a temple near Nantou's main industrial district, dotted with hundreds of graves, the long grass scorched brown by intense sunshine.

There my father-in-law and six of his siblings chatted, waiting for the master of ceremonies and the two bone collectors (who I nicknamed Burke and Hare after the infamous 19th-century Irish murderers who sold their victims' bodies to an anatomist for dissection) to show up.

While we waited, my wife's aunt wandered over and stuffed a *hong-bao*, or red envelope, into my pocket to ward off bad luck, she said.

After a few minutes, the three men arrived. Following instructions to apologize to the cemetery's residents as we stepped on their final resting places, we tiptoed our way across the graves.

The ritual of the second burial, according to Douglas Gildow, a PhD fellow in Buddhist studies at Princeton University's Department of Religion, began so that the remains of people who died away from their ancestral home could be returned for reburial.

For many 18th-century Chinese immigrants in Taiwan, that home was China's Fujian Province. But as they set down roots here, Gildow said, the practice developed into a general burial custom.

Many cultures in Southeast Asia still observe the same or a similar ritual, he said, adding that the body is usually left underground to decompose for between three to 12 years.

In Taiwan, the second burial usually takes place seven years after the first.

After being dug up, the bones are cleaned to remove any dirt or flesh before the skeleton is reassembled, painted with a mixture of wine and paint in a symbolic re-fleshing, and then deposited in an ossuary.

Gravediggers exhume bones from a burial site in Singapore. PHOTO: AFP

Despite the widespread observance of the annual Tomb Sweeping Day (清明節), which this year falls tomorrow, many of the Nantou graves looked as if they hadn't been swept in decades.

And despite coming from a sizeable family, my grandmother-in-law's grave also appeared to have been rarely visited in the 18 years since she died.

No one seemed exactly sure of what to do.

After much discussion, the tall grass was cleared from around the grave and some incense burned and prayers said. A stack of "ghost money" was also burned. We waited for the astrologically auspicious time to start digging: 9.04am.

I wondered why this reburial had taken so long.

My wife's youngest uncle said that practical considerations played a role. His mother's bones were being moved so she could be interred alongside her husband, who died last year aged 94. Having the couple in the same place would be more convenient for relatives to pay their respects.

A 2007 National Geographic short documentary film about second burials notes the practice is a way to consolidate ancestral remains at one site.

It was time to start digging. No sooner had Burke plunged his shovel into the reddish soil than up popped the head of an angry cobra. A sweep of the shovel later and the headless serpent's writhing body was tossed aside onto a pile of earth.

The first thud of the shovel hitting wood came after 10 minutes of digging. Another five minutes and the coffin lid, which resembled a hollowed-out tree trunk, appeared.

Apprehension set in. I'd never even seen a dead body before. Hare grabbed a crowbar and began prying the lid off. After a few seconds of struggling he and Burke managed to lift up the heavy wooden cover and heaved it aside.

There was no wispy cloud of long-trapped spirits escaping to the heavens, just a damp, musty smell.

The contents — a surprisingly small, brown, child-size skeleton half covered in orange earth, encrusted in what looked like rust and dressed in some tattered, old-fashioned clothes — weren't as gruesome as I'd imagined.

Burke jumped down into the coffin and began trampling all over the remains, heaving his shovel into the dirt with little thought for the integrity of the skeleton and tossing out the contents as he went.

First came the jewelry, hands attached. As with many other cultures, the Taiwanese often bury their dead with cash and jewelry for use in the "next world." Several jade and gold bracelets, necklaces and a small quantity of coins followed, which were separated for cleaning and distribution among family members.

Next came the feet, followed by the legs and pelvis. Then Burke and Hare moved on to the arms, ribs and spine, the bones of which had to be shaken out of the clothes and picked up from the dirt and dust at the bottom of the coffin.

Last, but not least, came the skull. The spine bones were counted. All present and correct. A quick sift through the remaining soil to check that none of the skeleton's smaller bones had been missed and that was that.

The remains were wrapped in an old cement bag that was tied up with string. Burke swung his sledgehammer into action and brought it down on the headstone and grave's wall, cracking them (to signify there's nobody home). The bones were sent off to the funeral home for packing into an ossuary. And that was my how I met granny.