

News from Asia *continued*

Debating Bukit Brown: bringing a cemetery to life in Singapore

Hui Yew-Foong

IN MAY 2011, the Singapore government announced that Bukit Brown Cemetery (BBC),¹ a historical Chinese cemetery in Singapore with an estimated 100,000 graves, had been earmarked for housing. In September, initial development plans were unveiled in the form of a dual four-lane road that would be built through the cemetery, starting 2013. The stated purpose of the road was to ease traffic congestion along the existing outer ring-road. In land-scarce Singapore, these were seen as “difficult trade-off decisions” that had to be made. The usual protests ensued. Letters were sent to the forum page of the national broadsheet, and an online petition was initiated by a local academic. In response, the Singapore government reiterated that the area had to be developed to meet the housing needs of Singaporeans.

In this instance, however, the protests of the public did not die down as usual. In June 2011, a Facebook group known as ‘Heritage Singapore – Bukit Brown Cemetery’ was formed. The group was “...Dedicated to our common heritage in Singapore – Bukit Brown Cemetery – where many of our forefathers were laid to rest...May they rest in peace, forever.” To date, the group has attracted almost 2,000 members. Subsequently, blogs such as ‘Rojak Librarian’, ‘bukitbrown.org’ and ‘All Things Bukit Brown’ emerged to share knowledge about the history and heritage value of BBC. Another group, known as ‘SOS Bukit Brown’, organized a petition against the planned developments, aiming to collect 100,000 signatures, that is, one for every grave in Bukit Brown. At the same time, two civil society groups – the Singapore Heritage Society and the Nature Society (Singapore) – compiled position papers on the preservation of BBC, based on its cultural and natural heritage. Volunteers have also been organizing weekly tours to educate the public on the heritage value of Bukit Brown.

Such a flourish of activities and activism over an old cemetery is unprecedented in Singapore; this is also a case in which the process of heritage site-making is more of a ground-up initiative than a state-sponsored enterprise. In the discourse of pragmatism that is characteristic of Singapore, the common refrain is that in land scarce Singapore, the needs of the dead will have to give way to the needs of the living. However, the Bukit Brown issue so far is not just about the interests of the living versus the dead, but a debate between preserving the cemetery for its heritage value or meeting the pragmatic needs of Singaporeans. That such a debate on the heritage value of a cemetery should rise to prominence suggests a shift in the public discourse of Singapore, whereby it is no longer sufficient to pursue simple ‘bread and butter’ issues. Rather, it is also important to be searching for the soul of the nation, and for some, the place to start is among the graves of Bukit Brown.

Historical background

As early as 1904, the Chinese community in Singapore had been lobbying the municipal government to set aside a cemetery for non-Christian Chinese. At that time, such burial needs were met by private family cemeteries or clan association cemeteries. However, changes in the law restricted the amount of space available, which was why the Chinese clamored for a public cemetery to take care of their burial needs. The colonial government was reluctant to venture into establishing a municipal cemetery for the Chinese because they expected that the Chinese would not be willing to subject themselves to the grid-like standard plots of a municipal cemetery, given their beliefs in geomantic principles (with very individualized preferences for size and bearings, and a seemingly haphazard layout). However, by the late 1910s, the municipal government

had been convinced that such a cemetery was feasible, and by 1919 had acquired 213 acres of land for the public cemetery.

BBC became the first Chinese municipal cemetery to be opened by the colonial government, in 1922. It was a cemetery that did not require communal affiliations, that is, a relationship with a family or clan. Thus, BBC was the first Chinese cemetery that facilitated a pan-Chinese identity in organizational and spatial terms. Chinese of diverse communal origins – such as Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka and Hainanese – or surnames, could be buried next to each other.

Initially, the Chinese were indeed reluctant to subject themselves to the discipline of a municipal cemetery. It was more than three months before the first burial took place, and only 93 were buried in the cemetery during its first year of operation. However, by 1929, more than 40% of all burials within municipal limits were at Bukit Brown. It had become acceptable and commonplace for Chinese of different communal origins, whether rich or poor, elite or commoner, to be buried at Bukit Brown. This trend continued till 1944 when the cemetery became full, although those with reserved plots could still be buried in BBC till it was officially closed in 1973. It is commonplace for Chinese Singaporeans today to have ancestors buried in Bukit Brown.

From familial space to national space

A Chinese cemetery is very much a familial space. Every year, during the Qingming Festival in March and April, Chinese families will trudge through the undulating landscape to locate their ancestors’ tombs, clear the overgrown foliage, and make offerings to their forebears. This is a family affair and the grave is a space for families to commemorate their ancestors. It is no surprise then that when plans for an eight-lane carriageway to be built through Bukit Brown were first announced, some of the most concerned citizens were those with ancestors buried in the cemetery. Many went down to the cemetery to find out if their ancestors’ resting places would be affected by the road project. Others who had not visited for years embarked on journeys of rediscovery to find their ancestors’ graves. The authorities announced they would pay for the exhumation, cremation and relocation of the remains in any of the graves that would be affected by the development plans. These people are those with direct stakes in the cemetery, and their concerns are very much confined to the interests of the family.

But there are also some who see the biographies of those buried in Bukit Brown as being intertwined with the early history of Singapore. Among those interred at Bukit Brown were prominent leaders of the local Chinese community, philanthropists, municipal commissioners, Chinese revolutionaries and literati, and even colonial office bearers from the Dutch East Indies. Their stories tell not only of the Chinese diaspora and their concern with developments in China, but also of their embeddedness in the regional networks of maritime Southeast Asia. At the same time, the materials used in the construction of tombs, such as fine stone reliefs from China and decorative ceramic tiles from Europe, demonstrate a material culture that is very much integrated with the global economy of the early 20th century. Furthermore, the cemetery features some of the largest, most intricate and oldest graves found in Singapore.

In this light, Bukit Brown can be articulated as part of Singapore’s national heritage, and indeed, many who have been actively lobbying for the preservation of Bukit Brown do not have direct familial connections with the cemetery. Their



Top: Ong Sam Leong Panoramic view of the largest grave at Bukit Brown (photo courtesy of author).

Above: National day Celebrating National Day at Bukit Brown (photo courtesy of Martina Yeo).

identification with those buried in Bukit Brown is not through direct familial ties, but through an imagined fraternity of the nation; those buried in Bukit Brown could be imagined as the concern, not only of their direct descendents, but of all Singaporeans. The cemetery could be construed not just as pockets of private familial space for commemorating individual ancestors, but a national space for commemorating pioneers of the nation. It was exactly this imagination that allowed a civil society group to celebrate Singapore’s National Day on 9 August 2012 at the cemetery, to commemorate the ‘Nation’s Deceased Pioneers’.² Through such efforts, lobby groups seek to reconstitute the cemetery as a national space.

The making of heritage sites

Many have noticed that there was little concern over BBC as a heritage site until the authorities announced that the site would be developed. Since then, many have been converted to the cause and, indeed, parliamentarians who have visited the cemetery have debated its value for Singapore. As communities emerge to celebrate the heritage value of Bukit Brown, the site begins to accrue meaning and becomes an important part of the heritage landscape of Singapore. It is no longer a mere cemetery, but a cradle for Singapore’s historical narratives. Through the deep investments of communities, a cemetery is brought to life and a heritage site is made.

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Notes

- ¹ ‘Bukit’ is Malay for ‘hill’. Thus, ‘Bukit Brown’ can be read as ‘Brown’s Hill’.
- ² Note that ‘Nation’s Deceased Pioneers’ is a play on the acronym NDP, which is commonly known to represent the ‘National Day Parade’, a civil ritual that is the highlight of the annual celebration of Singapore’s national day.

The articles on these ‘News from Asia’ pages were compiled by our regional editor Lee Hock Guan, at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.

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