



**SINGAPORE
HERITAGE
SOCIETY**
Research • Education • Advocacy

Position Paper on Bukit Brown

January 2012

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Fig 1. Chinese stone lion guarding grave. Source: Terence Chong

1. Summary

The Singapore Heritage Society (SHS) is deeply disappointed with the government's decision to build a road that cuts into Bukit Brown cemetery. SHS regrets that there was no consultation prior to the decision, and urges the government to consider alternatives that would not destroy the heritage value in the cemetery.

Looking forward, SHS strongly recommends gazetting and legally protecting Bukit Brown as heritage site; the full documentation of the graves in Bukit Brown; and turning a Bukit Brown into a heritage park for Singaporeans to enjoy.

2. The Value of Bukit Brown

What makes this land unique? What makes this land ours? What is worth preserving, and how far are we willing to go to preserve it? Such questions can no longer be ignored. Heritage will grow increasingly important as the processes of globalisation and rapid urbanisation manifest themselves in the daily lives of Singaporeans. Singaporeans have become more keenly sensitive to heritage loss.¹

Since 2001 when it was announced that the Bidadari Cemetery was to be exhumed, the Singapore Heritage Society has been making the case for the historical value of cemeteries in Singapore. A public forum was held at the Singapore History Museum in September 2001 and in May 2011, a 307-page book was published, partially funded by the National Heritage Board.²

Bukit Brown cemetery is the largest Chinese cemetery outside China. With approximately 100,000 graves it is a remarkable historical space, even in international terms. The vast amount of information provides a valuable database for international researchers and scholars.

A. A Space Specific to the Region³

Bukit Brown's heritage value lies in the information on the gravestones regarding provincial origins, descendents, and personal epigraphs. Such information tells us who we are and where we came from. Bukit Brown is unique to the region. For example, the very name Kopi Sua (羔盃山) is in Hokkien and uses Chinese characters not used in standard Mandarin. In other Hokkien-speaking territories such as Taiwan, a different transliteration of 'coffee' are used.

Another example of Bukit Brown's uniqueness is in the tomb design, artistic embellishment and fengshui orientation of the gravestones. Personalised inscriptions and design of tombs may also reveal further hitherto unknown details about an individual, such as the long poem written by Khoo Seok Wan about Khoo Yang Tin. The aesthetics and design of these gravestones are also specific to the region, especially the Straits Settlements, even though many of those interred here were from Southern China. The use of Sikh guard statues to

¹ See *Straits Times*. 31 December 2011. "The past is just a memory". By Oon, Clarissa; *Straits Times*. 26 November 2011. "Heritage is HIP". By Lee Siew Hua.

² The Singapore Heritage Society has made arguments for the preservation of cemeteries elsewhere. See Tan, Kevin Y. L. (ed.). 2011. *Spaces of the Dead: A Case from the Living*. Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society ; Ethos Books.

³ See Annex One for a broader history of Bukit Brown.

watch over these graves, for instance, is unique and serves to anchor our sense of identity and belonging firmly to the region.



Fig. 2. Painted Sikh guards⁴



Fig. 3. Unpainted Sikh guards⁵

B. Historical Connectivity to the Region

Even today we are continually discovering information that highlights the heritage value of the cemetery. It has become clear that Bukit Brown is evidence of Singapore's strong connectivity to the region. Take for example Tan Kim Ching (1829-1892), the eldest of the three sons of Tan Tock Seng. Tan was the first Asian member of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society as well as the Kapitan China of the Straits Chinese community. Tan was also influential in Malayan and Siam politics, and appointed as Consul-General for Siam in the Straits Settlements.

Bukit Brown is also important to the mapping of social networks and family trees. The clusters of graves of Chinese from Semarang, or of Tong Meng Hui members who supported Sun Yat Sen, reveal connections that might sometimes not be documented elsewhere. Family relations recorded on tombstones include females, who are often left out of official Chinese genealogies, thus enabling more thorough genealogies to be constructed. As such, many of the individuals interred at Bukit Brown, with their strong links to other places in the Straits Settlements, Malaya or the wider region, hold significant historical meaning for more than just Singaporeans.

⁴Source: <http://frontierlearning.blogspot.com> (access date: 28 Dec 2011)

⁵Source: <http://mymindisrojak.blogspot.com> (access date: 28 Dec 2011)

C. A More Democratic Singapore Story

Graves in Bukit Brown date from mid-19th century even before the cemetery was turned into a municipal one in 1922. The remains of many like Fang Shan (1833) were transferred from elsewhere. More broadly, alongside prominent pioneers are tens of thousands of ordinary migrants buried at Bukit Brown. The cemetery – with large sections for “paupers” (see Fig. 12) – is a poignant reminder of the ordinary people who anonymously contributed their blood, sweat and toil to the development of our city port. Such a move will enrich and democratise the Singapore story.

D. Safeguarding Cultural Practices

The value of Bukit Brown may also be found in the living practices of people who continue to pay their respects to their ancestors in the form of ceremonial rituals, offerings, as well as highly personalised ways. Such sacredness is not static or dead but embedded in the living habits of people. No amount of virtual or 3D reconstruction and photos can ever replace the impact of the physical space, the importance of engaging the five senses in education, as well as the loss of cultural practices.



Fig 4. Offerings at tombstone.⁶

⁶ Source: www.macaudailytimes.com (access date: 28 Dec 2011)

E. A History of People, Streets and Places

“I see the name so often, but didn’t know who he was.” “I didn’t know Hong Lim Park was named after a real person.” “It never occurred to me until now that Joo Chiat was a person.” Such remarks are not uncommon. Preserving the large number of graves of prominent pioneers will enable younger generations to make the link between abstract names and real and personal histories. Such preservation will also greatly enhance the study of toponymics.

Below are just some of the prominent people interred in Bukit Brown.⁷

Ang Seah Im

Ancestral Origin: Tong Ann, Fujian

Birth-Death: ?-1927

Biography: Ang was a Chinese community leader with business in mining, rice, rubber and trading. He owned properties in Malaysia and Singapore, especially along Telok Blangah Road. Seah Im Road is named after him.



Fig 5.

⁷ Source: Raymond Goh; Fig. 5 from <http://www.classicfengshuimastery.com>.

Cheang Hong Lim

Ancestral Origin: Changtai, Fujian

Birth-Death: 1841-1893

Biography: Cheang was a philanthropist and Chinese community leader. Places named after him include Hong Lim Park, Hong Lim Market, and Cheang Hong Lim Street.



Fig 6.

Chew Boon Lay

Ancestral Origins: Quanzhou Prefecture, Fujian

Birth-Death: 1852-1933

Biography: Chew founded Ho Ho Biscuit Factory in Chin Swee Road. He owned large piece of land in Jurong, now Boon Lay housing estate. Chew is buried with his wife Ong Cheng Neo, and has an SMRT station named after him.



Fig 7.

Chew Joo Chiat

Ancestral Origin: ?

Birth-Death: ?-1926

Biography: Chew was a property owner in the Katong area. He owned a large piece of land in the East which was bought for coconut plantation. Joo Chiat Road is named after him.



Fig 8.

Gan Eng Seng

Ancestral Origin: Qingjiao, Fujian

Birth-Death: 1844-1899

Biography: Gan was a philanthropist and Chinese community leader. He founded Gan Eng Seng School and helped establish Thong Chai Medical Institution.



Fig 9.

Ong Sam Leong

Ancestral origin: Kinmen, Fujian

Birth-Death: 1857-1918

Biography: Ong dabbled in various businesses until hitting it big as supplier of mining workers to phosphate-rich Christmas Island. His two sons Boon Tat and Peng Hock owned the New World theme park in Jalan Besar, together with the Shaw brothers. Sam Leong Street is named after him and Boon Tat Street after his son. Ong enjoys the largest grave plot in Bukit Brown.



Fig 10.

F. Conclusion⁸

Bukit Brown is valuable to the nation-building project. Much has been made about how Singapore is becoming more hotel than home for a growing number of citizens. Ultimately, the struggle for Bukit Brown goes beyond saving a few graves or greenery. It is the struggle for the soul of Singapore. The decisions we make will determine the value we place on our collective identity, our multi-textured heritage and our sense of belonging. They are decisions we will have to explain to our children.

⁸ For the natural and environmental value of Bukit brown please see Nature Society's (Singapore) position paper. <http://www.nss.org.sg/documents/Nature%20Society's%20Position%20on%20Bukit%20Brown.pdf> (access date: 05 Jan 2012).

3. Singapore Heritage Society's Position on the Bukit Brown Road

On 30 May 2011 the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) announced that the Bukit Brown Municipal Cemetery had been earmarked for housing. Responding to outcry from members of the public, the URA, on 11 June 2011, argued that Bukit Brown was needed for future housing needs, and that many such "difficult trade-off decisions" had to be made in land-scarce Singapore. On 12 September 2011, the URA announced that a dual four-lane road was to be build through Bukit Brown in 2013.

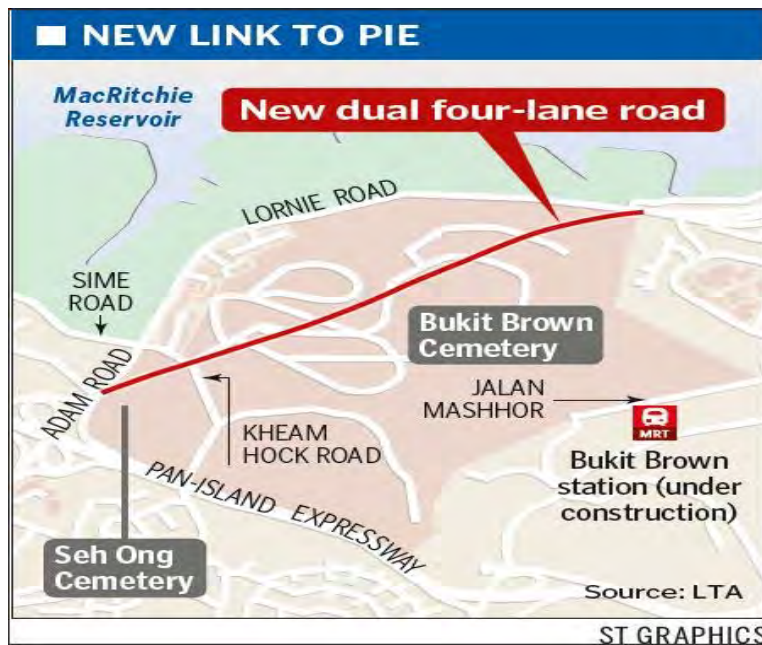


Fig 11. Source: Straits Times

A. A More Flexible Framework

SHS is deeply disappointed with the plans for the Bukit Brown road.

SHS believes that plans for the physical environment should not be cast in stone but, instead, be a flexible and incomplete urban framework that is able to adapt to unforeseen changes and accept new conceptual ideas. For example, like Bukit Brown, Pulau Ubin was also zoned for residential use in the 1991 Concept Plan but, unlike Bukit Brown, was later re-zoned as "open space and reserve land" in the 2001 Concept Plan.

B. More Sensitive Medium-term Plans

The Bukit Brown road is based on projected, but unconfirmed, needs 20 years or more in the future. While this may be prudent urban planning, it should not preclude the importance of more sensitive medium-term plans. Just as the current Lornie Road was expanded as a temporary measure, the Bukit Brown road could be planned with the immediate needs of the area in mind, with the possibility of future realignment in the long-term as and when such plans can be made with more certainty.

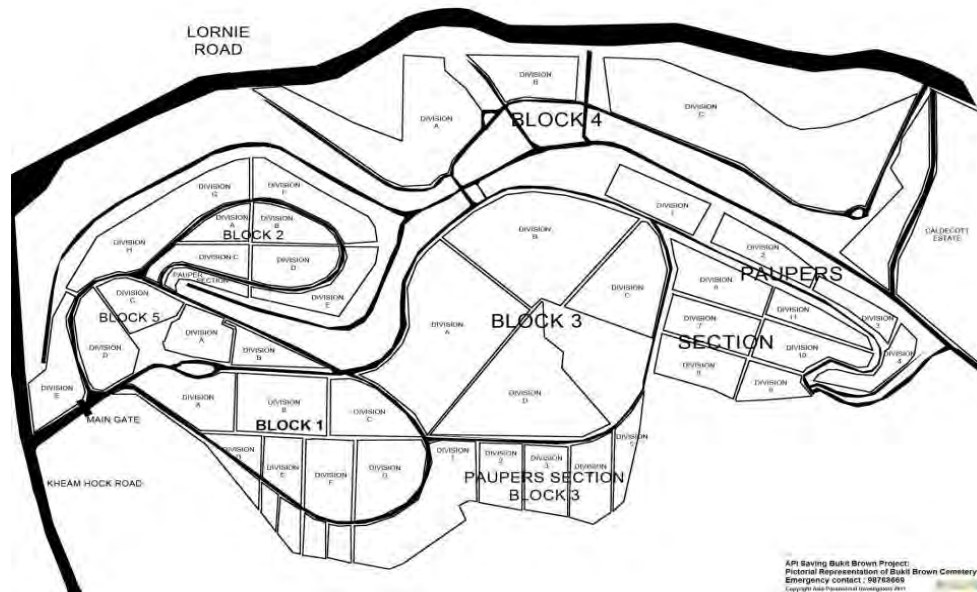


Fig 12. Plan of Bukit Brown cemetery. Source: Raymond Goh

C. Conclusion

The argument that a road which is not the shortest possible route through the cemetery is sub-optimal is a calculation based upon traffic needs only. Unlike standard road building projects, this one comes at the opportunity cost of a unique historical and valuable natural space in Singapore. The usual categories of analysis must be supplemented with these additional factors in order to decide the optimum holistic benefit that can be gained. Any new infrastructural developments should be designed in a way that is sensitive to the existing landscape and seek to minimise the hydrological impact (see Annex Two). Hence, if the Bukit Brown area is intended for use as a park for another 20 years, new roads should be designed to best serve the function of the areas as a single, open, recreational space free from the visual impact, air and noise pollution of large expressways .

4. Heritage as Standard Operating Procedure

SHS believes that heritage and heritage sites should be treated as “public goods”. These public goods have both tangible and intangible value. Tangible value includes the physical spaces they provide, the biodiversity they may hold, or their attraction as a tourist site. Intangible value includes the sense of belonging they promote amongst citizens to the land and their past, as well as their understanding of their ethnic, religious or communal identities.

Bukit Brown possesses both tangible and intangible value. As such, SHS believes due diligence should be carried out before policy decisions are made. Specifically, systematic studies on heritage should be standard operating procedure in all future government decisions.

A. Cost-benefit Analysis

Cost-benefit analyses (CBA) concerning heritage and environment are now commonplace. Although CBA has its critics, it is generally accepted that a well executed CBA can be a useful guide in policymaking. A good CBA will ask questions such as “what policy or project is being evaluated?” and “what are the alternatives?”, as well as determining if the present value of benefits exceed the present value of cost.⁹ Also important to consider is whose cost and benefits are to be counted?

CBA of heritage allows authorities to, firstly, systematically seek and assess the cost and benefits of listing heritage sites for conservation because they are likely to provide a net benefit to the community. Secondly, it better informs the debate over heritage loss and conservation. Thirdly, it promotes transparency and comparability in the decision-making process.

CBA also encourages the government and citizens to reveal the limits they place on intangible heritage benefits.¹⁰ For example, if the financial cost of keeping Bukit Brown works out to be \$1 per citizen, then it would be reasonable to assume that citizens would value intangible heritage at more than \$1 per person, hence presenting a strong case for keeping Bukit Brown. However, if the cost works up to be \$1000 per citizen or more, the government and citizens will have to ask themselves how much is intangible heritage worth?

⁹ Pearce, D.; Atkinson, G.; and Maurato, S. 2006. *Cost-benefit Analysis and the Environment: Recent Developments*. OECD

¹⁰ Bogaards, R. 2008. “Cost Benefit Analysis and Historic Heritage Regulation”. Working Paper 2008-03. Department of Finance and Deregulation, Australia. See also Byron, N. 2006. “Conservation of Australian Historic Heritage Places: Investing in Regional Assets”. Unpublished paper.

B. Environmental Impact Assessment¹¹

Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) are systematic evaluations of the positive or negative impact that a proposed project may have on the environment. EIAs enable authorities and stakeholders to measure the natural, social and economic bearing a project may have on the environment. Like CBAs, EIAs help inform and educate the decision-making process.

EIAs in Singapore are not uncommon. They have been conducted for land reclamation projects as well as development projects on Sentosa. The biodiversity in Bukit Brown similarly warrants an EIA. Of the 85 species of birds that have been recorded there, two are deemed 'vulnerable', six are 'endangered', and three are 'critically endangered'. Bukit Brown has also been designated a Tree Conservation Area by the National Parks Board under the Parks and Trees Act. Virtual technologies and documentation cannot replace the loss of ecology.

C. Transparency: Best Practices Elsewhere

One of the perennial concerns over government decisions is that they are non-transparent. Decision processes over heritage matters are opaque partly because of perceived sensitivities embedded in certain issues, and partly because of the fear that transparency will result in a slower, more cumbersome bureaucratic process. While such concerns are not without justification, it must be acknowledged that other countries provide positive examples for emulation.

In Hong Kong, for example, potential monuments or heritage sites under consideration are publicly listed and the Antiquities Board's decisions and meeting minutes are published.¹² The United Kingdom has a comprehensive mechanism which brings national and local authorities, NGOs and other charitable organisations together for a collective decision-making process. Singapore should study these examples and adapt them for the local context.

D. Conclusion

Heritage and heritage sites should not be seen as luxuries but as public goods. As such, due diligence in the form of systematic studies on heritage and the impact of its loss should be carried out prior to any decision. Such studies could be in the form of CBAs and EIAs. It is also important to make heritage decision process more transparent, and this can be done by studying best practices elsewhere.

¹¹ See Annex Two: Bukit Brown: A Hydrological Perspective

¹² http://www.lcsd.gov.hk/CE/Museum/Monument/form/AAB155_minutes_e.pdf (accessed 10 Dec 2011)

5. The Consultation Process

The consultation process is vital to the nation-building project. Government consultation of relevant stakeholders and citizens over national and policy issues serves to foster a sense of ownership and belonging to the nation. The Bukit Brown issue presents an excellent opportunity for government and civil society to engage in the exchange of ideas, concerns and interests.

A. Genuine Consultation

Genuine consultation must be initiated upstream in the decision-making process. Genuine consultation entails the sincere expression of government and civil society interests, as well as the honest deliberation of alternatives and options *before* government decisions are made. Authorities must approach such consultation exercises without prejudice and be open to changing their positions on issues. The consultation process serves to inform and educate the subsequent act of decision-making.

B. The Reality of the Bukit Brown Consultation Process

Unfortunately, such consultation processes have, in reality, been used by the government for two purposes – to inform civil society and relevant stakeholders of the rationale behind government decisions and/or to gather feedback in order to fine-tune such decisions before they are announced to the public. The decision to build the road through Bukit Brown, for example, was relayed privately to a senior member of SHS by URA and the Land Transport Authority (LTA) on 29 August 2011, just two weeks before the authorities publicly announced the decision on 12 September 2011.

What followed was a series of meetings between the URA, LTA and SHS. The primary purpose of these meetings was for the authorities to explain the need for the road, URA's efforts at conserving old buildings, to manage public opinion, and to tap on SHS's network in order to organise the documentation of the 5000 graves that would be exhumed.

The government has acknowledged that the consultation exercise could be improved.¹³

¹³ Minister of State for National Development Tan Chuan-Jin was quoted in the press as saying "We could have done better, a bit more of these conversations and briefings when we announced some of these things, maybe get more stakeholders, and earlier". (*Straits Times*. 6 November 2011. "Bukit Brown: Room for some flexibility, says Tan Chuan-Jin". By Yen Feng).

C. Decisions made without Consultation

Although Bukit Brown was zoned for residential use in the 1991 Concept Plan, it must be recognised that Concept Plans only serve as a guide. Furthermore Bukit Brown was still designated as a cemetery in the Masterplan 2008. If present conditions make some developments unsuitable, they should be reconsidered. Unfortunately, three decisions have been made without consultation.

1. The zoning of Bukit Brown for residential purposes in the 1991 Concept Plan was executed without consultation with heritage or environmental experts.
2. The decision to build the road through Bukit Brown was not made in consultation with these experts.
3. The road will be built regardless of heritage or environmental concerns.



Fig. 13. Documentation markers of graves. Source: Victor Yue

D. The Value of Consultation Process

URA is currently reviewing its long term plans in the Concept Plan Review: 2011. This is an excellent opportunity to review its stance on heritage and land-use.

The benefits of genuine consultation process go beyond nurturing a sense of national ownership and belonging. If such processes are carried out with sincerity and an open mind, there are several benefits for the government.

Political value: The government will be able to gauge public opinion on issues that are rarely aired. For example, public opinion on unpopular issues such as the high cost of living, immigrant policies, and the widening wage gap is well known and documented. However, public opinion on heritage issues is not only less well known but also shifts with time. Singaporeans will grow more sensitive to heritage loss as the nation matures. We will become more protective of our past and local identities. Underestimating strong public sentiments over heritage issues may have a political cost. A consultation process will help the government anticipate such strong sentiments.¹⁴

Knowledge value: All decisions are based on specific sets of knowledge. The LTA's Bukit Brown road decision is based on technical knowledge of traffic flow, engineering feasibility and economic cost. Such decision-making processes have a tendency to over-rely on such knowledge to the exclusion of others. A genuine consultation process would be an inclusive one. It would bring in other sets of knowledge such as data from an Environmental Impact Assessment exercise that would comprise natural, social and economic aspects. It would also bring in experts on heritage to contextualise the importance of certain sites and areas. This inclusion of different knowledge would result in a more holistic, even creative, solution to national needs.

Cost value: Finally, an inclusive consultation process will also ensure that financial costs are limited. Exclusive decision-making processes may result in the need to make costly U-turns or damage control which could have been avoided if an inclusive consultation process had taken place. For example, we have lost the train turntables at the Tanjong Pagar railway station for good. This could have been avoided if heritage experts had been consulted on the value of these artefacts.

E. Conclusion

Genuine consultation between government and civil society is not common. In reality such "consultation" exercises are opportunities for the authorities to explain their rationale or to fine-tune decisions which have already been made. This is unfortunate because genuine consultation processes have political, knowledge and cost value.

¹⁴ In March 2010 then Minister for Education, Ng Eng Hen, suggested that the weightage of mother-tongue language examinations in the Primary School Leaving Examination might be reduced in order to benefit students who were weak in their mother-tongue. This sparked a robust defense of the current weightage of the mother-tongue language among many Mandarin-speaking Singaporeans, culminating in a major petition signing event at the Speakers Corner. The government subsequently clarified that there were no plans to reduce the weightage. Public unhappiness and alarm would have been avoided if prior consultation had taken place.

6. Looking Forward: Recommendations for Bukit Brown

SHS would like to put forth three recommendations for the preservation of Bukit Brown.

A. Gazette Bukit Brown as a Heritage Site

As it stands, the National Heritage Board and the Preservation of Monuments Board do not support the gazetting of cemeteries. The upkeep and maintenance of cemeteries are left to the families of the deceased. Without being gazetted, Bukit Brown enjoys no legal protection as a heritage site, and its fate hangs in the balance. SHS believes that in special cases such as Bukit Brown, the state must show leadership and political will.

If it is not possible to gazette Bukit Brown in its entirety, large swathes of the cemetery can be designated for legal protection. The decision as to which portions should be gazetted can be made with the support of research and information gleaned from SHS's second recommendation – full documentation of Bukit Brown.



Fig 15. Touring Bukit Brown. Source: Terence Chong

B. Full Documentation of Bukit Brown Cemetery

Currently, only 5000 graves will be documented. SHS believes that thorough grave documentation should be an essential information-gathering exercise conducted *prior* to any decision-making, rather than merely a record of tombs that have already been slated for removal.

Looking forward, the rest of the 95 per cent of Bukit Brown has a 20-30 year window period before residential development plans are realised. SHS recommends the documentation of the rest of the 95 per cent of Bukit Brown. There is an untold wealth of heritage out there, and documentation is but the first step to heritage conservation. On this count, SHS urges the authorities to invest funds and institutional support for this bigger documentation project.



Fig 14. Carvings at the Ong Sam Leong tomb.
Source: Terence Chong

C. Turn Bukit Brown into a Heritage Park

Nevertheless, while documentation is necessary, it is not sufficient. Heritage only comes alive in the actual use of heritage sites. Singaporeans, especially the young, will better appreciate the importance of documentation and educational efforts when they directly experience physical space. Bukit Brown should be converted into a public park – cf. Pepys Hill and Fort Canning. A “Bukit Brown Heritage Park” would have the double benefit of preserving heritage and giving Singaporeans a green and natural space. Turning a cemetery into a public park is a good use of space in land-scarce Singapore as it satisfies the hunger for more open and recreational spaces.

D. Conclusion

These three recommendations are not exhaustive but mere starting points for the preservation of Bukit Brown. In order to best facilitate these projects, SHS recommends that the government studies the best practices of heritage parks and cemeteries around the world including Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge and Watertown, Massachusetts, and the Saints Innocents Cemetery in Paris.

Annex One

Bukit Brown as Contested Space

By Terence Chong¹⁵

Most of us know Bukit Brown Municipal Cemetery because it has been in the news lately. The Urban Redevelopment Authority's (URA) announcement in September 2011 that a road will cut through Bukit Brown to ease the traffic congestion along Lornie Road was the first occasion many Singaporeans had heard of the cemetery. This is not surprising since the cemetery was closed in 1973. For those who have heard of it, it is familiar either as a space for filial piety where family members return to maintain the tombstones of their ancestors, or as a space of quiet leisure where the lush greenery and diverse fauna have transformed it into a haven for joggers and dog walkers.

Bukit Brown, however, has had a more complex history that is tied to the politics of the land. From its legal status as the private property of George Henry Brown, a ship owner who arrived in Singapore from Calcutta in the 1840s, it has been a historically contested space. It has been fought over by different groups and institutions and, in the process, has laid bare the perennial problem of land scarcity, the politics of clan associations, Chinese-colonial tensions, as well as the modern dilemma of balancing heritage with urban development in both colonial and postcolonial Singapore.

An Essential Space

These contestations began when Bukit Brown was seen as an essential space. By the turn of the 20th century the explosion of the Chinese population on the island had resulted in a pressing shortage of burial grounds for the broader community. To be sure, there were adequate burial grounds dedicated to different clans and smaller religious groups such as the Christians but the absence of a sizeable municipal cemetery for the thousands of ordinary Chinese who could not afford expensive plots was increasingly problematic. To make matters more urgent, the disused Cantonese public burial ground in Tanjong Pagar had been acquired by the government in 1907-08 to provide filling material for the Telok Ayer Reclamation Scheme. The Christian Cemetery at Bukit Timah was closed in 1907, followed by the opening of the Bidadari Christian Cemetery in 1908 and the Muslim Cemetery in the Bidadari estate in 1910. The mid-1920s also saw 70 acres of land in Tiong Baru acquired by the Singapore Improvement Trust, resulting in the removal of over 280 huts, 2000 squatters as well as graves.

¹⁵ Sociologist and Senior Fellow, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies

This space crunch was also exacerbated by religious and cultural conflict. “Although available land could be secured at Bidadari for a Chinese cemetery, the Municipal Commissioners rejected this option as it was felt that the burial customs of the Chinese were incompatible with the general ambience of a site already consecrated to the Christian dead. As the Municipal President explained, since the burial customs of the Chinese were “characterised by noise” and the Christians “by silence”, there might be clashing and inconvenience should burials be taking place in both places at the same time”.¹⁶

The Municipal Commissioners had also considered the Hokkien cemetery near the Keppel Harbour golf links which spanned 150 acres and the cemetery at Holland Road district, both of which were rejected for cost and suitability reasons. Bukit Brown emerged as the most suitable in terms of value for money as well as land size and was first publicly mooted as a possible option at the Municipal Commissioners meeting in October 1917 (*Malaya Tribune*, 27 October 1917). By this time Bukit Brown was in the hands of the Hokkien Huay Kuan. It had been bought over by Ong Kew Ho, Ong Ewe Hai, and Ong Chong Chew in the mid-1800s and was administered by the She Ong Kongsu.

An Exclusive Space

Not surprisingly, the She Ong Kongsu was against the idea of selling Bukit Brown. The Commissioners first wrote to Tan Boo Liat, the great grandson of Tan Tock Seng, then head of the Hokkien Huay Kuan, to broach the idea after a visit to the cemetery. After a slight delay, Tan replied saying that the kongsu considered the Holland Road cemetery preferable for municipal needs. The Commissioners wrote back noting that Bukit Brown made more sense “to the ordinary man, and on the face of it, the Bukit Brown site was very much more suitable, seeing that a portion of it was already used as a burial ground and had been chosen before the Holland Road site” (*Singapore Free Press*, 29 December 1917). There was no answer from the kongsu.

The reluctance to sell stemmed from two main reasons. The first was financial. The surrender of the cemetery to the government meant that the kongsu no longer benefited from the sale of individual plots. It also made the sale of titles and transfer of trusteeships complicated.¹⁷ The second was the loss of exclusivity. “There was sufficient land to last the She Ong Kongsu for 200 years, and they preferred to reserve it to themselves rather than sell it and make use of it for other kongsus or other races of Chinese who were short of burial grounds” (*Singapore Free Press*, 29 December 1917). A year after the Municipal Commission

¹⁶ Yeoh, Brenda. 1996. *Contesting Space: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment in Colonial Singapore*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 301.

¹⁷ Yeoh, Brenda. 1991. “The Control of “Sacred” Space: Conflicts over the Chinese Burial Grounds in Colonial Singapore, 1880-1930”. In *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 22(2): 282-311

first wrote to the kongsi, Tan Kheam Hock raised the matter again and was told that the owners of Bukit Brown had been petitioning the government against the sale but the government would acquire the land anyway (*Singapore Free Press*, 26 October 1918). Bukit Brown was finally acquired by the government in 1919. Ironically, one of the first few acts in preparation for the newly purchased municipal cemetery was to exhume some graves in order to pave a road into Bukit Brown (*Malaya Tribune*, 25 June 1921). Bukit Brown cemetery was opened to the Chinese public on 1 January 1922.

On a more fundamental level, the colonisation of an ethnic 'sacred' space was also a challenge to ethnic identity. The compulsory acquisition of Bukit Brown was seen as the prying open of a private space layered with social ties and symbolic networks found in clan associations which fostered a strong sense of ethnic belonging. By opening it up to the public, the accompanying notions of violation and subordination only highlighted the loss of the kongsi's power, influence and prestige.

Such exclusivity was, nevertheless, a constructed one. Kongsis were originally made up of coolies and the lower classes and, together with secret societies, served to provide solidarity and protection to the non-elite in the community. Over time with the boom in the opium trade and other business, these kongsis flourished and were "transformed from egalitarian brotherhood" into collectives "run by the wealthy and the powerful to oppress the workers".¹⁸ The sale of Bukit Brown to the colonial government for municipal needs may thus be seen as a return to the original, more egalitarian objectives, of the kongsi.

A Regulated Space

Bukit Brown, now under the colonial government, was transformed from an exclusive to an inclusive space serving the broader Chinese population. The cemetery was divided into 'general' and 'pauper' sections. This inclusivity, by no means, spelt an end to the contestations. The cemetery's public role meant that it had to be a highly regulated space in order to accommodate the sudden influx of graves. Strict regulations over the size and layout of the plots were introduced to maximise space. The cemetery's by-laws were published in 1921 (*Malaya Tribune*, 30 August 1921). Many in the Chinese community saw this as an unnecessary restriction over their burial practices and customs. There were numerous complaints, for example, over the limited size of burial plots (*Malaya Tribune*, 29 August 1923).

There was also unhappiness over the uneven application of these regulations. Although each grave was assigned a plot, there were complaints that some graves occupied two or more plots and that the authorities had been lax in enforcing regulations. These graves

¹⁸ Trocki, Carl. 2006. *Singapore: Wealth, Power and the Culture of Control*. New York: Routledge, p. 4

invariably belonged to wealthy individuals, thus raising class concerns. Given the running battles between the Chinese community and the colonial government over the cemetery, one earlier newspaper report noted presciently that “Bukit Brown persists in getting mention at every meeting; some of these cemeteries will be a prolific source of controversy later on” (*Malaya Tribune*, 28 June 1921). A year later, in 1922, upon deliberation with the Chinese Advisory Board, the plot sizes were increased to 20 by 10 feet in the general division and 10 by 5 feet in the paupers’ division.

The acquisition and regulation of Bukit Brown should be seen in the broader politics of power and control exhibited by the colonial government. Under the colonial regime and Western notions of rationality, large tracts of land, especially in land-scarce Singapore, did not make any sense. The impetus to maximise limited space and optimise resources to facilitate economic and material growth was central to colonial development, alongside law and order, and health concerns. The colonial regime exhibited its power and control in the way it acquired land, and resettled communities and reshaped economic activities. Nevertheless, as with all colonisations of space, it was never a complete one. Bukit Brown continued to be referred to by locals as *Kopi Sua*.

A Space for Cultural Contestation

The nub of the conflict between the Chinese community and the colonial authorities was cultural difference. Both had different priorities over the physical placement of graves. For the Chinese, the location and position of graves were believed to be intertwined with the fortunes of the living. The links between this world and the afterlife were maintained by rituals, altar sacrifices, and ancestor worship, where communication between the living and the dead could continue. This meant that higher, more scenic and spacious ground was preferred because of the belief that their ancestors would appreciate this in their afterlife, and it also offered descendents an opportunity to perform filial piety. Western European cemeteries, on the other hand, were quieter and more tranquil, serving as a space for reflection and less for the noisy performance of rituals. In addition to this, the colonial government’s primary concern was the maximisation of this municipal space.

It is argued that the local Chinese resisted the (over)regulation of this space with fengshui. Fengshui was used as a “strategic discourse in the encounter between the colonial authorities and the Chinese community” such that it “insisted on the ‘sacred’ nature of the burial grounds and “mystified’ landscape” and “in doing so, challenged Western conceptions of urban development and planning priorities”.¹⁹ And because such notions of sacredness and mystification were not open to Western logic and reasoning, the authorities found it

¹⁹ Yeoh, 1996:303

difficult to enforce regulations over geomantic practices. And the more such practices persisted, the greater the informal claim the Chinese had over the burial ground.

Conclusion

Such historic examples hold instructive lessons for today. While the URA justifies its decision to build the road with sequential logic and empirical evidence such as projected population growth and traffic congestion, it remains acquiescent over heritage and environmental concerns because the latter two are impervious to such logic and evidence. It is thus on these grounds that ordinary Singaporeans and civil society should persist in claiming Bukit Brown for their own by including the space in their daily rituals like jogging, strolling, sketching or learning about their past.

Annex Two

Bukit Brown: A Hydrological Perspective

By Lim Han She²⁰

The topography of the Bukit Brown area consists of gentle rolling hills, with a maximum elevation of approximately 46 metres above sea level, that are currently covered by relatively mature vegetation. Construction of a road across this undulating landscape will first of all result in severe erosion of soils which will be carried rapidly by surface runoff down the gentle slopes into the surrounding drains and, ultimately, the Kallang River which drains into the Marina Bay Reservoir – even if soil protection measures are installed by the developers. Second, increased surface runoff from the removal of vegetation will place a severe strain on the drainage systems around the Thomson Road area, which are already prone to flooding during intense rainfall as seen in the recent past (floods in 2006 and 2011).

From a hydrological perspective, and given the flooding just experienced in 2011, the Bukit Brown cemetery area and its surrounds should be left covered with vegetation for two reasons. First the vegetation will intercept intense tropical rainfall and the soils will absorb rainfall, which will then recharge the reservoirs over time. Second, these processes prevent rainfall from becoming surface runoff over concrete and asphalt road surfaces, which will drain rapidly into drainage systems and cause floods if the drainage systems are clogged or are unable to cope with the increased runoff.

Further development around the Bukit Brown area for housing will magnify the impacts described above and result in serious implications for hydrological processes related to catchment recharge for our reservoirs and the increasing problem of flooding faced in Singapore.

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Acknowledgements



Fig 16. Grassroots efforts to save Bukit Brown. Source: Terence Chong

Paper prepared by Terence Chong.

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Thanks to Dahlia Shamsuddin, Kwa Chong Guan, Tan Wee Cheng and Kevin Tan for comments and suggestions.