



# Diaspora after Death:

## A Visual Essay of Bukit Brown Cemetery in Singapore

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### Abstract

This visual essay is a record of the social and cultural life of Bukit Brown Cemetery, where the deceased are considered diasporic subjects, even after physical death. This continuing journey was occasioned by the exhumation of about 4,000 graves to make way for an eight-lane highway, which also led to the documentation project on which the materials for this essay are based. The photographs in this essay depict three major phases related to the diasporic afterlife. First, *Seasons of Remembrance* considers the annual rituals of *Qing Ming* and the Hungry Ghost Festival, where the living visit the cemetery to commemorate the dead. Two, *Moving House* looks at the process of exhumation and displacement, through the lens of both private and state-funded exhumations. Finally, *Resettling* charts the different ways in which an individual's diasporic journey continues, where the process of re-interment could lead to other parts of Singapore and even beyond.

**Keywords:** Singapore, Bukit Brown Cemetery, Visual Sociology, Death rituals, Chinese diaspora

### Introduction

Bukit Brown Cemetery is one of the largest Chinese cemeteries outside of China and the first Chinese municipal cemetery to be established during Singapore's colonial era (Hui, 2012). Opened in 1922 from cemetery land acquired from the *Seh Ong* clan association,

Bukit Brown quickly became the site of choice for Chinese migrants in Singapore. By 1929, it housed 40 percent of all burials within municipal boundaries (Yeoh, 1996). It was a heterogeneous space, one that housed Chinese migrants from diverse regions and socio-economic backgrounds. As such, Bukit Brown became the final resting place for business magnates, political dissidents, civil servants and individuals spanning the social breadth of Singapore's Chinese migrant community.

Closed to new burials in 1973, the cemetery lay fallow for more than 25 years before it was slated for redevelopment in the Singapore state's urban masterplan.<sup>1</sup> The first phase of this masterplan included the building of a new road that bisected the cemetery in order to broaden the city-state's outer ring road (Bukit Brown is placed almost directly in the centre of Singapore). To build this road, almost 4,000 graves had to be exhumed, including several that were purported to be of historical and aesthetic significance.

Until this plan was announced in 2011, Bukit Brown could easily be seen as a "forgotten place". With its closure in the 1970s, it had escaped Singapore's relentless urbanisation process. Despite being 173 acres in size, it has no street or artificial lighting, comprises of single-lane roads, and has reverted to dense tropical vegetation owing to its geographical position in Singapore's rainfall catchment area. As a result, Bukit Brown is also an urban oddity, a "rural" space out of sync with Singapore's hyper-modern global-city persona (Sassen-Koob, 1990).

However, despite society's apparent amnesia, redevelopment plans for Bukit Brown sparked considerable consternation from certain segments of Singaporean society. In recent years there has been an increased interest in issues of heritage, as well as a wave of nostalgia for the Singapore of the 70s, 80s and 90s, have led to, amongst other things, a demand for nostalgic items and spaces.

As a response to these concerns, the Urban Redevelopment Authority, together with the Land Transport Authority (both government bodies) commissioned the documentation of the affected graves of Bukit Brown. Led by anthropologist Hui Yew-Foong, the project encompassed both a literal and interpretive documentation of the artefacts, activities and actors that make up Bukit Brown. Starting in 2011, the project team recorded a cultural inventory (Collier & Collier, 1986), beginning with the affected graves, carrying on to major rituals and festivals that took place in the cemetery throughout the year, and ending with the processes and narratives of exhumation and reinternment.

This visual essay is a record of the social and cultural life of Bukit Brown Cemetery. Here, we wish to show that the deceased continue to be diasporic subjects, even after physical death. Diaspora is often cast in a collective sense of transnational social, cultural and physical movements (Safran, 1991), with scholars focussing on a wide variety of issues, including, but not limited to, redemption (Bhaba, 1990), integration (Tuan, 1998) and cultural change (Gilroy 1991). But less considered are the nuances of quotidian everyday life (Amit, 2002), how diasporic subjects are constituted beyond death, as even studies that have considered death and diaspora tend to remove the deceased as active agents (Mbiba, 2010).

However, our fieldwork indicates that the deceased continue to be constituted as diasporic subjects through the discursive actions of the living and the materiality of their graves. Two frameworks are useful here – the first is the concept of secondspace (Soja, 1996), an imagined space that is often left to the realm of the creative imagination, but made in everyday life, and sometimes contests the planned first-spaces of architects and planners. The cemetery as a

secondspace can also be seen as a spiritual space, the space in which the living and the dead continue to interact. In the case of Bukit Brown cemetery, adherents to Chinese religion believe in the continued existence and influence of the deceased in the realm of the living. Their own identity-making is textured by these beliefs, shown through their acts of ancestor worship and honouring (Kuo, 1987). In this way, Bukit Brown is more than just a cultural landscape, but a concrete spiritual space where the dead have a presence through the actions of the living.

The second framework is the concept of ethnic comportment and aesthetic markers, and how material objects help in the performance of an individual's ethnic identity (Heng, 2015; Knowles, 2003). Whilst aesthetic markers are often part of the body, like clothes or jewellery, they can also have an architectural manifestation, giving the *look* of ethnic occupation (Soja, 1996). The style of graves and the kinds of offerings reflect cultural preferences and ethnic comportment, creating echoes of diasporic connections across nation-states through the transmission of cultural forms (Gilroy, 1991; Wang, 1991).

The photographs in this essay are arranged around three major phases related to the diasporic afterlife. First, *Seasons of Remembrance* considers the annual rituals of *Qing Ming* and the Hungry Ghost Festival, where the living visit the cemetery to commemorate the dead. It also introduces the landscapes of Bukit Brown and the materiality of a diasporic deathscape in Southeast Asia. Second, *Moving House* looks at the process of exhumation and displacement through the lens of both private and state-funded exhumations. Rituals range from simple to elaborate, but all involve some level of engagement with the interred. Finally, *Resettling* charts the different ways in which an individual's diasporic journey continues, where the process of re-interment could lead to other parts of Singapore or even beyond.

## Seasons of Remembrance

Two annual month-long festivals commonly bring Bukit Brown (and other Chinese cemeteries) to life. The first is *Qing Ming* Festival, where the living per-



Figure 1.



Figure 3.

form the duty of “sweeping the tomb” of the dead. Occurring on the 15th day of the Spring equinox, it is an opportunity for families to remember their departed kinsmen by visiting and cleaning their graves, while at the same time making food and paper offerings. Beyond being part of the process of remembering the departed, *Qing Ming* acts as an occasion for enacting the collective identity of families, where the deceased play pivotal roles. Indeed, the deceased in-



Figure 2.



Figure 4.

teract with the living in more ways than one. One common way is through *jiaobei* ( ), or *pua puay* (in the Hokkien dialect), where two kidney-shaped divining blocks are strewn onto the ground as a way of communicating with the spirit world. Another way is through dreams, where the deceased can convey to the living more elaborate messages.

**Figures 1 and 2:** Having been closed to new burials since the 1970s, Bukit Brown has been reclaimed



by nature. The once barren cemetery land is now covered with verdant tropical foliage. The sprawling unruliness of nature, combined with the smoke from burning paper offerings, add to the mystical aura of this spiritual space.

**Figures 3 and 4:** Various offerings are made to ancestors, including items that their descendants think they would favour, such as paper offerings in the form of cigarette packs, cars, playing cards and the latest tech gadgets. Serene (in black) is the 5th generation descendent of Tan Quee Lan, a business pioneer of 19th century Singapore. She rediscovered the graves of her ancestors, partly through what she believed to be messages conveyed to her sister through dreams. In Serene's own words:

I thought of the dream my sister had after we found my great grandparents, Mr. & Mrs. Tan Chew Kim's graves many years earlier. In her dream she was also standing facing a group of shadowy figures with a female figure all alone at their side calling out to my sister for help. One of the shadowy figures put up his hand and used his open palm to show my sister the number "5"...

I went back again to my great great grandmother, Mrs. Tan Quee Lan to share my news and ask her for advice on what to do next. About a week later, a Catherine Lim from the Bukit Brown Facebook group contacted me, saying that someone related to Tan Quee Lan was looking for the cluster and if I could meet up with this person and show him the graves.

Tan (2012)

This number eventually proved to be the same as the number of graves found in the Tan Quee Lan family cluster in Bukit Brown.

**Figure 5:** Families often make multiple stops in their journey to honour their ancestors during *Qing Ming*. Mr. Ang and his family have visited Bukit Brown where the grave was, after which they went on to the temple where the ancestral tablet was kept. Here, Mr Ang throws down the *jiaobei* to determine if his ancestor has had his fill of the offered food.

**Figures 6a and 6b:** From day to night, Bukit Brown transforms again during the Hungry Ghost Festival. Held during the Seventh (7th) Lunar Month, the Hungry Ghost Festival heralds the arrival of spirits

from the netherworld, including those of one's ancestors, who are allowed to roam for a month in the world of the living. Many believe that cemeteries are the doorway through which these spirits come into the world, and see it as their duty to make offerings to appease them.

**Figure 7:** Taoist spirit mediums, or *Tang-ki* (as they are commonly known in Hokkien), also regularly come to Bukit Brown to honour and appease the dead. In Singapore, a *Tang-ki* is often the spiritual leader of either a temple or a *Sin Tua*, a spirit altar, which is a social collective of Taoist spiritualist devotees. The *Tang-ki* enters into trance so that he may channel the spirits of Taoist deities and manifests them physically, dispensing advice, blessings and instructions. The *Tang-ki* pictured here is channelling *Li Ya Pek*, or Second (2nd) Uncle, an enforcer of the Taoist netherworld.

**Figure 8:** Apart from Qing Ming and the Hungry Ghost Festival, various groups also retain a connection with Bukit Brown. In November, one such group celebrates *Han Yi Jie*, the winter clothing festival, at the cemetery by burning offerings of paper winter clothing to warm the deceased upon the advent of winter. The photograph shows a temple group burning a two-storey paper terrace house custom-made to resettle those whose graves were affected by the road project.

## Moving House

In Singapore, there is typically no such thing as a final resting place. Cemeteries are constantly re-acquired by the state for other uses, including housing estates, train depots, shopping malls and roads. With the introduction of the road through Bukit Brown, the remains of those affected are exhumed, sometimes accompanied by religious rituals. Taoist exhumations are commonly performed at night so that the remains of the dead, which is of the *yin* element, can avoid the sun, which is of the *yang* element.

Exhumation rituals often involve a Taoist priest, who will convey to the dead that they will be moved to a new location. At each stage of the exhumation, the deceased is treated as present – a person who is



Figure 5.



Figure 6a.



Figure 6b.



Figure 7.



Figure 8.

about to continue on his or her journey.

**Figure 9:** An exhumation in process. A tarpaulin canvas is stretched over the grave, a shield against both physical and spiritual impediments. The grave is illuminated by the descendant's car headlights. With other graves deeper inside Bukit Brown, gravediggers and researchers work by torch and candlelight.

**Figure 10:** Gravediggers preparing for a private exhumation. Many gravediggers are also tomb keepers, former residents of *kampongs* (villages) that used to be located in the vicinity of Bukit Brown. Graves are exhumed manually with a *changkul* - a combination of a spade and a hovel. Although strenuous and taking up to 6 hours, we have met gravediggers who have been in the business for 60 years.

**Figures 11a and 11b:** A Taoist priest conducts a pre-exhumation ritual for the deceased, surrounded by descendants who have travelled from China to retrieve the remains of their grandfather. In 1943, Mr Huang, a migrant, died at the age of 31 in Singapore during the Japanese Occupation. He was survived by a wife and two sons who had been left in China. The descendants of these sons have come to bring the remains of the deceased back to China to be reunited with his wife at the family tomb. Before the grave is symbolically "broken", the family is instructed by the priest to turn their backs to the grave to avoid negative consequences from the ritual.

**Figure 12:** A gravedigger's work-in-progress. Choosing to ignore contemporary health and safety regulations, gravediggers work very much in the same way as they had for 50 years, albeit with the introduction of light-emitting diode (LED) head-torches. The *changkul* is first used to measure the approximate position of the casket from the grave's headstone, after which a rectangular trench about four to six (4 to 6) feet long is dug. Not all first-digs are successful – the casket sometimes shifts with the earth, or the casket may have been buried off-centre to deter grave robbers. Whichever is the case, the process takes anywhere from three to six (3 to 6) hours.

**Figure 13:** Mr Chee carries the exhumed remains of his father in a white plastic bag, tied and tagged for cremation, as is his duty as the eldest male descendent in the family. The tombstone in the background is

more recent, showing a photograph of the deceased, a common practice amongst the Chinese in Singapore. Regardless of the time of day, an umbrella is held over the remains as a form of protection from the elements.

## Resettling

In the final phase of the journey, the deceased's remains are cremated and placed in an urn before reinterment. These remains are more often than not reinterred at a public columbarium, paid for by the State. Occasionally, descendants will choose to repatriate the remains to another country (as was the case of Mr Huang in Figure 10) or disperse the remains at sea. Remains exhumed by the state and unclaimed for more than three (3) years are scattered at sea. Here, the diasporic trajectories of the dead are determined by where and how the living chooses to remember them.

**Figures 14 and Figure 15:** The Wee family gathered near the north-east of Singapore to bid farewell to their ancestor. Electing to disperse his remains at sea rather than keep it in a columbarium, they saw it as a way for his spirit to return to China. The sea is a common diasporic metaphor for Chinese Singaporeans, since it was the medium by which many first-generation migrants arrived in the South Seas.

**Figure 16:** Columbariums in Singapore echo the high-rise and high-density public housing that its living inhabits. The Ong family commemorates the first *Qing Ming* after the exhumation of their ancestor from Bukit Brown. This columbarium belongs to a *Huay Kuan*, a clan association commonly set up by early migrants of the same surname or regional origins in China as a form of mutual-help organisation in Singapore.

**Figure 17:** Even after several generations, the dead still transcends geographical and nation-state boundaries. The remains of Madam Chua, whose grave dates back to the 19th century, are brought to the family temple in neighbouring Malaysia, reuniting her with her kin after more than a century. For her and many others, the diasporic journey continues.





Figure 9.



Figure 10.



Figure 11a.



Figure 11b.



Figure 12.



Figure 13.



Figure 14.

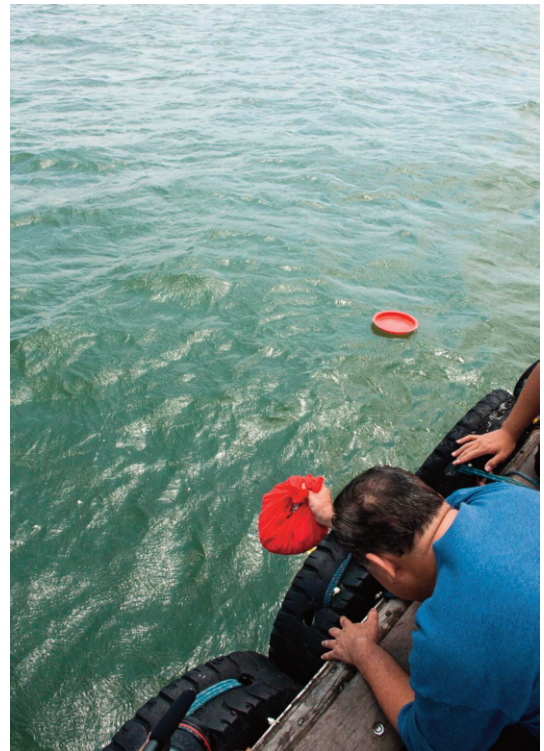


Figure 15.



Figure 16.



Figure 17.



## Endnote

<sup>i</sup> <https://www.ura.gov.sg/uol/media-room/news/2013/aug/pr13-48.aspx>, Accessed on 2nd July 2015

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