

More on Singapore's Bukit Brown

The Opinion



There is pressure world-wide concerning how societies, and nation states more specifically, manage their dead. On the one hand, there is the practical consideration of body disposal at the time of death. On the other, there are social and cultural considerations that link to beliefs and identities and which are important for social stability and cultural sustainability within and across communities. Such value systems are under threat because of the infrastructural and spatial needs of growing populations, particularly in urban spaces.

Ian Leonard Cook

SINGAPORE IS NO EXCEPTION, and neither is Sydney where I live. On ABC (Australian Broadcasting Commission) radio, 22 December 2012, Tom Nightingale reported that: "Sydney cemeteries are set to run out of space in just over 20 years and authorities are hinting at the possibility of reusing old graves." He also commented that legislation would most likely be tabled in the New South Wales (NSW) State Parliament in early 2013.

Further afield, a recent post on the 'illicit-cultural-property.blogspot.com.au' (16 January 2013) reports on an Associated Press story where "In Egypt at the Dahshour necropolis, modern cemetery expansion and looting are putting the much older pharaonic necropolis at risk." Such urban pressures are not a recent phenomenon, and they were not always about burial space per se, but space for purposes such as civic amenities and infrastructure development. For example, the principal cemetery for the colony of NSW (1793-1820) made way for the construction of Sydney's Town Hall in the 1860s and the exhumation of some 50,000 graves from Singapore's century-old Bidadari (Christian, Muslim and Hindu) Cemetery was undertaken from 2001 to build public housing.¹ The history of reclaiming cemetery land in recent times in Singapore goes back to the 1820s, which is not surprising (the total land area of the island is about 700 square kilometers with an expanding population and commensurate infrastructure requirements). The pressures to reuse cemetery land to meet population growth continue because it is conveniently accessible, inexpensive to recycle and to date, associated with low political risk.

World population stands at a little over seven billion people and the annual global mortality rate is approximately 56 million. This represents about 0.8% of the total population and by any reckoning represents an enormous number of bodies to be disposed of in one way or another. Moving from the global to the local, Singapore's population in 2012 was 5.31 million and included 3.82 million residents consisting of 3.29 million citizens and 533,000 permanent residents.² The total number of deaths in 2011 for Singapore was 18,027 (approximately 0.5% of the resident population) and while not all these peoples' remains stayed in Singapore,

one would think that the majority were cremated or buried on the island and that is where they will stay, or will they?

Connections, corridors, and communities

I was fortunate to attend the 3rd Conference of the Asian Borderlands Research Network held last September in Singapore (see the conference report in The Network pages of this publication). The theme of the conference focused on the exploration of ideas and research associated with 'connections, corridors, and communities' in the borderlands context. Cemeteries in general and more specifically, memorials, graves and columbariums are borderlands of a sort. Out-of-session conference chatter can prove very useful and the Singapore conference was no exception. During an after-dinner conversation, Michiel Baas (IIAS/ARI) suggested that my wife and I visit the Bukit Brown Cemetery while we were in Singapore.³ In retrospect the experience seemed particularly relevant to the conference program.

Bukit Brown provides connections between important aspects of Singapore's past and present, an ecological corridor linking key green areas on the island as well as a doorway into the intricacy and complexity of Chinese culture, especially that associated with migrants from Fujian and other Southern Chinese provinces. Bukit Brown provides a wonderful window into the Chinese clan system, filial piety and geomancy. It is a valuable genealogical resource and a gateway into Singapore's recent history and Chinese relations with the colonial administration up to the time of independence and in the early years of post-independence.

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.⁴ While the cemetery has been closed since 1972 and neglected to some extent over the last forty years, it has had its enthusiasts. Recently there has been a renaissance of interest because its integrity is under immediate threat from road building and its longevity is in doubt because of plans to use the cemetery for a housing estate. A quick Internet search on Bukit Brown

reveals the extent to which the cemetery has become a site for community engagement, a place for recreation, reflection and celebration – all important ingredients for identity-making and nation building and hence cultural sustainability. Hui Yew-Foong's article in the winter 2012 issue of *The Newsletter* (issue #62, p.44) frames many of these issues very clearly. And even on a first visit it is evident that the cemetery holds a vast amount of historical, cultural and social information that could provide a multi-layered and rich resource for local, regional and international researchers and scholars for many years to come.

Intergenerational ethics

Bukit Brown is in danger because of the competition for space in Singapore. This includes space for both housing and infrastructure. The Urban Redevelopment Authority announced that Bukit Brown Municipal Cemetery was earmarked for housing in 2011.⁵ In a response to a Government announcement in March 2012 regarding the construction of an eight-lane road, including a vehicular bridge, through Bukit Brown cemetery, the Singapore Heritage Society commented: "While we acknowledge the efforts to minimize disruption, the Singapore Heritage Society still has the following reservations. The 8-lane highway will destroy almost 4000 graves as well as the key landmarks of the internal road network, such as the main roundabout and the main gate, all of which form a central part of people's social memories of Bukit Brown."⁶

Protecting historical spaces as an anchor for memory, identity and local distinctiveness is an issue about integrity and authenticity; so snipping off bits of the whole interferes with the significance of the whole, devaluing the space and consequently impacting on its intrinsic value, social wellbeing and social function. It also impacts on potential instrumental values related to economic opportunities such as tourism, as well as education and the broad foundation of nation-building. Such discussion can be approached through the lens of heritage management and that will be pursued shortly, but before then, I would like to reflect on Bukit Brown's future in the context of intergenerational ethics. Essentially,

do we (as insiders or in my specific case, outsiders) owe those that have contributed to the building of Singapore, or more generally the world we live in, any special consideration regarding the protection (maintenance of the integrity) of their burial sites? And should this apply universally or only in special circumstances? I'll get back to this.

Stephen M. Gardiner's discussion of intergenerational ethics with respect to climate change, in his book *A Perfect Moral Storm: The Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change*,⁷ is appealing in his argument about the responsibilities of the current generation (especially those in developed and rapidly developing nations) regarding the wellbeing of future generations that very probably will bear the brunt of our current behavior with respect to the production of carbon dioxide through the unbridled use of fossil fuels. Is this thinking relevant to the Bukit Brown case/situation? Is there an ethics associated with those who have gone before us that is beyond identity making and nation building and if there is, why should we behave ethically? There will be no repercussions if we behave badly, or will there be?

I can't help thinking that Bukit Brown does fall under the umbrella of issues that Gardiner associates with 'a perfect moral storm' and our responsibilities to future generations. If this is true, how should we approach such a problem, and is the past so fundamentally linked to the present and the future, that past, present and future generations cannot be treated without proper regard in the way nations are managed today? My view is that if you cannot respect the ideas, values and actions of those who have contributed to our present through respect for their places of burial, then we are on shaky grounds for leading an ethical life now, and for protecting the interests of those that will follow us.

Heritage, symbolism, significance

In looking at Bukit Brown through a heritage lens there are two further issues that are worth consideration. The first relates to heritage and the utilitarian value of Bukit Brown, in particular the significance of the cemetery as a heritage place both in terms of tangible and intangible heritage and the second, concerns the powerful symbolic meaning of the place, particularly at a personal level.

While Bukit Brown's fate might be decided, there are many questions that seem relevant still. For example:

- What intrinsic and instrumental values does Bukit Brown display or reveal?
- Does it provide a breathing space in a highly urbanized environment?
- Does it represent an outstanding entry way into Chinese and in particular Hokkien and Teochew culture: geomancy and feng shui, etc., and is this important?
- Does Bukit Brown have economic/utilitarian value other than space for housing and infrastructure/transportation development and if so what might those benefits be?
- Could Bukit Brown contribute to local environmental sustainability?
- Can it play a part, even if a small one, in contributing to climate change mitigation?
- Could Bukit Brown form a cornerstone in Singapore's commitment to protect the lives and ways of living of future Singaporeans by acknowledging this particular, past population of residents who have contributed to the building of the nation and how might this be done?

If Bukit Brown has both environmental and cultural significance, possibly of substantial value or even outstanding universal value, then an integrated environmental impact assessment for both the planned roadway and the flagged future housing estate would have been, or would be, meaningful in terms of the 'moral storm' argument. Similarly, the economic contribution of the road development and future housing proposal could have been, or could be, usefully assessed by alternative cost benefit strategies for keeping or destroying Bukit Brown. One might enquire, for example, whether current approaches to meeting transport needs, with their focus on the automobile (influenced by international thinking from as long ago as the 1930s, from the likes of Robert Moses in New York),⁸ continue to be relevant, notwithstanding tensions between population growth, infrastructure needs and evolving community aspirations for high standards of living with strong links to private automobile use.

A key question that is worth exploring is whether the current fabric of Bukit Brown is of sufficient significance that it could be listed on the World Heritage List (WHL)?⁹ And if it were, what would be the benefits to Singaporeans in economic and social terms. The latter being part of a separate, but associated symbolic value argument for the long-term sustainability of the nation from tourism earnings (in its broadest definition – cultural and educational) as well as political, diplomatic and strategic benefits.



Fig. 1: Bukit Brown: a cultural landscape of outstanding significance.

Fig. 2: A sign in Bukit Brown locating the proposed road through the cemetery and outlining procedures to register a claim on a grave prior to exhumation.

Fig. 3: Just one in 100,000. The grave that moved me to write the article.

Fig. 4: Simplicity in form - transcendental in value. One of many graves in the profoundly rich cultural landscape of Bukit Brown.

Fig. 5: A detail of one of the pair of beautifully carved 'demon scaring' lions protecting the grave.

World heritage site

The Nature Society (Singapore) advocates that the entire 233 hectares of Bukit Brown be designated as a heritage park with the cultural and nature/ecological components integrated as one entire entity. They also state: "The heritage park could eventually be proposed to the UN as a UNESCO World Heritage site to attract tourists and other visitors, but more importantly to showcase the surprising cultural, historical, and biodiversity wealth that Singapore holds."¹⁰

In the press release announcing the Singapore Heritage Society's position paper on Bukit Brown Cemetery,¹¹ the Society states that "Among other things, the paper puts forth three recommendations, namely, gazetting Bukit Brown as a heritage site for legal protection; full documentation of Bukit Brown; and turning it into a heritage park for Singaporeans to enjoy." These recommendations represent a valuable first step for securing the integrity of the place and working towards examining the feasibility of World Heritage listing. In this context it is worth reviewing what appear to be the most relevant criteria for assessing the appropriateness of a WH proposal. Of the ten criteria¹² the following may be relevant:

- to exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design;
- to bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared;
- to be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history;
- to be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change;
- to be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance. (The Committee considers that this criterion should preferably be used in conjunction with other criteria);

Furthermore, the World Heritage Committee states that the protection, management, authenticity and integrity of properties are also important considerations. Since 1992 significant interactions between people and the natural environment have been recognized as cultural landscapes. If Bukit Brown has outstanding universal value it will be as a significant global cultural landscape. Notwithstanding the above, is the heritage value of Bukit Brown also important for Singapore's nation-building effort? And if it is, then it needs to be protected formally through legislation whether or not WH listing is seen in a positive light and achievable.

Personal reflection

I have asked myself why my short visit to Bukit Brown made such a strong impression? It is a special place where immediate engagement is possible despite temporal and cultural differences. My impressions of this heritage landscape reflect both the cultural landscape and the beauty of the natural park-like setting and its associated flora and fauna. Some of the trees are truly majestic and I had the good fortune to stumble across a fine monitor lizard carrying out its daily round. Bukit Brown is a place where one can reflect on the human condition – how we respond to the past, present and future. The aesthetic and historical character of this cultural landscape is both rich and substantial. At Bukit



Brown there are many graves, some beautiful, some humble and some reflecting the power and wealth of their occupants. There was one grave that proved pivotal to my Bukit Brown experience – it moved me to write this piece. I don't know who this woman was or what she did in her life, but I do know that her life was important in the way that all our lives are important. I do hope her resting place will be shown the respect it deserves.

Before ending I would like to return to the beginning and the dilemma of the remains of the dead and where, whether and how they should be preserved. In particular, is there a position between the pragmatics of recycling cemeteries for various purposes – from health management to the pressing needs of growth – and an appropriate ethics of respect that acknowledges the interconnectedness of past, present and future, and which is more than mere tokenism? If there is, how might it be shaped and applied. Could such an approach accommodate a scope that is universal rather than just for special cases such as Bukit Brown? Somehow an ethic for 'sometimes' doesn't seem right, yet there seems to be no other option considering the immensity of the problem. Pursuing what can be preserved when it can has its shortcomings from the perspective of a global intergenerational ethic concerning the remains of the dead. Such an ethic, nevertheless, may provide a useful reference point for the way communities might consider or frame their actions to protect what they hold dear.

Ian Cook is currently a deputy chair of AusHeritage Ltd, a network promoting the engagement of Australian heritage practitioners internationally. He is co-author of *A contemporary guide to cultural mapping - an ASEAN-Australia perspective*, in print, and manages 3CS AsiaPacific, a consultancy focussing on heritage, culture, risk and vulnerability. (iancook@bigpond.net.au).

Notes

- 1 Tan, Kevin YL. 2011. 'Introduction: The Death of Cemeteries in Singapore', *Spaces of the Dead*, p.18; Williams, S. 2011. 'The Bidadari Christian Cemetery', *Spaces of the Dead*, p.114-169.
- 2 *Population Trends 2012*, Department of Statistics, Singapore. In addition to the figures quoted there is a non-resident population of 1.49 million.
- 3 Bukit Brown Cemetery actually consists of two cemeteries – Bukit Brown and She Ong Cemetery. For the purpose of this article Bukit Brown is used generically to stand for both places.
- 4 *Position Paper on Bukit Brown*, Singapore Heritage Society, prepared by Terence Chong, January 2012.
- 5 Ibid, p11.
- 6 *SHS response to announced road alignment at Bukit Brown*, Statement by Singapore Heritage Society, 21 March 2012.
- 7 Gardiner, SM. 2011. *A Perfect Moral Storm. The Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change*, Oxford University Press.
- 8 Burns, Ric (director). 2001. *New York: A Documentary Film. Episode 6: City of Tomorrow*. A Steeplechase Films production.
- 9 The irony here is that World Heritage listing is the business of UN member states. There is no opportunity for citizens to propose a listing. It must be made by the appropriate state.
- 10 *Nature Society (Singapore)'s Position on Bukit Brown*, 12 December 2011.
- 11 *SHS Press Release: Position Paper on Bukit Brown published!*, February 2012, available at www.singaporeheritage.org (accessed 6 January 2013).
- 12 whc.unesco.org/en/criteria (accessed 25 January 2013).