

UNEARTHED:

Surveys Of 'Ground' In The Heterotopic Chinese Grave

by

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Abstract

In the physical processes of reclamation and urban renewal in Singapore, ground can be seen as a geomorphic entity that is endlessly shaped in accordance to a nationalistic vision. However, when the Chinese burial grounds in Singapore are repossessed for new usage, a contestation ensues between the contradicting values of land as a national resource and the landscape as a cultural entity.

This dissertation seeks to recast the Chinese burial grounds in Singapore as *beterotopia*, a Foucauldian space of 'otherness'. It will do so by identifying the unique spatial configuration of the Chinese grave that is anomalous to its surrounding environment, proposing that this particular reading hinges on the politics of 'ground'. It is therefore asserted that ground is a datum that has to be read in both its physical and symbolic potentialities. The Chinese grave is explored as a distinctive space arranged in

accordance to strict topological laws of geomancy, inextricably connected to 'real' spaces of the living. Thus, ground performs a crucial role in constructing an elaborate relationship between the physical and projected aspects of heterotopia. When the ground of the Chinese grave is broken into, these fragile relationships are disrupted.

Tan Pin Pin's short film *Moving House* and Kuo Pao Kun's play *The Coffin Is Too Big For The Hole* are adopted as vehicles discussing this disruption of the Chinese burial ground. In *Moving House*, the Chew family's ancestral grave is exhumed and their parents' remains are relocated into a columbarium, so that space may be freed for national development. Elsewhere, *The Coffin* comically pits the hapless protagonist and his father's ornate, oversized coffin against the unyielding ground of the public cemetery and its inflexible administrator.

Several *surveys* of ground will be conducted, plotting the interlinked spatial and ideological tensions between state and heterotopic Chinese burial ground. The nationalistic milieu is investigated in 1960s government propaganda film, revealing ground to be commodified as 'land' in utopian projections. The cultural complexities of the Chinese burial ground are mapped, unsettling the assumptions made in these visions of rational homogeneity. Finally, the physical razing and manipulation of ground is traced when the Chinese grave is exhumed and reconfigured in the columbarium, a 'degenerate utopia'. The aim of these surveys is to demonstrate that the Chinese burial ground's heterotopic qualities, while seemingly fixated in the immutable landscape, can be easily destabilized and dispelled by an order contrary to its own.

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Prelude: Choa Chu Kang Cemetery

It is at the cusp of twilight.

A ring of candle flames illuminate an indefinite boundary of grass; the screeching of crickets is accompanied by the rustle of plastic bags of food and offerings and the movement of people in the dim surroundings. A Chinese lady pours wine into red cups in front of an engraved tombstone, and the light from two candles flicker, defining the forms of fruit and cake on paper plates.

The brothers, their wives, their children, come with food, wine and prayers as offerings to honour their parents. In return, the spirits of their parents, the Chews believe, will protect and bless them with good fortune. Each visit reunites the family and reminds them of their beginnings in Singapore.¹

The other people move busily around the space, burning joss paper, carrying offerings, dousing the grave with water from a sprig of pomegranate leaves.

Today is different. They've engaged the help of a priest. As long as the usual rituals they perform for their parents, they will also be seeking absolution for what they are about to do.

As the gravediggers plunge their *cangkuls* into the soft grassy mound of the grave, the small gathering of people holler '*fatt ah!*', an unusual cry for prosperity that is meant to offset the profane, inauspicious task about to be carried out.

This task that the Chews are obliged to carry out will be undertaken by fifty-five thousand other Singaporean families in the months ahead.

Clumps of red soil fly and scatter through the air. Some are gathered in baskets. The earth gives way easily and soon the untouched verdant mound transforms into a gaping wound in the ground. The Chew family stands at a safe distance, peering and anticipating what is to happen next.

The Singapore government requires this land for further national development.

The Chew's parents have to move.

¹ Italicized passages are narrative commentary from Tan Pin Pin's documentary *Moving House*. *Moving House*. Dir. Tan Pin Pin. DVD. (Singapore: Objectif Films, 2001).



1
Still from *Moving House*.
The Chew family visiting
their parents' grave.



2
Still from *Moving House*.
Candles and offerings.



2
Still from *Moving House*.
The grave is exhumed.

Chapter 1

BREAKING THE GROUND

1.1

This scene documented in Tan Pin Pin's *Moving House* is one of many instances of exhumation done as part of a programme carried out at the Choa Chu Kang Cemetery, currently the largest burial plot still existing in Singapore today. Due to the complexity of this gargantuan operation, this exhumation process is divided into three phases.² The final and largest phase commenced recently, with an expected 10,000 graves to be exhumed by June 2010.³ While often surfacing in the mass media as faceless figures and dates, *Moving House* and other revelatory anecdotes lend an intimate perspective to such shifts in landscape that Singapore inevitably undergoes.

An example of this would be Zuraidah Ibrahim's emotive account, describing the exhumation of her family's Muslim graves at Choa Chu Kang. She reflects on how the sudden unearthing of the remains of her grandmother and other deceased relatives brought about a revelation of the temporariness of a final resting place in Singapore:

In the mélange of emotions that morning, there was also humour, as we thought about how the departed would have laughed and joked along about this mighty inconvenience of moving house.⁴

² 'Choa Chu Kang Cemetery Exhumation Programme', www.nea.gov.sg/cckexhumation/ (accessed 20 July 2009)

³ '10,000 Graves to be Exhumed', http://www.straitstimes.com/Breaking%2BNews/Singapore/Story/STIStory_352223.html (accessed 20 July 2009)

⁴ Zuraidah Ibrahim, 'Excursion to an Exhumation', *The Sunday Times*, 24 May 2009, p. 12.

None are spared from this process of *moving house*, regardless of race or religion. With the spate of national development projects from the time of Singapore's independence, the limitations of space results in a conflict of interests. These burial landscapes become challenged sites while land is aggressively repossessed for the construction of infrastructure and public housing.⁵ A timer was put on these burial grounds with the announcement of the New Burial Policy in 1998, extending the concept of property leasehold in Singapore to the spaces of the dead. This policy limits the burial period to a mere 15 years, thus resulting in the aforementioned phenomenon of mass exhumation.⁶

In Singapore, ground is endlessly moved and changed to meet the demands of the nation. The ground, as seen by the state, is a resource that has to be maximized in its use, simply due to Singapore's lack of it. As Singaporeans observe the thousands of graves that are unearthed, a few questions linger. What is the significance of this ground? Does it *matter* if the ground is broken into? Undoubtedly ground is a material thing. Its hardness, form, dampness and colour, constitute what we know of as *terra firma* – the earth that we stand on. Robin Dripps notes that ground has to be read as not just as the “physical structure and processes of the earth”, but a kind of metaphorical construct, referring to “patterns of physical, intellectual, poetic, and political structure that intersect, overlap, and weave together to become the context for human thought and action”.⁷ As Chinese graves are being replaced by high-rise Housing Development Board (HDB) flats, a contestation of meaning that goes beyond the moving of earth ensues. While ground is seen as a sacred entity with complex symbolic meanings in traditional Chinese culture and religion, in state discourse it is commodified as ‘land’. Yet, the physical *terra firma* cannot be dismissed because it is the *medium* by which these imagined mappings are enacted.

⁵ Brenda S. A. Yeoh, ‘The Control of ‘Sacred Space’: Conflicts Over the Chinese Burial Grounds’, in *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003), p. 281.

⁶ ‘Choa Chu Kang Cemetery Exhumation Programme’, www.nea.gov.sg/cckexhumation/ (accessed 20 July 2009)

⁷ Robin Dripps, ‘Groundwork’ in Carol J. Burns and Andrea Kahn (eds.) *Site Matters: Design Concepts, Histories and Strategies* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p.59.

In Singapore, the scarcity of land and the constant pressure to develop results in the government deeming burial ground as a waste of valuable space. During the British colonial rule, Chinese burial grounds were perceived to selfishly occupy land that could instead be harnessed for the common good. An 1887 Burials Bill authorizing the regulation of burial grounds states that:

(I)t is not right that all other classes of the community should be sacrificed to the desires of one section (the Chinese), to secure, for instance, all the small hills, which are the only places suitable for healthy houses in these countries, and take them forever, sometimes merely as a monument to the honour of a man's family and his own personal vanity.⁸

A 1952 report by the Governmental Committee shares this perspective, noting that central areas of Singapore had “more room for the dead than the living” and proposed cremation as an option to deal with the “waste of space in existing burial grounds”.⁹ Isolated graves in Singapore were considered a nuisance and therefore had to be eradicated. In 1978, E. W. Barker reiterated the need for clearing of land in a parliamentary debate, highlighting that “the needs of Singapore’s young population must require the use of sterilized land, for the economic and social good of all citizens of Singapore”.¹⁰

In this light, the Chinese burial ground could be seen as *heterotopia* – a term coined by Michel Foucault describing deviant spaces that exist as a counterpoint to the controlled homogeneity of the rest of society. Kevin Hetherington describes how heterotopia is related to modern societies: while rational modernity attempts to model the ideal society, heterotopia resides in the cracks of this system as a space that inverts the normalized order.¹¹ Foucault’s heterotopia positions Chinese burial ground as a space of ‘otherness’, internally contradictory and incongruous to the rest of ‘real’ space. While its description as heterotopia seems appropriate, there are slippages in the mapping of the Chinese burial

⁸ ‘Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements’, *Straits Times*, 20 Aug. 1887, p.103.

⁹ Burials Committee, *Report of the Committee Regarding Burial and Burial Grounds* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1952).

¹⁰ Parliamentary Debates (7 April 1978), quoted in Brenda Yeoh and Lily Kong, *The Politics of Landscape in Singapore: Constructions of ‘Nation’* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003), p.57.

¹¹ Kevin Hetherington, *The Badlands of Modernity: Heterotopia and Social Ordering* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p.14.

ground as heterotopia, which will be investigated further in the third chapter of this dissertation – “Reflections and Hills”.

1.2

Tan Pin Pin’s short film *Moving House* and Kuo Pao Kun’s *The Coffin Is Too Big For The Hole* are discussed as vehicles which address the tensions between the Chinese burial ground and the space of national development. Of particular emphasis is how heterotopia is manifested in these two narratives.

In *Moving House*, Tan juxtaposes contemporary ethnographic documentary footage of exhumation with government propaganda film from the 1960s.¹² The documentary weaves an arresting narrative of the process of moving and resettling that both the living and the dead have to undergo. *Moving House* becomes an investigative lens which examines Chinese funerary practice through the close observation of the rituals associated with the Chew family’s ancestral grave and the alteration of these rituals due to the exhumation and shifting of their parents’ remains. The documentary also presents the many strains of Chinese significance and symbolism that complicate the contestation of space.

Tan’s film reads as an essay on the erosion and mutability of cultural practices. It also broaches questions of how nationalistic space encroaches upon, and eventually reorganises, the heterotopic burial space in Singapore. The deliberate interspersing of images presenting orderly, newly-built HDB flats and the strikingly similar blocks of the columbarium underscores the government policies that shape both these spaces.

¹² Tan Pin Pin is a Singapore-based film director who has produced several award-winning short films such as *Invisible City* and *Singapore Gaga*. She favours a documentary style, and many of her films are surveys of life in Singapore. Her short film *Moving House* won Best Documentary at both the Student Academy Awards in 2002 and the ASEAN Film and Photography Festival in 2006.

A similar thematic notion of the regulated burial ground is again echoed in Kuo Pao Kun's play *The Coffin Is Too Big For The Hole*, albeit through a different medium and method.¹³ Written as a monologue, *The Coffin* is an allegorical short play about a man whose grandfather has prepared an excessively large and grand coffin for himself. After his grandfather's passing, the protagonist discovers that this coffin is unable to fit into the standardized hole in the public cemetery:

My grandfather was lying there in a coffin unable to get into his grave and this damn funeral man wants to talk relativity with me! I mean, whether the coffin was too big or the hole was too small, what's the difference? It didn't fit, did it? That's the problem, wasn't it?¹⁴

Feeling a deep sense of responsibility and pressured by friends and family members gathered in attendance of his grandfather's funeral, the man decides to rectify the matter. He approaches the funeral parlour manager, followed by a government official, requesting for a larger plot to accommodate the coffin, which stands awkwardly among rows and rows of ordered standardized graves. A quasi-comical situation is created as each person offers a different spatial solution to the problem, rejecting the others' suggestions as unreasonable. While the protagonist simply requests for the hole to be enlarged to accommodate the coffin, the men of authority refuse to relent. Instead, they propose methods to reduce or remove the coffin, some bordering on the ludicrous.

The 'solutions' offered reveals frictions between the two colliding worlds and the invisible boundaries between them. Although these two realms are presented as oppositions of governed and cultural space, T. Sasitharan suggests that this particular work "serves as a vital bridge, or an interface, between two quite distinct and disparate worlds"¹⁵ – the worlds of the Chinese-speaking and the

¹³ Kuo Pao Kun (b.1939 - d.10 Sep 2002) was a playwright, theatre director and arts activist widely regarded as one of the most significant dramatists in Singapore and a pioneer of Singapore theatre. He has produced over four decades of creative work, contributing greatly to the arts scene in Singapore. His plays, written in English and Mandarin, have been translated into many other languages and performed by both local and overseas theatre companies. Many of his plays such as *Mama Looking for Her Cat* address issues of community and identity in Singapore. Kuo's *The Coffin Is Too Big For The Hole* is one of the most frequently performed plays in Singapore and is considered to be his most important work.

¹⁴ Kuo Pao Kun, 'The Coffin Is Too Big For The Hole' in *Images at the margins: A collection of Kuo Pao Kun's Plays* (Singapore : Times Book International, 2000), p.63.

¹⁵ T. Sasitharan, 'Kuo Pao Kun and the Theatre of Tensions' in *Images at the margins*, p.11.

English-educated audience. Significantly too, *The Coffin* is a turning point in Kuo's body of work, being the first of Kuo's plays that directly addresses the fragmentation and destabilization of Singapore's Chinese-educated. It is also a critique of governmental campaigns that promote the use of English, and linguistically-unifying programmes like the Speak Mandarin Campaign.¹⁶

The world of Chinese religious and cultural burial rites manifests itself in several elements in the play. The *pièce de résistance* of the funeral – the coffin itself – becomes an important object that exemplifies the cultural weight of the antiquated Chinese world from which the protagonist's grandfather hails.

1.3

The aim of this dissertation is not to provide an extensive historical-cultural coverage of a particular Chinese burial ground. Neither does it attempt to perceive these contestations of ground as a crucial problem to be solved, or seek to find this solution.

The objective here is to conduct a *survey* of ground in Singapore's context, particularly in relation to its hybrid Chinese culture. While architects mostly understand a 'survey' to be a topographical mapping of the earth's surface, this particular survey has to encompass more than the physical measurement of areas, distances or points.¹⁷

In order to recognize the Chinese burial ground as a heterotopia, its inherent complexities and multiple identities will have to be considered. Correspondingly, the milieu of nationalistic development has to be surveyed as well, in order to uncover its contrasting values of ground. To do so, ground has to be read in its multifariousness: as cultural object or commodity; as benign or nonsensical; as channeler, territory, political field, and, just as importantly, as a physical surface. Also, this survey cannot end at a state-drawn boundary line. The investigation has to travel beyond the

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Author's own definition of "survey" derived from the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/survey> (accessed 7 September 2009).

artificial demarcations of site, extending out across space until the ground stops – at the edges of the island we know as Singapore.



4
The Koh family praying at
their grandfather's burial spot.



5
Near the Henderson
Waves bridge, passers-by
gawk at the unusual scene.

Ground Survey I: an unmarked spot along the Southern Ridges Trail

In April 2009, on a paved pedestrian walkway leading to the newly-built Henderson Waves bridge, a curious sight met the eyes of passing joggers.¹⁸ A middle-aged man and three women were kneeling in the middle of the concrete pavement in silent prayer, surrounded by ritualistic paraphernalia like joss paper, offerings, and lit joss sticks. A prayer to the dead, with no tomb in sight. The Koh family believed that their grandfather's remains lay beneath the impenetrable surface of the ground, claiming that the late Mr Koh was shot dead in 1942 by invading Japanese troops and was buried at this particular spot, a burial ground chosen as it was elevated and had good *fengshui*.¹⁹

The family eventually approached the authorities for permission to exhume his remains. A National Parks Singapore official initially replied that they could not verify the presence of these remains as "a pre-construction survey was carried out (...) and there were no graves in the area".²⁰ Eventually, the authorities acceded to an investigation of the site, discovering that the Koh's grandfather *was* indeed buried under this pavement. An exhumation and cremation was arranged shortly after.

Although empty now of the bones of the dead, for a brief moment the ground became a membrane that defined and superimposed three vastly different spaces - a hidden sanctum of personal history; a public space designed by state; and finally an empty spot on a survey plan that, perhaps, speaks much more than its suggested silence.

¹⁸ The Henderson Waves is a 300m long elevated pedestrian bridge, part of a series of links making up the 9km Southern Ridges Trail in Singapore that stretches from Mount Faber to Kent Ridge.

¹⁹ Crystal Chan, 'Is His Grandpa Buried Under Park Pavement?', *The New Paper*, 26 April 2009, p.27.

²⁰ Crystal Chan, 'Yes, That's My Grandpa Buried Under The Pavement', *The New Paper*, 9 August 2009, p.13.



6

Stills from *Berita Singapura: A New Look At Housing*.

Chapter 2

VISIONS IN CRYSTAL GLOBES

2.1

Perhaps the best place to commence a survey of Singapore's ground would be from a point high above it.

In the 1967 newsreel programme *Berita Singapura: A New Look at Housing*, a helicopter hovers over the land capturing monochromatic aerial footage of newly-built flats in Toa Payoh and Bukit Ho Swee.²¹ Apologizing for the shaky scene, the narrator carries a hint of regret in his voice, perhaps worried that this celebratory moment would be marred by the bumpiness of the ride. The camera pans slowly over block after block in a manner of surveillance, as if to deliberately accentuate their three-dimensionality and orderly arrangement. For a moment, the entire scene seems almost model-like and the buildings made of cardboard or drawn on paper, are redolent of Le Corbusier's isometric drawings for his utopian *La Ville Radiense*.²²

The scene above is taken from a bird's eye view. It renders every inch of ground visible as the frame is filled with Singapore's newly inaugurated and vastly sprawling satellite towns. Perhaps the reason for this choice of perspective could be found in Lee Weng Choy's words:

²¹ *Berita Singapura: A New Look at Housing* was made in commemoration of the 2nd Afro-Asian Housing Congress in 1967, while also showcasing the Housing Development Board's immense achievements since the beginning of the decade. *Berita Singapura: A New Look At Housing*. Videocassette. (Singapore: Ministry of Culture, Broadcasting Division, 1967). National Archive accession no. 1992000566.

²² Robert Fishman, *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century: Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Le Corbusier* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982), p.231.

In Singapore, the notion of a bird's eye view has less to do with enjoying the island's scenery than with a frame of mind prevalent amongst those of us who live here who've made a vocation out of "reading" this place. (...) It is hard to find talk about any dimension of Singaporean life that does not quickly turn into a commentary about the totality of the Singapore system.²³

While having an aerial overview of the Singapore landscape paints a pretty picture, it also sets the viewer at a vantage point reserved for the eyes of planners – the shapers of the ground. At this particular distance between the camera and the subject, the viewer cannot identify the geographical orientation or specific location of these new towns. Neither can a sense of scale be deduced, as human figures are indiscernable. The ground becomes disconnected, as if nothing lay beyond the edges of the screen. The resultant effect is a curious sense of placelessness although everything is in plain sight.

This is an image of *utopia* or a 'non-place', in its idealised content and choice of perspective.²⁴ Much like the imaginary island that Sir Thomas More described in his controversial work, the *Berita Singapura* footage presents a regulated landscape that the model city is constructed upon.²⁵ In this idealized terrain, everything that glorifies this perfected vision is made starkly visible and everything else that compromises it, like the coffin lying beneath the ground, has to stay fixedly hidden.

2.2

Produced by the Ministry of Culture, Broadcasting Division, the *Berita Singapura* newsreels feature vignettes tracing the economic and social development of Singapore. The programme was broadcast

²³ Lee Weng Choy, 'Time, Landscape and Desire in Singapore' in Lucas Jodogne and Marijke Van Kets (eds.) *The Bodiless Dragon: Singapore Views on the Urban Landscape* (Antwerp: Pandora, 1998), p.54.

²⁴ Etymologically, 'utopia' is derived from the Greek *ou* (not) and *topos* (place). Thus, 'utopia' refers to a non-place. Etymological meaning of 'utopia', <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?search=utopia&searchmode=none> (accessed 8 Sep 2009).

²⁵ Thomas More, *Utopia* (London: Adamant Media, 2005), p.9.

on a black-and-white service launched in February 1963.²⁶ During the daily four-hour television service in the 1960s, *Berita Singapura* was broadcast in various languages and dialects, primarily in English. It served as Singapore's first television news coverage, and featured scenes from daily life as well as important economic and social events. The formal inauguration of regular television broadcasting coincided with the formation of the Housing Development Board in 1960; thus, several *Berita Singapura* programmes focused on the development of new housing and its milestones.²⁷

In *Moving House*, footage from *Berita Singapura* is used to parallel the relocation of people into HDB flats with the forced exhumation and transfer of the remains of the dead into columbariums. The similarity is underscored when the narrator announces that “for Singaporeans, moving, building, resettling, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, is way of life”.²⁸ This interlude section of *Moving House* features a composition of scenes from *Berita Singapura: Housing Week* offering a retrospective look at HDB's progress in providing housing, followed by footage of present-day HDB flats under construction. The newsreel genre of the footage suggests a transparent documentary-like reading of the subject matter, reinforced by an authoritarian narrative voice. However, unlike the stark realism and intimate detailing of the Chews' forced exhumation, the newsreel, in contrast, is a collection of generic snapshots of progress arranged in a deliberate collage.

The *Berita Singapura* footage could be likened to Lucas Jodogne's photographs, which intentionally capture scenes at the fringes of Singapore's changing urban landscape:

These photographs are clearly not documentary images in the photojournalistic tradition of the single, transparent moment. Instead, "The Bodiless Dragon" lies at the intersection of two 'maps': firstly, the urban landscape which is undergoing a massive, rapid, and organised

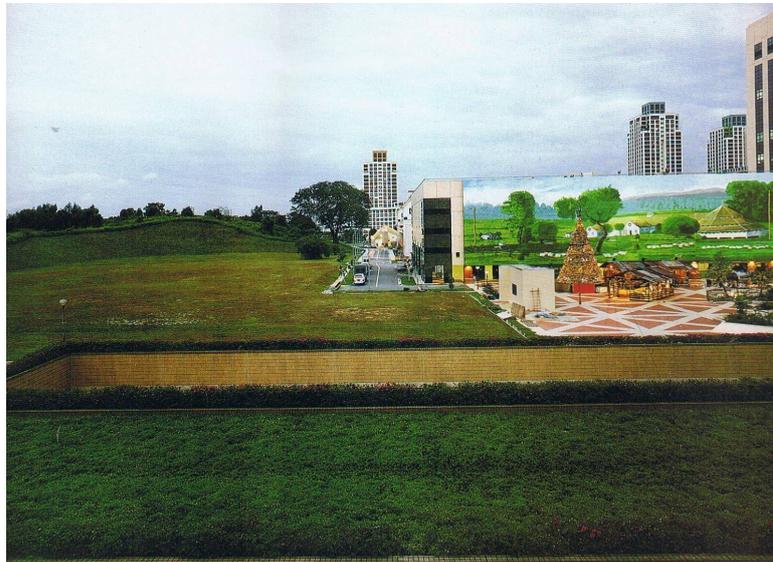
²⁶ Philip Kitley, *Television, Regulation and Civil Society in Asia* (Routledge: London, 2003), p.53.

²⁷ 'The History of 40 Years of Television', <http://mediacorp.tv.sg/40years/eng.htm> (accessed 30 July 2009)

²⁸ *Moving House*. Dir. Tan Pin Pin.

transformation or re-mapping, secondly, the 'map' of classical European landscape composition techniques which structure the composition of the photographs.²⁹

Like Jodogne's seemingly objective representations of architecture and public spaces, the impact of the newsreel is due to the overlay of two mappings of space – the physical and the imposed, the latter being a play of perspective, scale and composition of the former, disorientating the viewer with a 'hallucinatory' image. The image becomes a model; an instrument to facilitate an alternative logic in the perception of space, and more specifically in this dissertation, to rationalize the ground.



7

Photograph by Lucas Jodogne in 'The Bodiless Dragon'.

Robbie Goh acknowledges that this re-mapping of the Singapore landscape occurs in the mass media controlled by government bodies, noting that "such mappings may be a means of strategic emphases and visionary directions".³⁰ For instance, a published Economic Development Board map of Singapore entitled *The Growing Biomedical Hub* highlights infrastructural features and disproportionately vertical biomedical offices, and conversely portrays the central and northern parts of the island as

²⁹ Trevor Smith, 'The Bodiless Dragon' in Lucas Jodogne and Marijke Van Kets (eds.) *The Bodiless Dragon: Singapore Views on the Urban Landscape* (Antwerp: Pandora, 1998), p.5.

³⁰ Robbie Goh B. H. (ed.), 'Imaginary Space: Mapping / Contesting Singapore's Future in a Global Era' in *Contours of Culture: Space and Social Difference in Singapore* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), p.198.

undeveloped wilderness covered by jungle. The effect is the perception of ground as an illusory *tabula rasa* or a fertile plane for growth in the biomedical sector. What this particular image of ground glaringly omits or downplays becomes just as important as what it privileges. By stitching together what Goh terms as “imaginary mappings” of Singapore, like the Urban Redevelopment Authority’s Master Plans or campaign media, an ‘official’ impression of the Singapore landscape is generated - a utopian vision of regulated, purposefully empty ground.³¹

The following sections in this chapter will extend the argument by proposing that it is necessary to peel back and examine the layers of these mappings in order to see how ground is re-represented in the governmental metanarrative. It will do so by reading against the grain of the propaganda material. Thomas Osborne and Nikolas Rose propose that the ground must be seen as “a series of surfaces (...) upon which governmental aims can be projected”.³² While ground itself is a pliable medium on which state aspirations are shaped, utopian visualisations of ground are just as potent in their power to extrapolate futuristic possibilities. These visions therefore work with the landscape to animate nationalistic desires.

2.3

In *The Coffin*, the officer-in-charge becomes the voice of rationality who reminds the protagonist that his request for space to bury his grandfather’s coffin is “running against our national planning”, due to the “fact that we are a densely populated nation with very limited land resources”.³³ Similarly, *Moving House* reiterates the “small landmass” of Singapore and its crowdedness resulting in an “unlimited demand for space”.

The idea of Singapore’s smallness has attained an almost axiomatic status. Often descriptions of Singapore would begin with this lament, almost always followed by an account of how Singapore has

³¹ Ibid, p.184.

³² Thomas Osborne and Nikolas Rose, ‘Governing Cities: Notes on the Spatialisation of Virtue’ in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, v17 (1999), p.737.

³³ Kuo, ‘The Coffin’, p.68.

overcome and thrived in spite of this problem, a running theme in the nationalistic image. The Concept Plan 2001 identifies the “scarcity of land” as the “main challenge in planning for Singapore”, stressing a set of solutions crucial in alleviating this central problem.³⁴ Planning policies and politicians echo the same mantra about Singapore as a “Little Red Dot”, whether in reference to it as a miniscule marvel, or a potent pinprick.³⁵ And in 1996 Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong gave a speech to students of the Nanyang Technological University, articulating that Singaporeans should:

Remember that we are a small city state, 650 square kilometers, no natural resources, three million people, having to make a living against bigger countries with bigger populations and abundant resources.³⁶

This predicament is vividly illustrated in a collective ideology - the ground is a precious resource that has to be maximized in use, and this has to be done in accordance with the mapped rationality of national planning. Ground, in its scarcity, is seen as a commodity. This brings to light the difference between ‘land’ and ‘ground’ – the former is defined as “a portion of the earth's solid surface distinguishable by boundaries or ownership”, a product of legal division and possession, while the latter is physical and open to a multiplicity of meanings.³⁷

The nationalistic message is clear: the ground is barren, but it is precious. The infertile ground has to be transformed into ‘land’ through a process of alchemy – like how base metal is turned into gold, the mundane has to be made into the magical.

As a contrast to this profiteering approach to ground, Peter Schoppert invites us to view ground as Singapore’s ‘most ancient monument’, a geographical monolith that is a visual receptacle for

³⁴ Urban Redevelopment Authority, *Concept Plan 2001* (Singapore: 2001).

³⁵ Habibie: What I Meant by ‘Little Red Dot’, *The Straits Times*, 20 September 2006, p.9.

³⁶ Speech at Nanyang Technological University by Goh Chok Tong (1996) quoted in Goh, ‘Imaginary Space’, p.198.

³⁷ Definition of ‘land’, Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/land> (accessed 30 Aug 2009).

collective meaning and memory.³⁸ He muses on how the topological qualities of ground contribute to the identity of each place: “the long avenues of Manhattan, the seven hills of Rome, the Golden Horn, Parisian boulevards, Beijing’s precise orientation, its Drum Tower Hill”, and how Singapore has “misplaced its most ancient monument”³⁹ in her ceaseless cutting and moving of the landscape.

Perhaps Singapore has not misplaced her most ancient monument, but crafted a *new* monument out of the old.

2.4

The many scenes of HDB flats in *Berita Singapura: A New Look at Housing* are interrupted with images of a coastline of dense vegetation fringed with a wide band of virgin soil that expands into the sea.

This is the result of land reclamation at Changi and the East Coast where strips of new virgin ground were created, and later, transformed into new housing estates like Marine Parade.⁴⁰ In the process of reclamation, “one thousand acres of land are reclaimed”, forming an appendage that “stretches half a mile out to sea”.⁴¹ The earth comes from the Changi Hills, transplanted and formed into the homogeneous rectangle of land displayed in the film.

Similarly, reclamation is also used to turn what is deemed waste land at Kallang Basin into usable area: “As Toa Payoh was developed, five million tonnes of unneeded earth was transported and used as fill material for reclaiming the swampland of Kallang Basin”.⁴² The narrator informs that although it was

³⁸ Peter Schoppert, ‘Displacing Singapore’ in Lucas Jodogne and Marijke Van Kets (eds.) *The Bodiless Dragon: Singapore Views on the Urban Landscape* (Antwerp: Pandora, 1998), p.94.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ As of 2009, Singapore has a total land area of approximately 700 square kilometres. 20% of this area is reclaimed. According to the Concept Plan 2001, Singapore will reclaim an additional 100 square kilometres of land over the next five decades. Sources: Tommy Koh and Jolene Lim, ‘The Land Reclamation Case: Thoughts and Reflections’ in *2006 Singapore Year Book of International Law and Contributors*, v10 2006, p.32; Koh Gui Qing, ‘Singapore Finds It Hard To Expand Without Sand’, http://habitatnews.nus.edu.sg/index.php?entry=/news/20050411-reuters_nomoresand.txt (accessed 21 August 2009); ‘Land Reclamation in Singapore’, <http://library.thinkquest.org/C006891/reclamation.html>. (accessed 21 August 2009).

⁴¹ *Berita Singapura : A New Look at Housing*.

⁴² Ibid.

a gargantuan task, the process was efficient, “completely mechanized (with) no dust and no noise”; silently and without a trace a few million tonnes of land was moved.⁴³



8

Reclamation of land at the East Coast of Singapore.

What, then, is considered “unneeded earth”?

Drawing reference from Michael Taussig’s ‘The Beach (A Fantasy)’, this new coast is the “ultimate fantasy where nature and carnival blend as prehistory in the dialectical image of modernity”.⁴⁴ Taussig proposes that the capitalistic force of modernity pictures the natural landscape, together with its cultural and indigenous content, as a unified ‘second nature’. For instance, at the coastal beaches of Sydney, Taussig notices how native fishermen are invisible to the eyes of affluent office-workers,

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Michael Taussig, ‘The Beach (A Fantasy)’ in W.J.T. Mitchell (ed.), *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p.326.

almost disappearing into the natural setting of the beach. Likewise, the irregular ground here is seen as an archaic entity incongruous to modern, rational values. Intricate geographical features such as marshy swampland, rugged coastlines, and unclaimed hills are deemed unusable terrain. The *cultural* material embedded in this natural, irregular land is also inevitably marginalized. These are raw materials that have to be rubbed smooth, transplanted and processed for consumption, in service of modernity and progress.

It becomes apparent that the East Coast, like Taussig's beach, is a fertile ground on which *utopian* fantasies can be projected - the frontier of the changing landscapes of Singapore.

2.5



9

Aerial view of HDB flats.

Viewed from above the HDB flats in *Berita Singapura: A New Look at Housing*, pictured in shades of contrasting black and white, start to resemble a composition of solid and void – an architectural figure-ground drawing. The ground, the space between buildings freshly leveled and carpeted with grass or road, becomes a vestigial space defined by the volumes of the HDB flats. The HDB flats are described by the narrator as “all basic in design but with varying details in color”, indistinguishably similar.⁴⁵ Stripped of its topographical and physical features, the ground is similarly robbed of its nuances and is instead understood by the hierarchies and axes of the architectural volumes surrounding it, collapsing building and ground into a simplified polarity of black and white.

The ground starts to take on qualities that are perhaps best portrayed by Robin Dripps’ description of ‘white space’ in the figure-ground diagram:

The empty white space is not a pregnant silence waiting to take on meaning from what surrounds it, but instead a space so devoid of character that even the surrounding figures seem to lose a degree of their own quality.⁴⁶

Thus, like a white background that isolates the black foreground shapes, the empty ground removes the HDB flats from a physical context or site, creating a sense of genericity in both figure and background. Furthermore, Dripps notes that the problem does not lie in what is visible – the prominent HDB flats – but a “widespread myopia that makes much else invisible, including so crucial a presence as the drawing medium itself”.⁴⁷ In other words, the chosen aerial perspective of the film is selectively representative, rendering the ground as a blank canvas that becomes an “essential element of life for a drawing”, like the white paper that text is written on.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ *Berita Singapura : A New Look at Housing*.

⁴⁶ Dripps, ‘Groundwork’, p.73.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p.74.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p.74.

This strategy somewhat reduces the significance of the ground on which the HDB blocks are built upon because “(t)he ground displaced by the building can hardly be missed because it is shown as having nothing to contribute in the first place”.⁴⁹

Being presented without any discernable features in the film, the ground is easily replaced by the built forms - the black shapes in the figure-ground diagram. As the unseen helicopter in the film flies over the Macpherson Road housing estate, the landscape is visually reduced into a few distinct types: the unconquered black mass of trees that skirt around the estate, grassy fields of cleared land, and the new HDB flats that become the focus. The three textures of this landscape seem to illustrate a sequential diagram of what inevitably happens to the ground as it is absorbed into the utopian cycle of reclamation, demolition and construction.

2.6

In Italo Calvino’s fictional *Invisible Cities*, Marco Polo describes to Kublai Khan a gray stone metropolis called Fedora. At the centre of this city stands a metal building with a shining crystal globe in each of its numerous rooms.⁵⁰ Within each globe lies an image, a model of an alternatively envisioned Fedora, a possible form that the city could have taken, given other circumstances. Marco Polo then reminds the great conqueror of the importance of both the crystal globes and the city in flesh:

On the map of your empire, O Great Khan, there must be room both for the big, stone Fedora and the little Fedoras in glass globes. Not because they are all equally real, but because all are only assumptions. The one contains what is accepted as necessary when it is not yet so; the others, what is imagined as possible and, a moment later, is possible no longer.

⁴⁹ Ibid, P.73.

⁵⁰ Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (Florida: Harcourt, 1978), pp.32-33.

In this sense, Singapore is not unlike Calvino's Fedora. Her *physical* materiality is an assumption because what seems immutably chiselled in stone is transformed into the fluid and reconfigurable; her *imagined* form in the crystal globes of the state fuel the utopian desire for impossibility.

Through the study of the *Berita Singapura* footage, these images in crystal globes have been brought to light. The bird's eye view flattens the physical nuances of ground to highlight the planner's perspective. Untamed ground is portrayed as 'unneeded earth' which can be transformed and reclaimed for state use. The urban fabric is visually simplified so that the built forms seem to have displaced nothing significant when imposed on the blank slate of the ground. Ground attains a singular value of 'land'.

In the process of becoming a commodity, ground ceases to have a specific uses or divergent symbolic values. A different value takes over - an "exchange value".⁵¹ To borrow Karl Marx's term, a *phantasmagoria* is created in these utopian visions, an illusion that conceals the specificities of an object, portraying it only as a fetishised item of desire.⁵²

What then, is the significance of this utopian mapping with regards the space of the Chinese burial ground?

In Tan's *Moving House* the grave of the Chew's parents emerges as a space riddled with symbolic and cultural complexities, unsettling the homogeneity that the crystal globes evoke. In the case of *The Coffin*, the "rare, refined, solid, polished, grand and heavy" coffin is an object laden with cultural weight, existing as a counterpoint to 'land' as a commodified object.⁵³ The Chinese burial ground emerges as a space of deviancy, of 'otherness'. It is a *heterotopia*.

⁵¹ Karl Marx and Samuel Moore (trans.), *Capital A Critique of Political Economy Vol. I* (New York: International Publishers, 1967), p.72.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Kuo, 'The Coffin', p.61.



10
Graves at the highest point
of the Kwong Hou Swa
Teochew Cemetery.



11
The graves at the foot of
the hill.

Ground Survey II: Kwong Hou Swa Teochew Cemetery

The ground yielded a wealth of secrets as the last one thousand graves were exhumed from the 150-year old Kwong Hou Swa Teochew Cemetery in mid-2009.⁵⁴ The many remarkable objects that were unearthed spoke of the exuberant society of the Teochew elites buried in this particular area of the cemetery. Qing Dynasty jade bangles, remnants of courtly robes that once draped the corpses, jade beads with insignias – these were among many other artifacts that unlocked a world only hinted of by the government titles inscribed on the gravestones.

The cemetery sat on a hilly site along Woodlands Road that overlooked the Johor Straits, chosen for its positive *fengshui* as the highest point in the area.⁵⁵ Graves that were higher up the hill were well-spaced and belonged to the wealthy and powerful: merchants, businessmen and ambassadors. Many were omega-shaped graves built with a pond in front and a mound at the rear. The less elaborate graves at lower ground sat cheek by jowl, owned by those of more humble origin.

As the nearby Woodlands housing estate rose in the 1960s, the clear view of the Straits was lost. Instead of the hilly ground, the newly-constructed flats became the new highest point in the area.⁵⁶ In the 1980s, the government purchased the cemetery land from the Ngee Ann Kongsi for state use.⁵⁷ The graves were eventually exhumed in 2008 and 2009 to make way for the Downtown Line MRT (Mass Rapid Transit) Depot and other future developments.

Although this physical landscape has changed immensely over time, one thing remains constant: this ground is undoubtedly *prime* estate, in one way or another.

⁵⁴ 'Singapore Pieces the Rich History of the Teochew Community Together', *The Straits Times*, 23 February 2009

⁵⁵ *Fengshui* refers to the principles of Chinese geomancy, which is elaborated on in Chapter 3.

⁵⁶ Hui Yew-Foong, 'The Last Teochew Cemetery in Singapore', <http://www.overseaschineseconfederation.org/conference/files/179.pdf> (accessed 20 Sep 2009).

⁵⁷ The Ngee Ann Kongsi is a Teochew clan organization in Singapore.

Chapter 3

REFLECTIONS AND HILLS

3.1

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places - places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society - which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias.⁵⁸

In a lecture presented to a group of Parisian architects in March 1967, Michel Foucault introduced the concept of *heterotopia*, a site of alternative order that counteracts the order of normative space.⁵⁹ Arising as a postmodern spatial theory that challenges rational planning practices prevalent in the 1960s and the utopianism movement emerging in '68, *heterotopia* was conceived as a way to circumvent the norms that shackled the human imagination.⁶⁰ Foucault spoke of it almost as a flight of fancy.

⁵⁸ Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec (trans.), 'Of Other Spaces', *Diacritics*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring, 1986), p24.

⁵⁹ The lecture was later published in a text entitled 'Of Other Spaces (Des Espace Autres)' published by the French journal *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité*.

⁶⁰ David Harvey, 'Cosmopolitanism and the Banality of all Geographical Evils' in Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff (eds.) *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism* (Duke University Press, 2001), p.279.

Heterotopia is a space of ‘otherness’, a quality which Kevin Hetherington defines as how it “organize(s) the social world in a way different to that which surrounds (it)”.⁶¹ Due to this pronounced difference from its neighbouring sites, heterotopia creates an unsettling, unfamiliar configuration of spatial and social relationships. Making use of a smorgasbord of examples such as vacation villages, barracks, honeymoon hotels and gardens, Foucault illustrates an extensive and kaleidoscopic picture of what these ‘other spaces’ constitute, that is, unnatural and marginalized sites. They are emplacements in the fissures of the city that contest and reverse the monotony of mundane everyday life, and are characterized by their innate heterogeneity.

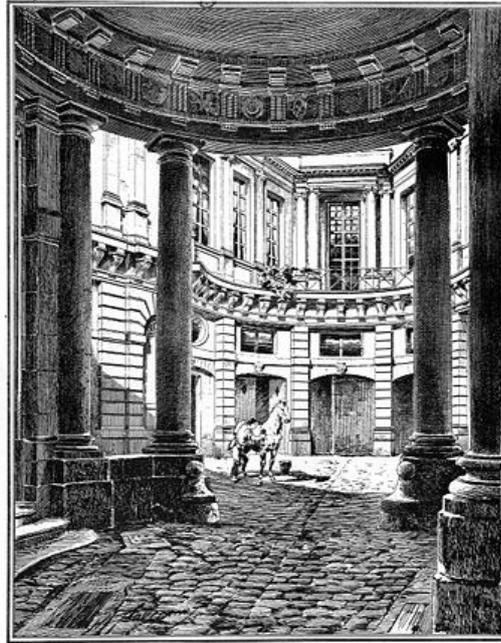
These microcosmic spaces are contrasted with their ‘unreal’ counterparts - *utopias*, which Edward W. Soja reads as “sites with no real place, nowhere lands, fundamentally unrealized spaces which present society in either a perfected form or else turned upside down”.⁶² While utopia, an imaginary realm, presents society in its most ideal form, heterotopia is a similarly perfected space - an ‘enacted utopia’ that is rooted in reality.

However there is more to this duality of heterotopia and utopia than a categorization of the ‘real’ and the ‘unreal’, or a simple relationship of polarity. It is possible for them to exist in a “mixed, joint experience”, namely in the situation of the mirror. Foucault employs the metaphor of the mirror to illustrate an object that creates an imaginary image, a nonphysical reflection of no locality: this image we know of as the utopia. The mirror *itself* is considered heterotopic: it is a tangible object that shapes the optically-reversed image observed within it, and is connected to all real space in a manner of reflection or inversion. Within the contained frame of the mirror is a space encapsulated and contrary, yet irrevocably attached to all of real space – the stuff of the everyday. Heterotopia, as circumscribed by the metaphor of the mirror, is a space both imaginary and real.

⁶¹ Hetherington, *The Badlands of Modernity*, p.14.

⁶² Edward W. Soja, ‘Heterotologies: A Remembrance of Other Spaces in the Citadel-LA’ in Sophie Watson and Katherine Gibson (eds.) *Postmodern Cities and Spaces* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995), p.14.

Given this analogy of the mirror-object, we have to consider the spatial implications of heterotopia as well. Although it is tempting to caricaturize it as a place isolated by incompatible or deviant function such as the brothel, the *physicality* of heterotopia is pivotal in holding together its disparate parts and meanings.



12

Vestibule and court of the Hotel de Beauvais in Paris.

Take for example Le Pautre's Hotel de Beauvais in Paris, which is an excellent case for the architectural heterotopia.⁶³ This seventeenth-century hotel arises from an irregular site, a fragment formed out of the space between other buildings. It is a fantastical assemblage of recognizable but spatially disrupted parts - rooms with multiple axial alignments, various entries that respond to "two streets of very different character", a disorientating garden "displaced to the upper level" - all built upon medieval foundations of "evocative configuration".⁶⁴ Robin Dripps describes the Hotel as:

⁶³ Dripps, 'Groundwork', p.76.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

(A) building with the programmatic complexity of a piece of the city. Its architecture reveals to its inhabitants the competing histories of all that surrounds. At the same time, multiple connections, both literal and implied, are established with different parts of a large and varied neighbourhood.⁶⁵

The Hotel de Beauvais is a mirror *of* Paris, *in* Paris. It provides us with a material understanding of heterotopia; like a chimera, it conjures a reflected fantasy, stitched together from fragments of reality.

3.2

With Foucault's mirror in mind, it becomes clear why he chooses to describe, at length, the "strange heterotopia" of the Christian cemetery in Western culture. Foucault describes the cemetery as a space that is "connected with all the sites of the city-state or society or village", or sites of the everyday.⁶⁶ Every family has relatives housed within the cemetery, located centrally as an ancillary space to the church. Over time, as societal attitudes and patterns shift, the function of the cemetery also evolves. Despite this, the cemetery retains coherence by being differentiated as a space of "otherness", whether as the "sacred and immortal heart of the city" or a space associated with darkness and death.⁶⁷ It is a reflection, a *mirror*, of society's attitudes and patterns materialized in physical space. It is also a site distinguished by its disruption of homogeneous urban order, due to its connotation with illness and the unworldly, and its "horrific spectacles of decomposing corpses, piles of bones and broken coffins".⁶⁸

However, there lies a fundamental difference between Chinese and Western cemeteries. This difference resides in the considerations of *ground*, its configuration and its meanings. The reading of the Chinese burial ground as heterotopia hinges on this crucial differentiation. It refreshes the

⁶⁵ Dripps, 'Groundwork', p.76.

⁶⁶ Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', p.25.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ R.A. Etlin, *The Architecture of Death: The Transformation of the Cemetery in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984), p. 32.

understanding of heterotopia rooted in the nuances of the cultural landscape; it also engages the Chinese burial ground as a heterotopic space with innate contradictions and complexities.

For the Chinese, a sophisticated collection of ideas determine the locality, orientation and design of graves. These are rules in traditional Taoist belief that have to be followed to ensure the success of burial.⁶⁹ Due to its preoccupation with the manipulation and harnessing of natural elements such as wind, earth and water, this set of rules is referred to as *fengshui* or Chinese geomancy.⁷⁰ Stephan Feuchtwang states that *fengshui*:

Stands for the power of the natural environment, the wind and the air of the mountains and hills; the streams and the rain; and much more than that: the composite influence of the natural processes. (...) By placing oneself well in the environment *feng-shui* will bring good fortune.⁷¹

The geomantic principles of *fengshui* describe a form of utopia - an imaginary and ideal vision of how a particular space should be arranged. When the ideological order of *fengshui* is realised, it distinguishes the site of the Chinese grave from all other 'real' sites by introducing a new advantageous configuration of social and spatial relationships, between the landscape and the grave; the living and the dead. Thus, the Chinese burial ground emerges as an 'enacted utopia', or a heterotopia.

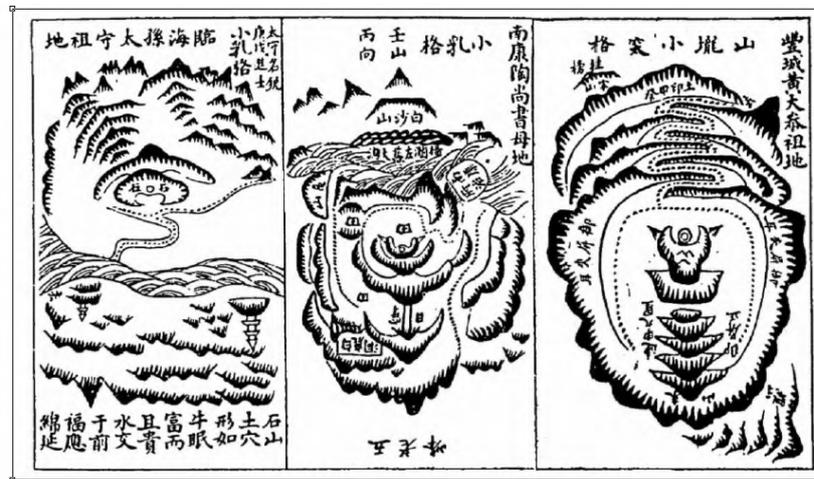
This application of *fengshui* involves the calculated manipulation of the landscape and its natural elements. Proper placement of the deceased's remains has a "direct effect on the worldly success or

⁶⁹ Several variants of Chinese religion converge to form a set of common beliefs in ancestor worship. While Taoism has a strong influence on Chinese burial rituals and grave site selection, Confucianism also plays a secondary role in establishing attitudes towards ancestor worship.

⁷⁰ Literally translated from Chinese, *fengshui* means 'wind-water'.

⁷¹ Stephan Feuchtwang, *An Anthropological Analysis of Chinese Geomancy* (Vientiane: Vithagna, 1974), p.2.

failure of the living” as it is possible to arrange the grave in a manner in which positive influences are drawn from the ground and bestowed upon the descendants of the dead.⁷²



13 Three examples of geomantic maps illustrating ideal topographical conditions.

Maurice Freedman, in his extensive analysis of geomancy of the Chinese grave, describes how the professional geomancer – the essential agent in the locating and mapping of the burial ground – facilitates the arrangement of the site in an ideal order.⁷³ Freedman explains that the geomancer’s task begins with the selection of a favourable burial site, preferably between the ‘boldly rising’ ground of the ‘white tiger’ in the west and the ‘softly undulating’ ground of the ‘azure dragon’ in the east. In Chinese geomantic maps, the ‘White Tiger’ refers to a steep slope or hill, while the ‘azure dragon’ refers to a gentle landform. In the situation where these prime conditions are unavailable, there exist variants of the Chinese grave where an artificial mound is created behind an omega-shaped tomb, simulating the hilly terrain of the ideal burial site.

These symbolically-shaped elements of the terrain are accompanied by other topographical features, like ‘stony ground and peaked, rounded, or steep mountains’ which would represent the elements metal, wood, water, fire and earth. The site’s terrain should not be flat or demarcated by straight lines

⁷² Rubie W. Watson, *Grave and Politics in Southeastern China* (London: University of California Press, 1988), p.207.

⁷³ Maurice Freedman, *Chinese Lineage and Society: Fukien and Kwangtung* (London: Athlone, 1966), pp.122-123.

formed by roads or water, but rather, should ideally be open in front, closed off on the sides and have a winding stream before it, so as to ensure the concentration of “Cosmic Breath” at the grave.⁷⁴

The physical ground of the Chinese grave is mapped with strict topographical laws corresponding to the imaginary realm of *fengshui* imagery and symbolism. Maintenance of this geomantic configuration is “so delicate that it can be upset by the slightest change in the environment”.⁷⁵ Like the reflective surface of Foucault's heterotopic mirror, the ground is the medium by which this geomantic transaction takes place; the nuances of the terrain correspond to the concavity and convexity of the mirror, exaggerating, reordering, or reducing forces in the relationship with the living. Therefore, the topography of this surface is important, as it determines how closely the reflected heterotopia matches the image of *fengshui* beliefs.

The connection between the ground of the ancestor's grave and his descendants is one that is consequential and inescapably strong. Emily M. Ahern elaborates that in the case of the traditional Chinese grave:

With a perfect configuration, all descendants of the deceased would benefit equally; but if the configuration is not perfect on all sides, then the descendants, and brothers especially, will almost certainly wrangle over the alignment of the axis of the grave, each hoping to have the character representing him facing a favourable direction.⁷⁶

Like heterotopia, the Chinese grave is connected to the real, everyday space – of the living. This connection is not simply prescribed by physical proximity or religious reverence, but produces a link of inextricable causality between ancestor and descendant, and allegedly even determines the tides of fortune for the latter.

⁷⁴ In Taoist belief, the ‘Cosmic Breath’ is a benign influence which can be accumulated to augur good fortune.

⁷⁵ Emily M. Ahern, *The Cult of the Dead in a Chinese Village* (California: Stanford, 1973), p.178.

⁷⁶ Ahern, *The Cult of the Dead*, pp.177-178.

In order to investigate how this connection manifests, perhaps we could compare the Chinese grave to its counterparts in Western history. Rubie S. Watson describes how the Greeks unlocked an essential “regenerative power” upon cremation of their dead, and how in early Christian times protection and shelter were provided by the tombs of saints and martyrs.⁷⁷

However, it is important to note that unlike the Western cemetery, the Chinese grave draws its power from the *landscape* itself, rather than from the physical remains of ancestors. Watson highlights how “the remains of the dead are not the source of power or renewal; instead they serve as conductors of a power that originates in nature itself”.⁷⁸ Similarly Freedman argues that the ancestors in the grave are “passive agents, pawns in a ritual game played by their descendants with the help of geomancer”, merely withholding or amplifying the blessings that are channelled from the terrain.⁷⁹ This does not mean that the remains of ancestors are insignificant, but that they are a part of the sacred, powerful entity of the *ground*, inseparable from the coffins that align them in the earth, or the surrounding soil extending indefinitely into the earth.

3.4

It is in *The Order Of Things* that Foucault first makes a reference to the heterotopia. Here, he recounts his irrepressible laughter as he comes across a passage written by Borges describing a Chinese encyclopaedia that divides animals into many disparate categories such as 'embalmed', 'frenzied', 'belonging to the Emperor', 'painted with a very fine camelhair brush' and so on.⁸⁰ This strange juxtaposition of incongruous categories amuses Foucault, who goes on to note that they are held together in this bizarre menagerie only by the order of numeration and listing, adding that:

⁷⁷ Watson, *Grave and Politics*, p.206.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Maurice Freedman, *Chinese Lineage and Society: Fukien and Kwangtung* (London: Athlone, 1966), p.126.

⁸⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Order Of Things* (New York: Random House, 1972), p.15.

The monstrous quality that runs through Borges' enumeration consists, on the contrary, in the fact that the common *ground* on which such meetings are possible has itself been destroyed.⁸¹

What Foucault means is that the crucial thing omitted from this collection is the spatial context of China, the only place where these categories could possibly exist in coherence.

Similarly, the meaning or significance of heterotopia of the Chinese burial grounds is dismantled when its *ground* is removed or displaced through the rational mapping of ground by the state. Such mappings supplant the Chinese interpretation of 'ground' by projecting a new order. The Chinese grave, without the complexities of ground as reiterated in the principles of *fengshui*, exists only as a stranded coffin that is awkwardly out of place.

We have previously established that the heterotopia of the Chinese burial grounds is a construct that does not exist in isolation but defined by the configurations of ground within and without. Thus, the ground, especially in landlocked Singapore, functions as a battle zone of conflicting ideologies which culminating in development and redevelopment displacing obstructions like the Chinese burial grounds which lie in its path.

3.5

The traditional Chinese burial ground has been discussed as a heterotopia, a space of 'otherness' distinguished by its inextricable ties to the ground datum. Thus, in this case, ground performs an important role in Foucault's metaphorical mirror by constructing an elaborate relationship between the heterotopia's physical and projected aspects, and the real world itself. In its inherent complexity, the heterotopia of the Chinese burial ground circumscribes a *fragile* set of relationships. This is hinted of in Kuo Pao Kun's play, in the excessive size and weight of the coffin that the protagonist is tasked to bury:

⁸¹ Ibid, p.16.

You see, the coffin was too big. It was so big we had to hire 16 coolies to carry it from the funeral coach to the grave. (...) It was so damn heavy that the 16 of them nearly dropped it to the ground when they got it off the coach. (...) You don't want the coffin to crash down. I'm sure you understand that.⁸²

In its cumbersomeness, the coffin is an object emblematic of cultural excessiveness that can be easily shattered. As such, disruption does occur in both Kuo Pao Kun's *The Coffin* and Tan Pin Pin's *Moving House*.

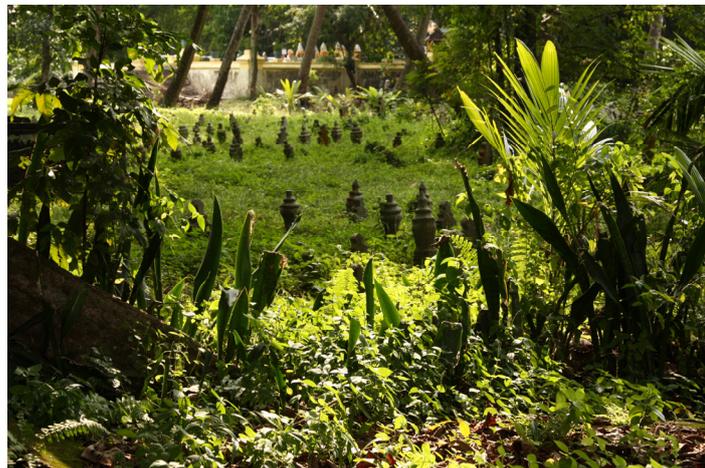
The protagonist of *The Coffin* is challenged by the standardized orderliness of the public cemetery and the rational motivations of its guardians, and finds himself unable to bury the coffin. The incompatibility between the hole and the coffin severs the ties between the Chinese cultural entity and its claims to having "roots" in Singapore ground. In *Moving House*, the ground of the Chinese grave is physically dismantled upon exhumation and reformed in accordance to the new order of the columbarium.

The ground begins to shift.

⁸² Kuo, 'The Coffin', p.61.



14
Tombs at the Jalan Kubor
cemetery..



15
The cemetery overgrown
with weeds.

Ground Survey III: Cemetery at Jalan Kubor

A walk along Jalan Kubor to the north of Kampong Glam would lead one to a small cemetery overgrown with shrubbery and weeds, a forgotten site dotted with knee-height tombstones draped over with yellow cloth. This is a site of limbo in all sense of the word, evidently a 'place or state of neglect or oblivion', 'an intermediate or transitional place or state', and 'a state of uncertainty'.⁸³ A map of Singapore dated 1839 reveals this neglected places as "The Tombs of the Malay Princes", which explains the vibrant yellow used in the cloth – a colour attributed to Malay royalty.

A site analysis of this area in the 1994 Rochor Planning Report by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) identified this cemetery as one of the 'Weaknesses and Constraints' which hinders the potential for redevelopment, justifying it to be labeled as an area of "Incompatible Use".⁸⁴ In a more recent Masterplan (2005) this 'place in limbo' is proposed to be replaced by high-density residential housing.

It is these fragments or unclaimed shards of the city that go unnoticed, and are silently rendered obsolete by the mapping of an invisible but very potent force of change. On the printed map, the cemetery is a rectangle of colour that could almost be easily swept off like a stray piece of paper, or could easily inherit the colour diffused from its zoned neighbours.

But land is land, and every bit is important.

⁸³ Definition of 'limbo', Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/limbo> (accessed 22 June 2009)

⁸⁴ Urban Redevelopment Authority, *Rochor Planning Report* (Singapore: 1994).

Chapter 4

WHEN THE EARTH MOVES

4.1

The exhumation of the Chews' parents' graves in *Moving House* takes place in an open space of tall grass. The natural tranquility of this space seems unusual when placed in contrast with the dominating urban images of national development. These verdant surroundings and its scattered gravestones are almost reminiscent of a primordial Singapore before independence, before the British thrust their flag into the soft soil of Temasek; a time when this ground existed as uncharted territory on the map and wild nature grew free over the earth, essentially creating a *terra incognita*. The ground with its tall grasses, uneven surface and irregular vegetation serves as a datum by which all development is measured and recalibrated. As the earth is broken into and the once-invisible remains of the dead are uncovered and removed, how does this process affect the meaning of ground? Is the value of ground then quantified as the number of floors built above it, or of the numerous basements that are dug below?

As discussed previously, it is almost too easy to conceive of this empty physical ground as *tabula rasa*. This is a condition which Rem Koolhaas infamously used to describe Singapore's post-independence state in *S M L XL*, a 'razed plane as a basis for a genuinely new beginning'⁸⁵. In Koolhaas' Singapore, ground assumes the identity of *land*. Unlike the cultural complexities of 'ground', 'land' is a territorially demarcated space, seen as a commodity that has to be efficiently maximized.

⁸⁵ Rem Koolhaas, 'Singapore Songlines: Portrait of a Potemkin Metropolis ... or Thirty Years of Tabula Rasa', in Bruce Mau and Hans Werlemann (eds.) *S M L XL* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995), p.1031.

Koolhaas equates Singapore's land to blankness, a malleable substance which can be moulded and sculpted to one's whim and fancy. The term 'raze' is used to suggest a certain aggression, a calculated move to scour the *ground* of impurities so that it may acquire the status of 'virgin' *land*. Drastic measures are required in order to bring ground to its elemental form so that it may be shaped again. It involves the removal of uncultivated jungle, slums, swamps, hills, rivers, or in this case, graves.

In Singapore's history of urban renewal, besides ground, the other elements of Singapore's physical geography have also been subjected to this process of smoothening and erasure. The Singapore River has been tamed and wrestled into shape resulting in a topologically featureless river today as a consequence of the River Cleanup Campaign. Elsewhere, greenery is re-appropriated into the oxymoronic artificial-natural environments of the Gardens by the Bay.⁸⁶

Every inch of ground, water and vegetation seems to hold a possibility of being reset to its original form in order to be moulded into a desired shape.

4.2

In Kuo's *The Coffin*, the process of 'razing' the ground is presented as an act of negotiation and offers access to imagined possibilities. The coffin, the play's *piece de resistance*, becomes a subject of physical manipulation and shearing, beginning with its inability to assume its natural position in the ground:

So I said quietly and politely, "Now, never mind which is too small or which is too big. The thing is, the coffin cannot go in. Tell me: Why didn't you measure the hole?" "But sir, this is standard size," he said.⁸⁷

The heavy, embellished coffin is emblematic of the ornate excess of Chinese culture. Refusing to enter its assigned place, it represents an archaic and inefficient configuration of space – a heterotopia

⁸⁶ For the River Cleanup, see Steven Dobbs, *The Singapore River: A Social History, 1819-2002* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2003), p.126.

⁸⁷ For Gardens by the Bay, see Wong Yunn Chii, 'Interview with Mr. Andrew Grant (AG)' in *SA*, no. 238 (2005).

⁸⁷ Kuo, 'The Coffin', p.63.

that is incompatible with the pragmatic order of the cemetery. The ‘new generation undertaker’ denies the physicality of the coffin that stands in front of him, instead using an imaginary measure of space as a standard to dig the hole in the ground. The problem is brought to a higher authority, and officer also continues the process of ‘razing’ the heterotopic coffin verbally, by proposing:

One, change to a smaller coffin.

Two, change to a private cemetery.

Three, chop off the extra wood on the sides of the coffin.

Four, simply remove the body and bury it wrapped in bamboo sheets.⁸⁸

Every option presented involves erasure, either in the form of reduction, displacement, amputation, or complete removal of the space of the coffin respectively, the increasing length of each line emphasizing the corresponding degree of which the coffin is physically altered. These are processes that negate this space so that the coffin may disappear, either into the ground or away from the public site of the cemetery, resolving the ground datum into its undisturbed horizontality once again.

In *Moving House*, this creation of *tabula rasa* takes place in the process of exhumation. The ground is expunged of its physical contents to create a “genuinely new beginning”, as Koolhaas describes it.⁸⁹ Having previously established that remains of the dead are inextricable from the ground mapped by geomantic principles, the exhumation and the migration of human remains also translates into the uprooting, displacement and re-shaping of this cultural space. We may understand this process of erasure and sculpting by borrowing an appropriate analogy from sociologist John Clammer. He likens Singapore’s landscape to the bonsai, a small plant artificially trained into a shape of the gardener’s fancy:

⁸⁸ Kuo, ‘The Coffin’, p.63.

⁸⁹ Koolhaas, ‘Singapore Songlines’, p.1031.

The real fragility of the remarkable society that has been created in this tiny island state (...) is not its ethnic and cultural complexity *per se*. It is rather in the artificiality of the attempts to prune it into a precarious order. (...) In both size and artificiality Singapore does indeed remind one of the bonsai: nature miniaturized and bent.⁹⁰

Before being subjected to the surgical procedures of the gardener, the woody plant grows according to its own logic and form, embedded with a natural blueprint that informs its growth and identity. Similarly, the spatial fabric of the Chinese burial ground is organic and responsive, arranged according to the situational principles of *fengshui*. Its formal logic is borne out of particular patterns of belief.⁹¹ With the exhumation and displacement of remains, the Chinese burial ground is forced into a new order unnatural to its physicality. Like the bonsai plant, it is seen as a blank slate to be shaped into the new ground of the columbarium - a similarly miniaturized and idealised landscape of the dead.

4.3

In *Disneyland with the Death Penalty*, William Gibson visits Singapore for the first time and realizes, on his taxi ride from Changi Airport to the city, that the country fulfils his expectation of it as a “clean dystopia” with “no dirt whatsoever(,) no muss, no fractal edge to things”.⁹² He describes it as a space that is meticulously micromanaged to the point where the entire island has the feel of a large corporation or a theme park borne from a need “to meet both the romantic longings and purely mercantile needs of the British Empire”, and eventually shaped according to the dreams of one man or one authority.⁹³

Singapore is thus caricatured as a harmonious and non-conflictual space that entertains, soothes and pacifies, invents history and cultivates a nostalgia for a constructed past. Gibson notes that Singapore

⁹⁰ John Clammer, *Singapore: Ideology, Society, Culture* (Singapore: Chopman, 1995), p.48.

Bonsai or *penzai* (in Chinese) is the Japanese and Chinese art of aesthetically pruning plants in containers. Bonsai plants are modelled as a miniaturized version of an ideal landscape, often inspired by Chinese brush paintings.

⁹¹ Brenda S. A. Yeoh, ‘The Body After Death: Place, Tradition and the Nation-State in Singapore’ in Elizabeth Kenworthy Teather (ed.) *Embodied Geographies: Spaces, Bodies and Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.242.

⁹² William Gibson, ‘Disneyland With The Death Penalty’, *Wired* (Sept. – Oct. 1993), p.34.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

television has the tendency to be didactic about ethnic identity – in television programmes “(m)odel families, Chinese, Malay, or Indian, act out little playlets explicating the customs of each culture”, however incongruous or inaccurate these appropriations are. Singapore is essentially a *Disneyland*, which is essentially an environment that assembles various contradictory worlds, “properly sanitized and mythologized, into one place of pure fantasy containing multiple spatial orders”, a faux “It’s a Small World” experience.⁹⁴

This description seems to echo that of Foucault’s heterotopia, of contradictory realms that are juxtaposed together. However, unlike the heterotopia that is openly responsive to its surrounding sites, Disneyland consists of real spaces that are artificially recombined in an isolated chamber. Could we then consider the Disney-like Singapore to be an *enforced* utopia?

Through the study of spatial relationships of the zones in Disneyland, Louis Marin concludes that this theme park could be termed a “degenerate utopia”, or a manifestation of utopia that models physical reality after myth, collective fantasy or vision.⁹⁵ Where there is a gap between Thomas More’s imaginary utopia – a non-place of happiness – and the physicality of real geometric space, the degenerate utopia fashions a bridge between the two by appropriating elements from the real world, much like how the heterotopia does. Marin elaborates on the purpose of the degenerate utopia:

This function has an obvious ideological function. It alienates the visitor by a distorted and fantasmatic representation of daily life, by a fascinating image of the past and the future, of what is estranged and what is familiar: comfort, welfare, consumption, scientific and technological progress, superpower, and morality. These are values obtained by violence and exploitation; here they are projected under the auspices of law and order.⁹⁶

The existence of the columbarium in *Moving House* can likewise be seen as a result of a materialized fantasy, a condensation of elements from the Chinese burial ground at Choa Chu Kang that resolves

⁹⁴ David Harvey, *Megacities Lecture 4* (Amersfoort: Twynstra Gudde Management Consultants, 2000), p.66.

⁹⁵ Louis Marin, ‘Disneyland: A Degenerate Utopia’, *Glyph 1* (1977), p.61.

⁹⁶ Marin, ‘Disneyland’, p.61.

a kind of utopian desire of efficiency and regularity. Just as Disneyland eliminates the troubles of actual travel by combining the rest of the world into a coherent centralized structure, the columbarium removes the problem of the shortage of land, repackaging elements of the burial ground into compact spaces.⁹⁷

In this arrangement, there is a marked compression of space. A reduction of proximity between individual units and vertical stacking of cremated remains creates space. It may be compared to vertical land reclamation. If previously, the remains of the dead are “of the ground”, the single ground datum is now eradicated. The new “ground” of the columbarium – a vertical cemetery – may be repeated ad infinitum, according to need.



17

Stills from *Moving House*. Welcoming the dead into their new home.

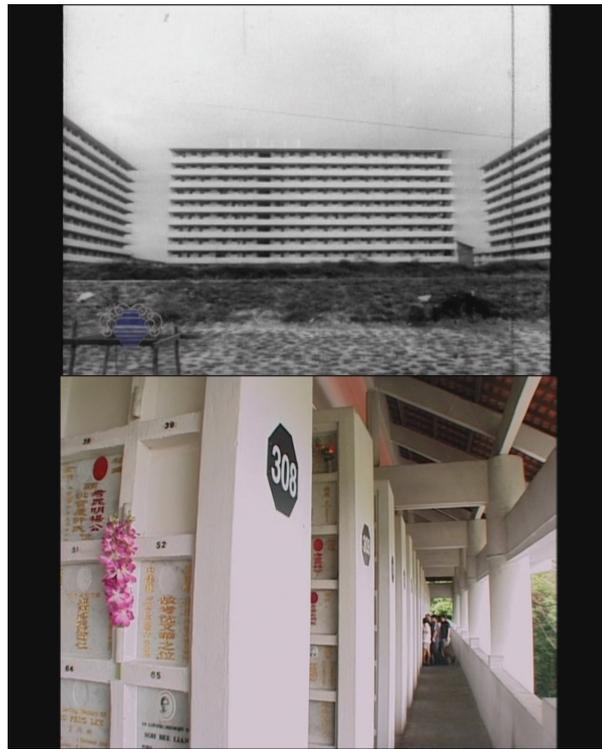
In the documentary, the vast unbounded prayer space at the Choa Chu Kang cemetery is now replaced with a small table covered with crimson cloth on which the Chews place their offerings. While previously the family could encircle the grassy grave with joss sticks and candles, now an inconspicuous container is provided beside each niche for this purpose. The columbarium niche is

⁹⁷ Harvey, *Megacities*, p.66.

even given a specific address, which the Chews recite as they set the urns containing their parents' ashes into the niche, announcing: "Block 306, third floor, niche 53. Welcome into your new house".⁹⁸

Perhaps it is then possible to see the columbarium as a degenerate Disneyland in its own right, a distorted recapitulation of the heterotopic Chinese burial grounds.

4.4



17

Stills from *Moving House*. Similarities between HDB flats and the columbarium.

Tan Pin Pin's juxtaposition of the HDB flats and the severe concrete columbarium may be seen as a move to draw architectural similarities between the two. The rows and rows of indistinguishable niches recall the utopian scenes of housing development in the *Berita Singapura* footage. It also brings to mind Rem Koolhaas' description of the Queenstown HDB flats in the 1960s as "colossal

⁹⁸ *Moving House*. Dir. Tan Pin Pin.

accumulations of slabs seemingly without architectural qualities (that) stand in militaristic formation.”⁹⁹

It seems appropriate that Koolhaas brings up the militaristic analogy as the columbarium seems to evoke Bentham’s prison plans for the Panopticon, which Foucault refers to as a “diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to an ideal form (...) a figure of a political technology”.¹⁰⁰ The columbarium inherits the Panopticon’s features – divided into cells and isolated by thick walls, openly subject to scrutiny by an unseen observer.¹⁰¹ An open arrangement of the niches, visually accessible like that of books in a library or products on display in a supermarket, are in stark contrast with the ruralness of Choa Chu Kang’s graves, hidden by long grasses and accessible only with a dirt track, on foot.

At the columbarium, close observation and governance are of prioritised. The result of this policing is what Marin describes as an operative mechanism in his degenerate Disneyland: “(t)he dialectic is repressed and stability and harmony are secured through intense surveillance and control”.¹⁰²

It may seem like a stretch to compare the fluffy Disney experience with the terrifying Benthamite prison, but stripped, they are fundamentally the same – both are enforced utopias. To materialize this space is to engage with closure, an authoritarian act. Correspondingly, the columbarium is also an expression of control in its reification of the state’s rational ideals.

There are also distinct changes in how the Chew family traverses this new spatial organization. The grave at Choa Chu Kang is treated with a respect for geodetic patterns in terms of the placement of ritualistic objects. Elaborate rites are conducted by a Taoist priest to ease the spirits from their disturbed grave, and the human remains are carefully shielded from the sun during its exhumation. Conversely, at the columbarium the Chews decide to shatter their late brother’s niche so that his urn

⁹⁹ Koolhaas. ‘Singapore Songlines’, p.1021.

¹⁰⁰ Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 205.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, p.208.

¹⁰² Harvey, *Megacities*, p66.

can be transferred into one niche, together with their parents' urns. Although the apparent motive is to "reunite the family", one of the Chew brothers admits that there is the added convenience of just visiting one niche.¹⁰³ In doing so, the Chew family has submitted to the rationalities of the system. The gridded hierarchy of the columbarium now underlines the order of the graves, displacing the specificity of site denoted by principles of *fengshui* and symbolic alignment, and once inseparable from the ground.

While the Chew family eventually accepts this new configuration, the protagonist of *The Coffin* resists it by comically retorting that:

You know, this is my grandfather being buried. It is not the bottling of soya sauce; it is not the canning of pineapple cubes; it is not the laying of bricks for your HDB flats and it is not the drawing of rectangles for your parking lots.¹⁰⁴

He adamantly refuses to let his grandfather's body be assumed into a system of commodification and regulation, unveiling a larger ideological mapping of space that is prevalent. This mapping dictates the disciplining of the excessive burial ground, exchanging it for the rational alternative of the columbarium.

When this ideology is enacted, the incongruities and contradictions of heterotopia are resolved, and the degenerate utopia is the new reality. If heterotopia were the mirror with an intricately sculpted surface of reflection, it is now replaced with a very different mirror – one that always presents an image of perfection, regardless of whatever is put before it.

¹⁰³ *Moving House*. Dir. Tan Pin Pin.

¹⁰⁴ Kuo, 'The Coffin', p.69.



18
Stills from *In Search of
Roots*. The hunt for
ancestral graves.

Ground Survey IV: Mandai Columbarium | Tam Tong Village, China

When my maternal grandmother passed away, her body was cremated and her ashes were placed at the Mandai Columbarium. At the time of her passing, I never questioned this process. Not just because it was mandatory, but also because it was inconceivable to me that it could be done in any other way.

During the *Qing Ming* Festival two years after my grandma's passing, several of my relatives embarked on a journey to *Tam Tong*, our family's ancestral village near Huizhou city in the Guangdong province of China.¹⁰⁵ They went "in search of roots", thus one of the objectives of the trip was to locate ancestral graves.¹⁰⁶ The party's first find was a triad of crescent-shaped tombs on a knoll some distance from *Tam Tong*. Engravings revealed that they belonged to ancestors *six to eight* generations before mine. The group then continued the hunt for graves at a hill a few kilometres away, with vague information from old geomantic maps that a particular ancestral grave sat at the crown, opposite a landscape formation described as the 'Monkey Hugging Its Knees'. After an arduous climb uphill, the party eventually found a time-weathered grave, belonging to *Chung Yuk Yen*, an ancestor who lived centuries ago during the Ming Dynasty. And sure enough, in the direction opposite the grave was a hilly ridge shrouded by fog, in the curious shape of a monkey hugging its knees.

My grandmother's final resting place has neither the grandiosity nor the topographical mysticism of my ancestors' graves. Instead it is highly *functional*. When we visit her niche at Mandai, we do not burn incense. Instead, we put plastic flowers because they last. There is no grass to trim, only a small marble tablet that we polish until it is spotlessly white. The hills have given way to concrete, and the strenuous climb has been replaced by a short trip by car. Things are undeniably different, but also convenient, efficient, clean and undoubtedly *Singaporean*.

¹⁰⁵ The *Qing Ming* Festival or Tomb Sweeping Festival is a traditional Chinese festival held on the 104th day of the Winter Solstice. It denotes a time for the Chinese to tend to the graves of ancestors.

¹⁰⁶ *In Search of Roots*. Dir. Terence Shan. DVD. (Singapore: 2009).

Chapter 5

POST-MORTEM

For myself, I am going to be cremated and maybe scattered in some beautiful landscape somewhere that doesn't change much, some parkland or something, possible abroad. I don't like the Singapore landscape at all because space here doesn't have any value ... but I do want to be scattered in a particular space where that space can still be a meaningful space.¹⁰⁷

In *Space, Power and Knowledge*, Foucault proposes that "(s)pace is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power".¹⁰⁸

His words act as a couplet that connects these two aspects – communal life and power - with 'space'. There is no end to the number of meanings or symbols that we can assign to space. But space itself is limited and can only exist in one physical form at any given time, whether irregular or ordered; obstructive or facilitative. Perhaps this is the fundamental reason behind the tensions in Singapore's relationship to ground, an entity which is continuously mapped by conflicting identities, for example, traditional Chinese burial rites and progressive development and redevelopment agendas. When ideologies battle to determine how ground is arranged, this ground inevitably changes.

In the discourse of this dissertation, various surveys were conducted to trace the reconfigurations of ground, both physical and imagined.

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Li Cheng, a Chinese woman whose ancestors' graves at Lorong Panchar were exhumed in 1997 and transferred to Mandai Columbarium. Quoted in Yeoh and Kong, 'The Dead', pp.71-72.

¹⁰⁸ Michel Foucault, 'Space, Knowledge and Power' in Jeremy W Crampton and Stuart Elden (eds.) *Space, Knowledge and Power: Foucault and Geography* (Williston: Ashgate Publishing), p.252.

In the wake of these investigations, perhaps a final survey of ground should be conducted; a *post-mortem* of the heterotopic Chinese burial ground. We would find this in the concluding words of the protagonist of *The Coffin* as he examines his grandfather's final resting place one last time:

I'm sure you'll agree with me that grandfather's coffin had its special charisma and unique character. But the problem was it was too big for the hole. So, under the circumstances, to be pragmatic, it seems I have to get a standard sized one. But then whenever I get to the cemetery and see those graves – those rows after rows of standard sized graves, I cannot resist thinking about the other problem, and this is what really bothers me a lot:

“Now, with them all in the same size and same shape, would my sons and daughters, and my granddaughters after them, be able to find me and recognize me?”

I don't know... I just don't know...¹⁰⁹

Understandably, the man is greatly perturbed about replacing his grandfather's coffin with one that is unidentifiable from the rest. His situation is paradoxical: in order to protect something of significance, in a way the meanings that circumscribe it have to be *abandoned*.

When the ornate and excessive coffin is standardized, the reason of the state on land usage overwhelms the traditional desires of the older generation. Consequently, the heterotopia of Chinese burial grounds and rites are dispelled. Foucault expressed a similar worry in 'Of Other Spaces', with the example of the boat as a "heterotopia par excellence". He cautioned that "(i)n civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates".¹¹⁰ Foucault portrays heterotopia as a kind of *paradise*, a romantic fantasy of a space that can exist despite all odds, and one that evades governance. In Singapore's reality, this heterotopic paradise is met with inescapable laws of control and order, and must inevitably be *policed*.

¹⁰⁹ Kuo, 'The Coffin', p.71.

¹¹⁰ Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', p.27.

But these acts of policing can be considered as *constructive* in achieving attaining paradise. After all, heterotopia exists as a space defined by differences, and is only made significant when contrasted with the order around it. In a way, this order sheds light on heterotopia. Although Singapore's ravenous demand for land cannot permit the fantasy of the Chinese burial ground, the columbarium is a stark reminder of both the country's needs and the cultural significance of one's final resting place. As Rebecca Solnit aptly puts:

Perhaps prison is anything that severs and alienates; paradise is the reclaimed commons with the fences; and so any step toward connection and communion is a step toward paradise, including those that take the route through jail.¹¹¹

¹¹¹ Rebecca Solnit, 'Prisons and Paradises', in *Storming the Gates of Paradise: Landscape for Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p.8.

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