

ROOTS IN A CEMETERY

Identity through the Multiplicity of Space in Bukit Brown

By

Tan Jing Xiang

A0073572A

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Dissertation submitted to the Department of Architecture
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Abstract

Keywords: Bukit Brown, Identity, Home, Nation, Imagined Community, Spatial Trilectics

Housed within Bukit Brown Cemetery are the many tombs of pre-independent Singapore pioneers with syncretic elements of a multicultural milieu. It remained a largely forgotten site except to families who visit the burial ground especially during the annual *Qing Ming* (tomb sweeping) festival.

In 2011, the state announced plans to redevelop Bukit Brown. Civil society groups, who saw the site as one rich in biodiversity and embedding an important historical past, contested the decision. This contestation rehearses a long-standing tension between heritage and progress in Singapore. This dissertation recasts Bukit Brown Cemetery as a highly charged site where notions of identity and belonging are latent.

The dissertation argues for an understanding of this forgotten landscape as integral to the Singaporean psyche of home and nation. Using Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities and Henri Lefebvre's spatial trilectics as its theoretical frameworks, this paper outlines the spatial taxonomies present in Bukit Brown, and how identity is produced and anchored in those spaces. The inquiry unfolds on two scales: the first is a micro-territorial scale where the spatial practices of the individual and domestic unit are studied in relation to the tombs and myths found within and around Bukit Brown. The second one looks at Bukit Brown as macro-territory dotted with cultural anchors signifying collective histories.

Taken together, these two scalar frames reveal the complex structures of individual and collective identity, and how such structures are still actively forming/reforming at the Bukit Brown Cemetery.

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(10,911 words)

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Prelude

ROOTS IN A CEMETERY



1 Roots in a Cemetery: a sectional drawing reveals the underground, a condition not immediately perceptible. The roots of the trees intermingle with some remains of the body. *The drawing straddles between what is real and what is imagined, what is there and what is not there, or 'not there' because we can't see it (yet) like other intangible (forces or) values of Bukit Brown.*

1.0

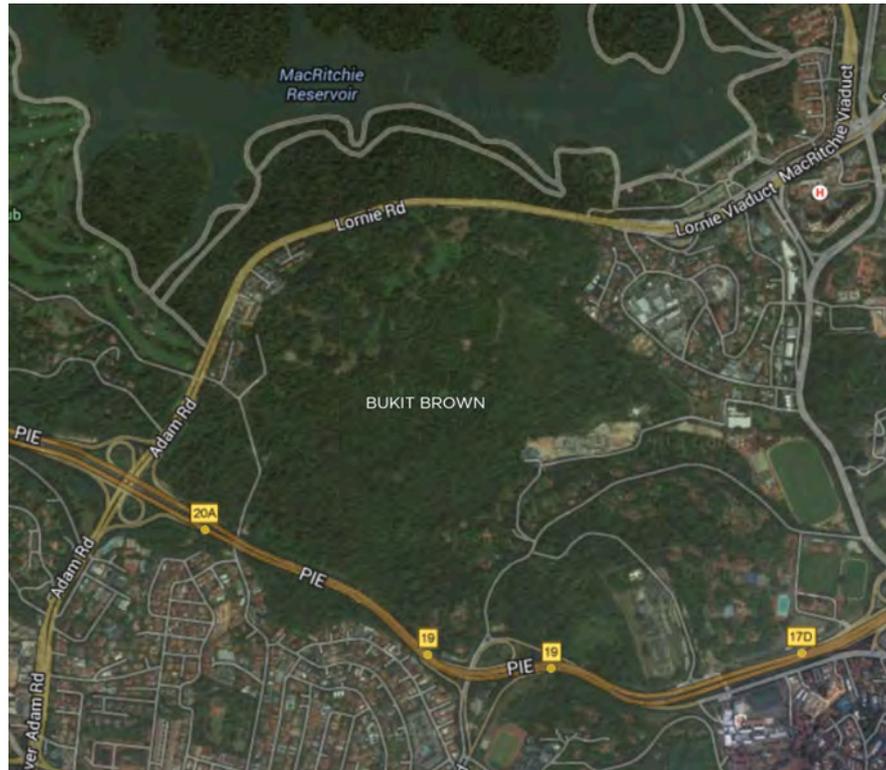
(AT) THE HEART OF THE ISLAND

1.1

A Precarious Existence



2 Rays of light in morning's mist



3 Bukit Brown. Satellite image showing the present-day Bukit Brown area; with MacRitchie Reservoir at the top.

At the heart of the island lies Bukit Brown, an undulating natural landscape consisting of nine hillocks.¹ The area covers about 200 hectares, bounded by Lower Thomson Road, Lornie Road, and the Pan Island Expressway.² Despite being surrounded by traffic arteries, the landscape teems with wildlife and forest vegetation. Dominant trees, such as Rain Trees (*Samanea saman*), and wild trees such as the Albizia are but a small sample of trees found in and around Bukit Brown. Smaller vegetation includes creepers like the Air Potato (*Dioscorea bulbifera*) and epiphytes such as the Bird's Nest Fern and the Rabbit's Foot. Bukit Brown is also abundant with animal and birdlife, some of which are rare finds. Ninety species of birds have been recorded, with as much

¹ 'Bukit' means hill in the Malay language.

² Ho Hua Chew, "Bukit Brown: Nature in an Old Cemetery," in *Spaces of the Dead: A Case from the Living*, ed. Kevin YL Tan (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2011), 102.

as thirteen of these species known to be endangered.³ The Straw-headed Bulbul, one such threatened bird, can be heard chirping bubbly throughout the valleys. These bulbuls and many other birds use the extensive tree canopies as ‘stepping stones’, moving across the forests of the Central Catchment nature reserves up north, and down towards Bukit Brown.⁴

Embowered within the dense forest, covered in leaves and creepers, are decrepitated Chinese tombs numbering to at least 200,000.⁵ Embracing three other clan cemeteries and a municipal cemetery, Bukit Brown is the largest Chinese burial ground found outside of China.⁶ Such hilly landscapes are preferred as cemetery grounds due to their *Feng Shui* (geomancy) significance for which it is believed that a tomb placed on an elevated plain is able to harness vital energy for the posterity of one’s descendants.⁷

³ For more information on endangered birds, refer to the Singapore Red Data Book. See, Nature Society’s Position on Bukit Brown. December 12, 2011. Accessed on August 8, 2014, <http://www.nss.org.sg/documents/Nature%20Society's%20Position%20on%20Bukit%20Brown.pdf>

⁴ The ecological data were referenced from Ho Hua Chew’s article, “Bukit Brown: Nature in an Old Cemetery.”

⁵ Terrence Chong and Chua Ai Lin, “The Multiple Spaces of Bukit Brown,” in *Public Space in Urban Asia*, ed. William S.W Lim (Singapore: world Scientific Publishing, 2014), 27.

⁶ The clan cemeteries are the Seh Ong Cemetery, Hokkien Huay Kuan’s *Kopi Sua* and *Lao Sua* cemeteries. The clan cemeteries were all acquired by the state. Reference retrieved from, Terrence Chong and Chua Ai Lin, “The Multiple Spaces of Bukit Brown.”

⁷ McKenzie, “Bukit Brown: A Garden of History and Heritage,” in *Spaces of the Dead: A Case from the Living*, ed. Kevin YL Tan (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2011), 65-71.



4 Aerial view of Bukit Brown in 1948, when the tombs were visible. The forest did not exist then, as the hill was constantly being maintained.

Bukit Brown or Brown's Hill was named after an Englishman, George Henry Brown, who originally owned the land on which the cemetery is located.⁸ The Chinese colloquially called the area *Kopi Sua*, a hybrid Malay-Hokkien word meaning Coffee Hill.⁹ These two names reflect a rich history of exchange and contestation between the colonial authorities and the local Chinese community. During the mid-1880s, three clansmen bought the land and turned it into the Ong Clan cemetery administered by the *Seh Ong Kongsu*.¹⁰ By the turn of the 20th century, the absence of an extensive municipal cemetery became a challenge as the Chinese population surged and many could not afford expensive clan burial plots.¹¹ Subsequently in 1922, while exercising the Land Acquisition Ordinance, the colonial government, seeing the demand for a

⁸ McKenzie, "Bukit Brown: A Garden of History and Heritage," 58.

⁹ Note: In Malay, 'Bukit' means hill and 'Kopi' means coffee; while 'Sua' means hill in Hokkien. Hokkien is a Southern Chinese dialect.

¹⁰ The land was bought over by Ong Kew Ho, Ong Ewe Hai and Ong Chong Chew. '*Seh Ong Kongsu*' in Hokkien means Ong Surname Clan Association, with 'Seh' meaning surname.

¹¹ Chong and Chua, "The Multiple Spaces of Bukit Brown," 28.

Chinese cemetery, obtained 213 acres of land from the *Seh Ong Kongsi* and launched it as a municipal cemetery for the broader Chinese community.¹² This then became known as the Bukit Brown Municipal Cemetery. Contestation arose when authorities attempted to standardize the burial plot through its size, depth, numbering and proposed a Cartesian layout to maximize space.¹³ Geographer Brenda Yeoh observes that such regulations were part of colonial policy to instill modern ways of organizing society in place of *Feng Shui* practices.¹⁴ This attempt at imposing such foreign control over the local spatial practices was contested by the Chinese because it displaced their traditions and ultimately also their identities.

In the transition from colony to nation-state, the land-scarce Republic borrowed and extended the existing discourses on burial grounds from its colonial administrator. It reconstructed these colonial narratives into its own contemporary rhetoric of 'national development,' deeming these Chinese burial grounds as 'obstructive' while its land could be optimised and cleared for nation building.¹⁵ By 1973, Bukit Brown was closed for interment and the grounds were left under-maintained. The dead however were not all forgotten. Interred within were luminary pioneers of the island's colonial past, who contributed largely to the making of early Singapore, and whose descendants now live in Singapore. Periodically, Bukit Brown would come alive as visitors made trips to the site for purposes of festivals that relate to ancestral worship, such as the annual *Qing Ming* in which families gather to perform rites of worship at the tombs of their

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Malayan Tribune, 30 August 1921

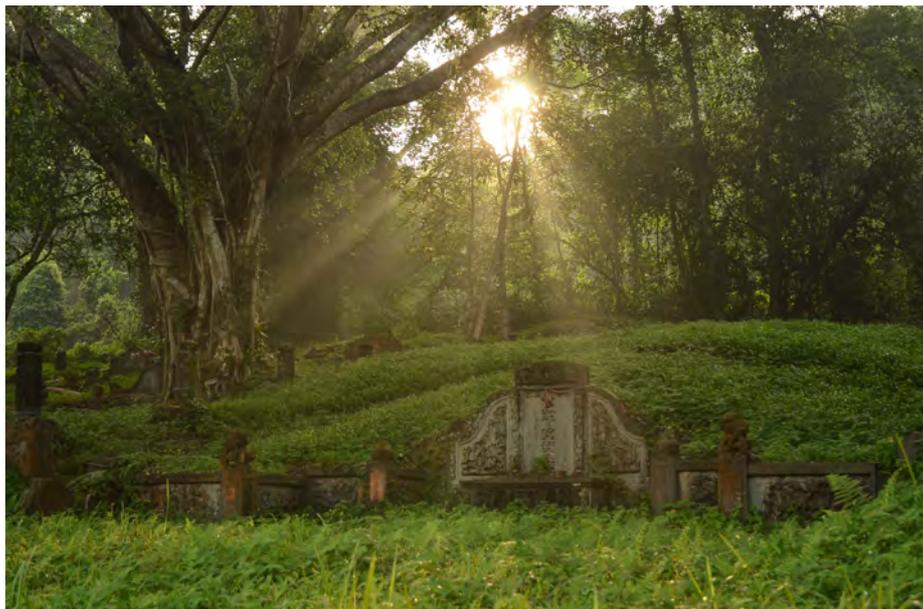
¹⁴ Brenda S. A. Yeoh, *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment*, (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003), 281-311.

¹⁵ Brenda S. A. Yeoh, *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment*, 2nd edition (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003), 281-311.

ancestors. These are communal affairs of an immense scale that even warrants traffic regulation from the National Environment Agency and the Singapore Police.¹⁶

Steeped in history, meanings and biodiversity, Bukit Brown was thought to be a hallowed space of eternal peace. However, the dead are inevitably required to make way for progress; and the natural landscape is now deep in the throes of development.

Down in the valleys of Bukit Brown, the Bulbuls fell silent.



5 A typical morning in Bukit Brown.

¹⁶ This is referenced from Chong and Chua, "The Multiple Spaces of Bukit Brown." Singapore Police Force, "Traffic Arrangements For Qing Ming Religious Observance Day 2011", 25 March 2011; available online at http://www.spf.gov.sg/mic/2011/110325_trafarr_qing_ming.htm, last accessed 20 May 2013; National Environment Agency, 'NEA Advisory: Crowds And Traffic Congestion Expected This Qing Ming', 25 March 2011; available online at http://app2.nea.gov.sg/news_detail_2011.aspx?news_sid=20110331887710549626, last accessed 20 May 2013.



6 Morning walk with the dogs



7 Footpath through the cemetery

An Identity In Crisis

On 30th May 2011 the Singapore Urban Redevelopment Authority announced that Bukit Brown had been slated for housing development to meet the demands of a growing nation.¹⁷ The decision caused much furor among Singaporeans and conservationist groups, to the extent that a nation-wide petition was circulated through social media to garner support against the redevelopment of Bukit Brown. Sentiments escalated in September the same year as another announcement revealed that the area would be bisected by a massive dual four-lane highway to alleviate existing traffic congestion and as a pre-emptive measure for future traffic growth.¹⁸

Consequently, activists and ordinary Singaporeans actively sought petition from the state to conserve Bukit Brown as a heritage site, rehearsing a long-standing public discourse on the subject of heritage and progress.¹⁹ Since then, Bukit Brown has appeared in the local news at least once a month, covered in symposiums, documentaries and international media—echoing a prescient 1921 report stating that Bukit Brown “will be a prolific source of controversy.”²⁰

¹⁷ Chong and Chua, “The Multiple Spaces of Bukit Brown,” 27; Jessica Lim, “Bukit Brown to make way for housing,” *The Straits Times*, May 30, 2011.

¹⁸ Royston Sim, “New road to ease Lornie Road jams,” *The Straits Times*, September 13, 2011.

¹⁹ Their efforts have amounted to listing the cemetery onto the World Monument Watch List 2014, an international body that lists cultural sites that are in danger.

²⁰ Referenced from Chong and Chua, “The Multiple Spaces of Bukit Brown,” *Malaya Tribune*. 28 June 1921.

Indeed, many people likened this controversy to the fate of the much beloved old national library building on Stamford Road, which, despite public objection was demolished in 2004 to make way for the Fort Canning traffic tunnel—setting a precedent for the precarious future of cultural sites as potentially reclaimable for infrastructural purposes such as these road works.²¹ Nevertheless it has also sparked greater awareness for the conservation of heritage among Singaporeans.²² 2011 also saw two other sites of memory being contested following Bukit Brown’s controversy: the “Save Old School” campaign was organized by local arts groups and tenants of the old Methodist Girls’ School at Mount Sophia when it was slated for residential development due to its location on prime land; and the closure of the 1932 Tanjong Pagar Railway Station—following an agreement between leaders of Malaysia and Singapore to free up yet more land for development. The second closure saw throngs of people flowing through the station’s halls and trekking along the defunct train tracks, a monumental remnant of Singapore’s Straits history, once lived and now rendered to an empty shell.²³

Fundamental to the contestation of Bukit Brown, is perhaps the underlying desire for an authentic past—material anchors of identity—which are gradually being displaced by the relentless need to develop, a condition propelled by Singapore’s lack of land. With that in mind, this dissertation seeks to recast Bukit Brown as a highly charged

²¹ Kelvin Wang, "Let's not lose National Library," *The Straits Times*, December 8, 1998; Ho Weng Hin et al., "Heed the people's call, conserve 'built' heritage," *The Straits Times*, March 16, 1999; Lydia Lim, "National Library building to go," *The Straits Times*, March 7, 2000.

²² Siew Kum Hong, "How important are those five minutes?" *Siew Kum Hong: Citizen and activist* (blog), March 12, 2007 (1:55 p.m.), <http://siewkumhong.blogspot.sg/2007/03/how-important-are-those-five-minutes.html>

²³ Justin Zhuang, "Singapore Artists Fights for 'Old School' Landmark," *The Wall Street Journal* (blog), November 23, 2011 (11:59 a.m.), <http://blogs.wsj.com/scene/2011/11/23/singapore-artists-fight-for-old-school-landmark>; Faris Mokhtar, "An emotional goodbye to Tanjong Pagar railway station," *Yahoo News Singapore*, June 29, 2011, <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/blogs/singaporescene/emotional-goodbye-ktm-railway-station-011918252.html>

territory where notions of identity and belonging are latent, arguing that Bukit Brown is integral to the psyche of home and nation-making in Singapore.

In his article *Fluid Nation*, cultural historian Terence Chong elucidates that Singapore's identity has been in a state construction ever since its formative years, and more importantly it is a construct premised on prodigious economic growth and survival. "Dynamic, open to change, and adaptable," like a buoy in the raging sea of global economy, the Singapore identity is always in constant flux.²⁴ The nature of this continuously changing identity thus runs counter to notions of rootedness, of constancy, of familiarity; according to Chong, is a statist trumpeting of identity which is destined to be a futile one.

Reflecting this incessant fluidity is Singapore's urban landscape which itself undergoes perpetual renovation and redevelopment: "buildings are improved, upgraded, extended, torn-down and replaced, after brief years of service; [...] the past continually makes way for a future that has no time to ripen into a present."²⁵ The same can be said about the body of the island; the prosperity of the island-nation is hinged to the requirement for land to be commoditized, rendered abstract and transferable, and hence unable to accrue identity over time. To be progressive, land is constantly being defaced, altered, displaced, acquired, repossessed by legal means and even reclaimed, not just from the sea—but also from forests, swamps, other natural bodies and not least, cemeteries.

²⁴ Terence Chong, "Fluid Nation: The Perpetual 'Renovation' of Nation and National Identities in Singapore," in *Management of Success: Singapore Revisited*, ed. Terence Chong (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010), 504-505.

²⁵ Peter Schoppert, "Displacing Singapore," in *The Bodiless Dragon: Singapore Views on the Urban Landscape*, eds. Lucas Jodogne and Marijke Van Kets (Antwerp: Pandora, 1998), 88.

In a way, one could say that it was only a matter of time before Bukit Brown would be called up for development. The road announcement was thus the first stage. Though announced in 2011, the preparation works for the road only began in 2013 after a government-sponsored documentation of the 4153 affected tombs was carried out in reaction to public outcry.²⁶ In late 2013, when the documentation was near completion, exhumations began on the affected tombs that were marked by wooden stakes with painted numbers—pegs that ironically signified the end of the tombs, suggesting a figurative double death on site.²⁷ Despite the concerted effort in the documentation project, segments of Singaporeans are still actively championing its conservation. Two groups of people took up stake with Bukit Brown: the first group has its shared memory with the site—formed largely by families who are linked to the site through their ancestors who are interred within; while the other group, comprising of conservationists and ordinary Singaporeans who—having no relation to the dead—see, or rather imagine Bukit Brown as part of their collective past, connecting their present to the efforts of these pioneers. These relationships could well denote an imagined belonging: between family and ancestor, nation and past pioneers.

²⁶ The documentation project in conjunction with the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) and the Land Transport Authority (LTA); was headed by Dr. Hui Yew-Foong, Senior Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. More on the documentation project can be found here, <http://www.bukitbrown.info/about.php>; *Straits Times*, 20 June 2012.

²⁷ “Construction of New Dual Four-lane Road to Relieve Congestion along PIE & Lornie Road and Serve Future Developments,” last modified October 5, 2012, <http://app.lta.gov.sg/apps/news/page.aspx?c=2&id=rj2i4o1u3d7018466v86y82epxjj32mwbvnhu6rpwt8lplkgo6>; “Tender to Construct New Road across Bukit Brown Awarded,” last modified June 6, 2013, <http://www.ura.gov.sg/uol/media-room/news/2013/aug/pr13-48.aspx>

To understand this imagined belonging, one recalls Benedict Anderson's idea of nation. Nation as he argues is an imagined community because "members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."²⁸ Even though Anderson refers to living people forming an imagined community, by extension, his concept could also be applied to the notion of imagined belonging—for it is also an imagined relationship pivoted on an image of affinity between the past and the present, between a living descendent and his/her ancestor and certainly between a community/nation and its past even though they did not live through it.

Furthering this discussion, the notion that territory is crucial to an imagined belonging, is also questioned. According to social anthropologist Nadia Lovell, locality and belonging are intricately linked. Locality, she explains, "serves to provide collective identity and a sense of cohesion and cultural commensality", and hence "belonging to a place is viewed as instrumental in creating collective identities."²⁹ In other words, space is the medium through which identity and belonging is formed and by extension, the sense of belonging afforded by Bukit Brown, through an imagined relationship to its past and those buried within, suggests the possible creation of collective identities.

Having now contextualized Bukit Brown in relation to Singaporean's primal desire to be rooted to a past—through an imagined belonging, this dissertation seeks to

²⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London, Verso, 2002), 5-7.

²⁹ Nadia Lovell, "Introduction: Belonging in need of emplacement?" in *Locality and Belonging*, ed. Nadia Lovell (New York; London: Routledge, 1998), 4.

understand on another level the spatial conditions for the formation and emplacement of belonging to a peripheral and almost forgotten territory like Bukit Brown.

The Multiplicity of Space³⁰

In his seminal book, *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre asserts that space is socially produced through a three-way dialectic between spatial practice, representations of space and representational space.³¹ These terms in turn correspond to three overlapping dimensions of space, namely perceived, conceived and lived space, which constitutes a simultaneous whole. This parallel delineates Lefebvre's understanding of space: from an epistemological standpoint the former set of terminologies denotes semantically structured spatial terms, while the latter expresses the phenomenological aspects of social space, revealing our bodily engagement with it.³² The following will outline Lefebvre's conceptual triad with respect to Bukit Brown.

Spatial practice denotes the practicalities of living—the routine everyday activities of which involves the senses and movement of the body.³³ By this, spatial practice is thus located within physical space, or as Lefebvre calls it, the perceived space that affords material engagement with the world through perception.³⁴ Lefebvre also adds that spatial practice “embraces production and reproduction” which can be understood in

³⁰ Lefebvre refers to ‘multiplicity of spaces’ as within a space, rather than ‘an indefinite multitude of spaces’ as a result of segmenting space by cognoscenti: geographic, architectural, economic spaces. See, Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Cambridge, USA; Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1991), 8, 27,40.

³¹ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 33, 38-40.

³² Geographer Christian Schmid notes that this parallel triad point to a twofold approach to space: one phenomenological and the other linguistic or semiotic. See: *Christian Schmid*, “Henri Lefebvre’s theory of the production of space: towards a three-dimensional dialectic,” trans. Bandulasena Goonewardena, in *Space, Difference, Everyday Life: Reading Henri Lefebvre*, ed. Kanishka Goonewardena et al. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 29; Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 33, 38-40.

³³ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 15, 17, 27.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 38, 40, 63.

two ways—that spatial practice “secretely that society's space; it propounds and presupposes it;” and that spatial practice “is revealed through the deciphering of [that society's] space.”³⁵ Thus an activity of a society not only necessitates the production of space, but also defines the type of space produced specific to that activity. Furthermore, the space that is able to reveal the activity that necessitates its production, can thus be said to also reproduce or more precisely afford the perpetuation of that activity. Drawing this concept in relation to Bukit Brown, one may say that the spatial practice of interment and death rituals compels the production of the cemetery and the specificity of the tomb and its space; which in turn, affords the enactment of specific traditional ritual practices. This perpetual and cohesive relationship between physical space and practice entails “a guaranteed level of competence and a specific level of performance” as observed from the activities and movements that are made by the body/bodies on site.³⁶ It is also important to note that Lefebvre acknowledges the improvisations and modifications that people may introduce into their practice, resulting in variations that may be observed and carried out in reality within an actual physical space.

The second term, representations of space, takes space as conceived within the mind—mental and geometric abstractions of space that are mediated through representations produced by planners, policy makers and other cognoscenti.³⁷ Signs, maps, discourse and codes govern the representations of this space, of which Lefebvre

³⁵ Ibid, 33, 38.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid, 38.

associates with knowledge and power.³⁸ By this, it is possible to read this mentally constructed or conceived space, as a “dominant space in any society.”³⁹ In today’s context of neo-capitalism, this space is synonymous to state planning.⁴⁰ Space, in the context of Bukit Brown is mediated through state agendas and rendered abstract into a quantitative plane. The space in which the site occupies, is thus seen as transferrable, bounded, measurable and superficial. To manage “the constraints of our small land area,” the Concept plan and Master plan were conceived as a “strategic land use and transportation plan” to which all structures and workings of the entire island must refer to in order [for Singapore] to function.⁴¹ For the state, the Concept Plan and its attendant instruments provide ideological readings for the management of land. They ensure an overall “control of places, its strict hierarchy, the homogeneity of the whole, and the segregation of the part.”⁴² They are thus authoritarian, dominant modes of producing representations of space. In relation to Bukit Brown Cemetery, the richness of ancestral space is reduced to a simplified surface of colour codes in two-dimensional representation. To manage land, which is crucially linked to a nation’s progress, policy makers employ cartographic modes of representation to flatten the space into zones that are labelled for efficient management. This is what Lefebvre terms as representation of space, and it is from here this dissertation argues—from within this two-dimensional representation that collapses what is perceived, conceived and lived about Bukit Brown—that a community and a nation’s spatially grounded identity is at

³⁸ Ibid, 10, 33, 38.

³⁹ Ibid, 39.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 49-51.

⁴¹ The first Concept Plan was formulated in 1971. Reviewed every ten years, the Concept Plan ensures that there is sufficient land to meet long-term population and economic growth needs while providing a good quality living environment for our people; “Introduction to Concept Plan,” Urban Redevelopment Authority, last modified July 22, 2014, <http://www.ura.gov.sg/uol/concept-plan.aspx?p1=View-Concept-Plan>

⁴² Henri Lefebvre, “Space: Social Product and Use Value,” in *State, Space, World: Selected Essays*, eds. N. Bremer and S. Elden (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 185.

once embedded and suppressed.

Conversely, there is yet another conceived space in Bukit Brown supplanted by the current dominant order. This is the representation of *Feng Shui* (geomancy), which is derived from traditional beliefs and understandings of the landscape. It is another organisational layer that is imposed onto the existing topography, and remains obscure except to those who still observe geomantic codes and discourse.

Lefebvre's third spatial term refers to the space of subjectivity and of lived experience. Representational space as Lefebvre describes it, is lived through "its associated images and symbols" as "it overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its object."⁴³ It is thus a space endowed with meanings where material and metaphor fuses between the interplay of perception and our imaginary construct; it is space experienced as both real and imagined—as lived space. It is this conception of representational space that dominates Bukit Brown. Redolent with mythic stories, symbolism, beliefs, all of which intersects and interweaves with material expressions and spatial practices. In addition, Lefebvre writes that lived space is also "alive: it speaks [...] ego, bed, bedroom, dwelling, house; or: square, church, graveyard." This suggests two arguments: firstly, that lived space by virtue of being "alive" is "qualitative, fluid and dynamic"—always in flux; and secondly, lived space can be further broken down into two scales: a personal and interiorized one as well as an exterior societal one, in which the imagined takes on different meanings as accorded to each space. Because of its fluid and thus subjective nature, Lefebvre foresees that lived space is "more or less coherent," in other words

⁴³ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 39.

lived space is more diverse and divergent.⁴⁴

Lefebvre's trilectics offers a set of lenses that help to re-look at the spatial conditions found in Bukit Brown, as parallel and multi-dimensional readings of the actual space, and at the same time as a confluence of Lefebvre's three types of spaces; one that sets them in "interaction, in conflict or in alliance with each other ... [and yet they each] assume equal importance."⁴⁵ This essay aims to reveal the layers of Bukit Brown Cemetery to be a site—in its parts and as a whole—that contributes to the formation of imagined communities from the relationships between territory and individuals, families, and nation.

In this paper, the argument develops in two folds to understand identity at the individual and collective levels—across the scales of an individual, a family unit and a community that forms a part of the nation. The first section "Home," will study the micro-territories of Bukit Brown, drawing from readings from the individual loci of the tombs. The tombs will be studied as physical anchors where familial identities in relation to the site, its associated myths and rituals, are pegged to the tomb through familial spatial practices at Bukit Brown Cemetery. The second section "Nation," zooms out to look at Bukit Brown wholly, as a macro-territory. In this instance, the tombs transcend private and familial associations to be collectively viewed as cultural anchors that encapsulate and suggest historical trajectories, which although obscure,

⁴⁴ Ibid, 39, 41.

⁴⁵ Schmid, "Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space," 33; Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, trans. S. Elden and G. Moore (New York: Continuum, 2004), 12; Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 33, 38-39.

signify an inherited past and a potential parallel to Singapore's national narrative and ultimately, identity. Fundamental in elucidating this connection is the tour, which will be examined as the spatial practice that cements an imagined connection to the past through the extraction and re-appropriation of obscure histories.

Taken together, this dissertation hopes to recast Bukit Brown—beyond a mere cemetery—as a highly charged territory where identity is produced, embodied and performed by social units of different scales—from the level of the individual, to that of the family, and further afield to a community—that collectively make up a nation.

2.0

Micro-Territories: Home

Seeking Roots, Extending Domesticity

2.1

The Tomb Whisperers

Since [...] their exploration of Bukit Brown in 2006, they have researched and identified hundreds of [pioneer's tombs], some so hidden by undergrowth—it defied even the best efforts of their descendants. The Goh brothers receive requests almost weekly not only for help to locate tombs, but also to help unravel familial relationships. Many of the prominent residents in Bukit Brown are related by marriage, and in life as in death continue to be enjoined albeit at times unbeknownst to their descendants.

One descendant has identified more than two-dozen residents [from] her genealogy. Long lost cousins have found themselves through Bukit Brown.⁴⁶

*

Many people are very emotional when they re-connect. They find their ancestors and their roots, and it helps ground them to Singapore.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Brownie, "The Tomb Whisperers: The Brothers Goh, Raymond and Charles," February 8, 2012, <http://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=557>

⁴⁷ Mellisa Sim, "Finders of long-forgotten tombs," *The Straits Times*, December 2, 2012.

These anecdotal stories reveal the unyielding passion of the Goh brothers, two siblings who in their spare time, sleuth for tombs to unearth the obscure histories embowered within Bukit Brown. What initially started as a rather esoteric hobby has turned into a part-time job, where their keen interest in Chinese tombs have been identified by families from all over Singapore who require the brothers help to locate their long lost ancestors. The job begins with the families' provision of basic information of the deceased such as name, death date, dialect group, and names of the deceased's children.⁴⁸ According to Raymond Goh—eldest of the Goh brothers—he can find a tomb within a few hours if sufficient details are furnished.⁴⁹ His conviction for discovering tombs and connecting descendants to their ancestors lies in a simple and long-held Chinese value, which he reveals, “all this [searching] is part of a broader picture. It's about filial piety”—it is about knowing our roots.

A Chinese proverb which says ‘remember the source of water as you drink,’ figuratively recounts that one should remember and be grateful for what one presently has. In some ways it also suggests being thankful to one's familial roots, highlighting the extended link between knowing one's roots, locating ancestral graves in Bukit Brown Cemetery, and the situating and expression of private familial and domestic practices in the external landscape.

⁴⁸ Rachel Loi, “Tomb Sleuth,” *The Business Times*, February 15, 2014.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

The Domestic Landscape

In tracing the history and meaning of domesticity, architectural historian Gülsüm Baydar Nalbantoglu points out that the term refers “to a whole set of ideas that developed in reaction to the division between work and home.”⁵⁰ In the context of the city, urban spaces are zoned according to functions, “living people inhabit houses, [and] dead people lie in cemeteries.”⁵¹ Hence cemetery land is inevitably *conceived* as inhabitable, as ‘dead spaces’ and domesticity is placed in the areas purposefully zoned for residences.⁵²

Since its closure in 1972, Bukit Brown Cemetery was left under-maintained and less regulated by state agencies. Some have described Bukit Brown and its immediate surroundings to be filled with tombs, “cracked with age,” with a makeshift “vehicle repair yard filled with rusty scrap metal and engine oil sit[ting] at the entrance of the cemetery.”⁵³ At night, the site becomes deserted and the graves “barely visible because of the tall trees surrounding them,” and there have been “sightings of the evil-spirit *Pontianak*, and the sounds of her spine-chilling laughs as she flies over the trees.”⁵⁴ Other anecdotal reports have helped create an air of terror in this space; a bride-to-be committing suicide over her father’s grave, another man mysteriously found poisoned

⁵⁰ Hilde Heynen, “Modernity and Domesticity: Tensions and Contradictions,” in *Negotiating Domesticity: Spatial Productions of Gender in Modern Architecture*, eds. Hilde Heynen and Gülsüm Baydar (Oxon: Routledge, 2005), 1.

⁵¹ Sir Raymond Firth, “Foreword: The Body in the Sacred Garden,” in *The Secret Cemetery*, eds. Doris Francis, Leonie Kellaher and Georgina Neophytou (Oxford: Berg, 2005), xx.

⁵² Brenda S. A. Yeoh, “Bones of Contention: Chinese Burial Grounds in Colonial and Post-Colonial Singapore,” in *Spaces of the Dead: A Case from the Living*, ed. Kevin Y L Tan (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2011), 282.

⁵³ Crystal Chan, “Hardly a ‘Pleasant’ Final Resting Place,” *The Straits Times*, Nov 27, 2004; Andrew Goh, “Heritage Redux: Bukit Brown Too Eerie to Attract Culture Buffs,” *The Straits Times*, Feb 11, 2012.

⁵⁴ The *Pontianak* is a Malay vampiric ghost. Ibid.

on his mother's tomb, and gang fights between members of the secret society, to name a few.⁵⁵ Seen as such, Bukit Brown's distinct absence of state intervention and therefore lack of *representation*—asserts itself as 'a place apart' and readily lends to one's imagination as a site of imagined or real horrors.

However there is another side to Bukit Brown, it can be argued, that the burial ground is also an extension—or borrowed space—for a domestic narrative. This unlikely relationship of Bukit Brown—an exteriorised landscape—may be perceived as part of the interiorised family space—through an exploration of practices familiar to the Chinese domestic environment of religious rituals, specifically the rituals in which ancestors are venerated, called the *Qing Ming* (清明) festival. The annual event or tomb-sweeping festival which is still today observed on the grounds of the Bukit Brown Cemetery becomes a focus on which the site is appropriated, and becomes entangled with the interiorized practices of ancestral worship found in most traditional Chinese homes. How then are personal and familial identity moulded and anchored in Bukit Brown through this domestic rituals and practices that take place in relation to the tombs?

⁵⁵ "Over Father's Grave," *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advisor*, Aug 17, 1933, 7; "Poisoned on "Mother's" Grave," *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advisor*, Aug 12, 1933, 7; "Fight At A Funeral," *The Straits Times*, Jul 21, 1927, 8; "Faction Fight In A Cemetery," *The Straits Times*, Jul 24, 1933, 12.

Filial Piety: From Home to Tomb

Filial piety is a fundamental Confucian value. One that has been passed down from generation to generation—it is *lived* through, inculcated since young, upheld and practiced till death, and as this chapter will elucidate, it is even conferred on the dead. Filial piety, the fidelity and reverence to one's family, cultivates an affirmative bond. It reinforces generational communion between children, parents, grandparents and ancestors.⁵⁶ Indeed, even the deceased is accorded this deep devotion.⁵⁷ To the Chinese, death does not mean the end—the spirit remains with a certain durable potency and personality.⁵⁸ This is carried to the netherworld, beneath the ground and in close proximity to the world of the living, from which the spirits are said to require attention.

This attention is satisfied through the practice of ancestral worship. It is an ancient rite of a syncretic tradition derived from the *Daoist* perspective of understanding the animistic spiritual world where sky and land are honored; and from the Confucian teachings of filial piety. Both practices eventually merged into one that promised spiritual protection over families who observe this tradition, expressing itself as a

⁵⁶ Typically, “ancestor” refers to a distant person from whom one is descended. In the Chinese culture, upon death, one's immediate relations (parents or grandparents) are elevated to the status of an ancestor through funerary rites.

⁵⁷ While many Chinese Singaporeans indicate Buddhism as their official religion, most of them actually practise a syncretic religious system, drawing from Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism and animistic beliefs. (Reference extracted from, Tong Chee-Kiong, *Chinese Death Rituals in Singapore*, 2004). This syncretic system is termed Chinese Religion.

⁵⁸ Tong, C.K, *Chinese Death Rituals in Singapore* (London :RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 16-17.

practice of self and family. In most Chinese houses, there is an area set aside for the ancestral altar. Placed against a wall, and centrally located on the altar, the ancestral tablet is complemented with a clay censer: a pair of candle lamps and daily offerings of fruits and flowers. The tablet, inscribed with the name and the death date of the ancestor is placed at the centre, and becomes the focal point from which the living family members ask their ancestors for blessings and favours.⁵⁹

An otherwise homely private matter, kept within the walls of one's home, ancestral worship takes on a spatio-temporal transformation during the *Qing Ming Festival*, where it is performed to a level of extravagance, excess and festivity before one's ancestor's tomb. At Bukit Brown, it is a communal affair practiced in a public setting.⁶⁰

"[...] families seemed to make an occasion of the visit, arriving in 40 seater air-conditioned buses, armed with cold drinks and umbrellas."⁶¹ [...] They sweep their ancestors graves, clean and slash back the foliage with which the jungle tries to reclaim untended tombs. They scrub the headstones and sometimes repaint the epitaphs. They burn joss and candles and strew coloured paper. They make bonfires of paper ghost-money and of gifts for the underworld. [...] They leave offerings of fruit, cakes, tea, and sometimes, duck, fish, pork or cockles (to be consumed by the living, with the shells scattered about to symbolize money). [...] Some [families] make a day of it,

⁵⁹ Lily Kong and S. Nair, "Home as Space of Worship," in *International Encyclopedia of Housing and Home*, V.2, ed. Susan J. Smith et. al (Oxford: Elsevier, 2012), 394.

⁶⁰ Some families would perform a grand ancestral worship during the death anniversary as well, but in private or at ancestral halls. This practice is less communal as it is contingent to specific death dates.

⁶¹ Ida Bachtiar, "Recall and Respect", *The Straits Times*, Apr 15, 1993.

taking time to fold the ghost money, and staying for a picnic of the foodstuffs
the dead will not, after all, enjoy by themselves.”⁶²



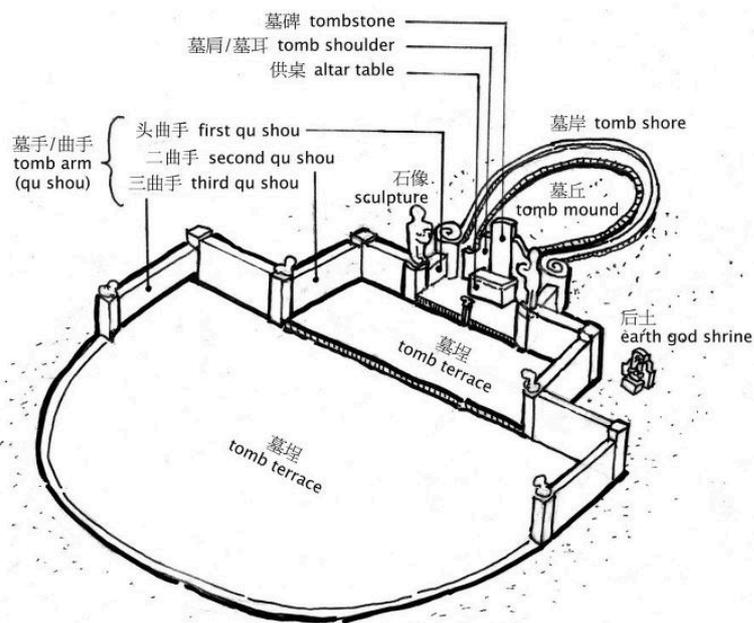
8 Families make final visit to Bukit Brown.

During the month of *Qing Ming* observances, the Bukit Brown Cemetery becomes a hive of activity as Chinese families and their extended kin gather to worship their ancestors. Reports in the 1990s record that “all along the muddy roads leading up to the graves, people [were] holding sickles try[ing] to catch your eye, waving hand signs at you and asking if you would like to pay them to cut your ancestors grave for you.”⁶³ There used to be “women in big sunhats also wait[ing] along the roads, selling orchids and carnations, which were bought and stuck into empty plastic *evian* bottles,” and

⁶² Banyan, “Singapore’s Heritage; Elogy For an Urban Graveyard,” *The Economist Newspaper Limited*, Apr 1, 2013, http://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2013/04/singapores-heritage?fsrc=scn/tw_ec/elegy_for_an_urban_graveyard

⁶³ Ida Bachtiar, “Recall and Respect,” *The Straits Times*, Apr 15, 1993.

people setting “up stalls and selling food such as noodles and satay”, as if the cemetery was a *Pasar Malam*—a kind of informal neighbourhood fair.⁶⁴ Many of these “temporary” tradespersons were former villagers who returned to Bukit Brown annually during the festival, providing services of grass-cutting, grave maintenance, repainting epithets and helping families locate lost tombs of relatives.⁶⁵ The festival is a cacophony of remarkable sights, sounds and smells as tradesmen hawked their wares, and the aroma of food, flowers, burning incense and perspiration mingled. These days, such “markets” have ceased to operate on such large festive scales—fortunately the tomb cleaning by families are still carried out.



ELEMENTS OF A NANYANG TOMB

drawn: c.k. lai, 4 jan 2012

9 Tomb drawing by Lai Chee Kien

⁶⁴ Ibid; Nicholas Yong, “Graveyard Shift,” *The Straits Times*, Apr 17, 2011.

⁶⁵ Nicholas Yong, “Graveyard Shift,” *The Straits Times*, Apr 17, 2011.

Located at the thresholds between private ritual and public space, the tombs in Bukit Brown are activated as focal points for the family. Each family member takes on a task ranging from sweeping the tomb's forecourt, weeding the mound, plating the food, repainting the inscriptions, to preparing the altar, or setting up the offerings for burning. When occupied by the descendants' ritualistic practices during *Qing Ming*, the tomb transforms into a *lived* space.

Indeed, the tomb's design is intended to accommodate this extended domestic ritual. The built-in altar echoes the altar at home, on which offering, foods and joss sticks are placed; the ridges at the sides, which are also called 'arms,' extend out from the tombstone to hug the forecourt—embracing the family as they use it as a platform for the enactment of ancestral worship. After the ritual, family members typically gather around the court, forming a semi-circle configuration facing the headstone. Sometimes they would also have their picnic within the court—for larger graves sites— after the worship rituals are over. Thus the forecourt serves to unite and reinforce the meaning of filial piety between ancestor and family. Another instance of family ritual for grander tomb settings recorded at Bukit Brown, is when the family members line up, again in semi-circular fashion along the stone rim demarcating the large grassy mound, for an annual family photograph, with the deceased elders represented by the headstones right in the centre of the family portrait as if seated on large stone armchairs and with the tomb's court space echoing the condition of a "living room," albeit one that is temporal and transient.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Maureen Lim, "Bukit Brown Graves Have Tales to Tell," *The Straits Times*, Jun 29, 2011.

This connotation of a house is not foreign; tombs do reflect the Chinese imagination of life after death. Seen here, the Chinese tomb is shaped with a verdant mound at the centre enclosed by an omega ridge. Symbolically formed as a womb, this anthropomorphic metaphor signifies the return of the body to its first home.⁶⁷ Sinologist Jan Jakob Maria de Groot noted that the mound could be considered as the house, and the tombstone the doorway.⁶⁸ According to an ancient Chinese myth, man was fashioned from earth by the goddess Nu Wa and so at death the body will return to its origins in the soil.⁶⁹



10 Qing Ming offerings

⁶⁷ McKenzie, "Bukit Brown: A Garden of History And Heritage," 64.

⁶⁸ McKenzie, "Bukit Brown: A Garden of History And Heritage," 64; Jan Jakob Maria de Groot, *The Religious Systems of China: Its Ancient Forms, Evolution, History And Present Aspect, Manners, Customs and Social Institutions Connected Therewith* (Taipei: Che'ngwen Pub. Co, 1969)

⁶⁹ Chen Jianing and Yang Yang, *The World of Chinese Myths* (Beijing: Beijing Language and Culture University Press, 1995), 40; Anthony Christie, *Chinese Mythology* (Rushden, England: Newnes Books, 1983), 56.

The Chinese Tomb and the Domestic Extended

Phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard states “a house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability.”⁷⁰ By this, the house then is both, a *physical* space for the inhabitation of the body and a *lived* space for the body to imagine itself and from which to project. The transformation from house to home hinges on the mapping of this ideological space through domestic practices. Similarly, the Chinese home constitutes a multitude of images informed by a rich tradition of values, symbols, anecdotes, beliefs, practices and festivities that anchor and reinforce Chinese identity. Through domestic acts, each image with its own body of meanings is imprinted into the structure of the home and inscribed onto the body and memory.

Home is not housebound; it transcends territorial boundaries and the formulation of domesticity as a simplistic binary of interior and exterior, private and public. According to geographer Linda McDowell, the home is much more than a physical dwelling space; as it is linked through ideologies and practices, to local networks and community and, on a larger scale, to national identities.⁷¹ In the case of the Chinese domesticity, the image of the family and piety is of utmost importance. During *Qing Ming*, this projection of filial piety and its attendant domestic practices are transposed beyond the house onto the ancestral tomb. The tomb becomes the central focus of the

⁷⁰ G. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1994, pp. vii-viii, xxxvi.

⁷¹ Linda McDowell, “Introduction: Homeplace,” in *Undoing Place: A Geographical Reader*, ed. Linda McDowell (London: Arnold, 1997), 13–21.

deceased's filial descendants.

Qing Ming customs used to be observed in many other burial grounds aside from Bukit Brown. As an example, a large plot of land once known to the locals as the “*green hill pavilions*” or *Pek San Theng*, now reconstructed into the Bishan housing estate, a heartland town outfitted with super dense high-rise government housing, town facilities, schools and infrastructural transport networks.⁷² The tombs that previously laid there were exhumed and its remains cremated to be stored within a columbarium. As with the fast changing landscape of Singapore, where sites such as old cemeteries come under the threat of development, the actual spaces on which these practices—linking family to gravesite—are associated, is rendered redundant in the columbarium, where efficient spaces are built for the storage of remains and “may be repeated ad infinitum, according to need.”⁷³

Many of these spaces where such spatial practices linked the notion of family and rituals to land, no longer exist or are amputated from their original meaning—for example, the experience of visiting and paying respects in the Mandai columbarium is a much hurried affair. There is hardly any room for families to linger on; no grass to cut, “only a small marble tablet that [is] polish[ed] until it is spotlessly white.”⁷⁴

⁷² Kevin Y.L. Tan, “Introduction: The Death of Cemeteries in Singapore,” in *Spaces of the Dead: A Case from the Living*, ed. Kevin Y.L. Tan (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2011), 10-12.

⁷³ Kenneth Koh, “Unearth: Surveys of ‘Ground’ in Singapore’s Chinese Burial Grounds,” in *Home Bound: Narratives of Domesticity in Singapore and Beyond*, eds. Lilian Chee and Melany Sun-Min Park (Singapore: CASA-ARMs, 2013), 46.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 50.

Domesticated Land, Anchoring Identity

According to architectural historian Jane Rendell, “placing things and bodies in unusual combinations, positions us in new uncharted territory,” as the inhabitant becomes “destabilized” and new spatial understanding is formed.⁷⁵

Here at Bukit Brown, the cemetery has significant cultural and social connotations. Beyond housing dead bodies, the tombs are also an extended domestic space for rituals that expound upon traditional Chinese virtues of filial piety. The tomb becomes a temporal locus of domesticity, a borrowed space for an annual event enacted by individual family units. The domestic condition of the cemetery is further sustained by embellishments on tombs, which habitually feature domestic signifiers. The layering of a momentary domesticity and the fulfilment of a space of intense ritualistic connection between otherwise disconnected generational family members challenges the notion of the cemetery as a dormant site.

Domestic meanings, rituals and associations fostered at home are stretched to cement a domestic condition and identity to land. Ancestral worship is a traditional means for the families’ to express their connection to their ancestors, reinforcing their own

⁷⁵ Jane Rendell, “Doing It, (Un)Doing It, (Over)Doing It Yourself: Rhetorics of Architectural Abuse,” in *Occupying Architecture: Between Architect and the User*, ed. Jonathan Hill (London: Routledge, 1998), 144.

identity and cohesion as a family unit. Ancestral worship is facilitated by the design of the tombs, which in turn perpetuates it.

According to philologist Angelika Bammer, home is a fictional construct conceived as “enacted space” within which we take on “roles and relationships of [...] belonging and foreignness.”⁷⁶ By this, a sense of home and consequently identity can be seen as a performative “belonging” in space—one that is acted out—a conscious effort rather than a given condition. This is reinforced by sociologist Vikki Bell, who notes, “one does not simply or ontologically ‘belong’ to the world or to any group within it, [and that] belonging is an achievement at several levels of abstraction [...] performatively produced.”⁷⁷

In exploring micro-territories and home as observed in the vast landscape of Bukit Brown, the tombs here are framed as mini loci of extended domesticity. The domestic value of filial piety is also extended to the dead through the *practice* of ancestral worship, which necessitates the specific *production* of the tomb design: as having a forecourt for families to gather, altar for prayers and offerings, and “embracing arms” as a welcoming gesture of communion and at times appropriated as seats or backdrops to family portraits. As such, the tomb—beyond a mere marker of the dead’s location—constitutes what Lefebvre terms as *perceived* space, a *physical* space that affords the family meaningful *practice* of their rituals of belonging. This ritual of belonging is *imaginative* and performative, forming experiences as *lived* through myths,

⁷⁶ Angelika Bammer, “Editorial,” *New Formations*, 1992, vol. 17, pp. ix-x; referenced from, David Morley, *Home Territories: Media, Mobility and Identity* (New York; London: Routledge, 2000), 16.

⁷⁷ Vikki Bell, “Performativity and Belonging: An Introduction,” in *Performativity and Belonging*, ed. Vikki Bell (London: Sage, 1999), 3; DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781446219607.n1>

biographical anecdotes and symbols that adorned the tombs—reinforcing their own identity and cohesion as a family unit, between descendants and ancestors.



11 Family Photo: Four generations of descendants crowd around Mr Ho Siak Kuan's tombstone

3.0

Macro-Territory: Nation

Performing an Alternative Singapore Story

3.1

Celebrating NDP—“Nation’s Deceased Pioneers”⁷⁸

*Tens of thousands of people gathered in the downtown Marina Bay area to mark Singapore's 47th birthday on Thursday. About 26,000 turned out for this year's National Day Parade [...] themed Loving Singapore, Our Home [...]*⁷⁹

*

*[...] after a short tour to some of these graves, the participants went back to the place under the old rain tree for a buffet. While some were making new friends and enjoying the food, others played with the dogs, patted the horse or took turns to hold the [national] flag and took a photo with it.*⁸⁰

⁷⁸ National Day in Singapore is marked by the National Day Parade, which is always abbreviated as NDP. The abbreviation was borrowed and used to mean “Nation’s Deceased Pioneers” by the Bukit Brown community. See, Martina Yeo, “NDP@Bukit Brown,” August 9, 2012, <http://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=4532>

⁷⁹ “Tens of thousands gather to celebrate Singapore's 47th birthday,” *The Straits Times*, August 9, 2012, accessed September 5, 2014, <http://www.straitstimes.com/the-big-story/ndp2012/story/tens-thousands-gather-celebrate-singapores-47th-birthday>

⁸⁰ Martina Yeo, “NDP@Bukit Brown,” August 9, 2012, <http://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=4532>



12 Participants with bags of goodies and mini flags in their hands.

It was August 9, 2012. As Singaporeans gathered at the Marina Bay area facing a grand stage floating on water backed by the city's famous skyline; a community of 70 people were congregating for the same purpose, although in a less spectacular location—a field within Bukit Brown. Parallel to the official event, attendees to this other celebration were each handed a goodie bag containing items symbolic of Bukit Brown.⁸¹ This was then followed by games, tours and food. It was a rather intimate affair that honoured the departed pioneers by celebrating National Day amongst their tombs.⁸²

⁸¹ Refer to Appendix B for more information on the goodie bag and its symbolic meanings.

⁸² Account written by the author based on, Martina Yeo, "NDP@Bukit Brown," August 9, 2012, <http://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=4532>

The National Day Parade (NDP), an otherwise grandiose and dynamic spectacle, was “enacted” in Bukit Brown by a loose fellowship of volunteers eponymously calling themselves “Brownies” to draw a connection between the nation’s pioneers to the national event.⁸³ Bukit Brown with all its migrant histories, cross-cultural associations with the region and beyond, is treated as a useful and appropriate ground to enact a National Day celebration. By doing so, the diverse threads of migrant histories and that of the Singapore Story are woven together and project a syncretic identity. Fundamental to this connection between space and a nation’s identity is the role of touring of the site, which can be viewed as a form of spatial appropriation using the means of story-telling, or the telling, and re-telling of the histories found at the grave site.

In the words of historians Terrence Chong and Chua Ai Lin, Bukit Brown has been framed as an “authentic” space against the tension between the “economic desire to be a global city and the primordial need to be a nation,” drawing references to the cost between striving for progress and a loss of a particular landscape, as well as bringing to fore the issues surrounding the desire for a sense of home and national identity that is anchored to something much more permanent.⁸⁴ What does it mean to be Singaporean in Singapore? What is Singapore’s national narrative? There are multiple ways in which the state attempts to propagate this narrative and for the longest time, one of the most visible, performative aspects of this on-going narrative construct is the NDP—a ritual that is performed and watched every August 9.

⁸³ Not to be confused with the girl guides, “Brownie”, is a hypocorism from Bukit Brown. Their main webpage is All Things Bukit Brown: <http://bukitbrown.com>

⁸⁴ Chong and Chua, “The Multiple Spaces of Bukit Brown,” 36.

*Fireworks lit up the night sky, with thousands of cameras and mobile phones capturing colourful starbursts that included heart and orchid shapes, during the finale of the National Day Parade (NDP) 2012 as Singapore celebrates her 47th birthday at The Float @ Marina Bay.*⁸⁵

Spectacular and episodic, the NDP is a celebration of Singapore's nationhood, bringing together the people and state leaders through mass display, floats, songs and cheers, instilling a sense of communion. As argued by numerous scholars, "nation" is an imagined community—a social construct—harbouring notions of stability and resilience that foster a sense of collective belonging.⁸⁶ In the case of Singapore, the idea of nation and identity is largely built upon a state-authored narrative. The Singapore Story—a narrative disseminated for national education and public consumption—was synthesized in the late 1990s, relating the founding of the island, its survival from its forced independence to its eventual achievement of success under the PAP government.⁸⁷ In the making of the story to build a new Singapore, certain historiographies were excluded while others were glorified, echoing what historian Benedict Anderson describes as "memory and forgetting"—where history is obliquely framed to be "remembered" by deliberately "forgetting" other contradictory or

⁸⁵ Goh Chin Lian, "National Day Parade costs rise to \$17.2m," *The Straits Times*, September 11, 2012, accessed September 5, 2014, <http://www.straitstimes.com/breaking-news/singapore/story/national-day-parade-costs-rise-172m-20120911>

⁸⁶ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

⁸⁷ Terence Chong, "Introduction: The Role of Success in Singapore's National Identity," in *Management of Success: Singapore Revisited*, ed. Terence Chong (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010), 1; Hong Lysa and Huang Jianli, *The Scripting Of A National History: Singapore and Its Pasts*, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008),

incriminating historical facts.⁸⁸

For the successful inception of the Singapore Story as the official state narrative, numerous strands of history were way-laid, forgotten and perhaps deliberately white-washed—there had to be a coherent singularity to the nation's history. Former Deputy Prime Minister, S. Rajaratnam's insistent assertion of Sir Stamford Raffles as the historical, colonial figure and the year 1819 as the beginnings of Singapore's history illustrates a deliberate “forgetting” of migrant histories—which he called “ancestral ghosts”—for fear that such histories would instigate “endless racial and communal conflicts.”⁸⁹ Seen in the context of Bukit Brown Cemetery, this historically charged site, rich with multiple strands of narratives from diverse, non-homogeneous communities, has, as a result, had its existence simplified and left to idle until its state of existence was threatened.

Yet again, this threatening of Bukit Brown's existence spans from the very trajectory of the Singapore Story, projected to be a progressive story, spun around the trope of economic survival, pegging nation to the bull and bear of “economic realism.”⁹⁰ Chong argues that this version of national identity is not only “fluid” but also “destined to be a futile one.”⁹¹ This inability to root seems to imply, necessarily, a metaphorical state of homelessness. It also seems to suggest that to help root the nation, more

⁸⁸ Terence Chong, “Fluid Nation: The Perpetual ‘Renovation’ of Nation and National Identities in Singapore,” in *Management of Success: Singapore Revisited*, ed. Terence Chong (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010), 510; Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 187-206.

⁸⁹ For further reading please refer to, Chong, “Fluid Nation,” 506; Hong and Huang, *The Scripting Of A National History*, 16, 167; Kwa Chong Guan, “Remembering Ourselves,” in *Our Place in Time: Exploring Heritage and Memory in Singapore*, ed. Kwok Kian-Woon et al. (Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society, 1999), 55.

⁹⁰ Chong, “Fluid Nation,” 504–505.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

meaningful, bottom-up alternative narratives need to surface, other than the official singular version of the Singapore Story.

They cheered, they sang and they danced [...] with 100,000 packing the area to inhale the festive atmosphere. It was a resounding show of national unity [...] the economy grew 1.7 per cent in the first half of the year, and the growth forecast for the full year has been revised to between 1.5 per cent and 2.5 per cent. Singapore is a success story [...]⁹²

*

[...] Participants then sung the national anthem and said the pledge as one voice. Of course, like other [National Day Parades], there was also the “fly-over,” but at Bukit Brown, participants folded their own paper planes [...] printed with the national flag and “flying” it using their hands.⁹³

At the Marina Bay area, as a nation celebrates their nationhood with dazzling opulence and with economic confidence in the future ahead; participants at the other NDP in Bukit Brown made did with what they had, in the most simplest of means to perform their own version of the national day celebration amongst the tombs.

⁹² Jermyn Chow, “Singapore celebrates its 47th birthday, Olympic success,” *The Straits Times*, August 10, 2012, accessed September 5, 2014, <http://www.straitstimes.com/the-big-story/ndp2012/story/singapore-celebrates-its-47th-birthday-olympic-success>

⁹³ Martina Yeo, “NDP@Bukit Brown,” August 9, 2012, <http://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=4532>



13 Celebrating Nation's Deceased Pioneers with paper planes

[...] the plane [...] was artfully and simply folded [...] The flag symbolizing how far we have come and our aspirations, side by side with a blank space to unfold the story still to be written.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Ibid.

3.2

Buried Past, 'Forgotten' (Hi)stories

I admit that for a while I resisted visiting Bukit Brown. Yes, it is a heritage site, but for me a cultural heritage identified with a specific community in Singapore... But as my passionate guides (Jennifer and Tien) helped to decipher the layout of the graves and the inscriptions on the headstones (some of which offered moral instructions for future generations), I thought about Singapore history not as a contest between strands of histories. Instead, in that space of contemplation and translation, I saw it as a dialogue between histories, between the Nanyang and the Nusantara, between the past and the future, the living and the dead. I knew that there were connections to be made, through the soil, the earth deities, the semangat (life-force) in the trees, the mute sentinels of weathered rock. As I ran a finger down the grainy beard of a stone Sikh "guardian," I knew that time "saved" in a cemetery is so much more important than the time saved on an eight-lane highway.⁹⁵

Bukit Brown as a site of a multifarious migrant past could offer these other (hi)stories—histories that recorded accounts of those “ancestral ghosts” as mentioned earlier on. Though deemed insignificant by the state, French scholar Michel de Certeau terms such histories as hidden “circumstantial detail[s]” with a latent

⁹⁵ Quote by AlfianSa'at, retrieved from, Chong and Chua, “The Multiple Spaces of Bukit Brown,” 39.

potential to distort or “reverse a well-known story.”⁹⁶ To recite this “insignificant detail” is to make “the commonplace [story] produce other effects”—opening up new interpretations and suggesting new representations.⁹⁷

Interred in Bukit Brown are by no means an insignificant assemblage of forgotten, anonymous dead; they were early migrant Chinese pioneers of pre-independent Singapore, who sailed through the South China Sea, battling the odds to arrive on this island where they started trades, set up homes, and built the very foundation for the Singapore today. The cemetery’s landscape is also a syncretic space where the intermingling of various ancestral cultures and dialect subgroups within the Chinese community find their resting place. It is layered with personal epitaphs and cultural symbols that unite bloodlines from mainland China with their Singaporeans offsprings.

History from the Hills, a documentary made in 2011, highlights a list of pioneers of pre-independent Singapore buried in Bukit Brown, including war heroes, founders of conglomerates, politicians and revolutionary supporters. These are but some of the names documented, whilst many more remain unmarked and undiscovered in this cemetery and its surrounding hills. The names found inscribed upon the numerous tombstones can also be found elsewhere in Singapore—as place names, commemorating their contributions to modern day Singapore—Boon Lay Town,

⁹⁶ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 89-90.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

Chong Pang precinct, Hong Lim Park and Sam Leong Road just to name a few.⁹⁸



14 Tomb lions (to the right of the tomb is the female lion, the left is the male lion)

Typically, in Chinese culture, it is customary for pairs of lions to be placed at the entrances of important buildings and sometimes, private residences as symbols of

⁹⁸ For an extensive study on Singapore's place names, please refer to Victor R. Savage and Brenda S. A. Yeoh, "Toponymics: A Study of Singapore Street Names" (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2003)

security and prosperity.⁹⁹ The lion pairs—a male lion on the left side with a yarn ball under its paw to symbolize a long unbroken line of descendants and on its right, a nurturing female lion with her cub—are similarly observed on many Bukit Brown tombs where they stand, protecting the deceased and their final resting place.¹⁰⁰

Parallel to this are a number of tombs here that, in place of the paired lions, hold a couple of burly turbaned men in full martial regalia. With their British rifles by their sides, they serve the same protective function. The guards come in various styles, ornamentation and height, with some as high as two meters. What potentially appear like whimsical sentries, are in fact statues of Sikh guards whose significance to this island are deeply rooted in the Straits Settlements.

According to Elizabeth McKenzie, the first Indians in Singapore were a group of *sepoys* (soldiers) who arrived with Raffles in January 1819, and subsequently were followed by troops from the Bengal Native Infantry. In due course, thousands of Indian men were recruited as peacekeepers, becoming additional police constables and watchmen for both government and private individuals.¹⁰¹ The presence of these statues indicate “strong bonds [...] between the two racial groups in Singapore’s early history,” describes political scientist Dr. Bilveer Singh, “the ‘jaga’, as we know them, was not what our present-day ‘security guard’ is. He was a friend, confidant and guard, both for the employer and his company.”¹⁰² There is also a fascinating coincidence in the name adopted by most Sikh men. Following Chinese beliefs, the lion is the Buddhist

⁹⁹ Lee Siow Meng, *Spectrum of Chinese Culture* (Selangor, Malaysia: Pelanduk Publications, 2006), 206.

¹⁰⁰ Ang Yik Han, “Lions as Guardians,” March 24, 2012, <http://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=2578>; McKenzie, “Bukit Brown: A Garden of History and Heritage,” 72.

¹⁰¹ McKenzie, “Bukit Brown: A Garden of History and Heritage,” 88.

¹⁰² ST Staff, “Sikh guards at Chinese tombs ‘show there were strong links,’ ” *The Straits Times*, January 12, 1993.

defender of law and a protector of sacred buildings. Sikh guards were peacekeepers, custodians of law and upholders of their faith. Baptized Sikh males adopt the term “Singh” as part of their name, which incidentally means “lion.”¹⁰³ As an enduring and distinctly foreign iconography that has been assimilated into the largely sepulcher landscape, the Sikh guards whose services were valued, have been revered and “elevated to guardians of the afterlife,” surpassing their colonial classification in peacekeeping to act here, at the tombs, as symbols of security and friendship.¹⁰⁴

The Sikh guard statues reveals stories about ways of life that were once practiced, where the migrant Chinese culture were very much intertwined with those of other ethnicity. These are but a few strands of trans-national migrant histories, encased in full materiality, suggesting many more multiple strands of alternative histories yet to be unearthed from this cultural repository. Together these “circumstantial details,” have the potential to add-on and enrich the Singapore Story, beyond the singular version of the Story as propagated by the state.

¹⁰³ Patwant Singh, *The Sikhs* (New York: Knopf, 2000), 54.

¹⁰⁴ Ishvinder Singh, “A Shared Heritage,” December 2, 2013, <http://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=8394>



15 A Collection of Sikh Guard Statues of Bukit Brown.

3.3

The Tours

The Performance of Another Bukit Brown

With the announcement of the proposed highway, we have begun to offer tours focusing on Seh Ong Cemetery, and Hills 1, 2 & 5 of Bukit Brown Municipal Cemetery as these are most affected by the government project. The [...] tour started with the beautiful tomb of Oon Chim Neo, aka Mrs Ong Boon Tat, in what appears to be one of the largest single tombs on Seh Ong grounds. Hers is also known as Tomb 77, the 77th one to be marked for exhumation. This is one of your only chances to see this expansive tomb, graced by two elegant fish features to signify good fortune and a significant Earth Deity altar to the right.¹⁰⁵

In a bid to prevent the loss of Bukit Brown Cemetery, the “Brownies” started free public tours since 2006 during weekends to raise awareness of its significance as “Heritage, Habitat and History.”¹⁰⁶ The volunteers are a motley crew of personalities comprising of, a project manager, a pharmacist, a journalist, a public relations director, and an anthropologist, amongst many, whose shared concern for Bukit Brown’s plight united them. This coming-together is what architectural writer Sam Vardy would term

¹⁰⁵ Claire Leow, “A Memorable Tour (March 25),” March 25, 2012, <http://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=2693>

¹⁰⁶ Not to be confused with the girl guides, “Brownie”, is a hypocorism from Bukit Brown. Their slogan is “Heritage, Habitat and History,” their main webpage is All Things Bukit Brown: <http://bukitbrown.com>

as a self-organized practice: a collective process of taking on politico-spatial roles to address issues that would have normally been excluded from politics.¹⁰⁷



16 Tour participants around the tomb of Onn Chim Neo

Operating in this mode of self-organization, the Brownies appropriate the cemetery through their tours. They each volunteer their personal time to thematize, organize and conduct the tours—regardless of the weather—passionately guiding groups of people, young and old, locals and foreigners, and from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Sometimes during the tours, the Brownies would place a few saga seeds and flowers on the altars of the tombs they visit—as a mark of respect and remembrance. At other times when they are not conducting tours, they go about setting the “stage” for it, by

¹⁰⁷ Sam Vardy, “Spatial agency: tactics of self-organisation,” *Architectural Research Quarterly*, 13, 133-140, doi: 10.1017/ S1359135509990224

trimming the undergrowth, uncovering tombs, scrubbing the tombstones, clearing up footpaths, erecting signage—activities that may not be *afforded* by other spaces in the city. Through these activities, Bukit Brown is gradually being transformed into their “homes-grounds.”

Seen in this light, the tours subvert the normative *conception* of a cemetery as an inactive, unchanging and unoccupied “dead” space. The actions of the Brownies and the people they inspire and draw into their circle by sparking a particular social consciousness activates this previously “dormant” space. The tour also destabilizes the taboo status of the cemetery, transforming it into a safe space for individual and family visits with the intention of procuring knowledge about a nation’s past.

Exercising their agency, the Brownies’ tours can also be read as a tactic to uncover Bukit Brown’s history that has been excluded by the “hegemonic system.”¹⁰⁸ In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Certeau distinguishes tactic and strategy; that “strategy” is a “mastery of places through sight,” in which it operates in the purview of power and knowledge.¹⁰⁹ Opposing “strategy,” a “tactic” is understood to be an “art of the weak” which emerges from the “absence of power” and operates “on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power.”¹¹⁰ Tactics, then, take advantage of “opportunities” offered at the “cracks that particular conjunctions open” in a system where it “poaches in them [...] creates surprises in them [...] and is also...” a

¹⁰⁸ *ibid*, 136

¹⁰⁹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xix, 36-40.

¹¹⁰ Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 36-40.

guileful ruse.”¹¹¹ The Brownies’ temporary occupation of Bukit Brown is a tactic that “insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety.”¹¹²

¹¹¹ Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 37.

¹¹² Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, xix.

3.3.1

The Tours

Telling (Hi)Stories: A Discursive Practice

*We all are spatial story-tellers, explorers, navigators, and discoverers, exchanging narratives of, and in, the city. Through the personal, the political, the theoretical, the historical we believe we are revealing cities in “strangely familiar” ways, but we are also creating cities as we desire them to be.*¹¹³

Somebody has to tell the next and this generation—Who came before us [...]

*We need more storytellers to tell our history.*¹¹⁴

At Bukit Brown, the past is conscripted through ad hoc tours and storytelling that performatively activate the landscape. As Certeau notes, “in the art of telling, [rhetoric] is already at work,” telling stories is thus both an art and a discursive practice.¹¹⁵ The tour is performed between people, and between people and stories through the telling of anecdotal histories, and the highlighting of relationships and events that could have been.

Social activist Bell Hooks notes that “spaces can be interrupted, and transformed

¹¹³ Jane Rendell, “Bazaar Beauties or Pleasure Is Our Pursuit: A Spatial Story of Exchange,” in *The Unknown City: contesting architecture and social space: a Strangely Familiar Project*, ed. Iain Borden (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 105.

¹¹⁴ A reflection by a participant of the 2013 National Day Celebration at Bukit Brown. Brownie, “NDP2013@Bukit Brown,” august 11, 2013, <http://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=7507>

¹¹⁵ Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 89-90.

through literary and artistic practices,” and by extension the practice of telling the (hi)stories embedded in Bukit Brown reveals a shared history and alters the perception of this space.¹¹⁶ Stories connect people to places and itself a space between people and events. Homi Bhabha argues “the subject is only graspable in the time between telling and being told,” which Jane Rendell understands as a temporal element of “telling.” Rendell further asserts “the time between telling and being told is also the place between here and somewhere else.¹¹⁷ Extrapolating this to Bukit Brown, the “here” can be said to be in the present, and in the presence of the tombs as the focus of the tours; while the “somewhere else” is where the “telling” of (hi)stories bring the imagination to, be it past, present or future. As one participant notes:

[...] as we toured [...] information was absorbed and exchanged, I began to recognize the [...] filigree interactions, and integrations, spidery web-like in nature, of Chinese cultures, with the cultures of Southeast Asia and beyond at that [...] This was surely living, breathing history, and I began to imagine the nine hills of Bukit Brown [...] as a Mother Goddess, her wave-like curves softly burgeoning with layers of history, pregnant with the bodies of our ancestors, fully conscious of the significance of her own history.¹¹⁸

To go on the tour and hear the (hi)stories amidst a sepulchral landscape is to make an intimate spatial and psychical connection between the departed and oneself. By

¹¹⁶ Bell Hooks, *Yearnings: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, London, Turnaround Press, 1989, p.148.

¹¹⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 150; in Jane Rendell, “An Atlas of the Welsh Dresser,” in *Surface Tension: Problematics of Site*, ed. Ken Ehrlich et al. (Los Angeles: Errant Bodies Press in collaboration with Ground Fault Recordings, Downey, CA, 2003), 285.

¹¹⁸ Sam Ng, “Mother Goddess,” accessed August 12, 2014, <http://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=6574>

extracting the multitude of fragmented information through the archival record, reels, blog entries and/or other sources and then piecing these together to relate to the tombs, the tour acts a projective intermediary between the contemporary context and a past which is now almost lost. Indeed, much of what is told lies in the realm of the speculative, existing more as stories, but slowly imbibed and eventually internalized by the audience and the tour operators as possible histories, albeit histories which are contingent within the communities who discover, construct and relate to these fragmented accounts of the past. These histories are meaningful only because they can be spatialized in relation to specific tombs, or to the larger territory of the site. The concreteness and specificity of the tomb, embellished by its iconography (images) and iconology (texts) enable a mapping of these obscure (hi)stories. Histories that would otherwise be abstract and formless are anchored palpably to this site and its objects or elements, both constructed and natural.

Philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin points out “the life of the text, that is, its true essence, always develops on the boundary between two consciousness, two subjects.”¹¹⁹ Linguistic and cultural scholars Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps explains that Bakhtin considers “readers to be authors and the act of reading to be a dialogue between a text already produced and a reactive text created by a reader.”¹²⁰ Similarly, tour participants bring their remembered past that is invoked by being in the space of Bukit Brown Cemetery, to co-author the tours through which one may begin to read an alternative text on the Singapore Story as lived by the “occupants” of Bukit Brown,

¹¹⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 106.

¹²⁰ Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps, *Living Narratives: Creating Lives in Everyday Storytelling*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 3, 254-255.

of both past and present on the contested grounds that is the Bukit Brown today.

It is really something when you get to run your fingers across the engraved characters of a headstone, in gold, red or green. [W]hen you mentally whisper an apology when you have to borrow a tomb wall for a foothold as you scramble up the slippery hill to the next new find.¹²¹

*

Others shared that it was the first time they had ever been to a cemetery, and that the experience had given them a different way of understanding how to relate to those who have passed on. Most of all, many were touched by the stories of the pioneers and those that made personal connections to the guides.¹²²

*

There's a heightened sense of connectedness you get from visiting this place somehow [...] I feel so Singaporean right now [...] this is intangible—it is something you cannot teach people from a textbook. It's a feeling, a belonging, an ownership. It is something brought out of you—something that you ARE, something that comes to you as a realization.¹²³

¹²¹ Lyra Tan Ai-Ling, "History You Can Touch," April 27, 2012, <http://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=3039>

¹²² Brownie, "RGS Learning Journey," March 14, 2013, <http://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=6175>

¹²³ Lyra Tan Ai-Ling, "History You Can Touch," April 27, 2012, <http://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=3039>

Through their agency, the Brownies have spatially reclaimed Bukit Brown and extended it beyond the discourse of a burial ground and into a national heritage ground. Bukit Brown with its numerous tombs is the perceived space in which the Brownie's tours are carried out. The tombs with their embellishments and forecourts afford the enactment and re-enactment of the tours. Within that space stories are shared, imaginations were brought back to the past through anecdotes, conjuring images. The tours are spatial occupational tactics to reclaim this space for Singaporeans in a bid to imagine and reconnect to a shared past. These tours read the site as a containment of a collective history, a space that is *lived* and *perceived*, and re-activated through the telling of multiple stories and histories, and make up a cacophonious space thick with contradictory pasts still unresolved and disenfranchised within the island state's official recording of History.

Conclusion

Majulah Singapura!¹²⁴

the forgotten hills the family's glories
deeply bury
coffins press down on the passing years
altars imprison the murmurs of the nether world
the shadow of the steel arm gradually closes with the setting sun
the leaves and trees are all whispering
peace is made out to be [an] alarming talk

in the future it will not be the blue sky which covers us
but the undercarriages of cars
neighbours, arise all of you
since the living do not cherish
why should the dead stubbornly remain?

[...]

the spirits return and wander
the tombstones have fallen into disrepair for long
the hoe's hurried movements pick at bones
but the claimants of the tomb do not come
a voice loudly proclaims

¹²⁴ "Majulah Singapura" is a phrase taken from the Singapore Anthem, it means "Onward Singapore."

three years later!

all will bade farewell to the soil!

only in the sea! will there be peace!¹²⁵

At the heart of the island lies Bukit Brown, an undulating landscape consisting of nine hillocks, some of which have already been razed. On one side of Bukit Brown, hoardings have been set up, trees have been felled, tombs exhumed with their owners' bones cremated.¹²⁶ The future of the place remains uncertain. Will this mark the end of Bukit Brown?



17 The forest razed and hills flattened.

¹²⁵ Refer to appendix C: This poem was sourced from All Things Bukit Brown website, originally a Chinese poem penned and published in Zaobao (newspaper), and translated to English by Ang Yik Han, accessed August 21, 2014, <http://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=6356>

¹²⁶ Grace Chua, "Exhumation at Bukit Brown begins," *The Straits Times*, December 19, 2013.

*

The first chapter clarified the notions of identity as imagined, as well as the multi-dimensional space of Bukit Brown: within *perceived* space, perception and everyday practices are played out, whilst *conceived* space epitomizes top-down mental representations and discourse of space; the third space is *lived* through subjectively, as real-and-imagined space. The ensuing argument is structured into two main chapters, respectively themed “Home” and “Nation” which are parallel readings of the very same space but on different scales, offering connections and feedback between one another. The common thread binding these two chapters is the question of how identity is formed and anchored through space (as a medium), of which Lefebvre’s spatial trilectics proves valuable in offering a critical lens to look at space, revealing the cemetery ground to be beyond neutral and passive, but which is socially produced and is constituted by three dimensions. Through this paper, it is shown that the production of social space is closely tied to how identity is produced, embodied and performed through the tombs in Bukit Brown.

In “Micro-territories: Home,” the vast landscape of Bukit Brown is studied through the tombs framed as mini loci of extended domesticity. The domestic value of filial piety is conferred to the dead through the *practice* of ancestral worship, which along with the *discourse on Feng Shui* necessitates the specific *production* of the tomb design: as having a forecourt for families to gather, altar for the prayers and offerings, and “embracing arms” as a welcoming gesture of communion and at times appropriated as seats. As such, the tomb—beyond a mere marker of the dead’s location—constitutes what

Lefebvre terms as *perceived* space, a *physical* space that affords the family meaningful *practice* of their rituals of belonging. This ritual of belonging is *imaginative* and performative, forming experiences as *lived* through myths, biographical anecdotes and symbols that adorned the tombs— reinforcing their own identity and cohesion as a family unit, between decedents and ancestors.

Zooming out, “Macro-territory: Nation” examines Bukit Brown as a whole and reveals that its vast territory is temporally appropriated to *perform* tours and story-telling. Tactical spatial practices, the tours break down existing preconceptions of the cemetery and familiarize “outsiders” to its ground, casting the Bukit Brown in new light. Through the telling of stories, a sense of belonging surfaces between the past and the present, between deceased pioneers and contemporary participants. The tours unravel obscure (hi)stories for both a nation seeking solace in its identity, and new meanings and new stories for families who have lost connections with their ancestors. Stories that are unfamiliar told through all too familiar names in a strangely familiar ground. These stories are not just heard, but *lived*, reinforced by the concreteness of the tombs and the vivid imagery conjured through those stories.

Though categorized as “micro” and “macro” territory, this dissertation discusses how these micro-macro spaces ultimately exist in simultaneity. Bukit Brown is at once a macro-territory for the nation and at the same time, a network of familial micro-territories. This simultaneous oscillation of scale—centred on the tombs and the contemporary practices revolving around these tombs (acts of filial piety, and more recent politicized instances of the tour as a display of bottom-up agency)—serves to

illustrate the dynamic identity frameworks at play: come *Qing Ming*, the tombs become an extended space for the performance of familial domesticity, and on another hand the tombs are appropriated for the performance of tours, as loci of shared (hi)stories.

Taken together they reveal the complex identities embedded in the placid landscape of Bukit Brown, ascending/descending in scale, from the individual and the family to the national community; and how such structure continues to form and reform in parallel to the perpetual production of space at Bukit Brown. It seems then, that an alternative representation of Bukit Brown has emerged through this reading. Conceived beyond the “obstructive” cemetery, Bukit Brown has perhaps transcended from a peripheral (and redundant) space into a territory where the nation’s identity is inescapably anchored.

Whatever its future is, it is, still, not yet, the end for Bukit Brown.



18 Brownies celebrating Nation’s Deceased Pioneer’s Day on August 9, 2014.

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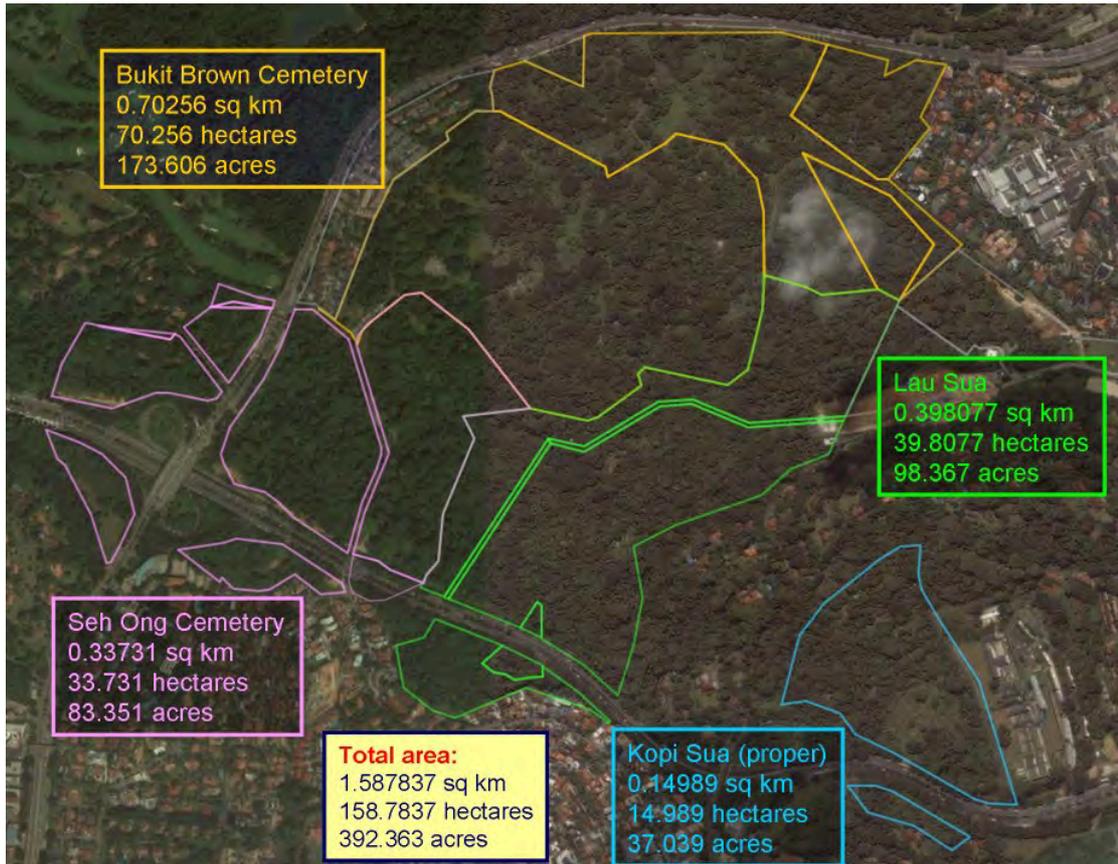
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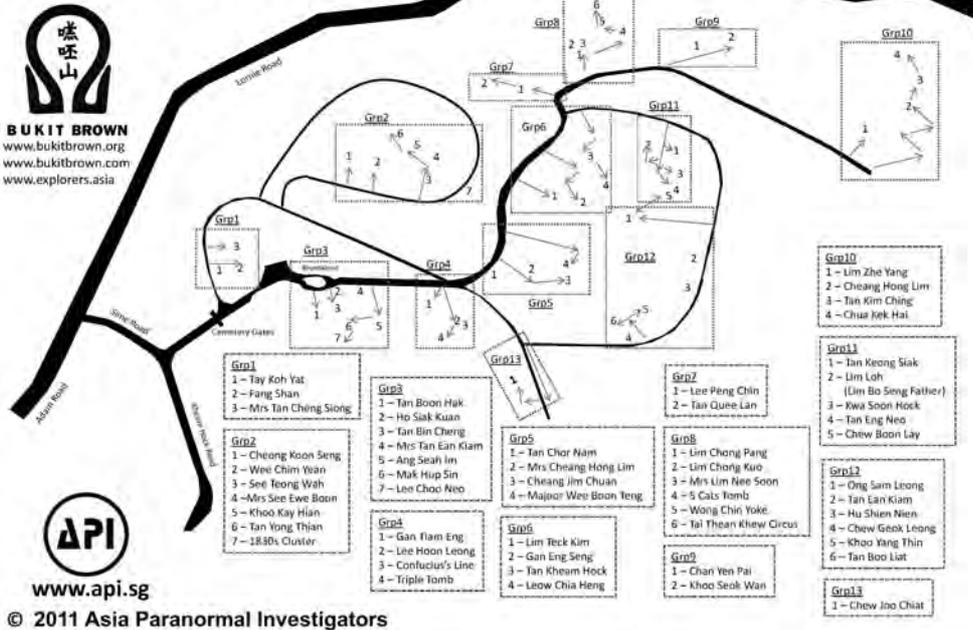
Appendix A: Maps



Map of Greater Bukit Brown

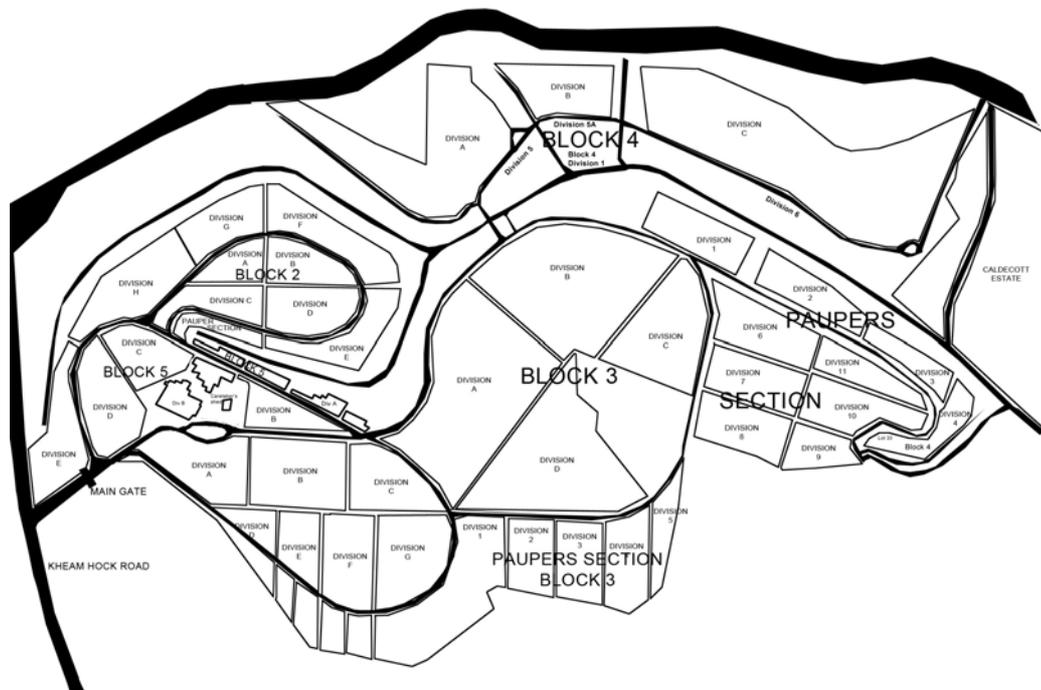
[Source: Mok Ly Ying, All Things Bukit Brown, <http://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=1170> (accessed 21 August 2014)]

API – DIY WALKING TRAIL MAP
BUKIT BROWN CHINESE CEMETERY



Tour Map of Bukit Brown Cemetery

[Source: All Things Bukit Brown, <http://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=1170> (accessed 21 August 2014)]



Bukit Brown Cemetery Division Map

[Source: All Things Bukit Brown, <http://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=1170> (accessed 21 August 2014)]

Appendix B: 'NDP' Goodie bag items

[Source: Martina Yeo, "NDP@ Bukit Brown," All Things Bukit Brown, <http://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=4532> (accessed September 7, 2014)]



"It contained an ice-cream stick with a number written in red (symbolizing the graves affected by the 8-lane road), a packet of instant coffee (symbolizing the name that Bukit Brown was popularly known by, Kopi Sua or Coffee Hill), a candle (for participants to offer to any grave), a box of matchsticks (for lighting the candle and which symbolizes one of the Bukit Brown pioneers, Lee Kim Soo's story from rags-to-riches), "Eagle" brand medicated oil (which is a brand successfully build up by Tan Jim Lay a grandson of Tan Quee Lan), and a party popper (which symbolizes the five-coloured paper which is laid out when descendants visit their ancestors' graves during the Qing Ming Festival as an act of remembrance)."

Appendix C: A Poem for the Departed

现在 ZB NOW

· 文 · 艺 · 城

武吉布朗坟场 坟墓挖掘最终通告

尘封的山脉将家族的荣光
埋得很深很深
棺木压着流年
龛盒囚禁着冥界的呢喃
钢铁吊臂的魅影随着夕阳在黄土上渐渐逼近
叶子和树皆正低语
把安宁说得危言耸听
日后头上盖着的不是青天
是汽车的底盘
邻居们，统统都起来哟
活着的既不留恋
死了的岂能做钉子户？
上坟的人，不知是哪家的子嗣
可否也能为我上一炷香
好歹我和我的宗家为邻，一躺就是几十年
你能否认得碑上
用鸡血涂抹过的福字
你能否记起下葬时
和尚念过的经文……

官鬼已火，父母未土
官鬼已火，子孙未土
东家的王先生
西家的张太太
是时候都要起来了哟
到阎王面前奋笔疾书
将活人听不懂的历史一一载入薄命的册子
魂可归兮呀魂亦游兮
墓碑年久失修
无人记得我的名字
锄头一铲铲急促地扣着骨头
认领坟墓的人却迟迟不来
一个人高声的宣布
三年之后！
统统别了厚土！
只有入海！
才能为安！

陈济舟 / 诗



(新华社)

Newspaper clipping of the original Chinese poem

[Translated by Ang Yik Han, All Things Bukit Brown, <http://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=6356> (accessed 21 August 2014)]

the forgotten hills the family's glories
deeply bury
coffins press down on the passing years
altars imprison the murmurs of the nether world
the shadow of the steel arm gradually closes with the setting sun
the leaves and trees are all whispering
peace is made out to be [an] alarming talk

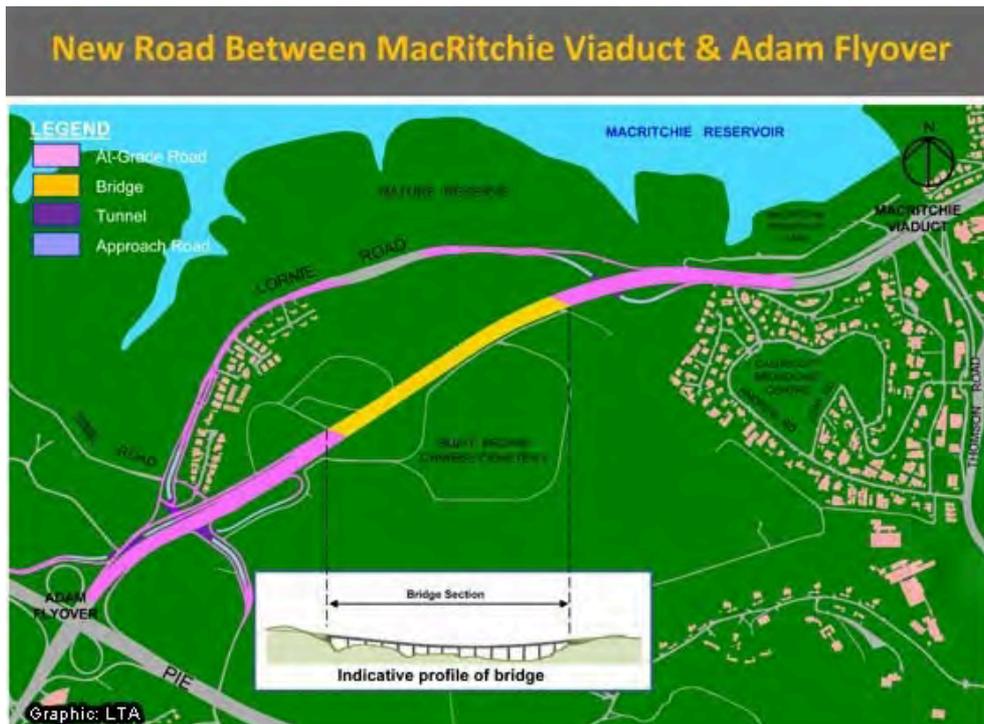
in the future it will not be the blue sky which covers us
but the undercarriages of cars
neighbours, arise all of you
since the living do not cherish
why should the dead stubbornly remain?
you who have come to offer your respects, i know not which family's descendant you are can
you place a joss stick for me as well
after all i am your ancestor's neighbour, laying together for tens of years

can you recognise on the tablet

the “fu” (fortune) character painted over by chicken blood
do you remember during the burial
the sutras recited by the monk ...
“guan gui yi huo, fu mu wei tu”
“guan gui yi huo, zi sun wei tu”

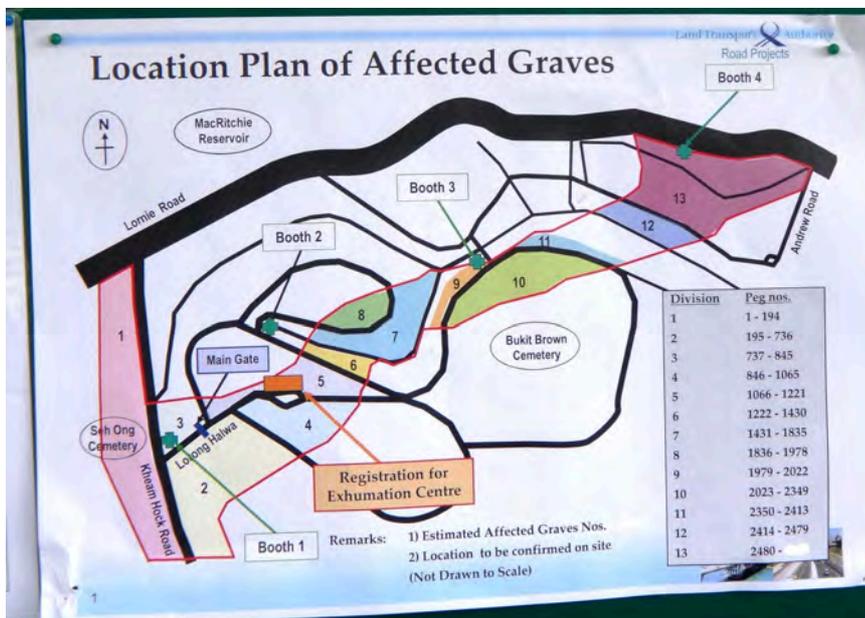
mr ong from the east end
mrs teo from the west end
it is indeed time to arise
with furious scribbles in front of the king of hades
record in the annals of the unfortunate the history which the living does not comprehend
the spirits return and wander
the tombstones have fallen into disrepair for long
the hoe’s hurried movements pick at bones
but the claimants of the tomb do not come
a voice loudly proclaims
three years later!
all will bade farewell to the soil!
only in the sea! will there be peace!

Appendix E: Article: Highway Alignment Through Bukit Brown



Article: Highway Alignment Announced

[Source: All Things Bukit Brown, <http://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=2527> (accessed September 9, 2014)]



Article: Highway Alignment Announced

[Source: All Things Bukit Brown, <http://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=2527> (accessed September 9, 2014)]

Update—Continued Pedestrian Access During Construction (updated 26 December 2013)
[Source: The Bukit Brown Cemetery Documentation Project,
<http://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=2527> (accessed September 9, 2014)]



1. Private exhumations have been on-going since April 2012 and public exhumations have commenced in December 2013.

2. While the work areas for exhumation will be closed for safety reasons, members of public can continue to enter other parts of Bukit Brown Cemetery that are not affected.

3. During exhumation, selected artefacts will be retained for further study and research.