

Notes on “The Material Culture of Bukit Brown Cemetery”

The Baba House organised a talk on The Material Culture of Bukit Brown which was conducted by Dr Lai Chee Kien from the Department of Architecture, NUS. This talk was organised as part of the museum’s Maintaining Heritage Series. Isaac Tan shares his notes taken during the lecture as well as some of his thoughts.

With all the hype over the fate of Bukit Brown Cemetery, it came as no surprise to find the NUS Museum full on a Wednesday evening. People from all walks of life – volunteers, academics, students, and curious citizens – filled the room as they came to learn about some of Dr Lai’s findings at Bukit Brown. After a brief introduction, the mild-mannered gentleman started his talk and took us on a ride of how Bukit Brown can tell us about the histories, politics, economics and culture of Singapore. This article will cover the gist of the lecture.

Features of the Graves

Dr Lai first presented us with some main features noticed in the Hokkien and Teochew graves. The difference between them is that a Hokkien grave would have an additional shore beyond the mound, which the Teochew graves do not. This means that the Hokkien graves are generally bigger than the Teochew ones though the scale of difference depended on the wealth of the family.

However, what is common between both types of graves would be the presence of a deity or guardian near it. The position of the deity is dependent on the *fengshui* requirements of the graves, and reminds us of Chinese beliefs and customs. It is important to note that there are hybrid graves that adopted a little of both designs. It is not known if such a design was adopted due to fact that the deceased came from both Teochew and Hokkien families but if it were, it would certainly be interesting as the Chinese were not very open to marrying across the dialect groups in the early 1900s.

An interesting find at Bukit Brown were the Christian graves which meant that this cemetery is designated for all Chinese rather than by a particular dialect group or religion. Another curiosity in Bukit Brown would be a couple of very small graves that were meant for pets though Dr Lai did not mention if it was officially allowed for pets to be buried there.

Tomb Elements

Aside from showing us what were the various elements that made up the grave. Dr Lai was keen to point out how certain aspects of the tombs actually reveal something about Singapore’s economy and social situation in the 1920s. From the epigraphic materials, it

was noticed that photographs of the deceased were imprinted onto a curved ceramic piece. To be able to accomplish that would require the most cutting edge technology of that time.

To see how advanced such a technology is, Dr Lai mentioned that this was not found on graves of the same period in the neighbouring countries. Hence, it sheds light on the relative prosperity of Singapore at that time. To further highlight the craftsmanship of the workers who constructed the graves, we were told that water channels were constructed around the graves for *fengshui* reasons and they were able to craft the channels in such a way that it would determine the direction of the water flow when it rains. Such feats can only be achieved through very intricate craftsmanship.

In terms of history, the graves in Bukit Brown provide a treasure trove of clues as to how the Straits Chinese were involved in the nationalistic struggle back in China. Several reformists and nationalists were buried there. Even in death, some of the nationalists never ceased to declare their political inclinations as murals of the nationalists symbols were found on their tombstones. Research into the lives of these luminaries will show how Singapore played quite an important role in China's nationalistic struggle that went beyond rich Chinese businessmen contributing money back home.

Another interesting element about the graves were the presence of statues. While the choice of statues do have very significant meanings, Dr Lai noted that quite a few statuary choices made by the families of the deceased revealed certain localised preferences. A striking example would be the statues of Sikh guards which serve to protect that the tomb. This is due to the practice by the British of employing Sikh soldiers to form the militia or serve as bodyguards. The motif of Sikh guards can be found on pillars of some shophouses and temples around Singapore as well. This shows that there is a shift in paradigm within the overseas Chinese community as while they start to view Singapore as their home.

Aside from changing paradigms, the graves also teach us about how the Chinese of the time viewed death. Several elements of the home were often incorporated in the graves. This was mostly seen in those who came from a wealthy background. Elements such as gates and stone chairs could be seen and it certainly gave any visitor a sense that one is visiting the deceased in his/her home. Death was certainly viewed as a very grand affair and how the dead is treated would have a direct bearing on the living.

Tomb Materials

Nothing reveals more about the wealth of the deceased as well as the capabilities of the country than the materials used for the graves. The perimeters of some of the graves were marked by bricks and they tell of a burgeoning industry in Singapore: brickworks.

The bricks found often contained imprints that indicate which brickwork factory it was manufactured in. From these imprints, we learnt that there were factories in Jurong, Alexandra and even Tekong. There were also bricks found that contained the words

“Kluang” and “Kim Lian” on it. Dr Lai pointed out that bricks were one of the more expensive materials used and they were very sturdy which attests to the quality of the manufacturing process.

Another material used for the graves was Shanghai plaster. This was done in three coats with the last being a coat consisting of fine stone granules. Again, the plaster proved to be rather strong as Dr Lai showed us a picture of a grave in which the tombstone has collapsed but the integrity of the grave remained intact. Of course, the fact that the plaster and other materials such as granite was imported from China attest to the kind of trade and imports done at the docks along Singapore river and other major waterfronts.

Ceramic tiles found on the graves can be said to be one of the most interesting materials since the use and design of such tiles are unique only to the straits settlement. They are mostly used by the Peranakans as part of the design and they often have flower motifs like those you would find in some shophouses in Singapore.

Importance of Bukit Brown

Dr Lai closed his lecture by making a few notes on why Bukit Brown is important. The most important aspect of Bukit Brown would be the intangible heritage and significance to the descendants of those buried there. It is a place in which people carried on the practices that have been passed down through generations such as tomb sweeping during *Qing Ming*. It is a place that connects them to their roots and a certain sense of identity of how they come into being.

The insights that Bukit Brown provide also have a bearing on how people measured and kept track of time. As a point of interest, those who are involved in construction of a grave used a special tape measure in which there were rows of Chinese text in between the metric and imperial system of measurements. Those that were in red meant that any grave constructed within such lengths would be auspicious and the reverse is true for lengths that are in black. Also, the dates that are written on the graves vary greatly from the usual dates that we are used to (in various southern languages) to ones that refer to the year of the nationalist state which reveal the political leanings of the deceased.

Speaking of inscriptions on the tombstones, the various Chinese characters do reveal a lot about the cultures of various groups. A case in point would be how a study of the different characters may tell us how food is cooked. For example the character 粥 is used to represent Cantonese porridge while 糜 is used to represent Teochew porridge. It is interesting to note how the character 米 (rice) is in the middle in the first character. This seems to mimic how Cantonese porridge has its ingredients well mixed with the rice. As for the second character, the rice is at the bottom and this mimics how the Teochews would cook their ingredients separately from the porridge and will pile the dishes on top of the porridge when eating. While such characters can be studied without the graves there, the kinds of Chinese characters found there would give us a general indication of the types of Chinese groups actually living in Singapore.

The most valuable resource of all would be the social histories that can be found by researching about the graves. Luminaries such as Chew Boon Lay and Lee Kim Soo indicated that Singapore did have a biscuit factory (Ho Ho Biscuits) as well as a safety match factory (Crocodile matches made by Elkayes factory). Such facts are certainly not known in my generation let alone those much younger. While the two figures mentioned are relatively well-known, it is an example of how the graves, even those from the lower classes, would be able to fill in on the social histories in Singapore.

Some Afterthoughts

This talk given by Dr Lai has certainly opened my eyes and filled me in on what we stand to lose once the 10 000 graves are destroyed. As his talk is focused on graves that were constructed in the 1920s-30s, it is unthinkable the amount of information that one will learn if one does a survey on all the graves there. The wealth of knowledge, significance and resources contained in Bukit Brown certainly compelled many, such as A/P Irving Johnson (Department of Southeast Asian Studies), to protest its destruction. My main aim of documenting this lecture is to provide the readers with some contextual and background knowledge to be able to engage in a fruitful debate about this issue.

Many have emphasized the importance of Bukit Brown in terms of Singapore's heritage yet what does that really mean to youths from our generation?

To me, it represents the alternative history of Singapore; one that is based on the true lives of many who worked to make Singapore what it is today. What Bukit Brown ties us to, regardless of whether you have ancestors buried there or not, is a concrete sense of identity and history. A friend once lamented on Facebook that the reason we do not have a concrete sense of identity is because we do not have a national narrative. In contrast to the 'Westerners' who have co-opted the Greek tradition as their own, Singapore's lineage is of a much more recent vintage; one that only throws the spotlight on some major events without going into details and leaves many other events out. It is also very well regulated to our own detriment.

To underscore my point, I once attended a talk by a Nigerian writer, Wole Soyinka, and when asked about his impressions of Singapore, he said that our society is "antiseptic." So how do we derive a national narrative; an epic tale that speaks of who we are as a nation? For starters, the stories behind those buried in Bukit Brown will provide several chapters and it is only our lost if they are destroyed.

Having said that, there are many who would argue that the land belongs to the living and a win-win situation would be for the government to allow academics to research on all those graves that are to be destroyed first before constructing a road that cuts through the cemetery. To do research on 10 000 graves would take a very long time but what is more important here is that proponents of this proposal belittle the importance of space. It is the physical space and environment that gives something its meaning. It is within the context and all its association that we find the ties that link us back to the past.

Another argument of the same vein would be that the government could remove all the affected tombstones and set up a museum for it for people to visit and understand which would serve all the cultural and academic needs that we are talking about. Again, it is not just about information and research but also of context. If one were to take a totem pole from a tribe that worships it and place it in a museum, it would just be an interesting pole to the visitors, but more importantly, the pole would have lost all its sacred meaning to the tribe members. This is because it is decontextualised and placed in a barricaded and sanitised environment. The same can be said of the graves in Bukit Brown and we all are the figurative tribe members by virtue of the fact that we are inheritors of the past.

I would also like to address another argument that has been given. A common complaint is that people are not even interested in Bukit Brown before plans were announced for it to be destroyed. Well, this is certainly untrue as many, whose ancestors were buried there, have been visiting it for years. Further, one could raise the valid point that the Bukit Brown cemetery was not incorporated into the mainstream primary or secondary history syllabus — if official historians have decided to “leave” it out of our national education, how are people of my generation, in this age of information-inundation, to know of this site firstly, and secondly, to form an emotional bond with the place?

While it is uncertain as to the level of academic interest prior to the announcement, I think it is important for academics who are working on areas that have a direct bearing on the population at large, such as social histories and heritage, to relay it to the public. It is only when the public is informed that fruitful discussions can be conducted. Having said that, I do acknowledge that it is an uphill task and a very problematic one as how does one define what has a direct bearing on the public?

All things considered, in the event that the exhumation of the graves come to pass, Bukit Brown would serve as a sobering lesson on how cemeteries are also spaces for the living and more attention needs to be paid to those that still remain. More importantly, it emphasises the need for active citizenship; to really learn about the government’s plans and how it affects our lives and to voice our opinions should we disagree with it at a much earlier stage when things can still be changed.