

Slide 1: Title Slide

Good morning Prof and fellow classmates, I'm Kai Jie, and today, I'll be presenting about Bukit Brown Cemetery and the significant role it has played for Chinese residents in Singapore - myself included.

Slide 2: Field Notes - Sight

Walking past the permanently open gates, I was met with a scene that sharply contrasted the hustle and bustle of city life in Singapore. Towering trees the size of Avatar flooded the scenery, surrounded with grass attempting to encroach every corner of the graves. Despite being abandoned for over 50 years, the cemetery still attracts people: joggers, dog walkers with their energetic pets, and families visiting to pay respects to their ancestors. I occasionally noticed vehicles and even horse riders passing through, as the cemetery also remains accessible by road.

Slide 3: Field Notes - Sound & Smell

Along the roadside, I noticed burning offerings in small pots, their scent a mix of ash, incense from joss sticks, and something that reminded me of cooking meat. The air itself carried an earthy smell, grounding the atmosphere of the cemetery. As I trekked deeper, I heard crickets and birds chirping through the forest, the wind rustling through the leaves, and Buddhist chants playing softly from solar-powered speakers near one of the altars.

Slide 4: Field Notes - Group Clues

As I explored further, I noticed several unique elements. First, the multi-purpose roads and pathways — they're open to almost anything, from people and vehicles to even horses (as I mentioned earlier). This openness is typical of abandoned spaces, which often lack barricades or security. Next, I noticed Tibetan writing on some letters. I found this significant because Tibetan is one of the main liturgical languages in Buddhism, even though Tibetan Buddhism is rarely practiced here in Singapore. Then, there were the brightly painted tiles on the graves, symbolising the souls of ancestors in the afterlife and showing respect and reverence from the living. Finally, the absence of street lamps suggested the area's lack of modern development.

Slide 5: Controversies

This space, however, is not without controversy. In 1991, the area was earmarked for residential development. By 2012, plans for an eight-lane highway led to the exhumation of over 4,000 graves, sparking a public outcry. Those supporting the development argue it is necessary to meet Singapore's housing and transport needs. On the other hand, heritage advocates view the destruction as a tragic loss of cultural and spiritual history. This ongoing debate shows the tension between urbanisation and heritage preservation which is the very heart of my exploration.

Slide 6: Research Question

After my exploration, this led me to my research question: *How does urbanisation challenge our spiritual and religious connection to sacred spaces?*

Slide 7: Main Source 1 (Ormsby)

Dr. Alison Ormsby, an environmental studies lecturer, introduces the idea of 'Sacred Natural Sites' — drawing from places like Krakus Mound in Poland and sacred spaces in Nepal. She argues that urbanisation threatens these sites by disrupting their peace and spiritual meaning, through things like pollution and relentless development. For Bukit Brown, her emphasis on protecting natural sacred spaces feels especially relevant, helping to preserve its cultural and spiritual importance for the Chinese community.

However, Ormsby focuses mainly on natural landscapes and doesn't consider how religious spaces might adapt over time. This limits her view of places like Bukit Brown, which isn't purely natural but also religious in its human rituals. This raises a key question: is preservation the only way forward, or can such spaces evolve?

Slide 8: Main Source 2 (Mydlowska)

In contrast, Dr. Elżbieta Mydlowska offers a more adaptable perspective. Using what she calls the 'snapshot method,' she captures how religious spaces evolve at different moments in time, rather than seeing them as fixed entities. Her focus is mainly on built religious sites like churches and temples, arguing these spaces can grow and change alongside urbanisation. This method opens up an interesting way to view Bukit Brown — perhaps not as a site frozen in time, but one that adapts as the city grows around it. However, Mydlowska concentrates on built environments and doesn't fully explore natural sacred spaces, which face different pressures. For Bukit Brown, this means her framework is suggestive but incomplete.

Slide 9: Key Takeaways

So, both scholars clearly value the preservation of sacred natural and religious spaces — Bukit Brown included. But they approach this in quite different ways.

Ormsby focuses on Sacred Natural Sites like Bukit Brown, showing how urbanisation threatens their peace and spiritual depth. She calls for strict conservation, helping us see the risks of development, both environmentally and culturally. But her argument assumes these spaces are fragile and unchanging, overlooking how they might adapt alongside urban growth.

Meanwhile, Mydlowska — through her snapshot method — shows how religious spaces can evolve with the city. She treats urbanisation not just as a threat, but as a chance for integration. This view offers hope that Bukit Brown could find a middle path. However, since her work centres on built spaces like churches and temples, she doesn't fully address the unique ecological and spiritual layers of a natural site like Bukit Brown.

Taken together, their perspectives give us a fuller picture. They help us ask: can Bukit Brown, as both a sacred natural and religious site, balance its heritage with the demands of modern development?

Slide 10: Personal Takeaways

Every time I leave Bukit Brown Cemetery, I carry with me a deeper understanding and newfound appreciation. It is far more than just an abandoned cemetery — it is a living tapestry of stories about the pioneers who helped shape Singapore into what it is today. The sight of burning offerings, the echoes of Buddhist chants, and the quiet serenity of the grounds made me feel profoundly connected to my Chinese roots, as though I were stepping back into my ancestors' village in China. This experience also opened my eyes to the importance of balancing preservation with urbanisation, revealing that there are thoughtful, creative ways for sacred spaces like Bukit Brown to coexist with modern development. Above all, it has instilled in me a stronger sense of urgency to be more mindful and proactive about heritage preservation, ensuring that these meaningful spaces are not only protected and respected, but also woven thoughtfully into our city's ongoing story.

Slide 11: Start Thinking Before It's Too Late! (Conclusion)

To conclude, urbanisation certainly puts pressure on our spiritual and religious connection to sacred spaces — but it doesn't have to mean their disappearance. Both scholars, though from different parts of the world, stress the importance of respecting and preserving these spaces. My visit to Bukit Brown showed me firsthand that even in a modern, fast-paced city, these spaces can survive, if we consciously make space for them in our urban future.

Slide 12: Thank You

Thank you for your attention.