

CC0001 - Echoes of the Pioneers: Bukit Brown's Spirit in an Urbanising Singapore



Figure 1. Gates of Bukit Brown Cemetery.

Right in the heart of Singapore Island lies a spectacular sight that is home to thousands of gigantic trees but also hosts the graves of a hundred thousand pioneers of Chinese heritage who shaped the Singapore we know today (Tsang, 2007). Despite its closure over 50 years ago (Tsang, 2007), the gates of Bukit Brown Cemetery remain open to welcome anyone keen to visit this hidden gem. Visitors include joggers eager to challenge themselves with the cemetery's arduously steep hills, residents walking their hyperactive dogs, and those coming from all over the island to pay respects to their ancestors.



Figure 2. Main Road through the Cemetery with Burning Offerings.

As I strolled down a wide and bumpy road from the main entrance, graves stretched endlessly on either side, with vegetation attempting to assert its presence. The savoury, meat-like smell of burning offerings from two metal pots made my nostrils tingle with curiosity. A white marble altar, adorned with nine intricate tiles depicting the afterlife and two cubic lamps, was waiting for me in the distance. Drawn by curiosity, I ventured closer.



Figure 3. Central Altar Up Close.

Standing before the altar was a surreal experience; it felt as though I stood between worlds — momentarily bridging the living with spirits returning home. ‘Om Mani Padme Hum’ (ཨོཾ་ཎི་པདྨེ་ཧུམ་, 唵嘛呢叭咪吽), the chant emanating from solar-powered speakers, wards off unseen dangers from floating spirits. The presence of devotional artefacts like incense holders and a Buddha effigy instantly transported me to the sacred space of a Buddhist temple, evoking memories of visiting my late grandfather. As I gazed out over graves, I wondered: If spiritual connection is rooted in place, what happens when that place is erased?



Figure 4. Unclaimed Tombstones around Bukit Brown.

As I descended from the altar and resumed my solitary expedition, I was immediately confronted with the monolithic presence of Lornie Highway. The abrupt transition from sacred tranquillity to concrete imposition soured my mood, stirring thoughts of displaced spirits. Nearby, an uncanny sight caught my attention — a miniature Stonehenge of unclaimed tombstones (Ng & Lim, 2024), solemnly arranged as if in silent counsel, all facing inwards toward where I stood. In that moment, I felt as though I were at the centre of a wordless vigil, surrounded by forgotten voices. I could not help but ask myself: Was it wise to extend Lornie Road in this deliberate and intrusive way?



Figure 5. Lush Vegetation of Bukit Brown Seen from Lornie Highway.



Figure 6. Miniature Altar at the End of a Path.

Bukit Brown is one of the few sacred sites in Singapore that deepens my sense of identity as an overseas Chinese, because it is the final resting place of Chinese pioneers who helped shape modern Singapore. While it offers profound historical and spiritual significance, urbanisation threatens to sever these cultural and sacred ties.

As I gazed rightwards towards the emerald-coloured forest, I decided to trek on. Despite the dangers of wild species lurking within, curiosity drew me forward. The melodic symphony of birdsong, crickets, and the rustling of ancient leaves seemed to soothe and protect the souls resting there. This untouched sanctuary felt like a window to pre-colonial Singapore, where towering trees once dominated the entire island. However, upon learning about the government's plan to transform it into a residential area (Urban Redevelopment Authority, 1991), I could not help but wonder: How does urbanisation challenge our spiritual and religious connection to sacred spaces?

Scholars like Alison A. Ormsby (2021) and Elżbieta Mydlowska (2024) address the tension between spirituality and urbanisation, each offering distinct perspectives on how sacred spaces should respond to urbanisation. While both emphasise the importance of preserving spiritual and religious elements, their approaches to urbanisation and strategies for preservation differ.

Alison A. Ormsby (2021), an Environmental Studies lecturer at the University of North Carolina Asheville, categorised a list of “sacred natural sites” threatened by urbanisation. She asserts that “urbanisation would eradicate the essence of tranquillity and spirituality around such spaces like air pollution,” (Ormsby, 2021) reasoning that “air pollution has a negative impact on vegetation and wildlife species” (Ormsby, 2021). Though her case studies are global, her concerns resonate with Bukit Brown Cemetery, a sacred grove entwined with curtains of greenery and cultural memory. Ormsby’s (2021) framing invites us to see Bukit Brown not just as heritage, but as a living, breathing, sacred natural site facing similar ecological and spiritual pressures.

While Ormsby's (2021) concerns are valid, they also led me to reflect more deeply: must sacred natural spaces always resist urbanisation, or can they adapt meaningfully? In Bukit Brown’s case, I believe it can be revitalised with a modern artistic touch — one that enhances rather than diminishes its spirituality and sacredness. Yet, I still agree with Ormsby (2021) that excessive urbanisation risks disrupting ecosystems and severing ties with heritage. The challenge lies in striking a balance: how do we meet the needs of modern residents without erasing the spiritual and historical roots of places like Bukit Brown?

Elżbieta Mydłowska (2024), an assistant professor at the University of Szczecin, emphasises the importance of practicing and preserving religion in religious buildings, such as churches, temples, and mosques. She posits that “religion plays a significant role in people's lives,” (Mydłowska, 2024) and introduces her “snapshot method” to document and plan for the ongoing evolution and conservation of religious compounds. While she acknowledges that “religious structures can incorporate well with rising impacts of urbanisation” (Mydłowska, 2024), the same cannot be fully applied to every part of Bukit Brown Cemetery. Unlike traditional places of worship, Bukit Brown is deeply intertwined with nature with its sprawling forests shielding it from urban sprawl.



Figure 7. Forkroad Showing Absence of Central Altar (October 2019).



Figure 8. Forkroad Featuring Newly Established Central Altar (August 2020).



Figure 9. Forkroad Showing Further Development of the Central Altar (December 2023).

Despite Bukit Brown's natural setting, I have observed patterns that echo Mydlowska's (2024) emphasis on preserving and nurturing religious presence, as well as her "snapshot method" in action. Since I began visiting in 2019, I have noticed the gradual emergence of new spiritual elements — most notably the development of the central altar, which was absent during my first visit. Over the years, the altar was constructed and evolved into what it is today — with new elements that included Tibetan leaflets, incense holders and solar powered speakers playing Buddhist chants. These evolving features exemplify how even a sacred and natural space like Bukit Brown can sustain a living religious tradition through the structured progression described in Mydlowska's (2024) "snapshot method".

Both Ormsby (2021) and Mydlowska (2024) offer invaluable yet distinct insights into sacred spaces like Bukit Brown. While I stand with Ormsby's (2021) view on the detrimental effects of urbanisation, I am also intrigued by how Mydlowska's "snapshot method" manifests in Bukit Brown, where modern elements coexist with the cemetery's spiritual stillness. Their works suggest that sacredness and religion can indeed coexist along with each other in natural environments, even if the scholars approach the issue from vastly different angles. Ultimately, this leaves me pondering: where should we draw the line between necessary progress and unnecessary erasure?

Bukit Brown Cemetery became a flashpoint of controversy following the announcement of the Land Transport Authority's construction of Lornie Highway, which required the exhumation of nearly three thousand graves (Ng & Lim, 2024). Although public attention surrounding Lornie Highway surged only in recent years, plans for development in the area can be traced back to the 1991 Concept Plan, which had earmarked Bukit Brown for future residential development (Urban Redevelopment Authority, 1991). These long-standing intentions angered many activists (Bukit Brown, 2011), who saw the project as a violation of spiritual peace — believing that spirits were being displaced rather than resting in peace. Their views also echoed Ormsby's (2021) concern that "urbanisation negatively impacts nature and wildlife through air pollution" (Ormsby, 2021). While I acknowledge the need to accommodate growing traffic demands, such projects raise tough ethical dilemmas about the preservation of sacred spaces. Unlike Mydłowska's (2024) "snapshot method," which advocates for gradual integration of religious sites to suit modern needs, the Lornie Highway project demonstrates almost no effort in preserving the site's spiritual and cultural essence.



Figure 10. Two Statues of Sikh Guards guarding a grave.

Putting urbanisation aside, Singapore is fortunate to house Bukit Brown Cemetery - a spacious, sacred and religious natural site as described by both Ormsby (2021) and Mydłowska (2024). Believed to be the largest Chinese cemetery outside of China, it is the final resting place of around a hundred thousand pioneers (Tsang, 2007). More than just a resting place, it stands as a living monument to the pioneers who transformed Singapore from a humble fishing village to a thriving metropolis. Located near my home, it has become one of my favourite running and walking routes if I am up for the challenge of its steep hills, while also seeking refuge from the urban sprawl. Each visit reconnects me with my Chinese roots; the quiet ambience and intricate carvings of each grave deepen my appreciation for the stories and legacies buried beneath. As a result, I

wholeheartedly encourage my friends to explore this sacred, natural gem at least once in their lifetimes. Whether through a jog, walk or simply pausing to absorb and appreciate the atmosphere, there is something deeply moving about this place firsthand. Together, we can honour our shared heritage and appreciate the silent lessons the cemetery offers — before time or development erases them from our landscape.

References

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