



PROJECT MUSE®

Resurgent Spirits of Civil Society Activism: Rediscovering the Bukit Brown Cemetery in Singapore

Huang Jianli

Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, Volume 87, Part 2, No. 307, December 2014, pp. 21-45 (Article)

Published by Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ras.2014.0016>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/560469>

Resurgent Spirits of Civil Society Activism: Rediscovering the Bukit Brown Cemetery in Singapore

HUANG JIANLI*

The proposed building of a major highway and expected extensive housing projects in the forgotten Chinese cemetery at Bukit Brown of Singapore in 2011 ignited unprecedented national and international attention. Opened in 1922 by the British colonial authorities and eventually embedded with over 100,000 graves of the Chinese diaspora within a site rich in biodiversity, it is now touted as one of the largest Chinese cemeteries outside of China and a possible candidate for listing as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

This paper is not intended as a major theoretical framing of larger issues; instead, the focus is on chronicling the important resurgence of civil society activism in the process of rediscovery and tracing the challenges posed to the disciplinary political authorities of Singapore. Previous studies about contestation over Chinese burial grounds in Singapore are centred on Western versus Chinese practices and on parochial sub-communal interest versus modernist developmental regimes, without bringing heritage concerns directly into the microphysics of power. This new narrative on Bukit Brown will unveil the extent to which heritage, history and identity suddenly surged to the forefront of citizenry consciousness and interrogated the fundamentals of governance and national developmental agenda.

Introduction: Rediscovery of an In-situ ‘National Treasure’

The thunderbolt which struck the tranquil Bukit Brown cemetery and unleashed haunting spirits of various kinds was the government announcement in September 2011 of the construction of an eight-lane highway diagonally across it. Although there were previous indications of designated development for the area, it was the concretization of a highway which sparked the awakening of many forces and aroused fervent local and international attention. It was reckoned as the first phase of an impending massive redevelopment which would possibly lead to the near total obliteration of the cemetery and its replacement by residential housing estates within the next thirty to forty years. There is already an underground mass rapid transit line running through, with a station located on the southeastern edge of the cemetery. Preliminary road graphics from the national press also show at least another horizontal and two vertical major arterial roads criss-crossing the burial grounds.¹

* HUANG Jianli is an Associate Professor with the History Department of the National University of Singapore and concurrently the Deputy Director of the Asia Research Institute and Research Associate at the East Asia Institute. Email: huang.jianli@nus.edu.sg; postal address: Department of History, National University of Singapore, 11 Arts Link, Singapore 117570.

¹ ‘Preliminary investigation of Bukit Brown’ (2011).

Despite the immediate public outcry that it should be regarded as an in-situ 'national treasure', the government insisted upon realizing the residential potential of Bukit Brown, estimated as being about 40 per cent of the nearby Toa Payoh housing estate with possibly 15,000 units of flats and 50,000 residents.² Soon after, it proceeded with detailed road planning by announcing in March 2012 a minor concession of making one-third of the road a 600-metre-long vehicular bridge 5–10 metres above some depressed ground in order to protect the biodiversity.³ With the construction contract officially awarded in August 2013, the highway is now expected to be operational by the end of 2017.⁴

With the long period of amnesia prior to its rediscovery, there is a scarcity of information on Bukit Brown's history and physical attributes.⁵ Historically, the general vicinity began life as a plantation property of British merchant George Henry Brown in the 1840s around the Mount Pleasant area. A nearby hillock was subsequently named Bukit Brown by British map makers. Brown was also an owner of three ships plying the South China Sea and a maker of horse carriages. He later lost an arm in an industrial accident and moved his residence to Penang, where he passed away. A substantial part of the land in the area then passed into the hands of the Seh Ong 姓王 clan and Hokkien Huay Kuan 福建会馆 from the 1870s as exclusive burial grounds for their respective clan members. When confronted with an exploding migrant population and a pressing shortage of burial grounds at the start of the twentieth century, the British colonial authorities acquired much of the land for an inclusionary Chinese public cemetery. Their Bukit Brown Municipal Chinese Cemetery was opened on 1 January 1922 for people of various Chinese dialect groups and religions. After a slow start, this 'Bukit Brown Proper' gained in popularity and filled up very quickly. Burials ceased by 1973 and the land was acquired by the post-independence government. There is no exact count of the number of tombstones, but an often-cited estimate is over 100,000 graves, making it the largest Chinese cemetery outside of China. Given the lack of precise data about the various constituent burial segments in terms of their respective size, territorial demarcation and even nomenclature, the English-language term 'Bukit Brown' (at times 'Greater Bukit Brown') later came to be used loosely to refer collectively to the conglomeration of burial lands in that entire vicinity of about 158 hectares framed by Lornie Road, Thomson Road and the Pan-Island Expressway.⁶

² 'Government revising the path of new road ...' (2012).

³ 'Timeline of a grave saga' (2012).

⁴ 'Work on Bukit Brown road set to begin next year' (2013).

⁵ For brief history accounts on Bukit Brown, see Yeoh (2003: 300–3); McKenzie (2011: 58); Chong and Chua (2014); Chia (2011, 2012a).

⁶ Area estimates provided by Mok Ly Yng, 'Bukit Brown cemetery in maps: A historical survey,' talk on 30 Jun 2013 at Chui Huey Lim Club; Official Chinese exhumation notices used the following nomenclature: '武吉布朗坟场 (咖啡山)' [Bukit Brown Cemetery/Coffee Hill] and '王氏太原山坟场 (姓王山)' [Wangshi Taiyuan Hill Cemetery/Seh Ong Hill]. The Ong clan is traced to Taiyuan 太原 of Shanxi 山西 province and thus the Seh Ong Hill 姓王山 is also often referred to as Taiyuan Hill 太原山. See Wang (1982: B18 map and B26 genealogical table).

With no new burials by the early 1970s, Bukit Brown increasingly faded from public memory over the next forty years and turned into a neglected space. The termination of maintenance contracts by government authorities soon led to overgrown wild grass, unrecognizable landscape and inaccessible inner parts. Initially, there was still the seasonal crowd during the annual Qing Ming 清明 festival of visiting ancestral graves. However, this too faded with people's changing social habits and diminishing commitment to the Chinese traditional rituals. The few who lived on its outskirts and enjoyed the serenity would take their family members and dogs for walking and jogging in the day time. A nearby equestrian club used the grounds for walking their horses. For the stout-hearted, it served as a fascinating night site for investigating ghostly paranormal activities. The secluded, unlighted cemetery even became the night playground for a gynaecologist to commit illicit sex with an underage school girl in his parked car until the law caught up with him.⁷ Thus the cemetery space with scattered engraved tombstones had never been totally out of sight, out of mind. With its recent rediscovery, Bukit Brown has now leapt to the forefront of national consciousness with a sudden flare-up of civil society activism which had been increasingly circumscribed during the colonial and, even more so, the post-colonial era.

Historical Context and Extant Literature: A Turning Point in State-Society Relations

In the early years of colonial rule, the British authorities in Singapore basically adopted a light-touch approach towards governing, providing the majority Chinese community much space to organize themselves in a vast network of temples, native-place or dialect associations, clan organizations, cultural groups and independent schools. The spirits of voluntarism and civil society activism were allowed to roam fairly freely. From the 1870s, and even more so the 1920s, the British began to adopt a tighter regulatory and governance framework to meet the rising socio-political problems of secret societies, China-oriented nationalism and communism.⁸ During the post-World War Two period, British preparations for decolonization and constitutionalism provided space for labour and student activism, but this was counteracted by simultaneous deep security concerns about communist subversion and a looming globalized Cold War. Civil society space truncated most dramatically with the attainment of full national independence in 1965 and after the progressive acquisition of overwhelming political dominance by Lee Kuan Yew and his ruling People's Action Party (PAP) over the next two decades. The collateral process of systematic depoliticization of all political activity other than that of the ruling party transformed Singapore essentially into what Chan Heng Chee termed 'an administrative state' devoid of pluralistic democratic politics outside of the regular election period.⁹

⁷ 'Retired doctor charged with underage sex' (2013); 'Doctor, 63, admits to sex with 14-year-old' (2013).

⁸ Cheng (1984); Yen (1986); Lee (1991); Gillis (2005).

⁹ Chan (1975: 51–68).

The stepping down of Lee Kuan Yew as Prime Minister in 1990 provided hopes for a new era of state–society relations, but it proved to be a false dawn on several occasions. The new Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and his team initially signalled a ‘kinder, gentler’ style and promised pruning of the banyan tree of the state to allow more light for the growth of civic groups. However, instances such as their subsequent harsh response to public criticism from academic and novelist Catherine Lim, the imposition of out-of-bound ‘OB markers’ on political debates, as well as the proscribing of political films, websites and donations, all indicated a status quo.¹⁰ The ascendancy of Lee Hsien Loong as Singapore’s third Prime Minister in 2004 also began with the rhetoric of encouraging public participation and debate, pluralistic views and forward-looking orientation, but again major political restrictions, threats of defamation proceedings, and other old politics stayed firmly in place. Therefore, in the first twenty years after Lee Kuan Yew stepped down as Prime Minister, the island city-state remained locked within the frame of old politics with no real new dawn for civil society activism, thereby clouding its aspiration of becoming a renaissance city.¹¹

The Bukit Brown saga which broke out in 2011 has not been fully played out yet, but it is already indicative of a turning point in state–society relations. In terms of the scale and intensity of civil society protests against the road building and any possible immediate development projects in the burial grounds, the saga has been exceptionally vigorous and impactful, and certainly worthy of chronicling. The limits of the hegemonic corporate state appear to have been reached and there emerged the prospect of having much greater genuine social space for citizenry expression and policy input. The British Broadcasting Corporation, with its liberal journalism, suggested viewing Bukit Brown as ‘Singapore’s mid-life crisis’ where its citizens in the past had mostly accepted the disciplinarian nanny state with only minor grumbling, but ‘this time the government’s plans have run into a sophisticated civic protest movement’.¹²

It is also arguably a turning point in terms of a shift in society priority by reducing the national fixation on modernist economic developmental goals and shifting attention towards privileging the intrinsic importance of history and heritage. Tension between two modernist state administrations and the Chinese burial grounds has been the subject of earlier scrutiny by historical geographers Brenda Yeoh and Tan Boon Hui. In their large corpus of scholarship, Bukit Brown and its establishment featured only in the discussion pertaining to the British colonial era, while several other Chinese cemeteries and their closures were examined for the post-independence period.¹³ Although their works have been cited extensively in support of the heritage cause, their focus was actually elsewhere: on the ‘microphysics’ of power and the politics of space under the broad developmental agenda of both the British and PAP governments. Beginning with the British regulatory approach from the late 1880s, differences between Western and Chinese

¹⁰ Cherian (2000: chs 2, 14); Koh and Ooi (2000); Singam et al. (2002); Welsh et al. (2009: pt. 1).

¹¹ Tan (2007: chs 1, 2).

¹² Head (2013).

¹³ Yeoh (1991, 2003: 300–3, 2011); Yeoh and Tan (1995); Tan and Yeoh (2002); Kong and Yeoh (2003: ch 4).

conceptualization of burial customs had coupled with the modernist administrative issues of sanitary science, developmental needs and rational planning to give rise to contestations and negotiations at both the collective and individual levels. The colonial regime was more limited in information collation, policing and legislative power and there was thus a greater presence of Chinese burial grounds sprouting and being maintained as sacred, autonomous entities. Under the increasingly dominant PAP party-state from the 1960s, power swung overwhelmingly in favour of the state, with an extensive use of developmental master planning, land use zoning, compulsory land acquisition, and other legislation wielding almost absolute administrative power beyond review. Although there were sporadic compromises and concessions, a large number of Chinese burial grounds disappeared under the relentless post-independence developmental drive towards land acquisition, grave exhumation and promotion of cremation. Therefore, heritage activism had not really been featured in these earlier extant analyses of both the colonial and post-colonial eras. Yet, the outbreak of spontaneous and widespread protestation over Bukit Brown from 2011 as chronicled below challenged and moved beyond the state developmental discourse by interrogating its rightfulness and bringing forth the new issues of the intrinsic worth of history and heritage.

Sparks of Prairie Fire: Spontaneity and Intensity in Cyberactivism and Voluntarism

Our 'new' story of Bukit Brown began when the government first announced that it had been earmarked for housing in May 2011. Protests first surfaced in cyberspace with the Facebook group 'Heritage Singapore – Bukit Brown Cemetery' launched in June 2011. But it was the concretization of a highway project cutting diagonally across the cemetery in September 2011 that led to a sudden explosion of public fervour. Soon after, many other social media sites emerged and uploaded thousands of photographs and commentaries, including the 'Rojak Librarian' (Peter Pak 白彼德) and the consolidated, encyclopaedic 'All Things Bukit Brown' (Catherine Lim 林雪芳 and Claire Leow 廖雪珠). Another group 'SOS Bukit Brown' (Chong Ja Ian 庄嘉颖, Lisa Li, Erika Lim 林秀颖, Jennifer Teo 张绿庭 and Woon Tien Wei 云天伟) also started to organize a petition, hoping to collect 100,000 signatures, with one for every grave.¹⁴ As new media studies have pointed out, the internet highway of the world-wide-web (a global mass feature operationalized only in 1995) provided the Bukit Brown activists with an exceptional space for their advocacy beyond state policing power.¹⁵ It was the speed, intensity and connectivity of cyberactivism via the digitalized virtual world that created the opportunity for a possible turning point in civil society activism.

Two other civil society groups with a long lineage before the internet era – the Nature Society (Branch of the Malayan Nature Society in 1954, Singapore 1991) and the Singapore Heritage Society (1986) – also compiled serious position papers to challenge the government's choreographed narrative, especially the latter's developmental mantra on 'space of the dead must give way to space for the

¹⁴ 'Stirring of Bukit Brown in the internet' (2012).

¹⁵ Liew et al. (2013).

living'. Hundreds of their volunteers organized weekly tours and hosted well-attended exhibitions and talks.¹⁶ There was an obvious shift in public discourse, with heritage-making springing from the ground. To anthropologist Hui Yew-Foong 许耀峰 of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies there was a historical turn in citizenry consciousness as it was 'no longer sufficient to pursue simple bread and butter' and it had become 'also important to be searching for the soul of the nation, and for some, the place to start is among the graves of Bukit Brown'.¹⁷

Historian Chua Ai Lin 蔡爱琳 of the Singapore Heritage Society who helmed the long-running 'Singapore-Heritage Yahoo Group' and its 'Singapore Heritage Digest' postings for 13 years noted that 'acting as a rare physical archive of a nation's past ... Bukit Brown is a treasure trove of personal stories that weave an intricate historical network of links between the overseas Chinese and the region'. To her, the 'firestorm of protest' and what the media had dubbed as 'the battle for Bukit Brown' merely 'signals an era in which Singaporeans guard more jealously the sites, spaces and artefacts of their forefathers. The unrelenting waves of globalization have made the search for authenticity more important, and this is something that has energized local heritage activism.'¹⁸ In September 2013 the Oxford- and Cambridge-trained academic became the youngest president of the 200-strong Singapore Heritage Society in its 27-year history and she pledged to uphold the society's advocacy role. Fending off images of the society as 'a pesky bunch of nostalgia lovers who constantly stand in the way of redevelopment and progress', she argued that 'when it's something of significance, let's just remember to give pause and fully consider all the options before we do something that is irreversible'.¹⁹

But the sparks which first ignited the prairie fire and unleashed the resurgent spirits from beneath the burial grounds were from an unexpected source. They were first provided by the Asia Paranormal Investigators company which organized ghostly night tours in various parts of the island; it was led by two brothers Raymond Goh 吴安全 and Charles Goh 吴安龙. The fiery response from Bukit Brown heritage activism soon overtook everything else in their lives. Raymond Goh soon acquired the gentlemanly moniker of 'Mr Bukit Brown' for his extensive probing, and was alternatively labelled as the 'tomb whisperer' and 'amateur historian'.²⁰

Raymond Goh, in his late 40s, was a university-trained pharmacist working in a multinational company and acquiring a tourist guide licence along the way. He became interested in tombs after an emotional visit to his grandfather's grave in 2006 when he saw his own name engraved on the tombstone and felt a connectivity which he wished to engender in others. Moreover, he became engrossed with the many references to Chinese history and culture embedded in the story of the

¹⁶ Bilingual exhibition-cum-talk in collaboration with the Teochew-led Chui Huay Lim Club 醉花林俱乐部, 'Bukit Brown: Our roots, our future 百年武吉布朗、追古扶今', 29 June–7 July 2013; 'Two organizations introducing Bukit Brown ...' (2013).

¹⁷ Hui (2012: 44).

¹⁸ Gray (2012).

¹⁹ 'Heritage Society's youngest president' (2013).

²⁰ Skinner (2012); 'Battlefield tour report' (2012: photograph caption); C. Leow (2013).

stones. His brother, Charles Goh, is four years younger and worked as a construction safety manager. He, too, is interested in tombs and founded the Asia Paranormal Investigators in 2005 to investigate ghost stories and alien abductions in Singapore, as well as the alleged sightings of Big Foot in Malaysia. Their first major tomb discovery was that of Cheang Hong Lim 章芳琳 in Bukit Brown in 2007 and since then they have never looked back. They cleverly framed the storm of citizenry activism unleashed by them in innocent, patriotic terms: 'They find their ancestors and their roots, and it helps ground them to Singapore' and for the young ones in particular, they might be infused with the notion that 'this is my country, it's worth fighting for because my ancestors are here'.²¹

The sudden prairie fire ignited by them and fanned by others took the government by surprise. By late November 2011 more than 280 volunteered for a documentation project, simply because 'many had hoped to play a part in keeping the history of Singapore'.²² By January 2013 it was estimated that All Things Bukit Brown, Singapore Heritage Society and Nature Society had organized 190 tours, with as many as 4000 participants.²³ By October 2013 the free tours had reached more than 7000 people.²⁴ Schools were particularly responsive, with Raffles Girls' School ferrying over as many as 450 young students. Signalling how death spaces had intruded into the calculus of futuristic urban living, a group of 30 students from the so-called 'Future Cities Laboratory' also visited the site.²⁵ The volunteer guides were known as Bukit Brownies (Brownies 布朗人 for short), and they proudly proclaimed: 'The Brownies have a code. We guide rain or shine. Which is to say, we persevere. We keep calm and carry on believing in the value of Bukit Brown, that it is a national treasure.'²⁶

Activism on Heritage, History and Identity: Critique and Contestation of State Policies

The intensity of the prairie fire could also be gauged by the content of the critique and contestation mounted by resurgent citizenry groups, especially in their immediate counter-response to the government's fire-fighting measures. Tan Chuan-Jin 陈川仁, as the government's frontline junior minister to manage the Bukit Brown controversy, had set up a documentation project under the leadership of Hui Yew-Foong for the highway-affected graves and flagged it as a major government concession towards heritage conservation and identity building.²⁷ However, this concessionary gesture immediately invited debate over its relatively low quantum of state funding. Journalist Han Yongmei 韩咏梅 reported Tan's interview

²¹ 'Finders of long-forgotten tombs' (2012).

²² 'Preliminary investigation of Bukit Brown' (2011).

²³ '400 gathered to celebrate Bukit Brown's heritage' (2013).

²⁴ 'Bukit Brown listing on World Monument Watch not to exert pressure on government' (2013).

²⁵ 'Bringing Bt Brown's history to life ...' (2013).

²⁶ 'Bukit Brown Cemetery has been named on the World Monuments Watch 2014' (2013).

²⁷ The project had a segment on oral history led by Loh Kah Seng on the surrounding underclass and informal economy; see Loh (2012a, 2012b).

comments that 'I am happy to see how the Bukit Brown has stimulated the historical consciousness of people ..., I hope this Bukit Brown debate has not only strengthened society's recognition of national history but also raised the government's support for and emphasis on cultural and historical studies.' But she immediately questioned the sincerity of the government, which had often poured hundreds of millions of dollars for all kinds of research grants but yet allocated only a meagre \$250,000 (inclusive of the cost of equipment and researchers) for this large documentation project to be completed within a year.²⁸ Moreover, while there was recognition of some value to this government-sponsored project for graves designated to be exhumed, some people also felt cheated. They argued that this digital storage in the virtual world could never be, or even come close to being, a replicate of the physical site for people to stroll along the tombstone rows and to experience the tomb engravings and all the other accompanying material culture with their five senses.²⁹

Critics also made a comparison between Bukit Brown and Wanqingyuan 晚晴园 which had been recently converted into—and maintained at high public cost—the Sun Yat-sen Nanyang Memorial Hall 孙中山南洋纪念馆.³⁰ They criticized the government spending on Wanqingyuan and centennial celebration of the 1911 Revolution in China, but unwilling to preserve the Bukit Brown tombs of revolutionary participants and other early Chinese pioneers. Minister Tan Chuan-jin insisted that these were two separate things, with Bukit Brown being a man-made burial ground occupying large tracts of land, while the Wanqingyuan was only a memorial hall with no issues of road building. He suggested that the critics were just hunting for scapegoats.³¹

This critique of misallocation of government resources spilled over to the golf courses. Liew Kai Khiun, of the Singapore Heritage Society, culled information from the Urban Redevelopment Authority and noted that '22 golf courses and three temporary golf sites occupied 88 per cent of the 1,600 hectares of land used for sports and recreation in 2000, or 2.2 per cent of total land area'. The Singapore Island Country Club bordering on Bukit Brown alone 'with its 18,000 members were enjoying four 18-hole courses, a 9-hole course and two driving ranges that stretch from Adam Road to the boundaries of Peirce Reservoir'. Reckoning 'it is unacceptable that a privileged few have exclusive access to large plots of land in a tiny country with a burgeoning population', he argued that 'if there must be redevelopment in the Lornie Road area, one of SICC's golf courses, rather than the cemetery, should make way'.³² Endorsing Liew's view, a Chinese press editorial joined in to lament land wastage through expansive golf courses serving only a few elites and on how the 1986 demolition of the landmark National Theatre had

²⁸ Han (2011).

²⁹ Undergraduate Aloysius Foo's reportage and Dr Chua Ai Lin's interview in *Mnemozine: The NUS history magazine*, Issue 2 (Feb 2012): 17, 22; Chia (2012b); 'Singapore Heritage Society: Position paper on Bukit Brown, January 2012' (2012).

³⁰ For its history and implications, see Huang and Hong (2004).

³¹ 'Tan Chuan-jin: Need balance in land usage and supply' (2011).

³² 'Golf courses, not history, should make way' (2011).

resulted in the land still being left vacant.³³ A former Member of Parliament and government minister, Goh Choon Kang 吴俊刚, returned fire by labelling those who drew a comparison between Bukit Brown and golf courses as being mistaken and extremist. He defended the multiple golf courses, urged all citizens to be rational in approaching the Bukit Brown issue, and repeated the government's mantra that the dead must give way to the living as an inevitable trade-off.³⁴

Nicholas Volland, from the Chinese Studies Department of the National University of Singapore, also laid bare the irony of the government in spending enormous amounts of money to reclaim land from the sea and in harping on 'sustainability of development', and yet using an expensive plot of reclaimed land to build the artificial Gardens by the Bay while destroying the natural habitat of Bukit Brown to accommodate more highways and villas.³⁵ Another writer similarly offered the contrast of the Gardens by the Bay as being 'an artificial construct or what I would often refer to as a huge manicured bonsai' and Bukit Brown as a 'rich but neglected repository of our cultural and natural heritage amid the lush, unkempt undergrowth'.³⁶

A new battlefield on war memories and identity was opened up by activists led by Raymond Goh and battlefield archaeologist-cum-military historian Jon Cooper when they framed Bukit Brown as a war cemetery and an important part of Singapore's World War Two history. Using burial records and testimonials from tomb-keepers, they publicized that thousands of unidentified bodies from the Japanese wartime bombing were buried in several huge communal trenches and, moreover, Bukit Brown—being on high terrain in the central part of the island—was itself a key battleground. Short but fierce fighting took place between the advancing Japanese forces and the retreating British Delforce troops and the Overseas Chinese Anti-Japanese Volunteer Army. Cooper's account on troop fighting and the only tank-on-tank engagement in Kheam Hock Road of Bukit Brown had been carefully reconstructed from Japanese battle maps, 1942 documents of the Bureau of Records and Enquiry at Changi prison camp, as well as the diary and burial returns records kept by a British regimental clergyman.³⁷ Some of the subsequent Sook Ching massacres by the Japanese occupation authorities were also likely to have taken place within the forested area. Raymond Goh observed pointedly that 'the highway [would] be built upon the bones of these war deaths, which means they may never rest in peace; day by day the traffic pass through them. I am sure this is not the way we want to remember their sacrifice, nor the way to commemorate the fallen.'³⁸

To make its stand emphatically, the Singapore Heritage Society released a 26-page position paper on 5 February 2012. Not mincing its words, the society

³³ 'Humanistic consideration in the exhumation of Coffee Hill' (2011).

³⁴ Goh (2011).

³⁵ Volland (2011).

³⁶ A.J. Leow (2013).

³⁷ Jon Cooper graduated from the Centre for Battlefield Archaeology at Glasgow University and was managing the Adam Park archaeological project adjacent to Bukit Brown. See Cooper (2013a, 2013b).

³⁸ Goh (2012).

declared that it was deeply disappointed with the government's decision to build the road and spoke out against the lack of real consultation: 'Genuine consultation entails sincere expression of government and civil society interest, as well as the honest deliberation of alternatives and options before government decisions are made. ... Unfortunately, such consultation processes have, in reality, been used by the Government for two purposes – to inform civil society and relevant stakeholders of the rationale behind government decisions and/or to gather feedback in order to fine-tune such decisions before they are announced to the public.' It did not believe that enough effort had been invested in the search for alternative solutions on public housing and traffic congestion. It demanded cost and benefits analysis and environmental impact assessment for heritage-related decisions, and warned sternly that major flooding will occur in the Thomson Road area once the ecosystem of Bukit Brown is changed. It strongly recommended the full documentation of the graves, gazetting of Bukit Brown as a heritage site and its conversion into a heritage park. In its view, 'ultimately the struggle for Bukit Brown goes beyond saving a few graves or greenery. It is the struggle for the soul of Singapore.'³⁹

The Nature Society had issued its own position paper earlier on 12 December 2011, but updated it with an addendum and a revised bird-watch count on 30 March 2012 after the government's offer of a compromise of a vehicular bridge segment. It proclaimed that it had studied Bukit Brown for over twenty years and listed it as one of the 28 sites in its own 1990 Master Plan for the Conservation of Nature in Singapore. It had again registered its importance in its 2009 'Feedback for the Inter-Ministerial Committee Project on Sustainable Singapore'. It emphasized Bukit Brown's climatic contribution in terms of carbon sequestration, natural air-conditioning through the release of water vapour, and soaking function as a rain-fall sponge. For biodiversity, it recorded 91 species of resident and migratory birds (of which 13 were nationally threatened species, equivalent of 23 per cent of 56 species listed in the Singapore Red Data Book). The cemetery was an important extended habitat and foraging ground for forest birdlife originating from the Central Catchment Reserve, as well as a transit pad to other woodlands. It urged a moratorium until more studies could be done and that any development decision should be left to future generations in the next 20–30 years when housing space may become really more pressing.⁴⁰

Tension Reaching New Heights: Government Insistence and Civil Society Responses

Civil society activism was propelled to new heights when Minister of State for National Development Tan Chuan-Jin pronounced on 19 March 2012 that the government would begin construction of the highway, compromising only with a

³⁹ Singapore Heritage Society (2012); 'Heritage society disappointed ...' (2012); 'Heritage Society takes issue ...' (2012).

⁴⁰ Nature Society's original position paper of 12 Dec 2011 in <http://www.nss.org.sg/documents/Nature%20Society's%20Position%20on%20Bukit%20Brown.pdf>; Updated addendum and bird checklist of 30 Mar 2012 in http://www.nss.org.sg/documents/BB_Response_HHC_AS_CL_v3-9.260312.pdf, accessed on 17 Dec 2013.

proposed bridge segment to lessen the environmental impact and reduce the exhumation of graves from 5,000 to 3,746. After his media briefing in the morning, the Minister met a selected group of civil society representatives in the evening for a closed-door meeting which left many people unconvinced and flustered. Ho Hua Chew of the Nature Society curtly noted that 'A lot of forest birds can be badly affected. If it's under shadow, the vegetation will not flourish.' The Nature Society, together with six others (Singapore Heritage Society, Asia Paranormal Investigators, All Things Bukit Brown, SOS Bukit Brown, Green Corridor, and Green Drinks), jointly issued a sternly worded eight-point statement at 10.25 pm criticizing the way the Minister had handled the meeting, including the manner in which civic representation was selective and restrictive, 'the lack of good faith on the part of the Ministry of National Development', the 'unilateral dissemination of information by particular agencies', and the denial of time 'to make their own presentation of alternatives'. They rejected the ministerial decision and explicitly called for a moratorium on all work at Bukit Brown until 'there is clarity over long-term plans for the area and discussions over alternatives have been exhausted'.⁴¹

Responding to the uproar, Tan Chuan-jin wrote a Facebook posting barely six hours later, before dawn at 4.30 am, to deny any intended consultative nature for the Bukit Brown meeting he had summoned: 'It was not a consultative effort to debate whether the road would be built or not. That has already been stated in Parliament' and added that the meeting was merely to announce the details and alignment of the road. However, the seven civil society groups stuck to their press statement and criticisms. Making a metaphorical reference to the newly proposed vehicular bridge as a poor compromise, the President of Nature Society Shawn Lum noted that 'the gap in expectations between the groups and the authorities could have widened somewhere along the line. ... How do you bridge those sets of expectations? Finding that bridge will be the way going forward.'⁴²

Tan Chuan-jin later acknowledged there was a 'mismatch in expectations' and 'there were things he could have done better' but 'he has no regrets about reaching out to interest groups on various policies'. He declared that he remained committed to public engagement as it would spur conversations leading to 'greater collective understanding', but added in the same breath that the government 'is elected to do what is right for Singaporeans and for Singapore' and 'when the time for decision comes, we will decide'. On the side of the civil society activists, some regarded it as a major step backwards in the evolving relationship between state and citizen.⁴³

Throughout the saga, the Land Transport Authority remained adamant in refusing to share details of the biodiversity impact assessment which it had conducted earlier with citizenry money.⁴⁴ The issue of sincerity versus secrecy was sharply raised in Chong Ja Ian's letter to the Chinese press. He argued that

⁴¹ 'Green Path for new Bukit Brown road' (2012); 'Bukit Brown meeting "not a consultation"' (2012); 'Minimal impact to Bukit Brown ...' (2012).

⁴² 'Bukit Brown meeting "not a consultation"' (2012); 'Time to move forward ...' (2012).

⁴³ 'Timeline of a grave saga' (2012); 'No regrets' over Bukit Brown effort' (2012); 'What does the saga teach about engagement ...' (2012).

⁴⁴ 'Bridge will help ...' (2012); 'What does the saga teach about engagement ...' (2012).

property speculation and national security could not be applied to Bukit Brown and all government professional studies conducted with taxpayers' money on its biodiversity, hydrology, environmental planning, heritage, and policy options should not be hidden from the public.⁴⁵ This issue surfaced again months later when Paul Barter of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy was asked to compare Singapore's plan to build a highway through Bukit Brown with Seoul's widely praised measure to tear down an expressway to restore a river in the heart of its city. He responded bluntly that 'Government does not make enough effort in engaging. There's a lot of secrecy in the Singapore Government. The cost-and-benefit assumptions were not made public ... so people are naturally skeptical because they don't see the analysis.'⁴⁶ In September 2013, Chong took advantage of an unexpected wave of flooding across Singapore to ask pointedly one more time 'Is the environmental impact assessment available?'⁴⁷

The immediate past president of the Nature Society, Geh Min, who succeeded in reversing the government's previous proposed reclamation of mudflats off Pulau Ubin in 2001, weighed in to call for more consultation on land use, given that Singapore had reached a level of affluence with most infrastructure already in place. To her, the new road with a bridge will still displace many reptiles, frogs and birds and affect an area which has a third of Singapore's endangered plant and animal species.⁴⁸ She argued that 'government policy makers including land use planners should consult far more widely before coming up with their blueprints and white papers. What was in the past an effective top-down approach may not be as appropriate as seen by an increasing number of policy U-turns recently. Certainly, a reflection of courageous admissions of past mistakes may address the trust deficit needed to ensure genuine consultation and discussion to help formulate future policies.'⁴⁹

The Bukit Brown activists even considered mounting a public legal challenge towards the government in the form of a judicial review. This option was analysed by Jack Tsen-Ta Lee of the School of Law, Singapore Management University in April 2012. He concluded that suing the government to prevent the construction was not likely to work because it would be difficult to prove that the government had acted unreasonably and that, more importantly, the purview of a judicial review was only to ensure the government had 'followed the correct legal principles' rather than whether it had made the 'right' decision.⁵⁰ This led the SOS Bukit Brown group to harden its position to continue with a public petition, rejecting the government's final decision as 'unpragmatic and insufficiently thought-through' and calling for a moratorium and the conscience of all property developers 'to save Bukit Brown 100%'.⁵¹

⁴⁵ Chong (2012).

⁴⁶ 'Sustainable transport needs new thinking' (2013).

⁴⁷ Chong (2013a).

⁴⁸ 'A giver, naturally' (2012).

⁴⁹ Geh Min (2013).

⁵⁰ 'The Cost and Value of Heritage in Singapore: A Pictorial Report' (2012); Lee (2012).

⁵¹ 'SOS Bukit Brown: To save Bukit Brown 100%' (2012); Gray (2012).

With Bukit Brown increasingly framed as a battle for the nation's soul, the annual celebration of national independence became another hotly contested space. Making a mockery of the government-orchestrated National Day Parade (NDP) amidst the ongoing destruction of Bukit Brown as a community foundation, the Brownies organized their own parade to 'remember and honour our Nation's Deceased Pioneers (pun on the acronym NDP)'. With about 30 participants, they assembled in Bukit Brown on 6 August 2012 in a mock parade of inspecting 100,000 pioneering souls. They even duplicated the usual parade symbolism of distributing goodie bags which contained items 'weighted with memory' (including pioneer brand Eagle medicated oil relating to the family of Tan Quee Lan 陈桂兰 and boxes of matches which built up the fortunes of Lee Kim Soo 李金赐), Bukit Brown T-shirts, as well as sparklers and torchlights to light up Bukit Brown as dusk descended.⁵² Noting that the majority of them did not even have direct familial connections to the cemetery, Hui Yew-Foong praised the occasion as one of national imagining. Instead of being just scattered private burial plots, Bukit Brown had been reconstituted as 'a national space for commemorating pioneers of the nation'.⁵³ The event was repeated the following year with an enlarged crowd of 80 and a graveyard tour of 48 eminent Singapore pioneers. It became 'a hauntingly patriotic moment' when they recited the Singapore pledge in unison as fighter jets flew past the cemetery on their way to the government parade ground.⁵⁴

Globalization of the Local: Extension of Tussle into the International Arena

The local cut and thrust over the Bukit Brown saga was unprecedentedly elevated on to the international level when Farida Shaheed, a Pakistani sociologist serving as the Special Rapporteur in the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, entered the fray with an unexpectedly stern letter to the Singapore government on 29 May 2012.⁵⁵ Disturbed by 'information received' that 'the decision taken by the Government to build the road was not preceded by a meaningful consultation process, in particular with civil society organizations and experts working on cultural heritage as well as environment issues', she invoked the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that 'everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community'. Claiming the mandate of the Human Rights Council, she stressed that 'individuals and communities have access to and enjoy cultural heritages meaningful to them' and 'States, in particular, have the duty not to destroy, damage or alter cultural heritage, at least not without the free, prior and informed consent of concerned communities.' She also underscored that 'States should make available effective remedies, including judicial remedies,

⁵² 'NDP@Bukit Brown' (2012); 'Tomorrow: NDP' (2012); Liu (2012).

⁵³ Hui (2012).

⁵⁴ 'Tribute to Bukit Brown's nation builders' (2013); A. J. Leow (2013).

⁵⁵ Letter from Farida Shaheed, Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 29 May 2012, in https://spdb.ohchr.org/hrdb/21st/Public_-_AL_Singapore_29.05.12 (2.2012).pdf, accessed on 1 Oct 2012 and 9 Dec 2013.

to concerned individuals and communities who feel that their cultural heritage is either not fully respected and protected, or that their right of access to and enjoyment of cultural heritage is being infringed upon'. She ended the official United Nations letter by seeking clarification on five major issues, including asking for details on the government's plan 'to work with the Singapore Heritage Society and other stakeholders to identify and document key heritage elements of the Cemetery', and 'would appreciate a response within sixty days' so that it could be 'made available in a report to the Human Rights Council for its consideration'.

The office of Singapore's Permanent Representative of the Republic of Singapore wrote back to the United Nations office at Geneva on 27 July 2012.⁵⁶ One obvious note of displeasure, annoyance, and possibly anger on the part of the Singapore government was the tagging on of 'Allegation Letter' to the subject heading of its reply. The other was an inserted footnote disputing the term 'eight-lane highway' by saying that technically 'the new road is not considered a highway because it is not designed for the traffic speeds of highways'. Otherwise, the four-page reply remained politely officious in tone without any accusations of unwarranted foreign intervention into local affairs or suggestions of back-hand conspiratorial operation against the Singapore government. It basically defended the government's record by reiterating its approach towards land usage, master planning, trade-offs, parliamentary endorsement, civic group discussion, road alternatives, bridge option, tomb documentation project, other conservation efforts, etc. The matter apparently ended with that exchange, with no further information released to the public.

The cause of Bukit Brown had, understandably, not sat well within the receptacle of human rights due precisely to political sensitivity about the deficit of human rights and liberty in the illiberal, disciplinarian state of Singapore. In comparison, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was deemed as the more appropriate channel for the Bukit Brown activists to advance their cause. The Nature Society was the first to advocate that Bukit Brown be designated as a heritage park and it 'could eventually be proposed to the UN as a UNESCO World Heritage site to attract tourists and other visitors, but more importantly to showcase the surprising cultural, historical, and biodiversity wealth that Singapore holds'.⁵⁷ Raymond Goh, too, had gone on record as saying in an interview that 'If there is any Singapore site that is worthy of UNESCO nomination, it is Bukit Brown.'⁵⁸

Recognizing that heritage issues had surged to the forefront of politics, the government—in an apparent pre-emptive strike—suddenly announced a ratification of the World Heritage Convention in June 2012 and launched its official

⁵⁶ Letter from Permanent Representative of the Republic of Singapore to the United Nations to Ms Farida Shaheed, Special Procedures Branch, Office of the Human Commissioner for Human Rights, dated 27 July 2012, https://spdb.ohchr.org/hrdb/21st/Singapore_27.07.2012_%282.2012%29.pdf, accessed on 1 Oct 2012 and 9 Dec 2013.

⁵⁷ Cook (2013). Quote from the Nature Society's position paper of 12 Dec 2011. Cook also reminded readers that 'World Heritage listing is the business of UN member states. There is no opportunity for citizens to propose a listing. It must be made by the appropriate state.'

⁵⁸ Lim and Danubrata (2012).

nomination of Singapore Botanic Gardens as the first possible UNESCO World Heritage Site in the country in December 2012. It proclaimed that the Botanic Gardens, which was founded in 1859 and played a leading role in developing rubber cultivation and tapping, was the oldest surviving example of its kind in the Straits Settlements and a 'living testament to the foresight of the early pioneering spirit of Singapore'. Bukit Brown activists supported the nomination, but described it as 'a low-hanging fruit', 'not a controversial choice', and encouraged the government to see 'if there are other sites we should conserve and further build on our national identity'.⁵⁹ They continued fighting for a Bukit Brown nomination.⁶⁰ However, the heart of the matter was that only government-supported sites with firm promises of legal protection can file for UNESCO listing and thus Bukit Brown in its entirety had no real chance because the government was driving a road right through its middle.

The heritage community generally supported the Botanic Gardens bid for the UNESCO listing.⁶¹ But the All Things Bukit Brown astutely outflanked the government-oriented UNESCO listing by securing a position in the alternative 2014 World Monument Watch list of 67 sites in 41 countries (assessed and picked from 248 nominations). The non-profit, independent New York-based World Monument Fund, which was established in 1965, has issued biennial watch lists since 1996 for cultural sites under threat. Its citation mentioned that to 'bisect Bukit Brown with a major thoroughfare' and 'redevelopment of significant areas of Bukit Brown for housing in the coming years' would be 'destroying the cultural landscape of Bukit Brown' and 'a loss to all of society'. It called for 'more transparency on the part of the government and for a participatory environmental impact assessment'.⁶² The success of international listing was celebrated by the Brownies as providing an independent validation of its heritage value and an elevation of its standing on the global plane. Some viewed it as a useful international spotlight and pressure to be put on the state. External financial assistance could apparently be made available for such listed sites, but the Brownies were quick to turn it down, saying that they were not applying for any as none was needed.⁶³ This again reflects concern about the ever-present danger of being unfairly accused by the government of foreign funding and international back-hand subversive operations.

⁵⁹ 'This could be Singapore's first World Heritage site' (2013); 'What World Heritage status would mean ...' (2013); 'Unesco bid' (2013). The third reference noted that it was the Singapore Heritage Society which had first suggested a nomination for the Botanic Gardens as far back as 2009.

⁶⁰ For the fitting of Bukit Brown into various UNESCO criteria for the assessment of 'Outstanding Universal Values', see *Rojak Librarian* (2013). See also Janice Koh's parliamentary query and minister Lawrence Wong's reply in 'No plans to nominate Bukit Brown for World Heritage site' (2013).

⁶¹ 'Botanic Gardens gets boost in UN bid' (2013). The Nature Society, Singapore Heritage Society, Singapore Institute of Architects, and the local chapter of the International Council on Monuments and Sites later joined hands with the Botanic Gardens for the nomination bid.

⁶² 'Bukit Brown Cemetery has been named on the World Monuments Watch 2014' (2013); 'Bukit Brown – World Monuments Fund, 2014 Watch' (2013).

⁶³ 'Bukit Brown put on world watch list' (2013); 'Bukit Brown listing on World Monument Watch not to exert pressure on government' (2013).

In another flanking move, Catherine Lim of All Things Bukit Brown advanced the novel idea of pairing Bukit Brown with the Botanic Gardens for the impending UNESCO nomination by arguing that the two are located close to each other and a pairing would get wider international recognition and strengthen the latter's UNESCO bid.⁶⁴ Indeed, a map in the Nature Society's position paper clearly marked Bukit Brown as being situated just northeast of the Botanic Gardens and separated merely by the Bukit Timah–Dunearn Road and the Kheam Hock Woods–Dunearn Estate. The Singapore Heritage Society similarly connected the two together in historical space: 'Bukit Brown's narrative of early immigrants and regional histories complements the Botanic Garden's narrative of colonial empire to provide a more complex and complete story of Singapore.'⁶⁵ During the public feedback session on the Ministry of National Development's 2013 Draft Master Plan, the Brownies made another pairing attempt: 'Bukit Brown's proximity to the Singapore Botanic Gardens allows visitors to easily combine their experience of Singapore's colonial history with a rich understanding of Singapore's immigrant history. ... Bukit Brown is [already] one of Singapore's top visitor sites and a Traveler's Choice Award Winner for 2013 ... despite limited public transportation access and amenities.'⁶⁶

The continuing tussle for global endorsement of a local heritage site rejected by the state and the opening for public feedback of the latest 2013 Draft Master Plan which had more details than in the past provided grounds for guarded optimism among the civil society activists. Terence Chong and Yeo Kang Shua 杨荳善, as leaders of the Singapore Heritage Society, felt that the greater openness to dialogue was a 'hint of how the Singapore Story will unfold'. They sensed that the government had made 'small but positive steps towards co-authorship with civil society, academics and ordinary citizens', but cautioned that 'this is not to say that co-authorship will always be smooth. Indeed, as the Bukit Brown saga has shown, tensions and disagreements continue to linger.'⁶⁷

Conclusion: Moving beyond the Dominant Party–State Dynamics and an Interplay of Past, Present and Future

Confronted with the sudden rise and public display of citizenry consciousness on issues of heritage, history and identity, and having underestimated their impact on general politics and development planning, the government was forced to revamp its bureaucratic establishment in July 2013 to meet the new challenges. A new Impact Assessment and Mitigation Division was created within the National Heritage Board, and the Preservation of Monument Board was renamed as 'Preservation of Sites and Monuments'.⁶⁸ The Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong 李显龙,

⁶⁴ 'Bukit Brown preservation group surprised by NHB offer' (2013).

⁶⁵ 'Singapore Heritage Society statement on the listing ...' (2013).

⁶⁶ 'Template for Feedback on Bukit Brown' (2013). See also Chong (2013b).

⁶⁷ Chong and Yeo (2013).

⁶⁸ 'New unit plays mediator on heritage issues' (2013). The revamp was executed earlier in July.

whose great-grandfather's grave is located in Bukit Brown, also announced a special grant of \$5 million to be disbursed over four years to fund citizenry heritage projects through exhibitions, publications, documentaries, and designing of mobile phone applications. Signalling his receptiveness to a new era in the relationship between the state and heritage activists, he acknowledged the importance of heritage and sent out a note of reassurance about avoiding the heavy hand of the Singapore party-state apparatus in the scripting of heritage making: 'It anchors our sense of place and identity. It enables a nation to adapt and to progress as the world changes. ... But the government does not own the Singapore heritage. It does not define the Singapore heritage.'⁶⁹

The Bukit Brown saga is therefore indicative of a turning point in state-society relations in two ways. After long years of being increasingly circumscribed during the late colonial and, even more so, the post-colonial independence periods, there was a sudden outburst of large-scale and high-intensity civil society protests. The limits of the dominant party-state appeared to have been reached and there was now vigorous demand for a much greater genuine social space for citizenry expression and policy input. It was also arguably a turning point in terms of a shift in national priority by interrogating and moving away from the long-held state-framed fixation on modernist economic developmental goals. Until then, the state had imposed its iron will and for years it had steam-rolled through its urban renewal programme and other development projects. The rediscovery of Bukit Brown and the citizenry awakening of the intrinsic cultural values of this 'national treasure' had firmly embedded the new dimension of heritage, history and identity into the formulation of national agenda. To insist that burial grounds were purely land wastage of high opportunity cost to state developmental plans was no longer straightforward and plausible. The equations of cost-benefit analysis and trade-offs were henceforth less binary and more complex. The early days of state rhetoric on 'spaces of the dead giving way to the living' were increasingly challenged by citizenry rallying cries advocating 'spaces of the dead: a case from the living' and 'spaces of the dead *for* the living' to serve as precious heritage sites and leisure-cum-biodiversity parks.

Indeed, the Minister of State Tan Chuan-Jin, in his 2012 parliamentary defence of government policy, had tried to stick to the old national script by evoking the famous 1960s remark made by the then Cabinet Minister Lim Kim San: 'Do you want me to look after our dead grandparents or do you want me to look after your grandchildren?' Lisa Li, who is a leading member of the SOS Bukit Brown, immediately criticized this as 'a severe misrepresentation of the issue'. Using statistics indicating burial grounds in Singapore had been substantially reduced to only 0.95 per cent of Singapore's land area by 1982, she pleaded that 'our grandchildren will not live in misery for want of that extra 0.95 per cent of land. In fact, I hope our grandchildren will be more creative in their urban design, with efficient use of land and infrastructure, without resorting to the destruction of the few cemeteries left. ... I suspect our grandchildren will enjoy walking in a protected, conserved Bukit Brown, seeing and touching history in tangible forms, and one day ask, what would

⁶⁹ Lee (2013); '\$5m grant set up ...' (2013).

Singapore be like if our grandparents had won? That is, if we don't win today.'⁷⁰

Nevertheless, probing questions from the public have been asked about the previous national amnesia on Bukit Brown and the timing of its remembering: 'If it is claimed that this is the most historical and most representative burial ground, why is it that before now we completely did not care and had little knowledge of Bukit Brown?'⁷¹ An undergraduate blamed it upon omissions in the official scripting of national history. He noted that '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 ... to know of this site firstly, and secondly, to form an emotional bond with the place?'⁷² Raymond Goh, as the spark which first ignited the prairie fire on Bukit Brown, had indeed promoted his cemetery tours as one where the young 'learn things in an authentic setting, things that history textbooks don't say'.⁷³

The timing of a 'historical turn' where a cemetery from the forgotten past suddenly became such a tinderbox was to be located in the larger context of a change in the national political landscape, with the ruling PAP suffering a substantive vote swing in the May 2011 general elections to score only 60.1 per cent of the electoral votes, its lowest since independence in 1965.⁷⁴ Its party-endorsed candidate scored even lower in the later August 2011 presidential election, capturing only 35.2 per cent of votes. Further defeats in the two subsequent by-elections of Hougang in May 2012 and Punggol East in January 2013 reaffirmed its political slide and a crying need for greater public consultations and bonding. An observer offered the view that 'The biggest message of the Bukit Brown campaign has nothing to do with cemeteries, highways, heritage or development. It is about Singaporeans' right to participate in their own political processes, to have their views heard, understood, and seriously considered in national debates.' To him, Bukit Brown is the litmus test of this growing public sentiment 'towards engaging with their government and taking part in the nation's political debate'.⁷⁵ A report in *The Economist* similarly commented: 'In this context, the struggle over Bukit Brown takes on a wider meaning. Among the improbable coalition of birdwatchers, conservationists and heritage buffs trying to stop the road are a few who see a broader political goal: testing the government's promises of a new responsiveness. In that sense, as in many, the argument over the fate of the graveyard may look like a tussle over Singapore's past. But it is really about its future.'⁷⁶

Cultural politics relating to cemeteries are notably different from most of the other heritage sites and monuments. Deathscape heritage is exceptional in that there is a much stronger degree of temporal interplay between the past, present and future. The ancestral human bodies buried beneath the mass of tombstones and the times of their ancient lives (especially if they were of an elite status, and

⁷⁰ Li (2012); Zhou (2013); Tan Chuan-Jin (2012).

⁷¹ Zou (2012).

⁷² Isaac Tan (2012).

⁷³ 'Bringing Bt Brown's history to life ...' (2013).

⁷⁴ 'What does the saga teach about engagement ...' (2012).

⁷⁵ Blaxell (2012).

⁷⁶ Banyan (2013).

belonging to the rich and famous) together constitute an especially heavy and haunting baggage of the past, unrivalled by any inanimate objects clamouring for heritage status. As for the immediate present of today, additional potency is derived from the traceable lines of familial descent, intimate kinship ties, as well as a current thirst for identity anchorage amidst the rapid changes in society as impacted by capitalism and globalization. The future is also of a much weightier consideration for deathscape heritage because the presumably constant lurking of ancestral spirits and souls is regarded as of prime importance in providing spiritual comfort and guidance as the living descendants stride forth into the frightful unknown, especially so for the younger generation.

The interweaving of past, present and future in the Bukit Brown deathscape was manifested most obviously by the strong presence of youth activists among the Brownies digging into and spreading the story of the tombstones. Terence Chong noted that 'There is especially greater yearning among younger Singaporeans to get in touch with their roots because we became global and cosmopolitan so fast. So it is natural that there is a desire to look back into the past for authenticity and comfort.'⁷⁷ Undergraduate Isaac Tan matched this interplay with a quest for political pluralism and an alternative way to understand Singapore's pasts: 'Bukit Brown ... represents the alternative history of Singapore. ... 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. ... Our society is "antiseptic". ... The stories behind those buried in Bukit Brown will provide several chapters and it is only our loss if they are destroyed.'⁷⁸ In wishing to write fresh perspectives, two polytechnic students were sufficiently inspired by the delicate 'Confucian 24 filial piety' mural carvings on Ong Sam Leong's grave and by oral stories from an 85-year-old tomb engraver to publish their school project as a booklet.⁷⁹

Similarly, twenty young students from the Pioneer Junior College plunged into another college project to put together a book on Singapore pioneers who participated in the momentous 1911 Revolution of China and who were later buried at Bukit Brown. Their principal proclaimed that 'The students' research on these pioneers gave them a glimpse into Singapore's immigrant past and helped them to place in historical context Singapore's connections with Asia and the world.'⁸⁰ Wang Gungwu, who is the doyen of Chinese Overseas studies and the guiding light of the history fraternity in Singapore, reportedly praised the students at its book launch: They 'had enthusiastically traced the source of their story to Bukit Brown so as to understand the relationship between *those ancestors* buried there and *they*

⁷⁷ 'Relatives claim 1,000 graves ...' (2012).

⁷⁸ Isaac Tan (2012). For a critique of national history and an offering of alternative interpretations, see Hong and Huang (2008).

⁷⁹ Wu and Yang (2012); See also Wu (2012); Yang (2012); Su (2012). These two students from China have been studying in Singapore for ten years, and might well constitute the next generation of permanent migrants into Singapore.

⁸⁰ Pioneer Junior College (2013: Principal's foreword, p. 3). Assistance was rendered by undergraduates from the School of Architecture of the National University of Singapore on photography and drawing of tomb architecture.

themselves. Looking at the substantive effort they had put in and their serious writing attempt, he felt it was most meaningful and especially moving. It also made him very hopeful about the *future of history learning*.⁸¹ In that single passage of heart-warming praise, the younger generation's deep engagement in the heritage activism of Bukit Brown deathscape had all the elements of past, present and future fused into one.

References

- Banyan, 'Singapore's heritage: Elegy for an urban graveyard' (2013), *The Economist*, 1 April, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan>, relayed in *Singapore Heritage Digest*, no. 3644 (1 April).
- Blaxell, Eddy (2012), 'Public consultation – the next step in Singapore's democracy', 16 April, <http://www.theonlinecitizen.com/2012/04/public-consultation-next-step-singapore-democracy/>, accessed on 8 November 2013; also relayed in *Singapore Heritage Digest*, no. 3371 (18 April).
- 'Botanic Gardens gets boost in UN bid' (2013), *Straits Times*, 14 December.
- 'Bridge will help ...' (2012), *Straits Times*, 23 March.
- 'Bringing Bt Brown's history to life ...' (2013), *Straits Times*, 8 July.
- 'Bukit Brown – World Monuments Fund, 2014 Watch' (2013), c. November, <http://www.wmf.org/project/bukit-brown>, accessed on 16 December 2013.
- 'Bukit Brown Cemetery has been named on the World Monuments Watch 2014' (2013), 8 October, <http://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=7930>, accessed on 11 October 2013.
- 'Bukit Brown listing on World Monument Watch not to exert pressure on government' (2013), *Lianhe zaobao* 联合早报 (United Morning Press), 11 October.
- 'Bukit Brown meeting "not a consultation"' (2012), *Straits Times*, 21 March.
- 'Bukit Brown preservation group surprised by NHB offer' (2013), *Yahoo News SG*, 13 October, <http://sg.news.yahoo.com/bukit-brown-preservation-group-surprised-by-nhb-support-offer-042807132.html>, accessed on 16 December 2013.
- 'Bukit Brown put on world watch list' (2013), *Straits Times*, 10 October.
- Chan Heng Chee (1975), 'Politics in an administrative state: Where has the politics gone?' in Seah Chee Meow (ed.), *Trends in Singapore*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies/Singapore University Press.
- Cheng Lim Keak (1984), *Social Change and the Chinese in Singapore*, Singapore: Singapore University Press.
- Chia, Cindy 谢燕燕 (2011), 'Piecing together the history of burial grounds', *Lianhe zaobao* 联合早报 (United Morning Press), 21 November.
- (2012a), 'Descendants of Brownies on family history', *Lianhe zaobao* 联合早报 (United Morning Press), 2 January.
- (2012b), 'Not much time left', *Lianhe zaobao* 联合早报 (United Morning Press), 31 March.

⁸¹ 'Participating in the preparation for roving exhibition' (2013); 'Wang Gungwu: Epochal changes ...' (2013), emphasis added. The book launches, roving exhibition (by students from River Valley High School) and supplementary talks were all held on 13 December 2013.

- Chong, Terence and Chua Ai Lin (2014), 'The multiple spaces of Bukit Brown', in William S. W. Lim (ed.), *Public Space in Urban Asia*, Singapore: World Scientific Publishing.
- Chong, Terence and Yeo Kang Shua (2013), 'Collaborating to preserve the Singapore story', *Today*, 19 December.
- Chong Ja Ian (2012), 'Reflecting on government's sincerity ...', *Lianhe zaobao* 联合早报 (United Morning Press), forum letter, 23 May; relayed in *Singapore Heritage Digest*, no. 3402 (29 May).
- (2013a), 'Bukit Brown, development and possibilities for Singapore's future', online forum letter in *Today*, 30 September.
- (2013b), 'Feedback on Bukit Brown', c. December 2013, <http://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=8420>, accessed on 12 December 2013.
- Cook, Ian Leonard (2013), 'More on Singapore's Bukit Brown', *The Newsletter* [of the International Institute for Asian Studies, Leiden], 63: 8–9.
- Cooper, Jon (2013a), 'Missing Amongst the Dead: Finding the Fallen on WWII Battlefield: Bukit Brown', undated, accessed on 27 July 2013.
- (2013b), 'The battle along the Kheam Hock Road', undated, <http://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=8434>, accessed on 10 December 2013.
- 'The Cost and Value of Heritage in Singapore: A Pictorial Report' (2012); public forum at Singapore Management University on 14 April 2012, <http://www.singaporeheritage.org/?p=2488>, accessed on 11 May 2012.
- 'Doctor, 63, admits to sex with 14-year-old' (2013), *Straits Times*, 11 September.
- 'Finders of long-forgotten tombs' (2012), *Straits Times*, 2 December.
- '\$5m grant set up ...' (2013), *Straits Times*, 22 July.
- '400 gathered to celebrate Bukit Brown's heritage' (2013), *Straits Times*, 21 January.
- Geh Min (2013), 'Singapore: A Contested Space', *Global-is-asian*, 16: 14–15.
- George, Cherian (2000), *Singapore: The Air-conditioned Nation: Essays on the Politics of Comfort and Control, 1990–2000*, Singapore: Landmark Books.
- Gillis, E. Kay (2005), *Singapore Civil Society and British Power*, Singapore: Talisman.
- 'A giver, naturally' (2012), *Straits Times*, 2 April.
- Goh, Raymond (2012), 'Mass graves in Bukit Brown: Where the fallen lies', 8 April, <http://bukitbrown.org/post/44373412763/mass-graves-in-bukit-brown-where-the-fallen-lies>, accessed on 7 December 2013.
- Goh Choon Kang (2011), 'How to "save" Bukit Brown?', *Lianhe zaobao* 联合早报 (United Morning Press), 21 November.
- 'Golf courses, not history, should make way' (2011), *Today*, 25 October.
- 'Government revising the path of new road ...' (2012), *Lianhe zaobao* 联合早报 (United Morning Press), 4 February.
- Gray, Tom St John (2012), 'Paying the price of progress', 21 September, *World Archaeology*, issue 55, <http://www.world-archaeology.com/world/asia/singapore-paying-the-price-of-progress/>, accessed on 27 September 2012.
- 'Green Path for new Bukit Brown road' (2012), *Straits Times*, 20 March.
- Han Yongmei (2011), 'How much of history to exchange for a road?', *Lianhe zaobao* 联合早报 (United Morning Press), 13 November.
- Head, Jonathan (2013), 'Singapore's mid-life crisis as citizens find their voice', 21 October 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-24540080>, accessed on 16 December 2013, relayed in *Singapore Heritage Digest*, no. 3826 (24 October).

- 'Heritage society disappointed ...' (2012), *Straits Times*, 6 February.
- 'Heritage Society takes issue ...' (2012), *Today*, 6 February.
- 'Heritage Society's youngest president' (2013), *Straits Times*, 7 October, relayed with personal message and additional committee membership information in *Singapore Heritage Digest*, no. 3810 (7 October).
- Hong Lysa and Huang Jianli (2008), *The Scripting of a National History: Singapore and Its Pasts*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press/NUS Press.
- Huang Jianli and Hong Lysa (2004), 'History and the imaginaries of "Big Singapore": Positioning the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall', *Journal of South-east Asian Studies*, 35/1: 65–89.
- Hui Yew-Foong (2012), 'Debating Bukit Brown: Bringing a cemetery to life in Singapore', *The Newsletter* [of the International Institute for Asian Studies, Leiden], 62: 44.
- 'Humanistic consideration in the exhumation of Coffee Hill' (2011), editorial, *Lianhe zaobao* 联合早报 (United Morning Press), 26 October.
- Koh, Gillian and Ooi Giok Ling (eds) (2000), *State–Society Relations in Singapore*, Oxford: Oxford University Press/Institute of Policy Studies.
- Kong, Lily and Brenda S. A. Yeoh (2003), *The Politics of Landscapes in Singapore: Construction of 'Nation'*, New York: Syracuse University Press.
- Lee, Edwin (1991), *The British as Rulers: Governing Multiracial Singapore, 1867–1914*, Singapore: Singapore University Press.
- Lee, Jack Tsen-Ta (2012), 'Bukit Brown cemetery: You can sue, but you won't win', 9 May, <http://singaporepubliclaw.com/2012/05/bukit-brown-cemetery/>, accessed on 11 May 2012.
- Lee Hsien Loong (2013), 'Celebrating our heritage', <http://www.pmo.gov.sg/content/pmosite/mediacentre/speechesninterviews/primeminister/2013/July/speech-by-prime-minister-lee-hsien-loong-at-the-launch-of-singap.html>, accessed on 15 December 2013.
- Leow, A. J. (2013), 'Reviving the national soul', 8 September, <http://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=7683>, accessed on 11 October 2013.
- Leow, Claire (2013), 'A voice for the unclaimed', 9 August, <http://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=7355>, accessed on 21 August 2013.
- Li, Lisa (2012), 'What would Singapore be like if our grandparents had won?', c. March, <http://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=2568>, accessed on 11 December 2013.
- Liew Kai Khiun, Natalie Pang and Brenda Chan (2013), 'New media and new politics with old cemeteries and disused railways: Advocacy goes digital in Singapore', *Asian Journal of Communication*, published online 24 May.
- Lim, Kevin and Eveline Danubrata (2012), 'No eternal rest for the dead in crowded Singapore', 27 November, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012/11/27/singapore-burial-idUKL4N09229V20121127>, accessed on 29 November 2012.
- Liu Jiaming (2012), 'Early documentation for Coffee Hill', *Lianhe zaobao* 联合早报 (United Morning Press), forum letter, 15 August.
- Loh Kah Seng (2012a), 'The caretakers of Bukit Brown ... and the cracks of Singapore history', <http://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=1866>, accessed on 5 March 2012.
- (2012b), 'History of the dead, heritage of the living: Bukit Brown cemetery in Singapore', *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*, 12.

- McKenzie, Elizabeth (2011), 'Bukit Brown: A garden of history and heritage', in Kevin Y. L. Tan (ed.), *Spaces of the Dead: A Case from the Living*, Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society and Ethos Books.
- 'Minimal impact to Bukit Brown ...' (2012), *Today*, 20 March.
- 'NDP@Bukit Brown' (2012), *Singapore Heritage Digest*, no. 3443 (21 July).
- 'New unit plays mediator on heritage issues' (2013), *Straits Times*, 26 October.
- 'No plans to nominate Bukit Brown for World Heritage site' (2013), *Asia One*, 9 July, relayed in *Singapore Heritage Digest*, no. 3722 (10 July).
- 'No regrets' over Bukit Brown effort' (2012), *Straits Times*, 30 March.
- 'Participating in the preparation for roving exhibition' (2013), *Lianhe zaobao* 联合早报 (United Morning Press), 14 December.
- Pioneer Junior College (2013), *1911 Revolution: Singapore Pioneers in Bukit Brown*, Singapore: Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall.
- 'Preliminary investigation of Bukit Brown' (2011), *Lianhe zaobao* 联合早报 (United Morning Press), 20 November.
- 'Relatives claim 1,000 graves ...' (2012), *Straits Times*, 13 July.
- 'Retired doctor charged with underage sex' (2013), *Straits Times*, 4 September.
- Rojak Librarian (Peter Pak) (2013), 'Bukit Brown Cemetery: A UNESCO World Heritage Site', 2 April, <http://mymindisrojak.blogspot.sg/2013/04/bukit-brown-cemetery-unesco-world.html>, accessed on 11 December 2013.
- Singam, Constance, Tan Chong Kee, Tisa Ng and Leon Perera (eds) (2002), *Building Social Space in Singapore: The Working Committee's Initiative in Civil Society Activism*, Singapore: Select Publishing.
- Singapore Heritage Society (2012), Position paper on Bukit Brown, January 2012' at http://singaporeheritage.theadventus.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/SHS_BB_Position_Paper.pdf, accessed on 6 February 2012.
- 'Singapore Heritage Society statement on the listing ...' (2013), 10 October, <http://www.singaporeheritage.org/?p=3165>, accessed on 16 December 2013.
- Skinner, Toby (2012), 'The battle for Bukit Brown Cemetery', *Singapore Heritage Digest*, no. 3371 (18 April).
- 'SOS Bukit Brown: To save Bukit Brown 100%' (2012), *Singapore Heritage Digest*, no. 3443 (21 July).
- 'Stirring of Bukit Brown in the internet' (2012), *Lianhe zaobao* 联合早报 (United Morning Press), supplement, 26 February.
- Su Junyong 苏俊勇 (2012), 'Tertiary students publishing *Trisection of Burial* 《入墓三分》', *Lianhe zaobao* 联合早报 (United Morning Press), 3 July.
- 'Sun Oct 21: Battlefield tour report' (2012), 21 October, <http://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=5217>, accessed on 28 July 2013.
- 'Sustainable transport needs new thinking' (2013), *Straits Times*, 16 April.
- Tan, Isaac (2012), 'Notes on "the material culture of Bukit Brown cemetery"', 20 May, <http://kentridgecommon.com/?p=15254>, accessed on 30 May 2012.
- Tan, Kenneth Paul (ed.) (2007), *Renaissance Singapore? Economy, Culture and Politics*, Singapore: NUS Press.
- Tan Boon Hui and Brenda S. A. Yeoh (2002), 'The remains of the dead: Spatial politics of nation-building in post-war Singapore', *Human Ecology Review*, 9/1: 1-13.

- Tan Chuan-Jin (2012), 'Celebrating and co-creating a rooted community', http://www.mnd.gov.sg/BudgetDebate/Speech_by_Minister-of-State_Tan-Celebrating_and_Co-Creating_a_Rooted_Community.html, updated 6 March 2012, accessed on 5 January 2014.
- 'Tan Chuan-Jin: Need balance in land usage and supply' (2011), *Lianhe zaobao* 联合早报 (United Morning Press), 6 November.
- 'Template for Feedback on Bukit Brown' (2013), 5 December, <http://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=8426>, accessed on 10 December 2013.
- 'This could be Singapore's first World Heritage site' (2013), *Straits Times*, 1 April.
- 'Time to move forward ...' (2012), *Today*, 21 March.
- 'Timeline of a grave saga' (2012), *Straits Times*, 30 March.
- 'Tomorrow: NDP ...' (2012), *Singapore Heritage Digest*, no. 3460 (8 August).
- 'Tribute to Bukit Brown's nation builders' (2013), *The New Paper*, 12 August.
- 'Two organizations introducing Bukit Brown ...' (2013), *Lianhe zaobao* 联合早报 (United Morning Press), 30 June.
- 'Unesco bid' (2013), *Straits Times*, 14 April.
- Volland, Nicholas (2011), 'Coffee Hill', *Lianhe zaobao* 联合早报 (United Morning Press), 19 December.
- 'Wang Gungwu: Epochal changes ...' (2013), *Lianhe zaobao* 联合早报 (United Morning Press), 22 December.
- Wang Shiow-Nan 王秀南 (ed.) (1982), *Wangshi lixing kaizu baishi pu* 《王氏立姓开族百世谱》 (Genealogy of the Ong clan), Singapore: Hokkien Ong Clansmen General Association.
- Welsh, Bridget et al. (eds) (2009), *Impressions of the Goh Chok Tong Years*, Singapore: NUS Press/IPS.
- 'What does the saga teach about engagement ...' (2012), *Straits Times*, 30 March.
- 'What World Heritage status would mean ...' (2013), *Straits Times*, 6 April.
- 'Work on Bukit Brown road set to begin next year' (2013), *Straits Times*, 6 August.
- Wu Yueshen 吴悦神 (2012), 'Tomb Mural on 24 Filial Pieties', *Lianhe zaobao* 联合早报 (United Morning Press), 25 June.
- Wu Yueshen 吴悦神 and Yang Yang 杨旸 (2012), *Rumu sanfen* 《入墓三分》, Singapore: Ngee Ann Polytechnic.
- Yang Yang 杨旸 (2012), 'Old tomb engraver in Coffee Hill', *Lianhe zaobao* 联合早报 (United Morning Press), 6 July.
- Yen Ching-hwang (1986), *A Social History of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya, 1800–1911*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Yeoh, Brenda S. A. (1991), 'The control of "sacred" space: Conflicts over the Chinese burial grounds in colonial Singapore, 1880–1930', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 22/2: 282–311.
- (2003), *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment*, 2nd edn, Singapore: Singapore University Press.
- (2011), 'Bones of Contention: Chinese burial grounds in colonial and post-colonial Singapore', in Kevin Y. L. Tan (ed.), *Spaces of the Dead: A Case from the Living*, Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society/Ethos Books, pp. 280–94.
- Yeoh, Brenda S. A. and Tan Boon Hui (1995), 'The politics of space: Changing discourses on Chinese burial grounds in post-war Singapore', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 21: 184–201.

- Zhou Wenlong 周文龙 (2013), 'Memories and Myths', *Lianhe zaobao* 联合早报 (United Morning Press), 25 March.
- Zou Lu 邹璐 (2012), 'Establishing a wider historical perspective', *Lianhe zaobao* 联合早报 (United Morning Press), 26 May.