

SPACES OF THE DEAD

A Case from the Living

Edited by
KEVIN YL TAN



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PREFACE

Almost a decade has elapsed since this book was conceptualised. It all began in 2001 with the announcement that the Government was exhuming Bidadari Cemetery. At that time, a new Executive Committee of the Singapore Heritage Society had just been elected into office, and two of its members, Kelly Fu and Liew Kai Khiun, thought that it would be timely to organise a forum to discuss issues arising from the planned exhumation. It was touch and go as the original idea of having it in a community centre or community club was scuttled on grounds of ‘sensitivity’.

Thanks to the National Heritage Board, we were able to hold the forum, *Spaces of the Dead: A Case from the Living*, at the Auditorium of the old Singapore History Museum at Stamford Road on 22 September 2001. At that forum, the speakers were Carol Foucher, Brenda Yeoh and Liz McKenzie. Despite the short notice, the forum was attended by more than 70 persons and the interest generated prompted Kai Khiun and Kelly to suggest putting together a book with the speakers and others who had spent a lot of time investigating cemeteries. Looking back at all the email correspondence that took place immediately after the forum, it is clear that there was a lot of excitement about the possibility of putting together a book on cemeteries in Singapore. Kai Khiun and Kelly were supposed to have written the chapter on Bidadari, but they found out that Sue Williams and her team had already spent a vast amount of time documenting that cemetery and were in fact planning a publication on Bidadari under the auspices of the Friends of the Museum (FOM). They were happily persuaded to join our enterprise.

Liz McKenzie was on board from the outset. Having studied Bukit Brown Cemetery since 1996, she had spent over 5 years documenting the cemetery and championing its status as an outdoor heritage site and museum. Liz reminded me a few weeks ago that back then, her efforts were welcomed neither by the authorities nor by the Hokkien Huay Kuan. Her familiarity with the cemetery and her sincerity in learning about the cemetery made her many friends among the caretakers of the cemetery and what we have in this book is the result of that research. Liz was also able to get her friend Lindy Kerr to share her wonderful photographs of Bukit Brown with us, and some of them are reproduced in this book.

My friend Brenda Yeoh was an early supporter of the project, having spent a lot of time investigating and writing about cemeteries in Singapore. We are also fortunate to be able to reproduce one of her articles, co-written with Tan Boon Hui, thanks to the kindness of the Society for Human Ecology which publishes the *Human Ecology Review*. Other old friends were also enlisted in the endeavour. John Miksic, Johannes Widodo, Kevin Blackburn, Edmund Lim, Ho Hua Chew, Wan Meng Hao, Clement Liew and Hui Yew-Foong were approached and all kindly agreed to write main chapters or box stories for the volume. Kai Khiun also contacted Ho Choon Hiong and Michael Kam to share their thoughts on the German Girl Shrine on Pulau Ubin.

It was never my intention to edit this volume; that was to have been done by Kai Khiun and Kelly. However, they both had to leave Singapore for further studies and the responsibility for seeing this project through fell on my

shoulders. It was then that I decided to pen a general article on the nature and evolution of cemeteries in Singapore. By the end of 2004, the manuscript was ready, as were all necessary photographs.

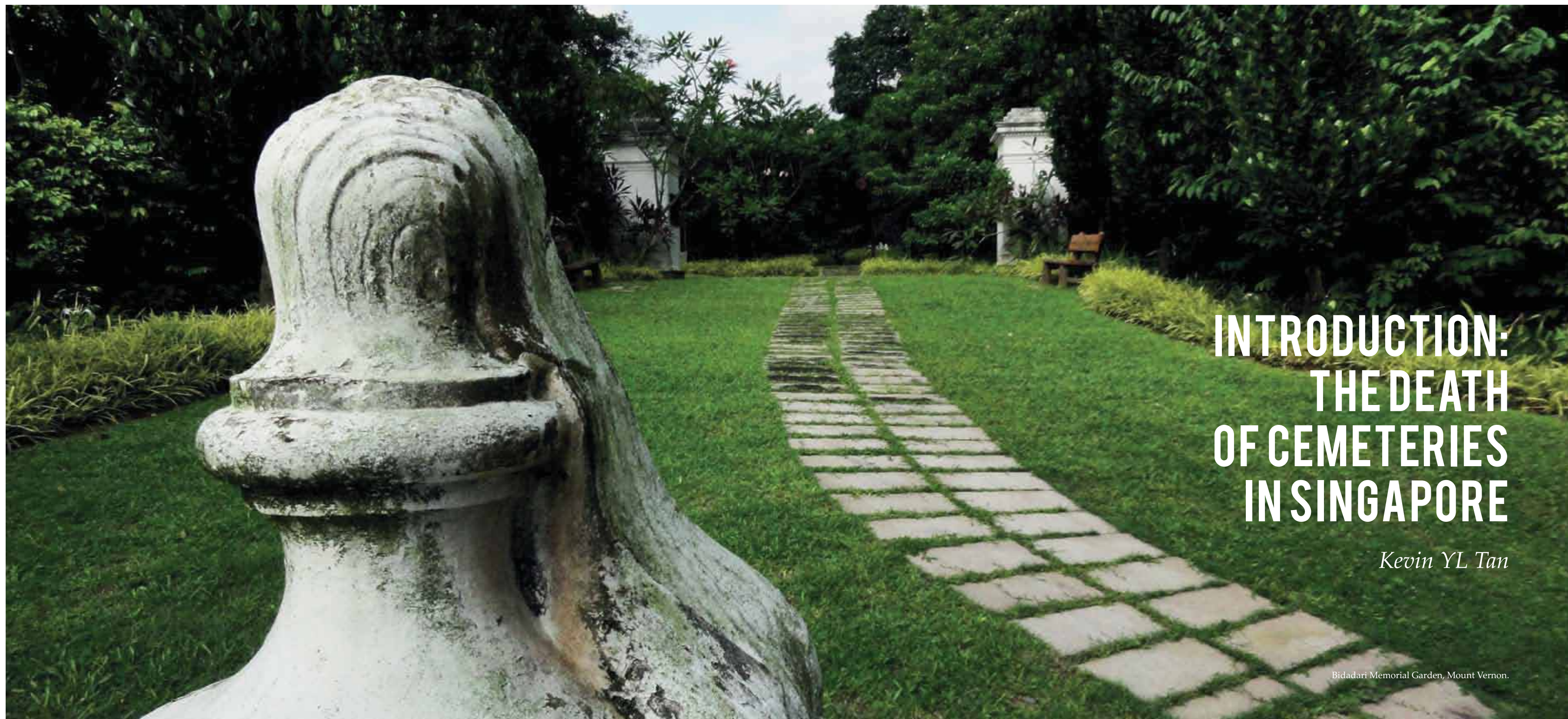
Finding a publisher was a major problem. Peter Schoppert, who was then managing the Singapore University Press (now NUS Press), was very keen to publish the book and I sent him the manuscript. However, he reluctantly returned the whole parcel to me six months later, telling me that he was unable to publish the book because of changes in editorial directions dictated by management. At about that time, I bumped into Shirley Hew of Marshall-Cavendish Publishing at a function at the Arts House, and she excitedly asked me to send the manuscript over to her as she was keen to do it. Six months later, not hearing a word from her, I retrieved the manuscript and persuaded the SHS Exco that we should undertake the task ourselves.

Raising funds for the project proved extremely difficult. Most would-be corporate sponsors I tried approaching immediately switched topics when I told them that I was looking for money to publish a book on cemeteries. ‘Why on earth do you want a book on cemeteries?’ they asked. I’m not sure they were too interested to hear my explanations and justifications, and even those who were polite enough to hear me out, even more politely ushered me out empty handed. Just before she left Singapore in 2003, Liz McKenzie had earlier told me that Professor Tommy Koh, Chairman of the National Heritage Board (NHB), promised to fund the project, so I approached Tommy. Hard as he tried, not many people were receptive to the idea of sponsoring such a book. Indeed, it was not till 2008, when the Heritage Board launched the Heritage Industry Innovation Programme (Hi2P) that Tommy was able to help, by getting us to apply for 50% funding from NHB.

That left the problem of raising the other 50% of the money needed, and I turned to two personal contacts. Daniel Teo has long been a member and staunch supporter of our Society and when I informed him that his grand-uncle Lim Bo Seng was being featured in the book, he responded quickly with a donation, as did his uncle, Lim Whye Geok, one of Lim Bo Seng’s sons. Alex Tan, our very own Exco member, was able to get the Settlement of Dr Lim Boon Keng (1921) trust to contribute towards the cost of publication as well.

It has been an incredible journey and many people thought that the book would never see the light of day. Indeed, when I wrote to the authors earlier this year to tell them about the book launch, a few of them expressed great surprise that I was still persevering. In closing, I want to thank all the authors who kept faith with the project and continued to believe me when I told them that I would get this book out one way or another. Our most grateful thanks to all our sponsors and supporters and to our respective family members who have made this possible.

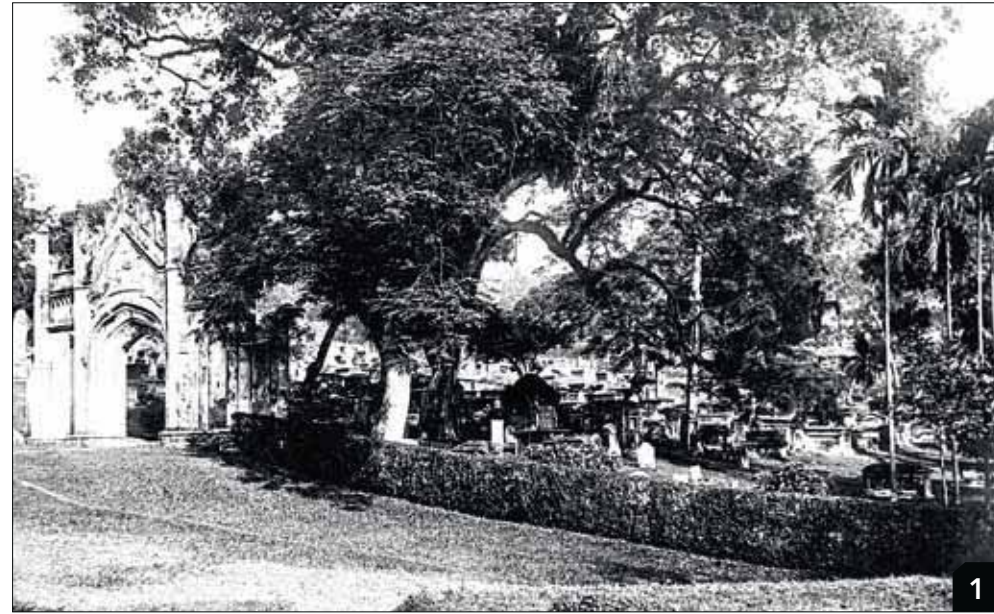
Kevin YL Tan
May 2011



INTRODUCTION: THE DEATH OF CEMETERIES IN SINGAPORE

Kevin YL Tan

Bidadari Memorial Garden, Mount Vernon.



1. A 19th century photograph of the Fort Canning Christian Cemetery, prior to its exhumation.
2. The barred gates of Keramat Bukit Kasita or Tanah Kubor Raja in Jalan Bukit Merah.
3. Old tombs from the Fort Canning Cemetery, embedded in the walls of the Fort Canning Park.
4. The old entrance to what used to be the Fort Canning Christian Cemetery.

Introduction

Death rituals vary across cultures and traditions. The Parsees and Tibetans leave their dead to be devoured as carrion by vultures; Hindus in India burn their dead upon a pyre and scatter their ashes in the Ganges River while Solomon Islanders leave their dead on a reef for sharks to eat. Even though societies dispose of their dead in many different ways, burial remains the predominant means by which the dead are laid to rest. Burying of the dead has been practised since the earliest days of civilisation. It is primarily because of this practice that archaeologists have found Man's earliest ancestors, some dating back over 2 million years.

Today, cemeteries dot the landscape everywhere. In tiny Singapore, the presence of cemeteries is even more

noticeable than in large countries especially since much of the island's high ground have long been set aside for burial grounds. In the last twenty years, many of these burial grounds have been exhumed and replaced by public housing estates. The latest of these exhumations were the well-known Bidadari Cemetery and the Kwong Hou Sua Teochew Cemetery. In late 2001, the Singapore Heritage Society organised a forum entitled 'Spaces for the Dead: A Case for the Living' to bring the public's attention to the importance of cemeteries as heritage sites and green spaces. This book is the result of that forum. Some chapters presented here originated from that forum while others were commissioned subsequently.

In this introduction, we examine the history of cemeteries in Singapore. We also

consider some of the key issues relating to cemeteries and deathscapes generally, and to Singapore in particular. The rest of the chapters will also be outlined.

Traditional Burial Grounds

We do not know where Singapore's first cemetery was located, nor when the first body was interred. We only know of the early cemeteries that were noticed and recorded by settlers and travellers. One traditional Malay burial ground in Singapore, located in Bukit Kasita in Kampung Bahru (near Keramat Bukit Kasita), is supposed to have been in continuous use for the last 400 years. Alas, we have no documentation to support these legends or assertion. This is especially lamentable in relation to old graveyards of early settlers of the 13th century. Even in colonial government

surveys conducted in 1907 and 1952, few, if any of these Muslim cemeteries were noted.

Fort Canning, Bukit Timah and Bidadari

When the British arrived, they appropriated the royal burial ground at Bukit Larangan (Forbidden Hill), later renamed Fort Canning in 1859 and installed the first British Christian cemetery there. It was a small site of just 0.8 hectares (2 acres) and was used only from 1819 to 1822. As we shall see in John Miksic's chapter, this cemetery was quickly replaced by another slightly larger one on Fort Canning. The early cemeteries at Fort Canning have been the subject of several important studies by Stallwood and Harfield.¹

As the Europeans settled in various parts of the island, they established churches. In keeping with their age-old practices, burials took place in the church yard, typically located just behind these churches. These church-yard cemeteries were more common in rural churches than those in town even though some

burials did take place in the Cathedral of Good Shepherd in Victoria Street. Up to a decade ago, beautiful and elegant tombstones graced the well-manicured grounds of the Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary at the end of Upper Serangoon Road. These have since been exhumed. The last remaining church-yard cemetery appears to be that of St Joseph's Church in Upper Bukit Timah Road. The cemetery is located at the back of this old village church and contains more than 100 visible tombs. Most of them are dilapidated and some appear to be very old, possibly dating from the 19th century.

After Fort Canning, the next important Christian cemetery was the Bukit Timah Cemetery which opened in 1865.² The cemetery was opened after much agitation

by local leaders to find an alternative to Fort Canning which 'by the early 1860s' was close to capacity. In particular, municipal councillor Robert Carr Woods was entrusted with laying out the new cemetery in Bukit Timah. Woods was a man of many parts. When the *Straits Times* was founded in 1845, he was its editor, and he later founded the law firm of Woods & Davidson (precursor of Rodyk & Davidson). Woods later became Attorney-General and Senior Puisne Judge. Appropriately, Woods was buried at Bukit Timah when he died in 1875.

The Municipal Councillors purchased the land for the Bukit Timah Cemetery at a then exorbitant sum of \$10,000 and was criticised by the *Free Press* for paying almost four times the worth of the property.³ This criticism went on for several years after its purchase, especially when it became evident that the eastern portion of the cemetery was prone to flooding during the rainy season. The cemetery was consecrated by Bishop McDougal of Sarawak and comprised two sections: one for Catholics and the other for Protestants. These two sections were separated by a path that eventually became a major carriage-way. The cemetery was located in the land between Bukit Timah Road, Kampung Java Road, Halifax Road and Hooper Road, now mainly occupied by the Kampung Java Park and the KK Women's and Children's Hospital. Alas little else is known of this cemetery, and



according to Harfield, the burial register appears to have gone missing.

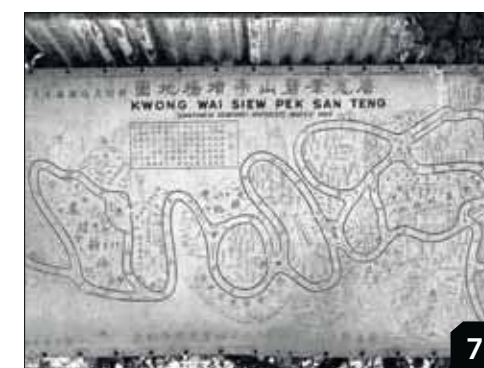
The Bukit Timah area was flood-prone but the cemetery filled up quickly nonetheless. By the turn of the century, a new Christian cemetery had to be found. The Health Department issued a report to the Municipal Commissioners condemning the water-logged condition of Bukit Timah and urged the Commissioners to acquire another piece of burial ground quickly. The property eventually identified was purchased from the Dato Mentri of Johor and was acquired for \$112,500. It was the Bidadari Estate on Serangoon Road. This property, which once belonged to Sultan Abu Bakar of Johor, was the site of a palace, Istana Bidadari, which the Sultan built for his second wife

5. New Christian Cemetery at Bukit Timah
6. Exhumation of Christian Cemetery on Bukit Timah Road.
7. Map of Kampong Pek San Teng (Bishan).



Cecilia Catherina Lange (Zubaidah bte Abdullah) whom he married in 1870. Clearing of the land commenced in 1903, and the first burial took place on 15 December 1907 while the cemetery was consecrated by Dr George Frederick Hose, Lord Bishop of Singapore, Labuan and Sarawak on 30 December 1907. By the time the last burial was carried out at Bidadari on 31 October 1972, it was the largest Christian cemetery in Singapore history. The exhumation of Bidadari Cemetery commenced in 2001 and was completed in 2006.

Burials at Bukit Timah Cemetery ceased once Bidadari was opened. The Public Works Department took charge of Bukit Timah Cemetery but over the course of two World Wars, it soon fell into disrepair. By 1956, the whole cemetery wall had been demolished and the whole site was overgrown with trees and shrubs. Furthermore, the eastern portion of the cemetery was often flooded. In May 1970, it was announced that the 10.5-hectare (26-acre) cemetery would be exhumed.⁴ In 1971, the cemetery was closed to visitors



and exhumation commenced. Most of the 4,000 memorials and tombstones were destroyed during the exhumation although 12 of them were saved and transferred to Fort Canning while one military memorial was transferred to the Ulu Pandan Military Cemetery.

The total land area used by these Christian cemeteries amounted to just about 40.5 hectares (100 acres) of land. In contrast, it was the Chinese cemeteries that occupied the largest swathes of land on the island. In 1952, the Committee Regarding Burial and Burial Grounds identified almost 100 different Chinese burial grounds in the city area or municipality alone, with an occupied area of some 720 hectares (1,780 acres).⁵ This survey did not take into account cemeteries in what was then demarcated as the outlying or 'rural' areas of Singapore. The survey did, however, note that there were then 229 registered burial grounds.

Major Chinese Burial Grounds

By far the largest and most numerous cemeteries in Singapore were those of

the Chinese community, especially those belonging to the Hokkiens. Starting from the 1820s, burial grounds were established in various parts of the island, wherever the Chinese settled and lived. Typically, the management of Chinese burial grounds came under the clan or *kongsi* and these were organised along dialect and family lines.

The earliest recorded Chinese cemetery was the Qing Shan Ting (Cheng San Teng or 'Green Hill Pavilion'), a Cantonese/Hakka cemetery at the junction of South Bridge Road and Tanjong Pagar Road (east of Ann Siang Hill and west of Peck Seah Street). Interestingly, this cemetery was run by the Hok Tek Chin temple or Fuk Tak Chi temple (now converted into the Fuk Tak Chi Museum on 76 Telok Ayer Street). Qing Shan Ting cemetery reached its capacity in the 1830s and the temple acquired another burial ground in Havelock Road called Loke Yah Teng (Green Field Pavilion). A splinter group established itself as the Yin Fo Fui Kun in 1870 and acquired a third cemetery in Queenstown. Today, the Hok Tek Chi Loke Yah Teng Association in Geylang – which represents 11 Hakka and Cantonese guilds and associations⁶ – handles all affairs relating to their remaining burial grounds in Choa Chu Kang and Commonwealth Lane; and columbaria at Holland Road, and the Pek San Teng Temple in Bishan.⁷

The Cantonese from three prefectures – Kwong Fu, Wai Chow Fu and Siew

Hing Fu – collectively gathered as the Kwong Wai Siew Association acquired a huge tract of land in what is now Bishan housing estate and established a temple and cemetery there called Peck San Theng (Bishan Ting or Bishan Pavilion). The cemetery, which was established in 1870, soon became the largest on the island. The cemetery was closed by the state authorities in 1973. Exhumation of the graves to make way for a new housing estate commenced in August 1982 and was completed in October 1984. In all, 75,234 graves were exhumed.

Peck San Theng was located within Kampong San Theng which was settled in the second half of the 19th century. The settlement was a collection of villages that mushroomed around the Kwong Wai Siew Temple. When it was cleared in 1982, there were more than 2,000 squatters. A columbarium and temple now stands on the remaining piece of land belonging to the site, adjacent to Raffles Institution and Raffles Junior College.

The Hokkiens established Heng Shan Ting (Heng San Teng) in 1828 between Silat Road and Neil Road. These early cemeteries were typically small, about 8 hectares (20 acres). As Chinese immigration increased, the demands for burial ground grew; larger and larger tracts of land were acquired by the Chinese clans for burial grounds. The Teochews acquired a 28-hectare (70-acre) burial ground in Orchard Road, the land on which now sits Ngee Ann City shopping centre and Mandarin Hotel.



By far, the largest Chinese cemetery acquired in the nineteenth century was a 90-hectare (221-acre) site bordered by Dunearn Road near the junction of Kheam Hock Road and Adam Road. This was the burial ground of the Hokkien Seh Ong *Kongsi* (Ong clan) which forms the bulk of what is now known as the Bukit Brown Cemetery. This cemetery is the subject of a study by Elizabeth McKenzie in Chapter 3 of this volume.

Prior to 1857, the colonial authorities were only concerned with their own burial grounds and exerted no control or influence over Chinese cemeteries. The Indian Conservancy Act XIV of 1856 prohibited burial in unregistered and unlicensed grounds but this Act was not enforced with any kind of rigour to discourage the general population from burying their dead wherever they deemed convenient, appropriate and

8. The cemetery at Kampong San Teng or Pek San Theng (Bishan).

propitious.⁸ Indeed, many wealthy Chinese reserved large choice parcels of land as their family burial plots. When the colonial government attempted to control Chinese burial grounds through the introduction of the Burials Bill in 1887, the wealthy Chinese businessmen objected. Seah Liang Seah, son of the wealthy and powerful Teochew merchant Seah Eu Chin and member of the Legislative Council asked for the second reading of the Bill as it 'seriously affected the interests of the Chinese community, mostly those of the respectable class.'⁹ The powerful Chinese merchants succeeded in delaying the passage of this bill for close to 10 years. In 1896, two bills were passed. The first was the Burial Ordinance XIX of 1896 which gave the colonial government power to control and licence burial grounds outside the municipal limits. For burial grounds within the municipal limits, the Municipal Ordinance XV of 1896 empowered the Municipal Commission to control, licence and inspect the burial grounds.¹⁰

Other Cemeteries

Besides the Christian and Chinese cemeteries, there were other smaller cemeteries used by other ethnic groups in Singapore. Most of these were fairly small. The small Jewish community, which numbered no more than 2,000 at any one time, for example, had two cemeteries, one at Orchard Road and Moulmein Road (see box story) totalling less than 2 hectares (5 acres). The Indian-Muslim Dawoodi Bohras, had a small burial ground in Serangoon Road just

opposite Sturdee Road (now occupied by HDB flats), while the Thai community had a large 28.7-hectare (71-acre) cemetery in Tiong Bahru Road adjacent to the railway line, near the Wat Ananda Metyarama (Thai Buddhist Temple) along Jalan Bukit Merah. There is an interesting small cemetery in Coronation Road, off Bukit Timah Road – known officially as the Temporary Chinese War Emergency Burial Ground occupying just 2 hectares (5 acres) – which was closed at the end of May 1947. In Upper Serangoon Road, there was a very small Dengue Burial Ground which was used for the burial of those who died of infectious diseases.

Many Singaporeans do not realise that one of the most well-known places in Singapore – Tiong Bahru – actually means 'new cemetery'. Brenda Yeoh and Lily Kong described Tiong Bahru as follows:

Up to the 1920s, the area was one of hill and swamp, dotted with plank and attap huts, some built on hilly ground and others on stilts over swampy areas in the valleys, as well as piggeries and graveyards. The living eked out an existence in close juxtaposition with the dead, and typically, graves spaced between one to nine metres apart covered the hilly portion of the land while squatters lived in the foothills near the swampy areas, paying rent to the caretaker of the burial ground. Burial grounds included *si jiao ting*, a public Hokkien cemetery, those belonging to various Hokkien surname groups such as the

seh Choa, seh Wee and seh Lim as well as numerous family burial plots of the Chinese.¹¹

What is now Tiong Bahru Road was originally known as Burial Ground Road and up to the 1920s, it led off from Outram Road to a number of Chinese burial grounds (what is now the Henderson and Redhill areas). Most of these cemeteries were cleared in the 1920s for construction of public housing.

Many other cemeteries are not even found in the government records. For example, in 1971, nine tombstones were discovered in the jungles off Old Upper Thomson Road in what was believed to be a secret Chinese burial ground.¹² Alas, there is barely any documentation of these cemeteries and individual graves, much less research done to study them and it is hoped that this volume will inspire some scholars and researchers to do so.

Four Intriguing Graves

Besides these forgotten graveyards, there are also curious individual graves located all over Singapore island, as well as on neighbouring islands. Three will be highlighted just to show how fascinating a study of this sort can be.

The first grave is more famous than mysterious but was, for many years, forgotten and hidden away from public view. This is the grave of one of Singapore's founding fathers, Tan Tock Seng (1798-1850). Tan Tock Seng was born in Malacca in 1798 and first came to Singapore in the early years of its

settlement by the British. He started out by buying fruits, vegetables and fowl from the countryside and selling them in town. With his savings, he opened a shop in Boat Quay and eventually made a fortune. Working alongside J Horrocks Whitehead, Tan made a fortune through trading and became one of the richest men in Singapore.

Tan Tock Seng was not only a leader of the Hokkien Babas but was also the first Asian to be appointed Justice of the Peace. He gave generously to all sorts of charities, including setting up a \$5,000 contribution to the Chinese Pauper's Hospital that was eventually to bear his name. When his friend Whitehead died, he erected a tombstone at Fort Canning as a token of affection for his friend. Tan was extremely sympathetic to the plight of the poor Chinese and often paid the expenses of giving them a proper burial.

He died in 1850 and was survived by his wife Lee Seo Neo, three sons Kim Ching, Teck Guan and Swee Lim and three daughters. Tan Kim Ching followed in his father's footsteps and carried on his substantial business concerns. It is not known where Tan Tock Seng was originally buried.¹³ It is possible that he was interred in a private cemetery plot or in an early Hokkien cemetery. However, his body was exhumed and reburied on Outram Hill where it now stands. It is not known who undertook the exhumation of Tan Tock Seng's grave and had it re-interred



at this commanding site although it was likely that his grandson Tan Boo Liat (1874-1934) was responsible.¹⁴

For many years, the gravesite lay forgotten and soon became overgrown. In 1989, the Singapore Heritage Society organised a Heritage Hunt and veteran tour guide Geraldene Lowe-Ismael's photograph of the grave won her second prize. Today, the site is beautifully maintained by Tan Tock Seng's descendants, led by Roney Tan.

The next two graves are much more mysterious but have gained some media notoriety. The first is a tomb located along Stevens Road. For many years, it was reputed that this century-old grave was that of the mistress of Sir Stamford Raffles. The tomb is that of Madam Tan Chwee Neo, a Teochew woman who died in 1904. A report in *The Straits Times*

- 9. Tan Tock Seng's grave.
- 10. The tomb of Madam Fan on the edge of the waters of MacRitchie Reservoir.
- 11 & 12 The oldest in situ tombs in Singapore - the graves of Qiu Zheng Zhi and his wife in the National University of Singapore's Bukit Timah campus grounds.

in 1988 first raised the possibility that Tan was Raffles' mistress. According to her ancestral tablet, Tan was born in 1818 and died in 1904. This would have made her only 5 years old when Raffles visited Singapore for the last time in 1823. Naturally, historians have discounted this 'legend' but Mr John Tan, who claims to be a descendant of Tan Chwee Neo, says that his great-great grandmother was married to a British governor known as 'Manam'. In 2002, the Singapore Land Authority issued an order for the grave to be exhumed but this was only done in 2004.¹⁵

The third grave dates from 1877 and lies beneath some mangrove trees in MacRitchie Reservoir Park, along the Chemperai-Jering jogging trail.¹⁶ There is no record of there having been a graveyard in the vicinity and it is speculated that the deceased was possibly to have been buried either at nearby Bukit Brown or Sime Road, but was buried here instead. The tomb lies just a few steps from the water's edge and commands a panoramic view of the Reservoir. MacRitchie was Singapore's first impounding reservoir and was built between 1867-1868 and was originally known as Thomson Reservoir. From its inscription, the tomb belongs to a Madam Fan (no maiden name given) who died on the 24th day of the 12th month of the lunar calendar in the 2nd year of the reign of Emperor Guangxu (possibly 6 January 1877). Madam Fang was the wife of a 7th rank Qing dynasty official named Seah. It is quite possible that Madam Fan was



the wife or concubine of the fabulously wealthy Teochew tycoon Seah Eu Chin (1808-1884) or his eldest son Seah Cheo Seah especially since the Seah family's Chin Chun Estate was known to be in the vicinity.¹⁷ She was probably a Hakka while her husband was almost certainly a Teochew. The tomb was erected for her by three 'sons' Hock Hai, Ren Shou and Tai Tai who were most probably not her biological children but 'sworn brothers' of her children.¹⁸ Other than this information, the tomb remains a major enigma to all those who pass by it. While no one has come forward to claim any connection to the tomb, it is clear that someone sweeps and maintains the grave.

The fourth is a set of three graves located in the Bukit Timah Campus of the National University of Singapore. Nested in the shade of a secluded slope of the campus, abutting the Singapore Botanic Gardens, is a tomb dating back to 1842 - quite possibly the oldest *in situ* tomb on the island. This belongs to Qiu Zheng Zhi and his wife, Li Ci Shu, who were buried together. Upon their death,



they were survived by their sons: Zhen Xing, Zhen Fu, Qin Lu, Qin Qin; and their daughters De Yan and Yu Ying; and their grandson Wei De. Qiu hailed from Xin An, a village in Hai Cheng county in China's Fujian province.

Nearby are two other tombs belonging to Huang Hui Shi (erected 1881) and his wife Si Ma Ni (quite possibly a transliteration of an Indian or Malay name). Huang and his wife were survived by a daughter, He Lan, and

two grandsons: Qiu Qin Chou and Qiu Qin Shuo. The fact that both grandsons carried the same surname as Qiu Zheng Zhi suggests that they were in-laws and that Huang He Lan was the wife of one of Qiu Zheng Zhi's sons. Huang hailed from the Bi Jian village which could either be in Guangdong or Fujian. Beyond the tomb inscriptions, nothing else is known about these graves which sit in what used to be the economic gardens of the Singapore Botanic Gardens. Old maps show that the area had once been a gambier plantation.¹⁹

The Move Towards Cremation

The colonial government's attempt to control and regulate burial grounds in Singapore was given a legislative boost by amendment to the Municipal Ordinance in 1906 which mandated that no more cemeteries be established in the municipal area. The solution to the allocation of precious land for the dead was, as far as the colonial government was concerned, to simply move cemeteries out of the city limits and establish them in the rural areas. It was not till 1952 when the Committee Regarding Burial and Burial Grounds met to deliberate the land crunch that the alternative solution of cremation was officially proposed.

The Committee, which was chaired by JA Harvey, Commissioner of Lands, comprised Jee Ah Chian (Straits Chinese British Association); Abbas Nomanbhoy (Indian Association); CG Menon (Indian Association); Ahmad bin Ibrahim (Malay Union); Yeo Tiam



13. The crematorium at Mount Vernon.

Siew (Singapore Buddhist Federation); Lien Ying Chow (Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce); Yap Pheng Geck (City Council); Lim Kim Seng (Chinese Advisory Board); CE Collinge (Singapore Chamber of Commerce); JN Shohet (Jewish Welfare Board); FW Harvey and W Fox (secretary). The Committee argued for Hindus and Sikhs, cremation was the norm while there was no objection to cremation by any Christian community except for the Roman Catholics and that historically, the Chinese practiced cremation from early times till about 600 to 700 years ago. The only communities who forbade cremation were the Roman Catholics, the Jews, and Muslims.

They then went on to recommend setting up a crematorium in Singapore as soon as possible along the lines of an English model. In their report, the model was described as follows:

24. A crematorium consists of a chapel, with a cataflaque upon which the coffin rests, an ante room, an adjacent furnace room, robing and retiring rooms and columbaria. The columbaria contain the niches for urns or boxes containing the ashes...

25. The firing of the furnaces may be by town gas, electricity or fuel oil and the average time taken for disposal is one hour. In considering the position and type of furnace it is essential that it should be inaudible in the temple or chapel.²⁰

The first state crematorium was located at Mount Vernon which opened in 1962. In the ensuing years, Singaporeans very quickly accepted cremation as a way of life (or death as it were). In a 1999 survey, a sea change in attitude was evident; most Singaporeans reflected a preference for cremation as a means of disposing the dead.²¹

Exhumation, Cremation and Concentration

Singapore's move to encourage its people to cremate their dead attained a new urgency in the years just before independence. This urgency was also matched by the state's provision of crematoria and columbaria to store

the ashes of the dead. Mount Vernon Crematorium located right across the road from Bidadari Cemetery was built in 1962, a good 10 years after the Committee on Burial and Burial Grounds issued its report. It was the first government-operated crematorium. Other privately-run crematoria commenced operations earlier. One of them was the crematorium at the Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Temple (Bright Hill Temple), which was founded in 1920.

In 1964, the powerful Land Acquisition Act was passed and this gave the state enormous powers to compulsorily acquire large tracts of land for development purposes. Between 1964 to 1973, some 15% of Singapore's land was compulsorily acquired under this legislation.²² This included a large number of Chinese burial grounds which were exhumed and cleared. The exhumation of these burial grounds allowed the Government to build a number of public housing estates: Queenstown, Tiong Bahru, Redhill, Kampong Silat, Telok Blangah and Bishan.²³ The widespread decimation of Chinese burial grounds was sometimes met with opposition from the various clan associations, but ultimately, they succumbed to the state's developmental imperatives. This subject is dealt with in great detail in Chapters 8 and 9 of this volume.

The need to reclaim land from the dead and to either re-bury the remains

in a more space-conscious manner or to cremate the remains and house the ashes in columbaria went hand-in-hand with the growth of the columbarium as the new Singapore 'cemetery'. By the 1990s, more than 80% of Singapore's dead were cremated. By then, the only cemeteries that remained open were those at Choa Chu Kang, a massive 700-hectare (1,730-acre) site that was managed as a public burial ground by the City Council since the colonial era. For a complete listing of extant cemeteries in Singapore, see Appendix 1 to this Chapter.

Today, Choa Chu Kang is home to the cemeteries of all ethnic and religious groups: Muslims, Jews, Parsis, Ahmaddiya Jama'at Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Chinese and those of the Bahai faith. All these cemeteries are controlled by the National Environmental Agency (NEA). In 1998, the Government announced that the burial period for all graves at the Choa Chu Kang cemeteries would be limited to 15 years. All graves more than 15 years old would be exhumed, cremated and the ashes would be placed in an urn and re-interred in a standard niche at one of the three government columbaria: Choa Chu Kang, Mandai or Yishun. A marble plaque, inscribed with the deceased's name and date of death would be installed over the niche. All costs would be borne by the NEA.