

## Reflections on The Impact of Documenting Graves

### An Impact Case by Dr. HUI Yew-Foong

Perhaps it is difficult to imagine how traipsing around Chinese cemeteries and documenting graves could have any kind of impact on society. When I first embarked on this work in 2008 to document graves in Singapore's last Chaozhou cemetery, my motivation was to create a record of the graves and their inscriptions before the government cleared the cemetery. The experience gained from that first project was invaluable, and it led to a more holistic approach that made good use of digital technology when I was commissioned to document part of the Bukit Brown Cemetery in 2011, before the Singapore government built a highway that affected almost 4,000 graves. The impact of the Bukit Brown Documentation Project (made wider via public forums and talks, an exhibition, and a website) was reported in our Research Newsletter – Advancing Research to Build a Better World – published in January 2019 (pp. 9–10).

Although the website ([bukitbrown.info](http://bukitbrown.info)) was built and launched in 2013, it has continued to attract a steady stream of visitors even 10 years afterwards. For February 2023, the website had 379 unique visitors and 30,371 hits, which suggests that the research and documentation materials shared on the website continue to be relevant to a larger audience. On one occasion (in 2021), one of the visitors to the website contacted me to express his gratitude for the documentation efforts and for sharing the photographs taken. Through the website, he was able to find photographs of the grave of his great-grandfather, and the information on the grave (such as the birthdates and names of descendants) helped him to trace his roots back to his ancestral village in Quanzhou, China. The twist in the story is that this was an exhumed grave that originally might not have been documented, but I had insisted on documenting even the exhumed graves at that time to ensure that we had as complete a record as possible. On hindsight, this has proven to be the right decision, as data recorded on graves can help descendants reassemble genealogical records and find their cultural roots.

In 2014, as the Singapore Botanic Gardens was preparing for induction as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, I was consulted on a set of graves lying on the fringe of the proposed site. With careful documentation, I found that one of the graves, dated 1842, was most likely the oldest in situ burial in Singapore, representing the oldest surviving material evidence of Chinese settlement in 19th century Singapore. Subsequently, the graves were included in the proposed boundary of the World Heritage Site, which was successfully inducted on 4 July 2015.<sup>1</sup>

It seems that graves do matter, both as a family heritage and as national heritage.



*Grave, dated 1842, representing the oldest in situ burial in Singapore, which was included in the Singapore Botanic Gardens UNESCO World Heritage Site.*

<sup>1</sup> "Singapore Botanic Gardens Candidate World Heritage Site Nomination Dossier," p. 490 (<https://www.nparks.gov.sg/-/media/sbg/documents/unesco-240114-sbg-candidate-whs-nom-doc-final-2014-01-opt.ashx>); "More history unearthed at Botanic Gardens," *The Sunday Times*, 13/12/2015.