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### **Cemeteries as Heritage: Influencing Policy-Makers, Promoting Awareness among the Public and Educating Students in Singapore**

When the Singapore government was planning to build an eight-lane highway through Bukit Brown and Seh Ong Cemeteries in 2011, it commissioned Dr. Hui Yew-Foong to document the affected graves and conduct research on the Cemeteries. Dr. Hui was chosen on the recommendation of the Singapore Heritage Society, based on the strength of his earlier experience documenting Kwong Hou Sua, the last Chaozhou cemetery in Singapore in 2008-2009.

The “Project for the Documentation of Bukit Brown and Seh Ong Cemeteries”, designed with a holistic approach in mind, included documentation of: i) inscriptions and cultural features of graves; ii) the religio-cultural life and memories associated with the cemetery; and iii) rituals associated with exhumation and re-interment of remains. The project was a multi-disciplinary one that organized epigraphic studies, genealogy studies, ethnography, oral history, architectural history, media studies and visual sociology within a geographic information system framework. Such a comprehensive documentation of cemeteries is the first of its kind in the world, and so far, the project has resulted in two publications. Three more are forthcoming.

#### ***Influencing Policy-Makers through Briefings on the Heritage Value of the Cemeteries***

As the documentation project progressed, Dr. Hui continually updated stakeholders on key findings by briefing an Advisory Committee that consisted of government agencies and civil society organizations. Through such briefings, these stakeholders were apprised of the heritage value of Bukit Brown and Seh Ong Cemeteries. Some briefings were conducted on-site for high government officials, such as the one given to then-Senior Minister of State for National Development, Mr Tan Chuan-Jin, on 3 February 2012. (A YouTube video of the visit is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2z5VxftSFGM>. There were 1815 views as of 20 December 2018). The knowledge generated on the heritage

value of the Cemeteries will be taken into consideration where urban planning affecting the Cemeteries and where their future are concerned.

#### ***Promoting Awareness of the Heritage Value of the Cemeteries Leading to a Greater Sense of Belonging***

Furthermore, through public forums and talks, an exhibition and a website, Dr. Hui and his team promoted awareness of the heritage value of the Cemeteries. The overall idea was to help Singaporeans gain an understanding of the Cemeteries as part of Singapore’s heritage, and as a result, acquire a stronger sense of place and of belonging in Singapore.

#### ***- Public Forums and Talks***

Dr. Hui participated in such public events either as a panel speaker or as the key speaker, updating the interested public and civil society on the progress and findings of the documentation work. A select list of the events is as follows:

14 April 2012: “The Cost and Value of Heritage in Singapore—The Belitung Shipwreck and Bukit Brown”, Singapore Management University, organized by the Singapore Heritage Society. (Estimated audience: 150)

19 May 2012: “Cultural Salon – Bukit Brown: A Dialogue on Space and Value” (in Mandarin), National Library, Singapore, co-organized by the Singapore Society of Asian Studies and the National Library Board. (Estimated audience: 80)

26 June 2012: “Moving House”, National University of Singapore (NUS), co-organized by NUS Museum and All Things Bukit Brown. (Estimated audience: 150)

8 September 2012: “Active Citizenship: For a Better Community, For a Better World”, SIM University, organized by the School of Arts and Social Sciences, SIM University. (Estimated audience: 200)

20 January 2013: “Celebrating Bukit Brown”, The Substation, co-organized by the Singapore Heritage Society and All Things Bukit Brown. (Estimated audience: 120)

6-7 July 2013: “Bukit Brown: Our Roots, Our Future”, Chui Huay Lim

Club, co-organized by Chui Huay Lim Club and All Things Bukit Brown. (Estimated audience: 120)

18 April 2015: "Heritage in Singapore – Saving History to Build a Nation", co-organized by the International Commission on Monuments and Sites (Singapore) and the National Heritage Board, Singapore. (Estimated audience: 120)

30 October 2015: "Great Peranakans Lecture Series – In Life and in Death: The Peranakans and Bukit Brown Cemetery", Peranakan Museum, organized by the Peranakan Museum, Singapore. (Estimated audience: 100)

### - Exhibition

Dr. Hui and his team also curated an exhibition that was held at the National Library from 19 July to 10 October 2014. The guest-of-honour for the launch of the exhibition on 19 July was then-Minister of State for National Development, Mr Desmond Lee. To extend the reach of the exhibition to residents in the heartlands of Singapore, who usually would not visit the Cemeteries or come into contact with related forums and talks, the exhibition also travelled to four regional libraries from October 2014 to January 2015. Over the course of more than six months, this exhibition reached more than an estimated 15,000 people.



*Dr. Hui bringing Minister of State for National Development, Mr Desmond Lee, on a tour of the exhibition at the National Library.*

### - Website

A website – [www.bukitbrown.info](http://www.bukitbrown.info) – was set up in 2013 to share information from the documentation work. This reaches out to the Internet-savvy public and continues to be a resource for visitors (whether from Singapore or overseas) to learn more about the Cemeteries. The estimated average number of page views for this website in 2018 was 5,000 per month.

### Educating Students on the Heritage Value of the Cemeteries

Dr. Hui has also been involved in lecturing, mentoring, supervising and advising students at secondary to graduate levels, impressing on them the heritage value of the Cemeteries. Among such educational activities were: lecturing to more than 400 students from the Raffles Girls' School; mentoring students from the Nanyang Girls' School and Temasek Junior College through on-site experiential learning at the Cemeteries; lecturing to students at the History and Sociology Departments of the National University of Singapore (NUS); bringing students from the History Department of NUS on a tour of the Cemeteries; supervising Master of Architecture candidates from NUS on tomb architecture (some drawings have been posted on <https://bukitbrown2060.wordpress.com/2012/02/16/samples-of-documentation-drawings/>); and advising landscape architecture graduate students from NUS on their projects, which resulted in a publication entitled *Bukit Brown Landscape Scenarios* that explored different ways of revitalizing the Cemeteries for different people.



*Dr. Hui explaining to students from Temasek Junior College the heritage value of graves at the Bukit Brown and Seh Ong Cemeteries.*

### Publications:

Hui, Yew-Foong. "Debating Bukit Brown: Bringing a Cemetery to Life in Singapore". *The Newsletter*, No.62 (2012), p. 44.

Hui, Yew-Foong. "Recording for Posterity". *the peranakan*, 2012 Issue 2, pp. 17-19.

Hui, Yew-Foong. "An Essay on the Development of Cemetery Research and Documentation in Singapore". In *Heritage in Singapore: Saving History to Build a Nation*, edited by Lim Chen Sian. Singapore: National Museum of Singapore & ICOMOS Singapore, forthcoming.

Hui, Yew-Foong. "Bukit Brown Chronicles: A Brief Cultural History of the Chinese in Singapore through the Lens of a Cemetery". In *A General History of the Chinese in Singapore*, edited by Kwa Chong Guan and Kua Bak Lim. Singapore: Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations & World Scientific Publishing, 2019.

Hui, Yew-Foong. *Documenting Bukit Brown: Exploring New Horizons of Knowledge*. Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, forthcoming.