



The Past in the Future

Bukit Brown Cemetery

By Mathilde van den Akker-Verhoog

Headstones against a green backdrop

Just off Lornie Road, at the junction of Sime and Kheam Hock roads, lies Lorong Halwa, the street leading to the official entrance of Bukit Brown Cemetery (*bukit* means hill in Malay). Entering through the old wrought-iron gate and walking along the roads and paths that loop around open grasslands, woodlands and rolling hillsides gives one the feeling of strolling in a peaceful secret garden. The vegetation has been left untouched for most of the cemetery's existence allowing magnificent trees to grow to full maturity. Creepers cover some of the old tombstones, giving them an even more enchanting character. Unfortunately, the peace at Bukit Brown will not last much longer.

Bukit Brown has approximately 100,000 graves and is one of the largest Chinese graveyards outside China. Its peaceful character is already changing, owing to preparatory work for the construction of an eight-lane highway that will cut through and pass over the cemetery's lush greenery. Almost 4,000 graves will have to make way for the new road. Those graves are now marked with numbered sticks and will be exhumed in early 2013 if they have not been claimed and privately exhumed before then. Fearing further urbanisation of the cemetery, some descendants may decide to exhume other graves, knowing that Bukit Brown will never be the same again.

Bukit Brown was named after the first known owner of the land, the British merchant George Henry Brown. The hill around which the cemetery lies was known as *Kopi Sua* (Coffee Hill), named after the nearby Mount Pleasant coffee plantations. Henry Brown sold the land in 1872 to three



Epiphyte-encrusted branch hanging over a creek

Hokkien businessmen named Ong who used it for farming and as a burial ground for Ong clan members.

Early in the 20th century a group of influential Chinese asked the authorities for a public burial ground for the Chinese community. After initial hesitation, the authorities bought the 213-acre plot of land and in 1922 Bukit Brown Cemetery was opened, an ethnically based cemetery, not affiliated with any specific religion. Some of the graves date back to much earlier than 1922; these were relocated from other cemeteries that had to make way for urban development. The Ong graves are still in their original and prominent positions and Ong Sam Leong's (1857-1918) beautifully decorated grave, at 600 square metres, is the largest in Bukit Brown. Many of Singapore's pioneers and wartime heroes also found their last resting place here. The cemetery was closed to new burials in 1973.



Female attendant standing at a graveside



Peranakan tiles in a forecourt



A rusting gateway

There used to be four *kampongs* bordering the cemetery, along Kheam Hock Road. Most of the villagers worked in burial-related businesses as tombstone engravers, grave-diggers or tomb-keepers. The village children played hide-and-seek amongst the tombstones, caught fish and chased paper boats in the creeks that meander around the hills of the graveyard. The *kampongs* were cleared in the 1980s.

There are two distinctive tomb designs at Bukit Brown. The architecture and positioning of the graves follow stringent *feng shui* guidelines in order to bring health and wealth to future generations. The most commonly seen graves are Hokkien. These have a rectangular forecourt at the back of which is the headstone, two shoulder-stones and two arms. Behind the headstone is a horseshoe-shaped wall surrounding the mound where the body is buried. The Teochew graves are less common and at first sight resemble the Hokkien graves, but have a horse-shoe-shaped forecourt and are often more elaborately decorated, with no wall around the mound.



Statue of Sikh guard watching over Ong Sam Leong's grave, photo by Tracey Lees

Peranakan graves, in either the Hokkien or Teochew style, are decorated with multi-coloured (often flowery) tiles which, even after many years of exposure to the elements, have not lost their original colour and shine. For those who can read Chinese (very few stones are engraved in English) the gravestones provide essential information about the deceased. The given name, date and place of birth and death, cause of death and spoken dialects can all be found inscribed in the stones. Occasionally there is a porcelain photo

of the deceased on the headstone. If the spouse is buried in the same grave, his/her details will be engraved on the stone as well. The names of the deceased's children are on the shoulders, with the daughters' and other female relatives' names on the left (the Tiger or female side) and the names of the sons and other male relatives on the right side (the Dragon or male side). Sometimes there are expressions of religious belief or good wishes for wealth, luck and longevity engraved on the stone.

Some are individual graves while others are family graves with one or more mounds. Most have a little stone altar for offerings to the earth deity, the grave's protector. Artistically carved statues of attendants, immortals and lions (again females on the left and males on the right) and auspicious symbols are often seen next to the graves. Additionally, the graves of some of the more prominent pioneers have statues



Conch shell, symbol of longevity on many graves

of Sikh guards protecting their masters in the afterlife.

The Nature Society of Singapore considers the diversity of wildlife in Bukit Brown greater than anywhere else in urbanised Singapore. The rain trees have grown tall and are full of activity with giant bird's nest ferns, orchids, insects, bats and birds in their branches. The feathery canopies of the albizias stand tall above other trees and the orange flowers of the African tulip tree add bright colour to the green leaves. The banyan tree's unique root systems create curtains of roots and the sago trees spread their little red seeds over the ground. The uniform weight of these seeds made them popular as weight measures in the old days. More romantic souls used them as 'love beads' because of their colour and resemblance to the heart shape. Fourteen of the 90 bird species that can be found at Bukit Brown are endangered. In addition to the diverse bird life, there are also monkeys, flying lemurs, bats, snakes and many other smaller creatures. The Singapore Heritage Society has also taken a strong position against the urbanisation of Bukit Brown and would like to see the area legally protected as a heritage site and turned into a heritage park for all Singaporeans to enjoy.

Several other groups have been formed over the last year, hoping to save Bukit Brown by educating the population through tours that highlight the natural and historical importance of the site. They also hope to influence the authorities into looking at alternatives for the new highway.

Unfortunately, preparations for the construction of the new road continue and evidence of the damage can already be seen throughout the cemetery. It is only a matter of time before Bukit Brown will no longer be a peaceful secret garden.



Nature taking over

Mathilde van den Akker-Verhoog became an FOM member in December 2011 and immediately signed up for *Field Studies Singapore*. She co-organised a trip to Bukit Brown, one of the most beautiful and culturally rich graveyards she's ever seen.

Unless otherwise noted, all photos by the author