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Chinese Deathscapes in Insulindia

Introduction

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Introduction

The essays presented here are the result of a workshop entitled “Death, burial rituals, and cemeteries among Chinese communities in Insular Southeast Asia (16/17th-21st centuries),” organised by Teresita Ang See, Catherine Guéguen and Claudine Salmon, and which was convened in Manila by the Kaisa Para Sa Kaunlaran on August 5, 2015. Some articles originated from this workshop while others were written subsequently. This workshop was made possible thanks to the Kaisa Heritage Foundation which provided the venue and the secretariat support, to the Philippine Chinese Charitable Association, Inc., and the Filipino-Chinese General Chambers of Commerce, Inc. which provided financial support.

Although the dead have no longer their place in the large megacities of Asia, the researchers working on the challenges posed by the gigantism of these conurbations pay little or no attention at all to the burial question.¹ This question arises however with particular acuity in this region of the world in relation with urban expansion and galloping demographic changes. Indeed, burial grounds which were first considered as sacred have become places of seriously conflicting discourses. In Indonesia, the old cemeteries of Surabaya and Jakarta were demolished without any further ceremony in the late 1950s and the late 1970s respectively. Only a few graves have escaped these violent

1. See Natacha Aveline-Dubach (sous la direction de), *La place des morts dans les mégapoles d'Asie Orientale*, Paris : Les Indes Savantes, 2013, p. 9.

waves of destruction, such as the tomb of the first captain of the Chinese in Batavia/Jakarta (So Beng Kong 苏鸣岗, ca. 1580-1644) and which remains as a landmark in the history of the Chinese in the Indonesian metropole. In the Philippines, their counterparts have so far managed to turn the Manila Chinese Cemetery into a kind of living open air museum which is famous at the international level. In the Malay Peninsula, since the mid-1980s, cemeteries have been endangered by urban expansion, legislative regulations, political decisions, and economic development. Consequently, the various Chinese communities are gradually losing control over their deathscapes.

In order to be in a position to preserve and maintain their ancient burial grounds (which for the most part are closed), some Southeast Asian Chinese communities have been led to think of their cemeteries as places embodying the history of their own ancestors—that is to say their own history. In so doing they have coined new concepts: from that of burial site (*yishan* 义山) they have moved to that of “place of cultural heritage” (*wenhua yichan gongyuan* 文化遗产公园 or “historic open space” [*lishi*] *guji gongyuan* [历史]古迹公园) which is conceived as an essential community and public space (as in the case of Bukit Cina or Sanbao shan 三宝山 in Malacca,² or of the Guangdong *yishan* 广东义山 in Kuala Lumpur). They have also been constrained to embellish these new open places by planting greenery and plants, by opening new paths, and cleaning them more regularly. Furthermore, they took the step of having these historical vestiges or cultural heritage spaces be recognized by legislative enactments in order to protect them from any encroachment. Simultaneously some Malaysian Chinese scholars and journalists began to reflect on the importance of their cemeteries as historical landmarks, on their own funeral culture or *muzang wenhua* 墓葬文化; as well as on the concept—new to them—of *guji baocun* 古迹保存 or preservation of monuments. Since the early 1990s at least, they have produced various articles which have appeared in the local Chinese media and eventually in book form.³ Last but not least,

2. See Carolyn L. Cartier, “Creating Historic Open Space in Melaka,” *The Geographical Review*, 83:4 (1993), pp. 359-373; the same, “The Dead, Place/Space and Social Activism: Constructing the Nationscape in Historic Melaka,” *Environment and Planning: Society and Space*, 15 (1997), pp. 555-586.

3. Such as Tan Ah Chai (Chen Yacai) 陈亚才, *Liu hen yu yihen, Wenhua guji yu huaren yishan* 留痕与遗恨。文化古迹与华人义山 (To preserve the roots or to regret. Cultural relics and cemeteries), Kuala Lumpur: Dajiang shiye chubanshe / Mentor Publishing, 2000; Ong Seng Hwat 王琛发, *Malaxiya huaren yishan yu muzang wenhua* 马来西亚华人义山与墓葬文化 (Chinese cemeteries in Malaysia and funeral culture), Selangor: Yinpin duomeiti chuanbo zhongxin, Yin Pin multimedia Communication Centre, 2001; Wong Wunbin 黄文斌, *Maliujia sanbaoshan mubei jilu* 马六甲三宝山墓碑集录 / *A Collection of Tombstone Inscriptions of Bukit China, Malacca (1614-1820)*, Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Chinese Research Centre, 2013; Gu Yanqiu bianzhu 古燕秋编著, *Sisheng qikuo: Jilongpo Guangdong yishan mubei yu tuwen jiyao* 死生契阔: 吉隆坡广东义山墓碑与图文辑要 / *For Life or for death, however separated. Important tombs, Epigraphs, documents of Kwongtong cemetery Kuala Lumpur*, Kuala Lumpur, Centre for Malaysian Chinese Studies & The Association of Kwong Tong

in May 2013, the Malaysian Chinese Research Centre, University of Malaya, launched a two year-research project on Malaysian Chinese cemeteries, with a sub-project aimed at preparing a database of the tombs contained in the Kuala Lumpur Hokkien cemetery, which remains to be exploited.⁴

In Singapore, where the *mort des cimetières*, lit. “death of the cemeteries,” had been systematically planned by the authorities,⁵ the local population was seemingly resigned to seeing its burial grounds disappear one after the other.⁶ However some intellectuals linked to the National Heritage Board, organized a forum entitled “Spaces for the Dead: A Case of the Living” aimed at bringing the public’s attention to the importance of cemeteries as heritage sites and green spaces in 2001, the year when the order to exhume all the tombs of the Bidadari Cemetery was given. The forum was attended by more than 70 persons and the interest generated prompted some of the contributors to suggest putting together a book “with the speakers and others who had spent a lot of time investigating cemeteries.” The last article, “Bones of Contention: Chinese Burial Grounds in Colonial and Post-Colonial Singapore,” by Tan Boon Hui & Brenda SA Yeoh is aimed at explaining the spatial politics of nation-building in Post-War Singapore as regards the remains of the dead.⁷ The editor, Kevin YL Tan states in the preface (p. 5) that when the manuscript was completed in 2004 he could find neither a person receptive to the idea of sponsoring such a book nor a publisher. The book finally came out in 2011, thanks to the financial support provided by the National Heritage Board and some private sponsors.⁸

The menace caused by the high-speed urban development and the speculation on land induced Chinese communities to reflect on their funerary practices in relation to the future. The poor had no other choice than to resort to cremation, the rather wealthy urban population did not renounce to the idea of

Cemetery Management Kuala Lumpur, 2014; the Association of Kwong Tong Cemetery Management Kuala Lumpur (ed.), *Festschrift of The Founding of Kwong Tong Cemetery 119 Years* (吉隆坡广东义山古迹公园成立一百一十九周年纪念文集), Kuala Lumpur: The Association of Kwong Tong Cemetery Management Kuala Lumpur, 2014.

4. Previous attempts were made to collect Chinese epitaphs in the various cemeteries in Malaysia by laying the emphasis on the oldest ones. See Wolfgang Franke 傅吾康 & Chen Tieh Fan 陈铁凡, *Chinese Epigraphic Materials in Malaysia / Malaixiya huawen mingke cuibian* 马来西亚华文铭刻粹编, 3 vol., Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1983-1987.

5. The Choa Chu Kang Cemetery 蔡厝港坟场 is currently the last cemetery to remain in operation. It comprises the Chinese, Christian, Ahmadiyya Jama’at, Muslim, Parsi, Bahá’i, Jewish, Hindu and Lawn cemeteries, and is located in the west of the island in close proximity to the Tengah Air Base.

6. Except after the Singaporean government announced plans to build an eight-lane highway through the Bukit Brown cemetery in September 2011, when several groups campaigned to save the cemetery, but to no avail.

7. This article was originally published in *Human Ecology Review*, vol. 9: 1 (2002), pp. 1-13.

8. Kevin YL Tan (ed.), *Spaces of the Dead. A Case of the Living*, Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society, Ethos Books, 2011.

designing special places to shelter their dead, while some well-to-do Chinese are still preparing their graves during their lifetime.⁹ In China incineration had been practised since remote times in relation to the introduction of Buddhism, but had never supplanted the burial practices strongly advocated by the court and the Confucian ideology.¹⁰ Similarly in Insular Southeast Asia, cremation was restricted to Buddhist circles and practised in the precincts of Buddhist sanctuaries. In Kuala Lumpur, Penang and Surabaya the first crematoria were constructed in 1951, in Jakarta in 1958, and in Singapore in 1962.¹¹ In Manila in 1967 the Philippine Chinese Charitable Association had a modern crematorium (which had been ordered in Great Britain) erected on the grounds of the Chinese Cemetery,¹² close to the Chong Hok Tong 崇福堂 temple. For this purpose, about one hundred tombs had to be removed.¹³ At the same time the private sector began to prospect and to consider the construction of lucrative private cemeteries on the outskirts of cities. These memorial parks, which borrow several features from foreign cultures and are deliberately organised as cultural landscapes, have opened a new era of deathscapes in Insular Southeast Asia. They also challenge the coexistence of the traditional non-profit cemeteries run either by secular Chinese associations or religious organisations, and the manner the Chinese communicate with their dead.

Cemeteries are evolving spatial, morphological and cultural constructions, or idealized microcosms, that serve functional and emotional purposes. They are witnesses to the evolution of mental attitudes, and to the manner the state tries to exert its control over all of them. Hence they are a good observation post for historians, economists, human geographers, architects, archaeologists, sociologists, and so forth. In relation to the problems that several Chinese communities of Insular Southeast Asia are facing, the historical approach is dominant here.

9. The entrepreneur Tommy Winata constructed a private cemetery close to Taman Makam Quiling, in *kabupaten* Bogor.

10. For modernist funerary reforms in China during the Republic and the Communist regime, see inter alia Ling Fang, Vincent Goossaert, “Les réformes funéraires et la politique religieuse de l’État chinois, 1900-2008,” *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 144 (Oct.-Nov. 2008), pp. 53-62; Rebecca Nedostup, *Superstitious Regimes: Religion and the Politics of Chinese Modernity*, Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009.

11. For more details on the creation of crematoria in Malaysia and Indonesia, see Douglas J. Davies with Lewis H. Mates, *Encyclopedia of Cremation*, Aldershot, England & Burlington, USA: Ashgate, 2005, pp. 313-314.

12. *Philippine-Chinese Charitable Association 100th Anniversary Souvenir Book, 1877-1977 / Feilübin huaqiao shanjugongsuo bainian daqing jiniankan* 菲律賓華僑善舉公所百年大慶紀念刊, Manila: Philippine-Chinese Charitable Association, Yi 义, p. 7.

13. “In the case of the Philippines, where the majority of Chinese residents are Christian, cremation and columbaria started to be popular largely after 1998, when the Archbishop of Manila approved it”; cf. *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*, November 1, 2006.

In Malaysia, where the Chinese were and to some extent still are required to justify and defend their long-standing presence in the country, the study of cemeteries is mainly aimed at tracing the oldest tombs in each locality. In addition, considering the growing control of the state over cemeteries, historians also focused on the way in which the colonial authorities had intervened in the management of the former burial sites.

Conversely in Indonesia where the old burial sites were occasionally abandoned, and largely swept away in the turmoil that followed independence, the purpose was first to trace the history of the development of these funeral landscapes, then of their rare vestiges, and finally of the manner they were managed.

In the Philippines the situation is seemingly not so tense, and the successive Manila burial grounds still offer a window on the history of the Chinese community and of the colonial regimes. A first article on the creation of the Manila Chinese Cemetery and on the remains of the previous churchyards inside the city shows an evolution reminiscent of that to be found in Europe at the end of the 18th and early 19th centuries when the various authorities decreed that for sanitation reasons the old churchyards should be demolished and the new graveyards be built on the outskirts of the cities. A second article on the Manila Chinese Cemetery analyses the architectural styles of the mausoleums that are mainly Western, but also Chinese. The rapid stylistic changes of these mausoleums showcase the receptivity of the Filipino-Chinese to the outside world over decades, and reflect the society's evolution in terms of taste and of acculturation. A third article deals with the current professional mobility of the Chinese living in the province and its serious impact on the maintenance of the traditional mortuary territories.

The last piece deals with the new concept of the memorial park introduced in the Philippines in the early 1960s, in Malaysia in 1990-1991, and in Indonesia in 2002-2003. It looks at pioneers in the memorialization industry, development of memorial parks as gardens of dreams, new cemeteries as mirrors of cultural identities, legal frameworks, the memorialization industry, and so forth. Finally, it raises the question of the impact of the first wave of memorial parks on those which were created more recently, not only in the Malay Peninsula and Java, but also in Sabah and Sarawak.

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