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Speaking up for the dead in Bukit Brown Cemetery? An anthropological enquiry on contemporary civil society in Singapore

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Thesis abstract

My research examines contemporary civil society in Singapore using the empirical example of a community interest group called 'all things Bukit Brown' (atBB for short) which has been advocating for the preservation of Bukit Brown Chinese Municipal Cemetery (BBC) for ten years now. atBB had emerged in early 2012 following the government's announcement in late-2011 of the cemetery's partial clearance to build a highway and eventual complete clearance for residential development. atBB had opposed the highway construction and when that failed, the group repivoted to advocate for the preservation of the remaining cemetery. Cemetery clearances are not new in Singapore, but BBC's experience has evoked sustained public objection for a substantial period and this has been taken into serious consideration by the government. atBB's engagement with the government to discuss on BBC's prospect is surprising and therefore worthy of academic scrutiny because of its unregistered and informally composed profile that has thrived in Singapore's authoritarian political environment which is said to be intolerant of civil society activities. I raise two questions in my research: (1) What is contemporary civil society in Singapore? and (2) How is death conceptualised in Singapore? My research is premised upon two arguments: first, I argue that atBB is an example of an emerging contemporary civil society in Singapore that has yet to be academically examined and bears the potential to open a third space for community voices to be heard; second, I argue that the need to care for the dead drives the emergence of contemporary civil society in Singapore. Thus, understanding the importance accorded to the dead in the Chinese community is essential to allow for an appreciation of atBB's advocacy as well as the slew of organised and ad-hoc community initiatives onsite that have been speaking up for the dead.

Lay summary

My research examines contemporary civil society in Singapore using the example of a community interest group called 'all things Bukit Brown' (atBB for short) which has been campaigning for the preservation of Bukit Brown Chinese Municipal Cemetery (BBC) for ten years now. Civil society refers to a group of individuals who share common interests on a particular issue or topic, while contemporary civil society refers to the present-state of civil society. atBB had been formed in early 2012 following the government's announcement in late-2011 of the cemetery's partial clearance to build a highway and eventual complete clearance to build houses. atBB had objected to the highway construction and when that failed, the group decided to campaign for the preservation of the remaining cemetery. Cemetery clearances are not new in Singapore, but BBC's experience has led to public objection for a long while and this has been taken into serious consideration by the government. atBB's discussions with the government on BBC's future is surprising and therefore worthy of research because of its unregistered and informally composed profile that has survived in Singapore's strict political environment which is said to be intolerant of civil society activities. I raise two questions in my research: (1) What is contemporary civil society in Singapore? and (2) How is death conceptualised in Singapore? My research is based upon two arguments: first, I argue that atBB is an example of an emerging contemporary civil society in Singapore that has yet to be researched and possesses the potential to open a third space for community voices to be heard; second, I argue that the need to care for the dead spurs the emergence of contemporary civil society in Singapore. Thus, understanding the importance given to the dead in the Chinese community is essential to understand atBB's advocacy as well as the series of organised and ad-hoc community initiatives onsite that have been speaking up for the dead.

Declaration

I, See Mieng Tan, declare that

    (a)   this thesis has been composed by me

    (b)   this work is entirely my own

    (c)   this work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification except as specified

    (d)   any included publications are my own work, except where indicated throughout the thesis and summarised and clearly identified on the declarations page of this thesis.

Electronic signature: <u>See Mieng Tan</u>

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Acknowledgements

I thank my parents for their unwavering support and faith in my academic aspirations and am grateful to my dad for funding my PhD endeavour. This PhD journey has not been the smoothest given my parents' rapid deterioration of their health, but they have remained resilient despite the series of adversities. From them I have learnt how to be resilient and persistent in my pursuit of an academic career despite the unexpected new role that I had to take up as their sole caregiver.

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INTRODUCTION

"Thank you for joining me in today's walk. I hope you have enjoyed it and learnt a little more about Bukit Brown Cemetery... I am glad I am not an activist so the police can't catch me…I am happy to be a volunteer so I can show you guys around in this cemetery." Darren then stopped along the footpath with a big smile. The participants thanked him unanimously and the crowd of 25 started to dissipate. Zachary and I walked to my car, and I drove us to dinner. "That was a great one, it was sure better than staying holed up in the hotel room catching up on my work!" Zachary beamed from our dinner at Westlake, an iconic Chinese restaurant known for its braised pork belly and *mantou* (white Chinese buns). "Yeah, if the government did not announce of the partial clearance of this cemetery, I guess we wouldn't have known about its existence!" "Let me know if there's a t-shirt my size, alright?" reminded Zachary when I dropped him off at his hotel accommodation. The Canadian professor of sociology was on a one-week visit to Singapore, where he was invited to deliver a lecture and conduct a workshop. I got to know Zachary from a conference I had organised years ago as a research assistant in Singapore. When he got invited to Singapore again, I took a stab and invited him to the guided walk at Bukit Brown Cemetery which he readily agreed to. The t-shirt that the volunteer Darren wore had captured Zachary's attention, and he wanted to have one too (Figure 1). However, I was to find out subsequently from Darren that the t-shirt was no longer in stock.

Three salient aspects of my research emerge from the opening paragraph, which I will discuss in this thesis. First, why would Darren identify himself as 'volunteer' and disassociate himself as an 'activist'? Second, why did Bukit Brown Cemetery only emerge in public discourse following the government's announcement of the partial clearance? Third, what is the significance of the t-shirt?

Figure 1: Bukit Brown t-shirt (Photo credit: Darren Koh)

The guided walk by Darren took place in July 2018 and I was spurred to join the walk to satisfy my curiosity on Bukit Brown Cemetery (BBC), which had been documented often in local news coverage in the past years. I wished to research on a topic related to death for my PhD thesis so the ongoing public discussion on the prospect of BBC appealed to me. Attending the guided walk confirmed my choice of selecting BBC as my fieldsite. The fact that BBC is already a well-trodden research topic did not deter me, because I was confident that I could approach the topic from an anthropological perspective, a lens that had yet to be utilised in the literature. I decided to focus on the advocacy of a group called 'all things Bukit Brown' (or 'atBB' for short). Darren is a volunteer from atBB and conducting free guided walks for the public is a main staple of atBB's advocacy. My impression of atBB was that of an activist group. However, the questions on whether it was appropriate to label this group as 'activist' and the potential risks that I would face with my Singapore citizenship by writing about an activist group emerged during my preliminary discussions with my supervisors. Eventually, I removed the word 'activist' from my thesis title, and replaced it with 'civil society', which is more generic-sounding and a 'safer' term to use. I also reassured my supervisors that academic endeavours on civil society in Singapore would likely not face sanctions from the government. Throughout my thesis, I have

consciously avoided the use of the word 'activist' wherever possible, but I realise subsequently that this avoidance can bring a fresh perspective to my thesis, which I will discuss subsequently in Chapter 5.

The Bukit Brown Cemetery controversy

In 2011, the Singapore government made two announcements in the local newspapers on the redevelopment plans of BBC, a Chinese municipal cemetery located in central Singapore with a history that can be traced back to the early 19th century (Lim and Leow, 2017). On 30 May 2011, the government announced that BBC has been earmarked for housing developments and construction of a train station in the area was also in the pipeline (The Straits Times, 2011b). On 12 September 2011, the government announced that 'a new dual four-lane road' would be constructed in BBC by 2016 to ease the current traffic congestion along Lornie Road and the Pan Island Expressway in the vicinity (CNA, 2011). The construction was initially referred to as 'Bukit Brown Road' but was named Lornie Highway (The Straits Times, 2018a). A day after this announcement was made, several civil society groups and newly formed community groups stepped forward to embark on discussions with the government by offering their feedback regarding the government's decision. These groups had shared a unanimous view that the cemetery could be preserved rather than cleared for the highway construction and subsequent housing redevelopment (The Straits Times, 2011a; The Straits Times, 2011b). Of these groups, 'all things Bukit Brown' (atBB) has persisted in its advocacy to speak up for the cemetery up to today, but as it shall be unravelled subsequently in this thesis, their advocacy is controversial on many fronts. On top of the public feedback, two public petitions were reportedly made in response to both government announcements. The first was launched by Assistant Professor Irving Johnson, an academic from the National University of Singapore on 5 June 2011 (The Straits Times, 2011c), and the second was a bilingual petition organised by a now defunct community group called SOS Bukit Brown in December 2011.

The cumulation of these public responses led to the controversy, which became a long-drawn public debate about the prospect of BBC over eight months, spilling into the first quarter of 2012. The mounting debate was described as a 'prairie fire', where

local journalists noted that there were 15 meetings between the government and civil society as well as community groups since July 2011, with academia from local universities joining the debate (The Straits Times, 2012d; Huang, 2014). There was even a plan to 'mount a public legal challenge towards the government' and an involvement of a Special Rapporteur in the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, who had written formally to the Singapore government on 29 May 2012 seeking clarifications on the matter (Huang, 2014). A parliamentary session held on 6 March 2012 was also preoccupied with discussions on BBC, where several Members of Parliament had attempted to dissuade the government from proceeding with the road construction (Today, 2012a). Two position papers each by the Singapore Heritage Society (SHS) and Nature Society Singapore (NSS) (both were registered civil society groups in Singapore), were posted on social media on 5 February 2012 and 12 December 2011 respectively, to voice their respective stances on the planned road construction (SHS, 2012; NSS, 2011). Seven civil society and community groups had also issued a moratorium on all works in Bukit Brown on the night of 20 March 2012 following an unhappy meeting between the government officials, civil society and community groups on 19 March 2012 (The Straits Times, 2012c). A newly minted minister who was thrust into this road construction project became the whipping boy in this controversy. This led to a few social media posts made by the said minister in defence of his repeated iterations of the government's unwavering decision on the road construction in BBC and even an indirect reference made to the controversy by the then deputy prime minister, Mr Teo Chee Hean, in his speech a few days later, where he had defended the government's decision-making process in favour of the public good (The Straits Times, 2012e). The local newspaper coverage concluded its coverage with a post-mortem report as well as a timeline of 'the grave saga' on 30 March 2012 by taking stock of the events that had unfolded from day one of the controversy and reflecting on the impacts that BBC brought to policy making and public engagement (The Straits Times, 2012f).

BBC was unkempt and forgotten for a long while because the government authorities had 'terminated maintenance contracts' after the cemetery had closed for burials in the early 1970s, resulting in a 'neglected space' with 'unrecognisable landscape and inaccessible inner parts' (Huang, 2014:23). Without the government's announcements, the cemetery would not have emerged on the radar of public

discourse and community groups like atBB would not have been formed to advocate for the preservation of the cemetery. A self-initiated advocacy that is not motivated by the government's actions would seem more noteworthy, given that 'public amnesia' of BBC has been ongoing for a long time (Huang, 2014). In fact, several attempts at rediscovering the graves of famous pioneers of the early Singapore Chinese community who are buried in BBC had been publicised before the government's announcements, but these garnered neither significant public attention nor interest. As early as 2006, SHS had been seeking out tombs of well-known personnel in BBC like the late Mr Ong Sam Leong, who was a Straits-born Chinese businessmen with interests in indentured labour, brickworks, and rubber plantations (The Straits Times, 2006; NLB,2016a). The grand double grave of Mr Ong and his wife was eventually discovered by former National Archives employee Madam Tan Beng Luan in May 2006 (The Straits Times, 2006). Brothers Raymond and Charles Goh, founders of Asia Paranormal Investigators (API), an interest group seeking to explain paranormal activities, were amongst the first few who had trawled BBC to satisfy their mutual interest in graves and had publicised their major discovery of Mr Cheang Hong Lim's grave in 2007 (The Straits Times, 2012a). Mr Cheang was a successful businessman and philanthropist, a major property owner and a leading licensed opium and spirits merchant (NLB, 2022). In 2011, the SHS had published a book on cemeteries in Singapore that were cleared or scheduled to be cleared, which includes a chapter on BBC (Tan, 2011). The book was funded by the National Heritage Board, a statutory board which supports heritage causes in Singapore. Given the availability of public information on BBC before 2011, why did atBB emerge *after* the government's announcements but not any earlier?

Notably, cemetery clearances are not new in Singapore. Singapore has lost 'more than 200 cemeteries in a span of 40 years' to national development imperatives in land-scarce Singapore (Tan, 2011). The continuous slew of cemetery exhumations would have mentally prepared the population for future exhumations. The government's Concept Plan dated 1991 had gazetted for BBC to be completely cleared for residential development, and subsequent iterations in the years that followed retained this plan. Evidently, the government's plan to redevelop BBC is final, but BBC's fate has been publicly contested for over a decade, which is perturbing. atBB had emerged with an initial objective of preventing the highway construction.

When their endeavour failed because the Lornie Highway has since been built and has been operational since April 2019, the group re-pivoted its advocacy to preserving the remaining cemetery. In fact, partial clearances of BBC had begun as early as 1965, when 237 graves were exhumed for road alignment; BBC was divided into two sections in the 1970s due to the construction of an expressway, and in 1993, 600 graves were exhumed to accommodate the expansion of the same expressway (NLB, 2013a). In 1984, the government issued formal eviction notices to the villages in the cemetery, giving the villagers four to five years to vacate and move to new public housing flats (Rojak Librarian, 2014a). Furthermore, before the government's announcements in 2011, 'many were anticipating the exhumation of Bukit Brown…This was a result of the construction of the Bukit Brown train station (Figure 2) and the exhumation of Bidadari (Cemetery)' (Yeo, 2012:47). Citing a local Chinese newspaper report on 'heritage enthusiasts photographing the graves at Bukit Brown Cemetery even before 2007' (Huang, 2007), Yeo (2012) further noted that 'the exhumation of Bukit Brown was expected many years before the announcement came', yet 'most enthusiasts only entered the scene after the announcement' (Yeo, 2012:48-49). Why did atBB not emerge to prevent the partial clearances in the earlier years and why has it persisted in its advocacy for BBC even though it does not seem pragmatic to do so?
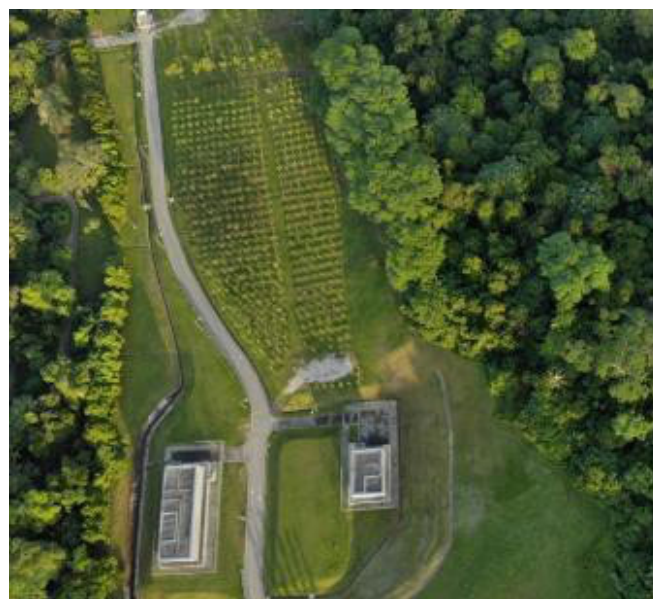
Figure 2: Drone photograph dated 2020 of the Bukit Brown train station
(Photo credit: Brice Li)

atBB's persistence has created an unfamiliar and surprising dynamic between state and society because this is the *first* time that a public objection from the ground against the government's redevelopment plan has been sustained for a substantial period *and* is taken into serious consideration by the government. Since 2014, atBB has been a member of a multi-agency workgroup called the Bukit Brown Working Committee, a collaborative platform chaired by the Ministry of National Development that discusses preservation issues relating to BBC This is despite the government's "remarkable efficiency…in silencing all activist groups" (Singam, 2017:3), an endeavour that has its origins from the Marxist conspiracy, which resulted in the government's negligible tolerance for political dissent (NLB, 2009). Why is atBB allowed by the government to thrive? What does this unusual relationship between state and society suggest of the Singapore government's management of public opinion from the ground?

Introducing my research

My research utilises Bukit Brown's controversy to understand contemporary civil society and its effectiveness in Singapore. The questions raised in my research are guided by two core research questions: (a) What is contemporary civil society in Singapore? (b) How is death conceptualised in Singapore? I see civil society and the conceptualisation of death as intertwined topics because understanding the importance accorded to the dead in the Chinese community is essential to allow for an appreciation of atBB's advocacy as well as the slew of organised and ad-hoc community initiatives onsite that have been speaking up for the dead.

This thesis utilises several terms that describe objects, deities, and occurrences in BBC. These are usually expressed in colloquial terms, Hokkien dialect, or a mixture of both. Whenever these are mentioned, I will first refer to them using formal English terminology (if available), followed by the English transliteration or colloquial/Hokkien term in italics and include the Chinese characters for each term in parenthesis. This allows the reader to have a clearer comprehension of the terminology. Chapter 5 on material wealth and associated relations in the cemetery has an abundance of such terminology, as I describe and explicate situations that entail material wealth in the

cemetery. The rest of the chapters each contain a handful of such terminology, some of which recur and should be easy to understand as the reader reads on.

My research is premised upon two arguments. First, I argue that atBB is an example of an emerging contemporary civil society in Singapore that has yet to be academically examined and bears the potential to open a third space for community voices to be heard. As it shall be evinced in this thesis, there is ample literature that discusses on civil society in Singapore in relation to the Singapore government. In particular, the Marxist Conspiracy has been highlighted in literature as the keystone historical event that has led to the hyper vigilant stance taken by the Singapore government against civil society. 16 people were arrested without bail under the Internal Security Act in 1987 as they were believed to have conspired to 'subvert Singapore's political and social order using communist united front tactics' (The Straits Times, 1987; NLB, 2009). More recently, local literature has focused on the ways in which civil society actors envision their voices to be heard and noted the more liberalised and engaging stance taken by the government (see Singam and Thomas, 2017 for an example). However, to my knowledge, there has not been any literature that examines the emerging contemporary civil society, one that is unique from the civil society that has been fervently discussed in literature and demonstrates the near-future possibilities of how civil society can be in Singapore. Specifically, the engagement between state and society is a new phenomenon that needs to be examined closely, given Singapore's unique political regime and past political and social unrests. Second, I argue that the need to care for the dead is a motivating factor that drives the emergence of contemporary civil society in Singapore. Death is an area that the government has not really been eager to handle, except when death encroaches upon land scarcity. As it shall be discussed, while the utilisation of the Land Acquisition Act (see explanation in the next section) ensures that the limited land that Singapore possesses is recovered from cemeteries to fulfil other national developmental goals, the government has been reliant on religious leaders to fill the gaps on the other aspects of death management, such as exhumation rituals and death disposal, such as persuading the public to embrace cremation as a default death

disposal method instead of burial.[1] The actions taken by contemporary civil society in BBC's context have demonstrated that care for the dead takes on various forms, beyond the general level of death management and death disposal, and is not to be interpreted in a singular, unidirectional manner, which I will discuss in detail in Chapter 4. I also highlight in Chapter 4 on the precarity of care for the dead, which has yet to be considered by both the government and the community groups that have been advocating for the preservation of BBC. In essence, ownership is pertinent where care of the dead is concerned, but to whom does this responsibility vest in at the end of the day when land belongs to the Singapore government, but the remains of the dead belong to the bereaved families?

Three overarching themes frame this thesis. The first theme is about state-society relations in Singapore, which comprises a multitude of push-pull interactions between the government and stakeholders. In BBC's experience, this would be the tombkeepers, former villagers who had been evicted from the cemetery by the government, descendants whose ancestors are buried in BBC, and community groups like atBB, as well as independent volunteers. These relations are evinced throughout the thesis and are best described as instances of engagement, resistance, control, and voluntary commitment. The second theme perceives the cemetery as a living organism, one that has a heart, pulse, breath, and growth in metaphorical terms. Different elements in the cemetery represent each part of a living organism and their totality forms the social ecology of the site. A stream that flows through the cemetery is likened to the heart that supports life within. Like how the heart pumps blood to the rest of the body, the stream supplies freshwater to sustain village life before the government evicted these human settlements from BBC, and continues to sustain the wildlife, flora and fauna that thrive in the cemetery. Tombkeepers who ply their trade use the stream to wash themselves after a hard day's work too. The pulse of the cemetery is represented by the tombkeepers' movements, which intensify in the months leading to Qing Ming Festival as they ready their clients' graves for the festival and are in turn compensated for their labour by the descendants for tomb

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[1] In my interview with Master Weiyi, a senior Taoist priest, he was invited to be one of the ten religious leaders to conduct a combined, multireligious prayer session at Bukit Brown Cemetery prior to the official commencement of the exhumation of graves that had to be removed for the construction of Lornie Highway. Further details will be shared in the next chapter.

maintenance. The dead and their descendants contribute the pulse during Qing Ming Festival, as descendants visit the graves of their ancestors to pay respects and make offerings. After the festival, the pulse decreases in intensity to a slow ebb, until the next Qing Ming. The cemetery continues to breathe figuratively when the community of users expands continuously from the conventional stakeholders of descendants, tombkeepers, and former villagers, to community groups and recreational visitors. Finally, not only does the cemetery register literal vegetation and wildlife growths, it also spurs metaphorical growths in various aspects. Where community groups like atBB's advocacy is concerned, their sustained advocacy for the preservation of BBC has been intensified over the years with their free public outreach events and significant social media presence. With each discovery of a forgotten tomb from the dense vegetation, an extended family is reunited with their ancestor and kinship bonds are revived between the living and the dead. Concurrently, there is a rediscovery of the social history of the dead and a family lineage that spans generations. Whenever the descendants visit their ancestors at the cemetery, these kinship ties are rejuvenated. The performance of ancestor worship at every Qing Ming by the descendants is a revisitation of a Chinese cultural belief that the dead continue to live on, with the soul of the dead metaphorically alive in their graves, and the memories of the dead and the dead's role as the ancestor thriving in the family unit. Qing Ming is also a representation of the continued revival of ancestor worship practices unique to the Chinese community, and an accompanying annual refurbishment or rejuvenation of the ancestors' graves. The final theme of the Covid-19 pandemic examines how the virus outbreak has become both an obstacle and catalyst for death management in Singapore. While infection control measures implemented by the government throughout the pandemic have impacted upon the liberated performances of ancestor worship and other festivals associated with the dead, it has also made apparent the values of such expressions in Chinese culture. The latter chapters will describe the conflict between subjective cultural obligations and the rational national response to fighting the virus. In a gist, when the Singapore government attempted to police BBC during the initial uncertain periods of the pandemic, public responses to the policing were unexpected and at times, resistant to the policing.

Chapter-specific micro themes are also realised from my fieldwork data. They are: governance and assertive communication (Chapter 2), abundance and

extravagance (Chapter 3), care (Chapter 4), and assertive communication (Chapter 5). Some of these micro themes may also overlap in other chapters. These micro themes provide a clearer framework for each chapter and contribute to a better understanding of the chapter's content. They relate to the overarching themes as well, where (1) and (4) bolster the theme of state-society relations in Singapore, while (2) and (3) augment the theme of the cemetery as a living organism.

This chapter is organised in three sections. The first introduces Singapore as the country in which fieldwork was conducted for this research, with information on its geography, colonial history, population demography, population density, religious inclinations, independence, political rule, and state-society relations. This section also refers to the Population White Paper 2013 to discuss on Singapore's national development goals. The second section introduces death disposal in Singapore and taps upon anthropological research that discuss Singaporean-Chinese cultural beliefs about death management to foreground the subsequent discussions on the ethnic-specific cultural events that occur at BBC during my fieldwork. The third section offers an overview of all things Bukit Brown (atBB), the community group that has been advocating for the preservation of BBC.

Introducing Singapore

Singapore is a Southeast Asian city-state located at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula, and comprises the Singapore island, which is connected by two road and rail causeways to Malaysia, and 60 small islets. (Britannica, 2022). The physical size of the Singapore island is small. In 1965, Singapore's land area was 518.5 km^2, which explains the government's fervent endeavours in recovering usable land for national development. Through land reclamation and land acquisition efforts over the years, Singapore has managed to expand its land area to 728.3km^2 as at the year 2020 (Government of Singapore, 2020a). The Land Acquisition Act, a legislative tool that was enacted in 1966, has enabled the government to acquire land parcels as they deem fit for the purpose of national development (SSO, 2020a; Chew et al, 2010). The acquisition exercises have allowed the Singapore government to become the biggest landowner by the year 1985, owning 76.2 per cent of Singapore's land (Motha and Yuen, 1999). Because of the limited land space available, developments in Singapore

are densely packed together to optimise land use for economic and social growth, with high rise buildings being the norm, even for housing. As at the year 2021, Singapore's population density was 7485 per square kilometre, with high rise public housing flats being the primary residences for more than 80% of the population (HDB, 2020). As it shall be evinced in a later section in this chapter, the limited land space in Singapore and the government's desire to continue to advance its economic and social developments for the country have spurred the continuous recovery of land from other prior uses, such as cemeteries.

Singapore was founded by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819 when he set up a trading post on the island after signing a treaty with the Johor leaders, though human settlements, immigration, and trade were apparent prior to 1819 (see Kwa et al, 2019; NLB, 2014b). The history of Singapore is 'heavily influenced by the British colonial era', which has resulted in 'a historical template that acknowledges Britain's place in modern Singapore but marginalises history prior to 1819' (Kwa et al, 2019:1). In the interest of limited word space, this section focuses on the history of Singapore beginning from the colonial rule. As part of the Straits Settlement in 1867, a consolidation comprising of Singapore, Penang, and Malacca, Singapore was under direct British control except for the period of Japanese invasion from 1942-1945 (Britannica, 2022). The British set up a free trading port in Singapore, thereby encouraging international networks to call at this city-state. The robust trade enjoyed by Singapore meant that it became 'a melting pot of migrants', with Chinese traders being 'the main force' in the trading business of China and Southeast Asia, which led to the development of Singapore as a Chinese trading centre, and the Chinese community into 'the colony's largest ethnic group' (Kwa et al, 2019:215-216). Other migrants who had settled in Singapore included the Arabs, Indians, Javanese, Malays, and the Europeans (Kwa et al, 2019). For government administrative purposes, an ethnic classification system, or the 'CMIO' model, was subsequently implemented in the year 1911 for the ease of managing policies around race in Singapore (The Straits Times, 2022a; The Straits Times, 2021). Thus, the Singapore population comprises four major ethnic groups, viz. the Chinese, Malays, Indians, and Others (i.e., Eurasians and other communities). As at the year 2020, the resident population for the Chinese was 74.3 per cent, 13.5 per cent for the Malays, 9.0 per cent for the Indians, and 3.2 per cent for Others (DOS, 2020). Like its ethnic composition, Singapore has a diversity

of religious beliefs too. According to the Census of Population 2020, Singapore's population is comprised of individuals indicating beliefs in Buddhism (31.1%), Taoism (8.8%), Christianity (18.9%), Islam (15.6%), Hinduisim (5%), other religions (0.6%) or have no religious beliefs (20%) (DOS, 2021).

The city-state attained self-government in 1959, with the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew as the first Prime Minister and the People's Action Party (PAP) as the ruling political party which was voted into power (NLB, 2015b). The British colonial masters retained control over defence and foreign policy until their withdrawal in 1971 (NLB, 2020a). The PAP was established in 1954 with an objective of gaining independence from the British colonial rule (NLB, 2015b). The party had initially comprised of left-wing members, who were said to possess communist inclinations, thus they were subsequently arrested together with other members of the public under the government's Preservation of Public Security Ordinance Act (NLB, 2015b). The late Mr Lee Kuan Yew had his compatriots who were educated in England like him, the late Mr Toh Chin Chye and the late Mr Goh Keng Swee, take on the positions of deputy prime minister and finance minister respectively (NLB, 2015b). The mission of the PAP is 'to build a fair and just society where the benefits of progress are spread widely to all' (PAP, 2020). Four core values have been embraced by the PAP, viz. honesty, multiracialism, meritocracy, and self-reliancy (PAP, 2020). The PAP's 'white-on-white' party uniform symbolises the traits of purity and integrity expected of its members (NLB, 2015b).

Prior to Singapore's independence in 1965, it had merged briefly in 1963 with the Federation of Malaya to form the Federation of Malaysia. Singapore's independence in 1965 was due to the 'deep political and economic differences between the ruling parties of Singapore and Malaysia during the Federation era, which created communal tensions that resulted in racial riots in 1964' (NLB, 2019a). A separation from Malaysia became inevitable and the requisite paperwork was eventually endorsed by the leaders of both countries (NLB, 2019a). 9 August 1965 marked the birth of independent Singapore where the PAP leaders took office as cabinet ministers (NLB, 2015b).

What is most noteworthy of the PAP is its 'absolute and undisrupted rule' since Singapore's independence, with the PAP continuously winning more seats than the opposition parties that had contested in the general elections (Chua, 2017a). Critics have continuously characterised Singapore as having an 'authoritarian regime' and that the Singapore government lacks democracy (Chua, 1994). The reasons behind these labels stem from the PAP's implementation of 'less than democratic tactics' to suppress dissent during the early independence years, the top-down approach adopted by the government that is 'based almost exclusively on technical-instrumental rationality', as well as 'anti-democratic legislations' 'that severely restrict conventional liberal freedoms and civil society activities' (Chua, 1994:657-658; Chua, 2017a:67). These have led to a 'familiar complaint' about 'excessive governmental paternalism in Singapore' where the government assumes the role of a 'paternalistic guardian' and the populations are subjected to 'a state of "perpetual childhood"' (Bell, 2017:284-285).

The PAP's stance of rejecting democracy and liberalism has been well-discussed in literature, which I shall summarise here. Profiling Singapore as an anti-democratic country is not unique since there are other East Asian countries that also experience 'democratic deficit' because of 'their respective histories of state formation' (Chua, 2017a). The PAP has claimed to be democratic nonetheless, citing its 'untampered elections', the fact that it is 'popularly elected', possesses the 'absence of financial corruption', and has maintained a good track record of improving the population's standard of living and 'governs through due parliamentary process' (Chua, 1994:656-657). The PAP has adopted an anti-liberalistic stance due the misgivings that the first generation of PAP leaders had, believing that liberalism may lead to 'excessive individualism' (Chua, 2017a:22). For a country that was forced by circumstances to become independent, survival was key and imminent to the first-generation leaders. Following Chua (2017a:183), the 'geopolitical and geospatial reality of Singapore's smallness (in size) and its multiple vulnerabilities (e.g., not having natural resources)' could have created 'excessive anxiety over survival' (Chua, 2017a:158). Liew (2017:204-209) suggests that these assertions by the PAP government are but myths used as 'regulatory tools…to strengthen the social fabric' and support the authoritarian politics in Singapore. There is perhaps some truth in the harnessing of political tools to transform the social and cultural fabric of the Singapore society. One explicit example observed by local sociologist Chua Beng Huat is the

multiracialism core value that the PAP embraces as a political tool to 'monitor and police the boundaries and contact points between races' to avoid revisiting Singapore's past experiences of racial violence and its multiracial demographic composition (Chua, 2017a:122-123).

As a way of unifying the population that is ethnically and culturally diverse, the PAP government promotes communitarianism, which prioritises national and collective interests over individual freedoms to attain social stability in the country (Chua, 2017a:181). Collective membership and group solidarity are prioritised over individual citizenship by the government as a strategy to reduce the prospects of race group identity being mobilised against the government (Rodan et al, 2019). This is demonstrated in the policy on 'Shared Values' adopted by the government in 1991, which are: 1) Nation before community and society above self, 2) Family as the basic unit of society, 3) Community support and respect for the individual, 4) Consensus, not conflict, and 5) Racial and religious harmony (NLB, 2014c). Chua (2017a) perceives communitarianism as PAP's political strategy of offering an alternative to liberalism, since it involves eliciting consensus from collective groups, and success can only result when 'all interested parties are consulted and their differences considered' (Chua, 1994:665). Rodan (2018) documents this communitarianism by examining the public feedback mechanism set up and refined by the PAP government since the 1980s and the Nominated Members of Parliament (NMP) co-optation scheme, which selects apolitical experts who can give voice to 'underrepresented aspects of social interests and segments of society'. He argues that these are two examples that help the PAP consolidate 'political fragmentation, both at the organisational and ideological levels' and helps to 'fortify the authoritarian regime' (Rodan, 2018). Calling this a 'consultative authoritarianism' that the PAP government has adopted, Rodan (2018) reckons that that this approach has managed to encourage some semblance of political participation and expressions of 'progressive political aspirations', as well as establish engagement between the government and its population albeit in 'state-sponsored political spaces' (Rodan, 2018). An example of such a government-initiated consultative process is discussed in this thesis, where community interest groups and civil society groups alike were invited to become members of a Multi-Agency Workgroup formed by the Ministry of National Development, to discuss the prospects of BBC.

As literature has argued so far, the communitarian approach is driven by the PAP's political desire to continue its rule over Singapore. Rodan's (2018), Chua's (2017), and Rodan et al's (2019) analyses of the results of the general elections in Singapore from 1981 to-date reveal that while the voting behaviour of the electorate signals the rational mindset of the electorate in casting their votes in favour of the political party they want to continue to be at helm, and also reveal the electorate's increasing autonomy in 'asserting their preferences and aspirations both socially and in politics' (Rodan, 2018:215). As Chua (2017a:181) has observed, 'each successive general election has seen the electorate using their votes to either put pressure on the government to change its policies and practices or to endorse them'. Consequently, communitarian strategies can be said to be responses from the PAP government after each election to address the unmet needs of the population with the objective of shoring up their political reign (see Rodan, 2018). In fact, the middle class has been singled out as the group that possesses the potential to 'threaten the traditional effectiveness of the PAP's methods of social, political, and ideological control' due to the group's 'considerable international mobility…through education or work' as well as its exposure to 'a wider range of ideas' (Rodan, 2018:225). However, 'a very significant segment' of the middle class is not expected to vote against the PAP government since 'they derive their livelihood directly or indirectly from the government's auspices' (Rodan et al, 2019:198). Paradoxically, the middle class seems to have a sustained hold over the PAP government, seeing how the PAP is keen to attract 'well-qualified middle class candidates to join but is concerned about the political apathy in the group, which is affecting its ability to recruit desirable members' (Chua, 1994:665). The interdependent relationship shared between the middle class and the PAP government supports Rodan et al's (2019:196-197) refutation of the long-standing 'authoritarian' label cast by critics on the PAP government, calling it a 'reductionist critique' that has failed to recognise the electorate as 'savvy voters' who know how to 'use their votes to assert their values'. The visibility of the middle class and their unique profile as being more vocal when compared to other class groups in Singapore will become apparent in this thesis, particularly in Chapter 5 where I delve into the attributes of the community group called 'all things Bukit Brown' that has been advocating for the preservation of BBC.

The communitarian approach can be said to be effective to a certain extent because it has spurred civil society in Singapore to become 'more assertive' and consequently, they have been accorded more room to speak up (Chua, 2017a:161). Through the government's self-initiated programmes to promote higher levels of social activism and provisions of government funding to support community-level activities, the government's intent to grow civil society is apparent. The People's Association and its associated sub-organisations as well as voluntary welfare organisations (autonomous groups that have objectives that are encouraged by the state) are two examples of civil society growths that are spearheaded by the government (Tan, 2000). However, non-state-sponsored 'ground energies' or autonomous non-state related community/interest groups have not been growing well, a situation that stems from a lack of understanding by the state (Tan, 2000). Tan (2000:102) argues that the main objective of civil society is to evoke change, and this necessitates objections to 'existing situations, legislative laws, policies or mindset'. However, the state has misunderstood the initiatives of these groups to be opposing the government, taking a wrong assumption that 'changes to the status quo' suggested by civil society groups signify their intent 'to enter the political fray, contest elections, and replace the government of the day' (Tan, 2000:103). This situation has probably resulted in state-society relations being described as 'muted and muddled' due to 'public chastises' directed towards civil society groups and the establishment of specific laws that limit free speech in Singapore (Tay, 2000:70).

Civil society in contemporary Singapore is also described to be 'fragmented', with the state 'systematically filtering out, co-opting, and bureaucratising interest groups' (Liew, 2017:207). Exceptions to free speech and formal limitations placed upon the boundaries at which civil society groups can operate in have led to former minister Chan Soo Sen using two analogies (i.e., the 'Black Hole' and the 'Black Book') to describe the government's attitude towards embracing civil society as an apolitical resource that can enhance the PAP's governance. The 'Black Hole' analogy refers to 'a government that is unwilling to concede that the ideas of others can be better than theirs and thus refuse to act upon the ideas received' whilst the 'Black Book' analogy implies that the government may 'blacklist individuals who vocalise new ideas or alternative views' (Chan, 2000:126). In addition, 'out-of-bound' markers (or, OB markers) are also utilised by the government at random to rein in civil society groups,

resulting in civil society advocacy to become 'an ambiguous and dangerous act' (Tan, 2000:103).

In explicating state-society relations in Singapore, Singapore's Ambassador-at-Large Mr Tommy Koh has used three different trees as analogies. Accordingly, state-society relations during the colonial period were characterised by the royal palm tree, which has a very small canopy that allowed for a 'vibrant civic society' to thrive – this is evinced by the community-led self-help groups like the Chinese clan associations (see Pang and Low, 2000). The banyan tree characterised state-society relations during the PAP rule during the first Prime Minister, the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew's reign from 1959 to 1989, which has a huge canopy that prevented undergrowth, or the development of alternative views that could distract the first-generation PAP leaders from focusing on their 'monumental tasks of nation building' (Koh and Ooi, 2000). Liew (2017:207) described the impact of this overpowering control over civil society as 'pervasive', resulting in 'the blunting of the culture of advocacy from the colonial era'. When the second Prime Minister, Mr Goh Chok Tong took office from 1990 to 2004, the tembusu tree was used to describe state-society relations, where undergrowth was encouraged due to the absence of a large canopy of the tree (Koh and Ooi, 2000). Evidently, there is gradual liberalisation for civil society to exist based on the loosening up of space for it to grow over two successive reigns of prime ministers in Singapore. However, there has been no further analogy drawn to describe the state-society relations during current Prime Minister who assumed office in 2005, Mr Lee Hsien Loong's reign. Singapore's present leadership has been described to adopt 'a different and softer style of governance' with recognition of 'civil society' (Soon and Koh, 2017; Chua, 2017b). Based on my fieldwork observations in BBC, I posit that the banyan tree and tembusu tree are both in the picture, with the PAP government possessing the liberty to exact their political rule using whichever tree they deem fit. The lack of an analogy during the current era also opens a free space for new configurations of civil society, as observed by Dr Kevin Tan, the longest serving President of the Singapore Heritage Society, a civil society group (Tan, 2000). It is the intention of this thesis to demonstrate this point using atBB as an empirical example. The window of opportunity presented by the gradual liberalisation for civil society has benefitted atBB's emergence in 2012, which coincided with the openness approach adopted by the government, following the results of the General Election in 2011. On a broader

level, I argue that gradual liberalisation has allowed for an emerging contemporary civil society in Singapore that has yet to be examined in literature but worthy of academic scrutiny.

It is likely that civil society in Singapore will experience better times ahead since it has been observed to have 're-emerged in the past decade', spotlighting the 'tensions between moral conservatives and progressives' (Liew, 2017:208; Chua, 2000). Despite the PAP's 'wide and deep' reach, the political party does not possess an absolute hold over the citizenry (Chua, 2000:71). As the examples shared in Chapter 5 shall demonstrate, there is 'no shortage' of civil society and civic voluntary activity, 'even if one chooses to exclude those directly promoted by the state' (Chua, 2000:71). Although some civil society groups have been 'marginalised' by the government, there is a silver lining beneath the clouds since the 'sidelined status' allows 'the flanker' to 'see the margins in a way that the centre cannot' (Liew, 2017:210). Therefore, Liew (2017:211) argues for the existence of 'flankers' because they can 'establish social linkages and networks between disparate groups and with the mainstream…to effect broader changes'. The middle class, or 'white-collared individuals/professionals' is once again brought into the discussion as Liew (2017:211) highlights their 'crucial' importance in civil society advocacy owing to their educated and articulate profile, which would allow them to 'push for greater administrative and legal reforms that would serve the interests of the socially marginalised'. This point resonates with the profile of atBB, which is composed entirely of white-collared professionals who volunteer their time with the group, and as it will be discussed in Chapter 5, have harnessed their collective expertise for fight for the betterment of BBC.

Taking stock of the situation faced by civil society in Singapore and the ambiguous state-society relations so far, local academics have unanimously highlighted the core problem of trust between the government and civil society that has created the uncertain circumstances for the health and survival of civil society (see Koh and Ooi, 2000; Singam and Thomas, 2017). There is also another problem of the government's concern about compromising its credibility with the identification of mistakes made in its policies, as evinced by BBC's controversy, which is detailed later in this chapter. Tan's (2000:104) points out that the government must recognise that

it is 'not omnicompetent' and 'not omniscient', thus it is acceptable that it makes mistakes in policy initiatives and there is no shame involved. As it shall be amply discussed in the subsequent chapters, the BBC controversy is thus named because it is an example that demonstrates both prevailing and unresolved problems between the Singapore government and civil society on a macro level.

The Population White Paper 2013

The Population White Paper 2013 is a catalyst that had likely set everything in motion for BBC and resulted in the BBC controversy. This section describes the policy document that was drawn up in 2013 and explains how this document has impacted upon BBC. I have included a screenshot of a Facebook post dated 29 January 2013 by Raymond Goh, co-founder of atBB, who informed the members in the Heritage Singapore –Bukit Brown Cemetery Facebook group of the government's Population White Paper 2013. He provided a summary of the Paper which drew 55 comments, of which screenshots of selected comments are shared (Figure 3). The Paper conveys the Singapore government's goals of increasing the country's population, enhancing transport infrastructure, building more homes, and improving 'liveability' in the long run. Together, these goals point to Singapore's national development imperatives of achieving economic and population growth at the expense of intangible factors such as heritage, culture, and tradition, which are argued to be evident and demonstratable in BBC based on the comments.

Raymond Goh
January 29, 2013 · 🌐

News flash : White Paper on Population released today:

Summary:

We will plan and invest in infrastructure ahead of demand, to create high quality urban spaces and ensure that our infrastructure can support a range of population trajectories, with a total population of about 5.8 to 6.0 million in 2020, and 6.5 to 6.9 million in 2030.

Additional facilities and improvement works are in progress to alleviate the strains that we are currently facing:

•We will add 800 new buses to the public bus fleet over 5 years, increasing capacity by 20%. Our rail network will be extended by about 100 km to 280 km by 2021. 8 in 10 homes will be within a 10-minute walk from a rail station in 2030.
•From now till 2016, 90,000 private housing units and 110,000 public housing units will be completed.
This significant expansion in our housing supply should help meet the demand for housing.
•More land will be set aside for parks and green spaces, in tandem with population growth. We will grow our park connector network to 360 km by 2020. At least 85% of our households will live within 400 m of parks by 2030.

We will explore new technology and innovative solutions, to expand and optimise our land use, create new land capacity, and make use of space more efficiently and effectively to enhance liveability and support longer-term needs.

Did the report mention anything about taking care of the software? Flats, roads, gardens, parks are hardware and money can solve those issues. What about culture, traditions and heritage? Any plans to protect, promote and even cultivate the local culture? Money cannot solve these issues.

Like   Share   9y

Yes. Absolutely! We will become a transient generation with no roots ready to pack and go when the focus is on material culture. They seem to forget that what binds the people is also the heartware and they are so eager to rip out BBC.

Like   Share   9y

The number of planned private housing is almost as many as the public housing... They are expecting Singaporeans to afford private housing despite controlling the loan cap recently introduced? Obviously they have not given deeper thoughts... Also, to set aside more land for parks and green spaces while taking away the green spaces that we already have at Bukit Brown? Very absurb...

Like   Share   9y

When phase 1 of the end of BBC is completed in 2016, Phase 2 onwards will see e systematic clearing of the rest of e land which will be turned to concrete jungle. Won't be surprised if the region is marked for private property development.

Like   Share   9y

For the younger generation, this white paper on "Population Projection" is to let you plan ahead where you want to emigrate.
I called this a "Green Paper" because you plan and decide which fence you want to cross over for a greener pasture.

Like   Share   9y   👍 2

Yeah. I only found out at noon today that they will clear the Bukit. To the civil servants, they always been clearing cemeteries. So they don't see the problem coz very few decendents bother to claim anyway.

Like   Share   9y

Please keep this precious heritage intact: one of the largest chinese Cemetry outside China: heritage, history, habitat....

Like   Share   9y   👍 3

Govt had decided. It reached a point of no return.

Figure 3: Screenshot of Facebook post by Raymond Goh (Permission for reposting granted by Raymond Goh)

For a small nation that had achieved independence some 50-odd years ago in 1965 and is without any natural resources, planning ahead and astutely is one of Singapore's goals to survive. This explains the rationale behind the 2013 White Paper, as well as other legislative documents. Planning for the country was a practice adopted by the colonisers when Singapore was a British colony from 1867 to 1959 and stemmed from the colonisers' observation of early Singapore's 'haphazard and unplanned growth' as a British trading post (BBC News, 2018; MND, 2019). Early Singapore had continuously admitted immigrants to the country and was stuck with the 'permanently on the sick' label since overcrowded and unsanitary conditions often led to the spread of tropical infectious diseases like tuberculosis, which necessitated proper planning to reduce these problems (MND, 2019:15). The municipal commission that was formed in 1887 to 'oversee local urban affairs in Singapore' had endeavoured to manage the living environment and restructure space to preserve the health of the local population through sanitary surveillance of aspects like the living conditions and sewerage system (Yeoh, 2013; NLB, 2013b). Subsequently, the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) continued to ensure that 'sufficient land was set aside for residential, industrial, commercial and leisure purposes' (MND, 2019). Concept Maps (now known as Long-Term Plans) and Master Plans offered by the URA formed the

primary roadmap for developing the nation, with the 1958 Master Plan as Singapore's first statutory land use blueprint (MND, 2019; URA, 2022a, URA, 2022b).

Planning for green spaces is also part of the government's plan since it does not want to build 'a concrete jungle' as one Facebook commenter called it. However, these green spaces are government-controlled/managed sites that have been officially classified as nature areas, nature reserves, and parks (NParks, 2020). BBC has been acknowledged by visitors to be a natural green lung for Singapore but is not officially classified as a green space. As it has been mentioned in several Facebook comments and described subsequently, BBC's status as a green lung is unintended but appreciated. Moreover, its other status as a heritage site possessing precious kinship bonds or 'roots' as one commentor termed it, is also an unintended benefit of its primary function of a century-old cemetery.

The Population White Paper 2013 projected that Singapore's resident population could reach 6.9 million by the year 2030, which explains the government's intention to redevelop BBC into residential housing to accommodate the rise in population (PMO, 2013). By 2030, 58% of land is expected to be allocated to uses for the needs of the local population, which includes housing, services, manufacturing jobs, facilities, green spaces such as parks and nature reserves (PMO, 2013). Of these, the planned land supply for housing by 2030 will be 13,000 hectares, up from 10,000 hectares in the year 2010 (PMO, 2013). While these projections of land use seemingly address the future needs and wants of the nation and its population, it is imperative to note that Singapore is already densely populated now and faces a perennial land scarcity issue—so where will all this land come from if the government expects the population to increase and all the attendant needs increased with the population increase?[2]

As aforementioned, the government has been clearing cemeteries using the Land Acquisition Act to free up land for redevelopment purposes to the point that such clearances have become so normalised that 'civil servants…don't see the problem',

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[2] As at 2021, Singapore had a population count of about 5.45 million and a population density of 7485 persons per square kilometres (DOS, 2022).

according to one Facebook comment (Figure 3). Singapore had '213 burial grounds on 2,146 hectares in Singapore, or about 3.7% of the island' in 1978, many of which were already slated for clearance (The Guardian, 2015). In fact, Singapore's main shopping district, Orchard Road, and seven public housing neighbourhoods are built upon former cemetery grounds (The Guardian, 2015; TSL, 2021). In the early 2000s, an 18-hectare cemetery called Bidadari Cemetery which served the Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Sinhalese communities was cleared for redevelopment into a public housing estate with 11,000 flats (NLB, 2015a, The Straits Times, 2013). The clearance of Bidadari elicited a 'mature response', where the next-of-kin of those exhumed were said to have understood that 'none can make claims to perpetuity when land is limited' (The Straits Times, 2018b).

However, public response to the partial clearance of BBC has been jarringly different from the Bidadari example. The Facebook comments to Raymond's post offer insights to how the public has perceived the government's decision. While the White Paper evinces the government's concern in redeveloping BBC for tangible outcomes, the Facebook comments questioned on the neglected intangible aspects of the cemetery such as heritage (or 'roots'), culture, and tradition, which one comment had referred to as 'heartware'. A statement issued by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) regarding the impending total clearance of BBC said, "Planning for long-term land use in land-scarce Singapore often requires us to make difficult decisions" (Reuters, 2019). As elaborated by the Minister for National Development, Mr Desmond Lee, the government has to continue balancing the needs of development and conservation as part of its long-term planning processes in a land-scarce and densely populated Singapore (TodayOnline, 2021).

The accompanying comments to the said Facebook post clearly evince that the public is vocal in their wishes to preserve BBC, which is something unheard of in previous cemetery clearances. A newspaper article dated 30 January 2021 pinpointed the 10-year running BBC controversy as the turning point in Singapore's state-society relations, with the government making the effort to 'deepen engagement' with nature groups (TodayOnline, 2021). This turn contrasts with the unforgiving political regime in the past, where political repression including imprisonment without trial of suspected communists using the Internal Security Act 1960 (SSO, 2020b) and the deregistration

of radical labour unions which were characteristic of Singapore's authoritarian rule (Chua, 2011:16). It can also be argued that it is challenging to govern a country that is inhabited by four major ethnic communities (Chinese, Malays, Indians, and Others) and is religiously diverse. These traits spur the government to adopt an active approach in policing race and religion to 'minimise threats to racial peace and harmony' as well as 'prohibit offensive proselytising and insensitive attempts at conversion to avoid conflict' (Chua, 2011:16). Yet, it is paradoxical that there have not been any government sanctions levied upon the community groups' objections towards the clearance of BBC, which is a Chinese cemetery. This suggests racial chauvinism that can be potentially criminalised because it privileges a particular ethnic group and may offend other ethnic groups whose cemeteries had been cleared by the government without any leeway offered (Chua, 2011).

The public response to BBC's clearance suggests 'deeper social changes' that have become 'far too complex to be contained by authoritarianism', a common description for Singapore's 'single party parliamentary political structure' since 1959 (Chua, 2011:18). An example of a 'deep social change' is the increase in the votes for the opposition party at the 2020 General Election, signaling maturation of Singapore's democracy, where the opposing voices have become louder, thereby placing the PAP "under pressure… to review and revoke systemic political policies and practices that are unfair" (BBC News, 2020). Chong and Chua (2014:47-48) posit that the BBC controversy is 'a barometer of state-civil society relations since the watershed 2011 General Elections' and unravels the interrelatedness of a variety of complex and sensitive issues plans surrounding population, housing, and transportation. Already, the selected Facebook comments in Figure 3 demonstrate that the population is not keen on more statistical achievements in population count, transportation links, and number of new homes but is concerned about qualitative aspects like heritage, culture, and tradition. The 2011 General Election results have initiated a shift by the government to adopt a 'collaborative tone' in politics which takes into consideration the electorate's changing political inclinations for more political diversity and competition (BBC News, 2020). The experience of BBC thus illustrates this inclination of the government in practice.

Death disposal in Singapore and Singaporean-Chinese cultural beliefs about death management

Related to its intent on recovering land from cemeteries for tangible development purposes is the Singapore government's focus on death disposal in the country. This section describes death disposal from the policy perspective and offers insights from anthropological research on Singaporean-Chinese cultural beliefs about death management. Land burial and cremation were the death disposal methods that were available in early Singapore. Land burial was popular, whereas cremation only amounted to 10 per cent of the total proportion of death disposal in Singapore 'in the closing years of colonial rule' (Yeoh, 1999:243). One of the first Christian burial grounds used by the British colonisers was that of Fort Canning Hill Cemetery which was open for burials in 1822, with the earliest burials occurring on the hilltop, then the slopes were subsequently used as the second burial site (NLB, 2016b). Bukit Timah Cemetery was the next burial site that opened for Roman Catholic and Christian burials from 1865 to 1907 (Harfield, 1988:187-188). Due to its perennial waterlogged conditions, the cemetery was closed to all visitors in 1971 and the authorities discussed the purchase of land for a new cemetery (Harfield, 1988). Bidadari Christian Cemetery was later opened from 1908 to 1972 for both civilian and military burials of the Christians, Muslims, Hindu, and Sinhalese communities (NLB, 2015a). After its closure, the Singapore government set up Choa Chu Kang Cemetery in western Singapore, which serves the burial needs of all ethnic and religious groups in Singapore and is the only cemetery that is open for burials today (NEA, 2021). Other cemeteries catering to the Chinese and Muslim communities were/are privately owned and run by various Chinese clan associations and Muslim groups. Burials were a popular choice that Singapore's first crematorium, Mount Vernon, experienced slow demand upon its opening in 1962 (TodayOnline, 2018a). It was only in 1976 when cremations were widely accepted, did Mount Vernon experience an increase in the number of cremations which led to an expansion of the crematorium's facilities (TodayOnline, 2018a).

Since 1907, public exhumations from private burial grounds have been increasing in Singapore with successive governments pushing for clearances to regulate land use and burial practices (see Yeo, 2012 for a detailed historical

overview). However, based on archival documentation, exhumed remains were usually re-interred in the next available cemetery, and rarely was cremation an option for death disposal. Chinese cemeteries owned by clan or dialect group associations were targeted for exhumation during the post-war colonial period partly because of the absence of sanctions against cremation in Chinese religious beliefs, and also because other religions like the Muslims and Jews had opposed exhumation then (see Yeo, 2012). However, the Chinese cultural conception of burial sites considers graves as 'sacred sites' that are 'immune from government intervention or other external interference' (Yeoh, 1999:242). The sacred quality stems from the grave being a crucial linkage that is established between the living and the dead, thus, the grave and 'its sepulchral boundaries are considered inviolable as any interference with them would spoil the efficacy of the fengshui and imperil the welfare and prosperity of living descendants' (Yeoh, 1999:242). Unfortunately, the cultural aspect of Chinese beliefs in death management was not considered by the authorities. In fact, the authorities were wont to clear Chinese cemeteries because of their attribute as 'major space wasters compared to Muslim or Jewish burial spaces' (Yeoh and Tan, 1995:188). Moreover, owing to geomancy concerns, the Chinese were inclined to select land plots in 'elevated localities' that were suitable for commercial or residential development, which reduces the amount of available land for the living, and conflicts with the government's national development goals (Yeoh and Tan, 1995:189). In a 'congested city' of Singapore, the amount of land space that each omega-shaped grave occupies and the amount of space that ancestor worship requires to allow for the performance of rituals threatens the 'economic ethics of space management' (Yeoh and Tan, 1995:188-189). Furthermore, the colonial government's biasness against the Chinese's unsanitary ways of living added to 'strongly racialised colonial discourses on burial grounds', where the colonial masters had pinpointed that Chinese burial practices were irrational and influenced by superstition (Yeoh and Tan, 1995:189, see also Yeoh, 2013).

The performance of graveside rituals warrants further description here to enable a clearer understanding of why space is integral to enact these rituals and highlight the misconception that Chinese cemeteries are 'major space wasters'.

Graveside rituals are important for venerating and appeasing the dead, with ancestor worship being the key practice of graveside rituals. As shared by Taoist priests

Master Weiyi and his disciple Nicole, any graveside ritual involves a multi-step process that must be done in a sequential order. A typical Chinese grave contains a space on the left arm of the grave which houses the Earth Deity. A small semi-circular or rectangular concrete headstone, usually with the word 土 (*tu*, or 'earth') or 神 (*shen*, or 'deity') engraved on it represents the Earth Deity. The Earth Deity must first be 'invited' to participate in any graveside ritual before the ancestor. This is done by placing offerings in front of the Earth Deity's headstone. These offerings may be identical to the fruit and/or food offerings prepared for the ancestor but should include a packet of tea leaves and a packet of 'candy' (inedible artificially coloured sweets specially produced for the Earth Deity) that are mandatory in this set of offerings. Thereafter, two red candles on each side of the headstone are lit, a process akin to switching on the lights of a room to indicate that the room is 'in-use' and welcomes the deity. Then, lit joss sticks (one or three sticks) are offered to the deity by each descendant who kneels in front of the deity's headstone. Usually, the descendant would seek protection and blessings from the deity for his/her ancestor. After the deity has been attended to, the same procedure would be undertaken for the ancestor. When offering the joss sticks, the descendant may pray silently or mutter under his/her breath to seek/offer blessings from/to the ancestor, update the ancestor on the going-ons in his/her life, or simply express deference to the ancestor with this gesture. To determine if the Earth Deity and ancestor have had their fill, two identical round-shaped coins (there are hexagonal shaped ones in the Singapore currency) or *jiaobei* (described on page 149) are tossed to ask the deity first followed by the ancestor. A positive answer received (opposing facing sides of the coin) means that the paper offerings for the recipient can be burnt, and this is done at the side of the grave, so that the recipient is able to receive the offerings conveniently and will not be embroiled in disputes with others who do not belong to this grave. Two of my interview respondents shared that they drew circles on the ground using fallen tree branches or a bottle of water and burn the paper offerings within these circles to ensure that the offerings were safely conveyed to the rightful recipients. Such a practice can only be done with ample space allowance.

The fate of Chinese private burial grounds was inevitable and unfortunate due to the initial biasness and lack of cultural understanding harboured by the colonial masters who had spearheaded the clearances. Apparently, Singapore has lost 'more than 200 cemeteries in a span of 40 years' to national development imperatives in land-scarce Singapore (Tan, 2011). National development imperatives had primarily

led to the change in death disposal methods from burial to cremation amongst the Singaporean-Chinese. Two other factors included the 'weakening hold of traditional ideas and beliefs concerning death and the afterlife', and the 'diminished role that regional, dialect and clan associations play in Chinese social life after independence' (Yeoh, 1999:244). The government employed persuasion and negotiation strategies to increase the buy-in for cremation via 'funeral specialists' who were in direct contact with the Chinese masses and were perceived to be experts in the death industry as they are cognizant of Chinese cultural and religious beliefs and were also in the position of modifying these in acceptable ways (Yeoh, 1999:247-248). These funeral specialists were 'more successful in eroding the distrust of cremation without any semblance of coercion', leading to the construction of a second government crematorium at Mandai to meet the increased demand for cremation (Yeoh, 1999:248; TodayOnline, 2018). Subsequently, to ensure the smooth sailing transition from burial to cremation, the government approved of more crematoria and columbaria by private establishments to ensure the population that there are sufficient facilities for the next three to four decades (The Straits Times, 2017). From 1998, the burial tenure at Singapore's only cemetery that is open for burials was adjusted to 15 years; remains would have to be exhumed for cremation thereafter (NEA, 2021). Moreover, the burial fee is now pegged at nine times (S$940, or GBP450) more than the cremation fee in Singapore (S$100 or GBP50) (NEA, 2021). Today, Singapore's cremation rate is 97 per cent as at 2017, up from 80% in the mid-1990s (The Straits Times, 2017).[1]

If a grave has to be exhumed, the changes in the space metrics will affect the graveside rituals performed. There are set procedures to adhere to for an exhumation, which I shall summarise here to be a sacred event that has to be completed before dawn and involves religious personnel, a skilled exhumer, a Chinese paper parasol to shield the exhumed remains from the sun, and copious amounts of Chinese rice wine to rinse the remains with. The exhumed remains from the grave will be sent to the crematorium for cremation into fine powder, of which a portion would be saved in an urn while the remainder gets discarded as 'biohazard waste' due to the small capacity of the urn. Accompanied by religious personnel, the urn gets transported to the columbarium where

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[1] In BBC, 4700 graves were exhumed to make space for the construction of Lornie Highway (LTA, 2013). Of these, remains from 3400 graves remained unclaimed at the deadline and were cremated and stored in the government columbarium by the government. The remains that were claimed by descendants were similarly cremated and stored in columbaria, but the process was handled by the family instead of the government.

it is stored in a niche. [add footnote: A columbarium is a facility with designated spaces for storing the cremated remains of deceased humans]. In the densely packed columbarium, there is no space available to perform traditionally observed graveside rituals since each niche is a defined squarish space and all niches are stacked one on top of the other, much akin to the public housing flats that Singapore boasts of. It is impossible to make offerings to the ancestor in front of his/her niche because all columbaria prohibit naked lights due to the risk of fires in the confined space. Thus, no candles and joss sticks can be lit, which impedes the commencement of any graveside ritual. There is also no Earth Deity accompanying each niche, with the cursory acknowledgement of the Earth Deity in the form of a red plastic board with the word 土 (*tu* or 'earth') or 神 (*shen* or 'deity') printed on it that is usually found at the designated space for burning offerings on the ground floor of columbarium. This arrangement prevents the proper sequential order to be observed for graveside rituals.

Although a workaround solution is offered by some columbaria in the form of a communal altar table placed at a common space in the compound, it does not fulfill the proper graveside ritual sequence. The ancestor could be 'invited' by the descendant to the communal table to partake in the offerings if the latter holds a lit joss stick and requests that the ancestor 'follow' him to the communal table, but this form of invitation is a mere improvisation of the proper ritual sequence. In fact, during my visit to a columbarium to visit my grandparents, I have observed that some descendants have resisted the use of the communal table, preferring to bring their own foldable tables for placing their food offerings, lit candles and joss sticks in front of their ancestor's niche. These individuals have attempted to continue with the proper ritual sequence of a graveside ritual but have flouted the rule in the columbarium since lit candles and joss sticks are used.

As amply described, Singapore's transition from burial to cremation has resulted in several practical and ritualistic impediments to graveside rituals. Although it may be more convenient to access the columbarium than trudge through a cemetery to pay respects to the ancestor, the absence of a physical grave already implies that the proper sequence for carrying out graveside rituals including ancestor worship, is lost. The fulfilment of filial obligations to the ancestor is now questionable, since it is unclear if the rule of disallowing for naked lights, provision of a communal altar table and the relocation of the Earth Deity to the site for burning paper offerings in a columbarium would still

enable effective ancestor worship to be conducted. Evidently, the resistance to the rule against naked lights and the use of personal communal tables already demonstrate that some descendants are uncomfortable with the limitations at a columbarium and are trying to recreate a setting akin to a grave within a cemetery. 39-year-old Kenny offered a clear comparison between grave and columbarium when describing his feelings at each location during Qing Ming Festival. He holds fond memories of conducting ancestor worship during Qing Ming in BBC as a child, together with his extended family of 50 members. He remembers that the space was so substantial at his ancestor's grave, that all 50 members could stand in a queue to each offer a joss stick to their ancestor. Now that his ancestor's remains have been exhumed, cremated, and housed in a columbarium, not all 50 of the extended family can perform ancestor worship at the same time; staggered attendances are now the norm. During the interview, Kenny lamented that while the festival is still being observed, the festive aspect of the festival is now lost.

Anthropological research on death management amongst the Chinese in Singapore has been scarce since the early years, only picking up steam after the first decade of the millennium. This has partly got to do with the absence of an independent anthropology department in local universities and 'the lack of institutional support or recognition of anthropology' resulting in a 'marginal existence' of anthropology in Singapore despite the existence of many practicing anthropologists in Singapore's universities (Thompson, 2012).[4] The pre- and post-war years had Vaughan (1974), Topley (1955; 1956), Freedman (1970; 1979), Elliott (1990 [1955]), and Watson and Rawski (1988) examining the different aspects of the Chinese community, such as customs, religion, marriage, ghost marriages, and family, all of which had touched upon the cultural beliefs of death and death management, albeit in brief. There was a gap in research on death until local anthropologist Tong Chee-Kiong published a book on Chinese death rituals in Singapore which examines in detail, how death is conceptualised, commemorated, and memorialised in Singapore using fieldwork conducted in the mid-1980s and late 1990s to early 2000s (Tong, 2004). The book begins by exploring why significant amounts of money are spent on elaborate death

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[4] There were 'a variety of personal and institutional dynamics' that also contributed to the marginal existence of anthropology as an independent discipline in Singapore. See details in Thompson (2012).

rituals despite the pragmatism of Singaporean-Chinese, then broadens the discussion on the obligation to worship the dead by examining a multitude of factors—the 'key symbols of death, rules of descent, ethical imperatives, debt repayments, duty and obligation, status elevation, social conformity, personal self-interest, and management of death pollution' (Tong, 2004:142). Tong (2004) argues that the adherence to death rituals is strong amongst Singaporean-Chinese, 'despite the advent of modernisation' which has led to 'structural and social transformations' in society, leading to adaptations and modifications to death rituals (Tong, 2004:154-156). He cites instances from his ethnography of several funeral wakes and post-death management by bereaved family members whom he had interviewed to support his claim on the variations on death rituals performed, nothing that the obligation to perform death rituals was consistently present. Thus, Tong (2004) concludes that death rituals still hold 'a central place' amongst the Singaporean-Chinese, where there is 'a strong indication of persistence' that underscores 'the sense of duty and obligation, desire for social conformity, and the achievement of calculated self-interests' (Tong, 2004:157).

American Ruth Toulson continued the discussion on death rituals in Singapore for her PhD research. A PhD candidate in Social Anthropology with Cambridge University, she ventured to Singapore to conduct her PhD research during the mid-2000s. Her interest in the political lives of dead bodies and her prior experience as a licensed embalmer allowed her easy access into the death industry via a well-known funeral company in Singapore (personal communication with Ruth Toulson). Her ethnography offers more up-to-date data on the conceptualisation of death in Singapore and its relationship with capitalism and the Singapore government, via her introduction on the topics of ghosts, ancestors, and desire (in three forms: affective, material, and bodily) in her research. She argues that examining death is an exercise in bringing visibility to the state, where state legislation governing death management, such as funeral ritual and cremation could be made apparent but also could be questioned concurrently. The visibility also extends to state power, in bringing to fore the question of who wields power over the dead, as well as the 'phantom nature of the state', which 'gave voice to unauthorised desires and unspeakable memories, the non-translation of discursive orders, and the inherent impossibilities of capitalism' (Toulson, 2009:192).

Toulson's ethnography (2009) resulted in two papers which address two other aspects of death management in Singapore—suicide victims and death pollution (Toulson, 2012; 2013). Taking reference from Freedman (1979) and Watson and Rawski (1988) whose works discussed on the 'formality and rigidity' of death rituals, Toulson (2012:372) argued that the contrary had occurred during death rituals for suicide victims based on her observations, for they were tinged with 'many moments of confusion within ritual' and 'moments of innovation'. She also drew upon Tong's (2004) research on death rituals in Singapore and Topley's (1955; 1956) papers that discussed on Chinese ghost marriages in Singapore in the 1950s to dispute their unanimous arguments that death rituals functioned to restore social cohesion within a family unit that was affected by the loss of a member. In her fieldwork observations involving seven funeral wakes for suicide victims, she noted the conflict between theory and praxis where death rituals were concerned as many ritual participants were clueless and lost in performing the rituals because they had no template for death rituals for suicide victims to refer to. Similarly, the availability of 'standard funeral rituals' meant that there was nothing available for suicide victims and improvisation would be needed. To complicate matters, the fact that the deceased had died due to suicide was mostly concealed from the funeral wake attendees; only the funeral director and the immediate family were in the know. This had to do with the strong cultural taboo against death by suicide, which results in 'bad deaths', or the biological cessation of life that did not end in a conventional/expected manner. The function of death rituals in restoring social cohesion was hence lost in these rituals. Therefore, drawing upon Brown's (2003:2) claim that ''indeterminacy is indispensable to ritual form', Toulson (2012) argued that the efficacy of such death rituals may be questioned and the expectation that these rituals could effectively transform the deceased into an ancestor would be uncertain.

Toulson (2013) approaches death pollution by introducing a puzzle at the beginning of her paper- that of red envelopes. Using literature on the anthropologies of colour, she questioned why red envelopes would be used in death, given that red is culturally believed to be an auspicious colour and is conventionally used for happy/celebratory occasions like a wedding. By contrast, death is an inauspicious event, where white and black are the conventional colours to be used to symbolise mourning. Toulson (2013:157) suggests that 'the meanings given to a red envelope

draws together existing oppositional perspectives that stress the social or material elements of exchange' because 'it makes visible the nature of the relationship between the bereaved family and those whom they employ, often in stark contrast to how the relationship is described'. Although the red envelope used is supposedly believed to help ward off death pollution from the death workers who had contributed generative labour to the bereaved family, Toulson (2013:168) argues that this is merely a lie because it is 'a signifier of bad luck transferred, and men condemned'. Such deceit is described as a 'society-sustaining lie' because the 'very mutability of red' implies that multiple meanings of the colour can be ascribed to suit the context (Toulson, 2013:168).

Following the Singapore government's announcement of the road construction in BBC, the state-sponsored documentation project on the affected graves resulted in two publications by another local anthropologist, Hui Yew-Foong, who was the lead of the project. These discuss on the notion of space (familial versus national) (2012) and the cultural history of the Chinese community in early Singapore (2019). Hui (2012) considers the burial site from two perspectives: as a familial space where descendants visit their ancestors every Qing Ming Festival to pay respects, and as a national space rich in social histories of prominent leaders from the Chinese community in early Singapore. Expanding on the second point, Hui (2012:44) wonders if BBC can be considered as a heritage site in Singapore, since it contains the graves of 'pioneers of the nation'. This possibility has galvanised civil society to 'reconstitute the cemetery as a national space' (Hui, 2012:44).

In a book chapter, Hui (2019:170) draws upon the available epigraphic data as well as the organisation and material culture of BBC to argue that the cemetery 'captures the cultural-historical dynamics of Singapore's Chinese community in the inter-war years of the last century'. He describes and analyses the dynamics in a series of progressive levels. On a micro level, he shares the history of BBC, how it came to become a municipal cemetery that had attracted lukewarm response from the Chinese community initially, to reaching full capacity during the Japanese Occupation of Singapore in 1944 (Hui, 2019:171). The fact that BBC was open to anyone from the Chinese community in Singapore regardless of dialect group, social status, and cultural background meant that it had become 'an iconic common space where a large

cross-section of Chinese families in Singapore shared the experience of commemorating deceased relatives' Hui, 2019:171). Given that early Singapore was composed of a largely immigrant population, BBC became a reflection of this Chinese diaspora in terms of the origins of the deceased buried there and the cultural influences as seen from the material culture of their graves. Broadening the discussion, Hui (2019) looks at how the municipal Chinese cemetery was a unique burial site in early Singapore, in terms of death disposal choices and management of death sites. Land burials in Chinese private burial grounds belonging to clan associations were conventionally used to cater to dialect, native-place, or surname specific members. However, BBC was managed by the colonial masters via the municipal government, which implied a shift in how death was mediated, from that of clan- or dialect-based community groups, to state control. This shift also highlights the way the colonial state had interpreted the Chinese community then, that it was a homogenous ethnic group, rather than discrete pockets of dialect or clan-based communities. Despite the perceived homogeneity, the cemetery still possesses signs of stratification not unlike the living society's. While the rich could afford to purchase and reserve up to six burial plots for family burial grounds, the poor and destitute could only rely on the free burial plots in low lying areas of the site sponsored by rich Chinese businessmen. This provision meant that the state had taken over the role of the welfarist from the clan/dialect community groups, by ensuring that the poor and destitute had their final resting place too. BBC is also a resting place for the Straits-born Chinese, who are of mixed heritage between the China-born Chinese and the local Chinese. They are distinct within the Chinese community owing to their mixed heritage and their use of unique suffix of 'neo' in female names and the use of English language in their tomb inscriptions. Despite these differences, BBC was still the final resting place if one was a Chinese by ethnicity and residing in Singapore at the time of death. The recognition by the state of the deceased as a resident of Singapore suggests that there was a 'flattening' of different Chinese communities in this cemetery, resulting in a reflection of 'the praxis of a pan-Chinese consciousness' (Hui, 2019:175).

Anthropologist Fabian Graham's monograph on Chinese underworld deities in Singapore and Malaysia offers a most recent account of how the spiritual realm intertwines with the dead and the state (Graham, 2020). Chinese underworld deities manage the realm of the dead, including wandering spirits and ghosts. This is a world

that is in direct contrast with the conventional mortal world deities that the Chinese living worship. Thus, cemeteries offer 'a tangible link between the realms of the living and of the dead…playing a significant role in the underworld tradition which is intimately linked to the post-mortal journey of the soul' (Graham, 2020:83). This association may be explicated with the Chinese cultural belief that the soul of the deceased continues to remain in the grave and thus there is still opportunity to connect with the dead by tapping upon the soul (Graham, 2020:26). Moreover, it is said in literature that the soul of ancestors 'consist of yang energy', allowing them to 'influence the lives of their descendants' (Graham, 2020:19). The locus of activities of underworld deities is therefore at the cemeteries, where they control/supervise wandering spirits and ghosts, which are essentially the abandoned/neglected dead who have not been cared for by their descendants for an extended period. The 7th lunar month, or Hungry Ghosts' Festival is 'a time of heightened ritual activity' because it is the time when wandering spirits are allowed 'to wander the Earth for one month' (Graham, 2020:85-87). The rapid clearances of cemeteries in land-scarce Singapore for national developments like urban housing imply that there is an overabundance of unhappy souls that had lost their final resting places plus the usual tier of nomadic wandering spirits and ghosts. Underworld deities are hence believed to be in the best position to manage this collective netherworld population, and spirit mediums become their human agents who straddle both realms to allow communication flows while in trance, or when they are possessed by the underworld deities. Dean (2018:71) reckons that the 'capitalist renewal in Singapore' has provided an avenue for spirit mediums to access heterotopic spaces' where their choices of cemetery plots to visit, are 'influenced by the impending destruction of graves located in them' (Graham, 2020:108). These visits underscore the 'causal interrelationships between land legislation and government-enforced exhumations, and the underworld tradition's ritual use of cemeteries as sites of resistance' (Graham, 2020:108).

While these anthropological research conducted after the turn of the millennium have addressed discrete aspects of the death management, there has been no known research that delves into detail about the dynamics between these aspects. Tong (2004), Toulson (2009, 2012, 2013) and Graham (2020) have unanimously indicated in their respective works on the importance of death rituals, which I argue cannot be merely explained with 'the sense of duty and obligation', per Tong's (2004) claim. How

is it that duty and obligation can spur the living to spend excessively on pre-death arrangements like purchasing family burial plots at BBC (per Hui, 2019), funeral wake packages, after-death arrangements, plus other associated rituals that are 'required' for a death? How can the persistence of death rituals despite modernisation and state intervention on death management as well as the staunch cultural belief in ensuring that death rituals must be performed regardless of the suitability of fit to the nature of death (per Toulson, 2012) be attributed to solely a sense of duty and obligation? Why are nebulous and questionable existences of the ghosts and wandering spirits so important to the extent that they occupy a prominent position in Toulson's (2009) discussion on death, and require other-worldly means of management per the underworld deities in Graham's (2020) monograph? Finally, why are the dead so important that civil society wants to have a say in how their final resting places at BBC are managed by the Singapore government (per Hui, 2012)?

My research endeavours to clarify the abovementioned doubts and unify the ongoing discussions. I also introduce a new element to the equation, that of the role of civil society which I examine in detail in this whole business of death management by the government and cultural beliefs at the level of the masses. Whilst undergraduate and postgraduate research from other social science disciplines like history, geography, and sociology have mentioned about civil society, in particular, atBB, in advocating for the preservation of BBC, these research have not addressed the questions of what, why, and how in relation to the emergence of atBB in response to the BBC controversy. In my research, I examine in detail atBB's formation, composition, mode of operation, as well as its inter- and intra- interactions with civil society groups and the government.

Introducing all things Bukit Brown (atBB)

atBB is an informally assembled interest group that emerged in early 2012 in response to the partial clearance of the cemetery to make space for the Lornie Highway construction. The group had opposed the construction and set up a blog (www.bukitbrown.com) and a Facebook group (Heritage Singapore – Bukit Brown Cemetery) upon its informal establishment the same year. It has its origins in a "Yahoo heritage news group" and was formed with an initial purpose to assist the two founders

of Asia Paranormal Investigators (API)—Raymond and Charles Goh, who had already begun 'hunting down tombs and spreading the knowledge of Bukit Brown' but were overwhelmed with requests from the next-of-kin for help in locating their ancestors' graves in BBC (atBB, 2019; Pang and Liew, 2014:88). Raymond, Catherine, and Claire are the three co-founders of atBB and there are about a dozen active volunteers within the group who conduct free guided walks in BBC on a regular basis. Volunteers are referred to as 'Brownies' by the press while they prefer to call themselves 'volunteers'. Through its relentless advocacy efforts, atBB has gained a 'rapid presence' on social media platforms like Facebook and critical mass and recognition for its successful application to the World Monuments Fund (WMF), an international listing of cultural heritage sites, which listed BBC on the World Monuments Watch as one of the cultural heritage sites that faces challenges from the years 2014-2016 (atBB, 2012a; WMF, 2017). atBB has also embarked on cross collaboration with other civil society groups, in particular, with the Singapore Heritage Society (SHS), and other like-minded individuals, to organise numerous activities to engage the public in its cause for preserving BBC (e.g., SHS, 2013a). In recognition of its steadfast efforts to conserve BBC, atBB received the Singapore Advocacy Awards in 2014 (atBB, 2014a). Chapter 5 details the group's emergence, advocacy, and modus operandi.

Conclusion

This chapter is an introduction to my PhD research at Bukit Brown Cemetery, Singapore. I have presented my two core arguments, three overarching themes, and four chapter-specific themes of my research. I argue that (a) the community group called 'all things Bukit Brown' (or atBB for short) is an example of an emerging contemporary civil society in Singapore that has yet to be academically examined and bears the potential to open a third space for community voices to be heard, and (b) the need to care for the dead is a motivating factor that drives the emergence of contemporary civil society in Singapore. The three overarching themes are: (a) the evolving state-society relations in Singapore, (b) the cemetery as a living organism, and (c) the Covid-19 pandemic as both an obstacle and catalyst to death management in Singapore. Each chapter is framed by at least a micro theme, and in totality, four micro themes are realised in my research, which are: (a) the theme of governance, (b)

the theme of abundance and extravagance, (c) the theme of care, and (d) the theme of assertive communication.

To help the reader gain clarity on the country in which I had conducted my fieldwork in, I have offered overviews of the relevant aspects. The various characteristics of Singapore introduced, viz. its geographical, historical, political, spatial, demographic, and social features. These help the reader comprehend how and why the BBC controversy has come about and why my research can make a significant contribution to existing literature on state-society relations and death management specific to the Singaporean-Chinese.

This thesis is organised in five chapters that explore interlinked topics of my three research questions. Chapter 1 introduces the fieldsite of Bukit Brown cemetery and addresses the challenges faced with conducting fieldwork during the Covid-19 pandemic. Chapter 2 examines the role of governance in BBC by explaining how spaces in the cemetery are organised by both formal and informal modes of governance and argues that the arbitrariness of the government's role enmeshed with the burgeoning role of non-government actors have resulted in BBC becoming a hotspot for illegality to fester. Chapter 3 explores the conceptualisations of material wealth in BBC in terms of how it is conceived, perceived, represented, and transacted amongst the key stakeholders of BBC. This chapter argues that material wealth is the primary means of organising relations amongst the key stakeholders. Chapter 4 discusses how the dead are being cared for in BBC by exploring the types of care that are observed onsite. The chapter argues that the presence of care demonstrates the longevity of bonds and relations formed between the living and the dead of this cemetery and underscores two aspects of Chineseness—the Confucian filial piety and the Chinese underworld religion. Chapter 5 delves into an interest group called 'all things Bukit Brown' (atBB) that has been advocating for the preservation of BBC for a decade now, by studying its advocacy strategies and activist methodologies. The chapter contends that atBB's prolonged existence signals an emergent contemporary civil society in Singapore. This optimistic change experienced in Singapore's civil society landscape has created a new avenue for the public to engage with the government, which is contingent upon the public's cognizance of the degree of prevailing governance on civil society, proficiency in using appropriate vocabulary to

communicate their advocacy and engage with the government, and ability to harness specialised expertise to aid in their advocacy and group survival. Using fieldwork data and discussions gleaned from the chapters, this thesis concludes by answering my two core research questions set forth in the beginning: explicating contemporary civil society in Singapore as well as the conceptualisations of death amongst the Chinese-Singaporean community.

CHAPTER ONE
FORAYS INTO THE FIELD DURING A PANDEMIC

"I got a call out of the blue on 29 August 2011. The call came from Ng Lang, who was then the CEO of NParks (National Parks Board). And he said, can I meet you for breakfast with the LTA CEO (Land Transport Authority), Chew Hock Yong? Let's meet at the Bukit Timah campus, let's meet at the prata shop. So it's really not far from here. On 31 August, that's two days afterwards. And er, that's when they dropped the bombshell and told me that's what's going to happen. So, at that time, I figured, wow, er if the two CEOs of two big organisations tell me this in person, then looks like it's a done deal. We can raise some objection and so on, but, er, I had to think on the spot, what can I extract from these guys. A pure protestation would be met with no response… So I thought ok if you come to me and you feel it important enough to tell me, President of Heritage Society, a really small NGO, that this is gonna happen. I said, you must ensure that you document everything before you clear it. "Yah! No problem!" they said. 'Wow,ok…' I thought. There's money, see, so I had to think on the spot alright, I mean, I don't claim to be terribly clever about these things but I gotta try. I pushed *for documentation, and I* pushed *for people to do the documentation and I* forced *them to commit that they will fund the documentation. In that sense, I am a very practical civil society guy. I was surprised that the ease at which I was able to secure the agreement on documentation and* funding *the documentation."* (Face-to-face interview with Dr Kevin Tan, former and longest-serving President of the Singapore Heritage Society (SHS), 14 January 2020)

The above transcript excerpt expands on a lesser known but noteworthy aspect of the Bukit Brown Cemetery (BBC) saga. The chief executive officers (CEOs) from two government agencies had contacted a leader of a civil society group to seek his views before putting out the official announcement regarding the partial clearance of BBC. This consultative approach is significant because it marks a turn in the state-society relations. Here were two government officials who were eager to hear the opinion from a representative of a civil society group and were agreeable to the terms proposed by the latter! The revelation from Dr Tan does shed substantial light on how the BBC documentation project was envisioned and how this had benefitted the heritage cause for BBC. Dr Tan's emphasis on 'pushing' and 'forcing' the government officials to

accede to his suggestion was a stab in the dark based on his admission, hence the "ease" at which the officials had agreed to his proposed documentation plan took him by surprise. As mentioned in the Introduction, Singapore's state-society relations have evolved, and the BBC saga has seemingly spurred or hastened the evolution. My interviews with respondents possessing direct or indirect relations with the cemetery provide deeper insights on this evolution, as discussed in the subsequent chapters.

This chapter introduces my fieldsite—BBC, in terms of its general profile, functions, and composition. Singapore's experience with the Covid-19 pandemic which struck the country in January 2020 is a centrepiece in this chapter because it had coincided with the commencement of my fieldwork. Modifications to my fieldwork were made due to the pandemic and I was able to continue with fieldwork by adapting to the constraints of the pandemic. As it shall be evinced in this chapter and the rest of this thesis, the Covid-19 pandemic assumed a central role in not just my fieldwork, but also how stakeholders of BBC functioned in and for the cemetery because of this infectious disease. The profiles of key informants who played pivotal roles in my research, the ways in which I had built trust and rapport in the field, as well as safety concerns in the field will be addressed. I conclude with a self-reflexive account of how my personal life has been impacted positively by my fieldwork and vice versa.

Introducing Bukit Brown Cemetery (BBC)

A search on Google on 'Singapore' evinces image results on Singapore's latest tourist attraction called 'Gardens by the Bay' (or 'the Gardens' in short), a 101-hectare manmade garden that houses local and international fauna species (STB, 2022). Chong and Chua (2014:37) compared the opening of this grand tourist spot in 2012 'barely a year after the Bukit Brown saga broke' with that of BBC, focusing on how each encapsulates contrasting aspects of Singapore's national development. The Gardens is marketed by the Singapore Tourism Board using its 'Supertrees', which are vertical gardens housing over 200 species of plants and reaching heights up to 16 storeys (GBTB, 2022). An expensive venture to build and maintain, the Gardens is an endeavour that is pursued to construct an expensive and artificial spectacle 'primed for the tourist gaze' (Chong and Chua, 2014:37). "We have supertrees here too,"

pointed out Darren as he led us along the footpath bordering Hill 1 during a guided walk. "Look up above you, these trees have been around for at least a hundred years. Do we need money to build them? No. Do we need to pay money to see them? Nope, you are standing right here beside them now," he said. Raintrees are iconic of BBC, with a majestic one located at the cemetery's original entrance. It was the meeting point for visitors to BBC, and a choice spot for atBB to conduct its public outreach events but has since been cut down when the cemetery was partially cleared for the highway construction. The government's two announcements on the redevelopment plans for BBC drew the ire of the public, igniting what Huang (2014:21) describes as an unleashing of 'haunting spirits of various kinds.' BBC News opined that the BBC saga had led to a 'turning point' in state-society relations in Singapore, where public opinion has seemingly gained a foothold in an otherwise 'disciplinarian state' (BBC News, 2013). Cutting down the raintree at the BBC's original entrance is analogous to cutting down the bridled confines of public opinion, leading to Chong and Chua's (2014:37) view that BBC is 'conceived as a space from which national narratives may be drawn'.

BBC has witnessed multiple changes since its inception. Before the municipal government purchased the 86-hectare land parcel between 1918 and 1919 that would function as a public Chinese cemetery, the land had belonged to the Hokkien Seh Ong clan association and was meant to be developed into a self-sufficient village for the poorer clan members (NLB, 2013a). However, this plan did not materialise; BBC, together with other adjacent plots of land were eventually used as burial sites and collectively referred to as the 'Greater Bukit Brown' (see Figure 4, NLB, 2013a). Therefore, the totality of graves in BBC also includes burials before the cemetery became the municipal cemetery. BBC was colonial Singapore's first public Chinese cemetery that was managed by the municipal government, where it had served the burial needs of the Chinese community from 1922 to 1973. Unlike private Chinese cemeteries, BBC was open to anyone from the Chinese community, regardless of his/her dialect/clan association and social background (NHB, 2021a). Another distinctive feature was its inclusive and planned structure. Figure 5 offers a schematic representation of the divisions in BBC, with the municipal government catering burial spaces to the poor, foetuses, stillborns, infants, and children in the Paupers Section

located in the low-lying areas, while the undulating slopes and hill tops had burial plots open for purchase by the well-heeled.
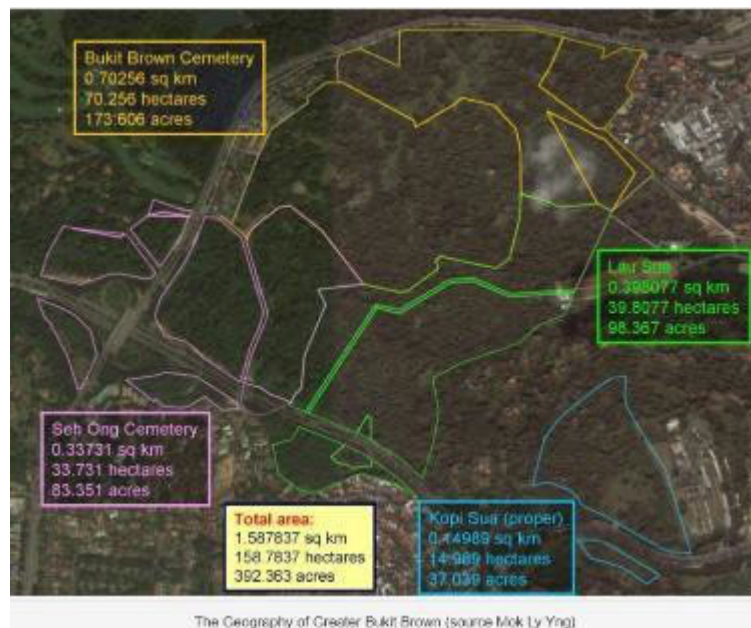
Figure 4: Map of Greater Bukit Brown (Source: atBB, 2013a)
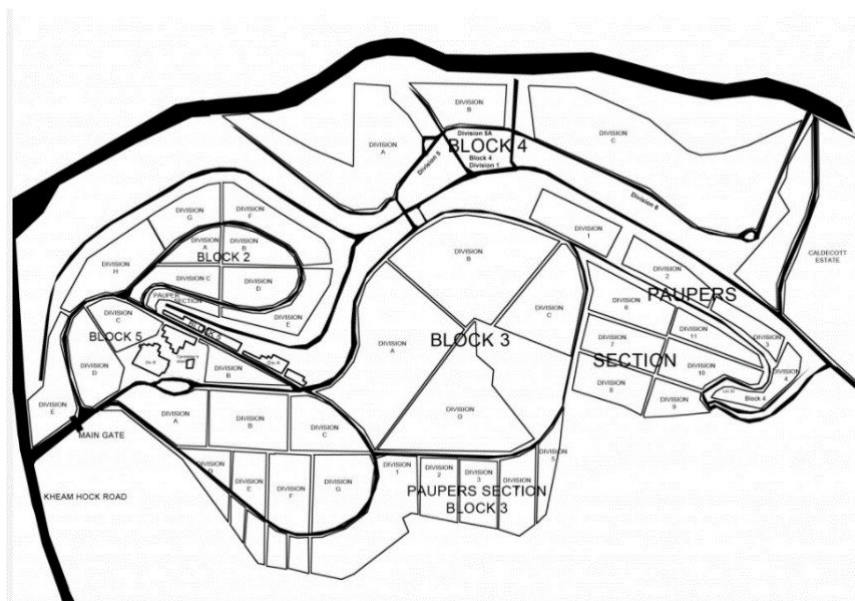
Figure 5: Map of Bukit Brown Cemetery (Source: atBB, 2012b)

I have always known that a cemetery existed in the thicket of the jungle that I pass by daily on my commute to and from school using Lornie Road, which is the arterial road bordering the cemetery, and the only road that I could use to get to school. However, in my 10 years of commuting along Lornie Road, I did not know of the

cemetery's name. My PhD research finally shed light on its name, which is a combination of Singapore's national language (Bahasa Melayu) and the immigrant community in early Singapore. 'Bukit' means 'hill' in Malay while 'Brown' is from businessman's George Henry Brown's name. Mr Brown had arrived in Singapore in 1840 and his residence was a stone's throw away from the cemetery (NLB, 2013a). During Qing Ming, or the annual tombsweeping festival for the Chinese, cars would randomly be parked at the leftmost lane of Lornie Road, and I would see people alighting with large red plastic bags containing offerings. They would then trudge through the tall grasses and then disappear into the jungle. The frequent traffic congestions along Lornie Road during the morning and evening peak periods allowed me to witness these annual occurrences. Once, the school bus dropped off a school mate at one of the landed enclaves beside the cemetery, and I was aghast to see that the backyards of these landed properties all faced endless clusters of graves.

BBC did not start off as a cemetery within a jungle. A 1972 Hong Kong martial arts film titled 'Ring of Fury' featuring the famous martial artist, Bruce Lee, had some scenes shot at BBC. From the YouTube video footage, the cemetery was orderly, clean, and tidy. Short tufts of grass indicated regular maintenance and each grave was clearly seen (Figure 6). Respondent Weera who had attended several funeral processions at BBC as a ten-year-old boy, described the cemetery as having "barren rolling hills". Descendnat Seng, had memories of visiting his late father's grave at BBC without experiencing any problems locating his grave as the grass was short and the cemetery was devoid of dense vegetation. But these days, when Seng visits with his son and the latter's family, they must rely on the tombkeeper, Queenie, to show them the way because the dense vegetation has made it impossible for them to locate their ancestor's grave.

Figure 6: Screengrab from Ring of Fury showing Bukit Brown Cemetery in the early 1970s
(Source: Rojak Librarian, 2020)

Evidence of the dense vegetation creeping in is seen from a photograph dated 1990 in Yeoh's (1991) article, where some of the graves were covered by creepers and tall grasses, and the backdrop of the photograph shows tall trees (Figure 7). Descendant Jack describes BBC as "completely overgrown" that necessitates his use of the global positioning system to locate his ancestors' graves whenever he visits. A drone photograph taken in 2020 further demonstrates the extent of the luxuriant secondary forest growth with the exception of a well-maintained area in Hill 1 courtesy of descendant John, who cuts the grass regularly as his ancestor's grave is located there (Figure 8).

Figure 7: A photograph showing Bukit Brown Cemetery in 1990 (Source: Yeoh, 1991)

Figure 8: Drone photograph taken at Hill 1 of Bukit Brown Cemetery in 2020. The small stumps are the graves while the rest of the cemetery is covered by a secondary forest. (Photo credit: Brice Li)

The growth of dense vegetation has been gradual over the years. However, this is not solely the government's fault in neglecting the cemetery. In a humid tropical climate like Singapore, it is impossible to halt nature's growth. Tombkeepers with whom I had chatted reasoned that the birds and other wildlife create pollination opportunities, while the fruit trees left behind from the evicted villages within BBC enabled more seedlings to sprout rapidly. Fruit saplings were planted with a vengeance following the government's eviction notice because the villagers were informed that each sapling from a fruiting species would receive cash compensation from the government.[5] The cumulation of the influences from nature and human agency paradoxically created a green lung that complements the Central Catchment Reserve in the vicinity, appealing to nature lovers and wildlife species alike.

The secondary forest that has claimed BBC is a site replete with biodiversity. Both resident and migratory wildlife have been recorded onsite and the area serves as an important foraging ground and extended habitat for the forest birdlife emerging from the Central Catchment Reserve (NSS, 2012). My personal encounters with the biodiversity in BBC while conducting fieldwork were also highly enriching. I was also

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[5] See Chapter 2 for details on the village eviction exercise

introduced to wild and native species such as yam, pomelo, java apples, and starfruit. I had also seen sunbirds, laughing thrushes, native fowl that could fly, a pink-necked pigeon in its nest, and a preying eagle that made off with a screaming baby bird. Tombkeepers and individual volunteers who clean up BBC shared with me their personal encounters with or sightings of hornets, wasps, scorpions, snakes, and wild boars. Pre-2011, before the government placed BBC in the national spotlight with its announcements, BBC was described as a tranquil spot with low numbers of visitors and negligible vehicular traffic. Avid hiker Michael Smith, a permanent resident of Singapore, started visiting BBC monthly on his own from 1989 and later joined a running club for weekly runs there. He described "those pre-PIE days" (before some graves in BBC were exhumed to construct the Pan Island Expressway, or PIE) as "an extremely peaceful place" where he "heard absolutely nothing except bird song". The lush green space is also used by jockeys and private owners to walk horses from the National Equestrian Centre (NEC), which is located at the fringe of the cemetery, as well as joggers and dog walkers (Huang, 2014).

With the government's two announcements, public curiosity about the cemetery grew, leading to surges in visitors. This status was boosted when the volunteers with atBB encourage participants from their free guided walks to write and post reviews of BBC on tripadvisor.com, an American online travel website, so that increased public awareness about BBC and visits to BBC can result. Michael shared during our interview that BBC is the default place he takes his visitors to whenever they visit Singapore. "Not Gardens by the Bay; I wouldn't encourage or recommend that to someone new to Singapore", he claimed. Twenty years ago, when Hwee was a jockey with the NEC, horses would be allowed to graze. However, due to the increase in human and vehicular traffic in BBC today, horses have "less luxury to stop and graze when they are being walked". Hwee explained that horses can become scared when the vehicle sounds its horns or if people shout or jump around. As such, horses are now being walked early in the mornings when lesser human and vehicular traffic are present.

BBC was also bustling in the past, albeit in a different sense of the word. It had witnessed World War II battles on-site, massacres of prisoners of war (POWs), and elaborate funeral processions of prominent Chinese and Straits-born Chinese (atBB,

2022; Rojak Librarian, 2022). Remnants of its battleground past are apparent in tombstones scarred with bullet holes, which were pointed out to participants during a World War II themed guided walk led by volunteer Mr T. These holes might be easily mistaken as signs of weathering given that this is an old cemetery, but with Mr T's guidance, we as participants could spot more bullet holes as we trudged along in the jungle. Tombkeeper Ah Soon was adamant that the areas adjacent to the footpath in Hill 4 contained trenches dug during WWII to contain the bodies of POWs who were brought to the cemetery in a lorry and shot down in a row. Apparently, the top tombkeeper of BBC had witnessed it and passed on his eyewitness account by word of mouth. Ah Soon shared this anecdote with me during our chat and I grew a little worried because I had parked my car along the footpath. After clarification, Ah Soon pointed that the trenches were only along particular stretches which are now overgrown with vegetation. He explained that there are no graves located there so footfall along those stretches is negligible. Another volunteer, Peter, posts archived news reports of elaborate funeral processions at BBC, such as that of the late Mrs Ong Sam Leong, the wife of the wealthy Straits-born Chinese businessman, whose funeral procession to BBC in 1935 was attended by over 3000 people (Rojak Librarian, 2018). The hustle and bustle was also contributed by the human settlements that depended on the cemetery for livelihood. On record, there were several Chinese villages and a Malay village, which were evicted in the early 1980s.[6] Most villagers had engaged in tombkeeping or cognate jobs related to the cemetery, such as stone masonry and selling funereal products like joss sticks. As a child, Tee Heong was sent to "the little hut...to buy opium for Ah Pek", who was the husband of his babysitter. The former villager recalled that the dense forest had provided ample cover for illegal opium dens, but police raids were also common then to sieve out these dens. A fuller discussion of the human settlements in BBC can be found in Chapter 2.

The annual Qing Ming Festival or tombsweeping event observed by the Chinese is the regular buzz expected of a cemetery. This is the day where descendants head to the cemetery to perform ancestor worship at their ancestors' graves. Their graves will be cleaned either by the descendants or tombkeepers, who

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[6] The three known villages were along Kheam Hock Road, Lorong Halwa, and Kampong Kubor (Loh, 2012a).

are individuals hired by the former to perform the work. As it shall be elaborated in Chapter 4, tombkeepers in BBC begin their tomb cleaning tasks about four months prior, with each grave cleaned thrice in anticipation of the occasion. Three cycles are necessary to keep the graves free from wild vegetation growth which is highly encouraged by the humid tropical climate. The whirr of the grass cutter machines, rattles of bicycles ridden by tombkeepers on footpaths, and the occasional chatter amongst them interrupt the otherwise peaceful terrain. This festival is observed for a month at BBC but may be observed for ten days prior and ten days after the actual day by other Chinese dialect groups in other places. In the past, Qing Ming was an annual affair that the village children in BBC had looked forward to, because it meant that they could earn pocket money by helping descendants perform odd jobs like burning incense paper in exchange for five cents (interview with tombkeeper Queenie). According to Queenie, the village children were also hungry and poor, so they looked forward to eating offerings that were left behind. "Sometimes, we would even eat the hard candy that was offered to the *Tua Pek Kong* or 'Earth Deity'(大伯公), even though that is not meant for humans to eat," reminicised tombkeeper Queenie. Contrary to Loh's (2012b) claim that tombkeepers were 'fairly well off', affluence amongst the tombkeepers was not uniform, just like how the social disparities are apparent based on the size and location of burial plots in BBC. As a child, tombkeeper Queenie lived in a rented home with her family, whilst tombkeeper Ah Beng's mother sold land parcels for burials on a clandestine basis, allowing the surroundings near their wooden hut to be used for burials while juggling a 500-clientele in her tombkeeping trade. Tombkeepers today earn their keep based on the number of graves they maintain, which is largely dependent on the number of clients their parents had amassed before they had retired from the trade. While Ah Beng and his two brothers manage the 500-clientele passed on from their late mother, Queenie and her siblings manage about 60 per cent of the graves in Hill 3, as their late mother had consolidated her clientele to one location for the ease of tomb cleaning. Chapters 3 and 4 share further details on the tombkeepers' work.

Qing Ming is also an occasion to observe affluence amongst the living descendants. Both sides of the narrow footpaths tend to be parked full of vehicles as descendants trek through the dense vegetation, headed for their ancestors' graves

during Qing Ming. Navigating the car on the narrow footpaths that were not built for vehicular traffic is challenging. There were several times I had to perch my car precariously on the edge of the footpath to let another vehicle pass, while taking care not to let my car roll downslope or hit a parked vehicle. Akin to former villager Tee Heong's sharing on how the villagers had judged the owner of the stud pig as being the wealthiest amongst them because he could amass wealth easily by walking his pig in the village to impregnate sows in exchange for money, tombkeepers peruse the parked vehicles on the footpaths to judge the wealth status of descendants and adjust their tombkeeping fees accordingly. I underwent a similar 'wealth assessment' by the tombkeepers, who cannot fathom how a PhD candidate can afford a SUV. Volunteer Mr T reckoned that I belong to "the banker's row, not the paupers' section", drawing an analogy with the social structure of the cemetery which situates my wealth as being on par with the rich deceased bankers buried in Hill 3, instead of the paupers buried in low-lying sections of the cemetery. Chapter 3 discusses further on material wealth in relation to Qing Ming and other occasions in BBC.

Festivals that celebrate death at BBC

Three festivals celebrate death at BBC. The first and most attended of all, is the Qing Ming Festival, or the annual tomb sweeping festival that is observed by the Chinese. Occurring in the month of April, descendants are expected to tend to the graves of their ancestors and perform ancestor worship rites (see Aveline-Dubach, 2012). The visit to the ancestor's grave at Qing Ming 'makes visible the persistence of the family, but also because it is an occasion of confrontation with the inevitability of death and the necessity of death for regeneration' (Toulson, 2009:184). Offerings are made during ancestor worship comprising food and paper funereal products, which may be customised to suit the preferences of the ancestor. During this month, BBC literally comes alive with the daily influx of descendants and ancestor worship activities. the narrow footpaths of the cemetery will be chock-full of vehicles travelling in either direction, and the dense vegetation punctuated by plumes of white smoke as paper offerings are burnt at the end of the ancestor worship ritual. The movements of people, vehicles, and plumes of smoke are akin to the life pulse of BBC. This is the month when tombkeepers are the most visible as they are focused on collecting tombkeeping dues, after having laboured for the past three months or so cleaning up the graves for

their clients. They travel from one grave to the next using bicycles, sometimes with brooms and other cleaning tools bundled together on their bicycles in anticipation of last-minute cleaning tasks. Temporary tents are also set up by tombkeepers to provide shelter and act as landmarks to facilitate the ease of descendants locating the tombkeepers to pay tombkeeping dues. During lull periods, groups of tombkeepers sit together and chit chat to pass time. An impromptu daily lunch delivery service will be quickly established amongst the tombkeepers, with those possessing vehicles offering to buy and deliver lunches to tombkeepers who would be stationed throughout the cemetery as they await their clients. Only a minority of tombkeepers would cook onsite using portable gas cylinders or generators. Further details on the tombkeeping trade will be shared in Chapter 4.

Qing Ming in the year 2021 was significantly different due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Due to the safe management measures implemented by the Singapore government, the turnout of descendants at BB was low, as only a maximum of five persons were allowed to gather as a group in public. My fieldwork observations evinced that only one or two descendants had visited their ancestors' graves, and because of the low turnout, the types of food and paper offerings made also decreased correspondingly, since there were not many pairs of hands to lend a hand. During her fieldwork conducted in Singapore more than ten years prior to mine, Toulson (2009) was shown photographs that were taken annually of families that had gathered around their ancestors' graves during Qing Ming to clean their tombs together as a family, offer food to the deceased, and eat the food with family members after offerings had been made. She noted that the family sizes had increased year on year, signifying the expansion of the family lineage (Toulson, 2009).[7] I did not have the luxury of witnessing large family groups gather at BBC for ancestor worship during Qing Ming, but I did observe multi-generational family groups conducting ancestor worship and had treasured opportunities to chat with some descendants, such as Mr Roney Tan,

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[7] Pre-covid, larger turnouts at Bukit Brown Cemetery were common. For example, a 2016 newspaper article documented on how a multi-generation extended family had visited their ancestor's grave during Qing Ming at BBC (The NewPaper, 2016).

the great-great-grandson of the late Mr Tan Tock Seng.[8] More details of how Qing Ming is practiced at BBC by descendants will be shared in Chapter 4.

In fact, ancestor worship is an intangible cultural artefact has been put forth as a claim to valuable heritage by the interest groups that advocate for the preservation of the cemetery. These community groups argue that the ritualistic actions, language, and behaviour that are unique to Singaporean-Chinese ancestor worship would be lost with cemetery clearance. Whenever Qing Ming is round the corner, atBB would post a notice to inform the members of the Bukit Brown Heritage Singapore Facebook group that they would temporarily cease conducting guided walks out of deference to the families that conduct ancestor worship onsite. However, atBB encourages the members to make their way to BBC on their own to observe how ancestor worship is carried out, so that they can learn about their Chinese heritage. Figure 9 shows the message conveyed via the Facebook post dated 2022 by one of the atBB volunteers:

March 12 at 1:06 PM · 🌐

This year, the Qing Ming Festival 清明節 falls on April 5. In Southeast Asia, it is observed from 10 days before to 10 days after the actual date.

Out of respect to the families, the Brownies will suspend all walks between 26 March 2022 and 15 April.

Anyone interested in observing the practices of Qing Ming are welcome to visit during this time to respectfully observe the qing ming practices.

Figure 9: Screenshot of Facebook post by atBB volunteer (Permission to reproduce this has been granted by Facebook group administrator, Raymond Goh)

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[8] The late Mr Tan Tock Seng was one of Singapore's most eminent philanthropists and a leader of the Chinese community who set up a hospital for the poor, which is now an acute hospital in central Singapore called Tan Tock Seng Hospital (NLB, 2008).

The second festival is the Hungry Ghost Festival (中元节), which is observed annually during the entire 7th lunar month (based on the Gregorian calendar, this falls in August) in Singapore.[9] This is a festival that focuses on appeasing the ghosts or wandering spirits that are endearingly referred to as 'Good Brothers'（好兄弟）. Ancestors are also revered during this month, though the focus is on the 'Good Brothers' (see NLB, 2020b).[10] 'Good Brothers' refer to individuals who did not die good deaths (e.g., they were murdered) or were 'abandoned' by their living kin (i.e., no ancestor worship being conducted). During this month, various temple groups descend upon BBC, sometimes with a temple medium in tow, to conduct prayers and make offerings to the 'Good Brothers'. There is no rule that designates specific individuals to make offerings and conduct prayers, so random individuals have been observed to perform rituals at BBC during this month. Master Weiyi, a senior Taoist priest, explained in layperson's terms to me on the rationale behind this charitable gesture: "The 'Good Brothers' need to be cajoled and appeased to 'let go' of their grouses or hatred towards their fates, which explicates the use of prayers and food and paper offerings. These will hopefully tame their maliciousness and ease them into accepting reincarnation, which is the eventual recourse recommended." According to my informal chat with a temple volunteer, temple mediums dictate the day and time to go to BBC for the lunar month's prayers upon receiving "messages" from the underworld deities with whom they are in "close communication" with. The temple medium's presence during the rituals offers opportunities for the underworld deities to show up via spirit possession, allowing the deities a spiritual channel to communicate with the mortal world.

The third festival is called the Winter Clothing Festival (寒衣节). It is annually observed on the first day of the tenth lunar month (based on the Gregorian calendar, this would fall in November) and is celebrated by Xuan Jiang Dian (玄江殿), a Chinese temple dedicated to Xuan Tian Shang Di (玄天上帝), known as God of the North (atBB, 2013b). This is a festival dedicated to the wandering spirits of BBC and is only

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[9] For a detailed description of this festival, refer to NLB (2020b).
[10] From my fieldwork observations conducted at BBC during Qing Ming in the year 2021, no descendant had come by BBC during the 7th lunar month to make offerings to their ancestor.

observed by this temple in Singapore.[11] My fieldwork observations have evinced that tombkeepers from and regular visitors to BBC are largely unaware of this festival. I had interviewed Master Tan, the anchor temple medium of the said temple, to understand more on this festival. Master Tan had prepared a spread of colourful paper clothing to show me during the interview and I remember picking each up to examine their intricate details. Master Tan explained that these are the 'warm clothing' that would be burnt for the wandering spirits in anticipation of the upcoming winter (the fact that Singapore does not experience winter is not factored into their consideration). Temple devotees are invited to include their ancestors from BBC in the temple's large-scale prayers during this festival and a set of five pieces of paper clothing will be burnt for their ancestors. Owing to Covid-19 restrictions implemented by the Singapore government, this temple did not conduct prayers in November 2020 thus I was unable to conduct onsite observations.

Covid-19 pandemic: Singapore's situation and impacts upon my fieldwork

The Covid-19 pandemic occurred first in mainland China when a cluster of 'severe pneumonia cases in Wuhan city, Hubei Province, China' was reported to the World Health Organisation (WHO) on 31 December 2020 (CNA, 2020a). The first Covid case in Singapore was reported by the Ministry of Health (MOH) on 23 January 2020 and the first infection cluster on 4 February 2020 (MOH, 2020, 2020b). The risk containment measures implemented by the MOH included mandatory mask wearing, physical distancing and postponement or cancellation of non-essential large group events (CNA, 2020b).

My fieldwork was directly impacted by the pandemic because I was to begin data collection in January 2020. For primary data collection, I had planned to conduct ethnography comprising semi-structured face-to-face interviews lasting 30-45 minutes each with various stakeholders of BBC who will be identified via purposive or snowball sampling, non-participant observations of the rituals held as well as participant observations of guided walks that are conducted on-site. I was keen to observe the advocacy efforts of all things Bukit Brown (atBB) spearheaded by their volunteers who

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[11] See Naquin (1988) for further substantiation.

are referred to as Brownies. This is the community group that has been advocating for the preservation of BBC for ten years running and conducts advocacy activities like free guided walks in the cemetery for the public. The pandemic forced me to modify my fieldwork and extend my fieldwork duration by six months. My plan for secondary data collection was unaffected since I could use the Internet to obtain publicly available information.

In the first quarter of 2020, the pandemic did not appear to bear upon the population as life continued as per normal in Singapore. I was able to conduct several in-person interviews in January. I was invited to a private 'ramble' with several volunteers from atBB in early February 2020, where the five of us trudged through the cemetery looking for certain graves. There were still several guided walks conducted by atBB from January to early March 2020, but I gave these a miss due to the emergence of local transmission clusters and the DORSCON Yellow status that was implemented by the MOH when the virus was first reported to the WHO.[12] atBB was later lambasted in the Heritage Singapore - Bukit Brown Cemetery Facebook group after the group's volunteers posted photographs containing the large groups of participants from their guided walks. Some members from the Facebook group were aghast that atBB has continued to conduct their guided walks, especially when social distancing measures had already been introduced by the government then. After March 2020, atBB stopped conducting guided walks.[13] I had initially planned to have doorstop interviews with cemetery visitors using a standard set of questions that I had prepared but the Covid-19 pandemic and public reactions in the Facebook group in response to the guided walks deterred me from doing so, as people might became wary of strangers approaching them for fear of the virus transmission. To counter this obstacle, I observed the frequent discussants in the Heritage Singapore – Bukit Brown

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[12] Singapore utilises the 'Disease Outbreak Response System Condition' (DORSCON)—a colour-coded framework that shows the current disease situation. The framework provides general guidelines on what needs to be done to prevent and reduce the impact of infections (Government of Singapore, 2020b). Singapore's DORSCON was raised from yellow to orange on 7 February 2020 to reflect the severity and local transmission of the Covid virus (CNA, 2020b). Singapore lowered the DORSCON level back to yellow on 26 April 2022 (The Straits Times, 2022).
[13] Only with the licence granted by Singapore Tourism Board (STB) did they resume their guided walks in late-November 2020. The STB granted permission to ten volunteer guides from atBB to resume their guided walks in BBC provided they comply with safe management measures and must report on any infected cases amongst their participants (Personal communication with Raymond Goh).

Cemetery Facebook group to sift out the regular cemetery visitors and then approached them for interviews via private messaging on Facebook Messenger.

After mandatory risk containment and social distancing measurements were implemented by Singapore's MOH and the University of Edinburgh (UoE), I modified my fieldwork to mitigate the disruptions caused. The MOH introduced a new system comprising of phases to communicate the permissible grounds for public gatherings and activities during the pandemic. In Phase 1, no social gatherings were allowed (Government of Singapore, 2020c) and subsequently, there was an implementation of a nationwide lockdown from 7 April to 1 June 2020 (Government of Singapore, 2020d). Therefore, my fieldwork was changed to become a virtual endeavour aided by the Internet.[14] I was able to conduct a) virtual interviews using UoE's licensed Zoom software, and b) non-participant observations of the discussions on BBC via social media platforms like Facebook. This is in tune with MacLean et al's (2020) view of attempting to 'access the field remotely', with digital sources being suggested as an avenue for doing so.

Singapore's national lockdown and the subsequent implementation of guidelines for business continuity plans, i.e. work from home or team segregation arrangements (Enterprise Singapore, 2020; Chua et al, 2020) provided windows of opportunity for me to pursue my virtual fieldwork endeavour with significant success. I was able to conduct remote data collection with ease because the national lockdown had presented me with more options to identify potential respondents and more avenues to collect data virtually. It helped that the lockdown had blessed people with more pockets of free time since there was no need to commute to work and in-person social engagements had become impossible. Social media became the go-to avenue to while away their free time. I was able to harness this newfound inclination to my advantage as I could conduct snowball sampling and purposive sampling via social media. I relied primarily on a Facebook group that was created for BBC in early 2012 called 'Heritage Singapore—Bukit Brown Cemetery'. This social media platform turned out to be the perfect avenue for me to access the field remotely and conduct non-

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[14] Phase 2 began on 19 June 2020 after the MOH observed that community infection rates had been kept stable; this phase allowed for small group gatherings of up to five persons. This differs from Phase 1 where no social gatherings were allowed (Government of Singapore, 2020c).

participant observations. Access was granted to me by one of the administrators, Mr Raymond Goh, who is also a co-founder of atBB. This was a large Facebook group with the number of members increasing by the day since its inception. The social world in the group had existed before the pandemic but could be said to have been enlivened with the pandemic, which provided ample fodder for me to observe. With the given access, I could read discussion threads and comments, browse photographs, observe the types of posts made by members, and source for potential respondents via purposive sampling. Being a member also allowed me to post in this group—a privilege that I utilised fully during the lockdown to initiate discussions on the eventual fate of BBC and elicit comments on aspects of BBC to evoke curiosity and interest within the group. I was able to initiate conversations with potential respondents via Facebook Messenger, beginning with casual talks about everyday life during the lockdown and delving into focused conversations on BBC. Although these chats were time consuming, they helped to build trust and rapport between myself and potential respondents.

Virtual interviews turned out to be very convenient because there was no need to schedule for a physical location to meet in-person. Furthermore, potential respondents were freer or had flexible time since they were working from home. Apart from those who were introduced by my key informants, other potential respondents were first approached via Facebook Messenger or WhatsApp, where I introduced myself and my PhD research in brief. Thereafter, I shared the soft copies of the Participant Information Sheet (PIS) and Consent Form (CF) (Appendixes A & B). I invited potential respondents to peruse these two documents before confirming on their agreement to be interviewed for my research, making sure I gave them ample time to do so and would nudge them with a gentle reminder via messaging them thereafter. I also highlighted that they were free to ask any questions or clarify doubts that were related to my research. For those who had agreed to be interviewed, I requested for signed consent forms in soft copy and saved each in a separate folder bearing the respondent's full or preferred name, in keeping with the University's ethical guidelines. Some of my respondents were not IT-savvy so they were unable to return a signed consent form in soft copy. I worked around this logistical issue by taking their verbal consent by reading out the content from the consent form and then recorded their responses using the audio recorder. I had encountered negligible logistical

challenges involved in recruiting respondents for the virtual interviews since majority were attuned to using social media regularly and possessed satisfactory levels of computer literacy.

There were also no ethical challenges encountered during the period of my virtual fieldwork since I paid close attention to conducting ethically sound interviews. All respondents for my research are adults over the age of 21 years old and cognitively intact. Approval from the Ethics Board at the University of Edinburgh was obtained on 26 August 2019 for permission to conduct fieldwork in Singapore. Minimal risks and harm were entailed in the study of human subjects for my research because they were observed or interviewed based on the condition of anonymity whenever possible or applicable.

Prior to conducting each virtual interview, I reiterated my research objectives and the method of data collection, highlighting that there would be audio recording used, and re-confirming with the respondent if he/she was comfortable with it. I made sure I showed my audio recorder to the respondent via the video call and made it known that I was switching it on to begin the recording. All respondents were alright with being audio recorded though some had indicated that specific parts of their sharing should be kept off-record, which I agreed to. Anonymity was offered as an option in the consent form. Each respondent could indicate if he/she would like to be referred to as his/her real name in my research, be anonymous with an assigned pseudonym or a self-chosen pseudonym. Several of my respondents were approached via their Facebook accounts, which already contained their nicknames as identifiers. These respondents did not reveal their real names to me and indicated that they preferred to use their Facebook names. I would confirm with the respondent before the start of the interview on his/her preferred pseudonym and would use this pseudonym to address him/her throughout the interview. In keeping with the Covid-19 regulation on mandatory mask wearing in Singapore, there were some respondents who took their preference for anonymity to the next level by wearing their face masks throughout the virtual interview. To align with the unstructured lifestyles arising from the uncertainties of a pandemic, I approached the virtual interviews as casual conversations rather than formal interviews. Each virtual interview lasted between 30-60 minutes long.

Interviews were also conducted using the telephone or voice calls with a minority of respondents during the national lockdown period based on their request because they were not comfortable with showing their faces. Prior to the start of each interview, I would seek the respondent's verbal consent and read through the consent form carefully during the call. Thereafter, I confirmed on their preferred pseudonyms and indicated verbally to them when I turned on/off the audio recorder. These interviews lasted more than an hour each, with the longest stretching to four hours.

Since I had several categories of respondents for my research, I designed separate interview guides for each category, with questions that were appropriate to the intended respondent group. Unique interview guides were created for respondents with ample publications and/or social media presence as the questions asked would focus on their respective work. The interview format followed Spradley's (1979) recommendations which includes audio recording and note-taking. Each audio file was saved together with the signed consent form in a folder bearing the full/preferred name of the respondent. If verbal consent was taken, I would indicate the respondent's preference on a blank form and save it under his/her name or preferred pseudonym. Where necessary, the audio files were transcribed to provide relevant qualitative data to support my claim(s) in this thesis. Interviews were conducted in English Language, a mixture of English Language and Mandarin, as well as in Mandarin. Only the researcher, i.e. myself, have access to all raw data. All raw data collected are stored in accordance to the data secure storage guidelines of the University of Edinburgh.

I was also able to conduct non-participant observations and collect the necessary data from the said Facebook group since posts were made by members on an almost daily basis. The national lockdown in Singapore was extended and people were understandably bored. I visited the Facebook group daily, reading new posts, new comments, and browsing old posts. Through doing so, I gained a better understanding of my fieldsite, albeit not being able to visit it for a few months. Based on the frequency of posts or re-posts or the number of comments made about certain locations in BBC, I was able to make a list of places in BBC that I wanted to visit when it became permissible to do so, since these places bore strong heritage or historical significance. Moreover, browsing the Facebook posts and comments allowed me to develop more questions to ask my potential respondents and helped to clarify my

doubts about some aspects of my fieldsite. Moreover, I was able to collect secondary data by saving the relevant photographs, comments, and posts that would aid in explicating the aspects of my research, and some of these would be shown in the subsequent chapters.

When Phase 2 commenced and public gatherings in groups of five were allowed, I resumed my fieldwork. I reached out to some of my interview respondents with whom I had connected with prior via Facebook to ask if they would walk with me in BBC. This assured my personal safety since I would not be going to BBC alone and allowed me to collect additional data from my respondents while in the field. Aspects that could not be captured via the virtual interviews could now be explored in the field. For example, respondents could show me some of the interesting sights that they had shared during the interviews. I had also conducted walking ethnography with two respondents on separate occasions, where I garnered valuable and rich primary data. I was able to conduct non-participant observations of the 7th lunar month or Hungry Ghosts' Festival from mid-September to mid-October 2020, but failed to do so for Qing Ming, or the annual Chinese tombsweeping festival in April 2020 due to the national lockdown. Similarly, I had nothing to observe for the Winter Clothing Festival in November 2020 as the temple responsible for this event had called off the preparatory work at the temple and the subsequent ritual at BBC due to the Covid-19 safe management measures imposed by the government, I could only rely on the past year's photographs as reference points to this event. Since Qing Ming is an important occasion to be observed in BBC, I requested for an extension of my fieldwork by six months. This was approved by my School and I was able to conduct non-participant observations in April 2021, and completed my fieldwork in June 2021.

The guided walks by atBB that I had wanted to observe as part of my ethnography had only resumed in late November 2020, which meant that I had about six weeks to fill in the gaps of information by participating in or observing these guided walks. Because the volunteer guides must adhere to Phase 2 social distancing and infection control measures such as conducting mandatory temperature checks, attendance taking with full names and contact details of participants noted and maintaining a strict cap on the number of participants per walk, I was sometimes asked to stand far away from the group by the volunteer guide so that I would not cause the

group size to exceed the legally allowable size. One of my key informants, Darren, allowed me to assist him with the preliminaries of two walks that he had guided in late November, where I was tasked to distribute and collect portable radio devices from the participants, These devices ensured a one metre safe distancing between each participant and reduced the need for participants to crowd around the guide just to hear what he was saying. My 'assistant' duty allowed me to recruit potential respondents using purposive sampling. I had approached some participants from these walks to share their post-walk experiences during Covid with me, while interviewing some others for their pre-Covid walk experiences.

In total, I had interviewed 60 respondents over 12 months who had/have indirect or direct associations to BBC. The breakdown of the categories of respondents is as follows:

Category of respondent	Number
all things Bukit Brown (atBB)	9
Singapore Heritage Society (SHS)	3
Participants of guided walks	10
Tombkeepers	2
Descendants	14
Religious leaders	2
Academics/researchers	6
Independent volunteers	4
Cemetery visitors	10
Total interviewed	**60**

Key Informants

My research would not be smooth sailing and complete without the help of five key informants. Apart from Dr Kevin Tan who prefaces this chapter, four more men have been instrumental in providing potential respondents for my interviews and relevant information to supplement my research.

As my first key informant, Dr Kevin Tan was the longest serving President (he had served in SHS for ten years) and had amassed a huge social circle of heritage enthusiasts. I had gotten to know Dr Tan in 2017 at a SHS event, after I had returned to Singapore from completing my MSc programme at UoE. I introduced myself to him after the event and mentioned that I had read and cited his book on cemeteries (Tan, 2011) in my MSc dissertation and was planning to embark on reading the PhD thereafter. Dr Tan passed me his business card and told me to contact him whenever I had questions. He was instrumental in sharing a lesser-known part of the BBC saga with me and generously shared his personal contacts when I approached him in late 2019 after returning to Singapore to prepare for my fieldwork. He was always ready to send an email or a WhatsApp message to his contacts to ask if they could help with my research and often, his contacts would not turn me down when I approached them. Since the current Minister for National Development was Dr Tan's student in law school, Dr Tan had a direct link that I could ride upon. Unfortunately, the link went dead in the Minister's Office, after I had sent my interview questions over. Nevertheless, I was glad that Dr Tan had tried to connect me with the Minister for my research.

Raymond Goh is a co-founder of atBB and the go-to person for all things related to cemeteries. He voluntarily helps members of the public to locate their ancestors' graves amidst the thick and unruly foliage in BBC. He keeps a robust and up-to-date repository of tomb data, newspapers, and other types of documentation relating to BBC and shared these with me. He was also very generous in sharing relevant contacts for my interviews. What touched me was his kind gesture of sharing his WhatsApp number with me so that I could contact him whenever I had queries. He was commuting between Singapore and India then, as he was running a pharmaceutical company in India. Despite the time differences and his busy workload, he took time to reply to my WhatsApp messages and supplemented his replies with relevant materials like photographs and news articles so that I could gain clearer understanding. The lockdown in India due to the Covid-19 pandemic brought him back to Singapore eventually, where he now invests his spare time on his voluntary work in helping descendants locate their ancestors' graves in BBC. I was slightly taken aback when I conducted the first interview with him in December 2020 because he spoke

rapidly and jumped from one topic to another randomly, making it challenging for me to ease the conversation back on track. The interview notes that I had taken were mere scribbles as I found it hard to keep up with his thought process.

Fortunately, Raymond was calmer and more collected when I conducted a second interview with him, on 31 December 2020, making it my final interview. He agreed to the interview but was curious on my motivation for it. "I thought you already know everything by now?" he asked. To prepare for this second interview, I scoured published records of journalists' interview questions for Raymond so that I did not repeat questions. He came away from my second interview feeling very satisfied because I had managed to spot an aspect that no journalist had interviewed him on before. I had focused on the lead-up to his forays into the paranormal and the cemetery, encouraging him to share on his life from his teens to adulthood, whilst journalists had focused on cross-sectional time points of his achievements. I had also encouraged him to reflect upon his passions, whether it was simply a serendipitous act that had allowed his twin interests in the paranormal and the cemetery to intertwine. In a gist, Raymond was an 'appointed' mortal being by a senior deity to take upon the role of a temple medium in his teens. The fact that he had an aunt who was a temple medium also lent him a significant degree of propinquity to the netherworld. Although Raymond had rejected his appointed role and chose to focus on his undergraduate studies, he developed interests in Chinese cosmological theories and geomancy. He read (and still reads) voraciously on these topics, amassing significant knowledge and certification along the way. These paved the way for his passions.

Victor is my third key informant. An executive committee member with the SHS, Victor is passionate about Chinese temples and Taoism and had established the Taoism Singapore Yahoo group (which has since closed and evolved into an email discussion thread) and is a co-founder of the Heritage Singapore - Bukit Brown Cemetery Facebook group. This is the Facebook group that actively discusses on issues pertaining to BBC and the platform upon which an online petition was launched in a bid to save BBC from being partially cleared by the government (see Chapter 5 for details). A retiree in his early 60s, Victor is friendly and approachable. My interview with Victor stretched unexpectedly to 2.5 hours, with Victor sharing his perspectives on BBC as a pioneer volunteer in all things Bukit Brown. He also offered substantial

contacts and insiders' information to me. Additionally, Victor also offered me access to the Taoism Singapore Yahoo group, where I was able to read the earliest online discussions on BBC.

A/P Darren Koh is a volunteer with atBB who conducts guided walks in BBC. I had participated in his guided walk in July 2018 and contacted him thereafter to share on my intended research. On my return visits to Singapore, Darren gladly set aside time from his busy schedule as the Vice Dean of Law in a private university to meet twice with me to discuss about my research. With his suggested list of contacts, I was able to conduct snowball and purposive sampling to expand on my list of potential respondents. Darren was always ready to answer any queries from me and explain situations from the ground to me. In 2021, I had the opportunity to co-author a conference proceeding paper and presentation with Darren on the topic of BBC, a partnership which I treasure greatly.

Ah Beng is a tombkeeper and my fifth key informant. He cleans graves for descendants in exchange for tombkeeping dues. We first met each other one Saturday morning in February 2020 at Hill 1, where Raymond had gathered a small group of us to join him in a private 'ramble' in BBC. A former villager, he learnt how to build graves from scratch from a master tombkeeper when he was a teenager. Ah Beng is a bachelor standing at about 1.55 metres tall and is 57 years old with callused hands and fingernails that are perpetually blackened with dirt from this trade. After dropping out of Secondary Two from a reputable secondary school because he could not cope with the English language syllabus, Ah Beng attended vocational school and then worked as an electrician for several years before taking over the tombkeeping trade from his parents when their health conditions declined. Together with his two elder brothers, the trio make tombkeeping their primary trade now. In his free time, Ah Beng indulges in lottery bets and swipes Chinese language dating apps because "I still want to find a wife."

Ah Beng's language proficiencies and literacy in using the smartphone have made him a suitable key informant for my research. He is conversant in Mandarin and understands basic written and spoken English, though his preferred language is the Hokkien dialect. We converse using Mandarin in-person and Chinese over WhatsApp

text messages. His language abilities have enabled him to able to explain tombkeeping and answer my questions clearly. As I had no opportunity to meet with Ah Beng in-person after February 2020 due to the national lockdown, I persisted in maintaining communication with him using Facebook Messenger after adding him to my Facebook account as a friend. Although he did not agree to be interviewed as he was worried about "saying the wrong things" or "I don't know what to say", he was amiable and open to sharing with me the daily activities he engages with in BBC after we had established rapport some six months later. He had also helped to bridge communication gaps with some tombkeepers using the Hokkien dialect whenever I try to chat with them, as I am not conversant in Hokkien. Using his smartphone, Ah Beng had shared with me photographs and videos from his stash whenever I enquired about certain aspects of tombkeeping and kept me abreast of his tombkeeping activities so that I could gather data. He was also instrumental in linking me up with another tombkeeper, Queenie, whom I had interviewed for this research.

The virtual communication paid off because Ah Beng grew to accept me as his friend and invited me to visit his 'garden', a space in the cemetery where he and his two elder brothers indulge in their gardening hobby during the lull periods of tombkeeping. He allowed me to get acquainted with this 'garden' by teaching me how to harvest edibles and sweep the leaves on the ground. I also took the initiative to learn how to make a broom from scratch using dried coconut leaves under his guidance. Ah Beng's substantial gifts of freshly harvested sweet potato leaves, bananas, limes, bitter gourd, papaya, and winged beans supplemented my weekly grocery runs to the extent that I felt as though I was heading to the supermarket whenever I visited the trio. "Take them, they are free. If you don't take them, the birds and monkeys will eat them," he urged. The random edibles that I was encouraged to try while walking in the 'garden' included ginger flowers, gooseberries, sawtooth coriander, bitter herbal leaves, hibiscus flowers, and pomelo. I could not decline these offers because it would seem rude, so I trusted him and put all the leaves and flowers into my mouth—and survived to share my experiences. Ah Beng seemed pleased that I was game to try everything, while I was happy that these 'taste tests' indirectly offered me ample opportunities to engage with Ah Beng and his brothers. As such, I was able to gather substantial primary data from these conversations even though none had agreed to be interviewed for my research.

Although Ah Beng's role as my key informant was not specified, he had gone the extra mile by acting as my lookout when I was stalked by a hobbyist photographer onsite, updated me on the going-ons in the cemetery, and offered guidance and protection whenever the need arose. For example, when I was keen to explore the 'tombhouse', a derelict tomb structure that became a makeshift tent of an elusive tombkeeper, Ah Beng brought me to the location, advised me to be careful of the tombkeeper's pack of wild dogs, and then waited for me nearby so that he could take me back to safety.

Establishing trust and building rapport

The national lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic meant that I had lost a fair amount of time establishing rapport with relevant stakeholders and potential respondents. Nevertheless, I worked around this limitation in two ways. First, as described earlier in this chapter, I used social media to establish and maintain contact. I maintained regular contact with my five key informants during the lockdown using WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger and established new contacts with potential respondents from the BBC Facebook group. In this way, I was able to establish rapport and build trust with my potential respondents even though we never met in person. Second, I made my presence seen, heard, and known as much as possible during Phase 2 by going to BBC for no apparent purposes.

My strategy of establishing my physical presence as a regular in BBC helped to mask the fact that I was a researcher there. I wanted to develop a different identity—a member of the public who was genuinely interested in the going-ons of BBC. I demonstrated my curiosity in everything and everyone onsite by asking a lot of 'why' questions which enabled me to gather valuable data. I had no fixed schedule of visits and would randomly appear at different times of the day, sometimes twice a day, or random days of the week to glean as much data as possible based on my encounters there. Being able to drive to BBC using my own car made it very convenient for me to travel there as it was rather out of the way if I were to take public transport. Living just 15 minutes' drive from BBC also helped. The tombkeepers saw me quite often and wondered why I was there 'all the time'. I made it a point to make small chats with each tombkeeper, addressing each as 'Uncle' to show deference to a Chinese elder.

I was never in any rush to go and could sit with a tombkeeper for a long time, sometimes watching the rain fall or enjoying the cool morning breeze while chatting about nondescript topics like wild boars and durian trees. Sometimes, I would be treated with a chilled canned beverage and invited to take a seat underneath a canvas shelter to chat. Each man was happy to see me, and each chat unearthed new information about their lives as tombkeepers and their memories of the village life from the past. I did not script any conversation starters with anyone and instead, allowed the conversations to flow freely, tweaking the flow as we went along if I wanted to gather crucial information. However, I did not press for information if the tombkeeper did not want to offer it; rather, I let the tombkeeper take charge of the flow at times so that it did not seem like a rigid interview. I shaped each conversation as a casual chat with no holds barred. It also helped that I am conversant in fluent Mandarin, colloquial slang, and have an ability to strike and hold conversations very well. "You seem to have a way with the tombkeepers", observed atBB volunteer Peter when we sat down to commence my interview with him. "Nah, I was just lucky that they were willing to talk to me," I replied with a smile.

My rapport with tombkeeper Hun Seng was established in this manner. I had formally interviewed him at his makeshift tent one weekday morning, after receiving a tip off from another helpful tombkeeper that he would be present at his tent between 9 to 10am that day. Hun Seng is known in BBC as 'the guy who would talk' and had granted interviews to newspaper journalists before. These news articles were displayed neatly on a table in his tent. After the formal interview, I would often drive and stop by Hun Seng's tent to chat with him. It helped that his tent was located beside the footpath and had some space for cars to be parked. Such convenience allowed me to stop and chat whenever and this informal 'routine' continued for over a month. Hun Seng was always ready to chat, and fellow tombkeepers would often stop by his tent to chat as well. This opened another avenue for me to get to know more tombkeepers and make my presence known to them. When the lunar 7th month was around the corner, Hun Seng invited me to the prayer ceremony that he had organised. I readily agreed to it and was glad I showed up because there were over 10 other tombkeepers who turned up for the event, thus allowing me to gain a deeper insight via non-participant observations of this group. While Hun Seng probably only wanted me to partake in the lavish food items that he had purchased for the ceremony (a

whole roast pig, roast duck, roast chicken, plus several types of Chinese prayer food delicacies), he probably did not expect that he was giving me treasured opportunities to interact with the tombkeepers.

A similar situation replayed itself at Hill 4, where I was introduced to Ah Soon, the lone tombkeeper stationed there, by atBB volunteer Mr T. Hill 4 was affected by the highway construction because it was cut away from the rest of BBC and is now located opposite the highway. This made Ah Soon a lonely man who had no one to talk to since most interactions and visits were concentrated at Hills 1, 2, 3 and 5. One fine morning in December, Mr T brought Ryan and I to Hill 4 upon my request as I had not experienced Hill 4. Ah Soon was seated quietly in his makeshift tent, smoking a cigarette when we arrived. He was friendly and chatty, sharing information readily of his exhumation business and social histories of some of the tombs that he cares for. When we bade goodbye, I told Ah Soon that I would return next weekend to visit him. I kept to my word and ventured back alone the following weekend to chat with Ah Soon, who continued to chat amiably with me. We bantered and chatted about casual topics, such as how he should be treated to two cups of coffee for guessing that I was at least 10 years younger than my actual age—a compliment that would only be heard if I am in the United Kingdom, but not in Singapore. I wanted to keep to my word and returned to chat with Ah Soon, so that I could gain his trust and could build more rapport with him. When Raymond heard about my interactions with Ah Soon, he commented, "That guy doesn't usually talk; you managed to make him talk!"

Perhaps, Ah Soon's reluctance to chat with strangers has got to do with the "noisy gossips" at "the other side" (i.e. where other hills congregate) which he wants to avoid and also his concern on "saying something wrong." On my second visit to Ah Soon's tent, Claire Leow, another co-founder of atBB, arrived with a group of students. She greeted Ah Soon, who returned greetings with a cursory smile. Claire thrust her handheld microphone into Ah Soon's face quite abruptly and asked him to talk about the tombs he maintains. Ah Soon was momentarily taken aback, then said, "There is nothing much to talk about." Claire retracted her hand and did a brief introduction of Ah Soon to the students before moving off to look at graves. After they were out of earshot, Ah Soon said to me, "She's asked me to talk about my work before. I did say it the first time, but I can't be saying it over and over again, and I don't think I am so

accurate each time. So, what if I say the wrong thing and then people come and tell me I was wrong? Better not say anything."

An unintended consequence of being a member of the said Facebook group was the ability to build rapport with the atBB volunteers and other related stakeholders. I noticed that certain volunteers such as Peter, otherwise known as 'Rojak Librarian' which is also the title of the blog that he maintains, would regularly post on Facebook about BBC. These posts allowed me to ask questions about his posts, read comments from others, and interact with him and others. Most of these interactions were casual and informal, and at times, pointless (e.g. commenting on Peter's food posts had no relevancy to my research per se!), but, they all helped to build rapport with him. Brice Li, an avid trail runner in BBC, would post BBC videos taken by his drone of BBC occasionally. These were beautifully captured and edited to include background music and sometimes captions. I approached Brice to interview him and subsequently chatted with him casually on Facebook Messenger. This new rapport built allowed me to include one of his videos in my virtual conference presentation with the Royal Anthropological Institute in September 2020, which I felt was highly appropriate to convey the beauty, greenery, and serenity of my fieldsite. A friend who had the privilege to preview my conference presentation slides commented that without Brice's video, it was akin to "taking the crunch away from the apple."

Safety concerns while in the field

I was constantly asked one unanimous question by most of my respondents and tombkeepers, which went along the lines of, "Do you go to BBC alone to do your fieldwork?" My answer was, "Yes and no"—Yes if I had no plans to trek through the jungle-like cemetery, and no, as sometimes I needed company to walk into BBC to see new sights and I did not know my way. There was usually a momentary silence or shock if I answered "Yes", because to visit BBC alone as a female is perceived to be a highly risky endeavour. Ah Ahn, a tombkeeper who works closely with Hun Seng, suggested that I bring a dog for company whenever I went to BBC alone because, "What if you meet a wild boar here?" I reasoned that I was not alone per se since there were joggers, cyclists, people walking their dogs, and horse jockeys walking their horses in BBC. I asked Ah Ahn in return, "What would you do if you run into a wild

boar?" He replied, "Walk in the opposite direction away from it." "Ah," I replied, "That's what I would do too." Hun Seng was also worried for my safety. He instructed me to inform him whenever I was in BBC so that he could at least keep a lookout for me. In a dramatic tone, he said, "What if someone carts you up the hill and does something bad to you when you come alone?" In the earlier days when I was rather unfamiliar with the area, Ah Beng would make the effort to walk me to his 'garden' (a space he uses to pursue his gardening hobby) but later as I became more confident of my bearings, he would wait for me at the 'entrance' of his 'garden'. Volunteer Peter described the individuals from BBC and those who use BBC as 'colourful characters', hinting to me that I should be cautious. This elicited a comeback line from me, "So are we all *characters* then?" Weera, a 74-year-old respondent who had walked BBC with me, advised me on our final walk in BBC, that I should not go to BBC alone as it was "dangerous". "Best to find someone to come with you; you never know who you will meet here," he advised. Similarly, Queenie, a female tombkeeper advised me that, "Only Ah Beng and Ah Kiat (Ah Beng's second eldest brother) are the reliable guys here. I can't say the same for the rest."

To a certain extent, the wilderness and large, unkempt expanse of BBC justify all the above concerns. As much as BBC is said to be a 'green lung' and 'living museum' in social media platforms, it is concurrently also a liminal zone where danger lurks. At its core, it is a cemetery, but it is now also a heterogeneous space that is used by a variety of individuals for recreational, religious, or illegal pursuits (such as gambling and illicit sex activities). Because of its jungle-like terrain, policing the activities in this area becomes a challenge. The physical terrain with dense undergrowth, slopes, and hidden depressions in the ground is also not for the faint-hearted; only experienced persons like the tombkeepers who trawl the jungle frequently are capable of navigating. Moreover, the 'wild' side of BBC could breed danger, such as attacks by wild boars or venomous snakes, falling into non-visible pits that remain of exhumed graves, being hit by falling tree branches, or encountering unsavoury characters. Descendant John told me that he was once stung multiple times by what he thought were wasps and fainted amongst the graves. His Indonesian helper who was with him panicked and shouted for help. An ambulance conveyed John to the nearest public hospital. John now has two epi-pens stashed in his Mercedes, just in case.

My visits to BBC were uneventful as I took extra precautions in all possible aspects. I wore protective attire and proper footwear and used a mountain walking stick, applied mosquito repellent, walked only on selected footpaths that were without potholes whenever I visited the site alone, stayed in my car while driving through BBC with my car doors locked, and used the high beam headlights when driving in BBC at night. When the male respondents I had invited to visit BBC with me on night of the 15th day of the lunar 7th month tried to persuade me to walk in the dark with them to "spot ghosts", I stood my ground and refused to budge from my spot where my car was parked. I did encounter individuals with heavily tattooed bodies working in a secluded part of BBC to repurpose the space. Weera had accompanied me on this trip and noticed that the tattoos contained gang names, hence his advice to me.

Ryan, a respondent, and a fellow researcher who had completed his research on BBC, did not receive such advice on or expressions of concern on his personal safety during his fieldwork. A possible explanation for this difference could lie in our different genders. Other factors were mutual amongst us; we each drove ourselves to BBC using our own cars, were of similar builds –tall and slim, and were equally proficient in Mandarin. To be fair, Ryan had spent just one summer conducting his fieldwork whereas I had spent more than a year. Perhaps I had 'overstayed' the desirable and 'safe' span of time in the field? Or, perhaps, being a single female researcher had invited too much attention from others?

Except for an unsolicited stalking from a young hobbyist photographer (Mr A) whom I had got acquainted to one night while observing the lunar 7th month rituals onsite, I felt that I was generally safe in BBC. Mr A had persisted in trying to woo me by stalking me in BBC, claiming that he never had a girlfriend and wanted to further our 'friendship'. I sought assistance from Ah Beng and his brothers and informed some atBB volunteers of Mr A's advances so that they could intervene to help if necessary. The saga ended some three months later after I requested Mr A to stop finding out my whereabouts from everyone else in BBC as it made me uncomfortable, and in response, Mr A denied doing so and threatened to report the matter to the police. This spurred me to cease all communication channels with Mr A. I felt that I could rely on the tombkeepers if I were to run into any danger in BBC because I have known and interacted with them over a considerable period and am assured of their gentlemanly

behaviour towards me. Furthermore, the tombkeepers were extremely familiar with BBC to the extent that they could recognise 'new' vehicles and 'regular' vehicles that enter the cemetery. This meant that they could identify new visitors to the site and keep a lookout on what these individuals were up to. A special trait that all tombkeepers possess is their superb hearing ability. Although it is considered "nothing special" (according to Ah Beng), this trait has enabled them to detect unexpected movements from insects, wild boars, or footsteps from humans. I tended to stay close to the tombkeepers or at least be within their sight or makeshift tentage if I were onsite alone, so that they could keep a lookout for me.

Conclusion

Conducting fieldwork during a pandemic is a rare endeavour that not every PhD student would have the privilege of experiencing. It demands resilience, patience, and flexibility in mindset to suit the changing pandemic situation. Like what MacLean et al (2020:1) had shared, a disrupted fieldwork 'takes a lot of intellectual, logistical, and emotional time and energy'. I am glad that I had overcome the disruptions due to the pandemic and collected substantial data with a rather smooth sailing fieldwork, which became a combination of virtual and in-person endeavours. My fieldwork was a productive and successful endeavour not only because I had collected substantial primary data despite the national lockdown and safe management measures mandated by the Singapore government and the University's research office, but because I had invested substantial time and energy to thrive in the virtual environment by building rapport with my potential respondents online, reading old Facebook posts and comments, and consciously keeping myself abreast on new Facebook posts and comments. I was also able to transfer the rapport from online to reality when in-person social gatherings became permissible during the pandemic, by inviting some of my respondents to walk in BBC with me so that I could interact with them in the flesh and have the opportunities to collect more data from such pursuits. In my experience, the pandemic had introduced limitations to my fieldwork but had also offered new opportunities that benefitted my research.

No anthropological endeavour is complete if the topic of friendship is not addressed. I was hesitant about establishing friendship at the start of my fieldwork and

had consciously avoided referring to my respondents as my friends. This has to do with my intent to keep roles distinct for I did not want friendship to mar my fieldwork data and my eventual write-up. Hendry's (1992) claim resounds with this nagging concern of mine, that friendship in the field would cause role confusion, which could impinge negatively upon the friendship and the research at hand. However, this nagging concern dissipated after my fieldwork was completed and I started writing my thesis. I found myself keeping in touch with some of my respondents, with our conversations developing beyond the cemetery. I realised that I could delineate between my respondents' interview data versus them as my friends. Their role as my respondents was distinct from their newfound status as my friends. Perhaps, my experience is akin to van der Geest's (2015) personal experience, where he suggested an association between friendship and research, with friendship being developed during research, '*because of the research*' (author's emphasis).

The friendships that I had developed were validated when I received altruistic moral support and help from Cathie, my interview respondent and Ah Beng, my key informant. Cathie reached out to me first when I shared on my caregiving responsibilities to my parents. She too, was a caregiver, and she could understand what I was going through as she had experienced similar while caring for her late-father and then later her mother, both of whom had suffered from dementia. She shared useful tips with me on how to manage my father, who suffers from early-stage Alzheimer's Disease. We connected well on this mutual ground. Subsequently, when I suffered two emotional breakdowns due to a bad break-up in late 2021, Cathie swooped down to save me just like a mother hen, by inviting me to her house and making sure I ate dinner. My New Year's Eve in 2021 was spent at Cathie's where she took the effort to prepare a sumptuous dinner for us, so that I would not feel alone during the festive season. Both occasions confirmed our friendship, and I was grateful that she had cared for me. I had also tapped upon Ah Beng's gardening expertise when I had to tidy up my house plants, which had been left unattended ever since my father was admitted to a nursing home. Ah Beng agreed to help and spent a whole afternoon repotting and pruning some 30 pots of unkempt plants. When Ah Beng's elderly mother passed on suddenly due to pneumonia in early March 2022, I took the initiative to attend his mother's funeral wake and was one of the earliest to arrive. Although I had already completed my fieldwork, I saw Ah Beng as my friend and I was

doing what a friend would do for another friend. When Ah Beng's sixth brother spotted me at the wake and nodded to me, I returned the nod with my heart feeling very full. I had only chatted with his sixth brother once when we met in the cemetery during Qing Ming. That nod was significant because it meant that I was not just a transient researcher, but someone who is worthy of acknowledging as a friend.

Indeed, my fieldwork endeavour has benefitted me in more ways than one. Not only was I able to fulfil the requisites for primary data collection and write my thesis smoothly, I was also able to enrich my social circle. Like what van der Geest (2015:3) had said, fieldwork is not a fleeting pursuit but one that 'generates affection and mutual expectations' from 'extended and continuous meeting'. I consider myself fortunate to be able to gain new friends from my fieldwork and am glad that we have managed to build and maintain the friendships even after the completion of my fieldwork. On top of these, my fieldwork has also allowed me to understand myself better. Through my fieldwork, I have learnt that I could stretch my mental, social, and physical limits quite significantly, As an introvert, I had to learn quickly to be a sociable and articulate person, so that I could build rapport, establish trust, and collect the necessary data from the field. My ability to encourage mutual communication between tombkeepers who were usually wary of strangers, or "making them talk", as described by atBB co-founder Raymond, is testament to my success in bridging communication gaps onsite. Waking up early every Saturday or Sunday morning just to go to the cemetery is no mean feat for an overburdened caregiver like me. I had survived on four hours of sleep on average every night because my father suffers night incontinence too. I had pushed my physical limits because hiking in BBC's terrain over three to four hours each time required significant mental and physical resilience to tolerate the humidity, heat, mosquito bites, wilderness, hunger, and a bursting bladder. But the upside of these regular hikes built my physical stamina and strengthened my mental resilience. I was never an outdoors person and possessed negative fitness, but my fieldwork changed these. I grew to appreciate the outdoors and all of its attendant sweat, filth, foul odours, and insect bites. My research has definitely brought positive impacts to my personal life, and this is a valuable experience that I would treasure for life.

CHAPTER TWO
WHO RULES IN BBC USING WHOSE RULES?

On 2 October 2020, respondent Weera posted in the Heritage Singapore - Bukit Brown Cemetery Facebook group with a photograph and a caption, "Something new and scary!". This photograph showed a red and white sign that was erected by the National Environment Agency (NEA), the government agency that is responsible for the upkeep of BBC (Figure 10). The sign cautioned cemetery visitors of potential hazards that they might experience within BBC and disclaimed liability of the NEA from any mishaps suffered by the users and their vehicles. Over the course of that week, more cemetery visitors posted in the said Facebook group with their snapshots of the signs that they had spotted in the cemetery. There was an unspoken worry from all, that the cemetery's fate had seemingly been shortened with the government's 'intrusion'.

Figure 10: Photograph depicting the NEA sign

This is the first time that the government has made its presence felt so acutely in the cemetery via the signs. The dispersed placements of these signs suggest government surveillance that is applied to all possible nooks and crannies of this site. Here, it seems that the government has oversight of this cemetery. However, as this chapter unravels more scenarios, the question of who rules in this cemetery using whose rules becomes difficult to answer.

This chapter examines the role of governance in BBC. I argue in this chapter that governance in BBC is ambiguous and evolving with no fixed authority that wields control over the cemetery, not even the PAP government of Singapore, which has been described as 'authoritarian' and 'omniscient' (see Introduction). BBC is state land and state managed. However, given the cemetery's large expanse (it is 86 hectares) and the uninhibited growth of wild vegetation and an extensive thriving ecosystem of wildlife, opportunities for the emergence of illegibility are ample. Anyone who possesses an assertive voice and/or an intent to defend his/her actions undertaken in the cemetery can create his/her own rules onsite. Existing government rules can thus be disregarded or re-imagined in this site, depending on the whims and fancies of the individual. The elasticity of government rules and the existence of ad-hoc rules created by random individuals suggest that this cemetery embodies 'a history of regulation and contestation' (Loh, 2012a). This chapter harnesses several theoretical concepts and arguments to explicate governance in BBC: Scott's (1998) concept of *mētis*, Li's (2005) critique of Scott's (1998) analytical scheme of 'the state' and associated failed schemes, Das' (1995) concept of a 'critical event', and Das and Poole's (2004) concept of the margin of the state. To complement the theoretical explications and evince the ambiguous and evolving degrees of governance in BBC, this chapter will examine governance in BBC during four distinct phases, viz. (a) when BBC was open for burials, (b) after BBC was closed for burials, (c) the village eviction exercise, and (d) the Covid-19 pandemic. Two micro themes will be unravelled in this chapter: the theme of governance and the theme of assertive communication.

I begin with an overview of the theoretical concepts and arguments to explain their inter-association and how they frame this chapter. In his endeavour to examine modern states' attempts to govern societies, Scott (1998:4-6) argues that the modern statecraft is composed of four elements, viz. administrative ordering of nature and

society, implementation of a high-modernist ideology, adoption of an authoritarian rule to allow the high-modernist ideology to materialise, and possession of a prostrate civil society that lacks the capacity to resist the statecraft's plans. However, the modern statecraft is problematic because it lacks *mētis*, or the 'knowledge that comes from practical experience' (Scott, 1998:7). This means that the 'formal schemes of order tend to become 'untenable' since they only contain *techne*, or 'abstracted and simplified knowledge' that falls short of representing any existing social community or full reality (Scott, 1998:22). This conflict tends to result in resistance from the masses and leads to failures in state-implemented schemes (Scott, 1998). The resistance also suggests that the civil society may not be prostrate as envisioned by the state for it does have the autonomy and voice to put up a resistance. As a result of the incongruence between the state's understanding of lived reality versus the actual social reality experienced by the masses, there is a tendency for margins of the state to emerge. These are defined as 'the state of nature as the necessary opposite and origin point for the state and the law' (Das and Poole, 2004:8). Representing 'the space between bodies, law and discipline', margins of the state depict the close association between law and the states of exception, where they allow insights as to how the 'conceptual boundaries of the state' can be extended, expanded, or reconfigured to suit local imperatives (Das and Poole, 2004:20-21). Das and Poole (2004) argue that margins of the state are not inert; they are constantly in flux because they move around to highlight areas of resistance from the masses and allow for engagement opportunities with the state. This point further supports the likelihood that a rugged civil society may be in existence in such margins of the state. Like Das and Poole's (2004) interpretation, Li (2005:389-390) describes margins of the state as 'gaps' that signify 'the intersection between control and local knowledge' which are 'necessary not only for surviving or resisting rule but also for maintaining it'. These gaps in the state apparatus are 'inevitable' due to the 'facts on the ground' that conflict with the state apparatus (Li, 2005:390).Therefore, contrary to Scott's (1998) claim that local practices may not necessarily conform to the 'official design' and would affect 'high-modern schemes', Li (2005:391) argues that 'power and resistance are intertwined' thus it is necessary to have both in the equation to allow local practices to shape the state apparatus 'in unexpected ways'. While shaping state apparatus by local practices takes time to emerge, another side effect that may also emerge with time from the tussle between the state apparatus and local practice is that of 'critical events', defined

by Das (1995) as 'one that institutes a new modality of historical action which was not inscribed in the inventory of that situation' (Das, 1995:5). Events like the Bhopal Industrial Disaster in 1985 and the case example of the resettled highlanders in Sulawesi, Indonesia who became radicalised because of the discrepancy between the promised improved livelihoods and actual reality have spotlighted on the pain and suffering borne by individuals and the collective population (Das, 1995; Li, 2005). In explicating the connection between pain and suffering brought upon by a keystone event like the Bhopal Industrial Disaster, Das (1995:190) draws upon schools of thought from Durkheim (1976) and Nietzsche (1989) and Clastres (1974) to argue that the 'changes in the institutional structures of society can lead to important differences in the institution of the body' in that the 'phenomenological experience of suffering' from an external event can be 'embodied' in the body in the form of 'dreams, memories, and other idioms of the body'.

As a nation eager to modernise quickly and achieve accelerated national development, it is no surprise that the Singapore government has adopted modernisation plans akin to that of 'high modern states' described by Scott (1998). It is small wonder then that the associated ramifications from the state apparatus reflect the concepts and theoretical arguments put forth by Li (2005), Das and Poole (2004) and Das (1995). The experience of BBC in phases (a) to (d) support my claim. As it shall be discussed in this chapter, the formal governance of BBC by municipal government during Singapore's British colonial era and the subsequent PAP government has long-term bearings upon the affected groups of stakeholders, such as the tombkeepers who rely on the trade to earn a livelihood, the villagers who used to reside within the cemetery, and the descendants of those buried there. Pain and suffering are definitely part of the long-term effects, especially for the evicted villagers who were rehoused in high density public housing flats by the government and had lost their community, livelihood, and lifestyle as a result. The resistances to formal governance are ample in the cemetery, owing to the lack of local understanding of the government agency in-charge of managing BBC, resulting in the stakeholders taking on personal initiatives onsite. Such creative approaches to self-governance in BBC have resulted in BBC becoming a margin of the state, where state resistance and alternatives to formal control are demonstrated.

Governance when BBC was open for burials

BBC was set up by the municipal government of Singapore using land acquired from the Hokkien Ong clan association to serve the burial needs of the Chinese community (NLB, 2013a). The municipal government was responsible for keeping a proper burial register. All burials in BBC had to be 'applied for and registered' (Loh, 2012a). The authorities also 'fixed the numbering, layout, size, depth, and fees for each burial lot' (Malayan Tribune, 1921). Archival photographs of BBC show barren ground with graves that were neatly spaced, and clear views of the horizon ahead, evidence of the meticulous planning done (Figure 11). As Chong and Chua (2014) noted, the 'British administration precision' had recorded the deceased's name in romanised form, sex, age, dialect group, date of death, cause of death and place of residence. The existence of the register dating from April 1922 until December 1972 allowed the National Archives of Singapore to digitize it for public access online via its website. This came in useful in the wake of the partial cemetery clearance prior to the Lornie Highway construction in late 2011 because it allowed descendants to locate their ancestors' graves amidst the wilderness. In contrast, the Hokkien Ong clan association that managed the adjacent cemeteries was described to be 'less assiduous or more private in their record-keeping', resulting in no existing burial records today (Chong and Chua, 2014).

Figure 11: Aerial photograph of Bukit Brown Cemetery taken in 1948 by the British Royal Air Force 81 Squadron. The areas within the red border show neatly spaced graves with little vegetation.
(Source: Rojak Librarian, 2014b)
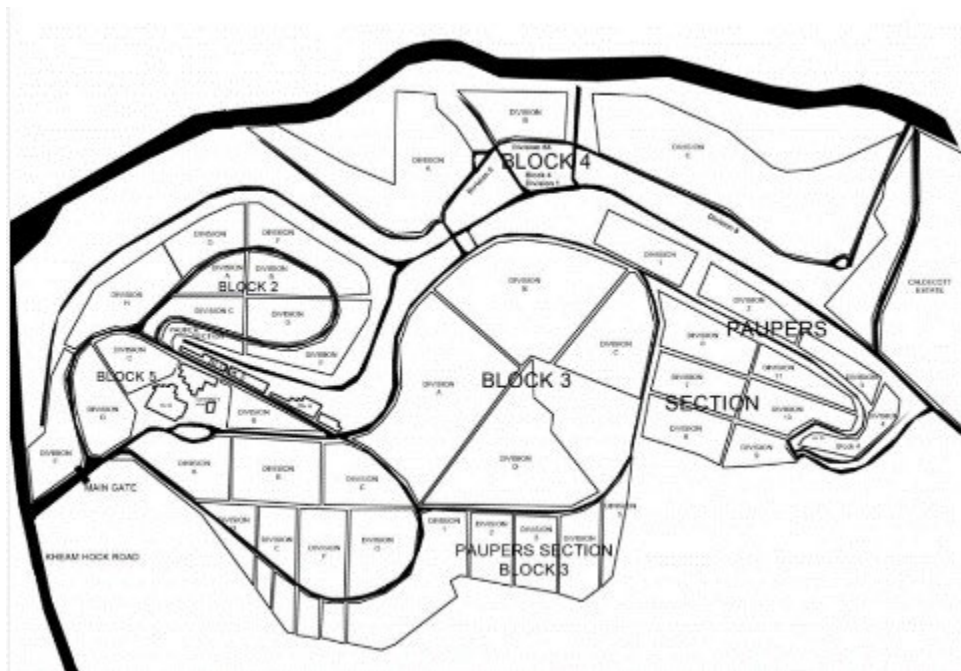
Figure 12: Division map of Bukit Brown (Source: atBB, 2012b)

Evidently, there was strong administration in the management of burial plots, with the needs of the poor being included in the planned social order of things. Sections were set aside for paupers, or the general poor (including children and stillborn foetuses) who could not afford the burial and plot fees applicable to the rest of the cemetery (see Figure 12; Lee, 2017). The all-inclusive ambit of this municipally managed Chinese cemetery meant that everyone was entitled to a burial plot, although the burial plots for paupers would be relegated to low lying areas that tended to be flooded (Lee, 2017). Furthermore, there was proper maintenance of the cemetery, enabling a clear aerial view of the cemetery to be captured. The layout of BBC is akin to Scott's (1998:1) description of 'a modern, manmade beehive which comprises orderly and standardized honeycomb units within'. The categories adopted in the burial register not only enable the ease of locating 'lost' or 'forgotten' ancestors, but also offer a decent portrayal of the demography at that time. Based on such detailed administrative information, volunteers Peter and Raymond from interest group 'all things Bukit Brown' (atBB) have been reliant on the register to assist descendants in locating their ancestors in BBC. In addition, atBB's volunteers have also incorporated the information gleaned from the burial register into their narratives when they conduct guided walks for members of the public.

The municipal government's administrative prowess did not stop at just burial plots. My interviews with the former villagers of BBC revealed that the municipal government had provided public goods like piped water, electricity, and regular police surveillance for the villages of Tan Hulong/Kheam Hock Road, Lorong Halwa, and Kampong Kubor that were located within BBC. There were at least four clusters of human settlements that were only accessible via small roads or unmarked paths in the cemetery (Loh, 2012a; The Straits Times, 2012b). The provision of public goods ensured that the villagers had a decent standard of living and were also on the government's radar where state protection was concerned. Moreover, each village hut was given a proper residential address with an accompanying postal code, according to tombkeeper and former villager Ah Beng. These formal schemes of order in the village underline the government's exertion of control on village life.

Governance after BBC was closed for burials

Environmental maintenance

After BBC was closed for burials in 1973, the role of the government became muddled and controversial at times. Following Li (2005), I argue that this uncertain role of the government has provided opportunities for non-government actors to enter the scene and 'attempt to govern' (Li, 2005:384). BBC was described as unkempt and forgotten for a long while because the government authorities had 'terminated maintenance contracts' after the cemetery had closed for burials in the early 1970s, resulting in a 'neglected space' with 'unrecognisable landscape and inaccessible inner parts' (Huang, 2014:23). With the supposed 'neglect' and the tropical humid climate, the vegetation in BBC thrived immensely well, resulting in a dense secondary jungle. When asked about his impression of BBC when he first visited the site in 2013, former grave cleaning volunteer Mr K shared that he was "totally shocked" because, "A forested cemetery is completely insane…the vegetation grows on steroids. This is insane. I have never seen such things before." The jungle has become a defining characteristic of BBC, and metaphorically, a permanent emblem of the government's controversial role in managing BBC.

Former villagers of the Tan Hulong village, such as tombkeeper Hun Seng, recounted on regular grass mowing ("about once every two months") and tree cutting by contractors at "just the fringes of" BBC. These contractors are hired by the National Environment Agency (NEA), the government agency that is in-charge of managing BBC. This is an ongoing maintenance for the cemetery today, though no one could give me an exact date when it had begun. Hun Seng said that tree cutting would be done if trees have fallen and blocked pathways. However, large fallen trees could not be transported out of the site due to the dense and uneven terrain. These were left to fester in the jungle, or, as suggested by Hun Seng, "they (unspecified persons) burn them secretly, set a fire and burn." From my fieldwork observations, the burnt remains of the vegetation remain in situ, contributing to a greater mess.

American Michael Smith, who is a permanent resident of Singapore and hikes often in BBC, compared American cemeteries with BBC, "Cemeteries don't get overgrown. They get quite taken care of. It's perpetual care." Indeed, perpetual care was lacking in BBC, so much so that its disorganised state has become an attraction to Singaporeans and foreigners alike. Expatriate Ms Norup was enthralled with BBC, describing it as a "magical place" that is "not organised save for minimal sign and minimally paved paths". Feeling inspired, she published a children's storybook about BBC to document her expatriate life in Singapore, weaving in the jungle-like environment into her storyline (Norup, 2020).

Although a good selling point for guided walks, the dense vegetation could hinder walks for the uninitiated participants. As such, the atBB volunteers would recce potential walking routes a day before conducting their respective guided walks. Alternative routes would have to be sourced if the usual routes were blocked due to fallen trees/tree branches. The overgrown vegetation also conceals holes in the ground left behind by exhumed graves, which become fall hazards during walks. Ironically, the overgrown vegetation deters descendants from visiting their ancestors' graves. For instance, descendant Kenny shared that the unconducive terrain prohibited his elderly father from entering the cemetery to pray to their ancestor. As a result, Kenny and his family lost track of their bearings to their ancestor's grave over time and resorted to praying at the edge of a slope which they felt was the nearest to the grave.

There have been community-initiated attempts to manage BBC's overgrown vegetation. Descendant John regularly cuts and clears away thick vegetation and rubbish at Hill 1, where one of his ancestors' graves is. During my fieldwork, I observed that the 68-year-old retiree had brought his Indonesian helper with him every morning to perform cleaning duties. Prior to his retirement, John worked in a shipyard and would mobilise some foreign workers to assist him with these cleaning tasks before Qing Ming Festival and on an ad-hoc basis. While taking his personal initiative was applaudable, John had experienced mishaps on two occasions. Once, he was clearing vegetation at the back portion of Hill 1 when he was stung twice by insects. He staggered back to his tent and fainted there, much to the alarm of his Indonesian helper, who shouted for help. John woke up in a nearby hospital and these days, he carries an epi-pen in his car, just in case. On another occasion, John brought an Indian foreign worker from his workplace to help with clearing of the vegetation at Hill 1. His foreign worker's finger was sliced by a chainsaw, and John had to rush the worker to a nearby private hospital using his Mercedes. John said, "His finger became shorter, I paid for his hospital stay. After that, he went back to India, and we still keep in touch." When I chanced upon John on my lunar new year visiting round in February 2021, he remained undeterred in his quest to continue clearing the vegetation at Hill 1 without his helper. She had returned to Indonesia to get married, he updated. In turn, he had engaged tombkeeper Ah Ahn to cut the grass for four days in preparation for the lunar new year. When I suggested that they could have requested the NEA to send their contractors to cut the grass, both men unanimously declared that they would not rely on the government's appointed contractors because they felt that they could do a more thorough job. In fluent English, Ah Ahn announced, "I do not need the government to cut the grass for me. I will cut my own grass!"

Apparently, ad-hoc vegetation clearance by the NEA could be requested by individuals with valid reasons. Local theatre group – Drama Box embarked on a project titled, 'It Won't Be Too Long' for the Singapore International Festival of Arts 2015. This project explored the dynamics of space in Singapore in two sub-projects that blended performance and participation. The sub-projects were titled, 'The Lesson' and 'The Cemetery'. 'The Cemetery' was staged in Bukit Brown Cemetery on 18 September 2015 at 5.30am. Before the artistic director of Drama Box, Heng Leun, staged his theatrical performance at BBC, he approached NEA to cut the tall grass at a selected

area to make space for his actors, audience, and props.[15] According to former arts correspondent, Corrie, who covered the performance at BBC for a local newspaper, benches were provided for the audience to sit on, a piano was transported to BBC and placed in the middle of the performance site, and the actors engaged in non-verbal performance in the area of cut grass, standing in a row along the footpath. In another instance of vegetation clearance, descendant Cathie's complaint about overgrown vegetation at her family graves to the NEA led to the mobilisation of contractors who came to clear the vegetation. Although the contractors came, Cathie felt that there were "still a lot of things still undone" as they had performed minimal cutting of the vegetation. Eventually, Cathie engaged tombkeeper Ah Beng to clean five of her family graves. Perhaps, the contractors sent by the NEA had not or could not perform thorough grass cutting from the perspectives of the tombkeepers and the descendants, who prefer to do it themselves (as in Ah Ahn's case) or engage tombkeepers to do it for them (as in John and Cathie's experiences). These self- initiated attempts evince that there is a desire from the ground to care for the cemetery in ways that outsiders like contractors would not be able to fulfill, indicating that there is a degree of *mētis* at work here since local experience is required to tend to the tall grasses to a satisfactory state.

BBC's disorganised state also provides ample opportunities to cemetery visitors and tombkeepers to contribute in small but significant ways to enhance its aesthetic value and appeal. Uncle Jimmy, a retiree living in the vicinity, had personally planted red crotons, or tropical plants with coloured leaves, along the fringes of Hills 1 and 3, injecting splashes of colour to the green scenery (these are captured in Figures 25-26). Tombkeeper Queenie was engaged by some descendants to repaint their ancestors' graves, mainly to rejuvenate their looks and partly to create visually inviting photograph opportunities for visitors. One example is the iconic grave of the late Chinese physician Mr Chew Geok Leong, whose two stone Sikh guards were painted in colour (Figure 13).

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[15] More details are available from Drama Box (2015).

Figure 13: Photographs depicting the two stone Sikh guards
(Source: Rojak Librarian, 2014c)

Chinese-Australian descendant Jennifer Lim spearheaded a project that focused on the aesthetic appeal of BBC for ten months in 2019. Called 'Tile Tidy Up' Jennifer mobilised members of the public to help her clean selected graves that are embellished with decorative tiles. Using the motto of 'We come, we clean, we revive culture', Jennifer was helped in her endeavour by tombkeeper Ah Beng to locate these unique graves, a professional photographer to take photographs of the cleaned tiles, and a host of local and expatriate individuals who stepped forward as volunteers. To document her journey, Jennifer produced a desktop calendar and coffee table book featuring some of the tiles. Figures 4 and 5 show the before and after look of a double grave with benches that Jennifer and her team cleaned.

Figure 14: Before the clean-up of the double grave in 2019 (Photo credit: Benedict Yeo)

Figure 15: After the clean-up of the double grave, the benches and grave architecture can be clearly seen. Photograph taken in August 2020.

Infrastructural maintenance

BBC's basic infrastructure –the concrete footpaths, were also in need of urgent maintenance when I commenced fieldwork. Former horse jockey Hwee who used to walk horses in BBC described the paths in BBC as "very old roads" that could have been preserved well if not for the sudden influx of vehicles into BBC due to the public frenzy after the government's announcements as well as the Lornie Highway construction. Large heavy vehicles transporting construction materials had damaged the roads, resulting in potholes and cracks. The uneven surfaces had loosened parts in my car as well, requiring frequent visits to the service centre to tighten these during my fieldwork. En route to sending Hun Seng back to his tent after giving him a lift to buy petrol one morning, he cautioned that the petrol might spill if there were too many bumps. I panicked at the thought of a fire or explosion and drove very slowly over the uneven surfaces, with Hun Seng ranting beside me about NEA's non-action to fix the broken paths. On 16 November 2020, atBB volunteer Peter took the initiative to provide feedback to the NEA regarding the uneven, pothole-ridden paths in BBC via the One Service app, which is a smartphone application created by the government for the public to provide feedback on public goods and services. Peter posted a screenshot of his feedback in the Heritage Singapore – Bukit Brown Cemetery Facebook group, urging members to come forward to "save Bukit Brown". Agreeing, another volunteer, Tee, reasoned that NEA must "undertake" its "public duty" to "fix roads" and he would be happy to have NEA "on the ground".
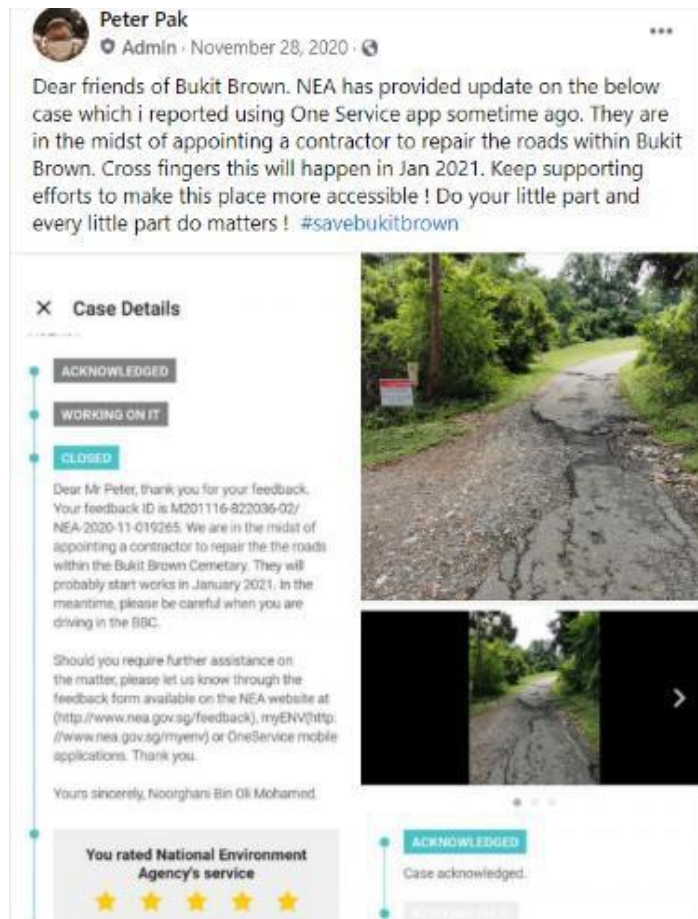
Figure 16: Screenshot of Peter's Facebook post (Permission for reposting granted by Peter Pak)

Shortly after, Peter received NEA's reply, which indicated that contractors would be appointed to repair the paths in BBC (Figure 16). However, this process was long and arduous because Peter had to lodge the same feedback two more times after seeing that NEA had not taken any action. On 19 March 2022, Peter shared happily in the said Facebook group that the faults were finally repaired (personal communication with Peter). My return visits after my fieldwork was completed were smooth drives as all the uneven surfaces on all the footpaths in BBC had been repaired.

Waste management

It seems like NEA's public duty is also lacking where waste management in BBC is concerned. There is more than one type of waste to be cleared from BBC and not all are conventional types. Conventional types of waste refer to rubbish left behind from prayers such as food offerings, joss sticks, candles, burnt remains of incense and

other paper offerings. Although community-driven initiatives have helped to clear such rubbish, the amount of rubbish continues to grow, especially during the Qing Ming Festival and the lunar 7th month. Tombkeepers often lament about the rubbish left behind after large-scale prayers, particularly those conducted by temple groups (Figures 17-18).

Figure 17: Examples of uncleared conventional waste

Figure 18: More examples of uncleared conventional waste

Apparently, prayer groups must seek permission from the NEA prior to conducting rituals in the cemetery and burning of their paper offerings onsite, as

shared to me by temple medium, Master Tan. In his book, Graham (2020) shared an example of a Chinese temple that had applied to the NEA for permission and received a permit to conduct prayers and burn offerings in accordance with the regulations set forth in the permit. Two examples of such regulations include the provision of adequate number of litter bins and portable toilets as well as the prohibition of rituals to be conducted on graves without consent from the next-of-kin (Graham, 2020:94). One wonders if NEA would come by to collect the litter after the ceremony or is the temple group liable to dispose of their own litter? It seems like the prayer ceremonies that I had observed in BBC were without permits, and hence were done illegally, since there was a lot of rubbish left behind. My personal communication with Master Tan revealed that it is in fact, "difficult" to obtain a permit from NEA for conducting rituals in the cemetery. "Nobody has *ever* obtained an approval, I tell you!" said Master Tan, shaking his head. "But why not?" I asked. Master Tan responded with a shrug of his shoulders and said that his temple group has always been responsible to clean up after conducting rituals.

During Qing Ming Festival, the amount of rubbish increases with descendants coming to make food offerings and burn paper offerings. Based on my fieldwork observations, some descendants did not clean up after performing ancestor worship, preferring to leave the food offerings in situ because they believed that they would be 'doing charity' by feeding the ants and other pests. However, after checking with Master Weiyi, a Taoist priest and several atBB volunteers, I learnt that not cleaning up after ancestor worship is an unacceptable and irresponsible civic behaviour. It is ironic that littering in Singapore will incur a fine, yet not clearing up after ancestor worship in a cemetery is not considered littering per se and there is no government sanction levied (Figure 19).

Although the government asserts its presence during Qing Ming Festival via public notifications and onsite contracted service to clear rubbish regularly, the effectiveness of these measures is limited. Reminders are issued to the public to keep the environment clean via the NEA website and small posters put up throughout the cemetery (The Straits Times, 2020a). Large trash bins placed at various locations in the cemetery encourage people to dispose of their rubbish appropriately. I had witnessed the tombkeepers helping some descendants discard their trash after they

had completed their ancestor worship as the latter did not bother to clean up. The appointed contractors were observed to come by BBC to clear the bins regularly, sometimes remaining in the cemetery throughout the day to maintain cleanliness, as I had seen their parked lorries at some parts of the BBC. Once, I had witnessed workers walking at the fringe of Hill 3, picking up selective pieces of rubbish from graves using metal tongs. They had skipped graves with waterlogged food containers and burnt piles of ashes, choosing instead to pick up lightweight rubbish. There is thus some kind of clearing service offered by the contractors, but this service does not seem to be sufficiently thorough.

After Qing Ming Festival, the trash bins were all removed, and contractors stopped coming to clear rubbish. This is an odd way of interpreting the uses of the cemetery by the government and is telling of the absence of *mētis*. Does the government see the cemetery as being utilised only during Qing Ming Festival? It should come as no surprise to the NEA officers especially since they patrol BBC regularly, that there are cemetery visitors in BBC outside of Qing Ming Festival, such as the tombkeepers. Do government officials not know that some tombkeepers do come to BBC to clean the graves periodically based on the grave cleaning agreement that they have with the descendants (for example, some descendants pay tombkeepers to clean their ancestor's grave every three months)? When asked about refuse disposal in BBC, Hun Seng said that the tombkeepers would try their best to clear whenever and whatever they could and dispose of the rubbish appropriately as they did not want ants and other pests to come by. I realised subsequently that 'appropriate' disposal of rubbish in the cemetery meant accumulating non-recyclables into a large pile and setting a fire to burn them, since carrying the rubbish out to the nearest bus-stop on foot to bin them would be logistically difficult for tombkeepers to handle given their immense weight. For recyclables, Hun Seng has a large flowerpot at his tent to contain empty aluminum drink cans which would be sold to the rag and bone man who would drive into BBC occasionally for such collections.

Other individuals have also chipped in to help to clear the rubbish on voluntary bases. For example, in 2012, a 'cleaning club' was assembled by Miss E, an avid history and heritage buff. This group aimed to clear rubbish from graves as a form of charity to the deceased. Mr K responded to the call for volunteers and joined the club.

Due to the inefficiencies involved in arranging for mutual timeslots to meet and clean graves, the group disbanded after two years. Mr K then worked independently, heading to BBC at dawn and finishing his cleaning before the tombkeepers arrived for work. Descendant John has also been clearing rubbish at Hill 1 in the year 2020 with assistance from his Indonesian helper, who accompanies him to BBC almost daily. When I arrived on a weekday morning to interview John, his helper was seen picking up used aluminum tealight holders from each grave and putting these into a large plastic bag. John knew who the culprits were and expressed displeasure, faulting them for lacking in civic mindedness to clean up. As the amount of litter grew and became more frequent, involving large fruits like pineapples and random individually packed sweets that were strewn all over the ground, he grew angrier at these individuals. When we stood near these piles of rubbish looking at one another in despair, he wondered aloud to tombkeeper Ah Ahn, "What should we do about them? If NEA comes, they will think that I had littered, but it wasn't me!" As soon as he finished his sentence, a black Toyota sedan car drove past and John exclaimed, "NEA car!" It was a patrolling car of a NEA officer which had become a regular fixture in BBC that John could recognise it. "Why does the NEA come to BBC so often?" I asked. "To patrol. But the officer does not get down from the car, so he does not see these rubbish, so there's no point in this patrolling" explained John.

Ironically, patrolling NEA officers had noticed John and his makeshift incinerator which has been fashioned out of an exhumed grave with a brick vault. John uses this contraption to burn cleared vegetation and rubbish collected by himself and his helper every morning. According to John, several NEA officers have cautioned him against doing so for fear of setting off a forest fire. In response, John explained to the officers that he is knowledgeable about fire safety protocols as he had worked in a shipyard before, and he had equipped himself with a fire extinguisher onsite. He took the opportunity to question the officers on their reluctance to collect the trash bags he had placed at Hill 1. In a passive-aggressive tone, John had reasoned with the NEA officer that "If you don't collect my trash bags, I don't have a way to discard the rubbish except to burn them. If NEA does not allow me to burn, then I would be left with piles of cleared rubbish with nowhere to go!" Clearly, BBC's experiences with refuse collection by the NEA underline the lack of *mētis* by the government agency (Scott, 1998). The government does not seem to understand that there is human traffic in the cemetery

all the time which inevitably generates trash, even with the regular patrols carried out by the NEA. Hence, provision of trash bins and regular collection of rubbish by government-appointed contractors should be an appropriate way forward in maintaining environmental cleanliness in BBC. Since trash bins can be such a common sight throughout the rest of Singapore, why are they a rarity in BBC?

An unconventional type of waste that needs to be cleared periodically from BBC is that of animal poop. Following complaints of indiscriminate sightings of and odour emanating from horse poop, the government began paying close attention to the regular clearance of horse poop. Jockeys from the nearby equestrian club utilise BBC to walk the horses daily, meandering through the backyards of some residential homes en route to BBC. Some owners of horses housed at the same club also use BBC to ride their horses. Horse poop is thus a common sight in BBC. Former horse jockey Hwee explained that it is logistically challenging for horse jockeys and horse owners to carry shovels and dustpans while riding the horses, though they are aware that they are expected to clean up after their horses. Yet, there is no fine levied by the government if these individuals fail to clean up after their horses. Although tombkeeper Hun Seng is employed by the Singapore Polo Club to clear horse poop in BBC, it is illogical to depend on one person to clear away all the horse poop, given the large expanse of BBC and Hun Seng's advanced age (he was 68 years old in 2020) and weak legs, he is unable to clear away the poop efficiently. More recently in March 2021, signs advising dog owners to clean up after their pets or 'risk getting fined' have been put up by the NEA. Since cemetery visitors include individuals who walk their pet dogs, it comes as no surprise that there may be dog poop left behind from their walks in BBC (Figure 9). However, where should the poop be binned if there are no bins provided? Additionally, why should fines be only levied on pet dog owners who fail to clean up after their pets instead of *both* dog and horse owners as well as horse jockeys?

Figure 19: Sign informing the public to clean up after their pet dogs or risk getting fined (Photograph taken in March 2021)

BBC has also become a dumping ground for another conventional type of waste: construction waste. This is evident in the choked wells that were once functional during the period when villages existed. Tombkeeper Hun Seng and former villager Ah Zuan had shared with me on their eyewitness accounts of workers throwing sacks of "things" into the wells. In a video featuring a night walk in BBC organised by Charles Goh from Asia Paranormal Investigators (API), he had shown the participants a choked well with contents like discarded electronic goods (SPH Razor, 2013). During my fieldwork, I had encountered wells that were choked with overgrown and dried vegetation. Singapore-listed civil engineering group Swee Hong Limited, the company that was awarded the contract as the main contractor to build Lornie Highway, had not cleared away large amounts of construction debris which were piled underneath the now-operational Lornie Highway during my fieldwork. Lornie Highway has been fully operational since April 2019 but the area beneath the highway remained to be a wasteland (Figure 20). It was only in mid-2021 that signs of clearance were spotted by the tombkeepers, who informed me about it.

Figure 20: Photograph depicting construction waste. Zinc hoardings and plastic barricades line the area beneath Lornie Highway, hiding from view construction debris that contractor Swee Hong had yet to clear. Photograph taken on 17 February 2021.

Makeshift tents and altars

Despite the pressing waste management issues that are abound in BBC, the NEA seems to have its surveillance lens trained on makeshift tents in BBC. These are tents erected by tombkeepers who perform tombkeeping on a regularly basis throughout the year and need resting spots. Hun Seng had been advised by NEA officers several times to remove his tent because "it collects rainwater and will breed mosquitoes." However, he maintained that this is his makeshift shelter to rest in-between tombkeeping. It also functions as a shelter for visitors, so he saw no reason to clear it. Unfortunately, his tent collapsed in end-October 2020 due to an immense amount of accumulated rainwater from days of thunderstorms (Figure 21). I was aghast when I saw this one Saturday morning and immediately phoned Hun Seng to check if he was fine. Fortunately, he had already reached home and was safe. It took a month and help from other able-bodied tombkeepers to repair the structure and replace the tent with a new piece of canvas.

Figure 21: Hun Seng's collapsed tent

Aware of the NEA's dislike for tents, tombkeeper Ah Beng was more cautious in erecting a makeshift shelter, only doing so during Qing Ming Festival. His shelter is a simple piece of blue canvas sheet stretched out using four poles. He explained that the NEA would "catch" him if he erected his shelter during other periods as it did not justify for a shelter when one is not performing tombkeeping duties. I observed Queenie and her family taking down their makeshift tent at the end of Qing Ming Festival because they were mindful of the authorities who may come by to conduct spot checks. It was an onerous task of climbing up and down to untie the thick cords, dismantling the PVC pipes and metal poles, and folding the canvas sheets for storage until their next use. More substantiation on the topic of makeshift shelters will be addressed in the next section.

Descendant John also had a run-in with the NEA over his makeshift religious fittings erected at Hill 1. Some years ago, he had erected a four-faced Buddha statue there. It was a beautiful structure, he said, complete with "timber decking." The NEA officer who patrolled BBC on a weekly basis ("usually on Mondays") advised him to apply for a permit to put up this structure, so he did. However, his application was rejected and subsequently, NEA officers came to "stick a notice" on the statue to indicate that it had to be removed. John was very upset with NEA's rejection but had to remove the statue since he had "no choice." Tombkeeper James remembers John's Buddha statue and remarked to me in a separate conversation that "It was too showy, of course it had to go." I asked James to elaborate, and the tombkeeper said, "You

know he went to put bright yellow lights there? At night, the lights would be turned on, attract attention. Asking for trouble, isn't it?"

Although he has had run-ins with the authorities, John has not given up on personalising the space at Hill 1. His latest creation is a little orange and green hut housing a makeshift altar for wandering spirits (Figure 22). He wished to "consolidate" the wandering spirits at Hill 1 so that it would be easier for him to pray to all of them, and thus commissioned for the design and building of the hut. This creation was shipped from Malaysia to Singapore and John made a series of steps for this hut using cement. The unpleasant experience with his Buddha statue has taught John not to take ownership of this creation. He feigned ignorance when the NEA officer queried about the author of this creation. This has allowed his little hut to remain since NEA does not know the author of this creation and is unable to issue a notice for it to be removed.

Figure 22: John's makeshift altar for wandering spirits

Similarly, other makeshift altars with no known authors have remained in the cemetery, some even expanding to become more elaborate structures. Figures 23 and 24 show the makeshift altar opposite Hill 1 for the underworld deity Ksitigarbha (地藏菩萨）which had undergone a revamp within a few months of my fieldwork. The space occupied by this altar has been expanded to include a smaller side altar, a few concrete steps and slabs, as well as a better-quality housing structure for the deity. The Tibetan prayer structure located at the forked paths was also expanded over a few months to incorporate more concrete slabs to create a larger prayer space (Figures 25-27). These are visible structures at Hill 1, which is located nearest to the cemetery entrance. They could have been easily removed if the authorities dictate it to be so; yet, because there is no known author or owner of these structures, the authorities could not make anyone responsible for them. It seems like the authorities have to adhere to a certain protocol of first locating the author/owner of these structures before they can issue a notice to inform these individuals to remove the structures. Being aware of the rigid modus operandi of the authorities implies that the author/owner of these structures can bypass authorities and allow their structures to remain in situ. This harks at the loophole of *techne*, where the predictability of the government's actions can pre-empt these individuals in devising a response to avoid being penalised by the former.

Figure 23: Makeshift altar for Ksitigarbha that is perched on remnants of a felled tree. Photograph taken on 30 August 2020.

Figure 24: Enhanced makeshift altar for Ksitigarbha with cement poured over the area. Photograph taken on 15 Nov 2020.

Figure 25: Makeshift Tibetan prayer structure with tea lights placed on the concrete slabs. Photograph taken on 2 Aug 2020.

Figure 26: Expanded prayer structure with solar-powered plastic flowers that play recorded Buddhist scriptures 24/7. Photograph taken on 25 September 2020.

Figure 27: A devotee engrossed in a prayer at the Tibetan prayer structure. Note the no-entry sign and the red "Caution" sign erected nearby. Photograph taken on 17 February 2021.

Illicit activities

The ambiguity of the government's rule in BBC is further evinced with published accounts of crime in the cemetery by local mass media. In 2012, BBC was described as "notorious for crime", where "gangsters hid their *parangs* (long knives) there" and robbery was so significant that "taxi drivers avoided entering the area for fear of being robbed, opting to drop off and pick-up passengers only along Lornie Road" (The Straits Times, 2012b). The following year, BBC was reported as a place for illicit sex to occur, as in the case of a retired gynaecologist who was charged with underage sex in 2013 (AsiaOne, 2013). Stepping out of my car one morning at the usual parking space in Hill 1, I spotted two used condoms strewn carelessly on the grass patch. Exchanging notes with fellow researcher Ryan made me realise that sightings of used condoms are commonplace in that parking area, suggesting that the area was used for more than just religious practices and ancestor worship.

The government's withdrawal of regular maintenance in BBC after its closure has plunged the cemetery into a sorry state of disrepair for many years. In particular, the lack of interest to govern the cemetery grounds appropriately and assert strict controls by the authorities seems to run counter to Scott's (1998) description of a modern state that operates fastidiously on the principle of bureaucratic order to support a grand scheme of improvement plans for the well-being of the stakeholders. This situation also suggests that there are limitations to formal governance in BBC. I argue that the government has a mere 'spectral' presence in BBC, appearing randomly to remind the cemetery visitors of its existence via 'materialised documents' of signs and notices, but probably lacks executive prowess to exert control to manage the cemetery appropriately (Das, 1991:250). For the government to exhibit such disengaged behaviour in BBC is unexpected and noteworthy. Two interpretations of the government's response in managing BBC are: firstly, the neglect in the past which led to BBC becoming unkempt and overgrown with vegetation is probably tacitly accepted by the government. Another reading is that the government seems to lack sufficient *mētis*, or ground knowledge that is appropriate to respond to local contextual needs (Scott, 1998). While government officials patrol the cemetery on a regular basis, they do not seem to see or realise that the cemetery is in need of a proper waste management system. The NEA's complacent attitude towards curbing the perennial littering habit in BBC and the absence of any trash bins in BBC outside of Qing Ming Festival are an indication of the government agency's lack of *mētis*. Despite its official preach that 'Everyone has a part to play in upholding high standards of cleanliness and public health in Singapore', the NEA's reluctance to strictly enforce anti littering behaviour in BBC is contradictory (NEA, 2022).

According to the Environmental Health Act (2002), littering is considered an offence in Singapore (Figure 28):

Prohibition against throwing refuse, etc., in any public place

17.—(1) No person shall —

(a) deposit, drop, place or throw any dust, dirt, paper, ash, carcase, refuse, box, barrel, bale or any other article or thing in any public place, except in a dustbin or other receptacle provided for the deposit of refuse and rubbish;

[Act 48 of 2018 wef 01/02/2019]

(b) keep or leave any article or thing in any place where it or particles therefrom have passed or are likely to pass into any public place, except in a dustbin or other receptacle provided for the deposit of refuse and rubbish;

[Act 48 of 2018 wef 01/02/2019]

(c) dry any article of food or any other article or thing in any public place;

(d) place, scatter, spill or throw any blood, brine, noxious liquid, swill or any other offensive or filthy matter of any kind in such manner as to run or fall into any public place;

(e) beat, clean, shake, sieve or otherwise agitate any ash, hair, feathers, lime, sand, waste paper or other substance in such manner that it is carried or likely to be carried by the wind to any public place;

(f) throw or leave behind any bottle, can, food container, food wrapper, glass, particles of food or any other article or thing in any public place, except in a dustbin or other receptacle provided for the deposit of refuse and rubbish;

[Act 48 of 2018 wef 01/02/2019]

Figure 28: The Environmental Health Act (Source: NEA, 2022)

Offenders would be required to pay a fine of S$2,000 (first conviction), S$4,000 (second conviction) and S$10,000 (third or subsequent conviction). NEA officers are known to patrol BBC on a regular basis but have not issued any fines to anyone for littering and had not offered waste collection services despite evident needs and repeated requests for it by cemetery users like tombkeepers and descendants alike. In fact, on my trips to BBC, I would often find trash bags left near the cemetery entrance, visible to every passing vehicle. It is odd that the patrolling NEA officers have not taken any action despite seeing these being discarded on a regular basis. Seeing but not perceiving the actual ground circumstances in BBC is clearly atypical of the way the Singapore government manages the country. BBC has seemingly fallen out of the government's radar where maintenance and improvements to the burial site are concerned.

The village eviction exercise

In 1984, the villagers living along "the biggest spread of cemeteries from Kheam Hock and Jalan Halwa" were notified to move within the next 4-5 years by the government

because the government had plans to develop the area (Rojak Librarian, 2014a; Singapore Monitor, 1984). This clearance was part of a broader initiative from both the British colonial government and subsequently the People's Action Party (PAP) government to make way for high modernist public housing (Loh, 2009). Most villages in Singapore fell victim to the government's mass urban relocation exercise, which was premised upon the ideals of ethnic integration in a multiracial society and the development of patriotism to the newly independent Singapore nation-state (Teo *et al*, 2004). This exercise implied that everyone had to purchase public housing flats built by the government at highly subsidised prices. Each home purchase makes one a homeowner and fulfills Singapore's home ownership programme, where it is believed that home ownership can foster a sense of belonging to the new nation (The Straits Times, 2014a). This exercise fulfills the Singapore government's national development initiatives, but does it fulfil the needs of the villagers? Using the BBC village eviction exercise and a comparative example from the Brickfields resettlement project in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (Baxstrom, 2008), this section further examines the gap between Scott's (1998) concepts of *mētis* and *techne* and elaborates on the theme of assertive communication.

BBC's village eviction exercise harks at Scott's (1998) 'high modern scheme', where the government is concerned with 'securing, sustaining, and enhancing life' by removing villagers from a location in which much of their lives had grown to be intertwined together as communities that were self-sufficient and close-knit. This exercise is akin to the Brickfields resettlement project in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia which occurred from the years 2000 to 2002, spurred by the Malaysian state's desire to organise the space and demography in this neighbourhood in ways that it perceives to be satisfactory (Baxstrom, 2008). Like how the Singapore government laid claim to the space inhabited by human settlements in BBC in its attempt to move the forms of human life to civilian areas, the Malaysian state also laid claim to the residential neighbourhood in Brickfields by building the KL Sentral train station and the KL Monorail transportation network onsite (Baxstrom, 2008). Like the villagers of BBC, the residents of Brickfields were significantly affected by the Malaysian state's 'rapid and seemingly arbitrary actions in annexing land, demolishing existing structures, and relocating residents' (Baxstrom, 2008:86).

My fieldwork data has revealed that the BBC village eviction exercise is a distressing event, especially for those who embrace village life, even after the passing of so many years. Tombkeeper and former villager James said, "We are not privy to the government's policies, which change ever so often. Anytime they produce a notice, ask you to move, then you have to move. You have no means to anticipate." To ease the distress, some former villagers return to BBC to replicate some semblance of village life today. For instance, some of the former villagers who work tombkeepers in BBC have returned to the locations of their former village homes to build makeshift shelters or re-possess wooden huts that were not removed during the eviction exercise, to resume their village activities such as gardening and rearing pets. Tombkeeper Ah Beng shared that he had once reared some chickens in cages placed outside a repossessed wooden hut. However, the cages were discovered to be unlatched one morning and the chickens had escaped. During my fieldwork, I was shown the pets (fishes, tortoises, chickens) reared by former villager Ah Zuan at his older sisters' makeshift tent and in the vicinity of the *sua teng* temple (described in a later section). Some were kept out of sight such as the large, covered fish tanks, whereas the chickens' cages were clearly in sight. Tombkeeper Jason shared that NEA officers had come by to mandate the clearance of a plot of land that a tombkeeper used for gardening. The tombkeeper cleared away his plants, waited until the NEA officers stopped coming to check, and then revisited his hobby. Jason supports gardening in BBC because "there is land here, the air is fresh here, so why must we follow the government's directive to rent a plot on the rooftop of those carparks, just to plant stuff when we have all the space we need here?"

Based on loose information gathered from my fieldwork observations and online sources, it is likely that some of the former villagers had/have returned to live in the cemetery post-eviction. Charles Goh, co-founder of the Asia Paranormal Investigators (API), an interest group that had conducted night walks for the public in BBC, was filmed leading such a walk in 2013 (SPH Razor, 2013). In the video, he said, "Some say that although the village was demolished in the 1980s, there are people that (sic) still stays (sic) amongst the graves." The (in)famous 'tombhouse' or 'doghouse' that regular cemetery visitors refer to is an example of a human dwelling in BBC. It was filmed in this video, showing a pack of stray dogs keeping watch over the premises in the absence of their owner, a reclusive tombkeeper. The structure of the 'tombhouse'

is an original structure belonging to the grave of the late Mr Tan Boon Cheng, which resembles a proper house with an upper floor attic. The tombkeeper had repurposed the structure to become his makeshift shelter, and over the years, turned the area into a living environment for himself and his stray dogs. A blogpost dated 29 February 2012 by Cavin Teo shared photographs of the 'tombhouse' and speculated that the tombkeeper lived in there (Teo, 2012). Figures 29 and 30 show that the dwelling has been in continuous use despite the areas of disrepair over the years. Ryan and I visited the 'tombhouse' and were greeted by a thick miasma. It was dark, damp, and extremely cluttered in the house, with large vats of water lined along the sides and mosquitoes buzzing around. A rack of dirty-looking menswear hung untidily on a rack. Household items like a kettle and food containers were placed carelessly around. The tombkeeper sat on a rocking chair, silently observing us as he smoked his cigarette.

Figure 29: Photograph from Cavin Teo's blog dated 2012

(Source: Teo, 2012)

Figure 30: Photograph taken on 8 August 2020.

Note the use of old banners and canvas sheets

These acts of "Hokkien stubbornness", as described by former villager Tee Heong, suggest a silent contestation of a particular Chinese dialect group against the government's eviction decision. More importantly, it highlights the jarring gap between the 'local principles of life' of the former villagers versus 'formal legality' (Baxstrom, 2008). While the former villagers have no legal claim to the land in BBC, they embody the desire to reconnect with a place that they call home, and therefore apply their 'local principles and beliefs' in this site (Baxstrom, 2008). This behaviour is like the displaced Brickfields' residents, some of whom had returned to the site to erect unregistered Hindu temples (Baxstrom, 2008). However, unlike the Brickfields' residents who had voiced objections against their displacement by pointing out their exclusion by the Malaysian state from legal processes of the resettlement scheme at Brickfields, the former villagers in BBC had made no verbal contest, possibly due to their lower educational levels (see Loh, 2012a). Yet, the former villagers have asserted their desire to relive village life by re-creating the site to be similar as before. There is definitely assertive communication here since there is a silent message conveyed by the former villagers of their desire to return to a place that embodies their sense of belonging.

In Singapore, unlawful occupation of state land is chargeable in court. The relevant clause that explains this form of unlaw occupation of state land in the BBC context would be, 'Any person who unlawfully enters into possession of any State Land either by residing or erecting any building or hut or thereon by clearing, enclosing, or cultivating any part thereof' (Singapore Statues Online, 2021a). According to the State Lands Encroachment Act (1985), a warrant may be issued by the Magistrate's Court to the police empowering them to '…dispossess and remove that person from the land, and on behalf of the State to take possession of the land, together with all crops growing thereon, and all buildings and other immovable property upon and affixed thereto, and all movable property found thereon.' (Singapore Statues Online, 2021a). For trespassing state land, the culprits 'shall be liable on conviction to a fine not exceeding $5,000 or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 6 months or to both' (SSO, 2021a).

Although I had never asked these tombkeepers if they were aware of the illegality of their doings, I sense that they are aware and are prepared to defend

themselves with reasonable explanations, such as Hun Seng's refusal to remove his tent because it can function as a shelter for visitors. This is Hun Seng's local belief, whereas the NEA officers who had repeatedly advised him to remove his tent were concerned about the water accumulating in the folds of the canvas that could breed mosquitoes. Once again, there is a clash here between local beliefs and formal regulation. In fact, the creation of makeshift shelters throughout the cemetery is endemic. Cemetery hiker Michael Smith estimates that there are about 40 tents in the whole of BBC, in various sizes and conditions (personal communication with Michael Smith). These makeshift shelters support Scott's (1998) argument that 'high-modern schemes are routinely resisted' and are representative of new creations that are outcomes of the resistance (Li, 2005). These new creations embody the physical articulations of the former villagers' aspirations of their livelihood and critiques of the government and are collectively one another's allies in confronting against the state power (Li, 2005). The 'official design' of BBC as envisioned by the government was not of makeshift shelters for sure; the government had wanted to clear out every single bit of human civilization from a burial site. However, the emergence of tents all over the cemetery post-eviction demonstrate resilience from the former villagers to retain their communities and livelihood.

The government's eviction exercise of the village in BBC can be likened to a critical event described by Das (1995) since it has resulted in psychological pain and suffering because the villagers were forcibly removed from a place that they had called home. More than one former villager cum tombkeeper had shared with me on the eviction exercise without being prompted, which suggests that they had/still are collectively experiencing the sense of pain from having lost their homes, their community, social circle of friends, and livelihood. The displaced Brickfields' residents had also experienced similar, which Baxstrom (2008:133) presented in detail with descriptions like, '…their legal rights or physical persons were being literally violated in the present, but rather that the transformation of the space had shattered the link between present experience and the possibility of future action'. Das (1995) discussed pain as a medium that can be conceptualised in two ways; the medium through which society establishes its ownership over individuals, and the medium that represents a historical wrong done to an individual in terms of symptom description or memory (Das, 1995:176). I argue that both types of pain prevail amongst the former villagers.

In a bid to advance Singapore in all aspects, the state had to modernise infrastructure and people quickly and efficiently, leading to the move to high rise, high density public housing and the clearance of what was thought to be backward and non-progressive. It also resonates with how Chua (2017) had described the disavowal of liberalism in Singapore, that communitarianism should take priority over and above individual needs and preferences. Per the trajectory of critical events observed by Das (1995), new modes of action and interactions have emerged after the village eviction. The former villagers have marked their returns to BBC in forms that bear semblance to their village life, such as erecting makeshift shelters and pursuing former hobbies like gardening. These forms of resistance underscore the fact that these former villagers have never accepted the eviction exercise and do not passively submit to the exercise by staying away from the cemetery. Following Scott (1998), the village eviction exercise is a 'failed scheme' because its designers (i.e., the Singapore government and its agencies) had 'claimed an omniscience they did not have, and they did not indeed, would not- know what they were doing' (Li, 2005:387).

To be fair, not all the former villagers were displeased with the eviction exercise. Some were happy to move into public housing flats because the locations were more accessible ("We don't need to walk 30 minutes just to take a bus from the cemetery"—Madam Soh) and have less pests ("There are too many ants here, but no ants in the HDB flat" –Tombkeeper Kok Tong's wife). Living a HDB flat also ensured safety that a village in BBC could not offer. In an informal chat with me when she was visiting her ancestor's grave during Qing Ming in 2021, Madam Loh shared that she was eager to live elsewhere because she was "very scared" to live in BBC to the extent that she did not dare walk out of the hut at nightfall. Although the move to an urban living environment seemed ideal, the sense of living as a community was lost with the move because the public housing flats that were allocated were dispersed throughout different HDB estates in Singapore. Tombkeeper James shared that the village head had made a request to the government official in-charge of the eviction exercise for all of them to move to the same HDB block of flats so that they could continue to sustain their "community spirit", but their request was turned down.

Even though there was/is resentment from some of the former villagers regarding the eviction, there is evidence that the government had not evicted the

villagers without thought. Notably, the government had been sensitive to *mētis* by considering the religious needs of the villagers. The villagers' treasured *Tua Pek Kong* (Earth Deity) temple was moved with the eviction, but the smaller outfit with the same deity on the *sua teng* (mountain top) called Sin Heng San Teng Tu Di Gong Temple (or 'Heng San Teng' for short), was not. According to Hun Seng and James, the villagers used the government's compensation amounting to about S$700,000, to move their temple to Sin Ming Industrial Estate on a 26-year lease, where it is now combined with two other temples to become Lian He Gong (联合宫), or 'united temple'.

The *sua teng* temple was rebuilt by some former villagers recently (Figure 31). Although the local media had reported about this temple (e.g., The Straits Times, 2016), I was told that it would be best not to reveal the geographical coordinates of this temple so that it would remain under the government's radar. This 'open secret' label perturbs me a lot, as local journalists had been brought to the temple and photographs onsite were also published. While walking to the *sua teng* temple, I noticed that some tall trees had been marked with small round number tags. Ah Zuan explained that that the National Parks Board had come to inspect the trees, and this is a regular procedure. Surely the government knows of the existence of the temple during their inspections?

Fig 31: (Left) Heng Sang Teng before refurbishment. Photograph taken in 2012 by CK Ng (Ng, 2012). (Right) Heng Sang Teng after refurbishment. Photograph taken on 23 February 2020.
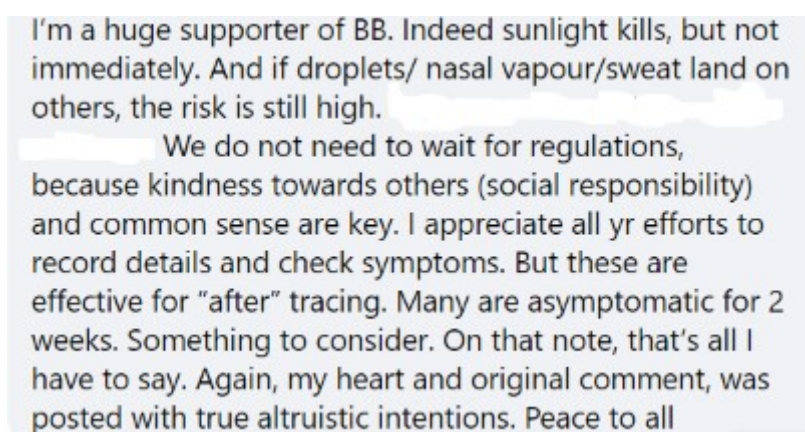
I believe that the government has been made even more aware of the *sua teng* temple based on a recent event that occurred here. Cemetery visitor Brice Li had posted on the Bukit Brown Cemetery Facebook group on 26 March 2021 about an entourage of 11 NEA officers that had visited in response to a complaint lodged by a member of the public on possible mosquito breeding grounds at the temple's premise (Figure 32). According to Brice, an entourage came because officers brought other officers to familiarise themselves with this location. Most members of the said Facebook group expressed anger at the complainant because inviting officers from a government agency to check on a 'secret' temple is akin to shortening the fate of the temple. One of the comments received aptly summed up the unnecessary need for the complaint, "Removing mosquitos from a forested area is like removing salt from the sea."

Figure 32: Screenshot of Facebook post by Brice Li
(Permission for reposting granted by Brice Li)

Governance during the Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic struck Singapore in January 2020 which prompted the government to implement a slew of infection risk prevention measures (further details in Chapter 2). atBB had conducted guided walks during Dorscon Yellow and Dorscon Orange periods where large group gatherings were allowed.[16] Although no government sanction was levied upon their walks and atBB had taken the government's social distancing guidelines into consideration while planning for the walks, it still received backlash from some members of the public in response to their post-walk photographs that were posted in the 'Heritage Singapore- Bukit Brown Cemetery's Facebook group. A screenshot of a disapproving comment is reproduced in Figure 33:

> I'm a huge supporter of BB. Indeed sunlight kills, but not immediately. And if droplets/ nasal vapour/sweat land on others, the risk is still high.
>
> We do not need to wait for regulations, because kindness towards others (social responsibility) and common sense are key. I appreciate all yr efforts to record details and check symptoms. But these are effective for "after" tracing. Many are asymptomatic for 2 weeks. Something to consider. On that note, that's all I have to say. Again, my heart and original comment, was posted with true altruistic intentions. Peace to all

Figure 33: Screenshot of the disapproving comment in Facebook

(Permission for reposting granted by Facebook group administrator, Raymond Goh)

Two atBB volunteers with legal backgrounds immediately responded to the disapproving comments (Figure 34) while supporters of atBB's guided walks mitigated the tense situation by offering objective takes. A screenshot of a comment written by a participant of that said guided walk is an example (Figure 35).

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[16] Refer to Footnote 12 in Chapter 1 for an explanation of these terms.

Thank you for your concern.

The current government guidelines are for a maximum of 250. Perhaps you're mixing it up with the French lockdown maximum of 5?

We are in the open air, and participants have been given the usual briefings about staying away if unwell etc. We also collect details for contact tracing if need be.

In any case participation is voluntary: some have chosen not to go.

We understand people's concern and hence when we organised the tours today, we took the following precautions-

a A msg was sent all registered participants to not come if anyone is feeling unwell.
b we did contact tracing by recording all Partipants' names and phone number on the spot
c at introduction to bb, we reminded all to keep social distancing during the tour
d we ensured that all tombs and locations we stopped to talk have enough space to social distancing.

Figure 34: Screenshot of Facebook comments from atBB volunteers
(Permission for reposting granted by Facebook group administrator, Raymond Goh)

Just my 2 cents worth. I went for the guided tour the day before. Throughout the tour, I did not come in physical contact with anyone, did not share any food or drinks. Though there was no instructions to stay at least 1m apart from each other, we were pretty spaced out since there was obviously lots of space.

I believe the volunteer guides are doing their best and I would think this is considered low risk activity, compared to activities like kids', enrichment class, crowd at supermarket, queue for some new coconut drink, eating at crowded restaurant, going to gym etc.

From how concerned the guides were about our safety during the two walks I have been on, I would think the BB guides would have cancelled all walks if the risks outweigh the benefits.

Perhaps what could have been better done is to include a declaration form to declare travel in the last 15days and if feeling unwell? Or a temperature check?

Figure 35: Screenshot of comment by a participant from the guided walk (Permission for reposting granted by Facebook group administrator, Raymond Goh)

Singapore underwent a nationwide lockdown in early April 2020 to curb the spread of the Covid-19 virus (Government of Singapore, 2020d). This lockdown coincided with the annual Qing Ming Festival which falls in April. During this month, descendants are expected to visit their ancestors to conduct ancestor worship rituals. The lockdown meant that alternative forms of ancestor worship had to be pursued in lieu of conducting the usual worship practices at ancestral tablet halls, temples, and columbaria (The Straits Times, 2020b). An experimental short film that was filmed locally by an online magazine called 'Not Safe for TV' offered a fresh perspective on how the dead were affected by the lockdown that was caused by the pandemic (Not

Safe for TV, 2020). It suggests that netherworld beings have emotional needs that extend beyond necessities like paper clothes, food, and money, that need to be met during Qing Ming (Not Safe for TV, 2020). It also posits that emotional support is bi-directional between the living and the dead, as opposed to conventional thought that only the descendants need to rely on their ancestors for advice and blessings every Qing Ming (Not Safe for TV, 2020).

The interviews that I had conducted with descendants and tombkeepers from BBC on their participation on ancestor worship during the lockdown evinced some unexpected information. Whilst majority chose to adhere to the lockdown measures, a minority decided to continue with ancestor worship onsite. Descendant John, who had several run-ins with NEA officers previously, was adamant that he should continue with ancestor worship despite the lockdown. While cleaning his late uncle's grave at Hill 2, he and his Indonesian helper were stopped by a patrolling police car, whose police officers demanded for their identity cards. John said that the police officers were especially cautious in making sure that his Indonesian helper had shared the same residential address as John on her work permit card, as persons from different households were disallowed to mingle during the lockdown. Despite the police check, John continued to return to the cemetery daily during the lockdown because he did not want to while away time at home watching "movie after movie." As Qing Ming Festival is the primary avenue from which income can be earned by the tombkeepers, they had to be creative to ensure continued income despite the lockdown. Ah Beng and his brothers continued to commute from home to BBC daily during the lockdown, even though they were aware that they were not classified as 'essential workers' by the government (Today, 2020). The three brothers unanimously felt that Qing Ming is an important event that should not be missed, pandemic or not. Therefore, they offered valet tombsweeping services to descendants who were unable to visit due to the lockdown by purchasing food and paper offerings based on instructions from these clients and performing ancestor worship on their behalf at the graves of their ancestors.

Findings from an Italian study that examined the impacts from selected governments' marginalisation of psycho-physiological process of grief and bereavement during the Covid-19 pandemic could be applicable to the BBC

experience during Singapore's national lockdown due to Covid-19 (Diolaiuti et al, 2021). According to the study, restriction measures imposed by some governments during the pandemic to mourning rituals can have a stressful impact on the next-of-kin, leading possibly to complicated grief (CG) syndrome and persistent complex bereavement disorder (PCBD) (Diolaiuti et al, 2021). Of course, the case examples cited related to deaths from Covid-19 hence the recent demise of loved ones could have led to CG and PCBD. However, the deceased in BBC have been long dead for almost a century, which probably suggests that the impacts of restriction measures on the coping mechanisms for grief and bereavement amongst the next-of-kin could be lower but not entirely non-existent. Thus, findings from Diolaiuti et al's (2021) study raise the possibility that persistence in performing ancestor worship during Singapore's national lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic could be signs of grief and bereavement (such as descendant John's case) or expressions of Chinese cultural beliefs of filial piety in line with Confucianism, as in Ah Beng and his brothers' provision of a valet tombsweeping service (see Fong and Chow, 2018). The experience of ancestor worship during the Covid-19 pandemic in Singapore brings to fore the need for the Singapore government to pay closer attention to balancing the cultural needs of the populace (in this case, performing ancestor worship) against the paradigms of risk containment and infection control during a global pandemic.

Post-lockdown, life slowly returned to normal in BBC like the social life in other parts of Singapore. As the Singapore government progressively opened the economy in phases, allowing increasing numbers of individuals to dine together in public and visit the homes of others (Government of Singapore, 2020c), so did the crowds at BBC. atBB's volunteers resumed their guided walks after receiving official approval from the Ministry of Trade and Industry in consultation with the Singapore Tourism Board (STB). According to Raymond Goh, ten volunteers including himself were granted licences to lead free guided walks at BBC as long as they adhere to the safe management measures for tours (STB, 2020). Volunteer Darren conducted the first guided walk with these measures implemented. He prepared hand sanitisers, a handheld thermometer, an attendance list, ten portable radio devices and a portable microphone for himself. He required participants to bring their own earpiece set to connect to his radio devices and brought spare earpiece sets for sale at S$2 each in case participants forgot to bring their own. I had volunteered to help Darren distribute

his radio devices at the start of the walk and collect them when the walk was concluded. Darren was very cautious to the extent that he required me to sanitise my hands before touching his radio devices and brought another cloth bag to contain the used radio devices so that he could sanitise them individually after he got home. The attendance list had to be submitted to STB after each walk, which meant that the volunteers had to be very strict on the number of participants, turning away individuals who did not sign up prior.

When it came to atBB co-founder Claire's turn to lead a guided walk, she was confronted with two Safe Distancing Ambassadors (SDAs) or, officers employed to remind the public to wear their masks and maintain a safe distance from one another in public places (Government of Singapore, 2020e). Darren, who was helping Claire take attendance, whispered urgently to me that there were SDAs around when I arrived and that I should be careful. The presence of the SDAs kept Claire on high alert, and she continuously reminded participants to keep one metre apart from one another and not remove their masks. The SDAs lingered around as Claire conducted her walk, and according to Claire, had taken photographs of the group from behind. After Claire led us into the depths of Hill 1, the SDAs let off and left. Standing in the thick of the jungle, Claire heaved a sigh of relief and removed her mask to drink from her water bottle, urging the rest of the group to do the same. She was visibly disturbed for the rest of the walk as she speculated on who had engaged the SDAs to come by to conduct the surveillance work. At the subsequent walk conducted for a group of students, Claire used a portable speaker and headset to address the group. When I asked for her experience on using the devices, Claire shared that she "got entangled with the headset, the strap of my hat and the strap of my mask plus my spectacles!!" She commented that the group would have to spend more on such portable devices when delivering guided walks and lamented on the number of interested individuals who had to miss out on the walks due to the cap on the participation.

Apart from conducting spot checks on atBB's guided walk, the government had also implemented random police patrols at BBC. Arriving one Saturday morning at BBC, I saw a large group of individuals walking on the footpath. Later, I heard from atBB volunteer Jonathan who was also onsite that day, that the group was caught by a patrolling police car for violating safe distancing measures. There were 11 of them

when the permissible number was five during Phase 1 (Government of Singapore, 2020c). Identity cards were checked, and names taken down by the police, according to Jonathan.

Despite the random police patrols, mask wearing is an uncommon sight in BBC.[17] Returning to my fieldsite when it was permissible to do so, I tried to keep my mask on whenever possible, even though the humid conditions discouraged me. I looked like an anomaly because the rest of the cemetery visitors and tombkeepers did not wear masks.[18] I was glad that I had my mask on one Monday morning because Ah Ahn and a former villager who was visiting (Ah Liong) were spitting randomly at Hun Seng's tent. This happened before Hun Seng arrived on his bicycle to meet me for a chat. I sat on a bench a distance from the two men and was appalled at their unhygienic behaviour. When Hun Seng arrived without his mask, the two men stopped spitting and came to chat together. As Ah Liong came to chat loudly facing Hun Seng, I quickly made my move as I was not sure if Ah Liong was genuinely ill (hence the spitting) or had a habit of clearing his throat often.

Conclusion

Who rules using whose rules in BBC? This question may be answered if BBC is perceived in phases. During the period when BBC was open for burials, the municipal government ruled by maintaining an active and consistent management of the cemetery in terms of allocating burial plots, keeping a burial register, regular maintenance of the site, and provision of public goods to the villages nestled within. This can be described as the 'rational mode' of state regulation (Das, 1991:225). Things took a turn after the closure of BBC, with the types of governance at BBC becoming varied and ad-hoc with an intermingling of roles from government and non-government actors. The intermingling also depicts the 'magical presence' of the government, which is evinced via the inconsistent sanctions by the government on the

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[17] Mask wearing is mandatory in Singapore even with the easing of regulations as the economy opens. If caught in public without a mask for the first time, a person would be fined S$300 (The Straits Times, 2020c).
[18] According to the Covid-19 Temporary Measures Act 2020, it is mandatory for every individual to wear a mask at all times when not in his/her ordinary place of residence, except when engaging in strenuous exercise, which is defined as 'jogging or running but not walking' (SSO, 2020c)

local practices such as the erection of tents and makeshift altars as well as the misappropriation of state land for personal uses such as gardening (Das, 1991:226). There are rules by the government to be adhered to, but they can be negotiated or ignored in favour of the local practices because there are no consequences for disobeying. Here, the theme of assertive communication is demonstrated, where individuals openly defy formal rules or establish their own rules to proclaim their rights to the site or as silent protests against the government. The instances of intermingling confirm that BBC is a margin of the state where 'the state is continually both experienced and undone through the illegibility of its own practices, documents, and words' (Asad, 2004:279). Like other margins of the state in Das and Poole's (2004) edited volume, BBC's margin evinces a reconfiguration of spaces that reflect the needs of the users in BBC. While community initiatives have endeavoured to clean the site, the large expanse of the cemetery inhibits the efficiency of such attempts. As BBC is state land, the government is expected to address the prevailing problems that the stakeholders have highlighted, such as the perennial problem of waste management. Ironically, the government has failed to notice these such jarring issues despite their regular patrols, which makes the government's role in BBC illegible. Scott's (1998) concept of *mētis* is demonstrated in several instances relating to environmental maintenance and infrastructural maintenance in BBC, a chief concern being the absence of waste management onsite. The government's technocratic and rational processes of approaching issues using simplistic administrative methods, or *techne*, have failed to address the gaps in public service provision in the cemetery (Scott, 1998). The experience of BBC makes it a clear candidate as a margin of the state where illegibility and formal governance inter-mingle. Furthermore, BBC's experience resounds with Das and Poole's (2004) argument that populations at the margins of the state are not always successful in prodding the state to respond to 'their notions of justice or the common good' (Das and Poole, 2004:22). Moreover, the experience of BBC underscores the theme of governance, where the malleability of governance is evinced when formal rules are sidestepped, ignored, or replaced with informal rules. The situations in which formal rules and informal rules intermingle suggest the malleability of governance in BBC.

BBC's village eviction exercise is a signifier of the Singapore government's desire to embrace national development plans, in terms of improving the standard of

living amongst the populace and modernising the living environment. Although the villagers were rehoused in public housing flats, the government's eviction exercise can be considered a reflection of the government's failure in its grand scheme of plans for national development because of the return of many former villagers to BBC to relive and recreate village life. In aspiring to modernise, the Singapore government had done away with many vestiges of lifestyles that it deems to be contrary to national development plans. Switching from an agricultural to industrial economy was one goal that the government pursued, thus villages that were agricultural in nature and occupied valuable land space were phased out in the nation's transition plan (BBC News, 2021). The revisitation of their former village hobbies such as rearing pets and gardening using state land, with nary a care in violating the rules concerning the use of state land, speaks of a silent revolt against the government's intended national development plan and an assertion of their perceived rights to the land. This exercise is a realistic demonstration of a 'high modern scheme' described by Scott (1998) that has failed owing to conflicts in the government's limited knowledge of *mētis* with the government's simplified administrative approaches of *techne*. To this end, Li's (2005) critique of Scott's (1998) analysis of the 'high modern scheme' aptly describes the BBC's experience.

The experience of the Singapore government attempting to govern BBC during the Covid-19 pandemic in Singapore emphasises the already controversial governance situation in BBC. While the government had attempted to assert its authority by stepping up onsite policing and conducting spot checks, it could only wield control in those moments. In fact, the large expanse of the cemetery implies that infection control measures like mask-wearing and social distancing measures could be easily disregarded without penalty since it would be impossible to govern the entire cemetery down to every nook and cranny. The national lockdown that coincided with the annual Qing Ming Festival in April 2020 had evidently cast restrictions on the performance of ancestor worship by descendants. While most people had adhered to the government's lockdown directions, the resistance by a few in BBC suggest that formal governance is never all-encompassing; individual beliefs about the cultural importance of ancestor worship and the liberty to visit the cemetery may still triumph at the end of the day. The lockdown situation also illuminates the need for the government to practise sensitivity in the subjective areas of kinship and familial bonds

especially during an annual occasion that encourages reconnection within the family unit between descendants and ancestors. Here, the overarching theme of the Covid-19 pandemic's influence on the cultural beliefs and practices of a particular ethnic group is highlighted. While the government has enforced strict restrictions against visitations in temples and columbaria, BBC has remained opened throughout and therefore becomes a liberalised avenue for individual interpretations of how the pandemic could restrict one's embracement of his cultural beliefs and practices. The insistence of a minority of individuals to perform ancestor worship during the national lockdown suggests that the valuation of Chinese cultural beliefs in caring for the dead and the importance and endurance of the extended family unit that includes dead kin, a positive takeaway from the pandemic.

The arbitrariness of the government's role enmeshed with the active and burgeoning role of non-government actors in BBC lead one to wonder if the government is 'truly legible' and the non-government actors' role as 'illegible' (see Nelson, 2004). Could the government have adopted a relaxed approach to maintaining BBC because it will eventually be cleared for residential housing development? Or, could there be genuine challenges in governing such a large area, that it becomes necessary to allow for the infiltration of non-government actors to upkeep the site? Regardless, this chapter has evinced that BBC is 'wild' in many senses of the word—it is a site that operates on its own devised rules and a hotspot for illegality to fester.

CHAPTER THREE

MATERIAL WEALTH AND ASSOCIATED RELATIONS IN BBC

8 December 2020: I was invited to tombkeeper Ah Beng and his brothers' (Ah Zai and Ah Kiat) work commencement or 'kai gong'(开工) prayers. The prayers 'inform' the netherworld spirits or 'Good Brothers' that the brothers would commence tomb cleaning in preparation for Qing Ming Festival [19]. Ah Beng had prepared two large plastic bags of paper offerings. "Are these what you plan to burn?" Ah Beng nodded. Suddenly, I felt embarrassed with my two small stacks of incense paper or kimzua (金 纸) because they seemed too little compared to the two bags of Ah Beng's. When Ah Beng poured the contents, I saw gold and silver incense paper, various types of hell notes in very large denominations, gold and silver paper cardboard bars, purple and dark green paper clothes, and a huge bunch of pale-yellow long strips of paper. "That's...a lot of money!" I exclaimed. "Tell the 'Good Brothers' that you have money for them, ask them to come and take," Ah Zai advised as I knelt to offer three joss sticks for the prayer session. The amount of paper products to be burnt was so immense that the brothers had to make 'air pockets' by stacking the pieces in a circle, leaving the middle of the circle empty so that all could be burnt easily.

This chapter explores the conceptualisations of material wealth in BBC. I examine how material wealth is conceived, perceived, represented, and transacted amongst the ancestors, netherworld spirits, tombkeepers, and descendants. Using Bill Maurer's typology of money, I investigate the types of monetary transactions and the cultural meanings behind these transactional orders (Maurer, 2006; Parry and Bloch, 1989). All monetary figures involved are in Singapore Dollars, except those stated on the hell notes.[20] The previous chapter explained how spaces in the cemetery are organised using both formal and informal modes of governance. In this chapter, I use fieldwork

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[19] 'Netherworld spirits' is a broad term used that refers to adult and child spirits as well as animal and plant spirits that wander about in the mortal world. These spirits had died unnatural /violent/untimely deaths (see Tong, 2004 for an elaboration and Toulson, 2012 for Singaporean-Chinese examples) or had been abandoned or forgotten by their descendants, rendering them as hungry and vengeful in nature (see Graham, 2020 and Feuchtwang 2010 for substantiations).

[20] A ballpark estimate of £1 in Singapore Dollars is S$1.66 (as on 11 December 2022, from www.xe.com).

data to argue that material wealth is the primary means of organising relations amongst the key stakeholders.

Anthropological understandings of material wealth are abound in literature. In Melanesia, the prototypical Melanesian leader called 'The Big Man' is described to amass 'prestige goods' that constitute his 'wealth', such as shell money and yam, which he would redistribute subsequently (Lindstrom, 2010:80). In native North American cultures, products of female labour such as textiles are considered 'wealth', which can be attained if the skills of females could be learnt and perfected (Pine, 2010:326). Strathern's (1988) Mount Hagen example listed women as 'wealth' that constituted the material for marriage transactions (Pine, 2010:327). The Nayaka hunter-gatherers from South India are said to accumulate 'cash wealth' from craft work, wage labour, and government transfer payments (Bird-David, 1992; Riches, 2010:365). These distinct understandings of material wealth imply endless conceptualisations, where each can be explained with the ethnographic context at hand. In BBC, material wealth assumes forms under two themes of abundance and extravagance, which will be explored in detail.

Maurer's (2006) typology of money explicates the notion of money by presenting it in different denominations and use-values in a variety of spheres. Money does not merely refer to the conventional and dominant 'modern, capitalist money' that possesses 'uniscalar valuation' (Kelly, 1992) and 'universal commodification' (Taussig, 1980). In contrast, there exists 'non-modern money' or, money that are used in pre-modern/traditional societies (Appadurai, 1986). Such money has its value established upon distinctions of gender, rank, age, and status (Maurer, 2006:21). In contemporary societies, the 'modern, capitalist money' is also the 'general-purpose money' that fulfills several functions and is used in many spheres of exchange (Maurer, 2006:20). In specific spheres of exchange though, 'special-purpose money' (Bohannan, 1959) can be utilised to perform one to two functions in limited ways (Maurer, 2006:20). There is also a denomination of money that is not money per se. This refers to transactions that do not involved 'the intervention of money, such as goodwill (Melitz, 1970). In this chapter, we will discuss different types of money that are either used in the formal economy in our mortal world or considered legal tender in the netherworld.

Theme of abundance

The theme of abundance in material wealth had emerged during my fieldwork observations of the 7th lunar month (or Hungry Ghosts' Festival) and Qing Ming (or the annual Chinese tombsweeping festival). Tombkeepers in BBC typically conduct prayer sessions during these festivals to bestow large quantities of material wealth to the netherworld spirits.[21] Concurrently, they also aspire towards achieving abundant earnings from lottery buying and tombkeeping. This section first discusses abundance accruing to the netherworld spirits, followed by the aspiration towards abundance amongst the tombkeepers.

Abundance and netherworld spirits

My first encounter with substantial material wealth had occurred on 1 September 2020, when I was invited by tombkeeper Hun Seng to his 7th lunar month prayer session for the netherworld spirits. This month-long festival acknowledges their existence with significant prestations of paper and food offerings. Netherworld spirits, also referred to as 'ghosts' or *gui* (鬼), are liminal beings that are 'not yet remembered ritually or respectfully', resulting in them being described as 'unhappy ghosts' and 'the pitiable dead' (Scott, 2007; Feuchtwang, 2010). Giving offerings to them is 'a pious act of charity' to satisfy their needs so that they would not cause harm to anyone (Scott, 2007:95). Kwon (2007) elucidates further on the 'intimate association between ghosts and money' in Vietnam, where ghosts are believed to be 'richly grievous' compared to the ancestors which necessitates the act of 'money-burning accompanied by small prayers…to lessening their wealth of grievance' (Kwon, 2007:86). It is interesting that Kwon (2007) describes the ghosts' grievance using terms commonly associated with material wealth and how mortal world money has a 'positive, ultimate value' because it is paradoxically able to 'emancipate' the ghost once the money is converted to 'true money' (Kwon, 2007:86). As intriguing as this series of conversion of different sorts of wealth sounds, Kwon (2007) does not delve further into the mechanics of this

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[21] A third Chinese festival held at BBC is also said to involve abundant material wealth offered to the netherworld spirits. Called the Winter Clothing Festival, this festival occurs in November and is conducted by a temple group, Xuan Jiang Dian. Refer to Introduction for a detailed overview of this festival.

conversion and how 'true money' results. A later section in this chapter titled 'The transformative quality of fire' addresses this conversion in detail.

"Come for lunch, there will be a lot of food and a lot of things to see," offered Hun Seng when I visited him at his makeshift tent for a chat on 30 August 2020. Two days later, I arrived at his tent at 1pm and was immediately ushered in to offer incense to *Tua Pek Kong* (or Earth Deity) at the inner tent. The Earth Deity was fully hidden from view because thick stacks of *kimzua* were placed in front of the statue as offerings. Food offerings also occupied the altar, including a whole roast duck and a huge pineapple. Nearby, another altar table was set up for the netherworld spirits, which was full of food offerings too. There were a whole roast pig, roast duck and roast chicken, a tray of large fruits, a big bunch of bananas, Chinese dumplings, assorted Chinese cakes, and another tray with uncooked rice grains and sweets.[22] After I had finished taking photographs of these, Hun Seng beckoned me to another table where he had some boxes of packed lunch. I declined to eat as I had eaten at home already. However, I sat with Hun Seng as he enjoyed a delicious smelling packet of seafood *horfun* (Chinese flat rice noodles stir fried in gravy) while observing the prayer session conducted by the Taoist priest. While chanting, the Taoist priest threw the cakes and some fruits to the ground. The thrown fruits were left in situ. Later, I learnt from Hun Seng that the fruits were thrown for the netherworld spirits to 'collect' and would not be 'wasted'. The sheer amount of food offerings for the netherworld spirits and the way the fruits were offered to them suggest that money is not the only instrument of emancipation from their 'grief' (following Kwon, 2007) or the only basis for extending charity by the tombkeepers. There could be another interpretation: the act of playing host to the netherworld spirits by offering excessive amounts of food to the guest (see Boylston, 2018), which will be analysed later in this section.

After the Taoist priest had finished his chanting, I was asked to join the other tombkeepers outside the tent. I saw a circular structure built from stacks of *kimzua* (akin to the structure built by Ah Beng and his brothers) and was told that these would be burnt for the netherworld spirits. The tombkeepers took turns to throw loose *kimzua*

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[22] Chinese cakes refer to sweet or savoury snacks that are baked or steamed and are made from glutinous rice, coconut and palm sugar. They are unique desserts in the Singaporean food culture (NHB, 2021b).

into the structure before lighting a fire. Someone passed me a stack of light-yellow rectangular *kimzua* and told me to throw the stack high up in the air when beckoned by the Taoist priest, then shout "*Huat ah!*"[23]. While waiting, I tried to fan out the stack like an expert but looked more like a novice peeling piece by piece. Then the cue came, "*Huat ah!*" I shouted, following the rest of the tombkeepers as I threw the stack of papers up as high up as possible.[24] The circular structure of incense paper was then lit, and the tombkeepers shouted "*Huat ah!*". After the structure was burnt to ashes, they moved to the front of the tent to burn *kimzua* for *Tua Pek Kong*. "Here, take this stack and put it into the fire, so *Tua Pek Kong* knows that you are contributing some money too," said tombkeeper James, thrusting a small stack of *kimzua* in my hands. I stepped forward and everyone stepped aside to let me have a turn. I peeled off a few sheets at a go and placed them into the burning fire. Thereafter, James poured a bottle of Chinese rice wine around the burning pile and announced that we were done (Figure 36).

Figure 36: Photograph depicting the process of scattering incense paper around a burning pile of incense paper

The completion of the prayer session meant that the food offerings could be cut and distributed amongst the tombkeepers. Each tombkeeper had contributed some money so he was eager to bring back his rightful portion of food offerings. James took the initiative to cut and distribute these. Hun Seng took a duck drumstick and insisted

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[23] 'Huat' stands for 'prosperity' in Hokkien. To shout 'Huat ah' is to emphasise on prosperity or all things good that should be enjoyed by the givers and the recipients of the paper offerings.
[24] Some types of paper offerings are not burnt but are scattered on the ground. See Scott (2007) for a detailed explanation on the practices of paper burning.

that I should eat it on the spot, but I declined as I was unsure about consuming food that had been set out in the open for so long. Then, he insisted that I accept a sizeable portion of roast pork, some Chinese cakes, buns, and dumplings. I politely declined, explaining that I should not partake as I did not contribute any money. As the host, Hun Seng pretended to be angry with me for rejecting his food offers. I learnt from my casual chat with Hun Seng subsequently that he had not broken even with the contributions from the tombkeepers. Some tombkeepers had not paid their sufficient shares and were trying to fleece him, he claimed. He became visibly upset and vowed not to organise prayer sessions in the future. In a small voice, I repeated that I had not contributed anything, so I felt that it was unfair for me to partake in the apportioned food offerings. Hun Seng immediately retorted, "No! You are my friend. When I say that the items are for you, they are for you. You don't have to worry about not having contributed any money." I recoiled slightly in my seat in surprise at his sudden declaration of me being his "friend" and wondered aloud about our "friendship". "Yes, I find that we can chat well, so that makes us friends," came his reply.[25]

At the work commencement prayers organised by Ah Beng and his brothers on 8 December 2020, I asked Ah Beng, "Why do you need to *bai* (pray, or conduct prayers)?" "So that we can pray for safety and protection", came his reply. This objective resounds with Tong's (2004) observation that rituals are performed because individual/collective participants expect to 'get something out of it' (Tong, 2004:7). Ah Beng had not expected me to make any contributions, but I thought I should since I did not want to turn up empty-handed like how I did at Hun Seng's 7th lunar month prayer session. Prior to attending this session, I was ignorant of the rationale behind the tombkeepers' hospitality to the netherworld spirits since they were not considered ancestors and thus did not seem to fit into the cultural rubric of Qing Ming (Feuchtwang, 2010).[26] However, Ah Beng explained that it is customary to conduct prayers to the netherworld spirits prior to and after Qing Ming Festival due to two reasons. Firstly, the BBC tombkeepers believe that netherworld spirits need to be appeased before tomb cleaning begins to ensure a smooth sailing workflow. Netherworld spirits are believed to harm tombkeepers during their work if their collective presence is not acknowledged. What harm could netherworld spirits cause?

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[25] See Introduction for my discussion on friendships forged in the field.
[26] See Chapter 4 for a detailed description of Qing Ming.

I was befuddled at first but after observing Ah Beng and his brothers clean graves, I figured out why. The work is onerous involving potential risks of injury from the thorny and unruly vegetation, the blades of the portable grass mowing machine, and venomous insects—harm which may be authored by the spirits. The second reason is to inform and seek blessings and protection from the Earth Deity. He is important to the tombkeepers because their work revolves around the ground, where they would have to maneuver via the uneven terrain, trudge through muddy or waterlogged soil during wet weather, pluck, cut, mow, and sweep away cut vegetation, leaves, and branches from the ground. In fact, for every prayer session conducted, the Earth Deity is the priority; the tombkeepers pray to him first and he receives the paper offerings before the netherworld spirits. Such a sequence indicates that prayer sessions are never conducted solely for the netherworld spirits though they are described as such by the tombkeepers.

Although the food offerings for the netherworld spirits and the Earth Deity provided by Ah Beng and his brothers were humble (Figure 37), the paper offerings were in abundance. Through helping Ah Beng unwrap the plastic wrappers from the paper offerings in his plastic bags (Figure 38), I witnessed the quantity and variety of material wealth that were prepared for this prayer session. Apart from *kimzua*, there were different types of hell notes in varying denominations, designs, and sizes, gold and silver bars made of cardboard, as well as miniscule paper clothes in purple and dark green for child spirits. I learnt from Ah Beng that there were 'many types of money' that were in circulation in the netherworld therefore there was a need to offer every possible type so that each netherworld spirit could receive something useful. The *kimzua* was referred to as the 'traditional' type of netherworld money, whereas the colourful hell notes were the 'modern' types (see Scott, 2007). Only one type of *kimzua* is suitable to be offered to the Earth Deity (and other deities, wherever applicable), which is the thin rectangular incense paper with a gold-coloured foil depicting three figures. These distinctions in money for the dead are like the different types of paper offerings offered to deities, lesser deities, ancestors, and ghosts by the Chinese in Hong Kong (Scott, 2007) as well as the Vietnamese ghost money described by Kwon (2007) which encompasses the *Do La* currency, or replicas of the Vietnamese Dong and the *giang vang bac*, or traditional ritual money. Regardless of the type of paper offering, paper offerings in general are considered 'crucial to all forms of worship' in

Chinese culture (Scott, 2007:26). This stems from the cultural belief that 'large quantities of money' are required upon the deceased's soul's arrival in the netherworld for payment to creditors and/or the King of Hell for debts incurred by the deceased (see De Groot, 1892).

Figure 37: Offerings made to the netherworld spirits comprising two packets of duck meat with white rice (left) and the Earth Deity comprising of a packet of tea leaves and netherworld candy (right).

Figure 38: An assortment of paper offerings

The abundance of material wealth became amplified at the three post-Qing Ming prayer sessions for netherworld spirits conducted by tombkeepers. I had observed that not only were there exaggerated amounts and varieties of paper offerings compared to Ah Beng's work commencement prayer session, there were also immense quantities and varieties of food offerings. My first observation was on 12 April 2021 at Ah Beng and his brothers' prayer session. Out of courtesy, I asked Ah Beng if I should contribute something. He said it was not necessary but was alright with my suggestion of contributing some *kimzua*. I decided to bring four small stacks of *kimzua*, an increase of two more stacks this time. However, my contribution seemed miserly *again* when I saw three *cartons* of paper offerings prepared by the brothers. The brothers created a knee-high six-tier ring of *kimzua* with the middle chockful of paper clothes, shoes, hats, and colourful printed hell notes (Figure 39). I was aghast when I saw the stack of one-metre long colourful hell notes each with a denomination of $1 trillion dollars. "So many zeros!" I stared hard at it, running my fingers over the first piece (Figure 40).

Figure 39: A six-tier ring formation created out of incense papers with other types of paper offerings filling up the space in the centre

Figure 40: A $1 trillion dollar note that is about one metre in length

The scale of Queenie and her family's prayer session held on 25 April 2021 was equally mind-blowing like Ah Beng and his brothers' (Figure 41). Not only did they prepare *twenty* large bags of paper offerings that were folded into ingots and lotuses, they had also cooked rice and *chap chye* (a dish of mixed vegetables with gravy) onsite, purchased roasted meats and *bao* (Chinese buns), *and* prepared a generous plate of snacks and mini packet drinks for the child spirits.[27] Once again, my contribution of *eight* stacks of *kimzua* seemed miserly! The family had also purchased a variety of fancy candles and joss sticks for the session, such as a pair of candles in

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[27] Folded paper ingots are believed contain greater value than unfolded *kimzua* (see details at NHB, 2021c)

gold with dragon motifs, joss sticks that were completely encased in gold glitter, and several lotus shaped candles. "Wow, it's a buffet!" I exclaimed when I saw the hearty spread. Queenie immediately shushed me. I returned a quizzical look and asked her why I could not verbalise that. Queenie explained that it was disrespectful to say that the spread was a buffet for the humans to partake. "It's not for us to eat. We are giving them food to enjoy," she clarified. In fact, Queenie and her family as well as other tombkeepers did partake in the spread after the prayers though I could understand that she had wanted to play host to the netherworld spirits and thus wanted to clarify that the offerings were solely meant for them.

Figure 41: Queenie's elaborate prayer session with offerings of fruits, cooked food, beverages and large bags of paper offerings

After Queenie and family had set the paper offerings on fire, I took my leave and hurried over to tombkeeper Ah Hong's tent to observe his prayer session. Ah Hong had not begun proper when I arrived so I could observe his preparations. Although his prayer items were modest compared to Queenie's, he had embraced variety by paying attention to details such as the composition of netherworld spirits and their respective wants/needs. For the paper offerings, Ah Hong had purchased paper shoes for the child spirits in gender-specific blue and pink colours. Male adult spirits would receive tobacco products, shoes, and clothes, while female adult spirits would enjoy an assortment of paper cosmetics, shoes, and clothes. Two luxury sedan cars were also included. In addition, there were offerings of *kimzua*, hell notes, gold and silver bars and coins of various denominations. I spotted some hell notes that resembled the

iconic US Dollars green bills, except that the King of Hades' face was the centrepiece on each bill.

Ah Hong explained that his choice of food offerings is partly influenced by the knowledge he had gained from attending religious classes at a temple. For example, he had learnt that some netherworld spirits consume raw food. Therefore, he prepared a simple platter comprising a slice of uncut raw pork belly, a bundle of uncut and uncooked yellow noodles, and large piece of dried raw cuttlefish.[28] He acknowledges a broader variety of deities which I had not observed at Ah Beng's and Queenie's prayers. There was *Datuk Gong*, a Muslim deity represented by a collection of five *qilin* (麒麟) or the Chinese chimerical mythical creature, which is said to be good pals with the Earth Deity and thus should be prayed to with halal food offerings (i.e. no pork). Ah Hong had placed a large, pan-fried chicken drumstick atop a bowl of white rice plus a bowl of vegetable curry that his mother had cooked. Ah Hong also prayed to the *shan shen* or mountain god (山神) because, "Without him, we may be lost in the hills and we can't find our way home," he explained. Overall, there was an abundance of food offered to all netherworld spirits and deities at Ah Hong's tent—roast meats, fruits, curry vegetable, beer, packet drinks and *huat kueh* (Chinese steamed muffins offered for prosperity). (Figure 42)

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[28] Offerings made to the T'ien Kung (the Heaven God) are also raw and uncut, which indicates the 'immense social gulf between the Heaven God and his devotees' (Thompson, 1988:79).

Figure 42: Offerings for the mountain god, *Tua Pek Kong* and the Earth Deity

Taking reference from Feuchtwang's (2010) and Boylston's (2018) expositions of hospitality, I argue that the abundance of paper and food offerings illuminates the generous hospitality on the part of the tombkeepers to the netherworld spirits who are hosted as guests. Moreover, the *excessive* abundance of offerings indicates the inexhaustible nature of netherworld spirits, which seem to outnumber the mortal being hosts, who endeavour to be overly generous so that they can provide for the uncountable netherworld entities. The ambiguity surrounding the absolute number of netherworld spirits also amplifies the stark differences between the living and the dead, in that the mortal world is quantifiable and can be profiled in qualitative ways, whereas the netherworld is qualitatively and quantitatively challenging to grasp. Despite the differences, tombkeepers acknowledge the presence of otherworldly beings, which explains why the co-existence of the latter is acknowledged via the prayer sessions hosted for them. This is similar to Boylston's observation in his ethnography, where he

describes the hospitality of the Orthodox Christians in Zege and their Eucharist feast as embodying the 'element of commensality' between the feeder and the fed, implying that there is a 'sharing of existence' (Boylston, 2018:119). Boylston's (2018) Easter feasting experience with his hosts (Abebe and his aunt) who were quite poor but were to be respected as hosts when they generously hosted Boylston for a meal, in which he described as, '…in no way could I say that my host had skimped or held back on me' (Boylston, 2018:120). However, while Boylston's (2018) hosts had extended altruistic hospitality to their respective guests, the same cannot be said of the tombkeepers' motivations to host the netherworld spirits in their Qing Ming prayer sessions.

The objectives meted out for the Qing Ming prayer sessions suggest non-altruistic intentions of the tombkeepers to elicit reciprocal gains from the netherworld spirits. Wee (1977) suggests that 'ritual performance among the Chinese is anthropocentric and egocentric', meaning that ritual participants perceive 'the entire cosmos from the human standpoint' and are motivated to 'enact rituals to serve calculated self-interests' (Tong, 2004:7). Therefore, offerings for such prayer sessions are unlike the ideological 'pure gifts' of the *dana* that are offered at Benares' Hindu pilgrimage, which refer to 'voluntary and disinterested donations made without ostentations or expectations of *any* kind of *this*-worldly return, whether material or immaterial' (Parry, 1989:66, emphasis by author). The amounts of money that go into purchasing paper and food offerings are thus mandatory (as opposed to voluntary) and are calculated donations from the tombkeepers (cf. 'voluntary hospitality' as described in Feuchtwang, 2010). Perhaps Boylston's (2018) analysis of hospitality as encompassing unequal relationships that can be altered based on 'the spatiotemporal circumscribed periods of dominance and dependence' could explicate the Qing Ming hospitality situation. The tombkeepers depend on the netherworld spirits for protection and wish to appease them so that they would not harm them in their tombkeeping work. In this skewed host-guest relationship, tombkeepers are the generous hosts who offer excessive amounts of paper and food offerings to negotiate with their guests for reciprocal returns during their tombkeeping work. It is perhaps apt to think of the Qing Ming prayer sessions as akin to the ideological *dana*, where they are 'masked by the emphasis on ethical and moral values' but like the *dana* in reality, because they embody and convey pointed (but non-evil) objectives and are performed based on a

egocentric motivation where the tombkeepers expect reciprocal returns from their guests by playing the role of the generous host (Parry, 1989:68; Tong, 2004:8).

As amply described, the most evident indicator of material wealth are the immense amounts of hell notes and *kimzua* offered to the netherworld spirits. Like our cash bills in the mortal world, these 'special purpose' monies (Bohannan, 1959) embody a use value and become 'general-purpose money' in the netherworld after they are burnt (Maurer, 2006:20). Because nobody knows how many netherworld spirits exist, there is no ballpark estimate on the exact quantity and variety of netherworld money required. No tombkeeper could explain to me how they came to decisions on the amount of paper offerings to purchase; they had simply purchased them based on intuition. Two Taoist priests (Master Weiyi and Nicole) I had interviewed shared with me on the cultural belief that a multiplier effect sets in after the burning which increases the amount offered by many folds. Their quantities will depend on the money expended, although I have realised from my personal experience that they are extremely affordable based on 'modern capitalist money' standards due to their low retail prices (Kelly, 1992). The *kimzua* that I had purchased cost $1.70 for six stacks, which Ah Beng explained was equivalent to $6000 in netherworld currency ($1000 per stack). A set of 10 stacks of coloured hell notes ($100,000 denomination per note) that I had purchased separately for my deceased grandparents cost $0.70 per set. These low quality and mass-produced papers burn easily and are cheap despite the gold/silver foils and the colour prints. The lavish quantities of very affordable paper offerings that are burnt for the netherworld spirits could easily enable each spirit to become billionaires/millionaires in the netherworld. The second largest category of material wealth accrues to the paper offerings such as clothes, shoes, accessories, and luxury items like the sedan cars. These paper representations of objects that are believed to be useful in the netherworld and could be replicated down to the smallest detail (e.g., the paper sedan car came equipped with a chauffeur). Food offerings constitute the third category of material wealth, but this category is not conveyed to the netherworld spirits via burning (see Thompson, 1988).

How do the tombkeepers know when the paper offerings and food offerings have been successfully conveyed to the netherworld spirits? Based on my fieldwork

observations, once the paper offerings have been burnt to ash, it indicates that the offerings have been conveyed. To know when the spirits and deities have had their fill, two coins are tossed in front of the offerings to query if they had 'consumed' the food. A positive answer is indicated by two opposing sides of the coins and vice versa. But conveyance of burnt offerings is one thing; how do the netherworld spirits collect these? Scott's (2007) fieldwork in Hong Kong revealed that using divinatory techniques and reliance on dreams conveyed by the dead to the living are ways to confirm on the receipt of offerings (Scott, 2007:131). However, interviews conducted with shopkeepers and workshop masters in Hong Kong revealed that they were unsure 'if items burned are actually received' (Scott, 2007:134). My fieldwork findings provided me with concrete answers which are extremely noteworthy as this aspect is scarcely documented in literature.

The transformative quality of fire

Fire is a central catalyst alongside with ritualistic chants that are uttered during all prayer sessions at BBC. Fire possesses the 'transformative power' that literally transforms the paper offerings by burning them. It alters the nature of the paper offerings from their original forms, which are described to be 'tentative replicas in a state of becoming', to their real and usable forms by the intended recipients (Scott, 2007:34). Burning the paper offerings is akin to how the fishermen's wives in Langkawi symbolically 'cook' the money that is earned by their fishermen husbands in commercial transactions to transform it into usable forms for their respective households (Carsten, 1989). Figuratively, the burning of paper offerings during specified periods in the Chinese lunar calendar are short-term exchanges that are converted to long-term transactional orders using fire (Parry and Bloch, 1989). As mentioned, the tombkeepers expect to reap reciprocal long-term benefits of protection and blessings from the netherworld spirits and the Earth Deity in their tombkeeping work. Similarly, the 'transformative power' of fire used in the cooking process converts the earned income to nourishment for the Langkawi fishermen's households, with the long-term goal of reproducing the household (Carsten, 1989; Parry and Bloch, 1989:25).

At the post-Qing Ming prayer session hosted by Ah Beng and his brothers, the wealth transfer began when the circular structure made of *kimzua* and other paper offerings was half filled. Ah Beng lit a piece of *kimzua* with a lighter and threw it into the middle. The fire sprang to life quickly, licking every inch of the paper offerings. When the entire formation was burning, we stepped back and waited for the paper offerings to be burnt to ash. Ah Zai and I sat under the shade while the other brothers stood around. The air was still, and the heat from the fire was very hot. Suddenly, a cool breeze blew from behind us towards the direction of the burning paper offerings. "They have come to collect them now," said Ah Zai, puffing on his cigarette. "Who?" I asked, perplexed. "The 'Good Brothers'" answered Ah Zai. It was a strange spiral motion made by a single gust of wind. After the wind ceased, Ah Zai stood up and said that the prayer session was complete. He went to the makeshift altar that he had set up at the side of the dirt tracks to say a formal 'goodbye' to the Earth Deity and the netherworld spirits, before retrieving the fruits offered to them and putting them into clean plastic bags to bring home.

"Of course they will come for the money!" exclaimed Queenie when I asked her if it was really true that the burnt paper offerings would be effectively conveyed to the netherworld spirits. Queenie whipped out her smartphone, scrolled for a bit, and thrust her phone to me. "Look, they are here, grabbing the money, you see them?" The photograph on her phone showed a pile of paper offerings being burnt. I stared hard at the photograph and asked, "Huh? What am I supposed to be looking at?" Queenie maximised a spot for me. I saw only orange flames of fire around the burning paper offerings. Queenie grew slightly impatient with me and pointed to a specific yellow plume of fire. "There is someone here. You see a figure, with hands stretching out?" I scrutinized the spot, and finally thought I saw a small figure with outstretched arms. "Oh," I replied, "Yes, I think I see it." Queenie nodded excitedly. "Erm, okay," I replied, not knowing what else to say. We were seated at a large grave at Hill 3 of BBC on a Saturday afternoon where I was interviewing her, and I was supposed to confirm there and then that I had seen a netherworld spirit that was photographed in the process of 'grabbing' burnt paper offerings? I thought I was not supposed to *acknowledge* sightings of netherworld spirits because they do not want to be seen? Feeling utterly confused, I glanced at the photograph again and saw *more* small figures spread out all over. Oh my gosh, I thought to myself. I *see* them!

On my next visit to Queenie's tent, I asked if she could share the photograph of the spirits 'grabbing' the burning paper offerings. Queenie asked, "Which one? I forgot," "Oh, so you mean there is more than one?" Queenie sat down and started to scroll through her photograph archive on her smartphone, exclaiming, "Of course! Every time we burn offerings, they will come to 'grab'!" Queenie's brother, Jason, interjected and said, "There was once we saw Tua Di Ya Pek too!"[29] "Huh?" I replied, raising an eyebrow. Jason explained, "We take photos of all our prayers and there was this photo, where we could see the tall hats of the two. Their silhouettes were being outlined by the smoke and the plumes of fire. They were standing at the corner, looking, or guarding the money. And then there were many hands grabbing the money." I asked Jason if he could show me the photo, and he replied, "Deleted away already." Without a photograph to show as evidence, I found it rather hard to believe that the two underworld deities had come by to 'guard' the burning paper offerings. Both deities are easily recognisable because they usually move around as a pair wearing tall hats; one is tall, and one is short; one is dressed in white whilst the other is in black, which probably explains how Jason had recognized their silhouettes. Queenie sent me three photographs that showed spirits' hands 'grabbing' the burning paper offerings and I reproduce one photograph below (Figure 43).

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[29] Tua Di Ya Pek refers to Tua Ya Pek (Great Grand Elder) and Di Ya Pek (Second Grand Elder), the two sworn brothers who are 'demon enforcers', or underworld deities. For a detailed description of their origins, refer to Graham (2020: 43-48).

Figure 43: Images of figures and a tiger's head can be seen from the orange plumes of fire

(Photo credit: Queenie)

I shared with Queenie about experiencing that strange single gust of cool breeze that blew in a spiral motion towards the ring of burning paper offerings during Ah Beng's prayer session. Queenie said that she and her siblings had similar experiences too. This phenomenon convinced the tombkeepers that they were indeed doing the right thing by praying to the netherworld spirits because they have always been around and watching them. To appease them in this way helps the tombkeepers in their work as the spirits would not disturb or cause harm. "Yup, that's them, coming to collect their money. Did you take photo?" asked Queenie. "No, I experienced the cool breeze and I really thought that it was just a breeze, but it seemed weird because the air was so still there and suddenly, this breeze blew in just once, in a spiral motion," I shared, looking perplexed. "It's like that, they always come in this way to collect their money. Now, do you believe that all of these are real? That netherworld spirits are real, the money grabbing and collection method using a breeze are real, and everything here is real?" asked Queenie. "Yesssss…." I stuttered, not knowing how else to respond. Queenie looked hard at me and repeated, "Do you REALLY believe in netherworld spirits?" "Yes!" I replied more resolutely, though I wondered why Queenie had to press me for an answer. "You don't look convinced," observed Queenie. Oh dear, I must also look convincing! I thought to myself. "Yes yes yes, I

believe because I have now experienced the breeze!" I said in a louder voice, to appear that I was convinced. Queenie smiled approvingly. Okay, so I have finally convinced Queenie that I was convinced, but was I really, deep down? I was not sure and am still unsure.

Abundance and tombkeepers

While ensuring that the netherworld spirits receive abundance of paper and food offerings, tombkeepers also make efforts to ensure that they personally benefit from an abundance of mortal world money during Qing Ming. This is done via hustling for tombkeeping opportunities during Qing Ming and indulging in their lottery buying habit during these periods.

Tombkeepers offer a slew of tombkeeping services ranging from regular maintenance of graves, grave enhancement (addressed in the following section), to ad-hoc services. For regular maintenance, charges range from $30 to S$100 per grave, depending on the tombkeepers' perception of the perceived wealth status of their clients, complexity of tombkeeping services required, and the frequency of upkeep requested for. Graves in densely forested or low-lying areas may justify for higher tombkeeping fees because they require frequent upkeep due to the higher rates of erosion caused by floods and rampant vegetation growth. Tombkeepers earn higher incomes if they care for more graves. From my interactions with tombkeepers, 500 is considered a substantial number of graves as this number kept popping up in conversations. Other tombkeepers told me that Ah Beng and his brothers care for some 500 graves, and they are considered the richer ones in BBC. Tombkeeper Ah Guan shared that he cares for 500 graves including some that were passed on to him by an elderly tombkeeper called Lao Chua who had retired in 2016 when he was close to 90 years old. Lao Chua also passed a portion of his customers to tombkeeper Ah Hong, but the latter did not share with me on the total number of graves he cares for. During my interview with Queenie, she shared that she and her family care for about 60% of all the graves in Hill 3, courtesy of her late mother's efforts in consolidating the business. Notably, their clients comprise significant numbers of high-profile Chinese individuals from the political and the banking sectors who were amassed from person-to-person referrals over the years. The tombkeeper's income is not easily accessible

unless he/she trusts the other party sufficiently to share the details. In fact, Ah Beng, was only open to sharing on some of his tombkeeping charges after almost a year of knowing me. Tombkeepers also do not share on the details of their tombkeeping charges within the tombkeeping community. Everyone simply assumes that the next tombkeeper is wealthier.

Ad-hoc tombkeeping services range from one-time grass cutting service at $15 per grave to helping descendants locate their ancestors' graves for $500-$800 per grave. Ad-hoc services are offered by younger tombkeepers such as Ah Ahn to older tombkeepers who are physically ill-disposed to clean graves, as well as to descendants who require a one-time clean-up of their ancestors' graves during Qing Ming. For example, Hun Seng cares for the largest double graves in BBC –that of Mr Ong Sam Leong and his wife. But his ill health prohibits him from climbing up to the hill peak to perform tombkeeping.[30] Ah Ahn is therefore hired to help perform this service on his behalf for a fee (Figure 44).

Figure 44: Tombkeeper Ah Ahn sweeping the grave mounds after cutting away the grass on the mounds at Ong Sam Leong and wife's double graves.

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[30] It is well-known within the BBC community that Hun Seng's cancer is in remission, and he also suffers from diabetes which affects his vision and gait. He had also indicated that he had cancer in a documentary that was filmed in 2016 (Source: SGMagazine, 2016)

My fieldwork observations evinced that tombkeepers take every opportunity to hustle for business. During Qing Ming, tombkeepers would stake out at various parts of BBC, approaching descendants to ask them in Hokkien dialect, "*xiang gor eh?*" (Who is the caretaker of your ancestor's grave?). They would offer their tombkeeping services if the ancestor's grave has no appointed tombkeeper. On a sweltering afternoon during Qing Ming, a car with four descendants was stuck in the mud. The four men requested for help to move the car. Tombkeeper Hun Seng's tent was nearby but he did not help and advised me not to help. "Ah, that's because they (the descendants) did not offer any payment," explained tombkeeper Ah Hong. "Oh? Why must payment be made?" I asked. "Because anything that requires the tombkeeper's labour, requires payment, including pushing cars out of the mud!" replied Ah Hong, laughing heartily at my naiveness. Beyond Qing Ming, tombkeepers remain alert for potential business opportunities. Interviews from tomb cleaning volunteer Mr K and descendant John revealed that there was some initial animosity between them and the tombkeepers when both voluntarily cleared graves and cut the grass because they were seen as intruders who 'robbed' income opportunities from the tombkeepers. In fact, relations between Ah Beng and atBB co-founder Raymond improved only after Raymond started referring tombkeeping opportunities to Ah Beng. Conversely, when Raymond stopped referring such opportunities to Hun Seng owing to his declining health, the latter became upset and grumbled about how Raymond had 'forgotten' about him.

The declining number of descendants who engage tombkeeping services has compelled tombkeepers to continue hustling for business. "Each year, I earn lesser and lesser," shared Ah Huay, a petite but sprightly tombkeeper in her 70s. She used to care for 100-odd graves, which she had inherited from her late mother. However, as the number of descendants who came to pay respects during Qing Ming has dwindled over the years, Ah Huay now cares for 10-over graves. "We only care for these graves for up to three years," said tombkeeper James. "If no one comes after three years, we will abandon them because no one pays us anymore." "Why three years?" I asked. James explained, "Sometimes, the descendants miss out on a year because they are busy but next year they would come. So, you can tell them, hey, last year you didn't come, you haven't paid me, but I did my regular tombkeeping for your ancestor's grave, so this year, you got to pay me for two years of fees." Hun Seng

showed me some abandoned graves in BBC which were full of overgrown vegetation, had large trees growing within the grave, dislodged headstones that were ravaged by tree roots, weathering, or the passing of many years while others had their headstones broken into three pieces as the joints had given way from weathering (Figure 45). According to Freedman (1970; 1979), 'more recent forebears' are more cherished by their descendants compared to the 'remoter ancestors' because 'the Chinese have never overburdened themselves with ancestors' (Freedman, 1970:173; Freedman, 1979:277).[31] Perhaps, abandoning ancestors embodies a cultural logic which unfortunately affects the tombkeepers' incomes. Other factors that have affected the earnings of tombkeepers are the construction of Lornie Highway and private exhumations. Over 4000 graves were cleared by the government to make space for the highway construction (TodayOnline, 2013). Others have been exhumed privately by descendants for various reasons such as structural instability of the grave (Figure 46) and personal motivations.

Figure 45: Two examples of abandoned graves

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[31] It is considered rare if more than five generations of ancestors are worshipped though the founding ancestor will always be worshipped (see Lakos, 2010).

Figure 46: A collapsed mound of a grave

Lottery purchase is another income source that tombkeepers explore on a regular basis as part of their aspiration to attain abundant material wealth. Analogously, like how one must drink water regularly to keep hydrated in the hot and humid cemetery environment, buying lottery regularly must be done to maintain that aspiration to become wealthy. Lottery buying by death workers is not novel based on observations by Toulson (2013). In her ethnography of a Singaporean-Chinese funeral, she noted that her informants had received cash payments in red envelopes after completing the exhumations and all had used these earnings to buy lottery. Toulson (2013) explained that their earnings were deemed to be 'dirty money' since they were 'money earned by touching corpses' and were only appropriate to be spent on lottery instead of for the household (Toulson, 2013:165-166). Despite winning the lottery several times, one death worker had described 'how money ran through his fingers', implying that he had used his winnings to persist in his habit (Toulson, 2013:166).

My first encounter with the tombkeepers' lottery buying habit occurred at the 7th lunar month prayer session at Hun Seng's. I watched tombkeeper James kneel at the altar table, pray, then take a glass and swirl it around the joss stick vessel, before pouring the contents from the glass. Then, he threw the *jiaobei* to confirm if the spirits had indeed chosen that number.[32] After four numbers were chosen, James stood up and announced to everyone the results. I saw Hun Seng speak on his mobile phone

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[32] *Jiaobei* refers to a pair of dark red/brown crescent-shaped blocks of wood that 'determine if a spirit answers in the affirmative or negative to a request or question' (Heng, 2020). The pair is tossed after a question is asked or a request made. If both pieces land on opposing sides, the answer as a 'yes'; if both pieces face the same direction, then the answer is 'no'.

with an intense expression—he had called up a "private" (illegal) betting organization to buy the four digits for $50. He shared that the prize money would be $400,000 if he struck the first prize. "Four years ago, I struck S$50,000. So, you don't underestimate these "private" betting organisations okay! They are so much better than the government's," claimed Hun Seng.

Ah Beng is smitten with lottery buying too. I had tapped on Ah Beng's expertise as a former electrician to complete the set-up for my new home stove. A week later, Ah Beng phoned me to inform that he had purchased lottery using my flat's unit number, my mobile number, and my home telephone number and managed to strike the top prize with my mobile number. I was quite shocked because I did not expect that he would take note of my flat's unit number. He insisted on giving me a treat for helping him clinch the top prize, threatening to unfriend me if I declined. The subsequent two months were then peppered with Ah Beng's frequent updates that he had struck lottery by buying all the numbers that were related to me. While Ah Beng was elated with his winnings, I was extremely perturbed at the strange stroke of luck that had bestowed so much wealth upon him.

Ah Beng's appetite for numbers was insatiable. Insisting that I was his "Goddess of Wealth", he badgered me for more numbers. I checked with atBB volunteers Raymond and Peter who work closely with Ah Beng, on whether buying lottery was endemic amongst the tombkeepers. "They just buy it for fun, that's all", was Raymond's reply. Peter said that Ah Beng's lottery buying habit "is bordering addiction already." I took Peter's hint and decided to put a stop to Ah Beng's incessant badgering by giving him a fake date of birth when he enquired. Ah Beng struck lottery by buying the fake date as well! It was unbelievable! Each time Ah Beng struck the lottery, he would text me to inform me of the good news and the prize money. Although he did not strike the top prizes all the time, my mental tally of all his winnings amounted to around $11,000 over two months. After the spate of mad winnings, Ah Beng sported a thick gold ring with a huge oval piece of green jade encased in the middle. I did not comment on his ring despite seeing him wear it at BBC because I did not want to support his lottery buying addiction.

When Ah Beng commenced tombkeeping work in preparation for Qing Ming, he stopped asking me for numbers and I felt more comfortable chatting with him about non-lottery related topics. Then, one Saturday evening during Qing Ming, he phoned me saying, "Your car number is top prize today…did you buy?" I replied, "No, I don't have a habit of buying lottery." Ah Beng then sighed and lamented that he had forgotten to buy my number that day, otherwise he would have pocketed $4000 as the top prize. After that fateful day, other tombkeepers came to ask me if I had bought lottery because my car plate number won the top prize. In fact, my car plate number did *not* win the top prize. The winning number was in a different permutation. The tombkeepers insisted that my car plate number was the winning number because to them, buying lottery means that one must buy all 12 or 24 permutations of the four-digit number to ensure that all permutations stand a chance at being won.

Ironically, despite Ah Beng's lottery buying habit, he was reluctant to teach me how to buy lottery. He reasoned that I do not need to buy lottery because it involves a great sum of money. I explained that I needed to 'earn' money to be able to afford my university tuition fees but he was not convinced. It took a few persuasions before he begrudgingly agreed to give me a crash course, but not without cautioning me that "If your pocket has a hole, it is not my fault". At the end of the crash course, Ah Beng said, "Don't forget to tell me the numbers you bought okay, so I can buy the same."

The importance of fortune seems significant for those who deal with the dead. Lottery promises either loss or superabundance, the latter which is exemplified in Ah Beng's experience. But superabundance also brings with it important moral significance, where the tombkeepers are cognizant of. For example, from my observations, Ah Beng would always redistribute his lottery winnings by treating people to meals. He would treat Peter and Raymond to lunch after their regular Saturday ramble in BBC whenever he won lottery too. From Ah Beng's behaviour, I gather that while it is important to him to amass wealth, it is equally, or more important, to know how to share his wealth with others so that he would not be consumed by pure greed and morph into an immoral person. Concurrently, he also does not hope to have someone else inculcate the same lottery buying habit as him, as seen from his reluctance to teach me how to buy lottery.

Theme of extravagance

So far, it looks like netherworld spirits have been on a roll amassing wealth. The theme of extravagance now examines the wealth status of the ancestors via two aspects – paper offerings and tombs.

Paper offerings are burnt for ancestors during stipulated periods of the lunar calendar, such as Qing Ming and the Winter Clothing festival, as well as the deceased's death anniversary. Ancestor worship is conducted during Qing Ming during which descendants make food prestations to and burn paper offerings for their ancestors. Ancestors who are not visited by their descendants in the long run regress to netherworld spirits and become reliant on charitable offerings from religious groups or individuals. Elderly without offspring may make advance arrangements to avoid becoming netherworld spirits. For example, some migrants from mainland China in Hong Kong make pre-funeral arrangements for paper offerings to be burnt for them by paper craftsmen upon their deaths (Scott, 2007:106). Some others from the Chaozhou community adopt a traditional practice called 'sending treasury' or *ji ku* (寄库), where the elderly burns several paper cabinets and copious amounts of *kimzua* bearing one's name to the Earth Deity for safekeeping until they die and can reclaim these in the netherworld (Scott, 2007:107).

Accumulating wealth is important because it is closely associated with the social status of the dead and the living. Toulson's (2009) ethnography examining the aspects of desire and fetishism in death rituals and deathscape in Singapore considers paper offerings as visible expressions of familial relationships that signify 'envy- provoking status' (Toulson, 2009:126). 'Shopping for death' by the living demonstrate their significant concern with status; paper funereal products are used to augment the status of their ancestors, and this 'power to create status' can only be facilitated with the 'quality of the relationship' shared by the living and the dead (Toulson, 2009:133- 134). The objects burnt for the deceased are 'obvious symbols of wealth' that would allow the deceased to 'attain a high social standing in the netherworld' (Tong, 2004:92). By burning these offerings in public, it demonstrates 'the virtue of the family in offering elaborate sacrifices to enhance the social status of the deceased as well as

their own social status' (Tong, 2004:94; Tong, 2004:143). My fieldwork data from Qing Ming attest to the association between wealth and social status and illuminate the theme of extravagance. Some descendants were seen offering large packets of paper clothing and stacks of *kimzua* to their ancestors (Figure 47), resounding with Freedman's description of grave rites that are 'all pomp and splendor' (1970:177). The scenes during Qing Ming at BBC—plumes of smoke rising from burning piles of paper offerings and the descendants' chatter as they meander to and fro the undulating slopes of the cemetery are akin to Feuchtwang's (2010) *renao*, literally 'heat and noise' (热闹), which describes 'extravagant festivity' in his observations of Hebei and Fujian Chinese festivities that were exemplified by 'the colourliness, social excitement, the care of display on offering tables…' (Feuchtwang, 2010:81).

Figure 47: Paper clothing (in the trays and paper bags), shoes and assorted *kimzua* (placed on altar and on the ground)

If wealth is to be assessed based on 'home' ownership, then perhaps it could be said that those buried in proper, marked graves in BBC are wealthier than netherworld spirits because each has his/her own grave, regardless of the size. Taoist priest Nicole explained to me that netherworld spirits are nomadic and usually reside in trees or plants, so they lack home ownership. Besides having a home to call their own, tomb architecture and the size of the grave often reflect the wealth and social status of the deceased and/or their descendants. Opulent-looking graves occupying large plots (Figure 48) and bearing hand carvings/artwork/stone statues (Figure 49) require extravagant amounts of money to allow such features to materialize. Intricate hand-painted blue porcelain artwork characterises the grave of Mr Tan Swee Kee, co-founder of Sze Hai Tong Bank (Figure 50), while brickworks proprietor, the Wee family, has their graves built with identical scallop-back designs using bluestone, an expensive raw material that the atBB volunteers said was used for Qing Dynasty's

royal tombs (Figure 15). In the Singapore-Chinese cultural context, the grave must be 'as comfortable as possible' because it ensures that descendants will reap 'good fortune and success', while failure to ensure comfort for the ancestor 'will not only bring bad luck, but also the displeasure of the ancestor who are capable of malevolent behaviour' (Tong, 2004:102-103). Thus, the priority of comfort explicates the substantial amount of money that is expended to secure 'a grave plot with good *fengshui* (geomancy)' and to construct graves that match or augment the wealth and social status of the deceased and their descendants (Tong, 2004:103).

Figure 48: The double graves of Mr Ong Sam Leong and his wife occupying 600 square metres (Source: atBB, 2012c)

Figure 49: The author standing at Mr Chew Geok Leong's grave with two painted Sikh guards

Figure 50: Grave of Mr Tan Swee Kee

Figure 51: One of the three graves of the Wee family cluster

As the graves in BBC are rather aged (the period of burial was from 1922 to 1973), the effects of weathering have worn down the graves significantly. Some descendants have engaged tombkeepers to aesthetically enhance their ancestors'

graves, which include vegetation removal, repatching broken parts of the grave, rebuilding the whole grave from scratch, repainting, and revamping parts of the grave. Arguably, the continued expenditures to enhance ancestors' graves are also intended to retain that said comfort so that positive reciprocal responses from the ancestor would be guaranteed over the years. Hence, enhancements enable the graves to enjoy rejuvenated looks. For example, the Sikh guards at the late Mr Chew Geok Leong's grave were repainted a few years ago upon the request of his descendant for $500 (Figure 49). Engagement of such services suggest that descendants possess the financial ability to afford these. These enhancements can also be considered as expressions of filial piety on the descendants' part and indirectly improves the kin relations between ancestor and descendant. The extravagance here arises mainly from the tombkeepers' charges for grave enhancement services. During Qing Ming 2021, Ah Beng shared that he had accepted two minor upgrading works, where he charged $880 for each, and a major overhaul which he charged $7700. Ah Beng had quoted $8800 for the third request but the descendant had negotiated so he agreed to lower the price to $7700. "Sometimes, I would charge $10,000 or more, depending on my judgement of the descendant's ability to pay. As long as I can discern that the descendant has the financial ability to afford, I will definitely charge the maximum possible fee. Of course, if the descendant is not well-off, I would obviously not take advantage of him," explained Ah Beng. Tomb cleaning volunteer Mr K had cautioned me during our interview that the tombkeepers tend to "cast negative impressions of one's car make". This is likely the benchmark used by tombkeepers to assess the wealth status of the descendant, which directly impacts upon the prices they quote for tomb repair works, resulting in these enhancements becoming extravagant ventures since substantial sums of money are expected to inject opulence, aesthetics, or both.

Grave enhancement demonstrates the symbiotic relationship between the descendants and tombkeepers. Descendants rely upon the latter's tombkeeping expertise and tombkeepers depend on the ancestors to generate income. Because each grave embodies unique traits and each enhancement requires different materials, hence there is no standardised fee to refer to. This offers substantial leeway to tombkeepers to peg the prices at whim.

Assessing the wealth status of ancestors via the aspects of paper offerings and their graves has evinced that the ancestors are just as wealthy, if not wealthier than the netherworld spirits. The close association shared between accumulated wealth of the ancestor, the wealth expended on the purchase of paper offerings and creations of elaborate, opulent, or unique tomb architecture with the social status of the deceased and their descendants in mind illuminate the theme of extravagance.

Conclusion

The production, transfer, and conveyance of material wealth from one stakeholder to the other illuminates how relations amongst the key stakeholders of BBC are organised (Figure 52).
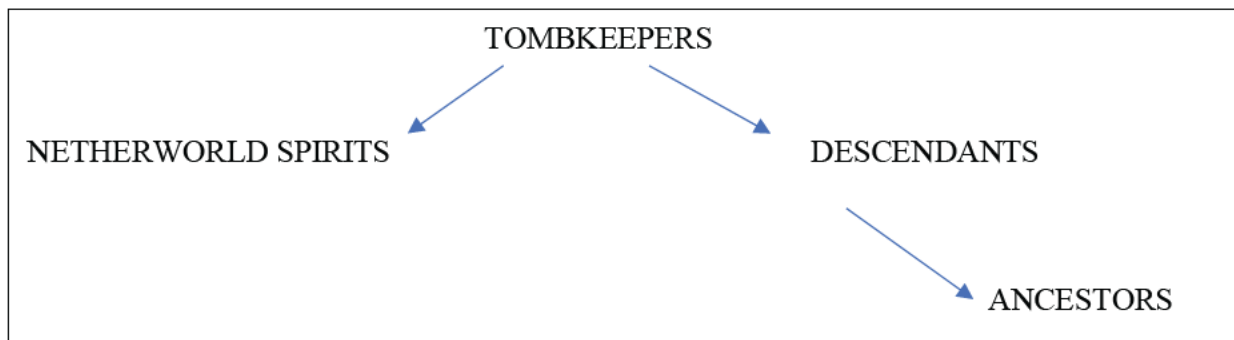
Figure 52: How relations amongst the key stakeholders of BBC are organised

Tombkeepers form the centrepiece of relations in BBC because they share relations with both the living and the dead. Tombkeepers share a host-guest relationship with netherworld spirits in BBC, where the former use material wealth to host netherworld spirits as their guests on occasions like Qing Ming, as indicated by the unidirectional arrow. Tombkeepers use modern capitalist money to purchase paper offerings and burn them for the netherworld spirits, using the transformative quality of fire to transform the paper offerings into usable currency for the spirits in the netherworld. As believed by the tombkeepers, the netherworld spirits are expected to reciprocate by not disrupting the tombkeepers in their work, but there is no concrete evidence gathered from my fieldwork to support this reciprocity so far, thus I present their relationship as unidirectional. Tombkeepers share a provider-client relationship with descendants because they are paid service providers to the latter who become their clients when they engage tombkeepers for tombkeeping services, as indicated by the

unidirectional arrow. These tombkeeping services help to rejuvenate the aesthetics of the graves of the ancestors, enabling the ancestors to experience comfort in their final resting places, and are expressions the descendants' acts of filial piety towards their ancestors. There are also underlying motivations from the descendants to connect with their ancestors to seek blessings and protection from them, which indirectly invigorate kinship relations between both parties. Thus, during Qing Ming Festival, descendants purchase food and paper offerings as part of their ancestor worship to their ancestors. These food and paper offerings will be figuratively consumed by their ancestors eventually, keeping them metaphorically well-nourished and well-heeled in the netherworld. The kinship relationship is indicated by the arrow leading from descendants to ancestors.

Notably, the production, transfer, and conveyance of material wealth underscore BBC's unique function as the site that embodies the propensity for material wealth regeneration, which are explicated by the themes of abundance and extravagance. The burning of copious paper offerings generates material wealth for the netherworld spirits, the refurbishment of ancestors' graves reinstates the opulence of these structures or illuminates the material wealth and/or social status of the ancestors and their descendants, while the material wealth of tombkeepers is rejuvenated with earnings from tombkeeping services rendered and their obsession with lottery. The no holds barred ways of excessive indulgence in the different forms of material wealth by the key stakeholders of BBC reflect on how the site is brimming with richness that makes experiencing BBC a unique and special one.

This chapter has placed significant spotlight on the dead (encompassing the netherworld spirits and ancestors). The examples shared underscore the fact that the dead occupy a highly visible position in the mortal world, despite their biological deaths. Three aspects of the dead are highlighted in the discussions here: the qualities of the dead, management of the dead, and communication with the dead. From the descriptions of how the netherworld spirits are believed to operate within the cemetery and need to be appeased as such, as well as how ancestors are believed to offer protection and blessings to descendants as a reciprocal exchange to food and paper offerings made to them, it is evident that the dead are not easy to dispel, possess a vexatious moral insistence on haunting the living, are 'unquiet' and multiply located

(e.g. they can travel to wherever paper offerings are burnt to 'collect' the transformed currency) (Comaroff, 2007). The mutual belief that the dead are very much active in the cemetery complements with the broad theme of my research –that the cemetery is alive. Indeed, contrary to the conventional belief that the cemetery is a tranquil final resting place for the dead, BBC's experience reflects a bustling marketplace of netherworld spirits comprising of adults and children, and ancestors who are all eager to garner attention from the living to make their presence acknowledged. Precisely because of their acknowledged presence, the living has responded by reactions of fear, trauma, and social anxieties. Therefore, the latter tries their best to appease the former so avoid potential harm. One example would be tombkeeper Ah Hong's prestations of varied paper and food offerings to different categories of netherworld spirits, indirectly acknowledging the male and female versions of adult and child spirits. Because spirits and ancestors are abound in the cemetery, it necessitates the underworld deities to step in to manage them.[33] Their presence is acknowledged when tombkeepers pray to an assortment of them (e.g., Ah Hong's elaborate prayers to a variety of deities) before conducting prayers to the spirits, and similarly, when descendants pray to the *Tua Pek Kong* before performing ancestor worship to their ancestors. But this is management done in the netherworld realm, does the mortal world have the means to manage the dead?

The logical flow of things would next lead to exploration of ways to manage the dead, which is the second aspect that is addressed in this chapter. Using scientific methods to manage the dead does not seem to be appropriate and effective. Chew et al's (1976) dated but relevant report of a mass hysteria due to spirit interference that erupted in a television assembling factory in newly independent Singapore supports my point. This report was published in the *Singapore Medical Journal* (an interesting choice for an academic journal given the nature of the content), where the authors utilised medical science to analyse the mass hysteria, treating the situation akin to 'an epidemic disease of bacterial origin' (Chew et al, 1976:14). The authors concluded that there was a clash between scientific rationality and traditional cultural beliefs where the former was inadequate to 'deal with an epidemic situation of this type with dubious and unknown origins' and was unaccepting that people 'in a modern world

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[33] Refer to Introduction for a description of underworld deities.

…still believed in "ghosts"' (Chew et al, 1976:14). Another local 'epidemic' outbreak that was reported also in Singapore Medical Journal before this mass hysteria episode, was referred to as the 'Koro Epidemic' where it was said to be 'an Asian disease that results from an individual and even social belief in fatally retracting genitals, or a belief in genital theft (Koro Study Team, 1969). Paradoxically, despite its reference, this epidemic was 'often attributed to supernatural causes' and led to the creation of a local film titled 'Tiger's Whip' (Tan, 2010).

A second way that has been explored to manage the dead is that of modernisation. Singapore politics is described as 'highly rational', 'highly administrative', and 'extremely aggressive and uncompromising', which leads landscapes in Singapore to be described as 'heavily interventionist landscapes' or 'national landscapes' (Comaroff, 2007). BBC is a most recent example of such, where the Singapore government has attempted to redevelop a burial site into a new modern landscape. The village eviction exercise (discussed in Chapter 2), the Lornie Highway construction (discussed in Introduction) and earlier construction of a shell train station called Bukit Brown Station at the cemetery's perimeter (at Jalan Mashor) are overt indications of the government's desire to modernise the site. This pursuit of modernisation can be said to be 'authoritarian' in nature because it requires the 'repression of primal desires, instincts, and drives' where jungles have to give way to the development of technologically advanced and highly urban cities (Tan, 2010 and Pile, 2005). Yet, the qualities of the dead imply that it is impossible to use modernisation to eradicate their presence. As argued by Comaroff (2007:65), the dead 'constitute a sacred realm that is beyond the administrative authority of the PAP' because 'they have no bodies upon which pressure can be applied, or against which "law-preserving" violence can be threatened'. While the government can commission contractors to 'knock down cemeteries and tear up trees', these acts to 'arrogate death' are ineffective there is 'wide resistance' from the living and the dead alike that continue to prevent the government from fulfilling its objective (Comaroff, 2007:63). Pile (2005:117) uses the female vampire or 'pontianak' in Singapore to explicate the ineffectiveness of modernisation as a strategy to 'exorcise the vampire', because vampires have 'deep connection to the earth' and possess the ability 'to make use of the infrastructure that the modern city throws up'. This is why 'phantamagorias' result in the city, where the dead continue to co-exist with the living as 'things' in the city that

'often appear and reappear' in the modern city (Pile, 2005). Similarly, in exploring the supernatural in Singapore cinema, Singaporean Kenneth Paul Tan, Professor of Politics, Film, and Cultural Studies, argued that technocratic rationality adopted by the Singapore government can only repress 'primal desires, instincts, and drives', but is unable to eradicate them totally, resulting in their re-emergences in folklore and consequently, portrayals in film (Tan, 2010).

The fact that the dead 'do not have a human sense of death' (Pile, 2005:128-129)—they do not disappear from the mortal world and are 'not easily exorcised' just because they are biologically deceased, suggests that other strategies are needed to manage the dead (Gordon, 1997:147). Gordon (1997:164) suggests 'grief work' such as formal commemoration, memorialisation, and remembrance but acknowledges that these approaches 'can never be made once and for all'. However, he highlights one crucial point, that 'all cities have to deal with their dead: what grief work points to is the significance of the choice of strategy for handling death, because there are consequences when the dead return to make demands upon the living' (Gordon, 1997:170). Here, Gordon (1997) acknowledges the assertive power of the dead in voicing their displeasure if they are not managed appropriately. Would this suggest that the dead are innately autonomous and powerful? Before graves in BBC were exhumed to make space for the Lornie Highway construction, the government engaged the ten religious leaders from Singapore's Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO) to conduct prayers onsite at BBC (personal communication with Taoist priest, Master Weiyi, who was one of the leaders onsite). However, it is clear from this chapter (and also from Chapter Two) that the extensive amounts of prayers and offerings made to the dead has its limits in appeasing the dead because they keep coming back. Therefore, tombkeepers and descendants must continue to pay homage to the dead at key occasions, and this endeavour is a long-term commitment.

It is apparent from the discussion so far that the PAP government is unable to wield authority over the dead. Unlike the civil society and community groups that can be sanctioned, monitored, and managed by the government using legislative acts (such as the Societies Act), the dead are essentially a distinct category of former beings that require alternative means to be managed by the living. Gordon (1997) recommends accepting the co-existence of the living and the dead in a modern city as

a solution to manage the dead. At first sight, the dead appear irrelevant to the modern city but on hindsight, they are 'informative' because 'they can teach us about what it means to haunt a city, about the procession of injustices that pass through city life, and about how hard it is to move on' (Pile, 2005:130). BBC's experience in Singapore's 'renovation' project in making it modern highlights that the government's antipathy to the dead in the forms of spirits and ghosts and reflects its negligence of the heartware of the nation, or the intangible elements that foster social cohesion (Comaroff, 2007). Whilst the traditional family unit is valued by the Singapore government in its legislative policies because it is believed to contribute to social stability and harmony, the dead are not considered to be part of this unit; only immediate living kin such as parents and children are part of the equation (MSF, 2021). But 'personal and collective senses of respect for the dead' do prevail, and may intensify over time too (Gordon, 1997:171). Dead kin and deceased members of society do matter because the dead is not merely a deceased individual but a social figure that personifies history, culture, and society at large (see Course, 2011). The injustice levied upon the dead by the Singapore government is apparent while the attention accorded to the dead by tombkeepers and descendants alike explains why it is challenging for the dead and the living alike to move on. The rituals performed for and offerings made to the dead by the tombkeepers and descendants can be termed as 'magical practices' in city life that embody 'emotional, expressive, gestural, dramatic, impulsive, and performative' traits (Pile, 2005:63). The involvement of underworld deities like the *Tua Pek Kong*, *Datuk Kong,* and the *Tua Di Ya Pek* as well as cultural interpretations of how the netherworld spirits 'collect' burnt paper offerings as a single gust of spiraling cool breeze are examples of 'magic beliefs' that complement the 'magical practices' of netherworld worship in BBC. Besides acknowledging the co-existence of the dead by being 'free and just…inclusive and flexible in their treatment of their ghosts' (Gordon, 1997:161), another alternative means to manage the dead is to care for them—the importance and extensiveness of which will be discussed in the next chapter.

The various attempts to manage the dead in BBC described in this chapter suggest that there is a two-way communication or interaction with the dead that allows for the negotiations to occur. This brings me to the final aspect of the dead that has been evinced in this chapter: that the dead have agency and therefore there are 'material proxies of consociation' with the dead, which means that the dead can act

out through material objects (Heng, 2020). For instance, the coin tossing method used by tombkeepers to ask the dead if they had finished 'consuming' the food offerings suggest that the 'absent dead' are 'alive and agentic' (Heng, 2020:18). Moreover, the fact that the netherworld spirits are believed to exact revenge or become malevolent towards the tombkeepers suggests that the dead do possess agency to express their displeasure. The theme of assertive communication is apparent here as it is possible to see the agency of the spirits at work through such behaviour.

In the whole redevelopment envisioned for BBC, the dead as an important stakeholder in the government plans is somewhat negated, as with the tombkeepers whose livelihoods are closely entwined with the dead. Tombkeepers and the dead are unseen and marginalised in the entire BBC controversy, even though they occupy key roles in the controversy. Nobody witnesses the actual tombkeeping work unless they shadow tombkeepers (like I did for my fieldwork) and partake in some of the work (as I had). Therefore, nobody has a concrete understanding of the laborious work and dangers that are involved in tombkeeping, but every descendant is aware that work will be done for their ancestor's grave when monetary compensation is offered. While money increases the material wealth of tombkeepers, it is hard-earned seasonal income, that has been dwindling over the years, due to various factors, one of it being the Lornie Highway construction that had eradicated a substantial number of graves (see Introduction for details). If I may suggest, both parties share an intimate relationship because they are interdependent on each other for sustenance, though in different manners. While the dead have been spoken for by civil society groups like the Singapore Heritage Society and community groups like all things Bukit Brown (atBB), the tombkeepers, or guardians of the graves as this term of reference suggests, are still not included in the advocacy for the preservation of Bukit Brown, despite their prolonged contributions in maintaining the graves here. While community efforts have been supportive of the preservation of this cemetery because of its rich history, heritage, and culture, they have failed to recognise that tombkeepers have made valuable contributions in these ways too. My effort to showcase the active presence of the tombkeepers in BBC is limited because they remain under the public and government's radar due to their invisibility and the fact that tombkeeping is a fast-disappearing trade.

This chapter has demonstrated how material wealth organises relations in BBC by discussing how the living and the dead are motivated by material wealth to engage in transactional or reciprocal relations with one another. In the next chapter, I delve further into the relations between the living and the dead, this time from the perspective of care, by looking at how demonstrations of care unravel the bonds shared between the living and the dead.

CHAPTER FOUR
WHO CARES FOR THE DEAD IN BUKIT BROWN?

The past two chapters examined how space and relations are organised in BBC. The organisations of space and relations revolve around the primary inhabitants of BBC—the buried dead, who are the focal point of every cemetery. Visiting the dead is the primary motivation for cemetery visitors at BBC. Other types of visitors may be attracted to visit BBC for purposes such as leisure, recreation, and knowledge acquisition in disciplines like history, cultural studies, and heritage research. This chapter discusses how the dead are being cared for in BBC and demonstrates the longevity of bonds and relations formed between the living and the dead in this cemetery. The theme of care is evinced via the different types of care performed onsite for the dead. Through the exposition of these varieties of care in BBC, this chapter aims to (a) illuminate the evolution of cares onsite, (b) highlight the symbiotic relationship in practice between the advocacy efforts of the interest group—all things Bukit Brown (atBB), and the care that is taking place, and (c) consider next steps regarding care for BBC with due consideration of its prospect. In exploring the varieties of care, I contend that they underscore the Confucian filial piety and the Chinese underworld religion.[34]

Who are the dead?

Most of the buried dead in BBC are commoners, very much like other cemeteries in general. However, a sizeable number are prominent figures, possessing publicly known social histories that were accumulated from their achievements garnered when they were alive. Therefore, BBC stands out from other cemeteries not only because it is Singapore's first communal cemetery for the Chinese, but also because of its composition of socially notable inhabitants who include school founders, bankers, philanthropists, war heroes, circus leaders, prominent females, grandparents and

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[34] The Chinese underworld refers to 'hell' as well, but this 'hell' is distinct from the biblical Hell, and from hells recognised by other religious traditions (Graham, 2020:1). Chinese underworld religion refers to non-mainstream religion that is practised by the lay masses, which is also referred to as 'shenism' (Elliot, 1990[1955]) and 'folk religion' (e.g. Harrell, 1979).

relatives of current Singapore politicians, and an impoverished rickshaw puller.[35] Singaporean anthropologist Hui Yew-Foong describes BBC's dead as representing 'a good cross section of the Singapore Chinese community…from the inter-war years of the last century' (Hui, 2019). In fact, the exceptional profiles of some of the dead in BBC have made it an attractive draw for the public to visit and provide fodder for interest groups like atBB to include into their advocacy on preserving this cemetery.

At the end of the day, despite some of their larger-than-life profiles, the buried dead are ancestors belonging to families who need to be cared for. Hui (2012) describes BBC as a 'familial space' which comes alive every Qing Ming, when descendants visit their ancestors' graves to perform ancestor worship, which is a display of care for departed forebears. Qing Ming is a 'family affair' and the grave is a place for families to gather to 'commemorate their ancestors' (Hui, 2012). When the government announced of the partial clearance of BBC in late-2011, it triggered substantial responses from descendants, who were concerned if their ancestors' final resting place would be affected by the government's endeavour (Hui, 2012). This reaction demonstrates the care embodied by descendants for their ancestors; the existence of a kinship bond between the living and the dead here spurs the former to always be on the lookout for the latter. Because of its expansive area, the government has earmarked the cemetery from as early as 1991 for residential development in anticipation of a population increase (MND, 2021).[36] The Minister who was in-charge of the partial clearance for the Lornie Highway construction then had defended the government's decision by citing a 'famous remark' made by former Cabinet Minister Lim Kim San from the 1960s, who said, "Do you want me to look after our dead grandparents or do you want me to look after your grandchildren?" (Huang, 2014). Between demonstrating care for the living versus care for the dead, the government has seemingly chosen the former. However, the negation of the bonds between the living and the dead does not seem to be acceptable. During our interview, Dr Kevin Tan, a former President of the Singapore Heritage Society, a civil society group that is involved in the ongoing discussions with the government regarding the prospect of

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[35] The story of Low Nong Nong, an impoverished rickshaw puller who died in a riot, can be read from a blogpost by the Rojak Librarian (Source: Rojak Librarian, 2013a). The late founding Prime Minister of Singapore—Mr Lee Kuan Yew, has his maternal and paternal ancestors buried in BBC (see atBB, 2014b for details).

[36] See Introduction for details.

BBC, offered a comeback line, "Everyone got [sic] grandfather you know." With an estimated number of 100,000 graves at the time of BBC's closure in 1972 (Hui, 2012), BBC indeed contains a substantial number of dead grandparents and by logic, more numbers of descendants spanning a few generations. When the government estimated that the partial clearance for the highway construction would result in some 4000 graves to be exhumed, Dr Tan said, "4000 graves equates to 4000 families," highlighting that each deceased has a lineage and to exhume one grave would affect at least one family rather than just the deceased. The government had not anticipated a furore to result from their first public consultation following the announcement of the partial clearance, because they had not considered family lineage and the existing family bonds between the living and the dead, shared Dr Tan. Indeed, despite biological death, the dead continue to retain roles in the family—they are the ancestors and will still be cared for by their descendants regardless.

Another category of the dead that is not conventionally considered as constituting as such are the netherworld spirits that were featured in Chapter 3. Their presence is acknowledged by tombkeepers and devotees at every Qing Ming and lunar 7th month festival, indicating that they share the burial site with the buried dead, albeit being nomadic. Although the care rendered is for the buried dead, Chapter 3 has evinced that the nomadic dead have also been cared for. While bestowing material wealth is one way to show concern for the material needs of netherworld spirits, the other way is to offer care to them to show that they matter just as much as the buried dead, as it will be discussed in this chapter. Therefore, the types of care discussed in this chapter encompass care that is offered to both the buried dead and the netherworld spirits.

Overview of care in BBC

This chapter examines the varied types of care are performed in BBC for the dead—contractual care, personal care, devotional care, and voluntary care.[37] The care

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[37] Some examples of voluntary care were mentioned in the Chapter 2, i.e., grass cutting, planting of colourful crotons and voluntarily cleaning/maintaining selected graves on a regular basis.

performed in BBC can be summarised into four distinct tiers based on the degree of commitment and relationship to the cemetery:

Tier	Description of carer	Type of care rendered
Primary	Tombkeepers	Contractual
Secondary	Descendants	Personal
Tertiary	Devotees	Devotional
Quarternary	Volunteers	Voluntary

Tombkeepers who perform contractual care on a seasonal basis form the primary tier. They are paid by descendants to perform tomb cleaning and maintenance, which commence typically from December until Qing Ming Festival (which falls in April) the following year, where descendants come to pay respects to their ancestors. Several months of cleaning and maintenance are necessary to clear away a year's worth of dense vegetation and grime at the graves. Given Singapore's humid tropical climate, vegetation growth is rapid. Tombkeepers shared with me that three cycles of grass cutting, vegetation clearing, and cleaning of headstones are necessary to present pristine and tidy graves by Qing Ming. Based on my fieldwork observations, each grave with three able men takes about 30 minutes to clear and clean, which translates to about five to six graves that can be cared for in a day, subject to the size of the grave and weather conditions. As mentioned in Chapter 3, some descendants prefer to have their ancestors' graves cleaned on a regular basis, instead of annually just for Qing Ming, which implies that tombkeepers are paid to work the whole year. As briefly described in the Introduction and discussed in detail in Chapter 3, tombkeepers are individuals who perform paid labour to maintain graves in a cemetery. This form of labour exists not just in BBC, but other cemeteries in Singapore and beyond too. However, the paid labour arrangement with tombkeepers I discuss here is unique to BBC since it is based upon my fieldwork conducted in BBC with tombkeepers who work exclusively in BBC.

Tombkeepers are intimately attached to BBC. They are former villagers from villages that had once thrived in the cemetery before the government's eviction exercise (see Chapter 2). The tombkeeping trade is a family business that is passed

on from one generation to the next, regardless of the gender of the next generation. If an elderly tombkeeper wants to retire and has no successors, he/she will pass the clientele to another tombkeeper who is a former villager, but never to an outsider. Therefore, BBC is not only the tombkeepers' former home; it is also the environment where they (and their parents and sometimes forebears) had grown up in, studied at (there was a primary school within the village), and now work in. To say that they are contracted to care for the graves accrues to the economic perspective of their informal employment; another perspective has to do with their emotional attachment to the site, which explains their commitment to clean the graves for three years before abandoning the graves if the descendants fail to show up to pay the tombkeeping dues.

The personal care performed by descendants when they come by during Qing Ming forms the next tier of care. During this annual occasion, descendants bring food and paper offerings that may be attuned to the preferences of their ancestors. Sometimes, they also perform cleaning on a more meticulous level at their ancestor's graves, which the tombkeepers may not be contracted to do. For example, I observed descendant Mr. Chan and his son bringing bottles of bleach and water, as well as hard bristle brushes to scrub the altar at their ancestor's grave at Hill 1. Such personal care is usually performed annually, unless descendants visit on other occasions such as the ancestor's death anniversary or Chinese festivals that celebrate death, such as the Winter Clothing Festival (as detailed in Introduction). However, findings from my fieldwork observations and interviews conducted show that it is rare for descendants to visit BBC on occasions other than Qing Ming. The reasons pertain to the inaccessible terrain of BBC coupled with elderly descendants, who may not be able-bodied to handle the long journey to BBC and the trek to their ancestors' graves, as well as the lower importance accorded to the other festivals.

Devotional care forms the third tier of care performed in BBC. It is a recent phenomenon that is performed ad-hoc by devotees who are usually unrelated to BBC, for deities housed in makeshift altars that are erected anonymously and randomly throughout BBC. These altars are unofficial and unapproved structures that grow over time by accreditation due to their artifact assemblages (see Grider, 2006 and Chapter 2). These deities are believed to protect the cemetery and its inhabitants. The

devotees may originate from certain religious sects or temples that have sent them to BBC to upkeep the makeshift altars. Otherwise, they may be individuals who come by on an ad-hoc basis. During Chinese festivals that celebrate death such as the lunar 7th month, different groups of devotees may visit on different days to perform devotional care to different altars. Because of their irregularity of appearances in the cemetery, these individuals are hard to track down for interviews during my fieldwork. I had however, observed tombkeeper James performing devotional care on an almost daily basis for two makeshift altars (the little red and green huts that will be discussed in a later section) that he had erected beside the cemetery gates. He shared with me on his belief that the deities possess spiritual affective functions in protecting the cemetery and its inhabitants, therefore he must take care of their altars daily by cleaning them, offering joss sticks to the deities and topping up the oil lamps.

The devotional care performed at these makeshift altars create a prayerscape that superimposes upon a deathscape (Kaell, 2017). Deathscape is a term usually used by geographers to refer to the varied permanent or temporary spaces and "places associated with death and for the dead" (Maddrell & Sidaway, 2010:4). By logical deduction, a prayerscape suggests a space or place that inspires prayers or encourages for prayers to be made based on spiritually affective purposes. Much akin to the 'wayside Catholic crosses' found across rural Quebec which are continuously maintained by 'caretakers', these sites of religious devotion in BBC have been actively maintained by devotees with a similar intended purpose of expressing and promoting their relationship with the assortment of deities that are housed in these altars (Kaell, 2017). Overall, the prayerscape conveys a sense of voluntary care from individuals who bear little/no relation to BBC and has fostered a growth of a new care chain where they care for deities by devoting time to care for their altars, in hopes that these deities would reciprocate and protect the dead in BBC.

The final tier is composed of ad-hoc, voluntary care that is performed by individuals unrelated to BBC and some volunteers from atBB. They perform different types of care, from picking up litter, to cleaning selected graves. Overall, they share a unanimous vested interest in keeping the cemetery's environment clean and tidy.

Confucian filial piety and Chineseness

The Chinese emphasize on the importance of proper after-life care for the departed (Tong, 2004; 1987). In Confucianism, filial piety dictates that descendants have the obligation to provide proper care and respect toward their ancestors, extending beyond death and into the afterlife (Lakos, 2010). A person's ancestors refer to his/her deceased elders in the (extended) family who are rarely tended to more than four generations distant from the living (Freedman, 1979:248). In the acts of ancestor worship, the ancestors are 'tended, reverenced, and fed', with the living acknowledging them as 'their superiors' (Freedman, 1979:297).

Besides ancestors, there exists another category of the dead which also needs to be cared for. These are the dead who have no 'caregiver and joss presenter' (Choi, 2020). Care for the dead that extends beyond the confines of kinship is an essential charitable act because it prevents the emergence of wandering ghosts, or unattended deceased persons. Early Singapore was composed of immigrant Chinese who had lived, worked, died, and 'were eventually buried in their adopted countries', especially when coffin repatriation became challenging after the 1930s (Choi, 2020). Despite the immigrant status of most Chinese in Singapore, literature has argued for strong ethnic solidarity of the Chinese, where most Chinese traditions, customs and languages are still retained (Chong, 2021). This observation is exemplified in the studies of overseas Chinese communities in Singapore (e.g., Freedman's research on marriage customs amongst the Straits Settlement Chinese, see Freedman, 1970). As it shall be discussed, the care demonstrated for BBC constitute distinctive practices of being Chinese that are still being practised in Singapore, which is only apparent upon a deeper level of academic analysis like this chapter.

Contractual care

Tombkeeping is contractual care because tombkeepers are contracted by descendants to upkeep the graves of their ancestors. Although there is no formal contract that details this arrangement and most of the time, no pre-payments made, tombkeepers acknowledge the clients' requests and keep to their verbal promise of helping to clean the graves. I see tombkeepers as a largely invisible and informal

workforce in the cemetery who are only active during certain months of the year. The months leading to Qing Ming Festival (i.e., December to April) may offer some opportunities for one to run into tombkeepers who may be busy with their tomb maintenance work. Qing Ming Festival is the only month when all tombkeepers can be sighted in BBC because they appear to collect tombkeeping dues from descendants who come by to conduct ancestor worship. At other times, most tombkeepers are not present in BBC, as they have other work and personal commitments. Tombkeepers who have retired from their day jobs may visit BBC on a regular basis, but they spend shorter hours onsite, usually whiling away time in their makeshift tents. Their quiet presence in BBC makes them largely invisible to the public eye.

To my knowledge, tombkeepers and their trade are largely understudied in Singapore, probably due to their muted presence as well as the public's assumption that it is the government that cares for the graves. Tombkeepers have been described as a group of individuals who have 'fallen through the cracks of history and are hard put to find a place in any account of our past' (Loh, 2012b). In my fieldwork interviews with members of the public, they would generally express surprise that the graves at BBC are *not* cared for by the government but are done so by a group of individuals called 'tombkeepers'. The next volley of questions I would usually get would be, "What are tombkeepers? What do they do? Do they get paid by the government?" Ironically, the government does not have anything to do with the tombkeepers. Singapore is described as having a 'nanny state' because the government is perceived to be involved in all aspects of the life of its citizenry (Kuah, 2018). It is therefore not surprising for the public to assume that tombkeepers fall under the purview of the government.

From as early as December, tombkeepers commence on their tomb cleaning work. Their presence is made known by the whirr of grass cutter machines, plumes of smoke from within the greenery, indicating that some cut vegetation is being burnt onsite, and cleared pathways on the hill slopes with bald grass patches. The dense vegetation in BBC implies that there are overgrown weeds, climbers, large trees, and tall grasses that need to be cut and trimmed in three cycles. Intensive cleaning is needed because the humid tropical climate in Singapore encourages rapid vegetation growth. Sometimes, tombkeepers use weed killers as an easier means of clearing

away a years' worth of overgrown foliage. Therefore, tombkeepers have the responsibility to present tombs that are cleared of unnecessary vegetation when Qing Ming Festival rolls around, so that they will be paid for their labour by the descendants.

On 8 December 2020, I followed tombkeeper Ah Beng and his two brothers into the depths of BBC where they commenced their tomb cleaning work. I observed that their work involves onerous physical labour that is invisible because the intensity largely goes unnoticed. While the descendants see neat and clean graves during Qing Ming Festival, they are unaware of the amount of time and physical labour that are committed to achieve this outcome. Furthermore, they are also unaware that tombkeepers are exposed to nature's elements in the course of their work, which makes this type of contractual care a highly risky one to undertake. Tombkeepers need to carry all their tombkeeping equipment like grass cutter machines, rakes, and saws, navigate hilly terrain to reach the graves that they maintain, and carry these downslope after work is done. They must cut through dense vegetation that may threaten to trip them over and encounter wildlife along the way which may harm them, such as wild boars, scorpions, and hornets. If it rains, they are without shelter. Tombkeepers like Ah Beng do lament from time to time during our chats that they are often not recognised for the hard work that they do, because descendants do not see the processes of their work and assume that "pulling out weeds is very simple". Although tombkeepers grumble to me about the "hard work", none expressed a desire to quit the trade because "this is what my father/grandfather/mother/brother/uncle passed to me, so I must do the job well."

Although local historian Loh Kah Seng has described the general profile of a tombkeeper to be 'highly skilled' because they possess skills in stone masonry, tomb making, paintworks, and/or exhumation, the bulk of tombkeeping is purely physical labour involving the clearance of overgrown foliage (Loh, 2012b). The tombkeepers' skills are only occasionally harnessed since not every grave needs to be repainted, rebuilt, or exhumed. The physically demanding nature of tombkeeping means that family members are often roped in to share the workload prior to and during Qing Ming. Qing Ming is a busy period, with every tombkeeper stretched to his/her limits given the endless stream of descendants' visits and ad-hoc tomb maintenance requests. When I arrived at late morning to interview Queenie in mid-December 2020, she was

standing atop a grave cutting away a thick mass of air roots from a large tree beside the grave. Her younger sister May assisted her from the side (Figure 53). 62-year-old Queenie shared that with each year of tomb maintenance, she experiences more body aches, quite likely due to age. She also accepts repainting work requests during Qing Ming on top of the usual tomb maintenance (Figure 54). This task requires long hours of sitting or squatting at the tomb to get the stone inscriptions painted, an onerous task if one is elderly and the tomb has many elaborate inscriptions.

Figure 53 Queenie (in pink) and her sister

Figure 54 Queenie painting the inscriptions with gold coloured paint. The details of the inscriptions have been blocked out due to confidentiality purposes. (Photo credit: Queenie)

Tombkeeping is a challenging task for tombkeepers to undertake especially if they have health issues. During Qing Ming, Hun Seng, a tombkeeper of about 70 years old, had injured himself while cutting the grass at the grave he looks after. Hun Seng is a cancer survivor and suffers from diabetes, which affects his vision and gait. It is not surprising that he fell in the hills carrying a portable grass cutting machine, given that he cannot even walk steadily on an even ground with his hands free. "Where is Ah Ahn? I thought he's supposed to help you cut the grass?" I asked, enquiring about a younger tombkeeper who is usually paid to help Hun Seng maintain his tombs during the lull periods. "He's got his own tombs to take care of," replied Hun Seng. Even younger tombkeepers also experience limitations in performing tombkeeping. 41-year-

old Ah Hong is considered a young tombkeeper who walks with a limp, so he is only able to clean tombs on flat terrain. 38-year-old Ah Guan is the youngest tombkeeper in BBC but he too, has health limitations. Although Ah Guan shares Ah Hong's load by maintaining the tombs on slopes, he cannot overstrain himself due to a past surgery. Despite physiological impairments, poor health, ageing and a persistently wild jungle in BBC, these tombkeepers continue to persist in their trade.

Fortunately, some of the descendants understand the limitations of the elderly tombkeepers and thus do not expect much from the tomb cleaning. One afternoon, I followed four Mr Tans to their ancestor's grave on the slope behind Hun Seng's tent. 80-year-old Kok Tong is the tombkeeper engaged to care for their ancestor's grave and I had a short chat with him while waiting for the Tans to set up their offerings on the altar. After the Tans had set up the altar, the eldest Mr Tan paid Kok Tong and the latter returned to his tent. The youngest Mr Tan took out large brown hard bristle brushes and started to brush the tiles embellishing the sides of the grave, which were full of green moss. "Why don't you ask Kok Tong to help you with it when he cleaned the grave?" I asked. "He's old already, as you can tell. It's okay, we just do what we can", came the reply.

The family-run business model in caring for the graves does not seem to auger well in the long run. Tombkeeping seemingly lacks successors after this generation of tombkeepers, which is concerning because it suggests that the contractual care for BBC will cease. Several reasons can explain this inclination. Firstly, tombkeeping is no longer sustainable as a primary means of livelihood today. "I only earn enough to buy myself a few pieces of nice clothes," shared Queenie. The current group of tombkeepers in BBC are aged between the late 30s to 60s, with most holding down day jobs, such as drivers, food delivery personnel, and manual labourers. They take leave from their day jobs during Qing Ming Festival to focus on tombkeeping, which brings them extra pocket money. Secondly, most tombkeepers are single, and for those who are married with adult children, the latter have not expressed any interest to take over the family-run business because of the intense physical labour required. Ah Soon, the lone tombkeeper stationed at Hill 4 shared that his adult children have persuaded him to give up on the tombkeeping business because it is "too hot, too dirty, and too tiring" but the 60-something year old chain smoker insists to drive to BBC daily

in his lorry "just to sit here, enjoy the silence, have a smoke, and then go home." Ah Hong and Ah Guan are the two youngest tombkeepers in BBC who are single. "After us, there is nobody else already," observed Ah Hong. "So, what does that mean?" I asked. "Hmm, I don't know… that's end of tombkeepers and tombkeeping I guess?" he answered. In an ideal situation, if atBB's advocacy bears fruit eventually, BBC will be preserved in situ. But who will care for these graves moving forward? "How would you feel if BBC were to be redeveloped into public housing flats next time?" I asked Ah Beng. "*Kai xin* (happy)!" he replied immediately. "Huh, why?" I asked. "Because it means that I can finally RETIRE!" beamed Ah Beng. "What about the graves?" I asked. "I don't know, it's up to the government to decide, isn't it?" replied Ah Beng. The fate of graves *if* BBC continues to remain in situ has not been discussed in government policy and public discourse because of the invisibility of tombkeepers and the negligence towards their contributions in upkeeping the graves. Right now, the public discourse reiterates what civil society has repeatedly advocated (i.e., to preserve BBC), but will anyone care for the graves in the next decade if BBC is here to stay? If BBC remains, will the public be happy to see the graves lacking in maintenance?

Personal care

Two broad categories of personal care performed by the descendants were observed during my fieldwork. The first is a generic type where the descendants perform care to their ancestor(s) and the surroundings, while the second is specific to just demonstrating care to ancestors. Uncle Jimmy (a cemetery visitor) and descendant John (mentioned in the Chapter 3) perform the first type of care. To recap, both men have unanimously decided to offer care to a specified area of the cemetery, with Uncle Jimmy planting crotons along accessible parts of the footpaths and John cutting the grass on a regular basis for the entire Hill 1 because his ancestor's grave is located there. Uncle Jimmy had started planting crotons when BBC was 'rediscovered' following atBB's active advocacy to preserve the cemetery, thus his regular presence onsite has led to friendship ties established with the volunteers from atBB. I had also observed during my fieldwork conducted during Qing Ming that some descendants offered joss sticks and food to the graves adjacent to their ancestors'. When I asked these descendants for their purposes in doing so, they had unanimously replied that

they wanted their ancestors' neighbours to enjoy the offerings as well so that all could live in harmony.

The second category of personal care refers to a customised type of care which is apparent during the annual Qing Ming Festival, where descendants clean their ancestors' graves. One morning during Qing Ming, I saw two Mr Ongs arrive in BBC with a trolley load full of offerings. I noticed that the younger Mr Ong had prepared unique paper offerings for his ancestor that I had not seen before on BBC's grounds. He explained that he had embarked on a sabbatical with a Taiwanese monk a few years ago and gained new knowledge on ancestor worship. The paper offerings were items he had shipped back to Singapore from Taiwan in bulk, "Enough to last us for a few years, no need to worry about Covid", he said, chuckling. There were miniature paper clothes in five colours, with each colour possessing a distinct symbolism. He had folded a large paper boat using yellow paper with Buddhist scriptures printed on them. In this boat, Mr Ong placed the paper clothes and folded paper ingots. He also prepared a huge paper bag of paper offerings which was already sealed so I could not see the contents. In all, he had hoped that these offerings would bring blessings to his ancestor.

The personal care performed by descendants is highly varied and customisable to their own preferences or the preferences of their ancestors (see Wolf, 1974). In fact, personal care can be further divided into physical (e.g., cleaning of the grave), emotional (e.g., seeking blessings for the ancestors), and spiritual care (e.g., prestations of paper offerings printed with Buddhist scriptures to ensure the well-being of ancestors) (Hsu, O'Connor and Lee, 2009). Because of the flexibility of personal care provided, this category of care should not be judged against conventional or traditional customs. As pointed out by tombkeepers whom I had interviewed, the focus should be on the descendant, who should embody a sincere intention to pay respects to the ancestor. Importantly, the display of filial piety is evident from the acts of ancestor worship, where descendants are obliged to provide proper care and respect towards their ancestor, beyond death and into the afterlife (Lakos, 2010). Just like how the ancient Mesopotamians memorialise their family dead, the annual return of descendants during Qing Ming at BBC evinces the continuous existence of family

ancestors as members of the family, and promote social identity and family solidarity (MacDougal, 2018).

Regardless of the category of personal care performed for the ancestors, it should be emphasised here that it is only through personal care that graveside rituals can be enacted (see Introduction on page 31 onwards for a detailed elaboration). The demonstration of personal care through cleaning and clearing the grave not only allows the site to be tidy and free from unruly vegetation and unwanted dirt, but it also prepares the site for graveside rituals. The cleared and cleaned altar table in front of the headstone allows for food and/or paper offerings to be placed on it, while the space after the altar table allows for the descendants to kneel and conduct ancestor worship to their ancestor. The space housing the Earth Deity must be also cleaned and cleared too, since this deity is also a participant in graveside rituals (see Introduction on page 31 onwards for an elaboration).

The annual Chinese festival of Qing Ming demonstrates the Confucian value of filial piety via the acts of cleaning and prestations of food and paper offerings. The cultural practice and Confucian value are reinforced and sustained over repeated annual cycles of tomb sweeping, which help to preserve the cultural heritage of the Chinese and rejuvenate bonds between the living and the dead within a family lineage. To respect this festival, the volunteers from atBB practise sensitivity by not conducting guided walks during this period so that they do not disturb the ancestor worship onsite. This notification is posted in the Bukit Brown Heritage Facebook group every year before Qing Ming, and indirectly conveys to the public to offer a wider berth to descendants should they want to visit the cemetery during this festival.

Devotional care

Devotional care is performed at the makeshift altars that are erected randomly throughout BBC by known or unknown individuals. Representatives from various temples come by on a regular basis to perform a variety of devotional care, such as offering joss sticks and burning paper offerings to the deities that are enshrined in these makeshift spaces and maintain the altars.[38] I focus on the most visible altars at Hill 1 and discuss the ways that devotional care is performed here.

During my first participation in atBB's guided walk, volunteer Darren had shown us a little red hut at the corner of the cemetery gates. He explained that the hut housed a deity who protects BBC and that it is common practice for all visitors to perform a customary prayer to the deity upon arriving and before leaving the cemetery (Figure 55). Apparently, this is to inform the deity of the visitors' comings and goings.

Figure 55: The little red hut at the cemetery entrance

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[38] Deities are not systematically researched in this thesis. I did not specify the types of deities in these shrines because they may be changed over time, depending on the preferences of the devotees

Subsequently, during my morning visits to BBC, I observed a man riding a blue motorbike who had stopped at the gates, spending substantial time praying to the deity. Shortly after, a little green hut containing more deities appeared beside the little red hut (Figure 56). I learnt that the man on the blue motorbike was tombkeeper James and he had erected both huts and brought in the deities. James tends to both huts whenever he goes to BBC. As a former temple administrator, he believes in the power of these deities in protecting BBC. When tombkeeper Ah Hong's mother left the cemetery on her motorised wheelchair after a busy morning collecting tombkeeping dues during Qing Ming, she too, stopped by the makeshift altars, clasped her hands together to say a silent prayer before moving off to the bus stop outside. One morning during the 7th lunar month, I observed a middle-aged couple scattering a small sack of rice grains around the little huts. Sometimes, light yellow strips of incense paper were also seen scattered around the huts during occasions like the deities' birthdays. When visitors to the cemetery acknowledge and pray to the deities in these huts, they are not only demonstrating deference to these perceived higher powers; they are also acknowledging the power of these deities. More importantly, they are subscribing to the Chinese vernacular religion of praying to underworld deities for purposes related to the underworld's matters, believing that this distinct realm exists.

Figure 56: The little green hut containing more deities

On the 15th night of the 7th lunar month, Taoist priest Nicole and I witnessed a food puja being performed at a Tibetan-Buddhist makeshift altar.[39] Two young men had driven up in a white car and unloaded food offerings. The men placed an assortment of food and fruits –a whole pineapple, apples, oranges, crackers, sliced white bread, oatmeal, and uncooked instant noodles, into a wire mesh container in front of this altar. Then, one man poured a carton of cranberry juice all over the items while the other poured coconut cream. I prodded Nicole to ask them questions as she possesses more religious sensitivity and vocabulary for the communication. The men explained that they were performing a food puja to the netherworld spirits, and the items they would set on fire all give off pleasant scents. It is believed that the spirits thrive on scents for nourishment and sustenance. During the 7th month, such pujas would benefit the well-being of the spirits. Nicole nodded and we stepped back as the men set the items on fire using torch guns (Figure 57), then settled into a seated position with one holding a handheld prayer wheel and the other chanting. Not all the offerings got completely burnt, as seen from the remains of the items the following day (Figure 58). Care for the netherworld spirits via a religious altar is an act of devotional care too, as the offerings are made to the former via an accessible platform to the netherworld with the spiritual powers of the Tibetan Buddhas. It is charitable act based upon the Confucian ideal of filial piety, that acknowledges the wandering spirits and their needs in BBC.

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[39] Nicole is a junior priest from Quan Zhen Cultural Society, a Taoist organisation in Singapore. She was engaged by me to accompany me to BBC during the 7th lunar month for my fieldwork.

Figure 57: Food puja in action

Figure 58: The burnt remains of the food puja the next day

The makeshift altars of Guan Yin and underworld deity Kṣitigarbha are recent additions to BBC and have been rejuvenated with paint works and additions of accessories like plastic flowers throughout my fieldwork. Such revitalisation efforts are akin to the repainting and accessorising of roadside crosses by caretakers in Quebec, Canada, who believe that these crosses are 'still-active objects of devotional labour' (Kaell, 2017:123). On a cold rainy night of November 2020, I drove into BBC hoping to conduct observations of the Winter Clothing Festival, which did not occur at all due to Covid restrictions. However, I saw the shrine of Guan Yin dressed in fairy lights, which made me feel that Christmas had come early to BBC! The fairy lights function to augment the visibility of the Guan Yin shrine, like how the wayside crosses in rural Quebec undergo regular rejuvenation with 'electric lights, zinc bolts, or car paint' to be more visible and durable (Kaell, 2017:7).

Devotional care is a recent phenomenon in BBC that has emerged largely in response to the Lornie Highway construction. Prior to the government's announcement of the construction and associated partial clearance of the cemetery to make space for the highway, BBC was largely deserted. Tombkeepers I had spoken to unanimously pointed to the highway construction as the turning point that led to the influx of curious visitors, the erection of makeshift altars, and frequent large-scale

public prayers conducted by devotees. "Of course the deities have to be summoned; the cemetery is in danger. Do you know that everyone is complaining in there?" shared Master Tan, a Taoist temple medium at Xuan Jiang Dian, a Chinese temple located in western Singapore. I had interviewed him to learn about the Winter Clothing Festival, which he had presided during pre-Covid times. "Who are the 'everyone'?" I queried. "The spirits and the deceased. You keep clearing their homes, of course they will be unhappy right? They have no place to stay! They complain to us, so we go there, conduct prayers to appease them, and try to offer them an alternative place to go, such as reincarnation," explained Master Tan. Similarly, I had also witnessed netherworld deity Bao Bei Ye (包贝爷), lament to the co-founder of atBB, Raymond Goh, via spirit possession in a temple medium, that he had received numerous complaints from the cemetery's inhabitants about the loss of their homes due to the highway construction. Perhaps, the unexpected loss of graves had prompted the netherworld powers to care for the cemetery, with the help of human agency to set up and maintain them.

Literature has evinced that makeshift shrines are common phenomena for memorialisation and/or devotion, with the latter function being demonstrated in the makeshift altars in Hill 1 of BBC.[40] Notably, a sizeable proportion of observed shrines are/were erected for deceased individuals, such as victims of road accidents in the United States (Collins and Opie, 2010), dead ancestors in Bangkok (Herzfeld, 2016), and victims of other tragedies (e.g., the September 11 terrorist attack in the United States—see Haskins and DeRose, 2003). Only a handful are/were built for deities or higher beings who are perceived to offer spiritual protection powers (e.g., street shrines in Mexico City—see Bourdreau, 2018) and may be composed of mass-produced imagery such as brochures (e.g., Buddhist shrines in Ladakh, India—see Kerin, 2021). The makeshift altars in BBC are distinct from the types discussed in literature because they are established within a burial site with an intended purpose of protecting the site and its inhabitants. The deities housed within these altars are temporary presences since they may be swapped from time to time, such as Kṣitigarbha's altar, whose figurine I had observed to be removed and replaced with a paper imagery, then replaced again with another figurine in a matter of months.

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[40] For standardisation purposes, this thesis refers to makeshift shrines as 'makeshift altars'.

Importantly, they had emerged following the public outcry arising from the government's decision to construct Lornie Highway across the cemetery. Therefore, devotees who come by to perform devotional care are probably individuals who know about the altars because of the highway construction. While street shrines were cleared away quickly in the United States by the public works department (Haskins and DeRose, 2003), the altars in BBC are seemingly untouched by the government, judging from the repeated cycles of aesthetic rejuvenation that the altars had undergone over the one-year period of my fieldwork in BBC (refer to Chapter 3 for detailed descriptions and photographs). Since BBC is state land, the Singapore government definitely possesses the power to manage the site and this includes clearing away the makeshift altars, just like the public works department of the United States, but it has not done so for the altars sighted in Hill 1 (refer to Chapter 2 for details). This is anomalous and contradictory, judging from the degree of control the government had tried to exert on descendant John's four-faced Buddha shrine and his makeshift orange hut that was built for the wandering spirits (see Chapter 2). Is the government supportive of devotional care, approves of these makeshift altars, or is the government nonchalant about the sources of care that are believed to protect the cemetery because it possesses the power to decide on the fate of BBC?

Nonetheless, these makeshift altars in BBC underscore Chinese underworld religion, which is a part of the 'Chinese vernacular religion' that is primarily based upon the transmission of oral traditions (Graham, 2020; Tong, 1989). Cemeteries are central to the Chinese underworld religion because it is believed in 'Chinese vernacular post-mortal cosmology, one portion of an ancestral soul remains by the grave after death' (Harrell, 1979), necessitating the importance of graveside offerings to family ancestors by descendants, as well as offerings made by underworld temples to those bereft of offerings (Graham, 2020:87). Based on findings from their fieldwork interviews with representatives from underworld temples in Singapore, Graham (2020) and Dean (2018) unanimously argue that 'cemetery rituals' have gained increasing importance because they resemble 'everyday forms of resistance against government-sanctioned urban redevelopment' (Graham, 2020:107). Spirit mediums from underworld temples can access 'heterotopic spaces' because of 'the flattening and homogenization of space through capitalist renewal in Singapore' (Dean, 2018:71). Therefore, cemetery spaces are harnessed by underworld traditions to become sites of resistance against

the government's redevelopment plans (Graham, 2020:108). Expanding upon their academic viewpoints, I posit that the emergence of makeshift altars in BBC may be perceived as sites of resistance against the government's plan to completely clear the cemetery. The introduction of underworld deities to BBC seemingly pits the mortal world and netherworld against each other, where the deities are brought in to prevent the cemetery's impending clearance by the government.

Voluntary care

The scope of voluntary care is as broad as personal care. It ranges from keeping the environment clean, such as the regular picking up of litter by descendant John and his Indonesian helper at Hill 1 in the mornings, to an initiation of a mass clean-up session post-Qing Ming in May 2021 by Singapore permanent resident Michael Smith, who is a regular cemetery visitor of BBC (Figure 59). [41]

Michael Smith
May 1, 2021 · 🌐

Bukit Brown post Qingming clean-up

Sunday, 2 May at 8:30am at the Information Platform inside the main gate, rain or shine
(but if it is raining hard on Sunday morning, I'll be there Monday morning too.)

Don't worry of you are a little late. We will send out volunteers as they arrive in family groups or groups of two so that we are COVID safe. Stay as long or as short as you like.

We are just picking up litter and containers from offerings left behind from Qingming. We are NOT cleaning graves, cutting back jungle or taking down tomb-keepers' trail markers.

I will provide trashbags, plastic gloves and some tongs but feel free to bring your own if you want. I suggest wearing long pants, shoes that could get a little muddy, socks, a long-sleeve shirt and a hat. This will help protect against the sun and bug bites. For extra protection, use sunscreen and bug spray. Please also bring some water to stay hydrated.

So that I have an estimate of how many people to expect, please let me know below or by direct message if you plan on coming. Currently I have about a dozen people coming from the running club and several people from this group. The more – the merrier and the more blocks we can clean-up!
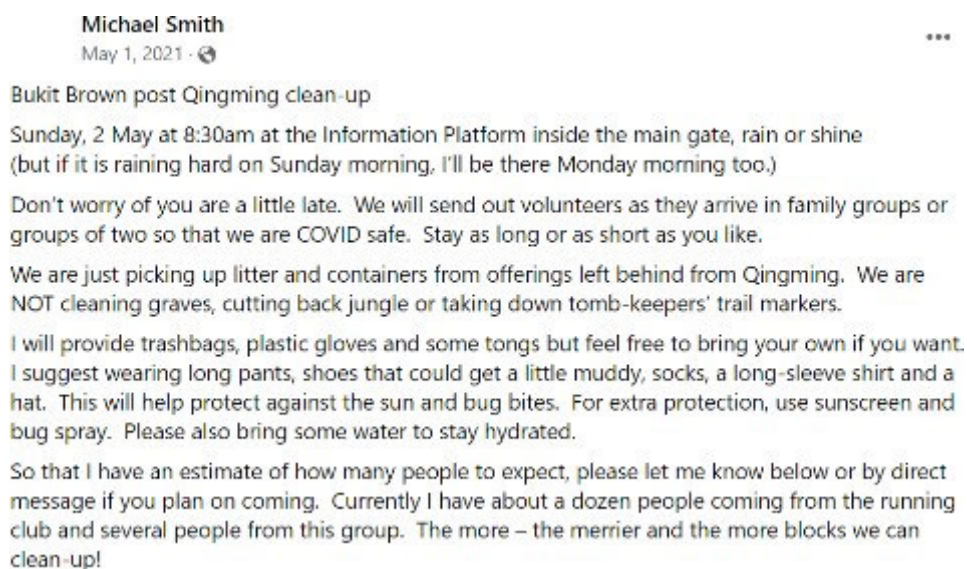
Figure 59: Screenshot of Michael Smith's Facebook post
(Permission for reposting has been granted by Michael Smith)

[41] John's efforts in cleaning up Hill 1 are mentioned in the Chapter 2.

Figure 60: Screenshot from a Facebook post by Michael Smith initiating the clean-up and sharing about the clean-up process details (Permission for reposting has been granted by Michael Smith)

Michael's objective in organising the mass clean-up was to keep the cemetery clean and tidy while indirectly indicating his displeasure at those cemetery users who had been complacent in cleaning up after themselves. At short notice, he was able to gather ten volunteers from the BBC Facebook group (Figure 60). Michael's initiative refutes Morozov's (2011) criticism against online activism, where he claims that online activism rarely develops beyond virtual reality. The photographs shared by Michael in his post were mostly of tea lights which were found at the graves in Hill 1 (Figure 61). In my private chat conversation via Facebook Messenger with Michael, he expressed unhappiness over the irresponsible individuals who did not clear the tea lights and continued placing new tea lights. Thus, he took it upon himself to stake out Hill 1 to speak with the individuals who had come to place tea lights with a goal of reminding them to clean up. It seems that Michael's personal initiative had worked, as indicated in his update (Figure 61).

Figure 61: Screenshots from Michael Smith's Facebook post that lamented on the amount of rubbish left behind at the graves and his reply to me via Facebook Messenger.

(Permission for reposting has been granted by Michael Smith)

Michael had publicised his initiative in the Facebook group not because he wanted to gain credit for his efforts; rather, he wanted to create awareness of the amount of litter that was accumulating in BBC and hoped to make a change. Michael's cause is akin to the daily performative practice of *Ganga aarti* at India's famous Ganges River, which seeks to raise environmental awareness via devotional practice (Luthy, 2019). The ecomaternalist discourse employed invokes the symbolism of Ganga as a Mother that is 'under distress' and 'no longer able to serve her divine purpose due to the greed and ignorance of humanity' owing to the indiscriminate acts of pollution by people to the river (Luthy, 2019). Likewise, Michael had exhibited sensitivity in not questioning

the way in which devotional practice is done but wanted to create an increased awareness of caring for the environment while performing devotional practice.

John and Michael are the visible individuals who demonstrate voluntary care in BBC; however, there are many other individuals who perform the same but are invisible because they are not sighted, known, or active in the Facebook group. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Mr K was a volunteer who cleaned selected graves for a few years before ill health deterred him from frequenting BBC. Mr K prefers to be low profile and does not want to be known for his efforts in cleaning graves voluntarily. However, I was able to score an interview with him with the help of his friend who is atBB's co-founder, Raymond Goh. As his friend, Raymond knows that Mr K has a favourite grave which he had cleaned regularly in the past. This is the grave of 'Suicide Girl', a 26-year-old lady who had committed suicide at her father's grave because she was overcome with grief by her father's passing (Rojak Librarian, 2012). She was buried one grave away from her father's grave and earned this nickname. Her story tugged at Mr K's heartstrings and that probably spurred him to clean her grave voluntarily. During my private 'ramble' with atBB volunteers Raymond and Peter, I was taken to her grave to see. On several evenings when I drove to BBC to conduct random observations, I spotted a man with a waist-length ponytail who always carried a bag of rubbish out from the cemetery gate. He could be another unseen and unknown volunteer who cleans BBC too. In this expansive burial site, it is impossible to know all the individuals who perform voluntary care but from the examples shared, it is evident that there is an ongoing degree of voluntary care that is being performed within BBC.

In between the spheres of visible and invisible voluntary care performed, lies an ambiguous chasm of voluntary care that is performed by some atBB volunteers. They have adopted certain graves that appeal to them, based on reasons such as the grave's aesthetics, social history of the deceased, and/or the interactions they had with the descendants. The volunteer would make a special visit to his/her adopted grave to clean up, and on occasions like Qing Ming Festival, make offerings to the deceased. For instance, volunteer Peter was so touched by Madam Soh Koon Eng's

story, that he decided to adopt her grave and upkeep it whenever he goes to BBC.[42]

He said, "Soh Koon Eng one [sic] is special to me…this one if any Brownie report [sic] overgrown I will take care..."[43] However, Peter was quick to point out that, "In general we don't try to take away the bread and butter of tombkeepers ...but if cleaning to give access to tombs [sic] ...why not?" This highlights the ambiguity of the atBB volunteers' voluntary care; it is not entirely altruistic if they wish to showcase certain graves for their guided walks, yet it may be considered altruistic if they are motivated to upkeep the grave after 'adopting' the grave. The atBB volunteers do not pay tombkeepers to clear graves for them on the grounds that they are volunteers themselves, yet they are also mindful in not impinging upon the latter's livelihood.

Conclusion

Care was neglected in BBC for an extended period after the government withdrew maintenance contracts, resulting in its overgrown wild state now (see Huang, 2014). The highway construction was the pivotal point that encouraged care to return to BBC. Paradoxically, the government's plan to prepare BBC for residential development with the Lornie Highway construction have brought care back to BBC. While personal care may be consistent with descendants visiting their ancestors' graves annually, contractual care faces a perilous fate owing to the declining health conditions and ageing of tombkeepers, as well as the absence of successors in the closed tombkeeping trade. In contrast, the increases in devotional care and voluntary care are recent phenomena, likely from the publicity generated by the highway construction and the prospect of BBC. The personnel performing care have evolved from insiders, i.e., persons with relations to BBC (e.g., the tombkeepers and descendants), to outsiders (i.e., persons with no relation to BBC). Evidently, the degrees of care have become significant in the recent years with trajectory of care being altered over time, despite the government's plan to completely clear BBC soon for residential development. My detailed examination of the types of care in BBC has made it

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[42] Madam Soh was killed by splinters from a bomb that fell on her house. She was taking shelter with her family under the altar table when she was wounded. She was taken to hospital but succumbed to her wounds (Rojak Librarian, 2013d).
[43] 'Brownies' is an alternative term used to refer to the volunteers from atBB. Further details of this group are shared in Chapter 5.

apparent that the dead seem to possess an agency to attract care to BBC, empowering these individuals to speak up for them.

The contribution of devotional care to BBC suggests the perceived insufficiency of care rendered to the cemetery and its inhabitants by the government following the government's recent partial clearance of the cemetery for the Lornie Highway construction. Like the statues that are placed in street shrines in Mexico City to 'protect the home, the street corner or one's own body', the deities in BBC's makeshift altars are believed to protect the dead from physical dangers (in this case, from being cleared away by the government). These deities may be swapped from time to time by devotees, suggesting that the combination of their supernatural powers may be adjusted to create the most favourable protective shield for BBC. When devotees pray and make offerings to the shrines regularly, they seek protection from the deities in exchange for recognition (see Bourdreau, 2018). Such contractual fidelity functions to establish reciprocal relations between the deities and the living. Akin to the 'perceived unsatisfactory muscular protection' in violence laden Mexico City, which necessitates the erection of street shrines containing saints, the protective powers of the deities in BBC's makeshift altars are tapped onto in exchange for regular care rendered to them (Bourdreau, 2018).

Returning to the question I had posed earlier in this chapter on the government's stance towards devotional care performed in BBC, I posit that the government has adopted an ambivalent attitude towards this form of care; it is neither supportive, approving, nor nonchalant about devotional care. This stance taken can be attributed to the government's nation building ideal to remain as a 'secular and religiously neutral state' to 'maintain ethno-religious harmony' in a multi-religious nation (Kuah, 2018). The PAP government has made a clear separation of religion from politics with two legislative implementations: the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act and a Presidential Council for Religious Harmony that were formed in 1990 (Kuah, 2018). Both 'consider and report on matters affecting the maintenance of religious harmony' in Singapore, and function to 'prevent religious tensions and conflict caused by insensitive and provocative acts, promote understanding, moderation, tolerance, and respect for other religions' (Kuah, 2018; SSO, 2022). Treading carefully and remaining highly vigilant where religion is concerned is the Singapore

government's approach to avoiding sectarian violence, like what had happened in the past (see Leifer, 1964 for an example).

The ambivalent attitude adopted by the Singapore government regarding the performance of devotional care at makeshift altars in BBC is akin to the Malaysian government's stance towards the unregistered Hindu temples in Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur (Baxstrom, 2008). Despite being illegal entities that occupy state land and not registered with the Societies Act of 1966, state agencies in Malaysia had 'moved very cautiously' when implementing redevelopment plans in Brickfields because they were concerned that the 'arbitrary liquidation of these small temples would have exceptional consequences beyond the limits of rational planning and the exercise of sheer sovereign force' (Baxstrom, 2008:205). Eventually, the temples had managed to 'resist eviction and successfully legitimise their status in the neighbourhood' when state agencies decided to set aside a plot of land in their redevelopment plans for these temples to be moved there (Baxstrom, 2008:200-202). This surprising turn of events highlights that the power of the state has created an 'ambiguous space…within the law that afforded these temples an enhanced legitimacy in the eyes of the state functionaries' (Baxstrom, 2008:205). BBC's experience is like the Malaysian Brickfields experience since the makeshift altars have remained because of a legislative gap in sanctioning these illegal structures within the cemetery. As mentioned in Chapter 2, without knowing the creators/authors of these altars, the government agency was unable to issue notices for their removal. Evidently, the creators/authors had cleverly exploited this gap to their advantage. The Singapore government agency has refrained from meddling further into these altars possibly due to its concern for 'exceptional consequences beyond rational planning' and its firm stance in not mixing religion with politics (Baxstrom, 2008:205).

This chapter has also made visible the mutually reinforcing relationship between atBB's advocacy, and the varieties of care performed at BBC. As it shall be discussed in Chapter 5, atBB's advocacy encourages for an alternative perspective of care for BBC to preserve it, based on the aspects of heritage, history, and habitat of the site. Notably, the care performed for BBC and its inhabitants appeal to the Confucianism ideal of filial piety and the Chinese underworld tradition. Both endeavours mutually reinforce each other; atBB's ability to foster public discourse on

the prospect and care of BBC via social media platforms and activities on the ground is efficacious only when complemented with the care work performed in BBC. Concurrently, atBB's active and persistent lobbying also spurs or attracts more care for BBC because of the strong publicity created via social media. Furthermore, the practices of care in BBC inform the atBB volunteers on the ways they can curate their guided walks for the public, amass useful tacit knowledge and archival information to narrate the social histories of selected deceased, and share enriching knowledge of the cemetery. It is apparent here that the active levels of care and varieties of care in BBC had created a space for the emergence of distinct community-led initiatives, with atBB's advocacy leading as an emerging contemporary civil society influence to be reckoned with. The next chapter shall explore atBB in detail to understand how its influence has created a new chapter for contemporary civil society in Singapore.

The advocacy and care taking place in BBC also invigorate the liveliness of the cemetery and underscore the theme that the cemetery is indeed alive in many senses of the word. Not only is the cemetery well-visited daily by individuals from all walks of life for purposes of recreation, exploration, or performance of care, the cemetery is also metaphorically alive with many netherworld beings, such as the netherworld spirits, the ancestors, and the underworld deities. It is precisely because BBC is perceived as brimming with life from the netherworld, that underworld deities have been brought into the cemetery to render assistance and offer protection to the netherworld population.

Two observations can be made from the recent emergence of makeshift altars at Hill 1 of BBC. First, Chinese religion is an enduring institution over time. The Chinese religious landscape in Singapore has been significantly affected with the government's urban relocation project by integrating ethnic groups in public housing flats built by the government (Graham, 2020:24). This implies the demolition of village temples that had previously housed 'local tutelary deities' and the resultant unbridled sprouting of 'unofficial temples' like the makeshift altars found in BBC (Graham, 2020:24). The persistence and longevity of these local religions are encouraged with the rise in 'wandering and malevolent spirits that need to be controlled', from historical events like Singapore's Sook Ching massacre by the Japanese military police and the clearance of 'more than 200 cemeteries in Singapore within a short span of 40 years'

due to Singapore's rapid national development (Graham, 2020:25; Tan, 2011:25). Similarly, Toulson (2009) argues that the 'Singaporean dead' possess 'surprising malevolence' because they have been subjected to rapid urbanisation without due care accorded to their lineage and their final resting places. These circumstances have led Graham (2020) to posit that there has been a 'gradual rise' in the 'dominance of the underworld over the Heaven deities in the temple landscape' (Graham, 2020:25). A new Chinese religious landscape is now established in BBC with the makeshift altars, where a different suite of deities from the underworld who are believed to possess spiritual powers are activated to protect BBC. Evidently, the underworld religion is a distinctive feature of Chinese religion that has survived over time despite the state-imposed government urban relocation and paradoxically, gained popularity with the urban gentrification endeavour pursued by the government.

The second observation pertains to the dual functions that Chinese underworld religion possesses in preserving the past and establishing identity in the present (see Halbwachs, 1992). Contrary to Graham's (2020) claim that underworld religion is 'a 21st century phenomenon' that has enjoyed 'unrivalled popularity in the local ritual arenas', I use Hervieu-Léger's (1996) assertion to argue that the underworld religion in Singapore 'is a creative force that confers transcendent authority on the past in order to assure present meaning and future continuity'. It is apparent that Chinese underworld religion is a revived figment from the past which has illuminated the unique practices of the Chinese as an ethnic group through the devotional care performed in BBC, thereby ensuring the continuity of the cultural practices within this ethnic group.

The discussions on the types of care also highlight the precarity of care for the dead, something that has received lesser academic consideration for Bukit Brown but ought to be tabled in the public discourse soon. Ageing tombkeepers suggest that contractual care may be unsustainable in the long run. Ideally, the physical appearances of kin or contracted workers at the graves are still preferred because they lend physical, emotional, and moral support to the deceased, and vice versa. Serematakis (1991) describes this as a process of 'adornment' where the dead and the living mutually endow each other with a sense of pride, status, and honour, a metaphorical demonstration of shared substance between both parties which involves reciprocity, the exchange of emotions, presences, and tangible and intangible

elements (e.g., food and paper offerings as well as blessings). The dead and the cemetery need to be and can be cared for in more ways than one, as evinced by the types of care observed at Bukit Brown. But Bukit Brown is an old cemetery, with graves at least 100 years old. With the tombkeepers' reduced physical ability to care for the dead, who will assume this responsibility moving forward?

One possible avenue to explore continued care for BBC is to consult the experiences of afterlife care from a local example (Peck San Theng (PST)), and a Japanese example. PST is a non-profit organisation that manages a columbarium that accommodates urns and spiritual tablets (Choi, 2020). In response to the unattended dead in graves and tablets, PST provides afterlife care work via accommodating cremated remains from unattended graves in a collective grave and conducts rituals are also conducted 'from time to time to merge unattended individual tablets into a collective tablet' to ensure that the unattended dead do not become wandering ghosts (Choi, 2020). Japan experiences a weakening of the primogeniture system and the parishioner system, coupled with low birth rates and new urban lifestyle alignments, resulting in mortuary rituals being 'emptied out' when the people who are assigned to manage these rituals by tradition can no longer do so or no longer exist (Mori, 2014; Allison, 2021). Automated-style columbaria that were created in the mid-1990s is Japan's solution to abandoned graves, where cremated remains can be stored with just an entrance fee independent of whether there are successors (Allison, 2021). These automated graves 'work as a social prosthetics' as they assume the performance of memorial care work in place of the deceased's kin (Allison, 2021:625). If the government were to preserve Bukit Brown in situ, it needs to have an engaging discussion with the public who support this cause to consider possible ways of care that can be performed to maintain the integrity of the graves and the cemetery.

The plethora of care demonstrated in BBC has underscored the fact that the living and the dead co-exist and there are 'manifold relations' within this co-existence (see Harrison, 2003). In BBC, the dead may not only be related to the living as ancestors, they may also be recipients of care from the living, or potential perpetrators that may harm tombkeepers. The fact that so many avenues of care are showered upon the dead in BBC, signals that the dead matter to the living on several levels – the local perspective (as understood by the tombkeepers), the religious perspective of the dead's 'involvement

in meaning-making and social practices' (as understood by the temple volunteers who perform devotional care), cultural beliefs on death and the afterlife, the filial piety perspective (as understood by the descendants who perform personal care and engage tombkeepers to perform contractual care) (Laquer, 2015). There is thus an 'unbreakable bond with the dead', where the dead enjoys a 'persistence of being' even though they are 'nothing' and their buried remains amount to 'nothing' (Laquer, 2015:16). Such an 'unbreakable bond' may best be explicated with an analogy of a blank slate onto which the living project acts of their individual thoughts and emotions regarding death and the dead, which adhere to the slate like how living cells adhere to one another (see Laquer, 2015:57). These thoughts and emotions are shaped by the cultural beliefs, religious beliefs, and existential beliefs about life of the individual, and are thus unique (Lacquer, 2015:58-65). The conglomeration of these cells from all individuals would therefore create culture, which in the case of BBC's experience, takes its form via mortuary rituals performed for the dead to assuage the omnipresent fear of the dead in the living. One cannot deny that there is an underlying element of fear behind every demonstration of care made to the dead, because there are 'unresolved anxieties' harboured by the living towards the perceived 'enchanted' nature of the dead which are believed to be powerful, command respect, and are feared (Harrison, 2003:98; Laquer, 2015:4).

CHAPTER FIVE
SPEAKING UP FOR THE DEAD IN BUKIT BROWN:
AN EMERGENT CIVIL SOCIETY IN SINGAPORE?

The preceding chapters have examined how individual efforts from the ground have spoken up for the dead via approaches such as the maintenance of site cleanliness and tidiness, performance of ancestor worship, conduct of spiritual devotion, presentation of abundant offerings and demonstrations of care. The theme of assertive communication underscores these efforts, conveying the message that the cemetery is worth speaking up for owing to its invaluable aspects of heritage, history, culture, as well as the longevity of bonds between the living and the dead. This chapter looks at the advocacy strategies and activist methodologies adopted by all things Bukit Brown (atBB). The overarching theme of state-society relations is surfaced with the discussion of the government's role in shaping and managing civil society in Singapore since the country's independence in 1965. The chapter contends that atBB's prolonged existence signals a plausible sign of an emergent contemporary civil society in Singapore. This emergence suggests a new non-political space that community-led initiatives can participate in to engage with the government, provided these initiatives adhere to the ground rules of this space.

atBB was informally assembled in early 2012 in response to the government's announcement of a partial clearance of BBC to build a highway (more details can be found in the Introduction). It is composed of a loose group of volunteers who hail from white-collar professions and have no deceased ancestors buried in BBC, meaning that this group has no personal vested interest in the cemetery. The volunteers are referred to by the press and public as 'Brownies' and the group operates a blog at www.bukitbrown.com and administers a Facebook group called 'Heritage Singapore – Bukit Brown Cemetery'. Both are used by the group to document events and information about BBC (Lim and Leow, 2017:113). It is through these social media platforms that atBB publicises its advocacy and lobbies for public support. atBB was not the only informally assembled group that had emerged because of the circumstances then; there were others, such as SOS Bukit Brown, which was instrumental in organising an online petition on 3 December 2011 that aimed to garner 100,000 signatures from supporters via the said Facebook group to oppose the government's highway construction plan (Figure 62).

atBB's co-founder Raymond Goh's Facebook post dated 30 August 2012 complements the petition's objective by emphasising on his group's advocacy to preserve the cemetery (Figure 63). Although SOS Bukit Brown has been instrumental in initiating the longstanding conversation within the Facebook group regarding the fate of BBC, the group is now dormant, with atBB stepping up to continue to advocate for the preservation of BBC despite the completed highway. It has been a decade since atBB began its advocacy for BBC, and similarly, a decade-long, ongoing conversation has been buoyant in the Facebook group. The resulting conversation in the group is akin to a bustling coffeeshop where communication can be facilitated 'one- on-one or one to many, many to one, and many-to-many' (Mahizhnan, 2016: xviii).
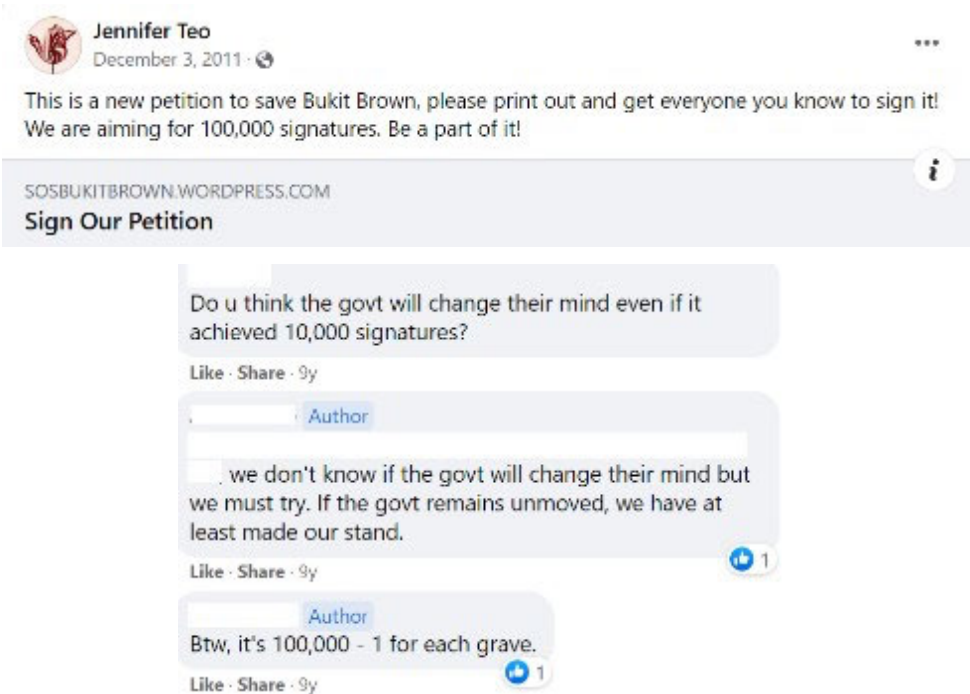

Figure 62: The Facebook post by SOS Bukit Brown's co-founder, Jennifer Teo, and selected comments beneath. (Permission to reproduce this screenshot has been granted by Facebook group administrator, Raymond Goh)
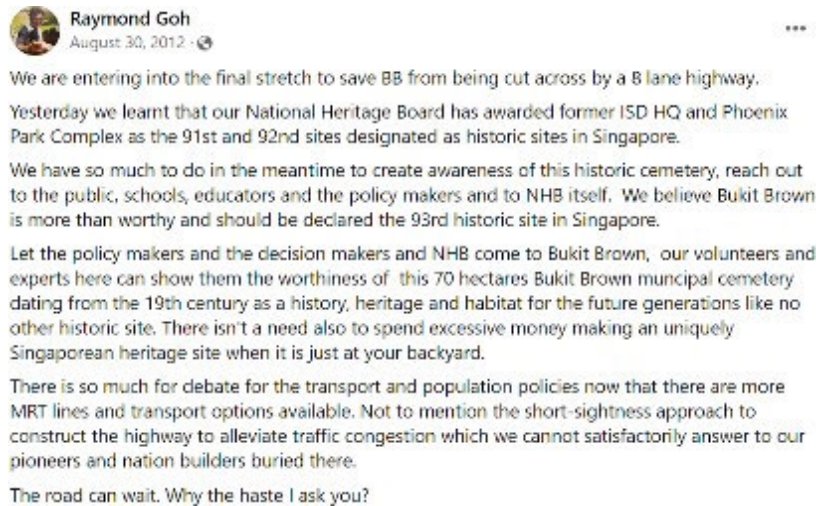
Raymond Goh
August 30, 2012 · 🌐

We are entering into the final stretch to save BB from being cut across by a 8 lane highway.

Yesterday we learnt that our National Heritage Board has awarded former ISD HQ and Phoenix Park Complex as the 91st and 92nd sites designated as historic sites in Singapore.

We have so much to do in the meantime to create awareness of this historic cemetery, reach out to the public, schools, educators and the policy makers and to NHB itself. We believe Bukit Brown is more than worthy and should be declared the 93rd historic site in Singapore.

Let the policy makers and the decision makers and NHB come to Bukit Brown, our volunteers and experts here can show them the worthiness of this 70 hectares Bukit Brown muncipal cemetery dating from the 19th century as a history, heritage and habitat for the future generations like no other historic site. There isn't a need also to spend excessive money making an uniquely Singaporean heritage site when it is just at your backyard.

There is so much for debate for the transport and population policies now that there are more MRT lines and transport options available. Not to mention the short-sightness approach to construct the highway to alleviate traffic congestion which we cannot satisfactorily answer to our pioneers and nation builders buried there.

The road can wait. Why the haste I ask you?

Figure 63: The Facebook post by atBB's co-founder, Raymond Goh

(Permission to reproduce this screenshot has been granted by Raymond Goh)

Explicating the spotlight on atBB

Civil society is not a new phenomenon in Singapore, and neither is it elsewhere. However, atBB is a novel emergent group that evokes discussions on the concept and functions of civil society in Singapore, which explicates its use as an empirical example in this thesis. The concept of civil society is said to have 're-emerged' in 1989, following the 'strategic deployment by dissidents in Eastern Europe in the final years of the Soviet bloc', the influence by 'failures of development in postcolonial states in the Third World, as well as "increasing significance of the voluntary or third sector in First World countries' (Hann, 2010:122; Tismaneanu, 1990). Of these, the communist propaganda from the declining Soviet bloc had popularised the concept the most because of the 'central socialist desire to transform the conditions of material life' (Ehrenberg, 2012:9).[45] Civil society comprises constituent institutions and actors and is not limited to non-governmental organisations, activists, and social movements (Fisher, 2010:3) Literature discusses contemporary civil society as a heterogeneous category owing to different socio-political, cultural, and economic circumstances. Conceptualisations of civil society from the South have been developing alongside those of the North that are steeped in European intellectual history, even though the former occupy an ambiguous position of being neither in opposition to the state nor in agreement with

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[45] A detailed historical overview of the emergence of contemporary civil society can be found from Tismaneanu (1990).

society (Skori and Hudson, 2003).[46] More recently, research on the 'third sector' that refers to the 'intermediate organisations' which interact with the state (as the first sector) and the market (as the second sector) and comprising social enterprises and philanthropy, has emerged (for examples, see Laratta, 2018 and Deguchi, 2018). This chapter does not aim to situate atBB into an ideal type of civil society like how literature discusses civil society; rather, it focuses on how atBB's emergence as an informally assembled advocacy group signals a change in Singapore's state-society relations.

There is thus value in examining atBB for its attributes against contemporary civil society discussed in literature as well as the political backdrop in which atBB has emerged and developed in these ten years. Already, three attributes of atBB are outstanding: (a) it is not registered with Singapore's Societies Act as a formal society (SSO, 2021b) yet it has thrived informally as one for a decade, (b) it is composed entirely of volunteers who are referred to as 'Brownies' without possessing any formal membership, and (c) despite its informal composition, it is part of the Working Committee on Bukit Brown, a multi-agency taskforce composed of government agencies who have oversight of Bukit Brown and chaired by the Ministry of National Development. Notably, despite being unregistered, atBB has been able to thrive for *a decade and counting*, without being sanctioned by the government. This is unlike The Online Citizen, another group that began as an unregistered entity but was 'forced to become a registered political association in early 2011' (Ortmann, 2013:132).

The Societies Act is a placeholder for the government's control over civil society in Singapore, but it is a recently established legislation. It is mandatory for all civil society groups (or groups that are formed based on a common interest/endeavour) in Singapore to register with the said Act (Koh and Soon, 2018) which implies that registered societies will have to comply with the regulations set forth in this Act. This practice does not differ from China's, which has a law that proscribes registration of civil society groups to prevent them from harming 'societal morality' (Spires, 2018:54). Notably, Singapore's Societies Act came about in 1966, a year after Singapore gained independence with a single political party at reign. This suggests that prior to the Act's

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[46] For example, the *ts'ici* system in Zhizuo village of Yunnan, China, is a Southern form of civil society which offered a slew of services to a select community of beneficiaries (Mueggler, 2001).

establishment, civil society groups were not recognised and referred to as such, which indicates that there could be an assortment of such groups in existence. Their freedom to exist represented a more liberal state that allowed for the vibrancy of their growth and development (see Introduction for an elaboration). Literature confirms that earlier forms of civil society groups did exist in the forms of rendering assistance to immigrant communities with their material needs or performed collective demonstrations of resistance against the series of ruling powers that Singapore had experienced in the early days (refer to examples in Hong and Huang, 2008). Owing to 'convenience and the lack of political will' by the colonial state, the emergence of collective organisations amongst the immigrant communities in Singapore could flourish (Trocki, 2006).[47] These organisations assumed different forms, such as the *kongsi*, which were "self-help societies" established by 'Singapore-born Chinese merchants', offering labour organisation, education provision, and other social services (Comaroff, 2007:70; Rodan, 2006:69). A type of *kongsi* is the 'anti-marriage societies' which provided social support to immigrant women in Singapore who took vows not to marry (Comaroff, 2007:58). Secret societies and 'friendly societies' like the Chinese clan associations may also be considered as civil society groups owing to their similar intentions to offer welfare functions to immigrant communities in the early days of Singapore (Freedman, 1979).

While there is no publicly available record of the number of registered civil society groups in Singapore, there are several registered entities that are well-known for their respective sustained advocacies that are mounted towards the government over substantial number of years. Termed as 'the prominent players', the Association for Women for Action and Research (AWARE), Singapore Heritage Society (SHS), and Nature Society Singapore (NSS) are formally registered groups that have campaigned for women's rights, heritage conservation, and issues on nature and wildlife in Singapore respectively (Koh and Soon, 2012). In general, the advocacies of civil society groups in Singapore include expressions of post-material desires, demands, and forms of resistance to dominant narratives, all of which are characterised by 'episodic and differentiated' events in terms of engagement and

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[47] Singapore was part of the Straits Settlement (comprising Malacca and Penang) that became a crown colony state under British control on 1 April 1867 (NLB, 2019b). The Straits Settlement was dissolved and replaced by the Malayan Union on 1 April 1946 (NLB, 2014a).

timing and constitute a plurality of interests and actors (Chua, 2003:22; Singam and Thomas, 2017; Koh and Soon, 2018:160). Notably, some civil society groups are described as 'deeply political' because they address issues like gay rights, conservation movements, and broader human rights-based activism (Koh and Soon, 2018:160). The modus operandi of these civil society groups may be described as 'vertical civil society-to-state relationship', where activists form a distinct group based on a mutual consensus on a public interest issue and bring their agreed-upon advocacy to the government for petition or appeal (Koh and Soon, 2012).

Although it is not registered with the Societies Act, atBB functions like a civil society group. atBB sustains its advocacy for preserving Bukit Brown Cemetery by lobbying for public support via social media platforms and organising free public events like guided walks. It is not any different from the registered civil society groups since it functions to express a type of collective public desire, i.e. to preserve a burial site and opposes the government's plans to build a highway across and the redevelop the site for residential development in the future. Because it is unregistered, atBB exists beyond the scope of the Singapore government's control, since they are not a legally recognised societal entity that the government can sanction or discipline. As such, atBB has managed to survive for a decade and counting, with just volunteers staffing the group, and has even struck an amicable co-existence with the government without being forcibly removed by the latter. The fact that atBB has been invited to discuss with government agencies in a multi-ministry committee on the prospects of BBC is a commendable milestone in atBB's developmental trajectory. Would this privilege suggest that atBB is situated in a no-man's land where it has become an 'untouchable'? Or, does atBB's unofficial status embody some benefits for the government? atBB's anomalous existence seems problematic in the civil society landscape in Singapore.

The Singapore government's authoritarian control over civil society

As mentioned in the Introduction, the conditions for civil society to operate in have been observed to be gradually liberalised via the political reigns of successive prime ministers. There is also an expectation for a 'further maturation' of Singapore's civil society under the influence of the Internet (Koh and Soon, 2018). A scan of the civil

society landscape in Singapore today reveals regional and international collaborations that are facilitated by modern-day information technology (Koh and Soon, 2018). The results of the General Election in 2011 revealed 'a growing voice of the public' which led to the PAP adopting a consultative approach by 'increasing collaboration and public participation in its policy design and implementation' (Lee et al, 2017). Perhaps this liberalised window of opportunity had benefitted atBB's emergence, since its emergence in early 2012 had coincided with the openness approach adopted by the government following the General Election in 2011. However, it still does not explain how atBB has managed to avoid official attention, given that it is an unregistered group.

In literature, discussions on civil society in Singapore are extensive and all unanimously mention Singapore's authoritarian regime that limits the existence and/or activities of civil society. Koh and Soon (2012) highlighted the 1980s to mid-1990s as the era where the government 'was seen as resistant to civil society', adopted an 'ambivalent view' towards civil society, and perceived it as a force that exists primarily to resist or confront the state' (Koh and Soon, 2012:93-94). Singam (2017) reckoned that the PAP government had perceived civil society in this way because it wanted to achieve political stability and economic development; the defeat of the opposition in 1968 enabled the PAP to gain full control of the political process, including supressing civil society activism (Singam, 2017:3). Subsequently, the government realised that it was inevitable that there were 'growing demands for participation' from the public in the 1990s (Ortmann, 2013). Therefore, a slew of legislative acts were drawn up by the government in a bid to 'initiate a controlled process of liberalisation', where civil society would be strictly governed by 'hard laws and soft political restraints' (Ortmann, 2013; Koh and Soon, 2018). Besides the Societies Act, civil society also needs to comply with laws on expression and speech, such as The Sedition Act and the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act (SSO, 2021c; SSO, 2021d). There are significant legal impediments levied on civil society such as the Internal Security Act, because of the government's 'fear of subversive political activity', which is a common concern in authoritarian regimes (Tan, 2017; SSO, 2021e). Koh and Soon (2012) posit that the ruling political party of Singapore—the People's Action Party (PAP), has always perceived that civil society lacks the ability to self-regulate and is 'fraught with conflict', which justifies the government's need to regulate the space for the activities of civil

society (Koh and Soon, 2012:95). Such a political environment further creates a conundrum for atBB's prolonged existence.

As explicated in the Introduction, the 'rules of operation for civil society have been liberalised' (Koh and Soon, 2012:94) with the PAP showing active support for civil society's growth via institutional and financial support (Chua, 2003; Chua, 2017b). However, there is evidence to show that the Singapore government has maintained strict surveillance on civil society's activities. For example, the government monitors publications by civil society groups or alternative voices.[48] While publications have enabled the rise of social movements and civil rights movements (see Anderson, 1991; Tarrow, 1998; Downing, 1995), they may attract (unwanted) attention from the government. Local publishing house—Ethos Books is known for publishing works authored by alternative voices or 'books that nobody else dared to publish and no one dared or wanted to publish' (Mothership, 2019). Founded by Mr Fong Hoe Fang, Ethos Books treads carefully in its publications. In a past interview with Singapore's leading youth-focused digital news platform, mothership.sg, Mr Fong shared that he practises selective publishing where he only publishes 'established facts, credible claims, and authentic evidence' (Mothership, 2019). During our interview, he elaborated that he also performs "fact checking" by talking to the author to "get a sense of intention". Ethos Books has most recently published a controversial book by Singaporean sociologist A/P Teo You Yenn, titled *This is what inequality looks like*, which had its second print run in 2019. The book contains an anthology of essays related to the inequalities experienced in Singapore and was first published in 2018. The book is controversial because it illuminates the areas of inequality in Singapore which are marginalised or receive less government attention and therefore governmental aid. This book contradicts the somewhat pristine image that the government hopes to project to the outside world, in that Singapore has no pockets of poverty and everyone receives due government welfare whenever necessary.

During my interview with Mr Fong, he let on that the government remains in "insidious control" of publications and will not hesitate to resort to "insidious means" to

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[48] Civil society groups in Singapore have utilised publishing to create awareness. For example, the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) has published books, position papers, and policy submissions on issues that concern women in Singapore (details in AWARE, 2022).

remove publications and/or sanction the authors. Although the Printing Press Act (1974) exists, it is "generically worded" which "leaves leeway for government to exert control whenever and wherever", suggested Mr Fong. When A/P Teo's book was published, government officials had arrived at Mr Fong's office in plainclothes and private saloon cars to bulk-buy the books. The only giveaway, noted Mr Fong, were the corporate lanyards that these plainclothes officials had forgotten to remove while performing this task. Subsequently, Mr Fong found out from his friends occupying senior management positions in the civil service, that some of them were tasked to read Teo's book and write book reviews. It was not the first time that government officials had 'visited' Ethos Books; in fact, when atBB's publication titled *World War II @ Bukit Brown* was launched in 2016, the bulk-buy also occurred. Ironically, this book was funded by a government agency—the National Heritage Board (Lim and Leow, 2017). This suggests that the government does scrutinise atBB afterall, despite not forcing the group to register itself as a society. Mr Fong reckoned that the government "fears mass mobilisation that isn't done via government auspices", and thus wields "an invisible shield of government power" over publications. In fact, the Singapore government has clamped down severely on the authors of publications that criticise the Singapore political system. An example is Alan Shadrake's book about the brutality of Singapore's judiciary regime which led to his six-week imprisonment and S$20,000 fine (The Guardian, 2011). However, his book is not banned in Singapore according to Mr Fong.

Mr Fong's experiences with the visits from government officials at Ethos Books highlights two points. First, the government surveillance on the publications industry suggests that the publication materials do lend voices to the marginalised or overlooked in society since the government pays close attention to these publication materials, *but* the onus remains with the government on whether to act on the issues. Second, the government surveillance harks at the 'controlled process of liberalisation' that characterised the mode of government control in the 1990s and the present political regime that is characterised by a 'softer style of governance' that recognises civil society *but* still exerts control over it (Koh and Soon, 2018). This implies that the government has been controlling the degree of liberalisation for civil society all along. I reiterate my stance regarding the degree of state control over civil society made in the Introduction, that the analogy of the banyan tree has not been replaced by the

tembusu tree. Instead, both stand alongside each other to be activated for use whenever the government deems fit.

The following examples further demonstrate how the PAP government retains a significant degree of control over civil society while allowing the opportunity for the latter to win. Civil society's successful negotiations to preserve the mudflats at Chek Jawa in Pulau Ubin, an offshore island of Singapore, and the establishment of a free speech area at Hong Lim Park, a small green space in the city centre are two milestones to be celebrated (Chua, 2017a:161). However, when the Singapore Heritage Society attempted to engage government agencies regarding the partial clearance of Bukit Brown Cemetery to build the highway, the latter offered only 'one-sided briefings with little room for dialogue or negotiation' (Chua, 2017b:101). atBB volunteer, Tee, describes the state-society relations as "frozen" during this period, as there was a "lack of willingness from the government to talk to the tree huggers." The two co-founders of atBB, Catherine and Claire, shared that the termination of any further engagement by the government with civil society was 'a body blow' because it meant that the government was not open to further discussion and consultation with the grassroots groups (Lim and Leow, 2017:111). Given this initial unpleasant engagement between civil society and government, how has atBB managed to engage the government as an unregistered group subsequently on a related topic of preserving the rest of the cemetery without being side-lined by the government?

Lee (2005) cautions that the change in the Singapore government's inclination to embracing civil society 'should not be taken at face value, since they are often cryptic and ambiguous' (Lee, 2005:135). Describing this change in attitude by the government as 'gestural politics', Lee (2005) explains that the political regime displays 'liberal' gestures and employs 'populist rhetoric like openness and inclusiveness' all for the sake of attracting 'foreign visitors and investors' (Lee, 2005:135). Given civil society's broad conceptual facets which are usually 'arbitrary and ill-defined', the ball remains in the government's court to define what 'civil society' is, which aspect of 'civil society' can be appropriated to support the government's political objectives, and when the government will engage with 'civil society' (Lee, 2005). If Lee's (2005) claim is taken into consideration, then atBB's engagement with the government is borne out of the government's decision to provide the opportunity for the engagement. But this

does not explicate the rationale behind the government's move. atBB remains as an unregistered society so it is officially *not* part of civil society, so on what grounds is the government engaging atBB as?

Clearly, the Singapore government has created an ambiguous environment for the survival of civil society and more so for atBB, an unregistered group that behaves like civil society. atBB was formed at the community level based on the volunteers' common intent to preserve BBC soon after the public was informed by the government of the Lornie Highway construction as well as the impending fate of BBC (CNA, 2011). As such, the group was faced with an urgent challenge to convince the government to reverse its decision. This raises the question of how atBB has managed to thrive as an unregistered group that is composed informally within this environment, and how its advocacy has enabled the group to engage with the government. An examination of atBB's advocacy strategies and activist methodology will shed light on its longevity as an informal group in Singapore.

atBB's advocacy strategies

Cautious planning

My interview with co-founder Claire revealed that the group's formation is a result of a well-thought-out process. At the onset, the co-founders had decided against registering atBB as a society in accordance with the Societies Act since there was "unfamiliarity" amongst themselves then, meaning that they were strangers and did not know one another personally. Thus, the co-founders preferred to remain "organic" instead of being constrained by the regulations of the said Act. For its group nomenclature, the use of 'cemetery' was avoided because it was deemed "controversial". According to Claire, "Nomenclature is very important because it readjusts the construct of the mind." The co-founders came up with the themes of 'habitat, heritage, and history' and wish to advocate for saving the site as their primary objective, while the creation of public awareness of BBC is their secondary objective. Their advocacy is not site-specific, though they have focused on the municipal cemetery (i.e., BBC) as it has an available public burial register that adjacent cemetery grounds that were controlled by Chinese Hokkien Seh Ong clan association, do not.

Members call themselves 'volunteers' and are referred to as 'Brownies' in press coverage. This explains Darren's self-reference as a 'volunteer' instead of an 'activist' during his closing speech at his guided walk in July 2018 that I had participated in. This is yet another well-considered aspect relating to the group's formation. According to Claire, "the government doesn't like the word 'activist', because it sees it as opposing government." She observed that the government "prefers 'civil society' because it has a more encompassing feel." However, if the word 'activism' were to be used to describe the advocacy, the "connotation" of the advocacy will "become negative."[49]

Informality

Because they are an unregistered society, atBB is described in press coverage and by its volunteers as an 'informal' outfit and is 'a loosely structured group that is composed of volunteers.' Literature has also continued to use these descriptions for atBB (e.g., Chong and Chua, 2014). Informality deters government sanctions because it will be difficult for the government to "hold individual groups accountable", opined A/P Yeo Kang Shua, who lent his architectural expertise for the government-initiated documentation project in BBC before the highway construction.

The informality also influences the way volunteers see themselves in atBB –as different 'types' of Brownies. Figure 64 details my understanding of this typology. According to Claire, active Brownies currently number to about 12 individuals. They were the ones who had readily agreed to be interviewed for my research and remained supportive in offering more information or data to enhance my research. They were also available whenever I needed clarifications for my research. Only two pioneer Brownies were willing to be interviewed while the rest cited 'retirement' from atBB or 'inactive' statuses in atBB as reasons to decline my interview requests. There is a category of 'supporters' within atBB who render ad-hoc assistance. During my

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[49] In not referring to the volunteers as 'activists' in my thesis, I have hopefully prevented the reader from immediately associating atBB as an activist group and forming a biased perspective of the group before reading on. I have instead, offered an alternative perspective to the reader in considering activism as a voluntary endeavour with the personnel involved as non-politically motivated members of the public. In doing so, I have hopefully re-written the conventional understanding that civil society = activism + activists, and replaced it with a new equation of, civil society = voluntary endeavour + volunteers.

fieldwork, I encountered two such supporters. Acrux Wana is an 85-year-old hobbyist photographer whose passion in photography has captured many guided walks with picturesque backdrops in BBC. Clare Teo is the second supporter who gamely shows up for video shoots and other activities whenever required to lend a hand. Supporters like them keep atBB buoyant and reciprocally, they derive a sense of social participation for a cause they believe in. Although I was unable to obtain a definitive answer as to how an individual becomes a Brownie in atBB, I learnt from Brownie Peter that:

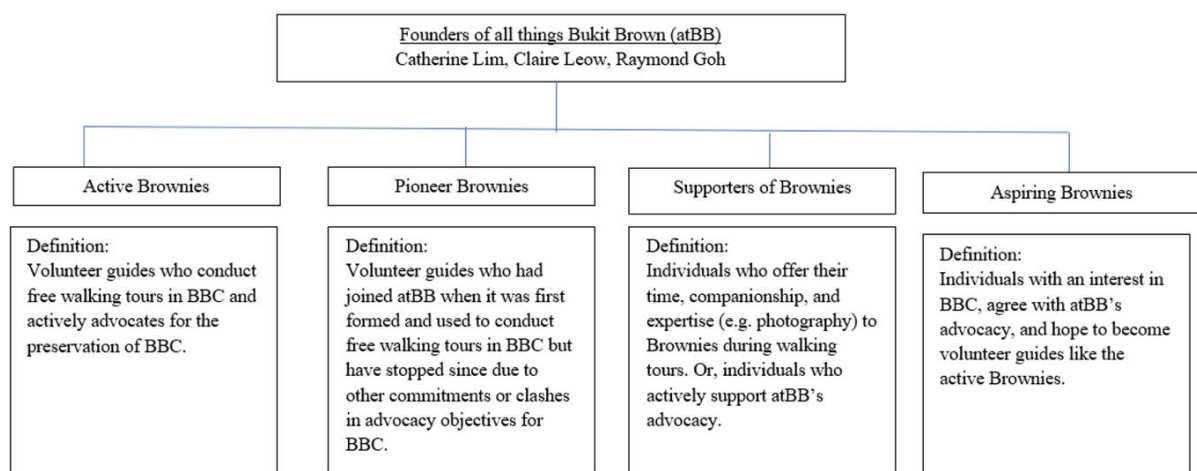"Anyone can be a Brownie as long as he/she loves Bukit Brown."

Figure 64: Typology of membership in atBB

Openness

The many permutations of a Brownie may also be attributable to the fluid boundaries set by co-founder Claire. She shared that individuals can be recruited as long as they express interest in taking up the role of a Brownie. These individuals constitute the category of aspiring Brownies. Despite atBB's professed informality and openness, there is a 'readiness assessment' conducted by active Brownies to ascertain if aspiring Bro   can make the mark as Brownies. Again, this is an informal criterion that was gleaned from my interview data, as it is not made explicit in any published interviews with and press coverage on atBB.

Individuals are also free to leave atBB anytime. This explains why some Brownies had deemed themselves as having "retired" or had become "inactive" in the

group. Active Brownies had unanimously pointed to two individuals, Mr W and Miss E, as 'ex-Brownies'. Both had been active in the early days of atBB's inception but had left subsequently due to disagreements with atBB's advocacy. While both are still active in matters related to BBC, they draw a distinct line between their personal endeavours and atBB's activities. Miss K remains as a member and an administrator in the Heritage Singapore - Bukit Brown Cemetery Facebook group, but Mr W has been removed from assessing the group due to his aggressive stance.

There is a notable internal tension between the strategies of careful planning and informality. One would not expect a carefully planned group to exhibit elements of looseness but in atBB, the latter is rather apparent in terms of how the members perceive and organise themselves. Informality makes atBB seem unstructured and almost laissez-faire. However, if informality is interpreted together with its strategy of openness, it may make more sense since recruitment of new members is done with a welcoming disposition sans formal recruitment regulation. Concurrently, it can also be argued that recruitment is a planned act because not every aspiring Brownie can become a Brownie eventually, given the 'readiness assessment' conducted by active Brownies. The following section on activist methodology further explores this point.

Passion

The atBB outfit is most intriguing because of its ability to sustain its passion for a burial site for so many years. This, coupled with the fact that its volunteers have no personal association with the inhabitants of BBC makes their advocacy for the cemetery even more noteworthy. Why would individuals from white-collared professions develop passion for a burial site that they have no prior connections with? SHS Secretary Han Mingguang remarked during our interview that he was "surprised that they (atBB) are not burnt out yet". As described by Brownies Darren, Claire, and Peter, atBB is a "collective of individuals" with "no hubris, no ego", and are united because they "love Bukit Brown". Darren reckons that their shared passion for Bukit Brown Cemetery "keeps people working". Indeed, identification with a common but broad goal helps to promote group cohesion while social bonding helps to draw strangers together. Because of the broad goal, there is no limit on what members can pursue within atBB. For example, they can explore thematic interests such as the social history of Chinese pioneers buried in BBC. It helps that the Singapore education curriculum (specifically the history and social

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studies textbooks at primary and secondary levels) contains neither mentions of nor discussions on BBC (MOE, 2016a; MOE, 2016b; MOE, 2020), which indirectly imbues atBB with an important role in public education, a responsibility that it has taken up with much candor via its free guided walks and public outreach events. Henderson (2010) argues that there is motivation for education and learning within communities that are committed to act together, and this opens 'closed worlds' and 'widens spheres of activities.' This is true for atBB because the Brownies are always keen to enrich themselves, learn from one another based on their different expertise, and share the knowledge with participants of their guided walks. Some Brownies had admitted during the interviews that they are unable to decipher complex tomb inscriptions due to their limited Chinese language proficiency. However, they are personally motivated to enrich their knowledge on Chinese culture, heritage, and history, to adequately prepare for the guided walks that they lead. For instance, Brownie Jonathan shared that he had googled for English versions of Chinese classics to read and scoured for reading materials to understand the different versions of the Chinese calendars that are inscribed on tombstones so that he could share the knowledge during his guided walks.

Affiliations

It is not only passion that sustains the group; rather, it is a collection of several characteristics of the Brownies which have provided fair advantages for their advocacy. atBB shares affiliations with other interest groups such as Singapore Heritage Society (SHS), Singapore Genealogy, and Nature Society Singapore. Such affiliations imbue atBB with prior background knowledge on heritage, culture, and nature in Singapore. These affiliations have encouraged cross-collaborations. For example, atBB had joined other civil society groups in a collective moratorium in 2012 after the government had announced of plans to partially clear BBC to construct Lornie Highway in March 2012 (Leow, 2012; BBC News, 2012; The Straits Times, 2012c). It has also collaborated with SHS on several public outreach events relating to BBC in subsequent years (The Straits Times, 2012c). According to Brownie Yik Han, these collaborations can only be effective if there is willingness "to work with others as a team, as friends." Besides teamwork, mutual trust between different groups also fosters strong 'coalitional capital' (Weiss, 2006; Ortmann, 2013). Ortmann (2013) highlights that there is proven significant potential via establishing collaborations from affiliations, such as the cases of the Ugandan Civil Society Coalition on Human Rights

and Constitutional Law, a union of 51 non-governmental groups that had gathered to fight an anti-homosexuality law and South Korea's National Coalition for Democracy Movement that was formed to fight for more democracy (Uganda Civil Society Coalition 2012; Kim, 2000).

Specialised expertise

All Brownies possess specialised expertise that benefit atBB. The co-founders are experienced professionals from the fields of journalism, media, and tourism while three Brownies are highly proficient in Chinese history and culture and are eloquent Mandarin speakers who lead guided walks in Mandarin. In general, the Brownies are English-speaking and work in white-collared professions. They were also able to leverage upon the research expertise of academics who were involved in the government-commissioned documentation project for BBC, gleaning essential information on aspects like the material culture and history of the site (Lim and Leow, 2017:113). Besides the data collected for the state-initiated documentation project for the affected graves that had to be exhumed to make space for the Lornie Highway, it has also been reported that 'the Brownies conduct their own independent research and surveys' (Liew, 2017:210). Added together, the general profile of a Brownie is an educated, well-informed, and articulate resident of Singapore which lends it substantial bargaining power in its advocacy for BBC. Their knowledgeable and articulate profile also helps in communicating their advocacy succinctly, firmly, and confidently. The theme of assertive communication is evinced here since the messages conveyed by atBB can both speak to the public while engaging with the government. It is perhaps the cumulation of specialised expertise that had enabled atBB to successfully have BBC listed in 2014 as a heritage site under threat on the World Monuments Watch, an international non-governmental organisation (Lim and Leow, 2017:115). Co-founders Claire and Catherine attribute this achievement as the catalyst that spurred the National Heritage Board, a government agency, to commence engagement with atBB (Lim and Leow, 2017:115).

Being diplomatic

One distinct trait that emerged from my interviews with the Brownies is that of diplomacy. I have observed from two instances that the Brownies refrain from talking bad behind the backs of others even if they see the unfairness of the situation or feel aggrieved. The first relates to how the active Brownies talk about the ex-Brownies. Usually, objective or neutral descriptors would be used. The second instance relates to atBB's engagement sessions with the government in early 2012 in a bid to stop the highway construction. The Brownies whom I had interviewed were only keen to talk about these sessions in a cursory manner. Brownie Darren had reiterated on "a procedural misstep of the government", hinting that the government could have reversed its decision to not build Lornie Highway but decided to go ahead with their "misstep". He did not wish to elaborate further but I managed to find a news article on this point. This "misstep" probably possesses relevance with SOS Bukit Brown's claim that the government had 'contravened the law when it amended and gazetted the land use masterplan' (The Straits Times, 2014b). SOS Bukit Brown had referred to the Planning Act which mandates that all amendments to the masterplan need public feedback, but such feedback were not made transparent when the government announced of its plan for the prospect of BBC (The Straits Times, 2014b). Although the government did not change its decision in the highway construction, concessions were made to document the affected area of BBC before it was cleared and the highway was realigned to 'minimise impact to the existing terrain and surrounding environment' (my paper, 2011; Today, 2012).

atBB's activist methodologies

This section examines the types of activist methodologies utilised by atBB in furthering its advocacy from the time of its formation. I argue that a combination of tactical activism, soft activism, and banal activism have enabled atBB to attain milestones in its advocacy. Tactical activism refers to employing strategies or targeting a particular institution or entity to convey the activist advocacy. Soft activism refers to the use of non-aggressive methods such as selecting appropriate vocabulary that does not offend, to convey the activist advocacy to the authorities and/or the public. Banal

activism refers to mundane, routine slew of small-scale activities that are organised on a regular basis to convey and reiterate on the activist advocacy.

Tactical Activism

Tactical activism has been pursued by atBB since its inception. To do this, the Brownies focus on engaging with the government. This method is believed to be more effective than opposing the government because, "Who can win against the government?" reasoned co-founder Raymond. The Brownies approached the government via various ways. For example, Raymond put in effort to unearth archival information to locate the graves belonging to the ancestors of Singapore's politicians and made special arrangements to bring these politicians to their ancestors' graves. Brownies who have had prior experiences interacting with government officials and the media would represent atBB to engage in discussions with the government on the preservation of BBC. Government officials like Mr Desmond Lee, the Minister for National Development, were also hosted on private walks led by Brownies to personally experience the cemetery. Such proactive approaches that were aimed at overcoming strong interests from Singapore's authoritarian government have borne fruit because the co-founders of atBB have been invited to annual "civil society-government dinners", according to Brownie Bianca.

However, engagement with the government is not fully accepted by all in atBB as a form of activist methodology but because of the group's informality, there is no way that the individual volunteers can object to the method. Ex-Brownie Mr W shared in his interview with me that being informal has impaired the decision-making process within in atBB. For example, he felt that the decision for atBB to "give up on the graves" in its advocacy was made unilaterally without due consultation with the rest of atBB. According to Mr W, atBB had sent one co-founder, Catherine, to front discussions in closed-door meetings with the government. He believed that Catherine had conceded to the government's plan to build the highway rather than persisting in atBB's advocacy to prevent the highway construction. Therefore, Mr W claimed that these meetings had yielded zero outcomes that benefitted the cemetery. In Mr W's view, he had hoped that the 4000-odd graves would not be cleared to make space for the highway construction. If it was impossible to prevent the clearance, then he hoped that the rest

of BBC could be preserved and attain the UNESCO status like Singapore's Botanic Gardens.

Evidently, Mr W's sharing has illuminated on the challenges involved in government engagement. Firstly, not everyone in the civil society group may share the same goal. Secondly, there are nuances in the ways that this form of activist methodology is expected to be pursued, such as Mr W's views that conflicted with atBB's eventual scope of action. atBB also has to learn how to 'cooperate with the state without losing its individuality and independence' while the government has to be 'responsive to alternative views' and 'acknowledge the words and actions of ordinary citizens to fulfill the thirst for dignity and participation' (Singam and Tan, 2002). It is a challenging equilibrium to attain for the civil society group and especially so for atBB which is an informal entity without any internal membership regulations and entitlements. Mr W is entitled to his views and so was Catherine in her decision when negotiating with the government because there is no formal decision-making protocol established within atBB. Neither is there any requirement for meeting notes to be taken, thus making it difficult to document who had said what. The internal tension between careful planning and informality emerges here again. This tension continues to exist because of the informality of atBB, thus members should be cognizant of this attribute and be ready to adopt an open mindset to embrace whatever activist methodology is being employed. Using tactical activism has yielded success for atBB because it is now included in the said Working Committee as an unregistered civil society group.

atBB's positive relations with the government is akin to *Shen Lan*'s "strategic" collaboration with the Chinese government, where this LGBT group embarks on 'informal lobbying' with 'trusted' government officials to conduct their pilot projects (Cao and Guo, 2016:506). This is a significant milestone considering that the LGBT population in China is the world's largest; plus, discrimination against the LGBT population in China remains deeply entrenched despite the repeal of legal persecution in 1997 (Wang *et al*, 2019). *Shen Lan*'s efforts have benefitted the LGBT community in Tianjin because the organisation's free HIV testing service has been made available to Tianjin residents by law (Cao and Guo, 2016). However, what sets *Shen Lan* apart from atBB is the former's desire for 'legitimate status and some political opportunities

to serve the LGBT community', whereas atBB thrives independently while serving the needs for the community. In fact, the reverse as happening in Singapore, where the government has recognised atBB's efforts and in turn accords the legitimacy to this group by engaging them a seat in the said Working Committee. Regardless, the partnership that has resulted between civil society and the state in both cases hark at the concept of 'contingent symbiosis', which describes the relationship forged between civil society and an authoritarian government (Spires, 2011).

Soft Activism

Woon Tien Wei, co-founder of SOS Bukit Brown, a now-defunct informal interest group that had led the online petition in 2011 to preserve BBC (see page 1 of this chapter), describes atBB's advocacy as "soft activism", where the Brownies employ non-aggressive methods to convey their advocacy to the government and to the public. Three examples of their soft activism approach will be shared in this section. The first relates to the choice of words used in conveying the advocacy. This matters since words can offend the government and cause atBB's advocacy to lose governmental support. The ability for atBB to employ this method can be accrued to atBB's strong foundation of specialised expertise, where the backgrounds of journalism, mass media, and law could come into good use. In contrast, ex-Brownie Mr W's candidness would not have been closely aligned with atBB's soft activism approach. In his interview response for this research and in his published blog posts and newspaper columns in the local Chinese newspapers, Mr W has held a strong opposing stance against atBB's engagement with the government. He had used atBB's focus on the graves of Straits-born Chinese as an example of how atBB had aligned its advocacy with the government's focus on Peranakan (another term for 'Straits-born') heritage in Singapore. This is evident from his choice of Chinese words such as "made worse", "mistake", and "being sidelined" which are assertive words that would not be aligned with atBB's intent to engage effectively with the government.

The second example is the storytelling approach adopted by the Brownies during their guided walks. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, guided walks by atBB were conducted regularly on weekends and these are advertised via Peatix, an event hosting website that handles online registration. The social histories of selected

deceased in BBC would be shared during these walks in the form of narratives, which one-time cemetery clean-up volunteer Gisella reckons to be atBB's gameplan. She describes how the storytelling approach allows the Brownies to "sort of glide into it" by conveying their advocacy concurrently while offering participants a glimpse of Chinese heritage. Putting together stories that seek to inform, entertain, and enrich while conveying atBB's advocacy using factual information gleaned from archives and secondary literature is *not* an easy feat unless one is proficient in languages and is sufficiently creative to inject both humour and seriousness in the tales. This again harks back at the specialised expertise possessed by Brownies that can foster this form of soft activism. These walks effectively function to galvanise Singapore residents to preserve BBC by "getting the message out without any partisan manner of conveying atBB's advocacy", as observed by Ryan, a participant of atBB's guided walk.

The third example is the free guided walks conducted by atBB that contributes to their soft activism. Notably, more than 22,000 members of the public had participated in the free guided walks conducted by atBB before Singapore's lockdown in the year 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic (personal communication with Brownie Darren). atBB aims to expose large numbers of individuals to BBC, by "taking as many people to see and experience the cemetery before it is gone for good", said Brownie Mr T. The secretary of Singapore Heritage Society, Mingguang, points out that atBB's "community ground-up approach" has benefitted the group immensely because "people who bring the public to this area is what will keep the area alive…community advocacy is effective in bringing BBC into the forefront". The group accepts requests for customised private walks from public and private educational institutions, other interest/hobby groups, and government organisations while the allocation of volunteer guides to each guided walk is dependent on the availability of the Brownies. Logistical arrangements are made via a private WhatsApp group and a private Facebook group. It is within this group that information, resources, and queries received from the public are exchanged and discussed. This method is like *Shen Lan*, which uses a popular messaging software service from China's Tencent QQ group to promote health-related knowledge and coordinate their offline activities (Cao and Guo, 2016). Brownie Yik Han estimates that Brownies "walk the ground" to recce possible routes and prepare for guided walks for about 75% of the time while the remaining 25% is dedicated to

conducting guided walks. Evidently, the guided walks are highly organised events with content being carefully curated and discussed within the group. Like how the co-founders (Claire and Catherine) had shared, the group continues to be well-organised, with the Claire and Catherine reporting that 'every project has a coordinator and is supported by those with interest, resources and time' (Lim and Leow, 2017:118).

The storytelling approach also demonstrates how atBB has cleverly harnessed the qualities of the corpse in their advocacy. Verdery (1999) argues that the dead body is ambiguous, possesses the potential to articulate different narratives or discourses, and is also polysemous. These qualities give atBB an edge when formulating the narratives for their guided walks because they can select deceased who had social histories containing 'hooks' (in Brownie Darren's own words) that could draw the participants' attention or allow the participants to find resonance with their everyday lives immediately. In fact, narrative hooks constitute a literary technique that functions to evoke curiosity in the reader so that he/she would be encouraged to continue reading to gather more information about the narrative. When I participated in the guided walks by Darren, he had presented us with graves of selected deceased with illustrious social histories, such as Tan Ean Kiam, a Chinese banker who co-founded a famous Chinese bank in Singapore whom everyone is familiar with today, the Chinese businessman Mr Lim Chong Pang whose name fronts a public housing estate called Chong Pang Village that is known for *nasi lemak* (a Malay coconut rice dish) and also presented heart-wrenching stories of the man in the street, such as that of Low Nong Nong, a rickshaw puller who died during a prolonged strike.[2] But Tan Ean Kiam was also a member of the Chinese Revolutionary League founded by Dr Sun Yat Sen that aimed to overthrow Qing Dynasty, yet this piece of information was cursorily mentioned during the walk because it could only appeal to participants who were familiar with contemporary Chinese history.[3]

Concurrently, it can be said the selected deceased whose social histories featured in atBB's guided walks are akin to political symbols that have been harnessed by the Brownies to illuminate the political struggles at hand. The BBC controversy was a political conflict brewing between state and society, or a disequilibrium between what the nation

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[2] Rojak Librarian. 2013. The Rickshaw Puller Low Nong Nong. Available from:
http://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=8011
[3] Rojak Librarian. 2013. Tan Ean Kiam (Bukit Brown). Available from:
https://mymindisrojak.blogspot.com/2013/07/tan-ean-kiam-bukit-brown.html

wanted to achieve versus what the citizenry aspired to attain. There was no mutual consensus because the state could not appreciate society's cultural beliefs and needs in caring for the dead, while society wanted the state to include the dead as part of the nation's demography in all national development decisions. Contrary to Verdery's (1999:48) claim that properly buried dead bodies should be considered as 'cultural property or heritage' because they are an 'important part of building national identities', BBC's experience has shown that the dead in Singapore have been relegated to a marginalised existence and are obstacles to the nations' modern development because they occupy valuable prime land. Fortunately, atBB has made every effort to reinstate the dead's importance in Singapore's cultural and heritage milieu via storytelling. Just like how Bishop Micu's remains animate the study of post socialist politics (Verdery, 1999), the 4000-over graves that were exhumed from BBC and the public outcry that resulted from this government decision collectively underscore the potential for improving Singapore's state-society relations.

Banal Activism

I suggest that atBB also employs banal activism for its guided walks. Banal activism is used to explicate the success of the Scottish Tories at the 2001 general election in Scotland (Smith, 2011). The Tories belonged to an unpopular political party in Scotland whose rule was ended abruptly in 1997 (Smith, 2011). Through the 'banal forms and practices' of conducting postal surveys, local newspaper advertisements, and canvassing using printed leaflets, the party was able to generate a paper trail and 'bring the local conservative campaign into view as a discursive artefact or object itself' (Smith, 2011:9). These are considered 'banal' because they are micro-level activities involving paperwork that do not seem to bear much significance. These seemingly insignificant paperwork helped the Tories build their 'political machine' because they became the instruments for the party to extend their reach of their campaign to a wider and rural electorate during a time when communications infrastructure was poor in Dumfries and Galloway (Smith, 2011). Similarly, atBB's free guided walks can be said to be the group's 'prosthetic tool' to reach out to the masses and forge relations with potential supporters in a nondescript way (Smith, 2011:8). The t-shirt that got the Canadian professor interested in (see Introduction) is also another tool used by atBB at the start to garner public support. According to Brownie Darren, the t-shirt was produced and sold "to people who wanted them", especially those "who wanted to fight to stop the

exhumation (of the graves)!" After two print runs, the group decided to stop producing the t-shirts as no one wanted to store the stocks.

Another example of a 'prosthetic tool' employed by atBB in their fervent advocacy campaign is their public outreach events that were organised almost year-on-year before the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2013, the group held their first exhibition at the Substation, titled "Celebrating Bukit Brown: Rediscovering the Past" (Figure 65) and later an exhibition titled 'Bukit Brown, Our roots, Our future' (Figure 66) (Rojak

Librarian, 2013b; Rojak Librarian, 2013c). In 2014, a series of public talks plus an exhibition led by BBC documentation project lead, Singaporean anthropologist Hui Yew-Foong, were held (Rojak Librarian, 2014d). In 2016, atBB published its book titled *World War II @ Bukit Brown*, a collection of short essays written by descendants and Brownies on BBC (Rojak Librarian, 2016). In 2017, the SHS, in collaboration with the government and other civil society groups like atBB, launched the Bukit Brown Wayfinder, a self-guided walking trail to explore the heritage and culture of BBC (Rojak Librarian, 2017). From 2012 to 2015, atBB also organised the National Deceased Pioneers (NDP) day on Singapore's National Day to commemorate the Chinese pioneers buried at BBC (atBB website). atBB had cleverly harnessed a wordplay on the acronym 'NDP' to connote something else that resonates with BBC, without diluting the original intended meaning where 'NDP' stands for 'National Day Parade'. atBB has been rewarded for their efforts, or "small victories" as described by Brownie Peter, as seen from BBC's inclusion in the list of the World Monuments Watch in 2014 as a heritage site—the first time that a Singapore site had been included (SHS, 2013b) and the government's decision to refurbish and relocate the cast-iron gates of BBC, a positive outcome from the said Working Committee (The Straits Times, 2015). Although atBB was unsuccessful in preventing the highway construction, other successful milestones were achieved in its advocacy trajectory that proves its mettle, just like how co-founder Claire had described, "Every baby step that you take, proves that you can walk." Adding on, Brownie Tee reckoned that the Brownies had experienced "a long and arduous journey before we found our voice."

Figure 65: atBB's first exhibition
Source: Rojak Librarian (2013b)

Figure 66: atBB's subsequent exhibition
Source: Rojak Librarian (2013b)

Moreover, getting organised is a part of banal activism which is evident in atBB's activist methodology. While the Tories met regularly until Polling Day to coordinate their mass production and distribution of campaigning materials as well as discuss their campaign plan using two spreadsheets, the Brownies gather virtually in their private WhatsApp and Facebook groups to organise themselves and the information that they possess to boost their advocacy (Smith, 2011).

Following Postill's (2011) anthropological account of internet activism that had utilised banal activism to reap success in Subang Jaya, Malaysia, I suggest that atBB adopts the same activist methodology in the Heritage Singapore - Bukit Brown Cemetery Facebook group. The Subang Jaya e-community founders were part of a new residential development who had decided to use the Internet to discuss pressing topics such as oppositions to the council's land use plans and their intent to raise local taxes (Postill, 2011:56-59). Using this online platform, members were successful in preventing the council from increasing taxes exorbitantly and building a food court on a piece of land that was reserved for a police station (Postill, 2011:58-59). Although the online petition to prevent the highway from built in BBC is now done and dusted in the Facebook group, the topic of preserving the rest of BBC continues to be discussed

fervently by members, with the petition as the initial catalyst that spurred the discussion. The screenshots in Figure 67 were taken in August 2021.

It's a site worth saving. Even though I hear all plans are already in place. But honestly it's worth trying to save even part of it

Like · Reply · Share · 3w   👍 3

Sigh. It's not even that. I mean, disinterring and reburying a body is to me simply disrespectful at best and sacrilegious at worst.

It is just too bad that Singapore is land-scarce.

Like · Reply · Share · 3w

    it is not land scarce, it is living beyond its means.

Like · Reply · Share · 3w   👍 3

Unless we are gunning for a much bigger population, it would make more sense to redevelop already built-up areas. Keeping green areas also benefits the environment, or is addressing the climate crisis not a "pragmatic" reason? Construction is not a sustainable way to keep the economy going at any rate. Not for a place as small as Singapore. It, at best, promises short-term gains.

Like · Reply · Share · 3w   👍 1

This is a worthy place for all Singaporeans n I encourage schools to consider bringing school children there for an outdoor history lesson. Much of SG's history can b learned from these tombstones. They r our civic history too. Legacy of our pioneers.

Like · Reply · Share · 4w · Edited   👍 2

May 6 at 10:07 AM · 🌐   ...

What if cemeteries were protected forests? Maybe that can be a more sustainable way to honour our ancestors who were buried in Bukit Brown too.
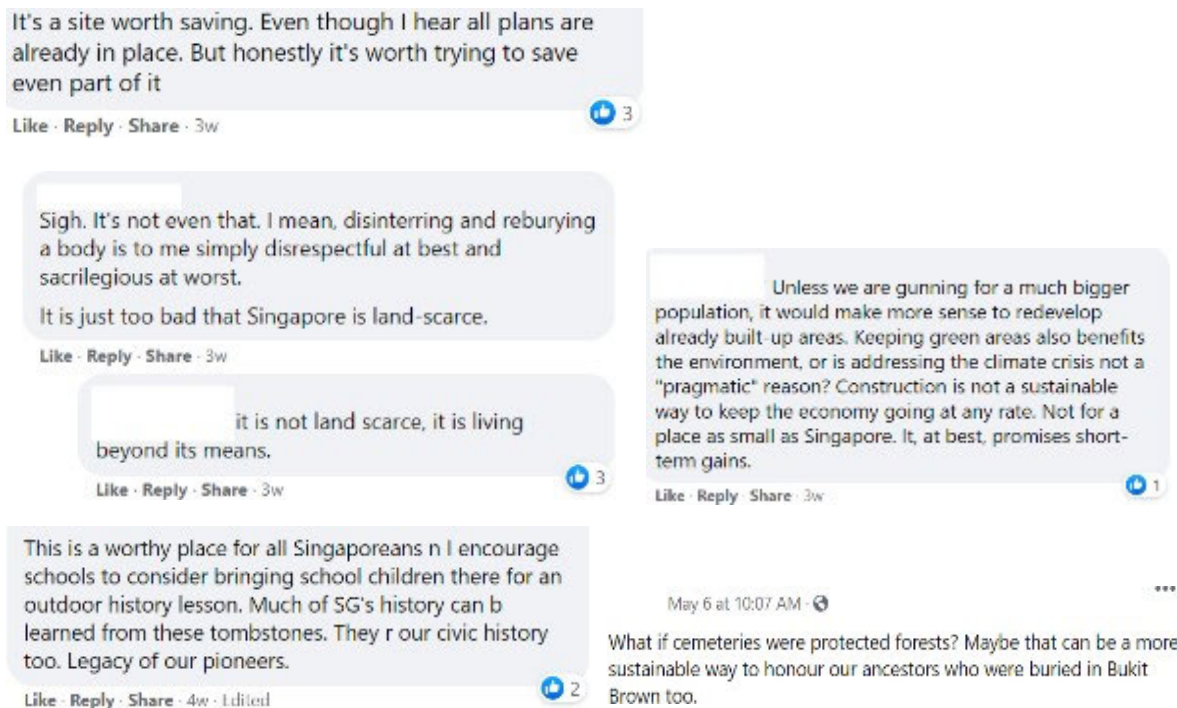
Figure 67: Screenshots of comments from the said Facebook group (Permission to reproduce these has been granted by Facebook administrator, Raymond Goh)

Several circumstances exist to favour banal activism to be utilised by the Brownies in this Facebook group. Group members possess vested interests in BBC – first, because their ancestors are/were buried there (e.g., Figure 68); second, because they utilise the space for their recreational pursuits (e.g., Figure 69), and third, because of their shared interest in BBC. Based on my observations, members do post and comment frequently even during the Covid-19 lockdown period last year, indicating that the group is buoyant and active.[50] Agamben's (1993) 'coming community' adequately describes the Facebook group as being 'composed of different singularities' that are 'brought together by relations of affinity', that is, members of this group are 'interconnected and united by values and shared ethico-political commitments' (Agamben, 1993:43-47). This serendipitous gathering of individuals from discrete walks of life may be considered as a social network because it functions on an online platform (i.e., Facebook) that supports three activities, viz. information

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[50] The group is actively growing, from 8161 members (as at 1 June 2021), to 8320 members (as at August 2021), and now 9300 members (as at December 2022).

procurement, networking, and active interaction amongst users. Specifically, 'horizontal communication' could be facilitated, where the public is 'empowered and encouraged to discuss events and issues in a way that was simply not possible with the old media which mostly facilitated vertical communication between the controllers of the media and the consumers of the media' (Mahizhnan, 2016: xviii).
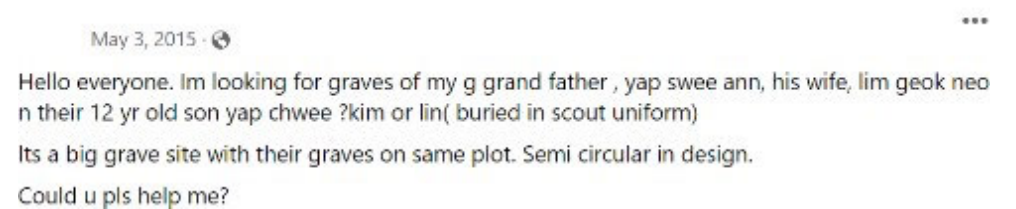

May 3, 2015 · 🌐

Hello everyone. Im looking for graves of my g grand father , yap swee ann, his wife, lim geok neo n their 12 yr old son yap chwee ?kim or lin(buried in scout uniform)

Its a big grave site with their graves on same plot. Semi circular in design.

Could u pls help me?

Figure 68: A descendant's post seeking assistance to locate his ancestors' graves.
(Permission to reproduce these has been granted by Facebook administrator, Raymond Goh)

Figure 69: A post by avid hiker Michael Smith who shared on his hiking routes in BBC using global positional technology (Permission to reproduce these has been granted by Michael Smith)

Brownies post whenever they have material relevant to BBC to share in the Facebook group. It could be something very mundane such as sharing snapshots of BBC, as evidenced in co-founder Claire's post (Figure 70). Notably, both posts have subtly highlighted atBB's themes of heritage, habitat, and history in their captions. The hashtag #savebukitbrown continues to be used by the Brownies today in their posts to evoke the shared objective within the group (e.g., Figure 71), along with the use of another new header, 'Community help', spearheaded by Brownie Peter. In the examples below (Figure 72), Peter had enlisted help from the Facebook group members for new sights witnessed during his weekend trips to BBC.
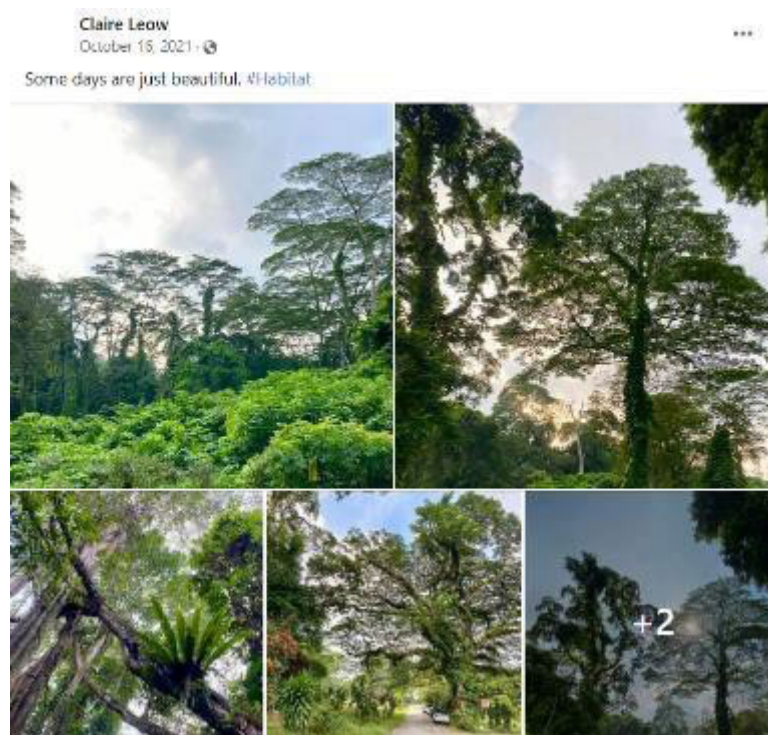
Figure 70: A post by atBB's co-founder, Claire Leow (Permission to reproduce this has been granted by Facebook group administrator, Raymond Goh)
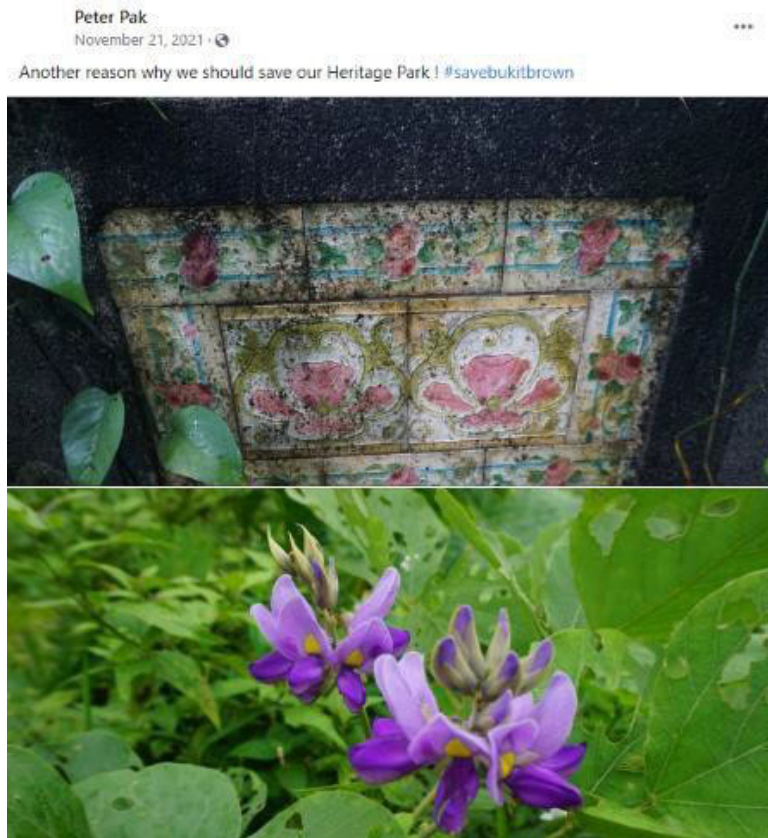
Figure 71: A post by Brownie Peter Pak (Permission to reproduce this has been granted by Peter)
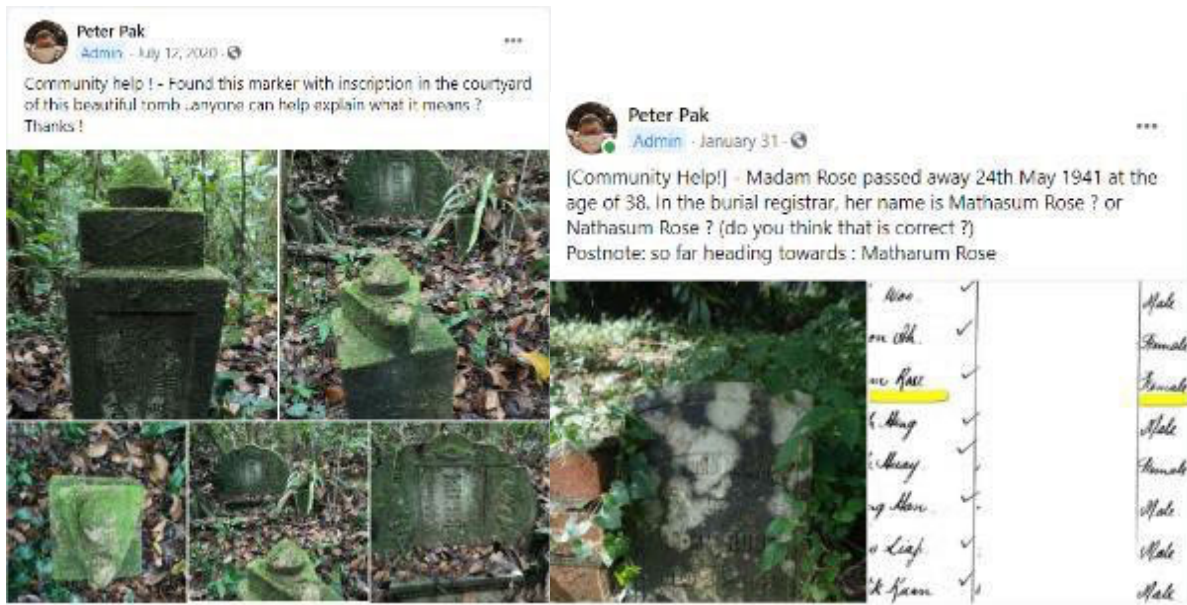
Figure 72: Brownie Peter's two posts titled 'Community help'
(Permission to reproduce these has been granted by Peter)

Clearly, the Brownies' seemingly 'random' posts about the scenery, tombs, and new sights are evidence of banal activism at work. The thought-provoking posts

prefixed by 'Community help' have evoked enthusiastic responses from the Facebook members, some with helpful comments. Figure 73 shows a successful example of how Brownie Peter sought community help regarding some medicinal pots and religious lights that he had discovered at BBC. Akin to the paperwork that the Scottish Tories have delved into to push for their electoral campaign, Brownies employ Facebook posts as a form of virtual paperwork or campaign leaflet to reiterate and expound on their advocacy in understated ways. Their efforts are clearly effective as seen from a complimentary comment from a member of the group (Figure 74).
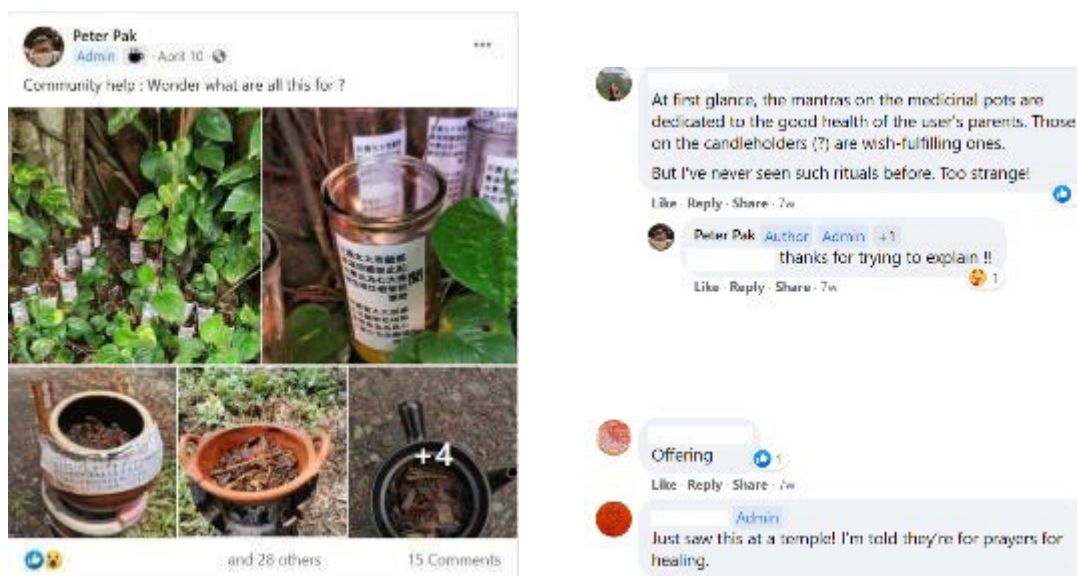
Figure 73: Screenshots of an example of a 'community help' Facebook post and accompanying comments (Permission to reproduce these has been granted by Peter)
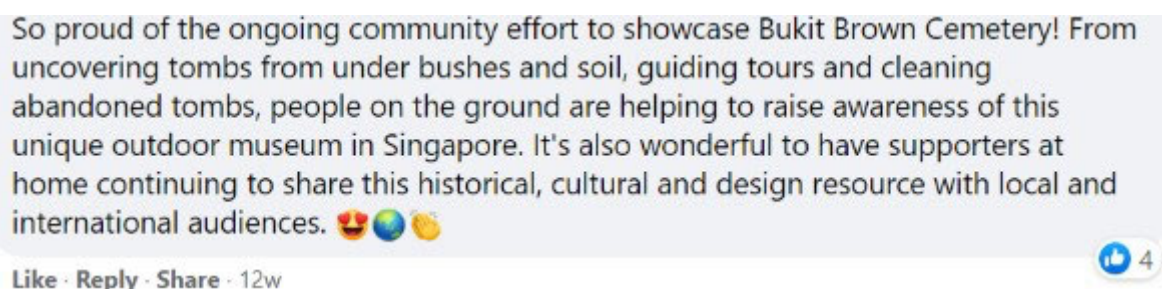

Figure 74: Screenshot of a complimentary comment.
(Permission to reproduce these has been granted by Facebook administrator, Raymond Goh)

The positive synergies observed from the Facebook group suggests a clear and optimistic association between online activism and civil society engagement. This observation resounds with the findings realised from Skoric et al's review (2016),

which underline a positive relationship between social media use and citizen engagement. The Brownies utilise social media as a platform to convey their advocacy and passion for BBC. In response, the members are encouraged to participate either online by responding to the posts or offline in terms of visiting the cemetery as their curiosity may be piqued by the posts. These synergies highlight the most valued aspect of this Facebook group, which is the liberty to interact with one another freely despite a heavily regulated virtual space in Singapore (IMDA, 2021; Singam et al, 2002). In this perceived safe and trusted space, Brownies can express their advocacy in various ways while members can express their passion for BBC and verbalise their opinions about the prospects of BBC.

The perceived safe space for the freedom of speech and discussions in this Facebook group juxtaposes LGBT group *Shen Lan*'s experience in China, where they tread carefully in posting content to online platforms. This is the group's strategy to retain "cooperative ties" with the government owing to "political and economic pressure" as they rely on funding from sources to keep their organisation going. Their other rationale of not antagonising relations with the government is because 'you won't change anything by simply criticising the government online' (Cao and Guo, 2016:506). I interpret BBC's Facebook group as engaging in discussions that are not antagonistic or highly critical to the point of incurring the Singapore government's wrath; rather, the Brownies and members engage in constructive criticism in fluent English. Both approaches give credibility to the group's advocacy and helps to keep the conversation alive. Such a non-confrontational approach is a strategy that is not unique to a geographical area or ethnic group; rather, it has emerged due to the sociopolitical circumstances that are experienced.

Conclusion

atBB's emergence, informal existence, unexpected longevity, and formal engagement with the government in Singapore is an anomalous phenomenon of civil society in Singapore. Over the years, the Singapore government has sanctioned civil society groups for various reasons, and informal groups like The Online Citizen had been asked to register themselves with the Societies Act. Literature has indicated that the harsh political environment of Singapore discourages growth and longevity of civil

society, but the case of atBB is exceptional. atBB's experience represents a paradoxical government decision to accept civil society and confirms the uncertainty surrounding the concept and roles of civil society in Singapore. Being unregistered with the Societies Act implies that atBB is not legally recognised as civil society by the government. Yet, the government has seemingly disregarded the said Act by inviting atBB to be part of the Bukit Brown Working Committee to discuss the prospects of BBC. Clearly, the government treats atBB like civil society, judging from the way the government scrutinised atBB's publication in 2016 and the provision of engagement sessions that offer airtime for the group to voice their advocacy. Even though the government has seemingly accepted atBB's informal and unregistered status, the space in which atBB operates in is still highly sensitive, quite akin to treading on eggshells. The Singapore government using gestural politics to win the trust and build rapport with atBB remains a possibility, which means that atBB cannot rest on its laurels and needs to be continuously on its guard.

atBB's modus operandi is highly sophisticated and formidable, which ensures its survival despite scrutiny by the authoritarian Singapore government. This quality is novel within civil society and suggests a new strategy that civil society could adopt to thrive in Singapore. While atBB's co-founders emphasise on the group's informality in their mode of operation, my interview data indicate that atBB is a highly organised and cohesive group. It has a coherent purpose, a straightforward structure, and organisational identity broadly shared amongst its members (Diamond, 1999:229). Moreover, atBB's repetitive claims in press reports and their interview responses that they are 'informal' and composed of 'volunteers' are likely marketing tactics to lower the guards of government officials who may be intent on checking upon them, diluting the intensity of their advocacy, and diminishing their calculated foray into the government's decision-making process. Regardless of whether they are active, supportive, retired, or aspiring, the Brownies have already been well-prepared to remain vigilant and cautious in knowing *how* and *when* to toe the line so that they can avoid unnecessary attention from the government or government sanctions. When considered together with atBB's advocacy strategies and activist methodologies, such advanced organisational powers are impressive and suggest that atBB has a unique gameplan that sits well with the government. Not only does the government not feel

threatened by this informal group's advocacy, it also feels sufficiently comfortable to engage with atBB.

A valuable outcome from atBB's advocacy is its reproduction of the 'ideological marketplace', which refers to the 'flow of information and ideas, including those which evaluate and critique the state' (Metzger and Myers, 1991). The marketplace encompasses aspects of the economic, cultural, informational, and educational, interest, developmental, issue-oriented, and civic (Metzger and Myers, 1991). In its bid to persuade the PAP government to not redevelop BBC, atBB has evoked societal interest in the cultural qualities of the ethnic Chinese community in early Singapore, incited public discourses on the developmental and economic facets of Singapore's nation building endeavour, ignited informational and educational interest in the cemetery as well as its inhabitants, and also brought to fore the civic characteristic of individuals from the ground, in their voluntary contributions to promote the cultural and heritage values of BBC as well as their unanimous endeavours to keep the site clean and tidy. Seen from this light then, atBB has been doing good for augmenting the social fabric in Singapore, because it has helped the PAP government to foster a national sense of belonging and social cohesiveness – items on the checklist for Singapore's nation building plan. These positive outcomes from atBB's advocacy may have encouraged the government to engage with the group in a consistent manner.

This chapter has also demonstrated the theme of state-society relations. From atBB's experience in engaging with the PAP government from day one to-date, it is clear that the reach of the latter is 'wide and deep, but it is not absolute' and neither is it inflexible (see Koh and Ooi, 2000). The state-society relations between the PAP government and the citizenry requires the right use of 'the PAP's language of politics' so that the boundaries and space for citizenry voice may be accessed, which is what atBB has done well in since it has figured out the *right* language and learnt how to use this language to benefit the group's advocacy (Koh and Ooi, 2000:63). Moreover, the state-society relationship regarding civil society may be said to be in 'the process of negotiation between the two partners in governance' (Koh and Ooi, 2000:64-65). We see how atBB strategises cleverly to avoid getting into trouble with the government while still retaining their informal, *un*registered status as an *interest* group (as opposed to a civil society or activist group) yet engaging fruitfully with the government

concurrently. The group has navigated cleverly past foreseeable and unforeseeable government sanctions by being clearly cognisant of the degree of governance that they are subjected to in carrying out their advocacy, using appropriate vocabulary to communicate their advocacy to the public and engage with the government, as well as harnessing specialised expertise to aid in their advocacy and group survival.

I would say that the PAP government still wields an upper hand in the state-society relationship in Singapore, since it has the power to 'demarcate a realm of acceptable activism' and the civil society groups that are still thriving now, have been aware of the 'permissible boundaries' of this realm (Heng, 2010:522-523). By toeing the line, civil society would be 'rewarded with a mix of state indulgence, engagement or recognition', something that atBB has enjoyed since it knows how to 'play by these rules' (Heng, 2010:523). But, analogously, like a rebellious child who needs to be taught about the rules of the game first, would the child (civil society) be able to get anywhere if the adult (state) does not endorse it? (Heng, 2010). Nevertheless, atBB's experience in engaging with the PAP government does signal a silver lining beneath the clouds, in that there is indeed a noticeable and optimistic 'expansion of liberal ethos' that can be observed over a period of time (Heng, 2010:530).

BBC's experience also reflects a 'tension-expectation binary' in the state-society relationship between the PAP government and the citizenry (Kuah, 2018). This tension is revealed when the public want to have a voice and subsequently 'a bigger voice' in the decision-making process of key national issues (see Kuah, 2018). atBB is like the consolidation of the 'bigger voice' of the public, particularly those who have vested interests in the cultural, heritage, and historical values that BBC is perceived to possess. atBB's engagement with the PAP government is a representation of the conveyance of the public's expectation to the government, that the latter is still expected to perform its rational role in planning, directing, and fulfilling its responsibility to the citizenry (Kuah, 2018). Continuing the analogy of the rebellious child, civil society is like a rebellious child who is growing up, who still requires shepherding from the adult (the government) yet wishes to be respected and allowed to have a say in his/her wishes. Singapore as a 'nanny state' as argued by Kuah (2018) may still be relevant since the government still has its finger on the pulse of everything possible,

be it 'the economic, social and political well-being of the nation-state on one hand and its citizenry on the other' (Kuah, 2018).

The discussion on atBB as a sign of an emergent contemporary civil society in Singapore also contributes significantly to the current broad discourse in literature on civil society in Asia that compares it with the western variant of civil society. For example, Schak and Hudson (2003:2) argue that civil society in Asia need to be understood differently from the western variant because the landscape for civil society in Asia has 'multiple conceptions', embodies 'a zone of interaction, cooperation, and compromise, where there is tension between state and society but where they also meet. The authors offer six reasons that differentiate the Asian variant of civil society from the western variant, viz. the inability to distill Asian civil society from public and private spheres hence contributing to its nebulousness, the 'pivotal role' played by the state in establishing civil society in Asia, the lack of evidence in the positive correlation between democratisation and civil society, as well as liberalisation and civil society, and finally the observation that Asian civil society does not necessarily oppose the state (Schak and Hudson, 2003). atBB has been thriving in a political environment of an Asian country that is resonant with Schak and Hudson's (2003) description, where the lack of liberalisation and democratisation in the ruling regime of Singapore does not necessarily preclude the emergence of a community-led initiative like atBB's. This chapter has demonstrated that atBB's experiences with the PAP government exemplifies the nebulous Asian variant of civil society that may or may not receive government support and bears no close correlation to liberalisation and democratisation but can be found in a liminal zone of ambiguous interaction and engagement with the government that may be fraught with tension at times.

atBB's experiences spur us to rethink the concept of civil society, and how this emerging inclination of civil society functions in contemporary Singapore. atBB can be likened to a 'quiet revolution' that is brewing away from public attention (Lee, 2018). In its online and offline forms, atBB demonstrates the evolution of civil society amidst a tightly controlled political climate in Singapore. What makes this group noteworthy is its sustained efforts in bringing a neglected burial site back into the public discourse through its persistent and consistent advocacy efforts. The assemblage of interested individuals with different expertise is not an overnight endeavour or a chance

encounter; it takes time to gather likeminded and passionate people to join the fray to preserve BBC. atBB's utilisation of community organising strategies in capacity building is both intended and unintended. The form and substance of atBB coupled with its advocacy strategies and activist methodologies employed differentiate it from conventional forms of registered civil society groups and earlier versions like the self-help associations that served the material needs of Chinese immigrants in Singapore. Its engagement with the government and receiving funding from a government agency in its book publication also suggests that it cannot be a standalone silo without government support. Therefore, atBB demonstrates the malleability and flexibility of what civil society can embody. The influence of social media complexifies the civil society conundrum because it can be now performed and conveyed online, expanding the breadth of possibilities that civil society can embody and extending the outreach process across temporal and spatial boundaries. atBB is a clear example of what contemporary civil society can be in Singapore and what civil society's future looks to be in Singapore.

CONCLUSION

This thesis began with two research questions. First, it sought to understand what contemporary civil society in Singapore is. Second, it explored how death is conceptualised in Singapore. It shall be demonstrated in this chapter that both questions are not distinct from each other; that civil society and death share a close association in relation to the experience of BBC. As described in Chapter 1, fieldwork for this research was conducted at Bukit Brown Cemetery in central Singapore over 18 months to seek primary data that could answer both questions. Face-to-face interviews using semi-structured interview guides as well as participant and non-participant observations formed the heart of my ethnographic endeavour. Secondary data was garnered from publicly available sources. My research design had to be modified during the Covid-19 pandemic, which prevented primary data collection to be done onsite for some months. Despite the unexpected hiccup, I was able to complete my fieldwork albeit over 18 months rather than the initial 12 months and could establish trust and rapport with my respondents as expected of an anthropologist in the field. I was also able to ensure my personal safety in the field by staying vigilant and with the help of a tombkeeper who was one of my key informants. Four other key informants also shared their contacts with me which led to successful recruitments of potential interviewees for my research via purposive sampling and snowball sampling. In total, I had interviewed 60 individuals from relevant stakeholder groups and covered the most important festival commemorating death in the cemetery amongst the Chinese-Singaporean community –the annual Qing Ming Festival or tombsweeping festival.

In searching for answers to my two questions, I examined how the space in BBC is organised via the types of governance onsite in Chapter 2 and explored how relations are organised in the cemetery, by investigating the conceptualisations of material wealth and how they are transferred and transacted amongst key stakeholders of BBC in Chapter 3. Thereafter, I focused on the primary inhabitants of the cemetery—the dead, by looking at how they are being cared for by the living in Chapter 4. Finally, I focused on the interest group that has been advocating for the preservation of BBC—all things Bukit Brown (atBB), by examining their advocacy strategies and activist methodologies to understand how and why they have managed to stay afloat for so long in the scene in Chapter 5. Three overarching themes and four

micro themes are unravelled from my research endeavour. The three overarching themes are: (a) the theme of state society relations, (b) the cemetery is alive, like a living organism, and (c) the theme of rejuvenation. The four micro themes are: (a) the theme of governance, (b) the theme of abundance and extravagance, (c) the theme of care, and (d) the theme of assertive communication.

My research is premised upon two arguments. First, I argue that atBB is an example of an emerging contemporary civil society in Singapore that has yet to be academically examined and bears the potential to open a third space for community voices to be heard. Second, I argue that the need to care for the dead is a motivating factor that drives the emergence of contemporary civil society in Singapore. I begin this chapter with a summary of my research and then draw upon the discussions from the preceding chapters to answer my two questions, demonstrate both arguments, and highlight the themes that are unravelled from this thesis.

BBC was historically managed by the municipal government of Singapore and is known as the first public Chinese cemetery for all Chinese dialect and clan groups. It was thrust into the national spotlight in late-2011 following the government's announcements of a partial clearance to build the Lornie Highway and eventual total clearance for residential development. Cemetery clearances are commonplace in Singapore due to the nation's perennial land scarcity and an ambitious government that strives to advance economically and socially since the nation's independence in 1965. Thus, land from cemeteries have been acquired by the government using a very powerful Land Acquisition Act which was enacted in 1966. The previous cemetery clearances were uneventful, but Bukit Brown's clearance sparked an unexpected public furore at the onset which led to a sustained public discourse for ten years running now, and a formation of a Working Committee chaired by the Ministry of National Development in 2014 to discuss the prospect of the cemetery. Although the highway has been built and became fully operational in April 2019, the public seems to be holding out hope to preserve the remaining cemetery. An interest group called 'all things Bukit Brown' (atBB) has been at the forefront in advocating for the preservation of the cemetery. In a political environment that is known to be intolerant of alternative voices from the ground, atBB's survival is intriguing, as is its longevity as an unregistered interest group, as well as its achievement in engaging with the

government to the extent of garnering a seat in the said Working Committee. atBB's existence signals a change on the state-society relations in Singapore, which this thesis delves into. The partial clearance of BBC and its prospect of being completely cleared soon has become a longstanding controversial saga, one that intrigues and enriches. Through detailed examinations of the controversy, the advocacy of atBB, and the conceptualisation of death in Singapore, this thesis endeavours to examine how speaking up for the cemetery has signalled a new emerging contemporary civil society that offers the potential for an optimistic change in the state-society relations in Singapore.

Findings from my fieldwork offer possibilities of how contemporary civil society in Singapore could look like. It is one that possesses a highly malleable and flexible profile, which can include organised initiatives at the grassroots level such as Michael Smith's voluntary endeavour of picking up rubbish post-Qing Ming Festival (in Chapter 4) and atBB's free guided walks for the public that aim to publicise about BBC to a wider audience (in Chapter 5). It can also include ad-hoc or self-initiated acts where random volunteers like Mr K and some atBB volunteers clean selected tombs in BBC and descendant John's regular grass cutting and rubbish picking at Hill 1, as described in Chapter 2. These ground-level initiatives can also be acts of devotional care as described in Chapter 4, such as tombkeeper James' morning routine of cleaning up and praying at the little red and green huts that he had erected beside the cemetery gates. The themes of assertive communication and care are demonstrated in these instances where community-led initiatives had persisted on their focus on caring for the dead. The common ground amongst these organised and ad-hoc initiatives is a unanimous desire to speak up for the inhabitants of BBC (i.e., the dead) against an authoritarian government that is highly sensitive about alternative voices from the ground.

It has been discussed in the Introduction that the highly sensitive and authoritarian Singapore government has impeded and still possesses the power to impede civil society. This has to do with Singapore's historical past, where the Marxist Conspiracy (explained in Introduction) and dissident voices had threatened to disrupt racial and religious harmony in this multiethnic and multireligious young nation. As such, the government has adopted a highly guarded and paternalistic approach to

managing civil society in Singapore by using surveillance. The Societies Act is a placeholder that the government uses to control all registered civil society groups in Singapore, so that they will not cause undue upheavals to the social fabric. The Act requires that all registered civil society groups adhere to the regulations set forth in the Act and allows the government full authority to monitor the going-ons in these groups. For those groups that are unregistered with this Act, the government pays close attention to their activities. For example, Chapter 5 shared about government surveillance on local publications, as seen from the visits by plainclothes civil servants who went to bulk-buy books which were believed to contain controversial content. We learn from Chapter 2 that BBC is also a site of regular government surveillance, based on the keen observations of descendant John, who recognises the black Toyota sedan car that drives around the hills of BBC every Monday. Likewise, the Covid-19 pandemic has also led to the government upping its surveillance via random police spot-checks conducted with cemetery visitors (see Chapter 2). In general, any disapprovals from the government with regards to the behaviour/actions of community groups would result in strict government sanctions. For example, The Online Citizen was forced to register itself with The Societies Act instead of operating as an unregistered interest group. This mandates compliance of the group with regulations set forth by the Act and offers the government the formal authority of disciplining the group whenever necessary. These boundaries set by the government limit the existence and/or activities of civil society. The fact that the government perceives the activities of civil society as potential threats to societal harmony and this suite of alternative voices as lacking the ability to self-regulate adds further public stigma to civil society. The theme of state-society relations is demonstrated here, where there is a disequilibrium between the two entities owing to historical events and the bias perception of an errant civil society held by the government. The the banyan tree is introduced to provide a visual analogy to the constraining situation, where the expansive canopy of the tree (the government) prohibits other plants (civil society) to grow beneath it.

As mentioned in the Introduction and in Chapter 5, although there is some semblance of gradual liberalisation for civil society following the political reigns of successive prime ministers in Singapore, there remains a certain degree of wariness by the government towards alternative voices from the ground. Analogously, the

opening of spaces for public expression may not necessarily mean that the banyan tree has been replaced by the tembusu tree, which has a smaller canopy that allows for plants to grow beneath it. A case in point is the government's reluctance to engage with civil society regarding the partial clearance of BBC for the highway construction, resulting in the submission of position papers by key civil society groups and a request for a moratorium by civil society groups and interest groups. Also, fact remains that civil society is an ill-defined concept in Singapore. Apart from having to register with The Societies Act, there is no other formal definition of what 'civil society' constitutes in Singapore. This implies that the onus still lies with the government to define what 'civil society' is and whether aspects of 'civil society' are acceptable. There is still no equilibrium established in the state-society equation since the government still wields the upper hand in asserting its control over the alternative voices from the ground. Therefore, I argue that both the banyan tree and tembusu tree still exist as analogies to describe the ambiguity in governing civil society in Singapore.

Given the challenging political environment that inhibits the emergence and growth of civil society in Singapore, one wonders how contemporary civil society can even emerge in Singapore. I argue that atBB as well as the community groups and individual volunteers in BBC represent instances of Singapore's emerging contemporary civil society. These groups and individuals can pursue their wants and interests in the cemetery without being sanctioned by the government because they have learnt to take advantage of the gaps in formal governance. For example, Chapter 2 described how descendant John had feigned ignorance when questioned about the erection of his makeshift altar as a strategy to prevent the authorities from clearing it away, since the latter cannot contact any known authors and issue them with notices. The micro-organisation of the groups and individuals in doing things for BBC within the site indicates an expansion of the definition of civil society and fuels the possible permutations of what emerging contemporary civil society can look like. The random collectivities of community actors increase the footfall and activities in BBC, metaphorically contributing to the life pulses within the site, which enliven the cemetery. The theme that the cemetery is a living organism that displays instances of life within is demonstrated here.

Furthermore, the intermingling of formal government and non-governmental roles in BBC makes BBC a margin of the state, one that is concurrently governed by government authorities *and* by individuals from the community who make up their own rules. This situation underscores the theme of governance where the opportunities presented with the intermingling suggest that there is potential for a third space to emerge in Singapore, one that allows community expression beyond government control. In Chapter 5, I argued that the robust and carefully considered approaches adopted by atBB have allowed it to thrive for a good ten years and counting as an unregistered interest group. It is not officially 'civil society' per se since it is unregistered with The Societies Act, but atBB has been able to engage with the government in discussions on the prospect of BBC to the extent of earning itself a seat in the Working Committee chaired by the Ministry of National Development. It is confounding how the government has allowed the voice of an informal group composed of volunteers to speak up for a neglected burial site and acceded to its request of refurnishing the original cast-iron cemetery gates and relocating them to the present cemetery entrance. Further, it is perturbing as to how the government had funded the group's publication via its statutory board called the National Heritage Board in 2016. My close inspection of atBB revealed that it embodies a well-devised suite of advocacy strategies and activist methodologies. It cleverly avoids being referred to and labelled as an 'activist' outfit. Instead, it wishes to be seen as a volunteer-driven, non-activist, and informal entity that is based upon a shared common interest and staffed by well-educated and articulate intellectuals with specialised expertise to boost the group's advocacy. Like the conventional civil society, atBB does not engage in politicking but is well-poised to engage with the government to discuss amicably on pressing needs and issues that are on its advocacy radar. What sets contemporary civil society distinct from the conventional civil society is its ability to engage with the government and sustain this engagement over an extended period. However, having a properly executed set of preliminaries is insufficient for the group's sustenance in the long run. The members in the group must be cohesive and committed to the advocacy and have the patience to walk together to see their advocacy through tough times. They must be resilient and come equipped with the passion to learn more, do more, and seek more, to continue driving their advocacy to greater heights.

How has the emerging contemporary civil society been faring in Singapore? Judging from atBB's sustained advocacy, its longevity in the civil society landscape, and its success in engaging with the government, it does signal that contemporary civil society has garnered some effectiveness and left positive impressions. The volunteers from atBB have expressed in the interviews that they feel that their advocacy has been effective, since they have reached out to a lot of individuals through their free guided walks and events, thereby creating public awareness of the cemetery. Their social media presence has also contributed to the effectiveness because members in the Facebook group set up and run by atBB have been mobilised to participate in the ad-hoc post-Qing Ming rubbish clean-up by Michael Smith, showed appreciation for descendant Jennifer Lim's Tile Tidy Up project, and responded positively to posts with the caption of 'Community help' and the hashtag of #saveBukitBrown. Yet, one atBB volunteer, Peter, felt that the group has not been effective, and his explanations are valid. According to him, having large turnouts in atBB's guided walks does not signal that the cemetery can be preserved—it just means that a lot of people are curious about the cemetery and have come to pique their curiosity. Peter felt that the outcome regarding Bukit Brown Cemetery's prospect is still unknown now since discussions between state and society are still ongoing thus it is premature to gauge the group's effectiveness. Nevertheless, the abilities of atBB to engage with the government and thrive for a decade and counting as an unregistered interest group in Singapore have signalled a positive upturn for state-society relations in Singapore.

The positive upturn indicates more opportunities for civil society to be vocal but being able to express themselves is just the tip of the iceberg. More academic insights are needed to understand how this situation of becoming more vocal amongst the citizenry has come into being and how the topics that the citizenry have grown to be concerned about have been selected. For instance, qualitative elements like kinship ties, family bonds, and care are non-material wants which have only recently emerged following the BBC controversy. But why have they surfaced only with the BBC controversy but not any earlier? This could be due to a shift in personal values, as shown by the findings from a 2018 survey conducted by Singaporean sociologist A/P Tan Ern Ser. Findings revealed an upward shift in personal values with more Singaporeans embracing 'higher order values like honesty, happiness and compassion which they consider desirable for Singapore' (TodayOnline, 2018b). The

surveyed population generally sought to embrace 'a well-balanced, purposeful life dedicated to serving the wider community', which they hoped to replace the negative societal values of 'dysfunctional competitiveness, materialism, and looking out only for onself' (TodayOnline, 2018b). The survey also revealed a rift between personal values and perceived societal culture at present, which the citizenry has been making efforts to close the gap. Civil society is hence a possible avenue that the citizenry can streamline personal values with their desired societal culture.

Therefore, a delicate equilibrium needs to be reached to balance both national development and the inclinations of the citizenry. Per former President of the Singapore Heritage Society Dr Kevin Tan's emphasis on the importance of kinship ties and family bonds in Chapter 4 where he stated that everyone has got a grandfather, and every deceased has got a family, the BBC controversy has underscored the fact that kinship ties between the living and the dead as well as the family bonds between generations of lineage cannot be negated in the face of national progress. There are five national values meted out by the Singapore government called 'Shared Values' which aim to promote social cohesiveness and national identity within the multiethnic population (NLB, 2015c). The second national value upholds the family as the 'basic building of society', which resounds with Dr Tan's opinion that the family institution is important (NLB, 2015a). It is therefore unsurprising that the descendants see their ancestors as part of the family unit and display acts of care for the latter by various ways as described in Chapter 4. To remove the graves of the ancestors for the pursuit of national development projects had sparked off concerns amongst the descendants as they were worried about the disruptions caused to their ancestors' final resting place. However, Singapore's first national value reads, 'Placing society above self', which implies an expectation that the population should give in to society's needs over and above their own needs (NLB, 2015a). This communitarian ideology poses a challenge to the liberalisation of civil society, especially when the massification of education has led an educated populace that has become more vocal in their intangible wants and needs and there is also an observable upward shift towards embracing higher order values amongst the citizenry today (Chua, 2017a; TodayOnline, 2018).

The connection between civil society and death based on the experience of BBC does not just stop at the association with the changes in personal values on the part of the citizenry because there is something more that has drawn civil society to speak up for the dead at BBC. To understand this connection, it is necessary to learn how death is conceptualised amongst the Chinese-Singaporean community. Chapter 4 began with defining the dead, by showcasing my fieldwork findings that the dead in fact embodies many different forms, as seen from the ways in which they are being worshipped and memorialised in BBC. The buried dead constitutes the main category and are conventionally perceived as the default inhabitants of any cemetery. They are revered by their descendants, who come by annually during Qing Ming to perform ancestor worship. Interestingly, my fieldwork has evinced another category of the dead—the netherworld spirits, which occupy a less visible (no pun intended) position in the category of the dead. These are the dead who are without caregivers to perform ancestor worship for them, have been abandoned by their descendants, or had died untimely deaths (e.g. murder/suicide). Tombkeepers have raised the visibility of the 'Good Brothers', a term of reference accorded to the netherworld spirits that is both respectful and euphemistic, by prestating copious amounts of food and paper offerings to them during Qing Ming and the 7th lunar month. Then there are also underworld deities whose roles are said to encompass governing the dead. The photographs in Chapter 3 showcase the material wealth bestowed to the dead. By acknowledging and caring for their co-existence with the dead in BBC, tombkeepers have helped the uninitiated like me garner a new domain of knowledge of the netherworld. It is not too different from the mortal world, since there are underworld deities that govern the realm, money used in transactions, food items and everyday items that are needed/wanted by a large uncountable (dead) population. Ironically, the thriving populations of the netherworld beings highlighting the theme of the cemetery being alive, in that there are not only non-human beings that coexist and operate in this space, but there is an unquantifiable amount of them.

Thus, death does not connote the cessation of relations between the living and the dead, since the bonds continue, and the exchanges of offerings and blessings are bidirectional. Helped by fire which is the key catalyst that transforms the material wealth to usable forms in the netherworld, death is a realm that exhibits material and emotional needs too. As discussed in Chapter 3, the material wealth of the dead

accumulated from these food and paper offerings can be said to parallel the riches accumulated by the tombkeepers in their tombkeeping trade, since they can levy any amount of fees at whim due to the informality of their family-run business that is beyond the authoritative radar of the government. The themes of abundance and extravagance are highlighted in this chapter, where I used fieldwork data to show the excessive quantity of food and paper prestations and the opulent or elaborate displays of extravagance that aim to augment the social prestige and wealth status of both the living and the dead.

The dead occupy a cardinal position in atBB's advocacy because they lend credibility and realism as well as depth and dimension to the longevous community-led resistance to redevelopment of the burial site. Although the dead do not participate in the advocacy and are not capable of doing so, their social histories, sepulchral culture of their graves, and the fact that they lay buried six feet under contribute to a convincing advocacy for atBB. There is resonance between what is publicly disseminated about BBC in the newspapers and social media with what is witnessed at the cemetery should the public pay a visit to satisfy their curiosity. This resonance is further enhanced with the mutual acknowledgement amongst the public of the need to revere and commemorate the passing of their loved ones with the erection of graves and continued maintenance of the final resting places of these ancestors. In short, atBB's advocacy is helped by the humanising aspect of death as a universal occurrence and ubiquitous commemoration/memorialisation of death.

To further underscore the role of the dead in atBB's advocacy, I draw upon a counter example to demonstrate the dead's necessity in the whole equation. During my thesis writing, a regular cemetery trekker called Brice had begun posting about Clementi Forest and Dover Forest in Facebook. These two forests in western Singapore are earmarked for development by the Singapore government, and Brice wanted to use his photographs and videos taken of the scenery, wildlife, and vegetation in these sites to convince the government to change their mind about clearing these forests. The media picked up on Brice's Facebook posts, the Minister for National Development also paid visits to both forests, Brice went on both local and international news to talk about the forests, and he was invited to participate in a panel assembled to discuss on the prospects of these forests. This is a similar trajectory that BBC had undergone since 2011, and the atBB volunteers are now part of the workgroup to discuss the prospects of

the burial site. However, the striking difference is that the traction for these forests did not sustain past the publicity period. Although Brice had also posted the photographs and videos in Nature Society Singapore's Facebook group to reach out to a larger audience who would be interested in the broad aspects of nature, there was no significant and sustained interest received from the public. From my observations of these posts and the accompanying comments, I gather that there was a lack of resonance between the posts and the degree of knowledge the layperson possessed of forests in Singapore. Brice is highly knowledgeable about vegetation types and could describe at length of a certain tree specie's characteristics. But this is a specialised domain that probably only a handful of the public can understand. Singapore is a highly urbanised nation with nary a substantial green field or lung to speak of, unless they are purposefully curated and regularly maintained by the Singapore government. There is therefore a dissonance between showcasing the types of vegetation in the forests using photographs and videos versus the public's vested interests. Why would this specie of a tree matter to the public, if there was no direct association to an individual's life? Furthermore, it was challenging for the public to gain access into both forests. As seen from some comments, some members of the public had asked Brice if these forests were accessible or how they could be accessed. Brice offered the geographical coordinates of both forests in response and explained how one may enter the forest. Although several hikers did venture into the forests, the environment in both sites is unsuitable for the uninitiated. Contrast this with the ease of accessibility to BBC - it is beside Lornie Highway, has a bus stop right outside, and footpaths within to facilitate walking and driving. Furthermore, the availability of free guided walks provided by atBB's volunteers allow for the public to learn how to access the cemetery on their own, and concurrently create public awareness of the cemetery. Without gaining straightforward access into the forests, the chances that the public may appreciate the forests for their constituents will be low. To put it bluntly, why would the public feel inclined to support Brice's advocacy to save two forests if they contained merely trees that the public does not recognise or feel would be important to be preserved? Singapore is a manicured Garden City that has many trees flanking her roads and expressways, the result of her founding Prime Minister's (the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew) ambition to build a flourishing modern city that also boasts of ample greenery to balance the urbaneness of this city-state (NLB, 2015c). Presented with the Garden City view on a daily basis makes it hard for the layperson to comprehend why the trees from the forests would be any different from the copious amounts of trees seen beside the roads.

Of what relevance is understanding the conceptualisation of death in Singapore amongst the Singaporean Chinese to my research? In a gist, without understanding the importance accorded to the dead in the Chinese community in Singapore, it is impossible to gain an appreciation of why civil society groups like the Singapore Heritage Society, interest groups like atBB, and community groups/individuals are motivated to care for the dead. My second argument states that the necessity of caring for the dead has spurred the emergence of contemporary civil society. Data collected from my fieldwork have illuminated the fact that the underlying Confucian filial piety in caring for the dead is deeply ingrained amongst the Chinese. Culturally for the Chinese, death is to be commemorated and the final resting place of the dead is believed to be sacrosanct. Therefore, the public furore after the government announced that it wanted to clear the cemetery to build the highway was expected. Despite the public petitions to prevent the highway from being constructed, the government went ahead with the highway construction with the objective of enhancing transport efficiency in that area. Although the number of graves to be cleared was reduced in the end, the affected graves that were in the way of the highway construction were exhumed. The government did not allow for any negotiation at all to let the dead remain in their graves probably because death is perceived as an unproductive state which generates no economic advances for Singapore. Moreover, the government's plan for the complete clearance of BBC to redevelop the land into residential housing reflects the Singapore government's objective to gain more tangible outcomes from the tract of prime land. The introduction of underworld deities to BBC in makeshift altars by the community underscores the Chinese belief in spiritual affectiveness in protecting the cemetery and its inhabitants, likely from the physical removal by the government, as discussed in Chapter 4.

It is unfortunate that care for the dead has been negated/marginalised by the Singapore government owing to a few possible reasons. First, the dead may be deemed 'unproductive' since they can no longer make any contributions to Singapore. In a country that focuses on tangible and quantifiable outcomes, and prioritises economic advancements and social developments, the dead no longer belong. Yet, it may be argued that the dead had made contributions when they were alive, and these contributions had played a significant part in advancing the economy for the newly independent Singapore. The examples of the social histories of successful businessmen, bankers, and generous philanthropists that now lie six feet underground in BBC are testament that they were once economically productive. Second, there is a disregard for ancestors as being part of the nationally prescribed family unit in Singapore; only people who are alive are included. Notably, in the list of defined family household types by the Ministry of Family and Social Development (MSF), the dead are absent from the configurations altogether (MSF, 2022). But the dead remain important to the (extended) family unit and have roles to play as ancestors. They are respected by their descendants, are included in the family unit's memory and activities, and are ritually cared for. Caring for the dead is therefore important for the Chinese community in maintaining the group's memory of ritual, practices, cultural and religious beliefs (see Connerton, 1989). Through this endeavour, the theme of rejuvenation is surfaced where the revival of kinship ties between the living and the dead, refurbishment of the graves, rediscovery of 'forgotten' ancestor graves and social histories of the dead, as well as the revival or revisitation of mortuary practices such as that of ancestor worship, are observed.

Furthermore, there may be a prevalent death taboo that deters the PAP government from managing the dead directly, because it has to do with human remains. Perhaps the unclear form of what was once a living human, once a citizen or resident of Singapore, once a member of society and a family, and presently a netherworld being, has led the PAP government to withdraw its direct control over the dead, preferring to delegate this task to a government agency with a nearly irrelevant organisational objective. In a most paradoxical arrangement, the National Environment Agency (NEA), a government agency that addresses environmental issues in Singapore including waste management, public cleanliness, pollution control, smoking control, climate issues, weather, port health, and hawker management, has

been entrusted with the responsibility of managing death and the deceased (NEA, 2020). During my fieldwork, some interviewees had unanimously expressed amazement that death presents as an environmental or waste problem that needs to be managed by the NEA. However, the NEA does not handle tombkeeping, despite being the government agency responsible for death management. As mentioned in the Introduction and Chapter 4, tombkeeping is not handled by the government at all, much to the surprise of my interviewees, who had unanimously assumed that tombkeepers are hired by the government to upkeep the graves. This informal trade has remained an invisible one that is unrecognised by the formal economy despite being an important and intimate service rendered to the dead in their final resting place. Tombkeepers are the *only* ones who possess the skills and expertise to clean graves and exhume the dead, but they are self-employed individuals. As described in Chapter 2, the ambiguous ways in which BBC is managed by the NEA contradicts the Singapore government's conventional practice of adopting an all-pervasive and interventionist stance in managing the matters of its populace. Death seems to have thrown the government off its usual course, resulting in a notable hesitance on the government wielding direct and strict management on all death matters in BBC.

Finally, the practicalities of caring for the dead in an overgrown site like BBC may have deterred the PAP government from doing a comprehensive and dedicated endeavour. For one, the site has already been gazetted for residential development soon thus it probably makes no economic sense to the government for expending more financial resources to upkeep the site. Even trees that are cut down are left in the jungle to fester naturally since they are too heavy and cumbersome to be dragged out of the foliage for disposal. The indiscriminate dumping of all sorts of waste in the cemetery grounds is also not sanctioned by the government, though some of these wastes are highly visible to the eye. Moreover, the uninhibited growth of wildlife and vegetation spread out on uneven terrain in BBC makes maintenance a highly challenging pursuit. In short, the government is not incentivised to care for the dead as much as the citizenry hopes for it to do, since there is no tangible economic benefit that can be reaped from doing so.

To conclude, the cultural importance to care for the dead is a motivating factor that drives the emergence of a contemporary civil society in Singapore. atBB has

stepped forward to speak up for the dead in its advocacy, highlighting on the historical, heritage, and cultural values of BBC, and reiterating the hope that the remaining cemetery can be preserved for generations to come. The BBC controversy clearly brings out the importance and urgency of recognising the care for the dead. Yet, this form of care will be precarious if BBC remains in situ. This is because, with ageing tombkeepers, lack of successors in the tombkeeping trade, a wild jungle growing within the cemetery, and a government with a nebulous oversight of the burial site, will the graves continue to be cared for in the long run?

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PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

1. **Title of research**
   Speaking up for the dead in Bukit Brown Cemetery? An anthropological enquiry on contemporary civil society and its effectiveness in Singapore

2. **School/ Discipline:**
   School of Social and Political Sciences / Social Anthropology

3. **What is the purpose of this research?**
   You are invited to participate my PhD research that studies civil society in Singapore using the example of the Bukit Brown Cemetery. This information sheet provides you with information about my research. I will also describe this research to you and answer all of your questions. Read the information below and ask questions about anything you don't understand before deciding whether or not to take part.

4. **What is the expected duration of my participation?**
   The expected duration will be about 30-40 minutes for the interview. You may be contacted via email subsequently to clarify points made during the interview. This is to ensure that accurate information is presented in my research.

5. **What is the duration of this research?**
   The duration will be about a year and will end in December 2020.

6. **What is the approximate number of research participants involved?**
   As with qualitative research, there is no fixed number of research participants. When information collected is deemed to be enough, the interviews will stop.

7. **What will be done if I take part in this research study?**
   First, you will be presented with this information sheet which you will read and raise any doubts or questions to me, if you have any. If you are comfortable with the information here and agree to be interviewed by me for my research, I would appreciate your completion of the consent form. I will keep the signed copy of the consent form under lock and key, as stipulated by the ethics regulations of the University of Edinburgh. We will then arrange a day and time of your convenience for the interview to take place. You will be audio recorded during the interview because I would need to capture accurate and comprehensive information shared by you. The audio recording will next be transcribed into text format by me. Concurrently, I may take some notes by hand during the interview. All data obtained from you will be stored in DataStore, which is a fully supported and backed-up file network that is

maintained by the University of Edinburgh. Where possible, you will remain anonymous in the interview unless your affiliation is obvious that it will not be possible to not identify you.

8. **How will my privacy and the confidentiality of my research records be protected?**

   Your personal data (e.g., names and contact information) will only be made known to me and these will not be released to any other persons.

   You will be assigned with a participant code and this code will be used in all subsequent documentation and publication of your input to my research.

   All data collected will be kept in accordance to the data governance regulations of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA).

9. **What are the possible discomforts and risks for participants?**

   This research entails minimal discomforts and risks.

   You may feel sad if you share information about your ancestors or prominent figures who are buried at Bukit Brown Cemetery or some of the discussion during the interview may evoke sad memories of your experiences at the cemetery. Apart from these, you will not come into any types of harm during the interview.

10. **Will there be reimbursement for participation?**

    There is no reimbursement for participation.

11. **What are the possible benefits to me and to others?**

    There is no direct benefit to you by participating in my research. However, future publications arising from my research may benefit the existing pool of academic literature that examines civil society in Singapore.

12. **Can I refuse to participate in this research?**

    Yes, you can. Your decision to participate in my research is voluntary and completely up to you. You can also withdraw from the research at any time without giving any reasons. The data that I have collected from you will then be discarded.

13. **Whom should I call if I have any questions or problems?**

    Please contact me at   or 91792737.

Appendix B

![The University of Edinburgh logo] THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

CONSENT FORM

Title of research
Speaking up for the dead in Bukit Brown Cemetery? An anthropological enquiry on contemporary civil society and its effectiveness in Singapore

I hereby acknowledge that:

1. I have agreed to take part in the above research.

2. I have received a copy of this information sheet that explains the scope of my participation in this research. I understand its contents and agree to participate in this research.

3. I can withdraw from the research at any point of time by informing the researcher and all the data collected from me will be discarded.

4. I will not have any financial benefits that result from any possible commercial development of this research.

5. (*If applicable*) I consent / do not consent* to have my coded data made available for future research studies.

6. (*If applicable*) I *agree / do not agree** to be re-contacted for future related studies. I understand that future studies will be subject to the University of Edinburgh's Review Board's approval.

7. (*If applicable*) I *agree / do not agree** to the photo-taking/ audio-recording / video-recording of my participation in the research. I understand that although my name will be not associated with the photographs/video-recordings used in publication/presentation, I may still be identified.

8. (*If applicable*) I *agree/do not agree** for the following personal data to be disclosed in any publication or presentation relating to this research, if any.
    ☐ Surname ☐ First name ☐ Organisation Name ☐ Position/Designation
    ☐ Disagree (I wish to remain anonymous and only agree to be known as
    _____).

*Please delete as appropriate. For clauses starting with "(If applicable)", please delete if they do not apply to your research.

_____   _____
Name and Signature (Participant)   Date

_____   _____
Name and Signature (Consent Taker)   Date