Introduction

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

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

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

In order to be in a position to preserve and maintain their ancient burial grounds (for the most part are closed), some Southeast Asian Chinese communities have been led to think of their cemeteries as places embodying the history of their own ancestors—that is to say their own history. In so doing they have coined new concepts: from that of burial site (yishan 义山) they have moved to that of “place of cultural heritage” (wenhua yichan gongyuan 文化遗产公园 or “historic open space” [lishi] guji gongyuan [历史]古迹公园) which is conceived as an essential community and public space (as in the case of Bukit Cina or Sanbao shan 三宝山 in Malacca, or of the Guangdong yishan 广东义山 in Kuala Lumpur). They have also been constrained to embellish these new open places by planting greenery and plants, by opening new paths, and cleaning them more regularly. Furthermore, they took the step of having these historical vestiges or cultural heritage spaces be recognized by legislative enactments in order to protect them from any encroachment.

Simultaneously some Malaysian Chinese scholars and journalists began to reflect on the importance of their cemeteries as historical landmarks, on their own funeral culture or muzang wenhua 墓葬文化; as well as on the concept—new to them—of guji baocun 古迹保存 or preservation of monuments. Since the early 1990s at least, they have produced various articles which have appeared in the local Chinese media and eventually in book form. Last but not least, 


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

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

The menace caused by the high-speed urban development and the speculation on land induced Chinese communities to reflect on their funerary practices in relation to the future. The poor had no other choice than to resort to cremation, the rather wealthy urban population did not renounce to the idea of burying their ancestors.\(^4\)


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

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


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designing special places to shelter their dead, while some well-to-do Chinese
are still preparing their graves during their lifetime. In China incineration had
been practised since remote times in relation to the introduction of Buddhism,
but had never supplanted the burial practices strongly advocated by the court
and the Confucian ideology. Similarly in Insular Southeast Asia, cremation
was restricted to Buddhist circles and practised in the precincts of Buddhist
sanctuaries. In Kuala Lumpur, Penang and Surabaya the first crematoria
were constructed in 1951, in Jakarta in 1958, and in Singapore in 1962. In
Manila in 1967 the Philippine Chinese Charitable Association had a modern
crematorium (which had been ordered in Great Britain) erected on the grounds
of the Chinese Cemetery, close to the Chong Hok Tong temple. For
this purpose, about one hundred tombs had to be removed. At the same
time the private sector began to prospect and to consider the construction of
lucrative private cemeteries on the outskirts of cities. These memorial parks,
which borrow several features from foreign cultures and are deliberately
organised as cultural landscapes, have opened a new era of deathscapes in
Insular Southeast Asia. They also challenge the coexistence of the traditional
non-profit cemeteries run either by secular Chinese associations or religious
organisations, and the manner the Chinese communicate with their dead.

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

9. The entrepreneur Tommy Winata constructed a private cemetery close to Taman Makam
Quiling, in kabupaten Bogor.
10. For modernist funerary reforms in China during the Republic and the Communist regime,
see inter alia Ling Fang, Vincent Goossaert, “Les réformes funéraires et la politique religieuse
de l’État chinois, 1900-2008,” Archives de sciences sociales des religions, 144 (Oct.-Nov.
2008), pp. 53-62; Rebecca Nedostup. Superstitious Regimes: Religion and the Politics of
11. For more details on the creation of crematoria in Malaysia and Indonesia, see Douglas J.
Davies with Lewis H. Mates, Encyclopedia of Cremation, Aldershot, England & Burlington,
Feilübin huaqiao shanjugongsuo bainian daqing jiniankan 菲律宾华侨善举公所百年大庆纪
13. “In the case of the Philippines, where the majority of Chinese residents are Christian,
cremation and columbaria started to be popular largely after 1998, when the Archbishop of
Manila approved it”; cf. The Philippine Daily Inquirer, November 1, 2006.

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

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

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

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

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