

The “Remains of the Dead”: Spatial Politics of Nation-Building in Post-War Singapore

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Abstract

This paper examines the changing constitution of Chinese landscapes of death in post-war Singapore through a close reading of the process of conflict and negotiation between the nation-state and the Chinese community. Using the spatial politics surrounding Chinese burial grounds as a lens, we clarify state strategies of control over land use and explain how they shifted from colonial to the postcolonial era. We also examine how the strategies of resistance and negotiation on the part of the Chinese community to continue to lay claim to their burial spaces. We then explore state rationale behind, and the community's response to, the shift from burial to cremation. In general, the birth of a new nation-state put in place stronger urban planning mechanisms for disciplining the landscape, and at the same time, narrowing the degrees of freedom within which the Chinese community was able to manoeuvre.

Keywords: *Chinese in Singapore, landscapes of death, cemeteries, cremation, nation-state*

Landscapes of Death as Contested Spaces

Sociologists claim that in late modern societies, death is no longer a taboo subject, whether in the discipline itself or more generally within society (Mellor 1993). This overturns Gorer's (1965) earlier assertion that death has replaced sex as contemporary society's major taboo topic. There is also growing interest and accompanying literature on the material expressions and consequences of death, whether in the form of bodily remains and habitations for the dead (the question of the embodiment of death) or in terms of the disposal of the deceased's assets (the question of inheritance) (see Clark 1993). While geographers' current interest in corporeality is primarily focused on the *living* body, and the way it is sexualized or medicalized (Longhurst 1997), this route of enquiry may in the future encourage more attention to the disposal of the *dead* body.

Awareness of the inevitability of death has contributed to the human desire to commemorate and individualize existence through funerary architecture and the elaboration of rituals to accompany the disposal of the dead (Curl 1993; Jackson and Vergana 1989). The explicit function of burial grounds is to house the dead. In the spatial and temporal ordering of places of burial as well as the ritual practices associated with it, however, burial spaces become transformed into sacred landscapes; the burial site “becomes an emotionally highly-charged site, not only for the families concerned, but also at times for the ethnic and cultural group concerned” (Christopher 1995, 43). While a substantial body of work exists which examines how burial landscapes reflect, in the words of Jackson and Vergana (1989, 3), a society's “collective representations of deeply shared attitudes and assumptions,” relatively little has been done to situate burial landscapes in the context of the politics of space (see Bower 1989; Cannon 1989; Francaviglia 1971; Hertz 1960; Howett 1977; Jackson 1967/68; Knapp 1977; Knight 1985; Lai 1987; Ludwig 1966; Nelson and George 1982; Vitebsky 1993; Walter 1993; Wescoat, Jr. 1994; Young 1960; Zelinsky 1975, 1994).

Elsewhere, one of the present authors has attempted to situate burial landscapes as a *contested* space within broader socio-political developments in the context of pre-World War II colonial Singapore (Yeoh 1991). Following the view that space is not a scientific object removed from ideology and politics but is instead political and strategic (Lefebvre 1977), it was argued that the site, location and morphology of burial spaces are invested with different meanings by different individuals and social groups. For example, over and alongside the priorities that immigrant and indigenous groups of different faiths accord to places for the dead are the perspectives of the colonial state which shape and control urban form and structure through successive measures of urban regulation. The clash of priorities is often resolved through a complicated process of conflict and negotiation among individuals, groups and the state: on the one hand, “dominant” groups construct the burial landscape as a site of control; on the other

hand, other “subordinate” groups may also use it as a site of resistance to resist exclusionary tactics and to advance their own claims.

Beyond the colonial period and with the transition to independence, landscapes of death were again implicated as an important focal point of debates in the developing discourses on and experiences of nationhood and nation-building. Elsewhere, we have focused on the way different discourses on Chinese burial grounds changed in strategic ways with the transition from colony to nation-state (see Yeoh and Tan 1995a). While the colonial state had highlighted the unsanitary nature of burial grounds and adopted a utilitarian view of burial space, the subsequent demands of nation-building reconstructed the “problem” of Chinese burial grounds as “obstructive,” “sterilized” land that urgently needed to be disciplined by an urban planning agenda and cleared for “development.” In contrast, the Chinese community under colonial rule advanced the view that their burial grounds were “sacred” spaces situated within the discourse of geomancy and ancestor worship and as such “immune” from state intervention. With independence, the status of the Chinese as a citizen in a nation-state with accompanying obligations made it more difficult for the community to maintain a separate distinctly Chinese discourse on burial space. Consequently, new discourses that stressed the rights of the Chinese as citizens emerged as instruments of negotiation.

These strategic shifts in discourses both undergirded, and are in turn influenced by, the interplay of actual strategies of control and resistance on the ground. The aim of this paper is to examine the changing constitution of Chinese landscapes of death in post-war Singapore through a close reading of these specific strategies drawn upon in the complicated process of conflict and negotiation between the nation-state and the Chinese community.² Through a detailed analysis of the clearance of selected burial grounds, we will demonstrate that, in the post-war period, while the nation-state did succeed in clearing numerous burial grounds, both the state and the Chinese had to make compromises and concessions in the process of negotiation. At the same time, the “microphysics” of the exercise of state power can provide insights into the constitution of the nation-state in Singapore. Power is “not homogeneous but can be defined only by the particular points through which it passes” and an analysis of the spatial politics of burial grounds illuminates one of the “series of interacting wheels or structures” which, on a different level produces the state as the “overall effect” (Deleuze 1988, 25). Before embarking on a detailed reading of the actual processes of negotiation over Chinese burial grounds, we first outline in brief the significance of burial space in Singapore and the strategies of control and resistance that came into play in the post-war era.

State Strategies of Control Over Burial Space

The Exercise of State Power

In Singapore, the use of land and competition for space have featured as significant issues on the state planning agenda since the immediate post-war era. Given the island’s scarce land resources in terms of both limitations of physical size and natural resources, as well as the need, from the colonial era, to optimize land utilization to facilitate rapid economic and urban growth, a “disciplined, rigorous, centrally planned economic and social regime” anchored primarily by the state has been (and is still) a major cornerstone in Singapore’s development (Perry et al. 1997, 153). In this context, extensive burial grounds belonging to the Chinese community have often been regarded as “space wasters” requiring state action to effect control, minimize proliferation and re-map in tandem with the state’s developmental goals.

One of the most urgent tasks confronting the state in the post-war years was the need to reconstruct the urban fabric of what was essentially a city-state that suffered severe social and economic disruptions, and to plan for a rapidly growing population faced with an insecure economic future. In its attempt to regulate Chinese burial grounds as part of a post-war effort to reconfigure urban space to meet developmental needs, the state came in direct confrontation with a complexly organized Chinese community with its own communal perspectives and priorities not necessarily supportive of, or even compatible with, those of the state. The immediate post-war Chinese community was organized according to ties of dialect group, kinship and surname lines, locality and regional affinity, where different groupings are represented by a multiplicity of clan associations and other voluntary and mutual benefit organizations (Cheng 1984; Yen 1986). These associations burgeoned in the era of colonial neglect and the resulting vacuum in areas of social support and welfare services. They represented self-help measures among the Chinese to provide cradle-to-grave services that served to bind each sub-community together, and ranged from the organization of job and trade opportunities to the conduct of rites of passage (including rituals surrounding death). In this scheme of things, burial grounds owned and run by Chinese associations proliferated. They were not only sacred sites but community spaces where kinship ties and group loyalties were cemented, independently of the state. They represented a lens through which to examine the complex structure of the Chinese community and its negotiations with the state over rights and resources.

State power is also often mediated through institutions and organizations. The presence of these mediating institutions often increases the complexity of negotiations over burial grounds. The principal colonial agencies that were in

charge of burial grounds were reinstated to their pre-war functions after the return of the British. The Municipal Commissioners were thus responsible for all burial grounds within municipal limits under section 233 to 236 of the Municipal Ordinance of 1896 (RCRBBG 1952). It is important to note, however, that the state structure was not a monolithic one. In dealing with Chinese burial grounds, the Commissioners would often seek the assistance of the Chinese Advisory Board, which served in the role of mediator between the Commissioners and the Chinese community. The result was that sometimes the Board's recommendations would result in the modification of initial proposals put up by the Commissioners and other planning authorities, in order to accommodate the views of the Chinese community. For example, in 1951, the Burials Committee deliberated on a proposal to limit the size of individual Chinese graves to a plot size of 7 by 14 feet. Many Chinese members of the Board brought up problems relating to geomancy, the needs of the rich, and the space required to worship before the grave. The result was that the final recommendation was altered to 7 by 15 feet (MMCAB 22 May 1951).

State strategies to control burial space reflect certain "modes of domination" that delineate "relations of autonomy and dependence between actors or collectivities of actors" (Giddens 1985, 8). In the nation-state, the power exercised by the state structure is mainly "administrative" in nature as opposed to the brute violence of absolutist states (Giddens 1985). By the administrative power of the nation-state, we refer to the notion that the nation-state has a relatively wide "scope" of rule, controlling large areas of the activities of its citizens, be it health, work, education or procreation. In contrast, traditional states that came before did not develop this ability to penetrate into the daily existence of its subjects. The sovereign power, however, frequently possessed a high "intensity" of rule in that it was able to invoke heavy sanctions to secure compliance, be it death or other forms of violence. As a citizen in the nation-state, such violent sanctions were no longer possible. In Singapore, such violent sanctions were not exacted even during the colonial era (although they were very much in evidence during the short-lived but traumatic Japanese Occupation years between 1942 and 1945, see Yeoh and Ramdas 1999). What we do see, however, is a gradual refinement and increased enforcement of the exercise of administrative power in the transition from a colonial to a nation-state.

The exercise of administrative power entails a distinct strategy of "surveillance" that has two components. The first comprises the collation of information about individuals, while the second involves the actual supervision of the activities of others; in our case, the ability to monitor and control land use as well as the supervision of human activities on the

land (Giddens 1985). The effectiveness of these strategies depends on the extent to which sanctions can be imposed on individuals by the state and are discussed below.

The Post-War Colonial Period

Informational Strategies

The inability of the Commissioners to control land use with regard to burial grounds during the colonial period can be partly attributed to the ineffective informational strategies that the Commissioners used. Even before the war, there were already cases of unlawful burials that were not discovered till after the act had been committed (Yeoh 1991). After the war, accurate records of the location and extent of burial grounds within the municipality were lost during the Japanese Occupation (MPMCOM 29 November 1946). The Burials Committee set up in 1950 was intended to correct this problem. It had, as one of its terms of reference, the duty of conducting "a survey of private and public burial grounds in Singapore Island ..." (MPC2OM 4 September 1950). While appreciating the importance of a comprehensive survey of burial grounds, the Commissioners had to admit that "it would be beyond the Committee to carry out a detailed field survey of all the burial grounds which would entail a considerable amount of work" (MPC2OM 4 September 1950). The matter thus remained unresolved during the colonial era.

Direct Supervisory Strategies

The Municipal Commissioners of Singapore regulated burial and burning grounds by mainly using a set of burial ground by-laws that laid out the administrative and sanitary requirements of such land use within the municipality (MCST 1929). All burial grounds were expected to satisfy criteria which included registering all burials properly in a standard burial register, and specifying depth of graves, size of plots and distance of graves from roads or water courses (MCST 1929). Back in 1906, the commissioners had already stopped issuing new licenses for burial grounds within municipal limits so post-war efforts were centered around regulating existing burial grounds, disused or otherwise (RCRBBG 1952).

However, efforts at control through legislative means were greatly hampered by two factors. The first was that the Commissioners had no powers to close existing burial grounds and order exhumation of the graves *other* than by invoking section 264 of the Municipal Ordinance (MPMCOM 29 November 1946). This particular piece of legislation enabled the Commissioners to close a burial ground if "they think that the cemetery is dangerous to the health of people living in the neighborhood of the cemetery" (PLCS 1948). This greatly circumscribed moves to clear existing

graves that impeded land development plans. For example, in 1949, plans to level a piece of land off Kim Keat Road ran into problems partly because of the presence of two Chinese graves. Although the trustees claimed that the graves were not the ancestors of the deceased owner of the land, they wanted the Commissioners to apply for the Court Order for their removal and indemnify them against costs, in the event that the request was refused. In the end, plans stalled because the Commissioners were wary of “the possibility of a future claim by any party to whom the two graves may later be proved to belong” (MPC3OM 8 July 1948). The Commissioners were thus limited in their legislative powers to clear land needed for new development. The intensity of control was shallow because the Commissioners did not possess sanctions of sufficient strength.

The Period of Independent Nationhood

Independent Singapore saw the Singapore state mustering together an effective set of both informational and supervisory strategies which gave it greater control over the burial space on the island.

Informational Strategies

The main informational strategy was the development of a Master Plan and a series of comprehensive land use surveys of Singapore Island. On 1 February 1960, the Planning Department was instituted under the Prime Minister’s ministry. One of its first major tasks was to undertake the creation of a master plan that would “take into account the greatly increased population and the government’s 5-year Economic Development Plan” (SLADOR 1960, 12).

By instituting a detailed land use survey that determined, *inter alia*, the extent and location of burial grounds, the master plan was an important first step in achieving control over space and providing the groundwork for regulating the temporal and spatial development of the Singapore landscape. While the British had always been frustrated by their lack of knowledge of the extent and location of burial grounds in Singapore which presented itself as a “serious disability” to “any person called upon to frame a master or overall plan for this island ...” (RCRBBG 1952), the combination of detailed land use surveys and the Master Plan served to provide the government after independence with more leverage.

At the same time, we should also note that the Master Plan as a document produced by government planners is both a product of and at the same time constitutive of the larger discourse of urban land use planning in Singapore. The 1965 Master Plan, for example, identifies cemeteries (together with military land, agriculture, quarry and mining, vacant land like swamps) as land “considered available for develop-

ment” (SPD 1967, 11). The rhetoric of planning embodied in these documents produced by the state contributed to a discourse that denied the alternative meanings invested in the burial landscape by the Chinese community. Pushed to the extreme, these narratives can sometimes describe the function of burial space without even noting that they are for the interment of the dead as evident in the following description from the MPFR (1965, 53): “The contribution here is more the ventilation of built-up areas and the breaking-up of amorphous sprawling intensive housing areas.”

By absorbing and recasting burial space into the discourse of urban planning, the Master Plan enables territorial control, specifically through what Piaget and Inhelder call infralogical classification (Sack 1981). This strategy works through assigning things to a category simply by virtue of their location in space. There is no need to define the exact characteristics of things other than their location. Consequently, there is also no need to take into account the complex social organization of burial grounds, such as their division into social-economic background, surname or dialect clan affiliations. Instead, they can be treated as a monolithic category of land use that can be assessed along with other types of land use in terms of their practical utility. Land use on Singapore Island thus became a “unitary field of objects, authenticated by the ‘sciences,’ and thus enabled it to function on a general horizon of ‘truth’” (Foucault 1979, 256).

Direct Supervisory Strategies

The period of nationhood saw the state increasing its powers of direct supervision over land used specifically as burial grounds. The Master Plan formed one of the bases upon which the state increased its powers of direct supervision over land use. This was done through two means: a system of land use zoning and compulsory acquisition of land. While the Master Plan was targeted at increasing the state’s direct supervisory powers over land use in general, it was to have profound effects upon burial land use on the island.

The leaders of the new state realized that previous laws had limited the powers of the state to clear burial grounds. In response, the government altered the laws in 1972 such that the Commissioner of Public Health has powers to “close cemeteries without having to assign reasons for doing so” (PDSOR 3 November 1972, col. 342). This major modification greatly enhanced the ability of the state to control burial space on the island.

Furthermore, there was increased regulation over the routine activities of individuals on the burial landscape. This regulation often involved the strict control of spatial-temporal rhythms of the Chinese through careful inspection. Activities like exhumations or cremations were closely monitored by state officials to ensure that they conformed to the

required routines. An informant, a caretaker at a funeral parlor who has had extensive experience in the exhumation of bodies since the 1960s, describes a typical scene at an exhumation:

The Health Officer from the Ministry will be present at the exhumation. We are not allowed to bring the remains back but have to send them for cremation immediately. If it was for reburial in another location, we would like, recover the body from 7.00am to 11.00 am, a Health Officer would be present to observe the exhumation and he has to certify the exhumation first, then later, certify the reburial (Ang, personal communication 1992).

The process of exhumation was thus subjected to intense supervision. For instance, a glance at the instructions issued to exhumation contractors for the Queenstown cemeteries illustrates this point (HB1018/57/50: Enclosure: Acquisition of Cemetery Sites in Q'Town). Various stages in the exhumation and reburial were supervised closely by putting into place procedures for applying for a license to exhume, seeking approval for the urns used for re-burial, choice of "coffins" to transfer undecomposed bodies, permission to use these coffins and so on (HB1018/57/50: Enclosure: Cemetery Sites in Question, 2-3).

During the period of nationhood, therefore, the state was able to increase its control over burial grounds by extending its powers of information-gathering and direct supervision over land use. Through its production of laws, guidelines, licenses and direct supervision requirements that penetrated every area of the burial process, the nation-state in essence makes visible and articulates Chinese burial landscapes and in the process renders them amenable to state regulation.

Chinese Strategies of Resistance

Chinese strategies may be broadly divided into "covert" or "overt" strategies. Overt strategies include all forms of legislative appeal and actions that utilize official channels such as legal forms of representation to the respective government agencies. On the other hand, covert strategies refer to all the clandestine or illegal activities that rely for their effectiveness on the failure of the state's informational and direct supervisory strategies.

Overt strategies were dominant in the period of nationhood, as seen in the various forms of collective representation that the clan associations make to the state for concessions in return for ceding their burial grounds (discussed later). There were also instances where the Chinese spontaneously formed

informal groupings to negotiate with the state and make known their views. For instance, in 1965, several residents of Kampong Alexandra who had buried their dead in the Cheang Hong Lim burial ground in Stirling Road were faced with the prospect of having their graves exhumed to allow for the government's compulsory acquisition of the land. As a result, they collectively made a representation to the government. The petition letter stressed that they did not intend to "quarrel" with the government's decision but "wish to co-operate with the [g]overnment in its endeavours" (HB1018/57/50: Enclosure: Letter from Tan Hong Kee to Lim Kim San 19 Jun 1965). Among other things they sought individual compensation for the removal and government undertaking that special sites be earmarked for them at the reburial place at Choa Chu Kang.

In contrast, clandestine activities like illegal burials were widespread during the colonial era and were ultimately responsible for the failure of colonial efforts to control burial grounds through surveillance (Yeoh 1991). These diminished in occurrence and importance after nationhood. After independence, for example, there were no large-scale clandestine burials given the proliferation of better informational and direct supervisory strategies on the part of the nation-state.

The Control of Sacred Space: Conflict and Negotiation

In the post-war colonial era, the state's attempts to control burial grounds in a concerted fashion did not go beyond various plans and proposals. The lack of reliable information about Chinese burial grounds, coupled with the absence of legal instruments to force closure and removal of burial grounds at locations needed for development, contributed to the failure of colonial authorities in clearing burial grounds in the City Area.³ Nevertheless, some headway was made towards a systematic land use policy with the publication of the first Master Plan in 1955. The Master Plan served to indicate the manner in which land use development in the colony was to be carried out (MP-RS 1955). The lack of any "settled policy" with regard to Chinese burial grounds meant that municipal strategies to regulate burial grounds were *ad hoc* in nature. As a result of the superficiality of state policies, the Chinese were able to continue their normal customs of burying the dead with considerable immunity and a low incidence of conflict with the authorities. This was to change decisively with self-government in 1959 and nationhood in 1965 as the state acquired wider legal powers to clear and control burial grounds.

The Period of Self Government and Independent Nationhood

Systematic Land Use Planning and Its Implications for Burial Grounds

Although the first master plan was published in 1955, it was not until the 1960s that it was implemented and had any effect on burial space in Singapore. In principle, the plan established the state's primary concerns as first, to reserve "adequate areas of land for places of work for the present and future population of Singapore" (MP-RS 1955, 19); and second, to give priority to "the feature which overshadows all others in the future planning of Singapore . . . the rapid increase in population and its relationship to the limited area of land" (MP-RS 1955, 15). The master plan thereby provided both the main justifications, that is, industrial land use and population resettlement, as well as a means of clearing burial grounds needed for "development." The Master Plan formed part of a three-fold set of state policies aimed at direct control of land use development in Singapore. Two of these aspects (land use zoning and compulsory land acquisition) are pertinent to burial grounds (Lim and Motha 1979).⁴

The System of Land Use Zoning

Through a system of land use zoning, the Master Plan sets out the "permitted uses, not permitted uses and the uses under special considerations" (Lim and Motha 1979, 5). This enabled the state to refuse applications for land to be used as a burial ground and was invoked by the officials of the new nation-state. This is exemplified by their encounter with the Foochow Association (SFA 1972, 86-89).

In 1963, the Association applied to the City Council for permission to use a newly acquired 115 acres of land at 17 1/2 miles, Lim Chu Kang as a private burial ground. The application was rejected by the City Architect for two reasons (SFA 1972, 86). Firstly, citing the Master Plan, it was pointed out that the area under consideration was already gazetted as a rural (agricultural) zone, and to use it as a burial ground would be tantamount to an infringement of the Master Plan. Secondly, the land in question was already close to the City Council Cemeteries and hence there was no need to consider setting up another cemetery nearby.

Unperturbed, the Association petitioned the Prime Minister's Office on 3 May 1963 (SFA 1972, 87). They argued that religious customs that required the Chinese to have a proper burial could not be changed overnight. What was more significant was that they pointed out that like any other association, they had worked for the common good of the nation. Since they did not have their own burial ground, to be fair the government should treat them equally and grant them their own private burial ground. The Foochow

Association went on to reinterpret the state's codified laws on their own terms when they pointed out to the government that current state regulations did allow for, and in fact made it necessary that burial grounds be segregated by ethnicity and religion, which all the more meant that they should be given their own private burial ground.

At a meeting convened later to discuss the petition, state officials drew upon the "texts" of colonial planners dating from the 1930s and 1940s which argued that with population increase and land scarcity, the government was not to issue any more licenses for private burial grounds but were to encourage cremation (SFA 1972, 87). When questioned as to why they needed their own burial ground now when they had managed without one for so long, the Association's representative replied that:

They were like a beggar who had gone without food for many days and had just come begging for a meal. Would one say to the beggar that he could stop eating altogether since he had already gone without food for so long (SFA 1972, 87).

The petition was later rejected again but the Association re-petitioned the Prime Minister's Office as they felt that the "state had not taken into account its citizens' feelings." Finally, after further negotiations, a compromise was reached whereby the Master Plan was altered such that four acres out of the Association's 115 acres was allowed by the Prime Minister's Office to be used as a private burial ground. The license was finally granted in 1966, three years after the application was first made. Negotiations over burial space in this case hence reached a compromise in which certain concessions had to be made to the Chinese in return for clearing their burial grounds.

Except for this isolated case, no further licenses to set up new Chinese burial grounds were granted after the 1960s except in the case of re-internment from other existing locations. By 1972, the government made it clear that it would close all cemeteries in and around the city area "to conserve land" and that it considered cremation as the only viable, long-term solution (APA 1972). However, the government also agreed to "extend existing public cemeteries at Chua Chu Kang as well as add new ones elsewhere" (APA 1972), a move which indicated that, like the colonial authorities before them, the new state had to compromise on the people's aversion to cremation, which could be encouraged but not made compulsory.

Compulsory Acquisition and Clearance

Another aspect of the state's land use development policies involved control over specific or existing development by compulsory acquisition of land for "any public purpose"

(APA 1972). Even though the Land Acquisition Act is generally all encompassing, outlining in detail the procedure to be followed as well as the rules for assessing compensation for land acquired, the expression “public purpose” was not defined in the Act (Khublall and Yuen 1991, 193). A landmark Singapore High Court ruling against a claimant contesting the “public purpose” for which the land was required had the court asserting that “the government is the proper authority for deciding what a public purpose is” (Khublall and Yuen 1991, 193). The Minister for National Development has in effect “absolute discretion in deciding the purposes for which land can be acquired under the Act” (Khublall and Yuen 1991, 193). There has been thus little, if any legal possibilities for challenging the Act directly.

From 1964 to 1973, about 15 per cent of the land area of the Republic had been compulsorily acquired by the government, with about 50 per cent of this solely for public housing (APA 1972). By the mid-1960s, with the Master Plan firmly in place, the state was in a better position to negotiate the removal of Chinese burial grounds. The most “pressing demand for land in the urban area [was] for housing” (MPFR 1965, 32). It was thus not surprising that the government agency put in charge of housing [initially the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) and from February 1960, the Housing and Development Board (HDB)] (SLADOR 1960, vol. 13) became a major player in state attempts to clear Chinese burial grounds. Numerous large Chinese burial grounds were cleared from the 1960s onwards for the purposes of New Town housing development at locations like Queenstown, Tiong Bahru, Redhill, Kampong Silat, Telok Blangah and Bishan (HDB 1960-1991).

The clearance process, however, did not involve the state simply steamrolling over the burial grounds of the Chinese community. In fact, even though the Land Acquisition Act conferred wide-ranging powers on the planning authorities, the clearance process was often drawn out and involved the government in a series of complex negotiations with the Chinese community. The discursive elements of Chinese religion and *feng shui* (Chinese geomancy) were still important as instruments of negotiations with the state. As the following discussion will attempt to demonstrate, however, the Chinese community in the post-war independence period frequently stressed their support of government policies, while at the same time petitioning the government for concessions in return for ceding their burial grounds. Their new relationship as citizens to the nation-state led to the emergence of new discursive elements that stressed Chinese participation in the nation-state. It therefore became more difficult to maintain a separate discourse that immunized their burial grounds against state control. The intricacies of the cemetery acquisition and clearance process can only be best appreciated if

we examine specific instances of the clearance process at a micro level.

In the 1960s, the HDB tried to acquire cemetery lands either by “private treaty” or if necessary, by utilizing compulsory legal powers to compel grave removal under the Housing and Development Ordinance and Land Acquisition Ordinance (HB1018/57/50 Enclosure: Ag Lands Manager to CEO 11 October 1962). In 1962, four cemeteries near the existing Queenstown housing estate were deemed by the HDB as “a logical extension of the Queenstown development” after the existing neighborhoods IV and III were completely built-up (HB1018/57/50 Enclosure: Ag Lands Manager to CEO 11 October 1962). Since compensation for acquired land was assessed at current (that is, as a cemetery) rather than potential value, the HDB sought the Planning Department’s co-operation to refuse to grant any planning permission and thereby prevent the lands from being developed until it could be acquired by the HDB. Since “cemetery land [had] no market [value]” and any proposed commercial development would require “an alteration of the Master Plan Zone” for which there appeared to be no justification (HB1018/57/50 Enclosure: Report by Johnny Loh, Lands Officer), the Board could arrange matters such that “no high claims [could] be admitted for loss of development value” when they were ready to acquire the land (HB1018/57/50 Enclosure: Ag Lands Manager to CEO 11 October 1962).

Many of the cemeteries acquired at this time were run by the various Chinese clan associations. For example, three burial grounds at Queenstown were managed by the Hakka association *Ying Foh Fui Kun* (YFFK 1989, 26), while the cemetery at Kampong Tiong Bahru and Redhill belonged to the *Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan* (SHHK) (HB25/59/II Enclosure: CEO-HDB to Permanent Secretary, National Development: enclosure in -Kampong Tiong Bahru Redevelopment of i) Fire Site, ii) Cemetery Site, iii) Exhumation of Graves 3 October 1964; *The Straits Times* 14 October 1964). In attempting to clear these burial grounds, the HDB often met with resistance from the associations.

The YFFK for example, “objected strongly to the compulsory acquisition of their only cemetery in Singapore” (HB1018/57/50 Collector of Land Revenue to E.M., C.E.O., Chairman 10 August 1966). The association, however, added that they would not “stand in the way of progress by the government. Instead, they requested several concessions from the government. Firstly, that a license for another burial ground elsewhere be granted. Secondly, that a portion of about 4 1/2 acres of their burial ground be returned to them for the purposes of constructing a memorial and re-burial of existing graves. They also wished to keep their existing temple on the burial ground. Lastly, the association requested that exhumation be delayed for another five years

(HB1018/57/50 Enclosure: Penolong Setiausaha (Undang²) to Pegawai Tanah Melalui Pengurus Tanah 2 December 1965). According to the association, the 4 1/2 acres were to be used for re-burial because their members would object to using the government cemetery at Chua Chu Kang for re-burial and would not like to see their only cemetery “extinguished” (HB1018/57/50 Collector of Land Revenue to E.M., C.E.O., Chairman 10 August 1966).

While the authorities did not accede to their requests to grant a re-burial ground elsewhere and to delay exhumation, the other request for a 4 1/2 acre re-burial site was granted in view of the fact that the Hakka people had “no other cemetery.” The proposed vestigial site on the southern fringe of the lot was deemed to have little effect on the Board’s “comprehensive development of the land” (HB1018/57/50 Collector of Land Revenue to E.M., C.E.O., Chairman 10 August 1966). In order “not to create a precedent,” the land was to be designated as a public burial ground with no fresh burials permitted (HB1018/57/50 Enclosure: Penolong Setiausaha (Undang²) to Pegawai Tanah Melalui Pengurus Tanah 2 December 1965). In other words, the ownership of the land was to be effectively vested in the government who would in return alienate on a state lease for a term of 99 years the 4 1/2 acres to the association at a nominal premium of S\$1.00 (HB1018/57/50 Enclosure: Teh Cheang Wan to Permanent Secretary, National Development 25 February 1969). Thus while the government effectively managed to acquire the cemetery for housing development, it also had to take into account some of the wishes of the Chinese. In fact, it was admitted that the concession was given as the government had to take into view “public sentiment as regards [the] government’s many acquisitions of private burial grounds” (HB1018/57/50 Enclosure: Penolong Setiausaha (Undang²) to Pegawai Tanah Melalui Pengurus Tanah 2 December 1965). On another level, the government also had to alter the zoning of the master plan to accommodate the re-burial site and the fact that this was a “concession to the [a]ssociation” was noted by the HDB (HB1018/57/50 Collector of Land Revenue to E.M., C.E.O., Chairman 10 August 1966).

When re-interment had almost been completed, the association requested that the stone tablets be re-set to conform more closely to geomantic requirements as the original layout was thought to be geomantically unfavorable. The government agreed to this request and absorbed the additional cost of the alterations (YFFK 1989, 30). At the same time, the government made arrangements to enable affected families to conduct private exhumations for re-burial elsewhere and also, if they wished, be informed of the date of exhumation so that they could witness the exhumation together with a representative from the association (HB1018/57/50 Enclosure: Johnny Loh., Lands Officer, to Acting Manager,

SIT 11 April 1959). The clan associations were hence involved at various points in the clearance process.

In a second example, the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan (SHHK)’s cemetery at Kampong Tiong Bahru was scheduled for acquisition and subsequent clearance in 1959 for housing development (HB25/59/II Commissioner of Lands to Acting Manager, SIT 11 April 1959; *The Straits Times* 14 Oct 1964). Like the YFFK, the SHHK petitioned for a small portion of the said land, on which a temple and outhouses serving it were situated, to be “wholly excluded from the future development of the surrounding area” (HB25/59/II Enclosure: Wee Swee Teow to Commissioner of Lands 9 June 1959). The reasons cited were that the “feelings of the Chinese Community which [they] represent [would] be deeply and seriously hurt” if the buildings in question were destroyed as a result of development (HB25/59/II Enclosure: Wee Swee Teow to Commissioner of Lands 9 June 1959). The Commissioner of Lands in his turn viewed their request “sympathetically” having been impressed upon by the SHHK of their objection to the proposed demolition “on religious grounds” (HB25/59/II Enclosure: Kwa Soon Chuan, f/Commissioner of Lands to M.I.T. 15 June 1959). It was thus recommended that the government accede to their request.

This was not the only time that the SHHK had managed to secure a degree of concessions in return for ceding their burial grounds. In 1963, when the government acquired their cemetery at Redhill, the Prime Minister’s Office had approved the association’s application to use four acres of their own land at Mandai as a re-burial site (HB25/59/II Enclosure: Report by Lands Officer 14 September 1964; HB25/59/II, Enclosure: Tan Kah Jin to Permanent Secretary, National Development 3 October 1964). Subsequently, about 15,300 graves were exhumed and relocated to Mandai by 3 October 1964.

For their cemetery at Kampong Tiong Bahru, the association petitioned to shift the estimated 5,200 graves to be cleared to Mandai. An application was then made by the association to acquire ten more acres at Mandai for the re-interment of the graves from Kampong Tiong Bahru. In addition, the association indicated that they needed the extension because they proposed to exhume their cemeteries at Whitley Road and Kheam Hock Road. The HDB’s response was that only one acre was needed to re-bury the graves from Kampong Tiong Bahru, and on 20 October 1964, the Master Plan Committee agreed to let the association open up one acre adjacent to the previous four acre cemetery site at Mandai for the re-burial of the estimated 5,200 graves (HB25/59/II LM Enclosure: Lands Manager to Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan 23 November 1964; HB25/59/II, Enclosure: Tan Kah Jin to Permanent Secretary, National Development 3 October 1964).

Other than negotiating for concessions, the SHHK also took particular interest in the exhumation *per se*. For the exhumation of their Redhill cemetery, the association “strongly recommend[ed]” that the exhumation contract be awarded to the caretaker of one of their burial grounds, Aw Tong Hung (HB/25/59II Enclosure: Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan to Lands Manager, HDB 27 April 1961). According to the association, Aw was recommended on the basis of his 30 years of service and his familiarity with the rites and practices of the Hokkien community. The SHHK highlighted the fact that they were “solely responsible to the descendants of the Hokkien community” who had vested trusteeship of their various burial grounds in the association. They also stressed the fact that they had helped to supervise previous exhumations, kept detailed records of the graves exhumed for the use of the dead person’s descendants and dutifully visited the graveyards every year during the “grave visiting festival” to perform “the necessary offerings, in accordance with the Hokkien community[’s] customs and rites.” They thus justified their “very keen interest” in the exhumation and re-burial as their “responsibility” (HB/25/59II, Enclosure: Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan to Lands Manager, HDB, 27 April 1961).

For the exhumation of their Kampong Tiong Bahru Site in 1964, the SHHK took their participation a step further by actually securing the exhumation contract of S\$70,000 to remove about 3,500 graves (HB/25/59/II Enclosure: Lands Officer to Lands Manager 26 October 1964). However, the burial records were destroyed during the war and hence the exact number of graves could not be ascertained. After the completion of negotiations for the purchase of the cemetery and the compensation had been agreed upon, the association informed the HDB that there was a mass re-internment at the site 30 to 40 years earlier (HB/25/59/II Enclosure: Lands Officer to Lands Manager 19 October 1964). They thus requested an additional S\$8,000 from the HDB to clear the extra graves (HB/25/59/II Enclosure: Lands Officer to Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan 28 November 1964). Initially, the HDB, claiming that the “mass re-internment” was not made known during the calling of tenders, insisted that the association bear the extra cost (HB/25/59/II Enclosure: Chief Clerk to Lands Officer, 27 October 1964). However, they later agreed to pay an additional “compromise figure of \$5,000” to the SHHK in view of the “urgency for clearance” while admitting that the Board was in a “weak position” (HB/25/59/II, Enclosure: Lands Officer to Lands Manager 3 December 1964).

Other than having to deal with the various clan associations in charge of the burial grounds, at times the state also met with direct resistance from the descendants of the graves

who sought individual compensation for the exhumation. State negotiations with individual citizens with claims on the acquired land would often also include squatters on the cemetery land, not an uncommon occurrence (HB25/59/I Redevelopment of Kampong Tiong Bahru Fire Site: Enclosure: Commissioner of Lands to Acting Manager, SIT 11 April 1959; HB1018/57/50, Enclosure: Lands Manager to C.E.O. 11 October 1962). At the Queenstown cemetery site belonging to the YFFK for example, there were approximately 338 families squatting on the site (HB1018/57/50 Enclosure: Report by Johnny Loh, Lands Officer). Thus, state attempts to clear burial grounds for development often met with resistance on both individual and collective levels. The state could not afford to ignore these problems when they surfaced. Instead the changing geography of burial space had to be carefully negotiated, often with concessions and compromises made by both the Chinese and the state.

The Success of State Attempts to Clear Burial Grounds

In general, the nation-state, armed with new legislative instruments, was considerably successful in clearing extensive areas of private Chinese burial grounds in the name of the “economic and social good of all citizens of Singapore” (PDSOR 7 April 1978, col. 1492). In the 1970s, the nation-state was to further enhance its regulatory powers with amendments to existing legislation that gave it the power to close cemeteries “without having to assign reasons for doing so,” hence breaking the last legislative deadlock that had rendered the former Municipal Commissioners (under the colonial state) powerless to close cemeteries except for “health” reasons (PDSOR 7 April 1978, col. 1491).

By 1978, the government was in a position to state that all private cemeteries “will be acquired as and when required for development” (PDSOR 7 April 1978, col. 1491). In 1967, 619 hectares making-up 1.1 per cent of land area on Singapore Island were given over to burial grounds (RMP 1985). That amount was down to 534 hectares, a drop of 13.7 per cent, by 1982 indicating the success of the state’s attempts to clear private burial grounds (RMP 1985).

The success of the state’s attempts to clear burial grounds therefore reflected the progressive consolidation of state power after independence. Unlike the colonial state, the nation-state was able to enact legislation that gave it greater power over the use of space as burial grounds. As a result of the greater intensity of state moves to clear burial grounds, the processes of conflict and negotiation can be more readily discerned as the Chinese responded to government moves by seeking concessions and compromises from the state.

The Shift to Cremation

The state's use of legislative instruments was part of the negotiations over Chinese burial grounds that took place at a more visible level. Beneath these large-scale changes were the more micro-level aspects of the state's attempts to control burial grounds. An important prong of the debate resided with the state's renewed attempt to promote cremation. The success of the state's attempts to clear private burial grounds could not have been possible if cremation was not accepted by the public as an alternative way to deal with the dead.

Although, as the colonial authorities had noted, cremation was not entirely alien to the Chinese before 1965, 89.8 per cent of the Chinese dead were buried with only 10.2 per cent opting for cremation (Tong 1988). By 1988, the majority of the Chinese dead, 68.1 per cent were cremated with only 31.9 per cent buried (Tong 1988), thereby contributing to the general (all ethnicities) increase in cremation instead of burial in Singapore during the period of nationhood. By the 1990s, cremation was preferred by four in five of those for whom burial is not required by their religion (i.e., all communities apart from the Muslim, Ahmaddiya Jama'at, Jewish, Parsi and Bahai populations) (*The Straits Times* 9 August 1994).

The change from burial to cremation as the main mode of disposal among Chinese Singaporeans is often seen as a reflection of the weakening hold of "traditional" ideas and beliefs concerning death and the after-life (Tham 1984). However, it must also be remembered that the decline of ritual practice is itself also inextricably linked to the diminished role that regional, dialect and clan associations play in Chinese social life after independence. With independence, in order to re-orient the new citizenry away from the more parochial, ethnically-bounded concerns towards acceptance of the nation-state framework, many of the functions of these Chinese voluntary associations including control over funeral and burial matters were transferred to the government which assumed responsibility for the welfare of the people. The acceptance of cremation in the period of nationhood is also partly a result of the government's provision of crematoria and columbaria as viable alternative means to dispose of and accommodate the dead (Tong 1988). For instance, the government built columbaria to house the cremated remains of the exhumed at places like Yishun and Mandai, both of which were built in the late 1970s (HDB 1978-1981; *The Straits Times* 31 August 1982). Clan associations like the Pek San Theng Association were also allowed to build a columbarium to house the exhumed, cremated remains from their cemetery after it had been acquired by the government for public housing (HDB 1983/84; *The Straits Times* 9 April 1986; PST 1988, 118-119).

At the same time, while cremation was encouraged, burial grounds were provided for those who insisted upon a burial so that the Chinese would not feel "threatened or forced into using cremation" (HDB 1983/84; *The Straits Times* 9 April 1986; PST 1988, 118-119). Earlier attempts to encourage cremation by the municipal authorities had failed due to Chinese opposition. This time, the state avoided direct confrontation. However, the change to cremation was certainly more complex than a matter of government provision of alternatives. It in fact entailed the state using strategies of persuasion.

The funeral specialists, the traditional managers of death in the Chinese community were instrumental to the promotion of cremation. Within the Chinese community, the power relations between the funeral specialists, be they caretakers, priests or even geomancers, and the Chinese masses, were such that ritual practices were often directed by the funeral specialists with the Chinese people paying for their expert knowledge of the various rites of each of the Chinese dialect groups. For example, the caretakers have expert knowledge of all the varied burial practices of the respective dialect groups (Ang, personal communication 1992). As they also had more contact with the Chinese masses, these middlemen were able to slowly ameliorate the previous distrust of cremation without any semblance of threat or coercion.

As citizens in the nation-state, one of the rights enjoyed by the people was "religious freedom." It was pointed out that:

the government cannot very well say everyone in Singapore has to be cremated since there is supposed to be religious freedom in Singapore . . . so they ask us (funeral parlor owners/caretakers) to promote cremation (Ang, personal communication 1992).

The same informant who also ran a coffin-making shop near Kampong San Theng in the early 1970s related the initial difficulties with cremation initially as there was no suitable coffin for cremation of the Chinese dead. The old Chinese coffins could not be cremated as they were too thick and the only ones available were the "Catholic religious coffins" (Ang, personal communication 1992). The Chinese objected to their use because of the presence of "crosses" on the coffins so he had to alter the designs himself into a form that was acceptable to the religious sensibilities of the Chinese. He relates his experience thus:

When we first tried to alter them it was so difficult, the suppliers said they didn't have the "flowers and grasses" design so then we went to find "lion head" designs, the bronze ones, plated them white and then put them together ourselves (Ang, personal communication 1992).

These “middlemen” were therefore able to convert the Chinese people to the idea of cremation because, firstly, as the traditional managers of death, they were the people who possessed the specialized knowledge about Chinese death practices that the Chinese depended on in dealing with death. Secondly, unlike the state officials, the funeral specialists had more intimate dealings with the Chinese and hence were in a better position to persuade the Chinese to adopt cremation. Lastly, by providing coffins and other religious paraphernalia which were suitably adapted for cremation and which gained acceptance among at least the less “traditional” Chinese, they were able to remove some of the religious objections to cremation.

This did not mean the demise of traditional discourses governing the disposal of the remains of the dead. In recent years the discourse of geomancy has been resurrected to encompass the siting of cremation urns in columbaria, a development which the government had not anticipated. For instance, in 1983, the government had to drop its previous practice of allocating niches at its Mt. Vernon Crematorium by sequential serial numbers and allow free selection “following requests from families, some [of whom] would keep ashes until they can get niche of their choice” (*The Straits Times* 23 December 1983). The upper two rows were preferred to the lower two rows which were “unfavorable” as urns there were in danger of being touched by sweeping brooms as well as being exposed to dust and dirt (*The Straits Times* 23 December 1983). There were also instances of people consulting geomancers to determine the favorable niches (*The Straits Times* 9 April 1986).

The nation-state was largely successful in promoting the acceptance of cremation as an alternative means of disposing of the dead. It succeeded mainly due to the use of a different strategy of control. Instead of promoting cremation directly to the Chinese like what the colonial-state did, the officials of the nation-state utilized “middlemen” like the caretakers and funeral parlor owners to gradually change the views of the Chinese to using cremation. By the 1980s, cremation had been accepted as the “norm” in Singapore. Whereas in the past descendants looked after their ancestral tombs, increasingly it became their duty to take care of the ashes of their ancestors (*The Straits Times* 9 April 1986).

Conclusion

We have argued in this paper that landscapes of death such as the Chinese burial spaces discussed here provide an important lens to understanding the transition between colonial rule and the incipient years of nation-building. This is because the politics of space accompanying such a transition come into sharp focus in examining a landscape that is mul-

tiple interpreted from different perspectives. From the state’s vantage point, the extensive burial grounds of the Chinese community are “dead” space which should be recycled for developmental purposes for the living, and particularly so in a land-scarce city-state with a rapidly growing population and a burgeoning economy. From the perspective of the various Chinese sub-communities, the burial grounds were not only a sacred landscape of repose but represented a major focal point for community-bonding.

We also argue that the politics of space needs to be examined in terms of a microphysics of multiple strategies and counter-strategies drawn upon by different fragments of the polity. It is by mapping out a detailed and substantive account of these strategies that we seek to clarify the transition in the nature of state-people relations in the post-war era. The negotiation between the state and the Chinese for control of burial grounds had markedly different outcomes in the colonial period and the period of independent nationhood. In the colonial state, even though there was much discussion and plans, no moves were taken to clear Chinese burial grounds mainly because the state lacked the legislative tools to do so. As a result, the Chinese were able to continue their traditional burial practices undisturbed. With the transition to nationhood, the process of negotiation resulted in the state succeeding in clearing Chinese burial grounds. In the nation-state, the Chinese were unable to ignore the state and instead became engaged in a process of negotiation with the state. As has been shown, even though the state did manage to clear numerous burial grounds, frequently, both the state and the Chinese had to make compromises and concessions in the process of negotiation. By examining the microphysics of power over burial spaces, this study has attempted to illuminate the intricate involvement of human agency in the nation-building project. In sum, following independence, the nation-state took the “unformed and unorganised” Chinese burial landscape with its “unformalized and unfinalised functions” and translated it into a generic land use category that could be articulated in terms of urban planning discourses. This movement also produced a narrowing of the range of human conduct possible within the territorial boundaries of the nation-state. This reduction is done by “distributing in space, laying out and serializing in time, composing in space-time, and so on” (Deleuze 1988, 34). As a result, while landscapes of death were continually shaped by strategies of negotiation using official channels on the part of the Chinese, clandestine burial and other evasion tactics, once widespread and effective as strategies of resistance during the colonial era, were increasingly circumscribed. This heralds the birth of a nation-state undergirded by a new set of relations between the state and the people.

Endnotes

1. E-mail for Brenda Yeoh: geoya@nus.edu.sg.
2. Our work has links with the substantial body of geographical work which do not deal directly with burial grounds but examine the role of conflict in constituting the landscape. These studies often acknowledge that different social groups invest different meanings in a particular landscape and examine the spatial politics that result (see for example, Duncan 1990; Jackson 1988; Ley and Olds 1988).
3. For a more detailed discussion of developments in the post-war colonial era, see Yeoh and Tan, 1995a; Yeoh and Tan 1995b).
4. The third aspect involves direct public authority participation in providing land development that mainly involves reclamation of land from the sea or swamp.

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