

## Colonial Cosmopolitanism of the *Peranakan* World Seen in the Grave Art of Bukit Brown Cemetery

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### ABSTRACT

This paper will attempt to construct and explore the colonial cosmopolitanism of the *Peranakan* world up to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly through the material culture and aesthetics of the Straits Chinese tombs at Bukit Brown Cemetery (Singapore). The unique grave art found at Bukit Brown displays the most cosmopolitan features and influences in the Straits Settlements (Malacca, Penang and Singapore). This paper argues that the grave taste of the Straits Chinese in Singapore is a consequence and manifestation of colonial cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitan modernity, as Singapore at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was (and still is) one of the most cosmopolitan cities of Southeast Asia. It explores and contextualizes cosmopolitanism in the *Peranakan* world and Southeast Asia, examining the cultural milieu, influences, commerce and technology that played into the aesthetics that developed in the grave art of Bukit Brown.

**Keywords:** Cosmopolitanism, colonialism, *Peranakan*, Straits Chinese, Bukit Brown, grave art

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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Over the period of October 2013 to May 2015, several trips to Malacca, Singapore and Penang were made to conduct research. Visits were made to Bukit China and Jelutong cemeteries in Malacca; Batu Gantong, Batu Lanchang, Mount Erskine, Kelawai Road and Western Road cemeteries in Penang; and several guided tours by brownies<sup>i</sup> at Bukit Brown in Singapore. These cemeteries are where most *Peranakans*<sup>ii</sup> were buried. Bukit Brown unlike the cemeteries in Malaysia is under threat (which is further discussed below) and because of its imminent loss, efforts are made by the Singapore government and Singaporeans (particularly brownies) to document and archive as much as possible. Relevant lectures and talks were attended and interviews were also conducted with undertakers, older generation of *Peranakans* and brownies.

This paper will mainly focus on the grave art at Bukit Brown Cemetery. The cosmopolitan features of these graves are found less in other parts of Malaya. This paper will argue, construct and contextualize colonial cosmopolitanism in the *Peranakan* world and Southeast Asia, and conclude with a brief discussion of a *Peranakan* cosmopolite, Ong Sam Leong, an affluent businessman, whose grave is the largest at Bukit Brown that contains much of these cosmopolitan features that illustrate and exemplify the colonial cosmopolitan lifestyle and reality of the *Peranakan* world.

### 2.0 BUKIT BROWN CEMETERY, SINGAPORE

Originally, the land on which Bukit Brown Cemetery sits belonged to George Henry Brown, who sold it in the mid-1880s to Ong Kew Ho, Ong Ewe Hai, Ong Cheng Chew<sup>iii</sup> and the Hokkien Huay Kuan (Chinese clan association). The ownership was subsequently passed to the Seh Ong Kongsi. In 1922, 213 acres of Bukit Brown Cemetery was acquired from the Seh Ong Kongsi through the Land Acquisition Ordinance for purposes of a Municipal cemetery (McKenzie 2011: 58). Today, the future of Bukit Brown is uncertain and a controversial topic in Singapore as the government, in 2013, announced plans to bisect it with a main thoroughfare (a new dual four-lane road and bridges) and redevelopment of significant areas for future housing, destroying the cultural and natural landscape of Bukit Brown. The government has exhumed an estimated number of 3746 graves (Pang and Liew 2014: 91).<sup>iv</sup> Bukit Brown has since been on the 2014 World Monuments Watch (World Monument Fund). On the World Monument Fund (WMF) website, Bukit Brown has been described as:

Bukit Brown is at once a study in the social and cultural history of Singapore and a green oasis in the heart of a densely developed urban environment. As a cemetery for pioneering Chinese immigrants from all walks of life beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, Bukit Brown showcases Singapore's origins and connections to regions beyond. Physically manifesting the links between southern China and Southeast Asia are the Hokkien and Teochew tomb designs and their inclusion of local Peranakan as well as European features.

Bukit Brown is undoubtedly a national heritage and treasure.<sup>v</sup> Bukit Brown, situated in Singapore, was developed and thrived under British colonialism, and in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, was affluent and one of the most cosmopolitan cities in Southeast Asia. Below, I attempt to contextualize colonial cosmopolitanism by exploring and discussing some of the different and dynamic situations of cosmopolitanism found in the *Peranakan* world and Southeast Asia.

### 3.0 Colonial Cosmopolitanism in the *Peranakan* World and Southeast Asia

According to historian, Wang Gungwu, the *Peranakan* phenomenon was a product of colonization which he calls a “proto-national community that was to have an influence on Chinese notions of state and nation”. He argues that it was the first Chinese community to be given a distinct identity under Dutch and British colonialism and that the *Peranakan* Chinese felt the impact of national interests before the Chinese in China became cognizant of the idea of nationhood (2010: 15). Kwa Chong Guan argues that British colonialism particularly in Singapore, provided the *Peranakan* Chinese with opportunities to accumulate wealth and establish leadership in the Chinese community and colony. He writes that “the Straits-born Chinese rose to positions of influence and power within the Chinese community because they were compradors and collaborators of the British” (2010: 50). Farish Noor, a political scientist and historian of Southeast Asia, explained that *Peranakan* cultures emerged out of a particular context, which is colonialism (Portuguese, Dutch and British) and that the history of Southeast Asia is about fluid borders and overlapping communities.<sup>vi</sup> The cosmopolitanism of the *Peranakan* world was very much entwined, even facilitated by colonialism. The *Peranakan* culture indeed flourished and peaked with colonialism.

In *Ethnicities, Diasporas and ‘Grounded’ Cosmopolitanisms in Asia*, Joel S. Kahn writes that

Rather than importing ‘western’ universalizing models, then, perhaps there are or have been local or regional cosmopolitan models to be rediscovered, or practices to be celebrated and encouraged. Historically, after all, Southeast Asia has arguably been the most cosmopolitan regions of the world. (2004: 2-3).

In another book, *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World*, Kahn explores the hybrid, fluid, overlapping and cosmopolitanism nature of the Malay world, particularly focusing on the late colonial period of British Malaya. He argues that Singapore was pivotal to the development of Malay nationalism: “Singapore (and not Kuala Lumpur) was the commercial, political, religious and cultural/intellectual hub of the modern Malay World” (2006: xvi). Kahn captures the commerce, migration, settlement, diasporic and cosmopolitan nature of Peninsular “Malay(s)i’a”. In his engaging chapter, “Universalism, Hybridity, Cosmopolitanism”, he explains that hybridity is at the heart of Malay culture and contentiously expounds:

Although it will doubtless scandalise Malay cultural purists to suggest it, surely Malay culture, at least as it has evolved over the last century, is the ultimate *peranakan* culture. This is literally the case for the descendants born in Peninsular Malaya and of the large numbers of other Malays who came to the Peninsular from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards from insular Southeast Asia. Although they were never called *peranakan*, the term is entirely appropriate to describe them. If, moreover, the meaning of *peranakan* is pushed beyond its literal meaning, to take in connotations of hybridity and cultural flux, then Malay-ness might be described as *peranakan* culture par excellence (2006: 170).

This hybrid, overlapping, fluid and “*peranakan*” nature of the Malay archipelago and Southeast Asia lends to cosmopolitan tendencies. Peter Lee further argues that cosmopolitanism is inherent in the hybrid cultures of the *Peranakan* world. He captures the interconnected, fluid, overlapping and hybrid nature of cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia (2014: 34-79).

In a more specific 20<sup>th</sup> century context of Penang, Su Lin Lewis explores cosmopolitanism through the idea of the modern girl. She argues that “in multicultural, port-city environments such as Penang, the Modern Girl was central to a discourse of ‘cosmopolitanism’” (2009: 1385). She discusses how modern feminism takes form in countries such as Japan, China, India and Africa through “cosmopolitan modernity”; and argues that “Nowhere were the confluences of these processes with local cultural dynamics felt more acutely than in the cosmopolitan port-cities of empire”, where the “network of local, diasporic, national and imperial affiliations that made them impossible to define through any one homogenizing concept of race and nation” (2009: 1388). These networks of trade and immigration linked cities such as Cape Town, Colombo, Calcutta, Rangoon, Singapore and Shanghai, and as we can see, colonialism facilitated cosmopolitanism.

According to Lewis, Penang and Singapore were sister cities and both had many similarities (2009: 1389-1390). Both were thriving and vibrant colonial cities. Her conception of cosmopolitanism is based on the global and local, which she describes as “double consciousness” that is afforded through the experience of modernity—a connectedness through the spread of modern education, print-culture, cinema and technology. Jan van der Putten writing about the *bangsawan* in Indonesia and the Malay world in the late 1800s, explains that the technology of the steam engine gave easy access and travel in Southeast Asia, which contributed much to the development of “cosmopolitan centres strewn along the coasts of the colonial empire” (2014: 268). The “double consciousness” Lewis speaks of, is indeed, a complex experience living in a multicultural society like Penang and Singapore, in which the individual draws upon and reshapes his/her experience through cross-cultural exchanges in a dynamic public sphere that recognizes vitality, elasticity and diversity of culture as part of a universal, humanist tradition (2009: 1392).

In the realm of photography, Karen Strassler studied the cosmopolitanism trends in Indonesia in the 1950s. She noted that *Peranakan* Chinese<sup>vii</sup> Indonesian amateurs, studio photographers and Javanese elite (aristocracy) acted as cultural brokers mediating global currents, such as developing and expanding a network of international amateur photography clubs and exhibitions;<sup>viii</sup> and reworking colonial-era conventions to forge new national visual idioms employing preindustrial landscapes of volcanic grandeur, terraced rice fields, coconut trees and buffalo boys (2008: 396-403). In this context, Lewis’s idea of “double consciousness” is evident. According to Strassler, “these scenes are embedded in the local spaces and sociality of the city, yet both are zones of translocal imagining where technology connects people to the temporal and geographic “beyond””, and she argues that this contributes to how Indonesians envision what it is to belong to this newly formed nation (2008: 396). Lewis and Strassler were exploring two different contexts of cosmopolitan modernity. Strassler further argues that these images transformed specific people and places into universalizing idioms of pictorial art, which became a currency enabling global exchange and cosmopolitan connections that also contributed to Indonesia as a nation (2008: 396).

Finally, Jean Duruz and Khoo Gaik Cheng’s recent book, *Eating Together: Food, Space and Identity in Malaysia and Singapore*, looks at a more contemporary scene of how eating together in these two Southeast Asian countries is a cosmopolitan affair—they use the leitmotif of *rojak* (a local salad in shrimp paste) to exemplify the cosmopolitan mix of cultures in the two countries. Under the section, “Tasting The Cosmopolis”, they very eloquently write:

“Eating together-in-difference,” however, is hardly a panacea for countering fears of national instability and for achieving interethnic sociability. We are acutely conscious that the celebratory hype surrounding support of hybridity or plural identity is too easily co-opted and commodified by state policies of multiculturalism and tourism and by empty national unity slogans like “1Malaysia.” Nevertheless, we are curious to explore how banal cultural pluralism, hybridity, and transethnic solidarities play out their scripts in food interactions in public eating places, virtual spaces on the Internet, and in relation to popular cultural forms, like the Mandarin television series *The Little Nyonya* (2015: 21).

They see the cosmopolitan subject as firmly rooted in local tensions and struggles—dynamics of Lewis’s concept of “double consciousness”; not so much the globalized, “one-world” view that contemporary cosmopolitan discourse is preoccupied with (2015: 21). The most relevant chapter is, “*The Little Nyonya* and the Peranakan Chinese Identity: Between Commodification and Cosmopolitanism”. According to them, “Peranakan Chinese identity constitutes a body or archive of past cosmopolitan possibilities that are the result of historical, cultural and ethnic mixing”; from Malay, Thai (especially with Penang *Peranakans*), Arab, Portuguese, just to name a few (2015: 151). They argue that such a hybrid culture continues to provide a contemporary cosmopolitan space. They further argue that *The Little Nyonya* struggles between issues of commodification and cosmopolitanism—raising questions of representation, authenticity, (re)packaging

(Chineseness) and the fetishization of ‘brand *Peranakan*’. All these are particularly played up in Singapore, and according to them, *Peranakan* Chinese culture has become the perfect synecdoche for Singaporean national identity (2015: 154). They conclude that “In the end, *The Little Nyonya* is a popular commercial product that reflects current Singaporean society, mainstream attitudes toward gender, and a pragmatic developmentalist imperative for survival” (2015: 169)

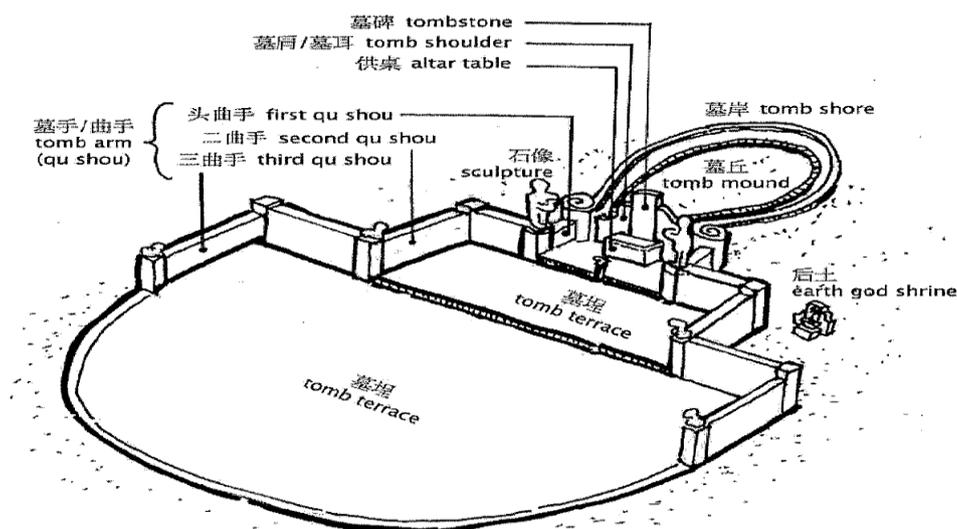
Cosmopolitanism, therefore, becomes layered and more complex in our postcolonial and postmodern world, particularly with the capabilities and capacities of modern media—that recreates and reconstructs *Peranakan* identity that is currently enjoying a vibrant revival (particularly in Singapore). As we have seen above, in a variety of locations in Southeast Asia that indeed there are many local or regional cosmopolitan models to be rediscovered, celebrated and encouraged as Kahn has incisively put it.

#### 4.0 BUKIT BROWN - COSMOPOLITAN GRAVE ART

Given the context of the colonial cosmopolitan *Peranakan* world, I will now focus on the grave art found at Bukit Brown cemetery, which illustrates adaptability and hybridity. This I argue, is made possible by colonial cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitan modernity, which exemplifies “double consciousness”.

##### 4.1 A Chinese Façade

The basic tomb at Bukit Brown Cemetery would consist of a tombstone, tomb shoulders at either side of the tombstone, followed by the tomb arms. A simple, basic tomb will have a pair of tomb arms, but a grand tomb may have more than three tomb arms. Behind the tombstone is an omega sign shaped tomb mound and the tomb shore lies outside the tomb mound. In front of tombstone is the altar table and in front of the altar table, the tomb terrace(s). In general, the number of tomb terraces is dictated by the number of tomb arms. By the side, on the left of the tomb, usually sits the earth god shrine.



#### ELEMENTS OF A NANYANG TOMB

drawn: c.k. lai, 4 jan 2012

Figure 1: Elements of a Nanyang Tomb

Traditionally, information of the deceased and their descendants are usually inscribed on the tomb in Chinese characters. But later, English replaced Chinese, and there are tombs at Bukit Brown where details are spelt out in English of the Hokkien dialect, which only attests the fluid and hybrid nature of different influences and practices that change and are adapted. According to Elizabeth McKenzie, “Symbols used by the Chinese are not merely decorative. Their purpose is also to increase the possibilities of a happy and wealthy life” (2011: 77); and in the case of the dead, these auspicious sentiments are meant for the living descendants or for the afterlife of the dead.<sup>ix</sup>

As the *Peranakan* Chinese is a diasporic and ethnically mixed group, we can see from the Chinese façade how they are holding on to their Chinese identity; and in death, they were returning to their Chinese roots.

But other influences have crept into the grave art (that will become more apparent later). Colourful majolica tiles are prevalent in the tombs of Bukit Brown, which are not as evident in the cemeteries of Malaysia. I believe this is because Singapore was the most cosmopolitan colonial city at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to McKenzie, these tiles are an English phenomenon and they represented wealth and stature in Asia (2011: 92).



Figure 2: Tomb Decorated with Majolica (*Peranakan*) Tiles

#### 4.2 (*European*) Majolica (*Peranakan*) Tiles

A thriving tile industry in Europe can be traced back to the sixteenth century in the Netherlands and it found its way to England around 1630. Majolica tiles became creatively fashionable in the 1880s and 1890s (Austwicks, 1980:79). According to a tile collector in Singapore, majolica tiles were still popular with graves at Bukit Brown until the 1950s. When Europe's tile industry went into decline, Japan started producing and supplying majolica tiles; but its quality was not comparable. These Japanese majolica tiles were a cheaper and easier alternative to the traditional Chinese materials used such as the cumbersome stone reliefs and carvings (Tsai: 113).

The adoption of majolica tiles on the graves of Bukit Brown stems from similar reasons—its availability and accessibility which soon came to replace the cumbersome and expensive Chinese stone carvings. But aside from the pervasive use of majolica tiles, tiles painted with Chinese scenery can also be found (McKenzie 2011: 93); it cannot be ascertained if these particular tiles came from China, but the cosmopolitan mix of aesthetics is clear.

#### 4.3 (*Sikh*) Guards

According to Lai in his lecture<sup>x</sup> on the material culture of Bukit Brown, he showed how tombs at Bukit Brown have evolved, been adapted and localized. Lai used Taiwanese tombs as a point of reference for Hokkien tombs in the Nanyang, explaining that human figures will usually guard and are positioned closest to the tomb, followed by animals and finally a pair of “pen” like pillars depending on one's social status. But McKenzie also notes the European influence of a grave where the Golden Lad and Jade Maiden have adapted European features—angel's wings and are erotically and scantily clad; yet the tomb was also expertly carved, with heavy reliefs of Chinese symbols and motifs (2011: 74-75).

But the most unique guards found in the Straits Settlements tombs are the Sikh guards and some of these statues are life-size. McKenzie describes them as representing loyalty and security (2011: 88-89). Amarjit Kaur explains that Sikh migration to Southeast Asia was a consequence of European imperialism. The British-sponsored deployment of auxiliary forces was because the British saw the Sikhs as a “martial race” (2011: 17; Arunajeet Kaur, 2011: 1-3). The Sikh community in Malaya is the largest in Southeast Asia with an estimated number of 120,000; and 12,500 in Singapore. Sikhs were soon also recruited as policemen in the other Malay states (2011: 30-32).

In Arunajeet Kaur's discussion of “The “Martial” Sikh Soldier/Policeman”, she constructs this as a subaltern colonized subject; arguing that the stereotyping of the Sikhs as a “martial race” upholds the colonial structures of power. They soon uniquely replaced the Chinese guards, which is probably the best example of “double consciousness”—whereby local realities and circumstances have given birth to something that is unique to the Straits Settlements. Sikh guards in the Straits Settlements exemplify what Kahn observes of Malaya—a place where local peoples and immigrants meet and interact (2006: 174).



Figure 3: Sikh Guards

#### 4.4 The Tomb of a Cosmopolite – Ong Sam Leong (1857-1918) <sup>xi</sup>



Figure 4: Tomb of Ong Sam Leong

Overgrown and lost for many years, the tomb of Ong Sam Leong was only discovered in 2006. This tomb that houses Ong and his wife occupies a plot of 600 square meters, is replete with majolica tiles, and stands as the largest grave at Bukit Brown.<sup>xii</sup> There are moats 15 meters long that apparently the caretakers used to swim in. Ong was a prominent *Peranakan* Chinese businessman.

Colonial cosmopolitanism can be seen in Ong Sam Leong's life and grave. His business ventures across the Straits Settlements (brickworks and plantations) to the Christmas Island (Phosphate Company); Ong's sons who were proprietors of one of the first amusement parks in Singapore and Southeast Asia; the elaborate grave art of his tomb at Bukit Brown (the fact that the name of the original British owner of the land has been retained and prefixed with the Malay word); and the various explorations of cosmopolitanism that I have discussed found in the *Peranakan* world and Southeast Asia, only illustrate the interconnectedness, fluid and overlapping nature of the varied and dynamic 'worlds' of Southeast Asia—what Kahn calls the interstitial linguistic. These complex networks of trade, technology and migration; the mingling of Europeans, immigrants and merchants; the birth of the notion of *Peranakan* are all made possible by colonialism (as Kwa 2010, Lee 2014, Noor 2014 and Wang 2010, argue in their work). Colonial cosmopolitanism underpins the *Peranakan* world, which is evident in the grave art at Bukit Brown—from its Chinese ethos of ornate Chinese carvings, and basic form and structure of the tombs; to majolica tiles made available by the trade and industrial revolution in Britain; the imprint of the Sikh guards on the cultural consciousness of the Straits Settlements; and the commercial opportunities afforded and wealth accumulated by the *Peranakan* Chinese made possible through British colonialism and development, which

are all realities of the cosmopolitan modernity in the Straits Settlements. “Double consciousness” is inherent and the basis of the mindset of the *Peranakan* world that embraces the local and global—such are the complex experiences and influences of living in multicultural Southeast Asia, where we draw upon and reshape our experiences through cross-cultural exchanges in a dynamic public sphere that recognizes vitality, elasticity and diversity of cultures (Lewis, 2009, 1392).

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<sup>1</sup> Volunteers of Bukit Brown are endearing called “brownies”—they tirelessly conduct weekly tours of Bukit Brown (estimated to have brought 10,000 people through); have organized public exhibitions and lectures to breed awareness and appreciation (and lobby against government encroachment). They also help descendants locate graves, track the material culture of the

tomb designs, and trace genealogies and histories of the deceased, exploring broader contexts of their lives (Pang and Liew 2014: 88).

<sup>ii</sup> *Peranakan*, which means “locally born” is a problematic notion. It has been taken to refer to descendants of intermarriages of other ethnic groups and local women. The largest *Peranakan* group in Malaya are the *Peranakan* Chinese. However, there are the *Peranakan* Indians, who are also known as *Chetti Melaka* (whose religious orientation is Hinduism) and the *Jawi Peranakans* (who are Muslims); and the Eurasians are considered *Peranakan* as well. The very notion of *Peranakan* would mean any offspring of intermarriages with the local; however, the word has come to describe communities that have developed, adapted and acculturated Malay and European influences. Recent offsprings of intermarriages with the local are not typically described as *Peranakan*. *Peranakan* cultures are understood to be hybrid cultures that have developed in the last 500-600 years in the Malay Archipelago. In this paper, when I speak of the *Peranakan* world, I am not only referring to the *Peranakan* Chinese but all *Peranakan* groups.

<sup>iii</sup> McKenzie has written Ong Chong Chew. But a brownie, who is part of the documentation team and researching genealogies of the pioneers buried at Bukit Brown Cemetery, has corrected me that it is Ong Cheng Chew. I have, therefore, written Ong Cheng Chew in the main text.

<sup>iv</sup> According to a brownie, more recently Dr Hui Yew Fong has made a statistical study and 4153 graves will be affected (this has not yet been published).

<sup>v</sup> Professor Lai Chee Kien, who is part of the documentation team for Bukit Brown, has intimated during his lecture at the Malaysian Heritage and History Club in Malacca (19 March 2014) that Chinese experts from China have declared Bukit Brown Cemetery as a national treasure, which sadly the Singapore government is destroying.

<sup>vi</sup> Noor expounds this at the first *Peranakan* Indian symposium, entitled: *The Lost Tribe of Chetti Melaka—Who are We?*, (4 October 2014) held at the Asian Civilisation Museum (Singapore).

<sup>vii</sup> Their orientations to the “modern beyond” were less Euro-focused and realized more in the pan-Asian diasporic community of overseas Chinese (2008: 406).

<sup>viii</sup> Singapore and Hong Kong became pan-Asian centres of modernity, the capitals of the Asian overseas community which shaped the aesthetics of Indonesian photography. The earliest photographic organization in Singapore was established in 1887 (2008: 408).

<sup>ix</sup> The Bukit Brown website (<http://bukitbrown.com/main/>) explores Chinese myths and motifs depicted on the tombstone.

<sup>x</sup> This lecture is available online (accessed 11 July 2015: <http://nusmuseum.blogspot.com/2012/06/recap-lai-chee-kiens-material-culture.html>).

<sup>xi</sup> The very first book reading at Bukit Brown was held at this tomb on 27 July 2013 of John Hunt’s book, *Suffering through Strength - The Men Who Made Christmas Island*. This brilliant idea was organized by the brownies and the Singapore Heritage Society (Rojak Librarian, accessed 11 July 2015: <http://mymindisrojak.blogspot.com/2013/07/book-reading-at-ong-sam-leongs-tomb.html>).

<sup>xii</sup> Although Ong’s grave is the largest at Bukit Brown, informants have told me that it is only average size. There were apparently larger graves in Singapore that have been exhumed and destroyed. Evidences of larger graves of the *Peranakan* Chinese found in Malacca and Penang suggest that the information from my informants are true.