

Singapore Management University

Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

Research Collection School of Social Sciences

School of Social Sciences

7-2021

Balancing sustainable development and cultural heritage preservation: Luxury burial legacies in Singapore

David OCON

Singapore Management University, davidocon@smu.edu.sg

Follow this and additional works at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soss_research



Part of the [Asian Studies Commons](#), and the [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#)

Citation

1

This Journal Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Social Sciences at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Collection School of Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email cheryl@smu.edu.sg.

Balancing sustainable development and cultural heritage preservation: luxury burial legacies in Singapore

Luxury burial legacies in Singapore

David Ocón
*School of Social Sciences,
Singapore Management University, Singapore*

Received 18 August 2020
Revised 27 March 2021
Accepted 18 June 2021

Abstract

Purpose – The paper aims to provide up-to-date analysis on how a country like Singapore, with a rich tangible and intangible cultural heritage associated with burial customs, approaches heritage preservation while ensuring modernisation and sustainable growth.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is an exploratory analysis of the association between cultural heritage preservation, particularly the one associated with elaborate burials, and the need for modernisation in Singapore. It mainly uses desk research tools, fieldwork and interviews with death services providers to build a set of conclusions. It employs a historical review approach and uses comparative analyses with other countries in the Asian region to substantiate the arguments.

Findings – The paper provides insights about how, since its independence, Singapore has switched to pragmatic models of growth and development which imply maximising the limited space available, often at the cost of precious cultural heritage. The rapid development has had a significant impact on the country's burial customs and legacies, particularly on elaborate graves and tombs, which traditionally use a considerable amount of space. The analysis concludes that Singapore is in the constant challenge of exploring alternative ways of handling death and its ramifications.

Originality/value – This paper presents a new outlook on the relationship between the preservation of the tangible and intangible cultural heritage associated with death practices and a sustainable approach to modernisation in the context of Singapore.

Keywords Singapore heritage, Cultural heritage management, Burial customs and legacies, Sustainable development, Space management, Cultural heritage preservation

Paper type Research paper

Introduction: *Space + Death = Luxury?*

According to French writer Georges Bataille, “of all conceivable luxuries, death, in its fatal and inexorable form, is undoubtedly the most costly” (Bataille, 1988). Death as the most luxurious exudation of a person's excess of energy, employed to elevate life to higher complexity. Death as a “waste”, the ultimate luxury. Bataille's metaphysical proposal can be simplified with the following equation: *Death = Luxury*. This paper adds another variable to the equation: *Space*. Space and its relationship with death has been a recurrent theme in urban studies research in the last two decades. As cities worldwide expand, they often appropriate and engulf spaces traditionally reserved for other uses, such as recreation and agriculture. In addition, deathscapes -the growth, planning and management of landscapes of death-, and the suitability of allocating urban land for cemeteries and columbaria, appear regularly in this field's literature (Coutts *et al.*, 2011; Hariyono, 2015; Davies and Bennett, 2015, 2016, 2016). These debates are particularly prolific in the Asian urban context, where death practices have evolved rapidly, predominantly with a growing shift from grave burials to cremations and columbaria, and most recently to alternative forms of funerals such as sea, woodland and



parkland burials (Kong, 1999, 2012; Teather, 2001; Teather *et al.*, 2001; Tan and Yeoh, 2002; Tremlett, 2007; Tan, 2011; Aveline-Dubach, 2012). In large and densely populated Asian cities such as Taipei, Hong Kong, Singapore and in several mainland China cities, this debate acquires an extra dimension: the space available is so limited, and it is often so tightly controlled that government authorities have frequently opted to divest deathscapes from their exclusivity as places for eternal rest, praying and recollection, availing them instead to development needs (Yeoh, 1991; Teather, 1998), at times labelling them as major space-wasting places (Yeoh and Tan, 1995). Space is at a premium, and authorities have often adopted a pragmatic view towards burial practices, one in which development and progress (for the living) are prioritised. In today's Asian urban context, *Space + Death* continues to equal *Luxury* (see Plates 1–9).

This paper also approaches the relationship between death and luxury from an objective perspective, one that involves measuring the costs in pure and simple monetary terms: *How much are we willing to pay for a final resting place? How far are we willing to go to ensure a dignified resting place, one that can be visited and admired by others? Can we make sure that a life of wealth has a parallel when death knocks at our door?* This investigation explores the association between elaborate burials and eternal rest and examines the implications of their relationship in the context of a land-deprived country like Singapore, which today continues to face the challenges of balancing modernisation with respect for burial customs and cultural heritage in a sustainable manner. To investigate these challenges, the paper employs a historical review approach and uses comparative analyses with countries in Asia to substantiate arguments. In addition, the data-collection methodology includes field visits to endangered death spaces and interviews with death services providers in Singapore.

Grandeur for the forever after

Becker (1973, 1975) argued that people counter their fear of death by creating a cultural worldview, which gives meaning and order to the world. Faced with the idea of death, people tend to seek attachment and comfort in perceived precious material possessions. In a related experiment, Mandel and Heine (1999) demonstrated that people who are thinking about their deaths are likely to be more interested in purchasing luxury items, such as high-end cars or prestigious watches. In this context, it is not surprising that when affluent people design their death's paraphernalia, settle on expensive funerals and burials for their lives' endings, with their bodies, more often than not, resting in costly tomb sites: luxurious looking shrines to commemorate lives of luxury. This has been a trend since antiquity. In ancient Egypt, pharaohs ordered erect imposing memorials for their transition to the afterlife. The complex of pyramids in the *Giza Necropolis* in Cairo and the temples at the *Valley of Kings* in Luxor are surviving examples. Pharaohs, their families and people of higher status in the Egyptian society of the 3rd and 2nd millennia B.C. were buried surrounded by riches and treasures (Grajetzki, 2003). In China, Qin Shi Huangdi, founder of the Qin dynasty and first emperor of unified China in 220 B.C., built a magnificent mausoleum for his eternal rest. It contained chariots with horses, thousands of real bronze weapons and more than eight thousand life-like, actual size statues of terracotta warriors tasked to protect the emperor from evil spirits. The emperor was buried inside a tomb that included replicas of palaces, rare utensils and beautiful objects, and channels made with Mercury to represent China's rivers (Man, 2007; Wood, 2008). India's *Taj Mahal* is a magnificent ivory-white marble mausoleum built in 1,631 by the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahān to mark his wife Mumtāz's death. The *Taj Mahal* is an architectural wonder with precious and semi-precious gemstones inlaid into the intricately carved marble panels that serve as walls, designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site for being "the jewel of Muslim art in India and one of the universally admired masterpieces of the world's heritage" (UNESCO, 2018).

Not only rulers, emperors and kings marked their departure, or that of their love-ones, with magnificent tombs, shrines and mausoleums. Traditionally, wealthy, influential and powerful people choose elaborate burial sites for their eternal rest. Churches and cemeteries in Europe, for instance, are filled with shrines honouring their lives. The gothic *Westminster Abbey* in London is the traditional coronation and wedding Church for the British royalty and the final resting place of its monarchs. Though at first, *Westminster Abbey* was the burial place of kings, aristocrats and monks, it soon became one of Britain's most noteworthy honours to be buried or commemorated there (Dunton, 1896). Generals, admirals, politicians and scientists such as Isaac Newton and Charles Darwin were interred at Westminster and poets and writers like Geoffrey Chaucer, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy and Rudyard Kipling. Likewise, in London, the *Highgate Cemetery*, since its opening in 1838, became home to world leaders, wealthy and famous people. One of the cemetery's most notable occupants is Karl Marx, whose grave is marked with an enormous bust. In Italy, Palermo's *Capuchin Monastery* catacombs, excavated by its monks in the 16th century below the original cemetery, is an example of an unusual, luxurious burying tradition. The Capuchin monks mummified the dead bodies, dressed them up in everyday clothing and then put them on display on the monastery walls. With generous donations, wealthy citizens and rich celebrities would ask to be preserved in specific clothing or have the clothes changed regularly. To be entombed in the monastery became a "status symbol, a way to preserve status and dignity even in death" (Palermo Catacombs, 2019).

Many cities worldwide also pride themselves in having scenic sanctuaries home to elaborate graves. Paris's sprawling *Cimetière du Père Lachaise* contains graves around cobblestoned walkaways and tree-lined promenades. Its elegant mausoleums include those of famous literary figures such as Molière, Marcel Proust and Oscar Wilde. Buenos Aires's *Cementerio de La Recoleta* is one of the city's top tourist attractions. It is full of impressive sculptures, marble sarcophagi, as well as art deco, art nouveau, baroque and neo-gothic shrines and mausoleums, including those of Eva Perón and former Argentinian president Bartolomé Mitre. In Sydney, *Waverley Cemetery*, situated on top of a cliff overlooking the South Pacific Ocean, is filled with luxuriously crafted Victorian and Edwardian monuments, and its occupants enjoy endless vistas. New York's Brooklyn rolling hills are home to *Green-Wood Cemetery* that, with ponds, lakes and views of the Manhattan skyline, is used as a recreational space and a popular tourist destination.

Singapore constitutes one of the exceptions to the trend outlined above. In this densely populated city state (above 8,000 people per sq. km in 2020), home to almost 6 million inhabitants living in an area of 720 km², space is such a highly sought and monitored commodity that often even the wealthiest of people need to settle for basic end of life abodes. There is no doubt that contemporary Singapore can be labelled as a luxurious destination: for several years in a row, it has held the title of the world's most expensive place for expatriates according to The Economist's *Worldwide Cost of Living Report* (The Economist, 2017a) [1]; it ranks second in the world in the list of countries by GDP (PPP) per capita, only behind Luxemburg (International Monetary Fund, 2020); due to import duties and regulatory taxes, it is Asia's most expensive city to purchase a luxury car, with a cost 30% higher than in Shanghai, almost double than in Hong Kong and Taipei, and nearly triple than in Tokyo; having a fine degustation dinner in Singapore averages \$293, which makes it the second most expensive upmarket dining experience in Asia; in terms of prime-market property cost, Singapore positions in third place, only behind Hong Kong and Tokyo (Julius Bär, 2020); according to Forbes, the market for luxury boats and high-speed motor yacht has been soaring in the last few years (Barker, 2017), and a recent RHB Bank research has shown that Singapore has ASEAN's highest concentration of retail space, 1.08 sqm per capita (RHB, 2017), that is one mall for every 53,000 people; with regards to the number of millionaires and multi-millionaires residing in the country, in several studies performed in the last five years,

Singapore consistently ranked top 10 worldwide ([The Guardian, 2013](#); [Spear's Magazine-Wealth Insight, 2016](#); [Compelo, 2017](#)) [2].

However, while Singapore tops many of the ranking indicators for luxury, a life of indulgences does not necessarily mean deluxe graves, mausoleums or shrines. A total of 21,446 people passed away in Singapore in 2019 ([Singapore Department of Statistics, 2020](#)), with an average funeral cost of S\$7,775 ([Funeral Arrangements Guide, 2018](#)). In this land-scarce country, the commonly longed dream of “purchasing of a space” for the eternal rest ([Mehta, 1999](#), p. 261) is today a challenge.

Land shortage and shrinking burial grounds

For most of its short history as a nation, Singapore has had to make challenging decisions regarding the use of its limited land. When in need of space to construct roads, housing facilities and other developments, few buildings, structures and natural areas are spared to provide for the new demands. Religious buildings such as churches, synagogues, temples and mosques are also subjected to demolition and relocation. They are treated as any other building that may come in the way of development and resettlement [3]. In some exceptional cases, religious buildings may be considered to be of outstanding historic, architectural or artistic value, and, instead of demolition or relocation, they are gazetted as national monuments by the *National Heritage Board* (NHB) [4]. Since 1973, when eight structures were designated, 31 religious buildings (twelve Christian structures, ten temples, six mosques, two synagogues and one shrine) have been safeguarded from development ([IRCC, 2018](#)). However, religious places not deemed historically and architecturally significant are not preserved, even if they are recognised as sacred spaces ([Kong, 2003](#), p. 357). As such, no burial ground or cemetery has been designated as a national monument.

The word “cemetery”, from the Greek word *κοιμητήριον*, which literally means, “sleeping place”, suggests that the land is specifically designated as a burial ground, which typically uses a considerable amount of space. Some cemeteries, particularly older ones, are located in premium and highly sought after land ([Capels and Senville, 2006](#)), which is often subjected to redevelopment. Choa Chu Kang Cemetery (CCKC) is Singapore’s biggest cemetery and currently its only public cemetery in operation. This 1.29 km² state-owned cemetery contains over 200,000 graves and comprises Chinese, Christian, Ahmadiyya Jama’at, Muslim, Parsi, Bahá’í, Jewish, Hindu and Lawn cemeteries. So precious is the land in today’s Singapore that at CCKC the space allocated for individual graves is on an “on lease” basis, limited to 15 years, following which the deceased’s remains are unearthened. If the religion of the deceased permits cremation, the remains are incinerated and stored in columbaria niches. Otherwise, if compulsory burial is required due to religious reasons (such as in Judaism and Islam), the deceased will be re-interred in smaller plots ([NEA, 2018d](#)) [5]. As early as 1965, the year of Singapore’s independence, cemeteries were identified as land “considered available for development” ([Singapore Planning Department, 1967](#), p. 11). In 1972, the government made it clear that it would close all cemeteries near and around the city area to “conserve land” ([Singapore Parliamentary Debates, 1972](#)). And in 1978, it stressed that to maximise the use of the scarce and valuable land available, privately owned burial grounds should be cleared to accommodate “the needs and pace of national development” ([Kong and Yeoh, 2003](#), p. 57). In the handling of burial grounds in Singapore, pragmatism was emphasised, as was the fact that no religion was exempt ([Kong, 2002](#), p. 1577).

Destruction of cultural heritage: splendid graves and shrines

Since independence, the clearance of old cemeteries, exhumation of graves and relocation of the remains has been one of Singapore’s preferred methods to allow space for development ([Mates, 2005](#)) [6]. In the last two decades, the total or partial dismantlement of several old/non-operative public cemeteries was in the spotlight, with controversies that crisscrossed issues

such as progress, urban planning, sustainable development, memory-shaping, identity-building and the right to rest in peace (Ocón, 2018). *Bukit Brown Cemetery* (BBC) is one of the largest and most prominent of those cemeteries. It started as a private cemetery for the She Ong Kongsí, a Hokkien clan community that, from the 1870s, used the property for burials. The government acquired the land and, in 1922, opened a public cemetery for the broader Chinese community (Tsang, 2007). It ceased operation in 1973, but it still contains many of the country's pioneers in more than 100,000 tombs, making it the largest Chinese cemetery outside China (Lim, 2012).

Today, BBC still hosts some of Singapore's most elaborate tomb sites as some of its residents settled in ample and luxurious looking graves for their eternal rest. Ong Sam Leong, for instance, was a successful businessman who, by the time of his death in 1918, had built up a fortune by being the sole supplier of labour (coolies) to the phosphate mines of Christmas Island. He and his wife rest today in the cemetery's largest tomb site, on its tallest hill and covering an area of 600 sqm. The burial ground was designed on *feng shui* principles to ensure prosperity for future generations; it has a tiled courtyard in front of the tomb and a surrounding moat once filled with fish. The tomb site contains 24 stories of filial piety, a virtue espoused by Confucius, carved onto the tomb's panels.



Source(s): David Ocón (2021)

Plate 1.
Ong Sam Leong's
tomb site

Tan Ean Kiam's tomb site is also an imposing and well-kept one. Tan was born in Fujian, China, and moved to Singapore in 1899. A successful businessman, he amassed a substantial fortune. In addition to his business activities, Tan was a philanthropist and an active local community leader and advocated for social causes related to China. After he died in 1943, a foundation was established in his name to provide welfare services. Beneficiaries include the *National Kidney Foundation* and the *Lee Kuan Yew Scholarship Fund* (Tong, 2006). Tan's grave contains an engraved self-composed epitaph written in Chinese that when translated reads as:

No need to bury me in my hometown
For the same quilt will have the same dream
Just bury me and let me have a deep sleep
For when you close the coffin lid, that will be my abode



Plate 2.
Tan Ean Kiam's
tomb site

Source(s): David Ocón (2021)

BBC also contains the graves of many other prominent pioneers, among them: Lee Hoon Leong, Singapore's founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's grandfather; Chew Boon Lay, a successful businessman who today has a housing estate and a metro station named after him; Gan Eng Seng, a businessman and generous philanthropist; Tan Lark Sye, entrepreneur and co-founder of Nanyang University; and Chew Joo Chiat, a prominent businessman who owned most of the land surrounding today's Joo Chiat Road. However, these and the other tomb sites in BBC may disappear soon as the cemetery and its surrounding land is slated for redevelopment into a new housing estate and a metro station. In the first phase, an eight-lane road was completed in 2018 over parts of the cemetery to cater to increased traffic and ease congestion in the area ([Singapore Government, 2011a](#)) [7]. This meant the exhumation of close to 4,000 graves. Oon Chim Neo's grave was one of the first ones to go. Oon, one of the first Chinese ladies in Singapore to receive Western education, had an impressive tomb (16 by 24 m) erected by her son. Her grave was one of the largest and most striking on BBC.



Plate 3.
Oon Chim Neo's
tomb site

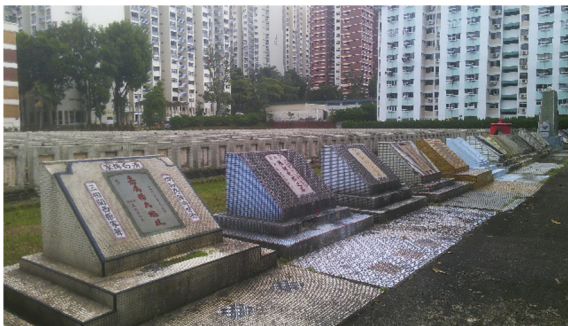
Source(s): The Bukit Brown Documentation Project (2012)

When Oon passed away in 1917 at the age of 31, she was given an impressive funeral, as recorded by the local newspapers: “the coffin, [. . .] was covered with ‘Kuantah’, Chinese silk and embroidered coverings.” ([The Straits Times, 1917](#)); it was borne to the burial ground preceded by a long procession of banners, paper figures and men carrying wreaths. The wreaths were a mass of beautiful colour, being composed chiefly of mauve orchids, [. . .]. In addition to a Chinese band, there was a Sikh military brass and bagpipe band. . .” ([Malaya Tribune, 1917](#)). Her tomb had many *feng shui* features.

BBC is not the first cemetery to fall victim to urban sprawl in Singapore; many have been cleared and exhumed to allow space for redevelopment [8]. *Bidadari Cemetery*, which served Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Sinhalese communities, had around 143,000 graves, all exhumed to make way for roads, parks, transportation and high-value property facilities due to its city fringe location ([Ong, 2016](#); [Property Guru, 2016](#)) [9]. Many notable people were buried there, including Augustine Podmore Williams, an English sailor whose story inspired Joseph Conrad’s novel *Lord Jim*. In 2017, it was announced that *Choa Chu Kang Cemetery*, the country’s only remaining public cemetery in operation, would have its size cut down by a third to make way for the *Tengah Air Base* expansion, which will cause the progressive exhumation of 80,500 Chinese and Muslim graves ([Singapore Government, 2017](#)).

There are also exceptions [10]. *Kranji State Cemetery*, located in northern Singapore, not far from the border with Malaysia, is a national cemetery reserved for the burial of people who made significant contributions to Singapore. Yusof Ishak and Benjamin Henry Sheares, Singapore’s first and second presidents, are buried there. Also, in Kranji, the *War Cemetery* is the final resting place for Allied soldiers who perished during Second World War in Singapore and other parts of Southeast Asia. After the war, this cemetery gathered most of the war-related graves from different parts of the country and has 4,461 casualties buried or commemorated ([CWGC, 2018](#)) [11]. Contiguous to it, the *Kranji Military Cemetery*, created in 1975, contains 1,422 burial plots.

In addition, a handful of smaller defunct cemeteries survive today. The *Ying Fo Fui Kun* burial ground is a Hakka cemetery built in 1887. It used to cover a vast space, but in the late 1960s, it underwent a severe reduction. Most graves were exhumed, the remains cremated and the ashes placed in urns within smaller, simpler and symmetrical memorial stones, arranged in neat rows. Today, the cemetery rests sandwiched by public housing blocks, car parks buildings, a metro line and a used car dealer.



Source(s): David Ocón (2018)

Plate 4.
Ying Fo Fui Kun
Hakka burial ground

The well-maintained *Japanese Cemetery Park*, located in Hougang, is the largest Japanese cemetery in Southeast Asia. Founded by three Japanese brothel-keepers in 1891 as a burial ground for Japanese women brought to Singapore for prostitution, today it hosts 910

tombstones that also contain the remains of other members of the early Japanese community in Singapore, including civilians, soldiers and 135 condemned war criminals executed at Changi Prison ([Singapore Tourism Board, 2021](#)). The park also holds the ashes of thousands of Japanese soldiers, marines and airmen killed during Second World War.

Several small and scattered Muslim graveyards still dot Singapore's landscape as well. *Keramat Bukit Kasita* is a well-hidden old Muslim graveyard compound in ruins situated on a small hilltop near the public housing flats of *Bukit Purmei*. The graveyard contains about 200 tombs, some of them draped in yellow (representing Malay royalty) and green cloth (the colour of Islam), and is often linked to the Riau-Lingga branch of the Johor Royal Family, and even to Sang Nila Utama, the legendary founder of the "Singapura Kingdom" ([Zaccheus, 2013](#); [Remember Singapore, 2018](#)). The century-old burial ground of *Kubor Kassim* served Javanese, Bugis and Baweanese people, and it is situated alongside Siglap road.

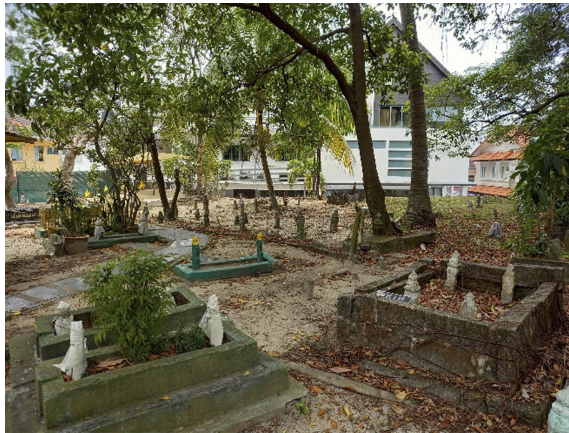


Plate 5.
Kubor Kassim burial
ground

Source(s): David Ocón (2021)

Two of the oldest cemeteries in Singapore, the *Old Muslim Cemetery* and the *Old Malay Cemetery*, separated by a small road, *Jalan Kubor* (grave street), still defy urban growth and development. They can be seen facing busy Victoria Road, near Bugis metro station. Visible too from the main arterial West Coast Highway is *Tanah Kubor Temenggong Johor*, a small unkempt cemetery in a location still owned by the State of Johor and under the sovereignty of Malaysia that also has a mosque and a royal mausoleum, *Makam Diraja Teluk Blangah*, the final resting place of Johor Royal Family descendants.

Contemporary Singapore can be a luxurious location for living. However, with dramatic land shortages and population pressures, even the wealthiest citizens need to settle on time-bound and simple burials. The traditional correlation of luxurious lives ending in luxurious dwellings is becoming a rarity. Apart from that anomaly, in its pragmatic approach to growth and urban development, Singapore has, for decades, sacrificed a significant part of its cultural heritage, the one associated with funerary legacies and death spaces. That heritage includes elaborated and magnificent graves and mausoleums, that beyond their artistic value, encapsulate many mementoes of the pioneers that contributed to building Singapore [12]. This unusual trade exemplifies the challenge experienced by Asian cities such as Singapore to balance the respect for past cultural heritages with practical presents that ensure sustainable, meaningful futures.

Singapore's alternatives to traditional burials

Except for religions that do not permit it, cremation has always been post-independence Singapore's most viable option to handle demises. To encourage the population to adopt this way of handling death, for a period of time, the state employed the help of knowledgeable and respected "funerary middlemen" (caretakers, priests, funeral parlour owners and geomancers) to wear down public distrust of cremation (Yeoh, 1999; Kong and Yeoh, 2003, pp. 63–64; Mates, 2005) [13]. By the 1980s, cremation had been accepted as the "norm" in Singapore (Tan and Yeoh, 2002, p. 11), and columbaria the most popular method of storing ashes.

Today, there are three functioning crematoria in Singapore. *The Mandai Crematorium*, operated by the National Environment Agency (NEA), is the only government facility. The other two crematoria are private and are located at the *Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery*, and at the *Tse Toh Aum Temple*, both in the Bishan district. After cremation, the ashes can be stored at home, in a columbarium or scattered in the sea [14].

There are four public columbaria in Singapore, although only two of them have niches available. *Yishun Columbarium*, which houses 16,000 niches in a building with architecture similar to that of a Chinese temple, has reached full capacity.

Mount Vernon Columbarium, the earliest public columbarium in Singapore, closed in 2017 to allow space for redevelopment. Its niches were housed within blocks with Chinese style green roofs, a nine-storey pagoda-style building, and a two-storey building resembling a



Source(s): David Ocón (2018)

Plate 6.
Nine-storey pagoda at
former Mount Vernon
Columbarium



Source(s): David Ocón (2018)

Plate 7.
View from the top of
the pagoda at former
Mount Vernon
Columbarium

Church. If niches at Mount Vernon remain unclaimed for three years after removal, NEA will scatter the ashes at sea (NEA, 2018a). In pragmatic Singapore, neither cemeteries nor columbaria can guarantee the deceased a truly undisturbed eternal rest; and surely, none is safe from progress and development.

The newer *Choa Chu Kang Columbarium* houses some 147,000 niches and still has niches available. The columbarium is described idyllically as “a clean, quiet and beautifully landscaped environment”, with buildings that “span the entire area like a Chinese fan, achieving maximum natural cross-ventilation and lighting” (NEA, 2018b). The compound resembles a park, with green and quiet surroundings. Lastly, *Mandai Columbarium* houses 133,000 niches, in lush “natural greenery, making it a wonderful final resting place for one’s beloved” (NEA, 2018b).

While these public columbaria do not offer particularly luxurious alternatives to old cemeteries, they have been the preferred option for most locals for decades. Even Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore’s founding Prime Minister, in synchrony with the policies on death championed by his government, chose cremation and placement at the public *Mandai Columbarium* for his eternal rest when he passed away in 2015. In a moving statement revealed by his daughter, Dr Lee Wei Ling, he professed: “For reasons of sentiment, I would like part of my ashes to be mixed up with Mama’s, and both her ashes and mine put side by side in the columbarium. We were joined in life and I would like our ashes to be joined after this life” (Koh, 2015).

However, not all Singaporeans choose government columbaria for their final rest. Over 50 private columbaria functioned in Singapore in 2020. They are operated by a variety of service providers, among them, *the Roman Catholic Church, the Methodist Church, the Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery (KMSPKS), the Wat Ananda Metyarama or the Singapore Soka Association*. There is a significant price difference between niches in government and private columbaria. While a standard single niche in a public columbarium costs S\$500, a basic one at the *All Saints Memorial Chapel* starts at S\$800, at S\$1,400 at the *Spiritual Grace Presbyterian Church’s Spiritual Grace Memorial Garden*, at S\$1,600 at Buddhist KMSPKS Monastery, at S\$2,000 at the Christian *The Garden of Remembrance*, at S\$2,500 with the *Order of Friars Minor*, at S\$3,000 at the *Church of St Francis Xavier* and S\$3,460 at Thai Buddhist Temple *Wat Ananda Metyarama* [15].

Luxurious alternatives to burials: lux, but perhaps not enough?

As seen above, religious groups are commonly the entities offering alternatives to public columbaria. In general, their offer is significantly costlier, although their focus does not

appear to be on providing predominantly lavish-looking options. At Christian's *The Garden of Remembrance*, the most exclusive niches cost up to S\$8,800. These premium niches are just slightly larger than the standard ones, are situated at eye level and have customisable coloured plaques that allow multiple images and inscriptions (*The Garden of Remembrance*, 2017). At the Franciscan columbarium in the Bukit Batok neighbourhood, the most expensive single niches, located at the columbarium's levels 5 and 6, cost S\$6,500 (*Church of St Mary of the Angels*, 2015). *Wat Ananda Metyarama* Thai Buddhist Temple in Bukit Merah neighbourhood also offers premium niches at its columbarium Julamanee Prasat (Palace in Heaven). At the columbarium's level 5, also known as "eye level" due to its location where niches look at as the temple's four Buddha statues eye level, a premium niche costs S\$6,488 (*Wat Ananda Metyarama*, 2018).

These amounts are tenfold or more the cost of a standard niche in a public columbarium and constitute exclusive ash storage alternatives. Regardless of their faith, the religious organisations running these columbaria pride themselves in offering niches designed to guarantee a peaceful retreat and final resting place, suited for prayer, meditation and quiet contemplation for loved ones, aimed at preserving the dignity and solemnity befitting of tradition and practices. In general, these columbaria are relatively spacious, located in tranquil and peaceful settings, and at times surrounded by beautiful landscaping and lush greenery.

However, private foreign providers' arrival seems to be impacting the existence of an otherwise relatively peaceful Singapore afterlife services landscape.

Nirvana Memorial Garden defines itself as "state of the art six-star premium columbarium." Part of a Malaysian conglomerate, the columbarium opened in 2009 and forefronts a new predisposition for premium after-death services for the affluent population in Singapore. It prides itself on presenting an "admirable combination of Chinese culture and modern architecture" with "extremely modern with luxurious facilities" (*Nirvana Memorial Garden*, 2018). To promote its niches, *Nirvana* uses commercial marketing strategies: for instance, in 2016, it launched a promotion where it offered free smartphones for every double niche purchased in its premium suite; it also provides discounts for early buyers, recommending them "to buy now before the rates go too high." Some of the "premiums" offered to include its reputation, location and site selection with good *feng shui*, air-conditioned pavilions and a "comfy and peaceful" ambience. At *Nirvana's* premium block, a double niche cost is more than S\$40,000 (*Nirvana Memorial Garden*, 2018).



Source(s): Cai Yinzhou (2019)



Plate 9.
Nirvana memorial
garden main hall

Source(s): Cai Yinzhou (2019)

Singapore's increasingly more affluent population seems to be demanding this kind of premier bereavement services, which also seems to promise good profits to potential providers (Zaccheus, 2015b). Some of the private local religious groups appear to be riding on this trend. Buddhist KMSPKS *Monastery* also offers premium options. Its columbarium's fifth floor, named *Pu An Ta* or *Hall of Gratitude*, is designed as a "serene and elegant area" for housing niches, supplied with air-conditioned and lift facilities, where families can select the niche's location and design. Even though niches can cost well beyond S\$30,000, most of the sections, notably the most expensive and luxurious ones, have reached full capacity (KMSPKS, 2018).

In general, these exclusive private columbaria respond to society's needs, cater to the increasing demand for upscale niches and count on the government's consent as long as they integrate well into the design of residential estates and fulfil a set of requirements [16]. However, at times, their amalgamation within the housing areas can be problematic. A recent dispute illustrates these challenges. The building of a premium columbarium nestled within a proposed Chinese temple in *Fernvale Lea*, a new public housing development in the Sengkang neighbourhood, sparked an outcry from nearby property owners. Some concerned residents complained about a lack of information on the ancillary columbarium use projected for the temple. They were worried about the resale value of their flats and showed discomfort with the idea of residing near a columbarium (Hio, 2015). The construction of the Chinese temple was won in an open tender by *Eternal Pure Land Pte Ltd*, a Singapore business wholly owned by *Life Corporation*, an Australian company initially set up in 2001 as *Cordlife*, a cord blood banking company that later re-established itself with a new focus on funeral services [17]. Some future residents questioned why the temple was developed by a commercial organisation instead of a faith group or a non-profit organisation (Zaccheus, 2015a). Ultimately, the flat owners' objections led to the government's reconsideration of the awarded tender and removing the projected temple's columbarium. National Development Minister Khaw Boon Wan cited as the main reasons the lack of religious affiliation from the temple developer and the unsuitability of building a commercial columbarium (Tan, 2015) [18].

As seen above, in Singapore, lives of wealth do not necessarily find an appropriate deluxe correlation in death, with private lavish-looking columbaria as the closest alternative. The graves, shrines and mausoleums that once made a statement for those that did well in life are on an extinguishing path and are becoming an uncommon sight. With them, their associated

cultural traditions and customs are declining. At this juncture, funerary legacies are fading together with part of the country's cultural heritage.

Luxury burial legacies in Singapore

Is Singapore lagging behind?

Other places in Asia are leading the path in taking the handling of matters of death to the next level of luxury. In Indonesia, for instance, the number of people entering the upper ranks of the middle class has increased exponentially recently (more than 52 million people in 2017, according to *The World Bank*). This sector has enough disposable income to acquire comfortable resting places for the afterlife, and resultantly several companies offer them premium cemetery plots. *San Diego Hills Memorial Park*, which opened in 2007, is located less than 50 kilometres from Indonesia's capital Jakarta. The cemetery complex includes sports facilities such as a bicycle track, a swimming pool, a camping ground, boutiques, a mini-market, an upscale Italian restaurant, a small-scale replica of Istanbul's *Blue Mosque*, games such as table tennis and billiards and even a lake dotted with rowing boats. The cemetery also hosts wedding parties, and wealthy patrons can land their helicopters on its dedicated landing pad. The memorial park has sections for Buddhists, Christians and Muslims (*San Diego Hills, 2019*). *San Diego Hills* resembles more a country club than a cemetery and aims to cater to middle- and upper-class Indonesians, where the most expensive memorials can cost close to \$1m (*Mellor, 2010*). Another example in Indonesia is *Al-Azhar Memorial Garden*, which opened in 2012, and where a single plot costs around 23 million rupiahs (\$2,379), four times higher than in a state cemetery (*Daily News, 2013*). The business of booking burial spots in advance is booming in Indonesia, too, with customers aiming to secure reasonable prices before prices go up as they do not want their families to be burdened by rising property prices (*Soeriaatmadja, 2013*).

In China, home to a large ageing population of close to 150 million people [19], and the country with the highest number of deaths globally, 9.98 million in 2019 (*National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2020*), prices of graveyard plots have skyrocketed in recent years. Despite the lack of available land and the local authorities' restrictions, wealthy citizens continue to demand the graves available at private, landscaped cemeteries and which are seen as status symbols (*Teather, 2001*). Dwindling land supply and growing demand are contributing to the flourishing of China's burial business, and custom-sculpted tombstones, celebrity-studded cemeteries and funeral packages that cost tens of thousands of dollars are the new must-have luxury items in China (*Kuo, 2013*) [20]. The "premium death care" [21] market, as referred to by China's largest funeral provider Fu Shou Yuan, is booming, and it is worth close to 100 billion yuan (\$166.4bn) (*Fu, 2013*). Fu Shou Yuan, which opened its first cemetery in 1994, now has funeral facilities in several Chinese cities. In Shanghai, its cemetery is the resting place for famous public figures like Ruan Lingyu, a Chinese starlet from the 1930s, Wang Daohan, a Chinese politician who managed China-Taiwan relations, as well as a tomb enshrining the clothes of famous singer Teresa Teng (*Kuo, 2013*).

State-owned cemeteries are also increasing the offering in other Asian countries. *Shehr-e-Khamoshan*, is one of Pakistan's new graveyards. Located in Lahore, this \$1.5m "model graveyard" is the first of what appears to be a new trend in Pakistan for upgraded burials. The cemetery has freezers imported from Germany and a network of video cameras that allows relatives of the departed to live-stream the funerals (*The Economist, 2017b*).

Singapore, not alone

Singapore is not the only place experiencing challenges adjusting to the new bereavement environment. Several other Asian cities are also scrambling to solve the sensitive yet urgent issue of where to put the dead, pushed to encourage alternative forms of burials such as sea

burials, woodland or parkland burials. Even online mourning and memorialisation (Kong, 2012), and vertical or skyscraper cemeteries (Hariyono, 2015), are options considered today in these land-deprived cities. In Hong Kong, high population density (close to 7,000 people per sq. km) has rendered luxurious graves impractical. Like Singapore, elaborate shrines and tomb sites that often include obelisks, heroic busts or angels have become a relic of the city's past. At the end of the 1960s, the Hong Kong government championed cremation and storage in columbaria over traditional Earth burials. However, citizens' resistance to the idea of having new columbaria built in their neighbourhoods (Kao, 2016), coupled with the shortage of existing ones, which are reaching full capacity, has brought the situation to an impasse. To ease this shortage of space, the government is now encouraging other options such as sea burials or scattering of cremated ashes at several public and private gardens. With the slogan "Returning to Nature, What Nature Creates", it encourages them as environmental friendly and sustainable means of ash disposal (in 2018, it launched a website for "green burials") and makes them affordable (e.g. for sea burials it provides free ferry) and accessible. This has seen a rise in green burials in Hong Kong, to 12.9% in 2017 (FEHD, 2018), a significant increase compared with 4.6% in 2010. It also set up an "Internet Memorial Service" for people to create memorial webpages for their ancestors free of charge so that they can pay tribute and express condolences at any time and from anywhere. Digitalisation is progressively becoming more instrumental in supporting the preservation of tangible and intangible cultural heritage (Ocón, 2021). These alternative options, however, are still not popular with the majority of Hongkongers. While more than 90% prefer cremation (Hester, 2018), there are still some that opt for expensive and luxurious traditional burials. Cultural pressures embedded in Confucianism and pronounced consumption keep families demanding traditional burials in prominent plots (Guilford, 2013), with some still believing that a "decent and expensive" cemetery is a necessity to express filiality (AsiaOne, 2015).

In Taiwan, the shortage of grave plots and increasingly crowded columbaria, with some of the major columbarium reaching full capacity, has spurred the authorities, particularly in Taipei City, to encourage eco-friendly and space-saving burial methods such as woodland and parkland burials: the Taipei Department of Social Welfare estimates that these burials require only 10% of the space needed by traditional grave burials (Kong, 2012). Eco-friendly burials that include sea burials are becoming increasingly popular, with an overall total of more than 30,000 in 2016, a sharp increase from just 200 a decade earlier (Taipei Times, 2018).

In mainland China's cities, cemetery plots are also increasingly scarce due to China's real estate boom. In Beijing, average burial plot prices per square metre have even surpassed the city's already booming home prices, and residents spend over 100,000 yuan (\$14,000) on burial expenses per death, above the average annual income (Kuo, 2019). *Beijing Tonghui Cemetery* charges as much as 600,000 yuan (\$95,000) for a three-square metre plot to hold six urns (Luo, 2013). In other major Chinese cities, such as Shanghai, Guangzhou or Chongqing, prices are similar or even higher due to the imbalance between high demand and lack of urban land supply: while Australia has over 10,000 cemeteries for a population of 25 million, and the US has more than 50,000 cemeteries for a population of 320 million, China has only 3,000 cemeteries for almost 1.4 billion people (Song, 2013; Luo, 2013). Several Chinese cities subsidise now eco-friendly burials, issued to the family members of the deceased. Shanghai pays 2,000 yuan to scatter ashes over the Hangzhou Bay. In Beijing, authorities have double the grant to 4,000 yuan, provide free ferry and allows up to six family members to participate in the sea burial ceremony; previously, only two were allowed (Schreurs, 2015). In 2018, Wenling became the first Chinese city to reward those who sign up for sea burials before death, and grants between 100 yuan and 400 yuan per month are paid to those aged 70 and above (Xinhua, 2018). Online mourning and memorialisation, and commemorative plaques engraved with a Q.R. code, are other methods that are also gaining popularity in China, and new burial alternatives are continually appearing in the market: a Guangzhou-based

company offers to take cremated remains and fashion customised diamonds from them; a Beijing-based company, sends ashes into space, with packages costing up to 75,000 yuan (\$10,884) for “a permanent celestial voyage” (Debutts, 2017).

Luxury burial legacies in Singapore

Conclusion

Today, Singapore is a luxurious destination for the living. Up until recently, it was also a place where luxury, cultural heritage and death could coexist. Old graves and mausoleums such as those still found today at cemeteries such as Bukit Brown bear their witness. These grand and sometimes lavish final dwellings speak of comfortable lives, success and abundance. However, in a clear commitment to pragmatism and sustainability, and in response to its acute land shortage and population pressures – something increasingly common in other Asian cities – contemporary Singapore has to sacrifice some of these remains of glorious pasts in favour of urban development and for the sake of the future: space is at a premium, and the death needs to give it away for the living.

At this juncture, the country’s wealthy need to resort to substitute options for their final rest, such as luxurious-looking niches in first-class private columbaria. In columbaria like *Nirvana Memorial Garden* or *Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery*, the niches’ price can reach tens of thousands of dollars. Air-conditioned facilities, good *feng shui* or state of the art technology are some of their selling points. However, while a lavish columbarium presents an alternative to elaborate traditional burial sites, they are far from displaying wealth in the manner that some of the wealthiest fortunes on Earth may desire. They are undoubtedly modest when compared with what other Asian countries such as Indonesia and China offer today.

As this paper has shown, in Singapore, lives of abundance do not necessarily find an appropriate luxurious correlation in death, with private columbaria as the best alternative. The graves, shrines and mausoleums that once made a statement in death for those that did well in life are on an extinguishing path and becoming an uncommon sight. Examining their gradual disappearance and the consequences associated with it, this paper has also identified an array of challenges posed by Singapore’s urban development model to sustainably preserve cultural heritage. In contemporary Singapore, these legacies’ progressive extinction have turned truer than ever poet John Donne’s saying: “death makes us all equal”.

Notes

1. In *Mercer’s Cost of Living City Ranking 2019*, Singapore ranked third in the list of most expensive cities for expatriates. Its position in the rankings varies depending on the report or survey, although in the last decade it has consistently placed in the top ten spots.
2. Albeit fiction, the 2018 romantic comedy-drama *Crazy Rich Asians*, filmed mostly in Singapore, brought to the spotlight the outlook provided by the economic indicators, and helped to substantiate the country’s reputation as a location for prosperous fortunes.
3. A 1973 policy statement stressed that “as people move out from old areas to be redeveloped, temples, mosques or churches will have to give way to urban renewal or new development, unless they are of historical and architectural value”. Mr. Tan Eng Liang, then Singapore’s Senior Minister of State for National Development emphasised in 1978 that “the resettlement policy is clear-cut, irrespective of religions, irrespective of owners and irrespective of organisations” (Kong, 1993, p. 30).
4. The NHB is a statutory board under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth. Until 2020, it had gazetted 73 buildings and structures as national monuments.
5. This policy was first implemented in 1998 by the *National Environment Agency* (NEA).
6. As early as 1940, a crematorium served the needs of the Japanese community, and in 1948 the Singapore municipal commissioners agreed to build a crematorium for all creeds, nationalities and races.

7. Tan Chuan-Jin, Singapore's Minister of State for National Development, justified the decision in the following terms: "We have sought to explore various possibilities for the road but there were no easy choices [...] Planning for the long-term land use in land-scarce Singapore often requires us to make difficult decisions" ([Singapore Government, 2011b](#)).
8. There is no shortage of defunct cemeteries in Singapore. *Forbidden Hill Cemetery, Fort Canning Cemetery, St Joseph's Church Cemetery, Tiong Bahru Cemetery, Bukit Timah Cemetery, the Jewish Cemetery at Orchard Road, the Jewish Cemetery at Thomson Road, the Ulu Pandan Military Cemetery, and the Pasir Panjang Cemetery*, are some of them.
9. To commemorate the cemetery's heritage, NHB created the *Bidadari Memorial Garden* with 21 selected headstones and relics of personalities. It comprises sections to represent the Christian, Muslim and Hindu parts of the old cemetery as "a reminder of Singapore's heritage and the contributions of our forefathers" ([NHB, 2016](#)). The old gates and gateposts of the cemetery were also relocated and now form the entrance to the garden. The practice of preserving entrance pillars as cultural heritage mementos is popular in Singapore: for instance, when the 1960s *National Library*, built during Singapore's transition from British colony to independence, was demolished and move to another location, two red-brick gate pillars were preserved and stand now inside the *Singapore Management University* campus.
10. Some old tombstones or shrines, usually from defunct cemeteries, can be found today in dispersed locations. For instance, twelve gravestones from the former Christian *Bukit Timah Cemetery*, closed and cleared in 1970s, were moved to the city centre and rest today at *Fort Canning Green* park, adjoining a space frequently used for concerts and festivals. Three small graves survived the redevelopment of the Siglap area in the 1990s: the graves of Penghulu (chieftain) Tok Lasam, his wife, and his Panglima (commander-in-chief), and are marked with yellow, denoting royalty. Catholic *St Joseph's Church* cemetery, located at Chestnut Drive, still contains a handful of the over 400 graves it used to have. Two Chinese graves, remaining from defunct *Tiong Bahru Cemetery*, sit on top of a small hill and house the famous merchant and philanthropist Tan Tock Seng and his daughter-in-law. Private columbarium the *Garden of Remembrance*, has preserved an elegant tombstone from the former *Bidadari Christian Cemetery*. The large and beautiful, but solitary, grave of late Mrs Tan Quee Lan, dated 1890, still defies modern development by standing in the middle of a private estate, off Binjai Park.
11. The *Kranji War Cemetery* also contains several special memorials: the *Singapore Memorial*, with the names of 24,346 allied soldiers, sailors, and airmen inscribed on its walls; the *Singapore (Unmaintainable Graves) Memorial*, that commemorates over 250 troops killed in action in British Malaya and whose bodies could not be moved due to religious conviction; the *Singapore Cremation Memorial*, with almost 800 casualties who were cremated as part of their religious beliefs; the *Singapore Civil Hospital Grave Memorial*; and the *Chinese Memorial*.
12. For instance, the *Qingming Festival*, also known as Tomb-Sweeping Day in English, is one example. The Festival is celebrated on the first day of the traditional Chinese lunisolar calendar's fifth solar term. During *Qingming*, families visit their ancestors' tombs to clean the gravesites, pray to them, and make ritual offerings. Offerings typically include traditional food dishes and the burning of joss sticks and joss paper. The Festival recognises the respect of one's ancestors in Chinese culture.
13. This was not exclusive of Singapore. In South Korea, prominent public figures such as chairmen of major industrial corporations were also encouraged to use the cremation option ([Teather et al., 2001](#)).
14. For this purpose, Singapore's Maritime Port Authority has designated a site located about 1.5 nautical miles (2.8 km) south of the island of Pulau Semakau where ashes can be disseminated ([NEA, 2018c](#)).
15. Prices accessed online in February 2019.
16. According to *Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA)* guidelines, columbaria can be part of free-standing buildings being used as places of worship, clan associations, homes for the aged, nursing homes and religious schools. There must be a 4.5m buffer between the sites where the columbaria are housed and other buildings. URA allows space of up to 20% of the total floor area for

columbarium use, which should be located inside the main building, out of sight from the surrounding developments (URA, 2018).

17. In Singapore, *Life Corporation* envisioned an “integrated state of the art automated columbarium” in order “to provide full suite of premium funeral services” (Baker and Hio, 2015).
18. Generally residents in other residential estates do not mind living near private columbaria (Cheong, 2015), and places of worship with columbaria have been integrated in many residential areas. Most of them are operated by temples and churches: the *Puat Jit Buddisht Temple* in Anchorvale, the *Church of St Francis Xavier* in Serangoon Gardens, the *Fo Guang Shan Chinese Temple* along Punggol Walk, the *Seu Teck Sean Tong Temple* at Toa Payoh Lorong 6, the *Church of St. Mary of the Angels* at Bukit Batok East Ave 6, the *Church of St Teresa* in Bukit Purmei, and the *Faith Methodist Church* in Commonwealth, amongst others.
19. According to the *China Statistical Yearbook 2019*, the number of those aged 65 or more has tripled in barely three decades and reached 11.9% of the total population in 2018.
20. Funerals, weddings and other occasions for traditional Chinese customs were banned by the Communist Party during the 1960s and 1970s.
21. *Euromonitor*, a global research organisation, recognises premium death care services as “those targeting premium consumer groups with relatively higher disposable income and are willing to spend significantly more on death care services for upscale services, higher quality products or well-known brands” (Fu, 2013).

References

- AsiaOne (2015), “Now and then: changing funeral trends”, *AsiaOne*, available at: www.asiaone.com.
- Aveline-Dubach, N. (2012), *Invisible Population: The Place of the Dead in East Asian Megacities*, The Rowman and Littlefield Publishing Group, Lanham.
- Barker, C. (2017), “Faced with world’s highest car prices, Singapore’s rich swap supercars for luxury motor yachts”, *Forbes*, available at: <https://www.forbes.com>.
- Baker, J.A. and Hio, L. (2015), “Columbarium in Sengkang: FAQ on death-related facilities and sites in Singapore”, *The Straits Times*, available at: <https://www.straitstimes.com>.
- Bataille, G. (1988), *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, Translated by Robert Hurley, Zone Books, New York.
- Becker, E. (1973), *The Denial of Death*, Free Press, New York.
- Becker, E. (1975), *Escape from Evil*, Free Press, New York.
- Capels, V. and Senville, W. (2006), “Planning for cemeteries”, *Planning Commissioners Journal*, Vol. 64, pp. 1-8, available at: <http://plannersweb.com/wp-content/uploads/2006/10/230.pdf>.
- Cheong, D. (2015), “Residents in other estates don’t mind living near columbariums”, *The Straits Times*, available at: <https://www.straitstimes.com>.
- Church of St Mary of the Angels (2015), “Wakes and columbarium”, *Church of St Mary of the Angels*, available at: <https://www.stmary.sg/web/index.php/pastoral-services/wakes-and-columbarium> (accessed 5 September 2018).
- Compelo (2017), “Compelo and wealth insight 2017”, available at: <https://www.compelo.com/london-most-millionaire-ceos/>.
- Coutts, C., Basmajian, C. and Chapin, T. (2011), “Projecting landscapes of death”, *Landscape and Urban Planning*, Vol. 102, pp. 254-261.
- CWGC (2018), “Kranji War cemetery”, *Commonwealth War Graves Commission*, available at: <https://www.cwgc.org/find-a-cemetery/cemetery/2004200/kranji-war-cemetery/> (accessed 15 May 2018).
- Daily News (2013), “Private luxury cemeteries a growing trend in Indonesia”, *Daily News*, available at: <https://www.nydailynews.com>.

-
- Davies, P.J. and Bennett, G. (2015), "Urban cemetery planning and the conflicting role of local and regional interests", *Land Use Policy*, Vol. 42, pp. 450-459.
- Davies, P.J. and Bennett, G. (2016), "Planning, provision and perpetuity of deathscapes – past and future trends and the impact for city planners", *Land Use Policy*, Vol. 55, pp. 98-107.
- Debutts, M. (2017), "Too many corpses to bury: China's new campaign for cremation", *SupChina*, available at: <https://supchina.com>.
- Dunton, L. (1896), *The World and its People*, Silver, Burdett, Boston and New York.
- FEHD (2018), "FEHD launches new website on green burial", [Press Release], *Food and Environmental Hygiene Department*, available at: https://www.fehd.gov.hk/english/news/details/20180329_6860.html (accessed 25 November 2018).
- Fu, S.Y. (2013), "Global offering", available at: <http://www3.hkxnews.hk/listedco/listconews/sehk/2013/1209/ltm20131209061.pdf>.
- Funeral Arrangements Guide (2018), "Singapore funeral costs guide", available at: <http://www.funeral-arrangements-guide.com/singapore-funeral-cost-singapore-funeral-costs-guide/>.
- Grajetzki, W. (2003), *Burial Customs in Ancient Egypt: Life in Death for Rich and Poor*, Bloomsbury Academic, London.
- Guilford, G. (2013), "Why a graveyard owner in China is turning its cemeteries into a public company", *Quartz*, available at: <https://qz.com>.
- Hariyono, W.P. (2015), "Vertical cemetery", *Procedia Engineering*, Vol. 118, pp. 201-214.
- Hester, J.L. (2018), "Can Hong Kong sell its residents on watery graves? Atlas Obscura", available at: <https://www.atlasobscura.com>.
- Hio, L. (2015), "Columbarium in Sengkang Fernvale Link 'will be out of public view'", *The Straits Times*, available at: <https://www.straitstimes.com>.
- International Monetary Fund (2020), "World economic outlook database 2020: gross domestic product per capita", available at: <https://www.imf.org>.
- IRCC (2018), "Religious structures gazetted as national monuments", in *Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth Singapore: Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circle*, available at: <https://www.ircc.sg>.
- Julius, B. (2020), *Global Wealth and Lifestyle Report 2020*, Julius Baer Group, Zurich, January 2020.
- Kao, E. (2016), "Controversial columbarium developer offers discounts to local residents in last bid for public support", *South China Morning Post*, available at: <https://www.scmp.com>.
- KMSPKS (2018), "For the departed", *Kong Meng San Phor Kark Monastery*, available at: <https://www.kmspks.org/services/for-the-departed/#ancestral> (accessed 15 February 2018).
- Koh, M. (2015), "Mr and Mrs Lee's love story touches Singapore", *The New Paper*, available at: www.tnp.sg.
- Kong, L. (1993), "Ideological hegemony and the political symbolism of religious buildings in Singapore", *Environment and Planning D-Society and Space*, Vol. 11 No. 1, pp. 23-46, doi: [10.1068/d110023](https://doi.org/10.1068/d110023).
- Kong, L. (1999), "Cemeteries and columbaria, memorials and mausoleums: narrative and interpretation in the study of deathscapes in geography", *Australian Geographical Studies*, Vol. 37 No. 1, pp. 1-10.
- Kong, L. (2002), "In search of permanent homes: Singapore's house churches and the politics of space", *Urban Studies*, Vol. 30 No. 9, pp. 1573-1586.
- Kong, L. (2003), "Value conflicts, identity construction, and urban change", in Bridge, G. and Watson, S. (Eds), *A Companion to the City*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, pp. 354-365.
- Kong, L. (2012), "No place, new places: death and its rituals in urban Asia", *Urban Studies*, Vol. 49 No. 2, pp. 415-433.
- Kong, L. and Yeoh, B.S.A. (2003), *The Politics of Landscapes in Singapore: Constructions of "Nation"*, Syracuse University Press, New York.

- Kuo, L. (2013), "China's largest funeral provider is trying to make death a luxury event", *Quartz*, available at: <https://qz.com>.
- Kuo, L. (2019), "'Can't afford to die': China embraces eco burials as plot prices outstrip housing", *The Guardian*, available at: www.theguardian.com.
- Lim, R. (2012), "Singapore to drive road through historic cemetery", *BBC News*, available at: www.bbc.com.
- Luo, C. (2013), "Where the living face rocketing costs to bury the dead", *South China Morning Post*, available at: <https://www.scmp.com>.
- Malaya, T. (1917), "The late Mrs", *Ong Boon Tat*, available at: <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/maltribune19170319-1.2.26>.
- Man, J. (2007), *The Terracotta Army*, Bantam Press, London.
- Mandel, N. and Heine, S.J. (1999), "Terror management and marketing: he who dies with the most toys wins", *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 26 No. 1, pp. 527-532.
- Mates, L.H. (2005), "Malaya, Malaysia and Singapore", in Davies, J. (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Cremation*, Ashgate Publishing, Aldershot, pp. 311-314.
- Mehta, K. (1999), "Ethnic differences in perceptions, preparations and rituals regarding death in Singapore", *Omega*, Vol. 38 No. 4, pp. 255-267.
- Mellor, W. (2010), "Cemetery luring brides lets Indonesians land helicopter at plot", *Bloomberg*, available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com>.
- Mercer (2019), "Cost of living city ranking 2019", available at: <https://mobilityexchange.mercer.com/Insights/cost-of-living-rankings>.
- National Bureau of Statistics of China (2020), "Statistical communiqué of the people's Republic of China on the 2019 national economic and social development", available at: http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/202002/t20200228_1728917.html (accessed 22 January 2021).
- NEA (2018a), "Mount Vernon columbarium re-location programme", *National Environment Agency*, available at: <https://www.nea.gov.sg/our-services/after-death/mount-vernion-columbarium-relocation-programme> (accessed 14 November 2018).
- NEA (2018b), "Government management columbaria", *National Environment Agency*, available at: <https://www.nea.gov.sg/our-services/after-death/choa-chu-kang-exhumation-programme> (accessed 14 November 2018).
- NEA (2018c), "Arranging a funeral", *National Environment Agency*, available at: <https://www.nea.gov.sg/our-services/after-death/post-death-matters/arranging-a-funeral> (accessed 14 November 2018).
- NEA (2018d), "Burial, cremation, and ash storage", *National Environment Agency*, available at: <https://www.nea.gov.sg/our-services/after-death/post-death-matters/burial-cremation-and-ash-storage> (accessed 14 November 2018).
- NHB (2016), "Bidadari memorial garden", *National Heritage Board*, available at: <https://roots.sg/learn/resources/virtual-tours/bidadari-memorial-garden> (accessed 15 June 2018).
- Nirvana Memorial Garden (2018), "Nirvana memorial garden Singapore", *Nirvana Memorial Garden*, available at: <http://www.nirvanacolumbarium.com/> (accessed 15 June 2018).
- Ocón, D. (2018), "The heritage-making conundrum in Asian cities: real, transformed and imagined legacies", *eTropic: Electronic Journal of Studies in the Tropics*, Vol. 17 No. 1, pp. 90-116, doi: 10.25120/etropic.17.1.2018.3644.
- Ocón, D. (2021), "Digitalising endangered cultural heritage in Southeast Asian cities: preserving or replacing?", *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, Vol. 27 No. 4, doi: 10.1080/13527258.2021.1883711.
- Ong (2016), "The rebirth of cemetery land in Singapore", *JLL Asia Pacific Research Blog*, available at: <http://www.jllapsites.com/research/rebirth-cemetery-land-singapore-2/>.

-
- Palermo Catacombs (2019), "History of the Capuchin catacombs", *Palermo Catacombs*, available at: <http://www.palermocatacombs.com/catacombs/history> (accessed 25 January 2018).
- Property Guru (2016), "Bidadari - from graveyard to hot property", available at: <https://www.propertyguru.com.sg/property-management-news/2016/10/138683/get-the-guru-view-bidadari-from-graveyard-to-hot-p>.
- Remember Singapore (2018), "Bukit Purmei Keramat Bukit Kasita", [Web log message], available at: <https://remembersingapore.org/bukit-purmei-keramat-bukit-kasita/>.
- RHB (2017), *Singapore Thematic Research: Singapore Retailing*, 4 July 2017.
- San Diego Hills (2019), "San Diego Hills: Memorial Park", *San Diego Hills*, available at: <http://www.sandiegohills.co.id/> (accessed 5 January 2019).
- Schreurs, M. (2015), "Want an extra RMB 2000? Dump your dead at sea rather than burying them on land", *The Beijinger*, available at: <https://www.thebeijinger.com>.
- Singapore Department of Statistics (2020), "Latest data: death and life expectancy", *Department of Statistics*, available at: <https://singstat.gov.sg> (accessed 18 August 2018).
- Singapore Government, Land Transport Authority (2011a), "Construction of new dual four-lane road to relieve congestion along PIE and Lornie road and serve future developments", [Press release], available at: <https://www.lta.gov.sg/apps/news/page.aspx?c=2&id=rj2i4o1u3d7018466v86y82epxjj32mwbvnhu6rptw8lplkgo6>.
- Singapore Government, Land Transport Authority (2011b), "Partnering stakeholders to document graves affected by the new road at Bukit Brown Cemetery", [Press release], available at: <https://www.lta.gov.sg/apps/news/page.aspx?c=2&id=xi3xxc1d3304j5hinc03vf422yv3vhh8ofe5yhg02x9vi37by9>.
- Singapore Government, Land Transport Authority (2017), "Tengah air base to be expanded to free up Paya Lebar air base for future development", [Press Release], available at: <https://www.sla.gov.sg/News/articleid/648/parentId/97/year/2017?category=Press%20Releases>.
- Singapore Parliamentary Debates (1972), *Addendum to Presidential Address, Official Report*.
- Singapore Planning Department (1967), *Technical Paper No. 48*, Government Printing Office, Singapore.
- Singapore Tourism Board (2021), "The Japanese cemetery park", *Singapore Tourism Board*, available at: <https://www.visitsingapore.com/see-do-singapore/history/memorials/japanese-cemetery-park/> (accessed 11 March 2021).
- Soeriaatmadja, W. (2013), "A burial plot to die for near Jakarta", *Jakarta Globe*, available at: <https://jakartaglobe.id>.
- Song, S. (2013), "Cemetery plots in major Chinese cities now cost more than housing", *International Business Times*, available at: <https://www.ibtimes.com>.
- Spears Magazine-Wealth Insight (2016), "Cities with the most millionaires per capita", available at: <https://www.spearswms.com/cities-millionaires-per-capita/>.
- Taipei Times (2018), "Eco-friendly burials find wider acceptance in Taiwan", *Taipei Times*, available at: www.taipetitimes.com.
- Tan, K.Y.L. (2011), *Spaces for the Dead: A Case for the Living*, Ethos Books, Singapore.
- Tan, J. (2015), "Singapore minister says Sengkang columbarium plans will be reversed", *Yahoo! News*, available at: <https://sg.news.yahoo.com>.
- Tan, B.H. and Yeoh, B.S.A. (2002), "The "remains of the dead": spatial politics of nation-building in post-war Singapore", *Human Ecology Review*, Vol. 9 No. 1, pp. 1-13.
- Teather, E.K. (1998), "The heritage values of Hong Kong's urban Chinese cemeteries", in Logan, W.S., Long, C. and Martin, J. (Eds), *Proceedings, 3rd International Seminar, Forum UNESCO: University and Heritage*, Deakin University, Melbourne, 4-8 October, pp. 104-109.
- Teather, E.K. (2001), "The case of the disorderly graves: contemporary deathscapes in Guangzhou", *Social and Cultural Geography*, Vol. 2 No. 2, pp. 185-202.

- Teather, E.K., Hae, U.R. and Eun, H.K. (2001), "Seoul's deathscapes: incorporating tradition into modern time-space", *Environment and Planning A*, Vol. 33 No. 8, pp. 1489-1506.
- The Economist (2017a), "Measuring the cost of living worldwide", *The Economist*, available at: <https://www.economist.com>.
- The Economist (2017b), "Pakistan inaugurates a luxury graveyard", *The Economist*, available at: <https://www.economist.com>.
- The Garden of Remembrance (2017), *The Garden of Remembrance*, [Brochure].
- The Guardian (2013), "Datablog: Which cities do the world's millionaires and billionaires live in?", available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2013/may/08/cities-top-millionaires-billionaires#data>.
- The Straits Times (1917), "The late Mrs", *Ong Boon Tat*, available at: <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19170319-1.2.31>.
- The World Bank (2017), "Indonesia's middle class vital for the country's future", [Press Release], The World Bank, available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2017/12/04/indonesia-middle-class-vital-for-the-country-future> (accessed 5 September 2018).
- Tong, C. (2006), "Business unusual", *The Straits Times*, Retrieved from NewspaperSG, p. 2.
- Tremlett, P.F. (2007), "Death-scapes in Taipei and Manila: a postmodern necrography", *Taiwan in Comparative Perspective*, Vol. 1, pp. 23-36.
- Tsang, S. (2007), *Discover Singapore: The City's History and Culture Redefined*, Marshall Cavendish Editions, Singapore.
- UNESCO (2018), "Taj Mahal", *UNESCO*, available at: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/252/> (accessed 15 August 2018).
- URA (2018), *Development Control Parameters for Non-residential Development: Ancillary Columbarium Use*, Urban Redevelopment Authority Singapore [Handbook], pp. 146-147.
- Wat Ananda Metyarama (2018), *Memorial Columbarium: Julamanee Prasat*, [Brochure].
- Wood, F. (2008), *China's First Emperor and His Terracotta Warriors*, Macmillan Publishing, London.
- Xinhua (2018), "Chinese city rewards seniors who choose Sea Burial", *XinhuaNet*, available at: www.xinhuanet.com.
- Yeoh, B.S.A. (1991), "The control of 'sacred' space: conflicts over the Chinese burial grounds in colonial Singapore, 1880-1930", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 22 No. 2, pp. 282-311.
- Yeoh, B.S.A. (1999), "The body after death: place, tradition and the nation-state in Singapore", in Teather, E.K. (Ed.), *Embodied Geographies: Spaces, Bodies and Rites of Passage*, Routledge, London, pp. 240-255.
- Yeoh, B.S.A. and Tan, B.H. (1995), "The politics of space: changing discourses on Chinese burial grounds in post-war Singapore", *Journal of Historical Geography*, Vol. 21 No. 2, pp. 184-201.
- Zaccheus, M. (2013), "HDB estate with grave links to the past", *Asia One*, available at: www.asiaone.com.
- Zaccheus, M. (2015a), "Should businesses be allowed to outbid faith groups for religious sites?", *The Straits Times*, available at: www.straitstimes.com.
- Zaccheus, M. (2015b), "Carving a niche in after-death services", *The Straits Times*, available at: www.straitstimes.com.

Corresponding author

David Ocón can be contacted at: davidocón@smu.edu.sg

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:

www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm

Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com