

UNEARTHED:
Surveys Of 'Ground' In The Heterotopic Chinese Grave

by

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Abstract

In the physical processes of reclamation and urban renewal in Singapore, ground can be seen as a geomorphic entity that is endlessly shaped in accordance to a nationalistic vision. However, when the Chinese burial grounds in Singapore are repossessed for new usage, a contestation ensues between the contradicting values of land as a national resource and the landscape as a cultural entity.

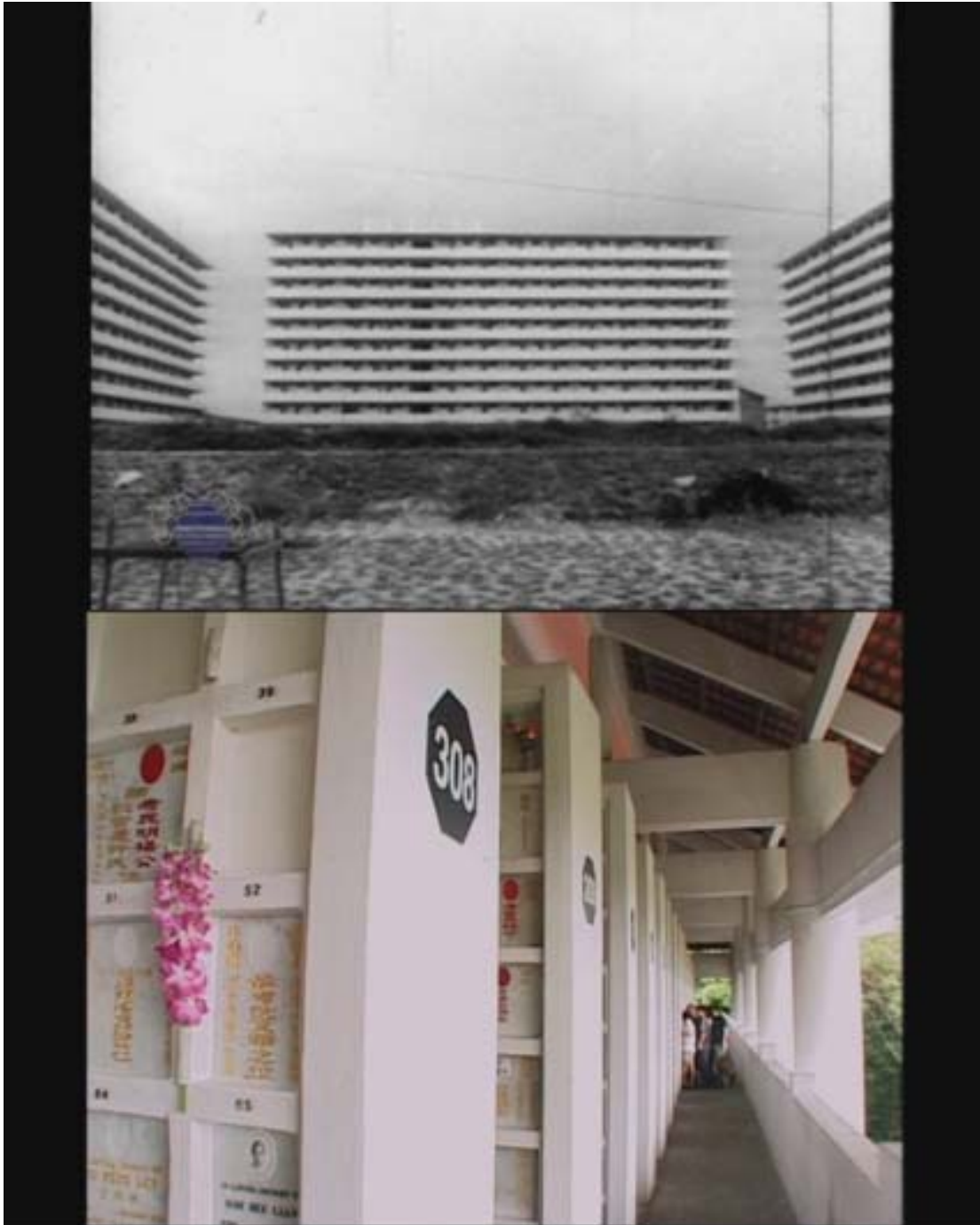


This dissertation seeks to recast the Chinese burial grounds in Singapore as *heterotopia*, a Foucauldian space of ‘otherness’. It will do so by identifying the unique spatial configuration of the Chinese grave that is anomalous to its surrounding environment, proposing that this particular reading hinges on the politics of ‘ground’. It is therefore asserted that ground is a datum that has to be read in both its physical and symbolic potentialities. The Chinese grave is explored as a distinctive space arranged in accordance to strict topological laws of

geomancy, inextricably connected to ‘real’ spaces of the living. Thus, ground performs a crucial role in constructing an elaborate relationship between the physical and projected aspects of heterotopia. When the ground of the Chinese grave is broken into, these fragile relationships are disrupted.



Tan Pin Pin’s short film *Moving House* and Kuo Pao Kun’s play *The Coffin Is Too Big For The Hole* are adopted as vehicles discussing this disruption of the Chinese burial ground. In *Moving House*, the Chew family’s ancestral grave is exhumed and their parents’ remains are relocated into a columbarium, so that space may be freed for national development. Elsewhere, *The Coffin* comically pits the hapless protagonist and his father’s ornate, oversized coffin against the unyielding ground of the public cemetery and its inflexible administrator.



Several *surveys* of ground will be conducted, plotting the interlinked spatial and ideological tensions between state and heterotopic Chinese burial ground. The nationalistic milieu is investigated in 1960s government propaganda film, revealing ground to be commodified as 'land' in utopian projections. The cultural complexities of the Chinese burial ground are mapped, unsettling the assumptions made in these visions of

rational homogeneity. Finally, the physical razing and manipulation of ground is traced when the Chinese grave is exhumed and reconfigured in the columbarium, a 'degenerate utopia'. The aim of these surveys is to demonstrate that the Chinese burial ground's heterotopic qualities, while seemingly fixated in the immutable landscape, can be easily destabilized and dispelled by an order contrary to its own.



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