

The evolution of Peck San Theng

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Kwong Wai Siew Peck San Theng is a cultural organisation and columbarium. Formerly it was one of Singapore's largest Chinese cemeteries. The 324 acre land was equivalent to over 180 football fields. Today the plot of land has become two-third of the bustling Bishan town.

In the 1980s, Singapore saw massive urban redevelopment. Cemeteries were cleared and graves were exhumed. For a cemetery that once contained more than 100,000 graves, the story of Bishan epitomises the concept of living and giving.



Figure 1: Peck San Theng cemetery (red boundary) overlaid with today's Bishan Town

Peck San Theng and Chinese immigrants

Since 1980s, Peck San Theng cemetery has converted to becoming a columbarium offering niches to the public. It is currently managed by 16 clan associations.

Peck San Theng was established in 1870 by Cantonese and Hakka immigrants from the prefectures of Guangzhou, Huizhou and Zhaoqing in Guangdong Province, China.

During the colonial era, the Chinese community had to be self-reliant as the government did not provide even basic welfare services to the immigrants. Clan associations and trade organisations were established to bridge the social gaps.

Upon arrival in Singapore, the majority of Chinese migrants would seek shelter from their clan associations. These associations were dedicated to aiding their clansmen. Over time, our forefathers broke away from dialect politics and contributed to society as a whole. Aside from being a point of contact for clansmen, the clan associations also played a significant role in the establishment of schools and charitable medical institutions, and the promotion of traditional Chinese culture.

The clan associations supported their clansmen in matters of everyday life such as housing, employment, business ventures, marriages, rituals and funerals.

The span of two centuries

In the past, the last wish of our forefathers was to receive a proper burial. The founders of Peck San Theng provided a final resting place for them to embrace their afterlife with dignity. Ritual activities are performed during Qingming and Chongyang Festivals.

The Cantonese cemeteries in Singapore have a history of two hundred years. The timeline can be divided into four periods:

- The first 50 years (1820-1870): Prior to the establishment of Peck San Theng along Thomson Road in 1870, Cheng San Teng (Maxwell Road) and Loke Yah Teng (Bukit Ho Swee) were established in the 1820s and 1840 respectively.
- The second 50 years (1870-1920): The cemetery management was stabilised after two decades of efforts. Community burial grounds based on kinship, locality and trade were set up. Along with an influx of Chinese immigrants, Kampong San Teng began to take shape and brought about a vibrant community.
- The third 50 years (1920-1970): Introduction of Wanyuan shenghui (Salvation Ritual). Since then, it has become a flagship event for Peck San Theng to promote the family value of filial piety. During this period of rapid development, Peck San Theng collaborated with Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital to set up a community burial ground for departed patients. Kwong Wai Shiu Peck Shan Ting School was also operated for 45 years before closing down in 1981.
- The fourth 50 years (1970-now): In 1973, the Government ordered for the closure of Peck San Theng cemetery. Following a lengthy negotiation, the Government eventually allocated 8 acres of land to Peck San Theng on a 99-year lease. The resting place of our forefathers was sacrificed to provide a better life for future generations.

Peck San Theng management upholds their commitment and continues to provide a columbarium and memorial garden for the deceased. The ground was laid in 2017 for the establishment of the Kwong Wai Siew Peck San Theng Heritage Gallery. The setting up of the Heritage gallery is vital in preserving the values of filial piety and providing a platform for reflection and root searching.

Kampong San Teng besides the cemetery

Peck San Theng cemetery had 13 burial hills demarcated by 12 pavilions. They were named Pavilion 1 to 10, New Pavilion 5 and New Pavilion 7. A shelter was built at each pavilion as demarcation.

Located just across St. Theresa's Home at Thomson Road, Kampong San Teng Road was the main road leading to Kampong San Teng and Peck San Theng cemetery. The Tea Pavilion (a giant coffee shop) served as an activity centre for residents.

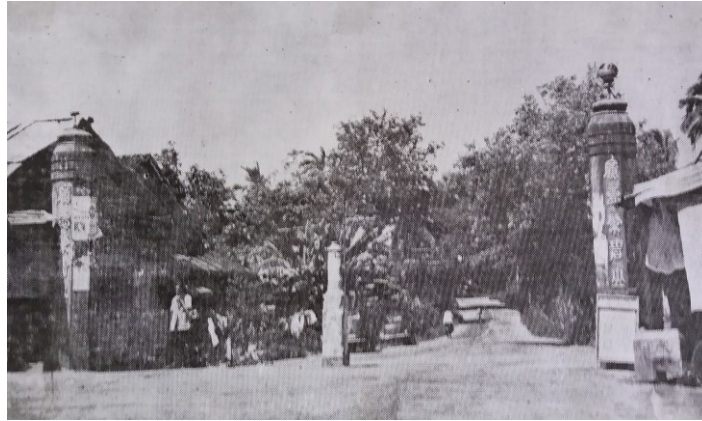


Figure 2: The entrance of Kampong San Theng

In the days before GPS became accessible for majority of the drivers, visitors had to rely on their memories to navigate through the cemetery.

The residents of Kampong San Teng led a humble life. A majority of the Cantonese residents living at Pavilion 1 to 3. A mix of Teochew and Hokkien residents settled between Pavilion 4 to 7. Pavilion 8 was populated by a Hokkien majority.



Figure 3: Ex- Pavilion 8 residents and their daughter who graduated in 2017

Young people travelled by lorry to work at the nearby electronic factories, Sembawang Naval Base and shipyards. The elderly and women led a peasant life. The average household could afford to raise at most 8 to 10 pigs. It was common practice to feed on credit, only paying the suppliers once the pigs were sold.

During the Qingming Festival, many residents would tuck a sickle at their waists and offer to search for graves and trim the grass. They earned about 50 cents for each trimming but later raised to 2 dollars. Some rich families would pay as much as 30 dollars, allowing some to earn over 100 dollars per day.

Mr Chan, who lived at Pavilion 2 of the cemetery, recalled that the majority of the residences at Kampong San Teng were attap dwellings or wooden houses with zinc roofs. Facilities were

inadequate and there was a lack of proper sanitation. However, the residents satisfied with a simple lifestyle. The residents of Peck San Theng formed close bonds among them.

Indian residents like Peritam Singh also lived in Kampong San Teng. His whole family were able to speak fluent Cantonese and his children attended the Peck San Ting School alongside other residents. His daughter even had a Chinese name 'Bili' (碧丽) which was named by the school principal.

A safe refuge during the Japanese occupation

During the Japanese occupation, Peck San Theng was perceived as a safe refuge by the Chinese community. The residents supported each other and lived through the Syonan years. Superstitious Japanese soldiers were fearful of spirits and chose not to disrupt the residents, allowing the residents to live in peace.

Residents recalled that when Japanese aircraft bombed Chinatown, many people escaped to Peck San Theng cemetery. The Samsui women who lived at Upper Chin Chew Street took lorry rides to seek refuge at the cemetery. Families living in other districts, from various dialect groups, also moved to the cemetery at this time. They returned to the city when the Japanese Occupation ended on 15 August 1945.

People tried to lead an ordinary life despite facing hardships under the Japanese. Peck San Theng resident Loh Weng Fatt and Wong Ah Loi registered their marriage in the year '2604'. However, this is not about living in the future. The year is counted based on the Japanese imperial year system which, according to the Gregorian calendar, should be 1944.

Community burial grounds

The 4 distinguishing features of Peck San Theng are community burial grounds, the salvation ritual, model burial system and chairmanship rotation system among the 16 clan associations.

Peck San Theng cemetery played host to a series of community burial grounds. They were set up for the Kwong Wai Siew community, 90 locality-based associations, 30 trade-based associations and 140 kinship-based associations. Each association would hold ritual ceremonies for collective worship. It enhanced community spirit and displayed the significance of ancestral veneration.

Salvation ritual

Inaugurated in 1921, the Wanyuan Shenghui (Salvation Ritual) is held generally once every five years. The name is derived from the Chinese phrase 'gather the fate of 10,000 people to create thousands of blessings'. The origin of this ritual can be traced to the Pearl River Delta region of Guangdong province at the turn of the 20th century.

During the Japanese Occupation in 1943, a Wanyuan Shenghui was organised for 50,000 Chinese who perished in the war and Operation Sook Ching.

In 1978, an explosion occurred on board the oil tanker Spyros at Jurong Shipyard. A Wanyuan Shenghui was conducted for the 76 victims who died in the accident.

Model burial system

Peck San Theng cemetery implemented a model burial system in 1916 and 1948. The deceased, regardless of them being rich or poor when alive, were buried in sequential order instead of having a burial plot of their choice. This practice gave rise to the locals saying that ‘one must die in an opportune time in order to be buried at an auspicious location’.

Rebuild Peck San Theng

Peck San Theng cemetery was acquired by the government in 1979. A special committee, led by Ho Kok Cheong and made up of members from 16 clan associations, was formed to negotiate for compensation with the Government.

The Housing Development Board eventually agreed to allocate 8 acres of land for rebuilding. The Peck San Theng management was tasked to resettle 2,000 residents from Kampong San Teng and Soon Hock Village.



Figure 4: Peck San Theng with HDB flat behind

Carrying the beckon

According to traditional Chinese culture, the building of wells, roads and bridges are considered as 3 major contributions. The tradition has been carried forward by our forefathers who laid their roots in Singapore, and further established cemeteries, temples, associations, hospitals and schools for the society.

Kwong Wai Siew Peck San Theng advocates the importance of filial piety laid by our forefathers, and of being able to contribute to the nation and its community. It will open a new chapter upon completion of the heritage gallery in first quarter 2018.

Reference:

李国樑, “碧山亭的起源与重建”, 《扬》 periodical, No. 35