Chinese Cemetery as Heterotopia: A Case of Kwong Tong Chinese Cemetery (KTCC)

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Abstract. With the emergence of new typologies of memorial parks and commercialisation of industries for the dead in Malaysia, what is the image and fate of older cemetery sites within the urban realm? This paper aims to re-define the perception of urban Chinese cemetery as a heterotopic space through the case study of Kwong Tong Chinese Cemetery (KTCC). Using the Foucauldian notion of heterotopia as a framework for analysis, this paper studies the transitions of KTCC through time, and how it stands in relation to the society that produced it. The paper argues that the cemetery is a highly heterotopic site; it is a space of representation and a space of difference, which celebrates the disruption of space and time in relation to society. The implication of society towards the ever changing role of a cemetery, and for now, the changing progression is at the stage where the contemporary Chinese cemetery in Malaysia displays its multi-functional spatial qualities within a single site, as a space of ‘otherness’.

1. Introduction
This paper aims to re-define the perception of urban Chinese cemetery as a heterotopic space. Using Kwong Tong Chinese Cemetery (KTCC) as a case study, it discusses the ever changing function, role, and condition of urban Chinese cemetery in Malaysia through the theoretical position of heterotopia by Michel Foucault. This position arises from the contestation of old urban cemeteries, the perception of fear and taboo related to them. Recent literature has shown that the cemetery has been both exceptional and separated from everyday regularities and at the same time, a domestic, or just an ordinary space. In Malaysia, prior to the development controversy over the historic Malaysian Chinese cemeteries, it did not carry much political influence, except as burial grounds for deceased Chinese [1]. They have been largely neglected and abandoned, except during Ching Ming festival, which happens once a year where people pay their respects to the deceased. However, Loo said that the Chinese cemetery is a space that relates to the collective memory of the Chinese community about their cultural roots and their sense of belonging to Malaysia [2]. This question of roots is both cultural and political; more importantly it is also spatial. Current days, cemeteries surrounded by the encroaching and congested cities may function as urban green belts; new commercial cemeteries are seeking methods to increase the function and human presence in cemeteries by providing new form of physical spatial elements, such as garden, café, jogging track, or community hall. All these elements place the Chinese cemetery in a highly contested space through time [3]. The current context of the
Chinese cemetery raises a fundamental question of how do contemporary conditions of cemeteries shape how we define and think about them. The perception of cemetery as a contested space links to the theory of other space or heterotopia, as the notion of heterotopia is to argue how space and place are always agents for processes of subjectivity, and stand in a political relation to the society that produced them [4]. This paper explores heteropology in a contemporary Chinese cemetery in relation to Foucault’s principles of heterotopic space, and subsequently, examines the relational spatial quality in a contemporary Chinese cemetery in Malaysia.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Chinese Cemetery and KTCC

The Chinese cemetery in Malaysia existed since the settlement of Chinese, especially during the period of British colonial rule from the late 18th century onwards. Whether they are the traditional or commercial cemeteries, their primary role is to serve as the “house” of the dead and to facilitate the practice of the burial culture. According to Loo [2] and Tan [1], the cemeteries have not been established merely to provide this utilitarian service. Not only do they bear historical witness to the role of the Chinese development of Malaysia, but also create a deep cultural and historical imprint on the landscape, especially the old Chinese cemeteries in Malaysia, such as Bukit Cina in Malacca and Kwong Tong Chinese cemetery in Kuala Lumpur. They are now a permanent component of the built environment in Malaysia and constant adaptation towards new management practices apply to each traditional cemetery as a functioning cemetery through time [5].

In Malaysia, the former Chinese cemetery is approached in the context of the core notion of “unity of heaven and humans” and the latter in terms of the management of cemeteries. Conceptually, the linkages are affected through the enactment of key cultural values of filial piety, the practice of Feng Shui, and the principle of ‘Yi’ [2]. Although the discourse on cemeteries has been directed to focus on environmental ethics among the dead, nature and humans, contemporary cemeteries, such as Nirvana Memorial Park and Xiao En Nilai Memorial Park in Malaysia yield insights on green culture without neglecting the traditional elements that constitute a Chinese cemetery, such as Feng Shui and the principle of ‘Yi’. In practical terms, changes are being made with the aim to influence the general perception of the cemeteries as landscapes of fear and taboos, into a beautified garden of remembrance, and at the same time, to safeguard the sanctity of the burial culture and tradition [1]. Serious attempts are taken by cemetery management committees to improve the image of the conventional cemetery, to adopt alternative modes of burial, to develop commercialized memorial parks, and to nurture a green culture of cemeteries. Cemeteries in contemporary period are acquiring a new meaning that integrate an ancient practice in accordance with the more enlightened view of the environment [3].

Kwong Tong Chinese Cemetery (KTCC) is one of the oldest cemeteries located in Bukit Petaling, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Founded since 1895, it covers an approximate land area of 343 acres and house to final resting place of many notable pioneers in Malaysia. There have been at least three major attempts by the state to relocate the KL Chinese cemetery, in 1994, 1998, and 2000. During 1994, the state announced the intention to develop the KL cemetery with an urban development plan [2]. The existing cemeteries were to be removed to a new designated site. After the Chinese communities raised their worries and concerns about the removal, no further plans were revealed. Following with a few more attempts from various developers, who approached the management of the Chinese cemeteries to acquire their land, the sign of contestation rises each year following the property value gain.

After the development threat, the Chinese community re-appropriated the KL Chinese Cemetery to represent Chinese history, to construct Chinese memory and at the same time, to provide an alternative interpretation of national identity and national landscape through three components – buildings, memorials, and community participation – contribute to the contestation of the state-dominant ideology, memory and history [2]. Learning from the landscaping and beautification project in the early stages in 1998, the management of Kwong Tong Cemetery combined most of the ideas,
buildings, and monuments together to turn the cemeteries into a cultural and heritage park, called KL Kwong Tong Cemetery Heritage Park (KTC Heritage Park). In various ways, the cemetery is constructed in the ‘Chinese’ ways, and all physical and spatial elements show an expression of a form of ‘Chinese-ness’. The cemetery acted as a living cultural archive for Chinese history, and at the same time, represented Malaysian history. Therefore, the Chinese-styled cemetery environment cannot be read as an enclosed Chinese world, but a symbolic spatial struggle against the state’s culture. This, however, opened up a different interpretation of Malaysian nationalism, identity, and landscape: A different form and a different style, represented in stand of a political relation to the society that produced them. This could relate to heterotopia as the space and place are always agents for processes of subjectivity.

2.2. Heterotopia and the otherness
The concept of heterotopia challenges us to question the reality of what society perceived as normal and different. Michel Foucault, being the proponent of heterotopia, argued for the otherness of space, relating the principles of heterotopia against the spaces and real sites, such as the garden, brothel, cemetery, asylum, and a boat [6]. This concept remained relevant till today amongst architects, urban planners, and social anthropologist [7], due to Foucault’s lack of any strict definition, leaving to the researchers a vast field for translation [8].

In explaining heterotopia, Foucault [9] spoke about the juxtaposition of hierarchic assembling of contrasting places: sacred place and profane place; protected place and open place; urban place and rural place. Foucault argued that the space, in which we live, happens to be a heterogeneous space, a space full of relations and one could describe different sites via the cluster of relations that allows them to be defined. Normal and ‘other’ space co-exist: Without the ‘normal’ space there would not be the ‘other’ space, and it is the society that justifies the laws, rules, and familiarity to form a ‘normal space’, therefore, creating the ‘other space’. According to Foucault, a heterotopia is the manner, in which society and culture, have power on the one hand and the interest of realizing this power on the other; define the subject through his differentiation from the general society [9].

From there, Foucault further elaborated two main types of sites: a ‘utopia’ and ‘heterotopia’. He compared such ambiguous space with the tradition of ‘utopia’, a place (topos) that is both nowhere (au-topia) and a good place (eu-topia), in which the word ‘heterotopia’, came from a different or another (heteros) place: Utopia is a place in which society presents in a perfected form, but fundamentally unreal, similar to the imaginary animals and encyclopaedia; Heterotopia, a represented, contested, or inverted site that is real and effectively enacted, juxtaposed to utopia as an imaginary site presented by society itself.

3. Material and Methods
This research used case study research as a strategy of inquiry. A case study is an observation and experiencing inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon or setting within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident [10]. The primary data was comprised of the original literature on the theory of Heterotopia by Foucault, and followed by the adaptations, interpretation, and conception by three authors: Michiel Dehaene and Lieven De Cauter [11], and Edward William Soja [12, 13, 14]. They are selected as they all adapted different school of thoughts while translating Foucault’s heterotopia yet emphasized on a real spatial quality that could have relations towards spaces in architecture. Based on review of literature, heterotopia celebrates the discontinuity and changeability of existence, and is much about the disruption of time and space in relation to the society. It could be argued that all spaces consist of certain degree of heterotopia, and Foucault’s six principles of heterotopia provides a way to determine the ‘level’ of heterotopias in various spaces through the summarization in Table 1 below.

| Principles | Questions |
|------------|-----------|
| Deviation  | Is the place privileged, sacred, or forbidden, reserved for |
individuals who are, in relation to the human environment in which they live, in a case of crisis?

2 Function Does the place have a certain function as a place within a society?

3 Diversity of spaces in a single real place Are there series of places in the place that are foreign to one another? What these places are and how they are juxtaposing each other?

4 Time Is the place accumulating time? How is it possible to notice the accumulation of time?

5 Place: Public-private relationship Is the place open for everybody? What user groups is intent?

6 Society What kind of population is operating in the place? What creates the uniqueness of the population? In which way the society in cemetery could be illusionary for random passers-by?

Each principle of heterotopia is used to determine the level of heteropology as to argue Foucault’s statement that the cemetery is a highly heterotopic space. This theoretical base is used to analyse the observations of Kwong Tong Chinese Cemetery (KTCC).

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. KTCC as a heterotopic space

Drawing from the six principles, how is the Chinese cemetery a heterotopic site? By interpreting Foucault’s six principles of heterotopia into KTCC, the findings suggest that heterotopia was consistently spatialised in the context of a Chinese cemetery. All principles held a certain characteristic that were easily linked to each other in terms of time, space, and society. However, time was highly represented and involved within each principle: through ‘time’ the society has changed; through ‘time’, the space is diversified within a single place; through ‘time’, the function was converted; through time, the space was opened up from private to public space; and through time, the events took place within KTCC have shaped its purpose to adapt to the ‘new’ time. Thus, the fourth principle relating to time has the most dominant factor compared to the six principles. Although the chronological timeline was emphasized through the events, issues, and change of function, purpose and programmes in KTCC, the sequential timeline was not the focus, but the spatiotemporal relationship that occurs within the site. In the fourth principle, the accumulation of time juxtaposing with the consistently flowing and transitory time both occur within a single real site that contributes to the spatiotempor al paradox, which Foucault states in the heterotopia of a cemetery that has an ever changing function and role, which is contested, inverted, and represented as a different form through time.

The sixth principle regarding the aspect of society was repeatedly mentioned too. The case of crisis, the diversity of places, the private/public aspect, and the purpose-programme relationship were consequences relating to the society as well. For example, the society under threat of relocating in KTCC, forged spaces and programs to function within the site as an action to resolve impending issues. The examination of the situation of people existing on the margins of society is one of the main pillars of Foucault’s work. He often focused on the ‘negative structure’ of society or an excluded group [16], which in KTCC, is the society within a Chinese community relating to a particular cemetery in Kuala Lumpur. This shows that KTCC was planned for a special group of people with a special function, making it a privileged and forbidden place as mentioned in the first principle, yet it is opened to the public as analysed in the fifth principle.

Analysing the public-private relationship of KTCC in the fifth principle, the site is blurred between pockets of private and public space. For example, the site provides private ‘dead space’ that was linked to a public access. This situation could relate to Dehaene and De Cauter’s statement that heterotopia has the ability to be neither public nor private, occupies an ‘in-between’ space, which includes institutions that are fundamental to urban-life [17].
4.2. Spatialisation of KTCC as a heterotopic space

To what extent does the findings imply towards the spatial quality of the contemporary Chinese cemetery in Malaysia? Firstly, heterotopia is an experience that can be contemporary and the conception of the cemetery is related to how it stands in a political relation to the society that produced it. The analysis of the Chinese cemetery describes an experience encountered by various societies through time. Cemeteries are not just communal ‘resting place’ for the dead; they are also, by their very nature, ground for enactments of commemoration and places of remembrance loaded with social meanings for the living. At the same time, cemeteries are an integral part of life, reflecting society’s attitudes and perceptions of both individuals and the Chinese community at large. The ability for a contemporary Chinese cemetery to be a highly heterotopic place depends on the society that governs it. The acceptance by the society decides the level of ‘otherness’ and the level of normality. The society, whereas in a situation of a contemporary Chinese cemetery, the Chinese community decides whether the cemetery is to be highly religious or secular, places of despair or places of hope and reconciliation.

Secondly, the juxtaposition of diverse spaces in a single space opens up a new form of cultural space. The argument here is that the cemetery in its actuality reveals a certain utility of function, but at the same time acts as a grid of intelligibility, exposing an ensemble of processes that contribute to what Foucault calls the ‘art of government’. In some ways, the analysis of the emergence of the contemporary cemetery has some resemblance to the birth of the museums within a cemetery. Based on the third principle of heterotopia, the diversity of spaces in a single real space shows that a heterotopic site is able to juxtapose in a single space, several incompatible spatial elements, such as the museum in a cemetery and a cemetery in a garden. The museum does not enclose or sequester dangerous population or communities, however, it opens up a new form of cultural space that draws in a wider range of society and embraces a moral register and pedagogic role, and same goes with the case of a contemporary Chinese cemetery, where the garden overlays the purpose of a cemetery that was perceive its core function to be disposing the dead. The opening up of new spaces within a space, and the acceptance by the society work as heterotopian dispositives, concentrating and illustrating a whole ensemble of relations involving ‘coagulation, support, reciprocal reinforcement, cohesion, and integration’ (p 23) [18].

In Foucault’s essay ‘Of Other Spaces’, he related cemeteries as a highly heterotopic space due to its ability to incorporate a number of incompatible concepts of spaces within its single framework of a physical space [19]. For the cemetery, these somewhat contradictory themes involve many aspects; for example, from the state of the body buried into the ground, the period of the body was to buried, the visiting space and events as a respect to the deceased, the funeral rituals, and the garden that encapsulate the graves within the cemetery.

Foucault explained that heterotopias are not like utopias, which are ‘sites with no real space’. Utopias are unreal sites with ideas about how society should be [18]. However, the notion of utopias is not opposed to heterotopia. Heterotopias are spaces that contain utopic notions, but are different from all the other sites that they are connected to. In this example, the contemporary cemetery holds the notion of a utopic idea, realised within a real site, which could be state that the contemporary Chinese cemetery is a heterotopic place. What makes the contemporary Chinese cemetery interesting as a heterotopia, is that in addition to the layers of meaning of space that the site could interpret through the six principles of heterotopia, the notion of heterotopia in a cemetery itself could be directly translated from Foucault’s essay ‘of other space’.

“The heterotopia begins to function fully when people are in a kind of absolute break with their traditional time; thus, the cemetery is indeed a highly heterotopian place, seeing that the cemetery begins with that strange heterochronia that lass of life constitute for an individual, and that quasi eternity, in which he perpetually dissolves and fades away. The population, individually and collectively, becomes viewed as dependent on a ‘series of variable’ including material surroundings, customs, tastes, values, conduct, fears, prejudices, and means of subsistence.” (p 182) [18]
5. Conclusion
This study has demonstrated the conception Chinese cemetery in Malaysia as a highly heterotopic space, a place of ‘otherness’, which is governed within the social conditions that shape its spatio-temporal continuum. The cemetery is a place in process. Heterotopia, through this study, is able to define the cemetery as a space of difference and a space of representation: a space in which the difference between the spatial quality of the dead and the living is placed within the same real site, made available for public contestation. Foucault’s initial explanation of heterotopia in a context of a cemetery was useful, as he highlighted various issues faced by cemeteries in general and how the progressing function is constantly altered through time, which leads this study to realize the implication of society towards the ever changing role of a cemetery, and for now, the changing progression is at the stage where the contemporary Chinese cemetery in Malaysia displays its multifunctional spatial qualities within a single site, as a space of ‘otherness’. The cemetery studies were diverse and relational towards the testing of the notion of heterotopia against the juxtaposing spatial elements within a single site, and seeing to what extent the framework of heterotopia through the six principles is able to ‘read’ the spaces and define the spatial qualities of a Chinese cemetery in Malaysia.

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Acknowledgments
We wish to acknowledge that the study is conducted as part of the dissertation studies in the Master of Architecture programme, Taylor’s University. We would like to thanks the academic staff from the programme who has contributed to the development of this study namely Professor Robert Powell, Dr. Francis Lin Chia-Hui and Dr. Sucharita Srirangam.