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Singapore

Pillars of history

A cultural history project uncovers a treasure trove of vintage tiles in an abandoned cemetery, raising awareness of the Lion City's heritage



Since May last year, over 100 volunteers have entered the abandoned Bukit Brown Cemetery, which was built in 1922 and, with about 100,000 graves, believed to be the largest Chinese graveyard outside of China. The volunteers do not simply spruce up the tombs – they also clean thousands of decorative tiles, colorful pieces of ceramic traditionally used to decorate the homes and final resting places of Straits Chinese. The activity is part of the Singapore Heritage Tile Project, launched in April 2019 by Australian artist Jennifer Lim (pictured), who first learned about these unique vintage tiles when her paternal great-grandfather's grave at Bukit Brown was exhumed in 2012.

That same year, the Singapore government began carrying out a plan to exhume nearly 4,000 graves to make way for a new eight-lane road. The remaining graves are slated to be cleared for a new housing estate in 2030.

Lim spent the last several years joining volunteer-led guided tours to learn more



about the cemetery before she started her own heritage walks. "These tiles symbolize my connection to Singapore," she shares. With the help of history buffs and caretakers, Lim has identified about 200 types of rare vintage tiles imported from Belgium, England, Germany and Japan. They are special because of their patterns: Some of them feature imaginary creatures, geometric designs and scenes depicting filial piety in Chinese folklore. They also present influences from the Art Deco, Art Nouveau and Arts and Crafts decorative movements, which were popular in the early 20th century.

Among the more surprising discoveries was the grave of Lim's Peranakan great-grandmother, who was buried in 1966. Decorative tiles of peacock feathers, flowers and landscapes adorned the grave. Lim and her team of volunteers also found an ornate bench-like tomb dating back to 1913, which is possibly the only one of its kind in the world with its myriad patterns and floral motifs.

While the Bukit Brown clean-ups are still ongoing, Lim has started putting together a book of the group's findings, called *Singapore Heritage Tiles: A Decorative Legacy of Love* (pictured), which will be published in November this year. Although the fate of Bukit Brown remains uncertain, enthusiasts like Lim have brought to light the deeply rich history of the area.

"I hope the project will help raise heritage awareness so that future generations can be inspired by Singapore's tiled treasures, which represent Singapore's complex cross-cultural DNA," she says. jenniferlimart.com – **Sanjay Surana**

TILE-SPOTTING

Three other places that feature unique heritage tiles in Singapore



Ann Siang Hill
Once dotted with traditional clan associations and exclusive social clubs in the early 20th century, this hip enclave is lined with restored shophouses where vintage Peranakan tiles can still be spotted.



Emerald Hill
Located off Orchard Road, this heritage neighborhood was the residence of wealthy Straits Chinese in the first half of the 20th century. It's also the setting of an iconic local play, *Emily of Emerald Hill* by Stella Kon.



Katong and Joo Chiat
Popular with Instagrammers for their colorful Peranakan shophouses, the quaint neighborhoods of Katong and Joo Chiat are replete with Peranakan tiles, which can be found at the conserved buildings.

IMAGES: FINBARR FALLON (MAIN), SHUTTERSTOCK (SIDE BAR)