

Grave Matters: The Burial Registers in Singapore

Genevieve Wong



The Bidadari Christian Cemetery. Burial registers offer a glimpse into the lives and conditions of early Singapore life. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

On 11 January 1924, amidst the pouring rain, grave diggers at Bidadari Christian Cemetery lowered the bodies of Cecilia Lee Yew Seah, Jeanne Yon Ah Soo, M. Lee Yon Rie and Jules Hoh Chin into their shared final resting place. As two nuns in their black habits from the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus (CHIJ) stood silently witnessing the burial of the four infants, the oldest of whom had only been seven months old, the gravediggers started shovelling soil back into grave number 363 of the French Roman Catholic Pauper division. This was their only burial of the day and they were eager to get out of the rain.¹ After all, infants from the convent orphanage seemed to die like flies. The nuns would come again tomorrow to deliver more baby corpses for burial.

¹ 11 January 1924 was recorded to have had one of the highest rainfalls in that month.” Meteorological Observations, 1924”, *Blue Book for the Year 1924* (Singapore: G.P.O., 1925), p.479.

² Val D. Greenwood, *The Researcher's Guide to American Genealogy* (Maryland: Genealogical Publishing, 2000), p.61

³ James Francis Warren, *Rickshaw Coolie: A People's History of Singapore 1880–1940* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003), p.8.

Cecilia Lee Yew Seah, Jeanne Yon Ah Soo, M. Lee Yon Rie and Jules Hoh Chin were individuals of no particular significance in Singapore's history. They were, however, four of the 584 infants buried in Bidadari Christian Cemetery in 1924, a year in which the cemetery recorded a total of 960 internments. Together with death certificates, birth certificates, grave inscriptions and obituaries, the burial registers have commonly been used in tracing genealogy.² However, the use of burial registers in writing social history has to date gone undiscovered. The astonishingly high number of infant deaths and the circumstances under which they died are but one of the fascinating stories that can be derived from the burial registers.

The burial registers in Singapore

Among the sources that can be used in the writings of Singaporean history, the burial registers are unique. Factual by nature, morbid in character, the burial registers present seemingly dry and dusty data sets that have the potential to reveal fascinating patterns about society upon further investigation. Although the burial registers have been useful in tracing genealogical ancestry, they have been vastly overlooked resources in the construction of Singapore's social history.

The burial register, alternatively called a burial or cemetery record, comprises a list of people buried in a particular cemetery, where certain information is recorded according to state-dictated categories. These categories include the following:

- Division of cemetery that the deceased is interred
- Grave Number
- Religion
- Nationality
- Rank or Profession
- Married or Single
- Date of Death
- Date of Internment
- Name of Deceased
- Sex
- Age
- Place of Residence
- Cause of Death

Used in tandem with other “traditional” resources such as state records and newspapers, such records of deceased individuals that collectively formed society has the ability to “resurrect Singapore life as lived” while opening new areas of research.³

In the past, as in the present, the state kept the burial registers for administrative purposes to account for every burial that took place. The British government initiated this system of record-keeping with the establishment of one of the first few public cemeteries in Singapore, the Bukit Timah Road Old Christian Cemetery in 1865. Such records were part of the mechanics of colonialism, which saw the gradual extension of the British government into documentation procedures such as taking census reports, standardising languages and keeping administrative records. The right to govern was determined by the knowledge that society could be understood and represented as “a series of facts” that classified the local population.⁴ Over time, the colonial government compiled and reproduced huge bodies of information that legitimised their right to rule and became the definitive body of knowledge upon which policies were based.

The legacy of colonialism has made historical inquiries into the lives of the early forefathers of Singapore much easier. The National Archives of Singapore (NAS) maintains burial records (see Table 1) of all public and state-governed cemeteries, the earliest from the Bukit Timah Road Old Christian Cemetery. After its closure in 1907, other municipal cemeteries such as Bukit Brown Chinese Cemetery and the Christian, Muslim and Hindu sections of Bidadari Cemetery were established. These records end in the 1970s, when all burial grounds in and around the city area were closed to conserve “scarce and valuable” land given “the needs and pace of national development”.⁵ An alternative was offered in the state-owned cemetery at Choa Chu Kang, which was erected in 1944 and came to include Hindu, Chinese, Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim cemeteries by the 1970s. This is the sole surviving public cemetery in Singapore and is still in use today. Its records stop in 1978, given the “25-year international archival benchmark” blocking access to unclassified public archives within that timeframe.⁶

Living and dying in Singapore: The convent orphanage

Early 20th century Singapore was not a pleasant place to live. In the rural plantations, there were dangerous animals, unsafe working conditions, and tropical diseases to contend with. Such diseases were exacerbated a hundred-fold within the overcrowded municipal limits, within which 83 percent of the population resided on 13 percent of the land area of Singapore. Poor sanitation, combined with overcrowded housing facilities, caused the rampant spread of diseases



Sisters and orphans at the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus.
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

that periodically cut huge swathes through the population.

The burial registers illuminate the state of the health in society, and are of use in recreating a more tangible lived experience of the inhabitants in Singapore. Health was recognised to be of paramount importance. For the Asian plebeian classes, health was the most important asset they possessed – “a man who sold his strength for a living ought guard his body: his physique was everything”.⁷ To the British colonial government, healthy labourers had greater economic value and “health services were established and operated precisely to maintain health in order to meet the labour needs of the economy”.⁸ Despite its importance, health was easily threatened by the high incidence of disease and mortality that was in many ways shaped by the “inequalities, powerlessness and poverty produced by the structures of colonialism”.⁹ Examining colonial records such as the burial registers and exploring the stories behind some of these data sets provide great insight into understanding British attitudes towards the inhabitants of Singapore. The burial registers thus draws attention to the state policies and institutions that shaped the health environment of its colonised subjects and contributes to the construction of a social canvas of the lives and deaths of ordinary people of that time.

⁴ Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), p.4.

⁵ Parliamentary Debates, 7 Apr 1978, quoted in Lily Kong and Brenda S. A. Yeoh, *The Politics of Landscape in Singapore: Constructions of “Nation”* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003), p.57.

⁶ Huang Jianli, “Walls, Gates and Locks: Reflections on Sources for Research on Student Political Activism”, in Loh Kah Seng and Liew Kai Khiun, eds. *The Makers and Keepers of Singapore History* (Singapore: Ethos Books: Singapore Heritage Society, 2010), p.34.

⁷ Warren, *Ricksshaw Coolie*, p.259.

⁸ Lenore Manderson, *Sickness and the State: Health and Illness in Colonial Malaya, 1870–1940* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp.17–18.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.4.

Name of Cemetery		Time Period	Missing Periods
Bukit Timah Road Old Christian Cemetery		Apr 1865 – 1910	Jul 1872 – Jul 1885
Bidadari	Christian Cemetery	Dec 1907 - Nov 1972	
	Mohamedan (Muslim) Cemetery	Feb 1910 - Dec 1973	
	Hindu Cemetery	Jan 1926 - Oct 1973	
Bukit Brown Chinese Cemetery		Apr 1922 – Dec 1972	Jun 1942 – Dec 1943; 1953 – 1958
Choa Chu Kang	Hindu Cemetery	1944 – 1978	
	Chinese Cemetery	Jun 1947 – Dec 1975	
	Buddhist Cemetery	1955 – 1977	
	Christian Cemetery	Aug 1968 – Dec 1977	
	Muslim Cemetery	1973 – 1977	

Source: List of Burial Registers, National Archives of Singapore

Race\ Age	0 - 1	1-10	11-20	21-30	Total
Chinese	467	58	1	2	528
European	4	2	1	-	7
Unknown	9	1	-	1	11
Total	480	61	2	3	546

Source: Bidadari Christian Cemetery Burial Register, 1924

¹⁰ Ibid., p.27.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² E. Wijeyesingha in collaboration with Rev Fr. René Nicolas, *Going Forth: The Catholic Church in Singapore 1819–2004* (Singapore: Titular Roman Catholic Archbishop of Singapore, 2006), p.236.

¹³ Ibid, p.261.

¹⁴ “Convent takes over 50 Babies a month”, *The Straits Times*, 2 Sep 1948, p.5.

¹⁵ Lily Kong and Tong Chee Kiong, “Believing and Belonging: Religion in Singapore”, in Chan Kwok Bun and Tong Chee Kiong, eds. *Past Times: A Social History of Singapore* (Singapore: Times Edition, 2003), p.200.

¹⁶ “1500 babies abandoned in colony”, *The Straits Times*, 4 Jan 1950, p.5.

¹⁷ Maria Jaschok and Suzanne Miers, “Women in the Chinese Patriarchal System: Submission, Servitude, Escape and Collusion” in Maria Jaschok and Suzanne Miers, eds. *Women and Chinese Patriarchy: Submission, Servitude and Escape* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1994), p.7.

¹⁸ “Tragedy of Singapore’s Unwanted Babies”, *The Straits Times*, 14 Nov 1946, p.8.

¹⁹ Elaine Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus: 150 Years in Singapore* (Penang: The Lady Superior, 2004), p.62.

At a glance, the methodical listing and statistical nature of the burial records “silence the undocumented, ordinary and unremarkable lives and deaths of the men, women and children of the colonies”.¹⁰ However, through an analysis of the categories of “Age”, “Gender”, “Cause of Death” and “Residence”, patterns of morbidity and mortality begin to emerge. Health and illness are “socially embedded phenomena” within these patterns and they “reflect the singular circumstances of time and place”, which helps in understanding society at a particular point in time.¹¹ This proves particularly relevant when examining the Bidadari Christian Cemetery burial records in 1924, which reveals an astonishingly high infant mortality rate originating from the convent orphanage.

Though 1924 had the lowest infantile death rate in a decade, infant deaths still accounted for 25 percent of the total number of deaths in that year, a clear indication of the deadly effect of the external environment upon infants (defined as a baby between zero to one year old). The burial registers of the Bidadari Christian Cemetery in 1924 recorded a startlingly high number of 584 infant deaths out of 960 internments. Of these 584 infants, more than 80 percent, or 480 infants, had resided in the CHIJ convent in their tragically short lives. Only through the burial registers (see Table 2) do the shocking numbers of infant

deaths come to light, allowing for an unraveling of the mystery surrounding the huge numbers of infant deaths from the Convent.

The large numbers of infantile deaths did not originate from the convent itself, a mission school established in 1854 by the Charitable Sisters of the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus to “educate girls of all classes”.¹² The infant deaths came from the convent orphanage, which was established simultaneously with the school. Unwanted babies, wrapped in newspapers or rags, were usually abandoned at the side gate of the convent, known as the “The Gate of Hope”.¹³ The Gate was ironically named—the majority of babies abandoned there perished. Prior to their deaths, the babies were baptised into the Roman Catholic faith and were given French Roman Catholic names.¹⁴ This would account for the disproportionately large numbers of Christian deaths in the census report of 1921 when the Christian population of Singapore comprised only five percent of the population.¹⁵

On the assumption that names were an accurate reflection of racial identity, of the 480 infantile deaths, the majority of infants (467) were Chinese, whose race could be inferred from Chinese names such as Gabrielle Wong Quek Soo, Joseph Loh Kum Hong and Therese Koo Tiong. The large numbers of Chinese infant abandonments at the convent could be due to a variety of factors, but were in all likelihood linked to cost and cultural beliefs. Chinese families who abandoned their child were usually too poor to afford funeral expenses and it was a common belief that a death in the house would bring misfortune.¹⁶ By abandoning their child at the convent, parents still had a thread of hope that their child would survive, or at the very least, be given a proper funeral. This led to the disproportionately large numbers of abandoned babies at the convent.

Within this group of 467 Chinese infants, the number of female infants doubled male infants at 311 females vis-a-vis 156 males. This was due to the Chinese cultural belief of practising preferential treatment of boys over girls.¹⁷ Because boys were regarded as more valuable, they were abandoned only when on the brink of death. This meant that while fewer male infants were abandoned, practically all male infants who were abandoned at the orphanage would die. In any case, despite the nuns’ care, most abandoned babies were “so undernourished and so ill that they [had] little chance of survival”.¹⁸ Though current literature records that the sisters cared for 200 children in 1892, and 400 children by 1936, the burial registers prove that the chillingly high number of 584

infant deaths in the single year of 1924 far exceeded the ones who lived.¹⁹

Such findings reveal that the convent orphanage was established within the framework of colonial structures and reflected societal conditions that had necessitated a private institution for infant welfare. The colonial government evidently provided little aid in improving the environment for infants and in providing adequate healthcare. At the Administrative Records of the Singapore Municipality, the evidence gathered by the European District Visitors over a 12-year period proved that most babies were born healthy.²⁰ However, about a quarter of them died within the first year, which meant that many of the infants had died from preventable causes.²¹

the spread of respiratory diseases.²⁵ With no proper town planning, these slums also grew haphazardly, with “numerous immense blocks of houses stretch[ing] from street to street, without a single lane, alley or court of any description”.²⁶ This obstructed the construction of an effective sewage disposal system and hindered the establishment of an urban water supply, contributing to the proliferation of water-borne diseases. Such conditions are reflected in the causes of death of infants, in which premature births and convulsions numbering 139 and 117 cases accounted for the largest causes of death. Premature births and convulsions were usually due to poor health conditions or poor nutrition of the mothers and infants, in which environmental factors

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Poor and squalid living conditions of the slums resulted in the proliferation of disease. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

While infantile deaths could be ascribed to a variety of causes, such as inherited diseases, improper birth procedures, inadequate feeding and neglect, unsanitary conditions were more often than not responsible.²²

Health was closely intertwined with place of residence, which could determine how one lived and died. Most of the babies abandoned at the convent came from “cursed cubicle[s]” within “slums of Chinatown, the squatter areas in Silat Road and the poor rural areas”.²³ Such cubicles were usually “dark and ill-ventilated” rooms that could easily be re-partitioned to accommodate more tenants.²⁴ The erection of such partitions “extended to the ceiling, cutting off even a modicum of light and air”, creating ideal conditions for

that encouraged the spread of diseases had a significant part to play. Enteritis, an infection caused by the consumption of contaminated food and water, and pneumonia, an infectious airborne disease easily spread in close living quarters, also claimed the lives of 82 and 58 infants respectively.²⁷ The environment in 1924 thus created ideal conditions for diseases to befall those with weak immune systems, making pregnant mothers and infants the most susceptible.

Colonialism lay at the root of the problem of overcrowded housing and the spread of diseases. The British had fundamentally changed the social landscape through colonialism, which had brought in an influx of migrants and accompanying new pathogens. However,

²⁰ “Clinics”, *Administration Report of the Singapore Municipality for the year 1924* (ARSM) (Singapore: Straits Printing Office, 1925).

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² W.R.C. Middleton, “The Working of the Births and Deaths Registration Ordinance”, *Malaya Medical Journal*, Vol. IX, Jul 1911, Part 3 (Singapore: The Methodist Printing House, 1911), pp.45–46.

²³ “Child Welfare Society”, *The Straits Times*, 25 Apr 1924, p.9; “Convent takes over 50 babies a month”, *The Straits Times*, 2 Sep 1948, p.5.

²⁴ W. J. Simpson, *Report on the Sanitary Condition of Singapore* (London: Waterlow and Sons, 1907), p.13.

²⁵ Kuldeep Singh, *Municipal Sanitation in Singapore, 1887–1940* (Singapore: NUS, Department of History, BA Hons. Academic Exercise, 1989/1990), p.39.

²⁶ Brenda S. A. Yeoh, *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003), p.141.

²⁷ Convulsions and enteritis were indefinite headings that served as umbrella terms for deaths due to dietetic errors, malaria and tetanus, in “The Straits Settlement Medical Report for the year 1926”.



The Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus was also home to an orphanage. Many parents who were unable to care for their newborns left them at the Gate of Hope to be taken in by the sisters of the orphanage. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Because the colonial government was unprepared to undertake expensive large-scale sanitary reforms to revamp the slums, they instead focused their efforts on the small-scale establishments of two infant welfare clinics in 1923 at the Registration and Vaccination depots at Prinsep Street and Kreta Ayer Street, which saw 5,338 consultations in 1924.³¹

they had not developed an urban infrastructure to accommodate the rapidly increasing population. Despite recognising the dire state of the housing situation in Singapore by 1910, as highlighted by Simpson's Report on the sanitary condition of Singapore in 1907, "no real attempt [was] made to grapple with the problem" by 1924.²⁸ Instead, blame was cast upon the "Asiatic ignorance and apathy" of those who were "filthy in their habits beyond all European conceptions of filthiness".²⁹ Even though overcrowding housing practices affected the health of the poor adversely, they lived in such conditions out of necessity and the lack of other affordable housing options. Since "neither the colonial government, the municipality, nor the private sector were prepared to shoulder the expense of providing housing for the Asian labouring classes", the poor had to adapt through maximising the little amount of available space in the city.³⁰

Because the colonial government was unprepared to undertake expensive large-scale sanitary reforms to revamp the slums, they instead focused their efforts on the small-scale establishments of two infant welfare clinics in 1923 at the Registration and Vaccination depots at Prinsep Street and Kreta Ayer Street, which saw 5,338 consultations in 1924.³¹ This was a mere third of the 14,398 babies born that year, which indicated that the majority of babies had not undergone vaccinations or treatment. In the absence of mandatory health measures, the convent orphanage was a private institution

that functioned as an alternative solution to the inadequate public healthcare system for infants.

Roland Braddell, a visitor to Singapore in the 1920s, immortalised the uplifting courage of the convent nuns in caring for abandoned infants in his writing:

A feeling of security and peace will descend upon you, with a vast respect for the courage and self-sacrifice of the quiet nuns...In the Convent unwanted babies of all races are left and are cared for...what a tremendous debt Singapore owes to the little ladies of the Convent.³²

Without having examined the burial registers, one might never have had cause to question the effectiveness of the orphanage in tending to these babies or the conditions of the babies at the time they were delivered to The Gate of Hope. Upon further investigation, one discovers that the convent orphanage was situated within a larger framework of colonial healthcare, housing discourses, and Chinese belief systems. Such insights are privy to the historian who analyses the burial registers over time to uncover patterns of morbidity and mortality that are unavailable from other sources. Further investigation in conjunction with the use of other sources reveals the dynamics within this discourse of health. Such everyday experiences of sickness and death as evinced from the burial registers contribute to constructing a historically richer picture of life in 1924.

The burial registers as historical resource

As a historical resource, the burial registers shed light on the morbidity and mortality of the inhabitants of Singapore, which is the subject matter and *raison d'être* of the registers themselves. However, the burial registers also offer insights into the power structures, prejudices and perceptions of state authority. This information helps in the understanding of the lived experience of the inhabitants of Singapore, while acting as a social commentary on the governance of the state. In particular, the records of the early burial registers yield rich data because they reflect the worldview of the British colonial authority. The burial registers of later years follow a standardised template that, while still of use in understanding more about a certain community, are no longer as reflective of society. Ultimately, the value of the burial register lies not in what it can tell us about history, but what questions it can enable the historian to ask that will offer a richer depth to history as we know it.

²⁸ "Idleness and Scarcity", *The Straits Times*, 27 Feb 1924, p.8.

²⁹ Yeoh, *Contesting Space*, pp.142-143.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p.137.

³¹ "Clinics", ARSM, 1924.

³² Roland Braddell, *The Lights of Singapore* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1934), pp.69-70.

About the author

Genevieve Wong is a Senior Officer with SPRING Singapore. This article is based on her honours dissertation, *Grave Matters: The Burial Registers and Singapore History*, completed in 2011 at the Department of History, National University of Singapore.



The cramped and crowded streets of Chinatown in the 1930s. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

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