Chinese Cemeteries as a Symbol of Sacred Space
Control, Conflict, and Negotiation in Surabaya, Indonesia

Sarkawi B. Husain

Introduction

‘Hidup hanya menunda kekalahan’ (Life simply means postponing defeat), said Chairil Anwar in his poem Derai-derai cemara. Everybody will die one day. Yet, is that the end of everything? It is for the individual who is dead, but not to his or her remaining family and relatives. Death can sometimes stir up a hornet’s nest of problems. Funerals might be obstructed, graves might be robbed, tombstones might be destroyed, and cemeteries may be relocated, having to yield to city development. These problems represent the fate that has befallen Chinese cemeteries in Indonesia. In Yogyakarta, for instance, a Chinese cemetery abutting the housing complex of the Gadjah Mada University (UGM) had to be relocated because the land was needed for a campus mosque. In Makassar, a Chinese cemetery had to make way for an office for the governor of South Sulawesi.

As Surabaya developed in the 1950s, Chinese cemeteries also had to be closed. The urban population grew rapidly after independence. Squatters were looking for land on which to build a dwelling, and both the municipality and real-estate developers needed land for housing estates. The threat posed to tombs in the middle of housing areas was especially high on two counts. Firstly, on the practical level, they were considered excellent building land for housing.

Secondly, the graveyards conflicted with the desire of the urban government to give the city a modern appearance, one which befitted the newly won independent status of the country. The scattered graveyards violated the aesthetics of order and regularity, which also in colonial times were in the eyes of planners a sign of modernization (Van Roosmalen, this volume). The cemeteries thus ran counter to the desired modern image of Surabaya. Chinese cemeteries in particular were deemed inappropriately located in the centre, because in a sense they encapsulated the problematic relationship between the politically dominant, indigenous majority and the economically powerful, but politically weak, Chinese minority.¹ Two excerpts of the reasons given by the Surabaya

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¹ According to the statistics of February 1959, the population of Surabaya consisted of: 1,003,312 Indonesians; 125,747 Chinese; 12,268 Europeans; 8,703 Arabs; 2,191 Indian/Pakistanis; and 117 Stateless persons (Surabaja Post 25-3-1959).
municipal government for its decision to close cemeteries in 1958 refer to the aesthetics (keindahan kota) and the fact that the cemeteries are no longer up-to-date with a modern city.

In view of the latest developments, it is inappropriate to have cemeteries such as those on Jl. Tambaksari Street, Embong Malang, Pandegiling, etc. in the middle of the city. [...] Moreover, if the aesthetic quality of the city is to be maintained, it is essential to close down the cemeteries.2

[...] Because they are no longer consonant with current conditions in the city, the cemeteries in the city should be closed. This is in order to enlarge the city [...] On that particular vacant land, decent houses, which would enhance the aesthetics of the city will be built3

For its part, in view of the significance of graveyards in their culture, the Chinese community was extremely upset by the closure of its cemeteries by the municipality. The reasons for closing the cemeteries and using the land for housing complexes reflect the insensitivity of the local government to the existence of a cemetery, which was more than just a resting place for the deceased; it was a potent symbol of respect for the ancestors (Figure 13.1). In the eyes of Chinese people, a cemetery is redolent with a sacrosanct significance and function. Any negligence in caring for the ancestors' tombs could have fatal consequences for their children and grandchildren. Quite apart from any sacred significance, a tomb is also a cogent reminder of people's social-economic status; the reason rich people are willing to buy a large piece of land in which to bury their parents.

In Chinese culture, a tomb has enormous importance as it is believed that the soul of the deceased remains in contact with surviving family members. In order to show proper respect to the ancestors, it was necessary to construct a tomb as soundly as possible. In Chinese culture, respect for parents is called Hao and this is shown to living parents every day, but respect for the

2 'Mengingat akan perkembangan-perkembangan pada dewasa ini, sangatlah tidak pada tempatnya adanya makam ditengah kota, seperti yang terletak di Djl. Tambaksari, Embong Malang, Djl. Pandegiling dsb [...]. Demikian juga untuk memelihara akan keindahan kota, maka perlu sekali sekarang dimulainja penutupan makam-makam tersebut'. Arsip Kota Surabaya (AKS), box 118, no. 1824.

3 '[...] karena sudah tidak sesuai lagi dengan keadaan kota, maka makam-makam didalam kota itu harus ditutup. Ini untuk keperluan perluasan kota [...] Diatas tanah yang kosong itu lalu diberdirikan rumah-rumah yang baik dan jang sesuai dengan keindahan kota'. (Surabaja Post 25-3-1958).