

TANGLIN HALT: MOVING HOUSE

BY NG CHLOE

On 27 June 2014, 31 blocks in Tanglin Halt, one of the neighbourhoods in the first satellite town Queenstown, were chosen for the Selective En Bloc Redevelopment Scheme (SERS). First introduced in 1995, SERS seeks to revitalise older estates and also optimise land use through the demolition of such estates and the construction of higher-density blocks. Since its inception, the scheme has proved both popular and controversial. The news came as a surprise to residents, many who have lived in the estate since the flats were constructed back in 1962.

The site of Tanglin Halt becomes a place of contestation between the dominant state narrative and individualised notions of belonging and attachment. Political and economic concerns begin to override residents' own notions of domesticity, where the familiar that makes the place their home are challenged. Residents thus become strangers and "ghosts" in the estate due to their feelings of uncertainty and impermanence. While the physical realm of the "domestic" has changed, it is the physical items discarded that begin to hint at the "domestic" that was left behind after the displacement of the resident. While the resident is the impermanent and uncertain "ghost", the physical objects that are discarded remain the only solid, grounding clues that the resident once lived here.

This video thus attempts to capture the elusive "ghost" through the lack thereof – that is, the "ghost" of the resident can ultimately and ironically only be captured through the things he/she leaves behind in the process of moving. Shots of discarded objects are interwoven with snippets of conversations with a longtime resident of the area that begins to reveal the perspective of the individual in contrast with the driving narrative of housing redevelopment. Through conversations with this resident, she reveals the affective aspects of the estate that make the place home and yet also begin to reveal feelings of uncertainty and impermanence with regards to Tanglin Halt, home, and moving out.

Interviewers (I): Students from AY2016/17 Semester 2 AR4102 Studio
Interviewee (E): Emily
Interview length: 2h23m38s

(Start of interview)

The students introduce the project, explaining that the aim of the project looks at keeping the neighbourhood centre.

E: This area so far. We have about 31 blocks here. So far have not hear what they are going to build. But got some people telling me, but I can't tell you what is there. Is it true or not true, I also don't know.

Students explain that the project assumes that not everything should be demolished.

I: How can we keep?

E: Area all gone, only left wet market and market. After ten year, this side also go.

I: Project keeping few blocks.

E: Few blocks cannot. All gone. They won't keep. But I already feel ah - last time this heritage... wanted to keep one block, but the answer: no. You know why? If you keep this block, everybody is not going to move. They still want to come back to this block. Better that all gone. [pause] Now only keeping is the 6-storey. That one they keep.

She indicates on a map what is to be kept, and what is to go.

E: This one, all small one. All will be keep.

I: Those 3-storey?

E: Yes. The 3 storey. 58 to 72.

[Emily picks up a phone call]

I: Would you rather speak English or Chinese?

E: 华语也可以. 英文也可以. 广东话也可以. Hokkien 也可以. 很多人会讲福建话. 我的福建话也学了六年了. Nevermind. You ask me what then I answer you lo. [Trans: I can speak both Mandarin, and English. Cantonese, and Hokkien dialects as well. A lot of residents here know how to speak Hokkien. I've been learning Hokkien for six years.]

I: So what we really want to know is, have you been staying here for very long?

E: I stay here for 48 years. (She shows us a photo of her sitting on a chair). I used to stay at Tanjong Pagar. 3 storey 的屋子. 现在我又搬去33. 我为什么搬? 因为那边是组房间. 50块. 两个房间, 一个客厅. 1968 我就来Tanglin Halt. 那边住3月. 冲凉, 出来, 下楼, 就是这样. 睡觉. 可是有孩子, 不想搬. 就住下去. 这样咯. [Trans: 3 storey house. Then I moved to block 33 storey 10. 50\$ for two rooms one hall (3 room). Starting out was rental. 1 year. I came to Tanglin Halt in 1968. And lived in a rented unit for three months. All I did there was bathe, sleep. That's it. At first rent one year. Then they wanted to sell the unit to me, but because I had children, I did not want to move. So I bought the flat for \$6,200 in 1969.]

I: Did you feel SERS will have a big impact?

E: 开始的时候我以为会有影响. 因为, 这边我们住的很好. 你叫我们搬我们也不舍得. 我们最重要是说, 我们一起搬. [pause] 但是我们需要一个market. Moving to Margaret Drive. 没有market. 把 residents 签名. 我有七百个人来拿一个market. 但还是拿不到. 那边一定要market 才可以 [Trans: At first, I felt that there will be impact. Because, we have been living quite well here. We can't bear to move. However, what is most important is that, we all move together. But we need a market. Moving to Margaret Drive; there is no market there. I got the residents to sign; there were 700 signatories in the end to build a market, but it was still unsuccessful. There must be a market there.]

That area. Very big area. Margaret Drive, Stirling, Strathmore, all. The people there have to go supermarket. 每个地方有market最好. 因为market build 感情. [Trans: It is best for every place to have a market. Because a market "builds" feelings.]

[09m07s to 11m57s]

She goes on to explain that in a market, you can take your own time and chat with other residents. shopping centres feel very rushed ("赶时间"). No chance to talk to other people apart from 'hello' ("没有见到别人, 只是'hello'")

She continues elaborating that in a market, for example, you can ask others where they bought their groceries. She also enjoys being able to buy in small quantities which cant be done in a supermarket. She goes on to say that whenever she visits a new place, she visits the market because it is interesting. As compared to shopping centres. ("全部shopping都一样为什们需要这么多?" [Trans: Why do we need so many shopping

centres when we already have so many?]

She shares that she enjoys seeing many things at the market, especially in the morning when stalls display their goods. When she visits other countries, she also makes sure to visit their markets. The current market in Tanglin Halt is "all together" - that is, one can eat, shop, and alter clothing. However she feels that in supermarkets, people just buy their things and go home. There are also no other services like clothes alteration available.

I: 你住在这里48年. 你觉得这边最让你有回忆是什么? [Trans: You have lived here for 48 years. What's your fondest memory of this place?]

E: Market. Market 很多朋友. [Trans: There are many friends in the market.]

[13m43s to 14m53s]

She explains that in a market, everyone can recognise you and that they all know where each other live. 喜欢凝聚力. 别的estate 没有人情味. 没有聚在一起的地方. [Trans: She likes how the residents of the estate are "bonded" and that there is a sense of warmth in the estate. Unlike other estates, where gathering places are missing.]

I: Do you meet with your friends at the market often?

[15m01s to 15m55s]

She explains that she and her group of friends gather at the market every Sunday although two of them are not even living in the estate, but at Jurong and Bukit Merah. For the past 12 years,

they've been coming down to eat. If there is anything, they can meet at the market which has become a designated meeting spot for them. She's insistent that "a market will be better" for the new sites.

I: Will you come back to this place?

E: 回来还要过两个马路。会远了。我们老了。 [Trans: I need to cross two roads to return here. That's far. We're old.]

I'm 69. I like to exercise, but 很多老人不会回来。太远。 [Trans: Many old people will not come back. It's too far.]

[18m23s to 19m53s]

She shares that she enjoys going to markets in other neighbourhoods: "all this market I will go" because she likes to see how stallkeepers decorate. Then if the things there are cheaper she will come back and tell people.感情就是在这边 build起来。 [Trans: This is how feelings between people are built.]

[19m53s to 17m22s]

She shares that the current community plaza ("which is only a name") has activities that have been ongoing for the past 8 years and counting. Through programmes like the CLAP (Community Live Arts Programme), movie screenings with stools that alternate monthly to "bring residents together". There are also performances, dancing, singing. Riddle guessing, games for young kids. These activities also tend to have broad appeal, with Emily sharing that they are "3G", or multi-generational that include the elderly and families

with children. Turnout often numbers from 150 to 200, and "all races" attend.

I: Do you think the timber deck [at the community plaza] can be improved?

E: Because there are many levels. When it first started out nobody wanted to use the space for anything. 50-60 people only. Now everybody wants this space. Don't make too many 1 step 1 step. A stage, shelter, make it pretty with flowers, will be better.

Emily shares that they "did show the MP [Member of Parliament of their estate] the design. But due to the stepped structure of the wooden deck, walking up and down is a bit more difficult. She also reflects that the wooden structure needs fixing and that it ought to be a place where the elderly can "come together" as usually they sit in the hawker centres as there is nobody at home to keep them company.

[27m23s to 38m42s]

Emily shares with us some nicknames for the hawker centres and that even the young people patronise the market. She insists again on the differences between the supermarket and the wet market. She also reveals how "playgrounds now look the same" and that there is "nothing to attract people".

I: What do you think must/should be kept?

E: 这个地方好像没有什么事情给我留恋。

I: Huh?

E: 48 年, 我是有回忆啦, 可是他们一直换这个, 换这个, 换到好像。。。 [Trans: Having lived here for 48 years, of course I have memories of this place. But they keep changing this and that, until...]

[39m17s to 48m11s]

She reveals that she has not been to the park near her house for quite long. While many visited it when it first opened more than 20 years ago, it is now rather empty, and Emily feels that it is due to a lack of novelty and "freshness". She shares with us her thoughts on several of the communal facilities in the estate. Mainly she feels that there are not many who are using the existing playgrounds and that the whole area has "nobody" and is "quiet". She's unsure whether that is due to the children having grown up and outgrown the playgrounds. Now, there is only the elderly. She gives a telling quote: 要保留这些屋子, 很难。 [Trans: If you want to keep these flats, it's hard.]

She also shares that the field where the former Tanglin Halt Industrial Estate was is still empty and has been that way for very long since the industrial estate's heyday from the 1960s-80s. She says that she is also not sure what they are going to do with the area although at first she heard there would be private residential developments like condominiums.

I: Do the new and old residents talk?

E: Ya. They still can talk. But now, these are new residents. A lot of new young people, here all old people. But in the market, the parents of the young still go together.

I: So the market is the one that brings all of them together?

E: Ya. And now, these few blocks, they move to there because the children study at New Town [Primary School]. They cannot go until so far. Many residents sold to young people who know about SERS. Some of them already hand back to HDB. Move to Bukit Batok, near to son, to children. Or Hougang, near to son and daughter. My son stay in Queenstown, so I have to move back to Queenstown.

[49m36s to 56m16s]

She discusses how the current SIT flats are rented out to people waiting to get their flats. She also reveals how the current nursing home (privately-owned and run by United Medicare) has been operating for less than a year on the former premises of the Queenstown Police Station (which has changed in use several times through its 50-year lifespan). She reveals that only "one or two" of the residents in Tanglin Halt live in the nursing home; but that there are also "not much old people inside. Quite empty."

"The residents who stay these house got maids. They're not poor people. The children can earn, get them maids."

[56m16s to 58m55s]

We share with her that our project brief includes the design of a new neighbourhood centre.

E: But if you build anything here. Nobody will use.

I: New residents?

E: New residents...don't know how many years [then] they come here. Maybe 10 years? Could be 20. Because I see a lot of empty places here. You see Queensway coming up the bus stop – turning into Tanglin Halt, there's a school already tear down. 30 years already. No use.

Some people know who is taking over, then you can go in and you see a lot of residents and what type of resident. If you are doing old estate... Margaret Drive: shopping, hawker, event place down there, RC (Residents' Committee Centre), HDB [flats], now still down there, haven't tear down the block 38. Going to becoming heritage and on top is shopping. Then inside a lot of things, attract people. Some people say too noisy; what for put so many things inside?

I: Did the wet market look like that last time?

E: Last time hawker centre all outside. Chairs put one side. Inside is wet market. So wet market was much bigger. All stalls are occupied in wet market. Monday is off day. No signboard? They don't put signboards here! "Like kampong (village)" you know where to buy your fish. Recognise stall. If stall isn't open you just go home. One row fish, chicken, veggie. Shops to alter clothing. If you stay here, you know to find them behind [in the stall]. Sometimes they hide inside [the stalls]. If not new people come and see they won't do that (because they don't know).

Shopping centres now all the same thing. Walk and walk also same thing. All same clothings, pattern. Other shopping centres also same thing, no new thing to attract us. E.g. Star Vista. Nothing to see. All food.

[1h1m01s to 1h6m09s]

She shares about the food in the hawker centres.

E: This hexagon like nothing to eat. Not all open in morning. Afternoon all closed. When events come everybody opens. Some open morning, some night. Not all same time. After 10 very quiet. At night a few stalls only. Very quiet here.

She shares that mum-and-pop shops (mama shops) have run out of business. This is not because mama shops are expensive, but it is just that residents "don't go." People only go there to buy newspapers and instead head to supermarkets to "buy everything". She herself says that her son "drives to NTUC instead [as there is] nothing to buy downstairs because 'all the thing no good, go there better is fresh.'"

She shares with us her thoughts on mama shops and how they can be better improved.

[1h6m09s to 1h20m46s]

She shares with us the *pasar malams* (night markets) of older times that used to take place by the roadside on Fridays and Saturdays. She reveals that it was popular among residents. Since 1972, the *pasar malams* on the road have disappeared and she hopes that estates should have such markets where people can sell old clothes etc. that attract others to "come and see".

E: But nowadays design all like going back... kampung spirit etc. Don't make quiet flats, come down no friends. Now all flats can see no friends. Doors always close. My door is always open (common corridor). Can see neighbours walking

past and chat. Next time all no friends.

I: Thought can book flat together? (referring to a scheme where residents of Tanglin Halt can book their new flats together as groups of 6 such that they can get flats located close to each other).

E: That time they say 6 person to get one floor, know. And at first this SERS say yes, can get 6 person. Then after sign up, they say no, can't get anything. I say, if you did not say anything then why must I go and find 6 person? To get 6 person stay together? If you say don't have, we no need to find. You say have then we go and find. Decide everything and go to HDB, then they say no.

I: HDB say no such thing? But newspapers say have. (This selection scheme was highlighted in the news).

E: Ya. Thats why! I get fed up. Then I say, they say sure got flat for you, but I also know "mother is a woman". Sure, flat not free, I also use money buy the flat. But it is not give me free. If one house to one house, no need use money. But now buy house. After give money, ask me go HDB choose new flat, pay money! Not house to house!

I: So you can't stay together?

E: No. One upstairs, one downstairs, one A one B.

I: Different block?

E: Ya la. We very angry. My friend stay in block 30. 30 floor. I stay in block 30 I go 38 floor. My sister go 36 floor. My friend go block 31. That means this – all my friends joined [as] 6 person [group]. All this 6 person go everywhere. All different.

I: So none of them managed to get as 6 people?

E: No.

I: None of them? Same floor, same block?

E: No, no. Because they build like that: [each floor has] 4 room, one flat. 3 room, one flat. And they give us the date in choosing also not right.

[1h24m01s to 1h28m09s]

Emily goes on to share her discontent about how residents who have not lived in the neighbourhood for as long got to select their replacement units first (e.g. in March). Then those who chose later (in June/July) had "not so many [choice] units." She feels that they ought to have gone by batches based on who has stayed longer in the estate as some residents who are "newer" and have not lived in the estate for as long got to choose first. She is also sceptical of the fairness of computer balloting.

She remains angry about the market issue, saying that they have been "told that there is no space" in the replacement sites for a wet market.

We discuss about the new flats.

E: 政府喜欢又不是我们喜欢。 [Trans: Government like, also not we like.] Inside all the tile. Whole estate same. Toilet same, kitchen same.

I: Thought can select tiles?

E: First thing they say, you want government to do, must choose this one.

I: If not got to pay extra?

E: If not you got to find people to do.

E: But then troublesome for old people to get suppliers, better to get HDB to do if anything can complain and get it changed easier.

Emily shares that when her friend told her that the tiles in their flats were the same, she insists that it is different because the “furniture not the same.”

She also has words for the new flat designs.

E: [The grilles] look like prison. Grilles are all the same, straight. Standardise can, but at least make them pretty. Children, can't be helped. But with every unit the same, the patterns are the same. Colour also. Cannot have different design. If you really want to make windows all the same, at least high class, not like prison. Now the colour all aluminium, not the nice black colour. If we have our own designs, always not approved – heart drop.

[1h31m59s to 1h57m59s]

Emily shares with us some of her personal life, like how she has done design artwork for advertisements before. She also shares with us her involvement in community work.

She also shares with us how, in the past, Wessex “rent was cheap. Now expensive, and to artists.” She says she used to go there to pick up saga seeds to fill in bottles. She shares fondly that once, when a Parisian artist came to the country, he asked what Singapore had. She thus taught him how to play with saga seeds, and he eventually “used the sounds to make music and dance.”

I: So now that [redevelopment has come to passed], how do you feel towards this en bloc?

E: This enbloc – at first I told you I feel not happy. Sad la. But see that the whole estate we're moving out, is all the friends still joined together, all the neighbours still together, and then we know that our neighbours – it's not a few blocks, they gone, a few blocks, but now it's the whole estate. Then after when we go to...that we know the news already to pull down the flat, everybody will ask you: “Emily, which block are you choosing?” “Emily, which block are you going?” They will start asking you la. then after they choose their flat they'll be “Emily, I go this block, I go this block”. Sometimes I play joke, there is a 47 storey. I stay in 48 [storey]. I'm going to do a penthouse on the top. Then they say, “You stay here? I also choose here.” But if everybody choose my block, then nobody [choose other blocks] already. So I say, “eh, you group A, you group C you go here, you go there. Go everywhere, then we can come back together.”

[1h59m14s to 2h2m59s]

She reveals that she was in the last batch to choose, and that she selected a unit in Dawson Site A (Margaret Drive).

E: All 31 blocks together. All move together. Nobody will go to the wet market? Empty. 死城。地方已经没有人了。 [Trans: This place will become a] ghost town. There is nobody left.]