

Book review

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Cangbai Wang, *Museum Representations of Chinese Diasporas: Migration Histories and the Cultural Heritage of the Homeland*, Routledge: London and New York, 2021; xi +178 pp.; ISBN 9780367466299, £120

Migration museums are institutions found in many migrant destination countries that tend to display the narrative of how immigrants adapt and settle into a new country. This book however is about another type of museum: that which is in the ancestral locale of emigrants, often a place where migrants and their descendants return to visit. In China, these museums are called “Overseas Chinese-themed museums.” According to Wang Cangbai, an interdisciplinary scholar of Chinese migration and heritage studies at the University of Westminster, the post-1980s museum boom in China puts the Chinese diaspora on public display there for the first time. While not all the information in the book is new, as Wang has previously touched upon several issues in prior publications, the contents are still rich in details and skilfully woven together in a logical manner. Collating his decade-long research into a single volume, *Museum Representations of Chinese Diasporas* persuasively interrogates what *huaqiaowenwu* (overseas Chinese heritage) is and how it is understood in China.

The museums featured in the book are primarily state-run and state-funded, but an “official” portrayal is avoided, as the museums depicted are not merely “national” entities for patriotic education. Wang instead opts for a critical perspective, an approach consistent with other volumes in the new *Routledge Research on Museums and Heritage in Asia* book series, to which this new addition belongs. Moving away from the conventional historical and managerial perspectives adopted in museum studies, Wang’s focus is on transnational migration. Crucially, the book complicates the static and single dimensional portrayal of museums by shedding light on the multifarious interpretations of the past that the museum founders and buildings themselves engage in.

In 2009, when researching the planned Overseas Chinese History Museum of China, a frequent remark that Wang heard was “What is *huaqiaowenwu* (overseas Chinese heritage)?” Many people in Beijing had trouble conceptualizing the idea of overseas Chinese heritage and where it would be possible to find suitable artefacts for the new museum. The concept of a new category of relics that extends beyond

the nation-state squarely challenges conventional views of how China identifies with its past, which is defined by historicity, rarity and nationality, and influenced by the “one China” rhetoric. Unsurprisingly, some overseas Chinese relics are made outside China, so *huaqiaowenwu* — much like migrants themselves — move away from a China-centric perspective and towards an expanded “double-rooted” notion (p. 39, 47). These relics are, therefore, at the same time, not only assets relevant to the migrant world, but also the ancestral homeland in China (p. 46).

By challenging the tendency to nationalize heritage under the discourse of patriotism, the author canonizes the scholarship of a prominent Malaysian-born Chinese anthropologist, Tan Chee-beng, who interviewed Malay returnees in two different languages with surprising results (see Tan, 2010). In Mandarin, Tan’s informants responded that returning “home” (to reside in a new China under the communist regime) was an act of patriotism, but when they switched to speaking Malay, they expressed deep regret at having returned to work on a *huaqiao* (overseas Chinese) farm (p. 94) in China. Language obviously allows people to express themselves in certain ways, but it can unintentionally also conceal one’s *true* feelings. Similarly, several chapters of the book touch upon this critical theme of conformity and resistance that undermine the overwhelmingly simplistic national ideal of patriotism. Ordinary visitors will most likely remain oblivious to the dissonance of migrants’ personal narratives, as some museum captions are deliberately incoherent regarding the displayed contents (p. 98). Underlying this is a tension between a highly unified nation-building agenda and the diversified, de-territorized forces and identities of the overseas Chinese. So, it is only through careful observation, much contemplation and interaction with curators and patrons that Wang could provide a counter-perspective as elucidated in his book.

Arguably, the book’s most significant chapter is the last one, about an inherent perplexity at the heart of diaspora heritage. The chapter illustrates how the past casts a shadow on heritage, resulting in its highly contested and difficult nature, demonstrating that we can also learn from the difficulties associated with so-called “unsuccessful museums.” Building upon the thinking of Basu and Coleman (2008), Byrne (2016) and Ang (2011), Wang problematizes the territorialized discourse on overseas Chinese cultural heritage and identities. However, unlike Logan and Reeves’ (2009) notion of destructive and cruel collective sites of shame, misfortune and pain, Wang argues that ambivalent heritage is embedded in a transnational space populated by artefacts and practices that continually change over time, with multiple layers of untold, incomplete narratives and hazy memories (p. 146). The idea of diaspora heritage, then, is ultimately an endless interplay between an interpreted past (such as historical migration) and a changing present (in which heritage is constructed). Although Wang states that “multifarious and sometimes conflating memories, interpretations and references” (p. 4) occur, what remains less explicit is how the commoners (*laobaixing*) in China make sense of this newfound category of heritage and how much their

views differ from that of those working at the museums and Chinese migrants living abroad. This provides obvious scope for further research.

This book will likely have a ready audience although it is far from flawless. Firstly, despite the urge to publish quickly, more care should have been taken with the editing — a legion of spelling mistakes litter the book. Although it is not uncommon among Chinese-authored English books, instead of using complicated “Chinlish” acronyms and abbreviations (such as OCHMC), single-letter village names (L village) and obscure three-letter names for persons (such as LSZ and CWN), the book could adopt a more reader-friendly naming convention. Another issue is the unusual rendering of the phrases referring to “Chinese roots” that have more commonly appeared elsewhere in the published literature, such as *luo ye gui gen* (落葉歸根) and *luo ye sheng gen* (落葉生根). Despite these quibbles, this book is a serious undertaking, although it is not a definitive account of overseas Chinese museums in China, which is no fault of the author’s. Instead, the author has noted the reason for this when he pointed out that memory work is an ongoing process, and hence, a viable topic for ongoing future study as museums in China undergo the next phase/s of development. Beyond that, more interdisciplinary scholarship, such as Wang’s, that is mutually constitutive of the migrant and the material world of migration is needed internationally to debunk the common nationalist emphasis associated with emigration histories and migrant heritage. As the critical heritage studies field matures, newer and competing interpretations and comparative research on museums in other emigrant countries, with their different geo-political circumstances, will likely surface. This book will likely serve more as a starting point than a complete catalogue of the types of overseas-Chinese-themed museums in China, a useful reference that has implications both for critical heritage studies in China and countries with histories of emigration outside China.

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