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Diaspora museum: Re-conceptualizing Tan Kah Kee's museum endeavors in 1950s China

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However, as in many other Asian countries, the idea and practice of museum was not native to China but transplanted from Western Europe (Lu 2014; Xu 2011). Three social groups played important roles in transmitting the notion and practice of museum from the West to China. The first group is the early European missionaries, especially the Jesuits, who started to build modern museums in Shanghai, Tianjin and other coastal cities as early as the second half of the nineteenth century.² The second one is the Chinese gentry-officials who had the opportunities to travel to Western Europe and Japan in the late Qing and early Republican era. After returning from the visits, they began to promote the development of museums as an important vehicle to enlighten the masses and modernize the country. One notable example was the Chinese industrialist and educator Zhang Jian 张 建 (1853–1926) who built the Nantong Museum (南通博物苑) in 1905, widely regarded as the first museum built by a Chinese national (Claypool 2005; Shao 2004). In the 1920s and the 1930s, returned Chinese students and scholars studying in Western countries became the new leading force in developing museums in China. As a result, in 1935, the Chinese Museum Association (中国博物馆协会) was established in Beijing with the support of the Nationalist Government. By convening annual meetings and publishing association journals, it contributed to the

² It is widely regarded that le Musée de Zi-Ka-Wei (紫 卡 威 博 物 馆), built by the French Jesuits in Shanghai in 1868, was the earliest modern museum in China. It was renamed as the Aurora Museum (晨曦博物馆) in 1933, and is the predecessor of the Shanghai Natural History Museum. See Wang (2005: 8–14); Xu (2011: 97–102) and Wang (2014: 27–31).

development of museology as a nascent discipline in China's higher education and as a subject of research. It also facilitated the cooperation between museums emerging in different parts of China. However, the rapid expansion of museums did not last long. It was soon interrupted by the outbreak of the War of Resistance against Japan in the late 1930s (Liang 2005: 27–29; Xu 2011: 97–102).

The contributions of these social groups in promoting museum development in China have been well documented.³ However, what is missing from the existing scholarship is the role of the Overseas Chinese⁴ in introducing Western-originated museology to China. This article is aimed at filling this gap through a case study of the museum endeavors of Tan Kah Kee⁵ 陈嘉庚 (1874–1961). Tan was a Singapore-based industrialist, philanthropist and the undisputed leader of the Overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia during China's War of Resistance against Japan (Chen and Hong 2003; Yong 1987).⁶ He was also the first individual from a diasporic Chinese background who engaged with museum building in China. In the 1950s, Tan built two

³ For a survey of China's early museums formed by the Western missionaries and Chinese cultural elites, see Lu (2014: 19–88).

⁴ 'Overseas Chinese' refers to Chinese nationals living abroad. Its equivalence in Chinese language is *huaqiao* (侨胞). In this paper, 'Overseas Chinese' and 'Chinese diasporas' are used interchangeably to encompass Chinese citizens living abroad and foreign nationals of Chinese descent. Similarly, the term 'diasporic' is used in this paper to refer to the experiences and subjectivities associated with transnational movement.

⁵ Tan Kah Kee is the name transcribed in the Wade–Giles system based on its pronunciation in the Hokkien dialect. The name is also transcribed and used widely in mainland China as Chen Jiageng based on the *pinyin* system.

⁶ Tan was the chairman of Southseas China Relief Fund Union (SCRU), the largest and most successful fund-raising body in Overseas Chinese communities to support China's War of Resistance against Japan. Between the early March and late July of 1940, Tan led a Comfort Mission to China participated by 50 delegates representing Overseas Chinese communities throughout Southeast Asia to console injured Chinese soldiers and to inspect the use of donation on behalf of SCRUI. For a detailed account of the mission activities, see Tan (1993: 127–383).

museums in Xiamen, Fujian province with wide moral and financial support from the Chinese diasporas. One is a civic museum called the Overseas Chinese Museum (Overseas Chinese Museum). The building of this museum started in 1956 and it was officially opened in 1959. The other one is an open-air museum called the Turtle Garden (Turtle Garden), built in the period from 1951 to 1957 at Jimei, Xiamen, named after the shape of the islet where it sits. In 1961, Tan was buried in the garden which marked the final completion of its construction. Most research of Tan's museum practices focused on the Overseas Chinese Museum only (Liu 1991: 83–85; Liu 2014a: 102–106; Lv 1995: 2–5), giving scant attention to the Turtle Garden. In this study, I argue that despite the vast differences in form and style, they both embody and materialize Tan's diasporic museum outlook.⁷ The two cultural institutes complement each other in demonstrating the unique role of the Overseas Chinese in promoting museum development in Maoist China and beyond.

I argue in this study that the Overseas Chinese make up the fourth social group in advancing museum development in China. Instead of transmitting museology directly from Western countries, as in the case of early Western missionaries, Chinese gentry-officials and returned Chinese scholars and students, the Overseas Chinese acquired the knowledge of museum through their encounters with mediated Western modernity in

⁷ I benefit from discussion with Mr. Ding Jiongkun, the former director of the Overseas Chinese Museum, who depicted the Turtle Garden as an open-air museum vis-a-vis the Overseas Chinese Museum as a civic museum. He believed that it was necessary to take into account both institutes when examining Tan Kah Kee's museum outlook and activities. Interview with Ding Jiongkun, Xiamen, 6 August 2013.

the host countries, many of which were the colonies of European powers, and then transferred their understanding and knowledge of museum to China indirectly. Furthermore, the museums built by Tan with the extensive support of the Overseas Chinese produced a novel interpretation of the Chinese nation and cultural heritage from a diasporic perspective that was never seen in other Chinese museums before. I argue that Tan's museum-building in 1950s China exemplifies what Chan (2018) called a "diaspora moment" that erupts and recurs when diaspora time interacts with the temporalities and spaces of the homeland due to the uneven process of globalization "under the multilayered forces of industrial capitalism, colonial empires, and nation-states in the modern world." (Chan 2018: 12–13) In this sense, I call the museums built by Tan "diaspora museums", defined as a heritage-making space constructed through the interaction between Chinese diasporas and the Chinese homeland, produced by and producing a de-territorialized vision of nation and identity. By creating this new genre of museum, Tan paved the way for "diasporic heritage-making" through museum, a cultural tradition that has been carried forward and adapted both in China and among the diasporic Chinese communities today.

The data based on which this article was written come from the author's long-term research of museum representations of the Chinese diasporas in the People's Republic of China (PRC hereafter). It draws upon in particular visits of the museums built by Tan in Xiamen and the Overseas Chinese History Museum of China (OCHMC) in

Beijing conducted in various years from 2013 to 2017, interviews with museum practitioners combined with historical research of Tan and his museum activities. In the following, it first introduces museum development in 1950s China as the political and historical context in which Tan built his two museums. Secondly, it unpacks the museum outlook of Tan through contextualizing his museum endeavors in his life experience as a Chinese migrant in British Malaya. Thirdly, it examines the two museums built by Tan in comparison to bring to light the distinctive feature of “diaspora museum” by looking into the architectural design, collection and audiences of the museums. The findings and large implication of this study are discussed in the concluding section.

2. Museum Building in 1950s China

When the CCP came to power in 1949, there were only 25 museums in the entire China (Zheng 2016: 100). Viewing museum as an important political tool to disseminate socialist ideology and construct a new national identity, the CCP was determined to restore old museums destroyed during the wars and build new ones. In 1951, the Ministry of Culture, the top Chinese authority supervising museum development in China, issued a policy document entitled “Opinions on the Principles, Tasks, Nature and Directions of Museum Development in China.” It stipulated that “the general task of museum building is to carry out revolutionary patriotic education, to enable the

public to acquire a correct understanding of history and nature and to love the motherland. It also serves the purpose of improving the political consciousness of the masses and stimulate their enthusiasm for socialist construction.” (Zheng 2016:100) As in many other fields of socio-economic developments, museum construction in 1950s China was under heavy influences of the Soviet Union. The Chinese government dispatched a senior delegation to Soviet Union in 1955 to visit and study museums, and at the same time organized the translation of major museum publications in Russian into Chinese (Zhen 2005: 111–113). In 1956, the Ministry of Culture convened the first national conference on the work of museums in Beijing, attended by more one hundred senior members and experts taking charge of museum development at different levels across China. The conference produced an authorized view on what museum is and for that has influenced museum development in China ever since. It stipulated that museums are in nature institutes for “scientific research,” “cultural education” and the “collection and preservation of cultural relics and specimens.” The two fundamental tasks of museums are “to serve the people” and “to serve scientific research.” While the former is to spread cultural knowledge and promote communist ideology among the masses, the latter is to support the advancement of research in natural and social sciences that are essential for socialist construction (Su 2005: 54–55).

The efforts made by the Chinese government led to rapid development of museums in the first decade of the PRC. By 1959, the number of museums in China had reached 480 (Zheng 2016:100). What is particularly worth mentioning is the building of core

national museums in Beijing, including the Museum of Chinese History, the Museum of Chinese Revolution, the Natural History Museum, the Cultural Palace of Nationalities and the Chinese Military Museum, among others. These museums became a model for museum-building in other parts of China and the pillar of China's museum industry in decades to come. These gigantic museums made a strong representation of an "authorized heritage discourse" (Smith 2006) of the Chinese party-state that was aimed at disseminating the communist ideology and promoting a pro-CCP Chinese nationalism.

It is in this specific context that Tan undertook his museum projects. Highly encouraged by the "new face" of China under the leadership of the CCP, in 1950, Tan returned to the Chinese motherland at the age of 77.⁸ Although he was given a number of senior positions in the newly established Central Government of communist China,⁹ Tan spent most of his time in his hometown Xiamen working on the building of museums. According to China's official scholarship and public media, it was the high tide of museum construction in 1950s that inspired Tan to solicit the support of the Overseas Chinese to build museums in China as a way to contribute to the socialist construction

⁸ On Mao's invitation, Tan participated in the Preparation Meeting for the initial Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) as representative of the Overseas Chinese and attended the ceremony of the founding of the PRC held at the Tiananmen Square on 1 October 1949. After taking up a short trip back to Singapore to make arrangements of some personal issues, Tan renounced his British citizenship and returned to Maoist China permanently. See QGZX (1984: 20–21, 30–31) and Yong (1987: 327–335).

⁹ Tan was appointed the founding chairman of All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (October 1956 to August 1961). His other titles include deputy chairman of Chinese People's Political Consultation Conference (CPPCC), member of the standing committee of Chinese People's Congress (CPC), committee member of the Chinese Central Government.

of the motherland (QGZX 1984: 287–289; Tan 2007). Not denying the influences of China’s official museum construction on Tan’s engagement with museums, I argue that Tan’s museum endeavors were driven by a very different agenda. While China’s official museums were aiming at legitimizing the CCP’s rule and cultivating a socialist citizenship by selecting and displaying carefully considered political objects in the museum (Hung 2005), Tan endeavored to construct a form of “cultural nationalism” through the medium of museum based on a global view of the Chinese nation and Chinese identity. As discussed below, this museum vision was not developed after he returned to the PRC. Rather, it was deeply rooted in his life-long experience as a Chinese migrant moving between Southeast costal China and British Malaya in the first half of the 20th century.

3. The Making of a Diasporic Perspective to Museum and Heritage

Tan did not write anything systematically to set forth his views on museum and cultural heritage. However, a Chinese inscription on the frontage of his mausoleum built in the Turtle Garden reveals, artistically, his museum outlook. Inscribed underneath the name of the garden are three Chinese characters, *bo wu guan* (博 物 馆), which could be translated into “museum outlook,” surrounded by a Chinese antithetical couplet written by Tan himself. The couplet reads (author’s translation) “a genuine and comprehensive museum outlook is never constraint by the physical size of a small island;” (博 物 馆 不 受 小 岛 之 限) “new functions and forms of museum stem from its re-configuration of past

heritage and traditions.” (□□□□□□□□) (Figure 1) The couplet is a literary articulation of his views on museum that can be summarized in three interrelated points: “a hybrid cosmology,” “a postcolonial gaze” and “a de-territorialized vision.” Indeed, placing Tan’s museum practices against a longer trajectory of his life experience as a diasporic Chinese and the broader political geography between China and Southeast Asia, I argue that what propelled Tan to engage with museum building in China had much to do with, firstly, his encounter with Western modernity as a Chinese migrant in British Malaya; secondly, a postcolonial gaze on the relationship between museum-building and nation-building that Tan’s experienced under British colonialism gave him; and thirdly, a de-territorialized perspective on China’s nation-building project that he had developed as a leader of Overseas Chinese nationalism.

<Figure 1 inserted here>

Figure 1: The inscription of “museum outlook” on the frontage of Tan’s mausoleum in the Turtle Garden, 30 August 2015 (photo by the author)

3.1. A Chinese Migrant’s Encounter with Western Modernity in British Malaya

Born to a peasant family in Jimei, Xiamen, Fujian Province, Tan received traditional Chinese education through private tutoring. He moved to Singapore at the age of 17 to

join the business of rice trade set up by his father and uncle. After the death of his father, he expanded the business to pineapples and rubber industry. By the 1920s, he had become one of the most affluent Chinese businessmen in Singapore, a respectable community leader and a philanthropist in Overseas Chinese communities (Chen and Hong 2003; Yong 1987). He founded the Jimei schools¹⁰ and Xiamen University¹¹ and donated most earnings from his business to maintain and subsidise the operation of the two educational institutes throughout his life.

As a Chinese immigrant in British Malaya, Tan inherited from his own educational and cultural background a full set of traditional Chinese values as the repertoire of principles guiding his conduct.¹² In the meantime, as an aspirational young businessman he was immersed in the British colonial society that provided him with a new source of knowledge and vision. Despite not being able to speak or read any English,¹³ Tan managed to establish substantial awareness and understanding of Western modernity through his encounters with British establishments and his reading of English books and articles in Chinese translation. As the leader of Chinese communities not only in Malaya but also in Southeast Asia, he frequented the office of

¹⁰ For a historical account of Tan's endeavours in school building, see Wang and Yu (1981).

¹¹ Tan set up Xiamen University in 1921 and had provided it with full financial support up to 1937 when he handed over its ownership to the Chinese Nationalist Government. Tan continued to finance the restoration and expansion of the university in the 1950s despite the fact it was no longer his personal property. See Tan (1993: 31), Wang and Yu (1981: 33–45) and QGZX (1984: 211–220).

¹² For example, in the early years of his business career, Tan used up nearly all his earning to pay off the debts left by his deceased father although this was not required by law in British Singapore. This conduct that follows the Confucian moral virtues earned him wide respect in the Overseas Chinese communities.

¹³ In fact, the only language Tan spoke comfortably was Hokkien, a dialect spoken by people in Southern Fujian. He was assisted by an interpreter in his communication with the British officials in Singapore and with Chinese political leaders when visiting China.

the Secretary of Chinese Affairs in Singapore to negotiate, with the help of a bilingual assistant, on a wide spectrum of issues in relation to the Chinese affairs.¹⁴ A careful reading of his published works, many of which were on the topic of Britain's modernization projects in Singapore, unveils the genesis of his museum outlook. In a book he wrote on Singapore's housing systems, entitled "Housing and Hygiene (□□ □□ □□)," Tan detailed the ways in which the British colonial government had modernized and transformed Singapore's housing systems as part of its urban planning project, and how this modern mind-set and the scientific way of management had greatly increased the city's hygiene standard, improved people's quality of life and extended life expectancy over the years (Tan 1993: 113–120.). On many other occasions, Tan reiterated his views that the Chinese population should get rid of its backward attitude and practices in social customs, health care, education and so on, in order to progress into a modern society. Tan had tried very hard to spread, through publications and public talks, the notion of modern civilization to the Chinese communities, both in overseas and in the homeland. In the 1940s, he made several recommendations to Chinese Nationalist Government arguing that China should follow the Singapore model when reconstructed and rehabilitated the society after the war (Tan 1993: 240–241). In short, the cultural encounters of Tan as a Chinese migrant with the

¹⁴ Partly due to his good relationship with the British authorities in the Strait Settlement, the fund-raising campaign led by Tan went smoothly. When the Japanese troops attacked Singapore in 1942, the British authorities entrusted him to organize the Chinese community to put up resistance against the Japanese invasion, and after the war, invited him to help restore the socio-economic order of Singapore. See Yong (1987: 201–208) and Tan (1993: 479–498).

mediated Western modernity in colonial Singapore had produced a highly hybrid vision on China's social development that underpinned his later engagement with museums.

3.2. A Postcolonial Gaze on the Relationship Between Museum-building and Nation-building

Tan returned to China in 1949 when the de-colonialism movement was rising high throughout the Southeast Asia. Experiencing the highly racialized colonial hierarchy in British Malaya as a Chinese migrant, he had a strong sympathy with local population's struggle for independence from European colonization. He publicly lent his moral support to nationalist leaders in a number of countries.¹⁵ Tan saw China not only as his home country but also one of the Asian countries seeking for independence and dignity in the world. One major challenge faced by the colonized populations in Asia was how to identify the dis/continuities with the colonial past and reconfigure colonial relations in the movement of "deconstruction-reconstruction" of power relations (Hall 1996: 242–260). Museum was one of the critical arenas where postcolonial conflicts and negotiations took place (Knell et al. 2011). The ways in which the notion and practice of museum were introduced, adapted and practiced in non-European countries therefore offer an ideal lens through which to examine the interactions between the East and the

¹⁵ Tan welcomed in person the visit of Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964), the leader of Indian nationalist movement, to Singapore. He also rendered public support to the independence movement taking place in Indonesia. In 1959, when the news of the independence of Singapore reached him, Tan sent a personal congratulatory note to Lee Kuan Yew (1923–2015) from Xiamen, China. See Yong (1987: 354–355) and Chen and Hong (2003: 430–431).

West in the nation-building process of newly independent countries. Indeed, there are perhaps no better cultural institutes than museums that could demonstrate the postcolonial nature of nation-building of Asian countries, the core of which was how to build a modern nation-state through its critical negotiation with colonial legacies.

The “Asian outlook” and the postcolonial gaze Tan obtained from his experience under British colonialism enabled him to give importance to museum building as an important vehicle in China’s modernization. During his 1949 trip to China’s “liberated areas,” Tan visited in particular the colonial museums built by the Russian and Japanese powers in Manchuria and by British Baptist missionaries in Jinan, Shandong Province (Tan 1950: 17, 61). Based on his examination of colonial legacies he came across firstly in Singapore and then in colonized regions of China, Tan had developed his vision on museum construction in the newly independent homeland as a cultural vehicle to re-configure social, cultural and political elements of the colonial past for the creation of a new China in the postcolonial present.

3.3. *A De-territorialized Vision of the Chinese Nation*

Tan’s experience of living in British Malaya as a Chinese migrant and his naturalization as a British citizen had paradoxically intensified his Chinese ethnic identity and national consciousness. Tan’s museum endeavors in the 1950s China was therefore a continuation of his efforts to modernize Chinese education and strengthen China’s

international status. Rather than having his museums built in China's political and economic centres, Tan placed his museums in the island of Xiamen that was far away from Beijing, China's capital, and from Fuzhou, the provincial capital of Fujian Province 270 kilometres away from Xiamen. Tan's decision to build museums at Xiamen was probably not only because he was originally from there. Tan saw Xiamen, one of China's major *qiaoxiangs* (the hometown of Overseas Chinese) and a key place bridging Southeast coastal China and Western modernity (Cook 2006), as the ideal place for his museum construction. It was aimed at articulating his global vision of China and bringing together domestic and overseas Chinese in the building of a modern motherland. The name of the museum is another case in point. Instead of naming the museum after the place of Xiamen, he called it the "Overseas Chinese Museum." It suggests that despite its specific geographical location, the museum was the result of collective efforts of the Overseas Chinese around the world. In this sense, the Overseas Chinese Museum was "not only national, but also global." (Tan 1999 [1956]: 7)

4. Negotiating the Chinese Nation and Chinese Identities in the Space of Museums

The Overseas Chinese Museum was built in the fashion of Western civic museums to materialize Tan's desire to transmit a rationalized claim of the Europe-originated museology to China. In comparison, the Turtle Garden, built in combination of the

Western notion of civic museum and the Chinese poetics of gardening, was designed to use entertainment as a medium of education. Despite the differences in style, they are both museums in nature where new knowledge and ideas were communicated to the public. Indeed, “intuitive seeing” (□□□) and “fun” (□□□) are the two key elements in Tan’s conceptualization and building of museums. In his view, these are the distinctive features that differentiate a museum from a “school” or “library” in term of popularizing knowledge and enlightening people. In an article he wrote in 1956, Tan said:

A museum is a particular form of cultural and educational institution. Compared to a library or school, a museum bears the same degree of importance but has a much wider audience. Schools are set up for students, and libraries for intellectuals. In contrast, a museum is for the general public to visit and it reaches much further than the scope of students and intellectuals. In addition, because a museum communicates ideas mainly through images rather than words, it makes it possible for audiences, men or women, young or old, literate or illiterate, sophisticated or vulgar, to acquire useful knowledge simply through intuitive seeing. (Tan 1999□1956□:6; author’s translation)

Funded and managed by Tan with the moral and financial support of the Overseas Chinese (Figure 2), the Overseas Chinese Museum and the Turtle Garden were the first private museums in Maoist China standing out from the state-run Socialist museums in

China at that time.¹⁶ In contrast to the official museum discourse that prioritized the promotion of political ideology and a pro-CCP nationalism, the museums built by Tan offered an extraordinary cultural space where a global vision on the Chinese nation and the Chinese identity are negotiated and articulated to both domestic and international audiences.

<Figure 2 inserted here>

Figure 2: A stone tablet engraved the names of donors to the Overseas Chinese Museum, Xiamen, 6 August 2013 (photo by the author)

4.1. Exhibiting Globality and Hybridity in the Overseas Chinese Museum

When the Overseas Chinese Museum was opened in 1959, it included a total of three exhibition halls, with each occupying one floor of the museum building. The ground floor held an exhibition of Chinese antiques produced since Shang (approximately 1600 to 1046 BC) and Zhou (approximately 1100 to 771 BC) dynasties; the second floor was an exhibition of cultural relics, artefacts and artwork produced in the period from Qing

¹⁶ Tan donated 100,000 Yuan to the construction of the Overseas Chinese Museum. He was the sole funder of the Turtle Garden. In addition, Tan masterminded the design, construction and curating of these two museums, in particular the Turtle Garden. See Ding (1999: 14–18) and Ouyang (2008: 7–8).

(1644-1912) dynasty onward, and the third floor was an exhibition displaying photos and objects on the social customs, natural landscape and local products of Southeast Asian countries as well as the daily life of the Overseas Chinese. It also displayed the artwork of foreign countries which was rarely seen in other Chinese museums at that time (Ding 2009: 5; Lu 1989 □ 1959 □: 17). The building of the Overseas Chinese Museum was only the first step of what was a comprehensive museum project in the mind of Tan. In fact, he planned to expand the Overseas Chinese Museum into a museum complex including a further four, more specialised museums.¹⁷ The first one was the Museum of History and Ethnology to display cultural relics of China's ancient history and its ethnic minorities; the second was the Museum of Natural Science to display minerals, geological and biological objects; the third was the Museum of Overseas Chinese and Southeast Asia to exhibit the history of Overseas Chinese and introduce the cultures, geography and economies of Southeast Asian countries; and the fourth was the Museum of Industry and Agriculture to show the achievements of economic modernization in the New China (Tan 1999 □ 1956 □: 6-7). Shortly before his death in 1961, Tan proposed to the Chinese Central Government to build a national museum in Beijing following the model of the Xiamen-based civic museum, also named in honour of the Overseas Chinese.¹⁸

¹⁷ The plan however never materialised due to political campaigns taking place throughout the 1960s and 1970s that seriously disrupted China's cultural development including the building of new museums. See Wang (2021: 29-30).

¹⁸ Tan donated 500,000 Yuan in his will as the seed fund of this national museum. It however never took off the ground when the Returned Overseas Chinese and their families were discriminated during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) for their suspicious connections with the capitalist world. It was not until 2014 that a national museum on Chinese migration, named the 'Overseas Chinese History Museum of China'(OCHMC), was opened in Beijing. The opening of OCHMC has been widely regarded in

Tan's museum ambition went beyond the aim of promoting civic education to the Chinese population, although this was certainly an important part of his museum mission. A more profound drive behind his museum endeavors was the desire to construct a new type of Chinese identity defined not by political ideologies, be it Nationalism or Communism, but by a shared cultural heritage developed collectively by the domestic and the overseas Chinese. This global vision is firstly represented in the architectural presentation of the museum. Widely known as the "Kah Kee Style," (嘉嘉) the architectural style of the Overseas Chinese Museum is strikingly different from the Soviet model that influenced heavily the design of museum and exhibition halls in 1950s China. Simply put, it is a creative amalgamation of elements of Chinese and Western architectures. While it follows the local tradition of South Fujian to use green glazed tiles to build the roof, it adopts the western architecture style Tan experienced in colonial Singapore to design and build the main body of the construction (Figure 3). This innovative architectural presentation with a high degree of cultural hybridity, firstly used by Tan in the building of Xiamen University (Zhuang 2011: 76–87), was chosen by him for the design of the Overseas Chinese Museum. As argued by Lanz (2016:183), "the museum building becomes itself part of the collection, and, at the same time, it creates a highly resonant framework for the exhibition, contributing to the explication and effectiveness of the whole narration." The

China's public media as the realization of Tan's unfinished museum dream. See Liu (2014b: 44), Fang (2014: 52–60) and Wang (2021: 25–30).

symbolically charged architecture of the museum has an evocative power that defines the institution as a key platform for Tan to express his cosmopolitan vision on Chinese cultural heritage and a diasporic perspective to the Chinese nation.

<Figure 3 inserted here>

Figure 3: Facade of the Overseas Chinese Museum, Xiamen, 6 August 2013 (photo by the author)

The Overseas Chinese Museum existed from its inception as a global institute that collected and exhibited not only Chinese cultural relics but also items related to cultures of other countries and of Chinese diasporas. In an article on the scope of museum collection, Tan wrote:

The Overseas Chinese Museum should be seen as a global institute. It is not constraint by regional locality and does not contradicts with any domestic museums. It ought to collect items as widely as possible, including those that are related to the Overseas Chinese around the world, as well as the local products, landscape, folk customs, social and historical documents of the host countries of the Overseas Chinese, and then put them on display for the appreciation of the public. (Liu 2014a: 104; author's translation)

Indeed, in addition to purchasing over 800 pieces of Chinese cultural relics, including bronze ware, China, paintings and calligraphy from antique shops in Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin (Lv 1995: 4), Tan paid particular attention to the collection of cultural relics outside the Chinese territory. He made a public appeal to the Overseas Chinese for their contributions to the construction of the museum:

My Overseas Chinese compatriots, this is an excellent opportunity to contribute to the motherland. No matter if you have returned to China or still reside overseas, you should do what you could to take an individual responsibility to support the building of museums in the motherland by donating Chinese cultural relics or artefacts related to the everyday life or public activities of the Overseas Chinese, so as to enrich the collection of the Overseas Chinese museum. (Tan 1999 [1956]: 7; author's translation)

By the time the museum construction was completed, Tan had successfully collected over 2,000 pieces of fine relics and valuable specimens from Southeast Asia (Lv 1995: 4). In addition, he collected over 1,000 photos on the history and cultures of Southeast Asian countries and several hundred relics related to the Overseas Chinese. These items were donated by individual members of Overseas Chinese, Overseas Chinese associations, returned Overseas Chinese and the alumni of Xiamen University and Jimei Schools respectively (Zhang 1989: 19). A total of 6,840 items from a highly

diverse cultural and historical backgrounds were presented to the public when the museum was opened. In the exhibition hall on the third floor of the museum displayed over 100 artefacts on the history of Overseas Chinese and their host countries. Notable artefacts included a wedding dress and jewellerys used by the peranakans in Malaya, copper items from Burma, a wood carving of elephant and religious items from Thailand, as well as various local products and animal and plant specimens originated from Southeast Asian countries. It also exhibited a large number of photos that visualized urban development, natural scenery, cultural customs of Southeast Asian countries and the life of Overseas Chinese residing in Indonesia, Malaya, Singapore, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, among other countries. On the third floor there was also a special collection of glassware, porcelain and artwork from Russia, North Korea, Poland, Britain, France, Germany, Japan and Austria (Lu 1989 [1959]: 17). In one of my recent visits to the museum, I saw items originally donated by the Overseas Chinese in the 1950s (Figure 4) were still on display to the visitors.¹⁹

<Figure 4 inserted here>

Figure 4: The *Sanbao* Knives (三把刀), donated by Mr. Cai Huansan, an ethnic Chinese of Indonesia in the 1950s. Overseas Chinese Museum, Xiamen, 6 August 2013 (photo by the author)

¹⁹ The museum was in danger of losing its collection during the most chaotic years of the Cultural Revolution. Mr. Chen Yongding, who was entrusted by Tan to oversee the museum construction and took charge of museum management after it was opened, took great political risks to move the museum collection to safe places. Thanks to his effort, the majority of the museum collection was intact. See Ding (2009:6)

From its opening in May 1959 to August 1965 when the museum was closed in the height of political campaigns, the museum received a total of 420,000 visitors coming from both China and abroad (Editorial Board 1989: 43).²⁰ Due to the lack of historical records, it is difficult to obtain a detailed profile of the museum audiences in this period. However, by reading Tan's writings on the function of the museum, it is possible to establish a general picture of the targeted museum visitors. In his 1956 article on the missions of the museum, Tan said:

I proposed to build a large-scale museum by the Overseas Chinese in a seaport in the hometown of the Overseas Chinese. This way, it could be visited by both the domestic public and the returned Overseas Chinese. Both groups would benefit from the museum. (Tan 1999 [1956]: 6)

In the same article cited above, Tan identified four specific groups of visitors, namely, the general public of Xiamen and people from other parts of China; teachers and students from Xiamen University and other educational institutes; researchers of the Nanyang (Southeast Asia) Research Institute based at Xiamen University; and the Overseas Chinese who returned to visit or settle in China. He particularly mentioned

²⁰ The museum was closed down in 1965 when the Chinese party-state radicalized its policies toward the Returned Overseas Chinese and their families who were not trusted by the party-state due to connections with the outside world. It was only after China launched the Opening up and Reform programme in 1979 that the CCP began to see 'overseas connection' once again as an asset rather than a problem. In 1981, the Overseas Chinese Museum was reopened as a cultural institute under the leadership of the CCP's United Front Work Department of Xiamen.

that one function of the museum was to support the cultural and educational development of the Chinese communities overseas (Tan 1999 [1956]: 7). It is sufficient to say that the Overseas Chinese Museum had had an international, if not global, reach of audiences from the day it was opened. The museum was built as a rallying point for the participation of the Overseas Chinese from around the world in the construction of a modern Chinese homeland.

4.2. Articulating a Diasporic Imagination of the Chinese Nation in the Turtle Garden

While the Overseas Chinese Museums represents Tan's effort to transmit a scientific conceptualization of Europe-originated museology to China, and through which, produce a new understanding of Chinese cultural heritage and the Chinese nation, the Turtle Garden was an innovative attempt to re-configure social, cultural and political elements of the colonial past for the creation of an (imagined) new China in the postcolonial present. Located in Jimei, Tan's home village on the outskirts of Xiamen, the Turtle Garden covers 9,000 square meters. It is enclosed by walls and includes an assortment of buildings and pavilions, trees and flowers. A roofed corridor goes from the entrance to the rest parts of the garden. In the center of the garden stand two main structures: one is the Jimei Liberation Monument that Tan built to commemorate the liberation of his home village by the communist troops from the occupation of the

Chinese Nationalist forces, and the other is a mausoleum where Tan was buried after this death. A distinctive feature of the garden is its extensive stone carvings that create a rich world of images as both artistic decoration and objects for display in their own right. These carvings are displayed on the galleries placed at both sides of the roofed corridor that connects the garden entrance to other parts of the garden, on the stone frames of the monument podium as well as a folding-screen-shaped stone wall between the monument and the mausoleum. It also has a large number of calligraphies, couplets and slogans inscribed on stone lintels and stone pillars as well as stone-carved figures, events, maps, plants and animals displayed throughout the garden.²¹

The Turtle Garden is described as a “three-dimensional encyclopedia” (Liu 2014a: 104) that visualize Chinese history and cultural values alongside Western-originated modern subjects and notions in the stone carvings displayed in the garden. While it offered the local residents and visitors a fun place to relax, the garden also acted as an open-air museum where people immersed themselves in new knowledge and ideas. There is a long history of gardening among Chinese gentry-officials who, by blending ornate architectures and natural elements, recreated miniaturized natural landscapes to symbolize their inner worlds (Ji 1988; Keswick 2003: 51). This tradition has also

²¹ The Turtle Garden was raided by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. Luckily, it survived the chaos with only a small number of stone carvings damaged. The Garden was restored in the early 1980s, and in 1988 it was listed as one of China’s key cultural relics by the State Council. Since the late 1990s, the garden has been further developed into a tourist spot as well as a base for patriotic education. See *Tan Kah Kee Memorial Resort Tourist Guide*, Jimei, 2013.

inherited by the elites of Overseas Chinese. As early as the 1930s, the legendary Burmese Chinese entrepreneur and philanthropist Aw Boon Haw 阿邦 (1882-1954), best known as the founder of Tiger Balm ointment,²² built two gardens in Hong Kong and Singapore respectively.²³ The twin gardens, called Tiger Balm Gardens after the flagship product of his family business, were built on the extensive grounds of his private residences named Haw Par Villa (阿邦別墅). The gardens were opened by Aw to the public as popular recreational facilities and advertisement spaces for the Tiger Balm products produced by the family. Furthermore, Aw had more than 1,000 statues and 150 colored giant tableaux placed in the gardens, many of which depicting Chinese folklore, legends, religion and moral stories. The gardens were therefore also “classrooms” where the visitors, most of whom were poor and unlettered Chinese migrants, were exposed to Chinese history, cultures and Confucian moralities (Huang and Hong, 2007; Teo and Yeoh, 1997).

²² Aw Boon Haw was born into an Overseas Chinese family in Burma originated from Yongding county, Fujian province, China. He later established a business empire in Asia that included pharmaceutical companies, publishing firms and a bank. For the business activities of Aw, see Coclanis (1995: 88–98) and Cochran (2001:1–14).

²³ The Tiger Palm Garden in Hong Kong was opened in 1935. It was closed in the early 1970s following redevelopment into an amusement park and then into housing. The Haw Par Villa, together with its private garden, is now preserved as a museum. The garden in Singapore was opened in 1937. It was acquired by the state in 1985 and has continued as a tourist attraction. In 1946, Aw started to build a third Haw Par Villa in his home village at Yongding, Fujian province. It was however abandoned in 1949. On the site of the original garden a museum was opened in 1994.

It is not the aim of this paper to investigate if, or to what extent, Tan was inspired by the Tiger Balm Gardens when he built the Turtle Garden. The answering of this question requires a separate research. Instead, it is aimed at bringing to light the unique ways in which Tan used the Turtle Garden as an open-air museum, rather than merely a recreational space and a commercial branding tool, to articulate his diasporic imagination of Chinese identities and the Chinese nation. I have argued elsewhere (Wang 2016: 537–538) that the Turtle Garden is “a zone of mixing and blending” that demonstrates an abundance of dualities and Tan’s struggling with self and national identifications. The first duality is “Communism” vs. “Confucianism.” In the galleries placed alongside the roofed corridor, stone engravings visualizing landmark events in Chinese communist revolution, such as the May Fourth Movement, the Long March and Mao’s famous Yan’an talks on arts and literature, were placed side by side with those depicting Zhuge Liang’s²⁴ mythical prediction of the rise and fall of Chinese dynasties. The prophet suggests Mao and the CCP were preordained to lead China toward a brighter future. The second duality is the contradiction between “modernity” and “tradition.” Abundant visual representations of West-originated modern subjects, such as biology, geography, botany, industrialization, urbanization, education and public health, sports and civilized custom and behavior, are found in many places of the garden. The exhibition of these modern subjects is in sharp contrast to stone carvings of traditional Chinese moral stories and scenes of classic historical sagas and

²⁴ Zhuge Liang 諸葛亮 (181–234), the prime minister of the Kingdom of Shu and a man of superb wisdom in Chinese folklore.

popular operas that instill Confucian virtues such as loyalty, filial piety and righteousness. (Figure 5)

<Figure 5 inserted here>

Figure 5. Confucian moral stories illustrated on the gallery along the roofed corridor starts from the garden entrance, Xiamen, 30 August 2015 (photo by the author)

<Figure 6 inserted here>

Figure 6. Stone carving of maps on the wall between the monument and the mausoleum, Xiamen, 30 August 2015 (photo by the author)

Thirdly, the garden is built at Tan's home village and is also where he was buried after his 1961 death. The contradiction and unification of life and death signifies the homecoming of Tan as a diasporic Chinese. It also symbolizes the emotional attachment of the Overseas Chinese who have settled in the adopted countries but have kept various connections with the homeland, in reality or imagination. Fourthly, Tan's tomb stands next to the Jimei Liberation Monument in the garden. The juxtaposition of private and political spaces signifies the entanglement of Tan's personal soul-searching as a diasporic Chinese and his longing for a modern Chinese nation-state as a champion of Overseas Chinese nationalism. Finally, despite its small size, the garden exhibits a much broader vision that goes beyond the place of Jimei and Xiamen. The maps of

Tongan County, Fujian Province, Taiwan, China and the world were carved on the stone wall between the monument and the mausoleum (Figure 6). These maps visualize a trans-local sense of space that bridges the gaps between the local, the national and the global. They reinforced Tan's vision to embrace various spheres of the world, articulating strongly a diasporic imagination of self and national identities beyond the territorial boundary of nation-state.

In sum, the Turtle garden represents a fascinating juxtaposition of a wide range of conflicting ideas, understandings and values - Communism and Confucian, traditional and modern, local and global, individual and national, rational and emotional, life and death - each demanding equal dialogic status. This unavoidably produces ambivalence between personal experience, emotional/ancestral longings and political realities; in the meantime, it unleashes a liberating power to challenge the authorised museum discourse that promoted the Soviet model of museums and propagandized anti-imperialism revolutionary ideals and socialist ideology. The Turtle Garden is therefore at once a museum and a miniaturised natural landscape symbolizing Tan's spiritual world in which he sought painstakingly to figure out who he was and articulate his vision of a modern Chinese nation from a diasporic perspective.

5. Conclusion

This study is an attempt to re-examine and re-conceptualize museum endeavors of Tan Kah Kee in 1950s China. The existing research of Tan's museum practices focus mostly on how he developed museums with the support of the Overseas Chinese as an educational institute to modernize China. While this was certainly an important part of his museum undertaking, this paper seeks to analyse his contributions from a longitudinal perspective and by adopting a transnational view. By contextualizing Tan's museum exercises in his life experiences as a Chinese migrant moving back and forth between South China and British Malaya, and through looking into the architectural design, collection and audiences of the museums he built, it put forward two interrelated arguments. Firstly, the Overseas Chinese, represented by Tan, opened up an alternative route of transmitting museology from the West to China. Instead of transferring the knowledge of museums directly from Western countries, as in the case of early European missionaries, the Chinese scholar-officials in the late Qing and early Republic era and the returned Chinese scholars and students studying abroad in the 1930s, the Overseas Chinese acquired the knowledge of museum and other modern ideas through their everyday encounter with mediated Western modernity in colonial Southeast Asia and then brought them back to China indirectly. This study therefore contributes to the scholarship Chinese museums by bringing to light the agency of the Overseas Chinese in China's museum development that has been understudied, if not overlooked, in the existing literature.

Secondly and more importantly, it argues for the emergence of a new museum category in Tan's building of museums in 1950s China. Drawing on Chan (2018), I call it "diaspora museum", a heritage-making space constructed out of the interactions between Chinese diasporas and the Chinese homeland. Underpinned by a de-territorial stance and a cosmopolitan vision unseen in other Chinese museums at that time, "diaspora museum" is where the past and the present and the domestic and the international are juxtaposed and negotiated and where the prevailing territorialized and politicized discourse of Chinese cultural heritage was problematized and suspended. It opened up a productive space for a diasporic imagination of the Chinese nation and the Chinese identities in a global context.

Tan's pioneering museum endeavors laid the foundation of "diasporic heritage-making" through museum, a cultural tradition that has a long-lasting impact on museum development in China today and among the Overseas Chinese communities. Indeed, one of the most recent museum developments in post-Mao China is an upsurge of the so-called "Overseas Chinese museums", including museums and exhibition halls established at different levels across China on the history of Chinese emigration and their relations with the Chinese homeland, showing a rekindled interest and a new form in China's engagement with the Chinese diasporas (Wang 2021). In parallel, since the late 1970s, museums on the history of Chinese migration and settlement have been set up by the Chinese communities in major destinations of Chinese immigrants as a way

to remember the past and articulate their identity as a minority group in the multicultural and multi-ethnic context of the host countries (Fang 2014: 57–59; Qi 2012: 77-80; Zhang 2012). While the on-going diasporic museum building around the world awaits further investigation, a re-examination of Tan’s museum endeavors unveils the genesis of its development that could be traced to 1950s China. More broadly, this research reminds us of the intricate connections between museum, mobility and meaning, the study of which has a larger implication for the research of Chinese diasporas and beyond.

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