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## **Ambivalent heritage: the im/possibility of museumifying the Overseas Chinese in South China**

### **Introduction**

Heritage enterprises in China and elsewhere have traditionally focused on what Macdonald called “settled heritage”, defined as ‘sedimented, publically established and valued distillation of history’ (Macdonald, 2009a: 93). By celebrating the glorious moments and heroic figures treasured or at least comfortably acknowledged as part of a nation’s past, the state authorities construct desirable collective memories and shared ethnic and national identity among people in the present. There is no exception in China’s ongoing heritage-making related to the Overseas Chinese.<sup>1</sup> Since the mid-1990s, the Chinese party-state has put enormous effort to building a large number of museums on the history of Overseas Chinese across China. Since then, over twenty “Overseas Chinese museums” have mushroomed across China at different levels. The provinces of Guangdong and Fujian, China’s major *qiaoxiang* (侨乡 hometown of the Overseas Chinese), are, to date, where the majority of ‘Overseas Chinese museums’ is located. The tide of ‘Overseas Chinese museum’ building has gradually spread to other parts of China, including major metropolises, such as Beijing and Shanghai, and smaller cities in the hinterland, such as Taizhou in Jiangsu province and Heihe in Heilongjiang province. In October 2014, the Overseas Chinese History Museum of China (referred to hereafter as OCHMC) was officially opened in Beijing, marking the peak of a nation-wide “Overseas Chinese museum fever”. At the time of writing this paper, about ten more museums that feature the Overseas Chinese were under

construction in the provinces of Guangdong, Fujian, Hainan, Zhejiang and Yunnan (Zhang, 2013; Fang, 2014; Tan, 2016).

Despite vary in location, size and style, the ‘Overseas Chinese museums’ are unified by an overarching and monolithic patriotic discourse. The aims of building museums on the subject of the Overseas Chinese, as proclaimed in an official document issued by the All-China Federation of the Returned Overseas Chinese in 2005, are “to propagandise the struggling history of the Overseas Chinese, to nurture the motherland-oriented sentiments and patriotic spirits embodied by the Overseas Chinese among the Chinese people, to demonstrate the great contributions of the Overseas Chinese to their motherland as well as to their hosted countries, and to promote China’s global cultural exchange with countries all over the world” (Li, 2014: 5). This authorized agenda on exhibiting the Overseas Chinese is best exemplified by the date chosen by the Chinese authorities for the 2014 opening of OCHMC, the first national museum on the history of the Overseas Chinese. The museum was opened on the 140<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Chen Jiageng<sup>2</sup> 陈嘉庚, the indisputable leader of the Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia in their moral and financial support of China’s War of Resistance against Japan, and the symbol of Overseas Chinese nationalism in the People’s Republic of China (referred to hereafter as PRC). Chen was hailed by Mao Zedong as “the banner of Overseas Chinese and the glory of Chinese nation” (Chen, 1993: 486), and became the founding chairman of All-China Federation of the Returned Overseas Chinese in the PRC. By memorizing heroic figures such as Chen Jiageng and treasuring the contribution of the Overseas Chinese to China’s revolutions and modernization causes, the party-state presents the Overseas Chinese as a highly unified “patriotic subject”. When the Chinese authorities are keen to realise the great revival of the Chinese civilization, or in the words of current Chinese

president Xi Jinping, the “China Dream”, the museum representation of the Overseas Chinese plays an unprecedentedly important role in promoting a “transnational nationalism” (Ang, 2001: 81) based on, real or imagined, shared ancestral, cultural and ethnic roots among the domestic and overseas Chinese.

The narrative structures and curating practices of staging the Overseas Chinese in China’s museum space have been discussed elsewhere (Wang, 2016; 2017). This article is aimed at examining an so far under-discussed aspect in the tide of the Overseas Chinese museums construction, that is, issues related to heritagizing the historical moments or figures of the Overseas Chinese that are “unsettled” or “uncomfortable” and therefore difficult to stage. “Difficult heritage” is a concept firstly developed in tourism studies under the guise of “dark” tourism or thanatourism (Biran et al., 2011; Dann and Seaton, 2001; Stone, 2006; Merrill, 2010). It now refers to heritage sites related to dark and traumatic memories about death, disasters and suffering (Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996; Uzzell and Ballantyne, 1998; Meskell, 2002; Price, 2005) or the senses of pain and shame when it comes to heritagize such scars of history as massacre and genocide sites, places related to war, civil and political prisons and places of “benevolent” internment (Logan and Reeves, 2009). Due to its close association with the negative side of the past, “difficult heritage” is also called “uncomfortable heritage” (Merrill, 2010) or “traumatic heritage” (Pantzou, 2011), the management of which requires a great deal of care and good strategic practice in order to achieve healing for positive transformation and change.

“Difficult heritage” raises important questions regarding the dis/continuity of national, collective and individual identities in the discourse and practice of museum and heritage. Macdonald asked the important question of “what happens when ideas of the continuity, persistence and substantiality of heritage for identity become



problematic” (2006: 11). While in her study, the architecture built by Germany’s Nazi was conceptualized as “undesirable heritage” that people in the present want to distance themselves from (MacDonald, 2009b), the “diasporic heritage” discussed in this research has evoked a different kind of difficulty. Here, the past is difficult not in the sense of being traumatic or painful like the Holocaust, although it may also involve senses of pain when recalling the past. Rather, the past is difficult in that it is deeply unsettled, creating an almost unsurmountable dilemma when it comes to the evaluation and uses of heritage. Indeed, produced and developed in transnational spaces and over time, diasporic heritage is associated with a high degree of complexity in terms of ownership, value and meanings, the interpretation of which involves almost inevitably endless negotiations between multiple perspectives that often go beyond the narrow framework of nation-state. One of the difficulties in dealing with diasporic heritage is how to manage the contradiction between this inherently de-territorialized nature of diasporic heritage and the often highly territorialized interpretation of it by state authorities.

In the specific context of museum representation of the Overseas Chinese in the PRC, the heritagization of Chinese diaspora has been dominated by a state discourse that is aimed at representing the Overseas Chinese, no matter how culturally hybrid and socially fragmented they are, as a singular China-oriented patriotic subject. Under this discourse, it is not unusual to see that heritage sites, despite possessing significant historical and aesthetic values widely acclaimed by the local residents and the Overseas Chinese, are not considered museumifiable by the state authorities because they do not fit comfortably the authorized discourse. The engagement with heritage of this kind creates inevitably conflicting views on the interpretation and uses of heritage, causing confusion and discord among people who seek to inherit the past for the

construction of a desirable contemporary identity. I therefore call it “ambivalent heritage”, referring to a physical remain of the past that people in the present want to engage with but are confused with how to deal with its interpretation and ways of representation. “Ambivalent heritage” confuses people more than it hurts them. It produces almost inevitably an awkward situation in which parties involved in the heritagization process are perplexed by questions of how to interpret the past, by whom and for what purposes.

Using the concept of “ambivalent heritage” as a framing device, this article investigates the im/possibility of heritagizing the Overseas Chinese through a case study of Longdu 隆都, Shantou, China. Shantou is situated at the eastern part of Guangdong province. Sitting on one of the major trading routes from Eastern Guangdong to Southeast Asia, Shantou, together with its adjoining city Chaozhou, has been a major sending area of the Overseas Chinese since the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, with Siam (Thailand after 1939) as the major destination (Skinner, 1957). Since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Shantou and Chaozhou have been called collectively as Chao-Shan 潮汕 region due to the close geographic, linguistic and cultural affinities between these two areas. It is estimated that there are now approximately eight million Overseas Chinese originated from the Chao-Shan region, with the majority in Thailand (Huang, 2003: 25).

Longdu, where this research is based, is well known for the large number of *qiaozhai* (侨宅, houses built by the Overseas Chinese) scattered in the villages under its administration. Among them, the Chen Cihong Residence (陈祠洪宅, hereafter referred to as the Chen Residence), a short-hand name for a number of compounds built by the Chen family during the period from 1920s to 1940s, is best known for the well-preserved structure and outstanding architectural values that it possesses. It is

even applauded by many local elites as “the number-one *qiaozhai* in South China” 侨乡 (Shen, 2002). The local authorities of Longdu township and the village committee of Qianmei 前美, where the Chen Residence sits, have shown great interests in preserving and using the cultural heritage of the Overseas Chinese. In 2013, the Longdu township government set out a plan to build an eco-museum, featuring the Chen Residence, to preserve and exhibit the heritage related to the Overseas Chinese. It was backed by the district government of Chenghai that officially listed this project as the “flagship” in the long-term strategic development of the region.<sup>3</sup>

The writing of this article is based on my fieldwork in Longdu in the summer of 2014 and 2015. A holistic method was employed for this research that included archive studies, qualitatively-oriented interviews, site visits and archive studies. Over 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with local government officials, members of the village committee of Qianmei. I also conducted numerous informal interviews with the local villagers and tourists who visited the Chen Residence, and made multiple site visits of the Residence and other major heritage sites at Longdu. Data collected from the fieldwork were supplemented by archives on the history of the Chen family and the local history of overseas migration, obtained from local chronicles, and newspapers.

The initial idea of this research was to follow the development of the eco-museum initiative and explore how the notion and practice of eco-museum can contribute to the preservation of diasporic heritage in rural China. However, the museum project was eventually suspended by the Longdu township authorities. This unexpected course of development prompted me to think what we can learn from, not the success of, but difficulties in museumfying the Overseas Chinese. As argued by Carr and Colls, “heritage is just as much ‘what goes on’ and what people are

prevented from doing at sites as it is about the sites themselves” (2016: 704). This article therefore seeks to answer the following questions: Why were the local authorities of Longdu keen to preserve and promote the Chen Residence at this particular time and place? Why, despite the initial interests, the museum proposal was unable to materialize? What could this case study tell us about the limits of using diasporic heritage in China (and elsewhere), and how could it shed new light on understanding the complexities in museumifying the Overseas Chinese in China today?

In the following, it first contextualizes the preservation of the Chen Residence in the reviving *qiaoxiang* project in Eastern Guangdong. It then introduces the history of the Chen family and the intricate relationship between the family and the Chen Residence. The main body is given to disentangling the ambivalent and conflicting meanings embedded in the Chen Residence, and to unveiling the contested ways in which it is seen, evaluated and used. My conceptualization of “ambivalent heritage” through the case study of the Chen Residence will advance two broader arguments. First, it is urgent to introduce a diasporic perspective to the study of cultural heritage that has been so far dominated by a restricting nation-state framework. Second, diasporic heritage is highly contested in nature. It not always managiabale and may become a source of discord if not treated with great care. It is necessary to develop new insights and innovative practices in the preservation and uses of diasporic heritage, not only in China but also elsewhere.

### **The reviving *qiaoxiang* project in Eastern Guangdong**

Since China embarked on the “open-door reform” in 1978, the *qiaoxiang* in

South China have gradually restored their social and economic connections with the Overseas Chinese communities that was seriously damaged during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). It has been widely recognized that the Overseas Chinese had contributed significantly to the modernization of *qiaoxiang* in the 1980s and 1990s through donations and investments (Douw, Huang, and Godley, 1999; Huang Jing, 2003). However, not every *qiaoxiang* benefited from their historically-formed linkages with the Overseas Chinese. While those sitting in the Pearl River Delta area usually enjoyed a relatively smooth restoration of *qiaoxiang* ties due to the geographical proximity to Hong Kong and Macau and thus easier access to the outside world, the Chao-Shan region did not experience the same level of success. This is not only because of geographical distance of the Chao-Shan region to the economic centre of Guangdong, but also, and more importantly, the changed identities of the Overseas Chinese originated from the Chao-Shan region. Research suggested that descendants of the early Chinese emigrants from the Chao-Shan region, mostly living in Thailand, have identified with the host country politically and culturally. Seeing themselves as Thai rather than Chinese, they have had little motivations to restore, let alone strengthen, connections with their ancestral homeland (Yow, 2007; Chao and Deng, 2009; Huang Xiaojian, 2013). The Chao-Shan region is therefore termed by some scholars as a typical example of the “declining *qiaoxiang*” (Huang Jing, 2003) given the weakening relationship between the hometown and the Overseas Chinese.

To catch up with cities in the Pearl River Delta area that have benefited hugely from their connections with the Overseas Chinese, the local authorities of the Chao-Shan region are keen to revive its *qiaoxiang* status, and to make use of *qiaoxiang* ties for city branding and to promote local economic growth. Since 2008,

major cities in the Chao-Chan region have convened six consecutive Eastern Guangdong Overseas Chinese Expos 侨博会. It was hosted in rotation by Shantou, Chaozhou, Jieyang and Shanwei, the four prefecture-level cities in Eastern Guangdong. The purpose of the Expo is to bring the *huaqiao* resources 侨资 into full play, to set up a platform to gather support from the Overseas Chinese, attract foreign investment and securing economic cooperation, and to promote the development of eastern Guangdong to a higher level. In 2013, during the fifth Expo, the Shantou municipal government launched the “Overseas Chinese Economic and Cultural Experimental Zone” in the coastal area of Shantou as “China’s gateway to the Overseas Chinese” 侨胞门户. The aim of this initiative was to explore new ways to tap into the *huaqiao* resources to enhance the cooperation between China and the Overseas Chinese in banking, manufacturing, trading, logistics and cultural exchange (Huang Yingchuan, 2013).

During the 2015 Expo, by drawing on the “One Belt One Road” 一带一路 rhetoric,<sup>4</sup> a global strategy initiated by the Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, the Chaozhou municipal government that hosted the 2015 Expo announced that it would use diasporic heritage as the “spring board” to join the tide of globalization and enhance economic growth. It subsequently branded Chaozhou as “a key nodal city in the maritime silk road, and the spiritual home of all Chao People” 潮人精神家园 (‘Innovation as a driving force,’ 2015). It was under these circumstances that the local authorities of the Chao-Shan region placed the use of diasporic heritage high on its politico-economic agenda. The uses of the Chen Residence, the most prominent built heritage of the Overseas Chinese in the region, however, has proven to be a difficult one. Before unpacking the controversies surrounding the preservation of the Chen Residence, it is necessary to first introduce who Chen Cihong is and why he

built the Chen Residence in the village.

### **The Chen family and the Chen Cihong Residence**

Chen Cihong was born in Qianxi 前溪 village in 1843.<sup>5</sup> His father Chen Huanrong (陈欢荣 also called 陈欢) engaged with the shipping and trading business between China and Southeast Asia with Hong Kong as the trading centre (Choi, 1995; 2006). Following his father's footsteps, Cihong continued to do trading and extended the business to Siam and some other countries in the region. In 1871, he established the Hongli Company 洪利公司 to specialize in the processing and trading of rice between Thailand and South China. The family business continued to prosper under Chen Limei 林梅 (Chen Cihong's second son, 1880-1930) and Chen Shouming 守明 (Chen Cihong's grandson, 1903-1945). By the end of the 1930s, based at Bangkok, the Chen family had established an economic kingdom integrating trading, shipping, banking and insurance industries, among others, with key branches established in Singapore, Hong Kong, Shantou, Saigon and Penang (Luo, 2012; Wang, 1997; Wang, 1998).

From the time of Chen Huanrong, the Chen family had begun to purchase large pieces of land in Shantou, then a thriving port city, and in their home village Qianmei. While they set up shops in Shantou to do business, they invested huge amount of money and time in building houses in Qianmei. Since 1871, the Chen family had built a total of 12 grand compounds over three generations, including residential houses, an ancestral hall, guest houses, study rooms, gardens, and so on. The main compounds include 朗中堂 (the Langzhong Mansion), built for his second son Chen Limei 林梅 during the period from 1910 to 1920; 尚书堂 (the Shoukang Mansion) and 三和堂 (the San

House), built by his eldest son Chen Lixun 陈立勋 during the period from 1922 to 1930; 山居 (the Shanju Mansion), built by his youngest Chen Litong 陈立同 during the period from 1922 to 1939. The house building came to an abrupt end in 1939 when the whole family was forced to retreat to Thailand on the eve of Japanese troops' invasion of Shantou. These houses sit next to each other, occupying a total of 6,530 square meters, consisting of approximately 506 rooms and halls (EBLCOC, 2013). They are now collectively called Chen Cihong Residence, an umbrella name used by the local to refer to all the houses built and owned by the Chen family.



Figure 1. The facade of the Shanju Mansion. Photo by the author, August 2014.

The Chen Residence stands out from *qiaozhais* in the Chao-Shan region and in other *qiaoxiang* in South China by not only the massive size of its residential complex, but also its unique style that blends the Chaozhou architectural tradition and imported techniques and aesthetics.<sup>6</sup> The Shanju Mansion, the best-preserved and so far the only one opened to the public, is discussed here to illustrate the architectural feature of the Residence (Figure 1). The main structure of the Shanju Mansion was typically



Chaozhou: it was made up of three entrances, and in each entrance sat a large residential house and a courtyard in front of the house. On both sides of the compound placed two lanes as walking corridors and for ventilation. A large open square was placed in front of the main entrance of the mansion, and a private garden was built at the rear of the residential area. The whole compound was surrounded by walls; inside the compound, houses and spaces were well connected by carefully-designed gateways. Traditional wooden and stone carving techniques were used in the interior decoration, particularly in the decoration of doors and windows. Stone tablets inscribed the name of the courtyard or Chinese poetic phrases were placed inside the houses as an expression of the owner's moral values and aesthetic tastes.



Figure 2. A corner of the courtyard of the Shanju Mansion. Photo by the author, August 2014.

The Shanju Mansion demonstrates innovative use of a wide range of architectural

techniques and materials imported from abroad, reflecting the owner's diasporic experiences and cosmopolitan outlook. For example, while the traditional Chaozhou residential houses are mostly one-storey building, the owner of the house built two-storey architectures surrounding the courtyards. In addition, concrete imported from Europe, called “red-hair lime” 紅毛灰 by the villagers at that time,<sup>7</sup> were used extensively in the building of the compound. The floors and walls throughout the compound were clad with imported ceramic tiles. More than a hundred different types of glazed tills with different colour and patterns were used to decorate floor, walls and archways (Figure 2). The windows, the size of which was much larger than that of the local houses, were the areas where the most sophisticated ornamentation were displayed. Colourful tills or glasses were put into geometric shapes, decorated with alphabetic Latin letters alongside Chinese scripts in some places.<sup>8</sup>

After the Chen family retreated to Thailand, the Residence had been largely unoccupied for years. It was confiscated by the Chinese government during the 1950s Land Reform, with many houses belonging to the Chen family allocated to the village committee and villagers as offices or living quarters (Luo, 2012: 194). In the early 1980s, keen to remedy its relationship with the Overseas Chinese, the CCP issued policies to urge the local government to return the wrongfully taken properties to the Overseas Chinese. It was under these circumstances that the Chen family resumed the ownership of the Residence in 1987 (EBLCOC, 2013: 16-17). The family subsequently set up a private company to look after the Chen Residence. A villager who was a distant relative of the family was hired to manage the daily operation of the company. In 1990, the family opened the Shanju Mansion to public visitors. After that, the architectural value of the Chen Residence has gradually received wider attention. In 2002, it was listed as the “Key Unit of Cultural Relics Protection of Guangdong

Province” 广东省历史文化名村. By the time of my visits, the Qianmei village has been awarded a number of glossy titles, including “China’s Historical and Cultural Village” 中国历史文化名村, “Guangdong Historical and Cultural Village” 广东省历史文化名村 and the “Demonstration Area of the Most Beautiful Villages in Guangdong” 广东省最美乡村示范区, among others.

Despite the widely-recognized cultural value of the Chen Residence, its preservation and uses is far from being straightforward. Instead, as will be discussed in the following section, the heritagization of the Chen Residence has been a complicated and frustrating process. As reminded by Logan and Reeves (2009: 13), ‘heritage conservation is a form of cultural politics; it is about the links between ideology, public policy, national and community identity formation, and celebration, just as much as it is about technical issues relating to restoration and adaptive re-use techniques’. To understand the difficulties in museumifying the Chen Residence, it is necessary to look beyond the materiality of the houses to examine broader issues of memories, politics and identities inherently associated with the Residence and embedded in history.

### **Difficult history, ambivalent heritage**

Although the Chen family has left China for nearly eighty years, stories about Chen Cihong has been passed on over generations in the form of folklore and chronicled in gazetteers (Luo, 2012: 154-157). Memories about Chen Cihong and the Chen family are however by no means singular or coherent. Instead, during my fieldwork in Qianmei, I encountered three different, despite overlapping at times, narratives about Chen Cihong, centring on the matter of economic success, class

differentiation and social reputation respectively. Three faces of Chen Cihong therefore emerge from these contested narratives.

The first face of Chen Cihong is an admirable “commercial genius” who makes his regional fellows proud. People whom I talked to, from governmental officials, tour guides to common residents of the village, were all familiar with the legendary story of Chen Cihong. Many told me his stories with spontaneous enthusiasm and pride. In this version of narrative, Chen was depicted as a talented and hardworking man with great foresight and sagacity in business. It was his decision to run rice trading between China and Thailand that laid the foundation for the family business. He was also known for being highly adaptable and bold in innovation, exemplified in the introduction of machinery to rice mills that solidified his dominance in business. In the same spirit, his son Chen Limei established shipping industry and set up money shops across major cities in Southeast Asia. Chen Shouming, Cihong’s grandson, expanded the family business to banking and insurance industries in the 1930s, providing the family business with much needed financial security (Luo, 2012: 170-83; Wang, 1994).

The second face of Chen Cihong is a despotic landlord who enjoyed a high status and enormous power in the village. After successfully established his family business in Thailand, Chen Cihong retreated to Qianmei. He spent the rest of his life at his home village and was buried on the outskirts of the village after he died in 1921 aged 78. The income from land renting and trading business made it possible for him to live an extravagant life, and to invest huge amount of money in house building. The compounds built by the Chen family were so splendid and the influences of Chen in the village was so powerful, that the villagers called the Residence “royal palace” with a sense of awe and jealousy (Luo, 2012: 156-157). It was not surprising that

during the 1950s Land Reform, the Chen family was classified as ‘landlord’ in absentia and their property confiscated by the local government. When I visited the Chen Residence in 2014, the images of Chairman Mao and the big character “loyalty” 忠 printed on the walls during the Cultural Revolution were still visible, reminding us of the “class struggle” and turbulent political campaigns that the village went through, and the deeply-rooted social and economic split between the Chen family and villagers that once tore the village apart.



Figure 3. The San House is now used as the office of Qianmei village committee and party committee. Photo by the author, July 2015.

The third face of Chen Cihong is a benevolent gentry who looked after the wellbeing of the fellow villagers. He generously funded the construction and renovation of dikes in the village, and provided free or affordable medicine to poor

villagers (Luo, 2012: 47-48). In 1907, Chen Cihong opened and funded a modern educational institute “Chengde Junior and Senior Primary School” (成德小学堂) using the ancestral hall he built as classroom and school office, offering free education to children in the village. It was renamed “Chengde School” (成德学校) in 1912 and continuously received generous funding from Chen Cihong (EBLCOC, 2013: 119).<sup>9</sup> In 1909, his son Chen Limei made a substantial donation to China towards disaster relief for which he was awarded a senior honorary title *Langzhong* 郎中 by the Qing court. In addition, Chen Cihong and his sons often offered free passages to the fellow villagers who travelled to Thailand, and assisted them in job seeking and accommodation in the initial stage of their settlement (EBLCOC, 2013: 122). The Chen Residence continuously offered (unintended) services to the village even after the family left China. For instance, in the 1950s, some of the houses were used by the People’s Liberation Army troops as barracks, and during the Cultural Revolution the Residence was used by the township government to host large-scale political meetings. At the time of my visit, the ancestral hall was used as a kindergarten, and the San House the office of the Qianmei village committee and party committee (Figure 3). In the words of Mr. Chen, the former chairman of the Qianmei village committee, “to be honest, we have benefited greatly from the Chen Residence”.<sup>10</sup>

The multifaceted, if not conflicting, memories about Chen Cihong are further complicated by the “mysterious” death of Chen Shouming, the leading figure of the third-generation of the Chen family. Chen Shouming was elected chairman of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Thailand 在泰华商会 in 1932 and again 1935. He was a member of the first and second National Political Council of China 国民参政会 (running from 1938 to 1948), the highest-level consultative body attended by representatives of all political parties and social groups including the Overseas

Chinese. He made substantial donations to the Nationalist Government to support China's War of Resistance against Japan (EBLCOC, 2013: 127). After the Japanese troops occupied Thailand in 1941, however, "out of consideration of safety and security of the Chinese community, and under the coercion of Japanese, he endured the humiliation to take up the role of Chairman of Chinese Chamber of Commerce for two consecutive terms" (EBLCOC, 2013: 127). On 15<sup>th</sup> August 1945, the day the Japanese troop surrendered to the Allied, he was assassinated in Bangkok.

It was not entirely clear who assassinated him and why. One may say that this event probably had things to do with his "cooperation" with the Japanese occupation troops during the war period that was interpreted by some Chinese patriots as betraying the motherland. However, intriguingly, the Nationalist and the Communist parties of China responded to the event very differently. While senior politicians from the Nationalist Government, including Song Ziwen 宋子文, Bai Chongxi 白崇禧 and Zhu Jiahua 朱家骅, sent condolences to his family and eulogized him as a national hero (EBLCOC, 2013: 127), the Chinese Communist Party (referred to as CCP hereafter) kept silent. At a time when the Communists and the Nationalists were in bitter battle for the support of the Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, as a leader of the Overseas Chinese in Thailand, Chen Shouming was inescapably involved in China's domestic politics. In this sense, he was a victim of not only the war but also ideological struggles between China's two political parties at that time. The assassination of Chen Shouming is a taboo subject in the PRC. No conclusion about this historical incident has been made and no research of this event was published. Although the event is not completely obliterated from CCP's historical account of the Overseas Chinese, the mention of it is extremely cursory and vague.<sup>11</sup> The side-lining, if not completely forgetting, of Chen Shouming is in stark contrast to aforementioned museum

commemoration of Chen Jiageng as a symbol of overseas Chinese nationalism in the PRC.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Chen Residence as a contested site of museumification**

As a place with a traumatic past and ambivalent identities, the Chen Residence “threatens to break through into the present in disruptive ways, opening up social divisions, perhaps by playing into imagined, even nightmarish, futures” (Macdonald, 2009b: 1). Indeed, the Chen Residence is a highly contested entity with conflicting meanings and inherently ambiguous values, closely associated with the cultural identities of the place and the ways in which it is interpreted by people in the present. I have identified three ongoing co-existing schemes related to the preservation and use of the Chen Residence, each with its own motivation, agency and agenda.

#### *The Chen Residence as an ancestral house*

The death of Chen Shouming marked a turning point in the relationship between the Chen family and the PRC. After the event, the family gradually withdrew its business operations from Shantou and other parts of China, and kept an aloof, if not antagonistic, stance toward the communist regime. Even after China embarked on “economic reform and opening up” in the late 1970s, the Chen family has not changed its attitude towards the Chinese government. Apart from making occasional donations to Qianmei village, notably for the construction of a new campus for the Qianmei Primary School, the family does not have any involvement in China’s political, social or economic affairs.





Figure 4. Photos of Chen Shouming displayed at the exhibition on the history of the Chen family inside the Shanju Mansion. Photo courtesy to Xiong Yanjun, March 2019.

The Chen Residence is now collectively owned by the descendants of Chen Cihong from over fifty households belonging to several different branches. The family put up a small-scale photo exhibition on the family history inside the Shanju Mansion shortly after it was opened to the public. The exhibition features a pedigree chart showing the genealogies of the Chen family, traced back to Chen Huanrong. It also put on display photos of key members of the family from each generation, including Chen Cihong, Chen Limei, Chen Shouming. Captions of these photos highlight the achievements of individual figures, and praised their contribution to the family, the village and the Overseas Chinese communities in Thailand. Notably, it

used five exhibition boards to introduce the life of Chen Shouming, who was remembered as a beloved son/father/husband, a devoted leader of the Overseas Chinese community in Thailand and a national hero who sacrificed his own life for the interest of the Chinese nation (Figure 4). Despite small in size and hidden behind the door of the Residence, the exhibition reveals to the visitors a past that is important to them but unremembered in the official narration of the Overseas Chinese. It speaks silently but powerfully a counter narrative to the state discourse that depicts the Overseas Chinese as a unified patriotic subject.

Since the late 1980s, the Chen family has organized several trips to Qianmei, during which, they visited the Chen Residence, viewed the photo exhibition and swept Chen Cihong's grave (Figure 5).<sup>13</sup> In this sense, the Chen Residence is first and foremost an ancestral house 祠堂. Regular visits of the Residence have brought together Chen family members scattered in Thailand, Hong Kong and other parts of the world, enabling them to maintain a shared identity as members of Chen family which was perhaps not achievable otherwise. Each time visiting Shantou, the Chen family kept a low profile, avoiding making any formal contacts with the local government or even the village committee. It sent out a clear message that their visits were purely for ancestor worshipping with no other interests attached.<sup>14</sup>



Figure 5. Chen Cihong's grave at Qianmei village. Photo by the author, August 2014.

Over the years, the Residence has attracted visitors from nearby cities, neighbouring provinces as well as Hong Kong, Macau and Southeast Asia. However, the number of visitors has not been particularly big.<sup>15</sup> The township authorities tried to persuade the Chen family to entrust the Residence to the local government so that the village committee could participate in the maintenance and development of the Residence. Negotiations with representatives of the Chen family have been going on and off for nearly a decade, but no progress has been made at the time of writing this paper. The Chen family made it clear that it had no interest in developing the Chen Residence into a profit-making enterprise. Instead, the purpose of setting up a company was simply to look after the Residence and use the ticket income to subsidize the maintenance cost.<sup>16</sup>

#### *The Chen Residence as a museum*

To the village committee and the township authorities, the Chen Residence is an asset for local “image-management” and “place-marketing” (Macdonald, 2009b: 1). For these purposes, in early 2013, the local authorities of Longdu decided to explore the possibility of building an eco-museum in Qiammei village, and invited a team of scholars from a major local university to draft a proposal on the museum project. The concept of eco-museum, firstly proposed by French museologists, refers to the use of an integrated approach to preserve natural and cultural heritage. Rather than having artefacts removed from the social and cultural context in which they were produced and have them displayed in artificially created exhibition halls, it emphasizes preserving the living condition of heritage and encourages co-habitation between people, environment and tradition. It also encourages the involvement of the local communities in the management of the project (Davis, 1999: 21). The construction of eco-museums in China has mainly taken place in China’s ethnic minorities regions (Su, 2001; Zhou, 2006). The Longdu township authorities are keen to establish the first eco-museum in *qiaoxiang*. According to the proposal, the museum will “become China’s only eco-museum featuring the Overseas Chinese heritage, filling a gap in China’s museum development, and enhancing the publicizing of China-Overseas Chinese relations ... guiding people to reflect upon the history of China as a maritime power and its implication to China today” (LEPDP, 2013: 15).

However, the township authorities soon called off the project. The deputy governor of Longdu township who rendered the strongest support to the museum project was reassigned to a different post outside Longdu. It was not clear why she was removed from her post and whether the reassignment had something to do with the museum initiative. When asked about the future plan for the use of the Chen

Residence, an official from the Chenghai District Government revealed that the administration in charge of cultural heritage and museums at the higher level was not particularly supportive of the idea of museum building when it comes to preserving the Chen Residence.<sup>17</sup> Due to limited access to the internal decision-making processes, the reasons why the museum project was renounced was not entirely clear. As argued by Macdonald, museum “has a sacralizing role” that would enhance the value of buildings and encourage people’s identification with the objects on display (2006: 20). One interesting dilemma dealing with heritage that is unsettled, such as the Chen Residence, is how to recognize its role in history and at the same time to “discourage visitors from looking at the display and the building itself through a ‘museum gaze’”. Such a gaze, shaped by a particular historical consciousness, seems to have been understood as potentially entailing admiration and a suspense of the critical” (Macdonald, 2006: 22). It is safe to say that the museumification of the Chen Residence would inevitably “sacralize” what is seen by the Chinese party-state as a highly problematic, and unsettling, past in the history of China-Overseas Chinese relations. Such a museumification practices will inevitably give rise to dissonance, undermining the “authorized heritage discourse” (Smith, 2006) in the PRC that is aimed at construct a unified image of the Overseas Chinese as a “patriotic subject”. The Chen Residence, despite its distinctive architectural values and noticeable historical significance, proves to be too difficult to be museumified.

### *The Chen Residence as a tourist destination*

Since 2014, the preservation of the Chen Residence has shifted dramatically from museum construction to tourist development. Early that year, the township authorities

of Longdu commissioned a team of specialists in city planning and tourist development from a Guangzhou-based university to produce a new development plan. The team made the suggestion of developing a national 4A tourist spot 国家4A级景区 in Qianmei village, under the name of “Chaozhou *Huaqiao* Cultural Tourist Zone” 潮州花桥文化旅游景区. The new proposal was then submitted to China National Tourism Administration (CNTA) for evaluation, and it soon received endorsement from the CNTA. The Provincial Tourist Bureau of Guangdong subsequently awarded the village committee four million Yuan RMB as the initial fund to kick off this tourist project.

While museums involve, explicitly or implicitly, ideological works, tourist development is a relatively softer practice that can be used to negate or at least neutralize what Macdonald called “heritage effect”, referring to the impacts of the past on the present-day construction of identity (2009b: 23). The repackaging of Qianmei as a “tourist zone” has *de facto* de-contextualized it from a politically problematic past, and re-contextualized it in a consumerist discourse in the present. What we see here is “anti-museum” (Macdonald, 2006: 22) in action, a tactic to defuse the contested nature of a heritage site. In so doing, the township authorities have found a pragmatic and safer way to deal with the Chen Residence, a site that is highly ambivalent, if not utterly difficult.





Figure 6. The “effect drawing” of the ‘Chaozhou *Huaqiao* Tourist Zone’ at Qianmei. Photo by the author, August 2014.

In my visit of the village in the summer of 2014, the official from Longdu township who was in charge of the project showed me enthusiastically an “effect drawing” of the tourist project (Figure 6). By using skilfully professional terminologies and meticulously designed colour illustrations, the drawing created an impressive and authoritarian presentation of Qianmei as a tourist destination. The core of the “tourism zone” development was to build a grand tourist resort with the Chen Residence as the focal point. Surrounding the Chen Residence and other *qiaozhai* in the village were a number of modern architectures, including a theme park, an international conference centre, high-end departments, shopping malls, a street built in the architectural style of the Republic period (1911 to 1949) with modern restaurants and pubs along both sides, an artistic activity zone, and so on. However, my interviews with the village committee members and informal communication with the villagers revealed widespread doubts about the feasibility of this ambitious plan.

Some worried that if implemented, the project will completely change, if not damaged, the natural and cultural environment of the village. They were particularly concerned with the building of a five-star hotel in the centre of the village surrounded by an artificial lake, which, according to them, will almost certainly alter the natural landscape of the village.

When re-visiting Qianmei in the summer of 2015, I saw a huge colourful illustration of the “Chaozhou *Huaqiao* Cultural Tourist Zone” hanging on the main wall in the reception room of the village committee, visualizing a dream future of the village to visitors. I was told that the initial fund awarded by the Provincial Tourist Bureau has been spent on improving the transportation and environment of the village, including renovating the main road of the village and building a new archway at the entrance of the village road. The rest was used for designing and printing commercials to publicise the tourist zone. The village committee sought to attract investment from the private sector to continuously finance this hugely expensive project, but how and when this could possibly happen remains a question.<sup>18</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The past two decades have witnessed an “Overseas Chinese museum boom” in the PRC. The museum representation of the Overseas Chinese, a marginal subject in Maoist China, has become a new site of redefining Chinese cultural heritage and representing the Chinese nation to the domestic and international audiences. By staging the Overseas Chinese as a unified and China-oriented “patriotic subject” in the museum space, the Chinese party-state is aimed at constructing a new face of China as an integral part of its pursuit of “China Dream”.



The heritagization of the Chen Cihong Residence, as examined in this article, however, suggests strongly that diasporic Chinese heritage is not as settled as depicted in the official discourse on the Overseas Chinese. Instead, it is intrinsically unsettling, uncomfortable at times, and often difficult to use. A site like the Chen Residence might be not as dark and hurtful as sites related to war, prison or atrocities, although it certainly involves painful memories about death and suffering. It however causes no less controversies on the meanings and uses of heritage. I therefore term heritage of this kind “ambivalent heritage” because “[t]he sites themselves seemed to play an active role in their own interpretation ... pressures people, almost involuntarily, to begin to debate over meaning” (Foote, 1997: 5). In other words, embedded in a complicated history and constructed in transnational spaces, the value, ownership and uses of diasporic heritage are highly contested, subject to constant negotiations among various parties involved and between the past and the present.

This research offers for the first time a discussion of the im/possibilities in museumifying the Overseas Chinese in the PRC. In so doing, it brings to light the ambiguity of diasporic heritage that has so far received little academic and policy attentions. More broadly, it makes a timely intervention in the study of Chinese heritage in particular and cultural heritage in general in two specific ways. First, it points to the urgency of introducing a diasporic perspective to the examination of cultural heritage that has been defined predominantly in the nation-state framework. In an increasingly globalized world, it is necessary to look beyond the national boundary to establish a fuller understanding of the contested nature and the uses of heritage that are closely associated with issues of transnational mobilities, shifted national and cultural identities and interconnected histories. Second, it informs the development of new insights and innovative practices in heritage preservation. As

shown in this case study, “heritage is not always as manipulable as it sometimes seems to be” (Macdonald 2009b: 23). Far from being a harmonious and manageable entity, and despite mounting enthusiasm from the national and local authorities, not only in China but also elsewhere, in using heritage for identity construction and economic development, the diasporic heritage may become a source of discord if not treated carefully.

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### **NOTES**

1. Overseas Chinese refers to Chinese nationals living abroad. Its equivalent in Chinese language is *huaqiao*. Despite the fact that a large number of Chinese living abroad today have become naturalized foreign citizens, official museums in the PRC still use the term *huaqiao* to designate them. In this paper, “*huaqiao*”, “Overseas Chinese” and “Chinese diaspora” 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.
2. His name is also transcribed as Tan Kah Kee in the Wade–Giles system based on its pronunciation of Southern Fujian dialect.
3. Author’s interview with official A from the district government of Chenghai, Shantou, 14 August 2014.
4. “One Belt One Road”, also known as Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is the abbreviation of ‘The Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road’. Xi Jinping declared the former during his visit of Kazakhstan in September 2013, and announced the latter when visiting Indonesia one month later. Initially an economic strategy to enhance trade and investment connectivity between China and Europe, Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa and South Asia, BRI has become a dominant discourse of domestic and international policies of China under Xi. For more information about BRI, see [http://ydyl.china.com.cn/2018-01/22/content\\_50267855.htm](http://ydyl.china.com.cn/2018-01/22/content_50267855.htm)
5. Qianxi village was incorporated into Qianmei village in 1941.
6. Buildings of different size and types combining Chinese and Western architectural features were widely constructed in China’s *qiaoxiang* during the 1920s and 1930s, especially in the Pearl River Delta area. Among them, the most notably one

is Diaolou 碉楼 in Kaiping county, referring to fortified multi-storey watchtowers made of reinforced concrete, that has been recognized as World Cultural Heritage. Unlike Diaolou that were built primarily for the purpose of protecting villagers against forays by bandits, the Chen Residence is designed and built as a residential compound characterized by a unique fusion of Choahzou architectural tradition and Western cultural influence that is not seen in other parts of China. For an introduction of the Diaolou in Kaiping and the emergence of new architectural landscapes in the 1930s *qiaoxiang*, Guangdong, see Zhang (2005), Xu and Situ (2004).

7. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Chao-Shan, the locals used the term “red hair” to refer to Europeans and thus called the concrete imported from Europe ‘red-hair lime’.
8. For a more detailed account of the architectural value of the Chen Residence, see Luo (2012: 144-53).
9. The ancestral hall had been continuously used as the main campus of Qianmei Primary School till the school was relocated to a new site in 1993. Since then, the ancestral hall has been used as a village kindergarten. See Luo (2012: 110-11, 134-35).
10. Author’s interview with Mr. Chen, Qianmei village, Longdu, 30 July 2015.
11. There is a short entry on Chen Shouming in the *Encyclopaedia of Chinese Overseas*, so far the most comprehensive documentation of the Overseas Chinese in the PRC. It mentions the assassination of Chen briefly but presents no further information about this incident. See Yang, Baoyun (2000: 69). No other research on Chen Shouming has been published in the PRC.
12. For instance, Yi Guangyan 叶光彦 (1879-1939), a pro-CCP leader of the Overseas Chinese communities in Thailand who was assassinated by pro-Japan forces is

commemorated as a martyr in the OCHMC. For a study of Yi Guangyan in Thailand, See Ren (1999: 234-247).

13. Author's interview with member A of the Qianmei village committee, Qianmei, Longdu, 11 August 2014.
14. Author's interview with member C of Qianmei village committee, Longdu, 11 August 2014.
15. Author's informal interview with the tour guide at the Chen Residence, Longdu, Shantou, 11 August 2014.
16. Author's interview with member B of Qianmei village committee, Longdu, 30 July 2015.
17. Author's interview with official A, Chenghai district government, Chenghai, 14 August 2014.
18. Author's interview with member C of Qianmei village committee, Longdu, 30 July 2015.

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