



Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies

Schweiger, Irmay. *The Landscape of Historical Memory. The Politics of Museums and Memorial Culture in Post-Martial Law Taiwan* by Kirk A. Denton. *Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies*, vol. 4 (2023): xxx-xxx.

DOI: xxx

BOOK REVIEW

The Landscape of Historical Memory. The Politics of Museums and Memorial Culture in Post-Martial Law Taiwan

Kirk A. Denton

Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2021. 272 pp.

ISBN: 9789888528578 (Hardback)

Irmay SCHWEIGER
Stockholm University, Sweden
irmay.schweiger@su.se

Keywords: Taiwan, memory museums

關鍵詞： 臺灣，紀念博物館

The Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies (JEACS) is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the EACS, www.chinesestudies.eu. ISSN: 2709-9946

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Within less than half a century Taiwan transformed from an authoritarian single-party state based on martial law rule under the Nationalist Party (KMT 國民黨) into a fully developed multi-party democracy with a robust civil society. The most spectacular transition in this highly contested process has been the rise of “memory” as leading political and moral currency. Sites of memory such as museums and public memorials play a significant role as agencies and channels for cultural policy to steer and disseminate a “common sense” of the past, the present, and the future. When martial law was lifted in 1987, Taiwan hardly had the time to sit idle. Not least due to the cross-strait threat scenario, it hastened to implement cornerstones of transitional justice. These included the rehabilitation of political victims and official apologies, later the restitution of ill-gotten assets, declassification of documents, and most importantly negotiating a shared historical memory as the basis for legitimising present politics and envisioning an imagined community. This process was shaped and constrained by fierce partisan politics and primarily opted for retributive and restorative mechanisms over individual accountability and recognition of historical trauma. For the sake of creating future peace, national healing, and solidarity, past conflicts were to be overcome by way of selective remembrance, reconciliation, and (strategic) forgetting. Thus, the current omnipresence of institutionalised memory culture across the island indicates the significance not only of historical memory in shaping national cultural identity but also which and whose memories of the past are turned into historical capital.

In *The Landscape of Historical Memory. The Politics of Museums and Memorial Culture in Post-Martial Law Taiwan*, Kirk A. Denton, a professor of Chinese literature at The Ohio State University, traverses this rough terrain of post-martial-law Taiwan and guides us meticulously through a varied selection of *lieux de mémoire* with a focus on museums. Perfectly equipped with his well-documented expertise in the literary, visual, and memorial culture of Greater China, Denton reads museums and other manifestations of memorial culture as texts of political and ideological complicity and contestation. Detailing the intricate negotiations proceeding their construction, interpreting and contextualizing their exhibits, Denton takes us on a fascinating journey through a collective and politically sanctioned historical narrative turned into steel and stone.

The Landscape of Historical Memory is a spin-off from the author’s earlier study of museums in postsocialist China (Denton 2014), which conveniently allows for comparative referencing. Despite obvious dissimilarities in curational processes, funding, interpretation of history, social and educational role, architectural shape, etc., the prominent role of state and party politics in the construction of the past prevails on both sides of the strait. Whereas the Chinese party-state never left much leeway for negotiating its national past, in the case of Taiwan partisan interests dividing the blue 藍營 (KMT) and the green camp 綠營 (Democratic Progressive Party 民進黨) constantly fuelled debates oscillating between a sinocentric vision of a cultural identity and a nativist outlook propagating Taiwanese subjectivity.

The fact that Denton applies a narratological approach foregrounds the stories of and around the memory sites, which makes the book highly accessible and informative. In presenting a selection of different types of the more than 400 museums plastering the island, Denton explores how these

institutions claim to build national identity and how this fluid process is entangled with the transformations of Taiwan's political and cultural landscape over the past decades.

Denton identifies various tropes and plots structuring the official narratives conveyed by the museums. Obviously, a pure sinocentric vision is no longer tenable in present-day Taiwan and, as such, public memory sites primarily display for the most part gradual nuances of a more or less Taiwan-centred history. Museums on premodern history and archeology, for instance, trace the origin of Taiwan back into the Neolithic Age – centuries before Han Chinese immigration – to forge a link between Taiwan's present and its non-Chinese past. Or they establish the island as “a ‘plural’ land where peoples from many places converged, interacted, and established roots” to promote a multicultural and multi-ethnic identity (p. 45). The National Museum of History 國立歷史博物館 is no exception. Denton chronicles how, starting in the 1990s, “nativization” 本土化 surfaced and the institution gradually shifted its self-conception from “regional history” (Taiwan as a renegade province) to “Taiwan history” propagating post-identity and the central narrative of inclusiveness to advocate a modern, pluralistic nation built on openness, heterogeneity, and tolerance (chapter 2). Denton details the fierce debates and clashes preceding the conceptualisation of the exhibits that ultimately “avoid the polemical and confrontational approach to historical memory” and construct “a past that reflects ethnic and cultural harmony” (p. 64).

Museums centred around political victims seem to be less consensus-driven. Exploring the turbulent history of the 2-28 Memorial Peace Park 二二八和平紀念公園 in Taipei, Denton shows how the trope of martyrdom together with the policy of funding and strategic staffing become highly useful tools to bolster current political and military power and to steer memory politics (chapter 3). Despite the fact that detraumatization and whitewashing of the traumatic February 28, 1947, prevail as the common denominator in the exhibits, the political significance and reading of 2-28 as foundational myth differs in the two political camps: while the KMT stresses reconciliation and national healing, the DPP deploys this date “as a means to reassert itself into the political landscape” (p. 88).

Museums are not only instrumental in recharging Taiwan's cultural identity; they also re-orient Taiwan in the international context. In the chapter dealing with Human Rights Museums, Denton explains how these sites realign Taiwan with a “free” and democratic world (chapter 4). He explicates how the architectural design of today's Ching-mei Human Rights Culture Park 景美人權文化園區 refers to the aesthetics of Holocaust memorials “to cast Ching-mei as a memorial space with the same kind of power as Holocaust sites in Europe” (p. 97). Green Island 綠島, where some 20,000 to 30,000 political prisoners were detained during the Nationalist-era repression, draws on analogies with Robben Island, suggesting that “like South Africa, Taiwan has been able to overcome its repressive and ethnically riven past and embrace a democratic government that respects equality and human rights” (p. 102). Following other human rights museums around the world where the negative heritage of past atrocities, conflicts, and political injustice is coupled with the quest for national peace and reconciliation, the negative white terror heritage is smoothly transferred into the positive context of human rights and democratic rule.

The chapter on aboriginal museums highlights in the first place how the mobilisation of indigenous heritage and the political appropriation of aboriginal culture was key in the process of “nativization” and building a “de-sinicized” 去漢化 Taiwan cultural identity (chapter 8). At the same time the author illustrates how the Austronesianisation 南島民族化 of Taiwan is functionalised for the sake of “Taiwan’s effort to shift its foreign policy initiatives toward the ‘south’ and Austronesia” (p. 196). Indigenous legacy creates a space for Taiwan on the international scene, since indigenous peoples’ NGOs can participate in UN activities and often serve as “a key form of diplomatic foreplay” (p. 196). As much as museums provide a space for aboriginal culture and history, they at the same time promote a white-washed history of ethnic harmony and neglect the interests of indigenous peoples.

The National Museum of Taiwan Literature 國立台灣文學館 in Tainan is another example contributing to the Taiwan-in-the-world discourse. Besides presenting an open canon of “national literature”—strongly interwoven with multiculturalism, pluralism, and a shared memory—the institution hosts large sections emphasising historical interconnectedness with international literatures, Taiwan literature’s place in world literature, and its “cosmopolitan” character (chapter 7). Presumably due to its strong academic and pedagogical orientation, the Museum of Taiwan Literature seems to stick out as an institution presenting diversified and contradictory narratives, even though “the national literature paradigm still holds sway” (p. 163).

Apart from commemoration and education, museums in Taiwan also function as “sites of cultural consumption in the neoliberal leisure economy” (p. 5). Like its South African counterpart, Green Island is known for its “prison tourism” but above all as a paradise for scuba diving in its coral reefs. “The memory of the horror of political persecution thus gets wrapped in a feel-good glow of the appreciation of nature” (p. 108). Denton exemplifies how commodification and commercialisation in the case of the Military Dependents’ Villages 眷村 makes at least a three-pronged experience tangible: nostalgia, ethnic identification, and perception of Cold War ideology, leaving it for mainland tourists, *waisheng* 外省 and *bensheng* 本省 people to pick (chapter 5).

Expectedly and hardly distinct from ethnic policies in China, aboriginal theme parks function explicitly in a commercial framework. Denton describes how the Formosan Aboriginal Culture Village 九族文化村, in the north of Taiwan, mainly operates as amusement park that “serves first and foremost to fulfill Han people’s fantasies about ethnic otherness, thus contributing to notions of Taiwan’s ethnic and cultural multiplicity and its status as a multiethnic nation-state” (p. 193).

De-Sinification and De-Chiangification 去蔣化 notwithstanding, KMT martial memory is still very much alive in Taiwan. The narratives of the Armed Forces Museum 國軍歷史文物館 or the Zhongshan Hall 中山堂 baldly link Taiwan’s history with China, and Chiang Kai-shek goes unchallenged as “father of the national revolutionary forces” (p. 122). It reads as a whim of history how Chiang Kai-shek memorial sites have become “pilgrimage target[s] for tourists from China” (p. 161), who seem to be drawn to the earlier vilified “devil incarnate” (p. 155).

Denton makes it crystal clear that his work is not a reading of museum as postmodern text that gains meaning solely by “being read” by visiting spectators. His analysis assumes the public sphere as a

limited, pre-given space of established groups and positions competing for historical capital. As a consequence, this allows him to discern cultural memory as competitive only. The case of post-martial-law Taiwan, however, encourages us to think of the public sphere as “a malleable discursive space” generated by dialogical interactions. This by implication would pave the way for a perspective on memory not as competitive but as “multidirectional” (Rothenberg 2009, 5).

Denton is to be praised for showcasing convincingly and in great detail how political alterations and cultural policy have affected museums and memorial culture in post-martial-law Taiwan. Choosing from the sheer number of museums and memory sites, he presents ten main categories and their wide-ranging exhibits and narrations that fabricate the memory landscape by balancing different pasts and narratives. To a large extent competitive memories are reconciled for the sake of community building and an inclusive, multiethnic, cosmopolitan, democratic cultural identity. Memory is pacified, formalised and institutionalised as “[h]istory is perpetually suspicious of memory, and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it [...] to annihilate what has in reality taken place” (Nora 1989, 9). Denton reminds us that museums are not merely cultural institutions and showplaces of accumulated objects but sites of interaction between individual and collective identities, between memory and history. As official memory sites they inwardly reflect a consensus and at the same time they outwardly project an image that links the past with the present. Whether Taiwan’s densely populated memory landscape and its lasting “memory boom” *de facto* indicate a genuine resilient “historical consciousness” or rather a state-funded provision of “knowledge of the past” needs to be seen.

The Landscape of Historical Memory is a must-read for students and scholars with an interest in memory, history, museums, and literature in Taiwan and Greater China. This book also makes a fantastic resource for teaching, as each chapter is self-contained and can be read as an individual case study. Together with *Exhibiting the Past* (2014), it makes a perfect point of departure for comparative explorations in the classroom and beyond.

Bibliography

- Denton, Kirk A. 2014. *Exhibiting the Past: Historical Memory and the Politics of Museums in Postsocialist China*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Nora, Pierre. 1989. “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire.” In *Representations* 26: 7-24.
- Rothberg, Michael. 2009. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.