

# The Stamp of Identities: Negotiating Diasporic Chinese Subjectivity in Philatelic Spaces

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## Introduction

This paper aims to examine the politics and poetics of identities among Chinese nationals known as *guiqiao* (Returned Overseas Chinese) in the People's Republic of China (PRC). During the 1950s and the 1960s, more than half a million ethnic Chinese 'returned' to their ancestral homeland, mostly from newly independent Southeast Asian countries. The profiles of these returnees were complex and diverse; so were the reasons for their return. Largely speaking, those who arrived in China in the 1950s were mostly young Chinese students. They were thrilled by the founding of the PRC and determined to pursue their future in the communist homeland. Most of them were lucky enough to receive higher education in Chinese universities or colleges. After graduation, many worked in cities as teachers, engineers, artists or professionals in other fields. Those who arrived in the 1960s were mostly petty shopkeepers, traders, labourers with their families fleeing anti-Chinese policies and riots in some Southeast Asian countries, especially Indonesia. They were received by the Chinese government as 'refugees' and allocated to *huaqiao* (Overseas Chinese) farms,<sup>1</sup> in the rural areas of southern China that were purposely built to accommodate the influx of refugees. A further wave of returnees arrived in the 1970s when a large number of ethnic Chinese fled the anti-Chinese violence in Vietnam. They, too, were allocated to *huaqiao* farms.

1 *Huaqiao* is the Chinese equivalent to Overseas Chinese, referring to Chinese nationals living abroad. As a historically developed and politically charged notion, it was first introduced at the turn of the twentieth century when overseas Chinese nationalism was rising under the leadership of Sun Yat-sen. Despite the fact that a large number of Chinese living abroad today have become naturalised foreign citizens, and therefore no longer suitable to be called *huaqiao*, official museums in the PRC still use the term *huaqiao* to designate them. The postage stamp exhibition under study, entitled 'Huaqiao Stories on the Postage Stamps', is a case in point. In this article, *huaqiao*, Overseas Chinese and diasporic Chinese are used interchangeably.

Regardless of their time of arrival and whether the return was voluntary or involuntary, once back in China the returnees/refugees were treated by the Chinese government as one particular group of population under a specifically created policy category, *guiqiao*, to set them apart from the domestic Chinese, who had never been abroad. In the 1950s when China was in urgent need of manpower and capital for rehabilitating the war-torn economy, *guiqiao* were welcomed and given favourable treatment, such as the right to receive and keep remittances from abroad and special access to consumer goods beyond the reach of the general public. With the radicalisation of China's domestic politics from the late 1950s onward, Chinese citizenship was increasingly defined by class affiliation rather than Chinese ethnicity. *Guiqiao* became an 'object for internal control' because of their connections with the capitalist world. They suffered severe social and political discrimination and many were persecuted during the Cultural Revolution (Godley 1989; Peterson 2012; Wang 2013). Disillusioned by China's political chaos and worried about the future of the next generation, a large number of *guiqiao* moved to Hong Kong and Macao in the late 1970s and early 1980s when the Chinese government temporarily loosened its control of their exit (Wang 2006). After Mao's death, China quickly moved on from ideological struggles to open and economic reform. The Chinese government realised the vital role of *guiqiao* in linking China with the outside world and resumed their honouring of *guiqiao* and *huaqiao* as patriotic subjects. At the turn of the twenty-first century they are increasingly counted upon by the party-state as a unique force for what the former Chinese leader Jiang Zemin called 'the great revitalization of the Chinese nation' (Jiang 2001).

Apart from some early research on *guiqiao* based on interviews with those who exited from mainland China to Hong Kong (Godley 1989; Godley and Coppel 1990a, 1990b), *guiqiao* as a research subject have not received sufficient scholarly attention until very recently. The past decade has witnessed publications on the general history of *guiqiao* (Huang 2005; Peterson 2012; Yow 2013) and a number of case studies of *guiqiao* living in cities (Huang 1999, 2005, 2007; Chan 2014) and rural areas, especially in *huaqiao* farms (Li 2005; Naicang 2010, Chen 2010; Tan 2010; Ho 2012). One of the major issues discussed in the works on *guiqiao*, which is also the central focus of this study, is the formation and representation of identities among these returnees/refugees. It is widely recognised that no matter in which parts of China they have settled, and regardless of the highly diverse cultural and linguistic division among them, those who returned to China from abroad in the Maoist era have invariably identified themselves as members of the *guiqiao* community. In other words, *guiqiao* have developed a collective identity to the extent that 'while not identical to ethnicity, [it] nonetheless came to resemble something

resembling an ethnicity, or “sub-ethnicity” (Ford 2014, 248) among the Han Chinese.

It has been recognised that the making and perpetuation of *guiqiao* identity was a direct result of state policies that differentiated *guiqiao* from domestic Chinese and various institutionalised segregations in the form of *huaqiao* farms and *huaqiao* schools. But *guiqiao* was also a part of this identification process. The identity making of *guiqiao* was, as Ford aptly argues, ‘a joint effort by the state and its bureaucratic institutions on the one hand, and those who would come to claim this identity (and pass it on to their descendants) on the other’ (243). What it refers to was the strategic employment of official rhetoric by *guiqiao* for the purpose of protesting themselves, ‘indicative of the persecution they experienced during the Cultural Revolution’ (252). Tan (2010) made some similar observations during his fieldwork in *huaqiao* farms. When he used *putonghua* (standard Mandarin) to ask villagers about the reasons for their return, they appeared cautious and replied with the standard answer of ‘*aiguo*’ (patriotic feelings). When he switched to Malay, they responded more freely, telling him about their regret of returning to China (561).

Building upon the existing scholarship on *guiqiao* in the PRC, this paper seeks to extend the discussion of *guiqiao* identity based on a case study of a postage stamp exhibition at Quanzhou Museum of Overseas Chinese History (QMOCH) in Fujian, put up jointly by an ordinary *guiqiao* and the authority of an official museum. Through a critical interpretation of the postage stamp exhibition against the context of China’s *huaqiao* museum boom, it unveils the tension and compromise between two coexisting meaning systems. This article argues, firstly, that it is partial and simplistic to reduce the agency of *guiqiao* to passive acceptance of an imposed political label for the purpose of self-protection, although this is certainly an important aspect of identity politics among *guiqiao* in China. But, as shown in this study, *guiqiao* have reacted to the official discourse in a more proactive and creative way. When analysing the identification process, it is therefore more meaningful to look at the two-way negotiation between the state from above and *guiqiao* from below, involving, simultaneously, conformity with and resistance to imposed official discourse of political, social and cultural differences. Secondly, and in close relation to the first point, this article brings to light the poetic of identity making among *guiqiao* that has been left understudied in the existing scholarship. It argues that rather than making outright political claims for autonomous identities, *guiqiao* have tended to resort to implicit and sometimes artistic ways to express their emotion, desire and belongings, often through bodily engagement with art objects and museum practices, ‘in which mind, body and world are seen as codependent. [...] that the mind is *embodied*, and that the mind is *extended*’ (Knappett 2002, 98–9).

In the following, the case study is first put in the context of the emerging *huaqiao* museum boom in the PRC. We proceed to a fine-grained cultural interpretation of the stamp exhibition drawing on notions of ‘texts’ (Barthes 1974) and ‘signs’ (Peirce 1932, 1955) widely used in material culture studies. We then go beyond the museum space to examine interactions between the object of stamps and the stamp collector that underpin the museum representation of *guiqiao* identities. The Conclusion discusses the major findings and larger implications of this case study.

### **The Postage Stamp Exhibition at Quanzhou Museum of Overseas Chinese History**

The data used for this study was collected during the author’s 2013 field visit to Quanzhou, one of the major *qiaoxiang* (hometown of Overseas Chinese) in the PRC. Opened in 1998 by the municipal *qiaolian* (Association of Returned Overseas Chinese),<sup>2</sup> QMOCH was considered one of the earliest museums built in post-Mao China to memorialise the history of Overseas Chinese. Indeed, since the early 1990s, China has witnessed a *huaqiao* museum boom. The Overseas Chinese, a peripheral subject during the greater part of the Maoist era, were brought back to the centre of China’s new nation-building project. Since then, the party-state has constructed sixteen *huaqiao* museums or memorial halls, mostly in the provinces of Guangdong and Fujian. The unprecedented museum fever reached its peak in October 2014 when the National *Huaqiao* History Museum was opened in Beijing as the leading organ coordinating the ongoing official project of *huaqiao* museum construction. Despite differences in location, size and style, all official *huaqiao* museums follow a unifying and clearly defined official discourse of heritage preservation in relation to Overseas Chinese and *guiqiao*. The aims of building *huaqiao* museums, 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 Overseas Chinese, to nurture the motherland-oriented sentiments and patriotic spirits embodied by Overseas Chinese among the Chinese people, to demonstrate the great contributions of 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). Ultimately, it is hoped that exhibiting *huaqiao* will construct a global image of China based on (imagined) shared ethnic, cultural and ancestral roots

2 *Qiaolian* is a quasi-official organisation set up by the Chinese party-state at all levels of administration to take charge of affairs in relation to *guiqiao* as well as relatives of *guiqiao* and *huaqiao*.

between China and Overseas Chinese, and to realise what the current Chinese leader Xi Jinping calls the ‘Chinese dream’.

As a local museum, QMOCH prioritises exhibiting the migration history of the local population. Simultaneously, being an official museum and a ‘base for patriotic education’, QMOCH is driven by the mission ‘to educate the masses, enrich their spiritual and cultural lives, and [...] to contribute to the construction of social advancement and social harmony’ through displaying and eulogising the attachment and contribution of Overseas Chinese to the homeland.<sup>3</sup> At the time of my visit, it held two regular exhibitions: one was called the ‘General History of Emigration from Quanzhou to the World’, and the other ‘Quanzhou People in Southeast Asia: Then and Now’. It also ran special exhibitions in relation to the subject of Overseas Chinese, and one of them was an exhibition called ‘*Huaqiao* Stories on Postage Stamps’, which the museum has hosted since 2005. The postage stamp exhibition is made up of a total of sixty panels displaying 535 postage stamps, nearly 80 per cent of which are foreign stamps.

The museum’s regular exhibitions provide visitors with useful information about Quanzhou’s local migration history by displaying a large number of items of material culture, ranging from paper archives (such as passports, certificates and correspondence), everyday utensils (such as furniture and cloths) to working tools used by the Overseas Chinese. The narratives of the exhibitions and the ways the items are presented, however, are similar to what one can see in other *huaqiao* museums. In contrast, the postage stamp exhibition is original and captivating, using the image of postage stamps to visualise *huaqiao* history in a way rarely seen in other museums of the same kind. Furthermore, while exhibitions in other official *huaqiao* museums are solely curated by museum authorities, the postage stamp exhibition in Quanzhou is an unusual collaboration between the official museum and an ordinary *guiqiao*, Mr Li, who originally collected the postage stamps. As such, it offers a valuable opportunity to scrutinise the negotiation process between the state authorities and ordinary *guiqiao*. Thirdly, as will be discussed in the following section, the postage stamp exhibition, albeit held in a local museum, visualises the general history of Overseas Chinese and their relationship with the motherland, enabling us to address the wider issue of *guiqiao* identities in the PRC through the lens of small things; here, the postage stamp.

My emphasis on the value of the postage stamp in Quanzhou does not suggest that postage stamps are the major medium of exhibition in China’s *huaqiao* museums, nor does it deny the efficacy of other forms of material

<sup>3</sup> See the official website of QMOCH: <<http://www.qzhqg.com/SinglePage.asp?Cid=8>>, accessed 27 April 2015.

culture for displaying *huaqiao* history. In fact, museum objects objectify various aspects of Overseas Chinese history in different ways and they all equally deserve specific scholarly attention. The postage stamp exhibition in Quanzhou is foregrounded here in that it demonstrates a level of complexity, not merely via the materiality of postage stamps, but through the ways it was curated, in the contested negotiation between the official heritage discourse and *guiqiao* at the grass-root level. It is therefore an ideal case for exploring the politics and poetics of *guiqiao* identity in the PRC, the analytical focus of this article.

Mr Li, whom I interviewed during the visit, was born in Saigon, Vietnam. He returned to Quanzhou, his place of origin, in 1949 at the age of sixteen. From a young age he was interested in collecting postage stamps, especially those related to *huaqiao* history or published by countries with a large number of Overseas Chinese. In 2003, at the age of seventy, he contributed a stamp collection with the title of *Huaqiao* to a provincial philatelic exhibition. This collection was well received and awarded a silver prize by the organisers of the exhibition. The success of this private collection and its *huaqiao* focus attracted the attention of the QMOCH. The curator then invited Mr Li to work with the museum to create a special exhibition 'to promote the glorious patriotic tradition of Overseas Chinese and inspire the next generation'.<sup>4</sup> Following 'professional guidance' from the museum authority, Mr Li expanded his original collection and turned it into a special exhibition permanently hosted by the QMOCH. Since its opening in 2005, the postage stamp exhibition has become the QMOCH's *zhenguan zhibao* (the museum's treasure) and has attracted a large number of visitors and wide media attention.<sup>5</sup>

The following section provides a semiotic reading of the postage stamp exhibition. Apart from the stamps on display, the analysis of the exhibition also draws on interviews with museum personnel and Mr Li, supplemented by Chinese newspaper articles about the exhibition collected by the author after the visit.

4 Quoted from the Epilogue of the 'Huaqiao Stories on Postage Stamps' exhibition.

5 When the stamp exhibition was first opened in 2005, all the stamps on display were original ones. The small size of the stamps, however, made it difficult for the audience to see clearly. A revised version was produced three years later which replaced the original stamps with enlarged colourful prints of stamps. Since then, the museum has organised a series of tour exhibitions to show the postage stamp exhibition in local schools, residential communities, parks and many other venues. Author's interview with the deputy curator of QMOCH, 9 August 2013.

## **Negotiating Diasporic Subjectivities in the Space of Museums**

Rather than seeing postage stamps as visual evidence for the purpose of restoring historical authenticity (Reid 1984, 223–49; Deans and Dobson 2005, 3–7; Watchman 2005, 31–55), this paper defines postage stamps as multi-vocal ‘texts’ (Barthes 1974, 1977) whose meaning is neither fixed nor one-dimensional, but open to multiple interpretations. The ‘*Huaqiao* Stories on Postage Stamps’ exhibition is made up of five sections, or ‘chapters’ as Mr Li called them, which tells the history of *huaqiao* from the ancient time to the present. The narrative was drafted by Mr Li based on his amateur research of *huaqiao* history. It was later approved by the QMOCH and provided the framework guiding the selection, order and presentation of the postage stamps.<sup>6</sup>

The exhibition starts with an eye-catching logo (Figure 1) whose design is based on the Chinese character *qiao* (sojourning). The yellow colour in the upper half of the logo represents the land; the blue at the bottom represents the sea; the purple in the middle signifies movements between the land and the sea and between China and overseas.<sup>7</sup> The logo serves as a strong iconic statement, in colour and words, of a China-centred imagination of diasporic Chinese, implying the attachment and an eventual return of Overseas Chinese to their ancestral/cultural/territorial roots. This idea is further articulated and glorified in the preface to the exhibition written on panel one:

The emigration of Chinese can be traced back to the Shang and Zhou dynasties.<sup>8</sup> By now, the Overseas Chinese have spread all over five continents, currently 500 million people. They have made efforts to survive and develop in foreign countries, and have made universally-recognised contributions to the host countries thanks to the merit of diligence, courage and wisdom they have inherited from Chinese culture. They have written glorious chapters in the book of modern Chinese history. Their contributions to China are both significant and diverse, demonstrated in their active participation in Chinese revolutionary struggles and patriotic movements, supporting economic construction of the socialist motherland, facilitating economic and cultural exchanges between China and the world, as well as promoting the great revival of the Chinese civilisation. (Author’s translation)

The logo and the preface set the tone for this exhibition: glorifying *huaqiao* history, eulogising their contributions to China and promoting patriotism among both domestic and Overseas Chinese – a theme unfolded step by step in the remainder of the exhibition. Section One (panels 2–11) offers an outline

6 Author’s interview with Mr Li, 9 August 2013.

7 Author’s interview with the deputy curator of QMOCH, 9 August 2013.

8 The Shang dynasty ruled China from about the eighteenth to the twelfth centuries BC; the Zhou dynasty replaced Shang and ruled China for eight centuries until 221 BC.



Figure 1. The logo of ‘Huaqiao Stories on the Postage Stamp’ exhibition

of the history of *huaqiao* as the background to the exhibition. It depicts the start of modern Chinese emigration as a direct result of Western imperialist invasion and oppression, echoing the *guochi* (national humiliation) discourse that has dominated the academic research and popular writing about modern Chinese history in the PRC. This discourse portrays China as a loving mother and Overseas Chinese as prodigal children, who were forced to leave home, but always longed to return.

Section Two (panels 13–26), entitled ‘The Hardship of Making a Living Away from Home’, narrates the bitter history of *huaqiao* working as coolies in foreign countries. ‘The Contribution of Overseas Chinese to Their Host Countries in History and the Present’ is the title for Section Three (panels 27–39). It praises the participation of *huaqiao* in struggles for independence in several Asian and Latin American countries and their roles in spreading Chinese culture worldwide. It also features stamps with images of a number of Nobel Prize laureates, architects and musicians with Chinese origin,



symbolising the contribution of Overseas Chinese to the social, economic and scientific development of the host countries.

Section Four (panels 39–49), entitled ‘Obsession with the Fate of China’, highlights the participation of *huaqiao* in anti-Qing, anti-imperialist republican revolutions led by Sun Yat-Sen, in China’s War of Resistance against Japan, and more recently in the Chinese Communist Party’s unification programme in relation to Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan. Section Five (panels 51–60), the final chapter, is entitled ‘The Emotional Attachment of Leaves to the Root’. It highlights the economic, social and emotional connections of Overseas Chinese to the motherland during different periods in history. On the final panel of the exhibition stamps with images of ancestral halls of the legendary Yellow Emperor and Yan Emperor are presented, symbolising the ethnic and cultural roots of the Overseas Chinese. The whole exhibition ends with a stamp displaying a portrait of the late Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai and a quotation from his famous speech ‘The motherland and the Chinese people will never forget the contributions made by *huaqiao* to their home country’.<sup>9</sup>

In summary, the whole exhibition reiterates the monolithic official narrative of *huaqiao* as patriotic subjects. This authoritarian reading of *huaqiao* erases the nuanced differences among them defined by linguistic affiliation, occupation, class, gender and political identification. In other words, local and personalised understandings of what it means to be *huaqiao* are lost in an imposed wider and unifying interpretation of the *huaqiao* as pro-China entities. It is what Barthes (1974, 4) called the ‘readerly text’ that makes no requirement of the audience to ‘write’ or ‘produce’ their own meanings, but to passively locate the ‘ready-made’ meaning of the given text. Through words illustrated by stamp images, it enables a panoptic narration of the diasporic dimension of the Chinese nation and speaks of the essentiality of Chineseness.

However, this is not all this exhibition is about. What actually captivates visitors is not the narrative on display, although this does provide some useful information for visitors with no prior knowledge of Overseas Chinese, but its visualisation of the diasporic world through the imageries of the postage stamp. Indeed, standing in front of the panels, the visitor’s attention is drawn away from the monotonous words, mostly printed in small size and placed on the margin of panels, and towards the colourful stamps placed in the centre of panels picturing exotic pictures of foreign countries and cultures. The stamps come to life while the words fade into the background. As argued by Peirce, an object can be simultaneously an iconic and an indexical sign

9 Zhou made this speech at Beijing in 1965, when he received Mr Lee Kong Chian, a Singapore-based Chinese tycoon and the son-in-law of the Overseas Chinese leader Tan Kah Kee. See Xiao (undated).



Figure 2. ‘The Hardship of Making a Living Away from Home’, panel 16, section 2

depending on how it is interpreted and in what context. A sign is an icon when it bears a visual resemblance to its referent. A sign is an index when it is defined primarily in terms of spatio-temporal connections between a sign and its referent (Peirce, 1955, 104–15). Knappett further argues for the ‘convergence of icon and index in the assemblage of agency and meaning’ (Knappett 2002, 114). As simultaneously ironic and indexical signs, the postage stamps bring an enchanting magic to the exhibition and create their own world where a second text/meaning system is constructed.



Figure 3. 'The Attachment of Overseas Chinese to the Homeland', panel 52, section 5

Two examples are discussed here to illustrate the formation of this second meaning system. Panel 16 uses a set of seven stamps to visualise the hardships of Chinese coolies making a living abroad (Figure 2). Words on the panel tell how Overseas Chinese constructed railways in Peru, grew sugar cane, cotton, rice and vegetables in plantations in South American countries, with many sent to the Islas Chincha of Peru where they died of heavy labour and maltreatment. The building of canals by Chinese migrants in Thailand is

also mentioned. However, among the stamps presented on panel 16 only the commemorative stamp for the 110th anniversary of the arrival of Chinese in Peru is relevant to the history of Overseas Chinese. All other stamps actually have nothing to do with *huaqiao* at all. They are displayed here simply because they happen to bear iconic images of the places or items mentioned in the narrative (i.e. railways and cotton in Mexico, canals in Thailand). Stamps with the image of crops and an island placed in the middle of the panel come from Cambodia and Brunei respectively, which are completely irrelevant to the geographical context of the topic on display or the history of *huaqiao* represented. One could say that the aim of using stamps here is less to create authenticity in exhibiting *huaqiao* history and more for affective visualisation of diasporic experiences and subjectivities.

Similarly, on panel 52, under the topic of 'Paying Back to the Homeland', a group of twelve stamps are presented to visualise the contribution by Overseas Chinese to China, particularly in the area of agriculture (Figure 3). Words in the middle of the panel are brief and vague, stating that 'the Overseas Chinese have brought back to China quality seeds to support national construction and agricultural development at home'. Stamps bearing images of crops and domestic animals from Mexico, Thailand, South Africa, Australia, Congo, Malaysia, Nigeria, Vietnam and Rhodesia and Nyasaland are presented. However, the narrative does not specify at all what seeds were imported, when, from which countries and to which parts of China. From the exhibition alone, it is impossible to establish any real and coherent understanding of the history involved. What it created instead is a poignant representation of the cultural and geographical diversity of diasporic Chinese and dynamic interactions between Overseas Chinese and their motherland.

Bennett argues that, in museum spaces, 'far from looking into things, the visitor's eye had to be directed to look along the relations between them' (Bennett 2006, 128). Stamp images successfully direct the eyes of the audience to both specific localities of Overseas Chinese and to the relationship between them. In other words, the stamp visualises simultaneously the situatedness of Chinese migrants in a specific time-place and the fluid temporal and spatial relations between localities. They produced diasporic 'translocal geographies as a simultaneous situatedness across different locales which provide ways of understanding the overlapping place-time(s) in migrants' everyday lives [...] these spaces and places need to be examined both through their situatedness and their connections to a variety of other locales' (Brickell and Datta 2011, 4). By using creatively colourful and diverse images of stamps, the postage stamp exhibition has produced what Barthes calls the 'writerly text' (Barthes 1974, 4). It invites the viewers to establish links between heres and theres, mobilities and localities and the past and the present, empowering the viewers to

rewrite the given texts rather than passively taking ready-made meanings manufactured by the narration of exhibition.

To sum up, two meaning systems are identified in the postage stamp exhibition. The first one is on the surface, explicit and prescriptive, telling an official *huaqiao* story authorised by the institution of an official *huaqiao* museum. The second one is hidden behind the narrative, implicit and flexible, narrating another *huaqiao* story through imageries rather than words, producing ‘playful deception’ (Knappett 2002, 114) of the directness and ‘truthful’ meaning of the official narrative. There is therefore one exhibition inside an exhibition and one text inside a text. The two meaning systems coexist in tension and negotiation, involving simultaneously compromise and conflict between the top-down and bottom-up representation of *huaqiao* identities in museum spaces. By inviting Mr Li to work with the museum, QMOCH has successfully increased the attractiveness of its propaganda of *huaqiao* history and eventually fulfilled its mission to promote patriotism among the public. At the same time, by collaborating with an official *huaqiao* museum, Mr Li is able to find a validated platform to proclaim, even though with compromises, future-oriented autonomous diasporic subjectivities. To fully understand the second meaning system where Mr Li’s ‘trans-local diasporic subjectivities’ are constructed and articulated, it is necessary to go one step further to examine the mutual constitutiveness between people and things in historical context and beyond the museum space, which is dealt with in the following section.

### **Body, Affect and Materiality in the Doing of ‘Memory Work’**

The emerging literature on cultural anthropological studies of migrants has recognised that migrants construct and articulate identities not in isolation from the material world they live in, but through it (Appadurai 1986; Basu and Coleman 2008; Ho and Hatfield 2010). It is particularly important to look at how, through situated corporeal engagement with the material world, migrants make themselves (Ingold 2000). Indeed, it is almost impossible to appreciate the hidden meaning embedded in the exhibition without looking at Mr Li’s lifelong stamp collection practice, which has been driven by his never-diminishing desire to memorise the history of diasporic Chinese to which he belongs. This is what he told me:

I myself am a *guiqiao*, and I saw and experienced the hardship of making a living abroad when I was in Vietnam. The exhibition shows what the Overseas Chinese have gone through, and I feel for them. (Author’s translation)

It was this empathy which motivated Mr Li to undertake the daunting task of creating the exhibition. As he said:

To put on an exhibition like this, you need to find postage stamps from a wide range of countries, produced in various historical periods, and covering diverse types of stamps in relation to the Overseas Chinese. It is not easy at all. How did I do it? By just going and collecting one after another over the past twenty years [...] Sometimes finding the right stamp is like searching for a needle in the ocean. (Author's translation)

The majority of Mr Li's stamps came from his personal correspondence with his relatives, friends and schoolmates in Vietnam and other countries. Sometimes he also reached out to collect stamps by writing to Overseas Chinese communities. For instance, after finding out from a local Chinese newspaper that the Malacca Chinese School in Malaysia had just celebrated the eightieth anniversary of its establishment, he wrote a letter of congratulation to the school and expressed his wish to collect stamps in relation to Overseas Chinese education. The head teacher wrote back to him using an envelope specially designed to commemorate the anniversary event, on top of which was printed the school name in both Chinese and English. This envelope was included in the exhibition. When the postage stamp he wanted was not available through correspondence, he had to purchase them from stamp dealers. He once spent 1,000 RBM Yuan (equivalent to £100) to buy a postage prepaid envelope published by the US in 1876 to celebrate the coming of the 'railway age'. This was used by Mr Li in the exhibition to illustrate the history of Chinese labourers, who participated in US railway construction in the late nineteenth century.

When asked if he regretted spending so much money on collecting stamps, he replied, 'It is not really about money. It is about putting your heart and soul into it.' In a sense, Mr Li and the postage stamp have become one: Mr Li has internalised stamps as symbols of trans-border mobility, and stamps have externalised his emotion and desire as a member of the diasporic Chinese. His willingness to collaborate with the QMOCH is also out of urgency to deal with both internal and external crises. On the one hand, like most of the first generation *guiqiao* who arrived at China in the 1950s, Mr Li has reached a senior biological age. He was eighty at the time of my interview, and he did not hide the desire to do as much as possible while he was still in good health to transmit the *guiqiao* memories to the public and to the next generation. On the other hand, the intensified museumification of Overseas Chinese by the state authorities has left little space for alternative articulations of *guiqiao* subjectivities from the outside and from below. It is urgent to find ways to collect the diasporic past, no matter how hard it is, and pass it over to the



next generation. In this sense, Mr Li's stamp collection and museum practice can be understood as part of the ongoing future-oriented 'memory work' (Mills and Walker 2008) among the ordinary *guiqiao* that I have discussed elsewhere (Wang 2014), through which they seek to give voice to their identities; not by confronting the official discourse but by working with it.

Indeed, for Mr Li, collecting and exhibiting stamps is more than a personal hobby. It is a pilgrimage and a soul-searching process: it is through collecting and displaying stamps that he makes sense of what he has gone through, who he is and what he wishes to do for future generations. Mr Li's stamp collection is therefore at once factual and highly symbolic. Through making a painstaking effort to collect and exhibit stamps in relation to the history of Overseas Chinese, he is collecting both the fragments of his own diasporic memory scattered across space and time, and the experience and subjectivities of diasporic Chinese as a whole. Here, collecting is recollecting individual and collective pasts, and remembering is 're-remembering', a process of identifying and reconnecting with the diasporic Chinese world. Through his stamp collection Mr Li got in touch with his old friends and schoolmates in Vietnam, and in 2009, he returned to his birthplace Saigon for the first time in sixty years. Mr Li's activities in the philatelic space intersected with his life in the real world, showcasing how 'mobile objects (are) constituted by but also constituting people, as materialities of performance, of bodies and of objects come together' (Basu and Coleman 2008, 322).

## Conclusion

This case study discusses a particular postage stamp exhibition on the history of Overseas Chinese put up jointly by an ordinary *guiqiao* and an official *huaqiao* museum in the PRC. Based on a cultural interpretation of the exhibition against the context of China's emerging *huaqiao* museum boom, it unveils dual meaning systems embedded in the stamp exhibition. On the surface and mainly through words, it promulgates explicitly a highly clichéd China-centred representation of Overseas Chinese, authorised by the institution of an official museum; simultaneously and implicitly it articulates a liberating diasporic 'trans-local subjectivity' through the convergence of icon and index in the assembly of meaning in philatelic spaces. The two meaning systems coexist in tension and negotiation, throwing up complex questions about identity, materiality, body and emotion in relation to diasporic Chinese.

This paper contributes to the study of *guiqiao*, and of the Chinese diaspora in general, in two interrelated ways. The first contribution is on the politics of *guiqiao* identity construction and articulation. Previous studies of *guiqiao* have

rightly identified the formation and perpetuation of a unique identity among the returnees/refugees as a result of state policies differentiating them from domestic Chinese (Tan 2010; Ford 2014, among others). There is, however, a tendency to give undue emphasis to the victimhood of *guiqiao*, and overlook the intervention made by *guiqiao* who reached out to contest state identification and challenged it innovatively from within. This study contends that the agency of *guiqiao* is not only manifested in their passive acceptance and use of official rhetoric for the sake of political safety, although it is certainly one major aspect of the identity politics of *guiqiao*, especially among those who had experienced tough lives at *huaqiao* farms. Instead, it is more meaningful to conceptualise their agency as a two-way negotiation between the state from above and the *guiqiao* from below, simultaneously involving conflicts and compromises. The irony of representing *guiqiao*'s diasporic subjectivities through the official optic, as shown by this case study, illustrates the highly contested nature of this negotiation process.

The second contribution is to the poetics of *guiqiao* identity-making and articulation. Previous studies of *guiqiao* and the diasporic Chinese in general have paid little attention to the intersection and interaction between migrants and objects in the making and articulation of emotions and subjectivities. As an attempt to fill this gap, this study draws people's attention to the ways in which *guiqiao* resort to poetic expression of their inner world through corporeal engagement with art objects and museum practices. It places analytical focus on the dialectic relations between people and things to look at 'how persons make things and things make persons' (Tilley et al., 2006, 2), and how through its silent speech and written presence, the museum object 'speaks what cannot be spoken, writes what cannot be written, and articulates that which remains conceptually separated in social practice' (Tilley 1999, 103).

To conclude, although this study is only based on data collected from one simple *huaqiao* museum in the PRC, it has significance beyond the place of Quanzhou. It sheds new light on understanding the politics and poetics of *guiqiao* identity embedded in the political history of China, shaped by and shaping power relations, and intersecting with the everyday life of migrants. By looking at diasporic Chinese from the empirical and analytic lens of a museum exhibition, it paves the way for integrating museum and migration studies with the potential to re-conceptualise transnational mobilities in the Chinese context and beyond.



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