

**Denton, Kirk A.** *The Landscape of Historical Memory: The Politics of Museums and Memorial Culture in Post-Martial Law Taiwan.* Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2021. 284 pp. ISBN: 978-988-8528-57-8 (hardback). Price HK\$620, US\$79. Review by Siyi Wang.

Prasenjit Duara emphasized that the nation-state is a political form with distinct territorial boundaries within which the sovereign state, “representing” the nation-people, has steadily expanded its role and power.<sup>1</sup> As the basis of cohesion and identity, a nation is “born” as “the social process of defining the object (i.e., its construction) enables it to exist in a social context, to have meaning.”<sup>2</sup> This is carried forward through censuses, maps, and museums.<sup>3</sup> Homi K. Bhabha captures this social process in his famous phrase: “nation as narration.”<sup>4</sup> The “historical memory” of a people is the practice, representation, and characterization of how they understand the past and the relationship between people and history,<sup>5</sup> and the museum is a product of the visualization of historical memory.

After his *Exhibiting the Past: Historical Memory and the Politics of Museums in China* (2014), Kirk A. Denton recently published another book addressing historical memory and nation-state building, *The Landscape of Historical Memory: The Politics of Museums and Memorial Culture in Post-Martial Law Taiwan*. It explores the place of museums and memorial culture in the contestation over historical memory in post-martial law Taiwan. This book is a spin-

off from an earlier study of museums of the post-socialist PRC.<sup>6</sup> The two works, covering the museum culture of Greater China, accomplish much in constructing the imagined mythology and nostalgia in the museums across the Taiwan Strait. *Exhibiting the Past* focused on the particular political functions of museums in the context of a post-socialist single-party state and discussed how revolutionary history, grounded in martyrdom and self-sacrifice, can be made to relate to a globalizing market economy that has self-interest as its primary motivating force.<sup>7</sup> *The Landscape of Historical Memory* introduces examples of how museums and politics intertwine, emphasizing the role of political parties in the establishment, administration, architectural design, and historical narratives of museums. It is framed around the wrangling between the “blue camp” (the Nationalist Party, or KMT, and its supporters) and the “green camp” (Democratic Progressive Party, DPP, and its supporters) over what facets of the past should be remembered and how they should be displayed in museums. Meanwhile, the book also indirectly analyzes how the politics of imagining the island applies in the context of museums and their visitors, whether from Taiwan or the mainland.

This book reveals much about how different politics and political systems influence and shape cultural identities and historical memories.<sup>8</sup> The driving forces behind the construction of museums and memorial sites in

<sup>1</sup> Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Shaughan Keaton and Graham Brodie, “Explaining Social Constructivism,” *Communication Teacher* 25, no. 4 (October 2011): 192–96.

<sup>3</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), 204.

<sup>5</sup> Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory* (London: Verso, 1994); Hilda Kean and Paul Martin, *The Public History Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Kirk A. Denton, *The Landscape of Historical Memory: The Politics of Museums and Memorial Culture in Post-Martial Law Taiwan* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2021), 6.

<sup>7</sup> Kirk A. Denton, “Museums, Memorial Sites and Exhibitionary Culture in the People’s Republic of China,” *The China Quarterly* 183 (September 2005): 565–86.

<sup>8</sup> Denton, *Landscape*, 3.

Taiwan have been political parties and their ideologies, specifically related to the politics of identity. Their struggles have involved decisions about what new sites of memory to establish and what kinds of memories to exhibit at those sites, as depicted in different chapters of the book. At the same time, Denton also analyzes exhibition narratives of different museums through the lens of the power struggle between the political parties.

Chapter 1 describes curation concept changes at the National Museum of History (NMH), the National Museum of Prehistory, and the Shihsanhang Museum. Denton depicts a shift from Central Plains narratives involving written historical documents or explanatory placards to artworks like pottery, bronzes, jade, landscape paintings, calligraphy, etc. A second change depicted is toward Taiwan-related collective memory narratives. Chapter 2 takes the exhibitions of the National Museum of Taiwan History (NMT) as the primary example to investigate the narrative turns of the previous chapter, which witnessed the process of shifting from “regional history” (depicting Taiwan as a part of China, studied with the goal of elucidating aspects of Chinese history) toward “Taiwan history.”<sup>9</sup> The exhibit “Our Land, Our People: The Story of Taiwan (斯土斯民: 台湾的故事)” used feelings of nostalgia to construct common historical memories for the people of Taiwan that bypass historical disputes. This also reflected a survival strategy on the part of the museum, to a certain extent.

A narrative of diversity leading to democratic pluralism serves the museum’s purpose nicely, as does a nostalgic mode of representation that downplays historical trauma, political repression, and ethnic conflict.<sup>10</sup> Taiwan is a nation caught schizophrenically between a sense of its Chineseness and its unique Taiwanese identity,<sup>11</sup> which Denton considers in

Chapter 3. On the one hand, martyrs’ memorials were erected around Taiwan to commemorate those who died fighting for the Nationalist cause; on the other hand, 2-28 Memorial Halls commemorate the victims who died in the atrocities of the local KMT government under the rule of Chen Yi. That period of White Terror and the question of human rights are considered in Chapter 4, with discussion of the role of the museum in transitional justice. Once a site has been established, there is often continued struggle between political parties and their respective sympathizers over the meaning of that site,<sup>12</sup> as is the case with Zhongshan Hall, the Armed Forces Museum, Chung-hsing New Village and Juancun (眷村) (discussed in detail in Chapter 5), and the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall (discussed in detail in Chapter 6).

When regarded as “discourse,” narrative goes beyond a style of literature and exists more as an ideology. Every discourse has its power base, i.e., every discourse is produced in a certain historical and cultural context. Narrative can produce meaning that forms our perception of things, which is the “history” in which we live. The different types of museums described in Chapter 7 and Chapter 10 also illustrate the role of culture, history, and memory in shaping identities in the multiply “post-colonial” landscape of Taiwan. For instance, The National Museum of Taiwan Literature depicts the appeal of “nativization”(本土化) and Taiwan “subjectivity,” Aboriginal Museums (Shung Ye Museum of Formosan Aborigines and the Ketagalan Culture Center) exhibit the harmonious coexistence between multiple indigenous cultures in urban and rural settings, and ecomuseums combine local knowledge and culture with nativization, forging a collective attachment to the land. In describing the movement to de-sinify and nativize Taiwan, Chapter 10 attributes a global importance to Taiwan that it lacks in the realm of

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 63–64.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 5.

diplomacy and geopolitics.<sup>13</sup> Museum exhibitions discussed in this chapter try to show that Taiwan's people and society are open-minded, inclusive, and increasingly integrated into the global community. Internationalism, somewhat paradoxically, has become a key ingredient in Taiwan's national identity.<sup>14</sup>

Given Denton's exploration of the museums (especially revolutionary museums and exhibitions) of China's mainland in *Exhibiting the Past*, the author is able to draw in this work in *The Landscape of Historical Memory*. In the 1980s, the work of the Pan Blue Alliance to shape the island's museums had a lot in common with the narrative methods of the mainland's revolutionary museums. For this reason, the Taiwanese memory of the KMT during the 1980s more or less resembles their current mainstream narrative about the CCP. Museums take this route in order to distinguish Taiwan's cultural identity from KMT Sinocentrism, and also from an (imagined) essentialism of Chinese culture on the mainland.<sup>15</sup> The book often mentions that mainland tourists seek out the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall. Their imagination of Taiwan is usually focused on the KMT, represented by Chiang Kai-shek, and this has downplayed the "fight" between the Pan Blue Alliance and Pan Green Alliance. At this time, the KMT, which carries both the mainstream narrative projection in Taiwan and the narrative imagination of China's mainland, constantly split and collapsed due to the contradictions within its identity. The traditional political doctrines and campaign slogans of the blue camp attract fewer and fewer young constituents nowadays, as revealed by recent parliamentary elections. In the near future, the KMT might have to drastically change its identity in order to survive.

Is national identity born in a museum? The answer can be either yes or no. Museums and

their collections contain deliberately crafted histories and memories, which were also the product of specific social behaviors intended to inspire consensual actions. However, these histories, memories, and actions do not necessarily summon the audience's sense of belonging, but may rekindle experiences of alienation instilled from the top down by the government or elites. Rodney Harrison once argued that heritage must be seen as separate from the pursuit of history, as it is concerned with re-packaging the past for some purpose in the present. These purposes may be nationalistic ones, or operate at the local level.<sup>16</sup> The example of Taiwan indicates how politically contested is the project of establishing a people's heritage through museum objects and their meanings, as identity politics characterized by "nationalism" and "nativization" offer competing narratives of the nation.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>16</sup> Rodney Harrison, *Understanding the Politics of Heritage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 10.

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