The Past is Now: Review Article

The Landscape of Historical Memory:
The Politics of Museums and Memorial Culture in Post-Martial Law Taiwan
By Kirk A. Denton

The second half of the twentieth century saw Taiwan transform from a single-party autocracy to a functioning multi-party democracy with robust civil rights protections. From the 1970s to the present, constant political and historical debate about the past has been both a symptom of a traumatic past, and a driving force for the maturation of Taiwanese democracy. In The Landscape of Historical Memory, Kirk A. Denton examines this dialogue from the perspective of Taiwan’s museum culture. Taiwan’s liminal position in international politics (being “a nation without nation-state status”) (3) is what makes its debates over historical memory so intense and relevant. Denton focuses on the politics of museums in Taiwan, and analyzes the historical narratives and political and ideological meanings contained within modern museum exhibits. One of Denton’s particular areas of concern is the founding mission and purposes of museums. The type of history produced by the museums Denton examines, for the most part, is in service to a contested present (7). In Denton’s view, the museums help advance the type of narratives that could be construed as nation-building projects. This book follows a similar thematic interest to that of the author’s earlier study of post-socialist PRC museums, Exhibiting the Past: Historical Memory and the Politics of Museums in Postsocialist China (2014). While Denton makes comparisons between museums across the Taiwan strait, the book is not intended as a shared history of Chinese-Taiwanese museums. Rather, Denton points out similarities and differences between the curatorial processes, funding, definitions of history, and social, political, and economic influences on museums across the strait. The political uses and politicized representations of history in museums is an element that is common to both PRC and Taiwanese museums (which arguably applies to most historical museums).

Denton’s study begins with a condensed history of museums in Taiwan, focusing on those that address history, literature, ethnography, archaeology, environment and ecology, and memorials for important political figures. Denton
omits fine arts museums for their relative lack of narrative-driven exhibits and less-constant engagement with historical memory (8). Taiwan’s museums, like those in the PRC, originated in colonialism and imperialism. George Leslie Mckay, a Canadian missionary, set up the first museum in Taiwan, exhibiting artifacts relevant to Taiwan’s “natural history” and ethnography. The Japanese colonial regime, which took over Taiwan in 1895 (around the time Mackay returned to Canada), decided to keep Mackay’s museum before establishing their own in 1908. Mackay’s museum and the Museum of the Colonial Administration served a similar function: to complement the “civilizing modernity” that purportedly more enlightened cultures brought to Taiwan (10). By framing the artifacts and bodies of existing indigenous peoples as part of a “natural history,” such museums enforced a new, hierarchical understanding of civilization on Taiwan.

Taiwan’s earliest museums served as a space where colonial powers could display and reinforce their dominion over the island, a trend which continued after 1945. The Chinese Nationalists renamed the Japanese Museum of the Colonial Administration the Taiwan Provincial Museum, and used it to de-japanify the local populace and instill Chinese identity and values (11). The Sinocentric theme of the Taiwan Provincial Museum carried over to many museums that still exist today, from the National Palace Museum to the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall and the National Museum of History (12).

After the end of martial law and the democratization of Taiwan, there have been concerted efforts to reframe Taiwan’s museums to focus on multiculturalism as a key aspect of Taiwanese society. Members of the dangwai movement, and later DPP, looked to colonial history and the histories of ethnic minority groups for narratives that would compete with the KMT’s Sinocentricism. New exhibits in existing museums, as well as entirely new museums themselves, also focused on themes ranging from global history to historical trauma and human rights. There has also been a localization effect in Taiwan’s museums, in the sense that local and regional museums have increasingly cropped up with the distinct goal of integrating existing communities.

The first chapter of the book addresses premodern history and archaeology museums. Denton primarily examines the National Museum of History, the National Museum of Prehistory and the Shihsansang Museum. While the NMH represents a Sinocentric model of historical representation, Denton shows that the latter two, newer museums focus more on the national origins of modern Taiwan, independent from China. This distinction is evidenced by the periods chosen as starting points for the museums’ exhibits. While the National Museum of History has largely focused
on promoting the notion of an unbroken cultural lineage between the Republic of China and the prehistory of mainland China, the National Museum of Prehistory and the Shihsansang Museum focus more on the migration of Austronesian-speaking peoples to Taiwan, and the subsequent blending of Han and Austronesian culture. This focus on Austronesian migrant added thousands of years to Taiwan’s history that had little to no relation to developments in mainland China. Unsurprisingly, the “Austronesization” of Taiwan’s prehistory was not well received by Nationalist scholars in Taiwan, and Communist scholars in China (43). Denton suggests that such museums function as texts, in the mode of Benedict Anderson, that help generate communities which think about themselves as more connected, with shared origins (8). Clearly, control over Taiwan’s (pre-)historical narrative has been a central point of contention between the DPP and KMT after democratization.

Chapter Two focuses on the “nativization” of Taiwan history as exemplified by the National Museum of Taiwan History. The NMTH, which opened in 2011, highlights the convergence of diverse cultural influences in Taiwan while trying to maintain as neutral a narrative as possible. One of the missions of the museum is to “construct common historical memories for the Taiwan people,” and it seeks to weave together episodes of history ranging from the period of early Chinese settlement to the Japanese colonial era, to the post-1949 period of martial law and beyond (63). The museum outlines how indigenous, Japanese, and Chinese influences have contributed to modern Taiwan’s social and political fabric, and it is important to note that the museum does not advance a radical “de-Sinicizing mode” of historical memory (58).

Not all museums seek to present a neutral, or “consensus” view, of Taiwan’s past. Chapter Three highlights the Taipei National Revolutionary Martyrs’ Shrine and the 228 Peace Memorial Park and Museum. The ongoing commemoration of the dead by both the “blue camp” (KMT) and “green camp” (DPP) in these two memorial institutions is telling proof of the split between two major identarian camps. The martyrs’ shrines across Taiwan commemorate KMT soldiers and civilians who died in fighting for the Nationalists in the various revolutionary efforts after the Xinhai Revolution of 1911. The 228 Memorial Museum, on the other hand, highlights KMT brutality in Taiwan and celebrates instead those who were martyred by KMT rule, most notably through the February 28 state-led massacre of 1947, which began a period of martial law that would last nearly four decades. While these memorials represent two different political camps, it is worth highlighting the fact that the KMT supports the exhibitions about atrocities committed during its rule. As a pluralistic society, Taiwan is home to organizations that are able to publicly seek transitional
justice and facilitate the processing of historical trauma. This is in marked contrast to the PRC, in which historical instances of state misgovernance continue to go unaddressed due to the nature of the party-state’s need for a unified line to support its own legitimacy (87).

Chapter Four explores Taiwan’s human rights museums. The discourse on human rights became a critical part of Taiwan’s identity after the lifting of martial law in 1987. Denton focuses on the Ching-mei Human Rights Cultural Park, and the Green Island Human Rights Culture Park. While both parks have been sites of contention between the KMT and DDP, there is a consensus that the parks play an important and positive role in boosting Taiwan’s global image as a bastion of democracy and human rights in East Asia (94).

Chapter Five addresses the memorials, museums, and parks that preserve the memory of the Cold War and War of Resistance against Japan. These include the Armed Forces Museum, Zhongshan Hall, Chung-hsing New Village, and various preserved military dependents’ villages (juancun). With Chung-hsing New Village and the juancun parks, Denton highlights an important facet of Taiwan’s memory landscape – public spaces and communities that, in some cases, continue to “live” in the present (through elderly juancun residents, for example).

Chapter Six is dedicated to museums and memorials centered on Chiang Kai-shek, the polarizing leader of the KMT who oversaw an authoritarian state in Taiwan from 1949 until his death in 1976. Denton makes it clear that memory is divided over Chiang’s regime, and that there are ongoing efforts to “de-Chiangify” Taiwan among pro-DPP circles (through the removal or renovation of Chiang statues and memorials). Aside from the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall, the Two Chiangs Cultural Park (which includes the mausoleums of both Chiang Kai-shek and his son, Chiang Ching-kuo) also figures in recent debates about the position of the Chiang dynasty in modern Taiwanese historical memory.

In Chapter Seven, Denton introduces the National Museum of Taiwan Literature, which opened in Tainan city in 2003. Taiwan literature as a field of study received serious consideration after the 1970s, in which Taiwan saw a growing “nativist” literary movement, distinct from “Chinese literature.” Museums like the NMTL that dedicate significant space to authors of the “nativist” movement stress Taiwan’s unique history, separate from that of China’s, and emphasize the emotional and spiritual connections between land and people.

Chapter Eight continues to develop the theme of Taiwanese identity construction, but with a specific focus on Aboriginal museums. Taiwan’s indigenous peoples belong to the Austronesian language group. They are thought to have settled
on Taiwan thousands of years before the first Han-Chinese settlers. Given the long history of colonialism and discrimination suffered by Taiwan’s indigenous population after large-scale Han migration (and especially after Japanese colonization in 1895), the construction of museums dedicated to indigenous peoples clearly fit into this book’s themes of cultural and national identity, and the resolution of historical traumas.

Chapter Nine introduces “ecomuseums,” so termed for their focus on education and the history of Taiwan’s natural environment and landscape. Denton examines the Lanyang Museum in Yilan and the Gold Ecological Park in Jinguashi, near Keelung. While the formation of these museums in the early 2000s and 2010s can be attributed to ongoing environmental activism dating back to the 1980s and 1990s, Denton stresses that contemporary political forces also play a role. Ecomuseums, which promote local culture and an appreciation for Taiwan’s unique environmental features, also fit into the Taiwan-centric historiographic shift explored in previous chapters. Post-democracy Taiwan’s search for a new identity, therefore, clearly involves both human and ecological components.

In the final chapter, titled “Taiwan Intertwined with the World,” Denton explores museums that adopt a global orientation. The Museum of World Religions and the southern branch of the National Palace Museum are two examples which incorporate globally themed exhibits, Denton suggests, as a “soft-power” tactic to enhance Taiwan’s cosmopolitan identity (216-17). Unlike Denton’s previous examples, these museums’ cosmopolitan vision is not a point of contention between the green and blue political camps. Rather, they reflect a consensus on the troubling ambiguity of Taiwan’s nation-state status.

*The Landscape of Historical Memory* offers a rich and comprehensive guide to the varieties of museums found in Taiwan, and the state’s role at various periods in constructing the museums and curating their exhibits. From the outset, Denton makes it clear that he employs a “statist” approach. Rather than focusing on visitor reception and experience, he spends more time examining the “political capital, time, effort, and funding” expended by the KMT, DPP, and other political actors on Taiwan’s museums (229). In one sense, this approach is justified, because while museums are simply one avenue from which to examine historical memory, anchoring an analysis of museums with constant reference to Taiwan’s political context (both before and after democratization) lends more gravity to the discussion.

However, it is unclear if this is an adequate justification for the omission of exhibit reception. Denton acknowledges that visitor experience and subjective perception remain a very important element in the discussion of historical memory.
as it relates to museum exhibits (5). A case could be made that a politics-centered study of historical memory in Taiwanese museums cannot be complete without serious engagement with the reception of the exhibits. After all, one of the key assumptions driving Denton’s analysis is that part of what makes contemporary Taiwan’s landscape of historical memory unique is its pluralistic, multicultural society. The majority of the museums that Denton discusses are partially or wholly public institutions, and he goes to lengths to show how the KMT and DPP vied for control in the realm of museums. Yet, the high-level political squabbles between the green and blue camps over museums and memorials tends to leave out the voices of ordinary citizens. The resulting approach is a top-down history of museums, and one wonders if the public should feature more heavily in this discussion. Measuring audience engagement through data collection (surveys and media coverage) for at least some of the more contentious museums in this volume would make the book more well-rounded, and show the connections between the people of Taiwan and the historical memory as conveyed in public museums.

Denton’s choice of museums offers great breadth across ten chapters, each of which references multiple museums and memorials. His ability to hold these different institutions together is formidable, and it provides the reader with a great primer on the ways in which major political factions in Taiwan have attempted to define Taiwanese identity. On the same note, however, one might also wonder if Denton tackles too much in this book. There is a dizzying array of themes introduced across these ten chapters, ranging from multiculturalism and de-Sinification, to environmentalism and urban development. The museums featured here often stretch beyond the confines of one discipline (prehistory, archaeology, and ethnic studies in the case of the National Museum of Taiwan History, for example). Denton makes a valiant effort to address the multiple sides of each museum, but in some cases, there is simply not enough room for detailed analysis.

As a result, the book can become conceptually opaque at times. Denton clearly shows that contests over Taiwan’s historical memory constantly play out within these museums. But his thesis is that ultimately these debates all occur in service to identity politics. There are issues with this approach. Namely, the “Taiwan” that is ostensibly fighting over its identity is at times rendered a single unit (in the global context, where it is isolated by world governments), and at others, bitterly divided into various political and social factions. It is certainly valid to argue that historical memory does play a major role in contemporary identity politics, but Denton may have missed an opportunity to delve deeper into the role of historical memory in trauma-processing and state-building. Throughout the book, Denton examines issues of human rights,
transitional justice, and trauma to great effect, bringing out perspectives from both political sides of the White Terror era. One way to tighten the focus of the book might therefore be to double down on these themes such as historical trauma and transitional justice, which undeniably form a major influence on post-democratization politics. Other portions of the book, such as the ninth chapter on ecomuseums, offer interesting connections but are not as closely bound to history and identity at the national level.

While museums are critical in curating and distilling historical memory and the collective consciousness of a given population, Denton could have further discussed the role of public education in either cementing or contradicting the views expressed in the museums that he examines. It would be interesting to see to what extent similar debates played out in government when it came to educational reform. Moreover, it may also be worth considering how political debates about museums also reflect or engage with emerging trends in Taiwanese historiography. Finally, Denton’s introduction may also have benefited from a note that clarifies the distinction between memorials and museums, and his approach to both, before proceeding to the main body chapters. While both memorials and museums relate to historical memory, their form, presentation, and purpose obviously differ tremendously. If Denton could have offered some thoughts on the distinction here it would be very helpful for scholars with less exposure to museum studies.

In sum, Denton’s book is a comprehensive study of museums and memorials in Taiwan. Denton’s politics-centered approach shows how history and memory are intricately connected with people’s everyday lives through educational and commemorative structures etched into the landscape. Yet with the amount of breadth Denton offers, his book sacrifices some depth when it comes to the discussion of particularly complex themes related to trauma and transitional justice. Scholars interested in historical memory in Taiwan should consider Denton’s book an excellent primer on the history of museums in Taiwan.

**About the Author**

Aidan Lee is a doctoral student in the History department at the University of California, Berkeley. He has received degrees from the University of Virginia (BA) and the University of Chicago (MA), where he focused on the history and memory of Taiwan as a Japanese colony. For his doctoral research, he plans a comparative study of Japanese- and Chinese-Nationalist-ruled Taiwan. In particular, he is interested in urban development, race and ethnicity, and sports and physical culture. He recently won the award for best PhD student paper at the 2021 conference “Remembering Taiwan’s Martial Law,” hosted by Australia National University, for a presentation on Taiwan’s military dependent villages.