

Australian Migrant Heritage in South China:

The Legacy of Diaspora-Funded Schools in Twentieth Century Zhongshan

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November 2022

Abstract

This interdisciplinary study addresses a problem of intellectual concern at the intersection of the scholarly fields of heritage studies and migration history: How to recognise and manage the heritage of a shared past beyond the boundaries of the nation-state? Existing research and conservation practice on sites of migrant heritage in Australia conventionally considers events and places related to the immigrant experience after they arrive in Australia, but not their continuing links to migrant places of origin overseas. An exception to this is the China–Australia Heritage Corridor project—an Australian Research Council-funded Discovery Project initiated by researchers at the Institute for Culture and Society at Western Sydney University to document the diasporic dimension of Chinese migrant heritage to Australia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Under the umbrella of the China–Australia Heritage Corridor project, this doctoral thesis specifically explores the social and architectural dimension of the Chinese diaspora’s educational philanthropy in the period from the early twentieth century until the present. It helps reveal how Chinese migration to Australia ultimately resulted in the socio-material transformation of the native home of migrants in the Pearl River Delta of China’s Guangdong Province, specifically in relation to the construction and operation of modern schools there. The following interrelated research questions are posed: How was this twentieth-century diasporic educational philanthropy organised? How did diaspora-funded schools engender new ways of being modern in rural China? What role do diaspora-funded school buildings assume once they cease functioning as schools? And, ultimately, how do Chinese Australians reclaim or reconnect with their heritage in China generation after generation?

Data collection was conducted between 2017 and 2021 in the *qiaoxiang* (remittance-built localities) of Zhongshan (China), and in Sydney and Townsville (Australia). Fieldwork included locating and photographically documenting Australian-funded schools in Zhongshan, archival and library research, and the recording of firsthand oral accounts by school donors, donor descendants, and former pupils of the schools.

This thesis presents a dual—*qiaoxiang* and diaspora—perspective that disrupts the conventional understanding of migrant heritage as defined by the nation-state. The study is the first of its kind to examine how the Chinese diaspora relates to the material heritage of the diaspora-funded school setting in China. Diaspora-funded schools were unique socio-material assemblages that first emerged in southern China in the early twentieth century. This thesis reveals how the modern school shaped a new way of life and future for the *qiaoxiang*. The socio-material legacies of the diaspora-funded school buildings are a testimony to the generosity of the donors, but the schools may also become a burden for donors and their descendants, requiring maintenance and continuous improvement. Since the 1980s, Chinese migrants in Australia (and their descendants) continued the tradition of erecting new schools and renovating old ones as a way to contribute to the *qiaoxiang*'s future. But this second wave of construction only lasted until the turn of the twentieth-first century, after which China no longer depended on the diaspora as a funding source for schools.

The thesis concludes that Chinese-Australian migrant heritage in China remains relevant to both China and Australia. It testifies to the history of their mutual entanglement and place-based attachment, as well as improving intergenerational relationships. It also has potential to strengthen the transnational ties established by the history of diaspora philanthropy.

論文摘要

本跨學科研究探討在文化遺產研究與移民歷史交匯下的關注點：如何識別和管理跨民族國家邊界遺產的共同過去？澳洲現時對移民遺產的遺址研究和保育，大多是圍繞移民抵達澳洲後的相關事件、移居地和生活經驗，而非他們與海外移民原居地的持續聯繫。由澳洲研究議會「探索發展項目」資助，西雪梨大學文化與社會研究院策展的「中澳承傳長廊」卻是一個特例，此計劃旨在記錄十九和二十世紀僑民的跨國遺產。

在「中澳承傳長廊」的計劃下，本博士論文專門探索從二十世紀初到現在，由僑民發起的教育慈善事業的社會和建築面向。這有助揭示僑民如何最終促使其故鄉珠江三角洲，特別是與現代學校的建設和營運有關的社會物質轉型。以下為相關的研究問題：二十世紀僑民教育慈善事業是如何組織的？僑捐學校如何促成中國農村的現代化？在僑捐學校的建築物停止運作後，它們扮演什麼角色？以及澳洲華人如何一代又一代地與中國遺產恢復或重新連繫？

資料收集於二零一七至二零二一年期間，在廣東中山的僑鄉以及澳洲雪梨和湯斯維爾進行。田野考察工作包括定位和拍攝位於中山的澳洲僑捐學校、檔案和圖書館研究、並記錄學校捐贈者、捐贈者後代和舊生的第一手口頭陳述。

本論文提出了一個僑鄉和海外華人的雙重視角，打破了以民族國家來定義移民遺產的傳統理解。本研究是同類研究中的先河，研究僑民與中國學校環境的物質遺產之間的關係。僑捐學校是二十世紀初首次在南中國出現的獨特社會物資聚合 (socio-material assemblages)。本論文揭示了現代學校如何塑造僑鄉在二十世紀早期和晚期的新生活方式和未來展望。僑捐學校建築的社會物質遺產見證捐助者的慷慨，但其後持續維修和優化工程卻成為捐贈者及其後代的負擔。自一九八零年代以來，澳洲華人（及其後代）延續了建設新校和翻新舊校的傳統，以貢獻僑鄉的未來。然而，這第二波的建設只持續到廿一世紀之初，其後中國已不再需要倚賴僑民的捐獻。

本論文提出的結論是，在中國的中澳移民遺產，依然與中國和澳洲息息相關。這見證了兩者纏結的關係和對地方依戀的歷史，以及改善中的代際關係。本研究並期望能加強僑民慈善歷史所建立的跨國聯繫。

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