BEYOND REPRESENTATION?
PORTRAYALS OF AN OVERSEAS CHINESE TYCOON IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Preliminaries

• Gensis of project on ‘Lee Kong Chian 李光前 & His Economic Empire’
  – A most impt Ch entrepr in Ch diaporic landscape fr 1920s~1960s
  – OC story of rags to riches, econ empire over Spore-Malaya(sia)-Indonesia
  – Shock discovery on extant writings: almost solely Ch-lang pubns + repetitive

• Thrust of today’s seminar: Beyond Representation ???
  – Part I: Representational analysis as core
    ➢ Historiographical but aim at revealing cultural & identity politics
    ➢ Surmising 3 portrayals
      ❖ A leading capitalist & philanthropist in Nanyang
      ❖ A representative patriot of the Ch diaspora
      ❖ A local ‘Virtuous Pioneer’ 先贤 in revised Spore history template
  – Part II: Moving beyond representation
    ➢ Limitations of representation-portrayal
    ➢ Current lines of empirical exploration

• Introducing the man (1893-1967)
  – Migrated 1903, age 10 fr Furong 芙蓉– Nan’an 南安 – Fujia 福建 to Spore
  – Back to Ch for edn 1908-1912 & return as sch teacher, translator, surveyor
  – With tycoon Tan Kah Kee 陈嘉庚, married daughter, started own biz 1928
  – Built up empire in Grt Depr & Korean War, retired 1954, died @ age 74
  – Still legacy & big impact today thro’ Lee Foundation
A. OVERVIEW OF WRITINGS AND DOMINANCE OF TAN EE LEONG

- Background info on Tan Ee Leong 陈维龙
- Tan’s best-integrated 1969 biogr a/c on LKC 李光前略传
- 1980s: ‘East Asia Econ Miracle’ thro Asian values discourse – Mahatir Mohammed & Lee Kuan Yew’ & scholars too
- 1980s: Abandonment of Maoist socialism & adoption of Dengist market reforms & reopening

- Oct 1993: 100th anniv of Lee’s birth, 50th anniv of Guoguang High School 国光中学, elevation of Nan’an 南安升省辖县级市
  - 1993 Nan’an literary & historical docs 《南安文史资料》
  - 1995 Quanzhou conference proceedings 《李光前学术讨论会论文集》
  - 1993 Guoguang alumni pictorial vol 《光前荣后千秋业》
• Single author, book-length biographies

  《一代风范李光前》

• A wide-range of representations on Lee
  – Most popular of all is imagery of him as a leading Nanyang capitalist philanthropist
B. 1st -- AS A LEADING CAPITALIST & PHILANTHROPIST FROM NANYANG

- Total wealth indeterminate
- Among wealthiest in Spore & Malaya
- By 1950s: ‘Rubber King’ & ‘Pineapple King’

In search of his formulae for success
  - Diligence & thriftiness
  - Entrepren acumen: Tiger-infested land

- Turning point: Great Depression of 1930s
  - Relatively small
  - Taking over biz of Tan Kah Kee
    陈嘉庚  & Lim Nee Soon 林义顺

- Major setback: Jap occup, 1942-45
  - Escape with family to USA
  - Attempt at biz ventures in Fujian prov 福建省

- Postwar recovery thro British grant & huge HSBC bank loan
- Hitting jackpot: Korean War, 1950-53
• Capitalist with a heart & socialist inclination
  – Company welfare system
• A leading philanthropist
  – ‘Bright light of sufferer, treasure of society’ ‘苦难者的明灯、社会的瑰宝’
  – ‘Perfect person of the generation’ ‘一代完人’
  – Mantra of ‘benefiting from society, using it on society’ ‘取诸社会、用诸社会’
  – ‘Malnourished’ NY millionaire ‘营养不足…南洋大富翁’
  – Early start to his charitable act
  – Small quantum approach: ‘Route of helping the world on a broad scale’ ‘广泛救世的路线’
• Need for a structured philanthropic foundation
  – Kuo Chuan Foundation, 1930 (?) 国专基金会
  – Lee Foundation, 29 Mar 1952 李氏基金会
  – Split in 1960, one each for Spore & Malaya
  – Some form of reorganization in 1965
  – China-centred Furong Foundation. 21 Dec 1991 芙蓉基金会
C. \textit{2nd – AS A REPRESENTATIVE PATRIOT OF THE CHINESE DIASPORA}

- Broad context of post-Dec 1978 Deng Xiaoping market reforms & reopening of China
- Re-emphasis on contributions of Lee & re-connecting with Lee family: Impt of provincial & county initiatives
- Several major paths in constructing Lee as a representative patriot of Chinese diaspora

- Contributed to modern Ch & its nationalism
  - Tongmenghui & 1911 Revolution
  - Sun Yat-sen Villa 晚晴园
  - Anti-Jap national salvation movements 抗日救国运动
Advancing interest of PRC

- Opposed 1947 KMT proposed elections of Spore & Malayan representatives into China national assemblies
- Urged quick lifting of China ban in Korean War
- Company representative in 1st trade mission to PRC, Aug-Sep 1956

Enormous contributions to Guoguang Educational Village 国光学村 (esp 1950-54 expansion) & Xiamen Univ 厦门大学
- This portrayal as repr patriot gained mileage due to continuity of financial & moral support from Lee’s children & his foundation
- In part also facilitated by significant socio-pol changes in Spore
D. 3rd – AS A LOCAL VIRTUOUS PIONEER ‘先賢’ IN SINGAPORE’S REVISED NATIONAL HISTORY

• 1950s~1970s
  – Final stages of struggle for independence from British & early post independence decades
  – PAP’s governing focus on developing economy & defeating Ch political Left
  – Isolation of Chinese community leaders from having independent socio-pol base
  – Tan Kah Kee 陈嘉庚, Tan Lark Sye 陈六使 & Lee Kong Chian 李光前
  – Beginning of a national amnesia
• Fr 1980s: Turning point in dispensation of historical knowledge & management of Ch lang & culture
  – Economy on firm footing, Defeat of Chinese Left
  – Worry about Western decadence & pride in Asian values
  – Endorsing search for civilizational & ancestral roots
  – Special Assistance Progr Ch schs 特选学校, social studies textbooks, national education
  – Iconic places assoc with Ch history & culture
    • Chinese Heritage Centre 华裔馆 (1995)
    • Sun Yat-sen Villa 晚晴园 (1997~2001)
    • Hua-Song Museum 华颂馆 (2006)
      ['In Praise of Chinese-ness']
• Informal & partial rehabilitation of Tan Kah Kee & Tan Lark Sye
• Lee Kong Chian back to limelight
  – 1984 unveiling of a bronze statute during 65th anniv of Chinese High School 华侨中学
  – 1987 Lim How Seng 林孝胜 on entrepreneurship & management style of Lee
  – 1997 Nan’an huiguan’s 1st vol on Biographies of Nan’an Virtuous Pioneers, selections on Lee, including reprint of Tan Ee Leong’s master biogr a/c of 1969南安会馆编《南安先贤传》
  – July 2005 opening of new National Library HQ with one of Lee Foundation’s biggest donation of S$60m
    • 7 storeys as LKC Ref Library + new research initiatives
  • Jul~Dec 2008 large-scale exhibition on ‘The legacy of Tan Kah Kee and Lee Kong Chian’, with an appended academic conference ‘承前启后 继往开来 — 陈嘉庚与李光前’
• Template of Lee as a ‘virtuous pioneer’ of local Chinese community 华社‘先贤’的模式
  – Adequately general & ambiguous
  – Avoided political sensitivity
  – Yet provided sufficient discourse space for various explorations
• Lee as a virtuous Conf gentleman 儒士君子 (?)
• Lee as a pioneer model of Conf capitalist 儒商模范 (?)
• Lee as a ardent defender of Ch lang & culture 中华语言及文化的极力保护者 (?)
• Lee as a pioneer in shifting identity fr temporary Overseas Chinese sojourner to permanent settler 认同感转移的先驱者
  – Shift fr China to SEA orientation deemed as good & desirable
  • Protected interest of locals
  • In line with Zhou Enlai’s post-1955 Bandung posture
E. ESSENTIALIZATION OF PORTRAYALS

- Essentialization in 2003 young readers’ picture book
  - Stanza of ‘Loving my Singapore island that has nurtured me, Loving my ancestral land that has served as my cradle’ ‘爱我星岛养育土、恋吾故国摇篮祖’

- Variation offered by 1993 commemorative spectacle
  - ‘Loving one’s nation & hometown, Tying one’s heart to the Sinic world’ ‘爱国爱乡、心系中华’
  - 1st half of phrase becomes preferred shorthand way

- Conflation of recently acquired nationality with ancestral hometown under a single umbrella of love & patriotism

- Strategic ambiguity attractive to governing authorities at both ends of diaspora & to diasporic elements themselves
• More ambitious & of a grander scale: Shi Jun 石君女士
  – 1984 popularized Lee as ‘the perfect person of the generation’
  李光前被定为 ‘一代完人’
  – 2003 commemorative conference presentation ended with a passionate call:
    ‘Lee Kong Chian was a shining model not only just for the people of Nan’an, Fujian, Singapore or Chinese Overseas, but for the whole of humanity!’
    ‘李光前先生不只是南安人的，不只是福建人的、新加坡的、海外华人的，他是全人类的光辉典范！’

➤ A didactic universalizing formulation
➤ Dynamics of local & global as embedded in life & times of Lee have seemingly attained & captured as the elusive golden mean
➤ All three portrayals appears to have been blended into one & somewhat crowned with a halo
F. PART II: MOVING BEYOND REPRESENTATION

- Limitations of representation-portrayal approach
  - Deconstruction of extant narratives & essentialization
  - Broad brushstrokes with insufficient details & many gaps
  - From post-modernist cultural studies back to historical empiricism on ‘What it really was?’

- Current lines of empirical exploration
  - Fleshing out details & less well-known aspects of his life & times
  - Beyond a straightforward, chronological-framed biography [Mainstay of US literary scene]
  - Building a transnational Ch family firm [Genre of Ch biz hist]
    - Crossing borders (both colonial & nation-states), ownership, management, succession
    - Debate on ersatz capitalism: Trader or industrial capitalist, etc
Confronting economic challenges
- European, American, Japanese & fellow Ch competitors
- Crises: Gt Depression, Korean War & Jap Occupation

Negotiating decolonization, Cold War & nationalist fervour
- Setting sun over British empire & transfer of power
- China CCP & KMT Politics
- Helping ancestral towns in Ch amidst Cold War environment
- Indonesian Rev & nationalization movement
- Local leftist politics & socio-cultural entanglement
  [→ Early retirement?]

CONCLUSION: Difficulties/Challenges in moving forward
- Big documentary gap: WW2 & burning of books
- Postwar anti-Ch outbursts in Indonesia & disconnection

Archival practices in new SEA nation-states
- Efficacy of 25-30 year archival rule
- Emphasis over acquisition over accessibility
- Privileging audio-visual over textual records

Family’s humbleness & preference for low-profile

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