

This project examines if and how Overseas Chinese museums in Southeast Asia offer alternatives to the nationalist discourses embedded in the People's Republic of China's (PRC) memorialization of history, forcing us to problematize our understanding of decoloniality and its transnational applications.

The term Overseas Chinese (*huaqiao*) was coined at the beginning of the twentieth century to refer Chinese residing outside their motherland. Migration from China to countries in Southeast Asia started as early as the sixteenth century, but it peaked in the second half of the nineteenth century with the advent of western imperialism in Asia. Following the Opium Wars (1839-1860), Chinese labourers emigrated around the world. Seen the large number of Chinese living abroad, the Qing court (1644-1912) started calling emigrants as *huaqiao*, a term that recognized these individuals as Chinese subjects despite their displacement from their native land. By the early 1940s, there were around 8.5 million Chinese emigrants worldwide, over ninety per cent of them in Southeast Asia.

Nowadays, there are several history museums in the PRC. Since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) forces institutions to comply to its sanctioned version of history, these museums tend to offer very similar nationalistic versions of the country's past. The same can be said about the museums of Overseas Chinese, which structure the modern history of the Chinese diaspora according to the nationalistically charged time-frame of official historiography.

A decolonial approach would allow Chinese museums to offer a more multifaceted representation of Overseas Chinese and their entanglement with colonialism and national history. In the last ten years decoloniality has emerged a keyword in the fields of history, museology, heritage studies and beyond. Following the decolonial turn, museums – considered as the strongholds of colonial thinking – have been called to reconstitute artefacts stolen during the colonial era, to reorganize their knowledge production, to take into account for multiple perspectives, and to confront historical injustice in their practices, narratives, and collections. Decoloniality, however, is not practiced in Chinese institutions. The reasons are multiple: first, the CCP exercises full control over museums' narratives, blocking bottom-up initiatives that are considered the motor of the decolonial movement; secondly, since China was a victim of Western colonialism, decolonial practices like those carried out in European museums are often deemed unnecessary in their institutions.

This project proposes to examine if and how Overseas Chinese museums outside the borders of the PRC converge or diverge from the nationalistic representation of history advanced by Chinese communist institutions. Because of their large number of ethnic Chinese citizens, Southeast Asian countries (namely Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia) are particularly suitable for this research. These countries host at least thirty museums entirely dedicated to the history of local Chinese communities, furthermore several other museums mention Chinese history and the Chinese diaspora in their exhibitions. These institutions differ greatly from one another: some of them are national museums, while other are projects curated by local communities. Since they still need to comply with national regulations and are at times influenced by the PRC's economic and political influence, their narratives are not by default 'decolonial'. Nevertheless, these institutions offer multiple historical narratives, and in particular they tackle the history of China and of colonialism from different perspectives, sometimes portraying China as a colonial power in the region and revealing how the Chinese communities adjusted to Western colonialism. These perspectives can add complexity to the monolithic representations of Chinese overseas communities and their entanglement with colonialism and nationalism offered by PRC's museums.

During this project, the investigator will visit the museums dedicated to Chinese history in Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia analysing how their narratives compete and compare, and if they differ from the CCP's sanctioned vision of the past, with a particular attention to the history of colonialism. Besides collecting data about historical exhibitions, the investigator will interview and collaborate with local curators and scholars to analyse the impact of decolonial theories on their curatorial practices. The result will be a series of articles and a monography about the representations of Chinese histories in Southeast Asia and about how these case studies allow us to problematize decoloniality as it intended in Western institutions.