

China, IRL (in real life) from 1-7 April 2024

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Introduction

My personal view of China is shaped by Chinese dramas from historical dynasties and wuxia (武侠) to melodrama romances and modern-day China stories of wealth and poverty. The former was my father's preference, the latter my mothers'. I am the youngest in the family, was happy to accompany both parents separately to the neighbourhood cinema down the street from the family home. So except for gaps when I was abroad studying, *Cdramas* have been a constant.

My world view of the country is informed by history lessons, global media mainly with a Western slant that advantage personal freedoms over Confucian ethics of family, community, and country. I was a broadcast journalist and TV producer. I read and follow cultural sites such as The Sixth Tone and social media such as in FB groups where 2nd generation and younger Chinese globally, document their journey to root out their ancestry, sometimes with nothing more than scribbled words they don't understand on the back of a photo of some old people who they resemble. Their stories are both inspiring and poignant; a testament to "remember the source of the water" (饮水思源)

At home I visit temples noted for deities that were born from the *huaqiao's* (overseas Chinese migrants) encounter with a new land and look out for temples or clans with esoteric spiritual practices. Closer to my heart is Bukit Brown Cemetery, and the diaspora story embedded in the stones speak to me of past lives which resonates with my identity now.

So it was time to make my first trip to China, irl, in real life.

Quanzhou

Quanzhou Surname Cultural Exchange Association (姓氏文化交流协会), Quanzhou Overseas Chinese Bureau and related institutions.

The Quanzhou programme was to give GSS insights to the Nanyang Chinese Root -Seeking Platform which will cost approx 96 million yuan when completed. It is an impressive database of Chinese surnames and genealogical records. Beyond this hard data, we were also introduced to how they use soft data in storytelling the *huaqiao's* journey to Nanyang, their lives, struggles and achievements and the prominent lives of returnees such as Tan Kah Kee. It was a visually stunning display - the heavy use of VR and other AI programmes - that enhanced visitors' experience in interactivity. We were given a sneak peek at their latest exhibition, still yet to open to the public. It is a wraparound genealogical wall, with drop down menus for e.g surnames, so you can start creating your own *zupu* -the family name book - with personal stories;



Meeting representatives from the Quanzhou Surname Cultural Exchange Association



Catherine found her surname!

We were hosted to a 12-course banquet lunch by the Quanzhou Overseas Chinese (*Huaqiao*) Chinese Bureau. There were some standout dishes for me, unique in colour, taste and presentation. I loved the braised yam which was a staple in almost all our meals. Sitting beside me was an officer from the Quanzhou Surname Cultural Exchange Association. I asked how many times a week he lunches like this. He said it can be as many as three times a week, because they do have a steady stream of visitors from different parts of China and *huaqiao* countries who are keen to learn about their database, like GSS. I thought to myself he was pretty slim for someone for whom banquet meals are a weekly affair. But his main duties involve field work and that takes him to far flung and remote villages to check on leads from families searching for their roots. Sometimes all they have to go on is a landmark, an old house by a river. Field work he says is hit and miss, more often misses but the hits make it rewarding for his department to help bring families closer to connecting to their roots.

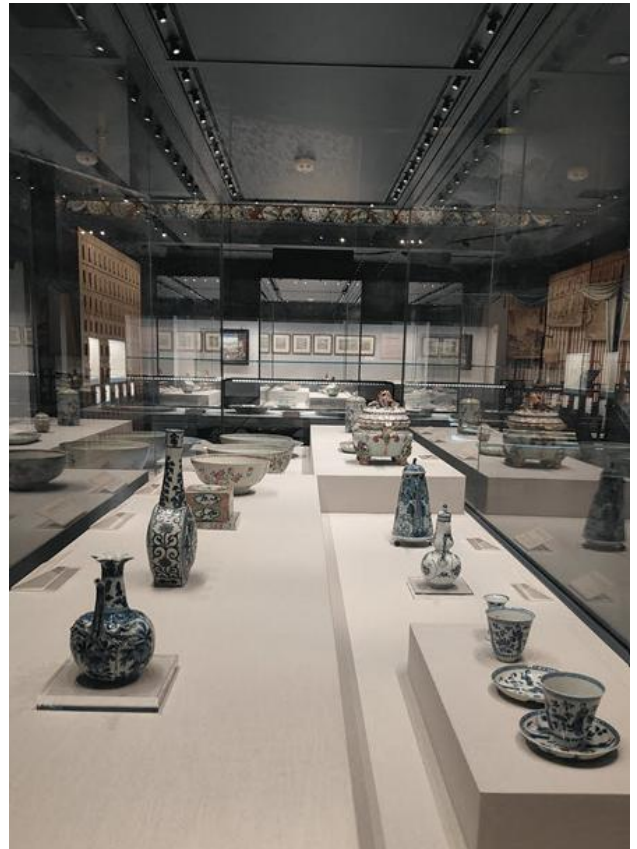
The day ended with discussions between GSS and Quanzhou's researchers and administrators about finding common ground to leverage off each other's content. The aim is to help the growing interest from the diaspora to trace their roots and contribute to the *huaqiao* story exponentially through collaboration, establishing the protocols for engagement. The treat for GSS members was visiting the library where some 2000 *zupu* have already been realised. I know one of Lee Kong Chian's grandsons, so I looked him up and he is indeed named. But since he is a private person, there is no information on his own immediate family. There are about 8,000 *zupus* still to undergo further research and digitization before they can be made searchable. And the researchers stress they are dependent on as much information from the families as possible including details of first and last known locations down to village names.

Meetings with representatives of different Quanzhou organisations



We spent two nights in Quanzhou and it gave us more time to explore old and still thriving landmarks such as the centuries old Luoyang Bridge and its newer extension.

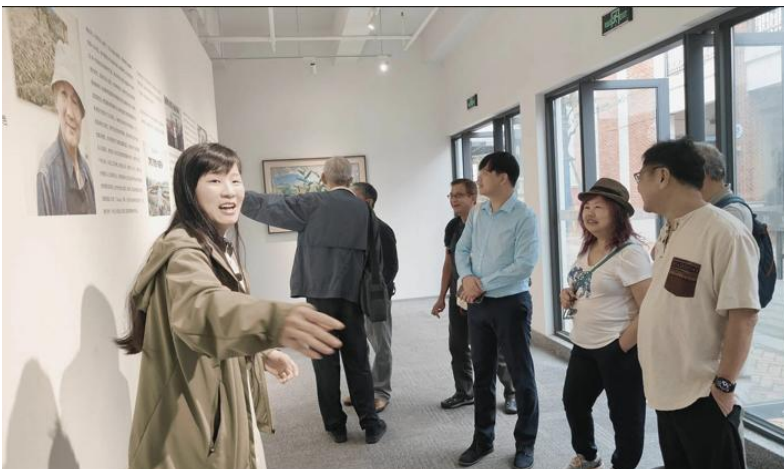
But the highlight for me when it comes to all the museums we visited on this trip was the Fujian Shimao Maritime Silk Road Museum (海上丝绸之路博物馆). Shimao is the name of the property and business tycoon who funded the setting up of this museum with a prize collection of pottery and ceramics that were both exquisite and robust. Hundreds upon hundreds of exhibits told the history of ceramic development - which were prized goods on the Maritime Silk Route - backdropped by photos of archaeological digs. The other exhibits included fine paintings, from inks to watercolours and calligraphy, some said to have been painted by Emperor Qianlong. He was a talented Emperor both in the field, with his prowess on the horse and precision bow and arrow skills, and, in his study, with a brush.



Fine ceramics displayed at the Shimao Maritime Silk Road Museum

Anxi

Anxi (安溪) is treasured tea growing county, as our coach wound its way up to the mountains, the landscape unfurled like a Chinese landscape painting. In the valleys, cash crops such as strawberries and other fruits flourished under covers. We were the guests of the Anxi Tie Guan Yin Tea Cultural Park (安溪铁观音文化园) where a guide took us on the Tie Guan Yin journey of innovation and experimentation to produce award winning tea leaves. An Art Gallery dedicated to all things Tie Guan Yin featured the works of an artist from Taiwan. The whole collection as it captures the tea culture of Anxi. There is a museum where we would taste tea made in the traditional way on a landscaped table with water features. And there was a shop but unfortunately we were short of time. We just made it to view a temple flanked on both sides by traditional buildings. Very instagrammable, with oversized modern sci fi statues scattered on the grounds, like space age guardians of this park.



Learning about Anxi Tie Guan Yin Tea culture at the Cultural Park

Xiamen

Xiamen was where we had all flown in, but we had to leave the very next morning for the two provinces we visited. Now back in Xiamen we had two more nights with no official programme, just for sightseeing. We visited Gulangyu Island, 5-minute ferry ride away. The island has UNESCO World Heritage status, famous for its architecture - some 15 foreign missions had their residences here. The island is beautifully landscaped, the highlight was an enclosed garden one facing the sea, built by a tycoon who was also a poet, so this garden was landscaped for reflection with pavilions for genteel pursuits such as tea drinking. In this garden is a museum of pianos and Gulangyu is also known as the Piano Island.

The directional signs on the island were in English and Chinese, and the heritage markers included information of special trees. One such tree was a natural invitation to climb. Proud parents cajoled their children onto the tree and I snapped a photo of an older brother comforting his younger sister who had an initial fear of heights.

The poet's garden extended right to the edge of the island's beach on the east, and it was crowded with locals on a day's outing because of the Cheng Beng public holidays; Despite the rain which gave a chill to the temperature, this was a warm, affectionate scene for me, reminding me of halcyon days on our own beaches before Changi airport claimed some of them.



Gulangyu Island was once home to a well-known doctor from Singapore for 17 years. Dr. Lim Boon Keng, who lends his name to an MRT station and a road at home, had been tasked to set up Xiamen University on the mainland by Tan Kah Kee. We didn't find his home but we saw the house that belonged to Tan Kah Kee. It's unoccupied as were many of the homes we saw that are protected because of the island's UNESCO status. Some of the houses have been repurposed to serve tourism providing F & B, retail and hotel accommodations.

To visit Xiamen University, we had to apply early, as the University controlled the numbers of visitors each day. Unfortunately we were too late.

On the day we visited the Tan Kah Kee Memorial Hall and his mausoleum which jutted out into the sea, it rained. The Memorial Hall was a tribute to his contributions as China's most respected and admired huaqiao who returned to the motherland. Educator, businessman and philanthropist, his legacy was such that at his funeral the then Premier, Chou En Lai was one of the pall bearers.



An unusual photo caught my eye, it is one which was shared with me by a descendant of Chia Hood Theam who is buried in Bukit Brown. It was a personal family photograph but it was "appropriated" as an advertisement for rubber tyres produced by Tan Kah Kee's companies.

Tan Kah Kee's mausoleum is lined with exquisite and elaborate carvings. The best of the carvings in Bukit Brown Cemetery, from graves of prominent figures, with the same quality granite imported from Quanzhou (泉州白石玉昌湖青石), are comparable. It is the same stone which blankets Tan Kah Kee's grave. Since it was Cheng Beng, there were many floral tributes at the grave.



China remembers and venerates the Tan Kah Kees, Lee Kong Chians and other well known *huaqiao* personalities from Singapore, more than Singapore. Yet, it is to be remembered they were not communists, they were in the first instance successful businessmen. This is a point of inflection in my impressions of how China looks upon the *huaqiao* with gratitude but it borders on hagiography, that part of this remembrance is I believe is for domestic consumption.

The children of the *huaqiao* are a product of much more diverse influences of the Nusantara and Colonialism, and the struggles for our independence, quite removed physically and intellectually from China's direct influence.

Impressions

In truth, my impressions of China were formed within the first few hours of arriving at Xiamen Airport. Raymond and I took an earlier flight and had to catch a taxi to our hotel. Raymond said to me, you know Catherine, if you take a cab and the fare is 60 rmb, you give them a 100 rmb they will always say no change. Well he was approached by a driver and we followed him a long way to the carpark when Raymond was very impressed by the electric car he was driving which belonged to BYD, currently the largest electric car company in the world. On reaching the hotel Raymond handed him a 100 rmb for a 70 rmb fare and the driver gave him change. I laughed. Raymond gave him a tip.

We visited the Zhongshan Mall which is a wide pedestrian boulevard flanked on both sides by F & B and retail, all roughly selling the same mass products from tea to cute souvenirs. Every city has one in memory of Dr. Sun Yat Sen whom China recognises as the first revolutionary and the ROC (Taiwan) recognises as their first Republican President, that they should have had.

We had some delicious street food. When we veered off the mall into a side street, we found ourselves in a network of old lanes. These were also historic lanes known for light industry like there was metalwork lane which had decorative markers on the wall. Public loos in the lane, Raymond reported, were clean and there were even recycling bins! He stumbled onto a quaint TCM clinic and I said I wanted to see the doctor. An elderly woman in her 70s said he was out, so I asked who he was. She replied straight faced, "*he is my lover*" And a younger man, I assume to be her son, laughed. We all laughed. Raymond said it was an unusual way to describe a husband so maybe they were really lovers with previous marriages.



In a narrow winding lane we heard children's voices and parents were waiting for school to be dismissed. The school was sprawling and one wall of the school was decorated with teaching messages and its main entrance opened out to this narrow street where motorbikes were in tight squeeze trying to make their way through the waiting parents. Everyone was polite and gave way to the biker. And bikers were also patient with this tourist trying not to be obvious with her holiday snaps of all she found charming, quaint and meaningful.

It was a world far removed from Zhongshan but more real. We hailed a public taxi from the street back to the hotel, and this time the taxi driver really said he had no change when paid with a 100 rmb bill.

In my short time in South China, I made indelible memories where I had person to person encounters which give the places where it occurred, also a sense of "home"

Taking shelter from yet another rainy afternoon, I made a beeline for a charming cafe along a well known street for locals and tourists. It was just after lunch and I needed a coffee fix.

We locked eyes with a pretty girl I guessed to be in her early twenties. We caught her attention because we were conversing in English. We chatted while waiting for our orders and then out of the blue, she announced 今天是我的生日 So I bought her a birthday cake, lit a candle and sang her a birthday song. She was beaming! She shared she was waiting for her husband. They were visiting from Guangdong. We had to leave for a rendezvous to visit a nearby temple but met her with her husband at the temple when I was leaving. They were a good-looking couple, he thanked me for celebrating his wife's birthday.



Capturing a moment to remember

We had a very early start the morning we flew home. As I was waiting for breakfast to open, an elderly couple struck up a conversation with me. They were visiting from Xian. They were the only people I met who, when finding out I was from Singapore, spoke about Lee Kuan Yew, instead of Tan Kah Kee.

Xiamen wakes up in the early morning, it seems, with a team of cleaners working every 200 metres or so, independently. Our hotel on Huli Avenue, a main highway leading to the airport, is twice the expanse of Singapore's highways, with both pedestrian' and motorists' traffic lights, the pedestrian lights start flickering about five seconds before the one for cars. Lining Huli on both sides are car showrooms from Western brands such as Cadillacs, Porsche, Japanese family cars, Subaru and Toyota, and not forgetting their hugely popular China made cars, one of which looked just dinky like a colourful clubman model.

There is no sense of want or need in the places we visited. But the winding lanes we explored off Zhongshan was an indication of how ordinary people lived. Our guide with a family with one daughter, says apartments and cars are expensive for them. His daughter is studying environmental science at a University. Everywhere we travelled in the city, there were high rise buildings in the midst of construction and more car showrooms.

Gratitude

When I am abroad, I like to visit supermarkets to sample new tastes. I chose moist looking small preserved plums among my purchases which included biscuits and cucumber chips! The plums were my best buy, a taste of China, stimulating in its tartness, counterbalanced by a sweetness which spoke to me of the people I had met. For me travel is not complete, unless I make contact with the people in the host country.



Wonderful companions, sweet memories

My thanks to KK Lee who co led the group for his measured and calm conversations with both officials and his travelling companions, a shout out to *“Lee Tai Sor”*, my nickname for the trio of “brothers” who immediately gelled and had so much chemistry, they were like Rediffusion, entertaining, but also cannot switch off. and to the other Catherine for female companionship and thoughtful conversations. And finally to Raymond who one day before we left for Xiamen found an ancestor from my maternal line which hailed from Eng Choon and settled in Malacca. He was the first generation, great granduncle who had three other brothers, but only he served as the President of the Eng Choon Association in Malacca. The Malacca trail had gone cold when my late parents moved to Australia and lived there for almost 40 years after retirement. Now it's warming up. There is the promise, I will return.

Spring by Catherine Lim

My soul is old

My heart beats young

It is Spring, and my journey has just began