

Home is where the heart is? – A study of the presentation of Tan Sri Dr Tan Chin Tuan's legacy

The most common way of presenting history has been in the museum where the past is reconstructed by archivists and presented to the public. However, this form of history can often be seen as de-contextualized with seemingly random and irrelevant items thrown together. As such, another approach to honouring the past in a more life-like and meaningful setting is by preserving sites, and buildings deemed historically significant. Such tangibles provide an interactive and personal approach to preserving history, as seen in the preservation of a person's residence. Yet, deciding to preserve a person's home as a symbolic heritage site is no easy matter. Firstly, they must achieve accomplishments significant enough to arouse interest in their life. Nelson Mandela's struggle against apartheid and J.P Morgan's pioneering of the US economy are examples of famous figures whose homes have been turned into museums, filled with their personal memories and an assortment of memorabilia. In Singapore, few personalities have been remembered this way. One of them is Tan Sri Dr Tan Chin Tuan, a local banker and prominent philanthropist,¹ whose family home was recently preserved as part of his estate. In the realm of local preservation, the Tan Chin Tuan Mansion provides a unique example, by showcasing Dr Tan's legacy – both as a museum and as the symbolic seat of his foundation

The symbolic preservation of the Tan Chin Tuan Mansion² serves to preserve the aims and values of the Tan Foundation while retaining the legacy of the late Dr Tan. A firm believer in philanthropy, Dr Tan established the Tan Chin Tuan

¹ Dr Tan (Sri) Chin Tuan's Timeline Website:

http://www.tanfoundation.com.sg/Images/pdf/aboutus_OurFounder/TCT_Timeline.pdf

Born in 1908 in Singapore, Tan Chin Tuan was educated in Anglo-Chinese School and in 1942 at 34 years of age became the youngest managing director in banking history when he was appointed joint MD of OCBC at age 34.

² The mansion is located at 42 Cairnhill Road.

Foundation on April 10, 1976, giving generously to society by supporting various causes and welfare organizations.³ The family home of the late philanthropist and “father” of OCBC now serves to preserve his legacy. Filled with photographs, personal artifacts and memorabilia, it has been fully restored by Dr Tan’s family, acting as a family museum and a place for hosting the foundation’s beneficiaries.

Interestingly, the Tan Chin Tuan Mansion is a private property⁴, thus challenging the long-held perceptions of Singaporeans that the past can only be preserved in rigid museum settings. By showcasing his legacy in his intimate family home, it allows viewers to learn about his private life, in a most realistic setting. The significance of the Tan Chin Tuan Mansion lies beyond the purpose of showcasing his life’s accomplishments, lying instead in its preservation as a symbol of the Tan foundation’s aims and values, evident in it being a venue to host the foundation’s beneficiaries.

Thus, the issue of sacred identity arises. His life’s work epitomises a brilliant and generous man; characteristics which his family is happy to highlight. However, the banker’s personal efforts in helping local charitable organisations were often left unrecognised.⁵ Newspaper reports recognising his generous contributions drew a blank during the 1970s.⁶ Therefore, the memorial might not truly reflect a man who did not actively seek fame and recognition, hence demonstrating how competing memories challenge an identity forged by a particular presentation of history.

³ Most notably, his contributions to education are seen in funding various school-building projects, such as the reconstruction of ACS Barker Road campus in 1950. He also funded scholarships such as the prestigious Tan Chin Tuan Scholarships, for outstanding and deserving students Secondary to University levels that are still being funded today. On 19 August 2008, the Foundation launched the Tan Chin Tuan Centennial Fund, where it endowed \$10 million dollars on Nanyang Technological University that ‘will be used to further the spirit of pioneering entrepreneurship and philanthropy of the late Tan Sri Dr Tan Chin Tuan’.

⁴ A 20-storey condominium actually sits atop the old-house. Such concept challenges the idea of preservation versus progress as well. However, due to word constraint, this topic will not be discussed in this paper.

⁵ Dr Tony Tan commented that despite his heavy responsibilities, Tan Chin Tuan ‘does a lot of good work, visits old folks home and helps those in need [and] yet [is] reserved and shuns publicity’ Loh G, Goh CB and Tan TL (2000) *Building Bridges, Carving Niches: An Enduring Legacy*, pp. 227-229

⁶ G. Loh et al, *Building Bridges, Carving Niches: An Enduring Legacy*, (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 227-229.

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