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博物馆

Museum

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What was a museum (*bowuguan*) in Mao's China? In 1952, a Shanghai Museum guidebook explained that New China's heightened political consciousness required attendant opportunities to study culture.¹ According to its directors, there was also a demand for museum visits from an increasing number of mass organisations, such as workers' groups and schools. Citing Mao Zedong's writings on the historic greatness of the nation, the role of antiquity in building New Democracy, and the place of China in world civilisation, officials announced the Shanghai Museum's guiding principles: to teach China's cultural traditions, to utilise ancient culture to develop the new, and to cultivate patriotism in service of socialist construction. 'The museum is part of society's superstructure,' declared director Shen Zhiyu in 1960, 'the goal for establishing museums is to carry out mass education in patriotism, socialism, and communism.'² A museum in China—from the Mao era to the present—has been a political classroom.

Writing on the rise of museums in nineteenth-century Europe, sociologist Tony Bennett described 'exhibitionary culture' as a complex: a system in which knowledge projected power and in which viewers were part of the display, both subject and object of the exhibition.³ In the Mao years, the Shanghai Museum participated in all forms of exhibitionary culture—not just the fine art for which it is famous for today. While its permanent display showcased art by dynastic era, it also mounted special exhibitions to accompany political campaigns, including exhibits on revolutionary artefacts, on the history of Shanghai, and on the transformation of class from old to new China. During the Cultural Revolution, its workers collected contemporary objects like the placard of the Shanghai People's Commune, anticipating that such artefacts would be the displays of the future. In these ways, the museum encompassed many functions. It was also a memorial hall (*jinianguan*), a display hall (*chenlieguan*), and an exhibition

hall (*zhanlanguan*). Its objects were mostly artefacts (*shiwu*), but also cultural relics (*wenwu*), which included a special subcategory of revolutionary cultural relics (*geming wenwu*).

Museums were not new to Mao's China. In the nineteenth century, foreign museums were founded in Shanghai's international settlements, and in 1905 reformer Zhang Jian established the first Chinese museum in the city of Nantong. The Nationalist Government had its own museums, including memorial halls that displayed the possessions of revolutionary martyrs. While some May Fourth intellectuals criticised museums as warehouses for old things, their Republican-era boosters explained that—as in the Soviet Union—museums could be used to spread ideology and transform the people's consciousness.⁴ The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) began planning for a Museum of the Revolution as early as 1930 and used small-scale exhibits in its rural base areas for mass education.⁵ After coming to power in 1949, the state established museums to reflect and project its political legitimacy. Beyond this, exhibitions became part of the Party's propaganda repertoire, deployed to mobilise the masses. As tools in China's Communist Revolution, museums have served politics, displays have been curated at the grassroots, and objects have served as evidence.

Museums as Politics

Museums in Mao's China were first and foremost the expression of a political narrative. In the 1950s, Chinese cultural officials followed the Soviet model of museums as 'living textbooks.' The Lenin Museum, for instance, arranged its rooms according to the chapters in Stalin's *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks)*. Inspired by visits and by handbooks of Soviet museology, Chinese curators followed suit, presenting Chinese history according to Mao's 1940 essay, 'On New Democracy' (see Blecher's essay in the present volume). Further, as a 'living textbook' the revolutionary history museum would always be incomplete, a work in progress; as Wang Yejiu of the State Bureau of Cultural Relics wrote in 1950, chapters would continually be added until the arrival of communism.⁶ Hence the Shanghai Museum's collection of Cultural Revolution artefacts: this was the age of permanent revolution.

In addition to the narrative of the past, museums provided a script for the current moment. Archival materials from the 1960s show that at the First Party Congress Site—the memorial established to commemorate the CCP founding in 1921—the official imperative was to serve the present (*wei dangqian zhengzhi fuwu*) (see the image on page 143). Exhibits were constantly updated to accord with contemporary politics, leading to a dizzying number of exhibition texts at the height of the Cultural Revolution, when scripts were continuously revised to include the latest political enemies. Docents themselves memorised scripts according to their audience—domestic visitors vs. foreign dignitaries—and also prepared lists of typical questions and appropriate answers. Even local and ad hoc exhibits had political scripts; in campaigns such as the Socialist Education Movement and the Cultural Revolution, display boards and docent texts presented visitors with the words, slogans, and quotations to attack alleged class enemies.⁷



The Site of the First National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, Shanghai (2010)

In these ways, exhibitionary culture functioned as a kind of political signalling: in an era of tumultuous politics, when words could both accuse and incriminate, museum scripts were the latest Party-approved text. No wonder that even if exhibition attendance was required, people paid attention: a visit included copying text to teach others in turn; individuals requested visits to exhibits to try to understand the Cultural Revolution as it was breaking out; and out-of-town Red Guards went first to the local Red Guard Exhibition to understand the movement at the grassroots. In Elizabeth Perry's study of the mining town of Anyuan, the Party secretary of its Chairman Mao Memorial Hall noticed Lin Biao's absence from Beijing's Great Hall of the People before news of Lin's death came out, and revised Anyuan's exhibits to his own political advantage.⁸ An exhibit's narrative text was a barometer for political winds: a docent script could be revised, a display backboard could be rewritten, and a cassette tape could be recorded over. As a political technology, the museum was at once an authoritative master narrative and an eminently adaptable form.

Since the end of the Mao era, the museum in China continues to be a site for political narratives. It was in 1990—one year after the 1989 Tiananmen student movement—that President Jiang Zemin chose Beijing's Museum of the Chinese Revolution as the setting to speak on the importance of patriotic and socialist education, calling on Chinese museums to take responsibility in cultivating youth. From 2004, the state has promoted 'patriotic education' by supporting red tourism (*hongse liuyou*), entailing visits to historic sites associated with the revolutionary tradition.⁹ In 2012, President Xi Jinping introduced his slogan 'China Dream' (*zhongguo meng*) at what is now called the National Museum of China. As Timothy Cheek writes in this volume, the project of 'telling China's story well' (*jianghao zhongguo gushi*) is a central priority for the current regime, and museums no doubt play a role. As part of local development, municipalities have been building museums, and there is an increasing trend for companies and work

units to each have their own museum. A tour of the museum is sometimes a stand-in for an inspection of the factory floor or an actual site visit—in other words, museums remain a way to control the script. And, in a time when China's influence increasingly reaches abroad, museums will play an important role in 'telling China's story well' for global audiences. For instance, the World War II Pacific War Memorial Hall (*haiwai kangri zhanzheng jinianguan*), a private museum in San Francisco, looks remarkably like a Chinese museum, featuring a sculpture 'Great Wall of Blood and Flesh' that evokes the Chinese national anthem.

Museums as Grassroots

Exhibitions in Mao's China departed from Republican and Soviet precedents in that they were a grassroots phenomenon. Neighbourhood cadres were instructed in the early 1950s to mount small-scale exhibits in alleyways that would complement the latest political campaign and the most recent propaganda. Officials were encouraged to enliven exhibits with objects and cartoons, to employ students to narrate them to those who could not read, and to even set up games; one anti-spy exhibition in Shanghai's Huangpu district presented a 'study city' in which visitors could work their way through a maze by answering questions correctly. Similarly, handbooks for rural art workers gave detailed instructions on how to put on 'class education exhibitions' (*jieji jiaoyu zhanlanhui*), down to how to set up display halls for the best visitor circulation and how to construct backdrops to maximise visual space. In these ways, exhibitionary culture served a historiographical trend that began in 1958: to write and display history at the grassroots. Indeed, museums also had their own Great Leap Forward, in which the Ministry of Culture called for a museum in every county.

In the era of permanent revolution, local exhibits served to mobilise the masses. They provided visitors with a narrative, but they also taught participation. At the grassroots, individuals were encouraged to provide artefacts to display: schoolchildren offered the uniforms and identity cards of their proletarian parents, workers presented the protective gloves and safety equipment of the factory in New China. During the Socialist Education Movement, which preceded the Cultural Revolution, teachers encouraged students to curate their own 'class education exhibitions' at school. The prototype for such a display was Sichuan's *Rent Collection Courtyard*, which showcased the threat of class enemies past and present. It also provided a stage for individuals to tell stories of class suffering, for viewers to remember their own pasts, and for visitors to shout political slogans (see Javed's essay in the present volume). Though the *Rent Collection Courtyard* was the most elaborate and well known, each locality had a 'class education exhibition,' some complete with a landlord manor and sculptural tableaux (see the image on page 145).

In today's China a different kind of grassroots exhibition is taking place. There has been a craze for personal collecting, ranging from retirees collecting Mao-era memorabilia to multimillionaires competing for artwork at international auctions. The former may do so for personal pleasure, with the occasional participation in a collective exhibition encouraged by the 'friends' of a local museum. The latter may see collecting as connoisseurship and investment, and build private museums on par with the most modern and professional of state museums. Grassroots exhibitions can

even be digital, as in the case of virtual Cultural Revolution museums.¹⁰ Unable to have a bricks-and-mortar Cultural Revolution museum in China, activists wishing to memorialise the period do so online. In Hong Kong, there is somewhat more space to mount a grassroots exhibit; the territory has hosted pop-up displays on the 1989 Tiananmen student movement, and between 2014 and 2016 a privately run June Fourth Museum existed across the street from the official Hong Kong Museum of History. Yet, the long arm of the Chinese state extends far and deep; with the rise of the Xi Jinping regime's 'sharp power,' even displays outside of China—like Harvard's 2017 exhibit of Cultural Revolution 'big-character posters' (*dazibao*) from an anonymous private collector—can be seen as politically sensitive (see the image on page 146).



Lei Feng Memorial Hall of Hunan, Changsha (2010)

Museums as Evidence

In the Mao era, museums and exhibitions differed from other propaganda forms in their focus on the material. Officials stressed that objects—more so than pictures or text—were most attractive for the ordinary viewer. 'Every exhibition object,' they exhorted, 'has in and of itself a life and the ability to persuade.'¹¹ Both accessible and arresting, material objects also fit within the ideological framework of a revolution based on Marxism: if a material object was a reflection of the historical circumstances—and class relations—that produced it, then an object was the ideal lesson. Yet curators in Mao's China departed from the Soviet model. In Soviet museums, exhibits explained class by showcasing the means of production and their ownership. In China during the Mao era—with the persistence of class struggle in the context of a 'continuous revolution' (see Galway's essay in the present volume)—curators displayed class through personal possessions: workers and peasants through patched clothing and humble quilts, landlords and capitalists through silks and furs. Like temple depictions of otherworldly justice, greed and corruption were represented by material excess.¹²

Yet ‘class education exhibitions,’ ubiquitous during the Socialist Education Movement of the early 1960s, were more than mere morality tales. These were used to make the argument that class enemies existed in New China, threatening the socialist revolution, and that it was necessary to struggle against them; hence such exhibits used material possessions to display what were literally called ‘evidence’ and ‘proof.’ Land deeds and rent registers were called ‘change-of-sky documents’ (*biantianzhang*), supposedly saved by former owners so that after a capitalist restoration they could stage a comeback. Similarly, gold bars and foreign currency were used to identify landlords and capitalists who had ‘failed to reform,’ concealing their wealth for a future ‘change-of-sky.’ Finally, weapons and Nationalist flags were proof of counterrevolutionary intent, revealing enemies in New China’s midst. So powerful at suggestion was the ‘class education exhibition’ that it gave the Red Guards concrete examples, things to look for when they ransacked the homes of alleged class enemies during the Cultural Revolution’s notorious ‘house searches’ (*chaojia*). The discovery of such material evidence became grounds for class struggle, and the Red Guards proudly displayed the spoils of their revolutionary rebellion.¹³

Four decades after the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution and the Mao era, where is the material evidence of this period? Outside of China, there have been exhibitions of its material culture, but most have been limited to displaying cultural artefacts and manufactured products: folk paintings and propaganda posters, ceramics and objects of everyday use, Mao badges and other consumer goods. Within China, a few collectors have established and built private institutions that exhibit what is sometimes called the ‘Red Age’ (*hongse niandai*)—for instance, Shanghai’s Propaganda Poster Art Centre

Red and Black Revolution: Dazibao and Woodcuts from 1960s China, Cambridge, MA (2017)



has become a niche tourist attraction, and the Jianchuan Museum Cluster, adjacent to Sichuan's *Rent Collection Courtyard*, boasts the largest private museum in China today. But in the main these private museums do not offer an alternate narrative to that of the state. Events like the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution are acknowledged, but their violence and tragedy are only obliquely referred to, if mentioned at all. A propaganda poster or an enamelware basin present a past that is as 'red, bright, and shining' as it was once imagined.

Ironically, the rare examples of individuals who collect negative evidence borrow a page from Mao-era exhibitionary culture. For example, the display of blood-stained shirts is a constant trope from the Nationalists' martyrs memorials to the Communists' land reform rallies to New China's 'class education exhibitions.' In Hu Jie's 2006 documentary film, *Though I Am Gone*, the husband of Bian Zhongyun—the first teacher beaten to death in the Cultural Revolution—saved her bloody clothing to be displayed one day in a Cultural Revolution Museum. In a similar way, some of the Tiananmen Mothers saved mementoes of their children: a death notice or a photograph of a bloodied corpse.¹⁴ Another central element of Maoist exhibitionary culture was the use of written and verbal testimony: letters and confessions, in-person recounting of suffering, and post-viewing reflection and self-criticism. Unconsciously mirroring this repertoire, the grandson of the notorious Liu Wencai—the landlord of the *Rent Collection Courtyard*—has spent his retirement years collecting testimonials of his grandfather's good deeds from former family servants and tenant farmers, a present-day attempt to rectify names.¹⁵

Jianchuan Museum Cluster, Anren, Sichuan (2016)



The Power of Material Objects

Material objects—in the Mao period and since—are powerful forms of evidence. To control their collection and exhibition is a priority for the state. Thus, museums in China, past and present, are repositories of official history, contemporary politics, and guides to the future. In the Mao era, a visitor could go to an exhibit and learn the script for a mass campaign as it was happening; likewise, an official could read a display's backdrop for clues on political reshuffling. Today, one can still read Chinese museums and note revisions to the displays. In 2016, subtle changes to the private Jianchuan Museum Cluster's 'Red Age' Exhibition Halls were observed. What was once to be a separate building devoted to the Cultural Revolution now exhibits the Red Army in Sichuan. A previous ambition to have a hall simulating the terror of the 'house search' was replaced with a digital collection of documents relating a house search account, erasable with the flick of a switch. In a series of glass cases, archival materials about property confiscation disappeared in favour of collectible cards featuring Mao Zedong quotations and revolutionary songs. Finally, a provocative side gallery consisting of the 'wanted circulars' of political enemies has been remade into a room for Mao-era textbooks (see the images on page 147–48). From official exhibition to private museum, the state continues to control the political narrative, the grassroots collection, and the material evidence of the past.



Jianchuan Museum Cluster, Anren, Sichuan (2013)

This text is taken from *Afterlives of Chinese Communism: Political Concepts from Mao to Xi*, edited by Christian Sorace, Ivan Franceschini and Nicholas Loubere, published 2019 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/ACC.2019.23