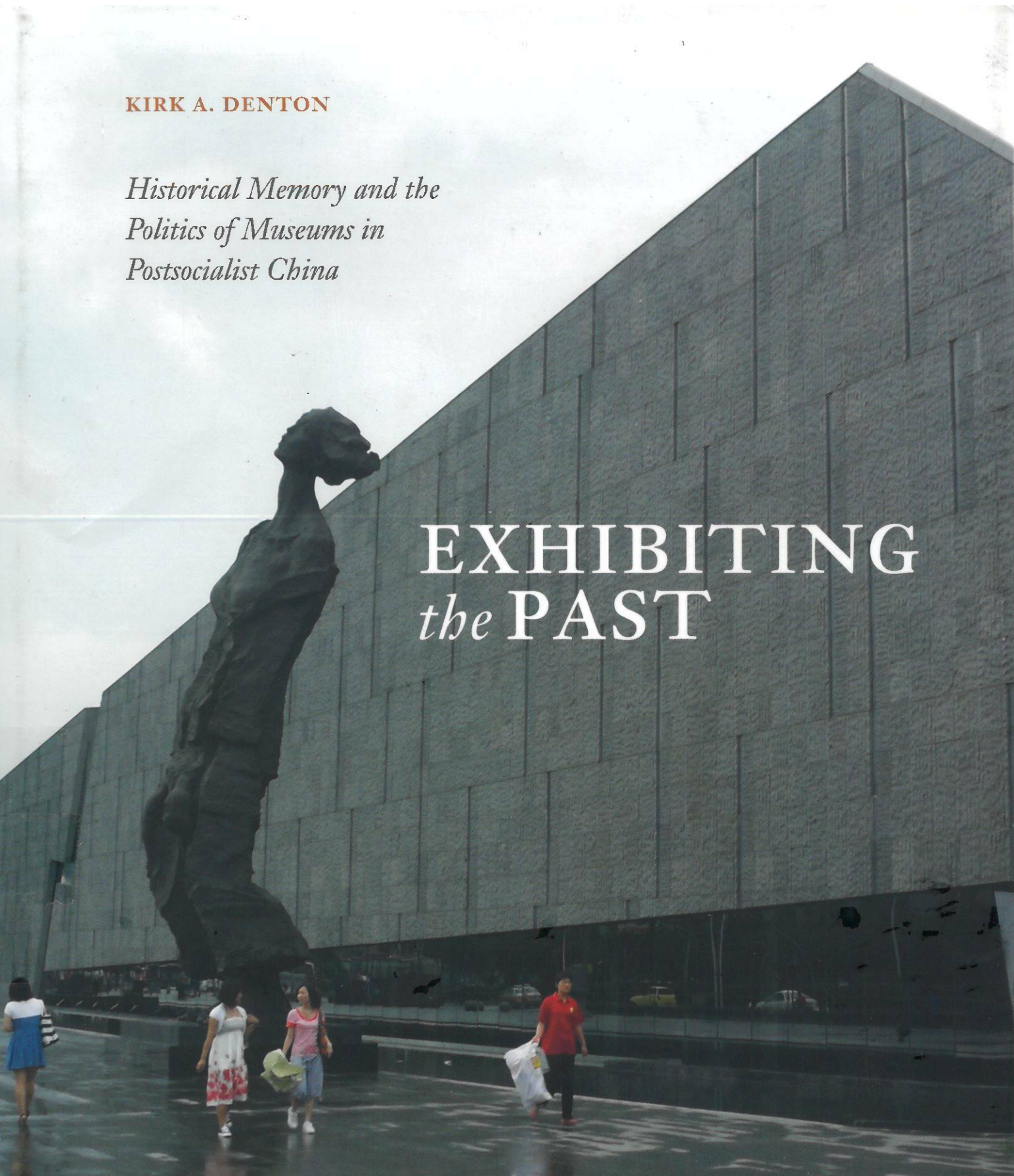


KIRK A. DENTON

*Historical Memory and the
Politics of Museums in
Postsocialist China*

EXHIBITING *the* PAST



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Introduction

IN MARCH 2011, AFTER MORE THAN FOUR YEARS OF RENOVATION TO ITS BUILDING ON the east side of Tiananmen Square, the National Museum of China (Zhongguo guojia bowuguan) reopened with a new permanent exhibition of modern history titled Road to Revival (Fuxing zhi lu). As many Western journalists commented at the time, the exhibition presents a retrograde history of modern China from the Opium Wars through the “reform and opening up” programs of the past three decades (Johnson 2011). The exhibition stresses the national humiliation inflicted by Western and Japanese imperialism, the role of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in liberating the Chinese people from that imperialism, the positive contributions of socialist construction in the Mao era, and the dramatic “rise” of China through its “socialism with Chinese characteristics” program. The party is at the very center of the narrative, the driving force behind China’s overcoming its imperialist past and striking out on the road to “revival.” The exhibition fails, of course, to confront the traumatic events of contemporary Chinese history—the violent campaigns against landlords, the purges against intellectuals during the Anti-Rightist movement, the famine and economic failures of the Great Leap Forward, and, most visibly, the upheaval of the Cultural Revolution, not to mention the traumatic social dislocation caused by the reform and opening up itself—but it has succeeded, for the first time in its existence, in treating the sensitive history of CCP rule after 1949. The very existence of an exhibit on contemporary history suggests a party that feels more comfortable about itself, its accomplishments, and its historical legacy and political legitimacy.

Opening at the same time and in the same museum was a temporary exhibition called The Art of the Enlightenment, which presented a history of the European Enlightenment through art works and artifacts borrowed from three participating German museums. The ironic juxtaposition of the propagandistic modern Chinese history exhibit and the Enlightenment exhibit, which ends with a sketch of Voltaire shining a lamp to an undetermined place beyond the frame, was not lost on some critics, who opined that this was an effort to co-opt for the party the Enlightenment values of intellectual autonomy, science, the liberation of the self, and the public sphere and to conceal its sordid history of totalitarian control. And yet the birth of the CCP in 1921 was indeed intertwined with the development of a discourse of “enlightenment” that was translated into China in the late Qing and May Fourth eras

representing the past and are subject to multiple ideological forces, among which are Maoist, liberal, and neoliberal.

My focus in this book is politics, both in the narrow and broad senses of the word. In the narrow sense, I am concerned with the role of the party/state in promoting museums and influencing and shaping their constructions of the past. In a broader sense, I analyze the historical narratives of museum exhibits and attempt to tease out political and ideological meanings that are intertwined with changing social and economic conditions. In the PRC, of course, politics and the state are synonymous with the CCP, but state discourse is not monolithic, immutable, or unresponsive to the dramatic social and economic transformations that China has experienced in the past three decades. One of the aims of this book is to analyze the ways in which history museums have moved beyond the Cold War narratives of the Mao era to both tell new stories and retell old stories in ways that speak to more contemporary concerns. The three exhibits discussed above reflect the multifaceted, multivalenced nature of the state today and the multiple ideological forces at play in exhibitionary culture and historical memory.

In focusing on the role of the party/state in supporting and shaping the nature of museums and memorial sites in China, I do not mean to suggest that it has absolute control over culture industries and historical memory or that their particular narratives are foisted on a disbelieving and recalcitrant citizenry. Indeed, I hope in this book to problematize any binaries of a hegemonic and monolithic state versus the passive people and to suggest a more fluid interaction between the two. Still, there has been a tendency in recent scholarship—a reaction perhaps against a Foucauldian discursive determinism that once dominated cultural studies scholarship—to paint the people less as passive objects of hegemonic discourses and more as active agents, subjects with self-conscious awareness and motivations. In this revisionist scholarship, state discourse and the power it has to persuade have been shunted aside in favor of excavating individual agency.

I hope here to reintroduce the state into the state/people equation. As Jing Wang (2001, 7) puts it, “the problematic of the ‘official’ cannot be written out of view” and needs to be reinserted “back into contemporary Chinese popular cultural studies, which is being increasingly dominated by the troupe [*sic*] of the market and transnationalism.” Such a focus reveals that state narratives and official memory are not monolithic and unchanging; indeed, they adapt continuously to changing economic and political demands. The state, moreover, is a multitiered entity, with municipal, provincial, and national levels of government not always on the same political or ideological page. In taking this “statist” position, I do not of course mean to deny the existence and importance of alternative and countermemories, which can be found in many contexts—for example, the independent films of Wu Wenguang’s Memory Project; unofficial memorial sites commemorating the tragic death of children in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake; avant-garde art projects such as the Long March Project; and in blogs and discussion forums online—but they constitute a relatively small and often

hidden part of the entire landscape of public memory in the PRC. Alternative memories have yet to enter the mainstream the way they have in Taiwan, for example; they are present, to be sure, but often obscured or overshadowed by commercial media, which continue to exhibit the strong hand of the state. In short, the CCP exerts a profound influence over the memoryscape and mediascape of China, and to dismiss this state presence as nothing but propaganda is to fail to understand the complexity of the state/people relationship. Such a view is blind to the subtle but important ways state historical narratives have changed in response to the social, economic, and technological revolution China has experienced in the move from Maoism to a globalized market economy. These changes in exhibitionary culture are the topic of this book.

MUSEUMS AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY: STATE AND SOCIETY IN POSTSOCIALIST CHINA

Since at least the 1960s, events such as the anticolonial and civil rights movements, the end of apartheid, the collapse of the Soviet Union and other communist regimes, and the demise of right-wing military governments have ushered in new forms of historical memory. Museums and other exhibitionary spaces have been active public players in this expression of new memories. In the United States, the civil rights movement opened up historical representation to marginalized and repressed voices and led to the founding of museums of Afro-American history (for instance, the Charles Wright Museum of African American History, established in Detroit in 1965), the Museum of the Chinese in America (New York; 1991), and the National Museum of the American Indian (Washington; 2004), to name but a few examples. Dramatic events in other parts of the world have similarly led to expression of new forms of memory in museums and other media. The end of apartheid in South Africa led to the formation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which allowed victims of apartheid to give public voice to their traumatic memories, and to the opening of the Robben Island Museum at the site of the once-notorious prison for dissidents, most famously Nelson Mandela (Shearing and Kempa 2004). The recent resurgence of democracy in Latin America has given rise to the building or planning of multiple “memory” museums, including the Museum of Memory and Human Rights in Santiago that chronicles the abuses of the Pinochet regime.

Political transformations have also led to revisionist history in Asia. The withering away of the military regime in South Korea and the democratization of its political culture have opened space for radically new forms of memory. Korea’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, modeled after that in South Africa, has unearthed memories of the Korean War period that sit uneasily with more official representations, such as in the Seoul War Memorial, which tend to glorify Korea’s martial history and gloss over atrocities (Choe 2007). Like South Korea, Taiwan has transformed from a single-party dictatorship to a thriving, if sometimes unruly, multiparty democracy, giving rise to a host of historical memories—and museums to house them—that

would have been unthinkable in the Chiang Kai-shek era. And in Japan, museums represent a range of historical memories, from those that whitewash Japan's military actions during the war to those that draw attention to atrocities and war crimes in the name of promoting peace.

Perhaps most relevant to postsocialist China is, of course, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the communist Eastern bloc. Moscow's Lenin Museum was closed in 1993, and the Museum of the Revolution changed its name to the Museum of the Contemporary History of Russia, reflecting a changing perception of the nature of modern Russian history, one whose telos is the new market economy and not the socialist revolution. These new memories are still constricted by Soviet-era narratives, though by no means to the degree that new historical memories in China are circumscribed by socialist representations. Writing before Russia's emergence on the global economic scene, Anatoly Khazanov (2000) describes Russia's post-Soviet museums as in a state of limbo. He describes the post-Soviet exhibits at the Museum of the Contemporary History of Russia as still serving "as the Soviet heritage-keeper and as the promoter of the affirmative version of Soviet history" (49). Furthermore, the Putin regime has shown subtle signs of restoring memories of the Stalin era as a historical foundation for its own authoritarian practices. At the same time, post-Soviet Russia has also produced the kind of museums that would, in their depiction of Soviet-era totalitarianism, be unthinkable in China today, such as the privately funded Andrei Sakharov Museum (Khazanov 2000, 54–60).

Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic have broken more forthrightly with Soviet-era historical memory. In Poland, Soviet-era museums have been dismantled and the national museums now present exhibits of Polish history that self-consciously deconstruct those of the Soviet era. In Budapest, memorials once prominently displayed in the socialist era have been moved to the remote Szobor Park (aka Statue Park) outside the city, where they have become empty testaments to a bygone era.¹ The Museum of Communism in Prague has as its central theme "Communism—the Dream, the Reality, and the Nightmare."² The Square of Red Army Soldiers in Prague was renamed, in 1989, the Jan Palach Square, after the martyr who immolated himself in 1969 to protest the Soviet suppression of the Prague Spring. Even in Albania, China's former socialist brother in Eastern Europe, museums are starting to expose the abuses of the Hoxha regime (Semini 2012).

But what about postsocialist China? Can its museums be seen in terms of this global shift in the expression of new historical memories? The Road to Revival exhibit at the National Museum of China would appear to suggest that things have changed relatively little since the Mao era. And there are many other museums and exhibitionary spaces in China that echo the narrative told in Road to Revival. The party/state still retains significant control over exhibitionary spaces like museums, over how they are used, and the historical narratives they weave. Museums and exhibitionary sites often serve as venues for the assertion of state foreign and domestic policy, as they sometimes do in the West.³ For instance, when in 2005 lead-

ers from Taiwan's opposition parties—first Lien Chan, leader of the Guomindang (KMT) at the time, and then Song Chuyu, head of the First Party—paid visits to the mainland, the political theater of relations between China and Taiwan was performed at memorial sites devoted to the War of Resistance against Japan or to the 1911 Revolution, suggesting a shared history between Taiwan and the mainland in their struggle against Japan and the Qing empire, respectively. Shortly after Lien Chan's October 2005 visit, the mainland celebrated with great hoopla the sixtieth anniversary of the retrocession (*guangfu*) of Taiwan to the mainland at the end of the war. Celebrations included a ceremony at the Great Hall of the People, a television extravaganza reminiscent of the 1964 *East Is Red* spectacle,⁴ and a major exhibition at the National Museum of China on Taiwanese resistance to Japan.

Changes in domestic policies, such as the rehabilitation of Liu Shaoqi in 1980 and of Lin Biao in 2007, are asserted through museum exhibits.⁵ Exhibition spaces can also more indirectly suggest support for state policies: the 2004 Red Flag Canal Spirit exhibit (*Hongqi qu jingshen*)—an exhibition memorializing the fortieth anniversary of an earlier exhibition about the famed Red Flag Canal and celebrating the economic and social benefits the canal brought to the area where Henan, Hubei, and Shanxi meet—was a propaganda ploy to push for the Yangtze River water diversion project, which had begun construction that year.⁶

Museums also serve as spaces in which to present positive images of China to its own people and to foreigners. In November 2006, for instance, the State Council sponsored an exhibition called Human Rights in China. The day I attended was media day, and as I strolled around the exhibition hall I was approached by a State Council representative, who handed me some literature and led me to a poster that emphasized the dramatic poverty alleviation that took place in China from 1979 to 2005, and I was asked by reporters of both the foreign and domestic media for my views on human rights in China and on the exhibition.⁷ Predictably, the exhibition presented a rosy picture of the state's support for human rights, emphasizing the right to economic and social well-being over such rights as free speech. Entering the Nationalities Culture Palace (*Minzu Wenhua Gong*) where the exhibit was held, the visitor first saw a large gold structure in the form of the character “human” (*ren*). The absence of the accompanying character *quan* for the compound “human rights” stresses unequivocally that the exhibit's emphasis was on the “human” and not on the “rights.” The rhetoric of the close relationship between the party and the people set the tone for the message that followed: the CCP has promoted and protected the rights of the people and created a “harmonious society” with “humanity as the base.”⁸ There was barely a hint that human rights might be an issue that needs addressing, though it should be said that the existence of the exhibit itself might imply this.

To be sure, the state continues to use exhibitionary sites for propaganda and for political legitimization in ways akin to the socialist propaganda of the Mao era. But China is a large and diverse country that has in the past three decades undergone the same radical transformations experienced by many other parts the world: democra-



FIGURE 0.1. The entrance display to the 2006 Human Rights exhibit in Beijing.

tization, economic and cultural liberalization, urbanization, globalization, and commercialization. Although these changes are clearly related to global trends, they must be understood within the specific context of the history of the PRC and its transformation from a socialist command economy to a market economy. I use the term “postsocialism” to suggest that China has entered a historical period that is at once starkly different from and yet still very much connected to its socialist past, and I use the term “neoliberalism” to refer to the market reforms initiated in the 1990s (Hann 2002). Although not all facets of Chinese economic policy (e.g., state capitalism) are consistent with global neoliberalism, China’s emphasis on deregulation, free trade, marketization, privatization, the free flow of global capital, commodification, etc., seem to me generally within the neoliberal scheme.⁹ The particular place of museums and historical memory in this postsocialist, neoliberal society are the focus of this book.

Like other cultural institutions and other forms of culture, museums reflect the many tensions and paradoxes that are apparent in Chinese society. In the decades since the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the PRC has transformed from a poor, isolated nation with a Soviet-style command economy to a freewheeling market economy that is deeply integrated with the world economy.¹⁰ This political and economic transformation has led to dramatic social and cultural changes. China is postsocialist in terms of its society, economy, and culture, but it continues to be a

socialist state run by a communist party that at least strives for political hegemony, and in this important sense it is different from Russia and the postsocialist states of Eastern Europe. The CCP is supremely self-conscious of trying to avoid the mistakes of the Soviet Union that led to its collapse, mistakes that began with Khrushchev's "revisionism" and continued with Gorbachev's "humanist" socialism (Waldron 2010). In its critique of a liberal and humanist socialism, the party reveals its continued and fundamental allegiance to its Maoist past. With the collapse of socialism as an ideology and as an economic system in China and the rise of globalization and marketization, however, space has opened for the expression of new cultural forms and new historical memories. The party and the central state clearly no longer have the kind of absolute control over culture and cultural heritage that is projected in the Road to Revival exhibition. The state also recognizes, in the face of a rapidly changing society and economy, a need to reshape the past to serve the interests of the present.

In his book on the culture of contemporary China, Jason McGrath (2008) analyzes the implications of the postsocialist market reforms for the cultural realm. He argues that the removal of state subsidies and the forcing of culture industries to respond to the market has led, on the one hand, to cultural diversification and pluralization and, on the other hand, to a new "logic of the market." Mass media and the culture industries have commercialized and in the process embraced popular entertainment the central ethos of which is consumption, self-fulfillment, self-absorption, and cynicism—a far cry from the ideals of self-sacrifice propagated in the Mao-era mass media. Television soap operas and "campus fiction" centered on teenage love, pop and rock concerts, novels and text messaging literature, pornographic Internet sites, fashion and design magazines—all center on the pursuit of personal happiness and self-fulfillment. Chinese bookstores are filled with "self-awareness" (*ziwo chengren*) books, something akin to the self-help books in the United States. One element of the vast and dynamic Chinese Internet culture is the mockery and defilement of, among other things, the heroes of the socialist past, a phenomenon referred to as *e'gao*, or spoofing. Internet video artist Hu Daoge spoofed the "red classic" *The Red Twinkling Star* (*Shanshan de hongxing*), a novel originally published in 1972 and soon thereafter made into a film.¹¹ State-sponsored museums and memorial sites have themselves been mocked, for instance, in novels by Wang Shuo, Mo Yan, and Yan Lianke.¹² Avant-garde artists interrogate official state memory. The photographer Tian Taiquan's series of fascinating photographs *Forgetting* (*Yiwang*), for example, presents female models, many of them nude and some dressed in Red Guard uniforms, in the setting of a dark and foreboding Shapingba Cemetery, a cemetery in Chongqing where Red Guards killed in the factional violence that racked the city during the early years of the Cultural Revolution are buried.¹³

Yet even as culture appears to be heterogeneous and at least some of it subversive, much of it, McGrath argues, conforms to a new ideology of the market and/or is strongly supportive of the state and its general vision of economic and social development. Writers publish novels, for instance, that glorify entrepreneurship and

those who survive its cutthroat ethos. As has been well documented in the Western press, the Chinese Internet is rife with emotional expressions of patriotism and support for state policies, especially on the international front. Meanwhile, the state continues to promote a “patriotic education” (*aiguó jiaoyù*) that seeks to instill socialist values and love of country. As Anne-Marie Brady (2008, 1) convincingly demonstrates, contrary to what one might think given the state embrace of the free market, the CCP actually intensified its propaganda role in the 1990s, making “propaganda and thought work . . . the very life blood of the Party State, one of the key means for guaranteeing the CCP’s ongoing legitimacy and hold on power.” If this state-sponsored nationalism of the 1990s was an effort by the party to fill the ideological void left by the decline of socialism, then revolutionary history museums were an important part of that effort. The CCP was and remains invested in a representation of the modern past that makes the rise of the party inevitable and justifies its continued place in power. Unlike much of the rest of the culture industries in China, museums continue to rely heavily on state funding for their existence. As a result, their exhibits tend to reinforce state ideology, but like the state political rhetoric itself, museums are caught between an old socialist discourse and a new ideology of the market. In this book, I explore the changing politics and ideology of museums and museum exhibitions in this ambiguous ideological space.

This study has two principal foci: to analyze the exhibition of the past in a variety of Chinese state museums and the role of these museums in nation building, the construction of national identities, and political legitimization; and to investigate how these representations of the past are changing in the new political and economic climates of postsocialist, neoliberal China. Museums and memorial sites offer a particularly visible and public space through which to discuss issues of memory, politicized constructions of the past, globalization and the changing role of museums in postsocialist societies, and the construction of national and postsocialist identities. The book is centered on the issue of how Chinese museums are responding to a world that is changing so quickly beyond their walls. How, for instance, are state museums in the PRC making the lessons of modern Chinese history—the lessons of revolutionary heroism and self-sacrifice—meaningful to people whose lives are enmeshed in the market economy? To what degree have exhibitionary spaces in the mainland changed their representations of the past to reflect the present? To what degree do representations vary from museum to museum and from place to place? How have museums responded to new official ideologies of state capitalism that are so at odds with the revolutionary ideology of the Mao era? What is forgotten in this process of remembering? What political motivations are behind these representations? These are among the many questions this book addresses.

Museums, of course, are of a variety of types. Chinese museologists generally recognize three main categories—arts, history, and science. Although the number of general museums is growing, most museums in China still conform to one of these broad disciplinary types. This book is primarily concerned with history museums,

particularly those museums and memorial sites that deal with the modern past. Although fine arts museums and science museums are by no means free of ideological or political intent or meaning, I focus on history museums because they tend to narrate stories that are more explicitly political. Moreover, history museums, especially modern history museums, have received little attention in the scholarship, which has more often focused on fine arts museums such as the Palace Museum. Because it is so close in time to the present—and to the present regime's ideological origins—the landscape of modern Chinese history is a political minefield, and analyzing the representation of this history in state museums reveals much about changes in Chinese society and politics.

Many of the museums I analyze, however, do not conform neatly to conventional definitions of history museums, or even of “museums” as a general category. For example, I include memorial halls and memorial parks—exhibitionary spaces devoted to the memorializing of martyrs (chapter 4) and heroes and models of the Chinese revolution(s) (chapter 7). I include revolutionary tourism (known more recently as “red tourism”) and the visiting of revolutionary sites such as Jinggangshan and Shaoshan (chapter 10). Included in the purview of this book are literature museums (chapter 8) and ethnographic museums that display the cultures of ethnic minorities (chapter 9). Finally, in the closing chapter, I examine exhibitionary spaces that represent the future: municipal urban planning exhibition halls, which, I contend, should be looked at in the larger context of museums of modern Chinese history—indeed, the exhibitions themselves explicitly make this link. My concern is thus a general rhetoric of visual exhibition of China, of its past, its territorial space, and its future.

I have chosen to organize this book around museum types and not themes in part to reflect an emic Chinese typology of museums and the different political and ideological roles each type of museum plays in the particular context of socialist and postsocialist China. That said, each museum type evokes a specific set of issues, and in that sense the generic approach and the thematic approach merge in interesting and profitable ways. For example, memorial halls are driven in part by a long tradition of political modeling in imperial and modern China; military museums project the power of the state; ethnographic museums contribute to the imagining of a multi-ethnic nation state; martyr memorials focus attention on social and political injustice and the state's role in overcoming that injustice; museums devoted to wartime atrocities exploit feelings of victimization in the service of national unity; and literature museums give a cultural face to political concerns, etc. Each museum type represents an important facet of the multifaceted whole of exhibitionary culture in China.

MEMORY, NARRATIVE, AND THE IDEOLOGICAL ROLE OF MUSEUMS

The museum is a cultural institution closely associated with modernity. Although there is, of course, a long tradition of the collection and display of cultural objects and commemoration of the past, the reasons for their display and the manner in

which they were displayed changed markedly with the appearance of the modern museum in the late eighteenth century.¹⁴ Before the modern museum, collections of objects were generally not exhibited to the public at large. Such collections could be imperial, representing the power and authority of the empire; they could be in the hands of members of the aristocracy and exhibited to friends and colleagues as signs of wealth and status; they could be those of connoisseurs, used as diversions and/or as forms of cultural capital through which to gain social prestige; or they could be religious, put on display in sacred spaces for spiritual edification.

Early modern collections in the West were in the form of "curiosity cabinets" (Impey and MacGregor 1985), an eclectic array of artifacts assembled without any particular organizational unity or explicit ideological motivation except the idea that the world can be known through objects. What marks the modern museum from these earlier modes of collection and display is that the former was designed for the edification of a broad citizenry. This pedagogical function and its service to nationalism are at the heart of the modern museum in the West and of its Chinese counterpart. The particular exhibitionary technology of the museum is also closely intertwined with the rise of science and modern progressive views of history.¹⁵ Museums taxonomize the past; they schematize it, periodize it, and shape it into narratives so as to educate the visitor. They give the impression of a "scientific" representation of history that is authentic and irrefutable, and they demand of the spectator, at least according to some museologists, identification with that representation.

At the time of the French Revolution, a "memory crisis" arose in Europe, a "massive disruption of traditional forms of memory" that led to a "crisis of representation," a crisis about how to represent the past (Terdiman 1993, 8). The museum is both a product of and a response to this modern memory crisis: it both seeks to restore a link to the past lost and is perhaps the perfect embodiment, in its tendency to reify the past, of modernity's severance from history. Museums are examples of what Pierre Nora calls *lieux de mémoire* (realms, or sites, of memory), which emerge at a "particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn—but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists." *Lieux de mémoire* exist, Nora writes, "because there are no longer any *milieu de mémoire*," settings in which memory is a living part of everyday experience.¹⁶ Sites of memory "deritualize" more local and traditional forms of living memory and impose on them a collective national memory. Memory sites present a public history that suppresses personal and private forms of relationships to the past.

From its beginnings in the late eighteenth century, the museum has been used by the state to control memory and to construct visual and spatial images of the past for political and nation-building purposes.¹⁷ The Louvre, for instance, was "conceived as a pedagogical tool for the people, the revolutionary museum was an instrument consolidating a newly revamped national character, promoting the myth of a

nation's innate 'genius' as well as the image of a grand historical destiny. . . . History becomes myth: that is, an image that gathers people and summons an identity" (Maleuvre 1999, 10). For Tony Bennett (1995), the museum is part of an "exhibitionary complex" that is closely related to the ideology of power. At once building on and arguing against Foucault's work on "disciplinary institutions" (e.g., prisons, insane asylums, clinics), Bennett sees museums as making power visible to the public, whereas disciplinary institutions attempt to conceal that power. Museums

sought to allow the people . . . to know rather than be known, to become the subjects rather than the objects of knowledge. Yet, ideally, they sought also to allow the people to know and thence to regulate themselves; to become, in seeing themselves from the side of power, both the subjects and the objects of knowledge, knowing power and what power knows, and knowing themselves as (ideally) known by power, interiorizing its gaze as a principle of self-surveillance and, hence, self-regulation. (Bennett 1995, 63)

Museums, Bennett adds, are "cultural technologies concerned to organize a voluntarily self-regulating citizenry" (335)—in short, a means used by the state to internalize ideology in the minds of its citizenry. Museums also assume and organize a particular way of looking at objects and a particular form of subjectivity. This way of seeing is "regulated in ways that are designed to offset the influences of other practices of seeing, usually those associated with commercial forms of popular visual entertainment, which are said to lure the eye into civically unproductive forms of visual pleasure" (264).

The great national museums of Europe and North America must also be understood in the context of imperialism and colonialism. Much of the collection of the British Museum, for example, was plundered from Britain's colonial domain, and the museum exhibits became, intended or not, a manifestation of the global power of the British Empire itself. Displaying the cultures of the world to the Western self may have been inspired by lofty Enlightenment ideals, but it also implicitly relegated non-Western others to the status of objects. As mentioned above, in the second half of the twentieth century, museum curators became much more self-conscious about the politics of "exhibiting cultures" and sought ways to make visible cultures and subjectivities that had been rendered invisible (Karp and Lavine 1991).

Like all cultural forms, museums have been the target of heated critique. The moderns, in particular, despised museums for their fetishization of art and history. Typical is Le Corbusier, who criticized the museum "because it does not tell the whole story. It misleads. It dissimulates. It deludes. It is a liar" (in Carbonell 2004, 405). Theodor Adorno (1981, 173–186) claimed that the museum inherently divorces art from life and necessarily becomes a fetish.¹⁸ This avant-garde attack on the museum was carried over into the socialist world, and in the early years of the Soviet Union the cultural avant-garde and the state collaborated to "create a single, total

visual space within which to efface the boundary separating art from life, the museum from practical life, contemplation from action" (Groys 1994, 144). Yet this avant-garde project, a reaction against the European bourgeois museum, largely failed, and museums in the Soviet Union ultimately were used in ideological ways similar to those of the bourgeois museum in the West: nation building and political pedagogy. It should be said, however, that whereas museums in the West had become elite enclaves of what Bourdieu (1984, 273) has called "the pure gaze" of connoisseurship, museums in the socialist sphere sought to reach a mass audience and were billed as "for the people." In this regard, Soviet museums served as influential models for the formation of museums in the PRC.

In the analysis of the spatial rhetoric of Chinese museums in this book, I draw primarily from these ideological approaches to museums. Not all museologists, it should be said, are comfortable with reducing museum collections to political functions—whether nationalist or imperialist, socialist or bourgeois—and prefer to see the museum as a "dream space" (Kavanagh 2000) in which memories, both personal and collective, circulate freely. Furthermore, whereas much museum theory has emphasized the power of the institution to impose ideology, to compel the spectator to identify with a politically driven civic and national character, other scholarship tends to be much less deterministic. One useful framework distinguishes between "official" and "vernacular" memory (Gillis 1994), the former associated with the state and the latter deriving from real people and their real responses. Susan Crane (2000) and her collaborators, for example, see museums as forms of memory serving "cultural, social, or ideological functions," but they also recognize that the uses and experiences of museums by individuals over time continue to demonstrate how the museum experience "shifts between expectation and experience—back and forth from an intention to receive, to an actual reception; from experience to memory in the minds of museum makers and museum visitors" (2–3). Furthermore, different ethnic and social groups will view and experience a historical site or museum in different ways. American Indians will surely experience the Museum of the American Indian in different ways than will other types of spectators. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (2000), arguing from a postmodern perspective, sees museums as "texts" without any inherent meaning; rather, individual spectators, with their variety of experiences, memories, and the communities to which they belong, will bring different meanings to museum exhibits.¹⁹ The museum as a storehouse of multiple memories, a contested site of historical and cultural representation, is an ideal promoted in much current scholarship on museums that is sometimes labeled the "new museology."²⁰

In this book, I am primarily concerned with the representations museums are attempting to convey to their visitors, even as I recognize that they do not necessarily achieve this goal and that experiences can vary dramatically from individual to individual, social group to social group, and ethnicity to ethnicity. An unemployed worker will experience the Memorial Hall of the First CCP Congress (Shanghai) differently from an entrepreneur who has successfully entered the middle class. At the

same time, we should not exaggerate the power, or even the desire, of individuals to resist dominant political discourses. Individuals in national contexts are socialized in similar ways, and this shared socialization can result in similar forms of interpretations of texts such as museum exhibits. As Maurice Halbwachs (1980, 45), who has argued for the importance of forms of "collective memory," has put it: "insofar as we yield without struggle to an external suggestion, we believe we are free in our thought and feelings. Therefore most social influences we obey usually remain unperceived." In China, there is indeed a tension between official and vernacular memories, but the two are actually intertwined in much more complex ways than this oppositional model would suggest. So-called individual memories are often mediated by state memory and state discourse propagated through state-controlled media; real memories, moreover, can sometimes influence official memory. As Gail Hershatter (2011) demonstrates, the memories of women activists recalling (in the 1990s and 2000s) their work in building socialism in the 1950s are influenced by official historical narratives, but also by contemporary anxieties about the erosion of village social structures and family life under pressures from the market economy. The point is that vernacular memory does not necessarily conflict with official state memory, and the two can overlap to a great degree.

Western museum scholars also often emphasize the multiple forces at play in the shaping of museums and their exhibitions. In open democratic societies, museum curators, interest groups, and government officials engage in public discussions about the nature and direction of museum exhibitions. The public debate surrounding the controversial Enola Gay exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution²¹ is an obvious example, but one could also cite the discussion surrounding the building of the National World War II Memorial or the controversy over the decision to award the design contract for the Martin Luther King Memorial to a Chinese artist.

While we tend to think of them simply as manifestations of official ideology and under absolute state control, we should recognize that PRC museums and their exhibits are also the product of negotiations and not always simply a transparent vehicle for some monolithic state propaganda. Negotiation in establishing new museums, renovating old ones, and designing exhibits takes place at a variety of levels among historians, academics, curators, display specialists, party cadres, museum officials, government officials, etc. This is clearly the case with the renovation of the building of the National Museum of China and the revamping of its history exhibits, which I discuss in chapter 2. These stakeholders sometimes have competing interests that must be worked out to achieve some sort of consensus. Unlike in open democratic societies, however, the negotiation process is generally not made public in China, and community groups, at least those that are not state organized, have yet to exert a profound influence on the public exhibition of China's history and culture.

My method is narratological in that I am primarily concerned with how museums tell stories of the past through a visual language.²² Museum exhibits are inherently multimedia, and their visual language comprises many elements taken from a

variety of art forms: photography, written text, painting, sculpture, maps, theater, film and video, architecture, computers and digital technology, etc. An analysis of a museum and its exhibits involves, therefore, strategies used in the study of all these forms and a recognition that each art form or medium establishes a particular kind of communication with the spectator. The map, for instance, offers the museumgoer a visual representation of space that can engender political and social forms of identification with a place (Pickles 2004). These various visual building blocks give form to stories of the past, and these stories have political and ideological implications. In some of the museums I discuss here, the shaping of a narrative is quite explicit, with placards dividing the exhibition into neat sections that resemble chapters in a history book. Other museums are less explicit and self-conscious about telling stories, but that does not mean, of course, that narrative lines are completely absent.

The historical narratives are also shaped and given power by the architectural and spatial context in which museums are situated. The symbolic power of a museum's exhibits derives as much from its building and its location in the urban landscape as from anything inherent in the exhibit's content or style. Just as a museum situated on the Mall in Washington takes on a rhetorical force it could not have if the same museum were located in, say, Memphis, the location of museums in China lends its exhibits particular political and ideological resonances.²³ A museum on Tiananmen Square takes on an official and national significance it could have nowhere else. Placing a museum at the base of Shanghai's futuristic Oriental Pearl Tower, as the Shanghai's Municipal History Museum is (see chapter 3), gives it a particular symbolism that is intertwined with the meaning of the exhibits themselves. In terms of site museums or memorial sites, which are built at a particular historical site, memory is connected with a place and gets inscribed onto a landscape.²⁴

THE DEVELOPMENT OF MUSEUMS IN CHINA

I end this introduction with a short overview of the development of museums in China from their inception in the late nineteenth century to the postsocialist museum boom of the 1990s and beyond. I do so to give a general context for understanding the various museum types I analyze in this book, to suggest that the incredible growth and diversification of museums in the past three decades has a historical foundation, and to show that the politics of historical memory in museums is not simply a product of CCP propaganda. The overview also serves as general background for nonspecialist readers on cultural developments in the Mao and post-Mao eras as they pertain to exhibitionary practice. In many of the chapters that follow, I also offer historical background to individual museum types as a way of suggesting that Maoist and post-Mao memorial cultures often have important lineages back to the Republican era. In so doing, I hope to suggest that socialist and postsocialist museum culture makes use of many of the same tropes developed under the aegis of the Nationalist state in the 1930s.

Since at least the advent of the imperial period, collection of objects and commemoration were common preoccupations in China, both at the state and private levels (Elliott and Shambaugh 2005). Emperors collected art and cultural artifacts and housed them as a symbolic manifestation of imperial power and authority, a way of asserting themselves into the glorious lineage of the Chinese cultural tradition. Possession of these artifacts constituted a form of political power, and dynastic usurpers took great pains to secure control over them to legitimize their new regimes. Cultural artifacts and art works from imperial collections would, in the twentieth century, become the foundation for two of the most important museums in the Chinese-speaking world, the Palace Museum in Beijing and its counterpart in Taipei (Elliott and Shambaugh 2005), which would use their collections for purposes not unlike those of earlier imperial states—political legitimacy first and foremost.

The political storytelling I associate with the modern museum in China also traces its origins back to imperial times. The Chinese have, of course, a long historiographic tradition that has been highly conscious of the political, ethical, and ideological implications of representing the past. When new dynasties came to power during imperial times, a historian was commissioned to write the history of the preceding dynasty. Naturally, that history portrayed the previous dynasty in a way that justified the new dynasty's claim to power and to reinforce its legitimacy and authority. History was conveyed in more visual and monumental forms as well. For instance, stelae—monoliths with engraved inscriptions—were erected both at the center of power and around the empire, to commemorate “virtuous women, the construction or repair of an important public building; the dispatch of a fleet; the establishment of a religion; the record of an episode of local history” (Waley-Cohen 1996, 874). In the Qianlong period of the Qing dynasty, stelae glorified battles connected to Manchu empire expansion. Architectural space also conveyed narratives about the empire. Imperial gardens, like the Yuanmingyuan or the Mountain Retreat in Chengde, were built as microcosms of China and Chinese ethnic diversity and in that sense expressed architecturally Manchu policy toward the various ethnic groups under its domain.²⁵ In this regard, they have an almost modern, theme-park quality to them, though they were of course not open to the public. Buddhists built cave art that served as exhibitions intended for religious pedagogy—for example, Dazu, a horseshoe-shaped ravine in Sichuan in which statuary telling stories and lessons from the Buddhist canon are carved into rock faces and displayed for the edification of visitors.²⁶ Literati, both those who held official positions and those who did not, often collected art and historical artifacts and displayed them to their friends and colleagues as a manifestation of their social position and prestige (Clunas 1991). And tourists traveled to monuments and historic sites to commune with the past, and then recorded their experiences—in diaries, poems, essays, and paintings—for posterity (Strassberg 1994; Tseng 2003).

The museum as a public institution is, however, a modern phenomenon in China, as it is in the West. From their beginnings, modern museums in China were closely

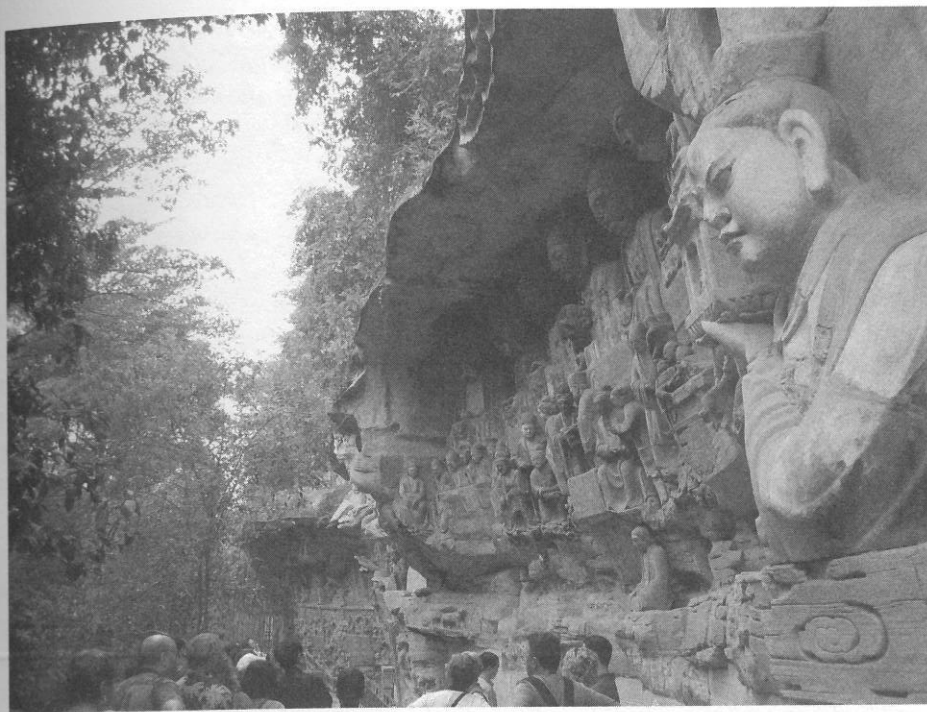


FIGURE 0.2.
Dazu, Sichuan.

associated with nationalism and the ideology of nation building. Late Qing intellectuals such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao saw the museum as a key element in national reform, as important to the strengthening of the nation as translating and printing books, publishing journals and newspapers, and opening libraries and schools.²⁷ The earliest museums in China, however, were founded and run by missionaries and were eclectic forms of natural history museums.²⁸ The first “Chinese” museum—as almost all overviews of Chinese museums are quick to point out—was the Nantong Museum (Nantong bowuyuan), founded by the late Qing industrialist Zhang Jian (1853–1926).²⁹

Like many reformers of the day, Zhang believed that industry and education would work together for the goal of strengthening the nation. Founded in 1906, the Nantong Museum had buildings devoted to history, natural history, and fine arts, as well as a botanical garden and a zoo, revealing neatly the interconnection between science, culture, and history that was typical of the eclectic nature of early Chinese museums.³⁰ Indeed, *bowu*, literally “broad [knowledge of] things,” a term that has a long provenance in Chinese philosophical and cultural discourse, captures this esoteric quality of early Chinese museums and links the modern museum with a history of collecting and ordering of human knowledge.³¹ These early museums did not organize their artifacts into discernible historical narratives the way later museums would.

FIGURE 0.3. One of the original buildings of the Nantong Museum, Jiangsu.



After the 1911 Revolution, national and provincial levels of government began to build and manage museums the collections of which were often created from the remnants of imperial and private collections. These early state-sponsored museums were motivated by both nationalist and localist impulses, but they also contributed to the larger modern invention of tradition that was taking shape in intellectual discourse more generally at the time. The Palace Museum was established by the Republican government in 1925 and became a memory storehouse for the nation and a cultural repository for the shared sense of history essential to the nation-building project.³²

Changes were also apparent in the realm of monuments and memorial spaces, particularly those that commemorated the 1911 Revolution and its martyrs. This nationalist use of public space was enhanced in the late 1920s and in the 1930s, when the KMT (Guomindang), or Nationalists, consolidated its power after the Northern Expedition (Harrison 1998, 2000; Fernsebner 2002; Liping Wang 1996). The 1930s, before the outbreak of the War of Resistance, was the heyday of museum development in the Republican period; many new museums were built—for example the Henan Museum and the Guangxi Museum³³—and museology as a field of study became increasingly professionalized.³⁴ The war, however, seriously curtailed these developments; by its end, there were fewer museums in China than there had been before the war.

The four-year civil war that followed further eroded museum development. The

resulting political division—the Nationalist government fled to Taiwan, where it carried on the banner of the Republic of China, and the communists established the People's Republic of China, with its capital in Beijing—led to the dismantling of museum collections, the large-scale dislocation of artifacts, and the establishment of competing museums. Much of the collection of the Henan Museum was taken to Taiwan and became the foundation of the new National Museum of History (est. 1955) and its sinocentric Central Plains (Zhongyuan) narrative of the history of China. The Palace Museum collection, which had been packed up and moved out of the Forbidden City before the Japanese invasion, was split up, with some of the artifacts returning to Beijing and the rest going to Taiwan, where they would form the basis of the new Palace Museum (est. 1965) collections. Only in recent years, with the relaxing of tensions between the mainland and Taiwan, have the two Palace Museums sought to collaborate. In 2009, they jointly mounted an exhibition titled *Harmony and Integrity: Emperor Yongzheng and His Times*.

When the CCP came to power in 1949, it proceeded to nationalize all culture industries and cultural institutions, including museums, and to develop them in ways that would align them with the new ideology of state socialism. National, provincial, and local governments promoted, funded, and constructed many new museums. As I discuss in chapter 2, not long after the liberation of Beijing, the Central Committee sought to establish a Museum of the Chinese Revolution to present an official view of party history, and in the early 1950s, the state started building memorial halls dedicated to sites of significance to revolutionary history, to important revolutionary leaders, and to cultural figures such as Lu Xun. In terms of exhibitionary style, the types of museums built, and the veneration of revolutionary heritage, these early PRC museums were deeply indebted to the Soviet influence.³⁵ It was not until the Great Leap Forward that a more systematic state effort to build museums nationwide was instituted. In general, it is useful to see museum development in the PRC as occurring in three dynamic bursts: the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962), the early post-Mao period (1980s), and the post-Tiananmen period (1990s–present). In what follows, I look in some detail at the growth of museums in each.

During the Great Leap Forward, the state sponsored a program to rapidly expand all manner of cultural institutions, including museums. One of the many slogans of the day was “a museum in every county, an exhibition hall in every commune” (*xianxian you bowuguan, sheshe you zhanlanshi*). According to one report, by 1958 there were 865 county museums and 85,065 commune exhibition halls, although these figures may be exaggerated, and many of these institutions did not endure. At the same time as it expanded the growth of museums into the Chinese hinterland, the Great Leap Forward also gave rise to some of Beijing's major national museums, including the Museum of the Chinese Revolution and the Military Museum, which I discuss extensively in subsequent chapters. These two museums were built in preparation for the 1959 celebration of the tenth anniversary of the founding of the PRC. Their resulting exhibits presented a narrow, party-centered vision of modern

history and forced the ancient past awkwardly into Marxist historical categories and stages. The Maoist view of history was, of course, constructed by excluding details and events that did not conform to the official narrative and by suppressing alternative ways of looking at the past.

Like most other cultural institutions, museums came under severe attack from the radical left during the Cultural Revolution because they were seen as “black” warehouses for the culture of the “four olds” (customs, culture, habits, and ideas). Yet some of these museums, and the people who worked for them, continued to be active in various ways. For example, the Museum of the Chinese Revolution, though officially closed in the fall of 1966, helped organize in June of the following year an Exhibition of the Battle Successes of the Capital Red Guard Revolution and Rebellion (Shoudu hongweibing geming zaofan zhanguo zhanlanhui), and Red Guard art exhibits were held at the National Museum of Fine Arts.³⁶ One could argue, though, that the Cultural Revolution was ideologically opposed to the very notion of the museum, to the ossification of history and of the revolution that the museum seemed to embody. Mao Zedong’s famous phrase from 1966, “I don’t like being treated as a dead ancestor,” captures this antipathy for the reverence of things past that the museum represents.³⁷ The Cultural Revolution was motivated in part by a desire to revive the fading memory of the revolutionary past, indeed to incorporate that memory into the very thoughts and actions of Chinese citizens who had become increasingly distanced from the revolution. Pilgrimages to sacred revolutionary sites (Mao’s home in Shaoshan and Jinggangshan being only two of the more popular) and the imitation “long marches” to Yan’an were instigated not so much as ways of learning about the revolutionary past as they were to relive that past and make it meaningful and alive in the present. As I discuss in chapter 10, the CCP has since 2003 revived revolutionary tourism (marketed as red tourism) to sustain the memory of the revolution in an active, participatory way, though with a nostalgic and commercial dimension that is markedly different from the revolutionary pilgrimages of the Cultural Revolution.

The early post-Mao period—the second burst of museum construction—saw a profusion of new museums, many of which are museums of revolutionary history or memorials to revolutionary martyrs.³⁸ This state-sponsored construction of museums was initially a response to the Cultural Revolution and the collapse of cultural institutions and state control over historical memory. Reopening established museums and revising their exhibits marked what could be called a state reinstitutionalization of memory of the past. For Donghai Su (1995), a former curator at the Museum of the Chinese Revolution and a leading figure in the Chinese museum world, among the important values for museums in the post-Mao period were to “verify” history and to extol such moral virtues as patriotism and self-sacrifice.

With the death of Mao and the advent of Deng Xiaoping-style liberalism, the Maoist master narrative of modern history began to erode.³⁹ Historiography of the 1980s humanized Mao and made him much less the central protagonist of the narra-

tive of modern history than he had been; political figures purged under Mao were rehabilitated. These sorts of changes in historiography were then reflected in new museums and revamped museum exhibitions. For example, in 1982 the “old home” (*guju*) of Peng Dehuai, who was purged during the Great Leap Forward and severely tortured during the Cultural Revolution, was restored as a memorial site. Chen Yun, Liu Shaoqi, and Deng Xiaoping were also rehabilitated, and large-scale memorial halls were built to commemorate each. These museums restored faith in the party after its legitimacy had been so undermined by the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. Despite these important changes, however, many of the basic elements of the Maoist master narrative of modern history—the temporal tale of liberation from darkness and oppression, the central role of the CCP, the contribution of revolutionary martyrs—are retained in early post-Mao museums of modern history.

The state and the party placed more importance on museums in the 1980s than ever before (Wang Hongjun 2001, 109). They promoted the role of museums in fostering “spiritual civilization” and passed laws enhancing the protection of cultural artifacts and regulating museums.⁴⁰ Museums were even mentioned in the 1982 constitution, where their service role was emphasized.⁴¹ This period saw the building of the Memorial Hall of the People’s War of Resistance against Japan, the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall, and the Yuhuatai Martyrs Memorial Park, all of which I treat in this book. At the same time, of course, many new museums dedicated to facets of premodern history, which I discuss in some detail in the first chapter, were also built, suggesting a changing relationship to the prehistorical and imperial pasts.

The third period of rapid museum development occurred after the crackdown on the Tiananmen movement of 1989 and continues to this day. This renewed state emphasis on museums and memorial sites was motivated by several factors: a perception that a decline in socialist values, especially among the young, had led directly to the expression of mass discontent in 1989; a need to fill the ideological void left by the party’s own promotion of a market-oriented economic program; the rapid collapse of socialist states in Eastern Europe; and the rise of a leisure economy as part of the market reforms of the 1990s.⁴² As people lost faith in socialism and competing forms of identity arose, the state was acutely concerned that Chinese not forget the humiliations and heroism of China’s past.⁴³ The state promotion of nationalism must be seen as one of the most significant factors behind museum growth during this period.⁴⁴ In exhibiting the magnificence of the ancient past and the glorious rise of the modern nation-state, museums inherently projected this nationalism to their visitors and contributed to forging a sense of cohesion among a population that was being splintered into economic classes by the market reforms. It is not that revolutionary ideology has disappeared altogether and has been replaced by nationalism, as Suisheng Zhao (1998) argues; rather, as they always have, nationalism and the socialist ideology coexist in state rhetoric and in museum exhibits.

Museums were an important dimension of the larger patriotic education program carried out by party organs in the early 1990s. In a March 1991 letter to education

officials, Jiang Zemin launched the program by declaring that the country needed to enhance its education of “early modern and modern Chinese history, and current events,” with the goal of instilling in young people a “sense of national pride, national confidence, and preventing thoughts of glorifying the West and fawning on the foreign.”⁴⁵ A circular in the same year issued by several state bureaus emphasized the importance of cultural artifacts, museums, and memorial sites in stimulating patriotism among the young and of using fresh techniques to increase the “attractiveness” (*xinyinli*) and “influence” (*ganranli*) of exhibits so that history could be perceived “directly through the senses” (*zhiguanxing*) and have a greater “sense of reality” (*zhenshi gan*).⁴⁶ The circular also suggests that the values of self-sacrifice embodied in the revolutionary tradition should not be forgotten.

In 1995, as part of the millennial and centenary fever, and as a way of drawing attention to the pedagogical potential of museums and memorial sites, the Ministry of Propaganda approved the Hundred Patriotic Model Sites to promote patriotism and knowledge of China’s past.⁴⁷ Although sites of ancient culture and premodern history—such as the Yellow Emperor’s tomb, the Great Wall, and the Dunhuang caves—figured significantly in the list, most are revolutionary history sites, and their nationalist and political roles are manifest. Also in the 1990s, older museums, such as the Museum of the Chinese Revolution and the Military Museum, revamped their exhibits and published patriotic books based on materials in their collections.⁴⁸ The state also promoted major revolutionary history exhibitions in the capital, such as the Red Crag Spirit exhibition in 1996.

An important dimension of this rising nationalism was, and continues to be, a renewed interest in the imperial past and China’s ancient philosophies, most prominently Confucianism. As Arif Dirlik (2011, 2) has put it with regard to the recent emergence of “national learning” (*guoxue*) in China, “economic and political success has transformed China’s relationship to the world, reinforcing confidence in national identity and with it, pride in a past that has been degraded by liberals and repudiated by revolutionaries.” Put differently, China’s emerging status as a global powerhouse is increasingly reliant on memories of dynastic glory and the Confucian ethical system that undergirded the imperial state. This changing relationship with China’s imperial past has found expression in new museums and new kinds of exhibitions, as I discuss in chapter 1.

Museums and exhibitions are given much play in the Chinese mass media. For example, when the special exhibits on Xibaipo (at the National Museum of China), the Yan’an Spirit (Military Museum), and Deng Xiaoping (National Museum of China) were put on in the summer of 2004, print and television media lavished attention on them, both to increase attendance and help propagandize the official interpretation of the meaning and importance of the exhibits. State propaganda organs, the mass media, and museums and exhibitionary spaces collude in propagating official historical narratives.

Of course, not all memorial sites that emerged in the 1990s were state sponsored.

Peasant volunteers from Leiyang in Hunan, for example, built with private donations the Sanyuan Temple (Sanyuan si), a temple devoted to Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and Zhu De (Cong 1997, 46). While state museums resurrected revolutionary heroes as a means of restoring the tarnished image of the party, for these peasants the temple was an “indirect form of protest against corruption and the widening gap between the rich and the poor” (46). In Chongwu, Fujian, a temple was erected to commemorate and worship soldiers who died in the 1949 battle over the island of Jinmen, a battle that is memorialized in many Taiwan museums as a great victory over the communist bandits. These kinds of memorial sites, with their religious overtones, are far removed from, though by no means alternative to, more official state remembrances of the revolutionary past.⁴⁹

The recent museum expansion in China cannot be explained solely in political or ideological terms; it is also part of a global rise in museums caused by growing consumer markets for culture.⁵⁰ As part of this process of making themselves more marketable, museums have also internationalized in the past two decades, forging links with Western counterparts and hiring foreign design firms to make their exhibitions modern, sophisticated, and high-tech.⁵¹ Cultural capital is a significant factor in urban economies; it helps to “brand” a city, making it more identifiable and competitive in the global marketplace. Museums and memorial sites have become an important element of this municipal marketing in the Chinese postsocialist economy. In 2002, for example, the city of Wuhan reconceptualized its Wuchang Uprising Memorial Hall into a Xinhai Revolution Museum, a move that contributed to a self-conscious branding of the city as the center of “culture of being the first to revolt” (*shou yi wenhua*), a reference to Wuhan’s role in initiating the revolution that overthrew the Qing dynasty.⁵² To celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of the revolution in 2011, Wuhan built a Xinhai Revolution Monument in the First to Revolt Park, which is part of the First to Revolt Cultural District of Wuhan.⁵³ In Beijing, the expansion and renovation of the National Museum of China were motivated by a desire to give the capital the cultural institutions commensurate with its new status as a “global city.” Even small cities are getting into the branding act. Anyang, once the capital of the Shang dynasty and famously the site where oracle bones were first excavated, has branded itself as the



FIGURE 0.4. Entrance to the 2004 Deng Xiaoping exhibit at the National Museum of China, Beijing.

place of origins of the Chinese writing system with the opening, in 2009, of the Chinese Character Museum (Zhongguo wenzi bowuguan). City branding, economic competition, and tourism are important factors in the dramatic growth in museums in the market reform era.

One significant trend in museum development in the past decade has been diversification. The history and culture museums I focus on in this book are just a small part of the total picture of museum culture in China. Big, so-called “comprehensive museums” (*zonghexing bowuguan*) continue to be built at the national, provincial, and metropolitan levels, but a growing number of museums could be described as specialty or niche museums. These include local culture and history museums, corporate museums that exhibit the history of a private or state enterprise, industry museums (e.g., tea, coal, railroad, aviation, cartoons), and science and technology museums. Because of their topical focus, these museums are less explicitly political and ideological than the kinds of museums that are my main concern, but they are not without political meanings. The Qingdao Brewery Museum, for example, presents a positive image of the company brand by displaying its long history, its global market penetration, and its “green” consciousness, but the museum also strongly buys into the corporate and commercial ideology of the present Chinese regime, suggesting that the brewery’s rise would not have been possible without the CCP’s market reform program. Science museums, which are among the most popular museums in China, indirectly reflect the state’s emphasis on the material transformation of China and its economic rise in the world, propagating powerful notions of the positive role of science and technology in building a great modern nation. They also reflect a society’s scientific attitude and its level of “civilization.”⁵⁴ The Shanghai Science and Technology Museum (Shanghai keji guan) building, for example, has a sleek modernist design and is situated on New Century Square in the heart of Pudong. The building itself is futuristic, and its location points to the role of science and technology in moving China toward the future, a future that is technologically modern and culturally civilized.

In this new economic climate, even revolutionary history museums are looking for their niche in the cultural marketplace. In 2006, the Without the CCP, There Would Be No New China Memorial Hall was opened in the rural area of Fangshan district outside of Beijing. Built on the site of the composition of the song “Without the CCP, There Would Be No New China” (*Meiyou gongchandang jiu meiyou xin Zhongguo*), one of the most popular and omnipresent propaganda songs of the Mao era, the museum tells the story of the foundation of New China through the prism of this quintessentially Maoist song.⁵⁵ This museum perfectly exemplifies the diversification and specialization of museums in the leisure economy.

Local museums, which I discuss in some detail in chapter 1, are being built at a frantic pace. These museums proudly exhibit the culture and history of their local region, though not in a way that could be construed as threatening to the hegemony of national identity; these museums present local culture as a manifestation of the



FIGURE 0.5. The Shanghai Science and Technology Museum.

great diversity that is Chinese national culture and contribute to the construction of the idea of a multicultural, multiethnic state. One can find museums, or basic exhibits within museums, devoted to the culture of Qi (northern Shandong), Lu (southern Shandong), Ba (eastern Sichuan), Shu (western Sichuan), Yue (Guangdong), Liaohé (Liaoning), Suzhou, and Hangzhou, to name but a few.

To give a sense of the variety and extensiveness of museums in China, take for example a city like Nantong. Located not far from Shanghai, Nantong is, by Chinese standards, a middle-level city, with seven million inhabitants. It has some twenty museums and memorial halls, including museums devoted to textiles, architecture, folk arts, kites, sports, old age, water technology, and the abacus, as well as more general museums such as the famous Nantong Museum and its neighbor, the Nantong City Museum. Nantong may not be typical of cities of its size in terms of the number of museums because it brands itself as the birthplace of the Chinese museum, but it gives us a sense of the proliferation of new kinds of museums and the important role of museums in forging a city identity and accruing cultural (and economic) capital.

Another trend in recent years has been the establishment of private museums.⁵⁶ Whereas in Taiwan and Hong Kong private museums have a relatively long history,⁵⁷ in the PRC they started appearing only in the early 1990s. As of 2006, it was estimated that China had some 200 private museums, out of a total of 2,200 (Song Xiangguang



FIGURE 0.6. The “China’s Heroes” display at the Jianchuan Museum Cluster.

2006, 6). Private museums tend to emerge from the personal interests and collections of the nouveau riche, who wish to display their new cultural and social status, and they developed in conjunction with the appearance of private entrepreneurship in the 1980s and 1990s (Song Xiangguang 2008, 41-43). In Gujia Village, Sichuan, the Liu family, one of the richest in China, has created a museum to itself, a kind of testimony to the family’s entrepreneurial success story.⁵⁸ Private museums tend to be fine arts museums, but there are also a few private history museums, such as the Jianchuan Museum Cluster (Jianchuan bowuguan juluo), located outside of Chengdu in the town of Anren. Private museums with a social

conscience are also popping up here and there. The Culture and Arts Museum of Migrant Labor (Dagong wenhua yishu bowuguan), which opened in 2008 and which is situated in a migrant residential community in the suburbs of Beijing, draws attention to the hardships faced by migrant workers in China but also to their “heroic” contribution to the miraculous modernization of the past thirty years.

Since the late 1980s, museums in China have faced a sometimes painful and difficult transition from the ethos of the planned economy to that of the socialist market economy. Some curators and museum directors have resisted the change. Modern history museums in particular have been slow to respond to new economic conditions and the changing society and culture beyond their walls, and many have, in their exhibits, continued to emphasize the centrality of self-sacrifice to the grand narratives of socialist nationhood and the communist revolution. In contrast to China’s vibrant popular culture, museums and their exhibitions have often appeared staid and stodgy. These museums are now showing both subtle and substantial transformations, but that they have been slow to respond to this changing world is not surprising given that they have been and continue to be primarily state funded and thus more closely associated with the state cultural bureaucracy than many other cultural forms and institutions. Some museum workers and scholars have embraced the socialist market economy. Lu Jianchang (2005, 8-9), who not only sees the inevitability of this trend for museums, also welcomes it as an opportunity and chides those who fear it or resist it. Either way, it is clear that the market economy, which has created a thriving mass culture and competing forms of entertainment, has been an important factor in the present proliferation and diversification of Chinese museums and the changing content and style of their exhibits.