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Kirk A. Denton, *Exhibiting the Past: Historical Memory and the Politics of Museums in Postsocialist China*,

Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2014, 250 pp.

Léo Kloeckner

Translator: N. Jayaram



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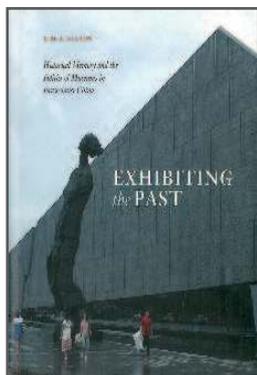
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LÉO KLOECKNER

This book offers an original analysis of official accounts by Chinese authorities of the nation's past, with a special focus on museums. Kirk A. Denton, professor of Chinese literature at Ohio State University, seeks to understand and measure the state's implication in elaborating and framing official discourse, as relayed through museums. His analysis treats the museum as a political object, noting that "museums and memorial sites are implicated in a highly politicised process of memorisation and representation of the past, and are dealt with by multiple ideological forces including Maoism, liberalism and neoliberalism" (p. 3).

The analysis covers all places, institutions, and practices identifiable as memorial sites in Pierre Nora's sense. For instance, the author devotes an entire chapter to "Red Tourism," examining the production of figures and exemplary personages (revolutionary martyrs, popular heroes, and model leaders) that are featured in these touristic practices and that legitimise the regime. Denton thus offers a precise insight into China's memorial landscape marked by this "exhibition rhetoric" and composed of a great variety of sites. He makes a break with "new museology," which regards the museum as a place where visitors' subjectivities play out, thus turning it into a space for interpretation and collective construction of meaning. He sees the museum as a configuration serving the state's discourse, but without negating visitors' ability to criticise such official discourse.

Using a Foucauldian perspective, the author adopts a resolutely "statist" approach and distances himself from the recent trend in certain currents of social sciences toward stressing the role of individual agents in the social process. In his view, this tendency obscures the state's role in constructing the Chinese museal landscape. Although a vehicle of state ideology under the direct control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the museum is not reduced to a simple manifestation of monolithic propaganda or rigid institution. Museums, like the state itself, are pulled between "an old socialist discourse and a new market ideology" (p. 9). Retention of an official communist line and the strengthening of the CCP's hold over civil society since 1989 in a marked context of passage to a market economy has, in his view, led to the production of an "ideologically ambiguous space" (p. 9), which the museum reflects.

His analysis also rests as much on the study of the narrative, to put it plainly, presented to visitors, as on that of the discourse of actors producing this narrative. It rests on an examination of diverse materials (visual, textual, architectural) presented in the museums, as well as archival documents and records from different periods helping the author put in perspective the evolution of the rhetoric of historical exhibitions from the end of the empire until now. The discourses analysed are not only of actors who are part of

museum institutions but also of visitors, some of whom deflect or reinterpret the visual rhetorical displays set up by the authorities. Therein lies the book's finesse, succeeding as it does in going beyond a schematic and sterile juxtaposition of the points of view of the state and the individual.

Each chapter in the book corresponds to a museum type, helping cover the complexity and diversity of the "ambiguous ideological space" (p. 9) that constitutes the museum. Most museums studied mainly seek to commemorate episodes in the nation's past: history museums (Chapter 1); museums devoted to memory of the revolution (Chapters 2 and 3); those dedicated to the memory of national martyrs (Chapter 4); military museums (Chapter 5); and those dealing with the memory of the Japanese invasion (Chapter 6). To this list the author adds institutions, memorials, and museums devoted to popular heroes and model leaders (Chapter 7) and to literature and major literary figures (Chapter 8). Another set of exhibition sites is devoted to the narrative of Chinese nation-building, the ethnic diversity of which is showcased in ethnographic museums (Chapter 9) and the contours of which come through in red tourism routes (Chapter 10). The last chapter focuses on what the author calls "museums of the future," that is to say, exhibition spaces that some municipalities devote to the evocation of national and local urban areas (Chapter 11). In this regard, it is rather surprising that the author has not covered the 2010 Shanghai Expo in his analysis. Despite its ephemeral character, the Expo was nevertheless a developed form of the official visual rhetoric the author deals with in the book. The Expo was a space presenting the way in which China was positioning itself on the world scene and how Shanghai envisaged its role in the twenty-first century.

The main issue the book brings out is that of modalities of evolution in the official narrative conveyed by museums regarding the nation's past in the ambiguous and changing ideological context of China today. How are museums changing? How are they reacting to transformations in the world outside their walls? In attempting to tackle these questions, Denton avoids painting a monolithic portrait of institutions that remain marked by some permanent features since the end of the Maoist era, linked to the role of the state and the CCP in the formulating official narratives of the past.

The main transformations examined in the book concern references to these narratives and to the forms of museal discourse. The analysis of history museums reveals swings in references to the pre-communist and revolutionary past. The author shows that the authorities seek to situate their legitimacy more in the evocation of a long period than in a revolutionary moment envisaged on the mode of historical rupture. The previously condemned imperial and republican past is partly rehabilitated, and the narrative of the CCP's revolutionary glories takes a larger place than that of humiliations suffered during the War of Resistance Against Japan. In the author's view, this new approach to the past reveals the CCP's wish to project an image of its history in consonance with the policies adopted since the state's conversion to neoliberal ideology.

In relation to each type of museum studied, Denton underlines that in this context of liberalisation of cultural industries, the forms of museal discourse are marked by strong commercialisation. Policies with regard to museums increasingly tend towards entertainment or rest on the construction of a brand image and heightened marketing. According to Denton, this tendency reflects the globalisation of the cultural landscape and an economic model in which museal institutions are evolving and will henceforth engage in international partnership and be open to the circulation of globalised museum models (pedagogic and architectural). According to Denton, even

if this commercialisation might seem to contradict the official narrative of Chinese history influenced by the CCP, it merely reflects the “ideologically ambiguous” nature of the contemporary “Chinese memorial landscape,” and at the same time reveals the fact that the state’s discourse is neither monolithic nor immutable.

■ Translated by N. Jayaram.

■ Léo Kloeckner is a contractual PhD candidate in geography at Université Paris 1. He is attached to the PRODIG laboratory (UMR 8586) and edits the online journal *Urbanités* (leo.kloeckner@gmail.com).



Jean-Pierre Cabestan,
Le système politique chinois.
Un nouvel équilibre autoritaire
(The Chinese political system:
A new authoritarian balance),
 Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2014,
 708 pp.

BENOÎT VERMANDER

In 1994, Jean-Pierre Cabestan published *Le système politique de la Chine populaire* (The political system of the People’s Republic of China – PUF). What he now offers 20 years later around the same theme is vastly enlarged and reworked. The difference between the titles of the first and second books is significant: apart from the strictly institutional aspect, it is the “Chinese” political system that is the issue, a system that combines and continues to integrate increasingly varying historical, cultural, and social aspects in a system in perpetual evolution and a “new and atypical” construction (p. 20). The new book explores a paradox: institutions set up just after 1949 still endure (albeit profoundly refurbished in their 1979 interpretation), even under the unprecedented economic, cultural, and social upheavals of the preceding three decades. What is presented is not a simple description of institutions but an attempt at comparative political science that grapples with the complexity, endurance, and transformation of relations between the authorities and society. The thesis may be summarised thus: it is not possible to understand the permanence of institutions amidst social upheavals they are supposed to govern without setting out the hypothesis of a “degraded continuum of the authorities, their forums, and influence on the one hand and society, structures, and social relations on the other” (pp. 20–21). By reasoning in terms of “continuum” rather than “opposition” it becomes possible to formalise the capacity for adaptation and consolidation in mainland China’s Party-state system.

The book’s introduction theorises these issues while offering a synthesis of work over the last 20 years pertaining to Chinese politics. It contrasts foreign approaches with those dominant in China itself (often concerned with “localisation” of problems), noting, however, the emergence of studies carried out by joint teams of Chinese and foreign academics. The main body of the book is divided into two parts. Part I, “Institutions,” contains 11 chap-

ters examining the way in which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) understands and expresses its mission and its organisational principles, its leading organs, its apparatus, and its finances, before turning to the Constitution and state institutions, administration, judicial system, People’s Congresses, Chairmanship of the Central Military Commission, the consultative system, and finally the PLA. The result is a veritable schema of the regime and its institutions, from their starting axioms on into the details of their functions.

Part II considers the “degraded continuum” between “regime and society,” articulated around four issues: concentric circles of official political society; corruption; diversification of forms of political participation; and control of ethnic minority regions. The conclusion of Part II hesitates between two observations: on the one hand, “political authorities are still attempting to guide and channel the social corps but control it less and less” (p. 591); and on the other, “the emergence of new elites and – linked to that – new forms of political participation in a large sense, have helped the CCP retain its status while being in sync with all, or at least the majority, of the social corps” (p. 592).

A similar hesitation is to be found in the overall conclusion, perhaps overly focused on the issue of the possible duration of the regime’s survival and scenarios of democratisation. The prudence of formulations in the scenarios outlined does not, however, prevent the author from observing *in fine* that “in China, as elsewhere, freedom and democracy are not granted, they are fought for” (p. 613).

The section devoted to institutions is remarkably structured, documented, and argued. It is difficult to think of a better synthesis to offer students and foreign actors seeking to understand the politico-institutional system they are dealing with. Part II is briefer as well as more selective: it attempts to clarify the main factors that could explain how transformations of the regime and society are taking place even as institutions remain formally unchanged. The chapter on selection of elites helps understand and explain the resilience of the Party-state, the organisational and control capabilities of which remain sound. The overview on corruption is clear, but the problem’s complexity and speed of change render any approach to the phenomenon incomplete. The study of forms of political participation is strikingly detailed but would have benefited from deeper theoretical treatment, given that debate over the very notion of civil society and its implications for the country’s future remains robust among Chinese sociologists and political scientists. More generally, the book could have offered a more precise glimpse into the debate around issues of society and governance as pursued in China, a richer one and perhaps containing optimism only hinted at here. Finally, the chapter on minority nationalities raises the question of evolution (or non-evolution) of institutions with that of national security challenges as perceived by the regime.

Other dimensions could have been added to the analysis, and the “continuum” issue could have gained from more precise theoretical explanation. However, at the end of Part II it is clear that by choosing the issues of elites, corruption, modes of participation, and “boundaries,” the author has rightly picked four sensitive points of articulation between the Party-state and society. On the whole, they explain both the formal resilience of institutions and the growing chasm between their spirit and what is driving Chinese society today.

The book’s length allows for easy perusal. It is a reference work that could be read at one go and also be used for checking some principle, practical aspect, political system, or other. The well-thought-out bibliography constitutes an excellent research tool. Despite the difficulty of the task, a happy