

BOOK REVIEW

Denise Y. Ho. *Curating Revolution: Politics on Display in Mao's China.*

Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018

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Denise Y. Ho's new monograph begins with a manual, distributed to Shanghai neighborhood cadres early in the 1950s. Among other instructions on how to organize daily life, the manual provides basic information on how to mount an exhibition. Ho's book demonstrates that during the Mao years, exhibition was a potent and prioritized form of mass communication. In dialogue with other works on how exhibition in China produces political power (Denton 2014, Lu 2014), Ho takes the perspective that during the Mao years this power was amplified in the perception that material things—artifacts, architecture, bodies, and scientific demonstrations—possessed a unique capacity to persuade by providing evidence of ideological claims. "In Mao's China," Ho writes, "to curate revolution was to make it material" (1). Indeed, as oral history interviews with then-child visitors to exhibitions show, material objects were often memorable. And yet, there were contradictions embedded in the work of curating artifacts, gaps that surface in the archive and complicate any simple assessment that exhibits directly transmitted ideological messages to the public.

This book demonstrates—thoroughly and often empathetically—how those involved in the work of curation worked through the contradictions at the heart of six museums and exhibitions in Shanghai. They are the First Party Congress Site, a row of preserved shantytown houses, a science dissemination exhibition, a class education exhibition, an exhibition of Red Guard achievements, and the Shanghai Museum. The account draws on archival research as well as oral history with exhibit visitors and a few key curators. The book's core sources are an extensive assemblage of descriptions of the exhibitions, docent scripts, news reports, internal reports on visitor reactions, memoirs, biographical writings, and contemporary materials in popular circulation. These popular materials comprise very different sources—films, plays, children's books, posters, cartoons, and ephemera. The six exhibits reflect themes from these popular materials, showing how exhibitions participated in a larger political culture, and this puts the book in conversation with studies of literature (Braester 2010, Tang 2015, *inter alia*), as well as history (Perry 2012). But some of these visual and textual materials also actually depict exhibitions and the experience of visiting them. Ho argues that this is because exhibitions and the objects they curated were experienced as such strong and convincing forms of evidence. Like the manual distributed to neighborhood cadres, exhibitions were contradictory but consequential handbooks for people living through the

increasingly tumultuous Mao years on how to speak, how to emote, how to mobilize objects as evidence in class struggle—that is, how make revolution.

Chapter 1 recounts the curation of the 1921 First Party Congress Site during the 1950s. It was a difficult task from the start. First, accounts of the location were in contradiction. The curators conducted many interviews and even secured the temporary release of the jailed widow of a traitor to lead them through the streets trying to identify locations by sight. Accuracy was considered to be of the utmost importance because "the Party's rise to power was attributed to its correct historical understanding," (33), but Ho shows how this contradicted the requirement to curate the site following the "Red Line." The fact was that Mao simply was not a prominent participant in the Congress. This contradiction surfaces in changing versions of docent scripts and lists of questions they might receive with approved answers. As time and politics progressed, more and more questions—even those as simple as who occupied the other chairs displayed in the meeting room—could only be met with silence.

Chapter 2 describes the display of shantytown housing at Fangua Lane. From this notorious slum, eighteen old houses were preserved as a workers' new village of five-story apartment blocks was built. The neighborhood became a living exhibit, toured by schoolchildren and visiting foreigners. Ho shows how the primary mode of exhibition here was juxtaposition of the new and old housing. Like the narrative practice of *yiku sitian* 忆苦思甜, or reflecting on the bitterness of the past to appreciate the sweetness of the present, Fangua Lane was meant to juxtapose the Old Society and the New Society narratively, as well as materially. Yet the juxtaposition of past and present plastered over other, hidden contradictions. Although Fangua Lane was a model for the dramatic changes that were supposed to transform the people's lives in the New China, actually Shanghai's shantytowns expanded during this time, and even in the new Fangua Lane, there was not room for most of the former residents.

Chapters 3 and 4 both discuss temporary exhibitions held during the Socialist Education Movement. Chapter 3 describes an exhibition called "Love Science and Eliminate Superstition," mounted in 1963-1964 at the Shanghai Youth Science and Technology Education Station. The curators first gathered questions from children. In the exhibition they refuted the "superstitions" they had gathered about gods, ghosts, and

souls. They dismissed unscientific beliefs, such as the belief in heaven, in favor of scientific facts, such as the chemical composition of the atmosphere. The exhibit included two memorable material demonstrations, of a dissected frog and of spontaneous combustion. Yet teachers reported that the exhibit's message did not reach some students. The exhibition created "superstition" as a category, and made it categorically incompatible with science. Ho argues that it met with limited success because people had long been adept at holding multiple beliefs at once.

Chapter 4 treats the Shanghai Class Education Exhibition (1965-1966). Ho shows how the exhibit provided ritual scripts, as well as ways of understanding artifacts as evidence, that later animated Red Guard exhibitions and narrative affect. *Jiezhan* 阶展 (class exhibitions) such as this one made use of three key curatorial techniques: juxtaposition of the rich and poor before Liberation; presentation of the body injured by work in the capitalist system, and the visitor's reflection, tears, and personal response to the exhibition. Curators faced the difficult question of how to exhibit class enemies that were supposedly hidden. The exhibition turned to wounded bodies and tattered clothing from before Liberation, and in the present day, hidden money, gold, and ledgers of lost wealth supposedly preserved in case of a capitalist revival (*biantianzhang* 变天账). Arguing against "peaceful evolution" of communism into capitalism, the exhibition taught visitors to be wary of hidden class enemies and the way they hoarded objects from the Old Society to undermine the New.

Although the Red Guards criticized the Shanghai Class Education Exhibition, Chapter 5 shows how they directly inherited its methods of curating and interpreting artifacts for visitors. After the start of the Cultural Revolution, Shanghai's Red Guards curated one of many "Exhibitions of Red Guard Achievements" held across the country. These exhibitions primarily displayed the fruits of Red Guards' house searches for counterrevolutionary objects—guns, transmitter radios, flags, "treasures"—and narrated them to elicit class feeling. By equating material possessions with class, and by narrating the stories of individuals as class enemies through objects, Red Guards did the work of the Cultural Revolution by learning as docents, and teaching visitors, to see class in things. Though this exhibition employed curatorial techniques learned from earlier exhibits, it used them to a different end: the objects and their hiddenness attributed successes to the Red Guards and justified the Cultural Revolution itself.

Chapter 6 focuses on the Shanghai Museum's early years and the "quiet salvage operation" (229) its curators carried out to rescue Shanghai's cultural artifacts during the "Attack on the Four Olds" Campaign, begun 1966. The museum set up a twenty-four-hour hotline. Whenever staff learned of a house search to be carried out in the home of a collector, they raced to the scene, catalogued important artifacts, and often removed them for safe storage. Zhong Yinlan, an oral history subject and one of several junior curators who received a crash course in appraisal during those tumultuous years, sorted thousands upon thousands of paintings. But while at the time the

Shanghai Museum justified their actions on the political grounds of returning artifacts to the masses, oral history subjects said they preserved the objects for their owners, and indeed, many were returned during the 1980s. Many were acquired by the museum, and many seem to have disappeared. For better or for worse, though the Shanghai Museum spent the Cultural Revolution mitigating its violence against artifacts, the campaign shaped the institution, its staff, and its collection into what they are today.

Students of museums and material culture will be interested in this book's many fascinating descriptions of how material objects were made into evidence in different exhibitions and political moments. The book hints at the ways in which some of the contradictions curators had to bridge were imposed by inconvenient material objects that threw doubt on the political narratives curators had to relate to visitors, such as the extra chairs in the First Party Congress meeting room. From the perspective of Museum Studies, it would be intriguing to explore further what these tensions say about objects. That is, what was it about materiality—not just historical materialism specifically, but materiality more broadly—that, as Ho says, made objects so memorable and made curators consider them to be so convincing?

This book will be of great interest to students of the Mao years focusing on both intellectual history and popular culture. Exhibition shared formal and ideological continuities with other media of the time, but it was unique in its use of objects. The materiality of exhibition meant that it fulfilled particular demands of historical materialism as interpreted in Mao Zedong Thought. Yet I think that the book also shows how curation was a two-way practice. Curators collected (or wrenched) narratives, objects, beliefs, and even images of the body from members of the public so that exhibitions would be recognizable and convincing for visitors. Gathering feedback from visitors was also considered critical for demonstrating visitors' experiences of coming to consciousness. Although much participation in exhibitions of the time was of course coercive, Ho cautions the reader not to dismiss curators' and visitors' experiences of exhibition. Like model workers who took their roles to heart (Hershatter 2011), people who learned political scripts and rituals from exhibitions often found them very meaningful indeed. I see in Ho's book a new perspective on the dense enmeshment of the political and popular culture of the time; the book shows how the objects and narratives involved in exhibition mattered both for politics and for individual curators and visitors. I would be interested to hear more about how Ho would characterize the meeting of political culture and popular culture in these exhibitions.

Braester, Yomi. *Painting the City Red: Chinese Cinema and the Urban Contract*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

Denton, Kirk. *Exhibiting the Past: Historical Memory and the Politics of Museums in Postsocialist China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014.

Hershatter, Gail. *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.

Lu, Tracey L-D. *Museums in China: Power, Politics and Identities*. London: Routledge, 2014.

Perry, Elizabeth J. *Anyuan: Mining China's Revolutionary Tradition*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

Tang, Xiaobing. *Visual Culture in Contemporary China Paradigms and Shifts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Response

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Many thanks to the *PRC History Review* and Yidi Wu for arranging for a review of *Curating Revolution: Politics on Display in Mao's China*, and my appreciation to Leksa Lee for her thoughtful analysis of the book and its implications. It is especially gratifying to view my book through the lens of an anthropologist who studies museums in China today, and to see how research on the Mao period is relevant to other disciplines and in the study of contemporary China. I look forward to finding out the ways in which *Curating Revolution's* themes are present in Lee's own case studies of new museums in the present day.

Lee's review is framed around "the contradictions at the heart of six museums and exhibitions in Shanghai," and I would like to highlight these dilemmas and what they meant both for the people who worked in museums and the people who visited them. How was one to understand Mao's revolution as ideology and as history? How should one view "models" when they were both exceptional and representative? How did one reconcile the presentation of science as knowledge vs. science as a category of truth? In the late Maoist ideology of class, how were class enemies both dangerous and doomed to failure? How might a Red Guard docent present a luxurious object in order to elicit class hatred rather than envy? And how might a Shanghai curator preserve objects in service of tradition and revolution, for the people and for the state? I was heartened to see Lee's use of the word "empathy," as my intention was to illuminate the difficulties of "curating revolution" and to take my subjects' words seriously—as Aminda Smith has argued in these pages, to read rhetoric both *with* and against the grain.

In the space of this response, I would like to address three topics that Lee brought up at the end of the review: the perspective of museum studies, "curation [as] a two-way practice," and "the meeting of political and popular culture." Of the first topic, Lee asks what the tensions of the book say about objects and "materiality more broadly." Materiality mattered to these exhibitions on a number of levels. Firstly, materiality was important on an ideological level. In speeches and texts on museology, officials explained that objects could raise perception (*ganxing zhishi* 感性知识) to the level of reason (*lixing zhishi* 理性知识); if visitors could see display objects as part of a system, they would see objects in their

everyday lives as part of a system as well (1, 3). On a practical level, materiality was important to both curator and visitor because objects were much more attractive and interesting. Comments and feedback often included requests for more objects, and it was objects that made for successful "living exhibitions." Finally, materiality was central to the way an object struck a viewer, whether it was a feeling of familiarity with an object he once owned, a sense of foreboding from a piece of "criminal" evidence, or a surge of curiosity about what luxury foods tasted like. Two elements are key to the power of material: the authenticity of the object and the experiential possibility of the object.

Lee also writes that the book "shows how curation was a two-way practice," underscoring how curators derived display content from members of the public, and also how it was imperative to gather feedback from visitors to demonstrate how lessons were learned. This idea of a "two-way practice" can be further expanded with two keywords, one that I propose and one that will be familiar. The first term is "participatory propaganda," which describes exhibitionary culture in the Mao period in that exhibits were meant to be interactive, both in their making and in their reception. Thus, grassroots exhibits came from the people: they were interview subjects, they could provide artifacts, and their stories were to be channeled by the same docents who had conducted the interviews. Similarly, an exhibition became a ritual space in which docent stories would spur visitors' own *yikusitian* 忆苦思甜 narratives, and in which the narrator's class feeling would call forth the audience's class feeling. The idea of "participatory propaganda," in turn, evokes Mao's "mass line" and the artist/cadre/intellectual going to the masses, distilling what he or she had learned, and then teaching the material back to them. The genre of exhibition is particularly individual and grassroots. Compared to, for example, a local performance of a model opera, the display was tailored to its very visitors—one could literally see oneself in an exhibition.

The review concludes by asking about the characterizing of political culture and popular culture in exhibitions. The case studies of *Curating Revolution* demonstrate how political culture and popular culture are deeply intertwined. We think of political culture as something that emanates from officialdom: it is Party-produced, cadre-led, and top-down.

By contrast, popular culture is thought of as unofficial: it is rooted in local tradition, it comes from communities/individuals, and it is grassroots. More and more recent scholarship shows how political culture is successful when it combines with popular culture. In Elizabeth Perry's *Anyuan*, "cultural positioning" is the use of popular culture for political purposes, in which "cultural capital [is converted] into valuable revolutionary currency" (Perry, 8). Of political culture Chang-tai Hung writes, "the process [of initiating political culture] is never unilaterally imposed from above...[it] is a negotiated one, forever in flux, although in the end the leaders always have the upper hand" (Hung, 5-6). In the conclusion of my book I trace which aspects of Maoist exhibitionary culture came from Chinese antecedents (from the late Qing or from the Republic) and which came from Soviet examples. I argue that China's display of class and class status drew most strongly from traditional Chinese cultural repertoire: enumerating suffering was like Buddhist ledgers of merit and demerit, speaking bitterness reflected Chinese village culture, and display techniques suggested imperial public punishments and temple displays, among others. "In its revolutionary mode, Mao-era exhibitionary culture was at its most Chinese" (262).

One aspect of the book not mentioned in the review, which has come up among book talk audiences, is its focus on Shanghai. How representative is Shanghai, and how representative is the city in Mao's China? The answer that I give in the book is that the two museums that are its "bookends"—the First Party Congress Site and the Shanghai Museum—are unique but important; no other city hosted the CCP's first congress and Shanghai was exceptional as a center of art collection. The other examples reflect the kinds displays mounted elsewhere, of neighborhoods, against superstition, about class, and by Red Guards. What has come out in presenting the book is both a desire to know about other places—particularly the countryside—and personal examples that show the prevalence of similar experiences elsewhere. One artist commented that he, too, had illustrated "class education exhibitions," but had not thought them significant because they were propaganda art rather than fine art. A book talk audience member shared how he, as a young man, also confronted Red Guards about to destroy an historic site. Two avenues for future research include other places and other media—in urban and rural contexts—to reveal further meetings of political and popular culture.

Hung, Chang-tai. *Mao's New World: Political Culture in the Early People's Republic*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010.

Perry, Elizabeth J. *Anyuan: Mining China's Revolutionary Tradition*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.