

BOOK REVIEW

Jie Li,

Utopian Ruins: A Memorial Museum of the Mao Era (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020)

Damian Mandzunowski, University of Freiburg

Imagine constructing a museum dedicated to an idea, to a fleeting concept: how would you design it? Can brick-and-mortar constructions give back emotions? And, to go a step further, is it possible to create a commemorative space for radical ideology that, in equal measure, engages with its tangible as well as intangible components? Jie Li's new book, *Utopian Ruins: A Memorial Museum of the Mao Era*, provides numerous illustrative examples questioning not only the very nature of what a museum is—and can be—but also showcasing how memory about the recent past could be—and has been—dealt with in the People's Republic of China (PRC).

The book itself is published almost exactly thirty-five years after the prolific writer Ba Jin called on his compatriots to build a Cultural Revolution Museum in June 1986.¹ Taking this call-for-action as a symbolic starting point, Jie Li intertwines critical inquiries into a range of textual and visual media to present an engaging vision of a future memorial site of not only the Cultural Revolution, but also the first three decades of the PRC under Mao's leadership. As such, *Utopian Ruins* is an exceptional addition to the ever-growing scholarship on memory of and in the PRC. Other recent significant contributions include, but are not limited to, works by Kirk Denton,² Gail Hershatter,³ Margaret Hillenbrand,⁴ Denise Ho,⁵ Sebastian Veg,⁶ and Tsering Woeser.⁷

Ursula K. Le Guin suggests in a short essay on Thomas Moore's *Utopia* that, if we treat the potent fifteenth-century concept as an abstract idea rather than an actually existing place, then "the way to get there is by the way that is not a way."⁸ As if in equal manner inspired by Le Guin and Ba Jin's initial call, Jie Li presents an ingenious combination of close- and distant-reading of a wide array of sources that creates an "imagined memorial-museum-in-book-form" (6). It is thus only right to give back the creative structure in what follows here too. Taking the readers on an imagined guided tour, like with a curator at an actual museum, the six chapters of the book present three distinct kinds of remembrance-evoking exhibits of the Mao era: textual (chapters 1 and 2), visual (chapters 3 and 4) and physical (chapters 5 and 6). These exhibits are also what constitutes the titular "utopian ruins": as laid out early on, all "memorial media that bear layers of inscription from the remembered past and the remembering present" (7) are to be counted as such.

If we were to follow Jie Li's conceptual construct, then each of the chapters would be treated as a separate room in an imagined

museum. And so, starting the tour from the ground floor, the first exhibition is as a symbolic retelling of the modus operandi of Maoist political campaigns at large (chapter 1). Here, blood used by the activist Lin Zhao as ink-replacement in her prison writings becomes a literal referral to historical violence. Jie Li takes up this first exhibit to argue that beyond being a witness, Lin Zhao was also engaged in "anticipatory memory" (26), a term referring to the belief that her writings would stand evidence for future generations. Li describes how, already imprisoned, Lin would make conscious use of the party internal flow of information, believing that all her dissident writings would circulate within the communication structure for study and criticism—and thus, inevitably and unknowingly to her imprisoners, amplify and preserve her message.

Besides the collected and re-created writings of Lin Zhao and their analysis, this first floor—and, in fact, most of the floors at Jie Li's memorial museum—also comes with a screening room. In this initial one, Hu Jie's 2004 *In Search of Lin Zhao's Soul*, a documentary that brought Lin's story to a broader public, is discussed. Albeit recognizing the high artistic and symbolic value of the film, Jie Li is fairly critical of the reception of Lin Zhao's hagiography as a national martyr entangled in consumerist modes of commemoration. Concluding the exhibition, Jie Li assesses that Lin Zhao's blood writings constitute "utopian ruins" in that they "caution posterity against the violence of revolution while reminding us of its original longing" (66). In the story of Lin Zhao Jie Li thus recognizes the actual revolutionary desires of many youths to showcase how these has been overshadowed by their often-tragic postscripts.

Moving over to the second exhibit of textual reminders of the Mao era, the reader-turned-visitor finds a discussion of the complicity of archives, and, especially, the personal dossier (chapter 2). As discussed in detail by Jie Li, the personal dossier in the PRC consisted of confiscated writings, informants' notes, confessions and interrogations—everything that the surveillance apparatus has collected on the given subject. As such, the dossier is a medium defined foremost "by its brush with political power" (71); its existence was common knowledge, and yet only the ones who were part of the power structure could gain insights into its full contents. The axis of this exhibition is the rediscovery in 2009 of the personal file of writer Nie Gannu that brought forth a wave of online discussions around memory, memorization and

commemoration. For Li, the case of Nie's personal dossier exemplifies that a new form of public sphere came to exist within the internal publications and surveillance system as "intellectuals entered into a strange, uni-directional dialogue with the authorities via the mediation of the informers who recorded the intellectuals' speech for the police archives" (83). Thus, the exhibition concludes, dossiers contain at the same time "the traces and ruins of real human lives" (98) that together inform about how Maoist mass campaigns encouraged memory-production via confessions and denunciations.

Most of the remaining floors in the imagined memorial museum are dedicated to visual and cinematic exhibits. Thus, ascending to the second floor, we discover a patchwork-like collection of photographic case studies from the Great Leap Forward of 1958-1962 (chapter 3). Jie Li investigates their complicity in the tragic campaign arguing that propaganda photographs like those published in *Mass Photography* "served as eyewitness testimonies to revolutionary miracles that not only failed to witness and record but also contributed to man-made catastrophes" (105). She thus recognizes three main uses of photography in this period: it was to actively promote production, propagate labor heroes and models to replicate, and to give authenticity to ideology by showing visual proof to revolutionary miracles. In addition, Li also recognizes the photomontage as the ultimate visual realization of the Great Leap utopian visions (129), at the same time bigger than life as well as grounded in the contemporary reality.

Another exhibition presented in this chapter—the second room on this museum floor—zooms in on the French giant of documentary photography, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and his second journey to China in 1958. This section adeptly highlights the tensions between the candid style promoted by Cartier-Bresson's Magnum agency and the by-then standard polished socialist realism of Chinese photojournalists (136-139). Finally, Li then discusses a range of non-public photographs taken during the same time—especially for use in police files—to show how these photographs were also engaging in "anticipatory memory" (146) in a similar manner as Lin Zhao's writing showcased before.

Moving up another floor in the conceptual museum we find ourselves in a large screening space. The first exhibit found here consists of two European documentaries shot in the PRC during the early 1970s, Michelangelo Antonioni's *Chung Kuo, Cina* and Joris Ivens' and Marceline Loridan's *Comment Yukong déplaça les montagnes* (chapter 4). Both are interpreted by Li as providing a window into the Maoist everyday life that official newsreels would not be able to depict (151). At the same time, the exhibition also engages closely with how both documentaries were rediscovered by Chinese audiences in the twenty-first century as "mediated memories of their own recent past" (152).

In its second part, the exhibition continues the discussion already started around Cartier-Bresson about different conceptions of a "just image": while the Western auteurs interpreted this to mean authentic, i.e., not staged reality, for their Chinese counterparts it meant to show ideologically

correct, i.e., dignified reality and thus "ontological truth [was] pitted against national pride" (153). In the end, Li shows how, although the Italian and Dutch-French documentary teams employed very different practical and ideological ways to make their movies, both found themselves in a "visual regime characterized by spectacle and surveillance" that Jie Li terms a "Maoist mise-en-scène" (163).

The second cinematic exhibition presented in this floor consist of three contemporary Chinese films (two documentaries and one feature film) dealing with industrial workers and their engagement with the Maoist past in post-socialist China (chapter 5). Here, Jie Li presents slow-paced and beautifully narrated close readings of the three films which all "remediate the socialist industrial ruins" (196) and, by doing so, comment on the given maker's relation to the past too. First, Wang Bing's 2002 *West of the Tracks* is considered as an impressive achievement that "museumifies the ruins and ruination of the socialist factories" (207). The second film, Jia Zhangke's 2008 *24 City*, through its use of slow camera movements and a blend of documentary and fiction, is reinterpreted as commenting on "postsocialist postmemory" (214)—the inheritance of memories of socialism by the children of "Mao's working class." The third film is Zhang Meng's 2011 *The Piano in a Factory*. Here, Li pays particular attention to location shooting and tracking shots that turned the industrial landscape into a performative platform for the workers (220).

The top floor in Jie Li's conceptual memorial museum resembles a research center discussing already existing memorial sites of the Mao era (chapter 6). Li divides these into two distinctive kinds: "red memorabilia collections and trauma sites"—the first of which commemorate utopian socialist dreams and practices; and the second of which are located at the ruins of the era's many catastrophes (229). Two examples of red memorabilia—Liu Family Estate Museum in Anren and Jianchuan Museum Cluster, both in Sichuan Province—and four trauma sites—Jiabianguo Labor Camp (Gansu), May Seventh Cadre School (Xianning, Hebei), Red Guard Graveyard (Chongqing), and the Cultural Revolution Museum (Shantou, Guangdong)—as well as a range of websites, albums and databases are visited and analyzed here. In the end, Jie Li demonstrates that one common strategy of all these memorial sites is to "represent victims as heroes and martyrs" and, by doing so, to "memorialize the human costs of the Mao era" (253). However, Li is not entirely content with either the scope or contents of existing memorial sites. Hence, in the epilogue, she lays out a range of her own advice and concrete propositions for future curators. This, in sum, should encompass both the red memorabilia and the trauma sites into a testimony to both utopia and ruin that would adeptly symbolize the multitude of voices and visions of the socialist period (262).

In *Utopian Ruins*, by skillfully navigating between the many sources and making precise use of language, Jie Li creates space for a multivocality of voices in a thought-provoking study that is as impressive in scope as it is deep in meaning. Some readers might perhaps feel that the proposed conceptual framework could have worked even better when presented in the form of an interactive website.⁹ However, despite being confined to

printed pages operating in the sequential manner of information-recording that defines almost all books, *Utopian Ruins* manages well to display a multi-layered picture of complicity, self-censorship and remorse that characterizes so many engagements with the Mao era. In addition, a variety of novel concepts is introduced and discussed throughout *Utopian Ruins* that will be of great use for all future engagements with questions of memory in the PRC—among them: technologies and ecologies of memory, future-oriented witnessing, masses-as-media, memory-writing as graphomania, palimpsests of memory, or mediation-as-reconciliation.

The fascinating exhibits discussed by Jie Li provide evidence of a wide range of social practices common to the Mao era too. They deal with textual remnants of interrogation and indoctrination (and resistance against them); visual traces of large-scale political tragedies (and their multilayered consequences); cross-cultural exchanges that aimed (and both succeeded and failed) to capture “real” images of the PRC; as well as contemporary attempts to deal with all these memories. In addition, I would like to ask the author how she would construct an exhibition floor around another popular activity, namely that of reading? Items that could bear witness to the varieties of reading both as a clandestine social practice and an institutionalized political ritual under Mao could include caricatures villainizing political enemies created at the grassroots in a range of mass campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s; hand-written entertainment fiction (*shouchaoben*) from the Cultural Revolution; or big-character posters created during the many movements of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Particularly interesting to read would be analyses of how contemporary readers interacted with such items—and how such interactions would change once the given object turned into a museal exhibit.

Coming to terms with the past inevitably also requires a vision for the future. Jie Li accordingly provides plenty indirect cues throughout the book about how such a memorial museum of the Mao era would locate itself in today’s PRC in an alternative

universe in which such existence was in fact possible. But, to make further use of the welcoming format of this review series, I would like to ask her whether a memorial museum of one era can anyhow foreshadow the given era’s immediate afterlives? Although Mao Zedong passed away in 1976, the Mao era arguably did not fully end immediately then. The few following transitional years saw the mutually related positions of victims and perpetrators crystalize in a range of processes of direct engagements through the mediation of party and state. Most, if not all, of these engagements also resulted in a plethora of textual and visual sources that would work greatly as exhibits in an expanded memorial museum. A final floor in the imagined space could hence include accusations and confessions, but also rehabilitation notices and amendments. Films and other texts of the scar genre, dealing with that period contemporaneously, could also be located here.

As a final point I would like to return to the title of the book and its many appearances throughout the text: while Jie Li convincingly juxtaposes utopia with ruins, perhaps the more immediate negative connotation is that of dystopia. The term appears, but only in passing—in the context of “utopian images and dystopian realities” (104) of the Great Leap Forward—yet there is, perhaps, an argument to be made of the post-reform era PRC constituting a dystopian distortion of the utopian dreams of Chinese communist revolutionaries. Recognized as such, it would be highly interesting to read how Jie Li would have incorporated the 1980s into an expanded conceptual memorial museum of the Mao and Deng eras in this context. This inquiry also somewhat channels one of the larger questions addressed in the book, namely about the ability of historic actors and objects to foretell their later uses and meanings, both in the metaphorical as well as in the concrete terms. What does the act of museumification—the conversion into a museum of objects, memories, people, or, as in *Utopian Ruins*, an entire era—actually do to our engagement with history?

¹For an archived English version of Ba Jin’s 1986 article, see <https://web.archive.org/web/20201112001318/http://www.cnd.org/cr/english/articles/bajin.htm>.

²Kirk Denton, *Exhibiting the Past: Historical Memory and the Politics of Museums in Postsocialist China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2014), and, Kirk Denton, *Landscape of Historical Memory: The Politics of Museums and Memorial Culture in Post-Martial Law Taiwan* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2021).

³Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China’s Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

⁴Margaret Hillenbrand, *Negative Exposures: Knowing What Not to Know in Contemporary China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

⁵Denise Y. Ho, *Curating Revolution: Politics on Display in Mao’s China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁶Sebastian Veg, ed., *Popular Memories of the Mao Era: From Critical Debate to Reassessing History* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019).

⁷Tsering Woesser, *Forbidden Memory: Tibet During the Cultural Revolution*, ed. Robert Barnett (Lincoln: Potomac Books, 2020)

⁸Ursula K. Le Guin, “A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be,” in Thomas More, *Utopia* (London: Verso, 2016), 185.

⁹For two recent examples of digital-only academic publications, see Jeffrey Snyder-Reinke et al., *The Chinese Deathscape: Grave Reform in Modern China*, edited by Thomas S. Mullaney (Stanford University Press, 2019), <https://chinesedeadscape.org>; and, *The Mao Era in Objects*, edited by Jennifer Altehenger (King’s College London, 2019), <https://maoeraobjects.ac.uk>.

Response

Jie Li, Harvard University

Many thanks to the editors at *PRC History Review* for creating such a stimulating forum for conversations about new books, and to Yidi Wu for commissioning a review of my book. I am deeply grateful to Damian Mandzunowski for giving such a careful and insightful reading of *Utopian Ruins*, for raising some thought-provoking questions, and for proposing additional potential exhibits for a memorial museum of the Mao era.

I would like to begin with Mandzunowski's closing question: "What does museumification do to our engagement with history?" Cultural critics have long cautioned against museums as mausoleums of ossified artifacts without contemporary relevance, yet the rise of memorial museums around the world have sought to re-enliven memories of crucial historical events. With *witnessing* as their mission, memorial museums underscore the word *exhibit* in two senses: as *display* (that attract attention) and as *evidence* (that make truth claims), so they resemble courtrooms that put history on trial for a broader public. Insofar as museums mediate encounters between the past and the present, the dead and the living, they are also shamanistic mediums. But I argue that the most fruitful kind of museumification treats historical artifacts like plants in a botanical garden of memories.

The garden metaphor was particularly significant for the cultural politics of the PRC, most notably after Mao distinguished between "fragrant flowers" and "poisonous weeds" to launch the Anti-Rightist Movement in 1957: Whereas revolutionary cultural flowers must be cultivated and disseminated; "feudal" or "bourgeois" cultural weeds must be uprooted (and turned into manure).¹ My book thus likens PRC's media and memory environment to an enormous garden tended by a giant gardener, namely, the Communist Party, which cultivates and chops off memory plants as "flowers" or "weeds". Yet the giant loosened its control over the garden in the post-Mao era, allowing much wild flora to grow in the cracks and ivy to extend beyond its walls. To study this evolving media and memory environment, *Utopian Ruins* cultivates its own memorial garden. Each chapter curates an exhibit around a different memory flora, tracing its emergence and dissemination, extinction or revitalization over time. Which memories thrive or wither and in what climate and soil? Why do some memories become viral, others die out, and still others mutate? How might remediation extend the life and reach of memories? How do different memories interact within a larger ecosystem of cultural, political, and technological forces? Thinking about memory and media in ecological terms gives us a more nuanced approach to propaganda and censorship than a totalitarian model of state-sponsored brainwashing and amnesia.

If the Party-state's official memory garden is carefully pruned and fenced, I would like my memorial garden to be generative rather than exclusive. Just as my book develops the seeds of ideas from Ba Jin and other writers, filmmakers, artists, curators, and scholars, I hope that others can take seeds from my garden and plant them in their own. As my "notes for future curators" suggest, my memorial garden is far from comprehensive, but is rather part of a broader ecology of memory collections in China and beyond. Thus I delight in every conversation that might link my "museum" to other collections and exhibits.

Mandzunowski's review has suggested two potential additional exhibition floors that draw on collections from two important research projects at his home institution, the University of Freiburg. The first, READCHINA, investigates the politics and practices of reading in the PRC—as Mandzunowski puts it—"both as a clandestine social practice and an institutionalized political ritual under Mao." *Utopian Ruins* shares READCHINA's approach to socialist culture that goes beyond established authors and artists to attend to the circulation and reception of cultural artifacts, which also affect their production. My first two chapters are particularly interested in reading and writing as practices of surveillance and censorship. As important as the biographies or literary oeuvres of Lin Zhao and Nie Gannu are the media conditions under which their words were produced, captured, archived, circulated and reproduced from the Mao era to the post-Mao years. Similarly, chapter 3 and 4 curated photographs from the Great Leap Forward and documentary films from the Cultural Revolution not only for their historical information or aesthetic value, but also for what they tell us about the evolving Maoist visual regime, whose conventions and taboos determined what could be documented and transmitted as memories for future generations. While analyzing how films, museums, and memorial sites narrate and represent the past, I also study how they were created and transformed over time, as well as how they interacted with different generations of viewers and visitors. Continuing my interests in socialist memory-making, my current book projects on film exhibition and reception as well as radio broadcasting and listening will further investigate the impact of propaganda media on the experiences and memories of their audiences.

The other "exhibition floor" Mandzunowski proposes for an expanded memorial museum of the Mao era would focus on the years immediately after the Cultural Revolution. This proposal may be related to the Maoist Legacy Database at the University of Freiburg, which collects documents and images from the post-Mao years of transitional justice, including a fascinating exhibit Mandzunowski curated of caricatures criticizing the Gang of Four. Fully agreeing that the Mao era did not end with

Mao's death, I find it most promising to draw on the prodigious memory production of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Bearing significant witness to the injustice and suffering of the Cultural Revolution, rehabilitation documents extend my notion of "dossier literature," which were partially or fully returned from confiscation to their original authors, subjects, or surviving family members, who could then publish or otherwise remediate memories for a broader public. In seeking to exorcize the demons of the Cultural Revolution, however, the cultural productions of the immediate post-Mao years also show the continuity of Maoist aesthetics, discourses, and practices. For example, one might curate an exhibit juxtaposing propaganda *against* and propaganda *by* the Gang of Four while showing their shared visual motifs or logic, such as how fallen historical figures are airbrushed out of photographs. Along these lines, one could also juxtapose scar literature, art, and films against remembering bitterness stories from the Socialist Education Movement.

Scars and bitterness narratives bring me to the final question concerning dystopia, which his review associates with the post-Mao reforms. Indeed, the dystopian imagination pervaded the most important Chinese historical novels written in the 1980s

and 1990s, as Jeffrey Kinkley's book-length study shows,² but the authors were often reflecting on the ruins of a socialist utopia as much as they were distrustful of a capitalist utopia. One could also argue for the existence of a dystopian fantasy—or gothic horror—in the Mao era pertaining to the bitter hell of "Old Society" as a foil against the sweet present and futuristic paradise of Communism.³ Much as dystopian fiction serves as compelling warnings against utopian schemes gone awry, however, my book privileges "ruins" to highlight the real impact and aftermath of utopianism, as well as to treat the memorial museum as a site to excavate the ideals that motivated so many Chinese to participate in the revolution in the first place. In this sense, a memorial museum shouldn't be a phantasmagoric chamber of past horrors, but instead invite visitors to retrace historical paths to figure out where and how things went wrong and to examine the complicity of utopian visions in human-made catastrophes.

¹ Geremie Barmé, "Beijing, a Garden of Violence," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 9, no. 4 (2008): 612-639.

² Jeffrey C. Kinkley, *Visions of Dystopia in China's New Historical Novels* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

³ For an illuminating study of "socialist horror," see chapter 5 of Haiyan Lee, *The Stranger and the Chinese Moral Imagination* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).