

Book Review

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Gail Dexter Lord, Guang Qiang, An Laishun, Javier Jimenez (eds), *Museum Development in China: Understanding the Building Boom*, Lanham, Boulder, New York & London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019, hardcover \$49.00, pp. xvii+142

What has changed in the Mainland China museumscape since the introduction of the Reform and Opening Up policy when, in 1978, only 349 museums existed across the country? According to the speech given by Liu Yuzhu, the director of the National Cultural Heritage Administration (NCHA), on the 2020 International Museum Day held in Hu'nan Museum, the total number of museums in Mainland China soared to 5,535, 4,929 of which provide free admission for the public. This adds up to one museum on average for every 250,000 people, and in some areas like Beijing, Gansu and Shaanxi, the average becomes one museum for every 120,000-130,000 people. This huge increase in museums is often reported as 'Golden Times', an allusion to the similar phenomena that took place in the 1930s under the Republic of China, and in the 1950s under the People's Republic of China. The volume *Museum Development in China: Understanding the Building Boom* (中国博物馆发展, Zhongguo bowuguan fazhan), issued at the twenty-fifth conference of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in Kyoto, Japan in 2019, is an official evaluation of this 'unexpected' phenomenon through the voices of experts in the field.

The book opens with a preface and introduction by Guan Qiang, the deputy administrator of NCHA, and Gail Lord, co-founder and president of Lord Cultural Resources. The 25 papers (written by prolific museum studies researchers and various leaders from the field) are divided into four parts – China's museum boom in context, Museum Building in China's new urban culture, Opening up to the world, Case studies innovation. This book is a clear response to the international debate around the extraordinary development of museums in China. Additionally, it is an experimental, inspiring study in 'museum building' (used as a verbal noun, like 'developing') in the context of China and from a global perspective.

Part 1 explores the Chinese museumscape chronologically and synchronically, as well as the global trend of museum growth in the last 20 years, which witnessed an increase of 50,000 museums, totalling 80,000 overall. This is mainly stimulated by the development of new cities, the emergence of new art forms, and the rise of private collections and philanthropy. With the transition from industrial society to knowledge society, museums are not only stores of knowledge, but engines of meaning-making. Chinese museum development has also experienced dramatic change, particularly under the strong support of the government, along with the implementation of new policies, like the integration of culture and tourism administration, and a great emphasis on social, economic, political and cultural aspects. However, as the authors argue in this section, both hardware (such as collection management and facilities) and software (such as professional staff training and academic research) of museums in China still have a long way to go, and fortunately, board institutions, social inclusion and open-source digital data will push museums in China into a more dynamic future.

Confronted with the tension between busy life in cities and a slow pace in rural areas, and large amounts of immigrants to newly built cities, Part 2 discusses how museums – following planned modernization – have been assigned or have taken responsibility as the symbolic identity of local place. As shared by directors, architects, and designers of private or public museums, the transformation of Chinese museum-building emphasizes high

density, fast speed, and giant architecture to accommodate local spirit, trend-fitting and efficient communication hubs. Museums in Mainland China have been acting as connecting bridges, linking art and community life. As Guan Qiang argues in the preface, this increase in museum-making might be largely attributed to the amazing economic boom in Mainland China as one of the aspects of the social development model based on Marxist materialism, which sees the economy as the material infrastructure and cultural institutions like museums as the superstructure. On the other hand, as some other authors in the volume imply, this could perhaps be interpreted as a response to past trauma, such as the nightmare of Chinese heritage during the Cultural Revolution.

Part 3 involves the inward and outward communication of museums in China with other countries. As an 'imported object' (舶来品, *bolai pin*) at the very beginning of the twentieth century, museums have had the role of witness, builder, and leader of Chinese diplomacy, which could be dated back to the very first pieces of western painting from the Ming dynasty four centuries ago, to the only Chinese who attended London's Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in 1851, and to the widespread dissemination of so-called 'Chinese art' over the last century. The exchange of museum exhibitions, as one cultural diplomacy tool, to some degree increases awareness of Chinese culture all around the world, and also sharply improves the professionalization, standardization, and internationalization of museums in Mainland China. Furthermore, cultural communication via museum display has enormously satisfied the eager needs of Chinese visitors. In short, a cooperation model based on mutual trust, dialogue, connection and understanding has formed. Museums in China have tried to take responsibility for public memory and to transition towards collaborative exhibition-making. This process includes the adoption of new media and technology to push forward public influence, the gathering and evaluation of public opinion and the encouragement of public engagement in cultural performances. All the above efforts are spent on seeking the value of creative design and the potential of the knowledge economy in the new era.

In Part 4, partly because of the free admission introduced in 2008, well-developed museums in highly urbanized cities, like Beijing, Shanghai, Suzhou and Guangzhou, are used to exemplify the museum building boom in recent decades. The implemented strategies encompass local culture research and the promotion of social education to enhance community impact; institutional change to facilitate collaborative efforts among different departments; boosting the cultural and creative industries to explore new marketing methods; and advocacy on smart museums.

This collection could be regarded as a combination of emic- and etic-perspective responses to the four monographs on contemporary Chinese museums that were published in recent years by Marzia Varruti, Kirk Denton, Tracy Liedan Lv, and Amy Jane Barnes. It is worth reiterating that the authors of this volume are insiders in the field (most of them are policy-makers, directors, curators, and architects in the museums mentioned above), experts in participation and engagement whose work contributes to the sustainable future of museums worldwide.

The main drawback seems to be the unbalanced selection of museums discussed in the volume. Firstly, territorially, the distribution, number and category of museums in the developed, east coastal parts of China overweigh those in the central and western areas, which almost coincides with the three-layer geographic settings. From a socio-cultural perspective, there is a dichotomic division between central cities and peripheral countryside, which accentuates this imbalance by focusing more on centrally-situated museums. This is to the detriment of, for example, eco-museums and village museums in ethnic group settlements which make up part of a new museology movement and could have been discussed further. Thirdly, all changes are initiated by museums as institutions, which means visitors (the public) have not been considered as actively involved in the meaning-making process of public spaces. This further reaffirms the top-down model adopted since the importing of museums into China. Finally, from the perspective of museology or museum studies, operational and practical aspects still occupy a lot of the discussion in museum related debates, while theoretical dimensions, especially meta-museology or multidisciplinary ones (museum anthropology, reflexive critical museology) have been reserved a smaller role. Nevertheless, this multifaceted

volume would be beneficial for scholars and students of museum studies in Mainland China, with sufficient museum policy-making processes and professional practice examples on the one hand and, on the other, a window for researchers in cultural studies who are interested in Chinese affairs as well.

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