

Chapter Four

“Slave(s)” to the Great Museum

Heritage, Labor and Ethics in the Jianchuan Museum Complex

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Since its initial development in 2003, the Jianchuan Museum Complex (JMC) has become one of China’s most visited and best-known non-state museums.* Labelling itself as China’s largest “private” museum project, the museum claims to house a still-expanding collection of eight million items, making it the biggest repository of historical artifacts and documents of twentieth-century China. Heavily influenced yet not completely controlled by the government, it is one of the very few museums that has been able to address China’s politically contentious history of the twentieth century, and the only one that has done so while achieving economic success and nationwide popularity.

Located in Anren, a historic town near the southwestern city of Chengdu, the JMC is a vast complex of more than thirty museums and memorials, spreading across an area of five hundred *mu* (roughly thirty-three hectares). Built up on the personal collection of Fan Jianchuan, a self-made multi-millionaire and collector-curator, the museums are clustered under four main themes: the Resistance War against Japan (1931–1945), the Red Age (1966–1976), the Wenchuan earthquake (2008) and Chinese folk culture. Welcoming over a million visitors from across the country every year since 2009, the JMC has become a major tourist attraction and a key driver of the local heritage economy. In 2009, Anren was officially branded as the “Museum Town of China.”

The development of the JMC and Anren is a small but significant segment of China’s “explosive” museum boom and cultural heritage “fever” since around 2005. By the end of 2018 China boasted 5,354 museums (Xinhua 2017), and the world’s highest number of listed items of both UNESCO World Heritage Sites and Intangible Cultural Heritage. The ramifications of China’s “museum and heritage boom” is a key issue behind the central themes of this volume, and as other chapters note, it is a highly politicized

phenomenon. On the one hand, it is an instrument for the state's promotion of its "ideological mainstream" (*zhu xuanlü*), as shown by a number of recent researchers (Denton 2014; Varutti 2014; Fiskesjö 2015; Evans and Rowlands 2015; Wang and Rowlands 2017), and on the other hand, it has become a space where nonofficial narratives of the nation's history have been made possible. By early 2016, over a quarter of all the museums in China were non-state, or *minban*, "organized by the people" (China Private Museum United Platform 2016, 7). Non-state heritage initiatives have made considerable efforts to bring public awareness to some of the "persistent" memories that are less encouraged or accepted by the state, articulating a unique sense of moral responsibility to heritage and history (Thaxton 2016, 14).

In this chapter, I examine the development of the JMC and critically address the ethical domain of museum and heritage work through the lens of the working lives of the museum staff. Based on fifteen months' ethnographic fieldwork conducted as a voluntary worker at the JMC between 2015 and 2017, I probe into the contrasts between Fan's self-proclaimed moral values and the grounded reality of the museum's everyday social life.

THE MUSEUM AS A MORAL PROJECT

"To collect wars for peace, collect lessons for the future, collect disasters for safety and collect folklore for cultural transmission." Such is the project's motto as inscribed in bold Chinese characters on the cast-iron arch at the JMC's entrance that can be seen in figure 4.1.

This marks Fan's redemptive aspiration to confront and deal with the nation's controversial recent past. Today, histories related to the Chinese Nationalist Party, or the Guomindang (GMD), and the Cultural Revolution concern politically sensitive issues and until very recently, have been largely neglected in public commemoration.¹ Though allies in resistance against Japan, the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party engaged in a civil war after 1945, resulting in the GMD's defeat and retreat to Taiwan in 1949. Since then, the Guomindang has been excoriated in dominant historical and political discourses under the communist government, and its major contribution to the war against Japan has long been downplayed. The Jianchuan Museum Cluster was the first museum in mainland China to dedicate attention to the Guomindang troops during the Resistance War. Before the JMC opened in 2005, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Publicity Department banned regional media coverage of the project and initiated an "investigation" of its museums, which led to changes in both their names and contents. Furthermore, due to the representation of Guomindang leaders, Fan



Figure 4.1. Cast-iron arch at the entrance of the Jianchuan Museum Complex, author's photo

was forbidden from inscribing any names on the “Chinese Heroes” memorial square, a group of 201 larger-than-life cast-iron sculptures of prominent CCP and GMD war heroes standing side by side. Public opening of the memorial was not allowed until 2007 when Fan invited a group of descendants of senior communist party leaders to visit the site to put pressure on the authorities. Fan also announced plans to build museums on war traitors (*hanjian*), corruption, the Anti-Rightist Movement (1957–1959) and the Great Leap Forward (1959–1961), though none of these have been permitted.

The political restrictions on the museum project indeed gave it additional moral weight. In 2007, the Hong Kong-based Chinese magazine *Phoenix Weekly* published a feature article on Fan Jianchuan, famously entitled “The Vernacular Preacher of the True History of China’s Last Hundred Years” (Huang 2006). By celebrating the role of the vernacular, this designation sets Fan’s museums against the state’s historical narratives. Western media have also depicted the project as telling an alternative version of history. In 2016, the *Wall Street Journal* even called Fan a “challenger . . . taking on Beijing,” who keeps pushing boundaries to test the censors’ tolerance (*Wall Street Journal* 2016).

In Fan Jianchuan’s own words, what he does is “sound the alarm bell” (*qiaozhong*) for the nation to evoke an ethical awareness about the “missing”

parts of China's modern history that have been overlooked and suppressed in official historical narratives. This is best demonstrated in the museums developed in the early years of the JMC, that are dedicated to diverse experiences and memories, including those of the GMD and war prisoners in the Resistance War, different aspects of the Mao era and the Cultural Revolution, and controversial issues in the 2008 earthquake.

All this was made possible by Fan Jianchuan's industrious practice of collecting in a nongovernmental capacity during the post-Mao period. Fan views his enterprise as motivated by a sense of "historical responsibility" (*lishi zeren*) to restore collective memory against the corrosive forces of rapid social transformation. Such moral impetus originates from his personal memories of growing up as the son of a denounced party official, a Red Guard,² a sent-down youth³ and a People's Liberation Army (PLA) soldier under Mao. Impelled to preserve the imprints that period left on himself and his family, Fan started collecting everyday objects from the Mao era soon after the end of the Cultural Revolution, when these were being abandoned and destroyed in the "de-Maoification" campaign in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Barmé 1996). Among the early beneficiaries of the economic reform, Fan then found success in the real estate business, before eventually devoting himself to building museums.

"China can easily spare a businessman, which might well be a good thing; but if no one does this (collecting), we would have a serious problem," Fan said in a 2008 interview (CCTV 2008). He attributes his move from the lucrative real estate business to the world of museums and heritage to a quixotic sense of moral obligation. Titling his 2013 autobiography *The Slave to the Great Museum*, Fan characterizes himself as "enslaved" to his memories and museum dream, regardless of the financial difficulty and political risks. Fan's notion of self-enslavement encapsulates the discourse of "self-sacrifice" and "historical responsibility" that upholds the JMC as a moral heritage project as well as Fan's public image and personal branding.

THE MUSEUM AS SOCIAL WORLD

While existing accounts have told the story of the JMC emphatically from the perspective of Fan Jianchuan as the mastermind of the project (Makinen 2012; Ho and Li 2016; Denton 2019), I examine the development of the project from the perspective of the museum employees, particularly of the curatorial staff members who I spent most of my time working with throughout my fieldwork. Their experiences of the JMC as a "social world" shed light on how the changes I have outlined affected the dynamics, both of their work in

the JMC and of the overall operation of the JMC over time. In this, I understand museum work as embodied practice, involving not only the production of knowledge but also the material everyday concerns and emotions of the working individuals as well as the relations among them.

Labor is not a new category in the study of heritage and museums. With the global expansion of the museum labor force, museum work has become increasingly diversified, incorporating not only conservation, research, exhibition making, but also aspects such as marketing, management and public relations (Fyfe 2006). Sociologically influenced works have investigated the changes of and conflict between different visions of the organizational identity of museums (Zolberg 1981, Alexander 1996). Macdonald's ethnography of the creation of an exhibition in the Science Museum in London explores what happens "behind the scenes" to make sense of the changing ideology in the museum's production of knowledge (Macdonald 2002). Engaging with the "social world" of Colonial Williamsburg, Handler and Gable show how the museum's egalitarian discourse "mystifies" the reality of its corporate hierarchy, and how its employees simultaneously accept and criticize the "company line" in their working lives (Handler and Gable 1997).

I place particular emphasis on the ethical domain of museum work because, on the one hand, the JMC, as already noted, is to a great extent a morally charged project. Fan Jianchuan's moral discourse permeates the ways in which it was conceived, developed and managed. The same discourse continues to permeate the museum's public face. In the meantime, the museum staff's working lives speak of contrasting moral values and concerns to those that Fan articulates. Museum work, in its constant negotiation with Fan's dominant moral discourse, therefore itself becomes an ethical process.

My theoretical impetus for conceptualizing a notion of museum ethics as exemplified by the JMC draws on the concept of "ordinary ethics" elaborated by anthropologist Michael Lambek. By locating ethics in the mundane practices and circumstances of the everyday, Lambek argues that an investigation into the dimension of ethics "in selfhood, social encounter and action" may provide a profound understanding of human social lives and activities (Lambek 2010, 7). This critical vantage point has been adopted by Charles Stafford who also holds that much can be learned about ordinary ethics from the "micro processes of everyday life" (Stafford 2013, 5). I therefore pay critical attention to both explicit expressions and the more implicit, tactical, circumstantial acts, reflections and remarks of the employees of the museum, to capture the ethical that is practiced every day, as distinct from Fan's claims about the moral values of the museum.

A couple of weeks after I started my fieldwork at the museum, one afternoon I walked into the office area to the sound of an extremely loud

argument. The chief of security, Guo Changlin, was roaring and cursing at the administrator Zeng Yong, shouting “how dare you deduct a half-day’s pay from my salary?!” An ex-commander in the People’s Liberation Army, six foot tall and phenomenally strong, Guo was intimidating when enraged. He was there raging for the loss of a half-day’s pay, which was approximately one hundred yuan (roughly £11), because he had missed a clocking-in. Guo said he had never missed a clock-in and it must be a problem with the clock-in machine. Zeng Yong defended himself for simply doing the job of calculating the salaries based on the machine’s record. The only thing Guo could do was to take it further to the senior managers. It was this drastic incident in the very early stage of my fieldwork that brought me face-to-face with the “real-life” mundanities of museum work, including the most down-to-earth matters such as a half-day’s pay. This suggests a strong contrast to Fan’s articulated visions and commitment and indicates a completely different ethics of heritage work. If Fan is a “slave” to the JMC, the employees are also “enslaved” in their own ways, and their ethical dispositions, desires and concerns need to be taken into consideration. I thus approach the JMC as a plural and dynamic social world that complicates our understanding of the labor relations within it. However, before turning to the employees’ stories, I set the scene by describing the early emergence of the JMC project.

CORPORATE IDENTITY OF A MORAL PROJECT (2003–2005)

To start with, I address the JMC’s organizational status. In 1999 Fan registered the “Jianchuan Museum” as a “private non-enterprise unit” (*minban feiqiye*), primarily in order to avoid legal risks in acquiring objects for his collection, since business companies were then not allowed to trade objects confiscated during the Cultural Revolution. According to the “Guidance Notes for Private Museums” issued by the State Administration for Cultural Heritage (SACH) in 2014, all non-state museums in China belong to the category of “private non-enterprise units,” abiding by the “Interim Regulations on Registration Administration of Private Non-enterprise Units” (1998). Due to its “private non-enterprise” status, the JMC does not have to pay corporate income tax on its revenue from admission.

The JMC had a commercial side from the beginning. In 2003, Fan set up the “Anren Jianchuan Cultural Industry Company” (*Anren Jianchuan wenhua chanye youxian gongsi*) within the Jianchuan Industrial Group (*Jianchuan shiye jituan*) to manage the museum complex. The organizational status of the museum thus became simultaneously a “private non-enterprise unit” and a “private enterprise” (*minyong qiye*), the former non-profit, and the lat-

ter for-profit. Different from most state museums in China, which outsource certain parts of their operations, the Jianchuan Museum is registered as a "private museum" and operates primarily as a private company. As I shall demonstrate, this dual nature of its organizational identity has had significant influence on its management and staffing. One story that I was told on several occasions about the establishment of the project is that in 2004 Fan sold the main official building of his real estate company to raise funds for the museum complex. But then I learned that the reason for sale was not simply Fan's enthusiasm. As Vice-Director Han Mei told me, the museum was initially a joint investment with two local state-owned corporates, the China Railway No.8 Group Company and the Sichuan Daily. These two companies then contributed up to 49 percent of the total investment and the museum held the controlling interest. Yet, shortly before the project was launched, the China Railway No.8 Company decided to withdraw its investment, claiming the "loss of state assets." Fan was forced to sell an office building in Chengdu that was worth forty million yuan.

Therefore, from the very early stages of the project, state capital interests were heavily involved, which raises questions regarding the museum's claims to its "private" position and moral motivation. Several informants saw Fan's museum building as a strategic move from real estate into cultural tourism, stating two main reasons.

The first was the changing circumstances in the local real estate market around the millennium. In 2002, Hutchison Whampoa, the Hong Kong-based company owned by Li Ka-Shing (Li Jiacheng) started its investment in Sichuan. Together with several other local real estate companies, Fan raised over two billion yuan to bid against Hutchison Whampoa in an auction for a block of land in south Chengdu, but did not succeed. According to senior employees, that incident marked a turning point in the company's change of strategy.

Second, since the early 1990s, the state had undertaken a series of legal and fiscal measures to develop and propagate cultural industries and cultural consumption, including the introduction of income tax and other fiscal measures in 1994 (Wang 2001), and a subsequent lowering of interest rates in 1996 and 1998. Fan started becoming involved in the cultural scene with a first exhibition in 1999 at the Sichuan Museum.

The JMC project thus had a Janus-face character from the start, as a private museum on the one hand, and a cultural enterprise on the other. To the public, Fan ascribes his decision to move from the lucrative real estate business to the allegedly unprofitable world of the museum to a sense of moral duty toward the nation and his paternal family. He regarded commercialization as "the way for a grassroots museum to survive," by generating an income to sustain

itself. He hence designed a “museum complex” (*bowuguan juluo*), mixing museums with teahouses, restaurants, shops, hotels and a boating service.

Fan has consistently striven to infuse his moral virtues into the management of the company. In 2004 he wrote to the museum’s initial team of eight people: “the Anren project is unique. It is unprecedented in China and the whole world. For its accomplishment, we have to be creative and face challenges. Of course, we all have different roles, so doing your own job well is the best way to take part in this great enterprise” (Fan 2013, 140).

This passage encapsulates some of the recurring themes in the museum’s managerial discourse, particularly the notion of “challenge” and the stress on the importance of abiding by one’s duty. Throughout my fieldwork, I found that Fan Jianchuan made a constant effort to reiterate these values through the interplay of the two notions of challenge and duty. The idea that the museum was faced with economic and political challenges, which required the diligence and sacrifice of its staff members, was a discourse that was repeatedly reproduced, and mediated through the structuring and management of the company.

IDEALISM AND SACRIFICE: THE EARLY STAGE (2005–2007)

Among the initial team of eight were the Han cousins, Han Mei and Han Zhiqiang; Han Mei was a senior manager in Fan’s real estate company and Han Zhiqiang was Fan’s assistant and driver. Within the museum project, Han Mei specialized in administrative procedures and liaison with local governments, and Han Zhiqiang worked intensively with Fan on collecting and construction. The cousins were soon promoted as vice-directors of the museum in charge of their respective lines of work.

For those involved in the early phase of the project, the creation of the museum complex was a challenging journey. Despite the openly expressed endorsement from the municipal and county-level governments, the museum team had a series of business banquets with government and military officials to settle the deal on the land and the mansions. Because of the heavy drinking during these banquets, Han Mei recalled that Fan gave each museum employee involved a ten-thousand-yuan cash bonus as “compensation for the damage to their health.”

In 2005, the museum also recruited a few younger college graduates to work on the construction of the first five museums in the complex. Lu Zhishan, an interior designer, was one of these. When we met in 2016, he described how the startup of the museum was “crisis-ridden” right from the beginning.

There were about twenty of us in the company, and we worked on the site for about six months, with huge anxiety and pressure, political pressure, financial pressure, time pressure . . . All the buildings were designed by renowned architects, but we had little experience (in construction). . . . We were short of money as well. Every penny had to come from Mr. Fan's pocket. He used to say that he would sell his office building if necessary. . . . At that time, it was uncertain if it would be approved. Before Mr. Fan left for Beijing to solve some political problems, he joked that he might not be able to come back to pay us.

The team of twenty employees, as Lu remembered, formed three departments: administration, construction, and the "decoration and display" section that he was in. Three vice-directors were appointed, each overseeing one department.

Despite the structure, the actual operation was fluid and collaborative. The construction site was in constant disarray. "We were really 'crossing the river by feeling the stones' (*mozhe shitou gouge*),"⁴ Lu told me. "There was a lot of overlapping and cross-working. Lots of things were done together, for instance, administrators had to help with construction work from time to time. It caused some problems. But we had no choice."

On his first day at work, Fan gave Lu an automatic camera to take photographs of the workers every day. These photographs were not for publicity but rather for the museum's self-documentation. From these photos, such as figure 4.2, most of which were taken between January and May 2005, we see construction workers drilling holes and plastering cement without effective eye or hand protection, some with bare torsos in the summer heat.

The living conditions were poor. The employees lived adjacent to the construction site, in a four-story house Fan rented from local peasants. The site was previously rice fields. Lu and his colleagues paved the muddy path to their dormitory with large wooden boards to walk across. Their bedroom walls were full of moths, and hot water was not available in the building. To have a shower, they had to be taken in a lorry to a public bath. "But we weren't bothered," Lu recalled, "we would sing revolutionary songs on our way to the shower, just like the sent-down-youth. For the two hundred or so construction workers living on the site, the conditions were even worse. When their families came to visit, they spent the night on the site sleeping under a mosquito net. It was really difficult."

In retrospect, Lu described the work experience as "interesting and fulfilling . . . probably more interesting than working in the museum today . . . It was interesting in the sense that people gathered from different places to cooperate on the same project; and fulfilling because one witnessed the whole thing being built from scratch." Lu fondly remembered that he attended the



Figure 4.2. Builders working on the early JMC museums in 2005, courtesy of the Jianchuan Museum Complex

museum's opening ceremony in August 2005, in a "clean white shirt," feeling "enormously proud." Lu also highlighted the role of Fan Jianchuan:

the museum was not built by one person, but by a group of people at the call of Mr. Fan. It took someone of his level of wealth and intelligence to lead us with his dream, so that however difficult the process was, nobody lost faith, or got too concerned about personal gains and losses.

These remarks reflect a consensus view among the museum's early-stage employees, which resonates strongly with Fan's idea about the unique moral significance of the museum project, namely that taking part in building the museum complex was doing something that had never been done before.

Fan sought to engage his employees in his sense of commitment and duty by setting himself up as a model for others. A colleague of Mr. Lu's, who was one of the museum's first frontline interpreters, described Fan as an endearing leader. "He trained us himself. The way he told the stories of the objects was so moving, because he had collected them, and nobody knew them better than he did." During the investigation into the first five museums from August to December 2005, Fan grew a beard to show his determination.⁵ He named a

pavilion in front of the Chinese Heroes Square the "Pavilion of Disturbance" (*fengbo ting*) to mark the difficult period. While the company was making financial sacrifices for the museum project, Fan never failed to pay his employees on time. Meng Xin, the museum's publicist, told me that when the museum was not making enough money Fan used to have his assistants bring large bags of cash from his real estate company on payday to pay the museum staff. Through such embodied performance of his moral commitment during the early years of the museum's establishment, the impression Fan Jianchuan left for most of the staff members was of a charismatic and inspiring leader.

After the official recognition of the museum's opening in December 2005, restraints were placed on the museum's publicity. A former employee, Mr. Xia Jifang, who was working for a local newspaper in 2006, told me that reporting on the newly founded museum was a delicate issue, particularly for official media outlets:

Publicizing the Jianchuan (Museum) was difficult, as any information concerning the Cultural Revolution or the Nationalist Party was strictly prohibited. But I found ways to do it. On the same page, I would put my article on "a museum in Dayi County" on the top half, without mentioning its name, and the museum's advertisement below it. The newspaper editors would examine the news, but not the advertisements. There was an advertisement for a summer camp, and I used a photo of a group of children standing inside the entrance hall of the Nationalist Army Museum. On the wall behind them was a large mosaic figure of Robert Capa's portrait of the Nationalist soldier, made out of porcelain Nationalist army cap badges. Readers would be able to figure it out and find [relevant] information. Things like this I did a few times.

By the end of 2006, Xia Jifang had visited the museum sixteen times as a journalist to conduct interviews with Fan Jianchuan. When Fan made him the offer to be the museum's publicity chief, he took it. "Working for the Jianchuan was a lot more meaningful than my job as a reporter," Xia told me in 2016. He felt that taking part in Fan's enterprise would create more space for his own abilities:

There was a team of idealistic and enthusiastic young people, who really wanted to do something. Though the living and working conditions were a lot more difficult than nowadays, and there was nothing in the town, no shops, no entertainment, no streetlamps, and when we finished work at six o'clock, it was pitch dark outside. We always lived right next to the office. But we were full of drive and vigor. We treated it seriously and took the work as a career. There was this feeling that we weren't there for the money.

Mr. Ren He was another member of this young team. In 2004 he was in the final year of his undergraduate studies in Chengdu. After hearing Fan's public talk on the museum project at his university, he immediately applied for a job at the museum and worked there as an administrator for three years.

By 2005, the museum was struggling financially with a total income of just over seventy-eight thousand yuan. Some were concerned that the admission fee of one hundred yuan (for three days) was set too high (Xiong 2008). Vice Director Han Mei told me that there were days when the museum had not a single visitor, when she would buy a ticket with her own money before the day ended.

Despite the revenue deficit in the opening months, further investment was continuously made into building the second museum series of the Red Age, including the Museum of Red Age Porcelain Artworks in 2006 and the Museum of Red Age Everyday Objects, the Museum of Red Age Stamps, Clocks and Badges in 2007. In 2006, Fan invited his old friend Zhao Jun to join the museum team to be the fourth vice-director in charge of the maintenance and security of the complex. Fan and Zhao used to be comrades in the army in Inner Mongolia in their early twenties. After Fan left for university, Zhao stayed in the army and became a professor in one of the country's most prestigious military academies. The two kept in touch and Fan made Zhao several offers to join him in business. It was Fan's plan to build museums on the Cultural Revolution that made Zhao decide to take early retirement from the military and join the museum team. "I was living the comfortable life of a professor at one of the country's top military universities. Even now my pension from the military is much more than my museum salary," he told me in an interview in 2017, "but I had to give that up because he [Fan] was doing this [building the Cultural Revolution museums], which was something extraordinary." Zhao told me that he planned to do research on the Cultural Revolution history with the materials in the museum's collection, but was reticent, understandably, about his personal experience of the period.

The above accounts of the museum's early years fit well with the themes of challenge and duty. There was a sense of common purpose in the employees' narratives of their work which they linked with Fan Jianchuan's articulation of his personal dream and commitment. Working for a not-yet-profitable enterprise was rendered as an "idealistic" endeavor, a collaborative and creative process of solving problems that entailed a sense of trust and hope, and, at the time, almost a "voluntary abandonment of self," to borrow the phrase from the late David Graeber, which was close enough to Fan's favored notion of sacrifice (2013).

COMMERCIALIZATION AND BUREAUCRATIZATION (2008–2015)

The year 2008 marked a turning point for the museum. In the immediate aftermath of the Wenchuan earthquake on 12 May 2008, Mr. Xia and a colleague proposed the idea of an exhibition on the earthquake. Fan took it further and decided to build an earthquake museum. After thirty days they opened the country's very first memorial museum of the earthquake on June 12, showing images and objects from the stricken area. This made international news, and largely due to the increased media exposure, the museum's income jumped from the more than three and a half million yuan in the previous year to more than five million, breaking even for the first time that year.

The growth of the museum complex brought changes to its organizational structure. From the three departments in 2005, the museum's division of labor gradually became more specialized. In 2008, the museum employed 319 people in total, almost half of whom were hired that year. There were twenty-eight regular employees in management posts (*zhengshi yuangong*) and the rest of them temporary employees (*linshi yuangong*) covering security, sanitation, maintenance and other services. The regular employees, usually referred to as "members of staff" (*gongzuo ren yuan*), or "members of management" (*guanli ren yuan*), worked across ten departments: administration, marketing, retailing, finances, security, publicity, display and decoration, cultural development, storage and acquisition, and hotel and restaurant. The four vice-directors oversaw different sections of work, and each head of department reported to one of them. As such, the museum operated a five-tier management hierarchy as illustrated below.

- *Fan Jianchuan*
- *Vice-directors [senior management]*
- *Department heads [middle management]*
- *Department members [lower management]*
- *Interpreters and temporary workers*

This was the overall managerial structure I encountered when I started my fieldwork in 2015. The company provided three meals a day and accommodation for management staff during working days (five days per week). The monthly salary for a department member varied from three thousand to six thousand yuan depending on the post. In the cultural development department, for example, a senior designer earned more than a researcher-curator, although the respective posts were at the same level of management. The temporary workers, including catering, security, cleaning and other services,

were hired locally and earned around one thousand to one thousand five hundred yuan per month.

At seven o'clock every Monday evening, all management staff would get together for a weekly meeting, provided that Fan was in the museum. Vice directors and department heads would sit with Fan Jianchuan around a long table, and the department members in rows of chairs around them. The meeting proceeded through a set agenda. The department heads would start by giving a summary of their department's work in the previous week, followed by usually very brief comments from the vice directors. Then Fan would open up the floor to the department members sitting in the back rows and ask if they had issues to raise, which was usually answered by silence. Sometimes he would select someone at random, and on most occasions that I was present, the selected person would respond with an embarrassed smile and a quick shake of the head. Then Fan would take the floor, starting with his response to the issues just raised and almost invariably ending up by reiterating the challenges faced by the museum and the importance of teamwork and sacrifice.

At the end of every month, staff members were required to submit a work report (*shuzhi baogao*) in a standard format, though some were handwritten, and others printed. These forms would be collected by Zeng Yong, the aforementioned administrator, bound into a volume and submitted to Fan for feedback. Fan would leave his general comment on the front page, and give each report individual remarks, and then pass them down to vice directors and department heads to review and leave their comments. The volume would then be circulated among the employees. The work report was a means to keep Fan informed about the employees' work as well as a platform for the employees to present their ideas, queries and concerns.

These two mechanisms have functioned to facilitate communication within management since the museum's early days. They serve as a prism reflecting the changing work ethos within the museum, becoming gradually more formal and standardized over the years. Fan's handwritten comments, in the meantime, preserve some playfulness and freedom. The contrast is illustrated in the image below in figure 4.3 of Yuan Hongwei's April 2014 report; under Yuan's neatly printed bullet points summary of his work of the month, Fan drew a stick figure portrait of himself pointing at the words: "for the Qingdao Project [a consulting project the team was working on], please show your best work as it relates to the company's future expansion of consulting business, in other words, it is a battle of life and death!"

By 2009, however, the anticipated increase in income had not occurred. The Monday evening staff meetings started to last longer, according to Xia Jifang. To boost morale, Fan would talk for a few hours about the notions of sacrifice and duty. The reference Fan most often used was the battle of Teng

安仁建川二〇一四年4月述职报告


姓名	吴宏远	部门	博物馆	职位	
述职内容					
<p>主要工作：</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1、参加考核讲解员。 2、摘录4月份观众留言。 3、对应聘讲解员面试。 4、帮助整理樊总书柜。 5、拟写《青岛要塞陈列大纲》。 6、联系磨西以及泸定县文化局，核实有关问题和图片。 					
		整理书柜让我方便很多。			
主管评定：		青岛的军事，抓紧，一定			
分管评定：		磨西平像活，绝活，青岛博			
高管评定：		博物馆的成功与否，关系建川博物馆对外业务之拓展的前途。换句话说：			
说：此般关系岂能！					

Figure 4.3. Fan's comments on Vice-Director Yuan's April 2014 work report, author's photo

County, Shandong, in March 1938, a crucial defense that paved the way for the Taierzhuang Battle, the first major Chinese victory in the Resistance War. The Sichuan-born general Wang Mingzhang who led the Teng County defense was killed together with his whole division of three thousand soldiers (Co 2015). Xia remembered Fan saying to the staff, “if I am to take Taierzhuang, what you need to do is defend Teng County!”

The extreme sacrifices in the brutal battle of Teng County more than symbolized the type of self-sacrificial quality Fan urged in his employees. However, the middle and lower tier staff were not keen to contribute their ideas to the staff meetings, in contrast with the meetings in 2005, which, according to Lu Zhishan were much shorter and “less formal,” and in which no one hesitated to speak.

This reflects a subtle change in the workplace ethos around 2008 and 2009, from one that was seen as collaborative and problem-oriented to an increasingly authoritarian mode. The two mechanisms—the work reports and staff meetings—were designed to encourage cross-level communication, but in fact they functioned to reinforce the managerial hierarchy.

On the one hand, this change reflected the shifting relationship between the museum’s corporate nature and its structuring framework. Between 2005 to 2009, the expansion of the museum led to an increase in management personnel covering much more diversified operational jobs, for instance in marketing, retailing, hotel and restaurant management. When I started fieldwork, the museum complex had two restaurants, two hotels, a boating service and several shops selling refreshments, souvenirs, vintage newspapers and Fan’s calligraphy works. The addition of the new divisions of business, together with an increasing desire for profit, entailed a much stronger sense of the need for “proper” and “scientific” management, as the executive vice-director put it, including more formal staff meetings, more frequent work reports, a rigid attendance checking system and so on. The commercialization of the museum thus went hand in hand with its bureaucratization, which by reinforcing the managerial hierarchy, hindered the willingness to communicate among its employees.

On the other hand, the change in work ethos may also have suggested an ideological shift relating to the collective understanding of work. Xia Jifang commented that it was the loss of a common purpose that brought the change in attitudes toward work: “once the project started to make money, people began to get concerned with their own benefit. If you look at the work reports, there were fewer suggestions, and more self-criticism. Nepotism emerged, and corruption as well.”

Xia’s remark concurs with the general awareness and tolerance of the practices of nepotism and favoritism in the museum that I observed and was in-

formed about during my fieldwork. Not only did Fan give jobs to his relatives and friends. Xia Jifang also recalled that at one point there were around thirty employees connected to the Han cousins, to the extent that when Han Mei's father passed away, all her relatives went on leave to attend the funeral, causing a conspicuous absence at work. From the gossip and informal exchanges among the employees, I got the sense that due to their long-term loyalty to Fan Jianchuan, the Han cousins were the ones with "real power" (*shiquan*) among the vice-directors, so some of the employees made a conscious effort to develop a good relationship with them. For instance, Han Zhiqiang's sister ran a small restaurant outside the museum complex serving cuisine from their hometown in Anhui Province. I had breakfast there regularly on weekday mornings as I lived outside the complex. Nearly every time I went there, I found other museum employees buying breakfast there even though there were several other local eateries around. The museum's designer, Guan Sheng, told me that Han Zhiqiang asked him to design the menu for his sister's restaurant.

Such nepotistic practices created a barely hidden hierarchy outside the administrative structure of the museum, which was based on the members' relational connections (*guanxi*) with Fan Jianchuan. In actual operation, this hierarchy could even take priority over the managerial structure. There were cases where employees prioritized tasks or errands from Han Mei or Han Zhiqiang over those from other vice directors. These vicissitudes of internal politics and *guanxi* relations, speak strongly about power, and the forms in which it is exercised and channeled (Yang 2002). The rampant nepotism and increasingly autocratic behavior of certain managers changed the ethos of the company. In his 2008 annual report, Vice-Director Zhao Jun expressed his concern about the increasing skepticism and mistrust in the workplace. But his dismay was conveyed in a restrained form of self-criticism of his own lack of drive and responsibility.

CURATORIAL STAFF AND CURATORIAL WORK

The politics and power relations noted above may not be unique to the JMC as a corporate institution, but as a museum project, it is worthwhile considering how the change of general work ethos affected the curatorial work, including the actual making of exhibitions and museums. Under the 2008 divisional structure, the curatorial work was undertaken mainly by the two departments of "cultural development" and "decoration and display." The cultural development department was then a team of three researcher-curators, whose job was to prepare the exhibition outlines and assemble texts, images

and exhibits. The decoration and display department consisted of four graphic designers who were responsible for the museums' interior design and other visual aspects of the exhibitions. A totally separate department dealt with the acquisition and cataloguing of the collections, and their work was more technical than scholarly. Due to a separation between the curatorial team and the "acquisition and storage" personnel, there was little research done on the collections. Curatorial research focused on the themes of the museums, hence were predominantly historical. Information about the exhibits generally came from the captions that accompanied the items upon their acquisition.

The first museums which opened in 2005 were curated by outsourced professionals, so when Wang Zhu joined the museum in 2006, he was technically the museum's first exhibition designer. His initial response to the then inexperienced design team, drawing by hand, was that it was "completely shocking."

The first project Wang was assigned to undertake was the Red Age Porcelain Artwork Museum. Not without difficulty, he managed to liaise with the curatorial and storage departments and designed the showcases according to the measurement of exhibits, in order to highlight certain valuable artworks. And yet, Fan was dissatisfied with the result, since he preferred a much "denser display," which in his terms meant having the space ready first and filling it up with a large quantity of items, including cups and teapots such as those seen on the front cover. "That was the first and only time I was granted any freedom [to make decisions]," Wang told me in 2017, "after that, I did every museum following his direction, which, to be honest, made my job easier."

It is hence not surprising that Fan invariably referred to himself as the curator of all his museums in interviews and speeches. He indeed personally authored some of the texts and captions, though not all of them, as he occasionally claimed. During my fieldwork, Fan's involvement in the curatorial work took the form of making decisions over matters ranging from architecture, layout and design to the selection of images and exhibits. Curatorial issues were discussed in work meetings in Fan's office. Very different from the formalized staff meetings on Monday evenings, these meetings with curatorial staff were much more practical. I attended many of these work meetings in which Fan would discuss in detail each team member's presentation of their work which then fed into specific instructions he eventually gave them to execute. Such meetings could last from a couple of hours to all morning and afternoon.

Wang regarded Fan's control over curatorial matters as "inevitable." "The point is that Mr. Fan and his employees are not at the same level," he said, "he hires people not to communicate ideas. He hires them to follow his orders and get things done. He gets his ideas from communicating with his friends,

intellectuals, artists and entrepreneurs." On a different occasion, Wang remarked, "there is, and can be, only one true talent (*rencai*) in the museum, and that is Mr. Fan himself." In 2010, after working for the museum for four years, Mr. Wang chose to leave to start his own business. The "decoration and display" department was merged into the "cultural development" department soon afterwards.

While Wang was concerned with his personal career, other curatorial members were frustrated by the workload. In her 2008 annual work report, Ms. Qin, head of the cultural development department, expressed her concern over the time pressures for curatorial work. She wrote, "everything [for an exhibition], the content, the design, the installation, had to be done in a hasty manner. While it is necessary to improve it in the future, the outcome is far from satisfactory right now." I also observed that the selection of material was sometimes hasty, leaving little time to proofread the texts. Some staff members told me privately that they felt that they were being "irresponsible" to the visitors, and the museum was sacrificing quality for profit, in a work style that resembled the Mao era "faster, better and more economical" (*duo kuai hao sheng*) slogan of the Great Leap Forward.⁶

Nevertheless, the company kept on building new museums at high speed, at least two or three every year. Furthermore, in 2010, the museum embarked on its own heritage consultancy business. For the price of two million yuan, the company would provide a package including the overall planning design of a heritage site, visual renderings of museums, detailed exhibition outlines and a loan of collections. Each project would last around two to three months. By 2018, the museum had completed over twenty such planning projects across a range of provinces and cities, contracting with different local governments and authorities. These projects were usually undertaken simultaneously with the preparation for new museums. At times, the curatorial team would work on two or three projects at the same time.

Yet despite the increased amount of work, the museum's curatorial team shrunk. In 2008, there were altogether seven employees in the cultural development department and the decoration and display department. When I started fieldwork in 2015, there were five people in the cultural development department that was already merged with decoration and display, and after one employee left in 2017 there were only four. Head of the cultural development department Qin Hua once made remarks about the increasing workload in a staff meeting. Fan responded that every member's duty was equally important, and it was selfish to claim that some worked more than others. Despite the lucrative museum planning business, Fan pleaded poverty and said explicitly that the museum could not afford to hire any more people, and staff therefore had to be keen to learn and do more.

These managerial changes happened against the backdrop of a tightening political environment. On January 8, 2017, Fan called for a staff meeting immediately after returning from the Sichuan provincial “two sessions” (*lianghui*) in Chengdu.⁷ “This is the first time that it’s been so difficult to communicate [with the government],” was the first thing Fan said as he sat down, with an unusual look of distress and frustration. “It is only going to get worse, and more difficult to ask [the government] for money,” Fan said, and “we all have to work harder” in order to “do as much as possible before the door is completely closed.”

Yet it was one thing to encourage self-development among employees, and quite another to have nonprofessional staff doing curatorial work. Toward the end of my fieldwork in early 2017, a few members from the administration and publicity departments, and two vice directors were involved in exhibition preparation and planning projects. Some might well have argued that this reflected a different attitude toward “expertise,” as Fan began to characterize himself as a “grassroots” (*caogen*) figure in the museum world, and his expertise as “vernacular” (*minjian*) in contrast with the “professional” (*zhuanye*) museums of officialdom. However, in my analysis, this had just as much to do with the nature of the work. Because while the alternative “vernacular” position seemed to suggest a fresh creativity, in fact, the work’s increasingly unprofessional character made it repetitive and mechanical. This could also be evidenced by comparing the first five museums, which were highly professional and undertaken by specialist architects and designers, with the later ones done by the museum team on the basis of the same formula.

This is not to deny that creativity has played a significant role in the museum’s curatorial practice. Creativity remains key to the museum’s appeal, and yet Fan Jianchuan seems to be the only source of it. As demonstrated above, the way Fan works with his team gives little space for his creative initiatives to be taken any further by his employees. Over the recent ten years or so, the team’s role in the museum’s curatorial work has been effectively instrumentalized and the quality of the museum has become dependent on the extent to which Fan is involved.

This has produced a very different understanding of work to the ethos of the JMC’s “creation phase.” The idealist and experimental ethos of the early years was replaced by frustration over the museum’s autocratic and exploitative style of management, voiced not only by the curatorial team, but also by other staff members. This marks a shift in the employees’ self-identification from “museum makers” (*bowuguan jianshezhe*) to “museum workers” (*dagong de*)—the former with an evident sense of pride and ownership, while the latter is a term often associated with migrant and short-term physical labor.

CONCLUSION

In charting a brief organizational history of the Jianchuan Museum, attending to its managerial structure, staffing strategy, and curatorial line of work, it becomes clear that for many if not most of the JMC's employees, the general work ethos underwent a shift from of an idealistic mission of museum building in the early phase of the museum's creation, to a sense of basic wage employment in recent years.

It is striking that over the course of the museum's development, the professionalization of its overall management has been accompanied by a *de-professionalization* of its curatorial work force, even though it is crucial to the museum's production of knowledge. Between Fan's self-identification as "vernacular" and the increasingly repetitive and top-down character of the museum's curatorial operations, there emerges a disjuncture between Fan's moralized discourse of his "self-enslavement" to the museum and the reality of how it works. The purveyor of true history to some is an exploitative capitalist to others. The ways in which this disjuncture is experienced and dealt with by different museum employees open up a significant new dimension in considering the ethics of heritage.

In broader terms, while China's continued heritage boom is giving rise to increasingly diversified articulations about the past, the JMC offers a sobering example of how political and financial pressures can suffocate the creativity out of inspiring projects and replace them with increasingly bureaucratic and managerial constraints responding to a shifting political and economic environment, which has been particularly apparent since 2012. The vicissitudes of labor management at the JMC speak of the moral as well as financial complexity of museum work and the contrasting ways in which heritage value can be formulated under the impact of the increasing tendency in recent years toward the top-down imposition of central policies of museum-building, curatorship and heritage meaning. As my account of the JMC indicates, to understand how this tendency is perceived and negotiated by local heritage initiatives requires critical attention to the often marginalized voices and undertakings from behind the scenes.

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earlier drafts of this chapter. With the exception of Fan Jianchuan, all names are pseudonyms.

NOTES

1. In 1981, the party-state adopted the “Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of our Party since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China” which deemed the ten years of the Cultural Revolution responsible for “the most severe setback and the heaviest losses suffered by the Party, the state and the people since the founding of the People’s Republic.” This has played the role of a “pact of forgetting” for the event, in the sense that only state-sanctioned historical accounts that conform to the official discourse are allowed. Since 2012, the state has tightened its control over public remembrance of the Cultural Revolution. China’s first public memorial of the event, the Taiyuan Cultural Revolution Museum built in 2005 in Shantou by a retired local official, was forced to close in June 2016.

2. Red Guards (*hong weibing*), were the millions of young students who were mobilized by Mao Zedong to combat “revisionist” Party authorities and carry out widespread destruction of “traditional” cultural objects and practices during the height of the Cultural Revolution in the mid-1960s. At the time, this was described as an attack on feudal practices and superstition in order to build a new socialist culture. This destruction was only later described as a destruction of China’s “cultural heritage.”

3. The “sent-down youth” (*zhiqing*), refer to urban young people of high school and university age who participated in the “down to the countryside movement (*xiaxiang*), between 1968 and the late 1970s. At the time, this was described as part of a revolutionary project to enable young urban people to “learn from the peasants.” For a recent analysis of the movement in Shanghai, see Honig and Zhao 2019.

4. This saying is known to be favored by Deng Xiaoping to describe China’s economic approach toward the Reform and Opening-up (*gaige kaifang*) policy that began in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

5. To grow a beard as the evidence of one’s will (*xuxu mingzhi*) is a Chinese tradition. Zhou Enlai, the first premier of the PRC, famously grew a beard during the Resistance War.

6. This phrase comes from the General Line for Socialist Construction—“Go all out, aim high, and build socialism with greater, faster, better and more economical results”—which was suggested by Mao Zedong and officially adopted by the CCP in the Second Session of the Eighth National Party Congress in May 1958.

7. The “two sessions” here refer to the annual Sichuan Provincial People’s Congress session and the Sichuan Provincial Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) session.

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