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# Memories from the Margins

## Remembering China's 'Red Age' in a Minjian Museum

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**ABSTRACT:** This article is engaged with the transmission of Maoist memories in the Jianchuan Museum Complex (JMC) 建川博物馆聚落, one of the country's largest and most high-profile non-state (*minjian* 民间) museum projects. Described as the "Red Age" (*Hongse Niandai* 红色年代), the Maoist period (1949–1976) is one of the four main themes that the Jianchuan Museum Complex commemorates, together with the War of Resistance against Japan (1931–1945), the Wenchuan earthquake (2008), and Chinese folk culture. Through a historicized account of the construction of these museums, this article examines the JMC's rendering of the Maoist period by analyzing the display methods and curatorial rationales in three of the Red Age museums. I show how Fan's curatorial approach changes, increasingly defined by his accommodation of the state's definition of what can be remembered and how.

**KEYWORDS:** China, Cultural Revolution, Jianchuan Museum Complex, material culture, non-state museums, *minjian*

What and how to remember the Maoist period is a contested matter in contemporary China. This article is engaged with the transmission of Maoist memories in the Jianchuan Museum Complex (JMC) 建川博物馆聚落, one of the country's largest and most high-profile non-state (*minjian* 民间) museum projects. Described as the "Red Age" (*Hongse Niandai* 红色年代), the Maoist period (1949–1976) is one of the four main themes that the Jianchuan Museum Complex commemorates, together with the War of Resistance against Japan (1931–1945), the Wenchuan earthquake (2008), and Chinese folk culture. Located in a historic town near the southwestern city of Chengdu, the JMC is a vast compound consisting of over 30 individual museums, with a still expanding collection of over ten million items, reputedly the biggest repository of historical artifacts and documents of twentieth-century Chinese history. The project was launched in 2003 by Fan Jianchuan, a wealthy real estate entrepreneur, collector, and self-fashioned consultant for government-funded heritage projects. In this article, I examine the JMC's rendering of the Maoist period by analyzing the display methods and curatorial rationales in three of the Red Age museums. Through a historicized account of the construction of these museums, I show how Fan's curatorial approach changes, increasingly defined by his accommodation of the state's definition of what can be remembered and how.

### Museums and Social Remembrance in China

The Jianchuan Museum Complex can be situated in the wider context of China's contemporary "museum-scape," particularly in relation to the dynamics between the state and non-state agencies in social remembering. Over the past 15 years or so, China has been undergoing a "museum boom." The number



of museums in China saw a phenomenal increase from around 1,700 in 2007 to over 6,000 in 2022. The majority of these are state-owned institutions for didactic purposes of expressing authorized narratives of history from the ideological mainstream. The state's orchestration of this museum development is also reflected in its ability to mobilize policy, resources, and coercive power against unwanted historical events, particularly of the Maoist period, including the Great Leap Forward campaign (1958–1962) and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

Contrasting with the state-led museum development is the rise of grassroots museums initiated by collectors from the “people's realm,” or *minjian* in Chinese. Taking its meaning from the historical dichotomy of *min* (民), people, and *guan* (官), officials, the notion of *minjian* typically indicates a non-elite social self-positioning with a degree of independence from the state's economic and bureaucratic structure (Veg 2019). The *minjian* museum scene has undergone a notable expansion since the late 2000s, making up over a third of all Chinese museums today. They offer salient alternatives to state-run museums by evincing moral concerns as the fundamental inspiration for museum work. Framed around ordinary people's ideas and emotions in relation to the past, they are able to address some of the subjects that are underacknowledged or suppressed in state-run museums and to redefine museum-making as an efficacious quest for social repair and historical justice.

Meanwhile, given the scale and prevalence of state power in China, *minjian* museums are subject to different forms of government censorship and intervention. The sustainability of these ventures depends greatly upon their ability to simultaneously accommodate and contest the interests of state agencies. Therefore, an understanding of *minjian* museum-making cannot be tied to the received dichotomy between public and private from a Western context. Rather, it suggests a mediating practice that allows very different perspectives and commitments towards history and morality to be negotiated and consolidated.

Therefore, the Chinese contemporary “museumscape” is a contested arena of a plurality of memory-makings, and its degree of multivocality is sustained through constant negotiation between the state and the *minjian*. This is why the JMC's development of its museums dealing with the Red Age marked a groundbreaking departure in China's museum world by addressing some of the politically “sensitive” memories of the Maoist period that are largely marginalized in official museum narratives and historical pedagogy.

## The Red Age on Display

The few decades from the founding of the People's Republic of China, to the beginning of the Economic Reform, is what we call the Red Age. The Red Age is not far from us and its historical pulse extends into people's everyday life today. The Red Age is idealistic, vehement, special, complex, and for ordinary people, it is also plain and simple. The collective life experience of several hundred million people bears a unique significance as a historical specimen. We try to preserve the real memory of that period through real artifacts. The history is like a river, and so is life. We were born, and we lived, and we shall carry on living.

These words above, displayed on the front wall of the Museum of Red Age Everyday Objects, opened in 2007, explain the museum's definition of the Red Age and the curatorial ethos of the museums. First, the historical frame of the museum encompasses the “Cultural Revolution” without explicitly articulating the politically charged term; secondly, it is clearly stated that the emphasis is on representing the “plain and simple” side of the everyday experience during the Maoist period. However, the elements of violence and trauma *were* subtly indicated, as I show in the sections to follow, in a de-contextualized style of presenting objects and information.

The first museum of the Red Age series, the Museum of Red Age Porcelain Artworks (*Hongse Niandai Ciqi Guan* 红色年代瓷器馆), was opened in August 2006. In a space of 696 square meters, it showcases over 4,000 items of porcelain artwork created from the 1950s to the 1970s mainly for propaganda purposes. Fan Jianchuan started developing the Red Age series from this particular subject because his collecting from this period began with porcelain works. Fan calls collectibles from the Maoist period “strange fruits grown on the vines of thousands of years of civilization,” for they “departed from the traditional values, life

experiences and artistic requirements, took a big detour and stopped moving forward” (Fan 2013: 114). The Red Age porcelain objects perfectly illustrate his judgement. In the preface Fan wrote for the museum, he summarizes the three characteristics of the Red Age porcelain as such:

First, they had to serve politics. They were used to propagate policies, annotate revolution, and to put people in the revolutionary atmosphere at any time as much as they could have been. Second, they fit the political environment at that time and reflected current affairs. They were used to inspire people and mask the material deficiency with lofty, optimistic and healthy figures and warm colors. Third, due to the prevalence of the ultra-left ideological trend and the confinement of people’s thoughts, their figures are simple, and subjects are monotonous. Artists and artisans dared not go one step beyond the prescribed limit for fear of violating political law, resulting in the monotony of the subjects of these works, and the loss of traditional content and techniques.

Upon entering the museum, visitors are greeted by a 1.4-meter bust of Mao that sets the tone for its revolutionary atmosphere. Inside, the interior is dominantly red, with revolutionary songs looping in the background and Mao’s quotes and political slogans on the walls and stairs. The 4,000 or so porcelain artifacts on display are organized chronologically into two sections: from 1949 to 1966 and from 1966 to 1976. The exhibits cover a wide range of forms, from statues and decorative items to everyday use objects such as pots, cups, and bowls. Though without much textual narrative of the historical context, the distinct styles and contents of the exhibits reflect some of the key political events of the time of their production, as well as their contemporary cultural and social phenomena. For instance, the first section includes porcelain ornaments made to commemorate the early PRC’s alliance with the Soviet Union, China’s aid to the Korean War in 1950, and political campaigns such as the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962) and agricultural collectivization.

The second section is focused on the Cultural Revolution. A special case is dedicated to a collection of statues of Mao, which present the different images of him in various periods—as a young student, leading the workers’ movement in Anyuan 安源, with the Red Army in Jinggangshan 井冈山, commanding the national liberation war, and meeting with the Red Guards—demonstrating the scale and intensity of the personality cult of Mao.

One notable item in the Cultural Revolution period is the “big-character poster vase.” Big-character posters (*dazibao* 大字报) were handwritten, wall-mounted posters using large-sized Chinese characters, one of the most iconic means of public expression used for propagating Mao Zedong Thought and attacking enemies. This particular vase has a big-character poster imprinted onto it which reads “XXX is obsessed with private interests and lets out ducks to eat public food. Which way should we go?” It is illustrated by a drawing of several young people leading a “struggle session” against a duck because it “stole” public food. The struggle session was really against the duck’s owner, who let his ducks out to eat public food. At the back of the vase is the quote from Mao: “All wrong ideas and poisonous weeds should be criticized and must not be allowed to overflow freely.” Fan again made the historical artifact bear marks of the present, but this time invited a group of his friends—liberal-minded intellectuals and artists—to leave comments on the vase, including “laugh until I cry,” “don’t laugh, this is the reality of our generation,” “I am like this duck,” and “the most solemn farce” (see Figure 1). Here, an item that was designed for propagandist purpose has been turned on its head through artistic re-invention to ridicule its original message. The display of the vase shows how humor and irony can be used to interpret heritage in ways that engage with, reflect on, and overcome difficult pasts (Holtorf 2010).

### **Museum of the Red Age Everyday Objects’**

Following the Porcelain Artwork Museum, the JMC opened another two Red Age museums in 2007: the Museum of Red Age Everyday Objects (*Hongse Niandai Richang Shenghuo Yongpin Guan* 红色年代生活用品馆) and the Museum of Red Age Badges, Clocks, and Seals (*Hongse Niandai Zhang Zhong Yin Guan* 红色年代章钟印馆). The Museum of Red Age Everyday Objects presents the living conditions and experiences during the Red Age, with over 24,000 items of everyday use displayed and several sets of life-sized dioramas depicting the household environments of families of different occupations and



**Figure 1.** The big-letter-poster vase with added comments, Museum of Red Age Porcelain Artwork, Jianchuan Museum Complex. Courtesy of the author.

status. Through a small door at the right side of the white wall, one first enters a tall and narrow corridor, painted red from floor to ceiling, wall to wall (see Figure 2). Walking down the corridor, one steps on red light boxes on the floor marking the years 1966, 1967, 1968, up until 1976, leading towards the other end, where a high screen is installed that shows a repeating 40-second-long video clip of Mao receiving the Red Guards in Tian'anmen Square. The sound of the crowd chanting "sailing seas depends on the great helmsman, carrying forth revolutions depends on Mao Zedong Thought" reverberates through the space.

Through the exit at the end of the corridor, one enters a hall with four sets of life-size dioramas, depicting the household scenes of "workers," "peasants," "soldiers," and "cadres." The sequence reflects the hierarchy of social classes during the Maoist period. Workers constituted the most politically advanced social class of the proletariat under Mao, and therefore the first diorama is a recreation of the "worker's home," a red-brick-walled room with frayed traditional Chinese wooden furniture, where a young and energetic-looking man, dressed in factory workwear, stands with one foot on a stool, lacing up his canvas shoe. Simply decorated with a collection of photos and a few award certificates, the room otherwise contains some clothes, a clay pot, and a sewing machine.



Figure 2. Entrance to the Museum of Red Age Everyday Objects, Jianchuan Museum Complex. Courtesy of the author.

The second diorama shows a peasant family of five sitting around a table, each holding Mao's Little Red Book. The room has typical rural decor, mud walls covered with yellowed newspapers, and a wheelbarrow and some farming implements stored in the corner. On the wall hang a portrait of Mao, a Chinese couplet, and posters of Revolutionary Opera. The third diorama, the "Soldier's Home," shows a young soldier sitting alone in the barracks reading a copy of Mao's Little Red Book, which is modeled on Fan's own dormitory and displays photos of Fan Jianchuan as a soldier (see Figure 3). The "Cadre's Home" depicts a distinctly higher level of material affluence, evidenced by a complete set of the "three rotations, one sound" (*san zhuan yi xiang* 三转一响)—a wristwatch, a bicycle, a sewing machine, and a radio—objects that were greatly desired in the Red Age and considered the mark of a modern life. The tea, cigarettes, and cookie boxes on the table were also luxurious items in the time of heavy food rationing. The "cadre" is a middle-aged man in a navy blue Mao suit, sitting in the comfort of his living room reading a newspaper.

Along the stairs leading down to the next hall, a series of old newspapers on the walls show news of the events from the 1950s to the 1980s. Downstairs, the area is divided into three sections, a long and narrow space that houses another four dioramas: a Red Age clinic, a radio station, a library, and a nursery. The wall around the corner from the dioramas displays copies of 10 different newspapers, the *New Year's Day* editions of the 10 years of the Cultural Revolution, each carrying Mao's portrait on the front page. They reveal a notable change in the size of the Mao portraits, which grew from the 1966 edition to cover the



Figure 3. Diorama of the “Soldier’s Home” in the Museum of Red Age Everyday Objects, with a photo of Fan as a young man in military uniform. Courtesy of the author.

whole page by 1968, 1969, and 1970, when his personality cult was at its height in China, and which then decreased towards the end of the Cultural Revolution.

One then descends a staircase and enters the main hall, where ration tickets, textbooks, pictorials, cookie boxes, wallets, cups, textiles, chopsticks, radios, and so on are on display in vast quantities in large glass showcases. More artifacts from the period are hung on the wall right up to its very high ceiling. These objects, all bearing explicit revolutionary images and/or slogans, were absolute household essentials during the Cultural Revolution and could be found in each and every home. They testify to the degree to which the most intimate and mundane parts of people’s everyday lives were saturated with socialist ideology and Mao’s personality cult. Fan Jianchuan refers to this technique as “warehouse-style exhibiting,” the idea of putting lots of objects of the same type on display, designed to highlight their ubiquitous presence when they were used by ordinary people in the course of their everyday lives (Fan 2016).

At the corner of the staircase leading to the last hall stands an installation which projects scanned pages of hand-written, self-criticism letters and personal files from the Cultural Revolution onto a horizontal screen in the shape of an opened book. The ephemeral appearance of these documents best exemplifies what Denise Ho and Li Jie call Fan Jianchuan’s “guerrilla exhibits” of “sensitive, unapproved materials that take semi-permanent and impermanent forms” (Ho and Li 2016: 31). The power of real objects (*shiwu* 实物) derives from their political sensitivity, and by re-arranging them in the exhibition, the “objects take on new rhetorical powers” (Ho and Li 2016: 31). The number of guerrilla exhibits, objects that speak of sensitive aspects of history, is very limited, however. Despite their highly ephemeral presence, they carry significance as “a counter-narrative” that disturbs and even potentially challenges official historiography. These, too, are a barely hidden reference to the violence of the period.

### Museum of Red Age Badges, Clocks, and Seals

The second Red Age museum that opened in 2007, namely the Museum of Red Age Badges, Clocks, and Seals, which focuses on the three most ubiquitous and significant objects used during the Cultural Revo-

lution, shows over 75,000 exhibits. Mao badges were the most iconic and ubiquitous artifact during the period, and also the most popular items among the collectible Maoist memorabilia over recent decades. The earliest Chairman Mao badges appeared in the 1930s and 1940s. During the Cultural Revolution, billions of Mao badges were manufactured—the number was estimated to be around five billion during the period of most intensive production from 1966 to 1971 (Wang 2008: xi). Wearing Mao badges was one of the most popular expressions of one's loyalty to the great leader and a specific glossary of honorifics were introduced. For instance, producing Mao badges was expressed as “respectfully manufacturing” (*jingzhi* 敬制), wearing was “respectfully wearing” (*jingdai* 敬戴), and to buy Mao badges, one had to use the term *qing* (请), an honorific used in the context of acquiring deity figures. This “badge craze,” the nationwide phenomenon of wearing, collecting, and worshiping the Mao badges, died down towards the end of the Cultural Revolution. In 1980, the central government issued an official call-back for the Mao badges to be recycled, but a great number remained in their owners' hands and, by the late 1980s, became the most circulated Mao memorabilia in China and around the world. The JMC has a collection of over 100,000 badges of around 40,000 different designs.

The first section in the museum presents around 4,800 badges. The majority of these items are displayed in glass cases, organized into different categories according to their content, size, material, and period of production. The badges displayed are accompanied by two visual installations. One is titled “Four Seasons,” and is composed of 10,113 Mao badges arranged into four large portraits of Mao in the “four seasons” of his life, from youth to old age (see Figure 4). In the other installation, Mao badges are arranged to depict an image of Mao holding a “big-character poster,” titled “Bombarding the Headquarters: My first Big Character Poster” (*Paoda silingbu: wode diyi zhang dazibao* 炮打司令部：我的第一张大字报), a short document he wrote on 5 August 1966, during the Eleventh Plenary Session of the Eighth Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, and published in the party's official newspaper, *People's Daily*, a year later, on 5 August 1967. It was believed to be directly targeted at the then-President Liu Shaoqi and



Figure 4. Display of Mao badges (left) and the installation “Four Seasons” made up of Mao badges (right), Museum of Red Age Badges, Jianchuan Museum Complex. Courtesy of the author.

senior leader Deng Xiaoping and marked the beginning of nationwide campaigns after the official launch of the Cultural Revolution on 16 May 1966.

The next section showcases Mao badges made with different materials, the most prodigious being the porcelain badges, introduced by the caption that reads:

At that time, a living person could be beaten to death in public, thousands of years of historical sites could be destroyed instantly, the city could be turned upside down, but one could not accidentally break such a porcelain badge. The owner of the porcelain badge does not even dare to wear it easily, lest it be damaged in “conflict” or inadvertently in daily life. One would always keep it as a rare treasure and only wear metal or plastic ones.

A rare mention of violence and destruction during the Cultural Revolution, this passage owes its appearance in the museum to its tactful avoidance of “sensitive terms.” The violent “struggle sessions” (*wudou* 武斗) were described with the equivocal term “conflict” (*chongtu* 冲突).

Downstairs, the second section showcases hundreds of seals of different “revolutionary committees” (*geming weiyuanhui* 革命委员会) across the country. The Revolutionary Committee, supposedly based on Mao’s idea of the “three-in-one combination” between the Red Guards, the Party, and the army (PLA), was a new form of government designed to break and replace the existing political structures. On 30 March 1967, the *Red Flag Magazine* (*Hongqi* 红旗), a theoretical political journal published by the CCP during the Cultural Revolution, published an editorial stating that “in those places and organizations where power needs to be seized, the policy of the revolutionary ‘three-in-one’ combination must be carried out in establishing a provisional organ of power that is revolutionary and representative and has proletarian authority. This organ of power should preferably be called a revolutionary committee” (Schoenhals 1996: 59). Seals were then an emblem of revolutionary authority, and now became the most direct and powerful evidence of this political innovation during the Cultural Revolution.

The last section of the exhibition starts with a scroll of images in black and white, including propaganda photos, the “big character posters,” and scenes of mass struggle sessions. The scroll leads to a narrow winding corridor, where 448 ticking clocks are displayed on both sides of the wall. Clocks were a symbol of affluence and decency in Maoist China, as only those of higher social status—cadres, for instance—could afford them, as shown in the diorama in the Museum of Red Age Everyday Objects. Red Age clocks were also endowed with the function of propaganda, as their design bears explicit ideological imprints such as slogans and revolutionary imagery. And now, as Fan wrote in the introduction to this section, “the clocks displayed here become bells of warning. Time flows forward but the alarm bell keeps ringing.”

With the reverberating sound of the clocks ticking, one enters suddenly into the last hall, named “Echoes of History,” an un-ceilinged cylindrical space with a standing microphone at the center. The photo scroll continues to go around the wall. The floor of this hall is paved with enlarged steel replicas of Cultural Revolution seal marks, and visitors are reminded by guides that they are treading on what used to be the most powerful revolutionary symbol. The gesture is provocative, but is only brought to visitors’ attention through the words of the guides.

As we have seen in the previous Red Age museums, Fan was able to slip unsanctioned and “sensitive” objects—what Ho and Li call “guerrilla exhibits”—into the exhibitions, as a way of provoking the audience’s thoughts. The Badges, Seals, and Clocks Museum is no exception. In 2013, Fan added 11 documents to the exhibition, including Premier Zhou Enlai’s speech on the struggle session against the then-Foreign Minister of China, Chen Yi; the records of the investigation against the then-President of the People’s Republic, Liu Shaoqi and his wife, Wang Guangmei; a speech given by Kang Sheng, member of the CCP Politburo of Standing Committee and the key ally to the Gang of Four, on the violent struggle sessions in Yunnan; and a news report on two deaths during violent struggle sessions in the city of Yibin, Fan’s hometown. These documents testify to the scale and intensity of violence and cruelty in political struggles of the Cultural Revolution from the very top of the Party leadership, to towns and cities across the country. However, shortly before 16 May 2016, with the approaching fiftieth anniversary of the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, Fan had these items taken out and replaced by old textbooks.



## Contested Objects, Marginalized Memories

Fan once told me in an interview that the aim of Red Age museums was to restore memories of the collective experience of everyday life in that period, which were soon thrown into oblivion after the death of Mao Zedong by organized destruction of the material remains of the Cultural Revolution. Fan describes his personal experience of the Cultural Revolution as characterized by “poverty, oppression, and chaos,” and remembers the strong and widely-shared negation and criticism of the Cultural Revolution in its immediate aftermath, which led to a movement of vehement destruction of its remnants (Fan 2013: 145). The purpose was to forget “personal traumas and unethical conduct” through the erasure of material things (Fan 2013: 145).

However, a substantial change in the symbolic status of the Maoist object took place around the late 1990s as they became collectibles, commodities, and gifts, gaining new values and meanings. In her study of Cultural Revolution posters, Harriet Evans points out the “ambiguity of address” in the renewed appeal of material remnants of the Maoist Era (Evans 2016: 90). She argues that “the enduring appeal of Cultural Revolution posters for diverse audiences across place and time lies in their ambiguities in a visual hierarchy that not uncommonly subordinated Mao’s figurative and symbolic status to other themes and interests,” and “their ambiguities lie not only in their viewers’ reception but also in their different registers of address, both then and now” (ibid. 2016: 90). The changing status of Maoist material culture from “totemic objects of veneration and emblems of social collectivity,” to tradeable commodities with a price, and then museum exhibits, reflects the complexity and ambiguity that they carry, which defies any overall narrative (Hubbert 2006: 146). They fit what anthropologist Graeme Were calls “difficult objects” that reject conventional definitions of collectibles through posing “political and ethical challenges” (Were 2019: 4). By relating themselves to these objects, assembling and mobilizing them in the public domain, the collector must deal with the challenges in the relationship that is “not only ownership of a commodity form but also of a history and a way of attending to that history, providing the owners of the objects a rhetoric with which to express and, indeed, create meaningful subjectivities” (Hubbert 2006: 146).

As the above accounts indicate, the Red Age museums in the JMC were all themed around different categories of objects and their most distinctive curatorial feature is the heavy reliance on the materiality of the exhibits, and the very restricted amount of text. The detachment from narrative can be seen as the reactive approach deployed when the museums’ “propositional knowledge” cannot be made explicit. This certainly has to do with the politics of the museum, in the context of the pressure from potential state intervention and the subsequent adoption of self-censorship. The museums’ impact on the audience, therefore, had to be realized in a different way.

Fan believes that real objects can provide a type of “close-up” view of history and convey vivid and affective experiences of the past (Fan 2013: 238). Rather than telling the audience about the ubiquity of Maoist ideology, Fan wants them to *feel* physically surrounded by the exhibits, which are themselves the evidence of the excessive indoctrination, personality cult, and political tumult of their time. By minimizing narrative, the Red Age museums purposefully harness spaces for ambiguity, letting viewers develop their own responses instead of imposing judgments. A 2018 article in *The Economist* admires Fan’s curatorial savviness, calling his museums institutions “that show, rather than tell” (*The Economist* 2018). This remark captures the significance of materiality in the JMC, which fits the overall curatorial strategy, epitomized in the signs placed throughout the museums that read “We don’t speak. Let the object speak.” The question is, then, how do these objects speak, if not through the words and narratives on labels and signage?

It seems to me that the effective force of the materiality is brought out not only in the sheer quantity of the objects on display, but in the ways in which the exhibits align with the overall spatial and sensory design—both visual and acoustic—of the museums. The exhibition spaces are saturated with symbols, images, and objects, and the visual intensity generated by the vastness of the space and density of displays contrasts with a contextual void, which Sally Price calls the “silences” of museums, the untold parts of the story muted due to their political sensitivities (Price 2008).

Despite the richness of symbols, artifacts, imagery, and audiovisual elements, the absence of any contextual information about the scale and intensity of this profound political upheaval—which turned China’s

towns and cities into a lawless, chaotic state where “local leaders were paraded through the streets in dunce hats by youthful Red Guards who drew their inspiration from Mao’s electrifying injunction—to rebel is justified” (MacFarquhar in Wu 2013: 200)—constitutes an overwhelming “silence” in the JMC Red Age museums. For many, particularly those with personal experience of or general interest in that history, the silence is obvious, yet understandable and quite likely even assumed. For some, this conspicuous, glaring absence of historical accounts, this obvious “elephant in the room,” is perhaps the most significant and poignant message in the Red Age museums, especially when it is hinted at by the presence of “guerrilla exhibits” and Fan’s curatorial gestures, for instance, the saturation of the red color in the entrance corridor of the Red Age Everyday Objects Museum, or the more subtle ones, such as placing the Mao bust at a slight angle at the entrance to the porcelain museum, implying a slight deviation in the Great Helmsman’s leadership.

And yet, the “silence” and these evocative gestures would hardly be intelligible to viewers without considerable knowledge of that history, which poses a great curatorial challenge and raises a crucial concern over the museum’s role of communication and interpretation. This was evident from the comments on the Red Age museums in the visitor books, which were collected regularly and read carefully by museum staff and some by Fan himself. Shortly after the Museum of Red Age Badges, Seals, and Clocks opened, some visitor remarks suggested that some of them were getting the “wrong idea” about the museum, taking it as a celebration of the Maoist Era and Mao’s personality cult. It was for this reason that Fan had the photo scroll added to the last section of the exhibition, but that did not completely solve the problem. During my fieldwork in 2015 and 2016 there were still visitor comments like the following being picked out by staff and reported to Fan: “the tone of this museum affirms the ideology of the Cultural Revolution” and “I hope that the exhibition can show more of the side of the violence and persecution during the Cultural Revolution.” Such direct criticism, however, does not dominate the visitors’ professed views. If we follow Carol Duncan (1995), who famously foregrounded the idea of treating museums as scripts that direct viewers’ behavior and response, we would understand the Resistance War museums as unequivocally emotional and provocative, while the limited narratives in the Red Age museums show a high degree of curatorial restraint and self-discipline, which is accordingly reflected in the visitors’ responses.

Most of the visitors I accompanied to the Red Age museums were restrained about their feelings. Xia Jifang, the former JMC publicity chief shares this impression:

The guests that I accompanied were mostly intellectuals and media professionals. They were reserved in their articulation of emotion and cautious so as to avoid superficial criticism of certain individuals. Therefore, even though they had opinions, it would not be necessary for them to express them. (Xia 2016)

For his part, Xia believes that violent and emotional forms of expression are themselves remnants from the Cultural Revolution. He told me that “these [emotions] are not necessary if one tries to pursue an objective representation of history. It still needs time” (Xia 2016). What Xia said about withholding emotions resonates with Fan Jianchuan’s own view on building a “Cultural Revolution museum,” which I find articulated most clearly in his 2013 autobiography:

The Cultural Revolution is a movement that involved hundreds of millions of people in this country. Although it has been over 30 years since it ended, to seriously sum up this special history would involve a huge deal of effort and can only be left for future generations to study in depth. As for now, we should try our best to keep the objects that bear witness for future generations. The time is not yet ripe to set up a museum that reflects the Cultural Revolution in all its aspects, but the reason and historical data for setting up a museum about arts and daily life during the Cultural Revolution, or the socialist period are sufficient. Therefore, I took the lead in a not-so-radical way, to show that the people have begun to face up to and record this history. (Fan 2013: 305)

Fan’s attitude towards building a Cultural Revolution museum is quite straightforward—the time is not ripe. This view was expressed in 2013 after his repeated but eventually unsuccessful attempt to build a museum about the 10 years of the Cultural Revolution. Instead of the political context, which he does not

comment on in the book, he gives another, seemingly simple reason, that the perpetrators of violence are still around. Here, Fan's charismatic authority or entitlement is again discernible in the way he identifies with "the people." By stressing the scale of the Red Age history's impact, Fan seems to be arguing that museums can only be made available for the individual pursuit of justice and reconciliation with that history when the whole of the people are ready for it. To preserve abundant material, but show only the portion that is allowed, may best describe Fan's approach to the Red Age in general.

The representation of the Red Age raises a salient question about the relationship between museums and historical truths, which occupies a central position in the self-professed moral mission of the JMC. Fan claims that museums are his way of "ringing the alarm bell for the nation," stressing "neutrality and objectivity" as key principles of his historiography (Fan 2016). This is achieved in the Red Age museums by displaying "real" and "authentic" artifacts (*shiwu* 实物); but does that mean that authenticity is sufficient for "historical truth"? The idea of authenticity is not unproblematic in the first place. Tony Bennett famously argues in *The Birth of the Museum*: "No matter how strong the illusion to the contrary, the museum visitor is never in a relation of direct, unmediated contact with the 'reality of the artefact' and, hence with the 'real stuff' of the past. Indeed, this illusion, this fetishism of the past, is itself an effect of discourse" (Bennett 1995: 146).

Then how should we understand Fan's idea of "neutrality and objectivity" in material things, in a context where providing a narrative of the basic facts about the Mao era and especially the Cultural Revolution is itself a daunting task? Writing on history-making in socialist Mongolia, Caroline Humphrey develops the idea of the "evocative transcript," a text "ambiguous by design" that is "intended to elicit or evoke a particular interpretation beyond the surface meaning" (Humphrey 1994: 23). She points out the limited applicability of an oppositional model in understanding the dominance-resistance relation in societies under state socialism, such as Mongolia under the Soviet Union, and, I would add, today's China. "Evocative transcripts," Humphrey argues, work instead as a channel of alternative knowledge in these societies with strong state control. Unlike unapproved private memories, they rely on superficial conformity to the authorized discourses that allow them to be publicly circulated, while carrying an implicit and coded evocation of values alternative to the state ideology (Humphrey 1994).

It could be argued that Fan's Red Age museums share this quality of evocative transcripts. His museums evoke what Foucault termed "subjugated knowledges," referring to the memories and forms of remembering marginalized and subdued by a dominant official discourse. Recognizing and evoking these memories and experiences means producing "insurrections of subjugated knowledges" (Foucault 1980: 81), which carry a critical force. The potential of criticality and emancipation derives from bringing alternative perspectives to the established frameworks of historical understanding. However, it would be simplistic to label Fan Jianchuan as critical or subversive on the basis that his museums showcase the history of the Mao era and the Cultural Revolution. Their critical function lies in Fan's way of addressing these sensitive pasts through material and visual objects, which opens up new possibilities of understanding as a kind of resistance.

## Concluding Remarks

In the conclusion of his recent article on the JMC, Kirk Denton laments that "in the present political climate in China, Fan cannot create the kind of museum that Ba Jin envisioned, one that would not only display the broad history of this traumatic period of China's past, but that would directly and explicitly address issues of moral responsibility" (Denton 2019: 105). However, I find it limiting to regard the JMC's Red Age museums as a castrated version of what could have been Ba Jin's Museum of the Cultural Revolution, because this again would presuppose that a "private" museum of the Cultural Revolution *should* present a critical account of the event, and be in other words the material manifestation of resistance to the state-enforced obliteration.

Fan did not build museums *against* the state, but ones that were *for* the people. The Red Age museums are designed to conjure memories or evoke emotions and sentiments that vary according to different

viewers. While the JMC could not exempt itself from the practice of state control, it at least managed to open up a space for expression, commemoration, and negotiation. The decision to minimize historical context was not purely the result of state prohibition; it reflected, at least partially, Fan's idea of how the history of the Mao era and the Cultural Revolution should be passed on. His museum was not "silenced" by coercive forces but by an internalized awareness of "self-discipline," a complicity with the broader "silence," so that he chose to keep quiet.

While there are other forms of remembrance that are contentious in terms of the official ideology that operates or tries to operate away from the control of the authorities, the JMC demonstrates that alternative or even counter narratives of history happen, if anywhere, within the state political structure. They are internalized, to the extent that they share some of the authorized discursive frameworks such as patriotism and national identity. The Red Age museums, in particular, represent a new role of the museum in history-making, with a unique museological language conditioned by its political context. They show how memories such as those of the Cultural Revolution might be presented and conveyed even under conditions of centralized state power.

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