

Zeitschrift: Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft

Band: 58 (2004)

Heft: 4

Artikel: Reconfiguring the political role of museums in post-communist China : the case of Shanghai

Autor: Varutti, Marzia

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-147665>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 25.03.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

RECONFIGURING THE POLITICAL ROLE OF MUSEUMS IN POST-COMMUNIST CHINA: THE CASE OF SHANGHAI

Marzia Varutti, Graduate Institute of Development Studies, Geneva

Introduction

This paper addresses the changing political role of Chinese museums within the framework of the current process of ideological, social and economic transition in act in the country. The museum proves to be a privileged point of observation of the processes of political and social change. It encompasses the social, political, economic and artistic spheres, and is at the same time a vehicle of tradition (to the extent it preserves the historical memory as well as the cultural and artistic heritage) and a symbol of modernity, showcase – often bearing the form of futuristic and innovative architectures – of the achievements of a civilisation.

Over the last decade, China has been witnessing a considerable increase in the number of its museums, the phenomenon being notably marked in Shanghai and Beijing. In China there are today approximately 2,000 museums, but the objective of the State Administration of Cultural Heritage – a governmental body based in Beijing – is to reach 3,000 museums by the year 2015, including “at least one fully-functional museum for every large or medium-sized city”.¹

Left in the shadow during the years of Deng’s reforms, museums seem to have regained the authorities’ attention and are today the focus of an increasing interest. The case of Shanghai is illuminating on this point. The government of Shanghai has in fact announced² the creation of numerous new museums in the coming years, so as to reach the number of one hundred museums by 2005.³ Furthermore, the municipality of Shanghai has recently adopted a plan that will

1 See the article “China to Have 3,000 Museums by 2015”, in *The People’s Daily*, 20th December 2002, available on the web page:

http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200212/20/eng20021220_108815.shtml.

2 See the web site: <http://www.sach.gov.cn/>.

3 Currently, the city counts 64 museums.

supply all twenty city districts with a “public culture centre” composed of a library, a cinema, a youth centre and a museum.⁴ Considering such a growing concern for culture in general, and for museums in particular, a few questions arise. Why does the government of Shanghai attach such an importance to museums? And more in general, why have museums suddenly become so important in China? What are the purposes of the current public endeavour in the museum field?

In attempting to answer these questions, I will first introduce the political function of the museum as well as its role within the framework of the economic and social transition in act in China, and more in particular in Shanghai. The focus will then shift to the link between politics and museums in China; I will notably try to elucidate the terms of such a relation through examples referring to Shanghai. The data collected on the museum system in Shanghai represent a first, inevitably partial, platform for an initial set of considerations, which are put forward in the conclusive part of this paper. Such considerations, far from answering the research questions, represent, in their turn, a phase in the process of verification/invalidation of hypotheses that will eventually lead me to a more satisfying explanation of the research object.

1. Museums as a mirror of political, economic and social change. Introducing the Shanghai case study

The political dimension of the museum appears to be entangled in all its other functions. As a social institution, the museum plays a series of crucial roles: education, conservation of artistic treasures, preservation of historic memory, and leisure, among others. In the implementation of these functions, a philosophy, a system of values, a political stance are conveyed into a process of interpretation of reality that results, through museum policies, in a given representation. These dynamics belong to the political sphere to the extent museum representations can affect the public’s perceptions and opinions.

The origins of the nation, its historical continuity and its defining features such as language, religion and traditions are all displayed in the museum in the same way as in a theatrical representation. What should not be forgotten, though,

4 Interview with Prof. Hua, Professor of Chinese literature at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences and consultative expert for the policy-making at the Shanghai municipal government.

is that such a representation is the result of a specific reading, a specific understanding of the nation that is dictated by a given political posture. Under this perspective, the museum appears to be a plastic space: its shape, content and message can be easily oriented by political will; hence the museum embodies and mirrors the processes of political and social change. In China, the pace of such processes is so high that one constantly needs new tools to analyse and decrypt them. Notably, the study of the museum appears to be of particular interest in the city of Shanghai, historically the most extroverted, cosmopolitan, wealthy and “modern” among Chinese cities.

Since the beginning of the 1990’s Shanghai’s economy has been booming: double figures growth rate, a flourishing local economy reflected and enhanced by the city’s extension to the Pudong area, increasing flux of foreign capitals, progressive growth of the tertiary sector ... This has led to important social changes among which the development of a wealthy class mainly linked to commercial, industrial and financial activities. Besides, the average annual income of a Shanghainese is one of the highest in the country⁵, although social disparities are increasing. In addition to economic and social changes, the metamorphosis of the city has overall a visual dimension. The skyline is changing at incredible speed, leading to the irreversible disappearance of older neighbourhoods, whilst the urban fabric is developing into a closely-knit network of shining skyscrapers of all shapes. Their vertiginous height and peculiar, spectacular architecture have become one of the main attractions of the city.

These features mark Shanghai uniqueness among Chinese cities. Indeed, one could even think that this is probably the least “Chinese” among Chinese cities and yet *it is* Chinese. As Marie-Claire Bergère puts it, Shanghai is “another China”.⁶ Having been exposed, as no other Chinese city, to Western ideas, philosophy, literature, artistic movements and lifestyle, Shanghai has always exerted a strong attraction, especially among young Chinese. It is probably not exaggerated to say that Shanghai’s modernity, artistic avant-garde and glamorous lifestyle embody the new “Chinese dream”. Not surprisingly, Shanghainese society has been described as the prototype of the modern Chinese society.

In line with its aspirations, Shanghai hosts a museum – the Shanghai Museum – that is considered one of the most beautiful temples of Chinese art in the world. Indeed, the city has become the hottest spot in the country as far as

5 Second only to the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone.

6 From the title of one of Bergère’s articles, “Shanghai ou l’autre Chine”, in *Les Annales : Economies-Sociétés-Civilisations*, sept–oct. 1979.

the museum scene is concerned, as a consequence of the success of the Shanghai Museum. Its architectural forms not only have become one of the symbols of the city, but also the symbol of a “new” China: a modern country conscious of the value of its fabulous artistic, cultural and historical heritage and perfectly able to make the most of it (culturally, but also economically speaking).

2. Outline of the relation between politics and museums in China

The recent renewal of interest in the museum is not foreign to the legitimacy crisis that has been challenging the ideological basis of the Chinese government since the end of the 1980's.

The reforms introduced by Deng Xiaoping – basically the dismantlement of the Maoist system based on collectivism and fixed prices – did not prevent the progressive loss of faith in the values of the Communist Party. Such disenchantment was further deepened by the collapse of the Soviet system and the dramatic repressions of Tiananmen in 1989. As a result, since the beginning of the 1990's, the Communist Party has been facing a new challenge: finding new sources of legitimacy to insure its own endurance. Definitely having put aside the dreams of social transformation, the Communist Party is today struggling for its survival and the perpetuation of the *statu quo*.

Deprived of the Communist reference, the Chinese government is compelled to “reinvent” its ideology: if the form retains the socialist features, the content is getting increasingly nationalistic. Chinese cultural nationalism is essentially based on the reinterpretation of Chinese history and on the renewal of the identity discourse. In a nutshell, one could say the Chinese government is trying to inscribe its legitimacy in the imperial tradition, claiming a historically uninterrupted link to that source of authority, while at the same time fostering an interpretation of the past that stresses the achievements of the most refined expressions of the Chinese civilization. Museums and museum policies appear to be among the major tools of implementation of such a political strategy. Tamara Hamlish succeeds in synthesizing with remarkable clarity the relation between the State and the museums in China: “The institution of the museum legitimises the State's appropriation of the luxurious accoutrements of imperial power, while the appropriation of these accoutrements legitimises the political authority

of the State.”⁷ It is not surprising then, that in October 2000 the Chinese Minister of Culture, M. Sun Jiazheng, synthesised the major tasks of museums as follows: “The museums should promote scientific knowledge and the nation’s long history while resisting the decadence of feudalism and capitalism [...] museums should intensify efforts to popularise patriotism and socialism.”⁸ Although from my own observations, many Chinese museums appear to align with such a statement, it should not be neglected that the framework in which museums operate is far from static. With no doubt, political changes are much less visible than economic ones, but their impact on the museum system is at least as deep.

One of the major political changes of the last years has occurred on September 19th 2004, when the 78-years-old Jiang Zeming withdrew from his post of Director of the Military Affairs to the benefit of president Hu Jintao. Being in charge of the three crucial State functions (State president, head of the Communist Party and head of the army) Hu Jintao can now be considered the new true leader of China. His mild efforts to open up the system and improve the image of the government – “tolerant” attitude towards the media, open condemnation of the corruption of the Party, reduction of some luxury expenses of Communist leaders etc. – brought many observers to think he might be able to lead, or at least initiate, the transition process from an authoritarian to a democratic system. Although it is impossible to foresee the dimensions, the speed and the effects of the eventual political reform, it seems legitimate to think that the September 19th succession has triggered a transition that will eventually have a crucial impact on the structure of political priorities, hence on the configuration of the museum system.

3. An overview of the museum system in Shanghai

In the attempt to sketch a general profile of the museum system in Shanghai, I will focus on museum typologies and their major common characteristics.

From the point of view of their status (and thus of their financing sources) one can distinguish among different museum categories. Most of Shanghai museums are State owned, i.e. under direct control of a State administration (central

7 Hamlish, Tamara, “Re-membering the Chinese Imperial Collections”, in Crane, Susan, ed., *Museums and Memory*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2000, p.155.

8 Article available on the web page: <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2000/Oct/2720.htm>.

municipality or district). Alternatively, the State financial support and intervention can be mediated by State owned institutions, namely industrial associations. This is the case for instance of the textile association, which runs the Textile Industry Museum, or of the State owned tobacco companies, which promoted the creation of the Tobacco Museum. A different category includes museums that have the status of non-governmental organizations. This is the case of a series of small folk art museums in the South-West of Shanghai run by associations of local artists. Quite an interesting kind of museum is represented by the “community-museum”⁹, a hybrid category that stands half way between a public and a non-governmental museum. In this case, the museum creation and management are the result of a strict collaboration between local community and local government administration (which insures financial support). The most famous example of such a kind of museums is the Duo Lung Road. This is a pedestrian (and quite touristy) road in northern Shanghai. The area is rich in preserved ancient buildings, among which the ancient residences of political leaders, writers and artists. This street and its “ancient-looking” buildings, in part restored in part wholly rebuilt, have been transformed into a sort of open-air museum. Despite the patently tourist approach behind such an initiative, one cannot deny that the whole community living around this street has found new lustre and vitality around its Duo Lung core.

Another category of museums that has been spreading very quickly in the last decade or so, is represented by private museums. In many cases, these are created by industrials wishing to devote a museum to the object of their business activities. One can find in Shanghai museums dedicated to pens, water pots, maps, or even chopsticks. The lack of educational purposes (the captions are extremely basic) and the characteristics of the layouts (aimed more at entertaining and astonishing, rather than informing the visitor) suggest that these museums are mainly meant to complement business activities with a “cultural” side, doomed to act as a marketing tool. The basic idea is that the museum is a “cultural attraction” that contributes to elevate the public image of the business activities (and of the businessman himself) testifying to a cultural concern. Moreover, considering that museums are also a locus of socialisation, they represent (especially for commercial and financial elites) both an opportunity to establish and nourish social relationships and a public space to show off and assert a given social position.

9 Interview with Professor Hua, 24 February 2004.

Looking at the panorama of museums in town, one is struck by the recent booming of a specific category of museums: industrial museums.¹⁰ In 2002, the Shanghai Tourism Administrative Committee announced the creation of several new museums devoted to cars, musical instruments and handicrafts, the bank system and the dairy industry. In the words of the Committee spokesperson “these specialized museums, intended to introduce the industries to the public, are expected to become tourist attractions in the coming years.”¹¹ There seems to be no doubt then that behind this kind of initiatives there is an overt aim to strengthen the city’s tourist power of attraction. But which are the consequences of such a turn towards this specific category of museums? The following paragraph attempts to give an answer to this question.

4. Museums in transition: trends of development of museums in Shanghai

Discussing the development path of Shanghai museums over the last decade, Professor Lu Jiansong stressed the existence of two complementary trends.¹² The first pertains to the source of financing of museums. Until a decade ago, the government was the only actor authorised, interested and capable to supply this institution with financial support. Such a situation has changed in the early 1990’s, with the appearance of museums financed indirectly by the State through State-owned enterprises. The second change involves a shift of interest from museums of essentially historic and artistic nature to museums that are linked to industrial or service activities (the Silk Museum, the Bank Museum, the Public Security Museum ...). As a result, industrial museums are gaining an increasing importance in the framework of the Shanghai museum network. Bearing in mind these development trends, the observation of the museum system in Shanghai suggests a few considerations.

First, the link between politics and museology appears to be structured as a hierarchical relation where politics plays the strongest part, rather than as a constructive and collaborative dialog. To clarify, the Shanghai municipal govern-

10 Here, the expression “industrial museum” stands for a museum whose exhibits and financial sources are unequivocally linked to a given industrial or service activity.

11 Article appeared on the *China Daily*, August 7, 2002, available on the web page: <http://www.china.org.cn/english/China/38880.htm>.

12 Personal communication, March 2004.

ment, namely the Cultural Relics and Museum department, supervises directly four museums: the Shanghai Museum, the Shanghai History Museum, the Lu Xun Memorial Hall¹³ and the Site of the First Congress of the Chinese Communist Party. The decisions pertaining to the museological domain (such as the choices concerning exhibits and layout) are taken by politicians (the municipal officers), on the basis of political interests, while museum professionals (curators and museologists) are relegated to the role of mere consultants.

Second, after the huge investments (estimated between 70 and 100 million dollars¹⁴) for the creation of the new Shanghai Museum in 1996, the Shanghai municipality is no longer willing to put much more money into museums. The case of the Shanghai Museum of Natural History elucidates this point. One of the largest of its kind in China, as well as one of the oldest (it was created on the basis of the material collected by a French Jesuit missionary in the 1870's) the Museum of Natural History hosts a large quantity of natural specimens (around 240,000) among which some of very high scientific value.¹⁵ Despite its undeniable scientific and educational importance, the museum is left in a deplorable condition. From the exterior, an elevated highway (that almost touches the windows of the second floor) hides the Western-style architecture of the building, leaving the museum in a sad and metaphorically meaningful shadow. Inside, the specimens are exhibited in old and dusty showcases, and more significantly, the exhibition content and organisation reveal quite an obsolete museologic approach. The museum introductory panels confirm that the last revision of the exhibits dates back to 1975.

The difficulties experienced by the Shanghai History Museum further testify to the public administration's lack of interest in some museums. The Shanghai History Museum is currently deprived of a proper location; for the last couple of years the municipality has repeatedly claimed to be searching for an appropriate

13 Considered the father of modern Chinese literature, Lu Xun (1881–1936) fostered the modernisation of China, whilst rejecting the traditional (“feudal”) and Confucian social system. Although he never formally joined the Chinese Communist Party, he is considered a revolutionary hero for his intellectual and factual support to revolutionary activities.

14 These figures are cited respectively in Kaufman, Jason E., “A glittering new museum for China (Shanghai),” in *The Art Newspaper*, October 1996, p. 8, and Leland, John and Anna Esaki-Smith, “The Rebirth of Shanghai”, in *Newsweek*, June 29, 1998.

15 In August 2000, a group of scientists from Britain, Germany and Australia “discovered” a rare kind of mammal bones, until then unknown, among the specimen collected by the French Jesuit missionary, Pierre Marie Heude, who initiated the museum collections. As reported by http://info.anu.edu.au/mac/Media/Media_Releases/_2000/grovesbones.html at the Australian National University.

site for the new building. In the meantime, the museum is (under-)represented by an exhibition mainly composed of wax figures and a few historical documents about the history of Shanghai. Quite interestingly, such an exhibition is located in the rented basement of the Oriental Pearl TV Tower. The museum curators overtly take their distance from such an exhibition, which they associate with a “commercial exhibition” mainly meant to entertain and generate profit, and the fruit of personal connections between municipal officers and the Oriental Pearl managers.¹⁶

Third, whilst neglecting to insure good conditions for important institutions such as the Shanghai Natural History and History museums, the government of Shanghai has been promoting the creation of several new “industrial museums”. These latter do not request direct financing from the municipality as they are supported by the industries they represent, which take charge of their financing, physical creation, and management. The advantages are two-fold. On the one hand, the local government keeps a light budget while increasing the number of museums in town. From the point of view of local political authorities, a large number of museums improves the image of Shanghai in terms of increasing its tourist attraction, cultural interest and modern appeal. No matter the quality of the exhibitions, the attitude of the municipality towards museums appears to be inspired by the principle “the more, the better”. On the other hand, the industrial sectors welcome the creation of museums presenting their own activities, since it allows them to acquire prestige (inscribing the contribution of their industrial activity into the larger framework of Chinese modernisation) and new visibility (being able to use the museum language to reach a new public and new potential customers).

As a result, new actors lacking museum professional expertise – State owned industrial associations and corporations close to government spheres as in the case of the Oriental Pearl TV – are gaining a crucial importance in the museum system of Shanghai. The layout of several of such “industrial museums” suggests the idea that rather than aiming at informing, they tend to entertain the visitor, bringing to the fore an understanding of the museum as a marketing tool.

16 Professor Qian Zonghao, director of the research department, Shanghai History Museum and associate professor at the Tongji University, Shanghai. Personal communication, August 2004.

Closing remarks

Looking at the evolution of museums in Shanghai over the last years, the tendency that appears to be taking shape is a progressive disengagement of the State from fulfilling some of the main museums' tasks, like preservation of cultural heritage and education among the others. Until a few decades ago, Chinese museums were all State-run and the museum initiative was considered an absolute right of the public sector. Now on the contrary, it seems that the State is abandoning its exclusive prerogatives by letting new actors enter the museum scene, and, most importantly, by adapting museum priorities and purposes to privilege economic and strategic logics aimed at attracting more capital and more tourists to the city, as well as improving the city's cultural profile.

The changes that are affecting the museum system in Shanghai – namely the shift from a “propaganda” museum to industrial, commercial, tourist, and “prestige” museum – whilst reflecting the political plans of the local government to enhance the city's appeal, confirm that, in the same way as the Shanghainese society and economy, the museum is experiencing a phase of transition. Chinese museums seem to be looking for a new way to approach their public, a new language and a new mission that will eventually translate the Chinese idea of modernity. In such a search, once again, the West is a source of inspiration. Asked about the future of museums in China, the museum professionals I have met hastened to stress that, while modernising, Chinese museums must retain their own character, i.e. the “Chinese socialist” character. What “modernity” and “Chinese socialist” character mean in terms of today's Chinese museology, appears to be at least as difficult to define as to guess what the museum transition will lead to. Whatever development path Chinese museums will chose, it seems of pivotal importance that they continue to assert and defend their basic functions: education, preservation of historic memory, conservation of artistic and cultural heritage. Otherwise, there is a risk of depriving this institution of its very *raison d'être*, to turn it into an empty tool at the sheer service of economic and political interests. That would be a major insult to the sublime artistic and cultural refinement of the five-thousand-years-long Chinese civilisation.

Selected Bibliography

BERGÈRE, Marie-Claire

2002 *Histoire de Shanghai*, Fayard, Paris.

CRANE, Susan, (ed.)

2000 *Museums and Memory*, Stanford University Press.

DITTMER, Lowell, Samuel S. Kim (eds)

1993 *China's Quest for National Identity*, Cornell University Press, London.

DOMINGUEZ, Virginia R., David Y.H. Wu (eds)

1998 *From Beijing to Port Moresby: The Politics of National Identity in Cultural Policies*, Gordon and Breach Publications, Amsterdam.

DUARA, Prasenjit

1995 *Rescuing History from the Nation. Questioning Narratives of Modern China*, Chicago.

KAPLAN, Flora E.S.

1996 *Museums and the Making of "Ourselves": The Role of Objects in National Identity*, Leicester University Press, London.

KARP, Ivan and MULLEN DREAMER, Christine

1991 *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington.

YEUNG, Y.M. and SUNG, Yun-Wing, (eds)

1996 *Shanghai. Transformation and Modernization under China's Open Door Policy*, The Chinese University Press, Hong Kong.

ZHANG, Liang

2004 *La naissance du concept de patrimoine en Chine. XIXe–XXe siècles*, Éditions Recherches, Paris, 2004.

