

Kirk A. Denton:

Museums, Memorial Sites and Exhibitionary Culture in the People's Republic of China

Source: The China Quarterly, No. 183, Culture in the Contemporary PRC (Sep., 2005), pp. 565-586

Published by: Cambridge University Press on behalf of the School of Oriental and African Studies

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20192509> Accessed: 07-04-2020 01:07 UTC

When I first read this book, I was sceptical on some points brought up by the author, therefore, I chose to review this book to get a better understanding on his views and see if my own views change. I believe Denton gives some valid points and I would like to highlight on these as well as what I disagree with.

The author of this book concentrates on describing recent trends of a museum's development in China and asks how museums are made relevant to a radically changing society. Denton firstly tells us that China hardly considers museums and exhibitions as part of their scope of influence. The PRC had adopted the European way of making an exhibitionary complex. Therefore, shows that China's heritage before the mid 1900's was primarily based on ancient skill such as painting, writing poetry, forms of combat etc. As the author states, it's a "New form of memory that compete with those of older more established national museums". Museums bring nostalgia and a sense of a disconnection from the past. He describes Museum culture as a product of modernization and globalization which I agree as I do believe museums are a global trend that brings people's past cultures and history back to life which of course, would appeal to people in the modern world be it if you're a historian, archaeologist, anthropologist etc, it will interest people as it teaches society how they developed over time to become the society that they are today. Denton goes on to mention he only will mention the changing of exhibitionary practices and historical narratives post-Mao period; hence I will not look at any evidence before this period. Denton goes on to say exhibitions now flourish in record numbers in China, this shows that their interpretation of heritage has adapted to not just craft but a display of the past for people to learn and enjoy. It's no doubt that China has grown both economically and globally which is something Denton stresses upon, but goes on to say "urban popular culture" stresses on the significance of "self, self-fulfilment and personal consumption" which I believe is not necessary when talking about museum culture in China as it disconnects from what I believe to be China's culture of being a unit and looking out for one other, China wouldn't have thrived into its current state of economy with a culture that stresses on self-fulfilment. The author goes on and highlights the question, is museum practice changing from the norms of the 1980's and earlier, or taking the old and bringing it into new buildings and "through sophisticated display techniques?" I believe that of course how people display artefacts etc in museums have changed since the 1980's and prior as to keep the interest of the society and to move with China's rapid economic growth, to become modern to thrive in today's society. Therefore, I believe this is unnecessary to question if they do grow with the times as they want to be a modern force in today's world. As I had exclaimed earlier, Denton wanted to concentrate on the question "How are museums being made relevant to a radically changing society?" He then goes on to say since the PRC's founding, museums are being used as "Tools by the state" to share information approved by the state on its modern history. I believe this is a very sensitive topic to shine a light upon but is an important one and I'm happy it has been brought up, he says this with no question, emphasising it is fact, this is to "control over the cultural sphere" which is very brave to bring up in this book but

definitely important when learning of China's recent history and makes the reader think what do China want to ignore from the past and what they find important during their history. It seems this strategy is being used to teach the Chinese people of party history. "(Museums) embody state power, and this power is expressed at a variety of levels." Denton believes that the architectural style of these museums' buildings, and their location in the cityscape, can highlight state power, I believe that the architectural style of a building couldn't possibly contribute to the teaching of "party history to the masses" it's merely a building. I understand that where a museum is located is important to drive more people in to look around and to learn the history of that region, yet I see no importance in its location as long as it's well known. He goes on to say a valid statement of the importance of martyrdom and the theme of national humiliation, therefore it's likely museums across China will concentrate on mainly Chinese history that show artefacts, information etc on what the country take pride in, nothing negative from the past. He then goes on to state that this is expressed "obliquely" using new architectural design and different styles of exhibition which I think is not the case and unnecessary to mention when writing about exhibitionary culture in China.

This book was easy to understand, and had a good pace, but I also found it quite repetitive. I was expecting more of a varied read that concentrated more on China's view of the artefacts that are shown in these museums he mentions. If I had written a book on the same topic I'd concentrate on the artefacts and information shared within the museum. Also, most of Denton's primary sources are his own research on archival material, therefore I would've liked to have seen a broader opinion, which he would've achieved by using more book sources for his own research as he did not give a strong argument on his opinion.