Review of *Exhibiting the Past: Historical Memory and the Politics of Museums in Postsocialist China.* By Kirk A. Denton. Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 2014. Pp. 350. US$ 59. Cloth.

A beautifully printed book with numerous photographs and a detailed English-Chinese glossary, Kirk A. Denton's *Exhibiting the Past* analyzes contemporary China's museums in a largely chronological manner based on the themes of these museums. In eleven chapters, the book moves through museums of premodern history, of the Chinese Revolution, of market economy reforms, of revolutionary martyrs, of military glories, of the Sino-Japanese War, of communist leaders, of literary figures, of ethnographic minorities, of Red Tourism, and of the future. The bulk of this far-ranging book, thus, is devoted to the communist state apparatus of ideological interpellation. Taking readers through multiple sites, Denton reiterates how the stories of great men and earth-shaking events have come to mold modern China. This brief description already highlights the ambiguity of the keyword "postsocialist" in the book title: there is nothing "post" ideologically about today's China, which continues and embellishes the communist mythology from its earliest days, precisely because it has gone capitalist.

Denton draws from "postsocialist" and, what is taken to be its next of kin, "neoliberal" in terms of theoretical underpinnings. These conceptual parameters lead Denton to repeatedly claim that his "focus in this book is politics" (3), or the State, to the extent that Denton justifies *not* analyzing cultural texts beyond the eleven types of museums. Examples abound: On the self-sacrificing revolutionary model Lei Feng, Denton gestures toward some online black humor and Stephen Chow-style parody of the hero, only to immediately withdraw: "My principal concern is the official state discourse on Lei Feng, not revisionist historiography or deconstructive spoofs" (161). However, such "spoofs" encapsulate countermemory to State-sanctioned, institutionalized memory. To grasp contemporary images of Lei Feng or even China itself, a chorus of voices is more telling than the dull drone from Beijing. Denton's meticulous description of his visits to these sites reveals, in fact, fissures where State control is on the verge of being subverted. The peddlers and beggars swarming the museums' environs would tell a very different story from the one played out inside the museums. Should Denton venture beyond China or area studies, the past that is exhibited becomes only the first layer of State memory, underneath which lies repression, countermemory, postmemory, and other constructs according to trauma and memory studies. What is the point of reprising the top down approach entrenched in these museums when there are excellent insights to be gained from a bottom up subversive reading? The latter is what energizes the last chapter on "Museums of the Future," to which I will return.

Denton's recoil from what he terms "revisionism" recurs in the chapter on "Red Tourism": "my aim [is] not revisionist; instead, I seek to understand the intentions and expectations motivating the state's promotion of red tourism" (215). To dismiss all non-orthodox, non-State discourse as "revisionism" already exposes a theoretical blind spot, particularly when it yields but few critical insights from the chapter's retracing of government-run Red Tourism, for instance, in Hunan among the memorial halls of Mao, Liu Shaoqi, and Peng Dehuai. In addition, the word "revisionist" is a misnomer. Mao deployed it to attack his rivals, alleged revisionist detractors from the orthodoxy of Marxism-Socialism. In Western academia, the term has an odious ring of deniers of the Holocaust. Either connotation ill-fits Denton's purpose. On the contrary, parodies of Lei Feng and alternate stories on Red Tourism serve to critique State ideology, which is itself a revisionist manipulation of historical memory. Even if one accepts Denton's designation of revisionism, then revisionism to revisionism may revert back to the truth. Should not truth enjoy some airing in a book devoted to historical

memory?

Halfway through the book lies perhaps the weightiest chapter. Chapter 6 centers on three museums on Japanese atrocities during World War II. These museums are not immune to politicization at a time of tense international relationships between China and Japan, but they are comparatively more substantive than, say, memorials halls on Chairman Mao and revolutionary martyrs. The fact that recent conflicts between the two East Asian neighbors are giving rise to a flood of books and films on the 1937-38 Rape of Nanking rather than Chairman Mao's anti-Japanese leadership illustrates that atrocities and pain endure more than the Great Helmsman. Denton agrees with other scholars that these museums suggest a shift from a "victor narrative" to a "victim narrative," the latter serving to rally the nation against its rival Japan in China's millennial rise. Denton is also mindful that his "political and discursive perspective" ought not to "downplay in any way the horrific atrocities" (135). Nonetheless, the book title's avowed emphasis on the politics of museums appears to elide the affective dimension of these institutions as well as the poetics of exhibitions. The affect or feeling induced by these museums is inextricably linked to their poetics or aesthetics. Contrary to his stated methodology and goal, Denton dwells on some of that affective impact induced by poetics rather than politics in this chapter when he zooms in on "the most powerful part of [Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall] is the graveyard ground" and contrasts the architect Qi Kang's original design with subsequent renovations that have diluted that power. This "power" comes not just from the trauma of history but from Qi Kang's "muted aesthetic" and "contemplative" architecture (146). The subsequent renovations are politically-motivated, hence a perfect example of how poetics and emotions are cheapened by politics. Denton has clearly stepped out of the circumference of politics and has found the experience "powerful," moving, on artistic, architectural grounds. On the other hand, as Denton theorizes such museums of atrocities in terms of "dark tourism" and "spectacular suffering" (138), his deepened inquiry borrowing from trauma studies also moves further afield from political discourse.

The eleventh and last chapter views the phenomenon of "municipal urban planning exhibition halls" as, quite shrewdly, "Museums of the Future." Denton diagnoses such, for lack of a better term, self-exhibitionist urban spaces: "The[ir] abundance and massive scale. . . reflect a society obsessed with a temporal desire to march toward the future and a spatial desire to join the world. Behind these obsessions is the motivation to leave behind the degrading pasts of imperialist humiliation and Maoist fanaticism" (247). This "city imaginary" is dubbed a "fantasy" (248), largely absent of "people, which [would] make a city messy and noisy" in the exhibit mock-ups or virtual reality (261). Toward the end of the book, the analytical fire Denton is building finally catches, but it comes too late. The fire or intellectual shock derives from conjoining two seemingly disparate concepts: how to "museumfy" (mummify?) the future? Whereas the staid/State approach parsing the politics behind museums produces solid scholarship, an edgier, more radical angle overall would have led to greater insights such as the finale at the eleventh hour. In fact, Denton feels compelled to defend, in the conclusion, his "incongruous" addition of "Museums of the Future" in a book on museums of the past. The symbiosis of the two spaces is, of course, self-evident: the past is commemorated in such a way as to shape the present and the future; the future is fashioned on the shoulders of a partly fabricated past. In his concluding paragraph, Denton confesses that his "state-centered approach might appear hopelessly out of touch or outmoded. With this approach I risk presenting historical memory as a state monopoly and failing to see it in its full complexity" (267). Neither caveat emptor nor mea culpa, Denton tries to preempt any potential criticism. He is most prescient.

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