

# ARRESTING DEVELOPMENT

## Winnie Wong on China's museum boom

**HOW MANY MUSEUMS** does the ideal society need? During the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s, the Chinese Communist Party had a slogan: "Every county must have its museum, every commune its exhibition hall." In 2002, the Chinese government rededicated itself to that ideal, when the State Administration of Cultural Heritage announced that the country would build one thousand museums by 2015. As improbably ambitious as that pronouncement might seem, it was in fact accomplished far ahead of schedule. By 2013, the country had already built almost fifteen hundred museums—in essence finishing a new museum every day during the periods of heaviest construction. And the building has continued apace. By way of comparison, a survey of new museums in the US found that only between twenty and forty were being built annually in the decade preceding the 2008 financial crash. This spate of construction is more than just a museum boom of the sort that has been celebrated in postindustrial cities of the West, wherein the public institution of the museum has taken on additional functions as a financial engine of the art world and crux of urban branding; in China, museums have a far broader range of forms and

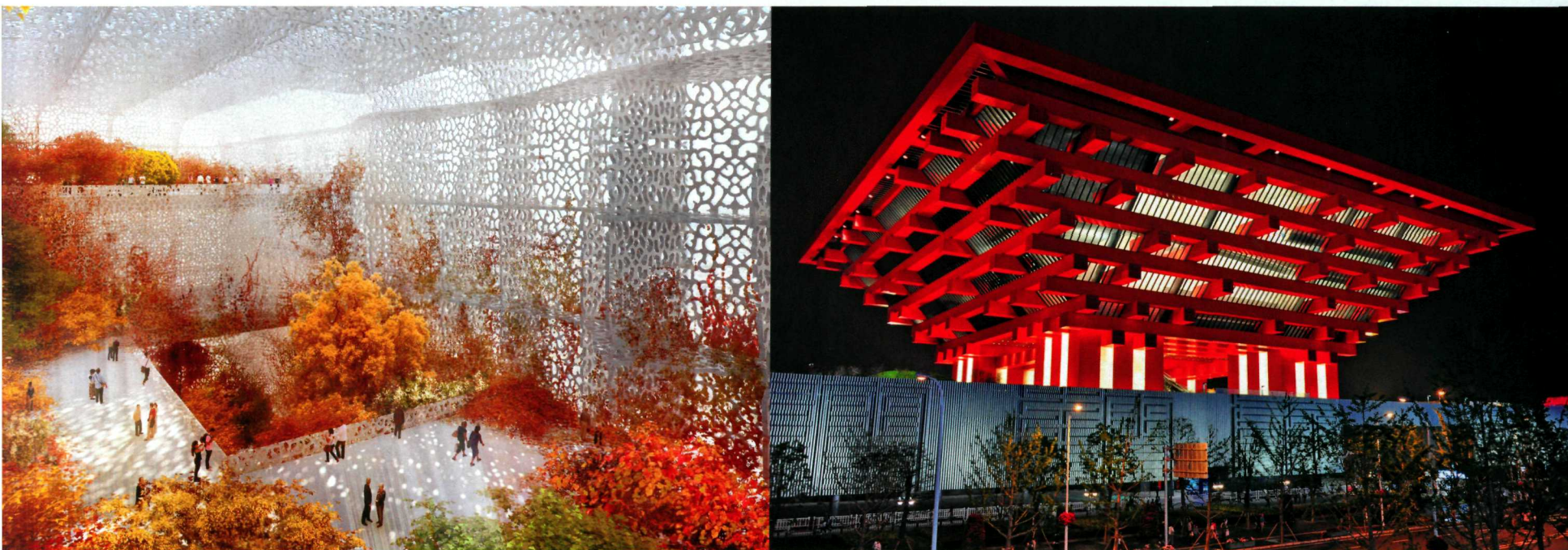
functions, and occupy a central symbolic role in the spectacular urban growth overseen by a government that still claims to put its people first.

The CCP inherited just twenty-five public museums when it founded the People's Republic in 1949. Ten years later, with the Great Leap Forward under way, the young nation eager to establish its cultural credibility as a world power, embarked on a spectacular effort to build "Ten Great Buildings" in Beijing in less than a year. International modernist in style, these included five museums or exhibition halls: the National Museum of the Chinese Revolution and the National Museum of Chinese History, which occupied the same building, today known as the National Museum of China; the Cultural Palace of Nationalities; the China Agricultural Museum; and the Military Museum of the Chinese People's Revolution. At the same time, following the "every county must have its museum" directive, thousands of new institutions emerged throughout the nation, but most of them lacked the staff, space, or infrastructure to function fully. As was characteristic during the Great Leap Forward, the political fervor to enact social change, in this case through exhibition, rep-

resentation, and documentation, exceeded the material means available. These thousands of "museums" ebbed away in the wake of the Great Leap's failed central-planning efforts and accompanying economic disasters. The current policy of building one thousand museums in thirteen years could be seen as a tempered version of that ambition.

Few Chinese museums hew to contemporary Western models for public institutions, which are typically run by either a cultural ministry (in Europe) or a board of trustees operating in the legal realm of the nonprofit (in the US). For example, there are few, if any, museums in China that do not rent out their exhibition spaces, thus allowing anyone with sufficient means to exhibit whatever they like—so long as it is not too politically sensitive. This approach is quite different from that of Western museums—which hold strict distinctions between private and public ownership; separate historical from contemporary periods, art from history, originals from museum reproductions; and, of course, are largely sequestered from political influence. At the same time, most Chinese museums charge little (if any) admission, and thus are public in a sense that few American museums are.

In the economics of "Creative China," designer cell-phone covers are subject to the same rhetoric and regulation as the most priceless archaeological artifacts.



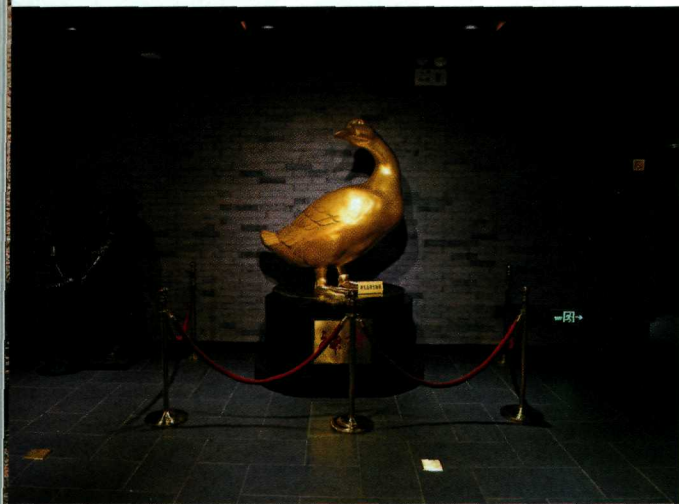
From left: Jean Nouvel, National Art Museum of China, anticipated completion 2017, Beijing. Rendering. He Jingtang, China Art Museum (formerly China Pavilion at Expo 2010), 2010, Shanghai. Photo: Simon Qiao/Flickr.



Indeed, many of the museums that have been constructed in China's twenty-first century are categorized as public ones, insofar as they are paid for by public funds and administered by the reenergized propaganda arms of local governments at the neighborhood or district level. While often imposing in design, many simply sit empty and dark after their grand openings, lorded over by unassailable culture bureaucrats who open the museum up only for their leaders' VIP visits. When they do turn on the lights, these institutions tend to display exclusively the "clean" and "nonsensitive" art (i.e., no eroticism and no politics) that is produced mainly by culture bureaucrats themselves. As Chinese artists like to say, no one has less culture than culture officials. Even the highest-profile museums of Beijing often sit closed and empty for long stretches, suggesting that these gargantuan public projects are less about serving the public than about signifying official power.

Ironically, in the often-paradoxical intermingling of public and private that marks China's unique mode of state-sponsored capitalism, the new institutions that have attracted the most public attention are actually designated "private museums" because they are run by nongovernmental individuals. Officially, these museums function in the conceptual administrative space of the *minjian*—as enterprises for the people and by the people—as opposed to that of the *guanfang* (officialdom). So many have been built in the past fifteen years that it is difficult to classify them: The best funded and best run are contemporary art museums such as the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing and the Minsheng and Rockbund Art Museums in Shanghai. These have drawn on a talented pool of cosmopolitan art professionals who have deftly navigated the international art world and brought much attention to contemporary Chinese and foreign artists. But these are just a few of the almost fifteen hundred that exist. Many more of the new private museums house the idiosyncratic art collections of the new wealthy and well-connected

Golden duck at the Quanjude Peking Duck Museum, Beijing, 2014.  
Photo: Greg Baker/AFP/Getty Images.



Urbanus, Dafen Art Museum, 2007, Shenzhen. Photo: Iwan Baan.

collector class—whose members are often at once owner, builder, and director. These museums include the China Red Sandalwood and the African Tribe, both in Beijing, which showcase their owners' obsessions with, respectively, huge red sandalwood sculpture and furniture and Makonde wood carvings. Some, such as the Beijing Museum of Tap Water, are eclectic corporate museums. Still others are admirable, serious projects that tackle politically sensitive topics, such as the Cultural Revolution, usually ignored in the public museums. In Shenzhen, a wealthy collector, helping to build the most vibrant arts district in the city, has given favorable treatment and lower rents to venues dedicated to art, design, crafts, and music, including a state-run contemporary art museum called the Shenzhen Overseas Chinese Town Contemporary Art Terminal. Yet on the outskirts of the city, a private developer's "culture highland" is an arts retreat in the mountains that features museums devoted to less broadly appealing fare, such as his own paintings and children's homework drawings.

Some emerging museums will be legitimated through partnerships with prominent Western universities and museums (among these is the design museum developed by China Merchants Group in collaboration with London's Victoria and Albert Museum, slated to open in late 2016 in Shenzhen's reglitzed Shekou district), while many, many others operate "unregistered" (without official acknowledgement) and are not included in the government's elusively underestimated count. In these fifteen hundred museums, there is certainly more than one that challenges the limits of what we had once thought a museum should be.

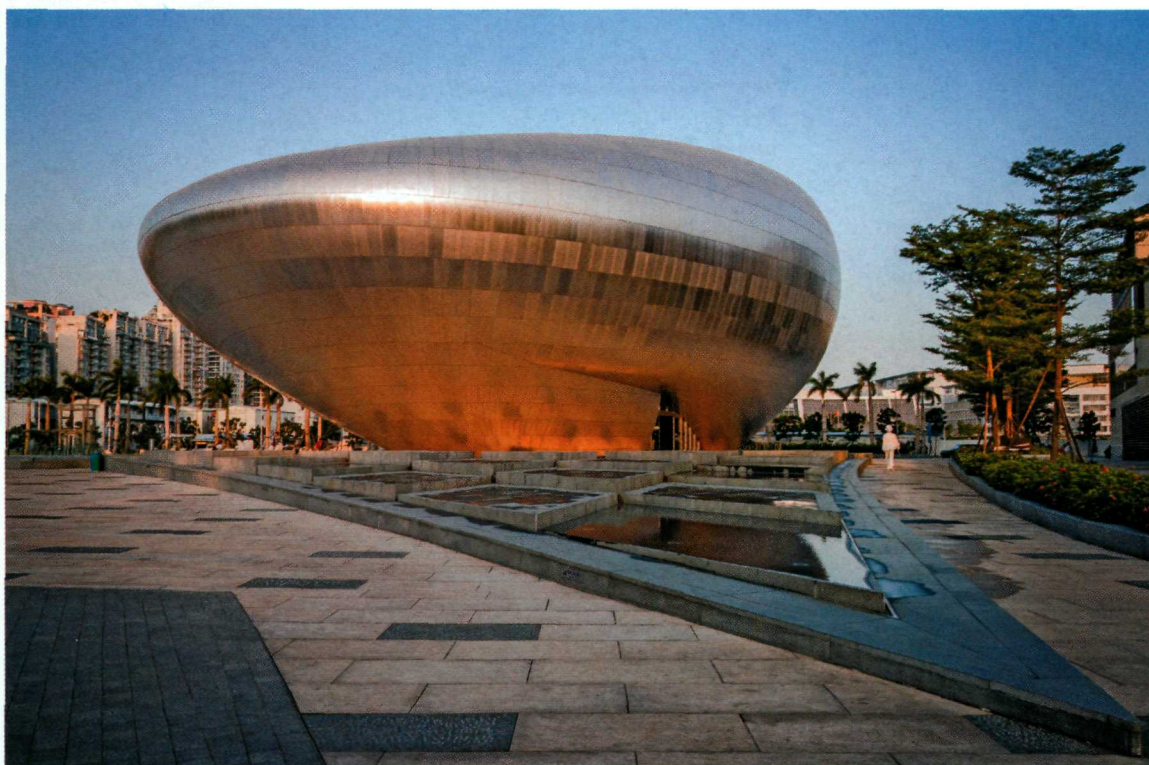
Whether public or private, however, the overwhelming majority share one characteristic: They are all politically

legitimizing components of far larger real estate schemes in which developers have been vastly enriched through the appropriation of land from the public. The Chinese government introduced the notion of "cultural industry" to national policy in 2002, and in subsequent years has increasingly placed culture at the center of programs intended to develop soft power and, recently, the Chinese dream. The thousand-museum drive can thus be understood as ideologically related to efforts to expand and quantify the nation's physical infrastructure, for example the metrics set for China's high-speed rail network or energy production.

Crucially, because cultural building projects fulfill the policy of serving the people through democratization, they are also instrumental for private developers who need governmental approval to appropriate land for their massive construction plans. In China, building a theater, opera house, concert center, art museum, or even golf school in exchange for vast tracts of public land is only the most obvious first step. Because property developers are so enriched by this process, they may as well become collectors (and golfers) too, setting themselves up as captains of cultural progress, redefining culture for the public, and enabling its instrumentalization in official discourse.

One private museum in northwestern China provides a particularly incredible example of this trend. In an ancient city of immense cultural heritage from the Han and Tang dynasties, a real estate-development firm with high-level connections to the provincial government was granted an enormous territory in the center of the city. Although archaeological work on ancient sites in China is usually closely guarded by the state, the developer was permitted to excavate the ancient site and retain





Studio Pei-Zhu, OCT Design Museum, 2012, Shenzhen. Photo: Sebastien Panouille/Flickr.

whatever archaeological finds it might hold. The firm consulted with “international experts,” excavated the site, and “preserved” it, but apparently found nothing of great value; in the meantime, construction proceeded on a stunning number of luxury developments, as the firm quickly grew into one of the largest developers in the province. At the heart of the ancient city, now towering with skyscrapers, the developer built the promised museum on a plot of historic land.

The president of the firm then appointed himself director of the museum. He also formed a provincial association of private museums to define ethical and professional standards, and—as the director of the largest private museum in the province—was himself elected head of the association. Alongside the few artifacts excavated at the site, the museum also displayed objects from his personal collection. Many of the latter objects are of undetermined authenticity, but the museum staff mixed them in with objects of more secure provenance, creating a collection that mimics that of the province’s own public museum, where a priceless (and authentic) collection is on permanent view. The ticket price for the developer’s museum exceeded that of the province’s most treasured archaeological sites, yet members of the public who paid up were still denied access to several floors, where only VIPs were allowed to see the highlights of the director’s collection, housed in shiny vaults beneath a silver-lined dome. The state-run media hailed the mogul as a great protector of national cultural heritage, a forward-thinking art collector, a successful museum director, a generous philanthropist, and an

innovative cultural entrepreneur. International archaeologists, art historians, and artists have been inveigled to lend legitimacy to his museum and his collection, while, on the Internet, anonymous citizens have accused him of bribery, corruption, theft, smuggling, and hiring thugs to perform illegal evictions. Now, in the midst of the central government’s anticorruption drive, he is rumored to be wanted for arrest.

The obvious problem with understanding a museum simply as a signature building, a unit of urban infrastructure, or a source of symbolic value is that in any case it does not need to be a functioning institution. The standard metaphor that Chinese architects and officials apply to the situation is that China lacks the “software” to fill all this new “hardware.” One contemporary art curator remembers vividly how he earned his title: In the early 2000s, while working at the Guangdong Museum of Art in Guangzhou, he was greeted in the elevator by a colleague who told him his position had been renamed and he was now a “curator.” At the time, he didn’t even know what the word meant. Today, at top-tier privately run contemporary art museums, directors and curators publicly call for greater professionalism and rigor in their own institutions. The complete lack of oversight—internal or external—might explain how a single individual could simultaneously and openly serve as developer, collector, museum director, *and* museum-ethics-association head. Private and public goods are commingled to such an extent that one could scarcely imagine where “corruption” might begin and end. Where there are no real institutions, there can be no real conflicts of interest.

Cultural institutions have long been the domain of the wealthy and powerful, of course—in fin-de-siècle Europe and America, for example, politicians and captains of industry recognized the very real value of cultural capital in building prestige and consolidating influence. What is new in twenty-first-century China is that a political structure legitimated by the ideals of equality and collective good has been recombined into a vast array of practices driven by market economics. Cultural capital has become equivalent to real capital. Thus, in the economics of “Creative China,” designer cell-phone covers are subject to the same rhetoric and regulation as the most priceless archaeological artifacts: Each is one small component of the complex juggernaut that is China’s ever-expanding economy. Hence it is possible for officials and developers to plan a theme-park “preservation” development of 3-D reconstructions, hotels, and museums, to be situated at the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang, a remote UNESCO World Heritage Site holding one thousand years of ancient Buddhist murals and statues. All culture is equal in the eyes of the market, and all culture is treated with the same degree of seriousness, ambition, and incompetence.

In a sense, the creation of any museum is an act of dispossession: hence the global claims of repatriation that rightfully dog the European institutions founded at the height of Western imperial power. China’s legacy of the repeated loss of cultural property forms the emotional drive behind the national devotion to collecting, to history, and to museums. Many of the nation’s archaeological sites were looted or “bought” for absurdly low prices by Europeans in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1925, the Forbidden City was appropriated by the new government and transformed into the Palace Museum, where the Imperial collections were open to public view for the first time; but as the civil war intensified in the late 1940s, many of the greatest treasures of the Palace Museum were taken by the Nationalist government to Taiwan, where a new National Palace Museum was established to stake an alternate claim to cultural-heritage protection. Paradoxically, the objects and artworks looted, bought, or taken were preserved, while in China, much was destroyed in the Marxist pursuit of a new world devoid of private ownership and capital. In today’s China, where, in a total inversion, private ownership and capital are celebrated as the drivers of everything good, far less patriotic fervor has been directed against the very few who have been empowered to exploit the many. And so, almost as troubling as the dispossession of citizens from their homes by rampant development is the dispossession of cultural sites, artifacts, and institutions from the realm of public interest in order to legitimate that speculation. The rush to enable private developers to grab what little cultural property is left (alongside whatever land remains), under the banner of reclaiming culture itself, has become a cynical solution to the deliberate destruction of the past and the present. □

WINNIE WONG TEACHES RHETORIC AND THE HISTORY OF ART AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)