

# From Landlord Manor to Red Memorabilia: Reincarnations of a Chinese Museum Town

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## Abstract

What was a revolutionary museum in the Mao era, and what are the lives and afterlives of its artifacts? This article traces the exhibitionary culture of the town of Anren, home to both the Mao-era sculptural icon the *Rent Collection Courtyard* and the Jianchuan Museum Cluster, China's largest private museum and collection of Maoist memorabilia. Examining the production and reception of exhibits from the 1950s to the present, we argue that—far from mausoleums that relegate objects safely to history—museums in China have been dynamic and vital public spaces that have defined and redefined the past for the present, serving as both a medium and a product of revolutionary culture. Over the last six decades, museums have paraded the revolution's spoils, served as a schoolroom for class education, replaced traditional temples as new ritual sites, staged theatrical performances, held court over historical cases, and, finally, commodified their collections into tourist memorabilia.

## Keywords

museums, Cultural Revolution, landlords, *Rent Collection Courtyard*, Jianchuan Museum Cluster

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In the summer heat of June 1999, the incomplete clay figures of the Cai Guoqiang 蔡国强 installation *Venice Rent Collection Courtyard* 威尼斯收租院 began to crack. The expatriate Chinese artist had just won the Golden Lion award from the Venice Biennale for his recreation of the Mao-era *Rent Collection Courtyard* sculpture series, first collectively produced by artists in China's Sichuan province in 1965. The original, consisting of 114 life-sized clay sculptures, presented a political lesson: once upon a time, in the "old society" before the Communist "Liberation," an evil landlord called Liu Wencai 刘文彩 (1887–1949) extracted rent from his oppressed tenant farmers. Made from the very earth surrounding Liu Wencai's "landlord manor" 地主庄园 and exhibited on site, the *Rent Collection Courtyard* stands to this day behind glass in the manor—a museum since 1959—in Anren 安仁, Dayi 大邑 county. In the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the sculpture series was hailed as an "artistic atom bomb," with replicas on display in major Chinese cities and copies sent abroad. Cai's reproduction of the socialist icon, however, was unlike any of its predecessors: fewer than half of the clay figures were completed while the rest were represented by frames, and because the clay had neither been processed nor fired, the figures crumbled as they dried (Wu and Wang, 2010: 378). The ephemeral *Venice Rent Collection Courtyard* nonetheless provoked a firestorm of controversy. Some of the original sculptors from the Sichuan Arts Academy threatened a lawsuit over copyright violation, but Cai and his defenders insisted that quotation and appropriation of existing works are commonly accepted practices in contemporary art, and no creative theft was involved since photographs of the original and Cultural Revolution propaganda booklets were also part of the exhibit (Wu and Wang, 2010: 370–71; Eckholm, 2000). Although the courts dismissed the lawsuit, the case raised questions about the meaning of art in China, past and present.

But for Liu Xiaofei 刘小飞, the grandson of the infamous landlord Liu Wencai, the *Rent Collection Courtyard* is not art. On a hot August day in 2013, Liu Xiaofei pointed an accusatory finger at the original sculptures and cried, "What kind of art is this? They couldn't find people to testify to their fabricated history, so they just made up these clay figures!" In his grandfather's elegant courtyard home, still a museum but now called the Liu Family Manor 刘氏庄园 and a nationally ranked cultural relic, Liu Xiaofei gave us and a group of curious tourists his own version of the narrative.<sup>1</sup> Born in 1946, Liu Xiaofei lived his youth under the shadow of Liu Wencai's posthumous notoriety. In middle school, he was forced to publicly recite poetry that denounced his grandfather; he had to confront the "despotic landlord" in a pictorial class education exhibition; and Red Guards beat him bloody before his mother in Cultural Revolution struggle sessions (Ding, 2012: 3–4). To Liu

Xiaofei, who has devoted his retirement to clearing his grandfather's name, the museum symbolizes the Maoist propaganda system and its consequences. Throughout Liu's tour, he insisted that the histories told in the Landlord Manor were fabricated to cover up the post-Great Leap famine that killed tens of millions in China—and millions in Sichuan alone—between 1959 and 1961 (Yang Jisheng, 2012: 197–247). Gesturing at a luxurious “dragon bed” alleged to be his grandfather's, he explained that museum officials installed it during the famine and asked, “Tell me, who was decadent? Have you seen the things that Mao Zedong ate?” Before the clay figure of a wrathful peasant, he demanded, “If Liu Wencai's tenants were really starving, how could they have these big muscular biceps?”

Long before the site of the *Rent Collection Courtyard* won national and international fame, and even before the Mao-era narrative that Liu Xiaofei recites in order to refute, it was inhabited by living and breathing human bodies. Molding real people and places into an emotionally charged work of propaganda, the original sculptures were made out of local soil, by local artists, and for a local audience. Cai Guoqiang himself pointed out that the original artists “used ready-made materials” to create a “site-specific” work, concepts resonant with avant-garde trends in Western contemporary art (Zhu, 2001). After its recent replications in Venice and New York, however, the *Rent Collection Courtyard* became a floating signifier, its rich palimpsest of meanings flattened into iconography.

This article returns the *Rent Collection Courtyard* to its origins in Anren and in the Landlord Manor Museum, which received tens of millions of visitors in the Mao era (Wu Jinzhong, 1992: 1). In tracing the transformations of Anren as a museum town, we also look at the Jianchuan Museum Cluster 建川博物馆聚落, established in 2005 and located literally across the street, China's largest private museum complex, with an enormous collection devoted to the socialist “Red Age.” Using Anren as a prism, we seek to answer the following questions: What was a revolutionary museum in the Mao era? How did its exhibitionary culture change over time, and why? What is the place of such a revolutionary museum in today's post-socialist China, and how are objects from the Mao years curated now? Theorizing the “birth of the museum” in the nineteenth-century West, Tony Bennett has suggested that museums were a technology that reshaped social behavior; by presenting a narrative of progress with the visitor at its pinnacle, the museum provided “props which the visitor might utilize for particular forms of self-development” (Bennett, 1995: 6–10). The story of Anren shows how the Landlord Manor cultivated revolutionary subjects, and how its exhibits today—together with the “Red Age” artifacts of the Jianchuan Museum Cluster—challenge and disrupt Mao-era history.

The *Rent Collection Courtyard* is one of the most iconic and most enduring exhibitions in the People's Republic. The museum in which it was housed took on various names, from the Landlord Manor Exhibition Hall 地主庄园陈列馆 (1959) to the Class Education Exhibition Hall 阶级教育展览馆 (1966) to the Landlord Manor Museum 地主庄园博物馆 (1980) to today's Liu Family Manor Museum 刘氏庄园博物馆 (Dayi xian zhi, 1991: 681–82). Although the earlier use of “exhibition hall” 陈列馆 suggests an emphasis on the landlord's “crimes” while the recent use of “museum” 博物馆 focuses on the site's “cultural treasures,” for the purposes of this article we will refer to all iterations as a museum. The use of exhibitions in China dates back to the late nineteenth century, when Qing dynasty (1644–1912) reformers promoted technology and modernization through exhibitions and fairs. In the Republican period (1912–1949), the Nationalist state created art museums and local education exhibitions, a practice adopted by the Communist Party even before it came to power (Denton, 2014). After the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, exhibitions became an integral part of political campaigns and propaganda at the national and local levels.

Despite the persistent and widespread use of museums and exhibitions, their function has been little theorized. Writing on the role of history in Communist China in the late 1950s, Joseph Levenson observed that the Communists had “nationalized” and “museumified” temples and relics, safely relegating artifacts to history (Levenson, 1965: 61–82). The idea of the museum as a static space without a vital relationship to its visitors continues to color analyses of China today; Theodore Adorno's concept of “museal”—that museums are like mausoleums—is cited to suggest that even local Chinese officials differentiate between museums as *past* spaces versus temples as *living* spaces (Mayfair Yang, 2004; Adorno, 1967: 177–81). Though a growing literature on museums in twentieth-century China suggests that the curating of exhibitions reflects behind-the-scenes negotiation and adapts to contemporary conditions, both pioneering and forthcoming work centers on museums' projected messages and the implied pilgrim. We propose, following James Robson's suggestion that museums in Asia function in religious ways, that museums in China have been *living* spaces (Robson, 2010). Moreover, revolutionary museology gave a social afterlife to things of the “old society,” imbuing artifacts with new meanings and a storytelling power that evoked a complex of emotions in their viewers.

This article, based on fieldwork in Anren and both primary and secondary sources, traces exhibitionary culture in the town from the politicized Landlord Manor to the more recently commodified red memorabilia. We argue that—far from being museumified or museal—museums in China have been dynamic and vital public spaces that have defined and redefined the past for

the present, serving as both a medium and a product of revolutionary culture. Over the past six decades, they have paraded the revolution's spoils, served as a schoolroom for class education, replaced traditional temples as new ritual sites, staged theatrical performances, held court over historical cases, and, finally, commodified their spaces and collections. More than translating exhibitions into narratives, we stress the power of material things to provide historical testimony: they make material the success of revolution, they provide object lessons in interpreting the revolution, they offer the aura of a religious relic, they serve as actors and props in revolution's drama, they are evidence in history's courtroom, and they are bought and sold in memory's marketplace.

## The Museum as a Collection of Spoils

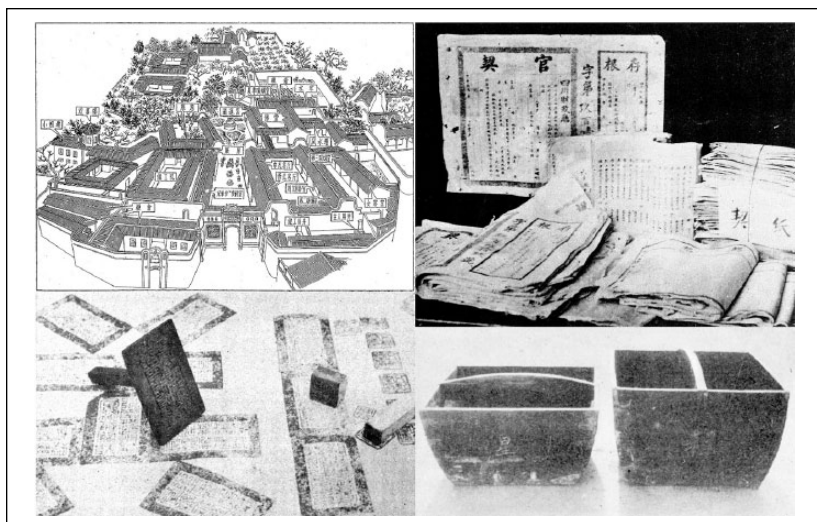
The earliest exhibitions of the Landlord Manor Museum included Liu Wencai's land deeds and official seals to suggest that he had seized land from the peasants using bureaucratic power backed by violence (Wan'e de dizhu zhuangyuan, 1965: 13–15). The wealth of the Liu family was indeed vast, and it accumulated rapidly in the turbulent Republican period. Liu Wencai's ancestors had been migrants from Anhui, and his father had a small landholding of two hectares and a liquor distillery. Without enough money to go to school, Liu Wencai became a liquor merchant, moving in 1920 to the Yangzi port city of Xufu 叙府, today's Yibin 宜宾. Here he made his fortune, which derived from and financed the growing warlord army of his brother Liu Wenhui 刘文辉 (1895–1976) and his cousin Liu Xiang 刘湘 (1888–1938).<sup>2</sup> Between his domination of local industries from salt and opium to shipping and banking, and his official positions with attendant powers to tax, Liu Wencai amassed huge wealth (Xiaoshu, 2008: 96–112, 233–40). Returning to Anren in 1932, he bought thousands of hectares of land, built dozens of manor houses, and engaged in the philanthropic projects befitting the gentry elite: roads, a dike, a theater, and a secondary school. On the eve of Liberation in 1949, Liu Wencai died of tuberculosis while his brother Liu Wenhui rallied his troops in revolt against the Nationalists, joining the Communist revolution (Zhou, 1994: 68–84, 148–54).

While Liu Wenhui rose through the ranks in the People's Republic, becoming a central minister in 1959 and authoring treatises on military affairs before he died in 1976, his late brother Liu Wencai became the personification of the "evil old society." Biographical sketches from the Mao era described Liu Wencai as the "four-in-one" landlord, warlord, bureaucrat, and bandit, who "sucked and scraped the flesh and blood" of the people of Sichuan, using his ill-gotten gains to buy property until "land in all four

directions bore the surname Liu” (Zui’e de dizhu zhuangyuan, 1963: 10–25). The narratives emphasized that Liu Wencai’s property was not legitimately earned, and therefore was rightly seized by the Communists. Liu Wencai’s estate was a fruit of the revolution, and in May of 1950 the Anren Peasant Association took stock of its spoils. In doing so it followed earlier patterns of the Communist revolution in rural areas. In Mao Zedong’s 1927 report on the Hunan peasant movement, for example, peasants claimed victory over the gentry by entering their houses, consuming their pigs and grain, and even “lolling for a minute or two on the ivory-inlaid beds of their young ladies” (Mao, 1927). Likewise, in Shanxi’s Long Bow Village in the 1940s, the wealth of the gentry became the “fruits of struggle”—people with the greatest grievances had the first pick, and the division of property galvanized increasing numbers to join each succeeding movement (Hinton, 1967: 147–49).

As prior experience showed that the division of spoils functioned as a great catalyst for revolutionary sentiment among peasants—materialists who couldn’t be satisfied with mere empty talk—the Anren Peasant Association summed up what they had confiscated, redistributed land, and divided farm implements, furniture, and clothing among the peasants. Liu Wencai’s Anren home became a cadre school for the People’s Liberation Army, and the manor’s moveable property was distributed among government departments: sheets and blankets were given to hospitals, grandfather clocks went to the local court, sandalwood furniture was selected by government offices, and a lady’s bronze four-poster bed went to the county party committee, where it was eventually smelted for steel during the Great Leap Forward in 1958 (Zhou, 1994: 159–64).

It was not enough, however, to practice redemptive justice by redistributing the landlord’s ill-gotten “loot” as the revolution’s spoils. In the same way that Napoleon’s armies paraded Italian art before installing it in the revolutionary Louvre, and as Walter Benjamin writes of the spoils “carried along in the procession” in which “present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate,” so too did the Communists exhibit the wealth they had seized prior to redistribution in order to flaunt their victory. More importantly, they wanted to show—as if in a Benjaminian “historical materialist fashion”—how the landlord’s treasures were not so much “documents of civilization” but rather “documents of barbarism” and exploitation (McClellan, 1994: 114–23; Benjamin, 1969: 256). Beginning in the early 1950s in Anren, and later in the cultural palaces and universities of the nearby provincial capital, Chengdu, as well as Chongqing and Beijing, the spoils of the Liu Wencai estate were put on display. To demonstrate the luxuries enjoyed by Liu and his family, the exhibitions included an ivory pagoda and an ivory ball, opium pipes, jade carvings, and porcelain. To show exploitation and violence, they included



**Figure 1.** Counterclockwise from left: A map of Liu Wencai's Landlord Manor, his official seals, an oversized peck juxtaposed with a regular peck, and his blank land deeds.

Source. *Zui'e de dizhu zhuangyuan*, 1963.

land deeds, tenancy contracts, oversized pecks, and iron shackles (Zhou, 1994: 162, 165–66; Xiaoshu, 2008: 297; Wang Zhi'an, 2001: 131) (see Figure 1). By 1959 the most symbolic of the revolution's spoils, Liu Wencai's manor home, was returned to the people in the form of an exhibition space.

The newly inaugurated museum was a response to the Ministry of Culture's call to create a museum in every county, the Great Leap Forward of museology. In the museum's booklets published in the 1960s, viewers were presented with a map of the house with its 27 courtyards and 180 rooms, built with corvée labor on "piles of white bones" and the "ruins of over a hundred peasant homes" (*Zui'e de dizhu zhuangyuan*, 1963: 7, 41). The museum's visitors were to read the architecture of the manor not in terms of wealth alone, but rather as a text of dispossession and deprivation; the booklets explained that Liu Wencai built his house piecemeal after annexing peasant homes, resulting in "high walls and narrow alleys that form winding, ghastly, and bloodcurdling labyrinths" (*Wan'e de dizhu zhuangyuan*, 1965: 10). Close to the entrance was a garage for cars and sedan chairs between Chinese-style and Western-style reception rooms; inside were living quarters still decked out as examples of decadence, with opulent bedrooms and an "opium room";



located behind a “hypocritical Buddhist shrine” was a water dungeon that supposedly imprisoned tenants in arrears. Other spaces of violence and exploitation included an accounting office, a granary, a yard for hired laborers, and a courtyard for rent collection.

As museum officials set out to restore the period rooms, they often had to use substitutes, either objects from other landlord families or even re-creations loosely based on testimony from Liu Wencai’s former staff. The museum commissioned local carpenters to make a nine-square-meter gilded “dragon bed” covered with a mosquito net. As a former docent related to us, the story of the mosquito net “as thin as a cicada’s wings” 薄如蝉翼, so that it could be stuffed into a matchbox, became a local legend (Interview with Wu Hongyuan, August 26, 2013). The bed also served to corroborate the account of one Luo Erniang 罗二娘, who was allegedly forced to abandon her baby to become Liu Wencai’s wet nurse and suckle him through the mosquito net. When she could give no milk, according to Luo’s own account, the petulant Liu Wencai bit her nipple until it bled. The Landlord Manor museum was thus not only the container of the revolution’s spoils but also sensational story; as Haiyan Lee has pointed out, “the material remnants of a lavish lifestyle can paradoxically fuel fantasy and spur desire” (Lee, 2014: 236). In the peasants’ encounter with extraordinary things, they could feast their eyes and imagination even if, unlike the days of land reform, they would not receive a share of the spoils. But the museum could not just be a spectacle of spoils. Rather, visitors were supposed to depart with tears in their eyes and hatred in their hearts after having imbibed a lesson in class education (Xiaoshu, 2008: 14). In the aftermath of the famine that followed the Great Leap Forward, the museum used artifacts to impart the object lessons of the Socialist Education Campaign.

## The Museum as Schoolroom

Over thirty years after he joined the docent staff of the Landlord Manor Museum, when asked to recite a section of its narrative script, Wu Hongyuan 吴宏远 chose the story of the oversized peck.

Peck! Oh, peck!

You are the mouth of the landlord, the maw of the wolves and jackals.

You’ve drunk dry the blood of the poor, you’ve scraped clean [our] flesh.

But you cannot contain the landlord’s evils,  
you cannot measure [we] poor people’s hate.

斗啊斗!

你是地主的嘴, 你是豺狼的口



你喝尽了我们穷人的血,你刮尽了我们穷人的肉  
可你,你装不完地主的罪  
你量不尽我们穷人的仇. (Interview, August 26, 2013)

Wu Hongyuan, who eventually became the museum's director in the Reform era, served as a docent for two years at the end of the Cultural Revolution. He found this passage—one that personified a humble wooden measuring device into the voracious appetite of the landlord—the most compelling. In contrast to the luxurious spoils redistributed during land reform, the peck 斗 for measuring grain was an ordinary, everyday object. How did the museum teach audiences to read artifacts through a socialist lens? Here we argue that the museum was a schoolroom; on site and through the mass mediation of print, photography, and film, the Landlord Manor Museum provided object lessons that defined everyday material culture in terms of class.

Instruction in how to relate to material culture in China was not new. Writing on luxury goods in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Craig Clunas explains how elites published texts for navigating the expanding market in “superfluous things.” Such “connoisseurship literature” instructed owners in how to understand and speak of their possessions, highlighting the proper relationship between connoisseur and object (Clunas, 1991). By the early twentieth century, educational reformers in China had also adopted the idea of the object lesson, a practice of teaching with tangible things that stimulated the senses and not just the mind.<sup>3</sup> In the Mao era, one of the most prevalent forms of political campaign was the practice of “recalling [past] bitterness and reflecting on [present] sweetness” 忆苦思甜. As workers and peasants told stories of their pre-Liberation suffering, their audiences literally ate “bitterness meals” 忆苦饭 and inspected artifacts that accompanied such narratives: a begging gourd, a ragged blanket, and even scars on the storytellers' bodies.<sup>4</sup>

The Landlord Manor Museum presented a microcosm of the “old society,” in which viewers were exhorted to imagine innumerable Liu Wencais and victims, and in mothers represented by Luo Erniang or a clay figure, their own. It became especially important to “speak bitterness” about the pre-Liberation past following the Great Leap Forward and the worst man-made famine in history. Between 1957 and 1961, in the surrounding Dayi county, official estimates show that the population decreased by 65,170 people, or almost one in five (Dayi xian zhi, 1991: 67).<sup>5</sup> Grain production had fallen by half, so that the new society had produced its own orphans (Wenjiang diwei, 1961).<sup>6</sup> In the wake of famine and all over China, the impetus to depict the “old society” in all of its evils intensified. Soldiers of the People's Liberation Army, their morale susceptible to famine news from home, were made to participate in

public and theatrical campaigns to remember past bitterness (Leese, 2011: 99–102). Similarly, in Shanghai teachers tried to make sense of such “natural disasters” by comparing the old and new society (Jiaqiang dui qingshaonian de jieji jiaoyu, 1963: 15).

In Anren, museum officials responded by asking local primary school teachers to make a series of small dioramas called the “one hundred evils” 百罪图 and seventeen waxworks scenes of Liu Wencai’s crimes. Precursors to the later sculpture series *Rent Collection Courtyard*, there were portrayals of innocent peasants behind bars and of the landlord’s gun-wielding lackeys, eyebrows exaggerated like an opera mask. There were images of torture, one scene portraying a turbaned peasant chained to a rack and another strung up by the arms and beaten. There were scenes of imminent death: a peasant is pinned to the ground and stoned, another victim has clamped around his head dynamite about to be lit (Zui’e de dizhu zhuangyuan, 1963). These dioramas and waxworks complemented exhibitions of “real” artifacts like handcuffs and shackles, spring steel whips, guns, and of course, the water dungeon, an essential prop in the bitterness narrative of a model peasant named Leng Yueying 冷月英, who allegedly was its sole survivor.<sup>7</sup>

The efficacy of such vivid exhibitions of material artifacts lay in part in their ability to “speak” even to those who were illiterate. On Anren’s main tourist drag, where the Republican-era street links the former Wencai Middle School to other restored manors-turned-museums, we met the proprietor of a snack shop who told us about visiting the Landlord Manor Museum even before he learned to read. Like other boys his age, he was most impressed by the torture chambers with “tiger stools,” hot chili water, bloodstained clothes, and Liu Wencai’s legendary walking stick that unsheathed into a sword. Their favorite part of the house of horror was the water dungeon, outfitted with spiked iron cages and flooded with fetid water. A cool “ghostly” wind blew from inside, and the giant basement was lit with a single dim white paper shade lamp. The boys dared one another to climb over the iron spikes, and eventually, all the boys could brag about the time they had served inside Liu Wencai’s water dungeon (Interview, August 27, 2013). These objects and spaces, then, had a powerful impact on the children’s imagination, sharpening their antennae for class enemies who might lurk in their everyday lives.

Even if one did not visit the Landlord Manor in person, it was possible to take a virtual tour of the museum through its many mediated forms in printed text and images, in films, and even in songs (Shouzuyuan, guimenguan, 1969: 41). From readers for children to small-format comic books to glossy photo collections for export abroad, such books often began with a map of the manor, included photographs of the luxurious rooms, juxtaposed Liu Wencai’s Buddhist shrine with his armory of human shackles, and let the reader peer

into the water dungeon. Indeed, every Chinese schoolchild would have known of Liu Wencai; his life was an example for history lessons, and his method of rent collection was incorporated into math problems.<sup>8</sup>

Such object lessons took on two forms. The first enumerated luxuries and converted them into grain and labor; both the artifacts and the later sculpture series revealed an obsession with counting. Liu Wencai's desire for human milk required seven wet nurses; his fifth concubine's fondness for duck feet sacrificed thirty ducks to make one meal; his addiction to opium racked up an annual bill that would have fed three thousand peasants; and the dragon bed was converted to its price in labor: over three hundred working days, or forty *shi* 石 (16,000 catties) of white rice (Wan'e de dizhu zhuangyuan, 1965: 30–40). Visitors were told that Liu Wencai had designed a special winnowing machine with a chain on it; it spun so hard that good grain was eliminated as chaff and neither counted nor returned. Thus winnowed, the peasants' grain was measured with special pecks made in different sizes, the better to give the landlord an advantage. The docent narration claimed, "The Liu Family winnowing machine ate people!" Even Liu Wencai's villainy could be converted, as it was explained that Leng Yueying's water dungeon confinement came with its own "rent" of one peck of grain for each of her seven days (Zui'e de dizhu zhuangyuan, 1963: 12–14, 28). Quotidian weights and measures were transformed into an object lesson in exchange value, measuring not only grain but also blood and tears. Speaking for the clay figures of the *Rent Collection Courtyard*, the museum's docent declared, "Here, you [Liu Wencai] settle accounts 算账. . . . Sooner or later we will settle our blood-and-tears account with you!" (Geming nisu "Shouzuyuan" jieshuoci, 1977: 4).

The second kind of object lesson juxtaposed the decadence of the landlord with the destitution of the peasant. A 1964 children's book, *The Detestable Landlord* 可恨的地主, devotes its first half to a biography of Liu Wencai and its second to stories told with objects. There are things of exploitation: a peck and an abacus, a surveillance tower to watch laborers in the fields, and a human-drawn plow. These are followed by objects of cruelty: a chain for leading child slaves by the nose, a pot for cooking peasants alive, a document for the sale of a girl. Throughout, luxury is contrasted with poverty: Liu Wencai's dragon bed shares a page with a 120-year-old pair of trousers. These object lessons come from all over China, with at least some of the landlords and the victims named (Kehen de dizhu, 1964). In the same way that the connoisseurship literature of imperial times taught readers how to evaluate an object's provenance and value, *The Detestable Landlord* encouraged children to view all things in terms of their class character.

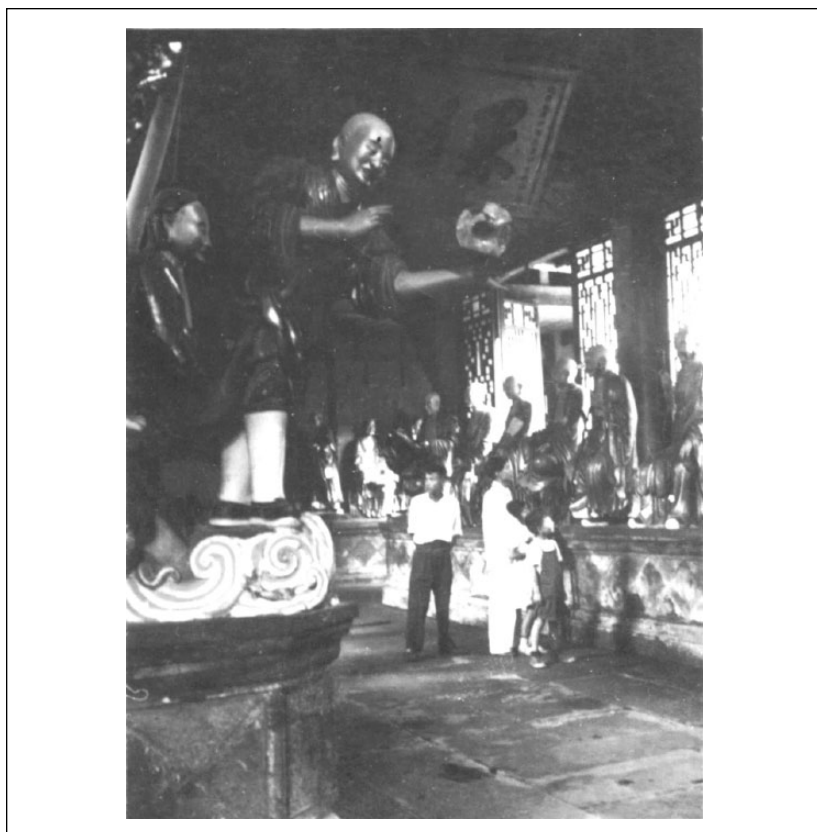
But rational calculations of and righteous outrage at the disparity between rich and poor did not suffice to instill hatred of class enemies who had been

long dispossessed by the 1960s. The Socialist Education Campaign 社会主义教育运动 in the wake of the Great Leap famine did not merely teach a lesson in continuous class struggle, but also sought to re-instill faith in a regime that had failed its people, to redirect grievances toward scapegoats in the wake of its catastrophe, and to convince the population that the Communist state was still their one and only savior. For this purpose, the museum had to be more than a schoolroom. In the words of the propaganda officials who created it, the museum had to become a temple.

## The Museum as Temple

In 1965, the Chengdu City God Temple was locked to all but the artists of the *Rent Collection Courtyard*. As the sculptor Wang Guanyi 王官乙 remembers, it was only through special permission that they gained access to the forbidden site of “feudal superstition,” its interiors neglected under heaps of dust and fenced off with bamboo mats shrouded in cobwebs (Wang Guanyi, 2011: 42). Wang and others from the Sichuan Art Academy went on to Xindu county 新都县 to study the arhats in a Buddhist temple (see Figure 2), following the directives of local propaganda chief Ma Li 马力, a graduate of the Lu Xun Art Academy. Ma Li had long believed in the persuasive power of the once ubiquitous City God Temple. As he suggested, “the clay Buddhas, the Ten Courts of Hell, and heaven-and-hell are truly lifelike, so the common people can easily understand them” (Wang Zhi’an, 2010: 7; Wang Zhi’an, 2001: 141). Delighted by the first set of dioramas in the Landlord Manor, he argued for using folk sculptures to arouse class feelings: “Those city god temples can fascinate people, can educate people, why can’t we do the same?” (Xiaoshu, 2008: 17; Wang Zhi’an, 2001: 141).

Under Ma Li’s guidance, traditional temples were a direct inspiration for the Landlord Manor Museum, and the *Rent Collection Courtyard* derived much of its success from its appropriation of religious forms of representation. Elizabeth Perry has recently suggested that the early success of the Chinese Communist Party had to do with what she calls “cultural positioning, or the strategic deployment of a range of symbolic resources (religion, ritual, rhetoric, dress, drama, art, and so on) for purposes of political persuasion” (Perry, 2012: 4). The Landlord Manor drew from all of these resources as well, and Ma Li’s motivations show that local officials borrowed consciously. Thus, our argument takes James Robson’s call to examine how “museums in Asia function in religious ways” one step further; not only did this revolutionary museum function in religious ways, it was based on city god temples all along (Robson, 2010: 121, 126). As Barend ter Haar has argued for the Cultural Revolution, the Communists preserved traditional demonological



**Figure 2.** Artists of the *Rent Collection Courtyard* visiting Xindu's 500-Arhat Temple.

Photo courtesy of Wang Guanyi.

paradigms, replacing demons with class enemies (ter Haar, 1996). The Landlord Manor Museum shows how the Cultural Revolution pump was primed, with Liu Wencai presiding over his own “court of hell” 鬼门关. And while the sculpture series centered on the “old society,” vignettes added during the Cultural Revolution provided virtues to emulate: struggle, resistance, rebellion.

In the journal *Art* 美术, reviews of the *Rent Collection Courtyard* explained that it was a local attempt to create a “socialist temple” 社会主义的庙 for China’s “five hundred million peasants” (Li, 1965: 2). In recent memoirs,

artists related their formal borrowings from sculptures in the City God Temple, which showed sinners crossing hell's gates and enduring punishment. Wang Guanyi particularly recalls a scene of a wife of a netherworld king being held aloft by demons, and explains how the artists discussed the following questions: Didn't the peasants already compare Liu Wencai to the King of Hell? Weren't the judges and their ox- and horse-faced fiends like the savage lackeys 狗腿子 of the landlord? (Wang Guanyi, 2011: 42). The artists also borrowed from the rich variety of facial features and gestures of arhats and added long nails to the landlord's lackeys' hands to make them look like "demon's claws" (Shouzuyuan qundiao, 2001: 10).

The *Rent Collection Courtyard* was portrayed as the hell of "old society," and Liu Wencai reigned over it as a king, surrounded by toadies like the ox- and horse-headed demons of the underworld. Visitors to the Landlord Manor were shown through the museum by docents, in much the same way that laypeople once visited temple caves with monks or were regaled by itinerant storytellers unfurling their scrolls with depictions of hell (Teiser, 2007: 40–42). If the metaphor of the underworld was not clear from the language of the docent's narrative, it was reinforced by visual cues, including the signboard over the water dungeon with its characters shaped by a weeping skull and crossbones. In the 1966 *Rent Collection Courtyard* documentary filmed by the Beijing Television Station, the gates to the manor bear the inscriptions "feudal society that ate people" and "palace of demons" 魔鬼宫殿, while the soundtrack features a sonorous mouth organ 笙. With dramatic musical scoring, camera pans of the still museum displays impart a sense of foreboding: dissonant intervals, slow-moving strings, and a lingering low timbre (Shouzuyuan, 1966).

As a socialist temple, however, the Landlord Manor Museum did not simply depict an otherworldly past. More importantly, it mediated between the past and the present in the same way that traditional temples occupied a liminal space between the local magistrate of the earthly bureaucracy and the judges of the netherworld. In the City God Temple, the threat of hell's punishments was meant to induce good behavior in the viewer. Similarly, Buddhist art told stories that encouraged the emulation of virtues, "ultimately turning the viewer into a worshipper" (Teiser, 2007: 257). The museum as temple thus imparted moral lessons with Mao Zedong quotations as its scripture. It portrayed a hell of the pre-Communist past, not unlike a dharma mirror that reflected Liu Wencai's past crimes but allowed the museum-goer to be the judge. Indeed, in additional scenes appended during the Cultural Revolution, clay worker-peasant-soldiers seized a Liu Wencai brought back to life to be judged by the masses. At the same time, like the liminal space of the temple, the museum blurred old and new society and warned that Liu Wencais



**Figure 3.** Panorama of the Rent Collection Courtyard.  
Photo courtesy of Wang Guanyi.

threatened to slip over the temporal edge and effect a restoration. Both old China's demon and new China's ghost, Liu Wencai had to be conjured up and exorcised again and again.

To make the Landlord Manor Museum and its scenes of hell even more cathartic, propaganda chief Ma Li turned to yet another traditional form: the theater. Already a promoter of the modernization of Sichuan opera, Ma initiated the creation of the *Rent Collection Courtyard*, which became not only model sculpture but also model theater (Wang Zhi'an, 2001: 157). Museum became stage.

## The Museum as Stage

As the artists of the *Rent Collection Courtyard* developed their sculptural series, they drew maps of the space's layout, of where the principal figures would stand, and of how visitors would enter the courtyard and turn to the left, circumambulating the large skylight to view the statues arrayed under the eaves (see Figure 3). One sketch portrays the movement of museum-goers and the tide of their emotions: low ebb, rising tide, climax, falling tide, and second climax. Another map locates a few main characters and uses dotted lines to indicate eyeline matches: the widow woman looks at Liu Wencai, the peasants regard the lackey with his dog, and the strapping youths in the final tableaux stare back at Liu Wencai with growing resolve to struggle (Shouzuyuan qundiao, 2001: 8–9). These maps demonstrate that the *Rent Collection Courtyard* was designed as a work of theater, that the silent clay figures were to interact with each other, and that the audience was part of the play. Indeed, Cai Guoqiang's *Venice Rent Collection Courtyard* was not the first to turn sculpture into performance. Rather, as we show in this section, the production and reception of the original work was also performative through and through—not in the sense of avant-garde performance art but rather as a “model theatrical work.”



Model theatrical work 样板戏 refers to a series of revolutionary operas and two ballets created during the Mao period under the direction of Mao's wife, Jiang Qing 江青. Just as Jiang Qing took on the modernization of Peking operas that would be suitable for a new China, Ma Li was an enthusiastic patron and reformer of Sichuan opera from 1963 to 1965 (Wang Zhi'an, 2001: 157). As he assembled theatrical troupes, Ma mobilized local artists, teachers, and cultural workers to redecorate the spacious and vacant rent collection courtyard by National Day, October 1, 1965. The eight members of the artistic team included a scriptwriter, a photographer, and several sculptors, among them a third generation folk sculptor. Ma Li told his team to first study Mao's "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" to "concentrate, synthesize, and epitomize with slight exaggerations, and to join revolutionary realism with revolutionary romanticism" (Wang Zhi'an, 2001: 156–59, 192–96; Wang Zhi'an, 2010: 16–17). The artistic team then "went among the masses" to interview local peasants and to draft sketches of possible sculptural tableaux. Using a "single main character as a thread running through the entire sculptural series," they wrote a script with seven plot parts or "emotional joints" 情节: delivering the rent, checking the grain, the winnower, the peck measure, accounting, forcing payment, and outrage/resistance (Wang Zhi'an, 2010: 10; Wang Zhi'an, 2001: 163). The artistic team then invited the local Sichuan opera troupe to come and serve as their models, directing the actors to perform *tableaux vivants*. Before curious local peasants who watched the unfolding spectacle, the artists went through four drafts of narrative and storyboard, submitting their work to local officials and peasant representatives for feedback (Wang Zhi'an, 2001: 165–67, 222–30).

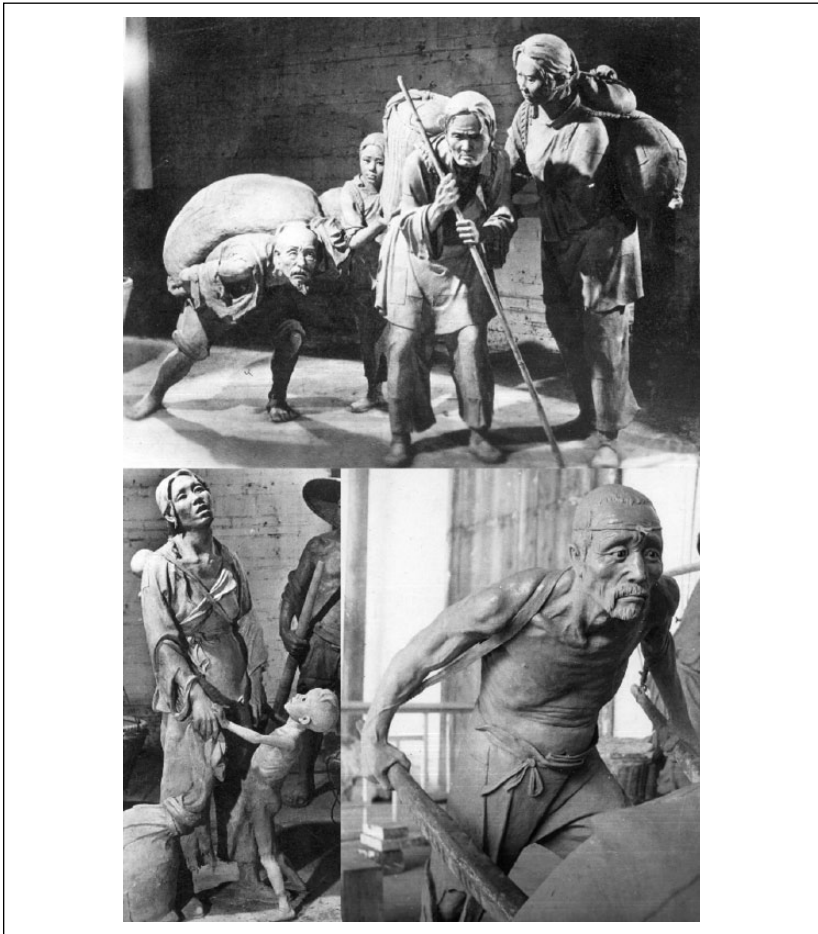
When museum officials first wrote to the Sichuan Art Academy to ask for assistance in May 1965, the Department of Sculpture was divided, with opponents arguing that the *Rent Collection Courtyard* was only a "political task" of "making models" 做模型 instead of "art" 艺术. In the end, two teachers, Wang Guanyi and Zhao Shutong 赵树同, took five of their graduates to Anren in early June, with another group of incoming students joining in September (Wang Zhi'an, 2010: 12–14; Wang Zhi'an, 2001: 179–83). Ma Li encouraged folk artists skilled at sculpting bodhisattvas and the academy artists trained in Soviet-style Western sculpture to learn from each other, "breaking old frames and foreign frames" to stage a revolution in sculpture. In his pep talk, Ma Li followed Mao's Yan'an talks in lockstep: the artists would learn from the masses, real stories would be transformed to make typical 典型 characters, the past would serve the present, and the foreign would serve China (Wang Zhi'an, 2001: 192–96; Wang Zhi'an, 2010: 16–17).

The expanded artistic team of Sichuan Art Academy students and graduates elaborated on the original script, deciding that the desired response to the

work was “tears, hatred, and strength” 哭, 恨, 劲, like the classical dramatic structure of the theater or a symphony. Employing the vocabulary of traditional opera, the team called Liu Wencai’s appearance the “dramatic highlight” 重头戏 (Wang Zhi’an, 2001: 196–202, 205, 258; Shouzuyuan nisu chuanguozuo, 1965: 4–5). Summarizing the creative process in a special issue of *Art*, the artists spelled out a layered and complex emotional progression for both the statues and their audience: “There must be hatred within bitterness, evil within cunning, hatred within sadness, and enlightenment within revenge” 苦中有恨, 奸中有恶, 悲中有恨, 仇中有悟 (Shouzuyuan nisu chuanguozuo, 1965: 6–7).

Though the medium of sculpture seems the opposite of theater, museumified and frozen in time rather than living and moving, the artists endeavored to enliven the statues. Taking Ma Li’s exhortation to combine their talents, the folk artist Jiang Quanguai 姜全贵 sculpted clothing that was “so vivid, one feels that one could take it off the sculpted figures.” Yet the face he sculpted still looked like that of a bodhisattva, so academy teacher Zhao Shutong remade the visage into a “modern peasant face.” Li Qisheng 李奇生 sculpted the figure of an old man wheeling in grain, tying a real piece of straw around his head to keep the sweat from flowing into his eyes, made out of black glass (Wang Zhi’an, 2001: 240–46). Thus the clay figures were to look not only real but also “sentient.” To further enhance the variety and vividness of the clay figures, the artists went to market fairs and the local grain collection depot to sketch and snap photographs of villagers. Peasants who worked the clay, and others simply passing by, became their spectators, critics, and models (Wang Zhi’an, 2001: 260–62; Wang Zhi’an, 2010: 25–26; Interview with Wu Hongyuan, August 27, 2013). The production of the *Rent Collection Courtyard* was permeated by the performativity of the sculptors, their models, and the final sculpted figures (see Figures 4 and 5).

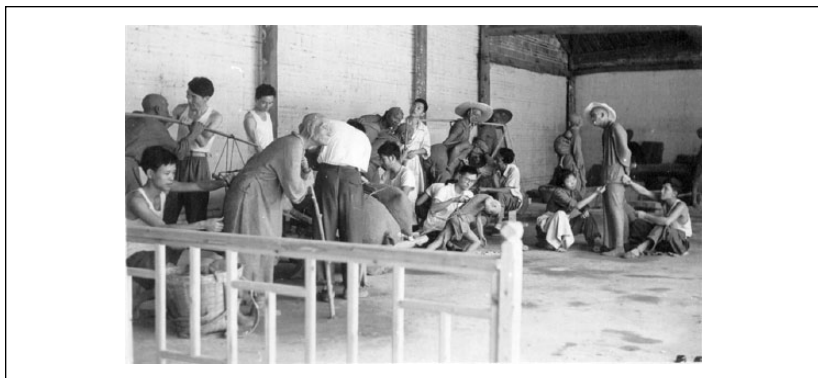
Lighting and sound also helped to animate the *Rent Collection Courtyard* both onsite and in the 1966 documentary. The first journalist to photograph the *Rent Collection Courtyard* for publication borrowed lights from the local opera troupe to heighten the drama of his photos (Wang Zhi’an, 2001: 67–70). In Shanghai, officials in charge of staging a replica wanted to have colored lights, blue for the scenes of “old society” and red for scenes of resistance and revolt (Shanghai Municipal Archive, B244-3-143: 190). The documentary used chiaroscuro lighting and other cinematographic devices to bring the sculpted figures to life: high and low camera angles conveyed power and vulnerability; panoramic pans simulated the museum visitor’s walk through the exhibit; alternating male and female voiceovers ventriloquized individual statues as the camera zoomed in on their faces and then dramatized the characters’ “points of view” by cutting to other clay figures (Shouzuyuan, 1966).



**Figure 4.** Sculptures from the Rent Collection Courtyard.

Photos courtesy of Wang Guanyi.

Immortalized in the documentary and recorded in local gazetteers as literature, the narration was an indispensable part of every visit to the Landlord Manor, whether played on loop over the loudspeaker or spoken by a docent. According to Wu Hongyuan, all new docents in the 1970s had to undergo training in standard Mandarin, recording their voices to perfect them; they memorized a script and where to stand with each line; and each gesture and motion with a conductor's baton was also prescribed (Interview, August 26, 2013).



**Figure 5.** Sculptors working on the *Rent Collection Courtyard* in 1965.  
Photo courtesy of Wang Guanyi.

The audience, its waves of emotions already scripted, were also part of the interactive performance. Among the first visitors to the *Rent Collection Courtyard* was a group of old peasant women who, unprompted, beat the statues with their walking sticks. Not convinced that even clay representations did not deserve a beating to “assuage their hatred” 解恨, the women were finally persuaded to “speak bitterness” instead, walking through all of the scenes and narrating as they went (Shouzuyuan qundiao, 2001: 11). Visitors to the Shanghai replica sang “The East is Red” and shouted slogans like “Never forget class struggle! Remember blood-and-tears hatred!” (Shanghai Municipal Archive, B244-3-143: 146, 156). In the Beijing version, a Palace Museum official who had been denounced was forced to stand among the clay figures as a “Living Liu Wencai” while he was abused and beaten by Red Guards (Barmé, 2008: 19–20). In late May 1967, rebel factions at the China Musical Dance Theater and the China Youth Art Theater wrote and staged a musical 歌舞剧 adapted from the *Rent Collection Courtyard*, which combined dance, music, spoken dialogue, and poetry recitation (Clark, 2008: 194). Even after the Cultural Revolution had concluded, as Wu Hongyuan remembers, visitors to the Landlord Manor Museum continued to spit on the Liu Wencai figure; at night before going home the museum workers had to wipe off the layers of spittle.

The success of the *Rent Collection Courtyard* as a model work was measured by its ability to turn audiences into performers. Certainly, it was also praised for its collective authorship, its modernization of tradition and its Sinicization of the Western, and for creating revolutionary artwork accessible

to the masses. Yet just as model works were models “not solely for a new Chinese culture, but also for a new Chinese person,” the *Rent Collection Courtyard* was not just a model for how to mold clay, but also for shaping the postures, emotions, and spirit of its audiences (Clark, 2010: 171). Sculpture thus became an art of enlivenment and liminal transformation. With Mao’s death in 1976 marking the end of the Cultural Revolution, however, the era of the model works drew slowly to a close. As the Communist Party began to reassess its recent history, the Landlord Manor Museum has become a courtroom, the model work now a case to be judged.

## The Museum as Courtroom

For Liu Xiaofei, the long-suffering grandson of Liu Wencai, the *Rent Collection Courtyard* is theater in the sense of farce (Liu, 2014). Showing his own penchant for political theater, Liu Xiaofei has done much more than give personal tours to the occasional academic or journalist. On two occasions, at the time of the Qingming grave-sweeping festivals of 2010 and 2013, Liu staged a big family reunion at the manor’s very gates. Comprising not only members of the Liu clan but also former tenant farmers and members of the household, the first of what Liu Xiaofei calls “friendship gatherings” 友谊会 swelled to over a thousand people spilling around 75 tables set up under tents. The online photographs of the event portray a Liu Xiaofei triumphant, leading a parade of a hundred through the cobblestone streets of Anren with an elderly man on each arm, one a tenant farmer and the other a hired hand. Between the parade and a luncheon that looked part sit-in, part carnival, Liu Xiaofei gave a tour of what had, for the moment, become his grandfather’s house again (Meng, 2013) (see Figure 6). In Liu Xiaofei’s present-day quest, the manor is a courtroom in which history is judged.

In some ways, the Landlord Manor Museum has always been a site of judgment and a stage for testimonies, with its exhibits serving as “material evidence” of historical crimes. Though Liu Wencai’s death on the eve of Liberation deprived the new people’s government of a public tribunal, the museum could still expose the evils of the landlord class with exhibitions of his land deeds, counterfeit currency, guns, and instruments of torture. Bodies also served as evidence: a family cook, for example, showed museum visitors the scars he suffered from spring-loaded whips (Wan’e de dizhu zhuangyuan, 1965: 13–27; Zui’e de dizhu zhuangyuan, 1963: 38).<sup>9</sup> At the height of the Mao years, the authorities fabricated evidence like the water dungeon, while “witnesses” like Leng Yueying readily gave false testimony that produced real tears of outrage among millions of listeners. In the Cultural Revolution,



**Figure 6.** Liu Xiaofei with former hired hand Wu Zhixuan and surrounded by descendants of his grandfather's tenants, giving his own tour of his family home in 2013. Photos courtesy of Liu Xiaofei.

the Landlord Manor Museum and the *Rent Collection Courtyard* also served as sites for show trials of newly denounced “class enemies” at the national and local levels.

After the Cultural Revolution, the Landlord Manor Museum officials searched for different kinds of evidence, as part of a movement to “redress unjust cases” and “seek truth from facts.” As visitors and ticket sales dramatically decreased after 1978, the museum was demoted to county-level administration in 1984, and museum officials, after conducting research and holding conferences, slowly revised the exhibits. They took down the signboards promoting class struggle and replaced the torture instruments room with a gallery of porcelain (Interviews with Wu Hongyuan, August 26 and 27, 2013). With provincial permission in 1988, the Landlord Manor Museum converted the water dungeon into an “opium storage room,” removed the nail-spiked cages, and whitewashed over the “bloody handprints” on the walls (Wu Zhiwei, 2013).



Yet twenty-five years later, the case of Liu Wencai remains unresolved. Wu Hongyuan, now retired as director, admitted that any kind of redress faced “social pressures,” and that he could only “proceed cautiously, making modifications according to the facts that [he] could verify” (Interview, August 27, 2013). An official booklet on the Landlord Manor that he coauthored in 1992 referred to the *Rent Collection Courtyard* as an artistic achievement and explained that the opium storage room had once been mistaken as a water dungeon. Still, the manor remains a witness to “the history of the landlord class oppressing and exploiting the working people” (Wu Jinzhong, 1992).

The “social pressures” to which Wu Hongyuan refers describe two camps. One seeks full redress of Liu Wencai as an individual, and the second claims that the rehabilitation of this representative of the landlord class would unsettle the very foundation of the Communist Party. The first view is represented by the former *Southern Weekend* journalist Xiaoshu 笑蜀, who has written two books on the Liu Wencai story. Based on oral histories and the museum’s own archives, Xiaoshu’s work is an exposé of the fabrications surrounding Liu Wencai. Echoing the idea of the museum as a temple, Xiaoshu argues that Liu Wencai was literally exhumed and then metaphorically revived because “if you want to create gods, then you must also create demons” as a “foil to the brilliance of the gods” (Xiaoshu, 2008: 5). Xiaoshu’s meticulous examination shows how, for example, oral histories lacking corroboration were embroidered to create the first wax dioramas. Quoting from directives found in the archives, Xiaoshu establishes that by 1964 officials were told that “neither real people nor real incidents are necessary” (Xiaoshu, 2008: 18–29). Aiming to reconstruct both the historical Liu Wencai and the history of the museum itself, Xiaoshu’s books have spawned over a decade of debate and even a multipart documentary by Hong Kong’s Phoenix Television.

The opposing camp is represented by a half-dozen retired cadres, including the local party secretary who had presided over land reform. They reject Xiaoshu’s writings and the Phoenix Television documentary as attempts to “reverse the verdict on Liu Wencai.” For the old cadres, the removal of the water dungeon is simply a matter of removing the excesses of the Mao period; it does not a rehabilitation of Liu Wencai make. After all, Liu Wencai was indeed a landlord, and to rehabilitate him would be to reject the Party’s correct judgment and land reform itself. Second, the old cadres hold that Liu Wencai’s hands “are soaked in the blood of revolutionary martyrs” (Ren, 2008: 1). Collecting the testimony of the martyrs’ survivors, the old cadres claim that Liu Wencai’s is an ironclad case with “iron facts like a mountain” 铁证如山, and the Landlord Manor cannot have its “political cap” removed. Though Liu had escaped justice, the widow Zeng née Tang 曾唐氏 asserted, his crimes were already written in history. If Xiaoshu wanted to overturn the



verdict, the widow Zeng's narrative declares, he should first come for her own testimony (Ren, 2008: 173). While the old cadres' accusations are mostly rhetorical, their tenacity demonstrates what is at stake: the party's legitimacy at the moment of Liberation, not just in Anren but in every village that had a Liu Wencai.

Xiaoshu has since turned to other causes, and as the old cadres have begun to pass away, Liu Xiaofei stands alone. Since his retirement as a petroleum worker, he has poured his pension into his own project to restore Liu Wencai's good name. The tour he conducted on our visit to Anren reflects this single-minded passion. Beginning in the entry courtyard and proceeding to the period rooms, which still contain the dragon bed, Liu Xiaofei's testimony relied not only on rebutting the artifacts and the signage, but on bringing the Mao-era narrative back to life: this was *not* the courtyard in which the Liu family feasted to the sounds of starving peasants outside; this was *never* a water dungeon *or* an opium storehouse, either. Before a trio of statues added in 1977 and entitled "Seizing Property by Killing," Liu Xiaofei explained that the clay figure depicted as the "landlord's lackey" was actually a villager called Cao Keming 曹克明 who was framed for murder in the Mao period. As his face crumpled and he wept, Liu related that Cao was tortured into confession using the very methods attributed to Liu Wencai—hanging by one's arms. Then the illiterate Cao was forced to imprint his thumb on a judgment that sent him to prison. After he was released in the Reform era, he tried to clear his name. But, told that his association with the Landlord Manor made it impossible, Cao Keming drank poison and died on the steps of the local people's court. Imprisoned in clay, Cao Keming was first destroyed by the revolution and then forced to lend his image to its glorification, a soul twice stolen.

Liu's counternarrative is thus composed of many testimonies. For the authenticity of his grandfather's house, he calls on his own memory and those of his family members; in the *Rent Collection Courtyard* he quotes from former tenant farmers, relating their incredulity at hearing the Mao-era script and their own accounts of rent collection as, on the contrary, a scene of happy feasting. In some cases, he attacked the logic of the exhibition, past and present: Who would have a water dungeon filled with rotting corpses in one's own home? If Liu Wencai had so many lackeys, why don't they appear on the present-day chart of employees? If the *Rent Collection Courtyard* statues really depict starving peasants, why does this one look so well-fed?

Beneath the tangle of these narratives and their crisscrossing logic, Liu Xiaofei denounces the Landlord Manor Museum and the suffering that such propaganda both masked and extended. It matters less that the dragon bed was fabricated and more that it was made at enormous expense at a time

when peasants were starving. It is not just that the revolution sculpted clay figures to be its witnesses, but that real people were evicted and sent off to be famine's victims. If the Cao Keming story is true, then clearing the name of the Landlord Manor is required to appease his hungry ghost. Until then, Liu's counternarrative is a text of revolution betrayed.

But in his grandfather's own house, Liu is a petitioner more than a lawyer. His momentary day in court must be purchased with a thirty-yuan ticket. Though a small group of tourists eventually followed us, one man even asking for a photo with a "fellow grandson of a landlord," the group quickly disbanded in the final courtyard, long since stripped of the sculptures of the Cultural Revolution "tail." To many among a present-day audience the testimony of the old cadres and Liu Xiaofei are anachronisms, still reaching for Mao-era bitterness narratives to make their opposing cases. Still, Liu Xiaofei believes that his truth-telling has resulted in changes to the narrative, and historian Guo Wu shows how images of the evil landlord have been and continue to be deconstructed (Wu, 2013). But today's public court of opinion has another bid on its attention: the marketplace of memory.

## The Museum as Marketplace

As the members of Liu Xiaofei's alternative museum tour spilled out through the final courtyard, they encountered the kiosks and snack shops ubiquitous at Chinese tourist sites. In addition to generic souvenirs, these shops offered up the landlord for sale. Restaurants served "mistress ribs" and "landlord noodles." A silk "landlord hat" was sold next to an army-green baseball cap with a Chairman Mao in profile. In addition to books and pirated VCDs about Liu Wencai, one of the bestselling souvenirs was a set of poker cards called "Struggle the Landlord" 斗地主. On each card the clay figures of the *Rent Collection Courtyard* are reimagined as cute illustrations, the jacks portraying the landlord's lackey and his dog, and the joker card reserved for Liu Wencai himself, a rosy-cheeked cartoon figure twirling his beard (see Figure 7). In China's contemporary tourist marketplace, the local people have also dissolved official narratives, taken history into their own hands, and profited from the Landlord Manor.

This final section chronicles how the museum town of Anren adapted to the market reforms in the 1980s and examines the changes wrought by the Landlord Manor's new neighbor, the Jianchuan Museum Cluster. The end of the Cultural Revolution took away the *Rent Collection Courtyard's* spotlight as model work, and the museum suddenly had to become marketable. As incomes rose during China's "economic miracle," the new Chinese middle class began to travel, and local townsfolk became invested in making Anren



**Figure 7.** Playing cards for the game “Struggle the Landlord” (above) and “Landlord,” Chairman Mao, and army hats for sale in Anren (below).  
Photo by Jie Li.

into a tourist attraction. In some cases, people like the snack shop proprietor were able to profit from their affiliation with Liu Wencai. After his family suffered for decades because his Grandfather Liu (no relation) was Liu Wencai’s butler, the young Mr. Liu—teased as a boy because his grandfather was thought to be the abacus-wielding statue—now makes his living selling the “authentic” Liu family’s “favorite snacks.” From the 2000s, Anren’s star has risen because of the Jianchuan Museum Cluster. Founded by real estate mogul and mega-collector Fan Jianchuan 樊建川, the museum series is China’s largest private collection and includes several “Red Age” 红色年代 museums that focus on the Mao era. While some scholars have used “commodification” to characterize Chinese museums in today’s market economy (Denton, 2014; Dutton, 2005), and though Mao’s replacement by Mammon is already a cliché, we argue that the commodity form is more complex.

Instead of merely erasing history, the marketing of Mao memorabilia can offer alternative, even subversive, understandings of the recent past.

The Landlord Manor Museum, as the preceding section has suggested, struggled to reinvent itself in the 1980s. Museum officials tried to earn extra revenue by using the manor's courtyards to show films and stage operas. They even held fashion shows, hosted a martial arts school, and opened a zoo with tigers, leopards, and snakes. In 1988, the manor home of Liu Wencai's brother Liu Wenhui—lumped with the Landlord Manor in Mao-era propaganda—was reestablished as the West Sichuan Ethnographic Museum 川西民俗博物馆, with items related to local marriage customs, everyday practices, and local folk art. One of the proudest achievements of Wu Hongyuan's tenure as director from 1990 to 2000 was the addition of a Cultural Relics and Treasures Museum 文物珍品馆. Though few of the objects—furniture, jewelry, porcelain, art, and antiques—belonged to Liu Wencai, the museum became so popular that Wu Hongyuan recouped his investment in one year's time (Wu Zhiwei, 2013). On our visit to Anren in 2013 this museum was the first stop on our combination ticket, and the entry was flanked on the left and right by replicas for sale. The *Rent Collection Courtyard*, too, was described by tour guides in art connoisseurial terms—as an internationally renowned artwork that won the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale. Eavesdropping on the comments of our fellow tourists, we had the impression that the landlord's material possessions, his multiple wives, and his protection by the local militia were models worthy of emulation rather than objects to be detested. Some were even underwhelmed: “Is *this* all the luxury a landlord had?” Before the sculpture of a destitute peasant, a mother said to her child: “If you don't study hard, you'll grow up to be like him.”

Across the street at the Jianchuan Museum Cluster—at 33 hectares dwarfing the Liu Family Manor Museum—the opportunities of the market have led to a new, private display of history. One of our local pedicab drivers likened Fan Jianchuan to the “new landlord in town,” just as good as Liu Wencai because both created jobs and built public facilities like roads and museums. As a small boy, Fan Jianchuan began collecting things related to the Cultural Revolution—Mao badges, Red Guard armbands, and various flyers and pamphlets—eventually amassing an astounding collection of millions of “red artifacts”—China's largest. Funding his collection fever with his real estate fortune made since the 1990s, Fan Jianchuan receives hundreds of containers of artifacts a year from his nationwide network of flea market contacts. In his 6,000 square meters of warehouse space, for example, Fan Jianchuan holds 30 tons of handwritten materials, 20,000 diaries, a hundred thousand propaganda posters, and millions of Mao badges (Fan, 2013: 131–32).



**Figure 8.** A display from “Red Age Daily Necessities” re-creates a typical home with everyday objects. Note the Jianchuan Museum logo (JH) on the glass barrier. Photo by Denise Y. Ho.

Fan originally intended to call his museum complex a “museum supermarket” (Interview with Fan Jianchuan, August 26, 2013). Indeed, both quantity and choice mark the fifteen-plus museums and other memorial spaces, commemorating the Anti-Japanese War, the Mao era (called the “Red Age”), and the recent Sichuan Earthquake. Outside exhibition halls, loudspeakers blasted “red songs,” consisting of hosannas to Chairman Mao and patriotic songs of resistance against the Japanese invasion from the 1930s. The soundscape of the museum supermarket is echoed in the uniforms worn by staff punching tickets at each hall’s entrance, at once reminiscent of Red Army soldiers and Red Guards, visually conflating the War of Resistance and the Cultural Revolution. The museum complex also includes facilities like a budget hostel for “Red Guards,” a “People’s Commune” restaurant, and souvenir shops featuring authentic artifacts like Cultural Revolution porcelain and vintage newspapers alongside t-shirts designed by Fan Jianchuan himself.

In curating his museum complex, Fan Jianchuan has traveled the world, drawing inspiration especially from sites like the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum and the Yasukuni Shrine Museum (Interview with Fan Jianchuan, August 26, 2013). Though he eventually jettisoned the title “museum supermarket,” Fan Jianchuan still organizes his artifacts not by chronology but by material and function, so that the first museums in the “Red Age” series were devoted to porcelain; daily necessities; Mao badges, clocks, and seals; and mirrors. Within a museum on “Red Age Daily Necessities” 红色年代生活用品陈列馆, the objects are further displayed by category: matches, records, projection slides, enamel cups, pencil boxes, musical instruments, and radios, all depersonalized to represent social types and evoke collective memories (see Figure 8).

Despite the supermarket metaphor and the sheer quantity of objects, it would be a simplification to say that the Jianchuan Museum Cluster is



**Figure 9.** A hall of clocks framing a rotunda with violent photographs (left) and a guerilla exhibit with “wanted circulars” from the Cultural Revolution (right). Photos by Jie Li.

commodifying the Maoist past into oblivion. Though in interviews Fan Jianchuan was quick to say that only future generations shall judge history, inherent in his curatorial practice are his opinions and sentiments. Turning exhibitions of artifacts into installation art, Fan shows off the sheer quantity of his collections through an aesthetic of the mass ornament, arranging Mao badges into four giant Mao faces, turning seals into paving stones, clocks into a catacomb-like wall display, and mirrors into labyrinths. “The seals,” tour guides explain, “once had power over life and death; now we step on them to show our contempt” (Fan, 2007: 108–17). Similarly, the eerie ticking and chiming of 112 clocks from the Cultural Revolution next to a rotunda lined with violent photographs from the period are meant to serve as “alarm bells” 警钟 against history’s repetition (see Figure 9, left). The Museum of Sent-Down Youth 知青生活馆 contains a central atrium filled with broken mirrors amidst rusty farm implements, poignantly suggesting the disenchantment that accompanied the mass movement in which Fan himself took part. By virtue of their arrangement, the objects take on new rhetorical powers.

Moreover, Fan Jianchuan’s curatorial practices play hide-and-seek with local censors. Unlike Liu Xiaofei, a lone petitioner, Fan Jianchuan has access to money and power, which means he does not merely challenge history in an official museum. With his private capital, he has built and curated his own growing museum empire. With his military connections, he escaped arrest

when collecting Sichuan earthquake artifacts. To help navigate local politics Fan has a personal advisor in Wu Hongyuan, a retiree of the Landlord Manor and the Bureau of Propaganda.

Nonetheless, what we call Fan Jianchuan's "guerilla exhibits" of sensitive, unapproved materials take semi-permanent and impermanent forms. An example of the former is an alcove in the Red Age Daily Necessities Museum, devoted to the film actor Feng Zhe 冯喆, who committed suicide in Anren during the Cultural Revolution. In a small shrine devoted to his memory, Fan Jianchuan installed photos and documents from Feng's family. An example of an impermanent guerilla exhibit is an outdoor display—hosted by the museum cluster in 2009—of photographs and posters from the Great Leap Forward next to the "People's Commune" restaurant. The images of agricultural utopia, clearly doctored and bearing their original captions, would appear ironic to anyone vaguely acquainted with the famine that ensued. In 2013, several of the "Red Age" museums included embedded glass cases, often holding documents with no other theme in common but their political sensitivity: interrogation records, lists of counterrevolutionary slogans, reportage on economic crimes, documents listing objects confiscated by Red Guards. Within the museum of mirrors, a room is furnished with "wanted circulars" from the Cultural Revolution (see Figure 9, right). The penultimate room in the Museum of Sent-Down Youth holds documents of strange cases such as accidental deaths, all with names blocked out with strips of yellow paper. Representing a tenuous edge between official and unofficial history, such guerilla exhibits offer a counternarrative, however fragmentary, of a private museum under official surveillance.

In some ways, these guerilla exhibits serve as placeholders for the museums Fan Jianchuan still wants to build. His sixth "Red Age" museum, a comprehensive permanent exhibition of the entire Mao era, is awaiting approval from central government censors. In the meantime, he envisions future museums centered on still taboo topics: the house searches and the factional warfare of the Cultural Revolution, the post-Great Leap famine, and even a museum devoted to confessions and denunciations. On the surface Fan Jianchuan is blithe about politics and willing to bide his time, sympathizing with the censors who have no yardstick for his museum cluster. He insisted that "a museum must restrain its own attitude and let the artifacts speak" (Interview, August 26, 2013). In fact, many of the museums bear signs that read, "Quiet, do not speak; let the artifacts speak." At the same time, Fan slips artifacts past the censors and onto the shelves of his museum supermarket, testing to see what the consumers of red memorabilia will buy.



## Conclusion

At the entrance to his museum cluster, Fan Jianchuan emblazoned his curatorial manifesto: "A human life lasts a century. Paper lasts a millennium. Stones and metal ten thousand years!" This suggests that museums are a permanent repository, sites that will preserve artifacts for the ages. By contrast, Cai Guoqiang's *Venice Rent Collection Courtyard* of 1999 was ephemeral by design; clay was left unprocessed so that the first statues would dry and crumble as the later ones were shaped. Have socialist China's material remains found a home in Fan's monument? Or are they so devoid of context that the socialist icon disintegrates, clay to dust? This narrative of Anren proposes a third interpretation. The key to this museum town's persistence has not been its material permanence but its malleability and transformation.

Indeed, over time Anren has enlivened the past to address contemporary concerns. As a parade of spoils at Liberation, the exhibition and redistribution of the landlord's loot catalyzed the peasants' revolutionary sentiment. In new China's classroom, its tangible objects legitimized bitterness narratives; its juxtaposition of decadence and destitution taught audiences to enumerate inequality and read everyday artifacts in class terms. To denounce the "old society" as a hell, the museum made Liu Wencai old China's demon and new China's ghost. On the eve of the Cultural Revolution, the landlord's courtyard became an interactive stage, where silent clay figures striking operatic poses elicited "tears, hatred, and strength." In the post-Mao era the museum has been a courtroom where historical cases are debated and alternative testimonies are offered. Simultaneously it has been subject to market reforms and the changing tastes of the newly rich tourist. Museums in China have been, and are, living spaces.

From the Republican to the Reform era, the museum town of Anren has refracted multiple layers of modern Chinese history. Its transformation challenges dichotomies between public and private, fact and fiction, secular and sacred, material and spiritual, serious and playful. At the same time, the top-down narratives of the Mao period have given way to post-socialist counter-narratives. Liu Xiaofei's alternative testimony and Fan Jianchuan's guerilla exhibits not only work to restore the past, they also evoke and debunk the myths of the Mao era. The museum in the People's Republic remains a powerful crucible for the alchemy of collective memories.

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## Notes

1. All interviews took place in Anren, Sichuan province.
2. Members of the Liu family continue to be treated very differently. Compared to Liu Wencai's home, the nearby Liu Wenhui manor is curated by Fan Jianchuan and its exhibits hagiographic. While nephew Liu Xiang rests in a prominent tomb in Chengdu, Liu Wencai's grave was recently exhumed to make way for construction, and remains unmarked. Thanks to James Flath for the reference to the Liu Xiang tomb.
3. The late Qing dynasty journal *Mengxuebao* (The children's educator) explains how to use everyday objects in the classroom, holding them up and explaining their usage. Such "object lessons" were popularized in nineteenth-century American pedagogy.
4. For an example, see "Shanghai gehang geye dagao huiyi duibi jinxing jieji jiaoyu" (Every industry in Shanghai carries out "huiyi duibi" for class education), *Neibu cankao*, December 6, 1963: 2–8.
5. In those years, land under cultivation decreased by 126, 272 *mu*, grain production fell by 137,820,000 *jin*, and the livestock count decreased by 102,223 head (Dayi xian zhi, 1991: 67).
6. In a report authored by the Sichuan Party Committee on the orphan situation in Anren Commune, 37.8 percent of orphans had nowhere to go, and some had been robbed of their rooms, property, and subsistence plots by relatives, neighbors, and cadres (Wenjiang diwei, 1961).
7. For an insightful analysis of the water dungeon exhibit and Leng Yueying's narrative, see Haiyan Lee (2104: 231), who uses Julia Kristeva's theory to argue that "the water dungeon was a primary material-textual site for the ritual process of abjection that delivered the birth of the socialist subject."
8. Many blog posts that refer to Liu Wencai mention learning about him and the *Rent Collection Courtyard* through primary and middle school textbooks, and

one informant insisted that the Landlord Manor was on the first page of the modern history textbook. While our survey of contemporary textbooks did not uncover such a book, it remains significant that Liu is remembered this way. One of our Chinese undergraduates, a junior in 2013, recalled learning about Liu Wencai in school.

9. In the former book, the man is Wan Hongrong, and in the latter book, his name is Wan Hongyun, but the story is the same.

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