

# Forgotten Sites of Memory: Allied Prisoner-of-War Camps in Chinese Taiwan during World War II and the Politics of Historical Remembrance— An Analysis Based on the Theory of *Lieux de Mémoire*

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**Abstract:** Taking the theory of *lieux de mémoire* ("sites of memory") proposed by the French historian Pierre Nora as an analytical framework, this study examines how the historical spaces of World War II POW camps in Taiwan, China, have become—or failed to become—triggers for collective social memory. Drawing upon the concept of "negative heritage," the paper further analyzes the absence of effective mechanisms in cultural governance, heritage preservation, political recognition, and commemorative practices. Through textual analysis, policy review, and spatial observation, the study proposes new perspectives for the preservation and reactivation of the historical memory embedded in these POW camp sites in Taiwan, China.

**Keywords:** Chinese Taiwan; Allied Prisoner-of-War Camps; *Lieux de Mémoire*; Heritage Preservation

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The French historian Pierre Nora put forward the concept of "*lieux de mémoire*" (sites of memory) to explain how, as living collective memory gradually moves away from everyday social life, physical places, monuments, rituals and narratives begin to serve as substitutes for keeping history alive. Now, many countries that have been victims of war or colonialism have converted former sites of war, such as concentration camps and detention centres, into public spaces for historical memory. Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp in Germany, Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration Camp in Poland and Robben Island in South Africa are typical cases. Chinese Taiwan was once an important logistical base for Japan in the war, and at least fifteen Allied prisoner-of-war camps were established here, as well as the Taipei Prison where captured Allied airmen were held. More than seventy years have passed since the war, and these sites have still not been formally included in the official cultural heritage system of Chinese Taiwan. Public awareness of their history is also relatively low.

## 1 Sites and Memory: The Disappearance of Dual Spaces

Based on the research of academics and field studies, at least fifteen POW camps and one POW detention centre were built across Chinese Taiwan during World War II, and they were distributed in various parts of the island. Among them were Jinguashi POW Camp, Xindian POW Camp, Youmu POW Camp in Sanxia, Muzha POW Camp in Taipei, Dazhi POW Camp in Taipei, a temporary POW camp in Taipei, Taichung POW Camp, Douliu POW Camp, Yuanlin POW Camp, Yuanlin Temporary POW Camp, Baihe POW Camp, Hualien Harbor POW Camp, Yuli POW Camp, Linluo POW Camp, Kaohsiung POW Camp, and the Taipei Prison, where captured Allied airmen were held. These sixteen sites housed prisoners of war from the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, the Netherlands, Canada and other Allied countries. A large number of prisoners were held in these camps, and many high-ranking military officers and senior civilian officials were also among them.<sup>[1]</sup>

The area of the Japanese military government was chosen to help to supervise the detention areas and use prisoners of war for labour. Some camps, such as those at Jinguashi and Xindian, were in remote areas rich in mineral resources,<sup>[2]</sup> and the prisoners there endured extremely harsh forced labour conditions and thus had a high death rate.

However, after the end of World War II, with a rapid political change in Chinese Taiwan and the development of land and cities, most of the former POW camp sites have gradually been forgotten by the people of Taiwan region. For example, the former site of the Muzha POW Camp was sold to private developers after the war and has been converted into a residential area since then. The Douliu POW Camp was built on the grounds of Gouba Elementary School, and some of the former classrooms of the POW camp still exist; however, all of these structures were completely destroyed in 2003. Although the Linluo POW Camp site was relatively intact for a long time, by 2019 it had been almost rebuilt as a stray dog shelter. Despite having rich symbolic value, when the Taipei Cultural Affairs Bureau designated it a cultural heritage area, they deliberately excluded the history of the World War II POW camp. As a result, it cannot serve the purpose of a "site of memory".

Although the official authorities have been ignoring the history of POW camps for a long time, some civil society organisations have tried to step in. The Taiwan region POW Camps Memorial Society is one such organisation, founded by relatives of former POWs and international supporters. Since the late 1990s, the organisation has continuously erected memorial monuments at several former camp sites and organised annual commemorative ceremonies; however, these commemorative activities have mainly been aimed at the foreign community and have lacked effective interaction with Chinese Taiwanese society or translation into local historical discourse. Therefore, they have not gained the attention of the general public, and more significantly, memorial monuments built by private groups do not enjoy the formal legal protection granted to cultural heritage sites.

## 2 Institutions and Culture: The Absence of Dual Governance

The long-standing collective silence about the sites of Allied POW camps in Chinese Taiwan is not merely due to accidental oblivion; rather, it is the result of a failure in the institutional construction of social memory. The phenomenon of "silence" is the result of the interplay between the mechanisms of cultural heritage recognition, the logic of local cultural governance, and the broader system for constructing historical narratives; thus, it has taken the form of organised denial. The reason these POW camp sites have not been listed as places of national characteristic and are thus not included in the general history curriculum is not a lack of historical value, but rather that they have "politically inconvenient" origins and have been marginalised in the mainstream history narrative.

In accordance with China's Taiwan's Cultural Heritage Protection Act, local governments are responsible for initiating the design of cultural heritage areas and having them approved by expert committees prior to formal announcement. However, among the fifteen POW camps and the Taipei Prison site, only a very small number have received preliminary heritage registration; most of them are still outside the institutional system and can be described as a form of "institutional silence".

The following are some of the reasons. First, the relevant authorities are often unmotivated. The local cultural department may not have sufficient funds, access to historical records, or knowledge about the cultural value of the POW camp, so it will not be able to start the heritage designation process. Even in cases of heritage damage, there are rarely penalties for the wrongdoers. Second, the expert review system is often unfamiliar with the concept of "negative cultural heritage". For example, when the Pingtung County government proposed converting the former Linluo POW camp site into a stray dog shelter in 2019, the local cultural affairs department did not participate in the review process at all and thus drew the attention of scholars and the media. Third, there are inherent problems of value orientation in the Cultural Heritage Protection Act. The first version of the 1982 law put forward the aim of promoting "Chinese culture", and the definition of cultural heritage at that time was relatively narrow, focusing on traditional, positive and representative cultural symbols. POW camps are historically linked to colonialism and war crimes, and are also complicated by international relations.

The historical consciousness of the people in the local political initiative is relatively low; as a result, attention and support for the protection of culture have been lacking. The memorial monument at the Xindian POW camp site, for example, has fallen into disrepair, is overgrown with weeds and other plants, and its inscriptions have faded and there is no regular maintenance. Although a memorial monument has been erected at the site of the Douliu camp, the original POW camp classrooms were demolished in 2003, and now only the monument stands alone in an empty field without historical context; thus, it has been reduced to a purely symbolic gesture.

However, at its core, it is about the whole-picture system of Chinese Taiwan's conception of the history of Allied prisoners of war during World War II. Within official memory structures, the Chinese Taiwan wartime narrative generally focuses on the idea of national victimhood and resistance to Japanese colonial rule. However, the victims in the POW camps were mainly foreign soldiers and thus did not fall under the narrative of Chinese resistance. As a result, POW camp sites have been relatively neglected in official historical exhibitions, commemorative events and museum spaces for a long time. In addition, repeated political and social changes in Chinese Taiwan after the war have further divided and destabilised these memory spaces.<sup>[3]</sup>

### 3 Repositioning the "Site of Memory"

In his theoretical work *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, Pierre Nora proposed that when authentic lived memory gradually fades out of daily life, society will begin to create symbolic sites of memory to take its place.<sup>[4]</sup> As tangible spaces of history, POW camps simultaneously embody the trauma of war, the shadow of death, and the violence of power. Now, these will serve as public places for people to reflect and remember. However, in Chinese Taiwan, these memory sites have long been in a state of "memory vacuum" due to the combined impact of historical, political and cultural reasons.<sup>[5]</sup>

The basic idea of a site of memory is the intersection of memory, forgetting and symbolism. Therefore, the three levels of POW camp sites can be considered as follows.

The first is the first dimension. As spaces, POW camp sites retain the material traces of the historical events that took place there. Areas such as Xindian, Jinguashi and Linluo have suffered damage, fragmentation or later reconstruction to some extent, but geographical and architectural remains that can provide evidence are still available. Within the theoretical system of sites of memory, even a remaining part of a wall, a foundation or a gate pillar can serve as a "trigger point" for historical consciousness and collective memory.

Secondly, there is a class system. The formation of sites of memory depends on collective processes of social construction, and communities select and interpret elements of the past in order to create their own sense of identity. After the National Government took over Chinese Taiwan, colonial memory was no longer the core content; it was turned into a narrative about the War of Resistance Against Japan by the Chinese nation. As the POW camps were built by the Japanese military and most of the victims were foreign prisoners, they were not included in the category of "our collective memory". Therefore, the formation of sites of memory was halted, and Chinese-Taiwanese society has had little emotional connection with these historical places.

The third is a Symbol System. Although the history of POW camps is full of suffering and oppression, within the system of sites of memory, negative memory also has cultural productivity. The Hiroshima atomic bomb site in Japan, the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland, and Robben Island prison in South Africa are all negative historical places, but they have received worldwide cultural attention by becoming spaces for reflection and warning. Compared with the above examples, the POW camp sites in Chinese Taiwan have a similar potential but lack mechanisms for symbolic transformation. Without cultural policies, spatial planning and historical education, they will have little symbolic significance and cannot achieve the social function of memory renewal.

As Nora put it, a site of memory is not only a place in space but also a system of symbols used to express emotions about the past in society. Because POW camp sites in Chinese Taiwan have strong elements of "otherness", they have been unable to join the common historical memory. The uncertainty of their historical attributes and spatial locations is due to the structural closure of China's Taiwan cultural

memory system. As a result, these sites have not yet received official cultural heritage status and are thus unable to evoke strong emotions among the public. As a result, they have gradually become forgotten historical "others".

## 4 Conclusion

The destiny of Allied POW camp sites in Chinese Taiwan during World War II has been hidden from public view, excluded from history and othered. It also provides a way to explore how contemporary Chinese-Taiwanese society deals with the problems of negative heritage and the politics of historical memory. POW camps are both places where war crimes have occurred and typical examples of negative cultural heritage. What is shown are not the heroism of the people or their victory in battle, but rather their suffering under institutional oppression and moral decline during the war. Therefore, the transformation of these sites into authentic "sites of memory" will require the continued support of all parts of society. Turning POW camp sites into good places of remembrance is to carry forward history and also to move forward. Therefore, the ethical meaning of memory politics is to take on the responsibility of dealing with the past and to foster an all-encompassing and humane historical awareness.

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