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An Affective Museum, or an Erasure of Authenticity? The Paradoxical Impacts of Unit 731 Crime Evidence Museum

Unit 731 was a biological and chemical warfare research unit of the Imperial Japanese Army that was built between 1934 and 1939 in Harbin, China. Among the major activities conducted here were experiments on humans, vivisections and germ warfare testing.

With the defeat of Japan in the Second World War, the Japanese officials responsible for the unit blew up major sections of the complex before retreating to Japan, leaving behind 27 buildings. The Chinese government initiated the building of the Unit 731 Crime Evidence Museum on this site in 2014, and it opened to the public on 15 August 2015. My research explores the paradoxical impacts of this newly built museum, namely, its positive role in facilitating visitors' interactive experience with history and, conversely, its damaging impact on the authenticity of this historical place.

The new museum is similar in shape to the black box used in airplanes. This shape metaphorically suggests that the function of this museum is to reveal the "truth" of history. In this sense, this museum building itself speaks an architectural language of trauma and denouncement. It is conceived of as "an evocative entity that is in dialogue with its content" (Giebelhausen 2003, 7).

Two twisted and withered trees outside of the museum signify the victims who were the targets of *maruta* (まるだ) – the human experimentation conducted by the Imperial Japanese Army. One enters the museum through a dark hallway, indicating the start of a gloomy journey through Unit 731's history.

*Unit 731 Crime Evidence Museum.
Photograph by Jing Xu*



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Natural light is not available throughout the entire museum until the last exhibition room, Contemplation Hall. Many of the interior walls are rust coloured, which provokes people's imagination of blood and the bloodiness of this place.

Modern technology plays an important role in creating an interactive space to motivate visitors' experience and imagination of the past. For example, an electronic screen is incorporated into the reconstructed scenario of vivisection; the screening of the victims tied to crosses is juxtaposed with actual crosses that visitors can touch. Such constructions make visitors feel closer to the victims and provoke a sense of historical continuity.

The Unit 731 Crime Evidence Museum provides an affective space for visitors to experience and interact with history. It both manipulates visitors' imagination of history and empowers them to produce an embodied experience of history. Therefore, this affective museum becomes an in-between space where the collective memory meets the individual's memory of history, where the pedagogical orientation of the Chinese central government meets the tourist orientation of the Harbin municipal government, and where local Chinese nationalism meets the cosmopolitan concerns of humanism and peace.

However, the authenticity of this museum is contested because the modern construction on the original Unit 731 site transforms and possibly distorts the "*milieu de memoire*, the real environment of memory" (Nora 1989, 7) of this place. Visitors seem to pay more attention to the museum than to the relic buildings that remain from the original complex. This may explain why when I visited Unit 731 in December 2016, there were dozens of museum visitors but I did not see anyone visiting the original Unit 731 headquarters, even though the two buildings are only metres apart. This "forgetting" of the relic buildings, to some extent, signifies that the memory of trauma on the site has weakened. In this sense, remembering history at a distance or in a constructed space of a museum rather than through its original buildings is a way to "forget", although it is also an alternate form of remembering.

Works Cited:

Giebelhausen, Michaela. 2003. Introduction. In Michaela Giebelhausen (ed.), *The Architecture of the Museum: Symbolic Structures, Urban Contexts*. New York: Manchester University Press.

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