

## A new trend in war museums

Nan Li

### Abstract

As the role of museums becomes broader nowadays, it has more social responsibilities. The war museum, a conditioner of public memory, has a new trend of focusing on the current life and the future instead of just stating the truth. It seems to become more audience-centered in curatorial strategy or audience activities. The visitor-centered strategy is applied well in UK war museums like the Imperial War Museum, while it should be improved in Chinese war museums like the Memorial.

Hall of the Victims of Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders. Based on the theory and practice, the paper discusses the following main aspects: the new trend of war museums, the case study of The Memorial Hall of the Victims of Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders in China, and the Imperial War Museum North in the UK, based on the contract between the two case museums in interpretation strategy and the situation of memory work. It will see the current situation of display and memory work in the Memorial Hall in Nanjing, which reflects the Chinese war museums, as well as the future landscape of the Memorial Hall in

Nanjing, China.

**Keywords:** History, Memory, Audience, Nanjing, China, Memorial Hall

### A new trend in war museums

History happened objectively but has been written subjectively. Difficult history, like war and massacre, has been interpreted by different people differently. For politicians, 'the past is a quarry for supportive symbols: imperial victories, martyrs, Victorian values, hunger marches. Recalling the hard memory is also a selective process. Museums cannot just contain the 'official narrative' as it is not the whole history. In this sense, museums should liberate authority and share it with the public. Upon the principle of telling the truth, it should collect public stories and comments to fill the collections' archive.

'Public history is turned toward the future no less than the past' (Simon, 2006: 187). It seems that it is similar to the traits of memory. The meaning of memory is not only limited to the past but also belongs to the present and the future. Though people should not forget it, it should be considered under a current context. Simon depicts the Holocaust or war history as a 'terrible gift' (Simon, 2006: 188); the documentary words and images are not only regarded as evidence of past injustice, but also a reconsideration of the history in current social life.

### Case of Nanjing Memorial Hall

The Nanjing Massacre was an extremely horrible massacre of civilians by the Japanese army during a six-week period from December 1937 to January 1938 after

its occupation of Nanjing, keeping slaughter, rape, loot, arson, and destruction. 'Japanese troops had committed 28 mass slaughters taking a toll of 190,000 persons, and 858 sporadic killings claiming the lives of over 150,000 Chinese; in total, over 300,000 Chinese lost their lives' (Zhu, 2010: 8). As 'a site-based museum of history' (Yang, 2007:6), the Memorial Hall consists of four functional parts, namely the Exhibition and Meeting Center, the Center for the Memory of the Victims of the Massacre, the Peace Park, and the Administrative Area.

### Texts and sculptures

The whole Memorial Hall space is divided into outside space and inside space. Abundant textual interpretation is used in these open and closed spaces. All the texts are translated into Japanese and English. They tell the truth and stay objective. However, they also show a standpoint. Some statements, poems, and conversations are written on the sculptures, installations, or display walls.

The visiting experience starts with a huge open square --- The Sculpture Square. A series of figure sculptures are according to true stories and positioned around the main exhibition building. The biggest sculpture is called *A Ruined Family* (**Image 1**). It is a 12.13 meter (December 13th is an exact war memorial day) high sculpture that depicts a heartbroken mother holding her dead baby in her hands. She is keeping her head up and crying. There is a little poem carved on the sculpture's base:

Family Ruined  
Never returns the son killed,  
Never returns the husband buried alive,  
Miseries drowns the wife raped,  
Good heavens!  
(The Memorial Hall of the Victims of the Nanjing  
Massacre by Japanese Invaders)

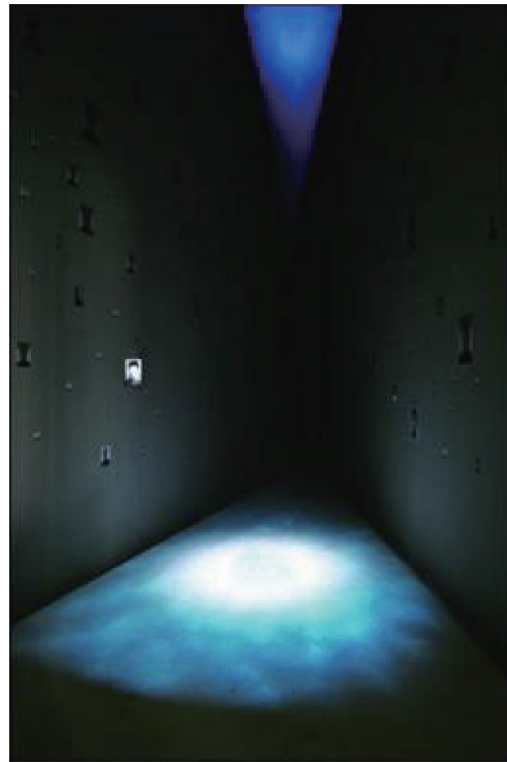


**Image 1** The Sculpture Square and *A Ruined Family*

The poem is integrated with the sculpture, implying the cries, struggles, protests, and the wrongs of numerous souls. With the sense of constriction and oppression when people go through the gap, visitors can truly feel the scene of the holocaust and recall memories.

### Installations

Some artistic installations are positioned in the exhibition hall. One is called ‘*The 12 Seconds*’ (Image 2). As Zhu (2010: 17) observes, there are photos of the massacre’s victims on the wall. Every 12 seconds, a drop of water falls, and a photo will fade away. During the six weeks, 300,000 Chinese people were slaughtered, which means one person was killed every 12 seconds. It expresses the fragility of life in a direct, visual way. The visitors should keep silent when entering the dark and quiet space.



**Image 2** The installation of *The 12 Seconds*



**Image 3** *The Witness Wall*

Another installation is called ‘The Witness Wall’ (Image 3). It stores over 12,000 archives of historical witnesses (Zhu, 2010: 17). Each folder contains fundamental information like the

name, age, identity, and address of the survivors. Beside the archive wall, electronic documents record all the information about the survivors, and visitors can search for it.

## Space and Symbol

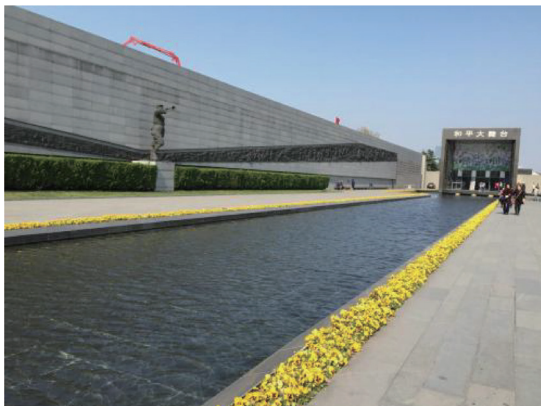
The space image can be translated into the emotional field. *The Meditation Hall (Image 4)* ‘Flickering candlelight reflects a dark wall in the water, an image of mourning and contemplation’ (Zhu, 2010: 54). Visitors trace the road in the dark space, the candlelight shining on both sides. It makes people reconsider the visiting experience and the history. Some children are too scared to come through the dark and frightening space.



**Image 4 The Meditation Hall**

Source: <http://www.ilvping.com/comment/TravelNotes/index/nid%3D124301.html>

*The Sacrificial Square* focuses the fire effectively. Numerous white pebbles cover both sides, symbolizing the bones of the victims. Some visitors offered flowers in front of the fire while remembering the victims. At the end of the space is The Peace Park (**Image 5**). It is a wide-opened square with water, flowers, and trees. The words ‘The Stage of Peace’ are carved on the sculpture, enhancing the theme of the park, rethinking current and future lives.



**Image 5 The Peace Park**

## Memory Work

The memorial hall has some official commemorative events and memory work every year. It cooperates with other cultural institutions like hospitals, theaters, and schools. However, the most eye-catching memory work in Nanjing Memorial Hall is the Testimony Meeting. This is an international project taking place in Nanjing, China or Japan every year.

Simon explores testimony and public memory in a detailed and thoughtful way. He states that *testimony* consists of representation by those who experienced or told the real stories of the specific events directly or indirectly (Simon, 2005: 91). Furthermore, the situation of the Nanjing Massacre is urgent as victims age and die. ‘The data shows that, after March 1938 (the end of the Massacre), there were 2350,00 survivors in the city of Nanjing. But after 60 years, there are no more than 3000 people.’ However, there could be less than 61 survivors today.

The Testimony Meeting has been an annual tradition since 1994. So far, 51 survivors have attended the testimony meetings in 36 different groups. One of these survivors is Xia Shuqin. Her family had nine people; seven were killed in the Nanjing Massacre. When she finished telling, all the meeting attendants stood up and silently mourned for the Nanjing Massacre’s victims. The attendants came from different countries, including Japan.

In summary, the Nanjing Memorial Hall displays the collections in multiple ways, including text, sculpture, space, and symbol. The mission of the Memorial Hall is ‘taking history as a mirror, looking forward into the future’ (The Nanjing Memorial Hall). It hopes to build a critical space for musing and rethinking the future action in the world outside of the memorial hall, peace park, and sacrificial square.

## Case of the Imperial War Museum North

Comparing it with the Nanjing Memorial Hall in China, the Imperial War Museum is a classical war museum in the UK. It was founded on March 5th, 1917, when the War Cabinet approved a proposal by Sir Alfred Mond MP for creating a national war museum to record the events still taking place during the Great War. The aim was to collect and display material as a record of everyone’s experiences during that war - civilian and military - and commemorate all societal sacrifices.

(Lees, 2013, on the official website of IWM North).

## Interpretation

IWM North translates and interprets archives and heritage



in multiple ways. Apart from the normal photo, video, and text methods, it also has unique architecture and a distorted inner space. In addition, it is the first war museum which applies interactive audio-visual displays. The building is an interpretation of wars and conflicts, and it can animate memories and stories. Specifically, it was hard to find the entrance when we visited IWM North. It is an unnoticeable and small entrance gate located at the corner of the building. The primary intention of the narrow and decentralized gate is the theme of wars. The sharp shape of the ceiling and the sloping walls (**Image 6**) immerse the the audience themselves into an uncertain and precarious space.



**Image 6 Inner space of IWMN**

*Source: the author*

Beyond the architecture and inner space, which immerses people into the unsettled and uncertain surroundings, giving people a sense of disorientation, the Big Picture Show intensifies the multi-sensory visit experience one step further in IWM North. The Big Picture Show was used in a museum for the first time in IWM North. The shocking music and fascinating photos composed the moving video. As IWM North (IWM North, 2013) interprets the Big Picture Show, 'Using surround sound, projected digital moving images and photographs, the Big Picture Show brings people's war experiences to life.' It

could give people a complete sensory experience.

The content of the Big Picture Show (**Image 7**) contains six topics. They are: The War at Home, which looks at the experience of people on the home front during the Second World War; Remembrance, which focuses on the different elements of remembrance, from the First World War to Iraq; *Children at War*, which explores children's perspectives of conflict from the Second World War through to today; Build the Truce which is inspiring by the Olympic Truce and looking at the concepts of truce; *Al Mutanabbi Street* which is a creative response to a bomb attack on Baghdad's Al-Mutanabbi Street'(Ibid.).



**Image 7 Big Picture Show**

*Source: The author*

The Big Picture Show includes not only the truth of war but also that of life and family during that time. For example, it tells a story of a family during wartime. It has no sounds but a little girl recalling and whispering her experience: 'My dad went out that day, and he never came back again...'. Hearing her whisper seeing the shaking poppy on the big interactive screen simultaneously could bring people back to that hard time. Another part shows the industry and food during the World War 2. Many young visitors immerse themselves in the imagination and curiosity about the food at that time. The show interprets the war material in a multi-angle way and engages the audience completely.

There are many interactive installations in the exhibition space (**Image 8**). For example, there are some boards for writing feedback, such as 'Imaging hearing that war had started - how might you feel?' (IWM North). And 'what role might you have had during the war? Touch to begin and find out what role you might have had during the war.' (IWM North). Some clothes imitate some identities in wartime, like the nurses in the troops. It stimulates people's passion and curiosity in a quite effective way.



**Image 8 Interactive Installation**

*Source: the author*

In addition, beyond text and installations, there is a huge data conditioner called the 'time stack. 'It is 'prominently displayed and built into the walls of the silos. These mechanical storage retrieval systems have 50 or so themed trays of objects from the museum's collection. Each is over six meters high, and visitors can call up any particular tray they wish ... The museum is rightly proud that it is the first museum to use them in a way that encourages visitors engagement and interactivity with historical material ' (Powell & Kakkranikal, 2013: 44) . Liberating the authority and material is a big challenge for current museums.

## Memory work

IWM North has substantial memory work. It intends to encourage people to understand the war from different angles: wartime food, football, artifacts, family, children, clothes ration, weddings, and Christmas. Moreover, the memory work could fulfill the war's tangible or intangible archives, sharing authority with participants and the public. For example, the interactive talks 'Children in the Second WorldWar,' 'What to Wear to a Wartime Wedding,' and 'Hearing the Sense of Billy ' are memory work that could not just extend people's cognition of the war but also collect the 'knowledge ' from participants. If you have pictures of your family during the Second World War, share them with us via Twitter and Instagram'(cite in the office website of IWMN). It shows the introduction of the activity on its official website.

The handling session could promote the children's interest in exploring and learning about wartime objects. As well as this, the museum could get some incredible opinions from the children during the session time. Multi-sensory experience and conversation lead to new possibilities for the collections.

## Comparing IWMN with the Nanjing Memorial Hall

The difference in memory work could be the aim and forms. The purpose of IWM North holding the memory work is to trigger visitors' learning and further motivation to explore, as well as liberate curatorial authority to complete the tangible or intangible archives in the museum. Certainly, educating and collecting evidence is true and meaningful, but it is not for everyone. On most occasions, most of the participants are government people or some specific experts.

In addition, the atmosphere of the memory work is different. The IWM North's atmosphere is relaxed and multiple. It relates to every aspect of real life, like weddings, food, festivals, etc. The memory work could be social transformation. However, the memory work in the Memorial Hall is relatively simple. It comes with the pain of terror and destruction, which should be translated into another way close to people. If it does that, visitors could gain more consideration of the Nanjing Massacre.

## Conclusion

Under diverse political and social backgrounds, there is a big difference in the identity of war museums between China and the UK. However, memory work in Chinese war museums is just under starting, and therefore, academic resources and interpretations in this field are inadequate. There is a need to rethink the current situation of audience engagement and memory work in the war museums of China. It is also valuable to reconsider the identity of war museums in China's public surroundings. There is a chance, and also a big challenge, to fill this knowledge gap.

As conceived above, this dissertation aims to discover the current situation of visitor-centered activity, such as memory work, in Chinese war museums within the context of the new trend of war museums. Within the broader role of museums, the audience-centered strategy should be used in exhibitions and activities. War museums should be open, dialogue-inciting spaces that 'encourage audiences to respond from their own experience and knowledge ' (Golding, 2013: 143), sharing authority with the audience and collecting more voices.

As the memory works, it is for engaging visitors well and creating a conversation opportunity and 'building bridges of meaning ' (Golding, 2009: 127). Moreover, under the new war trend, museums are a turn towards present life and the future: being a tool of reconciliation, memory work should be the dominant bond between museums and audiences. In total, through visiting war museums and attending their activities, it will be possible for visitors

to see ‘their past, your future ’ (RCMG at University of Leicester Report, 2011).

## The reasons for differences

The big difference between Chinese and UK museums is that the museum process in China is in its infancy. However, the international situation - the distinct attitude of Germany and Japan - cannot be ignored.

Many Chinese or international experts and writers have researched this international situation. As Henningsen states, during the Second World War, Germany and Japan performed many atrocities in other countries, which brought a lot of damage. With time passing and the change in the international situation, Germany apologized to the victims. It agreed to pay compensation on December 7th, 1970 (Henningsen, 2012: 88). The reflective attitude of Germany won reconciliation and peace. However, there is still no answer or apology from Japan. Japan chooses to keep silent.

‘Forgetting is a second killing, second genocide ’ (Zhang, 2007: 49). It is true that Japan’s response hurt every Chinese. Recognition of historical truth is to give primary respect to the victims of the Massacre. In this sense, it is reasonable that the Memorial Hall in Nanjing shows a strong voice and standpoint no, whether in curatorial display or audience activities, highlighting the truthful testimony.

In the future, with the change in the international situation and the promotion of the Memorial Hall, some interactive talks, sessions, and activities could be held inside or outside the Memorial Hall. It would have some sessions about the family, life, food, weddings, the Spring Festival, and children during hard times, not limited to the Massacre. As a result, more and more people would have a clear historical consciousness and remember Memorial Day and come to join the activities. Ultimately, the history will become a part of people’s life.

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