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The 1935 Hsinchu-Taichung Earthquake: Natural Disasters as Public History

Niki J.P. Alsford

At ten minutes to midnight on 6 February 2018 an earthquake of magnitude 6.4 hit the coastline of Hualien on Taiwan's eastern shore. With an intensity of VIII (severe) on the Mercalli intensity scale, Hualien was severely affected. At least seventeen deaths were reported with people 285 injured. Exactly two years previously, at three minutes to four in the early morning of 6 February 2016 the people of Taiwan woke to the shaking of an earthquake that would later also be confirmed as measuring 6.4. Due to its geographical location, Taiwan is prone to frequent temblors. However, this particular quake struck the Meinong District of Kaohsiung – the second-most populous urban area on the island – with a relatively shallow depth of only fourteen miles – giving it a maximum intensity of VII, or very strong, on the Mercalli scale. The most affected area was the city of Tainan – 26 miles from Kaohsiung – where numerous buildings collapsed killing 117 people. The seventeen-storey Weiguan Jinlong apartment complex in Yongkang District serving as the centre for rescue efforts.

The history of natural disasters – and earthquakes in particular – in Taiwan has, to a certain extent, been inadvertently linked to the practice of historical preservation, archival science, oral history and museum curatorship. All of these are hallmarks of a broad range of activities that fall under the umbrella of public history. What I mean by this is that these practices were not necessarily the main intention. But the very impact of natural disasters leave behind visual reminders such as Longteng Bridge (*Longtengqiao* 龍騰橋) in Miaoli, the remains of Siaolin Village in Kaohsiung following the mudslide caused by Typhoon Morakot in 2009 or, the best-known site, the former Guangfu Junior High School in Taichung which houses the 921 Earthquake Museum of Taiwan. These physical remnants have become a permanent reminder of an earthquake. These sites have a shared meaning, but with different understanding, among the local population. This is at the heart of what Kean and Ashton refer to as 'people and their past',¹ the framework of which is concentrated on the complex issue of 'heritage'. This is as much about the contested narratives as it is the building remains. Heritage is, as argued by Hodges, political. 'The very act of bearing witness to someone's past [has] immense power to change how the past is interpreted'.² Recognising this is vital in documented sites with shared histories.

Heritage museums and sites found in abandoned areas such as those in Taiwan are not unique. Dead economies of the past frequently find their 'ghost towns' forming parts of historical trails and places of memory and local history. Senka Božić-Vrbančić, in her chapter

on Kauri Gum Stories in New Zealand, highlights how narratives that have tended to be excluded from official histories have often remained within local communities close to abandoned sites.³ The problem, however, according to Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes, is that although there is extensive scholarship on the oral histories made by these communities, and although some of these have subsequently translated well into method and practices, few ‘take it out of the house and past the front door’.⁴ For Hamilton and Shopes these histories are semi-private and marginal. Yet when they are linked to public memory they successfully entwine the past and present via a wide range of cultural institutions that is then narrated to a wider audience.

Linking public history to natural disasters, and in this case, earthquakes, augments a number of important antecedents. Most important of these are the role of heritage museums situated on or close to sites of historical memory. However, this does not necessarily end here, nor does it need to. It is possible that these sites can draw upon public memory and representation of disaster via other cultural institutions such as amateur historical societies, public and private archive collections as well as memorial associations and heritage projects – both within and without the government. In certain contexts, these historiographies can enlighten readers with information about specific events that have been overlooked in official accounts. What is more, as argued by Ashton and Hamilton, is that these ‘sites of memory’ are not just object histories – physical reminders. They also correspond to changes in meaning – their interpretation. They are diversified in their purpose.⁵

This article uses the 1935 Hsinchu-Taichung Earthquake as a case study. It explores how sites of natural disasters can function as places of public memory in Taiwan. In what ways can this serve as a model for the understanding of disaster history as an important element in comprehending the social history of major disasters and subsequent humanitarian crises, as well as matters of preservation and heritage?

Context

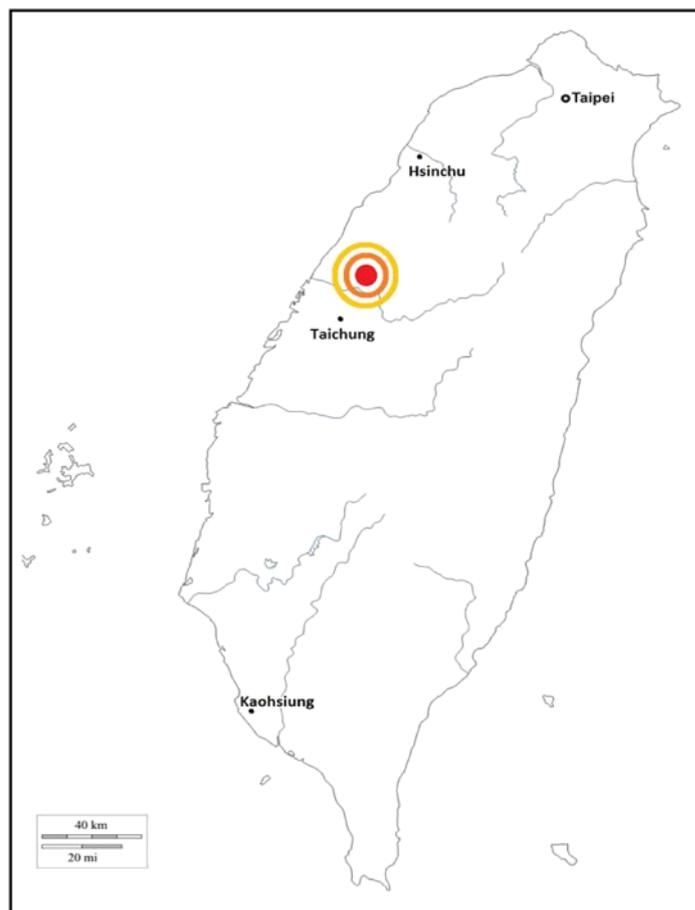
The island of Taiwan sits on one of the most seismically active zones in the world. Known as the Pacific Ring of Fire, it is a 40,000 km horseshoe-shaped ring of oceanic trenches and volcanic arcs, as well as home to roughly 75 per cent of the world’s active and dormant volcanoes. Almost 90 per cent of the world’s earthquakes occur along this ring, with at least 80 per cent of them being the largest. Taiwan, the geological topography of which is scarred by this violence, has 42 known active fault lines.⁶

The island is divided through the middle by a central range of rugged mountains, with several peaking at over 3,500 m. The highest, Yushan, stands majestically at 3,952. It is the largest on the Asian continent east of the Himalayas. This geography, both a blessing and a curse, has played a vital role in the island’s history. In 1683, when Taiwan was incorporated into the Qing Empire, a key factor in its acquisition was the mining of sulphur from the dormant volcano, Qixingshan 七星山, in northern Taiwan. This commodity was known to Chinese traders who had visited the island prior to the sixteenth century and was later brought to the attention of the Spanish who colonised the north of the island in 1626. Its importance to the Qing was further reinforced following an explosion at the Fuzhou gunpowder store in 1696 and the subsequent naming of the mountain range *Datun* 大屯 (Grass Mountain) in light of its lack of overgrowth due to the regularity with which the mountain was set ablaze in order to prevent theft of sulphur deposits.⁷ The subsequent surveys of the mines, following the explosion, were made by Yu Yonghe 郁永河 who later memorialized his journey in *The*

Small Sea Travel Records (bihaijiyou 裨海紀遊).⁸ The hot springs and filtered water which surface close to the mines have become havens for the affluent. Beitou emerged as a spa town following the establishment of the Beitou Public Bathhouse in 1913 by architect Matsunosuke Moriyama.⁹

Following the cession of the island to Japan in 1895, and improvements in seismic technology, a more detailed collection of data was made available.¹⁰ The first recorded earthquake filed by the Japanese colonial authorities was on 15 March 1897 when a quake of unknown magnitude hit Yilan and Taipei killing 56 people. The following 6.1 quake that hit Chiayi at 2.39 pm on 24 April 1904 killed three. Seven months later a 6.1 M_L (local magnitude) quake hit at 4.25 am on 6 November 1904 – the 1904 Douliu Earthquake – killing 145.¹¹ Prior to the 1935 Hsinchu-Taichung earthquake, the most notable in terms of death and destruction was the 1906 Meishan earthquake or the Great Kagi Earthquake, *Jiayi dadizhen* 嘉義大地震. It hit at 6.43 am on 17 March 1906 killing 1,258 and destroying almost 7,000 properties. Yet it was the 7.1 M_L quake in Sanyi, Miaoli County, on 21 April 1935 that earned the laurel of being the deadliest quake to hit the island. Before an examination is made of how the earthquake of 1935 arrived at a point of public history in the twenty-first century, it is important that a detailed account of the quake, and its response from the Japanese colonial government, be given. This will give necessary contextualisation for the following analysis.

The 1935 Hsinchu-Taichung Earthquake



(Map the Author)

At two minutes past six on Sunday morning 21 April 1935 the prefectural governor of Hsinchu, Utsumi Chūji, woke to violent shaking as a magnitude 7.1 earthquake hit Sanyi, in Miaoli County 63 kilometres south of his home. His diary entry for that day was markedly different from his usual intimate style. Instead, he wrote with a degree of authority, knowing that this could be a defining moment in his career as a colonial official:

21 April, 1935. Sunday, sunny.

At 7 am it was reported that Hsinchu City was hit by an earthquake and four persons died. Later on, there was another report that in Houlong five hundred houses were destroyed by the same earthquake, and fifteen persons died. I immediately made arrangements, and paid visits to the Governor General, the Bureau Chief of the Interior, the Bureau Chief of Police Affairs, and the commander of the military. After going around to exchange greetings in the Official Residence of the Governor General I returned to the office by car at 9.30 a.m. Upon receiving the report from Takahara, the department head of police affairs, and Yano the section head of Education, I right away sent general assistant officials and police inspectors to inspect the four earthquake stricken counties. With regard to the rescue work, I ordered county chiefs and city mayors to handle the emergency treatment. Automobiles were brought to a stop to the South of Zhudong, and tele-communication was suspended. A bit more information came in after nightfall, with reports of one thousand deaths and eight thousand collapsed houses, so I continued to send rescue squads. The condition was like a wartime crisis. Returned home at 3 am.¹²

The 1935 Hsinchu-Taichung earthquake – *1935nian Xinzhu-Taizhong dizhen* 1935 年新竹-台中地震 – was one of the largest earthquakes to hit Taiwan. Although smaller in magnitude than the 8.3 Hualien earthquake that hit on 5 June 1920 – claiming five lives and destroying 273 houses – it was by far the deadliest, killing 3,276 and causing damage and destruction to almost 55,000 properties.¹³ The major factor behind this disparity was largely due to population density and topography.¹⁴ The population of Hualien in 1920, according to official figures, was 49,764. The combined population of Hsinchu and Taichung in 1935 was 1,874,556.¹⁵ The Haiyuan (Gansu) earthquake in 1920, for example, which had a similar magnitude to the Hualien quake – ranging between 7.8 and 8.5 – with a category XII intensity on the Mercalli scale – incurred a total loss of life between 234,117 and 314,092 people.¹⁶ Key to this was the severe destruction over an area of more than 20,000 square kilometres.

Response

The four-month rescue effort that was overseen by Chūji was indeed a defining moment in his career as a colonial official. The Japanese colonial government responded to his requests by sending out Red Cross teams as well as mobilising the military. On 23 April, Chūji's diary entry affirms how he and his 13-man team coped with the chaos:

23 August, 1935. Tuesday, sunny.

At 6 am, I invited Takahara, Nishumura, Yano, and Hoshi to the Official Residence of Governor to discuss the use of the disaster rescue fund. [I] decided to allocate 140,000 yen from the funds, inform all counties and cities of the funding distribution, and send food and rescue goods to the stricken areas. Rescue teams were largely posted

in localities yesterday. The disaster emergency measures for the time being came to an end today. The bodies of the dead, totalling over 1,300, have also been disposed of, and construction materials for building shelters to house victims are being shipped by trucks to affiliated areas. One after another visitors flooded in from the Government General of Taiwan, and the military also sent visitors. I was overwhelmed with the reception. At night I decided on the outline for constructing shanties to accommodate severely injured persons.¹⁷

Chūji's diary entries following the quake are particularly revealing in the lack of emotion that they seem to offer. It was, after all, a personal diary and not an official correspondence; it was a reflection of something private and not material that was to be read publicly. Chūji thus seems to adapt to more official ruminations rather than continue to be personal even in his diary. Although there is no known specific reason for this – his other diary entries both before and after the earthquake reveal much more of his individual character – his choice to adopt this stance may well reveal an internal struggle to be the man that he is supposed to be. In this sense it is revealing but in different ways. By writing in this style he is affirming his difficulty in separating his public life from his private one.

The overwhelming loss of life and destruction of property not only led the colonial government to promptly review safety standards. It also provided a moment for the authorities to tighten their grip on non-governmental institutions, in particular the missionary-run hospitals. New regulations were issued not long after the quake on the running of the two largest private hospitals – Taihoku, present-day Taipei, and Tainan. The government demanded that improvements in services were needed, noting that the response to the quake had been inadequate.¹⁸ This was occurring in the midst of a growing sense of 'aggressive nationalism' within Japan.¹⁹ Only a year prior, it had officially removed itself from the League of Nations and was only two years away from its full-scale invasion of China. Chūji's personal response to the quake was firmly part of an ongoing colonising project. How they presented themselves collectively mattered more to their non-Japanese and non-Taiwanese audiences irrespective of the format in which it was being written.

Greg Clancey in his book *Earthquake Nation* presses this point in the initial Japanese response to the 1906 Meishan quake.²⁰ In the reporting of the earthquake, Japanese authorities pointed to the 'bad construction of native homes' in contrast to the newer-built Japanese buildings that 'received no particular damage, except cracking of plastered walls and disturbance of roof tiles'.²¹ As such, the way the Japanese response to the disaster was reported on in foreign press mattered greatly to them. In the case of the 1906 quake, it was the performance of the Japanese buildings in contrast to other 'Asian peoples' that took precedence.²² In the 1935 earthquake, what seemed to matter most was how they executed their relief efforts and, more importantly, how this was broadcast abroad.

On Wednesday 24 April 1935, the *North-China Herald* – an English-language newspaper published in Shanghai – posted a front-page article titled 'The Formosa Earthquake'. In it, the correspondent wrote:

The telegrams necessarily give but the barest details, but it is evident that the administration is efficiently and calmly taking measures to relieve distress and bring succour to the unfortunate victims of a big natural disaster. It is satisfactory to learn that the British authorities in [Hong Kong] are preparing to render the Royal Navy. The Japanese Army has been true to its traditions in promptly tackling the situation and in spite of the dislocation which the earthquake must have caused at

Taichu [Taichung], the troops there were able to despatch relief parties with medical personnel in rapid reinforcement of civil aid.²³

By the following day, after the main quake, and despite the frequent aftershocks – some reaching as high as 6.0 – major railway services along the coast had resumed. Regardless of the relief efforts people in the central districts were advised to pass each night ‘in the open air’ in light of the frequent aftershocks. The Japanese Ministry of Overseas Affairs had reported that, by the end of the first day, they had initiated a relief fund drive and agreed to donate a hundredth part of their monthly salaries and pay the costs of advertising in local newspapers with a call for donations. The Japanese Home Office at the same time had ordered all provincial governments to expedite financial aid in their respective districts. Tokyo City, for example, instantly subscribed and the Ministry of Finance issued a grant of 7 million Yen to the rehabilitation fund. Agencies in the West mobilised at the same time. The American Red Cross made ready its resources to help alleviate the suffering with an offer of food, blankets and medicine.²⁴ A year after the earthquake, the Presbyterian Church of England (PCE) reported to the *Messenger* – a monthly magazine produced by the Foreign Mission Committee – their appreciation for the donations received via a purposely set-up relief fund.²⁵

As reports continued to come in from the United Press, in the days following the disaster, these shifted from praise of the Japanese response to focus instead on anecdotal narratives of local heroism:

Grandmothers who knelt on hand and knees above children took upon their backs the shock of falling debris. In dozen villages, mothers of new-born babes [were] nursing at their breasts the infants of women killed in the catastrophe.

Japanese doctors braved tottering ruins and it was reported that they had saved hundreds of lives, their prompt first-aid measures saving many with gaping wounds and gashes from bleeding to death.

Work of the medical men was handicapped by a great shortage of bandages and medicines. So far, there is little evidence of any shortage of food, except milk for lack of which mothers are feeding their babies rice gruel.²⁶

The focus on the efforts of ‘Japanese’ doctors, rather than others, points to the systematic attempts made by the colonial authorities to be seen responding to the crisis in an efficient manner. The English-language newspapers’ most immediate response was to report that no serious damage had occurred to foreign property and that the population of forty British and twenty Canadians were safe and outside of the impact region.²⁷ This was followed by a statement suggesting that, in spite of the ‘rumoured’ tidal waves, ‘Japanese destroyers [were] rushing medical supplies and doctors’ to the disaster area.²⁸ It was just the kind of media coverage that the Japanese were hoping for. How the state is perceived and the mediated efforts put in place by central and local authorities in response to earthquakes and other natural disasters is well documented. Cover up is not uncommon, and neither is the case of multiple narratives of the same disaster.

In 2007, for example, the response to the Sichuan Earthquake, which killed 87,000 people and displaced 14.4 million, was almost entirely dominated by the Chinese government. Few international NGOs engaged directly in emergency response, their role being directed from central government to provide humanitarian assistance when and where they demanded it. The coverage of the response, thus, needed to be orchestrated. The Chinese government ensured

that global press were aware that, despite the scale of devastation, outbreaks of infectious diseases were avoided,²⁹ populations in danger of aftershocks and possible flooding and landslides were safely relocated³⁰ and baseline mortality rates were restored.³¹ Controversy, however, spread with the disturbing number of schoolrooms that collapsed – over 7,000 – in the wake of the earthquake killing 5,335 students.

The commemoration of the Sichuan Earthquake is thus particularly revealing. Bin Xu argues that the creation of a ‘topography of forgetting’ ritualises specific sites where possible ‘natural explanations’ occurred; where the ‘unnatural’ happened, these were either removed or covered. For Xu, the ‘naturalness’ of the earthquake refers simply to the geological phenomenon, while the ‘unnatural’ references a response to the social problems associated with the disaster. In the case of Sichuan, it was the schools that were covered and removed in order to assist in the ‘forgetting’ of parental and public concerns and their belief that the sheer number of collapsed schoolrooms were directly caused by ‘government’s negligence and corruption as well as contractors’ greediness’.³² Following the 1935 earthquake in Taiwan, disgruntlement was comparable. Yang Kui, a Taiwanese writer who had decided to journey to the most affected areas, reported that the people were critical of the attitude of the colonial government and highlighted the frustration being felt toward their rescue methods.³³ Yet in the case of the 1999 earthquake in Taiwan, this was different. Instead, the collapsed school became the ritualised site of remembrance and a museum.

What is clear from this is that there is no single narrative of commemoration concerning natural disasters. Writing on the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, Sue Robinson witnessed two competing narratives. At a national level the press demonized New Orleans as a place that needed to be avoided. The local agenda insisted on the importance of recreating a ‘lost community’ through documented oral histories and sites of commemoration.³⁴ This disparity between national ideals and local interest leads to the important question of historical authority. Understanding how authority is asserted in public memory is important. When crises becomes an issue for the governing elite, officials attempt to spin information, as was seen in the case of the Sichuan Earthquake and to a certain extent the 1935 Hsinchu-Taichung Earthquake. Attempts are thus made to control the narrative and redirect the story frame on how the event is remembered. The following section will look at this issue of authority in the concerns of remembrance and public historical memory.

Remembrance and Public History

The spectre of earthquakes remains close to many in Taiwan. For the 1935 Hsinchu-Taichung Earthquake, the remains of the Longteng Bridge that was built in 1906 and designed by American architects Theodore Cooper and C.C. Schneider stand today as a testament to the deadliest earthquake to strike the island.

Discussions concerning the earthquake are relatively absent within Taiwanese society. They occasionally feature on travel shows with all but a few referencing Longteng Bridge. Following contemporary earthquakes, Taiwanese shows, such as *Taiwan yanyi* 台灣演義 on Formosa TV, have referenced the 1935 quake in their historical features. It is perhaps the second-most deadly quake, which occurred on 21 September 1999, that features much more prominently in both collective remembrance as well as public history. It is known simply as the 921 Earthquake *jiueryi dadizhen* 九二一大地震 in reference to its date. The 7.3 quake

hit Nantou County at 1.47am killing 2,415 and causing over NT\$300 billion worth of damage.³⁵



Longteng Bridge (Photograph the author)



921 Earthquake, Dazhi (public domain)

On the former site of Guangfu Junior High School, which sits directly on the fault line, lies the 921 Earthquake Museum of Taiwan *guoli ziran kexue bowuguan jiueyi dizhen jiaoyu yuanqu* 國立自然科學博物館九二一地震教育園區. It opened on 13 February 2001 in remembrance of the victims who perished. The museum has five fine galleries: Chelungpu Fault Gallery, Earthquake Engineering Hall, Image Gallery, Disaster Prevention Hall and the Reconstruction Records Hall. But it is in the grounds of the building and the second and fifth halls that the museum serves as public history.³⁶ No attempt has been made to reconstruct the buildings – apart from securing them – or to clear debris following the initial quake.



The grounds of the 921 Earthquake Museum (Public domain)

The museum's narrative focuses on science. Through interactive displays, the content is principally on the cause of the earthquake, rather than its course and consequences. Very little has been said on the response to the earthquake and even less on public perceptions of the museum. Remaining *in situ* not only continues collective mourning. It also serves as a powerful reminder of the strength and scale of natural disasters on the island. One major fact for this is that the quake occurred in the early hours of the morning and no one was in the school at the time. Had there been a loss of life – and in particular young life – I am not certain that the site would have been used in its current form. As it stands, it is representative of the 'natural' happenings as opposed to the 'unnatural'. The two earthquakes, although very different, have certain similarities, especially concerning response. Both focussed on changes to building practices, in particular with regards to legal codes and the enforcement of them. When buildings collapse and loss of life occurs, public perception turns towards building practices. Yet damaged buildings and other forms of construction are often used as sites of public memory. It is as if there is an evolution in building regulations that follow natural disasters and that the sites of disaster remain a reminder of that 'before period'.

In places such as Taiwan, with its high population density and complex historical narratives, debates surrounding space often take place in much more contested terrain. More often than not, these are set against a backdrop of cultural programming in the form of nation-building. Each government or colonial period will use responses to natural disasters as a means of legitimacy. The Japanese did this in 1935. The Kuomintang party (KMT) and later Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) did this following the 1999 earthquake and every large quake and other natural disasters since. As historiography, this is often included in national curricula and is associated with the inculcation of civic values in particular, according to Chia, the formation of a national identity.³⁷

Developments of legitimacy have often gone hand-in-hand with urban development in the case of Taiwan. And while the advancement of an urban landscape may play a lesser role, there are far more claims made on it for public history and public culture than is realised. Although the practice of public history has had a much longer period of recognition in the United States,³⁸ the process of gaining ‘legitimacy’ in Taiwan during the post martial law period (1947-1987) has given rise to historical societies and local history groups. The only difference is that they have not been recognised as being part of a more formalised profession. The bridging of oral history and public history introduces a better language in Taiwan. This is perhaps most evident through the medium of documentary film, which since the advent of digital technology has tackled various issues that stem from Taiwan’s complex social and cultural environment.³⁹ Yet, in spite of this, the term public history or *dazhong shixue* 大眾史學 in the Sinophone context remains largely absent.⁴⁰

What I think has been missing is a more collaborative spirit. The social sciences and the arts and humanities have maintained a degree of regimentality particularly in the writing of history. Cross-disciplinary research in the context of Taiwan is not common. Yet, public history is by its very nature collaborative. It illuminates a shared authority over a much broader area. It needs to. It has to incorporate different audiences and employers and integrate them into a much wider perspective of a variety of partners and fields.⁴¹ If we take, for example, the subject matter of Taiwan indigenous peoples, the participation of anthropologists, archaeologists and cultural management, has to be coupled with that of linguists, art historians, historians and sociologists, among others. Yet museums in Taiwan such as the Shung Ye Museum of Formosan Aborigines, National Museum of Prehistory and the Bunun Cultural Museum (*Bunongzu wenwuguan*, 布農族文物館) in Taitung County are all good examples of collaborative efforts. A natural synergy to this – and one that in my opinion Taiwan is a leading example of – is the field of digital history, with its emphasis on access and broad participation in the creation of knowledge.⁴²

For Taiwan, the digital humanities platform provided a framework for the collection of oral histories. This is arguably most prevalent in the oral histories of the White Terror (1949-1987), a martial law period of political suppression. Difficult heritage, such as this, can, as argued by Shu-Mei Huang and Hyun Kyung Lee in their germinal work on colonial prisons, be considered ‘heritage *off* diplomacy’, one where heritage is seemingly ‘turned off’ when diplomatic challenges arise.⁴³ This is particularly the case in cross-border networks of Japan, Korea, China and Taiwan. It can also be domestic.

Prisons left behind by processes of colonisation as well as during periods of authoritarianism are sites embedded in the memories of punishment and imprisonment. Turning them into heritages of peace and freedom are forms of corrective memory and form a significant part of transitional justice efforts and collective memory.⁴⁴ Oral history – and by extension public memory, as advocated by Michael Frisch – is useful in breaking down

institutional barriers by offering useful paradigm shifts within the fields of public history.⁴⁵ The concept of ‘shared history’, as argued by Adair *et al* proposes an important question on whether changes in ideas of culture challenge representation and interpretation within museums by ‘their constituencies’.⁴⁶ For Adair *et al*, it is digital technology and social media that partially account for shifts in how museums explore historical authority. Oral history and other bottom-up histories have informed a change in the narrative of museum storytelling. The use of digital media to decentre historical narratives has impacted changes in areas much broader than museums, not least on the topic of disaster history.

A problem for Taiwan, though, concerns the legitimacy of the narrative. In the case of the 1935 and 1906 earthquakes, the Japanese colonial authorities through their necessary agencies made certain that the government response was seen in a positive light. The KMT attempted to do the same in 1999 but lost the general election the following year to the DPP. This is particularly clear in the Reconstruction Records Hall in the 921 Museum.

Designed over five ‘chapters’, the gallery opens with a room showcasing a site of the earthquake with newspaper headlines and photographs. This is followed by a ‘second chapter’ that highlights the government mobilisation effort and processes of reconstruction. The ‘third chapter’ follows this up with the actions of resettlement for those affected and immediately leads to the next chapter which explores the volunteer efforts made within communities. The hall ends on a ‘reflection and change’ chapter, whereby the government seeks to raise awareness of ‘disaster prevention, [improved] engineering systems [and] the quality of law and education.’⁴⁷ It is, therefore, natural that the museum opts to carry such political undertones wherein the government is portrayed as having played the greater role to the best of its capacity.⁴⁸ There is little, if any, discussion of the government response or relocation efforts in a negative light. If a similar museum was built in recognition of Typhoon Morakot, for example, could an entirely similar narrative be conveyed?⁴⁹ After all, the purpose of a public historian is to facilitate ‘a constructive use of the past to inform global and national citizenship and [to critically engage] with structures of inequality and power’.⁵⁰

The case of Typhoon Morakot could easily engage critically with disaster management. The establishment of the Office of Disaster Management following the disaster is a good example of this.⁵¹ The methods of reporting also played an important role in not only broadcasting peoples’ dissatisfaction with government relief efforts. It highlighted the enormous contribution made by aid agencies and emergency services. The Association of Digital Culture Taiwan (ADCT), a non-profit organisation established in 2007, built a peer-distributed integrated website Morakot Online Disaster Report Center – which collocated significant online sources such as Twitter, Facebook, PTT bulletin board and media outlets.⁵²

The scope of digital material that emerged following Typhoon Morakot has, according to the National Archives Administration, undergone a process of digitisation, in particular the experiences of those involved in reconstruction efforts.⁵³ On efforts to preserve oral accounts on typhoons, Taiwan Historica (*guoshiguan Taiwan wenxianguan* 國史館臺灣文獻館), an institute located in Chung Hsing New Village, Nantou City, has an online database of typhoons from 1945 to 2009 titled *zouguo fengyu: daoyu renmin taifeng jiyi* 走過風雨：島嶼人民颱風記憶 (Walking through the Storms: Islanders’ Typhoon Memories).⁵⁴ Although this database is somewhat poorly maintained, it is a step in the right direction towards preservation and public history in digital format.

Academia Sinica manages a digital database of earthquakes in Taiwan from 1624 to 2000 with its primary focus on the 921 earthquake.⁵⁵ In terms of other digital archives, the Central

Weather Bureau in Taiwan has a collection of photographs of disaster history and in particular the 1935 quake.⁵⁶ The potential for experimentation with digital media for public history is not new. Specific problems associated with ‘history online’ has, as argued by Fien Danniau, largely to do with a lack of narrative, a lack of self-criticism and illiteracy in the digital language.⁵⁷ Projects such as *Children of the Lodz Ghetto* and *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, for example, offer new ways of presenting historical knowledge. Digital media offers two important components: *accessibility* and *flexibility*, both of which acknowledge the dialogical dimensions of public history.

Thus, the link between archives and the public has now gone beyond that ‘obsolete and abandoned [place] where usually the archivist or the caretaker is someone swallowed up in the dusty corridors of bureaucracy,’ to something more accessible. They’re ‘popping up everywhere’ in the realms of ‘software-based interactions’ to borrow from Jussi Parikka.⁵⁸ As a consequence, it is in digital media that archival material is becoming synonymous with public history in Taiwan. It is easy and cheap, and thus there is a low threshold for presenting and sharing data online. The flexibility and accessibility of digital media, however, has consequences in how data is consumed and perceived. The interpretation of the data and the immense amount of big data that can be searched has an impact on how history is presented.

This impact goes back to what Frisch terms ‘the complex sources of historical interpretation’.⁵⁹ The closeness between authorship and interpretive authority is especially important in the concept of ‘place of memory’. With regard to disaster history, memory is critical. The work on history, memory and disaster by Dena Shenk *et al* argues that specific memories, values and views of disaster affect not only the experience of memory; they also affect specific coping strategies.⁶⁰ This is particularly the case when people unaffected by the tragedy nevertheless remember having taken part in the cultural moment as a spectator via media reports on the disaster. How disaster is mediated is important. It has the potential to function as a mnemonic device that links global public communities to historical experiences. Both the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami as well as the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami captured an international audience. Maria Kyriakidou argues that distant suffering and globally shared memories can form the basis of a transnational movement of memory discourses.

According to Kyriakidou, the Holocaust has been theorised as being a globally shared memory and is thus central in the construction of a ‘global moral space, where distant others become part of a common global past’. The relevance of this to the study of the 1935 earthquakes is that, as a site of memory, it offers a major assessment of places of collective cultural understanding. It is clear that this *lieu de mémoire* can, and does, extend beyond its immediate location. The 1935 earthquake does not exist in public memory today. However, the 921 earthquake most certainly does. The remains of Longteng Bridge are a critical trigger point in the existence of a collective site of memory that moves beyond its immediate history. Those who have directly experienced an earthquake have a shared experience with those who have experienced a distant suffering by seeing the effects of earthquakes through the media. Longteng Bridge serves as a site of memory and collective cultural heritage.

This has applications to all histories of natural disasters. Simon Winchester’s book on Karakatoa, for example, has similar applications. A collective global shared memory that is a distant suffering can engage with the gravity of trauma of the volcanic explosion through this shared interpretation. Pompeii is no different. The cast of a dog, frozen in agony, is a well-known image from the aftermath of the Vesuvius explosion in 79CE. This single image is presented to elicit a shared response that uses the experiences of memory and reflection. The

National Museum of Naples, which houses many of the casts – including the dog – is labelled with the following account:

You could hear the shrieks of women, the wailing of infants, and the shouting of men; some were calling their parents, others their children or their wives, trying to recognize them by their voices. People bewailed their own fate or that of their relatives, and there were some who prayed for death in their terror of dying. Many besought the aid of the gods, but still more imagined there were no gods left, and that the universe was plunged into eternal darkness for evermore.⁶¹

The text, written by Pliny the Younger in two letters to the Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus 17 years after the eruption, accompanies the casts of the people and the dog. The words resonate through distant suffering to form a collective interpretation of the disaster. Lorena Rivera-Orraca's paper *Are Museums Sites of Memory?* takes it further by situating the role of museums in the discourses of 'theoretical perspective, issues on history, past memory and their ongoing construction in cultural institutions.' Rivera-Orraca argues that museum spaces 'can be creative entities that open up the possibility of dialogue between past and present: a meeting point between history and memory'.⁶² In the context of the 1935 earthquake, using notions of disaster as public history – whether physically, as in the case of a museum, or digitally in the form of digital humanities – has the potential to go beyond simple aesthetic appreciation to encapsulate the issues of preservation, heritage and shared memory.⁶³

The focal point of *place* thus needs, through the notion of heritage, to 'affect' one's understanding of the meaning of heritage and sites of preservation. Laurajane Smith sums this up by arguing that 'heritage as place, or heritage places, may not only be conceived as representational of past human experiences but also of creating an *affect* [my italics] on current experiences and perceptions of the world'.⁶⁴ This in no way casts 'place' as a simple expression of past experiences; it is increasingly being used within the literature on heritage and the management of conservation policies and practices as a means of embracing the concept of public history.

The ability to accept a degree of flexibility, whether this is within the disciplines of academia or in the issues of heritage and preservation, raises important questions for Taiwan historiography and the role of social history and oral history. The Longteng Bridge, a reminder of the earthquake of 1935, functions as a site of collective memory. Since specific sites are often creations of a 'topography of forgetting', the shared memory of disaster sites ritualises possible natural explanations for earthquakes – a shared experience whether real or imagined from afar – while allowing an interpretation of the 'unnatural happenings'. Understanding how authority is asserted in public memory and recognising the disparity between multiple interpretations of disasters such as those discussed here points to the complexities of heritage. At the same time, it points to the specificity or national and cultural constructions of memory and further highlights the need for greater inter-disciplinary research into disaster history in Taiwan.

Endnotes

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