

# *Lieux de Memoire in Dalian: Political Narratives of History*

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**Abstract:** This paper examines two sites in Dalian, China - the Dalian Museum and Japanese Ambience Street - as lieux de mémoire that shape collective memory and representations of history. Through field visits, interviews, and online data analysis, the paper evaluates how accurately these sites portray Dalian's historical trajectory from its colonial past under Japanese rule to postwar reconstruction and modern development. It finds that while the Dalian Museum provides a factual modern history exhibition, its narrative omits aspects like Japanese immigration and adopts a narrow nationalist perspective. Meanwhile, the Japanese Ambience Street provoked public backlash due to rising patriotic sentiments influenced by government propaganda, despite Japanese cultural influences being accepted in the past. The paper thus explores tensions between national narratives, local stories, and changing political dynamics in memorializing contested histories. Overall, it contributes new perspectives on lieux de mémoire's role in shaping memory and their relationship with sociopolitical contexts over time.

**Keywords:** Lieux de Memoire, Dalian, East Asian Studies, history and politics

## 1. Introduction

"Lieu de Memoire" is a term coined by French historian Pierre Nora in his 1984-1992 seven-volume study, "Les Lieux de Mémoire".[1] The term refers to realms in which collective memory is preserved and shared, and it can include physical locations, events, symbols, rituals, and even individuals who have had a profound influence on a society's shared memory.[1] These sites of memory are where history crystallizes and secretes itself, serving as a bridge from the past to the present and into the future.[2] They are not just sites of historical importance but also spaces where cultural, social, and historical identities are continuously negotiated and redefined.

"Lieux de memoire" are significant in cultural and historical studies because they offer insights into how societies remember and interpret their past, shape their present identities, and envision their future.[3] They serve as a medium for collective memory, a lens through which we can examine the socio-political dynamics, conflicts, and power structures inherent in the processes of remembering and forgetting.[4] They also reveal how public memory is constructed, negotiated, and contested over time.[5] Moreover, "lieux de memoire" act as a powerful tool for nation-building and national identity formation, often reflecting the dominant ideology of a society.[6]

Many scholars have provided thoughtful perspectives about lieux de memoire in Northeast China. For instance, Bohao Wu, a history expert at Harvard University, draws attention to the fluid relationship between multiple memory characters: local communities, site administrators, and the

state.[7] With a comparison of the Sino-Japanese Friendship Garden and Memorial Museum in Nagano, he shows how local narratives focused on personal experiences can both challenge and be challenged by nationalist master narratives. This nuanced perspective contrasts with much existing research that portrays commemorative sites as monolithic conveyors of single narratives. Tracing how each site addressed criticism, the article also demonstrates the push-and-pull between memory pluralism and national cohesion in negotiations over historical representation. This adds a constructive dimension lacking in some critiques of memory politics. In addition, Mariko Tamanoi, a professor in the UCLA Anthropology Department, examines memoirs and interviews with Chinese peasants published in Chinese state-sponsored "cultural and historical documents collections" from the 1980s-1990s.[8] These accounts depict the brutal exploitation of the Chinese under Japanese imperialism through policies like concentration camps, conscription as coolie laborers, oppressive agricultural quotas, and violent abuses by soldiers.

Located in a city teeming with historical values, the Dalian Museum, which opened in 2002 as one of the national first-class museums, has been widely studied in China. Qian Ma, a copywriter at Dalian Museum, examines the practices of the Dalian Museum in Liaoning Province in spreading red culture. The city of Dalian contains a meaningful revolutionary history and red culture despite not being a major revolutionary base.[9] Important historical sites related to early communist activities, the anti-Japanese war, and socialist construction are preserved there. Dalian Museum displays over 130 historical sites and monuments significant to red culture. Secondly, telling Chinese stories enables the sharing of revolutionary traditions and passing on red genetics. Major exhibitions at the Dalian Museum depict the history of the Communist Party. Thirdly, leveraging red resources promotes public participation and serves people's cultural needs. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the museum showcased artifacts from frontline medics to commemorate their contributions.

In Dalian, the authenticity of the Syou-Kyoto Street has been notoriously met with skepticism. Following its opening on August 21, 2021, it faced public criticism on social media for exclusively selling Japanese products and being perceived as excessively "pro-Japan." It was not until September 2022 that the street resumed operations, but there has been no in-depth scholarly examination of this street. Since the former has been identified as a cultural relic that entails history, the main focus of this paper will be on the second one.

Studies on the Dalian Museum and Japanese Ambience Street are relatively sparse in English versions compared to essays published by China National Knowledge Institution. Therefore, due to the highly unified nature of patriotic education and pro-party ideologies within China, the field of historical studies is inevitably influenced to varying degrees by political propaganda elements, as commented in the book *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History*, "Historical interpretation inevitably varies with the values and interests that inform different eras. Whig interpretations of necessary progress have given way to greater sensitivity to other cultures and voices from the past.[10][11] Nationalistic or politically functional versions of history have lost legitimacy as history seeks more complex and critical understanding.[12][13] Hence, Chinese research papers may exhibit biased or incomplete analyses, lacking in-depth critique. In addition, the construction span of those two sites crosses twenty years, from 2000 to 2020. Thus, by simultaneously delving into both Chinese and English source materials and conducting on-site investigations, this article aims to offer a fresh, critical perspective on the historical narrative of Dalian within the changing 20 years. It seeks to enrich the body of information concerning historical relics in the Northeastern region of China while providing novel insights into East Asian interconnections.

## 2. Methodology

The research methodology for this study involves a multifaceted approach that combines field trips, semi-structured interviews with local elder residents and commentators at the Dalian Museum and

Japanese Ambience Street, and online data collection. This comprehensive approach has been chosen to obtain a nuanced understanding of how these lieux de mémoire in Dalian contribute to preserving and disseminating historical narratives and collective memory.

### 3. Field Trips

Field trips to the Dalian Museum and Japanese Ambience Street are foundational to this research. These visits not only provided firsthand experiences of the physical spaces but also facilitated direct interactions with the sites' stakeholders, including local elder residents and commentators. Field trips offer several advantages in this context. They allow for the observation of the physical settings, the examination of exhibits, and an appreciation of the sites' atmospheres and ambiances, which contribute significantly to understanding the visitor experience.

Furthermore, field trips enable the researcher to engage in informal conversations and discussions with local elderly residents and commentators, providing valuable qualitative data. These face-to-face interactions help gain insights into their perspectives on the historical narratives presented by these sites and their perceived impact on memorialization. However, it is important to acknowledge that field trips have limitations, such as potential observer bias and the subjective nature of on-site experiences.

### 4. Semi-Structured In-Depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews conducted during the field trips form a crucial component of this research. Interviews with elder residents and commentators at the Dalian Museum and Japanese Ambience Street allow for the collection of in-depth qualitative data. This data collection method offers the advantage of exploring the nuances of individual experiences and perceptions related to these sites. By engaging in open-ended conversations, this paper can delve into the respondents' personal memories, emotions, and perspectives on the historical narratives presented.

These interviews also provide a platform for respondents to express their views on the representation of history and memory at these sites, shedding light on how effectively these lieux de mémoire fulfill their roles as instruments of memorialization. However, it is important to recognize that semi-structured interviews may be influenced by social desirability bias, and the sample size may be limited by logistical constraints.

The primary interview subjects mainly consist of middle-aged and elderly individuals, aged fifty years and above. This choice is motivated by their direct experiences or being the descendants of those who have had profound experiences related to Dalian's history of colonization. Moreover, this demographic has also witnessed the economic growth brought about by Japan in Dalian during the 1970s.

As the interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, a strict question flow was not predefined. The questions provided here serve as general guidelines, and the actual course of the interviews may have been adjusted based on the responses of the interviewees:

1. Are you familiar with Dalian's history of Japanese colonization during the 20th century?
2. Besides the atrocities committed by the Japanese military in Northeast China, are you aware of the forced migration of Japanese communities?
3. Are you aware of Japan's investments in Dalian during the 1970s?

### 5. Online Data Collection

In addition to field trips and interviews, online data collection complements the primary data gathered during fieldwork. This methodology examines online sources, including news articles, social media discussions, and public forums. Online data collection serves several purposes. It allows for exploring

public attitudes and opinions regarding the Dalian Museum and Japanese Ambience Street. In addition, online data provides a broader context by capturing discussions on social and political aspects that may impact the reception of these sites. This method provides a quantitative part to the research. It enables the identification of trends and patterns in public sentiment. However, it is essential to recognize that online data may also be subject to biases, such as selection bias and the potential for misinformation.

This article's primary source of online data is one of China's most popular websites among young people, Bilibili. The analysis is primarily based on sampling three videos created by two video bloggers. The first blogger is "Sichuan Observation" (the official video account of Sichuan Radio and Television Station), and this account has a considerable public reach and influence. The selected video, dated September 3, 2021, covers the temporary closure and renovation of Dalian's Japanese-style street (resembling Kyoto) and has garnered over 930,000 views.[14] The other blogger is an amateur video creator known as "Senior Noise Maker," who separately filmed Kyoto Street with a view count of 360,000.[15] I organized the barrage of comments provided by Bilibili using Python and identified users' attitudes by counting, searching word by word, and categorizing the comments.

## 6. Results

In semi-structured interviews with five participants (three women and two men, all from well-off families), they all expressed relatively good knowledge of Dalian's history. However, only one participant had a better understanding of the forced migration of Japanese people and their abandonment by the state after Japan's defeat—this individual's relatives had once adopted a Japanese child. All five participants had heard about Japanese investments in Dalian but believed that Dalian's development in the previous century was mainly due to Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening up policies and the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, rather than Japanese companies' willingness to establish a market in China. Regarding the two streets, all five participants unanimously felt that the Kyoto-style street disrespected history. When asked about whether China should strengthen cooperation with Japan in the future, the five participants provided different answers. One man and one woman believed that China already had its own domestic brands that could replace Japanese ones, so further cooperation was unnecessary. The other three participants expressed concerns about Japan's colonial history but were open to some level of cooperation.

In the analysis of video barrage comments, 99% of the barrages on Sichuan Observation's video expressed support for the closure of the Kyoto-style street to regard history. Only one barrage comment said, "Don't mess with the rhythm." The attitudes in the barrage of comments on the Kyoto-style street from the amateur blogger were similar.

## 7. Discussion

### 7.1. Contextual Understanding of Dalian Museum

The collections of the Dalian Museum represent a significant aspect of the history of this city. The important collections in the Dalian Museum, particularly in the section dedicated to modern artifacts, primarily reflect various historical periods, including the late Qing Dynasty during the Self-Strengthening Movement, the Russian occupation of Dalian for seven years, the Russo-Japanese War, Japan's forty-year colonial rule, the liberation of Dalian and Sino-Soviet co-administration, as well as Dalian's folk heritage. The modern section mainly showcases tangible materials related to the early days of liberation and post-reform and opening-up achievements. Among these, a substantial number of items represent the developmental processes of multiple fronts in Dalian since the reform and opening-up era. Due to foreign invasions in modern times, some foreign artworks are also preserved

in the museum, including Japanese calligraphy and ceramics. These exhibits, as primary sources, hold significant value for historical research.

The "Modern Dalian" exhibition hall within the Dalian Museum shapes the collective memory of visitors concerning this city's history. Presented chronologically, it narrates the developmental history of Dalian.[16] Utilizing a photo wall as the main narrative device, supplemented with artifacts or models for explanatory purposes, the Dalian Museum vividly narrates the tragic years of Dalian's colonization and its resilient resistance to the public.

However, the narrative presented by the Dalian Museum is not entirely impartial. While the textual annotations provide objective descriptions of the industrial development during the Japanese colonial period, the museum only uses Chinese for the annotations. If the Dalian Museum aims to provide comprehensive historical knowledge to the public, especially given Dalian's international nature, it should consider adding annotations in languages with higher universality, such as English. As David Dean in his book *Museum Exhibition: Theory and Practice* discusses how the failure to provide interpretation for non-local visitors in their own language results in "the dominance of one cultural viewpoint over others". [17] Museums have an ethical duty to promote cultural understanding across linguistic and cultural divides. By only using the local language, a museum restricts the understanding of cultural relics only to locals, privileging one cultural perspective over others. Additionally, Thompson A. in the book *Curatorship: A Guide to Museum Practice* states that the interpretation of cultural objects should seek to be "as inclusive and pluralistic as possible" in order to avoid viewpoint bias.[18] He notes how the lack of interpretation in additional languages marginalizes non-local cultural groups and promotes "insider bias" rather than justice. By failing to be inclusive and pluralistic in interpretation, such a museum falls short of its educational role and reinforces bias.

Further, the Dalian Museum's historical records are not disinterested. In the 1930s, the Japanese government embarked on a large-scale program of colonizing Manchuria after seizing control of the region from China. According to historian John Dower, "The effort began with organized 'volunteer' emigration but gradually evolved into forced drafts of young laborers".[19] Many Japanese citizens resisted the resettlement but faced severe government pressure. As described by historian Louise Young, "Peasant villages were given quotas for families and able-bodied young people to 'volunteer,' and administrators kept records of those who dragged their feet".[20] The government presented Manchuria as a land of opportunity, but the reality was often harsh, with inadequate housing, health problems, and inter-ethnic tensions with Chinese residents. Those groups of people, many of whom were abandoned by the Japanese government after capitulation, were also victims of the war in Dalian. Nonetheless, there is no information about Japanese immigrants in the museum. Indeed, during World War II, the Imperial Japanese military carried out atrocities in China. However, the question arises whether a nation should erase the history of Japanese immigrants, who were also victims of Japan's militaristic ideology. This dichotomous narrative, influenced by Chinese nationalist politics "channel histories into very narrow passages".[8] Hence, people's understanding of Japan's invasion history during World War II is incomplete. As indicated by the results of the interviews, four out of five individuals were unaware of the dire situation faced by Japanese immigrants in China after Japan's defeat in the war. While patriotic education emphasizes the significance of Japan's wrongdoings, the complex relationships between victims and persecutors are not confined solely to the dynamics between China and Japan. Historical education should not be one-sided, as such an approach would hinder individuals from critically and comprehensively assessing a historical event. Consequently, a consensus in global understanding can never be achieved.

## **7.2. Contextual Understanding of Japanese Ambience Street**

The public's resistance to the Kyoto-style Street replica is primarily fueled by patriotic sentiments. As evidenced by the interviews and barrage survey results, the overwhelming majority of individuals



express that the Kyoto-style Street represents a lack of respect for history. One interviewee remarked, "This street is only 35 kilometers from the Lüshun Massacre Memorial. Allowing the culture of the aggressors from that era to flourish on this land again is intolerable." In recent years, due to the continuous promotion of patriotic education and attempts by Japanese right-wing elements to deny their historical aggression against China, the Chinese people's dissatisfaction with Japan has been on the rise. Consequently, in a city as historically sensitive as this one, the promotion of the culture of former colonizers naturally provokes many people's anger.

However, forty years ago, Japanese culture was also disseminated in Dalian without encountering widespread resistance. In 2000, popular culture from Japan, including fashion magazines, cafes decorated like those in Tokyo, and Japanese cuisine, has been widely adopted among Dalian's new middle class. In the book *Inheritance of Loss*, Koga writes, "Tokyo Street, lined with Japanese restaurants and bars...now enormously popular Japanese food," shows this culture has been readily accepted.[21] In addition, large Japanese corporations have a significant presence in the city and employ many Chinese workers. As described, office buildings like the Senmao Building, where "most of the tenants are brand-name Japanese corporations," do not mention any opposition to this level of Japanese economic influence.[21]

Therefore, the Kyoto-style Street replica embodies the collective memory shaped by the government. Forty years ago, as China was emerging from the Cultural Revolution and seeking rapid economic development, it presented a condition for Japan in exchange for compensation for World War II: investment within China. With its deep historical ties to Japan, Dalian became a focal point for Japanese enterprises. Today, constructing this commercial street may also serve as a means to stimulate economic development in Dalian. The critical difference lies in that forty years ago, the Dalian government heavily promoted the development of Japanese enterprises in Dalian and, to some extent, restrained the publicity of colonial history to maintain stable relations with Japan.[21] However, in the present era, the central government's predominant emphasis is on patriotic education, which has thrust Japan's wrongdoings into the spotlight. The differing attitudes reflect shifts in societal sentiment under government control. The Kyoto-style Street has inadvertently rekindled people's hatred toward Japan and deepened their memory of Japanese military aggression in China.

## 8. Conclusion

This study still has numerous shortcomings and limitations that future research could endeavor to address in order to attain a more comprehensive understanding of lieux de mémoire in Dalian. The primary constraints stem from the insufficient sampling of interview subjects. If future research could interview officials from the local tourism bureau regarding the delicate balance between economic development and historical issues and the resultant political orientation, it might yield a deeper understanding of the initial intentions behind the design of the Kyoto-style Street. Furthermore, understanding the perspectives of Chinese individuals who worked for Japanese companies in Dalian forty years ago might support the argument that patriotic sentiments' influence on the commercial street is not entirely positive. In the future, historians may explore how to balance national histories and local narratives to enable people to comprehend history more comprehensively and objectively. In simple terms, it may involve the process of de-politicizing history.

The results of this study further contribute to the examination of collective memory in a historically significant location in Northeastern China. Research on lieux de mémoire within China remains limited, and although Dalian has previously been a subject of study for the conflicts between economic development and historical recognition, this research provides fresh insights into the evolving political and cultural landscape as times change and ideologies shift. The absence of certain aspects of historical memory, such as Japanese immigration and Japanese corporate investments,

reveals how some lieux de mémoire in Northeastern China have become tools for government propaganda and highlight the interconnectedness of history and politics.

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