

Book Review

Heritage, Memory, and Punishment: Remembering Colonial Prisons in East Asia

Rin Ushiyama ^{1*}

¹ *University of Cambridge*, UNITED KINGDOM

*Corresponding Author: ru210@cam.ac.uk

Citation: Ushiyama, R. (2021). Heritage, Memory, and Punishment: Remembering Colonial Prisons in East Asia, *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*, 6(1), 07. <https://doi.org/10.20897/jcasc/11123>

Published: July 31, 2021

Keywords: heritage studies, East Asia, collective memory, postcolonialism, prisons

Huang, S.-M. and Lee, H. K. (2020). *Heritage, Memory, and Punishment: Remembering Colonial Prisons in East Asia*. Abingdon: Routledge.

In Western politics, heated debates over the representation of the colonial past have recently erupted in the form of mass protests demanding the removal of monuments that are perceived to celebrate the history of colonialism and slavery. Increasingly, material and symbolic marks of colonialism – statues, architecture, and place names – are being treated as ‘difficult heritage’, which pose moral and political dilemmas for former colonial powers as well as for postcolonial societies.

Japanese colonial prisons – used to house colonial convicts including anti-colonial activists – are undoubtedly such examples of difficult heritage. For East Asian societies which were colonised by Japan, the fact that authoritarian postcolonial regimes continued to use these prisons adds another layer of complexity for understanding the difficult legacies of these structures. However, there has been little scholarly attention paid to the historical trajectories of these disused prisons. Filling this gap and highlighting their importance in national and international politics as ‘sites of memory’, *Heritage, Memory, and Punishment: Remembering Colonial Prisons in East Asia* sets the ambitious task of comparatively analysing the ‘afterlives’ of colonial prisons in China, South Korea, and Taiwan from the end of the Asia-Pacific War to the present day.

Chapter 1 begins by tracing the development of European penal philosophy of incarceration as rehabilitation, which directly shaped Japan’s modern penal system. As a burgeoning Imperial power, Japan actively imported and implemented Western penal thought in a bid to defy Orientalist myths of Asians as barbarians. Modern prisons were therefore crucial for demonstrating Japan’s ‘civilized’ status to Western states, and for justifying its ‘civilizing’ mission across its newly acquired territories including Taiwan (1895), Liaodong Peninsula (1905), and the Korean Peninsula (1910).

Chapter 2 introduces existing debates on the preservation of colonial heritage. Here, the authors present a three-tier model of prison preservation. Firstly, ‘Not Remembering’ entails the physical demolition of colonial prisons, which was the most common outcome for many of these sites (p. 26). Secondly, ‘Selective Remembering’ refers to preserving specific features of prisons that merit conservation; for example, emphasising the architectural value of the buildings while avoiding references to difficult political histories surrounding them. Thirdly, ‘Corrective Remembering’ refers to heritage preservation in which the past is ‘corrected’ for present-day political ends. Whether the separation of selective remembering and corrective remembering serves a clear purpose is somewhat questionable. Surely, either form of remembering will display characteristics of the other if we consider

that all forms of commemoration and conservation are usually subject to ‘the selective promotion or even rewriting of memories (usually by the state) to pursue a political agenda’ (p.28).

Chapter 3 provides a useful overview of the transnational flows of ideas, people, materials, and resources across the Japanese Empire, which shows how prisons became integral to Japan’s civilizing mission and resource extraction (p.37). Crucially, the authors show that the movement of convicts across Japan’s territories and the exploitation of penal labour – and forced labour more generally – was central to Japan’s imperial project, enabling the construction of key infrastructures (including the prisons themselves) and the production of food, goods, and military supplies for the Empire.

The following chapters focus on individual case studies. Chapter 4 discusses the Lushun Russo-Japanese Prison, returned to China in 1955. The disused prison was turned into a museum in the 1970s, reflecting the Chinese Communist Party’s intent to promote nationalism as well as anti-Russian and anti-Japanese sentiment. As an example of ‘selective remembering’, the museum retold certain aspects such as forced labour in graphic detail from a nationalist perspective, although there have been more recent attempts to internationalise memories of the museum by incorporating experiences of Korean prisoners. Chapter 5 traces the trajectory of the former Seodaemun Prison in Seoul as a key site for Korean nationalism. In transforming the former prison and the surrounding Independence Park as a sacred space, the authors point out that the site has excluded experiences of marginal groups, including political prisoners under South Korea’s successive military dictatorships, ‘comfort women’ (predominantly Korean women forced to provide sexual services to the Japanese military), and the *Okbaraji* community which supported the prison system. Chapter 6 examines Taihoku (Taipei) Prison and Chianyi Prisons in Taiwan, examples which have repurposed old colonial buildings in re-urbanisation projects. In both cases, the prisons underwent renovation without reflecting on the historical significance of the structures by making them appear more appropriate for everyday use whilst avoiding discussing negative histories attached to them. Perhaps the concept of ‘gentrification’ can be used in conjunction with ‘corrective remembering’ to understand not just the redevelopment of urban spaces but also the domestication of memory narratives to suit present interests.

Chapters 7 and 8 investigate transnational flows of ideas in the preservation of the prisons as heritage. There are moments of repetition, as Chapter 7 reiterates collaborative networks between Lushun and Seodaemun in transforming these sites as monuments to transnational anti-colonial struggle. Chapter 8 discusses the redevelopment of the area surrounding Taipei Prison to transform it into the ‘next Roppongi Hills’, a luxurious area of Tokyo. The authors argue such a move reproduces the punitive logic of the colonial state, as the state seeks to ‘other’ unwanted residents by criminalising them as ‘squatters’ and marginalising their experiences and memories as insignificant (p. 142).

Overall, this book presents an insightful overview of former prisons as heritage sites that adds to a growing body of research on the politics of negative heritage. The authors masterfully mobilize historiography, archival sources, and ethnographic data to provide a rich history of former colonial prisons. On a more critical note, however, the authors appear to situate the state as the primary protagonists of national memory, devoting less attention to the role of civil actors. For instance, Japan (the state) is consistently depicted as a reactionary force opposing preservation of colonial heritage. However, this overlooks the fact that Japanese NGOs have been some of the most active voices against colonialism in relation to the ‘comfort women’ controversy and history education, having worked closely with transnational counterparts across East Asia.

This minor point aside, this book will serve as an essential reference point for understanding the historic role of prisons under colonialism, as well as their political uses in postcolonial societies. Tackling the difficult legacies of colonialism and decolonisation, the authors offer a refreshing and compelling perspective that transcends the often myopic and simplistic debates surrounding Western colonialism. As such, this book has a broad appeal not only to scholars interested in East Asian history, but also to scholars in postcolonial studies, heritage studies, memory studies, and penology.