

SOCIAL BOOKMARKING HAMBURG

Memory, Erasure and the Politics of the Urban Landscape

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The persecution of Chinese migrants in Hamburg during the Nazi period occupies a remarkably marginal position within the German culture of remembrance. After the war, German restitution authorities largely rejected the idea that the persecution of the Chinese community had been racially motivated. The so-called *Chinesenaktion* was frequently interpreted as an ordinary police operation rather than as part of the systematic persecution of a racialised minority. This post-war classification had profound consequences: unlike many Jewish survivors, whose persecution was gradually acknowledged through various forms of compensation and restitution, the Chinese victims received little public recognition for the violence they had experienced. The absence of acknowledgement did not simply concern the past; it contributed to the continued marginalisation of their history in the present.

This marginalisation can also be understood through the relationship between memory and silence. Many Chinese survivors left Germany after the war and did not speak publicly about their experiences. For some, the German language itself had become inseparable from the violence they had endured. Refusing to speak German could therefore be understood not merely as a practical difficulty but as a symbolic rejection of the language of the perpetrators and an attempt to regain a sense of self that had been violated. Silence, in this context, was simultaneously an expression of trauma and a form of resistance. As Dominick LaCapra has argued, traumatic experience challenges conventional forms of representation because trauma is characterised by a tension between the need to remember and the difficulty of fully articulating what has been experienced. Memory therefore cannot be understood simply as the recovery of a completed past; it is also shaped by absence, repetition and silence (LaCapra 1994).

Yet individual silence alone cannot explain the disappearance of this history from collective memory. The history of Hamburg's Chinese community was also excluded from the city's official narratives and from the visible structure of the urban landscape. The former Chinatown in St. Pauli disappeared almost completely from public memory, while the former labour camp Langer Morgen in Wilhelmsburg remained largely unmarked. The physical city therefore became part of a larger process of historical selection: some histories are repeatedly represented, monumentalised and integrated into the public imagination, while others remain peripheral, invisible or inaccessible.

This raises a fundamental question concerning the relationship between memory and the city: **who has the authority to determine which histories become visible in public space?** Andreas Huyssen has pointed to the increasing importance of the city as a site of memory, arguing that “urban space is a key site for the articulation of memory” (Huyssen 2003). Cities are not neutral containers of history. Streets, buildings,

monuments, empty spaces and architectural remains participate in the production of collective memory. What is marked, preserved or monumentalised becomes part of the cultural landscape; what remains unmarked risks disappearing from public consciousness.

Aleida Assmann's distinction between canon and archive provides a further framework for understanding this process. Forgetting is an essential condition of memory because no individual or society can retain everything. Yet forgetting can take different forms. Something may disappear simply because it is no longer actively remembered, or it may be deliberately excluded from attention. Assmann distinguishes between forms of passive forgetting and more active forms of exclusion. The latter becomes politically significant when institutions, cultural authorities or dominant social groups determine which histories deserve visibility. As she writes, "when thinking about memory, we must start with forgetting" (Assmann 2008: 97). What is excluded from the canon does not necessarily cease to exist; it may remain in the archive, waiting for circumstances in which it can be brought back into circulation.

The history of Hamburg's Chinese community can be understood precisely in these terms. It was not completely erased. Historical research, family memories, scattered documents and traces in the city continued to preserve fragments of it. What was missing was a sufficiently visible framework through which these fragments could become part of a shared cultural memory. Artistic practice can intervene at precisely this point. Rather than simply illustrating historical facts, art can reactivate forgotten places, bodies and narratives and create situations in which the past becomes perceptible in the present.

This was the intention of *Social Bookmarking Hamburg*, a collaborative artistic project that sought to reconnect the history of Hamburg's Chinese community with the city's contemporary geography. The project did not attempt to reconstruct the former Chinatown as a historical replica. Instead, it worked through temporary interventions, performances, walking and encounters. The aim was to make a suppressed history physically and emotionally present without pretending that the past could simply be restored.

A central component of the project was the collaboration between German and Chinese artists. The different artistic approaches revealed how differently a shared history can be approached depending on one's position within it. Dagmar Rauwald worked with historical imagery, family photographs, dates and visual references to both Chinese and Hamburg cultural identities. In the former Chinatown in St. Pauli, her paintings were installed in public space without extensive explanation. Their bright, expressionist surfaces disrupted the familiar appearance of the neighbourhood. They functioned almost as visual interruptions: not imposing a complete narrative, but creating a disturbance that could provoke questions.

Such an intervention can be understood in relation to James E. Young's concept of the counter-monument. Young describes the counter-monument as a form that resists the traditional monumental desire to establish a stable and authoritative image of the past. Rather than presenting memory as complete and permanent, counter-monumental practices can expose the instability of remembering itself. The memorial may therefore become an interruption rather than a conclusion. In Young's formulation, memory can work "against itself" by refusing to provide a final, reassuring representation of history (Young 1992: 267–296). Rauwald's temporary paintings operate in a comparable way: they do not establish a conventional memorial but introduce an unstable visual presence into an otherwise unmarked landscape.

The intervention by Liu Ding followed a different strategy. Instead of using archival images, he worked directly with the materiality of the former labour camp Langer Morgen. Participants travelled from the former Chinatown to the camp, repeating symbolically a route that had once been imposed upon Chinese prisoners. Walking thus became both a physical and mnemonic practice. The journey connected two locations that had been separated within the contemporary city but were inseparable within the historical experience of the persecuted community: the place of everyday life and the place of forced labour and death.

The act of walking is particularly significant because it transforms the city from an abstract map into an embodied experience. Michel de Certeau famously describes walking as a practice through which ordinary people appropriate and rewrite urban space. For him, "the ordinary practitioners of the city live 'down below'" and create their own spatial narratives through movement (de Certeau 1984: 93). In *Social Bookmarking Hamburg*, walking similarly became a way of rewriting the geography of the city. The participants did not simply observe historical sites; they physically connected them, producing a temporary alternative map of Hamburg.

At the former camp, participants buried potatoes together with approximately three hundred Euro coins. The choice of these materials was deliberately ambivalent. Potatoes evoke hunger, poverty and wartime experience, but also specifically German cultural associations. The Euro coins, by contrast, referred to contemporary Europe, economic value and the possibility of compensation. Buried together, the two materials created a tension between bodily survival, economic value and historical responsibility.

The action also generated resistance from some local residents, who objected particularly to the use of potatoes and proposed replacing them with flowers. This reaction became part of the meaning of the work. It demonstrated that remembrance is never politically neutral. The question is not only whether a history should be remembered, but also who has the authority to determine how it may be remembered and which symbols are considered acceptable. The demand to replace the potatoes could therefore itself be understood as an attempt to regulate the form in which the past becomes visible.

The project consequently operated against a hierarchy of memory. Rather than asking an institution to validate the history first, the artists and participants entered the landscape themselves. They transformed walking, gathering, performance and temporary installation into forms of historical intervention. In this sense, the participants became more than spectators. They became witnesses and carriers of memory, temporarily adding another layer to the city's spatial history.

The importance of the project also lay in its transnational dimension. The collaboration between Chinese and German artists did not produce a single, unified interpretation of the past. Instead, different perspectives remained visible. The resulting tension between victim and perpetrator perspectives, between local and transnational histories, became productive. It opened the possibility of understanding Hamburg's history not as a closed national narrative but as part of a larger history of migration, racism, displacement and memory.

The project further demonstrated that contemporary art can function as an archival practice. Its documentation circulated through exhibitions, discussion, radio, film and digital media, allowing the history to move beyond the physical sites where it had occurred. This process of mediation is important because memories do not remain stable simply by being recorded. They must continually be transmitted, interpreted and reactivated. Each new medium can create another point of access to a history that had previously remained outside public attention.

In this sense, artistic practice becomes a form of counter-archiving. It does not necessarily recover an intact past; rather, it brings fragments into new relations. The artwork can become a temporary archive in itself: a place where traces that have not yet entered the cultural canon can become perceptible. The distinction between archive and canon is therefore not fixed. Artistic intervention can shift material from one sphere to the other, transforming what was previously peripheral into something capable of entering collective attention.

The significance of *Social Bookmarking Hamburg* therefore lies less in its ability to establish a definitive memorial than in its capacity to interrupt forgetting. The temporary paintings, the collective walk, the buried objects and the conversations around them did not restore what had been lost. They created moments in which the absence itself became perceptible.

The project ultimately raises a broader question about the politics of memory: whose histories become part of the visible city, and whose remain hidden beneath its surface? Remembering is never simply an act of looking backwards. It also determines how a society understands itself in the present and what forms of responsibility it is willing to carry into the future. As Huyssen suggests, the struggle over memory is simultaneously a struggle over the meanings assigned to places and identities in the present (Huyssen 2003).

By returning to places that had been rendered historically invisible, artistic practice can challenge established hierarchies of memory and make room for narratives that have long remained unheard. The city becomes not only a repository of history but a contested medium through which history is continually rewritten.

In this sense, the most important achievement of such an intervention may not be the creation of a permanent monument. It may instead be the creation of a temporary disturbance in the ordinary perception of a place. After encountering the history of former Chinatown or Langer Morgen, the landscape can no longer appear entirely neutral. The ordinary street, the empty meadow or the industrial remains become charged with another temporal layer. Memory enters the present not as a completed narrative, but as a question.

Art can therefore act as a form of historical responsibility: not by speaking on behalf of those who were silenced, but by creating conditions in which their traces can become visible again. What had been pushed to the margins of the urban narrative can return—not as a fixed monument to the past, but as an active presence within the city and within the memories of those who encounter it

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