

“Within limits, the animals are free, but both they themselves and their spectators, presume on their close confinement. The visibility through the glass, the spaces between the bars, or the empty air above the moat, are not what they seem—if they were, then everything would be changed. Thus visibility, space, air, have been reduced to tokens.” Described from John Berger in *Why Look at Animals*.¹

A zoo is a big enclosure that contains smaller cages with various categories. Besides offering visitors the opportunity to appreciate the diversity and splendour of nature, learn about various aspects of animal behaviour, zoos also allow humans to feel superior to wild animals in their cages. Cages in a zoo, a secluded space that separates nature and human, a confined space that dominates the landscape. These additional spaces fulfill human needs, bringing a customized visual experience, while maintaining an assumption of superiority as well as performing an educational purpose. On the surface, they might seem as if there is only one direction of control — human to animal— but under different circumstances zoos can be powerful tools to manipulate humans’ minds.

Zoos use exotic animals as spectacle, reinforcing ideological narratives about cultural sophistication, global belonging, and human control over nature. These artificial ecologies are not lessons in nature; they are manipulations of perception. A kind of soft violence that can relate to the war period propaganda method. This essay will analyze Taipei Zoo in Yuan-shan during Japanese colonial period from the late 19th century to the 20th century as the main case, with examples of zoos in other nations as auxiliary case studies. It aims to dissect the unusual function of cages that born out of response from specific time and space background (Taiwan under Japan rule period and post war period, and to explore whether this historical influences remain in contemporary zoos in Taipei.

The Japanese Empire in the 19th and 20th Century and Its Expansion in Asia

In 1868, after the end of Japan’s feudal Tokugawa regime, the Meiji Restoration began. In this period, Japan adopted Western political, military and technological systems through rapid modernization and industrialization, in order to strengthen the nation and resist colonization.² As Japan grew stronger, it was eager to increase its influence and secure resources through imperialist expansion. In 1895, Japan invaded Taiwan and established influence over Korea after defeating China in the First Sino-Japanese War in their first wave of expansion.³ Taiwan was a major colony for Japan, which it used to experiment with Japanese-style colonial policy, driven by its desire for resources, regional dominance, and parity with Western powers.⁴

Zoo Development as a Colonial Means

The term zoo or zoological gardens refers to regional facilities that enclose wild and exotic animals for public viewing. This concept did not exist in the Chinese language prior to the Japanese colonial period.⁵ In traditional Taiwanese society, apart from hunting, the general public had limited ways to see wild animals — through art works and decorations was one such experience.⁶ There were also itinerant artists and merchants who used animals for performances, and there were small breeding farms or specimen display places scattered among communities.⁷ With Japan’s rule over Taiwan beginning in 1895, both the zoo as an institution and the term ‘zoo’ were introduced to Taiwan.⁸

Cage as Stage: How Zoos Perform Ideological Deployment

In the 19th century, the British Empire's zoos collected animals from various colonies to demonstrate the country's power and show its glory to their subordinates. The zoos set up in the colonies reflected the superior position of the imperial colonists, who dominated local knowledge and cultural input. An example of this is the Zoological Garden in Calcutta, Kolkata Zoo, which was established by the British in 1895.⁹ In similar fashion, the Meiji Restoration in the 19th century, led Japan to emulate the West, using zoos as symbols of modernization and civilization. The concept was introduced with the establishment of Japan's first zoo in 1882, the Ueno Zoo in Tokyo,¹⁰ after which the term 'zoo' was exported as Japanese Kanji. Taiwan was under a regime of language assimilation from Japanese empire, which was how 'zoo' appeared as an official term in Taiwan society.¹¹

After Taiwan entered Japanese rule, the Japanese government introduced a series of infrastructures, museums, parks, botanical gardens, banks.¹² Setting up a zoo was part of their domestication plan for the Taiwanese.¹³ So far, the Japanese Empire had found four major zoos, located in Japan and its colonies. In 1916, the Taipei Zoo in Yuan-Shan was established, the first in Taiwan, which became the Japanese Empire's fifth official zoo.¹⁴ It represented a significant expansion from the conqueror's point of view, with the Japanese empire using animals as a means to support its southward expansion policy during wartime. In addition, new animal and plant specimens were introduced as well. These specimens were extracted from their original ecological systems and repositioned, becoming a mechanism to assist in legitimization and cultural hegemony.¹⁵

The next section will discuss the the historical events and facilities relating to the Taipei Zoo in Yuan-Shan, starting with what I call the 'hard layer', where I will explain the cage design and my spatial investigation. After this, I will discuss the 'soft layer', in which I explore the zoos role in ideological deployment, and interpret the impact of zoos both on animals as well as humans.

● Hard Layer— Cage Design and Spatial Investigation

The 'hard layer' I define as the hardware and facility aspect of the cages. At the Taipei Zoo in Yuan-Shan, an iconic large hemispherical waterfowl cage was constructed using a steel framework. It stood 10 meters high and covered 283 square meters.¹⁶ Inside the cage, there were trees and a concrete pond inhabited by waterfowl. Although the zoo was for educational and entertainment purposes, some fences were designed with lower bars and less isolated from visitors, so people could interact with the animals behind the fence easily, even feeding them.¹⁷

Besides the aesthetic point of view, the design of the spherical cage resembled an enlarged version of a Chinese bird cage, similar to the one from The Lin Family Mansion and Garden in New Taipei City. From my perspective, the cage was similar to a fish tank. The design inspiration might be based on human habits, as we humans tend to duplicate things we are used to in life. For example, a circular fish tank direct the flow of continuing movement to the fishes. The viewers can watch these animals in the cage from every angle and makes them feel superior than these animals. Circular tank provides more steady flow patterns, more homogeneous distribution of dissolved oxygen and metabolites and better self-cleaning properties.¹⁸ It allows the fishes for continuing movement without too big exhibited space. The similar principle can be compared to this round bird cage: circular flight aviaries may be better equipped to facilitate flight in captive birds. This design which has the potential to encourage extended flight in captive birds without the need for excessively large exhibit design.¹⁹

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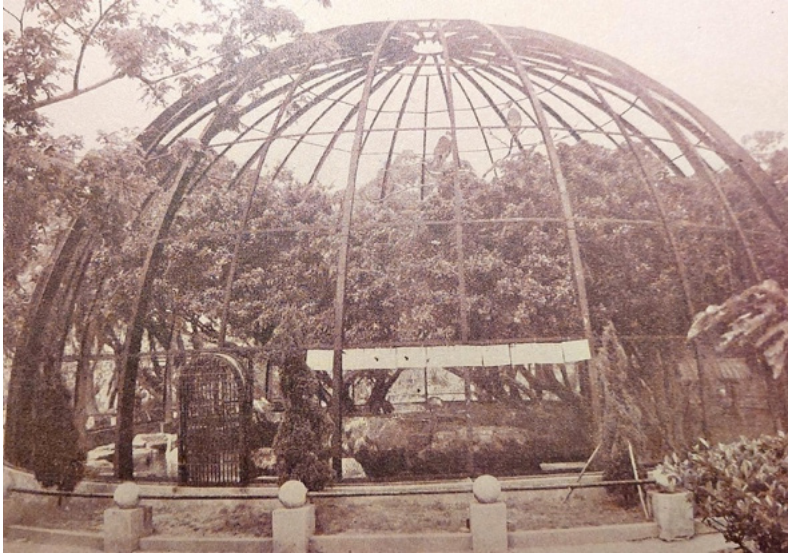


Figure 1

Large waterfowl cage at Yuan-Shan zoo with a total area of 283 square meters, where waterfowl can fly freely about 10 meters high, year unknown. Source: Taipei Zoo Special Collection.

From the zoo's perspective, the zoo officials aimed to create interactions between visitors and animals. Although the primary concern in the design of the cage was solidity, achieved through dense latticework to prevent escape, some cages were designed to allow animals to reach out for snacks or being touched by visitors (figure 2 and 3). Paradoxically, humans also appeared to have the desire to influence animals' behaviour: feeding sessions became part of the exhibition curation, intensifying the shared experience between viewer and animal. This act attracted visitors eager to connect with the creatures — or more importantly, to observe these remarkable 'animal specimens' in motion.²⁰ The scene of an animal dragging its heavy body to clumsily chase food thrown by a child became a vivid, visual reminder of the animals' tightly controlled freedom.²¹



Figure 2

Taipei High School Graduation Commemoration, 1932. Source: Matsumoto Old High School Memorial Hall.

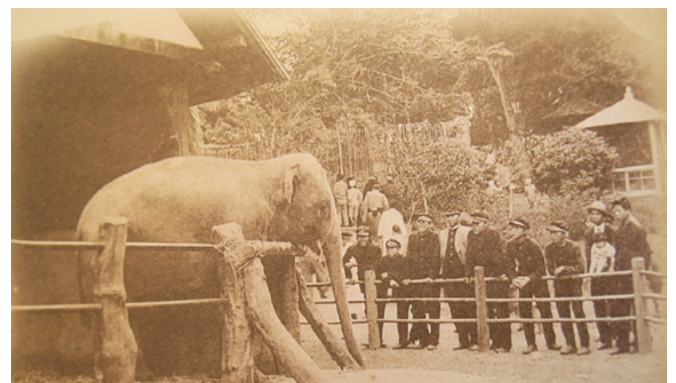


Figure 3

Zebra from Africa, 1931. Source: A guide to Formosa, Source: National Taiwan Library Archive.

● Soft Layer—Ideological Deployment

I define the 'soft layer' as the means of psychological control and as a metaphor of imprisoning citizens' free thinking and their own identities. Cultural institutions always carefully conceal certain aspects of their functioning.²² Under imperialism, solidarity among the people was essential, zoos could therefore be useful to enhance the connection of citizens and empire. Zoos certainly did more than teach visitors about colonial or natural history; they also reproduced ideology as nature and disguised policy as exhibition. By embedding cultural influence and shared mentality through entertainment and animal presence, it served as a tool to unite people in the colonies. I will demonstrate the ideological deployment in three topics: strengthening loyalty, solidarity and animal symbols and ethos elimination.

Strengthening Loyalty and Solidarity

From historical descriptions, the Taipei Zoo in Yuan-Shan resembled a contemporary theme park. Large amounts of lighting equipment were installed to illuminate animal cages, tourist rest areas and performance stages in the evenings.²³ The evening events offered several attractions for visitors: including cooler temperatures in the evening combined with entertainment such as dance, theatre, music, and fireworks.²⁴ Unsurprisingly, this increased visitor numbers, although in the contemporary context it could be considered strange and disturbing for the animals. The more visitors to the zoo, the more connection between citizen and the zoo would be built.

'Animal memorial Service' also played an educational role at the Taipei Zoo in Yuan-Shan at that time. These memorial landscapes involved religious associations: the memorial service held on the little hill at the Taipei Zoo in Yuan-Shan, decorated with colourful fabric strips and an altar set up in the middle, the memorial tablet on the altar indicated 'dead animals and the spirits from Taipei Zoo in Yuan-Shan'.²⁵ The human participants were mourning the spirits of those dead animals from the zoo: playing the chasing song and showing their condolences. The special scene was including a leading animal that being dressed in the middle, acting as a bridge and representative to the gods and spirits. The altar stage was surrounded by students and different associations (especially the ones who sacrificed the animals for scientific, medical and military purpose). The participants were reading the funeral oration, burning incense and giving flowers.²⁶

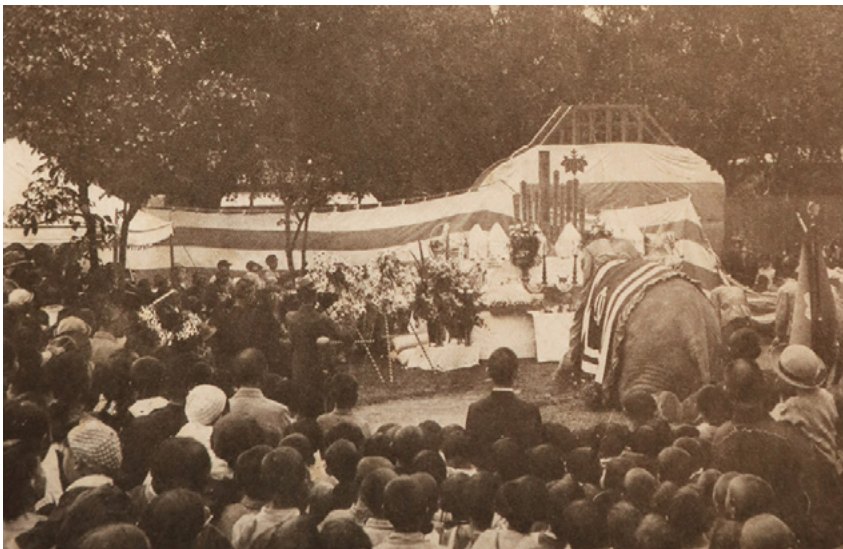


Figure 4
Animal memorial ceremony and the representative animal elephant in Yuan-Shan zoo, 1931.
Source: Taipei City Animal Photography provided by Taipei City Hall.

Initially, this kind of memorial service aimed to teach visitors compassion for animals and discourage abuse. The promotional methods were through zoo director's speech and printed flyers. Later on when the Japanese Empire expanding their ambition and proceeding more incursion through war, the memorial service became mandatory events involving animal hosts, students, religious groups, institutional participants (such as Taipei Medical Specialized School, Taipei Animal Husbandry School, Taihoku Imperial University, and the Animal Serum Factory).²⁷



Figure 5
Memorial tablet of dead animals and monkey's worship on site, unknown year.
Source: *Taipei Zoo 100-year History*, page 112.

As the war approached, rising food prices made it difficult to obtain animal feed.²⁸ Precautions against possible air raids became essential, including cooperation with military activities to avoid burdening the country and society.²⁹ To prevent wild animals from escaping and harming people during air raids, the Animal Disposal Policy was issued, an imperial order for the systematic killing of zoo animals.³⁰ The Japanese Army Eastern Command formulated the Outline of Emergency Measures for Zoos, classifying animals by their risk level to determine the execution of animals in the zoo.³¹ When the military informing Taiwanese citizens about this matter, it could be framed as sharing hardships and facing the current predicament together—thus, to a certain extent, reinforcing the psychological control over Taiwanese people at that time.

In August 1943, the governor of Tokyo ordered Ueno Zoo to dispose of their large animals.³² As a zoo situated in a Japanese colony, the Taipei Zoo in Yuan-shan was expected to follow the decisions of the colonial mother country.³³ Along with zoo staff, veterinary students participated in the killings and received dissection training. Before the executions, all employees were lined up and bowed three times to the animals. The killing method consisted of luring the animals into fenced enclosures with electrified iron plates, then electrocuting them with spears. As the animal bit the spear, a high-voltage current would pass through its body, killing it instantly. There were exceptions, however. Orangutans, considered valuable assets to Japan, were spared and placed behind double fences and stone bulletproof walls. Tamed elephants were chained and housed in similarly protected areas. Pythons and crocodiles, still hibernating at the time, were left alone.³⁵ Unfortunately, there are no first-hand written records of how zoo animals were handled during this period; most of what is known comes from personal memories and indirect evidence.³⁶

Ethos Elimination

The zoo was used by the Japanese Empire as a symbol of the political surrender of Taiwan—a facility to demonstrate a sense of superiority of their civilization. Korea, which is close to Taiwan, was invaded by Japan as well, and also featured a very distinctive zoo case. To eliminate the ethos that upheld Korean identity, Japan changed the purpose of the Korean Royal Palace Changgyeonggung (창경원, 昌慶苑) into Korea's first national zoo and botanical garden in 1909.³⁷ The former director of the Palace Affairs Bureau became the director of the zoo. After the merger of Japan and Korea, the Changgyeonggung Palace Zoo became the third zoo in the Japanese Empire.³⁸

Animal Symbols

The number of visitors to Taipei Zoo in Yuan-Shan did not decrease, even during the war period from 1937 to 1941.³⁹ A major reason was that the zoo was seen as part of the 'willpower' for the war efforts. While Taiwanese children and mothers visited the elephant in the zoo, the fathers were recruited as soldiers, serving the Japanese Empire in the jungles of Southeast Asia.⁴⁰ This resulted in the children connecting the elephant in the zoo to the battlefield and their absent fathers, symbolically uniting the public in service and loyalty, thereby reinforcing control and emotional alignment.⁴¹ Visitors sought to build a close relationship with animals, emphasizing their contributions in both private and public spheres. Through this, the zoo provided a form of psychological education for both children and adults.

● Legacy in the contemporary context

The imperial ambitions of Japan ultimately collapsed with its defeat in 1945⁴², ending its colonial rule and occupation in Taiwan. The Taipei Zoo in Yuan-Shan has also gradually lost the traces of past imperial control over the course of history. What legacy can be found in the contemporary context then?

When I visited the Taipei Mucha Zoo (previously the Taipei Zoo in Yuan-Shan), most of the historical fenced cages had evolved into hidden fence cages. This was inspired by Carl Hagenbeck's thoughts on cage revolution in 1907⁴³, which introduced the concept of planned nature in zoos, and continues to influence contemporary zoo design globally.⁴⁴ Unlike earlier farmhouse-style cages, animals are now shown in open enclosures separated by trenches and vegetation, allowing unobstructed viewing. Hagenbeck's design reformed the space, giving the appearance that animals do not need to be controlled, by its usage of man-made ponds, moats, mountains and plants. However, in doing so a fake reality is generated to give humans a comfortable feeling that they are 'taking care of nature'. Although it is important to improve animals' right by expanding more the space within the animal enclosure, reducing the feeling of guilt is probably as important for humans.⁴⁵

Furthermore, in order to present an artificially harmonious landscape, modern zoos often display species together that would not naturally coexist, creating a spectacle for human eyes rather than an authentic ecological scene. These 'improved' cages become the infrastructure in the zoo, a medium of invisible information that determines how we humans perceive our coexistence with wild animals.⁴⁶ It makes us believe that we are able to live together with all kinds of different species, while simultaneously covering up the damage.

Trenches can be effective to separate humans from animals. However, they are not always safe for the animals. A well-known example is Lin Wang, the Asian elephant at the Taipei Muzha Zoo. During a relocation, animals were trained a month in advance to move and eat inside their moving containers, which would help them adapt to the real situation later.⁴⁷ Despite this preparation, the move was organised by the zoo to become a public spectacle, reinforcing the connection between watching and controlling. On the relocation day, while arriving at Muzha Zoo in the evening, possibly due to disorientation by the dim light, Lin Wang mistook an elephant-shaped telephone booth for his companion elephant Ma Lan. He rushed toward it and fell into a trench.⁴⁸ This incident highlights how visual prioritization and human-centered planning can compromise animal safety and dignity, which echoes earlier forms of control and ideological framing seen during the colonial era.

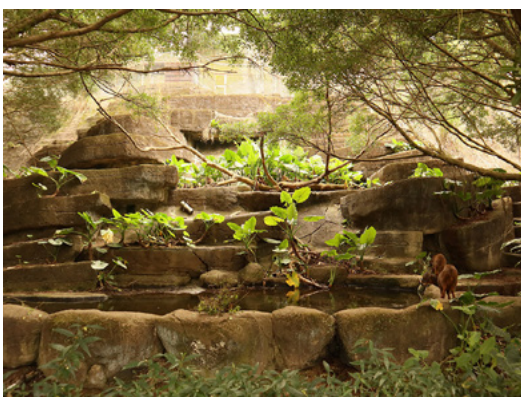


Figure 6
Animal memorial ceremony and the representative Enclosure of Formosan Serow in Taipei Mucha Zoo, Taiwan Endemic Species, 2024.
Source: photography Chang Yu-hsin.

Cage as Stage: How Zoos Perform Ideological Deployment

After walking through the tropical area within the elephant enclosure in Taipei Muzha Zoo, I followed the zoo map, which guided me to Antarctic Fauna area: the penguin hall. The entrance is a combination of props that simulate the penguins' climate landscapes. Penguins, who are not accustomed to Taiwan's subtropical climate, are kept in a long glass space. The ceiling is a cheap-looking sky blue, and many air conditioners are embedded within the white uneven walls to counterfeit the world of ice and snow. The cold air is engineered, and the rock formations stylized. It seems ridiculous that a snowy scene can be constructed in such a theatrical form: a stage where fiction plays as fact. This design of this type of transparent cage aims to divide animals and viewers by using colour, glass, plants, empty space and light to influence the visitor experience. It seems as if visitors can directly communicate with the animals behind the clear glass, but at the same time, this experience is designed to shape the imagination and reality of the visitors. The animals are labelled with their biological name and characteristics — this set design indicates that the native ecology exists somewhere else. Glass also isolates the sounds and the smells, which enhances the abstract feeling of the division between the animal and human world. The penetrating isolation seems so closed to the animals, but it is a hard segmentation. Through human' gaze, the penguins adapt, perform, survive in this absurd, yet normalized illusion. The use of architectural means and the creation of new social terms redefine the relationship between viewers and animals.⁴⁹



Figure 7 (Left) and Figure 8 (Right)
Antarctic Fauna area in Taipei Mucha Zoo, 2024.
Source: photography Chang Yu-hsin.

Celebrity animals existing in every era, they play an important role to attract visitors. Zoos consistently create star figures to attract public attention. During the Japanese occupation of Taiwan, the most popular animal at the Taipei Zoo in Yuan-shan was the orangutan Ichiro, who even received a certificate of commendation as 'the top orangutan in Japan'.⁵⁰ Famous Japanese printmakers Tateishi Tetsuomi (立石鐵臣) visited him in person to create artworks based on his environment, habits, and appearance, turning him into a cultural icon.⁵¹ Lin Wang (1918-2003), the aforementioned Asian elephant, was captured in Burma to serve the Japanese army during the Japanese occupation, and was the only elephant that survived the war. After Japan's defeat, he was fully cared for by the Taiwanese government.⁵² Taiwanese people love him since he represented an image of perseverance and loyalty. Today, the stars of Taipei Muzha Zoo (previously Taipei Zoo in Yuan-shan) are penguins, koalas, and pandas — all non-native species. Instead of promoting local animals, the zoo reckons the exotic animals can attract more interest for the visitors, whose appeal lies in their novelty and commercial value. This highlights a persistent pattern: human manipulations of perception and it is relatable to the war period propaganda.

Pandas are good example in contemporary political context, with 'Panda diplomacy' being used as a strategic tool for China to strengthen diplomatic relations and cultivate goodwill with other countries.⁵³ Beijing offered Taiwan the two pandas — Tuan Tuan (團團) and Yuan Yuan (圓圓), which together means "unification". The Taiwanese DPP government rejected the offer because China considered the export of the pandas a 'domestic transfer' between zoos and was the offer was therefore an affront to Taiwan's sovereignty.⁵⁴

● Reflection

At the Taipei Muzha Zoo (and other contemporary zoos), I can tell that the enclosures and the environment for the animals has been improved over the years. However, there exists a choreography of false harmony: animals that would never meet in the wild are placed side by side, arranged like props for a narrative that humans need to believe. Their coexistence appears easy and beautiful. Donna Haraway in 'When Species Meet' explores that humans and animals are not separated, they shape each other. Humans should take the responsibility and not pretend animals are passive or voiceless. We (human) owe them care, ethical attention, and recognition of their agency. Yet, the zoo replaces that encounter with a spectacle. The cage is not just for wild animals, it is a frame for the human mind too — a quiet architecture of denial, dressed as empathy. Should national zoos follow the animal collection trend and display models of other national zoos in the world? Some species are inherently unsuitable to live in captivity, such as giraffes and elephants. Keeping these animals in an artificial environment for their entire lives will also cause physical and mental harm to the animals themselves. Bob Jacobs, professor of Neuroscience suggests that "Living in enclosures that restrict or prevent normal behaviour creates chronic frustration and boredom. In the wild, an animal's stress-response system helps it escape from danger. But captivity traps animals with almost no control over their environment."⁵⁵

From these historical accounts and current observations, the question remains whether zoos should continue to accept and breed these large animals? Although these wild animals have shifted from being on colonial displays to being commercially branded, and used for educational purpose, the framing remains rooted in systems of visual dominance and emotional manipulation. Zoos are civilizing institutions whose primary goal is to instill norms rather than to describe how things really are or to faithfully reproduce the natural world.⁵⁶ This is important to rethink whether we should continue to accept and keep this form of understanding about the coexistence of human and nature.

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