

Historical Understanding and Visiting Behavior in Red Exhibitions

¹Hailan Liu, ²Chenyang Li, ³Zifeng Mo

ABSTRACT

Red exhibitions provide one important way for modern revolutionary history to enter into public space. This paper studies from the view point of historical reception: visitors' understanding and visiting behaviors in exhibition spaces. Using questionnaire surveys and on-site observations we investigate how visitors interpret, choose and simplify modern revolutionary history narratives. We find that photo-taking plus brief browsing is a common visiting mode; and there is lower understanding when there is more photo-taking and quick browsing, while smoother understanding correlates with more reading and lingering.

KEYWORDS: Red exhibitions; Visiting behavior; Historical understanding; Check-in style visiting; Public history

Date of Submission: 12-09-2026

Date of acceptance: 23-09-2026

I. Introduction

The modern Chinese revolution has gradually come into the domain of the masses in the form of memorial halls, thematic exhibitions and cultural events. Exhibit space history is highly compressed: complex processes become timelines, images, slogans, symbolic exhibits, which are experienced by being there, reading, or taking pictures. This contact is usually fragmented as opposed to being well-understood.

Current studies on red tourism and red exhibitions tend to be on ideological education or cultural dissemination. But the majority of them focus on the way history is perceived, but not the way history is received. The very visit behavior is a kind of reception. There are those who are more photo- and check-in-oriented in their approaches, but this approach appears to be superficial and leaves one wondering, when a revolutionary history is being shown by modern means, how the visitor interprets or oversimplifies the stories? This paper therefore examines visitors' understanding and visiting behavior in contemporary public space at the micro level.

II. Research Perspective and Review of Related Studies

As the phenomenon of public history appeared, researchers started to focus on the exhibition of history in museums and memorial halls. They emphasized that the show is some sort of a historical narrative framework with an interpretative purpose whose organization will influence the way visitors will comprehend it[1]. When documentary texts are too many or there is no evident narrative thread, it is hard to create an overall impression with insufficient time as a visitor.

The Museum Studies considers the visitors as the active objects of historical reception. They do not passively absorb information; instead; they choose and re-process what they received depending on their experience and cognitive capacity. This results in various experiences in history in the same location. There has been an augmentation in the discourse of check-in in tourism and cultural studies. Another argument advanced by some studies was that it is not merely a superficial consumption, but a symbolic form of engagement with scenes that were cultural in nature. However, these studies mostly address general tourism and pay little attention to historical content in red exhibitions[2].

In brief, although there are some excellent perspectives from previous researches, modern history research should consider visiting behavior as a mode of historical reception. This paper would follow this line to explore the way that contemporary visitors understand, select and simplify modern revolutionary history through red exhibition spaces according to field materials.

III. Sources of Materials and Research Methods

Materials are mainly drawn from field research through observation of various red-themed exhibitions (e.g., "The Tide Rises from the Pearl River"). The exhibitions are of similar content, narrative, and visitor behavior; this offers a real context in which to study historical reception inside red exhibitions.

In terms of methodology, we use both questionnaire survey and on-site observation: questionnaires capture visitors' understanding about exhibition contents as well as their visiting method and photo-taking behavior from a subjective perspective, whereas observations record linger time, reading, and photo-taking in different areas for supplementary behavioral data. This paper does not seek universal conclusions through quantitative data, but treats findings as materials for understanding how contemporary visitors contact and digest modern history in exhibition spaces.

IV. Survey Analysis of Exhibition Understanding and Visiting Behavior

Intelligibility of modern history content in red exhibitions[3]. Overall intelligibility ratings mostly fall into an upper-middle level: basically understandable, but not very clear. Some visitors chose low levels, and there were big differences in their understandings. It is related to the narratives in modern history exhibitions. The modern revolutionary history is full of long time spans, dense events, and complex personal relationships, which have to be expressed in a very condensed manner. When too much information is packed into limited space, visitors must filter information and build meaning within a short time, making understanding difficult. Excessive reliance on textual explanation without a clear interpretive structure also produces understanding breaks. Exhibition methods thus largely shape visitors' paths of understanding modern history.

For visitors' visiting methods, it is common that they visit in a "check-in style." "Taking photos plus brief browsing" as the main visiting method occupies a relatively large proportion of the sample, whereas systematic reading or prolonged lingering is relatively rare. The "check-in-style visiting" is not due to lacking an interest in historical content. The photo taking generally targets those exhibits that are symbolically significant and visually impactful—they usually have highly condensed historical meanings. Check-in is a symbolic way of participating in cultural scenes; its essence is not full understanding but confirming one's presence and memory. For the reception in modern history, photo-taking is an oversimplification for complicated stories. Image retention converts hard-to-digest content into symbols for future processing, completing a minimal contact with history in a short time.

Correlation between the level of understanding and visiting[4]. Categorizing visitors based on understanding reveals that the photo-taking as the primary visiting behavior is significantly higher in the lower-understanding group and that reading and lingering become significantly higher in the higher-understanding group. In case of a higher threshold, visitors take a fast photo and go through the page; in case comprehension is less trying, they take more time to read. Rather than having an attitude problem, check-in style visiting should be considered as a high cognitive cost formed historical reception strategy[5].

Photo-making reasons, historical differences in understanding. Recording and sharing on photos are the two types of photo-taking that translate to higher levels of intelligibility than checking in. Simple taking of photos does not imply superficial involvement; rather, the most important thing is whether it is founded on some understanding[6]. The way modern history is received by its visitors is more than linear and has a number of paths. Others establish a symbolic contact then develop deeper knowledge afterwards; others establish a fairly complete knowledge on the ground. Multi-path reception is a trace of the way our contemporary history is becoming even more complex when approaching the public space.

V. Conclusion: Modes of Reception of Modern Revolutionary History in Exhibition Spaces

There is a clear correlation between visiting behaviour in red exhibition spaces and knowledge of content of modern revolutionary history. The concept of check-in-style visiting should thus be perceived in the context of historical reception, rather than as an attitude question.

The exhibition space is an extremely compressed narrative. Complex processes become images, texts, and symbols that need to be understood in a short period. In case the threshold is high, visitors lower their cost for immediate understanding through photos or quick browsing—it is a reception strategy in reality instead of negating history.

This confirms the view in public history research regarding "visitor agency." Visitors are not passive recipients but actively select ways to contact history. Differences in photo-taking motivations indicate that "check-in" is not a single mode. There are some who arrive at a "deferred understanding" by keeping the images of historical symbols in their memory, and then revisiting them. Visiting behavior in red exhibitions should also be seen as an interaction between history and different visitors after entering public space.

To conclude, historical reception within red exhibitions is not one-dimensional (i.e., deep vs. shallow); it's a multi-path process that is jointly determined by exhibition narratives, visitors' cognitive costs, and their own choice. Lingering, reading, taking photos, and quick browsing form a complete picture of contemporary public engagement with modern revolutionary history. This picture can help us reflect upon the communicative effects of red exhibitions as well as provide concrete empirical grounds for the question of "how history is received" from the perspective of public history.

- [1]. Wineman, J., Peponis, J., & Dalton, R. (2006, September). Exploring, engaging, understanding in museums. In C. Hölscher, RC Dalton, & A. Turner, Space Syntax and Spatial Cognition—Proceedings of the Workshop held in Bremen (pp. 33-53).
- [2]. Jarosz, K. (2026). Red Shanghai and Urban Memory. In *Museums as Genius Loci in Contemporary Shanghai* (pp. 55-86). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland.
- [3]. Bonacchi, C., Krzyzanska, M., Sharpe, K., Horne, Z., & Hingley, R. (2025). Fostering tolerance through museums: assessing visitor engagement with historical analogies at three archaeological galleries in the UK. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 13.
- [4]. Falk, J., & Storksdieck, M. (2005). Using the contextual model of learning to understand visitor learning from a science center exhibition. *Science education*, 89(5), 744-778.
- [5]. Zhao, X., & Mao, R. (2023). Are visitors' satisfaction reliable? A perspective from museum visitor behavior. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 40, 96 - 112.
- [6]. Simpson, C., Hale, J., & Hanks, L. (2024). Self-Representational Photography at the British Museum. *E-Revista de Estudos Interculturais*, (12).