



UTS
ePRESS

Public History Review

Vol. 29, 2022



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Citation: Li, N. 2022. Public History: The Future of Teaching the Past in China. *Public History Review*, 29, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.5130/phrj.v29i0.7859>

ISSN 1833-4989 | Published by UTS ePRESS | <https://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/phrj>

ARTICLES (PEER REVIEWED)

Public History: The Future of Teaching the Past in China

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5130/phrj.v29i0.7859>

Article History: Received 14/08/2021; Accepted 10/02/2022; Published 18/02/2022

History is going public in China. The history written in textbooks, published in academic journals and taught in classrooms have become only a few of the many forms of representing the past. And they are often not the most effective forms. Into the twenty-first century, monographs have stopped being the only medium. History – depending on how one interprets it – is ‘already on your phone’,¹ and no one needs a license to write history on digital platforms. So the previously unquestionable authority has become questionable. The traditional history education, an integral part of the national nine year compulsory education in China, is at a crossroad: memorizing established facts, names, numbers and dates and treating historical knowledge as a privilege for only a chosen few is no longer the status quo. A more sophisticated public yearns for history that surprises and startles.

This article tackles this challenge. It argues that public history, as an emergent and reflective practice, constitutes an effective intervention into the traditional history education. With an in-depth analysis of three national public history faculty training programs (2014–2019), this article suggests that public history points to the new direction in teaching the past in China.

When Traditional History Education is Challenged

Why learn history? The National History Curriculum Standards, also known as the Standards for History in the National Compulsory Education (*Yiwu Jioayu Lishi Kecheng Biao zhun*) – referred to as the Standards² and issued by the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China – states that ‘The purposes of learning history include: to cultivate a national spirit, to inherit the excellent tradition and culture of Chinese civilization, to provoke a national spirit and patriotism, and to build a sense of pride, mission and social responsibility for being Chinese.’³ In report-style language, the Standards leave vague terms such as ‘national spirit’, ‘tradition and culture’, ‘a sense of pride’ and ‘social responsibility’ largely undefined and offers no concrete advice on how to evaluate core competencies. Using history as a booster for national myth, civic passion and social cohesion is certainly not unique to China, as cultures, ideology and patriotism constitute an indispensable part of history education around the

globe. However, in China where the state has played a paramount role, history education has long been engineered to shape collective historical consciousness. As Zheng Wang notes, ‘China’s one hundred years of humiliation when it was attacked, bullied, and torn asunder by imperialists and how this historical memory has been reinforced by the regime’s educational socialization of the Chinese citizenry.’⁴

The teaching of history has been integral to the national compulsory education administered by the Ministry of Education of the PRC. According to the Standards,⁵ history curriculum should be designed from three aspects – knowledge and capability; process and methods; and empathy, attitude and value system. The Ministry of Education exercises direct authority over both the content of history textbooks and teaching methodology. Since 1992, modern and contemporary Chinese history has become a required core course in high school. The official version of modern Chinese history is stated as follows: ‘Chinese modern history is a history of humiliation that China had been gradually degenerated into a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society; at the same time, it is also a history that Chinese people strive for national independence and social progress, persisted in their struggle of anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism, and was also the history of the success of New-Democratic Revolution under the leadership of the CCP.’⁶ In 2011, the Standards’ core competence was updated to include five components: historical materialism, the ideas of time and space, historical source analysis, historical explanation and family-state empathy.⁷

Following the Standards, history has been consistently taught in essentially the same manner over a long period of time. In the Chinese Virtuoso Model, a term coined by Lynn Webster Paine, teachers resemble a musician.⁸ They perform for the whole class, and the students become the audience. The focus in teaching is on performance and the goal is to produce an outstanding and virtuoso performance. The goal of such model is to transmit knowledge to students, with the textbook as the source of knowledge, and the teacher represents that knowledge.⁹ As a result, history classrooms are generally characterized by rote memorization and a lack of critical thinking.¹⁰ Historical thinking is frequently measured against the holy grail of memorization: as long as students collect and remember a large number of facts, they are more ready to make historical judgments and generalizations or offer analysis and explanations. Controversial histories are either glossed over or eliminated in the history textbooks. The materials are carefully selected and presented based on ideological concerns, and students are indoctrinated to trust that history is about answering questions. Disagreement is socially appalled. Students stand out in the process of memorizing certain factual statements and rarely bother to inquire about how or why.

Since the first decade of the twenty-first century, the nature and purpose of history-making has altered in a rapidly changing Chinese society. A flurry of historical activities, under the umbrella term ‘public history’, emerged ranging from oral history, family history, historical performance, historical video games and live interpretation at museums and heritage sites. These activities represent a sobering and urgent reality: history is thriving outside of traditional classrooms. Students taught and trained in the traditional way simply cannot live up to the new expectations or are ill equipped to intervene in history-making responsibly and meaningfully. The traditional pedagogy has met unprecedented challenge.

How Can Public History Contribute?

Public history in China, an *emergent* and *reflective* practice, has come of age by remarkably diverse routes: unofficial sources and presentations prevail; oral history, as a methodology and historiography, enjoys enormous popularity; memory studies has grown; visuals speak boldly and challenge the evidentiary status of written documents; heritage, from a pastime to an industry, plumbs the same historical truth; and virtual history, fueled by media technology, whets the public appetite for immediacy and efficiency.¹¹ It is *emergent*, because if we situate history learning and teaching as a dynamic and complex adaptive system,¹² the process of public history making generates outcomes from action and interaction of agent, or generators

of emergent behaviour. It is *reflective* because it ‘tends to focus interactively on the outcomes of action, the action itself, and the intuitive knowing implicit in the action.’¹³

How can public history contribute to traditional history education? I will explore the issue from three significant perspectives, all of which are undervalued and poorly incorporated into training in traditional educational settings in China. I make no claim of originality in raising these three points but ask the questions from a somewhat different angle and offer thoughts on how public history can provide practical advice.

Historical Thinking

Chinese historical thinking is closely associated with moral thinking. With a strong belief in the ultimate good, justice, and beauty: ‘Chinese historical thinking is ultimately a moral thinking’¹⁴ At the very core lies the notion that connotes both heavenly principles and human norms: *Dao* means principles or norms, and *Li* refers to pass judgment upon historical actuality. The *Li* and *Dao* obtained by observing history became the concrete general norm and lever whereby historians judged, admonished and even remonstrated with rulers. The intense sense of the meaning of history can be extrapolated and appropriated from historical facts.¹⁵

The Chinese perceive time in a continuum along which the past, present and future are seamlessly integrated. Historical time does not literally mean time exists in the past; instead, it implies continuity, with a particularity in the constancy of change. Hence, historical events happened in the past but exist in the present and point to the future. Confucius (551-479 BC) metaphorically interpreted time as a ‘river’ and stood at the bank of the ‘river of time,’ noting how it flows day and night without ceasing. The flowing, continuous and irrevocable nature of time is embedded in Chinese historical thinking.

Thinking historically, one simultaneously connects time at three intimate scales: past, present and future. The unbroken continuity of past-present-future is not unique to China. As in Western historical thinking, the past is also interpreted as a living present. There is the ‘logical necessity of the past-of-the-present, and the present is the-past-of-a-future-living present’.¹⁶ It is in China that personal experience is legitimately blended into national history. As Mu Qian has noted, ‘National history awakens the soul of a nation, for history is the whole experience of our life, the whole life past. We can understand our life by referring ourselves to history. History can thus allow us to appropriately project our life into the future.’¹⁷ In other words, history in China is taken as the crystallization of past personal life experiences. ‘Personal’ means that the meaning of one’s life is discovered, interpreted and shaped by the history in which one is situated. To live humanly is to be historically oriented. Thus, historical thinking is analogical-metaphoric thinking as an organic whole: ‘The basics of historical research is this: identify the questions from the present, while find the answers from the past.’¹⁸

The moral bent in Chinese historical thinking is culturally conditioned. Chinese philosophy emphasizes the harmony of the heavens and the earth in a poetical pursuit of immortality. Zhuang Tsu believes in the ultimate unity between body and spirit in which spirits symbolically and aesthetically morph into butterflies, or *hua die*. Chinese painting, filled with metaphors and breathtakingly beautiful, leaves those who do not understand the historical narratives behind the brushes and strokes strangely perplexed. Chinese characters, based on hieroglyphs, are intimately connected with visual and graphic thinking; inference, judgment and calculation are a set of purely abstracted symbols from which we derive meaning and significance. Historian Zhaoguang Ge explains that this kind of historical thinking takes little note of logic, rules and order.¹⁹ Chinese poems and prose are a well-nigh perfect blending of the signifiers and the signified, of text and images and of actual meaning and metaphorical significance. None of these implications are directly related to history. But all of them, in various capacities, influence the Chinese modes of historical thinking, which are essentially diffusive, divergent, analogical, metaphoric and, fundamentally, tacit.

When the abstract and universal rule over the empirical evidence of historical facts, the reasoning process is premised on a morally prejudged right or wrong, and the rest of the analysis follows or justifies that judgment. The intricate connection with moral history defies a clean and clear logic. In historical documents, one encounters more statements and fewer arguments precisely because moral judgment takes precedence over causal explanation embedded in these documents. Furthermore, nothing is intrinsically historical, and not all facts are historical facts. Any fact may be promoted to the status of historical fact once its relevance and significance is discerned. History begins with the selection and marshaling of facts by historians to become historical facts, so historical inquiry is an affair of selection and arrangement, controlled by the dominant problems and conceptions of the cultures of the period in which the inquiry is written. With new materials for constructing knowledge and a shifting analytical frame, new *presents* emerge. Thus, *the* past becomes *a* past of a different present, and arguing by analogy becomes questionable.

If we situate Chinese historical thinking in a broader intercultural context, as Rösen²⁰ advocated that culturally different manifestations of the logic of historical thinking ought to be framed in such a way that they do not exclude one another but rather interpret one another, public history can help students develop reasoning skills, cultivate analytical thinking and ignite historical imagination, all of which tangibly contribute to historical thinking. For example, teaching with historical video games as a counterfactual thought experiment, developing museum exhibits based on certain historical themes and doing live interpretations at museums and historic sites all stir historical imagination and even boast of potential for a new mode of historical thinking.

Methodological Implications

Morality rules over historical facts, revealing an uneasy relationship between theory and practice. Traditional Chinese education favors the theoretical over the empirical and rules and laws over facts and information, as if the latter are self-evident, while the former require intellectual engagement.

While the Standards state that students should ‘acquire a sense of history through a variety of venues’, it does not specify the possible ways of doing so. Suggestions for educational activities to reach the goals listed in the Standards indicate that practicum such as visiting museums with certain historical themes, watching historical movies and documentaries and completing group work based on collecting historical artifacts should be incorporated. Some even raise the idea of *doing* history: guiding students to actively participate in historical field investigations, discovering problems in practice, and then applying the knowledge that has been acquired to resolve the problems. This practice can include, for example, engaging with the historical analysis of nearby historical sites, communities, villages and enterprises; collecting relevant materials and information; and organizing, analyzing, narrating and formulating one’s own interpretation. As positive as these statements are, none provide actual guidance on how to do history, and in reality, very little has been achieved. Similarly, while field work has earned an official status in students’ overall evaluation, it lacks clearly defined project goals, much less systematic step-by-step guidance.

The practical dimension built into public history, reflective by nature, may not be a novel addition to textbook reading in the West, but they are in China. When public history was first introduced a concept and a discipline to China, the tension between discipline- and professional-oriented faculties, which was not all unfamiliar, loomed large. However, instead of seeking pure and abstract theories, public history encourages history educators to ‘shovel for dirt’ through practicum to develop substantial local cases, then develop theories *out of* them. A reflective practicum lies at the core of a public history curriculum: working with the public in various settings has demonstrated that a legitimate public space exists for citizen dialogues and for authority sharing.²¹

For example, family history and oral history projects, driven by a democratic impulse, have become new modes of inquiry. Additionally, students now learn how to mount a museum exhibit that ties into certain

historical subjects, working with local museums to use primary sources to do historical work while engaging historical thinking. In other words, they learn how to ‘analyze, comprehend, summarize, [and] compare’, to formulate their own ideas and interpretation of history, discern patterns in historical changes and eventually generate a more sophisticated understanding of past and present. Practicum and fieldwork push the burning question of the day upfront, encouraging students to participate in the intelligent discussions of a debating society instead of treating history as something that is antique and irrelevant to contemporary needs and wants.

Ethics and Professionalism

In Chinese historical thinking ethics are grounded in metaphysics. The morality and ethics of historians mean ‘moral integrity’. ‘One who possesses historical insight must already have a historian’s moral integrity’ (*neng ju shi shi zhe bi ju shi de*), so the morality of the historian has to be at the core of ‘historical insight’. The ‘historian’s moral integrity’ (*shi de*), according to historian Zhang Xuecheng, is embedded in classic arguments about objectivity and evidence-based arguments. Such integrity also helps historians discern the relationships of events and agency in people’s lives.

In light of this logic, if historians are objective – that is, if the meaning they attach to an historical incident is able to present the *Dao* correctly – that objectivity depends on how the historians treat themselves as human beings – how they treat their naturally equipped ‘emotions’ (*qing*) and ‘temperament’ (*qi*). The process of connecting reason to human nature is regarded as the ‘nourishment’ (*yang*) of the ‘moral constitution of the heart-and-mind’ (*xinshu*), and nourishment can only be achieved by gradual accumulation. Here lies the main difference with the Neo-Confucian School: the morality and ‘nourishment’ of the ‘moral constitution of the heart-and-mind’ can be achieved neither by speculation nor by interpretation and textual criticism of the Six Canonical Books. Instead, it has to be acquired through practice. Zhang explains the practical implication as the ‘nourishment’ of the ‘moral constitution of the heart-and-mind’ that he believed could only be acquired through practical work. That is, a person can only acquire and develop such moral constitution by studying history: ‘One has to study history in order to accumulate morality’ (*dushi yi xude*).²²

Historical impartiality was established in a circular process of studying historical examples, understanding the universal truth of *Dao* and, after a period of accumulation, once more returning to the interpretation of history to further ensure the objectivity of historical writing. However, this process does not present the moral tension between what one should do and what one actually does. And the ethical issues rarely take priority in traditional history teaching, simply because what one should do seems deceptively obvious. Educators diligently promote the lofty idea of authenticity and objectivity and walk around telling their students that the primary ethical responsibility of historians is to ‘never utter an untruth’. What these educators often refuse to acknowledge is that, despite all good intentions, it is not easy to tell the truth.

When history goes public it gets messy. How can one work in a complicated situation and resolve real problems without losing one’s moral and intellectual integrity? This is one of many challenges that today’s students face after they leave school. For example, when students investigate historic districts, interviewing original residents on the one hand while meeting with developers and planning officials on the other, they are stuck in a paradoxical relationship between their avowed professional goals and what truly matters for local residents. Which side should they represent? How can they forge a compromise among multiple stakeholders while still holding up their ethical responsibility? Oral history projects with family members, for example, often reveal emotionally difficult histories and memories. How can these projects be approached in an ethical manner? At what point should the students push forward or stop? Public history foregrounds many ethical issues that require more than a mechanical and naïve textbook approach towards truth, objectivity and authenticity. Instead it requires moral choices to be made on a case-by-case basis.

Compromises are inevitable and students should not see inevitable compromises as demoralizing. The past is inherently complicated and public history exposes students to that complexity.

Public history also embraces the idea of professionalism. While a minority of students will seek further education and eventually teach in educational settings, the majority will live a life with a professional calling. A certain level of professionalism should be taught and trained prior to that point. However, professionalism is not easily taught in classrooms with the artificial assistance of hallowed rights and wrongs. Developing professionalism requires a real historical context with real guidance from professionals. Such training also occupies a specific *public* role in society. Edward Said elegantly argues that being public is essential for the intellectual who is ‘unwilling to accept easy formulas, or ready-made clichés, or the smooth, ever-so-accommodating confirmations of what the powerful or conventional have to say... not just passively unwilling, but actively willing to say so in public.’²³ The *public* quality of history demands requires a true spirit of service, for a greater good and for the needs of the present.

Can the aforementioned three aspects be taught and trained? The answer is a qualified yes. Better-informed and better-resourced individuals make learning decisions based on the kind of information available, previous knowledge structures and personal experience – also known as *tacit* knowledge, which that cannot be easily summarized or conveyed to others.²⁴ History learning is no longer the same old familiar business it was in the preceding few hundred years, as is history teaching. The real question boils down to who is capable of teaching history with public history thinking and skills. If the spirit of a shared interpretive authority runs against an authoritative climate, and if public history challenges some of the basic epistemic beliefs about the nature of history along with some of the fundamental assumptions of traditional history education in China, the remedy has to come from *outside* the established frame of reference – that is, history teachers equipped with public history knowledge and skills.

Educating the Educators: National Public History Faculty Training Programs

Since the first National Public History Seminar held at Chongqing University in 2013 and the first national conference on public history in Suzhou later that year, discussions within the academy have transformed from theoretical debates to more practically oriented explorations. A small group of intellectual visionaries are sounding the call for educating the educators. Three National Public History Faculty Training Programs (referred to as the programs) have since taken place in this context to conceptually, practically and pedagogically introduce public history, to create the first generation of university-based public historians in China (See [Table 1.](#))

The programs were funded and hosted by three key universities. Central to the program rationale is the idea of authority and reflexivity. A shared authority invites a genuine dialogue between the professionals and the public²⁵ and reflexivity calls for the practice of actively locating oneself within the research process.²⁶ Both requires a critical understanding of power in a space of convergence. The programs broke down the barriers between academics and professionals, between professionals and the public. The author, working with the host institutions and local community partners, designed the training themes and organized the Programs.

The participants came from a diverse range of colleges and universities across China with good geographic representation. The selection committee, composed of public historians, practitioners and educators, recruited the participants based on their experience, interest and plans to teach public history, either starting up a public history course/program or incorporate public history into existing history curriculum. Approximately 90 percent of the participants came from history departments. The remaining 10 percent came from the fields of journalism, anthropology, archaeology, museum studies, archival management, film studies and comparative literature. The participants were at various phases of their

Table 1. Overview of Three National Public History Faculty Training Programs

	Theme	Time	Place	Host Institution	Partner	Participants
1	<i>History, Memory and the Urban Future</i>	July 18-30, 2014	Shanghai	Shanghai Normal University	Princeton University, Department of History at the Shanghai Normal University	16
2	<i>Public History and the Urban Environment</i>	July 20-22, 2015	Chongqing	Chongqing University	Institute of the Advanced Humanities and Social Sciences at the Chongqing University	22
3	<i>Public History, Oral History and Digital Humanities</i>	July 5-15, 2019	Hangzhou	Zhejiang University	Center for Public History, the World History Institute at the Zhejiang University	14

Source: the Author

professional lives, with assistant professors accounting for approximately 60 per cent, associate professors accounting for 25 per cent and professors accounting for 15 per cent.

Museum studies, archival management and library/information studies in China are entirely separated from history, each working within a closed system. However, these public institutions are increasingly facing a much better-informed public and a few have realized that the old ways may not work effectively. Though many did not use the term ‘public history’, the programs, designed with an inclusive mentality and broad thinking, covered key themes about the definition, theories, debates and methodology of using public history, including public memory, oral history, archival management, museums and historic site interpretation, library/information studies, media representations, environmental history, historic preservation, historical performance, digital humanities and ethics.

Key Modules

The two-week programs zeroed around four key modules. Each key module includes approximately three-day lectures, seminars, workshops and debates on a wide range of public history issues, along with field visits to a selective local historical sites and institutions.

First, new approaches to old contested or difficult histories were considered. This type of history, censored by the State, has traditionally been shunned by professional historians due to a lack of access to proper archives, or has not yet found a way into the official narratives due to draconian political censorship. Nevertheless it has already made visible appearance in the public space. One example was oral history projects about the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976, referred to as the CR). History textbooks provided

scant description of the CR, with the grisly details glossed over. But oral histories of those who witnessed and survived the CR revealed a complicated psychological world. Shu He, a prominent Chongqing-based historian, discussed his experience with interviewing one hundred and forty seven survivors of the CR and demonstrated how oral history worked as an effective tool for understanding the CR. Intense emotions or a victimized mentality can sometimes cloud rather than illuminate truth of such difficult chapters in Chinese history, so the work has to be approached with methodological rigor and professional ethics.²⁷

The second module looked at public history as an emergent methodology. ‘Emergence’ begins with the empirical world and builds an inductive understanding of it as events unfold and knowledge accrues. It is ‘inductive, indeterminate, and open-ended’, and the method resides within the research process.²⁸ Methodology, for the purpose of our discussions, refers to ‘a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed’.²⁹ Public history, in this vein, offers fresh perspectives, or a ‘theory of social reality’.³⁰ This module focused on wildly popular public history subjects that nevertheless lacked proper methodologies in China.

For example, oral history and digital humanities have caught on during the past decades. Among the noise of writing history from the bottom lies the tendency to transform history into a form of populism. Many oral histories are conducted without methodological rigor or a sufficient level of professionalism, so what people hear in public oral history pieces may skew toward propaganda without anyone fully realizing that stories from individuals only hold as much truth as other corroborating stories told.³¹ When should one probe further or stop asking questions when dealing with emotionally difficult issues? How can the narrators be informed of their rights in oral history projects? What kind of questions should one ask and in what way? How can we deal with discrepancies between what is officially taught and what is communicated anecdotally or tacitly? How can we discern nuances and hesitation, and how can we interpret what is left unsaid? Factually incorrect statements may still be psychologically or emotionally true. But the narrators – including the victimized, the vulnerable and the marginalized – all have their own agenda for telling a story in a certain way, as do the interviewers when asking their questions.

The third module examined the ethical responsibilities of the historians. As Wineburg writes with a slightly cynical tone, ‘in an age when no one regulates the information we consume, the task of separating truth from falsehood can no longer be for extra credit. Google can do many things, but it cannot teach discernment. Never has so much information been at our fingertips, but never have we been so ill-equipped to deal with it.’³² How can one work in a complicated situation and resolve real problems without losing one’s moral and intellectual integrity? This is one of many challenges that today’s students face after they leave school. Oral history projects with family members, for example, often reveal emotionally difficult histories and memories. How can these projects be approached in an ethical manner? At what point should the students push forward or stop? Another workshop, moderated by an academic historian commissioned by the municipal government to document and interpret local heritage resources, engaged intense moral debates on historians’ role in preserving and selling heritage: how to balance truth-seeking, ethical responsibility and making profit? This module foregrounded many ethical dilemmas and invited heated debates among the participants.

The fourth module utilized local historical resources. This was locally grounded and elicited a tangible sense of past and present at three cities at different regional scales. It also aimed to train the participants to teach at particular historical sites where learning interacts with material culture and where one’s intellectual capacity was expanded and potential fulfilled.

The 2014 program incorporated a one-day walking tour around colonial architecture in British and French concessions in Shanghai. Narrated by two historians from Princeton University and one Shanghai-based architect, the tour explored a range of issues concerning preserving urban built environments. The participants learned how to investigate and interpret historical architecture, and how to communicate that interpretation with the public.

In 2015, the program collaborated with Chongqing China Three Gorges Museum, one of the key urban museums in Chongqing, to help participants acquire exhibit and site interpretation skills. Traditional exhibit design in China rests on the assumption that visitors come to museums as passive recipients of information, ready to absorb whatever is presented. Public history perspective reveals the flaws in this assumption. Exhibitions fail if they do not engage with what the visitors bring to the museum.³³ The workshop focused on one of the permanent exhibits, *The Journey towards a City*, which records changes in the urban landscape and in doing so triggers local memories and collective nostalgia. As the only exhibit in the museum that attracted mostly local residents, it offered an inspiring space for engaging local voices and teaching interpretation skills. The question of how museums can make exhibits more relevant generated some fruitful conversations from the participants.

In 2019, a workshop was designed to analyze the dredging history at the Museum of West Lake in Hangzhou. With dredging, West Lake has evolved from a natural lagoon into a cultural landscape. The process represents an unfolding history, a sustained, intentional human intervention and a fluctuating journey subject to political whims and intellectual visions. The workshop provided multiple perspectives on public environmental history in the local context. How can environmental history be interpreted *with* the public? How can environmental history be communicated in the public space? How can a well-informed public be imbued with growing environmental consciousness?

Authority and Reflexivity

Approximately one third of each program involved professionals. Public history professionals were either invited to the training site or activities took place at their work place so that they could share their experience. For example, workshops on historical video material analysis, historical performance, site visits and mock interviews were undertaken at television stations in Shanghai and in Chongqing, and workshops at Shanghai Audio Visual Archives. The training created an interactive and reflective ambiance, something that the participants would later emulate in their own specific teaching environment. Consider 'From a Shared Authority to the Digital Turn in Oral/Public History', the three-day workshop on oral history and digital humanities.³⁴ It integrated discussions on a shared authority in the digital age, and the nature and skill of oral history interviewing, into hands-on work with free web-app PixStori, a digital platform adding voice to photos, recording brief stories, memories or comments prompted by and played along with the photo. The short-form photo-response mode, with other forms of digital storytelling, stirred instant enthusiasm.³⁵ Such workshops can be modeled at various scales.

In a well-designed practicum, students learnt how to 'analyze, comprehend, summarize, [and] compare', to formulate their own ideas and interpretations of history, discern patterns in historical changes and, eventually, generate a more sophisticated understanding of past and present. The practical implications in history education may not be a novel addition in the West, but they are in China. In a culture long dominated by state power and historiography as an inseparable part of statecraft, despite the liberty of discussion and suggestion still being in peril, the authorities have talked at an increasingly diminished volume during the past decade. Willingly or unwillingly, with the issue of authority and authority-sharing in an authoritative regime becomes prominent, independent and broad thinking about historical issues becomes more critical.

A Global Perspective

When history goes public, it also goes global. Cross-cultural elements were built into each program to encourage cross-referencing public history issues in the transnational context. Participants could interpret public history in a convergent space for broader and deeper historical thinking. The first training program was an institutional collaboration between Shanghai Normal University and Princeton University. It was

a bold experiment for a cross-cultural exploration of how public history is interpreted in two different cultures. A trip to the Nanjing Massacre Memorial and Museum in 2014 with the group from Princeton provoked an animated cross-cultural debate.³⁶ Is it possible to achieve a shared historical understanding that transcends national boundaries and possibly other fault lines?³⁷

Places as controversial, traumatic and highly political as the Nanjing Massacre Memorial and Museum should have the opportunity to confront the very complexity of their histories, to teach students how to tolerate complexity, cherish nuance, challenge moral judgment and to gain the ability to deal with controversies with confidence. Unfortunately, the exhibits failed to encourage multiple perspectives, provoke the audience to meditate and ponder or present multiple understandings, insights and interpretations. It also failed to provide a public space that engaged critically thinking citizens. Displaying the actual bones of the victims generated a ‘cultural war’ between the Chinese and American participants. For the Chinese, these were artifacts, forensic evidence that proved that the massacre actually happened, despite denial from the Japanese. For the Americans, the display of human remains constituted disrespect for the dead. In a group of only Chinese visitors, with an emotional assumption of a shared community, the issue would never have even been raised. But it became a source of conflict and misunderstanding in the transnational dialogues, as certain historical messages become confused when cultural values cross paths. While it takes some goodwill to achieve a shared understanding or mutual recognition of history that transcends national borders, historical events often embody distinct moral and cultural assumptions that do not travel across borders, and any interpretation has to go beyond simple comparisons.³⁸

Additionally, senior public historians from the United States were invited to the programs. The cultural differences humbled both the lecturers and the participants. One American public historian candidly acknowledged that his interpretation of history and his experience with oral history are shaped by the culture in which he lives, elaborating that ‘the same holds true for all of you. I would never presume to tell you what to do. I hope that you will find some of the things that I am going to share with you to be helpful and useful. I also expect to learn a great deal from you.’³⁹ Here, the spirit of sharing-authority presented a radically different perspective to the traditional history education in China that authority is rarely challenged. It also inspired the participants to work with an increasingly more demanding and educated public, to explore alternative historical narratives and to create more complex public history products in a range of settings from museums, archives, heritage sites, historical reenactments to virtual space that embraces digital humanities.

The cross-cultural sharing also highlighted many similar challenges that public historians encounter globally. For instance, another American public historian reflected upon the second program saying:

In my Chongqing lectures, I explained how in the early 1980s we built a program at my home institution. Two keys to success were first, to tailor the program to the urban setting, civic resources, and community needs of Chicago, the metropolis of the American Midwest; and second, to align our program with the philosophy and mission of our host university. Here, it meant making clear how public history fit the educational philosophy of the Catholic Jesuit order which was committed to social justice and a pedagogical system that encouraged students to move from knowledge to reflection to action. In the United States, the basic curriculum is often the same at public history programs but the best programs in various parts of the nation are in some way unique to their setting. The ethics of doing public history is another area for fruitful cross-cultural sharing.⁴⁰

His reflection resonated with many participants who planned to start public history courses or programs in their own institutions, each with unique disciplinary strength and local historical resources.

Result and Impact

Approximately thirty schools have started public history courses since 2014.⁴¹ Foundational courses, such as Public History, appeared immediately after the first National Public History Faculty Training Program in 2014, and evolved with the subsequent training programs. Each training program invited participating faculty to share the potential syllabus during the sessions on pedagogy, and the discussions centered around four aspects: different levels of public history courses; curriculum design; program design; and integrating public history into current course. Based on these fruitful exchanges, a variety of track courses are developed and improved over the years, including oral history, public archaeology, environmental history and public history, museum and heritage conservation, public history and history education, urban landscape and public memory, cultural theory and practice, historic preservation, writing history and digital history. Unlike their public history counterparts in the United States, top-ranking universities such as Tsinghua University, Zhejiang University and Fudan University have played an important role in building public history into the current history curriculum and establishing public history programs.

Conclusion

When history goes public, what happens inside and outside the classroom has evolved into not merely a gap but rather a gulf. A diverse and dynamic representation caters to a thinking public, especially to brighter and more imaginative minds. Students no longer dance on the wires of the early expectations of their teachers and parents. They absorb and interpret a vast amount of information in unaccustomed ways. Historians and history educators are facing a better-informed and technically savvy young public who are more empowered than ever to participate more meaningfully in history-making. Yafu Zhao, a leading voice in history education in China, draws a positive connection between public history and history education: 'History education should absorb and practise the basics of public history, transforming from the traditional sense of "learning history" to a more advanced idea of "doing history"'.⁴²

When the basic pedagogical assumption of traditional history education is challenged in this liberal ethos, public history presents an effectual intervention. The newly emerged public history courses and programs, as the result of the programs, have testified to this. The extent to which these emerging public history courses prove effective and sustainable remains uncertain for the moment. What does matter, however, is that, after three faculty training programs many history educators have continued to engage in open and stimulating debates on a wide range of historical issues, and to exchange their teaching experience both in classrooms and in the field. The way they approach these issues and involve students has been significantly different. At bottom, public history represents a vision of reality in which it lies the future of teaching the past in China.

Endnotes

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2. According to the *Standards*, history education includes six key parts, that is ancient Chinese history, modern Chinese history, contemporary Chinese history, ancient world history, modern world history, and contemporary world history. The *Standards* is part of the 19 subjects required by the national nine year compulsory education, applies to all schools across China. Refer to: The Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2011). *The Standards for history in the national compulsory education (Yiwu Jiaoyu Lishi Kecheng Biao)*, Beijing Normal University Publishing Group.
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 19. Zhaoguang Ge, *Chinese Intellectual History (Zhongguo sixiangshi)*, Fudan University Press, Fudan, 2013, p44.
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