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ARTICLES (PEER REVIEWED)

Prosuming History in China: A Paradigm Shift

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Introduction

A dazzling range of public histories emerged in China at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Consider the following:

- A diverse group of professionals, including journalists, historians, museum curators, archivists, librarians, film makers, work with the historically conscious public to produce oral histories with cutting-edge audio-visual media. Oral history at all social scales goes public.
- Ordinary people passionately build their family trees and meticulously trace their genealogies. Previously strictly personal, private and intimate stories, memoirs, diaries, letters and family ephemera have become available, representing a shifting combination of history and memory and of the private and the public. Family history has taken a populist turn.
- A spectacle of modern people takes an imaginative leap into the past, and engage in dialogue with an ancient past in a strangely intimate way. History is performed and reenacted in dynamic genres, such as living histories, ritual reenactment, documentary films, festivals, pageants, parades and dramas.
- Legions of history aficionados play historical video games which have impacted their historical consciousness at a scale unbounded and unmeasured by any existing academic or professional standard.

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Across China, we see a growing public co-created and co-curated exhibits with museum curators who devote their time and heart to working with archivists to build family history, oral history and local history archives. We also see a plethora of creative user-generated histories on new media platforms, including digital history, visual history, online commemoration and citizen walking maps. A handful of such activities have grown out from the established field of history, including oral history, family history and genealogy, though they remain at the fringe, shunned by most academic historians. An overwhelming majority, however, are not attached to any discipline: the past is everywhere and it defies pigeonholing.

What threads these seemingly disconnected phenomena? What lies behind purely emotional or aesthetic satisfaction? More poignantly, why do such amateurish and mostly unpaid forms of history possess such a mobilizing effect upon ordinary Chinese people? When the past is repeatedly and creatively reenacted, performed, narrated and explored in various ways, even the most conservative academics would acknowledge that the business of history is not business as usual any longer. Public histories seem to have offered an ever-expanding space of dissidence and possibilities for historical inquiry; all seem to have initiated a profound change in how people see, feel and engage with the past.

On the surface, these histories appear to be merely a passing fad, appealing more to emotion than to intellect. No wonder that most scholars in China choose to ignore such patently amateurish phenomena.¹ Some of the more serious scholars hastily discard them as empty rhetoric with no real intellectual substance. 'Is this *history*?' One can easily recognize the contemptuous tone of such a comment. Ignorance and arrogance naturally result in academic inertia. Despite inspiring voices from the field, academic historians react slowly and ineffectively. *Historical Research (Li Shi Yan Jiu)*, one of the most premier academic journals in the field, has so far published only one article about public history and that piece mainly discusses how public history originated and has since developed in the United States.²

The chasm, however, should not be automatically interpreted as the public lacking historical consciousness. Quite the contrary: grassroots consciousness has evolved and matured over the past two decades partly because media technology has revolutionized the way that ordinary Chinese people access information. The real issue is that folk-level historical consciousness rarely finds a legitimate space in the scholars' ivory tower. Academic historians may passionately advocate a more accessible version of hard-core historical scholarship, assuming that if the media professionals could streamline the dissemination, scholarly works could reach a broader public. It rarely occurs to them to involve the public in the knowledge production process. They remain the producers, the ultimate gatekeepers of knowledge, while the public passively consumes. This separation is unfortunate.

What has gone almost unnoticed in China is that, rather than a cosmetic change in the patterns of participation in history-making, there has been a fundamental shift in the *entire* process of history-making. The public have become *prosumers* who actively engage with the production and consumption of history. At the core, a growing public is *prosuming* history.

Prosuming history in China works in a novel way. It is a new social fact, a consciously collective phenomenon and an intricate code system of signs. Once various forces push the prosumption of history to the tipping points, they explode into a new model, reverse directions and initiate a paradigm shift in the field of history in China.

Prosuming History

Prosumption, a term coined by American futurist Alvin Toffler, refers to the interrelated process of production and consumption, the fusion of production and consumption. In his classic *The Third Wave*, Toffler defines prosumption as 'the principle of production for self-use, either by individuals or by organized groups' and sees it as coexisting alongside production and consumption, as both production and prosumption are 'forms of production'.³ Situated in his grand scheme of social waves, Toffler traces

prosumption back to preindustrial societies, or, in his words, the ‘first wave’. This was followed by a ‘second wave’ of marketization that drove ‘a wedge into society, that separated these two functions, thereby giving birth to what we now call producers and consumers’.⁴ Thus, the primordial economic form is neither production nor consumption, but rather prosumption. Contemporary society is moving away from the aberrant separation of production and consumption and toward a ‘third wave’ that, in part, signals the two processes reintegration into ‘the coming prosumer explosion’.⁵ The essence of being a prosumer, in this light, is to prefer producing one’s own goods and services; this externalizes the labor cost, thus holds economic meaning as well.

For much of recent history, especially since the industrial revolution, the popular and academic focus within the economy has been on production.⁶ More recently, especially after the end of World War II, the focus has begun to shift to the increasingly dominant process of consumption.⁷ With waves of technological revolution, production and consumption have converged. Much production takes place in the process of consumption, or rather, there is no consumption without some production. Thus, prosumption subsumes production and consumption as a single generic process.

In 1986, Philip Kotler urged business scholars to consider prosumers as a new market segment, but his voice was largely ignored for nearly twenty years.⁸ George Ritzer’s work broke this silence around 2000. Ritzer situates the concept of prosumption within the sociology of consumption and tries to break the production-consumption dichotomy. He argues that even during the Industrial Revolution, production and consumption were never fully distinct, and a wide range of processes existed along a continuum. The poles of the continuum involve production redefined as ‘prosumption-as-production’ (p-a-p) and consumption as ‘prosumption-as-consumption’ (p-a-c). Ritzer’s extensive work on prosumption focuses on its significance for capitalism from a neo-Marxist theoretical perspective.⁹ His ‘prosumer capitalism’¹⁰ as a new socioeconomic formation prophesies ‘the coming age of prosumers’,¹¹ or the ‘new world of prosumption’.¹² Nevertheless, as academics keep adding footnotes to Toffler’s visionary idea, they increasingly present prosumption in their own disciplinary jargon. This, counterintuitively, turns them away from the prosumers with whom they are trying to communicate, and leads to scholarship that risks losing the original analytical power of Toffler’s idea.¹³

Prosumption has so far received scant attention from the field of history, and this seems unsurprising. Historians, who focus primarily on the past are more likely to close their minds prematurely to something futuristic, something with no archival records to substantiate. As mentioned earlier, various public history practices in China, though as old as the discipline of history, have suddenly gained immense popularity during the past two decades. The ways in which people relate to the past and the scale on which that happens have changed profoundly. The production and consumption of historical knowledge, bypassing political and academic bureaucracies, has gradually converged. This grand convergence has led to a changing relationship between raw materials of various formats and a newly emerged public equipped with new technology, skills and aspirations. It also reveals a fundamental dissatisfaction with the established order in Chinese society, where a persistent need is palpably felt and waiting to be filled, yet academic historians are not prepared to answer the call.

When the public takes this on, they tilt the balance between production and consumption, change the whole equation and become the prosumers of history. They ask new questions that often are less cumulative and linear; they draw different points of contact between newly available data; they question the status of existing canons. Prosumers challenge, if not overthrow, the rules governing the prior practices of historical inquiry, which emphasizes chronology and archives. Most of the subjects that grab their attention simply do not have a corresponding archive to start with; the public is prosuming what academic historians call ‘primary sources’, which is far more than an increment to an already articulated body of knowledge. Rather than applying old rules to solve a puzzle, prosumption offers an analytical tool to *redefine* the puzzle.

How to approach such a radical and rapid process of constructing, interpreting and disseminating historical knowledge? In democratic cultures, public historians praise user-generated history and encourage crowd-sourcing for audience participation, for authority sharing.¹⁴ In this light, the world of presumption shares a similar logic with today's user generated culture, defined as generated by individual users or peers that has the potential to create engagement and/or drive conversations. Both involve the active participation of consumers in production: both unpaid, both externalize the labor costs and both favor participatory culture, making them networked and collective in nature. However, in cultures where authority is not supposed to be shared and history is highly controlled and censored, if we bring the core of presumption – a fusion of production and consumption – into a sharper focus, we will find that it offers a new reality *and* a new tool for analyzing that reality.

Deep Fundamentals

In the new era of media convergence,¹⁵ the line used to separate the producers and consumers of history is progressively blurring. The knee-jerk reaction from academic Chinese historians is to incorporate public history into the established knowledge structure. Thus, they are busy analyzing public history practices with traditional historical methodology or establishing public history programs within history departments. However, they soon realize that old methodologies, concepts and models do not accommodate these novel types of history.

In the traditional model of historical inquiry, or what I call the old model, history is produced by a central agency, the state, or the state-sanctioned educated elites, then passively consumed by the public, mostly students. The official history, uniformed and legitimized by the state, enters the national compulsory educational system, first indoctrinated then constantly reinforced and legitimized through a vast invisible network of state-controlled agencies. The old model produces a tribe of salaried historians self-authenticating themselves as professionals. They serve primarily political and professional interests, which often mean the same thing in China. In this model, the rift between the production and consumption of historical knowledge is a norm.

By contrast, in the perspective of presumption, or what I call the new model, history starts outside institutional boundaries, and appears in lounge rooms, cafes, cars, airplanes and parks, to name but a few places. It originates and thrives as hobbies, drives, emotional pursuits or leisure; it takes place at one's own pace, often outside of the monetary system, but carries tremendous tangible and intangible values; it works in a collective, cooperative, socially cohesive and efficient milieu. In short, it does not belong to any recognized academic category, nor is it merely an intellectual quest. This may not sound entirely novel. In some countries, such as Britain, history in the public sphere has taken a radical trajectory, rooted in labor, local and community history. The History Workshop Movement, a popular movement to democratize history in Britain in the late 1960s, represents a pioneering grassroots history. Yet, a perspective of presuming history rests on four key themes: goal, process, means and structure. They are interrelated and internegative.

First, if the goal of historical inquiry is to acquire knowledge about the past, presuming history aims for *tacit* knowledge *of the past*. For approximately two thousand years, Chinese history chronicles what happened in the past through state-appointed or professionally trained historians. Such knowledge, authoritative in both nature and process, has long claimed an indisputable official status. It remains external to the actual historical events, witnesses or people who have been involved. However, when history is presumed, it is internalized. It is internalized to correspond not with the raw and hard historical data, but with an inner sense, 'a congeries of psychiochemical impulses.'¹⁶ Prosumers are largely driven by a conviction that there are historical truths to be discovered. Thus, they commit not only their time and money but also their creative energy and inner psychology to such a conviction. Precisely because of this sympathy with the

deep psychology of the public, for the first time, history acquires personality, and becomes tacit knowledge in many forms.

For example, the recent waves of studies on the Cultural Revolution (referred to as CR, 1966-1976) reveal professional rigor, nuanced judgment and intellectual complexity. The Chinese attitude toward the CR transformed from an uncritically accusatory attitude in the 1980s to a more sensible and rational approach in the 1990s. Those who were middle-school students during the CR have become more mature observers. They have begun to publish their memoirs, recollections and stories. In 2006, a seminar to mark the fortieth anniversary of the CR took place in Beijing and was well attended by many scholars and people who had witnessed the CR. Shu He, a prominent local historian based in the city of Chongqing, started collecting oral history from CR witnesses from 2011 to 2013. The project was organized by the Culture and History Committee of the Chongqing People's Political Consultative Conference as a structured and systematic effort to collect the oral histories of CR eyewitnesses. His dedication continued after he retired from his position. He founded *Yesterday*, a widely circulated on-line magazine dedicated to CR studies.¹⁷

With personal connections, prosuming history epitomizes a different kind of commitment, which goes beyond educational and occupational realms. One can neither formalize nor quantify this. Here we see a nuanced transition from expertise to experience, in which a personal judgment is involved in seeking a historical truth, a reciprocal construction of identity and historical knowledge. As a result, historical knowledge is internalized, and points to a true knowledge of a theory that can be established 'only after it has been interiorized and extensively used to interpret experience.'¹⁸ Ontologically, such historical knowledge always involves a tactic dimension; epistemologically, such historical knowledge is acquired tacitly. It is acquired not through conventional venues such as books or in a specific location such as a classroom, but through a vast network of informal and freely available sources.

Second, prosuming history includes the process of co-creating *values*. Popular forms of prosumption involve unpaid work, as we see in most user-generated history projects. Does this work possess any value? If we differentiate values into two categories, values for use, and values for exchange, we realize that prosumers engage in a process of co-creating values, be it historical, social or monetary. Here we come across one of the classic ideas in public history, shared-authority, a term coined by Michael Frisch that means a collaborative and dialogical process that engages both the scholars and the public.¹⁹ Frisch has recently elaborated on the issue of 'audience', indicating that 'the notion that in public history "we" – whoever that is – generate historical 'products' and 'communicate' these to 'them,' whomever they may be. This is certainly an improvement over the conventional assumption that it is normal –literally, the norm – for academics, professionals or intellectuals to talk exclusively to each other. But it is a limited and limiting notion of public history, with the flow of intelligence, information and insight understood as unidirectional – a one-way street. It is immaterial whether 'we' understand ourselves to be using history to uplift and socialize the masses, or rather to subvert elites and de-center dominant cultural frames. Whether top down or bottom up, the always implicit and sometimes explicit assumption is similar: public history involves a unidirectional flow from 'us' to 'them'.²⁰

While prosuming history shares some fundamental elements with a shared authority, it is more than interactive, collaborative and sharing. Out of the prosumption emerges a brand-new social bound, knitted together and sustained by collective intelligence in both physical and virtual space. The ideal of collective intelligence implies the technical, economic, legal, and human enhancement of a universally distributed intelligence that will unleash a positive dynamic of recognition and skills mobilization.²¹ It is constantly enhanced and coordinated in real time, and results in the effective mobilization of skills. Within the vastly complicated yet almost invisible network of collective intelligence, knowledge of the past is more than shared: it is reciprocal, interpenetrating and self-generative; it creates and multiplies values.

Consider today's wildly popular historical video games in China. As an odd admixture of imaginative, playful, interactive and immersive elements, they combine spatiality, virtuality and simulation. Massive multiplayer online role-playing games (MMRPGs), for example, demonstrate a broader and deeper level of collaboration in the virtual space. The interactive nature of digital media reveals that grassroots creativity, authority sharing and empowerment converge. Many Chinese-style MMRPGs, such as *New Semi-Gods and Semi-Devils* (*Xin Tian Long Ba Bu*), *Fantasy Westward Journey* (*Meng Huan Xi You*) and *Grand Narrative of Westward Journey* (*Da Hua Xi You*), integrate history and morality into fun, and have attracted a growing crowd of users. The new media ecology, characterized mostly by digital but also by transmedia storytelling, has already stirred a multitude of minds and provided new possibilities for the past. Consequently, a shared authority and a tangible sense of ownership in virtual collaboration become incredibly empowering.

Third, if prosuming history is so pervasive, taking root in such a myriad of forms, and seemingly unstoppable, what is the *means* of prosumption? One critical agent stands out: media technology. The convergence of the new and old modes of media provides a novel model of revealing.²² Whether media technology is merely a neutral tool offering a neutral space, or possesses an intrinsic, autonomous power to shape and transform society remains debatable. But one thing is certain: if the emergence of new technologies, particularly new communications systems, is a result of complex interactions among technological, social, cultural, political, legal and economic forces, different cultures and different political regimes are experimenting and exploiting nascent technologies in radically different ways. Chinese culture is no exception. Yet 'the essence of technology is by no means anything technological',²³ media technology in China empowers and enfranchises; it spurs creativity, sparks collective imagination, and cultivates collective intelligence; it has progressively redefined prosumers and their relationship to the past.

The social consequences and psychological effects of these technologies are tangible. Socially, with extensive use of the Internet and creative experiments with digital tools and platforms, prosumers start to create and disseminate their own historical narratives. A virtual, disembodied community – history aficionados, practitioners, armature historians – directly engages with its own history, develops skills related to information management and preservation and builds up its own archives. Virtual history, born in the era of digital media, possesses a renewed and active sense of identity, ownership and citizenship. The past adopts a plural form: how are diverse versions of the past expressed and how do they multiply? Which version of the past gains public attention? Psychologically, when prosumers start to access information from their personal digital devices, technology extends their consciousness. As Marshall McLuhan brilliantly claimed more than half a century ago, the technological extension of human consciousness has altered the patterns of thought and valuation, or the sense-ratio of the psychic and social complex.²⁴ This extension also collectively affects prosumers' thinking process and their sense of history.

However, one mystery remains: how have previous waves of technological breakthroughs failed to ignite such sparks while the most recent one has succeeded in reaching the tipping point? The answer lies in the nature of the interactivity of digital media. When information flows vertically, it is consumed uncritically. In China, until the era of digital media, communications technologies worked in a unidirectional, hierarchical, highly centralized and largely closed system. Print media, for example, has long been controlled and censored by the state to build up what Benedict Anderson called 'imagined communities'.²⁵ However, when history flows horizontally, multiplied by audience interaction, as the popular social media has powerfully demonstrated, it becomes self-generative, and a liberal public space is released. This newly released space presents prosumers with infinite possibilities that the previous forms of media technology lack: interactivity sparks the pent-up democratic impulse in grassroots movements within an authoritative regime, unleashes an outpouring of fresh ideas about the past and provides practical venues and tools to quench the thirst for history. In such an evolving virtual space, if an inchoate anticipatory democracy is yet to take shape, a different public has already formed.

Last, prosuming history takes place in an *open* structure. It exists in an infinite continuum. This is directly related to the decentralized, participatory, recycling, efficient and accelerative nature of digital media. The structure of prosumption involves a strong spatial implication. From the tacit dimension of historical knowledge to the anthropological space of knowledge, or cosmopedia, the released space invites dynamic engagement with different types of expressions.²⁶ For example, private museums in China are taking a lead in creating sites of prosumption. The Shanghai Propaganda Posters Art Centre, a private museum in Shanghai, presents a telling case. It exhibits posters from the Maoist period of communist China. The gallery is located in the basement of an apartment building in Huashan Road, in the former French Concession. It consists of only two rooms, but with a rich collection of rare last-piece posters. The owner of the museum, Peiming Yang, who started collecting the posters as a hobby in 1995, is keeping the posters as an art form, and uses the gallery as a storytelling space. The word, propaganda, implies China's thinly disguised censorship. But the very pejorative tone latent beneath these posters reveals some indigestible history in a profoundly palpable fashion. These posters also show how state-appropriated and manufactured knowledge has impacted ordinary Chinese lives.

Two Caveats

Despite a visible amount of positive energy released from prosuming history, two caveats deserve further deliberation.

The first concerns human psychology. The impact of digital technology on the human brain and on the thinking process is not all positive. When the knowledge of the past is mechanized, first through print, then through new media – and when it grows too fast and too vast – it simply cannot be thoroughly absorbed by the human intellect. Graham Wallas argued persuasively that creative thought was dependent on the oral tradition and that the conditions favorable to it – personal contact and a consideration for others – were gradually disappearing with the increasing mechanization of knowledge.²⁷ When vast amounts of unidentified historical images become available through social media, they should, ideally, increase the possibility of original research and provide a novel model of revealing historical truth. Unfortunately, in most cases, prosumers are overwhelmed by floods of information. Yet they are poorly prepared to interpret the information critically and historically, much less engage in deeper analytical thinking and decision-making. The easy repeatability of unidentified visual materials through digital platforms dramatizes the ephemeral and the superficial, and simultaneously deprives social judgment and creative thought.

It is one thing to be able to know and read more, yet it is quite another to think, analyze and judge. A reading public may not necessarily be a thinking public. When media technology loads us with a vast amount of undifferentiated information, it exercises 'a benevolent tyranny over us',²⁸ and often cripples our capacity to think. Benjamin Barber reminds us that 'spectrum abundance, the multiplication of conduits and outlets is not the same as pluralism of content, programming, and software. In an information age, technology may simply help reinforce the conventional wisdom, diversity.'²⁹ More subtly, we experience a slow erosion of our humanness and our humanity with the information cascade. Wallace Stegner laments that 'bright as the media are, they have little memory and little thought ... Thought is neither instant nor noisy ... it thrives best in solitude, in quiet, and in the company of the past, the great community of recorded human experience.'³⁰

Let us take a closer look at a booming number of user-generated history projects in China. Most of them are more information based rather than knowledge based. They often lack critical judgment, and they do not generally present a coherent historical narrative. They involve far too little actual thinking, especially historical thinking, which always requires an attentive and critical mindset. In other cases, when the subjects of inquiry are contested, unsettled or difficult, such as oral histories of traumatic events, they can become visceral and emotionally charged, arousing feelings and sentiments and avoiding genuine argument based

on reasoning.³¹ Sifting, analyzing, critiquing the information freely available from various digital platforms should be a critical component of prosuming history. This is precisely why public history skills need to intervene, a point I will return to in the final section.

The second issue is more specific to Chinese culture. When the cult of documents turns into the cult of amateurs, the social power of media can backfire. At first glance, digital technology, especially social media, has released some positive energy, representing a new social reality and presenting possibility for a new collective imagination and intelligence, as we have seen in many cultures. However, whether grassroots consciousness poses a serious challenge to the existing political and cultural structures, or even constitutes a viable alternative to it, needs further deliberation. One needs to ask: who is in actual control over the past? Or rather, will an increasingly liberal access to abundant information inevitably lead to a more democratic ethos?

The early media conveyed news, gossip, opinion and ideas within particular social circles or communities, with little distinction between producers and consumers of information; they were an earlier version of *social* media. The vertical distribution of news, from a specialist elite to a general audience, had a decisive advantage over horizontal distribution among citizens. The new technologies of mass dissemination can reach large numbers of people with unprecedented speed and efficiency, but simultaneously put the control of the flow of information into the hands of a selected few. Though both types of information control lead to public ignorance, the earlier one is visible, expected and accepted, while the more recent one is invisible, pervasive, subtle and, ultimately, more effective.

To better control its more resourced citizens, China has started an ambitious and systematic experiment of digital dictatorship at a massive scale. The social credit system, which monopolizes personal big data, aims to score not only the financial creditworthiness of citizens, but also their social and possibly political behaviors. Despite two large technical hurdles, the quality of the data and the sensitivity of the instruments to analyze it,³² the system reinforces censorship and fuels nationalism. Private internet firms have long played an important role in censoring the content they and their users produce. More recently, censorship from the bottom-up has appeared. Increasingly, ordinary Chinese citizens are joining in to help the officials look out for ‘harmful’ content related to several broad categories.³³ Pierre Lévy has made a bold point in his claim that ‘totalitarianism collapsed in the face of new forms of mobile and cooperative labor. It was incapable of collective intelligence’.³⁴ No centralized power can completely control and censor what is essentially decentralized digital media. Even if such a power wants to, the attempts to do so will eventually fail.

Conclusion

Prosuming history has radically redefined the concept of history and altered the dynamics of constructing the knowledge of the past in China. It offers a creative space in which to integrate history into an interactive and communicative experience. In this space, time becomes less linear, and the very idea of historical knowledge takes on a tacit implication. Also in this space, historical thinking is constantly affected and reshaped. But while the old model works at a snail’s pace, the new model has not yet to constitute a viable alternative. A new generation of trained public historians is critical for accomplishing that transition.

Historically and socially, the patterns and impacts of the presumption of history in China at such an unprecedented scale have yet to be evaluated. While there exists a cultural lag—a lapse of time between the changes in the habits of many individuals when they use new inventions and the changes that occur in the organizations comprised wholly or in part of these individuals³⁵—the perspective of presumption will be significant for projecting the technology-driven public history in China in the coming decades. The vast amount of newly released, created, curated and archived historical data has generated a new kind of freedom. Rather than being oppressed by the feeling that the major work has already been done, the key documents

have already been exhausted and the canon for interpretation already established, prosumers work in novel terrain. A collective sense of being on the verge of discoveries looms large.

The perspective of prosuming history opens up some fascinating new potentials: it nourishes serious discussions about core values in historical research; it allows us to envision the possibility for change; it helps us detect some coherent patterns behind such a radical process of historical knowledge building. Asking larger and fresher questions beyond history textbooks, or reframing old questions in a new light, is more than an intellectual curiosity. It concerns the future of China's past.

Endnotes

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