

Jiang Meng¹

The Background, Development and Problems of Public History in China

¹ School of History, Renmin University of China, Haidian Qu, China, E-mail: jiangmeng@ruc.edu.cn

Abstract:

This article traces the origins and development of public history in China, from its roots in historical memory in pre-modern times, through its role in shaping the nation in the period of modernization, to the emergence of histories of everyday life and popular histories in China today. It raises questions about what is public history in contemporary China, particularly the relationship between popular and academic history and the formalization of the field as seen in new institutions and a new journal.

Keywords: public history, Chinese traditional history, “crisis of history”

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1 The Academic Background of Public History in China

1. The strong historical consciousness of the Chinese since ancient times is the first important academic background one should pay attention to in the development of public history in China.¹(中国人自古以来具有的强烈的历史意识是中国发展公共史学应该注意的第一个学术背景。)During the birth period of Chinese history, the idea of using history to shape social memory and regulate public manners was already evident. Such ideas have been depicted much more clearly in Sima Qian's *Tai Shi's Preface*.

Sima Qian (145 BCE – 90 BCE, in the Han dynasty, the second great unified Dynasty) was the most famous historian in China. *Records of the Grand Historian*, the first effort to organize the materials on the ancient history of China, helped to establish some theoretical systems to analyze history. *Records of the Grand Historian* presented two ideas closely related to people's life “History will hand down one's name (青史留名),” and “One may be condemned by posterity (遗臭万年).”

2. The strong “caution tradition” of Chinese history is the second academic background that China needs to pay attention to in developing public history.(中国史学强烈的“鉴戒传统”是中国发展公共史学需要注意的第二个学术背景。)

Sima Qian said, the first aim of historiography is for a better future. Truth and ethics are the first principles of historiography. Only through such historiography can valid historical judgements be made which will shape human memory in ways that can shape the future for the better. Memory may influence the future by regulating public manners.

3. The third academic background is to note the popularity of historical storytelling in education after the Song Dynasty.(寓教于乐的通俗史学在宋代之后的兴起是中国发展公共史学需要高度重视的第三个学术背景。)

During the Song Dynasty the political power partly weakened the connection between history and the public by making history a tool in the construction of the ideology of the Empire by limiting historical production to elites and politicians. Yet, at the same time, historical storytelling was a pleasurable activity enjoyed in both urban and rural communities. The Southern Song Dynasty poet Lu You once wrote a poem 《小舟游近村舍舟步归》 with the words:

At sunset, there is a blind man who tells historical stories with a drum in the ancient road of the village Zhao. Nobody cared about right and wrong after the character died while the whole village knew the name of the military officer called Cai Yong.

History became one of three features of the Song Dynasty (the others being cultural prosperity and commercial prosperity).

The popularity of history-telling during the Song Dynasty encouraged the appearance of historical writings during the later Ming and Qing dynasties, the most famous of which were the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Romance of Sui and Tang Dynasties*, *All Men Are Brothers* (Heroes of the Marshes, Blood of the Leopard) and *General Yue Fei*. Although there are some shortcomings with regards to historical veracity, these books not only matched the Confucianist moral spirit but also satisfied viewers' and readers' detestation of bullying. As a result, these books spread widely and were of incalculable influence on Chinese historical memory for hundreds of years.

Jiang Meng is the corresponding author.

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2 The “Publicity” of History in the Late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China

2.1 “Historiography Revolution” and Reconstruction of Chinese Historical Memory (1895–1911)

Ever since China’s defeat by Japan in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894, Chinese intellectuals tried to use modern history to reconstruct the historical memory of the Chinese as a driving force for ideological revolution and political reform. Liang Qichao, the leader of the liberation ideology of China, firstly divided history into “Folk History” and “Official History” and later launched the “Historiography Revolution,” putting forward the slogan “No historiography revolution, no possibility of saving the nation.” The historical understanding constructed by history during that period such as Chinese nationalism, heroes and traitors has continued to affect the Chinese people for more than one hundred years.

2.2 Some Scholars Made Great Efforts during the Republican Period (1912–1949)

Although they would not have described their activities as public history, scholars during the Republican period practiced their craft in ways that can be described as public history: public readings of history, historical plays, and historical story-telling. Chinese scholars carried public history out in three directions: Historical public readings (Gu Jiegang, 1893–1980), Historical play (Guo Moruo, 1892–1978) and history-telling (Li Dongfang, 1907–1998). For example, Gu Jiegang set up a publishing company aimed at compiling popular historical literatures. He wrote and published those texts personally in order to incite anti-Japanese sentiments among the Chinese people. Guo Moruo also wrote many historical dramas calling for opposition against the Kuomintang dictatorship as well as promoting anti-Japanese sentiments. In addition, Li Dongfang successfully started the process of commercial history storytelling during the tough times after the “Anti-Japanese War.” Securing his own livelihood, he also met public thirst for historical knowledge. On the one hand, China’s public history at this time was resourceful and accessible.

3 From “Crisis of History” to “Public History”

3.1 The Movement of “Writing History by and Public”

（“人人写史”意即当时认为人人都可以写作历史书籍、教科书等）Is Not “Public History”

After 1949, the new political regime attached great importance to history, but it saw history as ideological construction. Although there has certainly been “writing history by public” activities, history has increasingly moved away from being compelled by and for the public to become a political and ideological tool. This dominated historical representation and production between 1949 and the mid-1980s.

3.2 “Crisis of History” and the Breakthrough of Public History

In the mid-1980s, with the increasing “depoliticization” in China, people were annoyed with highly politicized, rigid, and formulated history. For a time, it became a hot topic in academia that is often referred to as the “crisis of history”. Some scholars suggested that if history was to emerge from this perceived crisis, it had to be free from political control and ideological motivation, and truly move toward a more open expression and more popular forms. Although it cannot be said that history managed to rid itself of political entanglement, it is also true that such demands were confronted by minimal opposition. It was also during this period that with the restoration of academic exchanges between China and the United States, some scholars introduced public history that was emerging in the United States. It can be said that this indicates that public history began to revive in mainland China.

3.3 The Development of China’s Public History in the Last Decade

In the 1990s, historians made some attempts toward improving how to make history serve the people, but the effect was not significant. In 2006, Yi Zhongtian began the storytelling activity concerning the “Three Kingdoms” 《品三国》 in a feature called “Lecture Room” (《百家讲坛》) on China Central Television (CCTV),

and he quickly became very popular in the Chinese-speaking world. In the same year, a customs officer introduced the history of the Ming Dynasty 《明朝那些事儿》 to the people in the Tianya community entitled “The Bright Moon Those Days” (作者署名“当年明月”). It quickly became a big favorite of readers in the Chinese-speaking world. The success of Yi Zhongtian and “The Bright Moon Those Days” showed people how attractive the popular history of providing knowledge services to the people was. Their success has not only produced a powerful impetus for this kind of historical activity, but has also prompted the academic community to discuss the issue theoretically.

3.4 The Discussion of Public History in Academia

In recent years, with the growing popularity of popular history, the theoretical discussions about public history have been gradually explored in the theory of public history. Wang Xi, Chen Xin, Jiang Meng, Qian Maowei, Li Na, Meng Zhongjie and other scholars have discussed the concepts, theories, and disciplinary framework of public history. Some public history institutions were already established. Some are in the process of being established. Nevertheless, opinions on this are sharply divided and the results are not yet significant. In the majority of universities, like Renmin university, public history has been established, and working mechanisms and financial support have also developed. Academic workshops have been held in recent years and have had an wide-ranging effect, especially “The First International Workshop on Public History in China” in September 2017 at Renmin University of China in Beijing. More positively, it is important to point out that the assessment of the Ministry of Education is considering social services important. It is believed that this policy will have a stronger impact on the development of Chinese public history.

4 Problems Existing in the Development of Public History in China

4.1 The Divergence on “Whether to Develop Public History”

The divergence in the relation between history and the people has persisted for a long time in Chinese historical academia. Some claim that history is advanced academic research, and therefore there is no need to consider how to disseminate historical knowledge to the general public. Others assert that history must come out of its ivory tower and pay much more attention to serving the people and the whole of society.

4.2 There are Differences in the Basic Theories of Chinese Public History

Chinese historical academia has great difficulties and divergences in various aspects of the fundamental theory of public history, such as the concept of the Chinese translation of public history, what should be included in public history, and how public history should be carried out. At present, it seems that these difficulties will not be resolved in the short-term.

4.3 Public History in Other Subjects and the Problem of Integration

Due to the compartmentalization of subjects and the establishment of institutions, some fields which are currently being developed in European and American public history are distributed in other disciplines or institutions in China. That includes the preservation and excavation of human sites by archaeologists and the administration by the Bureau of Cultural Relics or the Tourism Board. Compared to Europe and the United States, it has proven much more difficult to carry out comprehensive public history projects in China. Even worse, academic research regarding historical archives belongs to the field of Archival Sciences, yet the administration of these belongs to the Archives Bureau. The integration of these disciplines and institutions is a task that currently seems almost impossible to accomplish.

4.4 Conclusion

Although Chinese public history has its own origins and characteristics, it still needs to draw lessons from experiences in other regions of the world during the process of development. Currently, however, Chinese academia

still suffers from a lack of communication with the international academic world. Given that exchanging ideas, experiences, and scholarship in the field of public history are currently insufficient, several universities in China are very much committed to developing international connections in the form of international workshops and the exchange of scholars. The new journal *Public History in China*, published by the School of History at Renmin University of China, will be an important part of that development.

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Notes

1 The article does not discuss public history in China-Hong Kong, China-Macao and China-Taiwan.