

Preface

In May 2013, I met Wu Wenguang, an independent documentary filmmaker in China. He started the Vernacular Memory Plan and Grassroots Studio project in 2011. Integrating visuals and sounds into memories, Wu's project documented the history of the Great Famine from 1959 to 1961. Around 20 participants – villagers, innovative documentary filmmakers, and young volunteering students – were actively involved. The journey of recording and documenting individual stories and memories through visuals gradually became a quest for a renewed sense of identity, an alternative understanding of history. I was surprised about Wu's daring passion for documenting the vernacular memory of the still sensitive part of Chinese history.

In November 2013, I was sitting at a public history conference held in the newly renovated Suzhou Museum, observing quietly and listening attentively. The public, mostly local residents and history enthusiasts, came to present and discuss a wide range of historical issues. Emotions ran high, and my heart was stirred. For some reason, Raphael Samuel's words came to my mind: "history is not the prerogative of the historian, nor even, as postmodernism contends, a historian's 'invention'. It is, rather, a social form of knowledge; the work, in any given instance, of a thousand different hands." How come such an ebullient "social form of knowledge," so steeped in popular memory, remains an intellectual blind spot?

I wrote this book because these stories need telling.

The idea was conceived at Suzhou conference, and public history had become a major focus of my work since then. Writing this book has been quite a journey, and in many ways, a cumulation of the past eight years of my life, an outgrowth of my effort to understand public history in China, to engage genuine public dialogues, and to establish public history as a field of study at the college and university level. Two key universities, Chongqing University and Zhejiang University, where I have worked as Professor and Research Fellow, provided institutional and financial supports for various projects included in this book. Most of the research and field work were carried out in conjunction with my public history undergraduate and graduate courses in Chongqing and Hangzhou.

The cumulating meaning of such a challenging task has evolved during numerous conversations with public historians, history educators, and, most important of all, an educated and concerned public, in many cities across China. Back in 2013, the first Public History Seminar took place in Chongqing, where a small group of scholars and practitioners gathered to discuss an emergent field of public history. Later that year, the first National Public History Conference was held in Suzhou, where a much larger and more diverse group of participants engaged

in candid yet provocative conversations about public history. I was fortunate to be part of the conversations on both occasions. Many colleagues I met in Chongqing and Suzhou remain my best cohorts, and we have worked closely to define and develop the field since then.

Along the way, three National Public History Faculty Training Programs took place in three major cities in China from 2014 to 2019. Collectively, a group of visionary public historians and educators have brought their experiences and expectations to the programs. As the organizer of these programs, I was humbled by such diversity and dynamics. In 2017, with a fledgling Center for Public History and many young and innovative colleagues and students, I launched *Public History* (《公众史学》), the first national journal of public history in China. The journal has since served as a meeting place for scholarly as well as layman's discussions, exchanges, and reflections about public history, from which my thoughts about public history have been shaped and reshaped.

An especially big thank you goes to all my colleagues at the Institute for Social Sciences and Humanities in Chongqing University, and the Institute for World History in Zhejiang University, for their invaluable advice, criticism, and comments on the early drafts. In particular, Chen Xin, whose partnership in many matters, personal and professional, is valued more than I can express; Wang Xi, a prominent US-trained Chinese historian, patiently guided me through many difficulties in the early years of establishing public history in China, and wrote an insightful preface to my second book, *A Critical Introduction to Public History* (《公众史学研究入门》): I have tapped tremendous wit and wisdom from both.

Outside of my institutional homes, Meng Zhongjie (East China Normal University), Zhao Yafu (Capital Normal University), Yang Xiangyin (People's University), Mei Xueqin (Qsinghua University), Zhou Bin (Fudan University), Chen Heng (Shanghai Normal University), and many others have helped me significantly improved this book. My two doctoral students, especially You Lishi and Liu Yushi, have provided considerable research, translation, and logistics supports for the Center for Public History at Zhejiang University.

As the field has evolved so rapidly in the past decade, a work about public history in China would become instantly obsolete, or remain incomplete at the best, without dialogues with colleagues globally. My mentors, David Glassberg and Marla Miller at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where I was trained, continue to champion my work in China. David accepted my invitation to lecture about history and memory in the first National Public History faculty training program in Shanghai in 2014; Marla serves on the board of *Public History*, and advised me on many challenging issues when I worked in the field.

Along the road, many veteran public historians have helped in ways big or small: Sharon Babian, Rebecca Conard, John Dichtl, James Gardner, Anita Jones,

Page Miller, Patricia Melvin, Constance Schulz, Jannelle Warren-Findley, Robert Weyeneth, among others. In particular, Martha Sandweiss at Princeton University worked closely with me on the first National Public History Faculty Training program in 2014, a collaborative cross-cultural experiment. Philip Scarpino at Indiana University at Indianapolis, Theodore Karamanski at Loyola University Chicago, and Alison Marsh at University of South Carolina flew to Chongqing in 2015 for the second National Public History Faculty Training program. They generously shared their experience, and with the help of professional translators, engaged in many candid dialogues with the participants.

The National Council on Public History has been unwaveringly supportive. When I was serving on the Board of Directors from 2017 to 2020, Nicole Belolan, Kristen Baldwin-Deathridge, Catherine Gudis, Modupe Labode, Sharon Leon, Cathy Stanton, Alexandra Lord, Stephanie Rowe, and Joan Zenzen, among others, have offered encouragement and advice for my efforts to establish public history programs in China in countless ways.

Outside the United States, Thomas Cauvin, David Dean, Andreas Etges, and Serge Noiret at the International Federation for Public History; Steven High in Canada; Paul Ashton, Paul Hamilton, Anna Clark, Tanya Evans in Australia; Alexander Trapeznik in New Zealand; and James DeGroot in Britain have offered many inspiring global insights, and helped me connect with public historians around the world.

I have also been extremely fortunate to work with the editors of major public history journals, James Brooks and Sarah Case at *The Public Historian*, Paul Ashton at *Public History Review*, and Marko Demantowsky at *Public History Weekly*, who provided incredible support for *Public History*. Their professionalism motivated me to present public history to a larger and more thoughtful audience, with rigor and joy.

Over the years, I have delivered the major themes evolved in this book as keynotes, seminars, panels, roundtables, and working groups, among other forms, at a series of seminars and conferences, including National Public History conferences in Suzhou in 2013 and in Hangzhou in 2018 (in conjunction with the first Editorial Meeting of *Public History*); the National Public History Faculty Training Programs in China (Shanghai, 2014; Chongqing, 2015; Hangzhou, 2019); the National Council on Public History annual conferences from 2013 to 2019; *International Forum of Historia em Quarentena/ Produzir E Divulgar Historia em Tempos de Crise* in Brazil in 2020; *Oral History, Public Memory and Political Identity: A Transnational Dialogue*, Oral History Conference, Stout Research Centre for New Zealand Studies & National Oral History Association of New Zealand (NOHANZ), in 2020; and “Public History in China and its Global Implications” at *Historians in the Public Sphere* lecture series, University of Oxford, in 2021.

Like the nature of public history, this work is largely a result of collective intelligence. To weave scattering insights, inspirations, critiques, and advice together, I would like to thank my editors Michael Frisch, Indira Chowdhury, and Rabea Rittgerodt for their incredible intellectual and editorial support. Michael ran a three-day workshop about digital media and public history in Hangzhou, as part of the third National Public History Faculty training program in 2019. Our dialogues have continued ever since. Indira invited me to speak at the Centre for Public History at the Srishti Manipal Institute of Art, Design and Technology (CPH-SMI), Bengaluru in India, which spurred my thoughts on public history in the broader regional context.

Having implicated all these colleagues and friends, near and far, I now go to my family. This book was very much written in transit between different moving parts of my life. The writing started initially during the long flights between Hangzhou and the San Francisco Bay area in California. When the Covid-19 pandemic hit in early 2020, my teachings were moved into cyberspace, and travel plans held up. The manuscript was completed in my new apartment near the Pacific Ocean. Living along the coast reminds me, daily, that the beauty of public history, like the waves and sunsets, lies in unpredictable, imaginative, and dynamic flows.

In the past few years, I have witnessed, with sadness, the passing away of my father, and embraced, with fresh joy, the coming of Anthony, my third child. This book is dedicated to my parents, Li Zhongchi (1950–2018) and Kai Xuequn, who brought me into the world in the first place and gave me a heart to pursue my dream with tenacity and joy; to Wang Liang, my love and best partner in life that one can imagine, who is always there, always willing to listen, and always sees the best part of me; and to Annabel, Alexander, and Anthony, my three beautiful children, who have taught me to notice, enjoy, and celebrate the most treasured aspects of life. Without them, none of this would have been possible, or worth pursuing.