

Shanghai Memory as a case study of ideological impact on storytelling: the interplay between memory, language, and stories

Fu, Yaming

ymfu@libnet.sh.cn

Shanghai Library/Institute of Scientific & Technical Information of Shanghai, China

Mahony, Simon

SimonMahony@bnu.edu.cn

Research Centre for Digital Publishing and Digital Humanities, Beijing Normal University at Zhuhai, China; Department of Information Studies, University College London, UK

The research presented here builds on our earlier work on digital storytelling and how that has been used as part of the Shanghai Memory Project (<http://memory.library.sh.cn>) to give a voice to those usually unheard and to democratise the historical and cultural record (Burgess 2006, Guillianio 2022). This democratisation can be argued to be part of a social justice movement that challenges the mainstream discourse (Canella 2017) and the established historiography based on official archival records. We use this to develop a more robust digital humanities methodology to leverage the power of storytelling with digital tools as “counterpower” (Castells, 2011) to counteract the way in which the “dominant paradigms are established, reinforced and [importantly] resisted” (Canella 2017: 26).

This is particularly important as part of cultural memory studies as the local vernacular dialect, Shanghaiese, was the dominant language in the region before it was replaced by Mandarin as the official language of China in 1949 (Chen/Gussenhoven 2015). Language is closely connected with cultural identity, community, and the sense of self (Tönnies 2001), and Shanghaiese remains popular amongst locals as a way of confirming their identity as indigenous people (Shen 2016). Shanghaiese is not only the domain of the older generations but is also popular among the youth (Shen 2016), doubtless handed down by their elders amongst the stories of their wartime and revolutionary experiences.

In this context we explore the interconnected relationships between language, memory, and ideology, and particularly where there “is a dialectical relationship between the formation of national identities and of national languages” (Cameron 2006: 46). Shanghaiese in this setting is closely associated with a sense of identity that is formed partially through the passing on of history and culture; “how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space and how people understand their possibilities for the future.” (Norton 1997: 410).

All these stories that have been collected present certain ideology (a purpose, a standpoint, a perspective, or a tendency) and so inevitably come with a certain level of bias. Created and communicated by human beings, it is unavoidable that confirmation bias exists in constructing stories, particularly with regards to me-

memory and interpretation, as people tend to be more empathetic towards things that are in alignment with their own personal experience and values while being ignorant of things that are not (Nickerson 1998). Nevertheless, sharing these stories can benefit the community in many ways such as bringing people together, creating solidarity, and, crucially, serving as “a catalyst for political change” (Parvin 2018: 517).

The formal narratives, which we supplement using a digital storytelling approach, are constructed from the official records that have been mediated with all the inherent and unescapable biases stemming from “the embrace of capitalism, and the consequences of colonialism” (Guillianio 2022: 5). Our project has a specific focus on the area in Shanghai known as the former French Concession, and particularly on the Wukang Road. These stories, of and from the past concerning local history and experience, have been heavily influenced by the long-term Western colonial occupation and the shorter but arguably more divisive Japanese occupation. Shanghai was divided up by the colonial powers into a series of ‘concessions’ following the Treaty of Nanking (1842) and had been occupied by the Japanese military during the Second Sino-Japanese War from 1937 until 1945 (Scheen 2022).

A significant aspect of our research explores the ideological impact on the vernacular stories that have been collected as part of the wider project and how language and cultural memory have influenced the presentation and interpretation of these stories. Vernacular narratives can demonstrate the vital but often unappreciated way in which language plays a role in the development of cultural biases and prejudice (Bucholtz/Hall 2005). Shanghai Memory is used here as a case study to analyse the extent to which ideology impacts on storytelling and how perspectives change depending on who is constructing the narrative. It also explores the action (practice) of storytelling using digital tools in creating “a sense of community and solidarity” by pulling together personal and isolated experiences into a collective and cohesive whole. (Parvin 2018: 517).

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