

Reconstruction of cultural memory through digital storytelling: A case study of Shanghai Memory project

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Abstract

This article analyses how digital storytelling (DS) is applied to a digital humanities (DH) research project. It considers the purpose of storytelling and illustrates its use to help to democratize the wider project by including diverse voices and helping to reconstruct cultural memory. How can DS be used as a critical research method to help develop a robust methodology in DH research, particularly for organizing historical and cultural resources to form a story world and addressing biases in the established archival collections? This initiative is the latest phase of the Shanghai Memory project, adding an important additional dimension to the established showcase, *A Journey from Wukang Road*. Wukang Road, with many historical buildings going back to the colonial era, has important cultural significance as part of the former French Concession. Originally known as *Rue de Ferguson*, the name was changed in 1943, at the time of the Japanese occupation, seemingly as part of anti-colonial sentiment while China was being encouraged to resist her occupiers. Participation in the storytelling project is facilitated by user generated content and promotion in the Shanghai Library. The aim is to present a clearer storyline about the evolution of Wukang Road, explore its historical context, use the stories and reflections of the ordinary people to balance that of the elites, importantly encouraging inclusion of the vernacular *Shanghainese* dialect as part of wider movements to protect local languages.

1 Introduction

From classical narrative theory, usually traced back to Aristotle's *Poetics*, to modern theories such as post-structuralism in the 1960s, narrative and the study of storytelling has always been a crucial science in literary research (Armstrong and Tennenhouse, 1993). However, the form of the narrative never matches any specific literary genre, and in its essence, any record relevant to human expression, creation, interpretation, and construction can be regarded as narrative—that is, a series of symbols and media with internal logic. It is an act of communication between the storyteller and the audience/listener.

The act of storytelling can be interpreted as a means of describing and presenting concepts or events in a logical and coherent way to easily reach the listeners and be widely disseminated. Although it may be true that a straight line is the shortest distance between two fixed points, when it comes to two people, it would perhaps be

more accurate to say that a story is the shortest distance between them, something that can unite and bring them closer together, particularly if the experiences within the story are shared. Effective storytelling is based on the full participation of the self and of others, offering a mechanism for expression that resonates cognitively and emotionally among the listeners (Chaitin, 2003). As an approach to construct and express meaning, storytelling can also be seen as a process of reconstructing memory, the past as well as the culture of individuals, groups, and communities. For the audience, it can be a process of understanding and reinterpreting their lives and experiences, evoking corresponding emotions and thoughts, and spreading other related effects such as interactions and discussions among the listeners, prompting reflection and encouraging creativity (Bizzini, 2013). Storytelling is a way in which we can make sense of things, understand our world and our place in it. Telling stories also allows

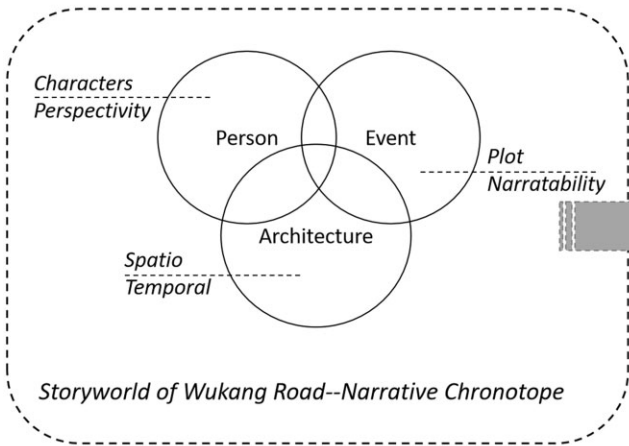


Figure 2. The Storyworld of Wukang Road

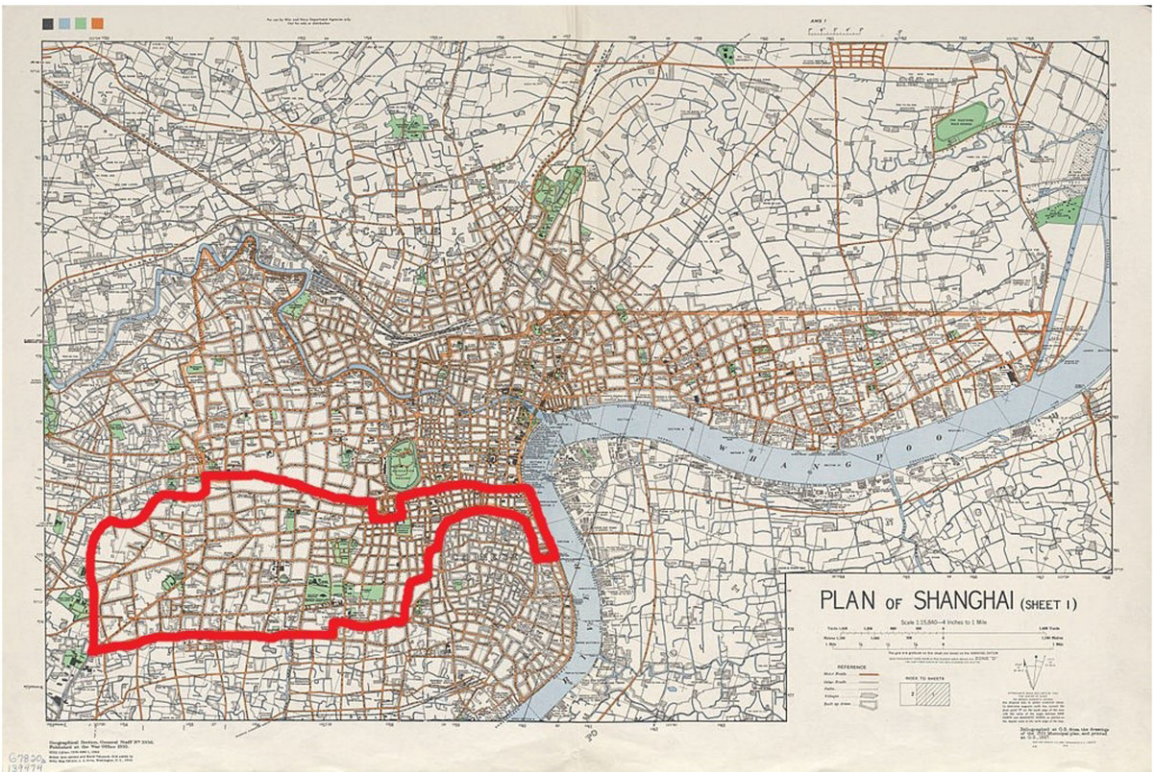


Figure 3. A map of Shanghai showing the former French Concession

Source: Jonipoon, CC BY-SA 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:FormerFrenchConcessionMap.jpg>.



Figure 4. Map detail showing Wukang Road and points of interest there

Source: Shanghai Xuhi, District People’s Government, https://www.sohu.com/a/500361662_121124215.

construct resources as proposed in the theory by Assmann and Czaplicka (1995). The buildings themselves are monuments to the formal history as part of the urban cityscape, and the ‘road is the smallest unit of urban geography [while] another focus of urban memory is the space-time structure’ (Xia *et al.*, 2021, p. 849). Deriving thinking from postcolonial studies around critical ‘re-reading’ and ‘re-writing’ of the colonial past along with the continuing effect of memory

(Ashcroft *et al.*, 2002, p. 221), the project recognizes and tells the holistic story of the past.

4.1 Historical context

Wukang Road itself has deep cultural significance within the historical context of Shanghai and particularly concerning the Western colonial powers. It is arguably symbolic as a part of throwing off the dominance of the Europeans. Hence, the voice of the Shanghai people is

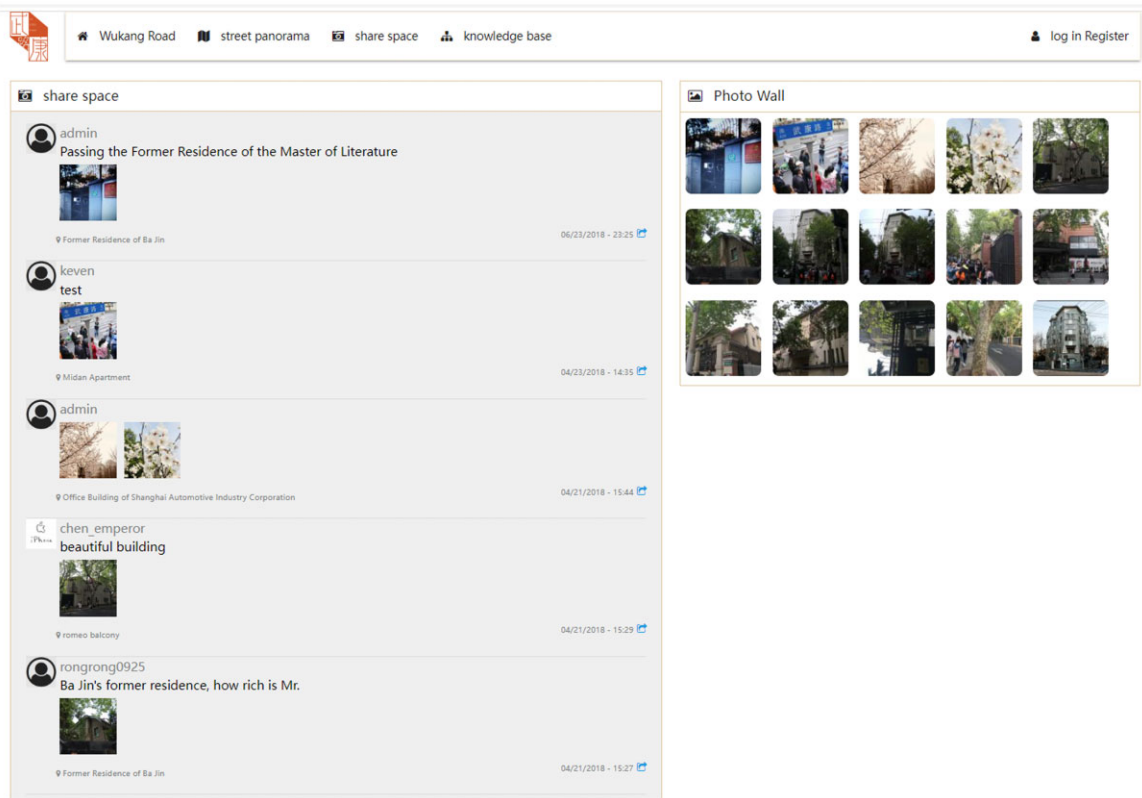


Figure 6. UGC interface to upload images and recordings

Source: <http://wkl.library.sh.cn/gallery>.

Dunn (2019, p. 39) describes as the ‘clear spectrum between the observation of place, the documentation of place, the transmission of that documentation, and the effect that that transmission has’, with regards to the story of Wukang Road (Fig. 7).

In addition, it foregrounds the underrepresented art forms housed in the library collections (old photos, audio recordings, maps, books and manuscripts, and images of buildings in different historical periods), the places and people that constitute the history of Wukang Road. By using the memory and voices of the people, it is particularly hoped that this would help efforts to collect and preserve the vernacular Shanghai dialect, *Shanghaimese*, and link in with the wider ‘ongoing movement to “save Shanghai dialect” across academia and the general public’ (Shen, 2016, p. 714). In addition, this vernacular expression can further enrich but also democratize the wider project and help to challenge the established historiography in the modern postcolonial era. In doing so, it unlocks the diverse possibilities for reconstructing its history and the

expression of existing narrative materials to meet the needs of different aims, contexts, and communities.

5 Discussion

DH projects often involve research objects from multiple fields and disciplines such as humanities, history, philosophy, art, archaeology, and so on. In the process of sorting, organizing, describing, and processing these multi-sourced and heterogeneous resource objects, it is significant to extract, relate, reconstruct, and present the elements of people, places, times, and events. These are also the crucial elements for DS. The process of presenting the results of DH projects is often the process of developing stories through digital means based on the elements and their related relationships. The focus of our DS is to reorganize and present scattered materials with a considerable degree of reliability and efficiency using digital technology to reconstruct history within a certain time period. In the process of this reconstruction, a large amount of historical material is

Authors' Contributions

Yaming Fu (Conceptualization, Methodology, Visualization, Writing—original draft, Writing—review & editing), Simon Mahony (Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing—original draft, Writing—review & editing), and Wei Liu (Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Writing—review & editing).

Notes

1. Shanghai Memory: <http://memory.library.sh.cn>
2. Bristol Stories: <https://www.bristolstories.org/stories>
3. See Xia *et al.* (2021): <https://doi-org.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/10.1093/llc/fqab023>
4. A Journey from Wukang Road: <http://wkl.library.sh.cn>
5. With thanks and acknowledgement to Donald Sturgeon and the China Text Project (<https://cetxt.org/>) for his help with the etymology and literary sources. The reference to the 'hilly area' referred to in the text is: <https://cetxt.org/datawiki.pl?if=en&res=227220> A Mainland Chinese government publication also refers to this text as the origin of the name: 上海市徐彙區地名志 (1989) <https://shizhiban.com/p/detail/9670ae8644/>.

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