

THE RIVER REMEMBERED TWICE:

Museum and Community Narratives of Shanghai's Waterways

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Abstract

This paper examines memory-making practices at Pengpu Local History Museum in Shanghai, a typical Chinese community museum characterised by government-led curation with limited resident participation. Drawing on Jan Assmann's distinction between cultural memory and communicative memory, alongside François Hartog's regimes of historicity, we analyse tensions between official narratives and oral histories of local residents with a focus on the waterways. The museum frames waterways as a symbolic cultural resource and ecological governance achievement for future-oriented cultural memory. By contrast, residents' communicative memory preserves vivid lived experiences tied to pre-urban riverine life. Rather than simple opposition, cultural memory and communicative memory form a "reverberating" memory complex. This negotiation of past-present-future temporalities reveals distinctive features of community-based heritage practice in contemporary China.

Keywords: cultural memory; communicative memory; regimes of historicity; community museum; waterways in Shanghai

1. Introduction

Pengpu, an area north of Suzhou Creek in Shanghai, remained rural until the mid-twentieth century. Historically threaded with a dense network of natural waterways, it was known locally as a vegetable-growing town. Industrialisation beginning in the 1970s drove its full urban transition. Backed by ample local fiscal resources, the town government has long invested in public cultural infrastructure, while collective assets have bound residents into a tightly knit community of shared interests. In 2023, the town opened Pengpu's Local History Museum. Led by the local government in partnership with municipal archives and cultural-tourism institutions, the museum solicited oral histories and material donations from local residents. The resulting space represents a characteristically Chinese model of a community museum, defined by government-led curation and largely passive resident participation. Within its halls, national history supplies the exhibition's narrative skeleton, while residents' everyday memories appear only sporadically as corroborating material.

To analyse the tension within this space, we must look to Jan Assmann's (2011) distinction between "cultural memory" and "communicative memory". Drawing on Vansina's notion of the "floating gap," Assmann argues that cultural memory relies on institutionalised carriers—archives, monuments, museums—to fix an origin narrative for a group and provide a stable foundation for collective identity. Communicative memory, conversely, is the vivid, unofficial memory generated by living witnesses, passed on informally, and anchored in recent, lived experience. While Assmann developed this framework for ancient civilizations, it applies equally well to secular, modern settings like state archives and museum exhibitions (Barnes, 2014; Tsang, 2014; Galikowski, 1998). Importantly, Pengpu shows that these two registers are not cleanly separated into successive historical periods; rather, they are two narrative registers of the exact same time and place, overlapping extensively across both museum display and resident testimony.

These two registers carry different values and temporalities. Cultural memory, shaped by professional memory-keepers, mobilises the past to legitimate present governance and project a progress-oriented future. Communicative memory, spontaneously narrated by those who lived through events, stays oriented to

present-tense experience. This distinction maps onto François Hartog's (2015, 2021) "regimes of historicity." The modern regime uses public museums to build a national ideology of progress, while the "crisis of time" of the 1980s gave rise to a presentist regime, where practices like community museums and intangible-heritage preservation anchor themselves in the present alone. Drawing on Henri Bergson's (2003) theory of duration and George Herbert Mead's (1932) social action, presentism is not a disorientation about the future, but a space where the ceaseless unfolding of daily life lends memory a distinctive, grassroots, creative character.

In museum and heritage practice, "new museology" has sought to break the monopoly of expert-elite discourse and use community museums to democratise memory. European precedents—such as Raphael Samuel's (2012) "Theatres of Memory" or Philip Coupland's (2012) study of Welsh mining heritage—contrast residents' oral memories of decline with official narratives of national industrial glory. China adopted community-museum concepts in the late 1990s, but domestic practice has diverged into a government-led pattern. Pengpu's museum is representative: curated entirely by a government team, its narrative treats pre-industrial rural life as a prelude to present-day prosperity, firmly aligning it with the future-oriented cultural memory of the modern regime. Yet, underneath this official surface, the ripples of residents' lived memories remain active.

2. Method

To explore the intersection between these two memory registers, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with nine local residents aged 65 and above, along with analysis on the museum exhibition. Suggested by the town government as representative historical figures of the area, these interviewees were not otherwise involved in curating or planning the museum exhibition. This methodology aims to capture the unedited, emotional texture of oral history that official museum archives often filter out. While the government-suggested list of participants initially pointed toward a cohort likely to align with the official framework, the actual depth of their oral narratives revealed a far more complex picture. This methodological approach allows us to read the museum's spatial display alongside personal testimonies, transforming the Pengpu museum from a static exhibition into an active field of negotiation. Within this field, we can observe how cultural memory attempts to absorb communicative memory, and how the modern and presentist regimes of historicity manage to coexist.

3. Grand Frameworks and Local Anchors

The museum's permanent exhibition, *Riding the Tide, Striving for Excellence*, comprises eight main units arranged strictly according to municipal historical periodisation. Pre-modern time is dispatched in a single stroke, the pre-1949 era is presented as a local replica of the national revolutionary narrative, and the post-1949 period is built around administrative reform, industrial transition, and governance change. Achievements since the Reform and Opening-up occupy more than half the exhibition, projecting a brilliant modernity that anticipates an even better future. This layout expresses a strongly progressivist view of time. The exhibition relies primarily on illustrated text panels, supplemented by a few donated objects and oral-history videos. Although folk material is physically present, its emotional texture is heavily edited, making the museum a typical vehicle for official cultural-memory construction.

In contrast, the interviewees' oral narratives function on two distinct levels. Narrators readily reach for official periodising terms—such as collectivisation, cooperatives, and Reform and Opening-up—to anchor their personal life trajectories. Existing oral-history scholarship confirms that individuals neither mechanically reproduce standardised official narratives nor simply oppose them (Doppen & Kirkwood-Tucker, 2023). Pengpu bears this out: interviewees invoke macro-historical events as narrative coordinates even where the events bear no direct relation to personal experience. For instance, while the official narrative of Reform and Opening-up stresses policy background and achievements, residents use the phrase simply as a temporal marker to contrast the decades of material changes in their daily lives.

Assmann compares cultural memory to a "festival" that imposes clear temporal order on otherwise scattered,

unruly communicative memory. This is evident in Pengpu, where three specific memory anchors recur stably across all interviews:

1958: The establishment of the People's Communes and production brigades.

1978: The initiation of Reform and Opening-up.

2000: Rural demolition and full township urbanisation.

That residents spontaneously reach for these institutionalised markers shows how deeply national history has been absorbed into folk consciousness.

Yet, residents' narratives are not fully disciplined by this official framework. The communicative memory built through oral testimony retains its own logic and creative autonomy. Interviewees rarely explain how a personal experience connects to a major historical event; instead, they favor emotionally rich, detailed scenes meant to draw the listener in. This autonomy is clearest on the theme of the waterways, where residents sharply distinguish the official grand narrative from their own everyday memory, repeatedly insisting on the distinctive value of lived experience on the water. Oral narration functions as an autonomous social act, granting folk memory a fluidity of meaning that resists being treated as mere passive raw material for official cultural memory.

4. Waterways in the Museum and Community's Memory

It is on this theme of waterways that museum and memory overlap most fully and diverge most sharply. The area now administered by Shanghai was once threaded with a dense waterway network, redolent of the Jiangnan landscape; in old Shanghainese dialect, asking "where are you going" meant asking "which creek are you headed to," testimony to how central the waterways once were to daily life. Pengpu itself arose amid this network, and the name derives from Pengyue Creek, which runs through it. During the Song and Yuan dynasties, tidal surges on the Wusong River (today's Suzhou Creek) repeatedly caused flooding, popularly known as the "Overlord Tide." Local people built a temple on the bank of a tributary to pray for protection, and in 1299 the monk Deming expanded it and enshrined Peng Yue — the Western Han general famed for defeating the Overlord of Western Chu — as the tide-suppressing god. The temple became known as Peng Wang Temple, and the tributary as Pengyue Pu.

The museum has absorbed this legend into its exhibition, identifying "Miaotou" (Temple Head) as an ancient name for the area and citing local gazetteers to document the waterways' role as transport routes through the Ming, Qing, and Republican periods. Later units link the waterways to more recent milestones — the 2016 introduction of the river-chief system, achievements in water governance and ecological restoration, and Pengpu's 2024 designation as a Shanghai ecological-innovation demonstration base — treating the waterways as both an index and a showcase of contemporary ecological improvement. A "tide-riding spirit" has become the core theme of official publicity, inspiring the town song "Pengpu Riding the Tide," which envisions "a tomorrow of riding the tide bravely and striving for excellence."

Residents, however, do not describe themselves as descendants of the Song-Yuan "Temple Head" ancestors (10th-14th centuries CE); in their own telling they are migrants who settled here in the early Qing era (17th century CE) to farm riverside land, tracing their ancestry through a mix of official archive and orally transmitted memory. Their recollections of the waterways center on the 1950s through the 1970s, when agricultural livelihoods predominated and daily life depended heavily on the water: it formed the space in front of and behind every home and gave the village its spatial skeleton, which is why residents call Pengyue Creek their "mother river." Self-built houses, farmland, and private plots all extended outward along the water (Figure 1), and residents recalling the 1950s still say, unprompted, that "every village had a river" and "without a river you couldn't survive." Aside from drinking water, which came from wells, creek water was used for washing clothes, vegetables, and rice.

In Chenjia Village, Qianmen Creek (literally meaning 'creek in the front') and Houbei Creek ('creek in the back') were tributaries that villagers had diverted westward from the north-south-running Pengyue Creek to build the settlement. Houses stood amid these crisscrossing creeks, with a narrow dirt path connecting

every household (Figure 2). The waterways also served as transport: villagers' plots were distributed along them, and when tidal water overflowed the embankments the uneven field paths became impassable. Bridges were scarce, so a boat was often faster than the long detours land travel required.



Figure 1: The layout of Luhua Hamlet in the 1950s (drawn by Jiang RX)

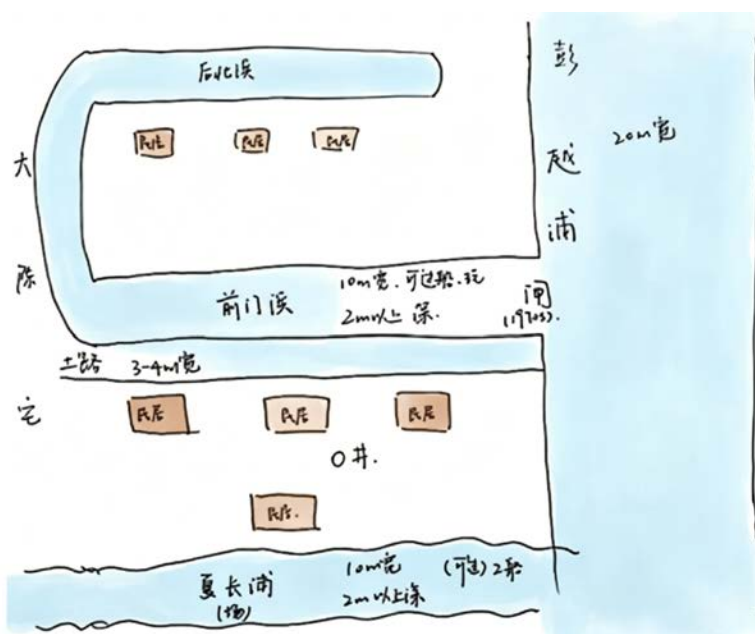


Figure 2: The relationship between Chenjia villagers' houses and the waterways (drawn by the authors based on descriptions by Chen J.D. and Chen R.F.)

This was also the era of collectivised production under the People's Communes, when the commune organised villagers to use the waterways for transporting fertiliser, irrigating fields, and other collective tasks. Beyond livelihood, the water shaped daily routines, leisure, and play. Residents born in the 1950s recall the creek as an ideal playground: the water was clear enough to swim in, with a sloping bank leading down to the edge, and it teemed with fish, shrimp, and crabs that children caught by draining sections of water or

lowering baskets. Recreation followed the seasons — hunting mitten crabs by flashlight during the plum-rain season, playing on the frozen creek in winter. As one interviewee, Chen J.D, put it, "our village back then was much like the countryside you see in the movies; when it was hot we'd cool off under the big trees by the river."

This shared rhythm — buying and selling vegetables at a common spot, washing clothes and rice, playing together by the water — made encounters among villagers frequent and stable, fostering a tightly bound, inward-facing social network. House layouts followed the waterways, kinship bound neighbors together, and relatives and friends tended to cluster in the same village; mobility between villages was rare, occurring mainly through marriage, and close proximity reinforced already intimate ties. The rivers themselves had not yet been straightened or narrowed — Pengyue Creek, as the main channel, was then nearly twenty meters wide, more than double its width today, and difficult to cross. Bridges over it were scarce and became well-used, crowd-drawing corridors: Baiyi Bridge, at the geographic center of the area, became the starting point of Pengpu's development. Residents no longer recall the origin of the bridge's name, but they frequently mention the nearby Chen ancestral temple, around which the Chen lineage network was built. According to legend, a grave by the river had obstructed the settlement's Fengshui and harmed villagers' health, so a geomancer recommended building a shrine and relocating the grave — after which, villagers believe, Baiyi Bridge village began to prosper.

The wide, hard-to-cross creeks were long objects of local awe, and successive generations built houses, graves, and ancestral halls along their banks, adjusting their circumstances by altering the waterways and the structures around them. At the same time, the water was a public space for daily life and recreation, one that linked the village's social network through shared use and shared ancestor veneration. This is what residents mean when they describe the old village life as "rich in human warmth": with material resources scarce and communication difficult, villagers depended on mutual aid to meet every day needs and cope with emergencies, and they especially recall the frequent visiting between households at festival time, when children received food gifts from adults on their rounds — a sociability made possible by the shared space of the waterways. In residents' recollection, the waterways were not just Pengpu's historical origin but the spatial framework of everyday life and social ties, carrying the accumulated texture of lived memory.

That intimacy did not survive industrialisation. As factories discharged pollutants indiscriminately through the 1980s, the water turned "completely black," boat traffic declined, and villagers' interaction with the waterways diminished; fetid, blackened water was no longer a site of recreation or sociability. Interviewees born in the 1970s recall the creek as still part of daily life, but the swimming, fishing, and crabbing that defined their parents' childhoods had already disappeared — for them the water was simply somewhere one passed "coming and going, running here and there." Township enterprises then offered new livelihoods, collective relocation began at the turn of the century, and residents grew steadily more distant from the water. Even the pollution control and greenbelt construction of recent decades have not restored the old intimacy: older residents now say they merely "take a walk and look around when they have time."

The exhibition and the testimony thus tell two different stories about the same water. The museum symbolises the waterways as a historical-cultural resource and a marker of present-day ecological achievement, using the past to imagine the future. Residents' memory, by contrast, is concentrated in the decades between origin legend and ecological showcase — the ordinary, unglamorous stretch of lived time the exhibition passes over. The result is a telling mismatch: the two accounts converge on the same river but diverge almost entirely on which moments of its history matter.

5. Summary

The case of Pengpu demonstrates that the relationship between official cultural memory and community communicative memory is not one of simple opposition, but of "reverberation" of historical narrative (Hartog, 2015). While residents habitually locate their own lives within grand historical processes, their personal memories actively reanimate history rather than simply commemorating it. The waterways, as a shared living space, serve as the clearest point of intersection between these two forms of memory. While the museum distills the water into an origin marker and a governance achievement, the community's

communicative memory restores the lived, everyday scene. This bottom-up memory provides the necessary foundation to understand the survival-based roots of the official "tide-riding spirit".

Assmann (2011) argues that cultural memory's core function is to organise scattered communicative memory into a coherent, future-oriented regime of historicity, applying Hartog's term — but such simplification carries a real cost. Curatorial selection of historical material can produce a one-sided reading even when every individual fact is accurate (Spence, 1984; McCullagh, 1998). Halbwachs's (1992) theory of collective memory holds that past and present interpenetrate at the moment memory is generated; once lived experience is distilled into a standardised "tradition," it detaches from vivid communicative memory and becomes what Assmann calls cultural memory, requiring professional curators to interpret it for the public. Museum curation on its own can achieve only this cultural-memory construction; it cannot fully convey the folk experience underneath. The Pengpu case suggests that residents' oral history can fill that interpretive gap and may even hold potential to reshape an ossified official narrative.

Residents' testimonies function as what Assmann calls "hot memory," one that actively reanimates history rather than simply commemorating it, standing in real contrast to the museum's optimistic developmental narrative. Interviewees lament the hardship of rural life and mourn the loss of local heritage even as they hold a dialectically neutral view of present-day development, using nostalgic recollection as a buffer against present uncertainty. This does not fully resolve the crisis of modern temporality that Hartog describes, but it does something more modest: residents keep narrating their individual, everyday stories, and in the juxtaposition of the two memories they find room to reflect on the present (Boym, 2002). They cooperate willingly with the exhibition and the interview process alike, retaining hope for the future while working, in their own way, to enrich and correct the fixed official narrative — building a denser communal memory that spans past, present, and future.

Pengpu's memory practice therefore takes the shape of a bidirectional negotiation: government leadership coexists with popular participation, cultural memory and communicative memory talk back to one another, and a future-oriented modern narrative interweaves with a present-grounded folk one. This "reverberating" composite — distinct from either a purely national modern narrative or a purely individual presentist one — may be a locally specific feature of contemporary Chinese community-memory practice, fusing a glorious past, a contradictory present, and a hopeful future into a single collective identity. Under current policy encouraging public participation in heritage protection, such reverberating practices seem likely to spread further, as community museums like Pengpu's incorporate residents' oral histories more deeply and build a localised theatre of memory in which plural memories converse within public space and historical narrative becomes, gradually, more democratic.

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