



In sharing and explaining the history of socio-ecological practice, we must act as intergenerational mediators between the past and present historymakers

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1 The role of intergenerational mediators: what if we omit to play it?

As researchers of socio-ecological practice, we subscribe to the time-honored ancient wisdom that history is a teacher of life and a guide to action, and aspire to grasp and share inspirations and lessons from our ancestors for our present and future (Antrop 2005; La Rosa et al. 2021; Xiang 2019 and 2020). As such, not only do we study and reconstruct the history of socio-ecological practice, but we also share and explain it to our contemporaries. In this dual capacity, we necessarily, intentionally or otherwise, position ourselves in what the American philosopher David Hull (1935–2010) refers to as “a three-member

relation”—a three-way communication—among the people of the past who made the history we inherit and study, the audience of the present who are or will be making the history we and our posterity will live in, and ourselves (Hull 1979, p. 5).

In this three-way communication with the past and present historymakers, we have a pivotal role to play. Because the history we study and reconstruct is about people of the past and what they did in a particular circumstance, while our audience live in the present and have different life experiences outside that particular historical context, we are anticipated by both our audience and the past historymakers—even if no way will they be present—to be “mediator[s] between generations”, a role of historians the British historian Herbert Butterfield (1900–1979) first identified nearly a century ago (Butterfield 1931, p. 10; Walsham 2017, p. 215).¹ Being intergenerational mediators, we are expected to make the past and the people of the past intelligible to the present audience and charged to translate the history of socio-ecological practice we studied and reconstructed in historical terms into present terms so that our contemporaries can understand.

But what if we are unaware of the role-playing expectation and accidentally omit to play the role of intergenerational mediators when sharing and explaining the history of socio-ecological practice to the present-day audience? The question is legitimate and the scenario it entails plausible for a simple reason: most of us are not professional historians and, with little scholarly background in historiography, we are generally ignorant of the principles, theories, and practice of historical research and writing, much less the various roles historians are entitled to play.² A case in point is a 2019 instance of historical Red Flag Canal research

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¹ Throughout this essay, we add parentheses (in square brackets) and ellipses to direct quotations for greater clarity unless noted otherwise.

² Historiography refers to one or any combination of the following: the writing of history; the study of the theories, techniques, and histories of historical research and historical writing, the methods of major historians; and a body of historical literature (Becker 1938; Vann 2021; <https://www.Merriam-Webster.com> Dictionary 2022a).

in which a historical presentation by researchers innocent of the role-playing expectation received a less than expected response from an international audience. In the following pages of this guest editorial, we, the members of the Red Flag Canal research team and coauthors of the presentation, share this instance and the hard lessons we learnt, in the hope that they together provide a piece of anecdotal yet valuable evidence that sheds light on how important an awareness of the role-playing expectation is and on what efforts are required to meet the expectation.

2 At first sight, a less than expected response of ignorance and arrogance

Since January 2017, our team has been conducting research on the history of socio-ecological practice in the Red Flag Canal, China, thanks to the support from The Center for Ecophonetic Practice Research, College of Architecture and Urban Planning, Tongji University, Shanghai, China [For an elaboration of our motivations, see Xiang (2020)]. At a 2019 international symposium in Shanghai (the Shanghai symposium, henceforth), we gave for the first time a plenary presentation in which we shared and explained an overview of the canal history we had studied and reconstructed [(Gao 2019; much of the overview is documented in a follow-up article (Xiang 2020)]. After the presentation, biodiversity questions and comments cropped up from the audience. Below is a compiled transcript.

It is awesome to hear the many lasting benefits the Red Flag Canal has been providing to the half a million Linxian people ever since its completion in 1969. But what about biodiversity loss during the decade-long process of canal construction from 1960 to 1969? What about the subsequent impacts of such loss on both the humans and nature? As we all know now, the construction of a cross-watershed canal necessarily changes the original structures of ecosystems and alters the natural processes within them; these changes inevitably lead to the region's biodiversity loss, which in turn affects the well-being of the people and the health of ecosystems directly or indirectly—was biodiversity conservation ever a concern to the Linxian people and their leaders in their planning, design, and construction practices in the 1960s?³

To a good many people at the symposium, including us, these questions and the way they are presented were less than expected because they, at first sight, appeared to be both ignorant and arrogant.⁴ How is it?

³ [1] This is a typed copy of recorded materials and written notes compiled by Wei-Ning Xiang, a coauthor of this guest editorial. Most comments and questions are in English and from the attendees during the question-and-answer session, while a few are in Chinese and from attendees during private conversations in the coffee break afterwards. In the latter case, the English translation was done by Wei-

First, for those who are versed in the literatures of biodiversity in both English and Chinese languages, the questions are rooted in a factual ignorance—the unawareness of the fact that neither of the two concepts, *biodiversity conservation* and *biodiversity loss*, existed when the Red Flag Canal was built in the 1960s.⁵ In the English-language literature, on the one hand, the word *biodiversity* is a contraction of *biological diversity*, and its first known use was in 1985 (<https://www.Merriam-Webster.com> Dictionary 2022b)—in an article entitled “The biological diversity crisis”, the American biologist EO Wilson (1929–2021) calls for “an international effort to understand and save biological diversity” (1985, p. 705). This is heralded subsequently by a 1986 symposium, sponsored by the National Academy of Sciences and the Smithsonian Institution in the United States, and later by an influential follow-up book “Biodiversity” (Wilson and Peter 1988). In the Chinese-language literature, on the other hand, the nomenclature of biodiversity emerged in early 1990s (Ma 1993), coinciding with the Chinese government's endorsement to the United Nation's Convention on Biological Diversity (Ma 1993; The United Nations 1993). It was only then when the Chinese terms corresponding respectively to *biodiversity* (生物多样性), *biodiversity conservation* (生物多样性保护), and *biodiversity loss* (生物多样性丧失) began to appear in the academic literature and governmental documents (Ma 1993), including the nation's pioneering “China biodiversity conservation action plan” which was launched in 1994 and successfully completed in 2010 (The Ministry of Environmental Protection of the People's Republic of China 2010, p. 4, p. 6). This factual ignorance manifests itself in the unchecked use in these questions of two chronologically misplaced concepts, making

Footnote 3 (continued)

Ning Xiang. [2] “Linxian people” refers to the people of the Linxian County, Henan Province, who in the 1960s built the 1500-km-long Red Flag Canal “with half a million pairs of hands” (Xiang 2020, p. 105).

⁴ Ignorance is the fact or state of unawareness. In this essay, we choose to use “ignorance” and its adjective “ignorant” in the very spirit of Ivan Petrovich Pavlov (1849–1936). In “Pavlov's bequest”, a 1936 open letter to young scientists, writes the Russian psychologist and winner of the 1904 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine, “However highly you are appraised, always have the courage to say of yourself—I am ignorant.” (Pavlov 1936/2017) Admitting ignorance, therefore, is a precursor of learning and erudition, in lieu of asking for forgiveness (Flam 2017).

⁵ In “The Cambridge dictionary of philosophy”, the Danish philosopher Nikolaj Nottelmann identifies three types of ignorance (2015). *Factual ignorance* is the absence of knowledge of some fact (e.g., one may be ignorant of the fact that kangaroos are marsupials); *objectual ignorance* the unacquaintance with some actual object (e.g., one may be ignorant of French cuisine); and *technical ignorance* the absence of knowledge of how to do something that could actually be done (e.g., one may be ignorant of how to speak Danish). Turkish philosopher İlhan Inan identifies two yet comparable forms of ignorance, objectual and propositional (2016).

biodiversity conservation and *biodiversity loss* anachronisms in this particular circumstance.⁶

Second, equally evident in these questions is yet another factual ignorance. For those at the symposium who studied the history of the Red Flag Canal, not only do these questions display a general unfamiliarity with the Linxian people of the 1960s who lived under life-threatening water insecurity in ways that are hardly imaginable to the present generations, but they also show a lack of understanding of the multifaceted context—the time, the socio-ecological environment, and the political and governance systems—in which the Linxian people and their leaders initiated and carried out this “decadal process of self-reliant, diligent, and ecophronetic socio-ecological practice” (Xiang 2020, p. 106).⁷ This factual ignorance culminates in the last question in the above transcript. By asking “was biodiversity conservation ever a concern to the Linxian people and their leaders in their planning, design, and construction practices in the 1960s?”, the question perceivably entails two pursuits *outside* the immediate milieu the Linxian people and their leaders lived and worked in. These pursuits are (1) seeking explicitly an assessment on the biodiversity knowledge of the Linxian people and their leaders and an examination on their attitudes toward biodiversity conservation; and (2) suggesting implicitly that the people and their leaders be re-portrayed and even the canal’s history reconstructed in terms of contemporary concerns, values, and scientific knowledge of biodiversity conservation. These pursuits as such exemplify what the American historian David Armitage refers to as *analytical presentism*—a human tendency to interpret the past in terms of present-day concerns and concepts (Armitage 2022, p. 7), revealing still another, and the third, ignorance.⁸

⁶ “Anachronism: a person, thing, or idea that exists out of its time in history, especially one that happened or existed later than the period being shown, discussed, etc.” (Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary & Thesaurus 2022) In the literature of historiography, however, anachronism is often used as a synonym for presentism (e.g., Armitage 2022, p. 4; Wood 2009, p. 5). Presentism is to be discussed in the next two paragraphs.

⁷ [1] This demonstrated ignorance was found in questions and comments raised primarily by non-Chinese speakers at the symposium and as such is in a sense understandable for two reasons. First, the planetary presentation, despite being delivered in English—the lingua franca of the symposium, contained only a precise background introduction about the people and the place. This is definitely insufficient for anyone, who is less or not at all familiar with the Red Flag Canal project, to make informed comments and ask prudent questions. Second, all the Red Flag Canal literature at that time was in Chinese, constituting a linguistic firewall preventing non-Chinese readers from accessing it. It was shortly after the symposium when articles in English language began to become available through the journal Socio-Ecological Practice Research (SEPR). These include Chen and Xiang (2020a-b), Li et al. (2021), and Xiang (2020). [2] Water insecurity is the antithesis of water security. “Water security here refers to a state of human settlement under which the inhabitants have both the assurance of adequate, sustained, and accessible quality water supply and the protection against impacts of such water-related phenomena as water-borne pollution, drought, flood, sea level rise, soil erosion, landslide, and mudflow.” (Jiang et al. 2022, pp.117–118)

Third, for those in the audience who are familiar with the literature of historiography, the last question and the two pursuits it entails, as described above, help unveil a subtly undergirding objectual ignorance of a historicist maxim. The maxim defines what historians should do as “students of the past” and is espoused by the great majority of professional historians [Armitage 2022, p. 19; Bullard 1976, p. 161; Cruseturner 2015; Hunt 2002; Murphey 1973, p. 120; Walsham 2017, p.214; Wood 2009, p. 5; the quote is from Walsham (2017, p.213)]. American historian and educator Ashley Cruseturner states it eloquently, “The role of the historian encompasses a sacred duty to offer a multi-dimensional picture of the past (and the people of the past) [sic] *in the context of the past.*” (Cruseturner 2015, in the third paragraph from the beginning of the article; italics by the authors of this guest editorial) Still, a succinct but equally powerful statement of the maxim, along with a hypothetical yet vivid example, comes from a non-historian scholar—the British geophysicist Edward Bullard (1907–1980), “An historian must study the past in its own terms. He must not ask ‘What was Henry VIII’s attitude to women’s lib?.’” (Bullard 1976, p. 161)⁹ Clearly, the essence of this historicist maxim is for historians to act “against [analytical] presentism” when reconstructing history (Hunt 2002).¹⁰ But what if they don’t? In a 2002 essay entitled “Against presentism”, the American historian Lynn Hunt, who was the president of the American Historical Association at that time, describes a worst-case

⁸ In his 2020 essay entitled “In defense of presentism”, David Armitage identifies five forms of presentism—teleological presentism, idealist presentism, analytical presentism, perspectival presentism, and omnipresent presentism (2022, pp. 5–9). In justifying the thesis which is highlighted in the title of the essay, he stresses that “The range of possible presentisms includes some that are compatible with writing good history and even conducive to human flourishing. It is these forms of presentism that I will attempt to defend in this essay.” (*Ibid.*, p. 4)

⁹ [1] Edward Bullard writes this passage when characterizing what the American historian Murray Murphey (1973, p. 120) calls “a historicist approach” to history. [2] Henry VIII (1491–1547) was the King of England from 1509 to 1547 (Elton and Morrill 2022); while “Women’s lib” (Women’s liberation movement), also called women’s rights movement, is a “diverse social movement, largely based in the United States, that in the 1960s and ’70 s sought equal rights and opportunities and greater personal freedom for women.” (Burkett 2020)

¹⁰ [1] Presentism is a well explored yet still contested topic in historiography. For a balanced understanding of the debate, interested readers may refer to Armitage (2022), Bartow (2015), Brush (1995), Bullard (1976), Butterfield (1931), Carr (1961/1964), Cruseturner (2015), Hull (1979), Hunt (2002), Murphey (1973), Walsham (2017), Wilson (2019), and Wood (2009), among many others. [2] A comparable debate in linguistics and anthropology is about the “emic” and the “etic” perspectives in epistemology, methodology, and theory (e.g., Bauman 1993; Mostowlansky and Rota 2020).

scenario should historians choose, deliberately or inadvertently, to take what she calls “the stance of temporal superiority”:

Presentism [analytical presentism, as per Armitage (2022, p. 7)], at its worst, encourages a kind of moral complacency and self-congratulation. Interpreting the past in terms of present concerns usually leads us to find ourselves morally superior; the Greeks had slavery, even David Hume was a racist, and European women endorsed imperial ventures. Our forbears constantly fail to measure up to our present-day standards.

This scenario helps explain *why*, in the eyes of many attendees at the Shanghai symposium, including us—we must come clean, the biodiversity questions and the way they are presented appeared at first sight to be arrogant—in the sense of a smug moral superiority over the Linxian people of the 1960s—as well as ignorant.¹¹

3 On second thought, an honest mirror of our oversight, ignorance, and misassumption

“Nothing is ever quite as good or quite as bad as it looks at first sight.” (Easy Learning Idioms Dictionary 2022) In retrospect, the “less than expected response” to our presentation at the Shanghai symposium came as no surprise; in fact, as ignorant and arrogant as it appeared at first sight, the response is nothing but an honest mirror of our failure, caused by our own ignorance and misassumption, to play the role of intergenerational mediators at the time of preparing and delivering the presentation.

3.1 Our ignorance and oversight

The factual ignorance we had at that time is about an impending involuntary migration we were about to make and the concomitant expectation of role-transitioning.

¹¹ The American landscape ecologist Richard Forman shows by example that the perceived “arrogance of ignorance” of the sort (Mayer 1984) can be avoided. After a field visit to The Woodlands New Community in Texas, USA, he praised in a 2002 book chapter that it is “an ecologically remarkable community” with “distinctive natural and cultural attributes” (Forman 2002, p. 104). He then went on with the following comments (*Ibid.*): “Designing and planning of The Woodlands [in the 1970s], ..., did not benefit from landscape ecology that coalesced a decade later. For instance, natural vegetation patches are relatively small, and forest edges that favored generalist edge species at the expense of interior species were promoted. ... In short, this suburban town would look very different if planned and designed today using the landscape ecology principles presented in this chapter.”

In historiography, the migration refers to the progression a historian makes in the process of historical research from studying and reconstructing history to sharing and explaining history. The essence of this migration, according to David Hull abovenamed (1979, p. 5), is a transition from a two-way communication to a three-way communication: “The two-member relation of a contemporary historian [with the historical figures when he/she was] studying the past becomes a three-member relation when the historian attempts to explain an earlier period [he/she studied] to people living in the present.” In this three-way communication, the historian is sandwiched between the past historymakers and present audience and has a pivotal role to play. Because the history he/she studies and reconstructs is about people of the past and what they did in a particular and often unique circumstance, while the audience live in the present and have different life experiences outside that particular historical context, his/her task of sharing and explaining the reconstructed history to the audience entails a critical and challenging endeavor, best described by a Chinese idiom as “夏虫语冰” —“talking about ice with insects that live only in the summertime.” (Chinese Idiom Dictionary 1985; English translation by the authors of this guest editorial). To fulfil the task, therefore, he/she is expected to be “a mediator between generations” (Butterfield 1931, p. 10; Walsham 2017, p. 215)—a different role from that of pure “students of the past” (Walsham 2017, p. 213) he/she took when studying and reconstructing the history before the migration. In this new role, he/she is charged to make the past and the people of the past that he/she understood intelligible to the present audience, and to translate the history he/she studied and reconstructed in its own terms into present terms so that his/her contemporaries can understand.¹² But first things first, he/she needs to know, and be crystal clear about, that sharing and explaining history is a whole new ball game that requires him/her to let go the students-of-the-past mindset and embrace the intergenerational-mediators mindset, and demands the use of mediation approaches often unfamiliar to him/her (Hull 1979, pp. 4–6).

Without knowing this upcoming involuntary migration and the concomitant expectation of role-transitioning, we inertially kept acting as students of the past when we should have played the role of intergenerational mediators. Consequently, in preparing and delivering the presentation, we failed to perform the abovementioned mediating duties as needed for an effective three-way communication; no wonder our presentation received “a less than expected response”.

¹² What does it mean to study and reconstruct the history in its own terms? According to Murray Murphey (1973, p. 120), it means “to seek for an understanding of past phenomena in terms of the system of thought and action of which they were a part”, granted that “this system is in part our construction, as is any theory, and it must usually contain recently discovered principles of which the members of past societies were unaware.”

3.2 The students-of-the-past mindset, a convenient yet false assumption, and the curse of knowledge

Manifesting the inertia of students-of-the-past mindset, our preparation for the presentation at the Shanghai symposium was based upon a convenient assumption. That is, the approach we took in *studying and reconstructing* the history of socio-ecological practice in the Red Flag Canal would be directly suitable for and equally effective in *sharing and explaining* our findings to the international audience at the symposium.

The history-reconstruction approach we had used is in itself rooted in a students-of-the-past mindset and characterized figuratively as “跟古人对话”—“engaging in dialogues with historical figures”—by Chinese historians Chen Yinke [陳寅恪 (1890–1969)] and Zhang Kaiyuan [章开沅, (1926–2021)] (Guangzhou Daily 2014; English translation by the authors of this guest editorial). Advocated as a “bottom-up” approach to “the authenticity of the past” (Arnove 2015, p.xiv; Wood 2009, p. 5) by many historians and philosophers, including *inter alia* Stephen Brush (1995, p. 229), David Hull (1979, p.6), Hao Jiansheng (郝建生) (Hao 2011; Hao et al. 2011), Shen Shufeng (申树风) (Shen 2020), Sima Qian (司马迁, 145BC–?) (Sima 94BC/2016), and Howard Zinn (1922–2010) (Arnove 2015; Taylor 2018; Zinn 1980/2003, 1994/2002), it aims to bring to light the stories, voices, struggles, visions, and successes of ordinary people who made history in extraordinary ways (Arnove 2015, pp.xiii-xv). The approach is commonplace in many successful and convincing history-reconstruction studies on the Red Flag Canal (e.g., Guo 2013/2018; Hao et al. 2011; Shen 2020; Wang and Sang 1995; Zheng 2015), and was effective in our study as well.

Following this approach, we rejected the two stereotypical images of detached and disinterested historians—“a recording angel” and “a hanging judge”—portrayed by the British historian Quentin Skinner in his 1981 book “Machiavelli” (p. 88).¹³ Instead, not only did we regard ourselves as students of the past, but we also strove to be *empathetic* students of the past who essay to understand the history through what the American psychologist Sherlyn Jimenez calls “role taking” (2009, p.210)—perceiving and vicariously experiencing the thoughts, feelings, and actions of the past historymakers within their particular circumstance [for definitions of empathy, see Jimenez (2009, p. 210) and Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary 2022c]. In this capacity, we first immersed ourselves in the pool of available

historical records in print or on exhibit in “Hongqiqiu Memorial Hall” (the Red Flag Canal Museum, <https://www.chinawiki.net/thread/48/7213.html>), and practiced “the ability to think in the language of the period under investigation” (Hull 1979, p. 6); we then managed to situate ourselves in a context we believed comparable to the one the Linxian people of the 1960s were in, and through a sheer vicarious imaginative participation in the canal project, played their role as the historymakers of this “socio-ecological practice miracle” (Xiang 2020, p. 105). This vicarious process of experiential learning was greatly enriched by our field surveys, including in-person conversations with the few remaining historymakers (Fig. 1), and further informed by virtual interviews with the Red Flag Canal historians whose work we read, including Hao Jiansheng and Shen Shufeng.¹⁴

Among many benefits we derived from this empathetic approach of “engaging in dialogues with historical figures” is that we became and have since remained mindful of the human tendency toward analytical presentism aforementioned (in Sect. 2 and footnote 10). We learnt and strove to conscientiously eschew, rather than embrace, modern-day concerns, values, and concepts when studying the life and work of Linxian people of the 1960s and especially when trying to understand why they did what they did in the Red Flag Canal project. This learnt and kept awareness enabled us to develop a deeper understanding of the Linxian people of the 1960s as well as a greater appreciation of the socio-ecological practice feat they built—the Red Flag Canal.

It was based on this very students-of-the-past mindset that we made the convenient assumption when preparing for the presentation at the Shanghai symposium. Specifically, we thought naively that the international audience could readily follow the same line of empathetic thinking and do exactly what we had done in studying and reconstructing the canal history. That is, following the same reconstruction approach, the audience would be able to immerse themselves in the milieu the Linxian people of the 1960s lived and worked in and engage in a vicarious activity of “role taking” to appreciate the piece of the Red Flag Canal history we reconstructed; through the power of empathy, they would be able to conscientiously, as we had done in our study, shun the tendency to interpret the past in terms of present-day concerns and concepts, such as those of biodiversity conservation. This, as it turns out, is a misassumption, under which we prepared and delivered our less effective presentation. We as such innocently fell to victim

Footnote 13 (continued)

“An angel is signing his name in blue light on a black wall. Recording his history, over thirteen centuries, on the head of a pin. Writing in a language known only to other angels, but with such variations as to confuse even them. ... The stuff the angels have transcribed for us, only a fraction of which—like the number of waking moments a prisoner actually forgets he is imprisoned—will be deciphered.” (Christopher 1993)

¹⁴ In “Acknowledgements” of this guest editorial, we provide a roster of the people in and outside the Red Flag Canal irrigation area who helped our research.

¹³ Of the two, Quentin Skinner prefers the former, “The business of the historian is surely to serve as a recording angel, not a hanging judge. ... [and] to recover the past and place it before the present, without trying to employ the local and defeasible standards of the present as a way of praising or blaming the past [as a hanging judge would do].” (Skinner 1981, p. 88) However, such stereotypical images of disinterested, neutral, objective historians are the object of criticism (e.g., Zinn 1966/1997, p. 510; Zinn 1969/1997, pp. 503–506) and even object of ridicule. In a 1993 poem “The recording angel”, for instance, the American poet Nicholas Christopher writes,



Fig. 1 A photo of the coauthor Wei-Ning Xiang (right) with Zhang Maijiang (张买江), taken in the Linzhou City (formally Linxian County) on June 10th, 2017, during an interview conversation. Zhang Maijiang, whose first name *Maijiang* literally means “buying a river”, participated in the Red Flag Canal project during the 1960s as a teenager volunteer. He shared many moving stories about the people, the place, and the Canal [the photo was first used in Xiang (2020, p. 110) with Zhang Maijiang’s permission]. As students of the past, we value field surveys and in-person conversations with remaining historymakers of the Red Flag Canal as well as historical records. From 2017 to 2019, the Red Flag Canal research team conducted three field surveys in the Linzhou City. The follow-up trips were canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic

of what psychologists call “the curse of knowledge”—“the difficulty in imagining what it is like for someone else not to know something that you know.” (Pinker 2014, p. 57).

4 Being humble while role-playing on a long, steep learning curve

What is the most useful lesson among those we learnt from the 2019 instance? It is no doubt the one about the actions we must take with a vengeance to meet the role-playing expectation in sharing and explaining the history of socio-ecological practice. Specifically,

we must act as intergenerational mediators and engage in three-way dialogues with both the past historymakers and present audience who are or will be making the history of socio-ecological practice;

as novices in historical socio-ecological practice research, we are on an arduous—long and steep—learning curve that involves unfamiliar topics of historiography and requires dedicated efforts and much practice in historical research and writing.

Following up on this actionable lesson, since the 2019 instance, we have been learning and practicing the role of intergenerational mediators in our research and writing of the Red

Flag Canal history. This guest editorial and four recent articles (Chen and Xiang 2020a-b, Li et al. 2021, and Xiang 2020) are the labored offsprings of this ongoing endeavor.

However, the most profound lesson we learnt is not the one abovenamed about “doing”; instead it is the one about “being”—being humble and courageous to admit our own ignorance. Such a mental state of humility cultivates—and is thus a precursor of—learning and erudition. Learning in this humble mode includes *inter alia* activities of recognizing our own ignorance and mistakes mirrored in others’ demonstrated ignorance and perceived arrogance. As we exhibited in the previous pages of this guest editorial, these activities of experiential learning are unfamiliar but, if we follow them through, deeply rewarding. They are indeed valuable part of the learning curve we are on in the historical research.

We hope that the 2019 instance and the lessons we learnt can capture readers’ imaginations and will be as instructive and useful to our socio-ecological practice research colleagues as they have been to us. We also hope that more colleagues will be willing and able to share their research experience and learnt lessons through the journal SEPR.

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