

A Review of Chinese Oral History Theory

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, with the booming development of oral history, scholars have offered their own views and opinions on the theory of oral history, which can be described as "the benevolent sees benevolence, the wise sees wisdom", all of which have important implications for the study of oral history. At the same time, it also highlights the lack of theoretical regulation of oral history research in China. This paper discusses the relationship between oral history and memory, and the value and significance of oral history, starting from the concept of oral history, and showing that there are still weaknesses in the theory of oral history in China, and that more classical theoretical achievements from various fields are needed to improve the theoretical system of oral history in China.

Keywords: *China; Oral History; Theory; Memory*

1. INTRODUCTION

With the rise of the "new historiography," a shift in historical perspectives and the development of technology, oral history has been widely applied to all fields of social science and is on the rise in China. According to Ding Yizhuang, "Strictly speaking, it is not a school of thought; it contains many differences and divergences, but on the whole it emerged as a reaction to traditional historiography, representing a new trend and a new paradigm that is fundamentally different from traditional historiography. It represents a new trend and paradigm that is fundamentally different from traditional historiography. In terms of historical perspective, it views history as a science of the human past, rejects the narrowness of traditional historiography, which is limited to political history, and advocates that historical research should encompass the entire range of human activities in the past and that history should be examined in multiple levels and aspects in order to grasp it as a whole; in terms of methodology, it advocates multidisciplinary cooperation, i.e., drawing on the theories and methods of other neighboring disciplines, etc [1]." Modern oral history emerged in the United States in the early 20th century and flourished in the 1950s and 1960s, eventually reaching its peak in the 1970s. Along with the reform and opening up, oral historiography was introduced into China. When oral history first emerged it did not form a major climate in China due to many factors such as the political and social environment, but as the international and domestic situation changed, oral history gradually

attracted attention and achieved a series of successes in China in the 1980s [2]. The development of oral history and scholars' research on its theory are closely related, however, the theoretical problem of oral history has been a difficult issue in the academic community and has never been effectively resolved. The theoretical dilemma of oral history is superficially due to a combination of many factors such as interviewees, interviewers, memory, emotion, cognition, people, events, environment, society, and culture, but the root cause is still a lack of knowledge of the essential issues [3]. Theoretical research on oral history in China has been divided into two stages. In the first stage, in the 1980s, the main focus was on the translation and initial review of Western oral historiography, aiming to introduce the basic theories and development of Western oral historiography; in the second stage, scholars focused on exploring and constructing theories and methods of Chinese oral historiography. The main issues discussed in Chinese oral history today are the lack of a sound theoretical research system and the authenticity and credibility of oral history materials.

2. AN OVERVIEW OF THE CONCEPT OF "ORAL HISTORY"

Clarifying and scientifically defining the basic concepts of the discipline is a prerequisite for its existence and development. Therefore, it is important to define oral history.

Regarding the definition of oral history, Alan Nevins,

a renowned historian and journalist at Columbia University and the founder of oral historiography, argues that "oral history is the preservation of oral language, sound, and image using modern technological products such as tape recorders and video recorders, a history that is audible, listenable, and viewable" [2]. Apart from this, two different views dominate today. According to Donald Ritchie, "oral history is the collection of oral memories as well as historically significant personal perspectives in the form of recorded interviews". According to Louis Starr, "oral history is the preservation of hitherto unavailable primary sources derived from the oral accounts of people through prepared, tape-recorded interviews." The difference between their views is clear: Donald Ritchie sees oral history not only as the collection and collation of oral history materials but also as the inclusion of a "personal perspective" on the interpretation of these materials, while Starr sees oral history as the raw record of interviews, which in effect amounts to "oral history materials" [4]. The greatest point of disagreement about oral history in China today lies in the definition of its concept. According to Professor Yang Xiangyin of the American Association for the Teaching of Oral History Education, "oral history is oral testimony preserved by recording the recollections of parties or eyewitnesses to historical events through traditional transcription or the use of modern technological means such as audio and video recordings" [5]. According to Zhong Shaohua of the Institute of History, Academy of Social Sciences, "Oral history is the product of cooperation between interviewees and historians, using the unique human language and technological equipment, and the recordings of both parties' cooperative conversations are oral history materials, The recordings are compiled into a transcript, which can be researched and processed into various oral history monographs [6]. This shows that there is a slight discrepancy between their definitions of oral history, with the former considering oral history to be solely a record of people's memories and experiences, and the latter emphasizing steps such as collation and processing. This also shows that this is not only a major point of disagreement in oral history in China, but also a hotly debated issue in the entire oral history community.

So why is the discipline of oral history so conceptually divergent that it has been unresolved for years? Zuo Yuhe, chief expert at the Chinese Academy of History, suggests that "behind the conceptual differences in oral history lies the difference between 'oral historical material' and 'oral history'." It is a common belief that oral historical material refers to a type of historical material from the perspective of historiography, and oral history refers to a way of representing history from the perspective of historiography [7]. To expand, the concept of oral history connotes the collection and use of oral history materials to reproduce a particular stage or aspect of the historical process. While oral Historical Information is limited to providing a variety of materials

for the study of history, oral history focuses on interpreting history in its own unique way. [4] Oral historical Information does not need to be processed, but oral history must be processed by the organizer, and this processing, the most important one is to compare with the documentary history of the interviewee's oral narrative screening. This is as the American professor Tang Degang pointed out that "the so-called oral history is not done by one person speaking and one person writing, but the oral part is only a part of the historical material [8]." It can be judged that the relationship between the two is that oral history elaborates history with the help of oral history materials. It has the following distinctive features: first, it can vividly reproduce history; second, it can make up for the shortcomings of historical records and provide new insights for historical research; third, it can reflect the course of social psychological development.

After the boundary between the two is clear, we will find that the so-called "oral history" that is commonly talked about in China is mostly limited to the level of "oral historical material" and not elevated to the level of "oral history"; this is the trouble caused by the conceptual differences.

3. ORAL HISTORY AND MEMORY

Memory is at the heart of oral history, and as such it plays a crucial role in the discipline. In order to develop oral history in China, it is necessary to focus on the memories of the people involved and to integrate and systematize them into oral history. At the same time, oral history can reflect social memory and social construction, and the two complement each other. However, Huang Kewu points out that at first glance, oral history seems to be a simple task, as long as one brings a pen and paper, a tape recorder, finds the right person to interview, and then compiles the recordings into text. However, there is a lot to think about when you look at each of these steps. Among the many questions, the inevitable core question is: What are the qualities of the historical "knowledge" produced through oral recordings? Does it belong to universal "knowledge" or is it only "personal opinion" [1]? Thus, the positioning of the acquired memory is an important criterion for judging the authenticity of the oral history in question.

After discussing the introduction of memory into the study of Chinese oral history, another question follows: how are the constructs of individual and collective memory represented in oral history? First, the concept of both is introduced: personal memory provides information not only about public history, but also about individual lives, emotional experiences, spiritual journeys, social relationships, linguistic characteristics, personality psychology, physical and mental conditions, and even about memory styles, memory abilities, representations, and expressions. Individual memory can enrich the data and information base of human life and is

a human resource in a broad sense, including historical information, which is also an important intangible cultural heritage of human beings [9]; collective memory is also called group memory. This concept was first proposed by French sociologist Habwachs in his article "The Social Structure of Memory", which defines it as "the process and result of the sharing of past events by members of a particular social group, and the condition that ensures the transmission of collective memory is the continuity of social interaction and group consciousness needed to extract the memory [10]." Zhou Haizhan shows that "oral history is the telling of the life history of individuals, and these memories themselves are fragmentary and scattered; some are deeply engraved in the lives of individuals and become highlighting fragments; others are hidden in the dark shadows of daily life and are difficult to notice without careful scrutiny. In any case, in the process of oral narration, one always has to organize these isolated fragmentary narratives into a combination of events with an internal logic. "In this regard, Professor Chen Mo has proposed the concept of individual human memory bank, which means that we must consciously search, collect, record, organize, and preserve individual human life memories through various possible means and ways, and gradually establish a corresponding individual human memory archive system to accumulate basic data and information resources for human self-cognition and related scientific research [9]. The existence of a repository of individual human information allows for the linking of individual memories to form a macroscopic collective memory. This moreover confirms the statement that "oral history reproduces many interrelated collective processes, which are not only individual memories, but also a series of intertwined and interlinked life stories and social memories embedded in the social-historical vein [11]." Authenticity of memory is a prerequisite for ensuring historical accuracy, and individual human memory banks have emerged to improve the information obtained in order to form a memory system. So how does this affect, and how do we ensure, the accuracy and authenticity of memory?

Zuo Yuhe shows that "memory is dynamic and takes on different forms with the passage of time and spatial changes, and thus has obvious fluidity and instability. Because of the fluidity and instability of memory, the authenticity of oral history, with memory as its core, is naturally questioned. The fluidity and instability of memory highlight the unique value of oral history. Because oral history not only has the function of consciously collecting and preserving memory, but also has the function of solidifying this fluid and unstable direct memory [12]." As can be seen, memory can be distorted or faded by changes in the environment to the extent that it affects the accuracy of the oral history. Another situation is that interviewees may conceal or even distort some of the facts from their own perspectives and positions, which may also cause the memories

provided by oral narrators to differ significantly from the documentary record in many ways.

In order to solve such problems, various methods have emerged. Wang Ruifang points out that, first, when the memory of an oral narrator is obviously incorrect during the interview, it is important to look for multiple sources or compare the oral narratives of others to verify them. Second, it is possible for the narrator to avoid important questions raised by the interviewer during the interview. In the first round of interviews, the interviewer does not answer the specific questions designed by the interviewer around the interview topic, but rather avoids, perfunctorily and stonewalls the questions designed by the interviewer, either intentionally or unintentionally. In such cases, a return interview is required to obtain clear answers. Finally, although the interviewer has designed specific questions around the topic before the first round of interviews, the first round of interviews reveals that the original interview design still omits many important interview content, and many important questions are not designed in the specific interview outline, which requires the interviewer to also conduct a return visit and ask the same questions in a new round of interviews, and ask the narrator to continue to elaborate and deepen the narrative by providing detailed and in-depth explanations of the issues [13]. At the same time, objective factors have provided the conditions for the development of oral history memory. Yuan Mengqian shows in the perspective of media memory that "In the era of mass media, media play an important role in constructing social memory. Social memory is not abstract; it is often expressed, maintained, and reconstructed through concrete media production and dissemination [11]." Zhou Haiyan, on the other hand, stands for social construction: "The Internet publication of oral histories connects people whose life trajectories would otherwise be difficult to connect. Among them, a particularly moving story-telling may evoke strong emotional resonance, a particular person may be shaped into a political or cultural representation, and the events he/she is involved in may become a part of the social process, or even trigger a certain social trend of thought that continues to drive political change [14]." In summary, with the increasing refinement of memory information, both from the standpoint of mediated memory and social construction, the information obtained from interviews is available everywhere, and such conditions undoubtedly make the prospect of domestic oral history worth looking forward to.

4. THE VALUE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF ORAL HISTORY

Although oral legend is fundamentally different from contemporary oral history research, it is like a mirror that can reflect a nation's cultural traditions and even historical-historical facts to some extent [15]. Oral

history has extraordinary historical value and, in addition to that, has been used in different fields.

Some researchers are keenly aware that oral history differs from traditional historiography in that it focuses more on the study of the human person, and that it is directed at the lower classes. The greater emphasis on the study of people in oral history marks a return to the true meaning of historical research. The people are the creators of history, and only by reaching out to them can history be authentically reproduced. Traditional historiography has often neglected the study of people, especially the lower classes. Oral history, on the other hand, focuses on the study of people, especially case studies [16]. Oral history is also far more extensive than traditional historiography in the extent to which it interrogates, presents and explores social life. In a sense, while traditional historiography was primarily the domain of the ruling class and the elite, oral history has carved out a territory next to the traditional one where the lives of the people are presented.

Paul. Thompson writes in *Voices from the Past* — Oral History: "The primary value of oral history lies in the fact that it can recreate the original variety of positions to a greater extent than the vast majority of source material Oral history may make a fairer attempt: evidence can also come from the mouths of the inferior, the unprivileged and the defeated. Oral history can reconstruct the past more realistically and fairly, and can challenge established accounts." This phrase emphasises the reaction or complementary nature of oral history to traditional historiography, uncovering the silent and the lost, mainly the lower classes. He gave high praise to oral history, which, he argued, "is a history constructed around the people. It brings a generous gift to history itself and broadens the scope of history. It sees that heroes can come not only from leading figures, but also from many obscure people. It prompts teachers and students to become partners. It draws history into the community and out of community [17]." One of the most prominent and fundamental values of oral history is that it can expand the sources of historical information and reflect history from various perspectives. Wang Xiaodong shows the value of oral history in terms of both its historical and historiographical value: from the point of view of its historical value, oral history can make up for the shortcomings of archives and documents, salvage historical materials, and restore the truth of history.

In terms of historiographical value, oral history marks a return to the true meaning of historical research by starting with the meaning of "people". Secondly, oral history has broadened the field of historical research; finally, oral history has changed the traditional historiographical mode of research based on written and physical materials [16].

Xia Yanjing points out: "From the perspective of communication, oral history is not only a need for

research, but also a need for a way of presentation, the value of which lies in the memorialisation of the perceptible history experienced, a different kind of historical narrative... In particular in the last decade, there has been a rise in the historiography of genres that are both journalistic and artistic, based on the oral accounts of interviewees, such as "non-fiction" writing for the literary or artistic world, "historical memory" written in biography, "the narrative of the eyewitness", the 'field record' of artistic fieldwork, and the 'microform truth' of the transmission of skills. Oral history has a particular role to play in helping the public to understand and appreciate more emotive historical 'truths' by directly recounting life experiences and visually describing historical representations[18]."The book "Oral History Perspectives on the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Guizhou Province Music Bearers and Their Music" shows the value of oral history from the perspective of minority music: firstly, helps to recover or reconstruct the history of minority music; Secondly, plays an important role in supplementing the lack of historical background information in the study of minority music in China under the perspective of ethnomusicology; Thirdly, enables minority music to permanently Preserve its value [19].

According to Chang Jiange: In terms of the function of recovering history, even a thousand words of written records are sometimes no match for a simple moment of audio recording or a short video clip. From the perspective of the use of tools, the emergence of oral history, from documentary to audio and video recording, is a great leap forward in the field of history. In terms of the breadth of the historical record, oral history offers a wide range of possibilities. The value of oral history is thus distinctive and significant, and it is vital to make the most of it in historical research. The value and contributions of modern oral history are as follows: First, the widespread use of oral history methods has facilitated the study of specialized histories in various fields, and has played a significant role in increasing historical sources, thus broadening the field of study of history and adding new research methods. Second, oral history is far superior to traditional historiography in terms of the breadth of its inquiry, presentation, and exploration of social life. In a sense, it can be said that while traditional historiography was mainly the domain of the ruling class and elites, oral history has carved out a garden next to the traditional domain to show the lives of the people. Third, modern oral history is not only a working method of historical research, but also represents a new concept. It has achieved a combination of "top-down" and "bottom-up" writing of history, forming a new pattern in which the elegant and popular main lines of history intersect, and the social and personal experiences are linked horizontally and vertically.

Some scholars have emphasized the value of oral history in social practice and social application. Especially for the endangered intangible cultural heritage

that is in urgent need of rescue excavation and documentation, the preservation and study of oral history of its bearers is almost the only way, such as the collection and storage of oral history data of minority music bearers in China.

Finally, the multifaceted participation, exploration, and examination of social life in oral history has widely resonated with the public, and all segments of society are strongly resonant in the face of the living study of oral history, which also expands the propaganda and educational functions of historiography [20]."

To sum up, we can embody the value of oral history in terms of research fields, research objects, working methods, and publicity and education to promote academic development. The value of oral history is immeasurable, and with the improvement of its methodology and theory, oral history will play an increasingly important role in historical research.

5. CONCLUSION

Theoretical weakness is a major problem in Chinese oral history, and there is a need to introduce and assimilate the classical theoretical achievements and the latest research in foreign oral history and to benefit more people, so that it can be presented to the public in a richer form, including non-fiction literature. It is believed that in the near future, Chinese oral history will have a better theoretical system.

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