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Orality, Affect, and Memory: Opportunities for Emergent Public Oral History in Asia

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Abstract: The convergence of new and old media technologies invites a renewed focus on orality, and it also makes possible oral history goes public in Asia. In an embodied interview space, orality, affect, and memory interact. Public oral history in Asia is emergent and complex. This article explores that emergence, that complexity. With a selection of case analysis in Asian context, the study argues how public oral history has emerged as an affective engagement with the past, and how that engagement has actively shaped the public memories.

Keywords: orality; affect; public memory; Asia; public oral history; media technology

1 The Return of Orality

Oral history, an account of first-hand experience through retrospective recalling communicated to an interviewer for historical purposes, is an ancient form of history. Oral history searches for the emotional truth, and its uniqueness lies in orality. In all cultures the world of sound has proved to be the most immediate sensory coefficient of thought, one that is intimately related to and shaped by technology.[1] Actually, at every stage, technology has significantly shaped the evolution of modern oral history. Starting from the presence of language, followed by the invention of the printing press, orality is often set against literacy, defined as the knowledge of written words, in mass circulation. The written documents assume an aura of permanence and authority. Consequently, as the field of study, oral history has gradually shifted away from orality to transcripts.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the convergence of new and old media technologies has invited a return of orality. Having shifted from analogue to digital recording, in concise, and predominantly audio-visual formats, oral history acquires a new orality. If in all human cultures the spoken word appears as the closest sensory equivalent of fully developed interior thought, nested in speech,[2] the new orality, mediated by digital technologies, seems rawer and more intense. It is not merely the material for historical interpretation; it *is* an affective engagement with history. The grand convergence of technologies also enables oral history to go public, or, to put it another way, we see the emergence of public oral history. Simply put, public oral history refers to both the oral history of the public, and the publicness of oral history. The former assumes the existence of a recognizable group referred to as "the public," and the later, the public appearance. Across the globe, the grassroots impulses of oral history from the socially marginalized and historically silenced groups to fill some gaps of written documents becomes more palpable; we also witness diverse and dynamic public presentations of oral history, including oral history-based museum exhibits, heritage trails, performance, radio documentaries, urban walking tours, to name just a few. Oral history has transcended from the confines of the archives into public space.

Why does Asia present an interesting case in the emergent public oral history? Culture is public, as Clifford Geertz observed half a century ago, because meaning is.[2] And that meaning is contested, as "culture is not a biologically transmitted complex,"[3] as Ruth Benedict wrote half a century before Geertz. Trained in language and literature early in my life, I have always had a sense of culture in analyzing historical narratives, and the scale matters in the compositional models of these narratives, that reveals the cultural forces of emotions in oral history. As "a knowledge of cultural forms is necessary in social thinking,"[4] such knowledge is deeply helpful in my understanding of culturally conditioned behaviors such as oral history.

1 Refer to: Walter J. Ong, *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 140.

2 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 10–11.

3 Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1935/1948), 14.

4 Ibid.

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Oral history constitutes a complex interweaving of culturally conditioned questions and responses, behind and beneath which lie orally patterned thoughts, imbued with emotional forces. Call it cultural documents in the "webs of significance,"[5] oral history reenacts a series of the significance of the selected details, conveyed verbally or through shaped behaviors. In this reenactment, stories people tell about themselves are conceived less as documents to be restored but as texts to be read, in which historical consciousness becomes the medium through which oral testimonies present the shape of the past.[6] Given such emotional focus, doing and analyzing oral history should not be reduced to a sterile comparison between the oral and documentary evidence; rather, attention is to be directed to the cultural form of oral history.

My professional interest in Asia stems from its linguistic and cultural diversity, which presents uncharted territories for the historical and social analysis of oral history. In a diverse network of language systems, distinctive cultural expressions, communicative styles, and a series of non-verbal signs, are all mediated. The traditional boundaries between the private and the public sphere have shifted. For instance, the family structure and associated space, once considered exclusively private, now increasingly moves out into the public sphere. The concept of authority and the cultural attitudes toward it have also shifted. Respecting authority – whether embodied as emperors, deities, or prominent political figures – has traditionally been embedded in "Asian norms," yet now, the subaltern has started to challenge that authority. Both trajectories are critical in our understanding of public oral history. The first one concerns the nature of the public sphere. The traditionally controlled space has become more fluid, liberal, and borderless. The second one highlights an emergent, historically conscious public.

Historically, many Asian countries have experienced a clash of colonial history and post-colonial memories. The traumas and violence associated with these recent memories offer rich possibilities for oral history. Many newly independent nation-states in Southeast Asia, with their fluid borders, mutual language influences, have experienced post-colonial awakenings in different ways. The Japanese occupation era (1941–1945) has left enduring collective imprints on the mental and physical landscapes. Oral history remains the only way of capturing the histories and memories of those who experienced war, genocide, mass killing, and political upheavals during that time.

Waves of technology innovations, especially the recent digital revolution, have impacted the region unevenly yet significantly. In the twenty-first century, technological influences are global, yet for oral history in Asia, the impact is transformative. For most Asian countries, the age of analog is largely absent; they have leapfrogged directly into the digital age. This implies that they do not have traditional oral history archives in the American or European sense, where one finds extensive collections of analog materials and tools, often accompanied by verbatim and searchable transcripts. Even in early adopters like Singapore where institutionalized oral history began in the 1970s, most recordings have been digitalized. Digital technology serves as a double-edged sword: while it accelerates the evolution of oral history, making it immensely popular across Asia, it also raised concerns about the lack of proper archival and ethical standard. As a result, the floodgates of orality have opened, with efforts to regulate them often proving inadequate. The curatorial efforts, if any, remain scattered and uncoordinated.

That said, over the past twenty-five years anxieties over the absence of subaltern voices have led to the emergence of public oral history, often marked by a sense of urgency. This will be discussed in the next section.

2 The Emergence of Public Oral History in Asia

Public oral history engages a subaltern or even counter public, with a diverse and dynamic range of representations.[7] Oral history has always involved a public dimension in ancient cultures such as China and India, where the terms "oral tradition" and "oral history" have often been used interchangeably. Yet public oral history in Asia, in a modern sense, began to take shape around the dawn of the twenty-first century. What follows is a sketch of the landscape. Careful readers will notice that these expressions are not unique to Asia, but all of them find distinctive cultural inflections. Use the categories as the signposts, and the illustrative cases as small, distinct dots, or strokes of color to a surface. When viewed from a distance, these elements visually blend together to form a cohesive image, offering glimpses into a broader understanding. The interpretations come from my first-hand experience of public history in the United States, Canada, and more recently, China and

5 Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture*, 5.

6 Renato Rosaldo, "Doing Oral History," *Social Analysis* (1980): 89–99, 97.

7 See David Dean, "Publics, Public Historians, and Participatory Public History," in *Public in Public History*, eds. Joanna Wojdon and Dorota Wisniewska (New York and London: Routledge, 2022), 3–6.

Singapore. Readers should approach the rest of the article in this framework.

3 Orality

Let us start with orality. Human voice connects thoughts. Orally patterned thought is the most immediate sensory coefficient of thought, as Walter Ong analyzed the contrast between oral modes of thought and expression and written modes.[8] All sensation takes place in time, but sound has a special relationship to time unlike that of the other fields that register in human sensation. Sound exists only when it is going out of existence. It is not simply perishable but essentially evanescent, and it is sensed as evanescent.[9] In an oral culture, untouched by writing, restriction of words to sound determines not only modes of expression but also thought processes, "think memorable thoughts,"[10] The more sophisticated orally patterned thought is, the more it is like to be marked by skillfully crafted set expressions. From oral tradition into oral history, a new orality, or secondary orality appeared, which reveals cultural patterns that transforms the social thinking, "sustained by telephone, radio, television, and other electronic devices that depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print."[11]

Oral history foregrounds the unique relationship of sound to interiority when sound is compared to other senses such as sight, smell, and touch. Human voice comes from inside the human organism which provides the voice's resonances. Sight isolates, sound incorporates, and the consciousness of each human person is totally interiorized, known to the person from the inside and inaccessible to any other person directly from the inside.[12] Oral history, through the interview space, in effect, brings the interiority of orality out into the public. Public oral history further elevates orality to a broader spatial scale, such as museums, heritage sites, trails, and landscapes. The physical essence of sound – the spoken word – emanates from the human interior, and manifests human beings to one another as conscious interiors, into communities. As these communities take shape, orality advances further into culture, and oral history becomes culturally mediated.

Early in my study of Kensington Market in Toronto, Canada,[13] I conducted oral history interviews with the residents in four selected sites, a bookstore, a bakery, a synagogue, and a market. As both an outsider (researcher) and insider (immigrant to Canada), I delved into the heart and mind of Kensington Market through various levels of orality, from the rich tapestry of multiple languages, pidgins, and creoles on the alleys and streets, to the vibrant soundscape of the market. For urban preservation, I proposed a culturally sensitive narrative approach, with oral history interviewing at its core. The experience of understanding a culturally diverse urban neighborhood equips me with the perspectives needed to explore equally diverse regions, such as Asia, with a similar cultural sensitivity. Ultimately, the cultural interpretation and narrative structural analysis give oral history a particular shape, and a unique internal structure.

Orality stands at both ends of the historical spectrum in Asia. On one end, oral history serves as an alternative source of evidence, often less controversial and supported by the state. Recent initiatives in many Asian countries such as China, Singapore, Japan, and India demonstrate a resurgence of interest in documenting intangible heritage through oral history. In China, in 2011 the National Library launched *China Memory*, a national oral history project that the state has authorized as key historical events and individuals in modern China. Topics included the Anti-Japanese Allied Forces in the North-Eastern Region; Arts and Science; the Daughters of Yan An; Our Words; Our Expeditionary Force; Contemporary Musicians; and recordings to document a range of traditional Chinese craft work – lacquer craftsmen, calligraphers, wooden block printers, folk singers, and storytellers. Around the same time, Singapore launched the *Singapore Memories – Documenting Our Stories Together* project, inviting the public to contribute to the nation's collective memories and narratives. This crowd-sourced initiative conducted oral histories with various groups from different segments of Singaporean society. While *Singapore Memories* was executed with greater professionalism in a relatively less controlled political climate, its goals align closely with those of *China Memory*: both projects serve the interests of the respective state who championed them.

At the same time, oral histories offer different and sometimes conflicting interpretations of historical events, for example, the oral histories of the survivors and the

8 Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 6.
9 Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 32.
10 Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 34.
11 Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 13.
12 Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 70–71.
13 Na Li, *Kensington Market: Collective Memory, Public History, and Toronto's Urban Landscape* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 82.

perpetrators of the Khmer Rouge (1975–1979)[14] which are presented and curated in the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, and the documentary *Bophana: A Cambodian Tragedy*.[15] Occasionally the subaltern challenges the official narrative. Take Singapore's public housing project as a case. In the aftermath of World War II, low-income Chinese nuclear and semi-extended families resided in unauthorized wooden dwellings within kampong (villages) on the city's periphery. Oral histories gathered from over 70 individuals who once lived in the Kampong Bukit Ho Swee area illuminate the tensions between Singapore's economic geography and the social dynamics of its low-income Chinese. The oral histories also explored the ambivalent relationship between urban kampong dwellers and the one major, seemingly nonpolitical threat to their homes, namely fire, which periodically destroyed large settlements in the 1950s and 1960s. How the residents coped with the fire hazard and how the outbreak of kampong fires became a deeply contested issue in these decades are important questions which throw new light on the emerging dynamics of the postwar state and society.[16]

Oral history in this context becomes a source of social memory for the contested voices of those who were pushed to the urban margins. These voices, often fragmented and uncoordinated, reflect the complexity of the living memories. Beneath and beyond these insurgent voices lies an emergent archival impulse, entangled with the official historical narratives. In many instances, oral history archives function as extensions of the official records, particularly in countries such as China, Cambodia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. They are state sanctioned, funded, and supported, mostly elite focused and politically driven. For example, the state-funded *Oral History of Reform and Open-Door Policy* project in China, aimed to systematically collect materials on the open-door policy,[17] to testify to its greatness and to complement the historical sources on the history of the Chinese Communist Party. There are a number of themes covered throughout all of the interviews: reforms in rural villages, the one-child-per-couple policy, Sino-US relations, the 1982 Constitution, science and technology, the macromanagement of the economy, the Three Gorges Dam project,[18] Hong Kong's (1997) and Macau's (1999) return to China, housing reforms in the 1990s, and many others – all of which the state deemed as direct consequences of the policy – and how they impacted people's lives. The oral histories, shaped by top-down governmental editing, are presented as a seemingly organic narrative. Similarly, the voices collected in the *Singapore Story*, the *Making of Malaysia*, and the state-led political oral history projects in the Philippines and Thailand, are frequently integrated into the state-sanctioned museum exhibits.

Sometimes, the vernacular challenges the official narratives in nuanced if not subaltern ways. Across Asia, there is an emergent public effort to keep the past alive, and to engineer the future of the archives to which they see themselves contributing. The subaltern truly speaks – rather than being spoken for or re-presented by others – and their voices find various expressions in the public sphere. However, much of this retrospective remembering consists primarily of individual biographical reminiscences, with few reaching the archival standards. Even those that do tend to remain at the biographical level and have not moved into the historical and social interpretations/analysis. The oral is not already an archive, and oral histories are constituted anew, recorded and "saved" through technology in the name of identicality and materiality.[19] In this vein, small-scale, diverse, community driven oral history projects, collected and curated by trained professionals, offer glimpses of hope.

For example, *West Lake Memory* Project (referred to as WLMP), a multiyear collaboration between the Museum and the Center for Public History at Zhejiang university, recorded three major dredging initiatives of the West Lake since 1949. WLMP focused on the tension between the history and memory of West Lake dredging, especially how such interactions entered the public space to acquire new understanding.[20] Oral histories collected in this project added an extra layer to the already well-documented dredging history. For example, the voices of the dredging workers, including many local residents who volunteered their labor for the dredging efforts, revealed a complex emotional and

14 The Khmer Rouge was radical communist movement that ruled Cambodia from 1975 to 1979 after winning power through a guerrilla war. The Khmer Rouge government under Pol Pot was responsible for the Cambodian genocide (1976-78), during which up to three million people were murdered.

15 Also see Michelle Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable: Silence, Memory, and the Photographic Record in Cambodia* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2014).

16 Loh Kah Seng, "History, Memory, and Identity in Modern Singapore: Testimonies from the Urban Margins," *Oral History Review* 36, no. 1 (2009): 1–24.

17 An economic reform, announced by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, to open China to foreign trade and investment to stimulate growth.

18 Three Gorges Dam is located on the Yangtze River (Chang Jiang) just west of the city of Yichang in Hubei province, China. The Three Gorges Dam project, as one of the largest hydroelectric engineering projects in China, started in 1994 and ended in 2006. The dam and accompanying hydroelectric plant were built in phases and over the course of many years.

19 Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (London; New York: Routledge, 2011), 100–101.

20 The Center for Public History at Zhejiang University, 2015.

psychological world. Some narrators vividly recalled their dredging experience, including their pride, fear, hope, love, drive, and regret, as if it all happened yesterday. By a fortuitous set of circumstances, their involvement in dredging was tantamount to a quest for daily meaning for the ordinary people. Words and phrases such as "value," "meaning," "a sense of responsibility," "spirit," and "personal growth" were frequently used.

For an act officially portrayed as heroic, there was barely concealed discontent and grievances and a complicated psychological world surrounding the dredging. One suction-dredging boat-worker described the process of manual dredging: "It was a hard life! There was no machinery, … the sludge was dredged, bit by bit, all by our hands, like this."[21] Another worker expressed that the dredging life, which was filled with hardship and deprived of material necessities, could likewise be described as "hard": "How did we transport the dirt and sludge? It was all by hand! I remember it was freezing cold in winter, and we had to pick up the mud, transport it from the dredger to the nearby dump, barefooted. We were supposed to work 8 h a day, so I left around seven o'clock at the break of the day, and came back at night, in that coldness."[22] When probing the place-based stories, insights, and patterns, we find that they challenge some of the basic tenets of how one ought to understand environmental history. Additionally, in a rather curious twist, when personal memories are made public, they acquire a fluid, collective, and ritualized existence.

Chronicling COVID-19 in Singapore through oral history presents another case for engaging public efforts to document and archive living memories.[23] What began as a medical and healthcare problem, spilled over into the economy, disrupting sectors such as the aviation industry, tourism, transport, food and beverage, retail, entertainment and the arts as well as the social lives of ordinary people. Initiated in 2020, the two-year oral history project recorded experiences, emotions and reflections of a wide array of respondents from government officials and healthcare workers to businesses and members of the community. About 130 narrators from all walks of life contributed to the project. For example, one narrator who developed an eye disease and lost her sight gradually from 2015, shared how losing her sight was more traumatic than COVID-19, and how she was grateful to her family for helping at home and for friends and neighbors who sent food surprises to her door during COVID-19. Quite a few migrant workers shared their dormitory situations during circuit breaks, and how they missed their families in their home countries.[24] Collectively, these voices contribute to our understanding of an ongoing crisis. More critically, the oral histories archived and curated by the National Archives of Singapore serve as invaluable primary sources for analyzing how the COVID-19 situation evolved and capturing the raw, fresh memories of ordinary public during the pandemic. This represents a significant step towards public-oriented oral history efforts in Singapore.

4 Affect

In the convergence of new and old media technologies, oral history re-emerges as an embodied experience, a performative narrative, and ultimately, an affective engagement. The power of voice is physiological and cultural, and orality elicits and provokes strong feelings in the narrators and the interviewers. The affective power of sound and voice, combined with the intimacy of the listening process, means we can be emotionally engaged by listening to oral history; this, in turn, affects how we absorb and retain its content, as well as how we evaluate that content.

Affect, visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion – that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension.[25] As force or forces of encounter, affect is born in in-between-ness and resides as accumulative beside-ness, as the body's capacity to affect and to be affected,[26] and is a two-way process, two-sided capacities. Oral history is essentially *an encounter*; it transmits affect, "a process that is social in origin but biological and physical in effect,"[27] between the biomediated bodies, i.e. the interviewer and the narrator, with bodily capacity, the bodies' capacity to affect and to be affected, in a mediated public space, between the bodies and their interview space.

The extra-lingual signals come alive and add complexity to the orality and aurality.

21 The dredging worker A, interviewed by Le Tian, transcript, the Center for Public History at Zhejiang University.

22 The dredging worker B, interviewed by Le Tian, transcript, the Center for Public History at Zhejiang University.

23 Chronicling COVID-19 in Singapore Through Oral History: https://youtu.be/ChecQ7TnVLI?feature=shared.

24 Recordings from Chronicling Covid-19 in Singapore through Oral History project: https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/ohyeah.

25 Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, "An Inventory of Shimmers," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Gregg and Seigworth (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 1–25, 1.

26 Ben Anderson, *Encountering Affect: Capacities, Apparatuses, Conditions* (Burlington, VT; Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2014), 9.

27 Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 3.

Consider the increasingly blurring boundaries between the private and the public sphere, where personal and family narratives are going public. In some instances, historians or scholars from such disciplines as sociology, anthropology, and psychology have actively intervened. In other cases, the impetus arises from a historically conscious public, seeking to share and validate their experiences. In families across Asian cultures, family oral history explores the cross-generational memories, with each biographical narrative offering a different view to the past. For example, oral history is used to reconstruct life histories, as evidenced by the flourishing memoirs and biographies of Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia.[28] In Japan, Tatsuichi Horikiri dedicated a lifetime to seeking out various items of clothing, from everyday kimono, work clothes, uniforms, and futons to actor's costumes, diapers, hats, aprons, and bags. He also collected oral histories of those who used these material cultural items. In his moving account 《布の記憶 庶民が織りなす哀と愛》(The Stories Clothes Tell: Voices of Working-Class Japan),[29] he presented these oral histories with images and narratives, revealing not only the difficult and sometimes desperate lives of these people, most from the marginalized groups in early twentieth-century Japan, but also illuminating their hopes, aspirations, and human values as an integral part of the marginalized history.

Taken together, oral history as an encounter embodies a two-way conversation as an affective engagement in an embodied space. This process involves multiple senses, variegated contingency, the capacities for the body to be radically creative in verbal and extra- or para-linguistic features. Such engagement becomes non-representational; it impacts historical consciousness at a scale that textual documents cannot reach. Going deeper, affect offers a dual perspective into oral history, resonating with the long-cherished ideal of oral history as a visceral, living experience communicated in a dialogical space. In such space, the interviewer and the narrator share an interpretive authority, co-authoring through verbal and non-verbal exchanges. However, affect is autonomous, as Brian Massumi discussed in his pioneering essay, *The Autonomy of Affect*, "it escapes confinement in the particular body whose vitality, or potential for interaction, it is."[30] Because of this, affect is non-representational and either happens before representation or with excessive generativity beyond representation.[31] It is mediated and shaped by the participants, the interviewer and the narrator in an encounter, thus generative and emergent, a hallmark of modern public oral history. The non-representationality challenges the received wisdom that oral history is merely a form of historical representation, carried out methodologically with a set of interview questions, then and subsequently expressed in print formats such as transcripts.

For example, oral history becomes the only way to understanding the working-class women's history in Japan, particularly regarding the shameful or difficult chapters of their lives. The research of Tomoko Yamazaki, entitled *Sandakan Hachiban Shookan* (Brothel Number 8 in Sandakan in Borneo) in 1972,[32] presents an excellent example of how oral history fortuitously becomes affective engagement. Yamazaki focused on women from Amakusa-one of the Amakusa Islands off southern Kyushu, now part of Kumamoto Prefecture-who traveled to Southeast Asia between 1900 and 1945 to work as prostitutes, highlighting the experiences of an elderly woman named Saki, who was one of these women. Known as *karayukisan*, these Japanese women worked as prostitutes in Asia, the South Pacific, and India following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, with the majority hailing from western Kyushu. Oral history emerged as the only viable means to uncover the truths surrounding this prostitution, as many of these women were illiterate. Yamazaki was also aware of the cultural stigma associated with shame in Japanese society. In this context, the oral history interviewing involved remembering, with a flow of feeling coagulated into language, and slow, sympathetic listening, in an intimate space.

Less traumatic yet equally affective, when oral history engages both old and new media, in movies, documentaries, and other media forms, it becomes an embodied, multisensory experience. For example, the oral history of the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake (東日本大震災)[33] recorded the experience and memories of survivors, eyewitnesses, among a wider public who have been personally impacted by the disaster, and presented these memories in a variety of audio-

28 Patricia Pui Huen Lim, "The Reconstruction of Life Histories," in *Oral History in Southeast Asia: Theory and Method*, eds. Patricia Pui Huen Lim et al. (Singapore: National Archives of Singapore and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998), 116–39.

29 Tatsuichi Horikiri and Rieko Wagoner. *The Stories Clothes Tell: Voices of Working-Class Japan.* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

30 Brian Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect," *Cultural Critique* 31, no. 31 (1995): 83–109.

31 Anderson, *Encountering Affect*, 105–35.

32 山崎朋子,《 サンダカン八番娼館-底辺女性史序章》(東京: 文藝春秋, 1972 年). Tomoko Yamazaki and Karen F. Colligan-Taylor, *Sandakan Brothel No. 8: A Journey into the History of Lower Class Japanese Women* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

33 The Great East Japan Earthquake (東日本大震災) took place on March 11, 2011. It was one of the most powerful earthquakes in Japan, and the subsequent tsunami caused the Fukushima nuclear disaster which affected thousands of residents.

visual formats.[34] Namie Town Story Telling Team, a grassroots organization, collected oral histories from eyewitnesses of these disasters, blended with the local folklores and comic books to continue the local memories, or biographical continuities.[35]

The affective nature of oral history finds the most vivid expressions in the theater, when oral history is performed. A community oral history theater project, *A Tale of Two Cities*, invited original residents of the Zhong Huan district on the Hong Kong Island to reenact their pasts and memories. The writers and actors crafted their performance based on the oral histories of the original residents; *A Tale of Two Cities* explored the traditional skills and crafts of the townspeople, the meaning of many of the urban landscapes in that district, family stories, and the joys and sorrows of everyday life in Zhong Huan. The performative, linguistic, and verbal arts aspects of oral history cannot be reproduced in mass media; the mediated orality produces an embodied knowing, which is precarious, contingent, sensuous, felt.

Similarly, in South Asia, the departure of the British from the region, and the Bengal partition in 1947, the region of West Bengal in India and East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh) became a contested space of riots, mass migration, and fluid memories. When the Partition Museum was established in 2023, the exhibit features oral history narratives of Partition survivors in each of the six galleries. In such a space, "affective listening," using cognitive power to interpret the narrator's emotions, becomes critical.[36]

5 Memory

Oral history shapes public memories. It reveals the tension between the official and the vernacular and brings that tension to the public space. It also introduces a sensory and tactile dimension to the process of collective remembering. Here we enter a complex structure of public feelings, traversing the nuanced boundary between history and memory, when history is melted into memory. Oral history has been widely used in heritage site interpretations to shape public memories. In India, a recent project designed and carried out by the Srishti School of Art, Design, and Technology's Centre for Public History, attempted to map legends and historical events onto the contemporary heritage site of the Bangalore Fort for the city of Bangalore and the history of the state of Mysore. The project sought to restore human voices to the site through oral history interviews with the residents who lived near the fort, with a focus on the different ways that local history intermingled with circulated legends. The Tipu, a critical historical figure, was still perceived as a hero, or was he generally forgotten, invoked only by politicians and special-interest groups? The project deployed three modes of orality: a guided walk by students, an audiovisual shadow puppetry show inside the fort, and an audio-scape of oral history interviews with some of the local residents played at the guard room of the fort.[37] Each mode attracted a particular kind of audience, yet collectively the oral histories of the residents revealed the fort as part of a larger landscape of shared stories.[38]

In the urban space, Shanghai Audio Visual Archives (referred to as SAVA) try to preserve and present urban memories–stories from those who have lived in many of China's major cities as those cities evolved. As part of the Shanghai Media Group, SAVA is the first professional institution to implement a central management of radio and television program files in China, and it houses all the radio and television program files of the Shanghai Media Group dating from 1949. With a strong focus on preserving urban history, SAVA has collected approximately 100,000 pieces of news and documentary footage about Shanghai since 1898. A recent project, *Shanghai Story and Memory*, draws from some oral history archives and presents a narrative history of Shanghai.

Oral histories are increasingly incorporated in museum exhibits, like in the oral histories used in the *Singapore Story* exhibit at the National Museum of Singapore. In Singapore, public oral history takes on two forms: the oral history of the historically marginalized public and making oral history available in the public space. Regarding the former, the Centre for Oral History has expanded the scope of interview themes into the socially, racially, or historically marginalized groups, and tried to go *below*. There is a major difference between oral history initiated from below, and the top

34 佐藤知久, "映像のオラリティ、映像のリテラシー——オーラル・ヒストリーと映像メディア," 《日本オーラル・ヒストリー研究》 第16号(2020年)11–15. (Sato Tomohisa, "Orality and Literacy of Moving Image: Oral History and Possibilities of Visual Media," *Japan Oral History Studies* 16 (2020): 11–15).

35 深谷直弘, "地域の歴史文化," 《日本オーラル・ヒストリー研究》 第 18 号(2022 年)97–114. Fukaya Naohiro, "Biographical Continuity and Handing down Memories of Fukushima Disaster," *Japan Oral History Studies 18* (2022): 97–114.

36 Sumallya Mukhopadhyay, "Affective Listening and the Digital Oral History Archive: A Case Study Based on the 1947 Bengal Partition," *The Oral History Review* 52, no. 1 (2025): 22–42.

37 An audio-scape is a curated, technologically driven sonic environment, unlike a soundscape which captures all sounds in a specific environment.

38 Indira Chowdhury, "Looking the Tiger in the Eye," in *A Companion to Public History*, ed. David Dean (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2018), 147–162, 153–54, 160.

goes to the bottom. While the bottom-up impulses have always existed, they often lack sufficient resources to be carried through or sustained. For the latter, the issue of relevance surfaces: how well can the top-down effort connect the bottom-up stories, aspirations, and memories? The appearance of oral history in the public space is complex, because in Singapore, public spaces are managed in a distinctive Singaporean manner, where the state plays an authoritative yet often invisible role.

Unlike the bottom-up social sentiment in oral history elsewhere, oral history in Singapore originates from the top, sanctioned and supported by the State. Examining the origin of the Centre for Oral History sheds some light on this dynamic. In 1978, Defense Minister Dr. Goh Keng Swee initiated a national oral history program under the National Archives and Records Centre in Singapore. He invited David Lance, an oral historian with the Imperial War Museum in London, to train the first generation of oral historians in Singapore. Lance took an archival approach to oral history, based on an overarching research outline about the historical event or issue, which was "to ensure some degree of thematic similarity among the interviews and thereby enable users of the interviews to draw comparisons about differences and similarities in the social memories of the interviewees."[39] Lance also recommended an infrastructure to index, transcribe, and store the tapes of the interviews. The Oral History Unit was set up by the Ministry of Culture and became operational in 1979. In the last 40 years, the Centre for Oral History, now part of the National Archives of Singapore, has evolved with political ethos and technological innovations, and become one of the best-preserved institutional memories in the region.

Unsurprisingly, the early projects included "Pioneers of Singapore," "Political Development of Singapore, 1945–1965," and "The Japanese Occupation," all of which focused on the elite political history, especially that of the governing People's Action Party (referred to as PAP). Collectively, these projects reinforced a state-sanctioned version of Singapore history, highlighting the achievements and successes of a select group of elites who guided the nation from a developing country to a first-world economy. When Kwa Chong Guan asked whether "our oral history interviews inadvertently contributed to the construction of a national history that privileged the PAP voices to the exclusion of other voices or incorporating them with the PAP dominated narrative,"[40] the questioning seems rhetorical.

The oral histories incorporated in the *Singapore Stories* exhibit come from the collection of the Centre for Oral History and are mostly used to illustrate the textual interpretations of the nation-building stories. Using the oral histories from the Centre to shape collective memory is not novel. The National Exhibition, *25 Years of Nation-Building?, 1959–1984*, exuded the celebratory tone of the exhibit, and reinforced the official version of Singapore Story, "a triumphal narrative of deliverance from political, economic, and social despair, through the ruling regime's scientific approaches to solving the problems faced by a developing and industrializing nation."[41] The 1984 exhibit, marking the first public presentation of the national past, focused on the role of PAP in nation-building, and the oral histories selected for this exhibit visibly supported that purpose.

Forty years later, the renovated exhibit, the *Singapore Stories*, draws on an expanded oral history archive and tells a similar national story in a more nuanced way. Patriotic as it stands, the national stories are shared with, rather than imposed on, the visitors. However, the oral history installations are spatially marginalized in all the exhibit halls expect when visitors reach the story of an independent Singapore, where the voice of former Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew's fills the entire space from the background. The remaining oral history installations, lacking pause or playback functions, serve as secondary support for what is already expressed through textual panels (Figures 1 and 2). The selected oral history clips echo the public sentiments, while leaving out other voices. For instance, participants in the first National Day Parade in 1966 expressed their passion and nostalgia for the nation, articulating their pride in having been part of that historical moment, often moved to tears and filled with emotion (Figure 3). In this context, the combination of authoritative governance and honest bureaucracy appears to be a relative blessing for ordinary Singaporeans. In another hall exhibiting the history of a public housing project by the Housing Development Board (referred to as HDB), the oral histories are selective. The narrators express how excited and grateful they are for moving from traditional kampong villages into the new HDB housing. However, others talked about how such sweeping economic uplifting actually disrupted traditional lifestyles and marginalized certain social groups, pushing them to the urban periphery.[42]

39 Kwa Chong Guan, "Desultory Reflections on the Oral History Center at 25," Oral History Center, Internal Publication, November 14, 2004.

40 Kwa, "Desultory Reflections on the Oral History Center at 25," 5.

41 Ernest Koh, *Singapore Stories: Language, Class, and the Chinese of Singapore*, 1945–2000 (Amherst, N.Y: Cambria Press, 2010), 2.

42 See Loh Kah Seng, "Kampong, Fire, Nation: Towards a Social History of Postwar Singapore," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 40, no. 3 (2009): 613–43. Loh Kah Seng, "History, Memory, and Identity in Modern

Figure 1: Singapore 1945-present, Singapore history gallery at the National Museum of Singapore. Credit: Na Li October 1, 2024.

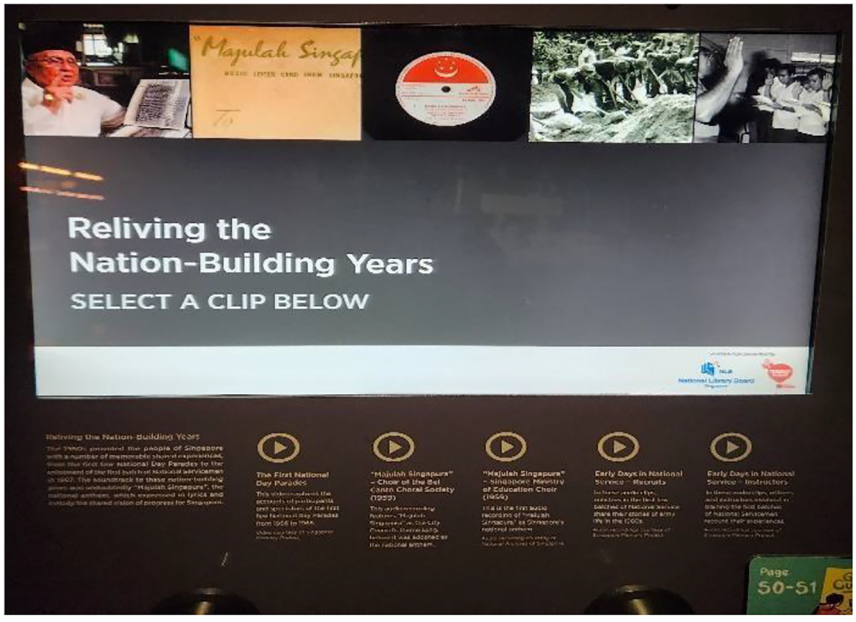

Figure 2: The oral history panels installed in the Singapore history gallery. Credit: Na Li, October 1, 2024.

Unlike its counterparts in Asia, the oral history in Singapore has followed a standard process of interview, conducted by professionally trained interviewers, properly curated to the best technologies available at the time. Approximately half of the collections have been transcribed, and over 80 percent are accessible to the public. However, simply making these oral history collections available does not ensure a meaningful public presence capable of shaping collective memories. As Lysa Hong rightly observed, history from below does not automatically come about when ordinary people's voices are taped.[43]

Singapore: Testimonies from the Urban Margin," *The Oral History Review* 36, no. 1 (2009): 1–24.

43 Lysa Hong, "Ideology and Oral History Institutions in Southeast Asia," in *Oral History in Southeast Asia: Theory and Method*, eds. Patricia Pui Huen Lim et al. (Singapore: National Archives of Singapore and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998), 33–43, 37.

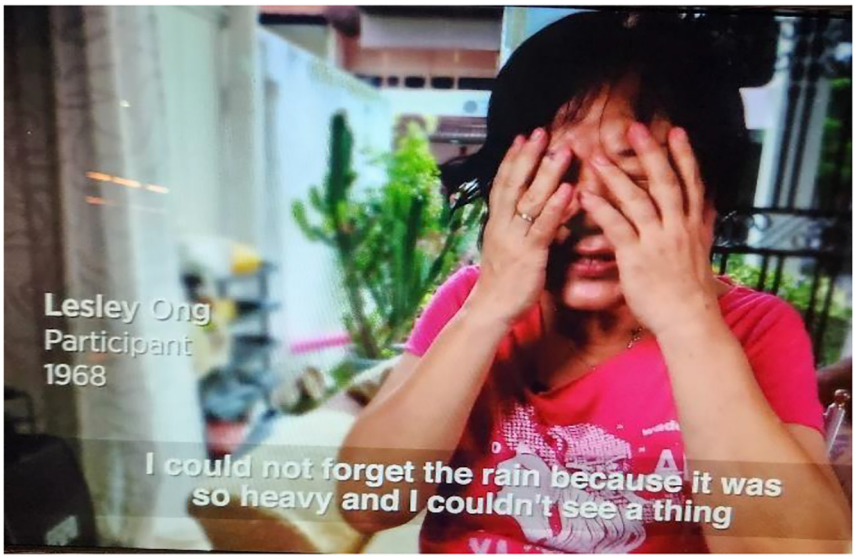

Figure 3: Reminiscing the experience of participating the national day parade, oral history panel. Credit: Na Li, October 1, 2024.

Another example is the *Urban Landscape and Memory* Project, in which I collaborated with the Chongqing Three Gorges Museum. The project adopted oral history interviewing to understand emotional behavioral clues from the visitors, especially the residents of Chongqing, in order to incorporate multiple voices into the exhibit redesign of the *Journey towards a City*.[44] The exhibit presents a panoramic view of how Chongqing evolved from a small town into a vibrant municipality in China. As the capital of the Kingdom of Ba (circa 1100–316 BCE) during the Zhou Dynasty, Chongqing became a regional political and military center after 316 BCE when the Qin Kingdom replaced the Ba. Centuries later, in 1890, the city took a new direction after China and Britain signed the Amendment to Yantai Treaty in Beijing, under which Chongqing became a bustling trading port along the Yangtze River. It was not until 1929 that Chongqing officially obtained "city" status. In 1937, during the war with Japan, the capital Nanjing fell and became the seat of the collaborationist government. In 1939, under the political contingency, Chongqing was designated as a municipality, and in 1940, the nationalist capital. The war capital quickly became home to approximately four hundred factories and one million immigrants. The best technology, industry, human talent, and political capital rapidly accumulated in the city, bringing energy and prosperity. The upgrade of the city to national status also influenced its urban structure and planning. The municipal government busied itself building roads, ports, and factories and redesigning the city into a tripartite pattern with the old core, the rivers, and the riverbank remaining intact. On November 30, 1949, the new Communist government took over Chongqing.

The broad strokes of the city's history are similar to that of other urban areas in China. Unlike many other cities, however, Chongqing does not boast about its ancientness; instead, it embraces modernity. The gaudy cylinder-block high-rises in downtown and the equally garish streetscapes against the skyline the color of unpolished pewter, all seem tastelessly bland. Even after its elevation to municipality status in 1997, the city struggled to shed its parochial identity. The city's history as wartime capital continues to shape urban landscapes and local identity. The State Council and the Central Committee have peddled Red Tourism as part of national patriotic education,[45] and the creation of the Red Crag Circuit, which connects two major museums, the Red Crag Revolutionary Memorial Hall cluster and the Gele Mountain cluster, among other scattered revolutionary sites in and near Chongqing, is part of this initiative. The interpretative labels at these sites, riddled with inaccuracies, false memories, and self-serving distortions, are all intended to evoke nostalgia for the revolutionary era.

Journey towards a City aimed to interpret and present the city's tumultuous history, urban landscape, and revolution-era identity within a structured public space. However, it faced two significant challenges. The first was the choice to primarily adopt a thematic structure, which obscured the chronology of events. Professionals within the Three Gorges Museum frequently criticized the exhibit for lacking a clearly defined chronological framework,

44 Na Li, "Museums and the Public: Visions for Museums in China," *The Public Historian* 42, no. 1 (2020): 29–53.

45 Red tourism refers to tourism associated with China's Communist Revolution and the establishment of the Chinese Communist Party.

describing it as "too scattered without a chronological order to tie the pieces together."[46]

In the past two decades, frenzied construction has dramatically reshaped the city, altering original street patterns and people's way of life. Traditional houses, perched on elevated topography, have long given the city a unique look, and locals believed that they should be preserved. At least some narrators reminisced with fondness about the past look of the city:

> The seemingly untidy streetscape, well-spaced buildings, and sun-flooded flora, gave us a pleasant space to reminisce. The real change started in 2004. Then-mayor of Chongqing, a visionary politician, took care of urban infrastructure, construction went well with historic preservation. You could feel, smell, and witness the change (of the urban landscape) even from ordinary landscapes such a sycamore-coned street. Old times.[47]

The political constraints over the publicness of the voices are easily felt, but the narratives that we collected from the field reveal that the act of remembering is a co-creative process: in remembering the experience with the city, the public reconnects with history. The curators integrated a few carefully selected oral histories in the exhibit to re-create a space for the public to share their memories. Unlike Singapore, the oral histories incorporated in this case emerged from the public remembering. They were intended for the exhibit, not for archival purposes, which allowed elements of contingency, spontaneity, and affect to resonate more powerfully.

6 Potentials and Opportunities

Beneath and beyond the insurgent voices lies an emergent archival impulse. Oral history has subtly yet actively shaped public memories in Asia, evolving into an alternative path into the pasts. Engaging with living memories, oral history exists in the ephemerality and immediacy, that cannot be reproduced in mass media. In many ways, oral history is anti-historical, because of its non-linearity; it is also anti-archival, because it is at a perpetual vanishing point. Here are some of the potentials and opportunities that can guide our efforts to further explorations.

First, the archival impulse should extend the biographical into historical and social contexts. Across Asia, the memories of ordinary people have been recorded and curated in archives. For these individual oral histories to realize their full potential as sources of historical interpretation, they must be aggregated to provide a social interpretation rather than remain at the level of biography. In most cases, documentary and oral evidence are more frequently complementary than contradictory. The oral history of a particular public requires interview questions to be designed within a certain social-historical framework to better capture the emotional truth and the psychological world of a certain social group, and oral history interviewing flows with their cultural assumptions. Oral history acquires cultural shapes in the interviewing process, as Trevor Lummis suggested, "properly historical; people are not only stratified by class or separated by gender, but within those categories are laminated by cohort experience…when the social-economic structures have a different bearing upon them."[48]

Second, a sufficient number of oral histories needs to be collected as representative samples of a particular public to detect patterns and structures for historical analysis. A critical aspect of aggregating oral history interview data is that they reflect a decision to take account of all the evidence available, even those cases which are contrary to one's thesis.[49] For the current landscape of oral history in Asia, the projects emphasize selected quotes from long interviews, interspersed with the authors' preconceived interpretations, most of which stem from their original research design. The assumption is that one has already listened the unabridged interviews and understood them so thoroughly that the authenticity of oral history as a source of evidence has been out of the question, without coding or any structural analysis.

Unfortunately, the assumption is misleading and often erroneous, as it conflates two fundamentally different uses of oral history: employing it merely as an illustration versus utilizing it to construct a robust historical argument. Going public, some oral histories are used for 'cosmetic' purposes, adding embellishments to capture public attention; others are published raw, lacking any analytical framework to assess their interpretative significance or determine whether the selected narratives are genuinely representative.

Third, the potential for transmedia storytelling remains largely untapped. With the convergence of media technologies, oral history has entered an era of big data, defined as data sets whose size is beyond the ability of commonly used software tools to capture, manage, and process within a reasonable timeframe.[50] The oral and the visual data,

46 Comments from the curators at the Museum.

47 Interview with visitor B at the *Journey towards a City* exhibition hall, transcript.

48 Trevor Lummis, *Listening to History: The Authenticity of Oral Evidence* (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble Books, 1988), 93.

49 Lummis, *Listening to History*, 106.

50 Lev Manovich, "Trending: The Promises and the Challenges of Big Social Data," in *Debates in the Digital Humanities* 2, no. 1 (2011): 460–75.

created on a massive scale, provide new space for transmedia storytelling and possibilities for a more complex understanding of the past. Oral historians are producing big data that requires a different method of analysis, distinguishing between "surface data," which encompasses information about large populations, and "deep data," which focuses on a few individuals or small groups. The emergence of new computational tools capable of processing vast amounts of data enables a fundamentally innovative approach to the study of human beings and society. Thus, we no longer have to choose between data size and data depth.

For a long time, transcripts have served as the default medium of choice for oral history research and dissemination, even when interview recordings are available. Transcripts may be easy to copy and distribute, but the meaning is lost when voices are reduced to words on paper. Alesandro Portelli showed that oral history recordings capture not just memories of historical content (what happened in the past) but also emotive personal perspectives on the impact and interpretation of historical experiences (what does the past mean and how do people feel about it), "the tone and volume range and the rhythm of popular speech carry implicit meaning and social connotations which are not reproducible in writing."[51] Nevertheless, many oral history recordings still sit unused in library archives and their value to historians and the general public is not fully appreciated. While big oral history data poses curatorial challenges, it also provides opportunities for transmedia storytelling in a transnational public sphere.

7 Concluding Thoughts

Despite the transient and quantitative nature of big oral history data, the long form of oral history still matters.[52] Orality, affect, and memory do not come easy or naturally; they come with carefully crafted questions, a slow and attentive listening, an intimate relationship-building, and, ultimately, a professionally prompted recalling and remembering.

Public oral history in Asia is emergent and complex. It is emergent because of the generative potential of oral history and complex because it challenges a linear way of documenting and interpreting history. This complexity calls for an effective intervention of oral and public historians in two key areas. First, there is an urgent need for a better structure of interviewing, emphasizing a flow of remembering process, while also being attuned to what Henry Greenspan referred to as "the unsaid, the incommunicable, the unbearable, and the irretrievable."[53] Interviewers need to actively focus on the cultural messages, the thread a series of verbal and non-verbal signals during interviewing, as well as in the subsequent interpretation. Second, the long-term relevance and significance of oral histories require a curatorial role that becomes increasingly critical, particularly when we seek to understand the various forces that shape the oral history collections and select the narratives to present in the public.

51 Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in *The Oral History Reader*, eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (Routledge: London and New York, 2016), 48–50, 50.

52 Stephen M. Sloan, "Swimming in the Exaflood: Oral History as Information in the Digital Age," in *Oral History and Digital Humanities*, eds. Douglas A. Boyd and Mary A. Larson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2014), 179–84.

53 Henry Greenspan, "The Unsaid, the Incommunicable, the Unbearable, and the Irretrievable," *The Oral History Review* 41, no. 2 (2014): 229–43.