

Research on the Application of Oral History in Anthropological Films

Tang Jinju

Language Communication, University Pendidikan Sultan Idris, For Tanjong Malim, Perak,
C035900, Malaysia

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Abstract

Oral history combines interdisciplinary methods such as sociology and psychology to study the formation process of people's historical consciousness, and provides a "new" research method for historical science. Objectivity is the first feature of oral history, while detail, consciousness and emotion are the second. Its main function is to confirm and reproduce history, not to explain it. Since the beginning of the anthropological film "Nanuk of the North", oral history has been gradually transferred to anthropological films. For example: "God Deer, God Deer", "Life and Death Line", "Testimony" and other films, are in the form of personal oral history to recall history with everyone. This film focuses on the analysis of oral history in the anthropological film - Three Sections of grass.

Keywords: Oral History, Anthropological Film, "Three Segments of Grass"

Oral History

Origin of Oral History

Oral history was originally an independent historical methodology, born in the 1930s and 1940s in the United States, and widely applied in Western countries in the 1960s and 1970s. Initially, oral history stayed at the stage of historiography, aimed at confirming the existence of historical figures and events, and developed through constant struggles with documentary history. Later, historians began to regard oral history as a method of historical research, integrating interdisciplinary methods such as sociology and psychology to study the formation process of folk historical consciousness.

Oral history provides a "new" research method for historical science. Although this method did not originate today, its functionality and pattern were perfected in the latter half of the twentieth century. The widespread application of modern audiovisual and computer technologies has added new vitality to traditional historical research. Three technological revolutions occurred within oral history in the latter half of the twentieth century: the "tape revolution" in the 1950s, the "audiovisual revolution" in the 1970s, and the "computer revolution" in the 1980s. The methodological breakthroughs caused by the first technological

revolution were unexpected. In particular, the advent of television documentaries brought this historical method directly to the general public.

It is noteworthy that the concept of oral history emerged almost simultaneously with postmodernist thought. Historians value the transition from simple representation to the reconstruction of folk historical consciousness, which aligns with the postmodern emphasis on the folk. In the Western academic world, oral history is the product of the dual influence of "total history" and "new social history," sharing many commonalities on significant issues. Oral history focuses on both group and elite studies while turning more attention to the folk. From a historical perspective, the public is the subject of history, and approaching the public can truly represent history, which is the real purpose of oral history research. As the famous British oral historian Thompson said, the greatest significance of oral history is that "it gives us an opportunity to restore history to ordinary people's history, making history closely connected with reality."

Characteristics of Oral History

Objective narrativity is the most distinct characteristic of oral history and also the most active motivating factor in it. For a long time, the international historical community believed that anthropological research could only rely on documentary materials, and field research could only depend on notes and memories. Anthropologists had to strictly adhere to reading local historical materials and "could never hear them." Oral history research challenges these traditional views and old models. Investigating historical phenomena through verbal forms not only compensates for the inadequacies of documentary materials but also actively approaches and studies the subjects, as oral historians often emerge as "pioneers." This anthropological method clearly has advantages and strengths that other anthropological disciplines lack. Recording reality, not just concluding evaluations, and listening to the narrators' stories are achievements difficult for anthropological writings and film commentaries to reach.

Details, consciousness, and emotions are the second characteristics of oral history. One of the greatest challenges for oral historians in the new century has been the autobiographical mode of oral history. It is well known that the vivid and detailed personal memories are a major feature of oral history, but also a significant limitation.

Some historians have pointed out that although oral history may provide "valuable clues" to scholars, it generally contains "a lot of nonsense." Approximately only fifteen percent of oral history is considered reliable. Relying solely on personal memory to reconstruct the complete history is impossible, but its significance lies in the provision of historical evidence and details. Therefore, details, consciousness, and emotions are critical aspects that oral history needs to explore. To encourage narrators to reveal their true feelings as much as possible and to accurately grasp the values deeply embedded in the narrators' life experiences, contemporary Western oral historians have abandoned the principle of excluding all subjective consciousness and avoiding leaving personal marks. Instead, they advocate that historians should actively join the narrators, stand in their position, and converse with them. Only through conversation can historians feel the individuality and commonality between people, thereby enhancing the understanding between historians and narrators. This is the unique aspect of the oral history method. As for the use of technical means, contemporary oral historians agree that audiovisual technology has promoted the development of oral history,

but it is not the only condition for the development of oral history. In fact, some accomplished oral historians do not rely on recording or video equipment to improve their narrative skills.

The historical events narrated by people in oral memories seem to be just a "re-enactment of past events," reflecting the emotions or desires of the narrators, which can to some extent reflect people's emotions at the time and, to a greater or lesser extent, reflect people's attitudes towards real society and dreams for the future society. In other words, the image established by the narrator in the oral memory can reveal potential events, as history is the precursor to reality, and reality is an extension of history, while the narrator themselves is both a part of history and reality. The more distant the oral memory is from historical facts, the more it contains the narrator's current attitudes.

Research feature of Oral History

Fundamentally, the main purpose of oral research is to confirm and reproduce history, not to explain it. Historical research is far from sufficient relying only on written materials and physical artifacts; it must also have ample oral historical materials for corroboration. The individuals being interviewed are often direct participants in major historical events, and their narrations of historical facts have a certain degree of authenticity. For a long time, the vast majority of historians have focused on documentary materials, but the emergence of oral history has broken this old pattern, challenging the traditional historical concepts of thousands of years. Although documentary materials and physical artifacts are important, history, especially significant historical events, cannot be truly reflected without oral historical materials.

Throughout history, both domestically and internationally, written materials documenting the ordinary life experiences of people are rare. Western oral historians believe that the personal life experiences of various groups can be used as primary historical materials, bringing a new dimension to history. The history of the lower classes forms the main part of history, hence, the disregard of ordinary people in historical research can no longer meet current needs. Undoubtedly, the emergence and subsequent development of oral history heralded the end of the "heroic creation of history" era and also signified the arrival of a new era.

With the objective of reconstructing public historical consciousness, contemporary Western oral historians, besides verifying the consistency of different narrators in reflecting the same historical event, also examine the representative range of social and historical views expressed by the narrators in their oral accounts. The reliability of oral historical materials depends on whether the narrators' interpretations and analyses of historical events can represent, especially the cultural attitudes and social historical views of the majority of members in the social groups formed by friends or relatives connected by blood and politics. The wider the representational range of the oral historical materials, the higher their reliability, because the trend of historical development is often closely linked to the emotions, desires, interests, and mentalities shared by the majority of the population in social groups.

Integration of Oral History Research Methods and Anthropological Film

In 1895, Félix Louis Regnault shot a film about the Wolof women making pottery, making ethnographic films an important tool for anthropologists. The real beginning of

anthropological film came with Flaherty's "Nanook of the North," followed by a succession of anthropological films.

Italian scholar Paolo Chiozzi, in his article "The Function and Strategy of Ethnographic Film," analyzed and summarized numerous ethnographic films, dividing anthropological films into three categories: the first category consists of anthropological films that serve as a means to preserve cultures that are disappearing; the second category includes anthropological films as communication tools, "these films not only allow research findings to be disseminated but also enable people to understand different ways of life, thus significantly influencing their worldview." Such films were not initially intended for anthropological research but were created by authors interested in a group, believing it meaningful to record their lives for more people to recognize and understand them. They adopted a non-intrusive "fly on the wall" filming technique to faithfully record their lives, making these films somewhat enjoyable to watch, like Flaherty's "Nanook of the North," a typical example of this type. The third category consists of ethnographic films for anthropological research. Chiozzi's classification effectively illustrates the different concepts of anthropological film creation in different periods, with the first and third categories of ethnographic films sharing the same concept: documenting and preserving cultures that are disappearing or have already disappeared. However, such anthropological films shot by anthropologists are often limited to their scientific research and then shelved. At the beginning of anthropological cinema, anthropologists and documentary filmmakers, due to their professional characteristics, exhibited different features in creating anthropological films. The differences between Regnault and Flaherty are evident. It's not a matter of comparing which is better or worse, but both can learn from each other, applying various film techniques to ethnographic films based on anthropological principles.

In the 20th century, with the widespread application of oral history in anthropological documentaries and the strengthening of the awareness of rescuing historical cultural witnesses, the means of image narration underwent profound changes. People began to listen to the real narratives of the parties involved on the silver screen. This includes Wu Wenguang's "My 1966," recalling the Cultural Revolution, Sun Zengtian's "God Deer, God Deer", "Life and Death Line", "Testimony" which focuses on Nazi concentration camps, as well as "Witnesses," reflecting the Jewish Holocaust in the first half of the 20th century, all of which are examples of oral history.

"The Last Days," which won the Oscar for Best Documentary in 1997, is also considered an oral anthropological film. The film organizes the entire story through the oral narratives of five Hungarian Jews about their experiences in concentration camps, starting from their childhood in their hometowns to being sent to the camps. In the narration, the personal destinies of the individuals gradually unfold. The neutral historical images, cross-edited with the oral narratives, seem to have been filmed specifically for them. Lanzmann, while shooting "Testimony," although he could find a lot of live footage about the Jewish Holocaust in the first half of the 20th century, chose not to use it, preferring to use the interview method, allowing the "history to be re-enacted" through the oral narratives of the parties involved. There are many documentaries about the Jewish Holocaust, most of which use film materials discovered after the war—layers of dried corpses, heaps of skulls, bones, hair, glasses, etc. However, Lanzmann did not use these images. As documentary film scholar Dan Wanli explained, "In 'Testimony,' past events are 'reborn' through the intermittent narratives of the interviewees, sometimes accompanied by silent footage of trains passing through forests or villages, distant green scenery sweeping by, and the train reaching its final destination,

walking from the train station to the place of execution, the empty gas chambers... Some scenes convey a particularly terrifying atmosphere." Lanzmann, during the filming of "Testimony," interviewed mostly ordinary people like the barber, because they believed that these ordinary people had played a role, more or less, in facilitating the genocidal actions. After a decade of research, Lanzmann found many such ordinary people and brought them in front of the camera and microphone. "These people include: officials from the railway transportation department, who were responsible for planning the train schedules, adjusting the trains carrying livestock, and then using these trains to transport thousands of victims from many cities and villages to gas chambers in Poland and other places; train drivers and mechanics, who knew what they were transporting at the time; station masters who herded the victims into livestock cars and unhesitatingly closed the doors; railway employees who witnessed everything but remained silent; guards who categorized and executed the killings in the extermination centers; barbers who cut the victims' hair before they entered the gas chambers. Lanzmann found them and persuaded them to speak out. For decades, these people had remained silent, and now Lanzmann told them that they must tell the world what they did at the time, how they did it, and why they did it. Lanzmann also told them that this was 'necessary for history' and also for their peace of mind."

Oral anthropological films record the lives and thoughts of those who are unspoken or considered social outcasts. The compilers of oral history can be community workers, local chronicle editors, anthropologists, or freelancers. The content of oral narratives can intersect with significant national historical events or have no direct connection. Oral narratives can reflect the complexity of major historical events and aspects that traditional history overlooks, stimulating people's thoughts.

For the basic practical life, conscience, and emotional thoughts of ordinary people contained in oral materials, an important task for historians is to unearth and objectively reproduce them. In this respect, the development of technology, the popularization of digital cameras, and their continuously improving performance are regarded as important material conditions for the emergence of oral history. The existence and application of digital cameras, more so than before, accurately record the entire content of interviews, making them valuable first-hand materials for both the interviewer and other researchers. Additionally, as new media that became popular in the 20th century, tape recorders, photographic cameras, and video cameras are different from text media and serve as new historical recording methods that affect people's audio-visual and cognitive processes. These new media, born in the 20th century, can be used in combination, making anthropological research methods richer and more comprehensive, and providing future generations with more vivid and specific anthropological investigation materials.

Relatively speaking, oral anthropological films have changed traditional academic methods. The role of anthropologists has changed from merely observing and writing field notes to becoming interviewers, sharing experiences in interpersonal communication. Subjectively, anthropologists need to actively exert their thinking ability, continuously improving their research level and interviewing skills. Objectively, anthropologists should strive to reduce their preconceived judgments and biases, and fully motivate the narrators to recall actively. Specifically, anthropologists should have meticulous designs and plans for each specific oral

history project, such as employing quantitative sociological methods, while also leaving room to avoid directly generalizing a social group with a theory. It is important to first understand how this cultural group expresses its interests and ideals, and how their value and behavioral patterns are. At the same time, anthropologists need to continuously improve their interviewing skills, thereby reducing biases, including spending time studying and understanding the characteristics of human memory, treating oral materials seriously, improving oral history analysis skills, communicating well with historical witnesses, and respecting the wishes of the interviewees, such as not using their real names.

Dialogue and memory issues naturally relate to the cultural issues between the interviewer and the narrator. In other words, the historian themselves are constrained by a specific cultural background, and the interviewed group also has a cultural background. The historical interpretation of oral history includes the cultural interpretation of the formation of texts. This interpretation process is part of the historical construction process. To do a good job in historical construction, interviewers must be good at overcoming the limitations of their own culture, combining the cultural issues that arise during interviews with other documented materials for analysis. Interviewers should not easily negate some seemingly unimportant oral content with a prejudiced view. Sometimes, what one party considers ignorant or irrational statements, supported by public opinion or other literature, may not be the case after an interview. When the interviewer hears the private statements of the other party and sees the letters written by the parties to the legislators, a new logic and rationality can be obtained through comparison. Importantly, oral evidence is as important as documentary evidence, and obtaining oral evidence makes people more aware of the limitations of all evidence.

Memory issues, preconceived notions, the special intentions of the speakers, and other factors appearing in interviews all affect the final form of oral history. DeHart summarized in history that "as historians, we must collect as much evidence as possible, treat documentary and oral materials equally, and compare and verify them. When we weave these scattered and fragmented pieces of evidence into a unified, coherent, and profound history, the experience of being an oral historian will make people more aware of the significance of their actions in historical construction." The author believes that this insightful summary of oral history also applies to the filming of oral anthropological films.

Analysis of Oral Anthropological Films

The anthropological film "Three Segments of Grass," also known as "The Last Wife of the Tusi," is a representative oral anthropological film, depicting the last matrilineal society on the shores of Lugu Lake, where the main character Xiao Shuming was the wife of a Tusi. This background itself is of great historical value. Xiao Shuming experienced over half a century of social changes on the shores of Lugu Lake, involving the Kuomintang, the Communist Party, and ethnic conflicts, which became the modern history of China behind Xiao Shuming's personal fate, showing one side of the entire ethnic history of China. Although "Three Segments of Grass" does not record mainstream macro history, it reflects historical changes in a way that uses the particular to represent the general, having high historical documentary value. In addition, the film's recording of real-life, depiction of exotic landscapes, description of the local population's living conditions, and tracking of ethnic and intangible cultures provide valuable real-life documentation.

First, the author briefly explains the film. Liang Bibuo's "Three Segments of Grass," filmed in 1998, won the Special Prize at the 20th French International Documentary Film Festival, was shortlisted for the 98 Amsterdam International Documentary Film Festival, the 98 Estonia International Film Festival, and the 40th Italian Florence Popoli Film Festival, and received the 4th China Documentary Academic Award and the 7th China Television Golden Horse Award. The film tells the story of a cultured Han woman from Chengdu who married a local Tusi by the Lugu Lake 54 years ago. The elderly woman, named Xiao Shuming, whose father was a Kuomintang official, had her fate arranged to marry La Baocheng, a Tusi, at the age of 16, and thus had to silently stay by Lugu Lake. At the same time, the old woman's granddaughter, La Lazhu, a girl who did not finish junior high school, had a chance to visit Chengdu today. The prosperous city made her linger and forget to return, so she begged her grandmother (Xiao Shuming) to take her to the city. The elderly woman, for the sake of her children's future, resolutely decided to use any possible means to send Lazhu to Chengdu. The film has two storylines: one is the legendary life of 70-year-old Xiao Shuming by Lugu Lake; the other is Xiao Shuming's fulfillment of her lifelong wish, actively facilitating her granddaughter La Lazhu's return to her hometown of Chengdu. These two storylines intertwine, forming the causal concept of the film. "Three Segments of Grass" features the elderly Xiao Shuming narrating her rich life story, interspersed with her and her family's current living conditions. From the rapidly developing modern human society to the last remaining matrilineal society, from legendary stories to exotic customs, from mysterious rituals to simple life... the film contains many different types of valuable content, making it a typical example for discussing the application of oral methods in anthropology and the value of anthropological films themselves.

The "Chinese modern history" in "Three Segments of Grass," specific to the living environment, is narrated by the elderly Xiao Shuming. This oral historical recording method stems from the field research method of historical studies—oral history. Oral history itself is mostly the narration of folk parties and witnesses, and it is precious because "the more private, local, and unofficial the documents are, the harder they are to survive." Therefore, for historical research, it is even more precious and authentic. Oral history on the one hand reproduces many little-known events, and on the other hand, due to this folk perspective of oral narration, greatly advances the mutual understanding and cognition between historical images and viewers. Anthropological documentaries often use this method to record history, leaving behind many unofficial image documents. In "Three Segments of Grass," through Xiao Shuming's narration of her memories of the Chengdu era, the old woman's experience of half a century of history is shown. Here, the narrative subject of the oral image is "I," and the party narrates their past and present from the perspective of "I." In front of the narrator "I," the camera and the viewer are the "listening" "you," positioned as observers. Through the camera's objective attention, the family life and historical changes and impacts are realistically restored and described, such as Xiao Shuming's life before and after the liberation: before the liberation, Xiao Shuming's identity was the Tusi's wife, with slaves and maids serving her; after the peaceful negotiation and liberation, because La Baocheng became a local government leader, Xiao Shuming became a cadre's wife; and after La Baocheng's death, Xiao Shuming became an ordinary farmer in the Anu community of Duosha Village by Lugu Lake. Her three identity changes indirectly reflect historical changes. Therefore, the cultural relics and customs recorded in the anthropological documentary "Three Segments of Grass," such as production tools, residences, folk religious beliefs, marital

customs, folk literature and arts, etc., can provide valuable image documentation for the research of agricultural history, religious history, marital history, art history, and other specialized histories.

In the film, a large number of monologues by Xiao Shuming facing the camera are used to explain the background, and the old woman's narrative and corresponding actions and expressions are vividly represented by the camera. For example, when Mrs. Xiao talks about La Baocheng going out to "flip mules" (referring to casually cohabiting with other women) when she was young, although Xiao Shuming was very resentful of this, she still retained the virtuousness of a Han woman, guarding her own womanhood. The only thing she could not tolerate was La Baocheng bringing "wild women" home, otherwise "she would shoot her dead." The old woman's emotions were somewhat agitated, her tone was heavier, her facial expressions were angry, and she even made a gun gesture with her hands. These detailed pieces of information occur simultaneously, and such vivid expressions of emotions and atmosphere can only be stimulated and expressed through oral methods, and the camera can fully and accurately record them, thus ensuring the objective and complete recording of the on-site observation.

One part of the film depicts La Lazhu rowing a small wooden boat on the lake to salvage, and the voice-over of Mrs.

Xiao Shuming says that in the past, the grass sea was abundant with shrimp and water chestnuts, and women from every household went there to catch shrimp and pick water chestnuts. After catching the shrimp, they were sun-dried until red, crushed, and added to the soup for a delicious flavor, and the water chestnuts were also tasty, praised in the saying "Luosuo (Lugu Lake) is a good place, with water chestnut cakes and shrimp soup." However, in the camera's view of La Lazhu salvaging on the lake, none of what Mrs. Xiao mentioned is visible; no shrimp or water chestnuts were caught, only rotten water plants and dirt were salvaged. Mrs. Xiao also regretfully said, "Now there is nothing left." The environmental change in Lugu Lake has altered the local diet, making this beautiful experience a thing of the past. This editing method harmoniously integrates the footage with the old woman's narration, which can also be considered a feature of oral films. Similarly, when Mrs. Xiao Shuming narrates how she missed her family in Chengdu very much when she first arrived at Lugu Lake, she emotionally sings "On the Songhua River," "When will I be able to return to my beloved hometown, when will I be able to reclaim the endless treasures, father and mother, oh, father and mother, when can we all be together," returning to her old home in Chengdu was a distant dream in her mind when she was 16 years old and arrived at Lugu Lake. However, this strong sense of homesickness is vividly expressed in the footage. This spontaneous emotional outpouring can touch the audience's heart, which is the charm of oral anthropological films.

Finally, in "Three Segments of Grass," no narration is used, because when the footage not only serves as an example but also "speaks" like a person, narration becomes an unnecessary burden. Moreover, in the face of a large amount of evidence narrated by Mrs. Xiao Shuming, narration cannot accurately express everything. The film extensively uses Mrs. Xiao Shuming's monologue facing the camera to explain the background, and the vivid individuality of the language encompasses content far beyond the language itself.

Oral history became an independent method of historical research due to its objectivity and presence. The use of oral history aims at the objective corroboration and reenactment of history, rather than its interpretation. Anthropological filmmaking originally existed to provide evidential visual materials for anthropological research, thus its core requirements are objectivity, authenticity, and presence. Therefore, the oral history methodology and anthropological filmmaking fundamentally share these characteristics. From the very first anthropological film, "Nanook of the North," elements of oral history were evident, progressing through films like "The Witness," "My 1966," "Oh, Deer! Oh, Deer!" and "Three Straws." The oral history method has increasingly gained favor among directors of anthropological films. This narrative style breaks away from the self-scripted, self-narrated mode of creators, transferring the discourse power to the experiencers themselves, dispelling audience skepticism and allowing objectivity and vividness to coexist. It quickly immerses the audience into the authentic lives of the narrators, delving deep into their souls and resonating spiritually with viewers. The integration of oral history methods with anthropological filmmaking has propelled the genre into a new phase of development, creating a new category—oral anthropological filmmaking.

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