



Knowing, experiencing, and reporting: Social memory and participant roles in a Tibetan woman's oral history



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ABSTRACT

This article argues for attention to the formation of social memory in interactive contexts, by analyzing a Tibetan oral history interview. In the course of the interview, an English-speaking interviewer and a Tibetan-speaking interviewee communicate through a translator, the interviewee's daughter. By joining analyses of genre, participant roles, the use of the grammatical markings known as evidentiality, ergativity, and egophoricity in Tibetan, and their subsequent translation into English, I look to multiple structures shaping the interactive context. This analysis reveals a generational difference in participants' shaping of narrative, and tensions among participants in the effort to align remembered events with ideologies that construct interviewees as eyewitnesses to political history.

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1. Introduction

In formulating the relations between personal memory and collective history, Maurice Halbwachs defined a 'collective memory' that 'evolves according to its own laws, and any individual remembrances that may penetrate are transformed within a totality having no personal consciousness' (1980: 51). Halbwachs' collective memory remains removed from any individual consciousness, through continuous retellings and transformations (Bloch, 1998: 117). Yet, Halbwachs' analysis lacked an articulation of the social facets of personal biographical events, and of the highly contingent nature of consecutive recollections, which often can take on generational differences (Climo and Cattell, 2002: 5). The term 'social memory' invokes these intersections of collective memory and personal history (Fentress & Wickham, 1992). Providing a methodological model for uncovering the formation of social memory, including generational divides in relation to remembered events, this article argues for a close attention to the verbal interactions that produce and transmit social memory. One among many repositories of social memory,¹ oral histories serve both to construct a community's social memory, and to preserve personal histories for a wider audience. It is through language, unfolding in specific interactive contexts, that the construction of oral histories begins. Generic conventions govern oral histories, which often begin with an interview between an oral historian and an interviewee—the oral history's subject. During the interview and in the grooming of a final product distributed to publics through archives, online collections, and museums, the subject's words undergo multilayered processes of revelation and reconstruction, across ideologies of history, memory, authority, and, frequently, across languages.

This article is based on an in-depth case study of one Tibetan woman's oral history, collected by the non-profit organization Tibet Oral History Project (TOHP). Marcella Adamski, the founder and executive director, created the project at the

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¹ Collective rememberings are not oriented only towards deliberately constructed documentary materials, such as those collected in oral history projects and displayed in museums and archives, but also to places and senses of belonging (Basso, 1996; Daniel, 1996).

behest of the Dalai Lama. While attending a meeting with the Dalai Lama to discuss findings from a human rights investigation Adamski was carrying out with the NGO Tibet Justice Center, she asked the Dalai Lama what else she could do to help the people of Tibet. He responded with a call to interview the oldest Tibetans, and to disseminate their stories online in both English and Chinese. As Adamski recounts in an article about the meeting, the Dalai Lama ‘wanted these stories preserved for the Tibetan people and for the next generation of Chinese who had no idea of what really happened to their Tibetan neighbors...[and disseminated] so that the world community would understand the true history and plight of the Tibetan people.’² Based upon the presupposition of a unified Tibetan community with a shared history of trauma perpetrated by the Chinese, this portrayal of the Dalai Lama’s statement presents oral history as a form of first-hand testimony to be transmitted to an international audience, and to be circulated among Tibetans as a medium for cultural preservation.

The following analysis also demonstrates the production of social memory *within* the oral history interview, itself. I address this interactive production by examining the generic conventions and grammatical realization of participant roles in the oral history interview of Cho Lhamo. One of three interviews undertaken as a pilot for TOHP in California in 2006, Cho Lhamo’s interview became the very first contribution to a growing archive of oral history interviews conducted throughout diasporic Tibetan communities by TOHP. TOHP has currently compiled a total of 278 oral histories.³ In focusing on the interview, I analyze one step in the process of creating a published oral history that conforms to the aesthetics of the TOHP’s collection. Since TOHP was guided by the imperative of multi-lingual and multi-modal dissemination of oral history interviews for the dual purposes of education and cultural preservation, it undertook a multilayered textual project involving several processes of recontextualization across languages and media forms. First, in the course of each interview, the oral history achieved a linearity that aided entextualization, the objectification of a discourse unit that facilitates its removal from an initial interactive setting (Bauman and Briggs, 1990: 73). In this case, narrative units from the interviews are extracted, and come to serve as first-hand testimony as they are recontextualized through three other media forms employed by TOHP: DVD copies, complete written English summaries that are published on TOHP’s website and distributed to libraries,⁴ and excerpted video clips that are available on TOHP’s website and YouTube.⁵ The video clips feature only the interviewee, divorced from the surrounding discourse that includes an interviewer and translator, and are subtitled in English. TOHP has begun to translate written summaries of the oral history interviews into Chinese. However, the distribution of these Chinese-language versions within mainland China and the Tibet Autonomous Region remains uncertain.

While the multi-modal construction of TOHP’s archive remains beyond the scope of this article, I attend to the first stage of production, the oral history interview. Here, the affective orientations of primary participants—an interviewer speaking English, an interviewee, Cho Lhamo, speaking Tibetan, whose competence in English remains unacknowledged during the interview, and a translator, Cho Lhamo’s daughter, speaking in both Tibetan and English—groom Cho Lhamo’s narrative for inclusion in an aesthetically coherent archive,⁶ and shape cross-generational affiliation with the narrative’s form and content.⁷ Attempts to distill multi-lingual and multi-party talk into monologic form obscure shifts in the distribution of knowledge across participants by effacing the role of Cho Lhamo’s daughter, the second-generation Tibetan exile translator, and by losing testimonial information encoded in the grammar of Tibetan once Cho Lhamo’s words are rendered in English. In fact, the local management of expression transforms complex multi-party talk into the interviewer’s extraction of monologic articulations of knowledge from Cho Lhamo.

Approaching the interview through a process of extraction treats the interviewee as an authentic source of cultural history, an ideology that permeates the Euro-American genre of oral history. As scholars of oral history Blouin and Rosenberg (2010) note, ‘direct interactions with a source [the oral history subject] give historians at least the opportunity to probe for clarity even in memory’s most murky waters’ (168). This view of the interviewee’s memory as a vessel of historical knowledge to be interpreted by the oral historian correlates with trends in oral history projects focused on Tibetan elders. Barnett (2010) identifies American-produced Tibetan oral histories as a genre of written and/or visual media primarily intended for consumption by Western, English-speaking audiences (especially those with the real or imagined capability to intervene in Tibet’s fight for independence or the safe-guarding of refugees living abroad). Originating in the documentation of the lives of marginalized peoples within America and Europe, American practices of oral history search ‘for a narrative that explains itself more or less completely...for an almost literary text, a thing that stands alone’ (Barnett, 2010: 79). As demonstrated below, this desire to objectify memory into linear narration crucially shapes the relations among interviewer, interviewee, and translator.

This background to TOHP, and its grounding in traditions of oral history within the United States, clarifies political and linguistic ideologies that guide Cho Lhamo’s interview. As Adamski explained, the goal of each interview was to ‘draw out’ the elder, so that they would ‘feel safe’ sharing their personal memories as intimately as possible.⁸ The individual elder was treated as a unitary speaker whose words bear witness to collective suffering, even when the language of transmission was

² Marcella Adamski, December 2007, ‘Survival of the Heart: Preserving the Tibetan Culture,’ in *The San Francisco Psychologist*, p. 1, 8, 13: http://www.tibetoralhistory.org/Articles/Survival_of_the_Heart.pdf (accessed 7 September, 2015).

³ <http://www.tibetoralhistory.org/aboutus.html>.

⁴ <http://www.tibetoralhistory.org/interviews.html>.

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/user/tohproject/videos>.

⁶ For the purposes of this article, I use ‘archive’ in the sense of a collection of text and talk that a group of trained professionals have deliberately imposed order upon (Cook, 2010: 173).

⁷ ‘Translation and Transcription in the Tibet Oral History Project’ (Ward, in prep) examines later stages in the construction of Cho Lhamo’s oral history.

⁸ Marcella Adamski, personal phone communication, February 15, 2016.

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