

Exploration of Oral History in Ethnomusicological Research

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Abstract: Oral history, which collects historical materials by means of oral interviews, is an important auxiliary means for ethnomusicological research. Marked by the First Symposium on Oral History of Music in 2014, the academic community has launched a series of discussions and elaborations on its concepts, methods, norms, meanings, and other dimensions, and a series of academic achievements have been born. In this paper, we will combine relevant theses to explain how music oral history as contemporary history can achieve “intertextuality” in ethnomusicological research, emphasize its humanistic attributes, and summarize our reflections on the basis of existing academic experiences.

Keywords: Ethnomusicology; Oral history; Music literature

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1. Introduction

Since the establishment of the Oral History Research Unit at Columbia University in the United States in 1948, oral history as a research method has been gradually applied to various fields of the humanities and social sciences. Oral history mainly focuses on interviewing and recording the historical memories of specific people or groups of people to form texts with historical value. At the beginning of this century, the research and application of oral history in the field of musicology in China started quietly. In 2005, Yibing Zang’s two journal articles “Oral History and Music History: A New Perspective on Chinese Music History Writing” and “Oral History Mode of Folk Singer Research—Theoretical Perspectives and Methods” were praised as “The Beginning of the Introduction of Oral History into Chinese Musicological Scholarship”^[1]. Over the past 20 years, oral history, which embodies the humanistic spirit and incorporates “grassroots” people into historical texts, has been applied to specific research matters, including ethnomusicology, music history, music education, and case studies represented by musicians and musical events.

Domestic research on the oral history of music is still at an emerging stage, and the author would like to sort out and discuss case studies on how to combine the oral history of music with historical documents and its significance in regional cultural studies and to put forward her thoughts on the subject.

2. Historical documents and oral history in ethnomusicology

The method of oral history is mainly to collect historical materials through oral interviews. The interviewer can obtain relevant historical materials of a certain historical event or a historical figure from multiple perspectives, levels, and objects according to his/her own academic will. This is a kind of “active historical storage” that materializes the “living historical materials” stored in the brain of the interviewer into historical materials that can be passed on to the world ^[2].

The method to identify, sort, compare, and interpret what the interviewees have expressed and present an oral text with maximum authenticity and reliability is the ultimate goal of research. Specifically in ethnomusicology fieldwork, the use of oral history is not just a research method used in isolation, but rather a way of recording and documenting one’s own interviewee’s oral accounts under relatively strict academic constraints, as well as the need to support it with relevant historical aids to help readers identify the authenticity and reliability of the oral history.

Therefore, oral history research should have a materialistic view of history, combining oral texts with historical documents for comparison, and combining the dual texts of ephemeral and co-temporal to discover the traces of history and the trajectory of change.

2.1. Intertextuality of documents and oral narratives

Intertext is derived from the concept of “melodic intertext” in Botelotu’s *Performance, Text, Context, Inheritance: A Study of the Oral Transmission of Mongolian Music* ^[3], which emphasizes the two-way connection of “you have me and I have you” between texts, rather than remaining in the unidirectional process of “parent-variant,” and stresses the idea of co-temporality. The intertext in this paper is not related to the tunes but extends this “intertextual relationship” to the level of music and music oral history in the historical documents to explain the state of its corroboration and intermingling, which, in essence, is more inclined to the “intertextuality” used in literary theory and cultural studies. In essence, it is more in favor of the “intertextuality” theory used in literary theory and cultural studies.

Kun Qi’s *Subversion or Continuity: An Oral and Documentary Study of the Changes in the Classes of Huizhou Musicians (Above and Below)* focuses on the changes in the two classes of Huizhou musicians, the big and small surnames, in the context of the larger history of Huizhou (present-day Huangshan City), combining historical documents and musician’s oral narratives with a variety of other sources of evidence. Taking 1949 and the period since the reform and opening up as the time coordinates and demarcation points, we can verify the class changes of these two groups in the process of tradition continuation. In the specific research process, Kun Qi used historical documents as vertical coordinates, referred to county records since the Qing Dynasty as well as textual information from contemporary experts and scholars, and clarified a number of issues such as the origins of the ethnic groups, the master-servant relationship between the big surname and the small surname in history, the trades of the two groups, and the situation of intermarriages, etc. The study was conducted by the bureau’s insiders and was supported by a number of sources. Taking the “oral history” survey conducted by the Bureau as a horizontal coordinate, the author verifies the subversive changes in social status and occupations between the big and small surnames under two time clues, especially the flow of the identity of the ritual musicians from the small surnames to the big surnames in the historical vein. In this article, the author grasps the principle that “true history is more than the presentation of facts and images” ^[4], thus reflecting the reasons behind the reversal or continuation.

Jianzhao Wang’s “Oral History: An Effective Dimension for the Study of Uyghur Mukam” argued that oral history, as an effective way to study Mukam, can be connected to history and thus build a history of the

overall development of Uyghur Mukam. The author argued that in the process of connecting with history, it is inevitable that the intertextuality between historical documents and the oral history of music will be formed. This undoubtedly echoes the viewpoints conveyed in Xiao Yang's "Oral History Writing in the Practice of Zitherology—Taking the Production of the Oral History of the Zither in Shuzhong as an Example." The author argues that it is only on the basis of solid historical research that one can move on to the practical stage and "pay attention to whether the various types of historical sources can form a mutual relationship." In the event of obvious deviations, especially with regard to different representations of the same historical event by several musicians, we will immediately seek evidence from various sources in order to get closer to the "past," which will lead to the scholarly phenomenon of "music interpreting history and history interpreting music and life"^[5,6].

To sum up the research of the three scholars, it can be concluded that they have adopted the method of combining historical documents and oral history in the field of ethnomusicology and that they have formed a dialogue between the "historical situation" and "social memory" to explore the process of immersion and enculturation in a series of internal and external factors, such as the individual, the group, music, politics, society, economy, etc., under the dual historical backgrounds of ephemerality and co-temporality from a pluralistic perspective. From this point of view, the excavation of documents is indispensable, and it is only when oral history and historical documents form a dialectical relationship with each other that oral evidence can really bring its value into play in research.

2.2. The "contemporary" attributes of oral history

The subject of an oral history is a person who has been present at a certain stage or on the trajectory of social change. Contemporary living history can be recorded through both written and oral means. Biographies and genealogies are different carriers of documentary forms, while oral histories are firstly works in the form of images, and secondly works that can be adapted into documentary forms. Different modes of research have different groups of participants, and different modes of participation have different types of work. While most of the research in antebellum history is writing, the research in contemporary history can draw heavily on oral narratives. As the most important feature of oral history is that contemporary people narrate the events stored in their own memories, it is impossible for the interviewee to go beyond the boundaries of his or her own history to give an oral account. In the final analysis, oral history belongs to the category of contemporary history by nature and has the following characteristics:

2.2.1. Research through first-hand brain memory

A person will meet countless people, experience countless events, and say countless words in life, so his brain will store countless pieces of information, which can be said to be a small database. The human brain has the ability to store and recall information. Brain memory can be further processed into text, becoming human-written content. Brain memory often contains cutting-edge, first-hand information.

2.2.2. Embodying the self-construction of the pro-experienced

How does the disappearance of reality become a memory? How do individuals perceive and remember? How do they process their own stories in daily life? These are all questions worth studying. The brain memories collected by oral history are not purely objective information at the time, but most of them have been processed by the person concerned after the fact. Everyone will rethink, interpret, construct, and communicate afterward, everyone is the interpreter and constructor of self-history, the first level of history constructor^[7].

2.2.3. Reason is associated with emotion

Historiography requires objectivity and avoids subjectivity as much as possible, which is not a problem in the study of history and the re-examination of documents but is unreasonable in contemporary history, which is dominated by living people. The text is descriptive, while the narration is a direct expression of emotions. It is possible to begin with the initial study of documents and end with the re-study of brain memories, which requires reasoning and emotion.

Therefore, in the specific case study of ethnomusicology, it is necessary to focus on the theory and method of oral history, so that the oral records of contemporary people in a specific era can be combined with relevant historical documents and third-party supporting materials to be refined, enriched, and interpreted to form oral history research results with the greatest authenticity.

In the field of ethnomusicology, fieldwork is the foundation of the field, and oral interviews with musicians are crucial. Interviews with a band or a musician are not only about the music itself but also about the history of the band, personal history, the path of transmission, the lineage of masters, and the experience of the times, as well as multi-dimensional research combining the literature and the oral narratives of other people.

3. Oral history of music in regional cultural studies

Culture is a multi-level phenomenon and concept. From the micro to macro level, culture can be divided into individual self-representation, group culture, organizational culture, national culture, and global culture. Is China's regional culture more "unified" or "diverse," or a combination of both? It is undeniable that there are clear regional cultural differences in China.

3.1. Differences in regional culture

As a cultural concept, "region" is different from the general sense of "area" and "administrative area," but refers to cultural homogeneity, geographic space with cultural homogeneity and cohesion^[8].

Different regions of China's vast land have obvious differences in ethnicity, geography, climate, food, language, writing, religion, etc. Different regions have formed "cultural color zones" with very different styles, and as they are located in different geographic locations such as plains, hills, plateaus, and coasts, their cultures, dialects, diets, folklore, arts, etc. also vary. The Han folk songs from the perspective of geographic regions can be divided into 10 color zones of folk songs. Based on this, against the background of complex regional cultural differences such as "thousands of miles of different winds, hundreds of miles of different customs" and "one side of the water and soil nurtures one side of the people." When scholars of ethnomusicology enter the field as "pedestrians," they are confronted with a lot of distinctive and unique artistic phenomena. Therefore, in a specific region and the face of a specific group of people, it is necessary to carry out a targeted field survey, which is an important step and a necessary link in the writing of the text of music ethnography.

It can be seen that in the research field of ethnomusicology, it is often the specific, microscopic, case-by-case music events and music societies as the research object. Taking domestic scholars as an example, Zhentao Zhang focused on the folk music societies in the regions of Jizhong, Shaanxi, and Jinbei, and Minkang Yang devoted himself to the writing of Southern Buddhism and music in the southwestern region of China. Therefore, according to Yibing Xue, "music anthropology (or ethnomusicology) mainly studies the 'individual history' of folk music in different places"^[9].

3.2. "People" in the microcosmic perspective

Oral history, as one of the research methods of ethnomusicology, precisely focuses on specific people, events,

music, and organizations. In other words, it is based on the idea that “human beings are the subject of oral history”^[10], focusing on the memories, experiences, and evaluations of musicians in a specific region on history and the present, forming a people-oriented subjective history, paying attention to and discovering the experiences of the interviewees in a variety of contexts, such as history, society, and music societies, and highlighting its grassroots characteristics compared to the official history books that focus on the emperors, generals, and saints and sages. Therefore, the theoretical starting point of ethnomusicology is consistent with the focus of oral history, which is to conduct multi-angle interviews with specific and different interviewees in the music of concern, collate the relevant texts, interpret the texts, discover the intertextuality between the texts, and form a clear and accurate understanding of the regional culture of concern and the basic forms of artistic patterns, which also has the meaning of “history.” It is only in this way that the meaning of “history” can be achieved.

In the author’s view, in oral history research, the formation of a certain difference in a certain issue, or even a very different point of view, reflects the need to pay attention to the differences between different individuals in the oral history research on the expression of the same issue, and then explore the root causes of the differences in the background, to find out that the individual’s multiple experiences under the representation of the history as well as the differences. In oral history research, the pursuit is the individuality of thousands of people and the diversity of multiple dimensions of expression. Multiple comparisons and collisions of perspectives increase the depth and breadth of research for outsiders.

Using oral history techniques, focusing on cultural research and transmutation in the region, we can observe the “slices” contained therein, as well as individual views and perspectives on the art of the region under the passage of time, and make comprehensive comparisons and care from a humanistic point of view. The so-called “people” does not only refer to “musicians” or a certain body but also needs to be elevated to the humanistic level, so as to understand the real cultural phenomena with “people” as the basis. Recording and interpreting is to explore and pass on the memory of history, so as to make up for the current predicament of the research subject that lacks historical documents, which is constructive to the writing of its music ethnography.

4. Reflections on oral history research

As scholars of ethnomusicology, interviews and oral materials have always been an important part of fieldwork. In other words, without field interviews and oral accounts, the foundation of ethnomusicology would be shaken. With the help of modern audio-visual means, dialogue and interviews with the parties involved in historical events and bystanders can collect first-hand information, which also broadens the scope of history and the development of ethnomusicological research, and brings a new impetus.

4.1. Taking advantage of dual identities

Insiders and outsiders are two social identities and roles that exist in the process of anthropological investigation and research. Culturally informed people are collectively referred to as those who know and understand things according to their cultural conceptual system, and thus belong to the insiders of that culture. The outsider is an outsider to a culture that is not his or her own because the outsider knows and studies the culture with his or her cultural conceptual system.

If the interviewer has the identity attribute of “insider,” he or she can skip the process from first acquaintance to understanding, and can directly carry out a purposeful dialogue and examination.

Although the author has not studied Yueju opera since childhood, she is aware that her hometown is the birthplace of Yueju opera, and she is an old acquaintance of Zhefei Cai, the deputy director of Zhejiang Little

Hundred Flowers Yueju Theatre and the inheritor of the Yin School. As the saying goes, language has a far-reaching influence on singing and tunes. When the local government promoted the idea of introducing Yueju opera in schools, the author's fluency in the local dialect made her favored by famous artists, allowing her to come into contact with, learn, and perform in Yueju opera. Geographically, culturally, and in terms of learning, the author has unique advantages, enabling her to avoid detours and unnecessary repetitive research in actual oral studies. While studying the compulsory course "Chinese Traditional Music A3" (Opera Music) at the China Conservatory of Music, the author chose the thesis topic "Yueju Opera's Female Xiao Sheng Singing from the Perspective of Gender," which involves analyzing the singing characteristics of different genres. This required interviewing artists, providing a good opportunity for the author to learn from personal experience. When interviewing artists, the author can "jump into" the same cultural background and conduct interviews as an "insider." Conversely, when analyzing the interviews, the author can "jump out" and examine the data from the perspective of an "outsider" in professional research. This dual approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of Yueju opera from both personal and academic viewpoints.

In the author's opinion, when "outsiders" possess the identity of "insiders" and can engage in timely exchanges, they can interpret and organize "oral history" content with a more neutral, objective scientific perspective. This dual perspective allows for a more accurate and balanced interpretation of the collected materials, enhancing the effectiveness of this research method. This view is not uncommon in the academic world. Boyu Zhang believed that "because Chinese music has a strong regional nature, scholars do not know much about the music they are studying, so they first need to learn, and at this time, scholars are also outsiders to the music." The objectivity of the outsider's viewpoint is often more objective, and its rationality and scientificity can often make it complementary to the insider's viewpoint, forming the validity and unique value of the outsider's research" ^[11].

It can be seen that if the interviewer holds both the "insider" and "outsider" identities simultaneously, they can bypass the tedious process of getting to know and familiarizing themselves with the interviewee. This allows them to ask questions directly about their areas of interest. By fully understanding and familiarizing themselves with the interviewee's interpersonal network and life experiences, the interviewer can uncover the maximum authenticity of the oral history materials.

4.2. Attention to detail and problem awareness

In the excavation of oral history materials, focusing on details and problem awareness will often get twice the result with half the effort.

In the summer of 2023, the author participated in a funeral ceremony in her hometown, watching from afar the performances of the musicians, singing, blowing, pulling, playing, and beating. During the exchange with the villagers, the author learned that these musicians were all organized to play music on an ad hoc basis, but knew all the procedures of the ceremony. Therefore, there were many questions: who are these people? Is there a specific name for this music group? Has it been included in the list of non-heritage items? What kind of group are these people, and what are the details of their survival and transmission? What are their musical events?

The villagers also said that the villages still retain the tradition of funeral ceremonies and that the people who come back to the villages speak a dialect that is different from the others. The author was puzzled again: do they only participate in funeral ceremonies? Is the specific process of the ceremony the same every time? Are their members fixed? What kind of music and songs can be played and sung during the ceremony?

Although the questions raised at the time were relatively superficial, attention to detail and awareness of the problem were still key, and if the fleeting information was not grasped, it was likely that a major discovery

would be lost.

Therefore, in oral history interviews, we need to maintain a high degree of awareness of the problem and vigilance, and always examine the interview text cautiously in our minds. We need to repeat the same question in dialogues and inquiries, citing circumstantial evidence, and interpreting it from multiple perspectives, so that we can get the research-value data and information from the oral text after a thousand refinements and finally form an oral history.

In contrast to the emphasis on theory in social science research, the thinking of oral history with a sense of problem is based on many dialogues, whether explicit or implicit and no matter how it is presented in the end, it is the core structure that supports an oral history. Setting up the intention involves the preparation of documents and the grasp of the dialogue context in a specific space and time when the oral history chooses the oral object and the theme.

5. Conclusion

The value of individual cases is more than microscopic, and the fragmentation of daily life is not equal to the fragmentation of research. The intention of oral history is to transcend the individual in its account of the individual's life experience. This kind of "transcendence" does not necessarily point to the grandiose, the majority, or the power of the individual and the collective to change reality and write history, nor is it only the filling of historical gaps, but it is also reflected in the knowledge of certain people, events, and reasoning and the judgment of the society, and it points to the grasping of the human nature, the sense of reality, and the view of history.

Based on the existing results and values in the academic world, the author believes that music oral history is not an effective research method in the fields of music history and ethnomusicology. Although controversial, applying this theory and method in practice, continuously refining and deepening its theoretical research, and subsequently producing rich academic results for testing and debate, is essential for achieving broader recognition.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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