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## Oral history: objectives for legitimizing this research method in Vietnam

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### ABSTRACT

*Oral history is both a method of gathering information and an important source of historical data in social history and public history. The narratives of individuals are not only exploited to find historical facts or “additional” details to a grand narrative but uncover the meaning of individuals’ stories for a broader social context. That shift has made oral history increasingly an interdisciplinary research method. However, compared with the popularity of oral history in international academic disciplines, the application of this research method restricts in Vietnam. This article presents the possibilities and prospects of oral history through different research topics/fields in history, at the same time, specify the causes of obstacles to the legitimization of oral history in Vietnam.*

**Keywords:** *historical sources, interdisciplinary research, oral history, qualitative approach*

### 1. Introduction

Oral History is a method of gathering information about the past experienced by narrators. It is their direct lived experiences, not their knowledge of the past or telling other people's stories. At the same time, oral history is also an important historical source besides other conventional historical sources for historical research. Appearing from the 1950s of the twentieth century so far, oral history has not only been gradually legitimized as a method of information collection and an important historical source in academic history research but also applicability of it extends beyond history to become an interdisciplinary research

method. We can refer to the article *Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History* (Thompon, 2006) to understand different approaches to oral history through four paradigms that develop sequentially over time. Oral history is also considered as one of the qualitative research methods in the humanities and social sciences clearly guided in *Oral History for the Qualitative Researcher* (Janasick, 2010) or *Recording Oral History: a Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences* (Yow, 2005) or *Oral History: Understanding Qualitative Research* (Leavy, 2011) and others.

In Vietnam, there are a number of articles that introduce basic information about oral history, including Oral History: Advantages, Limitations, and some Criticisms (Vu Thi Thu Thanh, 2009). To provide additional methods besides oral history, in the article Approach to Narrative Studies, Oral history, and Life History in Survey of Marine Anthropology in the Sea, Islands of south-central and southern Vietnam, Phan Thi Yen Tuyet said three approaches include: narrative research, oral history, and life history widely applied in the humanities and social sciences such as anthropology, history, sociology, culture, literature, and sociolinguistics, and the information gathered from these methods reveals not only about individual life but also community life as well as “space and time in its archetype” (Phan Thi Yen Tuyet, 2017). At the same time, she mentioned a course on social research methods held at the Southern Institute of Social Sciences in 1996, in this course, oral history was introduced to Vietnamese researchers at that time. Nguyen Manh Dung, in the article "Sea" in Vietnamese national history: the process of perception and interpretation introduces another historical source as valuable as oral history: oral tradition. The author writes: “Vietnam contains a very rich treasure of folklore. These are stories that, in the eyes of the historian, are also oral histories.” (Nguyen Manh Dung, 2013). In fact, oral tradition and oral history are two different terms. Oral traditions are stories passed down through generations by word of mouth that span the life of any one individual. In contrast, oral history is the narrative of witnessed things, remembering past events, and experiences that occurred during the interviewee's lifetime (Ngo Vinh Long, 2008).

A well-known historical work edited by Van Tao and Futura Mooto, *The 1945 Famine in Vietnam: the Historic Remnants*, in which, using interview methods to collect the testimony of witnesses. However, the interviews in this work are acknowledged by the authors that they use the method of historical sociology rather than oral history (Van Tao and Futura Mooto, 2006). Similarly, *Immigrés de force: Les travailleurs indochinois en France (1939 - 1952)* (translated and introduced to readers in Vietnam in 2014), Pierre Daum admits he is not a professional historian, he is just a journalist. The method of gathering information to write this work is also not acknowledged by the author as oral history. The author only stated that he was interested in the labor force that was requisitioned by France from the colonies during World War II. Films and studies on this

topic prompted him to search historical sources and interview surviving witnesses before it was too late. His collection of 25 testimonies, which he carefully compared and contrasted with archival sources, outlining the broad social context of their testimonies, makes the work valuable to French and Vietnamese histories about people on the margins of socio-political life in the period 1939-1945.

In general, the application of oral history in Vietnamese historical research in both theory and practice is limitative, not commensurate with its broad development in the world academics. Applying oral history in a number of theses/ on community history, social history and cultural history in Vietnam have not yet convinced members of the scientific council and experts because they consider these narratives to be "trivial", "subjective", "trivial" and "uninteresting" compared to grand narratives with major events and major events of the historical line. Vietnamese politics, war and diplomacy with which they were familiar. This causes many difficulties in legitimizing a research method that is becoming increasingly important in the study of social history and cultural history as well as hinders the pursuit of a related research approach branch of history.

## **2. Data sources and method**

We have used a literature review approach to assess whether oral history is being documented in Vietnam, how has this method been used in historical research works, and how theoretical synthesis about it is discussed. So, our data sources are the works of both theory and practice about oral history in the world that I found.

To demonstrate the possibilities and prospects of oral history, nothing is more convincing than to introduce and discuss works/articles that have applied oral history actually along with the results achieved. Thereby showing that the ability to apply oral history is not only diverse in research topics but also in many different approaches, showing interest not only in what is told but also in how it is told the story, why it is being told, and emphasizing the meaning of stories in the broader social context.

This article uses Thompson's approach of four paradigms for applying oral history in research. Accordingly, the work *Immigrés de force: Les travailleurs indochinois en France (1939 - 1952)* by Pierre Daum is ranked the first paradigm because it presents a historical flow of a people's history from below, has the nature of complementing, filling, and enriching the larger historical picture of the history of France under the Vichy government.

## **3. Results**

Applying oral history in migration research, Winternitz finds that modern national history, especially Australia as one of the countries that received a large influx of

migration in the twentieth century, will not be understood fully reflect without the sharing of recorded and archived experiences from migrants' narratives. Therefore, the implementation of historical projects through oral testimony is important not only for migration history but also for Australian history (Winternitz, 1984). Thompson (1999) found that migration is one of the dominant topics of many international conferences on oral history, especially in the UK, Australia, and the US in the last decades of the twentieth century. According to him, the need for sources of information from the stories of migrants stems from the fact that the history of migration has largely focused on immigration policies, and the attitudes of indigenous people towards immigrants, while migrants themselves, their experiences, and impacts on host society are encapsulated in statistics and simple informational records of arrival and departure times. A look at the full range of historical sources reveals that official archival sources reveal the enactment of policies on migrants, their implementation, and controversies surrounding migration and other issues about ethnicity; statistical sources reveal patterns of migration, settlement, employment, and well-being, but oral sources of life stories reveal the complexity of the actual migration process. Taking these sources together can explain how immigration policies and patterns have impacted the lives of individuals and relationships between individuals, families, and other co-migrants communities. As Rina Benmayor and Andor Skotnes (2005) argue, individual narratives can help in understanding the mechanisms by which social forces influence and shape individual identities, as well as how individuals respond, act, and create change in the broader society. Further, oral historians can theorize from the complex biographies and experiences of individuals to challenge mono-causal, linear, and mono-causal theories. purely economic, while creating a full understanding of migrants.

Applying oral history on feminism, gender, and homosexuality research, many documents on oral history acknowledge that feminists who made oral history become the interdisciplinary method (see *The History of Oral History* by Rebecca Shapeless (2007); *Oral History Theory* by Lynn Abrams (2010)). In *Beginning Where We Are: Feminist Methodology in Oral History*, Kathryn Anderson and her colleagues (1990) find that oral history is a powerful tool in an effort to bring previously overlooked women's lives, activities, and emotions into the mainstream study that can contribute to a common understanding of society. They find that women's voices can reveal hidden realities, as their experiences and opinions can challenge "truths" in mainstream literature and incredulous about existing theories. In this article, the authors say that their oral history project has step by step interdisciplinary with psychology, sociology, and gender. The authors also present problems that researchers may encounter when conducting oral research. The paper can be viewed as a methodology for the application of oral history in feminist research, both in terms of data collection and analysis methods.

In *Oral History, Constructions and Deconstructions of Narratives: Intersections of Class, Gender, Locality, Nation and Religion in Narratives from a Jewish Woman in Sweden*, Izabela Dahl and Malin Thor (2009) combine theoretical perspectives on social construction and oral history to explore how identities narrate and negotiate in situations, contexts, and with two different interviewers at two different times. Specifically, the authors analyzed interview data on only a Jewish woman living in Sweden but at two different time points and with two different interviewers. But the results of this article are not intended to generalize about social reality, but rather a suggestion about the constructivist and deconstructive approaches in two oral history interviews. The author focuses on the narrative attribute of oral history. Here, the author pays attention to the axis of analysis of intersections between gender, nationality, ethnicity, class, locality, and religion, these identifiers act as a frame of reference, with an understanding of identity construction through personal narrative and negotiation with other identities. Finally, the author shows a useful and close relationship between the social constructivist perspective and the eyewitness' oral history. Thereby, the authors also found that the identification of identities is flexible and multidimensional, not deterministic, and stable.

Most notable is the use of oral history to study female nurses who served in the war. The following two articles both use oral history to study Australian female nurses during the Vietnam War. However, in terms of analytical content, *The Wartime Experience of Australian Army Nurse in Vietnam, 1967-1971* by Biedermann and colleagues (2001) belongs to the first paradigm while *Vietnam Memories: Australian Army Nurse, The Vietnam War, and Oral History* by Hemmigs (1996) belongs to the second paradigm of oral history. The research aim of Biedermann and colleagues in using the oral history method was to describe the nature of nursing work during the Vietnam War, thereby increasing awareness and understanding of the work of caring, nursing, as well as contribute to the development of knowledge of women, medicine, war, and lessons learned for preparation related to the issues of clinical and psychological experience necessary for female nurses when dispatching them to war zones. Biedermann and colleagues considered methods and sources of historical data from oral history as a supplement and used other historical sources such as newspapers, diaries, and photographs, that is, they searched for information to fill in the gaps that the history is missing. Hemmings' writing draws attention to another but important attribute of oral history: memory. They studied the memories of 20 of 43 female nurses who volunteered to serve in the Vietnam War. However, this article does not present the results of empirical research but raises questions about memory. The author shows that there is an intersection between private memory and public memory; between public memory and myths. The author said that she believed that she could find some results from the true stories of female nurses who served in the Vietnam War, whom the author

assumed were will “tell it as it actually happened”. However, she found that what is remembered varies widely and changes with discussions of the war over time. The author gives two main factors affecting the narrator's remembering. First, is the relationship between the interviewer and the respondent, where the respondent fulfills the objectives of the interview. Second, is the influence of public memory on individual memory, where the narrator will often assimilate personal memory with public memory, which are representations of the inherited past publicly acknowledge them to avoid traumatic memories, mishaps, and controversial historical issues (see more recent discussions on the interpretation of memory in *Contextualizing Human Memory: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Understanding How Individuals and Groups Remember the Past* by Stone and Bieth (2015)). The article by Hemmings can help us understand the third paradigm of oral history, which is the study of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. In the third paradigm, the memory attribute of oral history is not about finding what really happened or generalizing what is remembered and told, but about the subjective elements of memory: why they remember and tell this event, why they want to forget and ignore other events.

A well-known book that can illustrate the application of oral history to queer research is titled *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History* by Boyd and Ramíre (2012). In the introduction, the author writes: “This book recognizes that an injustice has occurred and that those seeking justice sometimes have to create new methods. As such, queer oral histories have an overtly political function and a liberating quality, which the essays in this collection repeatedly underscore” (p.1). Using oral history for LGBT/queer research begins with their need to find oral evidence, since archival sources don't have this kind of data, so they have no other way to find it, understanding the past of queer genders is unachievable if not using new methods. The authors have collected stories from gay males, and from these stories try to build a separate and unique history about them. The book consists of four parts: silence; sex; friendship; politics with a total of 14 articles from prominent oral historians on gay research. Each article begins with an oral history interview in raw data, with both questions and answers, presented in a journalistic style. Each author then provides commentary aimed at contextualizing, biographical-historical analysis, and interpretation of this data. The structure of the book makes it easy for the reader to perceive it as a statement about the important contribution of oral history to the field of LGBT/queer, as reflected in the creation of a new and essential historical source of data for understanding many different aspects of gay male life.

There are many oral history projects on the Vietnamese community in the United States, one of those is a well-known book about the political collapse of South Vietnam titled *Tears before the Rain: An Oral History of the Fall of South Vietnam*. In this work, Engelmann (1990) gathered the accounts of seventy witnesses (both American and

Vietnamese). They are nurses, pilots, generals, ambassadors, marines, politicians, doctors, seamen, flight attendants, journalists, children, and representatives of the US embassy and CIA such as Graham Martin, and Thomas Polgar. Through their stories, readers can imagine their experiences in the final days of South Vietnam before the fall. Another work that uses the oral history method to interview half-Vietnamese children and their mothers after settling in the US is titled *Children of the Enemy: Oral Histories of Vietnamese Americans and Their Mothers* (DeBonis, 2015). When American troops withdrew from the south of Vietnam, they left behind thousands of half-Vietnamese children. According to DeBonis, the new regime in Vietnam considers this mixed-race children to be the children of the enemy, thus pushing them to the margins of social life. In 1988, the U.S. government's hybrid sponsorship policy created favorable conditions for the immigration of these mixed-race children to settle in the United States. However, the integration process of these half-Vietnamese children faces many difficulties in adapting to a new culture and the author says only about 2% of these children are reunited with their fathers. Through 38 interviews, the narrator's experiences speak to the hard lives that half-Vietnamese children and their mothers face in both their home country and new country.

According to Grele (2007), the form and content of the above two books are part of the American tradition of practicing oral history. After World War II, interest in undertaking historical projects through oral testimony re-emerged strongly, however, there were differences between the perspectives and traditions of practice between the United States and Europe. Grele remarks that “the general consensus in that the origin of oral history in the United States lay in archival practice, while in Europe the origin was the work of social historians. Therefore, those who followed the North American model established archival projects, and those following the European model accented the importance of social history” (Grele, 2007, p. 34). In the United States, community historians, librarians, archivists, and social activists have a strong interest in oral history and have done a lot of oral history projects that have been kept in university and local libraries, and museums. They share a common view that evidence produced by eyewitness accounts is the same as other historical sources such as letters, newspapers, and diaries. After the project is finished, it can be transcribed, indexed, and edited. In published works, they often present either raw data retrieval (with question and answer) or narrative style for oral stories, where the authors lead in the context of stories and comment according to a certain interest of the current public concerns.

However, in the United States, since the 70s of the twentieth century, oral history used in research works as evidence for the interdisciplinary theory. Interpretation and analysis of oral testimony have emerged and are usually discussed by academic historians. An example of the applicability of oral history to medicine and psychology is Judith Shepard's *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Vietnamese Women* (1992). The

author found unexpected discoveries in the use of oral history interviews with five Vietnamese women in relation to wartime trauma. Diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is used to consider psychological reactions to a trauma caused by a past event, including depressive symptoms, emotional paralysis, and avoidance of people, places, and things that may remind the individual of the initial traumatic event. But this diagnostic method before the 1980s was usually applied only to clinical research and treatment of men affected by the war. Experts do not recognize and appreciate this method of diagnosis for women. The author acknowledges that when using the oral history method for Vietnamese women, only with the aim of considering the elements of the past and the historical and cultural context along with their reactive both positive and negativity towards the trauma rather than understanding the symptoms or events that caused the trauma. Through interviews, however, the author discovers that the cultural-historical context and enormous complexity of women's lives during wartime and their positive responses to trauma have broadened the author's understanding of how women's culture, gender, and skills to cope with and manage trauma. That provides evidence and evidence for the care and treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder. Such studies contribute to discussions regarding trauma theories, including studies involving intergenerational trauma that oral history has contributed as a useful method. Currently, oral history widely applied in this field includes studies of the Jewish community during the Holocaust or studies of boat people and migrations extends to the study of similar traumas.

#### **4. Discussion**

After reviewing a number of topics and areas of research that can apply oral history, then compared with the current status of application of oral history in Vietnam, we find that legitimacy and expanding the coverage of oral history in historical research in Vietnam faces many difficulties for the following reasons:

*Theoretically*, including philosophy, theory, and methodology, Vietnamese historians are largely attached to the belief in the "objective" scientific paradigm of history, that is, they perceive there is a universal truth. In general, to achieve external objective historical facts, historians need to have sufficient knowledge, logical thinking, and scientific critical methods for historical sources to be able to discover historical laws and reveal historical truth, historical facts. Meanwhile, history in the world has undergone many shifts in terms of epistemology and historical methodology: from political history to social history, and economic history; from macro history to micro-history; from the hero and elite to the lower classes; from emphasizing the effects of social structure, geography, technology to focus on the mind, psychology, memory, spirit, perception. When the perspective is in a paradigm of positivism, grand narrative,



the story of anonymous people becoming "small" and "trivial" is inevitable. Breaking away from that paradigm or switching to another requires understanding the philosophical underpinnings including key concepts in order to understand the full range of underlying assumptions, theories, and debates surrounding them and the approaches to the research topic together with the methodologies corresponding to that paradigm. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn argues that scientific discourse is historically and culturally conditioned between those who set the rules and forms of inquiry and those who agree on investigative and explanatory strategies and they are institutionalized over a period of time, within a certain scientific community, and within a particular paradigm. Therefore, in order to legitimize oral history, we must first acknowledge its value, promote translation and dissemination activities, and in parallel open debate and exchange with practical application in Vietnamese history. When a scientific community is still in an "objective" paradigm that values political history, diplomacy, war with a macro perspective, grand narratives, the cult of elite figures, and truth-seeking, historical law methodology face many difficulties and embarrassments when dealing with "small" stories of anonymous individuals because of the lack of foundations and approaches to interpreting them.

The lack of a philosophical foundation and social theories and methodology in the various social sciences as analyzed above is a major obstacle to looking at historical sources in new ways. In addition, the failure to update current discussions and debates about the transformation of historical research paradigms: post-positivism; constructivism; interpretivism; historicism, and new historicism in humanity and social sciences as pointed out by Dinh Xuan Lam and Pham Hong Tung (2009) not only limit choosing the topics of historical research, but also lack of new historical interpretations. This challenge has not yet been adapted, Vietnamese historians have to face the digital age in which the digitization of social life and digital humanity creates big data sources requiring the use of methods related to computers and software such as data science, data-mining, and text-mining. Recent publications by historians show that they have had to quickly change and adapt to the digital age (see *Oral History and Digital Humanities: Voice, Access, and Engagement* (Boyd and Mary, 2014) and *Computation and the Humanities: Toward an Oral History of Digital Humanity* (Nyhan and Flinn, 2016). They constantly borrow theoretical frameworks and research methods from other social sciences, creating sub-disciplines such as media history, cultural history, family history, and women's history, and legitimizing some methods of obtaining information and analyzing historical data to adapt to the interdisciplinary and rapidly changing science due to the development of technology.

*About theoretical framework and analytical framework.* Unless the historian wants to find facts from the oral testimony, and then compare this oral testimony with a variety

of historical sources to fulfill the historical picture of the past not regardless of how the story is told and what they mean. But the historian is concerned with the subjectivity of those oral testimonies. Information from anonymous personal accounts collected in studies must be placed within a reasonable theoretical and analytical framework. Research aimed at the subjectivity of individuals: such as psychology, cognitive ability, memory, mood, experience, and emotions, the analysis must be established on theoretical frameworks, in which analysis will focus on the relationship between the individual and society, the individual and the discourse; individual and power; individual in each historical context; individual and culture; individuals and with the natural environment and with social changes. This analytical direction will delve into the mechanisms underlying the narrator's language; analyze the subjectivity and intersubjectivity of the narrator and the interviewer (researcher). It requires a systematic process of analyzing data sources using analytical methods with procedure and credit techniques; after that reference to other data units (text, statistics, images, diaries, etc.) and discuss results with previous studies. If we only describe at the simple level of narration and quote the responses of the interviewees that the author agrees with and considers meaningful without looking at the individual's accounts in the whole background also the theoretical basis of the topic and the connection oral testimony with the larger factors surrounding personal life that make the result of research difficult to convince its scientificity, namely a well-founded generalization.

*About analytical methods.* Historians have overemphasized methods of gathering information, and historical documents, but neglecting analytical methods and strategies of analysis and creating interesting arguments. Much attention has been paid to methods and techniques of obtaining information (collection of data from archives, national and local libraries, and books as well as qualitative research methods such as participatory observations, field notes, in-depth interviews, group interviews, and semi-structured interviews). The presentation of research results is sometimes just arranged narratives in chronological order and according to simple general logic and then quoted in the style of "cite chapter and verse". On the other hand, they wish to find the details and facts of what happened in the narratives and then narrate it as a complete historical narrative. But for other oral history paradigms as mentioned above, historians need an analytical framework for the relationships between individuals and social structures, individuals with discourses, individuals with social structures, and larger context. Therefore, in order to construct a good research work to contribute academically, in which credit and reliable verification and construction of interpretations are needed, analytical methods are needed and must be based on coherence from research literature review, theoretical framework, and research approach to research questions. Data analysis methods such as content analysis, discourse analysis, especially inductive analysis methods from grounded theory, and many other analytical methods must be applied to process and analyze the collected

data and create well-founded generalizations in a clear, transparent, and grounded manner in the research results. If there are no analysis methods of data, the researcher only stops describing the data, only exploiting the information on the surface of language, and phenomena, and only presenting common generalizations such as (features, characteristics, advantages, disadvantages, situations and solutions). If simple citing and quoting collected data rather than data analysis to extract findings from the social relationships and underlying meanings of things and phenomena, it will be difficult to have interesting historical explanations, and not create a premise for inheritance and debate to gain reasonably historical knowledge in the future.

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