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Possibilities of Oral History in Japan

—Its Present and Future—¹⁾

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American oral historians who are accustomed to using Japanese audio equipment for their interviews, transcriptions, and duplication might assume that we Japanese researchers must be taking advantage of these products to preserve our own oral history. On the contrary, in Japan, oral history is an underdeveloped discipline, used under various labels, mainly by academics who are often trained overseas or writers who have found interviews effective in collecting personal stories—without clear-cut methodological guidelines. This paper examines how oral interviews have been discussed and used in Japan, where oral history stands today in its historical studies, and how we can develop it into a full-fledged discipline as in the United States

The “Tradition” of Oral History in Japan

Oral History is called *kôjutsushi* or *kikigaki* in Japanese. Although sometimes called *ôraru hisutorî*, the English expression is not widely accepted. *Kôjutsushi* or *kikigaki* includes not only taped interviews but also “dictated” stories where an interviewer wrote down what the narrator told him. As such, this approach to history is said to date back to the eighth-century *Kojiki*. However, modern oral history, as an active approach to history and education, is little studied or understood. In 1996, a sociologist, Tani Tomio, defined *kôjutsushi* as a narrated personal history in the form of an interview, which needed to be tape-recorded, transcribed, edited, and polished to become a “life history.”

The first attempt to examine oral history systematically as a historical approach took place in 1987, when the Historical Science Society of Japan (Rekishi Kenkyû Kai) featured oral history in its *Rekishigaku kenkyu* (*Journal of Historical Studies*). Aware of the lack of an academic evaluation of the oral history approach, the journal discussed the possibility of common ground among those who used oral interviews for their research and writing. The first part was based on a symposium—reports and discussion by scholars, with reference to oral history in England, and the second part, ironically, was scholars’ interviews with a non-fiction writer, Sawachi Hisae, and a “reportage” writer, Honda Katsuichi.²⁾

Although rather informally put together, this was a significant landmark, showing that Japanese historians have started to recognize the widespread interview approach and the need to formulate both a methodology and an objective. Rather than giving an answer or presenting a model, much of the discussion was spent on reviewing the literature and raising questions about using oral history. To

show “models,” the journal printed interviews with Honda and Sawachi, who were considered expert interviewers, to solicit their interview techniques and opinions. Honda, a former newspaper reporter, had done extensive writing based on interviews on such topics as Ainu, Canadian Eskimos, Native Americans, African Americans, Vietnam War, and the Rape of Nanking. Through interviews with him, the journal attempted to examine the objective and validity of his interview approach.

The feature’s coverage stimulated further discussion of oral history in Japan. In the following year, the Historical Science Society published a book, *Ôraru hisutorî to taiken shi* (Oral history and experiential history), responding to the negative, as well as favorable comments, some of which considered oral history inaccurate and unestablished as a methodology compared to written documents.³⁾ The book tried to give an academic analysis of oral history, examining its advantages and limitations, and to develop it as a sophisticated and valid approach to historical studies. However, the fact that the conclusion ends with Honda’s own resistance to using the phrase “oral history” and his preference of “experiential history” as a label for his work shows that “oral history” was yet to be established in Japan.

Use of oral history in women’s studies has been discussed along with the use of oral history in general. In the same journal, Nagahara Kazuko outlined its past accomplishments in three categories: post-war women’s liberation movement; regional and working-class history; and war experience.

She considered oral history an important means of making women think of their present life, although she also pointed out that interviewers tended to have too much passion and presumptions.⁴⁾

Yamada Makiko examined oral history as an approach to women’s studies in 1994. With an international perspective—although without distinguishing the situation between Japan and other countries, the article outlined the objective of using oral history in feminist studies and reviewed its progress. Yamada, who has interviewed an Iranian woman residing in the United States and an Eskimo woman in Alaska, pointed out the difficulty in doing the interviews in a second language as well as in transcribing and translating them. She concluded her paper with a reference to the prevalence of feminist oral history in the United States and with a hope that Japan would learn from it and start an active discussion on its methodology.⁵⁾

While methodological discussions on the interview approach as “oral history” are very limited, works explaining the “life history” approach have come out from sociologists and social anthropologists. “Life history” or *seikatsushi* techniques have much in common with “oral history” techniques, although life history researchers tend to use narratives less directly and to restructure them more to suit their research agenda.⁶⁾ It is worth listing some major literature on the life history approach. Manuals and introductory books include: Tani Tomio, *Raihu hisutorî wo manabu hito no tame ni*, Nakano Takashi and Atsushi Sakurai, eds. *Raihu hisutorî no shakaigaku* (Sociology through life history) and “Intabyû kara raihu hisutorî e: Katarareta ‘jinsei’ to kousei sareta ‘jinsei’” (From interviews to life history: Narrated life and structured life).⁷⁾ Another sociologist, Kobayashi Tazuko has examined the interview approach in her articles, “‘Shinmitsusa’ to ‘fukasa’: Komyunikêshon ron kara mita raihu hisutorî” (“Closeness” and “depth”: Life history seen from communication theory) and “‘Keiken no monogatari’ to ‘fukugôteki jishoden’: Raihu hisutorî no kasane awase wo megutte” (“Experiential stories” and “compound autobiography”: Overlapping of life histories).⁸⁾ These are

useful and seem to be used by researchers outside the academic boundary of sociologists.

As a result, publications labeled “life history” are more identifiable among works based on interviews. Nakano Takashi, *Kōjutsu no seikatsu shi* (A narrative life history), published in 1977, was the first book in Ochanomizu Shobo’s “Life History Series” and is considered a pioneer work and a model of Japan’s oral history. Although the author was a sociologist by training and a former president of the Japan Sociology Association, he presented rather straight-forward transcription of the narratives, capturing the original dialect and adding minimal explanation, so that it could be used as a historical document.⁹⁾ The second in this series is Maeyama Takashi, *Hisouzokusha no seishin* (The ethics of the disinherited), portrayed the life of a Japanese immigrant to Brazil. Maeyama, a cultural anthropologist trained in Brazil and the United States and doing research on Japanese Brazilians, calls his work an interpreted image of his subject, not a self-image.

The first work clearly called “oral history” came out from the Japan Library Association (Nippon Toshokan Kyōkai). A group of its members organized a task force, Ōraru Hisutorī Kenkyūkai (oral history study group), to record the history of public libraries in middle- to small-size cities. Published in 1998, *Chūshō toshi ni okeru kōkyō toshokan no unei* is a product of such oral history interviews.¹⁰⁾ Although the interview method and format are more like dialogues and are different from the American oral history style, the book is significant in that it was planned and done as an oral history project in order to record the detailed history of some libraries through spoken narratives alone. This group is still in existence, with a plan to conduct further interviews.

If we include non-fiction stories such as historical reportage and analytical life histories, it can be said that there have been a fair number of works in oral history in Japan, although few of them call themselves “oral history.” Bibliographical listing and categorization of these works would be useful but would require another paper. The next section of this paper will be devoted to discussion on the problems that affect Japan’s development in oral history.

Barriers to Oral History’s Development in Japan

The causes of the underdevelopment of oral history in Japan can be compound. Some are general and broad, whereas others could be concrete and specific, but the following are the identifiable factors.

1. Japanese attitude toward the spoken language

A rather vague and yet obviously influential cultural factor is the Japanese low esteem for verbal communication or orally given information. Kasahara Tokuji points out that Japanese distrust in spoken narratives is one of the reasons why oral history has not acquired “citizenship” in Japan.¹¹⁾ There have been many sayings in Japanese that value “silence” or unsaid things over spoken words. Not only does this affect the interview process negatively, it also makes the society less receptive to information given orally.

Somewhat related to this is an aversion to getting the interviews tape-recorded. On the ground that narrators may become less talkative in front of a tape-recorder, some Japanese writers who are

considered to use *kikigaki*, such as Yamazaki Tomoko and Kanda Mikio, have stated that they refuse to use tape recorders.¹²⁾ Not only do these writers dislike being tape-recorded, they presume that others won't like it either.

2. Perception that interviews need to be processed and analyzed

Low esteem for oral information, combined with doubt about the accuracy of human memory, creates a negative environment for interview-based research. To counteract this, historians and sociologists have suggested that researchers should go beyond oral history interviews. This, of course, is a task that oral historians in other countries are dealing with also. The Historical Science Society of Japan, for example, praises Honda Katsuichi's approach for critically analyzing oral narratives before writing his books. Those in "life history" emphasize the need of restructuring oral information from interviews and analyzing the relationship between the narrator's life and his society. Either process could be overwhelming for non-academics or non-professional writers.¹³⁾

3. Lack of manual or guidelines for oral history interviews

As the focus of efforts to make oral interviews a valid source of information is critical analysis, researchers and academics have not provided a step-by-step manual or concrete guidelines for those interested in doing oral history interviews. Unlike the United States, where such publications are widely circulated and readily available, Japan offers little support or guidance in this field. To date, discussions have been taking place among academic and professional circles on the legitimacy issue, rather than on how oral history can be useful for the general public. It can also be pointed out that the historians' effort to legitimize oral history as a methodology relies on the pioneering work of a few individuals who utilized interviews. This way of developing an academic discipline was the case with Japan's folklore studies, which derived from Yanagida Kunio's personal commitment to the interview approach. Yet, following certain examples may not be suitable for formulating a clear-cut methodology for a wide range of people or for propagating the basic oral history interview approach.

4. Low interest in genealogical studies

Oral history in the United States draws much attention partly because the general public's interest in genealogy. As a means of collecting information on family history in a multi-ethnic society, oral history is very useful. Many family oral history books have been published, such as *Maggie's Dream*.¹⁴⁾ This contrasts to Japan's situation, where inquiry into ancestors has not broadly caught on. Most Japanese can safely assume that their family have resided in the same region, for farmers were tied to their land for generations under the feudal system. Even today, *koseki* (family registry) can easily allow one to trace back his family lineage.

5. Unclear ethical and legal issues

For oral history to have a solid foundation, ethical and legal issues have to be addressed, so that narrators will be both willing to give interviews and to allow them to be made publicly available. However, these are not matters comfortably received by most Japanese. As seen in the Historical

Science Society writings, both issues are called “moral” matters (*moraru*, which Japanese use for “morality,” usually meaning “manners”).¹⁵⁾

The sense of ethics, as seen in the Western concept based on the dichotomy between the good and the evil, is hard to find in Japan. Interviewers’ ethics will be harder to find. Shimizu Toru reports on a case where a writer forced an interview on someone who felt it would hurt his family, or an interviewer who stole some old pictures from his interviewee.¹⁶⁾ Legal matters are even less acknowledged. The notion of “contract” or “agreement” is rather new, and thus the concept of legality involved in business, government, and other organizations, is weak. Ethical and legal guidelines in oral history have yet to be drawn.

The lack of such guidelines can cause sad results. The Wakayama City Library’s immigration archives, according to its librarian, once conducted an extensive oral history project, conducting interviews with those who had emigrated overseas but then returned to Japan. However, the tapes have been stored away without any prospect of ever becoming publicly available on the ground, according to one source, that some of the interviews may contain stories that might hurt other people’s feelings. This may be just one example of oral history interviews that ended up being locked away.

6. Difficulty with Dissemination

As seen in the above-mentioned case, legal and ethical problems, combined with researchers’ tendency to collect oral history interviews for their own writing, seem to result in a lack of dissemination. Unless interviewers—often researchers themselves—turn the interviews into an written, edited form, they do not become available to the public. The situation is further affected by the fact that public institutions, such as universities, libraries and local museums, are not equipped to store oral histories and keep them available to the general public, not to mention planning or carrying out oral history projects.

This is partially due, it seems, to the fact that professionalization in general is not common. As job rotations are commonly practiced in many institutions, those with experience and training cannot stay in the same position for a long time. In order to improve the chance of dissemination of oral history interviews, well-trained oral historians, who can deal with legal issues and conduct interviews professionally, would be important.

7. History education in Japanese schools

In the United States, for example, oral history is now used in classrooms as a means for students to learn history actively. Japanese schools are not utilizing oral history, not to mention other kinds of active approaches to history education. Instead, history is considered a subject of “memorization” and is taught as such. Oral history can bring a change to history classrooms, but it will take a long time before high school history teachers will be receptive to oral history.

8. Discordance in historical views

Lastly, and probably most seriously, the problem with historical studies in Japan is the discord in

historical views, especially on Japan's involvement in Asia and World War II. As criticized internationally, there are still disagreements on whether such incidents as the Rape of Nanking and the enslaving of Asian women as "comfort ladies" really took place or not—issues that right-wing historians and activists deny occurred. Oral history testimonies of these incidents are thus criticized as false or exaggerated. Not only wording but some incidents which are held as "facts" are sources of debate. How oral history can attain proper respect in this kind of circumstances is a difficult question.

Honda Katsuichi points out, for example, that one of his interviewees, a former soldier who volunteered to offer factual information on the Rape of Nanking, gave a much smaller number of victims than what the Chinese had estimated. The narrator claimed he knew the "accurate" count and wanted to "correct" the false information propagated by the Chinese. After this interview appeared in Honda's article, the narrator further lowered the estimate of victims in response to threats he had received.¹⁷⁾

This kind of discord—or denial of Japan's war atrocities—makes documentation of history, especially through oral testimony, difficult. The problem lies not only in historical documentation and interpretations but also in the government's attitude toward the country's responsibility for the war. When accepting the past or telling the stories are rejected, how can we validate the goals and functions of oral history? This is a hard question to answer.

Possibilities and Future of Oral History in Japan

Under these circumstances, how will it be possible to firmly establish oral history in Japan as a valid historical approach? As interviews are used widely in Japan, it is important that there will be progress in terms of their procedure, reliability, and availability. The following can be set as broad and hopeful goals: (1) To develop a basic manual and guidelines, including ethic and legal aspects, so that there will be some kind of consensus and unity in terms of interview format; (2) To make collected interviews—in tapes and transcripts—available to the public as raw historical material; (3) To make public institutions, such as universities and regional libraries, undertake oral history projects; and (4) To create a network among those interested in or already involved in oral history. To attain these goals and enhance the future of oral history in Japan, the following are suggested as possibilities.

1. Utilizing the existing interest in the life history approach

In the light of life history's popularity in Japan, it is possible for oral history to gain legitimacy as a wider application of the interview approach which won't require an highly academic analysis. Life history in Japan, as in the Western countries, has an emphasis on the researcher's skill in reconstructing and interpreting his subject's life story. However, by laying out a more basic interview process for collecting oral history interviews, academics will be able to allow a wider range of people to do the interviewing and use their recorded oral history interviews as raw data for their own analysis. In that sense, it will be possible to expand the "life history" into an "oral history" field

which will benefit the life history sociologists in a long run.

In other words, it is not a matter of categorization but rather a matter of well-managed, well-conducted interviews that will allow researchers to do the analysis according to their disciplines.

2. Creating a branch or committee in already-established organizations

Oral history can contribute a great deal to existing academic organizations, especially in social science and humanities disciplines. The Historical Science Society of Japan has already pointed out the importance of oral history and yet, at the same time, its need to address the problem of establishing it as a respected method. It is hoped that the Society will continue its effort to develop oral history as an important approach to historical studies. The Library Association, as seen earlier, has started an oral history study group. Other organizations that can benefit from oral history would be the Japanese Association for American Studies and the Japanese Association for Immigration Studies, in which some members have used oral history. Women's studies, literary studies, and others could also take an active part, many of whom have already published works using oral history interviews.

3. Utilizing Japanese researchers abroad or with exposure to oral history abroad

As in the case of Maeyama Takashi, Yamada Makiko and others, many of the Japanese scholars who have published works in oral history (or life history) have been trained or educated or have done research overseas. By connecting them under the title "oral history," we may be able to gather a fairly big group.

4. Making it part of museology and library science programs

Many universities in Japan offer certificate programs in which you can get training and a licence as librarians or as museum attendants. Oral history is not used at all or even mentioned in these programs, but it would be ideal if a course in oral history will be taught to those students as part of their programs.

A problem lies in that professionalization or specialization is not common in Japan. In many institutions including libraries, job assignments are rotated regularly and discourage people from staying in the same work for a long period of time. In such a system, professional knowledge and experience cannot be accumulated or developed into expertise. All the more, by having an oral history training program at universities, it may be possible for laymen to sign up and get some training when they are assigned to the task of doing some oral history.

5. Affiliation with other Asian countries

Oral history is not common in Asia in general, but in some countries, such as China, India, and Singapore, researchers are beginning to use it for their research. While making efforts to develop oral history in Japan, we can also get connected with oral history researchers and practitioners in those countries and work together. As in collecting World War II history, it may mean that collecting stories on some topics could be a sensitive issue. However, cooperation between Japanese and other Asian scholars to collect oral histories will be beneficial.

6. Affiliation with oral history organizations abroad

Because of the lack of oral history organizations in Japan, it would be good if oral history practitioners in Japan joined with overseas organizations, such as Oral History Association (U.S), Oral History Society (U.K), and International Oral History Association. Oral history researchers and practitioners in North America and Europe have already developed guidelines and methods of oral history and established it as a well-respected discipline. A large proportion of Japanese researchers who are using oral interviews have obviously been exposed to this approach while they were overseas. It is also true that many of them are dealing with topics that involve countries other than Japan, such as Japanese immigrants overseas or immigrants to Japan. It should be possible, then, to develop oral history in Japan as part of an international network of oral history practitioners and scholars. Since the basic skills and procedures of managing oral history interviews are transferrable, Japan can benefit from the expertise that has already been established in other countries over the past half century.

Oral History Association of the United States, for example, already has an international quality. In its 1998 annual meeting in Buffalo, researchers from Europe, Canada, Brazil, India, and Japan were present. Would it be possible for Oral History Association to create an International Committee and serve the needs for oral history researchers in countries where such organizations are not yet created? The Oral History Society in England, which started in 1973, is another organization that Japan can look up to. Muramatsu Takao explained and evaluated what Japan could learn from it in the 1987 issue of *Rekishigaku kenkyū*.¹⁸⁾ The International Oral History Association will be a good place for Japanese oral historians to join.

7. Utilizing the Internet for organizing researchers and disseminating information on oral history projects

To realize the above goals, the internet will prove crucial. Because there are no core organizations of oral history in Japan, it will be important to connect those who are using the oral history approach, scattered across various disciplines and geography. The Internet will make this possible. H-NET has allowed those in oral history to exchange information with each other world-wide, whereas oral history projects can now be publicized through homepages. Through this new medium, Japan can easily join in the world-wide “oral history movement” that is now in progress.

Conclusion

In Japan, the oral interview approach to history has been used fairly well in various forms, although it is rarely labeled “oral history.” Concerted efforts have not been made to popularize it as a methodology. Either predominated by life-history researchers, amateurs or non-history professionals, experts in tape-recorded interviews in Japan do not perceive their work as “oral history.”

In view of the world-wide network of oral history scholars and practitioners, it is important—and will be quite possible—that Japanese society will accept this discipline under the name “oral history” and come up with basic guidelines in accordance with international standards. This will stimulate the

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collection of interviews worth preserving as historical information, as well as opening up the information to a wide range of researchers and future generations. Oral history in Japan has a great potential, and those who are already in it need to gain international cooperation and utilize the Internet in order to make it part of the international oral history movement.

Notes

- 1) An earlier version of this paper has been presented at the annual meeting of the Oral History Association in Anchorage, Alaska, in October 1999. The author wishes to acknowledge that this study has been made possible by a Sugiyama Jogakuen University Kaigai Kenshū Grant and a Fulbright Senior Visiting Scholar grant.
- 2) *Rekishigaku Kenkyu* (Journal of Historical Studies), 586 (1987), pp. 1–72.
- 3) *Rekishigaku Kenkyū Kai, Ōraru hisutorī to taiken shi—Honda Katsuichi no sakuhin wo megutte* (Oral history and experiential history: Over Honda Katsuichi's work) (Tokyo: Aoki Shoten, 1988), 129.
- 4) Nagahara Kazuko, "Josei shi to kikigaki" (Women's history and oral history), *Rekishigaku Kenkyu*, 586 (1987), pp. 15–18.
- 5) Yamada Makiko, "Joseikenkyū no hōhō to shite no ōraru historī" (Oral history as an approach to oral history), *Josei rekishi bunka kenkyu-sho journal*, 2 (1994), pp. 65–80.
- 6) Valerie Raleigh Yow explains the life history approach as a form of oral history. See Yow, *Recording Oral History* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1994).
- 7) Tani Tomio, *Raihu hisutorī wo manabu hito no tame ni* (For those who study life history) (Kyoto: Sekai Shisōsha, 1996), Nakano Takashi and Sakurai Atsushi, eds. *Raihu hisutorī no shakaigaku* (Sociology through life history) (Tokyo: Kobundo, 1995); and "Intabyū kara raihu hisutorī: Katarareta 'jinsei' to kousei saretā 'jinsei'" (From interviews to life history: Told life and structured life), in Toshiichi Baba, ed., *Chiho bunnka no shakaigaku* (Kyoto: Sekai Shiso Sha, 1998).
- 8) Kobayashi Tazuko, "'Shinmitsusa' to 'fukasa': Komyunikēshon ron kara mita raihu hisutorī" ("Close-ness" and "depth": Life history seen from communication theory), *Shakaigaku hyōron* 168 (1992), pp. 89–101; and "'Keiken no monogatari' to 'fukugōteki jishoden': Raihu hisutorī no kasane awase wo megutte" ("Experiential stories" and "compound autobiography": Overlapping of life histories), in Inoue, Soda and Fukui, eds., *Bunka no chiheisen* (Kyoto: Sekai shisō sha, 1994), pp. 73–93.
- 9) Nakano Takashi, *Kojutsu no seikatsu shi: Ai to noroi no kindai* (A narrative life history: Modern era of love and curse) (Tokyo: Ochanomizu Shobo, 1977).
- 10) Ōraru Hisutorī Kenkyūkai. *Chūshō toshi ni okeru kōkyō toshokan no unei* (Running a library in a small-to middle-size city) (Tokyo: Nihon Toshokan Kyōkai, 1998).
- 11) *Rekishigaku Kenkyu Kai, Ōraru hisutorī to taiken shi*, pp. 109–110.
- 12) *Rekishigaku Kenkyu*, 586 (1987), p. 4.
- 13) On this matter, anthropologists view people as culture-bearers and try to establish the relationship between culture and personality through life history. See Sidney Mintz, "The Anthropological Interview and the Life History," *Oral History Review*, 7 (1979), pp. 18–26, reprinted in David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum, eds., *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology* (Walnut Creek: Altamira, 1996), 2nd ed., pp. 298–305.
- 14) James P. Comer, *Maggie's Dream* (New York: American Library, 1988).
- 15) *Rekishigaku Kenkyu*, 586 (1987), p. 23.

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16) *Ibid.*

17) *Ibid.*, pp. 59–60.

18) Muramatsu Takao, “Igirisu ni okeru ôraru hisutorî” (Oral history in England), *Rekishigaku Kenkyu*, 586 (1987), pp. 6–9.