Piecing the story together: the political and psychological aspects of oral history interviewing in the Chinese/Vietnamese Diaspora

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Introduction

Oral history, a method of research that '[records] the speech of people' and 'then [analyses] their memories of the past' (Abrams, 2010, p. 1), has its roots in understanding the social and cultural experiences of individuals in times of political strife (Perks and Thomson [eds], 2006). This approach to the past, according to Thompson (1978), gives voice to those who have none amidst more traditional, source-based histories that can myopically forward economically elitist narratives. It is not to say that oral history cannot be used to supplement top-down approaches, but it has largely been a method promoting empowerment -- a history for the people by the people. Accordingly, it is a highly politicized form of history.

Not only can oral history provide a more complete picture of the past by documenting the lives of people from different walks of life, it simultaneously records the emotions invested in pivotal moments, both individual and collective. It is in this association to the realm of feeling and psyche, as well as the self-reflection stimulated by the interviews, that we find a connection to depth psychology: it provides a framework within which we may comprehend the nature of these feelings and emotions.

In this chapter, I explore how the use of this technique captures the complex ways in which individuals construct their identity, particularly members of the Chinese/Vietnamese Diaspora in London, who have experienced both political and cultural upheaval. Depth psychological ideas, especially Jungian ones, have helped me to understand a) the nature of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee and b) the psychological dynamics at play in the identity formation of participants who have matured in a climate of political unrest (experienced at the level of society, family and the individual) and who are faced with the (alarming) prospect of cultural fluidity and multiplicity. I argue, via a critical assessment of

interviews conducted with a sibling pair, that a Jungian way of working provides insights to oral historians that enriches their work which is, at core, politically-charged.

Methodological and ethical issues

I had reservations about interviewing siblings. Choosing siblings means that the data collected is not a random sampling of a given population. It further increases the loss of anonymity, which leads to an ethical issue. Although both R. (the elder sister) and J. (the younger brother) signed consent forms, this did not prevent the occurrence of ethically-challenging situations. For example, R. was interviewed first and J. second, on a separate day. At the end of our conversation J. asked how long his sister's interview lasted. The length of the interview became for him a standard by which the 'better' interviewee could be established, a point to which I will return below.

I decided to proceed with the interviews for several reasons. First, there has been a growing realisation within sociology, social psychology and the academic study of social policy that more work needs to be done on horizontal family relationships to balance what has been a concentration on vertical ones (Edwards et al. [eds], 2006; Mauthner, 2002; Ryan-Flood, 2015; Sanders, 2004). Second, there is an existing literature on siblings from psychoanalytic and psychosocial perspectives (Abend, 1984; Coles, 2003; Coles [ed], 2006; Lucey, 2011; Mitchell, 2003). Third, Jung did not shy away from studying families, including siblings. He applied the association test to twenty-four families, which consisted of one hundred participants who produced twenty-two thousand associations (1909/1973).[1] Finally, the researcher needs to be realistic about what the data provides and how he/she treats it. The interviews from which I draw are neither an indicative nor a representative sample of the Chinese/Vietnamese Diaspora community in London. This does not mean, however, that single cases cannot be a source of insight (Hinshelwood, 2013). So long as one is realistic about what can be done with the data, the potential pitfalls are manageable.

Interview with R.

R., who is twenty-three years of age, was born and raised in Croydon and has completed a university degree. She displayed a complex understanding of her identity, one situated between opposites and evidencing the potential flexibility of her loyalties:

> I feel like I get the best of both worlds. At home, I get the Chinese [...] I even went to Chinese school, so I had that side of me, and then when I went back to normal school, I was the English R., so I had two sides. (Interview with R., 16/9/14).

R. establishes that there are two sides to her identity, embracing both her Chinese ethnicity and the influence of British culture. She describes how her brother struggled at Chinese school and how she helped him get by. In some instances, she completed his homework so that punishment was avoided. Her brother dropped out of Chinese school after one year. R. persisted and eventually achieved an A-level credit for Chinese. This accomplishment supports the belief (held by J.) that R. (more so than him) embraces her background. Such a judgement is buttressed by R.'s hobbies and interests, which are deemed typically Chinese, like watching Chinese serial dramas. Her sibling's indifference to Chinese entertainment explains, for R., his lack of interest in Chinese culture and his lower level of fluency.

For R., the ability to speak Chinese fluently becomes the barometer by which one's cultural competency is measured. She provides a sociologically-nuanced account of why this might be. Her brother has befriended a diverse group of friends from different ethnicities, which explains why he is not as 'Chinese'. Yet a moment of tension arises when, upon reflection, she realises that the same could be said of her. It is only since entering university that the number of her Chinese friends has increased. This, she reasons, elucidates the 'two sides' within herself, although she understands why she is perceived as being more Chinese. Yet she is adamant that her 'Britishness' is what defines her:

> Just because I can speak Chinese and my friends are Chinese, doesn't mean I'm not influenced by British culture. Simple things like the music I listen to, the way I speak, it's British [...] Do you ever ask yourself, what language you hear in your mind? [...] My first language and everything I think in my head is English. So, I would say I'm more British (ibid).

I now turn to J.'s interview before assessing the ways in which depth psychological ideas inform my understanding of these narratives and the nature of this sibling relationship.

Interview with J.

J. is twenty-one and has completed a university degree. What surprised me about this interview was the consistent emphasis placed on family and friends, especially the former. His social network is comprised of a variety of racial backgrounds, but he has very few Caucasian and Chinese friends. J.'s minimal interaction with other Chinese, however, does not curtail how close he feels to his heritage. The key to this sense of connection is the notion of family, as opposed to R.'s emphasis on language. Perhaps it is because J. is aware that his sister's fluency is stronger that he chooses to focus on a core value rather than a tangible illustration of ability (i.e., mastery of a language). Regardless, J. asserts the centrality of family; it is fundamental to, and the essence of, being Chinese:

> I've always got along with my mum and dad. My dad's always been at work, so he hasn't really looked after us. But he's been there [...] My mum [...] was like study, do this, do that, but she's always been there to help us as well [...] I don't argue with her [...] I [...] try to make her happy [...] At the end of the day you just can't hold a grudge (Interview with J., 2/10/14).

J. then reflects on how his relationship to his parents is different to those of his friends. While others may treat their parents as 'mates', J. could never accept this type of interaction. His emphasis on the uniqueness and peculiarity of being Chinese is maintained throughout the interview:

> I wouldn't say I'm Vietnamese. I would say I'm Chinese. But if they asked me where I was born, I would say I was born here [in the UK]. I grew up here, but I'm Chinese. I'll never say I'm Vietnamese even though my parents are born in Vietnam. I never speak Vietnamese; all we do is eat Vietnamese food. But our culture is Chinese, isn't it? (ibid).[2]

Those who would base their understanding of J.'s connection to his culture on linguistic aptitude alone are mistaken:

> I don't look English, do I? Even though I'm British, I'm Chinese. I'm proud [...] When my mum used to call me on a bus packed with people, I wouldn't speak Chinese, I'd just speak English to my mum. When you're a little kid growing up, maybe you're a little bit embarrassed. But now I'm proud [...] I'd speak Chinese on purpose now (ibid).

His resolve to speak the language, even though he is less confident than his sister, is a marker of his commitment to being Chinese. He is quick to add that his inability to speak fluently does not diminish his devotion to his ethnicity: 'No, I think if I spoke better Chinese, I'll just be speaking differently [...] But I'll be the same person' (ibid).

A sibling transference

What fascinated me about both interviews was the constant reference to siblings when each reflects on their respective identities. It seems that one's sibling is crucial in the formation and articulation of one's identity. This might be a consequence of interviewing siblings, where interviewees know that one's brother/sister would also be questioned. There is a possibility that their responses anticipate what the other *might* say. These fantasies of the other sibling is related to what Coles (2003) terms a *sibling transference*, although I use the term slightly differently here. While she refers to a sibling transference between the analyst and analysand, I am specifying what is being projected onto one's sibling.

An initial observation is that the 'other' of one's hybrid identity -- a *shadow* specific to this Diaspora group -- has been split off and projected onto the other sibling. Stated another way, a projection of alterity or shadow has taken place, based on a fantasy of the other sibling's perceived identity. The projection 'sticks' because the sibling's respective actions provide suitable hooks onto which those projections may be attached. So, J. is perceived to be more British because of his disregard for Chinese school and his racially diverse social network. Based on these experiences, R. forms a particular image of her brother's connection to their heritage.

R. is perceived as closer to her culture because she possesses excellent language skills and enjoys Chinese dramas. Based on this, J. perceives her strong connection to their ancestry as a defining characteristic of her identity. Yet in fantasizing that the sibling manifests the 'other' of one's hybrid identity, one is blinded by shadow, which denies the possibility of

seeing the other sibling's identity for all its complexities. An understanding of one's sibling becomes simplified: R. *is* Chinese and J. *is* British. In actuality, the opposite is the case.[3]

I propose that we take seriously the prospect of being blinded by shadow -- a blindness that may lead to over-simplification -- and apply it to how we analyze these interviews from the lens of depth psychology. By appreciating the multiplicity of possible interpretations, we avoid doing violence to the phenomenon under scrutiny; it becomes one way of being ethical.

The elephant/Canuck in the room

Are the participant responses informed by an image of their sibling as 'other' or are they responding to me -- the interviewer -- as 'other'? I may be like them, a product of the same Diaspora, but I am Canadian, not British.[4] Could R.'s response -- that she is British -- be a reaction to the differences in identity I represent, and not necessarily what her brother personifies for her? Upon reflection, I gave her opportunities to ascertain this. When discussing her education, I sought the Canadian equivalent to GSCEs and A-levels, so as to establish in my own mind her developmental trajectory.

J., alternatively, stressed his identity with me as members of the same Diaspora. As cited above, he referred at one point to *'our* culture' (Interview with J., 2/10/14, emphasis added). When he said 'our', he was not simply referring to his sister, family or even British-born Chinese (BBC). He was indicating *us*, building a rapport with me by emphasizing ethnic similarity rather than the difference betrayed by my accent.[5]

Unconscious competition

I noted J.'s interest in how 'well' his sister did at her interview. There was evidence that sibling rivalry existed, although not in a destructive form. Friendly rivalries, for instance, endure in sports and propel protagonists to achieve their best. Yet J.'s inquisitiveness did compel me to consider the extent to which their respective responses may be expressions of

unconscious competition (Adler, 1927/2010). R.'s insistence that she is British may be a defiant response to what she perceives as her brother's belief that she is Chinese. J's reply may be his answer to the pedestal on which he and his family have placed his sister (as the ideal of what it means to be Chinese), i.e., she may speak better Chinese, but that does not make him any less Chinese. Each sibling is perhaps attempting to outduel the other and who is triumphant is decided by the interviewer, hence J.'s curiosity about R.'s interview. Based on my impression of their relationship specifically and the family rapport more generally, I suggest that in this case, an explanation based on 'unconscious competition' to understand the psychological dynamics of identity formation at play in this sibling pair does not do justice to the genuine feeling expressed by both throughout the interviews.

A sibling connection

R. and J. share a relatively close and loving relationship, but maintain a respectful distance where their personal affairs are concerned (perhaps reflecting J.'s description of a 'Chinese' way of relating). The strength of their bond, I propose, was partly forged through a consistent paternal absence during their formative years. It is not the case that love was withheld, but because both parents were working tirelessly to run a takeaway, the children were left to fend for themselves and care for each other.[6] The formulation of their respective identities in the interviews -- vis à vis the other sibling -- may be read as an attempt to identify with, and re-iterate the bond between, siblings; in essence, a sibling *coniunctio*. Where J. is adamant that he is Chinese, the following message may be implicit: 'If you, my sister, are Chinese, then I will become closer to what I perceive you to be.' Similarly, R.'s insistence that she is British may be an attempt to communicate the following to her brother: 'If, as I perceive you to be, are British, then I will try to be more British too, as we are in this together.' One issue that arises, if this interpretation is appropriate, is that the attempt at identification is built on a fantasy of the other sibling, namely, the shadow projection held by

the brother or sister. The need to recognize shadow brings us back to one of the aims of this chapter and will serve as a springboard to my concluding point.

In therapy, some work might be dedicated to the withdrawal of these projections or sibling transferences. An oral history interview, although similar to what a moment in analysis may resemble, is ultimately not analysis (Figlio, 1988; Roper 2003). Depth psychology certainly provides tools that enrich our interpretation of interview material and frame our self-reflexivity as researchers. It cannot, however, serve as the sole lens utilised by oral historians. Despite these differences and difficulties, an emerging middle ground bridging the two disciplines may be the mutual concern for the political: the intrinsically political agenda of oral history and our deepening awareness of the political potential and impact of analytical psychology.

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[1] To my knowledge, Broderson (2012) and Abramovitch (2014) are the only Post-Jungians currently researching the topic of siblings.

[2] On the animosity between the Chinese and Vietnamese, see Lawrence (2008).

[3] Similarly, when faced with the numerous ways in which their respective identities could be discerned, both ultimately made clear-cut choices. The retreat into a definitive response is intriguing, but beyond the scope of this chapter.

[4] Different Diaspora experiences mean different narratives that have been transmitted down the family line. There are similarities, but they are not the same. See Chan (2011).

[5] The dynamic experienced can also be understood from the perspective of gender roles and relations of power (Foucault, 1978/1990).

[6] This sibling relationship can be understood as a *simulacra* and repetition of the parental one. I have noticed that many of the first generation in this community were, or still are, involved in running takeaways or restaurants. An archetypal theme may be emerging amongst the second generation, mainly, that of parental absence. This has led to strong relationships -- both positive and negative -- being cultivated between siblings. This familial configuration may be a distinguishing feature of the Chinese/Vietnamese Diaspora in London, which in turn shapes the psychological dynamics underpinning relationships between first, second, and even third generations.