The Value Implications, Operational Logic and Practical Pathways of the Oral History Method in Inheriting and Promoting the Reform and Opening-up Spirit

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Abstract: The reform and opening-up spirit is an important part of the spiritual pedigree of the Communist Party of China, yet its inheritance faces three challenges: the aging of witnesses, the growing historical distance felt by young people, and the symbolization of commemorative narratives. Centered on the narratives of witnesses, the oral history method can restore an abstract spirit to perceptible historical experience. Based on a review of existing research, this paper expounds the value implications of the method at three levels: preserving firsthand memories for a history still in progress, offering a concrete pathway for education in the Party's spiritual pedigree, and introducing a bottom-up perspective into the methodology of ideological and political education. Its operational logic involves three transformations: memory generation linking individual and national narratives, emotional transformation from emotional authenticity to value identification, and value anchoring that screens memories under historical materialism. Accordingly, four practical pathways are proposed: building oral history repositories through thematic collection and standardized archiving, transforming oral narratives into teaching cases through layered extraction, organizing practical teaching through classroom-fieldwork-cloud linkage, and establishing long-term mechanisms through school-community collaboration and developmental evaluation. The oral history method helps shift the inheritance of the reform and opening-up spirit from commemorative discourse to everyday transmission.

Keywords: oral history; reform and opening-up spirit; ideological and political education; spiritual pedigree; collective memory

0. Introduction

At the conference celebrating the 40th anniversary of reform and opening-up, President Xi Jinping observed that the great spirit of reform and opening-up forged in this process has greatly enriched the connotation of the Chinese national spirit and become the most distinctive spiritual hallmark of the Chinese people in the contemporary era. The reform and opening-up spirit is commonly summarized as the character of emancipating the mind and seeking truth from facts, the courage to break new ground and pioneer, and the commitment to inclusive, mutually beneficial cooperation. As an important component of the spiritual pedigree of Chinese Communists, its inheritance and promotion constitute a major task of ideological and political education. In practice, however, this task faces three pressures. First, the witnesses and builders of reform and opening-up are aging, and a large body of still-unrecorded memories—personally experienced, personally witnessed and personally heard—is at risk of irreversible loss. Second, young students have grown up in an era of material abundance and lack direct experience of scarcity and transformation, so that the inheritance of the spirit tends to remain at the level of conceptual memorization; for many of them, phrases such as a shortage economy or a planned allocation of jobs describe a world they can barely imagine. Third, some commemorative narratives have become ritualized and symbolized, compressing the connotation of the spirit into slogans that can hardly enter the lived experience of students.

The oral history method, as used in this paper, refers to the planned collection, organization and interpretation of personal testimonies about lived historical experience through structured interviews, together with the pedagogical use of the materials so produced. Its distinctive features are threefold: the narrator is a witness rather than a professional historian; the material retains the voice, emotion and perspective of an individual life; and the process of collection is itself an intergenerational dialogue. These features make the method particularly suitable for the transmission of spiritual values, which cannot be carried by abstract propositions alone but must be anchored in the experience of concrete persons.

Chinese scholarship has already accumulated a methodological foundation for this approach. Ye Fangxing was among the first to articulate the distinctive value of oral history as a research method for ideological and political education, advocating the use of oral history to reconstruct the ideological and political educational memories of members of society and to connect individual historical narratives with the national historical narrative [1]. Hou Yong and Xiao Yang systematically demonstrated the emergence, value and practical rationale of the oral history method in the discipline of ideological and political education, arguing that its introduction responds to the internal demand for refinement of the discipline [2], and they further explored its norms in terms of research objects, data collection and the application of results [3]. Notably, Hou Yong and Bao Lingyun, taking the great spirit of the War of Resistance as an example, demonstrated the operational logic and practical pathways of the oral history method in education concerning the Party´s spiritual pedigree [4], suggesting that combining the oral history method with the inheritance of revolutionary spirits has general significance.

At the level of teaching application, the accumulation is likewise considerable. Kuang Libo and Zhou Shuang´e revealed the value of oral history for patriotism education and its realization paths [5]; Sun Jian and Zhao Yuxiang, working from the realities of higher vocational colleges, proposed a four-in-one pathway integrating oral history resources into ideological and political courses, specialized courses, extracurricular activities and online education [6]; Zhu Wenying positioned the educational value of the oral history paradigm through three unities, namely of theory and practice, of subjectivity and guidance, and of uniformity and diversity [7]; Xing Wenhai and Zhang Wenjie analyzed the logical mechanism of integrating oral history practical teaching into ideological and political courses along four dimensions [8]; Pang Yi summarized, on the basis of years of teaching, the methods and multiple meanings of oral history as a course assignment, an exploration that contributed to a national teaching achievement award [9]; Zheng Jinghui and Lyu Shu´e explored the application of oral history in teaching the four histories in universities [10]; Ge Yingying and Li Jifeng accumulated systematic experience of oral history teaching through the construction of a compulsory course [11]; and Wu Fan proposed that a grand view of history should lead the whole process of oral history practical teaching [12].

These studies form the basis of the present paper, yet a gap remains: the reform and opening-up spirit has its particularities. The history it corresponds to is still in progress, which means that its witnesses are available but diminishing; its creators are hundreds of millions of ordinary builders rather than a limited number of prominent figures; and it is directly connected to the transformation of everyday life, so that its narrative materials are dispersed in countless families, factories and neighborhoods. These particularities mean that the transformation of this spirit through oral history cannot simply copy the existing experience of red memory centered on revolutionary martyrs and major campaigns, and requires dedicated study. This paper addresses three questions: What are the value implications of the oral history method for inheriting and promoting the reform and opening-up spirit? How does its operational logic unfold? And how can its practical pathways be implemented? The discussion draws mainly on the experience of Shenzhen, the most concentrated site of reform and opening-up memories, while the analytical framework is intended to be applicable to other regions.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 expounds the value implications

of the oral history method for inheriting and promoting the reform and opening-up spirit at three levels: historical preservation, spiritual pedigree education and disciplinary construction. Section 3 analyzes the operational logic of the method as three interlinked transformations, namely the generation of memory, the transformation of emotion and the anchoring of value. Section 4 proposes four practical pathways, covering resource development, curricular transformation, practical teaching and institutional support. Section 5 concludes the paper, acknowledges its limitations and points out directions for future research.

1. Value Implications

1.1 Historical preservation: safeguarding threefold firsthand memories of a history in progress

Unlike the revolutionary era, reform and opening-up is a history without a concluding chapter. Many of its participants are still alive, and their memories retain a distinctly living character. This living character is both an opportunity and a source of urgency: the first generation of special economic zone builders, the first generation of migrant workers and the first generation of self-employed entrepreneurs have mostly entered old age, and much of what they know—the details of decision-making, the hardships of starting businesses and the texture of daily life—has never entered archival documents. Oral history collection is therefore of a rescue nature. Since 2014, the Shenzhen Municipal Committee of the Chinese People´s Political Consultative Conference has continuously compiled Shenzhen Oral History, accumulating narratives from hundreds of witnesses across five series and forming a large living repository for observing reform and opening-up. The repository records, for example, the Hong Kong businessman Zheng Keming, the first to walk across the Luohu Bridge with a processing contract numbered CND001; the first generation of female workers in the Special Economic Zone, who completed their personal transformation beside assembly lines; the builders behind the speed of one floor in three days at the International Trade Building; and the water engineers who, over decades, maintained the Dongshen water supply project that carries Dongjiang water to Hong Kong. This practice shows that systematic oral collection is entirely feasible, and that the mutual verification of archival documents and oral narratives can significantly improve the completeness of historical writing [15]. Compared with textual archives, audio and video recordings additionally preserve tone, dialect and facial expression—carriers of meaning that a transcript can only partially convey. For the inheritance of the spirit, preservation is not an end in itself; but without this threefold firsthand foundation, spiritual interpretation loses its most vivid basis.

1.2 Educational value: a concrete pathway for spiritual pedigree education

A spirit is abstract, yet its transmission must appeal to the concrete. Oral history enters the micro world and everyday life of individuals, enabling abstract theory to gain concrete experiential support [1], which addresses precisely the weak point of spiritual pedigree education. The value of oral history for patriotism education revealed by Kuang Libo and Zhou Shuang´e shows that witness narratives play a role in arousing emotional resonance and enhancing value identification that classroom instruction can hardly replace [5]. More importantly, oral history helps bridge the generational gap: oral historical materials provide not only information that can be retold, but also foundational elements such as scenes and sentiments. Liu Yaqiu calls the instantly emerging details and ineffable feelings the glimmer of memory, and regards them as constituting the emotional authenticity peculiar to oral historical materials [13]. When students hear a first-generation female worker in the Special Economic Zone recount her youth beside the assembly line, or an elderly builder recall the pressure and determination behind the speed of one floor in three days, the reform and opening-up spirit turns from a concept into a life that can be empathized with. A student who interviews his own parents about why they left their hometown for Shenzhen in the 1990s is no longer memorizing a spirit but re-encountering his own family history within a national one. For students in vocational universities, who are themselves about to enter factories, laboratories and service posts as skilled workers, the narratives of the preceding generation of

skilled builders carry an additional, professional proximity: the craftsman spirit they read in textbooks is the very spirit their interviewees once embodied. Understanding achieved through embodied narratives of this kind is the precondition for the spirit to truly enter the ear, the mind and the heart.

1.3 Disciplinary value: expanding the methodology of ideological and political education

From a disciplinary perspective, the introduction of the oral history method responds to the demand for refinement of ideological and political education as a discipline [2][3]. Traditional education concerning revolutionary spirits has largely followed a top-down logic of instruction, whereas oral history brings a bottom-up shift of perspective: students are no longer merely recipients of the spirit, but can become collectors, organizers and re-narrators of memories, so that the educational process acquires a participatory structure. This structure fits well with the requirement of the Great Ideological and Political Course to make good use of the larger social classroom; oral history provides both resources for the course and a methodological framework for organizing practical teaching [7][11]. It also creates new research objects for the discipline: the ways in which students ask questions, the errors they make in interpreting memories, and the changes in their value judgments across a project are all observable materials for the study of educational effectiveness. In this sense, research on inheriting and promoting the reform and opening-up spirit through the oral history method also carries methodological significance for disciplinary construction, since it tests and refines the norms of the method on a subject that is still unfolding.

2. Operational Logic

2.1 Memory generation: linking individual and national narratives

The starting point of the oral history method is the transformation of individual memory into collective memory. The account of a single witness is fragmentary; only when an individual narrative is interpreted within the coordinates of the national narrative does memory acquire the function of carrying a spirit. Viewed from a grand historical perspective, the life experience of each individual, like the sea reflected in a drop of water, is a microcosmic refraction of the development of the times [12]. For the subject of reform and opening-up, this connection can be operationalized as a layered narrative: personal feelings and family changes form the surface layer, the course of industries and community memories form the middle layer, and urban development and national strategies form the deep layer. The task of collectors and interpreters is to guide narratives to establish connections among these layers. The processing contract numbered CND001, for instance, can be read at the surface layer as one businessman´s cautious attempt, at the middle layer as the beginning of the processing-with-supplied-materials industry in the Pearl River Delta, and at the deep layer as a footnote to the institutional opening of the country. Similarly, the memories of truck drivers who traveled between Shenzhen and Hong Kong can be read simultaneously as a family livelihood story, as the logistics history of two cities, and as a concrete record of economic integration under One Country, Two Systems. The linking of individual and national narratives is the first procedure in the generation of the spirit.

2.2 Emotional transformation: from emotional authenticity to value identification

Memory does not automatically turn into identification; emotion serves as the intermediary. The unpolished details in oral historical materials—a sigh, a pause, an evasive look—often prove more penetrating than complete and fluent narration [13], for they carry an emotional authenticity that has not been disciplined. The psychological mechanism of spiritual inheritance proceeds roughly through three stages: embodied encounter, emotional resonance and value internalization. Students first meet concrete persons in interviews or texts; then, through empathy, they come to understand the choices of that generation—why someone dared to sign the first contract, why someone endured the dormitory of a processing factory; finally, they convert the reform and opening-up spirit into their own frame of value. This process suggests that oral history teaching

should not filter out the rough edges of emotion in pursuit of a complete and fluent narrative; preserving the glimmer is precisely preserving the point of educational contact [13]. It also suggests that the time for classroom silence after a testimony, and the space for students to voice doubt, are not pedagogical redundancies but necessary components of emotional transformation. A student who is allowed to ask whether the hardships were worth it is closer to genuine identification than one who is required to recite that they were.

2.3 Value anchoring: screening memory under historical materialism

The subjectivity and fragmentariness of oral historical materials mean that they can be misread, and this is especially true of materials on reform and opening-up: there is both a tendency to romanticize the period and avoid its twists and turns, such as presenting every entrepreneurial story as an effortless success, and a tendency to use partial failures to devalue the overall historical progress, the latter being a common device of historical nihilism. The operation of the oral history method must therefore contain a mechanism of value anchoring, that is, screening and interpreting memories with historical materialism as the yardstick, and establishing the value coordinates for criticizing historical nihilism while cherishing vivid narratives [14]. In practice, a grand view of history should run through the whole process of collection, organization and teaching [12], and the rigor of historical source use should be enhanced through the mutual verification of oral narratives and archival documents [15]. Screening does not mean filtering out different voices, but helping students understand the dialectical relationship between individual memory and the overall course of history: a laid-off worker´s complaint and an entrepreneur´s celebration are both memories, and the task of teaching is to place them within the same historical process rather than to select one and discard the other. This itself is an organic part of education in historical materialism.

3. Practical Pathways

3.1 Resource development: thematic collection and standardized archiving

Resource development must begin with a sense of rescue, with a timetable for collecting from elderly witness groups. Collection should follow a thematic design, drawing on frameworks such as entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship, skilled talents and the craftsman spirit, and grassroots officials and the history of the Party and the state [9], so that oral collection is directed from the outset toward the points of spiritual interpretation rather than unbounded conversation. The organizing stage requires established norms covering the whole chain: interview outlines prepared after documentary preparation, verbatim transcription of recordings, factual verification against archives, informed consent and ethical review, and digital archiving with standardized metadata on time, place, interviewer and subject. The collection and editing norms developed over the years by the cultural and historical affairs system of the CPPCC can be directly adopted by universities [15], while universities can in turn bring their intellectual strengths to local cultural and historical work, building thematic oral history repositories through school-community cooperation. New technologies can be introduced prudently at this stage: speech recognition accelerates transcription, and geographic information coding can present historical change visually, provided that all machine-processed texts are proofread against the recordings and that interviewee authorization explicitly covers digital storage and possible online dissemination. Institutions in a position to do so may also draw on existing experience of applying oral history in teaching the four histories, planning resource development and course construction simultaneously [10].

3.2 Curricular transformation: layered extraction of oral narratives into teaching cases

Raw oral materials, with their voluminous information and diverse perspectives, cannot be moved directly into the classroom and must undergo layered extraction in a pedagogical sense. In practice, the textbook system should be decomposed by themes, so that oral materials of different

periods and subjects are precisely matched to corresponding teaching topics [6]. A testimony about migrant work, for example, can serve the topic of the decisive role of reform and opening-up in determining the destiny of contemporary China when it is read together with the institutional history of the labor market. During extraction, particular attention should be paid to preserving the emotional authenticity of oral historical materials, treating fleeting details as the educational touchpoints of a case rather than as noise [13]. Classroom organization should replace one-way instruction with narrative seminars, setting question chains around oral texts: What did the narrator actually experience? Which details carry emotions that official documents do not record? Where does the memory diverge from the record, and how should the divergence be explained? What choice would you have made in the narrator´s position, and what does your answer say about your own values? Through such questions, students are guided to compare the accounts of different narrators and to analyze the tension between memory and historical fact, so that the training of historical source verification and the comprehension of spiritual connotations are accomplished in the same process [7].

3.3 Practical teaching: classroom, fieldwork and cloud linkage

Having students conduct oral history themselves is one of the most effective pathways of spiritual inheritance. Course assignments can follow the mature three-step experience: at the beginning of the semester, the purpose, norms and techniques of oral history are taught and the weight of the assignment in the course grade is made clear; at midterm, progress reports and draft reviews are conducted; and at the end of the semester, classroom presentations respond to the core issues of the course [9]. In view of the common problem that student assignments tend to be superficial and read like running accounts [9], preliminary training should be offered to help students build a grand view of history and an interview methodology [12]; after interviews, narratives should be organized and interpreted against documentary sources such as local gazetteers and statistical yearbooks, turning the assignment into a complete inquiry-based learning exercise. For fieldwork, students can be organized to visit historical sites such as the Reform and Opening-up Exhibition Hall, the Qianhai Stone and Lianhua Mountain to interview witnesses, so that the urban space itself becomes a walkable curriculum. For vocational universities, this model fits naturally with the tradition of learning by doing: an interview project is at once an ideological and political exercise and a piece of professional training in communication, documentation and project management. For the cloud, oral audio-visual materials and student-made micro-documentaries can be gathered into an online repository and broadcast as ideological and political micro-courses on short-video platforms, so that spiritual resources continue to grow beyond the limits of time and space [7][12]. The three settings are connected throughout by teacher-student co-creation: students participate in the secondary organization of oral materials, the production of micro-videos and the planning of exhibitions, becoming collaborators in teaching and re-creators of educational resources, and in this process they complete the transformation from listeners of stories to storytellers.

3.4 Institutional support: collaboration and developmental evaluation

For oral history practical teaching to be sustainable, the problem of everything ending with the course must be solved [8]. At the institutional level, universities should provide top-level design, set up special support, improve training systems and foster an atmosphere of practice [6][8], and establish stable cooperation with CPPCC cultural and historical affairs committees, archives, museums, media organizations and communities to jointly develop practice bases and invite witnesses into classrooms. In evaluation, a single result-oriented assessment should be replaced by process-oriented and developmental evaluation, incorporating interview practice, case seminars and creative output into assessment [8], and combining questionnaires, in-depth interviews, learning logs and classroom observation for triangulation, so as to assess the actual effectiveness of spiritual inheritance across cognitive, emotional and behavioral dimensions: what students know about the history, whether they feel connected to it, and whether they are willing

to act on it. At the same time, platforms for exchanging results should be built, outstanding works should be promoted to higher-level competitions, and evaluation should be used to stimulate learning and feed back into classroom teaching [12].

It should be emphasized that the four pathways presuppose certain conditions and cannot be implemented mechanically. Resource development requires a stable team and continuous funding, without which collection easily becomes a one-off campaign. Curricular transformation presupposes that teachers themselves have received basic training in oral history; otherwise the layered extraction of narratives will be reduced to the casual quotation of a few vivid sentences. Practical teaching depends on students´ available time and on the accessibility of witness groups, which varies considerably across regions and school types. Institutional support, finally, is a matter of long-term negotiation between a university and its social partners rather than a document to be issued. Recognizing these conditions is not a reason for hesitation but a reminder that the pathways should be adapted to local circumstances, starting from what is feasible—such as a single course assignment or a small thematic collection—and accumulating experience before scaling up.

4. Conclusion

The core value of the oral history method for the inheritance of the reform and opening-up spirit lies in restoring the spirit from commemorative discourse to accessible historical experience. When a young student sits down and listens to a witness recount his or her 1979 and 1992, the reform and opening-up spirit ceases to be a term in a textbook and becomes a life choice that can be conversed with, empathized with and carried forward. The foregoing analysis of value implications, operational logic and practical pathways shows that this method has broad prospects, but also sets clear requirements for collection norms, standards of interpretation and institutional support. Two limitations of the present study should be acknowledged: the analysis is based mainly on the Shenzhen context, and the effectiveness of the proposed pathways awaits empirical testing; moreover, the paper has not addressed in detail how the method should be adjusted for Hong Kong and Macao youth, for whom the same narratives may carry different experiential resonances. Future research may therefore proceed in three directions: conducting systematic content analysis of the reform and opening-up oral history resources already built, so as to distill narrative types for spiritual interpretation; tracking the actual effectiveness of oral history practical teaching through action research, testing the applicable boundaries of this micro mechanism across different school stages and regions; and examining, in the specific setting of cross-border education, how shared memories of reform and opening-up can contribute to the cultivation of a sense of national identity among young people in Hong Kong and Macao.

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