



Christopher Cheng interviewing 95-year-old Leon Siu-en in Cantonese in Cho Bin village, Zhongshan, China. Anthony Leong, 2017

Mutual Language Barriers in the Oral Histories of Immigrants

Conducting oral history interviews in community languages, such as Chinese, is an underutilised method of recording the diverse experiences of so many people living in Australia.

Dr Christopher Cheng

Oral history interviewer, National Library of Australia

In Australia, English is the dominant language yet there are so many Australians of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds who may never be fluent in English or might lose their English as they age. In 2021, 872,206 people in Australia—3.4% of the population—spoke a language other than English at home, and reported difficulties with English.¹ Mandarin remains the most widely spoken language other than English, with 685,274 people speaking it at home.² This is followed by Arabic (367,159 people), Vietnamese (320,758 people), and Cantonese (295,281 people). Despite their numbers in the community, Cantonese folk describe themselves as ‘mute’.³

A Missing Voice in Australian Oral History Collections

Oral history projects in Australia have for too long reflected English as the dominant language. As a result, the voices and experiences of non-English speakers have not always been documented. For example, the oldest interviews with Chinese Australians held at the National Library of Australia date from the late 1970s, with most oral history recordings produced in the 1990s.⁴ At the time, the migrant narratives of Chinese Australians were recorded only in English, usually involving English-educated second- or third- generation participants.

This has changed in recent years. For example, in 2021 the National Library of Australia launched a project on Australians with Chinese heritage. This included whole-of-life recordings in Chinese languages, such as Hokkien, Cantonese and Mandarin.⁵ In 2019 the State Library of New South Wales began collecting oral histories in Cantonese.

It is worth noting that those who are least likely to be fluent in English tend to be first-generation immigrants. Not surprisingly, in Australia's oral history collection there remains a conspicuous lack of first-generation migrant voices. This could be because oral history was not recognised as a valid method until the 1970s, when interest in Chinese Australian history also emerged. Interest in oral history among Chinese Australians took off in the 1990s due to the passing of the older generation who had lived during the White Australia era, with some narrators having memories of the gold rush.⁶ There weren't many multilingual interviewers at the time.

If these settler perspectives are not recorded, either by themselves or their families, their memories as immigrants may never be captured.⁷ By the time we reach the third or fourth generations they will be fully assimilated Australians wondering where their ancestors came from and what their early years in Australia were like.

Without this information, future historians will also have a much harder time writing the next page of the nation's history. The rich life experiences of first-generation immigrants, for whom English remained a foreign language, include memories of 'old-world' (homeland) experiences. They know what their home country looked like, who their extended relatives were, their customs, traditions, and why they left. As pioneers, they were also the first to set foot in a 'new world'. Their concepts of both the new world and the old world are worth sharing. It is a unique perspective that people back in the old world cannot understand, nor is it a perspective that their Australian descendants can fathom.

The Not-So-Bilingual Second Generation

At first one might think that the children of immigrants would seem more suited to conduct oral history in LOTE (languages other than English), yet this may not always be the case. This may be a consequence of the White Australia policies that lasted for almost six decades, and whose imprint still influences attitudes and practices. For instance, during those decades people from diverse backgrounds were expected to shed their native languages and speak the common language.

The dominance of English in Australia has meant that Australian schools have not been receptive to the development of a second language or proficiency in languages other than English. While interviewing Cantonese-speaking Australian parents in Cairns, I heard about how children of Cantonese-speaking immigrants lose their mother tongue—Cantonese—as soon as they begin school. Their white Australian peers ridicule them instead of appreciating their foreign origins. After school, children watch mainstream TV and see that nobody looks or sounds like them. The desire to be normal, fit in and assimilate is so intense that these children become determined to switch to Australian English, and there's usually no returning to Cantonese.

As a result, both the immigrant Cantonese-speaking parents and their Australian-born children claim that the second generation cannot adequately speak their mother tongue to conduct interviews. The issue here is compounded by the fact that the second generation may not have been exposed to the rich linguistic environment necessary to cultivate their foreign language skills in Australia. After all, these children were born or have been taught to be Australian, which prioritises English over other languages. Even Australian-born siblings usually communicate with each other in English, a foreign tongue that their immigrant parents may not have mastered. With the passage of time, English communication will most

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1 'Cultural Diversity of Australia,' Australian Bureau of Statistics, 20 September 2022, <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/cultural-diversity-australia/>

2 Ibid.

3 'Ada Cheng Interview by Long Yin Ko, 5 March 2020,' State Library NSW, <https://archival.sl.nsw.gov.au/Details/archive/110660202/>

4 For an early example see 'William Liu Interviewed by Hazel de Berg [Sound Recording],' National Library of Australia, <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-222787139/listen/>

5 'Australians with Chinese Heritage Oral History Project,' TRC7320, National Library of Australia, <https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/8646152/>

Not everything in another language is translatable. It may require historical or cultural understanding, and lengthy explanations.

- 6 Diana Giese, *Astronauts, Lost Souls & Dragons: Voices of Today's Chinese Australians* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1997); Mavis Gock Yen, *South Flows the Pearl: Chinese Australian Voices* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2022); Janis Wilton, 'Chinese Voices, Australian Lives,' PhD diss., University of New England, Armidale, 1996.
- 7 Gungwu Wang, 'Mixing Memory and Desire: Tracking the Migrant Cycles,' in *Chinese Overseas: Migration, Research and Documentation*, eds. Tan Chee-Beng, Julia Zimmerman and Colin Storey (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2007), 3–20.
- 8 Long Yin Ko, 'Not Only in English: Oral Histories with Cantonese (or Other Non-native English) Speakers in Australia,' *Oral History NSW*, January 22, 2023, <http://www.oralhistorynsw.org.au/latest/2023/3/16/not-only-in-english-oral-histories-with-cantonese-or-other-non-native-english-speakers-in-australia/>
- 9 Karen Schamberger, 'Whose Stories Are We Telling? Chinese Australian History in New South Wales and Victorian Museums,' *Australian Historical Studies* 52(4): 2021: 567–590.

likely replace whatever language is spoken at home.

In my experience, Cantonese-speaking Australian narrators have regularly expressed their gratitude to fellow oral historian Long Yin (Kiko) Ko and myself for the opportunity to be interviewed. This was especially the case because their Australian-born children were not able to talk to them in their first language, Cantonese, nor did they have the necessary skills to record their own stories.⁸

Generally, the children of immigrants do not possess a rich enough vocabulary to express themselves or console their parents in times of need. Furthermore, even for those immigrants whose English is adequate, memories and reflections tend to be more easily communicated and are likely to be more nuanced and culturally appropriate in an interviewee's first language. Due to this language barrier, subsequent generations can miss out on hearing their family and community histories. They miss the opportunity to enjoy learning about the perspectives of their ancestors if memories and life lessons are not passed down and recorded.

Oral History and the Wider Community

Across library and museum collections in Australia there is a lack of oral history sound recordings in community languages. Curators in Australia have long stressed the need to move away from one-sided perspectives and portray diverse experiences, including immigrants and minority voices.

Despite this, Karen Schamberger recently noted the lack of first-hand Chinese perspectives (that can be obtained from interviews in both English and Chinese) in exhibitions about the Chinese in Australia.⁹ Sophie Couchman, the former curator of the Chinese Museum in Melbourne, pointed out the practical difficulties in carrying out oral history projects in the Chinese language.¹⁰ To do so required interviewers

who were fluent in the dialects and histories of two countries, Australia and China, and to grasp the complexity and nuances of the Chinese-Australian experience.

At the same time, local libraries often do not have sufficient resources in community languages to educate newcomers to Australia about their immigrant predecessors.¹¹ As such, it limits access to otherwise useful insights about other Chinese Australians' lives, which could be drawn on as role models for newcomers. Access would be easier if such materials were recorded in the community language.

Promoting the Use and Retention of LOTE in Australia

What can schools do about this situation? Teachers can collaboratively encourage their students to work in the space of oral history, both within the classroom and as an extracurricular activity. As students embark on their own projects with their families and community, they will also improve their language skills and hopefully also appreciate the career potential of an oral historian in documenting untold stories. Then, with the permission of the narrators, there is an opportunity to make their experiences heard and amplified. This can be done by broadcasting recorded interviews on social media or podcasts, or by sharing text transcriptions as excerpts and quotations.

Next we are confronted with a further challenge of the mutual language barrier: translation. Not everything in another language is translatable. It may require historical or cultural understanding, and lengthy explanations. So how does one go about accurately interpreting the various layers of experience and meaning?

The problem with soliciting the help of the second generation is that they may not be familiar with the distinctive language and history of the old world. At the same time, the first generation may lack knowledge of Australia or have the breadth of English vocabulary to draw on.

The problem with soliciting the help of the second generation is that they may not be familiar with the distinctive language and history of the old world.

A possible solution could be a partnership between first- and second-generation bilinguals who can together speak, listen, transcribe and translate. In other words, to conduct oral history in this niche field of community languages, Australian students may need to work with bilingual people to conduct interviews and then allow ample time to make them accessible through the time-consuming process of transcriptions, translations, editing and writing, broadcasting or podcasting for the public.

Conclusion

If Australia is to be one of the most successful multicultural countries, we ought to seek opportunities to preserve the mother tongue

of our linguistically-diverse Australian communities for future generations. In doing so, we can ensure that, before the occasion passes, our children can record the life histories of their elder immigrants. Then, at some point in the future, multiple generations of Australians can discover where their forebears are from, and why and how they became Australians.

As one elderly participant told me at the end of our interview in Cantonese:

Thank you for interviewing me. I am incredibly grateful, as I have been waiting for the opportunity to have my story recorded for a long time but never had a chance until today.¹²

10 Sophie Couchman, 'Reflections on Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in a Chinese Australian Community Museum,' *Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association* 70(1): 2021: 84–89.

11 Oriana Acevedo and Ellen Forsyth, 'What if I Speak Another Language? Many Libraries, Many Languages,' *Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association* 70(1): 2021: 75–83.

12 Mrs Kwai Fong (Amelia) Wah Day interviewed by Christopher Cheng for the National Library of Australia on 15 January 2023.

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Readers responses to my piece “Mutual language barriers in the oral histories of immigrants” that appeared in *Agora* (2023).

“Chris, it’s an important contribution to oral history literature that, I trust, is distributed beyond the teaching community.”

Dr Janis Wilton OAM

Former president, International Oral History Association

“I have to say, I enjoyed your article and think it’s an important one. I actually sent your draft to several of my Library colleagues, and I know they also agreed it was an important article! Thanks for all you are doing - it really is very significant.”

Dr Shirleene Robinson OAM

Director, Curatorial and Collection Research, National Library of Australia

“You have some interesting points to make and I’m glad you have been given the opportunity to encourage and promote the use and retention of languages other than English in Australia.”

Dr Sophie Couchman

Former curator, Museum of Chinese Australian History, Melbourne

“The article is great, and very moving. I really like the perspective that you bring to this. I would like a copy to share with a public library Oriana and I are working with. We are suggesting (strongly) that they consider undertaking oral histories in additional languages to English and your article provides a perspective which may help their thinking.”

Ellen Forsyth

Consultant, State Library of New South Wales

“The Museum has just had an oral history training workshop... and language was mentioned in passing. But we didn’t touch on this adequately. We can include your piece as a reference in curatorial practice. We can also distribute your piece to the people who attended the workshop. Appreciate your consideration.”

Mark Wang

CEO, Museum of Chinese Australian History, Melbourne