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Beyond Generation: Taiwan Women in Dialogue

Traditional view of history has been characterized as linear, authoritative, progressive yet valid recounts of past events. Nevertheless, after a few waves of oral historical modifications of the grand history, the phallogocentric view of history is de-centered and turns towards little narrative-oriented perspectives of what happened before. Since the 19th century the “Grand History” began undergoing scrutiny from the perspectives of marginal groups and new historians started to challenge traditional perspectives of viewing past events. On the development of oral history, “it was not until the ninetieth century did oral histories find itself a position among the dominant literary genres, and it not only handled interrelating issues of historiographical dimensions but also concerned human activity and anthropological social problems as well.” Professor Allen Nevins of Columbia University coined the term in 1948 and formally introduced it to the academic field as a literary genre. The establishment of the Annals School and rise of both postmodernism and post-colonialism further shows the increasing attention towards the oral narratives of common people. This kind of deconstruction of Grand History and gave oral narratives, or, “Microstoria”, an opportunity to develop itself into full blossom³.

In Taiwan, “the National Academia Senica started promoting historical narratives in 1959, it was further developed by political institutions such as the KMT Party and the Historical Documentation Department of the Ministry of National Defense”². In the beginning, oral histories in Taiwan mostly covered political issues and the autobiographies of political icons, and it was not until 1980 did ordinary women appear in oral historical accounts. In terms of the development of women’s oral narratives, Chian-Ming Yu (游鑑明) finished her ground breaking thesis “The Education of Women in Taiwan during the Japanese Colonial Period” <日據時期台灣的女子教育> in the style of oral histories, and in 1995 again she published “Taiwanese Women of the Work Force during the Japanese Colonial Period” <日據時期台灣的職業婦女> and was involved in an interview titled “Working Women in Taiwan that Crossed Generations” 《走過兩個時代的台灣職業婦女訪問記錄》. Her works served as early contributions to the development of Taiwanese women’s oral history.

In the mid-nineties a large amount of women’s oral narratives began to emerge. As Xien-Ling Su (蘇芊玲) indicated in the preface of *Flapping the Wings of Life*, after 1987 and especially in the nineties, “collective women’s narratives and biographies started to emerge into the public sphere”¹; published works such as *The Ode of a Grandmother* 《阿媽的故事》, *A Mother’s Tale* 《阿母的故事》, and *Vanishing Grandmothers of Taiwan* 《消失中的台灣阿媽》 can be categorized as vernacular literary works that represent the daily lives of women in Taiwan. The

oral accounts of those local women emphasizes the power of “recalling one’s memory” that questioned the largely accepted “truth” of the mainstream history, and became a neo-social movement of “re-interpreting the past”⁴. These stories revealed the neglected Taiwanese women’s history. The historical ambience of these women’s oral narratives, Yuen-Xun Li (李元貞) explains, is a phenomena that resulted from the release of the Martial Law in 1987, that provided a change in social attitudes to certain topics that were not allowed to be discussed. In their oral narratives, women in Taiwan were able to recover their absent voice in history that went back all the way to the days of the Japanese Colonial Period, to the era of working women, and even the victims of political persecution during the period of Martial laws—all the silenced past could now be heard in the public.

Similarly, Wen-Yu Xian (江文瑜) also stated that “although history was primarily invented for the sake of the authority’s self interest, preserving the greatness of kings and empires, after these years of political liberation and democracy, the autobiographies and biographies of the common people became much more popular—the boundaries between political history and daily-life history is now blurred. The fact is that, history itself is a constructed invention, and it has always been only a matter of who’s perspective, and whose power”⁵. The true meaning of oral history may sum up to what Yu depicts in *Listening to Their Voices—The Application of Women’s Oral History’s Method and Material* 《傾聽她們的聲音—女性口述歷史的方法與口述史料的運用》, in which she says that oral narratives of women are instrumental to the construction of female subjectivity, and through this strategy of giving testimonies, women can avoid being seen as a homogenous group nor would women be subject to misinterpretations of men⁶. Furthermore, in “Beautiful Illusions Dissolving into Nothing? Truth and Fabrications of Female Oral History” <鏡花水月畢竟總成空？女性口述歷史的虛與實>, she concludes that oral history “is a self-interpretation of the way the narrator understands herself, that is to say, it is much like ‘the present self’ in attempt of understanding ‘who I once was’”⁷. Women then “had always been the marginalized other of the historical language, and their stories mostly do not exist in any known mainstream documentations in the past.”

Flapping the Wings of Life, edited by Show-Ling Lin (林秀玲) in 2003, is a collection of nine women’s oral narratives that show a new dimension of Taiwanese women’s experiences. Since the publications of several oral histories in the mid-nineties, *Flapping the Wings of Life* stood up among its contemporaries due to its unique style of recording its stories as well as the different aim of its making. *Flapping Wings of Life* is different from former women’s oral history. In 1990’s, women’s oral history in Taiwan intend to reconstruct history, centering on women

who are illiterate and excluded by mainstream history. Most of the narrators that were interviewed suffered from great oppression and were demanding for an opportunity to speak out against their oppressors. However, the collection provides a diverse account of the sometimes similar but more often strikingly different realities of women's experiences. The participants interviewed were "from various locations and belong to diverse social status" It records the development of several successful women's gender consciousness and feminist subjectivities, showing how they fight against patriarchal ideology on the one side and negotiating with the social expectation on gender on the other. In the process of constructing their subjectivities, one can see their resistance and negotiation within the marital system, their family, and the society, and moreover, from conflicts and contradictions, these women search and construct their own subjectivities.

Differing from the former oral narratives, the book also approaches history from a feminist point of view that wishes to achieve the goal of reconstructing Taiwanese women's subjectivity. In *Flapping the Wings of Life*, the heteroglossic message and diverse, social and professional identities of women suggest the possibility of different but parallel achievements for women in contemporary Taiwanese society. Ultimately, the oral narratives in *Flapping the Wings of Life* also tries to foster a generational dialogue by juxtaposing the interviewers and interviewees' stories, showing a continuation of the feminist legacy of its predecessors, and through the dialogic interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee, we see how the female experience operates as a mediation for the different generations oral history, as well as how they negotiate their multiple subjectivities.