Reconstructing the Past Through Oral History:
A Malaysian Experience

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Abstract. This paper examines the development of the oral history programme in Malaysia as a methodology to reconstruct the nation's history and heritage. Oral history refers to efforts to record and document a historical event or social phenomenon through people's experience and memory that enable us to have a deeper understanding of the past. In short, by recording people's experiences and memories from their personal lives, the oral history methodology acts as a bridge to connect the past to the present. For Southeast Asian countries which are rich in historical experiences and cultural diversity, the oral history project had begun in the 1960s with each country individually initiating its own oral history programme. This paper focuses on the experience of Malaysia which was the first to initiate an oral history programme, its subsequent development, the parties involved and the inclination or focus of oral history projects that were implemented. Even though Malaysia preceded other Southeast Asian countries in creating an oral history programme, the oral history methodology as a mode of reconstructing the nation's past and heritage is not particularly outstanding. This paper addresses this nagging issue and examines the challenges in implementing the oral history programme in this country. The paper recommends to the Malaysian government to activate the oral history programme which should be subsumed under an Oral History Centre at the national level so that the collection of historical information and the nation's heritage will be based on the inclusive memory of the community not just on written documents which are remnants of the colonial legacy.

Keywords and phrases: documentation, heritage, history from below, Malaysia, oral history

Introduction

This paper examines the development of the oral history programme in Malaysia as a methodology to reconstruct the country's history and heritage. Oral history refers to the efforts taken to record and document historical event or social

phenomenon through people's experience and memory to enable us to have in-depth understanding of the past. In short, by recording the people's experiences and memories of what they had gone through in their personal lives, the oral history methodology acts as a bridge to connect the past with the present.

In Southeast Asia, the Second World War (1942–1945) was a crucial period in raising awareness on the importance of creating an oral history programme. The war had resulted in the destruction of historical documents while the post-war period triggered an anticolonial movement to fight for independence which caused a paucity of records, most of which were produced by the colonial powers. This means there existed gaps in the historical records. These gaps can only be plugged through oral history which will provide not only a comprehensive perspective about the past but, more important, that represent the people's viewpoint about their country. Cognizant of this situation, in 1963 the National Archives of Malaysia was established to start an oral history programme, followed by Thailand in 1977 and Indonesia in 1978. Across the causeway, although the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies had initiated an oral history project in 1972 by focusing on the war and its impact, the Singapore oral history programme became much more organised after the establishment of the Oral History Centre in 1979 as a unit under the Singapore National Archives (Lim, Morrison and Kwa 1998).

At another level, Southeast Asia is rich in cultural diversity and tradition and if these were not documented they will disappear following rapid urbanisation and modernisation. Through oral tradition, attempts to record and document customs and traditions, beliefs and so forth could be carried out. The task of documenting this oral tradition first initiated by the Sarawak State Museum in 1957, followed by Malaysia's Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in 1961 and the Brunei Museum in 1965 (Lim et al. 1998).

Although there was interest in oral history methodology within Southeast Asia, it was not quite structured. Many parties had come forward to organise oral history seminars and to share their experiences in using this methodology in writing their national heritage. In 1973, the Ministry of Heritage, Youth and Sports organised a "Seminar on the Collection, Study and Use of Oral History in Malaysia". It was held in the University of Malaya (UM). This was followed by the "Regional Seminar on Oral Tradition" which was held in Kuching in the same year. The first colloquium on oral history was organised by the National Archives of Malaysia in 1978 in Penang. The colloquium aimed to bring together archivists and oral historians in Southeast Asia to share their experiences in implementing the oral history project and to help plan the direction of the oral history methodology in historical and cultural research. The Southeast Asian Regional Branch of the

International Council on Archives (SARBICA) which became the patron of this project held its first oral history meeting in 1990. The second oral history colloquium titled "Oral History: The ASEAN Experience" was held in 1991 in Kuala Lumpur. It was organised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Committee on Culture and Information and the National Archives of Malaysia. This was followed by another colloquium in Singapore in 1992 with the title "Recording our ASEAN Heritage". It was sponsored by the ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information. This colloquium placed considerable emphasis on the coordination of historical writing in the region by stressing the importance of the Japanese Occupation and bureaucratic experience as well as showcasing political luminaries as part of documenting ASEAN's development in its first 25 years (Morrison 1998, 8–9).

Although Malaysia was the first to organise an oral history colloquium and the first to establish an oral history programme, its development since 1963 until the present time is rather sluggish. In fact, this method had not received adequate attention from local historians, researchers and students.

In examining this issue, this paper begins with a discussion on the methodology used to recreate the past that was adopted by historians, and how oral history had become important in writing the history of a community. This is followed by an examination of the development of oral history in Malaysia including the various parties involved in conducting oral history programme and related themes. Challenges faced by proponents of oral history are highlighted while the final part encompasses both conclusion and suggestions to advance oral history as a method of writing the nation's history and heritage.

Historians' Approach to Writing about the Past

History, in essence, is a continuous dialogue between the present and the past with the aim of understanding and planning the future. Various debates have emerged among historians on how history should to be written. In line with the reconstructionist history founded by the 19th-century German historian, Leopold van Ranke, who strongly upheld the principles of writing "history as it actually happened", history can only be written through a study of documents or primary sources (Munslow 1997, 20). In fact, the adage "no documents, no history" was a general response given by reconstructionists to any attempt to insert non-documentary sources in any historical study. Consequently, oral sources are excluded in any form of history writing (Morrison 1998, 1). This position was strongly criticised by the constructionists/analytical school. To the constructionists, the empiricist-descriptive-narrative method advanced by the reconstructionists had

failed to analyse social structure because too much attention was given to narrative (story telling) compared to social group or class. Another criticism levelled by the constructionists is that Ranke's methodology placed too much emphasis on the elite group or individuals who were politically prominent in politics, war and diplomacy to the neglect of women, workers and farmers (Cheah 2007, 123).

One reaction towards the reconstructionist approach is the emergence of social historians who advocated "history from below" that champions ordinary people's life as part of their writing. To Thompson (1978), oral history is of similar age to history; in fact, it is "the first kind of history". The history of every society begins with oral history before its importance was superseded by documents and records. Historians who championed "history from below", that is history of marginalised groups, and ordinary people's history, persevered to steer readers away from the normal symbols of greatness left behind by colonialists. According to Yeoh (2003, 37):

> Historians of the underside have in response mounted concerted efforts to imaginatively mine the official archives and refilter colonial discourse through "other" lenses and, at the same time, widen the net to include hitherto ignored source materials produced by the everyday workings in the life worlds of the colonized. Methodologies to uncover the perspectives of the ordinary people have included existentialist means of encountering people and situations in an intersubjective manner through oral histories, reminiscences, eyewitness accounts, and interviews, as well as phenomenological approaches that look beyond the written record and at people's representations of their life worlds by using, for example, pictorial, visual, and artifactural evidence.

Thompson's oral history methodology began to gain importance in the study of social history, that is of society and local history as well as heritage and culture. To scholars like Morrison (1998), rejecting this methodology means deserting a large proportion of the world's community – people who are born, who live, and carry out myriad activities and who will die without leaving any account of their lives. They include the history of the colonised, labourers, ethnic minorities, women and children whose stories are rarely found in written documents. Through oral history, the marginalised are able to speak about their past. According to a well-known oral historian, Jan Vansina (1985, 198), this methodology is important as it would enable historians to become close to subaltern groups and to understand what they had experienced in their lives: "Without oral tradition we would know very little about the past of large parts of the world, and we would not know them from the inside. We also could never build up interpretations from the inside".

In other words, oral history provides an opportunity to the researcher to understand cultural tradition and society. Using the latest technology, oral history enables researchers to collect diverse folklores, sacred traditions and individual memories to fill the lacunae in written records (Manning 1999). The importance of oral history – whether to fulfil individual or institutional objectives – become more prominent if it is executed in a systematic manner, with its importance at par with primary documents kept in the archives. Simply put, oral history refers to the methodology of interviewing witnesses involved in past events with the aim of reconstructing this history although the Singapore Oral History Centre provides a much more nuanced definition:

> Oral history is the systematic collection of memories and knowledge about historical events and periods by researchers and institutions conducting recording interviews with selected narrators. The recorded information is then preserved for prosperity and made available for research purposes. It is one way of recording history that cuts across all strata of society, thereby enriching our knowledge of human experiences across space and time. (Oral History Centre 2007)

With this definition, the Singapore Oral History Centre meticulously planned its oral history project, including interview framework, selection of interviewees and respondents who are appropriate to the topic, high quality audio equipment and suitable place to store audio and visual testimonies. Until the present time, the Singapore Oral History Centre has carried out research which was informed by a systematic oral history methodology as well as undertaking more than 4,000 interviews ranging from politicians to hawkers, medical personnel, war prisoners, artists and entrepreneurs (http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/about-us).[1] Armed with the objective of disseminating this methodology to the public for the purpose of producing a society that is passionate about its history and heritage, the Singapore Oral History Centre has published in 1988 a manual on the procedures for conducting oral history titled *Memories and Reflections: The Singapore Experience*.

Oral history constitutes history that revolves around society itself. It provides an opportunity not only to leaders, but also the public who are themselves part of a particular historical episode. This methodology does not only fill the void in official records but also challenges conclusions that are based on these documents. More important, this methodology provides a "sense of belonging to a place or in time" to the entire community. It forms a basis for other original projects not only for the experts but also students or the community. As intimated by Thompson (1978), they will not only learn about their history but in fact, they can write their

own history. Oral history returns this history back to society using their own words. In retelling the past, this methodology indirectly helps society and the new generation to shape their future.

The Development of Oral History in Malaysia

In 1957 the Sarawak Museum was the first institution to conduct oral history in Southeast Asia. This was followed by other institutions like the National Archives of Malaysia in 1963 and the Department of Malay Studies, UM in 1968. In 1982, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) established an Oral History Committee[2] with the aim of collecting information pertaining to the Japanese Occupation in northern Perak, Penang, Kedah and Perlis. Aspects that were targetted include the entry of the Japanese army in Malaya, economic matters, social policies and the military, administration, resistance movements besides events that had taken place between 1944–1945 and the re-emergence of British troops after the Japanese withdrawal. Local luminaries interviewed include Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra al-Haj, Datuk Koh Sin Hock and Captain Mohamad Nor. These interviews were subsequently published with the first one titled *Reminiscenses of Tunku Abdul Rahman 1941–45* coming out in 1989. In 1991, the second one titled *Force 136 (1)* and the third, *Force 136 (2)* were published. The last two publications involved interviews with former members of Force 136.

The USM oral history project is still chugging along under the jurisdiction of the Malaysiana and Archives Division (within the main USM library) which was established in 1982. Apart from oral history collection relating to the Japanese Occupation which totalled 30 interviews, the division also possess a collection of interviews with notable Penang personalities including those involved with the development of USM since its establishment in 1969, indigenous peoples of Southeast Asia and Syed Hussein al-Attas (Siti Roudhah et al. 2012). However, the focus on the Japanese Occupation was discontinued due to a number of reasons. By and large the Japanese Occupation had restricted the number of informants who could be interviewed while the passing of time had progressively reduced the number of suitable informants (main witnesses).[3]

Much more interesting development had taken place elsewhere in the country. A number of higher learning institutions had begun to introduce oral history in their respective course offerings. Among them is Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) (National Archives of Malaysia 2005, 4). This methodology was offered under the discipline of Record Management from 1998 onwards and is still being offered until the present time. In 1982, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) introduced an Oral History course with the objective of increasing students' theoretical and

practical knowledge of oral history and to enable them to be involved in projects that document historical event. The teaching staff concerned, Nadzan Haron, had received training in this methodology while studying abroad. Equipped with the necessary experience, Nadzan was given the task of planning and conducting the course for undergraduates at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, UKM. Students are expected to complete a project on oral documentation which is identified by the course coordinator or selected by the student themselves. The outcome of this project is the recording and transcription of interviews kept at the Oral History Resource Centre in the History Department, UKM. The following are among the projects carried out under Nadzan's supervision:

1. The collection and documentation of oral tradition in Negeri Sembilan (1981/82)

2. Oral History project on Dr. Mohamed Said (1982/83)[4]

3. Oral History project on the Malay Regiment (1983/1984)

4. Oral History project on Gua Musang (1988/1989)[5]

5. The Siamese community in Kedah and Perlis (1990/1991)

6. The Memali Tragedy (1992/1993)

7. Emergence of Malaysian Military Elites (1993/1994)

8. Malay-Left Nationalist project and the CPM's 10th Regiment (1994/1995) (Nadzan 2005, 10–13)

The Oral History course offered at UKM is still ongoing with a variety of themes including the Perak Royal Museum, *pondok* education in Langgar (Alor Setar), the Chetti community in Malacca, the Ngajat dance in Sarawak, the songket industry, St. Anne's Church in Bukit Mertajam, the Bukit Kepong tragedy, political development in Besut after the Second World War, Malaysia-Indonesia confrontation (focusing on the experience of a family in Pantai Remis, Perak), history and the experiences of illegal Indonesian migrants in Malaysia, the Portuguese community of Malacca, Kuantan urban history, boat industry and collapse of the Sultan Abdul Halim ferry terminal on 31 July 1988.[6] The interviews were transcribed by students who were involved in the project while the transcripts are kept at the Oral History Resource Centre. It is accessible to the interested researcher.

Apart from UiTM and UKM, the oral history methodology was also introduced at USM through courses like The Socioeconomic History of Malaysia and the Japanese Occupation in Southeast Asia. The interest and motivation to introduce these courses began in 1982 when Paul Kratoska published *Hijrah dan Penghijrahan*

which comprise 17 essays written by students who had taken The Socioeconomic History of Malaysia course between 1978–1982. These essays focus on migration and migrant experiences in this country. This research did not just involve archival materials but also oral history while the interviewees were ordinary workers, coffee shop owners, trishaw pullers, small-scale farmers, drivers, rubber-estate labourers and farmers. The ability to explore "history from below" and the experience of the ordinary man was regarded as special by Kratoska who in his introduction gave credit to the essays which he regarded as "constituting fruitful knowledge unattainable from other sources". To Kratoska (1982), "in Malaysian history, these people were seen as mere statistics and their voices seldom heard. Their perspectives documented in this book, although unsurprising, but differed from what is written about Malaysia's history based from government files or reports".

The effort taken to publish student essays was continued when *The Japanese Occupation in Malaya 1942–55* was published in 1989. The project involves 14 essays and was coordinated by Kratoska and Abu Talib Ahmad. The book represented student endeavour to record the experiences and perception of older Malaysians regarding the Second World War. These essays were written based on documents, files and contemporary newspapers and oral interviews.

Until the present time, the National Archives of Malaysia is one of the institutions which is actively conducting oral history programmes in this country. They have in their possession more than 700 completed recordings (audio).[7] The earliest interview was conducted in 1965 and the interviewee was the film actress, Seri Dewi (Tengku Azizah Tengku Ariffin). Seri Dewi shares her experience of appearing on the silver screen with the late Tan Sri P. Ramlee who was already a well-known actor (Aliza 1991). Besides arts, topics taken up by the National Archives include political figures, teachers, journalists, teachers and students of *pondok* schools, officers of land office, life during the Japanese Occupation and the Emergency, opposition to the Malayan Union, soldiers, *mufti*, members of Force 136, Malaysia-Indonesia confrontation, embroidery, knitting and so forth.

For oral history in this country the recognition of George Town, Penang as a World Heritage Site by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) on 1 July 2008 heralded a new era. Apart from focusing on tangible heritage like historical buildings in the George Town inner city area, the Penang State Government since 2013 has activated the documentation of oral history through the George Town World Heritage Inc. (GTWHI) by focussing on the memories of urban dwellers regarding their daily lives or important incidents when they lived in the area. This project balances the excessive focus on tangible heritage and highlights the government's concern towards narratives/stories

behind the existence of such buildings, within a particular settlement or community. The entire projects corresponds with the selection of George Town as World Heritage Site based on its cultural heritage.

To date, GTWHI has carried out documentation of oral history project titled "Cherita: Living on Chulia Street, 1945–1970" which took place from March 2013 until February 2014. The project recorded the memories of residents of Chulia Street from diverse ethnic, cultural, religious and professional backgrounds who are still living or had resided and were active in Chulia Street. Chulia Street is special as it was one of the earliest roads constructed by Francis Light (Mahani and Kuah 2016). It remains one of the busiest roads in George Town. In comparison with other oral history documentation projects conducted by the Malaysian National Archives or local institutions of higher learning, GTWHI employed a "curatorial framework" in implementing its project. Pillai, one of the project advisors, used the term "curatorial framework" based on the diverse roles of the project coordinator which requires:

> To move to and fro between creative exhibition the traditional role of oral history curator, as a custodian of information, to an exhibition curator, organizing a creative exhibition of the oral and visual materials based on concepts and themes of memory and recollections. (Pillai 2015, 164)

Table 1. Summary of case study

Case study	Brief	Players	Engagement tools	Outcomes
Living on Chulia Street project, 2013	• Collect oral history • Build knowledge and capacity in oral history documentation • Interpret and communicate community's shared history to the public	• Curator: Researcher/designer • Documentation team: Oral history surveyors • Design and interpretation team: Illustrators, photographers, copywriters, video producers, etc. • Community: Residents/business traders along Chulia Street	• Interviews • Voluntary sharing of memoir and momentos • Use of popular media: video showing • Interactive exhibition and installations • Interactive walks	• Oral history archived on web • Community exhibition on site • Comic book and video • Tours of street

Source: Pillai (2015)

Based on this framework, the oral history methodology adopted by GTWHI does not merely revolve around holding interviews and producing transcription[8] but also disseminate information about the project to the public through exhibitions, video presentations, comics and guided walks in designated areas. The materials from the project are then shared with the public through websites and blogs

(http://penangoralhistory.wordpress.com).[9] This corresponds with one of the objectives of the documentation project "Cherita: Living on Chulia Street, 1945–1970" namely to enrich one's knowledge of culture and to create a sense of identity among all those involved including respondents and documenters (Mahani and Kuah 2016).

In the wake of the success of this preliminary project, GTWHI continued its research on intangible heritage in the vicinity of George Town's heritage zone by launching a second oral documentation project in 2014 titled "Cherita George Town" through collaboration with the Singapore National Archives. This time the focus was the basic needs of living in the city such as housing, food, transport and clothing. A total of 100 respondents from diverse cultural, religious, professional and gender backgrounds were interviewed. As in the first project, this second oral history documentation project (2014–2016) also employed a "curatorial framework". The project involved a total of 20 interviewers.[10]

As for oral history programme at tertiary institution of learning in this country, oral history as a subject offering was officially introduced at the Institute of Teacher Education in 2014 to provide knowledge as well as to train future teachers on this research methodology. In 2015, the Malaysian Oral History Association was set up in Shah Alam with the objective of collaborating with other agencies to carry out oral history studies in Malaysia; to offer an oral history course; to actively document oral history in Malaysia; to set up database of oral history experts and to promote awareness and the importance of oral history.[11] Still in its infancy and facing various challenges, such as manpower and funding,[12] the establishment of this society will provide space for researchers who employ oral history methodology in their research to share information and experience.

Challenges in Advancing Oral History in Malaysia

Generally speaking, oral history in Malaysia has yet to realise its full potential. Since 1963 when it was first introduced, this methodology has not been widely used in research in this country. Even the Department of History, UM does not have an oral history programme although scholars that it had produced like Khoo Kay Kim, Cheah Boon Kheng and Abdullah Zakaria Ghazali have incorporated oral history in their research. Cheah (1988) had interviewed numerous Malay informants in Kuala Nerang, Pendang, Yan and Sik (these places are located in Kedah) when writing his well-known book, *The Peasant Robbers of Kedah, 1900–1929: Historical and Folk Perceptions*. In fact, since 1974 Khoo (1975/1976) had emphasised the importance of oral history to study society and its use to overcome the shortcomings of documentary evidence.[13]

The UM's Department of History was the first in Malaysia to publish a journal that include essays on local history which utilise oral history. Their journals like *Journal of the Historical Society* or its replacement *Jernal Sejarah* have included studies on local history, many of which were written by students or former students trained in the department. Oral history methodology was widely used in their research.[14]

Besides university journals, there are other journals published by various associations since the 1950s. They became more active after 1957. In line with the aspirations of newly independent states, these journals gave emphasis on national history including local history, cultural and other practices of the various ethnic groups. One example is the Malaysian Historical Association which started to publish the journal *Malaya in History* in 1959. In 1967, it was changed to *Malaysia in History*. In 1979, it was published in Malay with the title *Malaysia dari segi Sejarah*. Looking at its publication between the 1970s and 1990s many of the essays used oral history method to examine local history, history of a village and local personalities. A majority of the writers were graduates of UM's Department of History. For volume 14 (1985) of *Malaysia dari segi Sejarah*, almost all essays touched on local history including history of the Siamese in Besut, the Bangkahulu community in Sungai Choh (Selangor), Banjarese migration into Mersing, Minangkabau migration into Hulu Langat, the Kampar village in Talang Bunut (Batu Pahat), Bawean migration to Kuala Lumpur, the Minangkabaus in Kuang (Selangor), the Kabul community in Besut and the Pakistani community in Jertih. All these essays utilised oral history method (interview).

At the state level, the Kedah branch of the Malaysian Historical Society which started its journal *Kedah dari segi Sejarah* in June 1966 had incorporated oral history as one of its activities. In the society's annual report for 1975 which appears in volume 7 of its journal (July 1976), oral history recording was a major activity throughout the year. There were interviews related to the Kedah-Siam war; prominent folklore practitioners like Awang Belanga, Awang Batil and Awang Selampit; lectures by Tunku Abdul Rahman, Professor Sharom Ahmat and Tan Sri Hamdan Sheikh Tahir; and the recording of old Malay traditional songs (Ismail 1976, 54–58). There are other journals that are related to history like *Tanah Melayu dari segi Sejarah* which started its publication in 1962 and *Peninjau Sejarah* which was published in July 1966 by the History Teachers' Association of Malaya. These journals do discuss the importance of the history of local communities and the use of oral history method in the writing of Malaysian history. The essay on social history by Wang Gungwu (1966) which was published in *Peninjau Sejarah*, for instance, called upon Malaysian historians to explore community history or social history based on the family and acquaintances or local history.

Although efforts to use oral history in historical research had started in this country a long time ago, however they have not been adequately implemented. A number of factors have contributed to this slow development. First, this methodology is not widely adopted among academicians in this country. In the discipline of history, for instance, which is closely associated with this methodology, academics are inclined to focus more on documentary materials in their teaching and research. Highly respected historian, the late Cheah Boon Kheng, saw the reconstructionist movement pioneered by Ranke as still influential among a large number of historians. This affected the interest of younger historians who are keen to explore social history (Cheah 2007).

Undeniably, the influence of the social sciences on historical research has opened up bigger space for excavating evidence from a variety of sources. This includes the interview method which provides important sources in social history which actually complement or augment knowledge that are not found in archival documents (Haryati and Hamidin 2007). However viewed in terms of output in research and writings, historians who have explored the field of social history are relatively small. Historians, Khoo (2006) and Sivachandralingam (2006), both from UM, agree that the development of social history research and "history from below" is rather sluggish because it received little attention from historians in this country.[15] In the case of historians venturing into the field of social history that revolves around gender, health, labour and other aspects associated with the subordinated class, their studies do not necessarily require them to utilise the interview method.

With increasing interest on cultural heritage in recent years, the oral history approach is gaining followings not only among historians but also anthropologists, linguists, folklorists and those from Malay literature. Anthropologist Patricia A. Harwick's study on *kuda kepang* (2014) is a fine example of how personal observation, video recording and in-depth interviews with Malay *kuda kepang* practitioners were used to trace how *kuda kepang*, a hobbyhorse trance dance originally introduced by Javanese immigrants, was localised by Singapore Malay practitioners and became a cultural presentation that manifest their identity. Mohamad Luthfi (2016) who works on traditional Malay folk performance of Kedah namely *mek mulong* has interviewed a *mek mulong* performer in the Wang Tepus area to highlight its uniqueness as healing ritual. In highlighting *boria*'s evolution from a ritualistic theatre to cultural heritage of the Penang Malay-Muslims, Shakila (2016) had used the oral history approach by interviewing three major practitioners in 1979 and 2010. Both Mohamad Luthfi and Shakila were part of a major study on cultural heritage of the northern region of peninsular Malaysia that was undertaken by the School of Humanities, USM between 2007 to 2010. Others in the group like Sohaimi (2012), Noriah and Omar (2012), Azmi, Mohamad Luthfi and Tarmiji (2012), Mohd Nizam and Azmi (2012) and Halimah (2012) had utilised oral

history in their writings on the culture of the Medan and Penang *peranakan*, hybrid languages among the Jawi Peranakan community in the northern region, handycraft heritage in Perak, Malay drums in the northern region, and dreams and translator of dreams, respectively. This shows oral history is useful for the study of cultural history and heritage although the number of its adherents is still small. However, efforts to utilise the oral history method in cultural heritage studies will not succeed unless there is in place a national oral history programme to promote such studies. In this regard, support from the Ministry of Tourism and Culture which is responsible for the reconstruction of national identity based on the arts, culture and heritage, is crucial. The uniqueness of the arts, culture and heritage in this country have to be foregrounded by the ministry through oral history projects relating to the different races and culture throughout the country. Such efforts in the long run could also enhanced the tourism industry.

The slow development of the oral history approach in universities which are universally accepted as the storehouse of knowledge and research, contributed to the instability of the oral history programme. In other words, it became too dependant on a particular individual or institution. The focus on teaching has also impeded the dissemination of methodology and output of oral history programme in universites. Without adequate manpower, it will be difficult for this programme to be implemented in an integrated manner because those involved are burdened with other responsibilities. As a result, oral history projects merely exist within the confines of a particular university and remain inaccessible to other researchers or the interested public.

However, this does not mean the oral history method is marginalised by historians. At UM, this method was widely discussed in seminars and post-graduate workshops organised by the Department of History. This helps to sustain awareness and interest on oral history method among the teaching staff.[16] In USM, with the aim of supporting George Town's position as the World Heritage Site, the History Section had established in 2014 an Oral History Unit. The unit endeavours to form a group comprising students and researchers who are interested to carry out oral history projects and to expose them to oral history workshops organised by GTWHI. It also organises similar workshops at departmental or national level.[17] However, without any increase in the number of academics involved in oral history, coordination efforts among history departments or unit in local universities or with the National Archives will never materialise as each institution implements projects to fulfil its own objectives and needs. This method will remain as a subject taught in a particular course or special seminar on methodology unless concerted efforts are made by department or unit to apply this method to special projects relating to history and national heritage.

A number of issues that hamper the development of oral history are leadership followed by finance, manpower and so forth. Without strong interest within the higher-ups, be it the government, department or unit, and the strong support of members of each section efforts to disseminate oral history in Malaysia will come to naught. Financial sponsorship, for instance, is not easily available because the public at large do not understand the importance of carrying out oral history project for the purpose of documenting the country's history and heritage. This situation is the opposite to Singapore. When Singapore began to be involved in the oral history project under the patronage of the Singapore National Archives in 1979, their main aim was to ensure the collection of documented memory become part of their heritage which explains the contributions and role of Singaporeans in the history of their nation state and as a community in Southeast Asia. As a result, public support in various forms began to pour in. In fact, the setting up of the Singapore Oral History Centre was actually through the effort of Dr. Goh Keng Swee, who was then Deputy Prime Minister. The unit was formed as part of the state's strategy to cultivate citizen psyche especially the younger generation on the role they could play in the making of Singapore history, and to demonstrate to regional neighbours and the world at large their ability and contribution to the historical and heritage development. This was nicely expressed by Kwa Chong Guan who was Advisor of the National Archives Board of Singapore:

> In the context of its time, the Oral History Centre was established in 1979, when Singapore had overcome its initial anxieties of economic survival and was moving into a new generation of high technology industries, establishing itself as a regional and international financial and transport and communications centre, and opening its foreign policy to the region. Singapore's revisiting its past was part of its new confidence about its present and future. (Kwa Chong Guan 2005, 21)

With the support of the government, finance was never a major issue for Singapore. Singapore's success to form an impressive and active oral history unit started with the full support of government leaders based on their awareness to form a new nation state that values its history and national heritage. The existence of a separate oral history unit also shows that the Singapore government was confident of the usefulness of the oral history method in documenting Singapore's national history and heritage.

The situation is somewhat different in Malaysia because a specific Oral History Unit within the National Archives does not exist. Rather it is placed within the archives' Documentation and Publication section instead of a separate unit of its own. This means the section faces various restraints in terms of the technical

workforce making it dependent on other sections to move the oral history project. In audio recording which is an important component of oral history, the section has to request manpower from the recording unit. In fact, the post of transcribers whose function is to transcribe oral interviews has ceased to exist.[18] Without a specific unit which monitors all aspects relating to oral history such as trained personnel, technical support and transcribers, the National Archives of Malaysia is never in a position to compete with the Singapore Oral History Centre in terms of the number of oral history projects that have been implemented thus far.

Another restraint to implement oral history programme in this country is human capital. As one of the institutions in Malaysia which support the oral history programme, the National Archives of Malaysia sees the shortage of trained personnel in this field as a major challenge.[19] This means the oral history project cannot be properly implemented without the creation of a group of professionals who are able to plan and carry out important projects for the country's history and heritage. This is very true when viewed from the experience of GTWHI which is directly involved in the documentation of oral history in George Town. For the oral history project "Cherita: Living on Chulia Street, 1945–1970" the challenge faced by GTWHI was to obtain and preserve a group of trained documenters. The group was intially trained by oral history experts from the Singapore Oral History Centre through theoretical classes, workshops and hands-on exercises. Many in the group provided service on a part-time basis which made it difficult for the project coordinator to sustain the manpower for the following project. Quite often the case after conducting one or two interviews, the documenters will leave the project to look for permanent employment. When this happens, a new group of researchers and documenters have to be trained by GTWHI. This is time-consuming and involves much expenditure. This problem happens because GTWHI has not mapped out a clear structure of the programme's future. As such, the recruitment of permanent staff has yet to be implemented (Mahani and Kuah 2016). Without any long-term financial allocation, it is difficult for a particular oral history programme to determine its direction, which includes keeping its manpower.

Conclusion

Oral history constitutes an important methodology that allows society to be closer to the nation's history and heritage. The interview method, the aim of which is to delve into the memory that constitutes human experience, is able to foster a closer alliance between the educator and his environment, between class and generation. This methodology returns history back to society. Given that this methodology is important in creating a "sense of belonging" of an individual or community to a

particular place, community and in a larger context, the nation, Malaysia requires an official body of oral history proponents that is recognised by the government and citizens as in Singapore.

Like Singapore, the National Archives of Malaysia which has a long involvement with this methodology, is more than qualified to be the patron, resource institution and coordinator of this project. As keeper of public records and conservator of the national history and heritage, the involvement of the National Archives in the documentation of oral history is to complement archival materials. Through correct principles and standards, the documentation of oral history could become a useful reference tool for researchers and the public that could enhance public appreciation of the national history. This is crucial at a time when the younger generation have little interest in history. In short, the oral history programme could become a medium to inculcate a sense of national identity and consequently national unity. To enhance this sense of national identity, the government have recently revised the history curriculum by putting more emphasis on national and local history. With this new orientation in terms of teaching and learning, there is a need to enhance oral history which form a crucial medium to understand history, traditions, customs, practices, beliefs and so forth relating to the lives of Malaysians in the past. This is meant to equip students' knowledge on oral history methodology which can be used at the workplace either as university teaching staff, journalist, geographer, staff of museum, archives and library or any occupation that requires communication ability and documentation. This means government support for the establishment of a national oral history programme within the National Archives of Malaysia will be able to coordinate all oral history activities in this country. With the increasingly important role played by the internet technology, the capacity to swiftly transfer and disseminate recorded sound and video kept in the archives to a global audience have immensely speeded up (Boyd and Larson 2014). In other words, digital humanities ensure information is no longer a commodity to be controlled or kept in archives, but to be shared, used and disseminated. Put in another way, oral history in the era of digital humanities is capable of reinforcing the role played by the archives in documenting a nation's history and heritage and disseminating it to a wider audience.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1.   National Archives of Singapore. n.d. About us: Oral history interviews. http://www.
     nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/about-us (accessed 29 July 2017).
2.   The USM's Oral History Committee was established in 1982 with members
     comprising of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research and Development) Professor
     Sharom Ahmat as Chairperson and others from the History Section, School of
     Humanities; USM Library; and the Centre of Educational Technology and Media.
3.   Interview with Abu Talib Ahmad, professor of Southeast Asian history in the History
     Section, School of Humanities, USM on 20 July 2017. He is one of the members of
     the USM's Oral History Committee who had interviewed a number of luminaries and
     selected as respondents for this project.
4.   Dr. Mohamad Said was the first Malay from Negeri Sembilan who had obtained his
     medical degree from the King Edward College of Medicine, Singapore.
5.   This project was conducted on the initiative of the Gua Musang District Officer
     himself after finding out that Gua Musang was a hiding place for Dato Bahaman
     and his followers during the Pahang War. The town was also under brief communist
     control during the 1948 Emergency.
6.   List of projects carried out at the Centre of Oral History, School of History, Politics
     and Strategy, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, UKM which was referred
     to by the author during fieldwork on 1 October 2015.
7.   Telephone interview with Mohd Nasir Ismail, Head of the Documentation and
     Publication Section, National Archives of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, on 10 October
     2018.
8.   Transcription of an interview for the project "Cherita: Living on Chulia Street, 1945–
     1970" kept at the GTWHI headquarters in Acheen Street, George Town which can be
     accessed for reference purposes.
9.   George Town World Heritage Inc. 2013. George Town oral history, preserving history.
     Buiding Community. Creating a sense of place. http://penangoralhistory.wordpress.
     com (accessed 1 August 2017).
10. This information was obtained from Ms. Kuah Li Feng, coordinator of the above-
     mentioned oral documentation project on 2 August 2017.
11. See Persatuan Sejarah Lisan Malaysia for "Perlembagaan bagi Pertubuhan Induk
     Persatuan Sejarah Lisan Malaysia" at http://www.sejarahlisan.org.my/index.php/
     maklumat-pertubuhan/perlembagaan-persatuan (accessed 1 August 2017).
12. Interview with Dr. Zahidi Dato' Zainol Rashid, Chairman of Oral History Association
     of Malaysia on 14 July 2017.
13. Khoo (2006) repeats again the importance of oral history in research and the writing
     of Malaysian history in his article titled "Trend dan Perkembangan Pensejarahan
     Malaysia".
14. See for instance, Abdul Aziz (1973/1974), Mohd Pawazi (1973/1974), Lamat
     (1975/1976) and Mohd Yunus (1975/1976).
15. One example of the historian using the oral history method in their research is Haryati
     and Hamidin (2007) who interviewed trishaw riders and local authority officials in
     their study of Malay trishaw riders in Kota Bharu between 2001–2003.

16.	This information was provided by Associate Professor Dr. Sivachandralingam Sundara Raja, Head of the Department of History, UM through e-mail communication on 11 June 2018.

17.	The first oral history workshop organised by this Unit was from 13 to 14 July 2017, held at the School of Humanities, USM, Penang. A total of 38 participants from within and outside Penang comprising graduate and undergraduate students, university and college lecturers, museum staff, teachers and members of the non-governmental societies attended this one-and-half-day workshop. This workshop exposed participants to the theory and practice of oral history. Since its inception, the unit have undertaken two oral history projects namely oral history of the Al-Mashoor School in Penang and oral history of the hajj in Penang during sea transportation era.

18.	Telephone interview with Mohd Nasir Ismail, Head of the Documentation and Publication Section, National Archives of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, on 27 June 2018.

19.	See Azemi (2005, 9). See also National Archives of Malaysia (2005, 1–10).

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