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TESTIMONY AS RESPONSIBILITY IN TIMES OF POLARIZATION: ORAL HISTORY AND SINO-SOVIET MUSICAL EXCHANGE

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Abstract: This article interprets the oral histories of Chinese musicians trained in the Soviet Union as acts of testimony and responsibility amid ideological polarization. Rather than viewing oral history merely as a supplement to archival research, it approaches it as an ethico-epistemic practice in which remembering becomes a conscientious engagement with contested pasts. Focusing on musicians educated during the formative decades of the People's Republic of China, the study explores how personal narratives mediate between individual life trajectories and the broader political and cultural tensions that shaped Sino-Soviet exchange. Epistemologically, it examines how oral testimony unsettles rigid distinctions between subjectivity and objectivity, memory and fact, showing that selectivity, reconstruction, and emotional inflection are intrinsic to historical understanding rather than methodological flaws. Ethically, it argues that recording and preserving fragile memories constitutes a responsibility to resist historical erasure and cultural amnesia, especially amid political rupture and polarized interpretations of the past. Oral history thus becomes a dialogical space where archival records and lived experience converge, enabling a more plural reconstruction of history grounded in conscience, resistance to forgetting and ethico-political imagination. By linking oral testimony with philosophical reflections on memory, responsibility, and public knowledge, the article contributes to

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interdisciplinary dialogue among historiography, philosophy, and cultural studies.

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1. Introduction

In the early decades of the twenty-first century, questions of memory, meaning and responsibility have re-emerged with renewed urgency across disciplines. The experiences of Chinese musicians who studied in the Soviet Union during the 1950s and 1960s demonstrate how individual memories can illuminate wider processes of cultural exchange, ideological formation, and artistic development during a formative period in the history of the People's Republic of China. Their narratives reveal that historical understanding cannot be confined to documented facts alone, since recollection is shaped by personal experience, emotional resonance, temporal distance and social context. The subjective and selective character of memory, therefore, does not necessarily weaken its historical significance; rather, it calls for an approach that recognizes the complexity of interpreting the past through multiple perspectives. At the same time, the memories of this aging generation carry an ethical significance, as many experiences may disappear if they are not recorded and transmitted. Attentive listening and the preservation of testimony thus become important means of safeguarding cultural memory and preventing the loss of experiences that contribute to a fuller understanding of history. Oral history consequently opens a space in which personal experience and collective memory interact, enabling historical interpretation to move beyond a purely documentary framework. That is to say, oral history can be understood as a form of cultural testimony that resists historical erasure and contributes to the construction of a more inclusive public memory (Chen, 261). Viewed from this perspective, remembering becomes not only an engagement with the past but also a responsibility toward those whose experiences have shaped it and toward future generations who inherit its meanings.

2. Cultural Exchange Between China and The Soviet Union

The People's Republic of China was established in October 1949, and the Soviet Union was the first country to recognize it and establish diplomatic relations with it. Both countries were socialist states that had emerged from prolonged revolutionary struggles and shared a broadly consistent ideological and social system. Faced with an urgent need for trained personnel to support socialist construction, China adopted a "one-sided" diplomatic policy toward the Soviet Union. Seeking to learn from the Soviet educational system and develop the skilled personnel required for national reconstruction, the Chinese government not only invited Soviet experts to teach in China but also systematically selected and sent students to study in the Soviet Union, giving rise to a major movement of "studying in the Soviet Union." During the 1950s and 1960s, study in the Soviet Union became the principal form of overseas education for Chinese students, accounting for 78.64% of the total number sent abroad. According to the political circumstances and the nature of bilateral cooperation, Sino-Soviet cultural exchanges during this period can be divided into three stages.

The first stage was from 1950 to 1952. On February 14, 1950, Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and other Chinese leaders signed the Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance between the People's Republic of China and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in Moscow. The treaty established a foundation for cultural exchange and friendly cooperation between the two countries. Article 5 affirmed the commitment of both parties to develop and consolidate economic and cultural relations in a spirit of friendly cooperation, based on equality, mutual benefit, mutual respect for national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and non-interference in each other's internal affairs. It also provided for economic assistance and cooperation. This provision offered an important policy basis for comprehensive cultural exchange and became a foundational framework for Sino-Soviet cultural cooperation during this period. Within the context of the formal alliance between the two countries, extensive exchanges developed in art, education, science, literature, journalism, and other fields. On August 19, 1951, the first group of 375 Chinese

students sent to the Soviet Union departed (Li, 87). However, because of limited experience and inadequate preparation, many of these students, most of whom had no prior knowledge of Russian, encountered considerable difficulties upon arrival. In response, China adopted the principle of "putting quality before quantity" and, in 1952, established the Preparatory Department for Studying in the Soviet Union, limiting the number of students selected to 220 and introducing stricter selection procedures. On August 9, 1952, Zhang Wentian, the Chinese Ambassador to the Soviet Union, and Gorky Maximovich Pushkin, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Soviet Union, signed in Moscow the Agreement on the Study of Citizens of the People's Republic of China in Higher Educational Institutions of the Soviet Union (1952), which came into effect on September 1. Under this agreement, the Soviet Union accepted Chinese undergraduate and graduate students into its higher educational institutions, while China continued to select outstanding students and young teachers for advanced study in Soviet universities. At the Sino-Soviet Cultural Exchange Symposium held at the Beijing Hotel on December 3, 1952, the two sides reviewed the cultural exchanges of the preceding two years, discussed existing challenges, and exchanged views on future plans. The experience gained during this initial period provided an important foundation for subsequent cultural cooperation.

Between 1953 and 1956, China entered the second stage, characterized by a comprehensive effort to learn from Soviet experience. In 1953, China began implementing its First Five-Year Plan. At the Fourth Session of the First National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, Mao Zedong called for "a nationwide wave of learning from the Soviet Union." This initiative generated widespread interest in Soviet experience and technology, bringing Sino-Soviet exchanges to an unprecedented level and marking a "honeymoon period" in bilateral relations. In 1953, the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China established nationwide selection criteria for students preparing to study in the Soviet Union, covering political qualifications, educational background, physical condition, and age. These criteria sought to ensure that

capable, disciplined, committed, intellectually motivated, and promising individuals were selected for overseas study. In 1953, 583 students were sent to the Soviet Union, including 523 undergraduates and 60 graduate students. The number increased to 1,375 in 1954 and, in 1955, reached 1,932 under the policy of sending more graduate students and fewer or no secondary-school students. Building on several years of exchange and cooperation, China and the Soviet Union signed the Agreement on Cultural Cooperation between the People's Republic of China and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in Moscow on July 5, 1956. The agreement provided for annual cultural cooperation plans, reciprocal delegations, and cooperation in science, technology, education, culture, art, health, publishing, broadcasting, television, film, sports, and other fields. Its signing marked a new stage of more systematic and standardized cultural exchange, providing clearer guidelines for cooperation in terms of fields, methods, and annual implementation (Yan, 146–151, 160). In 1956, the number of Chinese students sent to the Soviet Union rose further to 2,085.

The third stage, from 1957 to 1966, witnessed a gradual decline in Sino-Soviet cultural exchange as China's diplomatic position toward the Soviet Union changed and it began to pursue a more independent path of development. Consequently, cooperation in education, science, and technology gradually diminished. Between 1957 and 1959, growing tensions between the two countries led China to adopt the policy of "reducing scale and focusing on quality," resulting in a sharp decline in the number of students sent to the Soviet Union. From 1960 to 1966, Sino-Soviet relations increasingly deteriorated, and the number of Chinese students sent to the Soviet Union fell to 519. Between July 16 and September 1, 1960, the Soviet Union recalled nearly 1,390 experts working in China, further disrupting bilateral educational and cultural cooperation. The changing international and political context inevitably affected the movement of Chinese students to the Soviet Union. In May 1966, China ceased selecting and sending students there for study. Thus, the period of "studying in the Soviet Union" that had characterized the early decades of the People's Republic of China came to an end.

3. Sino-Soviet Professional Exchange in Music

From 1950 to 1966, China sent a total of 8,310 undergraduates, graduate students, and visiting teachers to the Soviet Union, where they studied at more than 200 universities and research institutions across over 20 cities. Their fields of study covered more than 40 areas in which China faced severe shortages of professionals, including art, machinery, hydropower, petroleum, steel, and aviation. Of the 8,013 students who returned to China after completing their studies, 77 were art majors sent by the Chinese government to the Soviet Union (Sun, 428). Between 1953 and 1962, 38 international students specializing in piano, composition, vocal music, music theory, harp, organ, violin, and other disciplines went to the Tchaikovsky Conservatory in Moscow, the Leningrad Conservatory, the Odessa Conservatory, and other higher educational institutions for study and exchange. The first and second groups of students sent to the Soviet Union in 1951 and 1952 included no art majors. In August 1953, eight art students were sent abroad for the first time as part of the third group studying in the Soviet Union. Among them were three music students: Wu Zuqiang (composition), Li Delun (conducting), and Guo Shuzhen (vocal music) (Wang, 2011). In 1954, Du Mingxin (composition), Huang Xiaohe (violin, musicology), Ni Hongjin (piano), Xu Yi (vocal music), Lin Yingrong (cello), Liu Zhigang (brass), and Yan Liangkun (conducting) were sent to study. In 1955, Zhu Jian'er (composition), Qu Wei (composition), Zou Lu (composition), Huang Xiaotong (conducting), Cao Peng (conducting), and Zhong Wei (vocal music), among others, were sent abroad. In 1956, Meiliqige (composition) was sent to the Tchaikovsky Conservatory in Moscow. In 1957, Cao Chengyun (harp) studied at the Tchaikovsky Conservatory in Moscow, while Han Zhongjie (conducting) studied at the Leningrad Conservatory. In 1960, Lin Yaoji (violin), Sheng Zhonghua (violin), Zuo Yin (harp, organ), Liu Shikun (piano), Li Minduo (piano), Situ Zhiwen (cello), and Zheng Xiaoying (conducting), among others, went to the Tchaikovsky Conservatory in Moscow. Meanwhile, Yin Chengzong (piano), Zhao Pingguo (piano), Bai Yu (oboe), Zhu Tongde (flute), Chen Genming (horn), and He Fuxing (clarinet),

among others, studied at the Leningrad Conservatory, while Ding Fengchen (piano) studied at the Odessa Conservatory in Ukraine. In 1962, Han Li (violin) and Zhu Li (violin) studied at the Tchaikovsky Conservatory in Moscow and the Odessa Conservatory, respectively. After several years of dedicated study in the Soviet Union, most of these students achieved outstanding academic results. For example, in 1958, Wu Zuqiang and Guo Shuzhen graduated with Grade-A results from the Tchaikovsky Conservatory in Moscow (Sun, 524).

In the modern Chinese study-abroad movement, which has a history of more than a century, the scale and systematic organization of study in the Soviet Union during the 1950s and 1960s were unprecedented, constituting a remarkable chapter in the "History of One Hundred Years of Chinese Studying Abroad." This extensive and influential cultural exchange gave the study-abroad movement in the early years of the PRC a distinctive significance and became a unique case in the history of education, overseas study, and international cultural exchange. From August 13, 1951, when China first sent 375 students to study in the Soviet Union, to 1965, when the final group was dispatched, a total of 8,391 people went to the Soviet Union for study over the fourteen-year period (Li, 220–225). This was the period when the PRC sent the largest number of students to the Soviet Union and when overseas study produced particularly significant results. It was also a period of rapid development in the training and institutional development of music education in China (Wang, 2011). Most of the musicians studied in the Soviet Union during the unprecedented "honeymoon period" of Sino-Soviet relations, when close diplomatic ties and extensive cultural exchanges provided favourable conditions for their study and life there. They received rigorous academic training at Soviet higher educational institutions, established solid professional foundations, and acquired advanced pedagogical systems and professional concepts of the time. After successfully completing their studies, they returned to China and joined universities, research institutes, art troupes, and other institutions, contributing to music education and research. They became an important force in the development of professional music

education in China and played a significant role in training successive generations of musical talent for the PRC.

4. Memory and Interpretation

What the musicians who studied in the Soviet Union saw, heard, and experienced provides a valuable space for academic research, with historical and literary value no less significant than that of official "government documents" (Li, 25–27). To understand their life journeys fully, it is necessary to return to the era in which they experienced the wars and hardships surrounding the founding of the PRC and participated as witnesses and contributors in the construction of the new Chinese music system. After the reform and opening up, their artistic achievements and academic contributions influenced, and in some cases shaped, the development of music in China. From a broader perspective, these musicians are undoubtedly the "backbone" of the Chinese music industry, vivid witnesses to the construction of China's musical system, and valuable historical treasures (Cao, 64–71). However, some have already passed away, while those still living are now in their late eighties and gradually withdrawing from musical and academic circles. These precious memories, which should not be forgotten, are gradually disappearing with the aging and death of those who experienced them. Therefore, oral materials concerning these musicians have become increasingly valuable. It is thus an important task for the contemporary music field to record, collect, organize, and preserve the historical memories of what these musicians saw, heard, and experienced, thereby addressing gaps in the historical record of musicians who studied in the Soviet Union and enabling a more comprehensive and systematic study of this group (Chen, 70–72).

At present, oral history research is flourishing in China's academic field. Its research approach differs from the "passive" method of traditional historiography, which relies heavily on extensive textual historical materials. Scholars can move beyond the study and engage directly with historical witnesses, actively "excavating" history through interviews and narratives and developing a distinctive research model (Contemporary Shanghai Research Institute, 17). As an important means of recording

history, oral history focuses on micro-level experiences and, from these, seeks to construct multiple perspectives on historical narratives. Taking musicians who studied in the Soviet Union during the 1950s and 1960s as its subject, historical context as its foundation, and oral history as its method, this research records in detail their experiences of study, life, creation, teaching, and artistic achievement. Through interviews focusing on their subjective experiences and dynamic narratives, it seeks to grasp historical memory comprehensively from different perspectives. The research can be approached through two dimensions: individual memory and collective memory.

A. Dimension of Individual Memory: Unlike traditional grand historical narratives, oral history, through the use of ordinary people's oral narratives, focuses on individual destinies and provides a micro-narrative perspective for deconstructing and analyzing macro-historical narratives through everyday lives and details (Contemporary Shanghai Research Institute, 9). As an effective means of exploring and preserving the individual memories of musicians who studied in the Soviet Union, it can deepen and broaden academic research. Detailed materials and diverse perspectives can supplement, reconstruct, and reproduce the process of the "study in the Soviet Union" movement, offering a distinctive means of piecing together the historical fragments of this period. It also enables individuals to narrate and express their life journeys, allowing history to be understood through the perspectives of eyewitnesses, participants, and informants (Hu, 140–146).

B. Dimension of Collective Memory: Historical materials obtained through oral narratives possess academic and documentary value (Zhou, 1–8). Many important details hidden in history are forgotten, overlooked, or obscured by time and remain undocumented. The oral histories of musicians who studied in the Soviet Union can recover such details from another perspective and cross-reference them with archives, notes, miscellaneous records, works, letters, newspapers, magazines, and other sources to understand or challenge historical accounts

through specific people and events (Hu, 140–146). This process extends documentary sources, fills gaps in historical records, corrects biased accounts, and contributes to historical reconstruction, creating a new dimension of research that connects collective experiences with individual memories across time and context. As scholar Cheng Zhongyuan observes, "The most important carriers of historical information are the archives that record history, and the memories of the witnesses" (Contemporary Shanghai Research Institute, 61).

In this sense, memory should not be understood as a passive repository of past events, but as an active process of interpretation through which historical meaning is constituted.

5. Oral History as Testimony: Method and Epistemology

Oral history is often described procedurally as a sequence involving preparation, interviewing, recording, and archival organization (China Memory Project Center of National Library, 12). Yet such an account risks obscuring its deeper epistemological and philosophical significance. Oral history should therefore be reconsidered not merely as a technical method of data collection, but as a testimonial practice in which knowledge is co-constituted through dialogue, memory, and interpretation.

At its core, oral history operates through a relational epistemology. Unlike archival research, which treats documents as relatively stable repositories of information, oral history emerges through encounters between interviewer and interviewee. Knowledge is not simply extracted but generated through interaction. This understanding places oral history within the epistemology of testimony. Testimonial knowledge cannot be reduced entirely to private observation or independent verification, because the social practice of giving and receiving testimony is itself a fundamental source of knowledge (Coady, 149–55). The interview is therefore not a neutral instrument but a dialogical space shaped by trust, temporality, and mutual responsiveness. The resulting narrative depends not only on what is remembered but also on how it is prompted, received, and interpreted. This relational dimension highlights memory as an

interpretive act rather than a passive retrieval of facts. The recollections of musicians who studied in the Soviet Union are inevitably shaped by temporal distance, personal experience, and changing social contexts. Memory is not a transparent medium but a site of reconstruction, where past events are reconfigured in light of present understanding. Such reconstructive features, often treated in methodological literature as limitations, may instead be understood as constitutive of historical knowledge. They demonstrate that historical truth is not given in a single fixed form but approached through layered narratives that invite comparison, reflection, and critical engagement.

From this perspective, the procedures of oral history—pre-interview preparation, question design, recording, and post-interview verification—acquire a different significance. Preparation is not merely the collection of background information but an interpretive orientation shaping the horizon of inquiry. Interview questions are not only technical instruments but ethical and hermeneutic acts that determine what may be expressed and what remains unarticulated. Recording technologies, while preserving testimony, also mediate expression by influencing the rhythm, tone, and openness of narratives. Likewise, transcription and editing are not neutral acts of documentation but involve choices concerning representation, coherence, and emphasis.

These considerations suggest that oral history cannot be reduced to standardized procedures. Rather, it requires methodological rigor combined with interpretive sensitivity. The aim is not to eliminate subjectivity but to engage it critically. Strategies such as cross-referencing archival materials, conducting repeated interviews, and comparing multiple testimonies do not produce absolute objective truth. Instead, they create a field of intersubjective verification in which different perspectives illuminate, challenge, and refine one another.

In this sense, oral history shares affinities with broader traditions of hermeneutic inquiry. It recognizes that understanding is situated, mediated, and open to revision. The researcher does not stand outside this process but participates in it reflexively, acknowledging both the possibilities and limits of interpretation.

By approaching oral narratives as testimony rather than mere data, oral history becomes a mode of engaging with the past that is simultaneously epistemological and ethical—concerned not only with what is known, but also with how it is known and under what conditions it can be responsibly transmitted.

These procedural dimensions—preparation, interviewing, and documentation—should therefore not be reduced to technical routines, but understood as moments of interpretive and ethical engagement within the broader practice of oral history.

6. Ethical Responsibility and the Limits of Memory

These limitations should not be regarded merely as methodological deficiencies, but as conditions that reveal the ethical responsibility inherent in oral history. The fragility of memory, the tension between subjectivity and objectivity, and the influence of psychological and social factors disclose the ethical conditions under which historical knowledge is produced and transmitted. Oral history is therefore inseparable from a responsibility toward both past and future: the responsibility to interpret, preserve, and represent lived experience with care and critical awareness.

First, the instability of memory demonstrates that historical narration is always shaped by recollection and reconstruction. The musicians who studied in the Soviet Union, most of whom are now advanced in age, inevitably recall their experiences through temporal distance, emotional resonance, and subsequent life trajectories. Memory is thus not a passive repository of past events but an active process that reshapes and reinterprets the past from the perspective of the present. What may appear as "inaccuracy" or "one-sidedness" in oral accounts can instead reveal how meaning is constituted through lived experience. The ethical responsibility of the researcher is not simply to correct such deviations but to engage them critically, recognizing both their limitations and interpretive significance.

Second, questions of authenticity and reliability must be understood within a broader epistemological and ethical framework. Oral testimony is inevitably shaped by personal emotions, social contexts, ideological backgrounds, and processes

of self-representation. These influences do not necessarily invalidate oral accounts but reveal the complex conditions through which truth emerges in narrative form. Authenticity in oral history cannot therefore be reduced to factual accuracy; it must also consider the integrity of the narrative voice and the circumstances in which it is expressed. The researcher must navigate between trust and critique, neither accepting testimony uncritically nor dismissing it as unreliable, but situating it within a process of intersubjective verification through comparison, reflection, and dialogue. Fricker's account of testimonial injustice further demonstrates that judgments of reliability are not socially neutral. Prejudice may cause a hearer to assign a speaker less credibility than the speaker deserves; researchers must therefore examine the power relations embedded in their assessments of oral testimony (Fricker, 154–73).

Third, the coexistence of multiple and sometimes conflicting narratives highlights the plural nature of historical understanding. Different musicians may remember the same events differently, shaped by their individual positions, values, and experiences. Such multiplicity need not be treated as a problem to be resolved but as a condition to be acknowledged. It demonstrates that history is not a single, unified narrative but a constellation of perspectives that must be interpreted in relation to one another. Oral history thus challenges the ideal of a singular objective account and encourages a dialogical understanding of truth that accommodates difference, contradiction, and ambiguity.

Finally, psychological and emotional factors underscore the vulnerability inherent in remembrance and narration. Recording technologies, interview settings, and the awareness of being documented may influence how individuals express their memories. Interviewees may hesitate, omit, or unconsciously reshape aspects of their experiences. These dynamics call for an ethics of listening grounded in respect, sensitivity, and attentiveness. Researchers must create conditions in which narrators feel acknowledged and at ease, recognizing that the quality of historical knowledge depends not only on the information obtained but also on the relational context in which it

emerges. Dotson's analysis of epistemic violence is particularly relevant here. When hearers fail to recognize and respond to a speaker's communicative vulnerability, they may produce practices of silencing, including situations in which speakers withhold testimony because they anticipate that their audience will be unable or unwilling to understand it (Dotson, 236–57)

Taken together, these considerations demonstrate that the limitations of oral history are inseparable from its ethical significance. Historical knowledge is not simply discovered but constructed through interpretation, judgment, and responsibility. To engage in oral history is therefore to participate in a practice that is both epistemological and ethical: one that seeks not only to recover the past but also to do justice to the voices through which the past is remembered and given meaning.

7. Conclusion

The period of "studying in the Soviet Union" during the 1950s and 1960s marked an important beginning of China's overseas education and constituted a significant chapter in its cultural exchanges with other countries. Oral history not only narrates and portrays the individual life journeys of the musicians but also reflects their deep connections with the historical era, nation, and society in which they lived. It represents a dynamic interplay between individual and collective memory, while simultaneously enabling a retrospective examination and deeper exploration of both. The multidimensional reconstruction of this unique and valuable historical panorama, viewed both diachronically and synchronically and examined through horizontal and vertical perspectives, can contribute to the systematic development of extensive oral historical archives. Such an undertaking not only supplements existing research on Sino-Soviet cultural exchange but also enables scholars to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the scope and significance of artistic and cultural interactions between the two countries. It further encourages researchers to move beyond the limitations of text-based sources, broaden their perspectives and methodological approaches, and bring new vitality to historical scholarship.

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