

Re/searching in Second Spring

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*To my mother,
and all the women across the three times—past, present, and future—
who have journeyed and transmitted the path of the odyssey into Second Spring.*

Acknowledgments

“Daily devotion fostered communities of women, as sisters gathered to study the sutras, or a mother interpreted a daughter’s dreams and recited chants¹”

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¹ Ko, D. (1994). In *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and culture in seventeenth-century China* (pp. 198–198). Stanford University Press.

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In closing, may all beings be free and flourish.

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Introduction

I am a Chinese immigrant from Hong Kong who moved to the United States when I was 38 years old. I embarked on the perimenopausal journey at 50, a transformative period I navigated after relocating from Colorado to New York. During this period, I faced the challenge of sifting through a vast amount of disjointed information online, coupled with modern medicine's predominantly pathologizing stance towards women's experiences at this age. At some point, I recalled from my limited understanding of Chinese Traditional Medicine (CTM), its term for this season of life: Second Spring. Far from the modern characterization as a problem to be solved, Second Spring rather suggests that menopause is a time of transformation and liberation. The recollection of this idea, which challenges the prevailing disempowering cultural narratives, sparked my interest in further research.

A pivotal moment in shaping my research direction was reading the Mayo Clinic's significant study, *Impact of Menopause Symptoms on Women in the Workplace*.² Highlighted in a 2023 *New York Times* article, this study revealed that American women lose an estimated \$1.8 billion annually in working time due to menopause symptoms.³ However, the study's focus

² Faubion, S. S., Enders, F., Hedges, M. S., Chaudhry, R., Kling, J. M., Shufelt, C. L., ... Kapoor, E. (2023). Impact of menopause symptoms on women in the workplace. *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*, 98(6), 833–845. doi:10.1016/j.mayocp.2023.02.025

³ Gupta, A. H. (2023). Study shows the staggering cost of menopause for women in the work force. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/28/well/live/menopause-symptoms-work-women.html>

predominantly on white, married, educated women raises concerns about its limited inclusivity, as it overlooks the rich diversity of socio-economic and cultural experiences among all women.

This limitation reflects a concerning trend in research that is narrowly focused on economic implications, often influenced by the financial ties between researchers and pharmaceutical companies.⁴ Such a narrow economic focus significantly undermines a holistic understanding of middle-aged women's well-being, especially during their transition into elderhood. More importantly, this perspective overlooks the essential role that women elders play in different sectors and communities, which is a crucial component for the sustainability of a society. Therefore, while shedding light on the economic impacts, the study fails to capture the full scope of middle-aged women's contributions and experiences, underscoring the need for a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to research.

This research explores how my perspectives, informed by Daoism,⁵ Confucianism, Buddhism, somatic practices, and modern science, could help shape a distinct research paradigm, especially tailored for the Chinese immigrant and Asian American community. While this perspective is deeply personal and reflects my experience, it is not representative of all the views of these diverse communities.

⁴ Nearly half of the researchers have received grants or consulting fees from various pharmaceutical firms, potentially influencing the scope and direction of their studies.

⁵ Also spelled "Taoism," the author chooses "Daoism" because its pronunciation is closer to the Chinese pronunciation.

This endeavor has led me into an unexpected journey of personal healing. This thesis aims to capture and celebrate Chinese immigrants and Chinese American communities, our collective liveliness, and advocate for a chorus of diverse voices. Each voice, singing in its unique language and accent, adds to our understanding of who we are in the location we inhabit. I wish that by sharing this narrative within the community of oral historians, we can recognize the possibilities of our work as a method of inquiry and a pathway to understanding, empowerment, and shared human experience.

A Spiral Research Paradigm

According to Shawn Wilson's *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*, research paradigms are frameworks that guide researchers, shaped by underlying beliefs and assumptions about the nature of reality and knowledge. These paradigms influence a researcher's approach, often subconsciously incorporating broad principles with their perspectives on reality and ethics. They involve critical questions about what is real, how we understand it, and the moral principles guiding this exploration. Comprising concepts like ontology (nature of reality), epistemology (how we know things), axiology (values and ethics), and methodology (methods of inquiry), these paradigms are value-laden, reflecting the researcher's views and approaches to their field of study, affect my research approach.⁶

The name of the spiral research paradigm is inspired by a reflection of my narrator:



“When I was in a few months of figuring out what I was going to do next, I realized that my experience of my life was more not from point to point. But more of a spiral. Yeah. And I wasn't sure if my spiral was spiraling out or spiraling in. But I had a sense that it was spiraling out. And my experience of the spiraling out was that with each experience... as I was dealing with different experiences,

⁶ Wilson, S. (2008). *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Halifax: Fernwood Pub.

I was able to look back and see how this moment had rhymed with this moment. And with this moment, not necessarily rhyme, but how it grew from that.”

As my narrator keenly observed her experience, she discovered fascinating connections and echoes between different moments in her life. This metaphor resonates deeply with my personal experience in knowledge-making. In my eyes, the process of knowledge creation takes on the shape of a spiral motion, somewhat different from my narrator’s viewpoint. In this intricate spiral, this spiral moves inward and outward simultaneously, symbolizing a dynamic process. It is within this spiraling motion that understanding is not just a linear accumulation but a synthesis of past insights and present awareness. These elements intricately weave together, forming the foundation for envisioning future developments.

In this light, my research paradigm draws upon a rich tapestry of influences - from various wisdom traditions to modern science, Western academics, and indigenous oral history practices. These diverse sources have intertwined, reflecting the spiral nature of my learning and growth. This journey has not been linear but rather cyclical and expansive, much like the spiraling motion described by my narrator. It highlights how my evolving perspective, shaped by a multitude of experiences and insights, affects my approach to research.

The Journey of a Chinese Midlife Woman Immigrant: Understanding Worldview and Sense-Making Mechanisms

In this section, I identify five themes that have influenced my perspective and approach to knowing. These themes are a tapestry of concepts, values, and practices, each encountered at different stages of my life; they are today the foundation of my sense-making. They define the

way I understand personal and societal experiences, which, as a result, defines my own identity as a Chinese midlife woman immigrant in the U.S. These themes have guided my research methodology.

1. Confucian Influence: Early on, when I was growing up, my culture was steeped in Confucian values; I learned the importance of collective harmony, respecting elders and ancestors, and following traditions. This laid the foundation for my understanding of the relationship between social dynamics and personal behavior.
2. Daoist Cosmology: My encounter with Daoism, a little later in life, as a novice practitioner, introduced me to the notion that the human body mirrors the universe. This perspective deepened my understanding of the profound connection between humans and their surroundings, encompassing both the tangible and intangible.
3. Somatic Wisdom and Neuroscience Insights: My move to the U.S. led to studying and practicing in a wisdom tradition that understands the body as a source of untapped intelligence and awareness. This approach is backed by neuroscience and embodied cognitive science, which demonstrates how the right brain and the entire body engage in 'bottom-up' processing, directly experiencing the world without conceptual filters. Once rooted in spiritual traditions, these practices have found applications in secular spaces such as education, business, and healthcare. Importantly, they have helped me regulate my state of being during interviews, staying attuned to the dynamic space between my narrator and me. This heightened awareness allows me to respond spontaneously to emerging needs and insights, further enriching the narrative process and demonstrating their universal value in enhancing embodied understanding and interconnectedness.

4. Daoism and Femininity: Further into my journey, throughout this research, I've delved deeper into Daoism's perspectives on femininity, unearthing a high regard for the feminine. In Daoist cosmology, the feminine is considered the fundamental principle of cosmic order and is revered as the source of nurturing.⁷ This knowledge has challenged and enriched my internalized understanding of gender roles and the intrinsic value of the feminine within my cultural context.
5. Diverse Oral History Traditions: Through the OHMA program, I have gained a deeper understanding of Western, Black, and Indigenous oral history practices. This exposure has increased my understanding of the fundamental values that influence my oral history research approach. One of the most significant principles is the shared authority principle, which promotes the ideas of a co-creating narrative process between the narrator and researcher. Also, the value of a generative association with heritage encourages a respectful and engaged approach to the exploration of cultural and ancestral roots. Additionally, this experience has instilled a deep sense of accountability, which is crucial for the ethical representation and interpretation of a diverse variety of narratives.

The five ways of knowing I examine here have played an important role in shaping the spiral research paradigm. This paradigm adopts a fluid, non-linear perspective of reality, resonant with Constructivist principles where multiple, dynamic realities coexist.⁸ Furthermore, both Daoist

⁷ Despeux, C., & Kohn, L. (2011). *Women in Daoism*. Dunedin, FL: Three Pines Press.

⁸ Wilson, S. (2008). *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Halifax: Fernwood Pub.

and somatic wisdom recognize that these different realities are not just external but also deeply embedded within our human physiology. The aim of this research is to move beyond traditional binary and linear approaches and reveal knowledge at both individual and collective levels.

A Spiral Research Methodology

The Spiral Oral History Research Methodology, with its fluid, non-linear approach and emphasis on multiple realities, provides the basis for a holistic and integrative research strategy. This methodology acknowledges individual and collective narratives within their broader cultural contexts resulting in a strategy that employs flexible narrative techniques and values personal experiences and emotions as much as factual recounts. This approach is enriched by integrating somatic and neuroscientific insights, particularly in understanding the physical and emotional dimensions of storytelling. Key to this approach is the inclusion of feminine and Daoist perspectives to ensure these perspectives are fully represented in the research. The strategy also includes a collaborative narrative process to uphold shared authority and ethical standards that are specific to the Chinese cultural context.

Ultimately, this methodology and the strategy derived from its aim to use oral histories as tools for social reflection, community well-being, and change, with an ongoing commitment to adapt and evolve in response to new insights and community needs, creating a vibrant and empathetic approach to oral history research.

Methods

Mutual Interviewing Approach & Shared Authority

Guided by the Spiral Research Methodology, one of the primary goals was to create an environment for in-depth study of the midlife experiences of Chinese immigrant and Chinese American women. Because this period of life is a dynamic intersection of stories, emotions, and transformations, it is crucial to create a space where narrators can freely explore and share their narratives. To counteract the power dynamics typical of oral history interviews, in which the interviewer often assumes a guiding role that may obscure the narrator's agency and influence the contours of the discourse, a different approach is taken here. After some discussion with my narrator, we chose a mutual interviewing approach. This approach allowed the narrator to ask me questions, transforming a traditional interview into a collaborative exchange and ensuring a more symmetrical creation of the historical narrative. A mutual, dynamic dialogue emerged that highlights the notion of “shared authority,” as I had experienced in this research.

"Shared authority" in oral history, as articulated by Michael Frisch, accentuates the mutual involvement in creating history, where the researcher and the subject each bring distinct expertise and resources. This dynamic process involves continuous negotiation of diverse authorities, affirming that the authority in oral history isn't solely held by the researcher but is mutually shared, and it becomes synonymous with shared authorship in this context.

The word “authority,” translated to 威信 (wēi xìn) in Chinese, marries 威 and 信, symbolizing dignity and trustworthiness, respectively. 威 (wēi), integrating the radicals 女 (nǚ), often

interpreted as an elder woman or matriarch, and 戊 (wù), signifying “Earth” in the Five Elements, evokes the notion of stability and maternal strength. 信 (xìn), on the other hand, indicates honesty and the reliability of standing by one’s word.

Reflecting on my interactions with my narrator, “shared authority” takes on a more culturally unique connotation compared to Frisch’s concept. My narrator and I experienced the practice of “shared authority” as our mutual recognition and acknowledgment of each other’s 威信 (wēi xìn) — our inherent dignity and wisdom—and our commitment to truthful sharing and trust in the authenticity of our stories. For us, “shared authority,” alluded to the distinctive dynamics and relational accountability within the Chinese cultural context.

In-Person Interviews & Activities

Given the exploratory nature of the project, it was critical to select a narrator who understood and agreed with its goals and research values, was thoughtful and articulate, and had positive, established relationships. Our interviews used a variety of methods, including semi-structured and adapted life story interviews, in which narrators recall and narrate significant life events. Over four months, we met in person, making and sharing dumplings and tea and engaging in other culturally familiar activities. Chinese pastries were integrated, creating a conducive atmosphere for dialogue and reflection.

The decision to meet with the narrator in person and over an extended period is informed by findings on physiological synchrony. This concept suggests that face-to-face interaction can enhance the coordination of physiological responses, such as heart rate and skin conductance,

between individuals. Such synchrony is associated with successful cooperation and bonding, which are crucial in establishing trust and rapport in oral history interviews.⁹¹⁰

On/Off the Record

Thematic exploration of this research included a combination of predetermined and emergent themes, focusing on physical and emotional aspects of midlife, family dynamics during and after the pandemic, changing community roles, and self-identity. These topics were not just discussion points but were at the heart of the interactions and provided insights into the midlife experiences of Chinese immigrant and Chinese American women. My narrator tells a particularly moving story about the difficulty of documenting her father's death during the pandemic which illustrates the tension between the immediacy of emotional processing and the pressure to document personal experience. This conflict highlights the complexity of grief and the delicate balance between personal boundaries and the responsibility to articulate and document one's story:

“I told the story about my dad’s passing to one of my mentors, and she said... ‘you need to write it,’ because she’s an activist. And she was like, ‘at least you need to set down the timeline.’ And I was like, ‘I can’t right now.’ And she knows that, she’s been like a serious activist who has gone to jail. Like she has sacrificed certain things. And I was

⁹ Gordon, I. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-biology-bonding/202006/what-is-synchrony-and-why-is-it-important>

¹⁰ Behrens, F., Snijedewint, J. A., Moulder, R. G., Prochazkova, E., Sjak-Shie, E. E., Boker, S. M., & Kret, M. E. (2020). Physiological Synchrony is associated with cooperative success in real-life interactions. Retrieved from <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-020-76539-8>

like, I cannot give that to people. And she was like, 'I understand what it was like, at least read it for yourself.' And I was like, it's a little too... And, of course, I wish I had it. I knew I would wish I had it. Yeah. But in that moment, I had to deal with the regret that I wouldn't have this thing written instead of just experiencing what I had."

This narrative aligns with the broader theme of the interconnectivity between personal experience and public history, a relationship particularly nuanced within Chinese culture's emphasis on collective harmony over individual expression. Judy Yung, an influential Chinese American oral historian, reflects on the interviews she conducted for her seminal works *Unbound Feet* and *Unbound Voices* (*Unbound Feet* documents the societal transformation of Chinese women in San Francisco from the gold rush to World War II, while *Unbound Voices* presents a collection of primary writings and oral histories from the same era)¹¹:

"...I had a difficult time finding anyone to interview. When I finally located the three Chinese women holding the banner and leading a parade in the front cover photo of Unbound Feet, all three declined to be interviewed, saying that they had been coaxed into participating in the parade to welcome Madame Chiang Kai-shek to San Francisco in 1941 and that they really had nothing to add about women's contributions to the war effort. Even when I found an interview that had been done with one of the key leaders, she seemed reluctant to talk about that period of her life or to take credit for her many

¹¹ Yung, J. (1998a). Giving voice to Chinese American women. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 19(3), 153. doi:10.2307/3347095

*long hours of volunteer work. I suspect this reluctance has something to do with Chinese women's socialized behavior to be self-effacing, to downplay their political activities and emphasize instead their role in the family."*¹²

My interest in the limited historical records of Daoist teachers and leaders reflects similar tensions. The scarcity of these records may be related to cultural values and perceptions of great teachers or saints, where silence and sacrifice for the common good are highly valued. This insight into cultural and historical practices provides additional understanding to the narratives in this study. It illuminates both the narrator's reluctance to document her personal grief and the historical trend of Daoist women not being mentioned for the sake of the greater good.

¹² Yung, J. (1998). Giving voice to Chinese American women. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 19(3), 132. doi:10.2307/3347095

Returning to the Roots - Understanding Silence

Daoism is a traditional Chinese indigenous religion that developed over 2,500 years ago and advocates living in harmony with the guiding principle of the universe, the Dao. Its spiritual practice, which includes meditation, Qi practice, and a deep connection with nature, aims to fully awaken practitioners to one's true nature. This tradition is reflected in public organizations, ritual structures, and centuries-old traditions.

In Daoist cosmology, women are regarded as the embodiment of Yin. This important cosmic energy is essential to the workings of the universe. It is often considered equal to or superior to Yang, a component of the cosmic duality, and symbolizes masculinity and action. At the heart of Daoist philosophy, Dao is often associated with femininity and is known as the mother of all things. Daoism holds women in high esteem, respecting their deep connection to the universe and nurturing qualities.¹³ In this study, I focus on Daoism during the Song Dynasty (960-1279), when Daoist teachings were integrated into state governance through the construction of temples and regular rituals. This era was a critical period for the recognition of the role of women in Daoism, and although female representation declined in the early Song, advanced female practitioners gained recognition for their spiritual influence and contributions to inner alchemy.

¹³ Despeux, C., & Kohn, L. (2011). *Women in Daoism*. Dunedin, FL: Three Pines Press.

This shift highlights the dynamic development of women's roles in Daoism and marks a critical juncture in religious and cultural history during this period.¹⁴

The Confucian patriarchal structure prevailed during the Song Dynasty (and throughout Chinese history), where men held dominant power as heads of households and in various aspects of societal governance, influenced Daoism, and created a complex narrative about the role of women. Historically, this structure has limited women's social roles and obscured their contributions to Daoist practice and society as a whole.

Although Daoism recognizes women as revered figures in a variety of roles, as mothers and nurturers embodying yin in longevity practices, as sacred teachers, and as central agents of spiritual transformation, there is one notable phenomenon: a scarcity of women in historical records. There are several interrelated reasons for this:¹⁵

First, for most of Chinese history, a patriarchal social framework rooted in Confucian orthodoxy naturally privileged the achievements of men in history-making. Women's contributions were overlooked or misattributed in service of institutional self-preservation.

¹⁴ Daoism in the Tang (618–906) and Song (960–1279) dynasties - education - asian art museum. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://education.asianart.org/resources/daoism-in-the-tang-and-song-dynasties/>

¹⁵ Cleary, T. (1999). Translator's Introduction . In *Immortal sisters: Secret teachings of Taoist women* (p. IX–XXIX). essay, Berkeley Calif.: North Atlantic Books.

Second, it is ironic that Daoist philosophy itself, with its emphasis on subtlety and the unseen, has resulted in the limited visibility of women in Daoist history. The Daoist spirit can be summed up in phrases such as “A skilled artisan leaves no traces,” emphasizing the value of actions over their public acknowledgment. This appreciation for the unobtrusive nature of contributions, coupled with a non-dualist perspective in which philosophy does not seek recognition, often results in an under-documentation of women's roles and achievements.

The problem is further exacerbated by the esoteric and often oral nature of many Daoist practices. Because Daoist teachings are often tailored to individual learners and kept secret to preserve their integrity, the contributions of female practitioners are unlikely to be formally recorded. While this secretive process of transmission protected the teachings, it inadvertently resulted in the important role of women in Daoism remaining historically unknown.

Uncovering the reasons for this long silence further fostered informed empathy for my narrator's desire to remain anonymous in this study. It also gives credence to a different, more embodied way of listening – a sense of solidarity, a sense of “we are in this together!” Thus, the historical novella is used to interpret and publish the research that informed this discovery of women's history-making.

Transferring Knowledge Through a Historical Novella

Oral history practices in Western scholarship tend to focus on the politics of sense-making, recording, and publishing personal narratives. This approach sometimes overlooks the subtle dynamics of Chinese cultural norms, particularly in the realm of family and community relations. In these situations, sharing personal or family stories, especially among women, can cause tension and discomfort due to cultural norms that emphasize privacy and collective identity. This presents unique challenges for oral history practitioners who strive to preserve, interpret, and publish these narratives while maintaining ethical practices that respect the long-term social harmony of the narrators.

Using historical fiction based on oral tradition data provides a nuanced approach to preserving, interpreting, and transmitting oral tradition. This approach is consistent with Confucian values and prevents possible social disharmony by avoiding direct attribution of experiences to specific individuals. At the same time, it adheres to Daoist principles and subtly highlights the essence of achievement while avoiding emphasis on individual awards. This approach was largely inspired by Nicki Pombier and Liza Zapol's course "Serious Play," which focuses on interpreting and representing the oral history of oral history through various forms, literary and performance-based. This approach broadens the scope of our processing of historical records. By interweaving fiction with factual narratives, historical fiction becomes a powerful medium for interpreting and disseminating knowledge that respects the cultural nuances prevalent in Chinese immigrant and Chinese American communities but also includes perspectives that might otherwise be excluded. By acknowledging individual stories as part of a broader collective understanding, this approach

also honors the practice of oral history and emphasizes the importance of each story without the need for explicit recognition or notoriety. This approach thus opens new avenues for scholarly research, where the interplay of literature and oral history practice brings richer and more nuanced insights into the past.

Modern Science of Imagination

As we explore how historical fiction serves as a powerful medium for interpreting and disseminating knowledge from a cultural and artistic perspective, it might be interesting to consider the insights of modern science on the role of imagination. Although the scientific study of imagination is not directly concerned with its application to historical fiction, the principles gained can be effectively applied in practice. This reflection shows how the use of imagination can actively change the way we engage with and understand historical narratives. In the discussion that follows, I examine the diverse effects of imagination revealed by modern science, exploring its potential to deepen our engagement with narrative and historical records and increase the richness of our interpretations.

First, imagination influences perception and actively shapes our experiences of reality.¹⁶ By engaging with historical fiction derived from oral histories, individuals are not merely passive recipients of information but active participants in the reinterpretation of the past. This

¹⁶ Nordqvist, C. (n.d.). Imagination - how and where does it occur in the brain? Retrieved from <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/266426>

imaginative engagement enables a deeper, more empathetic understanding of historical narratives and transcends the limitations of factual narratives. For instance, when individuals use their imagination to interpret the silences within historical records, they can empower marginalized voices to contribute to the (missing) narrative and, as a result, experience a sense of restorative justice for their ancestors.

Second, the interplay between imagination, memory, and decision-making emphasizes the cognitive depth of this approach. Imagination allows us to extract meaning from past experiences and apply them to new circumstances. In historical fiction, the lessons and insights of oral tradition can be recontextualized and relevant to contemporary audiences, resulting in a fuller and more informed understanding of history.

Third, imagination stimulates cognitive processes and has a significant impact on physical health.¹⁷ By intentionally stimulating readers' imaginations, historical fiction based on oral history can foster a deeper connection with the narrative, increasing intellectual engagement and emotional resonance.

Furthermore, activation of a network of brain regions during imagination suggests a complex neural basis for imagination. Engaging the brain in creative tasks during storytelling reflects

¹⁷ Marshall, L. (2018). Your brain on imagination: It's a lot like the real thing, study shows. Retrieved from <https://www.colorado.edu/today/node/31511>

cognitive processes related to empathy, introspection, and understanding and enriches the experience of connecting with historical narratives.

In some interpretations of quantum physics, reality is not a fixed entity but is affected by observation and interpretation. In the context of historical fiction, this means that the act of creating and participating in narratives can shape the collective reality of a community. This can empower underrepresented groups because it allows them to actively participate in constructing their own historical and social realities, challenging dominant narratives that may marginalize their experiences.

The aspiration to integrate culture-centered methods, cognitive science insights, and quantum physics perspectives into the creation of historical fiction based on oral history data represents a novel experiment. This approach aims to respect the complexity of individual and collective experiences while providing a scientifically grounded lens through which we can have a broad-stroke understanding of the impact of storytelling in shaping our perceptions of reality and how the approach can promote community cohesion and identity formation.

The Decisions Behind a Historical Novella

Touching the Inexhaustible Apricity

This historical novella focuses on a collection of letters. The letters are exchanged between a fictional middle-aged Singaporean immigrant named Sam-nan (Sam); a character created based on a series of conversations I had over a period of time with my narrator who wishes to remain anonymous.

Sam corresponds with Sam's teacher from 900 years ago, a fictional 12th-century Daoist student of the historically important Song Dynasty, Sun Bu-er.¹⁸ This interaction introduces a layer of history that connects the characters. This historical novella aims to celebrate the resilience of women throughout the centuries who ventured into a period of transformation known as their Second Spring. Chapters are organized around key Chinese solar terms, connecting, and anchoring the natural and cultural context to provide readers with a more immersive experience.

Analysis and Interpretation

A series of questions, some stemming from best practices in oral history, guided the formation of the historical novella:

¹⁸ Daoist nun – sun buer. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://daoistgate.com/dao-sisters-sun-buer/>

1. How can I authentically incorporate elements of my experience, the narrator's experience, and our broader community into each character?
2. What is the best way to harmoniously combine real historical details with fictional elements in a narrative?
3. What strategies are crucial to maintaining the narrative integrity and authenticity of an oral tradition shared by narrators, especially when translating it into fictional correspondences with historical figures?
4. How can I ensure that the experiences of modern immigrants and historical figures are represented in a way that respects their different times and personal identities?

Alessandro Portelli's *The Death of Luigi Trastulli* provides insights into addressing the above issues during the creative process.¹⁹ Portelli's unique approach to combining personal and community experiences was profoundly reflected in how I incorporated the narrator's and my own diverse experiences into the novella's characters. His emphasis on the ways in which individuals and communities construct memories to give meaning to

¹⁹ Portelli, A. (2001). *The death of Luigi Trastulli, and other stories: Form and meaning in oral history*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

their lives reflects his desire to create characters that reflect the synthesis of personal narratives and collective memory.

Furthermore, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli* provides a compelling model for the delicate balance between historicity, authenticity, and fictional storytelling. His research into the permeability between factual history and personal narrative provided fundamental guidance for designing frameworks that combine historical details with fictional elements. In the novella, this integration is demonstrated by contrasting the narrator's experiences with those of historical and fictional characters. Themes such as depression, family dynamics, traditions, immigration, historical moments, and the tension between personal transformation and cultural norms that emerge from conversations with the narrator are woven into the story in a straightforward and engaging way. This approach aims to preserve the integrity of the oral tradition and add depth and resonance to the narrative.

Furthermore, in addressing the above questions, in order to incorporate my own and the narrator's personal and community experiences into the characters, I engaged deeply with my own experiences in a way that I would not normally do as an interviewer and researcher. By siding with the narrator, I developed a deeper sense of listening and empathy, which also helped me develop characters, each representing a unique synthesis of the essence of our experiences.

Renowned historical novelist Hilary Mantel emphasized in an interview the importance of writers fully immersing themselves in the era of their stories. "Live in the world," she

advises.²⁰ I conducted research in English and Chinese to understand the world of a middle-aged woman seeking spiritual transformation and awakening, anchoring the fictional aspects within the context of the Song Dynasty. The research content covers the historical and cultural context of the Song Dynasty, the development of Daoism during this period, and the women's lives during this period.

This novella also aims to express the often-unheard experiences of middle-aged Daoist disciples in the Song Dynasty through my imagination, combined with historical materials and poetry about Daoist female teachers and their surroundings. The narrative in *Touching the Inexhaustible Apricity* achieves its goal by bridging past and present, fact and fiction, offering a complex, multi-layered story that invites readers into an immersive, thought-provoking world and connection with history and a new relationship.

Second-Person Point of View (POV)

In Nyssa Chow's course "Multimedia Storytelling,"²¹ she suggests four questions we can ask when making formal decisions:

What do I believe is at the heart of this work?

²⁰ Carswell, F. (2021). Hilary Mantel shares her secrets of writing historical fiction. Retrieved from <https://www.scotsman.com/must-read/hilary-mantel-shares-her-secrets-of-writing-historical-fiction-3462521>

²¹ Spring 2022, OHMA at Columbia University

What do I believe the audience needs to know to understand?

What kind of experience do I want to curate for the audience?

How do I want the audience to stand in relation to the subject?

When thinking about how to create an intimate, reflective piece that promotes embodied experience, I used a second-person point of view (POV) to create an intimate, reflective relationship.

To demonstrate the effectiveness of using second person POV in storytelling, we can look at two of the five variations summarized by Fiction Editor Diane Callahan:²²

1. Reader Insert: The reader is meant to be the main character. The “you” is literally the reader living the story.

In the Summer Solstice (夏至): The Longest Day chapter, the reader is cast as the main character addressed by the protagonist while introducing the premises of the story:

“It’s your fiftieth birthday, inaugurated by a merciless night shift at the White Horse Tavern. Spent from serving liquors of deliverance and ministering to customers’

²² Callahan, D. (2022). The Complete Guide to writing fiction in second person. Retrieved from <https://quotidianwriter.medium.com/the-complete-guide-to-writing-fiction-in-second-person-6ca0af4d627f>

existential problems, the city dweller's and an Asian woman's vigilance escapes you.

Descending into the seat like a tired nomad, the 1 train shapeshifts into the temple that has appeared in your dream since the beginning."

2. Distant Narration: The protagonist is referring to themselves as "you" to create emotional distance. The "you" is NOT the reader.

In the Start of Autumn (立秋): Shadowed Wisdom: Depression as Sanity in Disguise

chapter, the 2nd person POV is used to create a safe space for the main character to share a journal entry that describes a difficult emotional state:

"You sustain a fetal position for three consecutive days. You are trapped in a cycle, donning a wetsuit woven from threads of organic depression and anxiety. The grip of this emotional attire is unyielding until you recognize this separation within you. Your body is desperately trying to pull something together."

This historical novella uses the second-person point of view (POV) in a variety of ways to engage readers directly, placing them in a historical setting while encouraging them to reflect on their own cultural and personal background. The aim of this approach is to foster a deep connection with the narrative, allowing readers to explore their relationship to history and reflect on questions about their ancestry, cultural heritage, and the impact of history on their identity.

To enrich this experience, the novella contains several multi-media devices, including audio and visual elements such as poetry, dreams, still images, and videos. These elements are designed to spark readers' imaginations and deepen their engagement with the story. In addition, guidance on relaxation and contemplation is incorporated, inviting readers to engage more intimately with the story and with the existential themes presented. Together these elements create a unique, reflective reading experience.

A Spiral Perspective (Conclusion)

In response to the Mayo Clinic's recent study on menopause, which primarily focused on a specific demographic of white, married, educated women and on the economic implications of menopause, this research advocates for a "spiral perspective" on oral history. This approach seeks to integrate ancient wisdom traditions with contemporary scholarly understanding and forward-looking vision, particularly highlighting the experiences of middle-aged women from Chinese immigrant and Chinese American women. It recognizes the depth of each community's historical practices and knowledge and emphasizes the need to understand their narratives within the context of their ancestral heritage, present-day experiences, and future aspirations. By spanning past, present, and future, this spiral perspective aspires to enrich sensory perception, interpretation, and knowledge transfer.

Central to the spiral perspective is the oral historian's state of being. It views self-care as an ethical practice and requires oral historians to be grounded, connected, and aware of their own mental and emotional states before and during contact with narrators. This approach promotes the oral historian's well-being and enables sustained and sensitive engagement with narrators and communities. The White House recently launched an initiative on women's health research that aims to transform women's health research by addressing historically understudied and underrepresented groups, and by closing the research gaps to improve women's well-being.²³

²³ Launch of White House initiative on Women's Health Research. (2023). Retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/gpc/briefing-room/2023/11/17/launch-of-white-house-initiative-on-womens-health-research/>

This perfectly aligns with a spiral perspective. It provides oral historians a timely opportunity to engage in important conversations about women's health and well-being. This initiative highlights the importance of incorporating oral history practices into multidisciplinary research to ensure a comprehensive understanding of women's experiences and needs and to further enrich the spiral perspective.

A Final Note

The somatic practices of ancient Daoist and Buddhist lineages have historically been esoteric but are increasingly available to people in different secular spaces today. The "bottom-up" way of knowing arises from the body's innate wisdom. This concept is comparable to the practice of "oral history from below," pioneered by American historian Jesse Lemisch in the late 60s to challenge the elitist, or "top-down," approach to history writing within the academy.²⁴

Just as somatic practices prioritize knowledge that emerges from within the body, oral historians who practice bottom-up oral history focus on "going to the people" and supporting the emergence of wisdom from within individuals and communities as a praxis of community empowerment. This transcends the notion of merely recording and interpreting narratives.²⁵ It is

²⁴ Cahill, R. (2014). Retrieved from <https://overland.org.au/2014/04/anti-radicalism-and-history-from-below/>

²⁵ Lynd, S. (1993). Oral History From Below. *The Oral History Review*, 21(1), 1–8. doi:10.1093/ohr/21.1.1

a shift from viewing bodies or groups of people as mere objects of study to recognizing them as sources of rich and lived experiences that provide valuable insights into the human condition.

In this way, the bottom-up approach of oral history reflects the embodied knowledge of the somatic traditions. Both view the interior as a source of truth and understanding, whether truth is stored in the body or truth is found in the collective memory of underrepresented communities.

This integration of inner wisdom enriches the work of oral historians and grounds it in authenticity and lived experience.

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