Unveiling Tianzhu Walking Horse Culture in the Hexi Corridor

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Why oral history?
Why Tianzhu walking horse?
Evergreen Oral History Initiative

• Working with rural teachers, students, librarians, and community members on library development, we’ve been hearing cases that our local history and culture are in danger

• Rebuild the communal memory by ourselves

• In 2009 Evergreen launched a pilot oral history project at Tianzhu No. 1 High School, Gansu Province
Let’s start from ...
Its prototype – Hexi (Tianzhu) Horse
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The Local Breed Continued
Forming the Culture - Geography

http://www.flickr.com/photos/green99/3772932443/
Since Western Han - Great Maying Prairie as royal cavalry breeding base

Song - “Six Valley horses” from Tubo Six Valley Tribe is the main war horses

Yongle period, Ming- Gansu Horse Breeding Institution, 6 branches supervising 24 horse ranches each with 4000-10000 horses. 3 of these ranch names are still used in Tianzhu.
Forming the Culture - Trade Caravan
Forming the Culture - Frontier Trade

Eryuan horse market, photo by Jinyan Xu, China Travel

Tube to make yak-buttered tea
Photo by Guanghui Xie
China Travel
Forming the Culture - Harness
Forming the Culture – Courier Horse

The Courier (Tomb brick painting of Wei and Jin Dynasties, Jiayuguan Pass)
Ethnic Culture and Religion

Ethnic Tibetan Areas

- U-tsang
- Kham
- Amdo

Some regions in Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang

Walking Horse Cultural Area

- Tibet Autonomous Region
- Qinghai
- Gansu
- Sichuan

Ganzi Perfecture Walking Horse Festival, photo by Lizhi Mou
Feb. 2nd Fork Stage Horse Race

Feb. 2nd Fork Stage Horse Race, 2012, photo by Hu Yulong
Our Findings
• 19 interviews, 650 minutes
• 18 interviewees, 14 horse breeders, 1 village chief, 1 Animal Husbandry Bureau official, 1 Culture and Sports Bureau retired official, 1 descendant of a horse shoer.
• 3 village horse races and 1 official horse race
Traditional Walking Horse Culture
Changes since mid-20th Century
## Social Changes in this Period

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Social Movement Started</th>
<th>Impact on Horse Industry</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>Socialist transformation</td>
<td>private ranches redeemed</td>
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<td>1958</td>
<td>the people's commune</td>
<td>horses bred and used by the production team; family horse breeding gone, horse races and trading stopped</td>
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<td>anti-feudal movement</td>
<td>monasteries destroyed then later reopened in 1980s. Horse breeding by monasteries gone</td>
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<td>1966-1976</td>
<td>Cultural Revolution</td>
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<td>1985-1987</td>
<td>household contract regarding farmland, livestock, and grassland established</td>
<td>Family horse farm, horse races and horse trading resumed.</td>
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<td>2000</td>
<td>urbanization of small towns</td>
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<td>Farming: vegetables, grapes, mushrooms</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Animal husbandry: white yak farming and industrial chain; pasture management, barn feeding, fattening feeding, forage grass industry</td>
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<td>Tibetan wine and medicine industries</td>
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<td>Eco-tourism: one National Forest Park established, and one Tourism Festival started</td>
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Challenge 1 - Shrinking of the Production

- 1980 total horse # 24,000 => 2010 total horse # 8744, Tianzhu walking horse #4500 => 2013 Tianzhu walking horse # 2000+

- Central production area: 3 towns compared with 13 historically. Firewood Ditch Town counts for more than 50% of the production.
Cause - Harness market

- Modernization - use for grazing, cart-pulling, plowing, riding gone

- Alternatives means of livelihood (farming, cattle, sheep, pig husbandry). E.g. Hua Zang Temple town vs. Firewood Ditch Town

- Degradation of grasslands, and modern animal husbandry: barn feeding and fattening feeding. E.g. Pine Mountain Town
2003-2013, 5k – over 70k Yuan, 14 times. Profit of a common walking horse 10k-30k Yuan. Driven by:

- Walking horse cultural area is better off: “(Qilian, Qinghai) each family raises one to two thousand sheep, four to five hundred heads of cattle” “(Daofu, Ganzi) rely on cordyceps sinensis, tricholoma matsutake and herbs” (Hu Wanliang, 018)

- Rising of equestrian sports in China since 2000
Challenges of Sports and Leisure Riding Market

- Management in branding:
  - Horse Traders
  - County Culture and Sports Bureau
  - Rider Club
  - Local Forces
  - Relationships:
    - Horse Traders assist County Culture and Sports Bureau from 1995-2003
    - Best ranking: 4th place in 2000m, serious management problem

- Degradation and weakness of the breed – conservation and improvement barely supported by the government

- Sightseeing riding – need recreational equestrian to develop
Challenge 3 – Transformation of Horse Races

• Since 1985, horse races: folk fairs and festival fading, though blessing, horse trading/exchange functions remain

• Since 2001, Tianzhu government intervenes - “Culture is a stage where economy is the real show”. On the County Day, August 1, a county horse race together with the Tourism Festival for 7-8 days (not annually)

• Pros: 1) more resources; 2) connected with tourism; 3) byproduct – Tianzhu Walking Horse Association

• Cons: removal of traditional religious and cultural practices (Lunar festival date, ritual, rewarding the top 13) => oral tradition and folk custom in jeopardy
Challenge 4 - Inheritance and Evolution of Technologies

knowledge and technologies

feeding, training, breeding

hoof care, castration, disease control

trading

inheritance hit by:
(1958-1985) people's commune period
(1985-now) breeder reduction
e.g. Ma Chengbao
family business ending

fading into few families' trade
issue: need for horse doctors
vs.
one good horse doctor +
inexperienced veterinarians

higher quality requirements,
inheritance rate even lower
e.g. 3 of 7 farms no sons' inheritance
Evolution of Technologies

• Driven by sports and leisure riding market- modern and (inter)nationalized

• Signs:
  • Large-scale horse farms, share-holding farms emerging, modern enterprise management & operation.
  • "distant shopping" approach - a primitive form of e-commerce

• Forseeable:
  • Genealogy database of horses, periodic horse appraisal, biotechnological conservation and improvement;
  • E-commerce assisted horse trading to break market isolation and tap into a vast market.
On Protecting and Developing Walking Horse Culture
Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection

Protect the ecological environment in a dynamic and integral fashion:

- 1. Investigation, Documentation and Research-Basis
- 2. Plan and Design, Guidance and Regulation
- 3. Dissemination of Culture and Education

**Key: inheritance**

knowledge and practices
- respect natural evolution, inheritors' space to merge old and new

folk customs
- horse race as inheritance field, avoid pitfalls of ethnic tourism, by folk ownership of expression

sports & leisure riding market
- traditional/modern, convergent industry, key of dynamic protection

**Key: the public, esp. youth, and local communities, to understand and possibly experience the culture’s past and today, and draw wisdom from the tradition and its evolution**
Building Convergent Industry

Protecting the culture and its ecological environment

Convergent Industry

Culture  Breeding  Sports  Tourism

Key: Drive and management by industry association

More functionalities besides 3 aspects of cultural protection:
+ building walking horse related sports system
+ cultivating the culture of leisure riding
+ building industry-related information infrastructure
+ linking the government, NGO and commercial organizations

Reference: International Federation of Icelandic Horse Associations (FEIF)
Get the Structure Right

- China Horse Industry Association (CHIA)
- Chinese Equestrian Association (CEA)
- National Regulatory Agencies
- Tianzhu Walking Horse Association, assisted by Tianzhu County Government
- Tianzhu Rider Clubs
- Connected Local Forces of Walking Horse Cultural Area
- Other local associations
- Breeding
- Culture
- Tourism
- Sports
Reflections

Looking back on this research process, we got the following experience/lessons:
Role of Oral History in Minority Culture Collection

Two-fold: qualitative (case) surveys and personal stories/feelings collection

As qualitative (case) surveys
- Issue 1: “surface” and “points” vs. lacking of statistical data (oral history as pilot survey)
- Issue 2: sampling effectiveness vs. get interviewees through personal network

As personal stories/feelings collection
- Issue 3: glimpse of the cultural richness vs. revealing to the full
Target-specific Interview Techniques

- Group interview with middleman preferred for the first interview
- Create the situational atmosphere for in-depth narrative
Interview and background research alternating

E.g. Tianzhu walking horse hot-sale regions => walking horse cultural area

weak management of walking horse industry => management mechanism of the convergent industry

Several key interviews to establish the framework of a module - Get'em first!
Questions

- When oral history needs to construct both “surface” and “points”,
- Q1: How to effectively use oral history for the survey?
- Q2: How to effectively chose samples (points) when constructing "surface"? How to overcome the limitation of personal network?
- Q3: Tips to get in-depth narrative when the interviewees are reserved? (How to get that "telling a story" mode?)
- Q4: How to make the best of in-depth stories? (the pain of "stopping here")
- Q5: **How to advance our research further? How to make real impact?**

Q4 and Q5 related to challenge: archiving, sharing, and giving back to communities
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