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An Interview with John Kwo Wei Tchen
1994 Pogue Award Recipent
conducted by Linda Shopes

John Kwo Wei Tchen, recipient of OHMAR's 1994 Forrest Pogue Award for outstanding work in oral history, is currently director of the Asian/American Center and assistant professor in the Department of Urban Studies at Queens College of the City University of New York and a member of the Ph.D. faculty in the sociology department at the C.U.N.Y. Graduate Center. Among oral historians, he is best known for his work as founding director of the New York Chinatown History Project, now the Chinatown History Museum.

For a more complete biographical sketch, consult the summer issue of the Newsletter.

Linda Shopes, 1992 Pogue Award winner, conducted the following interview with Jack by telephone on July 8, 1994.

Shopes: Hi, Jack. Let's just launch right in. . . . It seems clear to me that your work in oral history is linked inward to your personal experience and outward to your concerns for a multicultural public world, or culture. So let's start with the personal. You've written about growing up in "white bread middle America," Midwestern suburbs, and coming of age in the political movements of the sixties. Let's hear a little bit more about that.

Tchen: Okay. Where to begin? My parents came the year before I was born, in 1950 . . . . My mother had me in her mid-forties. My father was already almost sixty. And they already had five children. The only reason they had me was that they knew that the immigration laws were such, and the Chinese exclusion law was such--well, the Chinese exclusion law was repealed in 1943, but what replaced it was a quota of 105 people allowed to come in a year. That wasn't repealed until '65, '68. So basically when they came . . . they came on a visitor's visa. They weren't sure they could stay, so they had me as an American citizen. I was born under this kind of circumstances, which really framed, I think, a lot of my life. . . . I grew up in a suburb, Park Forest, Illinois, which was written about by William Whyte in *The Organization Man*. It was very much a place in which white ethnics moved, out of ethnic enclaves and urban areas, and became white. . . . Their children became, were no longer Italian-Americans; they became white. You know.

Shopes: I do.

Tchen: It was a process that until I left, I didn't realize how limiting and how horrifying it was for me, because I was not white. It was in college that I began to deal with these things. I went to the University of Wisconsin in 1969. On campus, of course, this was the height of the anti-war movement. . . . I was being called "gook" on campus. Up until that time I didn't realize--I had really thought race relations had nothing to do with Chinese. . . . As I was being called "gook," I realized that, of course, racial attitudes carried over to me, as well, and that even though I was an American citizen, born and bred in the Midwest, speaking English perfectly well, I was seen as a foreigner just because of my appearance.

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It was at that point that I began dealing with issues of race and trying to think about how to document the history of Chinese in this country and more broadly Asian Americans, but also, secondly, thinking about the role and the position in the hierarchy of race and class relations in this country that Asians occupied. So those have been kind of formative issues that I've worked on for nearly the past twenty years. . . .

My sophomore year, I took a semester off and went to Cuernavaca, Mexico, to a program called Vidock, which was a center on radical educational reform founded by Ivan Illich, Paul Goodman, and other folks. It was at that time that I began thinking and reading about Paulo Freire's work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in which he, in Brazil, working with rural peasants, began developing this process of developing curriculum in teaching about the world. It was really a language class, but he began developing curriculum out of the world of these rural peasants. That became a whole kind of "naming the world" process, which was also a political process, given the dynamics of what was happening to rural Brazilians.

So that approach, to me, was a very important and profound one because it offered an alternative to a lot of what I thought to be top-down, rather authoritarian approaches in campus political movements. That, I think, has been, therefore, an ongoing concern of mine, how to work in communities in ways that do not simply reinforce traditional top-down ways by replacing them with new top-down ways.

The other thing I began doing, I eventually moved in the direction of history [away from my original intention to study genetics] and was taking American history courses and European history courses. I entered into a Ph.D. program at Wisconsin, and I wanted to do Chinese-American history. I went to the American immigrant historian expert, who said, "Oh, this is very nice, but I know nothing about this," and was not of any help whatsoever. I went to various faculty members. I ended up going to Harvey Goldberg, who was this radical French historian who understood what I was talking about. He pointed me in the direction of reading Albert Memmi and other books that really dealt with the colonized and the colonizer, these kinds of relations that French were dealing with with Algeria, interestingly enough, and also Sartre, *Semite and the Anti-Semite*. Then I ended up also going to the Afro-American Studies Department, because those were the only people who had any inkling of what I was concerned about. That's where I began reading a lot of books by African-Americans, from [W.E.B.] DuBois on.

So I think intellectually those were kind of key formative times, but throughout it wasn't just ethnicity and race, but also, as you had said in your interview, because of the women's movement and gay and lesbian movements that were going on on the campus, those were all issues that were swirling around all at the same time. It really became a broader concern about how our identities are constructed by all these different factors and facets. I think . . . I became especially sensitive to these issues because I could feel how I was being constructed, a forced construction upon me and how I was trying to fight back. . . .

Shopes: . . . It's interesting to me that many people who find themselves in "out" groups in one way or another don't choose to make that perception the sort of center of their life, choose in some ways to cope along perhaps in a less direct way. . . . What in your own personal background has allowed you to stay open to what marginalization can accomplish, or what the beauty is, or what the possibilities are?

Tchen: I find myself to this day really preferring in some ways to stay in these marginal positions, not because I want to be ghettoized or disadvantaged or oppressed, but because I think there's a privileged position that any person has on the margins of any culture, or on the borders of many cultures, put it that way. You are able to transit a number of different cultures and operate cross-

culturally. A number of people are arguing that oftentimes the peripheries or the margins become the centers. I think we're living in such an era in which straight-up nationalism and narrow forms of American identity no longer are functional. In fact, they're dysfunctional. It's acknowledging these multiple influences on any one life, whether by gender or ethnicity, nationality, language, religion, all these things, that is really going to be the key for people to flourish in the future. The world has become so small that Americans can no longer play out the luxury of being such a big country and really having just one language and one dominant culture. . . .

Shopes: Which really informs, it seems to me, a lot of your current work. I'll get to that, but I want to get to some of your early work in oral history. It seems, from what I can piece together, that it was with the Basement Workshop in New York City? Tell me a little bit about that, what was the Basement Workshop and how you found yourself there.

Tchen: The Basement Workshop was founded in the late sixties and was one of the premier Asian American cultural organizations in the country. When I was in the Midwest, I was finding myself looking towards the West Coast and the East Coast for some sense of direction and connectiveness to what was going on in campuses and communities. . . . I mean, they were still serving white bread at the local Chinese restaurant [in Wisconsin]. A nice German-American lady would come and plop down the white bread and butter. It was not the place to pursue community work or Chinese American studies.

Basement [Workshop] was doing a lot of different things, as early community organizations are wont to do. It was doing day-care programs, some of the first in the community. It was doing health fairs. It was doing resource workshops in a small library. It was encouraging emergent artists and actors and dancers. So it did everything, which was its great strength, which meant that a lot of people came through Basement to enter into New York City and to find their place.

I did the same, and I found myself gravitating towards what was called at the time the Asian-American Resource Center, and was helping to organize that. I bumbled into an exhibit that they were already committed to doing, but because of changes of people there, were not able to complete. It was an exhibit that was contracted with the American Museum of Immigration at the Statue of Library. They already had some blow-up photographs and this and that. So out of the limited things that were already there, we put together an exhibit called--gee, I don't even remember. . . . and in that process began to realize that we had to really begin to help to develop the voices from people in the community who had lived the historical experience. As we went around to the different collections, the New York Historical Society, the New York Public Library, different places, we'd find a certain number of images and photographs, but most of them very stereotypical or from tourist handbooks about Chinatown, and very few really expressing the point of view of Chinese themselves.

So we began trying to elicit that in this small exhibit, and I think that was my start in realizing the power and importance of oral history as a tool of empowerment. I tend not to think of it so much as an approach to history, but as a tool for empowerment. It is an approach to doing cultural documentation, as well, but it's always been, first and foremost, an empowerment tool, giving voice to, but also part of a process of coming to realization. So that harkens back, I think, to the Freirean kind of approach. . . . From that exhibit we realized that this exhibit thing was kind of interesting, and I applied for a grant from the New York Council for the Humanities. We got a small grant and we did [another exhibit,] "Images from a Neglected Past." We had it open on the third floor of the local Chatham Square branch of the New York Public Library, an old Carnegie building. . . . Inside it's got very steep, wrought-iron stairs that go up to the third floor that was not being used. We turned it into a gallery with clamp lights and all these things. It was a modest exhibit. . . . It was a general survey. We had a few panels on Chinese in New York. We couldn't find very much, and I realized at that time that, geez, there needs to be something based in New York. After all, this was the second largest Chinese community in the nation at that time, and now it's the largest.

(Tchen/Shopes Interview continued)

So in that process we began doing some oral histories. That was still limited. It was just a couple of panels, a few quotes from people we knew, that kind of thing. But what happened was interesting, was the response. What happened, a lot of old-timers in the community started walking up these three very steep flights of stairs, 90-degree weather, very poor conditions, very stuffy, no windows open, and they brought their flashlights, you know, and they started telling us stories. What we did is we created a space, we created an environment, kind of a memory hall. These images and quotes started touching off stories, and these are people who we never had met before, who wanted to tell us these stories. It was time for them. . . .

So that's when, I think, the whole idea of the New York Chinatown History Project began. Charlie Lai and myself had done this at Basement Workshop, and we realized that there was something happening, and that exhibits are just part of a process, and oral histories are part of a process, and the process is what we wanted to try to capture in an organizational form. That's when we began formulating this whole idea of how to in a sense use oral histories and photographs and other kinds of documentation as a community empowerment process.

The empowerment we had in mind was just fairly basic. With all the changes of immigration laws, Chinatown was changing quite dramatically. This was in 1979, 1980, so it's been a number of years that the immigration laws have changed. And there are all these new people coming into the community that a lot of the old-timers had no idea who they were, and new people coming in thought these old-timers were lonely old men. . . .

So our major motivation was how could we begin to understand this incredibly complex community that at that time was growing by leaps and bounds, Chinese coming from southern China, oftentimes families joining their fathers who they'd never met. In thirty years, forty years, they had never met their fathers. Wives rejoining their husbands. Second wives coming in, you know, and extended family members, and increasingly diverse Chinese from all parts of the diaspora, as well--Southeast Asia, South America, et cetera, et cetera. So how can these fragmented people, in a sense, or people coming from very different cultural and experiential backgrounds, all being technically Chinese, whatever that meant, coming into one community, living next to each other, how could we begin to understand that experience? So that's one level.

The other level is that Chinatown was never all Chinese. It was always a much more mixed, diverse community, and it's really the touristic image that imposes this monolithic image onto Chinatown. So we wanted to try to get at that complexity, as well, and that there was a creolization process of cultures both in terms of the diverse Chinese cultures and also the diverse multi-ethnic mix that's always been characteristic of lower Manhattan.

So I think that the idea for the New York Chinatown History Project was an effort to try to understand what that complexity was all about, grounded in people's own perceptions of what it is, and then to present it back, in a sense—again a Freirean approach--so that people could talk about it, become more aware of it, and debate it, think about it.

So that's what we did. We approached NEH [National Endowment for the Humanities] at the time. This is before [Ronald] Reagan got elected, when Joe Duffy was still there, and Duffy and his staff were very open to this. We gained a tremendous amount of support from the staff, in particular James Early, who is an African-American; he played a key role in helping us get these grants. . . .

Shopes: What kind of interviewing did you do? What was your approach? What kind of training did you have? What did you actually go out and do?

Tchen: Well, we had no training. [Laughter] We had a lot of strategizing. Given the complex dynamics of this community, where do you start? Who do you start interviewing? Well, if you interview these people, these people from that village are going to be upset. If you interview those people, they're going to say, "Well, we're not laundry workers, why do--," you know.

We actually decided to start out with laundry workers, because historically in New York City that has been the basis of the community--it was the hundreds of laundries that began opening up throughout the metropolitan area in the 1870s and 1880s that formed the basis for having a commercial district along Mott Street. So the very early founding of the community was premised on laundry workers, and to this day, if you have a successful person . . . just scratch the surface, there's a laundry in the background there.

Also since laundry has been a dying occupation and there has been no documentation, period, on Chinese and laundries, although that has been historically one of the major occupations, [we decided] that that would be a good place to begin. So we just started doing a lot of oral histories of laundry workers. We were just walking the streets--we hired a very young staff, very energetic but very young--and started talking to people. It was difficult, because a lot of people didn't want to talk about it. A lot of people looked at us young folks and said they thought some of us were gang members or other of us were just not worth talking to. "Why are you doing this? It's a shameful experience." Or, as they put it, "It's a blood and tears kind of experience. There is no history here." Some people would just scream us out of their shop once we raised this question.

So it was a difficult, difficult process, but we had the interim goal of having a small exhibit that would demonstrate what we were trying to do. That small exhibit, after a year and a half of really pulling teeth, opened up at the senior center that we had developed strong relations with and we visited a fair amount. I think it was when that exhibit went up, people began realizing what an exhibit was about. I had grown up with it [because my father bad worked at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago], so I didn't have such a problem with it, but a lot of people really had never been to an museum before. A garment worker doesn't take their one day off and go to the Met[ropolitan Museum of Art] to go look at an exhibit.

It started attracting some of the local Chinese newspaper attention, as well, so people started coming by. What we realized is that the exhibit itself became part of the process of doing more documentation. Once people came by, we would sit them down if they really liked the exhibit. . . . We were searching around for titles, and the obvious one became "The Eight-Pound Livelihood," because laundry workers in New York, in particular, referred to this occupation as "the eight-pound livelihood," the eight pounds referring to the weight of the iron. This one woman said, "This is my experience. I lived the eight-pound livelihood." So we began to realize that resonance was a key issue here, that if we could get enough resonance and put it up in an exhibit or put it out in some form and people were in a position to look at it or hear it, experience it, and feel that, yes, we had done a good job, that they would be all the more likely then to want to talk to us and tell us their stories. It was a question of opening up layers and layers of mistrust, and reversing that process--mistrust for good reason, because of exclusion, marginalization, et cetera--so people would begin talking, trusting us and telling us their story.

We worked on this for a number of years. We produced out of this ultimately exhibits and new documentaries, and radio docu-dramas, and other things, and books, that in various ways we thought were resonant and faithful enough of the experience that they could be then shown to a broader world. . . . After a lot of comments and criticisms of drafts of the exhibit, but also people seeing drafts of the exhibit itself and commenting, adding to that, then we felt at a certain point that we could show it to a broader public.

At that point we collaborated with the New York State Museum to produce an exhibit that opened at the New York Public Library, the 42nd Street Library, the research library, in the main entryway area. That was a huge success because also the *New York Times* covered us, and then the Chinatown papers said, "Oh, boy, if the *New York Times* is covering them, then they must be a serious project." So that's when the whole organization began taking off, and it was easier to raise money and things like that.

Shopes: I wonder if you could be a little more explicit now about how this interviewing and the bigger process and project that it was a part of perhaps led to, or helped support, the empowerment that you were critically interested in.

Tchen: . . . It's complicated, because if we go back to the laundry workers for a minute--first of all, the people who came and worked in laundries, usually Chinese men, were not laundry workers to begin with. This was an occupation that they were really given very little choice but to take on. In fact, when my father first came to this country in 1950, he was at a loss. Here he is, he had a Ph.D. in international law at Sorbonne, and he--first of all, they couldn't buy a house in certain areas, they couldn't move into certain communities around Chicago. But second of all, there were very few options for him. His skills were not transferable, so that laundries were the standard, tried-and-true occupation for Chinese. He ended up not working in a laundry, but they were seriously considering it. Now there are plenty of Ph.D.'s who did end up working in laundries. A lot of that was because they couldn't get [other kinds of] jobs. Part of the reason they couldn't get jobs is the transferability of their skills, language reasons, other reasons, but really, I think, mainly the issue was racial exclusion. . . .

So that laundries--I'm not going to tell you about the origins of laundries, but laundries have always been both what one laundryman told us, which was like a padded jacket, a padded Chinese jacket, it keeps you warm in winter, it's basic survival, but it was also a ghetto, as well. It was terribly isolating, it was terribly demeaning, it was very low status to wash other people's dirty clothing. . . .

So that this whole issue of racism, low status, creating in a sense shame, creating in a sense really an anger and bitterness, all of these are part of a social psychology that we encountered with this grouping of people, and felt that that's so basic in terms of people giving voice to their experience, they have to be dealing with these issues of shame and self-perceptions and self-esteem, but also anger at the society. So all those issues are wrapped into just simply speaking and talking to us. . . .

I think for us the empowerment process was not simply giving them voice in some simple way, of letting them speak and taping them, and then somehow putting their words up on the wall, but also to in a serious way try to deal with the history and complexity of how racism and how class issues framed and limited and created their experience. . . . In other words, the context of what this experience was about was just as important to present. In fact, oftentimes there was a context that the laundry workers and their families themselves had very little understanding of. So that [addressing] the context [of individual experience] in an engaged process, in a trusted process, was one of the most important things I think that we could play. Which is why when Mike Frisch talks about a "shared authority," I think this is our way of having a shared authority. We felt these bonds of trust. They had really shared with us their experience and their analysis of their experience, and we tried to help to bring some context because of our more privileged position of doing research and historical advantage[?] . . . .

Shopes: You're real easy to interview, Jack. I want to get on to some of your more current work, but I'm real mindful of time. So can we do that?

Tchen: Sure. I also want to talk to you about some theoretical issues.

Shopes: Okay. You've gone on to university teaching and directing the Asian/ American Center at Queens, and it seems you've moved away from direct involvement in oral history, but there's obvious connections. What lies at the center of your current work? What are you doing? What is it about? And how do these concerns perhaps link back to your earlier work?

Tchen: First of all, the whole experience of Asians in the United States is wide open, especially outside of California and Hawaii, the West Coast. Very little has been done. There are very few studies programs. We're one of three research programs in the country, which is outrageous, but that's the reality. So it's still hard for anybody who wants to pursue Asian-American studies to find a graduate program--or an undergraduate program--to go to.

Second of all, we've tried to find a more distinctive identity, which is to look at the Asians in the Americas, and to look at it more as a diasporic process, which gets us out of a more conventional North American orientation and opens up the whole question of diaspora, which is a very fundamental and important way, and shows how people are interconnected across many different cultures and also get at more global movements of people and money.

So by opening it up, all of a sudden we can look at the Chinese who were in Mexico City in the 1650s and the Mexican barbers who were complaining that the Chinese were becoming a monopoly in the barber trade. If we introduce that fact, if we talk about the Manila men who jumped ship in New Orleans and began setting up fishing settlements in New Orleans around that same time, all of a sudden we're looking at a much broader, complex system of world trade, of colonialism developing, and how peoples from around the non-European world are brought into this web of imperialism, therefore, port cultures, plantation cultures, and movements of peoples from one place to the next by these ships. So we're looking at really, in a sense, the Atlantic world as the Atlantic world spreads out. A lot is made now of the Pacific Rim. This earlier understanding of Asians in the United States needs to incorporate this Atlantic world. So a lot of our work, a lot of my own personal research but also a lot of the work of the Center, is really trying to get at this earlier historical phenomenon, which ties historically then South Asians with East Asians and other Asian groups together in this system of trade and contacts. . . .

We try to link that [work] up with community studies, smaller community-oriented examinations of the Chinese in Flushing, that kind of thing. We've not done too many oral histories per se, although cross-disciplinarily certainly people do life studies, and they do other kinds of field work in anthropology and other areas. So I think it's helped me understand in many ways the broader issues that are at stake in terms of the sociology of knowledge and how we need to cross a number of different disciplinary boundaries and what we can learn from these other disciplines, as well, in terms of ways of documenting and working with communities. . . . For me it's been a very different kind of point of view, of trying to think through how university resources can help link up with community issues and needs.

Shopes: Say a little bit more about how a university setting is different than a community setting and what sorts of positive or productive relationships can be put into place.

Tchen: . . . I think what's most hopeful for me right now is that in Queens, half of the Asians who live in New York City live in Queens, which means there's about 400,000 to 500,000 Asians who live in our borough. A lot of them increasingly are coming to Queens College, which right now is about 18 percent Asian American, and it will be increasing over the next number of years. This is the first chance, I think, for a lot of the young South Asians, Chinese, Koreans, Filipinos, et cetera, a lot of them are coming into contact with a world of ideas that I think can begin to comprehend their experiences. So I think potentially the university is a place that they can begin to realize what their lives have been about and begin to move on that realization in some way.

The problem oftentimes is that faculty are working with older paradigms that don't capture the complexity of what their lives are about, so it becomes a real challenge of how to get the faculty to rethink a lot of assumptions that they have, a lot of old paradigms they have about immigration or about identity, and get them to really begin to listen. To me, this is part of the wonderful quality of oral history. They can begin to listen to their students and begin to learn from them, and I think they can redesign their curriculum in ways that really create an incredible synergy.

(Tchen/Shopes Interview continued)

So that's one of the roles that we're trying to play at the Center in terms of beginning to unleash some of the real resources and strengths of the university, if we can just get certain faculty to begin to rethink things. We do have the advantage of having hired a lot of young Asian American faculty, so there's a lot of hope there in terms of what can be done. But it's not an easy process, and I think in some ways it's similar to the laundry worker experience that we had talked about earlier, in terms of developing trust, the resonance, and it takes time.

One of the ongoing issues that I think connects these different projects that I've been working on is this whole belief that in a democracy we really have to develop, not just to encourage voices--that's something that you had critiqued, as well, this kind of magical belief that if somehow more people speak, then that's going to be it. Really that's not enough, although that is a very important beginning point. But also to develop what Tomas Frausto, who is an important Chicano scholar, bas been talking about in terms of vernacular theory, a vernacular culture, and how to promote that. Just a little example of that, I think communities always have their own notion of wisdom and what is considered an intelligent perspective, based on life experience and thinking about it and that kind of thing. . . . So I think part of the promise of what oral history, among other methodologies, can do is to get at that vernacular culture and to help develop vernacular theories--in other words, theories and policies, social policies, that are not strictly from top down or springing out of the head of somebody who graduated out of the Harvard Business School, but really ways of approaching a community, ways of approaching issues that affect a community, more from the intelligence and perspectives of those communities. So to me that's one of the great challenges in American society, is how to strengthen and develop these vernacular theories, vernacular plans, and vernacular perspectives. Oral history is fundamental to that whole process.

Shopes: Do you see that happening anywhere?

Tchen: In funny ways, yes, but I think the frustration with American culture is that it's so individualistic that it doesn't cohere, it doesn't become something larger than that. So I'm very hopeful. I just saw Anna Devere- Smith's "Twilight L.A." This, to me, shows wonderful promise and the incredible leaps oral history has made. Anna Devere-Smith is actually a faculty member at Stanford, but more importantly she's somebody who is working on this project of really listening to voices in America and trying to define the American character, whatever that means. This is the second most public piece that she's done. The first one was "Fires in the Mirror," which was about Crown Heights. She interviews like 200 people and edits them down verbatim, including some mannerisms and scant pieces of dress, or whatever, and does a performance. She ends up doing about twenty-five people from all different perspectives of any given event. . . . And what's really quite amazing is that she theatrically creates a space which is very complex and doesn't give any one perspective the moral right or wrong, as is done now in American political culture--"you're right, you're wrong"--but gives voice to the complexity and gives a sense of respect to a lot of different viewpoints. So that she can bring together an audience--if they can afford to pay the ticket prices--she can bring together an audience of different people. She starts out this performance speaking in Korean in the guise of a Korean storekeeper. It's astounding. And then you hear African-Americans, you hear Reginald Denny, who was the truck driver who was beaten up. You hear from all of these different people.

So on the one hand, I'm just very excited by the power of what somebody like that can do and how it really comes out of the oral history movement. Whether she's aware of that legacy or not, this is a product of this movement. At the same time she is given attention as an individual performer, not as somebody who is a part of a larger approach. She's not seen as somebody who raises the issue of what should be a larger social policy or cultural policy. She's seen as this creative individual who is becoming a celebrity, becoming part of a theater circuit, that kind of thing. So I

think this culture, on the one hand, produces all these options and can develop all these specialist kind of wonderful possibilities, but because of its possessive individualism and its anti-group orientation, it refuses to translate that into social policy that can really help empower communities to become more participatory and more democratic. . . .

I think every community should have its oral history and community history centers and active projects. They need to be connected up with a lot of other kinds of activities that are going on in that community, whether they're dealing with recycling or whether they're dealing with--a range of quality-of-life issues or public policy issues. . . . Short of that, I think it's important for us to think of this all in terms of social movements. In this society it seems that the major way things are changing, in terms of the frameworks of looking at things and pushing for broadening rights and more democracy, is through social movements. Certainly we know through friends in South Africa that oral histories and getting at vernacular cultures and vernacular theories are ways of becoming parts of major movements for social change. Again I see the power of oral history. We can't simply look at it as a discipline or another form of history and we're trying to gain respect from the historical profession. . . . I think it would be a real problem for oral history to want so badly to become acknowledged by the academy that it begins to disown some of its more important qualities. . . .

One other issue I want to talk to you about, because I was jotting down notes. I think that there is one basic problem with the oral history approach.

Shopes: Please, let's hear it. This is so frustrating, let me tell you. I want to interrupt every two minutes. Oral history is supposed to be one way, and this is so frustrating. After this interview, I want to talk to you for another hour. [Laughter] . . .

Tchen: So I'm hoping we can talk about these issues, because I've been thinking about them, but fairly much in isolation. I think one of the problems of oral history as practiced within a Western enlightenment framework is that it tends to be too individualistic oriented. To me, I believe in the whole critique of possessive individualism as it's developed out of Western enlightenment notions. Part of the notion of possessiveness is not just property, but also the self.

Shopes: Right. My life.

Tchen: The individual. I think oral history, if it's premised on that, also then misses really what Maurice Halbwachs and certainly a lot of Asians and non-European cultures have valued, which is collective memory. In fact, he posits that memory is not this biophysical, neurological process; it's a collective process. I think by tending to approach individuals as if somehow that they are self-contained in a body, that can be a huge problem. Clearly not everybody's been doing that, but I think it's important for us to articulate theoretically and politically how that's a real issue and that has to do with the whole trajectory of a certain paradigm of knowledge and how things are approached. . . . Now it's not to say that individuals don't have their discrete, individual [unclear], but it's so lopsided right now in its focus on individualism, that I think we need to almost overemphasize the other side, the collective nature of memory and the complex kind of "boxes within boxes" nature of that, and begin to impact that process. I found, in doing work in the community context, that also methodologies have to be developed for collective memory. In other words, you need to bring together groups of people who share a certain experience. I know there are all sorts of technical and methodological problems with that, but it also gets at things that individual interviews just simply can't touch. . . .

The old paradigm [for doing oral history], of course, was kind of the classic epitome of that, of the great people, the great white men. But it's not good enough to simply then switch it around and say, "We going to interview a lot of individuals who are working class." What we need to look at and question are a lot of the paradigms which we're operating from and look at collectivities and the complex issues that are in those collectivities, and also think about how reception and circuits of creating these oral histories-- how they're received, who's received them, who are we

producing these oral histories for, the question of audience and language, not just in terms of the level of language and how we edit them, but also in what languages they're being done.

Shopes: And even mode of presentation, it seems to me. A book is profoundly linear, and it's one story after another after another. How can you formally create a product or an event that respects a plurality rather than a succession of individual stories?

Tchen: Absolutely. . . . At the History Museum we had experimented in the late 80s, early 90s, with reunions. Right now our current space is in an old school building called P.S. 23, and it's where for decades Italian and other Lower East Side immigrants, lower Manhattan immigrants, and Chinese increasingly in the 60s and 70s went to school. It closed down in the 70s. However, to this day, as we did all these individual interviews, their experience of P.S. 23 was a very profound one. For many it was the only schooling that they had and the first contact they had with the larger non-Chinese society.

So we decided to have a reunion of everybody who had been through P.S. 23 as far back as we could go. We had like 500 people come to this reunion, and then we continued this event over a number of years, trying to get at a number of issues, trying to document who was who. I think that was an example of a very polyvocal, very in some ways uncontrolled, spontaneous experience, which got a lot of people hooked up.

I think the more we can try to find what are ways in which people want to make and experience memories and meaning, not so much history, because history has this formal, official quality to it, but the more people want to experience their collectivity and explore their past and revisit that through their dreams or through their everyday lives or through telling stories, then the closer we can get toward finding appropriate forms to collaborate and to share authority with. It's happening anyhow with people, and it's really more our opening our eyes and saying, "Reunions are not simply nostalgia." . . . Nostalgia is important to unpack, and it's important for us to understand what that is and what is it that's going on there, and to engage in a mutually trusted process of exploring all that. When we begin to do that, we're going to begin to find people who will want to look at what we're doing, and there will be an audience there who are ready to look at it with us. But also that's where I think we can reconnect and not simply be academics writing morally very nice, self-satisfying kinds of pieces, but also connecting up with people out there and doing things that are of a larger social purpose. That was the main thing I wanted to say.

OHMAR INITIATES PRO BONO WORKSHOP PROGRAM

As an organization dedicated to the promotion and improvement of oral history, OHMAR intends to offer occasional, pro bono Workshops rotating geographically through the organization's mid-Atlantic region. The Workshops are intended to introduce basic oral history techniques and technology to beginners and to provide continuing training to those practicing oral history.

Just as OHMAR sponsors two meetings annually, with basic oral history skills workshops among the sessions usually presented, OHMAR's pro bono Workshops will be designed to offer at least one separate, day-long presentation annually (preferably two a year after 1995) devoted entirely to such topics as a general introduction to oral history, setting up an oral history project, interviewing, processing oral history collections, and using video in oral history.

OHMAR's intent is to select communities and co-sponsors in the OHMAR region that are some distance from the population centers where OHMAR typically meets, thus making oral history information and skills training available to audiences that might otherwise find it difficult to attend OHMAR's annual meetings. [continued on next page]