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Back to the Basics: Who Is Researching and Interpreting for Whom?

John Kuo Wei Tchen

I have always hated questionnaires. My conscious memory of this reaction goes back to grade school standardized exams when I gave the wrong answer to the question whether one takes butter out beforehand to soften it. Never having had that form of congealed fat in my Chinese home, I simply did not know the cooled nature of that artery hardener! My answers to the *JAH* questionnaire, it appears, were also far from typical.

What three to four books were most influential? The Bible was the hands-down winner. But for me? The writings of the Chinese Daoist philosopher Chuang Tzu, Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*, and Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized*—quite a postmodern pastiche! My favorite movie about the United States? Not *Gone with the Wind*, the overall favorite. It was George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*, where zombied Americans of all creeds and persuasions gravitate to the local indoor mall to wander aimlessly.¹

Growing up Chinese and “Oriental” in United States midwestern culture fostered a skepticism in my soul. I was born in the heartland of the U. S. of A. and yet was called a “gook.” Daoist philosophy, far more than the transcendental mysticisms of the Bible, helped me weather such existential angst. When I was seeking to find my voice at the University of Wisconsin in the early seventies, only Harvey Goldberg, a radical and gay scholar who taught French history, and the faculty of Afro-American studies had any idea of what would be useful for me to read. Memmi's complex psychological analyses and W. E. B. Du Bois's double consciousness made innate sense to me, with the added dimension of my being neither white nor black but Chinese American and Asian American.²

De facto racialized as an “alien” foreigner, I could never simply narrow my concerns to a nationalist frame of mind. The survey respondents' lack of interest in,

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¹ Robert A. Heinlein, *Stranger in a Strange Land* (New York, 1961); Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (New York, 1965); *Gone with the Wind*, dir. Victor Fleming (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1939); *Dawn of the Dead*, dir. George A. Romero (Laurel Group-Alfredo Cuomo and Claudio Argento Productions; United Film Distributing, 1979).

² W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York, 1969).

or experience of, studying abroad and in conducting comparative studies involving other countries—the overwhelming answers to questions nine and ten—reminds me how much my life's trajectory differs from the sampling I have been provided. Colonial anthropologists would look at these responses and claim that such people were far too subjective and limited to study their own culture. Although there persists an unstated assumption that Asians living in Western societies and studying or teaching Asian histories and cultures lack perspective, I do not share that assumption. But I do believe the sustained personal experience of being deemed an “other” and sustained reflection on that experience are vital to any study of the power dynamics of a racialized, gendered, classed, ethnicized, and sexualized history. Otherwise United States historians too easily suffer from a provincialism and quasi-magical faith in American exceptionalism. Furthermore, the deep knowledge of other languages contributes to an understanding of systemic cultural differences (and similarities), yet learning languages is seen as one of the least valuable features of professional training. A less generous interpretation would speculate that Anglo-American America is self-satisfied and betrays a lack of interest in Americans of other language groups or cultures and in immigrants from the non-English-speaking world. Yet many would probably agree that the “foreign” language requirements in most American history programs call for little but the momentary ability to pass an exam. Either way, the proof is in the practice, and the practice of understanding the differences and similarities of cultural systems has been terribly limited.

Is this an accurate gauge of the American historical profession? Clearly there is increasing attention to gender and racial ethnicity in hiring and allowance for individual idiosyncratic differences, yet what normative attitudes define our profession? While diversity and openness were two qualities of our profession highly prized by many, and they may indeed characterize much individual practice, are we a diverse and open profession as a whole? Efforts have been made in many departments, but how diverse are our cultural perspectives? I suspect, and this seems to be supported by the questionnaire, that we are overwhelmingly Anglo-American-centric. If so, is there much room for fundamentally different cultural perspectives?

Such epistemological questions are always difficult to answer. One partial indicator might be the degree to which “ethnic” and “women’s” studies have continued explicitly interrogating earlier-established notions of universality and salience, even as they have become part of mainline historical practice. How do the necessarily ever-revised master historical narratives being devised accommodate such fundamental challenges? Have they simply been incorporated into a hodgepodge of nominally “diverse” inclusions? How have the cores and margins, the wholes and parts, constructed each other? While Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and many others continue to fret over the feared “balkanization” of our academies, these relational questions are our true challenge—especially in light of the new demographics of the United States and an ever more interdependent world.³

³ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America* (1991; New York, 1992).

As our classrooms become far more diverse, with students from different cultural systems, what questions of American history will they be drawn to? Will we be prepared to satisfy their interests or will they simply have to go elsewhere, as I did twenty years ago? As some of these undergraduates go on to obtain Ph.D.'s, will they join more diverse faculties in American history? Or will one or two nonwhites in each department be the limit? And what level of "tolerance" will "we" have toward their challenges to established historical tolerance?

Assuming, and this is a big assumption, we can work out this question of "our" being diverse and truly accommodating, other equally important questions also need to be asked: Who is the audience for our research and interpretation? And how do we go about doing it? I was told by a well-meaning academic that to be a good public historian, one had first to be a good academic historian. Taking it at face value, who could argue with such a fundamental point? Whether teaching students or a lay public, one certainly should be well trained. I suspect this is a common belief among academically trained historians. It echoes sports common sense. Michael Jordan's genius with the round ball, after all, is built upon his mastery of the basics. The problem with such logic, however, is the unexamined assumption that the form of historical practice that best serves the public is the kind of trickle-down, all-authoritative academic history that students are trained in—a huge leap of faith.

What are the basic public interests and needs for history that everyday people feel? There are many different publics, and each may have slightly variant concerns. Academic historians, by and large, do not know and do not care. Their publications and lectures are automatically part of a circuit of professional scholarly discourse and power that does not need to be interrogated. Most academics probably believe that most people simply do not care about history. Public historians, however, operating via popular journals, museums, historical societies, film and video, and in other venues are always asking that question. What answers they find depend on how they ground their work. If their operational assumptions lead them to relate to living communities as either generic PBS-type audiences or passive receptors of erudite knowledge, they will immediately limit the response to their work. But if they seek to understand the particular interests and needs of their publics, they have a very good chance of pioneering meaningful engagements in public history. In a sense, they have to decide whether to make the academy or the community their primary base. Are they primarily researching, writing, and interpreting for fellow academics? Or are they writing for larger audiences?

Those in the profession who argue for a back-to-master-narrative approach are in part hearkening back to an earlier tradition of less specialized, more popular professional historical writing that members of the undifferentiated public also enjoyed reading. And certainly such individuals as David McCullough and Shelby Foote still operate in that grand storytelling tradition. Yet how much do we understand the demographics of their reading audience and how similar are its members to the populations of the United States in the coming century? Museums and funding agencies have mistakenly labeled these unacculturated publics "new au-

diences” and have offered exhibits that, they assume, will bring in such people, who will, they assume, then automatically become members.

The term *new* is wrongheaded for several reasons. First, Chinese, Koreans, Filipinos, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and the many others who are seen as part of the new post-1965–1968 immigration are not really new. They often represent groups that have been in this country for a long time but have never been considered part of the master narratives nor the constituents of most museums or historical societies. Besides the obvious prior bias of racialization, these exclusions have been based on class. In contrast to the past stereotypes of the Chinese is the current perception of them as “model minorities” who have money. Just as important, then, is the question of perceived potential patronage and “worthiness.” Blue- and white-collar working-class whites, still the great majority of consumers in this country, who have “escaped” into exurban rings around our increasingly majority “minority” cities are far from the reaches of most city-based museums and historical organizations. Furthermore, African Americans, perhaps the least tapped “new” audience of all times, are only now being catered to by specialized publishers and institutions.

Different publics respond to different themes. When the Chinatown History Museum in New York organized an exhibition about the history of the tenement, featuring a re-creation of a “bachelor’s apartment,” roach cups and all, non-Chinese uptown people came. However, when we focused on a reunion of former students and faculty of Public School 23, whose building the museum occupies, hundreds of local Chinese and Italians (as well as alumni from all over the country) showed up. They told stories, they reminisced, they were curious to know what difference decades had made to their former classmates, teachers, and the school building. What is it that they wanted to understand? How did they reinterpret their own pasts and collectively define their school history? What roles can a history museum and historians play in the process? In response to the enthusiasm of alumni, the museum continued co-sponsoring reunions, photo days, and other Public School 23 activities for several years. The continually renegotiated relations among neighborhood Chinese and Italians before and after the equal rights movements of the 1960s emerged from these events as a key theme. A dialogue between museum staff, scholars, and PS 23ers developed and drove much of the organization’s planning during the late 1980s and early 1990s.⁴

Perhaps it can be argued, as many respondents have, that the great strength of this nation is that individuals have the freedom to pursue individual searches for memory and meaning. A variety of scholars from a variety of backgrounds can conduct this pursuit with maximal freedom and minimal obstacles. For many, individualism may be the best vehicle for this pursuit, and professional associations (which allow these discrete individuals to be sociable and to find like minds) sufficiently satisfy their need for community. Yet, it seems to me that even greater pleasure and satisfaction can be gained from individuals’ linking with like-minded publics in

⁴ For further information about the Chinatown History Museum, formerly the New York Chinatown History Project, see John Kuo Wei Tchen, “Toward a Dialogic Museum,” in *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, ed. Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, 1992).



Community members attending the Chinatown History Museum's "Photo Day" assisted in recapturing the history of the community. Clear mylar sheets were placed on top of enlarged photographs of classes from Public School 23 so that visitors could write the names of students they recognized.

Courtesy Chinatown History Museum.

searching for these answers. I would tell historians who look for ever-greater challenges that I have found it more difficult to write about Chinese New Yorker history with and for fellow community members than for fellow academics. Those who have lived the experience have far more critical questions to ask and different assumptions to explore than those for whom it is a more purely intellectual exercise.

The playwright (and public historian) Anna Deavere Smith's two best-known works, *Fires in the Mirror* (about the strife between Hasidic and African and Caribbean New Yorkers in Crown Heights) and *Twilight—Los Angeles, 1992* (about the riots and uprisings centered in South Central Los Angeles), embody this more challenging practice. After conducting scores of oral histories for each play from a wide range of perspectives, she performed drafts of each for community advisers. After rounds of this process, each play was performed for the general public and was open to still further refinements. Smith's dialogue-driven approach fairly represented a great range of very different points of view while also providing a sense

of events as a whole. The plays were *both* emic and etic, expressive and analytic, polished cultural “products” and stimuli for further discussions.⁵

A public-oriented historian, I would argue, is qualitatively different from an academic historian. And that person, while no doubt benefiting from much academic training, needs an overlapping but different set of tools to function well. What interdisciplinary and applied tools need to be acquired and honed to explore such questions as why collectors of *tschotskes* collect, the role of nostalgia, the power of reunions, the fascination with fiction and drama that make historical themes more accessible, the role interpreting the past plays in community building for the future? Wouldn't such explorations with the public bear deeper insights on professional questions of declension, taste cultures, coalitions, and the historical consciousness of groups and nations? Just as the commercial marketplace has radically transformed what and how cultural goods are produced, so, too, would the opening up of a closed historical discourse addressed to others in the profession transform it. Theorizing from direct engagement with everyday people is quite different from theorizing from the archival evidence.

I have found, for example, that sociologist Paul C. P. Siu's definition of the “sojourner” is highly nuanced and sensitive to the actual everyday experiences of the Chinese laundry operators he studies in Chicago, who were essentially shut out of American society during the period of official exclusion (1882–1943). In contrast, Gunther Barth's deployment of the “sojourner” thesis in *Bitter Strength* relied overwhelmingly on documents devoid of insight on Chinese American subjectivities and survival strategies. Hence his study reiterated the ethnocentric perspectives of his sources—“they” kept to themselves and courted hostility. Siu, the son of a laundry operator and a confidant to those he interviewed, took the experiences and perspectives of Chinese Americans as the basis for his concepts. In the words of Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, he fashioned what can be termed “vernacular theory.” Barth, however, relied entirely on far more problematic English-language documents and came to a faithful but now largely discredited conclusion.⁶

I could argue that to be a truly competent historian, one should first master the basics of being a public historian. But I will not. The academically based specialist has much to offer. And so does the public, community-based practitioner. The problem, however, is the rather mechanical trickle-down view of historical practice many have. From policies of the National Endowment for the Humanities that emphasize academically credentialed adviser humanities specialists to tenure and promotion practices of research universities, the institutions of legitimizing historical practice ignore (and often display contempt for) community-based practices and

⁵ Anna Deavere Smith, *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights and Other Identities* (New York, 1993); Anna Deavere Smith, *Twilight—Los Angeles, 1992: On the Road: A Search for American Character* (New York, 1994).

⁶ For a fuller discussion of this point, see John Kuo Wei T'hen, “Introduction,” in Paul C. P. Siu, *The Chinese Laundryman: A Study of Social Isolation* (New York, 1987). Gunther Paul Barth, *Bitter Strength: A History of the Chinese in the United States, 1850–1870* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964); Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, “Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility,” in *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965–1985*, ed. Richard Griswold Del Castillo, Teresa McKenna, and Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano (Los Angeles, 1991).

theories. Our problem is one, not of individual virtue or will, but of structural biases that constantly work against public practice.

Ernest L. Boyer, in his Carnegie Commission study on the state of higher education in the United States, offered a remedy for such narrow-gauged academic solipsism. He proposed that criteria for tenure be broadened from individual research and teaching to include the equally necessary scholarship of application and scholarship of synthesis. If such additional criteria were differentiated, acknowledged, and applied, a more publicly engaged academic historical practice would be rewarded as part of the core activities of the academy.⁷

As David Thelen has noted, the answers to the questionnaire indicate that the individuals responding had complex analyses of what ails this profession. Contrary to those decrying the evils of particularists who do not care about the *unum*, those who practice the particular histories of particular groups also very much want to keep a broader, more synthetic perspective. The two are not mutually exclusive goals. So, too, I would argue that academically oriented specialist history need not be polarized from community-oriented public history. But it will take far more than an individual act of will to make this possible. The profession's laudable commitment to diversity of viewpoints cannot be limited to the content within the confines of established, narrowly academic forms. Someone practicing the not-so-new social history cannot simply hope that descendants of that history's bottom-up subjects will magically go to university bookstores and plop down \$45 for her or his university press books. The forms of historical practice also have to be re-envisioned for a more democratic practice truly to take root.

⁷ Ernest L. Boyer, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professorate* (Princeton, 1990).