

individuals. The CARA exhibition process continually reinforced this fact by identifying individuals throughout the country and incorporating their own points of view and then creating a place for them and their history in the show. The process was inclusive rather than exclusive, and encouraged a reciprocal relationship out of which future partnerships could be drawn. It dispelled the fear of the "other" and created a common ground.

The process of planning and implementing the CARA project was made logistically difficult at times by the continual interaction among the Wight Art Gallery staff, the many committees and task forces, and individual Chicano and non-Chicano consultants. Furthermore, it took place within an already demanding cultural context that called for inter- and intracultural sensitivity at all social and professional levels. However, despite the tremendous demands and inherent pitfalls, this interactive process has been followed faithfully because it has been crucial to the development of a model that encourages self-representation, inclusion, and diversity. This model provided the CARA participants—museum-based and non-museum-based alike—with a means of monitoring their contributions to the project, and of maintaining a critical approach to the subject matter as well as a self-reflective stance toward the process itself.

The power of the CARA exhibition development experience was recently summed up by the Los Angeles artist Judy Baca, a member of the national selection committee, who said during one of our planning meetings, "We made valiant efforts to think things through—every one of these sessions became a philosophical discussion. . . . In fact, I feel like I've been through an incredible course in Chicanismo."

Although the exhibition does not walk visitors through a formal academic curriculum, we do intend that the viewer will catch a glimpse of Chicano culture, hear a whisper of the language, and sense the power of humor in the Chicano community by looking at Chicano art—and maybe even get a feel for this thing called Chicanismo.

## CHAPTER 11

### Creating a Dialogic Museum: The Chinatown History Museum Experiment

JOHN KUO WEI TCHEN

**T**he phrase "Falling leaves return to their roots" has been popular among Chinese immigrants in New York for a long time. It is a saying rich in multiple connotations. For many Chinese who were subject to the Chinese Exclusion Acts (1882–1943) and prohibited from becoming citizens, the phrase described the desire to return to their home villages. Despite the decades they had spent in the United States, anti-Asian racism kept them sojourners. Unwelcome here, they sought to retire back to and die in their home villages, or at the very least to have their bones sent back to their family graves. The phrase also suggests at least two other interpretations. In a more metaphorical and modern sense, falling leaves are subject to the unpredictable currents of blowing winds, implying a sense of alienation; returning to the roots can be understood as a search for origins or home. The phrase can also be interpreted in the sense that we are all subject to cycles of birth, growth, death, and rebirth; perhaps this is closer to the original naturalistic meaning. Finally, a rebellious contemporary twist on this saying, used by recent immigrants intent on settling in the United States, rephrases the saying as, "Let falling leaves root wherever they land."

These multiple connotations of such a simple phrase convey some sense of the diversity and complexity of the Chinese experience in the



United States. In order to give voice to this multivocal history, the Chinatown History Museum has been developing the theory and practice for a new type of history museum. Originally founded in 1980 as the New York Chinatown History Project, the Chinatown History Museum has experimented with a wide range of community-based approaches to historical research and public programming in our effort to document, reconstruct, and reclaim the 160-year history of what is the oldest Chinese settlement in the United States.<sup>1</sup> In 1990 we began the process of planning what we call a dialogue-driven museum, which will explore the previously unexamined roles of Chinese New Yorkers, non-Chinese New Yorkers, and tourists in the creation of New York's Chinatown.<sup>2</sup>

While the Chinatown History Museum seeks to reclaim this neglected past, we believe it must be done in tandem with the people the history is about. We want to bring together members from our various constituencies to talk, assess, and suggest. By so doing we hope to build a creative, convivial, and exciting educational space in which sustained cultural programming will facilitate the collaborative exploration of the memory and meaning of Chinatown's past. We want to fashion a learning environment in which personal memory and testimony inform and are informed by historical context and scholarship. The Memories of New York Chinatown exhibition, inaugurated during Chinese New Year 1991, is the laboratory in which this dialogic concept will be fully articulated. Out of this experimental exhibition has been emerging a plan for the full-scale development of a dialogic museum.

This essay is intended to help facilitate the discussion on how the museum community and cultural activists can reenvision museums and the communities they serve. We offer these ideas and practices to be freely copied and further developed. We ask only that you let us know what you've done and how it has worked out. We especially welcome critical comments, suggestions, and new ideas.<sup>3</sup>

#### A HISTORICAL MOMENT

As we mark the quincentenary of Columbus's arrival in the New World, countless celebrations and national debates have been probing into the very soul of *fin de siècle* America. What should this event mean for the United States of the twenty-first century? Should it be a celebration of Western civilization? Should it emphasize the nation's

multicultural heritage, including the viewpoints of the indigenous peoples? Or does that put the already tattered social fabric at further risk? In the words of a *New York Times* op-ed piece, whose culture is it, anyway?<sup>4</sup>

It is clear that the very identity of the United States is at stake. During these contentious and very interesting times, at least three knotty, interrelated challenges face publicly oriented humanities institutions (and their staffs) and scholars. First, a great deal of concern has emerged about issues of cultural literacy and historical memory. While recent decades have witnessed a burgeoning of specialized studies of those social groups that traditionally have not been included in scholastic canons, critics have pointed out that academic scholarship seems ever more aloof from the general public. Besides the issue of insularity, one historian has termed this a crisis of "the wholes and parts": how can American history be presented as a larger synthesis without at the same time excluding most local and regional experience? No matter which side of the debate one is on, the basic form and content of historical practice are being reassessed.<sup>5</sup>

Second, since the elimination of racially defined immigration quotas by the Immigration Reform Act of 1965, the United States has been experiencing what many have termed "the new demographics." Asian and Latin American immigrants have been settling in our cities in unprecedented numbers, bringing with them a diverse range of cultures and a new energy. The great urban public has increasingly become majority minority. Traditional neighborhood boundaries have shifted. New conflicts have erupted—and new possibilities have surfaced.<sup>6</sup> Unless the humanities can more effectively provide forums to address racial antagonism, interethnic violence, the persistence of ugly stereotypes in the media, and other related thorny issues, scholars and institutions risk absenting themselves from meaningful involvement in public discourse on these issues. How can humanities institutions and scholarship respond to these "new" publics who have not traditionally been a part of "We the People"?

And third—as if the first two challenges were not enough—budget deficits have become a regular fact of life. Libraries and museums are being forced to close their doors for part of the week or curtail whole areas of programming for lack of funds. Consequently, the public venues for the burgeoning new scholarship are contracting. And the "new" audiences, which most institutions have not been able to reach, have not been actively lobbying with politicians to restore funds. A recent special issue of *Museum News* in which the challenges



of this new cultural diversity for museum practice were discussed attests to the national dimensions of this issue.<sup>7</sup>

Many of the oldest and most established institutions are now reassessing their mission statements, board composition, programmatic commitments, and outreach activities. For example, the New-York Historical Society, which was founded in 1804, waited until quite recently to add its first Jewish member onto its largely Dutch American and Anglo-American board of directors. The N-YHS was just beginning to question its past inactivity and reach out to new audiences when in 1991 it was devastated by a huge budget deficit. A third of the staff, including the coordinator of its educational outreach programs, was laid off.

The much-criticized 1980s initiative by the New York State Council on the Arts for helping museums attract new audiences and the Common Agenda for History Museums coalition, spearheaded by the American Association of State and Local History, are but two examples of steps already taken to improve museum outreach to underserved communities and better integrate the new scholarship into museum exhibitions and programs. Unfortunately, in 1991 the arts council's budget was cut by forty-eight percent and the Common Agenda program severely cut back. At the same time, a number of studies have revealed a curious paradox: while historical scholarship has become more insular, there has been a great increase in the public's interest in historically based miniseries and films, theme parks, living history museums, and the like.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the insecurity and teeth-gnashing generated by these three challenges, when considered together these concerns offer a unique opportunity for creating a more resonant historical scholarship and a more engaging museum practice. Basic to all three concerns is the core question of how community experience and consciousness relate to historical discourse. It should be kept in mind that questioning the relevance of history for the public is hardly a new phenomenon. Some sixty years ago, in his presidential address before the American Historical Association, Carl Becker foresaw the potential irrelevance of increasingly professionalized historical study (and, by extension, history museums). He stated, "If we remain too long recalcitrant Mr. Everyman will ignore us, shelving our recondite works behind glass doors rarely opened." Instead, he noted that "our proper function is not to repeat the past but to make use of it." In his view, everyone is a historian, and the professional historian's goal should be to make everyone better historians.<sup>9</sup> This democratic and popular attitude to-

ward the importance of history in the public's daily life has been rearticulated recently by the historian David Thelen and others, who insist that we are all involved in "rendering the past meaningful to ourselves and communicating these meanings to others." However, this activity has been "so integral to modern American life that it is largely unappreciated."<sup>10</sup>

This central issue of the role of history in everyday life can be recast in terms of each of the challenges mentioned above. For example, regarding the aloofness of and lack of interest in much historical scholarship, we can ask how historical research and writing can better speak to people's needs in exploring the meaning of the past. In terms of the new demographics, we can ask how new immigrants' lives as Americans are connected to established local and national cultures. And as far as museums are concerned, we can ask how new and old publics can be attracted into rejuvenated historical exhibitions and programs.

#### A DIALOGUE-DRIVEN APPROACH

As evidenced by the American Association of State and Local History's Common Agenda for History Museums program, there has been considerable discussion in the museum world about what Thomas Schlereth and others have called an inquiry-driven approach. Schlereth has urged that museums rethink their traditional collections orientation, so that collections can begin to reflect the needs of exhibitions, projects, and programs rather than holding the museum hostage to the limitations of an inherited artifactual base.<sup>11</sup> The 1988 conference at the Smithsonian Institution on the Poetics and Politics of Representation, the 1990 Smithsonian conference on Museums and Communities (of which this volume is a product), and the 1990 Chicago historical museums' conference on Venues of Inquiry into the American City: The Place of Museums, Libraries, and Archives, which was organized by the Chicago Historical Society, the AASLH Common Agenda program, and the Valentine Museum, represent notable and encouraging national movements in this direction.

In traditional museum practice, collections management and conservation have often consumed virtually all staff time. For older, established museums with large collections, an inquiry-driven approach shakes the foundations of this traditional practice, placing much greater emphasis on the assimilation by curators of insights from the



voluminous new historical scholarship of recent decades and suggesting a coordinated planning process for exhibitions and collections development.<sup>12</sup> However, for many recently formed and more publicly oriented institutions, the inquiry-driven approach has become standard. This has certainly been true of the Chinatown History Museum. Our collections have largely been built from our various exhibitions, productions, and programs. There is no question that this makes for a much more coordinated effort between collections and public programs. Nevertheless, other problems quickly come to the foreground. If only for practical reasons, the great majority of museum resources for public programs are allocated to the production of exhibitions. Once the exhibitions are installed, guards and the occasional museum educator are asked to take over, and often are the only points of contact between the museum staff and the public.

This lack of contact is especially troubling when the subject of scholarship and exhibition is a community that the museum is trying to attract into its membership. Even when done sensitively and well, exhibitions tend to speak in a single, authoritative voice, which precludes meaningful give-and-take with visitors. For example, while an exhibition on African Americans developed for Black History Month one year may successfully bring in the local African American community, such annual efforts are all too often short-term forays, and are not usually followed up by sustained programming that can take advantage of the new trust that has been developed. Many administrators and trustees naively hope that having one event in the museum about any given community will quickly translate into that community coming to other museum events and becoming members. Ever pressed for funds, museums often conflate the effectiveness of outreach with the amount of membership dollars brought in, often overlooking the many nonmonetary benefits of a more sustained engagement with their constituencies. Tragically, such short-sighted tokenism often shuts the door more tightly against future collaboration with traditionally underserved communities.

The educational missions of many history museums tend to be implicit. A plentiful supply of exhibitions and programs is often evaluated only by attendance numbers, with audience interests, needs, or demands rarely incorporated into the planning or evaluation process. In this sense, exhibitions can easily become fetishes, displacing any actual engagement with those who do or do not come. It is a very effective way for museums to distance and insulate themselves from the public they claim to serve. Perhaps such an orientation can be

described as talking *at* people. Nevertheless, a conversation between curator and audience is always taking place, even when it is not consciously thought through. Assumptions about the level of audience knowledge, attention span, interest, language abilities, and so forth are necessarily built into the exhibition design and content.<sup>13</sup>

Whether this communication between museum and audience is a lopsided and ineffective monologue or a mutually engaging dialogue has been the Chinatown History Museum's central concern. When people have "voted with their feet" and not come in, we have tried to understand what else will engage their interest. The CHM has sought to shape a museum practice that explicitly explores these dynamics, thereby regularly improving the quality of educational exchange among our scholars, production team, and constituencies. In contrast to collections-driven and inquiry-driven institutional practices, the CHM is seeking to develop a dialogue-driven exhibition and museum. In the following pages I will define what is meant by *dialogue* (which I acknowledge has become an overused term) and illustrate how the dialogic process drives our exhibitions and museum planning and practice.

#### WHAT PUBLIC NEEDS CAN HISTORY SERVE?

If we have learned anything since the Chinatown History Museum was founded, it has been that a community-based history organization can serve some very real and important needs felt by our constituencies. But these needs can be effectively served only by engaging in continual dialogue with people.

What, then, can a dialogue-driven museum mean? For us it has meant engaging with our audiences in mutually exploring the memory and meaning of Chinatown's past. It has meant learning how different people learn in different ways and helping to facilitate that process. And it has meant taking what we learn from these dialogues and further improving the planning and development of the organization. Ultimately, we seek to become an ever more resonant and responsible history center in which scholarship and public programs can help make a critical historical awareness a powerful factor in improving New York and the community for the future.<sup>14</sup>

Over the past ten years, the Chinatown History Museum has identified and tried to serve at least three needs. First, the reclamation of Chinatown's history has given recognition to individuals and



groups who are normally passed over in the recounting of New York City history. Our exhibitions on laundry and garment workers, for example, have publicly validated both experiences and shown how they have constituted the lifeblood of the community. The public representation of what has usually been considered grueling and thankless work has lent a sense of the broader symbolic importance to the workers themselves and their families of what the historian Jacqueline Jones, in reference to the experiences of African Americans, has called the “labor of love, labor of sorrow.” We have found that if an exhibition or public program is resonant with individuals’ personal experiences, they begin to identify actively with the exhibition. And for the sons and daughters of laundry and garment workers, learning about their parents’ experiences from a trusted third party augments their ability to appreciate and understand their parents’ occupational and life experiences. Second, the valuation of people’s past experiences better enables them to reflect upon and remember the past from the point of view of the present; that is, the past becomes a touchstone



Fig. 11-1. The opening of the exhibition *The Eight Pound Livelihood: A History of Chinese Laundry Workers in America* at the New York Public Library in 1984 was attended by an estimated 500 people. After two years of interviews, research, and community workshops with Chinese New Yorkers, the Chinatown History Museum collaborated with the New York State Museum in producing a bilingual exhibition on one of the major occupations of Chinese in New York City. Bilingual radio programs, a video documentary, a book, and a Ph.D. dissertation were also stimulated by this effort. Photo courtesy Chinatown History Museum.

against which the present and future are interpreted and understood. The more the activities of reflecting and remembering are made public, the more individuals will become active in identifying the differences and similarities in their experiences with one another and with people who have not lived their experience. At this point more critical insights begin to challenge simple nostalgia. People can begin to bridge the differences between their experiences and others’, and feelings of mutual respect begin to surface. Third, such acts of self-discovery shape and reshape individual and collective identities. People constantly reformulate their personal pasts: how people want to think of themselves in the present necessarily influences what they will remember about the past, and conversely, what they remember about themselves in the past influences how they think about themselves in the present. The need to constantly reassess this reciprocal relationship of past and present seems to be a fundamental human characteristic.<sup>15</sup>

A more integrative and inclusive community history can help to counter the sense of marginalization and disempowerment vis-à-vis

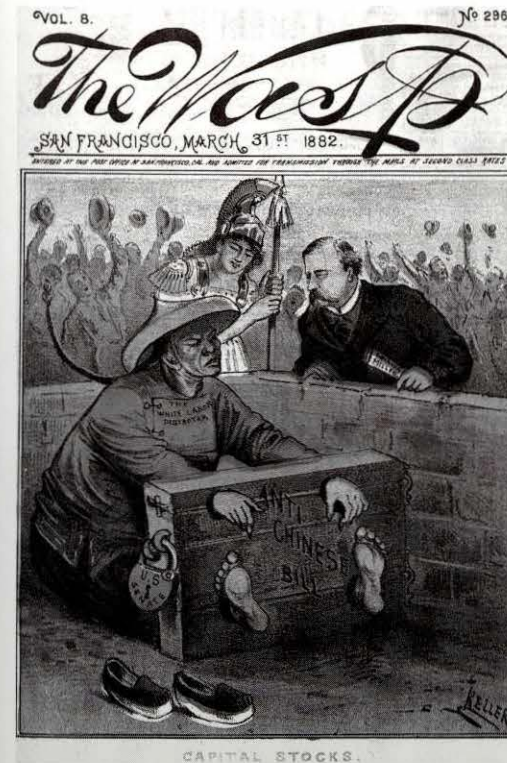


Fig. 11-2. Part of the basic dialogue to take place in the *Remembering New York Chinatown* exhibition is a discussion exploring why most Americans do not know that in 1882 the anti-Chinese forces in the United States were able to pass the Chinese Exclusion Act, which prohibited Chinese workers from entering the country. This law was not formally repealed until 1943, at which time a quota of 105 per year were allowed in. It was not until the civil rights-influenced Immigration Reform Act of 1965 that such racist legislation was truly ended. Illustration by Keller, *Wasp*, 1882. Wong Ching Foo Collection. Courtesy Chinatown History Museum.



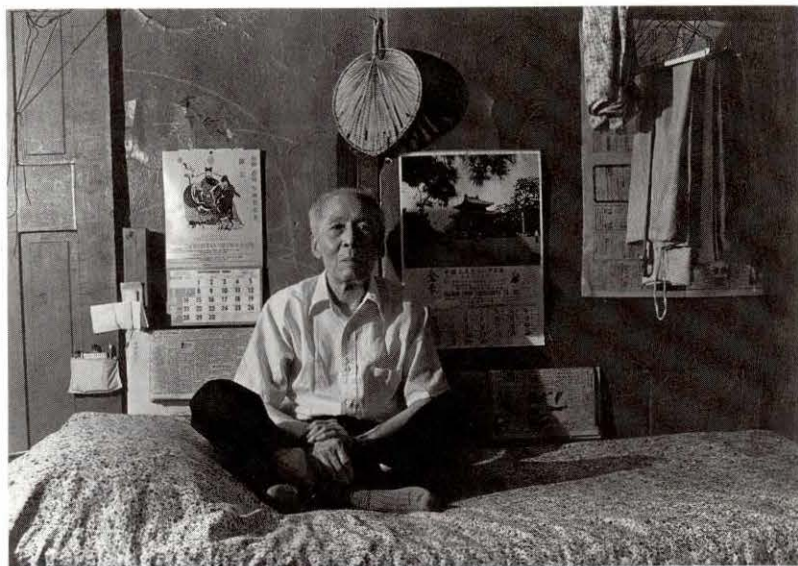


Fig. 11-3. A profile of Sin Jang Leung, a longtime laundry worker, is one of the changing individual biographies featured in *Remembering New York Chinatown*. Photo by Paul Calhoun, 1983, courtesy Chinatown History Museum.

the larger society that was imposed by the Chinese Exclusion Acts and decades of racism. And yet, this type of community history can also be limiting and claustrophobic. For example, the celebration of Chinatown's history can become too narrow-minded and overly culturally nationalist.<sup>16</sup> It can also deny other aspects of a Chinese New Yorker's experience. For example, while a person may be an "overseas Chinese" and live in Chinatown, he or she is also a Lower East Sider and a New Yorker, and may also have lived in other parts of the United States and other countries. To treat a bachelor laundry worker who spent many years in Cuba simply as a "Chinese," lumping him into the same category as a Hong Kong import-export merchant with a family, does great violence to both individuals' unique life histories. Their Chineseness can easily be overemphasized, becoming an essentialist and quasi-genetic characteristic untouchable by comparisons with other experiences.<sup>17</sup> The identity of a Chinese resident of New York has been formed by many layers of influences—the self is intricately tied to "others."

In a like manner, local historical studies can become too provincial and separate from the body politic. Indeed, this has been a recur-

ring criticism of the specialization found in much of the new social history. As was mentioned earlier, in isolation the parts cannot give us a sense of the whole—the highly nuanced social history of this or that locale inverts the sins of macro political history. Locality, region, nation, and world have all been represented as distinct entities, and their interconnectedness has tended not to be explicated. In particular, the uniqueness of the locality has tended to be either overemphasized or underrated—all-powerful to residents or all-powerless to national and international influences.

In summary, a resonant and responsible way of engaging any community in the interpretation of its own history needs to balance local, intensely private uses of history with the larger-scale understanding of why and how life has become the way it is. A variety of historical insights need to be brought together in a cultural free space for open discussion. The *Memories of New York Chinatown* exhibition will experiment with creating such a free space for our diverse audiences.<sup>18</sup>

#### WHO'S INVOLVED IN THE DIALOGUE?

At first glance, the target audience of a community-based history project might be assumed to be only that community. Although this may be true for some local historical organizations, it has not been true for the Chinatown History Museum. Given our recognition that the self and "others," and parts and wholes, are inextricably interconnected, we view the history of New York's Chinese community as tied to the cultural formation of the Lower East Side and New York City as a whole. Therefore, not only do Chinese have plenty to learn from this history, but so do all New Yorkers and tourists of things Chinese.

Contrary to popular assumptions, Chinatowns are not isolated "Cantons in the West."<sup>19</sup> They are multicultural communities that were (and are) created and recreated by the people who live in them and the people who have interacted with their residents. The history of New York's Chinatown is as much about New York and the development of an American identity as it is about Chinese Americans. The residents of Chinatown have never been all Chinese, nor has it been possible for Chinese immigrants to stay totally by themselves. Chinatown is all too often viewed as monolithic by outsiders, who also may see Chinese Americans as "clannish." Yet if one were to ask several



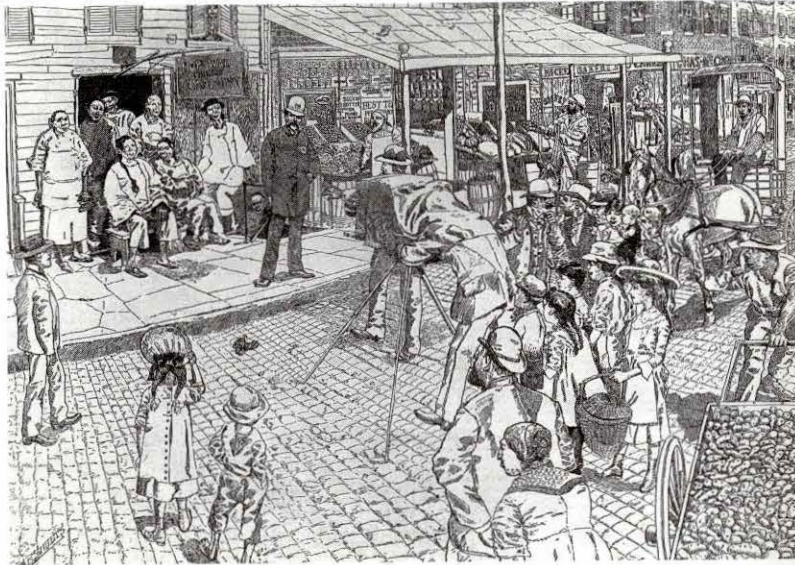


Fig. 11-4. Chinatown has long been the subject of much attention by the mainstream culture in New York City, as exemplified by this “stroller photographer” of 1883. Its representation has often been greatly exoticized, both in romantic and xenophobic ways. Negotiating between anti-Chinese discrimination and finding a means to gain a livelihood, Chinese entered the labor-intensive hand laundry business in New York sometime in the late 1860s. Drawing by A. B. Shults, *Harper's Weekly*, 1883. Wong Ching Foo Collection. Courtesy Chinatown History Museum.

Chinese—or any other “ethnic” New Yorkers—how they would describe their community, not one group identity but many group identities would quickly surface.

What roles should historians, and other professional specialists, play in the dialogue? Quite a few historians and historical organizations have tended to assume that their professional credentials and training give them greater authority to produce interpretations of the history and culture of a community than members of the community itself. Hence, exhibitions tend to be produced by curator-experts who are advised by Ph.D.'d humanities consultants and supported by funds allocated by organizations that judge these projects with panels of peer experts, all of whom are operating in a self-enclosed and self-referential world. In such an extreme and top-down approach to knowledge and standards, audiences are conceived of as more or less passive consumers, receivers of expert wisdom. The exhibition is produced so *they* can learn. As long as the institution is solvent, little attention is

paid to whether people come to see the show or not. And even if they do come, little concern is given to the audience's interests or preferences. The attitude is that knowledge is there for the taking, and it is the audience's loss if they do not take advantage of it. Conversely, some historian-activists have taken an opposite (but equally extreme) approach to the relation between communities and their history. In a laudable effort to destabilize the elitist practice of top-down history, some have counterposed the voices and life histories of “the people” as a self-evident, ultrademocratic alternative history. They view their own role as only that of a facilitator and do not want to insert their voice. Historian Michael Frisch has quite rightly pointed out that neither extreme formulation of the roles of historians and the public is very fruitful. Indeed, the authorship of an exhibition, and therefore the authority associated with authorship, should be viewed as a shared and collaborative process and not as an either/or proposition.<sup>20</sup>

Having laid out this concern over exhibition authorship, I recognize that it is not entirely accurate, nor quite fair, to characterize all historians and museum professionals in such a stark light. Certainly many historians and curators care a great deal about the general public and would like their work to reach people effectively. Yet their good intentions are often thwarted by institutional and organizational constraints. Professors gain tenure and advancement largely by publications in the “right” historical journals and the “right” university presses. Teaching counts, but is not a major factor. And in the rather effete world of much university scholarship, publicly oriented history is considered derivative and not truly a part of scholars' work. In museums, another set of institutional practices limits effective engagement. For example, the limited amount of time and money available does not permit curators or researchers to collaborate with either the people who have lived the experience depicted in an exhibition or the people for whom the exhibition is intended—there is no opportunity to jointly interpret and debate the ideas expressed in the exhibition. And such collaborative discussions are not thought to be what brings in the grants. Although the rhetoric of interactive exhibitions has become quite popular in recent years, much of the interaction ends up being reduced to high-tech gadgetry. Computerized laser disks with preprogrammed “choices” for the museum visitor tend to predominate in even the best-intentioned efforts.<sup>21</sup> Like the hierarchically organized corporations of the business world, the institutional practices within which historians and curators work tend to situate these professional specialists on the supply end of the production process and



place audiences on the opposite pole, the consumer end. At best, other experts are hired to evaluate a museum's programs and interview the consumers. Hence, even publicly minded historians tend to rely upon the concept of the passive general public when dealing with students and fellow academics.

Instead of such a dichotomous and segregative approach, the Chinatown History Museum has advocated a more nuanced and integrated process of producing historical knowledge. Given the complexity of the process of community identity formation, the dialogue exploring the memory and meaning of Chinatown's past necessitates the collaboration of many different people who can work with us in piecing together this huge, multidimensional spatial and temporal puzzle. We seek to bring together Chinese New Yorkers, Lower East Side residents, other New Yorkers, tourists, and scholars and other cultural producers (which includes museum professionals, journalists, designers, translators, and educators). Each group has played a major role in defining the experience and perception of Chinatown.

Four types of dialogues are being tested during the experimental, evaluative period. First, scholars and museum professionals have been working with the Chinatown History Museum planning group. Ideas and experiences have been exchanged, and plans developed, tested, evaluated, and retested. At this writing it is the end of the evaluation period, and a planning document is being produced. Second, target segments of the Chinese American community have been collaborating with the CHM planning group in documenting the history of Chinatown and reflecting upon their memories of it. Special emphasis has been placed on moving beyond exchanges of empirical information to deeper discussions of meaning. The formation of individual and community identities has been of primary concern. Staff has been soliciting ideas about how better to meet the needs and interests of Chinese Americans. Third, target segments of the non-Chinese community have been collaborating with the CHM planning group in documenting and reflecting upon their perceptions of and experiences with Chinatown. Multi- and monocultural identity formation has been of central interest; for example, how did the Italian Americans who attended P.S. 23 in Chinatown define themselves in contradistinction to their Chinese classmates? Fourth, those Chinese and non-Chinese most interested in pursuing historical exploration have been trained in historical literacy and museum work skills to help us further document and interpret community history. For example, many individuals regularly come to the Chinatown History Museum to work on papers or personal projects; volunteers often guard our exhibitions;



Fig. 11-5. As anti-Chinese hostility limited job options, the promotion of tourism into Chinatown became one of the few ways merchants and workers could earn a living. Postcards of New York's Chinatown began to appear in the 1890s. The postcard at top shows a tourist-oriented gift shop with Chuck Connors pointing at the right. In the 1900s, Connors was a well-known Bowery B'hoys entertainer who was dubbed by the media "the unofficial mayor of Chinatown." He gave tours of Chinatown to middle-class curiosity-seekers. The postcard at bottom shows the ornate interior of the Chinese Tuxedo Restaurant (located on Doyers Street off Chatham Square, shown sometime before 1906) as an orderly yet "exotic" place for tourists to eat while visiting Chinatown. Wong Ching Foo Collection. Courtesy Chinatown History Museum.



and members of the CHM have supported us financially and attended events. By setting up small workshops to train interested individuals, not only can we help our constituencies to appreciate the value (and difficulty) of humanities scholarship, but we can also greatly maximize limited staff time.

#### FORGING LINKS AND BUILDING SCHOLARSHIP

The linking of constituencies and scholarship has been the core concern of the Chinatown History Museum since its founding. This was not due to some supreme foresight or wisdom, but rather came from simple necessity. Our desire to produce historical programs for and about one of this nation's oldest ethnic enclaves was regularly thwarted by the lack of primary or secondary historical sources. The history of Asians in the United States has not been considered a part of the canon of American historical knowledge. Asian Americans have been cast as perpetual foreigners. And despite the significance of the China trade in the founding and early development of this nation, China (and Asia more generally) are seen as perpetually inscrutable and distant.

The legacy of racial marginalization and legalized exclusion (for example, the Chinese Exclusion Acts, which were in force between 1882 and 1943) left significant silences in the American historical record. So little has been known about what is now the largest concentration of Chinese outside of Asia that it has only recently been documented that Chinese have been living in New York City for at least 160 years.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the development of tourism in the 1890s (as a means of economic survival for Chinese American merchants) promoted a false, and oftentimes patronizing, intimacy that millions of Americans felt (and still feel) toward Chinatown and Chinese Americans.

Scholarly neglect has been matched by the alienation and low self-esteem of the New York Chinese community. In Chinatown, invaluable historical documents and personal belongings have regularly been tossed out with the trash. One embittered elderly laundry man waved us out of his store, screaming, "Laundries have no history!" This problem was made worse with the great influx of new immigrants from Hong Kong, Guangdong, Taiwan, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere. Recent estimates calculate that there are 300,000 Chinese in the New York metropolitan area. Why should these newcomers care

about what happened before they arrived? What relevance does history have for their efforts to eke out a living?

Without a base of scholarship and with no archival collections to draw upon, we had to rely on those who had lived the experience to collaborate with us in reconstructing the community's history. Without the advantage of a preexisting institution, we had to build our own infrastructure and seek innovative ways of reaching Chinese New Yorkers. Consequently, we have been in a unique position to develop fresh approaches to historical research and museum craft. Instead of viewing scholarship as separate from public programming, we have found that media productions and public programs are integral to the effort to document and understand the community better. A resonant exhibition demonstrates trustworthiness and predisposes more people to contribute to our collections—people, groups, and organizations who traditionally have been closemouthed begin talking to our researchers. The responsive historical productions and programs we have created have enabled many of the residents we have worked with to look at their own lives more reflectively and comparatively.

We have discovered that reunions are an excellent beginning point for historical research and programming. Long frowned upon as simple nostalgia or distorted celebrations of the past, we have found reunions to be an excellent way to link the felt need for history directly with historical scholarship. Our cosponsorship of reunions organized in the Chinese and Lower East Side communities addresses the need people feel to reconnect with the past and find meaning in their memories. For example, since 1987 we have organized a series of reunions for those who attended P.S. 23, the grade school once located in the building our offices currently are in. The school, whose students were largely Italian and Chinese youth, represents many important memories for this largely immigrant Lower East Side population.<sup>23</sup> In helping to organize such gatherings, the Chinatown History Museum can document social experiences that often have left no records. Ultimately, scholarship is improved, and even more effective programming can then be planned.

Fundamental to developing an understanding of Chinatown that serves as an alternative to mainstream neglect and misperceptions has been the development of an alternative archives. The CHM archives collection has grown primarily through donations and through our staff patrolling the trash bins. It now helps scores of students, scholars, journalists, and visitors from across the United States, for whom no such resource existed a short while ago. Bilingual exhibi-





Fig. 11-6. The Chinatown History Museum has sponsored a series of history workshop get-togethers of alumni from Public School 23, the main school serving Italian and Chinese youth on Mulberry and Bayard streets. The artifacts, documents, photographs, stories, and insights gathered from these sessions have been made into an exhibition which, in turn, will be used to gather more interviews and materials. The photograph at top left, of a class from P.S. 23 in 1942, was originally shown within the Chinatown History Museum exhibition *Salvaging New York Chinatown*; it sparked so much interest that it prompted the organizing of a reunion for alumni of P.S. 23. The photograph at bottom left is the 1988 "class" photograph of students who graduated from P.S. 23 in the 1940s.

The program around P.S. 23 has brought together Chinese and Italians to recall and reconsider their childhood experiences with history students from New York University and staff members of the Chinatown History Museum. Although some of the attendees still live in the immediate vicinity of the school, they have not seen former classmates for decades. The photo above shows the 1989 P.S. 23 Photo Day. Photos by Michael Ramos, courtesy Chinatown History Museum.

tions, walking tours, slide shows, video documentaries, radio programs, lectures, publications, and other programs have reached hundreds of thousands of people well beyond New York's Chinatown. With over ten years of sustained work in one community, the Chinatown History Museum's efforts have begun to bridge scholarship and personal interests, and newer and older constituencies. We have also managed to attract a historically nonmuseumgoing community with engaging historical programs.



## EXHIBITION AS A VEHICLE FOR DIALOGUE

The Memories of New York Chinatown exhibition has been the vehicle in which these ideas of dialogue-driven programs are being tested. We have been using this exhibition as a way to consolidate what we have learned, evaluate and improve on our successes, and build these and other insights into the plans for a new permanent exhibition and museum. In the first level of a two-tiered self-evaluation, audiences, scholars, and the CHM planning team have been collaboratively developing, evaluating, and refining this exhibition, and are reconceptualizing how it and related programs can serve as a meeting ground for diverse peoples. The exhibition itself has been engaging our collaborators in a set of humanities issues, and that engagement process has been the subject of the second level of our museum planning study. While the exhibition focuses on content and themes, the larger study focuses on museum processes and larger humanities issues.

*An Exhibition in Process*

Despite having been settled in lower Manhattan since the first half of the nineteenth century, Chinese Americans have been perceived as perpetual foreigners.<sup>24</sup> This dissonance between lived experience and perception defines the parameters of the Memories of New York Chinatown exhibition. It will explore how the cultural identity of an urban streetscape has been formed and reformed in the minds and lives of Chinese New Yorkers. And it will explore how that representation has differed from the perceptions of the larger New York public and visiting tourists. The Chinatown History Museum has chosen this seminal theme as the basis of the Memories exhibition because it is an issue relevant to the cultural identity of *all* Americans. We see a dialogic exhibition as the ideal vehicle for the public consideration of this issue.

The following humanities themes will be presented both as a set of ideas and as a framework for further documentation and discussion with visitors.

**MEMORIES OF NEIGHBORHOOD** How has the space of Mott, Pell, and Doyers streets become a place of multiple and successive memories and meanings? How have people of diverse cultural experiences and national origins remembered Chinatown? How have communities interacted? How have they segregated themselves or been segregated?



Fig. 11-7. Despite having been settled in New York City for over 160 years, Chinese are still largely viewed as “foreigners” in the United States. This paradox will be one of the issues discussed in the dialogic exhibition Remembering New York Chinatown. Chinese itinerant peddlers, such as this candy seller, could be seen in New York as early as the 1830s. Illustration from *Harper's Weekly*, 1868. Wong Ching Foo Collection. Courtesy Chinatown History Museum.

New York's Chinatown has become a fixture of the American urban landscape as much as Coney Island, the Statue of Liberty, and the Bronx Zoo. It is a place where literally millions of Americans and international tourists eat, shop, and wander. Although Chinese have been living in New York City since the 1830s, it was not until the 1890s that this Chinese settlement became a tourist destination. When asked about the whys and wherefores of its origins, most non-Chinese tend to assume that Chinatown is an enclave formed largely by immigrants to protect their own interests. Clannishness, language, new immigration, and unassimilability are often given as the reasons it continues to exist.

Unfortunately, these common impressions gloss over a much more complex reality. The streetscape we now think of as Chinatown has been the locus of a succession of ethnically or racially defined groups. Each group tied its own memories, meanings, and sense of self to the locale. Never populated only by Chinese, the area became a home base for hundreds of thousands in the metropolitan New York region.

The streetscape, housing, schools, and other shared spaces have



been the subject of exhibition panels and discussion. The study of cultural geography, the history of the built environment, ethnic/racial relations, and individual and group memory have informed this theme.<sup>25</sup>

**CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS** How has Chinatown been represented and remembered in the mainstream culture? How has New York's Chinatown been represented and remembered in China? How has the representation jibed with direct experience?

Sensationalist films and television programs—ranging from news reports about Chinatown youth gangs and drugs to Michael Cimino's film *Year of the Dragon* to episodes of the *Kojak* television series—have regularly played upon firmly established popular stereotypes of downtown danger, mystery, and exoticism. Contemporary media have simply continued a longstanding orientalism traceable back to nineteenth-century American theater, Tin Pan Alley, and silent films.<sup>26</sup> Hatchetmen, gang wars, opium trafficking, white slavery, restaurants



Fig. 11-8. Opium "dens" have been a stubborn, long-standing image of what goes on in Chinatowns. Indeed, filmmaker and comedian Woody Allen depicted a layout in his 1991 film *Alice* as if it were still a common practice today. Opium and its uses by Chinese and non-Chinese New Yorkers will be one of the more sensitive subjects discussed as part of the Remembering New York Chinatown exhibition. Illustration by J. W. Alexander, captioned "American opium-smokers—interior of a New York opium den," *Harper's Weekly*, 1881. Wong Ching Foo Collection. Courtesy Chinatown History Museum.

serving rat, cat, or dog meat, and laundries or stores with secret underground rooms have been recurrent, larger-than-life images in New York City's fervid cultural imagination. In recent decades other, more favorable images have come to the fore—yet the 1980s were marked by a precipitous rise in the number of acts of anti-Asian violence across the nation.<sup>27</sup>

How have New York and Chinatown been portrayed in the areas from which Chinese have emigrated? What have been the perceptions and expectations of would-be émigrés in China? What versions of the story of *gaam shaan*, or the golden mountain, have been accepted? How have Chinese New Yorkers colluded in spreading these stories? What happens when expectations confront realities?<sup>28</sup>

Popular films, photographs, and stories offer means through which these contrasting impressions and recollections are being explored. Studies of tourism, mass culture and entertainment, and racial representation have informed this aspect of the exhibition.<sup>29</sup>

**STRATEGIES OF SURVIVAL** For individuals caught between the community's own sense of self and outsiders' portrayals of Chinatown, what has been the range of adaptive responses? How have Chinese New Yorkers defined themselves in relation to the larger American culture? To Chinese culture? How have they become New Yorkers? How have they become sojourners? How have perceived cultural differences been exacerbated, bridged, or accommodated?

Historically, Chinese in the United States have been defined in racial terms. Charlie Chan's Americanized Number One Son could be presented as entertaining comic relief for the very same reason that his trademark "Gee whiz, Pop" seemed silly tumbling off Asian lips. As long as racial categories are used to define identities rigidly, Chinese will forever be cast as "inscrutable" and "yellow" and Americans as "normal" and "white."

Once racial identities become understood as changing cultural phenomena, then bicultural heritages can be understood as much more nuanced and variegated experiences.<sup>30</sup> Michael Fischer, for example, has made the point that the writer Maxine Hong Kingston, when faced with a world of literature that did not reflect her Chinese American sensibility, had to reclaim her own history and find a voice within that history that would embody a freer, more multidimensional concept of self.<sup>31</sup>

What happened, however, to Chinese in more everyday circumstances—such as laundry workers? Did they think of themselves as



temporary visitors, or sojourners, saving to retire back in China? Who decided to stay and settle? How were their lives different from merchants who could bring their wives and families?<sup>32</sup>

In addition to the traditional offering of historical information and interpretation developed by humanities scholars, the Memories of New York Chinatown exhibition is an experimental exhibition with various stations in which different types of dialogues can take place. Building on a concept pioneered by the Corning Glass Museum, layers of information and involvement are offered to visitors to accommodate their varying amounts of time and interest. The harried visitor with only fifteen minutes to spend in the exhibition is able to gain a basic understanding of its ideas and content. For those with more time and interest, a series of options are available so that they can increase their level of involvement with the exhibition. Ultimately, we seek to make it possible for anyone who comes to visit the exhibition to choose to collaborate with us in documenting and discussing his or her memories and reflections.

The CHM staff has been developing modules, staffed by Chinatown History Museum personnel and trained volunteers, including timelines that can be added to, a genealogy/biography database, and programs evoking group memories. The staff has been supplied with questions, various historical databases, and collections of photographs to further engage visitors in an exploration of what can be remembered of New York's Chinatown. We continually seek to create stations that will be able to both present and assimilate empirical information, such as the names of students who are in a class photograph. But we especially want to design stations that draw visitors into exploring deeper and more difficult recollections. The nature of memory and identity has been the subject of much recent interest among humanities scholars, and we have been consulting with some of these scholars, attempting to incorporate their insights into the design of the exhibition.

This unorthodox approach allows visitors to discuss themes and details of the exhibition; add their memories, photographs, documents, and personal memorabilia to the exhibition and the CHM archive collection; help the CHM staff locate collections and people to speak to; and help the staff listen to and learn from the visitors' perspectives, interests, and needs so that the organization can more effectively engage future visitors.

Perhaps two examples of interactive modules, one planned and



Fig. 11-9. The history of Chinese in New York City can only be understood multi-culturally, in relation to other New Yorkers. Chinese were part of the crews of U.S. merchant ships as early as 1785. Nineteenth-century artists often followed the conventions of "physiognomy," representing people as "racial types" that were purported to help viewers to understand the true character of anonymous individuals among the urban masses. The accompanying article for this illustration claimed, "Every Fig. and face in the picture is drawn from life, and each character tells its own story so well that to enlarge upon it would be superfluous." Drawing by Sol Eytinge, Jr., *Harper's Weekly*, 1871. Wong Ching Foo Collection. Courtesy Chinatown History Museum.

one installed, will make some of these ideas more concrete. One planned interactive module will be an exhibition and database on representations of Chinatown by both Chinese and non-Chinese. Panels and displays could provide some illustrations of how American popular culture has referred to Chinatown over the decades. Opposite them, more panels would document Chinese representations. Myths of *gaam shaan*, or the golden mountain, would be contrasted to the complex semiotics of Borrah Minevitch and His Harmonica Rascals performing "Chinatown, My Chinatown." At the station a filing cabinet, or a computer, would contain many more examples of stories, graphics, anecdotes, jokes, or whatever relates to this issue. Visitors would be invited to explore the database with a Chinatown History Museum staff person. Ideally, the exhibit would jog their own memories, and they could share something that might be added to the database. The staff person would also be prepared with a set of ques-





Fig. 11-10. In 1850, P. T. Barnum took advantage of the arrival of seventeen-year-old Pwan Ye Koo. He put her on display with what was represented as her retinue. Thousands of New Yorkers paid twenty-five cents to see "The Living Chinese Family" at his Chinese Museum on Broadway off Prince Street. Illustration by N. Currier, 1850. Wong Ching Foo Collection. Courtesy Chinatown History Museum.

tions that would engage the visitor in deeper levels of discussion. The staff person would be responsible for sharing information and listening for what visitors are telling him or her. (The staff would also be prepared to document what has been told to them and—if it is deemed desirable—would make an appointment for a follow-up session.) This listening would be on at least two levels. Staff would naturally be listening for explicit comments, such as "Oh, I used to cross the street when I saw a Chinese man. I was afraid he'd have a hatchet under his coat."<sup>33</sup> They would also be listening for implicit statements that will give us clues about which parts of the exhibition work better than others. Laundry workers, for example, asked why our Eight Pound Livelihood exhibition had more photographs showing laundrymen than photographs showing the work process. We learned from their comments that they would have represented laundry life in an exhibition very differently than the CHM staff had. This helped us refine our understanding of points of view in our expanded version of the exhibition. Different audience evaluation techniques will also be tried and their results compared.<sup>34</sup>

One operating module that we installed for the opening of the show evokes and documents spatial memories. We have found that many of our informants have strong recollections of the stores, public spaces, and homes they frequented many decades before. In fact, many "old-timers" enjoy recalling their old haunts with people eager to learn about them. The module will have a grid of old Chinatown streets and their buildings, and will also have overlays that show the changes in the built environment over time. We will invite Chinese and non-Chinese residents of the area to share with us their mental maps of the space. We have already collected the contrasting memories of Mott Street of Sydney Silberman, as told to his grandson, and 1914 arrival Lung Chin, as told to Dorothy Rony of the Chinatown History Museum staff;<sup>35</sup> their spatial references overlap but represent very different associational patterns and meanings. Staff will seek to engage visitors in discussion, comparing different maps displayed in the exhibition and inviting the more interested to add their mental maps to our database.<sup>36</sup> Documentation will have been created where none existed before. Scholars will be able to interpret and pursue these findings. Visitors who were or are part of Chinatown will be drawn into a meaningful encounter with their recollections, and those who have not been a part of the Lower East Side experience can easily make associations and comparisons with their own spatial memories of other places. And the exhibition will have served as a tool for a dialogue among parties who normally would not be communicating with one another, even if they were in the same room at the same time.

In a very real sense, the exhibition gallery will serve as a stage on which different activities will occur at different times. Of course, it will be open to the general public for viewing. At other times, it will be a place for group discussions about different aspects of the exhibition. These discussions will be part of the documentation process. At still other times, the CHM staff will be doing their work, such as copying documents or identifying photographs. We want the seams of historical research to be made apparent: we want to show it as a process with many steps. By so doing, we hope to move past the surface definitiveness of exhibitions and show the dynamic inner workings.

No doubt some modules will work very well. Others will need adjustments. Still others will need to be tossed out and replaced. This flexible, experimental approach will enable the planning team to do this, and to develop explicitly the theory and practice of a dialogic museum. Collections, programs, exhibitions, staff roles and time allocations, space usage, and many other aspects of museum work will



be redefined by this dialogic approach. These more formal issues of museum-building and work process will constitute a second level of planning and study.

### *Exhibition Programs*

A series of programs will bring in specific groups from both the Chinese and the non-Chinese communities to participate in discussions and special sessions at various modules. All programs will be designed to coordinate with the exhibition's themes and the overall dialogic-driven approaches. The formats of programs will vary according to the kind and size of the group; for example, groups of older people will be asked to come first because their experiences will need to be documented first.

Historical reunions will continue to be one type of program we encourage. Social, political, and cultural groups significant to the history of the community will be encouraged to cosponsor reunions with the Chinatown History Museum. Attendees at past reunions have been asked to bring photographs and talk with trained oral historians. Follow-up sessions were organized when they were mutually deemed desirable. Groups will also be asked to donate (or preserve and allow us to copy) documents, photographs, artifacts, costumes, etc. that document their experience. Selected individuals from these groups have been asked to work with us, either sharing more of their recollections or being trained to document their group. The owners of stores and restaurants, as well as the members of opera clubs, social clubs, sports groups, youth groups, and school graduating classes, are among the groupings we have asked to work with us.

The Chinatown History Museum will also organize family history and genealogy workshops, four-session series in which interested youths and adults will be trained in the techniques of tracing family genealogies and conducting family oral history projects. In exchange for the sessions, participants will be asked to place a duplicate of their work in the CHM archives. These workshops will also serve as a training ground for volunteers who will help out in CHM research projects.

We also plan to invite target constituent groups to view films, videos, and slide shows dealing with aspects of the exhibition themes. The media viewing is intended to stimulate conversation over issues of mutual concern and interest. For example, European immigrants who



Fig. 11-11. "I remember it was drizzly that day. The Chinese papers said don't wear no hats. Those days if you step out the door people go for the hat, everyone wear hats. That's the first time I see Chinese don't wear hats. All twenty thousand of them." Gene Eng, retired welder.

As a means to fathom the collective memories of community residents, such photographs as this will be used as a starting point for individual and group discussion sessions.

Anti-Japanese-aggression demonstration, Mott and Canal streets, circa 1930s. Photo courtesy Chinatown History Museum.

passed through Ellis Island could be shown Felicia Lowe's hour-long documentary on Angel Island, *Carved in Silence*, which documents the major detention center Chinese were ferried to during the period of the Chinese Exclusion Acts. Comparative discussions can then follow.

### RESHAPING THE ORGANIZATION

Over the past ten years, numerous Chinatown History Museum exhibitions and programs have allowed us to test aspects of dialogic approaches. Some efforts were more successful than others, but we learned from each instance that merely opening channels of communication is not enough; a great deal of follow-up is needed. For example, when the staff took our 1983 exhibition on Chinese laundry workers to a large senior citizens' center, many individuals who had been reticent when being interviewed by the staff began to come up to us and offer their stories. However, funding was limited, so we could not spend staff time on follow-up—everyone had to be mobilized for the next exhibition project.



A similar problem occurred in 1987, with our Salvaging New York Chinatown exhibition. The show drew great interest. One photograph in particular, that of a fourth-grade class from P.S. 23, stirred an unexpected response. Many individuals came forth to identify people in the photograph and began to tell us about their memories of the school. We quickly decided to organize a reunion of those Chinese who had attended the school. Word spread, and soon Italian residents began calling us in large numbers. We had some four hundred people come to the event, including teachers from as far back as 1917. We attempted to follow up on this enormous opportunity by applying for grants to plan and then implement an exhibition and associated programming on the public school. This was done; however, we found that our small staff was stretched too far for us to do this as well as we would have liked. Once interviews were completed, for example, we did not have the capability to process the interviews and make them accessible. People who had donated photographs wanted to see them on display. Names of other individuals were given to us by people we interviewed, but we could not get in contact with these other people quickly enough.

These experiences have taught us that the concept of a dialogic museum needs to be thought through with the entire organization in mind, for the archives, staff roles, the allocation of organizational resources, and so much more are all affected. These lessons are the reason for the two-tiered approach to our self-evaluation study. Not only does the dialogic exhibition warrant careful planning, but the overall museum structure demands consideration as well. We have been using and will continue to use an ethnographic approach to evaluating our exhibition and organizational practices: What do our audiences bring to the exhibition? How can we help improve the intergenerational teaching that goes on among grandparents, parents, and children in our space? What happens to individuals and groups after they go through our space? These questions and many more are being asked and discussed by staff. We have learned that the various levels of dialogue produce critical insights that, when taken to heart, reshape all museum productions and the museum itself.

The Memories exhibition, for example, will be refined in the following ways by insights we have already garnered from collaborators and visitors:

*The form and packaging of the exhibition.* How can the exhibition design be improved to better suit the cultural styles of our audiences?

How can we improve the effectiveness of the written and aesthetic languages of the exhibition (and museum) space?

*The documentation of the historical experience.* The interactive approach has an immediate impact, involving visitors in the documentation process and turning them into collaborators. We will seek to discover means whereby what visitors contribute will be immediately noticeable in the exhibition or collection. Their contributions should not simply be acknowledged, as most historical organizations do, in newsletter mentions, but instead put into the context of other contributions in the collection, where the contribution's significance can be made evident.

*A better understanding of what is remembered, and why.* How have collective memory and individual memory operated across generations? What has become a part of commonly remembered community history? The anti-Japanese-aggression demonstrations during World War II are an example of this. What aspects of life have become silences in the collective memory, as the laundry experience did? What stories or myths are retold to help understand the past?

*What is more interesting to whom?* More explicit interaction with our visitors and collaborators will enable us to gain a much keener understanding of who is interested in what. We can use that knowledge to improve the effectiveness of the communicative and interactive parts of the exhibition.

*Short-term planning.* What exhibitions should we plan next? What modifications should be made to our existing exhibitions? What programs should be planned?

At the level of the museum itself, we have become aware of how the dialogue-driven approach will have profound influences on reshaping the traditional structures and operations of museums. For example, even the way an interior space is designed will be affected. We anticipate that some of the following issues will have implications for the Chinatown History Museum's practice:

*Collection practices.* What constitutes our collection? How can it be organized to respond to the dialogic approach? How does this affect



the roles of archivist and registrar? How can we use new technologies to facilitate quicker processing and accessibility?

Museums traditionally have been defined by their collections. Recent historical scholarship and new technologies have increasingly destabilized the primacy of artifacts and archives in museums. We need to think through what constitutes a dialogue-driven history museum collection.

New technologies of object reproduction have greatly challenged the uniqueness of museum collections. Perhaps photographs, of which multiple copies can be printed, first posed this problem for history museums. Is not a good-quality copy of an original print almost as valuable to the historian as the original? Microfilm, photoduplication, audio and video recording, computerization, and other technologies have made it possible to abstract representations from the original. This issue strikes at the very heart of what is considered historical evidence. Paul Thompson has argued that tape-recorded oral-history interviews should be considered as reliable, or unreliable, as diaries or autobiographies. And Ron Grele has pointed out that oral interviews provide qualitatively different historical information than text-based historical sources. Increasingly, oral-history collections have become a part of what museums collect.

Perhaps more important, the behavioral scientist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has insisted that the importance of objects lies not so much in their material value but in the value of the meaning people invest in them.<sup>37</sup> Should collections be formulated based on the rarity of the originals in them, or instead by the body of precious information they contain? Although no one contests the unequalled eloquence of a Remington bronze sculpture or the special feel of an original manuscript, the boundaries defining what constitutes museum collections have become increasingly blurred.

Memories and thoughts—captured by videotape, pen on paper, or whatever means—have become a fundamental element of historical scrutiny and collection. What happens when museum collections shift from being primarily object-based to being information-based? Our past experience with dialogic databases suggests that computers with graphic interface capabilities could become the backbone of our information and artifact collections. Will this be feasible?

*Types of dialogues.* What are the different types of dialogues that go on within our space and programs, among both Chinese Americans

and non-Chinese Americans? Why should non-Chinese Americans care about the history of Chinese Americans? Can perceptions of cultural difference be bridged by new, multicultural approaches? What are the various roles that scholars could play?

*Linkages beyond the CHM.* What are the different types of dialogues that extend beyond our space and programs? How can the Chinatown History Museum link up with other cultural and educational institutions to combine resources and enhance effectiveness?

The CHM has regularly sought to link up with other cultural and educational institutions in New York City and elsewhere. The gradual but growing interest in Asian American studies in universities has made it easier to recruit staff members who have some background and training in scholarly work. However, the Chinatown History Museum's work with these institutions has been episodic. We want to think through the possibilities for establishing formal institutional linkages with primary and secondary schools, with local community colleges, with research units such as the newly established Asian/American Center at Queens College, and with graduate programs such as the newly established Ph.D. program in American studies at the State University of New York at Buffalo. A comparable set of relationships could be established with cultural institutions and museums.

Such linkages could have substantial implications for staffing and fundraising. They could provide interns at various levels, from high school students to doctoral candidates. It would mean that the CHM could really function as a research organization connected to broader projects and a wider range of scholarship, thus increasing its visibility and significance. And it could offer ways for museum scholars, interns, staff, programmers, and volunteers to connect their work with that of the CHM. Linkages like these have become fairly common between established museums and the world of scholarship. But rarely represented is the community whose experience is the stuff of the history being studied and exhibited, and whose capacities to deal with the present could be enhanced by direct involvement in that history's preservation and presentation in community-based museums such as the Chinatown History Museum.

*The dialogic approach and museum structure.* How does a dialogue-driven approach redefine organizational structure? How should the



staff work together? How should our facilities be reorganized? How can greater community participation be linked to membership drives, docents, and other structural features of the museum?

Traditionally, museum staff have been segregated into distinct departments that have little interaction in their daily work. This model of organization has presented some serious problems for the Chinatown History Museum staff: for example, work becomes fragmented and uncoordinated, and the effectiveness of public engagement suffers. During our planning period attention has been paid to redefining staff roles and reallocating staff time in order to facilitate a more integrated and coordinated work process. Much more time has been devoted to joint planning and communication among our archivist, curator, and public programs coordinator so that specialty areas of work will not be fragmented from overall organization objectives. Newly created staff roles will ideally be responsible for coordinating volunteer and member participation so as to maximize the effectiveness of our limited organizational resources.

*The effects of restructuring on historical interpretation.* How is the interpretation of Chinese American history affected by such collaboration? Not only will this dialogic documentation process fill in many gaps in historical memory, but it will necessitate the engagement of the community in jointly exploring with us the meaning of Chinese New Yorker history. This is the most challenging, yet overdue, aspect of the dialogue-driven approach. The exploration of memory and meaning of community experience should be a shared venture that enriches both individual and community life *and* scholarship.

#### LIVING WITH GHOSTS

One of the ironies of our nation's fervent faith in "progress" and "being modern" is that it has also created a simultaneous fear of and longing for roots. Every time I see filmmaker George Romero's (or anyone else's) "living dead" emerging from their graveyards to eat suburbanites regardless of race, gender, religion, or age, I cannot but view it as the distinctly American compulsion to escape the past. In this world, memories of our ancestors are best kept buried. And when they pop up from the recesses of our psyches, we have to actively repress them.

In an aggressive commercial culture that constantly markets new-

ness, we are told that we are being old-fashioned and sentimental—both negative things—if we refuse to toss away past attachments and buy the latest. At the same time, Americans' search for identity, roots, and "authenticity" appears to be becoming more of a preoccupation. The huge interest in tracing one's genealogy, exploring the concept of Afrocentrism, visiting living history museums, visiting the land of one's ancestors, going to high school reunions, and consuming popularized forms of history such as Ken Burns's Civil War miniseries attests to the apparently opposite desire to make the past come alive—to somehow connect.

While the ideology of Euro-American modernism is used to counter localism and "old world" habits and superstitions, the countervailing grassroots search for meaning and steadying values seems all the stronger. Even if the economic pie of "progress" continues to expand, we are no longer so confident about the values it embodies. In our separate living spaces we worry about Alar, environmental collapse, AIDS, homelessness and the "new" poor, sugar and other addictions, and the vacuousness of a technological materialism gone berserk.

In his 1944 visit to the United States, the Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong noted that the major problem he saw with the United States was that it was a "land without ghosts." Although he greatly treasured the Western education he had received, he mused, "Our lives do not just pass through time in such a way that a moment in time or a station in life once past is lost. Life in its creativity changes the absolute nature of time: it makes past into present—no, it melds past, present, and future into one inextinguishable, multilayered scene, a three-dimensional body. This is what ghosts are." And in the United States, "a world without ghosts, life is free and easy. American eyes can gaze straight ahead. But still I think they lack something and I do not envy their lives."<sup>38</sup> Perhaps the Iroquois have had it right all along: in their culture, tribal leaders are empowered to make judgments on behalf of their people as long as their decisions take into account the seventh generation to come. We sorely need these kinds of values and spirituality.

Plenty of academics are writing important books about these subjects, but too often only some three thousand other academics read them. Occasionally these concerns come out in private discussions with trusted friends, but in such contexts challenging points of view are rarely raised. And we know all too well how the commercial electronic media manage to package these issues into quick doses of "news" or scandal. There are precious few spaces for people to come



together who don't normally come together and collaboratively explore these issues by talking face to face with one another.

Many of us feel alienated in society; we feel we have no impact on social or cultural policies. While tens of millions of dollars have been spent by candidates for political office here and elsewhere, pittances have been devoted to public discussion about real issues. We must make local and regional, suburban and urban humanities forums a fundamental social priority. To do this we need locally and regionally accessible venues for these forums. Yes, community-oriented museums, libraries, and universities have to varying degrees served this purpose, and they need to do more—but what about senior citizens' centers, town halls, community recreation rooms, church basements, community organizations, shopping malls, schools, and maybe even computer bulletin boards? We need to have programs in places where people already gather, and these programs need to be participatory and inclusive.

At their best, public humanities programs should be creating expansive, convivial places in which social problems are pried open for critical examination. Such programs should make a special effort to include those who have not been a part of the traditional groupings of our public culture. In my experience, the humanities can help to fundamentally question and reenvision who we are and what we should be doing. It can be a magnificent tool for what the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire terms empowering people in "naming," and thereby changing, their worlds. Democracy, it seems to me, must be understood as a work in progress. We need to improve on it constantly, expand it, but never feel that it has been perfected.<sup>39</sup>

In the spirit of a dialogic approach, the Chinatown History Museum welcomes readers' responses to these ideas. We know that our experiences and goals are not unique and that we can learn from what others have done. Please write, call, or visit us.

#### NOTES

This essay was originally written in 1989 as a planning document to raise funds for the Memories of New York Chinatown exhibition. A version of it was then presented at the Museums and Communities conference organized by the Smithsonian Institution in 1990. Since that time, funds were raised and the exhibition has opened.

The proposal and this essay were penned by John Kuo Wei Tchen, and represent a collective effort among Fay Chew (the Chinatown History Museum's executive director), Michael Frisch, Charles Lai, and Dorothy Rony of the Chinatown History Museum. The dialogue-driven exhibition and museum concept has been developed over the past ten years by members of the Chinatown History Museum staff and community. They include Judy Auster Miller, Paul Calhoun, Fay Chew, William David Chin, Adrienne Cooper, Rachael Cowan, James Dao, Toby D'Oench, Michael Frisch, Robert Glick, Yuet-fung Ho, Maria Hong, Charles Lai, Edward C. H. Lai, Lamgen Leon, Mei-Li Lin, Mary T. Lui, Judith Wing-Siu Luk, Michael Mak, Stanley Mark, Katie Quan, Dorothy Rony, Judy Susman, Joyce Yu, and Wang Yung. The Memories of New York Chinatown exhibition curators are Mary Lui, Dorothy Rony, and John Kuo Wei Tchen. Advisors for the exhibition were Hope Alswang, Rina Benmayor, Elizabeth Blackmar, Sucheng Chan, Ronald J. Grele, Keith Hefner, Marlon K. Hom, Mary E. Janzen, Ivan Karp, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Edward C. H. Lai, Him Mark Lai, Raymond Lum, Joan Maynard, Barbara Melosh, David Ment, Roy Rosenzweig, Jessica Siegel, Robert W. Snyder, Bell Yung, and Judy Yung. I would also like to thank Roger Sanjek for the support he has provided me at the Asian/American Center, Queens College. Special appreciation goes to James Early, Timothy Meagher, Marsha Semmel, Lynn Szwaja, and Tomas Ybarra-Frausto for their warm support and most helpful suggestions. And finally, editor Sue Warga has greatly improved this essay.

As of 1 January 1991 the New York Chinatown History Project was renamed the Chinatown History Museum. This change is part of a larger effort to consolidate and further advance the achievements of the first ten years of the New York Chinatown History Project. We now seek to create a museum ready for the twenty-first century.

1. For background about the Chinatown History Museum, see Marvine Howe, "Hard Lives of Garment Workers on Display," *New York Times*, 3 Dec. 1989; J. Tevere Macfadyen, "Recording Chinatown's Past While It's Still There," *Smithsonian Magazine* 10, no. 13 (1983), 70–79; and Candace Floyd, "Chinatown: A History Project in Manhattan's Lower East Side Documents the History and Contemporary Life of Chinese-Americans," *History News* (June 1984).

2. This planning process was made possible by grants from the Arts and Humanities Program of the Rockefeller Foundation, the Museums and His-



torical Organizations Program of the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the New York State Council for the Arts.

3. All comments, ideas, and suggestions should be addressed to the author at the Chinatown History Museum, 70 Mulberry Street, second floor, New York, NY 10013.

4. For a sampling of some of the debates, see Karen J. Winkler, "Humanities Agency Caught in Controversy Over Columbus Grants," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 13 Mar. 1991, A5, A8-9; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Donald Kagan, "Dialogue: The Curriculum Wars—Whose Culture Is It, Anyway?" *New York Times*, 4 May 1991; and Sam Allis, Jordan Bonfante, and Cathy Booth, "Whose America?" *Time*, 8 July 1991, 12-17.

5. Thomas Bender, "Wholes and Parts: The Need for Synthesis in American History," *Journal of American History* 73 (1986), 120-36. For a sampling of a range of critiques, see Lynne V. Cheney, "Humanities in America: A Report to the President, the Congress, and the American People" (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Humanities, 1988); Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987); Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "When Ethnic Studies Are Un-American," *Wall Street Journal*, 23 Apr. 1990; Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals* (New York: Basic Books, 1987); and Catherine R. Stimpson, "The Necessities of Aunt Chloe" (Washington, D.C.: Federation of State Humanities Councils, 1988).

6. For examples of media coverage of these developments, see William A. Henry III, "The Browning of America," *Time*, 9 Apr. 1990, 28-31. For a much more in-depth examination, see Nancy Foner, ed., *New Immigrants in New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

7. Steven D. Lavine, "Museums and Multiculturalism: Who Is in Control?" *Museum News* 68, no. 2 (1989), and Donald Garfield, "Dimensions of Diversity," *Museum News* 68, no. 2 (1989), 36-42.

8. The New-York Historical Society's Why History? program series in 1990 and the Race and Class program series in 1991 are examples of this significant new outreach. See C. Gerald Fraser, "Aid to New Audiences Challenged," *New York Times*, 4 Mar. 1989; and Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig, "Introduction," in *History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); Susan Porter Benson, Steven Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig, eds., *Presenting the Past: Critical Perspectives on History and the Public* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); Jo Blatti, ed., *Past Meets Present: Essays About Historic Interpretation and Public Audiences* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987); Michael Frisch, *Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990); and "Common Agenda for History Museums," a special issue of *History News* (44, no. 3 [1989]).

9. Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian" (the American Historical Association President's Address, 29 Dec. 1931), in *Everyman His Own Historian* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 253.

10. David Thelen, "History Making in America: A Populist Perspective" (Laramie: Wyoming Council for the Humanities, 1989), 1. For further exploration of this issue, see John Kuo Wei Tchen, "Notes on U.S. History Museums: Institution Practices, Collective Memory, and Racial Identity Formation" (New York: Chinatown History Museum, 1990).

11. Thomas J. Schlereth, "Defining Collecting Missions: National and Regional Models," *History News* 44, no. 3 (1987).

12. For examples of some of the institutional cleavages this issue has sparked, see William Honan, "Say Goodbye to the Stuffed Elephants," *New York Times Magazine*, 14 Jan. 1990.

13. Barbara Melosh and Christina Simmons, "Exhibiting Women's History," in Susan Porter Benson, Steven Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig, eds., *Presenting the Past: Critical Perspectives on History and the Public* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

14. The dialogic learning process has been most fully articulated by Paulo Freire in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970). Also, see the problem-solving approach pioneered by John Dewey, discussed in Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991). Since the original formulation of our ideas, we have learned of parallel discussions about refashioning museums and other learning environments. For example, see Georges Henri Rivière, "The Ecomuseum—An Evolution Definition," *Museum* 148 (1985) and David Carr, "Cultural Institutions as Structures of Cognitive Change," in Lorraine Cavaliere and Angela Sgrol, eds., *New Directions in Adult and Continuing Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992).

15. Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. Francis J. Ditter, Jr., and Vida Yazdi Ditter (New York: Harper and Row, 1950).

16. It should be noted here that the cultural nationalism of Chinese in the United States has often developed in direct response to the far more encompassing and racially exclusionary Eurocentric cultural nationalism of the dominant culture.

17. For more on the formation of nationalist identifications, see Homi K. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

18. For a discussion of the concept of a cultural free space, see Sara M. Evans and Harry C. Boyte, *Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986). Also see John Kuo Wei Tchen, "'Race' and Cultural Difference: Historical Challenges and Future Possibilities" (Washington, D.C.: Cultural Education Committee, Smithsonian Institution, 1989).



19. This is a term used by German American photographer Arnold Genthe, who began his career by photographing San Francisco's Chinese community before the 1906 earthquake and fire. See John Kuo Wei Tchen, *Genthe's Photographs of San Francisco's Old Chinatown* (New York: Dover, 1984).
20. Frisch, *Shared Authority*, xxi. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has an apopose response to such a self-negating reaction; see her *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (New York: Routledge, 1990), 62.
21. For example, the very well intentioned Children's Bridge exhibition, which dealt with stereotyping and prejudice, at the Boston Children's Museum in 1990 relied a great deal on interactive computers while docent-guards stood by showing visitors how to operate the computers. An excellent chance for discussions between them and visitors about the issues of the exhibition was missed.
22. John Kuo Wei Tchen, "New York Chinese: The Nineteenth-Century Pre-Chinatown Settlement," in *Chinese America: History and Perspectives* (San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America, 1990), 157-92.
23. Joyce Young, "P.S. 23 Reunion in Chinatown," *New York Daily News*, 6 Jan. 1988; Bill Bell, "Last Ethnic Wave Rekindles P.S. 23," *New York Daily News*, 11 Jan. 1988; Dennis Duggan, "Shut School Is Still Teaching History," *New York Newsday*, 11 Jan. 1988; Jerry Talmer, "A Chinatown Picture Show," *New York Post*, 11 May 1990.
24. Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1989), and Tchen, "'Race' and Cultural Difference."
25. Elizabeth Blackmar, *Manhattan for Rent, 1785-1850* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); Anthony Jackson, *A Place Called Home: A History of Low-Cost Housing in Manhattan* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1976); Kevin Lynch, *What Time Is This Place?* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1972); Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977); Steven Steinberg, *The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in America* (New York: Atheneum, 1981); Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); Jacquelyn Hall et al., *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987); Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*; Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn, eds., "Introduction," in "Memory and Counter-Memory," *Representations* 26 (1989), 1-6; and David Thelen, "Memory and American History," *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 4 (1989), 1117-29.
26. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978) and John Kuo Wei Tchen, "Barnum's Chinese Museum," paper presented at the conference on The Politics of Portraiture: Icons, Stereotypes, and Other Approaches to Multicultural Images, National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C., 1990.
27. The representation of Chinese and other Asian Americans as a "model minority" has been extremely problematic in recent years. This portrayal has been linked to the rise of anti-Asian violence in the 1980s. See John Kuo Wei Tchen, "'Whiz Kids' and American Race Relations: Some Thoughts on the 'Model Minority' Phenomenon," in Mina Choi, "Race, Gender, and Eyeglasses: Teacher Perceptions of Asian, Black, and White Students" (Flushing, N.Y.: Asian/American Center, Queens College, 1989).
28. For more on this point of view, see R. David Arkush and Leo O. Lee, eds., *Land Without Ghosts: Chinese Impressions of America from the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). This volume is one of the few published works discussing the point of view of the Chinese gentry. On the other hand, the CHM has many stories in its oral-history collection that document the perspectives of farmers, laborers, school-teachers, and others.
29. Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken, 1976); John A. Jakle, *The Tourist: Travel in Twentieth-Century North America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985); Valene L. Smith, ed., *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989); Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (New York: Verso, 1987); Alan Dundes, *Cracking Jokes: Studies of Sick Humor Cycles and Stereotypes* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1987); Robert Jay, *The Trade Card in Nineteenth-Century America* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987); William F. Wu, *The Yellow Peril: Chinese Americans in American Fiction, 1850-1940* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1982); Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984); Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer, eds., "The Last 'Special Issue' on Race?" *Screen* 29, no. 4 (1988).
30. Recent cultural studies on gender and multiculturalism have demonstrated how the seemingly rigid categories of race, gender, class, and ethnicity have changed over time and from culture to culture. Indeed, the apparently immutable boundaries between "us" and "them" have proven to be in actuality quite permeable and ambiguous. See Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987); James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988); Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); and Rick Simonson and Scott Walker, eds., *Multi-Cultural Literacy* (Minneapolis: Greywolf, 1988).
31. Michael Fischer, "Ethnicity and the Arts of Memory," in James Clifford



and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

32. For the concept of the sojourner, see Paul C. P. Siu, *The Chinese Laundryman: A Study of Social Isolation*, ed. John Kuo Wei Tchen (New York: New York University Press, 1987) and Clarence Glick, *Sojourners and Settlers: Chinese Migrants in Hawaii* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1980).

33. This was a story told by a participant in a CHM historical walking tour led by the author in 1986.

34. For more on audience reception and evaluation, see Constance Perin's essay in this volume.

35. "Chinatown Memories," a 1987 interview by Bennett Weinstock of Sydney Silberman, CHM archives; and a 1989 interview by Dorothy Rony of Lung Chin, CHM archives.

36. Peter Gould and Rodney White, *Mental Maps* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1974).

37. Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); Ronald J. Grele, *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History* (Chicago: Precedent, 1985); and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

38. Arkush and Lee, *Land Without Ghosts*, 178.

39. A version of this section of the essay appeared in John Kuo Wei Tchen, "Chair's Statement," *New York Council for the Humanities Annual Report, 1989-90* (New York: New York Council for the Humanities, 1991), 6-8.

## CHAPTER 12

## The Museum as a Vehicle for Community Empowerment: The Ak- Chin Indian Community Ecomuseum Project

NANCY J. FULLER

This report is about the process of implementing a community-based education model as the initial phase of establishing a community museum. First I provide a philosophical and historical framework for understanding the ecomuseum approach. Then I discuss the application of the approach in a specific setting. I open by presenting the context that led the Ak-Chin Indian Community to seek a new institution, describe a communitywide education process for learning about the nature and structure of museums and archives, and discuss the staff training program. Then I identify the results to date and highlight some elements that seemed to make the project successful.<sup>1</sup> The photo essay that accompanies this text consists of photographs of the Ak-Chin ecomuseum and its activities along with edited excerpts taken from statements made by ecomuseum staff members and the tribal chairperson during the Smithsonian Institution's conference Museums and Communities and at the ecomuseum's opening celebration.

In a twenty-five-year period, the Ak-Chin Indian Community, a group of five hundred people who live on 21,840 acres in the Arizona desert, have transformed their lives, achieving economic independence and in the process creating a new tool for their continued growth and development.<sup>2</sup> Once impoverished and dependent tenants on their own lands, the community has become a group of prosperous farmers