EDITING LIVES

Diana Giese

The stories of oral history hover in that vibrant space between private and public, between what is thought and how it might be expressed. Oral history is 'the only research source where the historian can be involved at the point of creation and may influence the worth of the record,' as Ronda Jamieson, Library and Information Services of Western Australia, puts it. The relationship between interviewer and interviewee should be one of 'empathy and trust and the non-judgmental goal of seeking a better understanding,' adds Mark Cranfield, head of oral history at the National Library.

To collect oral history means to consider what it is—and is not. Cambridge University's Gwyn Prins observes that 'the move to a post-literate, newly, globally, electronically oral and visual culture deflates the professional self-esteem of traditional document-driven historiography'. Text-based historians, on the other hand, claim oral history is small-scale and trivial, imprecise and unstable. It lacks chronology and is unable to be properly tested. What they mean is: people lie.

But so do written texts, all the time. What is sanctioned by print is increasingly questioned. Who made the document collections on which historical judgments are based? What's been weeded, censored or forged? How are such sources used, by whom, and to what ends?

Oral history can fill silences. Who has something to say? is the first question it asks. This is the beginning of the long and strenuous process of collection, transcription and transformation that makes up an oral history project: the business of editing lives. First, choices must be made between this 80-year-old and that, this young turk on the make but not the other. They demand of the interviewer more than training in social science research. This sort of work needs a sense of who will share generously of their memories. It needs a nose for time wasters, self-promoters and manipulators. People have many overlapping motives for agreeing to take part in a project. They want to celebrate a rich life. They are ready to tell their story, or their family's, in public. They want to pay tribute to neglected achievements. They may seek to settle old scores. They want to set the historical record straight. They enjoy performing.

What are the motives of the interviewer? They overlap with those of interviewees; they are complex and often hidden; they require awareness and restatement. Take my own. My current National Library project is on the Chinese in north Australia.[1] I was at school in Darwin with many of the sons and daughters of the 'old families' of Top End Chinese. I was re-entering a community in which my family had been prominent for more than 40 years. In many senses, this project was a quest for the context of my personal identity as a fourth generation German–British Australian. I knew I would have to strive for the objectivity necessary to make the work relevant to a wider audience, now and in the future.

There have been few major works on the Top End Chinese. But my direction was mapped out for me. Several of the Chinese community had already stepped forward to draw attention to their own history—in talks, articles, contributions to local celebrations or archives, or educational

Chinese–Australian historian Charles See-Kee at 8 TOP FM

From Diana Giese, *Beyond Chinatown: Changing Perspectives on the Top End Chinese Experience* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1995)
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projects. The Reverend Shui Kwong Lo had sketched the genealogies, reconstructed the family links, the striking interrelationships by birth, marriage and association that did so much to sustain Chinese Australians through the long dreary years of White Australia. 'Insider' chroniclers include Charles See-Kee, who arrived in Darwin from Shanghai in 1941 before the invading Japanese. Cut off from his own family, his own territory, his own history, he began to record that of his adopted Australian community. Such accounts taught me much about how the stories of history are shaped and told, in whose interests. With recommended contacts offered by friends and professional colleagues, they helped me enter the world of eyewitness reports, opinions, legends, gossip, comment and hearsay that are the continuing defining autobiography of any community. I tried to be receptive to all these voices. An early section of my book *Beyond Chinatown*, a product of my project, is called 'Listening'.

My work has now spread to Queensland, following the clan, family, business and personal links which criss-cross north Australia. In response to an invitation from Bill Lee Long to observe the Kwong Sue Duk family history project in operation, I went to Cairns to interview his extended family and begin work with others in the Chinese community.

I'm now more aware of what happens to voices on tapes after the recorder has been turned off. As with my Darwin tapes, the first Cairns product will still be that invaluable research tool, the verbatim transcript. But oral history that is any good bursts out of such confinement. It clamours to be transformed into talks, articles, books, radio, video, film, multimedia.

Editing voices into other media raises a host of questions. Asks the Australian National University's Peter Read: 'How does one render what was essentially a personal, intimate and one-to-one communication to a form which is impersonal, public and one-to-many?' The tension between the tape and its forms is dramatised by how some people feel about going public. Distrust of what will happen to their lives after recording has made many Aboriginal people, for instance, wary interviewees. Those with a history of being controlled and managed feel that what they've said could be used against them.

People recording oral history from within communities or families are sensitive to how those with whom they have long-term relationships will respond to their tapes. A delicate balance must be found between presenting the sainted aunt in a rose-coloured glow, and tactless bluntness. Reflecting on the related area of family history, Macquarie University's Yasmine Gooneratne says: 'These are real people I am writing about, not fictional characters ... Although it is now apparently acceptable to drag every skeleton rattling out of its cupboard and expose it to the gaze of the curious reader, I have preferred to apply my own standards ... It is a poor writer who tells all.'

Psychotherapist Stephanie Dowrick has compared the interviews of historians and journalists. She raises questions of vulnerability. 'Interviewees often feel they can't comment on the banality or stupidity of a question. The interviewer holds too much power. They will be punished in print.'

She proposes making interviews mutually beneficial, by bringing to them 'openness, willingness to listen, to be changed, led into new territory or more profound reflections'. Interviewers should ask themselves not only what they want to take away, but what they want to leave behind. Often, she says, they leave 'a tremendous sense of disturbance'.

William and Darwina Fong at the wedding of their son Des, with Darwina's mother, Mrs Sue Wah Chin (centre)
From Diana Giese, *Beyond Chinatown: Changing Perspectives on the Top End Chinese Experience* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1995)

This may be inevitable. Everyone should be aware that oral history can be risky. If it offers a capacious space in which people can tell their stories, such terrain may be booby-trapped or mined. Emotions may spring to attack at any moment. People have cried on my tapes. I have been told long stories of violence and disgrace. Bottled-up resentments and frustrations have spilled out. Charles See-Kee was taken out to be shot by the Japanese. After leaving Vietnam in his tiny boat, Tac Tam Lam was turned away by country after country. Many in Darwin talked to me of the trauma of Cyclone Tracy.

How much emotional turmoil should an interviewer allow before turning off the tape recorder? Quite a lot. Oral history must learn to grapple with what might seem unspeakable, with memories of war or famine, with 'the torpedoed ship, the brutality of a prison camp, the hunger and despair of the Great Depression,' as Peter Read puts it.

How might such considerations be applied to particular projects? As mine unfold, parallelled by all those going on around the country about and from within Chinese communities, groups and families, I can compare my methods and aims with those of others. In Darwin, collaboration is going on between the Chung Wah Society and the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory. Chinese Australians in their thirties are collecting family trees, oral history, pictures and artefacts for a permanent but moveable exhibition. Daryl Chin is one of them. His aims are clear. He highlights the importance of 'documenting and preserving our rich history in the region. We will display to the greater community, uniquely from our own perspective, the history of the Darwin Chinese community, our way of life and our

contribution to the development of Darwin and its surrounding regions.'

When such projects started, I had already begun interviewing younger members of the Darwin community. With them, my focus had shifted from the content of lives, since these were still in the process of shaping and defining themselves. Instead, I asked these interviewees about embarking on the great adventure of historical research. Des Fong sat in on my interviews with his parents, William and Darwina, with a view to doing his own oral history. Liz Chin-Seet meditated on tape on how her loss of language separated her from real communication with her great-grandmother and, by extension, her Chinese heritage. Says Daryl Chin of the necessity of fixing community history in permanent form: 'If family stories are passed from generation to generation by word of mouth, it does not take long for many of them to be lost forever.'

In Cairns, from the generation before, Pat Lee Long observes: 'It's time to do this work, and they're aware of that. It's got to happen now. Anything they need to know they have to find out now. It's their heritage that's disappearing.'

The story of her family's determined reclamation of that heritage is worth recounting at length. When I arrived in north Queensland, I was plunged into the world of the Lee Long family, connected through marriage and association with others prominent in the district, like the Sue Sans, the Leong Sees, the Fong Ons, the Sangs, the Mings, the Jue Sues and the Fang Yuens. The exploration of tradition has taken the form of family reunions, bringing people together from four continents, with concurrent documentation of family history. Its present focus is a video documentary of the adventurous ancestor who first travelled to Australia, herbalist Kwong Sue Duk. He arrived in the 1870s, married four wives and produced 24 children.

Some of my own north Queensland interviews had been planned in advance: *curricula vitae* studied, backgrounds researched and questions prepared. But most didn't happen like this. Instead, with the Lee Longs, following the way they worked, history research became a hectic round of visits, meals and long, long evenings. There was total immersion in up to ten taped encounters a day.

At times I felt I was drowning in voices. What kept me coming up for air was the buoyancy of the family itself. Their drive, energy and enthusiasm for discovering their past, finding out where they came from and where they belonged, had begun with earlier generations. 'In 1978, Uncle Victor and Auntie Nui Bo Kwong came out to Australia from America with the idea of holding family reunions,' says Rosalie Hiah, great-granddaughter of Kwong Sue Duk. 'Victor had an address list, and Bill Lee Long, as he travelled the world for sports companies, collected about 150 addresses. Melbourne became the site of the first reunion in 1982, because most of the old aunties were there.'

The reunions have become a new family tradition. In Cairns, great-grandson Bernie Lee Long, the eldest of his generation, organised that city's first reunion, in 1984. The second was led by his eldest son, Bernard junior. 'I can see Bernard's kids eventually taking over when he leaves off,' he says. 'Benjamin's 15 this year. Another ten years and he'll be taking over.'

By the time I arrived on the scene with my tape recorder, the movers and shakers of the video project had become Warren Lee Long, Rosalie Hiah, Jenni and Paul Campbell, Aron Leong and Wayne King Sun. Super-charged, they dashed from camera to computer, from recording studio

Des Fong, Rosalie Hiah, Melanie Chin, Daryl Chin and Warren Lee Long discuss the model of early Chinatown at Darwin's Chung Wah Hall, 1995
Photograph courtesy of Rosalie Hiah

to fax machine. The creative process of recording their heritage had become their lives. They had taken leave from their jobs. They seemed barely to sleep. 'Real life' had been edited out; it receded and dimmed.

The video traces the life of Kwong Sue Duk from southern China to Darwin, Cairns, Townsville and Melbourne, and refers briefly to the lives of his descendants. In my early contact with the project, I'd seen the pioneer patriarch as assuming almost mythic status in family lore. His many portraits had become iconic. I didn't feel close to him either as historical figure or 'real person'.

Nor, early on, did some of the family. 'I tend not to believe any of the things written about him until I see a lot more evidence to back it up. That's my scientific approach, I think,' says great-great-grandson Warren Lee Long, a marine biologist. 'I'd like to get a better idea of what faults, what baggage he carried from his background and his culture, what his personality traits were which might have made it easier or more difficult for him, going to a new country, having such a huge family.'

In the 12 months since the video idea was hatched, much such evidence has been laboriously pieced together. 'We've been fortunate in that we've found history,' says Paul Campbell, husband of great-granddaughter Jenni Leong See. 'If we hadn't found all those newspaper articles, there would have been gaps. If Warren and Rosalie hadn't gone to Darwin and discovered this whole life that we didn't know existed ...' What he calls 'the historical Kwong' was assembled from a range of sources: official documents and

Aron Leong checks the sound for an interview with Paul and Jenni Campbell for the Kwong Sue Duk documentary, 1995
Photograph courtesy of Rosalie Hiah

pictures in archives round the country from Melbourne to Darwin, accounts of weddings, diaries, newspaper reports. Family stories of Kwong's generosity and resilience, of his attempt to live a life governed by a mixture of ancient Chinese philosophies and Christian teachings, have been buttressed by written sources. The researchers were also proactive. From America, Auntie Annie Chee, aged 96, one of two surviving daughters, spoke pungently for them on video.

There had always been more hard information available on the children and grandchildren, some of whom went on to starry careers. But what of the four wives, that aspect of the family story most often seized upon by outside chroniclers? They remain silent absences. There are a very few anecdotes. According to great-grandson Bill Lee Long, one wife was 'temperamental, the bossy one'; others remember her as 'the pet'. Continues Lee Long: 'The fourth mother was a northern woman, slower in thinking ... the Cantonese, from the south, always talk about how they're the smartest.'

Otherwise, it was as if the wives had barely entered family history. All the letters were from the father to the sons, the sons to the father, or brother to brother. 'The wives didn't do anything,' insists Annie Chee. She and the other surviving children and grandchildren 'only talk about Kwong Sue Duk,' says Pat Lee Long, wife of Bernie, mother of five. 'The mothers are not there.'

The scanty evidence on the wives Warren Lee Long identifies as 'a product partly of the way people told history back then and right through to now. You

always hear the stories of the men's achievements'—'certainly in Chinese families,' adds Jenni Campbell. Paul Campbell notes that 'Kwong the businessman and doctor' was more likely to be the focus of articles in European newspapers. 'And the sons went on to education,' says Jenni. 'Nothing was made of the daughters.'

Chinese clan genealogy follows the line of male descendants. Women's family names are gradually forgotten. Kwong family lore tells us that the general state of harmony in the three-wife household early in the century was due to a tacit agreement over who should do which chores. The first wife had returned to China. The second, it's reported, acted as midwife and nurse. The third was the seamstress. The fourth, 'being the youngest', did the cooking and the laundry. But there's so much else we don't know. How was the collective house set up and managed? Who slept where? How did the many children get along? How were trips to China and southern Australia organised for such a large group? Who exercised the power: was the patriarchy really a matriarchy?

'We've been asking for information in the family—anybody who knows anything at all,' says Pat Lee Long. Those working on the video agree that in future it will be necessary to rephrase oral history questions, to dig a bit deeper into the detail of daily lives. Warren Lee Long notes that there should be ways of getting a sense of the emotional support such women might have offered to their families. 'Maybe the wives didn't do anything special or significant,' says Paul Campbell. But he recognises the value to history of documenting ordinary lives as well as 'those who fly high'.

If the wives are necessarily shadowy presences, mere faces on the video, other exclusions were consciously made. After my trip, the family continued to film, then edit; at the same time I was reviewing and transcribing my tapes. I was also adding material from them to the Families section of my new book, *Astronauts, Lost Souls and Dragons*. As they were documenting the illustrious ancestor, I was documenting them. On my tapes is caught the voluble interaction of this large, lively family, its many voices talking with, to, at, across, against one another. I was intrigued with how the family hung together, maintained its unity, strength and impregnability. This offered powerful clues to the ways Chinese families, self-supporting and self-referential, both homes and havens, might have helped members weather life in an often inhospitable European-dominated pioneer society.

As more and more members crowded off the tapes and into my manuscript, Warren Lee Long was editing the 'big, meaty, warts and all' video script. 'There are all these ways of slicing into the story,' he says. The script, at 60–80 minutes, was generally agreed to be too long. Half-surgeon, half-cannibal, Lee Long talked of 'making desperate cuts'. These were 'like chopping off an arm or a finger at a time'. His imagery was apt. Study of the 11 draft scripts reveals that what was being cut out were family members, including himself.

On my tapes, family voices told me, however, that the continuing reclamation of family history brought people in, involved them. 'It has created friendships, a closer bond within the family,' says Bill Lee Long. 'People that we didn't spend much time with and didn't really know, such as the King Sun family from Townsville, did the transcripts of the oral history interviews, by hand. Then Aron's wife, Liz, put them on computer.' From Melbourne, Rosalie Hiah, long involved in family history with her

parents, the Chans, became the voice of the video. 'The ones with the skills and abilities came forward to do the work,' says Bernie Lee Long. They were also the ones prepared to make the huge commitments of time necessary to keep up the intense momentum of the project.

The video film was edited with professional help, its portraits in pictures and words supplemented by other documentation. It has been extended into discussion, also on video, of how the project is proceeding, and what it means to participants. Warren Lee Long talks of editing as 'a great experience from so many angles: the creativity of pulling it all together, making images come up. It's a creativity that pulls out emotions. You can embellish an image by choosing a small part of a photograph, panning across it, zooming in, holding still on the fine lines of someone's face. Dissolving two images together adds feeling and emotion, something which otherwise wasn't there. Flat text alone doesn't compare.'

The video documentary has progressed through many notional and paper versions. From speaking generally about its subject, it now dramatises and involves: moving into the worlds of historical photographs; artfully intercutting maps and oral histories; adding documents, highlighted and read aloud. It speaks eloquently for its component lives, past and present.

Its making has become a semi-professional activity, planned, budgeted and partly government-funded. There is also other, less public work going on in the family. While Warren Lee Long and Rosalie Hiah were working on the script, Paul and Jenni Campbell were filming their grandmother from her mother's side. There have long been projects centred on family links, done within Chinese clans and families, for them alone. In Cairns, *The Sue San Saga* is a good example.

Laser scanning, photographing and indexing material for the Kwong Sue Duk family history archive, 1995
Photograph courtesy of Rosalie Hiah

The Campbells wanted more. Jenni Campbell has the oral historian's 'real sense of urgency to capture my parents' generation'. At every opportunity, she reminds the others of the living resources around them. 'We've spent so much time researching someone who's dead, we've overlooked people who are well and truly alive,' she chides. 'They're here now. They're accessible. We can't wait another five, ten, fifteen years.'

Interviewing her grandmother, Nana Leong See, at 95, has opened her eyes to possibilities. 'It's really been amazing how she wants to remember and tries to remember,' says Paul Campbell. Nana See talks on video of her childhood, of choosing between two suitors, of working on a corn farm and in a milk bar, of her children. 'All of a sudden she's got this role,' says Jenni Campbell. The Campbells' energies are currently going into the process of recording. There is little editing, little reflection or presentation. Eventually, however, 'we want to talk to the aunties on both sides of the family to build up the pattern of their lives—their hardships, their strengths—the women's story,' says Paul Campbell.

What are the implications, including the technical implications, of such 'insider' work? Those of us working professionally in oral and audiovisual history are more and more interested in how family historians choose to capture and edit, preserve and shape the lives of their relatives and ancestors for public consumption. We would do well to note their enthusiasms and priorities. Their attraction to the video technology that is daily becoming easier to use, and less obtrusive for those filmed, is striking. They know that film can show not only what somebody looks like, but their gestures, expression and body language, their humour or sadness, their state of health and vigour, their style. It can show the context of lives: home, workplace, sportsfield, a street, a suburb or a town. Film is far more sensitive to presence than a tape recorder. The look on someone's face can be worth a thousand words.

Video recording as family life unfolds around you can lead, of course, to metres of unedited material, the unwatched pile in the corner. If such recording is to be more than process, logging and editing must be done in tandem with the filming. But what kind of editing? Professional cutting of oral history voices for a three-minute sound bite for a talk or radio favours the confident, the eloquent. However, as the Campbells have discovered, many interviews which have much to say about our shared past are less accessible.

Peter Read has noted of his tapes of Aboriginal oral history: 'the pauses, the almost audible searching of the mind for words long forgotten ... thoughts half-begun fade to silence'. So it is with much of the Campbells' documentation of Nana Leong See.

Editing such tapes for maximum effect might mean putting them on CD-ROM. Then they could be set against other historical material, contemporary photographs, maps, film, newspaper accounts and other oral histories. Such a form would mean users could move through her story at their own pace, could backtrack or fast-forward, never losing their place. They could call up maps or sound effects or pictures of the accoutrements of daily life: charcoal irons, horse-drawn carts. They could gather together other stories from the region. A sense of the life of the district for women at the beginning of the century would slowly emerge.

It's a challenge to demand of users that they become their own editors. It needs sympathy with the unedited encounter, with oral and audiovisual history in the raw. If print, talks, radio, video and film dramatise and place, with CD-ROM these selections fall to the user. Not all will have the time, inclination or patience.

But, as the 'insider' work demonstrates, many will. And technology can open other doors to the past. A camcorder can now sit in the corner of a room and take its own pictures of interviewees as they talk, gesticulate, demonstrate an action, or exchange meaningful glances with their partners. Then these images can be digitised—that is, not merely reproduced, but made into something entirely new, which can then be manipulated and transformed by the user. Edith Cowan University's Leigh Edmonds says that the software will eventually know enough about an interviewee to model responses which have never been recorded. Users will then be able to move fully into a virtual presence, recreating that most intense part of oral history—the interview, the shared encounter with the past. Material will be added from views expressed in articles or books, on radio or television. An

95-year-old Nana Leong See with Roma and Eddie Leong See, Jenni Campbell and her daughters Claire and Kate
Photograph courtesy of Jenni Campbell

extrapolated life will become a new reality. You, the user, will be able to enter it, become an actor in another history.

Oral and family histories can become, then, a real part of the brave new world of global multimedia. Cheaper and cheaper technology is putting cutting-edge developments within the reach of almost anyone with the motivation to learn to use them. Striving for the best possible result, seeking selective professional help, can supplement the feeling and spontaneity of personal history work, resulting in significant contributions to the historical record.

The past seen through the eyes of the present, expressed in today's voices, filtered through modern sensibilities, can become something entirely new. Fresh interpretations can cast back a powerful, searching beam, lighting up places previously dark, revealing continuities. This can help us all, from whatever ethnic background, to move forward more confidently.

1 This article is based on my oral history projects in Cairns and Darwin in which the main source material was tapes now in the collection of the National Library, my own research tapes, and video commentary. Sources and documentation of the Kwong Sue Duk family history project are being collected by the National Library. Other named comment in the article is largely from papers given at recent conferences in Sydney, Canberra and Perth.