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Experiences and Implications from the Oral History Resource Development at the New York Public Library: A Postprint

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] By reviewing the experience of oral history resource development at the New York Public Library, this study aims to provide reference for public libraries in China to develop oral history resources. [Method/Process] This paper summarizes the New York Public Library and its community oral history projects, focuses on introducing the current status and types of community oral history resource development at the New York Public Library, and conducts a comprehensive analysis of the experience in oral history resource development. [Results/Conclusion] Crowdsourcing is an important method for public libraries to develop oral history resources; efforts should be made to enhance the credibility and validity of oral history resources, highlight local characteristics as the distinguishing feature of oral history resource development, and increase the openness and public interest of oral history resources.

Full Text

Preamble

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Experiences and Implications from the Oral History Resource Development at the New York Public Library

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] This paper examines the experiences of oral history resource development at the New York Public Library (NYPL) to provide reference for public libraries in China engaged in similar initiatives. **[Method/Process]** The article outlines NYPL and its community oral history project, focusing on the current status and types of community oral history resources, and provides a comprehensive analysis of NYPL's resource development experiences. **[Result/Conclusion]** Crowdsourcing represents an important approach for public libraries to develop oral history resources. Efforts should be made to enhance the reliability and validity of oral history resources, highlight local characteristics as distinctive features, and increase both the openness of resources and public interest in them.

Keywords: New York Public Library; oral history; oral history resources; resource repository

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Oral history originated as a branch of historiography and was subsequently adopted and promoted by anthropologists and sociologists, primarily to uncover historical truths. Research on oral history has matured across disciplines including history, anthropology, sociology, ethnology, and cultural studies. In 1948, A. Nevins at Columbia University established the Columbia University Oral History Research Office, first proposing the concept of “oral history” and marking the formal establishment of oral history as a discipline [1]. Among Chinese scholars who have studied oral history extensively and influentially, Wang Mingming distinguished oral history from oral traditions from an anthropological perspective and proposed the significance of life history for oral history [2]. Yue Qingping systematically examined and discussed the origins, debates, methodologies, and limitations of oral history [3].

The library and information science field has only recently turned its attention to oral history. In the 1870s, the Bancroft Library in the United States pioneered oral history work, becoming a forerunner in developing, collecting, organizing, and disseminating oral materials [4]. However, several notable issues have emerged during resource development, such as how to establish rapport between interviewers and interviewees, how to edit manuscripts, how to reuse and preserve storage media, and challenges related to interviewer training and funding [5]. In the digital age, while online editing software has become mainstream for compiling oral history manuscripts [6] and audio-visual resources are stored on digital media, funding and personnel training remain primary concerns [7]. K. Turner notes that in digital environments, the creation, presentation, and online access of oral histories pose the most complex challenges, and only by addressing these can digital oral history work succeed [7].

Oral history initiatives in China's library and information sector began in the mid-to-late 1980s, initially with archival workers collecting oral archives. After

entering the 21st century, libraries such as Shantou University Library, Hunan Library, and the National Library of China successively launched oral history programs [8]. Given the relatively late start of oral history work in Chinese libraries, learning from international experiences has become imperative. The New York Public Library's oral history development is large-scale and highly visible, making it a valuable model for domestic libraries. NYPL's "Community Oral History" project encompasses over 1,250 oral history collections. As of September 2018, it had recruited 300 volunteers to serve as community oral history interviewers, providing them with training. This community oral history initiative represents the largest volunteer participation project in NYPL's history. The project aims to collect firsthand experiences from residents of New York City's diverse communities to preserve the city's unique and rich community history. Initiated by Professor A. Kelly of the State University of New York in 2013, this memory-gathering activity collects oral history resources across New York City. NYPL's oral history development achievements cover three areas: 1) the Moving Image and Sound project, which consists primarily of oral history interviews; 2) the Digital Collections project, which includes over 156,000 pages of text, 6,000 hours of recorded interviews, and 2,250 contacts; and 3) the Warped digital history map project, which displays oral history collection activities across NYC neighborhoods using a map interface.

2. Overview of the New York Public Library and Its Community Oral History

2.1 Brief Introduction to the New York Public Library

The New York Public Library (NYPL) was formed on May 23, 1895, through the merger of the Tilden Trust, the Astor Library, and the Lenox Library, providing free public access to books, information, innovative resources, and social education services. The Tilden Trust was created by Governor S. J. Tilden, who bequeathed approximately \$2.4 million upon his death to establish and maintain a free library with reading rooms in New York City. The Astor Library was created according to the will of German-American resident John Jacob Astor (1763-1848), who allocated \$400,000 to establish a reference library in New York to provide consultation and research facilities for the general public; this library was completed and opened in 1849. During the same period, another influential library was the Lenox Library, founded by J. Lenox with a collection based on his personal holdings of rare books, manuscripts, and American historical works, open to the public free of charge and serving primarily bibliophiles and scholars. In 1892, facing financial difficulties, the Astor and Lenox libraries decided to merge to reduce expenditures while expanding their collections. During this period, New York attorneys J. Bigelow and the Tilden Trust proposed a more innovative idea: merging the Astor Library, Lenox Library, and Tilden Trust to form a new entity—the New York Public Library. Representatives from the three institutions signed a cooperation agreement on May 23, 1895, officially completing the merger. A public library formed from three private philanthropic

institutions was unprecedented in American library history, pioneering private charity for public service [9].

Today, NYPL has become one of the largest public libraries in the United States, with a comprehensive network system spanning NYC communities through 88 branch libraries that provide basic library services to the general public, focusing on literature and popular science collections. The library also operates four research centers: the Library for the Humanities and Social Sciences, the Library for the Performing Arts, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and the Science, Industry and Business Library. NYPL serves over 17 million readers annually and provides remote services through its virtual library, with a collection exceeding 55 million items encompassing books, e-books, DVDs, and scholarly archives. The library conducts 103,000 free programs annually for diverse audiences, from toddlers to seniors. In digital resources, NYPL offers rich electronic collections, including over 700,000 award-winning e-books, and provides powerful online reading tools to help readers worldwide discover and utilize digital resources. To access NYPL's e-books, readers download an application called SimplyE and complete registration to read various electronic resources [10]. NYPL leverages librarians, collections, and both physical and virtual spaces to provide learning and growth opportunities for all patrons.

2.2 Origin and Development of NYPL's Community Oral History

NYPL's community oral history is an initiative launched by the State University of New York to document, preserve, and promote the city's unique and rich community history by collecting stories from those who experienced events firsthand [11]. In late 2013, NYPL's Department of Outreach Services developed the Neighborhood Oral History Project to enable Greenwich Village residents to share their memories with the public. Led by oral historian and former community organizer A. Kelly, branch librarians collaborated to train volunteer teams who would conduct oral history interviews with neighbors with whom they had strong connections [12]. This oral history project proved highly successful, receiving deep support not only from NYPL and its community branches but also from relevant local institutions. Volunteers recruited for the project came from the same communities where oral histories were collected, sharing cultural backgrounds with interviewees, which facilitated ensuring reliability and validity. NYPL's community oral history project is fully functional, allowing users to access oral history interview records, audio recordings, photographs, and videos online through NYPL's oral history database. As of August 2018, the project had collected over 1,250 oral histories, stored alongside collections on American history, local history, and genealogy [13]. During development, NYPL also created public annotation and transcription tools for user participation, making audio-video editing and collection convenient.

3. Current Status of NYPL Oral History Resources

The author conducted statistical analysis of resources in the NYPL Oral History Resource Database (<http://oralhistory.nypl.org/>), revealing the following status:

3.1 Interview Timing

The database contains 969 interview sessions. Interviews were concentrated between 2014-2016, accounting for 85.7% of total interviews (see Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]). The project launched in late 2013 with emphasis on volunteer training, resulting in fewer interviews that year due to limited time and volunteers being in learning and practice stages. In 2014, total interviews quadrupled from 2013, indicating the program was on track and in full development. In 2015, interviews peaked, while from 2016 onward, numbers decreased annually, suggesting the program reached maturity with sufficient resources, slowing development pace.

3.2 Interview Locations

Data shows the project involved 311 interview locations. Nine locations hosted over ten sessions each: The Storytelling Center (278 sessions), Andrew Heiskell Braille and Talking Book Library (54), Jefferson Market Library (42), interviewers' homes (35), Central Park Delacorte Theater (31), Seward Park Library (25), Stapleton Library (24), 67th Street Library (18), and 115th Street Library (10).

Libraries were the preferred interview venues, with 35 libraries hosting 320 sessions (22% of total). These included: Andrew Heiskell Braille and Talking Book Library, Jefferson Market Library, 115th Street Library, Seward Park Library, Stapleton Library, 67th Street Library, Riverdale Library, Inwood Library, Morris Park Library, Chatham Square Library, Fort Washington Library, Macomb's Bridge Library, Tompkins Square Library, Mulberry Street Library, Allerton Library, Mid-Manhattan Library, Pelham Parkway-Van Nest Library, St. George Library, Bronx Library Center, Kips Bay Library, George Bruce Library, Hamilton Grange Library, Stapleton Library, Countee Cullen Library, Huguenot Park Library, and others.

3.3 Interviewees' Birthplaces

Among 926 interviewees, 613 (approximately 66.2%) provided birthplace information. Geographically, 395 (42.7%) were born in the United States, with 325 (35.1%) specifically from New York, including 75 from Brooklyn, 23 from Staten Island, 21 from Harlem, 15 from the Bronx, and 7 from Queens. Another 184 respondents were broadly identified as from New York (including NYC and New York State). Additionally, 70 interviewees were born in other U.S. states and territories: 22 from New Jersey, 17 from Puerto Rico, 16 from Pennsylvania, and 15 from Illinois. Remaining respondents were immigrants from outside the

U.S., including Germany, the United Kingdom, China, Canada, France, Italy, Israel, Singapore, and India.

3.4 Birth Decades and Occupations of Interviewees

Interviewees were primarily born before the 21st century, concentrated after the 1930s, particularly those born in the 1940s-1960s, with each decade exceeding 100 respondents (see Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper]). This demographic structure relates to project characteristics: elderly individuals over 80 are fewer in number, and their cognitive and linguistic abilities are declining, making qualified interviewees rarer. Those born in the 1940s and later are under 80, represent a larger population, and include many qualified interviewees, making them more suitable for oral history development.

Using China's National Economic Industry Classification (released June 30, 2017), the author categorized interviewees' occupations into 19 types (see Figure 3 [Figure 3: see original paper]). The classification includes 20 major categories, with NYPL's project covering 18 major categories and 308 occupations. Due to classification differences between countries, freelancers and retirees were categorized under "Other." The industry with most participants was R: Culture, Sports, and Entertainment, with 177 individuals across 60 occupations—the most diverse category—including 31 writers, 29 artists, 11 musicians, and 10 actors. The second largest was P: Education, with 134 participants; teachers comprised 32% (43 individuals), followed by university professors (24), students (23), and educators (22), covering 19 education-related occupations. Industries with 50-100 participants included: Other (retirees, entrepreneurs, homemakers, freelancers, host mothers—retirees being the largest group), S: Public Administration, Social Security and Social Management, Q: Health and Social Work, and L: Leasing and Business Services. Retirees were prioritized because they possess deeper and longer-term community knowledge and have ample time for interviews. Industries with equal participation included J: Finance and I: Information Transmission, Software and IT Services; H: Accommodation and Catering and C: Manufacturing; G: Transportation, Storage and Postal Services and K: Real Estate.

3.5 Residence Duration of Interviewees in New York

Figure 4 [Figure 4: see original paper] shows that as a multicultural nation, the U.S. has experienced continuous population mobility since the 1920s, with the 1970s seeing the largest influx into NYC neighborhoods. Many immigrants from outside the U.S. arrived during this period to work and settle. Combined with interview locations, birthplaces, and occupational distributions, most interviewees work in culture, sports, entertainment, or education. These migrants brought cultural backgrounds from their birthplaces to New York, accelerating American cultural fusion. In later collection phases, these groups provide diverse perspectives on their migration history, enriching the oral history resources.

4. Types of NYPL Community Oral History Resources

NYPL's community oral history resources are implemented by dispersed, non-professional volunteers through community-driven projects, where communities serve as the basic collection unit and individuals with historical memory are the targets. Based on interview subjects and content, resources are categorized as follows:

4.1 Community Memory Oral History Resources

These resources focus on community historical memory as the main collection subject, interviewing elderly community members to develop their oral histories into thematically organized repositories. Projects include: "Your Village, Your Story," "A People's History of Harlem," "Voices from East of Bronx Park," "Bridging Our Stories," "Stapleton Speaks," "SoHo Stories," "Upper East Side Story," "Remembering Riverdale," "Hell's Kitchen Oral History Project," "Times Square Oral History Project," "Lower East Side Oral History Project," "Chinatown Legacy Project," and "Kips Bay + Murray Hill Oral History Project." These community memory projects form the core of NYPL's oral history program, comprising 13 categories. "Your Village, Your Story" was initiated by NYPL's Jefferson Market Library, while "SoHo Stories" collaborates with the Freelancers' Memory Project to interview community freelancers. All projects train community volunteers to conduct interviews, tapping into community networks to collect oral resources.

4.2 Special Ethnic Group Oral History Resources

These resources focus on American ethnic groups, primarily Latino and Black communities—the largest minority group in the U.S. with over 50 million people. NYPL continuously collects Latino resources, allowing them to share their struggles in New York, family and neighbor stories, and childhood memories [14]. They can submit photos and personal information digitally to become part of New York's historical memory. Sandy Ground, the earliest free Black settlement in the U.S. with four historic landmarks (the oldest dating to 1859), conducted oral history collection in summer 2017. Volunteers received joint training from the Sandy Ground Historical Society, NYPL, and the New York Preservation Archives Project, then recorded stories from neighbors, friends, family, and residents closely connected to Sandy Ground [15].

4.3 Special Population Oral History Resources

Special populations are minority groups relative to mainstream society. NYPL's special populations include veterans, transgender individuals, people with special medical conditions, and special audiences. From January-December 2013, NYPL collaborated with the Library of Congress to collect veterans' oral histories as part of the Veterans History Project. Volunteers collected stories from veterans across New York City to help future generations understand American

military experiences. These resources are permanently archived at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. [16]. The “Stories from the Line” project, in partnership with The Public Theater, collects stories from people waiting in line for free Shakespeare in the Park performances, held annually July 21-August 12. For over 60 years, free Shakespeare performances in NYC parks have provided barrier-free theater, attracting over 5 million cumulative attendees [17]. These participants share a passion for Shakespeare and willingness to wait.

NYPL also collects oral histories from people with disabilities to preserve specific themes through personal recollections, and from transgender communities to document resistance and acceptance in NYC. Transgender oral histories also record issues of race, ethnicity, poverty, disability, aging, immigration, sexism, and HIV/AIDS. This collection is inspired by public history movements, recognizing oral history as a component of social justice that helps eliminate prejudice against transgender communities [18].

5. NYPL Oral History Resource Collection Experiences

NYPL’s community oral history resources integrate community participation, crowdsourcing, and functions from numerous branch libraries and research departments [19]. Among these methods, crowdsourcing is a key and frequently applied approach.

5.1 Crowdsourced Construction

Each NYPL community collects approximately 100 oral histories, totaling over 1,250 stories stored primarily at the Paul and Irma Milstein branches alongside American history, local history, and genealogy collections [20]. To collect more specialized resources, NYPL employs crowdsourcing by distributing manuals to volunteers covering: finding narrators, recording locations, equipment guidance, and questioning techniques—completed independently by volunteers. To facilitate retrieval, access, and discovery, the project uses crowdsourced, wiki-style text editing, allowing volunteers and readers to edit and polish transcripts. Audio resources are computer-transcribed then manually verified. Each file includes interviewer/interviewee names, audio duration, title, original audio, and computer-generated text. Files display progress bars and contributor credits. Completed, undisputed text (shown in green) is locked from further editing but remains audible. Disputed sections (shown in orange) can be corrected by selecting the best transcription from submitted edits [21]. To improve semantic search accuracy, audio tagging tools mark important people, places, events, or themes, enabling users to manage files through tagging, renaming, and duplicate detection [12].

5.2 Community-Driven Approach

NYPL’s oral history project uses communities as interview units with public volunteer participation. This approach maximizes community engagement, as in-

interviewers have pre-existing relationships (neighbors, relatives, friends) with interviewees, facilitating participation. Similar social backgrounds between interviewers and interviewees make it easier to engage topics and mobilize volunteers to collect hidden oral histories, improving project completeness. Community-driven implementation also leverages volunteers' familiarity and personal connections to organically integrate community, residents, and history. From October 2016-May 2017, NYPL recruited volunteer neighborhood leaders, providing two-hour weekly training October-November, with volunteers conducting four hours of weekly interviews from mid-October. Volunteers needed interest in community organizing, community collaboration experience, ability to converse with diverse publics, attention to detail, planning skills, and basic oral history interest [13].

5.3 Multi-Institutional Participation

NYPL's mission is to inspire lifelong learning, advance knowledge, and strengthen communities [21]. Therefore, both research and branch libraries collect, preserve, and provide historical materials for general readers and scholars, who can participate in community activities through collection use. Consequently, NYPL's community oral history project involves not only numerous volunteers but also multiple branch libraries and research departments. The Paul and Irma Milstein branches are most prominent—the latter specializing in urban history collections, including materials omitted from traditional publications and unpurchased by academic institutions. The oral histories generated form major resources for these branches, documenting community life in detail, describing significantly changed locations and figures, and recording under-documented events. To enrich collections, branches actively participate by contacting outreach services staff for volunteer selection, training, and project planning. During audio preservation, collection volunteers, system developers, and metadata workers collaborate across departments.

6. Implications for Oral History Resource Development in China

6.1 Developing Oral History Resources Through Crowdsourcing

Crowdsourcing distributes work freely and voluntarily to specific groups for completion. NYPL's crowdsourced approach offers new ideas for Chinese libraries. Crowdsourcing involves volunteers, branch libraries, research departments, and government agencies in collection, organization, and utilization. Initially, NYPL leads while community libraries, volunteers, and researchers collaborate. During transcription and keyword description, library staff, volunteers, and users all participate. Volunteer involvement enhances community engagement and develops interviewers' capabilities, as oral history demands high interviewer competence requiring training. Crowdsourcing also raises public awareness, as developers from various fields ensure reliability and validity.

6.2 Emphasizing Reliability and Validity

Volunteer participation enhances reliability and validity. Macroscopically, diverse developers ensure objectivity and prevent subjective bias. During audio transcription and keyword assignment, users contribute multiple perspectives, comparing specific periods, communities, and events through multiple cases to vividly and authentically reconstruct history. Similar experiences between interviewers and interviewees at NYPL reduce psychological distance, encouraging more authentic narratives. After interviews, volunteers and readers edit transcripts using text editors and transcription technology, modifying uploaded audio files until consensus is reached. This Wikipedia-like editing model enhances reliability and validity.

6.3 Highlighting Local Characteristics as Signature Features

NYPL's signature feature is using NYC residents as primary interview subjects to recall community life and events. As physical distance from libraries increases, patron visits and resource use decrease [22]. Similarly, geographic barriers affect oral history collection, making local resources more accessible. Therefore, public libraries should develop locally distinctive oral history resources as collection highlights. Some Chinese libraries have begun building local oral history databases—Hunan Library, starting in 2009, located 130 local veterans of the Anti-Japanese War, generating significant social impact and media coverage.

As urbanization accelerates, rural cultural heritage, especially intangible cultural heritage, is rapidly disappearing and urgently requires libraries to conduct rescue excavation through oral history development. Libraries should target local cultural characteristics, focusing on indigenous culture preservation, particularly rescuing disappearing local oral history resources. Topics should be narrowly focused to highlight local features. Grassroots libraries below county level should comprehensively consider funding, staffing, and project timelines when planning development. Using local characteristics as promotional features facilitates support from local institutions and volunteer recruitment.

6.4 Enhancing Openness and Public Interest

NYPL's openness manifests in collection, organization, storage, and retrieval. Collection is not limited to experts and librarians but widely recruits volunteers. After collection, librarians, volunteers, and experts collaboratively transcribe texts. Published resources allow readers to annotate and edit transcripts. This multi-party, Wikipedia-style model mobilizes diverse forces to develop and improve the database. Openness also appears in partnerships—NYPL's oral histories are preserved at the Library of Congress as permanent archives.

In the high-speed internet era, public interest trends toward niche topics and local concerns. NYPL determines projects by first assessing community members' interest levels, only developing themes when sufficient interest coalesces. Volunteer recruitment also prioritizes those passionate about specific topics, with

interviewee groups arranged according to volunteer interests.

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Author Contributions:

Wu Hanhua: Responsible for topic selection, outline development, and comprehensive revision of the full manuscript.

Ni Hong: Responsible for data collection and initial draft writing.

The Experience of Oral History Resource Construction in New York Public Library

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Abstract: [Purpose/significance] This paper summed up the experience of the construction of oral history resources in New York Public Library by combing the process of community oral history resources construction in New York Public Library, aiming to provide reference for Chinese public libraries in oral history resources development. [Method/process] This article briefly introduced the development of the oral history project of the New York Public Library and the New York Public Library history, highlights the collection method of the oral history resources of the New York Public Library community, and sorted out the resource system of the New York Public Library community oral history. [Result/conclusion] Crowdsourcing method should be used to develop oral history. The reliability and validity of oral history resources need to be strengthened. The local oral history should be viewed as the local brand. The open and popularity of oral history should be strengthened.

Keywords: New York Public Library; oral history; oral history resource; resource warehouse

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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