

Interviewee: Hui Wu [W]

Interviewer: Jennifer Juskiewicz [J]

Transcriber: Elizabeth McGhee Williams

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### Transcript

J: This is Jennifer Juskiewicz interviewing scholar Hui Wu at RSA 50. We are ready to go. So the first question is, when did you first join RSA, and how did you hear about it?

W: I joined RSA in 1996, and my professor, Winifred Horner, introduced me to RSA. And that was probably the first conference where I seriously delivered a paper as a graduate student. But then the first conference was at—no, 1996, in Tucson, Arizona. Theresa Enos was the organizer.<sup>1</sup> It was fun. And then through Win Horner, I met Jim Kinneavy. We actually had lunch together, and Win Horner and I decided to swim in the evening. So we're in our swimsuits with a towel over us and when we walked into the elevator, we saw Richard Young. Now you know how early this history could be! I was so embarrassed by that! You know, Win Horner was Win Horner! [laughs] So that's how I joined.

J: I have heard stories about Win Horner, especially in the way she guided young female academics.

W: Right.

J: Could you tell me more about her mentorship style and what it meant to work with her for you?

W: Yeah. Well she was the one who actually enlightened me. I came to the United States to study American literature, so I was holding a fellowship to study literature. And then I was taking her history of English studies class, and also, I took a rhetoric class before that class, but I did not understand rhetoric. Then when I was in her class, she encouraged us to just do whatever you want to—research, read, and then give me feedback. “You guys just write these response papers.” So I started to check the literacy in China, and that led me to my current research. You know, I'm still doing it because of the beginning in her class. So I told her—after two weeks, I told her, “What is this class we're taking?” “You're studying rhetoric.” I said, “Yeah. What is it *about*?” Then she looked at me and said, “Rhetoric is not about everything. Rhetoric is about using language to persuade people. How language is written, literacy, all these things.” So I said, “Well actually I'm thinking about doing *this*—rhetoric and composition—instead of literature.” She looked at me and said, “Are you serious?” I said, “Mmhmm.” And then she said, “Think about it, and in a week you'll talk to me.” So I said, “Just tell me what rhetoric and composition is.” So she explained the brief history and then said, “Tell you what: in rhetoric and composition it's much easier to get a job.” [laughs] She is fantastic! So I went back, and I was thinking and talking to my husband, and the second day I

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<sup>1</sup> Enos was in charge of local arrangements for the 1996 conference.

found her and I said, “I made up my mind. I want to change. Do I need to talk to the director of graduate studies?” She said, “I’ll cover that for you.” And then she did. I went up to choose courses for next semester and changed my concentration. So as a Chinese, you’re always withdrawn and apologize. So I apologized to Dr. Linda Hughes. I said, “Dr. Hughes, I’m sorry to cause you such trouble, but I really want to pursue this.” And you know what she said? “Everybody should have free will to quest.” And I quoted her in my acknowledgment in my book.<sup>2</sup> This is how it happened. And then later on—because Win Horner was holding the endowed chair position of rhetoric and composition and then she’s in the retirement phase—then Jan Swearingen was visiting, and Susan Jarratt was visiting a year before Jan Swearingen. So before Jan arrived on campus, she put a book in my mailbox: Robert Oliver’s [*Communication and Culture in Ancient India and China*]. That’s how it started. So without them, I wouldn’t have today.

[05:17]

J: That’s wonderful.

W: Yeah.

J: I feel like there’s a particular community, especially of female academics, who’ve been brought together by Win Horner. Krista Ratcliffe, right?

W: Yes.

J: One of my advisors, Christine Farris.

W: Yes.

J: Who else is in that school? The Win Horner school.

W: The Win Horner school, okay. Kathleen Welch. We are still friends. She was also friends with [Edward] Corbett in Ohio State, and then she was also friends with James Berlin and Janice Lauer. So through her network, I knew all of them. And I remember—in our class, I remember James Berlin passed away, and Win Horner mentioned that to us. So I remember that moment; it was very sad. So through her, through this network, I’m friends with Cheryl Glenn, Lisa Ede, Andrea Lunsford—we’re just a whole group. And then she also—Win Horner was one of the founders of 4Cs,<sup>3</sup> and then later on she was one of the founders of the Coalition of Women Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition.

J: Yeah. Awesome.

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<sup>2</sup> I.e., the book *Once Iron Girls: Essays on Gender by Post-Mao Chinese Literary Women*, published in 2009 by Lexington Books.

<sup>3</sup> Conference on College Composition and Communication.

W: I'm still there. I'm on the advisory board. It's a great, vibrant, dynamic, very diverse organization. So she did a lot. And I also learned how to control my time—because Win Horner had four kids. When she started to pursue her PhD, she was forty-some, and she was adjuncting at the University of Missouri, and then she became an instructor, and then she told her chair, "I want to be like these people"—male, you know, professors. Then he told her, "You need a PhD." And she said, "What is a PhD?" [laughs] So then she went to Michigan to get her PhD, and I remember she told the story that when her kids were sick then she could not write papers, so she was reading Milton to them. [laughs] So she could be with them but at the same time working. It was a great story. Then, I think, she graduated when she was 50. In five years, she was famous. She told me, "You need to know where people are. You need to know what they do." So I noticed that, and then I said, "Dr. Horner, do you have any articles I can read so that I can be you?" [laughs] That was me. She said, "Hui." She looked at me. "Hui, I don't write articles. I write books." So when she passed away—actually before she retired—she published 35 books. It was amazing. So she gave me a lot of tips on how to be an academic. The most important thing, I asked her the question, I said, "How can I keep my"—how to be able to be independent as a scholar. And she said, "The most important thing is that you research, research, research. Only research makes you mobile." So that's her advice I still keep today. And then another thing I've learned—that's why people can see me working without [being] stressed out and can see me have fun and handle a lot of stuff. That's what I learned from Win Horner. She was directing the writing program at the University of Missouri. It was just mad work, everybody in it. She had I don't know how many adjuncts or people she was directing. She told me before 10 o'clock, she unplugged her phone so that nobody would bother her, and then she used a locker in the library to work on her research until probably 10, 10:30ish. Then she went back to her office and plugged the phone in. Yeah. She's an early riser as well. I tried, but I could not get up so early. [laughs] I mean, when she was older, she would get up at like 4:30 to write. By the time other people get up, she's already done her work. And she said, "I feel happy. I can do whatever, and nobody bothers me. I feel happy to see them." And it's now happening to me. She asked me, "What is most important as a scholar?" I said, "Professor, it's research." But then nobody—I always remember—*nobody* would ask you about your research. *Everybody* asked something else. Nobody. By the time you are tenured, they ask that thing *only*. You see my point? And I always remember, and now I remember, she said, "Put the most important thing first on that day, and when you finish that, you'll feel great." And now I'm doing that. Like, early in the morning, I'm in the office. People think, "Whoa, she's great. She's always in the office." Yeah, before 11 o'clock, that's my time doing my research. After 11 o'clock, somebody comes to see me and they say, "Oh, I'm sorry to bother you." "No, you're not! I'm happy to see you." [laughs] It's great!

[11:40]

J: That's amazing.

W: Yeah. That's her mentorship. I mean, she taught me so much about how to manage your time, how to put the priority as your focus, and without her, I don't have a fantastic

life even. She asked me, she said—I remember this conversation—she said, “Hui, do you want to work here, to find a job in the United States, or do you want to go back?” I said, “Well, I’m debating. I may want to go back.” Because I was already a chair of a department, kind of established, and then now I’m at ground zero. It would be easier, at that point I was thinking. And she said, “But Hui, life here—you can have luxury.” And then my answer was—but then I said, “Luxury is a habit.” “Oh, yeah. That’s right.” But then afterwards, I talked to my daughter. My daughter at that point was only twelve, and I said, “Mom wants to go back. Do you think that you want to come back with me to China? What’s your plan?” She was little. She said, “Mom, you want to go back because it’s easier. You’re a chair. You go back. You’ve got your position.” You know, I could be a dean or VP or whatever. And then she said, “But you want to test yourself. You do not know ever whether you will make it here or not.” I said, “That’s a very good statement!” A very good challenge. And I said, “Yes, I would like to test myself.” I could not believe how much potential, because of that decision, that I brought out about myself.

J: That’s amazing.

W: Yeah. It’s all because of Win Horner and Jan Swearingen.

J: So do you—to think about RSA, how would you describe the organization when you first came to it? ‘Cause it sounds like you knew a lot of people before you ever came here.

W: No.

J: No. So you walked in—

W: I met *all* of them just that time—1996, Tucson, Arizona. I saw Cheryl Glenn because Win Horner purposefully took me to meet these people: “This is Cheryl. This is—” I was just new, like second year, third year probably. Third-year graduate student. But then she introduced me to everybody. That’s how I met.

J: So do you think that that is a typical introduction to RSA? How do you think people become part of the RSA community then?

W: I believe that’s the people. Like today, because I was traveling to China—I was only summer faculty, guest faculty of a university in China until this year, so the contract ended. And it’s people today—I was looking at Steve Mailloux who was interviewing when I opened that [door]. He’s my friend! You know? He’s my friend. So I was trying to see who I can see. I just saw Elif [Guler], my friend from—Joonna Trapp from TCU. So it’s people that you see. It’s people that you can find, you talk to and you form your projects.

[15:27]

J: Do you think what makes RSA special is the community that's here?

W: I believe so. It's the community, and another thing is that you want to see what is happening in our field in terms of scholarship, like who is doing what. If you have your project in mind, you'll see, "Wow, that's the session I want to go to because I may want to talk to that person, I may want to call that person, I may want to watch that person's publications someday so that I can keep on going with my own project."

J: That makes sense.

W: Yeah.

J: What were some of the major projects that RSA was working on when you first joined back in the '90s?

W: At that point it was still, majorly, pretty traditional classical rhetoric and then I belonged—probably still early—people in doing Chinese rhetoric. That conference I published my first paper "The Enthymeme and Chinese Thinking Patterns"—something like that.<sup>4</sup> Another thing is that RSA used to publish—I think it still does—the proceedings, and the younger scholars, when they have good projects to come to the conference, they can submit their manuscripts. So even if it's not accepted, you are encouraged to do so. You get first review, which is not so harsh, and then RSA people are always very gentle. Even if they are critical, [laughs] they are very encouraging at the same time.

J: You described this really great moment where Win Horner took you around RSA and was like, "There's Cheryl Glenn. Here's this person. Here's that person."

W: Mmhmm.

J: Do you have any other memories of being at RSA that you think are characteristic of what RSA is? Like, "Oh, that was such an RSA thing to happen."

W: Let me think. It's much smaller. And then RSA usually has a banquet thing where you have that plenary speaker, and usually that speech is hilarious. I remember Win Horner delivered her speech—I'm still using that speech as a leading, a springboard toward the history of composition in the United States. That essay was another step forward based on Parker's article on where the English department is from.<sup>5</sup> Something like that.

J: Mmhmm.

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<sup>4</sup> Dr. Wu's "The Enthymeme Examined from the Chinese Value System" was published in *Making and Unmaking the Prospects for Rhetoric: Selected Papers from the 1996 Rhetoric Society of America Conference*, edited by Theresa Enos and Richard McNabb and now published by Routledge.

<sup>5</sup> I.e., William Riley Parker's 1967 article "Where Do English Departments Come From?", published in issue 28.5 of *College English*.

W: So I'm still using that. It's fun. And I'm asking my students to do a family tree. They have to digest the information, do a family tree, and they can cheat—they can work together. I just want them to get the idea, "This is how it goes." Yeah.

J: That's great. So Win Horner has been gone for a while, unfortunately.

W: Yes.

J: How do you think—do you have memories, after she wasn't coming anymore, of RSA? Any moment that you remember post-Win Horner.

W: She was going to Cs, I think three years before she died. The most—I'm actually the second-closest person to Win Horner. The closest person is Lynee Gaillet because they did the same project: history of Scotland, Scottish rhetoric, the influence of Scottish rhetoric on the United States on Harvard's curriculum.

J: She's down in Georgia?

W: Georgia State, yeah.

J: Since Win Horner's not here anymore, do you think RSA has changed for you?

[19:58]

W: Well, like I said, I haven't come to these conferences for I don't know how many years. It's every other year, so for a pretty long time. I cannot really nail down, pin down the characteristics. It would be very rash for me to make a judgment.

J: That's fair.

W: But then I remember the 1998—Pittsburgh, in Pittsburgh. I think it was in Pittsburgh, yeah. Jan Swearingen, who was also—they codirected my dissertation. Jan Swearingen was the president who organized that conference. But then we didn't have enough chairs, so I was a chair for five or six, I cannot remember how many sessions. Whenever there was—"Hui, can you do this?" "Okay!"

[both laughing]

W: That was a great one. There was also a proceedings that she edited.

J: That's great. You said you just got here today, right?

W: Mmhmm.

J: As you've walked around RSA, has anything struck you as different or surprising?

W: Well, because I have been going to 4Cs without missing much, the most important thing that struck me today was, “Wow, everything is in one place! It’s so easy!” And then I look at the publishers: “It’s so focused! No composition, great!” And I saw my book there and the people, and said, “Wow! It’s so easy.” I actually checked this room, and then I wanted to find my room for tomorrow, and it’s so easy. Everything is in place, and everybody is on the same floor so I can see so many people in one place. It’s not as overwhelming as 4Cs.

J: Especially this year. 4Cs was—

W: Yeah.

J: If you could make some predictions, even though you haven’t been here for a few years, what do you think RSA will look like next year, or in ten years?

W: I believe RSA would involve more studies of race. Feminism was very rare when I was attending. It was just taking off, probably late 90s and 2000. Because the article I published in that special issue<sup>6</sup> was kind of like a little after when *Reclaiming Rhetorica*,<sup>7</sup> that book, came out. So it was pretty early. But I believe that gender studies will be strengthened. At the same time, comparative rhetoric will involve more people. More people are interested in comparative rhetoric, and now we call it global rhetoric. I saw Elif, who is doing Turkish rhetoric.

J: Who is this?

W: Elif Guler. Yeah.

J: Okay.

W: And then Keith Lloyd is doing Indian rhetoric. He’s published several articles—very good scholar. I saw LuMing [Mao], and I’m here, and then I saw Bo Wang. We are the two doing Chinese families’ rhetoric. Yeah, so I believe these will be—and then classical rhetoric will still be there. But classical rhetoric, to me, the majority’s kind of like shifted, taken over by the International Society for the History of Rhetoric. You see a lot of European people who are doing—I mean, their research is fascinating though. I just love listening to them. And then the younger generation—younger *generations*, not just one now, I’m getting old—they are more interested in the history of the institution of rhetoric and composition, which is, for example, the interview itself. I think that’s a great thing. I also found out in our field—I just looked at a book title which said *Best Journals*

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<sup>6</sup> Issue 32.1 of *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, a 2002 special issue on feminist historiography in rhetoric, included Dr. Wu’s article “Historical Studies of Rhetorical Women Here and There: Methodologies Challenges to Dominant Interpretive Frameworks.”

<sup>7</sup> I.e., Andrea Lunsford’s 1995 edited collection *Reclaiming Rhetorica: Women in the Rhetorical Tradition*, published by University of Pittsburgh Press.

*in 2015-2016.*<sup>8</sup> That can be a project. But then rhetoric and composition people can make this thing, this type of project based on data, but make these projects more intellectual, more historical-based, and then put it into solid ground on scholarship instead of, like, data. You know, some research, they have the beginning, they have the methodology talk, and they have the data, they have the data discussion—we don't do that. We have a very diverse perspective on our methodologies and the projects we're doing. We always have that substantive discussion, which involves history, theory, sources. We are still solidly in the humanities, but our sense about data and the scientific use of data is getting sharper and sharper. And we bring that into our tradition of the humanities. Without trumping the tradition, we are doing the new thing. So that's how, and that's why this field is getting bigger and bigger, and there are more needs for the people who graduate with this degree. That's what I can foresee.

[26:27]

J: This is a related question. That's a vision of the future, but what do you *hope* to see at RSA in the future?

W: I hope that we will have more people to do—to connect rhetoric with composition. I have seen composition recently—it's shifting to more, like, education research. Hard to say whether it's social science or not. It's kind of like that. I would like to see there is more connection between rhetoric and composition. And then now, sometimes when they do rhetoric, they just throw that word out there in research without unfolding that word of "rhetoric" and to show why you define this phenomenon, this thing you are doing, as rhetorical. It's kind of like a word you take for granted. If we continue to do that, I do not think that rhetoric would make sense to a lot of people outside of our field because it will be like, "Oh, that's just rhetoric." That type of thing. And I was talking to Jeff Walker several years ago. I said, "How do you feel about the field?" He said, "Well, I feel it is more—" We were actually attending RSA. So we saw each other, and then we became friends, and then he said, "Well, it's kind of like more social science. Like education-, learning-based." He's a solid classical rhetoric scholar, you know. A great one. And I said, "Yeah, I feel the same thing." It's kind of like we are leaving the rules of our field. People started to study rhetoric in order to figure out how to teach composition, and now composition's getting bigger and bigger, and then literally it's kind of like we are forgetting what started the whole field. I was very lucky to have this first—or one point five, according to Janice Lauer. Janice Lauer told me that Win Horner was not the first generation. So I said, "One point five?" She said, "That's about right." [laughs] So I'm generation two or three. I don't know, two point five, three point—I don't know! [laughs] Because I could not say Jan Swearingen is first generation. She's not. She's not second generation either because she's later than Win Horner. So I'm Jan's student, and Jan and Cheryl Glenn are kind of the same generation. And Elizabeth Flynn, they are kind of like the same generation. So are they two point five or three? Or am I three or three point five? I don't know! [laughs]

J: Who knows.

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<sup>8</sup> Perhaps Parlor Press's *Best of the Journals in Rhetoric & Composition 2015-2016*.



W: Yeah.

J: Is there anything else that you want to say about RSA to wrap it up?

W: I think that's great. I just want to say congratulations. This is a fantastic project, and I'm so glad to be here.

[30:00]

J: Well I'm glad you're here, too. Thanks so much for coming in.

W: Thank you, Jennifer.

J: Thank you.