

Sylvia Wong	This is Sylvia Wong from the Coney Island History Project. Today we have Mr. Lu Zhao as our guest. He will speak in Cantonese. And now let's have Mr. Zhao talk about his childhood.
Mr. Lu Zhao	<p>I was born on Oct. 1, 1942, in Fushicun, Toishan County¹. It was a pretty difficult time and very unfortunately, my father passed away when I was one year and two months old. Therefore, my mother had to take care of everything.</p> <p>Because we were six siblings, it was extremely difficult for a single mom to raise six kids. But she came up with a good idea: She would go cut and gather firewood, and then sell it (in the town) every day. Additionally, after selling the firewood, she would buy our supplies from Doushan². That's how difficult our life was. We were living in a brick house and every time it rained, there were at least a dozen leaks in the house. That's what our life was.</p> <p>When I was about four or five years old, a huge rainstorm, with ferocious wind and heavy rainfall, hit and lasted for more than two months. I was so bored but when I found my grandfather's copybook, I started mimicking his handwriting. Because I didn't know anything, when I first started I was just doodling. Later when I ran out of paper, my mother told me to practice by using sand. There's the Lanxi Brook near our village, and I went to the riverbank and started writing</p>

¹ Toishan, or Taishang, is a county in China's southern Canton (or Guangdong) Province.

² Doushan is a town in Toishan.

	<p>on the sand. Later, I was able to read and learn from my grandfather's calligraphy book. That's how I started.</p> <p>In our extended family, there was a person named Jinyu Zhao. Because I had shown some promise in calligraphy when I was three or four years old, he (Mr. Zhao) let me carry his paper and tools; when I was six or seven, he taught me to write on scrolls, only three or four words at a time at this point. Under his instruction, I started to take a real interest in calligraphy. He taught me what I should pay attention to. For example, finding the right copybook is very important. And if I picked the wrong paper, it would have a tremendous effect on my calligraphy.</p>
Wong	Did you mean choosing the type of paper?
Zhao	<p>I meant the style of writing. I chose Ouyang Xun³, Wang Xizhi⁴ and his son, Wang Xianzhi's. First, you have to pick the copybook, and you have to quiet down your mind and focus. Additionally, you also have to learn about the relationship between paper, brush and ink: if you're writing larger-size calligraphy, you'll need to apply more ink so that it has enough moisture; if you're writing smaller-size [calligraphy], you don't need that much ink.</p> <p>Therefore, I can say I met a very important person on my path to mastering calligraphy.</p>
Wong	Was he (Jinyu Zhao) your first teacher?

³ Famed Chinese calligrapher from the 5th century.

⁴ Famed Chinese calligrapher from the 3th century.

Zhao	Oh yes. He really was my first teacher.
Wong	Mr. Zhao, how long did you study under him?
Zhao	Many years. I think I studied under him till I was 12 years old. He taught me how to choose copybooks and other knowledge. He really taught me a lot. The reason I learned so quickly was essentially because of him.
Wong	Thanks so much for sharing your story. But those were the years that your family had a lot of difficulties. How did you meet him (Jinyu Zhao)?
Zhao	<p>We came from the same family. I think the connection went back five or six generations. With my strong interest and determination, I honed my calligraphy skills. When I was younger, I would pull several all-nighters to practice. When I felt exhausted, I took a break; when the break was over, I came back and picked it up again.</p> <p>It took time to master the skills. And studying under him (Jinyu Zhao) helped me to understand, gradually, about the concept of aesthetics. You are not going to master calligraphy skills without understanding the beauty behind it.</p>
Wong	Where did you study after graduating from grade school? Did your time in high school have any impact on your calligraphy?
Zhao	Ok, I'll talk about that. When I was in high school, I was the "academic committeeman" on the student government. Therefore, every time we needed to make an update to the announcement board, I was tasked with it. Plus, my art teacher, Yuhai Chen, brought us to visit agricultural and industrial exhibitions. That

	was 1958 and those exhibitions were pretty common at the time. He taught us how to draw sketches. Because I had good calligraphy and art teachers, I was making a lot of progress.
Wong	To summarize, you studied calligraphy exclusively up to age 12, but started learning painting after meeting your art teacher, is that right?
Zhao	No, I started learning calligraphy when I was five, and painting when I was eight. Why? Because my older brothers and sisters studied history and I heard about some of the national heroes, and I really admired them. Then I started painting when I was in the third grade.
Wong	Did you learn Chinese painting?
Zhao	No, what I was learning was sketch painting.
Wong	Then when did you start to learn Chinese painting?
Zhao	When I was a third-grader, I started painting sketches. When I was in the fifth grade, I was able to do portrait painting. Because we were very poor, I didn't want to ask my mother for money to buy paper, brushes and ink. But one day when I came back from school, I found my aunt had stopped by and was talking to my mom. My aunt said she wanted to have a portrait of herself to pass down to her children. Because I had been studying sketch painting for two years and also bought some books to teach myself, I did a portrait for her. She was very satisfied and gave me 10 dollars!
Wong	Was ten dollars a lot of money to a kid?
Zhao	I could buy eight tams ⁵ of wheat. A dollar and 25 cents for one tam. I set these ten dollars aside for my

⁵ Tam is a traditional Asian unit of weight.

	<p>education fund for books on watercolor and Chinese painting, and calligraphy copybooks from Wang Xizhi, such as his <i>Yellow Court Classic</i> and <i>Words by Yue Yi</i>. Additionally, I also bought the <i>Ode to the Nymph of the Luo River</i> by Wang Xianzhi. And when I collected more money later, I bought the <i>Collection of Huang Huai ren</i> and Wang Xizhi's <i>Preface of Holy Doctrine</i>. It was because I studied the <i>Preface of Holy Doctrine</i> that my style resembles Wang Xizhi's. Uncle Jin (Jinyu Zhao) taught me if you're not familiar enough with the art, you were not going to be able to express your emotions through your calligraphy. Thinking about the past, I would say I had an uneven path. (Laugh) That's what it was.</p>
Wong	<p>It wasn't easy to make some money to support what you enjoy doing. After you successfully painted your aunt's portrait, did you do it for other people?</p>
Zhao	<p>Yes, but here's how it worked: I didn't ask them for money, but I would accept whatever amount they gave me. Though I understood my family was poor, other people were not much better off. Even if it's a dollar, it didn't matter. I painted portraits for the seniors.</p>
Wong	<p>How long did it take you to finish one portrait?</p>
Zhao	<p>Usually it took four to five hours. The most I spent was about six hours.</p>
Wong	<p>Did you participate in a lot of the student government's activities?</p>
Zhao	<p>I participated in some agricultural exhibitions and those honoring extraordinary people. Like those model</p>

	workers or people like Lei Feng ⁶ , who are representative of the idea of Serve the People ⁷ . My teachers really liked me because I was capable of writing calligraphy and painting. Some of my classmates were good at painting but not necessarily at calligraphy. Therefore, because I could do both, my teachers liked me a lot and offered me a lot of opportunities.
Wong	Because you were good at calligraphy and painting, you were an all-around talent. After high school, did you go to college?
Zhao	Due to my family, I didn't go (to college). And that was during the time of the Cultural Revolution, I didn't take the college entrance exam. During the Cultural Revolution, art schools stopped recruiting.
Wong	Was going to study at an art school your priority?
Zhao	Because of the Cultural Revolution, there was no such entrance exam and I could only study on my own, that was it. You can call those who receive professional training artistic talents, but the way I forced myself to study also worked out for me. Look at Wang Mian ⁸ from the Yuan Dynasty. He was raising cattle but somehow taught himself how to paint plum blossoms. That's why I followed their examples. That's it.
Wong	To achieve what you did at such a young age and facing such difficulties, you must be disciplined. I don't think today's young people could have done the same.

⁶ A People's Liberation Army soldier and communist propaganda hero in the 1950s and 60s.

⁷ A political slogan was promoted by Chairman Mao Zedong and the Communist Party.

⁸ A Chinese poet and painter from the late 12 century.

Zhao	When I had money, I didn't buy snacks or go to restaurants. I used the money to buy books. Each book is a teacher. When I had any questions, I would go find out the answers from the books.
Wong	From what I know, the Cultural Revolution went on for 10 years. Other than studying calligraphy, did you go to work during the Cultural Revolution?
Zhao	After graduating from high school, I became a teacher, and wrote for a monthly newspaper in our town Fushi. I took photos and wrote articles for the newspaper. I liked to spend my spare time doing what I enjoyed.
Wong	How long did this lifestyle go on? And during this period, did you find your calligraphy improve dramatically? Did you share with your students how to write calligraphy?
Zhao	I taught mostly Chinese literature in school, but also taught calligraphy and painting. Therefore, I had the opportunity to practice, and that's what I called "learning helps teaching and teaching help learning." Additionally, I also joined the Toishan Calligraphy and Seal Carving Society, and practiced my calligraphy and painting techniques. Also, I joined the Jiangmen Calligraphy before I left China, that's it. But before I left, I participated in the first ever Chinese Farmers Calligraphy Competition and won first place (laugh). That's a nationwide competition! Because I left in December, the prize and the certificate hadn't been sent out. I didn't know about it until someone told me later. A newspaper in Toishan published the story, and other people saw it and told me about it.

Wong	Can you tell me when you left China? How old were you? And what motivated you to leave?
Zhao	I was able to come here because of my sister. She had been living in the United States for many years. She came here in 1963 and because of her, I was able to immigrate here. At that time, I was ill and couldn't take up manual labor jobs. Therefore, I took advantage of my Chinese painting and calligraphy skills, and made some money by working as a painter for hire. The biggest assignment I worked on was a 70-inch-by-38-inch painting and I earned well over a thousand dollars. It was through painting that I was able to support my family. Both me and my wife worked to support our three boys and a girl. My wife was a seamstress and rarely made more than 30 dollars. The gala dresses she made didn't pay much, at most a little bit over 10 dollars. And at the same time, in addition to working at restaurants and in garment factories, I made several hundred dollars through teaching painting. Therefore, the painting I did the most often were two types of Shan Shui ⁹ , earning almost two thousand dollars. (Laugh)
Wong	When did you come to the US?
Zhao	I came in October 1989, after June Fourth ¹⁰ .
Wong	Right. You haven't told us about how you met your wife. And about your children, were they born in China?

⁹ Shan shui. Literally "mountain-water," refers to a style of traditional Chinese painting that depicts scenery or natural landscapes, using a brush and ink rather than more conventional paints.

¹⁰ In Chinese, people usually refer The Tiananmen Square Massacre as the June 4 Incident.

Zhao	I met my wife through family friends. My sister paid for our wedding. I remembered our engagement ran into some trouble, as it was raining heavily. That was in early 1966 and I was studying in the teacher's academy. I was completely drenched. We call ourselves the "Stormy Couple" (laugh).
Wong	Did you two meet during a rainstorm?
Zhao	Yes.
Wong	What did your wife do?
Zhao	She and I were both from farming families. She farmed on her family's land.
Wong	Your children were born in China. How old were they when they came to the US?
Zhao	When I first applied to come here, my oldest child was only 19 years old and under the 21-year-old regulation. But by the time my application was approved, my oldest child became "overaged" and couldn't come. Among my four children — the first and third are daughters, and the second and last are boys— only two boys and a daughter came.
Wong	So your oldest child, the first daughter, did not move to the US because of her age. But did she eventually move here?
Zhao	I moved here in 1989 and she came in 1995.
Wong	How many years did you work at restaurants and garment factories, and selling your paintings? And as your children grew up and started to work, you and your wife didn't have to work that hard, did you?
Zhao	Since 2006 our family has become much better off and even better now. My oldest daughter's husband graduated from New York University and became a

Interviewee: Mr. Lu Zhao

Interviewer: Sylvia Wong (Ching Man Wong)

<https://www.coneyislandhistory.org/oral-history-archive/lu-zhao>

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	<p>senior accountant. He's running his own accounting firm. My son is involved in the computer hardware business. Though he didn't go to college, my son is intelligent and persistent. He never stops until he figures out the answer, just like me. Therefore, he's been running his own computer business for over a decade.</p>
Wong	<p>It sounds like everyone is having a good life and you are enjoying your retirement. Mr. Zhao, where did you live when you first moved to New York City? Were you living where you are now?</p>
Zhao	<p>At the beginning, we lived on 6th Avenue and 55th Street in Brooklyn. But because we had more people (living together) and wanted a bigger space, we moved to 52nd street and 6th Avenue [in Sunset Park]. And my daughter first moved here, because she was getting married and soon moving out, only a few of us stayed in that apartment. Later, a house on 71st Street between 19th Avenue and 20th Avenue [in Bensonhurst], the one that I'm living in now, was being put on the market, and my sons decided to purchase it. That was 11 years ago.</p>
Wong	<p>Can you talk about who you are living with? And do you have any grandchildren?</p>
Zhao	<p>I have seven grandchildren. All but one of my children have two children. The exception is my oldest daughter: because of some health-related issues, she has only one daughter. My other three children all have one boy and one girl. My sons bought this house for me and my wife. And because my oldest grandchild goes to a college nearby, she stays with us.</p>

Wong	Did you teach your grandchildren calligraphy and painting?
Zhao	Some of them did study a little bit of painting, but only my oldest son's daughter continuously learned and has had some success. There's no shortcut to learning calligraphy but some of them gave up not long after picking it up. If you don't keep up the hard work, you can't master the skills.
Wong	Do you have anything you want to say to young people?
Zhao	Being a teacher, I hope I can inspire my students to support cultural development in our hometown. That's my hope for the younger generations.
Wong	It's well known that The New York Times interviewed you and wrote about how you created calligraphy scrolls for Officer Wenjian Liu ¹¹ when he passed away.
Zhao	I read about him and his sacrifice in the newspaper and from tv news, and really felt for him. As an ethnic Chinese living in the United States, he contributed to the public and did many good things. I regard him (Officer Liu) as a Chinese national hero. I have been admiring national heroes since I was a kid and showing a lot of respect towards them. I received high praise from the Times. Wherever we go, we Chinese value justice, and he (Officer Liu) is our role model.
Wong	I also want to talk about your life in retirement. Do you get paid for writing calligraphy for businesses or wedding ceremonies? Or did you do it for free?

¹¹ Wenjian Liu and his colleague, Rafael Ramos, were shot to death while sitting in their police patrol car in Bed-Stuy On Dec. 20, 2014. Liu is believed to be the first-ever Chinese-American NYPD officer killed on duty.

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Zhao	Well, normally when people who like my work and ask me to create one for them, I would do it regardless of money and feel very good about it. Why? Because this is not about me but Chinese art, which is what I am trying to promote. In terms of payment, I don't care about it. Living a simple life, I don't waste money on dining at restaurants. Rather, I would save up my money and donate to education in China. Or when I return to the Mainland, I would bring the savings with me (and donate it). As a Chinese, I'm doing what I'm supposed to do.
Zhao	I usually go to Chinatown. There's the Doushan Association ¹² , where I have space over there and can practice writing. Since there are many Chinese Buddhist scriptures that I haven't written before, I'm spending my retirement life doing this.
Wong	Thank you for talking to us, Mr. Zhao.

¹² Many Chinese immigrants form village or family associations based on where they originally come from.