

Coney Island History Project Oral History Archive. 康尼岛历史工程口述历史典藏

Interviewee: Linda Zhang

Interviewer: Yolanda Zhang (Yueheng Zhang)

<https://www.coneyislandhistory.org/oral-history-archive/linda-zhang>

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YZ: This is Yolanda Zhang (Yueheng Zhang) from the Coney Island History Project. Today we have the opportunity to interview Ms. Linda Zhang. Linda, would you like to introduce yourself first?

LZ: Hello everyone, my name is Linda Zhang. I have lived in Coney Island for the past 19 years.

YZ: What is your occupation?

LZ: I work in a beauty salon in Coney Island.

YZ: When did you move to New York, or to the US?

LZ: I moved to New York in 1996. First [I] lived in Chinatown, then moved to Coney Island in 2000.

YZ: What was your impression of Coney Island when you first moved here?

LZ: I thought that the quality of the air in Coney Island was just different. It is much better than Chinatown.

YZ: Have there been a lot of changes here since you first came?

LZ: Yes. I remember the social and political conditions being not exactly pleasant back then, and now, after redevelopment, the neighborhood is looking very bright and clean. I often go to the boardwalk for an hour every night. [I] see my neighbors and friends.

YZ: Who are your friends? What are their professions?

LZ: They are my friends who settled down and bought houses here decades ago. Some (also) do beauty and personal care. Others have retired.

YZ: Do you miss any buildings or places that are no longer around here?

LZ: Yeah, there used to be a lot of open space. Now [the vacant lots] are being used for high-rise buildings. There are no vacant places now. There was a lot more before.

YZ: Vacant? In what way?

LZ: They looked like they were farms. Foreigners [*laowai*, in this case meaning Americans, or non-Chinese Americans; *laowai* is a term originated in China, where it is used as a nickname for

anyone who is not ethnically Chinese] would be planting all kinds of vegetables, all kinds of things. It's all gone now. They built those condos instead, built up everything.

YZ: What would you do in those open spaces?

LZ: I would only pass by them. You were not allowed in, I think. They seemed to be private or something. Only when you were familiar with [the owners], would they ask you to go in and pick some greens, pick tomatoes.

YZ: But now because there are no more spaces like that, there is no way you can... ?

LZ: It's gone now, all built into apartments. Now, the [lot] next to me is still under construction, and I think it is also going to become a condo.

YZ: Where do you usually go to relax after work?

LZ: I'll go to 86th Street in Bensonhurst. I'll have afternoon tea. Then go shopping and come back home to cook.

YZ: Tell me about the place you go to have your afternoon tea.

LZ: Yes, there are many historic places on 86th Street. There are Chinese markets, and there are many Chinese.

YZ: How many years has this particular place been around for?

LZ: This one opened more than two years. I go there every day. Even the boss there knows me now (laughs).

YZ: So you always go to that area, because there is a lot to do there?

LZ: Yes. My friends are living there. They can just walk there. I am the only one who takes the subway there.

YZ: Are there any Chinese restaurants in Coney Island?

LZ: There used to be a buffet. The buffet was run by some Chinese and it was also decent.

YZ: How many years ago was it?

LZ: 5 years ago.

YZ: Not anymore?

LZ: No. Now [there's a] building under construction, next to McDonald's. It is not opened yet.

YZ: Let's talk about your mother now.

LZ: My mother came to the United States in 1990. She used to work in a garment factory in Chinatown. She came to Coney Island after retirement, and she has been living here ever since.

She is also used to Coney Island now. The air quality is good. There are many places to go for a stroll. Chinatown (in Manhattan), by comparison, has nothing to offer. She also has her own house here. She can take a walk in the front, and then can plant things in the back (yard). She can live comfortably.

YZ: What are some of the good memories you have with her?

LZ: Like planting a lot of melons, vegetables, and so on, in the garden in the summer time. My mother likes it very much. Basically, you don't have to buy food from the market. What we harvest is very different (in quality) from those bought from the store. Especially this big winter melon – you can't buy anything like that from the store. The taste is different when you plant them yourself. So we are all happy to do it this way.

YZ: Who first came up with the idea of gardening?

LZ: My mother (laughs). She used to farm when she was still in the mainland (China). So now, every summer, my mother plants a lot of things in the backyard. A lot of winter melons, a lot of vegetables, and peppers. There's plenty for me to eat. My mother's, one person's effort, is enough to feed us all. It is also organic, right? There are no pesticides.

YZ: What about Dad? Or other family members...

LZ: Dad passed away two years ago. Now my sister also lives in Coney Island.

YZ: Do you often go out with your sister...?

LZ: Yes. We are also only a street away. Mom is also a street away from me. I bought my house in 2004. Mom bought hers in 2000.

YZ: What about during the holidays or festivals?

LZ: For holidays, the church has... It seems to be... Thanksgiving. The Church would prepare a big meal. There are turkeys to eat, all for free and for everyone. I have been there twice now. Very good atmosphere. Many people go there. There are turkeys and potatoes. Every year.

YZ: What about Chinese traditional festivals?

LZ: There are not a lot of those. It is not a place predominantly made up of the Chinese. No one is really holding a Chinese festival.

YZ: Not even in recent years?

LZ: Nothing. Only Thanksgiving and Christmas.

YZ: So if you want to celebrate traditional Chinese occasions, you'll have to do it with your family?

LZ: With my family, sometimes with relatives and friends. We would come together to sit and eat. We are friends all the time. You go to my house, I go to your house. Multiple families get together. We are always like this.

YZ: How many families?

LZ: Three or four. We are all good friends. Sometimes we go to celebrate at this house, and sometimes they come to mine.

YZ: Tell me an interesting anecdote about your relations with the different cultures you see in Coney Island.

LZ: Non-Chinese cultures? A lot of people like to sing and dance on the beach on the weekends. Every Saturday and Sunday, I go and become very happy. Our neighbors once said: If you have troubles, go to Coney Island and walk around; then, there is nothing to worry about. How happy they always are! Singing and dancing.

YZ: How many times a week do you go?

LZ: I go every night. After dinner, if it doesn't rain, I will go there. I always spend an hour, and then go back on the boardwalk for an hour. When I don't have to go to work on the weekends, I would go again in the morning. I feel very comfortable. If it doesn't rain or snow, I will go. It also became a part of my daily schedule, inseparable from my life.

YZ: For the entirety of the 19 years?

LZ: Yes. I go a little more in the summer, and less in the winter when it snows. I also go in the afternoon when it's not too dark. After all, the kids are starting to grow up. And you get very bored from watching TV at home, which is not healthy, either. Just come out and take a walk. That's why I insist on going out every day.

YZ: Have you noticed any newcomers in the neighborhood over the years?

LZ: Yes, that too. In the past, there were not so many Chinese. But now when you come out, almost half of the people walking are Chinese. It feels as if I were in Chinatown.

YZ: Do you chat with those Chinese people during your stroll?

LZ: Yes. Because I meet them every night, we became like good friends. We are all chatting while walking. Every night is like this. I don't have to make plans beforehand. I just have to encounter them when I come out: a bunch of Chinese, and another bunch there. There is a place for fishing. I like going to see them fishing. After I have my dinner, I go for a walk, watch them fish, and go back. It usually lasts from seven o'clock to more than nine o'clock, when I get back (laughs). After washing, it is usually ten o'clock for bedtime.

YZ: Why was it interesting to come to the Coney Island History Tour?

LZ: Oh, at that time, oh, I heard it from a friend, and so I just came. Because I walk on the boardwalk every day, I saw that they are introducing Coney Island through tours, and I also tried it out. Because I have lived here for so long, I wanted to get a sense of the culture as well.

YZ: What was the most remarkable thing about the tour?

LZ: What impressed me the most was sitting on the Ferris wheel [Deno's Wonder Wheel] for the first time (laughs). I never dared to go on one.

YZ: Have you ever been to an amusement park before?

LZ: I have been, but I never dared to do the Ferris wheel. I thought it was all for kids. In the past, almost a decade ago, I went on a pirate ship, and it was very scary. I'm a bit afraid of heights. But she [the tour guide] said, do you want to try it for free? (laughs). I shut my eyes on my first ride.

YZ: So you would still think that the beach and amusement in Coney Island is the best place to meet people and make friends?

LZ: Yeah, you are here to have fun. My home (Coney Island) to me, is also a good spot for entertainment, like a show.

YZ: Thank you for coming to our interview today.