

Coney Island History Project Oral History Archive

Interviewee: Juanhua Zhao

Interviewer: Keenan Chen

<http://www.coneyislandhistory.org/oral-history-archive/juanha-zhao>

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Keenan Chen	Today we're talking with Tai chi teacher Ms. Zhao. Would you mind sharing how old you are. Where are you originally from?
Juanhua Zhao	I'm almost 82 years old. I'm from Guangdong Province, China. I lived in Guangzhou ¹ .
Keenan Chen	Where were you born?
Juanhua Zhao	I was born in Jiangmen. There was a hospital called Marion Barclay Hospital ² .
Keenan Chen	Can you tell us what your childhood was like?
Juanhua Zhao	Soon after I was born, my family had to move because of the Japanese military invasion. My parents and I fled to Hong Kong. My mom was a midwife. According to my parents, we moved back to Jiangmen after Hong Kong had also fallen to the Japanese. My aunt and uncle lived in a village near Zhaoqing ³ , and we went over there to stay away from the Japanese army.
Keenan Chen	Were you very little when you went to Hong Kong? Do you remember what year it was?
Juanhua Zhao	I was born in 1938, and my brother was born in 1940. I remember he was born in Hong Kong, but we later moved back. I don't remember exactly this period of time of my childhood.
Keenan Chen	How long did you live in Zhaoqing?
Juanhua Zhao	I don't quite remember. After the Japanese soldiers surrendered, my father brought me back to our old house near the Marion Barclay Hospital in Jiangmen. When we came back, we saw our house was a mess. My father came to the US when he was young. He later came back and married my mother, who later gave birth to us.
Keenan Chen	Your father immigrated to the US when he was a young man?
Juanhua Zhao	I think he was living in New York City for about 10 years. He worked as a busboy in restaurants. Later, he moved to Hong Kong. My mother was a nurse in Hong Kong and was probably among the first to obtain a midwife license.
Keenan Chen	Do you know what year you father came to the US?
Juanhua Zhao	I remember he was about 18 years old. And he was born in 1905.
Keenan Chen	He probably came to the US in the 1920's?

¹ Guangzhou, also known as Canton, is the capital and most populous city of the province of Guangdong in southern China.

² Marion Barclay Hospital was founded by the United Church of Canada in 1921. It's now named Jiangmen Central Hospital.

³ Zhaoqing is a prefecture-level city about 60 miles west of Guangzhou.

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Juanhua Zhao	Yes, maybe 1923 or 1925? I am not sure, but you can do the math.
Keenan Chen	Did you grow up in Jiangmen?
Juanhua Zhao	That's right. My parents told me that when we fled to Hong Kong, we were staying with relatives in Kowloon. After Hong Kong was fallen to the Japanese, we moved again to the country. I saw Japanese soldiers. At the time, there is a place called Shangkong Village in Zhaoqing. We stayed in an ancestral shrine for many days. But not long after I saw those Japanese soldiers, they surrendered.
Keenan Chen	Can you talk about your childhood? How about you learning Tai Chi? Or where did you go to school? Do you still remember your hometown?
Juanhua Zhao	There is a Pui Ying elementary school ⁴ in Beijie ⁵ . I later went to study at Pui Shin Middle School, which was managed by the same principal. He loved students and ran several schools in Jiangmen, Guangzhou and Taishan.
Keenan Chen	Do you remember what year you went to elementary school?
Juanhua Zhao	My last year at school was the same year of liberation ⁶ , 1949 or 1950.
Keenan Chen	How was your family?
Juanhua Zhao	Both of my parents worked at the Marion Barclay Hospital. My mother was a nurse, while my father was an office worker. The hospital's director was a Canadian doctor. Both of my parents worked at the hospital to support me and my siblings. It was difficult and they didn't make much money. When my brother became older, he moved to attend Pui Ying Middle School in Guangzhou. But I went to Peixin Middle School in Beijie. The two schools also had the same school principal.
Keenan Chen	Did your mother work as a midwife?
Juanhua Zhao	She was promoted to the head of the nursing department after moving back to Jiangmen.
Keenan Chen	Since both of your parents worked at the hospital, did you spend a lot of time there, too?
Juanhua Zhao	Yes, I hung out a lot (with friends) at the hospital. My house was nearby and that's why we went there a lot. The hospital was beautiful, with a well-manicured lawn. We often ran into those western doctors. They were very kind to us and that's why we liked to hang out at the hospital.

⁴ The two schools were founded by the [American Presbyterian Mission](#).

⁵ Beijie, or Pakkai, is a neighborhood in Jiangmen.

⁶ In mainland China, the Communist Party called its victory in the civil war against the Nationalist Party of China between 1945 and 1949 a "liberation."

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Keenan Chen	What did you and your friends play? What were the popular games in the 50s?
Juanhua Zhao	Unlike today's children, we didn't have any toys and were jealous. Even when my son was a kid, he didn't have many toys; we were always short on money and could only afford to buy him a bicycle. Back when I was little, my classmates and I would make some sandbags and toss them for fun.
Keenan Chen	Was that hospital run by the church?
Juanhua Zhao	Yes. We also had a church right in front of our house.
Keenan Chen	What's the church's denomination?
Juanhua Zhao	It's a Christian church. There were lot of churches in that area, including a Baptist church that's further away from home. The Baptist church was huge and beautiful. When I was a kid, I went to Sunday school, sang gospel music and had communion, eating slices of bread.
Keenan Chen	Did you go to a Christian school? Did you spend a lot of time in the church growing up?
Juanhua Zhao	I wouldn't say I grew up in the church. But I lived right next to it and often hung out there with other children, some of whom were from the families of port officials, pastors and hospital workers. That area is by the riverfront and beautiful.
Keenan Chen	Are you a follower?
Juanhua Zhao	I was baptized when I was a kid. But when I grew older, I stopped (going to church). The practice was not encouraged, though it was later resumed. The church was taken over and used for other purposes. But I heard it's now returned to the church.
Keenan Chen	Was it because of the government, since the Communist Party is against any religion?
Juanhua Zhao	Yes, it was the government. But I wasn't sure how the government did it. During the Cultural Revolution, churches were all closed down.
Keenan Chen	Because of the Cultural Revolution, you couldn't go to church. What were you thinking at the time?
Juanhua Zhao	I always did what my parents told me to do when I was a child, so I went there (to the church) to learn singing, dancing and other Christmas rituals. After moving here (to the US), I would have flashbacks whenever I saw a Christmas celebration. But as I aged, I'd rather not think about it.
Keenan Chen	Could you talk about your family? You said you have five siblings.
Juanhua Zhao	Three of them have passed away. I was the fourth child. My younger and the oldest brothers have gone, so did the third brother. Right now, only the second brother and I are still alive. Both the third brother and the

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	<p>younger brother passed away in the past few years. We felt pretty lucky because our parents were willing to pay for our education. Therefore, we all studied in college; some of us became engineers. My younger brother, who went to study at a sports academy, had great success and became a nationally renowned coach.</p>
Keenan Chen	What kind of sports did he coach?
Juanhua Zhao	When he was first enrolled in the sports academy, he studied track and field. However, the coaches found him to have excellent strength and advised him to switch to weightlifting. He achieved the “master sportsman” level when he was still in the academy. Upon graduation, he became a coach at the Guangdong provincial team.
Keenan Chen	Did he coach weightlifting?
Juanhua Zhao	Yes. And he coached a world champion.
Keenan Chen	What’s the name of the world champion?
Juanhua Zhao	Weiqliang Chen, the nephew of Jingkai Chen. Jingkai Chen was such a famous athlete because he broke the world record nine times. Since Weiqliang Chen is Jingkai Chen’s nephew, many of the coaches at the time weren’t interested in coaching him out of the fear of the pressure to succeed. But my younger brother didn’t care about it and said he would coach anyone who wanted to learn.
Keenan Chen	You said you also majored in sports. What did you study?
Juanhua Zhao	Initially, I studied track and field. However, a year into the program, I was diagnosed with kidney stones. After the surgery, the doctors advised me to give up track and field. I was disappointed because I really wanted to put what I learned into practice. But after taking a break for about half a year, I went back to the academy and managed to graduate from the program.
Keenan Chen	Did you become a teacher? Where did you teach?
Juanhua Zhao	I taught at the Beihai Middle School.
Keenan Chen	What city was it in?
Juanhua Zhao	It’s in Zhanjiang. Because the high school wanted to have a female physical education teacher, I was then sent there and stayed for about 10 years. During that period, I got married and gave birth to my child. But because I had been separated from my husband for way to long, I requested to be relocated to be closer to him.
Keenan Chen	Where did you relocate to?

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Juanhua Zhao	Sun Yat-sen University ⁷ .
Keenan Chen	You moved to Guangzhou in the 60s?
Juanhua Zhao	I moved there for my teaching job in 1973. But I used to live in Guangzhou because the sports academy was there.
Keenan Chen	Did you teach sports after you went back to Guangzhou?
Juanhua Zhao	I taught PE at Sun Yat-sen University. Our PE classes included many different programs, such as gymnastics, track and field, basketball and swimming.
Keenan Chen	What was the one sport that you were really good at?
Juanhua Zhao	Shot put. But I switched to practice basketball after the surgery.
Keenan Chen	But now you teach Tai Chi?
Juanhua Zhao	I started to learn Tai Chi after I started working at Sun Yat-sen University; Because my husband loved Tai Chi, I was influenced by him and practiced alongside with him. I became obsessed with Tai Chi.
Keenan Chen	Was your husband also a physical education teacher?
Juanhua Zhao	No, he taught history.
Keenan Chen	Was he a college professor?
Juanhua Zhao	Yes.
Keenan Chen	What benefits does Tai Chi have?
Juanhua Zhao	I think Tai Chi is great. Both of my knees had surgeries after I moved to the US. After the surgery, I couldn't even stand up. It was through practicing Tai Chi that I was able to correct my leg posture. Tai Chi is mostly about your core strength: you can only move your foot after you finish the previous move of the other foot and thus support your upper body. Therefore, I believe practicing Tai Chi is to train your legs; hips, shoulders and arms come second. And I gradually realized practicing Tai Chi is also beneficial to recover my stamina.
Keenan Chen	You said you had knee surgeries after moving to the US. When did you come to the US?
Juanhua Zhao	My first visit was in 1998. I came back and forth (between the US and China) many times.
Keenan Chen	Was your son already living in here?
Juanhua Zhao	He studied in the US and then stayed for work.
Keenan Chen	Did he study at a college here?

⁷ A major public university located in Guangzhou, it was founded in 1924 and named after Dr. Sun Yat-sen, a revolutionary and the founding father of the Republic of China.

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Juanhua Zhao	He was a college student in China but came here to study for his master's degree.
Keenan Chen	Does he live nearby?
Juanhua Zhao	Yes. His home is near 85th street. It's because of the close proximity, we chose to move here.
Keenan Chen	If I remember it correctly, didn't you tell me you moved to your current home in August 2012?
Juanhua Zhao	I moved to Coney Island (at W. 24th Street near Surf Avenue) in 2012. But prior to that, I had been living here for many years. I used to live with my son.
Keenan Chen	Where was your first house?
Juanhua Zhao	He rented a house on Bay Parkway and 71 st street
Keenan Chen	And didn't you tell me you moved to Coney Island right when Hurricane Sandy hit?
Juanhua Zhao	Yes, the hurricane was bad. Once my son asked me to go stay at his place, I left my apartment immediately. When I came back, I found the entire neighborhood was flooded. My neighbors were drying their clothes and shoes in their front lawns.
Keenan Chen	What floor did you live on?
Juanhua Zhao	I live on the ground level. Luckily, since I just moved here (when the hurricane hit), I hadn't unpacked. And because there is an elevated ramp leading up to the entrance of the apartment building and the entrance door was of good quality, my apartment wasn't flooded. However, the building's hallways were packed with trashed brought there by the flood.
Keenan Chen	Was your apartment not affected at all?
Juanhua Zhao	The only damage was my refrigerator, since the electricity was out.
Keenan Chen	How long did you leave your apartment?
Juanhua Zhao	Over a week. Because my apartment was not affected that much, I came home immediately after the traffic resumed. But I did see the damages caused by the flood and can imagine flood water reached as high as the windows.
Keenan Chen	Do you teach Tai Chi at the senior center ⁸
Juanhua Zhao	Yes. I teach stretching exercises because senior people lose their muscle strength. Additionally, because they worked really hard to make a living [when they were younger], many seniors are not in ideal shape and it takes a lot of efforts to improve. That's why I encourage them to learn slowly in order to avoid any injury. With my background in teaching

⁸ Mrs. Zhao taught Tai Chi at the Coney Island Seaside Innovative Senior Center on 37th Street and Surf Avenue.

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	physical education, I emphasize gradual progress. It really takes a long time to master a move.
Keenan Chen	How many classes do you teach a week? And how many students do you have? How long is each class?
Juanhua Zhao	A class is about an hour. We would stretch for an hour and then do Tai Chi for another one hour. I also volunteered in other programs, such as a handcraft course where I helped other seniors to use beads to make dog, cat and Christmas tree-shaped ornaments. They really enjoyed doing it. It's also an exercise for their fingers [and hands] and should be good for their mental health.
Keenan Chen	Do you have anything else you want to share?
Juanhua Zhao	<p>We moved to the United States to enjoy our retirement. My husband is 86 years old and I'm 82. Knowing we don't have many years left, we just want to do more exercises and enjoy the good air and water quality here.</p> <p>How bad was the air quality in China? Though it was bad in the past, we've found it becoming better in the past few years. For example, it was very difficult to find beautiful weather, but it's getting more common now. While the air quality in China has improved a lot and even though we missed our friends and families back home, we are already here in the US and want to stay close to our son. I recently heard airline companies will bar elderly people from taking flights. I don't know what I am going to do. Is [it] because of the insurance or something else. I hadn't gone back in five years. During those five years, my older brother and younger brother passed away and I was devastated. My son didn't want me to go back because he's concerned about me. Therefore, I've only gone back once late last year. But since I started volunteering at the senior center, I rarely went back. I teach Tai Chi, stretching and handcraft classes.</p>
Keenan Chen	Really appreciate you talking to us, Mrs. Zhao.
Juanhua Zhao	Thank you.