

Coney Island History Project Oral History Archive Coney Island History Project Oral History Collection

Interviewee: Tim Law

Interviewer: Yolanda Zhang

<https://www.coneyislandhistory.org/oral-history-archive/tim-law>

Content © 2021 Coney Island History Project.

All material on the CIHP website is copyrighted and cannot be used without permission.

Yolanda Zhang: Hi, this is Yolanda Zhang (Zhang Yueheng) from the Coney Island History Project. Today we're talking with Dr. Tim Law (Luo Tianfu) from the Chinese American Social Service Center in Brooklyn. Dr. Law, could you start by briefly introducing yourself?

Tim Law: My name is Tim Law. I came to the U.S. from Hong Kong in 1968. I was an international student back then, at a time when not a lot of people were studying abroad like I was. I remember applying to many U.S. universities. One day, I received a big envelope, which caught me by surprise. Because all the other envelopes, such as the ones sent from Columbia and NYU, were all small.; they usually would begin with the line “Thank you for applying to our school!” and that was pretty much it! But this big envelope, from Fordham University, contained an I-20 (student visa) for me. My reaction was like “oh my god! I am really grateful to them.” After completing the paperwork, I arrived in the U.S. Like I said, I first came here in 1968 and the Chinese population was small. If you wanted to get a copy of a Chinese language newspaper, for example, you’d have a difficult time to find it in Brooklyn. You’d have to go to the Chinatown in Manhattan. And there was only one major Chinese newspaper at the time, the *United Journal*¹, which has since ceased to publish. If you were looking for Chinese food, such as vegetables or dried fruits, you’d also have to go to the Chinatown in Manhattan. The most popular language of the Chinese community in Manhattan back then was Taishanese. Not a lot of people spoke Cantonese. I later moved to the Eighth Avenue area². While you see a lot of Chinese immigrants now, I was the one of only three Chinese families when I moved here. I remember the houses were very affordable. When I talked to a store owner, he raised three fingers, meaning his building was worth \$30,000. I’m sure it’s now worth about \$1 million! On this note, I’d say the neighborhood has changed a lot.

YZ: Thank you. Let's start with your basic information. You said you came to the U.S. in 1968. Then what year were you born, and was it in Hong Kong?

TL: Right, as for my birth and birth date, there is a quite legendary story. You can also read about it in some old newspapers. It was unfortunate that I grew up as an orphan. I was on my own. The villagers swaddled me in white cloth and placed me on the sidewalk. It is a true story. My mother passed away shortly after I was born. So did my father, who didn’t receive the necessary medical care

¹<https://catalog.loc.gov/vwebv/search?searchCode=LCCN&searchArg=sn%2083045864&searchType=1&permalink=y>

² Chinese residents in New York often refer to the part of Sunset Park where the Chinese community is located as the “Eighth Avenue” area.

or nutrition to cure his illness. I was told that I was born four or five years after the peace treaty³ was signed. When I went to apply for a passport to come to the U.S., I had problems with filling out my birth certificate. Because I initially gave out different birth dates, the official was pissed at me and asked, “How is it possible that you have different birth dates?” After telling him that I didn’t know what my actual birth date was, the official advised me to go back to the village and ask three elderly residents to come here and vouch for me. I later came back with three senior villagers, who recounted my birth story: when my mom passed away, I was abandoned on the curbside of the street. Our village shared the same ancestors and there was this elderly woman, Mrs. Law, who was already in her sixties. She brought me home with her. If she didn’t rescue me, I wouldn’t be here talking to you today. (Laugh) When I later asked her why she took me home, she told me that I was a boy and could help her with farming. I did grow up helping her on her farm, cutting and collecting wood. That’s because we lived in a rural area and had no electricity or propane, we had to burn firewood to keep warm during winters. I also harvested peanuts and potatoes. That was a really tough time.

YZ: How young? And you were working for her until you turned what age?

TL: Until I turned 5 or 6 years. Yes, even the three elderly residents had trouble remembering my birth year. They estimated I was born four or five years after the war against the Japanese ended and told me to take 1948 as my birth year. I then picked September 5 as my birth date. But honestly, I don’t know! We didn’t have birth certificates, and my adoptive mother was illiterate. Even though I wasn’t the smartest kid, I was very studious. At the time, even pens and paper were scarce. When I received a notebook for winning an award, I told my adoptive mother and she was delighted. I have been working hard since my early childhood and even after coming to the U.S. because I knew I would not achieve anything without working hard. So, I ended up graduating with three master’s degrees and a PhD degree in education – from NYU, Fordham, and LIU. Thanks to my employee perks at the NYC Department of Education, I was able to use these vouchers to pursue my education and take classes at NYU. I didn’t have to pay a lot for my tuition.

YZ: What made you decide to stay in the U.S.?

TL: My situation [back home] was very difficult, and so was my childhood. I hoped to stay in the U.S. if there was such an opportunity. Not only did I study a lot, but I also worked hard to look for jobs. Finally, I got a bilingual education position. And at around the same time, I also met the woman who would later become my wife. I met her when I was working a part-time job at a restaurant. As a college graduate, the restaurant owner assigned me to be the cashier and manager. Yet, I wasn’t familiar with American currency and couldn’t tell if a coin was 5-cents, 10-cents or 25-cents. One night, we had a long line of patrons trying to pay their checks. Seeing the long line getting longer, the owner realized I didn’t know how to count coins. Getting pissed at me, the owner told me to go wash dishes in the kitchen. But my wife was kind enough to walk me through which of these coins were 5-

³ The “peace treaty” Mr. Law was referring to here and later in the conversation was actually the Japanese Instrument of Surrender, which was signed on September 2, 1945. The Treaty of San Francisco, the official peace treaty between Japan and the Allied Powers -- which China was a member -- wasn’t signed until 1951.

cents, 10-cents and 25-cents. My wife has been really good to me. If I didn't meet my wife, I would not have been able to stay (in the U.S.). Through our marriage, I was able to become a naturalized citizen.

YZ: Was this restaurant in Manhattan?

TL: No, it was on Pitkin Avenue in Brooklyn. Because the restaurant was far, I had to take several buses to get there. Instead of serving Cantonese dim sum, the restaurant sold fried chicken and egg rolls. (The dishes) appealed mostly to Americans.

YZ: When did you move to Bensonhurst?

TL: The school was the main reason we chose to move here. When we used to live in the Eighth Avenue area, because my two kids spoke mostly English, they couldn't communicate with their classmates, who mostly came from new immigrant families. They came home and told me, "Daddy, mommy, I don't understand what the teachers say." My wife and I had a discussion on which area has better schools. And we decided to move to Bensonhurst because of School District 21 and the public transportation. We sent our kids to PS 177 Elementary School, which was good. My kids got into Mark Twain (I.S. 239 for the Gifted & Talented) and then Stuyvesant High School. They are now pediatricians.

YZ: What year did you move to Bensonhurst?

TL: In the 1970s. Maybe 1975. I don't recall exactly.

YZ: What was your first impression of Bensonhurst, when you first moved here? How was it different from [elsewhere in] Brooklyn or Manhattan?

TL: While there were fewer Chinese residents here, many of them spoke Cantonese. The neighborhood was very tranquil, unlike the noisiness in the Eighth Avenue area. The streets were also clean. The school district and the education quality were good for the kids.

YZ: So now let's talk about your previous career at the NYC Department of Education. What were some of your most memorable experiences?

TL: The Department of Education was looking for a Chinese speaker. I can speak Cantonese Mandarin, and Hakka. And the recruiter was impressed by the fact that I speak all three. He told me "Come on, come on" and hired me. I was a bilingual teacher for five years and then as an administrator for another 30 years. During my 35 years there, I helped a lot of Chinese students, helping them with their high school applications, giving them advice on what they should pay attention to in their applications, and intervening when students got into fights or encountered difficulties at home. I would investigate how these fights broke out. In many cases, it was because of the language barrier, especially for those students who immigrated here when they were already 15 or 16 years old. Their lack of English skills made it very difficult for them. A common misconception is

that we should put these kids in the same classroom with native speakers as soon as possible. Especially in social studies classes, because those textbooks were dense and written in English, some students couldn't finish their assignments. I remember some social studies teachers complaining to me about these students not turning in their reports. And I told those teachers that these students would like to finish their assignments but they did not know how. The teachers finally understood. For these students, I recommend them going to schools that have bilingual programs and studying under teachers who speak Chinese.

YZ: What years was this?

TL: The 1980s. From time to time, some school principals who knew me asked me to help communicate with the parents.

YZ: Are you still working? Or when did you retire?

TL: No, I retired about seven or eight years ago. I was doing counseling for Chinese parents up until then.

YZ: You later established an institution that offers free Chinese language lessons to immigrant families.

TL: Yes. We call it the Chinese Class or Chinese School, which has been held at IS 96 Intermediate School. We have been doing it for 12 years. Kids over the age of five can enroll. The classes are offered usually between 10:30 and 12:30 on Saturday mornings. We offer classes during the school calendar year: when the school is open, we open; when the school is closed, we close. We teach our children Mandarin under the "oral approach." We also teach children Pinyin⁴. For example, b-ei BEI, ji-yi-ng JING.

YZ: Where is the school located?

TL: It is on 99 Avenue P.

YZ: How did you come up with the idea of creating such a school?

TL: Right, let me elaborate. During my years working in education, I came across a lot of parents asking me to organize Chinese language classes for their children, who can't even say their names in Chinese. These are true stories. When you ask them if they have already had food⁵, many of them can only answer "yes" or "no," rather than responding in a full sentence. Some of them don't even know about Chinese traditional holidays, such as Lunar New Year or the Moon Festival. Some parents said their children asked what mooncakes are for. After these conversations with parents, I talked to the

⁴ A system to transcribe Mandarin Chinese sounds into a Latin alphabet. <https://chinese.yabla.com/chinese-pinyin-chart.php>

⁵ A common Chinese greeting phrase.

school and the Italian Center⁶. Now we are able to organize seven classes in seven classrooms without charge. I must thank the school and the Italian Center. Without their generosity, we'd have to pay \$1,000 to run these classes. We would have to pay for not only heat during winter but also security guards and even for the restrooms. We've been doing this for 12 years and ultimately, we want the second generation to learn a little bit of Chinese and Chinese culture.

YZ: Did the Italian Center and IS 96 fund the program?

TL: Yes, it's called the Beacon Program, which is funded by the city's DYCD.⁷

YZ: Thank you for sharing. Now let's talk about your experience as a long-time resident in Bensonhurst.

TL: Yes, as I mentioned, the biggest challenge to the Chinese community is the language barrier. First of all, if you aren't able to communicate, you lose out on many opportunities, including jobs and access to information. As a result, they'd have to rely on Chinese-language newspapers, radio and TV.

YZ: Would you say that a big part of the new development in the neighborhood has been the emerging Chinese language radio stations?

TL: Yes, like WZRC-AM 1480, which offers news and job information. We did not have anything like this in the past. Another challenge is employment. It has always been hard for Chinese immigrants to find jobs. Many of us are only able to work in restaurants, grocery stores, dry cleaners and other low-wage jobs. I know some of these immigrants, who were nurses and even doctors in Mainland [China], Hong Kong or Taiwan, couldn't get their licenses here due to their English. It's such a disappointment that they were only able to work in low-wage jobs. We would like the government to offer job training assistance to better equip these recent Chinese immigrants.

YZ: Did the government provide assistance?

TL: Not much. This is something I have been working on for the past few years. For example, we offer English class at our Center every Saturday. And at PS 96 Intermediate School, in addition to running Chinese classes, we also offer English classes. Additionally, we also run a naturalization test prep course for those who apply to become United States citizens. This class is also an opportunity for them to improve their English; we hope they can learn as much as they can. I'm also hoping to provide a basic job training program in the future for officer workers, nurses, doctors' aides and so on.

YZ: Great. And speaking of diversity in Bensonhurst, when did Chinese immigrants start moving to this neighborhood en masse? Are the majority of them still Cantonese speakers?

⁶ The Federation of Italian American Organizations of Brooklyn,

⁷ The Department of Youth and Community Development.

TL: Back then, yes. But in recent years, there has been a growing number of Fujianese immigrants.

YZ: When did the Fujianese arrive?

TL: In the past decade. They initially clustered on the East Broadway area in Manhattan. But when that neighborhood became overpopulated, they moved to Eighth Avenue because of the convenience of the N Train and the shuttle buses⁸. Now there are some Fujianese in Bensonhurst, though the number is smaller than on Eighth Avenue.

YZ: What businesses do the Fujianese immigrants run? Any difference from the Cantonese?

TL: Mostly in the restaurant business. They run the type of restaurants that I used to work at -- that they serve non-Chinese customers with dishes such as fried chicken, egg rolls, fried rice. This type of restaurant caters to Western appetites rather than Cantonese or Szechuanese. Some Fujianese restaurateurs took over some of the Cantonese restaurants. Some also go to work outside of the city and only come home once a month. I also learned that they started opening up a lot of sushi restaurants too. When a new business hits the maximum capacity at some point, you'll have to seek changes. That's how the Chinese run their business. Take the laundry business as an example: workers used to hand-wash clothes several decades ago. Those days were gone and now they've become laundromats. A lot of the stuff from the past has died out as the years go by.

YZ: I see. Tell me what has been motivating you to be active in your community throughout these years?

TL: Yes, I would like to especially mention the phenomenon that many of us in the Chinese community don't have adequate access to information. Whenever the federal government makes an [policy] announcement, such as SNAP⁹, healthcare, or SSI¹⁰, many of us are unaware most of the time. I think it is a pity. They have no idea how to deal with these changes. There're some who received their naturalization documents but didn't know what to do. Another example is the problem with the storefront signs a couple years ago¹¹. A lot of our restaurants and businesses received fines, and some even got penalties as high as \$6,000. Because many of them didn't know what to do, they had no other choices but to pay the fines. We later invited a representative from the city government to give a talk at our Center. The representative told us not to pay the fine immediately. And if they had already paid the fine, the representative told us how to request for refunds. Still, many business owners were so afraid to the point that they paid the fines and also shut down their stores. I think the reason behind these troubles is because we don't have adequate access to information. That's what motivated me to organize and communicate the latest information to our community, letting them know how to work with the government. For example, we have close ties to the 62nd precinct and

⁸ Privately-run buses that run from Chinese neighborhoods in Brooklyn to Chinatown and other area of the Lower East Side.

⁹ The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

¹⁰ Supplemental Security Income

¹¹ <https://bit.ly/3uRW918>

often have them over to speak to us. Many older residents fell victim to scammers, some of whom claimed they were calling from the Chinese consulate. That's a pity. While the newspapers reported a story about someone being scammed for over a million dollars, the typical amount is usually about ten to twenty thousand dollars. For example, there's an old lady who went to withdraw funds from Chase or Manhattan Bank. The bank clerk told the old lady that she's about to fall victim to a scam and advised her against wiring the money. But the clerk wasn't able to persuade her and had no choice but to allow the old lady to do what she intended to do, because it's her money. In the end, the old lady spent twenty thousand dollars on gift cards and mailed them to the scammers. This is actually pretty common in our community. That's why we always invite our senior residents to come to our Center, not only to participate in our workshops but also to have the opportunity to talk with others from the community, rather than just staying home all day.

YZ: Are these frauds still common?

TL: Yes, it's still very common. Another example I want to mention: There is an old Chinese man who found his food stamps account (SNAP) not working when he was trying to pay for his groceries. It turned out that the SNAP agency had spent months trying to contact him regarding the renewal of his application through mail and phone calls. The old man didn't understand English and thought it was just another spam call or mail. Until one day, his daughter came home to visit him and realized he had voice mails. She came to our Center with the phone number and asked me to help her father. I found out the agency had terminated the old man's account. A representative from the agency said the old man could have maintained his account by just sending over proof of his rental payments. However, because he didn't respond to the request, the representative said they had no choice but to terminate his account. I begged the representative, Mr. Nelson, to give him another chance, telling him that the 78-year-old man doesn't speak English at all. I told [the family of] the old man to go get a copy of his rent payments from the landlord and faxed it out. Five minutes later, I called Mr. Nelson, and told him again that the old man was 78 years old and very much relied on the food stamps. Without it, he'd be in big trouble. In the end, the representative did give the old man another chance but also warned him that he would have to respond to their mails in the future. Well, now every time I bump into the old man on the street, he always invites me to go have tea with him (Laugh).

YZ: Do you find those helpful resources by yourself or with a team?

TL: It's teamwork. Take "public charge" as an example; it's a serious issue but many senior residents don't understand. Whenever we see useful information in the newspapers, we would cut it out and put the clipping on our public bulletin board.

YZ: Do you have two daughters?

TL: I have two children, one daughter and one son. I didn't send them to take test prep classes. When they were preparing to take the test for Stuyvesant, I never told them anything like: "Jason, or Alina, you have to get into this school." I let them be who they want to be. I thought if they were able to get

in, that's because they received a good education in their elementary and secondary schools. That's more important.

YZ: Do your children still live with you?

TL: Not anymore. They lived with us before. But they've moved out since they got married. They also relocated for their jobs. When my children found their jobs in other states, they moved, unlike in the past, when Chinese families always stayed in one household no matter what. My son, for example, is a doctor and moved to Boston because he was offered a position at Boston University. His wife also found a job there. Again, we live in a different time and environment nowadays. And because of their employment, families don't always live together anymore.

YZ: Your son is at Boston University?

TL: Yes. He is doing his residency and also in charge of pediatrics. He is always busy. When we have dinner, his phone often rings or beeps with calls and messages from his patients.

YZ: Let's talk about the Chinese American Social Services Center. When was it established?

TL: Four or five years ago. A couple friends of mine, including Mrs. Ng, and I started thinking about helping the Chinese community by establishing the Center. As we mentioned, Bensonhurst has a lot of senior residents. While they like to walk around [and meet up] in the park, it's too cold to stay outside during the winter. They didn't have a place to get together or discuss the latest news, either. We thought it'd be nice to have an indoor space for people to get together and exchange helpful information. Our Center hopes to help those seniors to improve their language skills and help with their paperwork. Sometimes people would bring with them letters they don't understand. Additionally, we host workshops twice or three times a month, including with police officers, government officials and social workers.

YZ: What is the age group of the attendees? Or are they of different ages?

TL: We've had people of all ages, seniors, retirees and also younger. But younger people are fewer due to work. Most of them are in their 50s and 60s. When we host a workshop, we'd have 50 to 60 people show up and take up all the seats.

YZ: Is the Center working on any project?

TL: Yes, one of our upcoming agendas is to celebrate the Chinese New Year. We just turned in our application for the New Year parade on January 26th, that's this year's [2020] Lunar New Year. We plan to invite people to come perform Lion dances and folk dances. We also welcome local Chinese residents to join us. We also plan to invite senior residents to a dinner party.

YZ: Thank you. These are all the questions I have! Do you want to add anything that I missed?

TL: I hope that members in our community can all work together and be more active in voting. We don't have the awareness to participate in elections. Take Bensonhurst as an example, especially, our voter turnout is especially low. I don't know the reasons behind it. We always encourage our members in our community to go vote in every election. I do think participating in politics and voting are important. Because these elected officials would only pay attention [to the community] because of the number of our ballots. For example, many politicians said they supported cancelling the high school entrance exam. If your community's strength can be reflected in the elections, you can make a difference. I know Colton¹² and Peter Abbate¹³ both helped us [by opposing ~~getting~~ **doing** away with the entrance exam]. Another problem is with the new census. I encouraged our fellow members of the community to fill out the census forms. Ten years ago, I participated [as a census worker]. Once, I met a family of five, who were only willing to fill out information for one person. I asked them why they would do that when you had five people under the same household. "No, one person is enough," they said. First of all, this is not encouraged. Second, filling out a census form wouldn't do you any harm, and I wouldn't share information about whether your sister has five members in her family, or call the police or the immigration office. Census workers won't do it. But our fellow Chinese are always afraid of this and other things.

YZ: Thank you so much for sharing this.

¹² William Colton is a New York State Assemblyman representing part of Bensonhurst, Bath Beach and Gravesend.

¹³ Peter J. Abbate, Jr. is a New York State Assemblyman representing part of Bensonhurst, Sunset Park and Dyker Heights.