

Coney Island History Project - Oral History Archive

Interviewee: Boan Lin (Master Lin)

Interviewer: Yiyi Zhang

<https://www.coneyislandhistory.org/oral-history-archive/boan-lin-master-lin>

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* This is an edited version of the interview due to the interruptions and length of the original one.

Yiyi	<p>Today is May the 6th, 2019. We are at Master Lin's apartment, and I'm doing this [interview] for the Coney Island History Project. Master Lin, thank you for agreeing to do our interview today. I'd like to first ask you to tell us your name, and your date of birth.</p>
Master Lin	<p>0:29 Thank you. Thank you for coming. I was born in April 1932, so I'm a very old person, an old man (with a smile on his face). I grew up in mainland China, Xiamen in Fujian Province. This city is not big, but is very famous. I grew up in a household of doctors. So, I always wanted to be a doctor because of my family. Also, my parents had always encouraged me to be a doctor. But very coincidentally, I met three classmates from my middle school, and we are all Christians and so we started to dream of having a boat full of Christians. This boat would go everywhere, carrying cargo and passengers. We would be serving, this is an act of serving. As Christians, we would stay on the boat and love each other. So that's why I had this idea that I would live on a boat.</p> <p>When I applied to college, I was accepted by a college in the east, a medical school. That was because I chose medical schools when I filled out my college application. Because at that time the college exam was a nationwide public exam, and maritime academies were also open for applicants, though separately. So, I also applied to a maritime academy and got in. Because I got in to this maritime academy, I wanted to go. But my parents were very much opposed to my decision. Being doctors themselves, they want me to be a doctor as well.</p> <p>5:16 But at the time I still wanted and only wanted to go to sea, so I gave up on going to medical school. After graduating from the maritime academy, I was assigned to go aboard a ship. The ship was scheduled to go from Yantai to Yingkou, which would take roughly one day. However, right after we left port, we hit a gale. There were seasonal winds around Jiao Zhou Bay from the northeast. The wind was very strong that time, and so the ship was teetering, shaking violently. At that time, in the '50s, the ship was [already] very old and also had not been overhauled very often, and so water was leaking into the ship because of the wind. You know many people on the ship were very scared.</p>

But because I am Christian and I believe in God, I felt very much at peace, not afraid at all. I trusted that God would take care of me, would protect me. Many people looked terrible when they were facing death. They were crying out to their fathers and mothers. They didn't have God in their hearts, and didn't know where they would be going after death. But we who believe in Jesus knew that we would be going back to the heavenly home after we die, so we were not afraid.

The ship shook for three days. When we got to the Bohai Sea the wind stopped, but the waves were still high. But outside of Tianjin, because it was very flat, no mountains could be seen. There was a sextant on the ship. Sextants are used to measure the altitudes of the sun and the stars. So I told a telegraph operator on the ship to listen to the hour of the day on the radio. The radio reported the hours of the day at a fixed time. For example, if it's 10 o'clock, it would consecutively ring 6 times or how many times I forgot now. I asked the telegrapher to listen for me and when it reported the time in the morning, I measured the altitude of the sun. Then there was a marine chronometer on the ship, and so I used it to look up the altitude of the spot and draw a line, the line of the ship. In the morning I drew one line, and I drew one in the afternoon, and the intersection of the two lines is the location [latitude and longitude] of your ship.

When the wind calmed down, we used the location of the ship to go towards Yingkou. Though the wind calmed down, the waves were still high, and so the ship was still tossed around. When the ship was about to get to Yingkou – there was a beach called Lanjiangsha outside of Yingkou. We could only manage to go through during high tide, otherwise, our ship would hit the sand. Because the waves were still high, we didn't consider whether our ship would get stranded while crossing this area, and we kept on moving forward. But when we got there, as we hit the sand, the steering gear broke. Without the steering gear, a ship was very hard to control, but we still managed to move beyond the sandbar, and finally reached the port of Yingkou.

17:58 I was in China for decades, and I came to the U.S. 30 years ago. I spent most of my life on the mainland [of China]. When I graduated from college, I faced a very critical issue, that is whether I was right or wrong in believing in Jesus. If I were wrong, why should I believe in him? In China, when people assign you jobs after graduation, besides your grades, they also looked at your political thoughts and your beliefs. Everyone knew I believed in Jesus, because I prayed every day before meals, everyone knew.

My family is called the Five Red Categories in mainland China, you know? [The Five Red Categories during China's Cultural Revolution (1966–76) were the social classes favored by the Communist Party of China.] This is because of my parents. My dad joined the Communist Party in 1928, and my mother joined

	later as well. So, as someone who grew up in this kind of family, I belong to the Five Red Categories. Five Red Categories are the people the government focused its efforts in educating and developing. But I was thinking, if what I believed was true, I would have to give up on being one of the Five Red Categories, this special right. But I needed to find out whether what I believed was right or not. So, when I was about to graduate from college, I read a lot of books. I wanted to find evidence for me to doubt or even change my belief through the books against God. But I found nothing. I've read books on topics such as dialectical materialism and logic.
Yiyi	22:42 I wonder if I could ask you when you started practicing tai chi? I have watched other interviews about you, and it seemed like you started in 1960s. Can I ask under what kind of circumstance and opportunity did you start practicing tai chi in China?
Master Lin	23:00 When I was little, my father taught me Shaolin Quan [One of the oldest and most famous styles of wushu or kungfu. It combines Ch'an philosophy and martial arts and originated and was developed in the Shaolin temple in Henan Province, China.] That's when I was a teenager in middle school. And then later, later I came to the U.S. and needed to find a job. Where should I go to find a job? I almost forgot. Oh, but one thing I remember, that there was a social worker at a senior center. She wanted to help me find something to do, a job: "What can you do?" I said I could teach Chinese. I could teach, but in the U.S., you need an American certification to teach Chinese, many diplomas. But I don't have any certification. Why don't I have them? On one hand, I moved; on the other hand, my house was searched and confiscated. Everything was taken by the Red Guards, they took everything and destroyed everything, so I have nothing.
Yiyi	So, is that how and why you decided to teach tai chi?
Master Lin	Right, she asked what else can you do, and I said I can do tai chi, and I can teach tai chi. But this person didn't know to what extent I knew tai chi, and so she asked me if I could show her. I said sure and I did it for her. After I finished, this young lady said after watching your tai chi, I feel very peaceful. So, she helped me to contact places she knew. She put me in touch with a senior center. Because there were very few people teaching tai chi, as I started to teach tai chi there, other centers got to know me and invited me to teach as well. 30 years ago in New York, I had classes every day of the week. I taught each class for one hour, and so every week I went from one place to another to teach.
Yiyi	29:53 You mentioned that you had taught tai chi in Coney Island before. Can you share about your teaching experience there or your impressions of Coney Island?

Master Lin	<p>30:11 During that time, I lived in Brooklyn. Not like in Little Neck [Queens], from Little Neck to Coney Island would be very far. I used to ride a bicycle and soon I would make a turn and reach the boardwalk in Coney Island. Whenever I rode the bicycle, I would go there. Sometimes I took students to do tai chi as well, but during the times I have been there, no one seemed to be interested in learning tai chi with me. I don't remember anyone said that they would come and find me. So, I just went there to show up, and did a little bit. I did tai chi with a sword or a stick.</p> <p>But I have a memory from the beach there. Some people were leaning against the railing from the beach side and were watching me on the boardwalk side, doing tai chi on the wooden boards. They were not that interested in learning something, but only [watched] with a kind of curiosity. They would watch for a little bit and then walk away. No one thought to come and ask: when will you come again, or where should I go to study with you. So, I just stayed there and enjoyed myself. I didn't need others to appreciate me. I just enjoyed my tai chi, my tai chi stick. I liked to do tai chi with stick.</p>
Yiyi	<p>34:10 What do you think is the relation between tai chi and your faith? Does tai chi help me to understand your faith? For some people, because of the concept of qi ["life force," the energy that powers our body and spirit] in tai chi, they see it as opposed to religions. What do you think?</p>
Master Lin	<p>I think there is no opposition between them. Some people say that tai chi is like a religion, but it's not. Tai chi in my understanding is a type of exercise. Of course, when people say "yi shou dan tian" [to guard the awareness within one's energy centers], makes tai chi sounds very mystical. But it's not, it's very tangible, very real. When you do tai chi, if your awareness/thought is not focused, or if it is too focused – like if you were to concentrate on one part of your body, then you can't do it, and you won't be able to know what you are doing. I think when practicing tai chi, some people start step by step, and some do not. They do whatever they want, and it becomes a sort of freestyle, not fixed. I don't know if that is good or bad, but I agree with practicing step by step, whether with a simplified form or complex form, you do it step by step.</p>
Yiyi	<p>38:02 You mentioned that your parents had joined the Communist Party a long time ago, but your house was confiscated by the Red Guard during Cultural Revolution. May I ask what was the cause?</p>

Master Lin	38:19 The Red Guards, it was chaotic then. The children [in the Red Guards] saw you as strange, and so they would seize you, criticize you [in a "struggle session"] and humiliate you. Because I wasn't with my parents anymore then, they confiscated my house and then caught me and paraded me in the streets in Guangzhou. You know Guangzhou? They shoved me and made me walk through the streets of Shamian, with a gaomao [tall paper hat worn as a public humiliation] saying "God's son" and a signboard saying niu gui she shen ["Cow demons and snake spirits" was a popular term used during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) to denounce and dehumanize any "enemy."] When I was forced to wear the hat by Red Guards, I didn't feel abused, I felt unworthy, because they wrote "God's son." I praised God, for even they knew that I was a son, a child of God, and I felt honored. When I was being paraded on the street, the Red Guard pressed my head down, and they cleared the people on the sides. I remember there was a woman in her 40s or 50s, someone who has just came here to see what was going on. She came and hit me. I only knew that she was a woman, but I didn't look up to see her. I thought, I was not going to hate her. As Christians we say that she beat me because I deserved to be beaten. I didn't look at her even once. I only knew she was a woman, but I didn't look at her face, because I was afraid of hating her.
Yiyi	We are about to end our interview. Before that, is there anything else you'd like to share from the 87 years of your life journey? Whether it's about tai chi, or your faith, or your experience in the U.S., is there anything else you'd like to share that I didn't ask earlier?
Master Lin	I am not an author (laughing), and so I am not able to express everything in an orderly [manner], and there were many interruptions, and it was not very smooth. I'm very thankful for your patience.
Yiyi	(laughing) In that case, thank you Grandpa Lin for this interview today.