

NPS-72

LINDA WU

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CHINA, 1939

AGE 20

NASH: Today is September 3, 1974. This is Margo Nash, and I'm visiting with Ms. Linda Wu. Ms. Wu is the principal of The New York Chinese School on Mott Street here in New York City's Chinatown. She is also a sculptress, and is a member of the National Academy of Design. Ms. Wu came to this country at the age of twenty in 1939. Where did you come from?

WU: I came from China. I was studying in Shanghai during the war between the Japanese and our people.

NASH: Where were you born?

WU: I was born in Canton in 19, 1919, July 4.

NASH: Could you describe Canton, what you remember of it

from your childhood?

WU: In Canton I spent the time with my families. I was in kindergarten and the public school, so in the, in Shanghai, see, I was studying in the high school and the universities there, but during the war. So my father sent me down to Hong Kong.

NASH: You were living in Hong Kong with your family?

WU: No, see. I was teaching, see. I get a job teaching the kindergarten. But since I wait for, you know, wait for the change to come to the United States.

NASH: What do you remember about the war?

WU: The war is, to me, I should say, I was so fortunate because of Shanghai, the Japanese didn't, uh, come into the Shanghai, so my father sent me down. And then before, just before the Canton was attacked, see, taken by the Japanese, and so then I left the Hong Kong.

NASH: And what happened to your family?

WU: Well, my family was part in Shanghai, part in Canton, and some, let's see, in Hong Kong. So, but finally

before, see, I left Hong Kong, my father returned to Hong Kong from the Shanghai. So my mother, she back to the Canton. At that time the city, the Japanese, see, took over the city. We lost all of the things, you see, under the Japanese controls.

NASH: Do you remember when the Japanese took over?

(disturbance to the microphone)

WU: No, see.

NASH: Was it unusual for a young woman to be working at that time, or to be a teacher?

WU: Uh, because I'm waiting, you know, waiting the processing to come to the United States, so I thought I would try to teach some children, well, because it's very fun with those children. So since I came to this country I still keep to work for the schools until now.

NASH: How did you get, was it hard to get a visa to come to the United States? How long did you have to wait?

WU: No, because at that time exactly was the, uh,
(she pauses) the fair, the World's Fair in San Francisco. And I get the, I get the visa, passport,

see.

NASH: I don't understand. What did it have to do with the World's Fair?

WU: (she laughs) World's Fair? You don't know that?

NASH: No, I do. But why, what did this have to do with the . . .

WU: See, I wanted to come to see the World's Fair, see?

NASH: That's why you came? To see the World's Fair?

WU: Yes. Because the, I was so young, so my father's friend, Papa, Papa Tien, he was a professor of University of California. So, and then, see, he, under his sponsorship. So, and then, see, my father send me to, you know, let him to take care of me, see. So I came to the United States. And the first I stop at the San Francisco.

NASH: Well, what was your actual reason for coming?

WU: Because in the war, see, my father wants to send me for study, see. Because, you know, for private school it is so difficult, you know, having things there, everything's, you know, for profit, see. So, and

then, see, in the war, see, we lost our things. So my father thought, see, the first thing he send me for the visa. After I arrive in San Francisco, so I register going to the San Fran-, California School of Fine Arts. So, and then finally I got my drawing teacher, Mr. McKay, uh, Mackey, Mr. Mackey. He was a well-known painter in California, West Coast. So, see, he write to the Immigration Service, and then change my student's passports. (?)

NASH: What do you remember about the trip when you came?

WU: I was in, took the Preston Lines, the steamboat. And then I was staying there, second class cabins. And then got a roommate, also a Chinese lady. But then, but I don't enjoy that trip because I got really seasick. (she laughs) And then, see, I just stay in the beds for three weeks, except three meals I got up to enjoy it. (she laughs) I was lost twenty pounds.

NASH: Well, what happened when you got off the boat?

WU: Uh, to me because as if I live in the Chinatown there's a friend to, you know, receive me. And not too excited because I didn't see the, you know, the

big buildings, the big places. So it seemed a little bit like, you know, a little bit like Hong Kong still.

(she laughs)

NASH: You didn't have to go to Angel's Island or any place like that? You could just get off the boat?

WU: No, see, but in that trip also is, uh (she pauses) but first stop at the Japan, see. We don't want to go up there between the wars, you see, for us. And then second we stop at the Honolulu. I was enjoying for two days in there. It change, the weather changed, so many friends there, and then, so that was the most enjoyable place, in that trip.

NASH: What was it like to cross the ocean during wartime?

WU: Wartime, not, see . . .

NASH: It wasn't wartime then . . .

WU: Not the wartime, see, but the after, you know, it seemed, past Japan they seemed okay, see.

NASH: What did you find the most surprising thing when you came to the United States?

WU: Uh, because, for the opening, that's the opening

evening for the World War [sic] in San Francisco, see.

So the first time, see, I saw the big parades in San Francisco. So it's so crowded, see. So the people seemed so happy, so (?) that evenings.

NASH: And what, what did you find the hardest to get used to?

WU: The hardest, to me, it seemed not much, you know, and difficult for me, you see, the people seemed so nice to me, see, that even that time, see, I could not speak the good English, see. Still, the people seemed very helpful, see, very generous, uh, so, and then seemed a lot to enjoy the people in the United States, see.

NASH: Well, what were the things that seemed to you most different between American Chinese and people born in China?

WU: Well, that's the only thing, see, only the language, you see. You know, because, see, as I know in so many Americans-born Chinese, they don't speak Chinese at all, see. And then, see, I, their thoughts, also, of course, they're a little bit different because of education, see, and we came from the China, see. It's

a little bit, see.

NASH: How is it different?

WU: Different, like the food, you see. Just like the meals. The American-born Chinese, see, they eat all of the, what, I can't say it, see. (they laugh) Like the living, almost Western-style, you know. See, the Chinese people came from China, they still, you know, keep the living still as like Chinese-style, see, more Chinese style.

NASH: Was it hard for you, uh, I imagine that the man who was your sponsor must have been very protective of you.

WU: Yes, the Professor Tien, his wife and his daughter live in the San Francisco, see. I met them, they are so, you know, so nice.

NASH: Well, how long did it actually take you to finish school?

WU: Well, see, after, for a while, and then so I worked for the, you know, I worked for the church, see, Congregation, see, Congregation Church in San Francisco. So they got the, they built a Chinese

school. So, oh, and the afternoons I went to teach.
(she clears her throat) So then earned a little bit
money, because in China at that time the, in war, so
my family, it's very difficult sending money for me.
But my father, see, my father give me a, see, over
twenty-five paintings he gave to me. So, and then,
because he thought in case I couldn't receive the
money from family, so I can see, you know, sell the
paintings to, you know, to support myself. But
finally, I used the money carefully, so then I see, I
didn't sell his picture, except two, but after that,
see, I still sent those money back to him, I didn't
use it. But because in that see, in that time, it
seemed, the Immigration Service seemed a little bit
understand the students, you know, from China, see, at
that time. So they seemed quite kind for us, so
they're not very, you know, (?) to us. That's
different cases for different people. I should say,
see. (they laugh)

NASH: Did your father ever come to the United States, or
your mother?

WU: No, my father, see, was studying in Japan once, and
then he went to the Europe for a few years, but he

never been to the United States.

NASH: Well, how long did you stay in San Francisco?

WU: I stayed in San Francisco for three years. After the Second World War, so I transferred to the New York's National Academy of Design. They got art school you know. So they got the art school in National Academy of Design. The school of the National Academy.

NASH: What did you study there?

WU: I studied sculpture and drawing. Because, see, my father give me the encouragement. He thought, see, after the war my building big monuments, you see. Hope, see, some day I return to do something for my country. But, see, after the war, see, so, and then the, the Communists came, so I got no chance to return, and my family send everything, see. The second time they stole it, see, (?) was very difficult for us. First the Japanese came, and then second the Communists came. See, not only for me, I guess, for, you know, all the people of the country steals everything. Until now, see, I don't think that they allow us to, you know, to return also. So I just receive the citizen papers, see, two weeks, two weeks

ago. Can you imagine that? Because I was very difficult times between the immigration for me. I should say this is twenty years ago.

NASH: In other words, you were kind of hoping that you might go back some day, and you finally gave up the idea and you became a citizen? Is that . . .

WU: Oh, yes, uh, no. Because, you know, it doesn't matter I go back or not, I was anxious to become an American citizen. That is the, you know, that is the honorable thing for me. Because in our country, it doesn't matter how I become a citizen or not. All places they accept me as a Chinese citizen, you know. So, and then, to me, my life, you see, in the United States, you see, is longer, much longer than I was in my own country, China. Because the, two years ago, see, my mother passed away. So, because it's under the Communist control, and then she was dying there without the medicines. And so, see, in that case it's, I decided, I'm sure that I want to stay in this country as long as I can, see. So, and then I take the, you know, I, see, I'm sending the application forms as student. Very easy for me, you know, because before I thought it's so difficult for me, but this

time it's so, you know, everything is so easy, see, so peaceful. But before I accept the permanent resident.

I got, over ten years, suffering, I should say. Suffering, every year, see. And then the, hearing office calling me, questioning me, see. And then oh, so, you know, so many, see, things that upsets me, you see, (?) much easier, you know.

NASH: It's much easier here. Did you ever built any monuments?

WU: If I build monuments, I would not sit here, you know. (she laughs) You know, first I teach, I taught in this school, see, in 1942. I got sixty-five dollars a month for salary, see. So for this school we, you know, we try our best to serve the Chinese community. Because now the youngsters' problems is, you know, uh, see, there's too, you know, too hard for us tto think, to work, see. So that's why, see, I try my best to (?) the, not only for the Chinatown, I should say for the city, too. Because this school is after the public schools. Our school hour is from four to seven. See, we want to keep all of those children out from the street. Because most, the parents, they are working late. So I think not only, you know, not only

for the Chinese families, see, but the childrens also, for the cities, see, to save those, you know. At the weekdays, every weekday we got eight hundred children in our school. So I tried to do something for the community, see.

NASH: Do they come just from Chinatown, or do they come from other communities as well, student?

WU: Eh, for the days from Monday to Fridays they are locals of, the Chinatown children, to come for our school, from the kindergarten to the high school. And weekends, Saturday and Sunday, we have a morning, each day we have the morning section and afternoon sections.

NASH: I imagine . . .

WU: Excuse me. All of those children, see, are, come from the, like Queens, Bronx, even New Jersey and Philadelphia, too.

NASH: I imagine many more apply than can possibly come?

WU: Oh, yes. If our school buildings are bigger, we could accept more. But our buildings, they only twenty-two classes. Over a hundred teachers for it.

NASH: How much do the parents pay?

WU: Oh, the parents pay very little. Like for five days a week, see, they only pay, now only pay forty dollars for one semester. (she laughs) For Saturday or a Sunday, for three hours, see, each time, they pay twenty-seven dollars for one semester. So that's why this school, see, we should say, is a Chinese public school, because we need the Chinese people to help, to give the donations.

NASH: In what way have things changed in the school from the time you first started?

WU: Well, to me it seems that not much changed because I work here over twenty years, see. So I should say thirty-two years, because in those years I got two, you know, two accidents. Stay in the hospital for a long time, see. One was I got the automobile car accident. (she laughs) I broke my legs. And then the, twelve years ago, see, I got appendicitis. I almost died from that case. (she laughs)

NASH: Well, what about your sculpting? Have you been able to . . .

WU: Well, see, I'm sure, I'm still a good sculptress. Because, see, I, in the school, exactly twelve years in the school and continued to study the sculptures. Also, see, I was very fortunate that I got the three good teachers for the sculptures. See, I got a good foundation for it, see. So, and also, see, I got so many awards for my artworks, totalling I guess I got nineteen awards. (she laughs) Including the gold medals, bronze medals or the cash prizes, see.

NASH: What are your themes in your sculpture, in your work, the themes of your work?

WU: The styles, well, for my, you know, I work for the clay modeling and stone carving and wood carving. Even castings, I know how to do it. And for, you know, for my style I use not too modern. Even not too, you know, not too traditions, see.

NASH: Does your, does the fact that you were born in China play a role in the things that you sculpt?

WU: Eh, but when I was a little girl, see, I just paint the Chinese style with my father. My father was a very known Chinese painter. But, see, in the war, see, he lost most of the good paintings. At least I

know twenty, I know two hundred, see, two hundred paintings the Japanese, you see, took from him. Because he, see, he wanted to leave for Hong Kong but the Japanese did not allow him to leave, so they hold all of the paintings, see. So the Japanese wanted him to work with them because he was studying in Japan when he was young at that time, so he speak Japanese, see. So and then, see, he says, he says, "All right, see. You can pick the paintings. But I don't know when I'll return." So since he, that was a very, a very sad, sad story. Before he left the Hong Kong they gave him the injections. If he returns, it might have saved his life. But he didn't return back to the Hong Kong, what the Japanese sold. That's why he die, maybe for that injection. Well..., see, seemed very terrible at that time. That second, his first year, see, I came into New York. See, I got the bad news.

NASH: What was your father's name?

WU: Uh, Sao Pin Wu. Sao Pin, yeah.

NASH: Well, in your own work today, what sort of subjects do you work with?

WU: For me the easy to send to the public, also, and I do

the portraits most of the time, see, because they're easy for me to move, see, to send in. Because it's really expensive for, to do the sculptures. If I do the big things, that's for two men or three men a job.

(?) That might be over, you know, over a hundred shippings. So I want to save, (she laughs) save that kind. So I can manage to pick the small portraits. But I, I decide some day maybe after the, after I finish my, our son in the school, see. I will do the big things. (she laughs)

NASH: Where do you live now? Do you, did you, did you ever live in Chinatown?

WU: Uh, no. I, see, I live in Brooklyn, see. But I decide to . . .

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

WU: Also, they accept it. See, if they are very, you know, loyal to the United States, see. So to me it seemed that it's not, you know, yeah. Uh-huh. But difficult for every one to stay in the United States. We are very, you know, to keep, see, ourselves, you know, independent, loyal to the works, loyal to the

country. So I see, I (?), see. Why not the (?), see, and not to accept us.

NASH: Are you glad that you came to the United States?

WU: Well, I should say I learned a lot from the, you know, United States. Because the artwork is completely, see, I learned from the, you know, this country, see.

But my teachers, they are, one is American, the first teacher, Mr. (?). He was the very know sculpture in the half century. He built a very big statue in the World's Fair, named it "Pacifics," so huge that statue is. I hope that some day I can see it, see. It might be the government, see, of the California, it might be (?), but I don't know where it puts it, see.

NASH: What the name of it?

WU: The Pacific Statue, Pacific.

NASH: Pacific?

WU: Pacific, yeah. Because that statue was exactly like Eastern-style, so big. And then when a person stand, it is just like. (she gestures) This is so really big. (she laughs) (break in tape)

NASH: I'd like to ask you one more question. You've been in the country for I guess it's thirty years, yeah. And you seem to have still sort of some difficulty with the English language, and I wondered why that was. Do you think it's because English is a very hard language for Chinese people to learn, or is there some other reason?

WU: No, see, the English language is the most easy language, you see, in the world to learn.
(she laughs) To me, see, not too smart to learn.
(she laughs) But this way, to tell you the truth, for most of those years, see, I just put all of my time for the artworks. Besides that, I have to work, see, to make a living. So, see, honestly, see, I am not really to take an English course in this country.
(she laughs)

NASH: All right. Thank you very much. (tape ends)