Qi Hui Zhai
Narrator

Sarah Mason
Interviewer

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Asians in Minnesota Oral History Project
Minnesota Historical Society

Sarah Mason **-SM**
Qi Hui Zhai **-QZ**

SM: I'm talking to Mrs. Qi Hui Zhai who is from the People's Republic of China. And I'm talking to her on January 4, 1979 in Saint Paul. And this is an interview conducted under the auspices of the Minnesota Historical Society and the interviewer is Sarah Mason. Mrs. Zhai, could you tell us a little bit about your family when you were growing up in Shanghai, and about your parents, and your brothers and sisters if you had some?

QZ: Okay. I was born in Shanghai and grew up in Shanghai. My father was a university professor and he did research work in an institute.

SM: What was the name of the institute where he did his work?

QZ: It's an institute of biology.

SM: Yes. This was before liberation?

QZ: Yes, before liberation. At that time, my father taught in several universities.

SM: I see.

QZ: So he was very busy. Sometimes in Shanghai, sometimes in Nanking.

SM: Oh.

QZ: And sometimes also working in the Biology Institute in Peking. My father was one of the earliest zoologists of China. So he established the biology departments in several universities and established in several scientific research institutes in biological sciences.

SM: I see. Was that the University of Nanking and . . .?

QZ: Yes. It's the so-called . . .

SM: Well, now it has a different name.

QZ: Central University. [Formerly the National Central University, the name was changed to Nanking University in 1949.]

SM: Central University. I see. Did you say he studied in the United States?

QZ: Yes. He studied in the United States in the . . . before the 1920s.

SM: What is his name? Someone might know him! [Laughter] Is he still living?

QZ: No.

SM: Oh, he's died.

QZ: He died several years ago. My father . . . you know, my father, when he applied the scholarship to go to United States, he didn't use his family name.

SM: Oh.

QZ: He used only his first name.

SM: Oh.

QZ: So after that he never used his family name.

SM: Oh really.

QZ: Yes. Our family name is Zhai.

SM: Yes.

QZ: But my father used only his first name. That is . . .

SM: Even when he went back to China?

QZ: Yes, yes, yes. Because my father worked many years in the United States and published many papers, so he didn't want to change his name, I guess.

SM: I see.

QZ: So his name is C. Ping.

SM: C. Ping?

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QZ: P-I-N-G.

SM: Oh.

QZ: But actually, Ping is not the family name. [Chuckles]

SM: That's really his given name or . . .?

QZ: Yes.

SM: I see. And C . . . he just published under C. Ping?

QZ: Ping, yes.

SM: Oh, he just used an initial.

QZ: Yes, yes.

SM: Oh. I see. And that was before 1920 when he was . . .

QZ: Yes.

SM: So he was really a very early student.

QZ: Yes, yes.

SM: He published works on zoology then?

QZ: Yes. Different fields of zoology.

SM: I see.

QZ: He published papers on also paleontology. Yes. And morphology and entomology. And at that time they all [unclear].

SM: Goodness.

QZ: A lot of papers.

SM: He was a very talented man.

QZ: Yes.

SM: So he married then after he went back to China?

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QZ: Yes.

SM: And he was here thirteen years, you said, in the United States.

QZ: Yes, thirteen years.

SM: At which university?

QZ: Cornell University.

SM: And then he went back to Shanghai and then . . . are you among the oldest of your family?

QZ: No. We have five brothers and sisters in the family.

SM: Oh.

QZ: My elder brother, he's a medical doctor. Now he is a director of a medical research institute in Hunan Province. And I have also a younger brother, he is an engineer.

SM: Oh.

QZ: And two sisters. One is also a medical doctor but she studies pharmacology [unclear]. And the other sister is a chemist. She is a professor in a university.

SM: I see. They're all scientists. [Laughter]

QZ: Yes.

SM: I see. Is your mother living?

QZ: No, my mother also died.

SM: I see. Yes.

QZ: My mother was a housewife.

SM: Was she? Okay.

QZ: Because the older generation in China . . . Women of the older generation in China didn't work.

SM: I see. Well, that's interesting. Then you all got your education in Shanghai or different places?

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QZ: I studied in Shanghai until my sophomore . . . no, my freshman. I finished my freshman in Shanghai. And then I went to Peking.

SM: Did you go there because you thought that would be more helpful in your studies?

QZ: No, I was in the pre-med in the university.

SM: In Shanghai?

QZ: In Shanghai. And I went to Peking and entered the Yenching University, also a major in pre-med. I hoped I could enter the Peking Union Medical College. But in the third year of my college, I was not in very good health.

SM: Oh.

QZ: So and my family didn't agree I study medical school because it will be very tiring.

SM: Yes.

QZ: Yes. So I changed my major into biology from the third year in the university.

SM: To biology. So you did finish at Yenching?

QZ: Yes. I graduated in Yenching University from the biology department.

SM: I see. Well, which year did you graduate? Was that before liberation?

QZ: Yes, in 1949. The year of liberation.

SM: I see.

QZ: But at that time Peking was liberated already.

SM: Oh yes, it was.

QZ: Peking was liberated in the end of 1948 and . . . you know, the Yenching University's located in the suburb. It was liberated in the end of 1949.

SM: Oh.

QZ: But the city, downtown Peking [chuckles], was liberated in the beginning of 1949.

SM: Oh, I see, so Yenching was liberated later.

QZ: [Chuckles] No, earlier.

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SM: Earlier?

QZ: Earlier.

SM: Oh, before 1948?

QZ: In the end of 1948.

SM: Oh, end of 1948, Yenching was . . .

QZ: Yes, but the city was liberated in the beginning of next year.

SM: Oh, of 1949.

QZ: Yes. Yes.

SM: Ah. But the university went on anyway.

QZ: Yes.

SM: I see.

QZ: At that time my family was in Shanghai. And I couldn't get any money from the family for several months. [Chuckles] Shanghai was liberated in May 1949, so a half year later.

SM: Oh, and you had no money for all that time?

QZ: Yes, yes. [Chuckles] But, you know, my father had a large number of students. They were all professors in the university.

SM: Oh, I see.

QZ: In the institute in Peking. They cared for me. The living expenses. [Chuckles]

SM: Oh, that was nice.

QZ: Yes. [Chuckles]

SM: So they helped you out.

QZ: Yes. You know, when we were very small, my father spent all his salary to help his students.

SM: Oh, really?

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QZ: To send them abroad and to buy his equipment for research. So all of the students of my father were all so grateful to my father, and so they just . . .

SM: So they helped you.

QZ: Yes. Yes, helped me.

SM: Well, that's really interesting. Did you start to work then after you graduated?

QZ: Yes. Yes.

SM: Or did you study more?

QZ: I started to work after graduation. But after several years, I was sent to the Soviet Union.

SM: Oh, really?

QZ: Yes. [Chuckles]

SM: Oh, you've been in a lot of places.

QZ: Yes.

SM: And you studied there for some time?

QZ: Two years. Yes.

SM: Oh. And that was in biology, too?

QZ: Yes. In the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union.

SM: I see. So you did research there?

QZ: Yes.

SM: That's interesting. And then afterwards you came back to Shanghai or Peking?

QZ: From the Soviet Union?

SM: Yes.

QZ: Oh, to Peking. I . . . I just went from Shanghai to Peking.

SM: I see.

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QZ: Before I went to the Soviet Union.

SM: I see. Well, do you know Russian? Did you know the language?

QZ: Yes. Yes.

SM: So you learned that in school or . . .?

QZ: No . . . after 1949, in China, the students were taught to learn Russian in the schools and in universities, and we also learned in the institute.

SM: I see.

QZ: But I knew very little Russian before I went to the Soviet Union.

SM: Was that difficult to learn?

QZ: I think it's . . . Russian grammar is very . . . I think it's very strict. It has a lot of rules and regulations.

SM: I see.

QZ: And so it . . . it is not difficult to read Russian. It's very easy to know all the relationships between different words and sentences. But I think it's more difficult to speak Russian than to speak English.

SM: I see.

QZ: Because you should think all the grammar all the time to change all the endings of the words.

SM: [Chuckles]

QZ: Those verbs and nouns, you should change the endings. [Chuckles]

SM: Oh, that sounds really hard. I see. What were you researching there? Was that insects or had you gotten into that yet or . . .?

QZ: I did some research on insect physiology for one year. And the other year I did some work on insect biochemistry.

SM: I see.

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QZ: So I spent one year in Leningrad, in the Institute of Zoology, and the second year in Moscow in the Institute of Biochemistry.

SM: Of biochemistry?

QZ: Yes.

SM: Well, that's interesting. Did you have a lot of chance to meet Russian scientists then?

QZ: Yes.

SM: Maybe you could say a little about how you happened to come to the United States and Minnesota.

QZ: [Chuckles] Yes.

SM: How were the students chosen?

QZ: Oh, in China?

SM: Yes.

QZ: You know, in China, both the Academy of Sciences and the Ministry of Education choose students and scholars for sending abroad.

SM: I see.

QZ: And in the Academy of Sciences, we are chosen for short work, only . . . about one year only.

SM: Oh, I see.

QZ: But for those more experienced scientists. But the Academy also chooses some young scientists—very, very young people—to send abroad as graduate students.

SM: Oh, I see.

QZ: The Ministry of Education, they choose scholars and students from different universities and . . . those institutes belonging to different ministries. For example, some Institute of Chemical Engineering, which belongs to the Ministry of Chemical Engineering.

SM: Oh, I see.

QZ: Or some Institute of . . . metal . . .

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SM: Metallurgy?

QZ: Metallurgy, from that ministry.

SM: Yes, I see.

QZ: So . . . but those sent abroad by the Ministry of Education, they can stay two years. They should pass a national examination in English.

SM: Oh. That's given in China?

QZ: Yes.

SM: Oh, I see. So you passed that before you came here?

QZ: No.

SM: Oh, you didn't?

QZ: The Academy didn't give the examinations.

SM: Oh, I see.

QZ: Only the Ministry of Education.

SM: Ah ha.

QZ: So there are two systems.

SM: I see. I see. So you were chosen by your institute?

QZ: Yes. By the Academy, yes.

SM: I see. And are you working on something you worked on there [in China] here, for your research here?

QZ: Yes. Now I am working on the same projects as I was in Peking. My project is the [unclear] protein synthesis of the ladybugs.

SM: I see. And this is basic research rather than applied?

QZ: Yes. Yes.

SM: So you've been doing basic research for the last year or so?

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QZ: Yes. Only the recent two years.

SM: Recent two years.

QZ: Yes. You know, most of the scholars from China want to do some basic research here.

SM: Oh.

QZ: Because, you know, basic research needs more . . . more equipment.

SM: Equipment. Oh.

QZ: Yes. And we still have some difficulties in China now. So we want to take the advantage to do some more basic research here. [Chuckles]

SM: I see. Are there other Chinese students here now, too?

QZ: Yes, there are altogether fifteen Chinese scholars in the University of Minnesota now.

SM: Do you know what [unclear]?

QZ: They are in different departments. There are two in the department of pediatrics of the medical school. Some are in the agriculture college. Two in the department of horticulture, one in the department of agronomy, and one in the department of genetics. And the rest of them are in the institute of technology.

SM: I see.

QZ: So three in chemical engineering, two in mathematics, and two in electrical engineering.

SM: How many in engineering? Three? Two?

QZ: Two in electrical engineering.

SM: Yes.

QZ: And one in mechanics. [Chuckles]

SM: I see. And will they be here a year or two years?

QZ: Two years.

SM: They'll all be here.

QZ: Yes.

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SM: And then will more be coming in the meantime?

QZ: Yes. I think this year there will be more to come.

SM: I see. Have you also been asked by community groups or schools or whatever to talk to them?

QZ: Yes. [Chuckles] Yes I do.

SM: [Chuckles]

QZ: I have talked once in the Saint Paul Campus Ministry on the role of women in China.

SM: Oh.

QZ: Once in a church of the university.

SM: Oh, which is that?

QZ: In Minneapolis. I don't know. [Chuckles] I don't remember the name.

SM: [Chuckles] Okay. I'll find it.

QZ: [Chuckles] So I was taken there on Sunday morning [chuckles] after the church.

SM: Oh.

QZ: They divided into two groups. And one group had some program about China study.

SM: I see.

QZ: So I talked something about the science and education in China.

SM: Oh.

QZ: And once in a high school, also about education in China.

SM: Oh, which high school was that?

QZ: That's . . .

SM: Was it Central High School?

QZ: No. I don't . . . it's a . . .

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SM: Was it a public school?

QZ: Armstrong.

SM: Oh.

QZ: Very far from here. [Laughter] You know that high school?

SM: I'm not familiar with that one. Armstrong High School.

QZ: Yes.

[Brief interruption with background noises]

SM: Oh. Oh, they sent you a letter. That was before you went or after?

QZ: Yes, after. [Chuckles]

SM: Oh after. Thank you. Oh, I see. Can I look at it?

QZ: Yes. [Chuckles]

SM: Here, I'll turn this off.

[Brief recording interruption]

QZ: [Chuckles]

SM: What was the school like? [Chuckles]

QZ: It's a very big, new school.

SM: Okay.

QZ: Very, very new.

SM: Modern buildings?

QZ: Modern building. But they said, "Please don't think all the schools in the United States are like this one!" [Laughter]

SM: I see. Well, that's true. [Chuckles] I see.

QZ: [Chuckles]

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SM: What did you talk to them about? Just about China in general?

QZ: No, about the education in China.

SM: Oh, that's where you talked . . . ah, I see. How it differed from their education.

QZ: Yes. I talked something about the education system in China and the education policy and principles in China. And they wanted me also to talk something about the women in China, but the time was not enough.

SM: You didn't get to talk about that.

QZ: Yes.

SM: But you did talk about it at the Saint Paul United Ministry?

QZ: Yes, yes, yes.

SM: That's a religious group of students or . . .?

QZ: I think it's . . . both . . . most of them are faculty, not students.

SM: Oh, I didn't realize that. Let's see what else I was going to ask you . . . What are some of your observations about Minnesota that you think of? [Chuckles] What just struck you? Has it been fairly hospitable or friendly?

QZ: Yes. Yes. I like being in Minnesota very much. I like the place because it's very . . . I think very clean, very quiet. Not so noisy, so crowded. So I like the Twin Cities very much. And the people in Minnesota are all so friendly and so . . . so warmhearted, you know. [Chuckles] So I just feel at home.

SM: Well, that's nice. Is there anything else you would like to talk about on this tape? Maybe the women of China? [Laughter] Well, maybe you could just say a little about your children and what they're doing.

QZ: I have three children. The oldest one is a boy; he is now a high school teacher. The second is a girl, she is now….

[Recording interruption]

SM: …H-U-N. That's probably it. Oh . . .

QZ: Yes. Yes.

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SM: Okay. So the girl is in Changchun?

QZ: Changchun, in the Jilin University.

SM: Oh.

QZ: That is one of the universities which signed the agreement with the U.N. [Chuckles]

SM: Yes. Pretty soon your daughter can join you here. [Laughter]

QZ: And the youngest is a boy. He is a high school student now.

SM: I see. Is he interested in sciences, too? Or is it too early to know?

QZ: Oh, he . . . I think he's going to be an engineer. He likes to make everything himself. [Chuckles] But you know, in China now, it's very difficult to pass the national entrance examination of the high . . . of the high school . . . of the high school of the universities and colleges. You know, the percentage of enrollment is only three to four percent of the total students who . . .

SM: Who apply, who want to . . .

QZ: Who take the examination. I don't know whether he can pass the examination or not.

SM: That's really something.

QZ: I know, because during the Cultural Revolution, the universities and colleges in China stopped enrolling students for at least five years. And after that period of time, the universities enrolled only very few students. So there are now a lot of young people who want to go to the university.

SM: Yes. But can't find a place.

QZ: Yes.

SM: I see. So that really is hard to get in then.

QZ: Yes, very hard.

SM: Jilin [University], you said, is one of those who signed a contract with . . .

QZ: Yes.

SM: Are there four or five universities that have signed contracts?

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QZ: Yes. When the delegation of the University went to China last September, they signed five contracts with the Chinese Academy of Agriculture Sciences, the Peking Agriculture University.

SM: Peking Cultural . . .?

QZ: Agriculture.

SM: Agriculture, okay.

QZ: Agriculture University. Nankai University in Tianjin. Jiao Tong University in Xi'an.

SM: Jiao Tong.

QZ: Jiao Tong. That means transportation. [Chuckles]

SM: Oh . . .

QZ: And also the technical university in Jilin.

SM: What was the transportation university? I mean, where was that located?

QZ: In Xi'an.

SM: Oh, in Xi'an.

QZ: Yes. So they signed five last September.

SM: Oh.

QZ: And in December, when the Chinese delegation of university presidents came to the University, they signed another two with the Fudan University in Shanghai and the Jilin University in Changchun.

SM: I see.

QZ: So now there are altogether seven. [Chuckles]

SM: That's a lot. Well, you have the distinction of being the first one to arrive, I think.

QZ: Yes. [Chuckles]

SM: Since . . . well, since back in the 1940s, since before liberation, I bet.

QZ: Yes.

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SM: Well, do you have anything more you wanted to say on this? [Laughter] Well, if we have some more questions we'll have to call you up on the telephone, I guess.

QZ: [Chuckles]

SM: Thank you very much.

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