

Sunset Park Flooding and Climate Change Stories

English Translation

Participant: Yuguang Zheng, female

Interviewer: Jing Zhu (NYU)

Interview conducted in Chinese on 5/8/22

Site: Participant's home

Amy: Today is May 8, 2022. We are here to talk specifically about Superstorm Sandy, which took place in Oct. 22-29, 2012 and how it affected you, your neighborhood and its residents. We want you tell us what you remember from your experience. First, could you tell me where you lived when Sandy came.

Yuguang: I live on [...].

Amy: How long have you lived there?

Yuguang: From 2006. I lived there for 15 years.

Amy: Which floor did you live on?

Yuguang: The first floor.

Amy: Oh okay. Is it like this house?

Yuguang: It was rented, from the landlord. The basement was not rented. It was flooded in the bathroom in the basement at that time.

Amy: Oh really?

Yuguang: Our stuff that are stored in the basement all got dirty by the flood.

Amy: So you lived on the first floor.

Yuguang: Yes we lived on the first floor. The landlord didn't rent out the basement, because it can not be rented out for people to live, it can only be rented for storage. No one rented the basement, therefore we put some of our stuff there, such as mattress, bike, things that not in use. The water came out from bathroom. Very dirty water. We threw those things that were soaked in the dirty water away. And we didn't know.

Amy: So the water came in to basement from outside, or came out to the basement from the bathroom.

Yuguang: Came out from the bathroom. Probably because the drainage system outside was clogged. It was filled with dirty water. The neighbor found it out first. The water came out from the wall to the neighbors. The neighbors told us that the basement were really filled with dirty water. The dirty water seeped out from the wall. The neighbors saw it from their windows. Then we knew. Then the landlord came.

Amy: From the wall out?

Yuguang: So this is the landlord's house with a lot of water. So the neighbors can see the water mark on the wall. The water seeped out from the wall. The neighbor told the landlord about it.

Amy: You can see the basement wall from outside?

Yuguang: There was an open area between our basement and the neighbor's basement. Neighbor can see the wall of our house from their window.

Amy: So your basement is above the ground.

Yuguang: It is underground, but not exactly entirely underground. It's more like half above and half below. There's a wall on one side of the basement, and in the middle, there's a walkway where you can see the wall on the other side through a window.

Amy: I was wondering about some people whose basements are entirely underground, so their walls are not visible from inside.

Yuguang: In our case, the basement is nderground, but the walls are visible from outside. The front walls are connected, so you can't see the back, but there's a path leading to the back basement. There's a tree at the back, and some of its branches have broken off, not the entire tree, just some branches. The basement is like one level, then the first floor where I live, and there's another level above. The outside tree leaves blocked their drainage system, causing the balcony to fill up with water that couldn't flow down. Eventually, all the water poured down from outside. The construction in the US is made of wood, not cement, which can lead to leaks, and it happened to leak near my refrigerator in an unfortunate spot.

Amy: Oh, you mean the second floor.

Yuguang: Yes, on the second-floor balcony, the water gets blocked by leaves, and it becomes full, so it flows down through the stairs. He keeps his clothes in a small room upstairs, and the water leaked onto my refrigerator. The toilet area is also not cemented, so when there's too much water from the upper floor's shower, it leaks down. It's not like in China, where everything is made of cement; here, they use wooden boards.

Amy: So, the water leaking down from above comes from the balcony.

Yuguang: Yes, from the balcony above.

Amy: But the water coming from below comes from the toilet.

Yuguang: Yes, it's very dirty water. Recently, it leaked again from outside.

Amy: You mean it also got flooded during the last incident?

Yuguang: Yes, it was clean water from outside, not from the toilet. Maybe it was because they repaired the toilet later; the previous plumbing wasn't done properly.

Amy: So during Sandy, the water came from the toilet, not from outside.

Yuguang: Yes, it was dirty water from the toilet.

Amy: How high did the water rise? Do you remember?

Yuguang: About 30 to 40 centimeters. It flooded where we had things placed. We had to throw away the mattresses we had placed there since they absorbed water. But my other furniture like tables, chairs, and beddings are washable.

Amy: How long did the water flooding last?

Yuguang: I'm not sure. We only found out later, after our neighbor told us.

Amy: So after the water reached that high, it didn't rise anymore?

Yuguang: No, because our downstairs is pretty high, by the time we knew, the water level was already high. The landlord came the next day. The neighbor called him, and then he came. By the time he arrived, there was only a little water left. The basement has a door, and the water slowly flows out from there. If there's no more water outside, the water will also flow out from inside.

Amy: Do you remember when they discovered the water downstairs?

Yuguang: They found out the next day. Our neighbor discovered it and then informed the landlord.

Amy: So you didn't know that the basement was flooded when Sandy came?

Yuguang: We didn't know because no one lives downstairs. It's illegal to live there, so it's only rented to people doing business and storing things. I heard that a long time ago, before I moved in, someone lived there. It was rented to a woman who was involved in shady activities and brought in complicated people, so the landlord asked her to leave. The landlord is a decent person and doesn't like to rent to undesirable tenants.

Amy: Does the basement have windows?

Yuguang: Yes, it does.

Amy: But the water didn't come in through the windows, it flooded from the ground?

Yuguang: Last time, the water came in from outside. It flooded a lot. It wasn't water from the toilet.

Amy: So during Sandy, your first floor was not affected?

Yuguang: It was water leaking from upstairs.

Amy: So the water from the upper floor balcony leaked into your floor below.

Yuguang: Yes, that's correct. The leaves and branches from the back tree fell on our windows, making a loud noise. It didn't cause much damage; the windows were not broken, but it made us worried. We were too scared to sleep.

Amy: The house you were living in at that time, was it similar to this one? Was it far from the street or right next to the street?

Yuguang: It was right next to the street.

Amy: Did you take a look outside to see how the street looked?

Yuguang: There were lots of fallen leaves and branches on the street. We didn't dare go outside. Fortunately, there was no power outage; we would be even more scared.

Amy: Were other communications and connections still working?

Yuguang: There was a power outage in Chinatown. My friend lives on 43rd street, and a big tree fell in front of her house. Oh, my friend's name is Xiuting, and she said she was so scared that she couldn't sleep at all.

Amy: When did the tree fall down?

Yuguang: It was during the strong wind. It was her own house, and she lived there.

Amy: Do you remember when Sandy arrived and when the strong wind and rain started?

Yuguang: It was windy and rainy at night.

Amy: Did you feel the branches falling outside at night, or did you notice it the next day?

Yuguang: The wind was blowing hard outside all the time, and the road was covered with branches and leaves, so we didn't dare go out. Luckily, there was no power outage; we would be even more scared.

Amy: Did all other communications and connections still work?

Yuguang: The phone in Chinatown wasn't working. At that time, I was introducing a girlfriend to my cousin's son, and they had scheduled to meet that day, but he couldn't drive over.

Amy: Why couldn't he drive over?

Yuguang: The weather was bad, and it was very windy. The car couldn't make it. The phone lines in Chinatown were also not working.

Amy: Chinatown was completely cut off from communication?

Yuguang: At his place. He wanted to call and tell the girl that the car couldn't make it today, but the phone lines were not working. So, the blind date didn't work out.

Amy: Was it because there was no signal on his end, or there was no signal on your end?

Yuguang: It seems like we had a signal on our end.

Amy: Did you try to make a call?

Yuguang: No, we didn't make any calls. We didn't hear about anyone here having trouble with phone lines, just him mentioning that his phone lines weren't working.

Amy: So, the girl lives here, right?

Yuguang: Yes, the girl lives here. So, the blind date didn't work out.

Amy: That's really unlucky. Did you make any phone calls to your families or talk to friends during those days?

Yuguang: We didn't make any calls.

Amy: So, you don't know if the phone lines were cut off or not.

Yuguang: I don't the phone line has problem. Because our electricity didn't go out, and we didn't hear about any phone issues from people. Afterwards, many people applied for warefare, and Ms. Wang told us that if we had any losses, we could apply. But I told her I didn't have any losses, so I didn't apply. If, for example, there was a power outage and the food in the fridge spoiled, then we could apply. Later, someone applied and received compensation.

Amy: During that time, what did you do at home?

Yuguang: We didn't dare to go out. Fortunately, it didn't last long that time.

Amy: How many days did it last?

Yuguang: The worst part was only one day, then it was fine. But we didn't go out afterward. They cleaned the streets in two to three days.

Amy: So, the most severe weather lasted only one day?

Yuguang: Yes, it was just one night. Then followed by a day of bad weather.

Amy: When Sandy was about to come, did you already know in advance? Did you feel the wind and rain outside?

Yuguang: Yes, because everyone was talking about it. The kids would tell us. The young people in our neighborhood would talk about it too.

Amy: When did you find out about Sandy coming?

Yuguang: We knew before it arrived.

Amy: How long in advance did you know?

Yuguang: A few hours before, I think. A few hours before we heard there would be strong winds. Nowadays, it's better. If there are strong winds, our phones will alert us. In the past, our phones didn't do that. We could only know through the TV news.

Amy: Did you watch the news at home?

Yuguang: Normally, we watch TV at home.

Amy: Did you watch TV during those days?

Yuguang: We did watch TV.

Amy: So, during those two days, you were watching TV at home?

Yuguang: After the strong winds started, we stopped watching TV. We unplugged all the appliances. We were afraid.

Amy: That was the right thing to do. Did someone tell you to unplug the appliances, or did you know to do that in such situations?

Yuguang: Normally, before we go out, we check the appliances before leaving. During bad weather, we're even more cautious and don't dare to use electrical appliances because we're afraid they might explode or something. Sometimes we see water seeping into the wall near the socket, and we don't dare to plug anything in there anymore. I told the landlord that it's not good.

Amy: During Sandy, did you see water seeping into your ground floor?

Yuguang: No, we didn't. When it rains for a long time, water sometimes seeps into the wall near the socket, slowly coming in because of poor construction. But during Sandy, the rain didn't last long. When it rains for a long time, water would come in near the windows. There is a socket there where we plug in the TV and fan. We wouldn't dare to use the electrical appliances during

bad weather, fearing they might explode or something. If we saw water seeping into the wall, we wouldn't dare to plug anything in.

Amy: When Sandy came, did you see if other houses on your street also had similar problems with flood?

Yuguang: No, other houses didn't have the same problem. Their houses were well-renovated. My landlord rented out the house, so he didn't want to spend too much on renovations. The houses around us were renovated with new plumbing, and the owners lived in them. That's why those houses are more durable. My landlord bought an old house and patched it up a bit, so things often break.

Amy: After Sandy, did your landlord repair the drainage?

Yuguang: After it broke, he had someone come to repair it.

Amy: Did he renovate other parts of the house?

Yuguang: Yes, he renovated upstairs as well. But he needs to keep repairing things because when one thing is fixed, another thing breaks. So, the house isn't well-renovated as a whole, which is quite troublesome.

Amy: Did the community or others come to help with the water seepage and leakage after Sandy?

Yuguang: No, we didn't need help. The landlord called someone to fix it. We didn't inform anyone from the community.

Amy: Did the community organize any seminars or talks about Sandy?

Yuguang: We usually have many seminars organized by the Chinese associations and community groups. We attend them. Nowadays, we listen to the seminars on our phones.

Amy: If a storm like Sandy were to come again, would you be better prepared?

Yuguang: We would prepare the same things. No matter how much preparation you have, safety is the most important. We need to see if it's safe, whether anything will collapse, and how things will turn out.

Amy: You must have been scared at that time, right?

Yuguang: Yes, I was scared. I couldn't sleep, not knowing if it had stopped. Sometimes, it would stop, but we didn't know if it would come back.

Amy: So, at that time, you also didn't know how the storm would develop?

Yuguang: No, we didn't know. We were just checking to see if it had stopped. When it stopped, we felt relieved.

Amy: Before Sandy arrived, you heard from your neighbors that the storm was coming. After the storm came, did you talk to them again?

Yuguang: When the storm was about to leave, the neighbors upstairs would stand at the door and check if the storm had subsided or not.

Amy: So, they also didn't know how long the storm would last?

Yuguang: No, they didn't know either.

Amy: Did the news mention how long the storm would last?

Yuguang: They didn't mention it.

Amy: Did you follow the news?

Yuguang: No, we often say that the weather change fast, it might say it's going to rain, but then it doesn't. Or it might say it's going to be good weather, but it turns out not to be. We can't be sure. Nowadays, it's better; we can check the weather on our phones. We didn't have such detailed information before.

Amy: Did you have the internet back then?

Yuguang: We had internet when watching TV. But during bad weather, we didn't watch TV.

Amy: After Sandy, did it have any lasting impact on your community?

Yuguang: It seems like there wasn't any lasting impact because the electricity didn't go out. I have a friend in Staten Island; her house collapsed.

Amy: So, after Sandy ended, everything in the community returned to normal?

Yuguang: Yes, that's right.

Amy: After Sandy, did you have any changes in your mindset?

Yuguang: I don't think we need to be too afraid. If we keep worrying, we might develop depression.

Amy: As long as you are well-prepared.

Yuguang: For preparation, I'm mainly concerned about power outages. That's essential. Our friend, Bilian, later suffered from dementia, and she stopped coming to sing. She lived in Staten Island. She was a military family member. She said her house was destroyed by water, and the government compensated her. I heard from others that there was a person in Staten Island whose house was washed away by water. He knelt on the ground and cried, saying he didn't receive compensation. He might said he didn't buy insurance or something. He said it was his lifelong savings, and he didn't get any compensation. But that person is not someone we know. However, Bilian, whom we know, received compensation.

Amy: Did she receive compensation because she had insurance?

Yuguang: We don't know. Because she was a military family member, or maybe she met certain conditions. She said her house was washed away, and she received compensation. She said the government compensated her, and she bought another house. She might didn't buy another one in the end. She was over 80s.

Amy: Was the place you lived in lower than this area?

Yuguang: It wasn't lower than here. I lived one block over from here. The terrain was high there. The lower areas were further down. Sunset Park here has the highest elevation.

Amy: But your basement still flooded, and the water came up from the toilet.

Yuguang: The basement was flooded because the landlord's plumbing wasn't done properly. Our neighbor didn't have any flooding, and the houses next us ours were okay because they were newly renovated. Both sides of our house are like that. The new renovations were done well.

Amy: So, when Sandy came, did you see water flooding the streets?

Yuguang: No, we didn't.

Amy: Just tree branches falling.

Yuguang: Yes, there were many tree branches everywhere on the road. The big trees didn't fall in our area, but my friend's place on 43rd Street had big trees that fell. Trees in the park fell too, uprooted.

Amy: Did any of the fallen trees hit houses?

Yuguang: No. Xiuqing said trees fell in her area, and she couldn't sleep all night.

Yuguang's friend: Perhaps the trees there were relatively small, and the wind knocked them down easily.

Yuguang: She said the trees were quite big. She couldn't sleep all night.

Amy: What impressed you the most during Sandy?

Yuguang: The water from upstairs pouring down, and water leaking to my fridge. I quickly called the people upstairs and asked them what they were doing up there.

Amy: The balcony upstairs was blocked, and the water overflowed.

Yuguang: Water leaked from the wall near my fridge, which had a crack. There was also water leaking in the bathroom.

Amy: During those two days, you didn't make any phone calls to contact others.

Yuguang: No, we didn't make any calls. But I'm sure the phone lines weren't cut because I didn't hear anyone talking about it. Nobody said, "Oh, I can't make calls today." The only thing I heard was from my friend saying that the phones in Chinatown weren't working, and the guy she introduced couldn't make it here. They didn't show sincerity. They had arranged a meeting, and the car was supposed to come that day, but it didn't, and they didn't even call to inform us. So, the blind date didn't work out; there was no fate.