

American Ancestors Young Family Historians Essay Contest 2026

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Liu Yaozen: Remembering Her Revolution

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Picture yourself as a young Chinese woman in the 1980s, anxious yet determined, carrying nothing but fifty dollars and a dream in her pocket. With this single, daring journey to the US, she marks a turning point for her family, giving my father a chance to build a life and raise a family in a new country. My grandmother spoke little English, but her visions extended far beyond the limits of language.

My grandmother lived in one of the most diverse cities in the world—Queens, New York. During this vibrant decade, its variety of cultures, textures, and colors filled even the quietest streets. As she walked down Booth Street past the row of brick apartment buildings, glowing a muted orange in the afternoon light, she saw the world as an artist would, observing the changing colors and shadows. These scenes of color would later appear in her paintings. Although she had the delicate hands of an artist, her long fingers were reddened from hours spent washing dishes in restaurant sinks. As I walk down Booth Street every weekend to visit my grandmother, I often imagine myself in her shoes, noticing details others might miss. Throughout my life, I never imagined someone like my grandmother, a stubborn and retired artist, would have such a revolutionary impact on my family and me.

I always knew my grandmother was an artist, but as I grew older, I became curious about her history. I asked my father, who gave me a book featuring an interview with her titled *Shanghai Oil Painters in America*. After reading it, I researched what China was like when she grew up and learned about the Cultural Revolution and the Four Cleanups, a movement focused on "cleaning up" capitalist tendencies. As I delved deeper into her story, I also became curious

about New York in the 1980s and about her life as a female artist. I discovered that my grandmother possessed many qualities that enabled her to become revolutionary.

My grandmother was a risk-taker. Early in her career, she was forced to participate in the Four Cleanups. During that time, China remained closed off from the outside world, and ordinary citizens like her rarely saw original Western oil paintings. When she heard about an exhibit at the Nanjing Museum, she knew she had to see it. On a cold winter night, my grandmother climbed onto an open-roofed freight train to see this exhibit. For five hours, she clung to its side, driven by her determination to see the paintings she had long dreamed of. When she arrived, security guarded the museum's entrance and questioned her suspiciously about her credentials. Finally, after hours of persuasion, my grandmother finally stepped inside to see the art up close. At that moment, my grandmother experienced a small taste of freedom.

Despite her humble beginnings, my grandmother later attended the University of Iowa to become an artist, an achievement that once seemed impossible for an immigrant woman who arrived with so little. She had applied to multiple schools, and the University of Iowa accepted her. The journey to this achievement, however, wasn't always easy. My grandmother was in her twenties during the Cultural Revolution, when few opportunities existed for female artists. During that time, the only acceptable art was political propaganda celebrating workers and loyalty to the state. My grandmother's quieter paintings of everyday life did not fit that vision, and artists who pursued individual expression risked persecution. Only a small group of students was selected to continue their training. Amongst these talented individuals, my grandmother was one of the only female artists to pursue this path. After studying at the University of Iowa, my grandmother witnessed a completely different approach to art education than she had

experienced in China. The University of Iowa pursued a contemporary, experimental route, but my grandmother remained steadfast, insisting on her realist style.

Ever since I was little, I've had a strong connection to art. Weekends with my grandmother became informal lessons as she shared her deep knowledge of art with me. Before my grandmother developed dementia, she would often paint portraits of me and teach me different drawing techniques. "Hold the pencil lightly," she would say, gently guiding my hand across the paper, a lesson that stayed with me as I continued drawing. Although I visited her often, I never once imagined what her life was like in the past. I dreamed of becoming an artist one day, and my grandmother served as my main inspiration.

My house was like a miniature museum, covered with various works by my grandmother. I often looked closely at each of them when I was bored, hoping that one day I could paint like her. There was one piece that often caught my eye, an oil painting of the Grand Canal in Venice, which hung in my living room. While it reflected her usual style of realism, that painting uniquely captivated me. Though I had never been to Italy, I could clearly imagine myself there as I gazed at that painting. Her vivid colors added a calming element to the scene like sunlight spilling from the canvas onto my skin.

When I look at my grandmother now, it is hard to believe that this frail woman with dementia could have had such a revolutionary story. By packing her bags and leaving for America, she single-handedly sacrificed a stable relationship with my father and her life back in China, a decision that couldn't have been easy for any mother. My grandmother's revolution was not fought with weapons, but with courage, sacrifice, and the stubborn belief that her art mattered. As her granddaughter, I inherited her love for art and her desire to create, yet it pains me that she has no recollection of the things she accomplished.

As I sat down to interview her for this essay, I realized how little of her past she now remembers. "Where did you first live in the United States?" I asked for the fifth time. There was no answer. In that moment, I understood something deeply painful and beautiful at the same time: the woman who once crossed the ocean with so little could no longer recall the journey that changed everything. Yet her story lives on—in the paintings that hang in my home, in the galleries that display her work, and in the passion for art she passed down to me.

My grandmother's revolution was quiet but powerful. She defied expectations, crossed continents, and built a life that once seemed impossible. Liu Yaozen once came to America with fifty dollars and a dream. Today, that dream lives on through me.

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