

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Clara Fang, Class of 2005*

Interviewed by  
Rachel Dean, Class of 2013

May 14, 2010

## **Abstract**

In this oral history, Clara Fang discusses her involvement with MassPIRG, working to oppose drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, interning at the Environmental Science and Policy Program, working with the student group Gaia, and starting a student organization called Clean Energy for Smith.

Fang also talks about living in Park House, going abroad at Oxford University, her experiences as an English major, racial tensions on campus, the impact of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks on Smith, and her life after Smith, attending the University of Utah and Yale, and working as an environmental professional.

## **Restrictions**

None

## **Format**

Interview recorded on miniDV tapes using a Panasonic DVX-100A camera. One 60-minute tape.

## **Transcript**

Transcribed by Lauren Hinkle at the Audio Transcription Center in Boston, Massachusetts. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Olivia Mandica-Hart.

## **Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms**

### *Video Recording*

**Bibliography:** Fang, Clara. Interview by Rachel Dean. Video recording, May 14, 2010. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Clara Fang, interview by Rachel Dean, transcript of video recording, May 14, 2010, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Fang, Clara. Interview by Rachel Dean. Transcript of video recording, May 14, 2010. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Clara Fang, interview by Rachel Dean, transcript of video recording, May 14, 2010, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 14, 2010, with:

CLARA FANG

by: RACHEL DEAN  
filmed by: KATE GEIS

DEAN: This is Rachel Dean, and I'm conducting an interview with Clara Fang on May 14, 2010, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you for agreeing to be part of this project.

FANG: Thank you.

DEAN: What were the benefits in choosing Smith over other schools?

FANG: Definitely the academic program was wonderful. The community is amazing. And I think just there is such a great quality of life here, like the traditions and the campus and the resident houses is just really unique and fun, and yeah, I really liked it when I was looking into colleges.

DEAN: What reactions did you get from family or friends in choosing Smith?

FANG: Oh. My parents had never heard of it. They're like, Is this a good school? What is this school? (laughter) Do you want to go to a women's college? So they kind of asked around, and, you know, I think some of their friends, their American friends, were like, Oh, Smith is a really good school. Back in the day if you went to Smith, it was like similar to going to Harvard, so that made my parents a little happier. (laughs)

DEAN: And what about your peers? Did your peers know about Smith at all?

FANG: Yeah, not so much either. I'm from Maryland, and a lot of my peers went to University of Maryland, and there are some that went to, like, liberal arts schools. So I think people knew about it, but it was not like—most of my peers went to University of Maryland.

DEAN: Were the older women in your family college graduates, and did that influence you at all?

FANG: No. My mother went to college, but she went to college in China.

DEAN: Oh, OK. How did Smith live up to your expectations, hopes, and/or fears when you arrived?

FANG: I wasn't sure what to expect, so I think it went beyond my expectations, really. I kind of expected the academic side, but you really don't know what kind of friends you will make and what other activities you will do. And I actually ended up being really involved in extracurricular activities in a way that I wasn't involved when I was in high school, so it's been really amazing, I think exceeded my expectations.

DEAN: What clubs and organizations and/or teams were you involved in?

FANG: My first year, I worked on a couple of campaigns with MassPIRG. I as a campaign organizer for a campaign to oppose drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and we made a big polar bear out of plywood and had people sign names on it and took a picture and sent it to John Kerry, and we had a lot of petitions. So I think that polar bear is still at Bass Hall. (laughs) So I was responsible for that. (laughs) My second year, I was—I think I was still involved with MassPIRG, and then I interned at the Environmental Science and Policy Program, so I helped organize the events that year. And I also started the paperless campaign my sophomore year. I don't know if you know about that. Basically at that time, a lot of the promotions on campus was done through fliers in all of the mailboxes, so, you know, I felt like that was a big waste, so for one week, I asked all the groups to not flier everybody's mailbox and find alternative ways to promote their events, and President Christ was really enthusiastic about the project, and she helped me send out an email. So we did that for one week, and then the next year I think they had Gaia organize a paperless month, so that was cool.

DEAN: What's Gaia?

FANG: That was the student environmental group on campus at the time. There's more stuff that I did, actually. My senior year, I started a student organization called Clean Energy for Smith, and we worked on a campaign to get Smith purchase renewable energy. Our goal was to have the college offset 20% of its energy use through renewables by buying certificates. So I did a lot of presentations around campus and, you know, really tried to get the student body to be motivated. We voted in a referendum saying, This is a good idea, we want to do it. The college didn't buy that year, but the club that I started, the year after that, they were able to organize like an energy efficiency project where they saved a lot of energy from, like, shutting down computers, and then they bought renewable energy certificates with a couple other colleges in the area.

- DEAN: What house did you live in, and what role did your house community play in your overall college experience?
- FANG: I lived at Park House in Park Annex. What role did it play?
- DEAN: Yeah, was it influential in your making friends and...?
- FANG: Mm-hmm. Yeah, it was definitely a lovely home base. I had a lot of friends there. It was very fun. For my first and second year, the dining hall was in Park, so that was a great place to see your friends every day, and it's just really natural, and, you know, you can just catch up with them any time, so I felt really close to my friends.
- DEAN: Did you go abroad, and if so, where?
- FANG: Yes, I did. I did a year abroad at Oxford University.
- DEAN: And how did that influence you and coming back to Smith, and what was the cultural difference in Oxford versus here?
- FANG: Oh, that's like an hour-long answer. (laughs) Say the first part again?
- DEAN: Like, how did that impact you and...?
- FANG: OK. It was so great. I'm really glad I did it. It's, you know, completely different from Smith and really made me push myself, just try out a different environment, like, travel on my own. I traveled through Europe on my own during the breaks. I dated guys, which was hard to do at Smith. (laughter) Studied with Oxford professors. Made a lot of international friends. There were a huge amount of international students there. So it was amazing. And when I came back, I think Smith did feel a little small, and I was like, Wow, these younger students are really young. (laughs) Yeah, but it was really great to, like, kind of broaden my perspective.
- DEAN: And how did the cultural difference affect you, like, living in England versus here and...?
- FANG: Well, I think for me, like, I immigrated from China when I was young, so it's not like my first international experience or kind of seeing a different perspective on the U.S. So in that way, it wasn't too much of a change, but definitely, like, I had never been to Europe before. It's just like definitely a once-in-a-lifetime experience.
- DEAN: What was your major, and what professors or mentors guided you?
- FANG: Mm-hmm. I was an English major, and I studied with Pat Skarda, Michael Thurston, (pause) these professors that I can't remember their

names, too. Susan Van Dyne. I studied with a visiting professor my senior year; her name was Eleanor Wilner. She was a poet. So that was really influential.

DEAN: How exactly were they influential? Did they shape your ideas or influence [how you going?] to graduate school, or...?

FANG: Yeah, I think studying with Eleanor Wilner was really impactful for me. She was just such an amazing woman, just so full of life and independent ideas. And she really helped me in my creative writing. I wrote poetry, and in her class—I just loved her class so much. It was Wednesday nights, and we would meet at the poetry center, and she would bring us little chocolates and pomegranate juice, and it would be like a group of 12 of us sitting around discussing the poetry, and it was so wonderful. And she would have, you know, like really great things to say about our poems, and like very constructive criticism. And she was so detailed in her comments. Like, she would write all over the piece of paper so you could hardly see your poem anymore; it was like buried in all her comments. (laughs) But she just really encouraged me in my writing, and I ended up applying to graduate school in creative writing.

DEAN: So you were involved with those clubs. Were you involved in any other type of political activism or energy-efficient activism?

FANG: Just those things, yeah.

DEAN: What would you describe the campus atmosphere as when you were here?

FANG: I was here from 2001 to 2005. I remember there was a great deal of racial tension. There were, like, several very large kind of events that people got really riled up about, and there were, like, brownouts and parades and—

DEAN: What events?

FANG: —big meetings at JMG, these sort of things.

DEAN: What was happening, specifically?

FANG: I think my first year there was some kind of animosity towards an African-American student. I forget what it was, but maybe something that was written on her door, and it created this huge just foment, and there was, like, people with candles out on the streets. You know, John Connolly, our president at the time, like, he called an all-campus meeting, and all these students came up and talked about how they felt discriminated against at Smith and how unhappy they were here. It was

really intense. Just, you know, there was, like, several things like that when I was here. There was—the campus was really proactive in responding to that, and they organized a lot of, like, diversity events and things to help people talk about these issues. But it was a very big issue when I was here.

DEAN: So did the students organize as well as the college?

FANG: Yes, the students organized them, too.

DEAN: What were some of the challenges, if any, of being at Smith when you were here?

FANG: The challenges? I think managing the academic (laughs) life, sort of figuring out what classes to take and what should I do with my life. Keeping up with the extracurricular activities was pretty challenging for me. The ones I did were very demanding. Like, my last year, to be involved in that campaign, like, I had a meeting every single day of the week, and there were just, like, a lot of emails. It was basically a half-time job. (laughs) And then also trying to balance your social life and all that.

DEAN: Did you have any relationships or dating opportunities, or how did that affect your life while at Smith?

FANG: Yes. I had a couple relationships my first year, and then I met somebody when I was studying abroad and was dating that person my senior year. It's a very strange thing at Smith, I think. (laughs) I think that, like, that person is not there, and this is the case for everybody, of course, you know, so it feels like there's this other life, like you have this virtual life going on at the same time. And people are very stressed out about it. I remember a lot of my friends being stuck in relationships that I don't think they should have been in, but because it's like there aren't any options, they would just continue to be in that relationship. Yeah, so that was hard for all of us. (laughs)

DEAN: So for your commencement address, do you remember it, and did it leave you with any lasting impressions, or any commencement addresses before?

FANG: The commencement address was given by Madeleine Albright. I can't say that it left any sort of lasting impression on me. It was cool to see her. (laughs)

DEAN: So what did you do the summer after you graduated?

FANG: The summer after I graduated? I was going to start my graduate program in creative writing at University of Utah, so I moved to Utah.

(laughter) And I studied Spanish at Brigham Young University for the summer. Yeah, and then I moved to Salt Lake City.

DEAN: So who have you become since Smith?

FANG: Who have I become?

DEAN: Yeah.

FANG: Gosh. I have changed a lot since my time at Smith. I was an English major doing a lot of environmental activism, and now I'm becoming an environmental professional. I just finished a second graduate degree in environmental management at Yale, so I'm graduating soon and doing all of that. I still do writing—I'm trying to get my poetry book published—but I'm not like intent on becoming an English professor the way I was back then. I also used to be very religious. (laughs) I was a Mormon at the time that I was at Smith, and that was a very strange thing to be on this campus. (laughs) There were a few of us, but, you know, we were—we would go to church together every week and, you know, we were not into the lesbian scene. (laughs) You know, it was—that was a growing experience for me, and it was definitely really good for me. But pretty much after I left Smith and I went to Utah, you know, I decided that that religious thing was not right for me and I stopped going to the church and I became much more involved with Buddhism and... (laughs) Yeah, it's just my perspective has changed a lot.

DEAN: Did you feel ostracized while, like, being really religious on Smith campus since that's pretty much a minority, at least nowadays?

FANG: No, I didn't feel ostracized. People would ask questions, but yeah, it wasn't really, like, an issue that much.

DEAN: How has your life after Smith strayed from your original plan of what you were going to do?

FANG: Like I said, I'm doing the environmental stuff really seriously now. Living in Utah was a very different thing, so I think that's changed me a lot, too, and now I'm in—I'm finishing this stuff at Yale. And Yale is actually much more similar to Smith. I feel like there it's a really strong community and they really take care of us, whereas at University of Utah you had to be much more of an adult. (laughter)

DEAN: What difference has a Smith education meant for you, and would you make the same choice if you had to do it again?

FANG: Yeah, I definitely would come here again. What difference it has made... I just felt like here, we are so empowered to be ourselves and to



pursue our dreams. I think maybe at another campus it would have been pretty hard for me to get as involved as I could, or maybe I wouldn't have been able to make as much of an impact, because, you know, you'd just be able to influence people nearby. But here, I was really able to reach out a lot, and professors and other mentors were just really supportive and attentive. I felt like I could really interact with my professors. You know, here, like pretty much all my professors, I called them by their first name and I could invite them to my house for tea, for dinner, for anything, really. They just felt like they just really enjoyed us, and, you know, I could relate to them on a more personal way.

DEAN: Do you have any advice for current or future Smithies, and would you do anything differently?

FANG: I think my advice would just be to be adventurous and to try lots of things and try things that you think are kind of scary but might be good for you. (laughs) You know, yeah, like just really take advantage of everything that the school has to offer, and it makes a huge difference in your career later on and in your life in all these other ways. What was the other part of the question?

DEAN: Would you do anything differently?

FANG: Would I do anything differently? Um... I think I would have liked to made even more friends while I was here, because I think I was so stressed out and focused on my academics and all the extracurriculars that sometimes the social side slid a little bit—and also, like, trying to keep up the long-distance boyfriend. (laughter) Yeah, like, so it would have been good to be—to get out more in that aspect.

DEAN: We only have a few minutes left. Is there anything else you'd like to add that I haven't asked?

FANG: Yeah, I was thinking about the campus atmosphere question, and I think another thing that I should say about that is that September 11<sup>th</sup> happened the first week that I came to school, and that had a major impact on the campus in the next four years and also my time at Smith. People suddenly were really politically aware—or maybe they were before, but for me it was like my first real political awakening. And there was just so many things going on with that, you know, people being active in all sorts of things, and there was like a very strong kind of liberal (laughs) energy about opposing the war and opposing Bush and all of that. So that had a pretty strong impact on my time here.

DEAN: OK, well, thank you very much.

FANG: OK, thank you. (laughs)

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Lauren Hinkle, May 26, 2011.*