

Transcript for Oral History Interview
Conducted for University of Maryland Course HIST428M – Fall 2015
Instructor: Dr. Anne S. Rush

Interviewer's name: Kevin Duan

Interviewee's name: Chak Beh

Interviewee's Country of Origin: Malaysia

Interviewee's Current Residence: Silver Spring, Montgomery County, Maryland, U.S.A.

Date of Interview: October 18, 2015

Place of Interview: Rockville, Maryland, Montgomery County, U.S.A.

Kevin: Hi my name is Kevin Duan, I'll be interviewing Chak Beh today. Uh the date is October 18th, 2015 and we are in Rockville, MD. So uh Chak how are you today?

Chak: I'm good fine thank you.

Kevin: Okay, so to start uh I'd like to ask what was your life back in Malaysia?

Chak: Life in Malaysia, uh this is 37 years ago when I came to America. Before that, back home, during my early years, uh life is not as good in the sense of economic and politic. Uh we do not have the freedom of don't have freedom of speech nor freedom of choice. Uh school was a limited choice too, schooling. We have only uh I would say a discrimination, race discrimination where the ethnic, ethnic groups get the most privilege in schooling in all the assistance and scholarships and so on. So, for example, for Asian Chinese in Malaysia at that time was, for us to go on to higher education we needed to have straight A's in all our exams, whereas for the ethnic group, the Malays, they do not even have to score straight A's. All they need is just have to take the exam. So there is a disparity in that sense. At that time most of the Asians left the country for further studies. Uh for economical, the most of the jobs are all factory work job and was very low low pay. Ummm that is that are the reasons why I came to America. Because of the economic and the political situation.

Kevin: Okay uh do you have any memorable childhood experiences in Malaysia?

Chak: Life is simpler during that time. Uhh I grew up with no TV we don't have TV at that time until much almost in my high school days before we see TV. It was one example. Uhh transport is basically a bicycle. So life is much simpler. Everything is even our games and toys was homemade. Uhhh memories is I would say friends we had more friends and less uhh more neighborhood friends that we get together to play games and so on so forth to pass time. We had less electronical distractions, let's put it that way.

Kevin: Okay so you mentioned the uh the political and I guess umm economical disparities between the Malays and other Asians.

Chak: Mhmm

Kevin: And you mentioned that was what mainly you to the US.

Chak: Mhmm

Kevin: Umm so I'm guessing it was to find a better living situation like more opportunities?

Chak: Mhmm

Kevin: Or...

Chak: More opportunities and more fairness.

Kevin: Was it like specifically you know more like the US? Like did you consider any other countries or was it specifically that you thought the US had the most opportunities?

Chak: The US at that time was looked at as the most opportunities yes. And also because there was a chance for me to migrate to US due to uhh family ties my wife's family ties here.

Kevin: Uhh did you encounter any difficulties when you first immigrated to the US?

Chak: Uhh at first is I would say the values uhh. In that sense is they say culture shock in a way. You see the freedom of press is so, how would I say, is so widely available compared to what was in Malaysia everything was censorship. Uhhh to see ability to further education with with the multiple I would say lots of choices in university and colleges compared to Malaysia. Uhhh the education here is much easier and simpler. What else... ummm nope that's it.

Kevin: So how did you sort of, or I guess you said that mainly it was mainly culture shock. Did you just sorta get used to it as time went by or...

Chak: Yes time went by yup uhhh. Kind of assimilate into American life. The easy going, people are more easy going. Less stress uhhhh

Kevin: Did you find it hard to assimilate or.... you know sort of as time went on you found yourself becoming more and more comfortable

Chak: Yes its it for me it's. Since I'm English speaking it's easier for me to assimilate. Uhh the only thing is the the slang that we brought along in our English. We have to use get used to the American slang. Uhhh different words usage of the English language. Different words is different from the British English. There is I think there is basically English was fine with me.

Kevin: So you mentioned there was political difficulties. What was the political situation like in Malaysia?

Chak: Uhhh political situation in Malaysia. It was mainly one main political party that is all Malays. Most of the opposition are the Chinese and other races. What the government did was anything that does not go to the government's favor is considered uhh illegal or considered treason whatever the government call it. And they have the act for it is Internal Security Act. Uhh the situation that happened at one time was in my high school years was when the nati... when the opposition party got more votes got more seats in the parliament than their normal seats. They did won more, I think, won more seats than normal and uhh people celebrated their victory. End up with a bloodshed in the vein the government sent out troops uhhh to just slaughter the people during the celebration. That end up in a curfew for the whole country. So that was my first experience to see uhhh the disparity in the political situation.

Kevin: Did that like change your I guess like your way of thinking back then cause it must have been you know pretty severe seeing just people getting massacred in the streets.

Chak: Yes it changed uhh it changed for me is seeing there is no hope in the situation in Malaysia where the government has doesn't grant any freedom of press for one, freedom of speech is another. Uhh so the situation was hopeless for young people at that time. For people who have want to be educated has to leave the country in a way. To pursue their career.

Kevin: So uh sorta just switching gears. How does the uh culture here in the US differ than in Malaysia. Is there like different natio...uh I mean well there are different national holidays but are there like culturally like are there any significant culture changes between. Or that any significant culture changes that you experienced.

Chak: The easiest thing I would say our culture back home is more since we are Asian Chinese we are more family oriented. We are more uhhh the respect of the elders, whereas in American culture the child and parent is the same. There is no have a more uhh reverence to their elders. Uhh when we had the restaurant in, back then, we would see the mom and daughter would split the check whereas in Chinese culture that was not going to happen. So there is something different that we had to get used to is to seeing that mother and daughter is two different entity

Kevin: Is there one I guess I wouldn't say like enjoy but I guess one you prefer over the other or... you know I'm assuming after you lived in the US for that long your probably more used to American culture but do you sometimes miss Malaysian culture.

Chak: I still like the Asian culture. I still think that Asian culture is more family orientated umm more emphasis placed on the elders. The respect of the elders. Uhhh I find that the American culture is more loose which also give them the freedom to speak up in the family matters. They can speak up their mind, they put in their voice to be heard. Whereas the Asian Chinese is more... uhhh the elders has all the say let's put it that way.

Kevin: So do you think you're perceived or understood differently here than you are or you were back in Malaysia?

Chak: Perceived differently... back in Malaysia the Chinese, Asian Chinese, has no place in the political. Most of the Chinese in Asia it was just interested in just business. Financially they are into business. So their main concern is to make money in a way, you can say that, but nothing concerned, nothing to do with politics. Umm being in America you get to see how the country is set up in the sense that there's a distinction between the three branches. Whereas in Malaysia the government controls everything from the judicial to the constitution to the people and so on. So there is no distinction here. So I think that the US system is much better since they very transparent and democratic and everybody has a voice and a vote.

Kevin: So would you say I guess like you're perceived in a better light here? Cause you said there is no place for non-Malays.

Chak: Mhmm I would say so yes.

Kevin: Was like the discrimination really intense?

Chak: Yes, the discrimination is really intense. Uhh for example if I were to open a business in Malaysia I need to have a Malay partner to get the license. And Malay partner is just a sleeping partner but would enjoy the profits of the business with no contribution to the capital. So that to me is discriminatory and as an Asian Chinese we just doing a business, making happen, working like crazy to make it happen and yet have to share the profit with the Malay sleeping partner just because we need to have his name on the paperwork to get a license.

Kevin: So umm why did you choose to uhh settle in the D.C. metro area?

Chak: I first came to America I settled in Pennsylvania for ten years. Uhh came I decided to come down to D.C. metro was because of my uhh wife's family. All of them is in Maryland. So we used to come down every single day from Pennsylvania. Every single weekend from Pennsylvania. So for ten years we would drive down every weekend for a day and then goes back to Pennsylvania. So decided to come back down one day after we sold the restaurant. So the because of the family.

Kevin: Do you miss living in Pennsylvania?

Chak: Oh yes.

Kevin: Did you like it there?

Chak: I miss Pennsylvania. I think Pennsylvania is a great. The the town that we lived in was York, Pennsylvania. Uhhh I enjoyed my first ten years in America there. I think it's a very small city. I make lots of great friends uhh that became customer or customer became my friends too either way, but in the end it was very small very homey city where everybody knows everybody in a way. So that was a very good experience for me.

Kevin: Was there a high Malaysian immigrant population in York, Pennsylvania?

Chak: Nope. I think I'm the only family at that time from Malaysia. There's other Asian Chinese from other part of the world but not from Malaysia. Uhh we do have friends came over after we came to join us in Pennsylvania. But we are I think we are the only one that came to Pennsylvania York, Pennsylvania we are the only one I think.

Kevin: Where you live now is there a high Malaysian immigrant population?

Chak: Mmmm I would not say high, I would say maybe a 1% of population. Maybe if we're at that.

Kevin: If you could would you like to live, you know, how there's like Chinatown, would you live like to live in a place where there is a lot more Malaysian immigrants? Where you...

Chak: Mm not necessary. I still like the suburb. I think it's much quieter than the downtown, Chinatown area. Uhhh life in America is different too. In a sense you hardly see somebody unless you make an appointment meet somebody. Everybody is busy doing their thing. It's not like Asia we just hang out after work like 5 o'clock in the evening everybody hangout in the neighborhood and we meet everybody. Here is pretty much have to make an appointment in a way to get to meet somebody. So life is different too, its more hectic more activities involving children and so on and so forth. So time is very precious.

Kevin: So did you also live you said you liked York cause it was like a small sorta town where everyone knew everyone. Is that where when you lived in Malaysia was it like that as well where.

Chak: Yes I lived in a similar small town in Malaysia. Uhhh pretty much similar to what York, Pennsylvania.

Kevin: So moving to the D.C. metro was sorta like your first exposure, to quote unquote, a big city?

Chak: Yes. Yup uhh D.C. would be a big city then yup. Other than New York that we do frequently visit New York.

Kevin: So how did you know how did you adapt that sorta going between a small city to a big city?

Chak: Uhh the small city to big city. The at that Asian then here is. You see more different kind of people in the sense of different races, more people from different part of the world. Uhhh the big thing is the busyness of the town of the city umm more population is bigger. Other than that there is not much difference then.

Kevin: So what was your occupation like while back in Malaysia?

Chak: Okay. I have, I first started after high school was working in the uhhh factory. Where we make textiles. I was a, I would call it a tracer, in the sense that I draw the design to be printed on textile. Then I worked there for I believe 2 to 3 years when we, I quit after we staged a uhh sit in to get a unionized the factory. But because fearing retaliation from the company we decide to quit. Uhh then got a job in the Dept. of Labor umm my basic job was just like clerical job. Doing paperwork, filing, data entry. Then left that job and went to work for a private uhhhh car loan company, financial company. And that, I have, I would say like clerk cashier, so that I worked for maybe two or three years and after that I decide to open my own place. I've my own driving school, insurance and tour business. That I had for a few years until I was 25. Then I sold that place sold the business and came to America.

Kevin: Okay so mentioned a sit in at the factory for unionization.

Chak: Mhmm

Kevin: Was that like a big political issue? You know was were sit ins happening frequently all around Malaysia or I guess was it more centralized to where you were?

Chak: Uhh any sit in, so called sit in, is not a government approved activity. And neither is the company that operates the factory favors any of those unionized activities. So we pretty much shut down the factory for weeks until the company could not handle it anymore, in business as well as uhhh no worker working for them and so on and so forth. Until the government came intervene and get out the riot police to disperse the union, I mean the group of people. So we chose union to union to try to unionize the factory was because of poor wages and poor working condition. Uhhh there was this was the that's what the group was trying to achieve to unionize the factory. To have a better say in the uhh I would say the fair wages and the working condition.

Kevin: So what were the working conditions like?

Chak: At that time I was I would say we was minimum pay. Minimum pay means I believe it was just \$2 US a day for eight hours. So it was just pennies and cents for our work. Whereas the economy at that time to get a bottle of coke cost 25 cents US. So that is uhh the the low wages

that is very to us at that time was very disappointing for the number of for the skilled work that we have to do in that factory for that low pay. That's one of the reason why we tried to unionize.

Kevin: Okay so you also mentioned starting your own your own business. Sorta like a big you know like a driving school, insurance, and like a travel I guess agency. Uhh how did you sorta get started in all that?

Chak: It came about when I was working in the finance place and a friend came and invited me to start a uhh a business in my own hometown. So it just one of those opportunities that came and I took it and then tried to make the best of it. So the reason why most of the business back home then is not just a single kind of business. Most of them is multi in the sense of either you do multiple kind of business to make it work for economical reasons. So this way if you don't have people that comes in enough to do the driving school lessons and you do tour business as well as insurance.

Kevin: Do you do you miss owning your own business or any of the other work you did back in Malaysia?

Chak: Mmmm I don't really miss it, I think I got over that. I do miss owning my own restaurant in America. Uhh I like the challenge, the challenge to get make the business uhh thriving is a challenge. That is America though.

Kevin: So uhh you said, you mentioned, a restaurant that was in Pennsylvania?

Chak: Yes, Pennsylvania.

Kevin: What kinda restaurant was it?

Chak: Chinese American restaurant. Uhh serving Chinese American food. Uhh I did was with that do American breakfast. We do the Chinese for lunch and dinner. So it's an all-day project. Uhhh we start from 5:30 in the morning to almost 10, 11 at night. So it was a whole day.

Kevin: Would you uhh did you have any like, I guess, like original or uhh authentic Malaysian food or is there any...

Chak: Uhh we do incorporate some to bring in but as well as at that time York, Pennsylvania is very not cosmopolitan enough to really appreciate Malaysian food. Umm but my regular customer would enjoy because most of my regular customer would not ever look at the menu. Would just sit down I offer them whatever I cook. So that was the fun part. So they they enjoy whatever I cook there's no don't need a menu for that.

Kevin: Have you thought about opening a restaurant again here in the D.C. area?

Chak: Hmmmm not now not... I do not think so because of the cost of opening one and the competition is much greater now than 30 something years ago where everybody now here is can see restaurants everywhere. At that time there was less restaurants and the competition is less. Uhrr even though people now spend more money eating out than before. So regulation changes, more strenuous health dept. requirements, more building costs requirements compared to previously.

Kevin: So how would you describe your relationship with America before coming here?

Chak: Relationship with America before coming here.... uhrr for those in Asia, we know about America through the Vietnam War. During school time we heard about the Vietnam War, we heard about U.S. intervention to stop communism from spreading in South East Asia. We highly regard U.S. at that time for doing the big brother's job as they call it. So we look up to America because of its power, because of its manufacturing. Uhrr the high skill level, technology and also the economic power at that time.

Kevin: Did, I guess, America meet these standards when you when you came over?

Chak: Say that again.

Kevin: Did like, you know, so you said that they were high regarded back in Malaysia. You know when you came over were you I guess, I don't know were you disappointed, did they, did they meet your expectations of you know being the great you know America.

Chak: No, I think America meet my expectations. I I in fact some of the time exceed my expectation of America. Uhh it is what I read about and it's and it's true to what I read about America at that time. So it was highly regarded as a place to be, a place to be living, a place to go for studies and so on.

Kevin: Can you maybe give an example or two of when it exceeded your expectations?

Chak: It exceeded my expectations when I see the freedom of the press comparing to what was Malaysia all the publication including a church newsletter has to be censorship. So there's no freedom of press. uhh I like to tell people when I came to America was the comparison is a publication here in America that is so freely available at that time, like the Playboy magazine for example, where we see all the nude pictures in the Playboy magazine at that time. Back in Malaysia all those nude pictures is painted black. So there's no nude pictures back then, only what they see in America. so that's why when I first came and told my American friends there's a big difference, you guys get to the freedom of the press, the freedom of information is so uhrr widely upheld by the constitution. Whereas in Malaysia all this is censorship including even the church newsletter.

Kevin: So you mentioned the uhh like sorta like the government influence in the press in Malaysia. Were there ever any I guess, you know, like I guess like underground or anything newspapers where you could get information that wasn't censored or was that just maybe too risky or not as available or...

Chak: Mmmm all the underground or so called underground is not available. Even US publication like the Life magazine that feature uhh the riots in 19 in my high school years was even blackened out or censored. Even for western publication that published the situation in Malaysia. So there is not enough I would say underground news other than what we hear from the western the BBC the U.S. radio and so on. That's only way we know about the news back home.

Kevin: Was there anything like vastly different like say you know like there was like a government released article back in for like some event in Malaysia but then you came to America and found out things were, like the whole story wasn't exactly what was reported.

Chak: Back in Malaysia or back in US?

Kevin: Like okay, so like did events that occurred in Malaysia sort of or like as they were reported in Malaysia umm turn out to be different when you came to the US when you like learned more about those events from I guess a more neutral standpoint instead of one through like the the government's eyes as they censored the press.

Chak: Yes, of course. All the censorship is all government controlled, all the radio, all the newspapers is all government controlled. So it's up to what the government want the people to hear whereas when I come to U.S. to learn about through the Life magazine for example we get to see the actual picture of the riots in the Life magazine which was even banned at that time in Malaysia. So we get to see the real story back in America where theres the freedom of press and the freedom of information.

Kevin: Were the riots a uhh like a big major event in Malaysia.

Chak: Yes.

Kevin: You said there you said there was a curfew after. Oh, no, you said there was were the riots a result of the uh the the shooting you said that happened?

Chak: The riots is where the shootings happened and the curfew follows that, where the government try to control the situation. So the riot is major. It's the national thing it spreads out through all the community. So you just like the uhh where the Chinese tried to arm themselves to defend themselves and how the government tried use force, the armed forces, the police to their advantage.

Kevin: How long did this go on for and I guess what was the resolution of of it? Were like tensions greater were...

Chak: The tension was never the same after that, it was much greater. The uhh I would say the trust value between the two races was not there anymore in the sense they do not trust each other anymore. Or the Chinese do not trust authority anymore. Uhhh things does not, I would say, things gradually gets better through time, but at that time it was uhh hot cake hot baked rather hot baked for any rumors of sabotage or anything is always tie up to people thinking it's one race against the other. So the tension is always there.

Kevin: So there has been an sorta anti-immigration sentiment throughout America's history where I don't know if you know there's been like the Chinese Exclusionary Acts and then there was the the uhh like the early 20th century along with the quotas. And so like did you hear about any of this when you were in Malaysia?

Chak: I heard about the quotas that only uhh only so many people allowed to come to America from different part of the world, different countries has its own quota, Malaysia had its own quota. Uhhh that mean that is, I heard about that, but that doesn't make any difference. Uhh controlling the immigration each government will have to decide how to manage immigration since America is found by immigrants anyway so to shut the door after you came aboard is, I think it's not fair for the rest of the world.

Kevin: Well, did you experience any like anti-immigration or I guess racism when coming to America?

Chak: I think there is always some people who feel that this country belongs to them uhh there are people who who feel uhhhh insecure that their job is at jeopardy. There are people who feel that they have the right to be here since they are here first. Uhh I would say then that thing can I would say the discrimination would not go away anywhere though. Doesn't matter which part of the world you are there's always discrimination.

Kevin: So uhh what did your uhh journey to the US look like? You know in terms of like any hurdles you had to go through or, you know, like. Tell me about like your whole process of coming towards or coming to the United States.

Chak: The process coming to United States, okay. At that time, it's not possible to get a visa. We only could get a tourist visa to visit. So when we came over as a tourist visa that's when we started applying for a green card. So that was the hurdle, the hurdle then is to get an attorney to represent us to go through all the paperwork and waiting time to get approval. Uhh and that again is the quota too, depends on the quota. And then it took us, I would say, a good 2 to 3 years before we get approved. Other than that there's nothing big, nothing mmm like a big hurdle to accomplish or overcome.

Kevin: So you said you could only get a tourist visa. There was no work visas, student visas or anything?

Chak: It's not easy to get out of Malaysia even for student visa. For all students leaving the country, especially the Asian Chinese, they would have to put up a government state uhh a fund with the government to indicate, I mean to indicate that they would return back to Malaysia on completion of their education. So to get out the country is not as simple job unless you have enough money to put up the funds and the fund is, some of the fund is huge. So uhh many of the Asian Chinese who left not even bother to go back home since they have discovered that the West has more promise. Uhh they've discovered that going out to another country where there's more freedom and uhh more I would say they enjoy the better condition of other countries in the world. I think in my year, in my school years, in my senior years, most of my classmates have left Malaysia. I would say a good 60-70 percent have no longer in Malaysia. They are all settled in other parts of the world. Uhh some have taken roots in that part of the world.

Kevin: So what was the uhh approval process like for a green card cause I assume it must be hard to go from a tourist visa to I guess for a green card that's you're a resident alien, correct?

Chak: Mhmm. uhh all this is done by the attorney, so he has I think he has, knows the uhh the rules and regulation required to fulfill that condition. So that was done through the lawyer to take care of that. Uhhh nothing major other than make sure we have a secure job that they're looking for, secure income that we are not a burden to the state or the government, as long as we have a legit work or legit job that can support ourselves. That was one of the criteria.

Kevin: Okay. So uhh it seems like it was I guess like it was still a rough process but it seems I guess easier then than it would be now to get a green card from a tourist visa. Was it was it something do you know that happened a lot with Malaysian immigrants to the US. Was that the route like the usual route that they took?

Chak: Mhmm that is the usual route at that time. That was the usual route at that time. That's the only way to get out of the country is a tourist visa. Even to get a tourist visa we need someone in America that uhh I would say that we visiting. A relative in America that we are visiting is of good standing before you get granted a tourist visa by the U.S. embassy.

Kevin: So what is hard to get a tourist visa or just a tourist visa to the U.S.? Like say you wanted to go visit maybe like China or other like would it would it have been easier to get a tourist visa to go there?

Chak: At that time you cannot get a visit a visa to any communist county including China, Vietnam and so on so China is out of the question. Uhh the western countries we can go as long as we meet the criteria, the fee we have to pay, and so on and so forth. The criteria we had to meet to get approval from each individual country. America was the easiest one at the time. More open and less questions asked let's put it that way.

Kevin: So when you retire do you plan to retire in live out your life in the U.S.? Uhh would you think about moving back to Malaysia now?

Chak: Malaysia now is no different from when I left almost 30 something years ago. It has not gone it has not improved in any way politically. Uhh has not given the real freedom of press and information as what we enjoy in America. Uhh it will definitely, even economically it's still so disfavor in compared to U.S. dollars. Uhh definitely we stay in America because my children will be here. It'll be different going back home and moreover since I gave up my citizenship from Malaysia it would not be a permanent stay, it would be just for visitor status. So there will be a short term stay.

Kevin: Do you have any, well you said you gave up your citizenship, do you have any family back in Malaysia that you sometimes go back to visit?

Chak: I have all the family is back home. All my family is back home in Malaysia. I have only a niece in Atlanta and everybody else is back home. So most of them are, I would say, some of them in Singapore, some would be in Malaysia so those are the places I would visit when I go home. But still home is still America.

Kevin: So when you retire would you retire around the D.C. area, would you maybe go back to Pennsylvania maybe try out another state?

Chak: At this point, at this time, it just Maryland. So no plans to go anywhere else yet, maybe time will things will change when time goes on. At this point there's no plans

Kevin: Uhh is there anything else you would like to tell me before we finish up?

Chak: Uhh I would say no matter what other people say about America it's still a great place to live in. uhh a great place for the kids to pursue their professional career. It's still a place that is not perfect in every sense, there's still be discrimination no matter what the country can do. Uhh it's still be disliked by a lot of people in by a lot of other countries in the world for whatever policies you have, any foreign policy we have, so no matter, in spite of all that it's still a great country. Thank you.

Kevin: Thank you!