

Ho Yock Lin Oral History Content Summary

Track 1 [duration: 1:33:55] [Session one: 30 May 2013]

[00:00] Ho Yock Lin [HYL] second generation in Malaysia, parents from Hainan, China, moved to then North Borneo, Sabah. Raised in Chinese culture, example of wearing red at New Year's Eve dinner. One of six children, two others died very young, lack of medical facility. Describes accident. Childhood in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, father coffee-shop owner, mother helping. Describes mother as eldest daughter with no opportunity for school, expected to help at home. Story about mother teaching herself to read and write Chinese characters from newspaper, asking neighbours meanings of words. Story about mother's enterprising business and negotiation at market, contributing to household income. Reflects on her perspective as child and lack of realisation of burden.

[06:08] Comments on Chinese women as strong characters while serving husbands. Example of father's starched clothing. Describes lack of wealth and being last in line of girls for worn clothes. Story about mother never turning beggars away. Describes mother standing in flood water to cook for HYL and siblings while they played in same water.

[09:45] Comments on grandfather's views in feudalistic society and privileges of uncles, story about cleaning birds for grandparents during HYL's childhood. More description of mother's efforts, mention of Chinese medicine.

[13:14] Discusses treatment of brothers, best food saved for them and HYL questioning and complaining to her mother. Describes father breaking tradition to send all three daughters to England for further study, very difficult at time, and to much criticism from grandfather.

[17:07] Describes playing with stones and sticks and making up games with siblings. Mentions demolishing of old houses in Jesselton and playing with rats. Describes father's parents staying in China, father talking about his father. Mentions father writing for newspaper. Story of parents' meeting through matchmaker and father following mother to then Malaya. Mentions class distinctions and expectations.

[22:45] Describes grandmother having bound feet, wearing child size shoes, recalls asking questions and grandmother's explanations. Discusses feudalistic society and marginalization of women. Mentions leaving for England aged 18.

[25:25] Description of Chinese primary school. Mentions later attending Catholic school as English speaking school, common perception that 'brighter future'. Explanation of Chung Hua schools around the world. Describes principles of Chinese school, humility, integrity, respect. Compares to new generation. Talks about favourite teacher, recently found again in old people's home, influential person in HYL's life. Story about being moved from back to front of class and teacher seeing beyond rebellious behaviour.

[34:24] Discusses reading, mentions Luo Guanzhong's 'Romance of the Three Kingdoms', Wu Cheng'en's 'Journey to the West', Charlotte Brontë's 'Jane Eyre' and The Bible stories as influential, describing Jesus as a revolutionist.

[37:22] Impressions of Catholic secondary school and contradictions experienced. Further study, describes time in England as "golden period" for joining student movement and shaping of political consciousness. Another story from secondary school to illustrate stubborn character. Story from primary school. Discusses character traits shaped and lessons applied when raising own children. Mentions two children, boy and girl.

[51:22] Describes meal times growing up, everyone present and father's childhood stories and interest in their lives, unusual for society. Describes mother at table, but father's sister following tradition that no woman should be at table.

[53:50] Describes culture shock of England, body consciousness. Describes university societies and attending Ten Years After Merdeka [independence] conference in 1975, learning about Malaysia and exposure to political realities of home country. Beginning of involvement in demonstrations, describes protest against Internal Security Act (ISA) outside Malaysian Embassy, London, wearing balaclava. Discusses fear of going out on the streets then compared to common activity today.

[59:57] First exposure to women's movement, questioning women's position. Discusses collective memory and shared experiences as women. Describes desire among Malaysian students to return home and play a part comparing to today's exodus among younger generation, return home after eight years and formation of All Women's Action Society (AWAM) by 20 women, 1985. Describes relationship with husband met in student movement. Mentions KL Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall. Study of secretarial course then Business Studies, first secretarial job in the UK.

[1:08:21] Describes setting up of organization and climate at the time, lack of civil political activity. Decision to focus on five issues; rape, sexual harassment, domestic violence, media portrayal of women, and prostitution. Describes working with Association of Women Lawyers, Malaysian Trade Union Women's Section on rape issue and establishing that rape not a private issue, but social and political. Call for legal reform and awareness building to break myths. Reflects on period as challenging and enriching journey.

[1:12:43] Discusses achievements within Malaysia's legal framework. Mentions Domestic Violence Act, campaign for stand-alone sexual harassment act, addition of gender to Federal Constitution, Article 8. Discusses empowerment of people to speak out about rape and sexual harassment. Explains campaigns, example following rape and killing of nine-year old Ang May Hong. Remarks on work to be done and continued use of sexist language by parliament members today. Mentions lack of resources to tackle prostitution as one of original five issues of organization and limited work carried out on media portrayal of women with global report. Mentions trafficking and support for work of Tenaganita and founder Irene Fernandez.

[1:18:23] Discusses challenge of fundraising, and reliance on events, charity walks, dinners. Mentions three-year European Union (EU) funded project, donations in kind from companies. Discusses funding policy of not accepting from alcohol and gambling companies, and those known to violate worker's or women's human rights.

[1:21:37] Discusses Malaysia's recent 13th General Election as one of most important in country's political history. Mentions Barisan Nasional (BN) and political party coalition. Discusses context as parallel to Arab Spring.

[1:25:05] Discusses necessary engagement with government, caution from outset and challenges of process, strategies and response mechanisms to preserve organizational position.

[1:29:29] Discusses relationship with the media, and support in 1980s waning in 2000s. Mention of Women Deliver conference and abortion issue raised.

[1:31:56] Outlines abortion laws in Malaysia and public misperception even in medical profession. [pause for water]

Track 2 [duration: 36:29] [Session one: 30 May 2013]

[00:00] Describes case where judge used United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) for first time in Malaysia's history. Mentions lawyer Honey Tan. Discusses importance of CEDAW as rights based framework in training young people on women's rights. Mentions Women's Learning Partnership (WLP) manual 'Leading To Choices'. Mentions Women Development Collective.

[04:14] Discusses organizational values and partnership with WLP and training manual as awareness tool. [07:02] Discusses collective and uniquely female experience and success of Violence Against Women campaign as voice. Discusses participatory element of approach. Talks about WLP case studies.

[12:11] Describes 'feminist' counselling services offered by AWAM. Mentions Legal Aid Council, Malaysian Bar, Lawyer's Association and collaboration establishing gender sensitive roots in legal profession. Mentions difficulty managing diverse languages of callers. Mentions Befrienders Worldwide and inter-agency and inter-organizational reference. Describes organizational structure of AWAM

[16:50] Describes balancing full time employment with 27-year involvement with AWAM, encouragement of husband. Talks about 1987 Operation Lalang mass arrest including many friends. Mentions Cecilia Ng, Heng Leng. Mentions involvement in theatre group depicting issues relating to marginalized groups, example of performance at Central Market, Kuala Lumpur relating to violence against women, also '1000 Planks' play depicting poor housing issue. Describes Suara Inisiatif Sdn Bhd (SUARAM), human rights organization formed in response to arrests.

[20:53] Describes most difficult setback over the years as closed-minded people. Mentions authorities, religious people and fundamentalists. Attributes success to support of strangers and trust of people. Reflects on proudest moments, from childhood, own children, legal reforms achieved. Remarks that much too do in remaining estimated 20 years of life and lucky that HYL's children no longer need her attention.

[27:15] Explains that own family not first priority and husband and children's awareness of fact. Describes working for Sabah Action Women's Group (SAWO) and carrying new-born son to meetings and breastfeeding. Reflects on difficult moments in chosen path, taken in stride as part of course, humiliations, frustrations, discipline, gains.

[31:55] Highlights plight of indigenous women of Sarawak, East Malaysia, with cases of sexual abuse of schoolgirls by Sarawak logging company. Describes current case in Sabah where rape case withdrawn when perpetrator states that will marry 13-year old victim. Discusses facile marginalization of poor communities with no access to information. Mentions PACOS Trust. Discusses politics of interest groups in area, acknowledging growth of civil society in Kuala Lumpur and spectrum of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and regret regarding geographical distance and limitations in working with such communities.