

Sites and Signs of Remembrance 2nd February 2007

Helen Kon translating for Mr and Mrs Pang Lan Tai Mui at Kenneth Lee House

With Pam Schweitzer and Ya-Ling Peng

Transcribed by Gill Smith, History student at Greenwich University

Mr Pang was born in 1937 and his wife was born in 1936, and these are their children, who were born in 1959, 1962, and 1967, all in Hong Kong.

Pam (P) - Were the children born in Hong Kong, before Mr Pang left to come over here?

The first and second one were born when he was in Hong Kong, the third was born just after he came to London.

P- Then I have to ask Mrs Pang why her husband came here and how she felt about that?

Mrs Pang: Mr Pang came here five days and she had a daughter.

P- Why don't we ask him why he came at this time?

Mr P: During that time it was difficult to find jobs in Hong Kong.

P- And he had something to come to here did he?

Mr. P: In those days if you knew someone in a restaurant or a manger of a restaurant then you can ask them to write a letter for you on your behalf to say that you need to work in their restaurant, and they will send you a letter and you then could get to come here. And when you come here never mind whether you work with him or her or somebody as long as you don't come back and bother him.

P- So it doesn't matter who you work with to get here. To go back to Mrs Pang, How awful. I'm just trying to think what that would have been like saying goodbye to her husband.

Mrs Pang: There was nothing much she can do because they needed the money and he has to go abroad to get money.

P- So who helped her at home with the children?

Mrs P: The in-laws helped look after the children and she went to the fields to work in the fields on the land.

P- So what was she doing, what job?

Mrs P: Vegetables

P- Is that a traditional way of doing things?

Mrs P: Yes it is

P- And how did you keep in touch with your husband and send him pictures of the children?

Mrs Pang: She's says that in those days she can't read or write and when Mr Pang sends the money home she asks someone to write a letter to say we have received your money and that's it. There is nothing much to say.

P- Did she think he would soon be coming home?

Mrs P: What happens is he goes home for holidays

P- She knew then, she didn't expect that he would come to England, get money and then come home?

Mrs P: No no

P- Did she expect to come and live in England?

Mrs P: She did yes

P- Maybe she could say a little about that. How she came and what it was like?

Mrs. P: In 1975 she came. She bought her children here

To live

Mrs P: To live

P- 1975, so the youngest was 8 years old, so they had been living separately for 8 years. Gosh that's quite a thought, can you imagine that? So Mr Pang, how did you manage this time, were you very lonesome for your wife...?

Mr P: He still thinks about the wife. Everybody comes here for the same thing.

P- So he was living in a house with Chinese men and they all had their wives back home. So tell me about the house you lived in when you first came over and how you found that

Mr P: He says that the room is this big, (*very small*) 4 beds. For 5 shillings per bed.

P- Was that cheap?

Mr P: No, not cheap, the room was £2. And then money for the meter on top.

P- Was he able to cook for himself?

Mr P: Only one cooker, for all four people to cook.

P- And it was very cold I suppose

Mr P: Very cold. If it was cold you put money in the meter. 6 pence was about 1 hour
That not much time is it, that's expensive. And in the daytime you were working in the restaurant

Mr P: When I come in I worked in the afternoon, till 12 o'clock, from 5 o'clock to midnight.

P- I would love to know what he did in his first week in London, did he visit anything?

Mr P: When he came there were some friends who were on holiday and took him round.

What did they show him?

Mr P: Tottenham Court Road, he saying things like antiques and old things, so I think he means it was the British Museum

P- Did they show him china town?

Mr P: Before Gerrard Street was not called China Town, in the old days there was no China Town there. There was a restaurant called Good Friends in the docklands area, which was the old China Town, and it was the first Chinese restaurant.

P- And that's because of the people coming off the ships in the docklands area, which of course is now very smart. But in those days it wasn't, it was run down. Thank you for reminding me of this, there was the Good Friends and the Old Friends.

Mr P: He says in the 70's the person that does the Chinese paper and a few friends started China Town in China Town as we know it

P- How did they do that I wonder?

He says in the 70's those guys doing Chinese New Year, they bought things, food to pray to the gods to start China Town.

P- And how did he get the properties I wonder?

Mr P: In the old days the rents were very cheap. It was a rundown area so as long as they want to rent it, they don't mind.

P- So they all got together, and what street was that in, Dean Street or whatever

Mr P: Gerrard Street. In the old days that is where all the drug dealers used it.

P-And was that connected with the Chinese people at the time

No, not at that time, but it was a very rundown area

P- Was it also, if he was cooking and so on, where he would go and get spices?

Mr P: He says that in the old days all the shops were different except for one

P- And that's the one he used to go to?

Mr P: No, you used to be able to have your meal there for 4s 9p with rice.

P- When he had this one little cooking ring did he learn to cook for himself or did he already know how to cook?

Mr P: They all knew how to cook from home. The only thing they didn't know is how to cook how the restaurant people cook, which is quite different.

P- So he had to learn how to cook in the restaurant or did he not cook

Mr P: He was not on the cooking side; he was on the waiting side.

P- He was a waiter there. So did he have in his free time, did he have free time, what did he do?

Mr P: He walked around and tried to make friends

P- How did he make friends, I'm interested

Mr P: There is a coffee bar in Gerrard Street and he used to go there, lots of people used to go there. Then they'd sit down and ask what your name is, where have you been, and then you start getting to know each other from there.

P- So that was very important, I wonder if it is still there, it would be nice to take a photo of it.

Mr P: No its not there.

P- Was it a bar, or a Chinese?

Mr P: It's an English establishment, but if you are Chinese, you go there. They still serve you; because of the area it is in the Chinese go there.

P- I think he said last time Helen that he only found a room in the house because it was a mixed marriage. I just wanted to check that it was a Chinese woman who was married to an English woman.

Mr P: He'd forgotten that. Chinese marrying English people; a lot of Chinese people have no permit to stay, so they marry English people to get a permit. In the 80's there was a new law out whereby if you are a woman you marry an English person, you can take the nationality of the spouse and vice versa. And if it is a white girl marrying a Chinese man, the Chinese man can take her nationality.

P- I'm interested to how he got from being this night worker working shifts to having his own restaurant.

(Translator)He hasn't got a restaurant.

P- Has he never had one? Has he always worked in someone else's? Also how he got to find his way around London, because presumably he couldn't read the signs

In the old days, people travelled from Earls Court Station, and friends would teach them how to use the underground. They would write down on paper Piccadilly so they can recognise things.

P- I was just thinking how if I was in his situation I would be completely lost, and I know

people who have been to china who unless they had a piece of paper they wouldn't know where they were. So he had to stay within a certain area to recognise places. And he could read the English then? [Mr Pang]

Mr P: A little bit, but he hasn't the patience to learn, (laughter). He worked in the evening so if had wanted to he could have studied English in the mornings but he couldn't manage it.

P- Why, too tired?

Mr P: It doesn't go in!

P- Tell him I know the feeling, I'm learning German

Mr P: When he first came he worked in an Italian restaurant in Upton Road

P- What was the name of it?

Mr P: He can't remember. He used to work there in the kitchens and learnt a bit of English from them. They asked him to take a plate, so he learnt plate.

P- Out of interest, when Mrs Pang came over with the children, had she learnt any English at all?

Mrs P: No

P- What about the children?

Mr P: Children OK, they did speak some English

P- So how did she manage, the children were in school all day?

Mrs P: She worked in a European kitchen, washing up.

P- Did they teach her some words?

Mrs P: She just did the washing up, and when it was time to go home, she just went home

P- So she didn't talk to anyone?

Mrs P: There were two Chinese ladies, so she spoke to them

P-Did she then get work in a Chinese restaurant?

Mrs P: No

P- She didn't, why not?

Mrs P: She doesn't know how to get around London so she found a job in Queensway, because he was working in Queensway, in a Chinese restaurant so they could go home together after work.

P- So it was a European restaurant but it was close. Did they ever get to work together in London?

Mr P: No, it was not often they were in the same type of work in the same restaurant

P- So she is not in this photograph

Mr P: Not this one, got it for my grandson

P- So this is Mr Pang, and the older lady is who? It is her! So they did work in the same restaurant! [Mrs Pang]

Mrs P: No, they didn't work in the same restaurant, but they took the picture in front of the restaurant!

P- You did take your own business in the end?

Mr P: He had a take away before, and he moved into a proper restaurant.

P- So he did have a proper restaurant! Where was this?

Mr P: Tunbridge. This restaurant is smaller, and then they moved to a bigger restaurant

in Tunbridge.

P- With his wife?

Mr P: Once he moved it over there he changed the ownership to his son.

P- But then the family then worked together for quite some time

Mr P: Because of his asthma he couldn't work so he gave it to his son.

P- Did Mrs Pang continue to help her sons?

Mr P: When they are busy she will help, if not she won't

P- But there still there aren't they?

Mr P: They sold the lease of the restaurant, but they continue to live upstairs

P- So all the family has stayed in England is that right, all the children?

Mr P: Yes

P- But Mrs Pang goes home a lot, so she lives Hong Kong, is that right?

Mr P: No, she used to live in Hong Kong when they first came here, after 8 years she came here and stayed here. Now she is retired, she has moved back to Hong Kong and Mr Pang still lives here. She comes and visits him sometimes

P- And why did she decide to live her life out in Hong Kong?

Mrs P: Because she has a mother in Hong Kong who is 99 and she has to look after her

P- How old is Mrs Pang, born in 1936. So she is 70 years old, and her mother is 99. So these places are all the places you have lived and worked. So his London is all over the place, not just a Greenwich based thing. NW SW W6 W3, and this is where there was lots of work, Chinese restaurants I suppose [Helen agrees]. I want to ask Mr Pang if he thinks of London when he is away in Hong Kong, what are the places that come into his mind, the sights of familiarity?

Mr P: He says that he only remembers the places he's been to, not the places he hasn't been to

P- Of course

Mr P: So there are lots of changes

P- He's been here a long time a lot has changed. Does he now feel comfortable and at home in Greenwich? Does he now think of this as his home?

Mr P: He thinks of this as home. You stay here and think of this as home

P- So where you are is home! He did have an interesting experience of living in an English sheltered housing I think; and it would be interesting to hear something about this.

Mr P: He used to live in the ground floor and the windows were very wide and near the ground, so it was easy for people to break the window and come in, security problems

P- Was his wife with him as well?

Mr P: Yes

P- I think also they were quite isolated?

Mr P: The people in Number 7 used to come round and see them and talk to them

P- Also Chinese?

Mr P; No, English

P- Did Number 7 speak some Chinese?

Mr P: Speaks English

P- And you managed that?

Mr P: Yes, they used signs.

P- But that was the only one

Mr P: Yes. He didn't know how to use the intercom system and if there is anything wrong he couldn't report. Number 7 used to come down and show him, and did it for him.

P- So how did he find out about this place?

Mr P: His Daughter-in-law went to the Deptford Indo-Chinese Centre, you know. Well they started talking. And they met Mrs La and started talking to her. Mr Pang's daughter in law said that her parents would like to stay in the Chinese residential place, so Mrs La introduced her to me. He was on the waiting list here for three years. It was insisted that he had a referral letter and it would be better if he had a referral from an agency rather than himself. So he went to the Indo-Chinese Centre, and they didn't know how to write it and they wrote it wrong so he had to go back again, because Kenneth Lee House is quite strict on referrals because there are not many places.

P- Now he's happy here?

Mr P: He likes it here.

P-How does he spend his days?

Mr P: He goes to the club.

P- Which Club is it?

Mr P: In Poplar

P- So the other side of the river?

Mr P: Some days he goes to Thamesmead, Wednesday and Fridays, it's a day centre. Tuesday and Thursdays he sometimes goes to the one in Glyndon. But at Glyndon there is not many people chatting, they're all playing Mah Jong.

P- So why does he go across the river to Poplar, what's special over there?

I got it wrong, he didn't get the Indo-Chinese Centre to write his reference, he got the people in Poplar to write it, and so he goes back there because they really did help him.

P- These were the people he first came to when he got here?

Mr P: Yes

P- Is that connected to the Old Friends and Good Friend's people, a sort of Chinese community?

Mr P: The people there chat to him and he likes it there

P- So he has quite a good social life

(Helen) Yes he has

P- Mr Pang was in a wonderful play we made, (Helen says she has the photos displayed) so perhaps he could say something about that experience?

Mr P: It was alright but he's not an actor! *(They all laugh)* Some people find that acting is very nice, he says you can act!

P- But it was very nice for other people to see that story, wonderful. It would be interesting for them and the others to look at it now, and see what they remember about it.

Ya- Ling Peng- Apart from making a living and working in a restaurant, what is the happiest time in England and what was the lowest time?

It is very difficult to decide what the happiest time is, but he finds when he gets together with a group of people then that is the happy time and they start talking. The thing he

hates most is jealousy, and if you do something better people don't like it! All countries, people are like that, not just Chinese.

P- It is nice that you're happiest when talking to people though.

Mr P: It's like if both of us are working in a job in the same company, and one of us has a promotion and the other doesn't, then there would be jealousy.

P- And he experiences this a lot. What if we ask his wife the same question, what is the happiest and saddest time in her memories?

Mrs P: Seeing the children growing up!

P- If they were to live there life all over again, would they stay in Hong Kong, or would they come here?

Mr P: If he was younger and could find a good job in Hong Kong, he wouldn't come. In Hong Kong finding a good job is difficult and to get a good job you have to bribe someone.

P- I wanted to say to him that he made a good success because he found a wonderful place to live and interesting friendships across London and still has his wife with him, so this is a successful story.

Mr P: If you eat and have somewhere to live, that's good enough.

P- I really like what you said about home being where you are, because I think that would be true for a lot of people. And he's told us which places are important to him. It's very nice, interesting after our Berlin weekend. One more question, if I were to take Mr Pang and stand him in front of a couple of buildings in this local area, where would he take me?

Mr P: It doesn't matter, as long as it not a run down or awful place.

P- Oh, I meant the places he connects with, feels a link with or identifies with.

Mr P: He would go to Lewisham market if he was going to buy something, because there is more for sale. There is less in Woolwich market.

P- So he would go to Lewisham Market that would be the place. One more place maybe?

Mr. Pang: Deptford.

P- Where would he go in Deptford?

Mr P: Deptford Market. Sometimes he goes to the Glyndon Centre and sometimes he goes to the Thamesmead one. He eats fresh food, like fish, and goes to the Glyndon Centre for company. The friends from Woolwich go there as well. He goes to a club every day, depending on which one is open.

P- Thank you very much for talking to me.