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JAMES TSO

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NASH: Today I am visiting with Mr. James Tso at his office in LaGuardia College in Queens. Mr. Tso is the coordinator of the Cooperative Education Program here at the school, and Mr. Tso came from mainland China in 1955 at the age of eight and he is going to tell us about his earliest memories of that experience and the subsequent experiences of his family. Mr. Tso, what are your earliest memories of China?

TSO: It's really hard for me describe my early experience there.

I was very young when we left there. I do remember one very vividly, of the trip that we took to Canton to Hong Kong, and the reason why it is vivid to us is because

it was very hard for us to get out. The reason why we got out was because of the political prosecutions that went on when the Communists began to take over the entire country.

My father was involved in the Kuomintang Party and he was a Nationalist, and was also a judge in China. He left China to Hong Kong prior to my mother and I joining him. As a matter of fact, we had to go through a number of very, very sticky bureaucratic methods before my mother and I could get out to visit him because he was ill and that was the only way we could get out. And when we took the train ride there was a whole bunch of, again very bureaucratic and very red tape kinds of situations that we had to face.

And for a child of five it was really something to experience, particularly with, I guess, realization of what was going on, what was happening to us, and what could happen to us if we were not allowed to go out. But, we got out and when we got out we never went back. We stayed in Hong Kong about three years. My father had a very difficult time finding suitable employment. My mother worked, although she had a high school and college diploma and was a high school principal in Mainland China, she was not able to do so and as a result she went into clothing manufacturing on her own naturally, and with a cousin.

Fortunately for us one of her sisters married an American GI, in fact two of her sisters married American GIs, one lived in New York and one lived in Sacramento, California.

They sponsored our immigration. I don't remember exactly which law we came under, but it was under refugee status. So, through their sponsorship and help, we came to the United States in 1955. We stayed in Sacramento for about six months and that is when I was introduced to an American way of life. And I really enjoyed it. I liked it very much. I think from that point on there were some difficulties I realized in school, a lack of knowledge of English, and basically getting along and being accepted by the students there. However--

NASH: I just wanted to ask you, what were the things that struck you when you first came? Do you remember the differences, what seemed to you the most peculiar? Do you remember?

TSO: Yes, quite. I think the most impressive thing was riding through the Golden Gate Bridge, I guess. It was just completely awesome. We landed in San Francisco and got into the car and just drove on to the bridge, and the sight was just astounding. I guess at that point in my life I realized how big and gigantic the United States or the world was all

about. Up until then we were always sort of closed in with our own problems and our own situations. But, the things that impressed me were size, and magnitude, and just a variety of things that were an opportunity, and I guess that is the keynote because that is why we came, opportunities.

NASH: What about the people and the culture? Did you sense anything very different from what you had remembered?

TSO: I believe in my case, the adjustment was rather easy because of my age, and I guess because of my own openness to things. For my parents, as I begin to talk to them now at, I guess, a more mature adult level, that they were somewhat, had a hard time adjusting to conditions here. My mother worked in a tomato canning factory in California and my father worked in a restaurant. And that was hard because for him and his professional training, to not be able to use it was an unbelievably bad adjustment. In terms of the people, I would think that the majority of them were rather helpful, as far as I can see. I had basically very little problems and I think my parents had basically very little problems, perhaps because of their educational background.

NASH: What connection does your family now maintain to the Chinese community in New York, and in what way do they keep the traditions?

TSO: We maintain it very closely. When we left California we went to Philadelphia for about six months, and then we finally located in New York. Even now my father and mother live very close to Chinatown. They have a business in Chinatown. My father is president and operating manager of a garment manufacturing company. My mother is the foreman. I myself have a kind of migrated out of the Chinatown area and am living in Queens. However, I do maintain a great deal of contact in Chinatown because I grew up in Chinatown. Well, not so much in it, sort of outside of it. I was fortunate in the sense that I went to school outside of Chinatown. I was able to be more involved and develop more friendships with young people other than Chinese. I have very good friends and contacts who are Hispanic, black, as well as mainly Jewish, I guess. Sometimes I wonder if I am Jewish. But I get along very well with these people. As of now I am very much involved in Chinatown, very concerned about Chinatown. There are very unique problems about it, but those problems have begun to mushroom. To give some examples, gangs, the teenage juvenile delinquency, unwed mothers, drugs, and those are only the problems of the young people. The older people have worse problems. I'll give you a situation, our own situation. There are many, many professional people that are immigrated from China, from Hong Kong, from Taiwan, who come here as professionals, but because of the lack of English ability, are not able to obtain employment in the fields that they are trained for. A very sad situation, a doctor from Taiwan came to the United States and did not speak English and was not able to take the

medical exams and so on. Couldn't even get a job as a medical assistant. What is he doing now is a janitor, one of the janitors in our manpower offices and now being trained in English. That is a very sad situation because we are in such need of doctors in this country, even in Chinatown where he can perform with no problems whatsoever and yet, you know, there are a lot of bureaucratic things that are stopping him from doing it. I am very sensitive to those problems because my father came here as a lawyer and a very good lawyer too, and as a judge in China, and he was not able to get the training because of economic reasons for one, but also because of the English, and there weren't any programs here to help him develop English. There were no government fundings. In fact, I don't think the government realized it then. Now they do and now on a very small scale we are trying to help these people. So what I do now is try to get involved in programs in Chinatown, the Manpower Training Program which I am very close with, and helping them perhaps attain some funds from government and also volunteering some time and trying to help these Chinese people get jobs. We have formed sort of a small organization which is right now in embryonic stages, called the Chinese Professional Association, which hopefully will be an association of Chinese college graduates and Chinese professional people to help other professional Chinese people who have difficulty finding jobs and so on, and doing so contribute to the community. At the same time, my wife is involved in Chinatown teaching English as a second language to students who are taking keypunch as a skill development course in the Manpower Training

Program. So all in all we are involved to a great extent and we want to be involved even further although in terms of my own time and education, that is a little bit restricted. But eventually in time we hope to be able to contribute a great deal more than what is now.

NASH: There is a problem of a lot of illegal immigrants from China, isn't there, in Chinatown?

TSO: I don't know what you mean by illegal.

NASH: Illegal.

TSO: Illegal? I think there are, basically from the shipping area. We have shipmen who jump ship and so on and we are aware of the problems and believe it or not, we feel that they are more of a bad element than a good element for Chinatown because often they bring, I believe in the past we have read articles about them bringing drugs over and all kinds of things. And I don't doubt it. I can't, you know, prejudge on that basis, but there are a number of illegal immigrants in the United States, yes, from Taiwan, from China.

NASH: There are from all parts of the world, I am sure. I was just wondering how the community related to it. I imagine they are very

much economically involved with the community, just again as other illegal immigrants are involved with the economy of the United States.

TSO: They are. Yes, the illegal immigrants who come through by jumping ship or whatever have immediately simulated into the economy of Chinatown. Now, although Chinatown really is about five or six square blocks, it has a lot of people and a lot of businesses and a lot of interests. Now, one can't even imagine how vast the interests and the involvements are, you know, just thinking about them, but we do know that good and bad elements exist there and the unfortunate situation as I see it as a young person, as a young professional having lived through the experience and so on, that the politicians there or so-called politicians or better yet, the merchants, are not really that concerned. They want their money and they really don't care. However, I think soon we will begin to care and we want to do something about the drug traffic and situations like that.

NASH: How does it feel to live in Chinatown? What kind of a place is it?

TSO: Well, the food is great. We always go back there. As a matter of fact, we shop at least every other week there. But living there I guess is not any different than living in the Bronx or anything like that,

for me in any case because I really didn't live in Chinatown although I went there. I went to Chinese school after I went to American school, we used to call it. And I used to play a lot of hooky from Chinese school because I would rather play basketball and baseball with my friends at the park.

NASH: When you say you went to Chinese school, I don't exactly understand.

TSO: Well, when we came here my father and mother, you know, being educators themselves, demanded that I go to Chinese school to maintain my cultural base.

NASH: What is a Chinese school?

TSO: A Chinese school basically was run by the Chinese Benevolent Association and some of them are run by the Catholic schools there. They were designed to teach the young Chinese students who come here--Chinese children, actually, who came here because all their family immigrated, to teach them Chinese, to read and write, the history of China, the geography of China, mathematics, writing, calligraphy, and so on. So I went there and I went to the eighth grade.

NASH: Do most children in Chinatown attend these classes? Are

these schools separate from the regular school system?

TSO: Yes they are. As a matter of fact, they are quite regular.

You went to school from approximately four o'clock to about seven o'clock, and boy it is tough. Imagine going to school from nine to three and then going from four to seven and coming home and having two homeworks to do on weekends. It was not easy. It was a very difficult life.

As a matter of fact, thinking about it, when we came to the United States we were in very, very, very bad financial situations. We were practically penniless. We lived with my mother's sister for a while until my mother worked in a sewing factory, and my father worked in a restaurant. As a matter of fact, he worked in a restaurant up until about two ago when he went into this business. But we were in very bad financial situation. We had a two-room apartment.

I slept in the kitchen, which was also the bathroom, and my parents had their own room. It was very crowded conditions. It was just absolutely, well I wouldn't say bad because I know people who have had worse situation even now, today. You would be surprised that here in Chinatown in a two-room or three-room apartment there are about sixteen people living there and it is really bad. It is

sad and the landlords don't care and it is difficult. And the problem persists. But for us, in our case, it was a bad financial situation and my parents worked eighteen hours a day and they still work very hard, and they were always sort of afraid of my being influenced by bad elements. But I was lucky. As I said, I got along better with the Jewish kids than the Chinese kids, so I learned to go with the right elements. To me, handling the American school and the Chinese school was very, very difficult. As a matter of fact, as I said, as soon as I got into Brooklyn Tech, when I took the exam and got in, I told my father, "This is it. No more Chinese school." And he agreed and that was it. It was hard. It was very hard to cope with both of them.

NASH: You mentioned before that for various reasons the Chinese in Chinatown have not been represented so that they could meet all their various needs. Would you like to talk about that?

TSO: Yes. The Chinese people, which is their own fault really, are not very political people. They are not even apathetic. I think you can describe an apathetic person as someone who knows about the situation and really doesn't do anything about it. Unfortunately for the Chinese

people, they don't even know about the situation. They don't even know what benefits are available to them. Up until two or three years ago there weren't even agencies in Chinatown which described and helped people collect benefits, people who were able to get welfare money. In fact, Chinese people are very reluctant to accept welfare money. They would rather even starve to get welfare money. They are very industrious people. But they don't understand that it is part of the economic situation, part of the societal situation that they need the help. And I am very much aware of the problems which exist. I just described to you about the families who live and have sixteen people living in a two-room or three-room apartment. It is not uncommon. What is worse is that the employment situation, and this is like a powder keg at this moment and the fuse is going to be lit. I think it is slowly burning in any case. The employment situation. It covers basically two areas, restaurants and laundries. At this moment I think we are fortunate in Chinese restaurants having such a fine reputation and supporting the Chinese economy in New York. But the laundries are dying. One by one they are dying. I know this very much personally and am quite sensitive to it because my own father-in-law has his own laundry. Although he is doing well, he knows that eventually the machinery, big organizations are going to be able to take over. You know, meaning using automation to clean clothes and so on. It is going to take over the Chinese hand laundries.

NASH: In other words, some big organization will be able to do more cheaply and people will therefore go to them. Why would they change?

TSO: I think it is not only a question as cheaply as more professionally and faster and so on. It is just that the Chinese hand laundry will not be able to keep up with the cost factors involved. As it is, they work twelve hours, which is not uncommon, a day and really have very little to show for it and it is hard, hard work. But when you only have two areas of employment possible for the Chinese people, you have a situation there where if they can't go in one and the other is closed and they are not trained for anything else, you have a terrific powder keg. A powder keg from the standpoint of application to unemployment, application for welfare, you name it. That is why it is so important that programs like the Manpower Training Program down in Chinatown have got to work. But the politicians in New York aren't even sensitive to it. It took at least two or three years for us to get the money and the facilities to do this. Hopefully, we can continue, hope we can do more.

NASH: When you speak of powder keg and the fact that employment possibilities are narrowing, are you speaking for the older generation of does that primarily affect the older generation?

TSO: Yes, I would say the older generation and particularly the

generation that came here. Well, I think a better way to describe it is the generation that is not able to cope with the language. Let's put it that way. That is most appropriate because the younger generation, perhaps children who came as young as I did will have better opportunities because they would go into the American educational system and would be able to learn English and be assimilated totally within their period of time. But take those that come sixteen, eighteen, twenty, twenty-four, those who are just uprooted from their normal life in Hong Kong and Taiwan and come here and here is a situation where they have practically graduated from high school and now go to work or go to college in Taiwan and the family says, "We are going to the United States." They come here and they go to school and the people say, "Well, I'm sorry, you don't have that much English. I'm going to put you to the ninth grade until your English gets better." And our high school system is a lot to blame for that. They are not sensitive to their needs. They don't have special programs designed to bring these people up to the level which is appropriate for achievements in school. These are people that are a problem. These are the people who will not be able to be channeled into the restaurants, who are going to be unhappy if they are channeled into the restaurants, who are going to be totally dissatisfied if they are going to be channeled into the laundries which are non-existent anyhow. Where do they go, where do they train them? And this is a problem and this is one of the major problems that are causing the teenage groups and the drug problem among other things in Chinatown and we

would like people to be more sensitive about that.

NASH: Thank you very much Mr. Tso.