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Interview no. 779

Charles V. Balang

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Charles V. Balang
INTERVIEWER: Charles Martin
PROJECT: History of the University Project
DATE OF INTERVIEW: October 17, 1989
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted
TAPE NO: 779
TRANSCRIPT NO: 779
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Native of Sarawak, Malaysia, student at UTEP 1987-1990, mechanical engineering major.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Impressions of El Paso and comparisons of education and culture of Malaysia and the U.S.

Length of Interview: 25 minutes Length of Transcript 12 pages

Charles V. Balang
October 17, 1989
Professor Charles H. Martin
UTEP Diamond Jubilee

This is an interview conducted by Charles H. Martin with Charles Balang on October 17, 1989 in El Paso, Texas.

M: Yes, I think it's actually going to work. Why don't we start out by your telling me where in Malaysia you grew up and how you decided to go to university or college training? What part of Malaysia did you grow up in?

B: I grew up in Sarawak, which is the eastern part of Malaysia, which was formerly called Borneo. Borneo just consists of Sarawak, Sabah, Brunei, and part of Indonesia, which is Kalimantan.

M: How far away is that from the mainland of Malaysia?

B: It's around . . . if you use a plane it's around one and half hours' flight from west to east.

M: How did you decided, or how did you decide the particular field of study for your university work?

B: Oh it's because of the government program. The government usually sends students to overseas after their high school, after they finish their high school, but in order to save money some of them try to ask the student to study for two years in Malaysia for taking just the basic courses before they go to the United States. That's why I went to TIEC program.

M: The TIEC program was in Kuala Lumpur?

B: Shah Alam, Kuala Lumpur.

M: What was your first experience of American style education? Was it

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different from the preparatory education you had before?

B: You mean the TIEC and over here?

M: The TIEC and then over here also, compared to what you had in Sarawak.

B: Oh, in Sarawak it's more like the British type system, where the teachers talks a lot and the student just listens, give you the homework and that's all. But when it goes to American style the professor gets more involved with the students. They ask more questions and they [professor] get involved with students in other kinds of activities besides just studies. Whereas in Malaysia the students, I mean after the class there is usually not much contact between the students and the teachers themselves.

M: What about the language of structure? What was your native language, and the language of instruction in the schools in Sarawak?

B: The language of instruction in Sarawak right now is Bahasa Malaysia. I think mine is quite different from others because my language of instruction for my school is from one to four, five (???) in English. I was among the last to have English as my language of instruction in school. After that it is all Bahasa, Bahasa Malaysia which is the national language of Malaysia now. Bahasa Malaysia is Malay, it's the same thing.

M: Okay.

B: . . . Malay language.

M: What were you first thoughts about going overseas to school? Did you have any particular place that you wanted, any particular country or university within the foreign country?

B: I didn't have any preference to go. When I was just going to go to UTEP, I thought it was full of, what deserts and nothing because usually when

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you come from a tropical country to a country where there is, I mean four seasons, you want to feel the experience. When I heard I'm going to El Paso and it's just like Malaysia, I mean it's just one season except that it is colder in the Winter. At first I was pretty . . . what, not satisfied at all because I wanted to see snows . . .

M: Sure.

B: . . . that's the first experience. When I first came here and I feel the coldness, I prefer to go to El Paso. Also I wanted to see how true because I think of all in the world, I mean people watch a lot of American televisions, so I wanted to see whether the lives that are portrayed in television is true or not when you come to the U.S.

M: What were your very first experiences when you arrived to the United States, in El Paso? How did it fit what you were expecting?

B: When I first stepped out of the plane, for sure--because I came during January 1987--it was very cold. Because that time during the winter it hit its historic height. And then, the first thing that really struck me most was I thought I'm going see a lot of Caucasians in El Paso. But then as, when I've been in El Paso for a few days I saw that a lot of Hispanics that look like Malaysian, so I felt right at home.

M: Did people ever speak Spanish to you and mistake you?

B: Of course. The first time they asked me for directions, and I just said the first words that I learned in El Paso, "No comprendo, no hablo espanol." That's the first ones. And they were surprised to see a guy who can't speak Spanish but answer back in Spanish, because that is the only sentence I know.

M: How did you choose--what is your major?--and how did you choose that particular major?

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B: My major is mechanical engineering. We were given three choices by the Malaysian government before we went overseas. So I chose, my first choice was quantity survey, because I wanted to go to New Zealand or Australia to get quantity survey. My second choice was architecture, my third choice was mechanical engineering. So they gave me the third choice. Architecture because I didn't know how to draw, and I don't like to draw anyway. Because I thought I'd make a lot of money.

M: When you were a student at the TIEC at Kuala Lumpur, which professors did you have that also you have at least seen over here at UTEP and the United States?

B: I had classes with Dr. [Carl] Jackson, [Kenton] Clymer, and Dr.[H.S.] Oey, which came from El Paso. I didn't have any classes with Dr. Bath. I think those are the three professors from UTEP. When I came over here I didn't have any more classes with them because all of them [my classes] were junior and senior level. I'd finished all my basic courses already.

M: Were there any particularly humorous or funny incidents that occurred in your first few weeks or months here, as part of adjusting to a new country and different ways doing things?

B: Oh yes. On the first week when I first arrived here, I wanted to taste the burger over here, I wanted to compare [it] to the McDonald's and Kentucky [Fried Chicken] in Malaysia. So instead of going to a McDonalds and Kentucky over here, I went to Whataburger, and on this menu they have milkshakes, they have strawberry . . . they listed all the flavors, so I wanted to order a Mexican type of flavor, this is what I thought of. So when the attendant asked me, "What kind of flavor do you want?" I said, "Chico." And she looked at me and asked me again, "What kind of flavor you want?" I said, "Chico." Until a few times later and my friend was

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laughing outloud and I didn't what I was saying. And at last when I really looked carefully at the menu, "chico" meant small, so I made a fool of myself over there.

M: In the way of food and everything, is there anything in particular that you miss, that you don't find available in El Paso, that you're fond of from Malaysia?

B: I miss the open air food stores, because over here you have to eat indoor almost all of the time, and we never eat outdoors, usually only during picnics. Usually doesn't feel nice because of the air pollution. And the food here is expensive. On the variety of food, it's not as much as in Malaysia. Even the Chinese food here, to me, it's tasteless. I considered it to be junk food, as compared to the Chinese food in Malaysia.

M: What would be the difference in terms of how a class is conducted between a class in Malaysia of the secondary school British style, with that of an American style classroom over here--in terms of what the students do?

B: I think the students are more conservative in Malaysia than over here, because you can see the way they are dressed. In Malaysia you have to cut your hair short, you have to wear a uniform to class and you have to wear stockings there. There are certain strict rules for the students to follow and they're expected to be respectful to the teachers. In that way, American students are more . . . not as conservative as Malaysian students because they are allowed more freedom than Malaysians. Because Malaysia is a Muslim country, so the rule is more rigid than many other places.

M: What about the extent of discussion in classes in Malaysia, compared to here?

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B: It depends. If you're in high school, I don't think there's much discussion. Everybody is out for themselves. If they have a problem they just ask their friend, but there are no group discussions. Except maybe if you have a society or association, they may have a meeting for discussion. But usually it's not related to academic work; it's up to that person to do it.

M: Now let's see, when did you say you first enrolled--when did you first enroll--in the TIEC program and when did you finally enroll over here in El Paso?

B: I was first enrolled in 1985, January '85, for the TOFOL program and I did my TOFOL and SAT for six months and then went straight to the TIEC. I was in the TIEC for three years and then came here in January 1987.

M: When do you anticipate being finished here?

B: I anticipate to finish here by next semester--I hope so.

M: So you plan to graduate then, next . . . ?

B: This next Spring, Spring 1990.

M: And what kind of employment plans do you have after you finish your work?

B: I intend to go back to Malaysia because I miss my country. And I've read in the paper from the Library--the paper from Malaysia--and it said the economy is recovering and there is a lot of job openings in Malaysia so I think for sure I'll be going back.

M: What other things have you found in the United States that seem to be somewhat different from the way things are done in Malaysia?

B: What?

M: Such as activities of students on campus or off of campus.

B: Compared to the TIEC?

M: Compared to Malaysia, not really the TIEC.

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B: As I said, the Malaysian university students, I think, are more conservative than here because they are more controlled. I mean students here they are allowed to have a lot these kinds of gatherings, and games, big games. We don't have any kind of . . . it's like the universities over here . . . like the football games have these kinds of gathers, big large gatherings. But in Malaysia the students don't have that. In terms of discussion, you have a lot of association and . . . they have political parties in Malaysia but it is small [and] curbed, because of the government. You're not allowed to demonstrate or strike in Malaysian universities. If you do that you get expelled, but not over here. Rules are enforced because of the major university students strike during the 1960's so it still it applies today.

M: Okay. What about sporting events? Have you attended in any sporting event over here?

B: Yes, I went to the football and the basketball, UTEP basketball games. I found football at first was to me boring. Because I'd never seen so many people play a game before for one team. It looks as if 100 people were on field playing just one game. To me at first it was stupid, but then I found out the beauty of the game; then I came to appreciate it. And basketball was a new experience to me, because I've never seen people slam dunk, so that was the first time I saw it. Anyway I'm involved with the University Soccer Club, so I find that sports here are very interesting compared to Malaysia.

M: What other kinds of activities have you been . . . while you've been here, campus activities or activities in the community?

B: I helped the Malaysian Student Association but most of the time I'm involved with the Soccer Club, every weekend if I can.

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M: Of the professors that you have had or classes that you've had, over here in El Paso, which of the classes has been most interesting or useful to you, so far?

B: Which has been most interesting? That's a very hard question. I think the history classes are my most favorite because for me history teaches me people's cultural ways, where they come from, why they act like that, why they have a certain kind of characteristic for each people. So to me classes taught by both Dr. Jackson [and] Dr. Clymer, have been very interesting.

M: Have you had a chance to do any travel while you've been in the United States?

B: Yes. I've been as far north as Utah, New Orleans, all over Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas.

M: What did you think of New Orleans.?

B: New Orleans was beautiful, something else, something unique. It's not American, it's French or European style, especially the French Quarter and Bourbon Street.

M: I noticed your tee-shirt. We used to live in New Orleans. Did you go to Preservation Hall, or hear some of the Jazz while you were there?

B: Yes. I went to the Jazz Pubs streets because one of my friends had cousins working there, so he showed us around.

M: What would, for a typical Malaysian, what would be the greatest culture shock in coming to the United States? Particularly if they hadn't been to a program like the TIEC? What would be the most surprising things that would sort of give them a culture shock?

B: The first thing that they feel more liberal. I mean they'll feel more freedom, that's the first cultural shock. It's up to them to control

their new found freedom. But I think the cultural shock will be what they perceived the American people to be, they [think] that everybody is very liberal and there are no people who are very conservative and very strict like in Malaysia. But when they came here they found out that it's true. I mean people are not . . . everyone of them is not as rich as what they portray in the T.V.. There are not middle class Americans, there are people who beg, there are people who don't have homes. That's the thing that would surprise them most.

M: They thought just in the United States everybody was pretty much rich or . . .

B: Well off, easy life, I think that's counter-cultural shock for me.

M: I wonder how students from Malaysia view Mexico. I mean, they're not only in the United States, they're next to another country, a different culture. How . . . do they view Mexico at all, or are they very aware of Mexico?

B: When you are in Malaysia you are not aware of Mexico. I don't think so. But when I came here, I found that Mexico is interesting and unique because just by the borderline there's so much of difference in standards of living, economy, culture, and language. There's so much difference. I found that even though Mexico/Mexicans are poor they still retain their ethnicity very strongly, just like every other people who emigrate or who are close to a very rich country they tend to be very protective of themselves. That's what I thought of Mexicans.

M: Do you keep in touch with your family very much and friends back in Malaysia or Sarawak?

B: Yes. I keep in touch with . . . especially with the political system in my country, particularly Sarawak, because I'm interested in politics. So

usually I go to the Library, they have two newspapers, the New Straight Times, which is in English, and the ?????? Malaysia, which is in Bahasa, to see the flow of political system in Malaysia right now. I'm really much in line with what is happening in Malaysia at the moment.

M: Are you a member of any campus organizations or engineering associations?

B: No. I don't think I have enough time for that. All of my time is taken up by the soccer club because we are trying to make the soccer club into the NCAA level by next year. So that's what we achieve. We're getting better at the moment because we have been beaten almost everybody, even the University of Chihuahua, which is known for its good soccer.

M: What do you notice about American students in classes that's different or anything that stands out about the attitude of American students toward their classes?

B: I found that some of them are very serious about their classes-- especially if they work. If they work and if they are in the army or have previously not been students for awhile and then they come back to school, they're very serious about their class and they tend to ask more because they want to feel that they are getting their money's worth, that's for me, as what is outstanding [stands out] about American students.

M: How useful was going to the TIEC as a kind of transition or bridge from going to Malaysian school and then an American university?

B: For me I don't think it's any . . . I don't think it makes it more easier; it's better that Malaysian students are sent straight through their years, because in the final analysis, it's just a waste of money and time for the students because they have to set up a new program and ask for the professor to come in. Even though it costs more for the

student to be sent individually straight to the United States, I think for the students themselves it's much better for them to be sent straight to the United States.

M: To go ahead and . . . you think it's . . . to go ahead and get started.

B: Yes. It's much more better. Even if they want to make a transition it doesn't need to take that long. He has to be there . . . six months is enough for them to adjust themselves to the students life in the United States. Because when you are in the TIEC, the rigid rules that apply to other universities in Malaysia still apply to the TIEC, even though it is a transition program. So I don't think it makes any much difference. Only the thing that makes it unique is that the professors are from the United States, but the rigid rules still apply. You have to have your hair short, you have to have your collar, you have to use stockings, everything. This kind of thing.

M: Is there anything else you can think of about coming to school in the United States or living in El Paso that I haven't mentioned that made a strong impression on you, or has made a strong impression on you, so far.

B: Yeah. To me one thing that stands out the most is about . . . people tend to talk about discrimination and all these kinds of things, and I found that people in El Paso they tend, when they speak, they tend to refer to the other races very strongly. Especially in El Paso when the economy, a contrast is so big, that makes a lot of difference. But students, student wise, because they are in the same level there's not much discrimination, but when you are working especially, I think there is discrimination there.

M: When you go back to Malaysia and you're working there, presumably, after graduation, what do you think you'll remember most about having been a

student in El Paso and at UTEP?

B: I will remember for it the unique architecture buildings. It's really different from other places. The mix of people just like in Malaysia. Its proximity to Mexico and I have the opportunity to be on the center and near to the border to see different cultures going to and from. And how people react when they are from a rich country, how they react when they come to a poor country, how people from poor country go to a rich country but motivate them. Especially Mexicans who are poor and they try to go to the U.S. and to have a standard of living much higher than what they had in Mexico and home. The United States ????? perceive those Mexicans.

M: What did you think of the Bhutanese architecture when you arrived? Did you know that was the style of architecture?

B: Yes. I knew it because they have pamphlets over in the TIEC but I didn't know that it is all over the place. I mean, every building, most of the buildings have Bhutanese architecture. To me that's very unique; it fits perfectly with the surroundings, the mountainous area.

M: Well, I can't think of any other questions. Do you have anything else?

B: I don't think so.

[End of Interview]