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The Evolution and History of British Chinese Workforce

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Interview with Cllr. Thomas Chan

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Cllr. Thomas Chan (TC), Jiali Xu (JX)

JX: Hi Thomas, could you please tell me when you came to the UK and why?

TC: Well, I came to London... Err... I left Hong Kong on the 12th of October 1977. Err... I arrived next day at Gatwick Airport. The aim of my... coming to the UK in 1977 was to pursue a two-year diploma of Higher Education qualification at the then Middlesex Polytechnic. And after the first two years, I've got my diploma of Higher Education, and I opt for a final year of a degree course. So in 1980, I graduated with the Bachelor of Arts as well, and started working.

JX: So what did you study in the University?

TC: For the first two years the diploma of Higher Education was a very interesting concept. It run on modular programmes, which means as a student, we can pick and choose a different subject that interest ourselves. And because as someone who came over from Hong Kong, I didn't have the opportunity to have any freedom during... Well, when I studied Journalism in Hong Kong, all the programmes are fixed. You can choose different modules, true, but still, it will give you a degree on Journalism, full stop. But as far as the diploma of Higher Education is concerned, I can choose subjects like English literature, which I've never touched before; I can choose subjects like social linguistics and history, anything, anthropology. And at the end of the two years, I nearly... I changed my mind to go for a degree and finish it, because I was so err... captured by the subject Social Anthropology. But then I thought through. I said: "Hey, do I want to work as a lecturer in universities?" No, I don't want to. Why? Because young people keep on coming in and out, and I will remain at the university for years, isn't it, and getting old. I don't want that. And secondly, if I have a degree in Social Anthropology, I may need to do fieldworks in far front place, like Africa, which I think no, I don't want that, I love my precious comforts. So I just opt for the third year, final year of the degree, and finish with it. So that's why I... I... I choose the two years at Middlesex Polytechnic, and one year at the City of London Polytechnic, and just finished with it, and start working right away.

JX: You did Journalism when you were in Hong Kong...

TC: That's right.

JX: But you wholly devoted yourself in social service since you have moved to the UK.

TC: That's right

JX: In your forties you switched to food and health area, and politics as well. Is there any motivation, stories or people behind these changes?

TC: Well... As a matter of fact, I was involved in some community works back in Hong Kong as well. I worked as a... what they called... the community... What they call now? 社区干事 (in Cantonese: community officer), I can't remember what's it called ... it come back to me, yeah? With the information.

I worked part-time in the then Home Office Department in Hong Kong, because... if you remember... in... well you don't know, you are too young to remember. In 1967, there were disturbances in Hong Kong. And that was the year I graduated from high school. At first I want to... Well, actually at the...under pressure from my parents, I had to do O-Levels and A-Levels, and then hopefully universities. But at that time, there's only two universities in Hong Kong: Hong Kong University and the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Very difficult to get into... to either. And at that time, most parents, Chinese parents, would push their children to study subjects, science subjects rather than arts subjects – I hope it's changed now. So I was pushed into study A-Levels: pure mathematics and physics and all that. That's not me. So, err, after a few months, I said no, I don't want to pursuit that. If, I think if I continued with some other Arts subjects, like economics and, and other history, geography, I may stay on. And you'll never know, Thomas Chan will be totally different. But I didn't. And my mom – bless her – she find me a job through contacts in the... I have to take the entrance exam as well, to become a clerk in the Hong Kong Government. That's 1968, and the disturbances were just dying down, and then I was post and worked in the department which is that to deal with information: Government Information Service – just behind the Bank of China. It is now all demolished. It's Li Ka-shing's headquarter now. It used to be called Baconsfield House, I remember it well, 拱北行 (in Cantonese). And I remember we have a police inspector with a gun protecting us, because I was doing publicity for government. But... Of course I didn't study Journalism at that time. And so... Well, I can write, but later on, I talked to one of my cousins. She was studying, I think, Business Administration in Zhuhai College. And by that time, I have an interest in writing articles as well. So I just do it part-time, four years, and I graduate with the degree as well. So it's a by-product of my work and my interest in Journalism, and that's why I complete that one. What was the question again? (Laughs)

JX: So is there any motivation behind this...

TC: Oh, motivation. Motivation... And after I finished the degree here, obviously, I would like to stay, because by that time I met my wife now. And so, again, it's a result of some of the good work I've done in Hong Kong, because I met up with a visitor from Hong Kong who used to be the chairman of Area Committees – 区议会 (in Cantonese) – all those years ago. And he came over to visit his children who's already settled here. And when he visited me in my... How can I... It's not a bed-sit; I do have a bed-sit near Swiss Cottage at that time. And left a note – I wasn't there – he left a note and say: "Come and meet me." He runs a factory in Hong Kong as well, I remember, in the Western District. Because I was the liaison officer for 民政署 (in Cantonese: Home Affairs Department) in Hong Kong at... previously.

When I met up with his family, his children, who were all grown up and settled in London, I asked them: "What sort of job I can do?" And the son, one of the sons was very helpful. And it was only that conversation inspired me to make the application to my first job, Save The Children Fund. Because that was 1980 when I graduated, and what he told me was: "Thomas, find a job that you are not taking away an employment from the local people." That's it. That's all he's said. So I said: "What, well, what sort of job you are talking about?" And of course then I knew there were a lot of Vietnamese Boat people who came over from Hong Kong at that time. And I did some, a bit of research, and found out that there were three organisations which dealt with their resettlement: one was the British Refugee Council, now called Refugee Council; two, the Save Children Fund; and the third one was in Birmingham, called the Orpington Venture. So I wrote three letters, I got two interviews. One from the Orpington Venture, Birmingham. Where is Birmingham? I came to study in London, so, I said, no, I don't bother. The other one, Save The Children Fund, was in London. The interview was in London, but the reception centre was in Bishop's Stortford, which was in Essex, not too far from Harlow, yeah? Further up is Cambridge. So it's not too bad. So I accepted that one, and started working with the Resettlement Project. I've got proof here; I'll show you later. And, and then I went on for about two years, two and a bit years. And by accident, I discovered the Camden Social Services was looking for a community worker working with Mrs Lim, no less. Err... So I applied, and I got the job. So I was able to move back into London. I started working in first Camden Social Services, and then in Hackney Social

Services, and then in the National Health Service for twelve years before I started my own training and consultancy business in 2001.

JX: So you moved, changed your career path from community to business, and then to politics, although you remain in social service.

TX That's right.

JX: And now you are the first Chinese mayor. As you defined, you are "the first servant in Redbridge". Could you please tell me how you feel of becoming the very first Chinese mayor in London?

TX I was the first mayor of Chinese background. (Laughs) I cannot be the first Chinese mayor. I must make that correction. (Laughs) Because there are mayors from Asian backgrounds: Indian, Pakistani, quite a lot of them, Bangladeshis, Turkish, Greek, Cyprus, err... Caribbean, not in Redbridge, but in all local authorities across the country. But there isn't one until myself who's becoming a mayor from a Chinese background. Err... I... Yes, the mayor is the first citizen. I just explain that briefly what is the first citizen perhaps, yeah? The first citizen means unless Her Majesty is here, then I will take the second place; if she's not here, it's always me who will do whatever is necessary first: whatever speaking, taking food at the party, walking, coming in or leaving, anything. But for me, because I suppose is my community background, my nature, my personality, that's why I said I want to be the first citizen as well, I want to make sure that I am accessible to anyone who approach me. And I have done nearly seven months, still a few months to go. It has been extremely interesting, as well as challenging. Interesting in the sense that I get to meet a lot of people from various backgrounds – I can write a book about it. Challenging in the sense that when I arrive, say for example, in the Parlour, today it's an interview which would take most part of the day; but on other days, I got my diary to show you, I could turn up here at ten o'clock, and about 10:30, a quarter to eleven, Alan, my chauffeur and assistant, may come in and say: "Mr. Mayor, time to change up, and go!" – Which means, literally, I cannot literally focus myself to do anything. I lost my concentration. And the engagement may take one hour, may take two hours, may go to lunch time; coming back, relax a little bit, and then he will come in again: "Time to change up to the second engagement." It will go on, and on, and on. Last night, we were at an engagement in the Hilton hotel in Park Lane. We arrived at eight o'clock, because there is a new British high commission appointed to Pakistan, and we do have the significant Pakistani population locally. So I was invited to go to this dinner, and met up with him. It was on the engagement form it was supposed to be from 7:30 to 8:00, then drinks, and then go eight o'clock. 9:15 should be dinner. And we didn't have dinner until 10... 10:30, 10:30, and we didn't get back home until twelve midnight. And today I am sitting here again. So that's the challenging bit. You must have lots of... I don't know, adrenaline, energy within you in order to carry on. I think one year is more than enough, of course, because I give up more or less work totally. But it's quite interesting, because nowadays if I walk down the High Street, anywhere, people would say: "Oh, Mr. Mayor, I saw you twice last week." I said, "Well..." Because since perhaps meeting this person, I've met another hundred already. So don't expect me to remember the names; I may remember the face. And they, of course, they remember me. So it's quite interesting and exciting as well, because for me, having been a councillor for some years, I started to discover that there are many aspects of the Borough which I do not know exist previously, a lot of voluntary involvements that I am not aware of. But during this year, I was able to visit all these different projects, and discover what they do. And then I realize that after one year, I can answer any questions about Redbridge.

JX: Actually you have started your public appointment since the 1990s.

TC: That's right.

JX: Why do you want to get involved in politics? Is it related... is it related to your background in social services?

TC: Well, when I... Well, I can't remember exactly when I started, no... Yes, when I started working in the National Health Service, because then there's no conflict of interest for myself to get involved in politics. And then first, I must say that, I was a little bit hesitant in joining any of the parties, because I do not know quite enough about it. But there was a friend, as well someone I know locally in Camden all those years ago, she came to visit me in my office in Camden when I worked in the National Health Service then, and said: "Well, Thomas, you should join the Conservative Party." I said: "Oh, go away." She left. But some weeks... some weeks later, she came back: "You should join." Because at that time, the Conservative Party had set up a group called the One Asian Forum, trying to involve different minorities within the Party. I said "Go away" a second time. And then I thought, well, it's interesting, because it was Margaret Thatcher who was the Prime

Minister then, so I started helping myself with more information, reading about the Party, and see what's it represent, what's its principle, because people keep on saying that "Oh, Chinese, you must be naturally be Conservative Party". And I said: "Why?" And then, of course, by reading more information, I realized: "Yeah, there's some truth in it." It's all about giving freedom to individuals to achieve in education, achieve in whatever they like to do; the state become smaller, yah? The state become smaller, and the individuals become bigger. Whereas, the other party, the state is much bigger – of course, the Labour is socialism. In other words, it's communism. (Laughs) So I said: "Oh, forget it." The Liberals, I don't know what they represent. So the third time round when this person visited me, I decided: "Yes. I think I know enough about the Party." And I started to join, and becoming a member of the One Asian Forum. And I think that the rest is history and that's why. And after joining the political party, many community associates from my... keep on telling me, rather telling me off: "You shouldn't just be a sign up member of a party without doing anything about it. You must represent the community." And that what's drove me into finding out what... what opportunities are there, and then I realized within the Cabinet office there's a public appointments section. I filled in the form. Soon enough, the request start to come in, and then I was appoint. Oh, 1990, of course, I... when I moved in to the... my area – I'm living in Woodford – the local Conservative Association secretary approached me. And because I remember what the community was telling me, that "You need to get more involved", I asked the secretary: "What can I do to be more active locally?" "Well, next year, we have local election in 1990. Would you be interested to become a candidate? Because one of the sitting councillors is retiring." So I said: "I can think about that." Filled in the form, went through the selection process, got selected, got elected – that's what happened. And I think the first four years as a Councillor, I was very interested in community work; social services as well. So when I left, I was the vice chairman of the Social Service Committee, I chaired the Independent Inspection sub-committee which looked after all the care homes, old people's homes, that sorts of things. Fostering and the adoption panels, housing, etc. So I true to my belief. Yeah? I would like to see if I can use my experience to do something for the community in that way.

JX: So what do you think about the other British Chinese be involved in politics in the UK?

TC: For me, of course, I would encourage everyone to have an interest in politics, but it is not necessarily to become a member of a political party. I mean, in general. Because if you are not a member of a political party, it gives you even more freedom to do whatever you like. And we all know that coming back to public appointment, you could become a school governor, you could become... I don't know, a member of the Consumer Council, a member of the Citizen Advice Bureau; and you could be a trustee of lots and lots of organisations which will make an impact for the community. And so it is not necessary to be engaging in politics, but it is important to engage in public affairs, because having studied in Zhuhai, I know that, yeah? People had interviewed me before say: "Why? Why politics?" I said: "Well, is that not what Dr. Sun said? Yeah? '政治乃众人之事' (in Cantonese), yeah? Politics is something which involves everyone." And I soon discovered the truth behind this statement. For example, if the government decided to increase the tax, will it involve you? Of course, it will, right? You have not borrowed; I have not borrowed a penny for many years, but how come my family are now 40,000 pounds in the red, thanks to Gordon Brown and (Alistair) Darling. Do you understand? Right? It's having an effect on us. Yeah? Next year, it involves us all to pay more National Insurance, VAT is gone back to 17.5% from the 1st of January (2010). Do you understand? Yeah? Everything will have an impact on us. If we do not have a representation, if we do not have a voice, people would just ignore you. So I would encourage people to get involved in public affairs. And if they felt that... feel that they can agree to the principles of a political party, by all means, join that party, and get active.

JX: So have you met any difficulty when you established your career in different periods? And have you got any help from any supportive person?

TC: Well, at the... Well, how can I put it? In Britain, we all know that at the surface, it looks quite an open and equal society; but deep down, I think, there would be perhaps lack of understanding. And discriminations ex... exist, and it is true. I remember when I worked in... I am sure, I am quite fortunate, because so far, with only the example I am going to give you, I have not experience of any overt discrimination. The example I was giving... I was about to give you was this: when I joined the NHS in 1988, I was in the manager position; I didn't face any discrimination at all. Because I worked in an area which I have some knowledge and expertise in, yah? Around the efficacy services, providing patients interpreters in different languages. Now, after a few years that, after I have established that service which run quite successfully, I thought, hey, perhaps I should do... become a manager in another field. So... And there was a vacancy within the Health Service Trust which I used to work with, it's a Mental Health Service manager. Better paid, yes? More opportunity for me to develop my management skills as well, and so I signed it out. Because I know the service, I worked with all the service within the Trust. So I signed it out with, err, not the manager, not the senior manager of the Trust,

but with some colleagues. One of the senior managers of the Trust, female as well, white, call me, and say: "Oh, Thomas, you are doing a very good job." Yeah? Etc., etc., yeah? Singing my praises, because her services need my service as well. But, the job of Mental Health Service manager, involve bla, bla, bla, tried to discourage me. Why? Because she would like to see someone who works under her to take the job. So it... For me, I didn't say anything about it, because I know that I would not be welcomed even if I get the job. So I just don't bothered. Yeah? But it proves that there's still perhaps the situations where people would like to see what we call the blue-eyed boy, same school tie, yeah, doing the job. Even my line manager before I left the NHS gave me a project to do, and she said... Because I said: "Give me something more challenging, I am going to leave. Yah?" And so she gave me a project working with homeless people in King's Cross, that sort of area. And she's very open, and she told me that "Thomas, you know what, this sort of project I usually would give it to the usual suspect". Yeah? Because that... she managed several managers; I never get that opportunity. But because I threatened her that I was going to leave, then she gave me that project. So can you see, so and after that, I... I told my manager: "I would not leave right away, because my own project is getting bigger and bigger, and they need time to recruit someone." So for one year, the Millennium year, I said: "I would only work four days a week." One day I would like to help myself to develop my potentials for second employment. Yeah? I would get paid only four days a week, that's fine. I take a pay-card. In that year, and that year, those fifty-two days, let's say, I managed to test the water in terms of training and consultation. And I thought: "Yeah, that's good. I enjoy it." So after that year, I said: "Forget it. (Laughs) I resign now." That's why in 2001 I came out of the NHS and start self-employment. And I can fully recommend it.

JX: So what do you think is the current main barrier for a Chinese to get employment in the UK?

TC: Oh, I think we need to go back a little bit. The first generations of parents, because of their background, they never... they have never experienced political involvement, so they would not encourage the second and third generations to get involved. That is the first major barrier. We all know that, if you know the Chinese character, "官字两个口" (in Cantonese) – the word 'official' has two mouths. So... And in Chinese, yah, we have a lot of saying about '官', isn't it? Because being a mayor is exactly a '官', isn't it? (Laughs) Even though I only got one mouth. Err... We're quite concern that if you involve in politics, some... is not very nice: a lot of willing dealings. So they never encourage their second and third generation to do politics or public administration. Becoming a doctor? Yes. Becoming an accountant? Yes. Becoming a solicitor? Yes. But study politics? No! What sort of job you will get? Just like... Well, for me – of course, my approaches are different – I encourage my children: "Do whatever you like as long as it's something that interests you." That's why my son is doing complete ICT at Union Working; my daughter is doing... reading English, and she still does not know which areas she would find employment. But I think, those Chinese migrants from traditional backgrounds, they would still ask their children to do, well, perhaps not so much now, MBA, (laughs) or be a banker or trader. No, not now, but you will encourage them to go for professional jobs, and they would not encourage them to get involved in the public sector. So I think that would be the major barrier. And for young people, you can have a degree or postgraduate, they would have to look after their own family first, isn't it? That would be a second barrier. Because getting yourself involved in public affairs do take up a lot of your personal time. I remember the first term of me being a councillor in, between 1990 to 94: at the end of that four years, my son was seven years old; my daughter was one years old, only one year old – she was born in 1989. So by the time I finished that four years, she's about five. And someone from Taiwan actually came to my house and interviewed me, and said: "Oh, Mr. Chan, you can leave the room. I want to interview the wife separately," and asked my wife, "What was it like during the last four years?" I was behind the door. I was listening. She told this reporter: "Sometimes I felt I am a single mum." That upset me, because I had a full-time job at that time, and I had to leave after dinner to come here for meetings. It's true. And I still remember my son, Christopher, he's twenty-six now, but at that time, the question he would ask me when I arrived home from work would be "Daddy, Daddy, do you have any meetings?" That's an easy question to answer; I would say: "Yes." But the next question, it still hurts. "Why?" he was asking me, "Is the meeting going to be long, medium, or short?" Long meetings, I wouldn't be home until eleven to twelve o'clock. "He won't see me AGAIN, perhaps very briefly until next morning." Or, if I leave for work early, because I worked at Central London, I drove to work, I usually leave quite early, he wouldn't see me until the next 24 hours later – for dinner, very briefly, perhaps twenty minutes, and then I had to get back to the meeting; that's long. "Medium?" I may return home at 9:30 or 10:00; he's asleep already. Seven years old, you need to get up early in the morning, isn't it? Again he wouldn't see me. "Short?" Coming in here just to sign documents, and open tender to sign it, ten minutes, and get home; that's short. That's good. But two and far between. So there is, there is a huge gap in terms of the time I could spend with the family, and no wonder my wife was complaining. But this year is different: that the daughter is twenty years old, the son is twenty-six years old, they both have their own lives, work, study, can live away from home; and she's the Mayoress, so she could be with me all the time. So is that time commitment, I think, which acts as a barrier.

Quite a lot of young people, either married or single, and they want to establish their own career first, isn't it? It's natural. Right? So it is that... First of all, there's no encouragement; secondly, the commitment. I think that's the two major barriers. And not to mention, unless they are fully up-to-date with what's happening in, around politics and other public affairs, they would not necessarily know that which path to go to. So perhaps they still need just a little bit of guidance and advice, and then perhaps they may see the light and move into more participation, more involvement.

JX: So it is very important for Chinese people to get involved in politics.

TC: Oh, yes, extremely so.

JX: So do you think is there any advantages for Chinese people to get involved in politics? 'Cause you have mentioned to the Guardian in this April (2009), that you have "zen-like calm", and you could hopefully manage the heated political debate with your cultural background to find a mutual ground.

TC: Oh, yeah.

JX: So, does your Chinese education, philosophy or characteristics help you with your career?

TC: Well, I think being Chinese – we are all Chinese here with one exception; you (the photographer) are the token Chinese, yah? I don't know about others. For me, people who know me, they can confirm that I... my personality is I always try to be cool, calm and collected. I am never ruffled, and never, perhaps, raise my voice.

When I returned to the council in 2006, I think the environment had totally changed, because China is a country to be reckoned with, and the position, I think, of Chinese in Britain. I can't say it's improved; but at the same time, people do, do use a different perspective to look at Chinese who are now here, differently: a different perspective, as not just catering – but I've never been in catering. And there are more people, more graduates, more people in the professional jobs, even in public sectors. If I turn up at the Foreign Commonwealth Office, I would see Chinese faces; if I turn up at the Home Office, at different government departments, they do employ Chinese faces – let's put it in this way – and other minority people as well. So I think that's gradually changed after all those years. And secondly, I think it all comes down to, to how... When people ask me questions or want to talk to me, how I respond to them. Whether the response gives them as a... I just mentioned, a new perspective to the matters we are discussing. So sometimes, I would listen to all members' contribution, and perhaps I will say: "Well, Should I contribute?" Sometimes I got a personal view, but I may or be not interested to tell them, because this is a boring subject or something like that. But when I say: "Right, I would like to make a point." When I put up my hands in meetings of the Conservative group – we have about thirty people – without fail, I can tell you that, either the leader, or the deputy leader. And sometimes a leader don't see, it's the deputy leader, who put down the names of who want to speak. The deputy leader always says: "Let's hear what Thomas have to say." Because my argument usually is slightly different from the others' contributions already, and they love it. Yah? So, and I always... now doing the work I'm doing: advising people about business opportunities, I always use the term which I have learnt, which is to undertake dual diligence, whether it's in food safety or in the business support. I use the term on a very regular basis. What's that mean is, you need to do...thorough research, prepare yourself before you agree to do something. Or, that is dual diligence, you've tried your best, and there's a result, yah? Even in council work, yah? I had got a panel called Quality of Life Panel which got lots of money, giving money to different projects in our local communities. As a result of my dual diligence, guess what, the Panel was suspended. Because why? Because some of the applications they haven't done their dual diligence, they haven't done the research; so the application, yes? Looks good; but when I look at it, I say: "No, it's not right." And that's a result: we have to suspend the Panel. So I think that's the reason for most people who want to be engaged in public affairs: if you can make a difference, if you can help local people in whatever ways. Of course, the local residences who vote for me may not even know that I have done that, but that's not important. What is important is that I know that I have made a little difference to people's lives, and that's good. Yah? I can tell you more about... Because that's the interesting part of being a Mayor, that I am sure I can touch a lot of people as individuals in the community, and I can give you many examples if you like.

JX: People who were born in the Year of the Ox as you are usually being are usually regarded as being extremely hard-working. Do you consider yourself as a hard-working person?

TC: Oh, yes, certainly. Look at all the engagement forms there, (laughs) and the engagement forms there. In six months between myself and the Mayoress, we have done over 350 engagements. So in a year, that means 700, if not more, engagements. It's quite busy, including weekends. Yes, I agree with that. But I'm also a Leo; Leo means that... (laughs) flamboyant, isn't it? Yeah, we like to show off at times. But as a person, for me, my assessment is I love being modest; I'm not one to show off.

JX: Being hard-working and being modest.

TC: Yeah, and being modest.

JX: So could you share the other values with the Chinese Diaspora for their survival and success in this country?

TC: Well, I think the Chinese communities, famous remounted for the hard-working, and, some of them are quite generous as well, not just to the, their own community, but to the mainstream community as well, because I know of people who run businesses who will give up time, money, for other charities that need support as well. Err... Not to mention charities back home in China and Hong Kong and all that... If there's a message for them, the message would be: work more closely with the local communities. That's the message I gave to the Pakistani community yesterday as well, isn't it? You, there's a business people there, a lot of business people, community leaders, keep on talking about what is needed for Pakistan. At the same case, I can apply that to a lot of community leaders who want to help China, help Hong Kong, etc. Fine, but what about the local community here? You need to make sure that either as individuals, or as a community, you are a force to be reckoned with locally. And I think that is quite important; otherwise why... why the local communities need to pay any attention to whatever you want to say, or to help you to address the needs? We are not doing that enough at the moment. Like yesterday, I met up with the... I don't know if you know this person, Keith Best, who was the chief Executive of the Immigration Advisory Service. And I talked to him about all these MAC migrant advisory service report, who keep on saying that "Oh, catering. You'd better have catering schools here to train people to work as chefs". I said: "This is all an illusion, isn't it? And you agree!" Because he's been meeting with the Bangladeshi Catering Association, we all say at the same time. I say the same thing time and time again: if you have a school for ca... for... for chefs, who's your audience? Not my children, not their children, isn't it? Who can you recruit to do the training? So it's all in the imagination of these so-called experts. It will not happen, the same for the Bangladeshi community, for the Pakistani community, Indian communities... We work quite well in our localities, setting up different community organisations; but that's not good enough. We need to integrate with the local community; we need to be a part of it to make an impact. So when we have needs, they will come to our rescue as well, because they know that we are there. At the moment, I mean, even in Redbridge, we do have a Chinese group, but they just meet together once a week for lunch, exercise and lion dancing; I know they do lion dancing as well. Yes? That's it. There's no impact what so ever. They even... If I can say that, there are other community centres in different areas. Their impact to the local communities? Minimum. I can say that... Well, I won't name the area; there are at least... I don't know, eight or ten so-called community centres, isn't it, in London and outside of London as well. What sort of impact do they have? Locally, I don't think there's a lot. Yes, so they need to be more active, and get themselves involved with the local activities. I think only then the British people would have totally new perspective about our communities.

JX: So you always encourage Chinese people to get involved in politics and local community as well.

TC: That's right.

JX: Do you have any other advices for the young generation of British Chinese?

TC: Well, besides buying Gucci bags and... (laughs) and... Because I know that in some so-called Chinese websites and blogs, yes? All the profession people talking about is, yeah? About where's the best eating place, that 'In' place, where to get the bargains and, I said, Gucci bags and others, yes? Etc. Obviously, perhaps they are earning good money, they are young, they want to enjoy life. Fine, yah? And I don't expect all of them to be involved in public affairs, anyway. Yah? But, as I said about the principles of politics, perhaps they should, yah? Just offer a little bit of the time, and to help the local community. And since there's quite a lot of us, now, in different areas, the, I think the total sum of this voluntary contribution could be a lot. And as a matter of fact, when I met with the Foreign Secretary David Miliband a couple of months, a few months ago now, and he was very proud and saying that "Well, this year we'll have 80,000 Chinese students from China here. Next year, we will have 100,000 Chinese students from China here". And because I was sitting next to him, I was the first to ask to speak, so I said: "But this 80,000 or 100,000 people

who are here... You have missed the opportunity. Because even half of them return to China, how much they know about Britain, UK, PLC? Not a lot, isn't it? Yah? So I think you need to encourage both the universities as well as the local organisations to organise something for them." I know they may be... I'm sure you can confirm that they may be studying and working at the same time, they are very busy trying to finish their degree, and then start working. I know that, but all I'm asking is... Just picture this: 80,000 people, each one once a week give one hours to do voluntary work. And you could pair up with someone: a black young child, to teach him how to do maths; or help him with his, err... I don't know, general knowledge, and then in the meantime you improve your English as well. Then so it's mutual as well, isn't it? Just one hour, 80,000 hour per week, it's a lot of voluntary work; and you get to know the community better, you get to know the psychic of the British people better, isn't it?

Because knowing the country, knowing Britain, knowing Europeans, etc., is not just the language; you need to understand why they say such a thing. Do you understand? It's just like jokes. You may be living here for ten years, twenty years; if you don't get yourself involved, everyone around you is laughing at the joke, but you just think that "What's so funny?" You are missing out what I call 'the quality of life'. So by working with other people, other communities, getting yourself involved, actually improves enhance your quality of life, because you appreciate things so much better: you know why, what makes them taste. Yah? So I think that is something money cannot buy as well. And not to mention... I know all the Chinese students or even local children... If... if they can go with this principle I just brought up, we will be a community that will earn the respect of everyone. And you can just do it quietly – you don't need to make it into a project – just locally, go into a school: "I'm available," "I'm very good at maths," "I'm very good at science," "I'm very good at this." That's it, one hour. So I hope that they will consider that, and that would really help the community to change its image amongst the British.

JX: Now you are running your own company to train the young people to...

TC: Not necessary young people. All ages. (Laughs)

JX: All ages... and to provide necessary skills to, for them to get... get employments. Do you have a long-term plan or vision of your business?

TC: Yes, I will be going to China (laughs) – that's my next step. Because China has a new food safety legislation after what happened last year, and... I'm a food safety trainer, and I have worked very hard last year and the beginning of this year to make sure food safety training for all food handlers is in the new legislation. Because when I went there last November (2008), after six readings of the draft legislation, not one single word was mentioned about training. But when President Hu signed it on the 28th of February this year (2009), it's there. Right? Chapter 4, err... Subsection 32. I would say that is because of my lobby. I don't think President Hu would come out and say that "No, it's not you. We decided to put it in". No, he wouldn't do that. So what will happen...? Well, what is happening now, I've signed a memorandum of understanding with the Charter Institute of the Environmental Health here, to help them to promote food safety training in China. And it will not happen right away, because they would have to develop an E-learning platform. And what I've been doing at the moment is building up all the networks in cities and towns back in China. So they... Because first of all, they need to recognise the qualification; and secondly, well, because China is so huge, I cannot stand up and teach, and they have to learn it through the E-learning platform, and then they have to visit one of the centres to take the test on-line, yes? No cheating, they have to show their ID and all that. Otherwise I'll be sitting outside, and said: "Ten yuan, I'll do it for you. You'll get a certificate." No, you have to do it face to face through the on-line examination, and then they will get the qualification. So I will push out, push it out for them, and mark at it in the different regions of China. So that's my big project. As soon as I finish this year, I'll be on the first flight... Oh, no, get the local election out of the way first, because it would happen in May. And I'll be on the first flight to China.

JX: So what's your plan in the future for your political career? Are you planning of becoming an MP?

TC: No, no, no, no. Only fools want to become MPs. (Laughs) I will continue to finish my four years, hopefully, from 2010 to 2014, as a Councillor; and then I'll go into the sunset, retire. But for the four years, I'm sure I will come back as a Cabinet member and maybe other position as well. But we don't know, because politics, who knows?

JX: When you first started your political career, did you expect that you could be such successful?

TC: No. I didn't plan to be a Mayor as well. (Laughs) But since I know that I have the support of my colleagues I said: "Oh yeah, I'll give a try." And I've been, yeah, fortunately enough to get the support. No, a lot of... How can I put it? Political manoeuvring is depends on what we Chinese call is "the time, the place, and the people". And it's just err... the fact remains that when I returned to Council, in 2006, the leaders, deputy leaders and a lot of councillors I knew since my 1990-94 term in the Council. So that's the time, the place and the people. So that's why I was asked to become the Chairman of the School training Committee in the first year, Cabinet member for the second year, Cabinet member for the third year, and quite a lot of the intakes of 2006 didn't even become School training Chairman until the third year. Do you see? So I do have the advantage of experience, and network, and the cool calm... You know, I have a safe pill of hands, that's what it is. And I put the time in. You talked about hard working. I do put the time in. I have a Cabinet office there, so I would turn up, I would work the hours, I would meet with officers, I would put ideas to officers, I would make sure that things been carried out, and I support my officers as well. So that's why not just members from my own Party, even members from the other parties, they've already told me, "Thomas," yah, because, of course, that's a new Cabinet member doing my portfolio now, but people would come up to me and say: "Make sure we are keeping the seat warm for you, and then you'll go back there as a Cabinet member." So I think that says it all. And in becoming the Mayor, usually there will be nominations from one party, my Party, and nomination from the other two major parties as well. But this year, there's only one nomination: me, because I think the other parties feel that "Such a nice man, how can we put up other candidates?" That's a show. Because it's just a show, political show, because we have most votes, anyway, so they can put up candidates, but the candidates will not get enough numbers of votes. But they want to do it to show people that "Hey, the mayoralty should be circulated rather than just one party". But not this year, only one nomination, one second. And when the past Mayor asked the other parties: "Any other nominations? Any other nominations?" "No." "Do we agree?" "Agree." Just signed. So there's a... I suppose co-operations from all sides on my appointment. So I'm glad to say that it's the first, I'm gonna say it's the first, because I've been there four years before, and four years now. So all the last seven years, there will be nominations from other parties; this is the first.

JX: So you have been so busy with your political duties, and you hardly have any time for your family life. If you could choose again, will you choose the same career path?

TC: Err... Career... career-wise, I may do it differently. In the sense that... Because I'm still... I suppose it's quite Chinese deep down. I have mentioned about Save the Children Fund I worked for about two years, and then the Camden Social Service for about three years, and then Hackney Social Services, two years. Up to that point, I was still searching what's good for me. And then when I find and appointed to the manager posing in NHS trust, I thought: "Yeah, that's exactly what I want to do." And that's why I've stayed on for twelve years. But twelve years are too long. I should quit, I think, after the first five years, when I totally established the service, when I have recruited all the necessary staff, set up the necessary system, then I should go; but I didn't. I stayed on, developed further training for the staff I've recruited, developed further businesses for the Trust. Because we recruit interpreters, we all know that, yah? You just work with one organisation, that's not going to be enough, isn't it? So I developed different contracts with different hospital trust. I was a fool to do that. I should leave perhaps after the first five, six years on the high to do something else. And I suppose that what I mentioned earlier: I tried to be this Mental Health Service manager, because I know that I will be able to use my experience to the mental health service, right? But I didn't do it. So perhaps that's the only regret. And perhaps I should, after I failed to get re-elected in (19)94, I should try again, and get back in right away; then I could be Mayor many years ago now. I may do something totally different, politically as well. So, you never know.

JX: By the way, what's your dream when you were a child? Social service?

TC: Well, what sort of dream? I just wanted to have a decent job that I enjoyed, isn't it? Yah? I must say that doing community work is extremely enjoyable. I like social work, because you are helping a large number of people. And as a matter of fact, when I visited the Camden Chinese Community Centre for the Mid-Autumn Festival this year (2009) as a Mayor, yah? The hundreds of older people in the hall, you know, the Indian, YMCA, quite a lot of them still recognised me, and still said that thank you for some of the work I've helped them all those years ago. That gave me a lot of job satisfaction. Not to mention at the end of the show, after giving all the raffle prizes away, they were about to leave. So I said to them – I was picking up the raffles, and I said: "Hey, stay there. It's not finished yet." And they all looked at me on stage: "What's he going to do now?" I said: "Come on, all of you," – because I'm very good at crowd control, isn't it, Chungwen? – I said: "Now let's all sing this together." And I just sang two lines, "欢乐今宵再会" (in Cantonese)... (Laughs) I don't know if you know it, "各位观众晚安" (in Cantonese). And they all burst singing and clapping, and they enjoyed it. "Enjoy yourself tonight", which is an Australian variety show theme song, very popular in Hong

Kong. And because I know most of them from Hong Kong, anyway, so I got the letter to prove it. The celebration was nearly two hours, but that last two minutes was the highlight of the show. (Laughs) So that's why... what I mean by being the Mayor, being the first citizen, the first servant, being someone involves in community work. If I can make a difference to individual's life, I will be very happy.

Now I just want to, if I can give you one example of how, perhaps I helped to change local people's life. We attended an engagement, it's an outdoor engagement called the Green Fair. Lots of people there. And I was walking round the park, looking at all the exhibits. Someone came up to say hello to me. I don't know her. She was with her daughter; they were black. And the mum came up to me and said: "Mr. Mayor, Can I tell you something?" I said: "Yes? Tell me." And err... she said: "Oh, my father... my grandfather was Chinese." But looking at her: she's black, from Caribbean, either Jamaica or St. Lucia, I don't know. And then she told me the grandfather's surname. And I said: "Have you tried to trace your roots?" She said: "No." I said: "Very easy. Just go back home, visit any cemeteries. You need to know the Chinese character of your grandfather, because for Chinese, we always have the province and the village on your headstone, your tombstones. And that's the place. And then you can go to China and trace it. Simple." She's about, I don't know, late forties, fifty years old. For me, I didn't tell her that if she feels that she can accept her Chinese, she feels confident about that, perhaps for the first time, I've done a good job, isn't it? Because I think she saw me as a role model, so she's no longer keeping the Chineseness inside her without telling anyone. And of course there are others are as well. I've Indians who came up to say: "My father was Chinese." And the Mayoress, my wife, would say: "You don't look like Chinese. Yah? You are half, isn't it? You should look..." And guess what this Indian chap told her, said: "No, no, no, no. In the winter, my complexions look paler." You know, try to make links. Now why? Yeah, perhaps again, he may not have shared this information with anyone. So they are all coming out, like gays and lesbians, coming out. And I've attended a Rotary club, the Lions Club. I don't sell my ethnicity; it's there, there for all to see. But the president of this club usually will read something from my CVs, and said: "Oh, he was," like you said earlier, "He's the first Mayor of Chinese origin, yah? He came from Hong Kong blahblahblah..." And without a doubt, in the audience, all English, so one would say: "My grandfather was Chinese; he came with the English long time ago, selling tea in the... yah? The early 19th century." And etc., etc. I was looking at her; she's English. But there's another one, yah? Who's half Japanese, you know the Japanese, they are Orientals, try to make a link, isn't it? Half. She gave me a story as well. So they are all feeling more confident about saying that "I got Chinese blood". Because the simple reason that, yeah, if a Chinese could be a mayor, it's all right, isn't it? It's been accepted. So I think that's the difference I'm making to individuals' lives. They don't have to wait, because the one who is half Japanese told me: the mum who had her with this Japanese man before the Second World War, and then went back to Torishima after the Second World War as well, and never came back. She didn't tell this daughter, who's in her sixties now, until she's in her dying bed. She was in her dying bed. At least she doesn't have to wait until she's dying to tell her children and grandchildren, isn't it? Everybody now knows she's half Japanese. She doesn't look anything like that, a bit, yah, the eyes and the face, a little bit of the features look Japanese. But if she didn't come out to say it, you would not... you would not... I would not ask her the question, but giving people that confidence; I think I've done a good job – in Chinese, “死而无憾” (in Cantonese: I can die without regrets). (Laughs) It is really good. It gives me a very good feeling about what I'm doing. I don't sell my ethnicity, but it's obvious, isn't it?

JX: Your own stories are really encouraging to all people with Chinese background. Would you like to share some more interesting experience in your different career?

TC: Oh, in different career... With the Vietnamese, all I can say is one aspect about refugees. We talked about walking into this country. But their experience as boat people, it is something which... I think quite a lot of err... social workers and, perhaps even traumatic stress councillors don't realize. When they... When you worked with refugees, people who've gone through war – we are talking about war – and then leaving your own countries, and come to somewhere that's totally alien. Yah? That journey from Vietnam to Hong Kong, the boat, yah? You can picture this one, the boat started off in Vietnam: Sai Kung or wherever, with perhaps 200 people, old, adults, young people. And in their arrival in Hong Kong with 100, 150. What happened to the others? They are not telling. Yah? Survival, the fittest. Yah? Now, and you asked them, quite a lot of councillors, Traumatic Stress councillors would ask them: "What was it like?" Yah? Now, they would not tell you. Even I worked very closely with other workers of refugee backgrounds, they just said: "Don't even ask." And I can understand that; I respect that. Why? Because as a refugee, you got nothing, totally nothing. That memory, no matter how terrible, is their only thing you have here, that is yours. Would you like to share that? If you share that, you've got nothing here. Nothing here. Can you see? And that's so precious to them. That's the first aspect. So don't get... Try to help them how to deal with the current situation, rather than go back to that dramatic experience. That's the first thing I want to share.

And secondly, you need... When you worked with these refugees, or silent seekers, you need to understand that they have gone through hell. Their mentality, their approach to life here is totally different from yours, yours, every one of us here. Why? Nothing, nothing will stop them from doing something they're determined to do now. In Chinese, “死过返生” (in Cantonese: died once and come back to life) – I can do no wrong now; I'm rebirth, reborn. Yah? By all means, arrest me! But we have no death penalty, isn't it? I've done my death penalty when I left Sai Kung. Do you understand? So, so I can understand the people of Iraq or Afghanistan. It's the same thing: refugees, yes, they have nothing to lose, really, nothing to lose. Yah? So that is something when we provide service to these people, or when we try to help them, we need to understand their mentality. That is the first group I worked with, and I take that experience with me.

And for the second job in social services, supporting them while they resettled. Again, I think social work has its limitations. Yeah, social work is in the news recently, isn't it? It does have its limitations, because social workers are looking at helping the individual, but they are not looking at how to build the... what I call 'the network of support' for them. Yah? And as a result, it creates this sense of dependency. A lot of single mums, etc., people who have problems, personal problems; they would not do anything for themselves. If you ask them: “Will you do X or Y?” They will say: “Oh, talk to my social worker.” Yeah? “The social worker will help me to solve it.” This dependency which I don't like social work. I like community work; I want to see people empowered. Give them the tools, and they will continue hunting for food, isn't it? If you do everything for them, they will not know how to do it. Simple as that. So I think, whether it's social work or community work is all about empowering people to do things for themselves, and I get a lot of job satisfaction from that. Whether to ask them to learn English, ask them to do voluntary work, ask them to consider working part-time and then full-time, gradually empowering them, giving them the skills to do it. I think that helps individuals and the community in the long run.

Now, coming back to being a councillor, involving in the NHS, involving in the Take Away Association and all that, I think the lessons I've learnt is, again, is to help people to help themselves. I have known enough caterers who will be just concentrated on what they do without paying any attention to the... what I call 'the help network' that exists locally. Yah? There's a lot of help network, but they failed to use it, and they failed to seek help. And I suppose because they can't explain actually what's the focus on the problem. So in training people, you were talking about training as well, training people, I will train them how to communicate better to people that suppose to help them. I always give an example which... I don't think I've shared with you. Well, for the English or British people, when you purchase something, and you don't like it, what do you do? You take it back to the shop, and say: “I want my money back. That's the receipt.” Full stop. For Chinese, how do we do it? We say that “I bought this here the other day, I took it home...” And right away, the shop assistant says: “What happened at home? Did you damage it?” Yah? There's nothing to do with it, isn't it? But they would do it. They read the real issue in such a way that makes it problematic for them. For me, I even have to learn it. But I have learnt it now. Yah? You just take it back, say yah? “Can I have my money back?” That's it. I only did it the other day I was buying... Can I give you the example? I was buying a black tie, something I could tie myself – because I've learnt how to do it now. (Laughs) Used to be just the click on, which is no good. I need the real stuff. I bought it one, I went across here, bought one from Marks & Spencer, cost me ten pounds. Just a black tie. And then I went down to Moors Brothers – we have a Moors Brothers here, very good, men's wear as well. I wanted to dress a shirt and one of those. And they said... Oh, I bought the shirt, and then they said: “Do you want one of these?” The tie, exactly the same with Marks & Spencer's, three pounds. And the cuff link, etc. Everything was on sale. I don't know why? Very cheap. So I said: “Give me one.” That's right. Three pounds. And what happened to this one? I got it from Marks & Spencer's, the receipt's still there. I've never opened it, of course, yeah? So I took it back and said: “I don't want it now. You give my ten pound back.” Right? But I think a lot of Chinese people, if you ask them, they may not have that approach, attitude, confidence to do it. Because it's nothing wrong with the tie, isn't it? Just more expensive. So I would like to share this sort of approach to life and to people, and as I said earlier than other aspects. I would like to share with people is that get yourself involved, and it will err... I'm confident and hence your quality of life. Do you know when, why I want to stay here? Not because my family is all here now, but I do like look at today, it's beautiful. Do you want to be in Hong Kong? No! Taipei? No! Beijing? No! Look at it. Glorious, isn't it? Yah? Just right. And the buildings, some are awful, but there are some lovely buildings as well. I like... I do like my architecture. I like a bit of history; anthropology as well. And I like the English sense of humour. And my chauffeur Alan knows that, because we always share jokes together, etc. And that's life. Only you have certain shared cultures, then you can enjoy life better. Without that shared culture... Because... Chungwen knows it, I always burst into songs... whatever I do, yeah? And the chauffeur now got into the habit as well, because whatever we say in the car, just give me two words, and I will sing a song for you. Anything. And he's got the same habit now. And sometimes he says: “Who sings that song? Who sings that song? I don't know.” And he will come back into the office and Google, and find

out the singer, and then come to me: “Oh, Mr. Mayor, this and this.” Yah? That is shared culture. It is... Another word of it helps you to have bondings with your friends, your neighbours, your colleagues, isn't it?

Another story I want to share with you in terms of discrimination. And some is quite obvious, like the one which has discouraged me to apply for jobs; but some, you have to really understand why he's saying this. He wants to upset me, isn't it? That's obvious. A colleague, a councillor no less... After a full council meeting, we were all sitting in the room next door, enjoying a drink, and just chatting. Nothing, nothing too serious. But it's late: eleven o'clock. So I said: “Oh, I'm going home now. I don't want any more drinks. I'm driving myself home.” A year ago, more or less. And guess what this chap called Ted said to me. When I was about to leave this gathering of five or six people, he looked at me and said... He's a racist, no doubt about it, isn't it? “Tom?” I said: “Yes?” “Can you tell me something the Chinese contribute to human kind recently?” Now the sting is in the word ‘recently’, isn't it? Yah? Because we all know that, as Chinese, our contribution to human kind is a lot. You'll be without paper, without airplane even – because without compass, you cannot tell which direction you're going, isn't it? Yah, firework, etc., etc. Well, I don't need to tell you that. Recently – he's trying to make a difficulty for me, isn't it? But I was very good. I can tell you that I was good: I stood up, and I said to him in front of the other people surrounding him as well. I said: “Ted, without the Chinese, you will be sitting here totally naked.” And guess what, he reached out his hand to me, and said: “Tom, friends, we're still friends.” See, because I gave him the biggest, yah... come back that he just can't deal with it. Serve him right.

JX: Thank you for sharing these interesting stories and unforgettable experience with us. And the last question is: is there any very important person in your life that inspired you, and even keeps you motivated so far?

TC: I think I've mentioned his name already: Dr. Sun. Err... Not because he was a Cantonese, (laughs) but I think what he did and even giving up being President for the good of the party, was something which I admire. And, of course, he's also professional, yah? He's a doctor, isn't it? In medicine, no less. And being someone who's born in Macao myself, and knowing that my mum's family did help with the... his political venture in some way, because my mum's maiden surname was 卢 (in Cantonese: Lo), and Macao, you have 卢家花园 (in Cantonese: Lo's family garden) – I'm sure some of you know that. And the garden is now the... I think it's a heritage site or something, isn't it? Beautiful with lotus pond and all that. And... they were quite well-off, and the story, which I was... It was told to, to me as a young child was when Dr. Sun needed some funds, money, in China, the only way... perhaps on one occasion; more than one, I don't know. On one occasion, he raised some money, of course, from all over the, err.... the... universe. But he needed to send the money back to China in order to support his revolution. And what's the best way to do it? It just all happened. One of my mum's ancestors passed away, so the coffin needs to go back to China. And together with the coffin, the money under, underneath. And nobody will check a coffin from the Lo family, because they are so wealthy and powerful. So the money was transferred back to... No, not through Western Union, but through the coffin, and back into China helping with the revolution.

And, whilst in Zhuhai, I did read the Principle of Three... Democracies, isn't it? Something like that, 三民主义 (in Cantonese: Three Principles of The People, i.e. Nationalism, Democracy and the People's Welfare/Livelihood, put forward by Dr. Sun Yat-sen), and agreed with it totally. Yah? Because, like the beginning of the United States, government is really for the people, by the people, isn't it? And... I can't remember the third one. That's why there is a role model. I think that is something which inspired me that you need to get yourself involved in politics, and you need to consider that you're really serving members of the public. And that's something which I shared with a lot of people as well. Because they say: “Oh, you are now...where's the people below you, the community.” I said, I would say to these people: “Without the community, there will be no leader, isn't it? Then so you must have the communities behind you, then you'll have the leader. Just like a performance, it's an audience. Yeah, you could be very good at performing, but if you haven't got an audience – sorry, it won't work.

JX: Thank you very much, Thomas.

TC: You're welcome.

JX: Thank you for your time.

TC: Thank you.