# Transcription information

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# Speaker information

* Eleanor Lisney (Interviewer) (Eleanor)
* Eric Wu (Speaker) (Eric)

Notes:

All person and place names which require confirmation and/or checking are highlighted in yellow.

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Between Nasi Goreng and Fried Rice

Transcript 1: Between\_Nasi\_Goreng\_Fried\_Rice\_1.wav

Interviewer: INT

Date of interview: TBC

Location: TBC

Recording: One WAV file. ‘Between\_Nasi\_Goreng\_Fried\_Rice\_1.wav’ 00:00:00—00:35:02.

[Start of recording]

[upbeat electronic music 00:00:00—00:00:03]

00:00:03 Eleanor Hi, I’m Eleanor Lisney, also known as Thoe Chooi Wah 00:00:08. That’s my Chinese name. Very, very few people use that. I stopped using it here in the UK because most people mispronounce it. But friends from back home still call me Chooi Wah. That’s one of the reasons why I wanted a podcast. And this podcast is called *Between Nasi Goreng and Fried Rice*. [music fades out] Nasi goreng is fried rice in Malay, in Malaysia and in Indonesia, is exactly the same as fried rice. But obviously there are differences because there are spices in nasi goreng that the Chinese fried rice, chǎofàn as it’s called, it’s slightly different also because of the sauces that are used. I wanted to call it that, first of all, because I love food. And cuisine is one of my passions. Also because I wanted to talk about the differences in the cultures of being like the same but different. For example, I’m Malaysian Chinese, but I live here in the UK, London at the moment. And I think that there are many, many layers to my different identities. Some people say it’s like you need to peel an onion to get to the different layers. And the exploration is the different identities of being a Malaysian Chinese. And being of the Chinese diaspora, I am very appreciative of the fact that ethnically, I’m Chinese, but culturally I have taken in so much culture from Malaysia that I am actually different. So, it’s a bit like nasi goreng in which I have added different spices to it that is not there in chǎofàn or fried rice. [upbeat percussive music fades in]

00:02:51 Eric Hi, my name is Eric Wu, and I’m a student dietician studying at university here in London. I’m also an advocate and artist that works with the East and Southeast Asian community here in London and abroad. I’ve worked with the British East and Southeast Asian Network, [music fades out] Violence Against Racism, and Citizens UK on a variety of different projects ranging from mental health to immigration rights, to different arts projects. And I’m a very loud and proud Chinese American as well. [sound of running water and clanging metal]

00:03:26 Eleanor Eric, I’ve got a terrible memory. Where did we meet? I know it’s a performance. Can you tell us more about it? Because my memory is terrible.

00:03:40 Eric Of course. So, we met back at a creative workshop for East and Southeast Asian members of the community in London. And we formed a group to create a performance piece just to raise the general profile about stereotypes and racism and kind of struggles which our community faces.

00:04:03 Eleanor Yeah. If I remember right, it was called AAA.

00:04:07 Eric Yes.

00:04:07 Eleanor It wasn’t Alcoholics Anonymous.

00:04:10 Eric [chuckles] No.

00:04:11 Eleanor It was—what was the AAA stand for?

00:04:15 Eric AAA, which was the title of our piece, stood for ‘Angry Asians Anonymous’.

00:04:20 Eleanor Oh, right. I knew ‘Anonymous’ was somewhere. [chuckles]

00:04:23 Eric [chuckles]

00:04:24 Eleanor But I couldn’t remember it. So—and yeah, I think our piece was quite well received.

00:04:32 Eric Yes.

00:04:33 Eleanor And I think we—there were what? Five of us were quite passionate about, you know, what we were talking about.

00:04:42 Eric Yes.

00:04:43 Eleanor And we talked about going further with it, but we never quite did. But I’m fascinated by your story, Eric. What you said in it.

00:04:58 Eric Mhm.

00:04:57 Eleanor But I wonder if you could, like, expand a bit more on who is Eric.

00:05:02 Eric Of course. I mean, there’s a lot to unpack here. But I am originally from the US. I was born to Chinese immigrants in the West Coast, in the US, in Washington. And when I was fifteen, I decided to move to Singapore to finish my secondary school. And at eighteen, I’ve moved to the UK, London for university where I’ve been ever since.

00:05:30 Eleanor You—that is sort of like a reverse thing from me. Because I’m a Malaysian, I usually—

00:05:36 Eric Mhm.

00:05:37 Eleanor —hear about Malaysians and Singaporeans who moved to the US—

00:05:41 Eric Mhm.

00:05:42 Eleanor —and moved—or moved to the UK—

00:05:45 Eric Mhm.

00:05:44 Eleanor —or elsewhere. But not quite moved to southeast Asia like Singapore or Malaysia. Do you—you know, would you care to tell us why?

00:05:57 Eric Yeah, I mean at that time, I had moved with my family because one of my parents had an assignment in Asia for a few years. So, I had the fortune of moving with them and the experience of living overseas for a few years, which is why we ended up in Singapore for three years.

00:06:19 Eleanor Great. Actually, one of the reasons why I wanted to do this podcast is to sort of explore our different identities. So, I say ‘’identities because obviously you are American.

00:06:35 Eric Mhm, mhm.

00:06:34 Eleanor You are Chinese. You are Asian. But it’s a bit—for me, it’s a bit like peeling in onion.

00:06:43 Eric Mm.

00:06:44 Eleanor You know? Because there’s so many kind of aspects and perspectives and different ways, different roles. Different ways we look at things. I mean, this is fascinating, the fact that you went to Singapore—

00:07:04 Eric Mhm.

00:07:04 Eleanor —as an American. I mean knowing Singapore a bit, I would’ve thought that it was a very big sort of cultural change, in spite of the fact that Singapore is mostly made of people from Chinese roots. Chinese ancestry.

00:07:31 Eric Mhm.

00:07:32 Eleanor Or is that just me thinking about that?

00:07:36 Eric No, I found—of course it was very much a very large culture shock when I first moved over. Especially for the first few months. It’s a new country. In fact, I’d never lived in Asia before, just visited family in China. And it was very much a—this is a new culture, kind of getting thrown in the deep end. No one really coached you for this. But I found it somewhat familiar as well. Because I find that Singapore is almost a conversion 00:08:06 of East and West. It has quite a bit of Eastern influence due to its location, in Southeast Asia. Its strong roots and heritage with the Chinese diaspora and immigrants to Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, as well as the British influence of the Western culture. So, in a sense it was very strange, a different culture. But also seemed a little bit familiar being Asian American myself and experiencing that blend of Eastern and western culture. But this time on a much grander scale, it seemed.

00:08:39 Eleanor Yeah. But don’t you find—and I hope I’m not leading you.

00:08:43 Eric Mhm.

00:08:44 Eleanor And you know, do feel free to ignore this.

00:08:48 Eric Mhm.

00:08:51 Eleanor But don’t you think that the difference between Singapore and America is that there is… not just the culture and sense of ethnicity, but the culture in the sort of politics—

00:09:10 Eric Mm.

00:09:11 Eleanor —and kind of the way—the idea of freedom. Because Singapore is quite strict in, you know, sort of civil liberties—

00:09:25 Eric Mm.

00:09:26 Eleanor —and things like that. And America has this idea that they’re the beacon of democracy—

00:09:32 Eric Hm. Mm.

00:09:33 Eleanor —etcetera. I mean, did that in—did that sort of impact on you at all or maybe it didn’t?

00:09:39 Eric I mean, I think it actually quite did. I agree with you. There was in terms of a lot of things such as being able to speak about things freely or criticize things freely, I think that was a very large culture shock and large adjustment. But I think for me, going from an environment where even at university—sorry, even in high school and middle school people are very vocal. People are very political. You have a very—politics is kind of run through the community. You always see it running around. To go into a sphere where, you know, you kind of had to watch what you were saying in public, especially. It was quite a bit of a shock, but it also kind of ingrained in me the importance of knowing that—when to speak out. And especially the thought that, you know, it is important to often speak out. Because for voices and for communities which are often muted, whether by force or if not by the larger population, by the government. It’s even more important to speak out and to raise our voices and to create that rustling of the feathers. So.

00:10:52 Eleanor Yeah. I think I would feel that if I live in Singapore. But on the other hand, I think as Asians—

00:11:00 Eric Yeah.

00:11:01 Eleanor —we are probably very used to sort of Confucianist 00:11:02 type of—

00:11:05 Eric [inaudible]

00:11:07 Eleanor Yeah. So, you know, it’s not so much of a shock, perhaps. And I was just wondering if there’s a specific experience in your life that caused you to change your perspective on being an Asian American? Because you said you moved to Singapore when you were like fifteen, sixteen.

00:11:29 Eric Yes.

00:11:30 Eleanor So was there anything that has sort of changed what you think about being an Asian American? I’ve been reading—I think her name is Helen Zia—as her experience of being an Asian American. And how that is sort of a very difficult time for Asian Americans—of course, she’s much, much older than you are—during the time—you know, in that time. Sort of… not exactly after the Second World War, but not far from that time.

00:12:09 Erica Mhm.

00:12:10 Eleanor So was there a specific experience? Because I’ve heard a lot of people talking about, you know, that sort of discrimination, repatriation, you know. What happened to the Japanese and stuff like that. But that might not have any impact on your life.

00:12:28 Eric Mm.

00:12:29 Eleanor Just because, you know, you are where you are and you are what your age is. So it might be different from different generations, if I can say that, of Asian Americans.

00:12:44 Eric Mm, mm. I mean, I can’t really pinpoint one exact point. But I think one period of time which kind of awoke the sense of a little bit of differing about being Asian American was, especially when I was in middle school, and you would have kids who would tease you about your culture and your ethnicity and tease you for being Asian. And I just remember at that time I was very fortunate to have, in our community—in my community, a very large Asian American population. So, I had a lot of friends around me. But it was the teasing by other people because of my heritage, my culture, that kind of made me for the first time think about what it is to be Asian American. And think about where I stand both in the Asian spheres and the Chinese spheres. But also in America, white Western American spheres as well. And where, you know, these two very differing, often very clashing cultures can meet. Because at home you have a Chinese family. You are—I spoke Chinese with my family. You follow very Confucian Chinese ideals, and you follow very Chinese traditions at home. But then when you’re at school and the outside world, it’s—the US, it’s a very Western—Western world, Western perspective. And it’s very—you get raised in both, but you’re not fully immersed in one or the other. I think.

00:14:17 Eleanor I think in your performance, you—you know, where we did together—

00:14:23 Eric Mhm.

00:14:24 Eleanor —you mentioned about the awkwardness or you know, when you went back to Beijing—

00:14:31 Eric Yes!

00:14:32 Eleanor —and they said that, you know, “You are an American? No, you’re not American. You are Chinese.” Do you want to, you know, speak a bit more about—you know, I know you what you said in your performance, but people might not have heard that.

00:14:47 Eric Of course. Yeah. Giving a little bit of context. As part of our performance, we kind of told our stories and a few of our own personal stories about what it was being multicultural or being part of a diaspora. For me, the experience I told and it’s one that I’ve experienced a number of times in fact, is often while I’ll go back to Asia or I’ll go back into Chinese spheres in the west and the UK and the US, it’s that kind of, that contrast of they’ll accept you because you know, I am Chinese American. I am—I have that Chinese heritage and roots accept you as of that, but they won’t fully accept you because I’m still Americanized, I still get called the nickname of You are the American. Or often people will force you to choose one or the other and don’t understand that it’s really a mix between the two. They ask you if you are purely Chinese or purely American. And I’ve gotten this not only in the US but also in Singapore, in the UK as well. So, I think it’s a very much—people are very interested in your who you are because you might seem different from the people that they normally interact with. But it’s sometimes a little hard for people to grasp that you’re not just Chinese or you’re not just American. That you’re actually blend of—the blend and mixture of the two.

00:16:17 Eleanor Yeah. To go back to the UK—

00:16:22 Eric Mm.

00:16:23 Eleanor —because you’re here now. And also, I’m thinking also of the US. It’s very diverse.

00:16:34 Eric Mm.

00:16:35 Eleanor The population, especially in London, we are very diverse.

00:16:41 Eric Mhm.

00:16:42 Eleanor And so we’re not just Chinese. We’re also East Asians, Southeast Asians. Do you feel that kind of community, the sort of bigger community? I say that because sometimes I feel like not just East Asian, but very much part of Southeast Asia where a lot of the cultures are very different. And having to advocate for people in that wider community. And not just that, I mean, I’ve been involved in a little bit in the sort of Black Lives Matter, that sort of thing. Which I think in America, you would have sort of, you know, that Hispanic population. And I find that for reading some of the literature, some people of Chinese heritage, I feel, have—do not feel any association with the wider kind of immigrants, the sort of immigrant population. You don’t have to, you know—have you any thoughts of that or maybe not at all?

00:18:10 Eric No, I definitely think that what’s quite interesting about a lot of the Asian diaspora Southeast, Southeast Asian, middle Eastern, west Asian, a lot of our populations have gone through various different routes to come to where we have are. For instance someone might say that they’re Chinese heritage, but their family might have immigrated from Hong Kong directly to the UK. Or they may might have gone through Southeast Asia and then immigrated through the UK. Or they might have gone, been here for a few generations. There’s so many differing paths and the community is so diverse that I think that there’s always a space for everyone. But I feel that there still is this sort of disconnect, especially when we’re thinking about the population of new immigrants who’ve just kind of came to the UK to work and study for a few years and personally don’t necessarily—aren’t here permanently and don’t integrate with the wider diaspora community that’s here. And of course there’s cultural differences between someone who’s born and raised in Asia versus someone who’s from Asian heritage and kind of born and raised in the West. I feel there’s a lot of different, not only perspectives, but also our experiences and identities are different because of our upbringings and because of where we’ve—where our families are from and where, where we’ve grown up.

00:19:38 Eleanor What would you like to see? I mean, for me, I think that I’m not so sure about integration.

00:19:47 Eric Mm.

00:19:48 Eleanor Because that’s not always a good thing. [chuckles]

00:19:50 Eric [chuckles]

00:19:51 Eleanor I mean, how do you keep your own identity, but yet, you know, be open to other communities? Or to open—to be open to other cultures, whether it’s Asian or Western? And, you know, that that can be so confusing.

00:20:11 Eric Mm.

00:20:12 Eleanor Do you have any kind of like strategy, or…? Do you know, do you have any kind of like, thoughts that, you know, if I was a new immigrant, for example, you know, what would you say? What advice would you give?

00:20:29 Eric Well, I’ve gone through this very similar path myself coming to the UK and not being familiar with the diversity of culture is from the UK diversity of peoples that are here. The one thing that really worked for me was just being very open to ask questions or be very open to kind of anyone that you kind of interact with. Because you really don’t know who you’re going to get along with. They might be from a completely different background, completely different cultural identity. But you might get on as thick as thieves. It’s about being open and just being willing to learn. I think that’s the key. Because if you’re willing to learn about someone’s culture, someone’s heritage, someone’s beliefs, someone’s practices, they’re more than often more than willing to share and happy to share their culture and the perspectives. At the same time, you can share your own cultures and practices. And even if you differ, be open, be accepting, and be open to the fact that everyone is different. And not everyone will be exactly the same or have exactly the same beliefs, lifestyles, diets as you. I think that for me, that was really the key about being open and willing to learn and accept.

00:21:47 Eleanor Yeah. I agree with you. I mean, I spent four years in Austin—

00:21:52 Eric Mhm.

00:21:53 Eleanor —learning [chuckles] Texan.

00:21:54 Eric [chuckles]

00:21:55 Eleanor Although I know that Austin isn’t exactly—I mean, people say’s not exactly Texan culture. But you know, I certainly did sort of what you were mentioning there. I asked that because also—because, you know, we’ve just got by the pandemic. So as an East and Southeast Asian background, I’m sure you’ve also—have you encountered any discrimination because of it? Because I know from the work of EBR, for example, some people have definitely got some abuse and even violence because of our ethnicity—

00:22:58 Eric Mm.

00:22:59 Eleanor —or their ethnicity.

00:23:00 Eric It’s—it was—and it has been a very unfortunate situation that the people who’ve been targeted have been majority ESA 00:23:08 individuals. I haven’t faced any physical abuse. But I’ve gotten verbal abuse several times before including from previous classmates. And a very prominent incident of one evening, I was just walking on the street from my home to Sainsbury’s just for groceries. And as I was walking down the street, there was a car which had slowed down and turned the corner and it started shouting at me. I think there was just three or four young boys, young men, who was shouting at me to go back to Chinatown. And so that was a very unsettling situation because I was alone in the evening. And it’s just these small things that I’ve noticed that people are much more—were much more willing to throw verbal abuse at me or to other abuse in my community due to the pandemic and due to often unrightfully. So, the shifting of blame towards the ESA community.

00:24:14 Eleanor Yeah, I’m hoping that we’ve reached some kind of… watershed or whatever you call it, that, you know, this kind of thing might sort of slow down or even finish. But I don’t—I haven’t read any stats—

00:24:36 Eric Mm.

00:24:37 Eleanor —to say that it has. So, this is my hope. [chuckles]

00:24:40 Eric They—they—yeah. The effects are still lingering. And I think that’s kind of key of why it’s so important to—and for me, even though it was my culture and my heritage being attacked, and it wasn’t necessarily what anything I’ve done. That’s why it made me feel so strongly to continue to raise our voices, to stand up in the show, tell people that this is actually going on in our community, and that there are so many people who are affected by racism, by violence, by verbal abuse, almost on a daily basis.

00:25:14 Eleanor Yeah. I’m just wondering, apart from the sort of ethnicity—

00:25:23 Eric Mhm.

00:25:24 Eleanor —and then, and obviously culture. Is there any part sort of in London that—and I know we both appreciate London, [chuckles] that makes us, you know, think of London as a great place to live? We just, for example, we just had Pride, you know. And, I’m not sure, but I just missed Black Pride yesterday. [chuckles]

00:25:56 Eric [chuckles]

00:25:57 Eleanor So [chuckles] I was wondering if you have any thoughts about not just Pride, but sort of, you know, the amount of festivals that we have, you know, that Sadiq Khan goes to, you know.

00:26:13 Eric Mm. Yeah.

00:26:14 Eleanor Et cetera. The cultural events that, you know, that celebrates different communities.

00:26:21 Eric Absolutely. And I know the best thing about London is that the fact that it is so diverse and multicultural. And that you can find communities from almost every culture and ethnicity from across the world here in London. There are so many events that are being held year round in terms of religious events, cultural events that are always open to the public. And they’re always advertised. For instance you have [inaudible 00:26:48], you have the Lunar New Year, you have August Moon Festival. You’ve got so many different events around the year that’s going on in London that are always—

00:27:00 Eleanor Diwali. [chuckles]

00:27:01 Eric Diwali, yes. Diwali’s another one. Yes. But there’s so many things that go around. There’s always something every weekend or every day for you to find out about. And it’s just that London is so—it’s so diverse. It’s so large that there kind of is that space for everyone to express themselves. And there is a community which, you know, hopefully is accepting of themselves and of who they are as an individual culturally and identity wise.

00:27:37 Eleanor What do you hope to sort of… improve, if you want to call that, or in the sort of cultural awareness—

00:27:54 Eric Mm.

00:27:55 Eleanor —as an East Asian, or as an East Asian with Western… upbringing, if I can say that.

00:28:05 Eric Mhm. Absolutely.

00:28:06 Eleanor You know… I mean, for myself, I know that I’d like to see more acknowledgement, more awareness of East and Southeast Asian pop culture maybe. That—

00:28:32 Eric Mm, mm.

00:28:33 Eleanor —that type of culture, which we don’t even as Eastern Southeast Asians here—

00:28:40 Eric Mm.

00:28:41 Eleanor —you know, those of us who were not born here or who might not speak the language you know, want to learn more about that. That’s for me. That’s for me personally. [chuckles]

00:29:02 Eric [chuckles]

00:29:03 Eleanor You know, but what about you. You know, what kind of cultural awareness, if I can call it that—

00:29:13 Eric Yep/

00:29:14 Eleanor —would you like to see more of?

00:29:17 Eric I mean, probably the biggest thing for me is just continuing to combat a lot of generally negative stereotypes, which mainstream media or mainstream population might have about east and southeast Asian individuals. And to really get the people to understand that we’re not a single monolith. We are a plethora of different countries. And within each different country, there are a plethora of different ethnicities and cultures and backgrounds and cuisines that we are infinitely diverse. And I feel that often when ww—someone says to Asian, the first thing they, in the UK they often think South Asian. but they forget that there’s Southeast Asian, east Asians, the Central Asians, Western Asians. We’re a very diverse group. and even within East ourselves, me being Chinese my experiences and my family’s food and our culture is very different from the next individual who says they’re Chinese because of our roots, our ancestry, our heritage. So, it’s really bringing that diversity and that we’re not all smart, book smart, quiet, kind of meek individuals that we are, they’re creatives. We are loud, we are proud, we’re athletic, we are, you know, we are diverse. And we are not held by our preconceived conceptions of what an Asian or what an ISA 00:30:57 individual is.

00:31:00 Eleanor That’s great because, you know, the title of this podcast is *Nasi Goreng* and about nasi goreng and fried rice. So, I would like to, you know, sort of ask you, I know you were in Singapore.

00:31:18 Eric Mhm.

00:31:19 Eleanor So what kind of sort of cuisine would you—

00:31:25 Eric [laughs]

00:31:26 Eleanor —kind of associate most with or, you know, what would you like? I mean, I’m sure you like pizza. Everybody likes pizza.

00:31:33 Eric [laughs] Absolutely.

00:31:34 Eleanor But apart—[laughs] apart from that.

00:31:37 Eric I [sighs]—I mean, my time in Singapore, I loved going to the hawkers. I loved going to the markets. I loved Singaporean food. I still cook it. I still cook chicken rice, satay and bak kut teh 00:31:55 a lot at home. But I think the one, the cuisine that kind of most closely hits with me is Northern Chinese cuisine. My family have roots in Beijing and Xi’an, and Hubei province 00:32:08 province. And it is those fond memories of [inaudible 00:32:14], of dumplings, of—

00:32:19 Eleanor [inaudible 00:32:19].

00:32:20 Eric [inaudible 00:32:20]. All of these very traditional northern dishes that, you know—

00:32:34 Eleanor You don’t mentioned Beijing duck.

00:32:36 Eric [inaudible 00:32:36] yeah. Yes. Peking duck. [chuckles] It used to be one of my favourites as a kid, always had it all the time. But a lot of these dishes, why they’re also so close to home is because growing up in the US even ten, twenty years ago, it was very hard to find specifically Northern Chinese cuisine. And only in the past few years, there’s been a lot of [inaudible 00:32:57] restaurants. There’s been a lot of, Northern Chinese food that’s come out that there’s kind of this resurgence in kind of the west of northern Chinese cuisine. And I’ve—we’ve always, every time there’s a new restaurant, my family, we used to go try it out and go. We would judge the quality of the noodles and judge the quality of the [inaudible 00:33:21] because this was the food that was home for my parents and my grandparents. And for me, this is the food that I most so closely associate with my family, my culture.

00:33:34 Eleanor Yeah. If I can say so I think—

00:33:36 Eric Mhm.

00:33:37 Eleanor —London, it’s not so much recurrent, sort of anything, but the sort of Szechuan—

00:33:47 Eric Yes.

00:33:48 Eleanor —cooking has taken over.

00:33:51 Eric Yes.

00:33:52 Eleanor You know, hot pots everywhere.

00:33:53 Eric Mm.

00:33:54 Eleanor So yeah. I mean, I think that, you know, when somebody says, “Oh, you know, this food is more like food from home.” And I would say, “Well, which home 00:34:06?” [chuckles]

00:34:07 Eric Yes. Which one?

00:34:09 Eleanor You know, which one? Because you know, there’s food from mainland China, and there’s food from Hong Kong. There’s less, you say, food from Singapore, Malaysia, yeah, et cetera.

00:34:21 Eric Yeah.

00:34:20 Eleanor [upbeat electronic music fades in] But thank you very much, Eric. This has been fascinating.

00:34:26 Eric Thank you very much. It’s been a pleasure.

00:34:27 Eleanor Yeah. I hope we continue this conversation another time.

00:34:33 Eric Absolutely.

00:34:33 Eleanor Another place.

00:34:35 Eric [chuckles] Should we get some noodles now? [chuckles]

00:34:37 Eleanor [chuckles] Definitely.

00:34:39 Eric Absolutely. [music fades out]

[End of recording]