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Homecoming 2010, The Memorial Center

Kon Swee Chen: My name is Kon Swee Chen and today is Saturday October 10th, 2010 and my major here was Chemistry. The Organizations I belonged to are Independent Men's Association—I was Vice-President, President, and Treasurer at some point. I was Secretary for Magill Hall and I was a representative in Interhall council. I was also in the student council and Physical Science Club President. [I was voted to be included in Who's Who Among Students in American Universities and College, 1968-1969.] I attended IWU from 1965 to '69.

Steve Burrichter: Then you were going to talk about the—how you came here.

Chen: Okay. The way I came here was kind of a complicated way. I graduated from high school in 1959 and I always wanted to go to college but coming from a family with ten children—and my father was a mining engineer—it was impossible for him to send me to any school anywhere around the world. When I was in Malaysia we used the British system of the Cambridge Exams (something like the SATs except a lot more comprehensive). I took the Cambridge Exams for a whole week in December 1959 and then I got the results in April of 1960. I found out I passed and I was looking for a place to go to college and I applied to all kinds of scholarships and it was very difficult to get because in an undeveloped country like Malaysia, scholarships are given to people who either have a lot of money, which does not make sense, or you have to have a lot of influence. My father did not have either, so I went to work as a teacher and a clerk. Then in 1962 America decided to open up a Fulbright Scholarship Program in Malaysia, so I applied for it towards the end of the year in 1962 and I got a reply saying the Fulbright Scholarship is meant for only graduate students. [I told them that all I needed was some kind of a travel and expense grant so I can come to the U.S. I already had a scholarship from IWU.] We had a missionary pastor in our church and his wife was from Farmer City, Illinois and she said, "There is a nice little Methodist school called Illinois Wesleyan in the central part of Illinois," and her family has put some money for a scholarship there and she told me, "Maybe if she talked to the family members they might be able to divert the funds to me since nobody in the family was using it," and she did that and Illinois Wesleyan offered me the scholarship. But I have to find a way to get from Malaysia to Bloomington and I did not have the funds to do that, so I asked the Fulbright Foundation whether they can do something and they say, "Well, we do not have the authority to do that but somebody in the States who administered the program might be able to do that." And I asked them as to who I can write to for authorization. They told me that anybody who is in politics or in a government that administers the program should be able gain approval. So, coming from a small country, I wrote to the only politician that I know of and the politician was President John F. Kennedy. I wrote President John F. Kennedy a letter and in a couple of weeks the Fulbright Foundation in Malaysia received a letter from the White House saying that, "If this young man is so determined, we should do something about it because that is what the Fulbright Scholarship is about." And so the Fulbright Commission asked me to come in for an interview towards the end of 1963. Unfortunately that was the time when President Kennedy got assassinated and so the office was closed and we had to postpone the interview to 1964. We finally got together and they looked through the details of my case. They told me, "Well, it looks like we might be able to do something," and so they interviewed me and told me that they will get back to me shortly. In about two or three weeks they called me again and they said, "We want to talk to you some more," and so they asked me to come back. I went back and interviewed with them again and then they said, "Well, it looks like you are the kind of person we would like to give the scholarship to," and so he said, "We will make the final decision in a few weeks and then we will let you know and then we'll see when we can get you over there." And so finally about August of 1964 they said, "We have finalized it and we are going to get you the plane tickets and expenses and—for buying books and living expenses and all that—" but then I have to go through the embassy to get all the paperwork and finally in the end of

November of '64 I finally got all the paperwork done and so I embarked the plane and came here. I arrived in Bloomington, Illinois in December of 1964 and started my studies here in January of '65 and that's why I graduated in January, 1969. So I'm actually in between the Class of '68 and '69. I thought I would go and work and get some experience and earn some money and then I found out that because I was a visitor and I was not on a student visa—because under the Fulbright Scholarship you are a visitor and visitors are not allowed to work unless it is part of the studies. I told the Commission that I was not ready to go home yet but that I wanted to go to graduate school. So, after I finished in January of '69, I had to quickly find a graduate school and luckily at that time I already applied to a few and University of Kansas, where the Head of the Department of Chemistry, Dr. Wendell Hess graduated from made me an offer of a research and teaching Fellowship. So, I drove down to Lawrence and started my graduate school and then received my PhD in 1973. And so, in fact, I did not even realize that I was listed in the Fulbright Scholarship until about three years—two and a half years ago my wife went on Google and put my name there just for fun and here it popped up, it says I was the first alumnus of the Malaysian Fulbright Association and so last year when I went back to Malaysia for a visit, I contacted them and they asked me to come in for a visit. They asked me to write something for their newsletter and I gave a couple of talks there and so now I am officially listed as the first Fulbright Scholar from Malaysia and, in fact, I am the one and only time when an undergraduate was given this honor and very few people knew about it because they wanted to kind of keep it quiet and the Dean of Students at that time, Anne Meierhofer, knew about it because she was in constant correspondence with the Fulbright Foundation. And—

Burrichter: That's neat.

Chen: Yeah. Some of the questions here says, "How diverse was IWU when you attended?" I would say at that time it was not very diverse because, first of all, there were only four foreign students when I came and there was no such a thing as International Students Association or even an administrator that was assigned to us. So, Dean Meierhofer, the Dean of Students just took the position of advising the foreign students and actually when I came in January which is kind of in between semester, everything I took in my first year was backwards. I would take Biology 102 before I took 101 and same thing—I would take English 102 before I took 101...[laughs]...and it was a little bit complicated. And IWU, I look at it now, it's changed quite a bit because now I see there are a lot of foreign students. I see now they have an International House of their own and the university's push to get students from other countries. It's there, I can see it, and the campus is a lot more diverse and it's definitely changed a lot because there were—lots of new buildings that are here now that were not here when I was here. In fact, when I was here, the library, which is now going to be torn down, was the newest building and none of the other buildings like the Ames Library or the chapel or the Welcome Center were around. My favorite memory...I met a lot of lifetime friends here and, in fact, married a Wesleyan alum. I did not start going with Su Culver until after I graduated because at that time she was going with somebody else and I didn't want to interfere with their relationship since she was going with another Chemistry major...[laughs]...and so when I found out that they broke up, I started—I came back a couple of times and started dating her and it was a long-distance romance (I was attended Kansas University and she was at IWU) and we were married a year after Su graduated in 1970. We got married in the summer of '71 and we have been married ever since.

[After a brief pause to read other questions on the interview sheet, Chen continues]

Chen: I think IWU should attract more diverse populations especially now that the world is, as this book says, "The world is flat," and there's no such thing left of undeveloped countries or underdeveloped countries because a lot of the so-called third-world countries now are very technologically advanced. In fact, in some areas, they are more advanced than America. Take for example Singapore. The best stem-cell research in the world is done in Singapore because

Singapore decided about twenty-five years ago that because they're a small island with a small population and no natural resource, the only thing they can do is use the human population as their resource and they say, "Well, we want to go into no-chimney industries," where industries can make a lot of money in a very small space, so they decided to go into electronics and, in fact, all the electronic parts you see, they are all made in Singapore in Jurong Industrial Park and then about ten years ago when America decided that we should not go into stem-cell research, Singapore saw an opportunity there, so they invited all the very well-known scientists from all over the world to go there and to put in billions of dollars to attract all the researchers and they are now the world's leaders in stem-cell research where they hope to find a lot of cures for a lot of diseases like cancer and so on.

Burrichter: You were saying when we talked a little while ago that you thought foreign language is a very important thing. You were talking about your grandson as an example of this.

Chen: Yeah, because, in fact, now it is quite recognized that Chinese is the most spoken language in the world because, first of all, everybody in China speaks Mandarin and there's 1.3 billion people there and then, of course, a lot of overseas Chinese people still—all still speak Chinese and so Chinese has become a very important language and, in fact, where I am living now in Fairfield County, Connecticut, most of the high schools have a Chinese Department and, in fact, where my daughters went to school at Brien McMahon High School, they have a Center for Global Studies and this center is funded by the government of China, Taiwan, and Japan and—to teach the language—Japanese language or Chinese language and culture and all the cooking and everything, and the students that come from all over the county—it's a magnet school—and they learn all the different cultures and traditions of those countries. In fact, all the major companies now have got a China Department because they know that China is the next big economic power and so they all want to have some influence in China and what best way to get influence there is to be able to get people over there that speak the language, know the cultures, and so on. And so in Fairfield County, many of the people living there work for corporations and many of them are executives so they want their children to be prepared for the next twenty years or so and so they say, "Well, we should learn something about Chinese and about China," and that's why they all want Chinese to be taught in the schools. In fact, one of the big shortages in Fairfield County is Chinese-speaking teachers, so they have been having a big recruiting push to get teachers from China to come over and teach them proper Mandarin because they want to have mainland Chinese Mandarin and not Taiwanese Mandarin, which is very different. It's just like, you know, say American English and U.K. English and so they want them all to be well-versed with mainland Chinese Mandarin and so that's why they are recruiting a lot of mainland Chinese teachers to try and teach the students proper Mandarin. One of the requirements in this global studies is they have to spend a month in the country where—the foreign language they are learning, so that they can live like the natives.

Burrichter: Anything else you want to say?

Chen: Uh...well I'm very grateful for having a chance to come to Illinois Wesleyan and this is always going to be my home and every time I come back it's like coming back home again and, to me, a lot of the people I met in Wesleyan are like family and I still keep in contact with a lot of the people in my chemistry class. Every year we send Christmas cards to each other, newsletters, and all that.

[Pause for approximately ten seconds]

Burrichter: Thanks.

Chen: Okay...[laughs].