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Full transcript of an interview with

KHAI KHUU

On 22 January 2001

By Catherine Murphy

Recording available on CD

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Interview by Catherine Murphy with Khai Khuu at Adelaide Central Market on 22nd January, 2001, for the Central Market project.

Tape 1 Side A (very noisy recording n Market)

Khai could you begin by telling me the date of your birth and where you were born?

Khai: I was born in Cambodia in 1962.

What part of Cambodia, what is the name of your village?

Khai: It's actually the capital, Phom Phen. In '75 Khmer Rouge evacuates all the city and made all the people go to the provinces and start from nothing.

What province did you go to?

Towards the border with Thailand.

Your family had no ties with that area, you were just sent there?

Yes. They sent us there and we were there for two years and nine months when the Vietnamese people take over Cambodia. Then we come back from there to the capital and we think it's not secure to stay there, so we have to escape to Vietnam in '75. We live there for.....myself, until '86 and I think there's no future there, no education or nothing, so we have to escape again from Vietnam to Thailand to the refugee camp. My parents and sisters were wholesalers for the necessities since 1980 and build up a business, because they will come here. As soon as they came here they try to find a job, but couldn't find a job, because of language problems.

What date did they come?

I think 1988, in October.

Did they come straight to Adelaide.

Yes from Vietnam to Adelaide, but for myself it was from Thailand to Adelaide.

Tell me the name of your parents.

My father's first name is Khiem and his middle name is Duc and surname of course is Khuu. Mum is Lan Chan and surname was Ung.

Your sister?

My sister is Hien.

Is it just you and your sister?

No, I've got another brother, who works at Holdens and another sister works at Greater Union at the moment. They have graduated and been nursing and also in finance. All our education started here. When I started I was about 20 years old. I started with the kids.

Did you go to primary or secondary school?

No, when I started, I wanted to start from year 9, but they said: 'You're too old, you're not allowed to.' So, I said 'What is the minimum level you need to let me get in?' They said 'Year 11 is minimum.' But I can't get into Year 11 because I haven't got any education over there. I said if you don't believe me, I'll sit for test.' Then they said: 'Oh, all right, you have to go and start in Year 10'. I'm not sure I could, but I tried. I worked very hard and got through Year 10 and then go to Year 11 and then Year 12.

What school did you go to?

Initially Thebarton, but the standard is not that high. If I want to go to Uni there is no way. So I have to move to Unley. I studied there for two years and get through and I went to Uni. The course I've just graduated from, so I was happy. But it's very hard work.

Congratulations. Did you have an idea when you came to Adelaide of what kind of work you...what it was like or what kind of work you would do.

I had no idea of those sort of things. I know that of course it's going to be better than Cambodia and Vietnam because we were not P.R. – permanent residents. We were not allowed to go to school. They treated us like refugees and not allow us to go to school. There is no way to get a better job and become. So I decided to escape because that's the only way to get to another country.

When you went to Thailand were you able to get work there?

No, because I was in a refugee's camp in (name of camp?) and we can not get work there at all. But I just went to the Department that worked for all the refugees such as I.C.M. which I think stands for International Committee of Migration. We were there for one

year and then worked at the U.N. office for another year before I come here. It's all volunteer. I learnt some English and also it let the time go by very quickly. Otherwise I would get myself into trouble. That's what a lot of people do because it's too boring, there's nothing to do and it creates a lot of problems. So I just get to my place during the night time and in the day time I work there.

Yeah. So, when you first came to Australia, did your family have any thought about having a stall at the market? How did that happen? Did you talk to other community- - - ?

No, my dad went to- - - my parents planned to get a job, anything they could get. They did not expect anything because they could not speak English and they understand that, so that's why they think they will get whatever they can. They try for two and a half years, or three years, but can't get any job. Every time they go for an interview, they say 'No, you can't speak English.' At the same time we all passed our schooling and they decided to start a business because they had an Asian Grocery in Phom Phen and necessities wholesaler. They had that experience and that was the only way they can get any job. So they're looking around to find anything as cheap as possible to start a business. At that time there was a New World Asian Grocery at the corner of Western Roadway and the Arcade, which is where we are at the moment. They.(it was cheap?) because they didn't know how to do it or whatever reason. So we start the business there. They work very hard at the beginning, they have to worry because nobody's there – no customer, nothing. A lot of people go through the Market, but nobody was shopping there.

What have you done to change that?

We change it but how we are going to change it is a very long story. I did a lot of thinking and begin to understand the people, the customers and what they like. We just work to suit the customer instead of suit ourselves.

How did you do that? Did you talk to people or- - -?

Sometimes we talk and sometimes I listen to people and sometimes people come to our shop and complain about this or complain about that, so we take that into consideration and make sure they're happy when they come in. One day my dad says: "Why don't people want this product, it's good." I talked to some customers who said that people don't know how to use it, so what's the point of coming to buy it. So, from then, we started to plan what sort of things we can take in and what sort of service and other things and explain all these things to them and they can try it.

Tell me an example of that? What sorts of recipes were people asking you about?

Yeah, people would walk in with the idea of doing something with Asian food. We ask: 'What sort of thing do you like?' but they have no idea, do you like hot and spicy or little bit milder or little bit of soup or stir fry, this sort of thing and then they choose one. For instance for a little bit of hot, spicy taste, they want laksa. So I tell them what is different in the individual brands, what is good and in what way. Because all of them have one advantage over the other.

Are these Aussies, or are they Germans or are they Italians?

Multicultural. At the beginning I think Anglo-Saxon to start with and then Italian, Australian and then Greek and German, everything.

Because Aussies are a multicultural mob any way aren't they?

That's right. They have too much of their food and want to try a new cooking.

Who would tell them all this stuff? Would you and your sister tell them?

At the beginning, yes, because my parents know that, but they can't explain it. So, on the weekend, and after school, or Friday evening or Saturday, when we haven't got school, we come here and introduce to people, the sort of food we sell. Then customers try it and think it's good and then they come back and then they spread it to others and then everybody come in and ask for this and ask for that. One day one of the customers brings a book with pictures of a few things in there and they have no clue what it is about and come in to the counter, but don't know what size, what colour or anything at all. They walk in and ask: 'I want to do this, but I don't know how to get started.' I say: 'Oh, let me try to help you' and then they'll see what sort of ingredients in that recipe, because the recipe already tells them quantity and how to cook it, but their problem is they don't know how to start to get the ingredients.

Why did they want to cook this?

In terms of health, they ask themselves: 'Why are all the Asian people so thin and none of them is overweight?' They are told by some nutritionist that because the Asian diet is very high in fibre and rice and so they try it. Some of our customers have regular Asian food because they are on diets.

I see you stock all kinds of things in there. Italian brand as well as Asian brand. Tell me about the sorts of things you stock and where you get them from and whether you import much, or you get locally? How does it go?

The majority of our stock range is Asian because of the convenience of the customer, we just stock some item that are Italian because a lot of people ask for it. It's not our major range, which is Asian.

When you say Asian, what countries does that cover?

It's Taiwan, Indian, Philippine, South-East Asian, Hong Kong, Chinese, that sort of thing.

Are most of your customers Asians?

No. They're Aussies. I think it's about 90-95% is Aussie.

You've done a good marketing job!

Because to bring up the business, we have to understand the customer.

You changed the presentation of the shop and the way the food is presented inside the supermarket and also outside?

We have renovated three times since we took over in '93 because we think we need to do so in order to attract more people, more customers and how they're going to find things on the shelves, that sort of thing.

I like the way it looks a bit Asian out the front with the vegetables.

Initially my thinking was to try to move towards the supermarket trend, but I asked opinion from the Management about what they think and they said: 'It's better not to move toward the supermarket trend, because over here is the Market, not the supermarket, which is different. So, I say: 'All right' and I renovate the shop, but in the Market terms, not to make it too hygienic, or whatever it is (sterile) but it's to look like a market, not a supermarket.

You're not going up-market! (laughs)

No. And our food we try not to get direct from overseas, we get from importers, because if we want to import ourselves, there's no way we can import everything, the whole range there. The other day I counted up to almost 10,000 items.

That's the packages, tins and all of that?

Yes, it's a lot and if we were to import ourselves, there is no way, so we have to get from importer.

Are they local or interstate?

Interstate, local, yes. Sydney, Perth, Melbourne.

Are there many Asian suppliers locally? We were talking about Sam Wah and I think they've closing, but- - -

They are not closing, but just supply the bean curd or the noodles. They have 10 items in our shop, so you can see how many suppliers we have to go through in order to collect the whole range, the variety. If we don't have that sort of variety, people wouldn't come here. Because if I want to go there, make sure everything's there, so they have one-stop shopping.

Tell me about the growers

Some of them we have to get it from interstate, because the weather here is not suitable for the product such as okra, mango and long..... need a tropical climate. In South Australia, there's no way to grow them. Our produce which is locally grown is all the herbs such as parsley, dill, coriander and basil. Some of the year we have to get basil from interstate, it doesn't grow here. And the bok choy and choy sam is grown here. Chinese spinach, Chinese broccoli are grown here. Normally we've got two growers who supply to us.

You said you've got an Italian grower who supplies you, or Vietnamese grower?

Yes and Chinese people down south and they supply us with Chinese green leaf and we think that is not enough. We make sure of the continuity of produce that we sell and that it is fresh daily, so we have to get two or three growers, because one grower doesn't have good produce- - -

Do you go to Pooraka, or do you just deal directly with those people?

Pooraka, very little. In order to get the freshness of the produce we deal directly with the growers. At Pooraka there is the grower, then to Pooraka and then it passes to us. It's costly and the freshness is reduced as well. If we deal direct, they come in daily.

So your growers bring your produce here. That's the old fashioned way.

Yes, that's right. One of my customers asked: "How can we keep your produce in the fridge more than a week, but when we bought it from somewhere else it only kept two or three days?" Our produce would keep one week to ten days in the fridge. If the grower picks today, it would be here tomorrow, so it's still got ten days life in the fridge. Because the produce is very good for diet and people just buy more and more.

You used to have an old lady to come and stack up the produce? Or is that your mum?

Yes. She just orders what we need for the day.

She handles the garden produce does she?

Yes, the majority but I make sure she does not over-work or anything.

What's it like being part of the community? I notice you went to that meeting of stallholders the other day and you were the only Asian face there. I thought that was really good that you were taking part in that community meeting. Do you feel part of that?

No. I think they've still got some sort of traditional thinking in terms of Asian. So, I just go there and understand what is the situation for my business.

It's good that you do because a lot of people wouldn't do that.

That's only for my own understanding and my own decision in the market and what sort of information I need in order to stay there, to operate. For me, I don't say much, because they wouldn't listen.

No, but in the future would it your goal to participate more if people could be more accepting?

If they're accepting- - - For me, because I have been through many countries, for me it's more open. I can see the sort of thinking they have.

You're a newcomer.

Yeah.

But it takes a while, doesn't it. It might be one or two generations before there's full acceptance of people, or trust, that sort of thing.

Yeah. In the Market so far I've tried to suggest something, but nobody would listen.

But I might try to suggest something too, but they wouldn't listen to me because I'm a woman!

That could be true as well! (laughs)

You would keep trying to participate? Would that be a goal for you, to be part of things more? Or doesn't it matter?

It doesn't matter or me. If they accept, they accept. If they don't accept, it's up to them, but for me, as a community member of the Market, my idea is to do it right and as part of the Market, there is my own principle.

What does the Market mean to you?

The Market is some sort of traditional way of selling produce and products. It's not like a supermarket. You can go into the supermarket and not know anything and you can't ask any people.

It's not personal.

No. A Market has the personal touch.

It's face to face with the customer.

Yeah.

What do you think makes the difference for acceptance with the customer? What's made the difference for your family with acceptance by the customers who are largely Anglo-Saxons.

I don't know. We just try- - - - -

They like your produce. You can be open?

I don't know how they accept, but probably some sort of friendly thing. We would not treat them somehow different, but Australia is multicultural, so we just treat everybody the same.

You're the first person who has agreed to talk to me from the Asian communities. People say 'no' because it's too hard or too different.

That's right. It's too different for a lot of people because they come here just to live and whatever they do is up to them.

Because they've been through a lot.

Yeah. They probably have a bit of isolated thinking as well. They think if they don't accept us, we'll sit in this corner and they'll see this is the way of Asian people. Even they go to the manufacturing field, they have the same sort of thinking. The man he comes in and tells you what to do, then do it. You don't do anything. That's why they like Asian people working in factories, because they don't argue much, especially for the conditions of working.

What do you like best about Australia?

I think it's a very peaceful country. In living and the opportunities are a lot better than other countries in the world.

What about the future of the Market? Do you want to see it change or do you want it to be the same?

The future of the Market for myself, I think to stay where they are. The atmosphere of the Market. A lot of traders resent the thinking that management wants to change it like a supermarket. The reason why all the traders think that management want to change it into a shopping centre is the way they treat stallholders. They do *not* understand how many kinds of businesses there are in the Market. I went through the Memo this morning and there were 83 individual leases, so at least 50 different nature of the businesses operate in the Market. These businesses have different needs, but the management can't understand that. They think like a supermarket or shopping centre, one rule for everybody.

So difference is good, isn't it. It's very appealing to the customers and people come here for that difference.

Everything is different and everybody is an individual. Stallholders have their own way of operating, their system, not like a supermarket.

Would the Market shop that you and your family have, would that be something that you would want to pass onto children if you had them?

I have tried to learn what they have done and from there to find a better way to operate in the Market and keep the business growing. I would like to continue in the business where it is, but unfortunately there is something that disappointed us.

What?

Because the management wouldn't understand- - -

Tape 1 Side B

Could you just say that again. What is that management didn't understand?

They don't understand the nature of the business as an Asian Grocery in the Market.

What do they make it hard for you to do?

They don't understand what sort of needs we have.

Display on the footpath?

No. We need some sort of facility in order to provide better service, but the management wouldn't understand.

What sort of facility?

That is a temporary stall and that sort of thing for fresh produce. But the management wouldn't understand that, they said: 'How come the rest of the stalls don't need that while you have to be different from the rest?' Because we are the only one in the Market that's what they can- - - If there is two Asian groceries in the Market, then in order to keep up the demand for the customer, they all require the same thing.

What about the one down the end there, the Asian Kitchen and the Kuo Chee? Do you communicate with them?

Sometime yes and sometime no.

Are you in competition with them?

Yes sometime we try to compete with the rest of the Asian Grocery, but their decision and their facility is there- - - - like at my place, if people want to buy bulk product from us, we can't supply them because 'no standing' facility for the customer- - -

Like a Chinese restaurant or something like that?

Yes, normally we can't supply in bulk a lot because we haven't got facility there to serve them. If they want say, 5 cartons of the coconut milk, they have to bring the car next to our shop somehow, then we have to talk to them.

So it's a loading thing. I think that is an issue for some of the other stallholders too.

Yes. But management wouldn't understand that to provide the facility of a loading zone for the customer, this sort of thing. One of the stallholders talked to me the other day and there cabbage is about \$1 cheaper than the rest of the place. So a customer orders 25 or 30 on a Monday and nobody is here and they brought the car next to the stall to load and the parking inspector came in and gave him a ticket for \$35. So it ends up being dearer than the rest and providing they get a hassle when they come to the market, so they say what is the point of coming to the market to get produce, which appears to be cheaper, but ends up costing more.

That is the way they don't understand and think there can be one rule for everybody. Nobody is an exception. We are not a supermarket, we are a market, so individual businesses have individual needs.

Is there anything else about the Market you could tell me or you think about?

I think the Market- - - other than the multicultural thing it's an opportunity to change their diet. When they come to the Market they see a lot of things that are different and then they try it and the nutritional aspects they hear on the media about Asian cooking. I think it's going to change the way they're eating and Asian food is low in fat. A lot of people don't feel very comfortable when they go to the shopping centre and they feel more comfortable in the Market because everybody is friendly and everybody is here coming from different countries and they feel like they're participating rather than isolated. They are the main things about the Market.

Thank you very much for talking to me today Khai. I appreciate it.

Thank you.