

3-28-1989

Interview with Detthaxay Chanthalangsy (FA 83)

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[Summary]

Name of Oral History Project: Southeast Asians in Bowling Green

Tape # 1

Name of narrator: Detthaxay Chanthalangsy

Address: 204 East 11th Street
Bowling Green, Kentucky 42101

Name of interviewer: Greg Jenkins

Date of interview: 28 March 1989

Place of interview: Refugee Assistance Center
603 East 11th Street Bowling Green, Kentucky

Equipment used: Realistic personal cassette

Tape used: Ampex C-60; Amount (side 1) 30 min; (side 2) 15 min

Summary description of context and contents:

The interview took place in a small office in the center. Dett seemed please to do the interview, but had trouble conveying certain practices that took place during his wedding. He mentioned several times that his culture is very different than that in the United States. The tape consists mostly of narration about his wedding which took place in Bridgeport, Connecticut. He also contrasts his wedding to a typical American wedding.

JENKINS: This is Greg Jenkins. I am here at the Refugee Replacement Center on Chestnut and Eleventh. And I am speaking with Dett ...?

CHANTHALANGSY: Dett.

JENKINS: Dett. What is your last name?

CHANTHALANGSY: Chanthalangsy.

JENKINS: [pronounces] Chanthalangsy. And you are from Laos?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes.

JENKINS: Where in Laos are you from?

CHANTHALANGSY: Ah, Vietiane. The capital of Laos.

JENKINS: What were you doing before you came here?

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CHANTHALANGSY: Ah, I was a soldier in the military.

JENKINS: Okay. I just want to ask you. You got married-- You came over a year ago?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes, a year.

JENKINS: One year?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes, one year.

JENKINS: And then you were living where?

CHANTHALANGSY: In Bowling Green.

JENKINS: Oh, in Bowling Green. When you first came over you lived in Bowling Green?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes.

JENKINS: You ended up going up to Connecticut, Right? What did you do there?

CHANTHALANGSY: Because, my wife, she had like-- her sister, her cousins are over there. My cousins are over there. And we, two, her drove over there. We went to set up our marriage, because if we make a wedding celebration, but we do not have costumes. We cannot do; we don't have Evedia. And we do not have Evedia; and we don't have Weiness.

JENKINS: How do you spell that?

CHANTHALANGSY: Evedia? You know Evedia?

JENKINS: What is that?

CHANTHALANGSY: Evedia? Like people, both sides, we have people, their own witness. We have, right. After that we cannot make a decision by ourself, myself. But first, me and my cousins are going to talk with my wife's cousin. What are we going to do? How much are we going to pay money? And after that, they ask me? "Detthaxay, do you love each other?" Like that. Yes, I say yes. If you say yes, you are going to pay money. Because our culture is different. It is very strict.

JENKINS: [confusion over word] Your what, courtship?

CHANTHALANGSY: [Dett clarifies by stating his religion, which means that he probably stated "culture" in the last statement.] It is Buddhist.

JENKINS: Oh, so you had a Buddhist family?

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CHANTHALANGSY: Yes, that is right.

JENKINS: When you first met her--

CHANTHALANGSY: In Bowling Green.

JENKINS: You met her-- What is her name?

CHANTHALANGSY: Veuy.

JENKINS: How do you spell her name?

CHANTHALANGSY: V.E.U.Y.

JENKINS: [Repeats, Veuy.] You met her here? You ended up going north?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes.

JENKINS: How did you come and say-- What would you say to her if you wanted to marry her? Say if you wanted to marry someone, how would you approach her, the girl?

CHANTHALANGSY: It is not different, because man and woman, like American people. If you like-- If you love-- We have something, it is not hard. We can say, suppose you love that girl you can confess. I love you. After that I ask her if she loves me. It is easy to ask; it is no trouble.

JENKINS: And does that imply that you want to be married?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes.

JENKINS: So, what day was this? What day of the year did you ask her?

CHANTHALANGSY: Oh, before December, before January. I make the decision myself. Because, she came here with her sister, you know. And her sister ask me, "If you okay, yes." "Yes, okay," I say like that. It was no trouble.

JENKINS: How long did you know her before?

CHANTHALANGSY: No, just when we came here; when I know her. But we stay close; we have love, like have people. Like that.

JENKINS: Okay. So, that happened in December. When did you go to Connecticut to get married? [Repeats last sentence.]

CHANTHALANGSY: Oh, January-- No. December, later. December twentieth I went up there. And I've been there two weeks. And

we discussed both side.

JENKINS: [Confusion over the pronunciation of "both side".]
Both sides?

CHANTHALANGSY: Both side. You know, how it is my cousin, her
cousin talk together.

JENKINS: Cast?

CHANTHALANGSY: Discuss, you know, this cousin. Going to make a
decision. We invited the people, that come to join my wedding
celebration.

JENKINS: What-- How long did it take place, the celebration?

CHANTHALANGSY: In the morning we have-- we set up, we arrange
the time. Nine o'clock is the good time. Like--

JENKINS: At night?

CHANTHALANGSY: No, in evening. No, in morning. After that the
people come; and white people come to join our celebration.
People came in, dressing. Like that. After that we finish, and
we eat.

JENKINS: Okay, was it a Buddhist ceremony, a marriage ceremony?
Or was it like an American....

CHANTHALANGSY: No, we Buddhist, like religion only. When we
marriage-- like the monk. No, he does not come to join. But our
culture we do it that way.

JENKINS: Why did you not do it this way? Here.

CHANTHALANGSY: Because, old women and old man-- you know they
came to the United States-- we don't forget our culture,
whatever. It is long time; it is one thousand years going. And
we have respect, we cannot cut it off. We try to keep our
culture.

JENKINS: But you had a regular American wedding?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes, in my way, that is right; in my option. But
I can not do; it is the old man. It is dependent on the old man
and the old woman. And we cannot forget it. We can not pick up
like American culture, so fast. But we try.

JENKINS: Say if you would have gotten married at home, what
would you have done? From the first day, what do you do? You
know what I am saying?

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CHANTHALANGSY: But first after both sides, like my cousins and her cousins, we agree

JENKINS: Your cousins agree that you should be married?

CHANTHALANGSY: Right.

JENKINS: Is that always like that, or just with you? [Repeats]

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes always.

JENKINS: Everyone who gets married, their cousins

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes, Yes. If you are going to marry Laos people. Your daddy and mom come to talk-- her daddy, her mom and her cousin. And after that how much do we spend money, for, like we are going to buy food. We buy [inaudible], like a soft drink. Like in our culture a lot of people come to eat; and embracing for that day. Because it is a good day to decide to marry. Like American way. Because we came together, and then we bought food. And then we arranged the time.

JENKINS: [confused over last sentence, states] You had lunch?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes.

JENKINS: Before the wedding?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes, that's right.

JENKINS: Then you and your wife can see each other?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes.

JENKINS: So, you have a big lunch? Is it just for friends, or for family?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes, for friends. We invite maybe one hundred people. If you have enough money to buy a lot of food. It depends on you. Even if white people come to eat and to know you, when you marry. It is that way why we can do that. Because, it is one time only we marry, not two times. We need the people to come and know. We marry, we invited my cousins, my friends anywhere. Let them know.

JENKINS: Okay, so the day of the marriage, you have a big meal, right? Then after the meal what do you do?

CHANTHALANGSY: Nothing.

JENKINS: Nothing? So, that is the marriage?

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CHANTHALANGSY: Yes.

JENKINS: Oh, that is the marriage. The marriage is the meal?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes.

JENKINS: What ceremony do-- Do you go through any ceremony while you are eating or before?

CHANTHALANGSY: No. Like I said we have band. If you have too much money-- like, we have a band. Like, we will arrange someplace. You know, like [inaudible] if you have enough money, then we have dancing, Laos dancing. What ever we can do, but we do not have traditional dancing. But, we have band, if you have a lot of money you can lend to music band can come to play.

JENKINS: But at yours what did you have? Food--?

CHANTHALANGSY: Food and band. My cousins' band come to help me at that time. [Phone rings] A lot of people came. They came up and saw that I would have money. [Phone rings] I spent a lot of money. Maybe two thousand people, but maybe two thousand and five hundred. But, you know, people came and they shared the money for me. Like if you come to my party, you spend money for me. My friend over there-- a lot of people; like Massachusetts, like Connecticut. My friends come to Massachusetts before-- I make a decision to marry in [inaudible] Connecticut. I have a lot of cousins over there, like in Massachusetts. They came and spent for me because I don't enough money. That's right.

JENKINS: So, you didn't have to exchange vows?

CHANTHALANGSY: No.

JENKINS: Do you know what I'm saying?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes.

JENKINS: So, you do not sign anything?

CHANTHALANGSY: No, I--

JENKINS: How do you make the bond that you two are married? Just the meal?

CHANTHALANGSY: No, we have-- the old man-- my daddy, my uncle and my aunt. We had a table, thirty feet. You know, and man is my witness, on my side, both sides. How many people, like you confirm me; if this man is my uncle's son. I need you if you want me to come sign this paper, because we confess, you know, both sides. If I need a divorce, or separate. Sometime I am angry to my wife, it is not reason. And my wife complain to my

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father or-- everything she can-- she has a way to complain. And after that, like I go away and I didn't come back to stay with her and my wife complain, and they tell me to go to both sides. My wife's cousin, and they talk: "Why do you go out, why do you do that." It is our way like that. But we do not have the court, like American people.

JENKINS: So what did you do when you got married? When did you sign this paper, before the lunch?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes, after the announcement of people that came. But went after, we have, you know, base. It is different way. You know base? We have something we make. I don't know how to tell you.

JENKINS: What is it? [Pronounces] Base. How do you spell it.

CHANTHALANGSY: Base. It is base, we call it.

JENKINS: What is it, a big--

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes it is big. You know, me and my wife. My wife, she sat on my left hand [side]. You know, man is always in my culture, sits on the right hand. And after that we have old man come to embracing, you know like in American way. The master, he comes to read, and you going to marry. After that we have to sign a paper. If we decide no way.

JENKINS: So, you have someone to read, while you are standing?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes, like my uncle, he reads this paper. An announcement for the people, my friends, that come to join my wedding.

JENKINS: What's on the paper? [Repeats]

CHANTHALANGSY: What's on the paper, is meaning that me and my wife stay together. Everybody knows, for Laotian; but American people they don't know. Yes, for our culture it is a different way. We don't have license yet. But my way we have, yes, we have; the people know you, it is okay. That is good.

JENKINS: Where are the people, behind you, or in front of you?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes, the people sit down, around me. At that time, like me I sit like that, I need the blessings from the old man. My wife sits down there behind me. The people sit down around. You never seen before like that?

JENKINS: No.

CHANTHALANGSY: Okay, I don't know how to tell you too much.

JENKINS: So, after you read the paper to the people, your friends, right?

CHANTHALANGSY: Right.

JENKINS: Then, she reads the other side?

CHANTHALANGSY: No.

JENKINS: No, you just read?

CHANTHALANGSY: No, my uncle; nobody, me and my wife cannot read. Just the old man. And the old man come to decide who is the confess, who is the confirm for the man, who is the confirm for the women. Like if it's my neice, I sign for niece. If I need to divorce, I might talk with her cousin first. That is my way. That is our culture do that. Everthing we have done in the United States; we can not change this. After that if you need to go to court it is up to us, the trouble. Because both sides they know, they have known us; we marry each other.

JENKINS: [Confusion over his pronouncation of "both sides". It sounds like "botsid".] What is the both side.

CHANTHALANGSY: [He clarifies.] You know, both sides mean--

JENKINS: Oh, "both sides." What is base? What is that?

CHANTHALANGSY: I don't know how to tell you, it is hard.

JENKINS: Is it a sculpture?

CHANTHALANGSY: No, sculpture.

JENKINS: What is it?

CHANTHALANGSY: You know, we take bannana leaf. We put a flower and a cotton string. People come to join my ceremony. They take the string and they tie my arm, somebody has money, and they tie the money; and they put the string around my arm. We do that.

JENKINS: Where is this? Where is it in the room? Where is the base in the room? Where do you put it?

CHANTHALANGSY: You put it in the middle of the room.

JENKINS: In the middle. And it is just a bannana leaf with string. Tied to a pole? So, he takes the bannana leaf and keeps the string.

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes.

JENKINS: And ties it to your wrist?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes, it is our way.

JENKINS: What does it symbolize, what does it mean?

CHANTHALANGSY: It symbolizes, means; I don't know how to explain. It is maybe a five hundred generations we have done before. But not one hundred, but five hundred years ago. I don't know how to--

JENKINS: You don't know?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes, but I don't know--

JENKINS: Is it religious?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes.

JENKINS: Does it symbolize good luck?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes, that is right, good luck.

JENKINS: It is good luck?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes, anyway I need to show you the Laos movie in here.

JENKINS: What?

CHANTHALANGSY: You know, Laos movie, we have our culture. And have two men marry women. We have something put in front of me and my wife like that.

JENKINS: A base?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes, a base. If you see; you will see in our culture we have something to put in front. Wife and husband can stay together, sit down together. The old man will talk.

JENKINS: What did you do after the wedding? You had the meal, then the wedding. What did you do after you signed the form, the paper.

CHANTHALANGSY: The paper? After that we finished our celebration, then we eat. Then after we eat, we dance. We had a speaker on the band, an announcement of people, you know like "Laos move Laos." And we invite the people to join; for the first marriage for me. People come to join, like make me lucky. Yes, we have dancing.

JENKINS: How long does it go on?

CHANTHALANGSY: Generally, it depends on my people. Sometime we bought beer and whiskey, maybe twelve o'clock at night. Maybe longer.

JENKINS: Would you have drinks in Laos?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes, that's right.

JENKINS: What would you have drunk in Laos?

CHANTHALANGSY: Like beer, Laotian beer.

JENKINS: So, then you dance? So, what would you do the next day?

CHANTHANLANGSY: The next day we rest. We are tired because of partying; we have to wash, whatever we have done. Rest. We head home.

JENKINS: How do you embrace each others parents?

CHANTHANLANGSY: No, one thing, one reason. It is different American way; it is different American culture.

JENKINS: Tell me yours.

CHANTHALANGSY: Because, like you and me cannot live together before we marry. Before the own women, before the own man-- you know, both sides. If you do that, it is the wrong way. It is not American way. We are still Laotian, you know. We are not American people, you know. If you need to go alone by yourself, like if you have girlfriend, you cannot go by yourself. No, we stay in touch. No, it is different in Vietnam. It is different country; it is different culture. You cannot go by yourself with your girlfriend. Before you go you might let the parent know where you go. But some people they have to do like that, you know. But on most, we cannot protect them. Like some people they get pregnant before they get married. Yes, we have the same as in the United States. But almost, the people we do not like-- you know the Buddhist statement is protection. The man and women can go together anywhere and any time before you marry. But some people have diamond, yes I understand. That way they have done before in our country. But it is very strictly Buddhist, because we don't have the law. We use religion as a protection for man and women. It is that way in my country.

JENKINS: So, the next day you just sleep?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes.

JENKINS: So, that is the end of your marriage?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes. I sleep, like everyone. It depends on me. We have to do something else. It depends on me.

JENKINS: What do you like most about the wedding?

CHANTHALANGSY: The most wedding, I like it like we keep all of our culture. We show up for the people; the first generation born in the United States; we didn't lose our culture. It is my respect, it is too hard in my mind. Because we don't like to lose our culture, like that. We-- It is very much in my mind and my people. Some teenager come up and enjoy my wedding. They saw my wedding ceremony; I was very happy. Because when we dress it is different. When we marry, we do not dress in suits, like Americans. We have salon.

JENKINS: What? How do you spell that?

CHANTHALANGSY: S.A.L.O.N. Salon, like a skirt. The man wears it that way.

JENKINS: What does the women wear?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes, it is the same.

JENKINS: What do they look like?

CHANTHALANGSY: Like a skirt, but too long, not short.

JENKINS: What color?

CHANTHALANGSY: I don't know what color; It is up to you.

JENKINS: Who makes them?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes, it is made from my country.

JENKINS: Do you buy them?

CHANTHALANGSY: No, a lot of Laotian when they come here they carry with themselves. Even my wife, she had two. Yes.

JENKINS: You only wear this when you get married?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes, that is right.

JENKINS: Do you pass it on to your son?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes, we keep it a long time. You cannot lose it.

JENKINS: How long have-- how old is yours, that you have?

CHANTHALANGSY: Ah, you know, maybe, I do not know, because my cousin he had it.

JENKINS: So, you do not necessarily pass-- give them to your kids.

CHANTHALANGSY: No, I just borrowed from him. I do not have. Yes, but they carry with themselves. I do not have anything.

JENKINS: Do you wear that the whole day?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes-- No, not the whole day, but after we finish the ceremony, I take it off. I put on my pants, after that.

JENKINS: Do you have any special top?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes, we have a white shirt. We wear it all the time, we show up [inaudible]-- my wife; it is the same color. You know we put in white; when other people show up.

JENKINS: Does your wife wear one too?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes.

JENKINS: So you wear the same clothes?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes.

[Long pause]

CHANTHALANGSY: What else?

JENKINS: What else? I am not sure, hold on? How old are you?

CHANTHALANGSY: Forty-one or Forty-two.

JENKINS: Forty-two?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes, forty-two years old.

JENKINS: You look young.

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes.

JENKINS: How old is your wife?

CHANTHALANGSY: Eighteen years.

JENKINS: And you are living in Bowling Green now? Do you have

work?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes.

JENKINS: Where do you work?

CHANTHALANGSY: I work at the bank. One thing I need to know why American people; they need Laotian; and do license like that. It is big trouble for the people.

JENKINS: Really?

CHANTHALANGSY: It interest me very much in my mind. Why do people-- like we marry; "Why do you not go to the court." I know that way; anyway I thought the people talk. "Oh, you go to the church, or you go to the court. What happened." That is interesting to us. It is very important in my mind. It is that way. Most of the people like to go to the court and make license. Yes, I do not know.

JENKINS: Do you believe it does not bring you-- Why do not you believe in that?

CHANTHALANGSY: No we do not believe. We do not go; but I try to go, maybe I will go this year.

JENKINS: Is there anything you want to tell me about getting married.

CHANTHALANGSY: No, I do not have anything to tell you.

JENKINS: Well it is important.

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes, but one thing-- we came here with ourself; it is important. Like some people came here; the situation between American and Laotian. We try to become American citizen, but first thing we never forgot life. We have respect. I have respect for my Buddhism; but we came here and we can not change. But we know we will pick up some style, some other American ways. That is the best way for us to do, but we try. But we cannot change in a year, we can not pick it up. And we are too old, not too young. We were not born in the United States that way. Because of respect-- but it is conflicting among children when they came here four years or six years. It is not good enough. And after that they grow up. The parents confuse their children; when they are suppose to go to high school. But American way; the kids are embarrassed in high school.

JENKINS: They are embarrassed?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes. It makes the parents feel bad. Because Laotian, or Cambodian, or Vietnamese they have boyfriend,

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American boyfriend. And they need to go to someplace where they do not have permission from the parents. And the parents are really angry in the mind, but we cannot say. Because the law has taught us in the school. If you hit your daughter or your son, your daughter has the right to call emergency, like police come to capture or arrest. Then-- Now we have conflicting now. You see. Any state for the Laos culture. We can not say because we are afraid. We are scared.

JENKINS: You do not have children do you?

CHANTHALANGSY: No, not yet? Anyway we try? We know the law and the rules and regulations of the United States. It is a different way.

JENKINS: They will not-- It is nothing for you to worry about.

CHANTHALANGSY: No, but people, but some they worry, because, why we worry to much. Like I told you. Some people they have daughters, two daughters that go to Bowling Green high school. They pick up American style, American way. Like a teenager go to dances. The daddy and mom cannot say anything; Why? My friend he lives in Nashville. His daughter went to college, and he got in trouble. He cannot teach his daughter, because his daughter is a highly educated. He told me that last weekend he went to pick up her. And I met him and he discussed about his daughter. His daughter came up and sat down behind me. We do not forget our culture, forever. Yes, she told me, "Dett, I know." But how come when-- she said, "When I went to school and you-- I might do the same thing as they do."

JENKINS: Are you scared that maybe your daughter or son may not get married the same way as you. And Buddhism--

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes, we will carry on.

JENKINS: Do you think they will be Buddhist?

CHANTHALANGSY: Yes. Because anywhere, any state. Yes, because Laotian-- if they decide to marry, we have done that way. But some people believe in Christianity; they might go to church. We have to do it two ways. Because it is necessary if we do not go to the church. If we do not have the people to help, some people will decide to go to the church and they marry sometime in the church. And after that-- the second way. We have to do our culture again. Even if we do it in the church, like there is an easy way to understand. But we need the people to come and eat. Like the people need to show how rich you are. You know, people like that they have done that in the United States. Yes. I do not know. It is a different way.

JENKINS: How would you notify all your friends; how far in

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advance would you tell them to come?

CHANTHALANGSY: No. But when I went to Connecticut. I know my cousins, they stay over there too much. If I would have stayed in Bowling Green no one would have come. If I arranged my wedding here; I have no cousins, nobody to help me.

End of Side One.