

CITY OF SYDNEY

MEALS ON WHEELS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

TRANSCRIPT*

Name: YILI GU (Also known as ELY KOO)

Date: 22 March 2007

Place: Redfern

Interviewer: Margo Beasley

Duplicates: Master CD held in CoS Archives
Reference CD and paper copy of transcript
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*NB: Transcripts and audio files may have been slightly edited for reasons of privacy and coherence. In some cases transcripts may differ slightly from audio because of corrections made at the request of interviewees.

SUMMARY

Mr Yili Gu, who is known to his Australian friends as Ely Koo (a nickname given to him by his father), immigrated to Australia from China with his wife in 1996. He agreed to do this interview in English although it is not his first language. Ely Koo has been volunteering for Meals on Wheels (MoW) since 2000 but his background is very different to that of most MoW volunteers. He and his wife came to Australia in the wake of their youngest daughter who was studying here and permitted to stay permanently after the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989. In China Ely Koo was a civil engineer, and thus an 'intellectual', and found it very difficult to gain employment during the years of the Cultural Revolution. He is very happy in Australia but felt his life was somewhat 'empty', that he needed something to do with his time, and that he wanted to help society. A social worker suggested MoW and Ely Koo has been a runner for two or three days a week ever since. He is a strong man who appreciates the exercise he gains from climbing the stairs when lifts break down in high rise buildings. Ely Koo is very fond of his MoW clients and often helps them with small chores such as removing rubbish and posting letters. He also uses the opportunity to practise his English with both clients and with MoW drivers. They often elucidate some of strange examples of Australian English such as 'piece of cake', 'out of the blue', 'muggy' and 'possie'. They have also explained the meaning of street banners promoting Mardi Gras. Ely Koo describes himself now as a 'dinky-dy Aussie at heart.'

TRANSCRIPT

This is an interview with Mr Gu Yili and it's taking place at his home in Moorhead Street, Redfern. It's part of the Meals on Wheels Oral History Project that's being conducted through the History Programme of the City of Sydney and it's Margo Beasley interviewing. The date is the 22nd of March, 2007.

So, the first, Ely, I think is if I could ask you to tell me your name and then also tell me your name the way that Australians say it.

Oh, my name is Yili Gu. My name, how I spelling it, my name Yili Gu, Y-I-L-I, G-U, but this is after 1949 this is my name in my country but when I was young my father gave me the name is Ely Koo, E-L-Y, K-O-O, Ely Koo.

And you're referring to 1949, I think, because of the Revolution in China, aren't you?

Yes.

So, why did your father give you a different name?

Oh, it's because it's the Revolution, because my father still worked in the foreign company, English company in his whole life from he was very young. He was very young, I think about – my father told me it is he worked from about twenty years old he worked in the English company, round about

Why then did he say your name is Ely Koo, why did he give you this other name?

Oh, I don't know (laughs) because I was very young.

Because he liked it?

Yes.

Is it like a nickname?

Yeas, nickname. He gave the name – my sister name is Lily Koo, L-I-L-Y, Lily Koo, K-O-O. So, he gave my name as Ely Koo, yes, it is, yes.

That's a nice story.

Yes.

You've mentioned that you came here from China, you were born in China.

M'mm.

Can you tell me what year and where in China you were born?

Oh, I born in China – the city is Shanghai. I born in Shanghai in 1933, January 10th, and I study in China. I studied in China – oh, in Shanghai, yes, I study in Shanghai.

What did you study?

Study in the primary school and secondary school and technical college, yes, it's all, yes.

I think you were an engineer in China. Is that correct?

Yes, I am the civil engineer in China, in Canton, because I graduated in 1954. I graduated from Shanghai, then I go to the Canton because I like the warm weather.

Is that right?

Yes, because Shanghai, in winter it's very cold, yeah. I like the warm weather so I go, I went to Canton.

And you worked there as a civil engineer?

Yeah, yeah, yeah, because – oh, just worked – just I graduated from the school or from the college - I am a technician, not an engineer - then I up, up, up to then in Australia.

So, you built on your skills as a technician - - -

Yes, a technician.

- - - and eventually became an engineer?

Yes.

I think you also had difficulty during the Cultural Revolution, is that correct?

Yes, because my father in the Cultural Revolution, because he work – just I told you – my father in his whole life he work in the foreign company, it's like English company and American company and then after the Revolution, then he didn't work at any government office, he worked - - -

After the Chinese Revolution?

After Chinese Revolution he worked in the British Consul; he is an accountant. And then after the Korea War the British Consul finished and my father

worked in the Jewish Consul in Shanghai. Yes, so the government, the Communist, they don't like this, they didn't like this.

When the Cultural Revolution

Yes, and then the Cultural Revolution, they struggled. My father was struggled by them.

Strangled?

Struggled.

Struggled with them?

Struggled with them, yes.

And what happened to him?

Oh, what happened him? Oh, by the Red Guard – it is because it is the - oh, many, many people was died in the Revolution, Cultural Revolution. Because my father is from his history is not suit for the government and then the Red Guard struggled him. Yes, and he was hang by himself.

He hung himself?

Yes, in 1967.

That's a very sad story.

Yes, the February 1967, yes, it is.

What about your mother?

Oh, my mother was died very early because I am just in the secondary school. I just it is the seventeen years old, I think it is.

So, she died a long time before?

Yes, yes.

You also had difficulty finding work during the Cultural Revolution.

Yes, because it is the – my job is the civil engineer so I, sometimes I have to by my schoolmate and classmates they help me. If they had some work and they want me to help them and I work a short period, yes.

But you were no longer able to work in your profession as a civil engineer. Was that because of your father or also because you yourself were also an intellectual worker?

Mm, mm.

Were you prevented from working because of your father's background?

Yes.

And also I think you said that because intellectual workers anyway were not favoured?

Mm, mm.

Is that correct?

Yes, it's correct, yes.

So, somewhere along the line you decided to come to Australia.

Mm.

When did you come to Australia, what year?

Oh, I came to Australia in 1996, yes.

Why did you decide to come to Australia?

Oh, because my daughter. She comes to Australia in 1988, yes.

So, about ten years earlier

Yes, yes.

And why did she come here?

Oh, she learn English to come Australia.

She learnt English -?

Yes she come to Australia, learn English and get a job and then in 1998 there's the June, the 4th of June – do you know the 4th of June?

Tiananmen?

Yes, Tiananmen, yes.

Tiananmen Square?

Yeah, then the government allowed them to stay in Australia, yeah.

So, the young Chinese people could stay?

Yes.

And she had professional work by that time, did she?

Yes, now she is the technician in the RPA [Royal Prince Alfred Hospital].

She's a technician?

Yes, technician.

Does she work in medical technology?

Yes, medical technology. It is the – ah, but I can't – he use the telescope.

Yes.

Yeah, and she bio - - -

Not biotechnology?

Yes, biotechnology, yes.

But I think she has married here and has children?

Ah, yeah, she has married. She has married with my son in law is her husband, yeah.

And you have another daughter in America?

Yes, my elder daughter - her name is Nan Tran Koo. She married with her classmate. Then her classmates got to the America with their mother and she married.

Why did you choose to come to Australia and not America?

Why? Oh, because I think come Australia – enter Australia is easier than to go to the America, yeah, enter the America, yeah.

So, it's easier to immigrate to Australia?

Yeah, I think it is. Yes, yes.

And you came in 1996?

Yes.

Did you come first to Sydney?

Oh, it is very interesting story, yes, because I come to Australia, this is my first come to Australia. The first I from the Hong Kong to Australia, the first stop is

Melbourne and then to the Sydney. But I didn't know because when my English not good, so I arrived Melbourne but I think it is Sydney, so I get off the airplane, then I find my luggage. No, no, there's no luggage, then I ask the customer. "Oh this", they told me, "it is Melbourne, not Sydney", so I'm very afraid.

This was the Customs officer?

Yes, customs officer. Oh, they were – the Customs officer is very, very kind for me and friendly for me and they assure me, "Oh you don't scare", they will help me, he will help me, yes.

So, they reassured you?

Yes.

And explained to you that you hadn't actually arrived in Sydney - - -

Yes.

- - - that you were in Melbourne?

Yes.

So, you got back on the plane?

Yes, I get on plane. They assure me and they arrange me to get on the plane. Then I came.

And you came to Sydney?

Yes, came to Sydney – it's a very interesting story, yes.

Where did you live when you first came to Sydney?

Oh, I come – oh, I first lived in Kogarah because I living with my daughter but the unit, it's too small.

Because we should also say that of course your wife came with you as well.

Yes. My wife with me, yes, and come to Australia and we lived with – but the unit is too small.

So where did you go to live then?

H'mm?

Where did you go to live after that?

Oh, after that we were – we find a house in Kingsford, there is the house, and we moved to Kingsford and we lived there about three years or four years then we moved, yes.

Then you moved here to Moorhead Street, did you?

No, no.

Where did you go?

Oh, we live in the Taoist church accommodation.

Is that the Chinese church?

Yes, it's the Chinese church. Their situation is on the Bourke Street, it is very near, closely to here. And I was but my friends all they lived there – oh, I see it, it's a very nice place and, "Oh, how can I get it?"

Into Moorhead Street?

Into Moorhead Street or how can I get the public - - -

Public housing?

- - - house up there, public housing, and they assure me, they appoint me and go to the House Department, Department of Housing, and applied. I write my application, they give me to fill in the application and I then, about three or five years and I get it, yes. I got it, yes.

And are you happy here/

H 'mm?

Are you happy in here, in your flat in Moorhead - - -

Oh, I'm very happy in here, yes.

Is it a better life for you here than in China?

I think it – I think it is better life than in China, yes, because the life is, the people is very friendly and kindly and so I do this volunteer work for Meals on Wheels. When I do this volunteer Meals on Wheels, I think it is 2-0-0-0, 2000, the year of 2000.

That's when you started doing Meals on Wheels?

Yes.

Can you tell me a bit about why you started to do Meals on Wheels?

Oh, because I'm – I think I'm too old, I have nothing to do. My life is – I thinking my life is empty, so I think I must do some work for the society. Yes, it is good for me and good for all, yes, I think it is. So, I like do it, yes.

And how did you know about Meals on Wheels?

Oh, because the centre is very closely to my accommodation, work.

Which centre?

Oh, it is the Ron William Activity Centre. It is at the Kepos Street.

In Kepos Street?

Yes, Kepos Street.

That's in Redfern.

Then, so I'm first I went to the Kepos Street, I went to the Kepos Centre and I see the Di, I first see her.

You're talking about Dianne Giles - - -

Yes.

- - - the social worker?

Yes. "Oh, can I do some volunteer work?" Oh, she arranged me, "Oh, do this Meals on Wheels". I think Meals on Wheels is the very good work for the people, for the aged, yeah.

And I think you thought also that it might help you with your English?

Yes because my English is not good. The first thing, I must learn English but learn English in my age, it is very difficult to learn English because in school we don't allow, we can't let the student, the pupil take a book and read and remember it. I think learning English in my age in learn English we must always practise English.

So, you think - - -

Yes. Yes, so I think it is the volunteer work is better for me, yeah.

And so you were learning English formally at TAFE?

Yeah. I learn English – when I just came to Australia I learn English in AMES.

AMES? [Adult Multicultural Education Services]

AMES, yes. Only five hundred and ten hours. It is not enough for me, for us, and there is all of the student are Chinese. Go into the class, they talk with the Chinese and then it's like it's a meeting, it's the Chinese meeting. So, I can't – I didn't like it. So, I learn the English – oh, I just learn five hundred and ten hours and I went to the TAFE and learned English.

Was that better?

I think it's better because they're – in TAFE, learn English, it is the there's some Iraq and Middle East people and Russian and another – other nationality people. So, we can use the English and talking not only Chinese – because Chinese people group, make a group and talking with Chinese. It is no use for me, I think it is, yes.

You need to be talking to other people?

Yes, yes.

So, with the Meals on Wheels, I think you are a runner, are you, not a driver?

Yes.

A runner?

Yes.

Can you tell me a bit about what you do when you go out on the Meals on Wheels?

Oh, yes. I do the Meals on Wheels – I'm a runner, I prepare the food and the food and in the winter I prepare some soup, hot soup, for them and I give them the meals and sometime I look after them.

How do you look after them?

Oh, some - if their house, in the house there is some rubbish and I will take, pick it out in the garbage and then for help them. It is only my and then sometimes Mrs Mary ..., she write some letter, "Oh, can you help?" – oh, I can help her take the letter, put the letter in the post box, yes.

That's nice.

Yes, it is, and some old, the age is very different. Some – every year I think some aged was died because the winter. It's like Mr Troy ... and Mr Cook ... – I think James, some people, yes. Oh, it's very sad.

They die during the winter?

Yes, they had gone during the winter because they are old and they are weak, yeah.

So, do you get quite friendly with the people?

Yes.

Some of the people you visit would not be so old, would they, but they might be sick?

Yes. Oh, I think there's Jocelyn – there is – her name is Jocelyn ..., she is blind.

A blind woman?

A blind lady and I always send news for her, yeah, yeah.

So, do you help her when you take the meal in to her?

Oh, because she's very kind and she is very lonely and I talk to her and she ask me, "Oh, it's the Chinese Year" or "Happy Chinese Year" she say to me and I, "Oh, thank you very much" - that's, yes

Because when you deliver the Meals on Wheels it's fairly quick – you don't spend a lot of time with each client.

Yes.

But you still get the chance to talk some English to them?

Yes.

So, it's not the same thing every day, "Hello, how are you?"

Yes. Yes, it is most language is the, "Hello, how are you? Good morning", it's the same thing but it is a practise - I think it is good for me.

How often do you do the Meals on Wheels?

Oh, often – oh, last year and – before the last year I think I do the three days a week, three days a week, and then I do the two days a week, yes.

And although you are seventy four - - -

Yes.

- - - you are quite a strong-looking man.

Thank you.

Because it can be quite a task for people as they get older because there's a lot of stairs - - -

M'mm.

- - - carrying the meals up and down stairs and so on.

Yes, yes.

But you're O.K. with that?

Yes, I O.K. – sometimes the lift is not working. Oh, on Tuesday, this week on Tuesday I went to Northcott – the lift is not working. There's thirteen, the level thirteenth – but I'm lucky, I'm up to the level thirteen but the lift was not working down, was not working, so I walked down but I think it is some – I was happy with this work because it is – some people say, "Oh, it is very difficult, it is not easy", but I think it is good. This, I think it is good exercise for me, yes.

Not just exercise for your mind and your English - - -

Yes.

- - - but also exercise for your body?

Yes.

What area do you deliver in?

Oh, it is the Surry Hill, sometimes Darlinghurst. Sometimes Darlinghurst and last year Woolloomooloo, Darlinghurst.

Also Woolloomooloo?

Yes, but now - - -

From Kepos Street?

From Kepos Street – but this year the group is smaller and smaller, maybe smaller. Only Surry Hill and - I think it is Surry Hill – yeah, Surry Hill, all of the City of Sydney, yes.

So, when you go out as a runner it doesn't take you so long because you have fewer people to deliver to?

Yes.

Smaller numbers?

Small numbers – but I remember all those – sometimes it's very difficult to go in because it's like as you must push the – you must push the doorbell and go there.

The security system?

Yes, security and the lift security. No, it is very difficult but, oh, most of people they are very kind. “Oh, hello. Good morning. Oh, Mr Ely Koo, welcome to you” - and deliver the meals, “Thank you very much”. Oh, it is very easy, I think – I like this work, yes.

And it means you have a lot of contact with a lot of different people?

Yes

I think you've also told me that you learn quite a lot of English from the drivers, is that correct?

Yes, yes. The driver of Miss Barbara – I always I call her Miss Barbie – yes, I think she is more than sixty years old – she is always teach me English. Oh, one sentence is very interested because, oh, she taught me – oh, I say, “Oh, my background is China. I'm a dinki-dy-Aussie at heart”. And yes, and sometimes, oh, she taught me, “Oh, it is the possie”. She drive, she have a position, can be parking, it is language, it is “possie”. [meaning parking 'position']

Possie?

Yes, “Oh, it is possie” – oh, I learn the “possie”. I remember - - -

That's very Australian.

Yes, very Australia, yes.

You told me also she explained about Mardi Gras.

Oh, yeah, Mardi Gras. It is the on Tuesday's driver – her name is Miss Pauline and we drive on the Oxford Street and there's the flag at the Mardi Gras, Mardi Gras. Oh, she ask me, “What is Mardi Gras?” - I can't answer her. Then, on Wednesday I ask Miss Barbara, Miss Barbie, “Oh, what is this Mardi Gras?” “Oh”, she say, she told me, “Oh”, she explain. “Oh, it is the same sex and love together”, yes, (laughs) it is very interesting and I learn it, yes.

That is interesting because Mardi Gras is a French word originally.

Yes.

And another one you told me was “blue”.

Oh, it is not – oh, yes, it is not blue, it is very easy to say – oh, it is, oh, it's like it's a piece of cake, it is easy, yes.

A piece of cake?

Yes, cake, yes. And in blue, just you'd asked - - -

'Out of the blue'?

Yes, 'out of blue', yes, yes.

And what did they tell you that that meant?

Oh, this, "Oh, it's out of blue". Oh, it is successful, yes.

It is unexpected?

Yes, unexpected, yes, yes, because I am one years and some always the others, yes.

It's interesting to talk to you about English.

Yes.

Because when you talk about it, other people like me realise how very strange the language is sometimes.

Yes.

And these funny expressions that don't have any - their meaning is not literal.

Yes.

Their meaning is very strange to other ears.

Yes, I just I speak to you – oh, Joe - yesterday Miss Barbie taught me, oh, oh, I say it, "Oh, today is very humid" and she taught me, "Oh, muggy" – oh, muggy, yeah, "It is muggy", M-U-G-G, yes, muggy.

Another word for humid.

Yes, a new word – oh, she ask, she taught me and explain me but I don't understand – oh, I think it is formal to informal; it is the, "muggy" is the informal noun.

Yes.

Yes.

Yes, that's correct.

Yes. (laughs)

So, you make friends with the drivers?

Yes, I like – yes, I like them because they taught me and I like the ages, yes, because they are the custom for I deliver the meals and they are very friendly to me, yes.

Do you have some favourite customers?

Yes, Mr ... ; he lives in the Belvoir Street.

Belvoir Street.

Yes, Belvoir Street, yes.

What do you like about him?

Oh, he is Czechoslovakian and he is very old man. She always like to – she always invited me to come to his home but I didn't because I only the work. Sometimes I go in, go to their room – it is not - their home – it is not better, I think, yes.

You think you need to not be a personal friend?

Yes, yes.

But to be somebody who helps them?

Yes, yes because so they are friendless and need help and so they say, "Oh, I welcome you any time you must come to my to his house but I can't. I always say, "Oh, I always come to see you two days a week because I deliver the meals two days", deliver the meals there.

Yes.

Yes.

I think you're saying it's a bit like crossing a professional line?

Yes, yes.

Even though you're a volunteer you're there as a worker, not as a friend?

Yes, yes.

Not really as a friend?

Yes.

And are there other people that you've grown to like? Do you ever visit any young people who need Meals on Wheels?

Oh, it is Mr ..., Mr ... but, yeah, but I think he is not an Australian or he is in the Middle East, I think it, or the Pakistan or this.

Is he young?

He is young but I think he is a mental.

Has mental health problems?

Yes, and mental, yes, so I always deliver the meals to him, yes.

Because you have the Meals on Wheels, people think that it's just about old people but it also serves people with mental health problems - - -

Yes.

- - - and disability.

Yes, disability and blind lady – just I told you, Mr Jocelyn ... I think she is oh, almost forty years old, yes.

So, she's quite young, really?

Quite young, yes, but she is blind. So, I deliver the meals, hot meals and cold meals and hot meals I put on her table and the frozen meals, I put the frozen meals in her fridge, yes.

So, she can have them – is that for over the weekend?

Yes.

Do you think you'll keep on doing Meals on Wheels?

H'mm?

Do you want to continue with the Meals on Wheels?

But I think I like to do the Meals on Wheels because two day – only two days a week, so I think I very – I like do this work, yes.

What do you do with the rest of your time?

Oh, rest of the time. Oh, I – my rest time is, sometimes I went to the library or Waterloo Library to borrow some basic English book to learn, improve my English level, yes.

So, you still study English all the time?

Yes.

Do you go to classes any more?

Oh, last year I went to the Bowen Library, it is the Randwick Bowen Library. There's an English conversation class two days a week. Thursday and Friday I went there – I went there to - all of the English conversation class there are aged. They had the Russian and the – the Russian and the – most of the people of Russian, yeah, but we are talking together, yes.

That's good, because you're forced to talk English.

Yes.

And you can understand each other?

I can understand each other – I can understand them, yes.

That's good.

Yes. Because the Russian people they learn English – their English is not good as same to me, so we are talking very slowly and can understand it, yes.

Well, that's very beneficial, isn't it?

Yes.

And your wife, she doesn't do Meals on Wheels?

She is very weak lady; she had diabetes.

Diabetes?

Yes, diabetes, yes, and so she can't do this work, yes.

This would be too hard for her?

Yes. And there is diabetes and high pressure, high blood pressure, so she can't.

So, she has to take care of herself.

Yes.

Would you like to do other volunteer work?

Oh, yes. I think some volunteer work if I can do I like to do it, yeah, if I can do. It's like some Chinese people, they can't fill in the form – sometime it's like as the Department of Housing they send the form to them and can I? – I can help them? But I always afraid, I am scared, because my English not good. I can fill in the form for myself but I can't fill in the form for them.

You're worried you might make a mistake?

Yes.

That's a problem, isn't it?

Yes, I'm scared.

But even people who speak English all the time make mistakes on forms.

(laughs) Yes.

There are so many forms.

Yes. It's a problem, so I feel scared to have them, yes.

So, you think you made the right decision in coming to live in Australia?

Yes.

That's good to hear.

Yes.

O.K. Is there anything else that you'd like to say today?

No, that's all I think, yes. I like all talk with you because I learn English from you, yes.

We could talk all day.

Yes, so.

Thank you very much. I should say for this interview that you've agreed to do it in English.

M'mm.

We talked about doing it with a translator.

Uh huh.

But that I was worried that people wouldn't be able to hear your personality.

Uh huh.

That it would be very formal.

Mm.

So, you've decided even though it's quite hard for you - - -

(laughs)

- - - you've decided to agree to do it in English.

M'mm.

So, that is very much appreciated.

(laughs) Yes.

O.K, thank you Ely Koo.

Oh, thank you.