Interviewee: Li Wenshuang, male, born in 1949, Dashulin, Baiyun Village, Fengqing county, Yunnan Province

Interviewer: Li Xinmin, female, born in 1988, Caochangdi

Time: Feb 5, 2012

Location: Li Wenshuang’s home

Transcript:

Li: We are enjoying some of the benefits brought be the Communist Party. This kind of policy is good.

Min: What’s the worst thing that you ate?

Li: The worst is flour made with corn stalks and sugarcane dregs. Yam was good to eat with flour. We also ate grinded juejue root. Now things are better and reformed. Our parents have lived long. Things are good now. The past was really tough and sad. We ate things that even pigs wouldn’t want. Now everything is good. Some people didn’t live to see today. We also grinded some vegetable stalks. We didn’t have livestock because it was not allowed during the collectivization. We needed to eat. Animals didn’t eat these things. We fetched some vegetables from Yun County and grinded them. Didn’t even have livestock. It was that bad.

Min: How many people did your family have during the collectivization?

Li: We had 7, old and young. My family had two more kids than allowed—Little Fa and Little Chunlan. They didn’t get to have land. We had the lands of 5 people. I didn’t get anything. I have 4 siblings. The oldest one is Little Guifen. The second is called Little Chunzao. The third Little Chunlan. The fourth one is Little Fa. The two little ones are disobedient. Little Guifen went to Zhejiang to find work and got married in Anhui. Little Chunzao got married to Li Hao’s brother, named Little Lincun. Little Guifen has two children now, which are quite obedient. My little nephew went out working but gained no money. He borrows a lot of money. He is a problem.

Min: So did anyone die of hunger during the collectivization?

Li: No one died in my family. In the family up there, three people died of hunger within a month. You don't know about that time. When Shuncui was starved to death, his body was wrapped up with sheets and buried. Didn’t even have a coffin. So sad. Just to be carried without a coffin. Now at least we have some boards. Two people died in the Xi family, but they didn’t die of hunger. They died after lands were redistributed to households. People should tell the truth. Three died of hunger. One was a woman we called Big Aunt. Another was Big Grandmother. The last one was a mute. They really died because they were too hungry. It was during the collectivization. Then we had the canteens.

Min: Were they hungry because they didn’t have food?

Li: At the canteens, people only got a little amount of food. I am 64 this year. Is it 2004 now?

Min: It’s 2012.

Li: 2012. I’m handicapped too. People who didn’t labor only got one liang and a half. Laborers got 2 liang or 3 liang. Food was measured and cooked in steamers. Food was not only cooked but overcooked. People who didn’t go to the canteens—like the handicapped ones like me—got some uncooked food from home. One liang or two. I would put some old vegetables with my meal. We weren’t allowed to grow vegetables. We weren’t even allowed to start a fire. Rules were very specific. You had to participate in the collective farm work. If you didn’t go, you didn’t get to eat. You couldn’t get work points either. Your work points depended on the days you went working and the kind of work you did. Some couldn’t get enough work points and food. They were broken because of hunger. Three collapsed in January according to my memory.

Min: So is there anyone left in your brother’s family?

Li: Some. His wife, my nephew who is an honest man and my niece who’s married to somewhere else. He does some business here. I have another brother that was born in the year of snake. He is a few years younger than me. He’s not good at talking. He got a new wife.

Min: What did you eat when hungry?

Li: We were always hungry. We ate things that pigs wouldn’t want. At that time, we found roots, dried them in the sun and grinded them into flour. Some students liked to search for bran on the ground in the mill. Your third grand uncle was starved too. I don’t remember what year it was. I’m not literate. Some people could get some food. Real peasants were starved hard. At that time, Li Zhong, Li Rui, Li Bingyi and my third uncle Li Ruchang were able to get some food. They were in charge of the mill and the canteen. Those without power were utterly starved. If you are interviewing for these—to talk about those in power—it is a long story. You probably don’t know Old Changsheng, who was Zhang Guiyin’s father. Do you know Li Bingyi’s father? When everyone was eating at the canteens, they were in charge of plowing the lands. I got a little more food at the canteen. They were laboring, but when called to dig the roads, they didn’t have things to eat. They could only get some food from the canteen. The guy named Shi Daikai died. He was a landlord. He went to deliver food where they were plowing the land and digging the road. He thought they would leave some food for him, but they didn’t. Every share was small, so it was impossible to eat more. Food was all rationed and each family could only get a little to live by. Then one year, it was raining, and people from Huamulin, Dujia Village and Da Shulin altogether were eating 3 liters of flour, which had no color in it. Finally, my little uncle Old Jiusheng—who you probably don’t know—and another guy named Li Guozheng--the Old Hai from your Huamulin—had a fight. In the canteen, the cooked food was served in a mug and each person could get a scoop from it. Li Guozheng and Old Hai both wanted to scrape the mug for leftovers and they fought over it. It was like that. I am 64 years old now. We don’t even feed pigs with what we ate in the past. There was no water in the flour paste and no good taste. Things were like that. People didn’t work well, how could they have a harvest? The crops were only this tall, and we got a few grains into our bags made out of aprons. They smelled good. We wanted to eat more. It’s good that you are interviewing me for this past. After the reform and opening up, things have been much better. In the past, when you went working, you brought your rationed food and had to hand in the money you made to the production team. If you didn’t hand in your little money, you wouldn’t be able to eat. I’m telling you about our cravings for food. Those kind of interviews.

Min: Yeah, we are saving these materials. If we don’t interview you, when the old generation has gone, we young people will know nothing.

Li: Yes. At that time of collectivization, you needed to work even if you were sick. If you didn’t work, you couldn’t get your food. The food was given out according to work points. The highest one could get is 10 points. And then 9 points. 8 points. You were watched by some people and couldn’t go out to find work on your own. Every production team had control over people. Nowadays, people could go out to work on their own. In the past, food was not sold, and the production team didn’t allow you to go away. We ate bad corns, not good grains. If you didn’t eat that, you would starve. Now we have the reform and open-up, as long as you have money, you don’t have to bring anything with you. So many things you can buy out there. Your grandfather and my younger uncle got together once. Your grandfather was hungry. My younger uncle has brought with himself a little bag of rice and salt—not the granulated salt we have today, but clustered salt made from big pots. My younger uncle couldn’t find that bag and looked for it everywhere. It turned out that your grandfather ate the whole thing, including the salt. Your grandfather later had asthma, which was a lot of trouble. We couldn’t invite people over either. If someone came over, we had no food to serve them. We couldn’t grow any vegetables. Now we have money and can buy various things. At that time, food was rationed. Even if there were places that sold food, we had no money to buy it. Your third grand uncle liked eating. He was born in the year of goat. He wasn’t born until my parents passed away. I’ve been through a lot. When I first got my own family—this house is newly built—I lived in thatched cottages. There were three cottages and their roofs were leaking. When we slept in them, we didn’t have plastic above head, but something made of palm tree leaves. When it was raining hard outside, it was drizzling inside. The thatched cottages were this thick. When I built a house, I put a bamboo. After the redistribution, we started to bake tiles. Now we used cement tiles. The land reform was like that and I have lived this life. Then we had this kind of flat roof which was made by poured cement. People like my niece worked if they could I was with my elder brother—do you know Qiao’s father—we were like 12 or 13 and we were to build pig pens. Our father died early and some people bullied us. We didn’t even know how to cut trees. We learned to make pig pens because we had to. We were like 13 or 14. If you ask someone to do it now, he will not know how. We learned to make pens and raise pigs. I am telling you those hardships. Things are really good now. In the past, we grew something and had to hand in the grains. You had to. If you had pigs and killed one of the two, you had to hand it in. If you didn’t hand it in, you couldn’t get your rationed food. If you killed a chicken, you needed to hand it in. You were to even hand in eggs. It was like that. Our country was in poverty and farmers were poor. After our country got richer, farmers became richer too. If you didn’t hand in anything, you couldn’t have any of the supplied food and reserved grains. You handed in your pork leg and got a receipt to get your food. A pork leg at that time wasn’t as thick as a lamb leg. If you didn’t have the receipt, you couldn’t get any food and could only be starved. They fought over these things. It is so bitter to talk about it. The barn was on a tree at my place and I was sent to work there. Do you know Little Yingtao at Little Chengshi’s family? Do you know my older sister? Do you know the mother of Little Chenglin’s family? I went to get some food after work. There wasn’t much to eat. Many people were quarreling there—they had children to feed. Do you know Li Ping and Little Zaode? They were making a scene. They were denied food. So we swept the floors for grains, where rats were. They refused to give me any reserved grains and I cried. The mother of Lu and Little Yingtao only gave a little bit of food out, like one or two jin. If they happened to be working on the stone mill when you went, you could bring some food home. Many families needed food for their children. I was not the head of my family and I couldn’t get any grains with an accountant guarding there. They needed to get approval from the team leader too, or they dared not to (get food). It was as bad as that. It’s sad to talk about it. Many people then have died. If they were still alive, they could live a little good life now. That was three generations ago. The canteen was set up at the present home of Zhang Yinggui. You probably don’t remember Li Rui’s grandmother—that old lady was looking for pea tips everywhere to make some kind of stew. Every family could have one bowl of that. That bad. Now we have the reform and opening up, things are much better than that time. You don’t need to hand in the extra food produced. You have the land and they give you the hills too. They provide you with the money for fertilizers and seeds. This is good about the Communist Party. In the past, you needed to hand in the extra food no matter if you had food to feed yourself. Even the wet food needed to be handed in. Our country was poor and all the people were poor. After the liberation of collectivization, we had to work really hard. They asked Yang Cheng to take care of the livestock. Land Reform reached Luming and Houfeng. There were landlords at these places, which were hard to manage. Landlords and rich peasants had to be separated and managed. After Land Reform, you couldn’t work alone anymore. Here at Baiyun, we didn’t have landlords. They sent a landlord here. Li Guangming and Little Qingshu’s family and Li Qinghe’s family down there weren’t exactly rich peasants. They were not poor or rich and were classified as rich peasants. The other one is the landlord. Our landlord came from Luming. We were in charge of two families here. Now they have all died with only their offspring alive. I still remember these hardships.

Min: We are trying to write down all of these.

Li: Oh.

Min: So what time was the hardest for you?

Li: Ah, the hardest time was when we were laboring collectively. My father died in his 30s. Like Old Eight said, we wore tops with no sleeves and pants with no crotch. It’s meaningless to talk more about that. My father raised 7 or 8 children including me. I don’t remember the details. Things are much better now and our government is good, otherwise, we would not be here. We are handicapped but we do what we can. At that time, you weren’t allowed to plough the barren lands. You could leave it barren but you couldn’t plough it. But I wanted to do it and I cultivated a land out there. I worked till my clothes were all worn out. The commune was at Lumin. After a meeting, they came back talking about this problem but didn’t call out any names. At Modaoshi, it was illegal to cultivate the barren lands. I remained silent when they didn’t call my name out. If they did, I would struggle against them. After the end of canteens, people with power got themselves good lands and could grow anything on their lands. I didn’t get any good land and I couldn’t survive with my land. They talked about the problem of ploughing the barren lands but they didn’t call me out. I would struggle against them if they did because I didn’t go over the line—I didn’t cultivate a lot of land, but only some to feed myself. Now who cares. I’ve seen interviews like this. I have lived a difficult life with ups and turns. Our country was poor and people were poor. We can’t blame anyone. Our country didn't give us things because it didn’t have any. Once the country got richer, farmers’ lives were improved too. Like the reform and opening-up now. People like me actually should be able to have some kind of benefit for the handicapped. I don’t know how they deal with these in the village but they’ve only given me the pension for the no-insurance people. I don’t dare to say anything about it—I am still getting 70 or 80 yuan per month. But I’ve heard that other places provide this handicapped thing together with the no-insurance pension. I’m letting it go now. The policy is good and I’m sympathetic with the government. I’m now just living the rest of my life with your third grand uncle. We lived somewhere else and then moved here. My nephew was not a good kid. He’s gambling these days. He borrows a lot of money. I am so old and can’t lecture him all the time. I don’t even know when I am going to die. I eat if I have something to eat. If not, I will just not eat. The Communist Party is giving me 50 or 60 yuan per month because I am over 60 years old. I don’t know when I will die one day. That’s all I’ve got to say. You can go interviewing others. Are you still filming?

Min: Yes.

Li: I drink from time to time. In most cases, it is just your third grand uncle and me at home. We don’t keep cattle and sheep anymore. We’ve butchered our pigs. We still have one cow. If not for the little land we have, I don't even want the cow. I am 64 years old now. It is 20, 20…

Min: 2012.

Li: Oh, 2012. Since I’m not literate, I don’t know.

Min: You’ve never been to school?

Li: No. I don’t know even know my own name. I have a cellphone. I know how to pick up a phone call but I don’t know how to call others.

Min: What is your name?

Li: My name is Li Wenshuang.

Min: Li Wenshuang. Which year were you born?

Li: 1944 I think.

Min: What’s your zodiac animal?

Li: Ox.

Min: Oh ox.

Li: Ox. 1944. I don’t know for sure. Maybe 1945. It was an ox year for sure though.

Min: When did your father die?

Li: In 33 or 34.

Min: During the collectivization?

Li: He died during the reform. I don’t even remember which year it was. I don’t know for sure. I don’t know a word. Land Reform was going on. We went to Li Shaoxi’s place to have a meeting. We didn’t have a kerosene lamp or flashlight. We lit little plates of sesame oil. Then my father died. Don’t know which year but it was during the reform. My father got sick and later died. I still remember that day. My younger sister, Li Yong’s wife—you know her? —she was still a toddler. She was carried by the mother of Yongcun, I remember. I went to dig up vegetables. We cooked eggs in white wine then. My mother just came back from buy some baby peppers. She helped carrying me little sister back. He was 33 years old. Li Guotai helped me carve the gravestone while I was still working. He died in his 30s. My mother couldn’t accept it. My mother couldn’t accept my lameness too and asked someone to conduct sorcery. It didn’t work out. She carried me and let my sister look after me. She was as old as the mother of our neighbor Old Fulin. You probably know Old Fucai. It was the season of bitter wheat in May or June. It was raining. My older sister threw me into the yard and my bones were broken.

Min: What is Land Reform?

Li: Land Reform was like…some people had no lands while some had some. After the reform and collectivization, lands were evenly distributed and peasants got the land ownership. Before that, many had no land or livestock. The plan got ruined. After Land Reform and collectivization, Mao Zedong ordered; “We give you land if you have none; we give you livestock if you have none.” Then people had lands. Then people worked collectively. After a while, things were distributed to households. Every household would have tea and lands. After the reform, people worked collectively. After a while, things were distributed to households. If you didn’t have tea, they would give you some; if you didn’t have land, they would give you some. Now every family has something. Before, you could only get something if you had your own ways. That’s what Land Reform did. Mao Zedong was the leader then. For one or two decades, things were collectivized. For example, if you had some livestock, you would hand them in and got whatever you wanted. After the redistribution, the Communist Party leaders gave out everything so that you could support yourself. Land Reform was a hard time. Mao Zedong didn’t think it through. The gap between the rich and the poor was huge. After the reform and opening-up, things were somehow restored. Although the past and the present are different—not every family had a cow but they do now. I’m telling you these, but I am not literate. When we were to join the army, we had to go—two out of three people had to go. Things are better now. Then you were dragged away like a dog. People had to hid outside to avoid the recruiting. It is hard to ask old people about these things. Some have passed away, like your grandfather. He was older than me and you can’t ask him now. Some at your family, like Li Guotai, are younger than me. Bi Four is still alive and you can ask him. He knows much. He’s from Dafendi. Bi Three and Bi Four became sons-in-law. Bi Guangxiong is my uncle and Bi Laosheng’s father. Bi Guangxiong embezzled several hundreds of yuan and got so afraid that he hanged himself. His wife ate something with poisonous trees and died. That was at the time of the canteens. They had some power and ate more than others. They were punished. Bi Guangsheng is my uncle and Bi Four’s uncle.