Interviewee: LIN Fuchen, Male, b.1936, Huanzidong Village, Shenyang, Liaoning Province

Interviewer: LIN Tao

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Interview Site: LIN Fuchen’s home

Interview Length: Three videos, 11min 25sec; 11min 23 sec; 7min 57 sec.

Interview Transcript:

Lin Tao: What’s your name? How old are you?

LIN Fuchen: My name is Lin Fuchen. I am 74 old. I ate at the communal canteen in Great Leap Forward in 1958. China was in debt and paying foreign countries.

Lin Tao: Is that how people talked about it back then? They simply said it was because of foreign debt?

LIN Fuchen: Yes. There was no grain in China. People suffered from hunger and could only eat starch, such as corn flour. People were so hungry that they would just eat a corn kernel picked up from the filed. They ate whatever was in the field. People couldn’t defecate because of eating unhusked wheat.

Lin Tao: It was indigestible?

LIN Fuchen: Yes. Being so hungry, how could he not eat that? Do you know that kind of powder which was usually used to make oil? People ate that, even if they would vomit because of it. People went to the fields to eat raw corns and would sometimes be punished when caught. We were that hungry. That’s what I experienced.

Lin Tao: How old were you?

LIN Fuchen: I was 22 or 23. People suffered from hunger in 1960. I was fine, because I had a job of carrying coal in Sanjiazi Village. I had 27 kilograms of grains per month. Your aunt’s mother was at her brother’s place. She didn’t give birth to children. No one did that, because everyone was starving. Only cadres gave birth to children, even though it was also rare.

LIN Tao: Were you married?

LIN Fuchen: I was married. I was in Sanjiazi. She worked in the canteen.

LIN Tao: Did any one around you have relatives who died from hunger?

LIN Fuchen: I don’t remember. Dead people were just abandoned on the street. No one had the strength to bury them. That was when we were starving in 1960.

LIN Tao: You had grains and did not suffer from hunger?

LIN Fuchen: The state had to feed the workers in the mines. But it was not enough. Only 27 kilograms.

LIN Tao: So they actually had grains.

LIN Fuchen: You wouldn’t see the grains, even if they had them. Even the workers suffered a lot and the families had a very difficult time. 100 grams of grains per person each day. But we got 200 grams each day. Some of them saved the grains for their children and only ate pickles and drank water. They got edema disease. Then the production brigade got some kind of beans to treat this problem. But without grains and with only water, how could people not die? People died at their thirties, forties, or fifties, all because of hunger. Some old people in their seventies or eighties survived by eating rice powder. I was in Sanjiazi and therefore had no one to turn to. I was really skinny and bony. Old people in their sixties and seventies worked and survived by eating rice powder and raw flour. But they also suffered from hunger. 200 grams of grains per day. What can you do with that little grains?

Lin Tao: Was it that people could get grains by working at the canteen?

LIN Fuchen: Yes. No grains for you, if you didn’t work.

Lin Tao: Not at all?

LIN Fuchen: Of course. The canteen was fine. People brought home the grains. If they brought too much grains, they would feed the animals in the production team.

Lin Tao: Could you raise your own animals?

LIN Fuchen: No. They even took your pots and did not allow you to make fire.

Lin Tao: Why?

LIN Fuchen: Why? They didn’t want you to have private grains. Some people with better condition could have relied on their own grains for years.

Lin Tao: People were not allowed to have their own grains?

LIN Fuchen: No. If you had, your grains would be taken away and distributed. Everyone was hungry. Where did your grains come from? How could you do this? Pots were even taken away to the canteen.

Lin Tao: Too cruel.

LIN Fuchen: People didn’t starve when the communal canteen was first established. You could eat as many flat bread as you wanted.

Lin Tao: When was that?

LIN Fuchen: The communal canteen? 1958.

Lin Tao: It was established in 1958?

LIN Fuchen: Yes, 1958. The corns were frozen in the autumn, because people didn’t dare to take them home. People were also lazy. They just dug holes in the field and buried the corn. Such a pity. But no one dared to take.

Lin Tao: People were honest.

LIN Fuchen: Yes, unlike people today.

Lin Tao: It was so unreasonable to bury the grains in the field.

LIN Fuchen: You see, I even experienced something like this. People did something called “night fight.” People were gathered at night by the horn. The cadre from the production team would stand there with a light, watching us digging in the field. The night fight would be done in one or two hours, and then people were able to go home. They said the Gang of Four did this to us.

Lin Tao: You were in the mine?

LIN Fuchen: I hadn’t gone to the mine at this time that I am talking about. This happened before the hunger. Sanjiazi wanted workers. I could not stay at home any more. I was not married. The mine leader said, “what can you do with a body like this?” I said it was something that human could do. I was young. The leader said, “Just do it. You have a future.” After less than half a year, I was promoted to carry coal. I went to the town to learn about mining and coal seam for forty days. Then I worked in the mine. Later I went to Beidahuang. I was so hungry. Beidahuang is in Heilongjiang. People did not suffer from hunger there. I went to work there. People said that was for unemployed migrant people. One of my relatives asked, “what do you do there?” I said I had no children, and I didn’t have to carry the coal. I felt good there to be a keeper of warehouse.

Lin Tao: That’s a nice job.

LIN Fuchen: There were many goods and materials. I didn’t think that much. What could you embezzle? Just piles of thread gloves. Nothing else. You could not take the rain shoes or raincoats. The leaders and secretaries would know it.

The Second Video

LIN Chenfu: I worked there for four years. Later I was sent back to home, to the production team.

LIN Tao: When was that?

LIN Fuchen: The production team had already existed when there was the communal canteen. The collectivization began in 1956 and 1957. Domestic animals were collectivized. 20 to 30 families became a production team. All were put in a big yard. A breeder was usually elected. Carts were driven to work in the field. A production team leader would be there to distribute different positions. Production team lasted for 17 to 18 years. I was eighteen, when they built the reservoir in the south.

LIN Tao: The autumn of 1960 was the worst, right?

LIN Fuchen: Actually, the Heaven was being nice. The crops became ripe in the autumn. The grass was this tall. The corns were this long.

LIN Tao: 1960?

LIN Fuchen: It was 1960. We would not be able to survive another year. When the crops were ripe, people brought grains home, either officially or by theft. It was crazy. The cart drivers got a whole cart of corn. People were almost robbing.

LIN Tao: This was the autumn of 1960? So the natural disasters were not as serious as they were said to be?

LIN Fuchen: There were no natural disaster. Unlike the recent flood, the year was good. It always rained, when needed. Everyone joined the work, the fight, together. How could the job be poorly done, when everyone worked like that? More people would have died of hunger, if there were less crop that year. After that autumn, people did not suffer anymore. The production team had more grains to give people now. It was enough.

LIN Tao: That means the hunger was not led because of, as I said, three years’ natural disasters?

LIN Fuchen: No. What we knew was that the state was repaying Soviet.

LIN Tao: So there was actually grains in stock? I heard it was like this. The old couple I interviewed, Yang Deshan, he said there were grains in the granary. But even when they saw people dying of hunger, they just kept the grains. It was not because of foreign debt. I don’t know the cause. People say it was because of natural disasters.

LIN Fuchen: As long as there is crop, there is grains. It was impossible that they had no grains. They just dared not to distribute all of the grains. They had to keep for the workers. The state had to distribute grains to production teams. It was a lot, even if each person only got 100 grams a day. How could you say there was no grains? I used to eat hulled sorghum grains together with bran, which was made into buns. You had to keep the bun safe and hold it tightly in your hands. In the town of Shenyang, some people just hit others’ food onto ground and then picked it up and ate it. I myself had such experience. That was done by the workers. That was in the city. Didn’t the worker suffer from hunger? They suffered at home too.

LIN Tao: Famers suffered more.

LIN Fuchen: No doubt. Workers got more grains, 10.5 kilograms of grains a month. What could they do with that little grains? They got more than the farmers. How could 100 grams of grains per day be enough for the farmers?

LIN Tao: It’s not enough.

LIN Fuchen: That year was bad. The autumn was good. We had some grains. The production team gave each person 100 to 150 kilograms of grains. The quota was fixed. But they also needed some vegetables. Later they gave you more. The fixed quota was 180 kilograms each person. Do you think that was enough? Nobody cared whether it was enough or not. Do you think that was enough? It was enough for families with young children. But it would not be enough for a family with three to four adults. Now people eat less. People ate more back then. (The stomach was) empty.

LIN Tao: Did people eat too much and died?

LIN Fuchen: Of course. Too many. They didn’t realize they were full, no matter how much they ate. In Sanjiazi, someone ate eight corn buns made of 400 grams of powder.

LIN Tao: Who was that?

LIN Fuchen: A guy who worked in the mine of Sanjiazi. Eight buns. 400 grams of podwer. Eight buns. Now people eat this little. Back then, people had nothing, nothing, no oil. People drank the bugged soup in the production team. They just blew the bugs away. Each people could get a certain type of steamed food which looked like tofu jelly, really watery. Gone very quickly.

LIN Tao: You were fine in the mine.

LIN Fuchen: Yes. I was fine.

LIN Tao: Could you eat to full in the mine?

LIN Fuchen: Yes. 25.5 kilograms of processed grain. How could I finish all of them? I would leave some for your grandfather’s family. They got to eat rice once a week.

LIN Tao: You could get a day of better meals every seven days of work?

LIN Fuchen: Yes. The state gave us.

LIN Tao: What was in the better meals?

LIN Fuchen: The quota was also fixed. It was enough for a month. Things like beef-stuffed-buns.

LIN Tao: So people had meat to eat in the mine, while people outside had nothing?

LIN Fuchen: What else could it be?

LIN Tao: Why didn’t everyone go to work in the mine?

LIN Fuchen: You mean those people outside? The work was too exhausting. The baskets was this big. You first sat on the ground and put the basket on your back. Then you started to walk. You needed a stick to support yourself. You needed to walk through 3 to 4 meters with your body bent down. Then you climbed all the way up.

The Third Video

LIN Fuchen: There was black water flowing on my back. I wore plastic socks, tied up to my legs.

LIN Tao: Were you paid?

LIN Fuchen: Who would work if not paid?

LIN Tao: How much did you earn with each basket?

LIN Fuchen: We were paid monthly. Those who carried coal earned the first level salary. 25 days counted as a month. We got 55 Yuan a month.

LIN Tao: That was quite a few.

LIN Fuchen: The money was not little. We could not even squat in the beginning. You had to run, while your legs felt stiff.

LIN Tao: You were very tired in the beginning?

LIN Fuchen: Of course. They just opened the pit, when I went there. I had to carry water with a little shoulder poles and climb all the way up, with the support of my hands. They withheld some wages. You would get nothing, if you stopped in the middle of the month.

LIN Tao: They only paid you at the end of the months?

LIN Fuchen: Yes. We had to stand it. There were 3000 people in the little mine. Your resident permit (*Hukuo*) was even moved there. If you went back to your hometown, you would get no food from the canteen. With your resident permit moved, you had to stay there.

LIN Tao: You couldn’t even escape.

LIN Fuchen: You had to work there. You got no food from the canteen at your hometown.

LIN Tao: How long did you work there?

LIN Fuchen: I worked there until it was closed down, until everything was gone there.

LIN Tao: When was that?

LIN Fuchen: It was in 1966.

LIN Tao: Had production team been closed down when you came back in 1966?

LIN Fuchen: Not yet. I began to work in the production team once I came back. I was transferred back with another person, whose family name was Huang. He was the branch secretary of the Party in the brigade. I went to find him. At that time I just stopped working as the miner there. I was filling out forms, getting materials, working as the warehouse keeper. I had a good relationship with the branch secretary in the mine. Back then he said, “why don’t you come back?” I said that the branch secretary of brigade did not allow. Our workers’ union gave the branch secretary two bottles of wine. I went to talk to him later. I asked what was going on. He said, “you are a bachelor.” Back then all the bachelors were left there. They could not get wives. Now these mine workers got money and also girlfriends. They took care of people who had families. I was really mad at this. Then I worked for a couple of years before I was finally transferred back. The mine did not make money. I was transferred. They provided labor protection later. When we worked there, the maximum we could get was around 100 or 200 Yuan when we were transferred back. By that time we had already became official workers. I did not go there the second time. Otherwise, I would also get the labor protection, which would be 700 or 800 yuan. It was originally 400 or 500 Yuan, but it would increase to 800 or 900 yuan. I did not get it. The production team would not let you idle at home. I became the production team leader first. Later, when I stopped being the production team leader, I rode the carts, really big carts. I did that for many years. I began to work when I was 12 or 13 years old. I was the group leader. What was the group leader? The group leaders had lead people to work. Everyone, including the group leaders, had to work. Only the production team leader didn’t have to work. The production team leader did not work after giving out tasks to people. Life was fucking hard. I feel very bad seeing food being wasted these days. Now people waste so much. The shoes were not broken (before they were thrown away). Back then, who hadn’t broken their shoes because of their feet growing bigger? You had to stand it when the shoes were broken. Kids today eat nothing.

LIN Tao: They don’t know how lucky they are. They experienced no difficulties.

LIN Fuchen: Look at us. We only had six buns to eat with water at that time. We experienced that kind of difficulty. The kids have not. They do not know.

LIN Tao: Over 30 million people died of hunger across the country. People here in Liaoning suffered less then people in Henan.

LIN Fuchen: People all escaped to Heilongjiang, Beidahuang.

LIN Tao: How good was it there?

LIN Fuchen: Who knows how crops grew there. Working in the mine, you could eat to full. Many people fled there.