**Translated by Laurel Zhang, Timmy Huang, and Sisi Tang**

Interviewee: Zongmei Pan, female, born in 1941 at Xiaobaipo Village, Fumin Town, Kunming City, Yunnan Province, China

Interviewer: Wenguang Wu, male, born in 1956, Caochangdi Work Station

Interview date: August 17th, 2010

Interview site: Kaijun Wang’s Residence, Gaojia Village

Length of Interview: 19 minutes, 24 seconds

In the original Transcripts, interviewer is referred to as “Wu,” and interviewee as “Pan.”

Wu: Do you remember what was the commune canteen?

Pan: The commune canteen at the time, if it did not…so many people would have starved to death. We ate thinned-out porridge, three small spoons per person, we still had to work, anything tasted good during that time, that kind of life…Ugh, people these days even waste meat, during that time, anything you could eat tasted good. Three small spoons of porridge per person, it was finished immediately. Later there was nothing we could do, so we mixed in anything we could and ate it. We ate sweet potatoes, about 150 grams per person, adults ate sweet potatoes, and kids ate rice. No one today would be able to survive from a life like that. Work was hard, we also had to work additional night shifts for the “great collaboration”. In those few years, we made steel and iron. We did manual labor and still had to work additional night shifts. There were quotas for manual labor, picking manure, and digging holes, we had no choice but to finish the work. When I came back from college, I was assigned to be an accountant. The commune canteen calculated every meal eaten, we had to weigh our food, it was hard to be an accountant, the amount you ate depended on how much you worked, families that contributed little work but had a lot of children did not have enough to eat, they had to adjust in order to eat enough. There was still not enough to eat, some left the food for the children to eat, we were poor at the time, and our working team did not have money.

Wu: What year did the commune canteen start?

Pan: 1959, everyone ate together.

Wu: Where was the canteen?

Pan: at Zhang’s house, we ate together.

Wu: Later the big commune canteen was divided into smaller canteens?

Pan: Later food was allotted to households.

Wu: The hardest part was eating at the commune canteen.

Pan: Yes, that was the most difficult time. At the time, the country was going for “indiscriminately egalitarian transfer of resources” (note: all land and resources were transferred to the government and then evenly distributed to the people), they started commune canteens, during that time there was also “the great collaboration,” labor was transferred here and there, potatoes from the mountain areas were given to the village at Bazi (the Plateau in mountain basins) and rice from the village was given to the mountain areas.

Wu: What did you eat at that time?

Pan: Just different kinds of vegetables like cabbage, everything was mixed and made into food. Later when resources were distributed to households, life got easier.

Wu: How many years did the commune canteen go on for?

Pan: For a few years.

Wu: What was it like when you were most hungry?

Pan: (Sigh) it’s tough to say. So hungry that we could not work. Adults did not have the strength to work because they gave their food to their children. We had to hang in there until the food was assigned to households.

Wu: Did you have children at the time?

Pan: No, I had just finished my education and became an accountant.

Wu: How old were you in 1959?

Pan: I was…20 years old.

Wu: Were you married?

Pan: I got married at 21 years old.

Wu: When did you have your child?

Pan: The year after my marriage.

Wu: At the time, were your hands or feet swollen?

Pan: No, but my mother did get swelling in her hands and feet, and had to be taken to the hospital.

Wu: In your village, was there anyone who died from starvation?

Pan: No. No one died, but we only had half of our lives. There was always at least something to eat for every meal, although we were never full, and we had to save food for our children. It wasn't until the resources were assigned to households that the situation got better little by little.

Wu: Did you have energy to work in that situation?

Pan: I was an accountant at the time, so I didn't have any manual labor. Each day, I would only run statistics and calculate work points.

Wu: Then you really understand how food rations were distributed?

Pan: At that time, food was distributed based on work shares. "30-70 split", "40-60 split", forty percent of work rations and sixty percent of food rations by person. The number of food shares you got was based on this ration. Each labour could get over a hundred Jin (0.5 kilograms) of grains, plus some coarse grains.

Wu: Was there any meat?

Pan: No, never! Even people didn't have enough to eat, how could there have been food to feed pigs? It wasn't until resources were distributed to the households that things gradually got better, could we afford to raise pigs.

Wu: So then there wasn’t any meat?

Pan: How could there be any (meat). The pigs were raised collectively. We sent the elderly, the weak, the ones who couldn't handle labor, to raise the pigs. However, after several months, half a year, we still couldn't raise the pigs successfully, nor kill them for food. How could we have imagined that now every household can raise several pigs and eat as much meat as they want? Nowadays, people don’t want to eat meat, but back then, we barely saw any pigs.

Wu: Did you ever participate in the mass steel making?

Pan: At the time, I was still a student, so I only followed the adults and worked with them from village to village, cutting millets and doing all sorts of work.

Wu: Why did you want to work?

Pan: Everyone was assigned to work here and there. It was "The Great Collaboration" then.

Wu: Did you ever make steel?

Pan: Yes, I did.

Wu: I heard that when everyone was trying to make steel, nobody was caring about crops in the fileds.

Pan: Yes, so the crop production turned out bad.

Wu: how was the food at the beginning of the commune canteen?

Pan: In the first half of the year, eating in the canteens wasn't bad; there was enough to eat. But it turned bad later, and there was little to eat.

Wu: Why was it bad?

Pan: Well, it was because the crop production was bad. Also labors were transferred here and there to repair resevoirs and dams. Food kept getting transferred away, until it was gone, and there was nothing left to eat. No one cared about the crops in the fields, so the production was bad. Just like a family, if the family members do not work at home but run around and not care about the household busisness, then the family would collapse. That is what "Egalitarian Resource Redistribution" did. The millets in the dam regions were transferred to the mountain areas and then the corns and potatoes in the mountain areas were transferred here. Things like this ruined our lives. Those party cadres stole grains to their homes and they never went hungry. Only we common people did.

Wu: You were an account; so you knew this, right?

Pan: I was young at the time, and too afraid to do something about it. You just recorded whatever they told you.

Wu: so team leaders at the time could do something.

Pan: team leaders, custodians, or cadres, they could do something. I was young then and didn’t dare to speak up or take any actions.

Wu: Why were you afraid?

Pan: How could I have not been afraid? There was a village custodian who had stolen grains back home and got caught. When they went to investigate his house, they found a ton of grains.

Wu: So how did they punish him?

Pan: He is a cadre, well, they just made him step down.

Wu: Were there any incidents of cadres beating people at the time,?

Pan: No.

Wu: I heard that there were a few cases in villages of other provinces.

Pan: Not in our village.

Wu: Even with the landlords and wealthy peasants?

Pan: No, they never beat them, only disciplined them, or criticized them in meetings.

Wu: Have you talked about this with your children?

Pan: What would telling them about this do? Nowadays, if you tell them "we once ate in commune canteens....", they'll just say “stop, stop, we don't want to listen.” We went through a lot of hardship and did all sorts of work.

Wu: Your children don't like listening to this?

Pan: No, they don't.

Wu: Why not?

Pan: Because they think that life is good now, they think we're just making up stories to educate them. What a hard life we had at that time! Working when the sun rose each day, doing any kind of work. Huh, strange, at that time everyone was working as hard as they could, laboring as hard as they could, much harder than today. Fields then were the same as today's, and people were fewer then, but there just wasn't enough to eat. The commune canteens were dissolved, unable to continue, food was then distributed among the households. The land on the mountains was open to farm. We planted corn there, and life gradually got better. Now, it doesn't matter what you do, you can always find a bit of money, and as long as you have a plan, you can still manage your life.

Wu: Has anyone come and asked you about this before?

Pan: No.

Wu: So was I the first person to come and ask you about this?

Pan: Yes, you are the first.

Wu: What do you think?

Pan: I’m not good at speaking.

Wu: Is it weird for me to ask you about these things?

Pan: Yes. It's been forty or fifty years, and there's still someone asking me about this kind of thing.

Following conversation is about things that happened when I was at the village as an educated urban youth (omitted).