Interviewee: YANG Wanxiang, Male, b. 1922, Huanzidong Village, Shenyang, Liaoning Province

Interviewer: LIN Tao

Interview Time: August, 2010

Interview Location: Yang’s home

Interview Length: Two videos, 11m35s and 11m

Interview Transcript

**The First Video**

YANG: My name is Yang Wanxiang. I am 88 years old. In the three years of 1958, 1959, and 1960, under the leadership of the production brigade, I was the instructor. We had a company commander, a deputy instructor, and a leader of youth league. The collective was like: unified organization, organized income, sowing in the spring and reaping in the autumn. 1960 was a hard year. What was the life specifically like? Two to three hundred families ate together at the communal canteen and also worked together. The life was hard. We were still eating at the canteen in 1960. The production was low in 1959 and we could not get too much grain. The life became harder in 1960. 1959 was fine. We still had food. The canteen could still operate. Everyone could eat and tried to avoid waste. All this changed in 1960. We didn’t eat collectively any more. I remember that people received their food and ate at home. Each one got 150 grams of grain a day. The life was livable. We worked in the fields. But we only got 150 grams of grain. We tried hard to save food and other useful materials. People who had no food ate wild vegetables. People could eat to full. Like now. Just that one year. An average young man has a big appetite. Here in the Huanzidong village, a lot of people died. Several people from Old Yang’s family, Old Wang’s family, and Old Zhu’s family died. Quite a few of them! All died. Because (people had) big appetite but could not be satisfied. It was like that. 1960 was indeed hard.

LIN: 1960 was the hardest?

YANG: The hardest.

LIN: What did you eat back then?

YANG: There were several people in my family. My sons were all little, so they could eat more wild vegetables. I worked for the government. My wife was responsible for the seven lives of ours. She was also responsible for my food. Otherwise, I would have no energy for work. We lived through that time in this way. I am telling the truth. In all the years of my life, that period of time was the hardest. I am now over 80 years old. The situation got better in 1961. I still remember. The Great Leap Forward was in 1958. Senior workers and young people in the cities were sent to the countryside to learn and get practiced in 1959, 1960, and 1961. Among the senior workers, some were senior cadres. At that time, first we had mutual aid groups; later there came the elementary and advanced cooperatives, then the people’s commune. At that time, you had the county government at the top; below it was the district government; even lower was the People’s commune. That’s what the political organization was like.

LIN: Several decades have passed since then?

YANG: Yes, quite a few decades.

LIN: How old were you in 1960?

YANG: I am 88 years old now.

LIN: Then you should be 36 in 1960.

YANG: 37 or 38.

LIN: How did you survive those days with little food?

YANG: 150 grams per person. Everyone starved. Then you had to dig wild vegetables to replace staple food. Even the roots were eaten. There were no chemicals on those vegetables, not like these days. All in all, people’s living standard declined during those three years. Why? We were deeply in debt to Soviet Union. Chairman Mao. Premier Zhou. We paid off a lot of debts, otherwise we would not have been so pressured. I knew this. Your own country’s production was low, plus foreign debts. I have been thinking about this recently. Now that our life is improved, people get proud. This is not good. To talk about China, China is a big country. It is not a problem that people’s live has been gradually improved. It was quite good during Jiang’s time. The policies changed. Life was improved. But I think the improvement now is too much.

**The Second Video**

YANG: People are a little bit too proud. Farmers should be working in the fields. The country is rich and powerful. The country is militarily powerful and equipped. Nobody dare to bully China. China needs to be independent. The country should have its form. The people should be decent. This is what I think.

A (unidentified): How many people fled because of hunger?

YANG: People moved from here to Beidahuang. All went there. The regulation is now loosened. People’s life is getting better… (small talk omitted) …What else do you want to ask me?

LIN: Anyone you knew died of hunger?

YANG: Died of hunger? I had a cousin, a little bit older than 40. He starved to death. In the east, there was a Mute Zhu, who died in the same year. Quite a few. I don’t remember. Life was indeed not easy.

LIN: Anyone who over-ate to death?

LIN: No.

LIN: Nobody ate too much, when they suddenly got food?

YANG: I don’t know. People ate whatever they had. Some people even ate mice.

YANG’s Wife: We also had maize. It was ground, dried, and made into powder.

LIN: How did you survive back then?

YANG’s Wife: Old Mrs. Jiang died of eating too much.

YANG: She was in her 60s.

LIN: People could not shit. And they ate even mice.

YANG’s Wife: They were too hungry. They ate buns and potatoes without even cooking them. They ate raw corns in the field.

LIN: How old are you, Mrs. Yang?

YANG’s Wife: I am 84.

LIN: What’s your family name?

YANG: Her maiden name is Zhou. It was then changed into Yang when she came here.

YANG’s Wife: We cannot do anything. We both are sick.

LIN: How many children do you have?

YANG: Five.

LIN: How many were there during those years of hunger?

YANG: We had two. Not too many. A boy and a girl. The rest came later.

LIN: What did you feed them?

YANG’s Wife: They ate whatever we had left. We were too starved to even walk. We licked the roller, because there was still some powder left on it. We two suffered from eating like that. We stole salted vegetables. He was working, so we had to leave food for him. We were so hungry.

LIN: Did you have any title? Instructor? Didn’t they give the instructor more?

YANG: No. It was the same for production team’s instructor. The same as the ordinary people. Everyone had to work in the field.

YANG’s Wife: He brought home nothing.

LIN: Others took home food?

YANG: Impossible. There was no extra food in the team. No matter how high your position was, you had the same as everyone else. The amount for each person was fixed.

LIN: Even for those who worked?

YANG: The same.

YANG’s wife: They woke up so early to work and sometimes stayed up at night. What else could you say about those cadres?

YANG: The cadres back then needed to lead others to work. Look at the leaders now. No leader works now, except for working to take advantages of others.