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**Interview Notes:**

On the fifth day of Chinese New Year, my cousin took me to visit Guo Jingye. He is a neighbor living near my family’s old house in the village. In term of generation, he is actually my “brother.” The reason why my cousin brought me to him is that he was the accountant in the production team and knows a lot about the situation in the village. Guo is very genteel and uses some formal languages, which is different from other old people in the village. He actually quit school when he was in the fifth grade of primary school. He used to work in the propaganda team of the village, later in the exhibition house of the county, and then as an accountant in the production team. He is very gentle, speaking neither too slowly nor too quickly. As if he is telling elegantly a story. But this doesn’t reduce the cruelty of the stories at all. The reservoir workers worked in winter without clothes (“backbon-ization,” “clothes-whiten-ization”); a neighbor threw himself into a well, leaving four kids at home, only because he stole some food and was afraid of being prosecuted…and the so-called “table-nization,” a movement where people temporarily collected tables from each family and gathered them in the canteen in order to pass the leaders’ examination…Daily life was as absurd as drama, performed every day.

When we were doing the interview, I could feel he was very honest and peaceful. Just like most of others who survived that time of suffering, he also believes that the three years of difficulty was due to the fact that the nation was in debts to foreign countries, and that these events belong to the past, and that now everything is fine. I am very grateful that he is willing to sit down and share with me the experience. But I also have complicated feelings with this new version of “recalling the acrid past (only) to think about how sweet it is now.”

**The Interview:**

**“Table-nization”**

Back then, we all ate in the canteen. The nation was poor then. There’s a shortage in chemical fertilizer supply. We actually harvested nothing from the fields. We could collect around 50 kilograms of grain per *mu* of the fields. In order to set up the canteen, sometimes two families were compacted into one, and sometimes several families lived in one residential unit. The houses were emptied. Kitchen was then set up in there and we cooked in it.

We had a population of more than a thousand of people here. These people were then divided into eight teams. Oh. There were four teams in the beginning. There was a shortage in material resources and other aspects back then. So later they thought that this was too much and then decided to divide the people into eight teams. That means that we had eight canteens. So, people, after work, went to their canteens to get food.

The nation sent leaders at whatever times to examine what’s going on. Whenever this happened, we took broken tables and cabinets as tables and stools into the canteen. That’s the so-called “table-nization.” That’s equal to formalism. Alas. After the examination, we then took our own stuff.

Why did we eat like this? It’s first because we got no food from the fields. That’s why in the end we set up the canteen. There’s not enough food. That’s how we ended up there. Life, was hard. We didn’t have metal or plastic barrels. We only had small cans. We got food with cans from the canteen and brought food home. Alas. After a while, people were almost saying that the canteen was a failure.

**Eating at the canteen, sweet potato and its leaves** **meant a good life**

Dried sweet potatoes, sweet potatoes, red sorghum, and the like, were all that we live on. We also had to turn in grain to the nation. That’s all wheat.

Usually, sweet potato and its leaves already meant a good life. We ground the sweet potatoes to eat the powder. The life was hard. What have we eaten? We ate in the canteen. The production team had a big vegetable garden. There’s maize. How deep it grew! It’s called the vegetable of maize. Then we made buns with it. It was the hardest. Reed roots tastes terrible. I think 1959 was the hardest year. We dug reed roots. We used lentil chaff. There’s no bean in the lentil. It’s all just leaves. We used that. We mixed that into flour to make buns. Lentil chaff was this long. There’s usually two seeds in it. We ate the skin. We ground it. When there is wind, you can throw the lentil and the seeds will drop. We collect the chaff. We ate that. It’s the hardest time.

We used to pick up red potatoes that had already gone bad in the fields. Sweet potatoes have seedlings. After the winter, the seedlings turned dried in the cold. People picked them up in the fields. They were not entirely edible. My grandmother was one of those people. Here, the northern land. In 1958 when a lot of formalism was going on, people wanted to set up a pig farm. They wanted to build it right at that place. People were always cold back then. So, they brought firewood there to warm themselves up. The sweet potatoes were all over the places. The seedlings were so long. We brought them back home and cut them with scissors. We then put them into the pot to cook. Then pound them in a can. We then mixed them with the food that we got from the canteen. The food then looked thicker. That’s it. In other words, it’s like farmers feeding pigs. In the past, the farmers who fed pigs, all used maize straws, lentil straws, and lentil straw powder, with some bran mixed and stirred. That’s meant to make it tastes like starch and thicker. The pig wouldn’t feel hungry. But that doesn’t work. It’s not nutritious. Alas. Life was like that.

**No Work No Food**

Alas, there were a lot of people, who died of hunger. Quite a few. But few of them died directly of hunger. They mostly died of related sickness. When people have no food to eat, they will of course get sick. Who died of hunger directly? What’s cause? People escaped, because they cannot bear the hunger. When possible, they wanted to work outside the village, as long as they had food. Few were simply sitting there and waiting to die at home.

Back then people worked in the production team. If you didn’t work, the leader would say, “there’s no food for you.” It’s not okay for them to not work. He would surely go to work. But wasn’t he just too weak to go? How could he not work, if he still had in his mind the food? It’s canteen. The cadre was in charge. You don’t want to work? Okay. Who is not working? No food for him. The production team didn’t distribute food. All the food was collected by the canteen. You don’t want to work? No food for you, if you don’t work. There were also people, who stole sweet potatoes from the field. You have to eat something anyway. Sometimes you grabbed on your way.

Were he captured, he would be beaten up. Otherwise, he would be prosecuted. So, to have food for a short while is surely better than hunger. Who beat him? The cadre. Who beat him? The production team leader usually didn’t care about this. Most of the [thieves] were from the village or the team. So usually, such minor crimes didn’t really matter. If the team leader saw you, you would just be beaten up.

**The “Four More Four Less” Policy in the Production Team**

We turned in the fine grain (to the government). The production team could only deliver three months’ food. I was the accountant. Was it ninety-nine *jin* or thirty *jin*. Ninety *jin* of it was for the team itself. Each production team needed to estimate the yield near the moment of harvest. The whole brigade hold meeting for this. The leaders estimated. The commoner representatives estimated. How much you could produce in your own team. For example, your team can get 500 *jin* from each *mu* of fields. Based on that, it’s fifty thousand *jin* of food. Take off the amount that you are going to use to feed the livestock. The livestock eat barley. People eat wheat. A person needs ninety *jin*. Keep that part. Then take the part you will use as seeds for next year. The rest. Give it to the nation. The policy was like today’s agricultural taxes. When they took the food, they had a policy called “Four More Four Less.” Why was the production efficiency so low? This is the reason.

“Four More Four Less” policy was: those who turned in more could keep more; What does that mean? When you got more food from the field, you could turn in more to the nation. Then you could eat more. That’s to say that you can keep more. This is the “Four More Four Less” policy that the nation implemented. The situation was like: Those teams that got 90 *jin* were called “Self-sufficient Teams;” Those teams that got less than 90 *jin* were called “Food Shortage Team.” The nation had to keep these latter teams alive. If you got 90 *jin*, the nation had no responsibility for you. If you get more than 90 *jin*, you are called, “Surplus Food Team.” The part that went over 90 needed to be turned in to the nation. Alas. It’s this kind of logic.

**“Backbon-ization” and “Clothes-Whiten-ization” on the Reservoir in winter**

It was from 1959 to 1960 when people died of hunger when eating at the canteen. It’s the hardest time, first because of the material shortages. As for the country, the level of mechanization was very low. The construction site of Baiguishan reservoir was in the west of Pingding Mountain. Almost all of the young people in our village went there, male or female, constructing reservoir and the bank over there. They came up with “backbon-ization,” when doing the labor. It was snowing in the winter. This is “backbon-ization.” “Clothes-Whiten-inaction” was to ask people to take off their cotton-padded coat and wear only white cloth coat. It’s different from today, when you have clothes of various colors. It’s very backward. Where could we find colorful clothes? If cotton-padded coat was taken off, there’s only small white cloth coat. That’s how it was like.

**Workers Got Beaten Often on the Construction Site**

People got beaten up on the construction site of Beigan Canal. The most vicious one was a person from the west and whose family name is Song. He was on the site and was a cadre. Whenever his name was mentioned, people got frustrated.

(Why do they beat people)

Because he was trying to protect his job on the one hand and he was not hungry on the other. He was there to lead the workers and didn’t do the labor himself. Other workers were hungry and they didn’t work hard. So, he, who was responsible for the construction and his own leaders, would be blamed, if the construction didn’t go well. The leaders were always pressing the ones who were lower. That’s the logic. Think about the leaders in the county. The leaders on the level of the province came to check the progress. What could he do to the higher ones? So, he turned to the lower. If it didn’t work, then beat. Why? What’s the point of “backbon-ization?” His reason was that it was cold and if you didn’t work, you would be punished. They simply took off your clothes to make you feel the coldness. He was like that. He took the same means. He was like that.

**Someone threw himself into a well, because he stole food and was afraid of persecution.**

The next-door neighbor was an accountant in the granary of Wanggang in Linying. His brother worked on the construction site. Life was very hard. He did the labor in the daytime and worked on the mill in the evening. He was so hungry, when he was on the mill. He grabbed a little bit of food and was captured by the cadre. Debates (prosecution) and physical punishments such as coerced puddling were very popular back then.

The group of people stood in two lines, pushing each other. [An unintelligible phrase]. It’s prosecution. Criticism. Strike. That guy (his brother) was always timid. Hearing people were going to prosecute him, he ran away and jumped into a well nearby, drowned.

When his brother was drowned, he was an accountant in Wanggang granary. His brother had three sons and a daughter. The kids were sent to the East Village, sent to Du Qu. It’s near the woodwork factory on the east side of Jinlong Boulevard. That person’s name is Xue Tang. The couple had no children. He has been in touch with them for all these years. Four kids were left there after the death of his brother. They were so little. His sister-in-law’s feet were small. Since the drinkable water well was here, she had come here, with a big can, to get water. She was poor. He asked him to quit the job, move back, and become a farmer in the fields. He has a family. He has one son and three daughters. So, he also has four children. He had no other ways to go. He quit the job, came back, and began to take care of the family. After he came back, men believe that he once had a job and was a cadre and therefore he could find another job in the government. He was given the post of the production team leader. He took the post. He began to do the job from 1962. He did that for three or four years.

At the hardest time, people were so hungry. Men who were in forties or fifties began to use walking stick. People had nothing to wear and were half-naked. However far away, you could see how skinny they were. No fat. They were so skinny. You see. That time period. Alas. Hard! Later after that, they divided the pre-borrowed fields. Only after that. And slowly everything…Although life was not that good, people at least have real food to eat.