Psychological Collectivization: Cooperative Transformation of Agriculture in Jicun Village, Northern Shaanxi, as in the Memory of the Women

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The collectivization of agriculture was a revolution to change the traditional agricultural operation of past millennia; it was also a grand social experiment and social engineering led by the Communist Party of China (CPC) to reform and reconstruct the rural social structure. In this social change, the broad masses of rural women became important targets of mobilization as well as important participants. In the history of Communism, women not only emerged as a vital force but also served as significant tokens of the essence, significance and success of this social revolution. In the Chinese revolution, the issue of women was always linked with that of class; the emancipation of women was always looked upon as part and parcel of the elimination of class oppression and the emancipation of mankind. As early as 1922, the “Resolution on the Woman’s Movement” adopted at the Second Congress of the CPC, the first of its kind in China, pointed out, “The emancipation of women must be accompanied by the emancipation of labor. Only when the proletariat has seized power will it be possible for women to be truly emancipated.” In his article “Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan” written in 1926 Mao Zedong drew the famous inference that “Chinese women are subjected to the domination of the four authorities: political, clan, religious and masculine” and further pointed out that the basic way for the women to be emancipated was class emancipation and social development. This exposition came to be the most important theoretical basis for the mobilization of women to throw themselves into the national and democratic revolutions and fight for the liberation of themselves in the process.

Both theoretically and practically as participants in and driving forces of China’s revolutionary transformation, women should, of course, also have been spokespersons for and interpreters of this historical process.
However, accounts of the official history and the history of revolution say nothing about what they experienced and felt, what they thought, remembered and related. Their stories are missing pages in history books; they have no history, or at most only a brief history spoken for them by others.

This study is a part of a project to collect and study “Oral Data of Chinese Rural Social Life in the Latter Half of the 20th Century,” which tries, by analyzing women’s lives during the collectivization in Chinese rural areas, to investigate the impact of this revolutionary change on the daily life of the peasants and the practical formation of state and social relations during this process. The data for analysis came mainly from the investigations of the life history of women in Jicun village in Northern Shaaxi, focusing on listening to and recording the narration, interpretation and appraisal by the local women of their experiences in this period. This paper attempts to record and analyze the history of women’s life during this period on the basis of collecting their life experiences they can, and are willing to, tell.

Another consideration is related to the important reorientation of anthropological studies. As is known to all, the two basic data collection methods of anthropological fieldwork are participant observation and in-depth interview. In the past, researchers usually held that “seeing” is more reliable than “hearing.” But some discovered that in their investigations the old saying that “seeing is believing” is not always true. For one thing, many aspects of practice and process cannot be directly observed. As one woman anthropologist writes, “I was thrilled to have seen this much in only a few months in the field. Still, I did not feel I knew, except in the most general terms, what these events really meant to the !Kung. I could see, for example, how much they relied on one another and how closely they usually sat together, but I did not understand how they felt about their relationships and their lives. I needed information that could not be observed; I needed the !Kung to start speaking for themselves.” On the other hand, and more importantly, the stress on hearing as opposed to seeing, and the shift from observing to listening to are not merely due to limitations of investigational conditions. They are linked to a larger theoretical concern that takes narrative as an essential feature of human experience, shifting the focus of ethnographic description from the actual experience of a people to an account of the stories that they tell about themselves and others. Through the stories people tell ethnographers can gain insight into how they perceive themselves and society in general. Further, this shift will bring about a change in methodology from ethnographic observation to ethnographic understanding.

I. Change from Household Labor to Collective Labor in Women’s Memory

Collectivization in Jicun village was a tip of the iceberg in the national cooperative transformation of agriculture. Things here were rather simple and there were no spectacular events in villagers’ memory and narrative. From what they said we can deduce the several stages of the movement. At first, in the winter of 1954, a few Party members, Youth League members and activists began to organize themselves into biangongdui (work-exchanging team, an agricultural producers’ mutual aid organization) on the principle of voluntary combination with encouragement from the leading body at a higher level. In the following year,
again on the call of the leading body they formed a “small cooperative” (elementary cooperative) on a voluntary basis. About 1956, the small cooperatives merged into a “big cooperative,” that is, “agricultural production cooperative,” abbreviated as “agricultural cooperative.” At that time small cooperatives were thought of as semi-socialist elementary agricultural production cooperatives while the big cooperative was a fully socialist advanced agricultural production cooperatives. The people in Jicun village use the term agricultural cooperative to refer to the whole period of collectivization instead of people’s commune after 1958.

Collectivization was a revolutionary change for all the peasant households, a change in both property ownership and forms of production and income distribution. However, men and women remember it differently. It is not difficult to see in our interviews that many male villagers can relate the process from tilling the land as individual households to working in the collective ownership system and their mentality during this period. In contrast, the women, when asked about the political mobilization, the transfer of the farmland and the valuation of assets, were rarely able to give as clear an account as the men, and most of them replied, “I don’t know,” “I don’t remember” and “you must ask my old man.” When asking women about this historical change and the public affairs we seem to face their unspeakable feelings and memories shrouded in historical dense fog.

The rural women expressed their experiences, feelings and memories of the collective movement in a unique way: “Married women and girls all went to work in the fields.” The greatest change for the women in the collectivization was to go outdoors from indoors and to get out of their private houses into the community collective. According to the traditional division of labor, men were responsible for work in the fields. “In the past, married women did not go to the fields. They were tied to the kitchen sink, and took care of children.” After joining the cooperative, all people, except the old, young, weak and sick, had to join in collective labour and be paid for their labor in the year-end accounting, based on their total number of work points. This great change in their space of activity could not but leave an imprint on the women. However, we found in our study a “non-event” state even in this respect: a disorderly mixture of daily-life details without any clear sequence and division in time or their connections with the significant historical process at that time. In fact, their memories of the history of this period come back to their mind only when they were of immediate personal concern. Concretely speaking, the history of this period is recalled through memories of illnesses, child rearing, and food.

1. Memories of fatigue and illness

For the women the shift from household labor dominated by indoor activities to outdoor collective labor was not just a change in the way work was done, it also involved an increase in the quantum. With collectivization, women had to turn out for work on time just like the men; but their role in the traditional division of labor did not change at all and they still had to do all the chores of household work: cooking, washing, taking care of the children and sewing. In agricultural production, a woman always got less work points, the units of measurement used for work done and for labor remuneration, for her daily labor than a man did (the highest points for a woman was 5 per day in the early period of the elementary cooperatives and 8 in the period
of the communes; for a man, always 10 from the time of elementary cooperatives to the period of the people’s commune), but the quantum and intensity of her labor were the same as for men. Jicun started its farmland capital construction in the early period of collectivization. The able-bodied were divided into an agricultural and a capital construction group. The agricultural group consisted exclusively of men, all highly skilled farmers, responsible for tilling the land and harvesting; the capital construction group consisted of men not included in the first group and all the women, doing strenuous physical labor all the year round: filling up gullies and building dams and terraced fields. The division of labor suggests the women’s work was by no means lighter than the men’s, as two women recalled:

That year when we filled up the gully in Mount Guandao, I wore a pair of flimsy cloth shoes on my feet. I couldn’t stand the cold and caught ill, I had pain and numbness in my legs. In the first month of the following lunar year the building of terraced fields near the Temple of Dragon King began. It was a world of ice, very very cold. I was worn down. (yjg2002ZGL)

I was in my twenties that year, oh, it was more than forty years ago. We dug up potatoes one day and I caught a chill. Backing home in the evening my hipbone was cold as dead. We worked on the fields in wind, rain and snow. Now we have warm clothing, but then we did not have enough clothes, even when those with patches on them were put together. During inconvenient days women still persevered in working on the fields if they did not feel acute pain and only those who could not bear the pain stayed at home. The quota for a woman was more than 20 working days a month, very high. No quota for a man. Since there was a quota, a woman had to show up for work even in her inconvenient days. If you failed to show up for work, how could you make a living? Could you live if you did not earn work points? (yjg2002LGR)

It was easy to see during the interviews that different interviewees have different memories of their fatigue and illnesses and their descriptions and judgment are often incompatible with modern science, but there is one thing in common: they imputed their illnesses to the “terrible sufferings” in that period of time.

2. Memories of child rearing

Another suffering of the married women caused by their daily work in the fields was their inability to properly feed and take care of their infants. As able-bodied women all had to turn out for work at the prescribed time there were three options for their infants to be taken of. One was “the infants were taken of by the elders,” that is, by the grandmothers who were too old or weak for physical labor. The other was “the infants were taken of by the children,” that is, by the infants’ pre-school-age elder brothers or sisters. The third was “the infants were tied to the kang (a heatable brick bed) because no one took of them.” In the latter case, the infant could only be fed by the mother after she returned from the fields when the work finished.

One mother had to shed tears even today when she recalls the situation at that time:

There were the elders to take of my first daughter, but there was no one to look
after my second daughter. I went to the fields early in the morning and put her on the *kang*. When you came back in the dark of the evening, she was still there, crying so pitifully. I felt so bad that I began to cry, too. She was born in March, could not walk the following year, and was able to walk only in the third year. The child lay on the *kang* all the time and her legs became stiff, unable to take a step. She began to walk in July or August in the third year. I left early in the morning and fed her only when I got back. In the Spring I was away all day long and did not return during the day. Only after the year progressed into April or May did we began to take a midday rest when I hurried back to breast-feed her. Then I must wait until the evening before I could suckle her another time. (yjg2002GYL)

The pain inflicted on a mother by worry about her child is no less than the pain brought about by the illnesses:

I went to the fields forty or fifty days after giving birth to my child. While others took a rest in the fields I hurried home to breast-feed the child. You were so worried when you left the fields that you could not help but burst into tears and seeing the child you started sniveling, too. When my second daughter was very small, there were no blankets on the *kang*, only a broken mat. As she was very small with very thin hair, both her head and the soles of her feet bled from rubbing. My heart aches even today when I recollect this. (yjg2002ZYZ)

3. Memories of food

Jicun women’s memories of food are in fact recollections of hunger and food shortage. Of course, hunger was not limited to women; all the villagers who suffered from the great famines can clearly and vividly describe the misery of starvation. However, because of their traditional role of preparing food for the family the women felt keener about its shortage.

There were two times in the history of Jicun village when people “ate meals from a big kitchen”: during the Great Leap Forward in 1958 and during the movement of learning from the Dazhai Brigade in the 1970s. In the first case, the whole village was divided into three settlements, each running a big kitchen. Food was cooked with a mixture of gourds, vegetables, potatoes, sorghum and black beans. The big kitchen did not last for long. In the second case, the big-kitchen meal was provided only for people who took part in agricultural capital construction at the work site for lunch in order to save time and raise efficiency. The meal still consisted of potatoes with their peels, Chinese cabbage, crushed sorghum and black beans. Breakfast and supper were eaten at home. All the woman interviewees, including those who worked in the collective big kitchens, invariably confuse one big-kitchen meal with the other. Their respective timing and background were made clear only through questions put to the male villagers. What’s fresh in the womanfolks’ memory is the composition of the food, how it was served and the agony of going hungry.

People were dizzy with hunger. At the time of collective movement my eldest son was 15. When he grazed sheep one day he was so hungry that he dug out some green lucerne and put it into his mouth. But it was too astringent for him
to swallow. He told me about this when he came home. Poor child! I wept for him (sheds tears). Lucerne is used for feeding animals, cattle, donkey and sheep, not people. (yjg2002GXZ)

From the recollections of the women in Jicun we can get an inkling of the nature of women’s memories. Researchers usually presume that as women have always been excluded from public affairs of the community (including politics and ritual beliefs) their recollections of great historical events are usually in a disorganized, chaotic state, physical and individualized, and therefore not capable of constructing a credible account of a grand historical process in a chronological and logical way. This has its point, but is oversimplified. The married women in Jicun are not incapable of recounting the history of that period of which they formed a part, just incapable of recounting in formally recognized discourse. Actually, they experienced, recalled and recounting the history of that period with their bodies and lives. They were not isolated from that historical process. On the contrary, that process was as close to them as flesh and blood, for, after all, it fundamentally changed their state of existence.

II. Shortage in Supplies and Substantiality in the Mental World

We discern the bitterness of the Jicun women from the recollections of their work and life following the collectivization: constant lack of food, extreme shortage of daily necessities, physical fatigue and illness, miserable children no one looked after, languishing over the beloved who died in accidents and the desperate straits of coercive and unified management they sank into. The sobbing and weeping amidst their narratives constitute part of their traumatic experiences. During our interviews with the women in Jicun village we were not surprised to hear their narration of sufferings. Contrary to our expectation, however, we also witnessed their fits of hearty laughter and exhilaration when they recalled the atmosphere of collective labor and activities:

We were bustling with noise and excitement working together then. We cannot but feel elated to think about that. We had breakfast early in the morning and didn’t know what to eat for lunch. But we didn’t worry about that. We would eat whatever was available. Gourds, vegetables, either would do. We were in high spirits. The young people sang from morning to night while we, a bit older, talked and laughed. After the collective was disbanded, we no longer worked together in the fields and felt rather lonely. People living in the front and the back gullies now rarely see one another. Since we were divided everyone is busy taking care of himself and the people have no time to get together. (yjg2002LHZ)

Funny remarks and anecdotes of the collective production are still remembered and related by these women:

Married women were allowed to stop work a little earlier in the afternoon in order to come home and prepare supper. A woman from the front gully called Wuwaniang (mother of five children) was very tall and ugly. She often wore a towel with a knot in the head (usually worn by the men), very funny. Late in the afternoon when the women left for
home one of the commune cadres said, “Look at that guy. He stopped working before time to trail after the women. What a lecher!” Wasn’t that a scream? (yjg2002LHR)

It is not difficult for us to see from what they said their inner world in those hard years: high spirits and keen exhilaration in contrast to physical tiredness and pain, substantiality in mental world in contrast to extremely poor material life.

Like many villages throughout the country, after the collective transformation of agriculture, Jicun village also made a variety of socialist collective experiments with the initiative and encouragement from the higher level leadership: the “big dining hall” and “eating from the big kitchen,” running a kindergarten and a sewing team in an attempt to collectivize the individual and household life of the cooperative members. As an early experiment of collective enterprise, they also ran a papermaking workshop, producing paper to be pasted over the lattice windows of cave dwellings.

The regular collective activities included teaching married women to read, write and sing and inspecting household sanitary conditions, all collective management measures to organize the women. For the women, perhaps they did not grasp then, or do not remember now, what was taught, but these forms of activity were fresh and new to them and they found themselves in an entirely new world, which provided a source for riches and joys of their mental world.

We can easily see from the narratives of women who personally experienced the collectivist process that, with the change from a household laborer to a laborer in a collective unit, they did a greater share of workload, worked harder and sank into a more terrible plight. In contrast to this, however, they led an unprecedentedly substantial and rich mental life, filled now and then with enthusiasm and exhilaration. This rather puzzling phenomenon reminds us of Durkheim’s account of the social nature of religion: it is a collective manifestation expressing collective reality; religion and its rituals are bound to stimulate, maintain or remodel certain mental state of a group. During religious rituals, every soul is involved in the same vortex and the individual soul is reintegrated into its source of life. Working in the fields during the collectivist period in Chinese rural areas was not religious activities, but was often performed in a way of political movement and was similar in many respects to political rituals; it could therefore be understood as a ritualized “movement economy.” Seen from this perspective, we can easily explain the excitement and sympathy an individual could feel in these political, collective and ritualized activities. Durkheim summed very well how ritual is so closely combined with collective entertainment that no lapse is felt in the transition from one to the other. He also said that religion would not be a religion if it left no room for free combination of thinking with activities and for fun, art and entertainment that gives people relaxation. The rituals described by Emile Durkheim as “collective effervescence” are a source of collective identity and joy as well as an important mechanism of the emergence, keeping and constant renewal of collective memory.

The concept of “collective effervescence” provides in part an explanation of the above phenomenon, but it is, as a general condensation of the commonality of spiritual activities of human beings, too sweeping and simple. The questions cropping up and
puzzling us during the interviews still need to be answered: Where did their “terrificness” and “happiness” come from when they languished in poverty? Has the passage of time watered down the past bitterness? Does their dissatisfaction with today's social injustice and a comparison between today and the past change or even beautify the memory of their traumatic experiences? Or do the inherent peasant habits of resignation to fate and self-consolation take over? What is felt and remembered by the Jicun women about their experiences in the course of collectivization should have more complex and delicate reasons and logic and we must seek them from their narration.


The organized production and life that collectivization brought was a process of mutual construction of the collective transformation of human beings and collective transformation of psyche. This process affected rural women uniquely due to their role and position in the traditional society. In response, their feelings about, recollections and narration of this process were also unique, often beyond all expectation.

1. “It’s terrific to get together”

On the capital construction site everyone worked together, irrespective of sex. The more, the merrier. We worked all day long, building terraced fields, constructing dams and ramming earth, singing and chanting. Sometimes we composed new songs, sometimes we sang traditional North Shaanxi melodies; eight people sang in chorus with one man leading, we were all excited. If you worked alone you easily got tired; working with others you felt stimulated. When you came home, there were a lot for you to worry about: the child tied to the kang was crying; you didn’t have enough to eat and drink. Once you went out and mixed with others, we chatted, laughed and joked, forgetting everything unhappy. (yjg2002CYZ)

Collective labor provided an occasion for people to get together. In contrast to individual households as production units in traditional rural society this get-together in labor gave people, women in particular, a feeling hitherto unknown to them. In household work there was very little mutual aid and the women had little communication with men outside the family and clan in the daily production and life. Men, in contrast, had a lot of opportunities to meet one another during “village events” (including festivities, temple fairs and faith activities) while the living space of women was confined to the household. Dropping around to talk with outsiders would impair their good name and was therefore forbidden. The one exception was on the 18th day of the third month of the lunar year, when at the Temple of the Goddess there was a “fair for married women.” The Temple of the Goddess in Jicun village was located on the public square in the middle of the village, enshrining and worshipping two deities, the Goddesses of Fertility and Delivery. On that day women would visit the temple to burn joss sticks and kowtow before the goddesses, praying to have a child and for the safety of their children. In the memories of Jicun women, the day of the temple fair provided a rare opportunity for them to get together and was the happiest festival. Women from this traditional atmosphere
would have a feeling of happy gathering in
the daily collective production and political
activities; communication and interaction
between people of the same age, of the same
and of different sexes were greatly enhanced,
even amidst the growing intensity of labor
and physical fatigue. For women, collective
activities were a kind of “revolutionary
temple fair” and brought with them a festival
atmosphere and a feeling of openness.

2. “There was no difference for
anyone”

To the question “Why were you so
happy when life was so hard?” the villagers
often replied with the logic of “moral
economy” from a community viewpoint. In the peasant community, when everyone
suffers from hunger an individual will feel
less pain than when he alone has to suffer.

Life was hard for everyone, so I wasn’t 
particularly bitter about it. It was
the same for all, not for you alone, so what
were you complaining about? Everyone
led the same life. You mightn’t have
enough food and clothing, but neither
did others. So we didn’t feel deprived—
lived happily. Let me tell you: when we
got together we all felt very glad. But if
you alone led a life of privation, you
would be depressed. Don’t you think
there is reason in what I have just said?
(yjg2002LHZ)

Under the leadership of Chairman (Mao),
rich or poor, all the households were
the same. Today, if you are capable and
have skills you can eat well and dress
well; if you are not capable and unskilled,
you’ll lead an ordinary or poorer life.
You cannot say things were bad then
and good now. Do you think so? At that
time, we were led by the Chairman, who
was the head of a family and was always
afraid the stores would be depleted. The
Chairman treated all people alike and did
not make it difficult specifically for you.
Things were good at that time, just as
today. (yjg2002LGR)

It is not hard to see that their account of
“where happiness came from” is
dominated by an age-old community
mentality and ideal of Great Harmony as a
tradition of peasant culture. More thought-
provoking is the fact that the successful
combination of the communist ideal as the
mainstream ideology with the peasants’ ideal
of Great Harmony reconstructed the psyche
of peasants as well as the fibre of rural
society. The process of agricultural col-
lectivization embodied a socialist practice of
the ideal of Great Harmony while “uniform-
ity” and “equality” became spiritual pillars
during a hard time, which were of more
importance for women.

Their fond memory of “excellence” and
“joy” in the hard life during the period of
“agricultural cooperatives” is also closely
linked to their feeling and recognition of
present society. “No difference for anyone”
at that time contrasts sharply with the
present social polarization between rich and
poor, especially with the social injustice in
the polarization, and highlights the “joy” in
a life of half sorrow and joy. Almost every
interviewee made a comparison between the
era of collective labor and the era of individ-
ual labor. Although they could objectively
point out their respective advantages and
disadvantages they could not help but have
a sense of loss, coming from a growing
realization that they are subjected to
deprivation, deception and discrimination.
Their fond memory of the past is not due to
the superiority of collectivism, but as a result
of their vulnerable position in the present society. Their worsening social life and increasing marginalization have changed and watered down, to a degree, their memory of their sufferings in the past.

3. “Bitter first and sweet afterwards—it has come true now”

The historical change from the agricultural cooperation to the “contract system with remuneration linked to output” involved, in the parlour of the reform, a process of “bringing order out of chaos,” a process of correcting the institutions and policies that are not incompatible with Chinese social conditions and the interests of the broad masses of the people. However, to our surprise, in the mouth of some of the Jicun villagers this process is very logical, i.e., the change from collective farming to individual farming is not an institutional reversal for correcting past mistakes, but a cause-and-effect development—“Bitter first and sweet afterwards.”

Chairman (Mao) set the goal for us at that time, “We will live in buildings of two or more storeys with electric lights and telephone sets in them.” You know, we could not imagine at that time what a sight it would look like. Now, you see, it has come true. Premier (Zhou) said, “the people in North Shaanxi will not eat chaffs or edible wild herbs.” We said then, “Dear me! We have not got enough chaffs or edible wild herbs to eat now. If we do not eat them what else will we eat?” You see, are the people of North Shaanxi eating chaffs or wild herbs now? We now eat only the fresh and fine food. The two great men, what they said is truth and carries great weight. The life we have led is bitter first and sweet afterwards. Without hardships, where can you get happiness? No hardships, no happiness, that’s it.”

(yjg2002LGR)

The happy life now is a result of the efforts made under the leadership of Chairman Mao. The terraced fields and flat farmland built then are now having effect: these fields are capable of conserving water, soil and manure, and growing good crops. We suffered a great deal in agricultural capital construction at that time. Running a state is like administering a household: the younger generation profits by the labor of the older generation. Bitter first and sweet afterwards—This is an example. That is my opinion. (yjg2002CYZ)

To our astonishment, a large-scale social experiment with disastrous consequences acquires a rational logic in the analyses and explanations of these villagers. Even in the mainstream discourse, new policies of “reform and opening to the outside world” and “production contracted to the household” are measures designed to counter previous unreasonable and incorrect institutions and policies, but in the reasoning of the villagers the illogical becomes logical, the wrong becomes the correct. The idea of “bitter first and sweet afterwards” is another spiritual pillar that inspires them to brave great calamities and makes them calmly relate the years that the later generations cannot bear to look back on.

It is noteworthy that in the course of the collective transformation the collective identity is stronger for women than for men. The key to this phenomenon lies in the fact that for the women the transformation of “working singly” to “collective farming” also meant their own emancipation: working in
the fields, participation in political activities, bustling and exciting, singing and learning to read and write, all together with men. The “big dining room,” kindergarten and sewing group were all organized for the purpose of “liberating the woman work force” and “freeing them from household work.” In this sense, collectivization acquired a significance for women different for man.

Here we do not want to jump to the conclusion that there was another kind of collectivization, but just try to touch on women’s peculiar feelings and understanding of that social engineering. The history of life of the women in Jicun village tells us that in the course of collectivization every individual underwent traumatic experiences, but the process of collectivization was also a way for women to get free from their traditional sexual role (a role that brings misery and oppression on women) and therefore could also bring them fresh and even exhilarating experiences and memories. By walking out of their homes to take part in collective labor the women did not really go from the private domain into the public domain. In fact, they switched from being subjected to one form of domination to the other form of domination, i.e., from being an appendage to the family and clan to being an instrument of the cooperative and the state. However, this switch generated a vision of “emancipation of women.” The feeling of being emancipated while there was no actual fulfillment of emancipation originated in their acceptance of the dominant ideology that revolution equals emancipation. They got an ecstatic feeling of emancipation in the course of being turned into an instrument and their ecstasies difficult for others to understand just emanated from this vision and feeling.

IV. Conclusion: The Administrative Efficiency of Symbolic Power and the Development of Subject Consciousness of the Dominated

The course of life of rural women and the life history of ordinary peasants serve only as the vague backdrop of grand historical process and important historical events in the past historical books. These oral narrators of their own experiences are the silent majority in the official history. Their silence is rooted in their position of being dominated, and their recollections and narration today also demonstrates the domination-administration relations established by symbolic power—the collective transformation of agriculture accomplished the collectivization of people’s psyche in the course of the collectivization of production and daily life and reconstructed the peasants’ psyche as well as rural social structure.

The theory of symbolic power represents Bourdieu’s important contribution to research on power relations. While criticizing the illusion of linguistic communism he emphasizes the role of language as the medium and tool of power relations: in actual life language skills are not universally shared, but monopolized by some people. Speakers in some categories are deprived of the ability to speak in certain contexts—and they are often willing to be deprived.12

So-called symbolic power refers to the force imposed on a social actor by his own conspiracy. The actor does not think of this force as a power; instead, he approves of (in Bourdieu’s term misrecognizes) it. In his analyses, sex domination is the typical embodiment of symbolic power. Sex domination demonstrates more clearly than any other examples that symbolic power is attained through a behavior that is both
recognition and misrecognition, which are beyond the control of consciousness and animus or, to put it another way, lie in the depth of consciousness and animus.\textsuperscript{13}

The changes brought about by the agricultural cooperative movement in the way of life of the peasants, especially the women, and the influence over their ways of thinking, memory and expression represent a typical administrative efficacy of symbolic power. Symbolic power as ideological propaganda got into and impacted on the peasants’ daily life and inevitably stamped a brand on their mental world.

The old women in Jicun underwent and experienced with their bodies and lives the historical process of the collective transformation of agriculture and, therefore, their reminiscences and recounting render connections between the history of their personal and family lives and the grand history of Chinese society. In this way their memories of sorrow and joy in that period acquire real significance as collective memory. However, in recording and understanding this memory we should not reach a simplistic conclusion that their “joys in the midst of sorrows” should be understood as their misery and happiness being equally apportioned or as a side-by-side existence of errors and achievements. Our purpose is to gain an insight into the complexity and delicacy of the collective movement as an administrative process: how it changed women’s daily life and remodeled their psyche. As Bourdieu points out, symbolic power is not a force expressed by the discourse that resides in the semiotic system, but is defined in specific relations and through these relations—relations between those who wield and those who submit to power. Symbolic power turns the social attribute of dominance relations into the natural attribute at both the theoretical and practical levels.\textsuperscript{14} The enforced order is so deep-rooted that it is taken for granted. Then the dominated people share the stand of the dominators, make endeavors to construct these relations and see these relations as granted, natural and universal. That is why the Jicun women are able to render the ruling logic more reasonable than the rulers themselves.

It is not difficult for us to see here that when symbolic power takes effect the dominated are not entirely passive. Bourdieu elucidated the involvement and conspiracy in the imposition of violence on the part of the dominated on the basis of misrecognition and pointed out that this misrecognition is rooted in the fact that their mind is constructed according to the cognitive structure, which is, in turn, precisely from the structure of this world.\textsuperscript{13} But this philosophical inference of Bourdieu’s does not provide an analytic explanation of the inherent factors and mechanisms for the “conspiracy” and “misrecognition.”

In the study on the peasants’ oral history and confronted with the relations between the peasants and the state in practice, we see a social context different from “the structure of this world” as is described by Bourdieu. The grand social engineering with communism as its dominant ideal represents a great plan that is “entirely new” and negates and transcends the existing social structure and cognition. Then the unavoidable question arises: how does “misrecognition” arise when the peasants face a model of governance imposed from the outside and an ideology that negates their original “habitus”? And how is “conspiracy” contrived? Jicun women’s recollections about the collectivization tell us that one of the reasons for the powerful dominant force of symbolic power lies in its
tacit agreement with people’s logic, ideas and ideals in their living world. It also has something in harmony with the common sense of the people in their everyday. Or it takes advantage of this logic and common sense, intentionally or unintentionally, e.g., the ideal of “Great Harmony” in the rural society, the demand of women for a change in sex roles and freedom of traditional trammels and the common desire of humankind for “common collective effervescence.” We do not deny the fact that, like many of the political movements in the past half a century, the collective transformation is a construction, but it is not groundless, it is one that integrates some of the traditional ideas and basic needs in the peasants’ everyday life. Therefore, in the course of its implementation the dominated not only accept and approve it, but also make a creative understanding and explanation of it. This may be called the development of subject consciousness of the dominated, and this development gives rise to many unexpected results and constitutes an important aspect to gain an insight into the secrets of communist administration. The subject consciousness of the dominated people poses new issues for analyzing the communist civilization. A series of policies and strategies including the “mass line” as one of the cardinal principle of all works of the Communist Party of China and “respecting the creative initiative of the masses” can be further delved into within this domain.

The history in people’s memory and narration is like a dark and dense fog and perhaps we will never be able to get from it a thorough insight into historical truth. However, if we give up our efforts to penetrate the fog, it will be impossible for us to know its historical relevance. This paper only makes a preliminary attempt to establish connections between the micro history in the life of the masses and the macro history and set up a bridge between individual memory and social memory and between grass-roots representation and grand-scale narration, leaving many of the important issues to be further explored and analyzed.

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Notes

3. The project is under the charge of Professor Sun Liping from the Department of Qinghua University and the author and funded by the
National Social Sciences Fund. Jicun village in Northern Shaanxi is one of permanent fieldwork sites of the project and the interview investigation of social life during the land reform period has been basically completed in this village.


10. The Temple of the Goddess at Jicun village was demolished during the Great Cultural Revolution and not rebuilt.


**References**


— *Translated by Yang Qiushen Revised by David Kelly*