A Micro-History of Rural Society: Sun Village before and during the Revolutionary Period

To record micro-history is to excavate the realities cast aside and forgotten by “history writ large” and put them back on the stage, filling in the blanks... It is like adjusting the lighting in a theater, so that everything on the stage looks different.

PUN NGAI and C.H. NG, “Crying and Laughing: Oral History by Grannies (Excerpt)”

...[Oral history] provides a more realistic and fair reconstruction of the past, a challenge to the established account. In so doing, oral history has a radical implication for the social message of history as a whole.

PAUL THOMPSON, Voice of the Past: Oral History

To systematically record my father’s life experiences has been my wish for many years. He was born in 1921. He studied and later taught at a *sishu* (私塾)—a traditional Confucian school. After studying three and a half years at a new-style *xuetang* (学堂)—a modern school established by the Republican government—he got a first in Putian to pass the entrance examination and enroll in Xianyou Normal College. Upon graduation, he established several rural primary schools, before joining the Resistance against Japan. After the war, he was elected chairman of our township’s Peasant Association, where he served until 1952, when he retired from politics to become a teacher. During the “Four Cleanups” campaign (in 1963), he was denounced and returned to the village. Since this denunciation was reversed in 1982, he has played the traditional role of a “rural gentleman” (乡绅), arbitrating disputes among villagers.

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It was not until the weeklong May Day holiday in 2005 that my dream came true. Seeing my shiny MP3 recorder, my father asked, “Can such a tiny thing record so many words?” I said, “Sure, this is the most advanced digital recorder,” but it turned out that, due to a mistake in transferring the files to my computer, over ten hours of my father’s narrative were lost. I think my father was right: “modern machines” cannot make space for memories of the past. As Paul Thompson wrote, “The more personal, local, and unofficial a document, the less likely it was to survive. The very power structure worked as a great recording machine shaping the past in its own image.”

Three months later I returned to Sun Village, this time with an old-fashioned tape-recorder. For over four years from August 2005 until December 2009, I conducted over ten systematic interviews with my father about all kinds of Sun Village affairs before and during the revolutionary period, learning things beyond my imagination. Out of respect for Putian’s longstanding dialect, I have tried to minimize translating local expressions into Standard Mandarin.

I Livelihood

If one mentions traditional economic life in rural China, most people immediately think of “self-sufficient and self-provisioning,” including romanticized images of “men