

# **Oral History Interview Transcript**

Course Title: Energy in World Civilizations

Institution: University of Chicago

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*Interview was conducted in Cantonese and translated to English*

**Melody:** I am Melody Leung (梁子程) and I am interviewing my mom, 劉惠平 (Lau Wai Ping), Bonnie, about her experiences of energy systems and uses throughout her lifetime. I am in Chicago, IL, and my mom is in Hong Kong. It is February 23rd, 2023 for me and February 24th, 2023 for my mom.

Let's get started. Where did you grow up?

**Bonnie:** Mainland China

**M:** What sort of environment was it?

**B:** A village, a rural and very backwards village.

**M:** Around how many people were in your village?

**B:** Around 700 people.

**M:** And how big was it? Area-wise?

**B:** Around 10 soccer stadiums.

**M:** What were the geographical features in your village? Like rivers, mountains, and plains, etc.

**B:** Behind the village, there was a big river (北江河, Bei Jiang River), and we mainly relied on the water from the Bei Jiang River for drinking and using. In front, there was a plain for growing vegetables and rice, mainly providing our crops and food.

**M:** Were these rivers and plains shared by everyone? How was it split up?

**B:** Shared. These were natural sources that were public.

**M:** Was there anyone who managed it?

**B:** No one managed it. But, for example, in the spring when it rained heavily, the water would rise, and there was a dike. If there was any danger, the government would organize some villagers to prevent the dike from flooding and from the water rushing up and destroying the dike.

**M:** Do you have any impressionable memories of special years where people were needed to prevent the flooding, or any disasters?

**B:** It happened pretty frequently, almost every year. There were no real moments of danger, but almost every year, around monsoon season, sometimes even in the middle of the night there would be notices, so that adults and especially men would go and watch over and protect the dike.

**M:** How would they give these notices? Did they knock on doors?

**B:** Yeah, really loud, they would knock on doors, because it was in the middle of the night.

**M:** Were they paid? By the government? How did it operate?

**B:** My guess is they weren't paid. Because everyone wanted to protect it.

**M:** Have you or anyone in the family tried?

**B:** No we were so young, I was also so young.

**M:** Ah, and you said most of them were men or adults.

**B:** Yeah I could hear it at night. Most were neighbors and young strong adults.

**M:** So how did they prevent the floods?

**B:** They would hold 籬<sup>1</sup> (baskets) that carried mud. Wherever there was a small hole, they would fill it up, because the entire dike wasn't made of concrete, it was just made of mud—it was a mud dike.

**M:** So the entire dike was made of mud?

**B:** The entire dike was mud. The surface had grass planted on it. So when the water pressure was high, it could be pierced through and start leaking. If you didn't reinforce and patch it up, it would leak more and more, and eventually collapse and break. So it was crucial that at that time, you needed to find sand bags and stuff to reinforce it.

**M:** Where did the mud and sand bags come from?

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<sup>1</sup>Weaved bamboo basket, see appendix figure 1

**B:** In front, from the plains. We just dug. From the ground.

**M:** How big was the river and how was the water flow? How did it change during the seasons?

**B:** Usually in the Spring, even until May. During rain and monsoon season. When it rained a lot, the water would rush from upstream and the higher grounds and all flow down to the river, all accumulating and creating the risk of the dike breaking.

**M:** What was the water in the river like?

**B:** Usually clear, but during heavy flow the river would be very murky, as it rushed down it brought a bunch of sand and mud. Usually around June and July, and after, when there wasn't as much rain water. And into the Fall and Winter. Especially in the winter, there was barely any water—the water became really clear, and beaches would become exposed. The water didn't even reach the dike, it retreated all the way, and the beaches were really big.

Back then when we were fetching water we had to step over the dike and walk across the beaches, to the center where there was water. Then, the water was really clear, as there was barely any flow and didn't carry any silt.

**M:** How did you usually split the responsibilities? For example for fetching water?

**B:** By each family. I often fetched water. My mom (your grandma) usually went to the fields to work, so it was usually me or my sister to do this work. After school we would go fetch the water, grow and tend to the vegetables, these were the household chores. Like cooking, this was what the kids did.

**M:** And you said you also 耕田 (tilled the fields), fetched the water, did the chores and cooked, was there anything else?

**B:** Not 耕田 (tilling the fields) but growing vegetables. 耕田, planting crops, was usually done by adults. Back in that period, we were still part of 集體制 (collectivism), so the 田 (paddy fields) were part of an entire 生產隊<sup>2</sup> (production team), for the entire village. It was collective, so harvest was split up by person. Vegetables were privately

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<sup>2</sup> Established in the 1950s as part of the Great Leap Forward (Second Five Year Plan), a 生產隊 was the basic farming unit to the people's commune, see Appendix Figure 2. and [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Production\\_team\\_\(China\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Production_team_(China))

owned—every household was responsible for their own. For example, whatever vegetable you liked to grow, you had a piece of land and you could decide on your own what you wanted to grow on it.

**M:** So vegetables were your own, but grain was collectively owned.

**B:** Yes, the grain was the entire village's, and they distributed it by the population.

**M:** And was the grain usually just rice?

**B:** Yes, rice.

**M:** In a day, how did you spend your time? How did you structure your day and how much time did you spend doing these chores and how long was grandma out for?

**B:** For grandma, usually she went out early in the morning and until the evening, around 6 or 7 she got out of work and came back around dinner time. For school, we went early in the morning and got off around 3pm. After school we would immediately go grow vegetables—we had to remove weeds, fertilize, water, and pick the vegetables or plant new ones. The other person would go pick wild vegetables/ shrubs for the pigs to eat, because we had pigs at home. They would also fetch water, wash the clothes, and do the chores at home.

**M:** How did you allocate the tasks?

**B:** When I was younger, my sister would do the heavier tasks, like fetching water. When I was older and had more strength, we would just decide it amongst ourselves, we didn't have any set task.

**M:** You said you had pigs, did you have chickens and other animals?

**B:** We also had chickens.

**M:** And these were all private property?

**B:** Yes, they were all private. If you were more hardworking, you could keep more animals and you could eat more. It was mostly self-sufficient (自給自足), if you are able to care for it (養<sup>3</sup>), then you'll have it, but if you can't then you won't have it.

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<sup>3</sup> Raise, take care of it, referring to animals.

**M:** How many pigs and chickens did you have?

**B:** Around three pigs, two to three, and 10-20 chickens

**M:** How did you feed them? You mentioned picking wild grass—was there any change throughout?

**B:** No, we wouldn't buy feed for them. We would go to the paddy fields or by the ocean side to pick 豬菜 (pig vegetables)<sup>4</sup>.

**M:** Oh so the pigs eat vegetables?

**B:** Yeah they were plants that the pigs like to eat (豬菜). It was actually pretty fun. Because it was a bunch of kids around the same age who would bring a few 籮 (baskets) and go together, playing as we went.

**M:** And you said a lot of the river and paddy fields were collective. Do you feel like it was fair? Were there any issues or disgruntlement?

**B:** The distribution itself was fair—it was just based on the population: adults would get a set amount, and kids would get a set amount—that was very fair. But was this the most reasonable way? Not necessarily. Maybe everyone's contribution was different. In terms of productivity, some people are faster and do more work, but at the end of the day it was still split based on the population. So, it was really hard to increase the motivation. For example, if you had stronger abilities, you might not want to work as much since at the end you weren't rewarded for your work (多勞多得) but the harvest was just distributed based on the person count.

**M:** Was the allocation done by government officials?

**B:** No, the village did it themselves, it was very simple. The village head (村長) would do it, because the distribution was very easy, the method was so clear.

**M:** Would you have any leftover grain to store, or would you distribute all the grain each season?

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<sup>4</sup> Elaborated in the interview, "pig vegetables" referred to vegetation that was fed to the pigs, that the pigs liked to eat.

**B:** We would leave a bit for storage. Usually we would hand it over to the next higher level of government, and they would be responsible for grain reserves, for example for the next year if there was poor harvest, and we would be able to take from the reserves.

**M:** How about personal storage? Did you store water, grain, or other things privately?

**B:** Since the grain was distributed publicly in the same way, people who didn't eat as much [could store grain]. Because they gave the same amount to men and women, and of course men ate more, if you had more men in your family, they might not have enough to eat, and it would be very hard for them to have reserves. But, for example for us, we have a lot of women, so we would mostly have enough to eat. Of course, there were times when we all didn't have enough to eat, so you would have to find some 雜糧<sup>5</sup> to eat, like sweet potatoes and cassava.

**M:** Did you plant these on your own? Like the sweet potatoes?

**B:** You can plant the sweet potatoes in your own vegetable plots.

**M:** How did you get the seeds and shoots for the vegetables and plants? How do you start planting?

**B:** Sweet potatoes are really easy, there are sweet potato vines that you can just stick in the soil.

**M:** And would you buy it?

**B:** At first yes, but once it starts growing, since you just need the sweet potato, you can keep using the vines and replant. They are really cheap to buy. Or you can also feed the sweet potatoe vines for the pigs.

**M:** Switching topics, I want to ask about how you generated energy in the house? You said you fetched water from the river, but what about cooking and heating?

**B:** For cooking, we used 禾稈草 (straw), which is from the planted crops in the paddy fields—we just needed the rice, but the stalk of the plant we can dry it in the sun and burn it for cooking. Other than that, behind the village, at the river there was a beach on the banks and a small island, and sand and mud would accumulate, so it very rich and fat (nutritious), so there were a lot of 蘆葦 (reeds) and 豬菜 (pig vegetables). Every winter, the reeds grow really tall and we would harvest and cut it.

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<sup>5</sup> Grain crops other than rice and wheat

**M:** What is 蘆葦 (reed)?

**B:** It's a plant.

**M:** What is it similar to?

**B:** It's similar to bamboo. They're around 2m tall, like the really thin bamboo, but it's really thin, as thin as your fingers. So, it takes a lot of effort to cut it down, especially for our family, since we don't have any grown men, with your grandpa being in Hong Kong. So, our neighbors and other men in the village would help us, and in return grandma would sew for them, since she knew how to sew clothes.

**M:** And in the village, beyond your family, did you see any differences or characteristics in how work was distributed amongst men and women?

**B:** Yes. Since there was no mechanization back then, we relied on 耙 (rakes), very simple tool for farming, to loosen the soil. It was one big piece of sharp metal, and the cow would pull it, and the person would hold and control it from behind. It required quite a lot of strength, so usually the men would do it, and the women would be in charge of harvesting.

**M:** I know you moved to Hong Kong in your late teens, but did you go back to visit often?

**B:** No, not that often.

**M:** Did you keep in touch with people back at the village?

**B:** Yes, somewhat.

**M:** At first you said that a lot of it wasn't mechanized yet, but I forgot to ask if there was electricity?

**B:** There wasn't electricity earlier, but later on we had a small amount of electricity, so we had some basic light sources. We didn't have air conditioning or larger appliances, but we had basic light and sometimes a fan. Before, we didn't even have fans. We started with electric lamps.

**M:** So you had electric lamps at the very beginning?



**B:** At the start we didn't have any electricity. Then we started having electric lamps.

**M:** Did you have any memory of when electricity was introduced? When was it and how was it implemented? Was it an electric company? Or the government?

**B:** The government. All the owners of energy and power was the government. Around the 1970s, so when I was around 10.

**M:** So you still have memories of when there was electricity?

**B:** Yes.

**M:** Did you have to pay for electricity? How did it operate?

**B:** Yes, we had to pay.

**M:** Did every house have electricity? Did you pay a fee by household?

**B:** This, I don't really remember that clearly.

**M:** Did every house have electricity? Or did only some houses or places have it?

**B:** Every house had it. But before electricity, we used kerosene lamps, very small ones with a wick and oil.

**M:** Did you have to buy the kerosene and oil yourself?

**B:** Yes.

**M:** In terms of cooking...did you have to...

**B:** We used firewood. Reeds and straw, the stalks of the plant.

**M:** How did they compare to oil, coal, and other energy sources, in terms of ease of use and desirability.

**B:** Only cities had coal back then, and that was definitely more convenient than reed and straw, since they created a lot of smoke and dust, and it was very labor intensive—you needed to collect it yourself and dry it in the sun, and it took up a lot of

space, but since we had the space in the villages, we could do it. But straw wasn't feasible in the cities, so they used coal. Plus coal was also more expensive, and we couldn't afford it in the villages.

**M:** Do you remember if there was often leftover firewood (reed and straw) that was stored, or was it usually used up, say by the end of the week?

**B:** It was seasonal. So usually we would prepare enough for almost the entire year. Usually we harvest the reed in the winter, and we roughly know how much firewood we need for an entire year. It also depended on how much you can store in your house, since it took up a lot of space, and you needed to burn a lot of it even to cook a single meal. It's just that harvesting the reed and straw yourself meant that you didn't have to buy it with money, so that's what we did.

It also depended on how much space each household had to store it, and we also knew approximately how much we needed. If there wasn't enough, we could also go to the hillside and pick up dried twigs.

**M:** And you said this depended on each household. Was there a big difference in the size of each person's house or storage capacity?

**B:** There wasn't a huge difference in size, but this depended on how many people there were in each household. Some people had a lot of children, and even if it's around the same size, if there are a lot of people and end up using more space, there might not be enough.

**M:** When do people move out to new houses? How does that work?

**B:** Back then, people didn't have the ability to buy new houses. If you had a lot of children, it'll just be more cramped. But comparatively, people don't really take up much space, it's just the firewood and straw that takes up a lot of space, since even if you had a huge pile you could only cook a few meals with it. But with people, like even having 8 versus 4 in a household, it's not as big of a difference. 8 people actually don't take up that much space—in one room, you can just push the beds together more, and 8 can live in there. This wasn't a big problem, because back in the village, no one had requirements or expectations of personal space like you do now, so everyone shared rooms, 4 or 5 to a room was good.

**M:** How many people were usually in a household?

**B:** Usually at least 4 to 5 children, plus parents, and grandparents. So 8 to 10 people was very normal. Our family was quite small actually, since we had the four of us, plus grandma.

**M:** For storage, was there usually a storage room? Or was it kept in the kitchen?

**B:** We kept a portion of it in the kitchen, and some people had a firewood room—they would build a straw house to put it in. Others who didn't have space would just store it in the living room.

**M:** You mentioned that it took up a lot of space. Around how much space would it take up?

**B:** Depends on how much they bring back. Usually around 100ft<sup>2</sup> to 200ft<sup>2</sup>.

**M:** Besides firewood, was there anything else that took up a lot of space or you stored? Like oil, salt, food, grains....

**B:** Not really, those didn't take up much space.

**M:** So did you buy these?

**B:** They distributed all of these, especially early on. Rice and oil were all distributed. Usually the ceilings were pretty high, so we would use wood to build a loft, and we would put all the food up there on the loft.

**M:** What would you usually eat in a meal?

**B:** Rice, vegetables, usually ones you grew and picked on your own, or carrots and beans, and we wouldn't really eat meat or fish that often. Though because there was a river behind us, fishermen would sometimes sell us fish that they caught, so occasionally we would have fish. Or, if you raised some chickens or pigs, but this was definitely not every meal. For pigs, we would raise 2 pigs throughout the year, and every half a year we would slaughter one and make cured meat with it, so that we can stir fry it with vegetables.

**M:** Would there ever be a litter of pigs you have or tried to breed, or did you buy all your pigs?

**B:** Yes, if you raise a sow, then it could have a litter of piglets, but usually you wouldn't want to raise all of the piglets yourself. Since your house isn't big enough, if you have too many pigs your house would be overrun with them and become a zoo. Usually you would only raise 2-3, and sell the rest of the piglets.

**M:** You mentioned the house being overrun by animals—how did the layout work? Where did you keep them?

**B:** We had an 天井<sup>6</sup> (atrium) in our house. Usually when you walk in there's a sort of a front yard, the 天井, where we kept the pigs and chicken, around 300 to 400 ft. But usually not that much, or else it would become really cramped and uncomfortable for everyone.

**M:** You said most people usually woke up really early, like 6 or 7? And they labored the entire day, either tilling the fields or doing chores?

**B:** Yes, yes.

**M:** Then how much leisure time did people have? Or was it spent on work most of the time?

**B:** We still had leisure time. Usually after school, everyone had a different schedule—for kids, especially boys, they might not need to do chores all the time. For example, if there were 7 or 8 kids in a household, not all 7 or 8 of them would help with chores. There would always be some people playing in the open spaces, like little plazas, of the village. Sometimes we would sneak out to play for a bit. Sometimes, after dinner at night, we would go out to play for a bit, and grandma would get mad that we were still out so late. She would lock the doors so that we couldn't get back in the house, and we would sleep outside the door.

**M:** Weren't you guys cold? Just outside?

**B:** There were straws outside by the door, so we would crawl under it.

**M:** Like the ones used for cooking?

**B:** Yeah. But they would be dry since we would dry it under the sun.

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<sup>6</sup> Front atrium, a common architectural feature of older Chinese houses; outdoor area in front of a house. Refer to appendix.

**M:** Compared to now, after you left, for the next 10, 20, 30 years, were there any changes in people's lives? In their lifestyle?

**B:** Oh yeah, the changes were huge. Before, everything you had to do yourself in order to use it. Now you can buy a lot of things, and everything became automated. For example water, you didn't have to fetch water anymore, we had tap water. In terms of energy, we all use coal gas (煤氣) or liquified petroleum gas (石油氣) for every household. It's a lot more convenient—before we had to wash clothes ourselves, but now there's washing machines. There were a lot less chores we had to do. We didn't have to raise pigs or chickens. It wasn't vital, we could just go to the wet markets to buy them.

**M:** So from what I'm hearing, a lot of time spent doing these chores and work for daily maintenance is now replaced by other things. How do people spend their time now?

**B:** Now the villages have a lot more free time. They can socialize, rest, have more entertainment.

**M:** Are there more people moving to other places, or doing other jobs or things instead?

**B:** A lot of people moved. Automation has lightened the workload so that we don't need that many laborers anymore, so a lot of people have moved to cities or factories to 打工<sup>7</sup> (work to earn a living; wage-work). The amount of field workers have definitely dropped. Before, what took 200-300 people to do can be done with 10-20. The others then move away.

**M:** I want to ask a question about transportation. What was the main transportation back in the day?

**B:** We had boats to go places far away. Actually a lot of places were far comparatively, so we would bike to places that were not as far. For further places we would ride boats, since we were close to 北江河 (Beijiang River)<sup>8</sup>, so there were boats that would go from the town center to Guang Zhou. Later on, there were buses.

**M:** When were there buses?

**B:** Around the 1970s. When there started to be roads.

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<sup>7</sup> Noted chinese word as doesn't just translate to work, but working for a wage, and work that other people pay you to do.

<sup>8</sup> River by the village, rough translation.

**M:** What kind of energy sources did the buses and cars use?

**B:** The boats burned 火水 (kerosene)<sup>9</sup>, so we would call the boats 火船 (fire boat). I think it was maybe extracted from coal? The lamps we used before were all kerosene lamps. The bottom has a jar with kerosene, and there was a wick that you would light on fire.

**M:** It seemed like there was a lot of public transportation?

**B:** Private transportation would be bicycles. Or your two feet. We would call it the number 11 car. Biking was already really good. At first not a lot of people had bikes.

**M:** How did people buy... How did people earn money?

**B:** Not a lot of money. I mean some people literally didn't have money. For example, if you raise chickens or pigs, and you sell it, then you would get some money. But for some people, if they don't raise a lot of animals, and they don't have enough to eat, or they want to eat it, then they wouldn't have money.

We were a little better off. For one grandpa would earn some money from Hong Kong, even though it was only a bit of money. Grandma would help other people sew clothes, and that earned a little. Me and your aunt would go pick up pig poop. The pigs would roam around everywhere in the day, and the pig poop, the faeces, if you picked it up, you could sell it to make fertilizer. So that way you can get money, even though it was very very little money. I earned money too back then!

**M:** How did you pick it up?

**B:** With a shovel, like a trash pan, we would scoop it up and put it in a 籮 (basket), and bring it back and sell it. It was really stinky.

**M:** You said sometimes after burning the straw it would be really dusty and smoky...

**B:** Yeah it was really dusty, and you had to burn so much of it, and you had to constantly add more, and you had to squat in the kitchen the entire time, and my entire face would be all black from tending to the fire.

**M:** What did you do with the ashes after burning the straw?

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<sup>9</sup> Direct translation: fire water.

**B:** We would use the ashes as fertilizer, and sprinkle them on top of the soil used for growing vegetables.

**M:** What about other waste or trash? Were they also used for fertilizer?

**B:** Pig poop was used as fertilizer. Some other things too. But we really didn't have trash or waste, back in those days. A lot of things had use. We didn't really have bones from our food, since we didn't have much to eat.

**M:** For example, how did you wash things? In the river?

**B:** Usually yeah we washed it in the river.

**M:** How about showering?

**B:** At home. We would fetch water from the river back home and wash up there.

**M:** Where would the water run to, like after showering?

**B:** We would dig a ditch, it would flow out to the paddy fields, the water would flow out in front where there was a ditch.

**M:** What was the soap made out of?

**B:** We bought the soap.

**M:** But it wasn't really processed?

**B:** Back then there were 肥皂, it was yellow and very rudimentary. Like for washing clothes

**M:** How about the dishes?

**B:** Dishes we just scrubbed with a brush. There wasn't really any grease anyways.

## Appendix



Figure 1. 籬, a weaved bamboo basket used to store and transport grains and goods.

(Source: Material portfolio from the history of taiwan online archives,

<https://collections.nmth.gov.tw/CollectionContent.aspx?a=132&rno=2002.005.0339>)



Figure 2. 生產隊, the basic unit of a collective farm, the “people’s commune” as part of

the Great Leap Forward. (Source: Baidu, Chinese counterpart of wikipedia and google,

<https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E7%94%9F%E4%BA%A7%E9%98%9F/1789549>,

[https://www.baik.com/wikiid/7018690361610880554?view\\_id=1ociaxho6g0w00](https://www.baik.com/wikiid/7018690361610880554?view_id=1ociaxho6g0w00) )





Figure 3. 天井, Atrium or front yard. Structure in interviewer's village did not have the second floor, with a slightly different architectural design. (Source: historical architectural archives of china, <https://m.gujianchina.cn/news/show-8805.html>)