

**Document 10.11: Excerpts from a memoir by Li Xiuwen (1890–1992), describing life in the village where she grew up, early 20<sup>th</sup> century**

*Born in a Guangxi Province village to a poor peasant family, Li Xiuwen's life spanned a tumultuous century in China's history. She was the wife of one of China's most famous twentieth century generals, Li Zongren. Li Zongren was also elected vice president of China in 1947 and became the country's acting president from 1948–1949. After the Communists took power, Li Xiuwen lived in Hong Kong, then Cuba and the United States. In 1973, she returned to Guilin in China. She dictated her memoirs to the wife of her nephew, and they were serialized in Chinese newspapers. Her son translated the text into English.*

Usually farmers ate rice cooked with sweet potatoes or white potatoes with one dish of home-grown vegetables three times a day. Meat, mixed with vegetables, appeared at the table only on the New Year. People thought of eating melon or vegetables as producing cold in the body, so they ate hot peppers to counteract it. Therefore each family had a hot pepper stone grinding bowl in the house. Some nights, the farmers, after their hard day's work, went out to the river to catch fish, shrimp, and frogs. They would eat the frogs, and dry the fish, to save for meals in later days. In the busy farming season, farmers usually ate a little better. At dinner, they added a dish of fried soybeans, cooked dried fish, vegetables, and they might even drink some rice wine. Only the male workers drank rice wine, not female workers. Usually the men and women ate separately. The men's table had better food than the women's table.

### **New Year's Festival**

Although a farmer's life was very hard and bitter, I seldom felt it in my childhood years. I remember all the joy and fun we had in the festival times, especially during New Year. People sang native songs, and there was the dragon dance. Boys competed to see whose firecrackers made the loudest noise. Sometimes they scared the girls by throwing the lit firecrackers above their heads, and they laughed to see the girls run away, covering their

ears with their hands. The girls combed their hair smoothly and showed off their long pigtails tied with red ribbons.

The villagers hired professional singers to perform in the village for three days. These three days were the happiest and most joyful time for the farm people after working a whole year in hard labor. They watched the performances while they fried soybeans or chewed sugar cane. The men enjoyed smoking their homegrown tobacco. The women watched the show while they sewed. Life was so happy when we were children. When we reached fourteen or fifteen, there was so much thought and worry in our minds and the carefree days were gone forever. But those happy days are indelibly ingrained in my memory....

Source: Li Xiuwen, unpublished memoir.