

**Document 14.7: “I Now Knew the Face of Poverty,” an excerpt from *Growing Up in The People’s Republic: Conversations Between Two Daughters of China’s Revolution*, 2005**

*Ye Weili describes her experience as a zhiqing, one of 12 million “sent-down youth” sent to the countryside between 1968 and 1975 to be re-educated by the peasants.*

When we first arrived in the village we could hardly understand the northern Shanxi [Province] accent. To make communication easier with the local people, we all learned to speak with their strong twang. Some *zhiqing* mastered it quickly. I felt inadequate that I couldn’t do it as well. In the local vocabulary working in the field was called *shouku* (enduring hardship or bitterness) and a good laborer was *hao shoukuren* (a person good at enduring hardship or bitterness). The terms reflected the way of our farming: it was back-breaking manual labor. It probably had existed for thousands of years without much change. So working in the field was something to be endured, not enjoyed. Most of us *zhiqing* learned to be *hao shoukuren*. Once my team worked alongside another team. After watching me work for some time an old peasant in the other team remarked, “Now you know how to *shouku*.” He was widely respected for this knowledge and skill in farming. I regard his comment as the highest praise I received in my five years’ stay in the countryside.

Eventually I made a few village friends. They were either *laohan* (old men) or *xiao housheng* (teenage boys). Women in my village seldom worked in the field so it was hard to get to know them well. I was particularly close to a *laohan* whose name was Liu Gaodian. He suffered from a constant stomachache and could only do light farm work. Because of this his work points were low. His oldest son had already started working in the field even though he was barely fourteen, and there were still three younger children in the household. So his family was particularly poor. Gaodian’s wife was a kind-hearted woman from southern Shanxi. She was looked upon by the villagers as an outsider even though she had settled there for almost twenty years. Whenever there was a special occasion or a holiday, and there were many holidays on the lunar calendar that the peasants observed, I would be invited to a meal with the family. So the family was sort of

my host family in the village. Their food was simple and even coarse by urban standards, but it showed the kindness of a peasant family. Almost all of us Beijing *zhiging* had a host family or two in the village.

It was unsettling to see the poverty surrounding us. There were three scenes I will never forget. One occurred in late fall. By then I had lived in the village for a number of years. Our team harvested potatoes earlier that day. In the evening we were going to divide up the potatoes so that each household would get its share—we received all our grains and vegetables this way. After supper I took a wicker basket to collect my share. When I came out of our alleyway, I saw a scene that has been forever frozen in my mind. Under the yellow streetlight, people from my team stood by a pile of potatoes. They were shivering in the cold wind in their shabby clothes. How they resembled a group sculpture of beggars! It was as though I was seeing my fellow team members for the first time. I now knew the face of poverty.

Once I was late for work in the field. By the time I got there, the people had already disappeared in the thick and tall corn crops. Their shoes scattered outside the field—the villagers usually worked in barefoot during summer time to save shoes. I was alone with the shoes so I started to look at them: they were all homemade, many threadbare, and some completely broken. Years later I saw Van Gogh's painting of a broken shoe and I immediately made the connection. My life in the village taught me to tell a person's material situation by the conditions of his or her shoes.

There was another scene that has also stayed with me. One day I was visiting a peasant woman in her home. While I was sitting on the *kang* (brick bed) chatting with her, her little girl kept walking back and forth to the window behind us. I became curious and turned to see what was going on there. The girl was licking a candy, the cheapest kind sold in the village general store. She was clearly relishing every lick and there was a concentrated expression on her face. After a few light licks she carefully put the candy back on the edge of the window and walked away. After a few minutes she would go back and lick the candy again.

MA XIAODONG: What's so unusual about that?

YE WEILI: Rather than finishing the candy in a few bites, like I always did as a child, this little girl of no more than three years old already knew how to prolong a rare pleasure in her life. I was impressed by her incredible ability to restrain herself at the hardest.

In the first year I was in the village, each person on my team received 10 kilos<sup>1</sup> of wheat grain. By the time I left, an individual portion was reduced to 3.5 kilos. Only on special occasions such as a wedding ceremony or a big Chinese festival could a peasant family afford to have steamed wheat bread and some meat on their dinner table. The rest of the year their diet consisted mostly of corn bread, potatoes, and salted vegetables. In springtime when their grain reserve became low they even ate bread mixed with corn flour and edible wild herbs. Several months before the moon festival, the villagers on my team had already started talking about what food to have for the holiday. Before coming to the countryside I was puzzled as to why we Chinese greeted each other by asking "have you eaten?" Now I understood it was only natural. Nothing was more important than food.

Source: Ye Weili and Xiaodong Ma. *Growing Up in the People's Republic: Conversations Between Two Daughters of China's Revolution*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 114–116.

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<sup>1</sup> 22 pounds