

GUO YUHUA  
Qinghua University

## Making History from Everyday Life of Common People: The Oral History Studies in a Chinese Village\*

*Abstract:* Narratives of personal histories of “bitterness” told by peasants who refer to themselves as “suffering people” (*shouku ren*) occupy a significant place in oral accounts of rural life in China in the second half of the twentieth century. They constitute both an important academic resource and an independent field of knowledge production. The social dimensions of “suffering” establish an organic link between the everyday lives of ordinary people and broader social history, such that the deep roots of “suffering” can only be apprehended from the perspective of social structures and power relationships. Seeing the everyday practices of ordinary peasants as an integral part of “civilisation” links peasants’ life histories with the macro processes of social history. It gives the mundane, even trivial, experiences and accounts of peasants’ lives an *extraordinary* significance as organic components of the grand historical narrative.<sup>1</sup>

*Keywords:* social bitterness; grass-roots history; subaltern narratives; oral history.

In 1993, one of the world’s greatest thinkers, the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, produced *La misere du monde*, in which he examined the diverse everyday sufferings of ordinary people in contemporary society. In 1999, this large-scale investigation of social suffering appeared in English as *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*. Over three years, Bourdieu and his twenty-two researchers carried out interviews mainly with ordinary people of low social status, including migrants, unemployed workers, the homeless, female employees, laid-off company directors, peasants and farmers, high school students, temporary workers, foremen, street drifters, small managers, social workers, police, and so on, to reveal life trajectories, stories and experiences of suffering through an “exploratory examination of social suffering, painful circumstances, and dissatisfactions and complaints that are difficult to articulate,” (Bourdieu 1999; Bi Xiangyang 2006). Bourdieu and his collaborators’ work in listening to these people’s stories and entering their lives can be seen as a fulfilment of the sociologist’s political and moral mission—to reveal the deep roots of the social suffering of ordinary people.

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\* The main part of this paper has been published (in Chinese) in *She Hui Xue Yan Jiu* (Sociological Studies) No. 1, 2008.

<sup>1</sup> In Chinese, the different words for ‘suffering’ are often used interchangeably. However, there are some slight distinctions between them. ‘*Ku’nan*’ generally refers to suffering and disasters that are large-scale, social and common or universal; ‘*tongku*’ emphasizes feelings (*ganjue*) towards and about suffering, including bodily and emotional experiences; ‘*jiku*’ mostly refers to bodily suffering and sickness.

## The Social Character and Roots of “Suffering”

### Suffering as a Social Fact

Bourdieu and his colleagues’ research for *The Weight of the World* began with individual interviews about everyday life. Through numerous and apparently trivial accounts of suffering, the researchers used their imagination and sensitivity to discover the complex nexus linking individual conditions and structural transformations of society, and thus tried to transcend the binary opposition between micro and macro characterising conventional social science research. For example, a comparison of interviews with young temporary workers and the “old guys” at a Peugeot plant revealed that the differences between them were not only generational but included a series of structural differences in social position, labour relations, personal experience and political attitude (for example towards strike action). The formal distance between the two generations of workers depicted the profound transformation of the working class coming, as it were, to “the end of a world” (Beaud in Bourdieu 1999: 282–96, and Bourdieu 1999: 317). Interviews with ordinary state workers and social workers demonstrated that difficulties at work stemmed from the “inertia of a fragmented and fragmenting administration” in which workers possessed no more than symbolic resources—for example, the capacity to get on well with neighbours, trustworthiness and advice—but lacked public resources and a systematic foundation. With no alternative but to struggle between the onerous and endless tasks the state assigned them and their own limited capacities, the responsibilities the state demanded of them became an “impossible mission” (Bourdieu 1999: 189–202). Bourdieu also called this “institutional bad faith”—when the state’s the right hand does not know what its left hand is doing, or even worse, when its “right hand does not [even] want to know what gets done by its left hand” (Bourdieu 1999: 204–5). Or, for example, interviews with ordinary high school students all revealed the structures linking their individual lives and the educational system into which they were drawn, the structure and history of the school and education system as a whole, and particularly the mechanisms reproducing social inequality (Bourdieu and Champagne, in Bourdieu 1999: 421–26).

In bringing to light the social character of individual suffering, Bourdieu and his colleagues made a significant methodological assertion, namely that the individual is simultaneously social. What appears to be the most individualised is at the same time the most de-individualised. Difficulties in individual circumstance may be seen as subjective anxieties and conflicts, yet what they invariably reveal are the structural contradictions embedded in the stratifications of the social world. “Many dramatic scenes of the greatest personal intimacy may obscure the deepest dissatisfaction and most singular suffering. Men and women are all living creatures, but the roots of their experiences can always be traced to circumstances produced by objective contradictions, constraints and dilemmas. These objective, external elements are universally found in the structures of the labour market, the property rental market and inscribed in the mechanisms of economic and social inheritance.” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1998: 263–265).

“Social suffering” is also a key term for the medical anthropologist Arthur Kleinman.

Social suffering... brings into a single space an assemblage of human problems that have their origins and consequences in the devastating injuries that social force can inflict on human experience. [Such] grouping of human problems defeats the categorization of ... issues as principally psychological or medical and, therefore, *individual*. Instead, it points to the often close linkage of personal problems with societal problems. It reveals too the interpersonal grounds of suffering: in other words, that suffering is a social experience (Kleinman, et al. 1997: ix).

Kleinman’s research attempted to break through established divisions—for example, that separated the individual from analyses of social stratification, health from social problems, expression from experience, and suffering from intervention. The dualism of these divisions in fact impedes our understanding of how the multiple forms of human suffering are simultaneously both individual and collective, and how modes of individual suffering and trauma are simultaneously local and global (Kleinman, et al. 1997: ix–xxv).

Here, we can again appreciate the force of C. W. Mills’ *The Sociological Imagination*—his capacity to link individuals’ troubles in concrete circumstances to the public issues of the social structure, and to move back and forth between the micro data of individual experience and the macro history of society (Mills 1959). Mills argued that

in so far as the economy is so arranged that slumps occur, the problem of unemployment becomes incapable of personal solution. In so far as war is inherent in the nation-state system and in the uneven industrialization of the world, the ordinary individual in his restricted milieu will be powerless... to solve the troubles this system or lack of system imposes upon him (Mills 1959: 10).

The day-to-day troubles and anxieties that people across the world are incapable of resolving are created by structural transformations of society that they are powerless to control. In this sense, “the history that now affects every man is world history” (Mills 1959: 4).

The social interpretation of suffering can also be traced back to Durkheim’s classic social theory of suicide. In Durkheim’s view, suicide is an individual act but is powerfully influenced by the social environment, making suicide a social fact. The conclusion he reached from his research on suicide was that some human behaviour is moulded by the social environment—family, organisation, community, race and historical moment. In *On Suicide*, Durkheim refuted the idea that suicide could be attributed to asocial factors, including suicides supposedly caused by psychological factors (mental abnormalities, hereditary factors, racial characteristics), and natural factors (climatic, seasonal and diurnal), and using extensive factual and statistical data he argued that ‘suicide does not arise from innate characteristics but from the external factors controlling individual behaviour’—in other words, the external environment, social trends and public moral standards. Suicide thus emerges as a particular form of the collective malady, and as such helps explain its character. (Durkheim 1988: 257–80).

All these ideas come together in explaining how individual concerns, anxieties and suffering, such as unemployment and suicide, are ‘social suffering’. The research

on which they are based offers important evidence about the ‘history of suffering’ of ordinary people. It also provides a methodological basis for the study of a “history of suffering.” Bourdieu especially emphasised that

there is no more real or realistic way of exploring communication in general than by focusing on the simultaneously practice and theoretical problems that emerge from the particular interaction between the investigator and the person being questioned (Bourdieu 1999: 607).

By collecting the oral histories of ordinary people, and engaging in a close mutual exchange with those who are subjects of their histories, we can establish a link between individual experience and narrative and the macro processes of social history, and thus understand and explain the relationship between individual suffering and changing social structures.

### **Revealing the Deep Sources of Suffering**

A task even more important for the social sciences than bringing to light the unknown and invisible aspects of ‘social bitterness’ is that of exposing the basic roots of social suffering and the hidden mechanisms creating it.

The essays in *Social Suffering*, as Kleinman, Das and Lock pointed out in their introduction to the volume, critically explores the ways our historically and culturally shaped commitments to particular versions of modernisation construct moral quandaries and how our usual practices of casting social experience as “natural” and “normal” obscure the “greatly consequential workings of ‘power’ in social life.” (Kleinman et al. xi). They also pointed out that “politics and professional processes powerfully shape responses to types of social suffering. These processes involve both authorized and contested appropriations of collective suffering” (Kleinman et al. xii). As a result, the even more interesting and significant issue that research has to confront concerns how suffering is produced in society, and how recognition of suffering as a cultural process is acquired and regulated.

Bourdieu went even further in transforming the notion “social suffering” from a pathological metaphor into a sociological concept, through which he clarified his research objectives: “transforming sicknesses that are difficult to define into utterly clear and explainable diseases facilitates the use of politics to manage them.” He wanted to break through the multiple screens shielding social suffering, and to mobilise people to control the social mechanisms breeding immorality and degeneration, for, in his view, it was precisely these mechanisms that incited negativity, anxiety and despair (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1998: 262–80).

In *The Weight of the World*, social suffering is present in all the main spheres of life—in race and neighbourhood relations, the ghettos and “problem suburbs,” the fate of the working class, the education system, and family and generational relations. Bourdieu attributed its source to the ‘dual retreat of state and market’ that occurred at the same time as the expansion of market ideology and neo-liberal globalisation (Bourdieu 1999: 153). This can be seen, for example, in the withdrawal of the state from the supply of public goods and the draining of public services, the ‘systematic

self-deceit' of the state system, the breaking up of the working class and the dissolution of the labour movement brought about by the adjustments of the industrial system, the social exclusion and collective disappointment bred by the education system, the ruptures in family and cross-generational relations that encapsulate the contradictions of society as a whole. The "positional suffering" experienced by being situated in particular structures and the individual disasters that parallel collective decline can all be summed up as the political roots of suffering—the diminishing parameters of the social, the increasing atomisation of the individual, and the operations of state.

Bourdieu saw that the new suffering and the endlessly accumulating sense of injustice had already lost the means of public expression. Understandably, suffering leads to hatred, and "hatred is the deepest and most universal form of human suffering; it is the most contorted thing that those in control force on the bodies of those they control" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1998: 278). As a result, the aims of his research were precisely to

clarify the discourses that remain unexplained and suppressed, through a method involving talking to different kinds of people: those who because of their positioning in particularly sensitive areas of social space can be truthful chroniclers of their own diseases, those officially occupied with 'social problems', and those 'practical experts' who occupy strategic positions in the social world. The rich understanding and spontaneous knowledge these 'practical experts' have of the workings of society make them a living treasury. After gaining a full understanding of the individual's social experience and background, we can go on to carry out detailed, highly inter-dynamic and in-depth interviews to help the interviewees discover and articulate the hidden rules behind the bitter tragedies in their lives and in their everyday misfortunes, to help them throw off the constraints and harassments of such external realities, dispel occupation of their inner lives by external forces, and overcome the expropriation of people's innate creativity by external realities in the monstrous appearance of the dissident (263–4).

From this we can see what Bourdieu meant by combining science and politics. "As a social scientist, if you don't intervene, interfere, and appropriately recognise the limitations of each discipline, this is a betrayal of compassion; it is to choose the unacceptable" (265). "Because of this, in my view, sociology is an instrument of emancipation, and hence an instrument of generosity" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1998: 278).

I have set out Bourdieu's analysis here at such length because he and his colleagues' investigations, explanations and searches for the causes of social suffering demonstrate "sociology's capacity to shatter myths" as well as their great compassion. Their articulation and analysis of social suffering also represent an important line of thought for the analysis of the oral history of rural life in China in the second half of the twentieth century. The reflections and discussions Bourdieu's analysis opens up are grounded in an attempt to link the life histories of ordinary peasants with the broad contours of social history—narratives of social suffering thus become historical evidence, experienced by countless numbers of people at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

### **How can 'Suffering' become History?**

The history of ordinary peasants is a history of suffering, a history of the search for survival as well as a history of the struggle to overcome it. Rural society in twentieth

century China has seen fundamental and radical changes; peasants and the Republic together have endured trials and hardships for more than half a century. However, peasants' experiences and peasants' evaluation and explanations of their own experience are absent from the historical record. The elite's control of the power of expression, discourse and explanation enables it to event control social fact (such as the social surveys of the so-called 'social sorcerers' to which Bourdieu referred) and change the historical record (such as the accounts and descriptions of the Red Army leaders in the Jinggang Mountains). One of the ways to defeat the hegemony of official texts and official discourse is to write the history of ordinary people, the history of the "sufferers." In attempting to do this, this research thus explores the possibilities of transforming the existential condition of history.

### The Concept of the 'Sufferer'

The peasants of Ji village where we have been carrying out fieldwork for many years refer to themselves as 'sufferers'. This is not a term that we as researchers have imposed on the subjects of our research; rather it is the definition that villagers give to themselves. In the region surrounding Ji village, 'sufferer' is a traditional term that peasants continue to use today to refer to those who farm the land present. In local language, the 'sufferers' are those who 'make a living' on the land; it is a local term that is popularly accepted and conveys no sense of discrimination. When you ask a local person what he is doing the common response is '*zai jia shouku*' (lit. 'suffering at home'), in other words, making a living farming the land.

The concept of the 'sufferer' (*shouku ren*) may be a key to understanding how peasants characterise their lives, both historically and now. In the first instance, this idea of the 'sufferer' is distinct from the ideological category of the 'exploited and oppressed classes.' The 'sufferers' in Ji village are those who cultivate the land, in contrast to carpenters, entrepreneurs and migrant labourers; it is a concept that refers to employment and the division of labour. However, a detailed analysis reveals that the idea of the 'sufferer' labouring on the land is not completely unrelated to the ownership of land and wealth, since historically, Ji peasants have contrasted the term 'sufferer' to the 'rich man' or 'moneybags' and the 'boss.' This demonstrates the subtle classifications Ji villagers used before the arrival of 'class consciousness,' in particular how the two categories of labour and ownership of wealth are conceptualised with reference to each other. The criteria for defining the 'rich man' is ownership of wealth (land), and the criteria for defining others in relation to the 'rich man' are the types of labour (cultivating the land and physical labour) (Guo Yuhua, Sun Liping 2002). It is clear that the traditional idea of the 'sufferer' is very close to a class classification, but the formation of class categories was the product of revolutionary power entering the village. The basis of the traditional classification was principally the division of labour. Up until today, the concept of the 'sufferer' still retains its main implications. The most important thing is that the 'sufferer' is a term villagers use of themselves, embodying their life experience and evaluations across the generations, and constituting their history. In local life, people may describe someone who works until exhausted, or

a task that is onerous, as ‘suffering too heavily’ (*ku tai zhongle*). Someone who is very hardworking and able they will describe as ‘suffering well’ (*ku hao*), in other words able to endure a lot. ‘That suffering is too big’ (*nei ku da de e le*) is a common term for too great a hardship. Many of the local terms villagers continue to use to talk about events and people date back a long time. ‘Suffering’ thus refers both to bodily effects and psychological experiences; it is a critique of objective phenomena and, more importantly, and the articulation on individual and collective identity. ‘Bodily suffering’ (*shenti de ku*) and ‘spiritual suffering’ (*xinling de ku*) constitute the basis of their everyday lives, and thus—of course—their history. In sum, the history of ordinary peasants is the history of suffering.

Suffering takes on many different forms in the everyday lives of farmers and peasants, and most villagers we know describe themselves as ‘sufferers.’ Recalling their past lives, nearly every interviewee had endless stories of suffering. Life’s multiple pressures and difficulties appeared as the suffering of poverty, labour, family and marriage, gender issues and physical disabilities. Famine is the most acute expression of poverty, and to this day it continues to occupy a prominent place in the accounts of those villagers who experienced it.

### Explaining and Dealing with Suffering

As I have already noted, suffering is manifest in all aspects of life. Whether the effect of the cruelties of survival or of bad family circumstances, the ‘sufferers’ of the land are the descendants of ‘ancestors who failed to make any savings.’ Someone with a physical disability who can’t find a wife (*poyi*) is ‘very pitiful’ (*kexi huang le*). The suffering that women tell of is even less ‘reasonable,’ for simply being women, wives and mothers subjects them to the ‘suffering’ of having their feet bound, giving birth, labouring on the land and enduring a lower status. Their suffering is fixed by birth and by fate.

‘Sufferers’ have their own ways of dealing with and explaining their hardships. Those who are at the bottom of the social hierarchy have no choice but to struggle for a means of existence. In the day-to-day vocabulary of Ji villagers, there are various terms for the ways people deal with their suffering. ‘*Sheng*’ (to live) and ‘*shengxia*’ (to live on) are common words denoting survival or ‘living’ (*huozhe*), and ‘*shou*’ (to endure) is used to mean shouldering a burden, or enduring hardship. Someone who can endure extremes of suffering is ‘really tough’ ‘*ke shou jieshile*.’ ‘*Ao*’ (to endure, to bear) refers to the suffering of endurance, so ‘enduring hard and bitter labour’ is ‘*ke’aole*’ (enduring a lot). Enduring hardship, struggling with and living with suffering is a significant part of peasants’ daily lives.

Villagers’ most common explanation for the causes of their suffering is a ‘bitter fate’ (*ming ku*). On the one hand, they explain wealth and prosperity and the ‘capacity to struggle through’ (*renjia you benshi zhengxia de*) as the result of their ancestors’ morality and frugality, sagacity and ability, or they identify their own situation with an unhelpful fate, with ‘no smoke rising from the ancestors’ graves.’ Such explanations have often been condemned as signs of peasants’ fatalism and are often used as evi-

dence of peasants' 'backwardness' and 'stupidity.' They can just as well be seen as the classic product of the controls of an ideological system which before the revolution identified peasants as a subordinate group without class consciousness, with no more than a 'false consciousness' (James Scott 1976: 225–34). At the same time, it is also necessary to point out that the classifications created by the social relations grounded in ownership of land and wealth describe the objective condition of village society, and are categories that villagers can recognise. Peasants' routine forms of everyday life converge in the ways they obtain and accumulate wealth, and whether in their attempts to obtain and accumulate wealth, or in the unforeseen catastrophes of individual and family life, the kinds of fatalistic expressions that peasants use neither necessarily nor invariably express their attitude to real, social life. For example, when the fortunes of a wealthy clan decline, people may explain this as the ancestors' failure to 'accumulate virtue' (*ji de*). But it would be better to describe this explanation as an emotional response conveying complex ideas about gloating over someone else's misfortune. On the other hand, villagers will say that the misfortunes of those who deserve their sympathy are fixed by fate (*mingzhong zhuding*). But this kind of explanation for the causes of misfortune would be better articulated as the search for a kind of 'peace of mind,' both for the individual and for the group. What appear to be fatalistic explanations should be thought of not as realistic judgments or guides to behaviour but, rather, as skilful means of dealing with social relationships and assuaging anxieties.

Fatalistic explanations represent peasants' cognitive and classificatory understanding of the social world. However, before land reform, such economic and social classification was not a class classification; renting land and employing labor were not seen as relations of exploitation. The turn towards the class analysis of peasants' daily suffering only began with the arrival of revolutionary political power in the village. Nevertheless, despite this, peasants still had no alternative but to deal with the different kinds of suffering in their everyday lives and to mobilise all their courage, energies and wisdom to survive. This history of struggle to survive suffering is precisely what gives meaning to the idea that ordinary people propel and create history, for they have no other choice.

Suffering thus described the daily lives of the ordinary and disadvantaged. Their accounts reveal an experience of suffering that permeates their destinies, that cannot be associated with any particular cause, and that inevitably is often coloured by essentialist and fatalistic explanations. The reinterpretation of their individual physical and psychological sufferings into the sufferings of class exploitation and oppression, and hence the incitement to class hatred and class consciousness only came about with the arrival of revolutionary politics in the village. It was precisely through introducing new techniques of power in 'speaking bitterness' and 'digging out the roots of suffering' that the new ruling class 'excavated' the peasants' class consciousness, and could thus give a cause to their suffering.

#### **'Revolution'—'Rescuing' Peasants from Suffering**

'Suffering' is intimately connected to the political construction of state power and peasants' notion of the state (Guo Yuhua, Sun Liping 2002). In explaining the forma-



tion of the modern nation-state and the transformation of rural society, the historian Prasenjit Duara how political power entered the village in the first half of the twentieth century entered rural society. He used two important concepts—‘state-making’ and the ‘cultural nexus of power’—to analyse the complex historical relationship between the state and social relations in China’s countryside, thus moving beyond the modernisation paradigm of much western social scientific research. He clearly realised that the fundamental reasons explaining the Chinese Communist Party’s success in establishing state power were that ‘the Communist Party understood peasant bitterness, and so could mobilise the revolutionary enthusiasm of the masses.’ One aspect of their bitterness originated in the relationship between state and society at any given moment—fleecing the people with extortionate taxes and levies, a coercive dictatorship, rural public office becoming the means to serve self-interest, and so on. On the other hand, Duara also recognised that when revolution occurred in the village, it was difficult to mobilise people through using the concept of class, because peasants’ dependence on the landlord elite was extremely limited, due to the fact the absentee landlords who controlled the village lived in towns and cities. It was therefore difficult to light the ‘prairie spark’ of revolution in the village by means of class struggle. (Duara 1994: 238–41). While Duara clearly grasped the implications of ‘suffering’ for state-society relations and the importance to the revolution of mobilising a consciousness of suffering, he did not fully take on board the enormous potential of exploring and steering ‘suffering’ for social transformation as a whole. In particular, in not grasping the links between experiences and understandings of suffering and class, he did not pay enough attention to the crucial significance of the ‘consciousness of suffering’ for his main topic—the construction of state power and the nation-state.

The oral history of Ji Village peasants illustrates the Communist Party’s conscious deployment of a series of techniques of power to mould peasants’ experiences of ordinary suffering within class and nation-state frameworks. Through such techniques as ‘speak bitterness’ (*su ku*), ‘digging out the roots of bitterness’ (*wa ku gen*), and ‘recall bitterness and think of sweetness’ (*yi ku si tian*)—used during the revolutionary period and particularly after the establishment of revolutionary state power—the CCP condensed and refined the different kinds of ‘natural’ suffering of peasants’ everyday life as ‘class suffering.’ Articulating peasants’ experience and understanding of suffering as a process of ‘class suffering’ was basic to the subsequent class struggle and, just as significantly, to shaping the relationship between peasants and the state within peasants’ internal worlds. Managing ‘suffering’ emerged as a technique of power thus aimed at launching a social experiment to ‘rescue peasants from suffering’ in what was a profound and extensive revolution transforming both objective and subjective worlds.

The experiment in social engineering led by state and promoted in the form of a revolutionary movement thus transformed the lives and fates of ordinary peasants alongside the transformation of society as a whole. The goal of the revolution was to rescue the labouring masses; revolution was hailed as a process to deliver the masses from their suffering. However, a revolution launched in the name of salvation may have unintended consequences in the form of new experiences of suffering. In *Seeing Like a State*, the issue Scott explored was ‘how certain schemes to improve the human

condition improve have failed?' He summarised the logic of the failure of the twentieth century's utopian social engineering projects as the 'fatal combination' of four elements: the management system of nature and society—the simplification of the tools of the modern state for remolding society; the 'high modernist' ideology of the strategists of the new system; states that are willing and capable of using coercive power; and weak civil society that lacks the capacity to resist the afore-mentioned. (Scott 2004: 1–9) In his analysis of collectivisation in the former Soviet Union and Nyerere's 'villagization' project in Tanzania, he suggested that such large scale efforts to redesign village life and production have invariably been described as a 'civilising process,' but 'I would rather see them as an attempt at domestication, a kind of social gardening... a sedentarisation, concentration and radical simplification of settlers and cultivators' (Scott 2004: 243–356). As a 'civilising process' 'social gardening' deprives subjects of their agency, treating them as fruit and vegetables and thus without feeling, without thought and without consciousness. In its focus on confirming and promoting the [state's] capacity to rule, it disregards the value and feelings of ordinary citizens, very possibly constituting a fatal threat to human life, with disastrous consequences for ordinary people.

How do ordinary people protect themselves in their response to such enormous projects of social engineering? How do ordinary peasants at the bottom of the social ladder survive, experience and challenge such processes? What kinds of changes occur in their material and spiritual worlds as a result of these processes? We can only understand their answers to these questions if we listen very closely. Understanding the processes and logic of revolution through the narratives of ordinary people is also one of our motives in exploring and writing a history of 'sufferers.'

### **Constructing History from Narratives of Suffering of Those at the Bottom of Society**

The sufferers—the vulnerable at the bottom of society—are those without name, voice or face in history. There are at least two main reasons explaining their silence and invisibility in historical narratives. The first is that elite historiography erases the political attributes of the lower classes as agents of their own history and actions; the subaltern classes are those without political effectiveness and their depoliticization results in their complete disappearance from the histories created by the elite. The second is that the characteristic actions that Scott summarised as the 'weapons of the weak' and 'hidden transcripts' obscure from view the singular traces of the subaltern's actions. We could say that the logic of the politics of the disadvantaged is not to leave any trace of the tracks they pass through. Covering over their tracks diminishes the danger they confront, and also destroys much of the evidence that would enable social scientists and historians to believe in their contemporary political reality (Scott 1985: 1990).

Foucault's insights about power suggest that the historical appearance of the disadvantaged can only be illuminated for a brief moment by the ray of light of power.

There has to be a beam of light, or at least a brief moment that illuminates them. This beam of light comes from another place. These lives at root want to protect themselves in the darkness, and at root, they should stay there. Freeing them from darkness is none other than their encounter with power. There is absolutely

no doubt that without the impact of this encounter no note of their brief lives would remain. [...] All these lives are at root destined to live at the lowest social levels beyond the reach of discourse, to the point that never having been noted, they leave no trace. They can only succeed in leaving a trace through this fleeting contact with power, very brief and very profound, just like a riddle. [...] These lives that seem as if they have never existed only have the opportunity to survive because of their encounter with power, but this power only seeks to destroy them, or at least destroy all trace of them. These lives can only re-appear with us today because of the combination of a multiple chance encounters (Foucault 1999).

Subaltern studies scholars share common ground with the British Marxist historians in seeking to write a 'history from below,' but they do not agree with the latter in including the history of the subaltern in the elite narratives of western modernity. In their view, the so-called 'history from below' makes the narratives of western modernity more detailed, and more complete, but no 'history from below' can challenge the basic existence, stability and legitimacy of capitalist modernity. Because of this, subaltern history is not the same as the 'history from below'. In her famous essay, Spivak pointed out that the 'people' or 'citizens' written into the books of bourgeois history are the elite. The idea that the subaltern can acquire a voice through the books that historians write is simply a myth, and in fact is no more than the description of the subaltern written by the historian. From this perspective, the subaltern can never have a voice (Spivak 1988). The ahistorical methods of elite history 'clearly omit the politics of the people,' a sphere of agency and autonomy that is neither the product of elite politics nor depends on elite politics for its existence (Guha 1988: 39–40). Affirming the 'autonomous' existence of subaltern politics and subaltern consciousness constitutes the basis and premise for compiling their history.

In contrast to elite historiography, subaltern historiography argues that history is not characterised by all-encompassing roles and actors governing consciousness. If it were possible to resolve the problem of 'how the subaltern is described', the entire sphere of modern knowledge would open up to subaltern history, and all established research topics, such as the expansion of colonial rule, religious and social reform movements, the rise of nationalism, education, the press, and particularly the public system of the modern state would all become the research topics of subaltern history and subaltern research. One of the important tasks that the subaltern studies group has put energy into in its critique of elite historiography is compiling a history of the subaltern. In the preface to *Selected Subaltern Studies*, Guha pointed out that 'The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism—colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism' (Guha and Spivak 1988, Vol. 1: 1). The objective of subaltern history is to oppose these two forms of elitism. Subaltern studies scholars have paid considerable attention to the history of peasant uprisings at different periods, and in the process have discovered some materials enabling them to hear the stories that subalterns told of their own lives. But there is too little of this kind of material. A more effective approach is to read traditional (official) documents about peasant rebellions in new ways. Subaltern historians have therefore created some new methods, and read the accounts of peasant uprisings established by oppositional official structures from the position of the peasant, shedding new light on research into what constitutes the 'rebellious consciousness' (Chatterjee 2001).

A point that needs to be stressed is that while subaltern history seeks to rescue subaltern history from elite history, subaltern history should not be seen as a separate or isolated sphere: it intersects with and is interdependent on elite history. Just as Spivak suggested, the alternative history of the subaltern is integrated knowledge because it unequivocally clarifies history's ruptures, failures and neglect. With this, it becomes possible to conduct a more just examination of the comprehensive experience of anti-colonialism in India (Guha and Spivak 1988: v-x).

In the already existing histories of rural society in China there is a narrative absence of the ordinary peasant. The rural subaltern is excluded from the narratives of official discourse; whatever the narrative, the subaltern classes are denied an independent political position. To complete these narratives, or to provide a new narrative, is an epistemological task of subaltern studies—to produce a new knowledge that will become a field for the independent accumulation of knowledge. The birth of this sphere depends in significant measure on the narratives ordinary people tell about their own experiences, and not on the narratives of historians. The history of 'suffering' constitutes a significant part of the narratives Chinese peasants who have witnessed more than half a century of social change. In the process of China's socialist revolution, the authorities launched activities to construct a history of the people under terms such as 'speak bitterness' (*su ku*), 'recalling bitterness and longing for the sweet' (*yi ku si tian*), and the 'four histories campaign' (*si shi yundong*). However, though these campaigns appeared to position peasants as the main subjects, they were in fact historical campaigns led by the authorities, the aim of which was to reconstruct social class and transform the spiritual world of the peasants.<sup>2</sup> They were the product of the ruling ideology, and were oriented to completely different interests to those of our current research project on peasants' oral history.

Subaltern history and subaltern studies constitute a rich academic resource for exploring the history of rural social life in China over the past half century. We need to approach and understand history afresh from the perspective of the subaltern. Duara pointed out that the historical consciousness of modern society is totally and unequivocally dominated by the nation-state. National history has produced a unitary national community—the effect of an evolutionary process. However, the nation is in fact characterised by difference, and its history is by no means a linear process of evolution. Duara proposed the notion of 'bifurcated history' to replace the view of linear history, in order to complete the task of 'rescuing history from the nation-state' (Duara 2003: 1–16). The aim to 'rescue history' is still highly significant, but Duara's achievement in producing a 'bifurcated history' has not been able to fulfil its promise. As Li Menghas pointed out, bifurcated history seeks to serve as the mouthpiece of the oppressed, but can Duara's bifurcated history really help (or even hope to help) us understand those who have no history? Li Meng argued in his analysis of peasants' oral history that the contrast to linear history are not the bifurcations of historical narratives but the stratifications of historical lives. Peasants, settled at the subaltern

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<sup>2</sup> For the function of campaigns such as 'speak bitterness' in constructing peasant-state relations, see Guo Yuhua and Sun Liping, 2002.

depths of history, whose memories make no distinction between armies that have come and gone, and whose day to day lives are almost impossible to describe as historicised, have not proposed an historical formulation, or a counter-narrative, as an alternative to the linearity of national history. Even if there is something that contrasts with Duara's linear history, it is no more than a 'counter-memory' that rejects narrative, a 'corporeal memory' (Li Meng 2001).

From this we can see that the important task of oral history is not 'to put together the fragments of history' nor to 'fill the gaps in history' or to 'cure history of its sicknesses.' Subaltern history does not seek to make good the omissions and deficiencies of official and elite history. The tasks of oral history are elsewhere—to listen to the voices of those at the bottom of society, to record histories of 'suffering' in ordinary everyday life, and to write the history of survival and resistance which has not been written. For ordinary subalterns who have neither the means to write their own history nor even to raise their voices, our oral history is not to create a history on their behalf, nor to write their history for them. Rather it is an attempt to open up a space of 'narration' in which ordinary peasants can narrate their own experiences, understandings, and historical evaluations.<sup>3</sup> Apart from recording their histories, the researcher also has to articulate these through an analysis that draws on social theory. In contrast with 'rescuing history from the nation-state,' our efforts are to make history from the everyday life of ordinary people, recording and bringing to light the 'suffering' of ordinary people, and through this to clarify the shifting logic of civilisation.<sup>4</sup>

Experiences of suffering and the narratives of the experiences are, of course, individual; they are life stories told by many individuals or by groups constituted by individuals. It is precisely because individual suffering is invariably the product of structural contradictions embedded in the social world—or, simply put, of the 'social character of suffering', that the individual narrative acquires a significance that transcends the individual. This also explains why the individual 'narrative of suffering' can become history. In the past, the reason why the sufferings and narratives of sufferings of ordinary people have been hidden from view is because of the power relations embedded in historical writing—history has always been the history of the rulers and the elite, excluding the voices of the subaltern. This analysis shows us that 'social suffering' establishes an organic relationship between the daily lives of ordinary people and the history of society as a whole. It also shows the need to bring to light the deep roots of suffering from the perspective of the social structure and the power relations embedded in it. The history of revolution and reconstruction over half

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<sup>3</sup> During the course of ten years of research, we discovered that ordinary peasants are both able and willing to narrate their own history, as long as the researcher is a sincere, respectful, serious and understanding listener.

<sup>4</sup> The notion of 'communist civilisation' refers to the specific operational logic of social life in China, in contrast to that of 'capitalist civilisation.' This logic includes the forms of social organisation, modes of controlling resources, and the basic modes of life and value orientations. For more on "communist civilisation," see Guo Yuhua, "Shehuixue de xinzhizhi pinzhi yu dongcha nengli" (The psychological quality and penetrative insights of sociology), *Shehuixuejia chazuo* (Sociologists' Saloon), 2006 (1); Sun Liping, "Shehui zhuanxing: fazhan shehuixue de xin yiti" (Social transformation: developing new topics in sociology), *Shehuixue yanjiu* (Sociological Research), 2005 (1).

a century has been an enormous project of social engineering led by the Communist Party, but it is a historical project that concerns not only an elite minority, but also the lives and destinies of ordinary people. Hundreds of millions of ordinary people have experienced this project, and they have a visceral and emotional tie with it. We should be able to understand and analyse this period in the history and transformation of a civilisation from the experiences and common sense of ordinary people. To see the daily lives of ordinary people as the process of civilisation gives their mundane and fragmented experiences and stories extraordinary significance as dynamic parts of the bigger narrative. The sufferer who may or may not share the same fate as others is without doubt a small paving stone in the process of social change, but is this to say that he or she should not be considered, attended to, recorded, and described? After all, the lives and destinies of hundreds of millions are involved, and they are the real creators and promoters of history. Linking civilisation and the everyday life practice of ordinary people is what gives meaning to theme of “history created by the people.”

(English translator: Harriet Evans)

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*Biographical Note:* Guo Yuhua is Professor of Sociology at the Department of Sociology, Qinghua University, Beijing, China.

*Address:* Department of Sociology, Qinghua University, Beijing, 100084, P. R. China. Email: guoyh@tsinghua.edu.cn