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From Bitter Memories to Revolutionary Memory

On *Suku* in Northern China During the Land
Reform of the 1940s

Abstract: During the Chinese communist revolution, the revolutionary memories locked in the minds of rural people did not form naturally but resulted from purposeful shaping by the revolutionary party and the socialist state. Among the many techniques used to produce revolutionary memories, suku (outpouring of bitterness) figures prominently. The bitter past tended to be forgotten. Only when placed in the framework of collectivity, class, and society could it be evoked and crystallized into memories of bitterness, then elevated to memories of revolution. Throughout the land reform movement, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the state transformed private experiences and memories of bitterness into a public discourse. By using such effective tactics as promoting anger, fostering activists, tapping into awareness of consanguinity, and condemning landlords, the party and the state emotionalized and homogenized rural public's memories of bitterness and integrated them into the grand narratives of class, revolution, liberation, and nation-state. Incorporated by the collective and homogenous memory, personal and group memories of bitterness therefore provided an important source of legitimacy for the party and the state.

Suku (诉苦 outpouring of bitterness) is a widely used phrase in modern Chinese. It usually means to pour out one's heart, especially bitter experiences,

to someone else for comfort or help.¹ As China's modernization quickens its pace, the phrase gains new currency, since many Chinese professionals and university students who suffer under high pressure have made it a fashion and a pastime to pour out their bitterness on Web sites designed for that purpose.² During the land reform more than five decades ago, however, outpouring bitterness was by no means a mere pastime but rather a ritualized political activity launched by the revolutionary party to mobilize millions of impoverished peasants nationwide; hence it became a familiar phrase to most Chinese people. Unlike its present-day usage, *suku* acquired specific political connotations. The Chinese revolutionary leader Mao Zedong defined *qunzhong suku* (群众诉苦 the masses' outpouring of bitterness) as "pouring out the bitterness that the old society and the reactionaries imposed on people."³ A dictionary published shortly after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) may present a clearer definition: "*suku* means to tell one's history of being persecuted and exploited by class enemies so as to inflame other people's class hatred and confirm one's class position."⁴ Within the framework of class, *suku* awakened people to past bitterness and encouraged individual memories of bitterness to be homogenized into collective memories of revolution and consequently provided an important source of political legitimacy for the party and the state.

Collective memory or social memory has generated mounting academic interest and grown into an interdisciplinary field since Maurice Halbwachs published his classic monograph *On Collective Memory*. In recent years, some scholars of Chinese politics and history turned their eyes to the construction of collective memories and the micro-operation of power during the Chinese communist revolution. *Suku* during the land reform began to claim their attention.

In the past decade, a number of theses and journal articles have been devoted to *suku*. From the perspective of everyday memory and narratology, Fang Huirong 方慧容 pointed out that as a technique, *suku* resets an individual's life tempo on trans-place events so as to change that person's sense of "un-eventfulness" and produce a self in duration. A new collective identification then develops to realize the state's redivision and reintegration of rural communities.⁵ Focusing on *suku*'s fashioning of a "socialist new man," Cheng Xiuying 陈秀英 believed that peasants were enabled to form an abstract notion of class through their experiential encounter with the related discourse and became fundamentally qualified as members of the new regime.⁶ In Guo Jinhua's 郭金华 view, *suku* helped equip peasants with abilities to recognize public venues and to express themselves in public. Such abilities concealed their different degrees of participation in the land reform and ensured its success.⁷ Guo Yuhua 郭于华 and Sun Liping 孙立平 studied *suku*'s relevance to

reconstructing peasant–state relations. They discovered it to be an official technique used to transform people’s mindsets and an intermediary mechanism in shaping peasants’ notion of the state.⁸ Concerned about peasant women’s experiences of revolution, ideology, and all kinds of mobilization, Yao Yingran 姚映然 attempted to chart the development of their bitter feelings during the great social transformation so as to probe more deeply into their inner world.⁹ Identifying *suku* as an effective mobilizing technique, I conducted a micro-analysis of the tactics and skills employed by the leaders and executives during the land reform, which reveals another dimension of political operations in China’s communist revolution.¹⁰ Li Fangchun 李放春 observed rural people’s destinies during the revolution and used their memories of the land reform to delineate the expression structure of their emotions.¹¹ In Peng Zhengde’s 彭正德 analysis, *suku* was an important psychological mechanism to induce political identification among the peasants. It assisted the party in planting the concept of class in rural society, which, freed from traditional bondage, pledged high fidelity to the communist regime.¹² According to Zhang Jinguo 张金国, *suku* constituted a large-scale political movement that was based on the land reform and centered on spiritual and intellectual emancipation. It infused peasants’ bitterness into wartime mobilization, which helped enlist their support as well as political and material resources for the war.¹³

Drawing on the land reform archives collected from Shangdong and Hebei provinces, the present article delves into the connections among *suku*, bitter memories, and revolutionary memory. In particular, it focuses on how rural people’s bitter experiences were transformed into bitter memories and individual memories of past bitterness into collective memories of the revolution, which may hopefully provide a valuable sample for the study of collective memory, especially of political memory, in the Chinese context.

***Suku*: The Ritualization of Bitter Memories**

Bombarded with Western influences, China began its trek toward modernization in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The process did not bring immediate benefit to its rural society. On the contrary, the subsistence-oriented natural economy characterized by intensive farming and cottage industry was seriously undermined; and rural society—afflicted with lack of resources, social instability, and a brain drain—was in total decline. There is no denying that peasants in modern China suffered bitterly from oppression, exploitation, and poverty. Those bitter experiences, however, did not necessarily become part of the sufferers’ consciousness or accrue in their minds to form memories of the bitter past. As indicated by Maurice Halbwachs, only in operation can memories bind thoughts; when the hold of the past has weakened, the

most painful aspects of the previous society tend to be forgotten.¹⁴ Speaking and communicating in a community provide, in contrast, an important way to promote memory production. Angela Keppler's notion of "recollective speech" is relevant here: it holds that sharing and reviewing each family member's own experience play a key role in the formation of family memory and common knowledge of the past.¹⁵ Likewise, Chinese peasants' memories of past bitterness were shaped in close relation to the expression and communication of their past bitter experiences. Unlike what takes place in such a private sphere as the family, the peasants' expression and communication were not spontaneous but organized and regulated by the revolutionary party. They were overt political activities carried out and ritualized in public and typically occurred at *suku* meetings.

As recent research shows, the degree of land concentration and class differentiation in the rural area of northern China were far below the level imagined by the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). A scholar even depicted the prerevolutionary village as "a village without landlords."¹⁶ Accordingly, the peasants' chief burden was not land rentals but taxes; the major social conflict did not exist between peasants and landlords but between peasants and the state.¹⁷ Hence there was a big discrepancy between the class framework that the CCP tried to establish and the objective reality of rural society. The land reform to a large extent did not result from intensified class conflict in rural society but from outside interference and political mobilization. Many land reform documents touch on the so-called "muddle-headedness" of rural people. Some people had no acute sense or clear knowledge of the past bitterness and therefore no bitterness to pour out. Some had an understanding of the bitter past that did not fit the party's class framework, and the bitterness they poured out did not meet expectations. The land reform leaders of Huolu county, for example, noticed that many peasants "did not find life very tough." As they "did not hate" the local landlords, they "failed to take an active part in denouncing them."¹⁸ Various confused notions were also present among the predominantly peasant army, who believed in "predestined poverty" or that "good landlords should be spared from land confiscation," "inherited land should be kept," "middle peasants are not subject to exploitation," "the rich make their money through literacy while the poor go down the drain through doping," "today's landlords have also much to suffer," and so on.¹⁹ During the land reform, women in Ji village of northern Shaanxi province recalled many bitter experiences—including setting examples for others, attending meetings, and a difficult life in marriage and in war—whereas class oppression was counted only as a relatively ill-defined type of bitterness. In addition, many people's generous praise of landlords set the tone for their memories of the land reform.²⁰ In the oral records of Xi village in Hebei province, one peasant

woman who had suffered a lot told the interviewers calmly that she “did not feel embittered” at all and had “no bitterness to pour out.” When asked to air her grievances, another woman elaborated on her sufferings during the Cultural Revolution and the Four Rectification Movement: for example, her forced marriage to a fool and her role as the sole provider for her children and mother-in-law.²¹ Instances of false *suku* surfaced occasionally amid land reform documents in which some landlords and their relatives voluntarily participated in the collective activity. They “poured out their bitterness with strong emotions” and were “eager to ask for compensation” so as to “steal the land reform’s fruits.”²²

Given instances like these, it is not difficult to see that peasants’ bitter experiences did not necessarily lead to knowledge and memory of those experiences. To materialize the transformation requires carefully organized public speechmaking, namely *suku*, to act as the catalyst. Land reformers repeatedly emphasized that the ultimate purpose of land reform did not lie in peasants’ *fanshen* (翻身 liberation), but in inspiring them to *fanxing* (反省 to recognize the root cause of their poverty and deepen their hatred of landlords). It was imperative therefore to “mobilize people to pour out their bitterness.” “The more dramatic *suku* becomes, the easier it is to mount attacks against class enemies and to help people to *fanxing*.”²³ To implement land reform without practicing *suku* was criticized as premature, because it did little to help mold peasants’ bitter memories and class consciousness.²⁴

To fulfill its goal, *suku* must be conducted in a public venue where people can get together. The basic form of the practice is therefore a variety of *suku* meetings: family meetings, group meetings, poor peasants’ meetings, middle peasants’ meetings, representative villagers’ meetings, villagers’ meetings, township or district peasants’ meetings, and countywide *suku* meetings. For individual peasants who cautiously followed the trend, meetings “produced the sense of safety that comes from numbers” and dispelled their apprehensions about *suku*.²⁵ Priority was usually given to those who had suffered most so that the organizers could “boost bitterness with bitterness.”²⁶ Individual *suku* then grew into family *suku*, group *suku*, and large-meeting *suku*. With the escalation of the practice, “a movement was taking shape.” Conducted in different forms and at different places, *suku* displayed multiple features and functions. Individual *suku* and family *suku* were to raise consciousness and remove apprehensions; group *suku* to enlarge the scope of influence and provoke resentment; large-meeting *suku* to create an atmosphere and stimulate action.²⁷ Another theory of *suku* suggests that “small meetings prepare the mindset, and large meetings heighten morale.” Only when practiced in both forms can *suku* achieve the most desirable effects. Meanwhile, such situations should be avoided if the same person has repeated his bitterness too many

times or given speeches only at minor meetings, for both the audiences and the speakers soon lose interest.²⁸

William Hinton, who used to participate in the land reform as a work team member, gave a vivid account of the first *suku* meeting held in Zhang village. When nobody volunteered to speak up and the meeting fell into an intolerable silence, the new vice-chairman of the village slapped the chairman, a denounced landlord, in the face.

The blow jarred the ragged crowd. It was as if an electrical spark had tensed every muscle. Not in living memory had any peasant ever struck an official. A gasp, involuntary and barely audible, came from the people and above it a clear sharp "Ah" from an old man's throat. . . .

The people in the square waited fascinated, as if watching a play. They did not realize that in order for the plot to unfold they themselves had to mount the stage and say what was on their minds.²⁹

Apparently, the tension and violence at the meeting were unfamiliar to the villagers and frightened them. Only when they took up the role of actors and actresses could the mass movement really begin. So what is crucial about *suku* is not the act of "telling" but the motivation of peasants to "break with the landlords" and engage in "face-to-face struggles" through their narration and recollection of bitterness in public.³⁰

As Lyman Van Slyke has keenly observed, in these face-to-face struggles, "each action made the next one easier, and burnt the bridges back to the old ways. A tenant might for a time secretly pay his landlord the original, unreduced rent out of fear of retaliation or in the interest of community harmony. But once he had spoken out against him in a struggle meeting, he had probably passed the point of no return."³¹ Another document reveals that those who broke with landlords share the same thought that "the landlords won't spare them even if they did not take over their lands." Those who had not broken with the landlords tended to "behave passively and were ready to compromise with them for the sake of livelihood."³² These records underline the power of *suku* as a political ritual and drama.

Rituals are often general and exclusive events in which participants openly profess their identification and affiliation with certain communities through standard application of significant symbols. Supervised by land reformers, *suku* tended to generalize the bitterness of the poor so as to involve the rural public in political activity. Slogans like "the poor are all embittered, and the landlords are all to blame," "those who refuse to *suku* are virtually saying 'no' to Chairman Mao," "the poor all have bitter experiences, and everyone is free to pour them out," "no bitterness, no real poor man," and so on offered clear evidence of this tendency.³³ In these slogans, "poor" and "rich"

were tantamount to “good” and “evil,” respectively, whereas to *suku* or not to *suku* became the benchmark for judging “who are really poor”; and the key words above were all loaded with symbolic implications. Understandably, the scale of involvement had to be enlarged as much as possible. Not only were the poor peasants embittered, but “the middle peasants, the rich peasants who cultivate their own lands, and even the landlords’ henchmen are also embittered,” and every embittered individual should be called on to take part in *suku*.³⁴ Middle peasants from well-to-do families could also become *suku* activists if only they went all out in expressing their bitterness. Among more than 600 *suku* activists in Lucheng County, 288 were middle peasants.³⁵ Middle peasants accounted for two-thirds of the more than 15,000 *kuzhu* (苦主 outpourers of bitterness) in Shahe county.³⁶ Even *bao-zhang* (leaders of units of local households) serving the puppet regime and petty landlords were believed to be likewise embittered. The new district government in central Hebei province convened a meeting for “the less guilty members of the puppet regime” and invited them to join in the struggle against major traitors and despotic landlords after they had made confessions.³⁷ Almost all the residents of Wafang village in Yongzhi county showed up to attend the public denunciation of the traitor and landlord Li Yuchen, and some landlords also voiced their bitterness at the gathering.³⁸ Someone from Lin county proposed the division of *baozhang* into several types—“dogsboddy,” “sufferer,” “errand-runner,” “secretary,” and “administrator.” The first three types joined the ranks of bitterness outpourers.³⁹ The soldiers of the puppet regime and their families who made up more than half of the population of a village in Xintai “also obtained people’s forgiveness and were anxious to wash their hands of past sins and take part in the movement.”⁴⁰ According to a report of a certain *suku* meeting, “20 people softened, 56 dared not use force, 40 took pity on the landlords, 560 feared retaliation, and over 600 served the people heart and soul.”⁴¹ Degrees of accuracy aside, such meticulous statistics bear full witness to the popularization of *suku* and the party’s determination to make it a widespread political activity.

Through repeated practice at *suku* meetings, these bitterness outpourers gradually mastered the skills of expressing themselves in public, which was an important step in shaping and reconstructing their memories of bitterness. At the meeting to condemn the landlord Guo Liantang in Shangbolin village, “most speakers used to be habitually silent in the past.”⁴² In Licheng county, “those who had not been fully liberated and remained silent were activated to pour out bitterness and ask for justice,” and some peasants “poured out the bitterness that has been kept on their minds for thirty years.”⁴³ “Over 100 people who had not tried *suku* before joined the movement within a single day” in a village of Xintai, and “those who were reluctant to speak up were all

involved in the movement in three days' time."⁴⁴ Some peasants even learned to express their claims for private interest in a symbolic manner. They "wore their hats and trousers inside out with a tattered cotton-padded jacket on their trunks, which indicates that they were still embittered at heart though their heads and legs were liberated."⁴⁵ Similar cases are easy to find in the land reform archives, where peasants came to have a good command of the class discourse and master the art of making speeches in public.

The meaning of the past is subject to the needs of reality. Rituals are capable of reliving past events and relating them to current experience and behavior.⁴⁶ In Paul Connerton's view, commemorative ceremonies not only imply continuity with the past by virtue of their highly fixed procedures but also claim to commemorate such continuity.⁴⁷ The practice of *suku* during the land reform ran counter to Connerton's prescription; as a ritual that celebrated rupture, it was meant to declare its separation from the past, reform of the present, and expectations of the future through ritualized narration of bitter past experiences. For the speakers and the listeners alike (organizers included), *suku* exerted a powerful influence in shaping and reconstructing memories of bitterness. Through open, repeated, and ritualized telling and listening, bitter past experiences were repeatedly evoked to be crystallized into perceptions and memories of bitterness. In being told and retold, the villagers' bitter experiences underwent "a narratological turn"; certain kind of accidents (bitter events) were merged together as individual memories dissolved into generic memories and then collective memories for the villagers to share.⁴⁸ These shared memories were not produced to commemorate or immortalize past bitterness but to condemn and break up the roots of past bitterness, which inspires revolutionary actions toward a better future.

"Bitter Feelings": The Emotionalization of Bitter Memories

The CCP's huge reliance on "the management of feelings" is regarded by Elizabeth Perry as one of the differences that divide the CCP from the Guomindang (GMD).⁴⁹ The operational features and effective results of such management were brought into the fullest play in the *suku* movement during the land reform. Various tactics to motivate peasants to pour out their bitterness and awaken their memories were adopted by the party in an effort to stimulate peasants' anger with and hatred of the landlord class and its political representative, the GMD, while cultivating their gratitude toward and love of the CCP during the revolution. To fulfill such a goal, it is not enough for people to pour out their own bitterness; "a sense of bitterness" must be developed at the same time to make them "think of their own bitterness while listening to others' stories so as to create a solemn and grievous atmosphere at the meetings."⁵⁰ *Suku* thus

helped villagers foster memories of bitterness in ritualized communication. In addition, its grievous and provocative atmosphere rendered a sentimental touch to those memories and facilitated their conversion into an internalized habit. Appealing to sentiments rather than rational thinking, the memories of bitterness therefore exert an even more powerful and lasting influence on people's minds.

The selection of *kuzhu* was fairly important in emotionalizing bitter memories. Many documents emphasized finding breakthroughs with old people and women, since the elderly had weathered many hardships, and women were prone to feel embittered due to their domestic subjection. "Neither youth nor the middle-aged have much bitterness to talk about; preference should be given to old people because they have been most exploited and embittered by landlords."⁵¹ Women, in contrast, were sentimental and easily moved to tears, which was instrumental in building up the atmosphere. "Women are the best choice as far as the selection of outpourers is concerned. Being emotionally susceptible and having better memories, they never speak without shedding tears, and tears spread quickly."⁵² "In all kinds of *suku* meetings, old men pour out their bitterness most vigorously and women cry most readily. With women's presence, individual weeping can expand into collective wailing."⁵³ Furthermore, to tune up the mood of speakers and listeners, organizers usually tipped those *kuzhu* on how to pour out bitterness more effectively. Before each meeting, they helped them "sum up a few of the landlords' most disgusting evils so as to arouse intense hatred and engage more people to join the denunciation."⁵⁴ They also gave "instructions on their facial expressions."⁵⁵ In particular, *kuzhu* were trained to "wear a woeful and indignant expression when speaking of landlords' oppression of peasants and turn into emotional actors who move people in the end."⁵⁶ Meanwhile, the struggle targets must be carefully chosen for the predictability of their responses. They should neither stand their ground too firmly nor yield too quickly, because "defiance by a stubborn target might result in a deadlock," whereas "a struggle meeting without any resistance can excite few peasants."⁵⁷

The arrangement of venues for *suku* meetings played a key role in creating the wildest indignation among the audiences because it could better serve *suku*'s ritualized functions. For the convenience of organization, "appropriate places and security measures should be prepared in advance. When lining up audiences, organizers should separate children from women, those with affiliations from those without, and insert activists among them."⁵⁸ Leaders expected to see frenzied rage at such meetings. Yet local experiences showed that a calm and solemn atmosphere might contribute more to the effect. According to the experience of Jian village in Handan, "to ensure the meeting's gravity and quietness, cadres must behave solemnly, and then bitterness and

calm, mutually conducive, can naturally grow together.”⁵⁹ Another document raised a similar point, suggesting that the venues for *suku* meetings be solemn and “undisturbed by the outside, for it is easier for all to concentrate on *suku* itself.” “Poor peasants’ dim and shabby houses are good for the meetings and would be even better if dimly lit at night. Larger meetings should be arranged at out-of-the-way places that could easily stir powerful feelings if decorated like a scene on the stage.”⁶⁰ *Suku* in the army was conducted in the same spirit.

It is better to cease all kinds of entertainment and morning exercises for soldiers to focus on recalling their bitterness. Venues should be shady and secluded and decorated as somberly as possible. Slogans must point to specific sufferings. At the beginning of each meeting, disciplines should be announced for people to observe, ones that above all require solemnity and quietness. After the meeting begins, visitors or strangers are forbidden to enter the venue for fear of disturbing the mood. During the meeting, leaders should try by all means to create a sorrowful atmosphere to inspire soldiers’ recollections of the bitter past. In some army units, names of the soldiers’ family members who died in various kinds of sufferings are inscribed on the *lingpai* 灵牌 [spirit tablet for the deceased], and everyone stands in silent tribute after the names are read out at the beginning of the meeting. Many soldiers cannot help crying and dropping on their knees in front of the tablet, and the contagious mood soon affects the whole assembly. In other army units, cooked elm leaves, or “food of famine,” are dished out to the soldiers before the *suku* meetings, which immediately bring to life the memories of past bitterness. With tears still shining on their faces, the soldiers all have many miserable stories to tell at the meetings.⁶¹

Some narrative techniques facilitated the emotionalization of peasants’ bitter memories. Land reformers usually recalled the details and private feelings of bitter experiences to encourage peasants to speak out. “Do you still remember the time when you were starved to the extent that you were unable to move your body? Or the time when you had to part with your wife and children or your parents, knowing that you would probably not see them again?” “When traitors, despotic landlords, and their lackeys talked to the poor, were they friendly? Did they treat you as an equal?”⁶² The typical retelling of bitter memories did not end with an objective account of facts but began with vivid descriptions of the bitter past being experienced and felt. Both speakers and listeners were enabled to relive the past and thus enhance their sense of bitterness. This oral record is a case in point: “My son was a revolutionary leader and was poisoned by the landlord, who killed him together with six other revolutionaries. The landlord forbade me to wrap up his body in a mat, and I did not even have the nerve to cry. I was totally scared then. When I removed my son’s body, I stole a glance at him. He was soaked

in scarlet blood. I have kept his bloodied shirt till this day. Whenever I miss him, I take a look at it.”⁶³

With many emotionalizing techniques in operation, profound grief and intense hatred were aroused among the peasants at *suku* meetings. Feelings were subsequently externalized into actions: grief was expressed in tears, while hatred gave rise to violence. Statistics of crying cases at *suku* meetings are scattered about the land reform archives. In Leling county, “more than fifty of the sixty poor and middle peasants who attended the *suku* meeting in Xiliangjia village cried; the forty poor and middle peasants who attended the *suku* meeting in Xiaozhaojia village all cried; over fifty poor and middle peasants out of the sixty who attended the *suku* meeting in Dongliangjia village cried.” “Due to excessive crying, some peasants passed out, some fell ill, some had bloodshot eyes, and some simply refused to eat.”⁶⁴ In Li village, “quite a few women howled themselves hoarse,” and three old men fainted.⁶⁵ In Jian village, “two brothers cried on each other’s shoulders, vowing to take revenge; some were choked with sobs, and some had swollen eyelids; occasionally when the speaker burst into tears, the audiences would either cry for him or lower their heads in grief, and the whole meeting was then drowned in wails, so much as that anyone present would shed tears out of class sympathy.”⁶⁶ At a *suku* meeting in Huanghua county, “so sooner had one person finished his bitterness outpouring than the entire assembly exploded in tears; and some cried again along with their families after the meeting was over.” Statistics showed that altogether, 5,184 people poured out bitterness that year; of those, 4,551 cried bitterly, 12 wept until they lost consciousness, and 195 cried themselves sick.⁶⁷ Slogans like “no crying, no real poor peasant” and “wipe out the tearless poor peasants” appeared in some areas. A report declared that “it is wrong for cadres not to cry, for if they don’t cry, they don’t love people, or if they don’t cry when people are pouring out bitterness, they are not counted as people’s sons.”⁶⁸ According to one document, “the poor cry to reason, while others only reason without crying.”⁶⁹ Consequently, a valve of emotions seemed to be built into the peasants through the party’s considered “management of feelings.” As one peasant remarked, “the Eighth Route Army has an uncanny power; when it wants the poor to laugh, they laugh, and when it wants them to cry, they cry!”⁷⁰

Once a target to vent public anger was identified through imputation, grief soon turned into indignation, which triggered violent actions at the *suku* meetings. At a *suku* meeting of the activists in a training program, “class hatred was burning fiercely in everyone’s heart and 300 people shouted about taking revenge.”⁷¹ In a village of Shandong province, the speakers “struck the landlords while pouring out their bitterness, and over twenty attendants at the meeting, old and young, all took turns beating up the landlords. An old

man in his sixties was particularly vigorous in bringing down the enemies and was acclaimed with thunderous applause.”⁷² At a major *suku* meeting in Licheng, a speaker “could hardly contain his anger and gave the local tyrant several boxes on the ear.”⁷³ The leader of the Revenge Brigade was bitterly condemned at the *suku* meeting in Yucheng village, and after the villagers’ tearful denunciations, he was executed on the spot.⁷⁴ Two landlords accused of being GMD operatives were shot to death before the spirit tablet of the victims at a *suku* meeting in southern Shaanxi province. The sacrifice “highly gratified the animated masses who were shouting to settle old scores with the landlords.”⁷⁵ The ritualized speaking and listening at those meetings reminded the rural public of their “bitterness,” which engendered “grief” through the organizers’ creation of atmosphere and manipulation of emotions. The poor’s bitterness and grief, after being ascribed to the landlord class and the GMD, led to indignation. The shift from “bitterness” to “grief” and “indignation” prompted the important transformation from *suku* to revenge, from making speeches to taking action.

Halbwachs argues that the past can be recalled in two ways. The first way relies on particular images that correspond to facts or circumstances of the past; the other depends on “a sense of familiarity.”⁷⁶ Connerton draws a distinction between cognitive memory and habitual memory, inscribing practice and incorporating practice. In particular, he emphasizes the power of the incorporating practice and habitual memory, which engage our brains and bodies to understand and remember.⁷⁷ In the practice of *suku*, speakers and listeners were made to recall the bitter experiences they had undergone, which were then crystallized into memories that appealed to sense; the meetings’ special atmosphere and tight grip on feelings restored the sensations of the acute pains those in attendance used to feel, which shaped memories that appealed to sensibility. The connection between perception and memory of past bitterness and sensibility cultivates a habitual memory and is to some extent an incorporating practice. Capable of avoiding the abstraction and fixedness of the rational memory and inscribing practice, emotionalized bitter memories can be internalized and continued in a lively style. Rational cognitive memories and emotional habitual memories function interactively to build the mighty power of identification.

“Roots of Bitterness”: The Homogenization of Bitter Memories

“Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”⁷⁸ Since people’s bitter experiences differ, the memories of them ought to be diverse. Yet what underlies these memories, as Maurice Halbwachs has pointed out, is the common fact that the past is always reconstructed in

reference to the present, and “society from time to time obligates people not just to reproduce in thought previous events of their lives but also to touch them up, to shorten them, or to complete them.”⁷⁹ In the *suku* movement during the land reform, rural people’s bitter experiences of the past were called forth to be reconstructed into memories of bitterness that obliterated individual characteristics and led to homogenized collective memories.

One direct way to elevate individual bitterness to class bitterness was to have past bitterness poured out selectively, hence creating selective memories of bitterness. The “nonstandard *suku*,” which could not be assimilated into the class framework, should be supervised and guarded. A document recorded many nonstandard types of bitterness that were found among soldiers in the army: the bitterness of training and fighting, embitterment of landlords and rich peasants, bitterness that did not point to class oppression, the bitterness of being conscripted by party cadres, the false bitterness that was meant to please and deceive the public, and so on. When asked to reflect on their past mistakes, an act called *tuwushui* (吐污水 spitting out the dirty water), many soldiers “cannot distinguish the dirty water and the clean water due to the influence of feudal moral and legal values. For example, some regarded the following actions as ‘dirty water’: filching landlords’ crops because of hunger, deserting the GMD’s central army, joining the bandits to rob landlords, and so on. On the contrary, wenching and gambling were taken to be ‘legitimate.’” These records distinctly revealed the gap between the class discourse that the CCP intended to indoctrinate through *suku* and the peasants’ inherent moral values. To avoid the negative effects of such nonstandard *suku*, the organizers must select suitable speakers and set up models. They should not only “embolden the speakers” but also “help them recognize problems, perceive the roots of bitterness, and structure the content of their speeches to ensure the removal of the parts that bear little on class.”⁸⁰ As a result, past bitterness would be remembered only in the class framework, whereas memories incompatible with the framework would be forgotten.

It is difficult, however, to homogenize individual bitterness into class bitterness merely through careful selection of bitter experiences. More important, a justifiable logic chain must be established to attribute peasants’ sufferings to landlords’ evils and to the GMD’s corrupt governance—a practice also known as *wakugen* (挖苦根 digging the roots of bitterness). A document hammered home *wakugen*’s importance by saying that “*suku* would be pointless if it were restricted to the outpouring of bitterness while leaving people in the dark as to the origins of their bitterness. As some slogans went, ‘no digging of the roots of bitterness, no use in pouring it out,’ and ‘it is no use crying oneself blind without digging out the roots of bitterness.’ So *wakugen* in fact supplies the central link of the *suku* movement.” In essence, *wakugen* is a logic-based

incriminating strategy. The same document also put forward five “topics for discussion” designed to elicit peasants’ bitterness and realize the goals of *wakugen* and logical incrimination:

Why are the poor poor? Why are the rich rich? Do the rich feed the poor, or the poor feed the rich?

Why couldn’t we pour out bitterness and avenge ourselves in the past? With whom did the government, the special agents, and the policemen form alliances?

Why were the landlords excited when the central army of GMD came in? Why did they run away when the army left here?

Who is Chiang Kai-shek? How many crimes has he committed?

Why do the American imperialists help Chiang Kai-shek wage a civil war?⁸¹

In the logic chain that underlies the questions above, poverty is no longer a shame but the political capital of struggle. The root cause of being poor no longer lies in ancestors’ immorality, unfavorable *fengshui*, or predestination but in exploitation by rich people or landlords. The rich could exploit the poor because they were supported by Chiang Kai-shek and the GMD. So the conclusion is reached that “all bitterness is rooted in Chiang Kai-shek’s reign. The bitterness of the poor will not end so long as he remains in power. To liberate the poor, then, is to overthrow his rule.”⁸²

This kind of incriminating strategy was widely used, as shown by many *suku* documents. For example, guided by the logic chain, a peasant who detested his uncle for selling his aunt “came to see that his uncle was compelled to take this step under pressure from the landlord’s usury and therefore directed his anger at the landlord.” The incident indicated that “peasants cannot be convinced of their bloodless economic exploitation by the landlords unless their minds are truly liberated.”⁸³ During the War of Resistance Against Japan, a bachelor leader of local households refused to help the militia soldiers and their dependents cultivate their farmlands, the cause of which was then ascribed to a certain landlord who “let his wife seduce him” to “undermine the cooperative.” A soldier’s dependent borrowed more than 15 kilograms of cotton from the cooperative and sold it for food, an action believed to result from a landlord’s attempt to “destroy the cooperative.”⁸⁴ The wife of a peasant who joined the GMD army lamented over her husband’s ill-considered departure: “he is heading for a dead end, since he follows the ‘wolves’ to bite people. Chiang Kai-shek is to blame for my misfortune.”⁸⁵ One young peasant burst out crying and accused a landlord and special agent of the GMD of deceiving him into joining the GMD’s secret service. He raised his fist and shouted vehemently: “I’m sorry for joining the secret service, but the landlord was

behind it. I want to avenge myself and my father!”⁸⁶ Such peasant misconduct as refusal to farm for anti-Japanese soldiers’ families, taking advantage of the cooperatives, and joining the GMD’s army or secret service were all attributed to the landlords’ instigation and deception in order to fully demonstrate the evil of the landlord class: “Li Haishui 李海水, a villager of Mapingtou, has been working for a landlord as a farmhand for sixteen years. He thought that it was his destiny and spoke highly of the landlord for finding a wife for him. When the leaders asked him ‘why the landlord found him a wife’ at a *suku* meeting, a heated discussion began among the crowd. In the end, Li suddenly realized that the landlord helped him get married because he himself needed a servant and cook then. The marriage was used to tie him down and make him devoted to the landlord all his life.”⁸⁷

In this example, such an ordinary event as a landlord helping his farmhand get married, which was a typical illustration of the patron–client relationship between landlords and peasants and an embodiment of the existential ethics and moral norms of rural communities in the traditional cognitive framework, could be understood as a measure to sustain class exploitation. It is not difficult to imagine, therefore, that all the bitterness and misfortunes suffered by the peasants were subject to reinterpretation within the class framework. Due to this incriminating strategy, the content of *suku* could go beyond what had happened between the landlords and the peasants. One document clearly stated that “*suku* is not to be restricted to direct conflicts with the landlords but to cover all the bitterness in one’s lifetime, which is usually more touching and tear-jerking. Then put all the blame on the landlords so that the peasants will fix their hatred firmly on the landlords.”⁸⁸ Bitterness such as “poverty, toughness of life, or being plundered, bullied, or entangled in a lawsuit” were all considered fit for outpouring.⁸⁹ When inspiring women to pour out their bitterness, the organizers could also “associate their grievances against parents-in-law with female bullies in the landlords’ families.”⁹⁰ According to a report on *suku* in Huanghua county, 323 people spoke of “the bitterness of starvation,” 546 people mentioned “the bitterness of cadging,” 115 people voiced “the bitterness of selling their own children,” 42 people expressed “the bitterness of separation from families,” and 116 people talked about “the bitterness of being beaten by bandits.”⁹¹ Most people’s bitterness was related to poverty and bandits, and few harbored the bitterness of being oppressed and exploited by landlords. In fact, *suku* literally means to tell of past bitterness, which is also how peasants understood the phrase in many cases.

Narrative strategies also play an important role in elevating individual memories to class memories. According to one narrative strategy, a typical *suku* speech should be structured to begin with an account of personal bitterness and to end with accusations of class oppression. Take the following case of

a woman's *suku* speech, for example. "Although I'm younger than you, I've suffered a lot. My husband's family was extremely poor. After childbirth I had nothing to eat but boiled water with weeds, and three days later I left home with my baby to beg for food . . . all caused by the traitors and the bullies who exploited us."⁹² As many documents suggested, a *suku* speech should develop from "someone's specific grievances against the landlord" to the confirmation that "the poor person's bitterness equals the grievances against the landlord." Likewise, struggles should be generalized from "someone's struggle with someone else" to "poor peasants' struggle with bullies and landlords,"⁹³ so as to "augment one's hatred to the extent that it is shared by all."⁹⁴ In Fang Huirong's analysis, the text of *suku* speeches usually reveals a structure of "one person's narrative plus a conclusion using plural personal pronouns," through which individual stories become an epitome of the old society expanded in space and deepened in time. At this point, the authenticity of the embittering events does not matter any more; what matters is that these events can represent the "essence" of a particular historical moment, a particular state of existence, and a particular narrative theme.⁹⁵ Within such a narrative structure, "the narrative of one life is part of an interconnecting set of narratives; it is embedded in the story of those groups from which individuals derive their identities."⁹⁶

History is not confined to telling the story of the past, as Halbwachs has remarked. In fact, it never stops renewing the story so as to "adapt it to the mental habits and the type of representation of the past common among contemporaries."⁹⁷ The memory of the same fact can be placed within many frameworks, which result from distinct collective memories.⁹⁸ "We change memories along with our points of view, our principles, and our judgments, when we pass from one group to the other."⁹⁹ Before powerful external forces entered rural society, peasants were members of families and village communities, whose memories of bitterness, if they had any, were shaped and conditioned by the frameworks of family and village. Although individual memories of families and villages shared certain similarities, there were distinct differences between one and another. In the course of ritualized *suku* movement and construction of class discourse, the importance of family and village gave way to that of class and state. As the rural masses were drawn into a new collective, their memories of bitterness were also transplanted onto the class framework. Consequently, concrete individual bitterness was homogenized into the abstract bitterness of a class; hence "my bitterness" and "my history" were rewritten as "our bitterness" and "our history."

Bernhard Giesen and Kay Junge generalized four paradigms of historical memory, one of which "conceive[s] of the present as a turning point of history between the dark and repressive past behind us and a bright and open

future ahead of us.”¹⁰⁰ During the course of the Chinese communist revolution, what was constructed through the *suku* movement was exactly the historical view that draws too clear-cut a distinction between the dark past and the bright future. Being marked with such public events as land reform (along with *suku*), the time of individuals and villages were divided into two sections, “the old society” and “the new society.” The former was characterized by all kinds of bitterness and the latter by peasants’ being liberated to become their own masters, with the revolutionary party’s entry and control of the rural community as the turning point. Individual memories and local histories were thereby incorporated into the framework of collective memory and national history.

Conclusion

Maurice Halbwachs, the pioneer of collective memory research, held that individual memories take shape only when set in collective memory—a concept of social construct—and social framework of memory.¹⁰¹ His view laid the foundation for the study of collective memory or social memory for scholars to come, but he did not go into detail as to how collective memories are passed on within the same social group from one generation to the next. Departing from this view, Paul Connerton believed that the study of social memory should focus on “the acts of transfer that make remembering in common possible,” and the most important channels of transmission of social memory are commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices.¹⁰² Angela Keppler advanced a similar idea that scholars of social memory should explore the transmission procedures (*Prozeduren der Übermittlung*) through which memories come into being: namely, the means or social practices adopted by members of a group to express and preserve their opinions of the past.¹⁰³ The purpose of the present article is to examine how rural people’s memories of bitterness were generated and elevated into memories of revolution from the perspective of the formation mechanism of collective memory.

It is not my intention to deny the bitter experiences of modern Chinese peasants. Far from being a natural process, however, the transformation of objective bitter experiences into subjective bitter memories, the elevation of individual bitterness to class bitterness, and the homogenization of individual memories of bitterness into collective memories of revolution are essentially the result of the revolutionary party’s and socialist state’s careful shaping. *Suku* during the land reform, therefore, turned out to be an effective technique of memory production. Aleida Assmann employed two criteria—“authenticity” and “correctness”—to judge people’s memory of the past. What she meant by “correctness” was a memory’s availability to the rememberers and its

acceptability to a group or society.¹⁰⁴ For that matter, rural people's memories of bitterness and their memories of revolution therefrom, though reconstructed by the revolutionary party and probably deviated from the authentic past, are consistent with their survival strategy in the class framework and against the background of revolution. Furthermore, these memories correspond with the goals of the party and the state to strengthen political legitimacy and realize rural governance, and therefore acquire a "correctness" that goes beyond comparison with the original and plural individual memories.

Collective memory is closely related to political power. Since participants in any social order must presuppose a shared memory, the control of social memory becomes an important measure to obtain and maintain legitimacy.¹⁰⁵ The memories of bitterness produced in *suku* above all act as an effective tool for those holding political power to mold new collective identification with a self through class. Memory always produces a reality that transcends the individual and culture, which helps enable groups and group members to understand themselves at a certain period.¹⁰⁶ And social groups always select and reinforce particular social memories to consolidate identification among group members.¹⁰⁷ Before outside forces intervened in rural society, class differentiation was not represented as a clash between different classes; the class relations between peasants and landlords were embedded in social relations. Through the practices of *suku* and class division, the CCP redefined various contradictions in rural society as class conflicts to magnify the opposition between classes and obliterate the differences within a class. Expressions like "your bitterness is ours in common!" and "peasants under the sun are one family!" typified the new identification on the basis of homogenized memories of bitterness.¹⁰⁸ Through *suku* and class division, as one land reform document explained, peasants should "realize that there are only two clans in the world, namely the rich clan and the poor clan, that peasants under the sun are one family and middle and poor peasants are one family, that there are two different social systems and eras; that landlords and local tyrants are little versions of Chiang Kai-shek, who is the biggest tyrant."¹⁰⁹ The quotation manifests the two directions of memories of bitterness and class division: first, to distinguish peasants and landlords, the poor and the rich, and hence the CCP and the GMD; and second, to dissolve or omit the boundaries among poor peasants, tenants, and middle peasants, as well as conflicts among different clans and villages. The former direction relies on a class insulation technique that is meant to provoke rural people's resentment against the landlords, the rich, and the GMD for the purposes of mass mobilization and resource abstraction; the latter is based on a class integration technique that makes use of class unity to settle conflicts among and within communities to promote the integration and governance of rural society. Through ritualized

suku and rational calculation in the class framework, members of the society soon perceive substantial differences between “self” and “non-self,” friend and foe, so as to form a class consciousness that “presupposes the class’s own interest in any case and promotes voluntary unity with people of the same class in opposition to the enemy class.”¹¹⁰ On the basis of the new collective identification, it is natural for people to arrive at the recognition of the liberators’ and torchbearers’ legitimacy and inspire revolutionary consciousness and actions against the exploiters and oppressors.

“All beginnings contain an element of recollection. This is particularly so when a social group makes a concerted effort to begin with a wholly new start.”¹¹¹ In “the moment of beginning” when the memories, consciousness, and actions of revolution are produced, a brand new class framework comes to prevail over rural people’s original bitter experiences and memories of those experiences. It constitutes a perfect match with the experiences of current class struggle. Such experiences, although younger than family memory and village memory, ride the tide of the revolutionary party’s rise and are therefore more powerful. Henri Bergson categorized two types of memory: one that is concerned with the present life and guides actions, and another that is indifferent to the present life.¹¹² Rural people’s memories of bitterness during China’s revolution undoubtedly belong to the first type: not automatic projections of past bitterness but a result of communication and interaction in the ritualized *suku* movement. These memories by no means end with indulgence in past sorrows but are quickly converted into dissatisfaction and anger with present injustices and call for revolutionary actions to change the reality. Mediated by these memories, *suku* thus plays a central role in molding memories of revolution, raising revolutionary consciousness and promoting revolutionary actions. It is easy to see why a former member of a land reform team marveled at *suku*’s power even half a century later: “How amazing the bitter water was! Recalling and pouring it out indeed worked miracles and always ensured sweeping victories over the enemy; moreover, it was applicable and essential at any stage of land reform.”¹¹³

By investigating *suku* during the land reform of the 1940s, the present article explores how the revolutionary party transformed rural people’s bitter experiences into memories of bitterness and elevated them to collective memories of revolution to establish and fortify its own political legitimacy. I would suggest, however, that researchers take a more cautious position when considering the judgment above. As far as rural people were concerned, the transformation did happen, but how thorough it was or how long it lasted is still open to debate. Sociologists have discovered in fieldwork that peasants reveal a “collective forgetfulness” about the roots of bitterness when narrating collective memories of it, and that their feelings as “sufferers” fully

demonstrate different experiences in encounters with state power.¹¹⁴ Someone maintained that it is difficult to conclude that *suku* successfully altered and remolded people's memory in the sense of ideological education; rather, its real impact on people's mentality lies in the production of a self in duration.¹¹⁵ To those researchers who hold a constructivist view of collective memory, these opinions might serve as a positive counterbalance.

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