

Helen Siu

*Helen Siu: Reflections on James C. Scott and
the Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University*

The Yale Agrarian Studies Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Todd Holmes
in 2019

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Helen Siu

Abstract

Helen Siu is a professor of anthropology at Yale University and among the cohort of founding faculty for the Agrarian Studies Program. In this interview, Siu discusses the genesis of the team-taught Agrarian Societies seminar and the founding of the Agrarian Studies Program; her recollections of some of the program's memorable events; and the impact of the colloquium on students and scholars alike.

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Project history

By Todd Holmes
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Berkeley, California

Since its inception in 1953, the Oral History Center of The Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley has been responsible for compiling one of the largest and most widely used oral history collections in the country. The interviewees within this vast collection include many of the nation's high-profile citizens, ranging from senators and governors to artists, actors, and industrialists. And standing among this distinguished list is an equally impressive group of scholars. As a research unit based at UC Berkeley, the Oral History Center (OHC) has long gained rare access to the academy and ultimately built one of the richest oral history collections on higher education and intellectual history. Interviews with Nobel laureates and university presidents fill this collection, as do those with leading scientists and pioneering faculty of color. In recent years, the OHC has sought to further expand this interview collection with ambitious projects on University of Chicago economists and the founding generation of Chicana/o studies. Thus, a project on the famed Yale University political scientist, James C. Scott, and his equally renowned Program in Agrarian Studies stood as an obvious choice in these efforts and a fitting addition to the Bancroft collection. The result was the Yale Agrarian Studies Oral History Project, a two-part series featuring the life history of Jim Scott and short interviews with nearly twenty affiliates of the Yale Agrarian Studies Program.

Part I of the series, "James C. Scott: Agrarian Studies and Over 50 Years of Pioneering Work in the Social Sciences," was released in September 2020, marking Jim's final year at Yale and the thirtieth year of the Program in Agrarian Studies. This collection of interviews with program affiliates represents Part II of the project, aptly titled, "Reflections on James C. Scott and the Agrarian Studies Program." Here affiliates relate their experience with Jim and the program, helping to document the history and impact of Agrarian Studies, as well as offer future generations a glimpse at the scholar who shaped it. As Scott himself described their approach:

This is a sort of sermon I give actually, which is, you know how the health food people say, "You are what you eat"? Well, you are what you read. And if we can encourage students to read things broadly in several disciplines bearing on their interests, and force them, as we do in the Agrarian Studies Program, to make sense across disciplinary boundaries and leave behind their esoteric vocabularies of their own little discipline; if you're reading across disciplines, if you have friends across disciplines, you're going to be an interdisciplinary scholar. . . . So, you are what you read and you are who your intellectual companions are, and if we can change that . . . we can at least make a step toward real interdisciplinary work.

For the last three decades, this interdisciplinary spirit has made the rooms of the Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University one of the most exciting intellectual ecosystems in the academy. For both the humanities and social sciences, the program has served as a haven for heterodoxy, where casting aside boundaries and going against the grain not only proved to be the norm but a rite of passage. Officially founded by Jim Scott and collaborators in the fall of 1991,

the program brought a critical and interdisciplinary lens to the everyday experience of rural societies. With the world as its intellectual playground and the sweep of history as its scope, the Program in Agrarian Studies became *the* place for cutting-edge research. Anthropologists, historians, and political scientists filled the rooms of the weekly colloquium, as did sociologists, activists, and real-life farmers. The topics of discussion stood just as diverse. From peasant revolts in France and ancient Roman cuisine to dam-building in India and the industrial foodways of American agribusiness, nearly any topic of interest found a place within the big tent of Agrarian Studies. Few could have realized in the fall of 1991 that the newly minted program would not only last thirty years but also come to shape over two generations of scholarship and redefine the notion of interdisciplinary work.

The interviews included in this volume take stock of the program's history and achievements. They discuss how the team-taught graduate seminar, Agrarian Societies, proved the springboard for the program when first offered in 1990. The unprecedented student turnout for the course revealed an unfeigned appetite for such topics to Jim and collaborating faculty. To this day, the course continues to consistently boast the largest student enrollment of any graduate seminar at Yale. The interviews also offer highlights of the program's renowned Friday colloquium, a weekly forum that for over three decades has hosted leading scholars from around the world. Here cutting-edge research is presented to the group in a format that would become as famed as the program's founder. Unlike the typical academic lecture series, presenters at Agrarian Studies were asked to pre-circulate their papers, and after a brief framing and introduction, sit silently while the group discussed. After an hour, the author would then be "ungagged" and join the discussion, directing their responses to whatever they deemed most interesting and relevant. To be sure, it was a format that fostered vibrant intellectual exchange, one that often proved to be fruitful for authors and attendees alike. In his oral history, Jim Scott recounts how his adoption of the colloquium format was based on the Women's Studies Program at the University of Wisconsin, where he taught between 1967 and 1976. And if imitation is the best flattery, it should be noted that it was a format well-copied by other colloquia and programs around the world.

As the interviews in this volume also attest, Agrarian Studies was more than just a seminar and colloquium; it was an intellectual community. From Friday lunches to evening potlucks at his farm, Jim Scott understood the bonds that could be built over a good meal and conversation. He not only built this understanding into the program but would also generously open his home to guests and affiliates throughout the year. Longtime affiliates such as Bob Harms, Helen Siu, Michael Dove, Peter Purdue, and Paul Freedman (just to name a few) also played vital roles in the Agrarian Studies community, creating an environment of friendship that transcended disciplines, generations, and one's academic ranking. So too did the program's ever-growing family of postdoctoral fellows. Cared for by program coordinator—and designated "mother hen"—Kay Mansfield, the fellows created a new group of scholars-in-residence each year that offered both a freshness and stability to the program. This fraternity of *Agraristas* also added to the program's diverse and cosmopolitan nature, with the list of fellows representing nearly 40 countries.

Moreover, it is hoped that these interviews with affiliates provide some measure of the program's impact. In the university environment, where academic programs come and go with the changing seasons of disciplinary trends, Agrarian Studies celebrating thirty years of operation is a clear

testament to its continued contribution and importance. These interviews help bring such attributes into clearer focus, as affiliates detail the program's influence on their own work and careers. In some cases, they even discuss efforts to replicate Agrarian Studies in one form or another at their home institutions. Above all, many affiliates offer their observations on the success of Agrarian Studies, namely how a program on rural societies has remained adaptable, relevant, and popular in an ever-changing academic environment. To do so for a decade is an achievement; to do so for thirty years is nothing short of remarkable.

As a graduate student at Yale, I had the privilege of working for the Agrarian Studies Program for four years. That experience left an indelible mark on me, both intellectually and professionally. It also inspired the idea of using oral history to document and capture intellectual history. Reading the works of James C. Scott is much different than having Jim Scott discuss the aims and struggles of writing those works. Thus, the same could be said for capturing the history and importance of programs like Agrarian Studies. I hope the interviews conducted for the project do justice to that intended goal.

Interview 1: October 31, 2019

01-00:00:00

Holmes: This is Todd Holmes with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. Today's date is October 31, 2019, and I have the privilege of sitting down with Helen Siu, professor of anthropology here at Yale University, and we are here in the Agrarian Studies office on campus of Yale. Helen, thanks so much for sitting down today and talking about the Agrarian Studies Program and of course Jim Scott. Before we get to that, maybe tell us a little bit about yourself and how you came here to Yale.

01-00:00:43

Siu: Well, that's a long story.

01-00:00:45

Holmes: It could be, yes.

01-00:00:46

Siu: Thirty-seven years of it.

01-00:00:48

Holmes: Whatever you feel like sharing.

01-00:00:50

Siu: I started my research career when I was a graduate student at Stanford [University]. It was the tail end of the Vietnam War. Like everyone else in the generation, we were—how would I say?—revolutionary. I therefore decided to go to China to do research, not knowing anything about it at the time and thinking about doing revolution. I sort of deceived my advisor at Stanford and said, "Oh, I'm exploring rural transformation" and da-da-da-da, but of course I was not thinking about those intellectual issues at the time. I went to rural China in the 1970s looking for rural revolution—didn't find it. Then when China opened up promoting liberalization and reforms, I turned to market towns, imagining that I would find an emerging private sector—didn't find it. And then, in the 1990s, I followed several hundred million migrants into the cities, believing that they would finally experience urbanity and a touch of modernity. Of course I didn't find that either. In the past fifteen years or so I've been following all the energetic Chinese entrepreneurs in the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. In a word, I have been, in the past forty years, studying China as process.

01-00:02:54

Holmes: And when did you come here to Yale?

01-00:02:56

Siu: I received my degree in 1981, but I already took up a postdoc at Williams College in the fall of 1980. I moved to Yale in January 1982. I didn't know Jim then, but we came to know each other very soon afterwards.

01-00:03:19

Holmes: How did you meet Jim Scott? Was it through one of the area councils at the MacMillan Center?

01-00:03:25

Siu: It's been a while. I mean, you're really testing my aging mind. I was with colleagues in anthropology—Bill Kelly, for example, was one person whom I looked upon like a big brother. He greatly inspired my intellectual direction and work. He had been involved with a strike at Yale—is it Local 35? I can't quite remember.

01-00:04:06

Holmes: One of the unions.

01-00:04:07

Siu: Yes, one of the unions. And of course, Jim was at the front line among the faculty. We somehow were connected through Bill and other concerned colleagues. Then Bill and I started to think about broadening our intellectual horizon—much more interdisciplinary, interregional kind of work. And we decided to form an informal faculty study group. It was very fashionable at the time to have study groups. I mean, just like Berkeley a couple decades earlier. We could also reduce the pile of books on our desks that we would not have read by ourselves. Jim's name came up, and others—Deborah Davis in sociology, who worked on China, and others in American studies, French history, Susanne Wofford from Shakespeare, and classics. We were a bunch of interesting minds—all junior at the time. I think Jim was the only tenured person. We stayed together for I think at least seven, eight years. It was amazing comradeship, I would say, and remarkable intellectual curiosity. We broke boundaries in every sense of the word, and maintained very close personal friendships that we still cherish.

01-00:06:07

Holmes: Discuss a little bit how you got involved with Agrarian Studies.

01-00:06:11

Siu: Sure. At the time, there were five or six of us in the study group. Some left, and we invited new colleagues. Jean Agnew was one of them, from American studies. And we finally decided that we really needed to have this kind of intellectual vigor in our teaching and research. But at that time Jim was, as you know, he was already thinking about something like an Agrarian Studies group. But it was just basically linking our very, very intense research interest with our teaching agenda. And of course, at the time, we were very involved with graduate teaching. Most of us all have postgraduate students. I came '82, so I think we started our faculty group around '85, then by the early '90s, Jim already had that together. And I was at the time thinking a lot about fundraising in Asia for East Asian Studies, because at the time, we didn't have much funding for researching in China. Jim was really looking for foundations all over the place. So we put our heads together. And of course he did all the hard labor, right, and got the initial funding. We started in the early 1990s.

01-00:08:15

Holmes: And that also included, when the funding was secure, a seminar.

01-00:08:21

Siu: Yeah. It started with a postgraduate seminar, and then I can't remember when we had the colloquium, that Friday colloquium. When was that?

01-00:08:33

Holmes: The fall of 1991, the following year.

01-00:08:35

Siu: Basically it's like a packet, right? We have this colloquium, we have the postgraduate seminar, and of course we have all our parties at Jim's place. We had the perks, so to speak. And he at the time still had his animals on the farm, so it added a lot of good stuff, other incentives. But it's the seminar and the colloquium that has continued over these years. And not just the seminar—occasionally we have these big conferences, like the chicken conference.

01-00:09:22

Holmes: What do you recall from that?

01-00:09:26

Siu: The chicken conference. I remember one of my colleagues from Harvard, Woody Watson, who came. He talked about KFC in China, the domestication of Americana. He published a book on the domestication of McDonalds and the associated Americana in Asia. I remember him doing a paper on KFC, Kentucky Fried Chicken. And in the same conference, the variety of this—that you can have so many different bits, and then it would come together. The former chair of the history department gave a paper on medieval chicken, [laughter] you know, the meaning of chicken eight centuries earlier. Just that kind of breadth and coherence, and all centering on the poor animal. It was fun, it was outrageous, but it was also intellectually extremely important, for us as well as for our students.

01-00:11:04

Holmes: It's a good example, if we think of the chicken conference, of exactly what the colloquium largely does, if you look at the yearlong schedule, in many respects: a very loose kind of theme and yet all these different intellectual scholars coming together to have various discussions.

01-00:11:25

Siu: Yes. And that colloquium, actually, I would say—and I watched it over the years, and participated here and there, sometimes more intensely than what I do now—but it benefits, of course, our graduate students, because they were made to be the discussants, to think hard on the topics. But we were inviting likeminded people from all over the world, and it's a kind of exposure for them as well in the early stages of their academic career, and it has tremendous impact.

But then for our colleagues, junior and senior, it continued to open up our minds. That's the intellectual content. But in terms of the sort of personal context, it's also a very, very different kind of teaching and exchange. We're all pretty much equal, right? So if you're tenured and senior, it didn't matter. We were not judged by the amount of white hair we had on our heads. And so there's a kind of irreverence, if I may use the term, and a kind of respectful comradeship—across age and across generation and across discipline. I'm sure I can think of other terms, but that's the kind of very comprehensive way of what it means to be a new kind of academic, and I think that colloquium, far more than the graduate seminar, is more within the Yale system of teaching and curriculum.

But the colloquium—I can give you a very funny example. I remember one time there was an anthropologist, I think an Africanist anthropologist, and during her talk I asked a rather stupid question and of course got a pretty rough answer. [laughter] At the end of that, I got a consolation prize from Jim's farm, this huge duck egg, fresh duck egg. So that's what you get. But that's all right. We're allowed to ask stupid questions, we're allowed to be compensated with consolation prizes. And that duck egg was so huge! And I remember Jim saying, "Well, Helen, you can go home and make an omelet out of this." It took me two days to finish that omelet. [laughter] So you go away with that kind of intellectual exercise, but at the same time, something just personally very fulfilling. I don't know if that makes sense.

01-00:14:55

Holmes:

It does. What other kind of moments stand out in your memory from the colloquium? It's been going on now for almost thirty years.

01-00:15:07

Siu:

I haven't been participating as much now, first because I'm overwhelmed with other things—

01-00:15:15

Holmes:

But even from the early years.

01-00:15:18

Siu:

From the early years. What in particular?

01-00:15:22

Holmes:

Any kind of memorable event or anything that really strikes you about those early years.

01-00:15:29

Siu:

If I may characterize the whole program, the whole packet, and the people involved and our attitudes and what we got out of it, I would say, you know, in one sentence, that was actually a term that arose out of driving my little VW Beetle. My VW Beetle now is about eighteen years old, and it is still running well. I remember somebody saying—maybe the former provost of Yale—she said, "Helen, my God, you're driving that car on your way to work

in the morning. It really fits you." It really fits, you know, sort of your character or whatever. So I remember saying, "Yes, Susan. I think I'm never mainstream, but I'm not entirely outrageous." And I think this is the way I can characterize basically our group, our program, our activities. I think we're still very high-end in terms of the intellectual endeavors. Not with any bit of arrogance, but high-end in the kind of intensity of trying to satisfy our curiosity. But at the same time, we are really quite irreverent, subversive, and having fun. Academics shouldn't be just, oh, that serious. We should not take ourselves too seriously, and precisely with that character, I think, we can go a lot farther.

01-00:17:23

Holmes:

What do you recall from the first seminar? Because the seminar also fits that mold as well. It's team taught, which was also rare at the time, and it's one of the first times, at least from those that have discussed it, that there was no other class like that at Yale. From all different fields, put into one syllabus, here we go.

01-00:17:48

Siu:

I think the first seminar, I had a lot of input in what's being taught. Because the four of us—Jim, who was in Southeast Asian studies, political science; and then Bob Harms, who's ecological historian, West Africa; me, anthropologist working on China; and then John Wargo working on the US environment—and so how do you pull something that can tie all these different research areas with some coherence? So I was very involved with input, but basically the sharing of much higher level of coherence in the kind of theoretical and methodological sense. So that is, I think, what I remember of the seminar. But I also remember we took turns actually giving the lecture, and of course, Jim and I had—we still have—a lot of differences in terms of what power means and all sorts of perspectives. And I still remember talking about China, talking about power, and this and that, in my way, right, and I can hear him sort of behind me [makes inhaling sound]. Right? And I would say, "Jim, stop breathing heavily behind me. Let me finish!" [laughter] I was being very insistent. But it was all done with such rapport and mutual respect. It was a lot of fun.

01-00:19:47

Holmes:

Dinners at Jim's farm are legendary. There are so many of them, they happen every year, and they've been going on for decades. What are some of the memorable aspects of some of the dinners at Jim's farm that you recall?

01-00:20:01

Siu:

One time in the spring—I mean, he had so many dinners now, I just forget about which—and they're all very memorable, some of them very big and some smaller. The one big one was in the spring, and I remember the poster saying that "All Agrarians of the world, unite," you know, "let's have a party and be merry," that sort of thing. And during that dinner he dug a pit in the yard and he slaughtered—I don't know how he did it, but he actually killed a

lamb and roasted the poor animal in the pit. And people were doing dances and singing. That was the spring festival, and so "Agrarians of the world, unite." We didn't make revolution then, but close to it. [laughter]

01-00:21:07

Holmes:

I wanted to ask you—you've worked with Jim now since 1982.

01-00:21:11

Siu:

Oh, '85 or something like that.

01-00:21:12

Holmes:

Oh, yeah, '85, that's right. What are some of the memories or observations that you'd like to share about Jim?

01-00:21:22

Siu:

There's a question I still have been dying to ask him. I mean, of course his writings, his teachings, his person, his whatever has been inspiring in every sense of the word, and so I use a lot of his work in my classes. But I remember one time—I was dabbling into all sorts of things, too, as a junior person, and I published books on literature and all that before my tenure. That was a little scary. [laughter] I was delaying my own proper work, I suppose. And I remember it was the time of my tenure—1989, I remember that—and I was getting a little anxious because, I mean, I really have to show things. And that's when comrades like Jim would come into the support network, so to speak. And mind you, at the time, there were very, very few women tenured. When I first came to Yale, I think there were seven in the entire Yale system.

01-00:22:37

Holmes:

Wow.

01-00:22:40

Siu:

Of course we've improved a lot, but still, it's not enough. But still, 1989, and I was sort of fretting about how I shouldn't have written those two literature books; I should have done my proper writing. And I remember him saying, "Helen, you know, I have a threat to the provost." And I don't know whether he did it—he never told me—he allegedly went to the provost's office and told the provost, saying that, "Look, you better give this woman tenure, or else I'm going to send my chickens and pigs and sheep and goats to your office at HGS and let them shit all over you." [laughter] Whether he did carry that threat or not, I never asked him. Before he retires, I'm going to definitely ask him, "Jim, did you do that? To me, that is a beautiful 'weapons of the weak.' You really applied your theory." And, well, I got tenure, fortunately, but I don't know whether it was because of the threat or not. But I thought, wow, weapons of the weak. That's what we should be doing. So this is one question I want to ask him.

01-00:24:02

Holmes:

We're looking at the program encroaching thirty years. What are some of the unique aspects of the Agrarian Studies Program here at Yale vis-à-vis other programs that you've come into contact with over your career?

01-00:24:20

Siu:

I think the community of scholars. A lot of the programs here at Yale, and I mean, they're all very, very good; they can be interdisciplinary or whatever. But I have not seen as much of a time depth, as in every bit of our activities. I think the organizers are very, very mindful, or very conscious of the generational links—the passing on, this kind of attitudes towards intellectual endeavors, passing it on to younger, junior colleagues and students. And so you do see a lot of rejuvenation constantly in place. For us, the program is not just a program in any static sense; it's constantly changing. It's like water. Before Jim retires I'm going to ask him to change the program's name. In the past six, seven years or so, I think it has become very focused on agrarian things, and I think intellectually, it's a little bit harder to maintain that boundary, because being agrarian can be so connected, both in time, space, people, and whatever. And it continues to change into very different forms. So I think water, use a water theme. And we've tried that, too, even in our own individual research, and I would love to suggest that to him. He actually teaches a course on water. And in fact, it's not just playful, but it's very, very revolutionary if we think about how social science has been built basically on land-based, state-centered entities, and we use those land-based perspectives to define populations, cultures, politics, economies, and so on and so forth. I think that's very problematic.

And people have done other things, like analytically plunging into the oceans, and land-based entities wouldn't be okay, but oceans. But then it's more or less two sides of the same coin. Jim, myself, a few other people, including Willem van Schendel from Amsterdam, one of Jim's very good friends, we started working on river deltas—deltas all over the world—because there, you constantly see an entity moving, fluid, always in the process of becoming land. And so the question for our students and for the later generations is for the entire twentieth century, social science has built on these rather static-bounded, solid units of analysis. Now it's time to deconstruct all of them and make them fluid, like water. Now, the question is, how do you build a research design on change and on movable things? This is something that a younger generation will have to figure out over the twenty-first century. If Agrarian Studies is going to continue to take the lead in these kind of intellectual quests, we should change the name.

01-00:28:32

Holmes:

That's interesting. You know, a lot of people have talked about the success of Agrarian Studies—encroaching thirty years, being almost thirty, which very few programs reach—stems from its fluidity, that its openness and fluidity are really the key to that success. It wasn't just peasant studies, right, that it was

agrarian studies, that really opened it up. Do you agree with that, and what other aspects do you see as the key to the program's success?

01-00:29:04

Siu:

Yeah, I think that's one of it, and that's why I think now the term "agrarian"—and of course we can define it very broadly, but still, it's a loaded term because it has visual images, it has all sorts of meanings. But I think water. I got this term, actually, not only because I've been thinking a lot about water—rivers, oceans, deltas—and redefining our analytical units in the past decade or so, but I also think that I see a political agenda there. And I actually got that idea from having been in Hong Kong for the past three months—four, five months, actually—watching how the social movement of these youngsters facing very brutal institutional and physical violence from whatever regimes, and yet they are now strategizing like water. So in my mind, I mean, intellectually, I am really trying to find an answer to think analytically, but at the same time to closely watch what people on the ground are doing politically. And that's one of the themes, I think, for the initial organizers of the Agrarian Studies Program like Jim and me and Bill Kelly and many others. We are politically very concerned people, and we do not want to stay in these—what do you call these?—you know, within these pure academia, and that whatever we teach may have some social impact. And I think because of that, I think it may not be a bad idea to change our intellectual battle cry to something like water.

01-00:31:34

Holmes:

That's very interesting. Helen, I really appreciate all your time of sitting down. Any final thoughts you'd like to share about the program or Jim?

01-00:31:44

Siu:

Not really. I mean, we have differences, we have disagreements, but what we share, I think, have been what really gel the whole group together. And another motto, I suppose, I could give to the younger generations of the program's organizers—it's a motto that I've used for my own interdisciplinary and interregional research institute that I've put together in Hong Kong in the past eighteen years—"Never allow boundaries to define you. You define your own boundaries." I think I would advise the organizers to think in those terms, and if we can do that, then it continues to be changing with the times, contributing to those very changes in the times, and doing our own revolution of the times, so to speak. And it has been so much fun, in the kind of elite of the elite of institutions, a place like Yale, isn't it? We can be extremely subversive from within.

01-00:33:23

Holmes:

Helen, this has been great. Thank you so much.

01-00:33:26

Siu:

All right.

[End of Interview]