

Chapter Fifteen

Re-education in countryside begins 广阔天地炼红心 (1970-1972)

The train packed with youngsters pulled out of Shanghai Northern Railway Station 上海北站 and stopped at almost every possible station and was reluctantly crawling on its way to the north. In a normal situation, that journey should only take about eight hours to reach Bengbu, but it took us about 18 hours.



Most passengers on the train were heading for the countryside in northern Anhui province bordering with Henan 河南 province. There were only three of us in the compartment going to the same destination, which was Xiangzhuang village, Wangji Commune in the Mengcheng County. I looked at Afu and Xiaozhong, my fellow students and thought that as I would have to live with them for the unforeseeable future, I must be nice to them. I was always a dreamer and was encouraged to be independent in my upbringing. When I was at primary school, I was longing to live in a world like the Children's Palace, which was run by the youngsters and later when I was at secondary school, I was looking forward to having a new life far away from home in the Heilongjiang 黑龙江 forest in the northeast of China,

hunting wild animals. However, when that moment of “being independent” came, it turned out not as rosy and not as romantic as I had anticipated. However, it was too shameful to turn back, I had to face it head on. I supposed that most of the passengers on the train were in the same boat: we all had to deal with a new and unknown life ahead. There would not be parents and teachers bothering us or looking after and protecting us. I knew that everyone was as anxious as I was, although some of the boys were more assertively sociable, especially when chatting with the girls.

“Hi, where are you going?” One of the boys came to us and tried to be conversational.

“Wangji Commune in Mengchang,” Afu answered.

“I’m going to the same county as you are, but they’ve forgotten to allocate me a village. By the way, my name is Jiang Fan which means that a sail on river.” We all introduced ourselves to Jiang Fan.

“Are you on your own?” I asked.

“Yes, at moment, but someone might join me later,” Jing Fan answered. I was amazed by his cavalier attitude towards his future life. He was chatty, cool and looked experienced enough. He went on to talk to the others in the carriage.

I looked out the train window. The sky was getting dark and Shanghai, my birth-city and the built-up areas were left behind. The train was going through some agriculture landscapes that were filled with picturesque, mirror-like paddy fields. The peasants wearing their straw-hats were packing up for the day. I could see the large dark grey roofs of Chinese rural style houses scattered along the lake-side in the distance. It depicted an image of rich, beautiful and poetic southern China scenery that one would normally see on an official magazine. It also reminded me a bit of my home village where my great-aunt and Mr Wo lived.

“Life must have been content for these peasants,” I thought. This place might be too good to receive educated youths like us. Surely, the peasants in the rich countryside were peasants too. They still represented the proletariat, the leading class of China. Sometimes I wondered why we could not be re-educated by the peasants in the rich countryside like my home village in Xiaogang, Zhenhai. The official answer to my question was that the governments emphasized that the re-education programme must take place in the toughest and poorest places in China. Only the harsh conditions would teach the city youths a good lesson. In order

to prove our worthiness, the educated youths must choose the poorest destinations for their re-education programme. Because of that, many competed for the poorest or the most isolated places when making the choice at the beginning.

The Chinese population in big cities expanded rapidly since 1949, and many poor rural areas were still very underdeveloped. There was a more sinister explanation of this re-education programme. Some people in Shanghai believed that the hidden agenda for this massive human engineering programme was to move a generation from the large cities such as Shanghai, Beijing and Tianjin to the poor rural areas of China. This would not only ease the population density in the big cities, but also the educated youths could help in the development of China's poorest countryside. I did not want to speculate which particular explanation was the real truth. Many of my contemporaries did not want to be the sacrificial pawns of the re-education programme. As a result, they refused to leave Shanghai. I somehow, just wanted to get on with my life and move forward in a given condition. I believed that most of the passengers on the train would agree with me.

The train was travelling in the total darkness. When it reached Nanjing, it was in the small hours of the night. The streetlights, town buildings and the characteristics of big cities suddenly sprang back in front of my eyes. I thought I was dreaming of going back to Shanghai, the city that I had just left behind. I was wondering whether my parents were fast asleep or were awake and thinking of me. The train left Nanjing city and approached the famous Nanjing Bridge over the Yangtze River. The bridge was completely Chinese-built, was a national achievement that made every Chinese feel proud of. It was a symbol of China's modernisation. Economically speaking, it efficiently linked China's rich south to the poor north. Our train was gliding slowly onto the fully lit bridge that was outlined by thousands of lightbulbs, as if the bridge was decorated by countless precious shining-pearls. Looking at that bridge, I was impressed by the greatness of the structure and I felt proud to be a Chinese. In the past, the Yangtze River divided people and communities. It was the new bridge that connected us together. When the train gradually approached north side of the river, my feeling of responsibility became stronger: under the leadership of the Chinese working class, I believed that we, the educated youth would take part in building another bridge that would make the poor parts of China prosperous.

Nobody slept well on the train that night. As there was nothing else to see after crossing the bridge, we were eating and sharing out the "goodies" that our families saved for our journey.

Maybe we were all tired. The sound of chatting and laughing gradually disappeared and it was replaced by a sombre melancholic and negative mood. One of the passengers started singing these desolating and miserable songs about leaving hometown for an unknown land. The song implied that nobody was willing to leave our beloved home, but we were all put into that situation without choices. It made me feel very homesick.

The light of daybreak penetrated the windows of the train. We reached outside of Chuxian County 滁县 in northern Anhui. The countryside scenery reappeared in front of my eyes. This time there were no greenness; no large roof country houses and the mirror-like lakes. Instead, there were mud-hurts scattered around the yellowish-brown dry landscape. What a different scene from the south. The train slowed down significantly when passing minor stations. I could see a few peasants squatting by the railway line in their dusty dark-coloured old Chinese padded jackets, puffing away tobacco pipes. Their dark-brown wrinkled faces revealed a surprised expression, when seeing a train packed with city kids. Some of the passengers threw a few pieces of sweet bread at them. Some little kids rushed forward and fought to grab the bread. Somehow, it entertained the passengers on the train. The chatty and laughing atmosphere returned. Looking at what had happened made me very worried. I did not worry about the way that some of us treated the peasants just like animals in the zoo, but I was thinking that the conditions of our final destination would be even poorer than Chuxian County. We were not just going there for a year or two, but we would have to spend rest of our lives with the peasants there, and possibly, we would end up like them. Maybe in twenty years' time, our next generation might also be teased in the same way by city kids.

When the train reached the final destination, it was already in the afternoon. There were a few buses parked next to the Bengbu Station waiting to take us to different counties. About thirty of us got onto a bus heading for Mengcheng County, which was about over a hundred kilometres to the north-west of Bengbu. It took us over four hours to reach there. It was getting dark, when we arrived in Mengcheng. Some officials immediately gathered a few dozens of students onto a lorry, put our luggage in the trailer and headed for Wangji Commune. Most of that lorry journey was on the muddy tracks, so it was extremely bumpy. When we reached Wangji Commune, it must have been late in the evening and it was pitch dark. I felt very tired and sleep-deprived. The commune had prepared a "banquet" to welcome us. After listening to a commune official's semi-comprehensive speech, Zhang Ying, one of the girls in our group made a speech on behalf of us to thank Wangji Commune

for the generous welcome banquet. The speech went down well with the commune officials, especially the head of the militia, Mr Kui who was very happy and enthusiastic to see all the students. We were divided into the boy groups and girl groups to be taken to different villages. The “banquet” must have started after ten in the evening. Only then, I realised that our journey was not over yet, and there was another seven or eight kilometres of walk before reaching Xiangzhuang, the final destination that we had been allocated to.

There were over half dozen bowls of food placed on the earthy ground of a large room, which was lit by some paraffin lamps. Then we were divided into smaller groups and were asked to squat around the bowls with some peasants who were our luggage porters. I could smell a puff of freshly roasted and crushed sesame oil. Under that dim lamp-light our dinner in the enamel washing-bowl was visible: some see-through noodles made of sweet potatoes starch in soy source, a few pieces of thinly sliced pork with a large amount of flabby fat and some pieces of red chilli and garlic on the top. We were each given a white steamed bun, a bowl and a pair of chopsticks. Although I was quite hungry, looking at the food in the washing-bowl, I did not have the appetite to eat at all. I only had a few bites of the white steamed bun and watched the peasants gobbling down the food in a great speed. (After a year’s experiences of living in the village, only then I realised that the food we were given on the day was the most extravagant banquet in the area.)

“We’ll have to carry the heavy stuff for you. We have to eat quickly,” a man in his thirties explained apologetically. Maybe he noticed that I was staring at them. The peasants finished the last piece of the fat meat in the washing-bowl and felt satisfied. A man, who looked as if he was in charge, stood up and said to the other four, “Let’s go now. It’s about over a dozen Li¹ from here. We’d better get the luggage onto the carts quickly.” We stood next to the “boss”, while the others went out to load our luggage including my big chest onto two wooden-carts, which were pulled by ox. After that, Afu, Xiaozhong and I were slowly walking behind the carts on our last leg of the journey to Xiangzhuang.

It was quite overcast. Under the dark sky, the mud truck behind the ox-carts was just about visible.

“Just follow the carts, you’ll be OK. The ox can see in the dark much better than you can,” the “boss” warned us.

¹ Two Li equals one kilometre

“Are you our production team leader?” Afu asked. Under the People’s Commune system, all the surrounding small villages were called production teams 生产队. Each commune would have between fifteen and thirty production teams (or small villages).

“I’m the deputy leader. Mr Wang, the production team leader has to be at home to look after the work in the fields. By the way, my surname is Xiang. Over half of the population in village is the Xiang clan. So our village is named after our clan.”

I was so tired that my legs were on the autopilot; my mind was already half-asleep and was in the semi-dreaming state.

“Look, ghost fire!” One of the cart drivers shouted loudly.

“Where?” I woke up immediately and asked anxiously.

“Over there. Look very carefully on your left, by the tombs!”

“Tombs, what tombs?” I was a little frightened and tried very hard to look for the ghost fire, but I could not see it anywhere.

“You can see ghost fire around tombs when it’s overcast or when it rains lightly... Ghost fire is some little green-colour fireballs dancing about around tombs” Mr Xiang explained.

When I looked towards the left, I could only see five or six very tall pine trees under which were a few heaps of earth that the local people called them tombs.

Mr Xiang, the deputy leader of the village production team told us the house that we would be staying in, used to be for keeping the village donkeys. They had moved the donkeys to the oxen sheds and cleared the house up for us to stay.

As we approached our final destination, the “ex-donkey” house in Xiangzhuang village, the moon peeped out from the clouds. When we walked into our new home, we could see under the light of an oil-lamp it was packed with villagers. An old woman brought three bowls of noodles for us,

“Try some noodles that I’ve just made. You must be very tired and hungry, after a long journey.”

Mr Xiang told us that as the villagers had never seen anyone from Shanghai. Although it was midnight, they all had been waiting to meet us. A group of women looked at us, giggled and

said that they had never seen students from big cities. The villagers were not only interested in watching us but were fascinated by anything that we brought with us. Afu was wearing a watch. Some of them looked at it and asked him why he had it on his wrist. Afu explained that it helped him to keep the time. They all giggled and told us that they could tell the time of the day by looking at the sun in the sky. Afu told them it could tell him the hours of the day. They could not understand why one wanted to know the hours of the day. I was very sleepy, so that I took out a piece of dried sour-taste plum to eat to keep me awake. Mr Xiang looked at me, so I gave him a piece too. He must have thought that it was a sweet and ate it, but the unexpected sharp taste of sourness made him shoot out the room like a flash and spat it on the ground. Mr Wang, the production team leader asked everyone to go home so that we could have a rest. He told us to have a proper rest and not get up to work in the field the following day.

We all slept well and woke up in the following midday. Under the daylight, we saw everything much more clearly. The village had about over a hundred people and thirty odd houses scattered around from east to west. Our ex-donkey house was situated on the west side of the village. Like the most of the houses in the village, the two-feet-thick walls were made with mud and straws. The windows were two little square holes one on the south-facing wall and the other on the north. Inside of the house was very dark. The roof was also made of wheat-straws. There were three beds for Afu, Xiaozhong and me. The frame of my bed was cruelly made from a tree trunk that was spitted into two halves in the length ways. Some dried sorghum poles were laid on the top of the bed frame. On top of that, was the cotton under quilt that I brought with me from Shanghai. There was a rectangular small table which was called Anban 案板 by the locals. The table was just over the knee-height. There were three short stools. A clay-stove with a fixed large size wok that was placed next to the front door. Our cooking fuel was a pile of dried plants and straw. Mr Wang, the production team leader told us that for the first week, we were allowed to use the dried straw from the threshing ground for cooking, but later we had to find the cooking fuel for ourselves just like everyone had to do in the village.

In the south, there was a large pond about thirty metres away from our house. Walking out of the house, I could almost see the edge of the earth in the distance, which was a thin line that divided sky from the earth. The dark-green lumps on the horizon were the trees in the distant villages. I could see the rain clouds miles away bringing the showers to the faraway fields.

Standing in such a vast landscape and experiencing the power of nature, I felt humbled, rather small and insignificant. In the night, the sky was often clear. Without the pollution of the electric light, I could see the stars and planets floating on the deep dark-blue sky, which looked almost unreal. Sometimes stars were flickering, as if they were communicating with me.

The villagers spoke a Mandarin-like dialect. At mealtime, when I walked past the front doors of some houses, the owners would often come out to ask me friendly, “Would you like to eat with us 吃俺的?” The customary answer should be “No (I won’t bother you) 不了.” They have simple etiquette like that, but they were the most kind-hearted and straightforward people.

The second afternoon in the village when only Xiaozhong and I were at home, a young woman about our age (or maybe slightly younger) came to see us. As she had heard that people from cities often carried medicine, so she asked us if we could help her with her problem. When we asked her what problems she had, she immediately open up her top garment and revealed her two firm looking breasts with two upwards nipples. She was looking at us hopefully. Xiaozhong fix his sight on her breasts and could not move. “They are always very hard but...you can touch them, if you like.” I quickly said, “Sorry, we won’t be able to do anything for you...about these..., as we have no such medicine with us.” She was disappointed, fastened her top and walked out. Afu came into the house carrying two buckets of drinking water from the well on the east side of the village and asked,

“What does she want?”

“She wanted us to look at her breasts,” as if Xiaozhong’s sight was still fixed on her breasts.

“What? Do you know who she is?”

“Who?” I asked.

“She is Mr Xiang, the deputy team leader’s wife.”

“That can’t be true! Mr Xiang told me that he had two children, but... that woman is too young to be a mother of two,” I was flabbergasted.

“She must have married him when she was eleven ...or twelve?” I muttered.

“Mr Tao, the Brigade Party Secretary said that Mr Xiang’s wife was very pretty and many men have taken a fancy to her. Now I can see why,” Xiaozhong said.

Mr Wang, the production team leader was a solemn looking character. He had a broad chin; dark and almost brown-purple skin with sparkling eyes. When he was standing on the top of a straw stack and looking at the fields beneath him with a smile on his face, he looked just like a bronze statue. From his expression, I could tell that he was pleased that there would be another good harvesting year ahead for the village. He was very competitive. As far as he was concerned, the productivity of Xiangzhuang was the most important thing in his life. He wanted his village to do better than any of the neighbouring villages. The villagers of Xiangzhuang knew that if Mr Wang started singing his songs (which were completely out of tune), it indicated that everything must be all right for the village.

Mr Wang’s understanding of the re-education programme was simple. If the three of us learned all the farming skills and were able to handle the local agriculture affairs without assistance, then his responsibility for the re-education programme would be completed. We were also determined to learn everything that he taught us and we just wanted to be like the rest of the peasants in the village.

The local peasants had never brushed their teeth. Most men had yellow or brown teeth from smoking tobacco. However, Mr Wang did not smoke, so he had white teeth just like the women in the village. He did not speak much and only spoke to us when it was necessary. Very soon, we found out that he had a loud, screaming and shouting voice. When he roared, one could hear him from far away.

“Goooo tooo woork! Weeding in the northeast field...” He would walk through the whole village from east to west shouting at the top of his voice. We were woken up by his morning call every day,

Although the villagers did not have clocks or watches, somehow they were experienced enough to tell the time by looking at the position of the sun in the sky, even if when it was in a rainy day. They all knew when to start or finish work; when to have lunch and supper, as if they had a built-in clock in their bodies.

“Afu, first of all, you should not wear that watch of yours when you are here,” I said very critically.

“Why not?” He was defensive.

“The locals don't wear watches, why should you?” I asked.

“Because they don't have watches, so they don't wear them. Simple.”

“Anyway, what is the watch for? Do you remember that evening we arrived here, that woman said that they could tell the time by looking at the sun? They didn't need to know every hour of the day and they just want to know when to have meals and when to go out for work,” I paused. Afu did not reply.

“Anyway, we have to learn from them and to be like them,” I felt happy that I had won the argument.

Unfortunately, I had a disastrous accident at the very early stage of my work in the field. One afternoon, when we were having a break at the end of a sweet potato field, Mr You, one of the men said that he was told that the people from cities could do wrestling or marshal art well. He challenged me to wrestle with him. The others were encouraging us, so I could not refuse his challenge. That situation somehow reminded me of the humiliation that I suffered when Bendy Leg, my classmate who did one of his wrestling experiments on me at the playground of my primary school. Mr You was a strong man in his late thirties. He threw me about with all the strength that he had. It was obvious that my strength did not match his. I was trying to trip him over by putting my foot behind his legs. As the surface of the ground was uneven, one of my feet stepped into a hole, I lost balance and had a fall. My left kneecap was dislocated and caused terrible pain and shock. Someone came to put it back for me. Somehow, the ligament was damaged badly. It became very swollen. When Mr Wang heard about the accident, he rushed to the scene immediately. He was so angry and severely told off Mr You for causing my injury and the trouble for disrupting the work in the field. As there was no hospital in the area, Mr Wang got hold of a light single bed and put me on it. As Wangji Commune had no medical clinic, he ordered four of the strongest men including his deputy, Mr Xiang to carry me quickly to the neighbouring commune clinic to ask for their help. As it was quite late in the afternoon, the four men carried the bed with me lying on it and ran to the clinic. After running for six kilometres, we finally reached our destination, but the clinic was already closed. Mr Xiang went to the commune offices to ask if the local doctor could be found anywhere, but he had no luck. As it was getting dark, they had to carry me back to the village without having any treatment. When we arrived back in the village, it

was very late in the evening. Mr Xiang put me onto my bed and brought a half bowlful of sweet potato alcohol spirit. He lit the alcohol and spread the burning alcohol flame around my swollen knee with his hands.

“This should reduce the swelling and pain,” he said very calmly.

“It will be better by tomorrow morning,” he tried to comfort me and to make me feel better. “You should consider yourself lucky, as you didn’t break your bones, otherwise you might’ve ended up like Mr Mo, who has a permanent broken leg, as a result of being run over by an ox-cart.” Mr Xiang warned. As there were no medical services to deal with any agricultural accidents, so the lesson that I had learned was that I should not have any accident. It was too painful for me to remember and let alone to write down other terrible accidents that I had witnessed later in the village.

In the end, due to the lack of the medical care, it took me about six months to walk properly again. After the accident, I could not even go to the loo by myself, as I could not bend my knee. Over that painful six months, I could only do a poo when it was dark. Xiaozhong or Afu would help me to reach the big tree by the pond, so that I could do my business by leaning against the tree and squatting down with my right leg. Looking at the deep dark-blue sky which was scattered with stars of different densities and sizes, they reminded me of sitting on the thresh ground in the summer evenings and staring at the same sky with the neighbours in my hometown village in Xiaogang, Zhenghai. However, this time the same sky appeared much bigger and somehow more unfamiliar. There was no Mr Ao telling me about the names of the stars and the romantic folktales behind the innocent looking twinkling things. When I finished doing my business, dogs would come to eat the waste, so I did not have to worry about clearing it up.

I never told my family about the incident, as I feared that it could only bring more anxiety to my parents but would not help my situation in anyway. I knew then, one could not afford being unwell when living in that part of the world.

I missed out a lot of work, because of the injury. I could not “receive” as much re-education as I had intended to. Because of that, I felt that I was not given a proper chance to prove my worthiness. Mr Xiang came to visit me often and he would tell me about how fast Afu was learning his agriculture skills. How everyone in the village liked him. However, he told me that Xiaozhong was a lazy boy. He preferred going to the nearby market places 赶集 instead

of working in the field. Mr Xiang described Xiaozhong in a semi joking way, “He was a bit of naughty boy 小孬雄².”

Some of the villagers were sympathetic towards my injury. One day, Mr Tao the village ox-cart driver was going to Chuji 褚集, one of the nearby market places, to sell some grains for the village. As he knew that I was unable to walk far, he kindly offered to take me to the market by his ox-cart. The market was a lively place for peasants to exchange their home-produced goods and the products of their allotments. I saw abundant and colourful items: from homemade blue and white cloth, tobacco leaves, garlic, onions, aubergine, different types of grains, dried beans and piglets to the agricultural tools such as wooden and metal forks, sickles and hoes. The market restaurants were selling steamed buns. A strong smell of fennel puffed out from the steaming hot pots. I could see a few bowls of mouth-watering Big-mix 大杂烩 which consisted of a few pieces of fat belly pork and some sweet potato starch noodles. It reminded me of the “banquet” that we had in the Wangji Commune when we first arrived. However, I could not afford to buy anything or eat anywhere, as I did not have cash in my pocket and nor did I have any goods of my own to sell, I watched the waiters collecting the used bowls from the tables and dipping them into a big wooden basin, which filled with greasy “washing up” water. Then the bowls were fished out and ready to serve the next lot of customers.

I felt rather guilty of coming to the market place instead of working in the fields, as I remembered Mr Xiang’s comments on Xiaozhong being idle. Any comments of the local people stayed in my mind all the time. When I heard the praises of Afu, I would feel a bit uncomfortable, as I believed that I could have done the same. My mind of competitiveness did not help me to recover from the injury. I wanted to prove to the locals that I was willing to work in the fields just like Afu, despite my injured knee. One month after the accident, I limped to the fields at least once a day to work with the villagers. Instead of hearing praises for my good intention, I got myself a nickname of “the limping leg 蹩腿”. As Mr Wang would not give me any labour intensive tasks, I often ended up with working in a group of female and older people, doing the jobs such as weeding the field. On the hot summer days, most married and older women would come to work in the field like men: topless with large straw hat; only those girls who were not yet married would keep their tops on.

² A little bad seed

During the breaks, women often discussed their family life and gossiped about other families' affairs.

"I've heard Lynn and her husband arguing again last night," one of the women said very expressively. I could tell from her tone that she desperately wanted to share her story with the others.

"Was it about him seeing that girl in the east end of Wangzhuang?" another one asked.

"Yes, of course, what else could they argue about? ...Honestly, she is only a re-educated youth and she is too young for him."

"But he always likes younger ones," another woman giggled.

"You shut up. How do you know?" "Tell us more what they said to each other," a bossy woman tried to find out all the gory details.

"Well, Lynn wanted him to admit that he went to see that girl yesterday... Well, of course, he said no..." She took a deep breath and continued, "He wanted Lynn to calm down and asked her not to listen to the gossips in the village. He said that he and that girl had a "normal" meeting to talk about the "normal" matters. They didn't have sex..." "Then Lynn screamed and shouted 'if you didn't, I dare you to drink cold water and to jump into the pond.' Then she took a bowl of cold water from the water vat and asked him to drink."

"Did he drink it?"

"Of course, he didn't. It would've cost his life. Of course not, definitely not."

According to the local myth, after having sex, if the man drank cold water, or jumped into a river, he might die. I could not understand the logic behind that myth. The only thing that I could think of was that malaria was very common in the area and the local people called it a hot-and-cold fever 打摆子. Later I was also infected by malaria. Nearly everyone there was a malaria carrier. If there was any truth in the myth of sex and cold water, it must be some sort of disease that could cause mortality. I simply could not believe that after having sex, drinking cold water could kill someone.

Zhangsan 张三, an old single man, was sitting on the edge of the field, puffing away his tobacco. His mad, wild-looking eyes stared into space. He muttered with envy, “Life is not fair. He gets so many women, but I have none. Now I haven’t even got a goat...”

Some women looked sidelong at Zhangsan who had a reputation of liking to have sex with animals, especially with sheep or goats.

The life of first month in the village was not that harsh for us. The Wangji Commune authorities allocated us a month worth of rice supply to help us to bridge the local diet, which was mainly sweet potatoes, sorghum and a small amount of wheat. Occasionally, the village produced rye crops as well. We were also allocated a small plot of land 自留地 about 15 metres long and six metres wide, right in front of our house. The locals helped us to plant some onions, garlic, aubergines, and edible amaranth for our vegetable supply. Mr Wang suggested that we should use half of the land for growing wheat to improve our basic diet. We were told to look after the plot and water it if needed; otherwise, we would be left with no extra food supply. The villagers taught us how to make noodles with flour. Eating wheat flour noodles was a treat for guests or for a special occasion. In order to make our wheat flour last longer, the villagers told us to add some rye in wheat. Although the dough of the mix-flour looked darker and tasted rough, the rye-wheat noodles were much firmer than wheat noodles and did not easily disintegrate in water.

Anyway, we were inexperienced and were too young to understand how to live in that environment. We all had a good time at the beginning. Like any normal youngsters, within one month we consumed all the allocated rice, wheat and the food supplies that we brought with us from Shanghai such as the tinned fish and meats. We spent everything and did not even have the money to buy cooking oil. The rest of the year, we ended up eating mashed up raw garlic mixed with salt. The staple food was some buns that were made with flour of sweet potatoes and sorghum. I had some buns that were just made of the flour of red sorghum. They were so hard, dry and as rough as bricks. They were difficult to swallow. After eating one or two, some blood blisters appeared in my throat. By adding the flour of sweet potatoes in sorghum, the buns would soften a little. Then we almost “completely” lived with sweet potatoes: working in the sweet potatoes field, eating buns that were made with sweet potato flour, and burning the dried mouldy potato slices as our cooking fuel. Many of us ended up looking like sweet potatoes too, as we were growing extra flesh on our faces and even on our foreheads!

One day in the autumn, Xiaozhong came back from a market. To our surprise, he brought back a piece of pork. Actually, I would not call it pork, but it was a piece of thick white fat with skin on it. It looked almost like a piece of bean curd. He told Afu and me that he was given that piece of meat free. We did not want to know how he got it. We cooked it and ate it immediately. I never had eaten such tasty fatty pork in my life.

The first summer when I worked in the fields, I would go there under the scorching sun without wearing a straw hat to demonstrate to the peasants that I was not afraid of the hardship. However, they just laughed at me and told me that if I carried on like that, the colour of my face could end up as black and as wrinkled as a donkey's balls 草驴蛋. After six months working in the fields, we all felt really tired and lacked nutrition. I had completely run of steam to be tough. I looked forward to my bed every evening more than I had ever felt before. I did not feel that the night was long enough for my own comfort. The alarm-clock-like shocking sound of Mr Wang's calling for work in the mornings often gave me nightmares.

Some of the educated youths in the nearby villages had a terrible time and bad relationship with the locals. As they were depressed, they did not work in the fields. When they were told to go, they got very angry and argued with the local people. One of the youths even threatened to burn down his neighbour's straw house. That did not go down well with his re-educators. To be honest, although the educated youths had a tough time, the villagers did too. They had been living there peacefully for generations. In our eye, the life there was of poor quality, but they were happy without us being there. We, the city kids invaded their land and share their resources such as food and houses. The peasants were given the responsibility to "re-educate" us, but did not know how to deal with the difficult ones. Many locals had to put up with those who were always angry and behaved terribly. The peasants certainly did not ask for that!