Friends in Southern Hunan

Zhang Jianfu

With love and humor, Zhang recalls two zhiqing friends—Big Feng, a tragic hero, and Brother Geng, an eccentric but highly intelligent fellow—and Liugou, a young villager, who risked his life to help his zhiqing friends escape danger.

Late in the autumn of 1964, tens of thousands of youths left their hometowns throughout China, including Changsha, where I grew up. They traveled for days by train or ship toward poor swamplands or arid mountainous regions—in a period that produced numerous “political Sputniks” and heroes of epic proportions.

Earlier that year, a serious discussion took place in my family. My elder sister, my younger brother, and I all graduated from middle school or high school, and consequently, according to the call of the Communist Party and state, were candidates for shangshan xiaxiang. The problem was that if we all left Changsha, who would take care of our frail and sickly grandmother? So my mother pleaded with the authorities and got a lenient response: One of her children could stay in Changsha. That led to a very agonizing discussion, punctuated by long pauses, primarily between mother and grandma. After a long, sleepless night, a decision was made: We two boys would join the army of the urban youth bound for the countryside while my sister would stay in Changsha to help take care of Grandma.

Several days later, when five hundred of us got off the train at a small station, it was still early morning. Directed by some government officials who escorted us, we waited for over two hours until daybreak. Then we rode on buses for five to six hours across a huge mountain range before reaching our destination, Jiangyong County, in southern Hunan.

It was harvest season when we arrived. The first things that came into view were the pine trees, cypress trees, huge camphor trees, and bamboo groves. Like thousands of green umbrellas, they covered the mountain slopes and valleys. In higher elevations, the first frost had turned some leaves yellow and red. From a distance, the entire area looked like a vast oil painting, magnificent and brilliant.

The county had a population of 160,000. In 1964 alone, 7,000 zhiqing from Changsha descended on this scenic land. I spent a total of seven years in Jiangyong until I relocated to Liuyang County in 1971. The hardship year in
and year out there transformed me from a skinny boy into a burly young man. Endless farm work first shook my faith, then threw me into sheer despair. Forty years later, even after many vicissitudes in life, I still vividly remember the mountains, the waters, and the people of Jiangyong. I simply cannot forget the journey of my youth.

**Zhoujiabang**

I settled in a small village called Zhoujiabang (Zhou Family Village), which resembled a Chinese landscape painting. A clear creek ran through the village, with a few bridges running across it and nice-looking wooden houses on both sides. In one opening, you could see a cluster of gray brick houses with tiled roofs, old, vast, and quiet. During the Taiping Rebellion a century earlier, several families named Zhou moved here. They grew, multiplied, and thrived thereafter. Some people of the Miao nationality also lived in the village. For many years, Chinese mountaineers and the Miao people lived side by side in peace. A thick and high stone wall surrounded the village, which hinted at the tough nature of its inhabitants.

Among the young people from Changsha were five boys and seven girls. We were divided into two groups, one joined No. 6 Production Team and the other joined No. 7. My group had three girls and four boys. We were given quarter in a big wooden house that once belonged to a Miao tribal chief. Because of its past, local people called the house the Miao King’s Mansion. This century-old building was in the shape of a grill with a courtyard of nearly 10,000 square feet in the center. It consisted of more than 20 rooms, including bedrooms, a kitchen, and toilets. It was a little dilapidated for sure, but the fishpond in the courtyard, the miniature hills, the exquisitely carved corridors, and the solid hardwood walls in the building all spoke of the exalted status of its original owner.

The party secretary of the production brigade told us on the first day that, during the first year, the government would supply each of us with 50 jin\(^1\) of rice per month. But we had to grow our own vegetables. After the first year, the official supply of grain would cease, and we would rely on the grain that we received from our own production team.

There were a lot of trees in the mountains, but the local people did not know how to use them to their economic advantage. They could cut down some trees

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1 See glossary.