In a seemingly calm but deeply emotional way, Wu Baichun tells the sad story of his young friends at Camp Harmony.

Although stored in the back of my mind for nearly fifty years, this part of my memory has not decayed into a shapeless mess. Rather, the glitter of youth on it has made it clearer than ever before. From a different point of view both in time and space, I have come to realize the value of my burning youth when I was a zhiqing in rural China. Here are a couple of stories extracted from my cerebral storage.

Going to the Countryside after Losing Schooling

In the summer of 1965, I graduated from middle school. Although I wanted to be and, in fact, had been a model student since the first grade, I found myself barred from high school while mediocre classmates were admitted to high school to the surprise of some teachers and friends. The high school and college admissions that year relied on a criterion known only to its makers and implementers. It effectively dashed the hopes of many excellent middle school and high school graduates. No one raised any questions about it. No one asked why. A naive and passionate dreamer, I turned sixteen that summer. In the face of a foggy future that promised neither schooling nor employment, I was truly lost.

My quandary, however, did not last very long because the state offered people like me a role to play in the historical drama that we were living. The first act of the drama was called “The countryside is a vast world for those with talent,” a quotation from Chairman Mao. The advice for people like me, youths who were from “bad” families, was to seek out the boundless promise of rural China. Although questionable under close scrutiny, these words of propaganda had the authority of an imperial decree in those days.

I chose to believe these words. Why not? I had been taught all those years to listen to adults and teachers, so I would never have questioned the great leader of the nation. Thus, my panic ceased, and I made up my mind. Against the opposition of my parents, I stepped onto that shiny path toward the vast world for talent, carrying only a four-pound quilt and a few pieces of clothing.
Without really knowing what lay ahead, I hopped on a truck that would take me and other trusting youths on a bumpy road for several days to the mountains in northeastern Sichuan.

Along the way, we were greeted with a warm welcome. In particular, there was plenty of fat pork on our dinner table, quite a treat in 1965, when China was still plagued with material shortages. Upon our arrival in Xuanhan County, we were invited to a huge show in our honor. One portion of the show was the soprano solo by Li Baola accompanied by Xiao Hengli on violin, two high school graduates who went to Xuanhan the year before. I was totally captivated by the angelic voice of the girl with curly hair! To a sixteen-year-old boy, Baola seemed to be a goddess descending from heaven. The performance that evening brought the hospitality of the mountains to a climax. In the excitement, I forgot all my anxiety. The future looked absolutely bright.

This was but the happy introduction to a long play. After arriving at the town of Nanba, we got off the trucks because the paved road ended there. Beyond it, only steep mountain paths awaited us.

Nanba was an old town where the Kunchi District government was located. It was also a hub of local communication and commerce. Porters carried all kinds of local products on their backs or shoulders from the depth of the mountains to Nanba and household necessities back to the villages in the mountains. Its crucial role was reinforced by the Houhe River, which connected it to towns such as Tuhuang and Fankuai upstream and Xuanhan downstream.

Yet Nanba was quiet except on market days. On an ordinary day, the streets in Nanba were largely empty except for a few pedestrians and chickens and dogs. You would find a few women wearing blue turbans, sitting on wooden stools on the sidewalk and making cloth shoes. Occasionally, you would see several porters chatting and exchanging news with the owner of a small restaurant in town. Few people owned a radio those days, and TV was unheard of. In the mountains, a restaurant was a center for socializing, like a bar in a Western town, where people go not merely to drink.

When we left Chongqing, our party began with several hundred young people. At each major stop, we broke into smaller groups. By the time I arrived at Nanba, only fourteen boys and girls remained in my group. We were assigned to Great Dome Tree Farm at a place called Camp Harmony in Longguan People's Commune. Most of us were graduates of No. 47 Middle School; the others were graduates of the school that was affiliated with No. 2 Steel Works of Chongqing. The youngest ones, Liu Quansheng, Feng Xiaohong and Gu Qihua, were only fifteen years old.

How we finished the difficult hike to Camp Harmony or whether we spent one or two days to get there, I don't remember. What I recall is that part of the