My Days in Well Pass

Ding Yumin

In 1969, after the dissolution of her farm, Ding Yumin and her friends settled in a small village in the mountains. There they faced the challenges in rural China of trying to maintain dignity when confronted with political prejudice and keep hope alive in the face of a bleak reality.

When I was invited to write this article, my immediate response was reluctance to recall those events long ago. Yet in the dead of night, the scenes that took place forty years ago, those lost, stressful and helpless days, doggedly came back into my mind and kept me wide awake for hours.

My parents had three children. After graduating from No. 10 Middle School in Chongqing in 1965, my younger brother went to the Xixing People's Commune in Pingchang County. I graduated from No. 1 High School the same year and went to the Wensheng People's Commune in Tongjiang County. First as a zhiqing, then as a schoolteacher and, finally, as a government official, I spent a total of twenty-eight years in Tongjiang.

How did my friends and I end up there? Many people thought it was because we had failed to be admitted to college and had no other direction available to us. The fact is that we had taken the college entrance examination and received good scores but were barred from college. That experience still hurts to this day, and I really hate talking about it. In the summer of 1965, while our lucky friends left for college, we faced a suffocating environment and inner despair. For those of us who were eager to escape the deep sense of loss and get away from people's cold stares, the countryside became an ideal refuge. In fact, most people who graduated from middle school and high school in 1964 and 1965 volunteered to go to the countryside. It never occurred to me whether it was the only way out for us. I was too young and ignorant to figure out what was going on beyond my immediate situation.

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1 Both Pingchang and Tongjiang counties are in northeastern Sichuan Province.
Life on the farm was hard but never boring. With nearly fifty boys and girls who left school in 1964 and 1965 living together, the farm was a lively place. We had leadership, organization, and friends and didn't need to worry about food and housing. Lacking rosy dreams and surprises, we nevertheless had goals and comradeship.

After the farm broke up at the end of 1968, we joined production teams in small groups. This was when we faced the real world of rural China. For example, we needed to husk the rice and grind the wheat; we had to grow vegetables and raise pigs; if we needed vegetable oil, we had to carry the rapeseeds from the fields to an oil mill. We really lived among the poor and lower-middle peasants. Life during this period left an indelible imprint on my memory.

With the help of He Qingyuan, the party secretary of the First Production Brigade at the Wensheng Commune, Wei Xiaoyu, Zhang Guangqing, Liu Kaixuan, Yu Lingwu, and I joined No. 5 Production Team of this brigade. The territory of this team was a five-li² strip from the top of a mountain range to its foot. To live close to the source of firewood, we chose to occupy a house at Well Pass, the highest point in the team’s territory. Three families lived here. In the upper yard lived He Yixue and He Yiqiang, two sons of He Quande, the team head. In the lower yard lived Wu Xianqing, a woman more than fifty years old, and her son’s family. The five of us were given the central room and another empty room in the lower yard. Here we learned to call old men “uncles” and old women “aunties” and to live just like the villagers.

Our bedroom was in bad shape, with holes in the walls. To make it livable, we cut some bamboo sticks to mend the holes. Then we dug up some dirt and mixed it with short pieces of rice stalks and water. To blend them thoroughly, we had to smash them with our feet, wearing rubber boots. Then we had to take off the boots for better results. When the mud paste was soft and sticky, we spread it evenly on the bamboo sheet and covered the wall with old newspapers. When our bedroom was ready, we put five beds in it against the walls. In front of the window, we placed a sewing machine that had been the only valuable item on our farm when it was dissolved. The central room was used as our kitchen. When we washed our feet in warm water before going to bed that night, we all felt a burning pain on the back of our feet and the area around our ankles. Then we saw numerous small cuts made by the straw pieces in the mud paste.

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² See glossary.