Massacre in Nanjiang

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In 1969, a conflict broke out between some Chongqing zhiqing in Nanjiang County, Sichuan Province, and the local farmers. With the support of local authorities, a mob of peasants at Solidarity People’s Commune killed three zhiqing in a blood-curdling manner.

The most moving thing in this world is historical truth because although brutal, it really happened;
The most painful thing is also history because once something happens, no one can change it;
The most alluring thing is still historical truth because it contains lessons for the future and, for that, I will give everything I have.

Following Chairman Mao Zedong’s instructions on December 22, 1968, our farm disbanded, as did hundreds of people’s commune-operated farms in the Daba Mountains.1 We zhiqing were split into small groups to join production teams under the communes. For most Chongqing zhiqing, who were lost in the whirlpool of the Cultural Revolution and frustrated in their futile struggle to escape their rural exile, this was a big blow. While a few of our friends managed to relocate to better rural areas, most of us returned to the Daba Mountains and continued to serve our term. In the resettlement process, zhiqing encountered numerous problems for which neither they nor the local authorities were prepared. We were asked to survive on our own thereafter, but some zhiqing had virtually nothing with which to start a life. When these zhiqing arrived at their new homes in the villages, they found themselves in houses that were literally bare—no furniture, no farm tools, and not even containers for grain. Not only did they resent the sudden change in their lives, but the villagers did not want to have them either. This disconnect between the desperate zhiqing and the ineffective local government sowed the seeds of one of the bloodiest incidents in Nanjiang County.

It all started with that damn tree.

1 Mao said that “It is necessary for the educated youth to go to the countryside to receive reeducation from the poor and lower-middle peasants.” This instruction sent another 8 million urban youth to the countryside within a year.
Wang Yuanming and his wife, both of whom were zhiqing from Chongqing, had married by the time they joined No. 1 Production Team of the Second Production Brigade at Solidarity People’s Commune. Also settled in the same village was Zheng Kaizhong, another Chongqing zhiqing. Wang and his wife were given a vacant room owned by a local farmer. Their new home had nothing except a mud stove against the wall. Both households needed furniture, so Wang and Zheng went to the head of their production team for permission to fell a tree. The head of the team asked them to wait. Several days passed, but they heard no answer from the team, so they went to the commune administration to seek help—not once, but several times. Still, their plea seemed to have fallen on deaf ears, because the officials of the commune were then fighting one another for power and had no time to be bothered with the plight of the zhiqing. Finally, Wang and Zheng got tired of waiting and decided to cut down a tree, with or without permission. Never could they have imagined the disaster that would follow.

That day, when they were collecting firewood on the hill overlooking their village, Wang and Zheng found a big poplar tree. The tree was big enough to meet their basic needs for furniture. They went home and returned with an ax. The whacking of their ax broke the tranquility in the mountains.

Before Wang and Zheng could cut down the tree, a woman showed up, “Hey, who are you? How can you touch this tree? Do you know whose tree it is?” Wang and Zheng were stunned.

“Whose tree? We don’t know. You tell us.”

“It belongs to Wu Tenglu, the team’s accountant.”

“Impossible. This part of the woods belongs to the production team. By the way, who are you?” They asked as they sized up the woman before them.

“I am his wife. When I say the tree belongs the Wu family, that means nobody can touch it!”

Wang and Zheng now were incensed. “Damn, what a bully you are!” Wang yelled at the woman,

“Go away! How can you say this tree is yours! This hillside is our team’s common area. The tree obviously belongs to the team. Kaizhong, why should we listen to her? Let’s get it done!”

Unable to stop the two young men, the woman left. (It turned out that the tree did belong to the production team.) After cutting down the tree, the two asked some villagers to cut it into small pieces and carried the logs back to Wang’s house. After sending away their neighbors, the three young people laid out a plan to furnish their new homes. It seemed to be an auspicious start of