Ten Years in Dragon Spring

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This article consists of three stories. In the first account, Wan tells how one of his zhiqing friends was crushed by his own ideals and the harsh realities of rural China. In the second story, the author tells the bittersweet tale of his own blind date in the countryside. In the third tale, Wan recalls his ordeal in the hiring process.

Stone Sutra Production Brigade, which I had joined, was part of Tea Market People's Commune in Dragon Spring, a rural district on the distant outskirts of Chengdu. Though only about an hour's bus ride from the city, it was hopelessly remote to me and my fellow zhiqing. In 1964 and 1965, nearly two hundred middle school and high school graduates went to the area from Chengdu: some became members of the people's commune, while others went to live and work together on a state farm. Four of them died in the countryside, three of them by their own hand. One girl killed herself by drinking pesticide because of a failed romance. Another girl hanged herself to end a miserable marriage. One fellow threw himself in front of an oncoming truck because he could not face allegations of arson against him, and to prevent the truck driver from being charged with his death, he put a suicide note in his pocket.

Luo Ziqiang

As time passes, our memories become increasingly vague, but none of the Chengdu zhiqing in our commune will ever forget Luo Ziqiang, who just dropped dead in the fields at what should have been the prime of his life. His story has become a sad testimony to our rural experience, leaving us in perpetual sorrow while giving us a new perspective on our own lives.

Ziqiang graduated from No. 9 High School in Chengdu. A top student in his class and an officer of the student association, he signed up for the first class of the Chengdu Youth Training School and joined No. 5 Production Team in the Red Flag Brigade of Tea Market Commune on November 29, 1964. Later, he moved to the Old Well Production Brigade’s No. 1 Production Team.

A burly and strong man, Ziqiang was honest, hard-working, and frugal. Despite his extremely high self-esteem, he was unassuming and extremely generous. We once had a dog meat banquet at his home. Ziqiang prepared the
meat while the hungry guests picked out chunks of dog meat as soon as they were ready. By the time the host put the last piece of meat into the pot, most of the guests were full.

A person of impeccable integrity, Ziqiang would never tolerate hypocrisy, nor would he do something simply because everybody else was doing it. Although he was always smiling, he would never hesitate to offer his opinion and confront other people’s point of view. Before long, his propensity for differing from and arguing with other people earned him the nickname Luo Xiu, meaning Mr. Correct.

True to his nickname, Luo Xiu stuck to his principles, sometimes to such an extent that his friends found him to be a real pain. For example, he once had a quarrel with a commune official. A couple of years later, the same official recommended Luo Xiu for a teaching position at the commune’s middle school despite that unhappy encounter. To everybody’s surprise, our Mr. Correct turned down what many other people would have died for. The reason? He would not accept an olive branch from a “hypocrite”!

At the end of our third year in the countryside, Mr. Correct gave us a bigger surprise when he announced to all of us that our zhiqing family was preventing us from “mingling with the poor and lower-middle peasants.” When we urban youths lived under the same roof for too long, he philosophized, our weaknesses reinforced each other. That was not the way to remold our thinking, Luo Xiu told us. Further, he argued that while each of us had an individual strength, such strength only led to friction. How about our helping each other? Isn’t that beneficial? One of us suggested. “No good,” Luo Xiu responded, saying that it was in fact an obstacle to our independence. He was critical of the appearance-conscious girl in our zhiqing family, too. To him, her tastes were too “petty bourgeois.” So Luo Xiu took great pains to get himself transferred to Old Well Production Brigade and became the first to break away from a zhiqing family in Dragon Spring.

Because every official at the commune knew that Luo Xiu had a strong sense of principle, he was eventually appointed the accountant in the commune’s office of handicrafts because the artisans were not only capable but also cunning people, good at using the loopholes in regulations to evade taxes and fees. Luo Xiu’s predecessor in the office simply could not handle these rascals and did a lousy bookkeeping job. Unable to please either the commune or the production teams to which the artisans belonged, the poor fellow was fired. Our Mr. Correct was different. He was sharp and stuck to his guns. He never took

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1 The author and four other Chengdu zhiqing, including Luo Ziqiang, lived together for more than two years.