

# Differing Perspectives: Positive Accounts of the Down to the Countryside Movement

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DIFFERING PERSPECTIVES: POSITIVE ACCOUNTS OF THE DOWN TO THE  
COUNTRYSIDE MOVEMENT

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Despite the number of narratives regarding the negative outcomes and experiences of the Down to the Countryside Movement during the Cultural Revolution, there is a scarce amount of literature in the West regarding the fringe benefits of the movement. The historiography in the field is limited, with most Western writers only focusing on the unfortunate consequences of the movement, such as violence, rape, limited access to education, and the strain on families affected by the political movement. The purpose of this study is to give a voice to the Chinese sent-down youth whose positive thoughts on the Down to the Countryside are often not addressed in the West. This is done by the evaluation of memoirs in the form of books and journal articles. By analyzing these works, one finds that many of the sent-down youth had positive experiences during their time in the countryside. These include but are not limited to developing a strong work ethic, making long-lasting friendships with other sent-down youths as well as with peasants, and, for young women, developing a sense of equality with young men due to their effort in hard, manual labor. This study is significant because it can serve as a framework for future research into the lives and experiences of the sent-down youth.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, or Cultural Revolution for short, was a government program launched in China in 1966 that negatively impacted nearly everyone in Chinese society. Lasting until 1976, the Cultural Revolution was more than simply a political movement. Prior to the program's official sanction by the government, Mao Zedong, the Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), believed that many members of the Party held communistic ideology in contempt and wanted to restore capitalism to China. Mao Zedong's solution to this perceived threat was the announcement of the Cultural Revolution, a movement to purge the CCP of suspected capitalists as well as identify and shame those within society who sympathized with capitalist philosophy.

In order to eliminate so-called "capitalist roaders," Mao Zedong emphasized the concept of class struggle. In this case, Mao Zedong encouraged antagonism between groups such as factory workers and established members of the CCP. As a result, people humiliated others in the streets or at public "struggle sessions," and avid supporters of Mao Zedong beat and killed individuals for suspected political ideologies.<sup>1</sup> Mao Zedong and the CCP also targeted historical and traditional aspects of Chinese society during the Cultural Revolution, such as the concept of the Four Olds. The Four Olds included old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas.<sup>2</sup> In essence, anything cultural that originated prior to the victory of the CCP in the Chinese Civil War in 1949 was at risk of being considered counterrevolutionary or bourgeois.

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Meisner, *Mao's China and After: A History of the People's Republic* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 293.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: Norton, 2013), 545.

It was during the chaos of the Cultural Revolution that Mao Zedong announced his plans for the Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement. Most commonly referred to as the Down to the Countryside Movement, this program encouraged young adults from urban environments to volunteer to relocate and live and work in rural areas of China. In theory, the idea to send youths to the countryside of China would counteract the supposed spreading of capitalistic ideals within Chinese society. By working with peasants in order to complete crucial tasks such as farming, young adults from the cities would be given the opportunity to witness firsthand the work of the proletariat and their contribution to society as a whole. Recognizing the importance of peasants within China would allow for these youths to deepen their commitment to communism and eliminate any capitalist sympathies that they might harbor.

Although the opportunity to learn about the benefits of communism was technically the impetus for the Down to the Countryside Movement, it was most likely only considered a secondary benefit of the program. Prior to the launch of the Down to the Countryside Movement, the CCP officially cancelled all university entrance exams. This decision, made in 1966, effectively eliminated the opportunity for young adults to continue their education past secondary school. This was mainly because the CCP felt that universities offered too few opportunities for the lower classes.<sup>3</sup> The odds of attending university became slim, and the chances of acquiring a job in the city with no degree and no practical skills were virtually nonexistent. With the loss of the opportunity to continue their education, many young adults in major cities did not have anything to do with their time. Some of these youths joined the Red Guards, an organization of zealous young adults who adored Mao Zedong and oftentimes

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<sup>3</sup> Nirmal Khumar Chandra, "Education in China: From the Cultural Revolution to Four Modernisations," *Economic and Political Weekly* 22, no. 19/21 (May 1987): AN128. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4377015>.

suppressed and humiliated supposed counterrevolutionaries. The elimination of college entrance exams and the swelling ranks of the Red Guards with their violent tactics for rooting out capitalist-roaders contributed to unstable conditions within cities. Some historians, like Thomas Bernstein, author of *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages*, have argued that sending the Red Guards and other youth to the countryside was a way to restore some semblance of order to the cities.

Following the announcement of the Down to the Countryside Movement, Red Guards swiftly volunteered for the prospect of connecting with peasants and fostering an environment that would benefit communism. Since Red Guards were some of the most devoted individuals to Mao Zedong and his plan to reinvigorate the masses with communist ideology, it is perhaps not surprising that they believed their time in the countryside would help spread revolutionary fervor. Other young adults did not feel as strongly about the matter as did the Red Guards. Following the thousands that volunteered to be sent to the countryside were those who went reluctantly. In other words, volunteers did not consist of the majority of youths sent to the countryside. The government drafted many young people to go to the countryside once the number of volunteers began to drop. It is estimated that 17,764,000 million youths, both willing and unwilling, left sprawling cities such as Shanghai and Beijing for small villages or collective farms.<sup>4</sup>

As might be expected, such an idealistic plan ultimately left many supporters of Mao Zedong feeling disheartened and angry after spending years of their lives in the countryside with no notable results. In the years following the end of the Cultural Revolution and the Down to the

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<sup>4</sup> Carl Riskin, *The China Human Development Report* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 37.



Countryside Movement, historians produced many detailed studies about the programs while authors wrote autobiographies and works of fiction about the movements. Those who wrote memoirs of their personal experiences mostly documented the suffering of their middle or upper class families. The *zhiqing*, or educated youth, wrote many such works. The educated youth consisted of the young adults who were sent from urbanized locations to rural territories after the launch of the Down to the Countryside Movement. *Zhiqing* had varying levels of education, but the majority of memoirs written by them have come from those who had at least completed middle school. Literature that condemns the Cultural Revolution, including autobiographies and fictional works by the *zhiqing*, is known as scar literature.

Similar to the opinions of those who write scar literature, Western historians typically consider the Cultural Revolution and the Down to the Countryside Movement as wastes of time that were not beneficial to the people of China. However, it must be noted that the Down to the Countryside Movement has never received an overwhelming amount of attention from Western scholars. Western researchers, and even many Chinese writers of scar literature, typically give focus to the Cultural Revolution as a whole rather than just one subheading underneath it. This means that much of the writing describes issues that people faced within large cities such as Beijing. Struggle sessions, incarcerations based on scant evidence, and tales of violence against suspected capitalists make up the majority of such works. The growing popularity of scar literature abroad means that more people have heard of the Cultural Revolution, and have formed opinions based on the negative accounts that they have read. There can be no denying that the Cultural Revolution in combination with the Down to the Countryside Movement caused much grief and suffering among the Chinese. One wonders, however, whether these tales of suffering account for the entirety of the situation.

This study will argue that positive experiences of the *zhiqing* were more common than is currently acknowledged, and that their time in the countryside was not necessarily wasted. By using this argument I hope to dispel the idea that the Down to the Countryside Movement was detrimental to all Chinese. I will use the years 1966-1978 as the timeframe, since most of the educated youths left the cities during that time period. It is important to note that some youths left to work in the countryside as early as the 1950s. I will not be researching their stories since they left prior to the Cultural Revolution for different reasons. Their departure occurred before the inception of the Down to the Countryside Movement.

The majority of sources that I use in this study were published after the 1966-1978 time-period that I use as a framework for this research. This is because there were not many published accounts of the movements while they were still ongoing. While it can certainly be argued that time can cause one to look at negative events with a more positive bias, I do not think that is the main reason why many authors included nostalgic descriptions of their time in the countryside. The fact is that while many youths did have experiences in which they suffered hardship, the positive events were significant enough to leave lasting impressions that they would remember for years to come.

Although positive accounts of the sent-down youth are not unheard of, they have not been addressed in Western scholarship about the Down to the Countryside Movement. Western scholarship regarding the Down to the Countryside Movement focuses upon the atrocities and hardships faced by the *zhiqing* on their collective farms in rural China. The exceptions to this rule lie in personal narratives, often in the form of autobiographies and short stories, that provides the reader with fond memories of life in the countryside. This thesis will add to the

existing historiographical debate on the experiences of the *zhiqing* because it will provide a differing point of view from the majority of the scholarship on the topic.

Since this study will utilize many autobiographical accounts of those who were sent to rural areas, it is quite reliant upon the memories of such individuals. This leads one to question the accuracy of memories for recalling specific and general situations. As mentioned previously, the majority of works written by those who were sent to the countryside or those who were affected by the Cultural Revolution in some significant way have been negative. Do negative experiences impact how people remember certain events? Are people simply looking through rose-colored glasses when they remember being happy during their long stay in the countryside?

In “Bad is Stronger than Good,” a journal article published in the *Review of General Psychology*, the authors argue that events that are “negatively valenced will have a greater impact on the individual than positively valenced events of the same type.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, negative experiences are more likely to make a mark upon an individual than a positive experience. This conclusion makes sense when it comes to some works, such as *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* by Jung Chang, which can leave the reader wondering how much hardship one person could handle in a span of just a few years. Despite these findings, the authors make it clear that good experiences do leave lasting impressions. This occurs if there are enough good incidents to outweigh bad incidents.<sup>6</sup>

In terms of remembering past events, Elizabeth A. Kensinger, a professor of psychology at Boston College, argues that negative emotion contributes to how vividly an individual

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<sup>5</sup> Roy F. Baumeister, Elin Bratslavsky, Catrin Finkenauer, and Kathleen D. Vohs, “Bad is Stronger than Good,” *Review of General Psychology* 5, no. 4 (December 2001): 323. <http://eds.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.net.ucf.edu/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=9&sid=67b42f16-303c-421b-b3f9-5067f60f8205%40sessionmgr104>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

remembers a memory.<sup>7</sup> For example, if one were to have a terrible experience at some point during one's life that was responsible for negative emotions, then one would remember the instances of that event in greater detail. Such findings complement the conclusion of "Bad is Stronger than Good," and may explain why many works regarding the Cultural Revolution focus so heavily on negative themes. When reading scar literature, it is obvious that the negative experiences of the *zhiqing* far outweighed the positive. Although positive experiences are present in scar literature, they are less common and play a much smaller role in the narratives than when an author is describing a negative event.

The Down to the Countryside Movement is unique in history because no other country had ever launched such an ambitious program to reshape the agricultural landscape. Despite this, the fact remains that the program is not common knowledge in the West. One would think that the relocation of millions of youths from their homes to rural areas of the country to do manual labor would captivate public interest abroad. It is important to remember that countries such as the United States did not have diplomatic relations with China during the time that the Down to the Countryside Movement was in effect. In fact, people only began hearing of the program due to the release of biographies and fictional works that have slowly but surely made their way onto Western bookshelves since the 1980s. In addition to this, the opening of China's doors to the rest of the world in the late twentieth century is largely responsible for the release of a substantial amount of historical information. As a result, information about the Down to the Countryside Movement, as well as personal accounts of the experiences of ordinary Chinese citizens during their time in the countryside, are more widely available to the general public.

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<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth A. Kensinger, "Negative Emotion Enhances Memory Accuracy," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 16, no. 4 (August 2007): 214, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20183199>.

The first Western work to address the Down to the Countryside Movement was Thomas Bernstein's *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages: The Transfer of Youth from Urban to Rural Chin* (1977). Rather than giving focus on the political movement itself, Bernstein analyzes the reasoning behind Mao Zedong's launching of the program as well as the logistical issues of relocating millions of people to different parts of the country. Bernstein concludes that the relocation of the educated youth was not intended to foster an environment where city-dwellers could learn the ideals of communism. Instead, Bernstein asserts that Mao Zedong introduced the Down to the Countryside Movement so that factories could hire more low-wage employees, such as women and uneducated men.<sup>8</sup> With the next generation of educated individuals out in the countryside, factories could increase revenue by paying smaller wages. The author also argues that the Down to the Countryside Movement did not cause "discernible value changes" among the sent-down youth. In other words, the values of the educated youth did not change much from the beginning of the Down to the Countryside Movement to the end of it. His argument, however, suggests otherwise since many of the educated youth were no longer zealous about communism following their return to the cities. Instead, they were disillusioned.<sup>9</sup>

One of the drawbacks to this study is that it was published in 1977. Some educated youths were still in the process of leaving their hometowns following its publication. Many of the *zhiqing* were still in the countryside in 1977 and were not allowed to return to their homes. In many cases, permission for the educated youth to return to the cities was not given until the late 1970s and early 1980s. It leads one to question the veracity of Bernstein's conclusions in regards to "discernable value changes" among the educated youth who returned home. After all, how can

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Bernstein, *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages: The Transfer of Youth from Urban to Rural China* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), 96.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

one come to a definitive conclusion regarding the opinions of returned *zhiqing* if many of them were still in the countryside? Many of Bernstein's primary sources come from Chinese periodicals and articles published during the years of the Cultural Revolution. The *zhiqing* that he included within his study mainly consisted of those who had already returned home even though the movement was not complete by that point.

Unlike Bernstein, historians Michael Schoenhals and Roderick MacFarquhar analyze the Cultural Revolution with a political lens. One of the central arguments to *Mao's Last Revolution* (2006) is that the Cultural Revolution, as well as the Down to the Countryside Movement, was Mao Zedong's attempt at preventing Marxist revisionism within China.<sup>10</sup> They portray Mao Zedong not as a ruthless dictator, but rather a leader who was concerned that China might follow in the steps of the Soviet Union. Of course, this is not to say that they depict Mao Zedong in an innocent fashion; they recognize that Mao Zedong was responsible for the political and social upheaval of the time. In contrast to Bernstein, the authors of *Mao's Last Revolution* claim that the Red Guards were the reason that young adults were sent from the cities.<sup>11</sup> After years of disorder, and despite Mao Zedong's famous claim that "revolution is not a dinner party," the authors assert that sending the young adults out into the backwoods of China was an easy solution for the restoration of order to the cities.<sup>12</sup> The authors of *Mao's Last Revolution* take a top-down approach to the political side of the Cultural Revolution. There are no personal accounts or interviews with former *zhiqing*, which strips the educated youth of any agency.

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<sup>10</sup> Bernstein, *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages*, 14.

<sup>11</sup> Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 341.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 343.

Instead of a top-down approach, Bin Yang's "'We Want to Go Home!' The Great Petition of the *Zhiqing*, Xishuangbanna, Yunnan, 1978-1979" picks out the experiences of individual *zhiqing*. In this article, the author emphasizes the "impressive leadership and organization" of the educated youth in Yunnan Province. The *zhiqing* who resided in Yunnan petitioned the CCP in December 1979 to allow them to leave the countryside and return to their homes.<sup>13</sup> This article is significant to the historiography of the Down to the Countryside Movement because it does not avoid personal accounts of the *zhiqing*. The author places emphasis on the stories of frustrated *zhiqing* and their desire to return to their previous lives.

Although Bin Yang gives agency to the educated youth in Yunnan, he only includes examples of their negative experiences. He claims that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) was responsible for much abuse toward the sent-down youths, and that they beat virtually every *zhiqing* at some point or other.<sup>14</sup> The author states that the educated youth were not provided with enough food, leaving them no choice but to scavenge what they could in the countryside. One of the limitations to this study is that Bin Yang only looks at information from one province. The author mentions other provinces in his paper, such as Heilongjiang in the northeast, but acknowledges that he does not have enough information about the *zhiqing* there to come to any conclusions about their treatment. Bin Yang also does not take into account the experiences of those who were able to leave the countryside prior to the organized protest in Yunnan. Because he does not do this, he misses the opportunity to address whether or not the educated youth who had left by that point were treated in the same manner as those who were not allowed to leave.

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<sup>13</sup> Bin Yang, "'We Want to Go Home!' The Great Petition of the *Zhiqing*, Xishuangbanna, Yunnan, 1978-1979," *The China Quarterly* 198, (2009): 411.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 412.

*China's Sent Down Generation: Public Administration and the Legacies of Mao's Rustication Program* (2013) by Helena K. Rene is another work that provides insight into the lives of *zhiqing*. Rene's work covers a broad range of topics about the Down to the Countryside Movement, including the role of the central government as well as long-term consequences to the economy. The main point that the author makes is that the CCP was an extremely efficient entity during the Down to the Countryside Movement, and therefore was able to send youths to the countryside in an organized manner.

What is most significant about Rene's work is that it is a study not just of the CCP and the upper echelon of the Party, but also an evaluation of the experiences of the *zhiqing* in their local communities. Since Rene tries to balance between a top-down approach and a look at the people who were directly affected by the Down to the Countryside Movement, she only includes narratives of the *zhiqing* if they relate to the central or local government. Although her methodology may not be ideal for researchers with a strong interest in the educated youth, her book marks a change in the historiography of the Cultural Revolution as a whole with her inclusion of many accounts of the *zhiqing*. This stands in contrast with *Mao's Last Revolution*, which left little room for the experiences of ordinary citizens during the Cultural Revolution and the Down to the Countryside Movement. One of the most significant statements by Rene in this work is that many of the educated youth that she interviewed said they remember their years in the countryside with fondness, and think of their experiences there as some of the greatest times of their lives.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Helena Rene, *China's Sent-Down Generation: Public Administration and the Legacies of Mao's Rustication Program* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 12.



Of the aforementioned books and studies, only two even contain personal accounts of the *zhiqing*. *Mao's Last Revolution* essentially treats the Down to the Countryside Movement as a footnote of the Cultural Revolution, and does not give much detail about it other than why it was started. Bernstein and MacFarquhar and Schoenhals either neglect the *zhiqing* entirely or refer to them as statistics within their works. Bin Yang manages to give the *zhiqing* a voice in his study, but he provides a one-sided account where every educated youth is furious with the central government and wants to go home. He draws even more attention to this fact with his discussion of female *zhiqing*, and how they were tired of the constant threat of rape from members of the PLA. Indeed, Bin Yang's study leaves one wondering why the *zhiqing* were kept in the countryside for so many years, and whether or not anyone could have a fond memory from such bitter experiences.

In order to give more agency to the *zhiqing*, primary sources such as *Some of Us: Chinese Women Growing Up in the Mao Era* will be analyzed and compared to works that conclude the Down to the Countryside Movement was a terrible event, such as Bin Yang's article. *Some of Us* is a compilation of recollections that mainly focus upon the experiences of the sent-down youth. What makes this work significant is that it dispels the notion that all female *zhiqing* were subject to sexual harassment and verbal and physical abuse. In one of the recollections presented in the book, Naihua Zhang recalls how the villagers who resided in Baxizhao treated her with respect and did not care about her class background or sex. This fact is especially important if one considers that the political views of one's parents often colored the status of their children within the cities. As a result of such a worldview, Naihua Zhang went from being a "popular student to

an outcast” in Beijing.<sup>16</sup> This did not matter in the countryside, where the peasants treated her kindly because she worked hard and was polite. These characteristics were more important than one’s political beliefs or sex. To put Naihua Zhang’s experience in perspective, she states that she has “always felt a deep sense of gratitude and nostalgia toward the people in my village, a place I devoted a full eight years of my youth and from which I have also gained much in return.”<sup>17</sup>

On a similar note, *Growing Up in the People’s Republic: Conversations Between Two Daughters of China’s Revolution* is a primary source that also aims to dispel some of the commonly held opinions regarding the Down to the Countryside Movement that are typical in Western countries, such as the United States. Both authors, one being a former Red Guard who volunteered to be sent to the country and the other having been forced, relate their positive experiences and convey their sense of accomplishment and pride upon having completed their stays in their respective provinces. It is important to note that Ma Xiaodong, the eager girl who volunteered to go to the countryside, was sent to the province of Yunnan, just like the individuals that Bin Yang interviews for his article. Her experience is different from the individuals that Bin Yang interviewed, with Ma Xiaodong quickly recognized as the hardest worker on the farm despite her sex. She also did not experience sexual harassment during her stay in Yunnan.

Besides *Some of Us* and *Growing Up in the People’s Republic*, other autobiographical works such as *Red Azalea* and *Spider Eaters: A Memoir* will be evaluated. Both of these works include personal accounts of the *zhiqing*, and not all of them are negative. As one can observe

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<sup>16</sup> Naihua Zhang, “In a World Together, Yet Apart: Urban and Rural Women Coming of Age in the Seventies,” in *Some of Us: Chinese Women Growing Up in the Mao Era*, eds. Bai Di, Wang Zhen, and Xueping Zhong (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 4.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

from the sources discussed above, a gendered approach will be taken in order to understand the experiences of young women who were sent to the countryside. Their experiences will be discussed and analyzed, but with a special focus on how *zhiqing* women were treated and perceived. In addition to evaluating gender, the study will take an approach that is characteristic of history from below. Instead of focusing attention on the upper echelon of the CCP and why the Down to the Countryside Movement began, it will be focused upon ordinary *zhiqing*.

## **CHAPTER TWO: BACKGROUND, DISENCHANTMENT, AND FOND MEMORIES**

Originating from Qinghua University Middle School, the Red Guard organization started innocently enough in May 1966 when several students criticized the play *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*, as well as their school for supposed bourgeois leanings.<sup>18</sup> Although the play premiered several years prior to the start of the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong viewed the play as a critique of his policies. In the play, Hai Rui, a real-life bureaucrat during the Ming Dynasty, is fired from his position in the government due to his critique of the emperor. Audiences associated the play's events with Peng Dehuai, the former Chinese Minister of National Defense, and his dismissal from office after his criticism of Mao Zedong's economic policies during an event known as the Great Leap Forward.<sup>19</sup> To comment on the play and their school, students created big-character posters. Such posters featured large writing that supported communist ideology as well as denunciations of capitalism. These types of posters soon became the hallmark of criticism during the Cultural Revolution. Mao Zedong quickly praised the students of Qinghua University Middle School, led by Zhang Chengzhi, the first Red Guard, for daring to call into question the establishment and those in charge. Mao Zedong encouraged this type of behavior with his own big-character poster, titled "Bombard the Headquarters." The "Bombard the Headquarters" poster, as well as large rallies for Red Guards hosted by Mao Zedong in Tiananmen Square, gave legitimacy to students to criticize and condemn their teachers, school administration, and eventually high-ranking members of the CCP. This fed the rise of those who came to call themselves the Red Guards.

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<sup>18</sup> MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution*, 15.

<sup>19</sup> Domes, Jürgen. *Peng Te-huai: The Man and the Image* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), 94.

Although Red Guards began their crusade with criticism via big-character posters, their tactics grew extreme over time. Mao Zedong gave the Red Guards permission to engage in vicious class struggle against people and things considered part of China's non-communist past. Criticism turned into the destruction of material objects, namely in the campaign to eliminate the Four Olds, and destruction transformed into witch-hunts. Those who supposedly valued capitalistic ideas or venerated the history of China were primary targets for the Red Guards. These people, usually intellectuals as well as college professors and teachers, were often fired from their positions in the professional world. The threat of the Red Guards and their tendencies to imprison and even publicly beat and kill people made urban centers dangerous places to live. To put this in perspective, 1,172 people were killed as a result of the Cultural Revolution in Beijing in August and September of 1966.<sup>20</sup> That is quite a large number of people who were killed considering the Red Guards only started their criticism campaign three months earlier. Red Guards even grew so bold as to challenge the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the army of the PRC. Red Guards stole from barracks and attacked PLA members without worrying about retribution from the Party or from the police.<sup>21</sup> This was largely due to the fact that interfering with Red Guard activity was not permitted since to do so would indicate that you were possibly counterrevolutionary. The escalation from criticism to brutality made Mao Zedong and the leadership of the CCP question the merits of this type of chaotic revolution.

Mao Zedong officially disbanded the Red Guards in the summer of 1968 following almost two years of public denunciations, destruction, and death. By that time, the Red Guards had fulfilled their purpose. Their zealous devotion to Mao Zedong and purging of "capitalist

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<sup>20</sup> MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution*, 124.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

readers” left the CCP full of only those who proclaimed loyalty to Mao Zedong and communistic principles. Mao Zedong did not need to worry about members of the Party steering China on a path to capitalism after the years of terror that they had witnessed. Although the Red Guard movement was officially over, Mao Zedong recognized that former Red Guards could still be useful. Mao Zedong launched the Down to the Countryside Movement just several months later in December 1968. Former Red Guards volunteered in droves to go to the countryside. After all, working in rural regions of China meant that they could focus their commitment to revolution into other projects rather than trying to return to the normalcy of their pre-Cultural Revolution lives. Doing meaningful work in other areas of China was a way to fill the void left by the termination of the Red Guard movement. Another reason why former Red Guards were excited at the prospect of working in the countryside was because they thought that they would make meaningful differences in the lives of the peasants.

The exact number of Red Guards is unknown. Despite this uncertainty, some historians have tried to quantify the number of people who belonged to the same generation. In this case, Guobin Yang defines a generation as people of roughly the same age who experience the same historical events or influences.<sup>22</sup> This distinct generation consists of those born sometime around 1949, the founding of the People’s Republic of China. These were the youths who were of middle school age or older when the Cultural Revolution first started. Sometimes known as the Cultural Revolution generation, the *zhiquing* generation, or the Red Guard generation, it is estimated that its numbers range anywhere from ten million to thirty million.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Guobin Yang, *The Red Guard Generation: The Red Guard Generation and Political Activism in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 6.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

While these numbers provide a baseline to work with, different historians debate the definition of the Red Guard generation. Michel Bonnet, author of *The Lost Generation: The Rustication of China's Educated Youth (1968-1980)*, asserts that urban youth who were born between the years of 1947 and 1960 were a part of this “lost” generation.<sup>24</sup> In contrast, Guobin Yang does not consider youths born as late as 1960 to be a part of the Red Guard generation. Although many youths born around 1960 certainly participated in the Down to the Countryside Movement, Guobin Yang only takes into consideration those Red Guards who were involved in the Cultural Revolution during its heyday from 1966-1968.<sup>25</sup> This is mainly because those young adults were old enough to witness and participate in the tumultuous early years of the Cultural Revolution. This stands in contrast to those who may have been too young to understand or participate in the events from 1966-1968.

Unlike the Red Guards, many young adults who were not considered champions of the revolution were uninterested in leaving their homes for the rural parts of China. One of the reasons for this was that there were many people targeted by Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution who had “black” family backgrounds. Those who had black family backgrounds included families who had close relatives who at one point in the past were landlords, rightists, or rich peasants.<sup>26</sup> The past actions of older family members reflected negatively on their younger relatives, who were considered to be just as “black” as the rest of their family even if there was no evidence to support this.<sup>27</sup> For example, young adults were often criticized and excluded from joining the Red Guards if a relative such as their grandmother had been a

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<sup>24</sup> Yang, *The Red Guard Generation*, 6.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>26</sup> Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 551.

<sup>27</sup> Xing Lu, *Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 55.

landlord. During the time of Mao Zedong, landlords were always depicted as greedy capitalists who exploited their tenants for more money.<sup>28</sup>

It was “black” families who suffered heavily during the tumultuous years of the Cultural Revolution, with personal property destroyed and the constant threat of arrest and beatings hanging overhead. The steady scrutiny, threats, and violence made many young adults, such as Jung Chang (as seen in her memoir *Wild Swans*), opposed to participating in the Down to the Countryside Movement. It was difficult for some youths to support a revolution that caused irreparable damage to their family unit. While the contrast in revolutionary fervor between Red Guards and those from black families was notably different, there are no available estimates regarding the number of volunteers versus conscripts for the Down to the Countryside Movement.

Regardless of one’s personal feelings towards the Down to the Countryside Movement, both volunteers and conscripts were sent to regions across China. These included locations such as southern Yunnan Province, bordered by Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam, and Nei Mongol, or Inner Mongolia, bordered by Mongolia. The *zhiqing* typically, though not always, took trains from their cities of residence to the station that was closest to their assignment. For Ma Xiaodong, the trip from Beijing to Kunming, Yunnan took three days by train. Following the arrival of the train to Yunnan, she took a combination of buses and trucks to reach her state farm close to the Vietnam border in Xishuangbanna.<sup>29</sup> It took her a week to reach her destination.<sup>30</sup> Although Ma Xiaodong had a particularly long trip, not all *zhiqing* travelled nearly as far. The

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<sup>28</sup> Lu, *Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*, 56.

<sup>29</sup> Ye Weili and Ma Xiaodong, *Growing Up in the People’s Republic: Conversations Between Two Daughters of China’s Revolution* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 100.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*



government assigned the majority of educated youth placed to collective farms or villages only several hours to a day away from their family.<sup>31</sup> In *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages*, Bernstein provides figures that support this idea. The statistics show the numbers of urban youths who transferred from urban centers to rural locations. In addition to this, the data display the number of *zhiqing* who were already from that province as opposed to from other areas of China. For example, the information suggests that over 1,200,000 educated youths lived in Heilongjiang, a northern province in Manchuria, as of 1974, with 710,000 of those being youths who already lived in the province prior to the start of the Down to the Countryside Movement.<sup>32</sup> The remaining 490,000 came from the cities of Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, and Hangzhou.<sup>33</sup>

A large portion of the data simply says that all of the *zhiqing* from certain provinces already lived in the nearby area. One such example is Zhejiang Province, an area of eastern China to the northwest of Taiwan, whose data from 1973 suggests that all 358,000 urban youths who lived in the countryside as a result of the Down to the Countryside Movement were already from that province.<sup>34</sup> Although Bernstein's data is certainly helpful, one should look at it with a skeptical eye. As stated in his footnotes, most of his data came from radio broadcasts, such as "Radio Harbin" or "Radio Beijing," which would naturally provide information dictated to it by the state.<sup>35</sup> It is not improbable to surmise that the CCP could inflate their numbers to encourage additional volunteers. This ties in with data that appears altered by the state to look appealing rather than wholly accurate. The numbers that Bernstein provides are too clear-cut and are most

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<sup>31</sup> Bernstein, *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages*, 29.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

likely rounded upward or downward. Numbers such as 450,000 in Hunan, 500 in Tibet, and 800,000 in Jilin are quite precise and are most definitely rounded upward or downward. Another issue is that the information collected by Bernstein ranges from 1973 to 1976. As a result, the data is not final since students were leaving the cities for the countryside until 1978.

Helena K. Rene, author of *China's Sent Down Generation*, relies upon much of Bernstein's data and approach to the evaluation of the bureaucratic wing of the CCP that facilitated the relocation. Unlike Bernstein, Rene interviewed 44 educated youths who went to different regions of the country. *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages* only included 11 interviews from the educated youth, who all went to Guangdong Province in southwest China during the movement.<sup>36</sup> As such, information from his interviews is not representative of a wide variety of experiences from educated youth who went to diverse locations throughout China.

Rene organized her interviewees based on where the sent-down youth went during the Down to the Countryside Movement. The four types of interviewees include students who went to rural villages, state and military farms, the plains of Inner Mongolia, and factories.<sup>37</sup> According to Rene's data, twenty-two of the forty-four *zhiqing* that she interviewed went to state and military farms.<sup>38</sup> Of those twenty-two youths, Heilongjiang province had the greatest amount, with seventeen.<sup>39</sup> The total of 38.6% of Rene's interviewees who went to state and military farms in Heilongjiang is not surprising since most accounts of scar literature or memoirs about the Down to the Countryside Movement come from former youths who went to that region. Heilongjiang is a province of northeast China also known as the Great Northern

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<sup>36</sup> Rene, *China's Sent-Down Generation*, 7.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

Wilderness. As mentioned in *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages*, Heilongjiang received 490,000 youths from different areas of China.<sup>40</sup> This was out of a total of 1,200,000 educated youth who worked in Heilongjiang during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>41</sup> Based on the data available, only one other province had more *zhiqing*. This was Liaoning Province, located only slightly to the south of Heilongjiang. According to Bernstein's reported information, there were 1,240,000 educated youth in Liaoning, but none came from outside of their own province.<sup>42</sup> Sichuan Province, located in south central China, had similar statistics, with zero out of 1,200,000 *zhiqing* from outside provinces.<sup>43</sup>

If these facts are accurate, then Heilongjiang had the greatest amount of rusticated youth, 490,000, from different areas of China.<sup>44</sup> This helps explain why Heilongjiang Province is the setting for many personal accounts of *zhiqing* who went to areas farther away from their hometown. The location of Heilongjiang also likely played a part in how many rusticated youth that the province received. Since Beijing was closer to Heilongjiang than many other large cities, it was more efficient to transport youths from there than from provinces further south or west. One must keep in mind, however, that this did not mean it was impossible for youths who lived in cities further south of Beijing to end up in Heilongjiang. The fact that Beijing had such a large population, estimated to be 4.43 million people in 1970, most likely contributed to so many young adults going to Heilongjiang.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Bernstein, *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages*, 26.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>45</sup> "China: Population of Beijing from 1970-2030 (in millions)," Statista, accessed on June 5, 2018, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/466949/china-population-of-beijing/>.

The rest of Rene's interviewees are only slightly more balanced out in terms of dispersal during the Down to the Countryside Movement. Seventeen of the people that she interviewed went to rural villages.<sup>46</sup> These *zhiqing* travelled to provinces such as Guangdong and Shaanxi, located in the south and center of China, respectively. Those who went to Shangxi, another centrally located province, account for 59% of the students that Rene interviewed from rural villages.<sup>47</sup> Of the remaining two categories, four went to the Inner Mongolian Grasslands as nomads and one went to work in a factory in Shanxi.<sup>48</sup>

Upon arrival at their assigned villages or military farms, surprise was most often the dominant emotion for the *zhiqing*. The language of the local peasants was not always the same as what the youth used in their respective cities. After all, there are a number of different dialects of Chinese within China, each determined by the area of the country in which one finds oneself. For example, the southeast of the country is home to a more diverse set of dialects. Those who travelled to provinces such as Guangdong most likely needed to learn Cantonese, while those stationed around Beijing were more likely to speak Mandarin. The uneven distribution of language within China meant various dialects for some of the educated youth to master if they were to adapt to life in the countryside. Language barriers were serious impediments to both the educated youth as well as the peasants. The work put in by the rusticated youth to learn a different dialect of Chinese added an additional layer of stress to an already potentially overwhelming situation.

In addition to potential language barriers, poverty was rampant in the countryside. Although it would be wrong to say that these youths led perfectly sheltered lives given all that

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<sup>46</sup> Rene, *China's Sent-Down Generation*, 9.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

they saw or experienced in the cities during the chaotic years of the Cultural Revolution, it certainly can be argued that they were insulated against what rural China truly looked like. The housing provided to the sent-down youth served as a prime example. Some youths lived in structures made of wood, while others lived in straw and mud huts.<sup>49</sup> Some *zhiqing* even had to build their own communal residence halls after they arrived to their assigned destinations, finding nothing but open land at their village or military farm.<sup>50</sup> One educated youth who lived with a peasant family rather than with a group of other *zhiqing* in a hall recalled her introduction to the bathroom situation during her time in the countryside. The bathroom, which only the female members of the house used, was nothing more than a hole in the ground several feet deep.<sup>51</sup> There was no toilet paper; balls of mud were used instead.<sup>52</sup> The female peasants were quite proud of their bathroom. The state of the facility shocked the educated youth, who did not expect something so “backwards” in China.<sup>53</sup>

In addition to the lack of plumbing, the living quarters of the educated youth did not have the luxuries of heating or air conditioning. Considering that many of the farms or villages in which the *zhiqing* lived were in the far north or south of the country, this meant many freezing nights and blistering days. Ma Xiaodong noted that she was surprised to find that her clothes were wet when she put them on after her first night in Xishuangbanna in Yunnan. After all, they had the entire night to dry from any moisture accumulated during the day. Another educated youth explained to her that her clothes would always be wet because of the humidity in the

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<sup>49</sup> Rene, *China's Sent-Down Generation*, 169.

<sup>50</sup> Xiaomei Chen, “From ‘Lighthouse’ to the Northeast Wilderness: Growing Up Among the Ordinary Stars,” in *Some of Us: Chinese Women Growing Up in the Mao Era*, eds. Bai Di, Wang Zhen, and Xueping Zhong (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 71.

<sup>51</sup> Rene, *China's Sent-Down Generation*, 170

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

region.<sup>54</sup> It was clear to Ma Xiaodong that she would need to learn a great deal about living in the southern countryside.

Manual labor was another eye-opening experience for the sent-down youth. As Naihua Zhang stated in her essay, “Life was hard for us. We had to learn everything about farm life: how to husk and process millet, *gaoliang* (Chinese sorghum), and corn with a stone roller pulled by a donkey, and how to cook processed cereal in a huge pot on a kitchen range using grass or crop stems as fuel.”<sup>55</sup> This was by no means the end of what *zhiqing* had to do on their farms or at their villages. Some planted and harvested for over fourteen hours per day in the fields, while others helped village women with their standard set of chores for the day, including cleaning, cooking, and doing laundry. The difficulty of the work varied according to what “occupation” the *zhiqing* had while at the farm. Occupations could change over time, and those who worked in kitchens preparing food for the *zhiqing* could end up switching to farm work. Most educated youth did not simply stick with one skill or set of tasks for all of their years in the countryside. For example, Zeng Jianjun and the rest of her group of *zhiqing* in Heilongjiang Province in Manchuria were expected to unload boats that would periodically come in with supplies. The work was backbreaking, and consisted of unloading “about 300 tons of cargo.”<sup>56</sup> Once everything was unloaded from the boats, the youths would go back to their farm to continue farming.

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<sup>54</sup> Weili and Xiaodong, *Growing Up in the People’s Republic*, 100.

<sup>55</sup> Zhang, “In a World Together Yet Apart: Urban and Rural Women Coming of Age in the Seventies,” in *Some of Us*, 5-6.

<sup>56</sup> Zeng Jianjun, “Unloading Boats,” in *Zhiqing: Stories from China’s Special Generation*, eds. Ji Jiahuang, Zeng Jianjun, Li Wei, and Kang Xuepei, (Huntsville, TX: Texas Review Press, 2014), 1.

When taking into consideration the labor-intensive work and poor living conditions of the sent-down youth, one has to wonder how these factors affected eager participants, such as the former Red Guards, versus those who went to the countryside unwillingly. Based on the various autobiographies and memoirs of those who participated in the Down to the Countryside Movement, it is evident that those who were willing participants of the revolution tended to enjoy their time in the countryside more so than those who were forced to go. One such example is Xiaomei Chen from Beijing. Xiaomei Chen was the daughter of popular thespians, and was not allowed to join the Red Guards based on the fact that the Party considered her family “elite.”<sup>57</sup> Despite the fact that she never joined the Red Guards, Xiaomei Chen noted that she was eager to cultivate barren lands and defend the Chinese border from the Soviets.<sup>58</sup> China and the Soviet Union were not on good terms in 1969, the year that Xiaomei Chen travelled to her farm approximately thirty miles south of the Sino-Soviet border.

Xiaomei Chen loved to write, and spent much of her free time at the end of the day writing in order to keep her mind engaged. She labored in the fields and worked in the kitchen during the first two years of her time on the farm, but eventually became a reporter. While a reporter for the farm, Xiaomei Chen travelled to villages and other farms to report on positive accomplishments of the *zhiqing* and their work. Xiaomei Chen acknowledged that life was difficult during her years on the farm, but she did not condemn the Down to the Countryside Movement or the Cultural Revolution as a whole for it. In one instance she related how the CCP investigation of her father prevented her admission to the Youth League in her village. She was especially upset because a soldier at her camp recommended her for the league for being a hard-

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<sup>57</sup> Chen, “From ‘Lighthouse’ to the Northeast Wilderness: Growing Up among the Ordinary Stars,” in *Some of Us*, 56.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

working farmer. Despite her rejection to the organization, members of the Youth League stood up for her and argued that she should be allowed to join the Youth League. They argued that antiquated rules, such as the one that barred entrance to those who were under investigation, should be eliminated.<sup>59</sup> In regards to her setbacks while living on the farm, Xiaomei Chen stated, “I learned to conceive of the negative aspects of our experience as temporary and isolated events that we could eventually overcome. Moreover, I recognized that I was blessed with the opportunity to be in touch with all kinds of people, from whom I could learn a variety of qualities and skills.”<sup>60</sup> The rest of Xiaomei Chen’s essay contains similar reflections to the quote above that, while not praising the Cultural Revolution, acknowledge her experience as largely positive. She claimed that her experience was not the same as everyone else, and that she was “not as devastated as many authors of Cultural Revolution memoirs would have us believe everyone was.”<sup>61</sup>

Of course, not everybody who volunteered or was eager to get to work have only positive memories of their experiences. There are certainly instances in which former Red Guards or other young adults eager to prove their worth for the betterment of China ended up disillusioned or frustrated as their years in the countryside continued. One such example can be found in the memoir *Red Azalea* by Anchee Min. Anchee Min, a member of the Little Red Guards and one of the most respected revolutionaries at her school, volunteered to work in the countryside after her vice principal told her how beneficial it would be to both herself and to China.<sup>62</sup> She worked hard as a farmer, spreading manure and cutting plants all day to demonstrate her work ethic and

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<sup>59</sup> Chen, “From ‘Lighthouse’ to the Northeast Wilderness: Growing Up among the Ordinary Stars,” in *Some of Us*, 74.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>62</sup> Anchee Min, *Red Azalea* (New York: Berkley Books, 1995), 43.



impress the leader of her group of *zhiqing*, Yan Sheng.<sup>63</sup> Anchee Min idolized Yan Sheng because she was the image of a loyal communist. Yan Sheng was a physically strong, independent woman who had helped to establish Red Fire Farm, the state farm at which they both worked. She was a member of the CCP and loyal to Mao Zedong above all else. Anchee Min eventually tried to emulate Yan Sheng in how she thought and acted, speaking up at criticism meetings and discussing the merits of class struggle and how it would help build a better China.

Anchee Min acknowledged that her life on Red Fire Farm was difficult, but it was not until a friend suffered a serious emotional trauma that she questioned her purpose in the countryside. Yan Sheng caught Little Green, Anchee Min's friend, having sex with a *zhiqing* from another company. The sex was consensual, but officials at the farm coerced Little Green into denouncing it as rape. There was a trial for the young man and he was quickly convicted and subsequently executed. Little Green had a nervous breakdown following the execution, which lasted for several months. Officials on the farm sent her away for medical treatment since she, according to the author, eventually went mad.<sup>64</sup>

Little Green's breakdown transformed Anchee Min's adulation of Yan Sheng into distaste. Anchee Min understood that it was not Yan Sheng who sentenced the young man to die, but she blamed her for it anyway. Anchee Min also began to feel as though her mind was wasting away since she was not putting it to much use while only farming and doing manual labor. The rest of *Red Azalea* toes the line between outright dissatisfaction at Anchee Min's position in the countryside, as well as her later transfer to Shanghai, and fond descriptions of

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<sup>63</sup> Min, *Red Azalea*, 58.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

positive memories from those years. One of these memories is her developing friendship with Yan Sheng. Anchee Min was able to look past the anger that she felt at Yan Sheng for the execution of Little Green's sexual partner, and the two forged a friendship that developed into a romance. Considering she knew of the consequences of consensual heterosexual sex, Min was in dangerous territory by starting and continuing a relationship with another woman. Her relationship with Yan Sheng acts as a sort of balancing act for the rest of her time in the countryside. Although she faced difficult labor as well as other *zhiqing* who were looking to report potential infractions, Anchee Min risked her affair and viewed it as one of the highlights of her experience in the Down to the Countryside Movement.

Anchee Min's time in the countryside clearly shows that the optimistic outlook of former Red Guards, or in this case, Little Red Guards, did not always hold out for the duration of their time in the countryside. Aside from her initial admiration of and desire to be like Yan Sheng, Anchee Min described her time at Red Fire Farm almost matter-of-factly, with little emotion betraying how she truly felt about her experience prior to her disillusionment with the incident with Little Green. While Anchee Min's story about the Cultural Revolution is certainly sad, the issues that she brings up in her book mainly affect others. *Red Azalea*, while not portraying the Cultural Revolution or Down to the Countryside Movement in a positive light, is not like most pieces of scar literature. Instead of only focusing on her various hardships, the author recalls her time in the countryside as being full of both joy and sorrow.

When studying accounts of the Down to the Countryside Movement, it is important to remember that no two people had the exact same experience. *Zhiqing* were sent to many different regions of the country. Some, like Anchee Min, had leaders who inspired them to work hard and make sacrifices. Others harshly criticized regional CCP members or did not mention them at all.

However, one of the main threads in each memoir or article that connects the stories of the *zhiqing* together is the difficulty of manual labor and its impact on the lives of the educated youth.

It is probably not a surprise that labor is one of the central topics in many *zhiqing* narratives. Working took up a huge portion of the day, with many of the educated youth working from before sunrise to after sunset with scarcely any breaks. As mentioned previously, most *zhiqing* labored in the fields. This consisted of various tasks, but planting and harvesting are among those mentioned most frequently. Gu Yaochi, a former educated youth, recalled planting in fields all day and never reaching the end of the farm, which stretched past the horizon.<sup>65</sup> Some of the educated youth, such as Ye Weili, enjoyed the manual labor because she thought that she was truly helping China with her efforts. After all, propaganda that championed the Down to the Countryside Movement showcased hardworking youths and the transformation of barren lands into fertile farms.<sup>66</sup> The Party advertised the alteration of the landscape for the growing of crops as something that would be extremely beneficial to the country. The idea behind this was that more food could be distributed to those in need. It would theoretically make China more efficient, as successfully growing crops in regions that had previously been empty would make China more productive. In addition to this, time spent out in the countryside would help the educated youth to learn vital skills necessary for farm work. Such practical skills were not often taught in schools in the cities.

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<sup>65</sup> Kathrin Hill, "China's Sent Down Youth," *Financial Times*, September 20, 2013, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/3d2ba75c-1fdf-11e3-8861-00144feab7de.html>.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

Growing crops was not a job for everyone, however. As declared earlier, some of the sent-down youth did not work strictly within the realms of planting and harvesting. In *Wolf Totem*, an autobiographical novel, the author was a shepherd in Inner Mongolia. The author, Lu Jiamin, goes by Chen Zhen in the book. Much like other *zhiqing*, Lu Jiamin went to the countryside to help make the mostly unused land fertile for growing crops. Working as a shepherd could be banal at times, but there was always the threat of attack from wolves. Wolves were quite common in Inner Mongolia, and it was not unusual for them to attack livestock. Nights could be relatively peaceful, or they could consist of skirmishes between the Mongolians and the wolves.<sup>67</sup> Lu Jiamin's job of looking after sheep in Inner Mongolia might not have been as strenuous as laboring in a field all day, but there was considerably more danger in it.

Despite the long hours or risk of danger, Mao Zedong and the Party considered the work of the educated youth to be of vital importance. It was better, at least according to Mao Zedong, for young adults to be educated in manual labor rather than in academic pursuits.<sup>68</sup> Mao Zedong's opinion regarding the merits of labor versus attending school probably stemmed from his dislike of the urban intelligentsia, who were more prone to criticize the regime than those who lived and worked in rural China. In addition to that, manual labor could be seen as a more practical way to spend one's time. For example, China was still a poor country prior to the start of the Cultural Revolution. There was scarcely enough food to feed the people. The gap between rich and poor, especially when comparing urban and rural China, was severe. Those with more money generally lived in cities, while those with less lived out in the countryside. Of course, that is not to say that one could not find poor people in cities or vice versa.

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<sup>67</sup> Jiang Rong, *Wolf Totem* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2008), 8.

<sup>68</sup> Yihong Pan, *Tempered in the Revolutionary* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003), 48.

In Mao Zedong's mind, academics, such as professors or teachers, did not contribute anything of vital importance to the country. They were generally well paid, and did not understand the struggles of working outdoors trying to eke out a living. On the other hand, peasants in the countryside labored ceaselessly to grow food and raise animals, not only for themselves, but for the rest of the country as well. With farming, assuming it was a productive year, there will be clear results. These results, or food in this case, would benefit the country by feeding the masses. Within academia, in Mao Zedong's opinion, teachers or professors produced virtually nothing of vital importance. With universities shut down indefinitely as of 1966, urban youths had a substantial amount of free time. What better way to help the country than by training the youth to assist with agriculture? As Mao Zedong famously said, "we too have two hands, let us not laze about the city."<sup>69</sup>

With *zhiqing* spending the majority of their time in the countryside engaged in manual labor, one wonders what these hard-working youths did with what little free time they had. According to Liang Xiaowei, an educated youth stationed on the tropical Hainan Island to the south of the Chinese mainland, the best part of her day was bathing.<sup>70</sup> After working for hours on end tapping rubber from trees, Liang Xiaowei and her friends spent their available time sitting by the cool Wanquan River while talking about the future.<sup>71</sup> Informal gatherings such as this were common, with many of the rusticated youth spending their non-working hours reading or engaged in conversation in their dormitories or outdoors.

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<sup>69</sup> Pan, *Tempered in the Revolutionary Furnace*, 49.

<sup>70</sup> Xiaowei Liang, "Island of My Dreams," in *Zhiqing: Stories from China's Special Generation*, edited by Kang Xuepei (Huntsville, TX: Texas Review Press, 2014), 144.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

While solitary pursuits like reading were acceptable, the *zhiqing* had to remember that any reading material they possessed should not be considered bourgeois. Novels or books from the West were generally shunned during the Cultural Revolution in favor of stories or plays that portrayed some form of class struggle. The most popular book during the years of the Cultural Revolution was the Little Red Book.<sup>72</sup> The Little Red Book consisted of several hundred quotes and sayings from Mao Zedong about a variety of subjects associated with communism, including thoughts on reactionaries, revisionists, and the constant struggle for revolution.<sup>73</sup> Most Chinese citizens, at least those who lived in urban centers, owned a copy of the Little Red Book. The Little Red Book was a common item among the educated youth, especially former Red Guards.

Although reading and discussions with friends were fairly commonplace, group events among the educated youth in the countryside happened as well. Political study meetings for the *zhiqing* took place in villages and farms across the country. The Little Red Book was a prominent fixture for study at these political gatherings since many *zhiqing* and PLA members equated Mao Zedong's opinions with absolute truth. The study of communism, or Mao Zedong's interpretations of it, took place in conjunction with denunciation meetings. At denunciation meetings, *zhiqing* voluntarily chastised themselves for supposed inappropriate behavior, or simply accused others of counterrevolutionary behavior.<sup>74</sup>

Rae Yang, an educated youth assigned to the Great Northern Wilderness in Heilongjiang Province, recounted her boredom in *Spider Eaters: A Memoir*, following the conclusion of these meetings. Rae Yang and her friends often had nothing to do after the conclusion of dinner or a

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<sup>72</sup> Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 195.

<sup>73</sup> Alexander C. Cook, *Mao's Little Red Book: A Global History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), xiii.

<sup>74</sup> Meisner, *Mao's China and After*, 180.

political meeting, especially in the winter when it got dark by the middle of the afternoon. Eventually the sent-down youth decided to put together a play for their village, Cold Spring.<sup>75</sup> After all, there were no televisions, chess sets, or other modes of entertainment in Cold Spring.<sup>76</sup> A play was a good way to thank the villagers for their hospitality, as well as a means to keep the *zhiqing* occupied.<sup>77</sup> The play was a success, with all of the villagers in attendance.<sup>78</sup> The success of the play inspired Rae Yang to help put on other productions in the future. Rae Yang noted that she felt wonderful about the opportunity to bring culture to an area of China that had never before seen a play.<sup>79</sup>

While Rae Yang had the chance to reach out to villagers via a performance, not every *zhiqing* encountered peasants first-hand. For example, Anchee Min spent her years in the countryside at Red Fire Farm, a state farm that did not have any peasants in the surrounding area. Anchee Min still learned the various skills necessary for work on Red Fire Farm, but the only people at her location were other *zhiqing*, regional Party officials that were scarcely mentioned, and former Red Guards. Lu Jiamin, the author of *Wolf Totem*, lived on a collective farm in Inner Mongolia almost exclusively with Mongols. In fact, there were only four other *zhiqing* assigned to be with his group.<sup>80</sup> After several years on the steppes, Lu Jiamin became quite close with the Mongols and adapted to their traditions and ways of life. Naihua Zhang, an educated youth from Beijing who spent her years in the village of Baxizhao in Jilin Province in Manchuria, spoke about the villagers quite often in her essay. Naihua Zhang recalls that they were friendly and

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<sup>75</sup> Rae Yang, *Spider Eaters: A Memoir* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 181.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>80</sup> Rong, *Wolf Totem*, 18.

grateful for the extra help on the village farm. Naihua Zhang appreciated that the peasants did not care about the status of her family background or political trends in remote cities such as Beijing or Shanghai. Instead, it was the quality and determination with which one did their assigned tasks that determined whether or not one would earn respect from the peasants.<sup>81</sup> During her time in the countryside, Naihua Zhang forged deep friendships with peasant girls by the names of Guirong and Lifeng. These girls showed her the skills necessary for farming and living on one's own, such as how to harvest sorghum and cook traditional northeastern Chinese food.

One of the defining characteristics of scar literature, especially when it pertains to idealistic Red Guards, is a growing sense of disillusionment for the *zhiqing*. For one unnamed gentleman, who I will refer to as “Li Hongzhen,” idealism gradually eroded into a sense of hopelessness that stayed with him for many years. Although Li Hongzhen later remembered his days in the Great Northern Wilderness with a sense of pride and accomplishment, he acknowledges that his time in rural China tested his belief in the Down to the Countryside Movement.

Like many young adults in the early 1970s, Li Hongzhen was “full of enthusiasm aroused by the Red Guard Movement.”<sup>82</sup> He left his undisclosed city with a zealous fervor to transform his future corner of the Great Northern Wilderness into an agricultural breadbasket. Life in northern China was difficult, as Li Hongzhen and his companions quickly learned. The Great Northern Wilderness, at least in the 1970s, was not fit for agriculture. The land was mostly

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<sup>81</sup> Zhang, “In a World Together, Yet Apart: Urban and Rural Women Coming of Age in the Seventies,” in *Some of Us*, 7.

<sup>82</sup> “Trapped in the Great Northern Wilderness,” *Ten Years of Madness: Oral Histories of China's Cultural Revolution* (San Francisco: China Books & Periodicals, Inc., 1996), 17.



swampy with freezing cold temperatures. Li Hongzhen and the other *zhiqing* slept, at least temporarily, in tents with holes in them on the wet ground.<sup>83</sup> Their farm had no drainage system; mechanical harvesters often could not be used after a heavy rain.<sup>84</sup> In such cases, Li Hongzhen had to slog through the fields using only a sickle to cut down the wheat.<sup>85</sup> Eating meat was rare. Like Rae Yang, Li Hongzhen often participated in mandatory struggle sessions during his free time. The realization that transforming swampland into a well-irrigated farm with little tools or equipment at one's disposal showed Li Hongzhen that his dreams of a productive farm in the Great Northern Wilderness was extremely difficult to achieve.

As previously stated, the Down to the Countryside movement was born from a political need, largely unbeknownst to the population it affected in the greatest way. While seen by the rest of the world, if viewed at all, as an essentially negative experience and an embodiment of the flaws in the Communist system, it was largely a means for Mao Zedong to remove the more violent characters of the Cultural Revolution before their actions became more of a threat to his new system than the old one. Simultaneously, the movement also served to recondition some parts of Chinese society through their more impressionable, more malleable members. Apparent in some of the accounts documented throughout this work, basic acceptance of CCP ideals fueled the attitudes of the movement's volunteers, and even those of the conscripts. While Mao Zedong's personal intentions regarding the non-political aspects of the movement may never be known, the youths who participated in the movement experienced a variety of hardships, beginning with their removal from their families. When combined with the sometimes arduous journeys to their new communities, the harsh and back-breaking manual labor in which they took

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<sup>83</sup> "Trapped in the Great Northern Wilderness," *Ten Years of Madness*, 18.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

part, and the conditions in which they had to figure out how to survive with no prior education, it is no small wonder the majority of the accounts of this movement appear, at cursory glance, to be overwhelmingly negative, if not downright vilifying.

Beginning with the brutal and chaotic rise of the Red Guards, and sometimes finishing with a return to normalcy to their hometowns to study at university, the accounts of the Down to the Countryside movement present in a jarring manner the initial experiences and adversities of the newfound situations of the *zhiqing*. The fervor and ire associated with the movement eventually gave way to recognition that it had invariably imbued its participants with experiences, tools, and skills that they later recognized as invaluable. Additionally, and largely unrecognized without historical analysis, the benefits of the movement were apparent not only in the accounts of the youths who participated, both willingly and unwillingly, but also in the development of the communities in which they lived. The gradual acceptance of practices, perspectives, and ideologies of some of the CCP's messages to the general populace regarding gender roles in this new China are examined in detail in the following chapters.

### CHAPTER THREE: GENDER

A notable fact about literature from the Down to the Countryside Movement is that there are more English-language memoirs written by females than males. When comparing the differences between accounts written by men and women, the most apparent distinction between the two is how the authors felt about their experiences both during their time in the countryside as well as after they left. Personal accounts by females about the Down to the Countryside Movement are typically more positive in nature, while men are usually more critical. Why is this the case? This chapter will evaluate the impact of perceived gender limitations and ideals on the *zhiqing* during the Down to the Countryside Movement. Because of this, information about the role of women in Chinese society both before and after the establishment of the PRC is necessary.

“When there was a knock at the street door, no matter what we were talking about we had to stop. If a stranger came into the court, we had to disappear into the inner room. When my father came home, even if we had been laughing and talking, we were silent the moment we heard the latch fall in the socket as the front gate opened.”<sup>86</sup> Such standards demonstrate the expectations of girls and women during the closing years of the Qing Dynasty, the last dynasty of China (1644-1911). Women, at least those who wanted to bring respect upon their families, were neither to be seen nor heard by those who were not a part of their family.<sup>87</sup> These women

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<sup>86</sup> Ida Pruitt, *A Daughter of Han: The Autobiography of a Chinese Working Woman* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1945), 29.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

occupied spaces of the home where they would not be visible to guests or neighbors, and busied themselves with chores around the house, such as cleaning and cooking.<sup>88</sup>

While secluding oneself from the rest of the world as a sign of virtue may sound extreme, there is perhaps only one other Chinese practice that symbolized the oppression of women during imperial times: foot binding. Foot binding was the practice of binding one's foot so tightly with cloth that the foot did not grow to a normal size. This custom gave women better prospects when it came to arranging marriages, as many men found the small feet sexually stimulating.<sup>89</sup> In spite of the pain and awkward walk that resulted from the bones of the feet gradually fracturing, it was not until the establishment of the Republic of China in 1912 that the government outlawed the practice.<sup>90</sup> Of course, it would be naïve to say that foot binding ended once and for all following intervention from the government. For example, reports show that the tradition of binding feet did not die out in Yunnan Province until the 1950s.<sup>91</sup> Reformers severely challenged the idea of bound feet and cloistered woman in the years following the end of Chinese monarchical rule, but it was not until after the victory of the communists in the Chinese Civil War in 1949 that the government promoted the end of foot binding as well as concepts such as gender equality.

The passage of the New Marriage Law of 1950 marked an important turning point for women's rights in China. Under the law, marriage was only allowed if both parties consented to

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>89</sup> R. Keith Schoppa, *Revolution and Its Past: Identities in Modern Chinese History* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2011), 75.

<sup>90</sup> Rana Mitter, *A Bitter Revolution: China's Struggle with the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 72.

<sup>91</sup> Armando R. Favazza, *Bodies under Siege: Self-mutilation, Nonsuicidal Self-injury, and Body Modification in Culture and Psychiatry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 118.

it.<sup>92</sup> In other words, arranged marriages where the prospective husband and wife had no say in the matter were no longer permitted.<sup>93</sup> The government also gave permission for women to divorce their husbands, something that was not allowed under imperial or republican rule.<sup>94</sup> The New Marriage Law of 1950 also outlawed concubinage, an ancient practice where a husband could have one or more live-in sexual partners who did not share the same social status as the wife.<sup>95</sup> The law essentially promoted the nuclear family as the basis of society and provided women with more rights than they had previously enjoyed. The government sponsored widespread propaganda in support of the new law to bolster support for it. Posters depicting happy couples were common, with proclamations such as, “Freedom of marriage, happiness and good luck”.<sup>96</sup>

The Constitution of the People’s Republic of China in 1954 gave women another cause to celebrate. Article 33 of the constitution states that “All citizens of the People's Republic of China are equal before the law. Every citizen enjoys the rights and at the same time must perform the duties prescribed by the Constitution and the law.”<sup>97</sup> Although it did not explicitly say it, Article 33 professes the equality of men and women in the PRC. Though an important step for promoting women’s rights and shaping the ideas of young women born during the Maoist Era,

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<sup>92</sup> Neil J. Diamant, *Revolutionizing the Family: Politics, Love, and Divorce in Urban and Rural China, 1949-1968* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 6.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Diamant, *Revolutionizing the Family*, 8.

<sup>95</sup> Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Women and the Family in Chinese History* (London: Routledge, 2003), 39.

<sup>96</sup> “New Marriage Law,” Chinese Posters-Propaganda, Politics, History, Art, accessed August 14, 2016. <http://chineseposters.net/themes/marriage-law.php>.

<sup>97</sup> “Constitution of the People’s Republic of China, 1982,” USC US-China Institute, Accessed September 18, 2017. <https://china.usc.edu/constitution-peoples-republic-china-1982#chap3>.

the constitutional law was largely symbolic. Women were equal to men in the eyes of the law, but that did not mean that all citizens agreed.

As Jiang Jin states in “Times Have Changed: Men and Women are the Same,” the idea that men and women were equal had a major impact on her life.<sup>98</sup> Gender equality was the norm in Jiang Jin’s household, where her mother and father consulted with each other before making important decisions.<sup>99</sup> While Jiang Jin’s family lived up to the propaganda of the PRC proclaiming that all women were equal to men, the truth of the matter was that not every family did. Jiang Jin’s family shared an apartment with the Zheng family, who adhered to more conventional gender roles. For example, Mrs. Zheng was submissive to her husband and always cooked and did the housework with her daughters.<sup>100</sup> On the other hand, Mrs. Jin was neither submissive nor particularly concerned with household management.<sup>101</sup>

Jiang Jin eventually went to Lianjiang Farm in Anhui Province, a province in eastern China not far from her home in Shanghai. It was at Lianjiang Farm where she discovered that expectations for girls included participation in activities that conformed to her idea of outdated gender roles. This is not to say that Jiang Jin did not help with tasks that were not considered feminine, such as farming. An ordinary day for her consisted of planting and harvesting rice and vegetables, followed by an evening of needlework.<sup>102</sup> Unlike the girls, male *zhiqing* in her company did not have to sew. Although she grew to like needlework, Jiang Jin was always slow

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<sup>98</sup> Jiang Jin, “‘Times Have Changed; Men and Women are the Same’,” in *Some of Us: Chinese Women Growing Up in the Mao Era*, eds. Bai Di, Wang Zhen, and Xueping Zhong (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 100.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.* 113.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

and never as careful as some of the other *zhiqing* in her company.<sup>103</sup> For example, Peimin, one of her friends, recognized that skill in embroidery was still a desirable trait for a future wife to have as it could bring more money to the family.<sup>104</sup> On the other hand, Jiang Jin looked at it as a way to pass the time, but not something that would have an impact on her future.

Even though she had to perform needlework, Jiang Jin's experience on Lianjiang Farm was largely positive. In fact, she does not list any problems that she faced as a participant of the Down to the Countryside Movement. Jiang Jin notes that she took every opportunity she could in her free time to explore the surrounding areas of the province and interact with as many locals as possible.<sup>105</sup> She wanted to learn from the peasants, and their difficult way of life did not deter her. If anything, she lived up to the ideals of the passionate and hard-working young adult during the Cultural Revolution. For Jiang Jin, the Down to the Countryside Movement was an opportunity to step outside of her comfort zone as well as a time to aid her country on the road to prosperity for all.

To Jiang Jin, identity was not limited to the fact that she was female. She was a human being, and that mattered more than gender.<sup>106</sup> This idea stayed with her throughout her years at home during the Cultural Revolution as well as when she moved to the countryside. For example, it did not matter to her that she spent her evenings doing needlework instead of doing extra labor in the fields like some of the boys. She worked just as hard as the boys during the day, and that was what was important. As Jiang Jin states in the last paragraph of her essay, "The principle of gender equality was to us a self-evident truth. This was perhaps the single most

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Jin, "'Times Have Changed; Men and Women are the Same', in *Some of Us*, 118.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 118.

positive legacy the Maoist Era had bestowed on us. From that base we could explore further the meaning of freedom from gender stereotypes.”<sup>107</sup>

Much like Jiang Jin, Wang Zheng did not feel as though her gender defined her. This did not mean that Wang Zheng ignored the fact that she was female. In fact, one of her fears was that people would consider her to be a *funü*, or woman.<sup>108</sup> *Qingnian*, or youth, a gender-neutral term, was the preferable address for many female *zhiquing*.<sup>109</sup> Wang Zheng’s connotations with the Chinese word for woman stem back to her experiences growing up during the Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution was a time of sweeping change for much of Chinese society, and gender constructs were no exception. Ideal women were workers, scientists, and engineers.<sup>110</sup> The CCP viewed housewives as remnants from China’s unflattering past.<sup>111</sup> Revolutionaries, most notably Chinese youth who grew up with constant state-sponsored propaganda, held nothing but distaste for these so-called petty women.<sup>112</sup> According to Wang Zheng, “Funü invoked the image of a married woman surrounded with pots and pans, diapers and bottles, sewing and knitting needles, and who hung around the neighborhood gossiping.”<sup>113</sup> After all, what could a woman like that contribute to society? How could taking care of a family and managing a household assist in the constant struggle for revolution?

Another change for Chinese society during the Cultural Revolution was the way Chinese girls dressed and presented themselves. Those who were passionate about the realization of a

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>108</sup> Wang Zhen, “Call Me ‘*Qingnian*’ But Never ‘*Funü*’: A Maoist Youth in Retrospect,” in *Some of Us: Chinese Women Growing Up in the Mao Era*, eds. Bai Di, Wang Zhen, and Xueping Zhong (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 27.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 27.



communist utopia in China scorned women who cared about their looks. It implied that one wanted attention drawn to oneself.<sup>114</sup> “To be a revolutionary implicitly meant to look like a man. Femininity had no place in the all-encompassing revolutionary regime.”<sup>115</sup> With the onset of the Cultural Revolution, femininity was suddenly taboo. There were no laws regarding how feminine a woman could look, but it was worth avoiding the possibility of a negative reputation during a time when it seemed like most everyone was a target.

Although one could probably argue that many women in China changed their dress or hairstyle to fly under the radar of political correctness, Ma Xiaodong and Ye Weili changed their appearances for a different reason. Ma Xiaodong and Ye Weili both wanted to look unremarkable.<sup>116</sup> Neither desired to look feminine because they genuinely believed that worrying about their looks would distract them from work. Both Ma Xiaodong and Ye Weili took this idea to heart and shifted to more masculine outfits when they still lived with their parents in urban China. The desire to look less feminine did not end with clothes. Ma Xiaodong always asked her mother to cut her hair shorter and shorter every time she got a trim. She wanted her hairstyle to look as revolutionary as possible, and permanents or long, flowing hair simply did not fit that description.<sup>117</sup>

When Anchee Min first describes her friend Little Green, the girl who went mad at Red Fire Farm, she notes how different she was from the rest of the female *zhiqing*. Little Green tied colorful ribbons in her hair while the other *zhiqing* only used drab colors, such as brown.<sup>118</sup> She walked almost an hour each day after working on the farm to retrieve clean water so she could

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<sup>114</sup> Zhen, “Call Me ‘*Qingnian*’ But Never ‘*Funü*’”, in *Some of Us*, 41.

<sup>115</sup> Weili and Xiaodong, *Growing Up in the People’s Republic*, 52.

<sup>116</sup> Weili and Xiaodong, *Growing Up in the People’s Republic*, 63.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>118</sup> Min, *Red Azalea*, 56.

bathe herself before going to sleep.<sup>119</sup> Little Green even embroidered her undergarments with things such as flowers in order to make them less utilitarian.<sup>120</sup> Anchee Min describes how Little Green made them all uncomfortable by such bold acts of defiance.<sup>121</sup> Brazen symbols of nonconformity gave the impression that Little Green was not like everyone else, that maybe she was not truly a communist. Although it was not popular at the time, Little Green emphasized her femininity in whatever small way she could while her classmates conformed, willingly or unwillingly, to the gender expectations of the Cultural Revolution.

Even though she wore clothes that hid her feminine figure, Ma Xiaodong was acutely aware of her sex and the supposed limitations of her body. Consequently she wanted to prove herself as a capable worker in the eyes of her peers. The hard work that Ma Xiaodong performed was an attempt to live up to the “iron girl” standard. Iron girls were female *zhiqing* who worked as hard as males, typically in agriculture.<sup>122</sup> The CCP propagated the ideal of the iron woman in state propaganda in order to inspire young girls sent to the countryside. Such propaganda first began in the 1950s, much before the mass exodus of youth during the Cultural Revolution some years later. Common images included smiling girls staring into the distance while they farmed or took care of animals. Growing up in populated cities, it was inevitable that many *zhiqing* saw the propaganda and believed that they could live up to the expectations of these iron girls.

In one notable example in which she explains the process of digging holes for cinchona trees, Ma Xiaodong claims that the best male workers hoped to dig at least fifty holes per day.<sup>123</sup> Not to be outdone, she physically pushed herself to dig the same amount of holes as those

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<sup>119</sup> Min, *Red Azalea*, 57.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Weili and Xiaodong, *Growing Up in the People's Republic*, 104.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

physically fit young men. Physical labor gave Ma Xiaodong the opportunity to exert herself in order to prove that women could do the same work as men. She took this idea even further by refusing to take sick days when she was menstruating.<sup>124</sup> Female *zhiqing*, at least at Ma Xiaodong's farm, could take several days off each month during menstruation. Ma Xiaodong thought it better to not reveal her period to the other girls because it could be seen as a sign of weakness. She would rather show how dedicated she was to her work and that she did not have time for such concerns. Not taking any days off was difficult, and Ma Xiaodong worked just as hard as she normally would if she was not menstruating. The author even recalls other girls asking her about her menstruation schedule because it seemed as though there was never a time that she was not at work.

Her incredible work ethic earned her respect not only from females, but from males as well. In fact, Ma Xiaodong recalls an instance when the males with whom she was eating insisted that she receive the same amount of food as they did.<sup>125</sup> Boys generally received larger portions of food than girls at her farm despite the supposed equality of the sexes.<sup>126</sup> It stands to reason that both sexes should have received the same amount of food regardless of perceived ideals about the amount of work that boys did in comparison to girls.

Ma Xiaodong utilized the aforementioned examples in order to prove that her time as a farmhand allowed her to develop into a confident young adult who knew that she could perform physical labor just as well as any man. She even claims that the Down to the Countryside movement provided her with an opportunity to prove herself in a way that secondary school

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<sup>124</sup> Weili and Xiaodong, *Growing Up in the People's Republic*, 104.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

could not hope to match.<sup>127</sup> Instead of just academically competing with boys in a classroom, Ma Xiaodong could outshine her competitors physically in the outdoors. Ma Xiaodong wanted above all else to be considered an iron girl among her peers, and her dedication to her work provided her with just that opportunity.

Another trademark of the iron girl campaign, as well as a large part of the Cultural Revolution in general, was the idea that girls did not have time for sex or romantic relationships. Much like dressing in feminine clothing or wearing their hair in a fashionable style, many female *zhiqing* avoided relationships or sexual encounters. The rationale behind this was that romantic love distracted one from the goals of the Cultural Revolution, and that one should not pursue a relationship until one was in their late twenties and ready for marriage.<sup>128</sup> According to state propaganda, romantic liaisons were bourgeois and were not beneficial to the goals of the Cultural Revolution. Although there was arguably more pressure placed upon women to follow a chaste lifestyle during the Cultural Revolution, boys were not exempt from the unwritten rules regarding romance. As a result of the authoritarian outlook on sex and relationships, some educated youth thought of sex between young adults as something highly controversial that had no place at their communal farms or villages.

In her work describing sexual attitudes in China after 1949, Emily Honig notes that there were no recorded laws that specifically controlled sex or sexual activity.<sup>129</sup> In fact, what was significant about the government was in what it chose not to say about sexuality rather than what it did. For example, the author describes how the state simply erased references that signaled any

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<sup>127</sup> Weili and Xiaodong, *Growing Up in the People's Republic*, 99.

<sup>128</sup> Min, *Red Azalea*, 64.

<sup>129</sup> Emily Honig, "Socialist Sex: The Cultural Revolution Revisited," *Modern China* 29, no. 2 (2003): 147. Accessed April 21, 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3181306>.

kind of romantic or sexual relationship that could be read by the public.<sup>130</sup> Instead of love interests, men and women in plays or novels were friends, or comrades, dedicated to revolutionary struggle.<sup>131</sup> While the government did take action to curtail depictions of sex and romance, Honig argues that the puritanical outlook on sex during the Cultural Revolution was a result of the enthusiasm of the Red Guards during their effort to eradicate the Four Olds.<sup>132</sup>

According to Honig, instead of trying to eliminate an element of traditional Chinese culture, the crackdown on sexual liberalism was more of an attempt to abolish perceived Western decadence.<sup>133</sup> The elimination of the “threat” of foreign influence in conjunction with the adoption of chaste attitudes when it came to sex and relationships became a hallmark of Red Guard thought. As mentioned in Chapter 1, those suspected of being counterrevolutionaries, as well as those who simply did not perfectly fit the communistic mold set forth by zealous Red Guards, were often publicly humiliated. If Red Guards suspected one of sexual promiscuity, then one could expect to be ridiculed in a public struggle session. While both men and women were shamed for sexual behavior, such as affairs or simply remarriage, it was women who often fared worse.

In one such example, Red Guards ridiculed a woman, Nie Yuanzi, because she had divorced her husband and married another man.<sup>134</sup> Nie Yuanzi was a philosophy teacher, but that did not save her from criticism from her students.<sup>135</sup> As Neil J. Diamant states, “For students, divorce was not seen as an exercise in rights guaranteed by the CCP’s Marriage Law signed by

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<sup>130</sup> Honig, *Socialist Sex*, 146.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 146-147.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 147-148.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>134</sup> Diamant, *Revolutionizing the Family*, 290.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

the Supreme Leader Chairman Mao...but instead as a manifestation of promiscuity and unethical behavior unbefitting a true communist.”<sup>136</sup> This statement speaks volumes considering divorce was supposed to be an acceptable practice. The legality of divorce did not mean that it was considered socially acceptable to Red Guards. This is somewhat hypocritical given that the Red Guards viewed Mao as an almost divine character, especially in light of the fact that he approved the New Marriage Law of 1950.

In spite of Mao approving the aforementioned law, Red Guards considered Nie Yuanzi a “broken shoe,” or a woman with no moral compass.<sup>137</sup> This is intriguing when one considers the moralistic high ground upon which the Red Guards placed themselves. For example, devoted supporters of Mao claimed that women like Nie Yuanzi were corrupted by Western values that were antithetical to those of Chinese communism. However, the actions of the Red Guards were clearly reactionary in nature, hearkening back to conventional Chinese outlooks on female sexuality. That is, a woman was a “broken shoe” or a “whore” for her sexual liaisons, affairs outside of marriage, or even divorce.<sup>138</sup> While the idea of the cloistered woman was no longer a prominent feature in public thought, it was clear that women were still expected to lead scandal-free lives.

One can see this attitude regarding gender norms and sex with the previously provided example in *Red Azalea*. Yan, the author’s commander, saw Little Green as a victim when she caught her having sex with a man. Yan wanted to show her company that “today’s woman was no longer the victim of man’s desire”.<sup>139</sup> Despite the progressive nature of that statement, the

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<sup>136</sup> Diamant, *Revolutionizing the Family*, 290.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Min, *Red Azalea*, 66.

reality of the situation was that Little Green had a decision to make that was more traditional in nature than she probably realized. She could denounce the sexual encounter as rape and walk away with fewer negative repercussions for herself, or she could acknowledge the sex as consensual. If she claimed that her companion raped her, she could at least partially preserve her dignity as well as her good standing as a revolutionary. If she admitted to consensual sex, then society, or at least other *zhiqing* at her farm, would look down upon her for her inability to keep her desires in check.<sup>140</sup>

Despite Little Green acting of her own volition, it is important to remember that her actions would have had an impact on her immediate family. Sexual promiscuity brought shame onto families in a society where every individual act could reflect on the family. Even if one is not considering the moral element to Little Green's predicament, there is the fact that people would have looked down upon her family because her romantic entanglement meant that she was not putting all of her energy to the goals of the revolution. This implied that she was selfish, and China had no need of self-centered individuals who did not put the welfare of the country above their own wants and desires. As discussed earlier, traditional elements of Chinese culture still existed within the country. Mao's attempt to destroy the Four Olds in China had a noteworthy impact on young adults, but it was not as though a short political campaign had a high chance of erasing hundreds of years of Chinese thoughts on morality. In imperial and Republican times, the idea of a woman having sex before or outside of her marriage was taboo and implied that the woman had loose morals. This line of thinking, while maybe not quite as prevalent as it was prior to 1949, still held true during the Cultural Revolution.

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<sup>140</sup> Min, *Red Azalea*, 65.

As one can see, conservative worldviews on sex still permeated Chinese society. In addition to public disgrace for Little Green and her family if she confessed to consensual sex, the punishment was that both she and her lover must undergo reeducation. This likely included lectures, denunciation meetings, and reminders of the importance of their work as *zhiqing*. Reeducation and a struggle session with the other *zhiqing* at Red Fire Farm is probably the most punishment that Little Green's lover would have received had she said it was consensual sex. It is less likely that his sexual encounter would bring shame upon his family if they ever even heard about it. This stems back to older worldviews still prevalent during the Cultural Revolution; namely, that men could have sexual relations with females with little or no consequences, while the same could not be said in reverse. While there are most certainly accounts of adult men having their name dragged through the mud for having affairs, such as Ding Yi, a CCP secretary who had to wear a dunce cap and proclaim his adultery on the streets, the impact on women lasted longer.<sup>141</sup> China was in a transitional period between abandoning older customs and adopting new ones, and that means that more traditional thoughts and beliefs regarding one's sex and actions were still widely entrenched.

Despite the authoritarian outlook on sex and relationships, Ye Weili notes that as the years passed, more and more *zhiqing* became involved with each other romantically.<sup>142</sup> An eventual increase in sexual activity among the educated youth can most likely be attributed to the length of the Cultural Revolution. Many *zhiqing* felt their enthusiasm for the Down to the Countryside Movement wane with each passing year in a rural environment. Young men and women went into the movement with upbeat attitudes that they could change their country by

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<sup>141</sup> Diamant, *Revolutionizing the Family*, 289.

<sup>142</sup> Weili and Xiaodong, *Growing Up in the People's Republic*, 120.



gradually eliminating poverty and producing more food for the country. As time passed and it grew apparent that such a goal might not be possible, it is perhaps not surprising that morale declined among some *zhiqing*. Sex, or even a serious relationship between the *zhiqing*, was a way to pass the time when not working. Although some among the educated youth relaxed their moral standards, it is clear that not everyone did. Ye Weili's and Ma Xiaodong's responses to the idea of *zhiqing* engaged in sexual intercourse underlines this point. For example, Ye Weili was shocked when she discovered that some of the sent-down youth had sex. She clarifies that she could expect that kind of behavior from peasants, who were somewhat sheltered from the constant propaganda in the cities, but not from her group of educated youth from an urban center. Ma even responds with surprise to Ye Weili's statement about sex between the *zhiqing*. Ma claims that risking a sexual encounter was "daring," and that she could not envision the people from her farm even attempting such a thing given the consequences.<sup>143</sup> Considering the potential ramifications for one's actions, especially in regards to the fate of Little Green's lover, Ma Xiaodong certainly makes a valid point concerning the dangers posed by sex or a romantic relationship.

Although she and Ye Weiling look back on their naïveté about the sexual encounters of the sent-down youth with amusement, the fact of the matter was that the concept of sex was truly alien to those who focused on working and building up their nation. Staying revolutionary meant that one needed to dedicate oneself solely to the betterment of the country, and this put much stress on girls who felt that they had more to prove. Iron girls had to appear as strong, capable, and even as masculine as young men in order to earn recognition. Avoiding romantic entanglements was a way to bolster one's reputation among the serious-minded *zhiqing* and

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<sup>143</sup> Weili and Xiaodong, *Growing Up in the People's Republic*, 120.

members of the People's Liberation Army who were sometimes stationed in nearby villages or on communal farms with the sent-down youth. With the exception of the iron girls and others who were dedicated to laboring in the countryside, it is perhaps not surprising that sex and romantic relationships blossomed. As Ye Weili exclaims, "What else would you expect from a bunch of young men and women free from parents' watchful eye and in a sexually casual environment?"<sup>144</sup>

Clearly the roles and expectations of women during the Down to the Countryside Movement were complex. As of 1949, China entered a new era of history in which women were legally equal to men. While this may have been true on paper, the reality was that society still had expectations that women had to fulfill. For example, many girls and women in the countryside would performed the more feminine duties in camps or villages, such as cooking or cleaning, while men would perform more of the physical labor in the fields. People also expected women to be chaste, which was a requirement of Imperial China and Republican China. In addition to this, boys were generally seen as more valuable than girls. This was evident when Ma Xiaodong described how boys typically received more food at meals due to the notion that their labor was more valuable.

Despite these more conventional beliefs, girls were quick to conform to the ideals of Maoist gender equality. Although female *zhijing* wore drab clothes and sported masculine haircuts, they took advantage of their supposedly equal status. They did what was expected of them, with some trying to work as hard as or harder than the boys. This led to a sense of accomplishment and a great sense of self-worth, as young women proved to themselves and their comrades that they could perform difficult, physical labor. In essence, it was physical proof that

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<sup>144</sup> Weili and Xiaodong, *Growing Up in the People's Republic*, 120.

they were indeed equals to men. It is perhaps not surprising that many accounts of the Down to the Countryside Movement written by female authors are more positive in nature. They tend to emphasize the impact that gender equality had on them and their work ethic. The harder they worked, the more they felt they were fulfilling their part of the bargain by holding up half of the sky.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF EXPERIENCES**

In this final chapter, the information presented in the first two chapters will be drawn together, and in concert with a comparative analysis between the positive and negative accounts of the Down to the Countryside Movement, will assist in proving that the positive accounts of the movement are more prevalent than they may appear. By examining the differing experiences of the conscripted youth versus that of the volunteers; their free time, living conditions, work, changing perspectives over time and the views of the regional natives with whom these youths worked with, the overwhelmingly negative perspective seems to come from overly idealistic mentalities rather than a pervasive worldview. The accounts exemplify this, as most, regardless of their level of choice in the process, recognize the positive, almost developmental nature of the tasks they were appointed.

In this vein, the role of young women in the movement represents a cornerstone of its positive perception in two main ways. The first of these was due to the labor the women were forced to perform. Oftentimes they not only performed the duties prescribed to them by the somewhat more traditional views of the agrarian natives, but also pushed themselves to outperform even their male counterparts. Through this, they acted as a bridge of sorts. These female *zhiqing* eschewed and redefined certain aspects of the gender norms and perspectives of the time. Equality was won through hard work, and one of the main positives of the movement was a presentation of a true idea of gender equality, instead of propaganda-based lip service of the CCP. Secondly, by doing this, young women in the movement were able to inspire a favorable outlook from the CCP and populace as a whole on their sex, espousing the ideals of a

good Communist woman, with her lack of traditional femininity, her focus on supporting her comrades, proving her worth, and her relinquishment of the shackles of the bourgeoisie for good.

While the vast majority of the analysis of the Down to the Countryside Movement is rooted in the direct recollection of the youths' experiences, this final chapter will expand upon that by comparatively dissecting the positive accounts with scar literature. This includes, but is not limited to, a discussion of the histories of the educated youth, their social status as related to their level of education itself, and how active their family units were, if at all, in the Chinese Communist Party. Tangential to this, other aspects of the largely negative view the rest of the world has of this movement will be addressed, such as the cultural bias of the West in particular.

Of the positive and negative accounts, one major distinction between them is obvious: education. Most of the well-known scathing accounts of the movement originate in the works of members of the so-called bourgeoisie classes. While apparent, it is not largely evident why that is until one considers the topic of education. Higher-class youths likely did not have much knowledge in anything related to the basic agrarian work to which the state subjected them. Their learning dealt with matters pertinent to their class: manners, customs, and school subjects such as mathematics or science. While such knowledge was undoubtedly useful, this abstract and less practical curriculum ill-prepared them for long days in the fields herding livestock or farming. Perhaps not surprisingly, accounts from these sources tend to be the most prevalent, the most widely circulated, and the most verbose. Combine this with negative Western perceptions of Communism in all of its forms, and it is no small wonder that most accounts of the Down to the Countryside Movement appear negative. Children in lower-level social classes tended to have less formal education. They would have been more heavily exposed to CCP ideals and propaganda, and many were volunteers of the movement. While still recognizing their

experiences as extremely difficult, they are less likely to put words to said negativity. Instead they adhered to the messages purveyed by their family units and government, and participated with the mentality that they were bettering themselves for the good of their fellow citizens, rather than toiling in what some might have called forced labor. When this mentality is again tied into the cultural bias present in most Westerners' minds toward Asian culture, it confirms their lack of understanding of all aspects but those that are overwhelmingly negative, regardless of reality.

Probably the best known of mainstream *zhiqing* scar literature in the West is *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*. This detailed work outlines the life and hardships faced by Jung Chang and her family during the Cultural Revolution. *Wild Swans* has several chapters devoted to Chang's experiences in rural environments during the Down to the Countryside Movement. Much like Anchee Min in *Red Azalea*, Chang experienced disillusionment after she arrived in her first village. Idyllic dreams of cooperative labor with welcoming peasants under the bright sunshine soon gave way to the realization that hard labor was much more strenuous and not as pleasing as propaganda posters would have one believe.

Chang came from quite a wealthy family; both of her parents were Party members. In fact, her father was high enough in the CCP that the government provided them with housing and servants.<sup>145</sup> Such luxuries were not common for citizens of the People's Republic, even in the cities, which were more affluent than the countryside. As such, one must take into account how privilege affected Chang's outlook on the Cultural Revolution. It stands to reason that an individual who came from a wealthy family with many amenities would look upon their challenges during the Cultural Revolution with disdain. Going from a life where there is no significant struggle to a life where one must work for the preservation of one's family and social

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<sup>145</sup> Jung Chang, *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004), 190.

status would leave a negative lasting impression. The violence of the revolution, which included Chang's fellow Red Guard friends attacking teachers and students in addition to the public humiliation of her father and mother, caused Chang to doubt whether Mao's vision for the future of China and its people was truly attainable.

Although other accounts of the Down to the Countryside Movement discuss disillusionment occurring after months or years of forced labor, Chang's case was different. While it was true that she gradually lost faith in the ideals of the Cultural Revolution as time went on, it was not until her grandmother's death in 1969 that Chang truly felt that the revolution had let her down. As stated following the death of her grandmother, "How could the revolution be good...when it brought such human destruction, for nothing?"<sup>146</sup> It stands to reason that Chang channeled her anger over her grandmother's death to the Cultural Revolution and the Down to the Countryside Movement. After all, Chang was not even present when her grandmother died. Since her assigned place of work in the countryside was detrimental to her health, Chang was in rural China trying to obtain a permit to move to a more favorable work location. If it had not been for the revolution, then Chang would not have been hundreds of miles away from her family when her grandmother passed. For that matter, her grandmother may have lived longer if the revolution had not caused so much stress regarding the safety and wellbeing of one's family.

Although Chang witnessed cruelties during the Cultural Revolution, the death of her grandmother was a more personal issue. It is arguably easier to distance oneself from a negative event when it only concerns others. This is not to say that Chang or her family had not faced hardship during the revolution; both her parents fell out of favor with the Party, and were

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<sup>146</sup> Chang, *Wild Swans*, 425.

ridiculed for supposed capitalistic tendencies. While such an occurrence was certainly difficult to bear, it could not compare to the death of a close and highly respected family member. Chang credits her grandmother's death to overcrowded hospitals, an overworked medical staff, and the constant stress of her grandmother worrying about her children and grandchildren during such unpredictable and violent times.<sup>147</sup> The death of such an important member of the family jarred Chang and negatively impacted her perception about the Cultural Revolution. In fact, one could argue that the death of her grandmother served as the catalyst for the more pessimistic tone that is present throughout the rest of her work. Her disapproving attitude regarding the Cultural Revolution as a whole carried over to her future experiences as a result of this event. This affected her attitude when working as a peasant and as a barefoot doctor in rural China. Although she speaks positively of friends that she made or the beauty of the rural landscape, Chang finds herself weary of the Cultural Revolution, the constant need for struggle, and the uncertainty of the future.

The story about the death of Chang's grandmother is important because it brings to light the idea that an extremely unpleasant memory attributed to an event will most likely influence how a person remembers that event. In Chang's case, the death of a family member left a lasting impression that colored how she saw the Cultural Revolution. Given the findings in "Bad is Stronger than Good," this outcome makes sense. As mentioned in the introduction, a negative memory will leave one with a more pessimistic perception of an event. Difficult labor and a lack of food could certainly be considered negative. The death of a close family member, however, partially due to stress regarding a political movement that no one in the family even wanted,

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<sup>147</sup> Chang, *Wild Swans*, 425.



would certainly make a more lasting impression and override the majority of positive experiences from the Down to the Countryside Movement.

In addition to *Wild Swans, A Chinese Winter's Tale: An Autobiographical Fragment* by Yu Luojin discusses the negativity of living and working in the countryside during the flower of one's youth. This autobiography encompasses the entirety of the Cultural Revolution, with emphasis placed on the author's punishment on account of her actions, as well as her categorization as part of a "black" family. Yu Luojin and her family lived in Beijing and were of an upper-middle class background. Yu Luojin reflects on the barbarism of the Cultural Revolution with casual indifference, all while trying to honor her brother's memory. Her elder brother, Yu Luohe, was an outspoken critic of concepts such as the role that one's family status played in determining one's future behavior. The government executed him in 1970 for an unsubstantiated plot to kill Mao Zedong.

In contrast to previously mentioned authors, the Down to the Countryside Movement does not define Yu Luojin's story. In fact, the movement itself is scarcely mentioned at all. This is because Yu Luojin was not sent to the countryside as a result of the program. Yu Luojin went to Liangxiang Camp, south of Beijing, followed by Qinghe Camp, north of Tianjin, as part of a rehabilitation program for counterrevolutionary youth. Red Guards denounced Yu Luojin and her elder brother as counterrevolutionaries following the discovery of their personal diaries after Yu Luojin left them unattended.<sup>148</sup> "They went over every entry in my diary – more than twenty notebooks in all – with a fine-toothed comb, and managed to find six sentences to incriminate me as an 'inveterate reactionary'."<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Yu Luojin, *A Chinese Winter's Tale* (Hong Kong: Renditions Paperbacks, 1990), 22.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

Those six sentences were enough to land Yu Luojin a term of three years in labor camps. Both camps were essentially prisons with the sole purpose of politically reeducating its inmates. Although she spent several years in detention camps outside of her home city, the government did eventually relocate Yu Luojin to a village in Hebei Province, an area in northern China that surrounds Beijing. As Yu Luojin states in her memoir, “It was some new central policy - they selected a very small group of people...and sent them back to the villages they’d come from. Those who didn’t have a village (like me) were assigned one.”<sup>150</sup> This program consisted of sending youths who had completed their time in detention camps out to villages and farms so that they could cure their “harmful” ideologies by experiencing the hard labor of peasants firsthand. Although Yu Luojin’s circumstances were slightly different than the previously mentioned authors, her story espouses the same central themes of those who participated in the Down to the Countryside Movement: being separated from family, corrective or instructional labor, and the difficulties of life in the countryside. In addition to this, being forced by the government to live and work in a rural area as a young adult fits the outline of the Down to the Countryside Movement. It is for these reasons that her story should be considered as part of *zhiqing* literature.

As referenced earlier, Yu Luojin’s family was firmly in the middle class. Her father was a civil engineer and her mother was in charge of a factory prior to the start of the Anti-Rightist Movement in 1957.<sup>151</sup> The Anti-Rightist Movement was a campaign championed by Mao Zedong and the CCP to rid the Party of supposed “rightists,” or those who leaned slightly more

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<sup>150</sup> Luojin, *A Chinese Winter’s Tale*, 67.

<sup>151</sup> Lily Xiao Hong Lee and A.D. Stefanowska, *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women: Twentieth Century, 1912-2000* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2003), 651.

to the right of Maoist ideology.<sup>152</sup> The Anti-Rightist Movement began as a direct result of the Hundred Flowers Campaign of 1956, which was a brief movement that saw Mao encourage citizens to voice their opinions on the government and its programs.<sup>153</sup> The following crackdown in the form of the Anti-Rightist Movement forced many intellectuals and pro-capitalists from their jobs and into labor camps.<sup>154</sup> Given the fact that both of Yu Luojin's parents were successful, as well as educated in Japan, it is perhaps no surprise that the government targeted them.<sup>155</sup>

Another factor that contributed to the social ostracism of Yu Luojin's family was her elder brother's musings on the role of families and their impact on one's status as a revolutionary. Contrary to Party ideology of the time, Yu Luoke believed that a person's familial history had no direct impact on the kind of person one could be. Although *A Chinese Winter's Tale* does not feature much information about Yu Luojin's brother when he was alive, she does make a point to stress his opinions at several points throughout her autobiography. As stated by Yu Luoke when accosted by Red Guards who criticized him for simply belonging to his class, "A man can't choose his class, but he *can* choose what path to follow."<sup>156</sup>

Yu Luoke's famous essay, "On Family Background," which was published in 1967, was quite popular with those from "black" families. Although his essay was well liked among those reeling from the harsh effects of the Cultural Revolution, those who belonged to working-class families took such a manifesto as an affront. This is not particularly unexpected if one thinks about how events were unfolding at the time. Red Guards, who were usually those with reputable

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<sup>152</sup> Lee and Stefanowska, *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women*, 651.

<sup>153</sup> Meisner, *Mao's China and After*, 174.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>155</sup> Lee and Stefanowska, *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women*, 651

<sup>156</sup> Luojin, *A Chinese Winter's Tale*, 33.

class backgrounds (i.e. workers, soldiers, peasants), were at the top of society during the Cultural Revolution. Would it really be advantageous for them to acknowledge that opinions and personal choice ultimately carried the most weight when it came to the type of person that one would be? If one was to believe Yu Luoke's idea, then class background alone could not determine whether one was a revolutionary or a reactionary. That could potentially upset the entire social structure of the time and return things to how they were before the advent of the Cultural Revolution. In other words, the dominance of the Red Guards and their fellow worker/soldier/peasant comrades would be finished. It was a one-way street for Red Guards and other dedicated revolutionaries. The sins of the father and mother, at least when applied to so-called reactionaries, determined the status of the son or daughter.

Another aspect of *A Chinese Winter's Tale* that demonstrated the importance of class during the Cultural Revolution was Yu Luojin's admission that marriage for convenience was sometimes a necessity. After working in the countryside for a short amount of time, Yu Luojin's parents informed her of a marriage opportunity that could help her and her family. After several months of uncertainty, Yu Luojin married a *zhiqing*, Zhao Zhiguo, in the Great Northern Wilderness. She did this mainly because it could help get her family out of Beijing if they needed to leave. The *hukuo* system, a registration program similar to the concept of an internal passport, was in effect at the time of the Cultural Revolution. The system is still present today. During the Cultural Revolution, it was quite difficult to get authorization to transfer one's residence from the countryside to the cities. However, it was not quite as difficult to obtain authorization for the reverse. In either case, permission had to be granted by the area one was leaving as well as the

place to which one was potentially relocating.<sup>157</sup> As explained in Yu Luojin's book, the *hukuo* system treated Chinese citizens like "immigrants in their own country."<sup>158</sup> Due to tensions with the Soviet Union at the time, during which point the threat of an actual war between the two powers was possible, relocating to a remote village was not a bad idea. Yu Luojin's family was fortunate enough to receive permission to transfer out to her village if the need arose.

Yu Luojin's decision to marry during the Cultural Revolution was significant. Marriage could not only help her family, but could help her as well. At the time, marrying a peasant from a rural environment was not uncommon. It made sense if one was concerned for their own well-being and safety. If one wanted to try and keep a low profile during one of the most radical periods of Chinese history, then there was perhaps no better way than to marry an individual from a good class background. During the Cultural Revolution, factory workers, peasants, and soldiers were among the most highly regarded classes according to Mao and the CCP. Marriage to a member of one of the aforementioned classes looked better than marrying someone who was from a wealthier or more educated background.

Due to the uncertainty of *zhiqing* ever returning to their home cities during the Down to the Countryside Movement, many of the educated youth were unsure of their futures. Marrying a person from the countryside would most likely mean a difficult life of labor since most peasants did not have much money or food. This drawback was offset by the fact that one could avoid the more critical eyes of individuals who lived in the big cities. In other words, marrying a peasant had the potential to offer a greater degree of protection for yourself and your family. This type of logic carried over to marriages among the sent-down youth as well. In Yu Luojin's case, she

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<sup>157</sup> Luojin, *A Chinese Winter's Tale*, 182.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

married a *zhiqing* from Beijing who came from a family background that was not categorized as “black.” Although it may have been a marriage of convenience, or inconvenience for that matter, it allowed her to establish a household far away from any large cities, and even a healthy distance away from the nearest town. For the most part, Yu Luojin could focus on whatever work that she needed to complete without the constant oversight of a Party member. Of course, this is not to say that Party members and soldiers were not present in the countryside.

Another work that highlights the plight of *zhiqing* and supposed counterrevolutionaries during the Cultural Revolution is *Ten Years of Madness: Oral Histories of China’s Cultural Revolution*. Written by Feng Jicai, *Ten Years of Madness* is a compilation of the accounts of sixteen individuals during the years of the Cultural Revolution. As Feng Jicai explains in the preface, he believes that “a generation that paid such a grievous price deserves an ironclad guarantee that history will not repeat itself.”<sup>159</sup> As such, he claims that the accounts in this work serve to remind the Chinese populace of the terrible atrocities they suffered, as well as the importance of not forgetting such a difficult time in history.<sup>160</sup> Feng Jicai believes that the stories he compiled are important because they help to relieve those who have been burdened by such memories for so long. The act of recounting such personal experiences, the author claims, helps give solace to the many millions who experienced hardship during this unique decade of history.<sup>161</sup> In essence, it is the act of releasing any frustration that one keeps inside.

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<sup>159</sup> Feng Jicai, *Ten Years of Madness: Oral Histories of China’s Cultural Revolution* (San Francisco: China Books and Periodicals, Inc., 1996), vi.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

Feng Jicai states in his introduction that he wishes to “awaken the consciousness of those who launched the Cultural Revolution, making them squirm for the rest of their lives.”<sup>162</sup> This rather bold statement leaves little room for ambiguity, and it is clear from the majority of the entries in this compilation that he tries to do just that. Feng Jicai focuses almost entirely on the negative experiences of those who faced persecution at the hands of the CCP or their followers during the Cultural Revolution. By doing this, the author overlooks stories that hint at positivity. Despite the overarching theme of negativity, Feng Jicai does include several accounts that do not quite fit his own thesis. These more lighthearted stories seem almost out of place within the context of this oral history.

One of the more pessimistic short stories included in *Ten Years of Madness* revolves around an educated youth who was seventeen at the time of his departure for the Great Northern Wilderness in 1970.<sup>163</sup> The youth’s name, personal and family background, and city of origin are not listed. A pseudonym is not present in the book either. The youth, who I will refer to as “Zheng”, was immensely excited to go to the countryside and cultivate the lands of Heilongjiang Province. Zheng’s story follows a similar premise to some of the previously mentioned works; a young adult, excited to go to the countryside and make a difference for his country, loses faith in the movement over time. Zheng does not place emphasis on his problems during the Down to the Countryside Movement, but addresses the troubles faced by other sent-down youth.

One thing Zheng mentions is the death toll among the educated youths due to incompetence or unfortunate accidents. In one instance, over forty rusticated youths died trying

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<sup>162</sup> Jicai, *Ten Years of Madness*, ix.

<sup>163</sup> “Trapped in the Great Northern Wilderness,” in *Ten Years of Madness*, 18.

to put out a large forest fire.<sup>164</sup> This was because the regiment commander did not know what to do, and sent the youths too close to the fire to try and put it out.<sup>165</sup> Zheng does not mention where this fire took place, or how he knew about it. Fortunately for Zheng, no members of his group of educated youths died during the Down to the Countryside Movement. He also discusses accounts of rape, the broken hearts of peasant girls when educated youth returned to the cities, and poor living conditions.<sup>166</sup>

The most telling parts of Zheng's story are the remarks he makes regarding the consequences of his years spent in the countryside. He mentions how the Down to the Countryside Movement effectively stole years of education away from him, putting him at a disadvantage when it came to job opportunities. Higher education in the cities after the Down to the Countryside Movement was over was an option, but one had to study hard to earn a place in a university. With several years of formal education not available, educated youth such as Zheng did not feel prepared to move on with further education. This thought is insightful because it addresses some of the long-term effects of the sent-down program. The time spent in the countryside, while useful in terms of learning practical skills necessary for living in a rural environment, often had no substantial use in a white-collar, professional setting. This negatively impacted the educated youths since their specialties were not relevant to the jobs that they wanted.

The bright side of the situation is what Zheng took away from his years in Heilongjiang. He claims that the Down to the Countryside Movement enabled him, and most other educated youths, to handle even the most difficult of life's challenges because of the ability of the *zhiqing*

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<sup>164</sup> "Trapped in the Great Northern Wilderness," in *Ten Years of Madness*, 28.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.



to adapt to their difficult situations.<sup>167</sup> The long hours of labor in unfavorable conditions meant that they had no option other than to simply work to the best of their ability. This challenging life in the rural areas of China instilled in them a remarkable work ethic. This was a generation of young adults who knew true hardship, and therefore did not shy away from difficult work.

Findings from a study that evaluated the long-term effects of the Down to the Countryside Movement on the lives of *zhiqing* support this idea. In the study, the authors state that “the rural experience may have fostered sent-down youth’s determination to improve their social location, as is reflected in the higher proportion achieving college education and working in high-status organizations and occupations.”<sup>168</sup> This claim is backed up by data sampled from twenty cities in six Chinese provinces. Xueguang Zhou and Liren Hou, the authors of this study, compared the life experiences of sent-down youth as compared to youths who were not participants of the Down to the Countryside Movement. The authors differentiated between the rusticated youth by breaking them into two categories. These two categories consisted of those who lived in the countryside for less than six years and those who lived in the countryside for more than six years.<sup>169</sup>

The data compiled shows that a higher percentage of sent-down youths in both categories obtained a college degree after 1977 when they could return to their cities.<sup>170</sup> Fourteen point two percent of 401 individuals in the “Sent Down for Less than Six Years” category attained a higher

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<sup>167</sup> “Trapped in the Great Northern Wilderness,” in *Ten Years of Madness*, 30.

<sup>168</sup> Liren Hou and Xueguang Zhou, “Children of the Cultural Revolution: The State and the Life Course in the People’s Republic of China,” *American Sociological Review* 64, no. 1 (February 1999): 28. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2657275>.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

education.<sup>171</sup> Coming in several points behind them, 9.5% of 400 responses in the “Sent Down for More Than Six Years” category attained a higher education.<sup>172</sup> Both of these results are higher than the percentage of youths who were not a part of the Down to the Countryside Movement and did not pursue higher education. Of the 1,607 responses, just 8.4% pursued a college education.<sup>173</sup>

The data seems to indicate that the sent-down youths were actually more likely to pursue further educational opportunities beyond the realm of high school than youths who managed to avoid going to the countryside. Of course, one must look at the data critically. Combining the two categories of educated youths only yields 801 accounts. In contrast, the authors use over 1,607 responses, slightly more than double that of the *zhiqing*, to measure the percentage of non-educated youths who pursued further education. This translates to roughly 135 out of 1,607 non-*zhiqing* who sought college educations. That number is drastically higher compared to 57 out of 401 *zhiqing* from the category of those who only went to the countryside for six years or less. There is even more of a gap when one considers that only 38 out of 400 *zhiqing* from the six years or more category went on to achieve a college education. One wonders what the percentages would have been if the researchers had used the same amount of responses for all three categories.

A notable aspect of Feng Jicai’s compilation is that each chapter provides the reader with background details about the person who is the main focus of each chapter. It lists facts, sometimes inconsistently, such as sex, age, and location of that person. In some chapters, the word “victim” is placed in front of the description. For example, the last chapter in the book says

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<sup>171</sup> Hou and Zhou, “Children of the Cultural Revolution”, 27.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

“Victim One” followed the sex, age, year, and profession of the sent-down.<sup>174</sup> What is odd about this set up is that there are several instances where the word “victim” seems like a misnomer. “Victim Two” and “Victim Three” in Feng Jikai’s final chapter recall amusing tales from their years of labor during the Down to the Countryside Movement.

Victim Two starts his tale by stating that he and his friends had “a lot of fun” out in the countryside despite the “hardships.”<sup>175</sup> He recounts how he and other *zhiqing* stole a pig from a neighboring village one night because they were hungry. Another group of rusticated youth encountered Victim Two and his friend several miles away from the village while they carried the sedated pig on a stretcher. Victim Two told the other youths that they had a very sick woman on the stretcher, since the pig was covered by a sheet, and convinced the other *zhiqing* to carry her to the doctor who was conveniently located in the same direction that the other *zhiqing* were travelling. The other group of educated youths carried the pig to the doctor, none the wiser since they were told not to look under the sheet. Victim Two tells how after the other group of youths left, he and his friends “fell on the ground, laughing, rolling, somersaulting. We felt happier than we would have if we had eaten the pig.”<sup>176</sup>

Another amusing story revolves around “Victim Three” and how he managed to trick a Party secretary into letting him leave the countryside. Victim Three presented, or bribed, the secretary in his village with a luxurious clock that he received from his uncle. Some time later, after all the paperwork was ready for him to leave the countryside, Victim Three asked the secretary for his clock back in a room full of Party members. The secretary, embarrassed because Victim Three had essentially announced that he took a bribe, gave back the clock and sent the

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<sup>174</sup> “Seeking Pleasure Out of Misery,” in *Ten Years of Madness*, 235.

<sup>175</sup> “Aunt Pig,” in *Ten Years of Madness*, 240.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

youth on his way. The youth managed to secure his leave from the countryside while publicly embarrassing the “cruel and greedy” secretary in front of his peers.<sup>177</sup>

These amusing tales do not make the main characters sound like victims. If anything, the content is relatively lighthearted. Yes, there were reasons these youths felt compelled to commit their small acts of rebellion. Victim Two and his friends were hungry because they worked quite hard in the fields and only received “bad” food.<sup>178</sup> Stealing the pig could have resulted in negative consequences if they were caught, but the sent-down youth managed to escape punishment and pull a prank on others at the same time. Victim Two does not regret this incident, and looks upon it as a fond memory of his time in the countryside.

The story of Victim Three could arguably be called more negative than the story from Victim Two. With the secretary controlling who could or could not leave the village and return to their homes, Victim Three had a significant challenge. How could he secure his freedom when the secretary was known for his unpleasant attitude towards the *zhiqing*? The youth was fortunate that he had an uncle who provided him with a grandfather clock, a luxury that not many could afford and that he could use to bribe the Party secretary. If he had not had a connection to a more fortunate family member, then it is possible that he may not have secured his freedom. Even so, Victim Three left his village with no problems. He fondly remembers how he and his family had a great laugh about it afterwards.

Is it likely that the inclusion of these two stories in *Ten Years of Madness* will “awaken the consciousness of those who launched the Cultural Revolution, making them squirm for the

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<sup>177</sup> “Returning the Clock,” in *Ten Years of Madness*, 243.

<sup>178</sup> “Aunt Pig,” in *Ten Years of Madness*, 240.

rest of their lives”?<sup>179</sup> I would argue that it would not. These two accounts do not focus upon the unjust treatment of the authors at the hands of a totalitarian state. The stories, of course, describe some of the author’s hardships. These included long, strenuous labor, corrupt officials, and poor food quality. Those concepts, however, are not the main ideas of each memoir. The *zhiqing* recall events from the Down to the Countryside Movement that they are proud of, not occasions in which they suffered needlessly. Feng Jicai’s labeling of the two former *zhiqing* as victims seems cavalier, especially when one compares it to Zheng’s account of his life in the Great Northern Wilderness. While both youths certainly faced hardship over the years, it is clear that both accounts portray the authors as something closer to victors than victims.

One work that displays both positive and negative accounts of the Down to the Countryside Movement is *Tempered in the Revolutionary Furnace: China’s Youth in the Rustication Movement* by Yihong Pan. The main focus of Yihong Pan’s work is the educated youth and their experiences. This is perhaps the most significant difference compared to some of the previously mentioned works in this chapter, such as *Wild Swans* and *Ten Years of Madness*. The authors of *Wild Swans* and *Ten Years of Madness*, while certainly addressing the educated youth, also tackle the entirety of the Cultural Revolution. An important note that Yihong Pan mentions in his book is that the Down to the Countryside Movement had many different meanings for the people that it affected. In essence, not everyone saw the movement in the same way; some viewed it as a waste of time with no benefits, while others viewed the experience as worthwhile because of the skills that they learned and the fond memories they developed with others. Despite the differences of opinions regarding whether the Down to the Countryside Movement was a good or bad experience, Yihong Pan asserts that there are more positive

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<sup>179</sup> Jicai, *Ten Years of Madness*, ix.

accounts than negative accounts.<sup>180</sup> While this assertion is not backed up with data that compares all of the recorded experiences of the movement, Yihong Pan states that it is easy for Westerners to neglect this fact. This is due to the proliferation of negative accounts of the movement as compared to the positive accounts that are available in Western literature. Yihong Pan successfully provides unbiased commentary regarding personal experiences of the sent-down youth, and gives a balanced analysis as to how the Down to the Countryside Movement changed the lives of the *zhiqing*.

As stated by the author, one of the primary benefits that the urban youth received after being sent to the countryside was communal living. *Zhiqing* quickly learned that living with many other young adults who felt isolated gave them a sense of community as well as the impression that “all the hardships seemed less unbearable.”<sup>181</sup> Many *zhiqing* even formed unofficial groups that consisted of young men and women who came from the same general regions in China. Members of such groups often became quite close and bonded by singing revolutionary songs, or even banned songs such as “The Song of the Nanjing *Zhiqing*.”<sup>182</sup>

Another benefit to being located in certain areas of the countryside was that there was less government regulation. As one female *zhiqing* claimed, she did not have to worry about appearing bourgeois by indulging “instincts for wanting to be pretty.”<sup>183</sup> Young girls, typically those from locations such as Shanghai, gave themselves bangs and dressed in more colorful fabrics rather than the ever-present blue and green clothes so often favored by many young men and women. The relatively lax authority in some country locations, such as Dangshan County in

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<sup>180</sup> Pan, *Tempered in the Revolutionary Furnace*, 5.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

Anhui province, allowed *zhiqing* to even get their hands upon books. Banned books, such as *Anna Karenina* or *Dream of the Red Chamber*, were typically read after a day of working in the fields, or on days that the educated youth did not have to work.<sup>184</sup> In addition to classic literature, poems were often rehearsed and created by the *zhiqing*. Reciting poetry developed into a way for some to pass the time when laboring by themselves

As mentioned previously, many *zhiqing* came together to create music and sing. Learning folksongs was common, but was discouraged in less remote locations due to the disapproval of the CCP.<sup>185</sup> Dong Hongyou, a *zhiqing* who resided in Hubei, recalled that folksongs were “so refreshing...and so full of life.”<sup>186</sup> Such songs provided hope and a sense of calm for many of the educated youth during a time when it was easy to become discouraged from the long labor hours and constant hunger. *Two Hundred Foreign Folksongs*, a collection of songs banned during the Cultural Revolution, proved to be immensely popular with the *zhiqing*. Despite the disapproval of the Party, peasants willingly taught songs to the educated youth within their villages. When *zhiqing* created their own music, themes typically revolved around homesickness as well as hope for the future. Many *zhiqing* hoped that their efforts would bring a successful transformation of agriculture in the countryside, as well as the chance for them to return to their homes in order to obtain an education.

One author that elaborates upon the significance of songs, dances, and performances of the *zhiqing* is Paul Clark. In *Youth Culture in China: From Red Guards to Netizens*, Clark traces the development of youth identity in China. Clark argues that the Down to the Countryside Movement was unique because it provided the youth with opportunities that they needed to

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<sup>184</sup> Pan, *Tempered in the Revolutionary Furnace*, 123.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

express themselves.<sup>187</sup> Leaving the cities allowed the educated youth to bring various parts of their culture, often in the form of one of the eight model plays that were preferred by the CCP, to more rural areas of the country. Clark says that by performing state-approved plays such as *The Red Detachment of Women* and *The White Haired Girl*, distracted the educated youth from the reality of their situation.

It is this last statement that is among the most important points that Clark makes in his work. By immersing themselves in the so-called revolutionary plays, the *zhiqing* were not solely focused upon their own problems. This is understandable given the previously described living and working conditions in some of the most rural areas of China. A seemingly endless amount of backbreaking work in the fields would be more tolerable if one had something to look forward to at the end of the day. It would also help to keep their spirits up and perhaps even prolong their revolutionary idealism. If they did not feel as though they were making progress with manual labor, then putting on plays that drew large numbers of villagers and *zhiqing* from the surrounding communities was certainly something to celebrate.<sup>188</sup>

With the relatively low likelihood of resuming a formal education for at least several years after their arrival in the countryside, performances, whether they were plays or songs, served as a creative outlet for the sent-down youth. Clark even goes so far as to claim that “being denied completion of their schooling and being sent to the countryside or somewhere else in society produced in some an insight into their social position and potential that few young people growing up in the 1950s had ever achieved.” This makes sense when one considers the origins of the Cultural Revolution and the Down to the Countryside Movement. As discussed in Chapter

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<sup>187</sup> Paul Clark, *Youth Culture in China: From Red Guards to Netizens* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 2.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.



One, the Red Guards terrorized those who they perceived as counterrevolutionaries. The Red Guards, as well as other zealous youths invested in the political upheaval of the time, had a reasonable amount of autonomy in regards to their activities. The Down to the Countryside Movement however, was a stark shift in the other direction. For the fervent supporters of Mao, relocation to a new environment where their former destructive habits were no longer needed or encouraged by the establishment left a void. The *zhiqing* found themselves with no schools to attend, and no official purpose other than their assigned tasks in farms or villages. Performances served as an outlet, and a rewarding one that could draw admiration and much emotion from fellow sent-down youth as well as villagers who were not familiar with popular state performances from the cities.

One could argue that that the educated youth could not truly have been that creative during their productions. After all, how imaginative could one really be if one could only perform the same approved material time and time again? Although many of the rusticated youth did perform in the eight model plays, they did have some leeway when it came to creating their own stories. Song and dance crews branched out during the 1970s and wrote some of their own original material. As stated by Clark, the content could be altered to reflect the customs in the various areas in which the sent-down youth were performing.<sup>189</sup> After all, the eight model plays originated from the cities, and were therefore not truly reflective of the different regions of the country. It should be noted that although youths were able to create their own material, thereby adding their own personal flair to performances, they still had to be politically correct. In other words, performances still glorified subjects such as communism and Mao, and often featured heroes or heroines who were wronged by capitalists or revisionists within Chinese society.

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<sup>189</sup> Clark, *Youth Culture in China*, 32.

Despite the obvious restrictions placed upon the subject material, the educated youths were able to express themselves during a time period that was not known for its openness.

In addition to performing songs, plays, and dances, many *zhiqing* had become accustomed to the different cultures of the villages to which they travelled. As Yihong Pan mentions in her work, the educated youth were not always sent to locations where they could easily communicate with the local people. Cultural assimilation on the part of the *zhiqing* was often a necessary, and beneficial, aspect to their transition. The author uses her elder sister as an example of how rewarding the cultural transition could be. Instead of remaining on a farm, Yihong Pan's sister travelled with the Mongolian nomads. The work was difficult, but the author's sister gradually learned the Mongolian language and the labor involved in setting up and breaking down the yurts for travel. Eating beef in the Mongolian fashion, drinking milk tea, and learning to ride on horseback or on camelback were just a few of the customs that *zhiqing* travelling with Mongolian nomads had to learn.<sup>190</sup>

Much like Zhang and Xiaodong's narratives in *Some of Us* and *Growing Up in the People's Republic*, Yihong Pan's sister was enthusiastically welcomed among the people. The Mongolian nomads provided all urban youth with "new yurts, cooking utensils, carpets, and Mongolian style clothing."<sup>191</sup> With temperatures plunging well below zero in the Mongolian steppe, the importance of the yurts and proper clothing cannot be underestimated. Mongolians provided the *zhiqing* with the necessary instruments to adapt and thrive within their local culture. Some Han *zhiqing*, such as Xiong Xiaohong, adapted to the culture rapidly and decided to stay with their tribe rather than moving back to their home city. As the author states when referring to

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<sup>190</sup> Pan, *Tempered in the Revolutionary Furnace*, 129.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

interactions between two different nationalities, “one may have to be in a different culture to see more clearly one’s own.”<sup>192</sup>

While Yihong Pan attempts a balanced approach to the Down to the Countryside Movement, the same is not true of Bin Yang in “‘We Want to Go Home!’ The Great Petition of the *Zhiqing*, Xishuangbanna, Yunnan, 1978-1979”. As stated earlier, Bin Yang reflects on the negative aspects of the lives of the educated youth in Yunnan. Despite the focus on negativity, Bin Yang does provide the reader with useful background information that is not present in most autobiographies written by *zhiqing*. For example, the author notes that prior to the Down to the Countryside Movement, there was a severe labor shortage in the Xishuangbanna area of Yunnan.<sup>193</sup> There were few Han Chinese who lived in Xishuangbanna, and CCP enforcement of the *hukuo* system made it difficult for Chinese to move to that area.<sup>194</sup> Considering that Xishuangbanna was an important center for the production of rubber, an item that many Western countries would not trade to China, the lack of available labor in the region made rubber production proceed at a sluggish pace.<sup>195</sup> The advent of the Down to the Countryside Movement alleviated this need for labor, since many young adults could fill the much-needed gap.

A comparison of the experiences of the sent-down youth would not be complete without an analysis on Western perception of the movement. As mentioned earlier, knowledge of the Down to the Countryside Movement, let alone the Cultural Revolution, is not widespread in Western countries. What little information that can be found in bookstores or online, at least for non-academics, is scar literature. One of the main reasons for this is that China is not the most

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<sup>192</sup> Pan, *Tempered in the Revolutionary Furnace*, 134.

<sup>193</sup> Yang, “‘We Want to Go Home!’,” 403.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*

liberal of countries regarding the publication and distribution of works that are critical of their more recent history. As a result, books with a nostalgic or positive tone are more likely to be printed in China than outside it. With the publication of overtly critical works out of the question, authors turn to outlets in Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, or foreign countries. The results are an oversaturation of scar literature as compared with *zhiqing* accounts that recall positive experiences. It must be stated, however, that not all criticism of the Down to the Countryside Movement is forbidden. The CCP even admits that the Cultural Revolution was a “grave mistake” and that Mao Zedong was not infallible.<sup>196</sup> In fact, they assert that Mao was only “about 70% correct and 30% wrong.”<sup>197</sup>

With more negative publications in the West about the Down to the Countryside Movement available in comparison with positive publications, there is the possibility of people succumbing to confirmation bias. Americans who grew up during the Cold War, when war with the Soviet Union was a distinct possibility, knew that a favorable view of communism was not popular. During the Cold War, the United States government demonized communism for its faults, especially due to its spread in the years following the Second World War. Scar literature displays the absolute worst aspects of an already questionable political movement in a communistic society, and provides accounts of deep suffering and a longing for a return to normalcy. Reading about the depressing experiences that many Chinese had during the Down to the Countryside Movement may only serve to reinforce negative opinions about the Communist regime rather than allow one to think about alternative perspectives.

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<sup>196</sup> James P. Sterba, Peking Assessment Asserts Mao Made Errors As Leader.” *New York Times*, July 1, 1981. <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/07/01/world/peking-assessment-asserts-mao-made-errors-as-leader.html>.

<sup>197</sup> Nicholas D. Kristof, “Legacy of Mao Called ‘Great Disaster’.” *New York Times*, February 7, 1989. <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/02/07/world/legacy-of-mao-called-great-disaster.html>.

The lack of positive accounts of the Down to the Countryside Movement does have some benefits, however. Works in English, such as *Some of Us, China's Zhiqing Generation*, and *Children of Mao* have become more common in recent years as a response to the negative books or articles published by former *zhiqing*. More nostalgic works, such as the aforementioned compilations, help to combat the seemingly one directional viewpoints put forward by those who write about their negative experiences. With more books about the Cultural Revolution or the Down to the Countryside Movement in particular published in the West every few years, the historiography of the field is slowly growing.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

As can be seen, the Down to the Countryside Movement was certainly not without its faults. Although propaganda proclaimed that the movement was for urban youth to learn from peasants, the fact of the matter was that this was only partially true at best. While some dedicated *zhiqing* worked tirelessly to turn less fruitful parts of the countryside into agricultural havens, many wondered how they could serve their country better while being so far away from urban centers where the Party had a stronger influence. Young adults, most of whom were not even Red Guards during their time in the cities, labored and suffered needlessly due to a policy that had little more purpose than to clear out troublesome Red Guards from urban centers in order to restore peace. Even some of the most ardent supporters of Mao and the *Down to the Countryside Movement* were not immune from doubt as their time in the countryside lengthened. For some, like Ye Weili, there was never much enthusiasm for the movement even in her earliest years.

Chapter One addresses the history of the movement. The Red Guards played an active role in what they believed to be the reshaping of Chinese culture in an effort to please Mao Zedong and eliminate those who held onto the old ways, or the old customs, culture, habits, or ideas of China. After their voluntary, and sometimes forced, relocation to the countryside, the young adults realized the harsh nature of life as a peasant. Differences in language were one of the first barriers that some educated youth experienced after arriving at their destinations. Communicating with the locals was not a simple task given the fact that the *zhiqing* did not have unlimited hours of leisure time to learn different dialects of Chinese. Adjusting to the Spartan living conditions of the peasants was difficult for many. The countryside did not have many of

the amenities that young adults took for granted in their home cities, such as modern restrooms or heating.

In addition to the differences in language and living conditions, the hard manual labor in the fields demonstrated how different life was in the country versus the city. The educated youth worked in the fields during the sunlight hours, while cooks and animal herders worked well before and after sunset. Although most of their time consisted of working, the *zhiqing* spent their free time together. They explored their new homes, read and debated both permitted and banned Western literature, and attended struggle sessions or events sponsored by the CCP. Living and working in close proximity to the peasants allowed them to develop friendships with people whom they would otherwise not have met. One such example of this last benefit is Naihua Zhang. Naihua Zhang developed a friendship with Guirong and Lifeng, two girls from the village in which she lived during her years in the countryside. These young women assisted Naihua Zhang throughout her time in the countryside by instructing her how to perform the various tasks that she needed to accomplish. She remained friends with the girls long after she returned to her home city and often looked back upon her time with them with fondness. They made her feel as though she was at home at a time when she was so far away from her family. The story of Anchee Min in *Red Azalea* provides more support for the importance of friendship during the Down to the Countryside Movement. Min developed a friendship and eventually a relationship with Yan, the leader of her group. This relationship carried Min through the long years of servitude in the countryside.

Chapter Two focuses on the role of young women in the Down to the Countryside Movement and their struggle to prove their equality to their male peers. Although Article 48 of China's Constitution proclaims that women and men are equal, it is not as if cultural attitudes,

even among those who considered themselves communists, disappeared overnight. For most of China's history, women were treated as inferior to men. During the Qing Dynasty, the last imperial dynasty to rule over China, the idea of women who were neither seen nor heard was ideal. The cloistered woman could bring shame upon her family if she did something as innocuous as walk down the street. Obviously much changed following the almost 70 years since the end of the Qing Dynasty and the start of the Cultural Revolution. Although women certainly had more freedom, there were plenty of examples of how communists, those who were supposedly committed to ideas regarding equality, considered women to be the weaker sex.

One such example includes food rationing in rural locations. As previously mentioned, boys at the farm in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan, where Ma Xiaodong lived and worked, received more food at mealtimes than girls did. This still occurred despite the fact that Ma Xiaodong labored just as intensely and sometimes completed even more work than they did. The boys were generous enough to advocate for Ma Xiaodong and the amount of food that she received, but the general idea of girls receiving less than boys certainly does not match the description of equality stated by the Constitution. One can see a similar principle with activities considered to be feminine, such as sewing. Jiang Jin, who spent time at Lianjiang Farm during the Down to the Countryside Movement, recalled that her evenings consisted of needlework. As previously mentioned, boys were not expected to sew after a day's work in the fields, but it was expected of the girls. Boys would either work more in the fields or rest. Sewing still had to be done, and boys were not the ones to partake in a task that would not be considered masculine.

This double standard extended to sexual relationships as well. The example with Little Green, Anchee Min's friend at Red Fire Farm serves to illustrate this. If Little Green acknowledged her sexual relationship as consensual, then she would be branded as a whore and



counterrevolutionary. The man who she had a sexual encounter with would not have faced any major repercussions since Chinese culture expected that type of behavior from young men. If Little Green said she was raped, however, then her honor would still be preserved. This style of conservative thinking, similar to ideals of morality harkening back to imperial and Republican times, had not really gone away even with a more liberal regime change.

Even though girls and women still had to deal with some of the same limitations society imposed upon them from previous ages, it would be wrong to say that they were not able to thrive during the Maoist Era. Many cut their hair short and wore masculine clothes in order to emphasize that they were different from women throughout Chinese history. They were essentially saying that they were not delicate females, but people who could withstand hardship and prove that they were just as capable of doing the same tasks as men. This was proven by hard, manual labor in rural China. These young women, such as Ye Weili and Ma Xiaodong, explain their willingness to prove their equality by taking action. In other words, one could not claim equality if they were not willing to demonstrate it to others. Young women felt encouraged to contribute their energy and time to make China a better place to live. Although the labor was difficult, it was not without its rewards. Many young women felt a great sense of accomplishment from their work and the knowledge that they were doing the best that they could to help their country prosper.

Chapter 3 takes a more critical look at scar literature. While there is no denying that people suffered as a result of the Down to the Countryside Movement, one can see that their negative accounts are often filled with good memories. For example, Victims 2 and 3 in Feng Jikai's *Ten Years of Madness* offer insight into some of their "negative" experiences. In both stories the authors explain humorous circumstances that occurred to them in the countryside.

There was not enough “good” food on the farm according to Victim 2, so the author and his friends stole a pig. They managed to hand off the pig to a group of *zhiqing* in order to avoid getting into trouble for stealing. The author recalls playing the prank on the other group of educated youths as one of his fondest memories. In the case of Victim 3, the author managed to publicly embarrass a greedy CCP official who was not well liked among the *zhiqing*. The author mentions how he and his family laughed about the situation later and how he felt no qualms about putting a corrupt official in his place.

As stated by Yihong Pan, the presence of the CCP was less obvious the further one travelled from the cities. In other words, rules were not quite as strict in locations deep in the countryside because there were not enough Party members to enforce them. As a result of this, the *zhiqing* were able to partake in activities that would otherwise be much more difficult for them to do. Some read Western literature, sung folksongs, and some girls even wore colorful outfits or grew their hair out longer. The educated youth also developed a sense of community while living together. They longed for their homes, of course, but they had built-in support systems present. They could help each other with their problems because they all understood the issues faced by their peers.

Many former *zhiqing* think back upon their time in the countryside with a kind of nostalgia. For many, “*zhiqing*” is not just a word to describe a young, educated person during a specific time in history. It is an identity. People feel as though they can identify as a *zhiqing* because of the major impact that the Down to the Countryside Movement made on their lives. Many young adults in the 1960s and 1970s spent a rather large portion of their youth away from their families, friends, schools, and whatever else they considered to be traditional parts of their childhood. The isolation and manual labor of those years helped to build an identity different

from the young adults who were able to stay in the cities and who did not tolerate the same hardships. As these former sent-down youth have aged, many have wistfully looked back upon their time in the countryside. As a result, they wish to communicate with other people who identify as *zhiqing* as well. Most *zhiqing*, including Xi Jinping, the President of China, are in their sixties. With the *zhiqing* population entering the later years of their lives, sharing stories and experiences with other *zhiqing* is more imperative than ever.

Luckily for the *zhiqing* who want to reminisce about their years during the Down to the Countryside Movement, there are a variety of options available. The most popular of these would be the use of social media. One such website, the Educated Youth Network, includes poems, pictures, and even recollections from those who spent such a formative time of their youth in rural China. One of the most recent projects by the administrators of the Educated Youth Network calls for former sent-down youth to send in pictures of themselves during the Down to the Countryside Movement. The idea, posted to their website in November 2017, is to create a desk calendar highlighting some of the more iconic images from youth who were part of the movement. Clearly there are still those in China who participated in the Down to the Countryside Movement who do not wish to block their past and, in fact, are proud of their accomplishments.

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