

Introduction

My coming of age and growth started in the seven years I spent in Northern Shaanxi. Two things I learned were of utmost importance. First, I learned to be down-to-earth, seek truth from facts, and know the lives of the masses. ... Second, I learned to become confident. As the saying goes, a knife is sharpened on a stone, and a person is built in difficulties. Suffering and hardship can strengthen one's willpower. The tough life of the seven years of going "Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages" built my character. Xi Jinping (President of China), *I Am a Son of the Yellow Soil* (Xi 2012)

The send-down program caused a lot of damages to us. It changed my whole life. If I had had the opportunity to go to college, I would have been better off. How would I be like this if I hadn't gone down to the countryside? It was said that people could make an effort and change their lives. But in reality, not everyone could get what they wanted. ... If I couldn't pass the exam, that would be my problem. But they didn't allow you to apply! That ruined my career. Now the zhiqing experience still haunts my life. I hate Lao Mao [the Old Mao, Mao Zedong]! Gu Huifang (a retiree in Shanghai)¹

The words above come from two people who seem to have nothing in common: one, the president of China, the other, a struggling Shanghai retiree. But they belong to the same generation. Both were born in the early 1950s. Both were among the 17 million urban youths who were mobilized or forced by the state to settle in villages, semi-military corps, and state farms. They were participants of the "Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages Campaign" (*shangshan xiexiang yundong*, or the "send-down program," for short), a large-scale forcible migration program in the 1960s and 1970s (Bernstein 1977; Ding 2009; Liu 2009; Bonnin 2013). They were called the "educated youths" (*zhishiqingnian*, or "zhiqing" for short, as used in this book) or the "sent-down youths." They spent most of their adolescence and early adulthood years – seven years for Xi and eight for Gu – in the countryside. The program was

¹ Pseudonyms are used in this book to protect research subjects' identities.

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Figure I.1 *Xi Jinping's Seven Years as a Zhiqing* (the two piles in the middle) displayed in a bookstore in China. Photo taken by the author in 2018

designed to achieve several practical and political goals, including alleviating the grave unemployment problem in major cities, sending the youth to the countryside to be “re-educated” by the poor but supposedly more revolutionary peasants, demobilizing the Red Guards who caused a mess in the Cultural Revolution, and so on. The program, however, failed to achieve most of these goals and ended in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when most zhiqing returned to their hometowns.

Nevertheless, Xi and Gu tell dramatically different life stories. Xi Jinping’s zhiqing experience has been made into *Xi Jinping’s Seven Years as a Zhiqing* (2017), a 452-page book based on interviews with his peer zhiqing, local peasants, and various other people (Figure I.1). The book was published by the Central Party School Press and is clearly endorsed by the Party and Xi himself. It contains a narrative of resilience, perseverance, and success: Xi Jinping voluntarily went down to Shaanxi

to escape the horrifying chaos in Beijing, especially his family's ordeal due to the purge of his father, Xi Zhongxun, a high-ranking official. In his sent-down village, Xi performed so superbly that, despite his father's political problems, the local people recommended him to become a "worker-peasant-soldier college student" (*gongnongbing xueyuan*) at Tsinghua University.²

In this narrative, Xi's past difficulties in the countryside are "assets" that contribute to his tremendously successful career and help perfect his "man-of-the-people" leadership style. He thanks the zhiqing years for building his tough character in dire circumstances and forming close relationships with ordinary people. A prudent observer, however, may notice some political subtleties in this official story. It quietly responds to a widely held opinion that Xi is the epitome of the "princelings" – children of high-ranking officials – whose careers or businesses benefit from their family backgrounds. The official narrative also keeps silent on evaluations of the send-down program. It is a story of a resilient, self-made leader with a common touch, against an ambiguous historical background.

Gu Huifang's life story is the opposite of Xi's. In Heilongjiang, where she was sent down, Gu performed well in work and political activities but was not given opportunities for returning, especially for a recommendation for college, mostly due to her problematic *chushen* (family class background). To seek comfort in despair, Gu dated and later married a local zhiqing and moved to Harbin, the capital of Heilongjiang, in 1977. Two years later, when many other zhiqing were allowed to leave, her marriage and *hukou* (household registration) as an urban resident in Harbin, however, disqualified her from returning to Shanghai.

In 1990, Gu and her husband left Harbin for Shanghai to take care of their son, who returned to Shanghai for high school according to a new policy. Thirty years after she left Shanghai, Gu had finally returned, but only to find misery for a family with no *hukou*, no high-school education, no money, no jobs. They had to stay first in a makeshift house, then an attic. They did odd jobs, for example, they worked as unlicensed street vendors, but they often had to dodge the street administrators who tried to arrest them. Adding to her misery, her husband died of cancer. When Gu was interviewed in 2007, she lived off her pensions from her Harbin *danwei* (work unit), 570 yuan a month, while Shanghai's average wage was more than 1,000.

² College admission in the Cultural Revolution mostly, if not entirely, relied on recommendations from the local authorities.

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No one has made Gu's story into a book, not even an online post. Nor did Gu herself want to talk about it. She still met regularly with her zhiqing friends, but they rarely recounted their sent-down experience, which would only bring pain and regret. For the same reason, Gu also did not watch TV series or read novels about zhiqing. Her youth remained a liability rather than an "asset." In contrast to Xi's political ambiguity, Gu expressed unambiguous resentment toward the send-down program, the political class system of chushen, and capricious policies under the leadership of "Lao Mao," an expression that would have sent her to prison in the years when she was growing up.

Same generation, different memories.

The state media now focus on people like Xi rather than people like Gu, especially after the 18th Party Congress in November 2012, when Xi became China's highest leader. A search in the the newspaper database at the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) shows that from the 18th Congress to October 2018, there have been 428 reports with "zhiqing" as their subjects and with "Xi Jinping" in their full texts, compared to only two from the 17th and 18th Congresses. Major foreign media also speculated about how Xi's zhiqing experience had shaped his mindset and whether his coming-of-age experience under Mao contributed to the recent revival of a Mao-style personality cult of Xi (Buckley 2017). Despite their different political stances, both the state and Western media share an almost exclusive focus on President Xi.

One man's apotheosis, however, overshadows the memories of 17 million.

What rarely makes it to the mainstream media is a boom of memory of the zhiqing generation. Since the end of the send-down program, the former zhiqing have been telling their life stories in numerous ways – in novels, TV series, memoirs, exhibits, and museums. This memory boom has lasted for more than four decades and never subsided. Since the new millennium, it has culminated in frequent self-organized commemorative activities, from as small as a reunion dinner party of tens of people to as big as a week-long trip with hundreds of participants. A Beijing scholar, a former zhiqing, jokes, "If you see a big crowd of elderlies singing old songs and dancing like crazy in a restaurant, I am 80% to 90% sure that they are zhiqing!" Hardly any other group or generation in the history of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has generated so much memory, in so many forms, for so long.

On the one hand, this memory boom is unsurprising. Remembering youth is a universal psychological phenomenon. We all yearn for our youthful passions, energetic bodies, simple lives, and romantic love. "The symbolic prominence of the adolescent years for later nostalgic

experience persists despite the recoil many feel from their own adolescence” (Davis 1979, 62–63). Even if our adult lives do not treat us well, remembering is a way to figure out where our present convoluted mess started.

Remembering individuals’ youth is often intertwined with remembering a generation’s collective past. People in approximately the same age cohort who experience the same series of historical happenings constitute a “generation” (Mannheim 1952 [1923]). Members of the same generation tend to name the events they collectively experience in their adolescence and early adulthood as the most important ones (Schuman and Scott 1989). Thus, it is natural for the zhiqing generation to remember their collective experience of the send-down program, which happened in their formative years and altered the courses of their lives.

On the other hand, “memory,” in the sociological sense, is a complex social, political, and symbolic process rather than merely a cognitive function of individual psychology (Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Levy 2011). The zhiqing memory boom is more than natural nostalgia. It is something to be explained instead of something to be taken for granted.

Like other beautiful things in society, nostalgia is unevenly distributed. While zhiqing like President Xi tell stories of “suffering to success,” numerous zhiqing like Gu believe suffering begets suffering. Historian Michel Bonnin uses “lost generation” to describe the zhiqing’s difficulties re-joining normal social life upon their return to cities (Bonnin 2013). Sociologists have shown that the send-down program has caused lower education levels, delayed life stages, led to less satisfying jobs, and other negative impacts as long-term, accumulative effects of their long stay in the countryside (Qian and Hodson 2011). Many in this generation believe that their suffering in the present was caused by the state’s forcible migration forty years ago as well as by the policies that are designed to deal with the aftermath of the program. Even today, some zhiqing are still protesting to demand that the government solve problems with their pensions and healthcare, which they believe resulted from the program.

Another source of the difficulties in remembering this generation’s past is the overlapping of the send-down program, especially its “big-wave” period (1968–1980) (Liu 2009), with the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Many in this generation were former “Red Guards,” but others were not: they were too young, unqualified, or simply uninterested. Despite these variations and their reluctance, the Red Guards label has been firmly attached to the zhiqing. In today’s China, the popular stereotype of the Red Guards portrays a generation of poorly educated fanatics associated with foolish and violent activities such as beating

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teachers, humiliating classmates, singing Mao songs, doing “loyalty dances,” and so forth. Now, as some claim, the aging Red Guards have become angry old men with no sense of decorum and the “square-dancing mamas,” who recklessly play loud, annoying music to accompany their collective dancing in public spaces. The zhiqing, therefore, carefully, sometimes unconsciously, choose their identity label. Most of them now are eager to talk about their youthful passions, recount the hardship they experienced in the countryside, and call themselves “zhiqing,” making the “Red Guard,” their unsavory political face, slip into oblivion.

Red Guards or not, the zhiqing were “Chairman Mao’s children” (Chan 1985), the first generation who grew up after 1949 and carried the hope of the Party to be successors of Communism. Chairman Mao told them that they were like the “morning sun” at eight or nine o’clock, “full of vigour and vitality.” Therefore, “the world is yours!” (Mao 1966, 288). They were indoctrinated into a Manichean, bellicose political culture. Forty-something years later, they are still struggling to reconcile “Mao’s legacies” in their minds and dispositions with the rapidly changing society and politics in post-Mao China.

The Chinese state has been tiptoeing around two difficult issues related to the zhiqing generation: first, how to evaluate the controversial send-down program; second, how to deal with its aftermaths. After briefly acknowledging the failure of the program in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the state became ambiguous in its official statements about the program. State leaders avoided commenting on the program. Even the carefully crafted official narrative about Xi’s zhiqing experience highlights only himself but makes no explicit comments on the program. Meanwhile, the state attempts to salvage some useful political-moral values from the relics of the policy havoc, including adherence to the Communist ideal, integration of intellectuals with the peasants, patriotism, diligence, perseverance, and so on.

In short, the send-down program is uncomfortably situated in China’s national memory. It is a “difficult past”: “The event is swallowed, as it were, but never assimilated” (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991, 380). It poses three types of problems for the society, the state, and the zhiqing themselves: first, the political problem of how to evaluate the controversial program against the backdrop of the Cultural Revolution and other upheavals in the Mao years; second, the social problem related to impacts of the event on the zhiqing’s life course and present living conditions; and, third, the cultural problem of how the zhiqing generation remembers their youth and the event that altered their youth and subsequent lives. The three problems are intertwined, but the cultural

problem – the difficult memories of this generation – is the focus of this book.

Three Goals of This Book

I intend to achieve three goals in this book, one empirical, another theoretical, and the other normative.

The empirical goal is to understand how the zhiqing generation comes to terms with their difficult personal and collective past and what can explain the variations in their memories. This topic has received only sporadic scholarly attention even if the memory of this important generation has been booming for decades. A comprehensive, in-depth study of this generation of “Chairman Mao’s children” can help us understand the “red legacies” of the Mao years in today’s China, not only in relics like Mao badges but also in people’s mentalities and dispositions (Li and Zhang 2016).

The second goal of this book, more general and theoretical, is to contribute to our sociological understanding of memory, particularly generation and memory (Corning and Schuman 2015). Social changes in human societies can be imagined as a continuous biological and social transition from older to younger generations (Mannheim 1952 [1923]). Members of a generation remember and understand their personal pasts by locating themselves in their temporal position in history, mostly in the significant historical event that has defined their collective experience, such as a war, an economic recession, or a political incident. Such memory also varies across their different social positions in the past and present. Through examining generation and memory, we can understand the intersections between personal biography and history, an essential theme in sociology, and achieve the “sociological imagination,” the ability to “understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals” (Mills 1959, 5).

The third goal of this book is to use the empirical and theoretical analysis to contemplate some ethical and political issues, including social inequality and historical responsibility. At the heart of the “sociological imagination,” Mills argues, is the distinction between “personal troubles of milieu” and “the public issues of social structure.” For instance, a person’s unemployment might be his or her personal trouble, but, if the society’s unemployment rate is exceedingly high, it is also part of a public issue (Mills 1959, 10). From this perspective, the zhiqing generation’s difficulties are not individuals’ personal troubles but a public issue as a result of structural failures, including the state’s forcible migration policy

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that ended as a fiasco, the rigid political class system in the Mao years that deprived many in this generation of education and job opportunities, and the post-Mao state's inability to respond to the legacies of the program.

Nevertheless, looking beyond oneself is hard; self-enlightening is rare; emancipatory thinking like the sociological imagination is politically dangerous. "Winners" in this generation, such as President Xi, attribute their successes and other people's troubles to personal effort instead of public issues. Those who once enthusiastically participated in the radical political activities in the Cultural Revolution now rarely reflect on their responsibility for their wrongdoing and fanaticism. Also, questions about "public issues" threaten the state because the sociological imagination can be easily enacted in actions that demand the state to be accountable for a generation's suffering and loss. These ethical-political issues have been topics of public debates in China for decades. But most debates are divided along pre-held stances. This book, on the contrary, will address these issues by drawing on a solid empirical and theoretical analysis rather than mere opinions. In other words, the normative message of this book is based on rather than dictates the empirical analysis.

I pursue these three interrelated goals in a decade-long (2007–2018), multi-stage, mixed-method project. In writing the book, the main product of this project, I draw on extensive data collected from 124 in-depth interviews about the zhiqing's life history and other issues, 61 ethnographic observations that lasted from several hours to a week, thousands of press reports, numerous archival materials, personal texts, and literary works (see the Appendix for technical details about data and methods). I describe, analyze, and explain memories of the zhiqing generation, in several time periods, at different levels, and in various forms, including their life stories, literature, exhibits, museums, and commemorative activities. With this mountain of data and, more importantly, my long-time, on-the-ground interactions with the zhiqing, I attempt to offer a vivid picture of their passions, struggles, and dilemmas.

In the rest of this introduction, I first provide a brief account of the history of the send-down program. Readers interested in a more thorough historical narrative can consult the important historical works to which I am greatly indebted (Bernstein 1977; Ding 2009; Liu 2009; Bonnin 2013; Honig and Zhao 2019). Then I provide a snapshot of the diverse memories of this generation, which is followed by a discussion about how I dialog with the existing literature on the memory of the Mao years and the theoretical scholarship on generation and memory. Finally, I present a theoretical framework on which my analysis relies and a preview of the chapters and arguments before I share with readers some of my methodological reflections.

“Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages”: China’s Difficult Past

According to the most common definition in historical studies, the “send-down” program started in the first half of the 1960s, when the ad hoc practice of sending youths to the countryside became a long-term policy. The program reached its peak stage from 1968 to 1979.³ About 17 million zhiqing went down from cities, and most of them returned to their hometowns in the late 1970s or early 1980s (Ding 2009; Gu 2009a; Liu 2009).⁴ Their sent-down places included villages (this form of send-down was called *chadui*, meaning “being inserted into production teams”), farms, and the Production and Construction Corps (the Corps or *bingtuan*), a semi-military form of reclamation farm.

The send-down program was designed to achieve several ideological and practical goals. The main ideological goal was to “re-educate” the youths who were believed to have been contaminated by the “bourgeoisie-dominated” education system. Going to the countryside and being re-educated by poor but revolutionary peasants, as the leadership believed, could effectively eliminate the bad influences. The youths were expected to “temper” (*duanlian*, a metallurgical term used in the political vocabulary, meaning “building character”) themselves in the “revolutionary crucible” through strenuous manual labor and a stoic life (Cheng 2009; Bonnin 2013, 3–18). The zhiqing were also expected to pioneer the grand plan of overcoming the three great divides (industry and agriculture, rural and urban areas, and mental and manual labor). A slogan, derived from Mao’s 1955 “directive,” summarized these lofty goals: “[the zhiqing] should go to the vast universe of the countryside, where they can make a huge difference!” (*guangkuo tiandi dayou zuowei*).

³ This definition does not include two populations who were often referred to as “zhiqing” but did not share with the zhiqing of this inquiry the same generational experience: those who voluntarily went down in the 1950s, before the program started as a state policy; and those “returning zhiqing” (*huixiang zhiqing*), rural youths who studied in towns and cities and returned home after graduation (Liu 2009). In terms of memory, some models of the early zhiqing in the 1950s, such as Xing Yanzi and Hou Jun, were incorporated into the political propaganda used in the mobilization in the 1960s and still appear in many exhibits and narratives today. Thus, they are included in the public memory (Chapter 4). The *huixiang zhiqing*, however, have been marginal, if not nonexistent, in the zhiqing memory, and thus are not included in this book. Needless to say, this analytical decision based on the purpose of the book – inquiry about memory rather than history – by no means dismisses their historical importance.

⁴ Some, like Gu Huifang, returned in the 1990s when they accompanied their children for school, allowed by a new policy in Shanghai and other source cities. A small percentage returned after they retired.

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The ideological terms, however, cloaked the state's practical purposes. The most important practical goal was to solve the grave problem of urban youths' unemployment in the 1960s. This generation was equivalent to America's "baby boomers," born after WWII or the Chinese Civil War (1945–1949). The rigid command economy could not absorb the youths into the labor force, and colleges did not have the capacity to admit so many secondary school graduates (Bernstein 1977; Ding 2009; Liu 2009). The problem was aggravated by the turmoil in the early years of the Cultural Revolution, when schools were shut down, and the youths idled their time away in political activities or at home or on the streets.

Another practical objective was to use the zhiqing as the major labor force to develop the rural areas and the frontiers. In the frontiers, the send-down program was a continuation of the reclamation migration, which started long before the zhiqing's arrival and was intended to solve the labor shortage problem there. In Yunnan, Xinjiang, and Heilongjiang, there had been the practice of migration and settlement of outside peasants, demobilized soldiers, and the "rightists" (Ding 2009; Bin Yang 2009; Wang 2017). The reclamation also had its political purposes – for example, to send many Han Chinese to settle in the ethnic regions like Xinjiang to maintain the stability in the frontiers. In the Heilongjiang Corps, youths were occasionally used as military reserve forces for the conflict with the Soviet Union. However, many zhiqing went to villages (chadui), where there often was a surplus of labor (Bonnin 2013, 30–32). In those chadui cases, the practical goal of dispersing an unemployed urban population made more sense than meeting the labor shortage.

On December 22, 1968, *The People's Daily* published Mao's famous directive (Bonnin 2013, 4):

It is absolutely necessary for educated young people to go to the countryside to be re-educated by the poor and lower-middle peasants. Cadres and other city people should be persuaded to send their sons and daughters to the countryside when they have finished junior or senior high school, college, or university. Let's mobilize. Comrades throughout the countryside should welcome them.

Accompanying Mao's directive on the front page was a report on the urban youths in a Gansu town going to settle in villages. The title of the report subtly alluded to the urban unemployment problem: "We also have two hands and will not idle in cities!"

This amalgam of ideological and practical goals significantly shaped the zhiqing's personal experience. Some zhiqing went down with political enthusiasm, sometimes even before the program became a forcible migration plan at the end of 1968. Historical works have recorded well-