H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Liu Xiaomeng. *Zhongguo zhiqingshi: Dachao 1966-1980 (A History of the Rusticated Youths: The Tidal Wave, 1966-1980).* Beijing: Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 1998. 875 pp. 40.00 rmb (paper), ISBN 978-7-5004-2188-7.

Ding Yizhuang. *Zhongguo zhiqingshi: Chulan 1953-1968 (A History of the Chinese Rusticated Youths: The Early Ripples, 1953-1968).* Beijing: Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 1998. 489 pp. 23.00rmb (paper), ISBN 978-7-5004-2187-0.

Reviewed by Jerome Chen (Professor Emeritus, Department of History, York University, Toronto, Canada)

Published on H-Asia (March, 1999)

Was It a Lost Generation?

As if to disagree with these two solidly researched, carefully footnoted, and lucidly narrated volumes, the PRC decided to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the rustication of its best educated youth last year by publishing reams of reminiscences. At least four hundred of the former rusticated youth met in Houston, Texas, to mark the occasion (Shengzhou xueren, 1998.12). W ho among the first batches of the PRC overseas students were not erstwhile Red Guards and Rusticated Youths? These two volumes stand out as a pair of scholarly works by two young women who were sent to Inner Mongolia in 1968 and are now associate professors of history at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

Both authors make it clear that either the early ripples or the later tidal waves were chiefly designed as a way to find work for the urban unemployed school leavers. Any other reason was only en passant.

In this review, my own focus is on Liu's, rather than Ding's volume, especially on the end game, i.e. their return to the cities after the death of Mao. Here I must point out a mystery in some of the public libraries I used in the PRC. Several of the volumes on the rustication, though in the catalog, were often unavailable to my repeated requests.

Most of the people we are dealing with belonged to the three classes of "the old" (the 1966, 67, and 68 high-school graduates)–the first generation of boys and girls born and brought up under the Red Flag, reaching puberty in 1966-68 and the age of marriage during the rustication. Not counting the high-school children who were born and brought up in rural households and yet went through rustication, some 17 million urban educated youths responded to Mao's call to receive reeducation from poor peasants either at communes and production brigades or at the farms of the production, the reconstruction army corps (later state farms).

Under the given conditions of the Cultural Revolution which were brought into being with their own help, the old career pattern of acquiring knowledge, qualifications, and a secured job in the office or on the shop floor was no longer realistic. They had to find a new way of living and finding ideological fulfillment and personal dignity in vast rural China.

All these are familiar to most of us through reading Thomas Bernstein's 1977 book, *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages: The Transfer of Youth from Urban to Rural China* (Yale University Press), which has been translated into Chinese and admired by Ding and Liu. Their volumes are also narrative history, richly docu-

mented, comprehensive in their coverage, appended with useful statistical tables. They are indispensable references to all who are working on this subject.

Here I would like to focus only on three topics on which the new books throw much more judicious light for us to collate with other books. They are reeducation, sex and marriage, and return to the city.

1. Reeducation: It would be an insult to the rusticated youths if we assume that they were innocently unaware of the intellectual backwardness of the peasants. Their genuine admiration of them was perhaps more for the peasants' natural (maybe imagined) moral character, so as to prepare themselves for taking over the torch of revolution from the towering leaders of the Mao generation. Knowledge was a sin, especially 'bourgeois' knowledge. The more of it, the worse the guilt. To live with and learn from the innocent was to be reborn, to be freed from one's sinful past (Liu, pp. 130, 220, 242).

But what did they actually learn? Before the death of Lin Biao, they could read only ideologically correct tracts and literature. Lin's death seems to have shattered their faith and to have directed them to read other schools of thought and other themes for pleasure in reading. Some even began to study mathematics and natural sciences and foreign languages in anticipation of a restoration of the old educational regime. In the absence of a library and an instructor, no matter how industrious they were, they did not achieve much. At the time of the restoration of the college entrance examination in 1977, they had progressed no higher than grade six. Five and half million participated in the exam, and some 2.8 million were rusticated youths. The bitter remark of Yu Guangyuan and Xing Fensi', both renowned philosophers, was that the whole movement of youth rustication was a "backward step." Liu compared the disastrous consequences of the rustication to that of the Great Leap Forward twenty years before.

2. Sex and marriage. It was not that the central leadership was so remiss as to have overlooked the primordial drive of the youth; it was that it had confidence in the revolutionary spirit of the young to suppress and sublimate such "dirty, bourgeois thought." In this case, neither suppression nor sublimation worked. The leaders' power in the vast countryside was limited and feeble, and there were few devices available to help the young people.

For one thing, 860,000 rusticated youths got married and an uncounted number ran the risks of having illegitimate children or primitive abortion; for another, tens of thousands of girls, far more than the 23,000 reported cases, were sexually abused. Rape and torture were the two most frequent ways the local cadres and PLA officers resorted to persecute the youths. In many cases it was a girl forced to have sex with her abuser against her will. They were not always forced to do so. They were also lured by offers of better housing, better opportunities to join the Communist Youth league or the CCP, more frequent home leaves, more favorable reports and recommendations.

The educated youths married not only their own kind, but also peasants or workers who worked in the nearby cities. The first type of marriage would not be able to change the urban youths' social status, if it happened to be "black," and the material living conditions of the married couple would be the poorest. The second type was contracted between a peasant husband and an educated wife. The husband did not have to pay any bride money, but had to do more heavy household work. The wife could lose her old family status as well as her hope of ever moving back to her urban roots. Ideally the educated wife would raise her man's cultural level, but this often ended up in her becoming acculturated–cursed, beaten, and succumbing to the gender hierarchy.

3. Return to the cities. After Lin Biao's death, even Mao seems to have lost his heart in the lofty enterprise of rustication, although the practical problem of youth unemployment remained unsolved. Both authors are convinced that was at the bottom the real goal of the rustication movement. Therefore six elders, led by Zhou Shizhao, an old friend, gingerly suggested in the traditional manner to Mao that the Cultural Revolution as a whole might be wound up. A special conference was called in 1973. Ironically it led only to a second upsurge of the movement in 1974-76. Then the old leader died and the end of movement came traumatically.

A second special conference was called in 1978 to handle their return to the city. The "red" route was to obtain a job or a student admission while the "black" route was to beg for a sick or family leave. The prerequisite of returning to the city was only for the unmarried. For many married rusticated youth, this meant an instant rush to divorce. According to a description this was the biggest "divorce rush" in Chinese history. The Government's decree was to have all the necessary arrangements made in five days before the divorced were to depart from the state farms. A married couple had then to find some local family to take care of the child, if there was one. They went and stood in a line of five or six

thousand couples in front of a branch government office manned by three cadres who had neither the knowledge nor the training to deal with so many divorce petitions in five days. Divorce forms had to be quickly printed; ballpoint pens and seal-ink had to be bought. If the three worked, say, ten hours a day, they had to despatch 100 cases an hour so that they could send the 5,000 couples away without trouble. (This is based on the 1990 memoirs of Guo Xiaodong.) At Xishuangbanna there were then 50,000 urban youths. By 1979 only 70 were left. At other places, it may not have been so smooth and lucky. Some 30,000 Shanghai youths were stuck in Xinjiang till the early 1980s.

The urban economy was being revived, but not enough to meet the vast and varied demands. Shortages generated despair–the feeling of becoming the "lost generation"; on the other hand, the corrupt officials in the cities had the power to allocate scarce goods and opportunities in exchange for what they could extract from their victims.

The painful reality was that these were the best educated young people of the PRC. Eventually, the cream of them got admissions, scholarships, and passage money; they were on their way to the USA and Canada, and to other countries as overseas students. From the age of 15-30, they had metamorphosed from Red Guards and then the Rusticated Youths, preparing themselves to become Mao's revolutionary successors and finally and very quickly they changed themselves again, to go to the universities and colleges of the capitalist countries of the world. Hopefully, in the end, they will go back to the divine continent to modernize their beloved Vaterland!

Citation: Jerome Chen. Review of Xiaomeng, Liu, *Zhongguo zhiqingshi: Dachao 1966-1980 (A History of the Rusticated Youths: The Tidal Wave, 1966-1980)* and Yizhuang, Ding, *Zhongguo zhiqingshi: Chulan 1953-1968 (A History of the Chinese Rusticated Youths: The Early Ripples, 1953-1968).* H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. March, 1999.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2892