1972

As an experiment in educating the new socialist subject, the Cultural Revolution saw the intensification of the practice of sending educated urban youths to the countryside to learn from the peasantry. In the mid-1950s, Chinese authorities began sending young people from the cities to rural areas so they could gain valuable life experience by toiling side-by-side with peasants. However, the policy really took off only after the disaster of the Great Leap Forward, when the Chinese Government began to relocate urban youths of bad class origins to alleviate pressure on employment, food provision and services in the cities. Although the flow of students had stopped with the breakdown of state institutions at the onset of the Cultural Revolution, in 1967, some Red Guards volunteered to go to the countryside to merge with the peasant masses and continue their revolution there. What initially was only a trickle became a torrent one year later, after Mao Zedong himself endorsed the practice. Taking as a starting point a letter a disgruntled parent wrote to Mao in 1972, this essay looks into the experience of the Chinese 'rusticated youth'.

Transforming Urban Youth into Peasants: The Maoist Rustication Movement of the 1960s–1970s

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In 1972, Li Qinglin was a primary schoolteacher in Putian, Fujian Province.[2] He was annoyed because his elder son had been sent down to a rural village eighty kilometres away—a fate no ordinary urban family had been able to escape since the end of 1968. To add to Li's annoyance was the fact that, since his move to the countryside, the son had been unable to earn enough work points to feed himself properly. Just like the local peasants, the rusticated 'educated youth' (知识青年, abbreviated to 知青, *zhiqing*) had to earn work points every day to get a share at the time of the harvest, of grain and money, but most were given fewer points than the local peasants, in part because they were considered less skilled and robust and in part because the local cadres were unhappy about this burden imposed on them by the higher authorities, which reduced their meagre earnings. Rural labour was already plentiful, but they had been told that accommodating the *zhiqing* was a political task given to them by Chairman Mao. As a result, most *zhiqing* had to ask for help from their parents to sustain themselves. Li, for instance, had to provide food (bought on the black market) for his son, who had finished his yearly share after only six months, not to mention all the other necessary items, since the boy did not earn any money. In addition, even after four years of hard work, his son had no proper housing in the village.

As his younger son was almost sixteen and on the verge of also being rusticated, Li Qinglin became particularly worried. His own salary would not be enough to help sustain two hungry bellies. Li also resented the injustice of children of local cadres and leaders who were returning to urban areas 'through the backdoor' whereas the children of ordinary people had no idea how long their rural sojourn would last; theoretically, it could be forever. When Mao Zedong launched this movement with his famous directive of 22 December 1968, it was said that urban youth had to be re-educated by the 'poor and lower-middle peasants' (接受贫下中农的再教育) and transformed into 'new-type socialist peasants' (社会主义新式农民).[3] At the time, many young people were ready to

enthusiastically answer any demand made by Chairman Mao; as for the others, they were not given a choice. However, after a few months in the countryside, even those who had been full of enthusiasm lost their zeal. Having lost their precious urban *hukou* (residence permit), they were not allowed to return to the cities, where they would be illegal residents without the ration cards necessary to buy food or anything else, and no possibility of obtaining a job or shelter. Only at the beginning of the 1970s were some *zhiqing* hired in their home city or recruited by the People's Liberation Army (PLA)—a phenomenon that became more frequent in 1972, when, after the failed escape and death of Marshall Lin Biao, most former leaders and cadres who had fallen victim to the Cultural Revolution were called back to the cities and given new positions. The first thing they did after being reinstated was to arrange the return of their children—by admission to the PLA or the universities that had just reopened. This was of course resented by those who had no special privilege or, worse, had 'bad class status' and thus no hope of ever leaving the countryside.

Stimulated by his desire to denounce injustice and, at the same time, get some help with his specific case, Li decided to do something that had traditionally been the last resort for people in China with a grievance: write a petition to the Emperor (告御状)—that is, Chairman Mao. Two letters were sent with no reply, but he did not lose heart. Having noticed that Wang Hairong, Mao's grandniece, who had by then become a leader at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, received foreign dignitaries alongside the chairman himself, Li decided to send a third letter, through her. Then a miracle happened: on 25 April 1973, he received at home a letter containing three 100-yuan bills (almost seven months of salary for him) with a short letter in Mao's own hand, saying: 'Please find attached 300 yuan to help you a little with your problem. Such cases are widespread in the country, and will be dealt with in the standard manner.'

This was the first time Mao had directly sent a letter of reply to an individual, although he had already sent one to a group of Red Guards at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution.[4] As in the first case, the letter became a national political event and the name of Li Qinglin and the content of Mao's letter were soon known throughout the country. Mao was happy to appear as a benevolent ruler providing justice to the people and rectifying the ways of the bureaucrats who did not implement correctly his grand plans for the bright communist future of the country. His 'specialty' among the communist leaders of the world was precisely his regular use of the 'masses' to put pressure on other leaders and

bureaucrats who did not follow his line—the Red Guards being a good example of a social group he had used and then discarded. Mao insisted that Li Qinglin should be given official positions at the local and even national level. Li, then, took this opportunity to denounce some local leaders and even became embroiled in the political infighting between the top leaders who had managed to survive the Cultural Revolution and the radical leaders who had been promoted through it.

Unfortunately for Li, after Mao's death on 9 September 1976, the top radical leaders were labelled the 'Gang of Four' (四人帮) and arrested, while the local bureaucrats whom he had denounced took their revenge. Considered the number-two representative of the Gang of Four in Fujian, Li was condemned to life imprisonment, which was later reduced to fifteen years. He was freed in 1994 and died ten years later in the humble house where he had written his letter to Mao. To this day, Li's image remains good among the former rusticated youth, not because of his later political activity, but simply because in 1972 he had dared to tell the truth to the Emperor. Mao had seized this opportunity to give a new start to the rustication movement, which was an essential part of his revolutionary strategy aimed at educating and training 'revolutionary successors'—a process he deemed essential to preserve the socialist system in China. After a slowdown due in part to the fierce political struggle that monopolised the attention of the highest leaders in 1970–71 and in part to the realisation that, after the worst of the political chaos, the cities needed fresh labour, the Chinese leadership recognised that if they wanted to relaunch the movement, it was necessary to improve somewhat the material conditions of the *zhiqing*, which in many cases were simply unbearable both for them and for their families.

Relaunching the Movement

Feeling that Mao's letter to Li was a covert indictment of the leaders in charge of the country's daily management, Zhou Enlai lost no time organising the National Working Conference on the Rustication of Educated Youth, which took place in Beijing from 22 June to 7 August 1973. Drawing on the information collected by seventy cadres who had been sent to different regions to discover the main problems affecting the *zhiqing* and their parents, the conference adopted a series of remedial measures. As the inquiries had revealed that at some military farms officers had raped dozens of female *zhiqing*, some of these rapists were arrested and

condemned to death in a bid to reduce the anxieties of parents. But, with no systemic improvements concerning the rule of law in sight, the root of the problem remained, which explains why 10,000 cases of ill treatment of *zhiqing* (mostly rapes) were reported in 1976.[5]

Another decision taken at the conference was to insist on the responsibility of the leadership in the management of the system. At each level, 'small leadership groups in charge of rusticating the educated youths' (知识青年上山下乡领导小组) were established. The objectives of the measures taken during and after the conference were to improve the material situation of the *zhiqing* and to better control them. The subsidy paid to rural authorities for the installation of each *zhiqing* increased from 230 yuan to 480 yuan in the south and from 250 yuan to 500 yuan in the north. At the same time, the principle of equal pay for equal work was stressed in the hope of improving the number of work points given to the *zhiqing.* An important improvement for the wellbeing of the *zhiqing* was the insistence on regrouping them together for housing and for work wherever possible. More building materials were allocated. Having the *zhiqing* live in collective households (集体户) meant not only was it easier to rationally divide domestic tasks, but also the *zhiqing* felt less isolated and girls were less vulnerable to sexual harassment and rape. Where land and finance were available, the authorities encouraged the creation of *zhiqing* farms or plantations, where these youths worked together, sometimes with the help of an experienced peasant.

Working and living apart from the peasants reduced the occasions of conflicts between peasants and *zhiqing*, but it was at the expense of the original rationale of the movement: the integration of the *zhiqing* with the labouring masses and the re-education of young intellectuals by poor and lower-middle peasants. Regrouping *zhiqing* did, however, facilitate their monitoring, especially when the Chinese authorities established a new practice of sending 'accompanying cadres' to live in villages on a rotating basis to try to control the activities of the *zhiqing*, preventing them from evading work and organising political study in the evening. The presence of these cadres also gave some protection to the *zhiqing*, especially girls, against abuses. But they were not dispatched everywhere—the national ratio was about one for every 100 *zhiqing*—and the protection was far from sufficient, as we have seen.

Beginning in 1974, the city of Zhuzhou, Hunan Province, became the model for a new system, in which schools continued to designate those students who would have to leave for the countryside, but the parents'

work units took over the task of mobilising them and organising transfers to the village to which the units were 'hooked'. It was even more difficult than before to resist the transfer, given the enormous power of the work unit over the life of every family and especially considering the fact that the best chance for *zhiqing* to return home was to be hired by their parents' work unit. The Zhuzhou model was thus an important element in the development of what became, at the end of the movement, a pervasive practice of hereditary hiring in Chinese urban areas.

The changes resulting from the 1973 conference were not implemented evenly in all areas, but they brought a real improvement for most *zhiqing*. The basic problem at that time, however, was that an improvement of the material conditions of the *zhiqing*'s rural sojourn could not really satisfy them or their parents. At that point, the only question in their minds was: when will I be able to go home?

States of Mind

This state of mind was already deeply entrenched among the *zhiqing* before the 1973 conference and it did not change with the new wave of youths who arrived in the countryside in the following years. The policy of rusticating urban youth first began in 1955 in imitation of the Soviet Union, but on a small scale. Before the Great Leap Forward (1958–62), less than 100,000 Chinese youths were rusticated and the policy stopped during the Leap. When this period of utopian frenzy ended in famine and economic breakdown, the pressure on employment, food provision and education in urban areas was so great it was decided to send large numbers of urban youths to the countryside. From 1962 to mid-1966, on the eve of the Cultural Revolution, 1,290,000 *zhiqing* were rusticated.[6] At that time, this policy focused mainly on youth of 'bad class origin', who were discriminated against in access to high schools and universities as well as jobs. These people were given the opportunity to 'redeem' themselves by going to 'places where the country needed them most'. After they discovered that those rural places were not as idyllic as they had been told and that their prospects of returning home were dim, their mood was quite low and a number used the Cultural Revolution as an opportunity to go home and 'make revolution' there, asking the authorities to stop the 'revisionist' rustication policy. However, the Maoist nature of the policy was eventually reiterated and they were all forcibly sent back to the countryside before the end of 1967.

After the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, there were no new departures to the countryside, as the chaotic situation did not permit this type of organised bureaucratic activity. But in 1967, some Red Guards, disappointed by the orientation taken by their movement and stimulated by some of Mao's speeches, asked to go to the countryside to merge with the peasant masses and continue the revolution there.[7] Only about 2,000 Red Guards left this way in 1967 but, by mid-1968, as Mao was already thinking of putting an end to the Red Guard movement and restoring order, some provinces encouraged secondary school students to go to the countryside in an organised way. This movement accelerated after Mao himself published an editorial and then a directive on the front page of the *People's Daily* on 5 September and 13 September, respectively, but there was still resistance from those Red Guards who refused to abandon their fight and from parents who were worried about sending their children away, often to faraway border regions, with no guarantees about their fate in the countryside or their future return. Mao, then, decided to strike hard. On 21 December 1968, a directive from him was read on the evening radio news and published on the front page of the *People's Daily* the following day. It said:

> 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 mobilise. Comrades throughout the countryside should welcome them.

A huge mobilisation was immediately launched and, in the following months, most urban secondary school students were declared to have graduated and were sent to the countryside in an atmosphere of frenzied excitement. From the end of 1968 to the spring of 1970, about five million *zhiqing* went either to villages in their own province or, in the case of the biggest cities, to faraway border regions where they were often integrated into military farms that were later transformed into state farms. Such farms at least had the advantage of providing a monthly salary and enough food on which to survive, while in the villages there was no such guarantee, as we have seen. However, according to official statistics, only 15 percent of *zhiqing* were enrolled in farms (about 2.5 million of a total of 16.5 million

sent to the countryside during the period 1967–79).[8] From 1974 to 1979, two million youths were sent to separate *zhiqing* farms or plantations, but these were only collective units without a guaranteed salary.[9]

The overhaul of the system prompted by Mao's letter to Li Qinglin was by then incapable of gaining the acceptance of the *zhiqing*, who tried all methods to end their rural sojourn—by bribing officials or by extreme actions like harming themselves physically, returning illegally to the cities or escaping to foreign places such as Hong Kong or Burma. Even those who had a good attitude in the countryside, openly praised the policy and went as far as becoming cadres at the lowest levels were hoping to be eventually rewarded with an urban posting. The few who found jobs in which their talents were not wasted, such as primary schoolteachers or 'barefoot doctors', were looking for opportunities to leave as well.

The Wind of Return

The rustication policy also became a bone of contention between the two main political factions at the top of the Party: the Maoist radicals insisted on the necessity for the *zhiqing* to 'take root'—that is, to become peasants for life—whereas the moderates favoured a rotation system. Although the former made more noise, the latter had more influence over the daily management of the country, so a steady flow of returns continued. However, the number of returns was always lower than that of departures, which explains why the peak in the number of *zhiqing* actually present in the countryside (almost nine million) came in 1977.[10] In addition, after Mao's death and the arrest of the Gang of Four, Mao's successor, Hua Guofeng (who had organised the 1973 conference), decided to continue to pursue rustication—another factor behind the 1977 peak. But the questioning of all Maoist policies in 1978 brought hesitation among the leaders. This was supposed to be solved by a new work conference, which took place from 31 October to 10 December 1978. The conference decided to reduce the numbers sent to the countryside, with the objective of stopping the transfers after a few years. At the same time, the gradual return of the *zhiqing* sent to villages was also scheduled. However, new problems arose as the Chinese authorities announced that *zhiqing* sent to state farms were no longer considered *zhiqing* but employees of the farms. This decision caused an uproar among the *zhiqing* concerned, which translated into a desperate, spontaneous movement that included petitions, strikes, hunger strikes and the dispatch of delegations. This

resulted in a general 'wind of return' (回城风), which the authorities eventually decided to accept—although without saying so publicly. From 1978 until the end of 1980, there was a wave of returns that brought some six million *zhiqing* back to the cities.

Taking advantage of the political openness of late 1978, the *zhiqing* were then the first social group in the People's Republic of China to succeed in altering significantly the plans of the authorities in their favour. Of course, the new Party leadership's decision to prioritise economic development made the rustication policy untenable in the long run. The policy was indeed totally irrational from an economic as well as a sociological or psychological point of view. The active resistance of the *zhiqing* came after a decade of passive resistance, which had expressed itself in many ways and played an important role in fostering corruption in China and led to a general decline in idealism and basic ethics. Most of the opportunities to leave the countryside were arbitrary: entrance to university did not require passing an exam but only currying political support; being hired by the army or an urban work unit also depended on pulling strings; and return for medical reasons depended on a medical certificate, which could be bought.

Towards the end of the movement, the authorities acknowledged in internal discussions that by spending seven billion yuan, the state had just bought four discontents: that of the *zhiqing*, of their parents, of the peasants and of the state itself.[11] Considering the enormous cost of this movement, not only for the *zhiqing* and their parents, but also for the state and for the peasants who shared the financial burden of the installation and maintenance of a labour force that was not needed, the question is: why did this policy endure so long?

This movement served multiple purposes and, in the course of its long history from 1955 to 1980, the motivations of the leadership evolved with the situation. In border regions, the main objectives included land clearing and boosting the strategic presence of Han people in minority and/or scarcely populated areas. But in certain periods, the main motive was certainly economic—that is, to alleviate the problem of urban unemployment. Many people, including scholars, consider this the real rationale behind the whole movement, but this view is simplistic. It is true rustication was used in some periods for this purpose, especially after the catastrophic Great Leap Forward and at the end of the Red Guards movement, when it would have been difficult for the Chinese authorities to provide jobs for youth after years of turmoil. But in both these periods,

the employment problem was mainly the result of a political movement that had turned bad. In 1968, the most pressing problem was how to put an end to the political threat represented by those Red Guards who were unwilling to end their revolution. But this was a contingent problem. Statistics show that during the period 1968–77, the number of people from the countryside hired in urban areas was roughly equivalent to the number of *zhiqing* who were permanently rusticated. The *hukou* system could have avoided this exchange of population, if it were not for another reason: the fact that Mao had said rustication was 'absolutely necessary'.

Mao insisted during his final years on the need to preserve and develop this 'new-born thing from the Cultural Revolution' (文化大革命的新生事物). And, for him, this was certainly not a question of economic rationality but of political necessity, to train 'revolutionary successors' and prevent China from 'changing its colour'. Even when his health was already very frail, in February 1976, he wrote a comment on a letter that had been sent to him, asking the Politburo to organise a new conference on the rustication movement.[12] This reaction—reminiscent of his earlier reply to Li Qinglin—shows his interest in the rustication of educated youth had not abated even at the very end.

This is why this movement endured so long—not because of a supposed economic rationale. When economic development did become a priority, after 1978, a large number of new jobs were created in the cities to accommodate both the wave of returning *zhiqing* and the new cohort of youths who had been born during the baby boom that followed the period of food shortages and economic slowdown in the cities. This was made possible simply by abandoning the constraints Mao had imposed for purely ideological and political reasons on individual and small collective enterprises as well as on the service and light-industry sectors. After their return home, many *zhiqing* expressed the idea that this movement had been equivalent to turning the wheel of history backwards. And indeed, only when, a decade later, the Chinese Government accepted a reverse labour migration of much larger numbers of young peasants going to work in urban areas was China able to develop its industrial and service sectors on a large scale, while relieving the countryside of its surplus labour.