

Urban Youth on the Margins: Inequality in China's Sent Down Youth Movement

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Abstract

Nostalgia for the Sent-Down Youth Movement (*Shangshan xiaxiang yundong* 上山下乡运动) is receiving official endorsement in today's China. To help review the movement academically, this article presents a county-level case study of sent-down youths' rural experiences from 1968 to 1978. It reassesses the rural lives of the sent-down youth on the margins, those living beyond the city in homes located in county seats and townships. Numbering in the millions, the experiences of these urban youth on the margins contribute to a more nuanced study of the sent-down movement. This research pays attention to the inequalities between privileged and marginal youth that were legitimized by policies, which commonly existed even among those resettled in the same county or village. Supported by either their home cities' governments or resourceful families, many young migrants had an easier rural life and enjoyed favoritism compared with their marginal peers. As this article reveals, the gaps that existed in various sent-down groups at different levels should be fully exposed.

Keywords: sent-down youth, Sent-Down Youth Movement, China, Mao, rural lives, legitimizing inequality, Hechuan County

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Introduction

In recent years, together with an increasing fervor for Mao Zedong,¹ nostalgia for Mao's Sent-

¹ The increasing fervor has been shown by the statistics of annual visitors to Shaoshan 韶山, Hunan Province 湖南省, Mao's hometown. According to the statistics before tourism was limited due to COVID, in 2019 the number of people visiting Shaoshan was more than 25 million, while in 2008 this number was only

Down Youth Movement has become more popular. While the movement began in the 1950s and lasted until the end of the 1970s, most of the sent-down youth began their lives in the countryside between 1968 and 1978. In Hangzhou City 杭州市, Zhejiang Province 浙江省, the Sent-Down Youths' Spring Festival Evening Gala (*zhiqing chunwan* 知青春晚) has been held annually since 2017. In the five years following this display of nostalgia for their time as sent-down youth, similar activities have been well-organized and well-received by former sent-down youth in cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin. Today, hundreds of such gala videos can be found on China's video-sharing websites.

When examining the formation of this nostalgic trend, one must consider the influence of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s propaganda strategies. Without the CCP's endorsement, most of these public commemorative activities would not have been held. Although officially endorsed, the nostalgia expressed by those participating in these activities can by no means be regarded as representative of all sent-down youth. Not all sent-down youth look back on this period in their lives with nostalgia; some did not survive the relocation, while others prefer to not celebrate this time in their lives.

This paper examines archival materials related to sent-down youth from Hechuan County 合川县, Sichuan Province 四川省. It pays particular attention to the inequalities between different groups who relocated to villages in Hechuan County. The aim is to add to our understandings of the rural experiences of sent-down youth from hometowns at the county and township levels. These were urban youth at the margins. Comparing their lives with their peers who were resettled in rural Hechuan from a nearby city, this case study vividly presents a microcosm of the nationwide inequalities in China's Sent Down Youth Movement. Through molding the allocation of the nation's resources from the central to the basic level, the party-state system and the centrally planned economy legitimized and institutionalized these inequities.

Today, some former sent-down youth feel nostalgic about their rural lives due to the benefits they enjoyed from the inequalities. It is not a strange thing, although most of them are ashamed to admit it. Instead of identifying the direct correlation between sent-down inequalities and the ongoing nostalgia, this study chooses to concentrate on reexamining the inequalities themselves and helping review the sent-down movement from varied perspectives.

Beginning in the 1950s, under Mao Zedong's instructions of "to do great things in the vast countryside" (*guangkuo tiandi dayouzuowei* 广阔天地大有作为),² China began sending groups of urban youth to the rural areas as a way to release the pressure of urban population. The

3.6 million. "Shiernian fan qibei: cong Shaoshan youke jiedailiang baozhang kan Mao Zedong re" 12年翻7倍: 从韶山游客接待量暴涨看毛泽东热 [Seven-time Expansion in 12 Years: Observing the Zeal of Mao Zedong from the Drastic Increase of Tourists to Shaoshan], <http://www.szhgh.com/Article/red-china/tour/2020-12-26/256756.html>.

² Mao encouraged youth to make significant contributions in the vast countryside for the first time in 1955. After that, Mao's encouragement became the most widely used slogan mobilizing the urban-rural migration, which had taken place several times by the mid-1960s. On June 27, 1968, the *Henan Daily* (*Henan ribao* 河南日报) published Mao's original words again on its front page, signifying the tide of sent-down mobilization that would soon be promoted across China.

beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 delayed the sent-down program for almost three years. However, there was the national tide of sent-down mobilization that followed the delay. Youth who graduated from middle schools and high schools from 1966 to 1968—widely known as *laosanjie* 老三届 (old graduates of the three years)³—numbered approximately 10 million nationally, were without a suitable place to build their careers after graduation.⁴ Their uncertain life ended in December 1968, when Mao declared it was necessary for these youth “to be re-educated by poor and lower-middle peasants” (*jieshou pinxia zhongnong zaijiaoyu* 接受贫下中农再教育).⁵ The following year saw 2.67 million urban youth relocating to the countryside; this number does not include rural students who returned to their home villages after graduation.⁶ In the decade that followed, going to the countryside became a mandatory requirement for almost all urban youth finishing junior high school, resulting in the urban-rural relocation of approximately 17 million Chinese youth.

Among the young migrants, a noticeable number of them came from cities, especially from large cities. For example, from 1968 to 1978, a total of 1,112,952 Shanghai youth began their lives in the countryside.⁷ Migrations on a similar scale undoubtedly took place in other large cities. However, not all of the 17 million sent-down youth moved from large cities like Shanghai to the countryside. According to China’s urban household registration system,⁸ all the young men and women living in a city, prefecture, county seat (*xiancheng* 县城) or town were classified as urban residents and required to move to the countryside. At this time, China had approximately 300 prefecture-level cities, more than 2,000 county seats, and tens of thousands of townships. While an accurate number of young migrants from those smaller places is not available, given that a county seat normally accommodated thousands of families, not to mention those residing in townships, all of whose offspring should join the sent-down movement, these urban youth on the margins numbered no fewer than those from Shanghai-

³ Many of them were once activists in the beginning of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). After graduation, unfortunately, they were stuck in urban areas without job opportunities or chances for higher education.

⁴ Liu Xiaomeng 刘小萌, *Zhongguo zhiqingshi: dachao (1966-1980)* 中国知青史: 大潮 (1966-1980) [The history of China’s sent-down educated youth: the big wave (1966-1980)] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1998), 106.

⁵ Mao Zedong 毛泽东, “Zhishiqingnian dao nongcun qu, jieshou pinxiazhongnong zaijiaoyu, hen youbiyao” 知识青年到农村去, 接受贫下中农再教育, 很有必要 [It is very necessary for the sent-down youth to go to the countryside and to be re-educated by the middle- and lower-class peasants], *Renmin ribao* 人民日报, December 22, 1968.

⁶ Liu, *Zhongguo zhiqingshi: dachao (1966-1980)*, 170.

⁷ “‘Wenhua dageming’ zhong de Shangshan xiexiang yundong” 文化大革命“中的上山下乡运动 [The Sent-Down Youth Movement during the Cultural Revolution], Shanghai shi difangzhi bangongshi 上海市地方志办公室 [Shanghai City Local Gazetteers Office], accessed June 26, 2022, http://www.shtong.gov.cn/dfz_web/DFZ/Info?idnode=66390&tableName=userobject1a&id=62337.

⁸ The household registration system (*hukou dengji zhidu* 户口登记制度) had been established in China in the early 1950s by the CCP and has remained a major method for the party’s control over China’s huge population until now. Under this system, during the Mao era, there was the urban-rural dual structure in which peasants were prohibited from leaving the countryside freely, and the registration of non-rural households, from those in large cities to small towns, was strictly limited.

like metropolises. However, their experiences, differing from many youth from big cities have received much less attention during and after the movement.

In addition to the gaps between urban young people at the central and the peripheral levels, considerable inequalities also existed between youth with and without a family that could access attractive urban resources and exchange them for special treatment from rural cadres. Unfortunately, for most of these youth from county seats or townships, their parents did not have the resources to help their sent-down children. In this sense, these marginal urban youth became the most disadvantaged group involved in the movement and their experiences should not be overlooked or confused with those of their big-city or resourceful-family peers.

During the Sent-Down Youth Movement, Hechuan was a county in Sichuan Province, located 80 kilometers north of Chongqing City 重庆市.⁹ Situated in the eastern part of the Sichuan Basin 四川盆地, Hechuan's mild climate, fertile farmland, and rich water resources, made it a typical agricultural county with a dense population. By the end of the Mao era, there were almost 1.4 million people in the county earning a living from agricultural production.¹⁰ The considerable scale of the rural population there makes it an excellent site from which to examine Mao's policies in the countryside. Beyond Hechuan's agriculture, the urban areas and urban population there have experienced notable growth, including those at the county-seat and township levels. The water-transportation-based commerce through the Yangtze River and its tributaries played a major role in its development. By 1976, 112,936 men and women lived in Hechuan's urban areas, a number equivalent to many smaller city's populations.¹¹ The large numbers of residents in the county seat and townships led to the noticeable amount of urban graduates who needed to be involved in the Sent-Down Youth Movement.

By 1978, 26,933 young men and women had been resettled to Hechuan's rural areas.¹² But not all of these youth came from the county seat or the townships of Hechuan. In addition to these Hechuan locals, 10,762 young people came from Chongqing City.¹³ Benefitting from local policies, at least one-third of these Chongqing youth were settled in Hechuan's countryside as a result of *toukao* 投靠 (going to live with and depend on someone else, such as relatives or friends, known as *touqinkaoyou* 投亲靠友).¹⁴ In addition to personal relationships (*siren*

⁹ As the founding of Chongqing Municipality under the Central Government (*Chongqing zhixiashi* 重庆直辖市) that no longer belonged to Sichuan Province in 1997, Hechuan County has become a part of Chongqing and now is a suburban district of Chongqing City.

¹⁰ *Hechuan xianzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui* 合川县志编纂委员会 [Editorial Committee of the Gazetteer of Hechuan County], *Hechuan xianzhi* 合川县志 [The Gazetteer of Hechuan County] (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1996), 66.

¹¹ *Hechuan xianzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui*, 66.

¹² This data includes those migrants between 1964 and 1968, when going to the countryside had not become a required task for all the urban young people.

¹³ Lu Zhiqian 陆支全, ed., *Hechuan zhiqing* 合川知青 [Hechuan sent-down youth] (Chongqing: Internal Materials of Hechuan District Archive, 2015), 3.

¹⁴ In principle, *toukao* was a way of settling in a village where an urban youth had relatives; it was an individual solution to the sent-down youths' urban-rural migration that was allowed by local authorities. This policy aimed to reduce the resistance to mobilizing urban youth to go to the countryside. In practice, regarding the types of relatives these youth could live with, specific regulations varied region by region and were usually filled with ambiguity. Although this solution was clearly not in line with the expectation from the central level

guanxi 私人关系), as this research reveals, in many cases the parents of these Chongqing youth exchanged urban resources for special treatment for their children from rural cadres. Admittedly, under the regional-level *toukao* policy, the number of young people who could benefit from it was still limited. Once it was nationally promoted to build urban-rural partnerships under the party-state and planned-economy contexts, called *changshe guagou* 厂社挂钩 as this article discloses, a much larger number of urban youth benefitted from exchanges in urban-rural resources. However, apart from the expansion of these policy-based beneficiaries, most of those urban youth on the margins remained underprivileged in the countryside. As a result, the inequalities associated with this movement became even larger.

This article relies heavily on primary archives obtained from Hechuan County and nearby areas. Its sources also include internal materials, unpublished compilations of sent-down youths' memoirs and records, and informal discussions with former sent-down youth who were happy to talk about their rural experiences.¹⁵ These sources present a detailed exploration of sent-down youths' daily lives in the countryside, in the areas of housing, dining, and work.

Research Background

The Sent-Down Youth Movement first attracted the attention of Western academics in the late 1970s, while the resettlement program was still being carried on. Thomas Bernstein's 1977 publication is the earliest international monograph-length study.¹⁶ Despite the movement's end in the late 1970s, it remains a significant topic for researchers. In addition to Bernstein's classic study, several noticeable works have provided a comprehensive picture of the movement, mainly from the national and top-down perspectives, including Michel Bonnin's 2013 book,¹⁷ and the first and 2nd editions of studies by Ding Yizhuang and Liu Xiaomeng.^{18 19}

In recent years, there have been more studies published in Chinese and international academia viewing the movement from the regional angle. One example is Sun Chengmin's

of the CCP, which called upon urban youth to migrate to the neediest regions in the nation, the way of *toukao* had been approved by the authorities between Chongqing City and rural Hechuan at least since 1969.

¹⁵ In recent years, individuals or institutions with foreign backgrounds have often been described by China's government and social media as hostile overseas forces (*jingwai didui shili* 境外敌对势力), and Chinese people are taught to be highly cautious when communicating with them. Accordingly, if being asked to sign a consent form for an international study, most people in China would likely be frightened and feel as if they are in danger. To ensure that no trouble was caused to the informants, the author of this article chose to meet and talk with former sent-down youth informally, thereby avoiding the need for a consent form.

¹⁶ Thomas P. Bernstein, *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages: The Transfer of Youth from Urban to Rural China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

¹⁷ Michel Bonnin, *The Lost Generation: The Rustication of China's Educated Youth*, trans. Krystyna Horko (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2013).

¹⁸ Ding Yizhuang 定宜庄, *Zhongguo zhiqingshi: chulan (1953-1968)* 中国知青史: 初澜 (1953-1968) [The history of China's sent-down educated youth: the first wave (1953-1968)] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1998). Ding Yizhuang 定宜庄, *Zhongguo zhiqingshi: chulan (1953-1968)* 中国知青史: 初澜 (1953-1968) [The history of China's sent-down educated youth: the first wave (1953-1968)] (Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo chubanshe, 2009).

¹⁹ Liu, *Zhongguo zhiqingshi: dachao (1966-1980)*, 1998. Liu Xiaomeng 刘小萌, *Zhongguo zhiqingshi: dachao (1966-1980)* 中国知青史: 大潮 (1966-1980) [The history of China's sent-down educated youth: the big wave (1966-1980)] (Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo chubanshe, 2009).

the multi-volume length study, *The History of Sent-Down Youth in Sichuan*.²⁰ This monograph emphasizes Sichuan Province's policy making, promotion, and supervision of the youth rustication program and reveals regional differences within the movement. Nevertheless, below the provincial government, the prefecture- and county-level authorities played a more direct role in managing in conducting the movement, including mobilizing the urban youth, dispatching them to the countryside, arranging their accommodations, inspecting their work, making reports to upper-level authorities, and troubleshooting reported issues. If additional lower-level sources were included, especially those at the county level and below, Sun's 2015 monograph could have exposed many more realities regarding those marginal urban youth involved in the movement.

This deficiency resulting from the lack of basic materials is notably made up by Emily Honig and Xiaojian Zhao in their co-authored book.²¹ Relying on rich sources from not only Shanghai City but also the counties where Shanghai youth settled, the two authors revisit the rural lives of Shanghai's rusticated young people. Their emphasis on the urban resources that supported Shanghai youth presents another significant picture of the sent-down movement from the regional perspective. For example, *weiwentuan* 慰问团 (a delegation providing comforts), on behalf of Shanghai authorities, played an effective role in negotiating with county- and lower-level officials. As a common result of such negotiations, Shanghai City's resources helped the villages, and the Shanghai migrants there received special favors. According to Honig and Zhao, *weiwentuan* were also sent by other cities, provinces, and even counties at the same time.²² However, it is questionable whether the *weiwentuan* from other places—especially those sent by lower-level governments—functioned as effectively as those from Shanghai. In Chongqing, during the lunar new year of 1970, the government organized a *weiwentuan*. Its tasks included bringing letters of thanks to the peasants, letters of consolation to the sent-down youth, and silk banners, as an award, to the authorities accommodating the youth. It also planned to show movies for the young people. But no comforts in material form were provided.²³ Even so, it was just a temporary delegation that would only stay in the countryside no longer than the lunar new year holiday. Despite sharing the same name in Chinese, the *weiwentuan* sent by the Shanghai government worked in a markedly different way. Operating regularly from 1969, some long-term *weiwentuan* even “stayed on (agricultural) production brigades with Shanghai youth for several years.”²⁴

Since 2010, more scholars have focused on exposing the differences in sent-down groups' rural lives. In a 2016 monograph, Weiyi Wu and Fan Hong argue that the sent-down youth

²⁰ Sun Chengmin 孙成民, *Sichuan zhiqingshi (sanjuan)* 四川知青史 (三卷本) [The history of sent-down youth in Sichuan (three volumes)] (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 2015).

²¹ Emily Honig and Xiaojian Zhao, *Across the Great Divide: The Sent-Down Youth Movement in Mao's China, 1968-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

²² Honig and Zhao, *Across the Great Divide*, 50-51.

²³ Zeng Yisheng 曾义生, ed., *Chongqing zhiqing jianshi 1952-2018 (chugao)* 重庆知青简史1952-2018 (初稿) [A brief history of Chongqing sent-down youth, first draft] (Chongqing: Internal materials, 2018), 567-569.

²⁴ Honig and Zhao, *Across the Great Divide*, 50-51.

“were never a monolithic community.”²⁵ As for the factors that contributed to the differences in experiences, many researchers highlight the various family origins of the sent-down youth.²⁶ According to them, the privileges enjoyed by certain sent-down youth usually resulted in an earlier return home, with sickness being one of the reasons given. Such analyses parallel the findings of Xuegang Zhou and Liren Hou in 1999.²⁷ When paying attention to the families with bureaucratic backgrounds which protected their children from the state’s sent-down policy, Zhou and Hou also note their comparatively shorter stays in the countryside.

Besides the privileges of returning home earlier, noticeable differences had taken place as soon as different sent-down groups began their daily lives in the countryside. The differences were usually shaped by where they resettled. For the youth who became members of production teams and performed the same work as peasants, known as *chadui* 插队,²⁸ the destination-shaped gaps were extremely striking, when compared with those joining militarized farms.²⁹ But the same destination neither guaranteed an equal experience in the countryside. Even moving to the same county or village, as this article demonstrates later, many migrants were still able to obtain much easier jobs resulting in more comfortable lives than their peers. In these cases, where they came from, big cities or small towns, resourceful families or those without social resources, were more important.

In addition to the types of inequalities stemming from the youths’ origins or destinations, inequalities also resulted from issues related to gender and the time lag between each youth’s moving to the countryside.³⁰ Scholars, such as Wenqi Yang and Fei Yan, have discussed the gaps that many sent-down females experienced related to gender differences.³¹ According to the argument of Yang and Yan, confusing equality with sameness in gender issues, sent-down young women were deprived of their gender identity. Therefore, it was basically true that urban girls suffered many more difficulties compared with their male peers. Yet, as this article

²⁵ Weiyi Wu and Fan Hong, *The Identity of Zhiqing: The Lost Generation* (London: Routledge, 2016).

²⁶ See in Kevin A. Gee, “The Sent-Down Youth of China: The Role of Family Origin in the Risk of Departure to and Return from the Countryside,” *The History of the Family* 16, no. 3 (2011): 190-203. Doi: 10.1016/j.hisfam.2011.06.002; Zhenchao Qian and Randy Hodson, “‘Sent Down’ in China: Stratification Challenged but Not Denied,” *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 29, no. 2 (2011): 205-219. Doi: 10.1016/j.rssm.2010.08.001; Jia Gao, “Sick Returnees Among China’s Sent-Down Youth and Contemporary Chinese Practices of Identity Performance,” *East Asia* 38, no. 2 (2021): 139-156. Doi: 10.1007/s12140-020-09351-w.

²⁷ Xueguang Zhou and Liren Hou, “Children of the Cultural Revolution: The State and the Life Course in the People’s Republic of China,” *American Sociological Review* (1999): 12-36. Doi: 10.2307/2657275.

²⁸ After the Movement of Communization in rural China in the mid-1950s, under the scheme of people’s communes (*renmin gongshe* 人民公社), production teams were the most basic level of collective farming across the nation. Normally speaking, a commune consisted of a number of brigades that were equal to traditional villages, and a brigade was divided into several production teams.

²⁹ For the urban youth becoming members of militarized farms, China’s priority of war preparation under the Cold War context secured the logistic support.

³⁰ Although this article does not focus on the gendered gaps of the sent-down movement, it hopes to inspire future research on the topic. Moreover, this article does not address the experiences of the sent-down youth who had moved to the countryside before the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

³¹ Wenqi Yang and Fei Yan, “The Annihilation of Femininity in Mao’s China: Gender Inequality of Sent-Down Youth during the Cultural Revolution,” *China Information* 31, no. 1 (2017): 63-83. Doi: 10.1177/0920203X17691743.

reveals, being a female did not always equate to being disadvantaged in the Sent-Down Youth Movement. Instead, if a rusticated young woman had urban resources that were attractive to rural cadres, she would likely find herself to be well protected in the countryside. As for those earlier migrants to the rural areas, most of their families were tarnished by the politicized environment, depriving them of opportunities to find a satisfying urban job. Unfortunately, in most cases, relocating to the countryside early in the movement did not make their situations better than those who moved later. Mao required all of the 17 million young people in the sent-down movement to receive socialist reeducation. However, the various forms of inequalities experienced by different sent-down groups negated Mao's socialist ideals.

Leaving for the Countryside



Figure 1. Sending off the urban youth to the countryside. Photographer unknown. N.D. Accessed September 27, 2023. http://k.sina.com.cn/article_6438955897_p17fcaab7900100103g.html.

One month after Mao required the *laosanjie* to settle in the countryside, the editorial titled "Leaving Right Now" (*Shuozou jiuzou* 说走就走) appeared in *Sichuan ribao* 四川日报, urging all of Sichuan's urban graduates to join the sent-down movement.³² However, many youth and their families living in the county seat and townships of Hechuan were not so eager to begin the process of relocation. Instead, these parents were just as hesitant to send their children

³² Sun, *Sichuan zhiqingshi*, Volume 2, 123.

to the countryside as those in large cities, even though their homes were not as far away from the countryside. By the end of 1970, nearly two years after Mao's instructions, 1,161 urban young people who had graduated between 1966 and 1968 still remained at home in Hechuan County. They comprised more than one-fifth of the total number of the *laosanjie* in Hechuan, all of whom should have been settled in the countryside already.³³ In 1971, the county's annual sent-down quota was not reached until late October.³⁴ One year later, a county-level official delivered a long speech to Hechuan youth and their parents in an effort to persuade them to abandon the wait-and-see attitude.³⁵

Despite continuous and intense mobilization efforts, this reluctance to relocate remained an obstacle throughout the movement and led to an obvious decline in the scale of rustication. In July 1976, 981 Hechuan young people moved to the countryside, though more than 2,400 youth had graduated from middle schools in Hechuan County that year. According to the aforementioned provincial slogan of *Shuozou jiuzou*, July, the graduating season for students, should have witnessed most of the 2,400 graduates migrating to the rural areas.³⁶ The reasons behind the ongoing hesitation and the unmet quotas were the difficult living condition in the countryside.

The National Conference of Sent-Down Youth Work (*Quanguo zhiqing gongzuo huiyi* 全国知青工作会议) in 1973 proposed a series of top-down policies that aimed at easing urban young people's rural lives. However, for plenty of the *chadui* youth nationally, especially those without a Shanghai-like hometown or a resourceful parent, like most local sent-down youth in Hechuan, the two most basic needs of a human being, food and lodging, were still problematic by the end of the movement.

Housing Issues

One of the most urgent and long-lasting problems faced by youth upon arrival in the countryside was housing. In 1968, Mao required all comrades in rural areas to welcome urban youth. To ensure a warm welcome, starting in 1969 authorities at both the central and Sichuan provincial levels began allocating subsidies for sent-down youths' settlement. For those who became members of a production team in Sichuan, the standard subsidy was 200 RMB per person,³⁷ which should have been enough to build a new shelter. In practice, however, the funds seemed inadequate to solve the housing shortage. Even three to four years later, only 64% of sent-down youth were able to move into newly constructed homes across the nation. In Sichuan, this proportion was even lower, only 60%.³⁸

Compared to these national- and provincial-level statistics, data found in county- and commune-level reports reveal more striking realities. In rural Hechuan, although another 200

³³ *Hechuanqu danganguan* 合川区档案馆 [Hechuan District Archive], 13-1970-15-0084.

³⁴ Lu, *Hechuan zhiqing*, 148.

³⁵ Hechuan District Archive, 13-1972-15-0101.

³⁶ Lu, *Hechuan zhiqing*, 191.

³⁷ Lu, *Hechuan zhiqing*, 128.

³⁸ Liu, *Zhongguo zhiqingshi: dachao (1966-1980)*, 1998, 294-295.



Figure 2. Sent-down youths appealing to return home, circa 1978. Photographer unknown. Accessed September 27, 2023 <http://www.myoldtime.com/m/view.php?aid=14166>.

RMB was added to the subsidy for every sent-down youth after the 1973 National Conference,³⁹ the percentage of rusticated young people enjoying new residences, plus those living in old houses borrowed from peasants, reached just 54.7%.⁴⁰

In addition to the budget constraints remaining as a major hindrance in suitably accommodating sent-down youth, a serious lack of supervision and accounting further worsened the situation. All the subsidies were claimed and managed by the production teams according to the number of sent-down youth they accepted. In Hechuan County, cases of diversion from and misuse of sent-down youths' housing budgets were mentioned frequently in reports. In a production team in rural Hechuan, only half of the subsidy was spent to build thatched cottages for sent-down youth rather than the required brick houses. The remainder of the money was used to buy pork for all peasants on the team. Each person received 0.25 kilograms of pork, on average.⁴¹ Similar to Bonnin's discovery in his research, rural cadres managed to use these top-down policies to benefit local villagers instead.⁴² However, in doing so, they prevented a smooth solution to the issue of rusticated youth's accommodations. Building thatched cottages, instead of brick houses, seemed to be an economical tactic in this process. Unfortunately, in Sanmiao Commune 三庙公社 in Hechuan, 10 of the 36 thatched

³⁹ Hechuan District Archive, 13-1973-15-0116.

⁴⁰ Lu, *Hechuan zhiqing*, 177.

⁴¹ Lu, *Hechuan zhiqing*, 179.

⁴² Bonnin, *The Lost Generation*, 240.

cottages newly constructed for sent-down youth had collapsed by 1975 due to their low quality.⁴³

The serious deficiency of housing inevitably caused significant difficulties for sent-down youth. By 1975 in Hechuan, surprisingly, 874 young people were still commuting between their homes in the county seat or townships and the villages where they were assigned. Every day they had to get up very early and rush to the fields, on foot; then, after finishing a day's work, they would walk home again.⁴⁴ The commute consumed several hours each day. Even so, there was one benefit; they could at least have a good night's sleep in their own bed. According to the statistics in 1975, these commuters comprised 7.2% of the total number of sent-down youth in Hechuan.⁴⁵ On another commune, due to the lack of adequate housing, some Hechuan youth chose to live in a different village not far away from the one to which they were assigned. As a result, they also had to walk several kilometers to the fields every day.⁴⁶

In 1973, the National Conference of Sent-Down Youth Work issued numbers of instructions and policies, playing an influential role in improving rusticated youths' housing conditions. In Sichuan in September 1973, the provincial authorities planned to allocate 10 million RMB to alleviate the sent-down youths' housing issues and other concerns.⁴⁷ In practice, the actual expenditure on housing construction alone amounted to 40 million RMB, far exceeding Sichuan's budget.⁴⁸

Nevertheless, this financial investment still did not keep pace with the increasing demands for housing, especially as large numbers of sent-down youth had reached marriageable age after spending a few years in rural areas. Beginning in 1974, policies no longer encouraged late marriage (once a symbol of revolution),⁴⁹ but instead called for rusticated youth to find their spouses among the local peasants. Becoming a member of a rural family was deemed as another revolutionary way for urban youth to put down roots in the countryside.⁵⁰ However, marriages between sent-down youth were much more common, and these new families formed by two rusticated youth and the babies that followed soon thereafter created an even greater need for housing. In 1977, the marriage rate of sent-down youth in the entire country reached 10%, which was the highest level during those years.⁵¹ The situation in Hechuan was no exception: by 1978, a total of 1,274 sent-down youth out of 13,009 had married. Then, nearly half of them needed to enlarge or rebuild their houses because of the birth of their children.⁵²

⁴³ Hechuan District Archive, 13-1975-15-0220.

⁴⁴ Hechuan District Archive, 13-1975-15-0218.

⁴⁵ Hechuan District Archive, 13-1975-15-0218.

⁴⁶ Lu, *Hechuan zhiqing*, 231.

⁴⁷ Gu Hongzhang 顾洪章, ed., *Zhongguo zhishi qingnian shangshan xi下乡 shimo* 中国知识青年上山下乡始末 [The history of Chinese educated youth being sent to the countryside] (Beijing: Zhongguo jiancha chubanshe, 1997), 120.

⁴⁸ Sun, *Sichuan zhiqingshi*, Volume 2, 359.

⁴⁹ Influenced by the desexualized ideals that once prevailed during the Cultural Revolution, for young men and young women, dating and falling in love were regarded as not revolutionary.

⁵⁰ Liu, *Zhongguo zhiqingshi: dachao (1966-1980)*, 1998, 507.

⁵¹ Liu, *Zhongguo zhiqingshi: dachao (1966-1980)*, 1998, 507.

⁵² Hechuan District Archive, 13-1977-15-0438.

Even so, their situations were still better than those whose marriages were impossible due to the lack of a suitable shelter. In the countryside of Yibin City 宜宾市, on the southern margins of Sichuan Province, thousands of pairs of sent-down couples found themselves faced with this plight, delaying their marriage until leaving the villages.⁵³

Despite repeated reports being sent to the authorities of Hechuan alerting them about sent-down youths' accommodation issues, limited actions were taken by the county-level government to improve the situation. As for the *weiwentuan* or any other delegation sent by Hechuan authorities, at present, no archival records have been found showing that they had helped solve the issue either. For the majority of sent-down youth in rural Hechuan, as Bonnin has pointed out, housing remained one of the main problems that led to the end of this movement.⁵⁴

Food Issues

Apart from the issue of housing, these young people also had to struggle to feed themselves every day in the countryside. Once they were settled, self-sufficiency (*ziji* 自给) was the official primary objective set for these sent-down youth. As a popular article from *Renmin ribao* 人民日报 noted: "We who have two hands should not live an idle life in cities" 我们也有两只手，不在城里吃闲饭 (1968).⁵⁵ However, the stories of thousands of urban youth who settled in rural Hechuan proved that this goal was far from achievable for most of them.

Compared with their peers who joined militarized farms backed by military logistics, for each *chadui* sent-down youth, it was much more difficult to gain self-sufficiency by toiling for the production team and earning his or her own rice as other peasants did. Based on the rationing policy, sent-down youths' grain and oil rations would be canceled within one year of them moving to the countryside (The Bureau of Grain of the PRC, 1964).^{56 57} From that point on, these youth could no longer live an idle life, but had to make a living by earning work points (*gongfen* 工分).⁵⁸ Nonetheless, according to the results of a national survey in early 1973, only approximately 34% of all urban youth in production teams were considered self-sufficient.

⁵³ Sun, *Sichuan zhiqingshi*, Volume 2, 269.

⁵⁴ Bonnin, *The Lost Generation*, 247.

⁵⁵ "Women yeyou liangzhishou, buzai chengli chixianfan" 我们也有两只手，不在城里吃闲饭 [We who have two hands should not live an idle life in cities], *Renmin ribao*, December 22, 1968.

⁵⁶ *Zhongguo guojia liangshibu* 中国国家粮食部 [The Bureau of Grain of the PRC] "Guanyu chengshi xiaxiang qingnian liangyou gongying de jixiang guiding" 关于城市下乡青年粮油供应工作的几项规定 [Several regulations about the grain and oil supplies of urban sent-down youth] (Beijing: Internal materials, 1964).

⁵⁷ Driven by the centrally planned economy, the supplies of most basic goods needed for daily dining and use were rationed for urban residents based mainly on their age and vocation. By contrast, although limited rations covered peasants in some cases, such as cloth, they were required to work in collective farming to earn grain and oil rations by themselves. Once being members of a production team, the *chadui* sent-down youth were subject to rationing policies that were similar to those for peasants.

⁵⁸ Under the scheme of collective farming, the work points a peasant earned were the basic standard for evaluating an individual's participation and contribution. In addition to the number of family members registered in a rural household, which was another important factor in allocation, each year a production team disseminated grain and income accordingly.

As for the others, 35% needed some help from their families and 31% could not support themselves at all.⁵⁹ These results fell far below official expectations.

The 1973 National Conference should have helped ease sent-down youths' food challenges. In October that year, aiming to fill the gaps in these young people's basic food needs, Sichuan Province distributed a one-off allowance of 100 RMB for each rusticated youth who had settled in the countryside by the end of 1972 but still had not gained self-sufficiency. Sichuan's total expenditure on this issue reached 19 million RMB, covering more than 40% of the sent-down youth in the province.⁶⁰ In rural Hechuan, the rusticated youth waited no more than one month to receive the money.⁶¹

The direct allowance and its timely distribution undoubtedly provided immediate help to those in trouble. However, the endeavor did not produce a long-term solution to the problem. A sample investigation in August 1976 revealed that the proportion of sent-down youth who could not adequately feed themselves in rural Hechuan was still as high as 68%.⁶² Keep in mind that those who had died at an early age in the countryside, whose data have not been disclosed by Hechuan government so far, had already been excluded from this survey. Moreover, this investigation into whether or not sent-down youth could feed themselves did not include many young people with disabilities or diseases. Based on top-down policies, from 1971, groups of urban youth who were regarded as seriously ill or disabled and could not participate in agricultural production were permitted to leave rural Hechuan annually.⁶³ While the authenticity or seriousness of their situations might still be questionable, as discussed by Gao in 2021, their absence surely prevented the ratio of those who could not feed themselves from becoming even higher. Ultimately, the Hechuan government acknowledged that living standards, in which self-sufficiency was an essential standard had obviously not improved, even in 1978 when this movement finally came to its end.⁶⁴

Beyond the low production efficiency generally existing under collective farming during those years, a series of factors contributed to this longstanding difficulty. For countless *chadui* sent-down youth, the failure of gaining self-sufficiency was not only due to a serious lack of farming skills but also because of their inferior position in the system of collective allocation. For both single and newly married sent-down youth, they were always at a disadvantaged position in comparison with rural couples who normally had numerous offspring at that time. As a result of the lack of adequate food, "most of the young people realized that even if they worked as hard as they possibly could, they would never be able to survive decently by their own means."⁶⁵

To help the newcomers identify more ways to feed themselves beyond collective farming, the National Conference in 1973 required that all sent-down youth be allocated certain areas of private

⁵⁹ Liu, *Zhongguo zhiqingshi: dachao (1966-1980)*, 1998, 287-288.

⁶⁰ Sun, *Sichuan zhiqingshi*, Volume 2, 354.

⁶¹ Hechuan District Archive, 13-1973-15-0116.

⁶² Hechuan District Archive, 13-1976-15-0331.

⁶³ Lu, *Hechuan zhiqing*, 164.

⁶⁴ Lu, *Hechuan zhiqing*, 264.

⁶⁵ Bonnin, *The Lost Generation*, 248.

plots (*ziliudi* 自留地), a policy also applied to peasants. Recalling his time as a sent-down youth in rural Hechuan, one man recalled that, in the mid-1970s, each youth received one *fen* 分 (1 *fen* = 0.1 *mu* 亩 \approx 66.7 square meters) of land, on average.⁶⁶ The private plots provided more possibilities for improving the young people's food experiences. This former sent-down youth practiced his newly learned vegetable-planting skills there. Later, all the vegetables he ate came from his own plots.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, both peasants' and sent-down youths' freedom regarding these private plots came to a sudden end. In 1975, as the environment began to be highly politicized again, many policies that did not strictly follow the requirements of collective farming were no longer allowed. In rural Hechuan, a rigorous limit was set for the size of private plots. Any piece of land that exceeded the standard allotment was confiscated.⁶⁸ Although these recollections are from memoirs about Hechuan peasants' experiences at that time, no one was exempt, including rusticated youth who had become members of production teams.

To help sent-down youth reach the goal of self-sufficiency, raising poultry and even pigs was encouraged at the same time. Comparatively speaking, this sort of task was easier for those who lived together and were able to conduct group work. Things proved much more difficult for many sent-down young people living alone. One young woman who settled in rural Hechuan attempted to raise a pig by herself, but after several months of effort, she finally gave up due to lack of time and energy. In the end, she sold the pig cheaply before it grew fat enough to warrant a good price.⁶⁹

For most rusticated youth, even though they were allowed to earn work points in collective farming, to gain harvests from their private plots, and to raise poultry or pigs, these efforts were still not enough for them to make a living in the countryside. According to the regulations of collective farming, by the end of a year if the work points that members of a production team earned could not meet the team's average grain ration, which was a very basic amount of staple foods one needed to survive, they needed to fill the gap with cash. If the individual did not have enough cash, a debt would be recorded as owed to the production team. Until 1977, among all the sent-down youth in Lize Commune 利泽公社 in Hechuan, the ratio of those needing cash to make up their grain ration was 42.3%.⁷⁰ However, the agricultural conditions and the production level of this commune were above the average in the whole county. Still, in this commune, 101 rusticated young people had accumulated years of debt until the end of the movement. Yet, no one was kept from returning to their urban homes due to the overdue debts.⁷¹

Similar to the housing issues, the food challenges of sent-down youth were also repeatedly reported to the county-level government of Hechuan. However, the financial support it

⁶⁶ Informal interviews in Hechuan, December 2019.

⁶⁷ Informal interviews in Hechuan, December 2019.

⁶⁸ Chen Binru 陈彬如 "Canjia jiben luxian jiaoyu yundong de jidian ganshou" 参加基本路线教育运动的几点感受 [Several feelings of participating in the education movement of the party's basic line], in *Hechuan wenshi ziliao diershiyiji* 合川文史资料第二十一辑 [The cultural and historical materials of Hechuan, Volume 21], ed. Zhengxie Chongqingshi Hechuanqu wenshi ziliao weiyuanhui 政协重庆市合川区委员会文史资料委员会 [Committee of Culture and History of Hechuan District, Chongqing City, of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC)] (Chongqing: Internal materials, 2013), 47-53.

⁶⁹ Lu, *Hechuan zhiqing*, 263.

⁷⁰ Hechuan District Archive, 13-1976-15-0331.

⁷¹ Hechuan District Archive, 13-1976-15-0331.

provided was almost negligible. By July 1973, only a total of 22 sent-down youth in rural Hechuan ever received county-level subsidies to ease their hardships related to food, although the movement had been carried on for over half a decade.⁷² As mentioned previously, the Hechuan government distributed the province's one-off allowance in less than one month, but the county-level cadres' quick and accurate execution of top-down instructions could also lead to relentless cancellations of any lifesaving support. The aforementioned confiscation of oversized private plots was one such example. No records show that there had been any help from *weiwentuan* on Hechuan youths' livelihood either.

Inequality among sent-down youth groups

While the majority of the rusticated youth in Hechuan suffered heavily from the deficiencies in accommodations and food supply, another notable group of sent-down young men and women there had a much better life resulting from personal relationships and exchanges of benefits. As mentioned earlier, this comparatively privileged group in rural Hechuan mainly consisted of Chongqing youth who settled in through the local policy of *toukao*. During the last half decade of the movement, the privileges that were legitimized by the regional-level *toukao* policy were expanded to cover all the urban young people whose parents had advantages in resource allocation. Yet, the inequalities among sent-down youth did not shrink but were strikingly broadened instead. The more attractive resources that an urban parent could access, the better villages and easier rural lives he or she could secure for their relocating youth.

Different from their rusticated peers, who were organized officially and distributed randomly to the countryside, the *toukao* group of sent-down youth identified preferred destinations for their urban-rural migration and contacted the villages through their personal relationships. The regional-level policies in defining who could *toukao* to the countryside were not clear or consistent enough. As a result, various kinds of personal relationships—including not only kinship and friendship but also relationships of benefit exchange—were intentionally overlooked by local cadres.

While many county- and township-level young people in Hechuan still maintained a wait-and-see attitude, these *toukao* youth were much more willing to conduct the urban-rural relocation as quickly as possible. Within 10 days in January 1969, less than one month after Mao's instruction of sending urban graduates to the countryside, more than 180 Chongqing youth applied for *toukao* to Chaoyang Commune 朝阳公社, Hechuan's nearest commune to Chongqing City. Soon, they all received the commune leaders' approval for their settlement, without double checking to see if their applications really accorded with the *toukao* policy.⁷³ The number of *toukao* youth this commune accepted was more than four times larger than the quota of ordinary sent-down youth distributed there. Moreover, among all the production teams in this commune, the *toukao* arrivals were much more common in the richer teams

⁷² Lu, *Hechuan zhiqing*, 248.

⁷³ Hechuan District Archive, 1970-15-0084.

around the central town.⁷⁴ Across rural Hechuan, more than 80% of the *toukao* youth were concentrated in the communes and production teams near to Chongqing or enjoying convenience in transportation.⁷⁵

The arrival of the *toukao* youth, however, made young men and women in Hechuan even more reluctant to leave their homes. In Chaoyang Commune, the concentration of *toukao* youth in richer production teams dissatisfied the local township-level young people. There were 28 *laosanjie* graduates living in this commune's central town that should have been distributed to the villages nearby. Yet, 16 of them refused to accept the migration arrangement since quotas in villages with better conditions had already been filled by *toukao* youth from Chongqing City.⁷⁶

By the mid-1970s, the total number of *toukao* youth from Chongqing to rural Hechuan had reached almost 3,000, which represented the largest number among all the counties next to Chongqing City.⁷⁷ The Hechuan government stated that only those with direct or very close relatives could *toukao* to a village in rural Hechuan.⁷⁸ However, according to a survey of 917 Chongqing youth who moved to Hechuan by way of *toukao*, more than 46% of them did not have any relative in the villages where they settled.⁷⁹ The absence of kinship meant that what allowed for their relocation was purely a trade of benefits between these young people's urban parents with resources and the rural cadres accommodating them. Although there was no negotiation by Shanghai-like *weiwentuan*, many of the *toukao* youths' parents who worked in resourceful units in Chongqing City negotiated by themselves through allocating rationed materials that were in short supply in the countryside.⁸⁰ To build and maintain a positive relationship with the rural cadres, they even provided different forms of inducement.

With the help of the parents of several Chongqing youth, a production team in Chaoyang Commune was fortunate to purchase a series of rationed and scarce goods, like steel, threshing machines, and piglets.⁸¹ While obtaining such materials profited their collective farming, many more benefits brought by Chongqing youth were exclusively enjoyed by cadres of this production team and their families. They were often invited to pay a visit to Beibei, a suburban district of Chongqing City that was famous for its scenery, tourism and hot springs. All of the travel costs—including accommodations, transportation, catering,

⁷⁴ Hechuan District Archive, 1970-15-0084.

⁷⁵ Hechuan District Archive, 13-1970-15-0085.

⁷⁶ Hechuan District Archive, 1970-15-0084.

⁷⁷ Hechuan District Archive, 1970-15-0084, 227.

⁷⁸ Hechuan District Archive, 13-1969-15-0043.

⁷⁹ Hechuan District Archive, 13-1970-15-0085.

⁸⁰ In urban China during the Mao era, work units or units in short (*danwei* 单位) from large cities to townships played the most fundamental role in institutionalizing urban residents. With the exception of the unemployed, the place where urban adults worked for or retired from was their unit—either a factory, a government bureau, or a public sector. All of these units were controlled by the party-state system and were molded by the planned economy, yet the institutionalized capacity a unit enjoyed in resource allocation varied drastically.

⁸¹ Hechuan District Archive, 13-1970-15-0085.

and even admission fees for the thermal spas, most of which were rationed—were covered by the *toukao* young people's parents.⁸²

It is apparent that these parents' endeavors were not in vain; instead, they guaranteed a privileged status for their sons and daughters in the countryside. A young woman from Chongqing City soon became a teacher in the primary school of the village where she settled.⁸³ Admittedly, most urban youth with secondary schooling were able to contribute to rural education. However, before assessing the roles that sent-down youth played in rural schools, the question that must be answered is whether the selection process was fair. Due to the limited size of rural schools, very few youth had the opportunity to be a teacher there, which meant they lawfully no longer needed to toil on the collective farms. Yet, besides the gap in job assignments, satisfying their most basic needs were still highly worrisome for many ordinary sent-down youth who lacked resourceful parents. One young woman from the county seat of Hechuan cried, since she had lived for a long time in the countryside without a suitable place. However, in the same production team, two other sent-down female youth who arrived from Chongqing City through the *toukao* system, had already moved into the new houses prepared by the team.⁸⁴ According to the Hechuan government's requirement, the production teams were not responsible for building shelters for *toukao* youth.⁸⁵ If this policy had been followed, these Chongqing youth should have been accommodated privately by the rural families accepting them. Instead, the local Hechuan girl should have been sheltered in a new house built by the production team. As shown by the privileged housing condition the two Chongqing girls enjoyed in the village, being a female involved in the sent-down movement did not always lead to unequal treatment if the benefit exchange between urban resources and rural cadres was possible.

In contrast to popular opinions in the countryside that viewed the incoming sent-down youth as an additional burden, peasants in Chaoyang Commune privately regarded these young people from Chongqing as a treat like lard.⁸⁶ Being fundamental in Chinese residents' traditional ways of cooking, lard was always in short supply in the Mao era. This analogy vividly combined both the peasants' envy and desire to have a piece of the pie.

Chongqing parents' practice of exchanging attractive resources to make their offspring's rural lives easier inspired parents in Hechuan. In the county seat of Hechuan, a young woman delayed her relocation for one year. Since there was no way to avoid the migration legally, at last she was happy to settle in a village only several kilometers away from her urban home. As she admitted, most of her classmates, including males and females, relocated to the villages more remote than her. Moreover, she returned to the county seat in less than two years, earlier than many of her peers. Yet, the delayed, satisfying, and short-term relocation was not

⁸² Hechuan District Archive, 13-1970-15-0085.

⁸³ Hechuan District Archive, 13-1970-15-0085.

⁸⁴ Hechuan District Archive, 13-1970-15-0085.

⁸⁵ Hechuan District Archive, 13-1970-15-0085.

⁸⁶ Hechuan District Archive, 13-1970-15-0085.

surprising, because her father was a mid-level cadre in the government of Hechuan County,⁸⁷ whose power in relocating needing resources was not to be underestimated. In the case of this Hechuan girl, compared with her male classmates, the gender difference did not lead to inequality either. Enjoying the support based on urban resources that well protected her from suffering most gender-related issues as pointed out by researchers, when talking with the old woman, she expressed sincere nostalgia for her sent-down lives.⁸⁸

Such blatant exchanges of benefit, however, were always endorsed by the policy of *toukao*. From 1974, the mode of *toukao*, which was once available only for a small percentage of the sent-down youth, became nationally promoted and legitimized. According to the model experience of Zhuzhou 株洲经验, *changshe guagou* 厂社挂钩 (linking factories or other work units with communes) was deemed to be an effective way to speed up the urban-rural relocation of sent-down youth.⁸⁹ Factories and other work units were strongly encouraged to build formal partnerships with rural communes where children from the urban units would be sent. Normally speaking, the better conditions that a commune enjoyed, the more attractive it was to urban units, although this went against the original aim of the Sent-Down Youth Movement, which was dispatching urban youth to the neediest places.⁹⁰ Based on the material, financial, technical, and intellectual resources that were institutionalized by the party-state system and the centrally planned economy, an urban unit would be willing to provide substantial help to its partner commune, which, in turn, helped ease the rural experiences of its staff members' rusticated children.

In comparison to the limited number of *toukao* youth who migrated to the countryside through personal relationships, the official promotion and institutionalization of *changshe guagou* further guaranteed, greatly enriched, and formally legitimized the privileges of the young people who relocated to the countryside based on their families' privileged status in the Mao era. In Sichuan Province, the work units focusing on railway construction established partnerships with communes in Jianyang County 简阳县. In only three months, all the villages involved in the partnerships had made preparations to accept the offspring of railway construction workers, including building new houses that could accommodate 80% of the incoming youth.⁹¹ However, this was not yet the most enviable standard of housing that sent-down young men and women enjoyed under the policy of *changshe guagou*. Chongqing University 重庆大学 found its partner commune in Zhongxian County 忠县. Through efficient cooperation between the university and the commune, four tile-roofed buildings were

⁸⁷ Informal interviews in Hechuan, September 2019.

⁸⁸ Informal interviews in Hechuan, September 2019.

⁸⁹ In 1974, the authorities of Zhuzhou City 株洲市 in Hunan Province encouraged more than 200 factories and other units to link with communes where the offspring of their staffs would be sent. Known as *changshe guagou*, this trial was propagandized as a model of the urban-rural rustication by the center of the CCP and was promoted to the entire nation during the last few years of the Sent-Down Youth Movement.

⁹⁰ Known as "dao bianjiang qu, dao zuguo zuixuyaode difang qu" 到边疆去·到祖国最需要的地方去 [go to the frontiers, and go to the neediest place across the country], the appeal was first put forward by Hu Yaobang 胡耀邦 in 1955. At that time, he led the Chinese Communist Youth League 中国共产主义青年团 and encouraged young people to reclaim the wasteland on China's borderlands.

⁹¹ Sun, *Sichuan zhiqingshi*, Volume 2, 435.

soon constructed. With 24 rooms and a gross area of 400 square meters, these buildings accommodated 20 young people, all of whom were sons and daughters of the university's staff members. On average, each of these youth could live in a single room as large as 20 square meters,⁹² which is satisfying for China's young people even today.

Paralleling the benefits that *toukao* youth enjoyed in rural Hechuan, the privileges that the *changshe guagou* policy brought to urban youth also covered more than daily needs such as housing. The Canning Factory of Chongqing (*Chongqing guantouchang* 重庆罐头厂) partnered with two communes in the suburban areas. Among the 49 young people this factory sent to the communes in 1974, more than half acquired jobs such as teachers, technicians, barefoot doctors (*chijiao yisheng* 赤脚医生),⁹³ and accountants in the rural areas.⁹⁴ All these positions enabled them to earn enough work points to survive with much less or even no participation in collective farming. As for the opportunities to end one's sent-down time, although this article does not explore such issues in detail, it is evident that the young people whose families had competitive urban backgrounds, migrating either through *toukao* or *changshe guagou*, enjoyed favoritism in selection as well. These highly limited and precious chances for sent-down youth to leave the countryside included entering factories, joining the army, and being recommended to receive higher education.⁹⁵

Admittedly, the way of *changshe guagou* maximized the number of rusticated youth who could have their basic needs met in the countryside. Even if many young men and young women lacked a hometown government as resourceful as that of Shanghai youth, under the party-state system and the planned economy, if their parent only belonged to an urban unit that was not inferior in resource allocation, the benefit-exchange relationship worked no less efficaciously than the negotiation conducted by a Shanghai-like *weiwentuan*. All were legitimized by the *changshe guagou* system.

However, in urban China, including in large cities, not every young man or woman's parents had the fortune to work in such a unit with enviable resources. The system of *changshe guagou* was also carried out in Hechuan County. But in Hechuan-like county seats, the list of resourceful units was always much shorter than that of any city. As for the youth who came from townships, the margin of urban China's top-down system in resource allocation, most of

⁹² Sun, *Sichuan zhiqingshi*, Volume 2, 429.

⁹³ Beginning in the 1960s, as a part of the cooperative medical service under collective farming, some peasants and sent-down youth were selected to receive short-term and straightforward training in medicine and healthcare. Known as barefoot doctors, they acted as semi-professional and part-time medical workers in the villages in which they lived.

⁹⁴ "Chongqing guantouchang yu baxian shedui guagou" 重庆罐头厂与巴县社队挂钩 [The Canning Factory of Chongqing built partnership with communes and production teams in Baxian County], *Sichuan ribao* 四川日报 [Sichuan Daily], 16 August 1975.

⁹⁵ From 1966 to 1977, the system of college entrance examinations was suspended as a result of the Cultural Revolution. Beginning in 1970, based on the system of recommendation (*tuijianzhi* 推荐制), admissions to higher education recovered in China and were mainly open to students with backgrounds of factory workers, peasants, and soldiers (*gongnongbing xueyuan* 工农兵学员). In principle, the reliability in politics was deemed as the most critical standard in deciding whether a young person could be recommended for higher education. However, in practice, many sent-down youth received the recommendations through their personal relationships with rural cadres.

them could hardly have a piece of the pie of *changshe guagou*. For example, the 16 young people in Chaoyang Commune were displeased with the arrival of *toukao* youth from Chongqing. Yet, due to the continuous arrival of Chongqing young men and women not only through *toukao* but also under *changshe guagou*, it would be not surprising if the youth at the county and township level of Hechuan grew more and more unhappy. It was too difficult for their parents to win the game of competing for attracting rural cadres with urban resources.

From *toukao* to *changshe guagou*, under the institutionalized contexts of the party-state and the planned-economy systems, the legitimized inequalities inherently persisted and constantly grew throughout the Sent-Down Youth Movement. Through presenting the gaps between Chongqing City youth and their peers from an adjacent county and townships, this article only exposes a small yet vivid part of the whole picture.

Conclusion

For the sent-down youth from large cities and small towns, the goal of contributing significantly to the countryside turned out to be an institutionalized competition for attractive resources. In cases where sent-down youth did not enjoy the support of a Shanghai-like home city government, they needed to have parents with advantages in allocating urban resources. As a result, it is highly doubtful that many of these young people, regardless of if they won the resources competition, were authentically re-educated by socialist ideals. Instead, it is likely that they were effectively educated by the social realities of inequalities in Mao's China.

As mentioned in the beginning, it is difficult for those who enjoyed privileges in the sent-down movement to admit the connection between their better rural lives and their nostalgia, although many key facts that made their lives different from other sent-down youth speak for themselves. A former rusticated youth relocating from Chongqing City to Hechuan via *toukao* was enthusiastic about joining sent-down commemorative activities hosted by Hechuan officials. While he chose not to mention any specific experience in the countryside that differed from those of his Hechuan peers, several facts are self-evident in distinguishing him from many others. Moving to the village nearest to Chongqing, every week, he went back his city home for the delicious food prepared by his mother. Given the requirements of collective farming, asking for a leave to return home so frequently should not have been allowed without the special tolerance of the village leaders. As a result, it was undoubtedly a memorable time for him.⁹⁶ Tang Tongsun, another Chongqing youth who settled in Hechuan in 1971 shared a similar experience. According to what he disclosed in a public interview when revisiting his sent-down village, in a commune less than five kilometers from the county seat, he spent no more than two years there (which was nearly the minimum length of staying in rural areas as per the sent-down policies). Soon after his return to the city, he entered a machinery factory in Chongqing, a resourceful work unit under the planned economy.⁹⁷ He didn't regard himself as a privileged

⁹⁶ Informal interviews in Hechuan, April 2023.

⁹⁷ An interview of the former sent-down youth in Hechuan published on Hechuan ribao 合川日报 [Hechuan Daily], 28 May 2015.

sent-down young man. Yet, for a youth without strong support at that time, it was not easy to settle in a village so close to urban areas, stay in the countryside for such a short a period, or obtain a job so attractive after that.

Regardless of admitting the privileges or not, there is nothing wrong with privately cherishing a memorable time based on one's personal experiences. What is worth a second thought is the CCP's ongoing propaganda endorsing and promoting this trend. Instead of concentrating on the nostalgia itself, the inequalities between different sent-down groups in Hechuan County exposed in this article remind us that we must re-evaluate the sent-down movement, especially the rusticated lives of the urban youth on the margins. Through exploring the institutional factors that shaped the varied sent-down experiences, this article contributes to understanding not only the movement over half a century ago but also today's nostalgia and controversy for it.

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The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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