

ACROSS THE GREAT DIVIDE

The Sent-Down Youth Movement
in Mao's China, 1968–1980

EMILY HONIG
XIAOJIAN ZHAO



Across the Great Divide

The sent-down youth movement, a Maoist project that relocated urban youth to remote rural areas for “re-education,” is often viewed as a defining feature of China’s Cultural Revolution and emblematic of the intense suffering and hardship of the period. Drawing on rich archival research focused on Shanghai’s youth in village settlements in remote regions, this history of the movement pays particular attention to how it was informed by and affected the critical issue of urban–rural relations in the PRC. It highlights divisions, as well as connections, created by the movement, particularly the conflicts and collaborations between urban and rural officials. Instead of chronicling a story of victims of a monolithic state, Honig and Zhao show how participants in the movement—the sent-down youth, their parents, and local government officials—disregarded, circumvented, and manipulated state policy, ultimately undermining a decade-long Maoist project.

Emily Honig is Professor of History at University of California, Santa Cruz. She has written extensively on issues of gender and sexuality during the Cultural Revolution. Her books include *Sisters and Strangers: Women in the Shanghai Cotton Mills, 1919–1949* and *Creating Chinese Ethnicity: Subei People in Shanghai, 1850–1980*.

Xiaojian Zhao is Professor of Asian American Studies at University of California, Santa Barbara. She is the author of *Remaking Chinese America: Immigration, Family and Community, 1940–1965*, which was awarded the History Book Award by the Association for Asian American Studies. More recently, she authored *The New Chinese America: Class, Economy, and Social Hierarchy*.

Cambridge Studies in the History of the People's Republic of China

Series Editors

Jeremy Brown, Jacob Eyferth, Daniel Leese, Michael Schoenhals

Cambridge Studies in the History of the People's Republic of China is a major series of ambitious works in the social, political, and cultural history of socialist China. Aided by a wealth of new sources, recent research pays close attention to regional differences, to perspectives from the social and geographical margins, and to the unintended consequences of Communist Party rule. Books in the series contribute to this historical re-evaluation by presenting the most stimulating and rigorously researched works in the field to a broad audience. The series invites submissions from a variety of disciplines and approaches, based on written, material, or oral sources. Particularly welcome are those works that bridge the 1949 and 1978 divides, and those that seek to understand China in an international or global context.

Across the Great Divide

*The Sent-Down Youth Movement in Mao's
China, 1968–1980*

Emily Honig

University of California, Santa Cruz

Xiaojian Zhao

University of California, Santa Barbara



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India

79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108498739

DOI: [10.1017/9781108595728](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108595728)

© Emily Honig and Xiaojian Zhao 2019

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2019

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ International Ltd, Padstow Cornwall

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-108-49873-9 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-108-71249-1 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> vi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
<i>Stylistic Note</i>	x
Introduction	1
1 Farewell to the Huangpu River	18
2 Not All Quiet on the Rural Front	40
3 The Unplanned Economy	65
4 Inappropriate Intimacies	87
5 Urban Outposts in Rural China	117
6 Things Fall Apart	137
7 Epilogue	170
<i>Bibliography</i>	185
<i>Glossary</i>	203
<i>Index</i>	208

Illustrations

1.1 Bidding farewell to the Huangpu river	<i>page 25</i>
1.2 Media image of a happy departure of sent-down youth at the Shanghai train station	26
2.1 Shanghai youth Yang Shiguang with villagers in Yanbian, Jilin	41
2.2 Going to work in the fields	42
3.1 Shanghai youth He Xinhua anchors at the broadcast station at Huxi commune in Le'an, Jiangxi	79
5.1 Zhu Kejia with Ai'ni villagers in Xishuangbanna	123
5.2 Zhu Kejia during an interview with the authors	124
7.1 Former sent-down youth Yang Xiaohu at Heihe, Heilongjiang, helping villagers organize a co-op	171
7.2 Reunited with old friends in the village	173
7.3 Aihui Sent-Down Youth Museum	181
7.4 Sent-down youth remembrance wall in Huma, Heilongjiang	181

Acknowledgments

This book is the product of multiple collaborations, not only because it is coauthored, but also due to the numerous colleagues in both China and the US who contributed to the research and thinking. Jin Dalu, Zhou Gongzheng, Liu Qi, and Hu Xiaolan traveled with us from Shanghai to some of the remote counties in Heilongjiang and Yunnan to conduct research. We are grateful for their guidance in navigating access to local archives, their insights, and the conversations we had while traveling. This book would not be possible without the assistance of many other individuals. We want to thank all those who shared with us their personal experiences as well as letters, diaries, and artifacts from their private collections, especially Cao Jianhua, Xue Weimin, Chen Jiang, Wang Pei, He Xinhua, Hu Xiaolan, Zhu Kejia, Yang Xiaohu, Qinshu Qian, Peisheng Hu, Zhiqing Shi, Hengyuan Wang, Weilong Xu, Jianhua Wang, Jian Ye, Xiaoxia Wang, Jianmin Zhao, Sam Shixiong Yang, and Zhou Gongzheng, as well as villagers and locals at Le'an (Jiangxi), Xunke, Aihui, Heihe (Heilongjiang), and Jinghong (Yunnan). Special thanks to He Xinhua, Feng Xiaocai, Chen Baoping, Sun Jianzhong, Zhao Jianchang, Yan Jing, Xie Chunhe, Zhang Gang, Ruan Xianzhong, Fang He, and Yanjun Liu for their assistance in archival research. We are very grateful to many county and regional archivists in Yunnan, Jiangxi, and Heilongjiang, and in district and municipal archives in Beijing and Shanghai. Their enthusiasm about sent-down youth research encouraged and inspired us.

Over the years of conducting research, we were fortunate to be included in conferences hosted by Fudan University and East Normal University in Shanghai, and the Sent-Down Youth Research Institute in Heihe, Heilongjiang. We also had many opportunities to participate in gatherings of former sent-down youth associations and groups. A number of participants provided us with ongoing engagement, particularly Jin Guangyao, Xie Chunhe, Zhang Gang, and Ruan Xianzhong. In addition, a number of scholars in China contributed to our project, and we are

grateful to Feng Xiaocai, Jiang Jin, Ruan Qingquan, Gao Xiaoxian, Tan Shen, Ding Yizhuang, and Wang Yan.

Graduate students at both UCSB and UCSC assisted our research. At UCSB, we would like to thank Yanjun Liu for conducting research through Chinese-language newspaper databases and translating archival documents from Chinese to English and conference papers from English to Chinese. He also assisted with the bibliography, editing, indexing, and technical issues. Fang He conducted archival research in China and assisted with conference paper translation. Tian Wu was the first to join the research team, and we appreciate Angela He's assistance in the final phase of the project. At UCSC, we would like to thank Xiaofei Gao for identifying materials available on Chinese sent-down youth websites, and also for translation work. Xiaoping Sun, Sarah Chang, Jinghong Zhang, Wilson Miu, and Jeremy Tai also provided valuable research assistance.

We would like to thank several funding agencies for their support of this project. A system-wide University of California Pacific Rim Research Program Faculty collaborative grant provided funding for our trips to Yunnan and Heilongjiang; a UC–Fudan faculty collaborative grant enabled us to organize an international conference at UCSC in 2014. The UCSC Committee on Research of the Academic Senate Special Research Grant and Faculty Research grants provided funding for Emily Honig to conduct research in China and also for research assistance throughout the project. Xiaojian's early research trips to Jiangxi were supported by a Fulbright Senior Scholar Fellowship. Grants from UCSB's Academic Senate and Institute for Social Behavioral and Economic Research from 2013 to 2017 provided additional funding for research trips, graduate student research assistance, indexing, and other publishing expenses.

From the time we submitted the manuscript, the senior China editor at Cambridge University Press, Lucy Rhymer, has been its guardian angel, deftly guiding us through revision of the manuscript. We are indebted to Lisa Carter and Natasha Whelan for overseeing the production process. We are also the grateful beneficiaries of John Gaunt's long experience as an editor. We also want to thank the two readers who offered insightful comments and suggestions. The order of the authors' names was determined by a coin toss.

In addition, Emily Honig would like to thank the crew of colleagues and friends who contributed in myriad ways to this book. Members of the UCSC History Faculty East Asia reading group commented on several chapters of the book, and thanks are due to Noriko Aso, Alan Christy, Jennifer Derr, Gail Hershatter, Minghui Hu, and Juned Shaikh. Over the years of working on this project, conversations with Elizabeth Perry have

called attention to the broader context of PRC politics that informed the sent-down youth movement. China scholars Marilyn Young and Susan Mann also provided insights and encouragement. More ongoing and casual conversations with many friends provided sustenance throughout the years working on this book: Susan Basow, Wendy Brown, Laurie Coyle, Cheryl Jacques, B. Ruby Rich, and Susan Salisbury. No words are adequate to express gratitude to Gail Hershatter for the hundreds of runs spent discussing this project, for seriously long-term friendship, and for being the best intellectual interlocutor one could have. Finally, Emily wants to express the deepest gratitude to her mother, who unfortunately died before she could see the book in print, but who expressed continual curiosity about almost every point and did not hesitate to convey her disagreements and opinions. Emily's son, Jesse, provided wise counsel and great humor throughout the years spent growing up alongside the evolution of this project.

Xiaojian Zhao would like to thank colleagues and friends who have read parts, or the entirety, of the manuscript and who offered critical suggestions and encouragement at various stages of book: Gail Hershatter, Bryna Goodman, Paul Harvey, John Park, Yanjun Liu, Weijing Lu, Angela He, and Jian Zhao. She wants to express her gratitude to family members, colleagues, and friends who encouraged and advised her through the process. She appreciates the generous assistance and support from Arlene Phillips.

The word “across” in the book's title emphasizes the boundary between urban and rural China. The process of writing the book enabled us to see far more clearly the layers of multiple social boundaries that are not always easy to cross. Recognizing these boundaries will most surely inform our future research and writing on issues of race, gender, class, and power relations.

A version of Chapter 3 appeared in “Sent-down Youth and Rural Economic Development in Maoist China,” *The China Quarterly*, 222 (June 2015), 499–521.

Stylistic Note

Most sources cited in the footnotes are listed in the bibliography with the Chinese characters for the authors and titles. However, all the references to archival documents include the Chinese characters in the footnotes the first time the item is cited; the archival documents are not listed in the bibliography. Chinese terms in the text are in Pinyin. The glossary lists the terms with the Chinese characters as well as the definition (except for names of individuals or places).

Introduction

Of all the political campaigns that reconfigured daily life in the first three decades of the People's Republic of China, the sent-down youth movement that sent 17 million urban youth to live in rural China in 1968–1980 is one of the most vividly remembered and hotly debated. Mao's 1968 call for re-education catapulted urban youth into a world of rural poverty they would otherwise never have known. Memorialized in fiction, films, art exhibits, and even an orchestral performance,¹ the movement is commonly branded a misguided revolution, a forced relocation, and a sacrifice of youth. The victimization of sent-down youth has been invoked to symbolize the suffering of all Chinese people during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Whether former sent-down youth look back on that era as one of deprivation that handicapped them or as one that honed their ability to navigate adversity, their years living in the countryside constituted the pivotal experience for a generation that came of age during the Cultural Revolution.

This book differs from other accounts and studies of the sent-down youth movement. It is the first to draw primarily on archives in remote rural areas that hosted sent-down youth, offering a local perspective on the movement. Aiming to understand more than the ups and downs of this political campaign, the hardships experienced by urban youth, and the difficulties implementing Mao's directive for urban youth to be "re-educated" by the "peasants," this study centers on how the movement was informed by and affected relations between state and society, between the city and countryside, in the PRC. It highlights divisions as well as connections and interdependencies created by the movement, calling particular attention to the conflicts and collaborations between

¹ The orchestral performance is *Ask the Earth and Sky: An Oratorio for the Sent-Down Youth*, performed in San Francisco as well as several cities in China in 2016. For a description of some of the exhibitions about sent-down youth, see Xiaowei Zheng, "Images, Memories, and Lives of Sent-Down Youth in Yunnan," in James Cook, Joshua Goldstein, Matthew D. Johnson, and Sigrid Schmalzer, eds., *Visualizing Modern China: Image, History, and Memory, 1750–Present* (London: Lexington Books, 2014), 241–258.

urban and rural officials. Instead of chronicling a story of victims of a monolithic state and its powerful cadres, we show how participants in the movement—sent-down youth, their parents, and even local government officials—disregarded, circumvented, and manipulated state policy, ultimately undermining what was ostensibly a decade-long Maoist project.

Our study of the sent-down youth movement has its origins some thirty years ago when we first met at Fudan University in Shanghai. Emily Honig was an American graduate student researching the history of Shanghai factory workers; Xiaojian Zhao was a Chinese undergraduate in the Department of History who had recently returned to Shanghai after spending seven years as a sent-down youth. Living in the same dormitory in 1980, we hoped to visit the Jiangxi village where Zhao had lived, a plan thwarted by then restrictions on foreigners' travel to the countryside. In subsequent decades, we were otherwise occupied with establishing academic careers in the United States, Honig as a historian of modern China, Zhao as a historian of Asian America. It was not until 2010, when our paths intersected in Shanghai again, that we resurrected the idea of visiting the village in Jiangxi.

The village landscape had changed dramatically in the three decades since sent-down youth returned to the city. Large tracts of terraced land on the surrounding hillsides were left unattended. As most young adults had left to work in towns and cities, only elderly residents and their young grandchildren remained. Interspersed with the old mud houses were new two-story family dwellings featuring gated courtyards with fruit trees. Earnings from those working in cities had eased worries of the past about adequate food, and older villagers could now afford leisure time during this winter slack season, sitting outside in the sun or gathered indoors to play cards. The house where Zhao had lived with eleven other sent-down youth was now empty, only a faded picture of Mao remaining on the wall of the dusty interior. The bedrooms were completely dark on a sunny afternoon, their tiny windows boarded shut to keep out the cold winter air.

Though the trip was long overdue and meeting old friends was emotionally powerful for both the villagers and Zhao, it was our almost serendipitous visit to the county archives that catalyzed this project and prompted us, over the next several years, to seek access to a number of other county archives in areas that had hosted large numbers of sent-down youth from Shanghai. In addition to counties in Jiangxi, we collected records of sent-down youth offices in the far northern counties of Heilongjiang just across the Black Dragon (Heilong) river from Siberia, and in semi-tropical areas of Xishuangbanna, Yunnan, close to the

Laotian and Burmese borders. We also visited municipal and district archives (including Putuo, Jing'an, and Zhabei) in Shanghai. The documents in these archives—reports, meeting minutes, work plans and proposals, statistical tables, texts of conference speeches, correspondence, records of telephone calls, grievances, accusations, confessions, and investigative reports—made us realize just how much more complex a history of the sent-down youth movement remained to be written.

From its outset in the late 1960s, Western observers were captivated by this seemingly bold experiment launched by a socialist state to contend with the dual problems of urban unemployment and rural poverty, advocating the idealistic goal of closing the gap between the city and countryside.² For this reason, accounts of the sent-down youth movement, including scholarly studies, began to appear even before the movement ended in 1980.³ Whether produced in the late 1970s or the 1990s and early 2000s, these accounts almost all relied on newspaper reports, memoirs, and interviews (first with refugees in Hong Kong and later with former sent-down youth who remained in the PRC). These earlier scholars of the sent-down youth movement lamented the impossibility of accessing local archives and wondered how such materials might change their analyses.

This study is the first to do just that. The documents that comprise records of the sent-down youth offices held in those archives, many handwritten, were produced for internal use among cadres tasked with the implementation of Mao's directive for urban youth to receive "peasant re-education." They were not for public consumption, but rather for government agencies to evaluate progress and report to their administrative superiors. The authors of these reports were individuals enmeshed in the implementation of the movement, whose futures depended in part on how well or poorly they performed. Yet many reports, even if infused with a determination to chronicle local success, invariably also convey problems, sometimes in a relatively short section at the end. In contrast, reports by teams of urban cadres (referred to as the *weiwentuan*) tended to focus more on problems, as their members were tasked with investigating conditions for urban youth on rural production teams.

² See, for example, 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), 2–4. Also see Martin M. Singer, *Educated Youth and the Cultural Revolution in China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1971).

³ See Bernstein; and also D. Gordon White, "The Politics of Hsia-hsiang Youth," *China Quarterly*, 59 (July–September 1974), 491–517; and John Gardner, "Educated Youth and Rural–Urban Inequalities, 1958–1966," in John W. Lewis, ed., *The City in Communist China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1971), 268–276.

Although, like any and all historical documents, these records cannot be interpreted as representing a truth of what transpired, they are the first set of materials that provide insight into how a broad range of participants in the movement—cadres in county governments and sent-down youth offices, provincial officials, municipal government leaders, and the *weiwentuan* sent by cities to provide comfort for, investigate, and manage problems of sent-down youth—navigated the daily work of the movement, expressed frustrations, and sometimes articulated ideas on how policies should be modified. Reports from the county offices of sent-down youth include accounts of visits by urban and rural officials to sent-down youth settlements, often recording conversations with the youth and villagers that suggest the everyday interactions between the two. They reveal the conflicts that erupted at the local level, not only the most obvious between youth and their rural hosts, but between officials located at different administrative levels and in urban versus rural institutions.

Most importantly, the archival collections make audible the voices of rural villagers and cadres, previously overshadowed by the testimonies of sent-down youth themselves. While adjusting to harsh conditions in the countryside was difficult for urban youth, it was local officials, shouldering the blame for almost everything that went wrong, who expressed deep frustration about their job of managing hundreds of urban teenagers sent to their villages. Many archival reports voiced the worries of local officials about sent-down youth who did not tend their vegetable plots or collect firewood, and who overstayed their winter home visits and therefore could not earn enough work points to support themselves. Officials grappled with issues concerning dating, cohabitation, and pregnancies among sent-down youth. Groups of youth whom urban officials regarded as hoodlums, and were anxious to send to the countryside, sometimes refused to work and engaged in gang fights, causing local authorities particular consternation. They also complained about the intervention, if not the subversion of their authority, by the *weiwentuan*.

The integration of rural voices with those of urban participants changes the ways in which we understand the history of the sent-down youth movement. It becomes not simply a story of China's "lost generation," but instead one that reveals the burdens imposed by this campaign on an already beleaguered and impoverished rural population, which served to intensify an urban–rural divide that permeated all sectors of the Chinese population. Although the stages of the movement that we describe (mobilization, settlement in the countryside, recruitment to factories and universities, and returning to the city) echo those that frame other studies, the archival records make visible the processes, conversations, and negotiations that underlay each of these phases. They reveal how relocating

young urban residents to remote rural villages re-enforced the belief that rural and urban people were fundamentally different. Although attention to the voices of rural cadres articulated in the archival records attest to the rural-urban divide that both informed and was intensified by the movement, they also expose surprising linkages that were established.

Authors of the documents in local archives were by no means empowered to make decisions about policy. But the reports and communications unwittingly show the more local and everyday decisions made by low-level cadres. Maoist slogans and state directives may have been promulgated and implemented through mass campaigns, but urban and rural government officials infused them with their own meanings, sometimes reconfiguring the original intent, other times conforming to the letter of the directive while altering its spirit, and in some instances ignoring them altogether. The decision to end the sent-down youth movement, ten years after its launching, was not the result of popular resistance, nor can it be reduced to the death of Mao. Rather, it may be understood as death by documents, the extraordinary proliferation of local reports that increasingly conveyed the unwelcome message that “the problems cannot be solved.”

Although archival materials are at the center of this analysis of the sent-down youth movement, our study also benefits from sources of several other types that have become increasingly available in recent decades. Document collections, local gazetteers, and institutional histories published since the late 1980s make it possible to understand the archival records in a broader historical context. Personal accounts of participants in the movement also help contextualize the archival records. There are also memoirs published in the first two decades after the movement ended, some crafted to satisfy the sensibilities of an English-speaking readership, chronicling a story of suffering and victimhood.

Beginning in the 1990s, many former sent-down youth began to claim their experience in the countryside as a source of pride and became prolific in chronicling this period of their lives. They established associations; organized reunions and conferences; published magazines and newsletters; collected historical records of their experiences; and raised funds to provide financial relief, social services and support to former sent-down youth. The websites established by their associations began to provide a forum for extended informal recollections and conversations among sent-down youth, and between the youth and those who once hosted them. Many provinces and rural counties that had accommodated sent-down youth have in turn compiled collections of oral histories of both the youth and locals, published selections of local government documents, and incorporated accounts of the sent-down youth into

their local gazetteers. At the same time, personal recollections of *weiwentuan* members and officials who worked in sent-down youth offices have appeared. All of these accounts, in addition to our own interviews with former sent-down youth and villagers who hosted them, enable us to put a personal perspective in dialogue with the documentary record.

In addition to these newly available sources, we also consulted newspapers, particularly the Shanghai local paper *Jiefang ribao*. On the surface, newspapers issued government propaganda to the public, with articles praising the success of the movement: stories of idealistic urban youth who selflessly committed to life in the countryside as well as portraits of villagers who welcomed the youth with excitement and enthusiasm. Yet newspapers can also be read against the grain, as reflecting problems with the movement, reporting, for instance, on city parents who were not sufficiently enthusiastic about sending their sons and daughters away or on Shanghai cadres who were reluctant to be dispatched to the countryside to monitor the movement.

All these materials complemented the archival records of the sent-down youth offices. Based on this research, our study both builds on and departs from prior analyses of the sent-down youth movement. One of the first major studies, Thomas Bernstein's *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages: The Transfer of Youth from Urban to Rural China*, explores whether the movement, revolutionary in its premise that "educated urbanites can become peasants," could ever have achieved its goal of closing the gap between urban and rural China.⁴ Drawing on media accounts as well as interviews with refugees in Hong Kong, his careful analysis of the ideological and practical rationales for the movement details the challenges of mobilizing urban youth and accommodating them in remote rural areas. Bernstein highlights the ways in which sent-down youth, even if resentful of the requirement to live in impoverished villages, contributed to rural economic development, a theme amplified in more recent studies, such as those by Sigrid Schmalzer and Miriam Gross, of scientific and technological development under Maoist policies.⁵ Our study adds a new dimension to these observations by considering the extensive and complicated negotiations between urban and rural officials that made such development possible in the context of the sent-down youth movement, and the particular ways in which a large industrial city such as Shanghai, in order to improve the welfare of its

⁴ Bernstein, 3–4.

⁵ See Sigrid Schmalzer, *Red Revolution, Green Revolution: Scientific Farming in Socialist China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); and Miriam Gross, *Farewell to the God of Plague: Chairman Mao's Campaign to Deworm China* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 2016.

youth in the countryside, mobilized urban resources to support these developments.

The most recent comprehensive study of the sent-down youth movement, authored by French historian Michel Bonnin, reviews the goals and rationale for the movement as well as the implementation of its policies. *The Lost Generation*, partly aiming to consider the “limits of totalitarian power,” analyzes the extent to which sent-down youth, victims of what he describes as harsh Chinese Communist Party policies, engaged in what he terms both passive and active resistance.⁶ Our study shares his interest in noncompliance with state policies, but rather than categorizing types of resistance, our attention turns more to the explicit and implicit, blatant and muted ways in which all participants in the movement, including urban officials, rural cadres, parents, members of the *weiwentuan*, and sent-down youth themselves, interpreted and manipulated state policies. In this sense, our study is informed by and engages theories of state–society relations in socialist China, such as Vivienne Shue’s early challenge to Cold War assertions of state control over all aspects of individual lives. The archival documents that inform our study repeatedly affirm her insistence that China’s bureaucratic apparatus routinely “delayed, distorted, deflected and destroyed central intentions,” and that state policy itself was often “a series of forced compromises and squalid bargains.”⁷ Our study speaks as well to more recent scholarship that, focusing on the “grass roots,” emphasizes the disjuncture between the goals of mass campaigns and their results, as well as the subversion of state policies by local officials.⁸ And in its consideration of individuals who were sent to the countryside, it reinforces the early observations of Shaoguang Wang

⁶ Michel Bonnin, *The Lost Generation: The Rustication of China’s Educated Youth (1968–1980)* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2013). The book was first published in French in 2004. One other recent study of the sent-down youth movement is based on interviews: Helena K. Rene, *China’s Sent-Down Generation: Public Administration and the Legacies of Mao’s Rustication Program* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013). There are also a number of Chinese studies of the sent-down youth movement, most importantly Huo Mu, *Guangrong yu mengxiang: Zhongguo zhiqing ershiwu nian shi* (Glory and Dream: The Twenty-Five-Year History of China’s Sent-Down Youth) (Chengdu: Chengdu chubanshe, 1990); Liu Xiaomeng, *Zhongguo zhiqingshi: Dachao (1968–1980)* (History of China’s Sent-Down Youth, 1968–1980) (Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo chubanshe, 2008). Some of the extensive Chinese research on sent-down youth is compiled in a three-volume collection, Jin Dalu and Jin Guangyao, eds., *Zhongguo zhishi qingnian shangshan xiaxiang yanjiu wenji* (Collected Research Essays on Sent-Down Youth in China) (Shanghai: Shanghai shehui kexueyuan chubanshe, 2009).

⁷ Vivienne Shue, *The Reach of the State: Sketches of the Chinese Body Politic* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 17.

⁸ Jeremy Brown and Matthew D. Johnson, *Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday Life in China’s Era of High Socialism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 1.

that while Cultural Revolution activists identified themselves as loyal followers of Mao, they invoked and interpreted his messages to pursue their own self-interests.⁹

Focusing on the urban–rural relations that informed and were created by the sent-down youth movement, this book also builds on scholarship that has highlighted the chasm between city and countryside in China. Although this issue is often treated as particular to Maoist China, recent scholarship reveals that its origins go back to the early twentieth century. Prior to that time, as Martin King Whyte observes, the “status barrier between rural and urban residents was not large.”¹⁰ The divide emerged first in the context of nation-building projects that followed the 1911 revolution, and then became central to discourses of modernity. Throughout the Republican era, urban cosmopolitanism represented the modern, in contrast to peasants, who epitomized backwardness, if not the antithesis to modernity, most vividly exemplified in popular films featuring “country bumpkins” as stock figures.¹¹ Throughout the Republican era, the Nationalist government sponsored numerous projects to modernize the countryside: programs for agricultural improvement, rural education, and health care, alongside campaigns to combat superstition and religious practices. None of these projects proved very effective, in part because of the war with Japan and subsequent civil war between the Communist Party and the Guomindang, leaving most reformers to deplore what they believed to be the collapsing rural economy.¹² Meanwhile, left-wing social scientists conducted myriad investigations of peasant poverty, which also became a prominent theme in left-wing literature by writers such as Lu Xun and Mao Dun.¹³ No matter their political persuasion, Susan Mann observes, Republican-era intellectuals became increasingly concerned by the urban–rural gap: “social change and cultural crisis,” she concludes,

⁹ Shaoguang Wang, *The Failure of Charisma: The Cultural Revolution in Wuhan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 278–279.

¹⁰ Martin King Whyte, “Introduction,” in Martin King Whyte, ed., *One Country, Two Societies: Rural–Urban Inequality in Contemporary China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 1. Also see Jacob Eyferth, *Eating Rice from Bamboo Roots: The Social History of a Community of Handicraft Papermakers in Rural Sichuan, 1920–2000* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

¹¹ See Yingjin Zhang, *The City in Modern Chinese Literature and Film: Configurations of Space, Time, and Gender* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

¹² Kate Merkel-Hess, *The Rural Modern: Reconstructing the Self and State in Republican China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 17.

¹³ Xiaorong Han, *Chinese Discourses on the Peasant, 1900–1949* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 19–25.

“were intimately bound up with the differences between the city and the countryside.”¹⁴

If the urban–rural divide was prominent in the first half of the twentieth century, it stubbornly endured after the establishment of the PRC in 1949. Maoist policies did not create this divide, but, as Jacob Eyferth puts it, they did intensify it.¹⁵ Scholars including Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz, Mark Selden, and Martin King Whyte have emphasized how socialist economic policies privileged the cities while turning the countryside into an impoverished periphery and rendering its villagers powerless.¹⁶ This was primarily the result of two sets of policies. First, in order to finance the development of urban industry, rural residents were required to sell grain to the state at artificially low prices.¹⁷ Excessive demands for grain to feed the cities reduced the production of commercial crops, as David Zweig points out, “impoverishing many parts of rural China.”¹⁸ And, as Jacob Eyferth more cynically notes, “The Maoist ideal for the countryside was the self-reliant, insular collective that produced surplus grain and other inputs for cities but required nothing from the urban sector.”¹⁹ Second, in 1955 the government institutionalized a household registration system, known as *hukou*, which both forbade migration of rural residents to cities, and also identified all citizens as members of either “agricultural” or “nonagricultural” (or rural/urban) households.²⁰ Both policies not only solidified the rural–urban divide but also contributed to the popular belief that villagers and urban dwellers belonged to entirely different social categories. Most recently, in a study of Tianjin and its surrounding countryside, Jeremy Brown shows that even when urban and rural districts were in extremely close proximity, the household registration and state planning systems made the boundary almost impermeable for rural residents, although their efforts to challenge the boundary never ceased.²¹

¹⁴ Susan Mann, “Urbanization and Historical Change in China,” *Modern China*, 10, 1 (1984), 87–88.

¹⁵ Eyferth, 8–10. Also see Jeremy Brown, “Spatial Profiling: Seeing Rural and Urban in Mao’s China,” in Cook et al., *Visualizing Modern China*, 212.

¹⁶ Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz, and Mark Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); Martin King Whyte, “The Paradoxes of Rural–Urban Inequality in Contemporary China,” in Whyte, *One Country, Two Societies*, 9–10.

¹⁷ Brown, “Spatial Profiling,” 203.

¹⁸ David Zweig, “From Village to City: Reforming Urban–Rural Relations in China,” *International Regional Science Review*, 11 (1987), 44.

¹⁹ Eyferth, 10.

²⁰ Xiaogang Wu and Donald J. Treiman, “The Household Registration System and Social Stratification in China: 1955–1996,” *Demography*, 41, 2 (May 2004), 363–384.

²¹ Jeremy Brown, *City versus Countryside in Mao’s China: Negotiating the Divide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

The sent-down youth movement, a rare encounter between privileged urban youth and disadvantaged villagers, provides an ideal context in which to revisit scholarship on urban–rural relations in China. In surrendering their urban residency and relocating to the countryside, the sent-down youth might seem to have traversed this great divide. Yet the divide was so ingrained that even when rural villagers and urban residents were physically together in the countryside, social boundaries between the two remained intact. The presence of urban youth in rural China, if anything, intensified the social categories of “urbanite” and “peasant.” Though stripped of their official urban status, sent-down youth never compromised their identity as urbanites, nor did rural residents ever perceive them as peasants.

At the same time, however, the sent-down youth movement connected cities and remote rural areas in ways that were unprecedented in Maoist China. For the first time since the introduction of the *hukou* system in the mid-1950s, impoverished counties geographically distant from cities suddenly had both personal and institutional connections to urban resources. These connections often produced unanticipated results, such as the transfer of industrial equipment from cities to rural areas. Recognizing these relationships suggests a reconsideration of conventional beliefs that the post-Mao economic reforms represented a complete disjuncture with the Cultural Revolution: the ways in which connections forged during the sent-down youth movement effectively undergirded subsequent economic reforms become more apparent.

Shanghai and Its Sent-Down Youth

Unlike other studies that treat the sent-down youth movement in a national context,²² this study centers on Shanghai and the youth it sent to the countryside. Focusing on a single sending city offers an opportunity to examine how municipal government officials and residents deployed human, material, and institutional resources to ensure the welfare of their youth. It also enables us to see how the sent-down youth, after surrendering their urban residence permits and relocating to the countryside, remained a primary concern not only of their families but of the city government as well. Shanghai also manifests the ways that a major nationwide campaign launched by the central government was implemented, interpreted, and sometimes modified by municipal

²² The single exception is Stanley Rosen’s early book, *The Role of Sent-Down Youth in the Chinese Cultural Revolution: The Case of Guangzhou* (Berkeley: University of California, Berkeley Center for Chinese Studies, 1981).

officials, and how their efforts to support the movement could unwittingly undermine it.

Shanghai dispatched more youth than any other city in China, sending a total of 1.1 million to the countryside over the decade of the movement (1968–1980). The next-largest city, Beijing, had some 700,000 sent-down youth, and Tianjin approximately 400,000.²³ Shanghai in the 1960s and 1970s was not only China's largest city, but also its most prominent commercial hub and advanced industrial center. Its residents were among the most privileged citizens in China, many enjoying access to subsidized housing, education, health care, food, and basic consumer goods, as well as running water, electricity, and public transportation, amenities that were beyond the reach of rural residents. For Shanghai residents, the gap between city and countryside was particularly acute.

Rather than considering all sent-down youth from Shanghai, this book focuses more specifically on Shanghai youth sent to production teams (*chadui*) in remote regions far from the city. As other scholars have pointed out, the term “sent-down youth” has often been loosely used to describe all middle and high school graduates who were sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution. This could include rural youth who left their villages to attend secondary school at the commune or county seats and then returned to their home villages after graduation. These “returning-to-the-village youth” (*huixiang qingnian*) have often been included in sent-down youth statistics.²⁴

Although the term “sent-down youth” is most commonly used to refer to those sent from the city to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, the idea of sending urban youth to rural areas actually originated in the mid-1950s. At that time, youth from Shanghai (as well as from other cities) began to go rural areas, in large part because of urban unemployment, although some went voluntarily, such as the first Shanghai Voluntary Reclamation Team of close to 100 members who went to Jiangxi in October 1955.²⁵ Over the decade from 1955 to 1966,

²³ Shanghai qingnianzhi bianzhuang weiyuanhui, ed., *Shanghai qingnianzhi* (Shanghai Youth Gazetteer) (Shanghai: Shanghai shehui kexueyuan chubanshe, 2002), 553; Beijing shi difangzhi bianzhuang weiyuanhui, ed., *Beijingzhi zonghejue: Renmin shenghuozhi* (The Beijing Comprehensive Volume: People's Livelihood Gazetteer) (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 2007), 12; Tianjin listed 415,000 sent-down youth from 1962 to 1978. See Tianjin shi difangzhi bianzhuang weiyuanhui, ed., *Tianjin tongzhi: Renshi zhi* (Tianjin Gazetteer: People and Events) (Tianjin: Shehui kexue chubanshe 1999), 145.

²⁴ Bernstein, 21.

²⁵ In 1954, officials noted that some 60,000 youth in Shanghai could not find employment. Jin Dalu and Jin Guangyao, *Zhongguo xin difangzhi: Zhishi qingnian shangshan xiaxiang shiliao jilu* (China's New Gazetteers: Historical Materials on the Sent-Down Youth Movement) (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe and Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 2014) vol. 4, 2223.