Chapter 13

Images, Memories, and Lives of Sent-down Youth in Yunnan

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In 2006, I lived in the city of Chengdu in southwestern Sichuan Province. My apartment was about a mile west of downtown, in a building off a small alleyway. The alley was noisy during the day and quiet at night, much like any other urban residential area in China. At first, there seemed to be nothing special about it. However, as time passed, an unusual teahouse caught my eye. Set in a three-room condo on the first floor of a building about a hundred meters from where I lived, this teahouse was always bustling. Almost every night, a group of middle-aged men and women congregated, chatting away about household chores, reading evening newspapers, and playing Mahjong.

Like most Chinese cities, Chengdu is changing fast—state-owned factories laying off workers, suburban farmers losing their land, and house prices skyrocketing far past what an ordinary resident could easily afford. The teahouse regulars are just like their fellow Chengdu residents, striving hard to make a living and survive the changes. They are among the most ordinary of people. Without asking, I would never have known who they were—that all of them as teenagers had packed their suitcases, left home, and spent eight precious years on a rubber farm in the border region of Yunnan Province. They were just some of the vast number of urban people sent to the countryside over the course of the Mao era (see Brown's chapter in this volume). More specifically, they were among the twenty million middle school and high school graduates sent to the countryside for reeducation between 1968 and 1979, and still more specifically, among the one hundred and forty thousand who worked in the Yunnan

Construction Corps on China's southern border.[1] Having negligible power or status, their past is of little interest to their neighbors, siblings, or even their children. In this highly pragmatic city, few people pay attention to their history; only in this little teahouse do they have a place to recollect the past and share some old memories.

The people I met in the teahouse all belong to a special generation in the history of the People's Republic of China. Born between 1947 and 1955, they have experienced a life trajectory marked by sharp ups and downs closely tied to Chinese politics. In 1966, when Mao sought to reinvigorate China's revolutionary culture and curb the influence of Liu Shaoqi and other "moderates" among the party leadership, he turned to China's youth to be vanguards of the newly conceived "Cultural Revolution." Many urban youth jumped at the chance to become "Red Guards." When the Red Guards were disbanded in 1968, some of these same youth responded enthusiastically to Chairman Mao's call to join the "Up to the Mountains, Down to the Countryside" movement and rushed to settle in China's rural areas, where they were to learn from the peasants and put their schooling to work for China's "new socialist countryside." Others resisted the call but found themselves compelled nonetheless by a state anxious both to find occupations for a boom generation of urban youth and to quell the extensive havoc, no matter how "revolutionary," the Red Guards had wreaked in the cities. The majority of them did not return to the cities until the late 1970s, having "lost" their youth and needing to cope with a now-unfamiliar urban life.

I had the good fortune to make friends with some of these former "sent-down youth" (the standard term for young, urban people sent to the countryside) and talk with them in depth about their experiences. They have generously shared their memories with me and provided me with precious photos, sketches, paintings, and posters that they have carefully kept from the Yunnan years. These artifacts not only help visualize the stories they tell, but also offer a serious challenge to the one-dimensional picture that prevails in the dominant narratives about the lives of sent-down youth. The tales they relate in the teashop also speak in compelling ways to the role that visual images play in producing history and memory. In this essay, I seek to answer the questions: How do people remember the Up to the Mountains, Down to the Countryside movement? What role do visual materials play in depicting the lives of sent-down youth? How do these most ordinary sent-down youth reflect upon and come to terms with their past, and, how do these memories interact with their lives today?

DOMINANT LITERATURES: A "SCARRED YOUTH" VERSUS "NO REGRET FOR THEIR LOST YOUTH"

Before getting to know these former sent-down youth, my understanding of their experiences was heavily shaped by the existing literature written on the subject, in which two rather different depictions are most prevalent. On one side is the depressing, critical depiction, where sent-downers were the political victims of the ailing autocrat Mao Zedong and his wicked cronies. As part of the human tragedy in the "ten years of chaos" of the Cultural Revolution, the lives of sent-down youth were filled with massive violence, unfairness, and cruelty. On the other side is the uplifting portrayal of their rural experiences, where sent-down youth were heroes and heroines. They sacrificed their adolescence on the altar of duty; they were idealistic and charismatic, and when looking back from the present, they "have no regret for their lost youth."

The bleak representation of sent-down youth originated in works of "scar literature" that emerged soon after the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. The genre focused on the disastrous experiences of sent-down youth, intellectuals, and persecuted officials during the Cultural Revolution. In order to expose the inner wounds inflicted by the Cultural Revolution, writers of scar literature lamented their past sufferings and angrily denounced the crimes committed by the so-called "Gang of Four" (leading members of the radical faction during the Cultural Revolution). In the late 1970s, scar literature helped people express grievances long restrained; thus, it quickly gained popularity and defined public memory of the Cultural Revolution in China at that time.

The total condemnation of the Cultural Revolution is also the norm in English-language writings. This is particularly noticeable in autobiographical memoirs, a genre that blossomed in the 1980s and 1990s and generated several bestsellers in the United States and other countries. Written in English and geared to the interests of a Western audience, these memoirs, with only few exceptions, proffer horror stories of Maoist China in which "the Orient is seen seeking salvation from an exalted Occident."[2] The narrators generally appear as heroic and moral individuals while they invest others with the role of persecutors. As literature scholar Chen Xiaomei observes, "These memoirs read like stories of survival, culminating in the obligatory happy ending in America or Europe."[3]

Accounts emphasizing the horrors of the Cultural Revolution commonly incorporate images that emphasize the mob mentality that supposedly prevailed among youth. Typical examples found in history textbooks include photographs

of throngs of young students waving the “little red book” of quotations from Chairman Mao in support of their godlike hero Chairman Mao and shots of humiliated cadres and professors forced to bow their heads low to withstand the attacks of their youthful assailants (Figure 13.1). In many well-liked literary writings, such as Jung Chang’s *Wild Swans* and Liang Heng’s *Son of the Revolution*, this visualization is so strong that the mere mention of the Cultural Revolution is enough to bring to mind images of torture and deprivation.

Figure 13.1 Red Guards attack provincial governor Li Fanwu. This photograph, by photojournalist Li Zhensheng, appears in his celebrated English-language book *Red-Color News Soldier* (London: Phaedon, 2003) and a web exhibit by the same name, and has toured museums throughout Europe and North America. It also appears in a popular U.S. textbook on modern Chinese history, Jonathan Spence’s *The Search for Modern China* (New York: Norton, 1999, plate between p. 662 and p. 663). Such images dominate representations of the Cultural Revolution for Western audiences and produce a very one-sided understanding of what the Cultural Revolution meant and how people experienced it.

China’s public memory of sent-down youth underwent an abrupt shift in the

1980s. As scholar Qin Liyan explains, “Disillusioned with post-Cultural Revolution urban life, the site of their previous suffering (rural China) now appeared to former sent-down youth as a paradise.” The countryside was then imagined by former sent-down youth to be “wholesome, peaceful, and uplifting” in contrast to the “bewildering, corrupting, and empty” urban life they later faced.[4] It was at this moment, in 1983, that the novella *Snow Storm Tonight* by Liang Xiaosheng came to the scene and instantly attracted public attention with its uplifting optimism. It not only won a government-sponsored award, but was also broadcast on national radio, adapted into a TV miniseries, and “anthologized in high school textbooks as a model of thematic correctness and artistic perfection.”[5] This novel, together with similar works produced by other former sent-down youth, helped construct a new image of sent-down youth as heroes and heroines.

Photographs played a crucial role in shaping the new public image of sent-down youth and their rural experiences. The early 1990s witnessed numerous photo exhibits honoring sent-down youth, which in many cities sparked a craze for “the culture of sent-down youth.” In 1991, following an extremely successful 1990 Beijing photo exhibition honoring former sent-down youth in Heilongjiang Province, a group of Chengdu former sent-downers put together a photo display in the Sichuan Provincial Museum to celebrate the twenty-year anniversary of their departure for Yunnan.[6] The chief organizers were former sent-down youth who had held high positions in the countryside as “sent-down youth cadres.” After serious discussion, they decided to set the tone of the show with the uplifting title, “Having No Regret for Their Lost Youth.” Quoting from the Russian poet Alexander Pushkin, they chose the subtitle, “All suffering will be left behind, and the past will become a beautiful memory.”[7] The photographs they selected appeared to confirm the truth of such “beautiful memories,” as shown in Figure 13.2.

In this image, former sent-down youth are presented as cheerful young men and women, physically strong and healthy, their labor light and easy to shoulder. With smiles on their faces, they look happy and satisfied, merrily contributing to Chinese socialism. Moreover, the photograph suggests that their ideals and political conscience give meaning to their labor. The caption reads, “Youth is beautiful only when dedicated to the people; life is brilliant only when sacrificed to the revolution.” With such ideals, what regrets should sent-down youth have? Clearly, images like this celebrate the official values of the Cultural Revolution,

namely, unconditional sacrifice, loyalty, and collectivity. In fact, just as in Figure 13.2, many of the exhibition's photos originated in widely circulated pictorials published during the Cultural Revolution era. Ever since the beginning of the Up to the Mountains, Down to the Countryside movement, great numbers of pictorials, art books, and film documentaries celebrated the lives of sent-down youth. Moreover, every single battalion, regiment, and division in the Yunnan Construction Corps supported a propaganda team that actively produced many laudatory propaganda photos of sent-down youth. According to former sent-down youth and amateur historian Xie Guangzhi, despite the food deficiency in Yunnan, every propaganda team was equipped with a camera and rolls of film.[8] This also explains the disproportionally large number of "happy" pictures of sent-down youth at a time when cameras were too expensive for almost any ordinary person to own: propaganda teams would produce only happy photographs, and few others had the means to produce any photographs at all.

Figure 13.2 This image originally appeared in a pictorial about the Cultural Revolution. Former sent-down youth Xie Guangzhi remembers offering to put it on display for a 1991 exhibition on sent-down youth held in the Sichuan Provincial Museum in Chengdu. The caption beneath reads "Youth is beautiful only when it is dedicated to the people; Life is bright only when it is dedicated to the revolution; It is a heavy burden and a long journey to become a worthy revolutionary successor; We will move forward following the course directed by Chairman Mao." Provided by Xie Guangzhi and used with his permission.

Despite the two dominant literatures' radically different depictions of the experiences of sent-down youth—one as scarring, the other as glorious—more fundamentally they share much common ground. Whether as victims or as loyal followers of Mao, sent-down youth appear in these writings as passive subjects rather than as active agents in their own lives. Even more troubling is that, in both literatures, the narrators are always from the elite. Scar literature is mainly concerned with and written by intellectuals, persecuted officials, and sent-down youth from elite family backgrounds. After the Cultural Revolution, they returned to the center of Chinese politics and culture. The English-language memoirs reveal this yet more clearly: their authors, like Liang Heng and Jung Chang, were able not only to study foreign languages during the Cultural Revolution but also to go abroad to the United States and Europe afterward. Such experiences were privileges far out of reach for most Chinese people. Furthermore, the proponents of the "no-regret" account were fortunate in that they either received recommendations to attend college (and thus left the countryside early), as Liang Xiaosheng did, or held positions of power as sent-down youth cadres in the Construction Corps, as was the case with the organizers of the 1991 Chengdu exhibition. Missing are the voices of the more ordinary sent-down youth.

LIVES AND MEMORIES OF THE ORDINARY SENT-DOWN YOUTH

Unlike elites, ordinary sent-down youth had to think first about feeding their bellies and helping their families. Going to Yunnan was not about following the teaching of Chairman Mao or being idealistic. When they wanted to return to the city, their families were not powerful enough to open any "back doors." Regarding the sent-down youth cadres' having a "no-regret" attitude as "ridiculous" and condemning the tone of the scar literature as "oversimplified," the more ordinary sent-down youth have their own unique memories of the past.[9]

Going to Yunnan

"You could find no way to avoid going to the countryside," says former sent-down youth Deng Xian. Deng's family background was politically unfavorable and resisting the movement would have brought much trouble to his family.[10] Besides, after graduating from middle school and lingering in Chengdu for a while, he could find no job in the city. Fellow sent-downer Zhang Qingcong

recalls, “You could not even get a job sweeping public restrooms in Chengdu.”[11] In the mid-1950s, China experienced a baby boom. In the 1970s, these baby boomers grew up and created serious employment pressure. Former sent-down youth Xu Shifu recalls that the state’s response in Chengdu was that “in each household, one out of three children and two out of five children must go to the countryside.” Xu had five siblings. Moving to Yunnan would alleviate the severe food shortage in his home, so Xu felt proud to go.[12]

Leaving the city was an inevitable fate for these Chengdu middle school graduates. However, they did have one choice, at least. They could go to either a production brigade in the countryside or a construction corps in the Yunnan border region. Organizationally, a construction corps belonged to the People’s Liberation Army. At a time when the army held indisputable authority in China, joining a construction corps offered students enormous glory and prestige—at last they could wear the much coveted green army uniform and even get issued a rifle! Also, students in a construction corps were workers (*zhigong*) rather than peasants (*nongmin*), and were guaranteed a monthly salary and grain ration. Every month, each student received a rice ration of 38.5 *jin* (42.4 pounds) and a salary of CN¥ 28.5. At that time, 38.5 *jin* of rice was a third more than that of a regular middle school student and a salary of CN¥ 28.5 was even higher than that of a skilled worker in a Chinese factory.[13]

Images played a critical role in helping students make up their minds. Many young people believed what they saw in state-produced documentaries and pictorials: working on a construction corps in Yunnan was sublime (Figure 13.3, see website). Stories they heard from recruiters reinforced these tempting images. As a corps cadre spun the tale: “Yunnan is a place where you carry bananas on your head and step on pineapples wherever you go.”[14] To a student who dreamed of “having an apple all to himself,” Yunnan threw an irresistible lure.[15] After the successful propaganda campaign, the state soon began sending students to Yunnan. In 1971, from April to July, large groups of Chengdu middle school graduates filled the trains running along the Chengdu-Kunming line. When the train started down the track, many sobbed. But their sorrow did not last long. As soon as the train left suburban Chengdu, it became “a sea of cheerfulness.” After all, they were just teenagers, bursting with expectations.[16] High-spirited students rushed toward the unknown, far-away land. Even though going to Yunnan was not an entirely free choice, they still felt considerable thrill

and enthusiasm. And Yunnan was waiting for them . . .[17]

Life in Yunnan

It took seven days before they finally arrived at Mengding Farm in Gengma County, Lincang Prefecture of Yunnan Province. As they traveled, they noticed that "the roads were getting worse—from rails, to paved streets, and at last dirt roads"—and "the vehicles were getting smaller—from trains, to trucks, and in some places horse carts."[18] These sent-down youth were rather dumbfounded upon seeing their new home. Having regarded themselves as "construction corps soldiers," many had imagined that they would be living in tidy "two-story military dormitories, equipped with electric lights and telephones." Instead they faced one-story bungalows made of earthen bricks, only kerosene lights for illumination, and no telephones.[19] Even more disappointing was that they did not see many PLA soldiers; rather, those who welcomed them were farm workers who "wore shorts, stood barefoot, and waved their hands."[20]

After a lighthearted first week, the heavy manual labor started and the students' excitement quickly evaporated. Their job was to plant rubber trees and drain rubber sap. But before they could begin planting, they first had to strip the hills of vegetation (*pifang*) and carve out level terraces. For many sent-downers, *pifang* was the exhausting job they got after their arrival. Xu Shifu vividly remembers that to encourage hard work, cadres of Xu's company created a slogan, "Fighting in the Red May." The month of May was marked by several important revolutionary anniversaries, so students dared not slack off. Xu recalls, "We were competing with each other and worked so hard . . . After an entire month of tree-cutting, our bodies looked deformed and our bones felt disjointed." However, after May, the cadres just created a new slogan, "Struggling in June and July."[21]

The sun shines brutally in the high altitudes of the Yunnan Plateau. With insufficient water to drink while working, many sent-downers fainted in the field.[22] Zhang Qingcong remembers, "We had determined to embrace the hardship and be a "piece of kindling" [in the revolutionary fire]; however, embracing that hardship was merely a lofty ideal. When we faced the actual difficulties, we were paralyzed and did not know how to react."[23] The grueling manual labor was never recorded in any propaganda photographs, nor was the pain of constant hunger. Once they started working in the field, they found that

38.5 *jin* of rice was far from enough because they had almost no meat to eat with it. On average, they each received a meager diet of 0.2 *jin* of meat every month. Faced with such mundane problems, their revolutionary enthusiasm vanished. Yunnan was beautiful, yet its beauty was outweighed by the pain sent-down youth suffered. The constant hunger made some of them lose their principles: they started to steal chickens belonging to farm workers. Xu Shifu created a jingle to summarize their situation of that time: "Isn't it hard? Let's steal a chicken and boil it. Isn't it tiring? Let's blanket our heads and take a nap."[24] Some even stopped thinking that stealing chickens was wrong. Feeling collectively exiled, these young men and women had to try their best to deal with life on their own.[25]

As these sent-down youth strove to obtain physical necessities, they also tried to enrich their cultural lives. However, most nights their time was occupied by tedious political classes. Many felt suffocated. Zhang Qingcong remembers, "On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays, there were meetings organized to study Mao Zedong thought and Marxism-Leninism; and on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and sometimes Saturdays, there were special meetings for Communist Party and Youth League members." And there were other boring meetings to endure. "First, the company leader coached sent-down youth on the new central directives and discussed issues regarding our own company. After he was finished, the platoon chief spoke; then the general affairs officer. After the officer's lengthy report on logistical matters, it was already nine or ten o'clock at night and we were all yawning, bored to death." Whenever he sat through a political meeting, Zhang felt his "youth was murdered" and his "life foolishly consumed."[26] To live through such absurdity, sent-down youth had to find other things that made sense of life.

Zhang Qingcong found that meaning in art. Using pens, pencils, and scissors, he avidly recorded the beauty around him. In creating a world of his own, his life became meaningful. He looked forward to Sundays when he could go out and draw or make paper-cuts of the landscape of Yunnan, his sent-down friends, and what he saw as the unpretentious beauty of the Dai and Wa minority people (Figure 13.4).[27] Serene and peaceful, real and touchable, creating these images offered Zhang immense consolation and happiness. In sharp contrast to the forever correct didactic propaganda pictures, these images finally provided him with something full of personal feeling and offered him a hideaway to relax and be himself. It was in Yunnan that Zhang developed his own view on art: "Art is

the truthful recording of the beauty of nature and the attempt to present it in melodic strokes." He then realized how "awful" his previous works were, when he had "simply mimicked the images from those Cultural Revolution posters."[28]

Of course, not everyone was as lucky as Zhang in having artistic talent. But another sent-downer, Yang Quan, tells me, "We all need to learn to appreciate the beauty and pleasure of life so that we can live through the unlivable." This, he says, "is human nature." Yang loved to look at the Dai village nearby and its special architecture. "The Dai's two-story bamboo house feels so light . . . . Every day at sunset, I would watch the cooking smoke curling up over the bamboo house and listen to the sounds of life." [29] For Yang Quan, contemplating these beautiful scenes was the highlight of his day. Yang also brings my attention to the basketball hoops that were nearly "ubiquitous in every battalion." "As long as there was a small patch of flat ground, we would construct a wooden basketball hoop and play basketball."[30] Sent-downers tried to experience joy whenever and wherever they could. Against the backdrop of political absurdity, they creatively fought against dull routines and pursued a life they found meaningful.

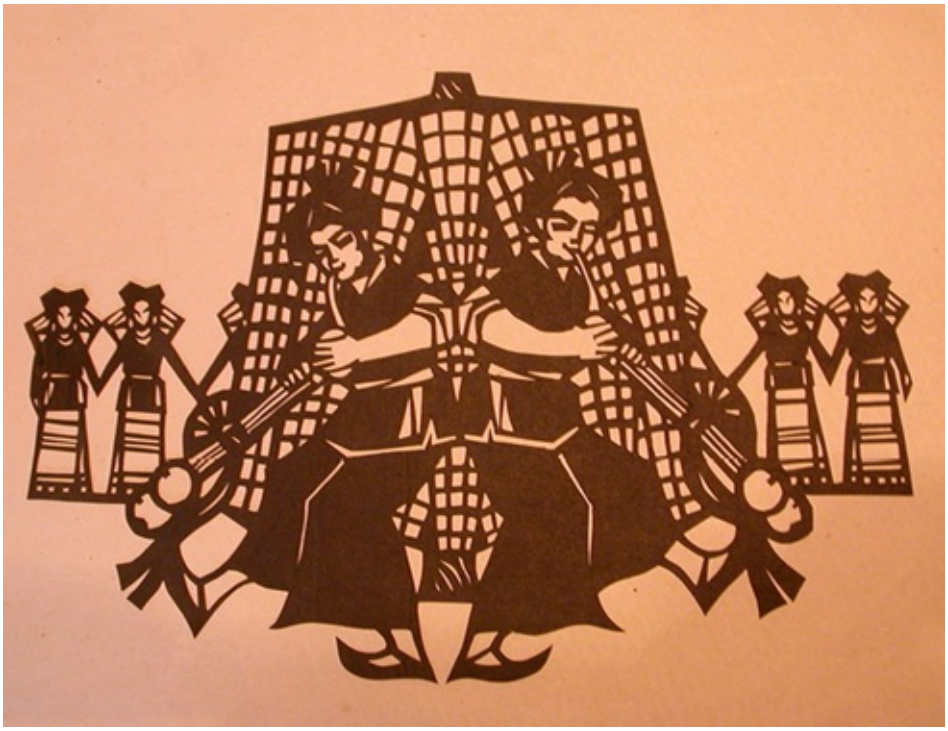

Figure 13.4 Paper-cut by sent-down youth Zhang Qingcong depicting a group of Wa nationality women dancing. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

Going Back to the City

Beginning in 1973, the desire to return home spread like a contagion among sent-down youth in Yunnan.[31] With the political shifts following the fall of Lin Biao in 1971, a large number of imprisoned cadres were released and gradually returned to power. Children of these cadres were able to exercise their political leverage and started to go back to the cities. In 1973 alone, using either formal or informal methods, a total of 4711 sent-down youth left Yunnan farms. Also in the early 1970s, Chinese colleges resumed operation, but personal recommendation became the only avenue for entrance. Of course, this benefited the children of party cadres the most. As Deng Xian observes, "Starting from 1973, the reopening of the city severely stratified us sent-down youth. After that, we totally lost our enthusiasm for labor." People asked, "Why do you get to return? Why are you going to college, while I have to stay? Didn't I work much harder?" Coming from a politically "bad" family background, Deng Xian had no chance to go to college. Quotas were reserved only for those from politically "good" families.[32] Deng felt abysmal agony, fury, desperation, and a sense of inexorable doom. Zhang Qingcong watched his well-connected dorm mates departing one after another, leaving more and more empty beds. He admits, "I really envied those cadres' children." Now, with so many people having broken their pledge to "settle at the Yunnan border forever," it all seemed like a kind of bitter joke. Zhang remembers, "Life at that point was like a banquet abruptly finished, a dream cruelly awakened."[33]

After 1973, the relationships among sent-down youth deteriorated drastically. Being recommended to college was a life-changing privilege. But to be recommended, besides coming from a good family background, one also had to be on good terms with the corps leaders. Because the recommendation quota was as slim as one percent, competition for the leaders' favoritism was ruthless.[34] The unpredictable future and insurmountable gap between city and countryside crushed many budding romances. Many people learned to control their feelings. "Because I would never want to raise a child in such a place, I held back my emotions and decided not to have a boyfriend," says Chen Lijun. In fact, Chen had fallen deeply in love with someone, and was still tearful when talking about it thirty years later.[35]

In 1976, Mao died and the Cultural Revolution ended, but for many urban youth the ordeal of sent-down life continued with no end in sight. In late 1978,

with a rapidly growing number of sent-downers rushing back to the city, those who were left behind became more depressed than ever. They had no powerful parents, useful connections, or adequate knowledge to pass the reinstated college entrance examination; going home was a remote dream. In November 1978, a sent-down girl died in a medical accident during childbirth. Strikes broke out on almost every farm in Xishuangbanna Prefecture, another region of Yunnan Province where many sent-downers stayed. More than ten thousand people joined these strikes. On December 8th, one-hundred and twenty representatives from seventy farms in Xishuangbanna gathered and decided to go to Beijing to appeal directly to the top national leader, Deng Xiaoping, with their demand—the right to return home.[36] On December 27th, twenty-eight representatives arrived in Beijing, where they met Vice Premier Wang Zhen. Wang did not accede to their demand; rather, he threatened to label them "counterrevolutionaries" and forced the representatives to sign a pledge to persuade the striking youth to resume work.[37] Strikes in Xishuangbanna went flat.

However, the strong desire to return home kept spurring radical actions at other Yunnan farms. On December 10, 1978, the All China Sent-Down Youth Working Meeting produced a memo stating, "From now on, all sent-down youth at the border region farms shall be treated as *workers* in state factories. They will *not* enjoy the special policies made for sent-down youth elsewhere."[38] This suggested that sent-down youth in Yunnan would probably stay there forever, like any other tenure-track workers in Chinese factories. When the news was broadcast at Mengding Farm on 24 December, it stirred deep anxiety and instant turbulence. On December 25th, Chengdu sent-downer Ye Feng led a demonstration in Mengding's streets. Venting their enormous frustration, they shouted, "We are sent-down youth, not farm workers! Give back my urban residency permit (*hukou*)!"[39] Sent-down youth at Mengding at first just planned to go on strike, but after they heard that the state council's investigative team had arrived at Yunnan, some decided to upgrade it to a hunger strike. This was a well-calculated decision at a very critical moment. Having dealt with numerous work teams from the local government, they believed that only direct intervention from the center could solve their problems and they would do anything to get the attention of the investigative team. "Seeing, not hearing, is believing. We were all anxiously waiting for the investigative team," hunger strike leader Xu Shifu recollects.[40] Another strike participant remembers

reasoning, “If we take the risk, we still have a slim chance to win; otherwise, we will certainly lose.”[41] At this time, sent-down youth cadres distanced themselves from the agitators, but they did not do anything to prevent the strike from happening.

The hunger strike was skillfully organized and carried out. Everyone who participated did so voluntarily. To prevent chaos and avoid being accused by the government of “stirring up a revolt,” leaders of the hunger strike committee formed a picket corps, enforcing discipline among strike participants. The picket corps not only disciplined strikers, but also guarded the armory and granary to prevent looting. The strike committee picked the Mengding rest house as the place of action, since they could lock the big iron gate and thereby ensure control. Moreover, to make sure nobody sneaked in food, every single participant was carefully body searched.[42] On January 6th, at 4 p.m., the iron gate was locked. Inside the gate were 211 strikers, who followed Xu Shifu’s lead to kneel down and swear their oath. Xu recalls, “Determination may not be the right word to describe how we felt; it was sheer desperation.”[43] Standing outside were their friends, lovers, and schoolmates. As time passed, some fainted from hunger. Those who stood watching sobbed in pain. The hunger strike committee was clear-minded. Several key leaders stayed outside, and they kept calling the state council to demand its investigative team come to Mengding immediately. On January 8th, in the fiftieth hour of the hunger strike and with more than twenty people in comas, another hunger strike leader, Zhou Xingru, finally got a firm reply from the state council that its investigative team was leaving for Mengding that night. The students had won their first victory and decided to resume eating for the time being. On January 10th, Vice Minister of Agriculture Zhao Fan led the central investigative team to Mengding. At the headquarters of Mengding Farm, Zhao asked farm cadres and sent-down youth cadres to implement the new directive from Beijing, explaining, “The center has decided to treat the sent-down youth with leniency.”[44]

At 4:30 p.m., Zhao Fan arrived at the Mengding rest house and met with the striking sent-down youth who had been waiting anxiously for him. Zhao was shocked by what he saw. His first greeting of “Hello, young farm workers!” immediately incensed the youth. They angrily shouted back: “We are sent-down youth, not farm workers!” Suddenly, people in the front row knelt down, followed by hundreds of others behind them (Figure 13.5). Together, they shouted the slogan repeatedly, “We want to go home! We want to go home!”

The strikers' perseverance and determination exhibited their strong desire and ability to change their fate. They had created a visual spectacle for the central investigative team as they collectively knelt down before it. Kneeling in China is always associated with obeisance and submission, and kneeling down in front of some unfamiliar authority shows both desperation and determination to win a concession from that authority. Here at the Mengding rest house, the sea of hundreds of strikers, many crying and many with their fists raised, created tremendous pressure on Vice Minister Zhao Fan. It was highly effective. Zhao Fan recalls, "I was faced with a petition, a strike, a sit-down, a hunger strike, a 'circling of the cadres.' And then the strikers knelt down in front of the investigative team . . . After talking to them directly, I could feel what the matter really was." Zhao continues, "Although I was already sixty-two years old, I could not hold back my tears . . . Such a scenario was not something that could be stirred up by several trouble makers."[45] The sent-down youth were resolute. They wanted a definite answer from Zhao and asked him to assert his take on whether they should return home. Zhao gave these words: "Not as a representative of the center or the investigative team, but rather as a parent of a sent-down youth, I say that you should all go back home!"[46] Only with such words was Zhao let out of Mengding Farm.

Figure 13.5 In a repeat performance of their confrontation with Zhao Fan six days earlier, sent-down youth kneel down and swear an oath to continue their hunger strike on January 16, 1979. This photograph, taken by a sent-down youth from Shanghai, offers a strikingly different window into how youth experienced the Cultural Revolution from those presented in Figures 13.1 and 1.9. Here, youth are active historical agents pursuing their own agenda, and not simply following state orders. Provided by Xie Guangzhi and used with his permission.

The photographs that allow us to travel back to that historic occasion and see the actions of sent-down youth do not exist as a matter of course. Rather, the sent-down youth who stood outside the iron gate and took those pictures was himself engaged in a daring form of political activism. After years of saving, he was finally able to afford an expensive camera for his own use. This amateur photographer recognized the critical moment and shot four rolls of film of the hunger strike scene. These photographs went through two rounds of censorship, once when he left Yunnan and again when he entered his home city. But the returning photographer still managed to save thirty-six pictures with which to remember the sent-down youth's vital struggle.[47] In these photos, the sent-down youth looked serious, determined, and heroic, not because they were sacrificing their youth for the state, but because they were bravely fighting for their own lives. When compared with the euphoric images produced by state-sponsored propaganda teams, these rare photographs are harsh and unbeautiful, yet they are all the more valuable because they allow us a glimpse into the not-so-rosy real lives of sent-down youth and preserve a memory that would otherwise have been effaced by existing power structures.

The Mengding hunger strike led directly to the quick resolution of the sent-down youth problem in Yunnan. Zhao did keep his promise and immediately reported what he saw to the state council. Sent-downers mocked the investigative team as "becoming sensible only after being threatened."[48] Soon, "returning home" swept like a storm across all the state farms in Yunnan. "We rushed back to the city like rabbits," recalls Zhang Qingcong. "Everyone was packing and fleeing as quickly as they could."[49] Once more, they sat on the trains between Chengdu and Kunming. However, the formerly happy and naïve faces had disappeared; instead, they had become dark-skinned, much changed, grown-up men and women.

LIVING WITH MEMORIES

By the end of 1979, ninety-seven percent of sent-down youth in Yunnan had returned to the city. Having lost their youth, they had to cope with a now-unfamiliar urban life. From the very beginning, sent-down youth were caught between ideals and reality, principles and survival. First, going to Yunnan was not simply an idealistic decision responding to Mao's call to settle in the countryside. Students did feel a sense of glory, but they also had serious material concerns: they needed to relieve the economic pressure on their families and go

where they could find employment. However, after the harsh reality had dampened their enthusiasm, they still sought something meaningful that would allow them to live through “the unlivable.” Along with pain there was happiness, among the absurdities there were serious searches for meaning, and after all the disappointments they had suffered, sent-down youth learned what they wanted from life and how to achieve it. To them, Yunnan is a paradox much more complicated than the one-dimensional stories found in either formulaic “scar literature” or “no-regret” accounts. So many of their memories of youth are rooted in Yunnan, and they always want to go back; but when they go back to visit, they “just want to escape as quickly as possible.”[50]

Over the years, sent-downers have sometimes spun tales about their youth in Yunnan and told these beautified stories to their children. The stories provide them with warm feelings and comfort as they move through middle age. They also take solace in the spiritual support and companionship they offered one another in the countryside and seek to keep these relationships alive. On April 15, 2006, three thousand Chengdu sent-down youth attended a gathering to commemorate the thirty-fifth anniversary of their departure for Yunnan. The event included song and dance performances by the former sent-down youth themselves. Several days later, at the sent-down youth teahouse, the performers were still proudly talking to me about the “sensation” they had caused.[51]

As I interview these ordinary sent-down youth, I find that remembrance has multiple functions and its meaning changes over time. For sent-down youth, recollecting helps them formulate their own history. Even more important to them today, looking at old pictures and reminiscing holds them together as a community. Sent-down youth’s reactions to photographs are also changing with the passage of time. Nowadays, when they look at the well-posed and artificially arranged propaganda photos, they do not show much dislike. Rather, the pretty images, though very unrealistic, remind them of their adolescence and of how strong, attractive, and youthful they used to be. Even those who have ridiculed the “no-regret” attitude of former sent-down youth cadres still want to stress the commonality of sent-down youth as a whole, to maintain friendships with those former cadres, and to sustain their community.

The year I met them, 2006, was the thirtieth anniversary of the end of the Cultural Revolution. The party-state of the People’s Republic of China has been reluctant to launch a serious reflection on this unusual historical period, and the official evaluation of the Cultural Revolution has remained virtually unchanged

since the early 1980s. In 1981, in its official conclusion regarding the Cultural Revolution, the reformist regime emphasized the full accountability of the previous political regime with the intention of letting bygones be bygones. Nevertheless, the past lives on and is never forgotten. Former sent-down youth actively reconstruct and share memories in ways that help them to live their present lives. Images play very important roles in both the reconstructing and sharing of those memories. Photos highlighting mob mentality and propaganda shots of smiling teenagers continue to circulate extensively, and each offers a glimpse of the past. But such images are very selective and fail to capture the richness of the participants' experiences. The ordinary sent-down youth were also active agents in creating images of their lives in the countryside, both through idealized paintings and paper cuttings and stark, truthful photographs. By preserving these images and circulating them, they have worked to reconstruct their own histories and define their own lives.

NOTES

1. Deng Xian, *Zhongguo zhiqing meng* [Dreams of Chinese Sent-down Youth] (Beijing: Remin wenxue chubanshe, 1993), 22 and 79.

2. Chen Xiaomei, "Growing Up with Posters in the Maoist Era," in Harriet Evans and Stephanie Donald, eds., *Picturing Power in the People's Republic of China: Posters of the Cultural Revolution* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 102.

3. Ibid., 102.

4. Liyan Qin, "The Sublime and the Profane: A Comparative Analysis of Two Fictional Narratives about Sent-down Youth," in Joseph W. Esherick, Paul G. Pickowicz, and Andrew G. Walder, eds., *The Chinese Cultural Revolution as History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 260.

5. Ibid., 255.

6. Deng Xian, *Zhongguo zhiqing meng*, 43.

7. Deng Xian, *Zhongguo zhiqing meng*, 1.

8. Interview with Xie Guangzhi by the author, 30 March 2007. All names appearing in this paper are real. Most interviewees' names have already appeared in preexisting publications and all interviewees have agreed to allow me to use their real names.

9. Interview with Xu Shifu by the author, 15 April 2006.

10. Interview with Deng Xian by Chen Xiaonan, December 2004. Chen Xiaonan is a reporter of Phoenix TV Station in Hong Kong. In 2004, Chen systemically interviewed former sent-down youth in the Yunnan Construction Corps and produced a television documentary *Qingchun wansui* [Long live youth].

11. Interview with Zhang Qingcong by the author, 18 April 2006.

12. Interview with Xu Shifu by Chen Xiaonan, December 2004.

13. Interview with Zhang Qingcong by the author, 18 April 2006. Interview with Yang Quan by the author, 17 April 2006.

14. Interview with Yang Quan by the author, 17 April 2006. Interview with Xu Shifu by Chen Xiaonan, December 2004.

15. Interview with Zhang Qingcong by the author, 18 April 2006.

16. Interview with Deng Xian by Chen Xiaonan, December,2004.

17. Interview with Zhou Meiying by the author, 17 April 2006. Interview with Deng Xian by Chen Xiaonan, December 2004.
18. Interview with Chu Bingxing by Chen Xiaonan, December 2004.
19. Interview with Shao Jinming by the author, 19 April 2006.
20. Interview with Zhang Qingcong by Chen Xiaonan, December 2004. Interview with Chu Bingxing by Chen Xiaonan, December 2004.
21. Interview with Xu Shifu by Chen Xiaonan, December 2004.
22. Interview with Yang Quan by the author, 17 April 2006. Interview with Deng Xian by Chen Xiaonan, December 2004.
23. Interview with Zhang Qingcong by the author, 18 April 2006.
24. Interview with Xu Shifu by Chen Xiaonan, December 2004.
25. Li Jianzhong, *Huimou, sikao, pingshu—Zhongguo zhiqing* [Memory, Reflection, and Evaluation of the Chinese sent-down youth] (Beijing: Guoji wenhua chubanshe, 2005), 258.
26. Interview with Zhang Qingcong by the author, 18 April 2006.
27. Interview with Zhang Qingcong by the author, 18 April 2006.
28. Interview with Zhang Qingcong by the author, 18 April 2006.
29. Interview with Yang Quan by the author, 17 April 2006.
30. Interview with Yang Quan by the author, 17 April 2006.
31. Interview with Zhang Qingcong by the author, 18 April 2006.
32. Interview with Deng Xian by Chen Xiaonan, December 2004.
33. Interview with Zhang Qingcong by the author, 18 April 2006.
34. Interview with Zhang Qingcong by the author, 18 April 2006.
35. Interview with Chen Lijun by the author, 18 April 2006.
36. Li Jianzhong, *Huimou, sikao, pingshu—Zhongguo zhiqing*, 564.
37. Interview with Xu Shifu by the author, 13 April 2004. Though no official publication mentions the content of this meeting with Wang, Xu Shifu told me that "Wang was said to decide that this is a conflict between 'class enemies and the people' and that strikers would be treated as enemies."
38. Emphasis added. Document "Zhiqing gongzuo sishi tiao" [Forty points on the work about sent-down youth], quoted from Deng Xian, *Zhongguo zhiqing meng*, chapter 3.
39. Yang Quan, "1978–1979 nian Mengding: Yunnan zhiqing da fancheng de qianqian houhou" [Mengding from 1978 to 1979: the Returning to the City Movement of Sent-down Youth in Yunnan] manuscript, 2.
40. Interview with Xu Shifu by the author, 13 April 2006. Interview with Xu Shifu by Chen Xiaonan, December 2004.
41. Interview with Yang Guoding by Chen Xiaonan, December 2004.
42. Interview with Xu Shifu by the author, 13 April, 2006. Interview with Xu Shifu by Yang Quan, 2004.
43. Interview with Xu Shifu by Chen Xiaonan, December 2004.
44. Zhao Fan, *Yi zhengcheng* [Remembering my journey](Beijing: Zhongguo nongye chubanshe, 2003) 211–212. Interview with Zhao Fan by the author, May 30, 2006.
45. Zhao Fan, *Yi zhengcheng*, 216.
46. Interview with Xu Shifu by the author, 13 April 2006.
47. Interview with Xie Guangzhi by the author on 31 March 2007.
48. Xu Fa, *Wo suo zhidao de zhiqing gongzuo* [The work on sent-down youth that I know] (Beijing: Yawen chubanshe, 1998), 100.
49. Interview with Zhang Qingcong by the author, 18 April 2006.
50. Interview with Zhang Qingcong by the author, 18 April 2006.
51. Interview with Yu Zhiping by the author, 19 April 2006.