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## **Lost in Revolution and Reform: the socioeconomic pains of China's Red Guards generation, 1966–1996**

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*This paper examines why the socioeconomic life of China's Red Guards generation has been difficult in both Mao's time and in the post-Mao reform era. It shows that Mao's Cultural Revolution destroyed the normalcy of society and prevented this generation from securing the life they expected. When reform moved China toward a market economy, their past misfortunes produced their present disadvantages. Their limited education disqualified them from the opportunities of employment and career promotion; their protracted sent-down to the countryside postponed their marriage and normal social life; and their longtime economic hardships debilitated their market competitiveness. Mao's revolution made them ill-prepared for the coming economic liberty, yet the post-Mao reform, instead of compensating them for their distress, left them behind when it pursued market efficiency.*

No generation in the People's Republic suffered more misfortunes than the Red Guards generation. In childhood they experienced the great famine of 1959–1961; in adolescence they endured the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) which closed schools and sent them to the countryside; in their twenties they were told to defer marrying and to have one child only when they did marry; in their thirties they were denied opportunities of career promotion because they lacked the college diplomas recently required; in their forties many of them were suddenly laid off by their employers. The generation before them endured Mao's political campaigns in the 1950s and 60s, but they at least benefited from some the Maoist socialism, enjoying secure jobs and free health care. The generation after them has grown up with Deng Xiaoping's reform, having all the opportunities that this reform has created. The Red Guards generation benefited from neither Maoist socialism nor Dengist reform. Mao's revolution abandoned them, sweeping them out of urban centers; Deng's reform left them on the sidelines when China moved to embrace the market.

In the West the hardships of the Red Guards generation have not been greatly researched; the understanding of this generation deriving largely from the study of

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their political behavior in the Cultural Revolution. Overwhelmed by the catastrophic social turmoil that they created in 1966–68, scholars have often seen them, ‘the children of Mao’, as a generation of violence steeped in a Maoist authoritarianism that led the society to torture, barbarity and destruction.<sup>1</sup>

Neither have Chinese scholars done much work on this subject. By proposing his idea of ‘looking ahead’ (*xiang qian kan*) in 1978, Deng Xiaoping might have shrewdly assuaged many people’s resentment that could have derived from the injustices or factional fights of the Cultural Revolution and distracted them from devotion to the reform cause, but he thereby discouraged a critical examination of the disastrous decade. In the mid-1990s the Cultural Revolution was still a ‘forbidden area’, and China had only 30–50 scholars studying it in an amateur way, publishing their articles mostly on the Internet and in overseas Chinese periodicals.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Deng’s policy has led to a neglect of the recent past among the people. As shown in Feng Jicai’s recent interviews of 20 young people born after 1976, teachers have not talked to their students about the Cultural Revolution, neither have parents talked to their kids.<sup>3</sup> A revival in the mid-1990s of the old literature and music of the Red Guards generation, mostly that which reflected their difficult years in the countryside, was criticized by one official scholar as ‘nostalgia’, using yesterday’s hardships and idealism ‘to resist the principles and beliefs that have shaped today’s trend’.<sup>4</sup>

The socioeconomic pains of the Red Guards generation do need to be studied, otherwise the life of this generation can never be fully understood. More poignant are China’s recent lay-offs (*xiagang*), in which many members of the Red Guards generation were among the first to lose their jobs when reform called for restructuring of state enterprises. Why are they among the first? How have they been disqualified from decent employment? Why is it so difficult for them to make the transition to the market economy? Answers to these questions can increase our knowledge of China’s transition from revolution to reform and how its recent past is influencing the present. After all, the Red Guards generation have exhausted their best years between Mao’s revolution and Deng’s reform.

1. For a discussion of the Red Guards’ violence during the Cultural Revolution see: Anita Chan, *Children of Mao, Personality Development and Political Activism in the Red Guards Generation* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985), pp. 124–184; Jing Lin, *The Red Guards’ Path to Violence: Political, Educational, and Psychological Factors* (New York: Praeger, 1991), pp. 19–29; Lynn White, *Policies of Chaos: the Organizational Causes of Violence in China’s Cultural Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 277–283; William Joseph, Christine Wong and David Zweig, eds, *New Perspectives on the Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard Contemporary China Series: 8, 1991), pp. 44–45; Yin Hongbiao, ‘Ideological and political tendencies of factions in the Red Guard movement’, *Journal of Contemporary China* 5(13), (1996), pp. 269–280.

2. For very recent discussion of Cultural Revolution studies in China see: Sun Yijiang, ‘Jinri wengxue hua kaizai shuijia?’ (Where are the Cultural Revolution studies?), *Huaxia Wenzhai* ZK 114, (1997), pp. 1–5; Qi Quande, ‘Wenge weishenme chengwei jinqu?’ (Why has the Cultural Revolution become a forbidden area?), *Huaxia Wenzhai* ZK 94, (1996), pp. 8–9; Yazhou Zhoukan, ‘Yuhuo chongsheng zhilu: cong huanmie dao xiwang’ (The journey of reviving from fire: from disillusion to hope), *Huaxia Wenzhai* ZK 93, (1996), pp. 1–6.

3. Feng Jicai, ‘Feiwenge jinglizhe de wenge ainian’ (The concepts of the Cultural Revolution from those who have never experienced the Cultural Revolution), *Huaxia Wenzhai* ZK 114, (1997), pp. 7–9.

4. Meng Fanhua, *Zhongsheng kuanghuan: dangdai zhongguo de wenhua chongtu wenti* (*The Revelry of All Gods: the Issues of Cultural Conflict in Contemporary China*) (Beijing: Jinri zhongguo chubanshe, 1997), pp. 73–76.

## Identifying the Red Guards generation

The Red Guards generation consists of about 27 million Chinese born between 1947 and 1959 in urban areas. They made up about 25% of the Chinese urban population in the mid-1960s and nearly 10% in the early 1990s.<sup>5</sup> In 1966, when the Red Guards Movement emerged, they ranged from the first grade of elementary school to the senior grade at high school (the official age for the first grade of elementary school was seven). By 1978, when the Red Guards organization dissolved, most had at one time served as Red Guards members, including those high school seniors who in 1966 had been in first grade. The stormy beginning of the Red Guards Movement marked their premature rise as a generation, and the quiet demise of its organization indicated that the kind of political life that had dominated their school years had ended. To be sure, there were quite a few who had never been members of the Red Guards. Some disliked the Red Guards' activism and never wanted to be part of it; others were excluded because their 'black' family background disqualified them. Even these, however, had not been able to escape from the impact of the Red Guards Movement. They had to mimic the Red Guards' fashion, repeat the Red Guards' jargons, listen to the Red Guards' music, and even suffer from the Red Guards' tortures and discriminations.<sup>6</sup>

A commonly shared post-school socioeconomic life also makes this generation distinct. After leaving middle or high school, most of them went to the countryside as the 'sent-down youths' (*xiafang zhiqing*). Before the 'sent-down' movement ended in 1979, those born in 1959 were caught in its last wave, unlike younger persons who never had to go to the countryside. The sent-down forced the majority of this generation to endure not only the hardships of remote mountains or villages, but the pains of readapting to cities after their return. There were many who never went to the countryside because local officials changed state policy, disabilities or chronic diseases exempted them, their parents' privileges protected them, or they tenaciously refused to go.<sup>7</sup> Whatever the reason, their lives were always held hostage to the sent-down movement. They had to face the uncertainties of being sent at the time of graduation, remaining in cities as the 'waiting-for-work youths' (*daiye qingnian*) after graduation, or seeing their brothers, sisters, friends and classmates go and suffer. Their lives differed from the others only because the movement had made them so. While they went back and forth to factories everyday, the distress experienced by the sent-down youths broke the hearts of tens

5. The numbers of the Red Guards generation are based on the statistics of 1966–68 urban high and middle school graduates and 1969–75 urban middle school graduates, available in Jiang Kun *et al.*, eds, *Zhongguo zhiqing huiyilu* (*The Memoirs of China's Sent-down Youths*) (Jilin: Jilin renmin chubanshe, 1996), pp. 1633–1757. Chinese urban (*shi* and *zheng*) population was 97.81 million in 1964 and 206.31 million in 1982. See: Tian Xueyuan, *Daguo zhi nan: dangdai zhongguo de renkou wenti* (*A Big Country's Problem: the Population Issue of Contemporary China*) (Beijing: Jinri zhongguo chubanshe, 1997), p. 155. Thomas Bernstein has estimated that the Chinese urban population was 125 million in 1970. See: Thomas Bernstein, *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages: the Transfer of Youth from Urban to Rural China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 2.

6. Wang Youqin, 'Wengzhong de tongxue pohai tongxue: shishi yu fenxi' (The classmates persecuted classmates in the Cultural Revolution: facts and analysis), *Huaxia Wenzhai* ZK 121, (1997), pp. 1–13; Zhong Weiguang, 'Qinghua fuzhong hongweibing xiaozu dansheng shishi' (The history of the birth of the Red Guards Group at the Qinghua middle school), Part I, *Huaxia Wenzhai* ZK 109, (1997), pp. 1–11; Part II, *Huaxia Wenzhai* ZK 110, (1997), pp. 1–5.

7. Liu Xiaomeng, *Zhongguo zhiqing shi: dachao, 1966–1980* (*The History of China's Sent-down Youths: the Great Waves, 1966–1980*) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1998), pp. 269–275, 491.

of millions of families, touched hundreds of millions of people, and psychologically scarred an entire generation forced to sacrifice themselves.

This generation had received a pre-Cultural Revolution education. As many scholars have pointed out, Maoist political education had profoundly nurtured this generation.<sup>8</sup> However, these scholars have put too much emphasis on the political socialization of this generation and the educational factors that led them later to violence. The Red Guards generation was educated to glorify Mao, be loyal to the Party, love their country and people, and hate 'class enemies', but political education was not all they received. As H. J. Lethbridge and Hong Yung Lee have argued, traditional Chinese social traits persisted and within families old education patterns still survived.<sup>9</sup> Whereas Jing Lin shows that as they grew up the traditional 'tinghua' (to obey) behavior was politicized by their parents into obedience to authority,<sup>10</sup> one can certainly make the case for the persistence of the Confucian concept of filial piety within families.

The pre-Cultural Revolution education had made them idealistic. They learned heroism, patriotism, altruism, communist internationalism, some Confucianism, and the dignity, decency and responsibility of life, through role models such as Dong Cunrui, a soldier who sacrificed himself to blow up the enemy's pillbox, ensuring victory for his comrades in the Civil War; Lei Feng, a soldier who always selflessly devoted himself to the benefit of others; or even Yue Fei, a general of the Song dynasty who remained loyal to his country and emperor until he was wrongly executed. These models showed them that whatever they dreamed to be, a scientist or a farmer, they should live for a cause larger than the individual.<sup>11</sup>

Such idealism inspired many of them to behave violently in the Red Guards Movement because they honestly believed that what they were doing served a great revolution, or to go down to villages because they saw themselves as engaged in a radical transformation of the backward countryside. This idealism was rooted so deeply in their hearts that it persisted even after the Maoist revolution faded away. Without understanding this idealism, it is hard to explain why, in the reform era, some of them became fighters for democracy, and many more, despite shouldering family responsibilities, participated in adult education programs to enrich themselves with knowledge in order to contribute to China's modernization. As many of them have proudly said, they were a generation of idealists for whom the country

8. For the discussion of the pre-Cultural Revolution education of the Red Guards generation see: Irving Epstein, ed., *Chinese Education: Problems, Policies and Prospects* (New York: Garland, 1991), pp. xiv-xvi; Suzanne Pepper, 'New directions in education', in Roderick MacFarquhar and John K. Fairbank, eds, *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 14 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 398-431; Chan, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-123; Jing Lin, *op. cit.*, pp. 73-113.

9. H. J. Lethbridge, 'Youth, Society, and the Family in China', in E. Stuart Kirby, ed., *Youth in China* (Hong Kong: Dragonfly, 1965), pp. 31-66; Hong Yung Lee, *The Politics of the Chinese Cultural Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 61.

10. Jing Lin, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

11. For detailed discussions of the pre-Cultural Revolution education see: Zhou Jin, 'Kua shiji de qiaoliang' (The bridge that links the coming century), in Li Guangping, ed., *Zhongguo zhiqing beihuanlu (The Bitter Happiness of the Chinese Sent-down Youths)* (Guangzhou: Huacheng chubanshe, 1993), pp. 530-539; Tan Can *et al.*, 'Sikao yidai de fansi' (The reflection of the thinking generation), Part I, *Qingnian Yanjiu* 11, (1986), pp. 21-31; Part II, *Qingnian Yanjiu* 12, (1986), pp. 12-17; Rae Yang, *Spider Eaters: A Memoir* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 87-100; Jing Lin, *op. cit.*, pp. 83-132; Chan, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-123.

and people always came first.<sup>12</sup> Sometimes, their idealism is admired by some of the younger generation. As one person put it, in comparison with the Red Guards generation, 'many in my generation have no ideals. Disillusion, emptiness, loneliness often fill our minds and hearts ... Of the people I know of my age group, money is the single goal most are after'.<sup>13</sup> This kind of life is not necessarily wrong, but it is different.

During the Cultural Revolution there were far more rural youths of the same age than the urban Red Guards generation, and many of them also participated in the Red Guards Movement, but their life experiences were different. From the mid-1950s the Communist Government ordered all rural youths to return to their villages as the 'returned youths' (*huixiang zhiqing*), when they completed their middle or high school education, unless they had already passed the state examination for university entrance. By its urban employment policy, residential registration, and food quota system, the Government blocked every possibility for rural youths to work or live legitimately in urban areas.<sup>14</sup> These policies of urban-rural dichotomy discriminated against rural youths and unfairly forced them to remain in the countryside forever, only because they had been born to peasant families. Tied to their backward villages, their lives were worse than those of their urban counterparts, but they never shared the trauma of the latter. For most of the Red Guards generation, their pain lay in the loss of an urban life which they had assumed would be theirs; but for the rural youths urban life was something they had never expected to get.

The Red Guards generation suffered more than the college students who also participated in the Red Guards Movement. In the initial 2 years of the Cultural Revolution the college Red Guards held more power than those of the middle and high schools, although the latter had started the Movement.<sup>15</sup> From 1968 the college students received jobs. In the remaining years of the Revolution, they lived on salaries. Nor were they disadvantaged in the reform era as they had diplomas. When they experienced unhappiness with job, income, or location, the unhappiness was individual specific rather than generational.

### The loss of education

In the summer of 1966, when the first Red Guards began to break classroom windows, beat teachers and enjoy free travel around the country, none of these 'old

12. Zhou Jin, *op. cit.*; Tang Can *et al.*, *op. cit.*; Cui Wunian and Yan Huai, 'Tantan laosanjie' (Talk about the old three classes), *Qingnian Yanjiu* 4, (1986), pp. 1-4; Guo Dong, 'Disandai renL kuanan yu fengliu' (The third generation: their pains and glories), *Qingnian Yanjiu* 8, (1993), pp. 16-19; Huang Jie and Mou Xiaoguang, 'Zhongguo qingnian sichao beiwanglu' (A memorandum on the intellectual trends of Chinese youths), *Qingnian Yanjiu* 9, (1990), pp. 20-27; Liang Heping, 'Wuhui' (No regrets), in Jiang Kun *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 1407-1418; Yang Shaobo, 'Miandui xinshiji de sikao: guanyu zhongnian zuojia de fangtan' (Thinking when facing the new century: the interviews with some middle-age writers), *Renmin Ribao*, 17 April 1998.

13. Xie Yiwei, 'Xiangqile women zheyidai de weilai' (The future of our generation comes to mind), *Dushu* 1, (1998), p. 148.

14. Liu Xiaomeng, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-8, 16; Liu Yingjie *et al.*, eds, *Zhongguo jiaoyu dashidian* (*The Book of Major Educational Events in China*) (Hangzhou: Zhejiang jiaoyu chubanshe, 1993), pp. 3-7.

15. Yazhou Zhoukan, 'Hongweibing lingxiu fujinsixi' (The Red Guards leaders reflect the past and present), *Huaxia Wenzhai* ZK 94, (1996), pp. 1-3.

three classes' (*laosanjie*, the 1966–68 classes of middle and high schools) thought they would not return to school. They wanted to rebel against China's 'old education system' which, according to Chairman Mao, was dominated by the influences of Western capitalism, Soviet revisionism, and Chinese feudalism.<sup>16</sup> However, when they smashed their schools, they destroyed not only a formal education that had taken the Communist Government years to build, but their own future.

In fact, after all the violent actions it became very difficult for the 'old three classes' to return to school because the previous teacher–student relations had been damaged. As many of them still recall, these relations had been good. The students respected the teachers because their parents and a highly moral society had instructed them to do so. The teachers also loved their students, because this generation had sincerely and diligently worked for their country and people, with lofty ideals in mind.<sup>17</sup> However, after many teachers were beaten to death and most of them insulted, it became difficult for the teachers to enjoy teaching the same students, although they might forgive them as misguided youths. For the students, if the difficulty of returning were not caused by guilt of how teachers had been maltreated by themselves or their classmates, it would arise from an ironic sense that they were going to be taught by the same 'monster and demon' teachers again. Mao's revolution estranged teachers and students from each other, and worst of all, the students lost their former revered educators.

Even if the 'old three classes' could return, there would not be much to study. In the first year of the Cultural Revolution the Red Guards had devastated their schools' libraries and laboratories; little of the old formal education existed. Few books and learning materials survived after the Red Guards' infamous 'house search' (*chaojia*) movement.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, what they could learn was a big question. Ever since Mao denounced professors and experts as 'bourgeois' in May 1966, having knowledge had become a sin. From August 1966 the alleged 'priority of intellectual education' (*zhiyu diyi*) had been a main reason for many students, often the best ones, to beat their teachers because the students saw themselves as victims of relentless academic testing and an educational regime that had alienated them from the worker–peasant masses, reality and revolution.<sup>19</sup> When acquiring knowledge lost its meaning, all that survived were Mao's works and political documents. As the Communist Central Committee declared in 1967 when calling all students to resume classes, 'the main responsibility of all classes is to study Chairman Mao's works and *Quotations*, learn the Cultural Revolution documents, and criticize the bourgeois textbooks and education system. In the meantime, a certain amount of time ought to be arranged for a restudy of

16. Liu Yingjie *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 271–273.

17. Cui Wunian and Yan Huai, *op. cit.*; Tan Can *et al.*, *op. cit.*; Zhou Jin, *op. cit.*

18. Ding Shu, 'Cong shixue gemin dao wa zufen' (From the historiography revolution to the digging ancestral graves), *Huaxiao Wenzhai* ZK 105, (1996), pp. 7–18; Xu Haoyuan, 'Wode fansi: gei laosanjie huobanmen' (My reflection: to the fellows of the old three classes), *Huaxiao Wenzhai* ZK 125, (1997), pp. 1–8.

19. Liu Yingjie *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 22–23.

mathematics, physics, foreign languages, and the needed common knowledge'.<sup>20</sup> But why restudy basic knowledge when it was 'bourgeois' and dangerous? As Wang Youqin recalled, in 1967–68 her famous girls' school in Beijing only engaged in political campaigns based on Mao's newest quotation.<sup>21</sup>

The revulsion against acquiring knowledge was carried into the younger half of the Red Guards generation, after most of the 'old three classes' had left for the countryside. In 1969 the Communist authority proposed a new education for rural middle schools and instructed them to teach five courses only: Mao Zedong's thought; agricultural fundamentals; revolutionary literature and arts; military physical education; and manual labor. This program embraced the Maoist disdain of formal education, and discriminated against rural youths, forcing them to concentrate only on 'agricultural fundamentals'. Yet, this program was to direct middle level education. When urban children entered middle schools in 1969 and 1970, they learnt that physics and chemistry had been combined as a new 'industrial fundamentals' course and biology and natural science had become a new 'agricultural fundamentals' course. Their classes were often interrupted. Each semester they had to spend several weeks in political campaigns, or in factories, villages or the army to participate in manual labor or military training.<sup>22</sup> The younger half of the Red Guards generation could still go to school, but, as Suzanne Pepper has pointed out, their education was of 'declining quality'.<sup>23</sup>

Even when they wanted to study, political conditions often prevented them from doing so. In mid-1972, opposition to revolutionary education surged, promoted by the academic professionals, supported by many officials, and backed by popular demand for restoring formal education, but teachers and students soon realized that while education was very difficult, learning had become meaningless. From 1973 onward Maoist politicians launched fierce campaigns against those trying to restore formal education. They celebrated the uselessness of academic effort by admitting Zhang Tiesheng to college. Zhang was a former sent-down youth, who had failed to pass the college entrance examination in 1973 and complained that the examination, the only of its kind during the Cultural Revolution, discriminated against his dedication to labor. They ridiculed serious teaching by cheering Huang Shua, a fifth-grade girl who denounced the rules her teacher established for her class, and brought criminal charges against a middle school's principal and a teacher for the death of a sophomore who had committed suicide because she failed an English test and hated being forced to learn the foreign language.<sup>24</sup> Accompanying these campaigns was the widespread breaking of classroom windows between 1974 and 1976 and the 'difficulties for school officials to administrate, teachers to teach, and students to learn'.<sup>25</sup> However, these problems did not bother the Maoist politicians who argued that China needed 'an uneducated worker rather than an

20. *Ibid.*, p. 276.

21. Wang Youqin, 'Nuxing de yeman' (Barbarity of female gender), *Huaxia Wenzhai* ZK 125, (1997), pp. 8–13.

22. Liu Yingjie *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 277–279, 376.

23. Suzanne Pepper, 'Education', in Roderick MacFarquhar and John K. Fairbank eds, *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 15 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 540–593.

24. Liu Yingjie *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 282–286.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 285. For a discussion of education during the Cultural Revolution, see also: Suzanne Pepper, 'Education', *op. cit.*

educated exploiter or elite'.<sup>26</sup> When Maoist disdain for knowledge was pushed to such an extreme, the younger half of the Red Guards generation had little incentive to learn, and they received only a limited education.

Whether one was a member of the 'old three classes' or of the younger half, all were forced to leave school prematurely, between the ages of 14 and 20, and would thus live with an incomplete education permanently. This was particularly true for those forced to go to the countryside. At their villages or at the 'farming corps' (*jiangshe bingtuan*) there was barely any book to read, and the peasants or the local people who were supposed to be their educators were mostly illiterate. If their villages subscribed to a newspaper, it always arrived a week late. When a movie was to be shown, they had to walk 3 or 5 miles to watch it. Everyday field work replaced books and culture, so that many became depressed and disillusioned.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, they were not supposed to read books. Mao had sent them to rural areas to be re-educated by the peasants through physical labor; to read signified to the authorities their unwillingness to live sincerely in the countryside. While the case of Zhang Tiesheng was used by Maoist politicians to block the restoration of formal education, it illustrates how the sent-down youths never resumed their education. In 1971, 3 years after he went to a village as a middle school graduate, Zhang was elected to head his village's productive team, apparently owing to his excellent performance of labor. But when he took the 1973 examination, he scored 61 in mathematics, 38 in language arts, and 6 in physics and chemistry, far from good scores, because he had not had time to study.<sup>28</sup> He might have sincerely complied with Mao's sent-down policy and practiced Mao's ideal of 'making worker-peasant masses knowledgeable and intellectuals workability', but his case certainly shows that Mao's policy and ideal was responsible for the largely empty brain of the Red Guards generation.

True, not every member of the Red Guards generation lost his or her educational opportunities completely. Between 1970 and 1976 Chinese universities and colleges enrolled a total of 940,000 'worker-peasant-soldier' students upon a recommendation system; of their number, perhaps half were from the Red Guards generation, having secured this opportunity through hard labor or their parents' connections. In 1977 and 1978, after Deng decided to resume the state examination system, a total of 680,000 people out of 11.8 million candidates passed the examination and entered universities and colleges. Of these, the majority were members of the Red Guards generation.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, in order to address the

26. Liu Yingjie *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 283.

27. For the depression of the sent-down youths and their lack of cultural life, see: Shi Weimin and He Lan, *Zhiqing beiwanglu: shangshan xiexiang yundong zhong de shengchan jianshe bingtuan* (*A Memorandum of the Sent-down Youth: the Farming Corps During the Sent-down Movement*) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1996), pp. 284-311; Zhiqing Riji Shuxin Xuanbian Bianweihui, ed., *Zhiqing riji xuanbian* (*The Selected Diaries of the Sent-down Youths*) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1996), p. 93; Zhiqing Riji Shuxin Xuanbian Bianweihui, ed., *Zhiqing shuxin xuanbian* (*The Selected Letters of the Sent-down Youths*) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1996), p. 52; Ma Xiangbo, 'Nanwang de suiye' (Unforgettable years), in Jiang Kun *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 43-50; Wang Dawen, 'Shouchaoben' (The hand-copied books), in Jiang Kun *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 59-61; Wang Guizhong, 'Yonggan de ren' (The brave man), in Jiang Kun *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 188-191; Sun Chunming, 'Yege' (The song of evening), in Jiang Kun *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 531-533.

28. Liu Yingjie *et al.*, eds, *op. cit.*, pp. 282-283; Liu Xiaomeng, *op. cit.*, pp. 560-569.

29. Liu Xiaomeng, *op. cit.*, pp. 481-483, 676-687.



shortage of higher education institutions for adults, from 1979 the Chinese Government started the Television University (*dianshi daxue*) and enrolled students on a full- or part-time basis. Of its total of 177,200 students in the first 2 years, most were members of the Red Guards generation.<sup>30</sup> From 1980 the Government also systematized the correspondence colleges and evening colleges and issued diplomas to those who completed all the requirements. Between 1980 and 1982 the correspondence and evening colleges together enrolled 168,113 students, of whom most were from the Red Guards generation.<sup>31</sup> Eventually, there were probably about 1.4–1.5 million members of the Red Guards generation who obtained a college level education, but this was only about 5% of their total. After 1976 the ‘worker–peasant–soldier’ system no longer existed; after 1978 the age of the state examination candidates was restricted to 25 or under; and from 1982 younger people constituted the major part of the students in the adult education programs. More than 90% of the Red Guards generation never had a chance to take the college level courses, their education remaining incomplete forever. Unfortunately for the majority, the incomplete education made them ill-prepared for the coming of the reform era. From 1979 the Communist Government began to value education as important for the promotion of officials, managers, or any kind of leader above the grassroots level, and in 1983 it required a college diploma as the main condition for promotion.<sup>32</sup> This kind of policy was no doubt intended to foster the rapid modernization of leadership at all levels, but it further victimized an entire generation. Despite their relative youth, rich life experiences, and often good performance in their work, the majority of the Red Guards generation were excluded from upward mobility because they lacked a college diploma.

Moreover, from the mid-1980s, with the deepening of reform, a higher degree of education has been emphasized for every sort of decent employment. Deng’s reform hoped to raise the living standards of the people and change every feature of China, but at its fundamental level the reform meant a technological upgrade and a realization of the efficiency of the market economy, for which a higher level of education and training for all employees had primary importance. By the mid-1990s even a tea shop in Beijing required its job candidates to have not only a good education but the ability to communicate in English.<sup>33</sup> Facing the rapid pace of change and the increasing emphasis on education for employment opportunities, many of the Red Guards generation became the ‘*meibenshi*’ (no specialty) people.<sup>34</sup> This is particularly true of nearly half of the generation who graduated from middle school only, whose education was essentially elementary in character. When

30. Zhao Yuhui *et al.*, ‘Quanguo dianda biyesheng shouci zhuzhong diaochao’ (The first nationwide tracing of the graduates of the Television University), *Zhongguo Dianda Jiaoyu* 9–10, (1990), pp. 13–48; Xie Guanxin, ‘Dianda jiaoyu shinian’ (The ten years of the Television University’s education), *Zhongguo Dianda Jiaoyu* 12, (1989), pp. 11–16.

31. Liu Yingjie *et al.*, eds, *op. cit.*, pp. 1961–1971, 1982–1990.

32. Zhu Guanglie, *Dafenhua Xingzhuhe* (*Great Diversity and New Synthesis*) (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 1994), pp. 241–246.

33. Wang Zhaolan, ‘Shen feng nijing wu ruonu, kuhan guohou cha piaoxiang’ (There is no weak woman while facing adverse circumstances, and there is tea scent after bitterness), *Renmin Ribao*, 21 May 1998.

34. Mei Zhe, ‘Xiangren shangxin chu changchu zili de ge’ (The laid-off workers sang a song of self-reliance from bitterness), *Huade Tongxun* 86, (May 1995), pp. 3–6.

between 14 and 17 years of age, most of these caught the peak of the sent-down movement and went to the countryside. In their forties many were nannies, grocery hawkers, restaurant cooks, security guards, and office cleaners, having being laid off from state enterprises.<sup>35</sup> Their lack of education debilitated their competitiveness for the new opportunities that the reform created, and when the reform moved ahead, it left them behind to work the low-income service jobs, thereby depriving them of the better jobs they had once held.

### The pains of delayed social life

In 1977, when Deng Xiaoping decided to give the first post-Cultural Revolution state examination for university entrance, the Red Guards generation was forcefully reminded that their development had been delayed for a decade. None of them could have imagined in 1966, when they put on the red armband and turned society upside down, that their expected life would thus be put off until society could once again operate normally. Mao's revolution turned them into a 'delayed generation' (*danwu de yidai*), yet what had been delayed was not simply the late-coming 'last bus' of higher education, but their entire social life: dating, marriage, family, birth of child, and job. They would find it very difficult to catch up with the rapid social changes of Deng's reform era.

Of all the things that delayed their social life, the sent-down movement was the worst. To be sure, not everyone went to the countryside, but for the majority who did their social life was delayed primarily because of the protracted time they spent there. From October 1967, when a small group of Beijing Red Guards first went to Inner Mongolia to realize their integration into the peasantry, to the end of 1978, when the Government decided to give up its sent-down policy, nearly 17 million youths had gone to the countryside. Some of them, after living in the countryside for 2 or 3 years, were 'pulled up' to cities by employment opportunities in urban enterprises or by the educational opportunities of the 'worker-peasant-soldier' system, but the majority often spent 5, 7 or more years before they returned. In 1978 there were still more than 8.6 million in the countryside, and among these many had been in their villages or 'farming corps' for a decade. When the majority of the sent-down youths returned to cities after the 1979 'Great Escape' (*shengli dataowang*), many could not but realize that their years in the countryside had been a great waste of time.<sup>36</sup> On the one hand, they did not change the countryside a bit. After they left, the countryside returned to its usual quiet and the only reminder that there had been sent-down youths were some graves. On the other hand, they had to restart an urban life.

Moreover, the protracted time delayed their formative dating relationships. For those who remained in cities, urban conditions allowed them to date and marry at

35. Mei Zhe, *op. cit.*; Zhang Huiying, 'Shehui xuyao shi wo zaijiuye de diyi xuanze' (The need of the society is the first choice of my re-employment), *Renmin Ribao*, 21 May 1998; Wu Yan, 'Duanwan hou de xinsheng: Shanghai baiwan guoqi xiagang zhigong zaijiuye jishi' (A new life after the cut: a report on the re-employment of a million laid-off workers from Shanghai's state enterprises), *Renmin Ribao*, 16 May 1998.

36. Qu Zhe, 'Faduan: 1967 nian 10 yue 9 ri' (The beginning: October 9, 1967), in Jiang Kun *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 366-371; Liu Xiaomeng, *op. cit.*, pp. 738-748, 828-832.

an appropriate age, but those in the countryside were at a notable disadvantage. In the early sent-down years, when most of them were still young adolescents, a communist asceticism did prevent many from dating since attention to personal life was considered 'bourgeois' and a mark of declining enthusiasm for revolution.<sup>37</sup> When they reached their twenties, it was rather a fear of being tied forever to the countryside that discouraged dating. There was no policy or law that forbade the sent-down youths from dating or marrying, but when neither the 'worker-peasant-soldier' system nor the urban enterprises took married people, it was understood that marriage would practically mean a lifetime in the countryside. The best way to avoid marriage was to eschew dating. For many, the optimum age for marriage had passed before they left the countryside. In the 1970s the Chinese Government, to reduce China's high birth rate, called young males and females to postpone their marriages until they turned, respectively, 28 and 25 years old—the so-called 'mature marriage ages' (*wanhun nianling*; the legal marriage ages for males and females were, respectively, 20 and 18). Yet, in Heilongjiang province in 1977, over 300,000 sent-down youths above these 'mature' ages had not got married; nor had over 90% of the Shanghai sent-down youths above these ages.<sup>38</sup> In the early 1980s, when most of the sent-down youths had returned to cities, the result was a large, aging, single, and dissatisfied population. In 1983 Shanghai had 127,000 singles aged between 30 and 39 and Tianjin had 65,000. Of these over 40% were returned sent-down youths. The problem was so serious that the Communist Party even called upon its local organizations to perform the role of matchmaker, although not for the returned sent-down youth only.<sup>39</sup>

If the unmarried were unhappy, so too were the married. By 1977 more than 861,000 people, or 10% of the remaining sent-down youths, had got married, in many instances because they could no longer endure the endless desperation, they were getting too old to remain single, or they simply wanted to satisfy their sex drive.<sup>40</sup> The fortunate found a beloved partner, but even for them marriage could be punitive. If a marriage took place between two sent-down youths, the punishment was the hardship they had to endure as they struggled to provide for the family under highly adverse conditions. If a marriage was contracted between a sent-down youth and a rural youth, then the sent-down youth would have to endure a life in the countryside forever unless he or she could get a divorce, the Government never allowing a rural youth to gain urban status by a marriage with someone from a city. When the exodus from the countryside came in the late 1970s, many of these marriages ran into trouble. As Honig and Hershatter have shown, in the early 1980s a large number of divorce cases occurred not only between the former sent-down youths and their rural spouses but also between the former sent-down youths themselves, thus raising a social debate on the moral

37. Shi Tiesheng, 'Huangtudi qingge' (The love song of yellow land), in Jiang Kun *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 283–290.

38. Liu Xiaomeng, *op. cit.*, pp. 670–671.

39. Xue Zhaohong, 'Zhongshi yanjiu daling guniang de zeou xinli' (The old maids' psychology of choosing spouses should be paid attention), *Shehui* 4, (1984), pp. 49–50; Zhang Shuying, 'Tianjinshi guangxin danianling weihun qingnian de hunyin' (The city of Tianjin cares for the plight of unmarried adults), *Shehui* 3, (1984), pp. 27–29.

40. Liu Xiaomeng, *op. cit.*, pp. 669–672.



obligations of marriage.<sup>41</sup> A group of Chinese researchers find that in 1980 and 1981 the resumption of urban status of the sent-down youths was a major factor leading to the 1274 divorce cases accepted and heard at the Dongcheng district court in Beijing.<sup>42</sup> However, after the divorces many returned sent-down youths still wanted to organize a new family. Hence, for most of the sent-down youths, whether they feared to make a date or got married, there was domestic turmoil. For a few who did not divorce their rural spouses, the countryside became their home. In the 1990s when a Shanghai delegation went to Northeast China to visit the hundreds of 'remained sent-down youths (*liuxiang zhiqing*)', the delegates found that only the latter's accent revealed that those middle-aged men and women were once the 'Shanghai folks'.<sup>43</sup>

Yet, when almost all of the sent-down youths returned to cities in the late 1970s and early 1980s, they found the pains of their delayed social life little eased. Instead, they became the 'waiting-for-work youths'. In the late 1970s the Chinese population reached one billion, imposing an unbearable pressure on society and the Government. In 1979, when a large number of newly graduated high school adolescents had no place to go, the 8 million returned old adolescents joined them and drove urban unemployment up to 15.38 million.<sup>44</sup> The labor market simply had no way to absorb quickly the returned sent-down youths. Unlike the other 8 million who returned before 1977 or were pulled up to the cities and towns other than their native ones mostly through the plans of a socialist economy, these later returners often returned to their native cities abruptly on their own initiative.<sup>45</sup> Yet, for the later returners, the 'waiting' was not a life they would have expected. They had endured long, hard years in the countryside, and the road of return was difficult. To make their way back, many had joined strikes and street protests or created traffic jams, thereby risking arrest. When the 'return of disease (*bingtui*)' became the most

41. Emily Honig and Gail Hershatter, *Personal Voices: Chinese Women in the 1980's* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), pp. 206–242. See also: Jiang Wei, 'Rensheng huanxingdao' (The circle of life), in Li Guangping, ed., *op. cit.*, pp. 215–251; Wu Biwen, 'Cuo, cuo, cuo' (Wrong, wrong, wrong), in Li Guangping, ed., *op. cit.*, pp. 252–271; Xu Anqi, 'Zhongguo lihun xianzhuang, tedian, ji qishi' (The present status, characteristics, and tendency of China's divorces), *Xueshu Jikan* 2, (1994), pp. 156–165; Rae Yang, *op. cit.*, pp. 272–273.

42. Zhongguo Renmin Daxue Zhexuexi 77ji Hunyin Wenti Diaochaizu, 'Xin hunyinfa shishi hou lihun qingkuang ruhe: Beijingshi Donchengqu de diaocha' (The divorce situation after the proclamation of the New Marriage Law: an investigation on the Dongcheng district in Beijing), *Shehui* 3, (1982), pp. 17–21. In its New Marriage Law promulgated in 1980, the Chinese Government for the first time defined 'love' as a foundation of a marriage. The definition, however, eased divorce and resulted in a rapid increase in adjudicated divorce cases from 115,000 couples in 1978 to 292,000 in 1986. In 1986, over 60% of the divorced couples were aged between 26 and 35, or they were members of the Red Guards generation born between 1951 and 1960. Sha Jicai, ed., *Gaige kaifang zhong de renkou wenti yanjiu* (A Study of the Population Problem in the Reform and Open Door) (Beijing: Beijing daxue chebanshe, 1994), pp. 432–442.

43. Cheng Kaiping and Zhang Fang, 'Menghui pujiang' (Back to Shanghai in dreams), in Jiang Kun *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 1472–1484.

44. Zhu Guanglie, *op. cit.*, p. 139. For a detailed discussion of 'waiting-for-work youths' in the early 1980s, see: Beverley Hooper, *Youth in China* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), pp. 77–93.

45. For detailed discussions of the sent-down youths' returning urban areas before and after 1977, see: Liu Xiaomeng, *op. cit.*, pp. 481–500, 723–799; Shi Weiming and He Lan, *op. cit.*, pp. 340–373, 392–423. For individual cases of how some sent-down youths managed to return to urban life, see: Liang Heng and Judith Shapiro, *Son of the Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1984), pp. 209–216; Jung Chang, *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), pp. 444–446; Fulang Lo, *Morning Breeze: A True Story of China's Cultural Revolution* (San Francisco: China Books, 1989), pp. 232–243; Rae Yang, *op. cit.*, pp. 261–273.

functional way, millions spent their savings to bribe doctors, injured themselves, took pills to create serious side effects, or even injected gasoline into veins to confuse blood tests or ingested pieces of lead to make their stomachs look terribly bad in X-ray examinations.<sup>46</sup> After all this, these individuals believed that they deserved a peaceful life and economic independence.

Furthermore, they never thought that Deng's reform would not be their gospel. To improve the quality of the Chinese work force in March 1979 the Government decided to have all job candidates take an employment test. Since scores on the test were decided essentially by a candidate's level of education, in many areas 99% of the sent-down youths failed.<sup>47</sup> As a result, when most of the sent-down youths got a job by the end of 1982, many women ended up in textile factories working night shifts which nobody really wanted and many men were often assigned to manual-labor jobs.<sup>48</sup> The reform did not take account of their disadvantages, instead it compounded them by putting them on 'waiting', making their past sacrifices present punishments when the employment test was institutionalized.

Their regaining of an urban identity was no less painful than its loss. When they left the cities in their teens, they had not yet secured a place in an urban society; when they returned in their late twenties or early thirties, they needed to struggle for a place. Yet their cities, having changed every day with the increase in people, buildings and streets, and the restyling of fashions, jargons and politics, were no longer the ones they had known. In Wang Anyi's well-known short story 'Destination', her hero Chen Xin, a sent-down youth who returned to Shanghai after a decade away, found that his alienation from the city had only increased with the length of his return. He did not know how to crowd in and out of a bus; he was mocked by Shanghai folks because he looked like a country bumpkin; he was pressed by his family to find a date because he was over 30; he was begged by his sister-in-law to marry out so that she and her husband could inherit the house from his mother; and finally his entire family broke into pieces because of his return. In the end Chen Xin determined his own destiny, returning to the place from which he had returned.<sup>49</sup> In real life only a few people had precisely this experience, but the issue Wang raises is valid. It was difficult for the returned sent-down youths to regain their urban identity and establish their place in more crowded and competitive cities after all the years living in the spacious and slow-paced countryside.

What made this problem worse was that they were in fact no longer needed in the cities. After 1968 more than 1.05 million youths had been sent from Shanghai to the countryside, and by the end of 1978, 0.74 million had still not returned. Only an acute sense of moral obligation induced Shanghai to accept all the returnees in a couple of years, in spite of a profound unease about the social consequences of doing so. Even Jinan, a city of 800,000 people, took 54,000 sent-down youths back within 3 years.<sup>50</sup> When the sent-down youths were absent, the cities had re-

46. Deng Xian, 'Zhongguo zhiqing meng' (The dream of China's sent-down youths), *Huaxia Wenzhai* ZK 25, (1993), pp. 1-7; Guo Dong, *op. cit.*; Liu Xiaomeng, *op. cit.*, pp. 725-726.

47. Liu Xiaomeng, *op. cit.*, pp. 822-823.

48. Mei Zhe, *op. cit.*; Wu Yan, *op. cit.*

49. Wang Anyi, 'Destination', in Wang Anyi, *Lapse of Time* (San Francisco: China Books, 1988), pp. 1-24.

50. Jiang Kun *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 1721-1722; Liu Xiaomeng, *op. cit.*, pp. 804-805.

established their normalcy. The surging return of the sent-down youths often disturbed it, as they knocked on the door of the labor bureau everyday, made every bus and public space crowded, and filled the streets with thousands of new wanderers. No doubt they deserved to be back. Ever since the late 1960s, when communist officials had used power or the 'back door' to pull their children back, returning to the city had always been seen by the sent-down youths as a way to get social justice. However, their return in the early reform era added enormous new troubles to the cities, making their own search for urban identity and places difficult.

Aside from all these pains, the returned sent-down youths and their urban counterparts together had to bear the most important social cost of reform: the one-child family. In 1979, when the entire Red Guards generation could marry and was of reproductive age, the Government believed that China had too many people and redefined its birth control policy to restrict one couple to having only one child. While the people in the countryside could often evade this policy by paying moderate fines and taxes, the Red Guards generation risked job opportunities, promotions, and retirement benefits, in addition to the fines, if they had a second child. There was no way for them to avoid the birth control program, because their working units and neighborhood committees were all watching and their pregnancies needed a permit from a local government or its agent.<sup>51</sup> The timing of the birth control policy seemed extremely unfair to them, particularly to the majority who had worked in the countryside. Many of these sent-down youths could have had two children if Mao's revolution had not upset their lives, but precisely when they returned to their cities, they were told to have only one child. It was not the Red Guards generation's fault that China had too many people, rather it was Mao's policy of encouraging excess births that had created the problem. When Deng's reform sought to reduce the population pressure, their generation had to bear the burden.

### The painful economic transition

In Mao's era the Red Guards generation were the poorest of all poor Chinese, living at the lowest income level. This poverty impeded their exploiting the opportunities of Deng's reforms. The increasing costs of economic reform often started with them, further diminishing their capacity for competing in the market. Mao's revolution made them poor, forcing them to live a terrible life without economic liberty or any chance of improvement. It was even more painful when Deng's reform left them poor while Deng's regime glorified the rich.

Ever since they had been forced into society, they had been living on an income that only kept body and soul together. For those in the cities, working life began with an apprenticeship in factories, at 18 *Yuan* a month. When Deng's reform began, they had climbed to the second lowest grade of China's eight-grade salary system for workers, having a monthly salary of less than 40 *Yuan*. In the 1970s and

51. Sha Jicai, ed., *op. cit.*, pp. 482-496.

early 1980s this salary allowed them some small savings, but it often took them 1 or 2 years before they could buy a Shanghai-produced watch or bicycle, each priced at around 150 *Yuan*.<sup>52</sup> Of those who went to the countryside, a minority was assigned to the military-imitated 'farming corps'. They first lived on a monthly subsidy of about 15 *Yuan* and later, when they had to pay for their own food, on a stipend system with '285 dimes' a month, as one sent-down youth mocked it.<sup>53</sup> The majority had been forced into the villages and lived on a 'points system' (*gongfenzhi*) of people's communes. If a sent-down youth became a ten-points laborer (the highest rank), his (or her) 1 day work in most areas was valued at 30–50 cents on the village's account. If he worked over 330 days, at the end of the year he might get 40–60 *Yuan* after the deduction of the costs of the grain and other agricultural products he had received during the year. In a few areas ten-points a day was worth over 1 *Yuan*, but in many areas ten-points a day was worth 20, 10 or only 7 cents. Even worse, the sent-down youths were often not regarded as ten-points laborers.<sup>54</sup>

Those in the cities were among the poorest because they were at the bottom of the urban salary ladder that was framed on seniority. Those in the 'farming corps' were among the poorest, because they were treated as the lowest ranked 'farming soldiers' (*bingtuan zhanshi*), while others in their 'corps' were either 'farming officers' or 'farming workers', living on a slightly higher salary. Those in the villages were amongst the poorest because they, unlike the peasants, did not have children or old parents to balance the consumption of the often inadequate amount of food, although the remittances from their urban parents often made their life better than the peasants'. When Deng's reform began to affect cities in 1984–85, urban individuals experienced new commercial opportunities but limited economic privatization. However, it was difficult for the members of the Red Guards generation to take advantage of these changes. They had been too poor for too long, and a revival of extravagant wedding celebrations from the late 1970s, as Honig and Hershtatter point out, had financially exhausted many of them.<sup>55</sup> They did not have the capital necessary to start a small private business, nor could they borrow capital from the Chinese banking industry which had no procedure to loan to private individuals.

Moreover, this generation's economic position suffered disproportionately because of the increasing economic costs of reform. By 1982 most had got a job in state enterprises or at enterprises under various collective ownerships. By the mid-1980s most of them had got married and received a salary raise, having 50–60 *Yuan* a month, still a low income level. With a heavier family burden, they had to bear the economic costs of reform that rose higher every year. Deng's decentralization gradually forced all enterprises and institutions on their own, and in order to survive they had to produce extra resources by collecting fees. Like everyone else, the Red Guards generation paid new fees, but what they had to pay uniquely was

52. Honig and Hershtatter, *op. cit.*, pp. 142–143.

53. Chen Xiaoguang, 'Zhu sansan qiren qishi' (Some kind of biography of Zhu Sansan), in Jiang Kun *et al.*, pp. 939–951.

54. Wang Mingyi, 'Nanhezhai jiushi' (The old stories at Nanhezhai), in Jiang Kun *et al.*, pp. 122–131.

55. Honig and Hershtatter, *op. cit.*, pp. 137–166.

expensive tuition for their kids. In the mid-1980s, the preschools and elementary schools began to collect 'supporting fees' (*zanzhufei*) that could run several times higher than the parents' monthly income, depending on a school's quality and reputation. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, when their kids were at the middle level of education, the middle and high schools also collected various fees. By 1996, when their kids began to enter universities, the State Commission of Education formally decided that all students had to pay tuition of around 3000 *Yuan* a year.<sup>56</sup> They paid all tuition fees, and seemed to be the one generation paying a disproportionate cost of the education reform. To be sure, in the 1990s the post-Cultural Revolution generation has begun to pay school fees for their children, but they already have a better income and expect the fees.

Another fee that the Red Guards generation paid was for housing. In the mid-1980s, when they began to move out of their parents' apartments or the singles' dormitories of their enterprises, China's housing reform had just started. By the mid-1990s a three-fold payment approach to privatizing housing was settled; the state, enterprise or institution, and individual would each share a part of the cost. For their parents' generation, who lived in the apartments or houses that socialism had offered them, the individual part of the payment would be deducted from their monthly salary or retirement benefit on an installment plan, but the monthly dues were so small that they would probably not have paid their share by the time of death. The Red Guards generation, now eligible for better housing based on seniority, usually had to pay a 15,000–30,000 *Yuan* down-payment for a dwelling, and have the remainder deducted from their monthly salary. This down-payment was often too heavy for them to bear, but they could not afford to give up a long-awaited opportunity because their seniority might not count in the next round of housing distribution. From the late 1980s, when the housing privatization reform gradually deepened, the members of the Red Guards generation often had to borrow heavily from relatives and friends for their housing, thus weakening further their economic position.<sup>57</sup>

To make their situation even worse, China began to have price inflation and overheated consumerism. Ever since Deng's reform started, people had complained about the rise in prices. Between 1985 and 1988, when the inflation rate was at 18.5% annually, the salary of the Red Guards generation increased little. Between 1992 and 1995 their monthly salary had increased to between 300 and 1000 *Yuan*, a range corresponding to differences in the cost of living between cities, but a general 35% annual inflation rate in 35 major cities made their salary raises mean very little.<sup>58</sup> In the meantime, influenced by Western lifestyles or simply by

56. Yang Yiyong, *Gongping yu xiaolu: dangdai zhongguo de shouru fenpei wenti (Justice and Efficiency: the Problem of Social Wealth Distribution in Contemporary China)* (Beijing: Jinri zhongguo chubanshe, 1997), pp. 77–78; Yang Fan, 'Wei disandaren zheng gongdao' (Fight justice for the third generation), *Zhongguo yu shijie* 12, (1997), pp. 12–13.

57. Lu Xueyi et al., 'Zhongguo jianli chengzhen zhufang xintizhi de jiben silu' (Some basic considerations on establishing a new system of China's urban housing), in Xu Xueyi and Li Peilin, eds, *Zhongguo xinshiqi shehui fazhan baogao (Reports on Social Development in the Market Transition in China)* (Shenyang: Liaoning renmin chubanshe, 1997), pp. 633–671; also see: Li Peilin, ed., *Zhongguo xinshiqi jieji jiecheng baogao (Reports on Social Stratification in the Market Transition in China)* (Shenyang: Liaoning renmin chubanshe, 1995), pp. 422–424.

58. Hu Sheng, *Zhongguo gongchandang de qishinian (The Seventy Years of the Chinese Communist Party)* (Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi chubanshe, 1991), p. 509; Yang Yiyong, *op. cit.*, pp. 66–67.



neighbors, a heated consumerism drove many to spend more than they earned. While in the late 1980s a color TV, a refrigerator, or a set of furniture often cost a family 1 or 2 years savings, in the 1990s a stereo sound system, a personal computer, or a complete home interior decoration called for an even heavier outlay. Of course, the Red Guards generation could choose not to purchase these commodities, but unfortunately these goods had become the index of life quality, the fashion of the times, and necessities for the one child.<sup>59</sup> In addition, they had to hire a private tutor to assist the child's education or buy a piano to develop the child's musical talent. They had lost too much and knew the pains too deep, so they did not want their children to be denied. To be sure, their living standards, like that of most Chinese, had increased during the near two decades of reform, but inflation and consumerism have eroded their relative economic position.

Insecure and poorly educated, they were now challenged by rural people and the young. During the Cultural Revolution, the rural youths could not complain of unfairness since the urban kids had been sent down to become peasants, seemingly forever. But, in 1979, when the 'Great Escape' of the sent-down youths swept across the countryside, many rural youths publicly denounced the Communist rural-urban division and demanded to have equal urban employment opportunities. When the Government refused to listen, they entered cities on their own initiative and formed that vast pool of 'floating peasants' (*mingong*) of the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>60</sup> After they floated to the city, they willingly took any jobs they could get, from construction to street cleaning, however low-quality, low-pay, or even degrading. By the early 1990s some 80 million 'floating peasants' closed the backdoor for the Red Guards generation, because the latter had few jobs to fall back on if deprived of their current employment. On the other hand the younger generation were taking the high-quality, high-paying jobs, from bank clerks to computer programmers in private enterprises, joint ventures and state institutions, because they had two assets all employers wanted: youth and education.<sup>61</sup> Their rise blocked the Red Guards generation from moving up from their current status. Sandwiched between the 'floating peasants' and the younger generation, the Red Guards generation often lost out in the job market. They disliked the work that the floating peasants were doing, and often could not have the jobs that the younger generation performed. Once they lost their jobs, they had no place to go.

They might also have a conceptualization problem about the market economy, making their own adaptation to the economic transition difficult. In childhood they learned the classical Confucian contempt for merchants, and in the mid-1950s they saw how communist society despised and punished merchants. Prior to the Cultural Revolution their schools taught them idealism and egalitarianism rather than profit-making; as a result, none of them had wished to become merchants or

59. Zhu Qingfang, 'Zhongguo shiji shenghuo shuiping jiqi mianlin de wenti' (China's real level of living standards and related problems), in Lu Xueyi and Li Peilin, eds, *op. cit.*, pp. 234-266. For a detailed discussion of the overheated consumerism and the influence of Western lifestyles, see: Hooper, *op. cit.*, pp. 35-40, 133-157.

60. Liu Xiaomeng, *op. cit.*, pp. 785-790.

61. Fang Ping, 'Zhongguo xianjieduan de shehui liudong' (Social mobility in contemporary China), in Lu Xueyi and Li Peilin, eds, *op. cit.*, pp. 138-162; Li Yingjie, 'Zhongguo chengxiang guanxi de bianhua de chulu' (The changes and the future of China's urban-rural relations), in Lu Xueyi and Li Peilin, eds, *op. cit.*, pp. 163-194.

businessmen, and many of them admired peasants and workers. Although in the mid-1990s they probably no longer had contempt for merchants, in the 1980s many did hate profit-seeking, and seeing the newly rich private entrepreneurs as indecent, they ignored or refused commercial opportunities.<sup>62</sup> The socialist economy was the only system they knew. Even if they hated it, they still knew its advantages of job security, free medical care and good retirement benefits. These sentiments increased their willingness to endorse socialism when the transition to a market economy caused them uncertainties.<sup>63</sup> For the returned sent-down youths, it was difficult to risk job security for new market opportunities, of which they were ignorant. After many years of hardship in the countryside, they needed time to heal their trauma and readjust to city life. As long as socialism paid them a living wage, there was no imperative to give up a secure life for the market economy.

However, they probably never imagined their socialist economy faced a threat to its very existence. From the 1980s China's rural industry, private enterprises and foreign joint ventures developed and increased their share of the nation's economy. The state and collective enterprises were the major losers in the economic transition because of their low efficiency, overcrowded work force, and shortage of capital. To survive and pay salaries to their workers, the only thing they could do was borrow from banks, which, under socialist obligations, had to lend. Yet, when these loans threatened to destroy the state banking industry, the Government had to force the enterprises to survive by their own devices or even go bankrupt. From the mid-1980s many enterprises began to ask their female workers to take a prolonged maternity leave, usually 1–3 years, on 50–70% of their regular salary.<sup>64</sup> Many factories adopted new names, to which they attached workers under 35 or 40 years old, and bankrupted the old names, throwing older workers out of work and forcing the state to make loans for their living. Many enterprises simply asked their workers over 35 years of age to take earlier retirement on a benefit of 60–70% of their salary.<sup>65</sup> When such measures were implemented, the members of the Red Guards generation were among the first to leave their jobs because many of them were over 35 years old. Moreover, after China decided to embrace completely the market economy in 1992, the lay-off was formally established as a standard measure to get rid of the workers no longer needed. Of all the people subjected to lay-off, the members of the Red Guards generation were most vulnerable, due to their relatively older ages and lower education. In 1996 China's official lay-off figure was 7.5 million. Shanghai, China's largest industrial city, contributed more to this total than any other city. In Shanghai 56.8% of those laid off were between 35 and 45 years old, indicating that the Red Guards generation took the heaviest hit.<sup>66</sup>

These lay-offs reveal that the past distresses of the Red Guards generation

62. Wang Meng, 'Wang Meng, Chen Jianguo, Li Hui tan hongweibing' (A dialogue on the Red Guards between Wang Meng, Cheng Jianguo and Li Hui), *Huaxia Wenzhai* ZK 94, (1996), pp. 5–8.

63. Wu Yan, *op. cit.*; Mei Zhe, *op. cit.*

64. Honig and Hershatter, *op. cit.*, pp. 250–255.

65. Yang Fan, *op. cit.*; Mei Zhe, *op. cit.*

66. Yang Yiyong, *Shiye congjibo: zhongguo jiuje fazhan baogao* (*The Shock Wave of the Unemployment: A Report on China's Employment*) (Beijing: Jinri zhongguo chubanshe, 1997), pp. 232–233.

profoundly shaped their present misfortunes. The case of Chen Jie best illustrates the point. In 1969, after being at her Shanghai middle school for only a year, Chen Jie was sent down to a remote area in Yunnan province. In 1979 she returned and became a worker at a rubber plant. She worked diligently, joined the Party, and never imagined that someday her factory would no longer want her. In 1993, when she was 40 years old, her plant laid her off. She applied for many decent jobs, but was always rejected because she had no specialty or was considered too old. She spent all her savings to establish herself as a hawker, but her business collapsed. Her life became so desperate that she could bear it only for the sake of her son, who was at a school, and her ill, old parents, for whom she felt a deep responsibility. Later, Chen Jie took a job as a nanny, and from there she finally became the director of a neighborhood committee and an officially praised example who has succeeded after being laid off.<sup>67</sup>

There were many who never had a chance to become a director of a neighborhood committee, urban China's lowest ranking official. Zhang Guiying, a woman in Beijing of the same age and having the same kind of education as Chen Jie, has only reached the nanny level after 9 years of being sent down to a remote part of Heilongjiang province, 14 years of working at a chemical fiber factory, and 3 years of lay-off. Zhao Yongwang is a good example of what men could do after being laid off. After 10 years of being sent down and 14 years as a truck driver, Zhao was laid off. He then became a security guard for a year, a grocery hawker for 6 months, a fruit hawker for a year, a seafood hawker for 2 years, and finally ended up as a shoe repairer.<sup>68</sup> What all this demonstrates is that for many of the Red Guards generation, the inadequate education they received and the hardships they endured created lasting difficulties.

## Conclusion

The misfortunes of the Red Guards generation owe much to their pre-Cultural Revolution education. Under the Maoist regime, they were educated to value patriotism, heroism, altruism and idealism, and to sacrifice themselves for socialism. Their intellectual predispositions were manipulated by Mao for his Cultural Revolution. However, when they violently dislocated the society, they shattered the system that could have permitted them to live the life they expected. As a consequence, they were poorly prepared for the future ahead.

Although Deng's reform made amends by allowing them to take a couple of state examinations for university entrance and permitting most to return to cities, it could not make up for all of their suffering. The Government, under enormous population pressure and financial constraints, instead worsened their economic conditions by promoting decentralization and a free market. These reform processes made society more responsible, efficient and competitive; they also elevated the standards for education, specialization and professionalization, beyond the level the Red Guards

67. Wu Yan, *op. cit.*

68. Mei Zhe, *op. cit.*

generation could meet because of Mao's revolution. In the end, this generation lost from both revolution and reform.

To be sure, a portion of this generation did have successes. Some of them, benefiting from their parents' power, suffered little under Mao's regime and moved smoothly to the top in Deng's era. As Xin Haonian points out, they were mostly the leaders of the Red Guards in the 1960s, the 'worker-peasant-soldier' students in the 1970s, and the high-ranking officials, army officers and chief executives of state enterprises in the late 1980s and 1990s.<sup>69</sup> The majority succeeded upon their own efforts. Under Mao's regime many learned knowledge by self-instruction under difficult circumstances, sometimes even at the risk of imprisonment, such reading being forbidden.<sup>70</sup> After Deng restored the state examination, quite a few of them passed it in the late 1970s and later became scholars, writers, artists and officials, or went abroad to pursue doctoral study. However, the ones who received a college-level education through the 'worker-peasant-soldier' system or the state examination and later succeeded in their careers made up only a very small part of the entire generation. Some others, lacking a degree, became low-ranking officials and managers through their performance of labor, but from the mid-1980s they were no longer eligible for promotion because of their lack of the required college diploma.

This generation's distress had a profoundly negative impact on at least one aspect of China's modernization: the development of science, which needs consecutive generations of manpower with formal education, systematic training and laboratory research experience. Few of the Red Guards generation possess these assets. Those who engaged in self-instruction during Mao's era read mostly in the humanities, arts and social sciences, because mastering scientific knowledge without a teacher's instruction and laboratory experiments was difficult. Although some of them later entered universities as science majors, they did so mostly in their late twenties and early thirties, having passed the best ages for scientific discoveries when they completed their advanced studies. As a result, the Red Guards generation contributed only a few scientists to the country. In 1997 the age group between 35 and 45 years old made up only 6.3% of China's over one million senior scientists.<sup>71</sup> In 1998, only 5% of the total 3700 'academic leaders' (*xueshu daitouren*) in China's research-oriented universities were younger than 50, and these universities had a shortage of professors aged between 40 and 50.<sup>72</sup> Even if all the overseas members of this generation return, they cannot change the overall picture because few of them are scientists. As Yin Hongbiao points out, Mao's Cultural Revolution caused a middle-age vacuum in science talent.<sup>73</sup>

69. Xin Haonian, 'Deng hou zhongguo: laosan jie ling fengsao' (Post-Deng China: the rise to prominence of the 'old three classes'), *Shijie Ribao*, 30 March 1997. For some cases of this particular part of the Red Guards generation, see: Zhong Weiguang, *op. cit.*; Lu Ren, 'Guyuan sanshier nian qian: wenge zayi' (My homeland of thirty-two years ago: some recollections of the Cultural Revolution), *Huaxia Wenzhai* ZK 151, (1998), pp. 1-7.

70. Shi Weimin and He Lan, *op. cit.*, pp. 301-305; Xiao Xiao, 'Wenhua genmin zhong de dixiao dushu yundong' (The underground reading movement during the Cultural Revolution), *Huaxiao Wenzhai* ZK 136, (1997), pp. 5-14.

71. Shijie Ribao, 'Rencai duanceng wenti' (The problems of talent shortage), *Shijie Ribao*, 24 January 1998.

72. Yang Xiaosheng, 'Duanceng weixie gongheguo de mingtian' (The break [in the scientist generations] is threatening the tomorrow of the People's Republic), *Huaxia Wenzhai* 399, (1998), pp. 3-8.

73. Yin Hongbiao, 'Ren dao zhongnian de hongweibing shidai' (The middle-aged Red Guards generation), *Haixia wenzhai* ZK 101, (1996), pp. 11-13.

For China's political culture, the socioeconomic pains of the Red Guards generation have produced many supporters of reform and fighters for democracy. In 1976 the members of this generation were the main participants in the April Fifth Movement, an event which partially inspired Deng's colleagues to remove the 'Gang of Four' and end the Cultural Revolution. In 1979, it was again the members of this generation that started the Democracy Wall Movement and initiated post-Mao China's cries for democracy. In Deng's era, the majority of this generation are firm supporters of reform.<sup>74</sup> Their sufferings prepared them to realize that China must change and can never go back to the Maoist society; idealism is still alive in many who are willing to support reform even though they themselves might be disadvantaged by it. This kind of determination and idealism makes them perhaps the most important generation for China's present and future.

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74. Guo Dong, *op. cit.*; Huang Jie and Mou Xiaoguang, *op. cit.*; Tan Can *et al.*, *op. cit.*; Zhou Jin, *op. cit.*