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## The Down to the Countryside Movement: Source Selection and Chinese Rustication

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Amidst factional tensions within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that fomented the Chinese Cultural Revolution beginning in 1966, Chairman Mao Zedong sought to purge China of party bureaucrats that “were taking the capitalist road.”<sup>1</sup> A means by which Mao sought to purge capitalist influence in China was the rustication program named *shàngshān xià xiāng yùndòng*, the Down to the Countryside Movement (or, more literally, the movement “up to the mountains and down to the villages”), sending urban youth to rural areas. The ostensible foundation of the movement sought to educate urban youth with the lessons of agrarian life in rural China; however, the movement also served a distinctly political purpose. Mao initiated the program prior to the start of the Cultural Revolution, but its implementation accelerated sharply in 1968 amidst the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>2</sup> The foundational English-language work on Chinese rustication, written by Thomas Bernstein in 1977, offers a romantic and idealistic narrative of the movement’s success. However, the experience of one sent-down youth, Jung Chang, author of *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*, along with interview-based studies by Helena K. Rene and Michel Bonnin, offer unique insight regarding the Down to the

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013) 542.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas P. Bernstein, *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages: The Transfer of Youth from Urban to Rural China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977) 2.

Countryside Movement that complicates the traditionally sympathetic narrative of the movement's motivations and effects.

Bernstein characterizes the Down to the Countryside Movement as a manifestation of the CCP's developmental and ideological goals. More specifically, Bernstein argues that rustication was designed to reduce overurbanization and to develop rural areas with the labor of these educated, sent-down youth.<sup>3</sup> Contributing to his rose-colored perspective on the Down to the Countryside Movement, Bernstein employed accounts from "the Chinese media, interviews with former residents, and visitors' reports."<sup>4</sup> Pairing first-hand accounts and public documents, however, Bernstein's source material in *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages: The Transfer of Youth from Urban to Rural China* has limited contemporary utility and academic significance. A review of his book published in 1978 found Bernstein's strategy balanced, arguing that because "interviews [with former residents] reflect the more negative aspects of the resettlement program, their views must be carefully evaluated."<sup>5</sup> Though the review acknowledges Bernstein's analysis was significant in that it somewhat offset the narrative promulgated by Chinese media that "generally [described] the positive aspects of the program,"<sup>6</sup> even Bernstein's analysis may have given too much credence to the party narrative.

Later writings on the Down to the Countryside Movement depart from Bernstein in their assessments of both the motivations and effectiveness of

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<sup>3</sup> Bernstein, *Up to the Mountains...*, 10.

<sup>4</sup> Bernstein, *Up to the Mountains...*, 12; Pan Yihong, "An Examination of the Goals of the Rustication Program in the People's Republic of China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 11, no. 31 (2002): 362; Ting-Hong Wong, review of *The Lost Generation: The Rustication of China's Educated Youth (1968-1980)*, by Michel Bonnin. *Journal of the History of Education Society* 46, no. 4 (2017): 547.

<sup>5</sup> David D. Buck, review of *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages*, by Thomas P. Bernstein. *The Oral History Review* 6, no. 1 (1978): 75.

<sup>6</sup> Buck, review of *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages*, 75-6.

rustication. Unlike Bernstein, who attributed the ideological motivations behind rustication to “remaking men” and “combatting elitism,”<sup>7</sup> French sinologist Michel Bonnin, author of *The Lost Generation: The Rustication of China’s Educated Youth*, writes that “there was... a very clear link between regaining control over the Red Guards and the massive rustication of young people.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore, according to Bonnin, Mao’s decision to send down Chinese youth was a move to reconsolidate power during the Cultural Revolution, as he hoped to move the troublesome Red Guards, a source of unrest, away from urban areas. Bonnin notes such a justification was never expressed in public documentation or in official media, possibly explaining why such an explanation was overlooked by Bernstein.<sup>9</sup>

It is evident that source material played a significant role in the narratives surrounding the effectiveness and success of the Down to the Countryside Movement. Unlike Bernstein, Helena K. Rene, author of *China’s Sent Down Generation: Public Administration and the Legacies of Mao’s Rustication Program*, did not use Chinese public documents in her book on the movement. Instead, Rene cites Xiaomeng Liu’s untranslated *A History of the Rusticated Youths: The Tidal Wave, 1966-1980* as a justification for leaving out studies of official (and often inaccessible) documents for their “limited and inexact descriptions.”<sup>10</sup> In place of official publications, Rene conducted an extensive series of personal interviews with sent-down youth to analyze the movement’s implications, identifying where their accounts corresponded.<sup>11</sup> Bonnin employed a similar approach,

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<sup>7</sup> Bernstein, *Up to the Mountains...*, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Michel Bonnin, *The Lost Generation: The Rustication of China’s Educated Youth (1968-1980)*, trans. Krystyna Horko (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2013) 20.

<sup>9</sup> Bonnin, *The Lost Generation*, 20-22.

<sup>10</sup> Helena K. Rene, *China’s Sent-Down Generation: Public Administration and the Legacies of Mao’s Rustication Program* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2013) 104.

<sup>11</sup> Rene, *China’s Sent-Down Generation*, 104.

structuring his study around oral histories and interviews. Although Bonnin did evaluate official documents, he deliberately marginalized government sources to privilege the experiences of those that lived through rustication. Bonnin acknowledges that he had to use other sources to verify interviewees' claims, but he also states that "the facts reported by the interviewees, as well as their judgments of them, have overwhelmingly proved to be correct."<sup>12</sup> As a result, unlike Bernstein, Rene and Bonnin more rigorously analyzed the Down to the Countryside Movement and accounted for the deficit in veracity associated with Chinese media reports.

The conclusions regarding rustication in Bernstein's, Rene's, and Bonnin's writings differ in accordance with their choices of source material. While Rene and Bonnin are skeptical of the benefits of rustication, Bernstein's work represents the "great deal of enthusiasm [toward rustication] in the West" at the time of publication.<sup>13</sup> Bernstein's enthusiasm led him to investigate whether rustication could be used to improve conditions in third-world countries, finding merit in its contribution "to the reduction of urban-rural differences."<sup>14</sup> He writes that it was a positive sign that being sent-down seemed to mark a permanent transition to peasant life for most participants.<sup>15</sup> To him, rustication was an effective policy, attributing its success to how the movement fostered a sense of class openness that defied a rigid social hierarchy and could "facilitate the integration of outsiders."<sup>16</sup> Jung Chang's account of rustication, however, contrasts heavily with Bernstein's rosy depiction. Chang acknowledges that the operation was "swiftly and supremely well

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<sup>12</sup> Bonnin, *The Lost Generation*, xxiv-xxv.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiii.

<sup>14</sup> Bernstein, *Up to the Mountains...*, 293.

<sup>15</sup> Bernstein, *Up to the Mountains...*, 3.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

organized,” but ultimately ineffective.<sup>17</sup> She writes that the “urban-rural differences” the policy was intended to correct persisted. Speaking of her personal experience, Chang writes that she “hardly got to know the peasants in [her] village,”<sup>18</sup> and even those that were sent down long before her, the “old city youth,” were unhappy and segregated themselves from the peasants.<sup>19</sup> From Chang’s account, it seems that such separation was mutual, as neither group saw much purpose in mixing; the openness Bernstein contended occurred was absent. Furthermore, not many sent-down individuals ever permanently adjusted to peasant life. Chang writes that the competition to return from rural areas was “fierce,” since many people were “desperate to come back.” Chang herself would return by gaining admission to Sichuan University in 1973.<sup>20</sup> And while Bernstein’s study had glossed over the suffering of sent-down individuals, Chang emphasizes it. She notes that she had dealt with skin rash,<sup>21</sup> altitude sickness,<sup>22</sup> and the risk of rape while hitchhiking to the countryside.<sup>23</sup> Chang’s *Wild Swans* may be just one autobiographical text, but its legitimacy is bolstered by Rene and Bonnin’s subsequent scholarship.

Rene agrees with Chang’s assessment that rustication was well-implemented but ineffective. She argues that rustication had been “tightly managed,” citing two separate interviewees from cadre families who noted a complete lack of loopholes. According to one of them, “if you stayed in the city, you [would] have no job, no pay, no food... your only option [was]

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<sup>17</sup> Jung Chang, *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (London: Williams Collins, 2016), 382.

<sup>18</sup> Jung Chang, *Wild Swans*, 387.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 402-4.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 458-9.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 386.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 400.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 398.

to mooch off your parents.”<sup>24</sup> Rene also finds rustication to have inflicted immense suffering: hunger and disease were prevalent, while medicines were not; women were often subject to sexual abuse, and suicides were not infrequent.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Bonnin finds that rustication failed to change those individuals that were sent down. He lists the challenges that those that had been sent down rarely overcame: poor housing conditions, difficult agricultural labor, risks of disease or injury, and a lack of leisure or cultural amenities.<sup>26</sup> Bonnin also found that the relationship between the peasants and those that had been sent-down was strained, and it did not promote easy integration.<sup>27</sup> In contrast to Chang and Rene, Bonnin does describe rustication as “low on organization,” but this is in reference to integration more than the process of being sent-down itself.<sup>28</sup> As a result, the accounts of Chang, Rene, and Bonnin all refute Bernstein’s enthusiasm for the Down to the Countryside Movement.

Wisely selecting source material is vital when writing about the Down to the Countryside Movement. Though Bernstein deserves credit for being the first prominent Western academic to study rustication, his methods left much to be corrected regarding the narrative and history surrounding rustication during the Cultural Revolution. The personal narratives present in Chang’s *Wild Swans*, Rene’s *China’s Sent Down Generation*, and Bonnin’s *The Lost Generation* collectively demonstrate the importance of accounting for the sometimes-deceptive nature of CCP records during the Cultural Revolution. This conclusion also emphasizes the importance of incorporating interviews and personal accounts into the study of modern Chinese history. As history scholars continue to research China, they must remain vigilant of the authorship and veracity of their sources, ensuring

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<sup>24</sup> Helena K. Rene, *China’s Sent-Down Generation*... 114.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>26</sup> Michel Bonnin, *The Lost Generation*... 238-65.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 265-77.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 78-9.

their accounts don't obscure important realities surrounding historical events of interest.

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