

BOOK REVIEW

Emily Honig and Xiaojian Zhao,
Across the Great Divide:

The Sent-Down Youth Movement in Mao's China, 1968-1980
(Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019)

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*The legendary feature of the grand history eventually faded, leaving individuals to take responsibility for their own fate. The glittering spectacle gradually dimmed. Life exposed its mundane aspect, which turned out to be gloomy.*¹

The send-down movement was undoubtedly a “grand history,” involving approximately 17 million youths and their families, cloaked in the revolutionary rhetoric in newspapers and sunny images on posters, and lasting almost two decades. Nevertheless, as Wang Anyi succinctly observes, its “glittering spectacle” eventually dimmed, and its “mundane” aspect resurfaced and provoked public concerns. Even before the movement ended, the sent-down youths, their parents, and officials from source cities and sent-down places took pains to come to terms with its detrimental effects on individual lives and local communities. Their efforts, though strategic and commendable, salvaged little from the dismal failure of the movement. Millions of weary sent-down youths returned to cities empty-handed, and the heavy, difficult legacies of the movement are still lingering now.

Across the Great Divide: The Sent-down Youth Movement in Mao's China, 1968-1980 by Emily Honig and Xiaojian Zhao examines one of the most important mundane aspects of the grand history—the urban-rural divide and the complex interactions across the divide: the youths, their parents, Shanghai officials, the local governments, and peasants made difficult efforts to improve the dire situation they all were stuck in by negotiating the policy, actively working with each other, and, sometimes, engaging in mutual conflicts. Their efforts were constrained by the political categorization, power structures, and social inequality in the Mao years, and their actions also reflected the patterns of their mentality and practice shaped by the urban-rural divide.

Their book is a significant addition to the scholarship on the send-down movement. Early scholarly works in the late 1970s and early 1980s were all done by scholars outside of China, who had to rely on limited textual sources.² Since the new century, such scholarship has revived both within and outside of China, largely thanks to the new availability of various sources and data including archives, local gazetteers, unpublished memoirs, self-published magazines and newsletters, interviews, large-scale surveys, and ethnographic observations.

The most remarkable collective data work is the archival compilation led by Jin Dalu and Jin Guangyao in Shanghai. Their work somewhat resembles the “history workshop movement;” they mobilized the former sent-down youths to read through a massive number of local gazetteers to find relevant information. The main final product of their product is a seven-volume compilation of new gazetteers and many unpublished archival materials.³ They also mentored a younger generation of Chinese scholars who had no life experience in the movement but have strong professional interests in the topic.⁴ Less visible but equally important is their instrumental role in helping other scholars acquire accesses to archives and people, hosting workshops at Fudan University and facilitating communications. Many scholars including Honig, Zhao, and myself greatly benefit from their persistent data work and selfless help.

The scholarship has evolved along three paths: new disciplinary perspectives, special topics, and regional foci. The “classic” perspective of historical studies continues to flourish,⁵ but scholars from other disciplinary backgrounds have brought in new perspectives including sociology, cultural studies, public administration, and gender studies. In contrast to the early “general history” introductions, new studies tend to focus on specific topics such as literary representations of the movement,⁶ impacts of the movement on the youths’ life courses,⁷ and the youths’ memory of their past⁸. The new studies also develop region-specific scopes, including both the source cities—especially Shanghai⁹—and sent-down places, such as Heilongjiang and Xinjiang.¹⁰ All three paths, which certainly intersect and intertwine, lead to a richer, more multifaceted understanding of the Chinese state—including the central leadership and local governments—and the youths and their families.

Honig’s and Zhao’s book has advanced the scholarship along all three paths: it articulates a new perspective, examines a few specific topics, and develops a regional focus on Shanghai.

Across the Great Divide puts the urban-rural divide at the center of its analytical narrative and examines human interactions across the divide, including economic relations, policy adjustments, individuals’ perceptions, and even sexual relations. This focus is not entirely new, but *Across the Great Divide* is the first book-length monograph that centralizes this

topic; it also adds new materials, analyses, and insights to our understanding of the topic.

One particularly interesting addition is *weiwentuan* (literally the “comfort teams”), delegations sent by the Shanghai government to stay in the sent-down places for shorter or longer periods of time. The *weiwentuan* was intended to deal with all kinds of problems the Shanghai youths encountered in the rural areas, and it functioned as a mechanism to link the youths to their parents, different bureaus in the Shanghai government, local governments in the sent-down places, and local peasants. They were not impartial. Rather, they were sympathetic to the Shanghai youths and argued on their behalf with the local cadres. But *weiwentuan* could appeal to the local governments because they provided accesses to Shanghai’s economic, material, and medical resources, which local officials otherwise could not acquire. Nonetheless, they were not always thanked. The book records vivid details of local officials’ complaints about the *weiwentuan*’s excessive intervention; at the later stage of the movement, local officials even openly resisted the presence of *weiwentuan* (Chapter 6).

To some extent, *weiwentuan* alleviated problems caused by the urban-rural divide by forwarding local requests for more materials to Shanghai and protecting the Shanghai youths. But they also ironically reinforced the divide by siding with the Shanghai youths and government. Analytically, the story of *weiwentuan* functions as a thread that runs through different parts of the whole narrative. Moreover, the authors offer a lively, convincing image of *weiwentuan* as human beings rather than cogs in a machine. The analysis presents their frustration of being sent to “backward” places as a form of punishment, their sincere sympathy with youths of their children’s age, and their sometimes condescending and even hostile attitudes toward the local governments.

This new perspective sheds light on some specific topics. The book consists of five substantive chapters, which deal with six different topics: the mobilization of youths, accommodating the youths in their sent-down places, economic interactions, sexual relations, education and vocational training opportunities, and the final failure of the movement.

Their analysis of two topics is particularly perceptive. In Chapter 3, the authors focus on the economic interactions across the rural-urban divide, especially how the sent-down place governments used the Shanghai youths’ presence, their family connections, and the Shanghai government to circumvent the command economy restrictions to develop the local community. The chapter presents lucid, sometimes comical stories of how local leaders almost immediately realized the potential value of the Shanghai youth, how they scanned through the youths’ personal dossiers to identify their family connections, how they repeatedly sent requests to the Shanghai government in the name of “the youths’ urgent need,” and how the Shanghai government was annoyed but remained cooperative.

The most powerful illustration of the authors’ new perspective is their analysis of sexual assaults in Chapter 4. The

conventional trope of sexual assaults is that the local cadres or military officers molested and raped young female sent-down youths. This trope was backed by some high-profile cases revealed in the 1973 national campaign against such assaults and popularized by novels like Zhu Lin’s *The Road of Life*. The authors certainly do not deny the existence of those cases, but they point out that the 1973 campaign started as a public accusation of Corps officers’ misconduct but ended up being a disproportionate punishment on powerless male peasants. In contrast, village officials rarely appeared in the records. This surprising fact even contradicted the popular trope of the local bad-apple officials raping Shanghai girls. But it makes sense when one considers that the local cadres rather than peasants made the accusations and arrests. Most of their assaults and harassments were not reported and went unpunished because they might offer opportunities to hush the female sent-down youths. More striking is that male sent-down youths were largely immune from punishment, which ironically corroborated another popular trope: a male sent-down youth fell in love with a local girl (always a “Xiaofang,” as in a popular song), sometimes even impregnated her (a “karma,” as in Ye Xin’s novel title), but eventually got away without moral and legal responsibility.

This rectification campaign, with legitimate intent, undoubtedly generated a latent consequence of reinforcing and reproducing the urban-rural divide *and* the power structure in the rural communities. This view is certainly not intended to acquit the culprits or deny the rapes, as a cursory reader might misinterpret, but to point out a problem similar to the mass incarceration of African Americans in the United States (in fact, the authors make this analogy on page 109). The authors conclude: “As the sexual victimization of female sent-down youths became symbolic of the bankruptcy of the movement, the demonization of male peasants became emblematic of the impossibility of crossing the divide between urban and rural China” (p.116).

The authors’ new perspective and topics are realized in an in-depth study with a regional focus on Shanghai. This choice is justified not only because Shanghai was the biggest source city but also because Shanghai was arguably the most advanced industrial and commercial city in the Mao years. The urban-rural divide experienced by the Shanghai youths was even more dramatic. In the meantime, the authors do not lose sight of the class divide among the youths and their families. For example, working-class families were emboldened by their red class background to resist the mobilization openly, and the lower-class, shantytown residents in Yaoshuilong also fiercely defied the government’s order because even those “sub-proletariats” in straitened circumstances in Shanghai dreaded going to the more impoverished places.

Overall, in *Across the Great Divide*, Emily Honig and Xiaojian Zhao masterfully play out rich details and nuances underneath the “grand history.” The book is based on a deep, meticulous analysis of newly obtained archival materials and interviews. The account they offer is filled with insightful analysis of politics, human feelings, and interactions. It will surely become

a must-read for anyone interested in the send-down movement, the Mao years, and related topics.

Here I invite the authors to discuss a question to deepen our understanding of this important historical event in particular and large-scale campaigns in the Mao years in general. The authors focus on *chadui* youths for good reasons stated in the introduction, but I wonder how the processes described in the book worked differently for the farm youths to the Production and Construction Corps and, in this particular case, to the Shanghai suburban farms in Chongming and enclave farms like Haifeng. More specifically, how did the institutional settings of the farms—semi-military Corps and/or the reclamation system—shape individual experiences, Shanghai government’s strategies, and some mechanisms (such as *weiwentuan*)? I know this question should be answered by a full-length article or even a book, but the authors’ thoughts on this would be appreciated.

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¹ Anyi Wang, “Wang Anyi Huiyi Zhiqing Suiyue: Qingchun De Fengrao He Pingji,” http://culture.ifeng.com/redian/detail_2014_03/23/35053205_0.shtml.

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

³ Jin, Dalu, and Guangyao Jin. *Zhongguo Xinfangzhi Zhishiqingnian Shangshanxiang Shiliao Jilu* 中国新方志知识青年上山下乡史料辑录. Shanghai, China: Shanghai Shudian Chubanshe 上海书店出版社, 2014.

⁴ Haitao Yi, “Xianzhuang, Ziliao Yu Zhanwang: Shanghai Zhiqing Zhiyuan Xinjiang Yanjiu Shuping,” *Qingnian Xuebao*, no. 4 (2018); “Initial Explorations on the Allowance of Shanghai Educated Youth Arrangement at the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps During 1963-1966,” *Contemporary China History Studies* 25, no. 6 (2018); Dalu Jin and Shenbao Lin, *Shanghai Zhishiqingnian Shangshanxiang Yundong Jishilu (1968-1981)* (Shanghai: Shanghai Bookstore Publishing House, 2014).

⁵ Michel Bonnin, *Génération perdue: Le mouvement d'envoi des jeunes instruits à la campagne en Chine, 1968-1980*, *Civilisations et sociétés*, (Paris: Editions de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 2004); Xiaomeng Liu, *History of China's Educated Youth: The Big Wave (1966-1980)* (Beijing: Contemporary China Publishing House, 2009); Yizhuang Ding, *History of China's Educated Youth: The First Wave (1953-1968)* (Beijing: Contemporary China Publishing House, 2009).

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⁹ Jin and Lin, *Shanghai Zhishiqingnian Shangshanxiang Yundong Jishilu (1968-1981)*.

¹⁰ Yi, “Xianzhuang, Ziliao Yu Zhanwang: Shanghai Zhiqing Zhiyuan Xinjiang Yanjiu Shuping.”

Response

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Xu Bin's thoughtful review of our book invites speculation on how the experience of urban youth sent to state farms (including Military Production and Construction Corps) differed from that of youth assigned to village production teams. No prior study of the sent-down youth movement emphasizes the difference between state farm youth and those sent to production brigades; most often they are treated as an undifferentiated category of sent-down youth. In the case of Shanghai, of the more than 1.1 million youth sent down to the countryside between 1968-78, slightly more than half went to state or military farms, with just fewer than half sent to production teams.¹

As explained in the "Introduction," *Across the Great Divide* focuses on Shanghai youth sent to *chadui luohu* (插队落户) in remote production teams, where they lived and worked in villages and earned daily work points, the value of which depended on local harvests. The book does not include youth from rural areas returning to their home villages — the "returning-to-the-village" youth (*huixiang qingnian* 回乡青年), graduates of city/county schools sent to nearby communes and villages, and youth who joined their relatives in the countryside through their own arrangements (*touqin kaoyou* 投亲靠友). Experiences of these groups of sent-down youth remain to be explored, and will most likely produce different conclusions from ours based on *chadui luohu*. We decided to focus on Shanghai youth sent to remote rural villages because they were the ones who traveled across China's regional divides, living and working for sometimes almost a decade with villagers in a world they would otherwise never have known. This distinctive form of *chadui* also closely reflects the original ideals of the movement during Cultural Revolution, articulated by Mao and elaborated in official government documents and newspapers.

Although many urban youth were sent to state and military farms located in remote areas, these farms were state-managed enterprises independent of local jurisdiction. During the Cultural Revolution, especially in 1968 and 1970, more than one hundred thousand Shanghai youth were sent to farms in Yunnan, Heilongjiang, Inner Mongolia, Anhui, and Jiangxi. They cleared forests, leveled hills and mountains, built dams and large irrigations systems, and turned vast tracts of barren land into plantations of rubber, forest, grains, and other crops. They experienced harsh working conditions similar to that of those who were sent to village settlements in the same region.

The singular most important difference between state farms (including those operated by the military, state, provincial, and

municipal governments) and rural communes was the former's status as government enterprises. Before the emergence of private enterprises in the 1980s, the great divide that separated China's urban and rural societies was reinforced by different economic systems. State-owned units offered their employees job security, a fixed salary and working hours, health care, paid vacation and sick leave, and in some cases subsidized housing, none of which were attainable by village collectives in the communes. The state planned economy prohibited trade and gave priority to urban industrial development. Rural communes were required to grow and sell grain to feed urban residents at extremely low prices set by the central government. This difference set state farm youth apart from those in the village settlements. The *chadui* youth did not have jobs; they had to support themselves by earning work points laboring in the fields, most of them unable to earn enough to cover the cost of their own grain. The lack of material goods in remote rural regions certainly impacted all youth sent there. While most parents in Shanghai sent food stuff and daily necessities to their children in the countryside, the state farm youth often paid for what they needed; some saved money to supplement their family income. A fixed income and job security may have made state farm assignments more appealing than village settlements.

At the same time, though, it was much harder for the state farm workers to leave and transfer to urban jobs. For example, a large number of Shanghai youth sent to villages in Yunnan were recruited by local industrial and agencies shortly after their arrival; some were relocated to more desirable urban areas. In contrast, mobility among state workplaces was highly restricted. Besides the military and colleges, state enterprises could not recruit members from different divisions. The youth were expected to stay on the farms for life, although within the farm they could be selected to teach in schools, work in factories, offices, and hospitals, or move up to leadership positions. Lack of opportunities to leave and move to the cities was a major source of frustration among youth on the farms. Disillusionment intensified when *chadui* youth began to return to the cities in large numbers in the late 1970s, triggering strikes of youth on state farms.

State farms also differed from the communes in terms of structure and organization. Managed by cadres under the auspices of the government or military, work and activities were delegated through squads, platoons, and regiments. Living and working with large groups of fellow sent-down youth cultivated a strong sense of community, but it also limited privacy and individual freedom. As employees of the state, Shanghai youth in remote areas were eligible to visit their families once every two years with salaries paid and travel

expenses reimbursed, but unauthorized leaves or overstaying the visits were subject to a pay cut and administrative warning. Overall state farm youth spent far less time with their families in the city. After fall harvests the farms would undertake large construction projects and organize group activities, while most villagers could enjoy some leisure in winter enabling youth on production teams more time to go home.

Of course, many of the issues that plagued the relocation of urban youth to villages were also found on state farms, from poor quality of food, inadequate housing, to abuses. As government enterprises, however, large state farms possessed resources and equipment to which village production teams had no access. For example, the farms could use their own money, products, vehicles, and trained technicians as well as connections with government agencies in large cities to exchange and purchase goods and materials and transport whatever they could get to the farms. Many village production teams, however, did not have enough left to feed their own members after contributing the amount of grain demanded by the state.

Backed by the powerful state bureaus and the military, state farms held an administrative advantage to negotiate with local governments. Shanghai *weiwentuan* also visited youth on the farms and suggested improvements, but they largely relied on farm leadership to solve their problems. Besides their location and agricultural-based production, the fact that state farms were government institutions makes it difficult to define them in a clear-cut urban-rural divide that was the central concern of our book.

State farms deserve academic inquiries of their own, including their history (which extends back to the 1950's), how they changed over time, and the multiple types of farms. In the first three decades of the PRC, in addition to the farms regulated by the military and agriculture and forest bureaus of the central government, large cities, provincial and district governments also established farms for various purposes. Affiliation with the military or central government bureaus could mean more resources, but locally administered farms could enjoy greater flexibility. Farms in the suburbs of Shanghai were unique. By 1972, Shanghai had thirteen new farms under its jurisdiction, most in nearby Chongming, Baoshan, Nanhui, and Fengxian counties. Shanghai also had a few farms in other provinces, including *Shanghaishi huangshan chalinchang* in Anhui. Shanghai residents had very different perceptions of the farms in the suburbs of the metropolis and those in remote regions of Heilongjiang and Yunnan. Most of the farms near the city were built responding to “problems” that “could not be solved” in remote rural areas. In addition to the fixed wage and standard benefits for state employees, it was advantageous to be in closer proximity to Shanghai. Youth on these farms could find most goods and materials available to city residents in farm stores, and a trip to the city would take only a few hours. Approval for requests for family visits or medical treatment in the city were fairly easy to obtain, especially during slack seasons. Under the jurisdiction of the Shanghai municipal government, these farms were able to build hospitals and schools and develop their own industries. The Shanghai government also found ways to

transfer some of the farm youth back to the city. For example, training programs developed by the Department of Education recruited youth directly from suburban farms and trained them to teach in the city's schools. Transitioning back to the city toward the end of the movement through *dingti* (顶替) enabled youth to take jobs vacated after the retirement of their parents.

An issue worth exploring in future research is the relationship between urban youth and the farm authorities. The military affiliated farms were unique: urban youth were workers and military personnel the administrators. While some youth were promoted to lead their squads, platoons, and regiments or selected to work in administrative offices, they could not obtain the far more desirable military status. Although assignments to the farms were considered temporary for military staff and they usually did not work in the field, their authority was not to be challenged. Non-military state farms did not have this hierarchy. While villagers in the communes often viewed urban youth as outsiders and were reluctant to promote them to leadership positions, state farms relied on cadres selected from the youth to organize daily activities. This suggests another question: what kind of relationship did city governments have with the state and army farms? Shanghai dispatched *weiwentuan* to both state and army farms. How did it deal with farm authorities, especially those affiliated with the military, differently from those in the communes?

A final issue to be addressed in future research concerns state farms' roles and responses to state policies related to sent-down youth. This is exemplified by the 1973 state directive on harm to sent-down youth, more specifically dealing with sexual assault of female youth. As discussed in Chapter 4 of *Across the Great Divide*, this directive was a result of reports to the Central Committee about cadres on state and military farms sexually abusing urban women on the farms. After promulgation of the directive, officials at the provincial, district, and county levels were pressured to expose and report cases. One result was that a large number of male villagers, including ones who held uncompensated village level cadre positions, were investigated; those found guilty faced lengthy terms in jail. Unlike the *chadui* youth who were largely confined in their villages far away from county or commune seats, youth on state farms lived in more centralized dormitories close to stores, activity centers, and administrative offices and they participated in more organized activities such as conferences, sports games, and performances. These group activities provided opportunities for youth to interact with farm leaders. Memoirs, collections of letters, and memoirs published by farm youth could be utilized to reconstruct their daily lives, although these personal accounts reveal little about sexual abuses. Nonetheless, these documents could help understand interactions between the youth and farm authorities.

A related issue concerns the regulation of intimacies involving sent-down youth on state farms. Farm authorities advocated for late marriage and were very concerned about sexual activities involving urban youth. If housing for married couples was a concern at the beginning, this must have changed later, as an increasing number of youth were in their late twenties. By the

late 1970s, a significant number of state farm youth were either married or planned to get married, including individuals holding leadership positions. Getting married, especially with someone on the farm, could imply a lifetime commitment to the farm. In Yunnan, we met a few Shanghai youth who never returned to the city. One was the head of the farm hospital; all of them were married before the return to the city movement toward the end of the sent-down youth movement.

The sources that we considered most valuable are the ones that were produced at the local level, often hand written, that offer original accounts of the events. In the context of sexual abuse, we paid careful attention to investigation files that include original accusations, confessions, interrogations, and testimonies. Unfortunately, high profile cases often left little trace at the local level, and we did not seek access to documents that were held by the military or the Agriculture and Forest Bureau. The two highly publicized sexual abuse cases that supposedly triggered the 1973 “campaign could be a starting point. They are strikingly similar: both criminals were high-ranking cadres, both used their power to lure and sexually abuse a large number of female sent-down youth, and both were publically sentenced and executed. How and why were these two cadres chosen at this particular moment? We learned that these cases were overturned (*ping fan* 平反) after the Cultural Revolution, which raises even more questions. It would be

¹ Shanghai laodong zhi, in Jin Dalu and Jin Guangyao eds., *Zhongguo xin difangzhi: zhishi qingnian shangshan xiexiang*

invaluable to locate the original investigation files of these two cases.

As Xu Bin acknowledges, a historical account of the sent-down youth on state and army farms requires an entirely new research project, one that could draw not only on archival records (including the published collections of archival materials about sent-down youth in Jiangxi, Heilongjiang, and Yunnan), but also the extensive material currently available on the websites hosted by sent-down youth associations in cities throughout China, such as the *Shanghai nongchang zhiqing wang*: <http://www.shnczq.org/>). Municipal, county, and provincial gazetteers also include accounts of state and army farms. There are also more than a dozen published collections by youth sent to state farms, such as *Neimenggu shengchan jianshi bingtuan xiezhen*, edited by Shi Wemin, *Nanwang Makuli: Heilongjiang sheng Jiangchuan nongchang zhiqing huililu*, edited by Zhu Mingyuan, *Zhiqing huimou yinlonghe*, edited by Shen Guoming, as well as provincial compilations of materials on sent-down youth, such as the *Heilongjiangsheng zhishi qingnian shangshan xixiang dashiji*.

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