BOOK REVIEW
Bin Xu, *Chairman Mao's Children: Generation and the Politics of Memory in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021)

Alice Yu, University of Arizona

Since the mid-1960s, the sent-down program, which re-settled middle school graduates in the countryside, became a long-term policy in China. At its height, between 1968 and 1979, the program sent approximately 17 million urban youths to the countryside.[1] These youths, "the educated youths" (*zhishiqingnian*, or "*zhiqing*" for short), comprised the generation born in the late 1940s through the 1950s.[2] Not only did the rustication of *zhiqing* effect the goals and outcomes of the sent-down program, but the ways that they remembered their experiences also affected how the historical event is narrated and evaluated in the public sphere. In the decades since, scholarly works on the Cultural Revolution and the sent-down movement have revisited *zhiqing* memories.

Bin Xu's book *Chairman Mao's Children: Generation and the Politics of Memory in China* examines a variety of means, events, sites, and languages that *zhiqing* used to remember their youth. The study is based on Xu's fieldwork in Shanghai from 2013 and highlights the "difficult memories" of the *zhiqing* generation (p. 7). On the one hand, with different backgrounds and events changing their subsequent lives, *zhiqing* memories are not a consistent or unified voice. On the other, an individual *zhiqing*'s memory interacts with remembering and forming the collective past of their generation. As the Chinese society experienced the memory boom in the 1980s, remembering a *zhiqing*'s youth thus became a sociopolitical event. Other scholars, such as Yihong Pan (2003) and Xiaomeng Liu (2009), noted that a *zhiqing* group includes urban youths (*xiaxiang qingnian*) and returned educated youths (*huixiang qingnian*). Yet during the sent-down movement, the majority of *zhiqing* were 16-to-18 year-old urban youths (*xiaxiang qingnian*) who graduated from urban high schools,. It is important to differentiate between the two groups because most historiographical accounts, narratives, and memoirs of *zhiqing* focus exclusively on *xiaxiang zhiqing*.[3] Xu's book, as he states clearly, also takes *xiaxiang zhiqing* as the main subject of study.

Chairman Mao's Children contributes profoundly to existing scholarship on educated youths and the sent-down movement. Previous academic works examine *zhiqing* and *zhiqing* memories from aspects of *zhiqing* roles in the Cultural Revolution, their contribution to the rural areas, memoirs and private accounts, and *zhiqing*'s nostalgia, among others.[4] Xu's book, however, focuses particularly on representations of memory and how the *zhiqing* generation makes sense of, and comes to terms with, its past. Xu's study consists of interviews with former *zhiqing* from Shanghai, analysis of a vast body of *zhiqing* literature, and ethnographic observation of group activities. The theoretical framework draws upon Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital and habitus. In approaching the act of remembering the past as a meaning-making process, Xu analyzes the *zhiqing* habitus and, more importantly, the changing of habitus after the sent-down program.

Xu identifies elsewhere that the scholarship on sent-down movement has evolved along three paths, namely "new disciplinary perspectives, special topics, and regional foci."[5] His book showcases such an evolution by focusing on *zhiqing* from Shanghai. His analysis provides a thorough examination of *zhiqing* museums and commemorative activities, and develops a new theoretical framework of studying generational memory. In this framework, Xu

examines memories at three levels: individual, group/community, and public. At each level, mnemonic practices take different forms and "generation" has different connotations. For example, "generation" means "a cognitive category" (p. 26) at the individual level, yet becomes "a cultural identity" (p. 30) as the context changes to the public level. Xu's framework thus underscores the complexity of memory and generation by revealing the intra-generational differences among the members of the generation.

After the introductory chapter outlines the theoretical framework and methodologies, the main body of this book consists of five core chapters and a conclusion. The first two chapters encompass the qualitative and quantitative analysis of *zhiqing* "life story" interviews. As Xu explains, "life story" interviews are not the same as oral history interviews in the sense that the former "intend to identify, analyze, and explain the patterns of meanings" (p. 33). Xu's goal in these two chapters is to explain why *zhiqing* remember their youth and the historical event differently, and what the differences indicate rather than what really happened in history. *Zhiqing* life stories have two intricately intertwined components of personal experiences and historical evaluations. In both components, social class plays a pivotal role and explains the intra-generational variations among the interviewees. Social class emerged in the interviews, but as Xu explains, this does not refer to the politicized system of classification in Maoist China. Rather, it indicates the interviewees' self-identified class positions in Maoist society and shows how their positions have shifted in the socio-economic stratification. However, present-day social classes do not explain fully the difference in the interviewees' historical evaluation. Xu thus draws upon two alternative parameters of "family class background/political class position" (*chushen*) and political performance (*biaoxian*). Altogether, these two paramters help Xu to explain the "political habitus" in the Maoist years. These chapters succeed in introducing four types of political habitus, and then categorize the interviewees by each type. The political habitus altered, Xu explains, after the sent-down movement ended and *zhiqing* had returned to the cities. The distinctive political habitus and how it has changed, he concludes, shapes *zhiqing* memories and further makes the memories of youth differ.

Although the first two chapters emphasize autobiographical memories on the level of individual memory, chapters three and four shift the focus to public memory. Chapter three examines literary memories, specifically. Rather than analyzing individual works, Xu focuses on the habitus of *zhiqing* writers, reception of *zhiqing*'s literary works, and the pattern of literary memories. The chapter notes that several iconic *zhiqing* writers, notably Liang Xiaosheng, Lu Tianming, and Shi Tiesheng, and explores their works. Xu explores their writing experiences and backgrounds in terms of the three types of habitus that he outlined in the previous chapter. His analysis indicates that *zhiqing* writers' different habitus resulted in the distinctive features of their literary memories. For instance, writers who were "aspirants" experienced political disillusionment during the sent-down movement. As a result, they reflected negatively when recalling the historical event, yet were nonetheless positive about their *zhiqing* time and "youthful idealism" (p. 114). The literary memories of "withdrawers," however, "paints marginally political, or even apolitical, picture of *zhiqing* characters, leaving the event largely unaddressed" (p. 123). In exploring their literary works, Xu discovers a predominant pattern across their literary memories – "the good people but the bad event" – which is a general characteristic of *zhiqing* memories that appears again in the later chapters.

In the next chapter, Xu demonstrates further how a similar pattern, "people but not the event," plays out at "sites of memory"—the *zhiqing* exhibits and museums. This chapter examines two exhibits in the 1990s (the "Souls" and the "Regretless Youth") and two museums in the 2000s (Heihe Museum and Dafeng Zhiqing Museum). The curators and organizers of these exhibits downplay the historical evaluation of the sent-down movement, yet foreground the contributions and sacrifice of zhiqing. The pattern of "people but not the event" appears in the dominant narrative of each exhibit/museum. Such a pattern enables the exhibit/museum to strike a balance between *zhiqing* nostalgia and the controversies of sent-down movement, such as the persecution of zhiqing and the protests in Yunnan province. Even though the curators of museums claim to present history "objectively," they only represent the winners' story (p. 172).

Chapters five and six examine forms of group memory. Former *zhiqing*, now retired, organized different types of commemorative events such as trips and gatherings in recent years that have generated new meanings through interaction between members. As Xu observes, some reunions are imbued with a sense of nostalgia not only for *zhiqing* youth, but also for Maoist China. One specific *zhiqing* group, "Black Soil," follows such a pattern that at once praises *zhiqing* and the sent-down program. Besides "socialist nostalgia," "rightful resistance" is another pattern of group memory that expresses the *zhiqing* contempt for their suffering (especially towards their current life) by using the "vocabulary of patriotism and collectivism" (p. 186). At these reunions, Xu finds out that members' individual memories (or "autobiographical memories") vary within the same group. The views towards the Mao era might be significantly conflicted. However, that which unifies the diverse individual memories, Xu concludes, is a common experiental history that helps to construct a generational *zhiqing* identity.

Chapter six explores a particular kind of *zhiqing* reunion: multi-group trips that borrow the form of Maoist "link-ups" (*chuanlian*) yet take the new route of "One Belt and One Road."[6] "Link-up" activities bring together several different *zhiqing* groups, and the intergroup divergence is manifest. Participants in such gatherings have diverse political stances and social backgrounds. To manage this diversity, the organizers and coordinators of these group adopt the narrative patterns of "people but not the event" and "pursuit of present happiness."(p. 203). At *zhiqing* reunions, the participants often play red songs or pay homage to Chairman Mao. As a result, *zhiqing* is sometimes painted as "Maoist diehards" by the public. However, the author reminds us that "Maoist diehards" comprise only a small proportion, whereas more *zhiqing* reminice about the Mao era to express their nostalgia for their lost youth.

Since the 1970s, the research on the sent-down program and educated youth has been a continuously growing field. Among the existing scholarship, Xu's new book is innovative in that it provides a three-level framework for understanding social and cultural memories in post-Maoist China. The author analyzes rich examples at each level and addresses how such memories interact with others across levels. Xu's explanatory framework uses political habitus to examine the complex and diverse *zhiqing* memories. At the same time, several key terms in studies of Maoist history, such as "*jieji*" (past and present social class), "*chushen*" (family class background/political class position), and "*biaoxian*" (political performance), are revisited in the context of Xu's study of *zhiqing* memories. Xu's framework introduces a new way to examine "difficult memories" of *zhiqing* systematically to understand intra-group differences among those from this generation. Importantly, Xu also reveals that despite intra-group differences such as *jieji* or *chushen*, *zhiqing* memories conform to certain patterns in public representation or group interaction. These include the following: "the good people but the bad event;" "people but not the event;" "socialist nostalgia;" and "rightful resistance." These patterns capture the varied memories and mentalities of the zhiqing generation and reflect how *zhiqing* manage their present lives and project their present onto their past.

Overall, *Chairman Mao's Children* offers a solid analysis of meticulousethnographic research. It is attentive to recent events within *zhiqing* groups and presents rich details of human mentalities and interactions. To anyone who is interested in the sent-down movement, the Maoist era, and memory studies, this book is a must-read. However, there are aspects in Xu's study that merit further explanation. In the book's opening pages, Xu notes that "*zhiqing* is a better lens than 'Red Guards' through which to examine the memory of this generation" because "*zhiqing*" incorporates more people who were not Red Guard activists (p. 21). Notably, there are many *zhiqing* who were previously Red Guards before the Chinese Communist Party sent them down.[7] Such *zhiqing* usually experienced struggles in identity transformation and labelling, which resulted in a more conflicted and ambivalent view toward their past. How do we account for these memories? How does their distinct political habitus shape their memories? Another question arises in the third chapter, where Xu examines literary memory by famous *zhiqing* writers. As the author mentions in this chapter, many literary memories are produced through private publishing or by anonymous authors. In this case, their habitus is difficult to know and the

relationship between literary memories and the authors's habitus is less explicit. Other than the authors who wrote and published in Mainland China, there are numerous literary works published by *zhiqing* overseas in other languages. Does the dominant pattern of literary memory ("good people but the bad event") also apply to these memories? Finally, what role does gender play in *zhiqing* memories? In his interviews, the author uncovers that men are "more likely to have more positive views about their personal experience" (p. 94). One wonders, then, does gender difference matter in situations like exhibits and commemorative activities? These questions might be beyond the research scope of the current study, but warrant a more in-depth explanation in future research.

[1] The Chinese Communist Party began sending urban youths to the countryside in the first half of the 1950s. But from the early 1950s to 1966, the program was not yet a state policy. During this time, youths went down to the countryside voluntarily. See Xiaomeng Liu, *History of China's Educated Youth: The Big Wave (1966-1980)* (Beijing: Contemporary China Publishing House, 2009); Michel Bonnin, *The Lost Generation: The Rustication of China's Educated Youth (1968-1980)*, translated by Krystyna Horko (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2013).

[2] Until 1968, high school graduates in 1966, 1967, and 1968 (born 1947-1950) numbered up to 10 million. Almost all graduates went down to the countryside at the beginning of the sent-down movement. See Liu, *History of China's Educated Youth*, 7 .

[3] Yihong Pan, *Tempered in the Revolutionary Furnace: Chinas Youth in the Rustication Movement* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003).

[4] See Thomas P. Bernstein, *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages: The Transfer of Youth from Urban to Rural China* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977); Rosen Stanley, *The Role of Sent-Down Youth in The Chinese Cultural Revolution: The Case of Guangzhou, China Research Monograph, 19* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Center for Chinese Studies, 1981); Peter Zarrow, "Meanings of China's Cultural Revolution: Memoirs of Exile," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique 7*, no. 1 (1999): 165–191; Pan, *Tempered in the Revolutionary Furnace*; Guobin Yang, "China's Zhiqing Generation: Nostalgia, Identity, and Cultural Resistance in the 1990s," *Modern China* 29, no. 3 (2003): 267-296; David J. Davies, "Old Zhiqing Photos: Nostalgia and the "Spirit" of the Cultural Revolution," *China Review* 5, no.2 (2005): 97-123; Emily Honig and Xiaojian Zhao, "Sent-down Youth and Rural Economic Development in Maoist China," *The China Quarterly* 222, (2015): 499-521.

[5] Bin Xu, "Review of *Across the Great Divide: The Sent-Down Youth Movement in Mao's China, 1968-1980* by Emily Honig and Xiaojian Zhao," *The PRC History Review Book Review Series* No. 20 (May 2020), 1.

[6] "One Belt One Road" is China's new initiative proposed and launched under the leadership of President Xi Jinping in 2013. See Xu, p. 213.

[7] Memoirs of this type of *zhiqing* include, for example, *Spider Eaters* (1997) by Rae Yang.

Response

Bin Xu, Emory University

I am grateful to Alice Yu for her thoughtful and generous review and PRC History Review for providing an effective platform for constructive discussions. Nothing could be more rewarding to an author than discussing their book to deepen our understanding of relevant issues. Yu raises three important questions about the Red Guard identity, literary memory, and gender. I will respond to her questions in this essay.

I will begin by addressing the the first question. Yu asks: How does one account for those conflicted memories of Red-Guards turned *zhiqing*? "How does their unique political habitus shape their memories?" I respond to this question from realist and constructivist perspectives.

From the realist perspective, the Red Guards were an internally diverse group whose composition varied across different contexts. In the peak years of the Cultural Revolution, involvement in the Red Guards was a significant way to engage actively in political activities. Such actions interacted with their class structural position and formed their habitus. Among my interviewees, a significant number of Red-Guards had turned *zhiqing*. Because many of them had red *chushen*, their habitus tended toward "faithful red." Some Red Guards had middle to bad *chushen* and, thus, developed an "aspirant" habitus, that is, they were highly active in political activities to achieve political-social mobility despite or, more precisely, because of their bad or middle *chushen*. Also, some Red Guards with good *chushen* only participated in some activities ritualistically and mostly were uninterested in politics throughout their Cultural Revolution years. They had "indifferent red" habitus. This was particularly true after the peak years and in places outside of the epicenters of the Cultural Revolution. In sum, the Red Guards' habitus was diverse, thus my analysis does not show a distinct correspondence between a particular habitus and one's participation in the Red Guards.

From the constructivist perspective, this question becomes more meaningful for collective memory research with greard to the concepts of "generation" and "Red Guards." "Generation" is both an age cohort and a social construct. A generation has experienced different historical events in its formative years and later stages of life courses. In so doing, a generation has various options of identities to label themselves. But a generation's choice of identity is limited by its political and social contexts. "Red Guard" is a stigma attached by the public to this generation, even if many members of this generation were not Red Guards and the Red Guards were a diverse group. Popular perceptions and discourses today have developed a pattern that attributes some senior Chinese citizens' bad manners—"square-dancing mamas" playing loud music in public spaces, for example—to their Red Guard socialization, although such attribution sometimes is not accurate or fair. This generation thus attempts to keep its distance from the Red Guard label by using "*zhiqing*" as an alternative identity. They carefully choose what to sing, what to say, and what to do in their commemorative activities. For example, in their public performances, they consciously shun those quintessential "Cultural Revolution" songs, such as "Sailing the Seas Depends on the Helmsman," to avoid perpetuating the stereotype. Even those who mostly retain their "faithful red" habitus and never regret their involvement in the Red Guard activities—in other words, the "Maoist diehards"—rarely attach the Red Guard label to themselves. Instead, as my ethnography demonstrates, they call themselves "positive energy people" or other euphemistic names.

In many situations, the *zhiqing* generation desperately seeks public recognition *because of* the public stigma of Red Guards. Over the years, I have heard various expressions by *zhiqing* to detach themselves from the stigma: "We were not Red Guards!"; "We were Red Guards but not as bad as

you think!"; or they are simply silent on their Red Guards experience. This desire for public recognition is evident in every form of memory, from life history, literary memory, and sites of memory to commemorative activities.

Nevertheless, this identity work is not easy. In this generation's response to the stereotype, they do not have many options. They try to shun Cultural Revolution songs, but their options are still limited to the songs they grew up in, most of which are regarded as "red songs" today—probably not "red red" songs but still songs that alienate younger generations. They attempt to emphasize their identity as "*zhiqing*," but the public often reminds them of the flipside, their Red Guard identity, even if such label is sometimes misplaced.

A more profound issue that Red Guards turned *zhiqing* must confront is their moral and political responsibility for the violence and upheaval of the Cultural Revolution. Literary critics, self-reflexive writers like Zhang Kangkang, the general public, and ordinary *zhiqing* themselves often raise this issue, but most *zhiqing* choose avoidance and silence. A member of this generation may argue that they simply followed the leader's highest imperatives, or claim that they were also victims of the Cultural Revolution and should not be blamed for the chaos that people with power created. One might say, "our passion and idealism should be respected." I heard statements such as these in my research for this and other projects, and some public figures, including Liang Xiaosheng and Zhang Chengzhi, use roundabout rhetoric to express the same ideas without conspicuously wearing a Red Guard badge of honor. Thus as I state in the book that "*zhiqing* is a better lens" for examining memories of the Mao years because *zhiqing* are a larger group and this identity more effectively demonstrates this generation's struggle and dilemma when they come to terms with their personal and collective past.

Alice Yu also asks whether the dominant pattern of "good people but not the event" is present in the numerous writings by less famous, mostly ordinary *zhiqing*. Most of them wrote but never published their memoirs. Some may have also published their writings in alternative ways, such as buying ISBNs and paying for all the publication expenses. Some of them even simply printed their writings into books without bothering to acquire ISBNs. There are also other ways of publicizing their writings, such as blogging. During my fieldwork, I received many of these books and publications and observed more in online spaces.

I include some of these writings in my life history interviews. In those cases, this type of writings is more an extension of individual memories than public memories since I was able to obtain and cross-check information about their coming-to-age experiences, family backgrounds, and present-day lives. The writings also demonstrate virtually all the patterns in individual memories (Chapters 1 and 2) rather than solely "good people but not the event." Nevertheless, for numerous other writings, it is difficult to obtain adequate important information about the authors' class, habitus, and present lives. I analyzed a few memoir collections and only found a handful of pieces that were somewhat useful. Theoretically, one could try very hard to identify those ordinary writers and conduct interviews with them. Still, this approach obviously takes much more time and generates limited "returns" for my analysis. One may also simply analyze the narrative patterns in those writings, as most literary analyses of the writings have already done. But this mere textual method deviates from my theoretical and methodological approaches, and its findings may be just as predictable and repetitive.

At the core of my analysis of public memories, including literary memory, is how the creators' social and political characteristics, resources, and constraints shape the content and form of the public memories that they create. The "people but not the event" pattern is more than simply a description of a patten in memorialization; it is also the joint force of various groups of people and political institutions, including memory entrepreneurs, the central state, local governments, publishers, and even tourist agencies. This sociological approach centers on people rather than texts. It cannot rely only on ordinary people's bits and pieces of private and online writings without much information about the people themselves. I would be glad to see if scholars will conduct further research on these writings with innovative methods and new theoretical insights.

Yu's question about gender is also a question frequently raised by the audience of my various talks on this project. As Yu points out, my life history interviews show a clear gender difference regarding *zhiqing*'s evaluations of their personal past. The difference comes from the gendered distribution of class positions: women's class positions today are generally lower than men's and therefore have less positive evaluations of their personal pasts. Such distinction, however, is not significant in the other component of individual memory, which is historical evaluations. In public memory, if gender is an "independent variable," then it is also not significant. If gender is a "dependent variable," then it appeared in some literary representations and public discourses in the 1980s, particularly in the stories about female *zhiqing* being raped and assaulted by local officials. In the 1990s, however, such public memories of gender violence became rare. Now they are absent in exhibits and museums because local governments do not allow them and sponsors and designers consciously practice self-censorship. This absence certainly does not mean that gender is unimportant; rather, some social and political forces silence public representations of gendered memory of violence. Most of the exhibits present "successful *zhiqing*," but the focal point is on their present class status rather than their gender—both men and women are presented. It will take a large-scale quantitative text analysis to examine whether there is a statistically significant difference in presenting two genders in connections with class, if such an analysis is practically feasible.

On a more general note, the relation between gender and memory should not be examined as a linear correspondence. Instead, one ought to examine it in the framework of intersectionality, that is, in gender's connections and intersections with other forms of social inequality, which in this case, are class positions. This intersectional idea of memory may indicate a promising agenda for *zhiqing* research and collective memory of the Mao years in general.