

# Sent-down Youth and Rural Economic Development in Maoist China

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## Abstract

This article explores the relationship between the sent-down youth movement and economic development in rural China during the Cultural Revolution. It examines ways in which sent-down youth themselves initiated improvements in rural life, and more importantly, how local officials used both their presence to acquire equipment and technical training and their skills and education to promote rural industry. The sent-down youth offices established in the cities and the countryside inadvertently provided connections between remote rural counties and large urban centres that enabled the transfer of a significant quantity of material goods, ranging from electrical wires and broadcast cables to tractors and factory machinery. Ultimately, we show how individual sent-down youths, their families, and both urban and rural officials – none of whom had a role in determining government policies – identified and made use of resources that those policies unintentionally produced.

**Keywords:** sent-down youth; Cultural Revolution; rural industry; rural–urban relations; office for sent-down youth

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Wei Min 魏民, a youth from Shanghai sent to work on a production brigade in Le'an 乐安 county in Jiangxi province during the Cultural Revolution, found himself, one day in April 1971, summoned by the commune Party secretary. Informed of his impending transfer to the county's industrial bureau, he was both pleased to be relieved of working in the fields and surprised by his seeming good fortune. He soon learned that his personal dossier, held by the local office for sent-down youth, had been scanned by county officials who had learned that his father was the head of an electric wire factory. The officials had visited his father at home in Shanghai. His father then agreed to supply them with equipment to establish a similar factory in the county. Wei himself would be trained in Shanghai and then assigned to assist the operation of the local factory.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Interview with Wei Min, Shanghai, 4 August 2013

Wei's story differs from most accounts of the sent-down youth movement, which began in 1968 following Mao Zedong's call for urban youth to be re-educated by peasants and ultimately involved some 17 million young city residents who lived in rural areas for up to 12 years. Memoirs and analyses of the movement typically lament the urban youths' lost opportunities for education, chronicle the deprivation they endured, express their sense of betrayal by the Communist Party, or offer traumatic coming-of-age stories. Wei's experience reflects a crucial aspect of the movement that has been obscured in these retrospective discussions: the role of sent-down youth in rural economic development. To mitigate the harshness of life in the countryside, individual sent-down youths, assisted by their families, transported goods to rural areas; they used their ability to read, and in some cases their minimal technical training, to help rural residents set up, use, and repair machinery. Their parents and urban officials, hoping to improve the conditions under which the young people lived and worked, used whatever means they had to provide the materials desired by local leaders.

At almost the same time as the sent-down youth movement was launched, the central government began advocating the development of rural enterprises, although it did not provide the financial and material resources that would have made such development possible. Moreover, most rural officials, particularly those in remote regions, lacked any connection with urban industrial centres. It was the urban youth who were able, in some cases, to provide the precise kinds of connections that were needed. Many rural officials used the presence of urban youth to acquire equipment and technical training and drew upon their skills and education to promote rural economic development. Behind the economic growth of this period is a tangle of complex connections binding the city to the countryside in unexpected ways, through the bodies and social networks of urban sent-down youth. These connections had profound, if largely unheralded, effects on the subsequent course of rural economic reform in the post-Mao decades.

This article, focusing on sent-down youth from Shanghai, aims to engage with previous studies of economic development during the Cultural Revolution, as well as with scholarship on sent-down youth. From that scholarship, particularly the comprehensive study by Michel Bonnin, we know about the government's motivations in launching the movement, the policies surrounding it and the methods used to mobilize youth, as well as about the harsh experiences of the youth in the countryside, ranging from the poverty-stricken conditions in which they lived and worked to the sexual and physical abuse that some of them endured.<sup>2</sup>

Drawing on local archives that have only recently become accessible, our research focuses on a new set of questions about the sent-down youth movement, and uses the movement as a lens to explore rural–urban relationships during the Cultural Revolution. Ultimately, our point is not to pass judgement on the

2 Bonnin 2013.

sent-down youth movement or its effect on individual young people. Instead, we hope to demonstrate how, despite the professed intention of the movement to re-educate and ruralize urban youth, its practice and effects were quite different. More specifically, we aim to analyse the ways in which individual sent-down youth, their families, and both urban and rural officials – none of whom had a role in determining government policies – identified and made use of resources and social networks that those policies unintentionally produced.<sup>3</sup> While state economic planning prohibited trans-regional trade, the sent-down youth movement provided rural leaders with a way of bypassing official channels and policies.

### Food, Clothes and Seeds

The rural–urban divide of Maoist China has become legendary.<sup>4</sup> Large industrial centres, with their state-owned enterprises and expansive civic infrastructures, provided the majority of urban residents with lifetime employment, heavily subsidized housing, health care, education and access to material goods unavailable in the countryside. At the same time, rural residents were required to supply cities with grain and other resources. As historian Jeremy Brown puts it, “Over the course of the 1950’s, 1960’s, and 1970’s, cities became privileged spaces while villages became dumping grounds.”<sup>5</sup> A strict residential registration system (*hukou* 户口) prevented migration to the cities, and the government’s campaigns against private commerce in a centralized economy deprived rural residents of access to goods from other regions.<sup>6</sup>

In this context, an initial experience for almost all sent-down youth in the late 1960s and 1970s involved confronting the gap in material goods available in urban versus rural China. One youth poignantly describes this in a letter home following his ten-day journey from Shanghai to Xishuangbanna 西双版纳 in Yunnan, by train, bus and boat. In Kunming, the provincial capital of Yunnan, he saw Shanghai-made merchandise in the fanciest stores, but learned that purchasing these items required government-issued coupons. When he arrived at Jinghong 景洪, the county seat where his state farm was located, he found that the stores were completely empty and lacked even the locally grown fruit. The availability of goods in stores at his state farm was even bleaker. In a letter home, he proclaimed that he would send all of his future income home because, “There is no way to spend a penny here ... Nowhere to buy any daily necessities, let alone food products.”<sup>7</sup>

3 Urban youth were sent to three types of areas: production brigades in rural counties, state farms (*nongchan*), and army reconstruction farms (*shengchan jianshe bingtuan*). See Liu 1998. This article focuses on those sent to production brigades.

4 An excellent analysis of this is Brown 2012.

5 *Ibid.*, 1–2.

6 Skinner 1985.

7 Lu 2009, 3–8.

Almost all accounts by former sent-down youth are punctuated by references to the myriad goods they brought from Shanghai to the countryside, ranging from clothing and bedding to laundry supplies, toiletries, nails and bicycles.<sup>8</sup> Food was most important, and urban youth commonly brought lard, biscuits, candy, noodles, dried meats, salted fish, canned foods and milk powder with them to the countryside.<sup>9</sup>

Sent-down youth not only sought goods for themselves on their visits back to Shanghai but also secured items desired by local villagers. Youth sent to Yunnan, for instance, discovered that the powdered dyes they could purchase in Shanghai were highly prized by Dai 傣 women, who were accustomed to producing dyes for their cloth from local plants and insects. Visiting a factory in Shanghai, one youth spotted steel bars that would be perfect to fashion hunting guns. Stuffing them into his duffle bag, he brought them back to the village in Yunnan to give to his peasant friends.<sup>10</sup>

In many places, the presence of sent-down youth created new economic relationships, involving the exchange of gifts, buying, selling and trading with locals. Peasants sometimes traded vegetables for candies and cookies from Shanghai, while youth brought Shanghai-made merchandise, especially bars of soap, children's clothing and candy, to express their gratitude to locals who offered them rides, temporary accommodation, or tended to them when they were sick.<sup>11</sup> In Yunnan, Shanghai youth brought tropical fruits from Dai villagers; in Heilongjiang, the meat from wild pig and moose sold by Erlunchun hunters was in high demand. Dai villagers realized that sent-down youth were willing to pay money for fruit, so they began to grow crops specifically for sale.<sup>12</sup> Increased demand drove prices up: the price of bananas in Xishuangbanna, for example, doubled in 1970 when a large number of Shanghai youth arrived.<sup>13</sup> The sent-down youth also bought local goods to bring to their families in Shanghai, including wood-ears from Yunnan and Heilongjiang, bamboo shoots from Yunnan, Guizhou, and Jiangxi, camphor chests from Jiangxi, and many local varieties of herbal medicines. Often these products were sold not by stores directly to the youth but by other locals who could earn a commission for the sale.<sup>14</sup>

Trying to become financially independent, sent-down youth often sought ways to earn cash. One Shanghai youth, a school teacher in rural Jiangxi, made money by travelling to villages with his camera on his day off and taking pictures for a fee.<sup>15</sup> Inspired by street vendors in Shanghai, a group of youths in Heilongjiang,

8 See, e.g., Zhang, Liang 2011, 105.

9 Xishuangbanna nongken ju 20 July 1976.

10 Interview with Zhu Kejia, Kunming, 23 September 2012.

11 Shi 2004, 45; Lu 2009, 83, 343–44; Pei et al. 1998, 211.

12 Yan 2004, 124–25; Lu 2009, 7, 25.

13 Lu 2009, 7.

14 Lu 2009, 32–33; Song 2004, 223.

15 Interview with He Hua, Shanghai, 18 August 2013.

on a trip home to Shanghai, acquired a machine to pop corn, rice and other grains. They roamed local villages earning more than ten yuan per day for their popping service.<sup>16</sup> In some cases, their cash-earning activities were not entirely legal. In Xunke 逊克 county, Heilongjiang, five young people from Shanghai were criticized for taking 1,006 *jin* 斤 of grain from the village, exchanging it for grain coupons, and then selling the coupons for cash on the black market.<sup>17</sup>

Some villagers actually advised sent-down youth on ways to make money. Under the principle of a grain-based agricultural economy (*yi liang wei gang* 以粮为纲), the government launched constant campaigns against commercial activities. But, in the name of helping the youth improve their living standards, many peasants, including village cadres, worked with the youth to develop side-line enterprises. In parts of Heilongjiang bordering the river, the most profitable trade involved lumber. Villagers in Xunke explained to some youth that every year in May, when ice on the Heilongjiang began to melt, logs from a wood storage facility on the Russian side of the river would float past their village. Instead of working in the fields as they were assigned to do, many youth began going to the river to snag the logs, which they could sell for 30–100 yuan a piece to villagers who needed the lumber for construction. One “consolation team” (*weiwèn tuán* 慰问团) investigating the conditions of sent-down youth complained about the number of Shanghai youth in Xunke county who were involved in capturing and selling logs.<sup>18</sup>

Sent-down youth made a more direct contribution to rural economic development when they tried to introduce new farming techniques, equipment and products. Although sent to the countryside by state authorities to be “re-educated by the peasants,” many youth were frustrated by the limitations of local farming methods. A woman sent to Yunnan complained that: “The Dai people were still in the stone age. They just planted the seeds and waited until it was time to harvest.”<sup>19</sup> In a production brigade in Anhui, Shanghai youth Zhang Ren 张韧 found that the locals tended to be suspicious of new crop varieties. To overcome their suspicions, she experimented with new varieties of cotton and rice on her own small plot of land (*ziliudi* 自留地), demonstrating the potential benefits of these new plants. Her efforts persuaded villagers to adopt new crops, which, by her own account at least, significantly increased productivity.<sup>20</sup> In Heilongjiang, where the growing season was short and peasants specialized in potatoes, turnips, onions and cabbages, sent-down youth from Shanghai brought the seeds of southern vegetables and grew *xuelihong* 雪里红, mustard and cauliflower. They also successfully introduced a new strain of soybean to the village, enabling the

16 Nengjiang (Heilongjiang) xian zhiqing ban 7 April 1975.

17 Ibid.

18 Xunke xian zhiqing weiwèn jiancha tuán May 1970. Also see Heilongjiang sheng weiwèn tuán dì bā fēn tuán dì sān fēnduì 1970 and Xunke xian zhiqing bangongshi 1973.

19 Interview with Hu Pei, Los Angeles, 18 August 2013.

20 Zhang, Ren 2008, 71.

youth and the local peasants to enjoy their own soya milk, tofu and cooking oil, and generating a substantial income for the village as well.<sup>21</sup>

Connections with Shanghai were often critical to these efforts to improve agricultural production. One youth recalled forming a “scientific experiment team” with four of her classmates in Huma 呼玛, a remote county in Heilongjiang: “Our parents, from faraway Shanghai, sent us the materials we needed for these experiments.” The team developed new varieties of wheat and soy on its experimental plot before the plants were adopted by villagers to grow in the regular fields.<sup>22</sup>

Seeds were not the only item brought from Shanghai to villages with sent-down youth. Shen Longgen 沈龙根, a Shanghai cadre who came to supervise youth in Huma, used the opportunity of having sick leave in Shanghai to acquire a noodle-making machine to send to the commune.<sup>23</sup> Chen Jian 陈健, sent to Guizhou, learned from conversations with local leaders that the tyres on the one village tractor were damaged. As his father was a technician in the Shanghai Tyre Repair Factory, he offered to use his father’s connections to get help, and succeeded in obtaining four new tyres for the village.<sup>24</sup>

The transport of goods by individual sent-down youth, whether for their own comfort and consumption, to trade or sell, or to contribute to improvements in agriculture, was only one aspect of a far broader traffic in material goods between cities and the countryside during the Cultural Revolution. For local officials – from leaders of production brigades to commune, county and district heads – the assignment of sent-down youth to their locales provided an opportunity to acquire resources from the cities that they would otherwise have not been able to access.

## Tractors and Broadcast Cables

In order to understand the role of sent-down youth in local economic development, it is necessary first to look at the bureaucratic structure that accompanied the sent-down youth movement. Since the residence permits (*hukou*) of sent-down youth were transferred with them (thereby revoking their legal residence in Shanghai), urban officials may well have assumed that the Shanghai government would no longer have responsibility for the youths’ welfare, which would then be assumed by the rural communities they joined. However, it quickly became clear that this movement produced problems far more complex than anyone had imagined. The overwhelming number of complaints issued by the parents (still residents of Shanghai) of sent-down youth about the harsh living and working conditions that their children had to endure in the countryside, as well as

21 Wang, Shicheng 2002, 214.

22 Wang, Jian 2004.

23 Shen 2004, 82.

24 Chen 2013.

about the injuries and abuses they were experiencing, meant that the Shanghai government was forced to be involved in the administration of the programme, particularly if it wanted to mobilize more youth to participate.

Every major city that sent youth to the countryside had a municipal office (for example, the Shanghai office for sent-down youth), which came under the authority of the State Council's All-China Office for Sent-down Youth (*Zhonggong zhongyang guowuyuan zhishi qingnian shangshan xiaxiang bangongshi* 中共中央国务院知识青年上山下乡办公室). Below the municipal-level offices were district branches, which oversaw schools and residential blocks. Although these urban offices were set up to implement policies, mobilize middle-high school graduates to go to the countryside, and distribute the financial support allocated by the central government, much of their time was taken up with securing non-agricultural employment for urban youth.

Sent-down youth offices were also established in every province, district, county and commune receiving the youth. The sent-down youth offices in rural regions came under the jurisdiction of local governments and were often staffed by cadres dispatched from work units in the urban centres of the province. These offices assigned educated youth to production brigades, distributed government stipends to the youth during the first year, and periodically convened youth conferences. Finally, in response to the complexity of the problems that were beginning to emerge, major cities organized *weiwēn tuān*, or consolation teams, which were composed of urban cadres who represented the municipal government, to assist rural governments administer the sent-down youth programme. These teams routinely spent a full year in the countryside. In reality, *weiwēn tuān* advocated for youth from their particular city and conducted investigations into issues ranging from food and housing supplies to criminal activities. Resolving such issues invariably required the *weiwēn tuān* to negotiate with local officials. As shown below, the *weiwēn tuān* also sometimes represented the interests of local officials by pressing for the acquisition of material goods that they needed. Individual youth, the *weiwēn tuān*, and the sent-down youth offices in both Shanghai and rural communities, all played a role in negotiating the transfer of goods, ranging from agricultural tools and equipment, machine parts, transport vehicles and electrical supplies, from Shanghai to the countryside.<sup>25</sup>

Both the individual and new bureaucratic connections between rural areas and Shanghai were particularly important in the context of state economic planning and distribution of goods. If a rural production brigade wished to purchase agricultural machinery such as tractors, even if it had sufficient funds, approval still had to be sought and given by the commune, county, district and province – a long and protracted process that could involve substantial delays, and possible denial. Thus, the most efficient way for villages to acquire tractors, as well as

25 A very general description of the offices for sent-down youth can be found in Rene 2013.

other agricultural machinery, was through the new-found connections with urban producers or distributors.

Local leaders quickly realized the value of sent-down youth in establishing such connections. In 1971, production brigades in Hongqi 红旗 commune in Jiangxi hoped to install electricity but were faced with a shortage of electric wire. While readily available to Shanghai residents in local hardware stores, electric wire was not available to rural residents. Sent-down youth were thus dispatched to take a “business trip” to buy wire for their villages. As one woman recalled, hardware stores in Shanghai limited each customer to 50 metres of wire for home use only. She and her family members went from one store to another throughout the city until they had bought enough wire to fill her two duffle bags.<sup>26</sup> Regardless of whether or not the wiring they acquired was sufficient to support the amount of electricity imagined by local officials, the project would have been inconceivable were it not for the youth who could go home to Shanghai, have a place to stay and who could enlist family members to maximize their purchases from hardware stores. In other counties of Jiangxi, Shanghai youth helped to purchase light bulbs and loud speakers; one even helped his county to buy a large van from Shanghai.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to obtaining resources through the individual connections of sent-down youth, local leaders negotiated directly with the offices for sent-down youth to acquire goods from Shanghai. Sometimes they asked for goods ostensibly needed by youth. In late 1969, the sent-down youth office in the Heihe 黑河 district of Heilongjiang requested that Shanghai immediately send 16,000 pairs of winter shoes for its youth.<sup>28</sup> At about the same time, a district in Yunnan requested 10,000 to 20,000 pairs of plastic shoes and/or army shoes as well as medicines for sent-down youth.<sup>29</sup> Whether these supplies of shoes were just for urban youth or also given to local residents is difficult to determine.

In many cases, however, the requested goods were clearly not entirely for the benefit of sent-down youth. In early September 1969, for example, the development office of the Heilongjiang province Party committee dispatched three comrades to Shanghai. The Shanghai office for sent-down youth reported that the visitors came “for the sole purpose of seeking support from our city for the allocation of materials required for sent-down youth,” and that “they were asking us to give the maximum amounts possible.”<sup>30</sup> The list of desired goods included 57 different kinds of car parts, 140 types of tractor parts, 33 kinds of tools, 17 varieties of electrical materials, as well as stationery, textiles, medicines, and miscellaneous items ranging from socks and blankets to raincoats and scarves. The Shanghai office for sent-down youth assumed the role of mediator and conveyed this request to the appropriate government offices, only to learn that there was a

26 Interview with Wang Mei, Houston, 21 September 2013.

27 Yang, Shixiong 2012.

28 SOSY 27 October 1969.

29 SOSY and Comrade Ma Tianshui 14 November 1969.

30 SOSY 1 September 1969.



shortage of most of these items in Shanghai. “The amount of help we can provide is very limited,” lamented the report. Of the 354 different types of goods and materials requested, the Shanghai office could secure only 60. Although the Heilongjiang officials expressed appreciation for what they were given, they were not satisfied and “repeatedly conveyed that they needed the materials very urgently.” Failing to get the desired response, they reiterated the needs of sent-down youth from Shanghai to legitimize their requests for goods: “They [the youth] need the small tools and sheets of iron to build houses and stoves ... Please report this to the leaders of the Shanghai Party committee.”<sup>31</sup>

Eventually Shanghai sent some of the goods to Heilongjiang, but within two months, another request was issued, once again invoking the needs of sent-down youth. “Some people from your area,” reported the Shanghai sent-down youth office, “wrote to us to say that because the number of youth from Shanghai has increased, there is not an adequate supply of drinking water.” Moreover, a number of urban youth were reportedly suffering from swollen joints owing to the high concentration of minerals in the shallow wells. Local leaders hoped that the Shanghai government could provide them with equipment to dig deep wells so that the sent-down youth could access safe drinking water.<sup>32</sup>

Concerned about the health problems of their sent-down youth, the Shanghai office immediately contacted the relevant municipal bureaus. When these bureaus replied that Shanghai did not have enough deep-well pumps to satisfy their needs, the office pleaded with leaders of the Shanghai municipal government, which proved to be more successful. Writing to its counterpart in Heilongjiang, the Shanghai office said that it would be able to send ten pumps right away and would strive to provide 90 the next year. “Please let us know the size and type you want,” the letter concluded.<sup>33</sup>

Ultimately, in addition to medical and other supplies needed by the youth themselves, Heilongjiang received a substantial amount of equipment from Shanghai. Through its sent-down youth office, by 1971 Shanghai had provided two buses, 13 trucks, nine tractors, 36 hand-operated tractors and several “fancy cars,” with a total value of 1.06 million yuan.<sup>34</sup>

Heilongjiang was not the only province hoping to use the presence of sent-down youth to secure equipment from Shanghai. In October 1969, the vice-head of Jiangxi’s Ganzhou 赣州 district government sent a delegation of six people to the Shanghai sent-down youth office to plead for material support. After arriving in Shanghai, they described the conditions in Ganzhou district, explaining that it had a very weak industrial base and lacked equipment and technical support. The delegation emphasized that both local peasants and the 5,000 sent-down youth from Shanghai were eager to improve conditions and become

31 Ibid.

32 SOSY 21 November 1971.

33 SOSY 17 November 1969.

34 SOSY 21 November 1971.

self-sufficient. “In order to advance agricultural production,” officials of the delegation explained to Shanghai officials, “we need to build a new factory that can produce 300,000 sets of axles per year. We hope Shanghai will help us get the equipment for this.” They also asked that Shanghai contribute equipment for county-level factories to provide machine repair services, electrical supplies, a variety of machines, and stoves. In addition, they hoped to be given motors and water pipes for irrigation systems. They envisioned establishing a cement factory and requested a full set of equipment – new or used – for that purpose. Transportation was problematic in the hilly and mountainous parts of Ganzhou district, and so the delegation requested that Jiaotong-brand 交通牌 trucks and three-wheeled tractors produced in Shanghai be supplied. Moreover, the provision of high-quality seeds and superior breeds of pigs would enhance production. Finally, “in order to publicize Chairman Mao’s thoughts,” they urgently required supplies of cables and loud speakers. They also conveyed their hope that any industrial units planning to relocate from Shanghai to other areas would consider Ganzhou.<sup>35</sup>

While members of the Shanghai office negotiated with other government bureaux to acquire these goods, the six-person delegation from Jiangxi anxiously waited for an answer. “We took them to visit some communes near Shanghai,” explained the Shanghai office. “They could pick some seeds to take home. And we also took them to visit the Shanghai Axle Factory, as well as the Shanghai Industrial Exhibition, so they could get ideas for future development of factories in their district.”<sup>36</sup>

The request for the cement factory produced the most positive result, perhaps because of the advance research Ganzhou officials had conducted. The district, they pointed out, needed to transport 100,000 to 200,000 tons of cement by truck every year, an enormous waste of energy that could be saved if only Ganzhou could operate its own cement factory. They also disclosed that they had heard about some old machinery once used by the Shanghai Cement Factory that had sat unused for ten years in Shanghai. Although the machinery had rusted, the delegates from Ganzhou insisted that they wanted it. Negotiations with other municipal government bureaux, however, were not always easy. The Shanghai sent-down youth office was told by the city’s industrial bureau that three sets of the polishing machines at the Shanghai Cement Factory had already been allocated to other places, and that the “baking machine” should be kept in the factory as a back-up for the current machine. The sent-down youth office nevertheless urged the bureau to give the machinery to Ganzhou.<sup>37</sup>

It was not long before the Shanghai office realized that wherever sent-down youth resided, requests for goods from Shanghai could be expected. Soon, it was juggling requests from numerous counties in Anhui, Yunnan and Jiangxi.

35 SOSY 21 July 1969.

36 Ibid.

37 SOSY and Comrade Ma Tianshui 14 November 1969.

“We feel that they have asked for too much, more than we can provide,” the office complained to the municipal government.<sup>38</sup>

Requests for goods from rural areas were brokered between local offices of sent-down youth, communicating with the Shanghai office, which in turn, negotiated with the relevant bureaus in Shanghai to make the deliveries. Dispatched by the Shanghai government to those areas where its youth were sent, the *weiwēn tuān* played an active role in communicating these requests. For instance, in December 1969, the head of the Yunnan *weiwēn tuān* telephoned the Shanghai office for sent-down youth to say that the Simao 思茅 district of Yunnan wanted Shanghai to deliver immediately the 5–7 hand-operated tractors that it had already agreed to provide.<sup>39</sup> In a report addressed to the Shanghai office, entitled “What the sending region can do for the receiving region,” the *weiwēn tuān* in the Jinghong district of Yunnan articulated its own opinion on what should be sent. It reported the difficulties locals faced in their aspiration to develop local industry, and suggested ways in which bureaus in Shanghai should help. The *weiwēn tuān* described a local paper mill that employed 229 workers. Although the mill had equipment, it was only able to produce low-quality packing paper. Conditions at a different paper mill in Mengla 勐腊, according to the same report, were extremely backward, producing low-quality toilet paper. The *weiwēn tuān* suggested that Shanghai bureaus should help by providing bleaching materials and more technology.<sup>40</sup> Often, the Shanghai sent-down youth office organized for donations to be sent to the countryside based on the suggestions of the *weiwēn tuān*.<sup>41</sup> When supplies were inadequate, the *weiwēn tuān* also had to explain the reasons why to the local governments.<sup>42</sup>

It was often through the *weiwēn tuān* reports that officials in Shanghai became aware of conditions in rural areas and of the often urgent needs of sent-down youth. Recognizing the importance of sustaining their livelihoods in the countryside (and perhaps in response to pressure from discontented urban families), the Shanghai office for sent-down youth sometimes initiated contributions of equipment to rural areas. For instance, in mid-1971, it wrote to the Yunnan labour bureau: “From the time the youth of our city responded to the call of Chairman Mao to go to the countryside, your province has accepted and settled large groups of youth from Shanghai in the countryside to receive the re-education of the peasants. To thank you for the massive support of your province, our city plans to give you another 150 hand-operated tractors. Please allocate them to areas where there are Shanghai sent-down youth. Please also give priority to poor communes and brigades.”<sup>43</sup> These types of goods continued to be supplied in such a way over the next few years.<sup>44</sup>

38 SOSY 14 November 1969.

39 SOSY 20 December 1969.

40 Shanghai shi fu Yunnan sheng xuexi weiwentuan Xishuangbanna fentuan 23 November 1974.

41 SOSY 12 December 1969.

42 SOSY 23 June 1975.

43 Zhonggong Yunnan sheng wei dangshi yanjiushi 2010, 3–26.

44 Yunnan sheng geweihui zhishi qingnian shangshan xiexiang bangongshi 2 June 1975.

Shanghai officials seemed particularly eager to provide broadcasting equipment to rural areas with sent-down youth. In many remote regions where radio reception was poor, broadcasting through loud-speakers served as the primary means through which youth could hear regional and national news. Perhaps more importantly, from the perspective of Shanghai officials, were the non-agricultural jobs created by the installation of broadcasting stations. Having learned to speak Mandarin in urban schools, the educated sent-down youth were better suited than local residents for positions in broadcasting. When Xishuangbanna received the equipment to install 50 broadcasting stations, the government announced that each station would assign the task of reading the news announcements to the sent-down youth.<sup>45</sup> The Shanghai sent-down youth office promised that, “If they have problems installing broadcasting cables, Shanghai will provide support.”<sup>46</sup> Such was the importance of broadcasting to the Shanghai office that it often supplied broadcasting equipment even when it had not been requested by local officials. For example, the office reported that in order to increase agricultural production, the Huaibei 淮北 region of Anhui, where a large number of sent-down youth from “our city” were located, had requested that Shanghai provide 2,000–3,000 electric- or gas-operated motors for their newly constructed irrigation system. “We think this is very urgent,” the report advised. “If we cannot allocate that many at once we should give them gradually. We should also give them some broadcasting speakers.”<sup>47</sup>

Eventually, the Shanghai government was able to turn rural regions into outlets for discontinued or used goods. In 1975, the Municipal Industrial and Transportation Group announced that 13 bureaus under its jurisdiction would collect used and remaindered equipment to “support regions with sent-down youth from our city.” Accordingly, these bureaus agreed to contribute 440 machines and 30,000 engines for this purpose.<sup>48</sup> With a plentiful supply of surplus and clearance materials in hand, the city government was able to satisfy requests from other provinces. In August 1976, the Shanghai office for sent-down youth notified its counterpart in Jilin province that Shanghai would donate a total of 135 tractors and other equipment from its “surplus materials” to Jilin and provide an interest-free loan of 100,000 yuan.<sup>49</sup>

Shanghai was by no means the only city engaged in supplying materials and equipment to rural areas to which its urban youth were sent. Records from the Beijing office for sent-down youth indicate that it also coordinated the transfer of a large quantity of goods, such as diesel engines, water pumps, trucks, three-wheeled motorcycles, cars, hand-operated tractors, sewing machines and books, to Heilongjiang, Liaoning, Shanxi and Inner Mongolia, where large numbers of

45 Zhongguo gongchangdang Xishuangbanna daizu zizhizhou weiyuanhui zuzhibu 15 January 1976.

46 SOSY 25 October 1969.

47 Ibid.

48 SOSY 16 October 1975.

49 SOSY 17 August 1976.

Beijing youth were sent.<sup>50</sup> A proposal drafted by the Beijing office in late 1973 recommended that the municipal government give 13,740,000 yuan worth of goods during the 1974 fiscal year to areas hosting Beijing youth. The proposal included a long list of cars, tractors, electric engines and agricultural machinery to be sent to rural communities, along with some goods and medicine for the youth.<sup>51</sup> As in Shanghai, the office later revised its proposal and the surplus equipment available in the city was given out as donations.<sup>52</sup>

One explanation for the willingness of urban administrators to satisfy these requests has to do with the sheer number of high school graduates sent to remote rural areas. The more than 1.1 million sent-down youth from Shanghai constituted 10 per cent of the city's population at the time. Almost every family had at least one member who was sent away, including the families of government officials at all levels. These government agencies became responsible for making the sent-down youth self-sufficient and ensuring their welfare, both of which were crucial to the stability of urban society. The first priority was to provide the youth with the goods needed for everyday life (books, towels, shoes and medicines). If production in rural areas increased (through the provision of water pumps and tractors), then presumably the living standards of the urban youth assigned to the countryside would improve. A more urgent priority was to provide materials that would enable the sent-down youth from Shanghai to have employment in the countryside outside of agricultural production.

## Factories

Local leaders quickly registered the enthusiasm of Shanghai officials to create non-agricultural job opportunities for sent-down youth, as suggested by their eagerness to supply equipment for broadcasting stations. Local officials therefore requested not only agricultural machinery but also materials to establish rural industries, as illustrated by the request from Ganzhou for equipment for the cement factory. At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, Mao had issued the directive that peasants "should collectively run small plants." Counties and communes were encouraged to develop the "five small industries": iron and steel; cement; chemical fertilizer; machinery; and power for self-reliance and national defence.<sup>53</sup> However, rural regions were expected to raise most of the funds necessary for these enterprises.<sup>54</sup> They were not allocated any resources by the central government and had to acquire the machinery, technical equipment and skilled labour that would make the development of these rural industries possible by themselves.<sup>55</sup> And so, for remote rural areas that were far from industrial

50 BOSY 26 August 1974.

51 BOSY 20 December 1973; BOSY 1 January–31 December 1974.

52 BOSY 26 August 1974.

53 Riskin 1978.

54 Wong 1991.

55 American Rural Small-scale Industry Delegation 1977, 6–7.

centres, developing these industries would be an almost insurmountable task. But, the presence of sent-down youth, and the administrative offices that accompanied them, provided new connections that gave rural officials access to the equipment and skilled labour that were crucial for rural industrial development.

This is illustrated by the Le'an county industrial bureau's use of its sent-down youth connections to Shanghai. As described above, a Shanghai youth, Wei Min, found himself transferred from field work in a village to the Le'an Radio and Electrical Wire Factory. As well as enlisting Wei's father to provide the production materials unavailable in Le'an, local officials also recruited a number of retired "master workers" from the Shanghai factory who would go to Le'an to help establish the county factory. While it was common for retired skilled workers in Shanghai to assist factories elsewhere, they were in high demand in suburban areas and would, under ordinary circumstances, never have gone to help in remote places such as Le'an. Like Wei's father, most parents in Shanghai were perhaps more than willing to help negotiate these arrangements if they had the means to do so. Securing jobs in county factories for their children meant that they would not have to work in the fields. In Wei's case, the benefits of such arrangements proved to be even greater. Along with a number of other Shanghai sent-down youth whose parents also provided services to the county industrial bureau, Wei was assigned to his father's factory in Shanghai for three months of training. Over the next few years, Wei was sent back to Shanghai several times for further training and other assignments.

While Wei and his parents must have appreciated the opportunities for him to take long business trips to Shanghai, the Le'an factory also benefited from these arrangements. Without skilled or trained technicians, the materials supplied by the Shanghai factory would have been useless. It would have been more costly and complicated for Le'an county to send local workers to Shanghai for training than to send an urban youth like Wei, who could live and eat at home, speak the local dialect with workers in the Shanghai factory and navigate Shanghai with ease.

The Le'an Radio and Electrical Wire Factory solved at least one other impediment to production through its sent-down youth connections to Shanghai. The factory's production of circuit boards for radios (in addition to electric wires) required fabrication of an alloy composed of copper and gold, a production process beyond local means. The officials, however, identified and recruited a sent-down youth whose father worked in a mint in Shanghai. They were then able to get the metals synthesized in Shanghai and transported back to Le'an. Sent-down youth subsequently had frequent "business trips" to Shanghai both for technical training and to process metals.<sup>56</sup>

In addition to using personal connections established through sent-down youth and their parents, some local officials issued promises of non-agricultural jobs in order to secure resources to establish new enterprises. For example, leaders at the

56 Interview, Wei Min.

Menghun 勐混 commune in Jinghong district, Yunnan, proposed to establish a wood products factory that would provide jobs for Shanghai sent-down youth. Their request for support from Shanghai began by announcing their two goals: “first, to support Chairman Mao’s sent-down youth programme; and second, to develop commune-based industries to consolidate the socialist collective economy.”<sup>57</sup> Noting that 40 out of the 50 workers would be sent-down youth from Shanghai, they listed the items they wanted Shanghai to provide. “We will get the wood locally and do our best to solve the problems that we can,” they began. For everything else, they planned to submit requests to the county government and the Shanghai *weiwén tuán*. The request to Shanghai stated that, “If we do not have enough initial capital and equipment, as well as transportation vehicles and tools, we expect to get a loan and a full set of equipment, all to be shipped here.” The report continued: “We suggest that Shanghai contribute two or three skilled technicians in the area of architecture and furniture-making to provide training for three years.”<sup>58</sup>

The presence of sent-down youth, in this case, provided the otherwise unlikely possibility of building a factory in a remote rural community. With nothing but forested jungle, a poor commune such as Menghun, populated primarily by Dai people, was not equipped to build a factory at the time. However, connections with the nation’s most prosperous city put this remote commune in an entirely different position. It could now expect equipment furnished by Shanghai to be shipped and delivered to the factory site, a loan to cover potential expenses, and urban technicians to help set up and train the workers to make fashionable furniture.<sup>59</sup>

Although the Shanghai office for sent-down youth was established to implement government policy by sending its urban youth to the countryside for education by the peasants, much of what it actually did focused on securing non-agricultural employment for its youth. In this context, it mobilized the Shanghai municipal bureau of industry to sponsor workshops to help establish small industries in a number of rural regions. The purpose of these new factories, according to a report by the Shanghai office for sent-down youth, was to provide employment for sent-down youth who, for a variety of reasons, were unable (or perhaps unwilling) to work in the fields. Most of the resulting factories relied on local resources, such as bamboo and wood. There were also factories manufacturing tools, fertilizer, furniture, hair dyes and cooking oil.<sup>60</sup> Following suggestions from the *weiwén tuán*, in 1975, the Shanghai municipal government sent an investigation team to Ganzhou and Jinggangshan 井冈山 in Jiangxi to help build rural industries. Working closely with the *weiwén tuán*, the team of 17 members –

57 Menghai xian Menghun gongshe geweihui 4 December 1976.

58 Ibid.

59 Likewise, when a wood factory, claiming its potential to employ sent-down youth, was established in Huma in the early 1970s, two “old masters” from the Shanghai Furniture Factory were assigned there to train young local workers. See Feng 2004, 182.

60 SOSY 17 July 1975.

selected from different bureaus of the city – developed a plan to establish up to 75 small industries in these two regions and submitted a request to the Shanghai government to provide equipment for these factories and 45 trucks for transportation.<sup>61</sup> The *weiwen tuan* in the Shangrao 上饶, Yichun 宜春, Fuzhou 抚州 and Jiujiang 九江 districts of Jiangxi also proposed that donations of equipment and transportation be given to an additional 15 factories.<sup>62</sup>

Groups of Shanghai cadres who accompanied the youth to the countryside also played a critical role in the development of rural industry. When 5,500 Shanghai youth were sent to Huma, they were accompanied by more than 450 cadres. The arrival of these cadres, many of whom had industrial management and technological expertise, as well as personal connections, was cause for excitement. County leaders, who in the past had access only to the limited technological expertise available in the small city of Heihe, immediately organized senior local leaders to greet them, and quickly solicited their help in establishing a paper mill.<sup>63</sup>

### Books and Skills

Perhaps more valuable to rural development, although not necessarily obvious and measurable, was the presence of young people with far more education than their rural counterparts. Most of the sent-down youth were the products of urban secondary schools, including graduates from vocational schools, in Shanghai. The desirability of these students is exemplified by what transpired when officials in Huma learned that 104 graduates of technical schools in Shanghai had been sent to Inner Mongolia in 1969. As the county was eager to develop its own industries, the officials immediately went out of their way to negotiate with the Shanghai municipal government and the Liaoning provincial government (which governed that part of Inner Mongolia) for their transfer to Huma. They succeeded in arranging the transfer of 93 youths. When the official from Huma met the students, he explained that Huma, situated at China's northern border, had only a few very small factories, and needed not just labourers but "talented people" to build national defence. "You are going to be the major force in Huma," he said, "And we very much welcome you." Upon their arrival, they were immediately sent to help in the fledgling enterprises, providing technical support and labour.<sup>64</sup>

Even with no formal technical training, literate and educated youth provided an asset rural areas would not ordinarily have had. All the efforts to acquire machinery and tools might prove useless without individuals who could read technical manuals. For precisely this reason, many rural regions used sent-down

61 Ibid. Also see Shanghai shi geweihui gongjiaozu 24 September 1975.

62 SOSY 17 July 1975.

63 Cao 2004.

64 Feng 2004.



youth to drive tractors, trucks or operate machinery. For example, the transportation team in Huma was composed primarily of sent-down youth. Transporting goods on narrow mountain roads in the long snowy winter season required not only good driving skills but also an ability to repair trucks when working alone in remote areas.<sup>65</sup> This problem was most apparent in regions with low literacy rates. An Aini 爱妮 village in Xishuangbanna had purchased a sewing machine but no one knew how to use it until a sent-down youth from Shanghai arrived two years later.<sup>66</sup>

In order to establish rural factories, workers had to figure out how to install machinery and solve the inevitable ensuing problems, a task often undertaken by sent-down youth. For example, when the Huma Yiziquan Electrical Power Plant was first established, the steam engine did not work efficiently and the boiler had to be cleaned by hand. Two Shanghai youths, one of whom had graduated from the Shanghai Chemical Industry Technical School, developed a chemical solution that could be used to clean the boiler. For a week, they conducted several experiments until they produced an ideal solution. To solve a problem with the water softening process, a Shanghai youth read and translated material from a book, based on which he built a new water-softening system that enabled the factory to produce water that exceeded established quality standards. The same youth also designed a device to control the water level in the factory's water tank to prevent overflow.<sup>67</sup>

In addition to skills they had before being sent to the countryside, sent-down youth also had opportunities to receive further technical training, particularly during visits home. In the early 1970s, the Shanghai television station and the bureau of education sponsored a joint lecture series for these youth. Some 16 universities in Shanghai, coordinating with neighbourhood committees, offered lectures in philosophy, political science, literature, history and science. They also offered training sessions in electrical work, carpentry, machinery repair, pesticide use, medicine, sewing and hairdressing.<sup>68</sup> These classes and training sessions reached out to 16,000 sent-down youth on home visits. Groups of Shanghai university professors also went to rural areas to train the sent-down youth. A total of 28,000 received training in 1974; in 1975, this number increased to 60,000.<sup>69</sup> Local officials enthusiastically supported the participation of sent-down youth in these training classes, as the skills they acquired would benefit their community.

Sent-down youth also had access to a vast range of publications which they could then take back to the countryside. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Chinese bookstores carried a plethora of technical books, including highly specialized books for senior engineers, translations of foreign books and articles, and

65 Wang, Zelin, 2004, 83–85.

66 Interview, Zhu Kejia.

67 Pan 2004.

68 Yang, Xinqi 2010.

69 Shanghai shi difangzhi bangongshi 2013.

books aimed at popularizing technology for workers, peasants and educated youth. Books on scientific farming, fertilizer application, agricultural machinery and maintenance, animal husbandry, carpentry, and elementary medicine enabled sent-down youth to acquire technical information which they could then apply to the development of agriculture, industry and medicine in the countryside.<sup>70</sup>

## Legacies

As shown above, the negotiations and collaboration between sent-down youth offices, *weiwen tuan* and Shanghai government bureaus, as well as between officials in Shanghai and in rural areas, often resulted in local areas succeeding in their efforts to acquire tools, machinery, factory equipment, skilled labour, training opportunities, and access to factories in Shanghai that could facilitate in the processing operations of certain goods.

The presence of sent-down youth had a particular impact in those remote areas that hoped to develop industry. For instance, Huma, located at the northern tip of China on the Russian border in Heilongjiang, had no access to materials and equipment. At the time sent-down youth first arrived, a large part of Huma had no paved roads, electricity, postal service or telephones. The decade following the arrival of sent-down youth witnessed a vast expansion of the local economy, including the establishment of a coal mine; factories to produce agricultural machinery, electrical engines, cement, paper and bricks; food, grain and oil-processing plants; and wine-making workshops.<sup>71</sup> The number of tractors in Huma increased from 48 in 1968 to 280 in 1979.<sup>72</sup> According to the local gazetteer, sent-down youth, especially those who had graduated from vocational schools in Shanghai, provided the technical know-how and labour for the establishment of almost all of these enterprises.<sup>73</sup> In one village, a number of the sent-down youth assumed leadership positions within the production brigade, procured machines, including an oven, to make bricks, built a small power plant, and installed an electric generator and electric wires. They also bought hand-operated tractors, an oil-processing machine, and a threshing mill for wheat and rice. In addition, they are credited for paving roads and building houses and a public recreation hall.<sup>74</sup>

The extent of the material improvements and agricultural and industrial development in Huma may well be atypical. It certainly represents a stark contrast to the image of economic stagnation suggested by many studies of the Cultural

70 American Rural Small-scale Industry Delegation 1977, 246–47. A youth sent to Anhui recalled following instructions from books on how to conduct scientific experiments for pest control. Pei et al. 1998, 98.

71 Zhonggong Huma xian weiyuanhui 1980, 363–378. The gazetteer also points out that in 1978 the Huma output value had increased 281% from 1968.

72 Xu 2004, 8.

73 Also see He 2004.

74 Wang, Shicheng 2002.

Revolution. The few studies that acknowledge rural economic growth during these years see it as a mere footnote to advances made during the subsequent post-Mao economic reforms. Dali Yang, for example, points out that in the years between 1972 and 1976 rural industry underwent dramatic growth, while agricultural production declined. Yang attributes this growth in rural industry to a national planning conference in February 1970, at which leaders advocated the “vigorous construction of local ‘small industries’.”<sup>75</sup> The ensuing response to this government policy may help to account for rural industrial growth; however, something more complex must have been involved, for, as noted above, the government did not accompany this initiative with a provision of funds or equipment that would have made compliance possible. While it is impossible to demonstrate a clear connection between the sent-down youth movement and the economic development of these years, it is also difficult to ignore the obvious, albeit unacknowledged, correlation between the rise and decline of local industry and the arrival and departure of sent-down youth.

Accounts by sent-down youth themselves and the plethora of conversational back-and-forth of reports found in local archives make it clear that sent-down youth played a significant role in local economic development, particularly in areas far from major cities like Shanghai that otherwise had no access to the goods required to improve economic conditions. In many cases, the only resources available were the personal connections that were forged through the presence of sent-down youth. What emerges most clearly in the archival record is the extent to which local leaders actively, persistently, and often creatively, made use of these personal connections, as well as the connections that came through the bureaucratic infrastructure that accompanied the sent-down youth programme. These connections helped to bridge the vast gap between large cities such as Shanghai and the remote rural regions to which urban youth were sent. All of a sudden, officials from these remote regions were not only issuing written requests to offices in Shanghai, but were in many cases travelling to Shanghai themselves in order to pursue their efforts to acquire resources.

At the same time, largely because of the vast number of the city’s youth sent to the countryside, Shanghai government bureaus assumed responsibility for the provision of economic assistance to remote rural areas. According to its gazetteer, Shanghai provided materials worth 16 million yuan to those places receiving its youth, along with tractors, cars, trucks, water pumps and engines with a combined value of 55 million yuan.<sup>76</sup> The quantity of goods and funds officially distributed by the Shanghai municipal government is probably dwarfed by the materials sent by individual factories, shops, street committees and schools in Shanghai that were negotiated through the personal connections established between sent-down youth, their parents, members of the *weiven tuan*, and rural officials and peasants. These connections provided a source of material

75 Yang, Dali 1996, 116.

76 Shanghai shi difangzhi bangongshi 2013.

goods as well as the skills training and technical support crucial for rural industrial development at a time of strong central planning when remote localities were often overlooked in the allocation of resources. Sent-down youth, sometimes unwittingly and sometimes intentionally, created connections that transcended the urban/rural divide of Maoist China and subverted the restrictions on inter-regional exchange prescribed by centralized state economic planning. In this context, the sent-down youth movement may emerge as a hidden history of Cultural Revolution economic history, while the transportation of material goods and equipment engaged in by individual youth and negotiated by the bureaucratic structure that supported them may represent a previously hidden history of the sent-down youth movement.

**摘要:** 本文探讨上山下乡运动和文化大革命期间农村经济发展的关系。文章阐述知识青年为改变农村现状所做的种种努力，重点显示边远地区干部如何取得发展农村工业所必需的机械设施和技术培训，并有效地对知青所带来的知识和文化技术等资源加以利用。各地各级知青办的建立为城乡沟通创造了条件。通过新的渠道，大量的文革期间的紧缺物资—从电线和广播器材到拖拉机和工业机械—从城市运往农村。文章所涉及的知识青年、知青家长和城乡干部都不是这场运动的决策者，然而他们对多种资源的发现、开发和运用却超出了这场运动的预期。

**关键词:** 知识青年; 文化大革命; 农村工业; 城乡关系; 知青办

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