

China's Troubled Down-to-the-Countryside Campaign

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*For a decade a principal component of Chinese policy toward higher education has been a policy not to further educate high school graduates—even as apprentices in urban factories—but rather to send them down for an indefinite period of agricultural labor in the countryside. Based on interviews in Hong Kong as recent as the spring of 1978. Jonathan Unger provides an evaluation of hsia-hsiang that is significantly more pessimistic than such earlier appraisals as Tom Bernstein's masterful, *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside*. Focusing on recent policy changes in Kwangtung, Unger allows us a unique glimpse into the vast reversal of domestic social policies currently underway in China. A sociologist, Unger teaches in the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures at the University of Kansas. He is currently revising his Sussex dissertation on Education under Mao for publication, and he is a coauthor of the sociopolitical history of a Kwangtung peasant village with Anita Ch'an and Richard Madsen.*

—The Editors

China's massive rustication (*xia-xiang*) movement,¹ which since 1968 has sent seventeen million urban young people to settle in the countryside,² is now quietly being allowed to fold. China's major magazine for young people admitted recently that "many rusticated urban youths (*zhi-shi qingnian*) have become listless and dejected, and the masses discontented."³ The government is now promising that as China's efforts to modernize proceed, the young people will be recalled in increasing numbers to the cities and far fewer new young people will have to rusticate.⁴

In interviews conducted in Hong Kong during 1975–76 and again during the spring of 1978, it was clear that the rustication program had been in serious trouble for some time. Based on interviews with emigrants from China's Kwangtung Province and upon the official documentation available for Kwangtung, it was possible to piece together the reasons in Kwangtung for the down-to-the-countryside movement's failure.

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RUSTICATION AFTER THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

During the entire decade leading up to the Cultural Revolution only some 40,000 young people from Canton had been settled in the countryside. But the two years of Cultural Revolution turmoil brought industrial expansion to a halt, and so there were few factory jobs available for the student Red Guards at the end of it. Some of them were still young enough to return to their studies, but there were not sufficient classrooms in Canton even to accommodate the new crowds

¹ The best secondary sources on the campaign before the Cultural Revolution are D. Gordon White, "The Politics of Hsia-hsiang Youth," *China Quarterly* 59 (July 1974); and John Gardner, "Educated Youth and Urban-Rural Inequalities," in John W. Lewis, ed., *The City in Communist China*, Stanford University Press, 1971. Secondary sources on the movement after the Cultural Revolution include Thomas Bernstein, "Urban Youths in the Countryside: Problems of Adaptation and Remedies," *China Quarterly* (March 1977); and Bernstein's *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside*, Yale University Press, 1977.

² NCNA in FBIS-CHI-78-238 (15 Dec), ES.

³ China Youth News (Zhongguo Qingnian Bao), 23Nov78, in FBIS-CHI-78-238 (11 Dec), E16-E19.

⁴ FBIS-CHI-78-242 (15 Dec), E4.

of younger children. In any case, the authorities believed it politically wise to disperse the recently combatant Red Guards. Consequently almost all of Canton's junior and senior high school students were informed in 1968 that they were now to consider themselves high school graduates. Furthermore, the great majority of these young people—75,000, or three-quarters of Canton's high school student body—were told that they would have to settle in the rural areas.⁵ Throughout the provinces, a third of a million urban youngsters were to be sent simultaneously to settle in the villages,⁶ and they were told it would most likely be for life.

Whereas before the Cultural Revolution all rustics from Canton had been volunteers, in the 1968 program rustics were forced to go—largely on the grounds of class background. China was entering a period when the “red” classes, that is the pre-Liberation industrial workers, the pre-land reform poor and lower-middle peasants, the veteran Party officials and the children of all of these groups were being shown strong political favoritism. A questionnaire was distributed in Hong Kong to fifty-five young people from Canton soliciting information on all their former high school classmates. The results suggest that something like 97% of the middle-class students (the children of Canton's pre-Liberation peddlars, white-collar workers, and professionals) and 99 percent of the bad-class background students were consigned to the countryside. On the other side of the “class” divide some 42 percent of the officials' children and 31 percent of the “red”-background working-class children were getting urban or military assignments instead.⁷ Thus, most of the students sent to settle in the countryside had good cause to feel that the grounds for selection had been unjust.

Yet not all of these young people were dissatisfied with their lot. At least some were initially enthused by the new adventure, despite all the reasons for them to feel otherwise. Although during the Cultural Revolution they had heard the complaints of those who had gone down during the 1960s, the students often discounted them as the self-interested exaggerations of selfish malcontents. They themselves had learned in school that life in the countryside might be tough. But they had also been taught to regard settlement in the countryside as a testing ground of their own political dedication as an experience of tempering that would strengthen and [p. 81] purify their own characters, and as a means to contribute to the economic construction and cultural enlightenment of the rural districts. Within a relatively short time though many of these optimistic new settlers were learning a series of lessons that disabused them of any romantic notions.

Problems of Sent-Down Youth

The first lesson was that in general they were neither needed nor wanted by the peasantry. They could have hoped for a welcome only in villages lacking labor power or the skills of literacy and numeracy. But with hundreds of thousands of urban young people dispatched into Kwangtung's countryside in 1968–69, most villages acquired more youths than they could readily accommodate. In a number of Kwangtung's rural districts, this point had been reached even before the Cultural Revolution. The greatest share of the youths in 1968–69 had to be assigned to villages that were labor-rich and land-scarce. This meant that limited harvests would have to be

⁵ *Southern Daily*, 18 Jan 69, in SCMP (Suppl.) 246, p. 18; also Canton Radio, 18 Jan 69, in FBIS-CHI-69-17 (24 Jan), D12. These rustivating students were joined by more than 17,000 of Canton's unemployed “street youths.”

⁶ Canton Radio, 10 Dec 69, cited in *China Topics*, 26 Jan 70, p. 7.

⁷ Stanley Rosen, Anita Ch'an, and Jonathan Unger, “Students and Class Warfare, Part II: The Emergence of Red Guard Factionalism,” *China Quarterly*, forthcoming issue.

shared among additional hands, lessening each family's income.⁸ Accordingly, the peasants sometimes noticeably resented the fact that surplus urban population was being shifted onto their own meager resources. As the post-Cultural Revolution high schools began spilling out their own crowds of graduates, successive allotments of rusticated youths increasingly taxed such villages' tolerance. As this occurred, the earlier student rusticans of 1968–69 found their own relations with the peasantry deteriorating apace.

The discomfiting circumstances of the sent-down youths were made worse by Mao's directive of December 1968 that "it is absolutely necessary for educated young people to go to the countryside to be reeducated by the poor and lower-middle peasants."⁹ With the media chorusing the refrain, the young people were placed in a position politically inferior to the peasantry. Their urban origins became a handicap. They were no longer able to fantasize that they were "glorious" revolutionaries for having willingly come to the countryside.

The young people found too that there was little hope for them to exercise their urban-learned skills. Though almost all the villages did need accountants, team cashiers, teachers, and Mao Study leaders, there were only enough slots for a fraction of the sent-down youths. Moreover the rural school system had begun turning out local graduates with literate and numerate abilities similar to their own. The peasants naturally gave the preferred positions to their own children rather than to the outsiders; the Mao directive and "class line" arguments provided the peasants with theoretical justification for doing so.

Even rusticans who have left China are quick to concede, though, that on the whole the peasants were tolerant of them and individually were [p. 82] often quite decent to them. But as a group the urban young people were sometimes treated poorly. Knowing full well that they were losing money on the immigrants to the countryside, some peasant cadres tried by hook or by crook to minimize the peasants' collective losses. For each sent-down youth the province had allotted 230 yuan—more than many peasants could earn in a year—to help build dormitories, buy farm tools, and provide foodstuffs for the rusticans' first eight months in the countryside. But in the cases of half of the six youths from whom I solicited this particular information, some of this money had simply been expropriated by the local production teams as illicit compensation for the long-term losses the rural population would suffer. The youngsters had to make do with extremely makeshift quarters.

Even after the young people had managed to settle in, they often had difficulty sustaining themselves. Agricultural labor in south China is gruelling, and the urban youths did not have the peasants' stamina or tolerance for unending work. Exhausted by day's end, the rusticated young people could not till their private plots diligently after work (or perhaps they were too lazy) and so were not able to supplement their diets. Many of the parents of rusticated youths had to begin sending their children funds each month to buy extra foodstuffs at the expensive rural free-market prices.

Canton's older generation had always expected that as their eldest children matured and entered the job market they would, in line with the continuing traditions of filial piety, contribute something to the parents' financial welfare. Instead the parents now discovered that they had to support their grown children. Factory wages had largely stood still since the early sixties, and the

⁸ Jonathan Unger, "Collective Incentives in the Chinese Countryside: Lessons from Chen Village," *World Development* (May 78).

⁹ *People's Daily* (23 Dec 68), p. 1.

parents in Canton were finding that in their middle age this new monthly drain on their resources left them with a lower, not higher, standard of living. Caught in this unexpected bind, they had good financial reasons to be antagonistic to the rustication program. Some whose children had been assigned to especially poor rural districts even calculated that it might be almost as cheap to keep the youngster illicitly and happily at home sharing the family's rations. Citing the living conditions of sent-down youths, a great many fathers began refusing to let their younger children rusticate when they graduated from school.

Word had gotten back to China's cities that a small proportion of rural cadres had taken advantage of the social isolation and vulnerability of rusticated girls and that there had been cases of seduction or rape. With this as a pretext parents were becoming especially adamant in refusing to let their daughters sign up to rusticate. Among other things they hoped that their stay-at-home daughters would eventually marry young men with factory jobs. Such young wives would gain a permanent urban status and would even be eligible to earn an income in one of the neighborhood workshops for housewives. In 1975, Kwangtung Province finally moved to [p. 83] close this escape-hatch by denying stay-at-home daughters the right to wed.¹⁰

By 1970–71 enough of the youngsters in the countryside were disgruntled, and urban opposition to the rustication program had become sufficiently great, that Lin Piao allegedly planned to muster support in his conflict with Mao by proclaiming opposition to rustication. Lin reportedly intended to hoist the slogan “rustication is labor reform in disguise,”¹¹ playing both upon the parents' concerns about the hardships of rural labor and upon the rusticated youths' own resentment at their suspect political status.

Improvements and Prospects

Mao himself was aware of urban discontent with the program, and in the spring of 1970 he issued a strong nine-point directive, ordering that rusticating youths receive the full monthly grain rations due them, that they get equal pay for equal work, that they receive adequate housing, that they not be excluded from the local health-care system, and that rural cadres who forced themselves on urban girls were to be severely punished. In short, the six or so million youths who had rusticated since 1968 henceforth were to be protected.¹² It was even stipulated that some were to be elected as local cadres in order to set the new mood.¹³

The circumstances of the sent-down youths began to improve after 1970. But the peasants remained reluctant, even under pressure, to sustain losses caused by the unwanted immigrants. When dormitories subsequently were built, in several villages the new structures closely resembled granaries and barns. Village leaders evidently hoped that the youngsters would not be in the village forever.

¹⁰ *China News Summary* (U.K. government), 594 (10 Dec 75), p. 3.

¹¹ This slogan was alleged to have been proposed in a conspiratorial “571 Document,” which the Party circulated widely in China after Lin Piao's death as proof of his treachery. The slogan was thereafter attributed to Lin in numerous broadcasts: e.g., Honan Radio, in FBIS-CHI-74-56 (21 Mar), H2, D1; and Hunan Radio in FBIS-CHI-75-95 (15 May), H2.

¹² This information comes from interviews; but see, e.g., Canton Radio, in FBIS-CHI-72-7 (11 Jan), D5, for a Kwangtung conference's summary of these nine new measures. A slightly different listing of the contents of this directive appears in *Zhong-gong Yan-jiu* (Taiwan), Nov 70, p. 25.

¹³ Wherever rusticated youths comprised a sixth or more of a production team's adult population, at least one sent-down youth was to sit on the team leadership committee.

For their part many young people feared that they would be trapped in the countryside for life. They saw themselves facing a lifetime, not just of hard work and tedium, but also of celibacy. To marry and raise families the young men would have to get their own private house built, and that would cost about a thousand *yuan*. Even in a well-off village, this was equivalent to three full years' earnings from collective agriculture, which is paid largely in kind. Young peasant men managed to amass the necessary cash through several years of private after-work production by their whole families. Urban young men had little chance to raise the needed money on their own. The young urban women had better opportunities. They were sought after as brides by the young peasant men, especially since the young women's families in the city did not demand the traditional expensive bride-price that still prevails in much of the countryside. But marriage presented an unwelcome risk for these young women, since it foreclosed any possibility of being recalled to the cities. This rule applied even if both partners to the marriage were sent-down urban youths. It [p. 84] deterred many from marrying even when they could afford it.¹⁴

The young people were aware that there did exist *some* possibilities of being recalled. Beginning in 1970 a series of policies had been initiated where some opportunities—a portion of the factory posts in county towns and Canton, some of the openings at Canton's universities and vocational schools, and some of the postings to the PLA—were reserved for rusticated youths. By mid-1975, 23 percent of the urban youths from Kwangtung who had been sent to the countryside had been able to find a way out.¹⁵

The government's directives to rural cadres stipulated that these selections were to be made largely on the basis of work enthusiasm and political activism. According to interviewees, this policy did convince some rusticans to labor energetically and competitively. But in the long run this same policy of providing some urban outlets contained serious drawbacks. In particular, it soon became common knowledge that the children of officials were getting unfair priority due to their parents' influence. For its own smooth functioning, the Chinese economy requires extensive networks for trading favors among economic and administrative units, since needed supplies and spare parts are not consistently available through legal channels. The officials now found it all too easy to make personal use of these networks to make contacts and reach bargains on their own children's behalf. Bad-class or even middle-class youngsters seemed to have almost no chance of selection—at least in their own eyes—while the children of the powerful seemed merely to be stopping off in the villages for one year or two to acquire a “gold-plating” helpful to their future careers. Referring to this phenomenon, a rusticant of 1964 who remained a fervent political activist till the early 1970s observed:

Ha! Those cadre's kids got out in no time! Though I didn't think this when I went to the village, afterwards I realized that it was “bad” people who got left in the countryside. If the policy really had been that everyone equally had to go down, I'd have been willing to sacrifice. If to work in the countryside were really glorious (*guang-rong*), I'd be glad and happy to be there. But it's become the

¹⁴ In 1978 a government spokesman announced that 900,000 (i.e., only 5 percent) of the 17 million rusticans have “married and settled permanently in the countryside.” FBIS-CHI-78-242 (15 Dec), p. E5. This percentage is extremely low considering that all of the sent-down youths are of marriageable age and may have been in the countryside for a decade.

¹⁵ Canton Radio, in FBIS-CHI-75-154 (8 Aug), H4-H5; a similar rate of return for the youngsters sent to work on Hainan Island, FBIS-CHI-75-163 (21 Aug). In Kirin Province, fully a third of the youths rusticated after the Cultural Revolution had been able to leave one way or another by 1975. (Kirin Radio, in BBC-FE/4803/B/11 (14 Jan 75), p. 14.

antithesis of glory; and I want nothing to do with it.¹⁶

This capacity of officials' children to leave the countryside "through the back door" was becoming a point of grievance for many urban Chinese. The best known articulation of this discontent came when a school teacher in Fukien found the courage in 1973 to write an angry letter to Mao Tsetung, complaining that his son in the countryside could not make ends meet. Despite the measures of 1971 the local officials were not showing concern for the youngsters, and his son was still getting short-changed in work-points and housing. The father was being ruined financially supporting the boy. It was entirely unfair, he wrote, that the kids of ordinary folks got shipped to the villages for life, while those with [p. 85] influence escaped, preferably to a university. The letter reached Mao, who responded in a quixotic gesture by publicly sending the father some money from his salary as chairman.¹⁷ The schoolteacher's letter became required reading for Party meetings throughout China; the Central Committee shortly thereafter passed a decree raising settlement subsidies to Y500 per youth; and a campaign began publicizing the rustication of the children of ranking Party officials. But rustication remained singularly unpopular, and reportedly the sudden ballyhoo surrounding the departure of the cadres' children to the countryside only sharpened the scepticism.

ALLOCATING GRADUATES TO JOBS

For most urban young people, job hunting in the 1960s had been a free-for-all. But after the Cultural Revolution this had ended once and for all, particularly since so many students had to be assigned to the countryside. From a special new city bureau, each school now received a quota of posts at specific places of work. The school itself decided who obtained which of these posts. Similarly, from a new Municipal Rustication Arrangements Office, the school received a list of rural destinations for those of its students who would have to rusticate.

The rusticating students in most years were offered at least two choices: they could be assigned to a commune or to a state farm. On the positive side, the Kwangtung state farms provided a fixed and reliable monthly salary of about Y25 and a social life among fellow urban youths. This compared to the vicissitudes of a village income and the possibilities of a more lonely life among the peasants. On the negative side, state farms frequently were run by the PLA and held a reputation for offering a suffocatingly regimented style of life.¹⁸ Moreover, Kwangtung's newly expanding state farms were concentrated largely on Hainan, the large tropical island off Kwangtung's southern tip. There backbreaking clearing of jungles in a malarial frontier area combined with exile too far from Canton to return home even on annual visits. Despite the growing distaste for both choices, as the years passed rusticants opted in increasing proportions for the easier life of the villages.

Criteria for Rustication

The question that most concerned young people was, of course, who would be selected to

¹⁶ From an interview transcript by Edwin Lee, to whom I am thankful.

¹⁷ The information on this episode comes from several interviewees, including a university professor still in China. Similar reports appear in Joseph Lelyveld, "The Great Leap Farmward," *New York Times Magazine*, 28 July 74; also Thomas Bernstein, *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside*, p. 82.

¹⁸ In late December 1978, 50,000 young people who had been assigned to state farms in Yunnan Province reportedly staged a general strike to protest what their leaflets called intolerable working conditions, "cheating, and oppression." (*New York Times*, 14 Jan 79, p. 12.)

rusticate in the first place. It was a problem that continued to trouble the authorities too. What criteria could be used that would not reinforce dissatisfaction with the program? In the first high school classes that graduated after the Cultural Revolution in 1969 and 1970, the selected teenagers had been almost entirely from the middle and [p. 86] bad classes. But as has been indicated, this only served to strengthen the feelings among Canton's young people that the villages were becoming dumping grounds for second-class citizens. The allocation policies of 1969 and 1970 had led to resentment among those selected, damaging the morale of those who had previously gone down. Kwangtung decided in 1971, therefore, that "class" should no longer be a determining factor.

Nor, for much the same reasons, could a student's political activism at school be permitted to affect allocations. Settlement in the countryside was something a dedicated student activist was supposed to *want* to do, not something to avoid. Nor, finally, could a student's academic record be allowed to play any part in the decision of who rusticated. That was precisely the standard that post-Cultural Revolution education no longer was supposed to reward.

Apparently as a way out of these dilemmas, Kwangtung decided in 1971 that instead of counting any of the graduate's own attributes, his or her job destination would be determined solely by reference to the proportion of a youth's brothers and sisters who had already gone to the countryside. If a certain proportion of the siblings had not gone, the graduate went. In this way, the onus of "failure" was to be removed from rural assignments.

For the year of 1971, this "sibling" policy dictated that the graduating student would have to rusticate if half or more of his or her brothers and sisters were still at an urban residence. For the most part, this meant the older children in each household now had to face the prospect of rural lives. But the parents were assured that at least the younger children, when they came of age, would be granted urban postings and remain near home, to support them in their old age. It was patently an equitable policy, and seems to have been recognized as such. But it was nevertheless difficult for Chinese parents to accustom themselves to it. In Chinese society the eldest son traditionally held special responsibility for the care of his parents and the continuance of the family line; the eldest son in exchange was most beloved and most doted on by his parents. Now it was the younger children who would be likely to hold those responsibilities—and, in many households, a daughter!

Despite this new "sibling" criterion for allocating the young people, the schools did continue to possess at least a degree of discretion as to whether any given student was to be placed on the urban or rural list, and parents tried to play on this discretion. From 1971 onwards, low-salaried parents with a goodly number of younger children were able to argue that the soon-to-graduate eldest child be given an urban assignment, so as to provide immediate help to the straitened family budget. A former teacher from a factory-managed school in Yunnan Province observes that, in contrast to the "back door" advantages enjoyed by officials in getting their children *out* of the countryside, here it was those at the bottom of the factory hierarchy who were better able to *prevent* their elder children [p. 87] from being sent down in the first place.

The deal in these cases was that a younger child would later rusticate in the elder brother's or sister's stead. Sensing that the rules for allocating youths had been changed almost annually, many of these parents seem to have been gambling that they could save the elder child without sacrificing the younger one. Some fathers even adopted the strategy of exaggerating their own ill-health so as to retire early. Their sharply reduced income would then oblige the school to

come up with an urban posting for a child about to graduate, or if none were of that age, would oblige the city to provide an urban job for one of their older children already in the countryside. The rush of parents trying to wangle early retirements grew to such proportions that the Central Committee reportedly had to pass strict regulations in 1973 to curtail the maneuver. Some other families, left with only younger daughters, tried to marry them off quickly into families that lived at a distance. They could then claim that the household's loss of the girl to another family warranted a son's return from the countryside.

Pressures and Counter Pressures

The proportion of graduating students who had to rusticate each year was determined by the annual manpower needs of the urban sector.¹⁹ In years of quickened industrial growth more new graduates could stay in the cities; in years of industrial stagnation the schools might have to send all graduates who were not the "last child." For the first several years after the Cultural Revolution's turmoil, as Canton's industry began reviving, between one-third to two-thirds of the graduates, depending on the year, were able to stay in the city. But in 1973, following a recession and industrial retrenchment throughout China, the Canton city government recalculated its future manpower requirements and decreed that henceforth all but one child in each family would have to go.

By this time, however, parental resistance to the rustication of their children had become pronounced. In 1969 and 1970 it had been easier to bring pressure to bear on parents to make their children volunteer, in particular since they had been predominantly of middle- and bad-class background. Two respondents, both from bad-class families, report that their own parents had been brought to school and subjected thereto daily "study sessions," sometimes having to sleep at the school overnight, until they submitted and made their children sign up. But if they could weather the school's barrage of strictures—and the schools learned eventually to shed this duty as quickly as possible—their case was handed over to their Neighborhood Residence Committee and local militia. These units had little desire to try to "persuade" the annually growing numbers of teenagers and their parents to give in. This was especially true after 1970, [p. 88] when the majority were of solid working-class background and could not so readily be addressed in threatening tones. The numbers sitting idly at home, having refused to rusticate, began rising sharply as word of the troubles in the countryside hardened into generalized urban discontent with the program.

New "mobilization" methods were needed. In 1973, it was made the responsibility of the father's place of work; it was no longer the responsibility of the schools or the neighbourhoods. Apparently it was calculated that the work-unit would have an easier time of it. That was where the father had to participate "politically" in all campaigns, where his dossier was kept, and where the influence of men important to his own life could be exerted on him. In short, it was where the family was most vulnerable to pressure. The heads of factories now had rustication targets to

¹⁹ Interestingly, the pace of the rustication program seems to have been greatest in the most industrialized and richest provinces; Shanghai has sent well in excess of a million. See FBIS-CHI-74-56 (21 Mar), C8. A record kept of different provinces suggests that, contrarily, the poorer inland areas of the country have sent a much smaller proportion of their urban populations. It seems industrialization was being pushed hardest by the government in the hinterlands. The coastal cities paid the cost in slower development and the loss of half of their younger generation; and the discontent and social unrest of the great cities in the 1970s—Shanghai, Peking, Tientsin, Canton—probably in consequence ran deeper than elsewhere.

meet, and from 1973 onward parents who resisted were sometimes subjected to gruelling “study sessions” at their work-units.

The factories only handled youngsters whom the schools had already earmarked for rustication. They were henceforth sent first to the parent’s factory, and from there to the countryside in a group composed entirely of factory children. To assuage parents’ fears factory cadres were to accompany these groups to help the young people adjust to rural living and to prevent rural cadres from discriminating against them.²⁰

Moreover, all these new rusticans were to be dispatched to sites within travelling distance of Canton. No more youngsters were to be sent to Hainan Island or other frontier districts. Similarly in Peking, Shanghai, and other major cities, the policy of sending youths to the frontiers was sharply cut back from 1974 onwards. In the first half decade after the Cultural Revolution, upwards of a million youths had been assigned to populate the frontiers and bring them under the plow: they were dispatched from Peking to Inner Mongolia; from Tientsin and Peking to the Manchurian wilderness; from Shanghai to the steppes of Sinkiang; from south China to Hainan Island and the Yunnan jungles. This massive program to use China’s younger generation to develop the borderlands had now proven too costly in terms of urban discontent, and by 1974 these efforts were quietly being retrenched.

At the same time, many of Kwangtung’s own villages were refusing to accommodate any more of Canton’s young people. So increasingly the groups sent out from factories were settled in their own separate “youth points” on patches of rural wasteland. The premise that young people should “unite with” and be “reeducated” by the peasantry was allowed to lapse. Placing the youths in isolated “youth-points” increased the need for prolonged supervision by factory cadres. Coming for a year or two in shifts, these cadres now also had to help control the young people and prevent them from slipping back unchecked to Canton.

Rusticated youths of earlier years—destitute, bored, or disgruntled—[p. 89] already were illegally stealing back by the tens of thousands. A teacher from a commune high school in one of the poorest counties of Kwangtung recalls that all but fifteen or twenty of the hundred urban youths who had been settled in his immediate vicinity had drifted off by 1971 to the cities of Canton and Swatow. The urban Neighborhood Committees and local police offices turned a blind eye to such youths so long as they were not of overly bad background and lived quietly at home. But there were thousands of other youngsters whose parents could not or would not support them. Without work permits, ration coupons, or residence cards, they survived in Canton through petty thievery and prostitution. The city’s rate of crime, which prior to the Cultural Revolution had been negligible, began rising rapidly, according to interviewees.

BALANCE SHEET

The national government still felt it economically advantageous to pursue the rustication program. The more than fifteen million young people shipped to the countryside since the Cultural Revolution (10 percent of China’s urban population!) had been able to contribute at least *something* to agricultural production, even if marginally. In the cities they would have been merely an idle, highly concentrated, and perhaps politically volatile body of unemployed.

²⁰ E.g., Canton Radio, in FBIS-CHI-74-157 (13 Aug), H3. By the end of 1974, 40,000 cadres in China had been sent to lead and “work together” with the rusticating youths. FBIS-CHI-75-14 (21 Jan), E1-E2.

However, the price paid for the program was heavy—more than just discontent among sent-down youths, the peasantry, and urban parents, more than the rising tide of urban crime. Perhaps more serious, many of the teenagers in Canton's schools who knew they would be earmarked to settle in the countryside for life refused to pay attention in class and fomented much of the disorder and juvenile delinquency that plagued the city's school system.²¹

Surveying the damage, Kwangtung's leadership decided that the costs far outweighed whatever advantages the rustication policies had. Most other provinces retained their rustication schemes; but in Kwangtung in the spring of 1975, the provincial Party Committee abandoned the "rustication for life" policy. Even more extraordinary, it decreed that almost all the youths who had been sent down to the countryside not only after but also before the Cultural Revolution—close to 400,000 Kwangtung young people *in toto*—were to be recalled rapidly from the countryside.²² Those who had been settled in the villages began flooding back into cities in the summer of 1975. The return of settlers from state farms was reportedly delayed.

The Kwangtung Party had moved at an apt time. Education in Canton had recently been reexpanded from eight years to ten. This meant that in two of the past several years no new graduates had entered the job market, and temporary labor shortages had thereby been created. Moreover, to [p. 90] assure further job openings for the returned urban youths, Kwangtung decreed in 1975 that almost all of Canton's newly graduating students would be sent to the countryside for a two- or three-year stint.²³

In the five years between early 1970 and the end of 1974 only 85,000 youths in Canton (and 260,000 province-wide) had actually been persuaded to rusticate.²⁴ Now under the new policy officials calculated that in 1975 fully 80,000 additional Cantonese youngsters would volunteer by year's end.²⁵ The volunteers apparently came not just from the newly graduating class, but also from graduates of past years who had previously resisted. Their objection had never been to the notion of working in the countryside, but to working in the countryside for *life*.²⁶ According to interview reports, they now went willingly, knowing that only by rustivating would they later be able to obtain urban jobs.

²¹ Jonathan Unger, *Education Under Mao*, forthcoming from Columbia University Press.

²² About 100,000 from Kwangtung had gone prior to the Cultural Revolution. They were joined in 1968-69 by an additional 300,000—Canton Radio (10 Dec 69), cited in *China Topics* (U.K. government), YB540 (26 Jan 70), p. 7. This policy of sending all these urban youths back to the cities seems to have been applied with considerable rigidity. The sister of an interviewee had been training before the Cultural Revolution to be a veterinarian and wished to continue in the countryside with her animal doctoring, but was ordered back to the city in the summer of 1975 and assigned work in Canton's construction industry. The only young people from the 1968-69 cohort who seem not to have been sent home quickly through the new policy were those who had misbehaved in the countryside (retained for a while as a punishment and warning to new rusticans, apparently) and some of the barefoot doctors and village teachers and some of those who had married.

²³ Information from interviews. In 1978 an American reporter was told by officials at a Kwangtung commune that the young people came by rotation for about two years. (*New York Times*, 5 Dec 78, p. 2).

²⁴ Canton Radio, in FBIS-CHI-75-5 (8 Jan), H6. The figures for the province are 560,000 from 1968 through mid-1975 [Canton Radio, FBIS-CHI-75-91 (9 May), H11], of whom 300,000 were pre-Cultural Revolution high-school students who had been rusticated in 1968-69. By the end of 1975, the figures province-wide had jumped 140,000 to 700,000. Canton Radio (25 Dec 75), in BBC-FE/5095/B/11/8.

²⁵ Canton Radio, in FBIS-CHI-75-114 (12 June), H3; also Canton Radio (16 Aug 75) in BBC-FE/4994/B/11/8.

²⁶ An interviewee from an island province where industrialization has been rapid enough to absorb practically all the new urban generation reports that his city's sent-down youths have consistently felt when they went down that they would be able to return to an urban life after three or four years. He attests that the rustication program there has worked smoothly all along, and that high school graduates often go in high spirits.

How will Kwangtung's cities be able to provide jobs for them? It is possible that a crisis of unfulfilled expectations will emerge. But it is also more than likely that Kwangtung will narrowly be able to pull off the new strategy. Massive imported petrochemical plants outside Canton will soon be operating, with jobs created in new auxiliary industries. More important, Canton will benefit from demographic trends. Canton's present all-too-large generation of young adults resulted from the urban baby boom of the 1950s. With a declining urban birth rate since the early 1960s and a halt to urban immigration, the crisis in the urban job market that has plagued Canton since the early 1960s should soon recede of its own accord. In historical perspective, the massive rustication campaign of the past decade will be viewed as a temporary economic expedient obviated by the Pill.

[Footnotes as endnotes in original]