



Bin Xu, *Chairman Mao's Children: Generation and Memory Politics in China*

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Wen Xie¹

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The send-down program has influenced the lives of about 17 millions of urban youth, but their experiences and memories of it vary greatly. The recently published book by Xu Bin, *Chairman Mao's Children: Generation and Memory Politics in China*, examines how the sent-down youths (zhiqing) remember their youth and the historical program that altered their life course.

In recent years, zhiqing research has increased, and this contribution advances our understanding of this program and its impact. Several of the arguments presented in the book are especially noteworthy. To begin, Xu wants us to examine the generation of Chairman Mao's children not as a homogenous whole, but rather to highlight intragenerational differences. Xu demonstrates that generational memory is complex, and these complexities are evident in how the event is depicted in their own narratives, literary works, exhibits, museums, and commemorative events. Xu's objective is to provide a "thick" description of the memory patterns and trajectories of the generation.

Second, Xu argues persuasively for a relationship between mnemonic practices and class. He divides individual-level memories, or autobiographical memory, into two intertwined components: personal experience and historical evaluation. He demonstrates that these autobiographical memory patterns have a strong correlation with class. Xu proposes, on the basis of narrative coding and statistical analysis, that class in the present could explain zhiqing's personal experience, whereas class in the past and political habitus shape their historical evaluation of the event.

Third, he discovers that remembering "the people but not the event" gradually became the dominant theme on the level of the public and group memory. This represents a shift from the "good people but bad events" paradigm that dominated literary work in the 1980s. This occurs due to interactions between the memory field and

✉ Wen Xie
wxie@pku.edu.cn

¹ Department of Sociology, Peking University, Beijing, China

the power field. While the few successful members of a generation “construct their uplifting, ascending life stories to confirm their personal achievements,” the voices of those who continue to suffer as a result of the aftermath have been silenced. Because “good people but not the event” has become the common way of commemorative practices, the cultural influence of such practices remains highly confined within their own circle and rarely reaches the general public.

Theoretically, Xu makes three important contributions to the burgeoning field of memory studies: first, he views memory as a meaning-making process rather than a mere cognitive-psychological concept; second, as opposed to earlier scholarship, which focused almost exclusively on intergenerational differences in memory, he emphasizes intra-generational differences; and third, he provides a comprehensive theoretical framework that addresses generation and memory issues at different levels (individual, group/community, and public) and details how each level’s explanatory factors work.

The book provides a fine-grained analysis of generation and memory, but a number of other possible analytical pathways merits equal consideration. First, Xu intends to depict the generation of “Chairman Mao’s Children” through a “zhiqing” lens rather than a “Red Guards” lens (p.21). While the reason for this, as Xu mentions, was to use a less derogatory label, the distinction between the “Zhiqing Generation” and “Red Guards Generation” also has a demographic component. The “Red Guard Generation” roughly refers to those born around 1949 who attended middle school by the mid-1960s, whereas the send-down program has influenced a significantly larger age group. Multiple waves were discernible within the send-down program, including the prelude prior to the Cultural Revolution (1962–66), the peak (1968–69), and the last wave (1974–77). Thus, the large zhiqing generation is divisible into sub-cohorts. How much does their age cohort impact their experiences and how they remember the send-down event? Second, Xu’s primary fieldwork site is Shanghai. As he mentions in the Appendix, Shanghai is the most important source city for cross-regional send-down and the most active memory field for zhiqing. Do people in other regions of China experience and remember send-down movement similarly to those in Shanghai? How should we account for the various institutional settings that shape zhiqing’s life experiences once they return to cities? Some cross-place comparisons and a more detailed documentation of the policy context would shed light on these issues.

The materials collected by Xu and the manner in which he analyzes zhiqing’s memory make his book essential reading for anyone interested in contemporary Chinese history. It is also a timely read for anyone interested in comprehending the current state of Chinese generational politics and potential future scenarios.

Wen Xie is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Peking University. She is a sociologist of social change with particular interests in generations, development, life course, work, and capitalist transformation. She is currently revising her dissertation *The Making of the Chinese Rust Belt* into a book manuscript.