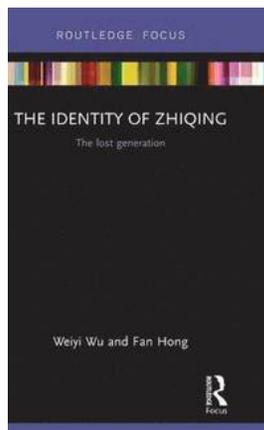




A lost generation? The story of the “zhiqing”

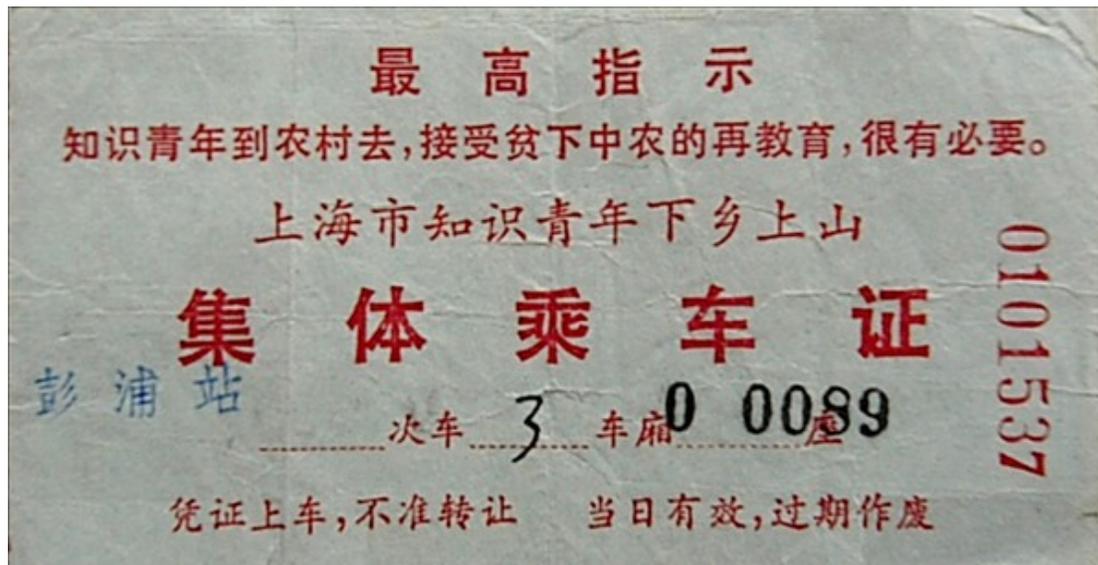
Cécile Van de Velde



Interview of the Chinese sociologist **Weiyi Wu**, who recently published with Professor Fan Hong a fascinating research about the story of the Chinese “Zhiqing” : those urban and educated youth who were deported to rural areas from 1967 to 1979. She is at present assistant researcher of the Art Institute of Nanjing University, China.

Who are initially the "Zhiqing"?

From the early 1960s to the late 1970s, over 16 million urban youth were relocated to the countryside during the Shangshan xiexiang yundong (Up to the Mountains Down to the Countryside Movement 上山下乡运动). Unlike the local peasants, who were mostly illiterate, those primary or secondary school graduates were called "Zhiqing" (知青, short for 知识青年 "Zhishi qingnian" – Educated Youth) which later became their collective identity. At the time of the UMDC Movement, Zhiqing were supposed to settle down in the countryside, contribute to the agricultural production and receive re-education from the peasants, hence being cultivated into revolutionary successors of the socialist regime.



How did they evolve throughout time?

As the first generation of the People's Republic of China (although their birth years range from the late 1940s to early 1960s, they could still be treated as one generation/group due to the categorical effect of the UMDC Movement.), Zhiqing's life transitions echoed most of its major historical events. Most recently, Zhiqing has been associated with the nation's future as the new leadership came into power in 2013. Among the seven members of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, four were Zhiqing during the UMDC Movement, including Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang.

Many historical books on the Zhiqing subject have analyzed the embeddedness of their life trajectories in Chinese contemporary history, such as Bernstein's (1977) and Bonnin's (2004) monographs, just to name two representative English publications. This book answers the question "How did Zhiqing evolve throughout time?" from a social psychological perspective by focusing on the group identity and individual members' identification process. More specifically, Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 analyze the two main stages of Zhiqing's identification process. The first chapter explains the construction and functioning of the Zhiqing identity as well as individuals' identification with their group

membership. The second one illustrates how a “long-gone” identity obtained in earlier life has had long-lasting efficacy on identification process later on.

How would you analyse their contemporary life trajectories compared to other young Chinese of their generation?

To compare Zhiqing with those of their generation who didn't go to the countryside, this book applies Glen H. Elder's (1999) explanatory framework to the analysis of Zhiqing's particular life trajectories. Chapter 2 focuses on four elements of Elder's life course theory: exposure to socio-historical changes, life chances, changes of social economic status, and inter-related lives. Take the inter-related lives for example, Zhiqing formed a special attachment to the rural society due to their experiences in the countryside, whereas those who stayed in the city have a relatively smaller social network and a hostile attitude towards migrant workers from the rural area.

Are they discriminated against and why?

Yes, the discrimination against Zhiqing even affects their children in some cases. The discrimination is mainly due to the strict urban-rural division and the resultant structural inequality which has existed for thousand years in China and thus has turned into a dominant mindset. Moreover, interviewees' perceived discrimination intensified every time when their social economic status worsened as the result of transformations of the society. For instance, when they firstly returned to the city, Zhiqing were treated as surplus labour and a huge burden; later during the reform of state-owned enterprises, most of them were laid-off because of their age and limited education, and they still rely on subsistence allowances provided by the state.

You call them « The lost generation »... Why?

Basically I borrowed the term “Lost generation” from Michel Bonnin (2004). However, Zhiqing tend to regard themselves as “the last idealists” who have sacrificed their personal interests to serve the nation through the hard times. In this book, “lost” refers to the anonymity of Zhiqing since the dissolution of the group after the UMDC Movement. Hence it is important to emphasize again the purpose of this book: to identify Zhiqing in the history and current society of China, based on the acknowledgement of their demographical, social and psychological significances. Just like what is said in the Preface: the generation is never lost.

Find out more :

Reference

Weiyi Wu, Fan Hong, *The Identity of Zhiking. The Lost Generation*, Routledge, 2016.

On the Back Cover

Outside China, little is known about the process and implications of the Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside (UMDC) Movement, a Chinese state policy from 1967 to 1979 in which more than 16 million secondary school-leavers in different cities were relocated to rural areas. The Movement shaped the lives of these young people and assigned them a shared group identity: Zhiqing, or the Educated Youth.

This book provides new research on Zhiqing, who were born and brought up after the establishment of the People's Republic of China and regarded as a lost generation during the Cultural Revolution. Presenting a remembrance of their tortuous life trajectories, the book investigates their distinctive identity and self-identification. Unlike earlier historical approaches, it does this from a social psychological perspective. It is also unique in its use of first-hand materials, as individuals' memories and reflections collected by in-depth interviews are compiled and presented as Zhiqing's self-portrait. This innovative research offers an informative and profound induction of the topic and also contributes to the development of contemporary Chinese studies by laying the foundation for a specialized Zhiqing study.

Combining rich empirical research with a strong theoretical perspective, this book will be invaluable to students and scholars of Chinese history, sociology, anthropology and politics.

About Weiyi Wu

Weiyi Wu, assistant researcher of the Art Institute of Nanjing University, China. Postdoctoral Research Fellow (Shanghai Jiao Tong University), PhD (University College Cork), MA (Renmin University of China). Her research field covers cultural studies, cultural anthropology and social psychology, with a particular interest in youth and inter-generational issues.

To contact Weiyi Wu

vviris0981@gmail.com

Pour citer cet article :

Cécile Van de Velde, «A lost generation? The story of the “zhiqing”», Le blog de la *Chaire de recherche sur les inégalités sociales et parcours de vie*, septembre 2016.

URL : <http://inegalitessociales.com/2016/09/27/a-lost-generation-the-story-of-the-zhiqing/>

Publié dans inegalitessociales.com,

Le 26 septembre 2016 © Chaire de recherche sur les inégalités sociales et parcours de vie.