

The Rustication of Urban Youths

In 1968, a new program sent millions of people from urban areas to the countryside to be “re-educated.” Mao’s rationale was called “thought reform through labor.” The city dwellers would learn firsthand the essential dignity of rural life and work, and the peasants would benefit by being brought up-to-date on the Cultural Revolution’s revolutionary thought and activities. In reality, this forced relocation, or “rustication,” of many thousands of people and severely disrupted the lives and families of those involved. Often careers and educations would not be resumed. Many splintered families never reunited. The program’s unstated purpose was to provide a means of ridding the cities of the hundreds of thousands of young people roaming about with little to do, and to provide a means of exiling adults who were believed to hold questionable political beliefs. The following recollections are from the perspective of a seventeen-year-old girl, Jung Chang.

In January 1969, every middle school student in Chengdu was sent to a rural area somewhere in Sichuan. We were to live in villages among the peasants and be “re-educated” by them. What exactly they were supposed to educate us in was not made specific, but Mao always maintained that people with some education were inferior to illiterate peasants, and needed to reform to be more like them. One of his sayings was: “Peasants have dirty and cow manure-sodden feet, but they are much cleaner than intellectuals.”

Everything in Ningnan was done manually, the way it had been for at least 2,000 years. There was no machinery—and no draft animals, either. The peasants were too short of food to be able to afford any for horses or donkeys. For our arrival the villagers had filled an earthenware water tank for us. The next day I realized how precious every drop was. To get the water, we had to climb for thirty minutes up narrow paths to the well, carrying a pair of wooden barrels on a shoulder pole. They weighed ninety pounds when they were full. My shoulders ached agonizingly even when they were empty. . . .

. . . Now I began to learn to cook the hard way. The grain came unhusked, and had to be put into a stone mortar and beaten with all ones’ might with a heavy pestle. Then the mixture had to be poured into a big shallow bamboo basket, which was swung with a particular movement of the arms so that the light shells gathered on top and could be scooped away, leaving the rice behind. After a couple of minutes my arms became unbearably sore and soon were shaking so much I could not pick up the basket. It was an exhausting battle every meal.

Then we had to collect fuel. It was two hours’ walk to the woods designated by the forest protection regulations as the area where we could collect firewood. We were only allowed to chop small branches, so we climbed up the short

pinces and slashed ferociously with our knives. The logs were bundled together and carried on our backs. I was the youngest in our group, so I only had to carry a basket of feathery pine needles. The journey home was another couple of hours, up and down mountain paths. I was so exhausted when I got back that I felt my load must weigh 140 pounds at least. I could not believe my eyes when I put my basket on the scales: it came to only five pounds. This would burn up in no time: it was not enough even to boil a wok of water.

On our first day working with the peasants, I was assigned to carry goat droppings and manure from our toilet up to the tiny fields which had just been burned free of bushes and grass. The ground was now covered by a layer of plant ash that, together with the goat and human excrement, was to fertilize the soil for the spring plowing, which was done manually.

I loaded the heavy basket on my back and desperately crawled up the slopes on all fours. . . . When I finally arrived at the field I saw the peasant women skillfully unloading by bending their waists sideways and tilting the baskets in such a way that the contents poured out. But I could not make mine pour. In my desperation to get rid of the weight on my back I tried to take the basket off. I slipped my right arm out of its strap, and suddenly the basket lurched with a tremendous pull to the left, taking my left shoulder with it. I fell to the ground into the manure. Some time later, a friend dislocated her knee like this. I only strained my waist slightly.

Hardship was part of the “thought reform.” In theory it was to be relished, as it brought one closer to becoming a new person, more like the peasants. Before the Cultural Revolution, I had subscribed wholeheartedly to this naïve attitude, and had deliberately done hard work in order to make myself a better person. . . . Now, scarcely three years later, my indoctrination was collapsing. With the psychological support of blind belief gone, I found myself hating the hardship in the mountains of Ningnan. It seemed utterly pointless.

Be able to . . .

1. Explain the reasons given for the rustication program that sent so many urban youths to the countryside. What other problems did they hope to solve?
2. Introduce your character to the other students, pronouncing her name correctly (as the spelling suggests), and tell what you know about her life.
3. In your own words, describe the events explained by this young woman.

1st Fold Here

2nd Fold Here

Jung Chang