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Sick Returnees among China's Sent-Down Youth and Contemporary Chinese Practices of Identity Performance

Jia Gao [1]

Abstract
China's first cohort of the sent-down youth during the Cultural Revolution has since its early years attracted considerable research interest and been analysed from a few different viewpoints. However, the gradual retreat from executing the sent-down policy, especially *bingtui* (return to urban centres of origin because of medical reasons) as the then-widely used tactic and its long-term impact on people's socio-political attitudes and behaviours has not been examined and evaluated adequately. This has resulted in a large discrepancy between the non-academic discourse of returning sent-down youth, including *bingtui*, and the academic literature on these aspects in both Chinese and English. As revealed by many non-academic publications, *bingtui* not only represented the emergence of a widespread popular resistance to the Maoist Cultural Revolution that involved mobilising those who were then sent to the countryside, but was also believed to be responsible for a surge in what has since become known as *songli feng* (a wave of gift-giving practice). Based on the information recorded in published personal memories of many sent-down youth and other published accounts, online and print, as well as the information collected from my own past observations and recent interviews, this article will go beyond both glowing and condemnatory documentations of the sent-down movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, and seek to analyse how *bingtui* was started, how it was utilised by sent-down youth and their families, and, importantly, how it had led more Chinese people to realise that certain aspects of their identity could be performed.

Keywords *bingtui*, sent-down youth, the rustication campaign, the Cultural Revolution, strategic identity performance

Introduction

The strategy of sending urban youth to the countryside was recycled and implemented in China nationwide in 1968 after the most chaotic period of the Cultural Revolution in both 1966 and 1967 [2, 45]. In 1967, the Cultural Revolution and Mao's leadership were seriously challenged by the Wuhan Incident of 20 July 1967, in which Mao himself was almost detained in Wuhan [40, 50]. The conservative veterans who were silenced after the so-called *Eryue Niliu* (the February counter-current, 1967) had once again enunciated the importance of restoring social order after the Wuhan Incident. The first major reversal of the Maoist approach was made publicly, and a few active members of the Central Cultural Revolution Leading Group were denounced and dumped for making too much troubles. To achieve the goal of maintaining stability, the Maoist leadership was then also

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under pressure to deal with the troubles caused by Red Guards, the rebellious urban youths who were used by Mao Zedong and his supporters in attacking their political rivals. In 1967, the radical and anarchical activism of the Read Guards was spreading beyond schools and university campuses into factories, government offices and even military institutes, which had resulted in a state of anarchy in much of the country. In the most hard hit urban centres, young Red Guard student activists had in effect become a new target of a top-down push for restoring social order and resuming production activities. Mao's old self-contradictory slogan proposed in the early 1960s of *zhua geming, cu shengchan* (focusing on revolution, hastening production) had reappeared in the headlines of newspapers nationwide. Just a couple of months after the Wuhan Incident of 20 July 1967, the push to send urban youth out of the cities had quietly occurred in early October 1967 [3, 7, 61], though most research publications have regarded 1968 as the start of the sent-down program according to Mao's directive publicised on 21 December 1968 [21, 39].

The Chinese phrase of *bingtui* (sick returnees) refers to some of those 17 or so million sent-down youth who were from as early as 1970 but mainly from 1972 onwards allowed to return to their cities of origin as long as they were 'proven medically unfit' [26, n.p.], when the program started falling apart rapidly [21]. As to be discussed next, *bingtui* was the experience of the first cohort of urban youth who have been described as *shengzai xin Zhongguo, zhangzai hongqixia* (being born in new China, and grew up under the red flag), but it was mostly characterised by both their collective resistance to the sent-down push and their tactical utilisation of some excuses for breaking the rules imposed by the Maoist leadership and gaining opportunities to return to their cities of origin.

Because of the significance and influence of the Cultural Revolution on contemporary Chinese society and politics, there has been a great amount of research dedicated to the analysis and documentation of what had occurred in China during this most chaotic period in post-1949 Chinese history. Among them are a large number of studies on the topic of *zhiqing* (the educated urban youth who were sent to work in the countryside), and earlier academic publications on the sent-down youth issue appeared as early as the early 1970s [1, 45]. The *bingtui* practice has been discussed unsystematically, if not sporadically or unconcernedly, in the research literature on the *zhiqing* issue, but obviously treated as an unexpected occurrence and trend against the sent-down push. The literature review of the *bingtui* practice of the sent-down urban youth has, therefore, to be based on the research literature on *zhiqing*, or sent-down youth of the Cultural Revolution.

In general, the academic literature on *zhiqing* could be divided into three major types according to the stages or aspects that have been studied, and these major research efforts include those focusing on the initial stage of sending the urban youth out of the cities to the countryside; the quiet and prolonged process of winding up the policy and operation; and the long-term consequences of the sent-down youth episode on a range of aspects of Chinese life in social, economic, and political terms.[1] Because the *bingtui* issue was only related to the last two types of research effort, this review devotes more attention to them than the first category. However, many earlier studies, as well as other studies about the early stage of the sending-down process, have provided this analysis with useful historical information, especially in terms of the influences of radical Red Guard activism [6, 58], idealism and passion on the participation of urban youth in the scheme [8, 56]. Since the sent-down history and the *zhiqing* as its creation have been a 'fascinating phenomenon' in the eyes of general readers and China specialists [8, p. 2], the first category of studies

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has also affected our current knowledge of this episode of Chinese history and the people affected in at least two fashions. On the one hand, research attention to the initial stage of the sent-down scheme has largely focused on its political and policy aspects, but the sent-down youth themselves, as well as their families, have been less visible. Therefore, while many researchers consider it as a 'policy failure' [56, p. 47], there are also some analyses that see the sent-down as a 'highly effective public administration' [39, p. 1]. On the other hand, among the limited research giving attention the people who were dragged into the sent-down movement, such analyses have, one way or another, been confined to an either-or thinking, whereby the sending-down is seen as either the deprivation of young people's rights or the opportunity to be re-educated by poor peasants [28, 32]. The simple division of victims and supporters, if not passionate partakers, has become the analytical constraint that prevents a deeper understanding of the sent-down youth issue.

Despite the analytical constraints, there has been an increasing research interest in the human side of the sent-down movement. The resistance by the sent-down youth and their parent communities to the policy and its implementation, as well as their actual, but slow, departure from villages and *bingtuan* (a shortened version of *shengchan jianshe bingtuan*, quasi-military agricultural farms), have also come into the sight of many researchers [3, 21]. While revealing the limits of totalitarian power in the Maoist China, the new focus on the noncompliance with state policies, in the words of Honig and Zhao [21], has also made researchers become aware that *zhiqing*'s return to the cities was the critical life transition that fundamentally transformed their 'identification process and behaviours' [52, p. 60]. Some of such studies have already identified many noncompliant manipulations by local officials and grassroots cadres in the process of executing the sent-down policy, including their sympathies for sent-down youth and tolerance for their demands for returning to the cities [21, 52]. However, it is still not very clear how *bingtui* was sought and organised by the sent-down youth and their families.

A number of channels through which the sent-down youth could leave rural areas have also been identified and examined in some studies, which are largely characterised by two types of focus on the departures of both the early cohort and the later groups. One of the large-scale studies about *zhiqing* has sorted out four major channels for leaving villages or *bingtuan*. They include being recruited as a worker; being recruited as a college student; joining the army; and making the excuse of health issues [58, p. 183]. Serval other studies have also noticed the existence of these four major channels, but the above order of them in terms of their usefulness and actual use is very different from what have been recorded in non-academic publications and oral history accounts. The latter sources of information suggest that these channels were not evenly used by *zhiqing* in the early 1970s, and that the sent-down youth did not have identical opportunities at that time to make use of them. While being recruited to urban factories was a rare and regional miracle, which had also to meet certain political criteria, both joining the army and being sent to a university were definitely the opportunities for privileged few in the early 1970s. Among research efforts to look at the use of illness excuses [21, 58], a few studies have revealed that many *zhiqing* had faked their health problems for returning to their home cities [8]. However, there is hardly anything else in the scholarly literature that confirms not only that *bingtui* was the most widely used channel as recorded in non-academic sources, but also that how it was used or faked as claimed by many.

As indicated above, the early *bingtui* efforts were also different from the one made by those who remained in villages or *bingtuan* until 1976, when the political climate changed drastically in China [3, 41]. The post-Mao period has seen not only more *zhiqing* returning to the cities and more research attention to their settlement issue, including their *bingtui*,

but also more state-sanctioned measures to resettle them in their cities of origin [17, 34]. As a result, while there are more studies on a range of aspects of the *zhiqing* issue, such as, the role of their family backgrounds in their return [16], the impacts on their education and their socioeconomic pains [7, 9, 11, 49, 55, 66], even their memories and attitudes [4, 13, 19]. But the early return, including *bingtui*, that transformed the dynamics of the *zhiqing* movement, and its effects on behaviours of the general public, have largely been overlooked by researchers, leaving them to be recorded in non-academic publications and oral history accounts. Despite the growing attention to more aspects of the issue, including the third type of research effort in evaluating its long-term consequences, it is largely true that 'their struggle to return to the cities attracted little attention, let alone support by the urban population' [8, p. 10], and that our understanding of the influences of the Cultural Revolution on people's attitudes and behaviours is still very incomplete.

This study is, therefore, conducted with the aim of examining how *bingtui* was started, how it was used by sent-down youth and their families and, more importantly, how it had made more Chinese people realise that certain aspects of their identity could be performed. With these research questions in mind, this article is to base its analysis on the theoretical clues hinted at in both a small number of scholarly studies and a large number of general or non-academic publications, especially some meaningful hints on the human side of this historical period [47] and the identity perspective that has been revealed in some research publications [8, 52, 58]. Specifically, this analysis draws on key theoretical concepts of strategic identity and identity performativity [5, 15], which believe that an individual's identify can be re-constructed and performed in real life in many different ways according to new social needs. These critical ideas put forward by Judith Butler a few decades ago provide this study with a theoretical basis for looking at what many sent-down youth did in the late 1960s and early 1970s and what new ways of thinking about individual identity have arisen among generations of Chinese people. The main features of the *bingtui* efforts by many sent-down youth displayed a sharp contrast to the crazy Red Guard activism of 1966 and 1967, indicating that identity is historically determined and that it can also be changed and negotiated.

Methodologically, this analysis is based on information gathered by through multiple methods to understand when the resistance of the sent-down youth to the decision to send them to the countryside was emerged and developed into some countermeasures, how the *bingtui* practice was conducted, including gathering written evidence to prove medically unfit, and how the practice went beyond itself and revived the cultural practices of using social connections and gift-giving more widely than the previous periods. As outlined at the start, this study relies on a combination of three different but mutually complementary research methods: content analyses of written documentary sources and visual materials; in-depth interviews with around two dozen former sent-down youth; and my own earlier observations as a junior staff member of an urban-based clinic in the early 1970s. All of the people who were interviewed over the course of the past two years from 2018 to 2019 were recruited through contacts known to the author, and the purpose of such interviews was to verify and confirm the various details of the *bingtui* practice, many of which have been revealed in numerous documentary sources. Information gathered through the first method forms the main source base of this analysis while the knowledge obtained through my past observations and recent interviews provides a context for new data.

This article has three discussion sections after this introduction to consider what was outlined above. The next three sections consider the following three main aspects of this research topic: the emergence of the *bingtui* practice; its actual utilisation; and its broader impact. This study pays special attention to the impact of the *bingtui* practice and related

actions on the social behaviours of many Chinese people since the early 1970s. This study aims to contribute to better understanding about not only the *zhiqing* issue and the Maoist Culture Revolution, but also the social changes in China since the early 1970s, aspects of which have been considered incoherently and are therefore still in need of more analysis.

The Rustication Push and Early Countermeasures

Both researchers and general readers have all more or less known something of the Maoist Cultural Revolution from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, especially because it was very radical and disruptive to the lives of Chinese people. What parts of the reading population may not fully understand is that their reading of the Cultural Revolution has been largely confined to the official discourses of that historical period and the academic attention to theoretically meaningful aspects of it. In recent years, there are also many non-academic publications on the sent-down movement and related themes, but too much detail, as well as a very strong tendency to either glorify or condemn the policy and practice, has often obscured other meaningful aspects of these past experiences. Many people's reading and understanding are, subsequently, often influenced, shaped and constrained by what they are expected to know and understand. Due to these considerations and the fact that there are numerous publications on this chaotic period in Chinese history, this analysis focuses on the socio-economic and -political conditions that led to a conflict in the minds of many sent-down youth and a gradual shift in their understanding of the sending-down scheme and their own lives and future. That is, more and different points of view on the topic are needed. China has been full of contradictions, the latter of which reached a very ridiculous level before and during the Cultural Revolution. Among many sets of important political-economic contradictions, one set of them had not only directly resulted in the formation of the sent-down strategy, or *shangshan xiaxiang* ('up to the mountains and down to the villages' movement) [23], but had also awakened many sent-down youth from their ideal dream of accomplishing what they were told, *guangkuo tiandi, dayou zuowei* (vast land and great accomplishment) [38]. This set of contradictions was predominantly caused by an inconsistency between China's serious socio-economic downturn in 1966 and onwards and the extreme idealism of Mao and his supporters.

Economically, despite the noisy self-proclaimed greatness and success by Maoists, the chaos in 1966 alone sent the Chinese economy into another tailspin after a brief economic recovery in 1964 and 1965 from what is often called Three Years of Natural Disasters or Great Famine in the early 1960s. Many analyses record that China's economy contracted by 5.7% in 1966, 9.6% in 1967, and further 4.2 in 1968 [48, 64, 65]. The official statistics also admit that the industrial output declined by 15.1% in 1967, and 8.2 % in 1968 [35]. The economic deterioration reduced state revenue by more than 30%, significantly limit the state's capacity to provide a large number of school graduates or leavers with jobs in factories, or production lines, and other forms of urban-based workplaces, except finding alternative ways to let them make a living elsewhere. The chaos also made impossible to utilise the administrative mechanism of China's planned economy in organising normal economic activities at the time. In 1967, the worsening situation saw rare suspensions of both China's regular annual planning processes and its national planning conferences at multiple government levels, creating a policy vacuum in which radical, short-sighted, and even politicised ideas were put in practice.

Different from economic realities, some of the most idealistic ideas were either quickly developed or re-emphasised, keeping many urban youth, Red Guards or otherwise, to stay in a Utopian state of thinking and dreaming before being thrown into a deep confusion of

what to believe and what to do. The Cultural Revolution was a time of fantasies, theories, and slogans, but numerous recent memoirs, print and digital, long and short, have all more frequently mentioned the effects of two sets of political discourse on their generation than other factors. Specifically, besides the dimension of their psychological development, the identity of these young adults, or adolescents precisely, was largely influenced and shaped by both the communist successor discourse to keep them inspired in a hopeless situation and the re-education theory to let them accept the sent-down policy as a way to be trained as future leaders [18, 52].

The first main set of narratives focused on the bright future of young people who were in the process of being trained and then selected as *gongchanzhuyi jiebanren* (the heir to communism, or candidates for the next leadership generation). The successor issue was raised by Mao himself in 1964 as his political strategy to re-emerge from his second-line leadership role. Although the topic was, in fact, aimed at eliminating Mao's rivals, Mao's supporters promoted it as a national political task to cultivate new generations of leaders almost two years before the Cultural Revolution, making the so-called *jiebanren wuxiang tiaojian* (five requirements for revolutionary successors) widely known and attractive to educated youth [20, 29]. While the connections between the successor discourse and the participation of educated youth in the Cultural Revolution have not been comprehensively examined, many of the earlier groups of sent-down youth were apparently inspired by the discourse, which has lately been dispersedly but frequently documented in many memoirs of sent-down youth.

On the other hand, the sent-down policy also produced its own re-education theory, or the above-mentioned 'vast land and great accomplishment' discourse, which encouraged many urban youth to think of better political or career future if following the sent-down initiative and qualifying themselves for future advancements through working in villages or *bingtuan*. This reasoning was obviously closely related to the revolutionary successor discourse, but it was a specific variation of it. Both of them have recently been frequently mentioned in many print and digital publications to recall how naive many educated youth were and how they were led, if not tempted, by the revolutionary successor identity before leaving the cities for the countryside.

As a result of the above idealistic political climate, there were a small group of students who opted voluntarily to go to rural areas more than one year before Mao's directive, the effort of which was then defined as the way to learn from poor peasants, and assisted the troubled leadership of Mao to find out a solution to the urban youth issue. China's urban youth were all familiar with the phrase of *yiqiong erbai* (poor and blank) that was used to describe how poor China was. What they found after arriving at villages or *bingtuan*, or precisely after the early excitement of being away from home, was a swift realisation of the meaning of poor and blank. Almost all of them realised that rural areas were not only not as happy as being propagated by the party-state apparatus, but also far too difficult to settle down for a long time. There are many estimates of living standards in China in the mid- and late 1960s, and one of them reveals that the average income per capita of rural residents was consistently less than 40% of urban residents [59]. The situation was in fact far worse than what was depicted by statistics as most sent-down youth were sent to the most impoverished and remote areas. Aside from many details about their life difficulties, this change placed them in a sudden tailspin in life, or a rapid downward social mobility, being excluded from China's small urbanised population, which was only around 15% of its total population of 700 or so million at the time [36, 37].

Various countermeasures were plotted by some families immediately after their sons or daughters were sent out of the cities, especially to extremely impoverished areas. Many

biographies or memoirs reveal that this process started taking place as soon as months, if not weeks, after the sent-down youth arrived at villages and *bingtuan*. This was the start of what has since been defined as the passive and active resistances to the top-down push to rusticate urban school leavers [3, 21]. What has not been stressed sufficiently to date by researchers, however, is the fact that family backgrounds and their connections of some *zhiqing* had kicked in at this point of their lives and had been utilised by a small group of families at the start to ensure some additional help for their sons or daughters [39].

The above point is analytical important in at least two aspects. First, the dynamics of the return of *zhiqing* from the countryside was in reality not as simple as generally thought because of the poverty and hardship in rural areas, but a result of the combination of the hardship of rural life and the interactive social processes initiated by the actions of some well-connected families to relocate their sons or daughters elsewhere, if not home cities. The hardship was regarded as the reality facing everyone at the time, which is why more *zhiqing* now believe that their hope, or wish, to return to the cities was largely a result of the fact that some fellow *zhiqing* with connections had not only started talking about it, or quietly working on it, but had also been found to actually depart one after another from their villages or *bingtuan*. Such explanations have been expressed in some different ways, which all seem to hint that they would never be worried about being away from the cities for a longer period of time than they did, but they became deeply concerned about missing the opportunities to return to the cities when an increasing number of fellow *zhiqing* were planning, if not plotting, to leave. Their subsequent actions were therefore triggered as a chain reaction under stressful circumstances.

Second, the way of leaving the countryside was, at least in earlier stages, also affected or decided by the family backgrounds and connections of some youth. While the role of the latter is nothing new, this perspective can not only help sort out our understanding of the ways in which many urban youth left villages and *bingtuan* in earlier years, but also find out when the so-called *buzheng zhifeng* (unethical practices) became widespread in China. What is more important to this study is that the latter trend, especially *zouhoumen* (going through the back door to get things done), included a considerable amount of effort made by families without connections [33, 39, 60]. Among three loosely-defined resources that were widely rumoured to have been deployed by many parents of *zhiqing*, i.e., official positions, good connections, and great efforts, which were recorded in many publications, the last means involved or referred to a wide range of practices of many ordinary families who neither held official positions nor sufficient contacts [60]. The *zouhoumen* issue was a widespread and serious problem that even troubled Mao himself profoundly and forced him to issue a directive in 1972 ordering to put an end to the practice [33], but there were various forms of *zouhoumen*, let alone the vast majority of families without access to the so-called back doors. To achieve what could be accomplished by the *zhiqing* from well-connected families, or to be able to knock on the back doors, many ordinary families and their children had made a range of efforts to improve their chances to return to the cities, including understudied health reasons for leaving the countryside.

Efforts to Prove Medically Unfit

It is worth noting, before discussing the *bingtui* practice, that the popular enthusiasm for the Maoist Cultural Revolution after the sent-down youth push was largely vanished, the best evidence of which was the alleged ‘571 military coup plan’ written by the supporters

of Lin Biao before Lin died on his way to flee to the Soviet Union on 13 September 1971 [46]. This document, now called the 'Outline of Project 571', denounced the decision to send urban youth out of the cities as a disguised form of labour re-education camp. Such anger over Maoist policies among officials, military and civil, at medium to senior levels had generated a far more favourable atmosphere for the *zhiqing* to leave the countryside than the limits of totalitarian power that scholars have identified [2, 3, 21]. The low morale and slack attitudes of grassroots officials at the time had also set a low level of corruption in motion, making the strategic use of *bingtui* opportunities possible.

However, it was still not easy to leave the countryside for those without powerful or well-connected parents or relatives. In the early 1970s, the *zhiqing* from ordinary families, as well as from politically problematic families, were left with only two main options for seeking the approvals for both leaving the countryside and returning to the cities. As noted, these two possible channels were *bingtui* (health reasons) and *kuntui* (family hardships or difficulties) including a rather small number of single-child families [44]. *Kuntui* was so straightforward that many *zhiqing* found it difficult to make use of it due to at least two reasons. First, some families in hardships were unable to afford the returning of their sons or daughters, while those being able to afford it were unable to meet the *kuntui* conditions. Second, it could a risky path to seek the return through *kuntui* categories as they had to rely on the documents from their parents' work units or neighbourhood street committees, while *bingtui* had no such stringent requirements except for doctor certificates. The latter could be obtained from whichever hospitals they wished to use, or even from local clinics in big cities. Therefore, many former *zhiqing* believe that almost all sent-down youth had attempted to do *bingtui* [54], and according to the estimate made by *Beidahuang Zhiqing* (the Great Northern Wildness in Heilongjiang province), one of the most popular, active and content-rich websites, 1.3 million *zhiqing* out of the total 17 or so million sent-down youth returned to the cities due to various health reasons [10].

Despite the fact that the above figure is believed by many former *zhiqing* to be greatly lower than the actual percentage, this estimate that seems to be based on one bigger region or a specific period is already very meaningful to show how widespread *bingtui* had been used. It was true that there were a number of *zhiqing* suffering from various health issues, who should be sympathised with and cared for by their families, but a great majority of *zhiqing* regarded it as the opportunity and channel to leave the countryside. On the Hunan *Zhiqing* website, a former female sent-down youth from Changsha, the provincial capital city of Hunan, wrote the following memory of *bingtui*:

> *Bingtui* as a phrase that was created in a special era is an expression coated with blood, saturated with tears and burnt with scars… *Bingtui* was the special policy initiated to allow the *zhiqing* with serious illnesses and being unable to take care of themselves to return to the cities, but it had evolved into the means the *zhiqing* had no choice but to use in order to return to the cities. The prerequisites for applying for *bingtui* were the serious illnesses affecting independent living, which implied that diagnosis certificates from hospitals were needed. The *zhiqing* who were unable to return to the cities due to family backgrounds and other objective reasons had to rack their brains to get an illness in order to get doctor certificates [30, p. 1].

The above quotation briefly outlines what *bingtui* was and how it could be pursued, which also needs to be understood in association not only with the above-mentioned sympathetic atmosphere emerged after the Lin Biao incident of 13 September 1971, but also with local variations in implementation procedures. Another Hunan *zhiqing* also recalled how upset

and annoyed he was when he was unable to show he was suffering from phthisis, hepatitis or heart problems, and that his successful try to become a kidney disease patient after an unsuccessful claim of chronic post-surgical pain from an appendicitis surgery [27]. As a critical former *zhiqing* put it, all these illness claims and tactics relied on *zuojia* (cheating and falsifying something) [54]. One of such typical examples was a Wuhan *zhiqing*, who pretended to be a psychiatric patient for more than a year until his *hukou* (urban resident permit) was re-registered in the city of Wuhan [51]. His crazy idea was born after missing all the other opportunities because of his problematic family background, but he learned how to pretend to be mad through reading various books. To strengthen his case, he even learned from a successful *bingtui* person and took an abandoned malaria drug to turn his skin ugly yellowy green colour, the secret of which was only known to few people, even excluding his parents and other family members.

A careful analysis of all the *bingtui*-related data, both written and spoken, has revealed that *zhiqing* appeared to have acted in three main different ways based on their own family circumstances and resources. The latter was mainly about the social connections, political influences, and financial capacities, as well as the sophistication of their own social skills. These three main approaches include the extended use of family's non-political contacts or networks beyond the Maoist revolutionary politics or social class divides; the uses of the money power and other alternative exchanges; and the *kongshoudao* (empty-handed or barehanded) approach for obtaining doctor certificates and approvals without contacts or money, or without using contacts and money. The latter point implies that these tactics were in general related to the level of social connections and financial capacity, but some shrewd *zhiqing* or their families achieved their goals without a high cost in terms of both social networks and money. However, all of these efforts were characterised by the intent to doctor certificates for applying for *bingtui*.

The first approach was used by the families who were not politically influential, or in trouble at the time, to be able to send their sons or daughters to join the army or study in universities, but had certain contacts for the purpose of gaining certificates to prove them to be medically and physically unfit for labour work in rural areas. More specifically, they might even not know any people working in hospitals in a straight line, but were able to dig out or find at least one through contacts, which was sufficient to overcome the multi-layered hurdles to seek medical certificates. Of course, this form of action also involved giving gifts to contacts and the people entrusted by the contacts to assist with certificates, but the process was not originated by gift-giving. Such practice at the time was also not called *la guanxi* (call on connections for help) that became popular in the 1980s, but just expressed in a less-negative way, such as *qiuren* (seek help from someone else), or *tuoren* (entrust someone with a task).

Even with usable social connections, most of the documentations produced by doctors were also about tuberculosis, hepatitis, chronic enteritis, chronic gastritis duodenal ulcer, and kidney and heart diseases as well, which were no different from those employing the second and third methods [3, 21, 27, 30, 44, 56]. These excuses indicated that they still had to pretend to be very sick and go through a few steps before a doctor certificate could be issued. As revealed by many *zhiqing*, the diagnosis of each of the above illnesses was not simply decided by one doctor, the clinic procedural complexity of which significantly reduced the risk to doctors while increasing *zhiqing*'s chance to break through the barriers. This is due to the fact that the diagnosis of all these commonly-claimed illnesses could be affected by a handful tricks, such as smoking inked-cigarettes to create a shadow, dark or light, on X-ray films; tests of urine and stool could be manipulated by a tiny drop of blood or swallowing certain substances [53, 63]. After more than 40 years, a number of former

colleagues of mine, who were then able to sign doctor certificates, admitted that they were initially unfamiliar with such requests, but they were almost all guided by two thoughts: *jiusi fushang* (revive the dying and cure the wounded) to focus almost every attention on diagnostic processes and treatments, not other non-clinical issues; and making a diagnosis based entirely on clinic testing results.[2] The latter was a tricky point, partially suggesting that issuing health, or doctor, certificates was then turned into a shared responsibility, or risk, among a group of doctors, which had made *zhiqing* focusing on gathering evidence from pathologists, radiologists, and other diagnostic specialists in order to convince, as well as protect, doctors in-charge.

The second type of tactic deployed to nurture new connections or make contacts work was to use various forms of gifts. Though additional benefits were behind the help many *zhiqing* received, the meaning of gifts or benefits was very different from the present-day understanding. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the income of ordinary households was so low that a couple of cartons of cigarettes, one or two bottles of Chinese spirits, a metre or so of fabric, or even a chunk of pork were all very precious and meaningful to the low-rank cadres or specialists holding decision-making positions. A Beijing *zhiqing* to Inner Mongolia once obtained a certificate confirming her suffering from renal hypertension by gifting about seven kilos of good-quality wheat flour in a regional city [57]. In a memoir written by a former Shanghai *zhiqing* to the Ningbo region, Zhejiang province, about 300 to 400 *yuan* were spent through a locally connected relatives on obtaining the permission to leave the Ningbo region [62]. After several months of seeking *bingtui*, there was even the emergence of well-connected go-betweens in almost every city according to numerous published and oral history accounts. These go-betweens, lately also including a very small proportion of medical professionals, used their networks or influence for their own gain, mostly for materialistic comfort that was seriously lacking at the time [53, 57].

The last barehanded approach was adopted by those who neither had usable networks to use nor money to spend on forming workable networks. These *zhiqing* or families are believed to be the largest group of *bingtui* seekers, the estimate of which is supported by a theory put forward by many former *zhiqing*, arguing that the income of ordinary families was so low in the early 1970s that they were reluctant, if not impossible, to spend any on obtaining doctor certificates. Therefore, apart from learning how to deal with pathologists, radiologists, and other diagnostic specialists in hospitals, there were numerous efforts and manoeuvres characterised by self-created strategies, smart and stupid, but predominantly made for identifying where and how to make the *bingtui* seeking process less problematic and more reachable than it was [30, 51].

Without useful connections, and without spending too much on obtaining certificates, a high level of social skills and a series of manoeuvres were required to ensure the success of seeking *bingtui*. A range of tricky operations have been mentioned in both interviews with former *zhiqing* and published sources, revealing the existence and actual utilisation of another set of combined approaches. The first tactic was called *da sawang* (cast a net widely), referring to those trying hospitals or big clinics one by one until find a point of breakthrough. Several interviewees agree with the claim made in a memoir that you could in the end find a kind-hearted doctor, or diagnostic specialists, to help if searching widely [57].[3] The second tactical approach was to *gege jipo* (tackle the issue one by one). Among its many actions, the most effective one was to put one end of the process under the control and then focus on the other end with a confidence. A Beijing *zhiqing* to Shanxi, who spent as high as quite a few hundreds of yuan on doctors in Beijing without a concern or a risky

[2] Anonymous Interviewees 6, 7 and 10, interviewed electronically in early November 2019.
[3] Anonymous Interviewees 1, 2, 5 and 16, interviewed electronically in late December 2018.

feeling, revealed that he had then been assured to be supported by a commune cadre after giving him many chunks of pork. A former colleague of mine was approached by several *zhiqing* claiming that their heads of villages or *bingtuan* 'had already nodded their heads', and what they needed was just certificates from doctors. Some of such claims turned out not to be true afterwards.[4] Of course, thirdly, there were also a small number of sent-down youth relying on *zili gengsheng* (self-reliance), a true barehanded approach. Examples of these include a wide range of conducts or tactics, such as obtaining, if not stealing, blank certificate papers from hospitals or big clinics, forging signatures of doctors or diagnostic specialists, and even *sike gongzhang* (forge official stamps) for stamping self-produced medical certificates [10].

The End of Maoist Idealism

The widespread and massive use of *bingtui* by hundreds of thousands of sent-down urban youth was a powerful sign of the end of Maoist idealism, and its idealist identity politics as well. This change at the grassroots level was, in the early or mid-1970s, characterised by the emergence and prominence of two sets of social attitudes and behaviours, one of which has been fairly visible and prominent to the Chinese general public, while the other has not been so clear. These two main sets of attitudinal and behavioural changes include the resurgence of gift-giving practices and the utilitarian use of identity performance.

The early and middle part of the 1970s was a critical transition period in recent Chinese history, when young Chinese lost their confidence in becoming *gongchanzhuyi jiebanren* (communist revolutionary successors) after failing to see the great accomplishments that they were promised to be able to realise in what Mao portrayed as *guangkuo tiandi* (the vast land of rural China). After the Mao era, the Chinese Communist Party also confessed that the Cultural Revolution had caused an unprecedented confusion in the whole nation's thinking and understanding, resulting in momentous damages to the Party's progress and the social ethos. The latter was typified by the so-called spiritual crisis or mass disillusion that emerged shortly before the height of the scar literature. An analyst of contemporary China, who was a *zhiqing* for many years, believes there was a close connection between *zhiqing*'s efforts to return to cities and the widespread practice of deception and duplicity, and he once made the following comments:

> Many provinces and cities started in 1970 recruiting some workers from the sent-down urban youth, and universities also resumed the enrolments of students nationwide in 1972. Because universities adopted a selection process based on recommendations, all the sent-down urban youth had since completely abandoned the lofty tone of settling down in the countryside for the whole life, and instead started making whatever efforts to catch the last chance to leave the countryside. Consequently, there was an increasing number of tricky channels to return to cities, including *dingti* [a child replacing a parent in the workforce] and *bingtui*, which had made the practices of bribery and deception prevalent in the country [14, p. 200].

Having been confirmed to be both useful and powerful in seeking *bingtui*, the gift-giving practices had become even more popular in the mid and late 1970s than the earlier years. A Chinese American lawyer, who was a Shanghai *zhiqing* to Yunnan, also witnessed the impacts of the gift-giving practices on social behaviours and ethos, recollecting that more

[4] Anonymous Interviewee 6, interviewed electronically in early November 2019.

people started giving out gifts and knocking on back doors to seek help beyond what their families and networks could reach [12]. It was over that period that the pronunciation of cigarettes, *yan*, and that of Chinese spirits, *jiu*, were linked together as a ridicule version of the Chinese phrase *yanjiu* (to study, to consider) as a result of widespread use of both cigarettes and Chinese spirits as gifts to those in power or able to help. As another former *zhiqing* commented, the use of *yan* and *jiu* was a big exaltation of moving beyond the use of pork and clothing fabric because the effort of giving gifts was then increasingly made in urban centres.[5]

According to interviewees, there were still three main needs for giving gifts after many *zhiqing* had already left the countryside in 1972 and 1973. First, those left-behind in rural areas until the mid-1970s had to repeat what earlier returnees did because the practices of giving gifts and obtaining sick leave certificates were open secrets to almost all the urban population. Second, those earlier returnees had also to make use of contacts and gifts for their re-settlement in their home cities, especially for finding employment opportunities [57]. In reality, thirdly, the gift-giving practices were believed to have even been used by some *zhiqing* returnees in seeking further job changes and promotions in their home cities as they were the first large group of people who were not only very experienced in giving gifts, but also confident in utilising the tactic.

Although many *zhiqing* and their families were originally reluctant to spend too much on obtaining health certificates for *bingtui*, the process of seeking the return to the cities, as well as their re-settlement in cities, had shown them and other sections of society that asking contacts for help and gift-giving are the alternative ways of overcoming many of the hurdles in their life and compensating for their powerlessness caused by Maoist class-based discriminations [11, 56]. In other words, socially and politically disadvantaged and deprived groups had used a range of abnormal practices, including gift-giving, to obtain something similar to what privileged families could offer to their children. Many of such practices have since been judged by many to be morally incorrect, but through using them, many *zhiqing* and their families did partially regain the power deprived by Maoist politics and break up the monopoly of power by newly formed privileged groups.

Importantly, second, the utilitarian use of identity performance has since also become a very crucial but less visible part of what has been called changing social ethos. This was reached through using various forms of gift-giving practices, which opened up a different social space from that controlled by the political ruling party. The process of finding their own chances to leave rural areas led *zhiqing* and other people to develop their own version of *ganxiang gangan* (daring to think and daring to act), which was previously promoted as part of the Maoist revolutionary spirit. The second half of the Cultural Revolution had seen that more ordinary Chinese started using what they learned from the Maoist politics in their own way, resulting in the realisation that certain aspects of their identity could be performed, especially when they can empower needy people. If leaving the countryside and returning to cities have to be seen as a turning point [24], one of the major attitudinal and behavioural traits of the era has to be the widespread use of identity performance.

In actual life, the *bingtui* practice was still in wide use in the second half of the 1970s, and even became informally sanctioned by the party-state [43]. Despite the tolerance of frontline officials, doctor certificates were still needed, which helped spread the practice of performing certain parts of people's lives in order to be seen as sufferers. At the same time, the utilisation of these practices was expanded to other areas, and many urban-based factory workers were found to have used the same tactics to cope with enterprises policy

[5] Anonymous Interviewee 3, interviewed in Beijing in mid-November 2019.

changes in the early years of reform [22]. The same practice was even used in the highly acclaimed university entrance examinations of 1977 and 1978, but in the way of changing date of birth to be eligible for the examinations [42]. Admittedly, this was rather rare and hardly known to the general public, but confirmed by a couple of interviewees.[6] Because of the wide use, the issue of identity performance has also been part of the current debate about both the Maoist Cultural Revolution and the sent-down campaign, which have all lately been complicated by new politics [4]. Among the various competing memories of *zhiqing* life, the following comments made by a professional writer, a former *zhiqing* to *Beidahuang* in Heilongjiang, confirm the importance of *bingtui* in the *zhiqing* history and the understanding of attitudinal and behavioural changes occurring in China:

> *Bingtui*? *Bingtui*! they had somehow all become patients and returned to home cities as sufferers… Is there anything more ridiculous than that lively *zhiqing* had to return to home cities as sick people? I have been wondering if there was no other way to let *zhiqing* return to cities in a proper way? … If it was forced at the time, no other options, does it deserve a clarification afterwards? … *Zhiqing* were allowed to return because of illness, the reason of which was then used to support that the send-down movement was not wrong, except that *bingtui* was overused. Are there sufficient evidence for all these? If they cannot be forgotten, the first task is to have authentic records [43, n.p.].

Apparently, the profound impact of *bingtui* on people's attitudes and behaviours has not only been felt across generations, but also a controversial one, which has been politicised in the highly polarised public discourses in China regarding the Cultural Revolution and Maoism. However, the debate about it has largely been confined to non-academic groups. The revelation of many *bingtui* cases has been linked to the end of the *zhiqing* movement, as well as other Maoist practices, but sophisticated clues about the wider and longer-term impacts of *bingtui* practices on contemporary Chinese practices of identity performance have not been adequately defined and analysed in the scholarly literature. As will be noted next, the *bingtui* practice was a significant push for, if not the actual start of, the strategic identity performance by more Chinese people in a utilitarian manner in the contemporary period of Chinese history.

Conclusion: Impacts on Identity Performances

This article has examined the *bingtui* practice deployed by many sent-down urban youth from the early to the very late 1970s. *Bingtui* has been identified by some researchers to be one of the few original ways of enabling some sent-down youth to return to their home cities [8, 21, 58]. This analysis is conducted based on the fact that the *bingtui* practice has not yet been adequately considered in a broader context, in which its early and powerful role in the emergence of increasingly utilitarian attitudes and behaviours in many sections of Chinese society has not been clearly understood. As pointed out, the resistance of many *zhiqing* to the sent-down movement in the early 1970s was quietly developed into various counter-measures against sending-down policies. This process had then been evolved into to a proactive stage, where many sent-down youth no longer believed in the promise of being trained as the heir to communism, or candidates for the next leadership generation. Instead, those from socio-politically disadvantaged or vulnerable backgrounds had found the excuse of health reasons to challenge the restrictions placed upon them and to utilise

[6] Anonymous Interviewees 5 and 18, interviewed electronically in early January 2020.

them to achieve the goals that could be easily reached by those from politically privileged families.

More importantly, the widespread use of *bingtui*, especially the success in using it, had provided many socio-politically disadvantaged people and families with a chance to learn that they could achieve what they needed through strategically performing identities that resonated with who they wanted to be. Through the latter, they became able to overcome the life difficulties caused by Maoist social class-based discriminations. Their experience had made many Chinese people in the 1970s realise that nothing could not be performed and acted. In much of the 1970s, when certain identities were difficult to perform because of a tougher political climate than the later years of the decade, gift-giving practices were used to assist with the performance of identity. Towards the end of the 1970s, other more pragmatic and materialistic forms of social exchanges than previous years were identified and used to help shape what people wanted to be or how they would like themselves to be presented. That is to say, the current complexity and sophistication of Chinese people's attitudes and behaviours started taking a shape as early as during the Cultural Revolution, when the Maoist philosophy of class struggle was used as an excuse for highly destructive behaviours of many Red Guards [31]. Since the early 1970s, the attitudes and behaviours of many *zhiqing*, including some Red Guards, had been changed by their life conditions, making many of them be gradually characterised with a set of pragmatic and performative identities. The best example of understanding the progress of such changes has to be the *bingtui* practice deployed by hundreds of thousands of the sent-down youth and their new realisation of the performativity of identity in actual social situations.

Practically speaking, according to what has been discussed, it is not historically correct to state that gift-giving practices and the widespread use of personal connections in China were a consequence of post-Mao reforms. In fact, both the sent-down movement and the *bingtui* practice were a perfect combination of strong push factors in reviving a range of traditional practices, including gift-giving and making use of contacts, as surviving skills alternative to what Maoist China had been practising. Of course, post-Mao social changes have made the many issues very visible and even more widespread than before. Since the issues of social ethos have been caused by multiple reasons or factors across a number of stages, the accurate understanding of social attitudinal and behavioural changes in terms of their formation and development has become more serious than before. As one of the early forms of bottom-up public resistance in Maoist China, the *bingtui* practice was not only the social action taken by the sent-down urban youth and their families to fight for their own rights and interest, but has also gradually and profoundly transformed the way people view the dominant socio-political norms and deal with the hindrances caused by them. As a *zhiqing*-turned scholar put it, the various issues associated with *bingtui* are in need of 'detailed and specific analysis' [25, p. 119].

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