


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Transform the Land, Train the Youth: Water and Soil Conservation Teams and State-Induced Migration in mid-1960s China

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Abstract

Beginning in 1964, the PRC party-state orchestrated the resettlement of thousands of young people from cities to erosion-prone areas in China's Loess Plateau to form "water and soil conservation teams" (*shuitu baochi zhuanyedui*). Although their ostensible mission was to limit erosion by building terraces and planting trees, documents related to conservation teams emphasized their capacity to thoroughly reform urban youth while mobilizing them to do the work of remaking the environment. Provincial and county archives, along with fieldwork conducted at the site of one water and soil conservation team in Shaanxi province's Baishui county, indicate that conservation teams did not realize either of these objectives. Due to urban youth's inexperience with agriculture and conservation, they did little to promote environmental management. At the same time, unruly teenagers who migrated to the countryside to join conservation teams, as well as the cadres who oversaw them, continued to engage in transgressive behavior.

Keywords: Environment; agriculture; Loess Plateau; sent-down youth

Introduction

Li Fa, a sent-down youth from Shanxi province, arrived in the countryside of Shaanxi province's Baishui county 白水县 in November 1964. Despite having graduated from primary school, Li Fa liked to wander around as he pleased and did not follow rules. Among other misdeeds, he roamed the village until late at night, snooped in the girls' dormitory, and stole people's music records (唱片) and other belongings. In half a year's time, Li requested absences from work on over twenty days and missed work nine times. Sometimes he feigned illness and, as soon as others left to work in the fields, ran off to hang around in the village. In addition to behaving badly, Li ridiculed good comrades among his fellow youth by calling them "falsely activist [假积极] and good at showing off [好表现]." Li had a fondness for saying vulgar things in front

of female comrades and boasted that while reading with one girl he “intentionally touched her face to see if she loves me or not.”¹

Li Fa migrated to Baishui county to join one of the water and soil conservation teams (水土保持专业队) that, beginning in late 1964, the PRC party-state formed to resettle thousands of young people from the cities to build terraces and plant trees to fight erosion in the rural landscapes of Northwest China’s Loess Plateau, a region that suffers from the world’s highest rates of soil erosion and acute water shortages. Large-scale conservation campaigns in Shaanxi and other parts of the Loess Plateau dated back to the early 1950s. By checking erosion, PRC leaders expected these conservation programs to limit sedimentation in the Yellow River’s lower reaches, prolong the life of dam and reservoir megaprojects, and increase agricultural yields to support China’s vigorous program of industrialization. During the Great Leap Forward (1958–1961), however, mass mobilization to complete hastily planned water and soil conservation projects at breakneck speed disrupted agricultural production and took a heavy toll on rural communities. Rural residents got a respite from conservation work for several years following the Great Leap Forward and the famine that it caused, but the PRC government issued new directives in 1963 that lent renewed impetus to water and soil conservation efforts.²

Urban youth who joined water and soil conservation teams were thus recruited for a specific task embedded in a long-term state policy of high priority. Zhou Enlai 周恩来 first called for establishing water and soil conservation teams in January 1963 when he instructed the Ministry of Agriculture (农业部) to select three counties in Shaanxi, Shanxi, and Inner Mongolia as trial sites. After strategic planning by the National Affairs Council’s Water and Soil Conservation Commission (国务院水土保持委员会), and with agreement from the provincial governments, conservation teams became part of management programs drawn up for controlling erosion in the middle reaches of the Yellow River watershed.³ As a decision from the National Affairs Council stated, conservation teams would use “redundant workers and sent-down personnel from large- and mid-sized cities” to “engage in water conservancy and afforestation demonstrations and take responsibility for technical guidance of cooperative’s and brigade’s water and soil conservation work.”⁴ In accordance with directives from the National Affairs Council’s Water and Soil Conservation Commission, in October 1964 Shaanxi province’s Water Conservancy Department (水利厅) arranged for 33 counties to set up water and soil conservation teams and groomed 1,100 youth to migrate “up to the mountains and down to the countryside” to join them. These young people would build terraces and plant trees in sparsely populated areas severely affected by erosion, while also engaging in agricultural production and infrastructural development.⁵

¹Weinan qu Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan yedui 渭南区白水水土保持专业队, “Li Fa danxing cailiao” 李发单行材料 August 8, 1965: Baishui County Archives (hereafter BCA) 50-6.

²Micah S. Muscolino, “The Contradictions of Conservation: Fighting Erosion in Mao-Era China, 1953–66,” *Environmental History* 25:2 (2020), 237–62.

³Shaanxi sheng difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui 陕西省地方志编纂委员会, *Shaanxi shengzhi di shi juan shuitu baochi* 陕西省志. 第十四卷, 水土保持志 (Xi’an: Shaanxi renmin chubanshe, 2000), 444–46. Liu Jinying 刘晋英, ed., *Lishi rushi shuo: Shanxi sheng zhishi qingnian shangshan xiexiang shilu* 历史如是说: 山西省知识青年上山下乡史录 (Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo chubanshe, 2016), 140.

⁴Liu Jinying, *Lishi rushi shuo*, 141.

⁵Shaanxi sheng difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, *Shaanxi shengzhi*, 94, 427–28, 536. This decision coincided with a January 1964 directive from the Central Committee and the State Council mobilizing educated urban youth to take part in developing the “new socialist countryside.” See Michel Bonnin, *The Lost*

During the early 1960s, in the aftermath of the Great Leap famine, the PRC government faced two challenging tasks. The first was to reduce the urban population to restore a balance between rural producers and urban consumers. The second was to limit the student population and find employment for recent graduates in the cities.⁶ At the same time, PRC leaders saw increasing arable land and limiting water and soil loss as crucial to the national economy. Moving urban students to rural regions to do water and soil conservation work presented a solution. The sent-down urban youth who joined water and soil conservation teams were part of the state-induced migration of nearly 1.97 million urban youth to rural villages between 1962 and 1966.⁷ These years saw a deepening of China's urban-rural divide due to stricter enforcement of the household-registration system and "deliberate reduction in the number of people entitled to access the urban welfare state."⁸

This article traces the experience of urban-rural migration for the young people who joined water and soil conservation teams. Provincial and county archives, along with fieldwork conducted at the former site of the water and soil conservation team founded in Shaanxi's Baishui county, make it possible to trace the selection of urban youth for the conservation teams, their internal functioning, how young women and men understood and adjusted to the difficult and unfamiliar rural landscapes where they resettled, and their relationships with rural villagers. Investigating these topics deepens our understanding of the urban-rural migration that took place during the "great downsizing" of the mid-1960s, the early phases of the movement to send educated youth "up to the mountains and down the countryside" (上山下乡), and the planned efforts to transform the landscape of Northwest China that made up a part of the environmental history of the PRC.⁹

Judith Shapiro identifies "state-ordered relocations" as a key ingredient in the environmental transformations between 1949 and the late 1970s that she terms "Mao's war against nature."¹⁰ As Shapiro points out, "Such relocations almost always had the dual purpose of transforming the landscape and accomplishing political goals."¹¹ Water and soil conservation teams were no exception. The proponents of water and soil

Generation: The Rustication of China's Educated Youth (1968–1980), trans. Krystyna Horko (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2012), 62; Felix Wemheuer, *A Social History of Maoist China: Conflict and Change, 1949–1976* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 58.

⁶Wemheuer, *A Social History of Maoist China*, 165, 172–73.

⁷Wemheuer, *A Social History of Maoist China*, 219.

⁸Some 66.6 percent, or about 1.29 million, of these individuals were educated youth. Bonnin, *The Lost Generation*, 62; Wemheuer, *A Social History of Maoist China*, 168.

⁹For the most important English-language scholarship on sent-down youth see Emily Honig and Xiaojian Zhao, *Across the Great Divide: The Sent-Down Youth Movement in Mao's China, 1968–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2019); Bonnin, *The Lost Generation*. An earlier but still valuable study is Thomas P. Bernstein, *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages: The Transfer of Youth from Urban to Rural China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977). The 17 million sent-down youth during the Cultural Revolution have received much attention, but historians have generally neglected relocations from cities to the countryside during the first two decades of the PRC. Key exceptions include Jeremy Brown, *City Versus Countryside in Mao's China: Negotiating the Divide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), chapter 5; Bonnin, *The Lost Generation*, chapter 4; Ding Yizhuang 定宜庄, *Zhongguo zhiqingshi, chulan (1953–1968 nian)* 中国知青史, 初澜 (1953–1968年) (Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo chubanshe, 2009).

¹⁰Judith Shapiro, *Mao's War Against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 4.

¹¹Shapiro, *Mao's War*, 139.

conservation teams held that they would “train” (锻炼) urban youth, transforming their minds and bodies as they labored to transform the environment. This migration of young people from the city to the countryside was as much about reforming young people as it was about remaking the land. This transformative vision reflected the Maoist insistence on the inseparability of knowledge and practice. As Aminda Smith puts it, “Total reeducation had always involved *both* consciousness raising and participation in production ... thought reform required particular physical experiences *and* a particular ideological framework within which to understand them.”¹² Reports from water and soil conservation teams narrated a similar dialectic between mental and bodily reform. Urban youth would not voluntarily engage in labor until they gained proper consciousness through study of Mao’s writings and revolutionary history, but youths demonstrated that consciousness by enthusiastically taking part in labor. By seeking to transform the character of the urban youth along with the rural landscape, conservation teams fit squarely into Mao-era experiments aimed at reforming and re-educating problematic youths, especially through exile of undesirable elements to the countryside.

However, despite the grandiose stories of political study remolding delinquent youths into model workers that the Baishui County Water and Soil Conservation Team (白水縣水土保持專業隊) included in its work reports to superiors in the Shaanxi provincial government, internal materials on the Conservation Team’s personnel show that it was unable to discipline the unruly teenagers who joined its ranks. Indeed, the party-state could not even control the local cadres in charge of the Conservation Team, who pursued petty rivalries and exploited leadership positions in conservation teams for their own personal engrossment. In addition to doing little to promote conservation, sending young people from cities to remote rural areas with no effective supervision often encouraged rather than limited transgressive behavior.

Going to the Frontlines of Agricultural Production

Urban educational institutions took charge of relocating urban youth to rural villages to do conservation work. In fall 1964 the Xi’an Work-Study School (西安市工讀學校) set about fulfilling its quota of selecting twenty-eight students to “go to a glorious post in the construction of new socialist agricultural villages” by joining Shaanxi’s water and soil conservation teams.¹³ To balance the party-state’s goals of reducing educational costs and freeing up labor power while also expanding general education and eliminating illiteracy, work-study schools where pupils divided their time between physical labor and study served students who could not attend highly selective full-time schools.¹⁴ The Xi’an Work-Study School in particular enrolled troubled twelve- to seventeen-year-olds who had “lost their way” (失足), in order to reform them into good citizens.¹⁵ In

¹²Aminda M. Smith, *Thought Reform and China’s Dangerous Classes: Reeducation, Resistance, and the People* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 148. Emphasis in original.

¹³Xi’an shi gongdu xuexiao 西安市工讀學校, “Guanyu xuansong 28 ming xuesheng canjia Shaanxi sheng shuitu baochi shuili zhuan yedui de gongzuo baogao” 关于选送 28 名学生参加陕西省水土保持水利专业队的工作报告, November 4, 1964: Shaanxi Provincial Archives (hereafter SPA) 152-2085. On work-study schools see Bonnin, *The Lost Generation*, 58–59; Wemheuer, *A Social History of Maoist China*, 173–74.

¹⁴On work-study schools see Bonnin, *The Lost Generation*, 58–59; Wemheuer, *A Social History of Maoist China*, 173–74; Liu Jinying, *Lishi rushi shuo*, 157–70.

¹⁵Chang’an xianzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui 长安县志编纂委员会, *Chang’an xianzhi* 长安县志 (Shaanxi: renmin jiaoyu chubanshe, 1999), 645. All ages are translations of the Chinese *sui* 岁.

essence, the work-study school was a kind of vocational training school for youth who had encounters with law enforcement and were not eligible for regular high schools. Since students in work-study schools had few job prospects after graduation, state-induced migration decreased unemployment by convincing urban youth to leave cities and work to transform the countryside. In effect, as Jeremy Brown points out, relocation policies tried to ameliorate employment pressures by “dumping troublemaking teenagers into villages.”¹⁶ Like other migrations of urban youth to rural China during the mid-1960s, students joined conservation teams voluntarily, without overt coercion from cadres or school leaders.¹⁷ Yet the Xi’an Work-Study School’s work report summarizing the process of selecting students for conservation teams conveys a more complicated reality. Although the work report contains a great deal of hyperbole about what this mobilization achieved, the document makes it evident that authorities carefully groomed candidates and orchestrated the entire recruitment process. This manipulation blurs the distinction between coerced and voluntary migration.

From the beginning, officials orchestrated the entire mobilization process. On October 19 the head of Xi’an’s Civil Affairs Bureau (民政局), Liang Qi’an 梁启安, came to the school to oversee recruitment work. That afternoon, the school assembled team leaders (队主任) and teachers to gather information about students and identify promising candidates. Their research determined that, due to their prior education, the idea that “going to the frontlines of agricultural production and going to the motherland’s most needy places are glorious things” had “taken root in the depths of most students’ thought.” Students viewed water and soil conservation as “an important aspect of agricultural construction” and realized that “in constructing new socialist mountain areas it is a matter of paramount importance,” so once they understood the significance of conservation teams, they would gladly take part. Furthermore, because the locations of the conservation teams were not too far from Xi’an, students’ parents would support their decision to go. A week later, on October 26, the Work-Study School held an administrative meeting and a meeting of team leaders in the afternoon, as well as a meeting for teachers and staff in the evening to conduct additional research and preparation.¹⁸ Students may have viewed conservation as an integral part of agricultural construction, but school leaders put enormous effort into selling them on leaving the city to join conservation teams.

In addition to instructing teachers and staff on how to recruit students, cadres used mass rallies to encourage urban youth to join. On the morning of October 27, students gathered in a meeting ground where a blue tent stood decorated with Chairman Mao’s portrait and two national flags hanging in the middle. Two large red banners read, “resolutely carry out the party’s general policy of taking agriculture as the foundation and industry as the guiding factor in developing the national economy!” and “respond to the party’s call, go to the villages, and take part in construction of agricultural production!” Another horizontal banner was emblazoned with the words “mobilization meeting” (动员大会). When students saw these adornments, they excitedly asked their teachers, “what meeting is being held today with such nice decorations?” The teachers responded that a group of students would “go to a post in water conservancy construction [水利建设岗位].” In language reminiscent of a propaganda newsletter, the report stated that as enthusiastic students listened to the mobilization rally, “application letters flew towards

¹⁶Brown, *City Versus Countryside*, 110.

¹⁷Bonnin, *The Lost Generation*, 61.

¹⁸Xi’an shi gongdu xuexiao, “Guanyu xuansong.”

the rostrum like snowflakes.” When it came time to sign their names, “everyone pushed and squeezed, striving to be first and afraid to be left behind” until signatures covered two large pieces of red paper. Many students asked to give speeches to express their resolve, and when each class broke into small-group discussions they spoke extremely passionately. Most students wrote multiple applications and some cried because they were too young to go.¹⁹ By characterizing the youth as eager volunteers, the Xi’an Work-Study School’s report echoed language common in work reports of the time. More than excitement to develop the countryside, however, many youth most likely signed up because they aspired to become a rural cadre, find a job, or secure some other form of social and political advancement.²⁰ The monthly wage that conservation teams would provide must have also been extremely appealing. In paying their members wages, conservation teams resembled state farms and fundamentally differed from arrangements that assigned sent-down youth to production teams (插队).²¹

Once students volunteered, the Work-Study School’s authorities had to convince their parents. Following the meeting, school staff reviewed each letter and confirmed that the students they originally targeted as candidates had all written applications. With this information in hand, they went about obtaining parental consent. More than 90 percent of the 32 parents whom teachers visited supported their children’s requests. As the parents of a student named Rao Kaihua 尧开花 stated, “After our child heard the school’s mobilization report he wanted to go take part in water conservancy construction, and we as parents fully agree. Our child is not afraid of eating bitterness, and the more they eat bitterness the more children are trained [越是吃苦, 越让孩子去锻炼].” With their parents’ encouragement, the students had “even more resolve to go to production construction posts to train themselves and serve the people [更坚决的走上生产建设岗位上去锻炼自己, 为人民服务].”²² In this idealized formulation, remaking the countryside to construct socialism also meant remaking the self.

Qualifying to take part in this training required one more round of assessment. On October 29, school staff took the 32 students for medical exams, and Liang Qi’an went with representatives from government agencies on October 30 to decide on the final twenty-eight students. Among the four students who did not make the cut, two had illnesses, one had parents who disapproved, and one lacked resolve (possibly another sign of parental disapproval).²³ Those selected were all over sixteen; ten had studied at the Work-Study School for two or more years, fourteen for one and a half to two years, and four for around a year. The report stressed that the behavior of these students set them apart from other pupils: twelve were student cadres, twelve took youth league classes, twenty-three had displayed honesty by returning lost items, and seventeen had received a “thought, labor, study three abundant harvests award” (“思想、劳动、学习”三丰收奖励). Each student had written application letters and convinced their parents to let them join. A student named Du Xi’an 杜西安 wrote in his letter that, “Once the classmates who joined the Production-Construction Army Corps (兵团) left, I resolved to take part in agricultural production, go to the motherland’s most needy places, accept

¹⁹Xi’an shi gongdu xuexiao, “Guanyu xuansong.”

²⁰Bonnin, *The Lost Generation*, 61; Brown, *City Versus Countryside*, 119.

²¹Bonnin, *The Lost Generation*, 56.

²²Xi’an shi gongdu xuexiao, “Guanyu xuansong.” Many other parents of sent-down youth resisted, as shown by Brown in his study of Tianjin; *City Versus Countryside*, 119–20.

²³Xi’an shi gongdu xuexiao, “Guanyu xuansong.”

the party's and the school's test, and release my light and heat in an arduous place [在艰苦的地方发出自己的光和热]." On the morning of October 30, the school announced the names of the twenty-eight students to all other students and teachers. The students then gathered to hear talks from school leaders, study editorials from *People's Daily* and reports from the provincial government meetings, discuss "the water and soil conservation and water conservancy teams' glorious mission," and go over how they should labor, study, and behave after getting to their posts.²⁴

The school held a "grand farewell meeting" for the students on November 2 to reinforce the righteousness of their mission. The meeting's decorations featured couplets with lines from Mao Zedong's poetry that read, "bitter sacrifice strengthens bold resolve, which dares to make sun and moon shine in new skies," and these words bolstered students' "lofty aspirations and high ideals of managing mountains and waters and conquering nature" (治山治水、征服自然的雄心壮志). Leaders of provincial and municipal agencies attended, and the school's principal and party-secretary, Gao Yongxiang 高永祥, spoke to students and encouraged them to "resolutely progress and overcome difficulties."²⁵

At midday on November 3, as the school's work report described, the deafening sound of gongs, drums, and applause filled the air as teachers and students gathered to bid farewell to the students as they strode proudly out the gates. As the students boarded the bus and waved goodbye, "many people had tears falling from their eyes. When the bus had already driven far away, some students still had their arms outstretched." In addition to outfitting the students with bedding and padded cotton clothes, the school sent the vice-principal and another staff member to accompany them to their destination so they would "more quickly be at ease, put down roots, and accept this new study and labor mission." Yet the work report, adhering to the format typical of this type of document, also took note of remaining problems. For the students who stayed in Xi'an, the Work-Study School staff had to "make them recognize that a vagrant lifestyle [流浪生活] and thieving behavior are shameful ... foster labor habits and transform their stubborn and obstreperous habits."²⁶ The concerns about delinquency present in this report would follow the Work-Study School students to the villages.

From City to Countryside

In January 1965, Baishui county's Beiqian 北乾 village became home to one such contingent of sent-down youth.²⁷ The Baishui County Water and Soil Conservation Team was subordinate to the county government, which deputed cadres to oversee its activities. The Conservation Team consisted of two cadres and twenty-eight young people (sixteen male and twelve female) between the ages of fourteen and twenty-one (with an average age of seventeen) from Xi'an and other locales. Two had attended lower-primary school, sixteen had attended upper-primary school, seven went to middle school, and two attended high school. Among those from Xi'an, nine came from the Xi'an Work-Study School, four came from the city orphanage (福利院), and two

²⁴Xi'an shi gongdu xuexiao, "Guanyu xuansong."

²⁵Xi'an shi gongdu xuexiao, "Guanyu xuansong." An English translation of the poem can be found at www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/poems/poems26.htm.

²⁶Xi'an shi gongdu xuexiao, "Guanyu xuansong."

²⁷Shaanxi sheng difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, *Shaanxi shengzhi*, 445.

were high-school graduates who had not gained admission to university. When the urban youth went to water and soil conservation teams their household (户口) registration went with them. Thirteen more unemployed graduates—or “society youth” (社会青年)—came from Baishui’s county seat.²⁸ With no work units and nothing to do, unemployed “society youth” often became “minor delinquents,” whom authorities wanted to get out of the cities.²⁹

But urban youth did not find a hospitable environment when they arrived in the countryside. The Baishui county government had selected a base of operations for the Conservation Team on the southern edge of a ravine beside the Luohe River 洛河 outside of Beiqian village, about 30 *li* northeast of Baishui’s county seat. Local residents dubbed this gully Xingshugou (杏树沟 Apricot Tree Gully) after the grove of 450 apricot trees growing there, but the Conservation Team renamed it Chuangyeling (创业岭 Pioneering Ridge). The rugged site had barren slopes, trees, and scrub-bush everywhere. No villagers cultivated this land, which covered over 950 *mu* (one *mu* equals one sixth of an acre). Only 310 *mu* were suitable for agriculture, while the rest would be planted with trees and grasses.³⁰

Initially, the relocated urban youth had no buildings to live in and had to reside at the Beiqian Brigade, six *li* from their work site. Going to and from work each day required walking a dozen or more *li* on narrow, winding paths along steep ridges.³¹ The urban youth did not have a kitchen for their meals or drinking water at first, “so hardships were severe.” But the Conservation Team borrowed cave dwellings (apparently without compensation) from locals near the work site and, after arranging for a cook from the Beiqian Brigade’s restaurant to spend ten days teaching the urban youth to prepare meals, set up a canteen. Eventually, the young people constructed their own brick dormitory.³²

Even after securing food and lodging, urban youth did not easily adjust to this environment. Work reports from the Baishui County Water and Soil Conservation Work Team did not shy away from recounting the difficulties that urban youth encountered. According to a 1964 report on the Conservation Team’s founding, some students recruited from the city complained, “The Luohe area has too much hardship [洛河地区真够苦了]; it’s not as good as Xi’an, and not even as good as the out-of-the-way Baishui county seat.” They whined and slacked off. Whenever the Conservation Team had official business in the county seat, over 80 percent of its members asked to go. Some said, “[We] can go on like this for a year or two, [but if it’s] for a long time what will we do?” Others said, “This mountain area has too many hardships. First [let’s] give it a try and if it’s no good then we’ll go back to Xi’an.” When some youth arrived and saw the Conservation Team’s conditions, they could not sleep for

²⁸Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuaniedui 白水縣水土保持專業隊, “Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuaniedui 1965 nian gongzuo zongjie” 白水縣水土保持專業隊 1965 年工作总结, November 25, 1965: SPA 155-96. See also Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuaniedui 白水縣水土保持專業隊, “Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuaniedui jianye qingkuang baogao,” 白水縣水土保持專業隊建業情況報告, January 1, 1965: SPA 155-2085.

²⁹Bonnin, *The Lost Generation*, 55. See also Brown, *City Versus Countryside*, 118–19.

³⁰Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuaniedui, “Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuaniedui 1965 nian gongzuo zongjie.”

³¹Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuaniedui, “Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuaniedui 1965 nian gongzuo zongjie.”

³²Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuaniedui, “Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuaniedui jianye qingkuang baogao.”

several nights. Other teenagers complained that rules were too strict, faked illness to avoid work, refused to do heavy labor, and “wanted to spend all day having fun” (整天贪图玩).³³

Many youths had never set foot in rural villages. Not only were urban youth unaccustomed to labor, noted the Conservation Team’s annual report for 1965, they had not even seen gullies and slopes like the ones that crisscross Baishui. When a student from Xi’an’s orphanage named Wang Guifang 王桂芳 went to work she feared going down the slopes, asking: “If I fall down how can I come back up?” The youth had responded to mobilization at their schools by coming to the “mountain area.” But as soon as they met with difficulties “ideological fluctuations” took place. A jarring dissonance existed between what authorities led urban youth to expect and what they found in the countryside. A few of the “little comrades” from the orphanage complained that their teacher had deceived them; others cried because of their misfortune. Some youth worried that if they worked in the countryside for a few years they would be permanently classified as peasants and “would not have a future,” so they wanted to go work in a factory. Others hoped to escape by volunteering for the army. Some said, “We might as well just sneak away. If you can’t get a household registration in Xi’an, being an illegal household (黑户) beats staying here.”³⁴ Claiming that urban youth spent wastefully, the Conservation Team gave them only a portion of their wages and put the rest in savings. This arrangement had the added benefit of preventing the teenagers from absconding.³⁵

Teenagers who caused trouble in cities did not change their habits when they got to the countryside. If anything, urban youth were less constrained in a rural environment that they saw as inferior to the cities they came from. In addition to neglecting their duties and engaging in “wasteful squander,” some team members sold their commodity ration coupons (花票) and cloth ration coupons (布票), which entitled bearers to purchase a specified amount of textiles or other goods, for cash. Theoretically, people could only give away coupons and could not resell them, but illicit sales regularly occurred. Worse yet, certain youth formed gangs (搞小团体), openly disobeyed the Conservation Team’s cadres, and organized “backward people” to attack their work-group heads. Boys and girls “took oaths as older brother and younger sister” (结拜为兄妹)—in effect becoming boyfriend and girlfriend—and some team members “committed crimes in public places” (在群众场合作案).³⁶ Other young people left the work site and roved about the village, did not return to the Conservation Team’s headquarters in the evenings, failed to study, and consorted with the village’s “backward elements.” A student from the Work-Study School named Wu Shunxing 武顺兴, for

³³Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan yedui, “Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan yedui jianye qingkuang baogao.”

³⁴Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan yedui, “Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan yedui 1965 nian gongzuo zongjie.” For similar responses from urban youth relocated to rural villages around Tianjin see Brown, *City Versus Countryside*, 110.

³⁵Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan yedui, “Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan yedui jianye qingkuang baogao.”

³⁶Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan yedui, “Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan yedui jianye qingkuang baogao.” Instances of urban youth causing similar trouble in rural villages can be found in Brown, *City Versus Countryside*, 130–32. On the widespread sale of cloth ration coupons in rural Shaanxi during this period see Jacob Eyferth, “Women’s Work and the Politics of Homespun in Socialist China, 1949–1980,” *International Review of Social History* 57:3 (2012), 365–91. The “gray economy” involving exchange of ration coupons is discussed in Karl Gerth, *Unending Capitalism: How Consumerism Negated China’s Communist Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 31–32.

instance, “ate candy, ate pig knuckles, and smoked every day, and he even told people that pig knuckles were even tastier than pork.” The behavior of these teenage interlopers made a poor impression upon the locals, who wondered, “Where did the government [国家] get these little hoodlums? How can they construct the mountain areas? It’s like throwing money into the gully.”³⁷ To rectify disciplinary problems, the Conservation Team resorted to criticism and self-criticism.³⁸ But not all urban youth adjusted to life in the countryside, became committed to conservation work, or followed the rules.

Dissolute Habits and Abnormal Relations

During a six month probationary period after they first arrived, members of the Conservation Team received a monthly wage of 25 *yuan*. After that time, young people became regular workers who earned specified monthly wages, with the level determined based on their performance. Individuals who performed especially poorly had the probationary period extended and their evaluation delayed. According to a directive from Shaanxi’s Water Conservancy and Hydroelectric Department (水利电力厅), Conservation Team cadres had to recognize that “the problem of setting team members’ wage levels is an important matter” and pay attention to “thought work.” The county government also sent cadres to assist in organizing team members for “democratic deliberation” (民主评议) about one another’s performance.³⁹ From July 16 to July 30, 1965, the Baishui County Water and Soil Conservation Team conducted “democratic” evaluations to set wage levels.⁴⁰ Out of the twenty-eight team members, twenty-five had their wage set at 33.66 *yuan* per month, an amount far higher than the income of rural households. But Li Fa (whom we met at the beginning of the article) and two other youth had their probationary period extended.⁴¹ Individuals whose evaluations were delayed had to write guarantees that they would rectify their shortcomings and catch up to their comrades.⁴²

Materials that the Conservation Team produced to explain the reasons for extending youths’ probationary periods offer vivid accounts of their transgressive behavior. Consider Guo Bianli, aged 18, who came to the Conservation Team on November 12, 1964, from the Xi’an Work-Study School and did not take long to run afoul of the Conservation Team’s leadership. A file on Guo from January 1965 related that, “Since coming, this comrade’s performance has been consistently bad. His moral conduct is abominable.”⁴³ Similarly, Guo’s 1965 evaluation stated that due to his

³⁷Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan yedui, “Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan yedui 1965 nian gongzuo zongjie.”

³⁸Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan yedui, “Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan yedui jianye qingkuang baogao.”

³⁹Shaanxi sheng shuili dianli ting 陕西省水利电力厅, “Guanyu shuitu baochi zhuan yedui duiyuan dingji wenti de tongzhi (65) shui dian bao ban zi di 58 hao,” 关于水土保持专业队队员定级问题的通知 (65) 水电保办字第58号, July 5, 1965: BCA 50-6.

⁴⁰Baishui xian shuili dianli ju 白水县水利电力局, “Guanyu woxian shuibao dui duiyuan pingji jieguo de baogao 65 bai shui dian zi di 041 hao,” 关于我县水保队队员评级结果的报告 (65) 白水电字第 041 号, August 15, 1965: BCA 50-6.

⁴¹“Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan yedui gongren zhuanzheng dingji biao” 白水县水土保持专业队转正定级表, August 15, 1965: BCA 50-6.

⁴²Baishui xian shuili dianli ju, “Guanyu woxian shuibao dui duiyuan pingji jieguo de baogao.” A former Team member recalled receiving 27.5 *yuan*, which was the probationary wage. Interview with Fan Qinglai, September 19, 2016.

⁴³Baishui xian shuili dianli ju 白水县水利电力局, “Guo Bianli danxing cailiao,” 郭便利单行材料 January 25, 1965: BCA 50-6.

“background and the fact that since he was little he has been dissolute, he has many evil habits and is vastly inferior to most comrades.”⁴⁴ Guo’s criminal record started in Xi’an, where he formed a gang, seduced two girls, and engaged in petty theft.⁴⁵ While going to visit the doctor on October 15, he had stolen 16 *yuan* from a man buying vegetables at a shop and gave 8 *yuan* to Chen Guoxin 陈国新, another Work-Study School student.⁴⁶ A few days before going to Baishui in November 1964, Guo and Chen stole a female worker’s purse on Xi’an’s #6 bus from the city’s famous Bell Tower (钟楼) to Northwest Industrial University (西北工业大学). The purse contained 16 *yuan*, which Guo and Chen split equally. Guo also got 7 *yuan* in cash and 10 *chi* worth of cloth ration coupons from a theft that Chen committed.⁴⁷ Moving to the countryside did not end Guo Bianli’s petty crime spree. Around November 13, he stole a purse with .78 *yuan* in it from a woman watching a movie at the Baishui Theater (白水剧场) in the county seat, but told his friend Wang Yunzhi 王运治 that if he had known the purse had so little money he wouldn’t have bothered stealing it.⁴⁸ Another theft landed him a bigger score of 12 *yuan*.⁴⁹ In addition, Guo taught “robbery methods” to Wang Yunzhi and their fellow team member Wu Shunxing 吴顺兴 and encouraged them to commit crimes. Wang admitted that on the train back to Xi’an during Spring Festival they “took advantage of the chance to line our pockets [再捞一把油水] and get some more money.”⁵⁰

In addition to organizing a band of thieves, Guo bullied younger team members and had other “hoodlum habits.” He verbally attacked the production-group head, cursed Conservation Team cadres and Work-Study School leaders, did not complete tasks, and “also said strange words” (还说怪话).⁵¹ Even after being reprimanded in January 1965 for stealing and other misdeeds, Guo did not change his ways.⁵² He went back and forth between the Conservation Team and Baishui’s county seat to “get up to who-knows-what” (不知搞些什么事情). Despite telling the Conservation Team’s cadres he would no longer go to the county seat, whenever they left “he secretly went into town at night and slept at the barbershop [理发馆],” where he had befriended an employee named Li Sancheng 李三成, who “performed poorly” and had romantic relationships with various women.⁵³

Guo also had a reputation for being “extremely impolite to female comrades” and “saying vulgar things” around them. He bragged to other team members that, “If I take a shine to a girl, when I call her, she won’t be able to run away.”⁵⁴ One girl Guo took a shine to was Yang Meiling 杨美玲, who came from Shanxi and was sixteen

⁴⁴Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan yedui 白水县水土保持专业队, “Guo Bianli danxing cailiao” 郭便利 单行材料, August 8, 1965: BCA 50-6.

⁴⁵Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan yedui, “Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan yedui 1965 nian gongzuo zongjie.”

⁴⁶Baishui xian shuili dianli ju, “Guo Bianli danxing cailiao.”

⁴⁷Baishui xian shuili dianli ju, “Guo Bianli danxing cailiao.” See also Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan yedui, “Guo Bianli danxing cailiao.”

⁴⁸Baishui xian shuili dianli ju, “Guo Bianli danxing cailiao.”

⁴⁹Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan yedui, “Guo Bianli danxing cailiao.”

⁵⁰Baishui xian shuili dianli ju, “Guo Bianli danxing cailiao.”

⁵¹Baishui xian shuili dianli ju, “Guo Bianli danxing cailiao.”

⁵²Baishui xian shuili dianli ju, “Guo Bianli danxing cailiao.”

⁵³Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan yedui, “Guo Bianli danxing cailiao.”

⁵⁴Baishui xian shuili dianli ju, “Guo Bianli danxing cailiao.” See also Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan yedui, “Guo Bianli danxing cailiao.”

at the time. Once Yang joined the Conservation Team, Guo asked her to take an oath to become “older brother and young sister” (结拜兄妹). Consumer goods were the bait with which this aspiring Lothario tried to win over the object of his affection. Guo gave Yang twenty gifts worth more than 15 *yuan*, including candy, handkerchiefs, a box of balsam (香脂), a bottle of toothpaste, two flatbreads (烧饼), two pieces of pork, and 1 *yuan* in cash. (Guo also promised Yang a sweater, but never gave it to her.)⁵⁵ Yang accepted the presents and became sworn sister to Guo, who frequently wrote notes to her. Once someone found one of Guo’s missives and gave it to the team’s cadres, who read the “vulgar words” he had written: “As soon as I can’t see your smiling face (referring to Yang’s) I want to cry. If I lose you it’ll be like losing a family member. I love your face. I love your eyes.”⁵⁶ Guo did not hesitate to act on these sentiments. One day in May 1965, team members went down into the gully to look at the apricot trees in bloom, but as they left Guo ran back to the dormitory and found Yang Meiling by herself. Laying down beside her, Guo “madly kissed Yang’s face, kissed her mouth, and touched her breasts.” We have no record of whether Yang consented to Guo’s advances, but they did not last long. Right at that moment, a team member named Yan Benjun 闫本君 discovered the pair and took Guo to work in the fields. Other youth had “many complaints” about the incident and suspected that Guo and Yang “had a problem.”⁵⁷ When one of Yang Meiling’s friends tried to talk to her about the alleged “abnormal relationship” with Guo Bianli, Yang cursed at her and told her to leave her alone.⁵⁸ Other youth told the Conservation Team’s cadres that Guo and Yang “might have done bad things.”⁵⁹ Guo, for his part, confessed that he “had bad thoughts, but hadn’t done bad things” (自己有坏的思想, 但没有坏事).⁶⁰ Despite the swirling suspicions, the cadres in charge concluded that Guo and Yang “had not done the real thing” (无真事).⁶¹

Although we have no way of knowing exactly what transpired, materials on Yang Meiling show that she did not have a clean record either. Yang had come to Baishui on November 20, 1964, and, like Guo Bianli and Li Fa, she had her probationary period in the Conservation Team extended in summer 1965 due to a poor evaluation.⁶² Yang did not work diligently or accept criticism from her production-team head, and she rejected tasks assigned to her. She had falsely requested sick leave on sixteen occasions because she was “in a bad mood and unwilling to take part in labor.”⁶³ She had a stubborn personality, did not “unite with comrades,” and had a fondness for doing things alone. In spring 1965, when the Conservation Team held cultural and artistic activities, other youth asked Yang to take part in a singing performance but she refused. When cadres mobilized team members for this activity Yang never showed up, preferring to “walk around by herself.” But in the evenings, as her comrades tried to take a rest, Yang would sing songs. If anyone said anything to her, she refused to listen and cursed

⁵⁵Baishui xian shuili dianli ju, “Guo Bianli danxing cailiao.” See also Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan-yedui, “Guo Bianli danxing cailiao.”

⁵⁶Weinan qu Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan-yedui 渭南区白水水土保持专业队, “Yang Meiling danxing cailiao” 杨美玲单行材料, August 8, 1965: BCA 50-6.

⁵⁷Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan-yedui, “Guo Bianli danxing cailiao.” See also Weinan qu Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan-yedui, “Yang Meiling danxing cailiao.”

⁵⁸Weinan qu Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan-yedui, “Yang Meiling danxing cailiao.”

⁵⁹Weinan qu Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan-yedui, “Yang Meiling danxing cailiao.”

⁶⁰Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan-yedui, “Guo Bianli danxing cailiao.”

⁶¹Weinan qu Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan-yedui, “Yang Meiling danxing cailiao.”

⁶²Weinan qu Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan-yedui, “Yang Meiling danxing cailiao.”

⁶³Weinan qu Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan-yedui, “Yang Meiling danxing cailiao.”

at them.⁶⁴ Rebellious habits and transgressive behavior among urban youth cut across gender lines.

Tales of Transformation

The Conservation Team's work report to the Shaanxi provincial government for the year 1965 described the steps taken to eliminate this kind of behavior. With its emphasis on successes, the work report is best read as an idealized narrative of the transformation of urban youth through conservation work rather than a faithful account of what transpired. According to the work report, the Conservation Team's cadres organized readings of Mao Zedong's works and used the Chairman's ideas to "arm the youth's minds." But due to the young people's immaturity and modest levels of education, at first most of them had no interest in studying. For example, the urban youth Fu Pingjun 付平均 admitted that although he read Mao's essays "Oppose Liberalism" 反对自由主义 and "In Memory of Norman Bethune" 纪念白求恩 many times over, he thought they "weren't interesting," while "On Contradictions" 矛盾论 and "On Practice" 实践论 were "too deep," so he figured he "might as well give up." The Conservation Team's cadres organized the young people into study-groups according to their educational level, making five relatively well-educated youth into a "Chairman Mao's works core small-group" to encourage, tutor, and take responsibility for others. When team members suffered hardships, the report stated, they studied "The Foolish Old Man Who Moved the Mountains" 愚公移山; when discipline flagged, and their work grew careless they studied "Oppose Liberalism." In idealized Maoist fashion, political study was supposed to create the strength of will to cope with an inhospitable environment.

Accounts of miraculous transformations inspired by Mao's writings contained in the work report were exaggerated, to be sure. But ideological pressures could undoubtedly change behavior and rusticated urban youth learned to speak the language of Maoism. A youth named Ma Xiongwei 马雄伟 admitted in his personal reflections that when he arrived in Baishui he had no devotion to the "mountain area." He considered life in the countryside stupefying, but could not do anything about it, so he stuck it out. Later, after studying "In Memory of Norman Bethune," Ma Xiongwei observed,

Comrade Norman Bethune was an elderly person over 50 years old. I'm a young guy who's 20. Norman Bethune was a foreigner who came to China from 1,000 *li* away to work diligently for the enterprise of the liberation of the Chinese people, and I'm only a few dozen *li* away from home. Norman Bethune worked under a forest of guns and a hail of bullets without complaining of hardship. I, on the other hand, grew up in a peaceful environment. What reason is there not to devote myself to the enterprise of constructing the mountain areas?

Thereafter, Ma reportedly resolved to work energetically in Beiqian for the rest of his life and rushed to do heavy labor. One rainy day, when carrying water up from the bottom of the gully, he grew exhausted but thought of what Mao said in "The Foolish Old Man Who Moved the Mountains" about being "resolute and unafraid of sacrifice, surmounting every difficulty to win victory." Ma gritted his teeth and hauled the water to the top. Afterwards, whenever Ma went to work, he brought Mao's selected writings

⁶⁴Weinan qu Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuanyedui, "Yang Meiling danxing cailiao."

with him. When the going got tough, he reread “The Foolish Old Man Who Moved the Mountains” and he “absorbed great spiritual power.”⁶⁵ However, we have no way to know whether Ma believed what he said, or indeed whether he said it at all.

The work report also stated that most of the Conservation Team’s members had been born after 1949 and had “grown up under the red flag.” Hence, they had insufficient recognition of class struggle and were unclear about how the “fortunate life” of the New China had come into existence, “which is an important reason why some team members are afraid of hardship and are not devoted [to their work].” To further their education, the Conservation Team’s political commissar, Liu Xiyao 刘西尧, told stories of revolutionary struggle, speaking about his past hardship doing hired labor for a landlord. The team’s accountant, Tian Jiqin 田积勤 likewise played the lead role in the revolutionary play “The Long-Term Hired Laborer’s Hatred” 长工恨 even though he was ill, “to educate the youth in keeping class hatred firmly in mind” and heighten team members’ consciousness and dedication. In this manner, the report emphasized that cadres were doing their job of training the urban youth.

The report also claimed that class education had the intended effect of inspiring the urban youth to endure hardship. Originally, Wang Guifang “said that she was sick and couldn’t go up the gully, and that it was too hard here and she couldn’t do it.” Afterwards, she could climb the gully, dig earth, and construct level trenches. Another teenage girl from the orphanage named Wang Qunzhen 王群珍, after listening to Tian Jiqin’s “recall-bitterness-and-think-of-sweetness class education play,” remarked that, “The previous generation suffered nothing but hardship in the old society. We have grown up in the new society. When we were little, we lost our mothers and fathers, but the party has raised us. I will definitely not forget the party’s loving-kindness and will resolve to work in the mountain area for the rest of my life.” Thereafter, Wang Qunzhen always asked to feed the pigs, and at night she dreamed about “washing the piglets, picking lice off them, and feeding them.” Fan Qinglai 范青来, one of the Conservation Team’s cooks, hauled coal and pushed the millstone for the elderly in Beiqian, for which he “received a favorable evaluation from the masses.”⁶⁶

Fantastic accounts of model workers’ exploits encouraged other youth to work harder. Twelve team members were evaluated as “advanced” and placed on an honor roll, which, according to the Conservation Team’s report, impressed local villagers. As the local cooperative member in charge of Beiqian’s tree nursery allegedly remarked, “The little heroes in the Water and Soil Conservation Team surpass fierce tigers and are like dragons. In one day, they made eight or nine trips to haul bricks. Our cooperative members couldn’t even keep up with them. The original claim that they were ‘little hoodlums’ has already gone away and will never return.” Thereafter, the work report claimed, the number of youths who did good deeds increased. In a heavy rainstorm, two teenage girls, Wang Sufang 王素芳 and Zheng Lingzhen 郑玲珍, hauled over thirty loads of water for Beiqian’s infrastructure development team. Onlookers reportedly exclaimed, “They’re really Chairman Mao’s good children. When the good girls from

⁶⁵Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan yedui, “Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan yedui 1965 nian gongzuo zongjie.”

⁶⁶Most likely due to the particularities of local pronunciation, this document records Fan’s name as “Fan Tinglai” 范庭来, but my interview with Fan (September 18, 2016) confirmed that Qinglai is the correct rendering.

the Water and Soil Conservation Team grow up and become daughter-in-law in someone's family, they'll definitely be good ones."

During the summer harvest, five female team members, including Qiao Xianhua 乔仙花 and Cai Qiaofang 蔡巧芳, assisted by cutting wheat. The report boasted that they complained neither of heat nor fatigue, going to work early with cooperative members and getting off late. In their spare time, they helped elderly peasants with their work. As the production team leader exclaimed, "You girls are really something else. I couldn't tell that you'd be able to eat bitterness like this. When you first came all the cooperative members were worried. Now they say, 'When they arrived we thought these girls wouldn't be able to be of any assistance; now we don't want to let them leave.'"⁶⁷ During the 1965 conservation campaign, the Conservation Team's "Iron Girl Terrace Building Group" (铁姑娘帮埝组) declared that they would not marry outside the village, "pledging their life to constructing Beiqian and thoroughly changing the face of Beiqian, struggling for early realization of the 'outline' for development of agricultural production."⁶⁸ Training youth and eliminating their transgressive behavior through political study that inspired them to take part in the work of transforming the environment to construct socialism, whether it happened or not, was the Conservation Team's main objective.

Thanks to the Conservation Team's "education for the future construction of the mountain area" (建设山区的前途教育), according to the report, accomplishments in land management and production grew. By late November 1965, with two oxen and 70 farm tools, the team reportedly opened 80 *mu* of wasteland, planted trees on 61 *mu*, constructed 14 terraces, built four roads, and dug four cave dwellings. A single youth could originally plant 15 trees in a day, but during a tree-planting competition held in fall 1965 each person planted over 80 trees per day, though the report did not mention how many of the trees survived.⁶⁹

Urban youth feigning illness to avoid work presented a serious problem, but the report claimed that the Conservation Team had gotten it under control. If Conservation Team members fell ill, cadres called doctors, bought medicine, or sent someone to look after them. If personnel stayed home sick, cadres went to visit so they would recover and could participate in labor. Consequently, "youth suffering from light illnesses did not say anything to complain of hardship and trick the leaders, and they labored while they were ill." When the teenage girls Huang Qiaoling 黄巧玲 and Qiao Xianhua got sick and cadres went to see them, Huang and Qiao were "so moved" that on that same day they went with the leaders to labor while ill. In March, April, and May of 1965, work turnout was 80 percent. After June, it reached 95–100 percent. In the first three months, expenditure for medicine came to over 40 *yuan*, but for three consecutive months it had not exceeded 10 *yuan*, and in November the Conservation Team only spent 1.9 *yuan* on medicine. With cadres keeping tabs, working through illness became the norm. The report stated that cadres also took part in labor and set examples. The Conservation Team's political commissar, Liu Xiyao, in addition to holding meetings and handling other affairs, worked every day,

⁶⁷Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuanvedui, "Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuanvedui 1965 nian gongzuo zongjie."

⁶⁸Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuanvedui, "Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuanvedui 1965 nian gongzuo zongjie."

⁶⁹Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuanvedui, "Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuanvedui 1965 nian gongzuo zongjie."

“which had a very good effect on youth and the local masses, and his comrades wrote a poem for him entitled ‘In Praise of the Leader’ [赞领导].”⁷⁰

The work report’s narrative expressed the official desire for urban youth to remake themselves and remake the landscape, but political education and training could not make up for the fact that the teenagers did not know how to farm. According to the report, “The personnel’s ideology is better, and their effort is great, but in terms of farming techniques quality is still poor.” To improve their skills, the Conservation Team organized “five on-the-spot observations, inviting local old peasants to give classes,” so that urban youth could learn about plowing, sowing, and building terraces. The Weinan 渭南 special area’s Water and Soil Conservation Station 水保站 also lent planning assistance, “making personnel unceasingly increase their diligence and improve techniques, struggling to realize the long-term plan.” Yet, because the Conservation Team had only existed for a short time, the work report admitted, its accomplishments were not great. For the first two months the Conservation Team concentrated on digging cave dwellings, but most had collapsed. In July 1965 team members transported brick and stone for Beiqian’s infrastructural development team, losing three months in the process. “For this reason, investment of labor in production has not been great, little wasteland has been reclaimed, few basic fields have been established, and little grain has been produced.”⁷¹ Finally, although political-ideological education had strengthened and most youth had made progress, the work report acknowledged, “there are still a few youths who will not change their old ways despite repeated admonitions. They do not listen to the leaders, intentionally cause trouble, do not labor actively, and do not abide by the system.”⁷² The Conservation Team’s inability to reform the habits of its members mattered as much as its efforts to transform the landscape, but both proved difficult.

A Corrupt Cadre

Materials on Conservation Team cadres further put the lie to the fantastic achievements described in its reports to higher-ups in the Shaanxi provincial government. In contrast to work reports that played up the Conservation Team’s achievements, these materials offered detailed background information on personnel who had disciplinary problems. Indeed, these documents indicate that some cadres were hardly better than young urban “hoodlums.” The countryside was the destination not only for problematic youth, but for problematic cadres as well. The Conservation Team’s accountant, Tian Jiqin, thirty-six at the time, was born to a poor peasant family from Dongshishi village 东石师村 in Baishui’s Chengjiao commune 城郊公社, but had attended school in his youth. Beginning in April 1950, Tian had worked as an elementary school teacher, a literacy cadre (扫盲专干), copy clerk in Baishui’s Chengguan commune 城关公社 party committee, a cadre in a civil goods company (民用公司), and an accounting tutor (会计辅导专干) in Baishui’s Agriculture and Animal Husbandry Bureau (农牧局). In January 1964, Tian received a severe demerit for embezzling social relief funds and cloth ration coupons, inflating his own salary, and other misdeeds. After his transfer to the

⁷⁰Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuanvedui, “Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuanvedui 1965 nian gongzuo zongjie.”

⁷¹Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuanvedui, “Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuanvedui 1965 nian gongzuo zongjie.”

⁷²Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuanvedui, “Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuanvedui 1965 nian gongzuo zongjie.”

Conservation Team, according to his file, Tian's "individualist thought" grew even more severe. "In his work he was arrogant and self-satisfied, he considered everyone beneath him; attacked, roped in, and corrupted the youth, promoted a bourgeois view of fame and wealth; and continued to engage in malfeasance."⁷³

Conservation Team meetings turned into the stage for power contests between cadres instead of discussions about how to implement conservation measures. Tian frequently bragged to boost his reputation among the Conservation Team's members, announcing that, "I used to work in the Youth League party branch [团支部]. I taught political classes at a school and I was the substitute principal." In addition to boasting about his own achievements, Tian cast aspersions upon his chief rival, the Conservation Team's commissar Liu Xiyao. As Tian declared, "Commissar Liu worked at a factory for a long time. He isn't as good as me in managing youth and educating people." To "lower Liu's prestige among the masses" and enhance his own, Tian told cadres in Beiqian that, "these kids were no good before, but after I came, they turned good. Liu can't manage these kids at all." Tian's self-promotion convinced some youth to do his bidding and look down upon Liu Xiyao, "making Liu's work passive." During one meeting, Tian declared that, "County leaders said that I've taught before and have methods for managing kids, so they assigned me to the Water and Soil Conservation Team." Tian also spread the word that, "Commissar Liu is a peasant cadre, his educational level is low, he has no ability, and he has no way of doing work. During meetings he frequently says the wrong words." To further marginalize Liu Xiyao, in November 1965 when the head of Shaanxi's Water and Soil Conservation Bureau (水土保持局), Yan Xuecheng 闫学诚, came to inspect the Conservation Team, Tian used "the tone of a report" (汇报的口气), while right in front of Liu, to tell the visiting dignitary: "Commissar Liu's educational level is low and he doesn't have ability. He isn't suited to lead these youth. Can you transfer a young person with ability here to serve as commissar?" With Tian making difficulties for Liu, "for a long time Liu did not have any assistance in his work and did it all single handedly, which was quite strenuous." For this reason, Liu did not feel "at ease" and requested a transfer several times. Under these circumstances, leadership power in the Conservation Team increasingly came under Tian Jiqin's control. Tian monopolized the team's speeches, mobilization sessions, and other meetings, in which he "talked and talked, taking up all or most of the meeting time, so that Liu had no chance to speak." In other instances, Tian claimed that Liu had not spoken clearly and interrupted him to repeat or elaborate upon what Liu had already said. In this manner, Tian "turned meetings into a place to brag about and promote himself."⁷⁴

When differences of opinion arose, Tian refused to listen to anyone. In July 1965, when the probationary period of sent-down urban youth ended and the Conservation Team set their wage levels, Liu Xiyao believed that several had not performed well enough to have their wage levels set. But Tian contradicted him by insisting that the team should "change many and retain few." In the end, Tian's views prevailed and three subpar workers, including Guo Bianli's pal Wang Yunzhi, "who stole and ran away from his residence," had their wages upgraded. Team members had many complaints about this decision and "the influence was very bad." What is more, when the Conservation Team made work assignments in spring 1966, Tian Jiqin said,

⁷³Baishui xian shuili dianli ju 白水县水利电力局, "Guanyu Tian Jiqin suo fan cuowu shishi de danxing cailiao, 关于田积勤所犯错误事实的单行材料," July 25, 1966: BCA 50-12.

⁷⁴Baishui xian shuili dianli ju, "Guanyu Tian Jiqin suo fan cuowu shishi de danxing cailiao."

“Commissar Liu, you grasp production, I’ll be responsible for all the remaining work.” In this way, Tian “usurped the status of leader to criticize and find fault with comrades.” When Tian went to the county seat for a meeting in March, Liu directed work. Even though everything went fine in Tian’s absence, after he returned he called a meeting at which he criticized the Conservation Team’s members by saying, “I’ve been away for a few days and the team has gotten like this. Tell me what work you’ve done these days. It’s such a mess. I’m afraid to even leave.” As a result, team members felt dissatisfied and Liu had an even harder time.⁷⁵

When not busy undermining Liu, Tian empowered urban youth who flaunted the Conservation Team’s rules. Tian “used the pretext of ‘care’” (以“关心”为名) to win over Guo Bianli and Ma Xiongwei. While the Conservation Team’s 1965 report to the Shaanxi provincial government had showered Ma with praise to showcase its achievements, internal materials frankly indicated that Ma had “serious problems.”⁷⁶ Perhaps because of Tian Jiqin’s influence, Guo Bianli treated Liu Xiyao impolitely and ridiculed him.⁷⁷ Tian especially liked Ma Xiongwei, whom he reportedly told, “You are the best comrade in my heart. Bureau head Ma (Water Control and Hydroelectric Bureau head comrade Ma Yugui 马玉桂) said he wanted to promote you to serve as a cadre. I said [he] can’t right now. Because two people from our team went to the army, backbone forces are insufficient. Later [he] can promote [you].” When other youth indicated that Ma Xiongwei “had problems in relations with the opposite sex,” Tian did not take the accusations seriously. Instead, he told Ma, “That problem between you and XXX was a small disturbance. You’re still ‘the best of the bunch’ [尖子] and a ‘red flag.’ You’re just off track [只是歪了].” In spring 1966, when Tian transmitted the content of a provincial-government water and soil conservation meeting to the Conservation Team, he falsely told them that Ma Yugui said that at year’s end he would promote two or three people from the Conservation Team to work for him, which made some of the youth dissatisfied with their current lot because they wanted to be cadres. On the other hand, Tian “attacked and got revenge against” good workers who made critical comments to him by preventing them from participating in labor, not recording work points for tasks that they performed, and making them engage in self-examination.⁷⁸

At the same time, Tian Jiqin’s malfesance went on unabated. In April 1965, Tian claimed that his household lacked grain so he could borrow 20 *jin* of flour from the canteen and did not return it. In May 1966, when team members discovered what Tian had done, he said he had returned the flour and “looked all over for a receipt to try to disavow it.” Only when confronted by witnesses with material evidence did Tian own up and hand over money for the grain. He had also taken home over 30 *jin* of apricots from the Conservation Team’s orchard. In addition to pilfering food, he abused his position as accountant to make urban youth plant his private plot, grind flour, haul coal, and haul water for him with the Conservation Team’s livestock, compensating them with work points from the team. When confronted, instead of owning up to his misdeeds Tian disavowed them and refused to confess. Following these accusations, Tian “passively slacked off in his work to threaten the organization.” Only after “many large and small meetings, help, and talks” (多次会议帮助和谈话)

⁷⁵Baishui xian shuili dianli ju, “Guanyu Tian Jiqin suo fan cuowu shishi de danxing cailiao.”

⁷⁶Baishui xian shuili dianli ju, “Guanyu Tian Jiqin suo fan cuowu shishi de danxing cailiao.”

⁷⁷Baishui xian shuili dianli ju, “Guo Bianli danxing cailiao.”

⁷⁸Baishui xian shuili dianli ju, “Guanyu Tian Jiqin suo fan cuowu shishi de danxing cailiao.”

did he finally admit his errors and make a self-criticism. For that reason, “to strictly enforce cadre discipline and educate him,” on July 24, 1966, Baishui’s Water Conservancy and Hydroelectric Bureau punished Tian with nominal expulsion from his post.⁷⁹ Rural cadres proved as difficult for the party-state to discipline as urban youth.

Good Conservation Soldiers

The beginning of the Cultural Revolution in autumn 1966 witnessed criticisms and denunciations within the Conservation Team, and Mao’s writings assumed even greater priority. By studying the Communist Party Central Committee’s decision on the Cultural Revolution below the county level, the *People’s Daily* editorial “Grasp Revolution, Promote Production” (抓革命,促生产) and speeches by Lin Biao 林彪 and Zhou Enlai, according to its 1966 annual report to the Shaanxi provincial government, the Conservation Team used “the soaring vigor shining forth from the Cultural Revolution” in production.⁸⁰ This work report once again described the Conservation Team in idealized fashion, boasting of the urban youth’s achievements bringing land under cultivation, constructing terraces, building earthworks levelling fields, and planting trees.⁸¹

To lend further impetus to production, the work report claimed, the Conservation Team “vigorously launched a mass campaign to study, compare, pursue, assist, and exceed.” During the summer farmland management and autumn tree-planting campaign, the team “rationally allocated and organized labor power, launching competitions between teams and between people.” Inspections took place daily and, after a week, team leaders evaluated and compared work groups. On day one, the first work group supposedly dug 480 fish-scale pits (鱼鳞坑)—a tree-planting method—with every person averaging eighty per day, doubling the previous year’s rate of forty per day. But by the next day the second group “leapt forward” and dug 540 pits, averaging ninety per person. On day three, the first group caught up and dug 612 fish-scale pits, averaging 102 per person. The second group then “organized its group members to study ‘The Foolish Old Man Who Moved the Mountains’ while in the fields,” and on day three they set a team record by digging 726 pits. Female team member Huang Qiaoling dug the most, and male team member Li Junling 李峻岭 dug over 140 fish-scale pits per day for five consecutive days.⁸² However unrealistic and overblown, these figures sent the message that correct thought and sheer determination made it possible to transform the landscape.

In addition to competing among themselves, the report celebrated the Conservation Team for striving to measure up to revolutionary martyrs from the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Highly embellished stories of these model soldiers, as Yinghong Cheng notes, placed an “emphasis on the endurance of pain and hardship” and celebrated how they had “intentionally made their daily work tougher and even into an ordeal, in order to temper themselves, so much so that sometimes they even rejected receiving medical treatment or taking a rest when they were facing physical pain or extreme fatigue.”⁸³ Looking to the PLA model Wang Jie 王杰 (a soldier who died throwing

⁷⁹Baishui xian shuili dianli ju, “Guanyu Tian Jiqin suo fan cuowu shishi de danxing cailiao.”

⁸⁰Baishui xian shuili baochi zhuaniedui 白水县委水保专业队, “1966 nian gongzuo zongjie (Baishui xian shuibaodui)” 1966 年工作总结 (白水县委水保队), January 10, 1967: SPA 155-227.

⁸¹Baishui xian shuili baochi zhuaniedui, “1966 nian gongzuo zongjie.”

⁸²Baishui xian shuili baochi zhuaniedui, “1966 nian gongzuo zongjie.”

⁸³Yinghong Cheng, *Creating the “New Man”: From Enlightenment Ideals to Socialist Realities* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2009), 97.

himself on an accidentally detonated landmine to save twelve comrades) and Liu Yingjun 刘英俊 (another PLA soldier who died in a car accident while trying to avoid hitting six children), the Conservation Team launched a “campaign to struggle to be a red team member.” After hearing about Liu Yingjun’s martyrdom, they “immediately responded to the call, with the whole team launching a movement to study heroes, do good deeds, and struggle to be a red team member.” All the young people wrote letters resolving to emulate Liu.⁸⁴

Members of the logistics small group, in addition to making food and carrying water, helped the production group plow land, brought water to the work site, carried earth, hauled manure, and cut grass for the livestock-raising group. According to the 1966 report: “The cooks Fan Qinglai and Wang Sufang suffered especially great hardship and endured heavy labor in all kinds of ways, regularly getting up early and going to sleep late, thinking about their comrades night and day, and running the team’s mess hall well, receiving praise from their comrades and good evaluations from county leaders.” Their comrades evaluated them as “model cooks and activists in the study of Chairman Mao’s works” and remarked that Wang Sufang “will not rest if she sees work to be done, and really is a red team member like Ouyang Hai 欧阳海 [another PLA martyr].”⁸⁵ Even if these accounts were exaggerated, which they likely were, by stressing parallels with PLA martyrs the report stressed how conservation work had advanced the goal of forging sent-down youth into exemplars of socialist values.

But alongside this list of accomplishments, the 1966 work report admitted that, in addition to being hampered by a lack of funds, the quality of team members’ “ideological effort” wavered and was not consistently maintained.⁸⁶ At the same time, the report stated, “There is little land and the quality of the land is poor, and furthermore there has been drought and our measures are not good, so little grain is produced.” Per capita grain production of 160 *jin* did not even amount to half a year’s rations for the urban youth. The Conservation Team’s cadres resolved to “vigorously struggle for grain self-sufficiency,” but no evidence exists that this goal came to fruition.⁸⁷ After 1967, with the Cultural Revolution in full swing, water and soil conservation teams dissolved, their cadres were reassigned to other locales, and most of their members joined rural production teams alongside the many educated youth sent to the countryside during that turbulent decade.⁸⁸

Conclusion

In their studies of the state-induced migration of China’s young people during the Cultural Revolution, Sigrid Schmalzer and Miriam Gross have documented the role of educated youth in scientific and technical projects to transform the countryside.⁸⁹ The Baishui County Water and Soil Conservation Team, by contrast, did little to promote rural development or environmental sustainability. When asked whether he and

⁸⁴Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan yedui, “1966 nian gongzuo zongjie.”

⁸⁵Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan yedui, “1966 nian gongzuo zongjie.”

⁸⁶Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan yedui, “1966 nian gongzuo zongjie.”

⁸⁷Baishui xian shuitu baochi zhuan yedui, “1966 nian gongzuo zongjie.”

⁸⁸Interview with Fan Qinglai, September 18, 2016. See also Shaanxi sheng difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, *Shaanxi shengzhi*, 428, 536.

⁸⁹Sigrid Schmalzer, *Red Revolution, Green Revolution: Scientific Farming in Socialist China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Miriam Gross, *Farewell to the God of Plague: Chairman Mao’s Campaign to Deworm China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

other urban youth understood anything about water and soil conservation at the time, the Conservation Team's model cook Fan Qinglai responded, "We only knew that Yellow River watershed water and soil management and decreasing Yellow River silt was the aim" (光知道黄河流域水土治理, 减少黄河的泥沙, 这就是宗旨).⁹⁰ Urban youth planted trees and built terraces, but the small scale of the project, its short duration, and their total lack of experience in agriculture and conservation made it impossible for them to provide technical guidance or demonstrations. Yet promoting agricultural production and stopping water and soil loss were not the only objectives. Official propaganda during the mid-1960s, as Jeremy Brown observes, "urged sent-down youth to transform backward [落后] and 'poor and blank' [一穷二白] villages, but also to reform themselves through rural labor and class struggle."⁹¹ For water and soil conservation teams, reforming urban youth was as important as remaking the land and transforming the countryside. The Baishui County Conservation Team's work reports to higher-ups in the Shaanxi provincial government described a process in which political study heightened the consciousness of urban youth, which in turn empowered them to overcome the hardships of the rural environment and work diligently on conservation projects.

Although the Baishui County Conservation Team's reports boasted of its accomplishments in reforming transgressive youth, other sources tell a different story. From the outset, getting urban teenagers to volunteer to move to the countryside required grooming and manipulation. Furthermore, urban teenagers had never lived in villages, had difficulty adapting to the rigors of the rural environment, and many longed to return to the city. Although some resigned themselves to life in the countryside, other urban youth avoided farming and conservation work, disobeyed orders, ran away, stole, illegally resold ration coupons, and had illicit romantic relationships. Baishui was not alone in this regard. Middle school graduates who migrated from Beijing to join water and soil conservation teams in remote areas of Shanxi province—who drank, fought, and broke rules—caused a major stir in August 1965 by sneaking into a movie theater and getting into an argument with its manager, who injured several of the youths during a fracas.⁹² The Baishui County Water and Soil Conservation Team's cadres were little better, as they feuded with one another, covered up the misdeeds of urban youth, and engaged in malfeasance. With all participants ignoring and subverting state policies, the twin goals of training young people and restoring the environment were not fully realized. Yet, as the rustication of educated youth during the Cultural Revolution would make all too evident, PRC leaders had not lost faith in relocation of urban youth to the countryside as a means of addressing social, economic, and environmental challenges.

⁹⁰Interview with Fan Qinglai, September 18, 2016.

⁹¹Brown, *City Versus Countryside*, 110. I have replaced pinyin romanization of the terms with Chinese characters.

⁹²Liu Jinying, *Lishi rushi shuo*, 175–76.