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The Sent-down Movement: Navigating
Collective Memories of Trauma in
Contemporary China

By

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Abstract

The sent-down movement in the 1960s and 1970s China influences a generation of urban youths. Despite the lively discussion of the movement in the two decades since its end, the collective memory of the movement has almost disappeared from public view in contemporary China in the twenty-first century. Through interviews and digital ethnography, this paper explores what specific factors most interrupted the inheritance and spread of collective memory of the sent-down movement from a transgenerational perspective. From the sent-down youth to their children and grandchildren, collective memory does not simply develop undistorted. Instead, the personal experience of each generation, the relationships within and between their respective communities, and the bigger pictures painted of social change all play a crucial role. The complexity of the memory inheritance process calls into question our assumptions about memory, agency, and oblivion.

Introduction

During the 1960s and 1970s, 18 million Chinese urban youth were forced to go to the countryside in the name of building a greater country (Bonnin, 2013). This “Up the Mountains and Down to the Villages Movement” (*shangshan xiexiang yundong*, hereinafter called the “sent-down movement”) was a turning point for millions of the so-called “sent-down youth,” as many of them spent years living miserably in the countryside and lost educational opportunities forever. When the sent-down movement was ended, in the 1980s, the government concluded it to have been a total failure, with the sent-down youth thus carrying

tremendous economic, social, and emotional costs (Gu 2009). As an extremely influential political movement, concern and debate about the sent-down movement lingered in Chinese society for decades. Most academic and public discussions have focused on its effects on the generation that was sent away, and on contemporary Chinese history broadly. In addition, special attention has been given to the turbulent collective memory of the sent-down youth.

In the 1980s, when the movement had just ended, the sent-down youth showed a strong sense of unity and critiqued the movement fiercely. However, public and academic attention have disappeared entirely in today's China. At the same time, a national cultural discourse of "realizing the Chinese dream" was established after president Xi Jinping took office in 2012 (Wang, 2014). By repeatedly emphasizing glorious ancient history and humiliation in wars against foreign countries in the 20th century, to motivate the rejuvenation of China, this discourse negates and ignores the history of the early years of the People's Republic of China (Ibid.). In many cases, even the descendants of the sent-down youth only have a vague impression of what their parents or grandparents have experienced. Unlike the general belief of the ripple effect in personal story sharing, the importance and legacy of the sent-down youth's collective memory is disrupted in their own family.

In this essay, I examine the following questions: What specific factors most interrupted the transgenerational inheritance of collective memory of the sent-down movement? What are the discrepancies in collective memories between different generations of the sent-down youth and their descendants? How does the memory of this movement impact the sent-down youth and their family members' understanding of today's Chinese society?

Combining archival and digital work with ethnographic interviews, my project mainly

builds upon former literature on collective memory theory. The idea of collective memory usually is traced back to the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs. In his foundational work, *The Collective Memory*, Halbwachs points out the two critical dimensions of this concept: collective and constructive. As he argued, the kind of memory that can be most easily retrieved is the one that has been remembered not only individually but also collectively. Basing our self-understanding on the memory of others, furthermore, generates community. People strengthen their memory through constant interaction with others. Secondly, memory is not a passive conception; instead, it is an active, constructive process undertaken by the community and external society (Halbwachs, 1925/1980). As Jeffrey K. Olick (1999; 2011) similarly notes, although memory is an individual cognitive process, it highly relies on the frameworks and definitions provided by society. Therefore, as a massive movement continued for more than a decade, the dissipation of the sent-down youth's collective memory can be seen as a result of the interaction both within the sent-down youth community and between them and the other members of the society.

In contrast with the mainstream sent-down movement studies, which analyze it from a macro, societal perspective, this paper examines it from a micro perspective and focuses on the inheritance and interruption between the sent-down youth's experiences and their family's apprehensions. I also pay special attention to the transgenerational inheritance of the collective memory. I argue that the interaction between the sent-down youth and their descendants is especially crucial as it can largely affect whether their collective memory can remain after their own generation.

As I will elaborate, diverse groups of people have shaped the collective memory of the

sent-down movement variously. For most of today's Chinese citizens, whose direct relatives have no experience in the sent-down movement, understanding of this movement is primarily shaped by official discourse. They view it as an abstract and vague period listed briefly in history textbooks. For the sent-down youth themselves, collective memory is built on their personal experience during and after this movement. They tend not to talk about their own stories to others who do not share the same experience. The children of the sent-down youth understand this movement through their experience as "returned children." Their difficulty adapting to urban life, being treated equally, and their common separation from parents at a young age makes them view the sent-down movement with confusion. Lastly, many of the grandchildren of the sent-down youth have only heard scattered stories related to the movement, and their collective memory is no more vivid than the general public. The complicated interaction between the sent-down youth and their descendants within families is a significant mechanism that leads to the blurring of a clear, collective memory of this movement by which those most affected could develop a sense of identity and historical contribution. Avoiding spreading their stories to a larger group audience, the sent-down youth tend to limit the circulation of their experiences within a specific circle, which does not even include family members.

Although official discourse does play an important role in shaping the collective memory of the sent-down youth, I argue that the oblivion and marginalization faced by the sent-down youth is mainly their own choice, rather than being silenced purposely by exterior pressure, perhaps aiding in their integrated relationship with the contemporary nation. By linking personal life trajectory with a country's development, the individual's painful experience can

be converted into a necessary sacrifice to build a modern China. Thus, the sent-down movement failed has to be constructed as a historical trauma, and both the sent-down youth and the government view it instead in paradoxical and turbulent ways. This, cyclically, further prevents the sent-down youth from articulating their stories confidently.

In what follows, I will introduce my methodology and provide relevant background. Secondly, in the sections “Generational ‘*Ku*’” and “The Uncommunicable in Collective Memory,” I will discuss the experiences and memories of different generations in the sent-down youth’s families. Thirdly, in “Individuals versus the State,” I will discuss the paradoxical relationship between the sent-down youth and the state and analyze why the sent-down youth failed to be constructed as cultural trauma. Fourthly, in “Oblivion and Its Resistance,” I will examine the present situation of the collective memory both in the official and in the non-governmental discourse and discuss the obligation of memory from a transgenerational perspective. Lastly, in “Memory as Agency,” I theorize my findings by discussing how the agency of memory be achieved by both the sent-down youths and their descendants.

Methods

My research adopts a combination of ethnographic and archival methods. For ethnographic data collection, I conducted six interviews remotely and did passive observation in a sent-down youth related chatroom and a Douban forum (a famous Chinese social networking website). Among the interlocutors I interviewed, 4 consisted of two couples of sent-down youth and their grandchildren. To better understand the sent-down youth's dialects

and create a relaxing atmosphere, I conducted interviews simultaneously with them and their grandchildren using the group meeting function on WeChat. Thus, the grandchildren could both translate the dialects for me and have direct conversations with their grandparents. The other two interlocutors were children of the sent-down youth, who are active in the chatroom. Both the chatroom and the Douban forum were created by the same group of people who are children of the sent-down youth. The chatroom and the forum also possess a shared name: "The forum for the descendants of the sent-down youth."

I also read oral histories of both the sent-down youth and their children published on digital media, as well as posts on the major websites established by the sent-down youth, such as the Shanghai Set-down Youth Website (*Shanghai Zhiqing Wang*) and Beijing Sent-down Youth Website (*Beijing Zhiqing Wang*). In addition, I take advantage of the massive creation of sent-down youth-themed novels and memoirs published mainly in the 1990s.

I coupled digital ethnography with archival data because of the sent-down movements' complicated, traumatic, and politically sensitive characteristics. As a nationwide movement that lasted for decades, the experiences of the sent-down youth were highly diverse. Incorporating archival data allowed me to examine a greater volume of materials. In addition, I am an outsider of the sent-down youth community, with no relatives who have gone through the movement. Thus, the sent-down youth would often regard me as an enthusiastic young student looking for some historical education and may have provided simplified accounts. Since the period of the Culture Revolution is politically sensitive in today's Chinese society, my approach of using digital communicative methods, which have the possibility to be recorded, can also result in the self-censoring of the interlocutors. Thus archival data provided

key complementary information.

Background

The sent-down movement is a political movement that began in the late 1950s. The movement reached its peak during the Cultural Revolution in 1966. Prior to the Cultural Revolution, the majority 'sent down' were urban youth who were forced to be "reeducated" by rural peasants (Bennin, 2013). At that time, in the official discourse, the sent-down movement was described as intended to educate the sent-down youth about communist ideology and allow them to achieve self-fulfillment in the rural areas (Ibid.). As a result, although reluctant to be sent to the countryside, many sent-down youth believed they were helping to build a better country.

However, this belief clashed with the harsh reality of strenuous labor and the inaccessibility of education (Bonnin, 2013). Many scholars argue that the movement's paramount aim was to address many practical problems, such as urban unemployment, rural poverty, and the chaos caused by the Red Guards in the Cultural Revolution (Bernstein 1977; Ding 2009; Gu 2009; Liu 2009; Bonnin 2013; Honig and Zhao, 2019). Bodies were needed in rural, rather than urban areas; the rest was not carefully thought through.

When the sent-down movement ended in the 1980s, and most of the youth gradually returned to their urban hometowns, the official discourse changed. The report presented by the State Council Sent-down Youth Work Office in 1981 concluded the movement was a total failure, and the sent-down youth carried tremendous economic, social, and emotional costs (Gu 2009). This was when the sent-down movement became 'history,' and the collective

memory of sent-down youth began to be negotiated. The drastic change in official narratives motivated a national reshaping of the collective memory of this massive movement.

Although the majority of the sent-down youth returned to cities after the 1980s, a sizable portion remained in rural areas for the rest of their lives because of policy and family restrictions. Those who went back to the cities were facing difficulty in finding jobs and starting families, as they had not obtained education or work experience as youths. Many of them chose to work in construction in the cities surrounding their sent-down destinations (Liu, 2009). To realize their dream of going back to the big cities where they were born, many sent-down youths sent their children to their urban relatives' homes or motivated the children to go to the universities in their hometowns.

Generational “*Ku*”

“My experience as a sent-down youth was a period full of *ku*!” Interestingly, that is the same opening both sent-down youth interlocutors shared. In Chinese, *ku* (苦) is the word to describe bitterness, suffering, and hardship. With no doubt, *Ku* is the ultimate theme of the collective memory of the sent-down movement.

For the sent-down youth, their experience of *ku* is manifold. The *ku* of the physical environment in rural places would always be the first thing mentioned in their articulation: “The house we lived in at the time was a mud warehouse with a roof leaking all the time. I slept in the same bed with two other sent-down youths. The winter is very cold, and the only way to keep warm is by burning thatch. It’s hot again in summer, and flies and mosquitoes are everywhere. I was astonished by how poor this place is when I first went there.” This

picture is painted by Guoliang, who was born in Shanghai and was sent down to a small village in Anhui province in 1969 when he was 18.

The *ku* of the laborious farm work is the other suffering often mentioned by the sent-down youth. As Guoliang recalled, he had to wake up around 2 AM when the farm work was busy and sometimes carried more than 50 kilograms of paddy walking 8 miles. Although he is now 70 years old, he can still clearly remember these details today.

The third kind of *ku* is mental depression and regret caused by the sense of hopeless future. Yinfang, a Shanghai sent-down youth sent down to Xinjiang province when she was 17, depicted her golden age in this way: “I started crying every day. I talked to myself every day, ‘am I not here for re-education? Is re-education just means to do farm work?’ I freaked out the first time I heard the team leader ask me to consider getting married here. I felt that I would never go back to Shanghai. I would be a farmer for the rest of my life. I love to read, but there wasn’t a single book there. I wanted to run away, but that will affect my family.” The severity of the feeling of *ku* is so dominant that all the happy memories during the sent-down movement can only be a minor decoration.

Ku is not just an element in the personal memories of specific sent-down youth. Instead, it is an inheritable theme of collective discourse and collective memory. Collective memory has the ability to persevere across generations. Transgenerational memory becomes possible because memory constantly interacts with external signs and symbols (A. Assmann, 2008). Hence, individual memory, constructed on a collective level, enables humans to maintain consistency in memory through generations (J. Assmann, 1992/2011). In other words, by experiencing collective memory in the interactive framework of a society, people can

remember things that they never experienced by themselves.

After the end of the sent-down movement, many novels, dramas, and music related to it appeared. Through the repeated reproduction of the history of this period, the former sent-down youth established shared symbols of meaning, such as *ku*, the massive rural field, the difficulty adapting to rural life, and the constant feeling of loss and hopelessness. This symbolic system, embedded in public discourse, fixed a clear impression of the sent-down movement and provided a handy template when telling the next generation about these experiences.

Zengqi, the grandson of Guoliang, who is an undergraduate student in Beijing, admitted the influence of this template in the conversation with his grandfather: “Before I knew you used to be a sent-down youth, I already learned the tough life of the sent-down youth from novels. But the stories I read depicted it in a quite romantic way. Such as the sent-down youth would happily fall in love with the kind-hearted farmer.” “No,” Guoliang refused with a smile, “that was not at all romantic. It was a horrible way to live.”

Zengqi’s memory of the sent-down movement is built by the symbolic social system. It is inevitably simplified and alienated through the filter of narrative and his own experience. As Zengqi explained: “It is hard for me to really relate myself to the *ku* depicted in these novels. I have never lived in a house made of mud. I cannot imagine how hard it is to do farm work. But I know how happy it is to be in love.” In fact, by internalizing this form of collective memory, personal suffering can be dissolved and even replaced with romanticism. When Guoliang asked his grandson why he could not imagine the *ku* after being told the sent-down stories since childhood, Zengqi replied: “What you told me about your experience is like

another story to me.” Thus, competing forms of collective memory cause abstraction and distortion from generation to generation, leading those without real experience to perceive direct personal narratives as ‘just another story.’

The competition of one’s own experience with general understandings is even more salient among the children of the sent-down youth. I conducted participant observation in an online chatroom with 32 sent-down youth’s children whose parents were sent to various places. Some managed to return to cities right after the end of the movement, while others remained in the rural places they had been sent for another decade. In this chatroom, with the exception of topics like career and governmental policies, the focus in every conversation is the *ku* of their parents and their own *ku*.

The discussion would first begin with the difficulty they face nowadays and then turn to discussion of the *ku* they experienced as a child of the sent-down youth, such as the separation from parents and the inaccessibility of good education since they do not possess the urban *hukou* (an identification of China’s household registration system). Since their collective *ku* results from their identity as the children of the sent-down youth, the topic would then switch to the discussion of the *ku* experienced by their parents and the mixed feelings they have regarding the sent-down movement. Their understanding of the sent-down youth’s *ku* is usually derived from a comparative perspective between themselves and their parents. Sometimes this comparison provided comfort: “we are already lucky enough not to be forced to be sent to some rural places, and we have more choice than our parents.” And sometimes, it caused depression: “my parents suffered, and I suffered, all I can do is to force a smile.”

Unlike the grandchildren of the sent-down youth, the members in this chatroom have

direct experience of the sent-down youth's *ku*, and their own *ku* is also primarily affected by it. Thus, in contrast with the next generation, who are able to easily label the sent-down movements as a "failure" and "a campaign that should not have been done," the children of the sent-down youth always feel unqualified to draw such dismissive conclusions of their parents' *ku* as well as the movement. The founder of this chatroom, Yanhe, told me: "What my parents have been through is unthinkable. I understand the collective sorrow of my generation as the children of the sent-down youth; that is why I created this chatroom. But I am not the one to evaluate my parents' experience and their generation. They do have faith in this movement."

Although the *ku* is the indisputable theme of the collective memory, understandings of it differ from generation to generation. For the sent-down youth themselves, *ku* is concentered and detailed. It is also an incontestable fact for their children, who view it as too severe to be evaluated by anyone other than the sent-down youth themselves. Surprisingly, grandchildren possess no more profound understanding of this movement than the general public. For them, the *ku* of their grandparents resembles an alienated historical fact that they could also learn in a history course.

The Uncommunicable in Collective Memory

I first became interested in this project while watching the oral histories of the sent-down youth, astonished to find that I had so little knowledge about this massive movement, as someone born and raised Chinese. This kind of ignorance is not unique. My parents, who are well-educated and only ten years younger than the sent-down youth generation, also view the

sent-down movement as a vague shadow in contemporary Chinese history and have no clear picture of the sent-down youth's life.

However, the sent-down movement is not taboo. It has been adapted to TV series, novels and movies again and again. So why, in today's China, when the movement only ended 40 years ago and many sent-down youths continue to live actively in society, is the collective memory of this piece of history so partial and vague?

According to Maurice Halbwachs, memory is always a fraction of history. Only those ritualized and commemorated can escape from the destiny of becoming "dead memory" and being forgotten (Halbwachs, 1925/1980). The selective, even repressive nature of collective memory creates tension between the official and public narratives of collective memory (Yerushalmi, 1982). Only those of higher social rank are singled out for a continuation in memory. Or, perhaps, only those feats and achievements that contribute to the honor and fame of those remembered. Similarly, adopting a Marxist perspective, Walter Benjamin (1942/1969) famously states that historicism always empathize the victor, and Aleida Assmann (2008) argues that the selection of events that can construct history always supports the opinions and interests of the ruling class.

As a result, negative or traumatic memories can have a prolonged influence on individuals and collectives (Olick, 2011; Alexander, 2012). However, the emergence of collective trauma is not natural; historical trauma also requires a collective construction process. By refusing to participate in others' trauma-creation, and by denying the existence of certain trauma, social groups enhance a form of solidarity, leaving the marginalized others to suffer alone (Ibid.). Thus, remembrance and articulation of traumatic experiences (or the

absence of said) carries a complex moral responsibility.

I argue that the two theories above can only explain a minor part of the blurry of the sent-down youth's collective memory. As Yang Jian claimed in his study of the literary works written by the sent-down youth, it is often the sent-down youth themselves who choose to deny their own trauma (Yang, 2002). I suggest that the denial of trauma happens throughout the sent-down youth and their children through a limiting of the discussion of painful experiences to people who share the same past. Thus, the spreading of collective memory to a larger public or even to their grandchildren is largely interrupted.

Both Zengqi and Jiaying (Yinfang's granddaughter) were motivated to assist my research because they "want to learn their grandparent's stories." During the conversation, they often exclaimed: "That is the first time I've heard you tell this story!" When hearing this, Guoliang and Yinfang usually replied with a smile.

The reasons why they rarely bring up past experiences with their grandchildren may be twofold. The first and most common explanation mentioned was that the stories are "not necessary" (*meibiyao*, 没必要) and "already the stories of the past" (*doushi guoqude shile*, 都是过去的事了). These grandparents understand the young generation is raised in a starkly different era, both economically and socially. They do not expect them to understand and are also afraid of their "outdated stories" annoying the young people.

The second reason can be seen as an extension of the first one. At the end of the posts on the sent-down youth website and the end of interviews, the most frequently appearing conclusion is "we need to be grateful for today's prosperous and peaceful life," or put it in a proverb, "a contented mind is a perpetual feast" (*zhizuchangle*, 知足常乐). The confirmation

of today's happiness makes the sent-down youth regard the articulation of their stories as inappropriate or offensive to this developed society. Even when they are telling their stories, they tend to modify stories into a history lesson that the young people should learn in order to cognize their luckiness.

The children of the sent-down youth share this inclination of silence. Yanhe and Ziqiu both reluctant to be interviewed at the beginning since I am not a child of the sent-down youth. They did not believe that I could understand them. The inaccessibility of understanding is the primary reason for them to choose not to tell their stories. Compared with the sent-down youth whose experiences have been discussed widely for more than a decade, their children's stories are largely overlooked. Many children of the sent-down youth were raised with their parents' expectation of "going back home". They either been sent back to the big cities at a young age and can only live in their relatives' homes since their parents need to remain in the rural place, or they grew up in a small town near their parents' working place, always with the impending pressure or even fear of having to leave for the big cities their parents came from. During the interview of Ziqiu, whose parents were sent to Jilin province from Beijing as sent-down youth, he told me, with a heavy Jilin accent: "I don't want to come to Beijing. I do not understand why I have to come here through all these difficulties just because this is my parents' hometown. And I only share this story with the people who share a similar experience to me. For others, this is a hard-to-understand story. I cannot even explain this coming-back-to-Beijing story to myself clearly."

Their refusal to tell their own stories would also stop them from telling their parents' stories. They regard their suffering as intertwined with their parents'. Therefore, they need to

escape from their parents' suffering if they want to escape their own. In addition, considering the common geographical separation and the tangled fates between the sent-down youth and their children, their relationships tend to be complicated. In Sun Peidong's study of the "matchmaking corner" in Shanghai, she stated that the sent-down youth is a generation full of fear. They are so afraid of the uncertainty they have been through. Thus, they usually control their children severely to ensure they have a stable life (Sun, 2012). Many members in the chatroom vilified this statement by saying, "I do not have a strong emotional tie with my parents," and "I grew up in their exhausting expectations."

However, a willingness to speak up is also detectable among some sent-down youth and their children. Until the pandemic hits, Guoliang and the other four sent-down youths sent to the same village would regularly assemble once a half year. They will spend half a day together, singing the songs in the sent-down movement, and always cried when they discussed the years they had been through together.

Given the collective, shareable, and inheritable characteristics, discussion about collective memory often relates to identity. By utilizing memory, yesterday's self connected with the self of today and tomorrow (Olick, 2011). Group identity can be generated by sharing collective memory, as members reach a consensus about the events and stories that constitute their uniqueness. In other words, it identifies what is our "past" and what we should remember that constructed what we are today.

In the case of the sent-down youth, group identity is assured by their collective memory during and after the sent-down movement, and the regular exchange of the collective memory by gathering reinforces their group identity in turn. Interestingly, the gathering of the sent-

down youth is highly ritualized, following the determined procedure they picked up during the sent-down movement. Some hold large gatherings, with usually more than 20 people participating, in restaurants. On the wall of the restaurant room, a red banner written “Unforgettable Youth: xx province/xx year sent-down youth gathering” would be held. On most occasions, the organizer of the gathering, generally an active sent-down youth with a relatively high social reputation, would begin the gathering with an opening speech. In the speech, the organizer would briefly retrospect their tough youthful years, concluding that they are the praiseworthy founders of today’s China. Then, other participants would share their stories and socialize with each other. During the dinner, the participants would sing the songs famously known among the sent-down movement to regain a sense of being a sent-down youth. After the gathering, the organizers or the volunteers would write a report and post it on their social media account or the public sent-down youth website. This ritualized and symbolized procedure remains stable; even the gatherings of sent-down youth in the US follow similar steps. The remarkable symbols such as the theme of the gathering, the banner, and the songs are all elements that bring the sent-down youth back to their youthful years.

By repeatedly exercising this symbolic system, the uniqueness, shared-perseverance, and value of the sent-down youth’s group identity can be confirmed. However, the stronger this group identity be, the more exclusive this community is. The strong feeling of being understood by the other sent-down youth is closely related to concomitant difficulty communicating with people who do not share the same memory more noticeable. Moreover, the identity as sent-down youths for some may also remain a semi-secreted fact. Combining the two factors, the sent-down youth can lose their willingness to share their stories with

others and limit their articulation within their community. As Yinfang told me: “I can have a conversation about that period with other sent-down youth, and that is enough for me.”

The community of sent-down youth’s children is far looser. Lacking the friendship between the sent-down youths who lived together for years, the sent-down youth’s children identify one another with something more like a secret code. In my observation of the chatroom and the Douban forum, the frequency of receiving new messages from the chatroom would be once a week. However, in the children’s forum, responses took a month or lower. In an interview in 2014, the founder of the “Sent-down Youth’s Children Community in Shanghai” Xu Yuying explained: “I want to get closer with this community, we need sincere communication and help each other... But unlike the sent-down youth generation, we still need to fight very hard for surviving” (*Dongfang* Website, 2014). By stating this, Xu Yuying indicates that the realistic pressure makes it hard for the children of sent-down youth to build strong relationships. Yet Yanhe said, “I am fine with the loose relationship in this community. I do not feel willing to reflecting my childhood and teenage years every day; life must go on. I just need some people with whom I can occasionally discuss the collective experience of ourselves and our parents.”

The collective memory of being a sent-down youth’s child thus can be a burden that holds them back when chasing a better life. This loose community fit their need by providing a platform to share their thoughts that can only be understood by people like them and preventing them from becoming an over-close community that makes them indulge in remorse and self-pity. As a result, like their parents but for different reasons, they tend to not share their stories with others who do not share their identity.

Individuals Versus the State

Despite the fact that both the sent-down youth and their children tend to confine their stories to a certain group, the lack of explicit discourse also limits both groups from telling their stories, and limits Chinese society from building a strong collective memory of the sent-down movement. Jeffrey Alexander argued in *Trauma* (2012), a trauma discourse needs three elements: 1) the definition and symbolization of the “facts,” 2) the identification of the victims and the perpetrators, 3) a solution that can overcome this trauma. If we use Alexander’s rubric as our guide, as I analyzed below, we find that all three elements are inaccessible in the case of the sent-down movement because of an intertwined relationship between individual sent-down youth and the Chinese state.

During my interviews with Guoliang and Yinfang, I noticed that the most difficult question for them to answer was, “what is your evaluation of the sent-down movement today?” They both fell into silence for more than 10 seconds and replied with sentences full of hesitation: “It is hard to say.....”, “It is definitely a mistake, but.....” After more than an hour of excitingly telling me about the hardship they have been through, their sudden dithering took me by surprise. As their grandchildren later told me, Guoliang and Yinfang occasionally mentioned some stories that happened in the sent-down movement. Still, they tended only to present the facts with fragmentary comments rather than evaluate these stories from their own point of view. In other words, they were unable to confer an explicit meaning on the movement.

This kind of denial of emotional expression and value judgment is prevalent for the sent-

down youth. The refusal, the awkwardness, and the hesitation to draw a personal conclusion about this movement can be found in many interviews and memoirs. For example, Liu Jiye was a sent-down youth model whose story was promoted by the government several times during the movement as a great example, but who went to jail after the end of the Cultural Revolution as a “counter-revolutionary”. He concluded his reflection of being a sent-down youth indirectly: “It is difficult to explain the sent-down youth complex... The sent-down youth, whether they are rich or poor now, whether they have status or no status, all think that they have a strong bond with this movement. The successful people attribute their success to the tempering of those hard years, while the laid-off and unemployed attribute their downfall to the delay that deviates from the normal growth path” (Liu, 2002).

From the very beginning, the sent-down movement already intertwined the fate of the individual and the fate of the state. In the milestone news report, around the early climax of the movement, in 1968, People’s Daily used the sent-down youth’s words as the title: “We also have two hands and do not eat idle meals in the cities!” The report depicted the sent-down movement as an indispensable step for the educated youth to join in the construction of Chinese socialism. Throughout the official discourse during the sent-down movement, individual suffering was always related to self-fulfillment and, more importantly, the bright future of modern China. This discourse inherited Mao’s idea, which scholars termed “collective individualism” (Apter, 2017). By establishing a strong link between individual self-interest and the state’s fate, self-interest transformed into a collective one.

The strong connection between the individual and the state is so fundamental in the sent-down youth’s understanding of this movement that it continues today. Although Guoliang

and Yinfang both hold a negative view of this movement and admit the suffering influenced them for their whole life, they do not want to deny it completely. Guoliang provided me with his personal achievement as evidence: “I have learned a lot from being a sent-down youth. I made friends with the local farmers and even met my wife there. This experience teaches me how to stay strong in despair.” Yinfang, however, concluded that “I wish nobody would go through what we have been through” after a long pause. Yet, she still viewed the sent-down movement as an inevitable step in Chinese history: “Young people could not get a job during the Cultural Revolution. They have to be sent to rural places. The government had no choice.”

It is difficult and even cruel for the sent-down youths to deny this movement completely—that would negate the conversion of what may feel like personal failure into a collective contribution and sacrifice to the state. For them, the denial of the movement is equal to the denial of their own efforts and suffering when they are young. Their unique experience and unparalleled suffering create a strong collective identity as the sent-down youth. In contrast, the understanding of the movement and the meaning of being a sent-down youth is always turbulent.

When the literary works written by the sent-down youth exploded in the 1980s, they referred to their own stories by using “us” and “our generation,” showing a strong sense of belonging in this collectivity (Bonnin, 2016). Aligning with the official discourse of reflecting the movement at that time, the sent-down youth emphasized their suffering in the countryside and perceived themselves as a generation “delayed” and “sacrificed” (Xiang, 2018). Yet, as Yang Guobin (2003) stated, there are also many expressions of nostalgia and pride in these novels. The writers regarded the generation they belonged to as brims with “heroism,” who

were willing to take the burden of China's development and survive through the cruel rural life. Yang argues that this surge of nostalgia towards resulted from a general reminiscence of adolescence combined with the identity crisis triggered by the radical social and economic change in China during the 1980s and 1990s.

Scholars argue that during the 1990s, the collective memory of the sent-down youth gradually shaped into a spectrum with nostalgia and rejection stood at two poles (Yang, 2002; Wang, 2008; Bonnin, 1996, 2006, 2007, 2013, 2016; Xu 2019). In most cases, the sent-down youth have mixed feelings about their experiences (Bonnin, 2016). They would refer to the "bad old days" through a rosy lens while never wanting to go back (Qu and Luo, 2006). The most famous motto branding the sent-down movement during the 1990s is the title of the first sent-down youth exhibition in Chengdu: "we have no regret for our youth" (*qingchun wu hui*). Later this title aroused fierce accusations for forbidding criticism, while organizers admitted it also reflects a sense that "we have no means to regret our youth" (*qingchun wufa hui*) (Bonnin, 2016). Thus, lacking a unified definition, explanation, and symbolization of the event, the sent-down movement failed to become a transgenerational cultural trauma in China.

Moreover, identifying victims, perpetrator, and solution-provider in the sent-down movement is also an unachievable goal. Above all else, the sent-down youth who believe in "we have no regret for our youth" refuse to accept their identity as victims. Even for others who view their youth as a tragedy and view themselves as victims, it is hard to identify who is the perpetrator. In the official discourse, the evil "gang of four" started the Cultural Revolution to be blamed, and the current government who carried on the political heritage of overthrowing the gang is the solution provider. Whereas for the sent-down youth, this clear

separation between the government in and after the Cultural Revolution cannot be easily achieved. “It is complicated. There are so many things we do not know.” Yinfang said. For the children of the sent-down youth, their suffering resulted from the unreasonable regulations formulated by the government after the Cultural Revolution; it is even harder to accept the idea that only the gang of four should be condemned. Combined with the claim that errors are unavoidable in the developing journey of a state in the official discourse, many sent-down youths and their families give up finding a perpetrator. As Ziqiu told me: “It is just fate. I just had bad luck in my childhood. Compared with my parents, my luck is even not that bad.”

In addition, given the inseparable relation between the people, the nation, the party, and the government in China, especially for the sent-down youth generation, they choose to fit their stories into the “we have no regret for our youth” discourse to show their love to the country. Their personal life trajectory, their youth, dream, and enthusiasm are so deeply integrated with the history of this country that they tend to accept both the good and bad parts of it and regard the latter as minor ones. In the two biggest portals for the sent-down youth, the Shanghai sent-down youth website and the Beijing sent-down youth website, nearly every post that writes not only about the historical facts but also emotions are expressing their unshakable love towards the country. Even Song Yongyi, who is the founder of the Cultural Revolution Database and famous for his acute criticism of Chinese politics, explained his emotions towards Mao and the Cultural Revolution as follows: “Mao is the father of my generation. Whether you deny it or affirm it, it is an objective existence of history... We all grew up ‘in the sunshine of Mao’s thought’” (The New York Times China, 2018).

Oblivion and Its Resistance

It is not only for the sent-down youth that understanding of this movement is complicated. The official discourse of the sent-down movement is also constantly changing. According to Halbwachs, the capacity to reconstruct is an essential element of collective memory. Memory can never equal the past; people constantly reconstruct memory to fit it into contemporary discourse. In fact, collective memory is nothing more than that “which society in each era can reconstruct within its contemporary frame of reference” (Halbwachs, 1925/1980). Thus, the memory of a collective event must be influenced by the contemporary context, and the presentation and understanding of these memories can appear differently through the lens of each era.

Echoing with this theory, the sent-down youth’s collective presentation of their memories about this movement has been through the reconstruction process repeatedly. Within two decades, the government drastically changed its view of the sent-down youth from a brilliant socialism construction campaign to a political failure. In the 1980s and 1990s, when Chinese society was busy integrating with the global economy according to the Reform and Opening policy, the fierce criticism of the sent-down movement was both a liberation from the Cultural Revolution and also a reconfirmation of the current policy.

In contrast, after 2012, the “realizing Chinese dream” discourse was established to build a more nationalist collective identity. Instead of reminding the previous failure of the Chinese government, it is the victory in the anti-Japanese war and the economic achievement that are dominant in the mainstream discourse of Chinese history today. In the junior high school history textbook published in 2002, for example, there is a lesson called “Ten Years of the

Cultural Revolution” of four pages, with an opening of “In the 1960s, Mao falsely assumed the Party Central Committee had revisionism”. At the end of this lesson, an additional part introduces the sent-down movement. In the new edition of the textbook, published in 2017, the lesson name was changed to “Hard Exploration and Construction Achievements,” and the content about the Cultural Revolution became a section with less than two pages. The word “falsely” was deleted from the opening line, along with the mention of the sent-down movement. As shown in the modification of the textbook, the sent-down movement in contemporary China faces the risk of oblivion from official discourse.

As noted earlier, Halbwachs’ theory emphasizes a contemporary context’s influence on collective memory. As a complement to this theory, the purposeful elimination of the sent-down movement from the official discourse can be seen as evidence of the government’s acknowledgment of collective memory reconstruction’s impact on contemporary society. Since traumatic memory is also a “symbolic vehicle that allows future collective identities to be formed” (Alexander, 2012), the narrative of memory about the past becomes important for both today and the future.

However, as Avishai Margalit stated in his book *The Ethics of Memory* (2002), the obligation of remembering people and events from the past is primarily assigned to people who share a “thick relation” with the witnesses and victims. In other words, it is families and friends of the victims to be counted on to remember, rather than people who simply share the same attribute, such as nationality. In fact, even though the government is reluctant to symbolize and retell the sent-down movement, and the sent-down youth and their children tend not to share their stories with people outside their communities, it would be wrong to

assume that the descendants of the sent-down youth have no interest in finding out the history of the sent-down movement.

In the Douban Forum, a daughter of the sent-down youth posted her handmade “sent-down youth wall.” She made a decorative wall in the small hotel she owned and decorated it with the messages of the sent-down youth and their descendants who have lived in this hotel. In the post, she wrote: “It is important for me to preserve my mother’s stories and other sent-down youth like her. I wish more people could know their experience when looking at this wall.” In the comments of these posts, many replied: “I am more than willing to visit here! This is such a beautiful idea.”

During my research, many descendants of the sent-down youth also mentioned reading books related to the movement and exchanging the stories of each other’s parents. 22-year-old Ziqiu said that one of her dreams was to accompany her grandmother to revisit the rural place in Xinjiang where she was sent. “I do not really know why this is important to me. I just want to understand my grandmother and her friends.”

However, although the descendants express interest and a sense of responsibility, they still face the silence of the witnesses. On many occasions, the (grand)children of the sent-down youth would choose to rely on the materials from other sources to learn about this movement rather than make direct conversation with their (grand)parents. They list the reasons as “feeling awkward”, “they also do not know the whole picture of the movement”, and “we do not talk about this.” The circuitous path they choose to approach this piece of history can reinforce the collective memory of it as a unity without branches. By emphasizing the importance of the published materials, which have a great variety but are also filtered and

censored in the publication process, their collective memory of the sent-down movement can be solidified even as their parents' vivid details are forgotten.

This paradox seems unsolvable. As Marc Augé stated in his book *Oblivion* (2004), the duty of memory is assigned to the descendants, not the direct witnesses. The descendants use memory to stay vigilance, “to return to it to find the hideous shape of the unspeakable again in the banalities of ordinary mediocrity (88).” Yet, the witnesses and victims must forget the traumatic past in order to regain faith in daily life. In the case of the sent-down youth, the movement they have been through is not a sheer trauma but a mixture of hardship, ridiculousness, some great memory of youth, and a paradoxical belief in the development of modern China. As a result, some will choose to silence these memories partly because the experiences are too complicated to articulate and partly because of the need to forget the painful past to live in the present. Others will keep talking about their past, either confining the discussion to a former sent-down youth group or filtering their stories into a brighter narrative, such as “we have no regret of our youth” and “we have dedicated our youth to serving the country.”

As the sent-down youth generation ages and the discussion about them gradually fade, the sent-down movement may disappear largely in the Chinese people's memory, just as it has disappeared in textbooks. But my hope is that the descendants will continue to be curious about this monumental movement as a step in continuous Chinese history. A lack of unified discourse leaves the understanding of this movement a forever open question. The sent-down movement is not an “objective history” that already be explained satisfactorily. In contrast, it constantly demands reflection on the nature of “history” and authority.

Memory as Agency

As discussed above, the classic collective memory theories are interested in what collective memory is and why or why not it can be reconstructed and last for an extended period. What I presented here, however, is a subtler and more detailed question: how, exactly, is memories of a public event open to new meanings both on a collective and individual level? In other words, how is the agency of memory achieved?

Throughout my interviews and research, individuals of the sent-down youth and the groups they formed are serving as active historical agents to reshape their memories, consciously or unconsciously, rather than passive recipients of collective memory. For them, although the identity of the sent-down youths is continuous, they divide clearly between their past self, who participate in the sent-down movement, and the present self, who live in contemporary China forty years after the end of the movement. Their memory opens to new meanings when the division is steadily formed.

When they look back to the miserable old days, there will always be an implication of comparing the past and present. As for the theme of *ku* in their articulation, the *ku* they experienced back then was the harsh living environment, a sense of disappointment, and the horror of a futureless future. While in their nowadays expression, the level of the past self's *ku* is elevated by their present self's knowledge of the movement's failure, the lingering negative influence it caused to the rest of their lives and the paradoxical feeling with the development of modern China. Thus, they either try to justify the severe *ku* by picturing it in a glorious context as a necessary sacrifice to the state or by freeing themselves from the

traumatic memory by silencing the memory of *ku*. When they are telling stories as sent-down youths, they are not standing in the past when they were living in rural places, nor are they living in the present when being interviewed online. Instead, they are placing themselves in the future of the past, as the future self of that sent-down youth, and as an unexpected realization of the past self's imagination of the future. Therefore, with the filter of the future, their memories of the past are open to modification.

Continuing this line of thinking, the sent-down youth's tendency to limit their stories in their own communities is not purposeful oblivion of the past but rather a separation between the past and the present. When discussing their experiences with people with no common backgrounds, the sent-down youths view the other side as a representation of "the present". The latter understand the stories based on their present knowledge without a perspective from the past. Thus, the sent-down youth must tell their stories in a way linking the past to the present, which will generate obstacles, misunderstandings, and even pain. In contrast, sharing stories within the sent-down youths' communities are much more relaxing by establishing a utopia of the former times in the present. There, they can largely forget both the present and the future and focus on communicating the experiences happened before. Moreover, the awareness of the present – the already achieved ending of the movement – can also generate a sense of safety, making internal communication within the communities more appealing.

The memory of the sent-down youths becomes open when the division between the past and the present is established. While for their descendants, their memories achieve agentive meanings when they realize the abstract, simplified, and constructive nature of the collective memory.

All the interviews I demonstrated above are presenting a complicated relationship between collectivity and individuals: how the collective memory appears on an individual level, how the collective conception is generated from individual experiences and memories, and how the collective narrative has influenced the individual's understanding of their own past. By nature, the collective memory of an event is the common divisor of the individual witnesses' memories with bias result from imbalanced social power. The parts that have been forgotten rather than remembered are the majority. In most cases, collective memory act as a limited description, a statement, and a conclusion. The descendants of the sent-down youths usually generate interest in chasing their (grand) parents' memories when they realize their vague impression of the collective memory of the sent-down movement lacks large part of facts and details. As many times occurred in my interviews with the sent-down youths and their grandchildren, "I never heard of these things! What actually happened at that time?" is the common line when the descendants spark interest and suspicion of the collective memories they share right now.

The duty of remembering for the descendants is not only about carrying their ancestor's stories further, but more importantly, about how they find their own futures from the past they never experienced in person, whereas forever haunted as a member of the collectivity. For the sent-down youths, they leave the past in the past to find the present and the future. In this way, they "create the conditions for a new birth... opens up into every possible future without favoring a single one" (Augé, 2004, 57). The descendants, in contrast, dig into the past to find the future. As noted before, the past of the sent-down movement and many other movements are alluring open questions for the descendants. In the sense of finding futures from the past,

it achieves not only reflection on the past but also the potential of action in the present and future. By utilizing the knowledge of the past, the futures develop more possibilities. As Walter Benjamin stated, “To articulate the past historically ... means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (Benjamin, 1942/1969, 255).

Conclusion

China’s sent-down movement provides a vivid example of the transgenerational interaction central to the construction of collective memory. From the sent-down youth to their children and grandchildren, collective memory does not simply develop undistorted. Instead, the personal experience of each generation, the relationships within and between their respective communities, and the bigger pictures painted of social change all play a crucial role.

The refusal of the sent-down youth and their children to tell their own stories is not only a matter of attitude but also reflects the turbulence of their experiences. The sent-down youth are reluctant to view their experience in the simple name of trauma. The deeply integrated relationship they share with the country lead to a paradoxical understanding of the sent-down movement; many do not know how to articulate their stories to their descendants living a radically different youth.

This kind of silence can transfer power to the official discourse. Facing the reality that the sent-down movement is gradually fading in the official discourse altogether, many descendants of the sent-down youth discuss a sense of obligation to learn about and remember what has happened to their (grand)parents. This questioning from the younger generation will

continue to preserve the possibility for the memory to be renewed and reconstructed.

Collective memory is the communicative channel between the past, present, and future. While many studies and theories focus on how and why particular narratives are historically prioritized, this paper presents something different: why the sent-down movement failed to be memorized collectively, and more importantly, how the agency of memory been achieved for both the sent-down youth and their descendants.

For the sent-down movement, the memory related to it possesses various, sometimes contradictory meanings, coupling with different accessibility for different groups of people in different historical periods. This finding creates new possibilities for the collective memory theory and can be adapted to a variety of cultural contexts outside China. In conclusion, I suggest a subtler and more inclusive perspective when navigating collective memory, to discuss when and where, exactly, is memory open to new audience, new meanings, and new eras.

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