

Document 14.8: “Singing Our Turbulent Youth,” an excerpt from *Growing Up in The People’s Republic: Conversations Between Two Daughters of China’s Revolution*, 2005

Ye Weili describes her experience as one of 12 million “sent-down youth” sent to the countryside between 1968 and 1975 to be re-educated by the peasants.

YE WEILI: As time went by some *zhiqing* began to leave the village, either to join the military or to work in a city factory. This always meant that their parents’ problems were cleared. I eventually realized that some day I might also be able to go. As the number of *zhiqing* shrank, factional divide also faded. I became more drawn to the *zhiqing* circle, even though at the back of my mind lingered a regret that I had failed to break the invisible wall separating us from the peasants. There would be more sexual liaisons among the *zhiqing*, but I stopped being surprised. I was conservative in my personal conduct, but my puritanical thinking dissolved into a more tolerant attitude toward other people’s “loose” behavior.

I came to appreciate the liberal spirit of my *zhiqing* group. It was not only reflected in people’s personal conduct but more in their political attitude. There was an underlying resentment against the Cultural Revolution. Several people’s fathers were in prison and their children didn’t even know where they were being held. One guy’s father committed suicide and the son heard the news in the village. The group was largely made up of children of the politically dispossessed elite due to the Cultural Revolution. In many ways I belonged to this group, even though I had reservations about it. Our political fate was closely linked to that of the country. A change in the political climate could improve or worsen our own personal lot. The Lin Biao Incident took us by surprise, but it didn’t shake us the way it did many other people. We received the news with great joy and hoped that the country would subsequently turn away from the radical leftist path. Some people became emboldened after the incident and began to openly criticize Jiang Qing and the other Cultural Revolution leaders. They knew they were safe among this *zhiqing* group. I found myself breathing more easily in this environment and almost forgot about my fears.

Another nice thing about our *zhiqing* group was that many of us shared a common interest in learning. One guy brought two huge trunks of his father’s books to the village. The father, once a

prominent journalist and later a high ranking official, had a marvelous collection of classical Chinese and European literature. Before he went to a “cadres’ school” in another province he divided the books among his children and we all became the beneficiaries. Occasionally we also borrowed books from *zhiqing* in neighboring villages. Once I had to finish Standahl's *The Red and the Black* in one night before passing it to the next person in line. I stayed up the whole night reading the book.

One memorable experience we had was hearing the entire story of *The Count of Monte Cristo* told by a boy who had recently read the book. For a week or so we gathered in his room every evening after supper, sitting around him on campstools made of straw. Since nobody else had read the novel we couldn't tell if he was faithful to the original tale. But even if he wasn't nobody would care, we simply enjoyed the story telling. One evening I was late for the event. Peeping through the window I saw people sitting in a circle listening to the boy attentively. There was something touching about the scene.

With or without books, people continued their pursuit of knowledge. One boy was a physics nut. He often adjusted the angle of his hoe at the end of the day, applying his knowledge of mechanics to make his hoe more labor efficient. Another boy was interested in international affairs. His hobby was to gather every piece of information he could find about a foreign country; climate, geography, population, and so on. The data primarily came from *The People's Daily*—the only paper available to us. His newspaper clippings eventually filled several thick columns of used magazines. He liked to challenge us to test him about any country in the world, the more obscure the better.

There was no electricity when we first arrived in the village. In the third year the area was connected to a power plant. By then we had become accustomed to physical labor and we needed release for our surplus energy, especially during the long winter months when there was little work in the field. Some of us began to make systematic study plans. My brother finished studying senior high math and physics on his own. Nobody knew if colleges would ever be open again, but the desire for learning was too strong for us to care about its practical value. Several people decided to study English and it was fun to join them. Many of us had short-wave radios. It

was amazing how easily we could receive foreign broadcasts such as VOA (Voice of America), BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation], and Radio Moscow in this remote region.

MA XIAODONG: You could have been arrested for listening to “enemy broadcasts!”

YE WEILI: We were careful. But I don’t think the village leaders would bother us even if they found out. VOA had a program called “Special English,” which contained limited vocabulary and the pace of speech was very slow, so I could follow. For a while the topic was American founding fathers. I was intrigued by Thomas Jefferson’s ideas about individual rights and civil liberty. Imagine Jefferson appealing to a young Chinese in a poor rural village.

Music was a big part of our lives. Two boys brought musical instruments: an accordion and a violin. Melodies often floated from our *zhiqing* yard. We sang Chinese songs from the 1950s and 1960s, Russian songs, and folk songs from the rest of the world. Somebody had a copy of *Two Hundred Foreign Folk Songs*, which contained pieces like “Oh Susanna” and “Return to Sorrento.” These songs had been criticized earlier in the Cultural Revolution, but now they became very popular among us. Our favorite was a Russian song from World War II called “Singing Our Turbulent Youth”. It was about love, friendship, and youthful yearnings to accomplish great deeds in the midst of war. The title immediately resonated with us. We liked it so much that we claimed it as our “village song.”

Singing songs helped us reconnect to feelings that had been long condemned and repressed. We liked love songs the best. I still remember one moonlit night filled with such songs. Our *zhiqing* yard was located at the edge of the village. That evening people from one faction were singing in the yard. They covered almost all the love songs from *Two Hundred Foreign Folk Songs*, singing one after another, not aware how late it was getting. There was still a factional division at the time, but nobody complained that it was too late. The rest of us stayed up inside enjoying their singing. It was truly a moonlight concert.

Source: Ye Weili and Ma Xiaodong. *Growing Up in the People’s Republic: Conversations Between Two Daughters of China’s Revolution*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 120–123.