

**Document 14.9: Excerpts describing the personal experiences of Nathan Hu as a “sent-down youth,” written in 2007**

*Nathan Hu describes his experience as one of 12 million “sent-down youth” sent to the countryside between 1968 and 1975 to be re-educated by the peasants.*

The majority of us were happy to go to the countryside because we thought that it was a test to our generation—the leaders of the People’s Republic of China in the future. First of all, we really believed what Mao said. He said the world belonged to us, also, the world belongs to you—the youth. You’re like the morning sun; the future will be created in your hands. We saw it as Mao offering us a chance to go to the countryside to be re-educated. The education we received before in school was a *bourgeoisie* education and now we needed to go to the countryside to get a farmers’ education. This would be a good education. So we said, “OK, yes, why not? We’ll go there.”

In some ways we felt very superior to the farmers. They were considered the bottom [of the social hierarchy]. We were from the city; naturally we felt superior. Even though we were supposed to receive an education from the farmers, mentally, psychologically we felt higher than them. We were cheerful, optimistic about going to the countryside. We were excited about going to a new environment. We felt it was like a test that we needed to pass. We would gain strength.

After schools closed in 1966, I lost the chance for an education for twelve years. I was sixteen years old when eleven of us were sent to a small mountain village near Baoji, a town about 80 miles west from Xi’an.<sup>1</sup> The life in the countryside was very hard. Six boys and five girls lived in one room separately. We cooked together. We worked more than ten hours every day. We did not have enough food to eat. For example, eleven of us only got a bottle of vegetable oil in a whole year. To us, the oil was as valuable as gold. We did not want to use it except for special occasions, so we placed it on a window sill.

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<sup>1</sup> In total, about 17 million urban youth across China were sent down to the countryside between 1962 and the end of the 1970s to, in Mao’s words, “receive re-education from the poor and lower-middle peasants.”

Unfortunately, a cat jumped through our glass-less window and knocked over the bottle. We did not have any vegetable oil for one year.

The reason why the village where we stayed was so poor was due to wrong-headed Party policy. In keeping with the slogan: “Prefer socialist weeds to capitalist seedlings,” each household was only allowed to raise one pig and three hens. The Party worried about a new gap between the rich and the poor if peasants were given the freedom to make their own decisions. Most of the land belonging to the village was on the bank of the Yellow River and it was only good for growing peanuts and watermelon. Actually, peanuts and watermelon could sell good price at markets. However, the villagers were not allowed to plant any cash crops such as these. They were only allowed to plant wheat and cotton even though the output was very low.

I worked both in the fields and in construction for three years. Our farm work consisted of planting crops. The hardest work was in the mornings when we had to carry night soil<sup>2</sup> mixed with earth. When it was composted and dry, we placed it in a big carrier. Mornings, with the large basket on our backs, we climbed a mountain to the terraced areas. It took about two hours. In the winter time we did this every morning, so the soil would be rich for spring planting.

Chinese leaders feared a sudden nuclear strike from the Soviet Union during the period of the Cultural Revolution. Therefore, the government moved all the big military and heavy industries to mountain areas. We were asked to build highways and dig big shelters for military industries in mountain areas. Even though the work was hard, we enjoyed doing it because we could have regular schedule every day.

### **My father is sent to re-education camp**

One day in the summer of 1968, my sixth sense told me that something was wrong with my family. I felt that I should leave for home immediately. Having received permission, I took a train to Xi'an. I was too poor to afford a train ticket, so I hid myself under the seat

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<sup>2</sup> Human waste

when I saw the train conductor coming through checking tickets. Almost all the students like me did this.

The closer I got to home, the more nervous I became. I knocked at the door and my mom greeted me. "What has happened," I asked her immediately. "Your father has been sent to labor camp because he was accused as a bourgeoisie academic authority," replied my mother. I felt very worried because I knew that Red Guards would likely mistreat intellectuals in the labor camp. But I could do nothing to help my father in this situation. Luckily, my father was released several months later.

### **From fields to factory**

Three years passed quickly. China decided to resume its industrial construction, and in 1971, I was assigned to work in a Railway Bridge Factory. I was delighted with this change because workers were regarded as the leadership in a proletarian country. Our factory built huge steel frames for bridges. My job was a locomotive driver for the factory train. I drove from the plant to the railroad depot. From there, our bridge frames were shipped all over China. I spent seven years in this factory.

### **1976: a pivotal year**

I will never forget 1976. It was the tenth year of the Cultural Revolution. People were exhausted by the endless class struggle. Several special events took place one after another in 1976.

Zhou Enlai, premier of the State and Mao's close colleague, died on January 18. I could not help but cry when I heard the news at dawn. Zhou was a leader that everyone in China loved because of his easy-approaching personality, talents, wisdom, humor, attention to people's welfare, and great contributions to China. People began to mourn Zhou in many ways. Poems appeared, to show our respect to him, and some of them implied criticism of the Gang of Four: Mao's wife and three faithful supporters of the Cultural Revolution. People secretly passed around a document said to be Zhou Enlai's

will. It hinted of Zhou's criticism of Mao's Cultural Revolution, particularly, Zhou's resentment of the Gang of Four.

During the *qingming* festival,<sup>3</sup> a large number of students, scholars, and local residents in Beijing went to Tiananmen Square to publicly mourn Zhou and express their anger with the "Gang of Four." The militia suppressed the demonstrations, which the Gang of Four labeled a counter-revolutionary action.

Then the "Gang of Four" ordered authorities to get to the bottom of Zhou Enlai's so-called will. This became a nation-wide political campaign. Yang, a close friend of mine, had been the original source of Zhou's Will in my factory. Before she was put into house arrest, she told me about her trouble. She was not concerned for her own safety, but she really worried about her uncle and aunt because she received the "will" from her aunt. Yang's uncle was already in jail for having commented: "Nobody can avoid mistakes. Mao is also a human being. Therefore, he may have made mistakes, too." Yang really worried that the trouble over Zhou Enlai's "will" might involve her uncle and lead to his execution. I asked Yang to say I had brought the "will" into the factory, but our trick failed. Yang was placed under house arrest for weeks because she refused to tell where she received the will.

In fact, the document being circulated was not Zhou's will at all. It had been written by a young worker in Hangzhou to express his anger toward the Gang of Four and the Cultural Revolution.

An earthquake took place on July 28 of the same year in Tangshan, Hebei Province. About 250,000 people died during this disaster. Word began to pass from mouth to mouth that Mao had lost his Mandate of Heaven<sup>4</sup>. The evidence was the natural disaster and social rebellion.

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<sup>3</sup> China's Memorial Day falls around May 5.

<sup>4</sup> For millennia, the Chinese believed that a leader could only rule if he had the "mandate of heaven," legitimacy from heaven.

On September 9, 1976, Mao died. It seemed that the “ship of China” suddenly lost its captain. A majority of the Chinese felt very sad and confused because people did not know which way China should go after Mao’s death. Pretty soon, The Cultural Revolution was put to an end with the arrest of the Gang of Four.

### **Deng Xiaoping takes over**

Taking advantage of the popular belief that Mao lost his mandate, Deng Xiaoping, former Party Secretary-General of the politbureau, and Mao’s political opponent during the Cultural Revolution, took power gradually. Even though Deng was of Mao’s generation, he was much more flexible in ideology because of his overseas student experience in France in 1920s. Among his best-known statements is, “It doesn’t matter whether it is a white cat or a black cat, it is a good cat as long as it can catch mice.” It was because of this statement that Deng was the second most powerful leader who was purged during the Cultural Revolution. The failure of the ideology of Communism and the socialist system and his painful experience during the Cultural Revolution made Deng realize that the CCP had to raise people’s living standard in order to maintain its legitimacy. The Party had to follow Confucius’s teaching that a ruler should put people’s welfare as a top priority in his agenda. Therefore, Deng launched economic reforms.

### **A chance for a college education**

As part of Deng’s grand strategy of economic reform, the government decided to resume the national entrance examination as a way to select college students in 1977. This decision was announced in April 1977. It had been my dream to receive a college education, and I was very excited to hear this news. I also felt great pressure because my education had been interrupted in 1966, when I had barely completed my 8<sup>th</sup> grade. I had spent twelve years in the countryside and a factory. I was now twenty-six years old. How could I make up my studies in such a short time? In addition, I was a full-time employee in the factory. However, I was determined to meet this challenge. I began to make use of any “spare” time weekdays and weekends to study. With great efforts, I passed the college entrance examination in 1977. You can image how thrilled I was because less than three

out of every one hundred candidates passed the examination. But my happiness quickly turned to disappointment. I failed to pass the “political check” (somewhat like a security check in other countries) because of my “bad” political behavior when I tried to protect Yang during the month of searching the origin of Zhou’s “will” in 1976.

Even though I was very upset with this result, I did not give up. I took the college entrance examination again half a year later. I passed it again. In order to avoid the problem of the political check, I selected a teachers’ college as the place I wished to attend. That is where my father taught for more than thirty years. I hoped that even though they might notice the bad record in my file, they would not take it as seriously. My strategy worked well, and I became a college student in 1978.

The four years when I was in college was the best time in my life. People regarded college students of 1977 and 1978 as *the* elite of China, because less than 3 percent passed the examination. You can image how well we felt ourselves at that time. I studied very hard. I became a teacher at my college after my graduation in 1982. I was elected chairman of my department in 1986. This was the first time in my university that the chairman was chosen by election rather than through an appointment from above.

*In 1991, forty-year-old Nathan Hu came to the United States to continue his studies. After completing his course work toward a doctorate, he worked full time while he wrote his dissertation. In 2005, he received his Ph.D. from the University of Massachusetts in Amherst.*

Source: Hu, Nathan. Unpublished memoir & interview with Liz Nelson, June 2007.