

## NEW FORMS OF OLD REVOLUTIONS

by Thomas Talhelm

**F**OR MY STUDENTS at South China Normal University Affiliated Middle School—one of southern China’s most elite high schools—the future is filled with brand-name universities and the best jobs in China. But on this sunny November day, a school bus took us down a road that would lead to the village of Feilai Xia, where these elite students would participate in *xuening* (literally “study farming”), a softened version of the Cultural Revolution’s “Down to the Countryside Movement.”

Each year, urban students across China are required by their schools to spend time in the Chinese countryside, presumably to instill in them an appreciation for peasant life, the foundation of the communist revolution. *Xuening* is an oddity not only for its socialist revival in fast-paced China, but also for a country where memorials of painful events are much less common than efforts to simply forget.

Mao Zedong launched the movement in 1968; in the following decade, an estimated 17 million urban “young intellectuals”—essentially anyone with at least a middle-school education—were sent into the countryside to recharge their revolutionary zeal. Often the students were assigned to work in communities where their labor was not needed. Officially, the movement’s goal was to destroy and “reform” the “bourgeois” viewpoints of urban youth by forcing them to experience the life of the

peasant. In *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, author Dai Sijie gives a rueful portrayal of the Movement: Students are forced to carry buckets of manure up and down a mountain and hide their books from a tyrannical rural leader.

The Cultural Revolution was a subject that I caught only veiled and timid references to while living in China, but every so often I was afforded glimpses into this past, which were often little more than hints at what had actually happened. A retired woman, who was a student at Tsinghua University when she was sent to the countryside, told me merely: “there was blood.” This woman belongs to the so-called “lost generation,” a group that never had the opportunity to finish their education.

The similarities between this modern revolution and the Cultural Revolution were obvious, and I wanted to bring this to the attention of my students. After all, I knew that many of their parents and grandparents were victims of Mao’s Down to the Countryside Movement. It was even possible that some of my students’ mothers or fathers were actually named “*Xuening*,” as it was common for children at the time to be named after political causes.

But the irony of sending a group of students with the brightest futures in China to relive the very experience that may have robbed their parents and grandparents of a good life was lost in the excitement on the bus. To these students, *xuening* seemed like good fun—a rare opportunity to escape their regimented school life.

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Today's rustification programs do not curtail elite education, but are supposed to enrich it. And this time around, the emphasis is less on reforming "young intellectuals" and more on researching community issues and inculcating a sense of appreciation for the hard toil of the peasant. During xuenong, students live in groups of two to six with peasant families, helping them to harvest rice or catch stocked fish. Each group of students is also assigned a research project to complete during the week, such as assessing village trash disposal or surveying local hospital services.

The opportunity to experience xuenong did not come easily. A teaching fellowship sent me to be an English teacher at South China Normal, but being a teacher did not automatically entitle me to travel to the countryside with the students. I managed to win a seat on our tan-colored bus only after indelicate persistence. As we rumbled toward the farming village, the young students' excited conversations bubbled through the compartment.

The town of Feilai Xia, where students from this school have completed xuenong year after year, is named after the Feilai gorge in which it is nestled, about an hour north of the metropolis of Guangzhou. The houses of this village cluster around a town center, from which individual square plots of rice radiate out. The region is hot and wet, an ideal environment for the growing rice the students would harvest.

The farmers in Feila Xia, who would play host to over 600 second-year high-school students from our school, were

relatively rich—far better off than those in the western and interior provinces. Most used machines to harvest the stalks of rice in their fields. But for full revolutionary effect, the farmers here had left large plots of rice tied into the shape of teepees for the students to cut and harvest by hand. Instead of gas powered machines, the students would use simple curved blades, just like farmers in less fortunate areas.

Although not the school's intention, the xuenong program is actually a kind



of reverse-migration aid measure. Since the opening of China's economy in 1978, labor power has been moving en masse to big cities where there are better paying jobs. As a result of this labor outflow, many rural families have been left without the hands needed

to reap their harvest.

One student of mine, 18-year-old Wu Hongbin, reaped the rice that his host family's son would have reaped had he not left for a job in the city. "My hands were very painful after reaping the rice for nearly five hours under the sun," Hongbin said. "But the owners of that rice were a couple of elderly people who were almost 80 years old and their children were working in [Guangzhou]."

Despite the hard labor, my students told me they were enjoying their experience. Seventeen-year-old Carol Wang told me how the opportunity represented a chance to experience the life of a farmer. "I've never been to a rural village in Guangdong province before, so through xuenong I got to know what it's like," said Carol.

And not all of the peasant families need-

ed as much help as Hongbin's. The students at those houses spent their time roughhousing in the fields and resting in the shade. Next to a pond with stocked fish, students talked excitedly about the environment, remarking on how blue the sky was and how they could actually see the stars and even the Milky Way at night. Others smiled wider than I had ever seen back on campus, as they told me about how xuenong let them escape the urban environment and its oppressive pollution. Even at an elite school, many have had few opportunities to leave sprawling Guangzhou.

Still others relished the freedom that came from bunking with peasant families rather than in strictly monitored school dorms. "Xuenong was a lot of fun," Carol told me. "Sometimes at night we stayed in the living room and drank beer with the 'uncle.'" Out of earshot from the administrators, students told me of their late-night plans to sneak out and watch the stars. Hongbin was so excited he barely slept: "The countryside was a new world for us! Four nights of seven, I didn't sleep or sleep in our rooms. I went to [a classmate's] host family to see the meteors and chat together till the morning!"

Though the students labored on the farms, their stay was not free. The students were required to pay their host families 100 yuan (\$14.64) to cover food costs, although many students conceded that it was not enough to cover the food their hosts provided. Hongbin enjoyed chicken dinners on three separate nights, only to later learn that his host family "hadn't had chicken for half a year and only had some vegetables." How "great [sic] the China's farmers!" he marveled.

The peasant families were just as gracious in letting me see their homes. One farmer opened the gate to the courtyard in front of his new house with a broad smile. During my visit to the farmer's house, students were taking their afternoon nap,

some two to a bed in a pair of rooms to the side. The farmer invited me to view the upper floors; the living room had a modern refrigerator, a small red altar of incense and a poster of Chairman Mao, the founder of xuenong's former incarnation.

The house plot, like most in the village, was narrow. But his home rose four stories high, and had tile flooring. The farmer smiled widely as he showed me his television and refrigerator because he knew his house was envied by his neighbors, whose homes were simple one- and two-story, brick homes.

Most students lived in the brick homes, while the teachers, presumably less in need of revolutionary zeal, were holed up down the road in considerably more modern accommodations at the town meeting building. The building included various nonrevolutionary provisions brought by the school, like a large color television set.

It is tempting to see xuenong as an anachronism, especially against the background of the teachers' color TV and the students' digital cameras. And as China races ahead, xuenong will continue to seem more and more dated, farther and farther from China's new prosperity. For one, farming is becoming less of a part of Chinese society. A Chinese blogger commenting on xuenong programs around Shanghai complained that the land around Shanghai "doesn't have any 'farming' to study anymore."

Yet as outdated as xuenong may seem, it may also continue to be important simply because it exposes the country's future leaders to a part of China that is so different from their own.

As the bus pulled away to take me back to Guangzhou, the rest of the students who remained in Feilai Xia were just waking from their afternoon naps. Soon they would head back to their square plots, long since drained of water, to harvest the rice that they might later eat in a cafeteria. ■