Old Zhiqing Photos: Nostalgia and the “Spirit” of the Cultural Revolution

David J. Davies

Abstract
During the past twenty-five years, as Chinese society has been radically transformed, the memory of the Cultural Revolution has also changed. As the generation who most actively participated in the Cultural Revolution has moved into middle age, some of them have actively promoted images of the Cultural Revolution that replace common tropes of violence and victimization with images of cooperation, hard work and sacrifice. “Bitterness,” in the words of one former Red Guard, “has become a kind of beauty.” Some have dismissed this “nostalgia” as simply an artifact of the media or the fashionable result of the consumer economy.

This paper closely examines the mass publication of a collection of old Cultural Revolution–era photographs and its reception by consumers. For both groups the evocative black and white images were useful to remember the past and also address present struggles among members of the zhiqing generation. For the publishers the photos were intentionally used to keep a valuable “spirit” of the Cultural Revolution alive in the present. For readers the images were read in a variety of ways dependent on their current lives. At a time when the state continues to exert
In early 1998, the Baihua Literature and Art Publishing House in Tianjin published a slim paperback packed with black and white photographs of enthusiastic revolutionary youth working down in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution. The collection was dedicated to “thirty million zhiqing” at the thirtieth anniversary of the Cultural Revolution campaign to go “up to the mountains and down to the villages” (shangshan xiaxiang) in 1968. Appropriately titled, Zhiqing Old Photos (Zhiqing lao zhaopian), it contained over one hundred and fifty glossy images illustrating the everyday life of the revolutionary youth down in the countryside. The photos illustrated beaming youth, often clad only in simple padded jackets, departing Tiananmen Square for the countryside, crossing rugged rural terrain, working in fields, engaged in military training, rehearsing theatrical performances, speaking at public meetings, studying with peasants, and relaxing during free time (Figure 1).

The Cultural Revolution zhiqing were “hot” during the year of their thirtieth anniversary, and their commemorations attracted much public attention as they gathered in restaurants, organized retrospectives of photography and objects from the Cultural Revolution, and returned to visit rural areas where they had lived decades earlier. That many people spoke of a “zhiqing craze” (zhiqingre) indicated the extent to which their activities suddenly burst into public view. Historical photos selected from personal photo albums, such as those published in Zhiqing Old Photos were an example of this visibility.

The zhiqing commemorations, however, presented images and narratives and expressed sentiments that were often an uneasy fit with both the physical environment of late twentieth century urban China and mainstream assumptions of the meaning of the Cultural Revolution. At a street kiosk in Nanjing, for example, the monochrome images of Spartan rural life and hard-working youth proudly showing off their Mao badges on the cover of Zhiqing Old Photos, were a stark contrast to the brilliant alluring images of cosmopolitan life featured on the covers of other urban magazines. Similarly, the beaming youthful faces of recognizable individual zhiqing represented a very different past from the chaotic
images of faceless crowds and smashed “four olds,” or the stark descriptions of struggle sessions and gratuitous violence common to mainstream depictions of the Cultural Revolution. Depictions of zhiqing life during the Cultural Revolution in publications such as Zhiqing Old Photos at times suggested a different vision of the Cultural Revolution, which emphasized a historical role of hard work, shared sacrifice and dedication.
The stark contrast between the zhiqing commemorations and mainstream representations of the Cultural Revolution did not go unnoticed by many who accused the zhiqing of “nostalgia” (huaijiu) for the past. The contours of this nostalgia were, however, expressed differently by voices in the media. For some, the former zhiqing were indulging in shallow emotional reflection or pleasure at thinking about their past youth. Commenting on the pleasure of nostalgia, Meng argued that it could be very profitable to those who provide places where former zhiqing could gather to “drink and be merry.” An article in the 18 March 1998 issue of Shanghai’s main local newspaper, the Wenhui bao, even described the nostalgia as a “model for marketing.” An article in Nanjing’s Fuwu daobao celebrated nostalgia as a bellwether of prosperity — a signifier of the growing affluence of the reform-era consumer:

After people have satisfied their material needs, the need for cultural entertainment is an inevitable result. For example, today old movies have become a hot object of urban consumption … the wave of nostalgia is also making great inroads into the publishing industry … as are unforgettable nostalgic tours … [this] nostalgia also has a kind of resistance to the noise of urban life as well as the unpredictable fluctuations of the times. People desire to use nostalgia to taste again the elegance, peace and tranquility of the past. No matter how you explain it, the wave of nostalgia that has emerged at the turn of the century illustrates that the Chinese nation is presently moving in a down-to-earth manner from reflecting on the past toward maturity.

Others, however, were uneasy with nostalgia for a time associated with the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. Shortly after its publication, Zhiqing Old Photos was criticized in a Wenhui bao article that cautioned consumers to be careful with “this flavour of nostalgia.”

Still others portrayed nostalgia for the Cultural Revolution as the result of a corruption or dilution of a natural healing process by the market economy. For example, the editors of a collection of essays describing pre-reform political movements observed,

The “Cultural Revolution” has been over for 20 years and the fading traces of [its] destructive effects on social development and abandonment of our human spirit have been obscured by the rising waves of economic change. We have reached the point where the “Cultural Revolution” has become for many people a means of making money, from “Cultural Revolution” badges, “Cultural Revolution” songs, “Cultural Revolution” model operas, the Cultural Revolution is even the topic of numerous publications….5
Feng Jicai, one of the first and most well-known mainstream writers of Cultural Revolution reportage living in China, criticized the nostalgia of former zhiqing during a conversation in the Spring of 1998.⁶ He commented:

Nostalgia doesn’t have any element of critical reflection. With nostalgia there is no clear-headed consideration of things — no deep thinking…. It is not a thing of reason, but a type of emotion. Nostalgia is able to take these bad things and see them as beautiful…. If, as in the case of the zhiqing, one does not go through a period of very deep assessment, we arrive at nostalgia. This is a very frightful and terrible thing…. That the Cultural Revolution didn’t go into a museum, but first went into restaurants, is a great tragedy for the Chinese.

In Feng’s view the commemorations of former zhiqing were misguided and potentially dangerous, but could be cured by correct education about the objective facts of the past. Feng suggests that this might be accomplished through the authority of a public museum, a reference to the Chinese author Ba Jin’s suggestion in 1986 of establishing a Cultural Revolution Museum.

Nostalgia as a Context of Memory

The powerful imagery and emotional content of historical representations described as “nostalgic” arouse interest, curiosity, and some ambivalence as to their social significance.⁷ There is also concern with the liberties nostalgia takes with the factuality of the historical past. Some academic researchers verge on frustration, as Perry Link does when he comments on his failure to understand how some Chinese seem to “show genuine respect for Mao.”⁸ Perhaps because the emotional intensity of nostalgia references the past and is often evoked by material traces of the past, it is taken to be an emotional or inaccurate version of historical fact. This understandable assumption, however, overlooks the possibility that the past might be intentionally evoked through nostalgic references to communicate something of value beyond the details of “what happened.” Similarly, consumers might choose to engage history in a nostalgic mode because it communicates something in a form that is useful in social life.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot has observed that the vast majority of historical narratives encountered in everyday life are not the work of professional academic historians, but of amateur historians.⁹ Each of these narratives establishes a relationship to knowledge of the past, and “…
authenticity is required, lest the representation becomes a fake, a morally repugnant spectacle." That zhiqing commemorations criticized as “nostalgic” were not repugnant, but were often enthusiastically embraced by many former zhiqing raises the compelling question of what kind of historical authenticity they conveyed.

In this paper I present one answer to this question through a close examination of the production and consumption of a single zhiqing publication, *Zhiqing Old Photos*. I argue that to the extent that nostalgia is socially shared and commemorative, it is not a kind of “false history” which misrepresents the truth of the past, but it is a contemporary social practice that engages with present struggles through recourse to the past. As I will describe below, the nostalgic form of the published collection of photos became a site for a discussion of social memory and a dialogue about the value of Cultural Revolution history.

Growing up in the Mao era and now living in the age of reform, many former Cultural Revolution zhiqing are caught in a contradiction between celebrating the successes of reform and the massive unemployment and anxiety which the dramatic economic changes have brought to members of their generation. At their thirtieth anniversary, former zhiqing regularly described their generation as split by reform into a small number of “successful people” (*chenggong renshi*) and a larger number of “losers” (*shibaizhe*). The awareness of these differences of relative success led to dramatically different evaluations of the shared sacrifices of youthful zhiqing during the Cultural Revolution and the relationship of that past to the present. These complex memories of the past were not consistent with the mainstream view of the Cultural Revolution as an unmitigated disaster for the nation with no redeeming value, but often attempted to evoke some value from the past to address the context of contemporary life.

The case examined here focuses on a group of successful former zhiqing who intentionally planned to publicly model what they troped as a “spirit” (*jingshen*) of the zhiqing that would speak to all zhiqing regardless of their success. This “spirit” was evoked by making explicit recourse to the language and imagery of the Cultural Revolution, recasting the meaning and lessons of a Cultural Revolution–era value — *duanlian* (“tempering through enduring hardships”) — to make very specific claims on zhiqing facing economic and social uncertainty at the thirtieth anniversary of the zhiqing period.

The case presented here is not a historical examination of the Cultural Revolution or the zhiqing experience in the Chinese countryside. Rather
it is a close anthropological reading of how a so-called nostalgic publication mediated an exchange about the value of the Cultural Revolution that was both publicly visible and privately discussed. *Zhiqing Old Photos* was designed to evoke reflection on the past by publicly presenting historical old photographs and the nostalgic form of the collection was desirable because it mitigated any potential “trouble” (*mafan*) associated with public displays of history. The powerful photographic conventions of the old Cultural Revolution–era imagery, while read in ways that related the past to the present, reached conclusions often very different from those the producers had intended.

**Publishing Old Photos**

Only a few months after its publication, I had a meeting with Xue Yanwen at Baihua Literature and Art Publishing House in Tianjin to discuss the concept, design and production of *Zhiqing Old Photos*. During a conversation that lasted most of an afternoon, Xue described in detail how he and three other former Cultural Revolution zhiqing had produced the collection of photos.

In the mid-1990s advances in publishing technology had enabled publishers to turn out books and magazines with high quality photographs at reasonable prices. A new publishing ethic of “taking photos as primary and text as secondary” fuelled an incredibly popular genre of publications featuring “old photographs” (*lao zhaopian*). Xue described how he and his colleagues sought to draw on the popularity of the genre and focus attention on the experiences of their generation of Cultural Revolution zhiqing had produced the collection of photos.

Xue and the others wanted to produce not just a collection of old photography to make a profit, but something that would memorialize the zhiqing experience. Xue described the complex nature of this memorial drawing on themes of suffering, endurance, and the future that awaited the young zhiqing.

Of course making money was part of our decision! We are, however, zhiqing and we also believed that it was an important time to remember. The zhiqing are a group that suffered. They should have gone to school to get an education. The period was a disaster, but it was also an opportunity to test oneself and build character (*duanlian*). Our publication strives to reflect the individual struggles as well as the spirit (*jingshen*) of the zhiqing.

The old photos were to represent the difficult daily struggles of
individuals in the past, but gathered together the collection would evoke a unified zhiqing “spirit” (jingshen). Xue implied this spirit was one of endurance through daily struggle, or the lessons one learns from struggle. His use of the term duanlian to describe personal development through enduring hardship evoked associations with revolutionary rhetoric. In Xue’s phrasing however, the spirit was valuable because it in some sense compensates for the formal schooling that many zhiqing missed.

Xue explained that the magazine had been designed to depend on the photos to evoke a sense of this “spirit” among zhiqing readers. The photos offered the additional advantage of more flexibility in interpretation than written text would provide:

It isn’t necessary to write much. When they [zhiqing] see the photos, they will immediately understand. If [we] write too much we will limit their contemplation and reflection on the topic … if we write one word we will limit them that much.

The only substantial text in Zhiqing Old Photos could be found at the end of the publication where short personal narratives of former zhiqing were printed. The publishers had solicited the narratives from successful former zhiqing who had become well-known government officials, city mayors, and elites in publishing, business and entertainment. Xue admitted, however, that many readers had written to him criticizing the choice of “successful” subjects at the expense of people who have “not succeeded” (meiyou chenggong).

The editors felt, nevertheless, that publishing stories of former zhiqing who had not become successful would only leave readers discouraged and not serve a positive purpose. Xue believed that if Zhiqing Old Photos contained too much negative content it would not be meaningful to contemporary zhiqing. Many zhiqing are currently having “a lot of difficulties,” he explained, and many have been laid off (xiagang). He and the other editors hoped that their publication would remind the former zhiqing of their unique historical experience and how they could draw upon it to help them in the present. Xue explained:

… the zhiqing have spirit. It is a spirit of struggle. This spirit still exists and is very valuable. The zhiqing are not afraid of being laid off. In 1978 [when the zhiqing returned to the cities] they were all basically unemployed. China needs this spirit…. The younger generation never grew up experiencing hardships. They are afraid of eating bitterness. There is no way to avoid this. It is just our knowledge of how to make it in life…. During the Cultural Revolution, the
zhiqing could not be held back or forced down, and they continue to exist. This was an advance for our nation.

Duanlian and the Spirit of Struggle

Commemorations face two directions in time, backwards to the past and forwards to the future, as they publicly evoke past events that are seen to contain enduring lessons worth remembering.16 Xue and his colleagues intentionally drew on the existing popularity of the old photos genre to provide public visibility for the value of a zhiqing spirit on which zhiqing could draw to sustain them into the future.17 Through the images they sought to evoke zhiqing suffering, struggle and sacrifice in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution. Interestingly, however, the primary example of suffering Xue repeatedly gave was something they did not have the chance to experience: he and the other zhiqing did not go to school to get an education.

The missed opportunity for a formal education comprises a central trope in descriptions of the effect of the Cultural Revolution on the subsequent lives of zhiqing. During the first years of the Cultural Revolution, schools were closed so that urban youth could engage in the revolutionary activities of protest, public debate, struggle, and labour in the countryside. According to the rhetoric of the time, these lessons in the “great classroom” of experience would duanlian the younger generation — tempering them like steel — to become successors to the mission of the Chinese revolution.

The lessons of a Maoist revolutionary education and zhiqing experiences no longer seem to have a place in a contemporary China where conventional schooling once again provides the primary means of social and economic opportunity. From the vantage point of the present, missing a formal education can be equated with suffering. A subtitle in a section of Zhiqing Old Photos entitled “The Great Classroom of Fields and Earth” sums up this feeling. Beneath a photo of a young zhiqing speaking at a rally, one fist raised in the air and the other grasping a rifle, and another photo of farmers and a zhiqing huddled in a small room studying beneath a poster of Chairman Mao, a subtitle reads: “In that year, the slogans shook the heavens, today they seem absurd.”18 The future for which the zhiqing had toughened themselves has become the past, and the revolutionary mission of Chinese socialism has become history.

In contrast to what was missed, Xue describes what the zhiqing did
experience as quite positive. The hardships and struggles of daily life gave them the opportunity to duanlian — to engage in physical exercise, to temper, or toughen themselves. For Xue, remembering past hardship as duanlian was a central aspect of zhiqing “spirit” that he wanted to commemorate. Xue’s reference to the value of duanlian is particularly interesting, for duanlian was one of the reasons that Mao gave for sending zhiqing to the countryside in 1968. Xue argued for a new value of duanlian for zhiqing facing the changes of China in the late 1990s, and his publication would communicate it through old photos.

The zhiqing photos had originally been created to evoke the ideal imagery of hard work and self-sacrifice necessary to achieve an ideal socialist future. During the Cultural Revolution the photographs were not intended to represent what was, but to suggest the future-oriented revolutionary values of socialist transformation — what would be. The images of manual labour, study sessions, public speaking and military training were produced as evidence of China’s ongoing transformation away from the past toward the future. They were “future-oriented photography” not taken to preserve an image of the present for posterity, but to suggest what awaited the present society. The photographs were not taken for memorial value, but attempted to capture the future in the present to make real, even as an image, the imagined socialist-utopian future. The photos were structured as objects of desire — images of the desired future constructed and then captured for a fleeting moment on film (Figures 2 and 3).

The photographic conventions of gazing outside the frame of the photo, the subjects of manual labour and technological innovation, and the focus on individual sacrifice were intended to evoke the ethical values of socialist revolution. If, as many Cultural Revolution–era photos attest, the photographic conventions were to take photos evoking the future, then the narratives that the photos intended to elicit were not those of personal memory, but narratives of collective future-oriented struggle — narratives that would reconcile the difference between the imaginary of the photograph and the reality of the photographic moment. The imagined future in the photographs illustrated a difference that made the present something worth struggling for.

The conventions of this “future-oriented photography” symbolically integrated the individual into the imagined social order. Rather than make the social personal, the photograph structured the individual as an element of a social context. The personal aspect of the photo is subjected to the
Figure 2. “Cheerfully Working to Recreate the Globe” (xiuli diqiu gan de huan). An image from Zhiqing Old Photos. (Image used by permission of Baihua Literature and Art Publishing House.)

Figure 3. “Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter, A Year Has Four Seasons” (chun xia qiu dong, yinian siji). (Image used by permission of Baihua Literature and Art Publishing House.)
social conventions of the photograph. The subject of the photo becomes an idealized “worker,” “soldier” or “peasant.” Reading the ideal “future-oriented” conventions of the photograph, the viewer is reminded of the struggles of the present as they are given meaning in relation to the goal of the socialist future.

Seeing old Cultural Revolution photographs in the reform-era present, however, presents the viewer not only with a glimpse of the photographic subjects of the past, but also with an encounter with the ideals and ideology of Cultural Revolution photography. Consumers of the photos must attend to that earlier aesthetic, which is heavily laden with optimistic dreams and aspirations of those (now past) futures.

Xue clearly intended to provide a context for the ideals and ideology of the past — their “spirit” — by reinterpreting the concept of *duanlian* from the vantage point of late 1990s China. Rather than Mao’s insistence on personal toughening for revolutionary struggle to bring about a socialist future, *Zhiqing Old Photos* attempted to tap the power of the past aesthetic and ethical values represented in the photos to evoke a *duanlian* from the past that anticipated the changes and transformations of reform. Seen in this way, the life the zhiqing endured in the old photos was preparing them for the challenges, struggles and unpredictable circumstances of a market economy. *Zhiqing Old Photos* called upon readers to remember the past and the ethics of struggle. Only this time it is not to create a socialist utopia, but to survive being laid off.

Rather than struggling for a shared socialist future, the lesson of this new spirit of *duanlian* is one of individual survival and a struggle to be successful. It is a Cultural Revolution concept that has been remembered in a way more amenable to *laissez-faire* capitalism than the spirit of self-sacrifice that motivated zhiqing to leave the comforts of urban life and move to the countryside in 1968. Zhiqing can become successful in reform because of the endurance they learned during the Cultural Revolution.

The short autobiographical narratives at the end of *Zhiqing Old Photos* provided more overt lessons of *duanlian* and “the spirit of struggle.” In nearly every story, the writers traced the roots of their reform-era success to seminal experiences that they had in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution. One woman, for example, explained how being a radio announcer to “revolutionary comrades” in rural Heilongjiang province as a zhiqing provided her with the experiences that later led to her job as a manager at China Central Television. The famous actor and comedian Ge You recalled how he was able to pass the audition for drama school
because he was able to draw on his experiences raising pigs for a short skit that was well received by the test administrators.21 A clear statement came from the description of the life of Shen Guofang, the head of the National Foreign Affairs Department media division (Figure 4):

At that time the youthful Shen Guofang had many expectations for life. But he knew that for every expectation one must build a solid foundation. Their [zhiqing] dredging river mud built a foundation of not being afraid to eat bitterness. He seized small opportunities to study and built a foundation of knowledge. The experiences of going down to the countryside created a foundational lifelong conviction: people must always do their best, and grasp every moment … he always exerts great effort at every task as well as in study. He always thinks that his half glass of water is continually in need of filling.22

The narratives suggest an “ideology for success” based on hard work or a positive attitude, which they imply led to the success of some former zhiqing. Recognition of the differences in fortune over the past twenty years among a group that had fairly uniform experiences during the Cultural Revolution requires a more complex explanation.

Figure 4. “Grasp Life’s Every Moment” (bawo rensheng de fenfen miaomiao). Shen Guofang during the Cultural Revolution (left), and during reform (right). (Image used by permission of Baihua Literature and Art Publishing House.)
Consuming Old Photos: The Context of Remembering

In the recent past the state dominated public photography. Images in the media were utilized as a means of structuring public memory of the past and disseminating ideal images of the future. Images of workers, soldiers or martyrs who sacrificed themselves for “the people” represented modes of moral behaviour for ordinary Chinese to imitate in their daily lives.

*Zhiqing Old Photos* engaged this power of representation in a manner that reflects the changing political economy of the reform era. The state no longer has a monopoly on representing the past, but now the past and its images circulate in a wider market of production and consumption. The intentions of the publishers at Baihua are, however, only half of the story. Their product was quite popular among consumers, and the success of *Zhiqing Old Photos* clearly indicated a desire to remember the zhiqing past. I spoke at length with over two dozen readers of *Zhiqing Old Photos* about their impressions of the magazine and the effect that seeing the old photos had on them. Each of the individuals had responded to an advertisement that I inserted into hundreds of issues of the publication for sale in bookstores and street kiosks throughout Nanjing during the spring and early summer of 1998. Other than three curious Nanjing University undergraduates, the individuals who responded were all former zhiqing from a variety of urban backgrounds, including university professors, government employees, factory workers, and various types of managers and businessmen.

Many individuals agreed to discuss their purchase of *Zhiqing Old Photos* because they considered its contents “very valuable.” The old photos were valuable because, as one commented, “photos speak, explaining the perspectives of people.” They provided a limited public recognition and context for seeing themselves and reflecting on their past. Seeing the youthful faces struggling for the future of Chinese socialism within the frame of the old monochrome images elicited nagging questions: “What about him? What about her? Where are they now?” The narratives evoked by the photos compared the past to the present and questioned the unknown future that awaited the optimistic youth.

For readers, *Zhiqing Old Photos* was a collection of publicly visible photographs that evoked personal memories. While the photographs in *Zhiqing Old Photos* were not their own personal photographs, readers easily related to images because of the familiar photographic conventions shared by images of the time. One of the first individuals to respond to my
advertisements, Mr. Xu Shijun described the undeniably strong effect of this similarity. While Xu was very critical of the magazine as “too simple and lacking deep literary flavour,” the photos it contained were so similar to his own personal photos that he began to reflect on his own past. He commented, “We [former zhiqing] can find ourselves on every page.”

The photos reminded Xu of when he went down to the countryside and why he had gone. He had not been entirely eager to go, but had been very excited. Xu described growing up in a small home constantly under the watchful eye of his family, and going to the countryside as a zhiqing was an exciting chance to live alone and “be a man.” “Young people seek mystery and excitement,” he continued, “we went down to change the backward state of the countryside and the Cultural Revolution offered me a chance to leave home and find myself. Bitter hardship is also a form of beauty.”

Readers of Zhiqing Old Photos tended to take one of two positions, which reflected an ongoing debate between former zhiqing at their thirtieth anniversary between those that had “no regrets about their youth” (qingchun wuhui) and those that “had regrets about their youth” (qingchun youhui). These positions and their different readings of the photos are illustrated in the following two case studies. In both cases, the readers demonstrate concern with contemporary zhiqing struggles, but evaluate the past differently depending on the relative success of their contemporary lives.23

“We Sacrificed for Our Ideals”

Li Youlang, a businessman from Shanghai, was eager to speak with me about his purchase of Zhiqing Old Photos. Our conversation began with his comments on personal experiences, remembered friends, personal opinions, and private memories. It was a safe register of reflection, facilitated by the old photos that were so similar to his personal experiences. He commented,

My first impression was that this magazine is great. The contents were very familiar to me, and I thought about my own experiences during the Cultural Revolution — it was an unbelievable time. After that I wanted to see if I knew anyone in these photos. When I look at them I feel as if I am looking at myself…. When I got to the last part, however, I felt it was a pity that all of the people at the end were so famous.
Li began by reflecting on his own past, but then quickly extended his comments to the subjects of the photos and others in his generation to note the difference between a shared zhiqing past and a contemporary reality. The photos illustrated that zhiqing shared equally the struggles and hardships of the past, and yet they also marked a difference with present disparities of relative employment and success. What began with private reflection on a personal past moved to a critique of contemporary society. Pointing to a photo of a young man carrying dirt in a shoulder sling, Li continued,

... this guy is probably not very famous, he is probably still doing average work — maybe he is still there! I wish that these kind of people had their stories in there. Many of my generation have been laid off, most of them are little people, but we all participated in this time. The results were different…. Many of the children of these people have a bad opinion of their parents. They are disgusted with their lives.

Li expressed the most disappointment with the narratives at the end of the magazine that focused on the famous, feeling that Zhiqing Old Photos had missed an opportunity to address the present by focusing on the average people who represented the majority of zhiqing.

“The dream that we had at that time has not finished,” Li explained, “I don’t regret that time. I don’t regret going to the countryside. We made a sacrifice for our ideal.” When I asked if this sacrifice was worth the end result of the Cultural Revolution, he replied, “A person is just a small piece of history. If you are born in one time you should do your part. Maybe the Cultural Revolution didn’t help society that much, but I made my sacrifice.” Li illustrated this point with an example from the Long March. Thousands had begun the Long March, but only a fraction survived. The march was not a failure, however, because those who endured it went on to do great things for society. Li explained that history is a process and that people should not disparage his generation or say that the people in the photographs were “stupid.”

Li repeatedly returned to the negative impressions the younger generation have of the zhiqing. Commenting on his own home life and his son’s impression of his sacrifice, Li explained, “My kid doesn’t understand. I can use these photos to teach him what it was like … so he doesn’t regret my sacrifice.” “My kids don’t believe it, but the feelings at that time were true,” he later added, “I can’t believe that anyone duped me, from my experience we were doing what everyone else was doing.” To
emphasize this point, Li opened his copy of *Zhiqing Old Photos*. “We thought that anyone who helps others was great. Like Lei Feng!”

While the zhiqing generation had venerated the revolutionary generation, their own sacrifices have become meaningless, becoming in his words objects of “disgust” or laughter for their children. The old photographs, however, provided the possibility of explaining this past, or at least offered a moment of public recognition he could share with his son.

The memories of the past evoked by the collection of old photos, however, did not provide a structure for theorizing history — the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist discourse of Chinese state socialism and all of the slogans of the Cultural Revolution were elided in Li’s comments. They were valuable proof, contrary to state discourse, that the zhiqing did do something to contribute to Chinese society. The photos of hard manual work and difficult life in the countryside held the possibility of remembering the past in a mode meaningful in the present — an idiom of productive work, contributing to society, and doing one’s part. Their value emerged at a time when most of the zhiqing generation were laid off “little people” with no socially valued productive position in China’s new economic order. The old photos reminded Li and others that zhiqing once did something of great significance, placing the zhiqing generation in history, rather than simply showing the human remainder of a failed period of history.

Not once in our long conversation did Li describe a zhiqing spirit, or the value of the past as *duanlian*. He did, however, emphasize the value of the sacrifices illustrated by the images that he and other zhiqing had made for Chinese society. They had done their part, and had been true to the ideology of the time. He illustrated this with a story recounting how he and a group of friends walked through the countryside during the period of *chuanlian*, staying at the homes of farmers along the way. At one home they discovered money in one of the peasant’s mattresses. “We didn’t take any of it!”, he exclaimed, “We had no desire to profit at another’s expense. These good personalities of many zhiqing have not changed.”

Li explained that many members of the zhiqing generation have lost their jobs and feel that the zhiqing period was responsible for their present difficulties. He wanted to “grab these people” and explain to them that zhiqing history was not that bad, and that they should not be critical of it. Of course it was easy for him to think this way, Li admitted, since he had a very stable job at a joint venture company and few worries about the future.
“We Were Too Ignorant”

When she responded to my invitation to talk about Zhiqing Old Photos, Zhang Xianning insisted that I travel out to her house for lunch, so that her husband and daughter could also participate in our conversation. Zhang and her husband, Song Changhong, live in an apartment on the outskirts of Nanjing near the factory at which they work. Before talking about Zhiqing Old Photos, Zhang told me she wanted me to see some of her own old photos from the period.

As we paged through the images, at one point Zhang gestured to a photo of her and some co-workers inspecting lambswool. “This one was taken by a reporter and appeared in the newspaper … it was a Red Flag Factory — a model factory,” she told me with some pride. She described being warmly received when they went to Inner Mongolia together as zhiqing. “Our material life wasn’t very good then,” she explained, “but our spiritual life was great.” Life had been hard there, but everyone had a clear sense of purpose. Zhang continued:

I chose to go there. We wanted to go to the most difficult place, but we were so naïve, we were so simple-minded … we were really radical at that time, but it was because our education was so closed. We were too ignorant, we didn’t really consider what things would be like when we arrived there. We went because of the mass education.… My self-image wasn’t bad though. Spiritually everything was good. We all thought that we were contributing to the country …

Song interrupted, “We went willingly, but were too brazen.” “We did, however, have the chance to learn about society.” Song explained that the zhiqing had trusted the leadership at the time. By the end of the period, however, all of the leaders had turned out to be “bad.” He had been disappointed and angry because he did not anticipate that the leadership would let them down. His wife explained,

You know, we lost our chance to study. I didn’t even finish elementary school! We went willingly but we were too ignorant. We got to see the poverty and hard work of the countryside; we met many people and were able to see things that can’t be found in books. But things weren’t as simple as we thought! Even the US wasn’t as dark as we were told it was. We were too naïve, that is my only regret…. In our lives we have gone from idealistic to petty, from respected to disrespected. As a result, we became increasingly low-spirited…. Now I read English every day to improve myself.

Zhang described with obvious pride the successes of her life in Inner
Mongolia: she had been an accomplished table tennis player, she had worked at a model factory, and even had her efforts recognized in the newspaper. The old photos evoked memories of these past successes in the rural countryside and the differences from their present urban lives. In a contemporary China where, as Xin Liu observes, the countryside is socially configured as a place one travels from to seek wealth in the more prosperous cities, the movement to the countryside needed some explanation. The reason Zhang gave for going in the other direction had to do with a spiritual motivation — to contribute to the country. She and her friends had been materially poor, but, as she explained, they took pride in their sense of purpose.

Zhang could not be entirely proud of the past, however, because she knew the future disappointment the hardworking and committed youths in the photos would experience when their aspirations were not realized. To resolve this contradiction her past motivation for going to the countryside is displaced by another explanation filled with references to how naïve and ignorant the zhiqing had been. The zhiqing went down because they really did not know what they were doing, and they went willingly because they didn’t know the “truth.”

The idea that the leaders were “bad” or they did not know the “truth” provided Zhang and Song with an explanation for the vast difference between the future represented in the photographs and their subsequent lives. Seeing unrealized dreams of their youthful selves in the old photographs raised the question of what they had been working for.

Xue’s answer was that the duanlian of the past had prepared them for their present struggles in reform. Zhang and Song’s answer to this question was regret — it had been a tragic mistake facilitated by the ignorance due to not having had a proper education. Zhang made reference to this by contrasting the socially esteemed idealism of her youth, as seen in the old photos, with the lack of contemporary recognition for their past sacrifices.

The old photos were valuable to Zhang and Song, but not for the value of duanlian that Xue had intended to evoke. Nor was it the period of self-sacrifice and decided participation, of doing one’s part for history, which Li Youlang remembered. For Zhang and Song, the photos evoked memories of regret and of having been manipulated. The old images of training with rifles, working in fields, tending animals, dancing “loyalty dances” and living with peasants reminded them of opportunities to study things not in books. However, in a contemporary life where formal education is one of the primary means of competition in China’s tight
labour market, the experiences represented by the photos were simply foolish. If there was a zhiqing “spirit,” its only use in the present is as a reminder of past mistakes, and a rationale for individuals to focus on themselves.

**Old Photos as Nostalgic Practice**

Extending James Scott’s concept of the “hidden transcript,” Caroline Humphrey has argued for an “evocative transcript.” The term “evocative,” she explains, “indicates a text that is intended to elicit or evoke a particular interpretation beyond the surface meaning … [evocative transcripts] are ambiguous by design.” Humphrey argues that evocative transcripts are found in social contexts where previous social codes and classes are suppressed by an official discourse and “all the rest.” She argues that the ambiguous and evocative nature of the texts offer a means to publicly articulate and thereby sustain non-state counter-memory and may be “a stage in the process by which personal recollection is transformed into rethought history.”

Humphrey’s concept of an evocative transcript is useful for thinking about the evocative nature of a publication like *Zhiqing Old Photos* and the way it was designed and read by former zhiqing. While the past twenty-five years of reform have transformed everyday life, historical narratives of the past continue to be policed either directly or indirectly in ways that have not been dramatically altered by the dismantling of state socialism. This is especially true of the contentious Cultural Revolution that immediately preceded the reform period. Publications dealing with the Cultural Revolution, if they manage to be published at all, are typically personal memoirs that avoid historical conclusions in favour of personal memory. As Mobo Gao has argued, these memoirs typically represent the interests of political and intellectual elites — groups which were silenced during the Mao period.

The reform period has its own new hegemonic historical narrative that repudiates the socialist period as the state highlights the resounding success of the reform agenda. This new narrative has brought with it new silences, however, the most conspicuous of which is perhaps the one most often mentioned by consumers viewing the images in *Zhiqing Old Photos*: Where are the experiences of insecurity and hardship experienced by the vast number of laid off or unemployed urban workers, a large percentage of which are former zhiqing?
In the late 1990s, as economic reforms deepened and insecurity increased, for zhiqing who might have felt that they had been left behind, the excesses of the Cultural Revolution made a critique of reform difficult. This was the point made by a friend from Shanghai who commented to me, “It is difficult to criticize Deng Xiaoping, because he brought us back from the countryside.” As Lisa Rofel suggests, the extreme nature of Cultural Revolution narratives that are published work to repudiate entirely the pre-reform period, and thereby act as a de facto affirmation of the entire agenda of reform.29

The repudiation of all events prior to the beginning of reform, however, invalidates the historical sacrifices and youthful ideals of groups such as the zhiqing. Ironically this happened at precisely the moment members of the zhiqing generation were most vulnerable to the lay-offs brought about by economic reforms. This not only invalidated the work of their youth, but disabled historical comparisons that might have provided a means of critiquing the present or remembering past values.

The cases described in detail above, as well as discussions with other consumers of Zhiqing Old Photos, demonstrate how the mass publication of the old Cultural Revolution–era photographs provided publicly visible traces of the past that evoked memories. The old photos were particularly powerful because photographic technology is assumed to be objective. The representational nature of the image, however, provided for multiple interpretations of the “real” past as readers viewed the photos in subtly different ways.

Seeing the old photos was also an encounter with the aesthetics and ideology that infused the photographs, and by extension their contemporary reading, evoking an evaluation of the present future for which the zhiqing youths struggled and sacrificed during the Cultural Revolution. For Li Youlang, the photos reminded him of a past of “no regrets” that was valuable, a past when he did his part for society, and which demanded recognition in the present. For Zhang Xianning and her husband, the same photos reminded them of the regretted failure of their past and the lessons of this failure for the future.

The old photos were intended to be evocative transcripts, in Humphrey’s phrasing, that would rely on the representational nature of photography to evoke memories and meanings beyond their surface reading. By foregrounding images of the personal experiences of the Cultural Revolution and evoking the current struggles of former zhiqing in the present, conversations about old photos suggest that they indirectly
evoke critical reflection on the relationship between the Cultural Revolution and the current agenda of state reform. Their evocative nature possibly represents a popular rethinking of Cultural Revolution history.

Transcripts, evocative or otherwise, do not establish a neutral counter-memory to historical hegemony, but resist it by seeking to establish a new position from which to speak. Xue’s project sought to recast history, contextualizing the memories of the zhiqing past in a way that would allow them to address very specific contemporary needs. He did not intend, for example, that evoked memories would challenge contemporary economic and political structures through remembering past activism or political struggle. Instead, he intended that memories of the Cultural Revolution, as evoked in the photos and through the stories of success at the end of the magazine, would serve as a formula for becoming successful.

Whether or not the old photos were presented in a way consistent with the history of professional historians is a question irrelevant to the significance of the photos in the lives of the readers. Likewise, dismissing the old photos as “nostalgic” obscures more than it illuminates, because the collection of old images clearly negotiated meaning and value between personal and social memories. The popular collection of Cultural Revolution images provided a link between personal and public memory in a way that compelled readers to remember the past and consider their own role in it. Although the editors’ attempt to evoke a spirit of struggle (duanlian) that would speak to the contemporary lives of former-zhiqing readers was not entirely successful, the publication of Zhiqing Old Photos did successfully move readers to reflect on the past.

This examination of a single example of “nostalgic practice” of former zhiqing suggests that the evocative nature of “nostalgic” display may constitute significant negotiations of reform-era collective memory. In the case of old photography, the difficulty of isolating a consistent historical narrative was, on one level, precisely what made it desirable — relying on the ambiguity of visual culture was an advantageous tactic of public display. The imagery avoided the potential hazards of authoritatively representing a contentious period of history, and allowed for a wide range of meanings without creating conflict by relying on the interpretation of the viewer.

As I have described, this effect was at least partially anticipated by the editors of Zhiqing Old Photos, who felt the lives and experiences of former zhiqing were important, especially in view of the difficulties that their generation face. They chose to rely primarily on photos to derive some
meaning and value from the past and engage readers’ present lives. The images of old Cultural Revolution visual culture were read in the present not as socialist “propaganda” but as proof of zhiqing sacrifice and hard work. The past spirit of struggle for the future represented through old photos became a means by which members of the Cultural Revolution generation could speak about and potentially critique the different levels of success they have had in their contemporary lives.

Notes

1. In a general sense, the “educated youth” known as zhishi qingnian, or zhiqing, began to go to the countryside as early as the late 1950s. These early zhiqing volunteered or were sent to the countryside to aid rural development and education. The term zhiqing in contemporary usage, however, is commonly associated with the cohort of elementary and middle school youth who had been active participants in the first years of the Cultural Revolution and were sent to the countryside beginning in 1968. The zhiqing youth who went the countryside during the Cultural Revolution are often referred to in English as “sent-down youth” or “rusticated youth” a usage that emphasizes their urban origins. This obscures, however, the associations of the Chinese term, which emphasizes the different educational level of the students vis-à-vis the rural peasantry. The multiple meanings of the language used to narrate the past is one of the subjects of this essay, and for this reason I have chosen to use the Chinese term unitalicized throughout this essay.


5. Xiao et al. (Note 3), p. 2.
6. Feng Jicai’s book *Yibaigeren de shinian*, translated into English as *Ten Years of Madness*, was one of the first books to directly address the topic of the Cultural Revolution in mainland China, see Feng Jicai, *Voices from the Whirlwind: An Oral History of the Chinese Cultural Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1991); *Ten Years of Madness: Oral Histories of China’s Cultural Revolution* (Beijing: China Books & Periodicals, 1996) and Feng (Note 3). I spoke with Feng one afternoon at his office in Tianjin.


10. Ibid., p. 149.

11. The work of Michel de Certeau theorizes the value of narratives and their


14. At the beginning of our meeting, Xue offered me copies of three new books he had published on the zhiqing and a copy of a second volume of *Zhiqing Old*

15. Beginning in the mid-1990s, collections of “old photographs,” mostly of pre-revolutionary or dynastic China, were extremely popular. Most of these contained images of urban spaces, old buildings, or temples. One of the earliest and most popular collections was a multi-volume set entitled Old Homes (Lao fangzi), which was published in Nanjing. These collections were generally considered to be art, no doubt because of the huge number of glossy photographs they contained and their high prices. In the late 1990s, books in the popular genre focused on colonial Shanghai and Beijing’s old alleyways (hutongs). Krebs provides a useful annotated list of a number of “old” publications he located in 1999–2000. See Edward S. Krebs, “Old in the Newest New China: Publications on Private Memories as Sources of Individual Views of History,” paper presented at the conference on “Modern Chinese Historiography and Historical Thinking,” 23–27 May 2001, at the University of Heidelberg.


17. The magazine had a publication run of 300,000 copies, quite large by Chinese standards and especially when compared to other publications dealing with the Cultural Revolution. Given China’s large population, first printings of books regularly run very large. Books that deal with the Cultural Revolution or zhiqing generally average about 10,000 copies a printing. By comparison, the 1996 state-sanctioned publication, Wenhua dageming jianshi (Note 13) ran to 50,000 copies. A 1997 republication of Feng Jicai’s famous book of Cultural Revolution reportage, Yibaigeren de shinian (Note 3) had a run of only 10,300 copies.


20. Xue (Note 2), pp. 48–49.

21. Ibid., p. 35.

22. Xue (Note 2), pp. 34–35.

23. The issue of “regret” (hui) for youthful experiences during the Cultural Revolution was one that was visibly debated in the mid- to late 1990s. Rae Yang has suggested that the group which has “no regrets” is comprised largely of the zhiqing that have become successful during reform. See Rae Yang,
“Two Kinds of Contested Memories in Contemporary China,” paper presented at the conference on “Memory and Media in and of Contemporary China,” 2–4 March 2001, at the University of California Berkeley. Among former zhiqing who have not become successful, Yang noted an extreme reluctance to talk about their experiences. Yang’s observations seem to be consistent with many of the comments that are made in the last half of this paper by the relatively “successful” Li Youlang and the relatively “unsuccessful” Zhang Xianning and her husband.

27. Ibid, p. 23.