

Deconstructing “Youth without Regrets”: State Power, Collective Memory, and the Formation of a Popular Narrative on the Educated Youth Generation

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ABSTRACT: Among the many slogans and descriptive terms concerning educated youth, “youth without regrets” occupies a special place. On the one hand, it is one of the earliest and best-known slogans about educated youth, and even became a cultural symbol of China in the 1990s. On the other hand, its initial association with educated youth and popularity actually reflect not so much a coincidence as a complicity between the popular and state narratives. This article thus analyses in depth the whole range of issues related to the slogan “youth without regrets”: the social context and political reasons for its emergence, the process that led to its popularity, its real meaning, and the common misunderstandings surrounding it, as well as the social, cultural, and political functions hidden behind its popularity.

KEYWORDS: China, educated youth, youth without regrets, collective memory, emotion, popular narrative, state power, strategic compromise, 4 June 1989.

On the morning of 27 January 2004, a bus left Chengdu and headed towards Chongqing along the Chengyu highway. Wang was on that bus, both worried and excited. Originally from Chengdu, Wang was the founder of the “Western China educated youth website”¹ (*Zhongguo xibu zhiqing wang* 中國西部知青網). The Internet was booming in China at the time, and from the moment it was created in 2003, the site attracted thousands of subscribers. One user, Ma from Chongqing, challenged Wang on the site’s forum: “You educated youth from Chengdu have put forward ‘youth without regrets.’ This proves that you like your life in the countryside, so why don’t you go back to Yunnan to continue being educated youth?” Wang had tried to explain to Ma that there were compromises to be made, but it was clear that they would not be able to convince each other. Finally, they decided to meet to continue their discussions. Ma invited Wang to Chongqing. Wang rented a bus and went with about 30 other *zhiqing* (知青, educated youth or send-down youth) friends to meet Ma and other educated youth from Chongqing. Although educated youth from Chengdu and Chongqing used to make up a large part of the Yunnan *bingtuan* contingents, they had not seen each other since the end of the Great Return to the City (*dafancheng* 大返城) Movement² in 1979. So Wang was both excited about the reunion after more than

two decades, and worried about escalating the conflict with Ma...³

The above story is both important and very ordinary – important because it immediately raises a question at the heart of this article, namely the origin and meaning of a well-known slogan in China: “youth without regrets” (*qingchun wuhui* 青春無悔).

1. Originally named “Yunnan production and construction corps educated youth website.” Production and construction corps (*Shengchan jianshe bingtuan* 生產建設兵團), hereafter *bingtuan* (兵團), is a semi-military and semi-productive organisation established in the 1950s. From 1968 to 1971, about ten *bingtuan* were designed to recruit educated youth (He and Shi 1996). Compared to educated youth sent to a production team in the countryside (*chadui* 插隊), those in *bingtuan* were more organised and homogeneous as they were concentrated in the same work and living places, and generally remained in contact after returning to the city. This is one of the reasons why, in the 1990s, major commemorative activities were initiated by *bingtuan* educated youth (from Heilongjiang and Yunnan, specifically).
2. The Great Return to the City Movement was a campaign of rebellion launched by educated youth in the Yunnan *bingtuan* from late 1978 to early 1979, demanding a return to their hometowns through strikes, petitions, and simultaneous demonstrations. In this sense, the educated youth of Chengdu and Chongqing were once close “comrades in arms,” as described in the book edited by Qu Bo 曲博 and Luo Xiaowen 羅小文, *颶風刮過亞熱帶雨林: 雲南國營農場知青回憶錄* (*Jufeng guaguo yaredai yulin: Yunnan guoying nongchang zhiqing huiyi lu*, The hurricane crosses the subtropical forest: Memories of educated youth from Yunnan state-owned farms), 2006, Hong Kong: Zhongguo guoji shiyejia chubanshe.
3. Account written based on an interview with Wang, a native of Chengdu, 30 June 2013. For the sake of anonymity, only the surnames of the respondents are mentioned in this article.

If it can be considered ordinary, it is because such gatherings of former educated youths, all of whom had direct experience of the same political and social movement under Mao, have become extremely common since the 1990s. This movement, called Down to the Countryside Movement (*zhishi qingnian shangshan xiaxiang yundong* 知識青年上山下鄉運動) and launched in China in 1953, is indeed a movement of sending people to the countryside that lasted for more than 20 years and affected nearly 20 million urban youth (Bonnin 2004, 2005; Ding 2009; Liu 2009), thus participating in the formation of a generation of educated youth, based on the common experience of participation in the movement. Starting from the controversies surrounding the expression “youth without regrets” among former educated youth, this article aims to take this notion in hand, to draw up its genealogy and decipher the social springs of tension surrounding its use.

Educated youth and “youth without regrets”: Critical state of the art

In China as in the West, the study of the Down to the Countryside Movement, which is central to the historical and sociopolitical understanding of the Mao era, has attracted many scholars. While Western researchers were pioneers in this field and continue to enrich the research today (Bernstein 1977; Seybolt 1977; Bonnin 2004; Xu 2021), Chinese research on the subject only emerged from 1987 onwards (Zhang 1987; Du 1991).⁴ The 1990s, marked by a social context of rising nostalgia, saw the successive publication of numerous collections of individual memoirs of educated youth from different region.⁵ Since 2000, research perspectives on the *zhiqing* have thus been enriched and diversified, whether with work on the artistic practices of the *zhiqing* (Dai 2002; Wang and Yan 2005), on the relations between *zhiqing* and urban-rural interactions (Liu 2008), on the intergenerational relations between *zhiqing* and their children (Yang 2009), or on the reading culture of educated youth (Sun 2016). A research team led by two Shanghai professors, themselves former educated youth, has also been involved in publishing a collection compiling historical documents on the *zhiqing* since the 2000s, making a fundamental contribution to research on the Down to the Countryside Movement (Jin and Jin 2009, 2014, 2019; Jin and Lin 2014).

Among the subjects of research on educated youth, “youth without regrets” is a hot topic. This positive and catchy slogan, which appeared in the early 1990s, is often seen as an expression of self-recognition by the *zhiqing* themselves of the contributions made by their sacrifices during the Down to the Countryside Movement. Beyond the lively discussions it has generated among the public, questioning or legitimising its relevance, this slogan has also attracted the attention of scholars, including historians and sociologists, who have tried to capture its values and meanings from their disciplinary perspectives. These approaches can be summarised along three distinct lines, each with its own limitations.

First of all, the assessments of this slogan in the academic world are mainly based on the observation of the same paradox: how can such a traumatic youth be “without regrets”? The lives of educated youth in the countryside were indeed far from happy:

not only did they lose the opportunity to study, evolve in society, and get married, but some were even abused, sexually assaulted, or accidentally injured to the point of losing their ability to work and even their lives (Bonnin 1989a, 1989b, 2004, 2019a, 2019b; Huo 1992; Liu 2004, 2009; Ding 2009; Lao 2009). In this context, it is indeed counterintuitive to think that the *zhiqing* could ever express any nostalgia towards this trauma. In response to the emphasis on “youth without regrets” in the early 1990s, two other implicitly critical phrases thus emerged among the *zhiqing*: “youth with regrets” (*qingchun youhui* 青春有悔), and “youth impossible to regret”⁶ (*qingchun wufahui* 青春無法悔), both of which have since come under close scrutiny by scholars (Bonnin 2016; Liu 2020). In this context, scholarly discussions about “youth without regrets” have tended to be limited to the collective emotions of the *zhiqing* generation and the opposition of “with” or “without regrets.” This polarisation has been at the expense of analysing other emotions related to suffering memory (grief, anger, or irony) and other material or spiritual difficulties that the *zhiqing* are and have been confronted with – all of which have been largely ignored.

Secondly, researchers have tended to view the *zhiqing* generation as a whole and then focus on the opposition between “elite *zhiqing*” and “ordinary *zhiqing*.” The elite *zhiqing* here refer to the older educated youth who, with their dominant social status and superior cultural capital, would have had the means to influence collective perceptions (Xi Jinping being a typical example), while the ordinary *zhiqing* would refer to the working-class *zhiqing* who rarely have the opportunity to express themselves in public. Based on this opposition, some researchers have tended to conclude that elite *zhiqing* are more likely to defend the legitimacy of the notion of “youth without regrets.”⁷ The link between “with/without regrets” and the socioeconomic status of individuals is therefore described as follows: most *zhiqing* who now belong to the more privileged classes adopt a “without regrets” attitude, while the more disadvantaged, who are still struggling to survive, adopt a “with regrets” and “with resentment” attitude (Huang 2003). The internal

4. See also Liu Shuang 劉雙, “醜陋的老三屆” (*Choulou de laosan jie*, The shameful old three classes), *Huanghe* (黃河), 1999, p. 131-46.

5. Such as the following books: Shi Xiaoyan 石肖岩 (ed.), *北大荒風雲錄* (*Beidahuang fengyun lu*, Varied adventures in Beidahuang), 1990, Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe; Shi Xiaoyan 石肖岩 (ed.), *北大荒人名錄* (*Beidahuang renming lu*, Name list of Beidahuang), 1990, Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe; 草原啟示錄 (*Caoyuan qishi lu*, The teachings of the grassland), 1991, Beijing: Gongren chubanshe; 紅土熱血: 雲南支邊生活實錄 (*Hongtu rexue: Yunnan zhibian shenghuo shilu*, Red lands, warm blood: The lives of youth helping bordering regions of Yunnan), 1991, Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe; Lin Wenshang 林文尚 et al., *青春無悔: 雲南支邊生活紀實* (*Qingchun wuhui: Yunnan zhibian shenghuo jishi*, Youth without regrets: The lives of youth helping bordering regions of Yunnan), 1991, Chengdu: Sichuan wenyi chubanshe; Yang Zhiyun 楊智雲 et al. (eds.), *知青檔案1962-1979* (*Zhiqing dang'an 1962-1979*, Archives of educated youth 1962-1979), 1992, Chengdu: Sichuan wenyi chubanshe.

6. The common translation, “youth without regrets,” although simple in appearance, is somewhat ambiguous, as it replaces the Chinese word for “youth” (age period) with “youth” (person). For “*qingchun wuhui/youthui/wufahui*,” a more accurate translation would be “I have no regrets about my youth,” “I have regrets about my youth” and “I have no way to have regrets about my youth.” In this article, I use the simplest translation.

7. Michel Bonnin 潘鳴嘯, “不要因自己的懷念, 就歪曲上山下鄉運動的事實” (*Buyao yin ziji de huainian, jiu waiqu shangshan xiaxiang yundong de shishi*, One shall not alter facts about the Down to the Countryside Movement because of personal nostalgia), August 2012, *Chenbao zhouban* (晨報週刊): 228; see also Guo (2020).

structure of this generation is more complex than that, however, and the collective memories formulated by different subgroups are in fact often diverse and sometimes go beyond class differences. The point here is not to deny the influence of individuals' current socioeconomic contexts on the forms of their collective memory, but to go beyond this opposition to highlight other factors that potentially influence the narrative of the past, such as geopolitical and cultural factors. This is what this article will analyse in the following sections.

Finally, as some sociologists have pointed out, one of the characteristics of research into Chinese collective memory is that it involves a strong presence of the state. Whether the bearers of memory are individuals or groups, the state has always occupied a central place throughout the course of their lives (Qian and Zhang 2015: 223-4). Indeed, the formation of *zhiqing* memories has also been influenced by this presence. For example, as Liu has pointed out, in the process leading to the success of the phrase “youth without regrets,” “without regrets” would mean that “the *zhiqing* generation shares the suffering of the republic,” thus elevating the suffering of the individual to the level of the state (2003: 72). The phrase “splendour after calamity” (*jie hou huihuang* 劫後輝煌) proposed by the *zhiqing* would in this respect embody, like “youth without regrets,” a form of attempted redemption of historical trauma (Wang and Liu 2006: 57-8). Instructive as they are, however, these analyses tend to focus their attention on the active adaptation of the educated youth's narrative to the presence of the state, neglecting both the strategies developed by the *zhiqing*

themselves to cope with these powerful macro-narratives, and the state's astute reappropriation of these strategies.

Purpose and method of investigation

The aim of this study is to deconstruct this slogan from a sociological point of view by enriching it with a more sociohistorical perspective. The aim is to shed light on aspects that have been overlooked in existing research on “youth without regrets,” namely the specificity of the social and historical context in which this slogan appeared, the discrepancy between the various accounts circulating on the origin of the slogan and the reality of the circumstances leading to its invention, and the way in which the state seized on this slogan to control the political scope of the accounts circulating on “sending people to the countryside.” This analysis draws on first-hand data collected as part of a doctoral research on educated youth. In 2012 and 2013, I travelled to China twice to conduct surveys in major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Kunming. Over a period of three months, I interviewed 40 educated youth from the Yunnan and Heilongjiang *bingtuan* and recorded their life stories in semistructured interviews, which were later transcribed in full. In this context, I was able to interview several witnesses of important moments, whose accounts provide a particularly central and original insight into the context of the emergence and popularity of the slogan “youth without regrets.” Below is a summary table of the *zhiqing* interviewed according to different criteria:

Table 1. Information on the *zhiqing* interviewed during the survey⁸

Zhiqing of the Heilongjiang <i>bingtuan</i>				Zhiqing of the Yunnan <i>bingtuan</i>			
Senior officials	Workers in culture and education	Ordinary employees or independent entrepreneurs	Unemployed or dismissed (<i>xiagang</i> 下崗)	Senior officials	Workers in culture and education	Ordinary employees or independent entrepreneurs	Unemployed or dismissed (<i>xiagang</i> 下崗)
2	5	2	2	2	6	9	12
Men		Women		Men		Women	
6		5		25		4	
Former members of the red categories		Non-members of the red categories		Former members of the red categories		Non-members of the red categories	
8		3		23		6	
Native of Beijing		Native of another locality		Native of Sichuan		Native of other localities	
10		1		25		4	
Total				Total			
11				29			

Source: author.

8. In this table, the first line distinguishes the *zhiqing* interviewed according to their current socioprofessional category. The red categories refer to identities with higher political status and include the so-called five red categories (*hongwulei* 紅五類), namely poor and lower-middle peasants, workers, revolutionary soldiers, revolutionary cadres, and revolutionary martyrs.

Based on the accounts collected during the survey, I will first discuss who actually introduced the slogan “youth without regrets” and under what circumstances, as well as the discrepancy between the accounts I was able to collect and the interpretations usually put forward concerning its origin. I will then analyse the reasons why this slogan is usually misrepresented as an invention of the *zhiqing* of the Heilongjiang *bingtuan*. In the third part, I will touch upon this distortion of information in the process of collective memory formation through the lens of the tensions between collective and individual memory. Finally, I will explain the popularisation of this slogan, which seems to contradict reality in many ways, by focusing on the confrontations and compromises between the state narrative and the popular narrative.

How did “youth without regrets” come to be associated with educated youth?

The first question to be answered is fundamental: who first formulated this slogan and under what circumstances? Although “youth without regrets” is a well-known expression, the answer to this question is not obvious. The slogan was not always associated with the *zhiqing* and was first used in the 1980s to refer to their precursors – the pioneers who were sent from some of the big cities to wilderness areas to clear them in the 1950s (Ding 2009: 26–45).⁹

It was not until the early 1990s, in the context of the rise of the *zhiqing* nostalgia movement (discussed in detail below), that the association between “youth without regrets” and *zhiqing* really emerged. However, it remains to be seen who initially made this association. Several divergent interpretations coexist in the available literature, which mentions very few precise sources. The first two interpretations are mainly formulated by scholars of literary studies, interested in the literature of educated youth. One, formulated by Yang Jian, a literature scholar and himself a former *zhiqing* of the Heilongjiang *bingtuan*, emphasises the general role of the educated youth of this *bingtuan* in the emergence of the association between *zhiqing* and “youth without regrets”:

The slogan *qingchun wuhui* was first put forward in [November] 1990, at the retrospective exhibition on Beidahuang¹⁰ organised by Beidahuang educated youth, and in the book *Various adventures in Beidahuang* (*Beidahuang fengyun lu* 北大荒風雲錄) compiled by the organising committee of that exhibition. These had a very strong influence throughout the country, imperceptibly providing commemorative activities and publications of [*zhiqing*] memoirs throughout the country with a new object of reflection. (2002: 416)

Yang also mentions an essay by the writer Liang Xiaosheng 梁曉聲,¹¹ a former *zhiqing* of the Heilongjiang *bingtuan*, and highlights the key role played by some of Beijing’s elite *zhiqing* (such as the performer Jiang Kun 姜昆) in the organisation of this exhibition in Beijing and in the emergence of the association between *zhiqing* and “youth without regrets.”

A second interpretive trend focuses more specifically on the

figure of Liang Xiaosheng, seeing his literary works as a reflection of his personal complex of “youth without regrets” (Jiang 2007; Kou 2013).¹² Although these scholars do not explicitly state that Liang would have been the first *zhiqing* to come up with this slogan, the close connection between Liang and “youth without regrets” as formulated in this research suggests that Liang would have played a central role in the association of this slogan with the *zhiqing* and its promotion.

A third, completely different interpretation is found in the work of Mi Heduo, a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) historian and former *zhiqing* from Shaanxi. For him, “the proposal of ‘youth without regrets’ [comes] from an eponymous exhibition organised by educated youth from Chengdu and the book of that exhibition”¹³ (2011). He bases his assertion on an interview in a 1998 documentary series, *The old three classes move hand in hand with the republic* (*Laosanjie: Yu gongheguo tongxing* 老三屆: 與共和國同行), and on the book of the same name containing the script of this documentary.¹⁴ As the *laosanjie*, literally the “old three classes”¹⁵ were very active in Chinese society from the late 1980s to the 1990s (as evidenced by the release of this documentary series), some see the *laosanjie* as the main proponents of “youth without regrets” or even assume that they are its direct initiators (Zhang 1998; Chen 2002; Huang 2003 Liang and Li 2014).¹⁶ Nevertheless, this interpretation is not supported by references, and the work does not generally focus on the slogan itself.

Summarising several of the above interpretations, one can see that while researchers and the general public have tended to associate *zhiqing* with “youth without regrets” since the 1990s, no one has really looked into the concrete origin of this slogan or pointed out the inconsistency of the existing interpretations. This article aims to fill this gap by tracing the genealogy of the term more precisely and placing it in its social and political context. Thanks to the unpublished interviews and life stories I have been able to collect, I will show that my investigations corroborate Mi Heduo’s account, but only partially, while at the same time adding clarifications and details to this interpretation. I will also return to

9. See for example the television series written by Wang Hong 王宏, “青春無悔” (*Qingchun wuhui*, Youth without regrets) and screened in 1986.

10. Beidahuang (北大荒) refers to a region in northern Heilongjiang. The exact title of the exhibition mentioned by Yang under the simple title of “黑土地回顧展” (*Hei tudi huigu zhan*, Retrospective exhibition on the black earth) is “魂系黑土地: 北大荒知青歲月回顧展” (*Hunxi hei tudi: Beidahuang zhiqing suiyue huigu zhan*, Our soul is bound to the black earth: Retrospective exhibition of Beidahuang educated youth).

11. Liang Xiaosheng 梁曉聲, “我看知青” (*Wo kan zhiqing*, My takes on educated youth), *Beijing wenxue* (北京文學), 1998, p. 4–27.

12. See also Che Hongmei 車紅梅, “論梁曉聲知青小說的理想主義敘事” (*Lun Liang Xiaosheng zhiqing xiaoshuo de lixiang zhuyi xushi*, On the idealistic account of Liang Xiaosheng’s novels on the educated youth), *Dangdai zuojia pinglun* (當代作家評論), 2020, p. 82–8.

13. Lin Wenshang 林文尚 et al., 青春無悔 (...) (*Qingchun wuhui* (...)), Youth without regrets (...), op. cit.

14. Xiao Jian 曉劍 and Guo Xiaodong 郭小東, 老三屆: 與共和國同行 (*Laosanjie: Yu gongheguo tongxing*, The old three classes move hand in hand with the republic), 1999, Beijing: Zhongguo wenlian chubanshe, p. 42–3.

15. A subgroup of *zhiqing*, the *laosanjie* are high school graduates who completed their studies from 1966 to 1968 and constituted the first massive cohorts of *zhiqing* after the Cultural Revolution. A significant proportion of them had been Red Guards. The *laosanjie* often present themselves as representative of the *zhiqing*. In the documentary series, however, several educated youth do not belong to the *laosanjie*.

16. See also Liu Shuang 劉雙, “醜陋的老三屆” (*Choulou de laosanjie*, The shameful old three classes), op. cit.

the other interpretations, showing that, although it is clearly not the Beidahuang *zhiqing*, nor Liao Xiaosheng, nor the *laosanjie* who proposed this slogan, it is possible to explain sociologically the reasons leading to this widespread belief.

Indeed, it was while conducting interviews that another version of the origin of the slogan was formulated, thus raising my first doubts about the relevance of existing interpretations. Zhang, a former *zhiqing* of the Yunnan *bingtuan* and native of Chengdu, told me:

At that time [in early 1991], we wanted to organise an exhibition on the *zhiqing* movement and then compile the contents of the exhibition into a book and publish it. So we needed a theme for this event and went to visit Ai Wu 艾蕪,¹⁷ who gave us the title *qingchun wuhui*. At that time, only two years had passed since the 1989 crisis and the political environment was very sensitive. Without a politically correct name, the government would not be able to tolerate our commemoration. Many *zhiqing* elsewhere do not understand the historical context of the emergence of “youth without regrets.” In fact, it was an effort that we *zhiqing* from Chengdu made. (Interview with Zhang, 4 July 2013)

According to Qu, also a former *zhiqing* of the Yunnan *bingtuan* native of Chengdu:

At that time, the political atmosphere was tense and a large number of articles were deleted from the original manuscript of the book *Youth without regrets: The lives of youth helping bordering regions of Yunnan*.¹⁸ The articles in the book praising the Down to the Countryside Movement were fillers, added temporarily. At the time of the exhibition, it was not allowed to accompany the photographs of the Great Return to the City Movement with textual explanations. Faced with the government’s demands, we gave in. If the government would not allow us to tell only the truth, then it was always better to tell three true sentences out of ten than to say nothing at all. The “youth without regrets” exhibition and the book were a success. They succeeded in helping this group to create their own voice, to let that voice spread throughout the world, and to let the world know that the *zhiqing* left a spiritual testimony in the Cultural Revolution. (Interview with Qu, 1 July 2013)

This enquiry suggests that the term “youth without regrets” is actually a compromise between the *zhiqing* and the state in a specific political context. Most of those who participated in the organisation of this event and accepted Ai Wu’s proposal were not so-called elites, nor did they seek to promote the movement. On the contrary, as we shall see, the *zhiqing* of the Yunnan *bingtuan* are among the most resistant and critical groups of this forced immigration movement. However, this compromise with the government had unexpected consequences – leading the organisers to become the target of public criticism instead of the authorities. The words of Xie Yiqun 謝軼群, an independent literary critic and writer born in the 1970s, are a good example of

the forms of criticism levelled against this expression later on by some intellectuals:

The Xishuangbanna *zhiqing* devoted ten years of hard labour to opening up vast tracts of rubber forests in the border areas, but 90%, or even 100% of the rubber trees they planted have died since the 1980s! (...) You have devoted your beautiful youth to absurd actions that violate the laws of society and nature: are you builders or destroyers? For such a youth, you even claim to be “without regrets.” What kind of mentality and values do you advocate?¹⁹

Wang, one of the organisers, who was once one of the *zhiqing* who planted rubber trees in Yunnan, said he was powerless to face such criticism even though the slogan, unpopular as it was, had been “hardly won”:

The process of organising this exhibition was really difficult. We had to do everything to get the government to approve our event. We mobilised the connections of many *zhiqing* and their relatives, and managed to get six leaders, including a member of the CCP Politburo at the time, the secretary of the Party Committee and the vice-governor of Sichuan Province, to write us a word of support (*tizi* 題字). The words and signatures of these leaders were the equivalent of “birth permits” [a certificate in China allowing couples to have children] allowing us to hold our event. We also contacted the local police station to inform them that we were holding an event on 8 June and that the Provincial Communist Youth League Committee and the Yunnan General Bureau of Agriculture and Land Clearing had also approved the event. We told the police that if there were any disturbances at the event, we would take the troublemakers to the police station, but we asked them to let them go secretly. (Interview with Wang, 30 June 2013)

These excerpts allow us to identify a number of misunderstandings in the generally proposed interpretations of the emergence and popularity of the “youth without regrets.” On the one hand, the difficult communication between the Chengdu *zhiqing* and the government revealed in the interviews is largely ignored in the public accounts; on the other hand, these interviews enable us to trace the first use of this expression by *zhiqing* from the Yunnan *bingtuan*, thus contradicting the accounts of a large number of people (including Yang Jian) who associate this slogan with the Heilongjiang *zhiqing*. It is this phenomenon that will be examined below.

17. Ai Wu (1904-1992) was a writer from Sichuan, a consultant to the China Writers Association and a member of the Standing Committee of the Sichuan Provincial Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. He embodies a viewpoint that is close to the authorities.

18. Lin Wenshang 林文尚 et al., *青春無悔 (...)* (*Qingchun wuhui (...)*), Youth without regrets (...), *op. cit.*

19. Xie Yiqun 謝軼群, “知青: 自我安慰的‘青春無悔’” (*Zhiqing: Ziwo anwei de ‘qingchun wuhui’*), Educated youth: “Youth without regrets,” a mere self-consolation), *Huaxia wenzhai zengkan* (華夏文摘增刊), 9 July 2012, <http://www.cnd.org/cr/ZK12/cr686.gb.html> (accessed on 29 June 2019).

With or without regrets? The social determinants of memory

I will focus here on answering the following question: Why are people more likely to associate the first use of the slogan "youth without regrets" with Liang Xiaosheng or other elite *zhiqing* from the Heilongjiang *bingtuan*, rather than with the *zhiqing* from the Yunnan *bingtuan*? Let me begin by introducing Liang Xiaosheng. Among the authors of *zhiqing* literature (*zhiqing wenxue* 知青文學), Liang Xiaosheng is probably the best known. Originally from Harbin, in 1968 he was sent to live in the Heilongjiang *bingtuan* for seven years. This experience completely changed his life trajectory: given his literary talent, he was recommended by the *bingtuan* management to enter university and eventually became a writer (Hong 1999: 273). Liang's works thus reveal a deep attachment to the *bingtuan* and a strong tendency to transform experiences of suffering into "personal enrichment":

I hope that in the future, when you remember or talk about the story of our ten years as *bingtuan* soldiers in Beidahuang, you will not complain, curse, ridicule, and... defame... We gave and lost much, but we always got more than we lost.²⁰

Although Liang himself publicly denied that he was the first to speak of "youth without regrets,"²¹ literary critics regularly insisted that his works were full of idealism and that he himself "had not really emerged from the 'youth without regrets' complex" (Wang 2014: 57). Liang Xiaosheng's positive assessment of and gratitude for the educated youth experience, therefore, makes it easy to misunderstand and attribute the authorship of "youth without regrets" to him.

Like Liang's gratitude, emotions are indeed crucial for the formation of a collective memory. Certain unimaginable events produce "massive collective emotional energy" (Assmann 2015: 42-4), and if we consider participation in the Down to the Countryside Movement as a "culture shock" (Oberg 1960), we can see that different subgroups can form diametrically opposed collective emotions. Witness these two typical assessments of *zhiqing* of the Heilongjiang and Yunnan *bingtuan* on their rural life:

The eight years of experience of living in Beidahuang was a positive test for me. The extreme hardships I experienced were also valuable, and I don't think I will be able to have similar ones in the future. (Interview with Bian, Beijing *zhiqing*, 15 July 2012)

When we left Xishuangbanna, many people said that not only would they never set foot here again, but after returning to the city, they would not even pee in this direction! (Interview with Yang, native of Chongqing, 25 June 2013)

The first hypothesis to explain this difference is that collective emotions are formed according to the experiences of individuals. Indeed, from a historical point of view, the contrast between the Yunnan *bingtuan* and that of Heilongjiang is obvious. The Heilongjiang *bingtuan* has always served as a positive role model among the *bingtuan*; it was appreciated by the central government

and was sometimes visited by state leaders. The Yunnan *bingtuan*, on the other hand, has always been infamous for its persecution and abuse of the *zhiqing*, who are often described as losers and exiles of political struggles. One can thus imagine that it is difficult for the latter to develop positive emotions such as "no regrets," "gratitude," and "dedication": "Our generation has endured the sufferings of the republic. But we, the *zhiqing* of the Yunnan *bingtuan*, have a very different temperament from the Beidahuang *zhiqing*" (interview with Yang, 25 June 2013).

Therefore, specific experiences stimulate different emotions in different groups, providing a basis for the formation of collective mentalities. Geographical and political factors also play a role in this process. It is important to mention here the central role of one specific group: the Beijing *zhiqing*. The importance of the capital is indisputable: all political slogans and high-level directives came from Beijing, and political movements often used the situation in Beijing as a reference (Wang 1998: 86-9). In the *bingtuan* of the border regions, the Beijing *zhiqing* were considered to have more political and cultural capital: "Before the Great Return to the City [Movement], most Beijing *zhiqing* had already left the *bingtuan* because their parents had connections. But we didn't have any, so we had to go on strike and petition" (interview with Yang, 2 July 2013).

The Beijing *zhiqing* and those from Chengdu and Chongqing differed in their degree of participation in political movements. Closer to the central government, the former had been able to obtain a "higher education" and experience the movement more directly: "Young people of 15 or 16 are often the most fanatical. At that time, my revolutionary ideal was to liberate all humanity" (interview with Bian, Beijing *zhiqing*, 15 July 2012). The often younger *zhiqing* in Chengdu and Chongqing, on the other hand, were far removed from the whirlwind of central politics, and their understanding of political movements was often more superficial: "When I went to Yunnan, [for me] it was like going to the countryside to learn about agricultural production (*xuening* 學農) in college. I was only 16 years old and didn't have many ideas about political movements" (interview with Wen, native of Chengdu, 5 July 2013). Unlike the Beijing *zhiqing*, therefore, they were driven neither by an awareness of their mission nor by a vanguard spokesperson mentality.

In the process of transforming collective emotions into a collective mentality, certain individuals in the role of spokespersons and some literary works also play an important role – for example, the "without regrets" *zhiqing* of the Heilongjiang *bingtuan* in Liang Xiaosheng's works, or the *zhiqing* of the Yunnan *bingtuan*, with their miserable living conditions, described by Ye Xin 葉辛 in his book *Niezhai* (孽債, Sinful debt).²² The reasons for considering Liang Xiaosheng or other *zhiqing* of the Heilongjiang *bingtuan* as the

20. Liang Xiaosheng 梁曉聲, "今夜有暴風雪" (*Jinye you baofengxue*, A snowstorm is coming tonight), in Liang Xiaosheng 梁曉聲, 梁曉聲知青小說選 (*Liang Xiaosheng zhiqing xiaoshuo xuan*, A selection of Liang Xiaosheng's novels on educated youth), 1993, Xi'an: Xi'an chubanshe, p. 281-416.

21. Liang Xiaosheng 梁曉聲, "我從不認為青春無悔" (*Wo cong bu renwei "qingchun wuhui"*, I never approved "youth without regrets"). *Phoenix New Media* (鳳凰網資訊), 22 October 2009, http://news.ifeng.com/history/zhiqing/mingrenlu/200910/1022_6855_1399779_1.shtml (accessed on 20 April 2019).

22. Ye Xin 葉辛, *Niezhai* (Sinful debt), 1992, Nanjing: Jiangsu wenyi chubanshe.

creators of this slogan thus stem from a combination of different factors: the embellishment and praise of *zhiqing* life in Liang's works, the positive historical image of the Heilongjiang *bingtuan*, and the positive collective mentality of the *zhiqing* who lived there. Beijing's elite *zhiqing* also play a special role: let us not forget that the first major commemorative event on the Down to the Countryside Movement – the exhibition on the lives of the Beidahuang *zhiqing* – was organised by Beijing *zhiqing* near Tiananmen in November 1990 (Bonnin 2019a). All of these factors reinforced a positive nostalgia, seemingly consistent with the “youth without regrets.” In contrast, the *zhiqing* of the Yunnan *bingtuan* native of Chengdu and Chongqing as the initiators of the Great Return to the City Movement embodied an image of resistance fighters. It is therefore understandable that it was difficult for the public to associate positive slogans such as “youth without regrets” with these victims of the movement.

Formation of collective memory: The sacrifice of diversity and the social function of collective narratives

If the previous section has explained the association between “youth without regrets” and the *zhiqing* of the Heilongjiang *bingtuan*, it is now important to ask the following question: How can we understand the diffusion of this expression, even though its meaning seems to run counter to the negative experiences of a number of educated youth? Can we hypothesise a role for the state in the popularity of this slogan? While it is generally accepted that the processes of formation and deformation of collective memory can be directly linked to the power and willingness of the state to shape and deform memory, I will show here that collective memory can be the object of autonomous state (de)formation processes, which partly explains the appropriation of this expression. Pointing to the autonomy of collective memory itself is thus essential to better understand the interplay between the *zhiqing* and the state in terms of narrative domination over historical events.

Let me first point out the conflict between collective and individual memory. A distinctive feature of social memories is that they generally become excessively conventional (Allport 1947: 60). A person affected by emotional circumstances is often eager to share the episode socially. The social characteristics of the person and the intensity of the emotional episode then play a role in the ability to share this experience on a large scope. Large-scale social sharing leads to a process of “secondary social sharing,” which refers to the reception and sharing of emotions or attitudes heard, seen, and experienced by others. Hence, collective interests are served by secondary social sharing as it contributes to the diffusion of emotional knowledge in a community (Rimé and Christophe 1997: 144). In the process of building collective memory, some “individualised” content is erased, while the rest allows the group to achieve consensus and emotional resonance (Finkenauer, Gisle, and Luminet 1997). This phenomenon, which some refer to as “collaborative inhibition of individual and collective memory” (Weldon and Bellinger 1997), may go some way to explaining why, when examining the collective memory of different subgroups

of *zhiqing*, a relatively unified mentality tends to form, such as the gratitude of the *zhiqing* of the Heilongjiang *bingtuan* and the anger of the ones from Yunnan *bingtuan*. This anger, combined with the fact that the Chengdu and Chongqing *zhiqing* had initiated a movement of rebellion (*dafancheng*), further strengthened the link between the Yunnan *bingtuan* and these *zhiqing* in the public mind. Consequently, although at the collective level some memories seem to be forgotten, at the individual level this information has not disappeared but has been strategically ignored in the formation of collective memory.

Secondly, collective memory can gradually deviate from historical truth in popular narratives. A typical example is the association between “youth without regrets” and the “old three classes” (*laosanjie*). As mentioned, some authors see this group as directly related to the emergence and popularity of this slogan; however, no *laosanjie* has ever claimed that this group was the originator of the slogan. This association can therefore be understood in two ways: on the one hand, the slogan “youth without regrets” is reminiscent of the quotations of Chairman Mao enthusiastically chanted by the *laosanjie* when they went to the countryside. On the other hand, the general public criticism of the slogan actually reflects widespread dissatisfaction with the *laosanjie*, often former Red Guards, and other Maoist political movements. Of course, the high level of activity of the *laosanjie* from the late 1980s to the 1990s, and the fact that they see themselves as representatives of the *zhiqing*, also provides a basis for this misunderstanding.

Finally, it is important to emphasise the social functions of the various collective narratives of educated youth that make up the collective memory of this generation, paying attention to its temporal dimension. Stordalen and Naguib have pointed out that there is a causal relationship between “memories of the past” and “present/future goals” (2015: 21-3). Memories of the past tend to be selected or forgotten, arranged and shaped in such a way as to serve the formation of a collective identity corresponding to the goals of the present (Anderson 1991). According to my research, one of the collective claims made by this generation focuses on the recognition by the state and society of the sacrifices they have made and the loss of value they have suffered. The collective self-portrait of this generation, whether in “splendour after calamity” or “difficulties and distinctions” (*kunan yu fengliu* 苦難與風流) (Jin 2008) implicitly embodies this intention, and involves a very particular psychological mechanism, which responds to the dynamics peculiar to China's political structure: in the process of dialogue with the authorities, negative emotions are contained as much as possible, while positive values, such as dedication, pioneering spirit, and sacrifice, are emphasised. The *zhiqing*, knowing that they could not openly criticise the authorities or demand apologies and compensation without the risk of reprisals, hence developed a narrative system with a core of “no regrets” that only awaited official approval. As such, one cannot ignore the particular historical and political context that led to the formation of this negotiation strategy with the authorities, which is discussed in the next section.

The crisis of 4 June 1989 and the rise of nostalgia: The social context of the popularity of "youth without regrets"

A final important question arises: Why and how did "youth without regrets" become popular specifically in the early 1990s? What concrete role did the state play in this process? The answers to these questions must be seen in the context of the nostalgia prevailing in Chinese society at the time. Yang argues that the generational identity of educated youth was born out of the nostalgia of the 1990s, and that *zhiqing* nostalgia was in fact a symbol of cultural resistance (2003). Veg agrees with Yang, while pointing out that the nostalgia expressed by the *zhiqing* reflects the transformation of collective memory from "elite-influenced narratives" to the "voice of ordinary people" (2019: 7-9). For educated youth, nostalgia would thus be both a sign of unease and insecurity, but also a source of identity coherence and an agenda for intervention in the present. It should be added that the state has always played a central role in controlling the content of national memories and the methods of remembering and forgetting (Yang 2005). Bonnin, for example, sees the wider diffusion of nostalgic discourse in Chinese society in the 1990s as a direct consequence of the Tiananmen massacre in 1989. After the 4 June crisis, the authorities did indeed do their best to bolster the Chinese people to return to their own "cultural and historical roots." Under these circumstances, *zhiqing* nostalgia and their commemorative actions were fully encouraged by the authorities. For although the 1960s and 1970s remained sensitive, they were considered less dangerous than the memory of the spring of 1989. In this sense, the tolerance of the authorities towards the activities of the *zhiqing* can be interpreted as a way of cutting a little slack in a particularly tense situation (2019a: 599-601). It is thus not insignificant that the exhibition organised in 1990 by the Beijing *zhiqing* of Beidahuang was located in the National Museum of China, next to Tiananmen Square. Such an event could of course not have taken place without official permission or support.

Therefore, the rise of the nostalgic narrative of the *zhiqing*, represented by the "youth without regrets," reflects a "complicity" between the government and the educated youth. On the one hand, the youth of the former educated youth, as "exemplary and dedicated," was highlighted in order to implicitly denounce the contemporary "disobedient and rebellious youth." On the other hand, the educated youth seized the opportunity to express themselves in public (Bonnin 2019a). They did not necessarily agree with the official intention to turn the Tiananmen massacre into a "non-event" (*ibid.*: 606-8). However, they fully understood the kind of narrative that could be "allowed." It is thus understandable that the authorities still play a predominant and active role in the popularisation and dissemination of the "youth without regrets" discourse.

This interplay between the *zhiqing* and the power of the state sheds light on essential dynamics of contemporary Chinese society. Indeed, this game is reminiscent of the discursive strategies adopted by contemporary petitioners in their negotiations with government agencies, as studied by Thireau and Hua (2010): likewise, this

research supports the idea that an examination of "civic action" in contemporary China must take into account the interactions between state and citizens. The exploration of the emergence and popularity of the "youth without regrets" also provides an interesting case study to complement existing work on popular memory of the Mao era (Veg 2019) and the cultural politics of post-Tiananmen China (Zhang 1998; Zhao 1998).

Conclusion

How can we understand the slogan "youth without regrets" today, and how can we explain the fact that this slogan, associated with nostalgia for the Down to the Countryside Movement, was put forward by those actors least likely to be nostalgic? An examination of the sociopolitical context of the time has been an essential aspect of this article. In the early 1990s, in the face of the urgent need for the authorities to bring about an ideological transformation of society as a whole, educated youth were given the opportunity to express themselves in the public arena. Of course, the Chengdu *zhiqing*, when organising their exhibition in 1991, never thought that this slogan would have such a social impact, even becoming a significant cultural phenomenon. Nor did they expect that this slogan would in turn be used by those who wanted to forget the negative aspects of the Down to the Countryside Movement.

Exploring the role of the state in promoting the nostalgia of educated youth is also crucial. Firstly, this nostalgic slogan is positive enough to be harmless. Secondly, the popular debates around "youth without regrets" has helped to depoliticise the *zhiqing* issue by reducing it to a "with/without regrets" opposition, while other very concrete (and more sensitive) issues have had to be marginalised due to the "collaborative inhibition of individual and collective memory" (Weldon and Bellinger 1997). Finally, and more subtly, as "youth without regrets" was initially a slogan proposed by the *zhiqing* themselves, the state was able to keep a lower profile when this "lost generation" (Bonnin 2006) blamed each other.

However, the fact is that the state constantly monitors and restricts the formation of popular memories. In the same year that the Chengdu *zhiqing* held the "youth without regrets" exhibition, the educated youth of Yunnan *bingtuan* from Chongqing sought to hold a similar exhibition, but without success.²³ According to the educated youth in Chengdu, this was because these *zhiqing* "had a tough attitude and wanted to confront the authorities" (interview with Wang, native of Chengdu, 30 June 2013); but for the Chongqing *zhiqing* themselves, it was because they "did not want to compromise" (interview with Ma from Chongqing, 25 June 2013). The failure to promote this event therefore caused such frustration among Chongqing's educated youth that, in early 2004, the Chongqing *zhiqing* Ma criticised the Chengdu *zhiqing* Wang on the Western China educated youth website for his use of the slogan "youth without regrets." Wang took his classmates to Chongqing in a rented bus to continue the discussion with Ma and other

23. On 14 March 1991, about 200 *zhiqing* from Chongqing were invited to meet, but the government sent the police to cordon off the area and disperse onlookers, so that the event could not be publicised (interview with Luo, native of Chongqing, 10 July 2013).

educated youth from Chongqing. When they met, the two groups could not help but hug and cry, and naturally became friends. They ate, sang, and talked together, and the “debate” was completely set aside. So, whether youth is “with” or “without regrets,” it eventually dissolves into a mutual empathy for the common trials shared during youth.

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