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NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Translated from the French original by Jonathan Hall

- 1 What a strange idea runs through this book! Not the author's, of course, but Mao's, when he sent students from high schools and universities to be educated by illiterate peasants. Admittedly, his admirers would later outstrip him by emptying Phnom Penh of its entire population, but still, he showed them the way.
- 2 It was such an aberration that some contemporary sceptical observers, searching for a "reasonable" explanation, imagined that Mao must have meant to relieve the pressure of new entrants onto the urban labour market. Admittedly, there was an even greater surplus of labour in the countryside, but a few more or a few less would not be noticed! Bonnin magisterially sweeps these demographic arguments aside (pp. 68-70, 436-7, *et al.*) and in general he dismisses any socio-economic account of the motives behind Mao's mad decision. The other, more "positive" motive attributed to Mao, namely the development of the hinterland and the frontier regions, fares no better at Bonnin's hands, since the "educated youth" (*zhiquing*) were not put to work in accordance with their skills, even if only to keep accounts or to teach the illiterate, but were simply added to an agricultural labour force which was already over-supplied with more competent people already hardened by such work.

- 3 That leaves the ideological and political motives: to train revolutionary successors and to get rid of any red guards stubborn enough to cling to the slogan that “to rebel is right”, just when the Prophet himself was revising his earlier pronouncement (pardon the sacrilege: how could Mao be a revisionist?) because it had led to catastrophic results. Each of these two motives played an important role, and although the second of them arose out of particular circumstances, it was not purely opportunistic, since Mao also wished to preserve and strengthen the forms of charismatic power, that is to say, his own. So ideological motives were fundamental, and their aim was not only to give the young softies who had not known Yenan a dose of its harsh schooling, but also to narrow the social gap known as the “three differences”, and pursue other such lofty aims, with which the Chinese (and French) media inundated us at the time.
- 4 Michel Bonnin’s argument is clear and convincing, and its conclusion provides us with an uncompromising overall assessment of those two linked fields, namely the “socio-economic” and the “politico-ideological”. In the end, there is virtually no distinction to be drawn, for the record in both arenas is equally damning—except, of course, for the short-term political gain in ridding the cities of the red guards and re-establishing order. Apart from that, the main difference lies in the fact that the socio-economic balance sheet records no gain, but this is a lesser evil than the political and ideological results, for these show that Mao’s aim of forging revolutionaries led to the production of sceptics.
- 5 Moving from motives to results, the main body of this work of over three hundred pages consists of two very substantial sections and one, inevitably shorter, dealing with the resistance by the people concerned. This was necessarily passive while Mao was alive, but very active and visible when the changes introduced by Deng Xiaoping made such things possible. Although this “overt resistance” of 1978-1979 is analysed at the end of the later brief section (pp. 383-391), its nature is uncovered in a most striking manner two hundred pages earlier (pp. 163-172), through the lengthy consideration given to the development of the *xiangiang* policy of sending educated youth to the countryside. But here the reader encounters one of the stumbling blocks in the book’s overall plan, broadly well organised and instructive though it is, because it forces the author to go over the same ground several times. In order to understand the terminal decline of the *xiangiang* policy, ending in its actual demise, he finds it necessary to give due weight to the social resistance which provoked it, before going on to consider that resistance in its own right. The essence of the matter lies in the earlier considerations, which are moreover new and interesting. I myself did not know that the social resistance had played such a large role.
- 6 Reading this careful analysis of the development of the policy of sending educated youth to the countryside before, during and after the Cultural Revolution, one experiences moments of sheer pleasure in following such an informed, closely argued, and severely critical presentation. But reading the next section, describing the lives of the *zhiqing* banished to the countryside, the pleasure evaporates in the face of the disillusionment, poverty and sheer frustration of the generation of the policy’s victims. The author’s tone is not one of righteous indignation, however. He blends his objective analysis of the difficulties, in adapting to life in the countryside and becoming part of a rural community etc., with quasi-literary flights. Restrained in tone, these draw on testimony from sources which are themselves literary works (by former *zhiqing*) and from interviews which he has conducted in person since the mid-1970s. This section is

deeply moving, and it is indispensable to recall it and bear it constantly in mind when assessing the terrible disruptions brought about by the Great Helmsman's lunacies.

- 7 Back in 1977 Thomas Bernstein published a very good study of these issues, called *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages: The Transfer of Youth from Urban to Rural China* (Yale University Press). But apart from the fact that most of the *zhiqing* were still wasting away in the countryside at the time, the available data cannot be compared with what Michel Bonnin had at his disposal. Thanks to him, we now have a definitive work on an important topic which is far less well known than the red guards episode. Moreover, its significance is greatly enhanced by the author's critical reflections, which are of concern to all readers, sinologists or not.