

# The Rise And Fall Of The “Up To The Mountains And Down To The Countryside” Movement: A Historical Review



## *Abstract*

The *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside (UMDC) Movement* (上山下乡运动) was an important event in the history of the People's Republic of China (PRC). It changed the fate of a whole generation of Chinese and had far-reaching effects on the history of the PRC. As a nationwide urban-

to-rural migration (i.e. the reverse of the urbanization process), it is also unique in human history for its complex origin and the wide scope of its impact (16 million urban youths and nearly every Chinese family), as well as its long duration, tortuous process, and contradictory attributes. However, compared to the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and other political events of the 1960s, the UMDC Movement is rarely known to people who are unfamiliar with Chinese history. Even in the area of Chinese Studies, the UMDC Movement has been misunderstood as a constituent part or a ramification of the Cultural Revolution. This paper reviews the process of the development of the UMDC Movement and analyses the social structural factors in its rise and fall in Chinese history.

## *Introduction*

From 1967 to 1979, more than 16 million[i] Chinese urban youths were sent to the countryside to engage in agricultural production. This was known as the Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement (上山下乡运动). Those 16 million participants, who were named *Zhiqing* (educated youth 知青) after this movement, lived and worked in the countryside as ordinary agricultural labourers during their teenage years. In the early 1980s, when most *Zhiqing* eventually returned to the city, they were immediately faced with the residual issues of the UMDC Movement as well as the challenge of readjusting to urban society.



The UMDC Movement not only changed the fate of a whole generation of Chinese but also had far-reaching effects on the history of the People's Republic of China. However, in overseas Chinese Studies, much less attention has been given to the UMDC Movement than to the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). For many researchers, the UMDC Movement is a constituent part or a ramification of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>[ii]</sup> In terms of the relationship between the two historical events, the Zhiqing Office of the State Council announced an official conclusion in 1981:

“First of all, the ‘UMDC’ was a major experiment carried out by the Communist Party from the 1950s, based on fundamental realities of the country, which then had a large population, a weak economic foundation, and employment difficulties; it was not the result of the Cultural Revolution. Second, the ‘UMDC’ was aimed primarily at resolving employment problems; during the ten years of the Cultural Revolution, it evolved as a political movement under the ultra-left ideology and resulted in serious mistakes in practice.”<sup>[iii]</sup> (Gu 1997, pp. 283–285)

As indicated in the above quotation, the UMDC Movement was characterized by its complex origin, tortuous process, and contradictory attributes. Simply associating it with the Cultural Revolution has led to the neglect of these historical facts. Therefore, to clarify the unique and significant position of the UMDC Movement in Chinese history, this paper reviews its rise and fall and further argues that its origin, development, and termination were all rooted in structural and fundamental contradictions of Chinese society, as well as the evolution of these contradictions under different historical circumstances.

Another theme of this chapter is to identify the *Zhiqing's* position in the history of the UMDC Movement and in Chinese society. The UMDC Movement created the *Zhiqing* group – a whole generation of youths who have been allocated “Zhiqing” as their collective identity. Based on the historical review, this chapter argues that the constitution of the *Zhiqing* group and the connotation of the *Zhiqing* identity both underwent transformations at different stages of the UMDC Movement.

To summarize, a comprehensive historical review lays the foundation for an advanced understanding of the UMDC Movement and *Zhiqing*. The following sections present a clear development process, including a pre-movement phase and three distinct stages of the UMDC Movement.

*Pre-Movement Phase: 1953–1965*



Mobilizing and organizing the Chinese youth to engage in agriculture can be traced back to the 1950s. After 1953, the problems caused by the country's overheated economy became acute. Large numbers of rural youths rushed into the cities to search for jobs. To alleviate employment pressure in the cities, the state sought to encourage these rural youths to go back to their home villages and engage in agricultural production. Those rural youth were called *HuixiangZhiqing* to distinguish them from the subsequent *Zhiqing* – urban youth. Because they were originally from the countryside, their return was regarded as normal and they were not entitled to a resettlement fee or other preferential treatments which were provided to urban youth when they settled down in the countryside. In addition to urban unemployment, another influencing economic factor was the development of agricultural cooperatives. Mao Zedong, the major promoter of rural collectivization, emphasized his opinion that educated young people should move to remote rural areas to make contributions to the nation and achieve personal development.[iv]

Another significant development in the 1950s was youth reclamation teams, which were arranged, organized, and guided directly by the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League. The two models used for these teams were the Beijing Youth Voluntary Reclamation Team(北京市青年志愿垦荒队) and the Shanghai Youth Voluntary Reclamation Team (上海市青年志愿垦荒队).[v] Driven by the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League, youth reclamation teams soon spread throughout the whole country as a new trend. However, they came to an end in 1956 because of economic deficiency and poor management (Ding, 1998, pp.60-68). Moreover, the majority of the urban youths in these reclamation teams failed to adapt to intense farm work and harsh conditions, and they did not settle down in the countryside as they were supposed to (Ding, 1998, p. 60).

The *Huixiang Zhiqing* and the youth reclamation teams were the predecessors of the *Zhiqing*. Apart from this successive relationship, the dilemmas they faced in the 1950s continued to influence the UMDC Movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Subsequent history has demonstrated that these dilemmas, revealed later as inherent problems of the UMDC Movement, had determined in advance its direction and final results.

Of those dilemmas and problems, the most significant one was the employment issue, which cyclically intensified alongside general economic fluctuations. This



was relevant with regard to the contradiction between population growth and development in the economy and education, as well as shortcomings in population, economy, and education policies. The second and consequent problem was that employment pressure and other social problems in the cities were often shifted to the countryside. Lastly, turning educated young people into simple labourers objectively resulted in a waste of human and education resources. Initially, it was hoped that young people would contribute to rural construction by exploiting their knowledge and skills and transforming the rural society with advanced urban culture. However, most urban youths failed to settle down in the countryside. So the ironic fact was that “educated young people were less capable than illiterate peasants” (Ding, 1998, p.63). It is clear now that this was due to the poor production conditions, which stopped these young people from using their advantages. However, in that particular historical period, these young people’s failure and resistance were interpreted ideologically as the weakness and individualism of the bourgeoisie.**[vi]**

After a few years of try-outs, in 1956, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the state decided to adopt mobilizing youth to the countryside as a conventional method to address the employment issue. This time, the urban youth became the target for mobilization. On 23 January 1956, the Political Bureau of the CCP Central Committee (中共中央政治局) issued an “Outline of National Agricultural Development from 1956 to 1967 (draft)” (1956 年到 1967 年全国农业发展纲要[草案]). According to Article Thirty of the Outline, graduates of urban secondary and primary schools, except for those who had managed to enter into further studies and those who had found jobs in the cities, should respond to the call and go down to the countryside and up to mountains to join in agricultural production and participate in the great cause of socialist agricultural construction. For the first time, “Down to the Countryside and Up to the Mountains” (下乡上山) appeared in an official document as a set term, though the sequence here was contrary to the later well-known expression, “Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside” (上山下乡).

In 1958, under the impact of the Great Leap Forward, the implementation of “Down to the Countryside and Up to the Mountains” was halted suddenly. By the end of 1962, the number of idle urban youths had reached 2 million.**[vii]** Soon, the UMDC work was brought back onto the agenda. In October of 1962, the Agriculture and Forestry Office of the State Council (国务院农林办) held the



“Reporting Conference of Resettling Urban Redundant Staff and Young Students in State Farms, Forest Farms, Pastures, and Fisheries (关于国营农林牧渔场安置家居大中城市精简职工和青年学生的汇报会议). Zhou Enlai attended the meeting and delivered a speech. In this speech, he pointed out that resettling the urban population in the countryside was an effective solution to the problem of surplus labour forces in the city. Participants discussed a series of practical issues, including the target and methods of resettlement, expenditure, and resources, as well as corresponding policies, plans, and safeguards. At this meeting, the Leading Group of Resettlement Work of Agriculture and Forestry Office (农林办安置领导小组) was founded, which was the predecessor to the Leading Group Office of *Zhiqing* UMDC (知识青年上山下乡领导小组办公室).

In the two years from 1960 to 1962, the chief method of resettlement was to send youths to state farms. In any case, resettling urban youth in the countryside was a constituent part of the main task of urban population retrenchment, which aimed to alleviate employment pressure in the cities and other associated issues. The situation started to change in 1963. That year, the national economy started to recover; yet, it was in this year that the state announced its decision to carry on the UMDC work as a separate and long-term programme.

From June to July of 1963, the Leading Group Leaders’ Meeting of Resettlement Work for Urban Redundant Staff and Young Students (城市精简职工和青年学生安置工作领导小组长会议) was held in Beijing. At this meeting, Zhou Enlai claimed that mobilizing urban youth to go up to the mountains and down to the countryside ought to be deemed a long-term task. In August 1963, the report from this meeting was approved and issued by the Central Committee of the CCP and the state. Key statements in this report included: the subject of mobilization would no longer be redundant workers but secondary school graduates who had failed to enter into higher education and those who could not find jobs; the age of eligibility would be lowered from 18 to 16; mobilization should be carried out primarily in large and medium-sized cities, and then in towns; each province, city, and autonomous region should set up a 15-year resettlement plan; the main destination for resettlement shifted from state farms to production teams; the ultimate aim was to develop these young students as agricultural workers equipped with knowledge and skills, as well as socialist consciousness, through education and influences from the poor and lower-middle class peasants (贫下中农) and farm workers (Gu, 1997, pp.38-40).



On 16 January 1964, the state issued the “Decision on mobilizing and organizing urban *Zhiqing* to participate in socialist construction in the countryside (draft)” (关于动员和组织城市知识青年参加农村社会主义建设的决定[草案]). Following this document, the Leading Group of *Zhiqing* UMDC (知识青年上山下乡领导小组) and the Resettlement Office (安置办) were set up, followed by the establishment of corresponding organizations at each administrative level.

In February 1965, the Leading Group held a work meeting. In the report of this meeting, Zhou Enlai made several important statements: the UMDC work was significant in terms of cultivating revolutionary successors, eliminating the “three main differences” (worker-peasant, city-countryside, and brainwork-manual work) and constructing the new socialist countryside; the state was responsible for the resettlement of *Zhiqing* and for providing them with a good livelihood in the countryside; a 15-year plan should be drawn up cautiously and the UMDC work should be brought into the integrated planning of the urban workforce (Gu, 1997, pp.60-64). By the time of this meeting, the pre-movement phase had reached its end. A new chapter of the UMDC Movement was about to start.

The above historical review shows that the UMDC work from early 1950s to 1965 went through the following stages:

Stage 1: secondary and primary school graduates were encouraged to go back to their home villages or to form youth reclamation teams (1953-1956);

Stage 2: unemployed urban youth and those who had failed to enter higher education became the target groups for mobilization (1957);

Stage 3: mobilization and resettlement work was suspended during the Great Leap Forward (1958 and 1959);

Stage 4: mobilization and resettlement work was reactivated; the main destination in resettlement was state farms (1960-1962);

Stage 5: production teams became the main destination; mobilization and resettlement work was institutionalized and regularized and was highlighted as a separate, routine, and long-term project by the CCP and the state (1963-1965).

Thus, it can be seen that during the pre-movement phase, mobilizing educated young people gradually changed from a provisional measure into well-planned and rigorously managed routine work. This was a phase of exploration and intentional preparation for the following massive UMDC Movement. By turning a provisional solution to the cyclical unemployment problem into a significant routine project, the CCP and the state put a much higher value on the UMDC



work after 1962. This strategic change led to significant transformations of the UMDC work, including the regularization and institutionalization of mobilization and organization, as well as the formation of guiding ideologies.

First of all, a complete model of mobilization and resettlement work was established. This model, as summarized by Ding (1998), was made up of unified organization and rigorous planning by the state, political mobilization, and state provision of material needs. This led to the institutionalization and regularization of the mobilization and organization work. For example, the resettlement plan was incorporated as part of the annual national economic plan; specialized organizations were established at different administrative levels; and a special fund was provided and planned by the state to provide resettlement fees (Ding, 1998, p. 236-241).

Second, since the early 1960s, ultra-left ideologies gradually took control over the UMDC work and turned it into a political movement. In April 1964, the Communist Youth League submitted the “Report on Organizing Urban *Zhiqing* to Engage in Socialist Construction in the Countryside” (关于组织城市知识青年参加农业社会主义建设的报告) to the Central Committee of the CCP. This report stated clearly that mobilizing urban youths to go to the countryside was of great importance to the revolutionization of educated young people, and hence it ought to be carried out as an important political task. The guiding ideology was: “Educated young people, as part of the petty bourgeoisie category, needed reinvent themselves. The only way was to integrate with workers and peasants by engaging in manual labour . . . It was the first step in the revolutionization of these youth.”[viii]

Third, the *Zhiqing* group gradually took shape during the pre-movement phase. It was differentiated from other social groups in terms of its exclusive rights and obligations. On the one hand, *Zhiqing* were entitled to a certain resettlement fee, which guaranteed their basic needs were met at the initial stage of resettlement, including grains for the first year, expenses related to new houses, and farm tools.[ix] On the other hand, *Zhiqing* were obliged to transfer their registered permanent residence (户口) from an urban residence (城市户口) to a rural residence (农村户口), and were thereby in a very real sense forced to settle down in the countryside.[x]

From the early 1960s, domicile control became more and more important in the



UMDC work. Through the control over registered permanent residence, the UMDC work became an effective means of urban population control and labour force allocation. This was the major reason that sending *Zhiqing* to the countryside had been implemented as a long-term task since the early 1960s. Moreover, because of the economic and hierarchical implications of the household registration system, the identity change from urban youth to *Zhiqing* had fundamental significance for these young people's livelihoods and self-development.[xi] When *Zhiqing* left their home cities for the countryside, their registered permanent residences were transferred simultaneously to the corresponding production teams or farms, so that they would take root in the countryside and become real peasants.[xii] As a result, "Zhiqing" was no longer associated with its original meaning: youths who have had a certain amount of knowledge (知识青年). Rather, it referred specifically to young urban students who were sent to the countryside and were supposed to take root there and become agricultural labourers thereafter. A whole generation's destiny was changed completely.

#### *The UMDC Movement: 1967-1981*

After the commencement of the Cultural Revolution, all universities and schools shut down in May 1966. On 13 June, the Central Committee of the CCP and the State Council issued the "Notification of University Entrance Examination Reform"(关于改革高等学校招生考试办法的通知). Another document, "Notification of University Enrolment Reform"(关于改革高等学校招生工作的通知), was released on 24 July. As a result, university and college enrolment was suspended until 1970.[xiii]

Driven by restless red guards, the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution soon swept over the whole country. To control the situation, the Central Committee of the CCP, the State Council, the Central Military Commission, and the Central Cultural Revolution Group released the "Notification of Resuming Revolution in Classes"(关于大、中、小学校复课闹革命的通知) on 14 October 1967. This notification "indicated that the Red Guards Movement had completed its historical mission" (Gu, 1997, p.108). In November of 1967, most school students went back to their classes. Secondary school enrolment started as usual but universities and colleges were still closed. At the same time, the economy had experienced a 9.6 per cent decrease in the gross output value of industry and agriculture, while job recruitment had been suspended in most factories because of the unrest. As a



result, millions of secondary school graduates became surplus urban labour, causing enormous pressure in terms of employment and social stability.

Under such circumstances, the UMDc work was brought back on the agenda. On 4 May 1967, The *People's Daily* published an editorial: “*Zhishi Qingnian Must Integrate with Workers and Peasants*” (知识青年必须同工农相结合). Later, on 9 July, it published another editorial, “Asserting the Right Direction of *Zhiqing* UMDc” (坚持知识青年上山下乡的正确方向). These editorials showed that the propaganda at that time followed the theme of the pre-movement phase: the revolutionization of the youth. A few red guards like Cai Lijian (蔡立坚) and Qu Zhe (曲折) responded to the call and volunteered to go to the countryside.<sup>[xiv]</sup> After this, sending urban youth to the countryside soon became a nationwide UMDc Movement.

The entire UMDc Movement can be divided into three main stages in accordance with policy changes: stage one, from 1967 to 1969; stage two, from 1969 to 1973; and stage three, covering the period from 1974 to 1978 and the termination of the movement between 1978 and 1981. Table 1 illustrates this development process.

Table 1. Number of *Zhiqing* (1962–1979)

Year	Total	Production Teams	Collective Farms & Production Teams	State Farms
Total	17,764,800	12,822,100	2,030,800	2,911,900
1962–1966	1,292,800	870,600		422,200
1967–1968	1,996,800	1,659,600		337,200
1969	2,673,800	2,204,400		469,400
1970	1,064,000	749,900		314,100
1971	748,300	502,100		246,200
1972	673,900	502,600		171,300
1973	896,100	806,400		89,700
1974	1,724,800	1,191,900	346,300	186,600
1975	2,368,600	1,634,500	496,800	237,300



1976	1,880,300	1,228,600	415,100	236,600
1977	1,716,800	1,137,900	419,000	159,900
1978	480,900	260,400	189,200	31,300
1979	247,700	73,200	164,400	10,100

Source: Table 3B in *Spring Tide*(Liu, 1998, p.863).

#### *Stage one: 1967-1969*

During this transition period, ordinary *Zhiqing* work eventually turned into a political movement – the UMDC Movement. A crucial event was the announcement of the “Re-education Theory” (再教育理论), which replaced the old slogans like “Revolutionization of the Youth” and “Revolutionary Successors”, and became the dominant ideology of the UMDC Movement.

Since the commencement of the Cultural Revolution, ideological factors had started to play a more and more critical role in mobilization and propaganda. Two typical examples were the Propaganda Team of the People’s Liberation Army (军宣队) and the Workers’ Propaganda Team (工宣队).<sup>[xv]</sup> Under these specific circumstances, many politically activist students joined the UMDC Movement out of genuine aspirations. For others, joining the UMDC Movement became an important way to prove their trustworthy political position and their loyalty to the Party and to Chairman Mao.

In September, *People’s Daily* quoted Mao Zedong’s instruction:

“Most of the students educated in old schools are able to integrate with workers, peasants, and soldiers . . . but they should be led under the right direction and re-educated by workers, peasants, and soldiers, and thus completely change their old mind-set. This kind of intellectual is welcomed by workers, peasants, and soldiers.”<sup>[xvi]</sup>

Before 1966, “Revolutionization of the Youth” was a slogan for encouraging *Zhiqing* to undertake the transition from educated urban youth to simple labourer in the countryside. The new guiding ideology – the “Re-education Theory” – had a much stronger mandatory significance, as young students were now obliged to go to the countryside to receive re-education there.

On 22 December 1968, the *People’s Daily* published a report on the story of urban



citizens in Huining County, Gansu Province, who had moved to the countryside to engage in agricultural production. The reporter quoted Mao Zedong's special instruction on this:

"It is necessary for *Zhiqing* to go to the countryside and get re-educated by poor and lower-middle class peasants. We should persuade urban cadres and other people to send their children who are graduates of junior and senior high schools and universities to the countryside, to carry out the mobilization. Comrades in various rural areas should welcome them."**[xvii]**

It soon became the guiding ideology of the UMDC Movement, known as the "12/22 Instruction". Under the effect of Mao's powerful command, the scope of the UMDC Movement was soon extended from big cities to all cities and towns. From 1967 to 1969, over 4.6 million urban youths joined the UMDC Movement (over 2.6 million joined in 1969 alone), making these three years the first climax of the movement.**[xviii]**

To summarize, the first stage was of significant importance to the entire UMDC Movement for the following reasons.

First, it created a specific group: the "Old Three Grades" (*Laosanjie* 老三届), secondary school students who had graduated in 1966, 1967, and 1968 and who had been stuck at home since the commencement of the Cultural Revolution. In other words, they were the original reason for the restoration of "UMDC". It is worth mentioning that many *Laosanjie* went to the countryside before the "12/22 Instruction", and that some of them were among those volunteers who had initiated the UMDC Movement in 1967. In this regard, within the *Zhiqing* group, *Laosanjie* had relatively idealistic and positive attitudes towards the UMDC Movement.

Second, from the pre-movement phase to the first stage of the UMDC Movement, the ever-changing guiding ideology resulted in multiple connotations of the *Zhiqing* identity: a new generation of educated peasants as contributors to socialist rural construction; revolutionary youth as successors of the socialist course; and, children of the petty bourgeoisie that ought to be re-educated in the countryside. In fact, throughout the process of the movement, these three connotations often fused together and manifested as a single *Zhiqing* identity. This ambiguity has been a main cause of individual *Zhiqing's* identity problems.



### *Stage two: 1969-1973*

After the upsurge in take-up in the first stage, the routine work began, of which a major part was resettlement work, including the regulation and management of the resettlement fee[**xix**] and methods of resettlement.[**xx**] Compared with the routine work, a more challenging task for the authorities was to cope with a low tide in engagement with the UMDC Movement.

As Table 1 above shows, the number of *Zhiqing* started falling in 1970, followed by a sharp three-year slump: fewer than nine hundred thousand signed on in each year from 1971 to 1973. Reasons for this are summarized in Gu's (1997) "The Whole Story of *Zhiqing* UMDC in China" as follows: senior high schools and vocational schools started recruitment again, which postponed job assignment for a few school graduates; in the national economy's three-year recovery period(1970-1972), actual numbers of new workers substantially exceeded annual recruitment plans; and, realizing that opportunities to stay in the city had increased, urban youth became less enthusiastic about joining the UMDC Movement (Gu, 1997, p.125).

Fundamentally, the sharp slump was a result of serious problems of the UMDC Movement. After settling down in the countryside, many *Zhiqing* lived in dire poverty because of maladjustment and their incapability for agricultural work. They thus became heavy burdens on local finances, causing conflicts between *Zhiqing* and peasants, as well as between cities and villages. Furthermore, some *Zhiqing* suffered discrimination and even persecution, which was due to weak regulation and poor management.[**xxi**] According to Liu (1998), an over-emphasis on mobilization led to the neglect of planning and preparation for possible problems after resettlement; moreover, "Re-education Theory" resulted in an inferior social status for *Zhiqing*, which consequently intensified their plight in the countryside (Liu, 1998, p.275). In other words, the low tide of the UMDC Movement during the second stage was an inevitable consequence of the climax in the previous stage.

In 1970, the central authorities started to look for solutions to these problems. One approach was to adjust the guidelines for and the operation of the UMDC Movement.[**xxii**] In addition to this, the state also relaxed education and employment policies to provide more opportunities for *Zhiqing*. In June 1970, the Central Committee of the Communist Party approved the "Report on Recruitment (pilot projects) by Beijing University and Qinghua University" (北京大学、清华大



学关于招生[试点]的请示报告).[xxiii] According to this report, university and college recruitment would be resumed based on the new method of “a combination of masses recommend, leaders approve, and university/college recheck” (群众推荐、领导批准、学校复审相结合的办法). This method was applied nationwide from 1972. After 1970, a few *Zhiqing* were permitted to go back to cities every year through this programme.[xxiv] In February 1971, the “National Planning Conference” (全国计划会议) ended in Beijing. *Zhiqing* were included in the plan for job recruitment for the first time. The eligibility requirements included recommendations from poor and lower middle peasants and at least two years’ work experience in the countryside.



Opportunities for higher education and job recruitment placated *Zhiqing* but gradually led to new troubles. First, fierce competition for these opportunities caused disputes and low spirits in the *Zhiqing* group. Second, a few cases of favouritism, fraud, and abuse of authority in quota allocation damaged the reputation of the UMDC Movement and further aggravated the difficulties of mobilization. Fundamentally, policy adjustment could not address the structural problems and inherent contradictions of the UMDC Movement. Nevertheless, even these effective adjustments were interfered with or dropped due to a series of political incidents. Consequently, the first low tide of the UMDC Movement had become a crisis by the early 1970s. A typical manifestation of this serious crisis was Li Qinglin’s letter to Mao Zedong.

In December 1972, Li Qinglin, the parent of a *Zhiqing* from a small town in Fujian Province, wrote a letter to Mao Zedong. In this letter, he stated the difficulties his son had in the countryside and the financial burden this had placed on his family, as well as his concerns for the futures of his two sons.[xxv] In April 1973, he got the reply from Mao Zedong. To his letter, Mao Zedong attached 300 Renminbi, and wrote: “There are many similar issues around the country. Please allow us to comprehensively address them through overall planning” (全国此类事甚多，容当统筹解决). This became a turning point in the history of the UMDC Movement because it triggered the “National Conference on the UMDC Work”-a response to Mao’s instruction regarding “overall planning”.



In 1973, the State Council held the “National Conference on the UMDC Work” (全国知识青年上山下乡工作会议) from 22 June to 7 August. After this conference, important policy changes and concrete measures were implemented. First, administrative bodies were established so as to strengthen the management and organization of the movement and *Zhiqings*’ lives. Second, the state increased its financial input to improve *Zhiqings*’ living conditions in the countryside. Third, the abuses of power for personal gain – “getting in through the back door” (走后门) – were addressed. Fourth, criminals who persecuted *Zhiqing* were interrogated and punished. Fifth, favourable policies were issued in relation to disabled youths, only children, and others with particular situations. Sixth, new methods of resettlement were applied, including the establishment of collectively-owned farms and production teams for *Zhiqing* and the appointment of cadres to support and lead *Zhiqing*. Seventh, a six-year plan (1973–1980) was released to guide overall organization of the Movement. Eighth, four routes of access to the city were clarified: job recruitment, university enrolment, conscription, and promotion (Gu, 1997, pp.141–142).

The National Conference marked the end of the second stage of the UMDC Movement. *Zhiqing* who had gone to the countryside during the five years from 1969 to 1973 were called *Xinwujie* (The New Five Grades 新五届). The “xin” (new 新) in “*Xinwujie*” was in contrast to the “lao” (old 老) in “*Laosanjie*”. As indicated by the contrast between “*Laosanjie*” (the Old Three Grades) and “*Xinwujie*” (the New Five Grades), stage two was the opposite of the first: it was a period of low uptake and adjustments.

As pointed out earlier, this low tide had resulted directly from the over-heated mobilization in stage one. As a reflection of underlying issues, fluctuations of the UMDC Movement were rooted in the inherent contradictions of the UMDC Movement. These contradictions included the interrelation of population growth, employment, and economic development, the urban-rural gap and rural construction, overall planning and adjustments in practice. These fundamental contradictions had existed since the pre-movement phase of “UMDC”. As “UMDC” gradually turned into a political movement under the control of the ultra-left faction, these contradictions intensified and resulted in the first crisis of the UMDC Movement. Through the National Conference and subsequent adjustments, the authorities suspended the deepening of this crisis. From then on, the UMDC Movement entered into its third stage, which was characterized by a



second climax in participation.

### *Stage three: 1974-1978*

The second climax of the UMDC Movement lasted from 1974 to 1977. In these four years, over 7.6 million *Zhiqing* went to the countryside (over 1.7 million per year). This can be attributed to the aforementioned adjustments to policies and methods after the National Conference on the UMDC Work.[xxvi] Some of these adjustments were temporary administrative modifications, while other structural changes did impact the trend and the nature of the UMDC Movement. As a result, during stage three, the UMDC Movement gradually deviated from its original purpose and moved towards its end.

One significant change occurred in relation to changes in the method of resettlement. In the third stage of the UMDC Movement, resettlement destinations moved closer to the *Zhiqings'* home cities or even to surrounding suburbs; relocation sites moved from production teams to production brigades and communes; new farms and brigades were established for *Zhiqing* (Liu, 1998, p.439). Two typical examples were the Zhuzhou Model (株洲模式) and the Leading Cadre System (干部带队制), which were promoted throughout the country.[xxvii]

The Zhuzhou Model was developed in 1973 in Zhuzhou City of Hunan Province. In this city, mobilization and resettlement work was organized by urban factories and mines in which *Zhiqing's* parents worked, and was also supported by the close cooperation between these factories and mines and the villages. The Leading Cadre System aimed mainly to protect the safety and rights of *Zhiqing* and to assist them in daily life and education in the countryside. The Zhuzhou Model highlighted the fact that, in order to sustain the UMDC Movement, the city ought to play a more significant role by sharing the responsibility with the countryside. Considering that initially *Zhiqing* were sent to the countryside in order to reduce burdens on the cities, the Zhuzhou Model was inconsistent with that original purpose. The Leading Cadre System showed that the state had to step in to reconcile divergence between the *Zhiqing* group and rural society. The failure of the *Zhiqing* to blend into rural society had proved that the Re-education Theory was not feasible in reality. Most importantly, the Zhuzhou Model and the Leading Cadre System were both expensive solutions. In fact, the increasing cost of the UMDC Movement became a main reason for the authorities to eventually abandon it.



Another significant change came in terms of the job assignment system. Since 1973, disabled youth, only children, and other urban youths with particular situations had been exempted from "UMDC". Due to these favourable policies, more and more secondary school graduates were staying in the city. Meanwhile, the number of returned *Zhiqing* had also increased rapidly as the relevant policies had been relaxed since the National Conference on the UMDC Work. By 1976, over 7.3 million *Zhiqing* had left the countryside, which was nearly half of the total number. The growing number of remaining graduates and returned *Zhiqing* gave rise to an increasing sense of relative deprivation in the *Zhiqing* group and hence affected its cohesiveness and morale. Not to mention that it was a huge waste of money and resources to send urban youths to the countryside and then recruit them back to the cities around two years later. As their stay in the countryside grew longer, the *Zhiqing* turned away from revolutionary ideals and enthusiasm towards hopes for opportunities to return to the cities. Hence, the ironic fact was that the authorities had to keep channels for returning available to *Zhiqing* in order to continue the UMDC Movement.

Judging from the implications of these significant changes, the UMDC Movement had gone off its designed track. In an economic sense, the movement had been designed to reduce the financial pressure on the state and to develop agriculture and rural society. The fact, however, was the UMDC Movement became a heavy burden on the state's finances, and most *Zhiqing* did not have any opportunities to use their knowledge or skills in the countryside. In a political and ideological sense, "UMDC" was intended to transform a whole generation into qualified successors of the socialist course. However, instead of becoming a new generation of educated agricultural labourers, the *Zhiqing* turned into a special group in rural society which was at odds with its environment and was dependent upon the state. Another ideological objective of the UMDC Movement, "eliminating the three major differences", also became empty talk. Because of their personal experiences, these social structural inequalities only became more prominent to *Zhiqing*, intensifying their desire to leave the underdeveloped countryside.

However, it became clear that, to resolve practical problems and carry on the UMDC Movement, the state would have to adjust its original plans and established measures. This meant that the state had to accept compromise in terms of the various opinions of *Zhiqing*, their parents, peasants, administrative



bodies, and other stakeholders. As pointed out by Liu (1998, p.461): “The result was that the UMDC Movement deviated from its original purposes. Leaders were stuck in a vicious circle.”

These compromises were supposed to provide a next-best outcome. However, most of the effective adjustments were disrupted by the “Gang of Four” from 1974 on. Before the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, many problems had become acute due to the negative impacts of the power wielded by the ultra-left faction.**[xxviii]** Under these circumstances, Mao Zedong issued another important instruction on the UMDC Movement on 12 February: “It might be better to carry out special research on the *Zhiqing* issue. [We] should first make preparations and then hold a conference to solve this issue.”**[xxix]** This was known as the “2/12 Instruction”. Following this instruction, related organizations and officials started to prepare for the “Second National Conference on the UMDC Work”.

The Eleventh National Congress of the CCP in 1977 marked the official termination of the Cultural Revolution. At that time, the guiding ideology, the “Two Whatevers”,**[xxx]** became a big obstacle to a thorough settlement of the *Zhiqing* issue. On 11 May 1978, “Practice is the Sole Criterion for Testing Truth” (实践是检验真理的唯一标准) was published in the *Guangming Daily*. This article was soon reprinted by the *People’s Daily*, the *People’s Liberation Army Daily*, and other major newspapers. This triggered a nationwide debate on the “Two Whatevers” and the “Practice Criterion”. By the end of 1978, the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CCP had noted the success of the “Practice Criterion”. This debate paved the way for the ideological settlement of the *Zhiqing* issue.

From 31 October to 10 December 1978, the “Second National Conference on the UMDC Work” took place in Beijing. On 12 December, the Central Committee of the CCP released two documents: the “Minutes of the National Conference on the UMDC Work” (全国知识青年上山下乡工作会议纪要) and the “Trial Provisions about Several Issues of ‘UMDC’ by the State Council” (国务院关于知识青年上山下乡若干问题的试行规定). The main resolutions recorded in these documents are summarized by Gu (1997): first, the UMDC Movement would be continued for the purpose of terminating it under appropriate circumstances; second, the movement would be downsized gradually, and some qualified cities were allowed to stop mobilizing their urban youth; third, resettling *Zhiqing* in production teams



would be replaced by establishing *Zhiqing* farms and production teams with preferential policies; fourth, *Zhiqing* in production teams would be relocated; and fifth, cities and towns would be required to expand employment (Gu, 1997, pp. 178-185).

Like the National Conference in 1973, the Second National Conference was another watershed event in the history of the UMDC Movement. However, the second conference led it in the opposite direction to the first - namely, towards the end of the movement. As indicated by the five key points listed above, this conference sent out, to the whole country, a signal that the termination of the UMDC Movement had been put on the agenda. In reality, large numbers of *Zhiqing* in production teams started flocking into cities through channels that had opened after this conference.

The above review of the three stages of its development shows clearly that, despite the unusual climax in stage one, the UMDC Movement underwent a process of “risk - adjustment - another risk - re-adjustment”. For the movement and its leaders, this was a vicious circle. For individual *Zhiqing*, it was a significant developmental stage in their course of their lives. During their stays in the countryside, they experienced what they had not been taught in school: the reality of rural society and peasants’ real lives. Through their personal experiences, they were able to rethink ultra-left ideologies which, in the meantime, were losing their dominance.

This was directly related to *Zhiqing* who went to the countryside in the final stage, from 1974 to 1978, who were known as *Houwujie* (the Post Five Grade 后五届). *Houwujie* was a group of *Zhiqing* who witnessed drastic changes in policies and measures throughout their UMDC experiences. From stage one to stage three, the UMDC Movement underwent two periods of significant adjustment and eventually moved towards its end. Apart from this explicit clue, changes to the ethos of the *Zhiqing* group concatenated into an implied clue as to the course of the UMDC Movement. Moreover, these explicit and implied clues or factors influenced each other and both became embedded in the general history of Chinese society. In this way, they constitute the history of the UMDC Movement and the *Zhiqing* group and were interwoven into its rich context.

### *Termination: 1978-1981*

A crucial event happened before the official termination of the UMDC Movement:



the resumption of the University/College Entrance Examination in 1977.[xxxii] This had a significant impact on the *Zhiqing* group. On the one hand, *Zhiqing* regained their hopes for higher education; on the other hand, it accelerated the disintegration of the *Zhiqing* group. Another important trend was that the state had started to use economic means to resolve the *Zhiqing* issue after the end of the Cultural Revolution. In March 1978, Deng Xiaoping expressed his desire to bring the *Zhiqing* issue into the overall planning for urban employment. In a series of preparatory discussions before the Second National Conference, central leaders like Deng Xiaoping, Li Xiannian, and Hu Qiaomu emphasized the necessity and significance of developing the economy and creating more jobs for *Zhiqing*. [xxxii]

It was clear that even before the Second National Conference, the CCP and the state had sought to end the UMDC Movement in a gradual way by shifting the focus from ideological to economic measures. This time-consuming strategy required overall planning and the collaboration of many government sectors. However, the reality was that the *Zhiqing* would not wait any longer.

In October 1978, *Zhiqing* in Jinghong Farm in Yunnan Province sent two successive joint letters to the State Council. In December, a petition group of these *Zhiqing* arrived in Beijing where they were received by Vice-Premier Wang Zhen and Minister for Civil Affairs Cheng Zihua. [xxxiii] After this meeting, the Yunnan *Zhiqings'* protests ceased for a while but then started again in January 1979. The protests soon developed into a trend that swept across 21 provinces and areas in February 1979. The state had to take a series of emergency measures to calm the situation. [xxxiv] The state further relaxed the controls on returning to the city, which led to a mass exodus of *Zhiqing* from the countryside in a short period of time. In 1979, only 247,000 *Zhiqing* went to the countryside, while nearly four million *Zhiqing* returned to the city. This suggested that the UMDC Movement had come to an end, although it had not officially been announced yet.

In August 1980, the Central Committee of the CCP and the State Council convened the “National Conference on Labour Employment Work” (全国劳动就业工作会议). After the conference, comprehensive solutions were applied to ensuring employment for *Zhiqing* in the cities. [xxxv] In 1981, most of the unemployed *Zhiqing* found jobs. The unemployment rate decreased from 5.4 per cent in 1979 to 3.8 per cent. Apart from creating jobs for *Zhiqing*, the authorities



also went to great efforts to resolve left-over problems of the UMDC Movement, such as making arrangements for disabled *Zhiqing* and married *Zhiqing* and their children, as well as calculating *Zhiqing*'s working years and auditing UMDC funds.[xxxvi]

In October 1981, the Zhiqing Office drafted the "Review and Summary of *Zhiqing* Work over Twenty-Five Years" (二十五年来知青工作的回顾与总结). This official document summarized important aspects of the UMDC Movement, including its origin, processes, faults, and experience. At the end of 1981, the Zhiqing Office was incorporated into the State Labour Bureau, followed by similar changes in provincial and municipal governments. This marked the official termination of the UMDC Movement as well as the beginning of a post-movement era. The latter has been a difficult on-going journey of recovery and adaptation for *Zhiqing* and the whole society in both material and spiritual senses.

### *Summary*

The UMDC Movement was a unique event in human history. As was shown in the above historical review, it was characterized by its long time-span, wide scope, multiple changes, and complex background and factors, as well as its contradictory nature. Its origin, development, and termination were all rooted in structural and fundamental contradictions in Chinese society, as well as the evolution of these contradictions under different historical circumstances. Even the most criticized ultra-left ideologies and the resultant politicization of the UMDC work followed a historical logic, rather than being products of power struggles or Mao Zedong's personal aspirations.

The uniqueness and complexity of the UMDC Movement has created difficulties for its researchers. Just as Bernstein[xxxvii] pointed out in 1977, assessment of the UMDC Movement should consider alternative options under the same circumstances as well as the cost-benefit ratios of these options. This leads us to several questions: first, what costs would have the state and the society paid to deal with the issue of urban surplus labour if there had been no "UMDC"?; second, how many of the 16 million urban youths would have received higher education if they had not gone to the countryside?; third, what would have the rural economy and rural society been if the urbanization process had started in the 1960s? A profound understanding of the UMDC Movement should take these questions into consideration.



These questions evolve into more detailed and more complex questions, and point out directions for future studies which would necessarily need the participation of researchers from multi-disciplinary backgrounds. As a comprehensive review, this article has presented complicated historical details and represented a rich social historical context for future researchers to further develop a study on the UMDC Movement and the *Zhiqing* group, providing the basis for a better understanding of the history and the nature of their research object.

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## NOTES

- [i]** Historians disagree as to the exact number of *Zhiqing*. This article adopts the figure given in *Spring Tide* (Liu, 1998, p.863).
- [ii]** This conclusion is based on the author Wu's literature review on previous studies in her PhD thesis, *A Study of the Zhiqing Identity* (Wu, 2013).
- [iii]** "Review and Summary of *Zhiqing* Work over Twenty-Five Years" (二十五年来知青工作的回顾与总结). See the original context of this document and other summaries and evaluations of UMDC Movement in *The Whole Story of Zhiqing UMDC in China*, (Gu, 1997, pp.283-285).
- [iv]** In 1956, *The Climax of Socialism in Rural China* (中国农村的社会主义高潮)



(General Office of the CCP Central Committee, 1956) was published and included 104 notes by Mao Zedong.

**[v]** The Beijing team went to Luobei in Heilongjiang and established the first communist youth farm, which they named Beijing Village (*Beijing zhuang* 北京庄), in August 1955. The Shanghai team set up a Communist Youth Commune in De'an in Jiangxi a month later.

**[vi]** Ding Yizhuang argues that this was in fact where the guiding ideology of the UMDC Movement - "Re-education Theory" (再教育理论) - derived from (Ding 1998, p.63).

**[vii]** The majority of them were redundant workers, secondary school graduates who had failed to enter higher education, and those who had not found jobs in the cities. For more details, see *History of Zhiqing in China: The First Wave (1953-1968)*, (Ding, 1998, p.194).

**[viii]** Ding Yizhuang [定宜庄] (1998), *History of Zhiqing in China: The First Wave (1953-1968)*, [中国知青史：初澜 1953-1968], Beijing: China Social Sciences Press [中国社会科学出版社], p.241

**[ix]** Usually, the money was distributed to corresponding farms, production teams, and other receiving units and was not given to individual *Zhiqing* directly.

**[x]** The "Household Registration Regulation" (户口管理条例) was approved by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress on 9 January 1958 and has been implemented by the Ministry of Public Security ever since. According to this document, spontaneous rural to urban population flow is strictly prohibited. Since the urban residence (城市户口) was combined with commodity grain provision, once a *Zhiqing* transferred to rural residence, backflow became virtually impossible.

**[xi]** Problems arising from the unequal household registration system started to impact on *Zhiqing's* lives in the latter stage of their staying in the countryside. Accordingly, regaining their permanent urban residence certificates became a common major request when *Zhiqing* sought to return to the cities in the late 1970s.

**[xii]** It was only when the ultra-leftist faction took control of the UMDC work after the commencement of the Cultural Revolution that the state enforced mandatory household relocation. When the UMDC work was operated by the CCP and the state as a long-term routine work (1962-1965), in order to mobilize as many urban youth as possible, the authorities hadn't applied any explicit stipulation or coercive measures in terms of *Zhiqing's* registered permanent residences (Zhao, 2009, pp.500-508).



**[xiii]** In 1970, university enrolment resumed through the new method of recommendation. Students who entered into higher education from 1970 to 1976 were called “worker-peasant-soldier students”.

**[xiv]** For more details on these early volunteers, see *The Whole Story of Zhiqing UMD in China* (Gu, 1997, pp.111-115) and *Spring Tide* (Liu, 1998, pp.123-137).

**[xv]** See detailed explanation of the mission and activities of these propaganda teams in *Spring Tide* (Liu, 1998, pp.158-177).

**[xvi]** *People's Daily*, September 13, 1968.

**[xvii]** *People's Daily*, December 22, 1968.

**[xviii]** See Table 1.

**[xix]** For more details on the regulations and management of the resettlement fee, see *Spring Tide*, (Liu, 1998, pp.204-208).

**[xx]** For further information on methods of resettlement, see *Spring Tide*, (Liu, 1998, pp.208-231).

**[xxi]** Further details are available in *Spring Tide*, (Liu, 1998, pp.291-370).

**[xxii]** In March 1970, the State Council held the “Forum for Youth in Production Teams in Yan'an” (延安地区插队青年工作座谈会). This forum aimed to discuss solutions to problems that had emerged in Yan'an and thereby establish a model for the whole country. For more information on this forum, see *Spring Tide* (Liu, 1998, pp.276-284).

**[xxiii]** During the Cultural Revolution, the state focused mainly on basic education. The primary concern was to provide basic education to the large population and thereby bring down the illiteracy rate.

**[xxiv]** Students who entered universities and colleges from 1970 to 1976 were known as “Worker-Peasant-Soldier students” (工农兵学员). Before the resumption of the University/College Entrance Examination, this was the only way to access higher education.

**[xxv]** See the original text of Li Qinglin's letter and its subsequences in *Spring Tide* (Liu 1998, 376-382) and in *The Whole History* (Gu 1997, 129-134).

**[xxvi]** Each of the eight major changes is explained in detail in *Spring Tide* (Liu, 1998, pp.397-496).

**[xxvii]** See the detailed description of the Zhuzhou Model and the Leading Cadre System in *Spring Tide* (Liu, 1998, pp.439-460).

**[xxviii]** For details on the disturbance caused by the ultra-leftist faction, see *Spring Tide*, (Liu, 1998, pp.546-620).

**[xxix]** In February 1976, Wu Guixian (吴桂贤), the vice premier sent a letter written by two *Zhiqing* in Shaanxi Province and her own letter to Mao Zedong, in



which they expressed their concerns about the UMDC Movement. On February 12, Mao wrote this brief comment on Wu's letter, which then became the new supreme instruction.

**[xxx]** The "Two Whatevers": We must support Chairman Mao's decisions, whatever they are; we must consistently follow Chairman Mao's instructions, whatever they are. (凡是毛主席作出的决策，我们都必须拥护，凡是毛主席的指示，我们都要始终不渝地遵循。)

**[xxxi]** In September 1977, the Ministry of Education held the National Conference of Colleges and Universities Enrolment Work. On 21 October, the State Council announced the decision to resume the University/College Entrance Examination. According to the conference resolution, the entrance examination was open to workers, peasants, *Zhiqing*, veterans, cadres, and new school graduates, and was guided by the principle of "unified examination, merit-based enrollment".

**[xxxii]** For more details, see *The Whole Story of Zhiqing UMDC in China* (Gu, 1997, pp.165-173).

**[xxxiii]** For further details on the conversations between central leaders and the petition group, see *The Whole Story of Zhiqing UMDC in China* (Gu, 1997, pp.187-192).

**[xxxiv]** See more details about these measures in *The Whole Story*, (Gu 1997, 198-204).

**[xxxv]** For details, see *The Whole Story of Zhiqing UMDC in China* (Gu, 1997, pp.211-216).

**[xxxvi]** See *The Whole Story of Zhiqing UMDC in China* (Gu, 1997, pp.218-228) and *Spring Tide* (Liu, 1998, pp.844-862) for further discussion of residual problems and solutions.

**[xxxvii]** Thomas P. Bernstein published the first monograph on the UMDC Movement, *Up to the Mountains and down to the Villages: The Transfer of Youth from Urban to Rural China*, in 1977. He is the originator of studies on the UMDC Movement in Western academia.

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