

Chapter 34 Primary Source Activity

China's Cultural Revolution (textbook pages 882–883) was devastating for many people, especially the educated. As schools and businesses were closed, teachers, writers, and office workers were made to work at manual labor. Yang Jiang and her husband were writers and scholars specializing in foreign literature. Both in their 60s, they were sent to do farm work on neighboring “cadre schools.” Her memoir of this time tells grim details but also reflects warmth and humor. ♦ *As you read, think how such a complete change of lifestyle might affect you. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

Working at the Cadre School

There were many forms of manual labor at the cadre school, including farm work like planting beans and wheat. During the dog days of summer, the field hands had to be at their jobs by three in the morning, on empty stomachs. Their breakfast was sent out to them at six, which they paused to eat before going back to work. They knocked off at noon to rest while the sun was at its peak, then at dusk they were back in the fields, not quitting until late at night.

As each new company arrived, the people were temporarily housed with local villagers, but the first order of business was to start work on their own living quarters. They should have had bricks to build their houses, but since bricks were so hard to come by, more often than not adobe blocks were used as a substitute. Making these blocks was one of the hardest jobs around, while tending pigs was the dirtiest and most disagreeable work of all. Most of the garden and kitchen duties were reserved for the weak and elderly, which placed the responsibility for all the strenuous labor on the shoulders of the young. . . . I was assigned to the vegetable-plot detail. Without the benefit of any machinery, and relying solely on the sweat of our own brows, we



had to dig a small well for ourselves.

Fortune had smiled on our cadre school, for the area on the banks of the Huai River had experienced two arid years in a row, and we were never visited by floods. But the other side of the coin was the difficulty of planting anything in the rock-hard earth. . . . After we ran the plow over the vegetable plot, the entire area was covered with dirt clods the size of human heads and harder than bone. Before we could do any planting, we had to level the soil, which meant crumbling up every single clod. . . .

After levelling the soil, we dug a series of irrigation ditches, only to discover that there was no water. The neighboring plot. . . had a mechanized well that was some ten meters deep. We often went over there to get our drinking water, since our hand-dug well was no more than three meters deep and produced muddy water. . . . The water from the ten-meter well was so cool and sweet that drinking a cupful under the glaring sun was like being blessed with manna from Heaven.

Source: *Six Chapters From My Life* “Downunder,” by Yang Jiang, trans. Howard Goldblatt (University of Washington Press, 1984).

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Questions to Think About

1. What were the first things that happened to newcomers at the cadre school?
2. What were some of the hardships of living and working at this “school”?
3. **Recognizing Bias** From the point of view of Communist officials, what do you think was the goal of making scholars and office workers learn to do farm work with peasants?
4. **Activity** Imagine that you have been forced to move to a primitive farm and learn to raise crops in conditions like the cadre school. Write a short letter home telling what your life is like.