

ISSN: 2514-0612

Journal homepage: <http://briefencounters-journal.co.uk/BE>

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‘Using the Past to Serve the Present’: The Resumed Criticisms Campaign of 1958

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Source: *Brief Encounters*, Vol. 6 No. 1 (April 2022), pp. 93-103.

URL: <http://briefencounters-journal.co.uk/BE/article/view/303>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24134/be.v6i1.303>

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# ‘Using the Past to Serve the Present’: The Resumed Criticisms Campaign of 1958

Dylan K. Wang

‘Unusual writing, together we praise;  
Uncertain meanings, together thrash out.’<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

On 26 January 1958, the Chinese state-sponsored literary journal *Wenyi bao* (Literary Gazette) launched its second issue of the year (Fig. 1). This special number carried half a dozen polemics under the rubric of *Zai pipan* (Resumed Criticisms), each followed by the unexpurgated text of the essay or short story that it targeted. In June, these articles were collected into a slim volume along with the condemned pieces (Fig. 2).<sup>2</sup>

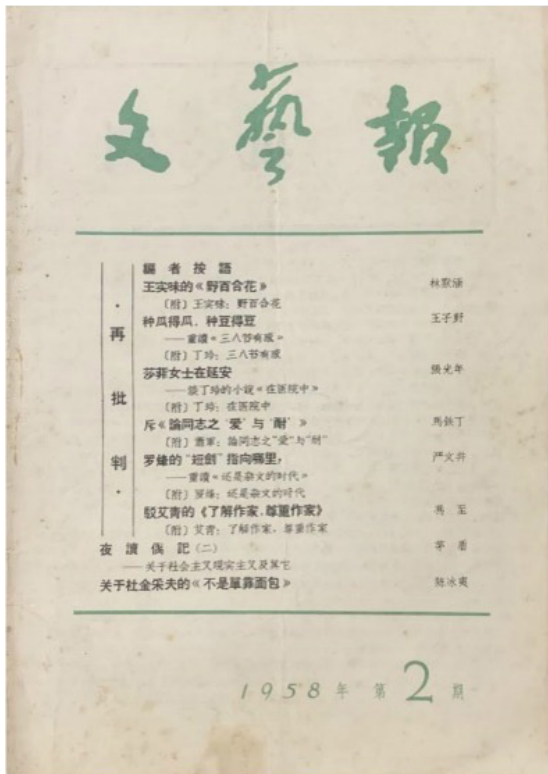


Fig. 1. *Literary Gazette Resumed Criticism*.

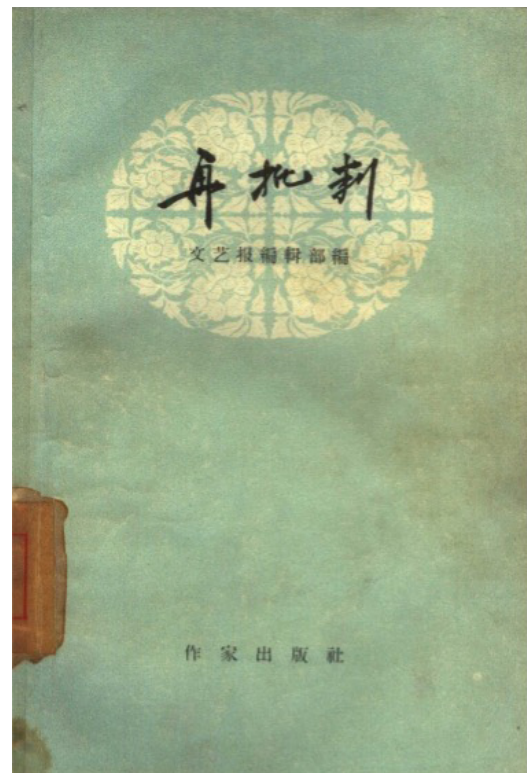


Fig. 2. *Resumed Criticisms*.

<sup>1</sup> A. R. Davis, *T'ao Yüan-ming (AD 365–427): His Works and Their Meaning*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), VI, p. 64. The poem is the first of a pair titled 'Yiju er shou' (Moving House).

<sup>2</sup> *Zai pipan* (Resumed Criticisms), ed. by *Wenyi bao bianjibu* (Editorial Board of *Literary Gazette*) (Beijing: Zuo Jia chubanshe, 1958).

Among the numerous political campaigns in Mao's China, this event seems insignificant at first glance, and most previous studies refrain from more than mentioning it.<sup>3</sup> Still, a closer look reveals many extraordinary features about it.

To begin with, all the targeted works were originally published in the early 1940s and had already been denounced in the famous Yan'an Rectification Campaign (hence the title): why bother dredging them all up again? Besides, recently published eyewitness accounts reveal that the campaign's manifesto was penned, in part, by none other than the Great Helmsman himself: why would a paramount leader condescend to denunciate a group of hapless writers, one of them already dead? This short essay seeks to explore the much-forgotten inquisition and explain some of its anomalous qualities. Furthermore, it argues that this campaign exemplifies Mao's own brand of historical revisionism—'using the past to serve the present.'<sup>4</sup> This brief essay is the first attempt at a systematic study of this movement to the best of my knowledge, and a more in-depth analysis will have to await another occasion.

### **'Poisonous Weeds Turned into Fertiliser'**

The following table presents the authors and works that made into the final hit list as they appeared in the Resumed Criticisms collection:

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<sup>3</sup> Sandwiched between and eclipsed by the Anti-Rightist Campaign and the Great Leap Forward, this campaign has received little to no attention in most general accounts of China under Mao. Most studies of intellectual life under the Maoist regime make no mention of it at all. See, for example, Merle Goldman, *Dissent in Communist China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967); idem, 'The Party and the Intellectuals', in *The Cambridge History of China, vol 14, The People's Republic, Part I: The Emergence of Revolutionary China 1949–1965*, ed. by Roderick MacFarquhar and John K. Fairbank (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 218–58; idem, 'The Party and the Intellectuals: Phase Two', in *The Cambridge History of China, vol 14*, 432–77. In addition, several specialised studies of the major targets merely touch upon it. See Gao Hua, *How the Red Sun Rose: The Origins and Development of the Yan'an Rectification Movement, 1930–1945*, trans. by Stacy Mosher and Guo Jian (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2018), p. 342 and Xu Qingquan, *Geming tunshi tade ernü: Ding Ling Chen Qixia 'fandang jituan' an jishi* (Revolution Devours Its Own Children: A True Record of the Ding Ling-Chen Qixia 'Anti-Party Clique' Case) (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2008), pp. 362–64.

<sup>4</sup> This quotation is from Mao's comment in a letter sent to him by the Central Conservatorium in February 1964. Quoted in Barmé, Geremie, 'Using the Past to Save the Present: Dai Qing's Historiographical Dissent', *East Asian History*, 1 (1991), 141–81 (p. 143). Translation slightly modified.

Author	Title	Date of First Publication	Publishing Journal	Place of Publication
Wang Shiwei	‘Ye baihe hua’ (Wild Lilies) <sup>5</sup>	13 and 23 March 1942	<i>Jiefang ribao wenyi fukan</i> (Liberation Daily Literary Supplement, hereafter <i>LDLS</i> )	Yan’an
Ding Ling	‘Sanba jie yougan’ (Thoughts on March 8) <sup>6</sup>	9 March 1942	<i>LDLS</i>	Yan’an
	‘Zai yiyuan zhong’ (In the Hospital)	15 November 1941	<i>Guyu</i> (Grain Rain), no. 1	Yan’an
	‘Wo zai Xiaacun de shihou’ (When I Was in Xia Village) <sup>7</sup>	June 1941	<i>Zhongguo wenhua</i> (Chinese Culture), vol 3 no. 1	Yan’an
Xiao Jun	‘Lun tongzhi zhi “ai” yu “nai”’ (On ‘Love’ and ‘Patience’ among Comrades)	8 April 1942	<i>LDLS</i>	Yan’an
Luo Feng	‘Haishi zawen de shidai’ (It is Still the Era of Essays)	12 March 1942	<i>LDLS</i>	Yan’an
Ai Qing	‘Liaojie zuojia, zunzhong zuojia’ (Understand and Respect Writers)	11 March 1942	<i>LDLS</i>	Yan’an

Table 1. List of Resumed Criticisms’ Contents.

All but Ding Ling’s (1904–1986) two short stories (‘In the Hospital’ and ‘When I Was in Xia Village’) were *zawen* essays published in the Yan’an-based *Jiefang ribao wenyi fukan* (Liberation Daily Literary Supplement) in March to April 1942.

The genre of *zawen* (literally ‘sundry’ or ‘miscellaneous’ essays) is known for its biting satire and was popularised in the 1920s and 1930s by Lun Xun (1881–1936), a leading figure of modern Chinese

<sup>5</sup> Translated by Timothy Cheek in Dai Qing, *Wang Shiwei and ‘Wild Lilies’: Rectification and Purges in the Chinese Communist Party, 1942–1944*, ed. by David E. Apter and Timothy Cheek, trans. by Nancy Liu and Lawrence R. Sullivan, documents compiled by Song Jinshou (Armonk, NY, and London: M. E. Sharpe, 1994), pp. 4–20. A second translation by Gregor Benton is found in Gregor Benton, ed., *Prophets Unarmed: Chinese Trotskyists in Revolution, War, Jail, and the Return from Limbo* (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2014), pp. 1048–54.

<sup>6</sup> Translated by Gregor Benton in Tani E. Barlow and Gary J. Bjorge, eds, *I Myself Am a Woman: Selected Writings of Ding Ling* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1989), pp. 316–21.

<sup>7</sup> Translated by Gary J. Bjorge in Barlow and Bjorge, eds, pp. 298–315. A second translation by W. J. F. Jenner is found in Ding Ling, *Miss Sophie’s Diary and Other Stories*, trans. by W. J. F. Jenner (Beijing: Panda Books, 1985), pp. 236–61.

literature.<sup>8</sup> In adopting this literary form, a group of younger writers were consciously following his example as a fierce critic of the authorities and social evils.

The incumbent editors of the *Jiefang ribao wenyi fukan* were Ding Ling and Chen Qixia (1913–1988). All five essays were written in support of Mao’s criticism of sectarianism in the Party; he even personally revised and polished Xiao Jun’s (1907–1988) essay ‘On “Love” and “Patience” toward Comrades.’<sup>9</sup> These essays had in common their pointed criticism of the strict hierarchical system in Yan’an. Especially disappointing for young intellectuals was their treatment by the leaders of grassroots units, who were servile to their superiors and imperious to their subordinates, and who would readily impose political labels to quell any discontent. In an ironic turn of events, Mao decided that their cry for increased democracy within the Party and greater equality among the revolutionary ranks had crossed a line.

The movement that later came to be known as the *Yan’an zhengfeng yundong* (Yan’an Rectification Movement, 1942–1945) was initially launched in February 1942 by Mao Zedong (1893–1976) to purge his rivals within the Party and consolidate his newly-established regime. To do so, he encouraged young liberal intellectuals to vent their spleen at the superiors, but when they went too far and started to question the Party itself, he quickly turned on the young critics and targeted them in the next round of the campaign.

As the revolution ‘deepened’, all the cadres were required to ‘bare their hearts’ to the Party and examine their personal histories. This soon turned into an all-out witch-hunt. Many were interrogated and tortured, while more than 10,000 were executed. As a result, the last traces of liberalism were eradicated, and Mao achieved absolute authority within the Party.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See David E. Pollard, ‘Lu Xun’s Zawen’, in *Lu Xun and His Legacy*, ed. by Leo Ou-fan Lee (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 54–89.

<sup>9</sup> Gao Hua, p. 342.

<sup>10</sup> Gao Hua remains the best study of the movement. See especially Chapters 8–12. Mao was to use the same sleight of hand when he launched the Hundred Flowers Campaign in late 1956 after the foundation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). See Goldman, *Literary Dissent in Communist China*, Chapters 8–9.

Of the five writers mentioned above, Wang Shiwei (1906–1947) was singled out and condemned as a ‘Trotskyist spy’ while the others were let off with a warning.<sup>11</sup>

Ding Ling went on to ‘reform’ herself and became a model socialist writer; she even won international fame when her novel *Taiyang zhaozai Sanggan he shang* (The Sun Shines over the Sanggan River) was awarded the State Stalin Prize in 1951.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, her fate was again reversed when in 1957 she was denounced, along with Chen Qixia, as the ringleader of an anti-Party clique and was dubbed a ‘Rightist’.<sup>13</sup>

Shortly afterwards, in January 1958, Mao sent a message to the editorial team of *Literary Gazette*, asking them to put together a *Resumed Criticisms* special issue. Chief editor Zhang Guangnian (1913–2002) drafted an *Editor’s Note*, but Mao found it far from satisfactory: ‘the tone of the note is somewhat dull and lacks political consciousness. Writers as you may be, you also lack literary flair.’<sup>14</sup> Disappointed, he took matters into his own hands and largely rewrote it (Fig. 3).<sup>15</sup>

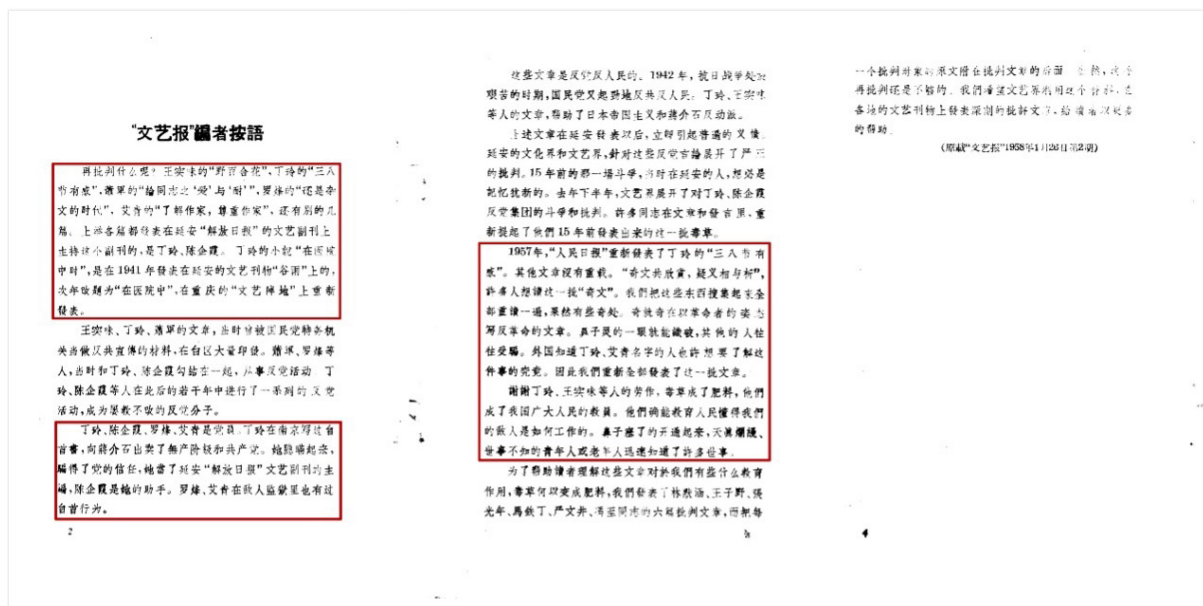


Fig. 3. The Editor’s Note as reprinted in *Resumed Criticisms* (with the parts revised and added by Mao enclosed in red).

<sup>11</sup> Wang was executed in spring 1947 (probably by beheading) and was not rehabilitated until 1991. See Gao Hua, pp. 361 and 656. His case is undoubtedly the best documented among all the persecuted. Representative accounts include Dai Qing and Gao Hua. See also Timothy Cheek, ‘The Fading of Wild Lilies: Wang Shiwei and Mao Zedong’s Yan’an Talks in the First CPC Rectification Movement’, *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, 11 (1984), 25–58.

<sup>12</sup> Barlow and Borge, Introduction to *I Myself Am a Woman*, p. 40.

<sup>13</sup> Xu Qingquan offers a comprehensive account of their case.

<sup>14</sup> Yan Gang, ‘Mao Zedong piping Wenyi bao “wen ye buzu” zhihou’ (After Mao Zedong Criticized *Literary Gazette* for ‘Lack of Literary Merits’), *Yanhuang Chunqiu*, 5 (2013), 53–56 (p. 53).

<sup>15</sup> Yan Gang, ‘Mao Zedong yu Wenyi bao “Zai pian”’ (Mao Zedong and the ‘Renewed Criticisms’ Campaign of *Literary Gazette*), *Yanhuang Chunqiu*, 3 (2013), 50–53 (pp. 51–52). See also Xu Qingquan, p. 363.

Playfully quoting the Eastern Jin dynasty (317–420) poet Tao Qian (365–427), Mao made his intention of republishing and re-criticising these pieces clear: ‘unusual writing, together we praise; uncertain meanings, together thrash out.’<sup>16</sup> That most of the targets had already been ousted and denounced was not enough; they had to be made an example.

Thanks to the labour of Ding Ling, Wang Shiwei, etc., poisonous weeds have now turned into fertiliser. They may serve as teachers for the broad masses of our country. Indeed, they can teach the people about the ways our enemies operate. [...] Those who are too naïve to appreciate the way of the world, whether young or old, shall immediately become mature.<sup>17</sup>

Needless to say, the polemics that accompanied the reprints were meant as examples of how to ‘correctly’ read them.

This act was highly unusual since in almost all other literary campaigns, authors and works had to be struggled against *in absentia*, and the reading public, the intended beneficiaries of campaigns, had little to no access to the actual ‘poisonous weeds’ besides selectively quoted fragments.<sup>18</sup> Some examples include the 1960 campaign against Pearl S. Buck (1892–1973; Sai Zhenzhu in Chinese) and the 1974 denunciation of Michelangelo Antonioni’s (1912–2007) documentary *Chung Kuo, Cina* (1972).<sup>19</sup>

### ‘Until They Were Written Well’

As insightfully put by Geremie Barmé, ‘[t]he use and interpretation of history are central to all socialist cultures. These cultures impose a unified worldview and attempt to create a narrow and ideologically-based style of historiography in order to justify current political realities and policies.’<sup>20</sup> Mao, for one, was well-versed in rewriting Party history to carry out inner-Party struggles and highlight his central role.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *Zai pipan*, p. 3. See also n1.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> This tactic might have backfired to some extent, for many young people who had grown up in the People’s Republic found inspiration in these ‘poisonous weeds’. See, for example, Gao Hua, Preface to Xu Qingquan, pp. vii–viii.

<sup>19</sup> Criticisms of Pearl Buck by Li Wenjun, Simu and Xu Yuxin are listed in the bibliography. Denunciations of Antonioni formed the contents of the volume *Zhongguo renmin buke wu: pipan Andongni’aoni de fan Hua yingpian Zhongguo wenji* (The Chinese People Shall Not Be Humiliated: Collected Critical Essays on Michelangelo Antonioni’s Anti-China Film *Chung Kuo, Cina*) (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1974). Neither case has been studied in detail.

<sup>20</sup> Barmé, p. 143.

<sup>21</sup> Even before Mao, people in the CCP had used the writing of Party history to carry out inner-Party struggles. For a classic example, see Gao Hua, p. 685.



‘Yet each major official recasting of the past would almost certainly inspire unofficial, even multiple, reinterpretations which undermine the Party’s monopoly on truth.’<sup>22</sup> Mao supplemented this historical revisionism on a grand scale with a deliberate manipulation of personal history, a ploy he personally developed and honed over decades of brutal strife. The *Resumed Criticisms* Campaign was characterised by the latter.

During the Yan’an Rectification Movement, Mao placed enormous emphasis and expectations on cadres’ debriefings of their personal histories. Extremely detailed and strict stipulations were issued about the autobiographies that the cadres were to provide, including nearly every aspect of one’s history and present reality. In addition, Mao required that they be ‘repeatedly rewritten until they were written well.’<sup>23</sup> The apparent purpose was to discover loopholes and conflicts between different versions to sort out suspect individuals and screen out hidden spies, but Mao had a higher goal to achieve:

There was, in fact, no explicit standard for a satisfactory autobiography other than an even more meticulous, wide-ranging, and in-depth personal debriefing. The crucial point in making cadres repeatedly rewrite their autobiographies was to further negate the self and show even more reverence to the Party and all levels of its leadership because the final determination of whether the autobiography was satisfactory, [...] depended on the attitude taken by the heads of each Party organ and school.<sup>24</sup>

Admittedly, the threat of infiltration and betrayal was real enough in the formative years of the Party; however, as Mao continued to develop and employ this strategy, there was a clear shift of emphasis to the latter aspect.

Mao’s intentions were by no means lost on his targets. For instance, Wu Ningkun (1920–2019), a survivor of two decades of relentless persecution, had seen through this ruse early on. The point in making the defendant repeatedly rewrite their autobiographies was not simply ‘to detect inconsistencies between different versions’; in fact, it ‘was nothing less than a premeditated war of nerves aimed at breaking our spirit,’ downright ‘psychological warfare’; yet his ‘mortal flesh was weak.’<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Barmé, p. 143.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Gao Hua, p. 452.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 452–53.

<sup>25</sup> Wu Ningkun, *A Single Tear: A Family’s Persecution, Love, and Endurance in Communist China* (Boston, New York, Toronto, and London: Little, Brown and Company, 1993), pp. 40, 44 and 67.



## ‘There Is Nothing Accidental’

When ‘baring one’s heart to the Party’, one automatically relinquished the right to interpret one’s own personal history. By this logic, only the paramount leader himself had a clean slate, and tiny details of one’s past could be raked up and reinterpreted at any time to justify an otherwise gratuitous allegation. In this way, any dissent could be easily stamped out. Even some of the highest-ranking leaders were condemned in a similar fashion, usually after their downfall.

A case in point is Lin Biao (1907–1971), Mao’s second-in-command since the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). After his ill-fated plan to flee, the country had fallen to pieces, Mao launched the *pi Lin pi Kong* (Criticise Lin Biao, Criticise Confucius) campaign and encouraged his long-term associates to expose his past wrongdoings. Jiang Qing (1914–1991), aka Madame Mao, claimed that the Chairman had already seen that ‘Lin Biao was not a Marxist-Leninist’ as early as July 1966.<sup>26</sup> Others chimed in, looking back at the decades they had known Lin and concluding that ‘there is nothing accidental about his stepping onto the anti-Party counterrevolutionary road.’<sup>27</sup>

The flaw of this tactic is evident since any further scrutiny into it would inevitably reach a sort of Epicurean paradox: Mao (i) wished to detect traitors but could not, or (ii) could detect traitors but did not wish it, or (iii) neither could nor wished to detect traitors, or (iv) both could and wished to detect traitors; but on (i) Mao was blind, on (ii) he was spiteful, on (iii) he was both blind and spiteful, and (iv) is inconsistent with the existence of traitors who seemed to emerge in an endless stream.<sup>28</sup> Occasionally the condemned did use this argument to their own advantage, but in the case under discussion, they were effectively muted.<sup>29</sup>

Ding Ling, who survived the 1942 campaign, took the brunt of the *Resumed Criticisms*. Of the ten articles collected in *Resumed Criticisms*, six targeted her. Critics read Ding Ling’s story ‘When I Was in

<sup>26</sup> Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao’s Last Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 367.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 337.

<sup>28</sup> For the original paradox attributed to Epicurus by the early Christian writer Lactantius, see Tim O’Keefe, *Epicureanism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 47.

<sup>29</sup> Ma Ruifang (b. 1942) famously survived a struggle session with a deft application of this argument. See ‘*Baijia jiangtan zhujiangren Ma Ruifang: Xueze zui zhongyao pinzhi shi zhengzhi*’ (*Lecture Room Speaker Ma Ruifang: Integrity Is the Most Important Quality of a Scholar*), *Jiefang ribao*, 7 September 2007 <<http://www.chinanews.com/cul/news/2007/09-07/1021397.shtml>>.

Xia Village' in the light of allegations against her supposed 'unchaste activities' during her years in Nanjing under house arrest.<sup>30</sup> They happily conflated political loyalty and sexual ethics, echoing the premodern cult of female chastity.<sup>31</sup> One of the critics even went as far as offering a revisionist version of Ding Ling's entire life, reading sinister intentions and traitorous motives into every single life choice she had made.<sup>32</sup> Personal history was thus constantly brought bear on the present, and historical revisionism operated on the micro and macro levels to safeguard the Party's monopoly on history.

## Epilogue

Later in 1958, Ding Ling and her husband were banished to the bitterly cold moorland in Northeast China (formerly known as Manchuria), where they lived for twelve years. During the Cultural Revolution, she was brutally persecuted and was imprisoned from 1970 to 1975. Fortunately, she managed to survive this second round of political turmoil and was granted a new lease of life after the Mao era. During her last years, she continued to write, travelled extensively in North America and Europe, and saw many of her early works reprinted and translated.<sup>33</sup> The Party's grip on history seems to have loosened considerably since then, as the new twist of Ding Ling's fate attests.

However, on 15 October 2014, Xi Jinping, the newly appointed president of the People's Republic of China (PRC), called a national meeting of cultural, artistic, and literary leaders and demanded that Chinese literature be undertaken once again in the spirit of Yan'an.<sup>34</sup> Mao's ghost is far from exorcised and threatens to return at any moment. Considering this, a better understanding of his many literary campaigns, especially the one studied above, is not only relevant but essential. I shall not have laboured in vain if this short essay can bring a little more attention to this largely neglected episode than has been paid to date.

<sup>30</sup> Barlow and Bjorge, Introduction to *I Myself Am a Woman*, p. 40.

<sup>31</sup> *Zai pipan*, p. 92. For the premodern cult of female chastity, see Janet M. Theiss, *Disgraceful Matters: The Politics of Chastity in Eighteenth-Century China* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2004).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 54–70.

<sup>33</sup> Zheng Xiaofeng, *Ding Ling zai Beidahuang* (Ding Ling's Exile in Manchuria) (Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi chubanshe, 2008); Li Xiangdong and Wang Zengru, *Ding Ling zhuan* (A Biography of Ding Ling) (Beijing: Zhongguo da baikeshu chubanshe, 2015).

<sup>34</sup> David Der-wei Wang, *Why Fiction Matters in Contemporary China* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2020), pp. 3–4.

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