

Chinese Literature

JULY 1980



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Qin Zhaoyang

The Writer Wang Meng

I made the acquaintance of Wang Meng one summer more than twenty-three years ago, so I ought to have a fair understanding of him. But actually I know very little about him. This seems strange yet is not really so. In a nutshell, it is difficult to gain a true understanding of anyone, and still more difficult to grasp the outlook and character of such a gifted writer as Wang Meng, especially as I myself lack insight.

We get to know a writer mainly through his works. Unfortunately I never had the time to read many of Wang Meng's writings. Moreover, during the twenty years when we were both under a cloud, he was far away in Xinjiang in northwest China (I learned that only recently), while I was in Guangxi in the south. Being several thousand kilometres apart, I had no news about him.

In the summer of 1956 when I was working as an editor of a literary journal, I received a short story by Wang Meng entitled "The Young New-comer in the Organization Department". It reflected the bureaucratic way of doing things in a district Party committee in a certain city through the experience of Lin Zhen,

Qin Zhaoyang is a writer and a member of the secretariat of the Chinese Writers' Association.



Wang Meng

a young cadre. I was so struck by its profundity and artistic appeal that I had it published that September. During that period I met Wang Meng twice. I was surprised to find him a young man around twenty, with a thin plain face. He could not express himself in conversation as fluently and intelligently as in writing. I forget what we talked about then, but remember I had come to the conclusion that he was a promising new literary talent. I would have been all the more surprised and delighted had I known that his maiden work, the novel *Long Live the Youth*, would soon be published in the *Wenbui Daily*.

"The Young New-comer in the Organization Department" created a sensation. But then it aroused an unexpected debate in a certain literary magazine. Some critics denounced it while some others praised it. The basic reason was that, at that time, we were allowed only to eulogize life in China but not to criticize it; nor could we intersperse our praise with comparatively acute and profound criticisms. That approach to literature and art had become deep-rooted in literary circles and in society at large.

So pressure was put on Wang Meng and on me because I had published the story. Both of us must remember what it was like, though we have never discussed it.

About a year later, Wang Meng was blacklisted. Less than a year after that the same thing happened to me, due in part to "The Young New-comer in the Organization Department".

After that, for twenty years, we had no word of each other. "Will this young new-comer in the literary field spend his life under a cloud like me? It's too bad!" I often thought.

But then, in the autumn of 1977, we met each other again in Beijing. It was Wang Meng who suddenly came to see me. He looked unchanged with the same thin plain face, lean medium build and black hair. Only the rims of his spectacles had become darker. As to his mind, it struck me that over the years he had gained in experience and knowledge, in the depth of his thinking and powers of observation. I discovered that he had stayed in the adobe cottage of a Uygur peasant in Xinjiang for six years, had learned to speak, read and write in Uygur and so had gained a good understanding of the working people there. He told me that an educated young man born and brought up in the city like him could never have had such a chance to live with the labouring people if not for his "misfortune" in 1957. He had also worked in the Xinjiang branch of the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, translating some works by Uygur writers into the Han language. He was not embittered by the hard times he had been through, as he felt he had gained so much from them. That was how he summed up the experience of those twenty years. He reached a conclusion about me too, for later he told a friend, "Of all those I've seen who have shared the same fate, the most spirited is Qin Zhaoyang." This was based, I believe, on the topic we had discussed most enthusiastically: the conviction we shared all those long years that the people, China's people, are really fine, really splendid!

Then he read and copied with great interest my poem on a scroll hanging on the wall:

The vast sea has surged through the ages,
The long river flowed from time immemorial;
And life is perpetual,
All things go round and start again.

Greatest of all are the people,
Strong is the scent of the soil;
High in the sky hang sun and moon,
A brave spirit fills the land.

These disjointed lines which I wrote after the Tiananmen Incident,* before the downfall of the "gang of four", not only summarized my life of the past twenty years but also of a longer period. . . .

It was actually at this meeting that I began to understand Wang Meng. I realized that he was not the sort of man he had so long been labelled. It was not because he was "black-hearted" that he wrote to expose abuses. In fact, "The Young New-comer in the Organization Department" was written by a man with fine aspirations, out of his deep concern over the defects of the Party and of certain Party members, out of his love for and his trust in the Party. Otherwise, instead of risking exposing these defects in public he would have turned a blind eye to them or even made use of them to better his own position. Lin Zhen's frame of mind in the story must have been that of Wang Meng. In the end Lin Zhen went to knock at the door of the Party secretary, intending to tell him what was worrying him. It was probably Wang Meng himself who knocked at the Party secretary's door and confided in him. How deplorable that he was locked outside for twenty years just because he knocked at it! However, hasn't the twenty years' test of history proved that his short story was needed, a very apt one that struck home? The door of our Party should always remain wide open for those who are concerned for and loyal to her.

I can see that in his recent works Wang Meng shows more concern for and trust in the Party, and more faith in the people, because our Party and all our work were sabotaged by the "gang of four", and our people suffered so much that their wounds are not yet healed. All this Wang Meng has experienced for himself. Naturally many of his works are filled with pain. When I read "A Night in the City", it seemed to me that the hero was none

* On April 5, 1976, during the traditional *Qingming* Festival, Beijing citizens flocked to Tiananmen Square in the centre of the city to mourn the death of Premier Zhou. They were suppressed by the "gang of four".

other than Wang Meng, who had returned from Xinjiang to attend to some business for a friend at night. With a heavy heart he observed and pondered over certain things he had seen and heard which escaped most people's notice. In "The Barber's Tale" Wang Meng seemed to identify himself with the narrator. In "A Spate of Visitors", the director of the paste factory appeared to be another reflection of the writer. And when he said at the end, "Unless we get down to business, our country's done for!" it seemed to me as if this were Wang Meng speaking.

Now after twenty years, I think, with his new works Wang Meng is once more knocking at the door of Marxist-Leninist truth and the fine tradition of the Party, the door of our country's future as well as of its past. He is open and honest, having complete faith in the Party and the people. He can be said to have expressed the views of the rank-and-file Party members and ordinary people. He really gets down to business!

Perhaps this is one reason why his works make such an appeal to readers.

However, I still don't fully understand him. For instance, how can he write so many works in such a short time? Why can't I do the same? Because "I'm busy" or "too old"? Hardly a satisfactory explanation.

In the last few years I have read a couple of his essays dealing with literature and art and heard him talking at meetings of writers. He did not quote the classics, resort to claptrap, or get carried away. But his style was convincing, combining logic with apt metaphors and incisive language. And this is the style that we find in his stories. The only difference is that his stories seldom expound his theories outright but express his views and experience by means of images and plots. He is a sensitive, thoughtful and intelligent writer. I was told some time ago that his father had taught in the department of philosophy in a university. Perhaps this stems from his family background.

It is evident that to be a successful and popular writer, one must have passion, keen powers of observation and an analytical mind. Not one of these qualities can be dispensed with.

At the end of last autumn, he sent me a copy of his novel *Long*

Live the Youth, which had just been formally published after more than two decades. Through the life of a group of girls in the graduating class of a Beijing high school, it portrays how the young students of the fifties looked forward to a glorious future for China and longed to dedicate themselves to their country. It describes their growth, their exuberant stirring life and their pure and ardent nature. It is obvious that the writer retained a strong impression of his own schooling.

I have come to realize that, as a young man, he profited deeply from the training he received in New China. In one sense he is still a young man though over forty, for his works continue to display the youthful ardour and fine aspirations we find in *Long Live the Youth*. He is full of vigour and steadily maturing. But he has not realized his full potential yet. In some years he may look back on his present achievements and probably find them as slight as his past achievements now seem. So I say he is now still in his youth and this is my way of expressing my high hopes of him.

Wang Meng

A Spate of Visitors

Who Was He?

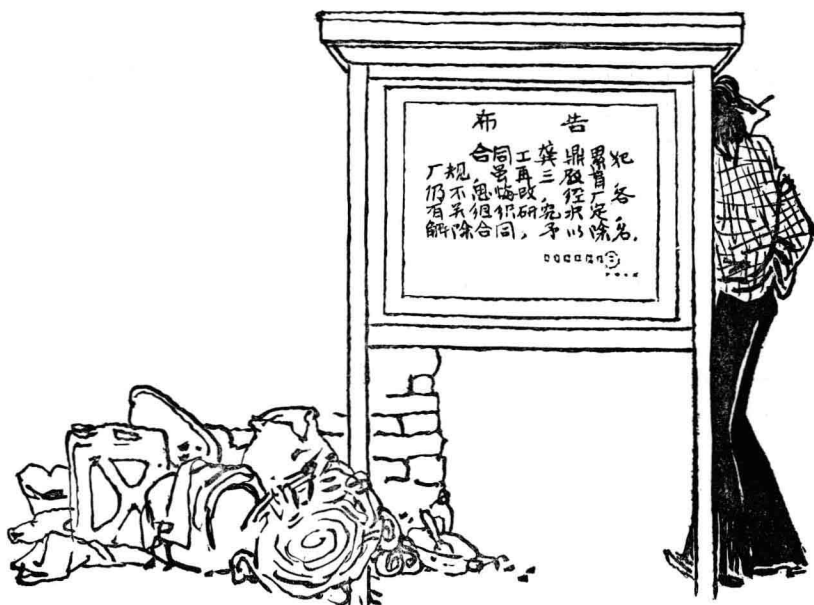
HE was so keen on efficiency and saving time that after going to the liberated area he changed his name to Ding Yi (丁一), three strokes in all. However, during the Cultural Revolution he, too, came under fire.

There was nothing special about his appearance or voice, and he wore his cadre's blue gabardine jacket all the year round. So some people were afraid that even his wife would find it hard to spot him in the crowd of customers in a department store. Fortunately he had two minor characteristics — it seems no one can be quite free from distinctive features. One was the bulge at the back of his head, the other his frequent frown. His critics had attributed the bulge to "a reactionary skull", the frown to his negative outlook.

In this issue we publish three short stories by Wang Meng (王蒙). "A Spate of Visitors" (《说客盈门》) has been taken from the *People's Daily* (《人民日报》) of January 12, 1980, "A Night in the City" (《夜的眼》) from *Guangming Daily* (《光明日报》) of October 21, 1979, and "The Barber's Tale" (《悠悠寸草心》) from *Shanghai Literature* (《上海文学》) No. 9, 1979.



He was bull-headed. In the countryside it was the unwritten rule to keep two separate accounts. That for the beginning of the year contained a plan, quota, guarantee and grandiose statements; that for the end recorded the yield, the amount of grain stored and sold to the state and the value of output. The two accounts were never compared or checked to see if they tallied. But this was not Ding Yi's way. He insisted on comparing them and investigating any discrepancies. It wouldn't have mattered if he had just ticked off the cadres in the production brigade and commune, but he took the accounts with him to the Party committees in the county and prefecture to protest. This happened in 1959. All of a sudden the situation grew tense as everyone there woke up to a sharpening in the acute, complex class struggle. Not only was he denounced and labelled a "Rightist", but all the ex-landlords, rich peasants, their children and grandchildren as well as those Rightists who had been sent from the provincial capital to



do physical labour in the countryside were reinvestigated and forced to make a clean breast of their relations with him.

Ding Yi's position went from bad to worse.

However, a settlement always comes in the end. In January 1979, Ding Yi was rehabilitated, and in June that year, thirty years after he joined the revolution, when he was more than fifty, he regained his Party membership and was appointed director of the county's Rose-fragrance Paste Factory.

Many people congratulated him, but he frowned and asked, "What for?" Others told him they thought he deserved a higher position; but without hearing them out he turned away. Yet others said that he had grown cocky again, having never really tucked his tail between his legs.

He made his rounds in the small factory day and night, his jacket often smeared with paste which smelt quite unlike the scent of roses. When his wife called him a poor wretch he only smiled.

So, he had very few visitors.

Ding Yi Stirs up a Hornet's Nest

At his new post Ding Yi discovered two big problems. Here, the word "discover" is hardly appropriate, because these two problems were as obvious as lice on a bald head. They made him frown and rack his brains every day. First, there was no proper control of the by-product of paste, gluten, which the workers divided among themselves to sell, give to friends or exchange for other goods. This was scandalous. Secondly, the labour discipline was so lax that the foreman sometimes tripped over people sound asleep during their work shifts. So, after consulting everyone concerned, Ding Yi drew up a set of regulations and a system of rewards and penalties. In fact, these were nothing new, just standard practice.

A month went by. In May, Ding Yi decided to make an example of a contract worker named Gong Ding. For one thing, this young man had stayed away from work for four months without asking for leave. For another, he came bold as brass to the factory to demand gluten, and if given none cursed or beat the man in charge. Furthermore, he turned a deaf ear to reprimands. So Ding Yi asked the Party branch committee, Youth League committee, trade union, personnel office and all the other departments to discuss Gong Ding's case. Though he prodded them three times a day, it took them a month and a half to agree to his proposal that this recalcitrant worker should be dismissed. On June 21, an announcement was put up in the factory: In accordance with regulations, Gong Ding's contract is terminated.

Some people knew that Gong Ding was a distant relative of the first county Party secretary Li and felt it was a mistake to fire him, but they did not like to say so. After all, he was only a distant relative. So, the decision was finally reached and announced.

Psychological Warfare Breaks Out

Three hours after the announcement was put up, Ding Yi began to have callers. The first was Old Liu from the county Party committee office. Fifty-seven years old, with an affable expres-

sion, he prided himself on his diplomacy and good relations on all sides. Smilingly, he put one hand on Ding Yi's shoulder. "Listen to me, Old Ding," he said. "You've worked hard and run the factory well. But as for Gong Ding's case..." Lowering his voice he explained Gong's relationship to the first county Party secretary. He added, "Of course, this has no bearing on his case. You're right to take disciplinary action. Secretary Li would be grateful to you if he knew. It's you I'm thinking of. You'd better not fire him. He'll still have to stay in China, in our county if he's kicked out. We'll still be responsible for him, and he's bound to ask Secretary Li for help. So, better let him off with a warning." He reasoned so earnestly and patiently that Ding Yi began to waver. Just then, however, Zhou, head of the county industrial bureau, rang up.

"What's come over you?" he bellowed. "Why pick on a relative of the county Party secretary to make an example of? What are people going to think? Hurry up and revoke your decision!"

"No, the decision stands!" replied Ding Yi loudly as he hung up the receiver. His face grim, he turned to Old Liu and said, "Outrageous!"

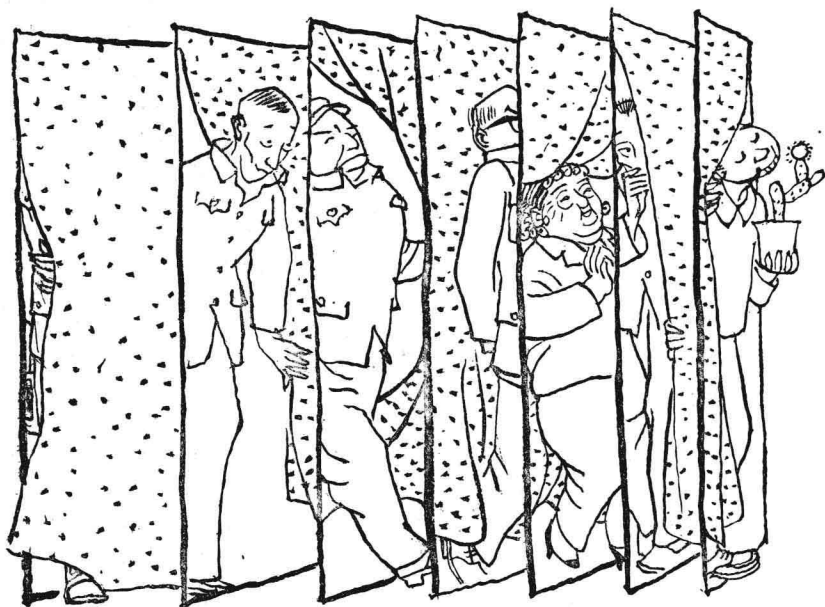
However, visitors kept coming. At dusk, Old Zhao, chairman of the county revolutionary committee, arrived. Zhao had worked in the county since land reform. He was most influential and strongly entrenched. With a certain reserve he shook hands languidly with Ding Yi, then paced the room while issuing his instructions, not even glancing at Ding.

"We must be prudent, mustn't oversimplify issues. Nowadays people are very sensitive. Gong Ding's dismissal would cause general dismay. In view of this, it's more judicious not to fire him."

He said no more, thinking this directive sufficient. He had paced the room slowly enunciating each word, as if weighing and savouring it. Yes, to him his words were as tasty as spiced beef.

When Ding Yi went home after dark, his wife also poked her nose into his business. Of course, she scolded him out of wifely concern.

"You perishing old fool! Don't you see what you've gone and



done? Has messing about with paste all day made you soft-headed? You stick to principles? Why aren't you a member of the politburo? Remember the bashing you got in 1966? Your principles not only got you into trouble but me and the children too."

This outburst stemmed from bitter resentment and love. And the tears she shed were more eloquent than words. Ding Yi sighed, and was just about to reason with her when in came another visitor. It was Young Xiao, who had befriended Ding Yi when he was in disgrace. Young Xiao had studied in the Philosophy Department of Beijing University where he was labelled a Rightist. Later he had managed to get a job in the county's electricity company. Recently, after his name was cleared, he had been promoted to be a buyer. He was short, big-nosed and extremely ugly. But the more pressure put on him, the more cheery, quick-witted and engaging he grew. His motto was: If someone slaps your face, turn the other cheek. He reckoned that this tactic succeeded three times out of four.



Young Xiao's arrival filled the house with laughter. The first thing he did after taking a seat was to finish up the dumplings left by Ding Yi and his wife who had lost their appetite. Then he asked after everyone in the family, saying admiringly, "How lucky you are to have so many relatives." Next he told them that he would soon buy and send over the TV set, a real bargain, they had long wanted. Finally he related various funny stories about their county, China and other countries till the whole family was roaring with laughter.

"Why aren't you a cross-talk actor?" Ding Yi asked.

"I don't want to do Hou Baolin* out of a job. He's my uncle on my mother's side, you know."

There was another roar of laughter.

Young Xiao took advantage of this to launch his offensive. "Why, there's a small matter I nearly forgot," he said. "It's about

* One of China's most popular comedians.

that young rascal Gong. He's a real shit! I'll dress him down next time I see him. But Old Ding, you mustn't go too far. You and I haven't got much footing here. Nor do we have powerful backing or commodities that other people want. We depend entirely on keeping in with others. Big shots rely on their power, we nobodies on our connections. With power they can get anything they want; by keeping on good terms with others we can make do. So don't be so bull-headed. If you haven't learned anything else all these years, you should have learned how to veer. . . . I know, you needn't explain it to me. The decision has been announced; still, it can be changed. Even the Constitution can be changed, and Chairman Mao made revisions in his writings. You're only a small factory director. Think you're more infallible than Chairman Mao and the Constitution? Go on! Get Gong Ding back. I must make myself clear. It's not the county secretary who sent me here, I came on my own initiative, having your interests at heart. Of course, Gong Ding did ask me to come and I told him, 'Don't you worry. Old Ding will do me a little favour like this.'

He certainly had the gift of the gab, able to range from the sublime to the vulgar, to crack jokes or to scoff.

Originally, Ding Yi had not known that Gong Ding was a distant relative of the county's first secretary, and he was not unwilling to reconsider the case. But all these visitors put him on his guard. If it hadn't been the first secretary's relative, would so many people have come to urge him to "be prudent", "not to oversimplify issues" and to "consider the consequences"? This question preoccupied him, to the exclusion of other considerations.

In his annoyance he sent Young Xiao packing.

Two days passed. June 23, Sunday, was a hot, long mid-summer day. Mosquitoes had kept Ding awake the previous night, and he had no appetite. At half past four that morning, a visitor arrived by bus. He was Ding Yi's brother-in-law. Tall, bespectacled and bald, he had studied in the Marxist-Leninist Institute in the 1950s and was now teaching in the prefectural Party school. He was the best known theorist in the prefecture and enjoyed great prestige. When listening to his lectures, grassroots cadres kept