

NEW
China

AN INSIDER'S
STORY

Wang Meng



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Preface

**I Want to Talk
Politics with You**

From the age of five to eleven, I aspired to be a good student. Then, when I was eleven, I decided that I wanted to be a revolutionary, and a professional one to be precise. Before I turned fifteen, I had already left school and become a young official engaging in local work. The age of nineteen saw me embarking unwaveringly on my pursuit of literary writing. At twenty-three, however, I was dismissed from my official position and labeled a “Rightist” during the 1957 Anti-Rightist Movement.

Through these ups and downs, I became entangled with politics. Should I regard this as good luck or misfortune?

A staunch follower of the Chinese revolution, I have borne witness to the advance of Chinese history. I have participated in the construction and development of the People's Republic of China. Throughout this process, I have both benefited and suffered from my involvement. As a part of my desire to testify and bear witness to, I am also an author of the Chinese revolution, Chinese history, and the construction and development of the PRC. I like to recall, reflect on, and discuss the political life of China. I feel it my responsibility to speak the truth and reveal “untold secrets” as an insider, rather than falling for fabrications of any kind.

Finally, to my delight, just before I turned eighty, I had the opportunity to write *Zhongguo Tianji*, or *New China: An Insider's Story*, in which I was able to write, to my heart's content, an account of what I have seen and heard in the political arena, along with my discoveries in political life including my own views.

Only childlike minds could regard the modern history of China as a children's game like playing house. Rascals may view political life as an adventure entailing high risk, but people of excessive ambition believe there are great, and surprising benefits to be wrought through cruel power struggles based only on the “law of the jungle.” Such is the nature of human beings, who, by adjusting their wavelengths and frequencies, accept and interpret messages about political life in line with their own views and vision. When they discuss China, there are biased distortions as well as many genuine narrations.

I hope to at least be able to share a few secrets with readers that provide a wider and deeper view, with honest insider insights into Chinese politics.

Can such untold intricacies and secrets be revealed? There are many instances of distance between a phenomenon and essential truth. Strategies diverge from conceptions, so special attention needs paid to what to say, do, keep in mind, or ignored. There are various ways to beat around the bush, or play cat and mouse, while making oblique accusations, testing the waters, or putting up a front all the while hiding one's capacities through slights of hand to bide one's time.

Yet politics remains a great enterprise. There are the loving hearts of benevolent people and the great sacrifices of patriots. Philosophical revelations and poetic passions become involved, with the wondrous foresight of strategists admired as related fates and contingencies may become clear. There is the weight of history. There are the hopes and interests of people throughout the country, and around the globe, that constitute the commanding themes among ordinary and extraordinary political actors. The mediocre, who cannot sense the solemnity and magnificence of history's power, peep out at history with shameful glimpses, distorting political life with scant insight. Lying, exaggeration, empty talk, and banal remarks will take away whatever credibility is left in politics.

Never assume that Chinese politics alone entails such untold secrets and intricacies. I witnessed audio and video proof while abroad, when George W. Bush claimed he would not impose higher taxes in his US presidential campaign speech, but then defended doing the exact opposite after winning the election. Bush pointed at his mouth and said: "Read my lips." I said, "No, no, no. No new taxes...." Then, Barack Obama, during his election campaign, proclaimed: "One voice can change a room, and if one voice can change a room, then it can change a city, and if it can change a city, it can change a state, and if it can change a state, it can change a nation, and if it can change a nation, it can change the world. Your voice can change the world." This is like the traditional Chinese saying: "Cultivate oneself, put family in order, govern the state, and bring peace to the world," which was deemed illogical by John King Fairbank. When I attended a speech delivered by Hillary Clinton, then First Lady, at Trinity College in Connecticut, though the venue was packed before the speech began,

she arrived over twenty minutes late, proving her a true VIP.

Another example: I met Francois Mitterrand, before he became France's president. During his visit to China in 1982 as leader of the Socialist Party, he gave me a signed book as a gift, *D'Ore et d'espace*. I then sent the French version of my book to him. He kindly replied with a personally signed letter. Several years later, he came to China again, now as the President of France, and was so heavily guarded that even a handshake became a luxury.

Yet, generally speaking, politics has moved forward in more transparent, open, democratic, and law-abiding directions.

There are no easy tasks when it comes to politics. Giscard d'Estaing, former French president, said to a Chinese leader during a visit here: "France has millions of people, making politicians feel overwhelmed. I feel so much sympathy for you at the thought of over one billion people in China." US politicians have also expressed similar sentiments.

One German chancellor said politicians are just like tropical fish in a tank, with each act and move closely watched and amplified.

Nevertheless, I have still recorded in writing the secrets and intricacies I think can and should be revealed. I believe this is constructive and am convinced that if I do not write these down, nobody ever will.

I have written views I believe are worthy of reference and open to further discussion. Perhaps such views are impractical in today's terms, but they still involve clearly interesting and important themes.

Views imply what has been seen and experienced. I have experienced my share, and provided my service, in a Beijing urban district, state-owned factory, rural production brigade, and government ministry office. I know there is a big difference between actually managing an office and getting involved, or taking part, in discussing governance. However, the very least we can do is to foster healthy relationships between those who govern and civilians, between officials and intellectuals, as well

as between adherents and opponents, through greater communication, mutual understanding, mutual complementariness, and mutual support. To this end, I do not fear disclosing certain experiences and ideas, and even secrets.

I also fully-understand people's indignation and frustration when it comes to certain political issues. They become envious or mocking, grumble and rage, feel helpless or admiring, and even itch to have a go at control and power. They itch to have the right person for certain positions, make preferential policies and related adjustments, allocate resources, experience the opportunities and risks presented by certain political events, watch a politician's ups and downs, be riveted by the idea of volatile political struggle, and take political gambles. After all, politics, unlike mathematics, mechanics, philosophy and linguistics, cannot be discussed in overly cold or calm ways.

Wang Meng
June, 2012

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CHAPTER 1

**A Sense of Youth:
As an Old Regime
Nears Its End**

Please allow me a quick diversion to tell you a story from long ago that's not so closely related to our subject. In 1947, when I was thirteen years old, I went to the Beijing Library to read books. At that time, the Library was not open to children. My challenge was that I looked too young and too short. Each time I went there, I would grow nervous and discouraged over having to ask the librarian to let me in. I told him I was a third-year middle-school student and had already read books by Lu Xun,¹ Ba Jin,² Bing Xin,³ Rabindranath Tagore, and Victor Hugo. Balancing a pair of thick glasses over my nose, I also told him that I had really come to read books in earnest, not to play.

At that time, it was quite taxing to borrow books from the Library. You had to first browse the index cards and fill in the book details on the call slips. Then, you had to find an available seat and wait 20-30 minutes until the librarian brought you the book you wanted.

On one occasion, I borrowed *Cement* by the Soviet novelist Fyodor Gladkov. Before that, I had received revolutionary education and learned about the merits of the Soviet Union and revolution. I had also grasped basic ideas on the development of human society, starting from primitive communism, through the evils of slavery and feudalism, to capitalism. Capitalism is the last stage of hierarchical society, during which the proletarian revolution would erupt and proletarian dictatorship would be implemented. What would follow is socialism, in which one does one's best and takes what one deserves. Finally, there would be communism – paradise on earth where one does one's best and takes what one needs.

At the age of thirteen, I thought I had already stolen some fire from the West and accepted historical materialism in general, due to the fact that the first theoretical book

1. Lu Xun (1881-1936), a leading figure in modern Chinese literature, used colloquial Chinese, as well as classical Chinese, as a short story writer, editor, translator, literary critic, essayist, and poet.

2. Ba Jin (1904-2005) is considered one of the most important and widely read Chinese writers of the 20th century.

3. Bing Xin (1900-99), originally named Xie Wanying, was one of the most prolific Chinese writers of the 20th century, with many of her works written for young readers.

I read about this was *Outline of Social Development History*, written by Hua Gang.¹ This book was given to me by the underground Communist He Ping after I had proclaimed myself an ideological leftist.

Through He Ping, I read Soviet literature, including *How the Steel Was Tempered* by Nikolai Ostrovsky, *The Rainbow* by Polish novelist Wanda Wasilewska, and *Peace Is Where the Tempests Blow* by Valentin Kataev. I also learned about such famous books as *Cement* and *The Iron Flood*, etc. Fortunately, those books had not been banned altogether by the Kuomintang.

It was fascinating for a young boy to read *Cement*, a book filled with a muscular revolutionary restlessness, excitement, enthusiasm, chaos, and upheaval. I can hardly forget the devotion of the protagonist, Gleb Chumalov, as he dissolved into the sea of red flags and huge crowds, as well as his own sense of self-sacrifice. To dissolve or to retain oneself? This is the question often encountered in revolution. It is hard to forget the depiction of a leader remaining composed, with not a single muscle on his face twitching, as a “petty bourgeois” shoots himself during a purging of the Party. The bloody violence renders the revolution even more venerated and appealing. “After all, a revolution is not a scientific experiment conducted with hands wearing white gloves, and it is not a dinner party. A revolution is not writing an essay, painting a picture, or doing embroidery. A revolution is instead an act of violence by which one class overthrows another,” thus said Mao Zedong. It is hard for me to forget the fervent cheers when a neurotic, intellectual rich peasant was deported to the penal colonies after the October Revolution. It is even harder to forget the strong body and bright red scarf of the heroine Dasha, who advocated sexual sacrifice by “sacrificing” her body to soothe wounded revolutionaries, and who slept with a powerful official at the drop of a hat. Those scenes set the heart of a thirteen-year-old pumping heavily, sending a red blush over his face. My yearning for the revolution and the Soviet Communist Dasha fused.

1. Hua Gang (1903-72), former President of Shandong University (1950-55), was sentenced to over a decade in prison after the trial of the Hu Feng counter-revolutionary group.

How great Dasha was!

It is true that in the early days when the Chinese Communist Party was founded, the spearhead of the struggle against feudalism was sharper. Anyone who accused the Communist Party of “making property and women common assets,” in the same rotten manner as the old man, Feng Leshan, in Ba Jin’s novel *Family*, would be regarded as belonging to the conservative and declining Kuomintang.

The image of Dasha still lingered in my mind and dreams, even when I eagerly read a more truthful account of the Soviet Union after the October Revolution in *Travels across a Starving Country* and *Records of My Impressions in the Red Capital (Observations in Russia)*, by Qu Qiubai,¹ written while he worked with the China New-Democratic Youth League. The strong, red-scarved Dasha, inseparable from the image of the sickle and hammer, was more vivid and powerful than any sense of hunger and chaos.

Half a century later, when I gave lectures at a US university, I said to the students: “There is nothing more attractive to youth than sex and revolution. The climax and charm of revolution is more powerful and intense than sex.” Soviet songs were imbued with a mobilizing power that aroused one’s enthusiasm: “*Brothers, toward the sun, toward freedom / Brothers, way up to the light / Brightly from the dark past / the future shines out;*” “*... You’ve died a noble death / In the struggle for the people’s cause / You have found an honest death;*”² “*Life flows like a muddy river / A machine eating up our flesh....*”

However, these songs are no match for the *Internationale*’s: “*So comrades, come rally together / And the last fight let us face...*” or *The Communist Manifesto*’s: “The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.” In addition, the final line *The Communist Manifesto* reads, “Workers of All Countries, Unite!” There is such

1. Qu Qiubai, a revolutionary writer, visited the USSR as a journalist in 1921 and was greatly impressed. In *Travels across a Starving Country*, the writer notes the twists and turns on his way to the USSR from Beijing to Harbin. From these writings, we learn of Chinese conditions and an intellectual’s duty. *Records of My Impressions in the Red Capital* narrates his observations and feelings when working as a Chinese journalist communicating with representatives in such fields as social activism, literature, and poetry in the USSR.

2. Lyrics from *Comrades, Let’s Bravely March*, by Leonid Petrovich Radin (1860-1900), Russian revolutionary, composer, and poet; and *Tormented to Death by a Heavy Captivity*, by Grigori Machtet (1852-1901), Russian-language writer of Ukrainian origin.

sentiments, sacrifice, grandeur, and intoxication in the world. Singing such songs, reading such books, and shouting such slogans, you could defiantly charge toward enemy bayonets.

On a visit to Karl Marx's grave in London in 1996, I recalled a political joke told by a Hungarian friend during my stay in Budapest, Hungary, in 1987. He said that, during the Sino-Soviet border conflicts near Zhenbao Island in March 1969, a joke spread where he lived that claimed that Marx had sent a message in people's dreams that he had changed the slogan of "Workers of All Countries, Unite!" into "Proletarians of the World, Stand Apart!"

You may say that a boy's mind in 1946 would have been too naive. You may say, how could one know that the revolution in China and International Communist Movement would be so full of twists and indefinite in direction, and that deviant paths could lead sheep to death and lambs to madness. You may also say that burning blood tends to give rise to absurdity and risk, with hazard and hardship likely to incite desperation and recklessness. Yet people lived in this way. Youth are fervent and supposed to be so. One cannot do what one wants only after becoming mature and experienced. The vast events of history are not made in salons and parlors, or at tables in neat and well-lit rooms. History's directions and manners of movement are not established after thousands of observations, graphic drawings and computation, or thousands of lab experiments with fruit-flies and white mice. Rather than being a stone-faced man having no sympathetic heart, or a wise man waiting to tell whether "the water is hot or cold immediately after he drinks it,"¹ the manipulators of history might shriek in anguish or burst into tears, as if hit by an electricity-accumulated thunderbolt, or sing at the top of their voices calling for significant change. History is not some beautiful work by a seamstress or a surgeon, but sometimes, extraordinary works produced by artists and suicide squads driven by desire.

Where does the motivation for revolution originate? The answer varies from person to person. When I was small, my family had no means whatsoever of living. There was more than one moment, as the time for cooking came close, when my mother, aunt

1. Quoted from Qian Zhongshu (1910-98), a Chinese literary scholar and writer known for his wit and erudition.

and grandmother had to think of solutions about what to eat and what to cook. There was no grain, no vegetables, nothing that could kill hunger. Then after rummaging around the house, they would hunt out a worn cotton-padded gown, pawn it, and with the money, buy a kilo of corn-mixed noodles, come back and start a fire to cook.

In fact, typical class theory did not apply to our situation. We were neither workers nor peasants who “eat coarse food like pigs and dogs while working like horses and oxen.”¹ So, it is not enough to say that my family difficulties were caused by the exploitation of a landlord and the oppression of the Kuomintang. The distress we faced stemmed more from the disharmony between my parents, my mother's lack of employment, and her inability to seek work. One of the characteristics of old China, or one obstinate malady, was precisely that a large number of people had no permanent jobs and even had no intention of finding one because it never occurred to them that everyone should and could have jobs and work for society. When I was young, eight or nine out of ten women in the neighborhood were unemployed. As for men, two in ten stayed idle at home.

A hatred of the rich grew naturally in my mind, as I believed that the poverty of my family was the result of rich people showing no benevolence. This can be a great provocation and motivation, which requires no work on the part of one's brain at all. I lived in the vicinity of Xisi and Ping'anli streets in Beijing for a long time. Many times as I passed by Tongheju, a time-honored Shandong restaurant in Xisi, I would sniff out the aromas of delicious fish and fowl, and stare at the plump diners, whom I thought of as vulgar when they were walking out of the restaurant. I believed that intellectuals with insufficient food and clothing tended to think of people with lavish meals and warm clothes as vulgar and low. My hostility toward the restaurant and the diners in it may have also related to my love of literature. The books I read nourished my thinking, of despising the rich and liking the poor. In grade three at primary school, I wrote a composition in which I declared, “If I were a tiger, I would eat all the rich.”

There is another more subtle experience. Act III of *Thunderstorm*, a play by the Chinese dramatist Cao Yu, depicts the poor urban family of Lu Gui. The family is so poor they had nothing to do but catch mosquitoes, grumble, hum little ditties, listen to trains

1. A line of the lyrics of *A Tune for Looking for Work*, a folk song popular in northern Shaanxi Province.

approaching from afar and then fading away, listen to the wind, rainfall and thunder, and watch lightning in the depths of night. However, all these things moved me deeply, gripping my attention more forcefully than the incestuous Zhou family. While in old China it was detestable to be rich, it was also despicable being poor. Take Cao Yu's other play, *Peking Man*, for instance. The banging done with the striking of a copper bowl by the dried-fruit peddler made me painfully feel the meanness and the lack, the insignificance and shallowness of life. I decided that emptiness and idleness were an insult and injury to life, the greatest crime committed. Later, I blamed it all on the reactionary government, or the Kuomintang (KMT) and Chiang Kai-shek in particular. I yearned for a divine undertaking, great changes and a solemn mission. I was willing to turn into a moth flying toward the flames, and prayed that these flames would burn the evil old society to ashes.

In 1948, I turned fourteen. I joined the Communist Party of China (CPC) and went underground. My family moved to No. 46, Xiaorongxian *hutong* or lane. Across the wall to the south lived a family in Shuaifu *hutong*. Every summer, from the neighboring compound came the sound of a *huqin* (traditional Chinese bowed string instrument) or unaccompanied opera. It was perhaps because of my neighbor's poor skills in playing the instrument and singing, or my meager understanding of traditional opera, or my simplistic radical thinking at that time, that I felt uncomfortable all over at the stale sounds. What I felt was a sense of stagnation, conservatism, feudalism, emptiness, outdatedness, and even corruption. From that, I could sense that the Chinese had been living numb lives, one generation after another. I kept visualizing great victories in the War of Liberation (1945-49). I was thinking that there would be no place for such instruments and operas in our new life. In their place would be Soviet-style songs such as *March of the Volunteers* and *Yellow River Cantata*,¹ brass music, and symphonies.

It all began with the surrender of Japan. During the summer vacation in 1945, I went to my teacher Zheng Yi's house and listened with many classmates as he spoke of the significance of the defeat of the Japanese aggressors. At that time, I was about to turn

1. *March of the Volunteers* was later adopted as the Chinese national anthem. *Yellow River Cantata* was written in the revolutionary base of Yan'an by Xian Xinghai (1905-45), one of the earliest generations of Chinese composers influenced by Western classical music, influencing generations of Chinese musicians.