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My Life as a Chinese Writer

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MY LIFE AS A CHINESE WRITER

I am a Chinese writer, a daughter of the Chinese people. I was raised and educated by the harsh life which the Chinese people have lived. It was possible for me to follow the footsteps of the people in my work and writing. For sixty years, it can be said, I have experienced all kinds of sorrows and have gone through extreme hardship. Now, being seventy-seven years old, I have only one wish left: to continue struggling for the cause of the people. As the Chinese saying goes, "Bend oneself to a task and exert oneself to the utmost; give one's all until one's heart stops beating."

I was born in 1904, at the beginning of the 20th century and the last years of the Qing dynasty. My family was a wealthy and influential clan, and from generation to generation they were governmental officials. In this family there were all the characters described in the classical Chinese novel, *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, and *Ru Lin Wai*, the sarcastic saga lampooning Chinese scholars of the Ming. Actually my family was the epitome of a waning feudal family. Little by little, parts of the clan disintegrated and declined. My father was an example. By the time of his death, when I was only four years old, he had exhausted all his fortune. I became a poor orphan, and my lonely childhood helped me to understand, deeply, the tragic fate of the people in this 20th-century feudal society, and the anxiety of the people. This is the reason why I am so fond of reading classical Chinese novels. I felt that they reflected my time and society and gave me comfort as well as knowledge. I also enjoyed reading European literature and the 19th-century novel. This sowed the seed for what would later be my literary career. But even more fortunate, I had an intelligent mother. Once she became a widow, she managed to free herself from the bonds of the feudal family, fought her way into society, and supported herself by teaching. She not only accepted the concept of Western democracy, but also held a vague hope for a socialist revolution. She often told me her impassioned and heroic stories. Because of these early influences, I was able to discard the sadness which was gathering in my young heart.

In 1919, the dawn of the May Fourth Movement, I was fourteen years

old. My mother and I both participated in the movement, which inspired me greatly. That movement liberated me from the small world I used to live in, and in which I thought that education only would lead to personal success and create for one the possibility of having the upper hand in the society. That movement taught me to care about the world, the condition of the people and the country, and the necessity to liberate China from thousands of years of feudal shackles and hundreds of years of colonialism. So I went to Chong Sha and Shanghai and entered the first common school for girls, where I met and was influenced by the famous revolutionaries of that time. I participated in some of the mass movements. The Chinese Communist Party then was in its early stages, seeking the path to connect Marxism with the Chinese reality. Because of my petit-bourgeois fantasy I wanted to soar high in an utterly free sky, but in face of the dark reality of the time I was doomed to fail, and sank in an abyss of misery. I felt lonely and frustrated. I wanted to speak up and shout loudly but I had no way to do so except to pick up my pen and write down my anger and rebellion against the old Chinese feudal society. Therefore, it was only natural for me to follow my predecessors, Lu Xun, Qu Chiu-bai, Mao Dun; and, like them, I did not write for art's sake or for my own amusement. I wanted to write for the people, the liberation of the nation, the country's independence, democracy, the progress of the society. Many of my contemporaries and many of the younger generation also joined the literary field because of these reasons. I don't mean to imply that there are no people in China who believe in art for art's sake.

After the failure of the 1927 revolution, the Communists were massacred by the KMT counter-revolutionaries. I couldn't avoid thinking about what the way out for China might be. Naturally, I stood on the side of the people, and my thinking moved more and more toward the Left. Even though at that time I had little fame as a writer, I could still use the fame I had to influence some influential people. I could have found myself a job that paid well and gradually have climbed into upper-class society. Some of my friends did this. But it was against my desires. I despised this kind of personal vanity and selfishness and resolutely went my own way.

In the thirties, when white territory came more and more under the KMT reactionaries, I joined the Leftist Writers' Association and then, soon after, the Communist Party. I wanted to immerse myself in the People, be with the people to share their sorrows and fate—survive as

part of their survival. This was reflected in my writing: from writing about the petit-bourgeois woman who rebelled against—and denounced—feudal society in the late twenties, I became a spokesperson for the working people. This path I chose was not tolerated by the ruling class. It was a time when criminal charges due to one's writing were a common practice.

Exactly fifty years ago, my husband, Hu Yeping, and five other members of the Leftist Writers' Association (including Ron Shi), and some dozen other revolutionaries, were executed at the Shanghai garrison headquarters in Longhua prison. Some friends might be surprised: how could they, without any court proceedings, fire machine guns at the young writers? But merely a book with red covers was reason enough for arrest and execution. The writer shared the fate of all other revolutionary martyrs. This illustrates the major characteristic of the new Chinese literature: its growth is inseparable from politics. The blossoms of the new literature are stained with the blood of martyrs.

In May of 1933, I also was secretly arrested and thrown into jail. But because of the Chinese Alliance to Safeguard Human Rights (Soong Qingling, Cai Yunpai, Lu Xun, Yang Sinfou, and others belonged to it), and also because of the support I received from internationally known persons, I did not die. But my works and books were banned, and, at the same time, articles which spread political rumors and personal attacks were allowed in the newspapers. Three years later, because of Lu Xun and the Communist Party, I was able to escape from Nanjing and get to the Xan Pai revolutionary base. At last I was reunited with the people.

During the Anti-Japanese War, I travelled with the army to the front to do propaganda work and in Yanan also did literary work. During the war of liberation, I participated in the land reform, a movement to abolish the system of feudal ownership. After the founding of New China, I participated in organizing and leading literary courses. Those were the times when I often forgot I was a writer. I drowned myself in work and thought that I could be quite satisfied in serving the people, and my talent could be fulfilled by being a propaganda worker or a party secretary in a village. Only when I was transferred from this practical work did I feel, deep in my heart, those lovable characters and those thrilling scenes which I could not help but want to put down on paper. So I wrote! I wrote novels, prose-fiction, and essays.

When I am writing, I never think about the restriction of the form

nor what kind of ideology I should tie myself to; nor do I worry about the kind of reaction I will receive. I believe all this is for others to judge—after I have finished and after publication. I write spontaneously and freely feel and think. I only ask myself to maintain those feelings which initially moved me and not distort those people I love and admire so much.

Many friends and fellow writers are concerned about what I went through these past decades. There are also those who know about the rough and bumpy life of a Chinese revolutionary and are concerned about the future of China. This is natural; I can understand it. And I want to use this opportunity to thank my friends and colleagues.

Way back in 1955, another comrade and I were identified as an anti-party clique. We were accused of engaging in counter-revolutionary activities and spreading the bourgeois belief in “one bookism.” At the time, there were many people who thought this unfair. My husband, Chen Ming, and I lawfully took this to court. Then came 1957, when Chen Ming and I and many other comrades were branded as rightists in the Anti-Rightist movement. I was openly criticized and accused in all the nationwide newspapers and magazines. But since 1976, especially after the 11th-party congress, our party has exposed the crimes committed by the “Gang of Four,” sincerely criticized the ultra-left mistakes, putting much effort into restoring the precious tradition of judging according to facts. The correction of this historical mistake, which began twenty-two years ago, was made possible by the encouragement of the new party leadership: truth was finally restored, and the falsehood of my not being a Marxist and of the so-called anti-party clique was repudiated.

Today, history has opened a new page: my party membership was restored, my salary was restored and I can write again. I was also elected to the People’s Political Consultative Congress and made Vice Chairman of the Chinese Writers’ Association. Within the Association those who were branded rightists because of me have all been rehabilitated. They are all now working in responsible positions in the Association and have been given the chance to write again. Those who helped bring about this wrongdoing have also learned a lot. They have openly apologized. Now we are all working for the realization of the four modernizations and for the new flowering literature.

After the Anti-Rightist movement in 1957, I gathered up my courage and, with the passionate devotion and love given me by the party and

the people, put aside the rightist cap and all the inevitable obstacles. Chen Ming and I went to Bai Da Huang to open up a new path in life. I performed manual labor, worked as a teacher, and organized housewives—until the beginning of the Cultural Revolution.

I did not go to Bai Da Huang as a punishment given me by the Party. After I was criticized I felt I could not close my door and write in Peking; I could not bear being so far from the life of the people. I could stand being criticized, punished, not having a job or income, but what I could not stand was being expelled from the Party—because that meant being apart from the people! But past experience told me that if I did not submit to the political persecution, that would be an excuse to add to my punishment. I had to swallow this bitter herb. Therefore, I submitted and asked to be sent to the bottom of society—to a place where conditions were the most severe, to be with the working people in order to gain their understanding and forgiveness. I asked, therefore, to be sent to Bai Da Huang. It was not possible to refuse my request.

Going through the eight years of the Anti-Japanese War and the four years of the War of Liberation greatly helped me and made it possible for me to bear this severe, new test. After working in the fields for a year, I became the Chinese language teacher for the production team. My work was praised by the people and the leaders of the farm. Several times they even tried to have the rightist label, which was keeping me and the revolution apart, taken away from me. In these years I learned about life all over again and made many good friends.

Regaining the understanding of the people was a very precious thing. It was the best medicine for me then, curing me of my sadness. I will always remember those people. It was at the time when the party leadership agreed to provide me with the conditions to write, when the Cultural Revolution broke out. Our party has by now made a historical and comprehensive analysis of this so-called “Cultural Revolution.” It was an internal disorder brought on by the mistakes committed by the leadership, and it was used by the counter-revolutionary clique. China and the Chinese people suffered greatly because of it. It is not hard to imagine that even though I had been a dead tiger I could not escape the disasters. In this period of tremendous destruction, the Party’s policy was destroyed, its tradition was abandoned and the cadres and the masses were savagely trampled. I, myself, went through all kinds of torture. Even though I was helped and protected by many kindhearted people in those hard times, whom I’ll never forget, this could not prevent what

was to come. My neighbor once said to me, "Death is better than the life you are living now." In April, 1970, using the name of The Military Controlling Committee, "The Gang of Four" arrested me. When they were putting the handcuffs on me, the first thought that ran through my head was "My saviours have come." It was in this way that I ended my twelve years at Bai Da Huang and started my prison life which lasted for the next five years.

Life in prison was relatively quiet. One could read *People's Daily* and *The Red Flag* periodicals. The healthy forces within the party began resisting the treacherous designs of "The Gang of Four" at that time. Even in prison I felt the effect. After the downfall of Ling Biao, the food in prison improved automatically. We also could go outside our cells every day and borrow books to read. It was at that time that I read the works of Marx and Engels and much of Lu Xun. This gave me great comfort. I persisted in doing exercises in prison, practiced Tai Ji, and jogged. In order to prevent the deterioration of my speech, since I rarely had the chance to talk to anyone, I used to recite poetry and sing quietly. In 1975, when Deng Xiao Ping was in charge of the leadership, many people were released from prison, myself and Chen Ming among them.

In 1975, I was finally reunited with Chen Ming. In those five years, I didn't know his whereabouts. Seeing each other again was, of course, a joyous moment, and at the same time we also reestablished correspondence with our son and daughter. In the beginning of 1979, with the permission of the central committee of the Party, we returned to Peking. During the last two years all my banned books were reprinted; in addition, two new books of mine were published.

This is my life, an ordinary one. Now, as I search within me, I truly cannot find any resentment. It is true, though, that I have had some losses myself, but the losses of the Party, the people, and the country were greater than mine. When I was confronted with misfortunes, the Party and the people were suffering too. Many people who contributed more than I to the revolution suffered greater misfortunes.

Our country is now trying to recover and is taking steps toward a new future. The situation easily makes one think of the patriotic, classical poets who drowned in their sorrows and were melancholy up to their bitter end. I will not mourn over yesterday's suffering. Furthermore, I will never be one of those who, sincere as they are in their analysis of the situation, ignore the complete picture and see only one part of it. By doing this, they actually cannot help in the reconstruction of the

country. I firmly believe that the one billion people of China must unite into one under the leadership of the Communist Party. We must work and study hard, liberate our thoughts, sum up our past experiences, and develop a democratic spirit. Only then can our country contribute to the progress of mankind and world peace, and our literature will enrich the world with its unique cultural experiences.

*translated by
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