

## **The Trial of Wang Shiwei 1942**

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### **Themes and Goals**

This teaching unit leads students through an exploration of a significant event in the early Chinese communist movement: the trial of Wang Shiwei in 1942. The trial had many long-reaching repercussions for the Chinese communist movement. The case:

- foreshadowed the *modus operandi* of many ideological campaigns of the later People's Republic of China;
- dramatizes one of the key moral choices China has faced under the Communists: the choice between collective well-being on the one hand and individual rights and freedom on the other;
- offers a case for discussing the role of literature in society; and
- demonstrates the sense of vulnerability that characterized the Chinese Communist Party in the early 1940s. Leaders of young social and political movements often worry that their movements are vulnerable; in 1942, these feelings led to the tragic trial of Wang Shiwei.

The unit features a role-playing component (class sessions two and three), during which the students re-enact the trial but with outcomes that may differ from what actually took place in history.

Through this unit, students will gain a fundamental knowledge of an internal conflict that deeply affected the Chinese Communist Party during a critical period of the Communist movement in China. Students will also gain an in depth understanding of the course of the Rectification Campaign in Yan'an that allowed the CCP to establish complete ideological control over its followers. Through writing and speaking exercises, students will put into practice the unique political discourses of Chinese communism, the rhetorical effect of which directly impacted the daily lives of people for the next sixty years. While the game itself does not presume to replicate the exact process of a "political struggle session," it affords students a glimpse of the workings of mob psychology, where rational thinking gives way to mass frenzy.

While it is tempting to characterize the trial of Wang Shiwei as an illustration of the fate awaiting free-thinking intellectuals in a repressive state, it is clear from the questions raised in the first session that the Wang Shiwei trial epitomizes the difficulty of voicing a minority opinion, especially when that opinion is pitted against a more powerful entity such as the state. For this reason, the trial resonates with many other situations across time and place. Instructors may wish to draw comparisons with social and political movements in other societies, such as the civil rights movements in the U.S. For the most part, the consequences for those civil rights activists who brushed against the law were not as dire as they were for Wang Shiwei, but the similarities are unmistakable.

### **Audience and Uses**

This unit can be used in courses including, but not limited to, these general areas:

- Modern Chinese history
- Chinese politics
- Public opinion and ideological control
- Freedom of speech and censorship
- Politics and literature
- Political movements
- World Communist movements
- Intellectuals and the state
- Law and society
- Literary and political dissent

### **Instructor's Introduction**

#### **Historical Background**

- After the fall of the Qing dynasty during the nationalist revolution of 1911-12, China was declared a republic. During the following decade, China witnessed great social, cultural and political change. The May Fourth Movement (1919), and the New Culture Movement that followed, sought to unify the Chinese nation and create a new society, while the decline of the central government's authority and subsequent rise of regional warlords challenged the integrity of the Chinese state. In this climate of continued uncertainty and eroding central power, many recognized the need for further revolution to ensure continued progress towards a new society. These revolutionary convictions found political expression in two main forces: Sun Yat-sen's Nationalist Guomindang Party (GMD; also known as the Kuomintang or KMT) and the fledgling Chinese Communist Party (CCP), founded in 1921.
- In 1924, the GMD and the CCP came together to form the First United Front. Lacking the numbers and organization to launch a successful military campaign to reunify China on its own, the GMD asked the Soviet Union for assistance, a

request that Soviet leaders approved under the condition that the GMD ally itself with the CCP. This alliance succeeded in uniting more than half of China under a Nationalist government in the Northern Expedition of 1926-27.

- The CCP and the GMD maintained their tenuous collaboration until 1927, when Jiang Jieshi (better known as Chiang Kai-shek in the English speaking world), the new leader of the GMD, conducted a bloody purge after his troops entered Shanghai. Arguing that Communism was corrosive to social and economic progress, Chiang had hundreds of his political opponents imprisoned or executed.
- Persecutions on a minor scale also took place in other cities, in effect forcing the CCP out of all major urban centers in China. Mao and other remaining members of the CCP organized a series of peasant and worker uprisings in many major Chinese cities. Known as the Autumn Harvest Uprisings, they proved to be a disaster and were crushed by the GMD. Mao fled to the mountains with his remaining forces, and his strategy of “using the villages to surround the cities,” developing the rural regions of China as revolutionary strongholds while leaving the cities to the hands of the GMD, began to gain ascendancy among the CCP leadership.
- Communist influences were further curtailed, except in the mountain areas of Jiangxi. At the end of 1931, the GMD initiated a series of military campaigns aiming to annihilate the Jiangxi Soviet\* and eradicate the CCP once and for all.  
\*Established in 1927 and run by Mao Zedong, the Jiangxi Soviet was a stronghold of popular support for the CCP, as its land reform policies greatly benefited the peasant population. The Jiangxi Soviet was also important in the training and expansion of the Red Army.
- In October 1934, with GMD troops in hot pursuit, the Communists set out on a long expedition that stretched over 6,000 miles and took more than a year. CCP historiography later glorified this expedition as “The Long March.” In June 1936, the Communists arrived in Yan’an in Shaanxi Province after suffering colossal losses. One report estimated that only one in ten soldiers that participated in the Long March made it to Yan’an.
- Life in Yan’an was hard. The communists were under siege, and the arid landscape of Shaanxi provided little material comfort. In such an unaccommodating setting, the CCP depended for its survival on iron party discipline and, more importantly, an imagined community governed by justice, freedom, and egalitarianism. Posing as an alternative to the corrupt and decadent GMD, the CCP was eager to show the world that Yan’an was organized in accordance with a fair and just social ideal, a model society where everybody, regardless of position and power, worked for the common good. Those who had to battle with the harsh realities day to day, however, saw a different picture of Yan’an, where uneven access to resources and privileges left the general populace feeling disgruntled.

- Wang Shiwei, a young writer and translator, first showed an interest in politics when, as a high school student, he joined a demonstration in support of students of Peking University during the May Fourth Movement. In 1925, he entered Peking University and actively participated in student movements. He later joined the CCP in 1926 and went to study in Moscow in the late 1920s and early 1930s, becoming an associate of a Trotskyist group for which he translated a number of Trotsky's works. He traveled to Yan'an from Shanghai in 1937 to join the Academy for Marxist-Leninist Studies. Wang specialized in the short essay (*zawen*), the kind deemed particularly useful to expose social ills. Communist writers often use this genre in political debates. The *zawen* was also Lu Xun's preferred means of social critique.
- In 1942, the CCP leadership faced an internal crisis, as a group of "Internationalists" had returned from the Soviet Union with ideas that challenged Mao's authority. In response, Mao launched the Rectification Campaign, inviting open criticism from the masses. This call for criticism was Mao's way of inviting popular opinion unfavorable to his enemies. However, rather than speaking against the planned targets of the campaign, Party intellectuals took the opportunity to unmask the CCP's hypocrisy by pointing out instances of inequality in Yan'an.
- Wang Shiwei was one such intellectual who came forward with his criticism. He was disillusioned with life in Yan'an, and began to write short essays critical of life in Yan'an. The most famous of these is "Wild Lilies," which touched a chord in the hearts of many new arrivals in Yan'an. Around the same time, other writers also spoke up against what they considered to be the dark side of Yan'an.
- Wang Shiwei was by no means the only one who spoke out against the CCP's leadership, even though his "Wild Lilies" and other essays made him the "negative model" in the Campaign. Writers far more famous than he, including Ding Ling and Liu Xuewei, also voiced their disillusionment with life in Yan'an. Yet, while others soon recanted under pressure, Wang Shiwei remained unrepentant.
- The CCP machinery went into action and pressured Wang Shiwei to retract his criticisms. Wang refused, and the CCP's initial attacks on him only made him more intransigent and popular among his supporters. Wang was put to trial for disrupting party unity, slandering party leaders, espousing Trotskyite ideas, and most damning of all, being a member of the "Five Member Anti-Party Gang," which was supposedly a group of subversive Trotskyists within the CCP. The trial took the form of a series of what are known as "struggle sessions" in May and June of 1942, at the conclusion of which Wang was found guilty and put under arrest. He spent the next five years in prison, but was allowed a number of public appearances during which he spoke to outside visitors of the magnanimity of the CCP in bringing him back from his errant ways. In 1947, when Yan'an

once again came under Guomindang attack, the Communists were forced to quickly retreat. Under circumstances that are still unclear, Wang Shiwei was summarily executed during the evacuation from Yan'an.

### **Instructor Readings**

Instructors will find the following materials useful as a general introduction to the Wang Shiwei Trial.

Wang Shiwei, "Wild Lilies Part I and Part II" in Dai Qing, ed., *Wang Shiwei and "Wild Lilies"*, Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1994, pp. 4-9, 17-21

A relatively short essay, serialized in two parts when first published, "Wild Lilies" constitutes the primary evidence of Wang Shiwei's "crime" against the CCP. In this essay, Wang speaks of the stultifying and mendacious atmosphere of Yan'an, where a new class of the privileged lorded over the rest of society. Wang launches his attack under four headings: 1) "What is missing in our lives?" 2) "Confronting 'Running into Difficulties';" 3) "Inevitability,' 'The Sky is Not Falling,' and 'Triviality';" and 4) "Egalitarianism and Hierarchy." There are various translations, but Dai Qing's version is accompanied by a narrative of the trial.

"Images of Yan'an" (<http://www.princeton.edu/~his325/week5/YanImage/photos.html>)

A brief but useful introduction to life in Yan'an with maps and photographs that illustrate the rugged landscape of Yan'an and the haggard look of the Communists living there in 1940s. Follow the links at the bottom of the pages for folk songs (audio available), dances, and skits, all believed to have captured the harshness of life in Yan'an, and hence considered to be politically correct, unlike the kind of writing that Wang Shiwei and other critics of the CCP produced.

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*, No. 11 (Jan. 1984), 25-58. (Available online through JSTOR.)

Mao's speech (sometimes called "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Art and Literature;" see below) was delivered in May 1942, and the Rectification Campaign that showcases the trial of Wang Shiwei, began in June the same year. In preparation for Wang Shiwei's trial, the Communist Party instructed its rank and file to study a number of documents, including Mao's "Yan'an Talks." In the "Talks," Mao put forward the argument that literature is class-based. Taken to its extreme, Mao's theory radicalizes and politicizes literary debates, where a writer is deemed either speaking for or against the people. There is no middle ground, and any argument that literature transcends time, place, and class is a sham.

Cheek spells out the relationship between the “Yan’an Talks” and the downfall of Wang Shiwei. Pp.37-44 provides a “calendar” of the Rectification Campaign.

### **Student Readings and Activities**

The teaching unit consists of four class sessions. Session one takes the conventional class format of lecture and discussion. Sessions two and three are dedicated to a role-play activity. Session four is a wrap-up session, otherwise known as the “post-mortem.”

#### **Session 1: Introduction**

The first session explores the intellectual issues involved in the Wang Shiwei trial. Instructors should encourage students to resist the temptation of passing judgment on the historical figures at this point, so as not to interfere with the role playing activity. Instead, encourage students to try to understand the reasons behind the key players’ thinking and actions. Students have to understand that even people who hold opinions different from them may have a legitimate reason for doing so.

#### **Session 1 Readings:**

\*\*\*Mao Zedong, “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Art and Literature”

- Several translations are available, including some online. For instance, see:
  - <http://www.religion.sbc.edu/Talks%20at%20the%20Yenan%20Forum%20on%20Lit>
  - [http://www.etext.org/Politics/MIM/classics/mao/sw3/mswv3\\_08.html](http://www.etext.org/Politics/MIM/classics/mao/sw3/mswv3_08.html)
- An abridged version of the speech is available in: *China: Adapting the Past, Confronting the Future*, ed. Thomas Buoye et al., Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 2002, pp. 435-39.

Mao’s speech was delivered in May 1942. The Rectification Campaign, which showcases the trial of Wang Shiwei, began in June of the same year. In preparation for Wang Shiwei’s trial, the Communist Party instructed its rank and file to study a number of documents, including Mao’s “Yan’an Talks.” In the “Talks,” Mao argues that literature is class-based. Taken to its extreme, Mao’s theory radicalizes and politicizes literary debates, where a writer is deemed either speaking for or against the people. There is no middle ground, leaving no room for the argument that literature transcends time, place, and class.

Instructors may want to assign Cheek’s article (see Instructor Readings above), especially if using the abridged version of speech. However, it may be worth students approach Mao’s speech directly in its entirety.

\*\*\*Mao Zedong, “A Single Spark Can Start A Prairie Fire”

- Available online at [http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1\\_6.htm](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_6.htm)

“A Single Spark” outlines Mao’s reasons for giving up urban centers while focusing on rural areas to further the cause of the revolution. Extremely important in understanding the thinking of the Communist leaders in rural Yan’an.

\*\*\* Wang Shiwei, “Wild Lilies Part I and Part II” in Dai Qing, ed., *Wang Shiwei and “Wild Lilies*, Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1994, pp. 4-9, 17-21

A relatively short essay, serialized in two parts when first published, “Wild Lilies” constitutes the primary evidence of Wang Shiwei’s “crime” against the CCP. In this essay, Wang speaks of the stultifying and mendacious atmosphere of Yan’an, where a new class of the privileged lorded over the rest of society. Wang launches his attack under four headings: 1) “What is missing in our lives?” 2) “Confronting ‘Running into Difficulties’;” 3) “‘Inevitability,’ ‘The Sky is Not Falling,’ and ‘Triviality’;” and 4) “Egalitarianism and Hierarchy.” There are various translations, but Dai Qing’s version is accompanied by a narrative of the trial.

\*\* Ding Ling, “Thoughts on March 8” In:

- *I Myself Am A Woman: Selected Writings of Ding Ling*, edited by Tani E. Barlow with Gary J. Bjorge. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1989. Pages 316-321.
- *Sources of Chinese Tradition, Volume II*, edited by Wm. Theodore de Bary et al. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001. Pages 446-449.

Ding Ling is perhaps the most famous writer who joined forces with Wang Shiwei in criticizing the Communist Party in 1942, even though she later recanted under pressure and turned against Wang. March 8 is Women’s Day, and Ding Ling’s article addresses the inequality that women suffered in Yan’an.

\* Wang Shiwei, “Politicians, Artists.” In Dai Qing, ed., *Wang Shiwei and “Wild Lilies*, Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1994. Pages 90-93.

This additional short piece by Wang can provide students with a better understanding of Wang’s ideas, style, and his thoughts on the proper role of art and literature in a revolutionary society. In this way, it might present a nice counterpoint to Mao’s “Talks on Art and Literature.” It is mentioned several times in the forum.

Session 1 Discussion Questions:

- In what way can one speak of literature and art as performing a social or political function?
- Who is to decide what specific functions literature is to perform? The writer? The reader? The state? The dominant ideological apparatus?
- Mao believes that literature is class based and that it is disingenuous to pretend good literature is universal and timeless. Give arguments for and against these assertions.

- Mao pins his hope of the revolution on the peasants of rural China rather than the exploited proletariat in major cities. How does such a view shape his literary and artistic policies?
- Wang Shiwei, Ding Ling and a few other writers came under strong criticism from the CCP in 1942. Why did the CCP leadership single them out for criticism?

## Session 2: Organizational Meeting

The role play portion of the unit occurs during sessions two and three, with students playing out the trial of Wang Shiwei.

Scheduled speakers should talk for four to five minutes each, followed by questions from other participants. Participants not scheduled to speak are free to express their opinions as well, indicating their wish to do so by standing behind the podium. Scheduled speeches must be put in writing and circulated before the session, but speakers should not read from prepared scripts when they stand up to address the assembly.

In the beginning of Session two, the instructor distributes roles to students. There are three roles:

- Pro-Wang faction
- Anti-Wang faction
- Indeterminates

The activity works best with a class of 12 to 13 students, with four students assigned to the pro-Wang faction, four to the anti-Wang faction, and four or five to the indeterminates. With different class sizes, adjustments should be made. The pro-Wang faction and the anti-Wang faction should have the same number of participants, and as far as the possible, there should be an odd number of indeterminates to avoid a tie. The goal of the pro-Wang and anti-Wang factions is to win the indeterminates to their side through the persuasiveness of their arguments.

As soon as students are assigned their roles, they should meet within their groups. The pro-Wang faction and anti-Wang faction should each select a leader for their group. Both leaders are responsible for ensuring that their faction functions collaboratively and smoothly. The anti-Wang leader will also act as the Chair of the assembly.

While the factional meetings are going on, indeterminates should circulate between the two opposing factions to learn about their positions and strategies. They should also feel free to express their own concerns, raise questions, and engage the two factions in discussion. To win the indeterminates over to their side, both factions should answer the indeterminates' questions as fully as possible without jeopardizing their strategies, while taking care that whatever they propose during the rest of the session will address the concerns raised by the indeterminates. The instructor should also circulate to answer questions as needed.



### Session 3: Trial

The Chair, the leader of the anti-Wang faction, opens the trial by reading out the charges brought against Wang Shiwei, citing evidence where available. The factions, beginning with the anti-Wang faction, will take turns speaking, until all factional players have had a chance to express their opinion.

First speaker from anti-Wang faction

First speaker from pro-Wang faction

Second speaker from anti-Wang faction

Second speaker from pro-Wang faction

And so on ....

Each presentation should be followed by a brief question and answer session. The Chair of the assembly is responsible for acknowledging speakers and keeping time.

After a short break during which the players have a chance to reflect on the process of the trial, the assembly will reconvene. The indeterminates will have the floor, each speaking for four to five minutes. They can either raise more questions to either of the factions and indicate and explain (very important) their position regarding the trial up to that point of the game. The factions will respond after each presentation.

The Chair again reads the charges against Wang. The charges are then put to a vote. Factional players are allowed to vote across factional lines.

In the event that Wang is found guilty, proposals for the appropriate penalty are entertained, debated, and voted upon. In the event that Wang is found not guilty, the assembly will issue a statement announcing Wang's innocence.

In addition to participating in the role playing activity, all students are required to submit a writing assignment. Scheduled speakers from both the pro- and anti-Wang factions must submit transcripts of their speeches at the beginning of Session three, before they make their speech to the assembly. Indeterminates, who do not commit to a position until Session three, will take into consideration these transcripts as well as what transpires during class to decide on Wang's guilt or innocence. They must document their reasoning in a short paper due at the beginning of Session four.

#### Session 4: Post-mortem

Session four reverts to a conventional class format. The instructor should reiterate the basic facts of the trial. Students, especially those who argued and voted outside of factional lines, are invited to raise questions and reflect on the roles they played. The instructor may also want to lead the students through the website “Images of Yan’an.”

#### Session 4 Readings:

\*\*\*Wen Jize, “Diary of a Struggle,” in Dai Qing, *Wang Shiwei and “Wild Lilies”*, Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1994, pp. 102-113.

An edited transcript of the historical Wang Shiwei trial. This will help correct counter-factual assumptions and outcomes that may have arisen from the game in the last session.

\*\*“Images of Yan’an” (<http://www.princeton.edu/~his325/week5/YanImage/photos.html>)

A brief but useful introduction to life in Yan’an with maps and photographs, where one can see the rugged landscape of Yan’an and the haggard look of the Communists living there in 1940s. Follow the links at the bottom of the pages for folk songs (audio available), dances, and skits, all believed to have captured the harshness of life in Yan’an, and hence considered to be politically correct, unlike the kind of writing that Wang Shiwei and other critics of the CCP produced.