The Party Never Sleeps (Part 1)

Read Part 2, Part 3

an excerpt from *Bearing Witness: Coming of Age in Mao's China*

by Manyin Li (April 2020)

Door, Girl, Plant, Huang Rui, 1981

1. An Unexpected Turn

Summer, 1955

After three years of hard studies, all students, including me, in Class 304 at the Shanghai Electric Technology School, had finished the field study and finally left the exams behind them. For all of us, this summer meant the beginning of a new chapter in our lives. From a grand point of view, we would soon become constructive elements contributing to the implementation of the First Five-Year Plan for the young People’s Republic of China. Personally, it was also the time each of us would begin to make money and live a life independent from our parents, who were mostly in financial hardship. In either sense, this summer was supposed to be a positive turning point of our lives, and every one of us was enjoying a carefree period filled with laughter, thinking and talking about nothing but youthful hopes of the future while waiting for a job assignment.

It goes without saying that we had to go through some sort of pre-graduation political study before the day of commencement. It was all right, since we were used to various kind of political study at any given time and knew well that it was just a routine. All we had to do was to understand how important our jobs were to the construction of a socialist China and express our willingness to obey the job assignment and promise to do our best at the new job. The political study would not take long. A couple of weeks, perhaps. Therefore, it was a big surprise when Principal Zhang, also the Party leader of the school, announced that all graduating students had to

participate wholeheartedly in a movement called “Eliminating Hidden Counter-Revolutionaries” just beginning all over the nation. He urged us to forget about jobs because this political movement was more important than anything else. It was revolution versus counterrevolution.

This sudden change of course and the resulting delay of job assignment were most unwelcome, but we had to conform. As we students were trained and even fed by the Party and the government, we had to listen to the Party and do whatever the Party told us to do. All we needed was patience. But it turned out that patience was not the only price I had to pay. The summer of 1955 to me, ironically, was the end of innocence, not by starting a new job but the beginning of persecution that was to continue for the next 30 years.

Read more in *New English Review*:
- **On the Beach, On the Balcony**
- **Manyin Li Meets the Party: A Commentary**
- **It’s Turtles all the Way Down**

I was not a landlord or rich farmer, not one who had served in Jiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist’s Party, government, army, or intelligence apparatus, not a member of any of the so-called reactionary religious organizations, nor a bandit, thug, thief, murderer, or one of any other sort of criminal, and I did not join any secret anti-Communist groups, either. In a word, I did not belong to any of the above categories officially designated as the enemies of the people. How come I became the target of the proletarian dictatorship? Well, it started with someone named Hu Feng. Who was he? I did not know him. I had never even heard his name.

Hu Feng was a poet and a literary critic by profession. In July of 1954, he submitted the so-called *Three Hundred Thousand Word Report,* literally *Report on the State of Literature and Arts,* to the Central Committee of the Communist Party and Chairman Mao. In his report, Hu Feng enumerated problems in the literature and arts circles that he deemed needed to be addressed and changed in order to make literature and arts flourish. Among the problems he mentioned in the report were factional leadership which consisted of literary men, Party members, who suppressed others, and ideological disputes regarding socialist realism. He especially criticized the dominating idea that subject matter determined the value of literature and art works and the demand that writers must write about only the lives of workers, peasants, and soldiers. He even argued that "theoretical knives" were smothering writers' creativity and leading to the withering of literature and arts. He hoped for Chairman Mao and the Central Committee's attention and support to clarify the theoretical disputes and reappoint non-factional officials to administer literature and art affairs.

To his dismay, the Party's response was a well-organized nationwide criticism of the *Report* led by the Party's primary newspaper *People's Daily*, and he was accused of "attacking the Party." That was how I got to know about Hu Feng.

Back in late 1951, the Party already had begun to demand all intellectuals to participate in the Reform of Thinking Movement. Each of them must change his bourgeois thinking to proletarian by way of self-criticism and public criticism. In the past few years before Hu Feng submitted his report, a number of nationwide criticisms were made public against

scholars and film makers. Chairman Mao himself was personally in command of these criticisms. This time it was the same. By June of 1955, the criticism of Hu Feng had escalated to a political campaign, and what Hu Feng had done was characterized as “counter-revolutionary.” Hu Feng, along with his friends and followers, were now officially labeled as “counter-revolutionaries.” Three batches of *Hu Feng’s Counter-Revolutionary Materials* were published in a row together with the editor’s comments.

On July 1, 1955, the Central Committee of the Communist Party issued the *Directive on Fighting against the Hidden Counterrevolutionaries*, with an estimate of about five percent of all persons working or studying in any institution or school as hidden counter-revolutionaries and bad elements. At this point, criticism of the Hu Feng group had evolved into a political movement involving all institutions, groups, schools, and enterprises throughout the country. In universities, colleges, and even secondary technology schools, not only the faculty and staff had to participate in the movement, even the graduating students were not exempt. The rationale was simple: to prevent the hidden counter-revolutionaries from mixing into nationally owned enterprises, schools, and institutions of science and technology as well as literature and art organizations.

Was there any connection between Hu Feng and me? Absolutely none! To my disbelief, however, the fire that had been burning Hu Feng caught me. In order to tie in with the nationwide political movement, our school froze the job placement of graduates. All students of the graduating classes were ordered to attend an orientation meeting. At this meeting, Principal Zhang told us, “minds longing and waiting for job placement must be redirected to participating in a more important

event.” The delay of graduation was really annoying. Wasn’t the criticism against Hu Feng a matter of literature and arts? What did it have to do with us, students of a technology school? As if he had read our minds, the Principal told us that we should not think of it as something irrelevant, because according to him, “the counter-revolutionaries are sharpening their knives to stab the Party, and millions of human heads would fall to the ground if the counterrevolutionaries’ conspiracies succeed.” To be honest, I could not see how Hu Feng and his followers, as literary men, would cause the fall of millions of human heads, but that was the Party’s rhetoric. The principal further exhorted us: “You have heard the old saying, ‘a scholar rebellion does not last for three years.’ That might be true in the past but no longer.” As the situation was so serious, every one of us was required to carefully study the documents criticizing Hu Feng and his counterrevolutionary group and link theoretical learning with our reality.

Decades later, I learned Hu Feng was not a member of the Communist Party, but from the 1930s onwards, he accepted Marxism and the leadership of the Communist Party and became one of the leftist writers working in the areas under the control of the Nationalist Party. His literary career made him an influential figure among many young poets and novelists. After the Liberation in 1949, he was given the title of National Political Consultant and a member of the Chinese Writers Association, both with honor but no power. That shows he was not really trusted by the Party.

The distrust actually began in the early 1940s when Hu Feng was criticized by the Party for views of literature and arts incompatible with the Party’s. Hu Feng advocated that life was everywhere, and a writer should write about the life of any

human being as he chose. Hu Feng also strove for the freedom of creative writing, whereas the Party viewed this kind of pursuit of freedom as opposition to Marxism, Leninism, and Mao Zeng-dong's Thoughts. Worse, he even dared to express independent interpretations of *Chairman Mao's Speech at the Yan'an Symposium on Literature and Arts* and was deemed not only heretical but subversive.

Hu Feng had the ambition and guts to strive for freedom and even make a difference, and that was what brought him down. No one, however, even the Communist officials in the literature and art field, had expected that the expression of personal views would be considered "counter-revolutionary." This was the first time this label was used to mark a literary figure. Hu Feng's reform proposal to the Party's Central Committee and Chairman Mao expressed his yearning for literary prosperity and a sense of responsibility to call for freeing writers from dogmatic shackles so they could create great works, an aim not incompatible with the Party's policy to let "a hundred kinds of flowers bloom," an expression borrowed from the 5th to 3rd century BC to describe literary prosperity. But the Party's policy is often not what it looks or sounds.

Hu Feng was first arrested in 1955 but was officially sentenced to fourteen years of imprisonment ten years later. During the Cultural Revolution, he was re-sentenced, this time to life imprisonment. He was released in 1979, but his redress had to go through three phases, in 1980, 1986, 1988, respectively, which shows the reluctance of the Party to give him justice. He died in 1985 when he was not fully redressed.

At the time of the 1955 movement against Hu Feng, I did not know his background, nor the true nature of his *Report,* since

we had never even read the whole *Report*, only quotations from it for the purpose of criticism. We were in the habit of following the Party's call. When the Party told us to fight against the counter-revolutionaries, we followed; when the Party wanted us to be informants, we followed; when the Party required us to confess, we followed. The difficulty was: what were we to inform or confess about?

We did learn something in theory. First of all, the Hu Feng incident extended our concept of the term "counter-revolutionary." We used to know that people who joined or served in the Nationalist Party, its army and intelligence units were no doubt counter-revolutionaries. Also, if someone tried to organize an uprising against the current regime or secretly serve Jiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Party, he was counterrevolutionary. Now we learned that there were more. Even those openly supporting and working for the Communist Party might be counter-revolutionary, and what they actually did could be just writing articles and books. These were the "hidden counterrevolutionaries."

On the concept of 'organization,' we also made progress. In the past, the understanding was: an 'organization' must have a formal name, clear purposes, goals and programs; now we knew these were not essential elements of an 'organization.' As long as a few like-minded people often gathered together to have lunch or dinner, communicated with each other by letters, or formed formal or informal cooperation, they could be considered forming an 'organization.' *As everybody has close friends, everybody could be considered in an organization*, depending on how the Party looked at it politically.

Despite the progress of theoretical learning, we youngsters

without any social experience still could not keep up with the political movement. We generally believed that there was no hidden counterrevolutionary among us. This was a conclusion based on simple math: When Liberated in 1949, we were only twelve or thirteen years old; even a few older ones were no older than fifteen. At that age, none of us could have joined counterrevolutionary organizations, such as the Nationalist Party or even its youth group. As for the six years since the Liberation, we had been attending schools under the leadership of the Communist Party, nor could we join any counterrevolutionary group. Due to this mindset, as far as our class was concerned, this political movement became a purely theoretical study, for there was no real connection. Even when Principal Zhang at a general meeting criticized this attitude and disclosed that a small reactionary group was hidden in graduating students, we still thought it could not be students in our class.

The next day, a Party agent responsible for students' ideological education personally came to our class and made the following announcement: "Principal Zhang's warning was aimed at Class 304." It was like throwing a grenade into our class. We were all shocked! The hidden small reactionary group was in *our* class! No kidding!

The nature of political learning immediately transformed into a battle against the hidden counterrevolutionaries. Activists began to call for this small reactionary group to step out and surrender. Other students advised the small reactionary group members to follow the example of Shu Wu, a member of the Hu Feng group who turned his weapon of criticism against his mentor in the early days of the anti-Hu Feng campaign. It was a pity that no Shu Wu appeared in our midst. At this point, except for a few most trusted by the Party, the majority of

the students in Class 304 did not know who the members of the small reactionary group were, and it never occurred to anybody that a counterrevolutionary could not know that he was one.

When asked to speak, many, including myself, repeated what we had learned from the Principal and the activists: “The hidden counterrevolutionaries are before our eyes. Yet, I have been unaware. I really lack of revolutionary alertness. I must do better in political learning. Even though I am unable to reveal anything, I would like to advise the members of this small reactionary group: early confession earns leniency; resistance receives harsh punishment. Do not think you will be lucky enough to muddle through.”

Despite warnings and advice, however, the hidden reactionary group members did not come out to surrender. My fellow students were both curious and anxious and, like a reader of a mystery novel, eager to know who the bad guys were. I was equally curious and anxious as everyone else.

2. The “Small Reactionary Group”

The leadership team that consisted of the Party Committee members, Communist Youth League leading members, and student activists came up with a new tactic, dividing Class 304 into three groups so as to narrow down the encirclement. At the same time it was formally declared to all the graduating students at a general meeting that there was among them a small reactionary group with an organization, plans, and actions. And this small group, we were further told, attempted to attack the Communist Party by publishing a magazine. The

Party's General Secretary and Principal of the school, Zhang, then continued with a loud and firm voice after the declaration: "Our Party defeated Chiang Kai-shek's troops in the millions. Are we not able to eliminate a few hidden counterrevolutionaries?" No one, of course, doubted the Party's power.

Principal Zhang also announced the Party's policy: Confession is the only way out; recalcitrance leads to a dead end. At the end of the general meeting, he addressed the reactionaries directly by saying, "The legal net of proletarian dictatorship covers from heaven to earth; you have nowhere to escape! There is still time to confess, though. We are giving you a chance. Do not alienate yourselves from the people." We all felt that the situation was more serious than we had thought. But, still, in my group, no one stepped out to confess. It was unknown how the other two groups were doing, as we were told not to inquire about one another.

The next morning, J. Lu approached me. He was a cadre student and Party member who served as a member of the leading group of the Anti-Hidden Counterrevolutionary Movement. He told me to follow him to an empty classroom where two other cadre students were waiting. They sat behind the desk in front of the blackboard and pointed to a student's seat to let me sit down.

The three revolutionaries looked at me seriously for a while. Then, one of them asked "You heard what the Principal said yesterday? What do you think?" His tone was peaceful. "Principal Zhang's message was clear. Somebody should step out and confess," I replied as I thought. "Who do you think will step out and confess?" The same guy looked at me with

exaggerated interest. Perhaps they hoped to get some information from me? But my answer was disappointing: “That I don’t know.”

“You say you do not know?” Another cadre student spoke with voice raised, and his tone was grim.

“I really have no idea.” I became a little nervous. Why did they think I should have known the reactionary elements? While I was wondering, the revolutionary who questioned first angrily roared, which frightened me, “C. Wu and F. Ding have already begun to confess, but you are still pretending you do not know! Is your brain made of a hard piece of granite?”

Now the cards were on the table! As if an electric shock had suddenly activated my dormant memory, I began to recall what happened about a year and half ago as soon as I heard the two names. Wu and Ding got the idea to publish a magazine, and they thought I might be interested in it and discussed their plan with me. But it was just a talk. We never actually did anything. What did the talk have to do with a “small reactionary group?”

While all the above thoughts were running in my mind, I instinctively defended myself: “I am not pretending. I just forgot that C. Wu and F. Ding had discussed the matter of publication with me. Now I recall it, but how was that relevant to counter-revolution? We talked about it but did nothing.”

J. Lu had kept silent. He slightly twisted his lips and opened his mouth sarcastically: “You are very clever. Others have confessed, but you forgot it. But now you remember it. Good! Tell us about your secret meeting.”

“It was not a *secret* meeting,” I replied earnestly, because a secret meeting sounded conspiratorial, and even criminal. “We were talking under the library stairs, where everybody walking by saw us, and the time was afternoon after class when many students went to the library. Actually, Z. Shen walked by and stopped and listened for a few minutes.”

“You see how well you remember it! You even remember who passed by.” J. Lu seemed happy as if he had got a piece of evidence of my good memory. Presently, he continued asking: “Why didn’t you have the discussion in the classroom if it was not a secret meeting?”

“You know how noisy the classroom was after class. It was impossible to discuss things.”

The first interrogator chipped in and said, “We will leave this for another time. Now, just tell us what you talked about at this meeting?”

“About publication matters.” I replied frankly as that was the fact and I did not see anything wrong with that.

Q: “What kind of publication?”

I: “A literary publication.”

Q: “What is its name?”

What is its name? There must be a name. Damn! How come I don’t remember it? The interrogators did not allow me to think and kept asking: “Was there a name?”

“There should be a name, but I forget,” I said, helplessly.

“M. Li! You are very smart.” J. Lu went again. “You have a memory better than anyone else. You can recite a large section of a poem when you are on stage. Now you say you forget. Who believes you?” J. Lu grabbed what I was good at to mock me, and I could not rebut his argument. Still, I tried to explain:

“I cannot recall it right now. Why wouldn’t I just say it if I remember it?”

“Why do you want to have a literary publication?” Another interrogator dug deeper.

My answer was simple but true: “Because we all love literature.”

“What was your purpose?”

“There was no purpose . . . ” was all I could say. Then, presently, I recalled something: “Oh, C. Wu said that the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League had advocated the enrichment of after class life. And that was what we wanted to do.” This was true.

“Literature and arts always have a purpose.” J. Lu said in a preaching manner, and he must be right, because the Communist Party had always insisted that literature and arts had a political purpose. But we did not have a political purpose in mind, so I did not know what to say. After a short pause, another interrogator changed the question to a less theoretical one:

“What kind of articles did you want to publish in that magazine?”

“Short stories, poetry, reports, literary criticism, what one gained from reading . . .” I listed what I could come up with at that moment. “What did you want to achieve by publishing these articles?” The interrogation was getting sharper, and ‘purpose’ was the key.

I replied, hesitatingly: “We did not really think that far. Literature has its own artistic value . . .” As I was speaking, I realized they were pushing me to the corner, so I had to be cautious about the words I chose to use.

“You wanted your magazine to have readers, right? What impact did you want to have on your readers?” I was at a loss; we never discussed that. “Didn’t you want to have certain social impact by publishing a magazine?” J. Lu asked the same question in another way. “We wanted our articles to be interesting. We wanted to praise positive things, such as good people and good deeds. Meanwhile, we wanted to criticize negative things.” No sooner than I said it, I began to realize that I should not have said the second part, but I could not take it back.

Q: “What are the positive things you wanted to praise, and what are the negative things to criticize?” I smiled bitterly and said: “We never published anything. I cannot answer such a specific question.” I was quite proud of my answer to the last question, for they did not go further with this subject, at least for now.

But J. Lu raised a more crucial question: “You were well organized. What is the name of your organization?”

“Organization?” I was puzzled. After a pause, I got the answer: “In order to have a magazine, it is natural to have an organization to publish it. In this sense, there was an organization.”

“What is the name of your organization?” What is the name? Again, a name! A name I forgot. I could not come up with a name but offered what I did remember: “I do not remember any name, but there was a division of duties, such as the

president, the editor, and someone who handled funds. But the magazine was never published, so this organization never existed, except in talking." I took every chance to make clear that the magazine was never published and everything was in talking only because not only was the fact, but in my thinking something we never did could not be considered guilty. The poor me did not understand that the revolutionaries did not care whether we did something or merely talked about it. By the standard of proletariat dictatorship, action, talking, and even thinking are all the same.

They did not listen to my argument about talking and doing but continued to press me: "How did you divide the duties?" I had to think for a moment before I replied. "Yeah, we did talk about the division of duties. C. Wu was the president, for he was the initiator; I was responsible for publicity; Q. Xue was to serve as the treasurer even though he was not at the meeting; F. Ding was the vice president."

It seemed that this answer satisfied them, so they moved on to the next question: "How many meetings did you have?" My answer: "Just one." "Only once?" They did not believe me, but that was it. We exchanged a few words about that afterwards, but that could not be considered another meeting. So I replied, "What you may call a meeting was only once."

After the three of them had a brief discussion in whisper, J. Lu delivered the following ultimatum to me: "M. Li! You are the worst, the most stubborn of the three of you in this political campaign. After so many general meetings and class meetings, even after the expounding of policies again and again, you are still indifferent, trying to muddle through. But you didn't expect that your cohorts began to confess.

Today, when we put the cards on the table, you were forced to admit some facts. Your attitude is very, very bad, still pretending to forget what had happened. That is evasive. We must tell you, this is very dangerous, and the consequences are serious. We are giving you one more chance. You must write a detailed account of what your small reactionary group has done. You must submit it before nine o'clock tonight. Understood?"

I finally understood that the targets of the anti-counterrevolutionary campaign at this school were C. Wu, F. Ding, and me! We had formed a "small reactionary group" to attack the great Communist Party.

This was already determined before I was even aware of it.

Now, the reader might ask me at this point: "It was illegal to interrogate you without due process. Why didn't you keep silent? You should not co-operate with them." Dear reader, your question is legitimate, but you don't know what proletariat dictatorship is. The Communist Party has all the power to confine you, detain you, and interrogate you solely at its discretion, because the Party is leading, meaning "over," the government, including the judiciary system. Even though there are laws and rules to follow in normal circumstances, there is absolutely no due process in a revolutionary movement.

This remains true, even though the Party's leader is verbally advocating "the Rule of Law." In addition, people under such a regime have been indoctrinated and trained to believe that the

Party had the power to do anything to the people and that what they must do is obey the Party. That is why I, and all the others in similar circumstances, co-operated with the persecutors in political movements.

Throughout the afternoon and evening, I was racking my brain trying to recall what we discussed at the “secret meeting.” I tried my best to dig up all the information deeply buried in my memory in order to make an account of facts. In my view, the accuracy of facts was crucial, for any judgment should be based on accurate facts. Therefore, I tried hard to make an account of all the major and minor things that I was able to think of. My thinking was, facts would prove that there was neither counter-revolutionary motive, nor counter-revolutionary action, and therefore, no counter-revolutionary consequences. Thus, a conclusion of “a small reactionary group” could not stand.

My efforts did not have much success though. The discussion took place in the spring of 1954 when I was barely 17 years old. For me, it was a fleeting happening. It was over as soon as the discussion was over. In the next one and half years, other things had occupied my mind. Now when it was recalled by an outer force, it seemed something that happened long, long ago. Although I thought and thought really hard, I still could not recall the name of the unpublished magazine.

The next morning, my group had a meeting. They let me stand in the front to accept denouncement and interrogation. Apparently, my classmates already knew who the members of the hidden small reactionary group were. I suddenly noticed that C. Wu, F. Ding and I had been placed in three different groups for a couple of days. Yet, I was not aware of that until now.

How dumb I was! Didn’t I know the ancient tactic of crushing the enemies one by one, or the still popular police tactic to make each of the accused worry that the others had already told something and hurry to confess?

3. A Foe of the People

J. Shan, the leader of the group I was assigned to, presided over the meeting. Two other activists, B.Liu and S. Yang, the leaders of the other two groups, were also present. And J. Lu was the leading revolutionary always present, even though he never played the presiding role. J. Shan came from a peasant’s family in a suburb of Shanghai. Before this campaign, he was a headman with the lowest rank in our branch of the Communist Youth League but now became an outstanding political fighter. In addition to repeating what J. Lu had said yesterday, J. Shan delivered the following denouncement: “M.Li is sly, very sly. We all know that she is one of the most intelligent students of our class, but in her account, she disguised herself as a confused person, a person who does not remember anything. Is she a person like that?” he asked the whole group.

“No!” a few voices responded. The “smart” impression I had given to people now turned most unfavorably against me. J. Shan went on: “She muffled herself well and kept low-key before yesterday. But when she was forced to confess yesterday, she evaded the crucial questions and avoided touching the key issues. She even said, she did not remember the name of their reactionary magazine being *Tide Front*. Do you believe it?”

“No!” came a loud roar.

Oh, yes. *Tide Front!* That was the name of the unpublished magazine. How did I forget it? Even I myself could not believe it. But I never pretended to be forgetful. Somehow, that never-born magazine had no place in my heart or brain.

“M. Li,” J. Shan turned to me, “is it not called *Tide Front*?”

“It is.”

“Why did you refuse to admit it?”

“I really forgot about it.”

“Then how come you just said it was *Tide Front*?”

“You mentioned it and reminded me.” What I said was true but, somehow, attracted a burst of ridicule.

“What do you mean by this name?”

I was able to reply smoothly: “Tide means the wave, and Tide Front is the tip of the wave. In Mr. Lu Xun’s time, there was a magazine called *Zhejiang Tide*. We were inspired by it.” Lu

Xun was a great writer who died in 1936; even Chairman Mao praised him as a revolutionary fighter.

“What is the implied meaning of this name?” J. Shan further asked.

What is its *implied* meaning?

“Speak!” J Shan spoke with a tone not to be disobeyed.

“Tide, *chao*, is a pun of mockery, and the tip of the tide, *feng,* is a pun of satire,” I replied with a shudder of fear. I began to realize the seriousness of the implied meaning of this name, but I had no other way out but to answer the question truthfully.

“This you have not forgotten?” B. Liu said coldly, with an air of an elderly. He was the secretary of our branch of the Communist Youth League, also one of the main activists in this political campaign.

“Once the name is revealed, I naturally come to remember it.” Again, I was telling the truth. As a matter of fact, I always tell the truth.

Read more in *New English Review*:

- **Mariusz Matera: Preserving the Memory of Jewish Life in**

Chelm, Poland
- **An Apology for Smoking: A Politically Incorrect Reflection**
- **Do Dogs Go to Heaven?**

“So, the purpose of your magazine was to satirize? What did you want to satirize? Who did you want to satirize?” J. Lu waited until now to speak, and he was always able to focus on the key point. Yes, the key point was satire. Whether socialist society should allow satire had been a cardinal question of right and wrong in debate.

The orthodox view held that satire should not be allowed because satire should be used against enemies only, not the people and their representative Party. Unfortunately, the members of the “small reactionary group” were clearly standing on the side arguing that satire should be used as a means to criticize anybody. But still, in my mind, satire was just a means, the purpose of which was not to attack the Party and our society but to improve things which were the object of satire. I tried to keep calm and objective as I answered J. Lu’s question.

“We did not have specific objects of satire on mind,” I said. “There are always unfair things in any society and any place. Whatever is going on, there is always something not done in the right way. Bias and shortcomings always exist. They are negative things, and all negative things can be satirized and criticized, at least that was how we thought.”

My answer, however, did not satisfy the revolutionaries. “Be specific!” J. Shan now yelled at me.

“For example . . . ” I tried to say something but could not come up with any example.

“You act like squeezing toothpaste from a tube. A few words come after a little squeezing. What kind of negative things did you talk about at your secret meeting? Be specific!” J. Shan kept nagging me.

“Let me repeat again: there was no *secret meeting*. You can say that the discussion was a meeting, but it was not secret.” I insisted on this point because number one, it was true, number two, a secret meeting could bring criminal charges. A simpleton like me was not aware at the time that the logic of the proletarian dictatorship was this: any meeting not organized or permitted by the Party was a secret meeting, and my argument was futile.

“As for what we intended to satirize, I cannot remember for now.”

“You are playing tricks. ‘Cannot remember’ is your characterized excuse.” B. Liu spoke again. His voice low but his tone cold: “Don’t you try to muddle through.”

“Speak now!” A few shouted.

“Speak!” J. Shan looked fierce and ordered boisterously.

We, the few “small reactionary group members,” did not actually live up to our ambition. We had never even written a single article to be published or to voice our opinion on any topic in public. Yet, we indulged in wild fantasy to publish a magazine! I must admit that we really overestimated our capability. Now that I was asked to explain what the objects of our satire were, I was unable to come up with an answer.

“Speak!” Several voices echoed. I heard the voices but was unable to tell whose. All the faces I had been familiar with now became blended into one, a face without features.

Under such pressure, I had to say something. “Let me think . . . For instance, we thought that the activities of our Communist Youth branch are not lively enough. Some cadres’ family members pick up flowers on campus. Have the peasants’ lives been improved? We talked about this kind of things.”

“You are discontented with a lot of things, and your satire covers a wide range of matters.” S. Yang, who always looked at people with an eye slanted, spoke slowly, apparently ridiculing me. “In addition to writing articles, what did you want to do?” J. Lu once again led the direction of the interrogation. “We also planned to engage in social surveys, but we did not actually do it.”

“You are a handful of persons dissatisfied with the reality. You tried to find excuses to attack our Party by means of social investigation. Your confession must focus on this key point.” This was J. Lu. I wondered what made them allege that

the outcome of a yet-to-be done social investigation would necessarily be used to attack the Party. But at least I came to realize that social investigation could only be done by the Communist Party, and any others trying to do the same without the Party's leadership were "reactionaries."

After the above interrogation, the meeting turned to denouncement. Everyone present had to express their hatred and ire toward me. Several of my classmates stood up to speak. One of them, filled with righteous indignation, angrily called me "a wolf in sheepskin secretly engaging in evil deeds." He said I had been wearing a beautiful garb to deceive the revolutionary masses. In the past, these extreme words were only heard in the movies and attributed to spies and the worst of bad guys. I was terrified that they were applied to me today. What evil things had I done?

Some students, including the girls close to me, had not learned to speak in such a way. Still, they had to say something, such as "It is really unexpected. I always think that the three of them are the best in our class. They are smart, hardworking, and outstanding. They are also progressive. How could they do such a thing?" Some others said, mimicking a revolutionary statement: "Now I understand the complexity and long-term nature of the class struggle. The counterrevolutionaries are in our midst. They have a program, an organization, and actions. We are like the blind unable to see them. Our vigilance is far from adequate. That means we really have to do better in our political study."

Whether the above denouncements were out of revolutionary indignation or forced expression, the students who were not members of the "small reactionary group" also had to go

through a political test by how they denounced the three of us. There was no exception! At least, they now believed that "doing something like this" was reactionary and illegal. Therefore, they warned me in unison: "Make a thorough confession; believe in the Party's policy, which is Honest Confession Leading to Leniency and Resistance Leading to Harsh Punishment." They advised me to do my best to get lenient treatment, or there is only one way: the road to death. I was more confused than scared, because I could not see why I deserved death.

At the end, J. Lu made a summarizing statement. He had a short and strong figure and a small square face. His clear-cut lips showed that he was a person with strong determination. He spoke pure Shandong dialect but always clearly and with an undisputable tone. He had an air of a self-confidant Communist Party member who knew that he belonged to the master group of our country. Now, with a general's bearing, he spoke forcefully.

"Class 304 has finally exposed a small reactionary group! My fellow students, you are very naïve. You used to think that there could not be counter-revolutionaries in your class. Now, you see them with your own eyes. Not only is there such a group, it also has a program, a purpose, an organization and actions. They say they were inspired by Mr. Lu Xun. Think about it. Mr. Lu Xun was a great fighter against the Kuomintang reactionary rule; to whom is this small reactionary group opposing? They are aimed at our Party and our society. They are against the Party's leadership and our socialist system. Now this small reactionary group is uncovered, which shows that all eye sights have been polished and consciousness has been sharpened. This is a great victory for the Anti-Counter-revolutionary Campaign. However, do not think it is

finished. On the contrary, our task has just begun. We must continue fighting as Chairman Mao teaches in one of his poems: *'Let us pursue the cornered foe with our strength and valor; not seek like Lord Chu the fame of being a conqueror.'*

"We must carry forward this campaign all the way to the end. As you can see, even though this small reactionary group is exposed, its members have not confessed thoroughly. They have not completely surrendered. They are trying to muddle through by avoiding the critical but admitting the trivial and pretending being forgetful or unintentional. Can we let them pass?"

"No!" A loud chorus almost made me deaf. This chorus showed that the revolutionary mass had roused, united and becoming unyielding. I realized I was in big, big trouble. But I was utterly confused how I got into it and what they would do with me next. All I was sure of was: I had become a foe of the people.

«**Previous Article** **Home Page** **Next Article**»

Manyin Li was a student at York College of the City University of New York after she immigrated from China to the US in the late 1980s and later became a US citizen. She worked for the Association of the Bar of the City of New York while studying literature and philosophy and finally graduated from the

Graduate Center of CUNY. She now writes freelance, mostly for Chinese language newspapers and magazines published in North America.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast]