Written in 1942 at the Communist base camp in Yenan, Wang Shih-wei criticises the hierarchical structure and privilege of the nascent Maoist bureaucracy in the camp. The article makes clear that the hierarchy was well established long before the 'Communist' Party came to state power in China in 1949. Wang was the most piercing, outspoken and unrepentant of the several literary critics who wrote articles with similar themes. This sealed his fate; the Maoist regime later executed Wang Shih-wei.

[This translation was originally published in 1975 with this introduction.]

While I was walking alone along the river bank, I saw a comrade wearing a pair of old-style padded cotton shoes. I immediately fell to thinking of Comrade Li Fen, who also wore such shoes. Li Fen, my dearest and very first friend. As usual my heart missed a beat and my blood began to race. Comrade Li Fen was a student in 1926 on the preparatory course in literature at Peking University. In the same year she joined the Party. In the spring of 1928 she sacrificed her life in her home district of Pao-ch’ing in Hunan province. Her own uncle tied her up and sent her to the local garrison—a good illustration of the barbarity of the old China. Before going to her death, she put on all her three sets of underclothes and sewed them tightly.
together at the top and the bottom. This was because the troops in Pao-ch’ing often incited riff-raff to debauch the corpses of the young girl Communists they had shot—yet another example of the brutality, the evil, the filth and the darkness that characterized the old society. When I received the terrible news of her death, I was consumed with feelings of deep love and hatred. Whenever I think of her, I have a vision of her pure, sacred martyrdom, with her three layers of underclothes sewn tightly together, tied up and sent by her very own uncle to meet her death with dignity. (It seems rather out of place to talk of such things in tranquil Yenan, against the warbled background of a Yü-t’ang-chünn and the swirling steps of the golden lotus dance, but there again the whole atmosphere in Yenan does not seem particularly appropriate to the actual conditions of the day—close your eyes and think for a moment of our dear comrades dying every minute of the day in a sea of carnage.)

In the interests of the nation, I have no intention of reckoning up old scores of class hatred. We are genuinely selfless. With all our might and main we are dragging the representatives of the old China along the road with us towards the light. But in the process the filth and dirt of old China is rubbing off on us, spreading its germs and diseases.

On scores of occasions I have drawn strength from the memory of Li Fen—vital and militant strength. Thinking back on her on this occasion, I was moved to write a tsa-wen under the general title of ‘Wild Lily’. This name has a two-fold significance. Firstly, the wild lily is the most beautiful of the wild flowers in the hills and countryside around Yenan, and is therefore a fitting dedication to her pure memory. Secondly, although its bulbs are similar to those of other lilies, they are said to be slightly bitter to the taste. They are also said to be of greater medicinal value, but I myself am not sure of this.

1. What is lacking in our lives?

Recently young people here in Yenan seem to have lost some of their enthusiasm, and to have become inwardly ill at ease.

Why is this? What is lacking in our lives? Some would answer that it is because we are badly nourished and short of vitamins. Others that it is because the ratio of men to women is 18:1 and many young men are unable to find girlfriends. Or because life in Yenan is very dreary and lacks amusements.

There is an element of truth in all these answers. It is absolutely true that there is a need for better food, for partners of the opposite sex and for more interest in life. That is only natural. But one must also recognize the fact that all the young people here in Yenan came with a spirit of sacrifice to make revolution, and certainly did not come to satisfy their desires for food, sex and an enjoyable life. I cannot readily agree with those who say that their lack of enthusiasm, their inward disquiet even, are a result of our inability to resolve these problems properly.

So what is it that is fundamentally lacking in our lives? Perhaps the following conversation holds some clues for us.

During the New Year holiday I was walking home in the dark one evening from a friend’s place. Ahead of me were two girl comrades talking in animated whispers. We were some way apart so I quietly moved closer to concentrate on what they were saying.

‘He keeps on talking about other people’s petty-bourgeois egalitarianism; but the truth of the matter is that he thinks he himself is something special. He always looks after his own special interests. As for the comrades underneath him, he doesn’t care whether they’re sick or whether they’re well, he doesn’t even care if they die, he hardly gives a damn!’

‘Crows are still black, wherever they are. Even our Comrade XXX acts like that.’
‘You’re dead right! All this bullshit about loving your own class. They don’t even display ordinary human sympathy. You often see people pretending to smile and be friendly, but it’s really all on the surface, it doesn’t mean anything. And if you offend them in the slightest, they glare at you, pull their rank and start lecturing you.’

‘It’s not only the big shots who act that way, the smaller fry are just the same. Our section leader XXX crawls when he’s talking to his superiors, but he behaves very arrogantly towards us. Many’s the time when comrades have been ill and he hasn’t even dropped in to see how they are. But when an eagle stole one of his chickens, you should have seen the fuss he made! After that, every time he saw an eagle come flying over he’d start screaming and throwing clods of earth at it—the self-seeking bastard!’

There was a long silence. In one way I admired the comrade’s sharp tongue. But I also suddenly felt depressed.

‘It’s sad that so many comrades are falling ill. As a matter of fact, nobody wants people like that to visit them when they fall ill, they just make you feel worse. Their tone of voice, their manner, their whole attitude—they don’t make you feel they care about you.’

‘How right you are. They don’t care about other people, and people don’t care about them. If they did mass work, they’d be bound to fail.’

They carried on their conversation in animated whispers. At this point our ways parted, and I heard no more of what they had to say. In many ways their views were one-sided and exaggerated. Perhaps the picture they drew does not apply very widely; but there is no denying that it is useful as a mirror . . . .

2. Running into ‘Running into difficulties’

On ‘Youth Page’ No. 12 of this paper [*] I read an article by one comrade entitled ‘Running into difficulties’ which aroused my interest.

Here are two passages from that article.

‘Recently a middle-aged friend arrived from the Kuomintang rear. When he saw that the young people in Yenan were incapable of putting up with anything that was in the slightest way unpalatable, and were constantly grumbling about everything, he raised his voice in sharp protest and said: “What’s all this about? We people in the outside world have run into countless difficulties and suffered constant illtreatment . . .”

‘What he said was right. Many aspects of life in Yenan may anger you or offend you. But in the eyes of someone who has run up against countless difficulties and who has experienced more than enough of the hardships of life, they are mere trifles and scarcely worth worrying about. But it is an entirely different matter in the case of immature young people, especially when they are of student origin. Their parents and teachers coddle them into adulthood, whispering to them about life with love and warmth and teaching them to imitate pure and beautiful emotions. The ugliness and bleakness of their present situation is entirely new to them, and it is not surprising that as soon as they come up against the slightest difficulty they begin to bawl and to feel more upset than they ever have before.’

I have no idea what sort of person this author’s ‘middle-aged friend’ is, but in my view his sort of philosophy of life, which is based on the principle of being contented with one’s lot, is not only not ‘correct’ but is positively harmful. Young people should be treasured for their purity, their perceptiveness, their ardour, their courage, and their keen energy. They experience the darkness before others experience it; they see the filth before others see it; what others do not wish or do not dare to say, they say with great courage. Because of this they are more critical, but this is by no means the same as ‘grumbling’. It may be that what
they say is not always solid and well-balanced, but it is by no means the same as ‘bawling’. We should enquire into the nature of the problems that give rise to phenomena such as ‘grumbling’, ‘bawling’ and ‘disquiet’, and set about removing such causes in a rational way. (Yes, rational! It is completely untrue that young people are always engaged in ‘thoughtless clamour’.) To say that Yenan is far superior to the ‘outside world’, to tell young people not to ‘grumble’, simply to describe Yenan’s dark side as some ‘slight disappointment’, and ‘nothing worth worrying about’ will solve no problems. Yes, Yenan is far superior to the ‘outside world’, but it should and can be better still.

Of course youths are often hot-headed and impatient—an observation which appears to be the main theme of the author of ‘Running into difficulties’. But if all young people were to be mature before their time, what a desolate place this world would be! In reality, young people in Yenan have already seen a great deal of the world—after all, the grumbling conversation between the two girl comrades that I quoted earlier was held in whispers in the dark. So far from resenting ‘grumbling’ of this sort, we should use it as a mirror in which to inspect ourselves. To say that youth ‘of student origin’ are ‘coddled into adulthood, whispered to about life with love and warmth and taught to imitate pure and beautiful emotions’ is, in my opinion, very subjectivist. Even though a decisive majority of Yenan youth come from ‘a student background’, are ‘inexperienced’ and have not ‘seen more than enough of life’s hardships’, most of them arrived in Yenan after a whole series of struggles and it is not at all true to say that they experienced nothing but ‘love and warmth’; on the contrary, it was precisely because they knew all about ‘hatred and cold’ that they joined the revolutionary camp in the first place. From what the author of ‘Running into difficulties’ says, all the young people in Yenan were brought up pampered and spoilt, and only ‘grumble’ because they miss their candied fruit. But it was because of ‘evil and coldness’ that they came to Yenan in search of ‘beauty and warmth’, that they identified the ‘evil and coldness’ here in Yenan and insisted on ‘grumbling’ about it in the hope of alerting people’s attention and reducing it to a minimum.

In the winter of 1938 our Party carried out a large-scale investigation of our work and the Central Committee summoned comrades to ‘unfold a lively criticism’ and to ‘give full vent to their criticisms, no matter whether they were right or wrong’. I hope we have another such investigation, and listen to the ‘grumbles’ of the rank-and-file youth.

3. ‘Inevitability’, ‘the heavens won’t fall in’ and ‘small things’

‘Our camp exists amidst the darkness of the old society, and therefore there is inevitably darkness in it too.’ Of course, that’s ‘Marxism’! But in actual fact that is only one-sided Marxism. There is an even more important side which the ‘masters of subjectivist factionalism’ have forgotten, i.e. the need, after having recognized the inevitability of such darkness, to prevent its emergence through Bolshevik activism, to reduce its growth, and to give full play to the ability of consciousness to transform objective reality. Given present conditions, to destroy and clean out all traces of darkness from our camp is impossible. But to destroy as much of it as we can is not only possible, but necessary. The ‘great masters’, however, have not only failed to emphasize this point, but have scarcely even mentioned it. All they do is point out that it is ‘inevitable’ and then doze off to sleep.

But in actual fact they don’t simply doze off to sleep. They use ‘inevitability’ as an excuse for considerable self-indulgence. In their dreams they sentimentally tell themselves: ‘Comrade, you are a product of the old society, and there is a tiny spot of darkness in your soul. But that is inevitable, there’s no need to get embarrassed about it.’

After the ‘theory’ of ‘inevitability’ comes the ‘national form theory’ known as ‘the heavens won’t fall in’. Yes, it is impossible for the heavens to fall in. But what of our work and our
cause? Will they suffer as a result? The ‘great masters’ have given little or no thought to this problem. If this ‘inevitability’ is ‘inevitably’ allowed to pursue its course, then the heavens—the heavens of our revolutionary cause—will ‘inevitably’ fall in. I suggest we should not be so complacent.

The so-called ‘small things’ theory is linked with this. A criticizes B. B tells A he shouldn’t waste his time on ‘small things’. Some ‘great masters’ even go so far as to say: ‘Damn it! It’s bad enough with the women comrades, now the men are spending all their time on trivia too!’ It is true that there is probably no danger in Yenan of such big problems as treason against the party or the nation. But each individual, through the small things he does in the course of his everyday life, either helps the light or helps the darkness. And the ‘small things’ in the lives of ‘great men’ are even more capable of calling forth warmth or desolation in the hearts of men.

4. Egalitarianism and the system of ranks

According to what I have heard, one comrade wrote an article with a similar title for his departmental wall newspaper, and as a result was criticized and attacked by his departmental ‘head’ and driven half-mad. I hope that this story is untrue. But since there have been genuine cases of madness even among the ‘little devils’, I fear there may be some madness among adults. Even though the state of my nerves is not as ‘healthy’ as some people’s, I still feel I have enough life in me not to go mad under any circumstances whatsoever. I therefore intend to follow in the footsteps of that comrade and discuss the question of equality and the ranking system.

Communism is not the same as egalitarianism, and what is more we are not at present at the stage of carrying through the Communist revolution. There is no need for me to write an eight-legged essay on that question, since I can guarantee that there is no cook crazy enough to want to live in the same style as one of the ‘heads’. (I don’t dare write ‘kitchen operative’, since it sounds like a caricature; but whenever I speak to cooks I always address them in the warmest possible way as ‘comrade kitchen-operatives’—what a pitiful example of warmth!) The question of a system of ranks is rather more difficult.

One argument goes: we definitely do not have a system of ranks in Yenan. But that does not square with the facts, since such a system palpably exists. Another argument goes: Yes, we do have a system of ranks, but it is rational. At this point we should all use our brains and think.

Those who say that a system of ranks is reasonable use roughly the following arguments: (1) they base themselves on the principle of ‘from each according to his ability, to each according to his worth,’ which means that those with more responsibilities should consume more; (2) in the near future the three-thirds government intends to carry out a new salary system, and naturally there will be pay differentials; and (3) the Soviet Union also has a system of ranks.

In my opinion all these arguments are open to debate. As for (1), we are still in the midst of the revolutionary process, with all its hardships and difficulties; all of us, despite fatigue, are labouring to surmount the present crisis, and very many comrades have ruined their precious health. Because of this it does not yet seem the right time for anyone, no matter who, to start talking about ‘to each according to his worth’. On the contrary, this is all the more reason why those with greater responsibilities should show themselves willing to share weal and woe with the ordinary rank-and-file. (This is a national virtue which should be encouraged.) In so doing, they would win the profound love of the lower ranks. Only then would it be possible to create iron-like unity. It goes without saying that it is not only reasonable but necessary that those with big responsibilities who are in need of special treatment for their
health should get such treatment. The same goes for those with positions of medium responsibility. As for (2), the pay system of the three-thirds government should also avoid excessive differentials; it is right that non-Party officials should get slightly better treatment, but those officials who are Party members should uphold our excellent traditions of frugal struggle so that we are in a position to mobilize even more non-Party people to join us and co-operate with us. As for (3), excuse my rudeness, but I would beg those ‘great masters’ who can’t open their mouths without talking about ‘Ancient Greece’ to hold their tongues.

I am by no means an egalitarian, but to divide clothing into three and food into five different grades is definitely neither necessary nor rational, especially with regard to clothes. (I myself am graded as ‘cadres’ clothes and private kitchen’, so this is not just a case of sour grapes.) All such problems should be resolved on the basis of need and reason. At present there is no noodle soup for sick comrades to eat and young students only get two meals of thin congee a day (when they’re asked whether they have had enough to eat, Party members are expected to lead the rest in a chorus of ‘Yes, we’re full!’). What is more, relatively healthy ‘big shots’ get far more than they need or than is reasonable to eat and drink, with the result that their subordinates look upon them as a race apart, and not only do not love them, but even . . . . This makes me most uneasy.

But perhaps it is a ‘petty bourgeois emotion’ to always be talking about ‘love’ and ‘warmth’? I await your verdict.

[*] Liberation Daily, the paper in which Wang Shih-wei’s article first appeared.

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[For further discussion of Wang Shih-wei and the later development of the Maoist state bureaucracy see this article by Simon Leys.]