

**‘THE CHEN DENGKE PHENOMENON—
A CASE OF “AFFIRMATIVE ACTION” IN MAOIST CHINA’¹**

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Little known outside China, from illiterate peasant Chen Dengke rose to become a prominent novelist and literary bureaucrat in the 1960s. While he continued to publish into the 1990s, he subsequently sank into relative obscurity. This paper will examine how Chen learnt to read and write while in the army during the 1940s and became a writer under the tutelage of Party cultural cadres—clearly benefiting from ‘affirmative action’ in the Maoist era. What has been described as the Chen Dengke ‘phenomenon’ was the product of a unique set of historical conditions stemming from the dictates of Mao Zedong’s Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art and the circumstances of the 1945–1949 Civil War. During the 1950s and 1960s Chen embarked on a series of explorations in the subject matter of his writing, repeatedly falling foul of the Party organisation. This paper will also attempt to situate the Chen Dengke ‘phenomenon’ in today’s historical context in the light of this.

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The Early Years (1919–1940)

Chen Dengke was born in 1919 in a small village in the very poor part of northern Jiangsu province. Like their neighbours the Chen family was forced to go out begging for much of the year in order to survive. When Chen was twelve years old, a schoolmaster came to the village to run a private winter school during the slack farming season. Chen's mother did washing for the schoolmaster in order to enable her son to attend the school. The children were taught to write from the *Baijixing* [One hundred family names], and their lessons were based on the principles of Confucius and Mencius. Chen had difficulty memorising the texts. On one occasion the schoolmaster made him kneel on the ground until he could memorise a text. Chen became so frustrated that he picked up an ink stone and threw it at the schoolmaster. He did not hit the teacher, but the ink stone smashed and for such outrageous behaviour Chen was soundly beaten and expelled from the school. The schoolmaster said to Chen's father: 'This child is too wild and cannot be taught. All he is good for is to be a swineherd, he can't study'.² That was the end of his childhood studies.

When Chen was fifteen, his father died from injuries suffered as a cart pusher. Chen took his father's place and supported the family farming their meagre land, which was so alkaline it could barely support one person. When he was nineteen, Chen's mother died and his two sisters were married.³

Chen was conscripted as a Guomindang soldier in 1937, serving in the district militia corps for several months before the corps was disbanded. Economic necessity and a natural desire to fight the Japanese led him to join a local anti-Japanese detachment with pro-communist leanings in which he served for over a year. When the communist New Fourth Army marched northwards into northern Jiangsu in 1940, Chen's detachment joined these regular communist forces.⁴

Education and Combat in the New Fourth Army

In Chen's self-reflective writings, in which he describes his experience in the New Fourth Army, he represents himself as something of an heroic character. On the whole his

² Chen Yunhao, 'Cong wenmang dao zuojia—Chen Dengke zougude daolu' [From illiterate to author—the path taken by Chen Dengke], *Renwu* 2(1980): 77.

³ Chen Dengke, interview by the writer, January 1981, Hefei, tape recording.

⁴ Chen Dengke, interview by the writer, January 1981.

autobiographical persona could be likened to a positive 'heroic' character within the socialist realist genre, especially in his frequent expressions of gratitude for the help provided him by the Party.

During the first couple of years in the New Fourth Army, Chen Dengke served in the Liandong County Guerrilla Regiment. Chen wrote in recollection of that period of his life:

At that time I was indeed a soldier with little love of study. My only quality was that I was bold and not afraid of death. When my superiors gave me an assignment to go into an area occupied by the enemy to capture a traitor or spy, or to kill a local tyrant, not once did I fail or let him slip through my hands. I would have captured and killed several dozen traitors, spies and enemy soldiers. Although I would not class myself as a crack marksman, I could handle a rifle and a pistol quite well. It was because I possessed these meagre qualities I was often praised by the regimental commander, Zhao Jingchen.⁵

In constructing his autobiographical persona, Chen consistently emphasised this quality of boldness as something that provided him with the fortitude to overcome difficult situations. He also noted that at times this same quality was to cause him to make rash decisions for which he was later to suffer adverse political consequences.

Although Chen had briefly attended school as a child, in 1951 he claimed that when he joined the Communist forces in 1940 he could not even write his own name.⁶ Zhao Jingchen began to teach Chen to read and write and encouraged him to keep a diary and to write wall posters [*qiangbao*] promoting the war effort.⁷ It was because of his successful wall posters that Chen came to the attention of a reporter from the North Jiangsu *Yanfu Masses News*, who asked him to copy down the contents of his wall posters and submit

⁵ Chen Yunhao, 78.

⁶ Chen Dengke, 'Wode xizuo kaishi' [My apprenticeship begins], *Xinhua yuebao* 8(1951).

⁷ Sun Xiecheng, 'Chen Dengke de beixi rensheng' [Chen Dengke's bitter-sweet life], *Renwu* 4(2000), at http://www.renwu.com.cn/UserFiles/magazine/article/RW0314_200005211435000417.asp (accessed 19 December 2007). At that time the wall posters were written on cloth. When the troops moved at night Chen would roll them up and carry them in his back pack. Whenever there was a victory, good news or a soldier had performed an heroic deed, Chen would record this on a wall poster.

them to the newspaper.⁸ In 1944 Chen's first piece of reportage appeared in the paper.⁹ In the spring of 1945 he was honoured as a model newspaper correspondent and in May of that year was assigned to the *Yanfu Masses News* as a worker-peasant reporter.¹⁰

Following the defeat of the Japanese, in the autumn of 1946 Chen took part in guerrilla fighting against Guomindang forces around the Hongze Lake area of northern Jiangsu.¹¹ In the winter of 1946, he was transferred to the front as a field reporter, and it was around this time that his first literary work, a piece of prose about a kindergarten entitled 'Children', was published.¹²

In the spring of 1947 Chen returned to the newspaper office and worked on a literary supplement to the paper, which published stories, 'clapper talk' and ditties.¹³ A piece of reportage entitled 'Iron Bones' was published in 1947.¹⁴ Chen's first novella *Sister Du*, which describes resistance to the Guomindang in the Hongze Lake area of northern Jiangsu, was also published in 1947.¹⁵

In 1948, during the Huai-Hai Campaign, Chen was assigned as a New China News Agency reporter at the front. Following the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, he was assigned to the Hefei (Anhui) branch of NCNA and, at the end of 1950, was

⁸ Chen, 'Huigu yu zhanwang' [Looking back and ahead], *Renmin wenxue* 5(1977): 14.

⁹ Chen Yunhao, 78–79. A piece of some sixty Chinese characters entitled 'Guizi zhua zhuangding' [Japs Grab Able-bodied Men].

¹⁰ Chen, 'Chen Dengke zizhuan', 1–2.

¹¹ Chen Dengke, interview by the writer, January 1981.

¹² 'Chen Dengke zizhuan', 2.

¹³ Chen Dengke, interview by the writer, January 1981. 'Clapper talk' (kuaiban): rhythmic comic talk or monologue to the accompaniment of bamboo clappers.

¹⁴ Chen, 'Tie gutou' [Iron bones], *Subei ribao*, 1947 (day and month not known).

¹⁵ Chen Dengke, *Du Dasao* (Shanghai: Xinhua shudian, 1951). The novella was published locally pre-1949 and nationally in 1950.

selected to study at the Central Literary Research Institute in Beijing.¹⁶ In 1951 Chen's first novel, *Living Hell*, which was written on the battlefield, was published.¹⁷

The Chen Dengke Phenomenon

The period from when Chen came under the tutelage of Zhao Jingchen until the time he entered the Central Literary Research Institute is an amazing one in his development as a writer. Just over a year elapsed between the time he began to learn to read and write and the publication of his first article, and just three years later his first novella *Sister Du* was published. The process by which he developed from an illiterate peasant-soldier into a budding writer is quite remarkable, and has indeed been described by the editors of his collected works as the Chen Dengke 'phenomenon'.¹⁸

When Chen was writing in 1951, he described himself as being confused and knowing nothing about revolution or study when he first joined the Communist forces. He was not clear as to his own class identity, and when he heard others talking about class, standpoint, 'isms' and other such unfamiliar terms, he would just stare blankly. He did not take political study seriously and just drifted along for over two years between 1941 and 1942.¹⁹ It was only after he became Zhao Jingchen's bodyguard in 1943 that he started to learn to write. Zhao had developed a special affection for Chen because of his prowess as a marksman and was keen that Chen should work for him.

Aside from this personal element, there was a decisive historical factor in Chen receiving an education from Party cultural cadres. This was the coincidence of his joining the New Fourth Army with Mao Zedong's 'Talks' at the 1942 Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art, the spirit of which was promoted in the major communist Base Areas throughout China.²⁰ In his Yan'an 'Talks', Mao asserted that the cultural front would play an

¹⁶ 'Chen Dengke zizhuan', 2. The Huai-Hai Campaign (November 6, 1948 to January 10, 1949) was the second of the three decisive campaigns in the War of Liberation. 'Huai-Hai' refers to the area north of the Huai River, centring on Xuzhou and extending as far east as the city of Lianyungang (formerly Haizhou).

¹⁷ Chen Dengke, *Huoren tang*; (Beijing: renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1951).

¹⁸ Lu Yanzhou and Su Zhong, 'Bian *Chen Dengke wenji yougan*' (Thoughts on editing the *Collected Works of Chen Dengke*), <http://www.oh100.com/art/wenxue/eye/express/200310/10070407011958.html>, dated 10 October 2003, accessed 26 March 2004.

¹⁹ Chen, 'Wode xizuo kaishi' kaishi', 5

²⁰ Lu Yanzhou and Su Zhong, 'Bian *Chen Dengke wenji you gan*.

important complementary role to the military front in achieving national liberation. Mao claimed that literature and art were ‘indispensable in achieving unity among ourselves and winning victory over the enemy’.²¹ McDougall identifies a new interest in popular literature and theatre in the immediate aftermath of the ‘Talks’ with the adoption of such forms as *yang’ge* folk songs and *kuaibanr* ‘clapper talk’ for the purpose of political education.²² Xuan Mo writes that Chen could write, direct and sing the *yang’ge* performances promoted by the communists and could play stringed instruments like the *erhu* and *jinghu*, making him something of an all-round talent.²³ Mao saw such popular cultural forms as being particularly important as a mode of propaganda since they reached a wide audience.²⁴ The substance of the ‘Talks’ seemed to be aimed precisely at someone like Chen: of pure, poor peasant background; illiterate; war hero; learning to read and write; writing wall posters and reportage in the army; skilled in folk music and other forms of popular entertainment. The editors of Chen’s *Collected Works* write that Chen represented ‘the target for writers and artists to serve, he was also the target for their popularisation and elevation [of literature], and even more so he was the object from which intellectuals wanting to take part in the revolution should learn and with whom they should establish close relations’.²⁵

The editors also point out that the nature of Communist Party hierarchy was instrumental in Chen benefiting from such ‘affirmative action’. They note the enthusiasm and patience with which Chen’s superiors in the army, the editors of the *Yanfu Masses News* and other cultural cadres helped him learn to read and write, observing that their cultivation of Chen’s literary talents was due in no small part to the effect of the

²¹ Mao, Introduction to the ‘Talks’, in Bonnie S. McDougall, *Mao Zedong’s “Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art”: A Translation of the 1943 text with Commentary*, Michigan Papers in Chinese Studies, no. 39 (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Center for Chinese Studies, 1980), 57.

²² McDougall, 38.

²³ Xuan Mo, ‘Chen Dengke de hong hei shi’ [Chen Dengke's chequered history], *Wenyi* (Taipei) 3 (September 1969): 38.

²⁴ McDougall, 73.

²⁵ Lu and Su.

Communist Party command structure. They assert that without this unique set of historical circumstances, there would have been no Chen Dengke ‘phenomenon’.²⁶

The education that Chen received from Zhao Jingchen was through the discourse of communism. Each evening Zhao would tear a page from his notebook and write down a phrase about something with which Chen was familiar, the content of which also had a didactic function, for example: ‘Yue Xiaoji is a traitor’, ‘The New Fourth Army loves the people’ and so on.²⁷ Chen recounts that in the evenings Zhao would teach him from a primer on learning Chinese characters and would also talk to him about revolutionary principles. As an aid to learning how to write, Chen began by reading aloud from a book; later he practised copying characters and writing from memory. Zhao encouraged Chen to keep a diary and, when he knew four or five hundred Chinese characters, Chen began to write the things he wanted to say in a simple way and was encouraged to write wall posters.²⁸ Chen’s talent as an oral narrator no doubt made it easier for him to recount the things he had observed first-hand as well as stories he had heard. What he learnt in his four year internship provided him with the skills necessary to translate his oral narratives into written form.

Chen Dengke produced his first novel only four years after he had learnt to read, while much of his time was spent fighting. How then was his writing able to develop so quickly? The cadres who were specially assigned to help him while he was working on the *Yanfu Masses News* may in part account for his rapid progress. Just as importantly, was the experience in his formative years of traditional Chinese storytelling. As a child, a local opera troupe would play in the village for up to three days each winter. The only other form of entertainment Chen and his fellow villagers knew was storytelling. Professional storytellers visited the village, especially at New Year. Chen’s father was also skilled at storytelling, and Chen himself loved to both tell and listen to stories. In the summertime the villagers would sit outside, swatting mosquitoes, and each person would take a turn at telling a story. This early exposure to and participation in the storytelling tradition gave

²⁶ Lu and Su.

²⁷ Chen Yunhao, 78.

²⁸ Chen Dengke, ‘Wode xizuo kaishi’, 6.

Chen the ability to speak about his own experiences, and those of his friends who would talk to him about them, and subsequently, after learning to read and write, to put these stories down on paper. His 1947 piece of reportage, 'Iron Bones', was partly based on his own experience as a guerrilla fighter and partly on the stories other guerrillas had told him.²⁹

Sister Du was written in a similar way. Initially, when Chen returned to work at the newspaper office in 1947, he had witnessed too much to record on paper, but was able to relate his experiences verbally. Chen's editor, Lu Ting, helped him to combine six stories about his experience as a guerrilla fighter at Hongze Lake through a fictitious central character Sister Du. At the time Chen was not conscious of any 'plot structure' or 'characterisation', explaining in 1951: 'The characters were already furnished by the story. At the same time they were people with whom I had shared meals, I just changed their names. Actually I wrote the novel in exactly the same way as I usually tell stories'.³⁰

When *Sister Du* was published in 1947, Chen might be called a naive writer who had learnt to transcribe his felt impressions of life but who lacked any substantial knowledge of the craft he was starting to practise. He was vaguely aware that in writing *Sister Du* and earlier pieces of reportage, he had drawn on the story-telling tradition of his youth but was completely ignorant of any wider concept of literary representation. Writing in 1978, Chen in fact recalls how he was surprised when *Sister Du*, which he had just considered to be reportage, was praised as a novel, and describes his introduction to the world of literature as a misunderstanding.³¹

The well known author and literary editor, Zhao Shuli, was instrumental in the publication of Chen's second novel, *Living Hell*. Zhao not only personally read the manuscript, he also showed it to the novelist Tian Jian, remarking, 'Recently I have read a number of manuscripts that have been sent to me, but few have moved me as much as this. I hope you can have a look at it. Although the characters have not been portrayed with great

²⁹Chen Dengke, interview by the writer, January 1981.

³⁰Chen Dengke, 'Wode xizuo kaishi', 12.

³¹Chen Dengke, 'Huoren tang you ji' [Further postscript to *Living Hell*], in *Huoren tang* (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1979), 148.

care, they are unforgettable.’³² It was on Zhao Shuli’s strong recommendation that Chen entered the Central Literary Study Institute at the end of 1950, and as Chen puts it: ‘From this time on I also stepped through the portals of the world of literature and art’.³³

The Institute Period

Following the establishment of the Communist government in 1949, it was official Party policy to foster writers of a worker-peasant background who came from the former revolutionary base areas. The Party’s stated aim in doing so was to improve the educational level and writing skill of such writers in order to form them into the future dominant force in the Chinese literary world. It also imposed a certain uniformity on literary production. To this end, the Institute was set up under the auspices of the Chinese Writers’ Association with the famous woman writer Ding Ling as head.³⁴

When interviewed in 1981, Chen looked back nostalgically on the time he spent at the Institute. He expressed a sense of pride at being a member of a small elite chosen to study there and feelings of incredulity that someone of his background should have had this privilege. He also expressed gratitude to the Party for providing him with this opportunity, which was pivotal in the development of his writing career. Chen’s two years at the Institute provided him with his first opportunity to systematically study the works of well-known writers. He thereby gained a viable basis for his later writing, especially in the structuring of stories and novels. Chen admits that in the beginning, he and the other students were quite ignorant about the literary work in which they were involved. He sums up the main benefits of the time spent at the Institute: ‘I came to understand the basic concepts of literature and the requirements of writing’.³⁵

At the Institute Chen came under the influence of Ding Ling, who was to shape his writing throughout the 1950s. Writing in 1986 Chen described Ding Ling as the ‘teacher who introduced me to literature’ and Zhao Shuli as the one who ‘led me onto the literary

³²Chen Dengke, ‘*Huoren tang you ji*’, 149.

³³Chen Dengke, ‘*Huoren tang youji*’, 151.

³⁴Gu Hua, ‘Yidai geming zuojia de beiju—yi Kang Zhuo xiansheng’ [The tragedy of a generation of revolutionary writers—remembering Mr Kang Zhuo], *Zhengming* 6 (1991): 70.

³⁵Taped interview with Chen Dengke by the writer, January 1981.

road'.³⁶ The relationship between Chen and Ding Ling was a twofold one. As Thomas Gold points out, relations between individuals in Maoist China were not only subject to the requirements of the Leninist state, they were also influenced by millennia of continuous Chinese history.³⁷ These two streams can be identified in the relationship between Chen and Ding Ling. For Chen she held a position of power as his Party superior and also enjoyed traditional respect as his teacher. Consequently she is likely to have exerted a decisive effect on the direction which his writing took, as she sought to ensure that it conformed to the socialist-realist paradigm. Indeed, writing in 1986 Chen recalled how after he arrived at the Institute he had been invited to Ding Ling's home where she had made clear to him his duty as a writer with implicit subservience to Party discipline: 'You were transferred to the Institute so that the Party could better foster you. You might develop into a writer, or you might not. But no matter what, first and foremost you are a Party member, and only then a writer'.³⁸ Throughout the early period of Chen's development as a writer, he stressed the role that the Party played in educating him; indeed he had no other education. He was therefore unlikely to have developed the ability to think independently, and it is not surprising that his early writing should have developed to an accepted formula.

Writing in 1953 Chen was critical of some of the aspects of the 'affirmative action' policy of which he was a beneficiary. He protests against the pressure that the Party literary apparatus placed on writers of a worker-peasant background such as him simply because they possessed that quality exalted by Mao in his 'Talks' as the basis for artistic creation: 'life'. He confesses that initially he had felt proud when feted by others for possessing 'life', but subsequently this made him uncomfortable because 'in terms of what was required of a writer, this knowledge of life was not worth mentioning, it was pitifully narrow'.³⁹ Chen writes that the attention he initially received as a worker-peasant writer

³⁶ Chen, 'Yi Ding Ling' [In memory of Ding Ling], *Xin Guancha* 8 (1986): 28.

³⁷ Thomas B. Gold, 'After Comradeship: Personal Relations in China since the Cultural Revolution', *The China Quarterly* 104 (December 1985), 673–674.

³⁸ Chen, 'Yi Ding Ling', 29.

³⁹ Chen, 'Women yao xuexi', 32.

made him lose all sense of proportion, but that this was restored during his period at the Institute.⁴⁰

Despite repeated revisions, Chen experienced frustration with his third novel, *Sons and Daughters of the Huai River*, which he finished while at the Institute.⁴¹ In *Sons and Daughters* he had attempted to reflect the war on a larger scale, but had been unsuccessful for a number of reasons, including superficiality of characterisation and a laborious, tedious plot in which the activities of the guerrilla band were not linked to the wider war situation.

Why then was Chen unable to improve the standard of his writing? Why was *Sons and Daughters* less successful than his earlier works? One possible consideration is the ideological constraints under which he was writing. It is not surprising that the writing he had been encouraged to produce by his teachers, to an accepted formula, should have produced such black-and-white characters and a predictable ‘glorious victory’.

At the same time there is unlikely to have been a great deal of conflict between the type of writing Chen’s teachers encouraged him to produce and the way he viewed his subject matter. It is also likely to have had a certain degree of compatibility with the oral traditions or his youth. Having fought in the war as a peasant-soldier, he was likely to have viewed his own side and the enemy in polarised terms. Through the storytelling of his youth he was also likely to have been influenced by the characters from traditional Chinese literature like *Water Margin*, which tend to be polarised between the good and the evil. It is hardly surprising that, when it came to translating his war experiences into a novel, individual characters representing opposing factions should have appeared in black-and-white terms. In this way, these early novels represent an unwitting privileging of the didactic function of literature on Chen’s part. However, more importantly, although each of Chen’s characters had a real life basis, what primarily contributed to the creation of characters like ‘blocks of stone’ was his limited experience and knowledge and his simplistic and naive understanding of literary representation.

⁴⁰ Chen, ‘Women yao xuexi’, 32.

⁴¹ Chen, *Huaihe bian Shang de ernü* [Sons and daughters of the Huai River] (Beijing: Zuo Jia chubanshe, 1953).

Chen's First Exploration—Psychological Description

Affirmative action may have engendered a sense of gratitude on the part of its beneficiaries, but this was not automatically accompanied by docility and compliance with Party orthodoxy by the rebellious Chen Dengke. Out of the frustration he had experienced with *Sons and Daughters*, Chen responded to the criticism that the characters of his previous novels lacked a psychological dimension by deciding to follow a new path in his writing. This exploration first found expression in his 1954 short story 'Leaving Home'.⁴² 'Leaving Home' represents a marked development in Chen's writing as he incorporates a psychological dimension to the narrative. He also displays a more sophisticated narrative technique in his use of temporal manipulation through flashbacks in the principal character's thoughts.

In a 1954 letter to Chen, which was published in the literary journal *Wenyi bao*, Ding Ling was critical of Chen's adoption of a narrative technique, which Chen described in 1986 as a form of 'stream of consciousness'.⁴³ This technique clearly runs counter to the authoritative narrative voice and coherent plot structure required of socialist realism to fulfil its didactic function. As Hilary Chung points out, the 'shifting and unreliable narrative perspectives of modernism' are inappropriate to perform this task.⁴⁴

The Hundred Flowers and Chen's Second Exploration

In China the first half of the 1950s represents a period of relative intellectual repression. However, in May 1956 a period of relative liberalisation was ushered in with Mao's revival of the slogan 'Let a Hundred Flowers Blossom and a Hundred Schools of Thought Contend'.⁴⁵

Chen took full advantage of this more liberal atmosphere to begin a further exploration. A number of his friends challenged him to write on the theme of 'romantic

⁴²Chen, 'Li xiang' [Leaving home], *Wenyi yuebao* 2 (1954): 1–4.

⁴³ Chen, 'Yi Ding Ling', 31.

⁴⁴ Hilary Chung, 'Introduction: Socialist Realism', introduction to *In the Party Spirit—Socialist Realism and Literary Practice in the Soviet Union, East Germany and China*, ed. Hilary Chung et al. (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Editions Rodopi, 1996), xv.

⁴⁵ Merle Goldman, *China's Intellectuals—Advise and Dissent* (Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 1981), 9.

love', which writers were just beginning to broach. Of course, care still had to be taken that the 'moral atmosphere' of the society of New China was reflected.

In 'Love' and 'First Love' Chen touches on the taboo subjects of sex and adultery. By writing realistically about some of the ills in China's supposedly ideal socialist society Chen shocked readers and broke through ideological restraints fettering writers. The portrayal of these events, which would hardly seem shocking to a Western reader, and which lacks a significantly realistic description of the motivation and logic of the characters' actions, was strongly condemned by the Chinese critics.⁴⁶

The Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957–58

When the Hundred Flowers campaign came to an end with the anti-rightist campaign of 1957-58, in fear of being labelled a rightist, Chen was forced to make public statements to show his obedience to the Party. The full text of his self-criticism was published in *Wenyi bao*.⁴⁷ Chen's public affirmation of acceptance of the Party line also represents a dissolution of the political naivety in having assumed that Mao's 'Hundred Flowers' call had removed all ideological restrictions on writers. In the self-criticism Chen not only turned his back on his own works, he also made a clean break with his teacher, Ding Ling, who was herself one of the first intellectuals to be labelled a rightist.

Because of his class background, strong support he enjoyed within the Party (literary Commissar Zhou Yang explained to the Provincial Secretary that Chen had at most idolised Ding Ling and was rather naive politically), and his public display of contrition, Chen escaped being labelled a rightist. It was decided that he had merely 'committed errors', and he was sent to the countryside.⁴⁸

Concluding Remarks

During the Great Leap Forward, as false reports of record production—'satellites'—were launched on the economic front, writers were called upon to launch satellites on the literary front eulogising these 'achievements'. Chen displayed 'loyalty' to the Party when he did in

⁴⁶ Zhou Peitong, 'Ping Chen Dengke de liangpian xiaoshuo' [Critique of Chen Dengke's two short stories], *Guangming ribao*, 23 February 1957.

⁴⁷ Chen, 'Huidao Dang de huaibaoli lai' [Returning to the embrace of the Party], *Wenyi bao* 27 (1957).

⁴⁸ Interview with Chen Dengke by the writer, January, 1981.

fact launch such ‘satellites’, however subsequently, with relaxations in the political climate, he was able to publish works describing the economic disaster and human suffering resulting from successive political movements and changing political lines. While his works can no longer be found on the shelves of popular bookshops in China, Chen was, nevertheless, an influential writer during the second half of the twentieth century and the product of a unique set of historical circumstances, exemplifying the politics of literary production during the Maoist period.