Yan’an Rectification Campaign

The Yan’an Rectification Campaign of 1942 established the *modus operandi* of subsequent ideological campaigns in the history of Chinese Communism. It signified the expansion of the power of the Communist leaders from political and economic realms into other spheres of life, with the result that no alternative bases existed from which political authorities could be challenged.

The Yan’an Rectification Campaign, 延安整风运动, of 1942 was a significant event in the history of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The campaign’s success in quashing the first serious challenge to CCP leader Mao Zedong’s commanding position within the party, gradually acquired during the Long March, made it a prototype of later ideological campaigns; it also showed the aggressive reach of the CCP into intellectual life in Yan’an, a city in Shaanxi Province. No longer content to manage only political and economic affairs, CCP leaders would regard as their prerogative the total subjugation of literature and art to politics from this point on. As such, the campaign was a mass movement of a kind hitherto unseen in the history of the CCP, affecting not only the top echelon of the party’s leadership but also the lives of people from other social strata in Yan’an.

**Targets**

The late 1930s and early 1940s brought a fundamental change in CCP membership as more and more people...
from various places arrived in Yan’an, the last stronghold of Communism in China at the time. Unlike those who had endured the hardships of the Long March, many of the new arrivals were perhaps more anti-Japanese or anti-Guomindang (Nationalist Party) than pro-Communist. Moreover, coming mostly from cosmopolitan urban centers, they had an outlook quite at odds with the nativist bent of Mao’s brand of Communism, making it difficult for the party to maintain its iron discipline.

In a speech delivered on 1 February 1942, at the Central Party School at Yan’an, Mao highlighted three errors that he called upon “the masses” to correct: subjectivism, sectarianism, and party formalism. The scope of the Rectification Campaign at this stage was still rather limited, aimed as it was only at the general working style of party cadres. But when Mao’s call triggered vociferous complaints from students disgruntled with life in Yan’an, the nature of the campaign began to change. A number of prominent writers associated with the Jiefang Ribao 解放日报 (Liberation Daily) saw an opportunity to voice criticism of the party leadership, utilizing a form of intellectual essay called the zawen 阐文章 to highlight instances of inequality that exposed the party’s hypocrisy and pointedly questioning the legitimacy of the party to assume leadership in areas other than politics. Wang Shiwei, who would later become the prime target of the campaign, was particularly outspoken in asserting the role of writers and artists as social critics free from party interference. As these events unfolded, it became clear to party leaders that the campaign would have to rein in this group of wayward intellectuals and neutralize their destabilizing influence.

**Modus Operandi**

To lay down the ideological groundwork for the expanded scope of the Rectification Campaign, the party confronted head-on the question of art and literature in a socialist society. Mao’s keynote speech on 2 May, the first day of the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art, served this purpose. Mao argued that literature and art transcending time and class did not exist and hence that the notion that the artist could be an objective critic of society was a myth. It behooved artists and writers to ally their interests with those of the workers, farmers, and soldiers under the guidance of the CCP, Mao asserted. Any public criticism of the party at this stage would be regarded as an act of betrayal of the larger cause of Communism and tantamount to heresies such as Trotskyism, with which Wang Shiwei was indeed later charged.

The campaign then moved to the next stage of bringing intellectuals to heel, proceeding through a number of phases that would be replicated in subsequent ideological struggles. First, a negative example was established, in this case, Wang Shiwei and people thought to be associated with him. Second, gentle pressure was applied on this group by means of private visits from leaders and friends to persuade them of the error of their ways. When this pressure failed to produce the desired results, public meetings were held at which Wang was put under hostile cross-examination. At the same time people throughout Yan’an society were instructed to study key Communist texts and documents related to Wang’s case so that they could participate in the denunciation of Wang. Transcripts of these public meetings, called “struggle sessions,” clearly indicate a willful distortion of Wang’s position by the CCP. Despite claims of fairness, the proceedings often degenerated into name calling and other forms of intimidation. Most of Wang’s associates, notably Ding Ling and Liu Xuewei, recanted at this point, but Wang remained intransigent, going so far as to threaten to withdraw from the party. Finally, trumped-up charges were brought against him for belonging to the Five-Member Anti-Party Clique, and what had begun as an ideological disagreement then turned into a punishable crime, and Wang was arrested. The goal of the campaign had been achieved at this point, even though it would be extended and would evolve into other political movements in 1943. Wang was executed in 1947 under circumstances that remain unclear to this day.

**Repercussions**

The Yan’an Rectification Campaign was one of the most successful attempts of the CCP to induce conformity among its ranks. The same strategies that were employed in bringing intellectuals to submission, especially the clever deployment of “the masses” against the target of the campaign, would be applied to nonparty members in later years as well and often in more thorough and violent ways.

The success of the campaign also marked an important ideological victory for Mao. With the suppression
of cosmopolitan elements in the party, Mao was able to continue with his project of “making Marxism concretely Chinese.” After the CCP’s role as the sole arbiter of what was right and wrong in all spheres of society was established, no alternative bases from which its authority could be challenged existed.

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**Further Reading**


