



## A Painful Reminiscence of a Dignified Soul

**Zhong Da**

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*The memoir A Painful Reminiscence of a Dignified Soul recalls the crushing policies of Mao Zedong's regime.*

Zhong Da's unsettling, illuminating memoir *A Painful Reminiscence of a Dignified Soul* discusses the oppressiveness of Mao Zedong and his regime.

When he was a child, Zhong lost his parents; he was placed under the guardianship of a distant, unfair sister-in-law. His older brother was kind to him, though, and Zhong did well in school. Enthusiastic about communist ideals of freedom and equality, he joined the Communist Party in his youth, a decision that he calls naïve in hindsight.

Zhong mines his experiences for political insights, recalling how he supported the Communist Party in the beginning, came to develop suspicions about it, and later learned of serious issues within the government. He discusses how Mao formed a cult of personality, championing his causes via propaganda and dogmatism and repressing opposing figures with torture and cruelty.

The effects of Mao's repressive policies are explored in parallel to Zhong's political shifts. He was subject to horrific circumstances, including being sent to the countryside to do manual labor after he was accused of criticizing the government; losing his position at a publishing house; and being exiled to a remote area for sending money to his father-in-law, a historical counterrevolutionary.

The book also moves beyond the personal, focusing on the stories of others who suffered under Mao, including Liu Shaoqi, a politician who advocated for social democracy and restraint of the president's powers, and who was put to death; and Long Zhenghua, a math teacher who committed suicide after been accused of having worked for the former political party. Their stories and others are used to argue that Mao's oppressive regime had devastating impacts on many individuals.

Chinese poetry, songs, and proverbs are incorporated into the book, as are explorations of topics like Scar literature, or the literature of those wounded by Mao's regime. In a similar fashion, the philosophies of Confucius, who advocated for benevolence and restraint, are addressed to support Zhong's objection to the idea that Mao was a revolutionary. Discussions of more equitable systems of governance and progressive cultural trends that existed before Mao's ascension to power become essential to the book's work of expounding upon Chinese history and heritage. Zhong's topical treatments of Chinese culture come to function as a powerful tribute to the cadres and intellectuals who were persecuted by Mao.

Though Zhong's book begins years before the Communist Party became popular and before Mao assumed a leadership role, and though it extends to cover Chinese politics after his death, its pieces are bound together by its continual focus on drawing lessons from the rise of the Communist Party, and from its effects on the country. But the text is presented without divisions, and it is heavy on details; its pertinent points are sometimes missed because of its structure, which is absent pauses for reflection or rest. The timeline is muddled because of the book's tense shifts,

and its punctuation errors and missing words also slow its progression.

The memoir *A Painful Reminiscence of a Dignified Soul* recalls the crushing policies of Mao Zedong's regime.

EDITH WAIRIMU (April 23, 2021)

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