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REVIEW ESSAY

# No Country for Women

Women in China have suffered abuse, silencing and erasure — despite Communist Party slogans about women's liberation. Two novels by the Chinese writer Fang Fang show how gendered oppression persists throughout political change.

YANGYANG CHENG — OCTOBER 6, 2025

FICTION SOCIETY

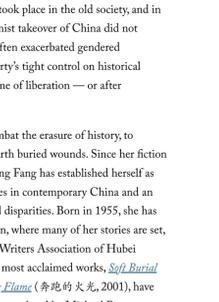


Reviewed: *Soft Burial & The Running Flame* by Fang Fang, tr. Michael Berry (Columbia University Press, March 2025).

“ Stars fill the sky, and the moon is bright. The production brigade is having a meeting, to speak bitterness and seek justice for our grievances.”

So begins a popular 1964 [song](#) from the Mao Zedong era, “Don’t Forget the Bitterness of Class Division” (不忘階級苦). Carried by a sweet female voice, the lyrics depict scenes of abject misery and deprivation. The song narrates in the first person the story of a rural boy. To pay back debts owed to a landlord, the boy’s father toils for endless hours and succumbs to starvation; he and his mother are then sold off as slaves to the ruling class. This contrast between text and timbre spotlights the plight of the rural poor in China before the Communist Revolution.

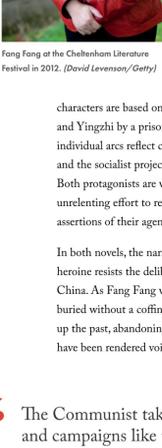
Organized by Party cadres and performed with copious coaching, such public forums for voicing the people’s suffering, as depicted in the song, were a common fixture in Chinese villages in Communist-controlled regions in the late 1940s, and nationwide after the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. The practice was indispensable in stirring up the masses to carry out the land reform (土改) movement that lasted for several years, concluding in 1952, where assets from the rural gentry were seized and redistributed among the poor. The ritual of “speaking bitterness” (诉苦) continued after the landholding class had been abolished and agricultural labor was collectivized into “production brigades” (生产队), as the song describes. At these formalic sessions, national identity was fortified alongside class consciousness. By recalling their pain in the old days, the people pledged their allegiance to the new regime.



A “speaking bitterness” (诉苦) public trial of a landlord in China, year unknown. (Chinese History for Teachers)

Since the start of the revolution, women played a major role in speaking their bitterness and struggling against landlords. Writing from Communist-controlled regions in northern China in 1947, Deng Yingchao, wife of Zhou Enlai, highlighted in a [pamphlet](#) the indispensable work of women in carrying out land reforms. They took the lead in voicing their grievances, and were particularly adept at uncovering secret assets tucked away by the landlords. During land reforms in Guangdong province in 1951, eight out of ten [official sessions](#) against landlords in Guinan county were initiated by women, according to [official records](#). The women wailed against not just labor exploitation but also sexual abuse from the landlords and their cronies; their tears were a potent weapon in class warfare.

For Chinese women, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s promise of emancipation was two-fold: freedom from class division and freedom from gender inequality. “Speaking bitterness” gave women not only a public platform, but also fresh vocabulary and a new framework in which to interpret their predicament. The prescribed rhetoric of the public forums offered a clear break in history, where all injustices took place in the old society, and in the New China only sweetness abounded. Yet the Communist takeover of China did not vanquish patriarchy, and campaigns like the land reforms often exacerbated gendered oppression as well as causing mass violence. Instead, the Party’s tight control on historical narrative has rendered much of the pain afflicted in the name of liberation — or after liberation had ostensibly been achieved — unspeakable.



Fang Fang at the Cheltenham Literature Festival in 2012. (David Levenson/Getty)

Literature is a vital tool to combat the erasure of history, to recover a lost past and to unearthen buried wounds. Since her fiction debut in 1982, the novelist Fang Fang has established herself as one of the most eloquent voices in contemporary China and an astute observer of its gendered disparities. Born in 1955, she has lived most of her life in Wuhan, where many of her stories are set, and served as the chair of the Writers Association of Hubei province. This year, two of her most acclaimed works, *Soft Burial* (软埋, 2016) and *The Running Flame* (奔跑的火光, 2001), have been released in English, both translated by Michael Berry, a professor of Chinese literature at UCLA.

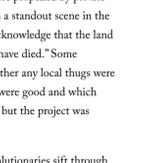
In both books, the story is told retrospectively, centering one woman near the end of her life, looking back. In *Soft Burial*, Ding Zitao, whose real name was Hu Daiyun, is dying of old age and suffering from amnesia. In *The Running Flame*, Yingzhi has been sentenced to death for killing her abusive husband. Both characters are based on real women — Zitao was inspired by the mother of Fang Fang’s friend, and Yingzhi by a prisoner Fang Fang had interviewed for a [TV program](#) — while their individual arcs reflect collective tragedies. Zitao was a casualty of the land reform movement and the socialist project. Yingzhi was consumed by capitalist desires in the post-Mao period. Both protagonists are victims of patriarchy, and neither is blameless in her own ruin. Zitao’s unrelenting effort to reclaim her past, and Yingzhi’s determination to “say her piece,” are final assertions of their agency.

In both novels, the narratives are propelled by exercises of power by the powerless, where the heroine resists the deliberate silence and forced erasure that has plagued countless women in China. As Fang Fang writes in the afterword to *Soft Burial*, the novel’s title refers to being buried without a coffin, but another kind of soft burial is “when the living insist on ... covering up the past, abandoning history and refusing to remember.” Generations of Chinese women have been rendered voiceless by the patriarchy. Their stories refuse soft burials.

“ The Communist takeover of China in 1949 did not vanquish patriarchy, and campaigns like the land reforms often exacerbated gendered oppression.”

The novel *Soft Burial* opens on an old woman “in a state of constant inner struggle.” A part of her wants to remember; the rest is afraid of what the memories might hold. Half a century ago, in 1952, she was pulled out of a river in Eastern Sichuan. Badly injured, she spent more than two weeks in a coma and woke up to a blank past. Her attending physician, Dr. Wu, gave her the name Ding Zitao, combining the phrase *dingsi* — the two syllables she kept uttering, later revealed to be the name of her firstborn (汀子), lost in the river — with the character for “peach” (桃), referencing the peach trees outside the hospital window.

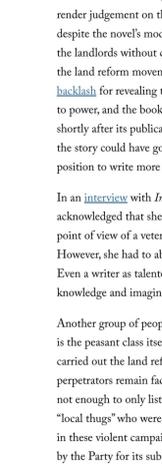
Dr. Wu also kept a secret: His whole family died in 1948, during the land reform movement in the northern province of Shanxi. After escaping, he concealed his identity, calling himself Wu Jianning (无家名, “without a family, without a name”). Judging from her smooth complexion and manicured nails, Dr. Wu suspected that Zitao came from wealth and had survived a similar calamity, which is sadly confirmed by her final recollections later in the book.



A struggle session against a landlord during the early days of land reform, 1948. (Wikicommons)

The land reform movement was marked by blood from the start. In 1927, when the CCP was a fledgling force, Mao observed the peasant movement in Hunan, [writing](#) that “a revolution is not a dinner party” and cannot be gentle; it is “an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another.” The nationwide campaign to topple the landlords and confiscate their wealth (as described in Brian DeMare’s 2019 book *Land Wars*) began in 1947 in the Communist strongholds in the north, where Dr. Wu was from, and moved south alongside Communist advancements in the Civil War. For regions like Zitao’s hometown on the border of Sichuan and Hubei provinces, which was among the last to fall into Communist control, the land reforms were especially [brutal](#). Landlords and their relatives were berated and beaten during struggle sessions, and tortured to give up alleged hidden assets. Many were summarily executed. Some, like Zitao’s father-in-law Master Lu and his family in the novel, committed suicide.

While rural women played a prominent role in the campaign, and many felt empowered by their actions, this triumphant narrative elides the gendered violence afflicted for the sake of revolution. Mao [wrote](#) with glee that the peasant rebels of Hunan “even loll for a minute or two on the ivory-inlaid beds belonging to the young ladies in the households of the local tyrants and evil gentry.” Cadres and activists routinely [committed](#) sexual assault against the wives and daughters of class enemies. The CCP cynically courted women for liberating them from feudal practices such as arranged marriages and concubinage, but during the land reform movement, female members of the gentry households were divided up among the peasant class alongside the land and other valuables, as noted by scholars including Zhi Xiaomin in his 2008 book *Liu Shaogui and the Land Reform Movement in the Hunan Region* (刘少奇与晋绥土改).



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In *Soft Burial*, when the maids at Master Lu’s mansion learned they would be forced to marry villagers they did not like, they volunteered to follow Master Lu’s lead in taking their own lives. It would be an honor to serve the master in the afterlife as well, they said. What might seem like an act of unabiding loyalty was in fact a testament to their helplessness. With or without Master Lu, the maids were treated as property, not people. The Lu household operated by the same gendered and class-based hierarchies that has structured Chinese society for centuries. Wading through the torrents of her lost memories towards the end of the novel, Zitao blames her father-in-law’s “arrogance and tyrannical attitude” for the family’s demise.

As Michael Berry points out in the translator’s introduction, the past that emerges from *Soft Burial* is “riddled with ethical dilemmas.” “None of the characters stands beyond moral reproach,” he writes, but all are “rendered in human terms,” not as black-and-white caricatures. These layered portrayals are a strength of the novel, but too much attention to nuance can also distract and obfuscate underlying power relations. The real question is not whether Master Lu deserved his punishment, but who held the authority to make such a decision and why.

Many of the most egregious acts during the land reform movement were propelled by private grievances. The official movement gave cover for personal vendettas. In a standout scene in the novel, a group of elderly cadres reminisce about the revolution. They acknowledge that the land reforms “got out of control,” and “a lot of people died who should not have died.” Some attribute these “mistakes” to a lack of experience; no one checked “whether any local thugs were included among the poor,” or tried to “differentiate which rich people were good and which were bad.” By this logic, missteps only happened during the execution, but the project was warranted and the cause was just.

What was the true aim of such a vicious campaign? As the retired revolutionaries sift through their regrets and come up with rationalizations, it becomes clear that subduing the rich was more important than liberating the poor. “The price for social stability may have been high, but the most important thing was achieving that stability,” the old man nod in agreement. Here, the keyword is stability, not equality. Beneath the noble slogan of “land to the tiller” (耕者有其田), the struggle against landlords served a more pragmatic goal: to establish Communist rule and consolidate political power. The land reforms helped [rally](#) mass support for the Communists, and the removal of traditional elites from rural authority cleared the way for the Party to [install](#) new local leadership: often the campaign’s most ferocious actors, and those most loyal to the Communist cause.

Excessive force in China’s Communist revolution was not in error; it was by design. By partaking in state-sanctioned violence, the people became beholden to a regime that rules by fear. The brutalization of women from the opposing class (even if they were only maids serving that class), whose bodies constituted enemy territory, completed the Party’s domination over the old order. Similar methods of mass mobilization and class struggle, including gendered aggression, were adopted in later CCP campaigns, most [notably](#), during the Cultural Revolution when countless “counter-revolutionaries” were tortured to death, and many of their widows and daughters were raped by fanatic followers of Mao.

In the novel, a storyline that runs parallel to Zitao’s recollections is her son Qinglin’s effort to piece together his mother’s past. A wealthy real estate developer, Qinglin stumbles upon the diaries of his father, and an architectural survey takes him close to Zitao’s forgotten hometown. Through this juxtaposition of present and past, the book hints at a broader failure of China’s socialist experiment.

In the areas that saw the harshest land campaigns, the Communist revolution did not bring abundance; on the contrary, the destruction of the rural gentry plunged the villages into abject poverty that continued to this day. In 1953, less than a year after the completion of the land reform movement, the Party began demanding the peasant class hand over their newly-gained land to collective farms. While the peasantry was agitated as the backbone of the revolution in the Mao years, the socialist state kept the price of agricultural products artificially low, and used the value extracted from the villagers to support industrialization. This dispossession continued after Mao died, as rapid urban development robbed land and livelihoods from the rural population. In all of these cases, the rural poor were freed from landlords only to be exploited by the Party-state.

As with her characters, Fang Fang does not explicitly render judgement on the Party in *Soft Burial*. Yet despite the novel’s moderate approach — humanizing the landlords without challenging the legitimacy of the land reform movement itself — she faced [backlash](#) for revealing the dark side of the CCP’s path to power, and the book was pulled from shelves shortly after its publication in 2016. I wonder how far the story could have gone if the author was in a position to write more freely.

In an [interview](#) with *Initium*, Fang Fang acknowledged that she had initially conceived a third storyline for the novel, told from the point of view of a veteran CCP revolutionary; in addition to those of Zitao’s and her son’s. However, she had to abandon it as she was unfamiliar with the inner lives of senior cadres. Even a writer as talented and empathetic as Fang Fang struggled with the limits of her knowledge and imagination.

Another group of people whom Fang seemed unable or unwilling to write in the voice of is the peasant class itself. Other than brief appearances in group dialogue, the villagers who carried out the land reforms or their descendants are notably missing from the story. The perpetrators remain faceless and voiceless. To fully understand the cause of mass atrocities, it is not enough to only listen to the victims or blame the wrongdoing on a few bad apples, like the “local thugs” who were mixed in with the poor. What motivated the peasants who participated in these violent campaigns? Are they haunted by what they saw or did? Do they feel betrayed by the Party for its subsequent policies? A novel that fully explores these dimensions remains to be written.

“ The book hints at a broader failure of China’s socialist experiment. ... The rural poor were freed from landlords to be exploited by the Party-state.”

In *The Running Flame*, which was published in China in 2001 and is set in the late 1990s, the voice of the offender is central. After enduring years of domestic abuse, a young rural woman, Yingzhi, sets her husband on fire. Yingzhi has just graduated from high school, and wants to explore the many opportunities that the new era has to offer, but her early marriage to a young man from the neighboring village crushed all of those dreams.

At less than half the length of *Soft Burial*, this “explosive short novel” is also one of Fang Fang’s “more complex acts of fictional witnessing,” Berry writes in the translator’s afterword. As he explains, Yingzhi’s tragically grew out of the intersection of two dynamics: China’s long history of gender politics, and the economic and social tensions unleashed by the reform era that followed Mao’s death in 1976. The entanglement of these two forces created new forms of pain and precarity for rural women.

Under the banner of gender equality, women in the Mao era were [encouraged](#) to step out of their homes and take part in production. As scholars including Gail Hershatter to have [elucidated](#), labor’s emancipatory potential was nevertheless diminished by discriminatory policies. At communist collective farms, women were paid less than men, while shouldering most of the unremunerated domestic labor. Beginning in the late 1970s, as China abandoned the socialist project to integrate into global capitalism, collective farms were disbanded and agricultural production returned to households. In the meantime, an emerging market economy led to exploding labor demand in the cities. Millions of rural residents, mostly men, left the fields for fresh opportunities, in a new private sector that symbolized masculine prowess. By the 1990s, farm labor was primarily carried out by women and the elderly.

At Yingzhi’s village, men who floundered as migrant workers in the city, like her husband Guoqing, have returned home and fritter away their time at the poker table. Beating their wives is a way to recover their masculine pride. Yingzhi aspires to material comfort, but does not want to toil in the fields to achieve it. She realizes there are easier ways to make money, using her looks as an asset. Joining a local song-and-dance troupe, where sex appeal is commodified, Yingzhi gets better tips when she wears revealing outfits and has a flirtatious attitude. Being touched by a male colleague or a paying customer is part of the job. At one show, the price is 200 yuan (then about \$25) to go topless, and 500 yuan to strip all the way.



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Yingzhi debates internally over her boundaries. She wonders whether it is appropriate for a wife to be fondled by other men. She envies her unmarried bandmate Xiaohong, who does not share such reservations. Yet one cannot simply blame Yingzhi for seeing her body as a site for profit. Her marriage already carried a transactional value. Still in her late teens and unexpectedly pregnant with Guoqing’s child, she married him “with a sense of resignation.” Yingzhi’s pregnancy “also took away her bargaining power when it came to her betrothal gifts,” and her in-laws treated her coldly. As Guoqing admits, his “parents said that any daughter-in-law who comes so cheap must not be any good.”

Trapped in a hasty and degrading union, Yingzhi finds self-affirmation by being the breadwinner of the family. Guoqing might overpower her physically, but he has to rely on her for pocket money and to help with his gambling debts. Money becomes her leverage in the relationship. That she earned it by sexual transgressions only sweetens the revenge.

The desire to defy gender conventions also strengthens Yingzhi’s resolve to self-finance a new home, so she can move away from her disparaging in-laws. The jobless Guoqing still lives with his parents, and Yingzhi has had to endure all of them under the same roof since her wedding. “I may be a woman,” she thinks, “but I’m still going to build a house for all of you to see!” Yingzhi chooses March 8, International Women’s Day, to break ground, but after exhausting her savings, she is a few thousand yuan short. She asks her parents for a loan, but they refuse: their money is reserved for Yingzhi’s brothers. (Owning a home is considered a man’s duty and entitlement in China; many parents contribute to the marital home of their sons, but [few](#) do so for their daughters.) Yingzhi’s mother reminds her of the Chinese idiom that a married daughter is like spilled water: “As soon as you left this family, you became the property of another family.”

In a moment of despair, Yingzhi contemplates death. This detail of the novel is also rooted in truth: from 1995 to 1999, 93% of all suicides in China [occurred](#) among rural residents, and the suicide rates among young rural women were 66% higher than their male counterparts. Yet Yingzhi is not one to give up. Leaving Guoqing seems to be the only way for her to live her own life. When she broaches the thought to her parents, her father says she would better kill herself than bring such shame to the family. Her mother adds that all Yingzhi’s investment into the new house will go to waste if she divorces Guoqing, since the land it is built on is not hers but belongs to Guoqing’s parents. “[T]he day a girl marries is the day she forever loses her sense of home,” Yingzhi reflects. “They are truly the saddest people in this world.”

The reality of modern China is even more brutal than this fiction. The first national legislation to be passed in the People’s Republic of China was the 1950 [Marriage Law](#), which granted men and women alike the right to divorce, in an attempt to deliver on the promise of liberating women from feudal matrimony. Yet an unintended effect of the law was that 70–80,000 people, mostly women, [died](#) each year trying to leave their spouses — killed by possessive husbands and other family members, or taking their own lives — until the Party adjusted its policies in 1953 to make it harder to formally break up a union. In the post-Mao era, divorce still remains a perilous undertaking for many women, and the commodification of land and privatization of housing have led to [new forms](#) of gender disparity. As is the case with urban real estate, the majority of rural land contracts are registered under men. Village women routinely [lose](#) land rights in their natal homes after marriage, and rarely gain access to land in the family they marry into. Meanwhile, according to [surveys](#) between 2000 and 2010 from the National Women’s Federation, nearly one third of Chinese families have [experienced](#) domestic violence, and 90% of the abusers are men.



A dramatized reenactment of the Dong Junhui case, in the Chinese TV show *Thirteen Capital Cases* (命案十三宗, 2000). (Sohu)

*The Running Flame* is based on the real-life case of Dong Junhui, a rural woman from Hubei province. In 1999, 32-year-old Dong was sentenced to death for murdering her husband. Unlike Yingzhi, who is executed in the novel, Dong [appealed](#), arguing that her husband had repeatedly sexually abused her in their decade-plus marriage, and threatened to kill her entire family if she sought a divorce. In 2003, Dong’s sentence was reduced to death with a two-year reprieve, which was automatically converted to a life sentence after she submitted no crimes during that period. She received further [reductions](#) in her sentence for good behavior, and completed her term on November 3, 2024, four months before the novel’s English publication. In 2001, the year after Dong’s initial verdict, [revisions](#) to the Marriage Law included, for the first time, domestic violence as a cause for divorce. And in 2016, after years of advocacy, China enacted the [Domestic Violence Law](#), though its efficacy is [limited](#) and its [implementation](#) has been uneven.

As Fang Fang writes in the short essay “How Many Women Like Yingzhi Are Around Us?,” published in the Chinese journal *Contemporary Writers Review* (当代作家评论) in 2002, for women like the protagonist of *The Running Flame*, “the simple fact of being born in an impoverished rural area has already decided her tragic fate.” She can accept it in silence and “live a simple and difficult life,” or she can strive for a different path and pay an enormous price. Sometimes, that price is higher than life itself.

Michael Berry, translator of both novels as well as Fang Fang’s *Wuhan Diary* (2020), [describes](#) the trio of books as Fang Fang’s “trauma trilogy.” They cover the traumas of history, domestic violence and the pandemic, but gender relations link all three, with women experiencing greater and distinct forms of pain. (The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the burden of caregiving on women, while instances of domestic violence [skyrocketed](#) under quarantine.) As Leta Hong Fincher points out in *Leifinger Women* (2013), women’s employment rate has fallen in the shadows of China’s economic rise, and the gender wealth gap has widened. Recent legal provisions, including Supreme People’s Court [interpretations](#) of and legislative [updates](#) to the marriage law, further [limited](#) Chinese women’s right to marital property and their ability to get a [divorce](#). As the country approaches a demographic cliff, with a declining birth rate and aging population, the Party has shifted its rhetoric on gender. The exemplary woman is no longer the Mao-era model worker who can handle the same tasks as men, but a loving wife and devoted mother. Speaking in front of the National Women’s Federation in 2023, Xi Jinping [emphasized](#) the importance of “traditional virtues” for women.

Countless Yingzhis live among us, while the Zitaoos of China are fading away with time. The tears of Chinese women, if unleashed, could drown a nation. Yet many women refuse to accept tragedy as their fate, wielding their voices and their bodies against the patriarchal order. They fight for their rights in court, and push back against discriminatory policies. On Valentine’s Day in 2012, three young female Chinese activists [marched](#) in the streets of Beijing, wearing wedding gowns stained by artificial blood. One of their placards [read](#): “Beating is not intimacy. Verbal abuse is not love.” The following year, the same feminist outfit helped a group of village wives stage a [demonstration](#) against unequal land access. In a scene reminiscent of the “speaking bitterness” sessions from the 1960s, using elements of the same revolutionary theatrics, the women prostrated in front of a government building and covered their bodies in protest banners.



A protester in a wedding dress with fake blood stains holds a sign: “Against domestic violence, do not harm.” (文汇报网/文汇报)

A Chinese woman today — unlike her mother or grandmother, those women of Zitao’s generation whose voices were restricted — has acquired a more capacious vocabulary, and learned new ways of struggle. Her body bears witness. Her speech gives testimony. Her imagination conceives a new world. Her labor carries it to fruition. If there are enough like her, maybe her daughters and granddaughters will truly be free. ■

Header: A woman walks her dog past portraits of Mao Zedong, painted in 1968, at a soon-to-be demolished housing area in Shanghai, 2006. (Mark Ralston/Getty)



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