Presentation

Gregor Benton is a sinologist specialising on Chinese revolutionary history. He has taught at the University of Amsterdam and is presently Senior Lecturer in the Department of East Asian Studies at the University of Leeds. He collaborates with the IIRE. A major work of his is going to be published in October 1992: Mountain Fires. The Red Army's Three-Year War in South China, 1934-1938, a Philip E. Lilienthal book (a 668 pages book which unfortunately costs $70 cloth!).

Gregor Benton has extensively studied the history of Chinese Trotskyism as well as of the Chinese CP. We are circulating as our WP-IIRE nº 26 his "explorations" in the history of Chinese Trotskyism. We intend to publish this study, hopefully in 1993, as a Notebook for Study and Research. This paper is also part of a much broader academic project, in collaboration with a Russian expert on the Comintern's history (and in relation to the opening of its archives). Comments and criticism will therefore be more than welcome.

Gregor Benton is presently in Asia. He'll be back early 1993. One can write to him at the following address:

Gregor Benton
Department of East Asian Studies
University of Leeds
Leeds LS2 9JT
Great Britain
I. Introduction

In the lightless years of the Mao dictatorship, the darkest spot behind the blackout on the history of the Chinese Revolution was reserved for Trotskyism. In 1952 the Trotskyists in China were swept up by the security police and gaolled (in some cases for the next twenty seven years) as "counterrevolutionaries". This was not the first time that they had disappeared behind bars for their beliefs. Most of their main leaders had also spent in gaol the best part of the 1930s, then as revolutionary opponents of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist dictatorship. Both times the bulk of their archive vanished with them into government vaults, where it still is, beyond the reach of most historians. On the rare occasions that Trotskyists were paraded in government-sponsored history books after 1949, it was as grotesque caricatures epitomising national and political treason. Those few Trotskyist leaders who had slipped abroad before the clampdown did their best to keep alive the Trotskyist critique of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) policy. But they lacked information and resources, and in any case they had been consigned (not least by their fellow revolutionaries) to the remotest margins of political life by the Maoist victory.

In the 1980s, however, some mainland historians gingerly started to lift the curtain on Chinese Trotskyism, so revealing a complex, original movement, a failed experiment in urban revolution in the land of rural revolution, that throws light from many interesting new angles on familiar questions of the Chinese Revolution. In the course of academic debate, the official view on Trotskyism has noticeably softened. In Mao's days it was classified as "counterrevolutionary"; now it is simply "wrong". In the new, more liberal climate some Chinese writers have dared to strip away the lies and prejudices from Trotskyism and the Chinese Trotskyists, and memoirs by Trotskyist leaders have appeared in the Chinese press, including restricted editions of the memoirs of Wang Fanxi and Zheng Chaolin.

Of the founding generation of Chinese Trotskyists, Wang Fanxi (born 1907) and Zheng Chaolin (born 1901) are still alive, but they are too old to take an active part in political life or even to keep up a regular commentary on it; and though Zheng is still hale and lucid and is a member of Shanghai's People's Political Consultative Conference, he has not been formally rehabilitated and so he is still partly muzzled. However, their memoirs have become objects of great admiration among the Chinese academics allowed to read them. At the same time, many foreign writings sympathetic to Trotskyism have appeared in Chinese translation. In the West, in Hongkong and on Taiwan, and among the diaspora of Chinese communities overseas interest - measured by publications - in the Chinese Trotskyists is also growing. Wang's book has already appeared in English, Japanese, German, and French, and preparations are under way to publish Zheng's in English. The opening of Leon Trotsky's "Exile Papers" at Harvard has gone a small way toward remedying the lack of accessible primary documentation on the Chinese Trotskyist movement in the 1930s and the early 1940s. The new literature on Trotskyism commands an eager readership on mainland China, where layer after layer of the official leadership has been discredited in the public eye, where the crisis of faith in Stalinism and Maoism is deep and general, and where many historians have taken seriously the regime's call for truthful scholarship.

We already know much about Trotsky's relation to China, [note] and we are increasingly well informed about Chen Duxiu, who became the most important figure in the Chinese Trotskyist movement in the 1930s. But the biography of Chen, in China and abroad, is often impermissibly silent about his relation to the Trotskyists, who disappeared from sight for several decades. So I will try to summarise the present state of knowledge about Trotskyism in China from formal sources and to supplement it from informal ones (mainly interviews).

The time, however, is not yet ripe for an authoritative history of the Chinese Trotskyists. Even in China, where archives dealing with most areas of Party and revolutionary history are now open in part or in full to privileged categories of researchers, much of the writing on Chinese Trotskyism still depends heavily on memoirs rather than on contemporary documentation, so either a Trotskyist archive has not yet been found or sorted or opened, or none has been kept. The same may go for Taiwan. But as a rule memoirs should be used to complement evidence gained from other sources rather than to form its main frame. It is equally wrong to write history out of secondary sources, all the more so when they in turn are largely dependent on autobiographical evidence. So would-be historians of Chinese Trotskyism must first discover their materials and assemble an adequate corpus of primary materials from various places - government archives in China (insofar as they are accessible) and on Taiwan, the Harvard Exile Papers, and private archives and collections scattered here and there among China's revolutionary exiles. A minimum requirement would be runs of the various journals published at different times by different Trotskyist organisations; but historians should also aim to unearth Chen Duxiu's notes and letters from 1927 to 1929 (which may soon be available in China), the
Trotskyists' internal records, and, in particular, documentation of their various Congresses. Only then can their story be written properly.

This, then, is not so much a history of Chinese Trotskyism as an outline for one, or rather an agenda of issues that such a history must engage. It is based on interviews, correspondence, memoirs, and analytical studies, both published and unpublished (in China, on Taiwan, in Hongkong, and in the West).
II. Chinese Trotskyism: The Historical Context

The birth of the Trotskyist Opposition in the Soviet Union in 1926 and 1927 can be traced back to three main issues, and Trotsky's demands in relation to them. In the Soviet Union he called for Party democracy and industrialisation; in the British context he called for an end to the Soviet Government's alliance with conservative leaders of the Trade Union Congress; and in the Chinese context he called for the withdrawal of the CCP from the Guomindang (or Nationalist Party). The Chinese question not only featured centrally in the international debate inside the world Communist movement but also led quite independently of this to the alienation of veteran Communists in China from the pro-Stalin majority. Independent-minded Communists everywhere were shocked by the events in China in 1927 and highly susceptible to Trotsky’s criticism of Stalin’s policy there. For obvious reasons the shock, and the reaction, were deepest in China.

The CCP was helped into the world by envos of the Communist International (or Comintern) and owed much of its early success to Russian aid. But the disaster that overtook the young Party in 1927 was also due in large part to Russian interference. During the Revolution of 1925-1927 the CCP was working on Comintern instructions for national independence and unification in alliance with the Guomindang, a party committed to defending the economic interests of the rich. The terms of this alliance, known as the first united front to distinguish it from the second one formed in 1937, were in practice disadvantageous to the CCP. They required its strict political subordination to the Nationalist leaders and the subversion of important sections of its membership into the Guomindang. In 1920, at the Second Comintern Congress, Lenin had called on Communist Parties in "colonial and backward countries" to support "bourgeois-democratic movements" but to preserve their own organisational independence, to resist bourgeois attempts to control the mass movement, and to carry out vigorous propaganda for the idea of soviet. To square their position in the mid-1920s with Leninist orthodoxy and to counter Trotsky’s criticism of the Chinese alliance, the Comintern majority in Moscow (under Stalin and Bukharin) argued that the Guomindang was not a bourgeois party but a "bloc of four classes" (bourgeois, workers, peasants, and petty bourgeois) and the "only serious national-revolutionary group in China".

By 1925 the Soviet leaders’ real aim in China was not so much world revolution as an indiscriminate search for allies against the hostile Western powers, for by then the majority of Russian Communist leaders had abandoned internationalism in favour of the conservative pursuit of Russian national self-interest. So they turned a blind eye to the friction that grew up between the two Chinese parties in early 1926, when growing social tensions began to lay bare the underlying divisions between the Nationalist Party of property and a Communist Party whose constituency was among the urban and rural poor. In July 1926, Chiang Kai-shek launched the Northern Expedition to overthrow warlord rule in territories to the north of his base in Guangdong. But first, in March, he staged a preemptive coup against his Communist "allies" there. Only then did he feel confident enough to send his armies north; reorganised with Russian help and supported by a populace roused by Communist agitators, they sliced easily through the warlord ranks. Then, in the spring of 1927, in a second and far bloodier coup, Chiang launched a murderous assault on the Communists in Shanghai and drove them from the city. The Party’s surviving forces fled east to Wuhan where the alliance with the Guomindang continued, this time with its so-called "left wing" under Wang Jingwei, who had split with Chiang. Again, the Communist Parties from all over China fled to the new "revolutionary centre" in Wuhan, but in mid July Wang too turned against them and killed thousands more, robbing Stalin of his last possible candidate for the role in his China-script of leader of the "national bourgeoisie". Shortly afterwards both wings of the Guomindang reunited in Nanjing under a government effectively controlled by Chiang. Even now the shell of an alliance was retained: it was not until after the Communist-led risings of the autumn of 1927 that the Party finally lashed down the banner of the Guomindang.
III. The First United Front and the Chinese Opposition: Trotskyists *avant la lettre*

Leon Trotsky challenged the policy on China of the Soviet majority leaders throughout the three years of the first united front, but before late 1926 he kept his criticisms to the ruling bodies of the Soviet Party, hampered by Stalin’s rule that there should be no record or public reporting of leadership discussions and also by divisions within the minority Opposition to which Trotsky belonged. Partly for this reason, for a long time the leaders of the CCP were probably unaware that not everyone in the Comintern leadership was convinced that the policy being carried out in China on Comintern orders was right. It was not until September 27, 1926, that Trotsky criticised in a formal resolution the policy of “permanent entry” by the CCP into the Guomindang (though even then his strictures were uncharacteristically restrained) and not until May 7, 1927, after Chiang Kai-shek’s Shanghai coup, that he bluntly, directly, and openly attacked Stalin’s mismanagement of the Chinese Revolution.

The first and most consistent early opposition to the policy of submerging the CCP into the Guomindang came not in Russia but in China, where the Comintern envoy Henk Sneevliet (alias Maring) could only persuade the reluctant leaders of the Chinese Party to accept the policy by appealing to their sense of discipline.  

In 1922 and 1923 the two main movers in the policy of close collaboration with the Guomindang were Sneevliet and the Soviet diplomat Adolf Joffe. Neither man was a Stalinist: on the contrary, Joffe became a leading Trotskyist and Sneevliet an Oppositionist and at one point Trotsky’s ally. Sneevliet had earlier won the support of the Comintern for a similar policy of cooperation with Sarekat Islam in the Netherlands Indies. His view on what tactic to pursue in China can best be seen as a projection of this earlier experience; it is far too simple to attribute exclusively to Stalin authorship of the line of collaboration with the Guomindang.

Even Trotsky said in September 1926 that the participation of the CCP in the Guomindang had been “perfectly correct in the period when the CCP was a propaganda society which was only preparing itself for future independent political activity but which, at the same time, sought to take part in the ongoing national liberation struggle”. Perhaps this sentence was a diplomatic gesture toward other Party leaders, for Trotsky claimed elsewhere that he had opposed entering the Guomindang as early as 1923. But we have no direct evidence of this, so we can’t know in what terms - mild or firm - Trotsky framed his opposition.

There is, in contrast, overwhelming evidence from many different sources to show that Chinese Communists themselves opposed entry from the very start, kept up their opposition throughout the period of the united front, and voiced it at regular intervals. On this issue - which after 1926 became where China was concerned the main issue in dispute between Stalin and Trotsky - the dissenting Chinese Communist leaders were Trotskyists *avant la lettre*.

The first time that the Chinese Communists opposed joining the Guomindang was in early 1922. When Sneevliet proposed the policy, they flatly refused to accept it. The revolutionary aims of the two parties were completely different, Chen Duxiu told Sneevliet. Meetings of Communists in Guangdong, Shanghai, Beijing, Changsha, and Wuhan likewise opposed entry. The strategy adopted by the Chinese Communists at their Second Congress in 1922 was far more in line with the orthodox Leninist position than the abstractly propagandistic platform adopted at the First Congress in 1921. Lenin’s strategy - cooperate with the nationalistic democrats but at the same time organise independently for class struggle - had been readopted at the Congress of the Tollers of the Far East held in Moscow in early 1922. According to Chen Duxiu, the Manifesto of the CCP’s Second Congress was based on resolutions of the Moscow Tollers’ Congress.

The second time that the Chinese Communists opposed joining the Guomindang was at the Party’s Hangzhou Plenum in August 1922. According to Chen Duxiu and Zhang Guotao, who were both there, Chinese Communists present spoke out against Sneevliet when he directed them to enter the Guomindang in order to push forward the revolution, but they eventually dropped their opposition out of respect for “international discipline”. Sneevliet himself denied this story. “I possessed no specific instructions from the Comintern,” he told Harold Isaacs in 1935. “I had no document in my hand.” But we know that Sneevliet did carry an order from the Comintern to the CCP directing the Chinese Communists to work in close concert with Sneevliet.

Later, after having agreed to the new strategy against their own better judgment, various Communist leaders at various times continued to speak out against it with persistent regularity and to call for an end to it. At the CCP’s Third Congress, in June 1923, there was almost a majority for an amendment calling for an independent workers’ party, but Sneevliet fought back and won the vote. Again in 1924, Chen Duxiu, Cai Hesen, and Mao Zedong advocated a break with the Guomindang and wrote to all committees and cells directing them to prepare for one. But Borodin and Voitinsky, representing the Comintern, were against the idea, so again nothing came of it. At the Fourth
Congress in November 1924 some Communist leaders, including Chen Duxiu, continued to oppose membership of the Guomindang; it seems that the decision at that meeting to permit some Communists not to join was a compromise. In October 1925, after the right wing of the Guomindang had begun to oppose the Communists' presence in the Guomindang, Chen Duxiu is said to have proposed that "we should prepare ourselves immediately to withdraw from the Guomindang and become independent", but once again his proposal was defeated. In July 1926 he called one more time for withdrawal; again the Comintern rejected him. Finally, around July 13, 1927, after repeatedly but unsuccessfully advocating withdrawal from the Guomindang, he resigned as General Secretary of the CCP. On August 1, a fortnight after Chen's resignation, Communist armed forces raised the banner of the Guomindang to attack a Guomindang army in Nanchang, where they briefly seized power before being routed. Even now the Comintern instructed the CCP to remain within the Guomindang, though at the same time it was told to withdraw demonstratively from the Wuhan Government.

So it is quite misleading to picture Chen Duxiu as belonging to the right wing of the CCP in this period, and his rivals like Qu Qiubai in the leadership as belonging to the left. The situation was more complex than such an allocation would allow. On some issues — for example land revolution - Qu took a more radical stand than Chen. But on the question of allying with the Guomindang, Chen was on the left and Qu - who was collaborating closely with Borodin in this period and was CCP delegate to the Guomindang [source] — was on the right.

This is shown for example by the different attitudes of the two men to the Northern Expedition. The aim of the Northern Expedition was to overthrow warlords like Duan Qirui in the north. But according to Zheng Chaolin, Chen took a position more or less in line with the nationwide mood of the period in leftist circles, which was openly voiced by the Communist (and future Trotskyist) Gao Yuhan: "Before overthrowing the northern Duan Qirui, we should first overthrow the southern Duan Qirui" (i.e. Chiang Kai-shek). Qu, however — echoing Borodin — backed the Northern Expedition to the hilt. So according to Luo Yincang, the reason the Moscow leaders were against Chen Duxiu as leader of the Party in 1927 was not because of "right opportunism" but because they wanted to replace him with "someone close to the Guomindang". This would explain why, according to one scholar writing in the early 1930s, the Comintern accused Chen Duxiu of "following, and on certain points even going ahead of, Trotsky".
IV. The Origins of Trotskyism in China

Some people have tried to argue that Trotskyism was transplanted to China from abroad, either by Chinese acting on the instructions of Russian Oppositionists or directly, by Trotsky and Radek, who somehow activated the Left Opposition in Shanghai while they themselves were still in Moscow. Others have tried to write off the Chinese Trotskyists as mere Westernisers with neither roots in China nor Chinese solutions for a Chinese crisis. But actually one of the two main strands of Trotskyism in China was homegrown.

One of the chief issues that Trotsky engaged in 1927 was the nature of the Chinese Revolution and the strategy that Chinese Communists should adopt in it. Trotsky’s prescription was induced from the facts as he understood them and derived from his theory of permanent revolution. This said among other things that “the development of historically backward nations leads necessarily to a peculiar combination of different stages [whose] development as a whole acquires a planless, complex, combined character.... From the universal law of unevenness thus derives ... the law of combined development - by which we mean a drawing together of the different stages of the journey, a combining of separate steps, an amalgam of archeic with more contemporary forms.” In such countries, feudalism and capitalism therefore develop “in combination”, so capitalism lacks a progressive character and is corrupted by both “feudalism” and imperialism. This means that the bourgeois-democratic revolution against “feudalism” can only be completed if the proletariat (rather than the bourgeoisie) seizes power and takes measures to end capitalism and bring in the socialisms. The conclusions Trotsky drew from this were that the Communists should withdraw from the Guomindang and fight for soviets. “The Chinese bourgeois-democratic revolution will go forward either in the soviet form or not at all,” he said in 1927. Stalin and his supporters rejected this advice and forced the Chinese Communists to continue in alliance with their butchers. After first Chiang Kai-shek in Shanghai and then Wang Jingwei in Wuhan had turned on the Communists and “betrayed the revolution”, Trotsky in Moscow loudly declared that Stalin’s policy was to blame. Stalin refused to accept this, and instead blamed the Chinese Communist leaders for not carrying out Comintern directives.

Had the revolution been defeated in 1927? Trotsky thought so, but Stalin - as architect of the defeated strategy - could not agree with him. According to Stalin, the revolution was at most passing through a short trough between two waves. So Stalin’s policy for the Chinese Communists after 1927 was premised in the idea that the victory of the revolution was still within the Party’s grasp.

In China, Chen Duxiu had no doubt that the revolution had dipped, and future Trotskyist leaders like Zheng Chaolin thought the same. Zheng and others still believed in early 1928 that it was their duty to fight for the leadership of the Party; they rallied round the tradition represented in the Party by Chen Duxiu. Chen Duxiu opposed the Communists’ armed struggle after 1927, and disagreed that a new “high tide” of revolution was in evidence or in the offing; instead he proposed a retreat, and a “concentration on the economic struggle”. But he had no wish at present to join the active opposition. He was depressed by the personal tragedy he had suffered when in the purge after 1927 Chiang Kai-shek’s forces murdered two of Chen’s four sons. It must also have been hard for him to shake off the habit of loyalty to the Comintern. For a while he busied himself with philological and linguistic research. Later he said that “at that time he had been pondering basic questions in the Chinese Revolution, including how much responsibility he himself should take for the defeat”, for though he had opposed the strategy followed by the CCP between 1924 and 1927, he had reluctantly gone along with it and was responsible for its execution.

Even so, a group of Chen Duxiu’s old supporters tried to form an Opposition after uniting around Wang Ruofei and other “Chen Duxiu-ites” at the CCP’s Sixth Congress in Moscow in 1928.

Who were these Chen Duxiu supporters? The origins of the group are to be found in an earlier faction that formed in China in the mid 1920s; the so-called Moscow faction, comprising Chinese students like Zheng Chaolin sent back from Moscow to China in 1924 to staff the infant CCP. “The Moscow group was not tangible,” wrote Zheng Chaolin, “but it undeniably existed.” These people became important leaders of the Party back in China: their highest flier was Peng Shuzhi (P’eng Shu-tse), who returned to sit on the Central Committee as head of its Propaganda Department. These Russia-returneds students - the first of several generations of such - “were united as one and worked in close concert” according to Zheng Chaolin, who was one of them. They soon developed into a virtual clique. Shortly after their return, the theory of so-called “national revolution” that they had brought back with them was adopted as the guiding theory of the revolutionary movement in China. The clique’s two main leaders were Peng Shuzhi and Luo Yining. In 1926 and 1927 the Moscow clique disintegrated. Though Chen Duxiu himself had never lived or studied in Moscow, the Moscow clique
had congregated round him as its leader. In 1926 a difference began to emerge between Chen Duxiu and people like Borodin representing the Soviet Union. Borodin wanted to put the emphasis in Party work on helping the Guomindang seize power; Chen Duxiu was more interested in preparing the future Communist revolution, which (according to "national revolution" theory) would come after the victory of the Nationalists. Chinese Communist leaders like Tan Pingshan, Chen Yannian, Zhou Enlai, and Qu Qiubai in Guangdong, where Borodin's influence was strong, gradually prevailed over Chen Duxiu in Shanghai. This is the main reason why the Moscow clique disintegrated. The remnants of the clique who stayed loyal to Chen Duxiu became known as the Chen Duxiu-ites.

The group's core was formed by Peng Shuzhi, Wang Ruofei, Yin Kuan, Zheng Chaolin, and Chen Qionlian. Other members included Chen Bilan, He Zishen, Cai Zhende, Ma Yufu, and Liu Boliang. Of the core, three later became Trotskyists, while Chen Qionlian died and Wang Ruofei became a secret sympathiser of the Trotskyists, though he remained within the official Party. All of them save Peng Shuzhi had spent some time working and studying in France before going to Moscow in the early 1920s. They had joined the revolution more or less simultaneously and gone through a long period of shared experiences at a most formative time of their lives. This naturally inclined them to make a clique. In France they had lived a hard and taxing life, as wage-slaves in capitalist industry; and Zheng Chaolin in particular had learned libertarian ways of being and thinking that were alien to those Chinese students like Peng Shuzhi who had gone straight from China to Russia. Zheng knew that there could not be just one idea, one leader; his experience inclined him toward scepticism, intellectual curiosity, democracy, and internationalism. In Moscow, Zheng and some of his old comrades from France suffocated under the regime of stifling orthodoxy over which Peng and others presided. Zheng's habit of questioning accepted beliefs and values inclined him to an affinity with Chen Duxiu, Chinese Communism's most critical, free-thinking, and iconoclastic leader. But it also preconditioned him to be out of sympathy with bureaucrats like Peng Shuzhi. "Those of us who continued to support Chen Duxiu," remembered Zheng Chaolin, "learned early on to despise Peng Shuzhi as dull-witted, vain, and unable to work together with other people." Only with reluctance did the Chen Duxiu supporters let Peng join their campaign in 1929. Here the lines of the future split in Chinese Trotskyism are already visible.

France was not in itself enough to weld these people into a coherent group. Many young Chinese who had spent some time in France in the early 1920s turned against Chen Duxiu between 1926 and 1928. Cai Hesen, who became Chen's arch enemy, had been in France; so had Chen Yannian, who came under Borodin's influence in Guangdong; and so had Zhou Enlai and several other CCP leaders who distanced themselves from Chen in the 1927 crisis. What distinguishes most members of the Chen Duxiu group is that they had been both in Paris and in Moscow. So they experienced the Soviet Union in a different way from people who had not confronted the "bourgeois individualism" of Bohemian France. To this we must add the dimension of personal relations. These people had joined the revolution more or less simultaneously and gone through a long period of shared experiences. This fact too inclined them to make a clique. But the important thing is that they made it around Chen Duxiu, not Borodin or Voltinsky.

Given Chen Duxiu's refusal to join the group that bore his name, its chances of succeeding were extremely thin. But it is not true, contrary to allegations, that it was an unprincipled clique of friends. "It was bound not simply by personal ties," wrote Zheng Chaolin, "but also by a sort of principle - a principle drawn from practical experience, or from pronouncements on various issues by Chen Duxiu (mainly by his insistence that the revolution was in a trough rather than on the rise). True, the principle lacked clarity and no one overly raised it as such, nor did anyone have the courage to think it through to the end. Even so, the group was grounded in principle, as evidenced not just by the fact that its members later joined the Trotskyists almost to a man and woman but also by the famous 'resolution of the Jiangsu Provincial Committee'. Wang Ruofei drafted this resolution... Trotsky was delighted and specially wrote an article about it. He thought that it was unwittingly in concert with the ideas of the Left Opposition."31

The issues that animated the Chen Duxiu-ites concerned Party style as well as policy. They blamed the new leaders for denying at the Emergency Conference on August 7, 1927, that a defeat had taken place and for urging revolutionaries to continue to rise up, for that policy was costing lives. But they also criticised the August 7 Conference for heaping all the blame for past "mistakes" on Chen Duxiu, who in their view had simply been carrying out Comintern directives. And they were outraged by the Party's moral degeneration under the new leaders. "There was no democracy in the Party, and senior cadres were split into numerous unprincipled warring cliques pursuing private ends... The Party's various leaders were not acting in an upright way; they were base in character and morals."32

So in China a constituency existed that unwittingly echoed - and had even foreshadowed - Trotsky's two main positions on the Chinese Revolution: that it had been wrong to join the Guomindang, and that the failure to follow a course independent of the Guomindang had led to the Communists' defeat. The base even existed in China for an Opposition to match that in the Soviet Union. Like the Soviet Opposition, China's Chen Duxiu-ites were concerned at the collapse of Party norms and democracy. But they lacked the confidence and the means to do as the
Trotskyists in the Soviet Union had already done. In any case, by 1928 the Party had been smashed in the Chinese cities and Communists of whatever stripe were in hiding or on the run, which made the organisation of an Opposition doubly hard.

Above all the Chen Duxiu-ites lacked a justification in terms of Marxist theory for their misgivings about the strategy of the CCP after 1927. Having no Marxist theoretical framework within which to place their doubts prevented them from winning support for their positions and probably held many of them back from arguing for their views in Party circles, where it was mainly theoretical certitude that bred political confidence. To remedy this lack, they would have to wait for writings of Leon Trotsky to arrive in China. It was only then, wrote Chen Duxiu, that he and his followers gained “a systematic and fundamental understanding of the mistakes” of the CCP and the Comintern. For though the embryonic Opposition in the CCP had heard that there was a political struggle going on in Russia, they had no idea of the issues in it, or that those issues included the nature and condition of the Chinese revolution. When they were eventually able to read Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution for themselves, the effect was electrifying.
V. The Origins of Chinese Trotskyism in Russia

After the defeat of the CCP in 1927, several hundred young Communist survivors went to Moscow, where they studied at the Communist University for the Toilers of the East (KUTV) and Sun Yat-sen University. Even before their arrival, in the autumn and winter, a Trotskyist Opposition had sprung up among Chinese students at Sun Yat-sen University, which for a while had been under the direction of Karl Radek, a prominent Trotskyist, who chose the textbooks, set the curriculum, and frequently invited Trotsky and Bukharin to lecture to his students. In 1927, however, Radek had been replaced by Pavel Mif, a Stalinist. “The fate of Trotskyist students at the university had also been settled,” wrote the Trotskyist Wang Fanxi: “some had been expelled from the CCP, and were awaiting transfer either to Siberia or back to China, others had capitulated and renounced their views.”

But this purge did not put an end to Trotskyism among Moscow’s Chinese students. Though the new batches of them knew next to nothing about the Soviet Union or the world Communist movement when they first arrived in Moscow, within a matter of weeks they were “more or less acquainted with the substance of the controversy” between Stalin and Trotsky. What they lacked in theoretical grounding before going to Russia they made up for in direct experience of the events in China, which formed one of the three great battlegrounds on which Stalin and Trotsky fought each other.

This experience in China explains the enormous attraction that Trotsky’s critique of Stalin exercised over them. Other foreign students in Moscow were less interested in the controversy. There were foreigners from more than seventy nationalities studying in Moscow, mainly at KUTV, in the 1920s. Hundreds of the Chinese among them became Trotskyists: of the thousands of non-Chinese, only a handful did.

Even before the end of their first year in Moscow, the seeds of sympathy with Russia’s Left Opposition had been sown in the minds of some of the new Chinese arrivals. The conversion was far from automatic, for the habits of “Party spirit” and mindless obedience were hard to shake off. Moreover, the Opposition had been denounced as “counterrevolutionary”, and few lightly risked the stigma of disloyalty or the charge of treason. However, in the course of time the more critically minded students studied whatever documents they could lay their hands on and progressed through sceptical neutrality to active support for the Opposition. Earlier they had swallowed the official explanation that the policies followed in 1926 and 1927 were “mistakes committed by Chen Duxiu in defiance of Comintern instructions”. Now the truth dawned upon them: the policies ascribed to Chen Duxiu were Stalin’s.

Nor was Stalin’s policy for China the sole issue that exercised their indignation. They had arrived in Moscow fresh from battle. They were bursting with moral courage and a strong antipathy toward the high-handed ways of the Moscow leaders. “We were upset,” wrote Wang Fanxi, “by the arbitrary and bureaucratic way in which the Stalinists conducted the inner-party struggle and the suffocating atmosphere which this created. The gulf between what we thought and what we were allowed to say, between our sympathies and the demands of discipline, grew wider and wider. All six hundred of us had just left behind a revolution, and we were restless and full of energy.”

Many writers have described the baleful influence on Chinese Communism of the Russia-Returned Students or Twenty Eight Bolsheviks, names given in China to the Stalinist clique of leaders educated in Moscow and sent home to usurp the leadership of the CCP. What of the Russia-returned Trotskyists, who for a while formed the majority of the Trotskyist movement back in China? Are there parallels between the two groups? Was the role that they played in Chinese politics similar? The answer must be no. In almost every way the two groups were reverse images of one another. Each learned diametrically opposite things in Moscow, and developed a diametrically opposite character and style. The Trotskyists grew in opposition to “Red compradors” like the “survivors”, a group of Party officials, translators, and interpreters who had spent much of the 1920s in Moscow, where they tried to keep a monopoly on the Russian language in order to safeguard their role as middlemen; and like wang Ming, who overthrew the “survivors” but, like them, exploited his links to Soviet bureaucrats in order to build his own power-base first in Russia and then in the CCP. Whereas the Russia-educated Stalinists gravitated toward power and privilege, the Chinese Trotskyists in Moscow risked - and in many cases lost - their lives by hitching their wagons to the star of the defeated, persecuted, and eventually “liquidated” Opposition. The students who rallied round the leadership of the CCP’s Moscow branch were centralists, bureaucrats, and sycophants. They learned the techniques of political control; they brazenly abused the power vested in them by the Soviet state. The Trotskyists, on the other hand, learned the techniques of the underground, and became experienced in combating the terror and prying eye of the despotic state. By comparison with the ruling group and their hangers-on in Moscow’s CCP, they
were democratic, free-thinking, broad-minded: according to the Party’s Moscow Bureau [?] they were “petty-bourgeois liberals”. Whereas nearly all the Russia‐returned Trotskyists (at least of the second batch) had personally lived through the revolution of 1927, none had of the five main leaders of the Twenty Eight Bolsheviks, and of the other twenty three only a minority had left China after the start of the revolution.

In the winter of 1927 a dozen or so known Oppositionists among the Chinese students were expelled from the Party and sent back to China, but enough secret Trotskyists remained at Sun Yat-sen University (their stronghold in Moscow) to win an underground following among the several hundred new arrivals in 1927. By the summer of 1928, most of the Chinese students in Moscow - including nine out of ten of those who had studied at KUTV - reportedly sympatised with the Trotskyists. “The Opposition no longer seemed poisonous or untouchable to us,” wrote Wang Fanxi. “There was an almost holy aura about it, wronged and persecuted as it clearly was.” In the early autumn of 1928, ten Trotskyists held a secret meeting and elected three (or five) of their number to form a committee to support the Opposition. The existence of this committee soon became an open secret. The committee organised its supporters to translate into Chinese and circulate Oppositionist writings. Even some trusted Party leaders like Wang Ruofei, Guan Xiangying, and Luo Zhanglong read and agreed with them.

By the winter of 1928 Trotskyists were everywhere among Moscow’s Chinese students: “in the Lenin Institute, in the various military academies, and in particular at Sun Yat-sen University, where out of a total of four hundred students about one hundred and fifty were Trotskyists, either as members or as close sympathizers.” The Stalinist clique that controlled the Party Committee at Sun Yat-sen University tried to stop the Trotskyists by organising thugs - including Chinese workers recruited to the Party in France and members of Wang Ming’s personal bodyguard - to beat them. It also tried to cow them into submission by administrative measures. Previously CCP members studying in the Soviet Union had automatically come to be considered as members of the CPSU through a formal process known as “transference of Party membership”. Now Wang Ming used this process to discriminate against anyone suspected of sympathising with the Trotskyists: some were even stripped of their second-class membership of the CCP. The Trotskyists responded with a boycott of the transfer process that nine out of ten students were said to have supported.

Earlier the Wang Ming clique had often got rid of Trotskyist recalcitrants by dumping them back in China. But by 1929 they were no longer content with ruling the small Chinese community in Russia and had set their sights on the broader Party: so it was no longer convenient to litter the CCP with “undesirables” and “troublemakers”, who instead were kept in Moscow, where they could be supervised and if necessary killed.

In late 1929 two hundred of the Trotskyists in Moscow were seized by the Soviet political police. They had taken elaborate precautions against discovery, building their organisation vertically rather than laterally and skillfully covering their underground activities. But they were no match for the veteran GPU commissars “toughened in numerous struggles” (including intelligence operations in China) who were detailed to crack their group. Some were imprisoned for a while, expelled from the Party after recanting, and then deported (these numbered fewer than ten). Others were sent to labour camps in Siberia or the Arctic Circle, whence two escaped back to China after 1949 to tell their tale. Some were shot. When the archives of the GPU are thrown open, the fate of the 190 or so Trotskyists hitherto unaccounted for may become public. The number of this second generation of Chinese Trotskyists in Moscow who made it back to China, with their beliefs intact was fewer than twenty.
VI. The Birth of Trotskyism in China

In September 1927 the Central Committee of the CCP left Hankou, where the second stage of its alliance with the Guomindang had come to grief, and returned to Shanghai. At first the distinction between the two groups - one for Chen Duxiu, one against - that had formed at around this time was by no means absolute. According to Zheng Chaolin, other members of the Central Committee knew full well that Chen was being blamed for a policy foisted on the CCP by Moscow, and even Qu Qiuhi behaved respectfully toward Chen in Shanghai. True, Chen's views in this period were completely out of sympathy with those of the Party's Standing Committee, but they were disjointed and unsystematic. Moreover, Chen still believed that the members of the Standing Committee were capable of reform, and kept them informed by letter of his views.47

But despite Chen Duxiu's abstention, his supporters in the Party were now more firmly organised, particularly on the old Shanghai Regional Committee (now called the Jiangsu Provincial Committee), which was virtually their exclusive political domain under their de facto leader Wang Ruoqi.48

In early 1929 the two currents of Opposition, one formed in Moscow, tight and highly ideological, the other - looser and vaguer - in China, started out on the long and difficult journey that would eventually bring them together for a brief moment, before catastrophe overtook them, in Shanghai. The group of Chinese Trotskyists deported from the Soviet Union in early 1928 had formed Oppositionist nuclei in Shanghai, Hongkong, and Beijing and had started publishing a national magazine called Womende hua (Our Word).49 In 1928 they held their First National Congress; in September 1928, their Second. According to a report published in the Opposition's International Bulletin, they had five hundred members (probably an exaggeration) in Shanghai, Wuhan, Hongkong, Suzhou, Guangzhou, Beijing, and Harbin.50 Gradually they began recruiting people who had never been to Moscow.

The China-based Our Word people exchanged letters with the new generation of Chinese Trotskyists that by 1929 had formed in Moscow, but they had no contact at all with the embryonic indigenous Opposition in eastern China. This was partly because they were young, and belonged to a different generation of Party members from the veterans around Chen Duxiu. Though a few of them had worked clandestinely in the official Party for a while after getting back to China, they were soon expelled, so they shared no circuits of activity or debate with the Chen Duxiu-ites. In any case, they distrusted and even despised the "old opportunists" around Chen, whom they (like many other youthful Communists who did not know the facts) blamed for the 1927 defeat. Their attitude to Chen can be gauged from the three demands they made on him after he and his supporters had finally set up their own small Trotskyist organisation: he should publicly declare Stalin's leadership opportunistic, criticise his own past opportunist errors, and disband his group.51

Nor was the distrust all one way. At least one "indigenous" Oppositionist - Zheng Chaolin - was dissatisfied with and kept his distance from the Our Word group on political grounds. For Zheng Chaolin, one of Trotsky's most important contributions to the China debate was his thesis that the revolution was on the ebb. But Our Word apparently believed that the Chinese revolution was "still in spate or already on its way up after a period of ebb". According to Zheng Chaolin other Oppositionist veterans - in particular Peng Shuzhi - may have scorned the new group because it "was led by people without experience and ability".52 In any case, it was some time before the Chen Duxiu-ites were entirely ripe for a fruitful approach by the organised Trotskyists. They too had to go through a difficult and searching period of change. This was particularly true of Chen Duxiu, who spent several months in intellectual withdrawal and solitary reflection.

The conduit through which Trotskyism reached the Chen Duxiu group in Shanghai was a veteran Communist called Yin Kuan. Yin Kuan had joined the CCP in France. Later he was appointed leader of its Provincial Committee in Shandong, where he got to know the Shandong Communist Wang Pingyi. Wang Pingyi went to KUTV to study, and returned to China in the late summer of 1928. Later, he became a supporter of the Left Opposition in China. Later still, after he had gone over to the Guomindang and become a member of the National Assembly on Taiwan, he boasted that he had independently, and alone, contacted the Russian Left Opposition while a student in the Soviet Union, but this is untrue.53 It is more likely that he got some Oppositionist documents from friends of his who had arrived back a year earlier and contacted the Our Word group. Wang Pingyi passed them on to Yin Kuan, who was deeply impressed by them and passed them on to Peng Shuzhi and Wang Zekai, probably in March or April 1929; whereupon Peng and Wang passed them on to Chen Duxiu, who was a frequent visitor to the house they shared.54

Only after a long period of questioning did Chen Duxiu and the others come round to Trotsky's point of view on China.55 The depth and speed of the conversion differed from individual to individual, and
different people put different constructions on what Trotsky said. Trotsky’s writings appealed to them for two main reasons. First, because they put the blame for the defeat of Stalin and not on Chen Duxiu; second, because they provided support and in particular strong theoretical underpinnings for Chen Duxiu’s contention that the revolution in China was in a trough and unlikely to rise quickly out of it. There was also an implicit personal bond between Trotsky and Chen Duxiu: both had journeyed into exile: to Turkey in the case of Trotsky, and to a secluded address in Shanghai in the case of Chen Duxiu, who led an “extremely secret and solitary life” in internal exile in the east of the city.

Though Trotsky’s role was crucial in inspiring the Chinese Left Opposition, from the point of view of Chen Duxiu and others, the move to Trotskyism was not so much a transfer of allegiance to yet another set of foreign ideas as an expression of national independence and self-reliance. Chen Duxiu had not only resisted entering the Guomindang when Sneevliet ordered him to in 1922, but was even worried about joining the Comintern, on the grounds that the Chinese could better make a revolution on their own. In the spring of 1928, Comintern and Chinese Communist officials tried hard to persuade Chen to go to Moscow to attend the Sixth Congress of the CCP. Chen refused the invitation, partly because he was afraid that he would be branded as a Trotskyist if he attended the Congress; and in any case, he was increasingly dissatisfied with the Comintern, which had made him the scapegoat for the defeats of 1927. But the main reason he would not go, as he himself explained, was because in his view “the Chinese Revolution should be led by Chinese people”, since foreigners failed to understand the Chinese situation. “Who understands Chinese people’s problems better, Chinese or foreigners?” he asked. “If as a Chinese I want to study Chinese problems, why can’t I do so in China? Why do I need to go to Moscow to do so?”

The same patriotic sensibility underlay Chen’s later intervention on the question of the Chinese Eastern Railway, after fighting broke out between Chinese and Soviet troops in 1929 for control of it. In a letter to the Central Committee, Chen criticised as mechanical and offensive to patriotic feeling the Party’s slogan (echoed by both Trotsky himself and the Chinese Trotskyists) of “armied defence of the Soviet Union”, and recommended instead a slogan opposing “Guomindang mismanagement of the nation”. Today, Chinese historians concede that on this issue, he was right.

Trotsky’s first main intervention in the China debate after the 1927 defeat, written as the second half of his “Criticism of the Draft Programme of the Communist International”, was mainly a retrospective analysis of the debate and of the wrong policies that had caused it. This article had little immediate impact on leading members of the CCP’s emergent Opposition. His second intervention through the article “The Chinese Question after the Sixth Congress” analysed the current situation in China (an ebbing, not a flowing tide) and the way forward to China’s third revolution (through a struggle for democracy in the cities). It was this article that most directly won Chen Duxiu, Peng Shuzhi, and the others to Trotskyism; and it even caused a violent wavering among many of the older generation of CCP leaders who did not go over to the Opposition.

The conversion happened in May and June 1929. Chen Duxiu’s letters to the Central Committee of the CCP between August and October 1929 show that Chen, having first rejected proletarian dictatorship as an immediate goal of the revolution, had by then accepted it. He had also come to agree that capitalist property relations prevailed in China, that the revolution was for the time being over, that bourgeois rule had stabilised, and that the best way of reconstituting the revolutionary movement was by campaigning for a constituent assembly.

Very soon the Trotskyists around Chen Duxiu got organised, in three branches, and began to win over working-class members and even an entire cell of the CCP (of which they were still members). In November 1929, Chen was expelled from the CCP, and so were the other Trotskyists around him. On December 10, he responded by issuing his famous “Open Letter to All Comrades”, followed five days later by “Our Political Platform” signed by eighty one people, including many veteran members of the Party. The last batch of Trotskyists was expelled after the publication of this collective statement. The people who had been expelled then set up a formal organisation, with branches and several district committees, and began publishing a journal called Wuchangzhe (Proletarian).

While these events were going on, other individuals and tiny groups of people sympathetic to Trotskyism or members of the secret Opposition were trickling back into China by various routes. Liu Renling visited the exiled Trotsky in Turkey on his way home, and agreed to become Trotsky’s correspondent in China; he brought back with him three documents, including a “Draft Programme of the Chinese Bolshevik-Leninists”, specially written by Trotsky for Liu to take to China. Also in 1929 the second batch of Chinese Trotskyist students, including Wang Fanxi, returned from Moscow to work clandestinely for the Trotskyist cause in the official Party. Several of them worked in the Party’s Central Committee in Shanghai before they were discovered and expelled at the time of the smashing of the Chinese Trotskyist movement in Moscow. After that, a few of them, including Chen Duxiu’s nephew Wu Jiyan, joined Chen’s Proletarian group; Wang Fanxi and some others joined Our Word. As for the group - including Liu Renjing, Zhao Ji, and Liu Yin - who had come out openly as Trotskyists and refused to join in the attempt to subvert the CCP, they scorned the Our Word group as “childish amateurs” (though it had already been in existence for nigh two years) and decided to try an overture to the Chen Duxiu group. Besides these groups, there were still some Trotskyists
working underground in the official Party.68

By the summer of 1930, the number of Trotskyist organisations in China had risen to four, all bitterly hostile to one another. Liu Renjing and Liang Gaqiao, who had actually met Trotsky (Liu in Turkey, Liang in Moscow) felt that they had a special claim to Trotskyist orthodoxy, and therefore formed a special obstacle to unity. Liu, having welcomed Chen Duxiu's progression to Trotskyism in August or September 1929 and demanded of the Our Word group that it unite with Chen, had turned against Chen by the end of the year; but he was still opposed to a reconciliation with Our Word, so he set up his own organisation called the October group, after the name of its publication, Shiyue (October).69 Finally, a fourth organisation called Zhandou (Militant) was formed by Liu Yin and Zhao Ji.70

Though there were minor political differences between the four Trotskyist organisations, what really kept them apart was personal ambition and factional prejudice;71 in an article published in 1981, Zhao Ji frankly admitted that the Militant group had been formed not for ideological reasons but to get a better position for its members in the future unified organisation.72 The three Russia-returning groups continued to fight with and denounce one another, yet on one thing they were agreed: the Chen Duxiu people were "opportunists who had lost favour with Stalin and now wanted to climb back into prominence using Trotsky's name."73 There was, of course, a real basis for this division. The Proletarian group was formed mainly by members of the senior generation of Chinese Communists. Several of them had personally played a leading role in the policy that Trotskyists were now criticising so vehemently. The Russia-returning students, on the other hand, were younger middle-ranking cadres who felt no responsibility at all for the defeats and so could more easily and wholeheartedly embrace the Trotskyist positions.

All four groups wrote to Trotsky explaining their own views and attacking those of the other groups. A particular concern of Chen Duxiu's young Trotskyist critics was that he appeared to favour the idea of a "democratic dictatorship" as opposed to Trotsky's call for a "dictatorship of the proletariat". Whereas they believed that the next revolution in China would be "socialist from the start", Chen still thought that "the future Chinese Revolution ... would be neither Russia's October nor its February Revolution, but a summation of February and October". Chen Duxiu thought that his formulation was "identical" with Trotsky's, but the Trotskyist Liu Renjing pointed out that it was no different from the call for a "workers and peasants' democratic dictatorship", which Moscow had forced on the CCP in the mid 1920s.74 Many of the Chinese Trotskyists viewed this as an insuperable obstacle to unity with Chen, and a symptom of his abiding "opportunism". For several months, Trotsky took a cautious but positive attitude toward Chen Duxiu, and opposed any attempt to win him too quickly to the Trotskyist cause, for fear that it would lead to a quick divorce. However, he sharply dissociated himself from the Chinese Trotskyists' criticisms of Chen in the matter of the "dictatorship" slogan. In a letter to Liu Renjing he described Chen's position as "absolutely correct"; it was "simply a popularization and amplification of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' formula".75 Yet Chen's formula for the future shape of revolutionary state power in China was telling, and the thinking that it embodied was preserved and magnified in his last letters and articles about the relationship between socialism and democracy.

So on January 8, 1931, Trotsky wrote from Prinkipo urging the Trotskyists in China to unite.76 The Trotskyists complied; a unification campaign got under way. The negotiations at first made little or no progress. The main obstacle this time was in the veteran party of Chen Duxiu supporters. Chen Duxiu himself was captivated by the youthful enthusiasm of the Russia-returning Trotskyists, who reminded him of young people at the time of the 1919 May Fourth Movement.77 "The main thing is to rely on young revolutionaries to take up the burden," he commented; "in the Proletarian group there are too many old men."78 But Trotskyists like Peng Shuzhi and Yin Kuan took an opposite point of view. They thought that the younger Trotskyists were insufficiently respectful of the old Communist generation of which Peng considered himself a pillar, that they were too "young and politically inexperienced to lead us old cadres who have participated in the revolution, [and] that they can only be led by us".79 The representatives of Chen's Proletarian group, flattered by Trotsky's letter praising Chen, entered the talks "as victors". According to Peng Shuzhi's critics, Peng thought that unification should take the form of the other three groups joining the Proletarian group. Decades later, Peng's view (reflected in the writing of his wife) was still that the official "Left Opposition in China" was formed by the Proletarian group in 1929, and that its chances of success were dashed by the sectarian attitude of younger people who "had not participated in the revolution" "organizing Trotskyist groups".80

Finally Chen Duxiu, who for several months - while in hiding and incommunicado to everyone but Peng - had been misinformed by Peng about developments at the talks, learned by chance of the procrastination and engineered a change in delegates. For Chen, whose main eye was on the CCP, it was important for the Trotskyist factions "to put aside unnecessary disputes and swiftly unify", since in his view the official Party, split under the "leftist" regime of Wang Ming, was about to enter a state of crisis.81 After Chen's intervention, the rivalry stopped, the talks progressed quickly and smoothly, and the negotiators were able to transform their Committee into a Preparatory Committee for a Unification Congress, which was held between May 1 and 3, 1931.82 At the Congress seventeen delegates represented some 340 Trotskyists in China.83 The new Trotskyist Central Committee, led by a Standing
Committee made up of Chen Duxiu, Chen Yimou, Zheng Chaolin, Wang Fanxi, and Song Fengchun, ordered the merging of the branches of the four organisations, set up a Party journal called Huahuo (Spark), and decided to launch a national campaign for a constituent assembly. But within three weeks, on the night of May 21, the entire Central Committee save Chen Duxiu was arrested together with other members of the Trotskyist organisation, and sent to prison for between six and fifteen years.

The imprisoning of the Trotskyist leadership in 1931 and the police raids that continued relentlessly throughout that and following years did not put an end to Chinese Trotskyism in the 1930s. Some of the Trotskyists who had escaped arrest issued declarations “breaking with Trotskyism and capitulating to the Guomindang”. But for the time being Chen Duxiu and Peng Shuzhi were still at large, and they spread their influence considerably in 1932, at around the time of China’s “undeclared war” against Japan in Shanghai. But they too were arrested, together with others, in the autumn of 1932.

Of the handful of Trotskyists who escaped the dragnet, some (including Shi Tang) belonging to the Our Word group went to Guangxi, where they became schoolteachers (a classic cover for Chinese revolutionaries after 1927). Though they were no longer members of a Trotskyist organisation, they continued to proselytise in Guangxi for Trotskyist ideas, and in 1935 some of their converts sent representatives to discuss with the “provisional” Trotskyist organisation that had been set up in Shanghai.

Two attempts in 1933 to restore Trotskyist organisation in Shanghai had come to grief, mainly as a result of internal bickering. Liu Renjing, who played a prominent role in these activities, polemised sharply in 1933 against the views of Chen Duxiu, expressed in documents smuggled from his prison cell, and was supported in his attacks by Peng Shuzhi. The differences between Chen Duxiu and his critics concerned the nature of the situation, the meaning of the call for a constituent assembly, the question of economic revival, and the question of common action with bourgeois liberals. In the course of the polemic, Chen displayed greater realism and flexibility, though he stayed within the broad framework of Trotskyist analysis. According to Liu, economic revival was an essential precondition for a revival of the revolutionary movement in China, “for it is easier to win the struggle for state power if the workers’ bellies are a little fuller”. Chen criticised this view as an echo of the Stalinist “stages” theory of revolution, which is rooted in a theory of economic determinism, and countered that wherever a proletarian movement exists and finds powerful allies, revolution is conceivable. This is especially so, said Chen, “in an economically backward country like China, where through the democratic movement - the road to a constituent assembly - the proletariat can achieve power earlier than in advanced countries”. On the question of joint action, the two men were similarly divided: Liu stressed the need to maintain the gap between the classes, while Chen pointed out that before “final victory in the class struggle”, bourgeois liberals will under certain circumstances - for example, in the event of foreign aggression - move to the left, in which case revolutionaries should “act together with them to attack the common enemy”.

Sometime in 1934, a new Trotskyist body was set up in Shanghai with the help of the English-born South African Trotskyist Frank Glass, whose Chinese name was Li Furen (Li Fu-jen). Nationalist and Communist observers alike have consistently tried to establish the theory that Trotsky sent Glass to China in pursuit of his project to found a new world body, the Fourth International, to take over from Stalin’s Comintern; that Glass was the Sneevliet (or Maring) of Chinese Trotskyism, and that the Fourth International was like the Third. But according to Wang Fanxi, who knew Glass well and questioned him closely about his mission, Glass had not been in contact with Trotsky and represented no one.

In Shanghai, Glass went to work under Edgar Snow on the China Weekly Review, where he influenced Snow and converted Harold Isaacs to Trotskyism. In Beijing, Isaacs and Liu Renjing collaborated on Isaacs’ history of the revolution of 1925-27, and won some students to Trotskyist ideas. Subsequently a number of these students, led by Shi Chaosheng, went to Shanghai to join the Trotskyist leadership, which Glass and Isaacs, influenced by Liu Renjing, considered “too conservative”. Liu Renjing had thoroughly poisoned Shi and his friends against Chen Duxiu, whom they declared expelled from the Trotskyist ranks after he refused to criticise himself for “opportunism”. Simultaneously they expelled Chen Qichang and Yin Kuan, both Chen Duxiu supporters.

Among the actions for which Shi and Glass criticised Chen Qichang and Yin Kuan in 1934 was their attempt in 1933 to engage in “joint action” with anti-Japanese politicians and military leaders, a tactic pioneered by Chen Duxiu in 1932 (and discussed in the following chapter). Chen and Yin had sought to join Song Qingling’s Congress Against Imperialist War and Fascism, though on their own terms and while preserving their own “absolute freedom” of policy and action; and in November 1933, at the time of the Fujian Incident, when nationalist-minded soldiers in Fuzhou had declared the Fujian People’s Revolutionary Government in opposition to Chiang Kai-shek, they had negotiated to cooperate with the dissidents, at a time when the CCP’s policy toward the Fujian rebels was sectarian and dismissive.

When Chen Duxiu, in prison, learned of the purge, he wrote an indignant letter to Shi Chaosheng criticising him for using organisational means to stifle political dissent; Glass’ role particularly angered him, for it was a painful reminder of the role that foreigners had played in destroying his influence in the Third, Stalinist, International. But the expulsions meant
little in practice, for in March 1935 this new organisation too was raided and destroyed.  

In the summer of 1935, a second Provisional Central Committee was set up by Wang Fanxi (newly released from gaol) with Chen Qichang, Yin Kuan, and Frank Glass, who in the meantime had been reconciled to one another, as had Chen Duxiu (in part, and at least for a while) to the presence of this foreigner in the Trotskyist group. This was the longest-lasting of China’s pre-1949 Trotskyist bodies. From early 1936 to late 1942 it published a monthly political journal called Douzheng (Struggle) and a theoretical journal called Spark. But it failed to attract back Chen Duxiu after his release from prison in 1937. This was mainly because of its sectarian approach to politics, and the contempt with which some of the younger leaders even of this new Trotskyist organisation viewed the “old man” of the movement, whom they denounced as a right-opportunist, “vulgar and scholastic”, and even as a “Fuzhou Road prostitute”.  

In May 1941, the Trotskyist organisation in China split again, after ten chequered years as a united body. The split was about the nature of the War against Japan and the question of the rights of minorities in the Party. A group around Wang Fanxi argued that once the Pacific War started, the Guomindang would become a “junior partner of American imperialism”, so its war would no longer be progressive; in which case revolutionaries “would lay more stress on the victory of the revolution than of the war”. Another group around Peng Shuzhi said that the Guomindang’s war would remain progressive unless British or American troops started fighting Japan on Chinese soil. But the immediate issue in the split was organisational. The minority (soon to become a majority) around Wang Fanxi wanted the right to continue to argue their position in a column of Struggle, or at least in the Trotskyists' internal bulletin. When this demand was refused, they started publishing their own paper, called Guojizhuiziyi (Internationalist). During the war, the Trotskyists set up two workers’ schools in Japanese-occupied Shanghai. After the Japanese surrender, in 1945, the two groups began to grow a little in influence; in late 1948 the Peng group set up the Revolutionary Communist Party; in April 1949 the other group set up the Internationalist Workers’ Party. Together the two parties had a membership half the size of that registered in 1931. Ever since then, the Chinese Trotskyist movement - in Hongkong and among the diaspora of exiles - has stayed split along lines that have their origin in the disputes of 1941.  

In 1949, when Mao Zedong’s armies swept away Chiang Kai-shek’s Guomindang regime and founded a new state, Peng Shuzhi’s group left the country to escape repression, but Zheng Chaolin’s group stayed on to try to organise a workers’ movement independent of the Communists. At first Zheng’s old friends in the new regime tried to talk him into joining them. Li Weihan personally called on him to seek a reconciliation, but Zheng said no. Finally, on the night of December 22, 1952, Zheng and two to three hundred other Trotskyists disappeared into prison.
VII. Chinese Trotskyism and Chen Duxiu

Chen Duxiu (1879-1942) is a towering figure in modern Chinese thought and in the history of Chinese Communism. He is also an extremely complex figure, broad enough to encompass a profusion of contradictions. Some have seen in him the Lenin of the Chinese Revolution, others point out that he lacked Lenin's knowledge of and gift for theory. Chen's friend Hu Shi, his fellow-leader in China's seminal New Culture Movement, thought of him as "an oppositionist for life" to any established authority, his and his comrade Wang Fanxi has called him "Communism's first great dissembler". Be "independent, not servile," Chen told Chinese youth around 1919; "progressive, not conservative; dynamic, not passive; cosmopolitan, not isolationist; utilitarian, not emply formalist; scientific, not merely imaginative". "The new society we have in mind," he said on another occasion, "is characterized by honesty, progress, positiveness, liberty, equality, creativity, beauty, goodness, peace, love, mutual assistance, joyful labour, and devotion to the welfare of humanity. In it all those phenomena that can be described as hypocritical, conservative, restricted, privileged, conventional, ugly, detestable, combative, frictional, inert, gloomy, and oligarchic will gradually disappear." It is easy to see why interest in Chen soared among scholars and thinkers emboldened by the post-Mao talk of the need in China for democracy and liberated thought.

Was Chen Duxiu a Trotskyist? The question may seem strange. After all, he was General Secretary of the Left Opposition of the CCP between its founding in May 1921 and his arrest and imprisonment in 1923. Yet many Chinese historians have tried to cast doubt on Chen's Trotskyist affiliations, especially since the start of Chen's partial rehabilitation in 1979.

There are several explanations for the decision to rehabilitate Chen Duxiu. One was that it was part of a wider trend to recognise the strengths as well as the weaknesses of leaders who ended their careers in political disgrace, and to write an objective history of the CCP before the last of its veterans go to "meet Marx". So starting in 1979 (Chen's hundredth birthday) a fresh version of Chen's political biography was released episode by episode to the Chinese public. First his role in the May Fourth Movement (then celebrating its sixtieth anniversary) and in founding the CCP was officially acknowledged. Then, the historian Xiang Qing and others wrote that Chen's "right opportunism" in the mid 1920s was mainly the result of Comintern meddling (for by 1979 the taboo on criticising Stalin and the Comintern had been lifted). Some historians even defended Chen's controversial stand on the Chinese Eastern Railways Incident of 1929, when he criticised the Central Committee's slogan of "armed defence of the Soviet Union". Finally, a number of studies have shown up as a groundless slander the 1938 charge that Chen Duxiu took money from the Japanese.

In the new, more liberal climate of the 1980s even Chen's Trotskyism was no longer wholly taboo, and some scholars began to consider it objectively. But Trotskyism remains a suspect ideology in China, and many Party officials - especially some of the more senior ones, whose view of Trotskyism was formed by Wang Ming's 1938 campaign to discredit the Trotskyists as traitors - are still deeply prejudiced against it. So younger scholars anxious to rescue Chen Duxiu the champion of "Messrs. Science and Democracy" try to decontaminate him by purging his Trotskyist commitment. The Trotskyist Zheng Chaolin has summed up the range of suggested formulas: Chen Duxiu was only influenced by Trotskyism, he didn't join the Trotskyist organisation; he joined it but broke with it after his arrest in 1932; he joined it but broke with it before it became a cover for murderers and spies; he gave up his Trotskyist beliefs a few years before he died.

The discussion of Chen's Trotskyism is complicated by a number of things. Chen Duxiu was a creative and independent-minded thinker, not the sort of man to toe the Party line. He was a sceptic and an innovator. He had come to Marxism (notes Wang Fanxi) after a breathless rush through telescoped isms of centuries of European thought. Though his revolutionary commitment was total, his grasp of Marxism was quite shaky. Wang Fanxi has compared him in this respect with Mao: "Both had their first love of learning in Confucianism; both built their ideologiical foundations in the Chinese classics; both acquired their knowledge of modern European thought, in particular Marxism-Leninism, by building a rough superstructure of foreign style on a solid Chinese foundation at a time when they were physically as well as intellectually fully matured." Unlike some of his more doctrinaire comrades, Chen was not afraid to challenge accepted policies and beliefs, even those that bore Trotsky's personal imprimatur. The Chinese and the Russian greatly admired and appreciated one another, and Trotsky even remarked that he "should learn Chinese" so as to be able to read Chen's writings. But whereas for most Trotskyists in China, Trotsky was a fount of pure wisdom, for Chen Duxiu - who was Trotsky's age (the two men were born on the same day) and a veteran practical revolutionary in his own right - Trotsky was an equal, whose proposals were open to scrutiny and question. Chen believed that the essence of the
greatness of revolutionaries like Lenin was their “refusal to be bound by ready-made Marxist formulae” and their “insistence on adopting new political slogans and methods of struggle to meet changing times and circumstances.” Chen was never prepared to accept uncritically the word of foreign Communists, for in general he had a poor opinion of them (wrote Wang Fanxi), “all the more so after Moscow had shamelessly heaped the whole of the blame for the defeat of the 1927 revolution on his shoulders”; and he had an even poorer view of Chinese “red compradors” who “kowtowed to foreign comrades.” So it is quite easy to find points on which he adopted positions radically different from those of Trotsky. The question is, did these differences remove him from Trotsky’s intellectual orbit?

Between the arrest of the majority of the Trotskyist central leadership in May 1931 and Chen and Peng Shuzhi’s arrest on October 15, 1932, Chen maintained the work of the Trotskyist organisation. He edited both Spark, founded on September 5, 1931, and the theoretical journal Xiaonai shenghuo (Internal Bulletin), and wrote major articles for each issue. These writings embody a consistently Trotskyist point of view; their main foci are proletarian democracy, socialist internationalism, and anti-imperialism. On September 13, 1931, in an article called “Whither China?”, he insisted on the need to view the prospect of socialist revolution and a “proletarian democratic movement” in China from an international perspective. According to Dai Jitao, said Chen, China is economically backward, and therefore not ripe for proletarian revolution; according to the Trotskyist Ren Shu, however, “China’s economy has already developed to the point where a socialist revolution can be realised”. “The common and fundamental mistake of both,” argued Chen, “is that they start from a purely economic point of view and not from the point of view of political struggle, they both start out from [the premise of] socialism in one country, and not from [that of] permanent (i.e. world) revolution.”

Chen was particularly excited by, and wrote prolifically about, the protest movement that developed after the September 18 Incident, when in 1931 the Japanese seized Shenyang as a step toward taking the whole of northeast China. Between September and July of the following year, he wrote some forty articles for Spark and the Internal Bulletin, and on December 5, 1931, he founded a newspaper called Rechao (Hot Tide) to which he contributed (as editor-in-chief) no less than 102 “contemporary comments”. The aim of this publication, he said in its inaugural issue, “is to make a small record of the hot tide, and to give a small impetus to it”. In his articles and comments, he denounced Japanese aggression, UK and US complicity with it, and the Guomindang’s “treasonous” failure to resist it; it is an illusion, he insisted, that “the US is China’s friend”. In reviewing the students’ protest movement, he condemned as “stupid and ignorant” the peaceful petitioning with which it had begun and applauded its development in the direction of opposition to the Guomindang government as well as to the Japanese. National salvation can only be achieved, he wrote, through the struggle of “the lower stratum of the tolling masses.... It is definitely wrong to depend on the rulers”. In this new context, he lent new substance to the Trotskyist call for a constituent assembly, which should “rival the Nationalists’ traitor government”, act as a general command for representatives of the masses of the whole of China, organise armed forces, organise the state, exterminate the organisations of Japan’s running dogs, and champion a political programme that included a refusal to negotiate with the Japanese and a commitment to a policy of land to the peasants. He called on patriotic junior officers of the nationalist armed forces to disobey orders and prevent compromise. He also called for the “immediate convening of a delegate conference of the masses of Shanghai Municipality to organise an emergency action committee and to centralise all material forces in aid of the armed forces’ resistance to Japan.”

To Chen Duxiu, the events of late 1931 must have seemed like the build-up to a new anti-imperialist mass movement of the sort that he had led first in May 1919 and, again, after May 30, 1925. Up to then, the constituent assembly slogan, adopted on Trotsky’s recommendation, had failed to find an echo in society, and appeared overly theoretical and lifeless. Stirred by the students, Chen creatively adapted Trotsky’s orthodox conception to the realities of China’s changing politics. It seemed to him that the revolution, in ebbs since 1927, was once again in flow, and that the time had come for the start of a “decisive struggle” with imperialism that would simultaneously sweep the Guomindang from power. If his earlier formulations of the constituent assembly idea could be faulted as excessively abstract and mechanical, his new understanding of it in early 1932 was radical and dynamic. “We in the Left Opposition,” he said in January, “ought not to restrict ourselves merely to ‘constituent assembly’-style slogans ... [but] should quickly move forward from toppling Guomindang political power through a ‘constituent assembly’ to realising ‘revolutionary popular state power’.” In February he said that where there were anti-Japanese armies, troops susceptible to revolutionary influence, or strikes, Soviets should be organised of workers, peasants, and soldiers.

At a time when the official Party was bent on a sectarian political course that prevented it from taking full advantage of the political turmoil caused by Japanese aggression, Chen issued a daring call for joint action with bourgeois, petit-bourgeois, and other parties, noting that since the September 18 Incident, the programme adopted by the Trotskyists in May 1931 was “no longer appropriate, or at the very least was inadequate”. He also proposed that the Trotskyists and the official CCP cooperate to lead the anti-Japanese campaign. In Trotskyist eyes in 1932, the official Party was still a party of the workers (though it would not be so for much longer), and the Trotskyists
considered that they were by rights a constituent part of it and had been wrongfully expelled. So in Trotskyist terms, Chen’s call on the CCP “vigorously to seek unity in all its actions” and to work “hand in hand” with the Oppositionists was quite orthodox and acceptable. He went on to add, in a less conventional vein, that once urban soviets or anti-Japanese volunteer forces had been established, “in parts of provinces where there were already peasant soviets, they should converge with the Red Army to occupy the cities”.113

But Chen’s olive-branch to the official Party did not stretch beyond resistance to Japan. On other issues concerning the policies and basic programme of the CCP, he remained fiercely critical, and stuck loyally to Trotskyist prescriptions. For example, he criticised the CCP’s call for a “democratic dictatorship of the workers and peasants” for “leaving a way open in the future new state power for ‘anti-landlord’ bourgeois”; and the CCP’s Red Army for representing “bandit methods of struggling for a livelihood” and for “running the danger of [degenerating into] peasant consciousness”. Not surprisingly, the CCP rejected Chen’s overtures and compared the Trotskyists to Guomindang reformists and the Third Party, i.e., “the most dangerous enemy whom we should attack ... with might and main”.114

Few Trotskyists supported Chen’s policies in early 1932. Some, including Liu Renjing, described the resistance to Japan by Nationalist armies around Shanghai as insincere and simply an expression of “contradictions within the ruling class”, and therefore condemned Chen’s search for joint action with “patriotic soldiers” and petit-bourgeois parties against Chiang Kai-shek and the Japanese as “taillism” and “thorough-going opportunism”. They were especially scornful of his call for joint action with the CCP, to which they implied he was in danger of “capitulating”, and of his changed attitude toward the Red Army. Chen defended himself by warning his fellow-Trotskyists against committing the opposite mistake of “estimating the peasantry too lightly”. He pointed out that joint action is always contingent on special, temporary circumstances and cannot be likened to a “long-term political alliance” or a merger. So convinced was Chen that the political situation in China might change dramatically if the Japanese continued their offensive that he was prepared to flatten dissent among the Trotskyists by overriding established committees of the organisation (for example its Northern Committee) that refused to go along with his analysis. He set greater store by campaigning for his policies among the “nationalist democratic movement of the students” and the railway and industrial workers than by compromising with the “liquidationist wailists” and “ultra-leftists” who apparently dominated what was left of his own organisation.115

The dispute was short-lived, for on October 15, 1932, Chen was arrested and disappeared for the next five years into gaol. But the episode illustrates Chen’s
great perspicacity as a political observer. Chen was no ideologist or theoretician, and was never able to develop a sustained and systematic Marxist analysis of society or politics. But by the same token, he was one of China’s least dogmatic Communist leaders, never sectarian and always able to respond receptively and creatively to new developments, to the despair of his more orthodox and dogmatic comrades.

After Chen’s arrest in the International Settlement and his subsequent extradition to the Guomindang, he was handed over to the Jiangsu Court for trial. At first Chiang Kai-shek and his military authorities had intended to deal summarily with this “long-sought leader of the Chinese Communist Party”, to which end they mobilised branches of the Guomindang, local officials, and army units. Their eventual decision to hand him over to the courts rather than execute him out of hand can be explained by several factors. First, he was too famous and too popular to be dispatched without due process, and was supported after his arrest by a broad wave of public sympathy that extended even to young army officers. Second, many of those who had once been his intimate friends were high officers or officials of the Guomindang, and worked to shield him from his more implacable opponents in the establishment. Third, he was no longer - at least for the time being - a real political threat to the regime.

Initially, his Nationalist interrogators had apparently suspected him of having had a hand in the armed Communist risings in the south, but they quickly realised that he opposed the official Party’s Red Army tactic.116

At his trial, Chen allowed himself to be represented by his old friend Zhang Shizhao, once a revolutionary, but by now one of China’s most eminent conservative (?) lawyers. Zhang based his defence on arguments that were wholly unacceptable to Chen, whom he painted as someone who had rendered loyal service to the Guomindang and was a disciple of the Three People’s Principles, a parliamentary politician, and an aggressive henchman in the campaign against the Communists. “Lawyer Zhang’s defence is his personal view,” replied Chen, who countered with a rousing call for proletarian revolution; in that sense, he added, “I am still a Communist”. Against the charge that he was seeking to overthrow the government of the Guomindang and replace it with a proletarian dictatorship, he distinguished between government and state, and accused the former, under the Guomindang, of selling out the latter to the foreigners and of even preventing the Chinese people from resisting Japanese aggression. Zhang Shizhao was not the only one of Chen’s old friends who tried to win him a merciful judgment by presenting him in a moderate light, but Chen dissociated himself from such endeavours. At his subsequent appeal, he dispensed with the services of a legal representative and conducted his own defence, during which he argued that he had rebelled not against his country but against the Guomindang.117
At the time of the May Fourth Movement, Chen Duxiu had identified “the two sources of world civilisation” as the laboratory and gaol: “Only civilisation born of both places is true civilisation, with vitality and value.” He began this his fourth spell of prison life with a hunger strike to “overthrow evil regulations”, and succeeded in getting prohibitions on visits, letters, and publications lifted. He formulated a “research plan” designed to cover ancient and contemporary China, Daoism, Confucius and the Confucianists, Jesus and the Christians, and his own memoirs, and he also engaged in philological study and wrote a large number of poems. He achieved much of his plan before leaving gaol but failed to finish it, for he was freed at the outbreak of the war against Japan, several years before completing his sentence. 118

At around the time of his release, secured for him by old friends such as Hu Shi and Zhang Bolin after the start of the new united front and Japanese air raids over Nanjing, the Nationalist authorities demanded from him some expression of contrition, but he refused to comply and said that he would “sooner be blown up in his cell” by enemy bombs. To save its face, the government “lesserned the punishment of Chen Duxiu” on the grounds that he was a patriot who “deeply regretted” his past actions and had asked for leniency. A few days later, Chen wrote a statement admitting to patriotism but denying that he had anything to regret; he sent the statement to the editor of Shenbao, who refused to publish it, “in order to avoid unnecessary troubles”. 119

The dispute, mentioned earlier, about the extent to which Chen Duxiu can be described as a Trotskyist is further complicated by his difficult relationship after his imprisonment in 1932 to the Chinese Trotskyist organisation, with which he frequently clashed during the last ten years of his life. I have already mentioned that its new young leaders despised him as an “opportunist”. Chen’s relationship to Peng Shuzhi, who played a prominent role in Chinese Trotskyism after his release from gaol in 1937, was also one of mutual hostility. In prison, where they shared a cell, they quarrelled bitterly, 120 and they differed greatly in politics and even more so in character and style. 121 After they fell out, Peng no longer considered Chen a Trotskyist, and he denounced him after his death for “failing to maintain his integrity in later life”. 122 Chen Duxiu continued while in gaol to identify with the Trotskyists and even helped to direct their activities by smuggling secret messages to them through Zheng Chaolin’s wife Liu Jingzhen. 123 But when he left gaol in 1937, he refused to join an organisation that was in the hands of people like Peng who so bitterly opposed him. 124 So there is no shortage of incidents and statements to prove the satisfaction of those who are minded to believe it that Chen Duxiu “was not a Trotskyist” after 1937.

But to discuss the issue fairly, we must distinguish between Trotskyist beliefs and Trotskyist organisation. Chen Duxiu did say after leaving prison that “I do not represent Trotskyism”, but never that “I am not a Trotskyist”, 125 even though his Trotskyist connections got him branded as a “pro-Japanese traitor” by the CCP. On the contrary, as Zheng Chaolin shows in his study on Chen Duxiu and the Trotskyists, there is every evidence that he continued to view himself as in the Trotskyist tradition. True, he denied in 1937 any longer having dealings with the Trotskyist organisation, but that was because it was in Peng’s hands and because at the time Chen wanted to create a broad anti-Japanese front of “democratic personages”. His letters to Chinese Trotskyists and to Trotsky himself in 1938 and 1939 show that he still closely identified with the Trotskyist organisation in China, though he strongly opposed its “ultra-leftist” leaders, who he said were in danger through their policies of “tarnishing the prestige of the Fourth International in China”. His differences with them were differences within Trotskyism: these differences represented a continuation and deepening of traditional differences among Chinese Trotskyists on the nature of the revolution and the tactics to be pursued in it. Chen’s long-term aim was not to abandon Trotskyism but to rectify its Chinese organisation after first establishing a new political base for himself through independent political activity. 126

Trotsky himself was aware that Chen Duxiu, more so than most of the young Communists who had joined the Opposition, was an internationally known politician of independent views and stature, who deserved special solicitude and respect. He took strong exception to the news, brought to him in 1935 by Harold Isaacs, of Chen’s expulsion, and wrote to Frank Glass praising Chen as “wise,... absolutely reliable,... and still loyal not only to the revolution but also to our tendency”. The loss of Chen Duxiu, he concluded, “would be a severe blow to the prestige of the Fourth International”. 127 He stuck to his opinion despite receiving a letter from Chen that expressed opinions quite contrary to his own, and said that he was glad “that our old friend remains a friend politically in spite of some possible divergencies”. Trotsky continued to call Chen “the most prominent figure in our movement”, and mentioned him as a possible member of a special committee of the Fourth International that he wanted to form. 128 Apparently, he wished Chen to play a similar role in his new world body to that played by the Japanese veteran Katayama Sen in the Third International. 129

Though Chen Duxiu was prepared after 1937 to support the Guomindang against the Japanese, he remained alert to Nationalist provocations, and, despite his hostility to Stalinism, was careful to avoid chiming in with the Guomindang’s propaganda campaign against the CCP. When anti-Communist specialists of the Guomindang like Hu Zongnan and Li Dai tried in 1939 to extract from Chen views that they could use as ammunition against the CCP, Chen resolutely stuck to a position of political neutrality. 130

And the later Chen? During the final years of his life, between his release from gaol in 1937 and his
death in 1942, Chen wrote in a number of letters and articles (edited into a collection by He Zishen after Chen’s death) about democracy and dictatorship, war and revolution, and the future (in the light of his views on these questions) of China and the world. In these posthumous papers, Chen repeated some of the arguments that he had advanced in Spark in articles that he smuggled from prison in 1936. He asserted that democracy is the content and form of each stage of human history, and must not be exclusively equated with the bourgeoisie; on the contrary, in the modern world, proletarians were the only true democrats. At the start of this new trend in his thinking, Chen simply counterposed democracy and bureaucratic, but he later ended up by counterposing democracy and proletarian dictatorship in all its forms. He completely denied the progressive import not only of proletarian dictatorship but also of Bolshevism, which he described as the twin of Fascism and the father of Stalinism. However, he rejected proletarian dictatorship not in favour of capitalism but in the name of genuine Marxism. At times, including in a letter to Zheng Xuejia, he even appeared to reject Marxism itself, but on the whole his final views are not irreconcilable with Marxism as Karl Kautsky and others understood it.

In June 1940 and January 1941, the Shanghai Trotskyists passed two resolutions on the Chen Duxiu question in which they criticised Chen for Plekhanov-style “opportunism” and for failing to “defend the Soviet Union’s ... socialist system of property” or to call for world proletarian revolution. On such issues, the Trotskyists were as one, but they differed greatly in the interpretation that they put on Chen’s later evolution, and in their appraisal of Chen the person.

According to Peng Shuzhi, the late Chen abandoned his revolutionary ideas and lost his integrity. Wang Fanxi, however, believed that though Chen’s thinking “in the final years of his life was already far from Trotskyism, ... had he lived longer, he would almost certainly have ... returned to the Trotskyist camp, since he not only had all the attributes of a genuine revolutionary but also was a shrewd and brilliant observer.” For Chen as for the generation of April Fifth (1976) and June Fourth (1989), “pure” democracy was an indispensable part of the socialist society, and at the end of his life (says Wang Fanxi) it was to this his intellectual “first love” that he returned. For Marxists, democracy has class content: but for Chen Duxiu at the end of his life democracy was a universal concept expressed in institutions that transcend class and time.

Zheng Chaoxin’s assessment of Chen Duxiu at the end of his life is less critical. True, says Zheng, at the time of the Hitler-Stalin pact Chen got so angry that he went too far, “but it would be wrong to take that as proof that he had broken with Trotskyism”. Zheng goes on to quote from an article that Chen wrote on May 13, 1942, just a fortnight before his death, which in Zheng’s view shows that Chen “remained a Trotskyist to his dying day”. The article called on “oppressed toilers the world over” to unite against imperialism and to “replace the old world of international capitalism based on commodity deals with a new world of international socialism”. The main difference between Chen and Trotsky (by then dead) was that by 1942 Chen no longer considered the Soviet Union to be a “degenerated workers’ state”.


VIII. Chinese Trotskyism and Peng Shuzhi

The induction of Peng Shuzhi (1896-1983) into revolutionary politics was quite different from that of most other Chinese Trotskyist leaders. He very soon fell out with the other early Trotskyists, and as a result the movement split in two (it remains split even to this day). At the age of twenty five, in 1921, Peng went to Moscow, where he joined the CCP, without first having served a revolutionary apprenticeship in China.\(^{138}\) Peng enjoyed his years in Moscow and stayed on longer than most Chinese, who quickly rejoined the fight at home. In Moscow he was known as a bookworm and acquired the nickname Confucius (which stuck) on account of his bookish learning and the contempt with which his fellow-students in Moscow viewed it.\(^{139}\) The longer he stayed in the Soviet capital, the more connections he acquired. In mid 1924 he returned to Shanghai. But before he left, the Comintern in Moscow - shy about being seen publicly to manipulate its Chinese section - instructed him in a new line for the CCP that he was to take back with him and represent in China. This was the so-called theory of “national revolution”, which stressed the need for “proletarian hegemony”.

The Trotskyist Zheng Chaolin has called Peng a “Wang Ming before Wang Ming”, and the analogy is apt. Wang Ming is the archetype of a Stalinist plant in the CCP. His group dominated the Party after 1930, but in 1935 it was defeated by the rising faction of indigenous Maoists, and Wang later ended his career in ignominy. Like Wang, Peng started his life as a Communist in China but in Moscow, where apparently he and his fellow-leader Luo Yinfong were the sole Chinese members of the Russian Party; when he returned to China in 1924 he drew great strength from this Russian link, just like Wang in the 1930s. Of the students who went back at around the same time as Peng, many stepped into leading posts, just like Wang’s Returned Students in 1930. Just as Wang was co-opted straight onto the Politburo in 1930 without ever having faced election, so Peng shot straight into the leadership in 1924. If Wang was the protégé of Pavel Mif, Peng too had his Russian patron in the person of Grigori Voitinsky, who “planted” him in Shanghai to push through the Comintern’s directive.

Given Wang’s Moscow training, his specialities naturally included anti-Trotskyism. Even here the likeness with Peng holds, if only just: though Peng in time became a Trotskyist, when at the Fourth Congress Voitinsky proposed a denunciation of the Russian Left Opposition, in an otherwise quiet hall it was Peng Shuzhi who rose to second it. Wang’s best-known speciality was “Bolshevisation”: the imposition on the Party of “iron discipline”, extreme centralism, and dog-like obedience of the sort that Wang drank in at the Comintern. Peng too was this kind of “Bolsheviser”. Indeed, “Bolshevisation” reached China not in one wave but in two: in 1925 with Peng, and again in 1930 with Wang.

Still, as a revolutionary Peng was braver, more independent, and more principled than Wang. As Moscow’s man, his rise stopped short of General Secretary, unlike Wang Ming. And his backer, Voitinsky, was less arbitrary, inflexible, and autocratic than Wang’s backer Mif. Moreover, though in 1924 the Comintern was already in the habit of infiltrating its supporters into the leadership of national parties, its tactic was to supplement and not yet to supplant national leaders, and it had not yet been wholly converted into a machine for forcing Moscow’s views on the world Communist movement.\(^{140}\)

Back in China, the Moscow returners of 1924 at first acted in close concert. According to Zheng Chaolin, Luo Yinfong proposed to Peng that they “form a central force” to control the Party, but Peng demurred, for he intended to keep the leadership of the Moscow group to himself. In any case, Peng and Luo soon fell out altogether when Chen Bilan, who had been Luo Yinfong’s lover in Moscow, dropped him for Peng. Throughout his period on the Central Committee, Peng supported Chen Duxiu. According to Zheng Chaolin, he “tightly latched onto Chen in order to make himself more important!”.\(^{141}\) If so, the tactic backfired, for when the Central Committee fell into the hands of Qu Qiubai, Zhang Guotao, and Tan Pingshan in 1927, it was precisely Chen’s retinue (most notably Peng Shuzhi) that was elbowed from office (though Chen himself was as yet too powerful to attack directly).\(^{142}\)

Most of the other members of the so-called Moscow group removed from power at the same time as Peng had long despised him. It has often been said of Chen Duxiu that he only became a Trotskyist as a reaction to his expulsion.\(^{143}\) But the charge is prejudiced nonsense. Chen was not sacked: he resigned. And even after resigning, he could if he wished have negotiated his way back into the leadership, for Stalin could see that he remained a key figure in the CCP who could not easily be supplanted.\(^{144}\) In any case, there were many paths that Chen might have trod other than the thankless and dangerous path of Trotskyism. The same cannot be said of Peng Shuzhi. Politics were Peng’s profession. He had been trained in Moscow for the life of a political organise; he had no other obvious qualifications with which to make his career. If anyone became a Trotskyist for lack of an alternative, it was Peng Shuzhi. If he had been allowed to stay on within the leadership of the official Party, he would
probably have become an even worse Stalinist than Qu Qiubai, who by comparison was quite liberal-minded. In Moscow Peng and Luo Yitong had alienated many of their Chinese fellow-students by their high-handedness, their economic and political privileges, and their elitism. Their authoritarian and bureaucratic ways were particularly abhorrent to those Chinese students in Moscow who had earlier spent some time in France. Gradually after 1927, old antagonisms reawakened; when the split in Chinese Trotskyism widened and became fixed, it is not surprising that most of the old French-educated members of the Moscow group found themselves in the opposite camp to Peng, together with the majority of the 1929 Russia-returned Trotskyists, upon whom Peng Shuzhi looked down because they were only middle-level cadres.

Relations between Peng and Chen Duxiu in the Trotskyist party were also strained, both politically and personally. After the arrest of the Trotskyists' first Central Committee in May 1931, and further attacks in August of the same year, Chen and Peng were practically the only Trotskyist leaders still at large, but even so they found it difficult to stay on friendly terms, partly as a result of Chen's forthright denunciation of Peng as a "rotten water-melon" during the period of unity negotiations. After their arrest in 1932, they were at first put together in one cell, but their relationship finally collapsed and they were given separate rooms. According to Peng, they fell out entirely on political grounds, but friends of Chen attribute the collapse to minor differences of personality.
IX. The Trotskyist Impact on the CCP

The direct impact of Trotskyism on the CCP, in terms of the number of people who became Trotskyists in 1928 and 1929, was not negligible. Those who joined the Trotskyist camp included Chen Duxiu, founder of the CCP, elected General Secretary at its first five congresses; a score or so of the Party’s senior veteran officials; and getting on for half - the best half - of the Chinese students sent to Moscow in the wake of the 1927 defeat.

Chen Duxiu’s authority in the CCP was vast and for a long time automatic. Many of those Communists who supported the Trotskyists at first did so not so much because they understood and agreed with Trotsky’s political analysis as because Chen supported them.146 Not surprisingly, Stalin was extremely worried by Chen’s defection, and made anxious enquiries in 1928 about his intentions and resources.147 “Considering Ch’en’s [Chen’s] imposing reputation as a political figure as well as a scholar,” wrote Sheng Yue, one of the chief inquisitors of the Chinese Trotskyists in Moscow, “[the CPSU and the Comintern] may well have hoped to keep Ch’en within the Party so as not to give the Trotskyite movement in China a well-known figure. Without Ch’en, the spread of Trotskyite influence in China would undoubtedly have been hampered.”148

The indirect impact on the CCP of the Trotskyist organisation was less profound. However, even many Communists who did not become Trotskyists wanted to see the rift between the Opposition and the official Party healed, and felt that it had been wrong to expel Chen Duxiu.149 One example of a call for reconciliation is that by the three CCP martyrs Peng Pai, Yang Yin, and Yan Changyi, who from their death cells in late 1929 sent out a last testament imploring the Central Committee to solve its dispute with the Chen Duxius-ites by peaceful means.150 According to Wang Fanxi, a glimmer of Trotskyist influence (gained in Moscow) can be detected in the famous “conclusionist” faction of 1931, particularly in the “recalcitrance they displayed towards the Wang Ming clique”.151 The conciliators too urged the Party to undo the expulsion of Chen Duxiu and Peng Shuzhi.152 As a result of Chen’s special standing and the sympathy he enjoyed even among Party leaders, the CCP treated him rather cautiously (until the return to China of Wang Ming in late 1937), and generally spared him the vilification that it extended to many of its own members during the “leftist” period of the early to mid 1930s.153

At the time of their Unification Congress in 1931, the prospects of an even more massive conversion to the Opposition looked extremely bright.154 The official Party, to which the Trotskyists still vowed allegiance (they called their new organisation the Left Opposition of the CCP and regarded their expulsion from the Party as unlawful), was in terrible disarray. It had changed its leader four times in as many years and was racked by factionalism, largely a direct result of Russian interference. In late 1929, many branches of the CCP had not yet discussed the new political line decided on at the Sixth Congress in Moscow, and others were inactive;155 moreover, the new ultra-left Li Lisan line did much harm to the Party’s security and standing. Its urban members were depressed and demoralised by a series of arrests and executions, particularly of the Party’s Jiangsu group under He Mengxiong, which some Communists blamed on treachery by Wang Ming, the Party’s new imported leader. Many Communists, even those who did not secretly sympathise with the Opposition, thought like the Trotskyists that the revolution had been defeated and that the tactics proposed by Wang Ming were no way out. Zhang Guotao, an outstanding workers’ leader in the CCP, even considered founding a new Workers and Peasants’ Party outside the Comintern (but still friendly to it).156 The Trotskyists, in contrast, were freshly united under the Party’s founding father. They had an explanation for the long row of defeats, and claimed to have discovered a new way forward for the Party. So Chen Duxiu’s challenge to the Party threw it into confusion, and according to a Party resolution “caused a mighty uproar among middle and senior cadres”.157 But the Trotskyists did not live up to their early promise. After 1929, they attracted practically no further recruits from the official Party, and absolutely no important ones.

One reason that the Trotskyists’ dream of supplanting the CCP leadership failed was that Zhou Enlai took severe disciplinary measures to protect the Party organisation from them and to counter their propaganda. Another is that the Trotskyists, unlike the official Party, simply lacked the resources to fund a party. As a result, the Proletarian group largely failed to establish cells among the workers of the big cities, who were its chief target, and by May 1931, on the eve of the unification of the four Trotskyist groups, had no more than one hundred or so members, fewer than a year earlier.158 The main reason, however, why they failed was because their entire leadership went to prison in 1931 and 1932. By the time they came back out, China was at or on the point of war with Japan. The world had moved on, and the CCP was no longer vulnerable to Trotskyist infection. Moreover, as I shall show in a subsequent section, the Trotskyists were unable to develop a strategy for taking advantage of the new opportunities opened up by the war.

If they had remained free after 1931, would they...
have been able to influence the official Party? Probably yes, if they had managed to remain united, for their criticisms were telling and their proposals, if implemented, would have helped the CCP out of the crisis into which its policies in the early 1930s plunged it. But however perspicacious their views and however sensible their proposals, one factor would have continued to militate against them even if their organisation had survived: money. The CCP was backed financially by the Soviet Union to the tune of US$40,000 a month (said to be Leningrad’s Party dues, remitted via New York); and after 1927 its rural bases were a further source of funds. But the Trotskyists had no bases and no foreign backers. So it was a big step for a CCP official on $25 a month - equivalent to the salary of a teacher - to give up this secure income for the uncertain life of a Trotskyist militant. This question of livelihood played on the minds of a number of Communists who were at first attracted by the Opposition’s theses. This explains why the leaders of the Opposition, almost to a man and woman, were scholars, writers, and intellectuals who could support themselves and their organisation independently by writing, editing, and translating in their free time.\(^{159}\)

The Trotskyists' lack of resources would have placed a severe strain on the unity of their organisation (achieved at the cost of considerable compromise) whether or not they had fallen foul of Chiang Kai-shek's political police. This unity was achieved in 1931 under considerable external pressure from Leon Trotsky; within the groups that came together, some desperately wanted unity in order to create a force capable of replacing the CCP, but others were not so motivated, having joined the Trotskyists in search of a retreat from the dangerous path of revolutionary action. A unity born chiefly of external pressure and eased by compromise was unlikely to withstand severe political tests of the sort that were inevitable under Chiang Kai-shek's police terror. It is not surprising that when the repression began in earnest after the defection of Ma Yufu, Liang Gangqiao and three others surrendered to the government.\(^{160}\)

As the 1930s wore on, another and even higher barrier formed between Trotskyists and members of the official Party: prejudice. When Wang Ming’s Returned Students took control of the CCP in 1930, two of their main imports were anti-Trotskyism and the purge. Tens of thousands of people in the CCP’s rural bases were “unmasked” as “Trotskyists”, “Anti-Bolsheviks”, “Social-Democrats”, and “Guomindang agents” in the 1930s and executed. Recently Chinese historians have admitted that nearly all these people were wrongfully killed, and the Trotskyists themselves say that few if any of their comrades were ever active in the Chinese soviets. But the campaign generated an air of terror and a deep fear and hatred of Trotskyism among less informed Party members. For a while after 1935 the anti-Trotskyist hysteria died down as other leaders (and other issues) came to the fore in the CCP, but in 1938 it started up again when Wang Ming returned to China for a second time and the word “Trotskyist” became synonymous in Party usage with “Japanese spy”. Even at the time, the knowledgeable public (including in the CCP) knew that Wang Ming and Kang Sheng’s charge that Chen Duxiu had taken money from the Japanese was quite absurd,\(^{161}\) and recent Chinese studies have admitted that it was a groundless slander.\(^{162}\) But the mud stuck, so that even today many veteran Communists continue to resist any suggestion that the Chinese Trotskyists, including Chen Duxiu in his Trotskyist phase, should be rehabilitated.

Even so, most better-informed Communist leaders had little time for anti-Trotskyism in its more virulent form. In China not Trotskyism but anti-Trotskyism was the foreign transplant, and one that did not altogether take. This, Wang Fanxi explains, was mainly because the real threat to Mao and the Party’s China-based leaders came not from the “Trotsky-Chen faction” but from Moscow’s well-connected Wang Ming clique.\(^{163}\) Privately Mao criticised the Moscow show-trials and thought that Stalin in his campaign to “suppress counterrevolutionaries” was making even more mistakes than had the Chinese Communists in the early 1930s. One of the main reasons why he succeeded in wresting to himself the leadership of the CCP after 1934 was because he put an end to the purge regime in its most extreme form. When Wang Ming, eager to seize back the leadership from Mao, launched the second anti-Trotskyist campaign in China in 1938, his main indirect target was actually Mao. Wang attacked Mao in this way partly because Mao’s policies in that period were more radical than Wang’s and so seemed closer to the Trotskyists; and partly because the Central Committee under Mao had rashly conceived of allowing Chen Duxiu back into the Party.\(^{164}\) Wang’s aim was to finish off all the left-wing opponents, starting with the Trotskyists and ending if possible with Mao, of his “accommodationist” conception of the anti-Japanese united front. But instead Mao finished him off, and no doubt took great satisfaction in labelling him a “Chen Duxiu-style right opportunist”.

On occasion some of the CCP’s China-based leaders even warmed a little to the Trotskyists. On April 25, 1936, the CCP issued an appeal “to all parties” for unity against Japan. Sixth among the forty parties listed in the appeal was the “Chinese Trotskyist League”.\(^{165}\) The existence of this appeal to the Trotskyists serves as additional evidence that there were differences between Mao and other CCP leaders on the one hand and the Moscow group around Wang Ming on the other concerning what attitude to take toward the Trotskyists; however, the difference was short-lived, for Mao soon stepped into line when ordered to do so in 1938 by Wang Ming, who was prepared to ally with anyone but the Trotskyists. In late 1937, Ye Jianying, then the Party’s representative in Nanjing, spent two days trying to discover the fate and whereabouts of the Trotskyist Wang Fanxi.\(^{166}\) Also in 1937, Mao Zedong, who “seemed to miss his
old friendship" with Chen Duxiu, discussed the possibility of uniting against Japan with Cheu's Trotskyists, as long as they "showed themselves to be repentant". [167] (Needless to say, they didn't.) [168] Many Communist leaders were cautious in their approach to the Chinese Trotskyists, and made careful distinctions between the Trotskyist factions. Despite Wang Ming's campaign to slander Chen Duxiu, Zhou Enlai told the Trotskyist Luo Han in 1937 or 1938 that it was no longer necessary to call the Chen Duxiu-faction of Trotskyists "bandits", and expressed the view that the situation inside the Chinese Trotskyist movement was "actually quite complex". [169] Again, in the wake of the CCP's Sixth Plenum, held in the autumn of 1938, when Wang Ming lost much of his power in the Party, Zhou Enlai sent emissaries to Chen Duxiu asking him "not to be active or publish articles", in order to prevent an exacerbation of the anti-Chen hysteria created by Wang Ming. [170] "As Stalinists," wrote Wang Fanxi, "they all opposed Trotskyism, but only a handful of them were clear about the issues involved and positively supported Stalin; and of those only Wang Ming and his friends used opposition to Trotskyism to bolster their own political position. Most people attached no importance to the struggle between the two factions, considering it an internal affair of the Soviet Party. The majority of the older generation of Party members continued to look upon us as fellow-revolutionaries." [171]
X. Chinese Trotskyism and Democracy

Democracy ran a poor course in the Chinese Revolution, and even anti-Stalinists like Peng Shuzhi were not free from “Bolshevik” contempt for it. Chen Duxiu, however, having found traditional strategies for social change wanting, fixed once for all on socialism with democracy as the appropriate remedy for China’s ills. Chen Duxiu may have drawn his inspiration for the Party from the Bolsheviks, but his idea of it was quite different from theirs. Like Lunakarsky, Chen believed that “revolution is the work of saints”. Unlike Stalin, he opposed the creation of a strong Party chief, rather insisting that the General Secretary should be elected by and responsible to the different committee heads. He even let non-Marxists and anarchists join the Party. Under his leadership, different points of view vied rather freely, and though the outcome of the discussion was settled largely in Moscow, it was some time before the Chinese Party was transformed completely along Russian lines. Even Mao Zedong recognised that under Chen Duxiu the Party was “rather lively” and free from dogmatism.

Though Chen Duxiu had never joined the anarchists (on the contrary, he was their sternest left-wing critic), he shared with them a libertarian suspicion of the state that partly explains his Trotskyist conversion. Other connections too can be made between Chen and the anarchists. They shared a common commitment to internationalism and an opposition to militarism, even in its “revolutionary” guise (for like the anarchist leader Li Shizeng, Chen believed that revolutions carried out by armies would simply create new forms of oppression and lead to a self-perpetuating militarist cycle). And like the second generation of anarchists active after 1915, Chen was equally opposed to native capitalists and foreign imperialists, and put his main emphasis on the revolutionary role of urban culture and the proletariat (though not to the exclusion of the peasants).

Before he became a Communist, Chen’s project, as formulated by his journal Xin qingnian (New Youth), was to save China by learning from the West. Just as Europe’s early Enlighteners had once looked to China for models of the rational society, so China’s Enlighteners of 1919 sought their light in Western concepts of humanism, democracy, individualism, and scientific method. But they learned them in artificially compressed time, unlike the philosophes, who had a century to prepare and spread their ideas. They assimilated an impressive list of isms, but reached real depth in none. So even democracy, though among Chen’s first and last loves, was rather shallowly rooted in his thinking, and no match for the “Bolsheviks”. The “Bolshevisation” set in train by Peng Shuzhi in 1924 was undoubtedly helped by Moscow’s requirement that the Chinese Party work as a disciplined, highly secretive faction within the Guomindang.

But though Peng Shuzhi and his fellow-“Bolshevisers” brought authoritarian habits into the Party, it was not until after 1927, when Chen Duxiu was removed from the leadership, that these habits became general. The Party’s “assimilation” to the Guomindang in Wuhan in 1927 after Borodin’s victory over Chen Duxiu did nothing to help restore it to good health. As a result of this “assimilation”, observes Zheng Chaolin, “the Communist Party was no longer a closely united party but one rent by conspiracies and tricks, by acts of secret collusion, by mutual attacks, and by power struggles, just like the Guomindang we so despised”. Chen’s expulsion speeded the drift in the Party toward bureaucratic centralism, both because he had been the leader who most fervently espoused democracy, and because the decision to expel him marked the Party’s formal resolution to ban factions and hence democratic discussion and debate. Moreover, Chen was a man of independent stature who did not need to look to Moscow for backing - something that could not be said of those who succeeded him over the next few years. In 1930 the CCP was engulfed by a second, more conclusive wave of “Bolshevisation” when the Stalinist Wang Ming returned to take over its main leadership. The transition from Peng Shuzhi to Wang Ming reflected corresponding changes in the Comintern’s role in the world Communist movement over the same period - from meddling in it to master of it.

There are two main ways in which Chinese Trotskyists tried to keep alive the Party’s libertarian tradition after 1927. One is in their public politics, the other in their internal politics. Both attempts collapsed.

In 1927 the Guomindang delivered a series of crushing blows to the Communists, but the Communist leaders - taking their cue from Moscow - refused (mainly for factional reasons) to recognise that the Chinese Revolution had been defeated. If they were right, then the struggle was, of course, free to rise to new levels, with insurrections in the cities backed up by peasant armies in the countryside. Which was indeed the course on which the Communists embarked.

The Trotskyists, however, argued that a massive defeat had been suffered, and that the Chinese Revolution was not remotely near a “new high tide”. For them, the immediate task was to rebuild the shattered trade unions, to re-establish the Party in the
towners, and to forge fresh links to the workers. Central
to this programme, said Trotsky (and his Chinese
followers agreed), was the struggle for an all-powerful
National (or Constituent) Assembly elected by
universal secret ballot, since this alone could bring
together China's disparate economic and political
struggles. Meanwhile, and until the revolution reached
a new "high tide", the call for socialism, proletarian
dictatorship, and soviets should be relegated to the
realm of general propaganda. This, then, was the
strategic aim that shaped the course of Chinese
Trotskyism in the first nine years of its life.

Would the official Party have benefited by
adopting the policies that the Trotskyists were
pressing on it in the early 1930s? Different people in
the Trotskyist movement interpreted the call for a
constituent assembly in different ways, and this has
led to some confusion. "Some Chinese Trotskyists," wrote Zheng Chaolin, "believed that the next
revolutionary high tide was distant and uncertain, that
China's bourgeois state would probably enjoy a long
period of stability, and that the present system of
military dictatorship would gradually give way to
parliamentary democracy, which in their view would
be long-lasting." Naturally this "parliamentary"
interpretation of the slogan was incompatible with a
strategy of armed risings in the villages. Most
Trotskyists, however, interpreted the slogan in a quite
different way, "The main reason for raising the slogan
of a constituent assembly," wrote Wang Fanxi, "was
to help the revolution mature in a period of counter-
revolution, and to hasten the proletarian
revolution."

This radical interpretation of the slogan was highly
compatible with the organisation of armed struggle
in the countryside, and might have rescued the CCP from
the dead end down which it was rushing in the early
1930s. In 1931 not even the leaders of the official
Party, Mao included, had abandoned the idea of
recapturing the towns as a precondition for a nation-
wide revolutionary upsurge, even though by then
Guomindang repression had forced them to withdraw
the bulk of their people to the countryside. It was only
after several years, and in the teeth of much opposition
in the Party leadership, that the Maoists - having ended up by accident among the peasants - finally elaborated their famous strategy of "encircling the towns with the villages". In November 1928, Mao himself wrote from the Jinggang Mountains that he
was suffering from "an acute sense of loneliness", and
that to put an end to "this lonely life... it is necessary
to launch a struggle for democracy involving the urban
petty bourgeoisie". But the Party refused to make
such a call for democracy, so it could neither unify the
various scattered struggles in town and countryside
nor seriously undermine the stability of Guomindang
rule in its urban strongholds. It became increasingly
isolated, and was eventually forced (in late 1934) to
abandon its rural bases to advancing Guomindang
armies and go on the Long March (often portrayed as
a victorious advance, but in reality a disorderly
retreat). Its strategy had led to catastrophic military
defeat in the countryside, where most of its divisions
were practically wiped out; and to political
obliteration in the towns, where its underground
organisation had become extinct.

Two things saved it from complete destruction
after 1934. The main one was the Japanese invasion,
which created conditions under which Communist
armed forces could revive and grow. The other was
the CCP's decision to switch during its second united
front with the Guomindang to a strategy of
"democratic" struggle in the towns. Although this was
a minor theme in the Maoist symphony of revolution,
it helped win the friendship of some liberal and
democratic organisations and so contributed to Chiang
Kai-shek's political isolation.

The Chinese Trotskyists' call after 1929 for a
constituent assembly is often explained - not least by
Trotskyists themselves - as a tactical adjustment to the
new conditions obtaining after the defeat of the
revolution. But its strategic meaning and potential
should not be ignored. If China had developed in the
1930s in the way that the Trotskyists were predicting
and if the Trotskyists, instead of disappearing into
guilt, had been in a position to concentrate their efforts
on uniting all democratic organisations in the cities in
a powerful movement against the Guomindang,
China's modern history would have had quite a
different outcome. Many people were amazed when
the Chinese Trotskyists espoused democracy as their
platform in 1931, for Trotskyism is generally
considered to be a left-wing variant of Communism.
However, it was not only Trotsky's analysis of the
failure of the Chinese Revolution but above all his
advocacy of the democratic slogan for China after
1927 that attracted Chen Duxiu, who had started his
political career as a radical democrat, to the
Opposition. As for the "dictatorship of the proletariat",
Chen all along opposed this slogan, and when - as a
Trotskyist - he eventually accepted it, he did so
reluctantly, believing it to be too radical in the Chinese
context, and he still preferred to talk of the
"democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the
peasantry". On the whole in China, Trotskyism stood
historically for the democratic movement, unlike the
CCP, which - especially after 1927 - opposed
democracy altogether and for several years accused
the Trotskyists of "liquidationism" precisely because of
its democratic policy.

Democracy within the revolutionary party was also
an important theme in the history of Chinese
Trotskyism. The official Party after 1927 was run as
an elite dictatorship, modelled on that of the Soviet
Party. Until Mao's rise to power in the late 1930s, this
was a Party plagued by factionalism, both self-
inflicted and imported. All its leaders after 1927 used
methods learned from Moscow, plus some that they
invented independently, to resolve conflict and crush
minority opinions. Each new candidate for leader contested Moscow's favours by tailoring his policies to suit the Kremlin: so CCP politics became increasingly irresponsible and unaccountable. In 1929, when Chen Duxiu was expelled from the Party, he reminded its leaders that "democracy is a necessary instrument for any class that seeks to win the majority to its side", and he warned them that the suppression of dissent views could lead only to a regime of bureaucratic centralism. But CCP leaders dismissed "bourgeois" the democratic, humanist, and universalist values of May Fourth for which Chen still stood, and which continued their erratic growth in the darkening circles of Chen's expelled Opposition.

The Left Opposition born in China in 1931 was riper and better founded than the CCP had been at the time of its founding ten years earlier. The revolutionaries who came together in 1921 were for the most part political novices who had only the vaguest notion (drawn mainly from a sketchy knowledge of Russia) of what constituted a socialist revolution; most were not even Marxists. They were closely guided in their decisions by the Russian Voltinsky. The 1931 Opposition was quite different in character. It was born of four different organisations most of whose members had behind them several years' first-hand experience of revolutionary activity, and the even more valuable experience of having "clearly realised their own mistakes." At first these people "looked upon one another not as comrades but as enemies, and fought each other with diplomatic tricks". They too were monitored by a foreigner, but in their case the control was remote and delicate, for Trotsky was not a tactician like Voltinsky but a strategist. Trotsky's role in the negotiations that created the Opposition was not that of a Voltinsky and even less that of a Sneevliet or a Borodin, who bullied and manipulated the CCP into submission. Instead of trying to bludgeon Chen Duxiu into accepting every jot and comma of the Trotskyist creed, or even worse shutting him out of the new movement altogether (as some Trotskyist hothouses would have wished), Trotsky urged his supporters in China to welcome Chen into their ranks and to agree to differ with him on certain issues. Again unlike Voltinsky, the exiled Trotsky had nothing to offer his Chinese comrades save ideas and advice, but so great was his prestige that his decisive intervention in favour of broad unity and against the creation of "artificial differences" got talks under way within weeks. Unification was at the same time a process of "purification and selection": sectarians incapable of accepting the idea of a broad regroupment left the movement of their own accord. Delegates to the Unification Congress were allotted to the four groups in proportion to their size. The Conference "put an end to the rivalry... and the atmosphere afterwards was one of harmony, solidarity, and hope." But very soon the Trotskyists were behind bars.

In the long run the Trotskyists were unable to maintain a pluralist tradition. The official Party remained intact and monolithic partly through bureaucracy and terror; in any case, an overwhelming majority of its members were determined to stick by it mainly because it represented the best chance of overthrowing Chiang Kai-shek. It embodied revolutionary legitimacy in China. It commanded a material base that stabilised its membership in a way no poor Party could hope to do. For the Trotskyists had neither whip nor witchery to hold their ranks in line. As soon as major differences of opinion arose in their organisation in 1941, it split into two rival camps that have remained in existence ever since.

The political difference at stake - on what attitude to adopt toward China's war against Japan should China be drawn into the wider conflict - was deep, but even so most veteran Trotskyists regretted the split and tried hard to stop it happening. They agreed to accept the decision of the more youthful majority (soon to become a minority) around Peng Shuzhi but demanded minority rights within the organisation. But Peng and his supporters turned them down, so the split became inevitable; other issues later got drawn into it, and it became permanent. Peng Shuzhi was, of course, acting true to character and training. In Moscow he had learned Stalinist norms of political organisation. The idea of a free debate in the Party was no less foreign to him than it was to the official Party.

Probably the Chinese Trotskyists' main point of interest for critical Chinese Communists today is their consistent promotion of the idea of socialist democracy, both for the revolutionary state and for the internal regime of the revolutionary Party. Between 1936 and 1938 and again in late 1939 or early 1940, Wang Panxi and others had a vigorous exchange of views with Chen Duxiu on the issue of democracy. Sometime in 1936 Chen, then in prison, smuggled out an article on democracy to the Trotskyists in Shanghai, where Wang published it in Spark together with some of his own critical comments. Then, three or four years later, Wang and others again discussed this same question with Chen, by then in Sichuan, in letters that they sent him from Shanghai. Chen's replies to them were later published by Hu Shi in a collection of Chen's last articles and letters.

In the mid to late 1930s, two crucial events - the Moscow show-trials and Stalin's alliance with Hitler - caused Chen to rethink many of the basic views on democracy advanced by Lenin and by Trotsky. Chen concluded that Lenin's complete denial of the value of democracy was at least in part responsible for Stalin's bureaucratic crimes and that dictatorship of any sort, revolutionary or counterrevolutionary, is incompatible with democracy. Whereas in orthodox Leninist terms the dictatorship of the proletariat is simultaneous - at least for the workers - the most extensive form of democratic government, Chen no longer bothered to distinguish the various democratic rights from democracy as the bourgeois governing form - an example, in Wang Panxi's view, of Chen's tendency to push his ideas to an extremity. After his move to Sichuan in 1938, it seemed to his comrades in...
Shanghai that Chen Duxiu had returned in his declining years to his 'first love' in 'pure democracy'. For Wang and other Trotskyists, democracy was not abstract but bounded by class and time, whereas for Chen Duxiu after 1938 it was a more or less transcendental concept expressed in universal institutions. Even so, Wang did not dismiss from hand Chen's formulations, and instead strove to develop along Marxist lines the elements in them that he found to be perceptive and valuable. Between them, Chen and his Trotskyist correspondents raised - decades in advance of the mainstream of Communist dissent - issues that bear directly on the invariably vexed relationship between socialist government and democratic freedoms. Chen's last views have been preserved, but Wang Fanzhi's replies to Chen published in Spark and the letters that he and others wrote to Chen before he died in which they tried to reconcile the necessity of radical revolution with democratic rights have apparently been lost. Fortunately, in an article written in Macau in 1957, Wang summarised in seven points positions derived from those that he had advanced in the late 1930s in his exchange with Chen. Wang's seven theses were as follows.

"1. Under present historical conditions, if the proletariat through its political party aims to overthrow the political and economic rule of the bourgeoisie, it must carry out a violent revolution and set up a dictatorship to expropriate the expropriators. So in nine cases out of ten it is bound to destroy the bourgeoisie's traditional means of rule - the parliamentary system. To complete such a transformation 'peacefully', through parliament, is practically if not absolutely impossible.

"2. A proletarian dictatorship set up in such a way neither must nor should destroy the various democratic rights - including habeus corpus; freedom of speech, the press, assembly, and association; the right to strike; etc., etc. - already won by the people under the bourgeois democratic system.

"3. The organs of the dictatorship elected by the entire toiling people should be under the thoroughgoing supervision of the electors and recallable by them at all times; and the power of the dictatorship should not be concentrated in one body but should be spread across several structures so that there is a system of checks and balances to prevent the emergence of an autocracy or monocracy.

"4. Opposition parties should be allowed to exist under the dictatorship as long as they support the revolution. Whether or not they meet this condition should be decided by the workers and peasants in free ballot.

"5. Opposition factions must be tolerated within the party of the proletariat. Under no circumstances must organisational sanctions, secret service measures, or discriminatory sanctions be used to deal with dissenters; under no circumstances must thought be made a crime.

"6. Under no circumstances must proletarian dictatorship become the dictatorship of a single party. Workers' parties organised by part of the working class and the intelligentsia must under no circumstances replace the political power democratically elected by the toilers as a whole. There must be an end to the present system in the Communist countries, where government is a facade behind which secretaries of the party branches assume direct command. The ruling party's strategic policies must first be discussed and approved by an empowered parliament (or soviet) that includes opposition parties and factions, and only then should they be implemented by government; and their implementation must continue to be supervised by parliament.

"7. Finally.... since political democracy is actually a reflection of economic democracy and no political democracy is possible under a system of absolutely centralised economic control,... to create the material base for socialist democracy a system of divided power and self-management within the overall planned economy is essential.

"All these points are not in themselves enough to save a revolutionary power from bureaucratic degeneration; but since they are not plucked from the void but rooted in bloody experience, they should - if formulated with sufficient clarity - (a) help workers and peasants in countries that have had revolutions to win their anti-bureaucratic struggle when the conditions for the democratisation of the dictatorial state have further ripened; and (b) enable new revolutionary states from the very outset to avoid bureaucratic poisoning."\textsuperscript{185}
XI. Chinese Trotskyism and the War Against Japan

The outbreak on July 7, 1937, of all-out war between China and Japan changed Chinese politics utterly and irrevocably. The Chinese Communists resumed their unified front with the Guomindang in 1937, this time against the Japanese invaders. But they had learned their lesson from 1927, and took measures to ensure that this second united front would not end up in the same catastrophic way as the first. During the war they were able to win the sympathy of ever wider sections of Chinese society by championing the cause of national resistance more actively than the Guomindang, whose reactionary policies and corrupt government in the war years progressively alienated popular support. The war created conditions that the Communists, with their previous experience in the southern countryside, were uniquely equipped to exploit. Now political issues were settled increasingly by the gun. Earlier, the CCP’s rural strategy had failed mainly because the Party was unable to mount a simultaneous challenge to the Guomindang in the towns. Now, by struggling for “democracy” in the context of the united front and calling an apparent halt to land war, they made new friends among Chiang’s enemies in bourgeois-democratic circles. In any case, the Japanese invasion had cut the Guomindang off from the industrial and commercial nerve-centres of eastern China, forcing it to retreat to the backward southwest and so depriving Chiang of one of his chief political and logistic advantages over the Communists.

The Trotskyists viewed the CCP’s activities in these years as a shameless sell-out of the revolution and a repeat performance of the mistakes of the 1920s. From their own vantage point this is indeed how things looked, for on paper the new united front allowed for the reorganisation of the Red Army into Chiang’s national forces, an end to class struggle, and the merging of Communist and Guomindang territories. What the Trotskyists could not know was that the Maoists, though reluctant to disagree openly with the Comintern proposals (pushed by Stalin’s emissary Wang Ming) for a close united front, had not the slightest intention of giving up their military or territorial independence. So the revival of the united front in 1937 was, as Wang Fuxi later saw, “by large at the level of tactical maneuver rather than of strategy”. One reason the Trotskyists so badly misread the situation was that their eyes were fixed in 1938 on the cities, where Wang Ming’s “accommodationists” dominated Party work. Another was that, having already written off the CCP as a “petty-bourgeois”, “peasant” Party as early as 1934, they paid insufficient attention to its continuing differentiation.

The Chinese Trotskyists themselves spent the best part of the war in Shanghai, organising workers under the very noses of the Japanese. This was brave, but dangerous and largely futile. On the strategic questions of war and the peasantry, they failed to meet the changing needs of the situation after 1937. Their failure to develop their own armed forces robbed them of the chance to take part in the military resistance to Japan, and left them defenceless against their many enemies. On the peasantry, their mistake was not, as critics allege, that they “ignored” it. On the contrary, after 1927 one of their main charges against the Comintern was that it had opposed a deepening of the agrarian revolution. But in the early 1930s they had argued, understandably in the light of their tiny numbers and the immense difficulties of establishing military bases without weapons or wealthy backers, that before trying to influence and lead the peasants they should first establish a firm base among the urban workers. Yet after the Japanese invasion this strategy was no longer feasible. The Trotskyists failed to see that the workers had been neutralised as a cumulative effect of the 1927 defeat, the ensuing Guomindang repression, and – most decisively of all – the Japanese occupation of China’s main industrial centres; and that for the revolution to succeed, it was essential to start organising the peasants even before the movement in the towns revived. At the root of this failure lay an excess of orthodoxy.

Not all Trotskyist leaders so easily wrote themselves out of China’s modern history. Some, including Chen Duxiu and Wang Fuxi, were acutely aware that the war had rendered many of the old formulas out of date and tried to find new ways, especially during their brief period of collaboration in Wuhan in 1938.

On more than one occasion in 1936, Chen Duxiu from his prison-cell expressed and published opinions either explicitly or implicitly critical of the CCP’s moves toward a rapprochement with the Guomindang. On July 1, 1936, he described the CCP’s Manifesto of August 1, 1935, which proposed a government of national self-defence, as a “disgraceful document” and Zhu De’s call on army officers in all provinces to unite with the Red Army as “even more disgraceful”. Within the year, however, he had modified his views in the light of new events.

Just before he left gaol in 1937, Chen drafted the elements of a new political programme that included a proposed “temporary ceasefire with the Guomindang government”, and after leaving gaol, he sought out Ye Jianying and Bo Gu to express his approval of the united front. At the time of the Xi’an Incident in December 1936, when Chiang Kai-shek was arrested by Nationalist generals intent on collaborating with
the CCP in an anti-Japanese alliance, Chen had become extremely excited and thought it unlikely that Chiang would escape with his life. After Chiang’s release, however, he concluded that “Chiang Kai-shek’s rule seemed to be rather stable; it is not as frail as we analysed it to be”. It was therefore only logical that after his release, he abandoned his old position of a two-front struggle to overthrow both the Guomindang and the Japanese aggressors in favour of a policy of “loyal support for the War of Resistance” and - given the overriding need for unified leadership - for the Guomindang government, insofar as it remained committed to the anti-Japanese resistance. Chen viewed the war not only as progressive but as “the revolutionary war of an oppressed nation resisting imperialism… The ultimate aim of this War of Resistance is to topple the obstacles imposed by imperialism on China’s national industrial development.”

Was Chen’s support for the government a complete reversal of his earlier call for its downfall? By no means. After his release from gaol, Chen deliberately avoided wording his speeches in too radical a way, in order to prevent their suppression by the authorities. As a result, most of them were openly published at the time. And his support for the government against Japan did not extend to other of its policies, where he maintained his own separate position. Like Mao and the Maoists, he demanded democracy, opposition rights (including for the CCP), a multi-party system, an end to the Guomindang dictatorship, a lessening of the burden on the people, and a resolution of the land problems of the poor peasants. He adamantly resisted all attempts to draw him into organisations connected with the Guomindang and generous offers of money to “organise a new Communist Party” together with the ex-Communist renegade Zhang Guotao. “Chiang Kai-shek killed many of my comrades and two of my sons,” he said, “we are absolutely irreconcilable.”

Chen Duxiu saw no hope for the revolution as long as the Guomindang continued to resist Japan: and, anyway, how could there be a revolution with the industrial cities under enemy occupation and the proletariat dispersed? So he believed that, for the duration of the war, the Trotskyists should put their main energy into building a united front of all democratic parties independent of the Guomindang and the CCP, on the basis of a broad programme of freedom and democracy. This tactic can be understood as a particular adaptation to new circumstances of the Trotskyists’ old right for a constituent assembly. But Chen Duxiu found it hard to persuade even his closest followers to support him in this endeavour. Today, Wang Fanxi admits that “tactically, Chen Duxiu was right and we were wrong”, but at the time he and others were not prepared to make the political compromises that Chen’s policy required.

In any case, by 1938 there was no room for Chen at the democratic centre, for when the “democratic upsurge” that Trotsky and the Trotskyists had been predicting ever since 1928 finally began in 1935, it was not the Trotskyists (who were at first mostly still in prison) but the Communists, with their newly hatched unified front, who were best placed to take advantage of it. “For years they had constantly misrepresented and caricatured our democratic programme,” wrote Wang Fanxi, “but suddenly they took up positions identical with all the worst features of the caricatures they had made of us.”

The CCP’s new turn had foredoomed Chen’s hopes of a revolutionary-democratic alliance in 1938, for the Communists, having occupied the space that Chen planned to enter, warned their new friends in the democratic parties against dealing with this “national traitor”. In any case Chen’s chances of finding allies were now slim, for with Stalinists and Trotskyists apparently calling for the same thing, people naturally chose the bigger party.

During this period, Chen Duxiu was not in principle opposed to cooperating with the CCP, and he condemned as “politically wrong” the Shanghai Trotskyists’ vituperation against the Stalinists. Though he continued to disagree with them on a number of questions of political principle, he would under certain circumstances have allied with them, though on condition that his separate views were tolerated and respected; under no circumstances would he have submitted politically to the CCP. The main reason that he took no practical steps to cooperate with the CCP and instead concentrated his efforts on winning the support of the minor democratic parties was that he realised that an alliance of the sort he desired could only be realised from a position of political and military strength, which he as yet lacked.

Chen’s second project was to win over anti-Japanese armed forces by infiltrating Trotskyists into them as political advisers. Chen criticised the theory that “weapons only” can decide political questions, and he had no faith in the belief that guerrilla war waged from the villages could defeat the Japanese, for “in terms of weapons, economy, and culture, villages and small towns cannot exist independently”. However, he realised that even if military means are not in the end decisive, they are nevertheless an indispensable ingredient in any realistic political solution to China’s crisis. At first, Wang Fanxi and Pu Dezhi held back from supporting Chen in his attempt to infiltrate existing armed forces, for they were worried that they would simply become “concupines” of the military. But eventually they were persuaded. “Our most important task in the army,” Chen told them, “is to educate the rank-and-file and bend all our efforts towards creating revolutionary conditions among the masses. This means that we must do all we can to launch agrarian reform in the area under our control, thus also speeding the revolutionization of the troops themselves.” But this project too fizzled out after Chen’s contact in the army was relieved of his command, probably by Chiang Kai-shek’s Fascist Blue Shirts, who kept Chen in Wuhan under secret
supervision and monitored his every action. After mid 1938, the Japanese push up the Yangtze toward Wuhan forced Chen to flee further inland, to Sichuan province, where he was more or less completely isolated and cast definitively onto the margin of Chinese political life until his death in 1942.

Both of these projects that Chen Duxiu tried to launch in Wuhan show that as a revolutionary he was not afraid to depart radically from set ways. Not surprisingly, he mouthed his contempt for the Trotskyists in Shanghai who could “only publish their miserable papers from their writers’ garrets”, and pointed out that “by sneering at the word ‘patriotism’”, they unwittingly gave credence to the CCP’s attempt to smear Chen and the Trotskyists as secret agents of Japan. His military plans were all the more remarkable given his strong doctrinally formed repugnance for “military” revolution, both by Chiang Kai-shek’s Northern Expedition (though for a while, before the Wuhan debacle, he was dazzled by its victories) and by the Chinese Red Army in the early 1930s. In principle, both he and his supporters like Wang Fanxi viewed the “military” road to power as an impermissible short cut that would pollute the revolution at its source. Their departure from principle in 1938 can only be explained by their understanding of the special circumstances of the war against Japan, which no party in China that wished to play a revolutionary role could afford not to join.

Though Wang Fanxi’s own efforts to join an army came to nothing, others cut off from Shanghai by the war organised and led Trotskyist guerrilla detachments in various parts of China. All were crushed between the millstones of the CCP and the Japanese. For example, in Shandong, Wang Changyao and Zhang Sanqie’s two thousand-strong guerrilla column (mainly organised from among their relatives) was destroyed by the Communists; and in Guangdong’s Zhongshan the Trotskyist guerrilla leader Chen Zhongxi was killed in battle by the Japanese.

Despite this cheerless experience, Wang Fanxi continued in later writings to argue that the Trotskyist leadership should have actively encouraged and coordinated the setting up of armed detachments. “It is impossible to say for certain,” he wrote, “whether we could have built up a force strong enough to compete with that of the CCP, but at least we would not have ended up as we did. During the war our organization was practically obliterated. Some of our cadres even starved to death, and we made no active contribution to the resistance. After the war we were too weak to take advantage of the pre-revolutionary situation that had opened up, and we adopted an entirely passive attitude towards the civil war between the CCP and the Guomindang.”

Others around Peng Shuzhi, however, clung to what they saw as the “traditional” Marxist analysis: that the peasantry was backward and conservative, and that armed struggle would have to wait until the conditions were right for an insurrection of urban workers. So in 1937 and 1938, the Trotskyists’ newly restored Provisional Central Committee continued to concentrate exclusively on urban work and to oppose “military adventurism” of any kind – a position that Wang Fanxi has criticised as a “very grave and absolutely unforgivable political mistake”. The Trotskyists in Shanghai also continued to maintain their position of hostility toward both the Guomindang and the CCP in 1938. On October 28, 1938, they attacked the Nationalists for aiming to capitulate to imperialism; and the CCP for capitulating to the Guomindang, abandoning the class struggle, and sowing illusions in Britain and US imperialism. When Chen Duxiu denounced their opinions, on January 20, 1939, they changed their line, promising to cooperate with the Guomindang and the CCP on condition that those parties launched a popular movement in support of the war and guaranteed all parties unconditional freedom of political action. But still they failed to translate their conditional support for the war into political or military activity.

Even after 1949, Peng Shuzhi held on to his “orthodox” opposition to guerrilla war waged from the villages. He insisted that Trotskyist strategy in China had been essentially correct and that the Chinese Communists’ victory had nothing to do with its guerrilla strategy but was instead a result of “exceptional historical circumstances”. Mao Zedong, in contrast, scorned “foreign dogmas” and followed a pragmatic course. Eclectically combining elements of rebellious Chinese tradition with some postulates of Marxism and modern military thinking, he developed an original and highly successful theory of revolutionary war as waged from the countryside.
The Chinese Trotskyists' influence on literature and scholarship before 1949 was far greater than their political influence and in some respects could match that of the CCP. Many of the CCP's early generation of writers and scholars either died, or retired from the revolution, or became Trotskyists. This was true of nearly all the literary figures who joined the early CCP, which by the mid 1930s could boast only a handful of such people. It was partly this thinning of the CCP's critical intelligence that permitted the rise to power in it of a man like Wang Ming, whose influence in Soviet-style Marxism-Leninism was one of his main assets in a Party otherwise devoid of "theoreticians"; and of Mao Zedong, who recruited the hack-philosopher Ai Siqi to lend himself a semblance of Marxist learning by plagiarising Soviet "dialectical materialism". After 1937, the CCP attracted quite a few writers to Yan'an, where they worked to champion the Communist cause in the Resistance War against Japan, but the relationship between them and the Party remained a difficult one, and eventually Mao cracked down on some of their leaders.

The Chinese Trotskyists' greatest and most influential literary figure was Chen Duxiu, who in New Youth in January 1917 published and enthusiastically supported Hu Shi's famous article on literary reform. Overthrow the "painting, powdered, and obsequious literature of the aristocratic few,... the stereotyped and over-ornamental literature of classicism,... [and] the pedantic, unintelligible, and obscurantist literature of the hermit and reclusa," wrote Chen; "create the plain, simple and expressive literature of the people,... the fresh and sincere literature of realism,... and... the plain-speaking and popular literature of society in general".205 Chen was a pioneer of the movement to abolish classical Chinese from the contemporary press and spread the vernacular; in 1904, in his native Anhui province, he published Suhua bao (Vernacular Speech Journal), a newspaper written in vernacular Chinese. During the May Fourth period, through New Youth he played a major part in introducing modern Western literature to China. The discussion in 1916 by Chen Duxiu and others of Western and Chinese literary trends was, says Chow Tse-tsung, "probably the first manifestation of the new intellectuals' intention to reform Chinese literature in accordance with Western theories and foreshadowed trends of Chinese literary thought in later years."

During his Communist and Trotskyist period, Chen mainly concerned himself with social and political movements, but he did occasionally return to his philological studies. He did so as part of his project to alphabetise the Chinese script, in pursuit of his dream of universal literacy. Chen hoped eventually to replace China's many dialects with a single national language that would promote unity and patriotism,206 but in the meantime he put great emphasis on the need for a proper study of dialects, on the grounds that the national language as conceived in the 1920s was "too artificial, too removed from the real language". Until such a time as a truly national language arises, he said in 1929, we should manage the transition by taking as our standard the most influential local languages, namely, those of Beijing, Shanghai, Hankou, and Guangzhou, for these are "the biggest metropolitan centres of production and politics". Chen sent his dialect study to the publishers but it was not accepted, due to Chen's "wanted" status. Nevertheless, his linguistic research was well regarded, and among those who contributed toward his living in the difficult years of his Trotskyist period was the linguist Zhao Yuanren.

After Chen Duxiu, China's best-known literary "Trotskyists" were Wang Duoqing and Wang Shiwei, who though never actually members of any Trotskyist organisation were very close to the Trotskyists on many questions and completely agreed with Trotsky's polemic against the idea of "proletarian literature".

Today Wang Shiwei has become one of the main symbols of libertarian dissent for critical Chinese youth, who have access to his "counterrevolutionary" writings in various collections of "negative teaching materials" put out by the Party, and, increasingly, for critical historians of Chinese Communism in the West. Wang Shiwei, who joined the CCP in 1926, was a gifted writer and translator. He was one of many city intellectuals who, as patriots and socialists, went by secret and dangerous paths to the Communist headquarters at Yan'an after 1937. In 1942, shortly after Mao had started his Rectification Campaign against "bureaucratic tendencies" in the Party, Wang and others (including the well-known feminist writer Ding Ling, the novelist Xiao Jun, and the poet Ai Qing) began to voice their disquiet about the existence in Yan'an of a privileged elite. They also dealt in their essays with the role of literature in a revolutionary society. Wang said that writing should be free of political control, that it should be allowed to monitor privilege and bureaucracy, and that it should be free to treat questions of human spirit, to which politics has no answer.

At first Wang Shiwei and the writers were widely applauded, particularly by young people in Yan'an. Such was the depth of their support that they became the main target of Mao's famous Talks on Art and Literature, in which he advanced the thesis that the task of literature was not to expose the "dark side" of revolutionary society, but to reflect its "bright side"
and to extol the masses. Many spectators at Wang Shiwei's later trial initially dissented from the official condemnation of him. Wang Shiwei alone among the writers was put on show-trial for his views. He was the scapegoat, first, because he was the least known of the writers, so he would attract the least outside attention; second, because he took his criticisms of Yan'an society further than the others; third, because of his past Trotskyist associations; and, last, because he refused to eat his words.

The Trotskyists' failure to join wholeheartedly in the Resistance had not made them popular, and Wang Ming had, of course, smeared them as agents of Japan. So the charge of "Trotskyism" levelled against Wang Shiwei was extremely damaging, and helped swing public opinion against him.

But was Wang Shiwei a Trotskyist? It is not clear what his relationship to the CCP was at this time. His biographer Dai Qing says that he had quit the Party after it criticised him in 1927 for falling unhappily in love with a woman Communist. But his friend Wang Fanxi believes that he lost his membership later, when Chiang Kai-shek's White terror reached Beijing in 1928 and Communist organisation in the city was automatically dissolved. So that would mean that he neither left nor was expelled, but was simply cut adrift like many thousands of other Party members during the crisis years after 1927. In 1930 he tried, unsuccessfully, to get back into touch with the Party in Shanghai. While he was living in extreme poverty in Shanghai, his closest friends (in particular Wang Fanxi) were driven from the CCP as Oppositionists, and he too became an Oppositionist of sorts. He was against their expulsion, and he translated various political writings for them. But he passionately believed that social revolution was never so radical as revolution in the soul, since unreformed human nature - the source, as he saw it, of Stalinism - would taint any future revolution that failed to deal with it. So his Trotskyist friends considered him an emotional revolutionary rather than a hardened Bolshevik, and he never joined their ranks. He probably rejoined the CCP after going to Yan'an in 1937.

Evidence of various sorts was offered at Wang Shiwei's "trial" to "prove" that he was indeed a Trotskyist: He had described Stalin as boorish and unattractive; he had condemned the Moscow purges and the sentencing of Zinoviev; he had refused to brand the Russian Oppositionists as fascists, and continued to insist that Trotskyists like Wang Fanxi and Chen Qichang were "Communists of humanity"; he had made a distinction between a political party of the workers and a peasant party with proletarian leaders; and he was allegedly negative about the wartime united front with the Guomindang. But Wang's article "Wild Lily" suggests that his position on the united front was in fact quite orthodox. As for his other views, Mao himself is reported to have said similar things about the Moscow purges and the Trotskyists, and Wang Ming had made a similar assessment of the class nature of the CCP as late as 1941.208

Wang Shiwei stuck to his views even though he was attacked and humiliated in front of an audience that at times numbered more than one thousand. Eventually he was dismissed from his translating job and sent to work in a matchbox factory. In 1947, he was hacked to death with a sword. In 1962, Mao said that it had been wrong to kill him, though he approved of the other penal sanctions against Wang. Curiously, Mao then remembered Wang as a "Guomindang agent". In the 1980s, however, all the slanders against Wang were openly retracted; and finally, in 1991, he was officially rehabilitated.209

Another writer who was strongly influenced by Trotsky's theory of literature was Lu Xun, modern China's best-known literary figure. Lu Xun read Trotsky's Literature and Revolution in Japanese; he sponsored the translation of it from Russian and English, which was first undertaken by Wei Lanyuan (from the Russian version) and Li Qiye (from the English). But Wei died of tuberculosis, so the translation was done by Li alone, and it was published in 1926. Lu Xun himself translated Trotsky's long speech delivered at the meeting on literary policy organised by the Central Committee of the CPSU on May 9, 1924. In April 1927 Lu Xun, echoing Trotsky, said of "people's literature" that it "is nothing of the sort, for the people have not yet opened their mouths. These works voice the sentiments of onlookers".210

Though Lu Xun, probably for diplomatic reasons, stopped referring to Trotsky's theory after 1930, it continued to inform his work.211

In 1936, Lu Xun criticised calls by some pro-Communist writers for a "literature of national defense", which in his view smacked of class collaboration. Instead he proposed a "literature of the masses for national revolutionary war". The two slogans mirrored two positions in the CCP: Mao's position, which advocated struggle as well as unity in relations with the Guomindang during the anti-Japanese united front; and Wang Ming's, which advocated unity without friction. So the Trotskyist Chen Qichang wrote to Lu Xun enclosing some Trotskyist literature. In his letter Chen told Lu Xun that the only result of the new united front ordered by the "Moscow bureaucrats" would be "to deliver the revolutionary masses into the hands of the [Guomindang] executioners for further slaughter".212 After Lu Xun's death in 1936, a document was published which was purportedly his reply to a "letter from the Trotskyites". The document implied that the Trotskyists were in the pay of the Japanese.213 It has subsequently been used by the CCP to discredit the Trotskyists. Ironically, its implication that the Trotskyists were traitors was later made explicit by Wang Ming, whose policies Lu Xun had - knowingly or unknowingly - been attacking. Since 1949, evidence has emerged to show that the reply was written not by Lu Xun but by the Communist Feng Xuefeng, acting on behalf of his bed-ridden and dying friend. Chen Qichang, the man smeared by Feng, was
seized by Japanese gendarmes while working for the anti-Japanese resistance in Shanghai in 1942 and was tortured to death.214

Apart from this indirect influence on writers like Lu Xun through translations of Trotsky's Literature and Revolution and, more directly, on Wang Shiwei and other critical intellectuals who hovered between the orthodox Party and the Opposition, the Chinese Trotskyists themselves contributed vast reams of copy to the "cultural enterprises" that mushroomed in Shanghai after 1929. The scholars and writers who opted for Trotskyism in the late 1920s gave up writing as a permanent career, but to earn a living and to finance their political work they formed close links to a number of these publishers, who specialised mainly in social science books. Until the crackdown in 1931, the Chinese Trotskyists published far more Marxist writings, including translations of the Marxist classics, than did the official Party.215 To write independently you need capital to tide you over the period of writing; but with translation you can calculate exactly how much effort you need to expend in order to secure a living. So the Trotskyists mainly worked on translations in this period. But they also wrote novels, short stories, biographies, political and social studies, and histories. "Our 'rice-bowl' literary activities during that period played no small part in popularizing and deepening socialist thinking in China," wrote Wang Fanzhi.216

The Trotskyists played an important role too in the famous academic debate in the 1930s on the nature of Chinese society. Dongli (Motive Force), later renamed Dushu zazhi (Readers' Magazine), was an influential Trotskyist forum on social, political, and philosophical issues of the day. Whereas writers influenced by the Stalinists believed that Chinese society was basically feudal, the Trotskyists thought that it combined features of both feudalism and capitalism, and that capitalist relations were dominant in both town and countryside. But for most of the debate the main Trotskyist thinkers were in prison, and those - including Yan Lingfeng and Ren Shu - who argued the Trotskyist theses were either ex-Trotskyists or Trotskyists of the second rank, most of whom later went over to the Guomindang and brought Trotskyism into discredit.217
XIII. The Chinese Trotskyists in Historical Perspective

Of the dozens of Trotskyist organisations spawned outside Russia by the International Left Opposition after 1927, the Chinese Left Opposition set up in 1931 was among the largest (with some 340 members), the best prepared, the most mature, and the most able. Probably the American Socialist Workers’ Party had more members: but it was a legal party, and the conditions under which it operated were quite different from those of its counterpart in China, where under the terror generally only those who felt absolutely committed to the Trotskyist Opposition took the perilous step of joining it. The Chinese Trotskyists looked to Trotsky like a party of quality, the flower of his flock. Unlike Oppositions elsewhere, he wrote - rather flattering to the Chinese Trotskyists, it “did not develop on the basis of petty backroom intrigues but from the experience of a great revolution that was lost by an opportunist leadership. Its great historic mission place on the Chinese Opposition exceptional responsibilities.”

Trotskyism in China was no more a “foreign transplant” than was the official Party: both had their roots deep in Chinese soil, though both were strongly shaped by the world movement of ideas. The Chinese Opposition’s “Trotskyist” concern preceded its Trotskyist conversion; and it brought to Trotskyism an authentically indigenous - insofar as in the contemporary world this word means anything - tradition of revolutionary democracy.

Why then was it so signally ineffective in Chinese politics after 1931? The fate of a political party is determined by one or more of four main factors: the goals that it sets itself, the methods that it adopts to realise them, the resources (human and material) that it can apply, and the odds that it encounters. To explain the failure of the Trotskyist project in China, each of these dimensions should be examined.

Some would say that the fault lay in the goals, but the point is weak, for though the official Party did not share each and every objective of the Trotskyists, the revolution that it brought about achieved their main aim, which was to overthrow capitalism and replace it with collectivism. Wang Puxi has rightly pointed out that the actual course of the Chinese Revolution broadly confirmed the Trotskyist theory of permanent revolution (according to which the bourgeois-democratic revolution would grow over with no intervening stages into socialist revolution) rather than the theory of New Democracy, which was in essence the Chinese version of Stalin’s theory of revolution in stages. The dynamic of the revolution, both in town and countryside, was radically anti-capitalist, and Mao’s prediction that New Democracy (and hence elements of capitalism) would last for “several decades” was rapidly disproved by the tempo of social change in China, which was completed in just a few years. The irony is that this fundamental tenet of Trotskyist theory was put into practice not by the Trotskyists themselves but by the Maoists, who arrived at it more or less through trial and error. So despite the Trotskyists’ practical failure, their criticisms of the CCP leaders are not without significance and value.

In strategy and tactics, the Trotskyists were by comparison shortsighted and doctrinaire. On April 30, 1930, Chen Duxiu, criticising the CCP’s Red Army, described its “leading peasants in guerrilla war” as a betrayal of the workers’ movement, and predicted that this army of “lumpenproletarians” would either collapse, sell out to the ruling class, or become the “White Army” of the rural petit bourgeoisie. This was not wholly incompatible with Trotsky’s view, expressed in a statement drafted in September 1930 and passed by the Trotskyists’ provisional international committee. According to Trotsky’s formulation, the revolutionaries should wait until the workers controlled all the main industrial and political centres before organising a Red Army and setting up soviets in the villages. Some young Trotskyists used Chen Duxiu’s comments about the Red Army to attack him, and in January 1931 Trotsky himself said that it was wrong to confuse the Chinese Red Army with bandits, and that the future proletarian dictatorship would be able to make use of a Red Army base in the villages. Later, at their Unification Congress, the Chinese Trotskyists took a more positive view of the Red Army; it was, they said, “proof that it is possible for the Chinese revolution to develop”, though they added that “while the urban industrial centres remain depressed, it stands no chance of victory.” Similarly, in an article written in January 1931, Chen revised his description of the Red Army as a force of “local bandits” and, while vigorously attacking its “bureaucratic adventurist leadership”, recommended an “absolutely friendly attitude toward the peasant guerrillas; to stand on the sidelines and view them with hostility is not the attitude of a Communist.”

But the idea that peasants cannot play an independent role in politics is deeply rooted in orthodox Marxist thinking, and Chen’s original contempt for the Red Army and its peasant strategy (seen not only as wrong but as the ultimate proof that Stalin had “abandoned the proletariat”223) was widely shared by his fellow-Trotskyists.

Instead the Chinese Trotskyists vested their main hopes and exclusive effort in the urban proletariat. But this class formed only a tiny fraction of less than half
of one per cent (or two million people) of the Chinese population (fewer than in Hongkong today); according to Mao’s 1926 “Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society”, even “semi-proletarians” numbered a mere three million. In any case, after 1937 the proletarian classes were disabled by war and occupation, and by the time they started to revive in 1945, the chief focus of political struggle had long since switched to the countryside, where two giant armies were squaring up for another sort of “class struggle” waged primarily on the field of war. By sharing the hard life of these urban classes, the Chinese Trotskyists wrote themselves out of the real Chinese Revolution and relegated themselves to the role of bystanders in the titans’ fight of the late 1940s. They remained unarmad at a time when arms decided all, and so they failed, for those who use prayers “always succeed badly and never compass anything, but when they can rely on themselves and use force, then they are rarely endangered”.224

Not all Trotskyists cleaved so slashingly to orthodoxy, especially after 1937. Some hatched plans to create Trotskyist armed forces and foment revolution in the villages. But the plans came to nothing, and for two main reasons.

First, the Trotskyists lacked the material resources to start and support armed struggle. Mao Zedong to the contrary, the Chinese countryside was never a blank page on which Communists could write and paint at will. One needed guns as well as guts to force a passage into the villages. The Maotist Red Army did not form spontaneously like mist on a peasant sea. It formed around the remnants of a defeated army, which fought its way into the mountains and brought the villages into a lively ferment. It organised remnants of the Party organisation in Wuhan (including the workers’ armed picket) and on the border between Jiangxi and Hunan (including the important mining communities organised for the CCP in the mid 1920s by Liu Shaoqi and others). In the mountains it created a small state - poor, backward, endangered, but still a state - that could subsist if necessary on its own resources. The CCP also got finance and other support via Shanghai from the Russians. Though the Russia-Returned Students were in many ways a bane to the Chinese Revolution, the training that CCP cadres - particularly military cadres - got in Moscow was inestimably valuable when it came to staffing the higher levels of the Chinese Red Army. Again, in the war against Japan225 and particularly in the War of Liberation of 1946-1949, the Soviets gave military and financial help to the CCP. The handful of Trotskyists around Chen Duxiu in 1938 had courage but no guns, and no money with which to buy guns. As we have seen, they tried a short-cut to armed power, but were thwarted. Even had they succeeded in subverting a division or two, it is doubtful that much would have ever come of it, as the experience shows of those few Trotskyists who did set up guerrilla columns.

The Trotskyists lacked not only the material but the human resources to wage armed struggle. Most of them were literati who had no experience of bearing arms. Few were prepared to swap the cities that they knew for the villages they didn’t; their background in books and theory were another world from that of the plebeian and military types who formed the ranks of the official Party after the closing of its urban phase, and who had a natural affinity with Mao’s rougher road to revolution.

But the main reason why the Trotskyists were probably doomed to failure whatever strategy they pursued had to do with the odds that they confronted. The cities that they chose to work in became so dangerous under the Guomindang’s summary justice and “scientifically organised” White terror that even the Central Committee of the official Party, with its vastly superior contacts and resources, was forced in 1931 to flee to the villages. So the Central Committee of the Chinese Trotskyists is distinguished above all by its long, long prison record after 1931.

The Guomindang was not the Trotskyists’ only problem. Revolutionaries in many countries have faced state terror in the course of revolutions, but most could find space in which to operate, either in places of lesser government control or in occasional interludes of political ferment or relaxation. But the Chinese Trotskyists faced an additional obstacle that was quite unique to them: organised Communism. Their new revolutionary party was equally hated by both government and opposition. It is probably impossible to find the same pattern anywhere else in the world except perhaps Vietnam (where after 1945 the Trotskyists, despite their relative strength, were likewise crushed).

In China after 1927, the CCP survived extinction and set up states within the state along the mountainous borders of the southern and central provinces. The CCP probably never killed - never had the chance to kill - large numbers of Trotskyists, for few entered its armies or its bases. One known exception was the Oppositionist Li Xiao, who was killed by the Communists in Guangdong in 1929 while taking part in Peng Pai’s peasant movement.226 Another was Lu Yencai, sent to Moscow for military training in the 1920s by the “Christian General” Feng Yuxiang. In Moscow Lu got very close to the Trotskyists; when he returned to China, he became a Divisional Commander in the Red Army of Peng Dehuai, who shot him during or after the retreat from Changsha in 1930. Others too were killed throughout the period of armed struggle. But in general, where the Trotskyists were concerned there was as it were a tacit division of labour between the Guomindang, which killed and gaoloed them, and the CCP, which slandered, discredited, and isolated them. Between 1936 and 1938, the CCP acted against the Trotskyists in the cities and closed off to them areas of democratic politics in which they might otherwise have managed to intervene. By the late 1930s, they had ensconced themselves in Japanese-occupied areas all over China, and monopolised most of the active resistance. They were able (for example in northern Jiangsu in 1940) to
expel even powerful Guomindang remnants from behind Japanese lines; the ragged and isolated columns of Trotskyist partisans who tried to join the resistance were far less of a match for them.

Two remaining predators on the Trotskyists were the Soviet political police and the Japanese. The GPU wiped out practically the whole of the Chinese Opposition in Moscow in late 1929. Trotsky was convinced that agents of the CCP were out to kill Chen Duxiu in the late 1930s, but there is no evidence that its intelligence service sent people to harass or spy on Trotskyists in China before 1949. However, there is evidence (which I am not yet free to publish) that the GPU specially sent a man to China in the late 1930s to spy on foreign Trotskyists in Shanghai (in particular Frank Glass and Alex Buchman). As for the Japanese, they destroyed an unknown number of Trotskyists on the battle-field and on the resistance front in Shanghai.

Pounded from both left and right, the Trotskyists were completely unable to influence the course of Chinese politics between 1931 and 1949. The same was, of course, true of all the tiny parties of the democratic centre who tried to follow a third way in China. Only those that leaned to one side or the other could hope for the consolation of some small crumb of symbolic power. The Trotskyists could have tried to use the Guomindang, as many ex-Trotskyists later said they should have done, and as they were even accused of having done. But they refused, in the belief that if they stuck to principle their time would one day come. Later, some Guomindang leaders regretted having pulverised the Trotskyists. After 1949, Xi Enzhen, head of the Guomindang Special Services, said that by doing so they had rendered a great help to the CCP. Other politicians in the wilderness fled into exile and tried to rebuild their bases from abroad. But this option was not open to the Trotskyists. They were too poor, too proud, to flee.

So was their calvary in vain? No, for through their advocacy of socialist democracy and internationalism, they kept alive a tradition that the official Party had long since abandoned. For decades this legacy was kept from view: only recently has it become known, particularly through memoirs by Chinese Trotskyists published as “reference materials” for Party historians. The official Party, meanwhile, had dismissed this libertarian tradition, subsumed by Chen Duxiu into the politics and morality of Marxism, as “bourgeois” and fought to extinguish it. For Chen Duxiu and his tiny band of followers, it was ultimately the CCP’s retreat from these intellectual conquests of the early period of the revolution that ruled out any prospect of a reconciliation with it.

Chinese Communism began life as fervently internationalist, under the influence of both the Russian Revolution and May Fourth, whose main leader Chen Duxiu denounced “selfish nationalism and patriotism” as “inferior goods” from Japan, to be boycotted along with other Japanese products. The official leaders of the CCP transformed this internationalism into unquestioning obedience to Moscow and later gave it up altogether for a modern version of “Han chauvinism,” modelled on the “Greater Russian chauvinism” promoted by the Soviet Stalinists. But the Trotskyists maintained a consistently internationalist approach and refused to compromise with the deeply ingrained national prejudice of the politics of old China.

The mission of the CCP in its infancy, shouldered in 1931 by the Trotskyists, was - so the Trotskyists believed - to break the pattern of the Chinese past, which appeared to them doomed to repeat an endless cycle of dynastic decay, peasant revolt, and renewal under a new despotic line. Chen Duxiu’s Communists in 1921 thought that they found in the modern urban classes - the bourgeoisie, the proletariat, the critical intelligentsia - a way to break this vicious circle. Which is why Chen Duxiu and his Trotskyists insisted after 1927 - save for a brief interval in 1938, under the exceptional circumstances of the Japanese invasion - on sticking to the cities, and why they never once considered forsaking them in the long term for the villages.

They were Marxists in the classic mould. True, they understood the need for agitation in the villages, but first they wanted to sink sturdy roots in the metropolitan littoral, for their members were too few to dissipate across the vast Chinese countryside. Even after the Japanese invasion, Chen Duxiu stuck to his belief that there could be no revolution outside urban culture. Unlike his younger comrades, he was deeply pessimistic about the chances of revolution breaking out during the war, for China’s industrial base along the coast had been destroyed and unrest in the countryside cannot make a proletarian revolution. “In numbers, in material strength, and in spirit,” he wrote to Trotsky sometime in 1939, “[the workers] have gone back to where they were thirty to forty years ago.”

But the Trotskyists never achieved even their initial aim of building a movement founded among the city workers. Their movement was tested and steel in gaol than in struggle. At most they became a propaganda group, but even as such they had little impact. So their programme remained abstract and schematic: it was never “nationalised” like the programme of the Maoists, which was able to develop over a long period and acquire genuinely Chinese features.

The popular view is that after 1927 Mao saw through the bankruptcy of an urban strategy and turned to the villages, whereas Chen Duxiu, who did not understand the peasants, was incapable of this leap in imagination. However, it is not that Chen Duxiu failed to understand the role of the peasantry in Chinese history but that - from his own point of view - he understood it all too well. Mao Zedong’s move into the countryside in 1927 was forced on him by circumstance. The Trotskyists, far from ignoring the villages as a result of intellectual sloth, actively resisted a turn to the countryside and insisted on
striving for a new way to redeem Chinese society and the Chinese nation, rather than follow the old and fruitless one. They failed, partly because the class of industrial workers on which they tried to fasten was too small, too little spread (in just two or three big cities), and too demoralised by defeat and terror to pay much attention to them. In a word, they were prophets before their time, for which they paid the price. When the repression came, unlike the official Party they had no rural sanctuaries to which they could retreat. So in 1973 Wang Fanzhi admitted that they would have done better “to open up new battle grounds in the countryside, where the masses were in higher spirits and the repression was less harsh, with the aim of preserving our cadre and recruiting new militants”, but while continuing to devote their main efforts to restoring and strengthening underground work in the cities through the struggle for a constituent assembly.

Mao Zedong, in contrast, turned his back on the urban culture that had produced the CCP and was able to discover rich new seams of revolutionary energy. He still claimed even after 1927 to represent the proletariat, yet by then his Party no longer had organic ties to it. The Trotskyists predicted that Mao’s Red Army would either disintegrate or degenerate into a reactionary peasant jaquerie, hostile to the workers and incapable of transforming China. But if the CCP was no longer a party of the workers, nor was it ever a party of the peasants. Despite the Trotskyists’ predictions, it strenuously and successfully resisted being sucked down into the villages during its twenty two years away from the cities. Once it had regained them it took radical measures to dispossess the old conservative forces, spread wealth more evenly, free China from foreigners, and start modernising Chinese economy and society. In that sense it made a revolution.

But the Chinese Communists did not emerge unchanged from their immersion in the villages and their switch to “military” revolution. Foreign friends of the CCP have argued that its authoritarian impulses were inhibited after it was plunged into the countryside in 1927: that it was forced to develop a responsive and responsible style of government so as not to lose its peasant base. Mao too liked to paint the peasants as the true source of socialist values, unlike Marx, who traced these values to the proletariat. But now in China this Maoist view has been widely rejected, and the Party’s time in the villages is seen by many as the main source of its authoritarianism and corruption. Of course, it would be wrong to swallow this theory whole, for the revolution has had forty city years in which to grow, and it is only too convenient for Party historians to trace the blight exclusively to the peasants. Still, it is important to question a theory that is widely rejected in the place where it once meant most.

During the war against Japan, the Chinese Communists regulated village politics by spreading political “representation” proportionately across the classes, including the local elites, in order to keep the wartime united front as far as possible intact. The effect of this artificial regulation of wartime politics in Communist-controlled areas was to rule out a truly radical mobilisation of the village poor in pursuit of their own separate interests. But in the absence of such a mobilisation, village politics in the resistance were even more surely bound to stay dependent and controlled. Once agrarian revolution was resumed after the defeat of the Japanese, the main say in the villages went briefly to the rural poor, within the local communities that formed the horizons of their lives. These changes were earth-shaking for those at the centre of them. But though they led to a limited form of local democracy, they did not provide an adequate base for wider democracy, and once the initial tumult had died down and the changes were fixed in formal institutions, even the local democracy evaporated.

“Everything in Yan’an has been built up by the gun,” said Mao in 1938. His was a Party geared for war. Mao’s admirers stress the unique social relations of the Chinese Red Army - what Mao called its “democracy”. If one defines democracy as local accountability, there is, of course, a sense in which the lowest level of Mao’s military hierarchy - the militia - was a democratic force in the villages, and one that enabled the peasants to face down the local elite and widen the area of their control. But on the base of these militia a regular army was built up that, though plainly less cruel and corrupt than the Guomindang, forces, insisted like any army on discipline, regimentation, secrecy, and a top-down command structure. These qualities, which are radically incompatible with democracy, rubbed off thickly on the CCP, and military norms increasingly came to rule political life in the Communist areas. These norms combined easily with the view, derived from Stalinism, of the Party as a machine, led by a disciplined hierarchy of book-trained professionals. So the idea held by some socialists that “the longer the liberation war, the better the socialism” is the very opposite of the truth, for long wars not only exhaust people and things but are by nature inimical to democracy, without which socialism is an empty phrase.

So the CCP abandoned the principle of democratic organisation after 1927, as a result of both Russian influence and the switch to a strategy of “military revolution” waged from the villages. The regime that the Communist leaders established in 1949 monopolised political decision, even against the classes they claimed to represent. They had long been used to seeing themselves as the sole source of decision, authority, honours, and reward. They formed their new administration from the top down, and explicitly based it on the Stalinist model. Far from stirring up the workers to take an active part in the affairs of state, they acted as arbiters over all spheres of life, from sex to science, and cracked down on all signs of independent organisation. They had broken the dynastic cycle - but only just.

This system in which decision-making powers
were vested in a small elite and in which dissent was met with crude repression was in the long run inherently unstable, and the Trotskyists' expectations of new social tensions and political crises were soon and repeatedly fulfilled. The Maoist leaders reckoned that they could prevent a Soviet-style bureaucratisation of the state by regularly directing outside social pressures onto it, and so put their reputation and popularity in China to productive use. But this strategy failed for two main reasons. First, the social forces mobilised to exert such pressure were never content to stay within the narrow limits set by the Party to their criticism, and when they expressed themselves in ways of which the Party disapproved, they were put down. Second, bureaucrats can only be brought properly under control if the people are sovereign over the government; sporadic pressuring from outside is no substitute for this.

Chen Duxiu had always thought, perhaps fatalistically, that the peasantry is incapable of making a modern revolution, and that only the active and widespread participation of the workers can achieve one. He was wrong in the short term, but in the long term he is surely right, for today issues for democracy, legality, representation, and control point like daggers at the heart of the Chinese state and threaten the Party's very future. Although the CCP has shown itself since 1949 to be more differentiated, flexible, and resourceful than the Trotskyists imagined at the time of the revolution, its fatal and abiding flaw is its acquired antagonism to the modern, urban constituency that gave birth to it and its inability to establish a firm, stable base in the most advanced parts of society, which it instead either alienates or holds at bay.

The Trotskyists' legacy for China is that they upheld the standard of urban revolution and socialist democracy, and pointed a way forward for Chinese society that would release it from the endless chain of repression, risings, and repression. Because of their democratic critique of Chinese society and Stalinist politics, they have become metaphors incarnate for a host of unresolved problems in Chinese politics. After 1949, the old Trotskyist polemic about the nature of the Chinese Revolution (proletarian or bourgeois-democratic, permanent or staged?) and the strategy and tactics to pursue in it was relegated to the history books, but the other main issue that had exercised Chen Duxiu and his followers in the 1930s - the relationship between socialism and democracy - became a central and burning issue for young people in China, especially in the universities. The mass protests and unofficial oppositions that have flowered every few years, culminating in 1989's popular rising (born neither of peasant misery nor, primarily, of nationalism) against a venal and vicious tyranny, are a retrospective vindication of their life's work and, for the handful who have survived, the first bitter-sweet fruits of victory in defeat. After 1949, opposition to the personality cult, the repression of dissent, the bureaucratic dictatorship, and the lack of civil and human rights became central planks in the platform of the Chinese Trotskyists. Today the class on which they originally pinned their hopes is no longer small, weak, marginal, and immature. The industrial proletariat in China now is a class of fifty million. Before 1949 Chinese factory workers were largely illiterate: now many are graduates at least of secondary school. Though only a small number of high-minded idealists among them are directly concerned with critical politics, many are disillusioned with China's present course and are receptive to radical ideas. Even the peasants are more prepared for an active and independent role in politics now that administration has penetrated to the villages. So the chances of a workers' movement in China are greater today than fifty years ago.

Is there then an echo of Trotskyism in China now? Or are the parallels between the libertarian, anti-bureaucratic concerns of Trotskyism and today's movement of dissent purely formal? In the 1950s, all the China-based Trotskyists were in prison and for most of the decade the authority of the CCP and the confidence it inspired were at their apogee. Even many of the Trotskyists beyond the reach of the CCP, mainly in Hong Kong, had given up politics and were busy pursuing other occupations. For a time both Wang Fanxi and Peng Shuzhi were able to watch and comment from exile on developments in China. Their last important writings on current events date from before the fall of the "Gang of Four" in 1976. The last great movement that they watched closely and wrote about at length before retiring was the Cultural Revolution. It was only after their retirement that the "liberation of thought" began in China. Meanwhile, outside China, particularly in Hong Kong, young Chinese disillusioned by developments on the mainland and radicalised by the Vietnam war had begun to show an interest in Trotskyist ideas. In 1979 Zheng Chaolin and other Trotskyists were freed from gaol. But Zheng Chaolin, born in 1901, was even older than his comrades overseas, and in any case he is still not wholly free to voice his opinion.

Even so, the ghost of Trotskyism haunts China. Dissidents like Wang Xihe, Chen Fu, and Shi Huasheng were attracted by the Trotskyist theses on socialist democracy, though they were careful not to subscribe too openly to Trotskyist ideology, which remains suspect even now.231 When Wang Xihe was eventually brought to trial in 19XX, among the books found in his possession and used as evidence against him was one by Wang Fanxi. It was no accident that the students on Tian'anmen Square in May and June 1989 drew their inspiration from the May Fourth Movement of 1919, which Chen Duxiu led, and that they even copied Chen's famous slogan calling for science and democracy. So though the movement that culminated in the massacre of June 4 shows that Chen's legacy still lives, it set back the prospect - seriously mooted before the crisis - of a full rehabilitation of Chen and his Trotskyist disciples, whose return to limbo symbolises the present blockage...
of China’s evolution toward greater freedom.

Others too closer to the Chinese mainstream began to find Trotskyism interesting in the 1980s. Though the Trotskyists have not been rehabilitated in China, Zheng Chaolin’s release and the availability of his and Wang Fanzhi’s memoirs have had quite an impact on historians and intellectuals. Though the Trotskyists’ old publications and records are lost or scattered across the archives of the police forces - Guomindang, CCP, GPU, or foreign - that have persecuted them, these memoirs have finally given younger Chinese a chance to get to know China’s Trotskyist veterans. In the past, said the journalist Dai Qing, even the word Trotskyism could produce an electric shock, so great was the prejudice accumulated over half a century of vilification. Today, writers and historians are free to read for themselves the truth about the Trotskyist enterprise in China, and to meet the Trotskyists on their own terms, both as living individuals and on the printed page. Previously people went out of their way to keep their distance from Trotskyist “traitors”: today they go out of their way to call on Zheng Chaolin and other released Trotskyists, in order to pay their respects and to consult them about events in the 1920s (of which Zheng is one of the only two surviving witnesses: the other being Deng Xiaoping, Zheng’s old comrade from France, and politically his junior in the 1920s). The most important factor in the reconsideration of Trotskyism now under way in China is, of course, the rediscovery of Chen Duxiu. By the late 1980s, research on Chen Duxiu was a growth industry in China: no fewer than three book-length biographical studies or chronologies of him were published in China between 1987 and 1989, as well as a major new study in Taiwan. Chen Duxiu’s last articles and letters, which discuss the relationship between socialism and democracy, have been particularly influential among a generation alienated by the “fascist lawlessness” of the Cultural Revolution. But it is impossible to stop the biography of Chen Duxiu short of his Trotskyism, so the new tolerance of and even enthusiasm for him has inevitably helped bring Chinese Trotskyism back into the public view. The rehabilitation of Wang Shiwei has, of course, also played a role in this new consideration for Trotskyism in China.

After 1979, many Chinese began to awaken to the faults of Mao and of the CCP, to ask why their confidence had been betrayed, and to rethink their attitude to politics. As new information about radical alternatives to existing Marxism became available, as old fears were removed and old taboos broken down, the Trotskyist memoirs began to make an impact in the academies and found an echo among creative writers. In the second part of his autobiographical trilogy, the veteran Communist and left-wing writer Wang Ruoyang draws a very positive picture of a stubborn, principled Trotskyist revolutionary, semi-fictionalised but apparently based on the memoirs of Wang Fanzhi. The novelist Zhou Meisen published a long and extremely sympathetic story about another Trotskyist, persecuted (like Zheng Chaolin) under all regimes, in the periodical Xaoshuo jie (World of Novels). Other writers and some Communists previously hostile to the Trotskyists are now friendly to them. Though the old debate on what strategy to follow in the Chinese Revolution now belongs to the past and evokes little apparent interest, other issues - particularly the Trotskyists’ more liberal attitude to literature - have begun to attract attention.
XIV. The Chinese Trotskyists and Trotskyism

Though the Chinese Trotskyists professed allegiance to the Fourth International, their links to it were quite tenuous. The Third International (or Comintern) to which the CCP belonged had resources of the Soviet state at its disposal and was in more or less uninterrupted radio contact with its Chinese followers save for a few months in the mid 1930s. The Fourth International had no such resources and kept in touch with China if at all by post, which was slow and unreliable; or through occasional visits there by foreign Trotskyists (mostly American seamen), some of whom stayed on for a while to work with their Chinese comrades. The Chinese Trotskyists spent the best part of the 1930s in prison: what secret organisation they built in those years was repeatedly destroyed by government agents. They spent the late 1930s cut off in the Chinese interior or on the "lonely island" of Shanghai, and in the early 1940s they were cut off from the outside world altogether when Shanghai was invaded. So they rarely had direct relations with other sections of the Fourth International. Even when they were able to stay in touch with the Opposition overseas, it was either directly through Trotsky in the early years or, later, via Frank Glass and other members of the American Socialist Workers Party.

So the Chinese Trotskyists played little part in the debates of the world Trotskyist movement, and though Trotsky himself kept up a desultory correspondence with Chen Duxiu and others in the 1930s, most foreign Trotskyists - particularly those in Europe - knew little about developments in their Chinese section. True, the Chinese Trotskyists published an impressive range of literature, but there was no one in the movement outside China who could read it, so it went unnoticed. After 1949, most of the Trotskyists who had stayed behind in China were incommunicado; after the arrests of December 1952, all of them were. In 1949, Peng Shuzhi and the members of his Political Bureau transferred to Hongkong, and Wang Panxi was sent to Hongkong to coordinate from a "safe place" the activities of his own organisation, which stayed behind in China. Peng Shuzhi landed up in Paris via Vietnam, but he got a cool reception, for in the eyes of most of his European comrades he had played no active role in the revolution that swept China in 1949, and he even refused to recognise it as a revolution; so as far as they could see, he had failed, and deservedly so. Wang Panxi, whose "safe place" turned out to be unsafe, was deported to Macau, where thinking and writing became more or less his sole political activity.

Between 1949 and 1975, when he left for Europe, he wrote several books and a large number of articles and pamphlets. Wang's small band of friends in Hongkong published these writings, but they were not translated, so they made no impact on non-Chinese Trotskyists overseas.

Because the Chinese Trotskyists were all along isolated from their comrades in other countries, their thinking about the remarkable drama that they at first acted and then watched develop along independent lines. Not all of them were capable of critical and original reflection. Peng Shuzhi was more a dogmatist than an innovator: it is symptomatic of his view on politics that he despised the iconoclastic Mao but liked and sympathised with the more orthodox and conventional Liu Shaoqi. His thoughts about the Chinese Revolution were rarely more than variants on slogans and theses he had learned in the 1920s.

Other Chinese Trotskyists, however, reworked old ideas and invented new ones when events showed received verities to be false. They themselves deny that they added anything new to the basic principles of Trotskyism and claim only to have elaborated and concretised them, for any theory is inevitably modified and changed when it is applied to a specific problem. But when old theories are stretched to permit new strategies and to make intelligible unexpected events and experiences, the point is sometimes reached where they change beyond recognition.

One example of a radical modification of an existing strategy is the concept of "victoryism" developed by Wang Panxi and Zheng Chaolin during the war against Japan. The word "victoryism" is a play on the idea of "defeatism", advocated by Lenin as a strategy for Marxists in imperialist countries in the First World War. So "defeatism" was not appropriate in a semi-colony like China, whose resistance to Japan was progressive and to be supported. But to support China's resistance to Japan (said Trotsky) was not the same as uncritically supporting the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek. "To bring the war to a victorious end," wrote Wang Panxi, "it was also necessary to have a revolutionary government." In other words, revolution could not wait on victory but was a precondition for it. Though Wang and Zheng developed the idea of "victoryism" independently, they thought that it was entirely compatible with, and a logical extension of, Trotsky's own attitude to the war. Trotsky said that revolutionaries should support the Chinese side but maintain their independence and the right to criticise the conduct of the war. "But criticism," says Wang Panxi, "developed beyond a certain point becomes the criticism of arms, it becomes revolution." There are parallels here with the Maoist strategy of both uniting with and struggling against the Guomindang in the second united front.
Peng Shuzhi, in contrast, emphasised the progressive nature of the war against Japan and opposed trying to win it through revolution. However, the difference between Wang’s group and Peng’s group on this question meant nothing in practice, for neither was ever in a position to try it out.

The other main issue on which Chinese Trotskyists developed original positions was the nature of the revolution carried out by the CCP and the reasons for its victory. This issue above all else taxed their inventive powers and theoretical ingenuity. For years they had been arguing - in line with orthodox Trotskyist opinion - that Stalinist parties like the CCP had degenerated beyond the point of reform into “petty-bourgeois” parties and so could no longer carry out revolutions; on the contrary, they were destined for defeat. So the Maoist victory of 1949 took the Chinese Trotskyists by surprise and threw them into great confusion.

Many of them at first argued that the new regime in Beijing was “bourgeois” and would never advance beyond its purely “bourgeois” nature. How then had a “bourgeois” party been able to overthrow the Guomindang? According to Peng Shuzhi, the CCP had won less through its own “subjective” efforts than because it had been lucky enough to profit from a series of “exceptional” historical circumstances, including the corruption and disintegration of the Chiang Kai-shek regime, the USA’s decision to abandon the Guomindang, the Japanese invasion (which benefited the CCP), and Russian aid. So he saw no reason to question the characterisation of the CCP as a “petty-bourgeois, peasant” party, which he said had been “the traditional Chinese Trotskyist notion for nearly twenty years”. As if to mock him, the new state soon began to move in a radically anti-capitalist direction, establishing itself in an apparently unassailable position. He then started to argue (in May 1952) that the CCP had changed in nature as a result of the large numbers of workers who had joined it after 1949, so it was “in transition toward becoming a workers’ party”. Peng’s ad hoc adjustment to his view of the CCP shares one thing in common with his whole argument about its role in the Chinese Revolution. He explains everything about it - its original “class nature”, its victory in 1949, and its evolution after 1949 - in terms of external and “objective” determinants: at no point is he prepared to credit the men and women who led the CCP with making the revolution.

For a creative and original attempt to reconcile the tradition of anti-Stalinism with the reality of the Chinese Revolution, we must look to the writings of Wang Fanxi, who by 1953 was the only member of his group free to reflect in public on the meaning of 1949. The imposition after 1945 of Soviet-style parties all over Eastern Europe and the victory of the CCP in China plunged the world Trotskyist movement into confusion. In Paris Michel Pablo, leader of the Fourth International, thought that the only possible explanation for the CCP’s victory was that it had abandoned Stalinism and become revolutionary. Wang Fanxi, however, did not agree with this conclusion. At first, following Max Schachtman, he analysed the Communist regime in China as a party of bureaucratic collectivists. Whereas Peng Shuzhi described the CCP’s overthrow of the Guomindang as a switch of power among bourgeois, Wang believed that the revolution had from the very start produced a qualitative change in Chinese society, though not the sort he wanted. “This analysis,” wrote Wang, “seemed to me to explain many features of the Stalinist parties and to solve the riddle of the CCP victory.” It was theoretically consistent and intellectually satisfying, but it failed to meet the needs of a prescription for revolutionary action, so in the end Wang dropped it. He started to rethink the old Trotskyist assessment of the class nature of the CCP. He still continued to characterise the CCP as Stalinist, but was it a petty-bourgeois party that had given up class struggle, as orthodox Trotskyists believed? No, and for four main reasons. First, because it had withdrawn to the countryside not of its own will, as part of a deliberate strategic reorientation, but to escape repression. Second, because in the villages it had not - even after its second united front with the Guomindang - renounced class struggle. Third, because the second united front of 1937 had been a tactical manoeuvre, not a strategic turn. Fourth, because the CCP “all along remained an organization of highly disciplined revolutionaries and carried out its recruitment (both political and military) on a class basis”. So it had remained “a working-class party of sorts”, for a political party cannot be reduced to its social composition, and we must look instead at “the people who lead it”. However, because of its switch to peasant war it had become profoundly bureaucratised and nationalist.

This analysis raises important questions about Trotsky’s view of Stalinism as thoroughly corrupt and bankrupt. But though Wang was prepared to admit that Mao-Stalinism was more resourceful than he had ever imagined, he still thought that it had been right to form a separate and independent Trotskyist party in China, for even where Stalinist parties do prove capable of overthrowing capitalism, the methods that they use to do so inevitably result in a “socialism” deformed by bureaucracy and despotism.
Notes

1. Traditionally Auguste Blanqui, the French revolutionary who spent thirty-three of his sixty-five years in prison (and so became known in France as l’enfermé), is regarded as the record holder for political imprisonment. The Chinese Trotskyist Zheng Chaolin had beaten Blanqui’s record by one year when he stopped from prison in June 1979 after twenty-seven years, to add to the seven he had already served under Chiang Kai-shek. But there are almost certainly even worse cases than Zheng’s.


12. Wilbur and How, Missionaries of Revolution, pp. 84-85.


38. Wang Fanxi, Memoirs, pp. 49-76.

39. Yueh Sheng, Sun Yat-sen University, pp. 208-209.


41. See Yueh Sheng, Sun Yat-sen University, for a list. Stuart Schram says of the Twenty Eight Bolsheviks in his early biography of Mao that “these young men [in fact four of them were women; GBH] had no revolutionary experience”. This is not quite true. Xia Xi and Yang Shangkun (one of the butchers of Tian anmen Square in 1989) had led China in mid and late 1927 respectively. But Schram’s further point that they were thoroughly imbued with the view prevailing in Moscow that a good grounding in Leninist theory was far more important than direct experience of the revolution is in itself false. (See Stuart R. Schram, Mao Tse-tung: A Political Biography, Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966, p. 150.)

42. Wang Fanxi, Memoirs, pp. 76-84.


44. Wang Fanxi, Memoirs, p. 97.

45. Wang Fanxi, Memoirs, pp. 105 and 129; Yueh Sheng, Sun Yat-sen University, pp. 174-180; Zheng Chaolin, Siebzehn Jahre Rebellen, p. 310. There is disagreement about the number of Chinese Trotskyists in Moscow. According to Comintern sources, there were only 29 at the Chinese University in Moscow (Materials for the Seventh World Congress, Moscow: Bureau of the Comintern Secretariat, 1935, p. 702). According to the one-time COP leader Zhang Guotao, a student called Li handed over a list of more than one hundred Trotskyists to the Stalinist authorities on defecting from the Opposition (Mingbao yuanhuan, 1968, vol. 3, no. 7, p. 87). According to Yueh Sheng, Sun Yat-sen University, pp. 164 ff.) a list of eighty to ninety students was submitted to the Party authorities by a traitor, but apparently there were others apart from these. There were twenty Party cells at Sun Yat-sen University; of the twenty-odd students in Sheng Yue’s own cell, all but two or three were Oppositionists. Sheng Yue says that only a few Chinese Trotskyists died in the camps, though the number who died in prison “was not known”; the majority, “after surviving terrible hardships, were sent back to China”. According to Tang Baolin, Biography, p. 81, two hundred odd were arrested, most of them not actual Trotskyists but simply opponents of Wang Ming. Wang Fanxi puts the number of Chinese Oppositionists in Moscow at about two hundred. In May 1981 Wang wrote a short note about Sheng Yue’s book: “Only recently did I come across this book by Sheng Yue, alias Sheng Zhongliang, one of Wang Ming’s ‘Twenty
Eight Bolsheviks', who left the CCP in 1925. In 1929 when the Chinese Trotskyist organisation in the University and its members were mercilessly crushed by the Wang Ming group with the help of the GPU, Sheng was the member of the Party committee appointed responsible for dealing with the Trotskyists. In Chapter 13 of his book he discusses some of the same events as I do in my book, and there are discrepancies between his account and mine. According to him, the man who committed suicide was not the man who actually handed over the list of secret Trotskyists. The suicide was Zhao Yanjing (Sheng forgot his name and only remembered that he was a native of Henan and had been a teacher and a school principal), who killed himself after making a half-hearted confession to Sheng and Ignatov, the Secretary of the Party Bureau, and the man who—several days after Zhao's death—handed over the list was called Li Pin. So the arrest by the GPU of the Chinese Trotskyists happened not before but after Zhao's suicide. Sheng is probably right, for whereas I heard the story from two Chinese Trotskyists who escaped from Siberia back to China, he knew the facts first-hand and was deeply implicated in the episode ‘from start to finish’. Sheng does not say whether the number of ‘some eighty to ninety’ was the total of Chinese Trotskyists in the University (or in Russia). So was it? I knew Li Pin well, and I know that he was a leading member of the Executive committee of the secret Trotskyist organisation in the University. (The actual person responsible for organisational affairs was Fan Jimiao, who appears in Sheng’s book as Fan Ken-pan.) So Li was in no position to provide a complete list, for as Sheng himself says, ‘the Trotskyists at Sun Yat-sen University were not in any underground organization which had only vertical, but no lateral, organizational connections. That is to say, members of one cell did not know what other cells there were or who belonged to them... Thus, any cell member who vouched for his loyalty was in a position to betray only his own cell members.’ So Li Pin could not have known all the members and there were almost certainly more than ‘eighty to ninety’ Chinese Trotskyists in Moscow. I cannot say exactly how many there were in late 1929, but I know for sure that in the summer of that year when I was a member of the leading committee there were more than one hundred in Moscow. Most of these Communist cells in the various universities and institutes of the Soviet Union who had become Trotskyists, and I was told that in the six months after my return to China the secret organisation grew.

49. Zheng Chaolin, Siebsjg Jahre Rebell, p. 264, wrongly says that this group was formed in late 1928 or early 1929.
50. Wang Fanxi, Shuang Shang huiyi (Shuang Shang’s memoirs), Hongkong: Chow’s Company, 1977, p. 153 fn. I made my English translation of Wang’s memoirs from this text, but some pages (including this footnote) were omitted for reasons of space from the published version of it.
53. Wang Fanxi interview; of Yuch Sheng, Sun Yat-sen University, p. 171, fn.
61. Evans and Block, eds., Leon Trotsky on China, pp. 345-397.
62. According to Zheng Chaolin, about one third of the eighty to ninety signatures were “invented”, but at another point he says that “some worker comrades used false names.” (Siebsjg Jahre Rebell, p. 266 and 306). It seems that what he meant was that one third of the signatures were unreal, i.e. some were fictitious and some were false.
65. See Wang Fan-hsi, Memoirs, p...
68. Zheng Chao Lin, Siebsjg Jahre Rebell, p. 263.
69. Tang Baolin, Biography, p. 71; Shuang Shang, ed., Tsuoluciji dang’anzhong, pp. 15-16 fn. 2; Wang Fan-hsi, Memoirs, p. 131. Shortly after the setting up of the October group Liu Renjing resigned from it and founded his own journal called Mingtian (Tomorrow), but this remained a one-man show. Liu Renjing played no further part in the Chinese Trotskyist movement in 1934 he translated materials for Harold Isaacs’s Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution; he was then arrested, and in prison he "reptected"; in 1938 he joined Ho Zongqian’s Anti-Communist League; in 1949, when the Communists took power, he wrote a statement denouncing Trotskyism. (See Zheng Chao Lin, Siebsjg Jahre Rebell, p. 345, and Wang Fan-hsi, Memoirs, pp. 140-141.)
73. Zheng Chao Lin, Siebsjg Jahre Rebell, p. 311.
74. Tang Baolin, Biography, pp. 34-42.
77. Tang Baolin, Biography, p. 71; Zheng Chao Lin, Siebsjg Jahre Rebell, p. 315. Both this footnote and the one quoted in Kufus (263) and Pu Qingquan (quoted in Zheng Chao Lin, Siebsjg Jahre Rebell, 360) say that Chen Duxiu scorned these young Trotskyists: Chen Binlin because they had gained their Trotskyist convictions in the relative security of Moscow; Pu Qingquan because they were “monkey pups still smelling of their mothers’ milk”. Both Zheng Chao Lin and Wang Fanxi contest this view, and point out that the young Trotskyists’ real detraction was Peng Shuzhi, i.e. Chen Binlin’s husband.
78. Tang Baolin, Biography, p. 96.
79. Tang Baolin, Biography, pp. 70 and 93.
82. Zheng Chao Lin, Siebsjg Jahre Rebell, p. 270 ff; Wang Fan-hsi, Memoirs, pp. 145-149. The resolutions of the Congress can probably be found in the Guomindang archives in Taipeh.
83. According to Tang Baolin, Biography, p. 107, the new organisation had some five hundred members.
84. According Wang Fanxi, the Committee comprised Chen Duxiu, Luo Han, Song Fengchun, Chen Yinou, Zheng Chao Lin, and Zhao II.
91. For example, see Tang Baolin, *Biography*, p. 190, where Liu Renjing is quoted to the same effect.
92. The charge of "opportunism" was based on the policies described in the chapter on "Chinese Trotskyism and Chen Duxiu" appended to Zheng Chaolin, *Siebing Jahre Rebell*, that Chen pursued in 1932, before his arrest in October of that year. See Tang Baolin, *Biography*, p. 130.
93. See Tang Baolin, *Biography*, pp. 192-192. According to Wang Fanxi (oral communication), the woman Trotskyist Li Callian went to Fuzhou during the rebellion, and the Trotskyists' positive attitude toward the rebellion was one of the factors that swung Issacs away from the official Party and toward the Opposition.
95. Wang Fan-hsi, *Memoirs*, pp. 172-173; Zheng Chaolin, *Siebing Jahre Rebell*, p. 331. On the Trotskyist movement in 1934, see also Tang Baolin, *Biography*, pp. 191-197. According to Tang Baolin, p. 197, Issacs and Glass were arrested, though as foreigners they were soon released; but according to Alex Buchman, another foreign Trotskyist present in Shanghai at the time, Issacs and Glass were not arrested.
99. Hu Shi used this phrase in his preface to Chen Duxiu zai shihua shenzheng (Chen Duxiu's Last Articles and Letters), first published posthumously by Chen's friends and later republished on Taiwan with Hu Shi's preface. (See in XXX.)
100. "Unless we conscientiously research Chen Duxiu," wrote Xiao Ke, another Party veteran, "the future Party history that we write will be one-sided" (quoted in Benton, "Two Purged Leaders," p. 317).
103. Chen's slogan calling for this resurrected word for word in Tiananmen Square in May 1989, on the seventieth anniversary of the May Fourth Movement.
121. Benton, "Two Purged Leaders."
128. See Kuhfts, "Chen Duxiu and Leon Trotsky," p. 274; and Jean van Heijenoort, *With Trotsky in Exiles: From Prinkipo to Coyoacan*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978, p. 143. This special committee, elsewhere called the General Council, was intended to be an honorary organisation; it never came into being.
131. In the summer of 1946, He Zhenhong took Chen Duxiu's last articles and letters from Sichuan to Shanghai. As executor of Chen's will, he edited into a pamphlet the manuscripts of a number of what he considered to be the more important letters, together with four of the articles. Sometime in 1948, those Trotskyists (in Shanghai) who remained well-disposed to Chen's memory produced a primitively printed edition of He Zhenhong's pamphlet, to which they added the title *Chen Duxiu zai jianwen bi zuhuan" (Chen Duxiu's last articles and letters). He Zhenhong sent a copy of the pamphlet to Dr Hu Shi, who wrote his own introduction to the articles and letters, and later sent the introduction and the pamphlet to friends of his by then in Taiwan. These people published the collection in Taibei at the *Zyous Zhonggguo chubanshe* ("Free China Press"), under the title *Chen Duxiu zai jianwen bi zuhuan he xishu* (Chen Duxiu's last articles and letters); there was a second printing of the Free China Press edition in Hongkong in June 1950. This Taiwan edition dropped several of Chen Duxiu's letters. In 1967, the truncated version of the pamphlet, together with a selection of other writings by and about Chen Duxiu, was published in Taibei by Zhanhu wenxue chubanshe under the title *Shian zishuan" (Shian's autobiography)."
140. Benton, “Two Purged Leaders.”
162. Benton, “Two Purged Leaders.” There was a special reason why Deng Xiaoping and others were prepared to be fair to Chen Duxiu on this question after Mao’s death. The man who started the main anti-Trotskyist campaign in 1938 in China was Kang Sheng, just back from Moscow where he had been trained by Wang Ming and the NKVD. Kang Sheng later switched his allegiance from Wang Ming to Mao, and was the Mochu’s chief inquisitor during the Cultural Revolution, when he branded Deng and others, when Kang died in 1975 he was among those most hated by the Deng group, which expelled him posthumously from the Party. When the time came to expose Kang’s frame-ups, consistency required that his first great frame-up (that of 1938) also be exposed.
172. Feiguen, *Chen Duxiu, especially ch. 5.
180. This united front was formed as part of a world-wide switch to more moderate policies by the Comintern as a result of Hitler’s rise to power in Germany.
185. Shuang Shan, “Cong Chen Duxiu ‘di zuhuo yijian’ shuiqi” (On Chen Duxiu’s “Last Views”), in *Xiabing wenti* (Some Ideological Questions), Hongkong, 1957, pp. 5-6.
187. For a rebuttal of the charge that Chen Duxiu “always disparaged the revolutionary role of the peasantry and opposed the peasant movement” see Gao Xiyin, “Reconsideration of Chen Duxiu’s Attitude toward the Peasant Movement”, *Chinese Law and Government*, vol. 17, nos. 1-2, pp. 51-67.
198. An intelligence report (No. 270,10491) in the archive of the Guomindang’s Intelligence Bureau in Taibei mentions an incident on the border between Shandong and Jiangsu in 1939 in which about one hundred and fifty Trotskyists were killed. See, however, Qian Jun, “Salu yianqiu ‘du gengfei Su Tao xishu’ (The Communist bosses: ‘Purge of Trotskyists’ in the ‘border region between Jiangsu, Shandong, and Henan’), *Gongdang wenti yanjiu* (Taibei) 11, 4, pp. 102-103, which denies that even the ringleaders of a “Trotskyist” conspiracy (perhaps leading to the same incident) at around this time were actually Trotskyists.
201. Tang Baolin, Biography, p. 279.


205. Felgen, Chen Duxiu, p. 71.


207. In 1989 Dai Qing, one of China's best-known investigative journalists, arrested after the June massacre in Tiananmen Square on suspicion of "taking part in the turmoil", published a major study of three writers, including Wang Shiwei, that defended Wang's libertarian stand and denounced his murder. Her study was called Xian dai Zhongguo zhishi fenzhi quan: Liang Shuming, Wang Shiwei, Chu Anqing (Contemporary Chinese Intellectuals: Liang Shuming, Wang Shiwei, and Chu Anqing), Nanjing: Hangzhou yishu chubanshe, 1989. Some months earlier these three studies had appeared as separate articles in Shanghai's Wenhai yaobao.


214. Yi Ding, Lu Xun, pp. 246-249; Wang Fanzhi, Memoirs, pp. 159-161.

215. The early Chinese Communists knew little or nothing about Marxist theory. It was not until 1937 that they became acquainted with descriptions of it sent to them from the Soviet Union. But by then Soviet Marxism was no longer a critical philosophy for competing schools but a set of sterile, vulgar, utilitarian dogmas, a closed state ideology whose main purpose was to justify Stalin's bureaucratic dictatorship. This was the "Marxism" that Mao, through Ai Shui, appropriated and used as a tool to shape his own tyrannical regime. Insofar as Marxism in its classical form reached China in the 1930s, it was through the endeavours of the Chinese Trotskyists.


217. Wang Fanzhi, Memoirs, p. 161; Ch'en Pi-lan, "Introduction," p. 34.

218. Letter to the Chinese Opposition (January 8, 1931). In Evans and Block, eds., Leon Trotsky on China, p. 500.

219. Wang argues his case in Shuang Shan, Mao Zedong zizhu lun (Studies on Mao Zedong Thought), Hongkong: Xidu chaobanshe, 1973, esp. ch. 7; Cai Lian (pseud.), "Liangzhong Buduan Geming Lun" (Two Theories of Permanent Revolution), appendix to Yi Yin (pseud.), Buduan geming lun ABC (ABC of Permanent Revolution), Hongkong: Xindu chaobanshe, 1958, pp. 61-71; and in his own translator's introduction to Leon Trotsky, Xin lusang (The New Course), Hongkong 1958.

220. Tang Baolin, Biography, p. 78.

221. Tang Baolin, Biography, p. 100.


223. Tang Baolin, Biography, pp. 103-104.


229. "That is not to say, however, that Chen Duxiu and the Trotskyists were mere "Westernised Intellectuals" without roots in China. Lee Felgen, Chen Duxiu's biographer, subjects to telling criticism the thesis that Chen Duxiu was an unthinking believer in Western solutions to China's problems. That a person of Chen's towering presence, immense breadth, and indelible influence could have lacked roots in China's culture is indeed implausible, and Felgen shows that Chen was first and foremost a Chinese patriot for whom democracy was a way of restoring life and strength to the Chinese people.

230. Quoted in Gregor Benton, "Introduction" to Wang Fanzhi, Memoirs, p. xxv.


234. The story is called Zhong'e (Hames).


239. Evans and Block, eds., Leon Trotsky on China, p. 567.


