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China: “I won’t go to Moscow until the revolution triumphs”

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A review of Wang fan-hsi’s ‘Memoirs of a Chinese Revolutionary’



These are the words that Mao said to a comrade in 1927 when the Chinese Communist movement was in complete chaos. They are mentioned at the end of [the book by the Chinese Trotskyist Wang fan-hsi](#). The book is written in 1957 and covers one of the most tumultuous periods of Chinese history from 1919 and the May Fourth movement to the victory of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1949 and final defeat of Trotskyist opposition in 1952. Wang survived both physically and without being thrown in jail (as most Chinese Trotskyists were by either the Kuomintang (KMT) in the 1930s or CCP in 1952) thanks to being transferred to Hong Kong in 1947.

The book is very well and very honestly written, and I suppose also very well translated since the text flows easily. (Wang himself worked mostly as writer and translator in order to survive in the 1930s and 1940s—since his “job” of professional revolutionary paid no returns in cash; rather the “pay” was in terms of permanent poverty, precarious survival, and many years in jail, punctuated by torture by Kuomintang goons.)

Since the book covers a long period in Chinese and world history there are many things that one can discuss, but I will limit myself to three: Trotskyist movement, Moscow in 1927-29, and Stalinist international politics and Wang’s judgment on Mao. But before I go to these topics, I need to note a thing which is not surprising, but is worth mentioning: an extremely high intellectual and moral caliber of the left-wing, and especially Communist, activists in China in the first three decades of the 20th century. This is not surprising because similar self-selection existed in many countries in those years. But perhaps that in China the self-selection was even stronger than elsewhere because China suffered not only from an unjust social system but also from humiliating colonialism.

The features of Trotskyism which appear in this book (partly thanks to very candid description by Wang) are dogmatism, heavy emphasis on ideology as against practical action, and factionalism. For example, after a formal Trotskyist Chinese Communist party was founded in 1931, it immediately broke into four sub-parties, each with hardly a hundred members, and despite a short period of

“unification”, done at Trotsky’s insistence, the factions continued to exist. This made Trotskyists almost entirely irrelevant in the great struggle that opposed the Japanese, KMT and CCP. Wang mentions that other than for two small units, Trotskyists never managed to field any military force against the Japanese. Trotskyist activity during the war against Japan consisted in translations of Marxist classics and their distribution to Shanghai’s workers. It does not take much imagination to see that Shanghai’s workers might not have been in 1941 extremely keen to spend their time reading Plekhanov and Trotsky. The total failure of Trotskyist parties, frankly analyzed by Wang in the last section of the book, is rooted in that sterile intellectualism.

Wang spent two years in Moscow, sent there as a promising revolutionary in 1927. His description of Moscow in 1927-29, seen through the eyes of a foreign Communist, is very interesting. There were more than 1000 Chinese “students”- revolutionaries attending two universities “University of the Toilers of the East” and “Sun Yat-sen”. Wang was in Moscow when the split between most of the leading Bolsheviks and Trotsky took place. But the Trotskyist Opposition was not easily defeated. At the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution, the Opposition tried, and partly succeeded, to break into the “official” rallies. Chinese students were divided approximately 50-50. Even Russian cadres who taught courses at the two universities were divided: many rowdy discussions followed, and sympathizers of the Opposition were gradually eased out, replaced by others, then jailed or exiled, but it took time and things did not at all move fast and easily.

Wang also shows in some details how the Stalinist line found its supporters among those who either wanted more stability and an end to extreme left-wing policies as well as among those who directly benefited from bureaucratization, the opportunistic new class.

After 1929 when Wang returned to China, he could observe (and suffer) first-hand from the disastrous decisions made by Stalin that led to disarmaments of Communists while they “worked together” with KMT and before Chiang Kai-shek turned against them and massacred them. The Comintern line, here like in many other instances as Wang argues, was extremely timid, “petty-bourgeois” and directly responsible for the decimation of Communist parties. During the entire period that he was in power, Stalin’s international policy was always dominated by excessive caution, numerous mistakes and unwillingness to help indigenous revolutionary forces. Only those, like Mao and Tito, who ignored his blandishments succeeded in taking power.

This is where Mao’s quote mentioned in the beginning becomes relevant. Mao, as Wang writes, was ideologically a Stalinist, but he was not a Stalinist cadre. That role was played by Wang Ming who was sent by the Soviets to China in 1929 with a group of “28 Bolsheviks” and who briefly managed to become the leader of CPP until he lost out in intra-party struggle with Mao. Mao ignored Comintern’s “suggestions” or orders, paid mere lip service to them, and fashioned the Party in such a way that it fitted Chinese conditions (including using peasantry, rather than workers, as the basis of the Party.) Mao, Wang argues, shared many features with the disgraced founder of CCP, Chen Duxiu: grounding in Chinese philosophy with European Marxism only a “rough superstructure”, dislike of “red compradors” and huge self-confidence and stubbornness.

Wang also worked for several years with Chou Enlai whose administrative talents he praises. Every leader wanted to have Chou by his side since he was an excellent administrator but lacked ambition to be No. 1. Already in the early 1930s, Chou acquired the sobriquet of “pu-tao-wang”, the Chinese toy “old man that never falls down”—in every shake-up Chou would emerge on the winning side. This as we know, continued until the end of his life.

This is a precious, intelligent, candid and honest book for those interested in Chinese and global Communist history and the period of time when these two histories were tied to each other. Today, international workers’ movement no longer exists and China follows its path that is still in some

aspects inheritor of the era discussed here, but in other aspects can be better understood within the long-run context of Chinese history.

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