

## Reviews

### CHINESE REVOLUTIONARY

Wang Fan-hsi

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This memoir is a unique document in more than one respect. Politically it is a retrospective glance at the revolutionary struggles in China leading up to 1949, narrated by an activist, a veteran of the movement. It is also a beautiful and moving story of a life devoted entirely to the high ideal of communism, a story of tenacity and courage told with touching modesty and self-effacement.

Wang Fan-hsi was pushed onto the thorny road of revolution in his early teens by the May the Fourth Movement of 1919, and never abandoned it. Exiled in 1949 from his native country, he spent 16 long and dismal years in the Portuguese colony of Macao where in 1957, without access to sources,

documents and libraries, he completed his recollections in order 'to help others understand the past and thus prepare better for the future'. Nearly a quarter of a century had to elapse before his work, published now in a proper Chinese edition in Hong Kong and in an excellent translation in English by Gregor Benton, can reach a wider public and fulfil its function.

Wang came to political maturity when Chinese communism was dominated by Chen Tu-hsiu, one of the intellectual pioneers of Marxism in Asia, and an outstanding political thinker and theorist who led the party right from its inception till late in 1927. It was this school of thought which, one might assume, predisposed the young Wang, then a university student in Peking, later on to embrace the Trotskyist heresy rather than to swim with the tide of Stalinism.

Wang joined the party in 1925, the year when the fate of Chinese communism was truly in the balance. Against the advice of the Russians, Chen Tu-hsiu was preparing to take his party out of the Kuomintang, to re-establish its own identity and its own independence, albeit in alliance with the Kuomintang. But the pressure from Moscow and the appeals for 'international discipline' were too insistent. Chen Tu-hsiu had none of



the slyness and tactical cleverness of Mao, and none of his strength and determination, and so, against his better knowledge, he submitted to the diktat of the fraternal party. The results, as we know, were disastrous. Within a very short space of time Chiang Kai-shek turned against his erstwhile allies

and supporters, and in coup after coup, decimated their ranks. His action attained unprecedented brutality in the final massacre of workers in Red Shanghai, in which tens of thousands of communists perished.

It was at this time, when 'there was no longer any revolution in which to participate', that young Wang Fan-hsi was sent to Moscow. He was one of the seven or eight hundred Chinese, half of them intellectuals, who were chosen to study and undergo military instruction for future class struggles in the capital of the Soviet Union. Before leaving China, Wang already had his doubts about the wisdom of his party's policy. He also had his first taste of prison, all the more bitter and difficult to bear because it was inflicted on him under a government in Wuhan which was considered as revolutionary. In the middle of the 1920s the spectacle of communists imprisoned under communists was not yet as widespread as it became later on. The two years in Moscow in no way dispelled Wang's doubts, but on the contrary, confirmed them. Paradoxically enough, he emerged from his studies at the Communist University for the Toilers of the East a determined oppositionist and a Trotskyist.

The chapters devoted to his stay in Moscow are of utmost interest. The Chinese students arrived at the capital of the first workers' state full of hope and trust, knowing little of the internal struggles which were rent the party and the country. '... we had been told that Lenin had been succeeded by Stalin who was now the leader of the communist movement both in Russia and in the world, whereas Trotsky was consumed by personal ambition, was a romantic, and was a militarist man of the Chiang Kai-shek type'. But things were not all that simple. Soon the Chinese were drawn into the fierce factional struggles, subjected to incessant barrage of official propaganda, intimidated and manipulated, and thoroughly bewildered by whatever echoes of the voices of the opposition they were able to catch. It was by trying to find out the most recent history of their own country, the history which they had themselves made, witnessed and lived through that they realised how misleading the official version of events was. They were supplied with a mass of documents over which they pored breathlessly, only to discover that they could learn much more from documents which were withheld from them. During his second year in Moscow, Wang was already a wholehearted supporter of the Trotskyist opposition, devoting all his time free from official studies to translating and circulating oppositionist literature among his countrymen.

Concealing his Trotskyist allegiance, Wang returned to China in 1929, where for a time he worked in the organisational department of the Party's Central Committee under Chou En-lai, the future Prime Minister, among whose many talents was that of emerging always on the winning side. There was then in the party a rather tolerant attitude towards the sympathisers and members of the 'Trotsky-Ch'en Tu-hsiu' faction because the Chinese were too preoccupied with their day to day tasks to care much for the baffling internecine struggles in the Soviet Union. But, shortly after the wholesale arrests of the oppositionists in Moscow, an order from the Soviet party put a stop to this 'fraternisation', and Wang and his friends were expelled from the party.

During the twenty years that followed, Wang and the dwindling group of Trotskyists carried on a hopeless but valiant struggle to maintain an independent organisation. But, however correct their theoretical analysis of the situation might have been, it was an undertaking doomed to fail. Squeezed between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party backed by the Soviet Union, hounded by both, the small band of Trotskyists had no chance. Numerically insignificant, without means of making their views known, without popular support and unable to act, the group was torn by internal dissensions, prone to constant splits and defections. Its precarious existence in double clandestinity and complete isolation was in itself a miracle of heroism and tenacity.

Their failure to establish themselves as a political force does not necessarily mean that the discussion of their strategic 'errors' is unproductive. The problems that agitated them may still be alive for revolutionary movements outside Europe. Should they have, as Wang now maintains, tried to get a foothold in the countryside and look for support among the rural population? Was it a mistake to cling to the view that the urban proletariat remains the decisive agent of the revolution? In retrospect the Chinese revolution may be seen as a confirmation of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution — was it not, to begin with, a bourgeois revolution which transformed itself into a socialist one? But none of the chief promoters of that revolution, who anyhow were not of the theoretical bent of mind but pragmatist to the core, were aware of this. Nor were the Trotskyists. It was not theory that affected reality, but reality which caught up with theory.

The fact was that the most idealistic revolutionaries played hardly any practical role in the tremendous upheaval that changed the face of Asia. And yet they secured for

themselves an honourable place in the history of that upheaval. Wang Fan-hsi, probably the last survivor of Chinese Trotskyists martyred in the prisons of both Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Tse-tung, has written a worthy record of their endeavours and has thereby earned the respect and gratitude of future historians.

**Tamara Deutscher**