

# In Memory of A Chinese Revolutionary: Zheng Chaolin, 1901-1998

Wednesday 8 February 2012, by [WANG Fanxi / Wang Fan-hsi](#) (Date first published: 1 November 1998).

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ZHENG CHAOLIN, A veteran of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and of the Chinese Trotskyist movement, died August 1 in Shanghai. He devoted his entire life to the cause of the liberation of the Chinese workers and peasants, and yet his achievement was far from restricted to the revolution.

Zheng was extremely versatile; his talents were numerous and many sided. He was at once a writer, a poet, an historian and linguist, and a translator. His achievements were not only numerous but exemplary. In all respects he avoided a superficial approach and probed deeply into the essence of things, assiduously perfecting his skills and knowledge.

Naturally, he was first and foremost a faithful and unyielding revolutionary. His efforts and achievements in other fields took as their keynote his revolutionary thinking, and were imbued with his revolutionary spirit. Therefore I shall restrict myself in this obituary to writing a brief introduction to his life as a revolutionary.

Zheng Chaolin was born in Zhangping in Fujian Province in 1901, and as a boy received a traditional Chinese education. In 1919 he went to France as part of the "Work Study Program" (under which young Chinese students financed their studies by working part-time in French industry), and came under the influence of Western thought, particularly the Russian Revolution.

As a result, he gradually abandoned his attachment to the philosophy of Confucius and Mencius and even of Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi, and embraced the ideas propagated by Chen Duxiu and his co-thinkers who advocated democracy and science. Shortly afterwards he embraced Marxism, and very soon progressed from thought to action.

In June 1922 when some young Chinese Marxists living in Europe held a meeting in Paris at which they set up the "Youth Communist party," Zheng Chaolin was among the eighteen delegates, who included Zhou Enlai, Zhao Shiyuan and Yin Kuan. In 1923 he was selected to go to Russia to study at Moscow's University for the Toilers of the East.

In July 1924, when the CCP urgently needed cadres as a result of the rapid development of the revolutionary situation in China, he was sent back to China together with Chen Yannian and others. He worked in the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee, edited party journals, drafted internal educational materials and external propaganda materials, and translated Bukharin's ABC of Communism while at the same time teaching at the party school, i.e. Shanghai University.

From 1925 to 1927, when the Chinese Revolution grew apace, he participated in the famous May

Thirtieth Movement and in the second and third Shanghai workers' risings. After Chiang Kai-Shek's bloody coup of April 12, 1927, Zheng went with the Central Committee of the CCP to the Wuhan, where he took part in the party's Fifth Congress. After the Congress, he was appointed head of Propaganda Department of the Hubei Provincial Committee.

After the final defeat of the revolution, he took part in the party's famous August 7<sup>th</sup> Conference, and soon afterward secretly moved back to Shanghai with the new Central Committee and took charge of the new party organ *Bolshevik*, as its chief editor.

In 1928, he went to Fujian to reorganize party affairs in the province. In 1929, he married comrade Liu Jingzhen. Not long afterwards, he was arrested for the first time by the Guomindang. Fortunately, his identity was not discovered, and after just forty days he was freed from prison as a result of the secret intervention of the party.

### **Turning to Trotskyism**

Between 1929 and 1930, he began to come into contact with Leon Trotsky's writings on the Chinese Revolution. Deeply impressed, he turned towards Trotskyism, together with Chen Duxiu and over eighty veteran party members.

In May 1931 Zheng, Chen Duxiu and three other comrades represented the Proletariat group at the unification conference of the four Trotskyist groups. He was elected to the Central Committee of the new Trotskyist organization and took charge of its Propaganda Department.

Not long afterwards, he was arrested by the Guomindang authorities and sentenced to fifteen years in prison, though he was freed after just seven years, when the Japanese War broke out.

After his release from prison, he rested and recuperated for a while in a village in Anhui Province together with his wife, and proofread and translated the remaining part of Trotsky's *The Revolution Betrayed* (one third of which had already been translated by two other Trotskyists in Nanjing Prison).

In 1940 he returned to Shanghai, where he joined the leadership of the Chinese Trotskyist organization and the editorial board of its underground paper, *Struggle*. At the same time, he translated Volumes II and III of Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*.

After outbreak of a new World War in Western Europe in 1939, differences of opinions grew up in the Chinese Trotskyist leadership, principally in regard to what attitude to adopt to the Chinese resistance once the Anti-Japanese War in China became caught up in the wider war. A protracted dispute ensued, and spread from political to organizational split in 1942.

Chaolin was a leading member of the group later known as the International Workers' Party of China. [This group argued that the Guomindang's struggle against Japan had become subordinated to its partnership with U.S. imperialism. See Gregor Benton, *China's Urban Revolutionaries*, 39.—ed.]

### **Occupation and War**

On December 7, 1941 the Japanese army occupied Shanghai's foreign settlements and revolutionary activity directed against the Japanese became extremely difficult. From then until the Japanese

defeat in August 1945, Chaolin put his main effort into writing. Apart from editing *Internationalist*, the underground Trotskyist journal, he wrote his memoirs and *Three Travellers*, a collection of political debates in the form of the imaginary dialogues.

He also wrote the *ABC of Permanent Revolution* and a *Critical Biography of Chen Duxiu* (uncompleted). To earn a living, he also translated some literary works, among them Ignazio Silone's *Fontamara* and a book by Andre Gide.

From August 1945 to May 1949, from the Japanese surrender and the civil war between the Guomindang and the CCP through to the Communist victory in China, he wrote numerous articles for the *New Banner*, a publicly declared Trotskyist biweekly, which was banned by the Guomindang Government after twenty-one issues.

On the eve of the Communist occupation of Shanghai, the group to which he belonged reorganized as the International Workers Party (IWP), which he helped lead. In the meantime, Chaolin systemically researched the social nature of the new China and wrote a pamphlet on the subject, *On State Capitalism*.

### **Decades In Mao's Prisons**

In the next two to three years, the IWP continued its activities under communist rule and extended its influence. As a result, on December 22, 1952 its entire membership, together with all the other Chinese Trotskyists and even sympathizers, were netted up by the Maoist political police.

This development had naturally been foreseen. As a precaution, the other Trotskyist Organization, under Peng Shuzhi [Peng Shu-tse], has already transferred its leadership to Hong Kong. The group to which Zheng Chaolin belonged also decided to send someone to set up a liaison station in Hong Kong.

Chaolin himself, however, refused to go and insisted on staying behind in Shanghai, although he was fully aware of the great danger that he faced there. His St. Peter-like spirit of self-sacrifice led him not to a martyr's grave but to a further twenty-seven years in prison, including physical and spiritual abuse.

In June 1979, as a result of changes in the leadership of the CCP and in response to calls by people both inside and outside China (in 1979 he was declared a Prisoner of Conscience by Amnesty International), Chaolin and eleven other Trotskyist survivors of Mao's prisons were restored to liberty.

In all, Chaolin spent a total thirty-four years behind bars under first the Guomindang and then the CCP, thus equalling the record for political imprisonment set by the 19<sup>th</sup> century French revolutionary Louis Auguste Blanqui.

In the nineteen years between his release in 1979 and his death in August 1998, Chaolin suffered from poor health as a result of his long years in prison, but he refused to live the sort of life that most retired people live, and put enormous effort into reflecting or writing about events in the world around him.

In those years, he achieved three main things:

First, he helped various historians write true accounts of the Chinese Revolution and the CCP

(including Chinese Trotskyism), to correct distortions made, consciously or unconsciously, by official historians, and in particular to refute past slanders and distortions directed by the CCP against Chen Duxiu.

Second, he reflected independently and systematically on fundamental questions in the Chinese and the World Revolution, and put the process and outcome of those reflections into writing in his long essay "Cadreism."

Third, he repeatedly demanded of successive Congress of the CCP that they rehabilitate the Chinese Trotskyists, formally declare Trotskyists (in China and throughout the world) not to be counter-revolutionaries, and admit that the past suppression of the Chinese Trotskyists had been wrong.

He recorded his efforts in these three regards in writings of more than one million Chinese characters. Unfortunately, so far it has been possible to publish only a small part of them. Even though Chaolin enjoyed personal freedom after 1979 and was even named as a member of the Shanghai Municipal Political Consultative Committee, he continued to be labelled a "counter-revolutionary" and to suffer discrimination.

In recent years, his memoirs were twice allowed to be published "internally" (i.e. for a restricted readership) and his translation of D. Merezhkovski's *Resurrection of the Gods* was republished, but none of his main works dealing with ideological and political questions, whether written in prison or after his release, has received permission to be published.

Because Zheng all along resolutely maintained his opposition to Stalinism and Maoism, he has continued to be viewed as a "counter-revolutionary." Of his main writings, only his memoirs have appeared in English, in a volume titled *An Oppositionist for Life: Memoirs of the Chinese Revolutionary Zheng Chaolin*, published in the USA in 1996 by Humanities Press. (His memoirs were also published in German in 1991 by the ISP Verlag Frankfurt, in a translation by Rudolf Segall under the title *Siebzig Jahr Rebell: Erinerrungen eines Chinesischen Revolutionars.*)

From these writings, foreign friends can get some idea of the life of this remarkable Chinese Marxist-Trotskyist.

Chaolin's wife Liu Jingzhen died less than half a year after her and Chaolin's release from a labor camp in June 1979. Their son Frei, born in 1938, died in 1945. In his final years, Chaolin was cared for by his great niece.

**Wang Fanxi**

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\* From Against the Current (ATC) 77, November-December 1998:  
<http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/1777>