

# Problems of Chinese Trotskyism

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## Presentation

When the Chinese Trotskyists split in May 1941, the minority group led by Zheng Chaolin and Wang Fanxi published the magazine *The Internationalist*, and from June 1946, *New Banner*. In July 1949 it assumed the name of the Internationalist Workers Party of China.

When the previous document by Peng Shuzi [1] had been printed in *Fourth International*, the Internationalist group was “surprised and embittered”, describing it as a “combination of slanders, distortions, black lies and irresponsible boasts”, commenting that it “aroused no little indignation in our ranks”. This rejoinder was sent to the magazine’s editorial board as well as to the rival Workers Party, which published it in condensed form in *New International*, Volume xiv, no.2, February 1948, pp.58-62, and no.3, March 1948, pp.90-2. It should, of course, be read in conjunction with the former piece, along with Wang Fang-hsi, *Chinese Revolutionary*, London 1980, pp.232-7, 247-51. A more complete version of these memoirs is promised to appear in English, hopefully in the near future.

Of the names mentioned in this article “the traitor Liu-Jen-Ching” Is Liu Renjlng, who defected to the Guomindang after 1937, “Yvon Cheng” is the pseudonym of Zheng Chaolin, and “Li Fu-Jen” that of Frank Glass. The editor whose notes appear is Max Shachtman.

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## The struggle with Chen Duxiu

The Report begins with a description of the struggle carried on between the Chinese Trotskyist organisation and Chen Duxiu. It attempts to describe the relations which existed between the Chinese Old Man and the old revolutionists of the 1925-27 generation. The Report says of Chen

Duxiu: "He turned his back upon our League almost immediately after he left prison" and "declared in a letter to one of our old comrades in Shanghai that he had decided to combat damned Bolshevism to the very end of his life!"

Such a description is oversimplified, therefore incorrect. Chen Duxiu, "the father of Chinese Communism", the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party from its very inception until August 1927, the No 1 leader of the Chinese revolution of 1925-27, who became a Trotskyist after the debacle of the revolution, became one of the founders and leaders of the Chinese Trotskyist movement, served four years in a Guomindang prison while remaining a staunch Trotskyist - Chen Duxiu did break with Bolshevism during the Second World War. But this break did not take place "immediately" and it was not final.

During the period from the beginning of the anti-Japanese war down to the outbreak of the Second World War, he held the position that the Chinese Trotskyists could do nothing else than support the anti-Japanese war unconditionally. In his opinion it was quite out of the question to speak of revolution during the war or of transforming the war into a revolution. But as usual with him, Chen Duxiu did not present this position as a matter of principle but rather empirically and tactically. He justified his position in the following manner: we must at present support the war; as for this revolution, let's speak of it later. You can see from this that Chen Duxiu's position was false; but it was neither final nor systematic.

In 1939, one year after the beginning of the Sino-Japanese War, in order to acquaint himself with the position of the Chinese Old Man, Trotsky asked Comrade Li Fu-jen to make an inquiry of him. Chen Duxiu wrote a statement in answer which was given to Trotsky by Li Fu-jen. After reading Chen Duxiu's statement Trotsky wrote Comrade Li as follows:

I am extremely glad to know that our friend remained our friend politically, although there are some possible divergences existing between us; but right now I cannot judge these possible divergences with necessary precision ... However, I consider that what he expressed is essentially correct. (Trotsky's letter to Li Fu-jen, retranslated from the Chinese, 11 March 1939.)

Chen Duxiu's position moved further away from that of the Trotskyists after the signing of the German-Soviet pact and the outbreak of war in Europe. He held that we should support the democracies versus the Fascist and Russian 'imperialisms'. He was of the opinion that in order to facilitate the victory of the democracies in the war, the Indians should for the time being put a stop to their nationalist movement.

It goes without saying that this is the same as the position that was held by Plekhanov, Guesde and Co during the First World War and that was held by the Third International after the outbreak of the German-Soviet war, during the last slaughter of mankind. Needless to say, such a position meant a complete break with Trotskyism.

But, as we have said and as Trotsky had correctly observed, Chen Duxiu was not a theoretician of Plekhanov's type but a revolutionist à la Lassalle. Lacking profound theoretical training, his action was always directed by impressions, his opinions were changeable and fallible; but at the same time and for the same reason he was often able to make bold corrections of his mistakes.

The over-thirty-years' history of Chen Duxiu's revolutionary activity was replete with such conflicts and mistakes. One's defects sometimes become one's merit. It was partially because of this 'defect', we believe, that Chen Duxiu was able to complete his evolution from a democrat to a Communist and from a Communist in general to a Trotskyist, in the brief period of seven or eight years.

We may speculate whether, if Chen had not died, he would have devoted the remaining years of his life to the cause of the *Fourth International*. We cannot give a definite answer to this question. That is why we also said that his break with Trotskyism would not be considered as final.

What attitude did we, the so-called “old comrades of the 1925-27 generation” take towards Chen’s false ideas? Comrade Li Fu-jen gave very good testimony on this point in the August 1942 issue of the *Fourth International*:

This polemic, which was carried on by correspondence between the remote Sichuan village where Chen lived and the Central Committee in Shanghai, left Chen in a minority of one [our emphasis].

How far the Chinese revolutionary movement has advanced beyond the political level which Chen represented is evidenced most strikingly in the fact that he could not find in the Chinese organisation a single supporter for his later political ideas.

Comrade Li Fu-jen is an old friend of the Chinese Trotskyists. He lived in China during the period from 1935 to 1941. He was a member of the Chinese organisation and more than that, he was once elected a member of the provisional Central Committee. Since he is quite conversant with the ideological groupings of Chinese Trotskyism, his testimony, of course, is trustworthy.

But the Report said, exactly to the contrary: “Almost all the comrades who belong to the 1925-27 generation were grouped around him; Chen’s retreat exercised a decisive influence over them.” What a black lie!

We, whom the Report calls the “old generation”, not only did not support Chen’s ideas but carried on a most uncompromising struggle with him; so much so that finally the ‘Old Man’ became very angry with us and broke off all relations.

In attempting to describe the ‘old generation’ the Report fell into a gross self-contradiction. In the first paragraph it said: “... Only after the comrades who returned from the Nanking prisons provided the organisation with a new impetus, only after a serious ideological re-education was the movement put in order ...” while in the second paragraph it said: “... it was a question of the complete retreat and disillusionment of the Old Bolsheviks ...”

Neither the first nor the second paragraph is correct. The former exaggerated the rôle of the ‘old comrades’, while the latter derogated them.

## **The traditional ideological differences within Chinese Trotskyism**

The inception of the Chinese Trotskyist movement dates back to 1928. There were serious divergences, political as well as theoretical, in its ranks almost from its very birth.

During the 19 years of experience of the Chinese Trotskyist organisation there have been two main traditional issues on which there were great differences of opinion. These were: (1) the relation between the democratic revolution and the Socialist revolution. (2) Tactical questions regarding our attitude toward the Guomindang, centring around the slogan of the constituent assembly.

On the first question there were many comrades who showed Stalinist leanings, headed by Comrade Peng Shuzi, the present leader of the Struggle Group, and the traitor Liu Renjing, known in the foreign press as Niel Sih. The latter took and the former still takes the position that the democratic and Socialist revolutions constitute two different and successive stages, if not two different historical

epochs. In their opinion the future Chinese revolution will begin with the democratic revolution during which the power will be conquered, while the Socialist revolution will begin only after the establishment of workers' power.

The Report clearly describes this idea when it says: "We preach the elementary ideas of the permanent revolution, as a revolution starting from the democratic struggle to the goal of Socialism." (*Fourth International*, July-August 1947, p.214.)

Another group of comrades, the present leading elements of the Internationalist Group, opposed this idea from the very beginning. They considered that such an explanation of the idea of Permanent Revolution has nothing in common with the Trotskyist theory, since the idea of "starting from the democratic struggle to the goal of Socialism" can be accepted not only by Stalin but also even by Leon Blum and Attlee. We hold a different position, one which really follows Trotsky's analysis of the character of China's future revolution.

According to Trotsky the character of the future Chinese revolution will be Socialist from the very beginning owing to the following considerations: (1) The class struggle, especially the struggle between bourgeoisie and working class, has become extremely sharp. (2) The agrarian revolution in China is anti-capitalist. (3) The struggle for the expropriation of the factories has become imperative. (See Trotsky, *The Summary and Perspective of the Chinese Revolution, The Third International After Lenin*, p.184.)

In accordance with his ideas we are of the opinion that the democratic and Socialist tasks of the Chinese revolution are interlaced with each other, not that they successively follow each other. Thus we held and still hold that the democratic tasks can only be solved, in passing, by the Socialist revolution; that the scope of the democratic movement can be widened and deepened into a revolution; and that the revolution can have a perspective of development only when the democratic struggle is waged as a factor of Socialist revolution. If, on the contrary, we make Socialism a 'goal' and limit ourselves to staying within the circle of 'democratic struggle' in the first stages of revolution, then the 'goal' would become (as we Chinese put it) the "flower in the looking glass" which will never be reached.

There were also two positions opposed to each other from the very beginning on the second question - that is, on the tactical question of our attitude toward the Guomindang, with the constituent assembly as the central slogan. One group, again headed by Peng Shuzi and the traitor Liu Renjing, saw in the constituent assembly slogan mainly a "historical driving force". They hoped that there would be a parliamentary perspective of long duration in China, and that the Chinese proletariat would carry their Socialist revolution on to a "higher historical plane".

Starting from this elementary idea, they always leaned toward maintaining a 'United Front' with the 'democratic' bourgeoisie and toward believing in the possibility of the solution (at least the partial solution) of the democratic and national tasks through 'democratic means', through the constituent assembly, etc. The traitor Liu Renjing gave a famous formulation on this point: "The constituent assembly is the popular formula for the proletarian dictatorship".

This group of comrades, of course, entertained too much hope in the bourgeois "national and democratic struggles".

Another group, also represented by the leading comrades of the present Internationalists, has always taken the position that the importance of the constituent assembly slogan lies mainly in the fact that it is a means of consolidating the proletariat and helping them to re-enter the political scene. Starting from this position the attitude of this group on other tactical questions naturally

emphasised the problem of how to mobilise the masses in opposition to the bourgeoisie.

In their essence the many rich discussions within the Chinese Trotskyist movement during the past 19 years can be reduced to the above-mentioned two questions. They revolved around these two questions as around a permanent axis. Chen Duxiu's position on the two fundamental questions coincided with that of Peng Shuzi & Co. except at the beginning of the 'thirties, when his ideas on the character of the future Chinese revolution were very close to ours. We are therefore justified in saying that Chen Duxiu's eventual break with Trotskyism was due largely to his position on the fundamental disputed questions within the Chinese Trotskyist organisation.

It goes without saying that the two traditional divergences in Chinese Trotskyism reflected different social bases: the 'democrats' represent the petty-bourgeois wing of our ranks, while the 'Socialist revolutionists' represent the proletarian tendency. But we are not ready to resort to this 'class analysis' since the causes of our ideological division, we believe, is in no small degree due to infantilism and theoretical backwardness. In the case of only a few of the old leaders, such as Peng Shuzi, is their opportunism systematic and obstinate.

### **Issues in the split of 1942**

The Report told you that the internal struggle among the Chinese Trotskyists in 1942 was "the continuation of the struggle in the American party in 1940". This statement is false to the core, made with the obvious aim of winning your sympathy and support. In reality it was a continuation of the traditional struggle within the Chinese Trotskyists. It was merely the old divergences reflected in the new question of the Sino-Japanese war.

Prior to 1940 there were already differences of opinion among the Chinese comrades with respect to China's anti-Japanese war, although these were still of a minor and episodic character. Although they could be already considered as divergences of principle, yet all participants in the discussion had not fully developed their arguments on the plane of principle. This fact was mainly due to the weakness of the Chinese organisation, and a result of it, its position did not have the opportunity to be matched against the real development of events.

Among the potential and episodic disputes the following facts are important:

(1) After the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war, Comrade Peng Shuzi insisted on the withdrawal of our central slogan, "Down with the Guomindang", while, on the other hand, the late Comrade Chen Chi-chang fought with equal persistence to keep the slogan in our programme. Peng's proposal finally won out, when Comrade Yvon Cheng was out of Shanghai and Comrade Wang Ming-yuen was still in a Guomindang prison; the traditional slogan of Chinese Trotskyism, "Down with the Guomindang" was thus withdrawn.

(2) Comrade Chen Duxiu looked upon the anti-Japanese war as a higher development of the national struggle of the Chinese people, while other comrades preferred to point out that China's anti-Japanese war was a result of the defeat of the Chinese revolution.

(3) The conference which took place in November 1937 under the leadership of Peng Shuzi decided that we should centre our attack upon the compromising tendencies of the Guomindang in the anti-Japanese war, and called for a workers' and peasants' uprising to support the war with the aim of prolonging it. On the other hand, other comrades, first Chen Chi-chang and then Wang Ming-yuen, took the position of deepening the social basis of the war, above all, of 'supporting' the war with agrarian revolution.

(4) Comrade Yvon Cheng was of the opinion that the Sino-Japanese war could only be considered as a part of the imperialist war; consequently, he opposed the war itself from the very beginning and wanted to apply the Leninist policy of revolutionary defeatism to the war. His position did not win a single supporter at that time.

If we ignore the tactical side of these questions, there were evidently two opposing fundamental tendencies behind the above-mentioned “episodic” divergences: on the one hand, a tendency which emphasised the meaning of the war itself and consequently considered it the means through which the national tasks of China might be solved; on the other hand, the tendency which looked at the anti-Japanese war from the point of view of proletarian revolution and consequently considered it mainly as a road through which one might or might not achieve the workers’ and peasants’ revolution.

The former is a position of pure democratism (national emancipation is only one of the democratic tasks), while the latter is the position of Socialist revolution, namely, the position of Permanent Revolution. The former was represented by Chen Duxiu and Peng Shuzi, while the latter was represented by the leading comrades of the present Internationalist Group (Comrades Chen Chichang, Yvon Cheng, Wang Ming-yuen and others). Such a line-up was not accidental but rather quite faithful to the traditional ideological groupment within the Chinese Trotskyists during nearly the past 20 years.

But the different views on the anti-Japanese war were not fundamentally and finally formulated until 1940 when the war between the imperialists and the Sino-Japanese war began to intertwine. At the end of 1940 the international situation posed a new problem to the Chinese Trotskyists, namely, the fact that the fast-approaching Japanese-American war in the Pacific was sure to make China’s anti-Japanese war a phase of the imperialist war. Should the Chinese Trotskyists then reconsider their attitude and policy on the war?

With this question as a starting point there broke out a very sharp internal struggle which caused the traditional divergences of Chinese Trotskyism to again burst forth deeply and extensively on the question of policy on the anti-Japanese war in particular and on the national question in general.

### **What were the different views? How did the discussion take place?**

The first question discussed at that time was formulated in the following manner: did the Sino-Japanese war become an integral part of the imperialist war in the autumn of 1940, when the so-called ‘ABCD front’ in the Pacific was formed? To this question nearly all the Chinese Trotskyists answered in the affirmative. They had some differences only on the question of the time. Peng said: the Sino-Japanese war will become a part of the imperialist war only after the outbreak of the war in the Pacific; Wang Ming-yuen said: the Sino-Japanese war has already been intertwined with the undeclared and not-yet-shooting war between Japan and the USA; while Yvon Cheng said: “It was part of the imperialist war from the very beginning”.

The second question was: is there any difference in the character of China’s anti-Japanese war now that she is fighting as the junior partner of an imperialist power as compared with the time when she was fighting independently? In answering this question Comrade Peng said: the character of China’s anti-Japanese war will not be changed in the least regardless of how it is fought. Other comrades [2] – that is, all members of the Political Committee except Peng Shuzi – were of the opinion that the anti-Japanese war was progressive when fought by China more or less independently but that it was reactionary when fought as a part of the imperialist war. In different cases the character of the same anti-Japanese war was different as well. In the course of discussion, however, Comrade Liu Chia-

liang changed his views and went over to Peng Shuzi's position.

The third question: if the character of the war has changed, should our attitude toward it be changed accordingly? Comrade Wang Ming-yuen, the sponsor of the "changing-character theory", insisted that once the character of the war had changed from progressive to reactionary, our attitude must be changed from defencism to defeatism. Comrade Yvon Cheng, who had been a defeatist from the very beginning, naturally supported Comrade Wang's position, while on the other hand Comrade Peng, and later on also Liu, fought desperately against the defeatist position.

The fourth question: what is defeatism? Is Trotsky's position on the Chinese war defencist or defeatist? This question, as you may easily see, is merely a continuation of the third question. We, four out of six of the then editorial board of *Struggle*, were of the opinion that especially in the case of China's anti-Japanese war, the meaning of defeatism should be understood as a policy of prosecuting the class struggle during the war with the aim of developing this struggle into a civil war. To take a historical analogy, the 'defeatism' of the Chinese Trotskyists may be compared, in a not very exact manner, to the 'defeatism' of the Russian Bolsheviks after the February revolution when they 'supported' Kerensky in the fight against the Germans and Kornilovists.

Peng Shuzi & Co., either out of simple ignorance or intentional distortion, declared that revolutionary defeatism with respect to China's side of the war meant favouring the victory of Japanese imperialism and, even worse, it meant "sabotage and other destructive activities in the Guomindang area". This explanation of defeatism by Peng Shuzi is in reality as great a distortion as was the prosecutor's accusation against the SWP leaders in the Minneapolis courts!

## Tactical

What position, in fact, did Comrade Trotsky adopt on China's anti-Japanese war? In his letter to Diego Rivera (published in *La Lutte Ouvrière*, organ of the Belgian PSR, No.43, 23 October 1937), he repudiated 'defeatism'; but in the same letter he outlined the following tactical line for we Chinese Trotskyists:

It is necessary to win influence and prestige in the course of the military struggle against the foreign enemy's invasion, and in the political struggle against the weakness, failures and betrayals within. At a certain point which we cannot fix in advance, this political opposition can and must be transformed into armed struggle, for civil war like any other war is nothing else than the continuation of politics.

To fight against the internal enemy politically, and more than that, to transform this political opposition into armed struggle - i.e. to transform the national war into civil war - is a thoroughly revolutionary policy. In our opinion, this policy, no matter on what position we stand when we carry it out, is essentially different from traditional defencism and even from defencism à la Clemenceau, but quite close to the Leninist policy of revolutionary defeatism.

It goes without saying that defeatism, as applied to China, cannot be fully equal to the defeatism which was held by Lenin in 1914-1918 in relation to the Russo-German war. But this does not prevent us from considering Trotsky's position on the Chinese war as defeatist in essence, just as the defeatism adopted by the French, English and American revolutionists during the Second World War was also somewhat different in application and implication from that of the Russian revolutionists in the First World War.

The victory of Hitler was not a 'lesser evil' for the French, English and American working classes. Therefore, during the Second World War, in the democratic imperialist countries, the defeatist

position could and should be understood merely as a policy of prosecuting the class struggle during the war and transforming the national war into civil war. These two fundamental ideas were obviously implied in Trotsky's position on China's anti-Japanese war from the very beginning.

Thus, in the course of the discussion the attitudes of Comrade M.Y. Wang and Comrade Yvon Cheng on the anti-Japanese war became identical. The former also granted that the attitude which we adopted toward the war should be 'defeatist' or nearly 'defeatist' in essence from the very beginning, although he still insisted that China's anti-Japanese war was objectively progressive in its first period.

With the deepening of the questions in dispute, the comrades who later organised the Internationalist Group came to the conclusion that the Leninist defeatist line was less concerned with the character of the war than with the task imposed upon a revolutionary party of conquering power during the war. They believe that if the task of the revolutionary conquest of power by the proletariat is put before the world working class in general, then once war breaks out, no matter in what country and no matter what character it may assume, the fundamental attitude toward the war which a revolutionist should take must be one which is nearer to 'defeatism' and farther from 'defencism'. It cannot be otherwise if the revolutionists wish to seize power during the war. In other words, to transform the war into civil war is the strategic line of 'defeatism', no matter on what tactical basis one puts this line into effect.

On the other hand, Peng Shuzi and his similars had an opportunistic and obstinate attitude on this question. They were not willing to move a single step from their interpretation of 'defeatism' on the basis of their ridiculous definition, namely, "to explode bridges for the enemy". From Trotsky's position on the Sino-Japanese war they remembered only the term 'defencism'. Its content - that is, "to transform political opposition into armed struggle", "to overthrow the Guomindang during the war" - was forgotten by them completely.

Their essentially compromising attitude toward the Guomindang thus became clearer as a result of the discussion. They openly declared that "so long as the Guomindang fights against the Japanese we cannot change our attitude toward the war and toward the Guomindang government, we cannot put the slogan 'Down with the Guomindang' again in our programme". According to their opinion therefore, it is absurd and false to subordinate the interests of war to that of revolution.

Thus the Peng Shuzi group supported Chiang Kai-shek's war up to V-J Day. Before V-J Day they invariably declared that "in spite of the intertwining of the Sino-Japanese and Japanese-American wars, China's war of resistance will never lose its great historical significance of regaining national independence from the hands of Japanese imperialism". But after the 'victory', they had to admit in a resolution, as if suddenly awakened out of a dream, that "China is going to be a second Philippines"! They did not even bother to ask themselves the following question: were not Peng Shuzi & Co among those supporters of the war to the "victorious end" who had helped to make China "a second Philippines"?

The fifth question was on the possibility of an independent bourgeois China. We said and still say that while struggling for the independence of China we must make clear the following truth to ourselves as well as to the advanced workers: in the present stage of imperialism there are only two alternatives for China - either an independent soviet Socialist China (an integral part of the world Socialist union), or else a colony under the control of American imperialism. There is not and cannot be any middle way.

An independent capitalist China is an illusion. Peng and his followers, however, opposed this position of ours with all their strength, declaring that the 'imperialism or Socialism' formula is false, a sort of

'ultra-leftism'. For them a non-capitalist and non-Socialist perspective for China is possible. But you know no less than we that outside of the formula "imperialism or Socialism" there are only Shachtman's "Socialism or bureaucracy or barbarism" [3].] or Mao Zedong's "new democratism" left for Peng Shuzi to support.

The difference on this question clearly reveals two opposing tendencies: Permanent Revolution on the one hand, and on the other, the theory of a purely democratic revolution.

## Meaning

The sixth question is on the meaning of the theory of Permanent Revolution. This is simply a revival of an old divergence. As we said above, Peng and his followers "preached the elementary ideas of the Permanent Revolution as a revolution starting from the democratic struggle to the goal of Socialism".

Dear comrades, are you satisfied with such an explanation of Permanent Revolution? What is meant by "to the goal of Socialism"? Do not Attlee and Leon Blum also take Socialism as their 'goal'? Are we not correct in condemning this position as 'opportunism'? We said that, to speak more exactly, we only followed Trotsky in saying that the future Chinese revolution will be Socialist from the very beginning. This is so, first of all, because we, together with the proletariat, in the future revolution will orient ourselves on the road of struggle for power at the first revolutionary tide, regardless of whether the immediate cause of revolution is democratic or nationalist.

Secondly, because the democratic and nationalist tasks of the Chinese revolution - that is, the agrarian revolution and the anti-imperialist struggle, just as Trotsky analysed them - themselves have an anti-capitalist character. Therefore, he said:

The third Chinese revolution ...will not have a "democratic" period...But it will be compelled from the very outset to effect the most decisive shake-up and abolition of bourgeois property in city and village. (*The Third International After Lenin*, pp.184-5)

Is it not clear from this quotation that according to Trotsky, 'Socialism' in the future Chinese revolution will be the means of carrying on the revolution, not a 'goal' to be reached? If we believe that the third Chinese revolution "will be compelled from the very outset to effect the most decisive shake-up and abolition of bourgeois property in city and village" then we are justified in asserting that the future revolution will be Socialist from the very beginning.

In his article entitled *A Review and Some Perspectives*, after quoting Ferdinand Lassalle, Trotsky wrote in 1906 that "the future Russian revolution must be declared Socialist from the very beginning". The same view must be held by us on the character of the Chinese revolution. Trotsky has dealt with the same question in great detail in his *Letters to Preobrazhensky*, *A Criticism of the Draft Programme of the Communist International*, *Retreat in Disorder*, and other documents. His ideas constitute a flat refutation of the theory of 'Socialism as a goal'.

It is our hope, therefore, that international Trotskyism will return to the old fundamental platform, Trotsky's ideas on the character of the Chinese revolution, which as you well know has been one of the few most important questions marking the division between Stalinism and Trotskyism.

## **Conclusion**

Our tactical divergences at the present stage are centred on the question of the civil war now being waged between the Guomindang and the Chinese Stalinists. In January 1946 the Struggle Group adopted a resolution on the civil war which declared the war to be a “meaningless strife between selfish gangs”. They ostensibly took the position of the ‘third camp’, but in reality they took the side of the Guomindang by branding the armed struggle led by the Chinese Stalinists as a manifestation of the “particularism of new war lords”, as “military adventurism”, and by demanding that the Chinese CP “give up their arms in order to fight for the constituent assembly”.

We reject and oppose this bankrupt position of theirs. We maintain that the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party represent different class forces in Chinese society. The former represents the landlords and bourgeoisie, while the latter represents mainly the poor peasants. Thus, if we take only its national factor into consideration, the present civil war in China is a kind of peasant war against the landlords and rural capitalists. As a peasant war, the civil war has a progressive character on the side of the peasants; but, as a peasant war only, the civil war is devoid of any perspective, and is even doomed to failure because of its Stalinist domination.

Basing ourselves on this estimate of the civil war, our attitude towards it is to defend the peasant forces from the oppression of the Wall Street-Guomindang alliance on the one hand, and to attack the treacherous Stalinist leadership on the other.

In defending the peasant forces we not only fight side by side with the masses, but also call for unconditional peace. This is not a self-contradictory policy. This is so because the slogan “immediate cessation of the war without disarming the Stalinist armies” at the present time would constitute a blow against the Guomindang war lords, and with the progress of events it would also mean a blow against the Stalinists. In war-weary China today there is no other slogan which can play as great a revolutionary rôle as the slogan of peace.

In a word, our position on the civil war is as follows: for the immediate and unconditional cessation of the war; in favour of participation in the de facto civil war on the side of the peasant forces; and at the same time to point out that the victorious outcome of the civil war can only be secured through the revolutionary leadership of the urban proletariat and the removal of the Stalinists from control of the peasant armed forces.

The position taken by the Struggle Group on the civil war is quite close to that of the Shachtmanites, but worse than that, they even openly take the side of the Guomindang.. Their participation in the Guomindang-sponsored ‘Sovereignty Protection Movement’ was an example of this position. In the Report they accused us of “boycottism” and “abstentionism” with respect to the “mass anti-Kremlin demonstrations”, while they, as they put it, “boldly plunged into it to expose all the evil intentions of the Guomindang, expand and deepen it, and try finally to convert its leadership”.

[But these ‘anti-Kremlin demonstrations’ were not really supported by large masses. Three such demonstrations have taken place since V-J Day, instigated by the most reactionary clique of the Guomindang, organised as anti-Russian demonstrations but really intended only to counterbalance pro-Russian feeling and support the failing prestige of the Ouomindang and of American imperialism. The first, in February 1946, drew large mass support, and we did not boycott it. We did not stand aside but participated, in order the better to expose and fight its reactionary sponsors and to distinguish our policy from that of the Stalinists. Our participation also produced good organisational gains for us.

[The second anti-Soviet demonstration, in March 1947, was a great failure. Nobody came out in

support of it and no demonstrations of any size took place. Peng Shuzi and the Struggle Group were in favour of “boldly plunging into it” but we considered that it was merely the affair of a few professional red-baiters and advocated boycotting it.

[The third, in June, organised with an equally reactionary motive though ostensibly directed against the invasion of the Mongolian army into Sinjiang province, was an abortive attempt and even more miserable in scope than the second. Under the influence of our criticism, Peng Shuzi and his followers also took the stand of ‘abstentionism’ in this case.]

This mistake of the Struggle Group was not accidental either. Here we believe it fitting to tell you of an old difference of opinion among the Chinese Trotskyists. In 1939, when Stalin waged war against Finland, Peng Shuzi was the only one in the leadership of the Chinese section of the Fourth International who stood for the “defence of poor little Finland”. He stood on the position of national independence of Finland, and favoured the adoption of defeatism in the USSR.

In spite of this fact, however, Peng Shuzi now has the courage to tell you that he and his followers are simply “continuing the internal struggle in the American party” in China. What cheap flattery this is! Peng Shuzi followed in the footsteps of the American minority and was converted to Trotsky’s point of view only after he read the latter’s article; but on fundamental points he has not changed his opinion – it reappeared on the question of the civil war and also on the question of “plunging into” an “anti-Kremlin” demonstration.

Since the Struggle Group takes a neutral, even pro-Guomindang, attitude on the question of the civil war; since they identify the left mass movement partially led by Stalinists with the quite isolated ‘patriotic’ movement which was completely conducted by Guomindang agents, it is quite natural that Peng Shuzi cannot have correct views on party work.

A sort of liquidationist tendency has invariably decided the direction of the leadership of the Peng Shuzi group. Their ‘general line’ of activity is to “utilise the antagonism” between the Guomindang and the Stalinists in order to seek a full legal existence under the Guomindang regime. In order to attain this goal they are ready to pay, and have paid, no small price; until now, they did not dare to revive *Struggle* [their organ], which had been suspended for five years; they preferred the publication of ‘theoretical’ magazines and ‘popular’ periodicals with bourgeois scholars to the introduction and publication of any book or document of the Fourth International or of Trotsky; they discounted our slogans and adapted them to Guomindang policy; they echoed the Guomindang publicity ministry in branding the Chinese Communists as “new war lords” and demanding “the voluntary disarmament” of the Stalinist army.

All this was done in the name of the struggle for legalisation and in the belief that this was the shortest road for the Trotskyists to reach the ‘masses’. The direction of their policy can be justifiably called one of ‘legislation at any cost’.

Can the present Guomindang regime grant the Chinese Trotskyists the right to legal activity? If this is possible then it is only on the following condition: that the Trotskyists will fight against the Stalinist party only, and put this ‘fight’ under the direction of the Guomindang. If the Chinese Trotskyists were ready to accept this condition, the Guomindang government would grant us not only legal status but ‘protection’ and ‘subsidies’ as well ...

With respect to the party work and the party paper, our attitude is precisely contrary to that of the Peng Shuzi group above mentioned. We maintained and still maintain that, no matter how bad the circumstances of our organs (*Internationalist* from 1942 to October 1945 and *The New Banner* from June 1946 until now), we would rather translate and publish Trotsky’s books and the documents of

the Fourth International than cooperate with bourgeois scholars in issuing legal magazines. We would rather that our *New Banner* were banned by the Guomindang (October 1946) than change our attitude toward the government; we would rather assemble insignificant worker revolutionaries under the programme of the Fourth International than to recruit more petty-bourgeois sympathisers under the 'democratic banner' of a third party.

## Price

Needless to say, we are not fetishists on 'underground work' and we know no less than they the significance of the struggle for legality. But at the same time we firmly believe that it would be a betrayal of our cause if we were ready to pay the price of legality: suspension of our party organ, refraining from propaganda for the ideas of the Fourth International and Trotskyism, cessation of life against the Guomindang, and finally, supporting the Guomindang and conducting a one-sided attack against the Stalinists. We believe that a revolutionary party's struggle for legal existence is an uncompromising fight, not an adaptation to the reactionary laws, still less to the reactionary policy, of the ruling class. But the 'struggle for legality' made by the Struggle Group in recent years has consisted precisely of political concessions. That is why we could do nothing else but criticise and oppose them mercilessly.

The favourite accusation which the Struggle Group directs against us is that we "attacked the *Transitional Programme*", that we "revised the colonial programme of the Fourth International". According to them, it is absolutely impermissible to "attack" or "revise" the *Transitional Programme*, regardless of how the programme is revised and whether the revision is right or wrong. The demand for, or attempt at, revision is in itself in their opinion a sort of "betrayal" or "crime". We consider this attitude far from a healthy one and quite contrary to the spirit of Trotskyism. In this respect Trotsky said correctly: "but a platform is not created so as not to part from it, but rather to apply and develop it". (*Fourth International*, September-October 1947, p.254.)

[The Struggle Group attacks Comrade Wang and others as 'eclectics'.] According to these 'eclectics', the anti-imperialist war of a colonial or semi-colonial country is progressive, even if it is under the leadership of the bourgeoisie. This is, of course, the traditional Leninist position and also the position of the *Transitional Programme*. But, these comrades say, if the leadership of the emancipation movement of a colonial country remains in the hands of the bourgeoisie for long, then the progressive movement will sooner or later degenerate into a kind of counter-revolution, serving the interests of the imperialists and against the interests of the native workers and peasants. In addition these comrades hold the opinion that, once the anti-imperialist war of a colonial country intermeshes with a war waged between rival imperialist powers, it is in no circumstances progressive but becomes reactionary in character. Therefore, according to them, China's anti-Japanese war was no longer progressive since it had become intermeshed with the anti-Japanese war of American imperialism.

This position cannot be found in the *Transitional Programme* of the Fourth International, because at the time the programme was drafted such a situation did not exist, and consequently there was no need for a corresponding answer to be given to it. Here, quite clearly, it is not a question of revision or non-revision of the programme; in this respect there is nothing to be revised in the programme. But if we consider the question in the light of the fundamental ideas as well as the writings of Lenin and Trotsky, we can easily see that such a position rather coincides with the tradition of revolutionary Marxism.

In his *History of the Russian Revolution* Trotsky said: the participation of China in the First World

War was “the interference of a slave in the fight of the masters” (p.38). “The interference of a slave in the fight of the masters” is, of course, not progressive. As for Lenin, it is well known that he had two different views on the first and later stages of Serbia’s war of resistance against Austria in World War I in 1916. In a polemic against Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin also admitted, in an article entitled *The Military Programme of Proletarian Revolution*, that the “national wars may be swallowed up by the war between rival imperialists and become imperialist in character”. On this question we believe that we have not revised the programme but have supplemented it with something which was not said previously.

[However, the Struggle Group’s fiercest criticism has been levelled against Comrade Yvon Cheng. They attack him for “revising” the programme but do not bother to criticise the content of his ‘revision’. There are two points to Comrade Cheng’s view. At first, he said only that China’s war had been a part of the imperialist war from the beginning; that it was reactionary from the beginning; but he still agreed that the anti-imperialist war of a colonial country alone is progressive.]

### Doomed

Secondly – that is, later on – having studied Lenin’s theses on the national and colonial question, Comrade Cheng arrived at the conclusion that in the imperialist epoch all emancipation movements or national wars led by the colonial bourgeoisie are doomed to be impotent and devoid of progressive significance. He developed this idea in a pamphlet called *The Permanent Revolution and the Chinese Revolution*. It found some supporters in our organisation.

This position of Comrade Cheng’s is, of course, a revision of a certain point in our *Transitional Programme*. But, whether we support or oppose his ideas, the fact of ‘revision’ itself is not a ‘crime’. Instead of calling it so, we should rather call for its consideration and discussion. Now, there are not a few comrades in the Fourth International who propose to give up the slogan of “unconditional defence of the Soviet Union”. This is also a revision of a very important part of the *Transitional Programme*. We can and should discuss such revisions in the field of theory, fight against or in favour of them; but we cannot simply attack them and refuse to discuss with their proponents on the sole ground that our programme is “not to be parted from”.

Positions resembling Comrade Cheng’s were held 30 years ago by Rosa Luxemburg, and during the first years of the Communist International they were held by some Italian Communists. Yet we never heard that Lenin or Trotsky refused to cooperate with, or refused to make attempts to unite with, Luxemburg or Serrati because of this difference – or called them ‘traitors’. Twenty or 30 years have elapsed since then; during these stormy years there have been revolutions and counter-revolutions in Turkey, Iran and China. Many colonial wars took place during and after the Second World War. History has provided us with a great deal of experience and many lessons which are worth our most careful study and attention. We sincerely hope, therefore, that the Fourth International and its sections will carry on an unprejudiced consideration and decision on the colonial question. Only then can we decide what should be preserved out of our traditional positions, what should be revised, and what should be developed.

[In order to refute the Struggle Group’s accusations that we are “opportunist”, “sectarian”, and “ultra-leftist” we cite our programme. You can clearly see whether we have “abandoned the transitional demands”, “want no democratic struggles but only Socialism”, or “yield to the pressure of Stalinist-controlled public opinion”.]

1. For the immediate cessation of the civil war ...

2. For workers' security and the improvement of their livelihood ...
3. Land to the poor peasants ...
4. For the democratisation of the army ... (Guomindang and Communist) ...
5. Defend the standard of living of the urban poor ...
6. Equality in education and job security for the youth ...
7. Freedom of speech, press, assembly, association, demonstration, appeal, striking and picketing ...
8. For the national independence of China and self-determination for minorities ...
9. Defence of the USSR. Down with the policy of the Stalinist bureaucracy! Against the Guomindang as the cat's-paw of American imperialism to attack the Soviet Union ...
11. Solidarity with the working class and oppressed peoples of the world ... For the immediate convocation of an all-powerful constituent assembly elected on the basis of universal suffrage ... For a workers' and peasants' government.

At the end of this long letter we wish to say a few words about the publication of the Struggle Group's *Reports* in your magazine. The writer of that Report repeated the following many times:

- Our struggle was obviously the continuation of the struggle in the American party in 1940.
- Our minority had the same class basis as the Shachtmanites.
- The Chinese minority was a miniature of the Shachtmanites.

In publishing their *Report*, you did not express your opinion of it. That was cautious. But readers of your magazine were naturally impressed by the fact that you were satisfied with the declarations in the *Report*, and that you had thus taken sides in the internal polemics of the Chinese organisation. We admit that the ideological groupment in the ranks of Trotskyism will take place on an international scale; but we do not think that such groupment has taken place definitely in the national sections as in the whole International.

For example, on questions like the character of the USSR, the estimation of the international situation, the civil war in China, national questions in Europe, etc, our position still coincides with yours; while on the question of the attitude toward China's anti-Japanese war after it had been merged with the imperialist war, the Shachtmanites took, after the Pearl Harbour debacle, the same position which we held before that event. On the other hand, the Struggle Group, especially its leader Peng Shuzi, took the same attitude toward the Soviet-Finnish war as the Shachtmanites, and their position on the present Chinese civil war was and is quite close to that of the Workers Party of the USA. But on the question of China's war, their position coincides with yours.

In such circumstances, which group in the Chinese organisation shall be labelled as the "petty-bourgeois wing", and which group as the "proletarian tendency"? Again: the Bolshevik-Leninist Party of India, for example, took the same point of view on the colonial anti-imperialist war, during the World War, as we did; should the B-LPI be called the Indian "miniature of the Shachtmanites"? Of course not!

A sharp process of ideological regroupment is taking place in the world Trotskyist movement. This is

a result of the development of the world situation. We are not pessimistic about it. On the contrary, we rather consider it quite natural. But instead of weakening or destroying world Trotskyism, artificial factional prejudices must be carefully avoided in order to strengthen and consolidate it. To reach that goal, we hope that the Trotskyists of all countries will take the trouble to learn and study the polemics arising in the various national sections before taking sides on them.

We agreed completely with Comrade Li Fu-jen when he said in his last letter to us that "it was an error to print the article [the *Report*] as it was written", although we also agreed with him when he said in the same letter that you "cannot be blamed for it as you are not conversant with the affairs of China".

With Trotskyist salutations,

**The Communist League of China  
(Internationalists)**

**M.Y. Wang (Wang Fanxi)**

12 November 1947

Shanghai, China

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**P.S.**

- <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/china/wang.htm>

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## Footnotes

[1] <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/china/china06.htm>

[2] The leading body of the Communist League of China was the editorial board of *Struggle*, corresponding to the Political Committee of your party. Six comrades constituted the board; these were Comrades Chen Chi-chang, Kou Woo, Wang Ming-yuen, Yvon Cheng, Peng Shuzi and Liu Chia-liang. [MYW].

[3] Comrade Wang here gives sad evidence of the effects of the systematic slander and misrepresentation campaign against the Workers Party carried on by the Cannonite agents abroad, especially among those Trotskyist groups not yet in close contact with us. He is the undoubtedly honest victim of these slanders, having not yet learned to distrust their purveyors. There are only two things wrong with his reference here to Shachtman's "Socialism or bureaucracy or barbarism". (1) Neither Shachtman nor the Workers Party has ever, anywhere, put forward such a triple formula. We accept as ours only Trotsky's and the Fourth International's "Socialism or barbarism" as the historic alternatives before society. We do add that the 'barbarism' here counterposed to Socialism can mean a form of totalitarian bureaucratic statism or bureaucratic collectivism - but that much even Trotsky said already in his *In Defence of Marxism*. The only place where this absurd triple-alternative formula can be read written down in print is, to be sure, in an SWP attack upon us (see Shachtman's *The Nature of the Russian State*, NI, April 1947). (2) In any case, neither the use of "Socialism or barbarism" by us or Trotsky, nor our view that Russia is a totalitarian bureaucratic-collectivist society has anything to do with the more immediate alternatives of "imperialism or Socialism" for China today. It is undoubtedly correct that either China breaks with all imperialism through a revolutionary Socialist workers'

government or it remains under the direct or indirect control of imperialism. We urge the Chinese comrades to remember that the same Cannon who prints what they call Peng Shuzi' s slanders against them is the master workman in that field, Peng at worst only an apprentice. [*Ed.* - (*Max Shachtman*)