

What Was Chinese Trotskyism?

Reflections On Wang Fanxi's Mao Zedong Thought

Friday 5 November 2021, by [LI Promise](#) (Date first published: 28 October 2021).

What does it mean to speak of Chinese Trotskyism, and what is its relevance for us today? While early leaders of the Left Opposition in China were some of the key founders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the most knowledgeable readers of Marx, this tradition had also been marginalized, vilified, and later brutally suppressed by the CCP under Mao. The CCP's treatment of its proponents offers an important paradigm for its treatment of left dissidents that continues today: the Chinese Trotskyists had their intellectual and organizational groundwork completely uprooted in the mass purges of the early 1950s. This is familiar today as we reflect on the deep extent of suppression of dissident mass movements in Hong Kong and China. To echo Gregor Benton's question from his preface to *Prophet Unarmed*: "why is anti-Trotskyism such an enduring part of the CCP's political constitution and so hard for it to disown?" [1] Many of these Trotskyists lack the prowess to effectively organize mass movements behind a coherent program like their Maoist peers. They had only a minimal base of supporters to begin with, especially after years of persecution from imperial Japan, the USSR, the Kuomintang (KMT), and later, the CCP.

Here I offer a few little-known vignettes to paint a picture of what this marginal Marxist movement entailed and through which alternative futures were being imagined on the ground. [Li Cai-lian](#) joined the Chinese Left Opposition a year after the devastating Shanghai Massacre in 1927, which decimated the ranks of Communists in the cities. She continued the dangerous work of organizing female workers in Shanghai factories and supported prisoners under the Kuomintang dictatorship until dying at age 24, as the CCP fled to the countryside. In the late 1930s, [Liu Ping-mui](#), another young Trotskyist, conducted anti-Japanese organizing in Guangdong, and offered an unfamiliar perspective on how the mode of struggle against imperial Japan ought to be conducted in a propaganda pamphlet addressed to the citizens of Chongshan. He wrote that "the masses should have the freedom to independently form mass organizations in order to freely combat the Japanese."

Around the same time, Chen Du-xiu, leading figure of the Xinhai revolution and co-founder of the CCP in its infancy, offered a minority view within the divided Trotskyist factions in a 1938 letter to Trotsky. He called for a national front struggle against Japanese aggression while laboring to "form organizational links to the workers and making propaganda for the democratic and national struggle" as an alternative to the then-struggling CCP at the urban heart of "both Japanese-occupied and Guomindang-occupied territories." [2] While he believed that the Trotskyists would not gain influence until industry revived in the cities, he cautioned that inaction and lack of organization would eventually destroy their movement.

Revolution or Revolutionary War?

These political initiatives have failed. And by and large, they have not been remembered and studied. Many Trotskyists continued to stay active in the war against Japan, though they fought as

individuals without an organized program able to offer the masses an alternative to the KMT and the CCP—perhaps not too dissimilar to the left in the suppressed Hong Kong movement in the past few years. In December 1952, the CCP rounded up all of the Trotskyists it could identify, effectively ending Trotskyism as a political force in China altogether. Archives were decimated by the authorities and while some Trotskyists were able to flee abroad, most languished in prison for years or even decades. Most importantly, however, many tried to make sense of the circumstances around their defeat and its lessons for future movements.

It is in this context that Wang Fanxi put forward his critical analysis of Mao's influences and thought. His goal was not to equate the personality of Mao with the CCP's political character across time, but to excavate how understanding Mao's intellectual background and political decisions can give us a glimpse into the contradictions of the Chinese Revolution, and how certain aspects continue to shape the core of the CCP's politics today. At the heart of this project is Wang's central inquiry: in what manner should the political revolution against global capitalism be organized?

Wang's chapter "Brilliant Tactician" captures the essence of his response through his critique of Mao: Wang envisions a praxis of revolution that does not simply see, in his words, "all mass-based non-military revolutionary movements as preparatory to and subordinate to revolutionary war". [3] This is not a rejection of waging revolutionary war, but a theory of revolutionary war as a tactic rather than a strategy. Mao's key problem for Wang was that everything was reduced to the paradigms of war, rather than independent mass organizing in its own right—even after the CCP's seizure of state power. The end result of Mao's formulation is that all expressions of democratic self-organization must be co-opted into the national program of CCP state-building. And the Xi Jin-ping administration today displays a renewed version of this ethos, with its rhetoric of anti-imperialism against "foreign interference" and its "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy.

What Wang calls "revolutionary war" in fact points beyond the specific phenomenon of militaristic conflict. It articulates a certain ethos that one can locate in various elements of mass organizing work today: at best, the temporary suspension of democratic process and mass empowerment in the urgent task of effective direct action planning; at worst, the long-term concentration of decision-making power in the hands of paid staff or cadre organizers. Wang contrasts "revolution" to "revolutionary war" since the former "happens from below. It tends to be excessively democratic... the popular will gains the upper hand," whereas "war, even revolutionary war, is top-down, centralized, and the product of the will of a few leaders who must establish their authority and coercive power." [4] These lines contain lessons that reverberate beyond the scope of Marxist movements of Wang's time: they tell us that genuine mass revolutionary energy—from building a local coalition of grassroots movements in a liberal democracy to a city-wide mass movement against the party-state—will always be contained and perverted when not built on democratic and independent organization at the heart of its praxis, rather than militaristic or bureaucratized formations. Wang's schema rejects, on the one hand, the CCP's paternalistic and anti-democratic [way](#) of relating to their mass base, and on the other, the kinds of "leaderless" movement energies seen in the likes of the Hong Kong struggles, which later [valorized](#) adventurist and atomistic "frontline" actions over collective organizing, in which the masses have the vehicles they need to independently develop platforms and strategies together.

"Chinese Trotskyism's failure is a testament to its lack of a sustainable politics of independent self-organization."

This brings us to Wang's second key question: can a critical and independent left-wing movement be built and sustained when pushed into near-complete surveillance and suppression, alienated from the masses? Wang is well aware of what Mao's influence both enabled and prohibited for the Chinese masses: in the 1930s, while the forces under Mao received rigorous training in concrete

mass organizing, the space for ideological reflection and democratic debate in leadership was systematically eradicated within the CCP, forced into military hierarchies by the circumstances of besiegement. On the contrary, the Trotskyists found themselves alienated from mass work, but their experiences of exile and imprisonment instilled in them a keen interest in what Chinese *independent* mass politics—one that can effectively take power—could look like.

The Lessons of Chinese Trotskyism

Wang's analysis of Mao's pitfalls was prescient, applicable as it is to Chinese, and especially Chinese American, mass politics today: NGOs, service centers, and various bureaucratic and staff-driven political vehicles overwhelmingly represent the political leadership of our working-class communities. Of course, there are always moments of self-organization by workers themselves, but these are fleeting and often only induced by localized crisis, like the countless strikes by Chinese workers on the mainland, if not heavily steered by professional staff organizers, like the organizing campaigns by diasporic Chinese American tenants and workers against their landlords and bosses. After each crisis, organizers often struggle to transition out of the mindset of "revolutionary war" and develop infrastructures that can allow Chinese masses to continue independently and collectively to expand their campaigns from below on a sustainable basis.

In her [analysis](#) of Maoism in India, Tithi Bhattacharya goes further to say that such militaristic authoritarian politics is not a contingent aspect of Maoism in the global South:

Maoism, unlike revolutionary socialism, is a doctrine that thrives in scarcity. Whereas democracy, freedom of the press, and a strong, confident working class are the fertile ground for socialist ideas, being the self-proclaimed vanguard of the most depressed classes, usually living under the most undemocratic conditions, is the recruiting ground for Maoism. This is because Maoists do not believe that the emancipation of the working class is the task of the working class. The revolution for the Maoist is made by a dedicated team of guerrilla warriors, not the masses of people led by workers.

Bhattacharya charges the Maoists with valorizing unorganized classes in the most abysmal conditions at the expense of mass organizing that can build democratic alliances and campaigns between the organized and the unorganized. A similar phenomenon arises in Chinese and Chinese diaspora communities: from rural migrant workers in China to low-income immigrant homecare workers and tenants in Chinatowns, they hold enormous power as a class, but are often excluded from independent mass mobilizations and organizing due to their super-precarious status in relation to other workers, the lack of language capacity, and etc. Maoist paradigms may effectively turn some seeds of discontent into struggles, but ultimately fail to empower the masses in the long run as an independent political force capable of making decisions and taking power autonomously. To center the revolutionary war means that movement politics would always be suspended in states of exception, where the slow but necessary work of uplifting workers to think for themselves and develop their own demands in coalition with one another becomes subsumed under the priority of defense of national sovereignty, or in a more local scale, superficial "wins" for the leadership to gain more resources or power as in NGOs.

We must be careful not to see this as an intrinsic quality of the Chinese working class, nor as the fault of individual organizers or organizations. Instead, we should understand this weakness as a key consequence of the historical and material conditions that have shaped Chinese working-class consciousness to this day. Thus, the failure of Chinese Trotskyism is a testament to the resounding consequences of the absence of a sustainable politics of independent self-organization to build power in the historical and present-day political consciousness of many Chinese communities. What the decimated legacy of Chinese Trotskyism powerfully represents is an aporia that Wang clearly

sees but cannot fully resolve on his own: while the CCP can boast and harness the power of an enormous mass base, the party-state cannot tolerate ideas of independent self-organization and must reduce its most independent organizers to the margins of exile. But by understanding the historically contingent nature of Chinese communities' political weakness and its sources, we can begin to recognize that this reality can be changed with the right objective conditions, and to borrow from C.L.R. James, Grace Lee Boggs, and Cornelius Castoriadis' *Facing Reality*, by cultivating the working-class organizers rooted in their communities to "produce the organization, the forms and ideas which [their] emancipation demands." [5]

Socialism, for Wang, exists in a dialectical relationship with the workers' movement: the former does not "emanate" from the latter, but "each arises alongside the other." They are co-constituted. Socialist organizations do not have to degenerate upon being removed from their mass bases immediately, but in the long run, would "absorb elements of the style, behavior, policies, and even fundamental thinking of other classes, so that the party, especially the leadership, spoils or changes in nature." [6] This is a thesis distilled from Wang's years of persecution, as he reflects in exile on the role of socialists forcibly torn apart from the masses with whom they should organize and from whom they learn.

Wang and others should be remembered not because they give us the exact blueprint to rebuild the socialist movement today and tomorrow. I echo Hong Kong socialist Au Loong-yu in viewing Trotskyism as an "[outdated](#)" identity, and I certainly do not endorse all of the key tenets of orthodox Trotskyism. But the *spirit* of Chinese Trotskyism, encapsulated in Wang's critical analysis of Mao, represents the importance of an independent Marxist opposition—though one that we must invent anew. The Chinese Trotskyists inspire because of how they reflect and set up their thinking in a dialectical relationship to the experience of defeat and exile, intertwining their lives and ideas. The state of politics in Hong Kong and China today brings us back to a similar place more than half a century later: in a climate in which any independent organization is now impossible, with waves of activists fleeing abroad or deactivating, how can Marxists reflect on our failures in order to ultimately avoid the tragic fate of last century's Trotskyists? What does organizing for an independent and democratic Marxist opposition to the CCP and global capitalism look like today? And more importantly, how can we develop organizing strategies that can adapt to the material conditions and social consciousness of Chinese communities today, in both the mainland and the diaspora, in order to articulate a praxis of independent self-organization? This entails the daunting task of unpacking multiple generations of atomization and paternalistic political practice under colonial and CCP rule—an uphill battle that the Trotskyists lost, and for which they paid dearly: with their lives. Wang's critical appraisal of Mao reminds us that they are not simply to be remembered for their sacrifices, but also for their ideas and internal differences—for the capacity for independent democratic self-determination stands at the heart of genuine revolutionary struggle, rather than the barrel of a gun.

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Footnotes

- [1] Gregor Benton, 'Editor's Introduction,' *Prophets Unarmed: Chinese Trotskyists in Revolution: War, Jail, and the Return from Limbo*, ed. Gregor Benton (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 38.
- [2] Chen Du-xiu, 'Letter to Leon Trotsky (3 November 1938)' in *Prophets Unarmed*, 717.
- [3] Wang Fanxi, *Mao Zedong Thought*, trans. Gregor Benton (Chicago: Haymarket, 2021), 113.
- [4] Wang Fanxi, *Mao Zedong*, 113.
- [5] C.L.R. James, Grace C. Lee, and Cornelius Castoriadis, *Facing Reality* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 2006), 95.
- [6] Wang Fanxi, *Mao Zedong*, 164.