

Interviews with Wang Fanxi

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Gregor Benton, *Interviews with Wang Fanxi on Tang Baolin's History of Chinese Trotskyism*. Leeds East Asian Papers, 1995, pp. 20

IT WAS sometime in the 1940s when Max Shachtman wrote about the interrogation he had to undergo leading to his expulsion from the Communist Party of the USA. Among the witnesses called was the manager of the party's bookshop whose evidence was succinct and to the point: 'Comrade Shachtman', said this pundit, 'would come into the bookshop and ask if there was any new material on China. Everyone knows that is a Trotskyist subject.'

That request for material on China and the expulsion of Shachtman took place over 60 years ago, and since then, if my impressions are correct, there is much less interest amongst Trotskyist cadres in what happened in China, in 1927 or subsequently. This might be because we are unable to read Chinese, and are cut off from a vast field of publications – good, bad or indifferent. Yet there has been a steady stream of publications (and translations) by Gregor Benton into English, some of them published in specialist academic journals, which contribute to our knowledge and understanding of what happened in China.

This short critique of Tang Baolin's History, introduced by Benton, is based on Wang Fanxi's memories of events in the 1930s, and includes references to Trotsky's writings on China. The issues included by Benton raise problems, old and new, that are of more than historical interest.

It is not certain what led to the publication in China of a book on the Chinese Trotskyists, but we can be certain that it would be filled with misinformation and downright lies. Indeed, that appears to be the case, although Tang Baolin has at least had the good grace to counter Stalinist and Maoist condemnations of Chen Duxiu, one of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party and later a supporter of the International Left Opposition. In all other respects, says Benton, Tang 'peddles the same mixture of misunderstandings, crude misrepresentations and mindless copying of familiar Stalinist and Maoist smears'.

In refuting Tang's misrepresentations, Wang Fanxi provides accounts which have not previously appeared in English of what happened inside the Trotskyist groups. He speaks of activities and positions taken by individuals in the group on the Trotskyist policy on the Japanese invasion of China, and on the war that subsequently raged in the Pacific region. In this respect, Wang repeats what he has described elsewhere, that is, that the position taken by their group – and by Trotsky – was not one of 'revolutionary defeatism'. The stated aim was to 'transform the war against the foreign invaders into a revolution to replace the leadership of the resistance war and thereby to assure the victory of the war against the foreign invader ...'. This policy, says Wang, whilst avoiding a discussion of the dispute inside the Trotskyist group, was in line with Trotsky's declaration that the workers' organisations had to 'participate actively and in the front lines of the present war against Japan'. But because Chiang Kai-Shek could not assure a victory over the Japanese, the Trotskyists had to win prestige in the military struggle and the political struggle against the deficiencies and

betrayals of the Guomindang. That is, the policy towards the war could be more properly called 'revolutionary victoryism' than revolutionary defeatism. Wang adds, pace Tang, that the Trotskyist group never adopted a policy of defeatism towards the Chinese Communist Party during the civil war of 1945-49.

Despite the brevity of this publication, the issues that are discussed provide material that should be required reading by newcomers and veterans alike in trying to understand some of the difficulties faced by that small group of revolutionaries who faced persecution and martyrdom in holding aloft the banner of proletarian revolution. In the aftermath of the counter-revolution of 1927, it was a task beyond their capabilities, but it was a task that they had to undertake. They failed, and the lessons that are to be learnt from their work need to be understood by those who will strive to rebuild the revolutionary movement.

There is an additional bonus for readers in the footnotes to this essay. Benton provides guidance to texts on China that are either not generally known or are still forthcoming. Included in the list of Leeds East Asian Papers are Benton's **The Founding of the New Fourth Army, 1937-38** (1991); **Chinese Trotskyism and Democracy** (1992); **Bolshevising China: From Lenin to Stalin to Mao, 1921-1944** (1994); and Wang Fanxi (ed. Gregor Benton), **Isaac Deutscher, Chen Duxiu and the Chinese Trotskyists: A Comment on Deutscher's *The Prophet Outcast*** (1994). And in the text there are footnote references to two forthcoming titles by Benton: Chen Duxiu's Last Articles and Letters, 1937-1942 from the International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam, which he has edited; and his **China's Urban Revolutionaries: Explorations in the History of Chinese Trotskyism, 1921-1952**, Humanities Press, 1995. One other title of supreme interest that is quoted is Zheng Chaolin's **Siebzig Jahre Rebell: Erinnerungen eines chinesischen Oppositionellen**, edited by Benton, Frankfurt am Main, ISP-Verlag, 1991. The text, in English, is on disk, and it is surely high time that the work is made available to English readers.

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- <https://www.marxists.org/archive/hirson/1995/xx/china.html>
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