

Obituary

Wang Fanxi (1907-2002)

Friday 21 October 2005, by [BENTON Gregor](#), [ROUSSET Pierre](#) (Date first published: January 2003).

On December 30, 2002, the Chinese Trotskyist leader Wang Fanxi died of heart failure in Leeds, Britain, aged 95. Born in Xiashi near Hangzhou in 1907, he joined the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1925, abandoning his literature studies at Beijing University for the revolution. In 1931, he was expelled from the CCP and helped set up the Left Opposition led by Chen Duxiu, the CCP's founder and a giant of modern Chinese thought and letters.

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History and Memory

He and the Trotskyists spent much of the 1930s in Chiang Kai-shek's gaols. In 1949, when the Communists set up their regime in Beijing, his comrades sent him (much against his will) to Hong Kong, to act as their external link while they continued the fight in China for workers' democracy and socialism worldwide. The colonial authorities evicted him from his 'safe place' even before his comrades' arrest on the mainland in 1952. (Some stayed locked up for the next 27 years.) In 1975, he fled his second sanctuary in Macao, where Communist agents were plotting to spirit him across the border. He went on invitation to Leeds, where he lived until his death.

Wang was one of hundreds of young Chinese borne into radical politics by the New Culture movement, which peaked on May 4, 1919, in a campaign of protest against China's betrayal by the Versailles Peace Conference. Like May Fourth's leader Chen Duxiu, he continued to view internationalism and democracy as indispensable ingredients of Communist society, even after their extinction in the Stalinized CCP. An accomplished author who contributed to the seminal literary journal 'Yusi' ('Threads of talk') before committing himself to a life of revolution, he was also a virtuoso linguist, fluent in English, Russian and several Chinese dialects and able to read Japanese, French and German. His university class in 1925 was unusually distinguished. Besides him, it contained the party's two best-known literary dissentients, his close friend Wang Shiwei (executed by the Communists in 1947) and Hu Feng. After his expulsion from the party, Wang resumed writing and translating in time snatched from politics, to help fund the impoverished Trotskyists and feed his family. In lonely exile in Macao, he had more time to write than he would have wished. His books include 'Study of Mao Tse Tung Thoughts', 'On the Proletarian Cultural Revolution' and many others.

His memoirs were published in English translation by OUP in 1980 and in an expanded edition by Columbia University Press in 1991.

Wang was imprisoned for the first time (of three) in Wuhan in 1927, after boldly criticizing the CCP's senior Nationalist allies. Following the bloody collapse of the alliance, he went to Moscow for military training. There he rallied to Trotsky's criticism of the Chinese united front, which had ended in massacres of Red supporters. Back in Shanghai, he worked under Zhou Enlai as an undercover oppositionist until his exposure and expulsion in 1931, as a prelude to his second and third spells in gaol. When not behind bars, Wang and the other Trotskyists strove in the early and mid 1930s to revive the revolution's shattered urban base by campaigning for a democratically elected constituent assembly. The campaign failed miserably, if only because most Trotskyists were in gaol, but so did the rural strategy favoured by the CCP, which sacrificed its forces in futile warfare. In 1937, the start of the Japanese War radically altered the nature of Chinese politics.

Quixotically, Wang and Chen Duxiu tried to win armed forces to a policy of resistance combined with rural revolution. The CCP, hundreds of times bigger and with a decade of military experience and some Soviet support, effortlessly eclipsed them. After the war, the Trotskyists resumed their campaign for radical democracy and class struggle in the cities. They were as if blind to Mao's peasant armies, poised by 1949 to seize power everywhere on the mainland.

Wang spent the first years of his exile reflecting on the causes of the Maoist victory and the Trotskyist defeat. In a departure from Trotskyist orthodoxy, he found that a real revolution had indeed taken place under Mao. He criticized his own group's failure to develop armed forces and mobilize the peasants as one part of their activities. Yet he continued to question the overwhelmingly military thrust of Maoist strategy, which he feared in some ways was just another link in China's endless chain of wars followed by tyrannical restorations. Instead, he argued for the centrality of the industrial workers and the intelligentsia, new urban classes that offered a way of unlocking the cycle with an experiment in democratic communism.

Other Trotskyists around Peng Shuzhi, in exile in the United States, denounced Wang for 'capitulating' to Stalinism. The row was symptomatic of the Trotskyists' fractiousness, which left them even more vulnerable to their many enemies.

Relegated to the role of a mere observer of Chinese politics in later life, Wang could offer little more than commentary, but even in his early nineties he kept up a lively interest in developments in China and the world. He closely followed the CCP's evolution and predicted a new opposition would emerge from it. Communist officials tried to tempt him home, but he demanded in return the rehabilitation of Chen Duxiu and the others, a condition that stayed unmet. He kept up a voluminous three-way correspondence with the veteran oppositionist Zheng Chaolin in Shanghai (freed from prison in 1979) and the Trotskyist writer Lou Guohua in Hong Kong. The death of Lou in 1995 and of Zheng in 1998 shut down his sounding boards and sources of inspiration, at a time when ill health (caused partly by Nationalist torture) and massive exhaustion anyway made it hard for him to read let alone to comment.

The Trotskyists' main contribution to the Chinese Revolution was by the pen. The Maoists paid scant heed to Marxism until the late 1930s. By then, Stalin had reduced Marxist theory to a self-serving state ideology, which Mao plagiarized to boost his 'theoretical' credentials. Wang and his comrades, in contrast, published Marxist writings in Chinese by the shelf-full, including their own creative studies and translations of the classics. In the 1970s, Wang's memoirs were published in Beijing in a restricted edition. More recently, his study on Maoism also appeared. Before Mao's death, the very word Trotskyism was enough to trigger a violent shock in most old cadres, but bolder thinkers took a friendlier approach after official ideology began to lose its grip in an increasingly polarized and corrupt society. Among well-known thinkers who have shown sympathy for Wang's ideas are the former political prisoner Wang Xizhe, the party critic Liu Binyan, the philosopher Wang Ruoshui, and the woman dissident Dai Qing. Although this list of Wang's Chinese admirers is still short, their

writings roused him to a state of high excitement.

In Britain, Wang did not directly engage in politics. However, he influenced students from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Southeast Asia and was revered by radical leaders of the local Chinese community, who sought his advice on their campaigns for social equity in Chinatown and against white racism.

He was unswervingly radical but departed in almost all respects from the stereotype of the hard, narrow, unrelenting revolutionary. Friends knew him as deeply cultured, sensitive, modest, gentle, courteous, enlightened, approachable, open-minded and absolutely true, to individuals as well as to the cause. His extreme selflessness and the fortitude with which he bore numerous personal tragedies and losses lent him an almost saintly aura. He is survived by his wife in Shanghai and by two children, three grandchildren, and two great grandchildren. Dora, a sort of adopted daughter, cared for him in his old age.

Gregor Benton

Wang Fanxi was someone very special

From the mid-1970s and for a decade, I was often travelling in Asia as a young member of the Fourth International bureau. I met many activists of all ages in many countries during these trips, among them Wang Fanxi for a few times and too briefly. At that time, I read also many books on the Chinese Revolution, and very little was available from him in a language I could understand.

Because of other responsibilities, my links with Asia shrunk in the following years and unhappily, I lost contact with Chinese friends. It proved impossible for me to keep alive most of the relations I had tied during these 'Asian years' which I found very sad, even if lately some old contacts were revived and new ones established because of common involvements in the present rise of anti-capitalist globalization struggles.

In these circumstances, my memory of Wang Fanxi should have slowly faded away. But it remained vivid. My wife Sally (even if she never met him) and I time and again thought "When we go to England, we shall visit him in Leeds". We never went to England. Last summer still, we were planning to go on holidays to Scotland - with a possible stopover in Leeds. Sally fell ill and there were no holidays, no stopover.

Wang Fanxi was someone very special, for us to feel such a desire to meet him again even after twenty years have passed. He was kind, human and intellectually sharp. So experienced but unpretentious and helping, able to relate equally with inexperienced youngsters (as we were at that time) in spite of the age and cultural gaps. We could learn from him and his extraordinary life, while feeling his friendship. He kept a fresh look at a changing world. With so much to say about the past, he lived in the present, caring for the new generation of Chinese activists. To use a formula those from my generation will understand the meaning of, in a factional political environment, especially in Hongkong at the time, he could keep alive an unfactional vision of realities.

These words are so often used at the time of funerals that they become ritualistic, but they do express our feelings: Wang Fanxi will not be forgotten.

Pierre Rousset

P.S.

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