The Year 1931

1931 was a very important year in modern Chinese history – not just for the Guomindang and the Communist Party, but also, and especially, for the Chinese Trotskyists.

Early on the morning of 1 January 1931, from his heavily guarded field headquarters in Nanjing, Chiang Kai-shek published his New Year message in all major national newspapers. It was titled ‘Two Issues of Vital Importance in the Twentieth Year of the Republic – Respect Learning and Promote Farming’. The message was a Confucian-style admonition to the people of the whole country and was summed up in two slogans, respect education and pay attention to farming. It said nothing at all about the bloody ‘large-scale campaign of extirpation’ then being carried out against the Chinese Communist Party. Chiang Kai-shek smugly believed that in this way he could unite the people of the whole country and realise his wish to make China rich and strong.

At the time, Chiang Kai-shek was in a good position to issue such a proclamation. On 12 April 1927, he had seized power in a military coup. Under the banner of the Three People’s Principles, he had proclaimed himself successor to Sun Yat-sen. Relying on military men of the Huangpu clique whom he had personally trained, for more than one year he carried out numerous military campaigns coupled with political manoeuvres, until finally, on 18 September 1928, northeast China’s Zhang Xueliang switched flags and went over to the central government and the Guomindang and the whole of China was formally reunited.

The decade from 1927 to 1936 was the Guomindang’s best period and both Chinese and foreigners have called it a ‘golden age’. In the past, textbooks described it as ‘the civil-war decade’, as if the only thing Chiang Kai-shek did was hunt down the Communists. That he suppressed the Communists is a fact, but, at the time, they occupied no more than a few remote and backward mountain regions, far from China’s political and economic centre, and formed no threat to the Guomindang’s rule. Chiang Kai-shek’s early advisor Yang Yongtai, from Jiangxi, likened them to a disease of the skin, not of the heart, and therefore not fatal, although when they began to itch they discomfited the whole body and could become intolerable. The analogy was apt.

From 1927 to 1936, China’s industry grew at an average annual rate of more than 8 per cent. In 1936, industrial output was 83 per cent higher than in 1927 and agricultural output was 107 per cent higher. By the end of 1936, the country’s rail-network had grown from 8,000 kilometres in 1927 to 13,000; highways had extended even more quickly, from just over 1,000 kilometres to
Education had also made substantial progress. Whereas there were only 74 universities and colleges in 1928, there were 108 in 1936. The Guomindang showed in those few years that it was serious about reconstruction.

However, the Japanese imperialists were not happy to see China develop. On 18 September 1931, three years after Zhang Xueliang’s switch of allegiance, Japan’s Kwantung [Guandong] Army launched its long-planned ‘18 September Incident’ in Shenyang and began its campaign to annex China. Chiang Kai-shek mismanaged the incident and created an even greater crisis that eventually changed the course of Chinese history.

On 7 January 1931, on a cold, wet morning in Shanghai, a group of men and women slipped quietly into a newly built lane house in a workers’ district near Huxi to hold a very important meeting in the history of the Chinese Communist Party, the Fourth Plenary Session of the Sixth Congress. Mao Zedong was in his red base in the Jinggang Mountains, but the 37 who attended included Zhou Enlai, Qu Qiubai, Xiang Zhongfa, Ren Bishi, Li Weihan, He Chang, Gu Shunzhang, Guan Xiangying, Chen Yun, Wang Ming, Bo Gu, Shen Zemin, Xia Xi, and Wang Jiaxiang, some of the Communist Party’s most important leaders, and the Comintern’s Pavel Mif, representing the Russian Communist Party. The causes and consequences of the meeting were complex. Mao Zedong bitterly resented it, but it was legally constituted. Its sole purpose was to allow Mif’s students at Moscow’s Sun Yat-sen University – Wang Ming, Bo Gu, Luo Fu (Zhang Wentian), Xia Xi, Wang Jiaxiang, and others – to assume power in the Chinese Communist Party.

The meeting lasted all day, until ten at night. Mif achieved his objective. Qu Qiubai was removed from the Politburo, along with Li Weihan and He Chang.

Qu Qiubai was born in Changzhou in 1899. He and two others born in Changzhou, Zhang Tailei and Yun Daiying, were known to the Chinese Communist Party’s early leaders as the ‘three heroes of Changzhou’. After the defeat of the Great Revolution of 1927, Qu Qiubai convened the 7 August Conference in Wuhan, after which the Chinese Communist Party fired its first bullet at the Guomindang and began an independent struggle for revolutionary power. From the 7 August Conference to the Sixth Congress in 1928, Qu Qiubai was the actual leader of the Chinese Communist Party, General Secretary in all but name. In late July 1930, he and Zhou Enlai were urgently called back from Moscow to Shanghai to convene the Third Plenary Session of the Sixth Congress, to correct Li Lisan’s left-opportunist errors (on the orders of the Comintern). From 24 to 28 September, the conference met in a small Western-style house on today’s Taixing Road. According to Nie Rongzen’s reminiscences, Zhou Enlai constantly pushed Qu Qiubai to the fore while he himself hid behind the scenes. Perhaps he was being modest, but it is a fact that