The Chinese Trotskyists' Unification Congress

In the second half of 1930, China's four small Trotskyist organisations, which were engaged in violent disputes with one another, received a letter from Trotsky in Turkey that showed Trotsky's high hopes for their movement.

On 22 August, Trotsky wrote to Liu Renjing:

Today I finally received the 'Letter to All Comrades' written on 10 December 1929, by Comrade Chen Duxiu. I think this letter is a very good document. On all important questions it takes a perfectly clear and correct position. Comrade Duxiu has adopted an absolutely correct position, particularly on the question of the democratic dictatorship. . . . When an outstanding revolutionary like Chen Duxiu formally breaks with the Party, so that he is expelled from it, and ends up announcing that he completely agrees with the International Opposition – why do we ignore him? Can you find many Communists as experienced as Chen Duxiu? He made many mistakes in the past, but he has already understood his errors. It is a very precious thing when revolutionaries and leaders understand their own mistakes. Many young people in the Opposition can and must learn from Comrade Chen!

The same day, the Our Word group also received a letter from Trotsky. It said: 'I absolutely cannot agree with your position', that is, that 'the other two factions must first admit their mistakes to you before you allow them to join your organisation'. This attitude of 'first humiliate them and then unite with them is impermissible and unacceptable'. Trotsky referred specially to Chen Duxiu, saying he 'has plenty of political experience, which the overwhelming majority of Oppositionists in China lack'. Trotsky's letter sounded the alarm for Shi Tang, Liang Ganqiao, Ou Fang, and others who had returned to China from Moscow's Sun Yat-sen University.

On 1 September, Trotsky wrote a letter to the October Group in which he said:

Comrade Chen's views on fundamental issues are entirely consistent with our own general positions. Given that, I cannot understand why certain of our Chinese comrades call Comrade Chen Duxiu a 'rightist' . . . I therefore feel that the four groups should, on the basis of a common principled stand, publicly and sincerely unite.
But that the problem of the Chinese Trotskyist organisations and their unification could be resolved only from afar by Trotsky suggests they lacked certain basic talents. It also shows Trotsky’s absolute authority over them. Whatever the case, their unification was greatly accelerated as a result. In October 1930, the four groups each sent two representatives to form a negotiating committee to discuss unification. On 8 January 1931, Trotsky sent another letter asking them to put aside their prejudices and endless arguments and to act decisively and unite. He again beseeched them: ‘Dear friends, merge your organisations and journals this very day!’ After receiving Trotsky’s letter, Chen Duxiu was deeply convinced and determined to use radical means to resolve ‘past and present disputes’. He and Yin Kuan, an honest and sincere person, personally acted as the Proletarian Society’s delegates in negotiations and sought out the other delegates for discussions. As a result of the deployment of Chen Duxiu’s prestige and talents, coupled with his extreme modesty, a unified Chinese Trotskyist organisation finally came into being, on 1 May 1931.

This first meeting was quite different in character from that of the Chinese Communist Party a decade earlier. The Chinese Trotskyists lacked external support (Trotsky was in exile, and his support was merely moral), and the Unification Congress was difficult to organise – even the expenses. According to Zheng Chaolin,

[t]he negotiating committee made the Proletarian Society responsible for arranging the venue. The Proletarian Society gave the responsibility to He Zizhen [who succeeded Mao Zedong as Secretary of the Party’s Hunan Provincial Committee]. Li Zhongsan brought a gown lined with lynx-fur that I pawned for 200 yuan to help pay for the meeting. He Zishen sent Comrade Wang Zhihuai’s whole family to live as tenants in the house we rented. Wang Zhihuai himself was a Proletarian Society delegate. The other delegates gathered in groups of three or four and were then conducted to the house. Once you entered it, you were not allowed out again until after the congress had finished, three or four days later. The only exception was Chen Duxiu, who was allowed to go home after every session.

Those attending the Unification Congress were Chen Duxiu, Zheng Chaolin, Wang Zhihuai, Jiang Zhendong, Jiang Changshi, and Peng Shuzhi (who arrived late), representing the Proletarian Society; Liang Ganqiao, Chen Yimou, Song Jingxiu, Luo Han, and two workers from Hong Kong (one, according to Wang Fanxi, was called Zhang Jiu, the name of the other is not known), representing Our Word; Wang Fanxi, Song Fengchun, and Pu Dezhi, representing the October Society; and Zhao Ji and Lai Yantang, representing Militant.