The Left Opposition

Zheng Chaolin

Source: An Oppositionist for Life (1945).

We were only forty days in jail, but coming out was like entering a new world. While driving along the Longhua Road, we saw that there was no longer any plum-blossom on the trees. The grass was high and the air was full of orioles; it was a typical late spring in Jiangnan.¹ I remember that, before we were arrested, there had been no air of spring in Shanghai, and the trees along the pavements had not yet put forth leaves. In Longhua Prison, no trees were to be seen, and the grass that grew in the prison courtyard was pitifully scant. At Qingming,² one of the guards had brought in a twig of plum-blossom, so in my heart I knew that it was now spring, but I had not imagined that it was so advanced. When we got to Shanghai, the noisy, bustling streets gave us a feeling we had never before experienced.

But something else, too, had changed: a change more abrupt than that between the seasons. Yin Kuan came to the New Hotel to visit us. He had originally planned to come to our house on 18 March, to play mahjong; I don't know whether it was because he had forgotten or because something else happened, but he had failed to show up, thus escaping the fate of Ma Yufu. We praised his good fortune. After some social talk, he took out a roll of mimeographed paper. It was an essay by Trotsky on the Chinese Revolution, later included in the first volume of Zhongguo geming wenti (‘On the Problem of the Chinese Revolution’), that we published.³ The essay was very poorly mimeographed, but even so, it made a much deeper impression on us than Qu Qiubai’s well printed and well translated Comintern circulars put out by the Secretariat of the Central Committee. It was as if an electric-beam had been shone into our skulls. For a while, I was confused, unable to say whether the document was right or wrong. Later, when I met Peng Shuzhi and Wang Zekai, I discovered that they had already read some of these mimeographs; and that Chen Duxiu

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¹ Jiangnan is that part of eastern China directly south of the Yangtze.
² Clear Brightness, the fifth solar term, roughly corresponding to our Easter time, around 5 April.
³ Here, I got the time and place wrong. Yin Kuan did not give us any Oppositionist documents when we first left jail. He only did so after we had moved home. [Note added by Zheng Chaolin in 1980.]
had also read them. They had got them from Yin Kuan, who had obtained them from the Shandong comrade Wang Pingyi, just back from Moscow. Yin Kuan had once taken me to see him, but we had not talked much.

After that, I read a whole series of such documents, together with one or two issues of Womende hua (‘Our Word’). Since Yin Kuan had not sworn me to secrecy, I passed them on to Cai Zhende and Ma Yufu after reading them. Being newly out of jail, I had no idea that an opposition had already formed in the Chinese Communist Party, or what the Central Committee’s attitude was towards it. I thought it was an open secret that comrades were passing round Trotsky’s articles. On one occasion, Huang Wenrong came to visit me.

‘Has there been any reply from the Central Committee to Trotsky’s ideas?’ I asked him.

‘Who told you about Trotsky’s ideas?’

I thought for a while and then said: ‘Yin Kuan gave me an article of his to read’.

A few days later, Yin Kuan came to remonstrate with me, for after Huang had gone back and reported on our conversation, the Central Committee had interrogated Yin Kuan about the source of these articles. I apologised and said: ‘I didn’t know it was so serious’. Now, the Central Committee knew that we were already acquainted with Oppositionist documents.

We by no means accepted Trotsky’s analysis overnight. Speaking personally, I only accepted it after repeated deliberation and repeated discussion. There were so many issues involved, and the issues were so complicated! The last to give in was Chen Duxiu. Every time he talked with Yin Kuan, he raised a different objection, and held to it even after listening to Yin’s reply; but the next time they met and spoke, he no longer raised the same objection but raised a new one on the basis of what Yin (following Trotsky) had said the previous time. And so the discussion proceeded, layer by layer. By the time the rest of us were one hundred per cent convinced, Chen still had differences. Finally, he wrote an article saying that China could only carry out a workers’ and peasants’ dictatorship, not a proletarian dictatorship. The article was never published, but later, after he had come over completely to the Opposition, Liu Renjing attacked him on the basis of it. Apparently, Liu had not read it himself but had only heard about it from Yin Kuan.

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4 Our Word, founded in 1928, was published by the first batch of Chinese Trotskyists to be deported back to China from the Soviet Union.