Preface to the Collected Poems of Chen Duxiu

Xiao Ke

In August 1981, at an academic symposium, the veteran Communist General Xiao Ke praised Chen Duxiu's role in the Chinese Revolution and hinted at the possibility of a rehabilitation not only of Chen but of his previously reviled Trotskyist comrades. In his talk, Xiao Ke summarised various positive evaluations of Chen by Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. Source: Xiao Ke 1994.

Comrades Ren Jianshu, Li Yueshan, and Jin Shupeng have asked me to write a preface to their edition of Chen Duxiu's collected poems, and to write the title of the book in calligraphy. I know little about poetry, but the fact that the collection was by Chen Duxiu excited my interest.¹ Chen Duxiu was the early twentieth century's man of the hour. When I was young, I read many of his essays in Duxiu wenjun ('Duxiu's writings'), in bound volumes of Xin qingnian ('New youth'), and in Xiangdao ('Guide weekly'). But I don't recall reading his poems, so I was pleasantly surprised to see this collection. I feel that in this nation where poems and songs are so highly valued, it is essential that Chen's poems are edited and published.

I would like to argue that Chen should be seriously studied. After the defeat of the Great Revolution, Chen split from the Party and I no longer trusted him politically, so my impression of him dimmed. But I continued to admire his essays and meritorious exploits in the struggle against feudal remnants and superstition and to promote science and democracy. I constantly followed the course of his life and his situation in the years between the defeat of the Great Revolution and his death. On 18 August 1981, at an academic symposium to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the CCP, I gave a speech a passage of which I shall now quote:

In the past, the Chen Duxiu question was taboo; today it is semi-taboo, by which I mean that although no few people have touched on some aspects of that question, their research is not yet all-sided or profound. Probably people still have apprehensions. Must this question be researched in a comprehensive fashion? Yes. Comrade Mao Zedong said, 'Chen Duxiu was the

¹ We know of 140 poems written by Chen Duxiu over a span of nearly forty years, from 1903 to 1942. Only one of these poems was written in the 1920s, when Chen devoted almost his entire energy to revolutionary activity. He resumed his poetry writing in the early 1930s, in prison. Chen's poems were either published in journals or kept in manuscript by his old friends.
Commander-in-Chief of the May Fourth Movement', Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao and others ‘gathered together’ progressive youth who had embraced Marxism and ‘founded the Communist Party…, which was his merit. When we write China's history, we must note his merit in that regard’. Comrade Zhou Enlai said: ‘Chen Duxiu performed a meritorious service in founding the Communist Party’. In my opinion, we should make an all-sided evaluation of this Commander-in-Chief of a glorious age, this distinguished founder of the Party, even though in his later period he committed the error of rightist capitulationism and became a Trotsky-Chen liquidationist after his expulsion from the Party. Comrade Mao Zedong also said, ‘In various respects, Chen Duxiu resembled Russia’s Plekhanov’. I completely agree with that assessment; unless we conscientiously research Chen Duxiu, our future writing of Party history could become lop-sided. Not long ago, I watched [the documentary film] Xianquzhe de ge ('Pioneers’ song'), which said nothing about Chen Duxiu, Commander-in-Chief of the May Fourth Movement and the main figure in the founding of the Party. Only Li Dazhao appears in the lens of this film. But it is a universally recognised fact of history that ‘Chen in the south and Li in the north’ [played the main role in founding the Party]. Although Li Dazhao was a principal figure in the founding of the Party, the prime place [in that process] belonged to Chen Duxiu. We should not blame the comrades who wrote the script and directed the film for this error; it is a problem relevant to research into the history of our Party. In my opinion, in researching Chen Duxiu we cannot confine ourselves merely to his days in the Party or before the founding of the Party, but must also include the Trotsky-Chen liquidationist period. What were the differences between China’s Trotsky-Chen liquidationist faction and foreign Trotskyists? How was their programme? What was their attitude to Chiang Kai-shek’s Guomindang régime? What was their attitude to the Communist Party? What was their attitude to imperialism and in particular to Japanese imperialism? How did they acquit themselves in the jails of the Guomindang? What was [Chen’s] political attitude between his release from prison [in 1937] and his death? All these issues need to be researched. As for our evaluation of Chen Duxiu, we should follow Comrade Mao Zedong's guidance and learn too from Lenin's critical view and standpoint. From 1903 until the period of the October Revolution [in 1917], Lenin repeatedly criticised Plekhanov’s ideological and political errors. Especially during the period of the imperialist [First World] War, he criticised Plekhanov as a ‘mediocrity’, a ‘social chauvinist’, a ‘Marxist renegade’. But after Plekhanov's death, at a joint conference of the All-Russia Executive of the Central Committee of Soviets and the Moscow City Soviet with the Trade Unions, he stood with the delegates in silent tribute to Plekhanov. Later, a memorial meeting in Leningrad was attended by