Introduction: Leon Trotsky and Chinese Communism

Wang Fanxi

(October 1980)

This is a previously unpublished English version of Wang Fanxi’s introduction (‘Einleitung: Trotzki und der chinesische Kommunismus’) to the two China volumes (Schriften über China) that formed part of the definitive ten-volume German edition of Trotsky’s works (Leo Trotzki, Schriften), edited by Helmut Dahmer and published in Hamburg by Rasch and Röhring in 1990. Source: a manuscript in the editor’s possession.

This book is a collection of Leon Trotsky’s articles, speeches, and letters on China – on the Chinese revolution of 1925–7 and the Sino-Japanese war that broke out in 1937. The pieces cover a period of sixteen years, from 1924 to 1940, when the author was assassinated.

The main writings were published in Chinese by Chinese Trotskyists, first in 1930 and then in an enlarged edition in 1947. This German edition, based on the 1976 American edition, larger than the Chinese one, adds to that edition material from Trotsky’s Exile Papers and other unpublished documents. It is the most complete presentation of Trotsky’s work on China to date.

It would be superfluous to commend these writings, which are basic for an understanding of the history of the communist movement in China and the Soviet Union and of the tactics and strategy of world socialist revolution. That said, there remains a need to link these separate pieces and make more intelligible certain aspects of various fiercely contested problems. Having participated in the events described, I can claim some qualification for writing these notes.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was an offspring of Russia’s October Revolution. Ideologically and materially, it owed its birth and growth to the aid of Soviet Communists, who had already achieved victory in their own revolution. Without this aid, a Communist organisation might still have emerged in China in the early 1920s, but it is unlikely to have grown at the same speed; nor could it have played as powerful a role in the revolution of 1925–7.

This outside aid not only promoted the emergence and growth of the CCP and sped the development of the revolution; it also, ironically, became a main
cause of its tragic defeats. To explain this paradox, we must look at the nature of the aid, particularly the Comintern’s directives.

No strategy for the countries of the East was advanced by the Comintern until its Second Congress, in July–August 1920, when leaders of the world Communist movement, through Lenin, worked out their theses on the national and colonial questions. These recommended ‘support [for] bourgeois-democratic national movement in the colonial and backward countries only on the condition that, in these countries, the elements of future proletarian parties, which will be communist not only in name, are brought together and trained to understand their special tasks, that is, those of the struggle against the bourgeois-democratic movements within their own nations. The Communist International must establish temporary relations and even unions with the revolutionary movements in the colonies and backward countries without amalgamation with them, but preserving the independent character of the proletarian movement, even though it be still in its embryonic form’ (Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 31, p. 149).

These Leninist principles could not be carried out under Lenin’s personal guidance because of his illness and death. When revolution broke out in China in 1925 (and even during its brewing), the leadership of the Comintern and the Soviet Communist Party had fallen into other hands (first the Stalin-Zinoviev bloc, then the Stalin and Bukharin faction). A new chapter had begun in the history of the Russian revolution, in which conservatism replaced revolutionary enthusiasm, ‘socialism in one country’ replaced ‘world revolution’, and arbitrary bureaucracy emerged and consolidated itself. The new leaders monopolised the direction of the Chinese revolution, adopting a line opposite to Lenin’s. In defence of the October tradition and of Lenin’s strategy for China, Trotsky and his co-thinkers tried to secure a change of course, but failed.

The defeats of the Russian Opposition and the Chinese revolution were closely linked. The clearer the bankruptcy of Stalin’s China policy, the more violent the suppression of the Opposition. When the revolution was brought to catastrophe in the autumn of 1927, the Trotskyist Oppositionists were annihilated – first politically and then physically. Their views – confirmed by events in China – were suppressed, distorted, and tabooed. But the documents survived Stalinist censorship, and the truth can be established.

The first controversy that arose before the outbreak of the revolution and continued until its defeat was whether the CCP should retain its independence. This first and perhaps most important controversy on a fundamental question of the Chinese revolution initially broke out not in the Russian or Comintern leadership but between leaders of the young CCP and the Comintern, immediately after the CCP’s Second Congress in July 1922.