A Self-Description at the Age of Ninety

Zheng Chaolin

Source: Appendix to An Oppositionist for Life (1989).

My name is Zheng Chaolin. I was born in 1901, so according to the old Chinese way of counting, this year I am ninety.

I was born in Zhangping, a small mountainous county in the south of Fujian province. My family was an old-established landlord family already in decline, but it still maintained the ancient trappings of culture and education. When I was a child, a ‘foreign-style school’ had already started up in my home town, but I still acquired my schooling at the old-style private academy, until, finally, I was inserted into the graduation class of the foreign-style school, to get my certificate of primary education. I graduated under the old-style system of middle school, that is, after a course in traditional Chinese culture lasting only four years.

I graduated from middle school in the same year as the May Fourth Movement broke out. In our small county high up in the mountains, we heard only about the student movement to boycott Japanese goods and knew nothing about the ‘new culture movement’.

In the spring of that year, while I was preparing to take my graduation exams, some Guomindang troops under Chen Jiongming invaded Fujian from Guangdong and occupied the southern corner of the province, including my home town. Chen Jiongming ordered each county under his control to select two students to go to France under the work-study scheme. Each student would get an annual subsidy of $300 from his local authority. That is how I ended up in France. Those who went from Fujian were work-study students like the rest of the Chinese in France; the only difference being that they received these local subsidies.

I experienced my ‘new culture movement’ on the boat from China to France. The first time I saw New Youth and found out about the ‘new culture movement’ was on board the boat. Only then did I go through the struggle between the old culture in which I had received my schooling and the new culture that I learned about at sea.

In France, I got close to the progressive students on the work-study programme. I studied together with them, I struggled with them, and together with them, I organised the ‘Communist Youth Party’ and embarked on the road of revolution.
In 1923, the Communist Youth Party chose its first batch of members – twelve people in all, including me – to go to study at the Communist University for the Toilers of the East in Moscow. In the summer of 1924, the Moscow branch of the Chinese Communist Party chose its second batch of students to send back to China. I was among them.

As soon as I got back to Shanghai, I was allocated to work as secretary in the Party’s newly founded Propaganda Department. My job was to write, translate, edit, and publish the Central Committee organ and its various publications, and at the same time to teach ‘sociology’ (that is, historical materialism) at Shanghai University. I participated in the May Thirtieth Movement and in Shanghai’s second and third workers’ insurrections.

In the spring of 1927, when the Central Committee moved to Wuhan, I, too, went to Wuhan and took part in the Fifth Congress there. After the Congress, I was allocated to the Hubei Provincial Committee to take charge of its Propaganda Department. I experienced the defeat of the revolution and attended the 7 August Conference. After that, I returned to do propaganda work in the Central Committee. In late September, the Central Committee moved back to Shanghai and so did I, to take charge of the Central Committee's Publishing Bureau and to edit Bolshevik. In the summer of 1928, I was sent to Xiamen to sort out organisational work in the Fujian Provincial Committee. In late September I returned to Shanghai to continue editing Bolshevik.

At the end of 1928, I resigned from Bolshevik and from various other propaganda tasks because of differences of opinion with Li Lisan, then in charge of the Central Committee’s propaganda work. After that, I had nothing to do save wait for the Central Committee to assign me new work.

This period marked the end of the first stage of my work in the Party.

During it, my main activity was literary propaganda, though I also did some oral propaganda, teaching, and organising. Everything I did was in line with the Central Committee’s policy; that in its turn was based on the line set for China by the Communist International, which you were not allowed to doubt. So during this stage, I scarcely needed to do any thinking of my own about basic questions of line. After the 7 August Conference, I began to question the line of the Communist International and to consider wrong some of the Central Committee’s policies, but whenever I made propaganda outside the Party, I stuck to its line.

Factions had already started fighting one another inside the Party. The main struggle was between the Chen Duxiu supporters around Wang Ruofei and the Central Committee faction of Comintern loyalists around Qu Qiubai; the General Labour Union faction, previously under Zhang Guotao and now under Luo Zhanglong, vacillated between these two groups.