



Obituary - Wang Fan-hsi, 1907-2002

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Wang Fan-hsi, a key leader of the Chinese Trotskyists has died. Peter Main surveys the life and struggles of the veteran Trotskyist

When Trotsky began the task of building the Fourth International, in the very difficult circumstances of the late 1930s, his first priority was to assemble the communist cadres who had survived the devastating defeats inflicted on the world working class movement by the treachery of the Social Democrats and Stalinists. Among those who had survived and remained committed to revolutionary Marxism were a handful of comrades in China who had regrouped in Shanghai under the very noses of the Japanese occupation. Here, Din Wong commemorates the passing of the very last of those heroic comrades, Wang Fan-hsi.

"I have spent the greater part of my life and effort in the struggle for socialism and against Stalinism. " Wang Fan-hsi 1907-2002

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, many on the left greeted the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in the USSR and Eastern Europe and the rise of US "New World Order" with dismay and despondency. But not Wang Fan-hsi, a life-long Trotskyist and Chinese communist revolutionary, who passed away in Leeds, England, on 30 Dec 2002, aged 95.

For Wang, the collapse of Stalinism was a vindication of his opposition to both its theory and practice, first in the Soviet Union and then in China. It was Trotskyists like Wang who consistently came out against the degeneration of the Soviet state, against its bureaucratic dictatorship and who exposed as an illusion the Stalinist idea of "building socialism in one country".

Born in 1907 in Hsia-shih (between Shanghai and Hangchow), Wang became politicised in high school at a momentous turning point in Chinese history the May Fourth movement. As a student at Peking University in 1925, Wang Fan-hsi joined the Chinese Communist Party, at a time when the CCP was under instruction from the Comintern to subordinate itself to the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang KMT) and Chiang Kai-shek in a fatally opportunist interpretation of the united front tactic.

For a brief period in 1926, Wang was in Canton during the 18-month Hong Kong-Canton General Strike during which the strike committee formed a virtual second government that established a workers' militia and enforced a boycott of the coastal ports. This experience of revolutionary working class politics and the need to fight for a working class revolution in China, as the Bolsheviks had in Russia, never left him and remained the bedrock of his politics.

After the betrayal and massacre of workers in Canton and Shanghai by Chiang Kai-shek in 1926-7, Wang Fan-hsi was sent to Wuhan, the power base of the "left" Nationalist leader, Wang Ching-wei with whom the Chinese Communist Party, under orders from Moscow, now made an alliance. He watched with growing unease as the Party once again agreed to the surrender of arms by trade unionists and workers' militia to the local garrison as a mark of their "loyalty" to the nationalist government, just as they had in Shanghai.

In 1928, Wang Fan-hsi arrived in Moscow for military training at the Communist University of the Toilers of the East, then in the thick of Stalin's campaign against Trotsky and the Left Opposition. Persuaded by Trotsky's analysis of the failure of the second revolution, he joined, and soon became one of the organisers of, the clandestine group of Chinese Left Oppositionists.

When he returned to China in 1929, Wang worked as an aide to Chou En-lai in Shanghai until he was expelled from the CCP. He then worked for the unification of the four opposition groups to overcome their divisions regarding the nature of the coming revolution and the slogan for a constituent assembly. Unfortunately, soon after he was elected with Chen Tu-hsiu to the leadership of the unified opposition group, Wang was arrested and jailed for three years by the Nationalists.

Undeterred by this setback, he returned to Shanghai and, in collaboration with the South African communist Frank Glass and the American Harold Isaacs, threw his energy into rebuilding the Trotskyist organisation and publishing theoretical and political periodicals.

Just before the outbreak of war with the Japanese, he was kidnapped by KMT special service agents and endured another jail term. Under interrogation, despite torture, Wang refused to divulge the names and addresses of his comrades and was put in solitary confinement. This period, described by Wang as the darkest days of his life, was cut short only by the action of a sympathetic jailer who unlocked his cell before fleeing from the approaching Japanese army.

Back in Japanese-occupied Shanghai, Wang and his comrades resumed political activity under very difficult circumstances and at great risks to their lives. Their efforts centred on education, propaganda, writing, translation and the publication of Trotsky's work.

Looking back on this period, Wang was proudest of his translation into Chinese of *The History of the Russian Revolution*. Just weeks before his assassination, Trotsky wrote of this: "The day I learned that my *History of the Russian Revolution* was to be published in Chinese was a holiday for me."

This clandestine political activity continued in Shanghai throughout the war years. When the Japanese surrendered in 1945, the Trotskyists were able, despite a split in their ranks and a ban by the KMT government, to take some advantage of the situation in the cities where the CCP's concentration on the countryside had left a virtual vacuum in the leadership of the urban working classes.

When a CCP military victory seemed certain, however, Wang was sent to Hong Kong to set up a new co-ordinating centre. He was not at all a welcome arrival as far as the British authorities were concerned. They promptly deported him to Macau where he stayed until he came to England in 1975. His comrades in China were rounded up in 1952 and the last of them, Cheng Ch'ao-lin, one of Wang's closest comrades, was not released until 27 years later.

In Macau, having lost his family, relatives, comrades and friends, Wang recollected his part in the Chinese revolution and reflected on the defeat of the Chinese Trotskyist movement in his memoirs, which have now been translated and published in English, French, German and Japanese. He kept a critical watch on events in China and continued to publish his writings which included translations of Trotsky's works, studies on Mao Tse-tung's thoughts and the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution". He also wrote several plays.

Despite years of hand to mouth existence, perilous threats to his life and prison terms that were most injurious to his health, Wang was unshaken in his political beliefs. The terms of his exile in Britain did not allow him to be politically active, yet he kept up extensive political correspondence with revolutionaries around the world and, ever forward-looking, he encouraged and inspired, a new generation of radical Chinese youth in Hong Kong and Britain in the seventies and eighties.

With the recent partial rehabilitation of Chen Tu-hsiu in China, Wang's *Memoirs of a Chinese Revolutionary* and a new edition of his *Study on the Thoughts of Mao* have also now been published, although with restricted availability, in China. He was also very gratified to learn that some of his work is available on the Web, his only regret being that he was too old to learn how to use a computer.

If the downfall of Stalinism vindicated his commitment to the programme of Trotskyism, the emergence of a new workers' movement in China and of the anti-capitalist movement globally, confirmed his continuing political optimism

and enthusiasm. An internationalist to the end, he was still enquiring about the progress of the anti-war and anti-capitalist movements even in his very final days.

A modest comrade, without a trace of bitterness despite his suffering, he was generous and scrupulously fair to others in the Chinese Trotskyist movement with different views. His memory, and his example, will continue to inspire us all.

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