

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article8155>



Review

China's Unarmed Prophets

- Reviews section -

Publication date: Wednesday 19 July 2023

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JUST OVER 70 years ago, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) extinguished the last organized revolutionary Marxist tradition that emerged from the early CCP and remained independent after its regression. In the final weeks of 1952, what remained of the Chinese Trotskyists — by then already worn and reduced in numbers by numerous rounds of persecution by different forces — were mostly imprisoned wholesale.

Among the largest grouping of Trotsky's followers outside Russia, the Chinese Trotskyists were no strangers to persecution. A couple hundred of the young Chinese Marxist students sent to Moscow who became early founders of the Left Opposition were arrested in 1929, in an overnight sweep, and eventually lost their lives in Stalinist prisons.

Faced with intense persecution by right-wing nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) agents after the party's about-face in 1927, turning from an uneasy alliance with the Communists to open persecution, Trotskyists lost their lives in large numbers, especially after their expulsion from the CCP. (Readers looking for an introduction to this tangled history and the disaster of Moscow-directed Communist strategy may consult *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution* by Harold Isaacs. —ed.)

The surviving militants continued the dangerous work in small numbers of covert labor organizing in urban areas after the CCP's departure into the countryside. The 1937 Japanese invasion further decimated their ranks: Chen Qichang and countless others lost their lives fighting against the invaders — all while being baselessly smeared and hounded by the KMT and CCP for being agents of imperial Japan; Han Jun died from hunger and malnutrition while working in Hong Kong's shipyards during the war.

Yet these militants remained committed Marxist revolutionaries even as the chaos raged on throughout their lives, thinking deeply about the prospects of world revolution in the most difficult of times. The final nail in the coffin of the Trotskyist movement in mainland China resulted in the tragic loss of a bulk of their writings to CCP authorities — yet some survived.

The process of recovery, compilation, and translation of the comprehensive collection of documents in this volume has been far from easy, so it is hard to overstate the singular role of Gregor Benton in making the materials of this whole tradition accessible to the Anglophone world.

Benton, an emeritus professor at Cardiff University, is a longtime researcher and editor on the Chinese Trotskyist movement, its leading figures, its contributions and its fate. Benton is the key reason why Wang Fanxi, one of the greatest Chinese Trotskyists who were able to escape the purge of 1952, was able to find a stable home in Leeds, away from the increasing pressure from CCP operatives during his time living as a schoolteacher in quiet exile in Macau.

Supported by Wang's assistance and his manuscripts, Benton steadily published and translated Chinese Trotskyist materials into English in different collections over the years, in addition to Wang's memoirs and monographs. The publication of *Prophets Unarmed* [\[1\]](#) represents a significant milestone in these efforts, gathering some of the most important primary and secondary sources on the Chinese Trotskyists' activities in an authoritative edition.

The Purpose of Revival

Yet what is the use of this meticulous revival of a long-dismissed history and tradition? For one, it models the core principles of what it means to be an independent Marxist, forced to survive amidst strenuous material conditions and difficult political contradictions.

The collection's wide-ranging 18 sections show the breadth and care with which these writers dealt with the social and political phenomena around them. These investigations emerged not in a vacuum, but from the practical life of politics.

The first third of the book details the political autobiographies of these Marxists, beginning with the translation of Wu Jimin's *Purgatory* — one of the first independent texts in Chinese to study and record the lives and major events of the Chinese Trotskyists from a person outside the movement.

The excerpts from Wang, Chen Duxiu, and Zheng Chaolin's memoirs importantly describe what drew them into the Communist Party, and later the Left Opposition. Wang and Zheng both matured not as leaders of the momentous May Fourth movement, but as youth observing its rise and fall as an unfinished revolution, in search like many others at the time of a theoretical and political framework that could carry on the program of social revolution and democracy.

They had their first taste of organizing as student activists: Wang in the Hangzhou student movement; Zheng with other work-study students in France, many of whom later became limelights of the CCP. Both became part of the key waves of Chinese Communists who were sent to study under the tutelage of the Bolshevik Revolution at Moscow Sun Yat-sen University — the Soviets' experimental academy for Chinese communists.

In this sense, Wang and Zheng represented an important strand of Chinese Marxism that would soon be lost with the turbulence of the 1920s and '30s: the idea that communism entailed a deep social revolution that necessarily requires continuous organization of the working classes across the globe.

In short they were internationalists; and Wang in particular, having to witness the early fruits of bureaucratism in his time in Moscow through personalities like Pavel Mif and Wang Ming, realized early on that revolution and democracy must be deeply intertwined.

The early promise — but also the ultimate failure — of the Chinese Trotskyist movement reveals the hardship of socialist revolution in the Third World. Their movement shows that the key value of this tradition is not in providing a ready-made set of dogma, or a political framework based on opportunistically responding to world events without clear principles (the Maoist "Three Worlds Theory" comes to mind), but in demonstrating what it means to struggle through difficult political questions posed by shifting objective conditions as Marxists.

They all understood the limitations of bourgeois democracy, but had little agreement on the practical question of how to relate the bourgeois revolution to the socialist one in a society increasingly submitted to capitalist market relations, even while pre-capitalist land relations remained dominant in the countryside.

The Debates Within Trotskyism

Trotsky represented many different things to people of his time, especially in the early 1920s, but the Trotsky that resonated most with his Chinese admirers was clearly the theorist of permanent revolution and anti-bureaucratism that mainly emerged in his declining years in Soviet politics.

It is noteworthy that none of the Chinese Trotskyists ever met Trotsky, with the exception of Liu Renjing; their communication with their comrades of the international Left Opposition was also greatly limited after their expulsion from the Communist Party. Yet Trotsky's ideas and the epistolary relationship between Trotsky and the Chinese Trotskyists in the 1930s provided an important bedrock from which they uneasily developed on their home soil the ideas of permanent revolution and anti-bureaucratism.

The middle sections of Benton's collection illustrate the intensity of debates within the Chinese Trotskyist camp. They also show the difficulty of how to properly build revolutionary organizations from these disagreements, compounded by increasingly harsh and limited conditions for organizing.

Once again, history tells it all: the Chinese Trotskyists split into four separate groupings almost as soon as the formation of the Left Opposition, reunifying into one section at Trotsky's prodding, only for their ranks to be decimated mere weeks later by the KMT's clampdown.

The book reconstructs these debates mainly through the eyes of Wang, Zheng, Peng Shuzhi, and Chen. One key disagreement is the nature of the transition between bourgeois and socialist democracy, as it relates to what the socialists should be fighting for on the ground within the framework of "permanent revolution."

Wang and Zheng remain convinced of the transitional demand for democratic institutions like a constitutional assembly, inspired by Trotsky's "The Chinese Question After the Sixth Congress," which Wang saw as only a "means of consolidating the proletariat and helping them to re-enter the political scene." (867) As Wang recalled, Liu believed in "limiting the aims of the struggle to the establishment of a parliamentary system" in the meantime, which Wang saw as a "social-democratic" deviation. (480-481)

While Wang's perspective became part of the founding consensus of re-unification, ambiguities around how to relate immediate tasks of democracy and anti-imperialism to socialist revolution only re-emerged with the start of the Japanese invasion.

Chen argued for a tactical alliance with individuals or factions of the broader military resistance against Japanese fascism who were at least sympathetic to the left, believing that there would be little hope for a socialist revolution until at least industry revived in the besieged cities.

The section devoted to Chen testified to his persisting significance to the Trotskyists, although his increasing belief in a transcendental idea of democratic values, rather than one tethered to the historical and material conditions of the present, in his later life led him away from orthodox Marxism.

A nuanced spectrum of positions eventually consolidated into these two general camps, which would define and separate the remnants of the Chinese Trotskyist movement that survived in exile until the end.

In 1941, Wang and the majority advanced the idea that the nature of struggle against Japanese imperialism has changed with the entry of the United States into the war. Though China's struggle against Japan remains "progressive," this aspect "would dwindle away to insignificance or disappear entirely within an inter-imperialist conflict." (558)

Nonetheless, his faction still supported resistance efforts against the invasion. Wang's downplaying of the progressive nature of China's struggle against Japan appears to contradict his endorsement of resistance efforts. Unfortunately, his full-length elaboration on this argument lies in one of the many invaluable texts lost during the

waves of repression against the Trotskyists.

Peng and the minority offered a different position that foregrounded the progressive nature of China's struggle against Japan, later convening a national conference that ended up with a pro-Peng majority in the leadership. This new leadership rejected Wang and the new minority's right to continue disseminating its program in the party, leading to the last great split in the Chinese Trotskyist movement.

Though Peng's group would later officially represent the remnants of the Chinese Trotskyist movement in the Fourth International in exile, Wang's insistence on the right of internal factions and "plurality of political parties" (560) best anticipates the emphasis on political pluralism that the Fourth International would emphasize.

Tragic Irony

A thorough treatment of the many other differences that arose over the years between the two camps, often represented by Wang and Peng respectively, reasonably remains beyond the scope of the book. Some of these debates, especially on the evolving class character of the Chinese Revolution and the CCP, can be glimpsed in the later sections, such as the essays and reports of Wang, Peng, and Chen Bilan in parts twelve and thirteen.

The tragic irony is that some of the most incisive Marxist analyses of the political and economic conditions of China in those war-torn years came from these individuals. Yet these analyses failed to cohere enough to "justify practical activity, an initiative of will," as Gramsci once remarked, such that "they show what are the points of least resistance where the force of will can be applied most fruitfully; they suggest immediate tactical operations; they indicate how a campaign of political agitation can best be presented, what language will be best understood by the multitudes, etc." [[2](#)]

Of course, this is not to understate the enormous contributions of Chinese Trotskyist fighters during the war as individuals, like Chen Qichang and Liu Pingmui. But they mainly fought in isolation, and in conditions of immense poverty.

Workers' movements had been decimated since the 1920s in the coastal cities of industry where most Trotskyists lived, and the Japanese occupation ensured that none would revive. Resistance units against the invasion were by and large organized haphazardly, with minimal capacity for coordinated and rigorous political agitation.

The Trotskyists had doubled down on their belief that Marxists must further take advantage of the new political terrain shaped by the invasion to rebuild proletarian forces in the cities through the anti-imperialist struggle. Subscribing to the orthodox Marxist line that the peasantry is not the revolutionary subject of the socialist revolution, the Trotskyists did not think to deeply consider and underestimated the need to build a base among the peasantry waging guerrilla struggles during the war (on which Wang and Lou Guohua self-critically reflected in a document submitted to the Tenth World Congress of the Fourth International in 1973). [[3](#)]

These factors greatly complicated the Trotskyists' capacity to develop and implement a unified independent program that could mediate between immediate demands and a larger revolutionary vision.

Perhaps, in the extreme conditions of the 1930s and '40s, the opening for a genuinely socialist revolution remained close to impossible. The Communists had been largely delinked from the urban proletariat after the KMT's murderous betrayal in a country decimated by hyperinflation and war.

Slim was the real prospect of a mass movement of workers and peasants organized democratically, breaking beyond the limits of a bourgeois-democratic stage without regressing bureaucratically.

The victory of the Chinese revolution enabled incredible successes, just as it eventually confirmed the Trotskyists' grim prediction that a political revolution without continuous social revolution — only possible with pluralism and democracy to unlock the full capacity of the proletariat — can easily backslide into bureaucratism, and eventually counter-revolution.

Balance Sheet and Lessons

In this sense, the invaluable writings compiled in *Prophets Unarmed* provide today's readers not with blueprints for revolution, but a series of lessons and models for reference to inform our organizing. Since the CCP took power, there has been little space for independent and rigorous Marxist analyses of strategy and objective conditions, with fleeting periods of exception like the Democracy Movement of the late 1970s.

The result is that few organized left-wing platforms and opposition have been able to emerge from the myriad struggles of Chinese activists, which often fall into a binary of wildcat labor actions without larger visions and programs for social change, and a liberal democratic opposition movement, tethered to Western institutions.

The Chinese regime lifted hundreds of millions from conditions of “extreme poverty” only to create a new, massive working class that has little historical resources and expertise in organizing that can relate rank-and-file labor militancy to a larger political vision.

The Trotskyists' inflexible attention to industrial labor organizing to build socialist revolution — even when the circumstances made such an endeavor nearly impossible — ultimately separated them from the conditions of political victory. Unexpectedly enough, this wealth of knowledge may prove to be more useful for Chinese organizers today, now surrounded by a sea of proletarians, than for those who were operating in its original context.

It is apt that the book concludes with sections on miscellaneous documents, from the Chinese Trotskyists' pivotal contributions to the Chinese world of letters in the late 1920s and early 1930s to their obituaries: they show that the spirit of Chinese Trotskyism lies in how they thought and what they did as living Marxist revolutionaries.

They strived and persisted to the best of their ability to synthesize the social and political phenomena around them in their totality. They actively participated in the painful decades of modern revolution, holding fast to the value of theoretical clarity even in the most impoverished material conditions.

There was no moment of redemption, or even recognition, for most of them; what maintained the unbreakable spirit of those who ultimately held fast, despite countless tribulations, was a sense of political clarity and will to interpret and act in the world they inhabited.

Despite its breadth, *Prophets Unarmed* only opens up a conversation about these militants, rather than concluding it; this tradition is far too rich, even in its fragments, to encompass in one volume. Many of the fiercest members of their movement are only recorded in history by their obituaries, written by their comrades, like Wu Jingru.

Wu, as Wang poignantly recalls, was an indispensable militant and administrator who became an elder sister or

mother for many rank-and-file communists, though “no important exploits or famous writings can be ascribed to her ... never behaved like a heroine, nor did she show off as a militant.” (1172)

Many more such obituaries exist beyond the collection, like that of Li Cailian, who joined the Left Opposition as a teenager and worked tirelessly to organize women workers in Shanghai until her untimely death at 24.

Li Pei, whose life is documented in an obituary written by his comrade Jiang Junyang, organized workers in Guilin to resist the Japanese invasion but was imprisoned by the KMT in the period when Trotskyists were baselessly smeared by both the KMT and CCP for being agents for Japan. Similar to Zheng, he spent another 26 years in prison once the CCP took power.

The memoirs of Wang Guolong, Zhao Fangju and Zhang Kai, among others, are available in their original language on the Chinese marxists.org website, still yet to be rendered into English. [\[4\]](#)

More to Come

More materials, especially from the majority split after 1941 that continued as the official Chinese section of the Fourth International (Revolutionary Communist Party) remain to be translated, and can serve to further contextualize the internal debates collected in the middle sections.

For one, Peng's “On the Struggle Between Two Lines” (1941) offers a valuable middle ground between both Chen and Wang's perspectives on the war, offering a clear defense of China's self-determination struggle against Japan even with the emergence of inter-imperialist war on the Pacific front. [\[5\]](#)

Other untranslated writings by Chen Bilan, including her reflections on the early 20th century women's movements and women in national liberation struggles, serve as the key surviving perspective on feminism and women's movements in China from the Trotskyist camp. [\[6\]](#)

Other lesser-known militants in the majority beyond Peng and Chen preserved the main organizational infrastructure of the Chinese Trotskyists in Hong Kong, with much difficulty and effort, until the revival of the tradition in the 1970s in the city.

The need for this editorial work thus continues, and fortunately Gregor Benton shows no signs of stopping. This year, Benton and John Sexton released the first edited collection of writings in English by Zheng Chaolin. His incisive and prescient writings on state capitalism can only prove to be more relevant with time. [\[7\]](#)

A sequel to *Prophets Unarmed*, co-edited by Benton and Yang Yang, is entering its final stages of production as I write this review, detailing the afterlives and late activities of Chinese Trotskyists in exile. These endeavors, building on the magisterial *Prophets Unarmed*, are significant not simply for the sake of historical record and greater access in the Anglophone world, but also for the political development of the socialist left, especially in China and the Chinese diaspora.

As the contradictions of Chinese state capitalism grow today, Chinese social movements can benefit from revolutionary political frameworks that can adequately diagnose the CCP's idiosyncratic marriage between bureaucratic capitalism and authoritarianism.

New generations of socialist militants are needed, not to dogmatically revive the banner of historical Trotskyism, but to learn from their own experience of organizing and in conversation with the lessons of the past, what it means to be a revolutionary and to transform social reality.

Chinese social movements are only becoming more decentralized and eclectic in the face of an increasingly autocratic capitalist regime that is "socialist" in name only. Wildcat strikes continue to abound in the mainland, feminist and LGBTQ+ movements provide important entryways to politics for new activists, while Chinese international graduate workers' struggles begin to gain momentum abroad.

A Marxist outlook encourages the creative discipline of intellect to understand all these entities in ever-shifting relation to each other, in order to discover an informed practice of organization against the totalizing force of capital. The revolutionaries documented by *Prophets Unarmed* model such a way of thinking, but it is ultimately up to socialists today to interrogate the lessons of history on their own terms to breathe life into the movements of the future.

Source: July-August 2023, [ATC 225](#).

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[1] Prophets Unarmed:
Chinese Trotskyists in Revolution, War, Jail, and the Return from Limbo
Gregor Benton, editor
Brill Historical Materialism Series, 2015;
Haymarket Books, 2017, xvii + 1289 pages, \$55 paperback.

[2] Antonio Gramsci, *The Modern Prince and Other Writings* (New York: International Publishers, 1970, 173).

[3] <https://www.marxists.org/chinese/wangfanxi/marxist.org-chinese-wong-1973.htm>

[4] <https://www.marxists.org/chinese/fourth-international/biography>

[5] <https://www.marxists.org/chinese/fourth-international/china/mia-chinese-fi-19410404.htm>

[6] <https://www.marxists.org/chinese/chenbilan/index.htm>

[7] Zheng Chaolin, *Zheng Chaolin, Selected Writings, 1942-1998*, edited by Gregor Benton and John Sexton (Leiden: Brill, 2023).