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Chinese Trotskyists

# The Longest Night

- Features -

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<https://brill.com/display/title/70959?rskey=Rwqgb6&result=1>>*The Longest Night: Three Generations of Chinese Trotskyists in Defeat, Jail, Exile, and Diaspora*, Editors/Translators: Gregor Benton and Yang Yang, with an introduction by Gregor Benton. [1]

This sequel to [Prophets Unarmed](#) delves into the tumultuous journey of Chinese Trotskyism after 1949, tracing its evolution through defeat, exile, and diaspora, while showcasing the enduring relevance of its revolutionary ideals through memoirs, theoretical writings, and historical analyses; this extract is taken from the introduction by Gregor Benton. [2]

Chinese Trotskyism was born in 1929 in the Soviet Union, among Communists sent to Moscow to study Marxism and military science after the defeat of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the towns in 1927 and the start of the CCP's flight to the villages. This defeat was made even worse by Stalin's insistence that the revolution was still on a rising tide and that the CCP should throw its remaining urban forces into suicidal insurrections, whose crushing led to the almost total annihilation of the party's working-class base in the cities. Several hundred Chinese students sent to Moscow after the defeat were quickly convinced by Trotsky's denunciation of the cross-class alliance with the bourgeois-nationalist Kuomintang (or Nationalist Party) foisted on the CCP by Moscow in 1925, in which the CCP was made to play a junior and deferential role. The CCP's alliance with the Kuomintang was part of Stalin's search in Asia for allies "on which to blunt the hostile pressures of the Western powers". At the time of the alliance, Trotsky opposed Stalin and insisted on the need in China for communist independence and class struggle. [3]

In 1931, Chinese Trotskyists held a turbulent first congress in Shanghai that was to be their last. [4] Most of them disappeared almost immediately into jail under Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang. They played little part in the Japanese War (1937–1945), and even after 1945 their movement was beset by a chain of violent headwinds. Then in December 1952, at the winter equinox, twenty-one years after their founding congress, hundreds of their members and dozens of their leaders disappeared into prison under the newly founded Mao regime. Some remained behind bars for the next twenty-seven years.

Critical Chinese communists in Moscow accepted Trotsky's view that Stalin's sacrifice of the CCP to the Kuomintang had made the party's defeat in China inevitable. The creation in Russia of a secret Chinese branch of the Left Opposition, formed by Trotsky in 1923 to counter the "bureaucratic degeneration" of the Soviet party under Stalin, was followed by the Opposition's importation into China, where Russia-returned Trotskyists showed disaffected communists Trotsky's writings, smuggled home from Moscow. This China-based opposition began as a supporting section of the international Left Opposition, set up by Trotsky in 1930 to win the Third International (or Comintern, formed under Lenin and Trotsky in 1919 but captured by Stalin in the 1920s) to a programme of permanent revolution. In 1938, after concluding that Stalinism could no longer be defeated by acting within organs of the Third International and its national sections, the Trotskyists founded the Fourth International (FI) in Paris. The Chinese Trotskyists were formally among its constituents, but their links to it were fragile and intermittent and for long stretches dormant. Its tie with Trotskyists inside China was definitively broken by their arrest and jailing in 1952, although remnants clung on in Hong Kong and parts of the diaspora.

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The Historical Materialism series aims to celebrate the variety of world Marxism in practice and theory, yet its coverage of Asian and particularly Chinese Marxism was thin before the appearance in 2014 of *Prophets Unarmed*. That monumental work of well over one thousand pages of original sources and critical analyses, the first sourcebook

on Chinese Trotskyism, reignited interest in this original and creative movement of dissent. Its story had first begun to emerge from the shadows in 1980 with the publication by Oxford University Press of a translation of a memoir by the Trotskyist leader Wang Fanxi [5] Wang's book was followed by another Trotskyist memoir (by Zheng Chaolin), [6] a compendium of letters by the Trotskyist leader [Chen Duxiu](#), [7] and other similar books and articles. In the late twentieth century, the start of a revival by a new generation of young Chinese activists of the tradition of radical socialism and critical Marxism pioneered by the Trotskyists added to the appreciation outside China of the richness, depth, and relevance (faint but enduring) of that tradition.

The writings of China's Trotskyist leaders excerpted in *Prophets Unarmed*, frank, truthful, self critical, and revelatory, put in poor light publications by leaders of the CCP before and since 1949, which are unswervingly loyal to its elite, turn a blind eye where necessary to the truth, and rarely if ever depart from the cliches of state ideology and the official line, seen as sacrosanct and central to their maintenance of power. This is why the autobiographies of early Trotskyist leaders like Wang Fanxi and Zheng Chaolin have had an allure in China far greater than might have been expected given their authors' scant political achievements. The appearance in Japan, Europe, and North America of translations of Chinese Trotskyist books has had a retroactive impact in China itself, where their publication had long been unthinkable. Their publication overseas helped draw attention to them and speeded their release to a wider domestic public, and may also have helped speed the release in 1979 of the final batch of Trotskyist prisoners.

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This sourcebook carries memoirs and biographical and other writings of the Chinese Trotskyists, mainly focused on events since 1945 and theoretical essays written since 1949 concerning more recent developments in China, the Soviet Union, and the world communist movement. At some points, it extends to writings about events and activities from earlier years, where these were unavailable for inclusion in the earlier volume.

*The Longest Night* is a sequel to *Prophets Unarmed*, in that it takes the story of Chinese Trotskyism beyond 1949, the year of Mao Zedong's victory at national level and of the Trotskyists' imminent destruction. The title of the earlier volume borrows Niccolò Machiavelli's distinction between prophets unarmed (like the Chinese Trotskyists), doomed to ruin however much admired, and prophets armed (like Mao), who "always conquer". [8] The title of the present volume draws on a line from a poem by the Chinese Trotskyist leader Zheng Chaolin conceived in prison in 1959, the seventh anniversary of the Trotskyists' arrest in December 1952. The poem pictures the jailed Trotskyists in darkness at the time of the winter solstice, "the longest night", the exact day of their netting up. Each stanza ends with a reference to Zheng's separation both from his party and from his beloved wife Wu Jingru, who lived out her last couple of decades in poverty and isolation, blind (even more so than Zheng Chaolin in his old age) and left crippled by rampaging Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. The poem also asserts Zheng's belief in the inevitability of socialism, inexorable as the changing of seasons:

The light today dies soonest,  
tonight's the longest night.  
Looking back across these seven years,  
I recall the night that broke our hearts in two.

When yin attains its limit, yang begins to grow,  
and heat and cold eventually swap places.  
The years spin round at ever greater speed,  
while I pursue my lonely, dreary course.

The subtitle, *Three Generations of Chinese Trotskyists in Defeat, Jail, Exile, and Diaspora*, refers to the three ages of Chinese Trotskyism: the founding generation around Chen Duxiu, Zheng Chaolin, Wang Fanxi, and Peng Shuzhi,

who joined the Opposition after their expulsion from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP; the first generation of those who (after 1931) did not first pass through the ranks of the CCP before becoming Trotskyists; and those who joined the Trotskyist movement after 1949, mainly in Hong Kong. But the “generations” are mere age cohorts that overlap and interact. Surviving members of the first two generations helped bring the third into being and maintained close links with it, until their eventual passing away. Exile refers to the Trotskyists who left China around 1949, either for Hong Kong and Macao or for abroad. Exile and diaspora became interlinked, as Trotskyist refugees sank roots outside the Chinese mainland and Trotskyism began to make minute inroads into settled communities of migrant and ethnic Chinese.

*Prophets Unarmed* included major excerpts from the memoirs of Wang Fanxi and Zheng Chaolin, which have become established classics of the Chinese Revolution. Nearly all the memoirs in the present volume are by less-known or unknown members of the second and third generations, but they occasionally include recollections by and about members of the first. The volume also includes a small number of letters, a tiny sample of the huge volume of correspondence that passed between Chinese Trotskyists scattered across the globe after the 1952 clampdown. The three-way correspondence that started up after Zheng Chaolin’s release from prison in 1979 between him and Wang Fanxi (in Leeds) and Lou Guohua (in Hong Kong) includes hundreds of archived letters sent to Wang by Zheng and Lou, while Zheng’s niece in Shanghai has control of hundreds of letters from Wang and Lou to Zheng. The fate of Wang and Lou’s letters to Shanghai is unclear, for Wang was not in the habit of keeping copies. In recent years, some of Zheng’s letters have been put up for sale on the internet, it is unclear by whom. Wang’s letters to Shanghai and to his hometown in Zhejiang also seem to have become “collectibles” in China. [9]

Together, this and the previous volume tell the tragic story of Chinese Trotskyism. The sources include original documents of the movement, hostile Chinese and Russian government reports, memoirs by first-and second-generation Chinese Trotskyists, statements by Chinese Trotskyist leaders, correspondence among those leaders and with Trotskyists in other countries, eye-witness commentary by friends and enemies, retrospective commentary by specialist historians, and recollections by sympathetic observers and members of the Trotskyists’ present-day progeny. Most of the writings included in *Prophets Unarmed* are memoirs and post-1949 reflections by early leaders and founders of Chinese Trotskyism, including Chen Duxiu, Zheng Chaolin, Wang Fanxi, and Peng Shuzhi. They deal chiefly with the movement’s early history, in the two decades between its birth in 1929 and its destruction starting in 1949, and reflect on the course of their movement during the civil wars between the Kuomintang and the CCP (1927–1937 and 1946–1949) and the Resistance War against Japan (1937–1945). They encroach only occasionally on developments after 1949. The present volume focuses on Chinese Trotskyism in the postwar years and after 1949. Its contents are more or less equally divided between memoirs and documents by veteran survivors of the founding generation not included in the first volume and others by younger Trotskyists of the second and third generations, as well as essays by historians of Chinese Trotskyism. The veterans had begun their revolutionary careers in the CCP and joined the Opposition as a result of their direct experience of the CCP’s defeat in 1927. Their writings excerpted in *Prophets Unarmed* talk chiefly about the revolution in the 1920s and the founding and early years of Chinese Trotskyism, in the Soviet Union and in China, in the 1930s. Members of the second and third generations, on the other hand, were Trotskyists from the start. Another difference between the two volumes is that the veteran leaders whose work is covered by the prequel were active (when out of prison) mainly in Shanghai, whereas the membership of the second generation (before its own jailing) was more widely spread, in Wenzhou, Chongqing, and other provincial cities. Their memoirs deal in part with activities during the Japanese War and the civil war of 1946–1949. They thus cover a wider geographical area than the first volume and a different time-span. The main difference is that only the second volume systematically covers Trotskyism under the People’s Republic of China (prc) and in the immediate run-up to it. As a token of hope, it concludes with a brief survey of a number of present-day movements in China, some of which have at least a slender lineal or lateral tie to Trotskyism.

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As part of a movement that aspired to resurrect the communist vision of international revolution led by disciplined

professionals, the Chinese Trotskyists based their thinking on Trotsky's idea of permanent revolution, his main contribution to Marxist theoretical debate. Trotsky summarised his theory in 1929 as "a revolution which makes no compromise with any single form of class rule, which does not stop at the democratic stage, which goes over to socialist measures and to war against reaction from without; that is, a revolution whose every successive stage is rooted in the preceding one and which can end only in complete liquidation". At the same time, it would "give a powerful impetus to the international socialist revolution", for only its victorious passage to the West could "protect Russia from bourgeois restoration and assure it the possibility of rounding out the establishment of socialism". [10] The Chinese Revolution featured centrally in the debate about permanent revolution, of which Trotsky saw it as a major practical test.

Permanent revolution was the underlying principle of Chinese Trotskyist strategy, but its tactical focus changed according to circumstance. The early history of the movement, until the 1952 crackdown, can be found in the memoirs excerpted in *Prophets Unarmed*. At the time of their unification conference in Shanghai in 1931, marking the formal creation of the Chinese Left Opposition, Trotsky's Chinese followers rejected the CCP's pursuit of an imminent "revolutionary high tide", a wrong strategy that they attributed to Stalin's unwillingness to face up to the reality of the defeat of 1927 as a result of his own misdirection of it. Instead, they resolved to campaign for a National (i.e., Constituent) Assembly as a step towards rebuilding the shattered trade unions and the urban party in China, while insisting (with Trotsky) that the future Chinese revolution would be socialist in character from the outset. But their plans got nowhere, for within months almost their entire leadership was imprisoned under emergency laws proclaimed by the Kuomintang in 1931. Even so, their focus on a democratic assembly became their main badge of identification.

In 1937, the start of Japan's full-scale invasion of China led to the disintegration of the Kuomintang government in Nanjing and the release of its remaining political prisoners, including Trotskyists (some had been freed a little earlier). During the Resistance War (1937–1945) and its continuation in the Pacific War (1941–1945), two political issues occupied the Chinese Trotskyists. One was the practical role they should play in the war. In 1938, Chen Duxiu, the leader of the Chinese Trotskyists in 1931, expressed his dissatisfaction with what he saw as his comrades' failure to engage in new forms of political and military activity in the new context of the war. He proposed a campaign to unite all political tendencies independent of both the Kuomintang and the CCP on a broad programme of freedom, democracy, and land reform and to infiltrate Nationalist armed forces active in the resistance, among whose generals Chen could count on friends and supporters from his pre-communist past. A handful of Trotskyists around Wang Fanxi tried to implement Chen's plan but were thwarted when Chen's main contact among the generals was relieved of his command, probably because of his tie to Chen. So the Trotskyists played no real part in the resistance apart from scattered attempts here and there to set up guerrilla forces in some rural areas. A second issue uppermost in their minds was the nature of China's resistance war. One faction (around Wang Fanxi and Zheng Chaolin) argued that once the Pacific War broke out, America would become the dominant power and the Trotskyists' attitude towards the Kuomintang-led war should "lay more stress on the victory of the revolution than of the war", a policy they called victoryism, in an allusion to Lenin's policy of defeatism. (This issue is discussed in greater detail later in this introduction.) Another faction, around Peng Shuzhi and Liu Jialiang, which ended up as the majority, argued a less radical position, that the war would remain progressive unless British or American troops fought Japan on Chinese soil. [11] The resulting controversy was of no practical account, since the Trotskyists were too marginal to influence the course of the resistance, but it led to new and separate problems within the Trotskyist party, regarding the status and rights of minorities. The Wang-Zheng minority requested a continuation of the debate on the war in the party's paper and its internal bulletin, but their request was refused and the movement split. The Wang-Zheng group continued to argue for greater internal democracy, whereas the Peng-Liu group favoured a more centralised internal regime. The split, which started in 1941, was never mended.

Even after the Japanese surrender in August 1945, the two Trotskyist factions remained few in number and weakened by the split, but both resumed their publishing and organising activities and made new recruits. The Wang-Zheng group formed a Marxist Youth League in Shanghai that claimed to be a main force behind the student movement in Shanghai in 1946–1948. They also worked in industry, where they formed trade unions and led strikes.

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They could see in 1945 that a revolution in China was imminent, but Wang later conceded that he and his comrades were “ideologically and organisationally unprepared for it when it actually broke out”. [12] The Peng-Liu group set up similar organisations and extended its influence in schools and factories. However, both groups remained tiny, with just a couple of hundred core members between them and a few hundred more sympathisers (and no prospect of reunification), at a time when Mao commanded millions. Each group started to move at more or less the same time towards setting up a party, the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) in late 1948, in Peng’s case, and the Internationalist Workers Party (IWP) in April 1949, in Wang and Zheng’s. However, by that time the People’s Liberation Army under Mao was on the brink of seizing power at the national level, so neither of the two new parties ever came to anything.

The IWP under Zheng Chaolin resolved to stay in China under CCP rule, and sent Wang Fanxi to Hong Kong to set up a supposedly safe coordinating centre, after dissolving horizontal links. But Wang was deported almost immediately to Macao by the British colonial authorities, anxious to avoid upsetting the Communists in charge across the border. The RCP took a different course. Its main leadership, including Peng and Liu Jialiang, fled to Hong Kong. Peng and his wife Chen Bilan eventually ended up in Paris by way of Vietnam, where Liu Jialiang was assassinated by Vietnamese Communists. Peng and Chen stayed in Paris from 1951 to 1972. They then moved to Los Angeles, where they lived until Peng’s death in 1983.

In late 1949 and early 1950, members of the Zheng-Wang group in Shanghai continued to publish a journal, “Marxist Youth” and to lead strikes and other campaigns. Zheng (in Shanghai) and Wang (in Macao) wrote about Stalinism and the Soviet Union in light of events in China and about the causes of Mao’s victory. Topics included the nature of the state Mao and his followers had established, the reasons for the Trotskyists’ failure, and the nature of Maoism and its tie to Stalinism. Peng and Liu also wrote from their places of exile criticising the Maoists and defending the Trotskyist legacy. Some of those writings are contained in the prequel, others here. In December 1952, the net fell on the Trotskyist movement in China, putting an immediate end to the debate within the country, although both Wang and Peng continued their thinking and writing in solitude and exile.

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[1] The current price is very high destined for institutions, a cheaper paperback will be out in a year's time.

[2] This introduction benefited from comments by Au Loong-yu, Paul Hampton, Pierre Rousset and Zhang Shaoming.

[3] *The tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*, Harold Isaacs, Stanford University Press 1961, available on [Marxist Internet Archive](#).

[4] In February 1949, [Peng Shuzhi](#) staged the founding conference of his Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), but by that time the Chinese Trotskyists had split into two probably more or less equal halves.

[5] On Wang, see “[Wang Fanxi](#)”, *Chinese Revolutionary: Memoirs 1919 1949* Wang Fan-hsi, OUP 1980, republished Columbia University Press 1991.

[6] On Zheng see “[In Memory of A Chinese Revolutionary: Zheng Chaolin, 1901-1998](#)”, *Oppositionist for Life : Memoirs of the Chinese Revolutionary*, Benton (ed.), Brill 1997.

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[7] *Chen Duxiu's Last Articles and Letters, 1937-1942*, Benton (ed.), Routledge 1998.

[8] This distinction was first made in a Trotskyist context by Isaac Deutscher.

[9] Philately remains popular in China. Chinese philatelists collect not just stamps and "covers".

[10] From the introduction to *The Permanent Revolution*, published in Berlin in November 1929.

[11] Wang Fan-hsi 1980, p. 234.

[12] Wang Fan-hsi 1980, p. 246.