STUDIES ■ ON ■ EAST ■ ASIA

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the Chinese League of Left-Wing Writers, 1930–36

Wang-chi Wong

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MANCHESTER
UNIVERSITY PRESS
Manchester and New York

distributed exclusively in the USA and Canada
by St. Martin's Press

First published in 1991 in Great Britain by
Manchester University Press, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL, England
and Room 400, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA

Distributed exclusively in the USA and Canada by
St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA

Editorial responsibility rests with the East Asia Centre, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, England, which promotes publications on the individual countries and culture of East Asia, as well as on the region as a whole.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Wong, Wang-chi
Politics and literature in Shanghai : the Chinese League of left-wing writers, 1930–1936. – (Studies on East Asia).
1. China. Intellectual life, 1919–1938
I. Title II. Series
951.04

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Wong, Wang-chi,
Politics and literature in Shanghai : the Chinese League of Left-Wing writers, 1930–1936/Wang-chi Wong
p. cm.—(Studies on East Asia)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0–7190–2924–4
1. Chung-kou tso i tso chia lien meng—History. 2. Chinese literature—China—Shanghai—History and criticism. 3. Chinese literature—20th century—History and criticism. 4. Chinese literature—Political aspects—China—Shanghai. I. Title. II. Series: Studies on East Asia (Manchester, England)
PL1011,W65 1991
895.1'09951132'09043—dc20 90–25519
CIP

ISBN 0–7190–2924–4

Printed in Great Britain
by Billing & Sons Limited, Worcester

Politics and Literature in Shanghai

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Contents

Foreword

The League of Left-wing Writers has to figure largely in any history of modern Chinese literature by virtue of the fact that having got off to a relatively liberal start, the trend of the literature was increasingly leftward, and from 1930 to 1936, the years in which it existed, the League led the trend. It led the trend not because its members published the most or the best literature of the time, but because it dominated discussion of literature and society in the periodical press, so moulding views which informed the next wave of literature.

Before the formation of the League and attendant on its dissolution, some of the noisiest and not the politest of the debates were conducted by left-wingers among themselves, but this was not necessarily harmful to the cause; the frays attracted spectators, who might have thought one side wrongheaded, but that still left the winners on the left. While the League was active, internal feuding was damped down and hostility directed outwards, apparently victoriously, if victory is won by endurance and weight of numbers: the rival ideologues were never so strident, and fell silent first. Both in its polemics and in its propaganda, the League undoubtedly achieved its aims of promoting the class struggle and arousing interest in proletarian literature.

So much is generally known, but a great deal about the workings of the League has been obscure, due partly to the fact that it had to operate secretly and partly to deliberate obfuscation. The obfuscation arose because communist historians, who were of course in the best position to tell the tale were first required to represent the operations of the League as an unqualified success, as it was led by the Communist Party, but then to declare a succession of its leading lights black sheep when they fell from favour, a process which culminated in the condemnation of Zhou Yang, the man in charge of the League in its later years, as a 'bourgeois revisionist'. Added to these complications have been questions raised about the arrest of the Five Martyrs of the League executed in 1931 (were they betrayed?), and the relationship between the communist leaders of the League and Lu Xun, whose prestige made him necessary as an ally but whose prickly temper made him an uncomfortable bedfellow.

The rehabilitation of the old guard after 1976 released a flood of memoirs intended to put the record straight, but inevitably also to show the individual authors in a good light. The result was to further cloud as much as to clarify certain issues. It has been Dr Wong's task to sieve the wheat from all this collected chaff and reconstruct what happened where that can be ascertained, and assess the balance of probability where it cannot. He has been remarkably thorough in the first respect and shown very sound judgment in the second. In other words, he has put forward as complete and reliable a picture as may presently be obtained.

Dr Wong's book may be profitably read as the detailed history of one communist front organisation among many, or more particularly by students of modern Chinese literature as an answer to a number of puzzling questions surrounding some of the most forceful personalities of the day.

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Acknowledgements

The present book is a revised version of my PhD dissertation at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. In the process of writing, I was helped in one way or another by so many people that it is impossible to acknowledge them all. I am particularly grateful to Professor David E Pollard, my supervisor, without whose guidance, advice and assistance, this study could not have been accomplished. His valuable comments and suggestions corrected many of my mistakes. I am especially grateful for his willingness to write a foreword, which adds so much pride to this book. I am also heavily indebted to Dr Siu-kit Wong, my teacher at the Department of Chinese, University of Hong Kong, Drs Nigel Bedford and Gregory Lee, two of my best friends in London, who read the manuscript, providing illuminating suggestions and saving me from many errors in English. Needless to say, I alone am responsible for any mistakes that remain.

Special thanks should go to, among others, Mrs Man-yee Fung and Mrs Kit-ling Kiu, Professor Ling-yeong Chiu and Professor Ping-leung Chan, my former teachers in the Department of Chinese, University of Hong Kong, for their constant encouragement in the process of writing. I must also thank my several schoolmates in the University, Mr Sai-shing Yung, Dr Ching-kiu Chan, Dr Kwok-kou Chan, Dr Kang-kwong Luke and Dr Wing-on Yeung for their immense help and interest.

For friends and scholars in Shanghai, I would like particularly to thank Mr Tang Tao, Mr Wang Xiyan, Mr Wang Xiaoming, Mr Hu Congjing and Mr Ding Jingtang for hospitality and help during my stay there. I am also grateful to Dr Zhou Yushan of the Institute of International Relations, Taipei. His thorough research on the Left League has provided me with useful information and suggestions.

In the west, there are two pioneering works in the study of the Left League, Dr Neale Hunter's 'The League of Left-wing Writers, Shanghai, 1930-1936' (Unpublished PhD dissertation, Australian National University, 1973) and Dr Anthony Kane's 'The League of Left-wing Writers and Chinese literary policy' (Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 1982). I would like to thank them for providing some illuminating ideas and useful information.

I must also express my gratitude to Dr David Goodman and Dr Ian Neary, of the East Asia Centre, University of Newcastle upon Tyne for their kind inclusion of the book in the series *Studies on East Asia*. Their encouragement and help have greatly eased the hard work of revision. I should also thank Mrs Margaret Levy of the centre and Miss Celia Ashcroft of Manchester University Press for the help in various ways which makes the publication of the present book possible.

I wish to thank the Association of Commonwealth Universities for the Commonwealth Scholarship, and the Central Research Fund of the University of London which enabled me to do research in London and Shanghai.

Lastly, I wish to thank all members of my family and in particular my wife, Anita, who has shared with me the hardships of a student's life, and my three sons, Tsun-ting, Wai-ting and Ho-ting, who have always been able to cheer me up at times of frustration.

Introduction

1927 was one of the most important years in modern Chinese history, especially in the history of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). It marked the end of the first united front with the Guomindang (GMD, the Nationalist Party). At its formation in 1921, the young Communist Party, comprising a few dozen intellectuals with no experience in politics, stood no chance in the fight against China's two evils, feudalism and imperialism. Collaboration with the bourgeois party, the GMD, seemed a natural and acceptable course of action, as the latter's large membership constituted the strongest force in the revolution, and the bourgeoisie, after all, was the only class then fully aware of revolutionary ideas.[1] The Communist International (Comintern) in Moscow, to which the CCP turned for guidance, had also been in favour of a united front. As early as September 1921, Maring (H Sneevliet), the secretary of the National and Colonial Committee of the Comintern, met Dr Sun Yat-sen at Guilin. It was reported that Maring proposed a collaboration with the GMD.[2] Though the plan failed, it seemed that Dr Sun was very much impressed by the New Economic Policy of the Soviet Union. GMD delegates were sent to attend the Congress of the Toilers of the East (the Eastern People's Congress) in Moscow in January 1922. There, the Soviet delegate, Safarov, commended the achievements of the GMD and declared that 'in colonial and semi-colonial countries the first phase of the revolutionary movement must inevitably be a national-democratic movement'.[3] The first united front was finally realised in 1923 when the GMD was reorganised and took in Communist members.

During this first collaboration, the Communist Party grew rapidly. With only fifty-seven members at the First Congress in 1921, it had 57,693 members in 1927, plus some 35,000 members of the Youth Corps.[4] But this did not mean that the collaboration was smooth and stable. After Sun Yat-sen's death on 12 March 1925, the hostility of many GMD members towards the Communists became apparent. Liao Zhongkai, the Finance Minister and an ardent supporter of the united front, was assassinated in August. In November, about ten important GMD members met in Beijing and formed the group which was later known as the Western Hill Group (*Xishanpai*). They demanded the immediate expulsion of the Communists. Several months later, the March 20th Incident - or the Gunboat Zhongshan Incident (*Zhongshanjian shijian*) - took place in Guangzhou. Jiang Jieshi claimed that the gunboat manned by Communist officers planned to kidnap him, and declared martial law.[5] Although the incident did not immediately lead to serious hostilities, it became clear to the Communists that Jiang was not a reliable ally. Then early on the morning of 12 April 1927, Jiang staged a coup against the Communists in Shanghai. Large numbers of Communists were arrested and shot. Similar action was taken in other parts of the country. On 18 April, Jiang formed a new

national government in Nanjing and the first united front was completely shattered.

The impact of the 'purge' on the Communists was strong. The leadership changed: Chen Duxiu, CCP founder and chief secretary since its formation, was replaced by Qu Qiubai. Qu, reacting to Chen's so-called 'capitulationist' policy, initiated, under Comintern direction, a 'putschist' line. Desperately trying to regain lost ground, he ordered CCP members in different places to stage uprisings, but they were easily crushed by the GMD. Even worse, within a year, party membership had fallen to less than one-fifth of the level before the coup.[6]

The 1927 coup also had its impact in the literary field. The left-wingers, defeated in politics, took refuge in literature. They launched a large scale revolutionary literary movement in Shanghai, and within a few years, left-wing literature became the dominant element in the literary arena. Thus 1927 has been regarded as a turning point not only in the political history, but also in the literary history of modern China. In fact, the ten years following 1927 are commonly known as the 'Left League Decade' (*Zuolian shinian*).[7] The Left League (*Zuolian*), or in full, the Chinese League of Left-wing Writers (*Zhongguo zuoyi zuojia lianmeng*), was a literary organisation formed on 2 March 1930 under the direction and control of the CCP, after a polemic among the left-wingers had been brought to an end. In the first half of the thirties, the Left League fought a number of lively battles against pro-government and even apolitical writers, regarded by the Left as obstacles to their revolution. 1936, the year in which the League was dissolved, marked the end of this era as the Communists called for another collaboration with the GMD against Japanese aggression.

During the Left League Decade, the CCP's political and military survival was threatened. Jiang Jieshi, firmly established at Nanjing, was determined to wipe out Communism in China and launched five large scale campaigns against the Communists in remote areas of Jiangxi until they were driven out of the so-called Soviet areas and forced on to the Long March in 1934. In Shanghai, the base of the Left League, the situation was even more serious. 'White terror' threatened the life of every left-winger. The propagation of their ideas was difficult owing to strict censorship and the banning of their publications. Internally, the left-wingers themselves were troubled with intra-Party conflict. Within the same period, the Communist Party is said to have been ruled by three left-deviationist lines, under Qu Qiubai (from August 1927 to June 1928), Li Lisan (from 1929 to September 1930) and Wang Ming (alias Chen Shaoyu) (from 1931-1936).[8] Literary activities were directly or indirectly affected by party policy, resulting in some serious mistakes. Further, the base of the Left League was not solid. Thus, in its final years, the League itself was badly hit by factionalism, ending the Left League Decade with another polemic.

However, it was not an easy time for the Nationalists either. Having won a telling victory over the Communists in 1927, they still faced other internal enemies. Warlords like Li Zongren, Li Jichen, Yen Xishan and Feng Yuxiang,

in different parts of the country, posed great threats to the newly established regime. In the early thirties, large scale battles took place. Though Jiang finally emerged the victor, the damage was huge. It was reported that three hundred thousand men were killed in a single battle in 1931.[9] Such wars also damaged the nation's economy. Military expenses in 1928 was $210 million; that of 1930 was $310 million, a fifty percent increase.[10] To meet these expenses, government bonds had to be issued, a total of $520 million in 1928-1930.[11] The situation was made more acute with the worldwide economic slump in 1930.

This period also saw the Japanese invasion of China. In 1931, there was the Mukden, or September 18th, Incident, when the Japanese invaded the northeast of China, and took more than a million square kilometres of land in four months. Then, in January 1932, the infamous Shanghai battle erupted. In neither case did Jiang take serious and positive action against the Japanese. He adopted a policy of 'pacification first, then resistance' (*xian annei, hou rangwai*) believing that the Communists must be wiped out before China could fight a successful external war. This inevitably aroused anti-GMD feelings among the people.

Throughout the thirties, Communists continued to pose a serious threat to the nationalist government. Although badly hit by the coup, they gradually regained some strength outside the cities. With the expansion of the Red Army, Party membership began to grow again.[12] A large Soviet area was built up in southeast China, greatly threatening the Nationalist regime. The first four campaigns launched against them ended in failure on the part of the GMD, resulting in heavy casualties and economic strain.

In Shanghai, the Left League and other leftist cultural groups tried every means available to propagate Marxist theories and attack the authorities. Often, left-wingers sought refuge in the foreign concession areas. One fatal weakness on the part of the Nationalists was that they could not build up any sort of literature or literary movement of their own to counter the influence of the left in the literary circle. On the other hand, the left was able to secure the services of Lu Xun, one of those writers who were dismayed at the coup of Jiang Jieshi. Lu Xun's contribution to the left in the thirties was invaluable. His name alone stood out as a great symbol. A famous writer and the 'mentor of the youth' (*qingnian daoshi*), he was able to attract around him a group of young fighters. This alone made him such an important member of the left-wing literary movement.

However, since so much importance had been attached to him, Lu Xun could constitute a strong divisive force if alienated. Consequently, the solidarity of the organisation and the development of the left-wing literary movement depended very much on his relationship with other cadres of the Left League. Unfortunately there was no solid base for a genuine personal friendship. Before the formation of the Left League, there was a heated debate between him and other left-wing writers, while in its final years, he was very much discontented with the deeds of some of the most important members of the organisation.

Hence, the period covered in this study can be properly described as volatile. Both the Communists and the nationalists were confronted with internal and external foes and problems, as was the entire nation. It was in this chaotic situation, in the Shanghai, 'paradise of adventurers',[13] that left-wing literature emerged and grew.

Notes to the Introduction

1 Jacques Guillermaz, *A history of the Chinese Communist Party, 1921-1949* (Translated by Anne Destenay) (London: Methuen & Co, 1972), p 68.
2 Wang Jianmin, *A draft history of the Chinese Communist Party (Zhongguo gongzhandang shigao)* (Taibei: Zhongwen tushu gongyingshe, Sept 1974), pp 93-4.
3 Jacques Guillermaz, *A history of the Chinese Communist Party*, p 70.
4 *Ibid*, p 83.
5 For an account of the incident, see James P Harrison, *The long march to power: A history of the Chinese Communist Party, 1921-72* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972), pp 76-82.
6 *Ibid*, p 83.
7 For example, see Wang Yao, *A draft history of modern Chinese literature (Xinwenxue shigao)* (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, November 1982 reprint), pp 162-216.
8 Mao Zedong, 'Resolution on certain questions in the history of our Party', *Selected works of Mao Tse-tung* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1965), Vol III, pp 183-8.
9 Wang Yunsheng, 'Observing the tides for ten years' (*guanchao shinian*), *Guowen zhoubao* Vol XI No 1 (1 January 1934), pp 1-13.
10 Wang Yuanqi, *A history of modern China (Zhongguo xiandaishi)* (Henan: Henan renmin chubanshe, July 1982) Vol I, p 277.
11 *Ibid*.
12 James P Harrison, *The long march to power*, p 148.
13 G E Miller, *Shanghai, the paradise of adventurers* (New York: Orsay Publishing House, 1937).

Chapter One

The Pre-League Period: Debate on Revolutionary Literature (1927-1929)

The years from 1927 to 1929 are generally taken as the 'pre-League Period' of the Left League decade, as the Chinese League of Left-wing Writers was not formed until March 1930. Nevertheless, this short period was no less important than the six League years. In Shanghai, there was a heated debate over the issue of revolutionary literature among the left-wingers who were driven to literary activities after the political setback caused by Jiang Jieshi's coup in April 1927. This revolutionary literary movement provided the basis for the formation of the Left League and other left-wing literary movements in the thirties.

Three groups were involved in the polemic on revolutionary literature; the ultra-left, who ardently advocated and supported revolutionary literature; the left, in basic agreement with revolutionary literature but not satisfied with the means proposed and the ideas expressed by the first group; and the right, who opposed revolutionary literature on principle. The first group was made up of members of the Creation (*Chuangzaoshe*) and Sun Societies (*Taiyangshe*), the second was headed by Lu Xun and Mao Dun, representatives of the Thread-of-talk group (*Yusipai*) and the Literary Research Association (*Wenxue yanjiuhui*) and the last group was mainly the Crescentists (*Xinyuepai*), with Liang Shiqiu as the key theoretician. The polemic was three-cornered: fierce arguments took place between the first two groups as well as between those two and the third.

Soon after the debate began, in early 1928, there was an argument among the ultra-leftists themselves over the question of leadership in the revolutionary literary movement. Li Chuli, prominent in the last stage of the Creation Society, labelled as the first voice in the advocacy of revolutionary literature the article 'Revolution and literature' (*Geming yu wenxue*), published in April 1926 by Guo Moruo, a founder of the Society.[1] This idea was unacceptable to Qian Xingcun of the Sun Society, who believed that Jiang Guangci was at least two years ahead of Guo in advocating revolutionary literature, because as early as August 1924, Jiang had published an article 'Proletarian revolution and culture' (*Wuchan jieji geming yu wenhua*).[2] This dispute reflected clearly the sectarianism of the ultra-leftists, who tried to take all merit for their own groups.

It is difficult to give a general definition of revolutionary literature. The new literature created shortly after the May Fourth Incident can be regarded as 'revolutionary' in a broad sense as it aimed at the destruction of the old order and the promotion of radical change. In terms of form, the use of the new vernacular (*xinbaihua*) was an emancipation from classical Chinese (*wenyan*). But obviously, this was not the kind of revolutionary literature demanded by the self-proclaimed revolutionary writers of 1927. They wanted a revolutionary literature in Marxist terms. An acceptable definition would be as follows:

> Revolutionary literature must consciously endeavour to 'raise the consciousness' of its audience - that is, it must promote and increase the audience's understanding of socio-historic reality according to the perspective of class struggle and the stages of historical development all societies pass through on their way to communism.[3]

By this definition, works from the May Fourth period were excluded from the category of revolutionary literature, since class consciousness was not distinct then and the Communist Party was formed only two years later. Not until 1922-23, was there the first advocacy of the kind of revolutionary literature to fit a Marxist definition.

In 1922, the Chinese Socialist Youth Corps (*Zhongguo shehuizhuyi qingniantuan*) held its first general meeting. Its members included Deng Zhongxia, Yun Daiying, Shen Zemin and Xiao Chunu, who became important members of the CCP. The corps passed a resolution in the general meeting calling for members to take part in various literary activities and proletarianise literature and art.[4] In December 1923, Deng Zhongxia published in its official organ *Zhongguo qingnian* (*Chinese youth*) an article called 'Proffered to the new poets' (*Gongxianyu xinshiren zhiqian*). In the article, he expressed his disgust at those poets who took no notice of social problems. He discussed the effect of literature in driving people to revolution:

> We admit that men are sentient beings. We admit that revolutions are economic and political struggles in the face of oppression. But it is necessary to move people's sentiment first if we want to awaken their revolutionary consciousness and inspire them so that they have the courage for revolution. You may use speeches or treatises to move their sentiment. But the most effective means is literature.[5]

He also urged writers to participate in revolutionary activities and write on actual life in society.

Deng's close associate, Yun Daiying expressed a similar idea in a short essay called 'Literature and revolution' (*Wenxue yu geming*). He believed that taking part in revolution was a prerequisite for writing revolutionary literature. To him, as literature was a product of the noble and sacred feelings of mankind, one had to have revolutionary feelings before creating revolutionary literature; and as one could acquire revolutionary feelings only by participating in revolution, one had to become a revolutionary first. He did not mean that all revolutionaries could be revolutionary writers. 'Among these revolutionaries, there will be someone who has abundant feelings and he will certainly create revolutionary literature.'[6]

Shen Zemin, younger brother of the famous writer Mao Dun, also pioneered the promotion of revolutionary literature. On 15 December 1923, a week before Deng Zhongxia published 'Proffered to the new poets', he had already called for writers to 'go among the people' (*dao minjian qu*).[7] In another essay, 'Literature and revolutionary literature' (*Wenxue yu geming de wenxue*), he argued that a great change was approaching and the whole structure of society was shattering.

The world's proletarians had awakened. A revolutionary writer, being their spokesman, should use literature as a means to express the desires, sufferings and wishes of the oppressed. More important, he was able to bring out the issue of proletarian consciousness. He believed that someone with only revolutionary ideas could not create revolutionary literature. Unless one had joined a workers' strike, been thrown into prison or chased by police, or had worked hard and been ill-treated by employers, one could never understand the proletarian subconsciousness and could never be qualified to write revolutionary literature.[8]

Although *Zhongguo qingnian* was a very important publication in advocating revolutionary literature, it was largely neglected because the few essays it contained sparked off no large scale movement. The issue of revolutionary literature was taken up again and turned into a widespread movement basically because of the work of Jiang Guangci of the Sun Society and Guo Moruo of the Creation Society.

Jiang Guangci was also a member of the Chinese Socialist Youth Corps, having joined in the winter of 1920. In 1922, he became a member of the CCP. From 1921 to 1924, he studied at the Oriental University of Moscow. Upon his return, he lectured on Marxist sociology at the CCP-run Shanghai University.[9] In 1924, he published his first book of poetry, *New Dreams* (*Xinmeng*), which has been regarded by many as the first fruit of the revolutionary literature. In the poems, Jiang Guangci called for a world revolution and the awakening of the proletariat. He also demanded the downfall of imperialism and an end to civil wars between warlords. His first piece of fiction, 'The young tramp' (*Shaonian piaopozhe*), published in 1926, was described by Qian Xingcun as a piece of 'proletarian revolutionary literature' and 'a genuine record of the germination period of proletarian revolutionary literature'.[10] His subsequent works, such as 'On the River Yalu' (*Yalujiang shang*) and 'Des Sans-culottes' (*Duankudang*), are important, though maybe not good, specimens of revolutionary literature.[11]

However, he did not seem to put much emphasis on theory. As late as 1928 he still insisted that 'what we demand from writers are literary and revolutionary creations, not those empty and elusive treatises which can be written by anybody'.[12] On the other hand, the contribution of the Creation Society in the theoretical field was much greater. The different attitudes of the two groups towards theory constituted a major source of conflict between them.

Initially, the Creationists advocated 'art for art's sake' introducing to China the work of such Western romantics as Goethe, Whitman, Byron and Shelley. They denounced in particular so-called 'artistic utilitarianism' and for this reason, a pen-battle erupted between the Society and the Literary Research Association. But soon there were signs of change. In the May 1923 issue of *Chuangzao zhoubao* (*Creation weekly*), the two leading figures of the Society, Guo Moruo and Yu Dafu, published two articles considered by some critics as 'preludes to the later revolutionary literary movement'.[13] In the short essay 'Our new literary movement' (*Women de wenxue xinyundong*), Guo condemned the militarists, politicians and capitalists of China, stating unequivocally: