

Chen Duxiu's Last Articles and Letters, 1937-1942. Edited and Translated by Gregor Benton. Published under the auspices of the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam. Richmond (Surrey): Curzon Press, 1998. ISBN 0-7007-0618-6.

This book is a timely and important source for understanding the intellectual development of the late Chen Duxiu and Chinese Trotskyism. Chen, a radical iconoclast during the May Fourth Movement and one of the two principal founders of the Chinese Communist Party, became a Trotskyist in 1929. His name was vilified for political reasons, especially after 1949. As a consequence, his later views on politics and on Trotskyism have received little attention among scholars.

Benton's adept translation is valuable and most welcome, for it affords the English reading audience new access to important materials and opens the door to new scholarship.

The main content of the book is an 'exact reconstruction' of *Chen Duxiude zuihou lunwen he shuxin* [Chen Duxiu's Last

Articles and Letters], a pamphlet of Chen's 14 letters and articles published in Shanghai by Chinese Trotskyists in 1948. Included in the translation is a series of appendices (mostly written by Chinese Trotskyists on Chen Duxiu and his relationship to Chinese Trotskyism), a brief and useful note on the text and recent scholarship, a glossary and an introduction. Both Benton's annotations to the letters and some of the appendices offer brief overviews, which are especially informative for readers who are not entirely familiar with Chen Duxiu and his relationship to Trotskyism.

In an introduction largely drawn from his previous book (*China's Urban Revolutionaries: Explorations in the History of Chinese Trotskyism, 1921-1952*. New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1996), Benton situates Chen's letters and articles within the larger context of Chinese Trotskyism. Benton's introduction is notable for its attention to the significance of this democratic trend in modern Chinese politics. It also provides an overview of Chen's intellectual development which is very helpful. However, Benton overemphasizes the democratic trend of the Chinese Trotskyists, which is exemplified by Chen, at the expense of a more balanced picture of the variable debates and friction in Chinese revolutions. As a result, the introduction is useful and problematic at the same time, troubled by a tendency towards over-simplification. The problem is twofold. First, Benton almost equates Chinese Trotskyism with Chen Duxiu. As Benton himself points out later in the book, Chinese Trotskyists were divided into two groups, the majority 'Struggle' Group and the minority Internationalist Group in 1941 (p. 127). It is true that Chen Duxiu was associated more closely with the leaders of the minority group. Even so, Chen disagreed with these leaders on many important issues, such as democracy and fascism (Chen Duxiu, Letter to Lianggen, pp. 59-61). However, Benton repeatedly speaks of 'Chen and the Chinese Trotskyists' as if they were a coherent group, a classification that obscures the issue of whether, or to what extent, Chen remained a Trotskyist until his dying day and leaves unanswered important questions about the nature and the development of Chinese Trotskyism.

The second and more troubling tendency lies in Benton's oversimplified dichotomy between the Chinese Trotskyists' pursuit of democracy and the anti-democratic tendency of the Chinese Communist Party. While he acknowledges the troubled relationship between socialist government and democratic freedom, Benton believes that 'Chen Duxiu and the Chinese Trotskyists stood historically for the democratic movement, unlike the leaders of the Communist Party, who, especially after 1927, opposed democracy' (p. 18). He then concludes that the oppositions from 1949 to the 1989 Tiananmen Incident are a 'retrospective justification of the Trotskyists' critique of Maoist politics' (p. 26). His insistent effort to rescue Chinese Trotskyism from its contamination by the Communist Party and to extol the values of democracy is admirable. However, democracy is not carefully defined here. The meaning of democracy is crucial in understanding the theoretical debates concerning bourgeois democracy and socialist democracy, the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the means of achieving socialism. Without a more penetrating study of the problem of democracy in socialist revolution, which can be traced from Marx, to Lenin, to Trotsky and Chen Duxiu, and a critical analysis of the nature of Chinese Trotskyism, Benton reduces the sophisticated issues Chinese Trotskyists confronted in the 1930s to a simplified and exaggerated image of totalities facing off against each other: good Chinese Trotskyists as democrats facing evil communists. Moreover, Benton overlooks the importance of articulating clear distinctions between the Chinese Communist Party, Maoism, and Deng's regime.

However, despite an introduction which could be more analytical, Benton's work makes an important contribution to the fields of Chinese history and political theory. The accomplished translations rendered here will remain essential documents for the future study of Chen Duxiu as well as Chinese Trotskyism.

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