

REVIEW ESSAY

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WANG MING REVISITED: A NEW LOOK AT THE CHINESE SECOND UNITED FRONT

SHUM, KUI-KWONG. *The Chinese Communists' Road to Power. The Anti-Japanese National United Front, 1935–1945*. Oxford University Press, Hong Kong [etc.] 1988. 312 pp. £ 29.95.

Wang Ming, otherwise known as Chen Shaoyu, is a controversial figure in the history of the Chinese Revolution. Chinese Communists claim that he led the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to disaster between 1930 and 1934 by blindly following a radical “left-opportunist” line, but that his attempt after 1935 to foist a new “right-opportunist” line on the Party was thwarted by Mao Zedong and his supporters, who followed an orthodox Marxist path that avoided both extremes. More recently, especially since 1979, Chinese historians have begun to argue that these two “deviations” were in fact the work of Stalin and the Communist International (or Comintern), whose faithful lackey Wang Ming was said to have been. Outside China this latter thesis is not new. Even before 1979 I for one had explained in detail that Wang Ming was not an independent actor on the political stage, but a Moscow puppet.¹

In 1977² the historian Shum Kui-kwong took issue with my thesis about Wang Ming, and in his new book³ on the second united front between the CCP and Chiang Kai-shek's Guomindang he returns to battle. In Shum's opinion Wang Ming, like Liu Shaoqi and others vilified by the Maoists, has been the victim of a rewriting of history by the Party. Shum also believes that I and others who “praise Mao Zedong” and “negate the Comintern” have uncritically accepted the CCP's view of Wang, so we exaggerate the differences between Mao and Wang and pretend that Mao “consistently”

¹ Gregor Benton, “The ‘Second Wang Ming Line’ (1935–38)”, *China Quarterly*, 61 (1975), pp. 61–94.

² Shum Kui Kwong, “Comment on ‘The “Second Wang Ming Line”’”, *China Quarterly*, 69 (1977), pp. 136–145.

³ *The Chinese Communists' Road to Power: The Anti-Japanese National United Front, 1935–1945* (Hong Kong, 1988), 312 pp.

defied the Comintern, “constantly” opposed Wang, and was “exclusively” concerned with mobilising the peasantry after 1935.

First a comment about the general charges, which in fact are rank distortions of the positions of those of us who in our past research and writings have reached conclusions different from those of Shum. Any fair-minded observer will admit that over the years I have spent far more time drawing attention to Mao’s egregious and catastrophic faults than to “praising” his undeniable merits. What’s more, far from arguing in 1975 that “Mao was basically opposed to Moscow’s desire for a united front with” Chiang Kai-shek, I said that “the CCP’s initial resistance to the new turn was [...] the result of a conjuncture of circumstances and not absolute [...]. As the mood in China and in the [Guomindang] began to harden in favour of national unity and resistance, so the CCP’s tactical resources grew and the gap between Moscow and [Yan’an] diminished.”⁴ Here at least my views are not so very far apart from Shum’s. By the spring of 1936 “Mao and the CCP leaders were preparing to move a little closer into line with Moscow”,⁵ I said in 1975. “For reasons of its own, the CCP was also moving in the same direction [as Wang in the spring of 1936]”, comes Shum’s distant echo, in 1988. Luckily the book improves after these misdirected opening salvos, and it is in part a model of archival digging and of the dogged pursuit of truth through a maze of traps, false trails, and dead ends. But unfortunately this is not everywhere the case, and at times Shum selects his evidence to fit in with preconceived ideas.

A basic – and largely uncontroversial – premise of Shum’s argument is that Mao learned from the failure of the Jiangxi Soviet in 1934 that peasants alone cannot make a revolution, and that the Party needs support too from rural and urban elites. Far from opposing the united front with the Guomindang that Wang “initiated” in 1935, Mao therefore embraced it and eventually won power through it. But instead of admitting Wang’s authorship of the tactic, Mao claimed it for himself – and some of us believed him.

Frequently Shum harks back in this book to debates of the mid 1970s in which he defended his rehabilitationist thesis against me and others. Has he now won the argument, or do the new sources vindicate us “revisionists”, as John Garver⁶ thinks? On some issues – for example the origin of the CCP’s call for a democratic republic and the CCP’s response to the Xi’an crisis – Shum is clearly right. He proves his original contention and shows that the differences between Mao and the Comintern were less clear-cut and com-

⁴ Benton, “The ‘Second Wang Ming Line’”, p. 62.

⁵ Benton, “The ‘Second Wang Ming Line’”, p. 67.

⁶ John Garver, “The Origins of the Second United Front: The Comintern and the Chinese Communist Party”, *China Quarterly*, 113 (1988), p. 31.

prehensive than some of us used to think. But not all his assertions are supported by the evidence, as I shall now show.

The August First (1935) Declaration announcing the Chinese Communists' willingness to moderate their policies and seek new allies against the national enemy (Japan) was, says Shum, "issued unilaterally" by Wang in Moscow, a "discovery" not taken seriously by Western historians until confirmed in 1979 by Soviet publications. But Shum apparently forgets that as early as 1975 I made the same "discovery",⁷ which as far as I know was universally accepted, on the basis of an analysis of various published sources. Did Wang "create" this Declaration? Shum thinks so, but his only evidence is Wang's 1979 memoir, plus unsubstantiated information from a report of a comment by Wu Yuzhang – which in fact says that Wang drafted the Declaration on the basis of other people's recommendations. Some scholars suggest that Wang only came round to the new line "with the help of the [Comintern's] Seventh Congress preparatory committee".⁸

Was the Comintern inclined toward a rapprochement with Chiang Kai-shek in August 1935? Not according to Shum, though he admits that pro-Soviet sources say otherwise (and thus confirm the argument I developed in 1975). But he is oddly silent about the meeting of Chinese Communists in Moscow between August 25 and 27, when Wang is said to have concluded that the Guomindang was strong and the CCP weak, so the CCP should switch to a policy of "uniting with Chiang".⁹ He also ignores evidence that on August 15 Wang denied that the CCP wanted Chiang dead;¹⁰ and that when *Jiuguo bao* (in Paris) published the Declaration on October 1, 1935, it also published a statement purportedly (but not actually) by the Central Committee in China describing as an "enemy forgery" a death sentence passed on Chiang.¹¹ Perhaps Shum has reasons to disregard these findings of Xiang Qing, a Chinese Communist expert on Comintern-CCP relations whose conclusions sometimes contradict Shum's. If so, he should tell us what those reasons are.

Did the CCP's leaders in Wayaobao (where they held a meeting during a brief pause in the Long March) resist parts of the August First Declaration? No, says Shum, who thinks that insofar as they diverged from it, it was because they had received only a verbal account of it and were therefore not

⁷ Benton, "The 'Second Wang Ming Line'", pp. 63–64.

⁸ Garver, "The Origins", p. 32.

⁹ Xiang Qing, "Gongchan guoji he Zhongguo gongchandang guanyu jianli kangRi minzu tongyi zhanxiande celüe" ("The Comintern and the CCP on setting up the anti-Japanese national united front"), *Dangshi tongxun*, 11–12 (1983), pp. 16–25, at p. 18; and *Gongchan guoji he Zhongguo geming guanxide lishi gaishu* ("Outline of relations between the Comintern and the Chinese Revolution"), *Guangdong renmin chubanshe* (1983), p. 143.

¹⁰ Garver, "The Origins", p. 34.

¹¹ Xiang Qing, "Outline", pp. 143–144.

fully acquainted with its contents. But there is little evidence for this assumption, beyond the testimony of Otto Braun and Zhang Guotao. According to Shum, the Wayaobao Resolution of December 25, 1935, contained a ten-point programme “identical to the one proposed by Wang”, which suggests to me that the transmission must have been more than verbal. The Declaration had reached Beijing as early as mid August and had then been distributed.¹² Did its recipients include the Chinese Communists in Shaanbei, where they had ended up in the autumn of 1935 at the end of the Long March? Even if not, the Communists there could have pieced together details of it from radio reports, for they had receivers though not transmitters. (All they had to do was listen – nobody in Moscow expected them to talk back.) If Chiang’s agents in Nanjing could hear the Declaration on the radio the day that it was issued,¹³ might not Communists in Northern China also eventually have heard it? So it cannot yet be ruled out that the differences between Moscow and Shaanbei, particularly on land policy and on how to treat Chiang Kai-shek, were – as I argued in 1975 – significant. Strangely, to prove that “the CCP’s new line was based entirely on the Comintern’s instructions” Shum cites “recollections” of the “ex-Communist” Wang Fanxi (perhaps because I translated them). But for Shum’s purposes, the reference is cheap and worthless. Wang Fanxi is not referring to the Wayaobao Resolution in the passage Shum cites, which moreover is based on a general study published by Hu Qiaomu in 1951. How could Wang Fanxi in 1935 have had personal knowledge of developments in a Party from which he had been expelled in 1930? In any case, Shum must know that Wang Fanxi’s view of Wang Ming, and of the relation between Wang Ming and Mao, is far closer to mine than to Shum’s.

Had Mao “completely fallen in line with the Comintern” by January 1936, as Shum claims? I doubt it now, just as I doubted it in 1975. Otherwise, why in April did Wang in Moscow criticise “serious weaknesses” in the CCP’s policy on land, economy, and democracy? True, on April 9, 1936, Peng Dehuai and Mao said that at present the slogan *tao Jiang* (“launch punitive expeditions against Chiang”) was inappropriate, but they added that it could be restored once the Party’s mass base had firmed.¹⁴ As “one final piece of evidence to illustrate the CCP’s readiness to accept Wang Ming’s proposals”, Shum quotes the organ of the Party’s Minxi’nan (or Southwestern Fujian) Committee, run by the “Maoists” Deng Zihui and Zhang Dingcheng. I too happen to have read this obscure journal, now

¹² Chen Luo, “Guanyu ‘bayi xuanyan’ chuxian yu guoneide shijian” (“The date of the arrival in China of the August First Declaration”), *Dangshi ziliao congkan*, 4 (1981), pp. 116–117.

¹³ Zhong Xiangping, “Dierci guogong hezuode qianxianren” (“Go-between in the second Guomindang-CCP cooperation”), *Dangshi tongxun*, 3 (1986), p. 46.

¹⁴ *Wenxian yu yanjiu*, 3 (1985), p. 2.

kept in the Taibei archives. What Shum missed was the accompanying inner-Party polemic in which an erring member was attacked for “wanting only to talk of Comrade Wang Ming’s report” and not mentioning opportunism or trying to strengthen the Red Army.¹⁵ Even in late 1936 suspicion of Wang was rife in local Party committees everywhere; he had made too many enemies in the early 1930s for it to be otherwise. Even without the comment on “opportunism”, this publication of Wang Ming’s report says little about “the CCP’s readiness” to agree with him. The Minxi’nan Committee had been cut off from the Party since October 1934 when the Long Marchers went North; it was desperate for guidance, and loyally prepared to act on whatever directives came its way; some of its related units (for example those under He Ming) dropped their guard too far as a result of the new line, and were denounced as “opportunists”.¹⁶

In July 1936, says Shum, “on the advice of Wang Ming, the CCP [...] drastically moderated its policy towards compliant (‘patriotic’) landlords”. But the main thing – as I pointed out fifteen years ago – is that they had procrastinated several months before doing so. In the meantime they had been able to build a new social base in Shaanbei. Timing was of the essence. If the CCP had adopted Moscow’s united front earlier (asks Garver), could it have won eight thousand recruits and numerous supplies on the Eastern Expedition? Could it have won over Zhang Xueliang and Yang Hucheng? And might not its new base in Shaanbei have succumbed to Chiang’s drive against it in late 1936?¹⁷

Did Mao or did Wang draft the Ten Points issued by the CCP at Luochuan on August 25, 1937? Wang, says Shum: so it was Wang who authored this call for sweeping reforms, and the allegations that Wang Ming had turned into a “rightist” must therefore be discounted. But Shum’s only direct evidence for this is the memoir of Otto Braun, who was neither disinterested nor invariably truthful. CCP historians dismiss Braun’s claim as a “fabrication with an ulterior motive”. They say that Wang himself never claimed authorship of the Ten Points, which were in fact drafted by Mao: he had already published a shorter version of them on July 23, 1937, and he put them in his *Selected Works* after 1949.¹⁸

Did Mao and Trotsky hold similar positions in late 1937? No, says Shum

¹⁵ Minxi’nan junzheng weiyuanhui fenhui, Yannanzhangde yanzhong jumian yu Li Hua tongzhide jihuizhuyi (The serious situation in Yannanzhang and Comrade Li Hua’s opportunism). March 5, 1937. (Bureau of Investigations, Taibei, file 256.1, 813 7326.)

¹⁶ See Gregor Benton, *Mountain Fires: The Red Army’s Three-Year War in South China, 1934–1938* (Berkeley, 1992).

¹⁷ Garver, “The Origins”, p. 59.

¹⁸ Zhao Xiaomin *et al.*, “Gongchan guoji he Zhongguo nongmin tudi douzheng” (“The Comintern and the Chinese peasants’ land struggle”), *Zhongguo xiandai shi yuekan*, 7 (1985), pp. 41–42.

(echoing our old debate), for where Mao foresaw two stages – bourgeois-democratic and socialist – in the revolution, Trotsky foresaw only the socialist one. But Mao's declared intention to transform "war into socialist revolution" was not unlike the Chinese Trotskyists' war-revolution thesis. Both Mao and Trotsky called for unity with but criticism of Chiang. So Wang's attack on Trotskyism in 1938 was simultaneously an attack on Mao, as the Trotskyist Wang Fanxi and some Chinese scholars have pointed out.¹⁹

Did Wang disobey instructions to send forces from Wuhan into the countryside in 1938? This is a bone of contention to which Shum, uncharacteristically, does not return. In 1977 he flatly declared that my inference "that Mao exhorted Wang to move into the surrounding countryside to found guerrilla bases among the peasants [was] totally unjustified".²⁰ Now he admits that "it can be said that [Wang] wasted CCP resources which could have been better utilized in the countryside". But he is reticent both about our old debate and – surprisingly for someone with his nose for quotes – about the new evidence that Mao did direct Wang to switch his focus from town to village.²¹

Was the CCP after July 1937 in a "serious ideological crisis" that produced a wave of defections? Shum believes that it was, and quotes as evidence a Guomintang intelligence report plus "ex-Communists". But the rumour and Shum's claim are puzzling, for Party membership shot up by 760,000 between 1937 and 1940. According to Shum, Mao invented the theory of New Democracy during this supposed "crisis" to defend his alliance with the progressive bourgeoisie; and he argued positions in it that were more rightist than those of Wang, who objected that Mao's theory was (a) premised in the idea of a multi-class dictatorship and (b) denied that at the point of victory bourgeois-democratic revolution could develop directly into socialist revolution. But the "bloc of four classes" had already been invented for China in the 1920s (by Moscow, not by Mao), as too had the idea – stock-in-trade of the old CCP under Wang Ming – that socialism can come only after several long stages, including a capitalist one.²² According to Ren Bishi's 1938 Report to the Comintern (approved by Moscow), it was only after Wang Ming's return to China that the CCP changed its strategic

¹⁹ Wang Fan-hsi, *Chinese Revolutionary, Memoirs, 1919–1949*, translated by Gregor Benton (Oxford, 1980), p. 223; Garver, "The Origins", p. 69.

²⁰ Shum Kui Kwong, "Comment", p. 142.

²¹ See Liang Hanbing and Wei Hongyun, *Zhongguo xiandai shi dashiji* ("Chronicle of contemporary Chinese history") (Harbin, 1984), p. 176; and Zheng Derong *et al.*, *Zhongguo gongchandang lishi jiangyi* ("Talks on CCP history"), Jilin renmin chubanshe (1984), pp. 230–231.

²² K. Shevelyoff, "The Communist International on the Transition to Socialism in China" (unpublished paper).

aim to a “new-democratic republic that is not a non-capitalist or socialist state”.²³ And in May 1940, in a spineless eulogy to Mao, Wang praised his New Democracy as a guide not just for China but for colonies and semi-colonies everywhere.²⁴ But Shum is apparently unaware of Ren’s report, and he ignores the implications – devastating for his own thesis – of Wang’s exultation of New Democracy in 1940. Instead he puts his faith in Wang’s unfounded and unlikely claims, which Wang developed in exile in the Soviet Union as his contribution to a concerted Soviet propaganda campaign after the Sino-Soviet split to discredit Mao as an unprincipled opportunist.

Did the CCP stick to “bourgeois reformism” after 1941 and eschew “violent class struggle”? Shum, keen to prove his general thesis that the CCP did not ride to power on a peasant wave and that Wang Ming’s positions were not necessarily more right-wing than Mao’s after 1935, says yes. But if his argument is supported by some (but not all) of the CCP’s public statements, it is irredeemably falsified by my own work on the villages after they came more firmly under Communist control in the course of the resistance, and by the masterly study of Yung-fa Chen.²⁵ So convinced is Chen of the centrality of social conflict to the Communists’ war against Japan that he calls one section of his book “Class Warfare within the United Front”.

So was Wang a Chinese patriot and a creative, innovating Marxist? A Liu Shaoqi before Liu Shaoqi, wronged and framed to serve the Mao cult? While I have no doubt that the Maoists told many lies about Wang Ming (and vice versa), I find the comparison with Liu Shaoqi quite ridiculous. Wang’s political character cannot be understood outside the context of his baptism into politics. He went to Moscow as a teenager, straight from middle school. Before 1938 he spent no more than a year or two in China, once as Pavel Mif’s interpreter in 1927 and again, briefly, in 1930–1931, as Moscow’s plant in the CCP. The qualities that endeared him to the Comintern were unquestioning obedience to whoever held the reins of power, a talent for political conspiring and manoeuvring, ideological rigidity, an absolute intolerance of unauthorised innovations and of the slightest stirring of intellectual curiosity, and an appalling lack of backbone. In the early

²³ Ren Bishi, “Zhongguo kangRi zhanzhengde xingshi yu Zhongguo gongchandangde gongzuo he renwu” (“China’s resistance and the CCP’s work and tasks”) (April 14, 1938), and “Gongchan guoji chiweihui zhuxituan guanyu Zhonggong daibiao baogaode jueyian” (“ECCI Resolution on the Chinese delegate’s report”) (July 1938), *Wenxian yu yanjiu*, 4 (1985), pp. 22–35.

²⁴ “Xuexi Mao Zedong” (“Learn from Mao Zedong”), in *Wang Ming xuanji* (“Wang Mings Selected Works”) (Tokyo, 1971–1975), 5 vols, vol. 5, pp. 322–323.

²⁵ Chen, Yung-fa, *Making Revolution: The Communist Movement in Eastern and Central China, 1937–1945* (Berkeley, 1986).

1920s Communist Parties everywhere were founded and led by independent-minded revolutionaries. In the mid to late 1920s many of these indigenous leaders were ousted by “Bolshevists” whose main recommendation to Stalin was dog-like loyalty. Moscow was the school to which impressionable youngsters like Wang, Chinese Communism’s archetypical “Red comrador”, were sent for training as literal interpreters and line-by-line transmitters of Stalin’s political directives. Liu Shaoqi, by contrast, was steered in the furnace of the Chinese workers’ movement, where he developed political qualities of quite a different order.

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