



## “Li Li-san line”: Failure of Independent Trial by Leaders of CCP

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### Abstract

For quite a long time, “Li Li-san Line” has been the target of criticism as being typical of wrong lines by Chinese Communist Party (CCP). However, under the subjective and objective circumstance at that time, it wasn’t by accident that CCP released this line. Regardless of its victory or defect in the history, and only considering behaviors of CCP leaders in the formulation and implementation of the entire line, this was a god-given and independent trial by CCP leaders to resolve revolution in China in its infancy and under the strong controlling force of Comintern.

**Keywords:** Li Li-san Line, Comintern, The Far East Bureau, Li Lisan, Xiang Zhongfa

### 1. Offer of issues

“Li Li-san Line”, also termed as the second “Left” Line in the history of CCP, was aimed to give rise to “outbreak” of the World War and “outbreak” of World Revolution through rebellion and strike in some large cities in China (mainly rebellion in Wuhan, Nanjing and strike of overall alliance in Shanghai) and through attack of the Red Army (all Red Armies were required to “join forces in Wuhan” and “Mmdream”), so as to guarantee victory of Chinese Revolution.

Since 1980s, there have been various studies on Li Li-san and “Li Li-san Line” in academic circles. However, a general survey of these studies, it is generally considered to be somewhat biased. For instance, some scholars argued that this line originated from Comintern through relationship between “Li Li-san Line” and Comintern theory, (Note 1) and it seemed that leaders of CCP were just speaking tubes at that time; due to thinking set, some scholars thought that this line was wrong, so they merely afforded sympathy to the representative Li Lisan. According to them, Li Lisan played the role of a wrong scapegoat of Comintern. In opinion of the author, these views ignored decision-making ability and political means of CCP leaders. This article is going to attempt to review some historical details and explain how CCP leaders at that time tried to resolve independently revolution in China.

### 2. “Li Li-san Line” should borrow experiences and theories of Soviet.

Just as many scholars have affirmed, theory of “Li Li-san Line” and Comintern had close relations. However, it doesn’t mean that CCP didn’t have its own ideas. As a matter of fact, for Chinese Communist in its infancy, what sort of revolutionary road to take was still a problem to be explored in practice. Therefore, some experiences and theories of Soviet should be borrowed, and it shouldn’t be mistakenly thought that the CCP behaved just according to terms of Comintern. For example, “Li Li-san Line” particularly emphasized the center of city and also the importance of armed revolts in cities, which had been expressed in detail before June 11, 1930, when Resolutions of <<First Victory of the New Revolutionary Climax and One or Several Provinces>> (hereafter as June 11 <<Resolutions>>). That is, “Villages are four limbs of the governing class, and cities are their minds and second selves. If only their four limbs were chopped, but their minds were not, and their second selves were ruptured, then this wouldn’t cause their death. This war of chopping a governing class’ mind and rupturing its second self mainly relied on the final acute combat of working class --- armed revolts.” Obviously, this was mainly affected by mode of Russian Revolution. CCP leaders were willing to recognize and accept to these viewpoints, because they could keep down different voices within CCP by dint of Comintern theory, namely, prestige of Comintern.

However, the first requirement of Comintern on Chinese Revolution at that time was to accumulate power first of all. Resolutions at the 9<sup>th</sup> Plenary Session of Comintern Executive Committee in February 1932 and Resolutions at the 6<sup>th</sup> Congress of CPC held in Russia in June 1932 both made amendments on situations in China at that time and on action strategies to be taken in China. In view of disastrous failure and losses of CCP, failure of its rebellion before these two

conferences were regarded as the first tide of failure and loss of revolutionary movement by workers and peasants. Thus, Comintern advised CCP to take the measure of recovering and accumulating power by temporarily retreating and “winning for the masses”. Considering all the above, there was no wonder why the June 11 Resolutions were opposed by Comintern, so that Comintern finally took a series of political and organizational measures to forcibly re-construct the leading organ of CCP. It was strange that, “Li Li-san Line” hadn’t come into being in one step. Over half a year before the line, a series of phenomena had obviously revealed tendency of “pinko”. But Comintern hadn’t made any tough response within this period.

### **3. Implementation of “Li Li-san Line” by CCP leaders by all means**

#### *3.1 Aborative modification of revolutionary opportunities*

In terms of revolutionary opportunities, it was obvious that CCP leaders were reluctant to lose them and made further modification. For instance, CCP leaders, such as Li Lisan, put forward their own viewpoints under the banner of “supporting Comintern” and “guarding Russia under armed forces”, etc. At the 2<sup>nd</sup> Congress of CPC in Jiangsu Province in November 1929, Li Lisan said that, in order to “guard Russia under armed forces”, arms of the whole nation should be launched, because “guarding Russia under armed forces” would be an empty slogan without a nation-wide armed rebellion. Considering “Zhongdong Railway Incident”, it wasn’t difficult to discover that Russia placed more emphasis on its own interests than on Chinese sovereignty interests. Therefore, “guarding Russia under armed forces” was in accordance with taste of Comintern, but it was Li Lisan’s own idea to launch a nation-wide rebellion, with the purpose of carrying out his nation-wide rebellion plan as soon as possible under the banner of “guarding Russia under armed forces”.

Furthermore, From July 3<sup>rd</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup>, 1929, the 10<sup>th</sup> Plenary Session of Comintern Executive Committee organized a discussion on Chinese situation from several aspects. Some scholars believed that it was from this conference that Chinese revolutionary movement came into a new tide. However, according to meeting minutes, the author confirmed that Moscow at that time basically didn’t think “China had entered a mushrooming revolutionary tide”, and “premise of this tide was being created”. However, when resolutions of the 10<sup>th</sup> Plenary Session of Comintern were delivered to China in December, CCP leaders made aborative modification. On one hand, they “were all for spirits and lines of this session and all resolutions”, and on the other hand, they said, “under these circumstances, it was without doubt that revolutionary struggle of the masses should be matured to become a tide in the world and to go towards a situation of direction revolution. Rightists and Reconciling School thought a Great Wall seemed to cut off the current new revolutionary tide and the direct revolutionary situation, which was, without doubt, an extreme mistake.” They further reaffirmed viewpoints at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Congress of CCP in Jiangsu held on December 19, “Especially the recent situation... which indicates the situation of the revolutionary revitalization, and we should more rapidly start this national revolutionary tide and go towards the situation of direct revolution”. (Note 2) The entire resolution superficially complied with resolutions of Comintern at all aspects, but it was exactly in terms of revolutionary opportunities that it had a different opinion from Comintern, and it should be said that, CCP had given much thought into this resolution.

Of course, aborative modification on revolutionary opportunities wasn’t a serious issue, because on February 9, 1930, in his response to students in Sverdlov University, Stalin said, “a deadline cannot be crossed between ‘revolutionary tide’ and ‘situation of direct revolution’”, and “it was usually the case that the former was transformed into the latter ‘unconsciously’”. On April 15, Mamayev also mentioned, “current situation in China is on the verge of the situation of direction revolution”. (Note 3) On July 29, Comintern still held the attitude towards China that “it was generally acknowledged the strategy of Political Bureau of the Communist was correct”. (Note 4) Then, what is the largest conflict between them?

#### *3.2 CCP concealed the major content of “Li Li-san Line” from Comintern*

It can be seen from aborative modification on revolutionary opportunities that CCP wished to put its political thoughts into practice as soon as possible. At the same time, CCP leaders kept back the major content of “Li Li-san Line” from Comintern possibly in order to diminish resistance. Within the period from February to the end of June 1930, whether in reports and letters from the Far East Bureau to Comintern Executive Committee, or in letters from the Far East Bureau to CCP leaders, the content of Red Army attacking cities and the rebellion etc, was not mentioned at all. Documents of the Far East Bureau also indicated, before the introduction of June 11 Resolutions, the Far East Bureau didn’t know the plan of CCP leaders had gone that far. And during negotiation with Li Lisan, the Bureau had no idea at all what was actually contained in his theories and views, and mistakenly regarded them as a manifest to “talk glibly about various great events for us (Here referred to Comintern).

There are various reasons for CCP to successfully concealing its plan. Firstly, the Far East Bureau had no Chinese translation, so they didn’t understand content in Chinese publications, and the Bureau did mention that they didn’t understand translation of the CCP telegraphs. (Note 5) Secondly, from letters by Chen Shaoyu et al to Mif, any relevant content of the plan couldn’t be discovered, so the content was extremely surreptitious within CCP. Thirdly, from

paraphrasing without any judge or criticism of materials about population of the CCP and Red Union and their development and of materials about development of Red Army, Guerrilla and rural Red Region, it could be concluded that, judgment of the Far East Bureau and Comintern on specific situation in China was too much dependent on information of CCP, which offered convenience for CCP to keep back its plan. Besides, there was another important reason, that is, CCP leaders at that time, especially the three whole show --- Li Lisan, Xiang Zhongfa and Zhou Enlai, respectively played a noticeable role.

Discussion with the Far East Bureau which represented Comintern was a job with many skills, and the one who was responsible for negotiation with the Far East Bureau was Li Lisan. During negotiation with the Far East Bureau, Li Lisan manifested excellent diplomatic skills, so that in the letter to the East Secretariat of Comintern Executive Committee in the last third of June 1930, the incumbent Far East Bureau Principal Eisler complained that Li Lisan was a wicked politician, and often responded to criticism of the Far East Bureau by playing games. He suggested “removing the leadership position of Li Lisan”. One of the reasons for the complaint was the unexpected release of June 11 Resolutions. Before June 11 Resolutions, Li Lisan had promised the Far East Bureau to firstly deliver the draft resolution, and the Far East Bureau at first believed this would “be another meaningless resolution”. However, Li Lisan violated his promise, and only after the Political Bureau passed the Resolutions, he told the Far East Bureau to attach its recommendations and suggestions for revision to the Resolution with the topic of “Suggestions from the Far East Bureau”. (Note 6) The Far East Bureau felt as if they had been hoodwinked, and said, “Now, Moscow is carefully reconsidering all issues related with Chinese Revolution and Chinese Communist, and your representative (Here referred to Zhou Enlai) also participates in this. Maybe they have made a decision by now. But you suddenly make an overall resolution... You try to carry out this resolution.” (Note 7) This wasn’t the first time that the Far East Bureau had been hoodwinked by Li Lisan, and such a case also happened in the previous Soviet Congress. A series of incidents enabled the Far East Bureau to come to realize that as a leader of CCP, Li Lisan played a decisive role in specific organization of the Party and in development of worker cadres.

Another important person of “Li Li-san Line” was Xiang Zhongfa. As a general-secretary of a working class background, Xiang Zhongfa benefited from the strategy of Comintern leading cadres as workers and came into power. Maybe he hadn’t received higher education and had historical blemish, many scholars despised Xiang’s ability and personal character, and thought he was just a “nominal general-secretary”. Not to mention that Comintern would choose a lout good for nothing as a leader of CCP, and just to mention that CCP kept back its plan from Comintern, Xiang Zhongfa played a noticeable role. He had a short fuse, and often landed on his face no matter what he did. Thus, during negotiation with the Far East Bureau, Xiang often served as the screener of Li Lisan. “Li Lisan skillfully asked elderly Xiang to be his screener, and since Xiang was always eaten up with diseases, so he lost his psychological balance when he shouted at the top of his voice. Meanwhile, the Political Bureau made resolutions one after another”. (Note 8) Of course, Xiang Zhongfa contributed more than this to “Li Li-san Line”, and although his personal ability was inferior to Li Lisan, he was in extreme support of the line. Most of the time, he had highly consistent viewpoint and standpoint with Li Lisan.

Compared with the former two, Zhou Enlai’s influence was not such obvious. As for whether Zhou Enlai was in support of “Li Li-san Line”, there are approximately two opinions. One starts from his decisive role and his practical activity within CCP, and thinks that Zhou Enlai played an extremely important part in ceasing the line. The other opinion says that, due to constraint of historical condition and limitation of consciousness, Zhou Enlai seemed to be indecisive and weak in resisting the wrong line. Even some scholars said that it was after March when Zhou Enlai left Shanghai that Li Lisan began to put forward his action plan, and it seemed that Zhou Enlai’s departure from Shanghai enabled Li Lisan to have nothing to fear. However, considering Zhou Enlai’s status in CCP at that time, it was impossible that he had no idea about tendency of Political Bureau of the Communist Party, and he should be quite clear about the core view of the entire line. Although from the perspective of the Far East Bureau, Li Lisan and Zhou Enlai had different standpoints, (Note 9) during his report in Moscow from April to May 1930, Zhou Enlai didn’t disclose any tendency of the Political Bureau of CCP to Comintern. Hence, the author believes that Zhou Enlai’s attitude towards “Li Li-san Line” can be at least understood as acquiescence.

In brief, under co-influence of various conditions, CCP successfully kept back its plan. However, in the eye of Comintern, any concealing behavior of CCP would make her indignant, because “this decision surpassed ours”, (Note 10) and it was under the circumstance when Comintern had no idea at all that CCP carried out this adventurous plan. Furthermore, this plan posed a threat to national interests of Soviet.

### *3.3 CCP carried out the overall rebellion plan independently at any cost and posed a threat to international interests of Soviet*

As early as April 17, 1930, with agreement from Xiang Zhongfa, in his letters to Zhou Enlai and Qu Qiubai, Li Lisan also mentioned the relations between Chinese Revolution and World Revolution in addition to continuing to criticize “Right Deviation” of the Far East Bureau. He thought that World Revolution might break out firstly in China, and then

caused coming of the situation of direct revolution all around the world. Therefore, the largest international obligation of CCP was to strengthen international propaganda of Chinese Revolution and propaganda of guarding Chinese Revolution. In June 11, Political Bureau of Communist Party passed <<Resolutions>>, which definitely affirmed that, “outbreak of Chinese Revolution should not only encourage imperialism to oppress unanimously Chinese Revolution, but also encourage them to attack Russia more actively.” In the light of CCP’s assumption, victory in one or several provinces was just a primacord, and Russia had to be involved in order to gain an overall victory. Furthermore, what should be noticed was that this resolution hadn’t made clear whether it would guard Chinese Revolution, but would change international obligation of Chinese Revolution into “guarding Russia under armed forces”, which made Chinese Revolution part of the strategy of guarding Russia. Thus, it can be seen how CCP leaders made painstaking efforts in order to win support from Comintern.

However, negotiation with the Far East Bureau for several months enabled CCP to foresee that their plan would get opposed by Comintern. In his letter to Mif on July 24, Wang Ming recorded ideas of Xiang Zhongfa after the Conference of staff of Departments under the Central Committee. According to Xiang, each party should work independently, and wouldn’t allow external interference; revolution could only thrive in China; Chinese Party should merely focus on China. On June 25, in his letter to Zhou Enlai, in addition to expounding revolutionary situation and discrepancy between the Central Committee and the Far East Bureau, Xiang Zhongfa particularly enjoined on Zhou Enlai that “Situation in China now is quite difficult... After receiving this letter and reporting to Comintern Executive Committee, you should immediately return to China without delay and even if the discussion is not over.” “If [Qu] Qiubai, [Deng] Zhongxia, Shu Hui [Yu Feiyi], Huang Ping and other comrades haven’t committed serious political mistakes, then please let them return to China.” Considering the fact that CCP kept back the Far East Bureau and passed various plans of attack, it can be supposed that, in the eye of CCP at that time, status of Russia was merely a part that could be made use of by Chinese Revolution, and CCP had already had the idea of breaking away from Comintern and functions independently. However, this didn’t immediately arouse alertness of Comintern, and it was only on July 29 that Comintern reminded CCP in a formal way that they should respect the status of the Far East Bureau as Representative of Comintern.

However, before long, speeches of Li Lisan at the two conferences of Political Bureau respectively on August 1 and August 3 thoroughly rubbed Comintern the wrong way. The two speeches not only rebuked Comintern Executive Committee for “not understanding situation in China”, and said that “if we deviate from line of Political Bureau, then we can only trust telegraph of Comintern, but we may commit a crime to Chinese Revolution”. Furthermore, he affirmed that Chinese Revolution would cause the World Revolution, and in order to stir up an international war, Russia should be up in arms with all its strength; Mongolia should declare itself as part of Soviet China and send troops to attack North China. Besides, he mentioned it Comintern didn’t agree, we will protect our strategy from being [destroyed] by Comintern on the basis of practice”. (Note 11) Li Lisan made further avowal that CCP would talk with Comintern in another way after occupying Wuhan. Such as speech was not only a challenge to reputation of Comintern, but would interrupt the First Five-Year Plan of Russia once put into practice, which would be bound to cause huge damage to national security and interests of Russia.

Response of Comintern was not out of expectation at all. Stalin lost patience immediately and said, “Tendency of Chinese is extremely ridiculous and dangerous. Under current circumstance, rebellion in China is no less than a monkey business. Establishment of Soviet Government is a strategy for implementation of rebellion, but not in the whole country, but in places where it is possible to be successful... It is absolutely inhibited.” (Note 12) As for Comintern, “there are several means to curb a runaway horse” (Note 13) in the face of CCP in its infancy. Furthermore, when military attack by Red Army failed everywhere, and the plan of rebellion and strike in large cities was either terminated or opposed strongly by Nationalist Party Government, “Li Li-san Line” had go bankrupt actually. Therefore, re-organization of CCP leadership was imperative.

#### **4. Conclusions**

In sum, “Li Li-san Line” as collective will of CCP leaders is not simply a Comintern line. In the background at that time, CCP leaders selectively utilized mode of Russian Revolution and theory of Comintern, and at the same time, borroed reputation of Comintern to realize their political declaration. Besides, on the basis of borrowing Russian experiences and theories, CCP leaders further put forward a set of assertions for Chinese Revolution.

In order to win support from Comintern, CCP leaders had really made painstaking efforts. In the situation of not triggering nerves of Comintern, CCP leaders modified revolutionary opportunities and put forward several slogans to the taste of Moscow. They utilized political means to conceal major content of “Li Li-san Line” and decided to function independently without the least hesitation after being opposed.

Although the entire line finally failed because it didn’t correspond with power of CCP at that time and encountered oppression of Comintern and oppositions within CCP, it can be judged from manifest of CCP in formulation and implementation of the entire line that, it was a trial by CCP leaders to resolve Chinese revolutionary issues.

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## Notes

- Note 1. Xu Huaci even mentioned, "Strategy of Li Lisan is strategy of Moscow". Please refer to Benjamin Schwartz, *Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951, p149.
- Note 2. Resolution of CCP to Accept Resolutions of the 10<sup>th</sup> Plenary Session of Comintern, passed at the Conference of Political Bureau of the Central Committee on December 20, 1929.
- Note 3. Mamayev's Reports at the Enlarged Meeting of East Secretary Committee of Comintern Executive Committee (April 15, 1930), CPSU (Bolshevik), Comintern and China's Soviet Campaign (1927-1931), Vol. 9, Beijing: Central Party Literature Publisher, 2002, p120.
- Note 4. No. 73 Record of Political Committee of Political Secretary of Comintern Executive Committee (July 29, 1930), 2002, p230.
- Note 5. Letter from the Far East Bureau of Comintern Executive Committee to Political Bureau of the Communist Party (June 20, 1930), CPSU (Bolshevik), Comintern and China's Soviet Campaign (1927-1931), Vol. 9, Beijing: Central Party Literature Publisher, 2002, p178.
- Note 6. idem, p192.
- Note 7. Letter from the Far East Bureau of Comintern Executive Committee to Political Bureau of the Communist Party (June 20, 1930), p177.
- Note 8. Г• Eisler: Letter from the Far East Bureau of Comintern Executive Committee to East Secretary of Comintern Executive Committee (August 7, 1930), CPSU (Bolshevik), Comintern and China's Soviet Campaign (1927-1931), Vol. 9, Beijing: Central Party Literature Publisher, 2002, p273.
- Note 9. Letter from Lerisky to Mif (February 1, 1930), CPSU (Bolshevik), Comintern and China's Soviet Campaign (1927-1931), Vol. 9, Beijing: Central Party Literature Publisher, 2002, p53.
- Note 10. Letter from Eisler to East Secretary of Comintern Executive Committee (June 23 to 25, 1930), p189.
- Note 11. Letter from Stoliar to Rozovsky (August 5, 1930), CPSU (Bolshevik), Comintern and China's Soviet Campaign (1927-1931), Vol. 9, Beijing: Central Party Literature Publisher, 2002, p259-260.
- Note 12. Telegraph from Stalin to Molotov (August 13, 1930), CPSU (Bolshevik), Comintern and China's Soviet Campaign (1927-1931), Vol. 9, Beijing: Central Party Literature Publisher, 2002, p300.
- Note 13. Letter from Stoliar to Rozovsky (August 5, 1930), p261.