

# Who killed Shen Dingyi?

On August 28, 1928, rising political star Shen Dingyi was gunned down by assassins at a bus stop near his home. No one was ever charged in his murder: too many people had wanted Shen dead.

By James Carter Published August 31, 2022 at <https://thechinaproject.com/2022/08/31/who-killed-shen-dingyi/>

## **This Week in China's History: August 28, 1928**



It had been a long day for Shěn Dìngyī. He had begun the day in the resort hill town of Moganshan, up at dawn to begin the journey — by steamboat to Hangzhou, then by bus to another ferry, crossing the Qiantang River, and finally another bus — back to his home in Yaqian. Stepping off the bus at 5:15 in the evening, Shen was greeted by an old friend and pouring rain. No doubt exhausted by the long trip, Shen was nonetheless in good spirits, looking forward to the short walk to his house, where his wife was expecting their third child.

Before he could make the walk, Shen paused to produce his ticket to exit the station. While he rummaged through his pockets, two men in white shirts — they had been traveling on the bus with him since Hangzhou — put a violent end to Shen's journey. Drawing guns, they shot Shen first in the chest and then in the head, standing over his fallen body to fire 10 more times, ensuring that their job was done. Shen's friend and several bystanders chased the assassins, but they escaped, leaving Shen's corpse bleeding by the ticket window.

No one was ever charged in the killing, despite Shen being one of China's rising political stars, well connected and well known. "Who did it? And why?" is historian Keith Schoppa's frame for his award-winning book about Shen, [Blood Road](#).

(Schoppa's book won the Levenson Prize<sup>1</sup> in 1997, so I think the statute of limitations on spoiler alerts has run out, but just in case...fair warning.)

Schoppa writes that the problem with solving Shen's murder is that there are too many possibilities: "In the midst of the revolution, he had made many enemies in his national, provincial, and local leadership in the last dozen years of his life." Shen is not well-remembered today, and part of the reason for that is, most likely, connected to the reasons he was killed. He did not fit neatly into the categories we have for the Chinese revolution. On arriving in Yaqian in 1993 to research Shen, Schoppa was told by local officials, "We don't yet know whether he was a good or bad man."

Identifying Shen's ideology is difficult. For Shen, Schoppa writes, "the isolation and separation of individuals loomed as the critical issue, the solving of which was necessary for China to advance." He was one of the earliest members of the Communist Party, but was also a member of the Nationalist Party (KMT). A powerful organizer who led farmers to demand a 30% reduction in rent, he also spearheaded the KMT's purge of Communists. He railed against the influence of the Soviet Union on China's communist movement, but pushed the KMT to the left, insisting that there must be "another revolution." And while thousands sought solutions through force of arms, Shen insisted on "education as a, if not the, key" for China's path forward.

All of these contradictions left Shen Dingyi without an ideological home. This has left him — with the notable exception of Schoppa's book — poorly remembered. There has been little space for people who fit poorly into the categories that emerged as China's revolutionary 20th century progressed. It was possible to be a modernizer or a traditionalist, a Communist or a Nationalist, a leftist or a rightist, but what to do with someone like Shen, who exhibited elements of all these?

Charismatic as he was — and he could mobilize tens of thousands of people — his refusal to toe a party line left him ultimately vulnerable. Just 45 years old when he died, Shen could have played an important role in the pivotal decades to come. His murder has gone unsolved, even a century later, but Schoppa explores some possibilities, and those possibilities not only expose the intricate and diverse networks that Shen was part of, but what gets lost when we force the past into rigid "either/or" structures.

The first was straightforward revenge. As a May Fourth intellectual, Shen had little regard for religion, and had seized a large Buddhist temple in Yaqian to serve as the headquarters for the Farm Association that would later lead the rent resistance movement. The head monk from the temple threatened Shen

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## <sup>1</sup> Joseph Levenson Book Prize Winners

The Merlin Foundation, established by the late Audrey Sheldon, has provided for the two awards, one for works whose main focus is on China before 1900 and the other for works on post-1900 China. The prizes are awarded by the Association of Asian Studies to the English-language books that make the greatest contribution to increasing understanding of the history, culture, society, politics, or economy of China.

for years after the 1921 seizure, and allegedly raised money to hire an assassin to eliminate Shen. An immediate suspect, the monk was never charged, and evidence against him is circumstantial.

The second suspect, or suspects, are the local silkworm merchants who stood to lose thousands of dollars when Shen advocated switching the source for silkworm eggs to support sericulture in his local township. Without doubt, there was motivation here: Shen's decision undermined the livelihood of an entire county — a county whose dialect the killers spoke, according to witnesses — and the silkworm merchants had the financial resources to hire hitmen. But while plausible, it is hardly proven. Shen was not solely responsible for the change in policy (it continued after his death) and the evidence linking the merchants to the murder is also circumstantial.

Another group with motives were the Xiaoshan landlords, who had been fighting with Shen Dingyi for years. Shen had led the rent strike of 1921 and also the movement to reduce rents by 25%. "That many landlords in Xiaoshan hated Shen was common knowledge," Schoppa writes matter-of-factly, and one of them, Wang Yuanhong, was arrested for the murder. He was released because of a lack of evidence, but he remains a possibility for orchestrating the murder.

The last two possibilities are the two dominant political parties: the Communists and the KMT.

The Communist Party is widely seen as the likely culprit. Shen had double-crossed the party, of which he had been an early member, and personally led the purge in 1927. He was directly responsible for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of deaths. Certainly, many Communists celebrated his killing. But were they responsible? Schoppa doubts it: The party was in disarray in the summer of 1928, clinging to existence. With barely enough resources to survive, would the party invest in a killing that was little more than revenge (given that Shen had himself been purged and was no longer shaping KMT policy)? Besides these questions, there is no physical evidence linking the CCP, or any of its members, to the murder.

Which leaves us with the KMT, Shen's own (contentious) political home. Schoppa concludes, "There is a high degree of probability that the Guomindang, at either the national or provincial level, ordered the assassination of Shen Dingyi." Shen was a thorn in the side of the party, especially as it moved to the right at the start of the Nanking Decade. He had alienated many in the leadership, and defied discipline. Though out of favor, Shen's charisma and connections were formidable. Moreover, Shen had met with KMT leaders the day before his death; his movements would have been easily known and communicated. "Circumstantial, but compelling," Schoppa concludes about the evidence.

Keith Schoppa passed away last month. It is ironic that the professional highlight of his career was a book about murder, for I never met a gentler soul. He commented on the first paper I presented publicly, and his comments showed the kindness and rigor that I would see in all our interactions. He was tirelessly supportive, though we had no formal connection other than a shared field (and, I suppose, a Jesuit employer). My memory of him will always be after a conference, where we talked about things we shared besides the study of Chinese history: Texas roots, a fondness for Czech beer, a desire to write creatively about the past. I can only hope that I show my colleagues a fraction of his generosity and professionalism.

Rest in peace, Keith.

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[This Week in China's History](#) is a weekly column.

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