

Writing Women's Experiences in the Early Twentieth Century China: A Study of Chen Hengzhe's Autobiography

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Abstract

*Chen Hengzhe (1890-1976) was a pioneering woman writer, historian, and critic in modern China. However, Chen and her writings have not been given adequate academic attention so far. This paper examines her self-narrative, *Autobiography of a Chinese Young Girl*, which was written in English and published in the 1930s. My research indicates that far from a simple narrative of her early life, Chen's autobiography persistently and multi-dimensionally challenges and subverts traditional gender roles and literary conventions through verbal and textual strategies. Meanwhile, as one of the earliest woman writers in modern China, Chen was aware that women lacked their own literary language at the historical moment. Therefore, Chen endeavored to create modern Chinese women's own language through creating new images, inverting the gender hierarchy in the traditional literature and culture, and even actively intervening in the powerful discourse of the time.*

Key words: traditional gender roles; gendered literary conventions; modern China; women's autobiography; Chen Hengzhe; literary language

Chen Hengzhe (1890-1976), best known in Western-language sources as Sophia H. Chen Zen, was a pioneering woman writer, historian, and critic in modern China. Chen achieved quite a few "the first" in modern Chinese history. She was among the first group of nine female students who were sent to study in the United States by the Chinese government in 1914. She became the first female professor at Beijing University in 1920. She was the first woman writer who published a vernacular short story in 1917. The promotion of the vernacular was one of the key elements in the birth of modern Chinese literature and culture. However, Chen's writings and thoughts have been neglected to some extent in mainstream Chinese studies, especially her autobiography, written in English and under a pseudonym.

Chen Hengzhe's Life and Career

Chen was born in a scholar-official family in Changzhou, Jiangsu Province. Many of her male ancestors or elders were outstanding scholars and officials.¹ Remarkably, many women in Chen's family were well-educated and talented. Her grandmother was an artist. Her mother, Zhuang Yaofu, was a renowned painter in Changzhou. Her paternal aunt, Chen Deyi, was excellent in poetry, calligraphy, and Chinese medicine.

Chen received good education in Chinese history and literature from her father and was introduced to the newly imported Western learning by her maternal uncle, Zhuang Sijian. She was sent to a newly established medical school in Shanghai upon her strong request in 1904 and studied there for three years. During this time, her father arranged a betrothal for her.

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¹ For more details about Chen's male ancestors or elders, see section four of this paper.

Resisting the arranged marriage at a time when it was hardly ever heard of, Chen left home alone in a miserable situation. Fortunately, she was taken in by her aunt, Chen Deyi, and stayed with her for several years. Since her father did not provide her enough financial support, Chen once had to act as a tutor for two children of a rich lady. In 1914 she passed the examination of the Tsing Hua College and was sent to study in the US on a Boxer Indemnity Scholarship.

Chen entered Vassar Collage in 1915 with a major in Western history and minor in literature. In 1919 she was elected to Phi Beta Kappa and received her B. A. in history from Vassar College. Then she continued her graduate study at the University of Chicago. During her study in the US, Chen not only made rapid progress in her study, but also actively participated in activities of American educated Chinese students. She started to write essays and literary works for *Liumei xuesheng jibao* (American educated Chinese students' quarterly paper) in 1915 and became a regular contributor. Chen met Ren Hongjuan (1886-1961) and Hu Shi (1891-1962) who were then both editors of the journal. When Hu Shi advocated the vernacular and literary reform around 1916, most Chinese students in the US were strongly opposed to his idea of the reform. Only Chen gave Hu Shi the moral support. Later Hu Shi called her "the earliest comrade of new literature." Most importantly, Chen also put her moral support to concrete action and published a vernacular short story "Yiri" (One day) in 1917, which was one of the earliest vernacular short stories in modern China.

Chen received her M.A. in History from the University of Chicago in 1920. She returned to China in the same year and became the first female professor at Beijing University. Chen actively participated in the New Culture Movement and published approximately 25 vernacular poems and 15 short stories. In post-May Fourth periods, Chen broadened her writings from literary works to social criticism, historical essays and monographs. Well versed in both Chinese and Western cultures, Chen made great contribution to the cultural communication between China and the Western world in the 1920s to 1940s. She was a member of the China Council of the Institute of Pacific Relations (I. P. R.) and attended several international conferences of the I. P. R. Chen acted as the editor of *Symposium on Chinese Culture* which was published in Shanghai by the China Council of the I. P. R. in 1931.

Chen married Ren Hongjuan in 1920 and became the mother of two daughters and one son, who also received their higher education in the United States. After 1949, Chen lived in Shanghai and passed away in 1976. Chen wrote her autobiography, *Autobiography of a Chinese Young Girl*, in English and published it around 1935 to 1936.² Chen's autobiography narrates important events and experiences in her early life. It highlights her struggle for modern education and the long road to fulfill her academic ambition. It ends with her departure for study in the US in 1914. It was one of the few autobiographies written by Chinese women and published in English in the 1930s. In order to situate the study of Chen Hengzhe's autobiography in the specific historical and literary context, first I will briefly describe women's autobiographical writings in China.

Women's Autobiographical Writings in China

Autobiographies written by women were very rare in pre-modern China. The one most well-known in Chinese history is "*Jinshi lu hou xu*" (The postscript to the *Records on Metal and Stone Inscriptions*),³ written by the famous poet Li Qingzhao (1084-1151 A.D.) in the Song Dynasty (960-1279 A.D.). Li's husband, Zhao Mingcheng (1081-1129 A.D.), wrote the book as well as a preface in his lifetime. After Zhao had passed away, Li wrote this postscript. Even this remarkable autobiographical writing did not bear the word "autobiography" in its title. As for its writing style, Jing Wang observes, "Her autobiography is surreptitious, concealed in a postscript and an account of her husband's work in making the anthology."⁴ Why did Li write her autobiography in a form of postscript and in a rather surreptitious style?

Why did women rarely write autobiographies in pre-modern China? In her discussion of women's writing in mid-Qing Dynasty, Susan Mann closely examines the concept of "separation" (*bie*).

² The book itself does not provide the date of publication. My estimate is that Chen's autobiography was published between September 1935 and February 1936.

³ Pei-Yi Wu points out, "It is the only autobiography written by a Chinese woman until fairly recently." See Pei-Yi Wu, *The Confucian's Progress: Autobiographical Writings in Traditional China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 64.

⁴ Jing Wang, "Strategies of Modern Chinese Women Writers' Autobiography" (Ph. D. diss., The Ohio State University, 2000), 28.

The separation between men and women was a fundamental rule of Confucian ethics. It was mainly embodied on two levels. On the spatial level, men and women had their own proper sphere with women staying in the inner chambers while men dominating the outside world. The socially assigned gender roles for a woman were daughter, wife, and mother. Noticeably, all the roles fell into the “kin-reflected” gender category.⁵ In other words, these roles were related to others, mostly, male others. The center of women’s lives was others rather than themselves. Therefore, in general Chinese women were confined in the inner chambers and rarely made public appearances in pre-modern times. On the language and literature level, the realm of writing had been the privileged sphere of men. Male Confucian intellectuals repeatedly argued that women’s writing must never pass beyond inner apartments. Besides this, they also tried to “reduce a writing woman to recognizable domestic shapes: mother, wife, and daughter.”⁶ Thus, there was a general gender bias against women’s writing. In spite of this, from the early periods in Chinese history to the late imperial times, some women still wrote and in most cases they wrote poetry.

As a genre, autobiography has both constructive and didactic purposes in Chinese culture. As Janet Ng points out, “The records of the eminent can inspire and anticipate an ideal future because those who read them will also be spurred to great achievements and contribute to development.”⁷ Therefore, on the mind of most Chinese only an eminent person is qualified to write one’s autobiography. Confined in the households, women rarely had chances to manifest their talents and achieve anything great. Thus, women were regarded as unqualified to write autobiographies. In addition, the gender bias against women’s writing made women feel that writing was a transgression, particularly autobiographical writing. Presumably, these are the reasons why women’s autobiographies were rare in pre-modern China and why Li Qingchao was aware that she was not in the right position to write an autobiography.

With the collapse of the Qing dynasty (1616-1911) in 1911, China entered the Republican period. “Early Republican period witnessed a boom in subjective and autobiographical writing.”⁸ Many important writers and intellectuals wrote their autobiographies in the 1920s to 1930s. In the Renaissance era, European culture underwent a transformation from the theological domination to the human-centered humanism and individualism. The genre of modern autobiography came into being in this significant cultural moment. The New Cultural Movement, which strongly advocated humanism and individualism, has been regarded as the Renaissance in China. During this time the importance of individuals came to be valued. Many intellectuals began to choose unknown or marginalized persons as the subject of their biographies while some began to write their own autobiographies. Noticeably, in this boom of autobiographical writing one conspicuous feature was autobiographical writings by modern women intellectuals.

Amy D. Dooling observes, “Nearly every major woman writer of the period also published personal accounts of her own life, or parts of her life, in the form of autobiographies, memoirs, personal correspondences, and diaries.”⁹ The situation forms a sharp contrast with that of pre-modern period in which women’s autobiographical writings were rare. As for the reasons for the popularity of women’s autobiographical writings, Dooling observes that for women, “this period was marked not by a loss but an expansion of cultural authority stemming from formal education and its attendant privileges.”¹⁰ With the increasing availability for formal education and job opportunity, Chinese women began to go beyond inner chambers and make public appearances. Through pushing past the confines of the household and entering the outside world previously dominated by men, women not only broke the spatial separation, but also largely changed their traditional gender roles. Thus, the center of a woman’s life began to switch from male others to herself. This is significant for autobiographical writing, because as a genre, autobiography features the narrative of the life of an individual self.

⁵ Tani Barlow, “Theorizing Woman: Funü, Guojia, Jiating (Chinese Woman, Chinese State, Chinese Family),” in Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow, ed. *Body, Subject and Power in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 266-270.

⁶ Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China’s Long 18th Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 119.

⁷ Janet Ng, *The Experience of Modernity: Chinese Autobiography of the Early Twentieth Century* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003), 96.

⁸ Amy D. Dooling, *Women’s Literary Feminism in Twentieth-Century China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 105.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 106.

Meanwhile, the separation between men and women on the literature level was also disputed. During the New Culture Movement, known for its anti-Confucianism and anti-tradition spirit, women's writing was no longer viewed as a transgression. Modern women began to write for publication and write as peers of men. Accordingly, this also made women feel more comfortable to write their autobiographies.

However, the boom of women's autobiographical writing in the early twentieth century has been neglected to some extent in the mainstream of Chinese culture studies. Two most influential English-language studies on subjectivity and autobiographical writings are: *The Romantic Generation of Modern Chinese Writers* by Leo Ou-fan Lee and *Literary Authority and the Modern Chinese Writer: Ambivalence and Autobiography* by Wendy Larson. However, neither of them talks much about women autobiographers. Yi-tsi Feuerwerker's essay "Women as Writers in the 1920s and 1930s" has been regarded as a pioneering study on women's autobiographical writings. Although Feuerwerker examines quite a few autobiographies of women intellectuals, Chen Hengzhe, Yang Buwei, and a few other female intellectuals' autobiographies are not even mentioned. Janet Ng conducts an insightful and relatively comprehensive study on autobiographies of the early twentieth century. She discusses Chen Hengzhe's short story, "One Day" (Yiri), in great details and illustrates her resistance of male-dominated literary conventions. However, examining Chen's short story rather than her autobiography in a book exclusively devoted to autobiographical study is rather interesting. Amy D. Dooling devotes a chapter of her book, *Women's Literary Feminism in Twentieth Century China*, to the autobiographies of modern women intellectuals.

Dooling successfully brings some less-known writers and their autobiographies to academic attention. Regrettably, Chen Hengzhe is not mentioned. In her book devoted exclusively to autobiographical practice of women writers, Lingzhen Wang examines how women from Qiu Jin to Wang Anyi have articulated their specific historical situations through autobiographical writing. However, she also doesn't include Chen Hengzhe in her research. In the English-language study on modern Chinese literature, Chen's works have been examined mainly by two scholars, that is, Janet Ng and Jing Wang. Ng closely studies Chen's short story "One Day" and points out, "It is aural, rather than visual, resemblance that Chen attempts to capture, thus creating for us a reading experience that imitates the 'other' reality."¹¹ Ng argues that through using this strategy of aurality, Chen challenges the gendered literary convention and releases her writing from the limitation of the gendered ideology. Although Ng's argument is quite insightful and impressive, she examines a short story rather than the autobiography of Chen. In her Ph.D. dissertation Jing Wang briefly examines Chen's autobiography.¹² Wang makes a few insightful observations. However, due to the limit of the space which is only ten pages, many features of Chen's autobiography such as the textual structure, writing strategies, and literary and historical significance have not been adequately studied.

The notion of rebellion or rejection of prescriptive norms was one of the key spirits of the New Culture Movement. Nurtured in this spirit of the time, women pioneers took a train of rebellious actions such as anti-footbinding, struggle for modern schooling, and rejection of an arranged marriage. In fact, these are the central events in women's autobiographies of that time. In the self-narratives of most women pioneers, apparent rebellious and anti-tradition stance and discourses can be identified. For example: Chow Chung-Cheng states, "but before I could attend school at all, I had to wage a bitter war against my parents: it was a battle between the old traditions and new China."¹³ Most strikingly, the title that Wei Tao-ming chose for her autobiography is *My Revolution Years*. In fact, words and phrases such as "fighting against," "revolution," "waging a war against the old," and "breaking norms or rules" appeared frequently in the writings of both male and female intellectuals and were prevalent in the discourse of the time. To a different extent women autobiographers adopted this discourse to write their life stories.

Like her contemporary women intellectuals, Chen Hengzhe also narrated her rebellious actions. Interestingly, words prevalent in this discourse such as "fighting against," "revolution" appeared relatively less in Chen's autobiography. For example, in the description of anti-footbinding, Chen narrates, "My mother was not of insistent nature, so after several attempts in vain, she gave the matter up.

¹¹ Janet Ng, *The Experience of Modernity*, 32.

¹² Jing Wang, "Strategies of Modern Chinese Women Writers' Autobiography."

¹³ Chung-Cheng Chow, Preface to *The Lotus-Pool of Memory*, trans. Joyce Emerson (London: Michael Joseph, 1961), no page number.

Thus my feet became free again, ...”¹⁴ Chen’s resistance to the arranged betrothal made her father very angry. Later, her mother told her that in spite of his threat and anger, her father was thinking for Chen’s own good. Chen writes, “This I readily believed.”¹⁵ Without the high romantic rhetoric of struggle, this sort of writing makes people feel that her autobiography is merely a simple narrative of her early life. However, if we closely examine the content and narrative strategies of Chen’s text, we will see that it challenges and subverts traditional gender roles and gendered literary conventions mainly through conceptual and rhetoric devices. Meanwhile, Chen also endeavors to create a literary language for modern Chinese women. In the second half of this paper, I will elaborate this argument through three significant examples.

Starting Her Autobiography with an Allegorical Dramatic Scene

Chen Hengzhe starts her autobiography with an allegorical dramatic scene, “The Yangtze River and the Grand Canal” in which the Yangtze River and the Grand Canal have a debate at the place of their confluence.¹⁶ Since this dramatic scene is a prelude in parable and holds considerable significance in the autobiography, parts of it deserve citation and close reading.

Grand Canal

I heard that the Szechuan mountains are dangerous and impassable, that the cliffs are like steel walls, that the stones are like sharp swords. How did you come?

Yangtze River

I pierced them through, I leveled them down, and conquering, I came!

Grand Canal

Ha! Ha! Ha!

Yangtze River

What are you laughing at?

Grand Canal

I am laughing at your grand boasting! Now look at your body, how weak! And your movement, how slow and shy! Do you wish me to believe that you could have conquered the Szechuan mountains?

Yangtze River

But I was not what I am. What I am is a proof of my struggle with those mountains.¹⁷

In Chinese culture “water/river” can be a metaphor for a woman. The weak body, slow and shy movement of the river can also be read as conventional feminine features. Especially after the great Chinese novel, *Honglou meng* (The dream of the red chamber), came out in the eighteenth century, the famous remark, “women are made of water,” which was made by its male protagonist, Jia Baoyu, has become very well-known. In contrast, “mountain” is usually a metaphor for a strong man. The cliffs that are like steel walls and the stones that are like sharp swords convey a sense of tight control and oppression. Although it was once weak, slow, and shy, the Yangtze finally conquered the strong and impassable Sichuan mountains. In this process, the weak river itself has become stronger and formed its present shape. The Yangtze River is apparently meant to be a symbol of Chen and other pioneering modern women. Weak as she was, she eventually conquered many perilous obstacles and struggled a way out in the masculine society. This image largely departs from the traditional female image that was weak, slow, and submissive.

Grand Canal

Is that so? Poor River! Then why should you struggle?

Yangtze River

Why should I struggle? Because I wanted to shape my own life.

Grand Canal

To shape your own life? Why, that certainly is a queer phrase! I don’t understand.

¹⁴ Chen Hengzhe, *Autobiography of a Chinese Young Girl* (Peiping: s.n. 1935), 12-13.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹⁶ This is exactly the title of the first chapter of Chen’s autobiography.

¹⁷ Chen, *Autobiography of a Chinese Young Girl*, 1-2.

Yangtze River

Have you ever tried to shape your own life?

Grand Canal

No. My life was shaped by somebody else.

Yangtze River

I do not envy you.

Grand Canal

Poor thing! Was there nobody ever to shape the life for you?

Yangtze River

I never wanted that.

Grand Canal

Funny! Do you think your life is more desirable than mine?

Yangtze River

Your life is a favor from somebody's hand.

Grand Canal

What difference does it make? Am I not as alive as you are?

Yangtze River

You do not understand the meaning of life. Your life was made by others. So others could also destroy it. But nobody could destroy mine.

Grand Canal

Who would destroy my life?

Yangtze River

That is not within your power.

Grand Canal

I do not care for that.

Yangtze River

Good, good! A happy slave fares far better than a complaining one; though he is different, oh so different! from the master that toils!¹⁸

If the textual emphasis of the previous part of the scene is on the struggle between the Yangtze and the mountains, symbolically the relation between women and the masculine world, this part can be read as a debate between two categories of women.

The Yangtze, naturally formed, is the symbol of pioneering women who subverted women's traditional gender roles and struggled to shape their own lives. She is confident that nobody could destroy her life since it was shaped through her own force and within her own control. In contrast, as the Grand Canal whose river course was built by men, the life course of the majority of women in pre-modern China was shaped by the patriarchal authority. Confined within the household, these women acted the gender roles assigned by the patriarchal society. As the water in the Grand Canal flows slowly and quietly, the women spent their lives submissively and even happily in the arranged life course, having no idea or chance to struggle to control their own fate. Choosing the Grand Canal as a metaphor for the majority of Chinese women shows Chen's original creation.

We can also see that women of the two categories did not understand each other. In the end the Yangtze says, "A happy slave fares far better than a complaining one." This not only shows Chen's disapproval of women's traditional gender roles, but also conveys a sense of sarcasm towards these women and indicates a psychological distance between the two. After the debate:

Then the Yangtze River parted with the Grand Canal, and flowed into the East Sea, singing as he went along:

Sweet is the consolation.

Joyous is the suffering;

From the burning flames of a volcano

The real meaning of life is found.

¹⁸ Chen, *Autobiography of a Chinese Young Girl*, 2-3.

Tears are sour, blood is red,
When the struggle of life is ultimate;
And life is beautiful only,
When its struggle has been ultimate.¹⁹

The use of language in this dramatic scene deserves careful examination. First, in depicting the Szechuan mountains, Chen uses adjectives with negative connotation such as “dangerous” and “impassable” to describe the traditionally prestigious masculine image. Second, although at the beginning Chen uses words with feminine connotation such as “weak,” “slow,” and “shy” to depict the attributes of Yangtze River, textually, these attributes are used to form a contrast with what the Yangtze actually achieves in the end. The textual emphasis is clearly on the latter. Third, verbal phrases such as “pierced through,” “leveled down,” and “conquering” vividly show the fierce fight between the river and the mountains. These words have strong gender connotation and are often used to describe masculine actions. The word “struggle” is repeated twice at the end. Meanwhile, words and phrases such as “burning flames of a volcano,” “Tears are sour, blood is red,” “Joyous is the suffering,” indicate the intensity of the struggle. According to Chinese literary convention, “submissive,” “yielding,” “physically weak,” “sentimental” are commonly used words for feminine features. On the contrary, words with strong sense of intensity such as “struggle,” “burning flames,” “red blood,” are often used to depict masculine features.

It is noteworthy that Chen tends to use words and phrases that are conventionally used to describe masculine behaviors to depict feminine actions. Meanwhile, she uses some words with negative connotation to depict traditionally respectable masculine image. Moreover, she creates the image of the Yangtze River to symbolize the struggle of women pioneers. These writing strategies prompt our further exploration.

In modern China, the traditional bias against women’s writing was challenged. For the first time modern women began to write as peers of men rather than writing in a lower position as a daughter, wife, mother or courtesan. However, women intellectuals soon realized that they lacked their own literary language. As Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua observe, “Nearly all the existing literary conventions, narrative formats, as well as descriptive words and phrases latently contain masculine content and sense.”²⁰ As women pioneers, they had some special, if not unique, experiences such as anti-footbinding and resistance of arranged marriage. To narrate their unique feelings and experiences, they did need their own language. However, in the existing pre-modern and even modern literature, “there are no ready-made female literary tradition, perspective, and literary models except for some general concepts and vocabulary such as romantic, reason and emotion, love, and loyalty.”²¹

Facing this dilemma, some women intellectuals “could only use the impersonal, abstract, and general concepts and vocabulary to express or explain their subtle and unique gender experience.”²² For example, words and phrases such as “rebellion,” “fighting against,” “revolution,” and “a war between the old and new” appeared frequently in their autobiographies. In fact, these were prevailing words in the discourse of the New Cultural Movement. Through adopting these words, women intellectuals brought their writings into the mainstream discourse, making their writings embody the spirit of the time. However, by using the discourse dominated by masculine ideology and authorities, their personal and special female experiences were more or less sacrificed. In Chen’s autobiography, however, some words prevalent in the discourse appear relatively less. This does not mean that she lacks the subversive agency of the time. Rather, she meticulously creates an image of the Yangtze River which largely departs from the traditional female image; she uses words conventionally used to describe masculine behaviors to depict feminine actions; she uses words with negative connotations to deflate the prestige of the masculine image. Through using these strategies she inverts the gender hierarchy in conventional literary discourse. Her writing not only subverts women’s traditional gender roles, but also challenges traditional rhetoric conventions.

Moreover, as one of the earliest modern women writers, Chen was clearly aware that she was unable to write the unique experiences of a modern woman with the general discourse.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua, *Fuchu lishi dibiao* (Emerging from the horizon of history: modern Chinese women’s literature, 1989) (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2004), 42.

²¹ Ibid., 23.

²² Ibid.

Thus, she experimented in creating new images, reversing and rewriting the existing discourse to create a new language to write the experiences of modern Chinese women.

Chen's effort in creating a new language is not limited to the conceptual and verbal level. In terms of textual structure, starting an autobiography with an allegorical dramatic scene challenges pre-modern as well as modern convention of autobiography.²³ Most pre-modern autobiographies started with the narrative of one's ancestry.²⁴ For example, Sima Qian (145?-90? B.C) starts his self-written preface with a genealogy of his family, tracing back to the golden ages of it. Large portion of Liu Yuxi's (772?-842 A.D) autobiography is devoted to his ancestors, especially those with official positions. In the modern period, Hu Shi devotes a chapter long encomium to his parents at the beginning of his autobiography and Shen Congwen starts his autobiography with the military achievement and the glory of his grandfather.²⁵ In the first chapter of her autobiography, Hsieh Pingying delineates her grandfather as a poor yet honest and hardworking farmer and her father as a self-made scholar, although she claims herself as a completely rebellious child.²⁶

Starting her autobiography with a dramatic scene rather than a description of the genealogy of her family is not simply an issue of changing the regular order in the convention of autobiographical writing. The dramatic scene not only allegorically depicts Chen's struggle to overcome various obstacles and shape her own life, but it is also full of subversive consciousness and resistant agency. The centrality of this dramatic scene shifts the emphasis of the genre from one's ancestry or parents to the individual self. Again, in most autobiographies, starting with the genealogy of one's family places the life of the author in a temporal sequence that can be traced back to ancient past and transmit to future generations. What is emphasized here is transmission. The glory, the official positions, and property thus can be handed down from one generation to another. As a historian, Chen was well aware that such a transmission is not available to women, because in Chinese society, especially pre-modern China, the transmission is only limited to male descendents. In general, once married, daughters are excluded from their natal families and have nothing to do with the transmission. Thus, through starting her autobiography with a significant dramatic scene, Chen not only subverts the gendered convention of autobiography, but also challenges the underlying marginalization of women by a patriarchal genealogy.

A Female Cultural Tradition

In the second chapter Chen Hengzhe introduces a female cultural tradition of her family that was started by her great-grandmother:

This lady deserves the gratitude of her offspring for having started a family tradition under which almost every woman, born in or married into the Chen family, has been more or less artistic or literary or both, either by natural inclination or by force of environment.

Thus, my grandmother was an artist, and my mother still enjoys a reputation as one of the leading woman painters of the Chinese school. All my aunts, both on my mother's side and my father's, are no exception to this rule; and many of them have distinguished themselves in the fields of painting, poetry, or calligraphy. This then was the cultural background of my family, a background which was by no means unusual in provinces such as Chekiang and Kiangsu.²⁷

According to the principle of Chen's great-grandmother, every woman, born in or married into the family has the eligibility to be educated and inherit this cultural heritage.

²³ Wendy Larson divides pre-modern Chinese autobiography into two major categories: the circumstantial and impressionistic autobiography. See Wendy Larson, *Literary Authority and the Modern Chinese Writer: Ambivalence and Autobiography* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991), 3, 5.

²⁴ I agree with Larson that impressionistic autobiography as a category disappeared in modern era. Thus, when I talk about pre-modern autobiographies in this paper, I refer to circumstantial autobiographies only.

²⁵ Hu Shi, *Sishi zishu* (Self-narration at forty), in *Minguo congshu*, vol. 86 (Shanghai: Yadong tushuguan, 1947, reprint by Shanghai shudian, 1990), chapter one; Shen Congwen, *Congwen zizhuan* (The autobiography of Shen Congwen), in *Minguo congshu*, vol. 86 (Shanghai: Yadong tushuguan, 1947, reprint by Shanghai shudian, 1990), 6.

²⁶ Pingying Hsieh, *Girl Rebel: The Autobiography of Hsieh Pingying*, trans. Adet and Anor Lin (New York: The John Day Company, 1940), 7-8.

²⁷ Chen, *Autobiography of a Chinese Young Girl*, 5-6.

Recent scholarship by Susan Mann and Dorothy Ko demonstrates that in the late Ming and Qing Dynasty, many women of the gentry families in the lower Yangtze area were well-educated and highly literate.²⁸ The learned women in Chen's family were good examples of this observation. However, what is noteworthy is how Chen textually presents the female and male cultural tradition of her family.

In fact, many of Chen's male ancestors or elders were outstanding scholars and officials. Chen's grandfather, Chen Zhongying, was a *Jinshi* degree holder of Qing Dynasty.²⁹ Her eldest uncle, Chen Ding, was not only a *Jinshi* degree holder but also a scholar of the "The Academy of Learning" (*Hanlin Yuan*).³⁰ Her father, Chen Tao, a renowned scholar and poet, was a magistrate in Sichuan Province. Her third uncle, Chen Fan, once served as a magistrate in Jiangxi Province and later became the owner and editor-in-chief of *Subao*, a major newspaper in Shanghai in the early twentieth century. Although her male ancestors and elders were so outstanding, Chen doesn't even mention their names, official titles, and literary achievements. In contrast with the description of a genealogy of literary women in her family, the narrative of a lineage of the learned men in Chen's family is largely, if not completely, obscured. More strikingly, Chen states, "This lady deserves the gratitude of her offspring for having started a family tradition... This then was the cultural background of my family, ..." ³¹ Here she apparently refers to the entire family, including both male and female members. Actually, it is only a part of her family cultural tradition. Using the female cultural tradition to represent the entire cultural tradition of the family, Chen puts the female cultural tradition in a central and superior position.

Chen thus builds up a genealogy of literary women against the traditional patriarchal lineage. Through these textual strategies, the lineage of learned women triumphs over the conventionally male-dominated genealogy. Janet Ng observes, "In May Fourth writing, it is often through erasing the patrilineal information in their autobiographical works that writers express their rejection of the traditional society."³² In Chen's autobiography, Ng's observation is valid in terms of the erasure of the dominating patriarchal lineage as a rejection of the traditional society. However, what is striking in Chen's narrative is that she genderizes the tradition. While erasing the patriarchal lineage of learning, she consciously builds up a genealogy of learned women to replace and triumph over the patriarchal lineage.

Girls are Better Equipped for Modern Education

One of Chen's most daring challenges to the masculine society is her idea of the "fresh mind" and the assertion that "girls are brighter than boys." Chen's maternal uncle once hired a scholar to teach her arithmetic. In a mere four weeks Chen managed to learn what took the teacher a few months to put into the heads of his boy students. Thus, Chen employs the authoritative figure of the teacher who makes the following striking comments:

I have to admit that girls are brighter than boys, but this does not explain the vast difference. The real reason for this difference is that your mind is fresh, being entirely free from any previous mis-teaching, while the boys, having been taught in the wrong way, have so much to unlearn that it takes more time and energy than simple teaching.³³

In Confucian gender rhetoric, the position between men and women was arranged in a series of hierarchical oppositions: superiority vs. inferiority, authority vs. obedience, honorable vs. humble. The inferior status of women was manifest in nearly every sphere of the society: social, domestic, political, and educational. Through the teacher's words, "Girls are brighter than boys," Chen seriously yet subtly challenges the inferiority of women in the traditional society.

²⁸ For details, see Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

²⁹ Jin shi degree holders refer to people who had passed the palace examination, which was the highest level of civil service examination in pre-modern China.

³⁰ Chen Ding received his "Jin shi" degree in 1881. Then he served as a scholar in the Academy of Learning, the highest academy under the imperial regime of the Qing Dynasty. In 1890 he was appointed as the vice officer of Civil Service Examination of Zhejiang Province. See Qiao Xiaojun, *Qindai hanlin zhuanlüe* (The brief biographies of the Hanlin scholars in the Qing Dynasty) (Xian: Shanxi lüyou chubanshe, 2002), 403.

³¹ Chen, *Autobiography of a Chinese Young Girl*, 5-6.

³² Ng, *The Experience of Modernity*, 93.

³³ Chen, *Autobiography of a Chinese Young Girl*, 84.

In addition, Chen uses her own experience of studying arithmetic to illustrate the assertion. She not only negates the inequality between men and women in terms of intelligence, ability, and knowledge, but also replaces it with female superiority. More strikingly, here Chen raises an issue of the fresh mind and mis-teaching. Girls' minds are fresh, because they are not exposed to previous mis-teaching. On the other hand, boys' minds are full of wrong content as they were taught in the wrong way.

Some historical context is useful in understanding Chen's idea of the mis-teaching which had much to do with the "Chinese learning."³⁴

China's defeats ... was not only or even primarily a result of undeveloped military strength, but rather came from hundreds of years of emphasis on the wrong kinds of study and scholarship—cultural traditions which produced an intellectual elite who were masters of a body of texts but ignorant of what was in the process of becoming identified as 'modern' skills.³⁵

In the historical context, "a body of texts" mainly referred to Confucian classics and canons in traditional high culture. "Modern skills" referred to western-imported science and technology needed for the self-strengthening and modernization of China. These reformers' ideas on China and Chinese learning had great influence on Chinese people, especially, young people. Chen mentions the influences that shaped the course of her life, "One of these elements was the inspiring voice of the late Liang Chi-chao, one of China's greatest scholars, then at the height of his popularity with intellectual China."³⁶ In this regard Chen took the stand of the reformers.

Recent scholarship notes that "gender was one of the most potent metaphors of the late Qing" and demonstrates that gender was also a primary way of signifying differences between the tradition and the modernity in the discourse of leading reformers such as Liang Qichao (1873-1929).³⁷ In his essay "Lun nǚxue" (On women's learning), Liang not only connects the weakness of China to the lack of education for Chinese women,³⁸ he also redefines "learning" in his comments on a group of talented elite women (*cainü*) who were either experts in classics or composed volumes of poems. Liang concludes, "Now this sort of thing really cannot be called learning at all."³⁹ Thus, the reason for the weakness of China shifts from Chinese learning in general to the learning represented by talented women in particular. As Hu Ying points out:

For Liang, the woman poet represents more than herself or women writers as a group; she becomes a stand-in for bad poets in general or, even more abstractly, for the lyrical tradition as a whole, here represented as sentimental and flaccid—the *cainü* as metonym of a feminized cultural tradition, leading to the emasculation of the national fiber.⁴⁰

The opposite of the "useless" traditional high culture was modern science and technology. Interestingly, Liang Qichao also tends to genderize it. To him, the feminized cultural tradition should be replaced with the "martial spirit" exalted by the reformers. Hu Ying observes, "The discourse of tradition and modernity then becomes gendered, with the past coded as feminine and the future masculine."⁴¹ It is significant that in Chen Hengzhe's narrative of "girls are brighter than boys," we can see another way of genderizing "Chinese learning." Boys who had the rights to receive formal training in "Chinese learning" end up with their minds filled with the wrong stuff. On the other hand, girls who were denied the opportunity to study "Chinese learning" luckily keep their minds fresh. Apparently, "Chinese learning" or tradition is coded masculine. To get rid of the wrong stuff, men have to "unlearn" the wrong thing, a process that takes time and effort. The word "unlearn" subtly conveys a sense of mockery and superiority.

³⁴ I agree with Larson's concept of "Chinese learning." To Larson, it means "the corpus of the Chineseliterary tradition." See Wendy Larson, *Literary Authority and the Modern Chinese Writer: Ambivalence and Autobiography*, 6.

³⁵ Larson, *Literary Authority and the Modern Chinese Writer*, 7.

³⁶ Chen, *Autobiography of a Chinese Young Girl*, 48.

³⁷ In his essay, "Lun nǚxue" (On women's learning) Liang states, "When I try to deduce the deepest underlying reason for the weakness of a nation, it always starts from the lack of education for women." For details, see Hu Ying, "Naming the First New Woman" in *Nan Nü* (Men women) 3, no. 2 (2001):197, 202.

³⁸ Liang Qichao, "Lun nǚxue," (On women's learning) in *Yubing shi heji: wenji* (Shanghai: Zhong huashuju, 1936) 1:39. For an English translation by Hu Ying, which I used here, see Hu Ying, "Naming the First New Woman," 201

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Hu Ying, "Naming the First New Woman," 202.

⁴¹ Ibid.

With fresh minds, it is easier for girls to absorb modern knowledge. Noticeably, the updated science and technology or modernity is coded feminine. In this way, Chen interprets the lack of opportunity to study “Chinese learning” as not a loss for women, but a gain and blessing in disguise. Through this seemingly small episode, Chen not only subverts the traditional gendered discourse on women, but also subtly attacks the “Chinese learning.” Moreover, capitalizing on the critique of “Chinese learning,” Chen dissolves the male domination and privilege in the academic and educational fields in pre-modern China. Chen shows respect for leading reformer Liang Qichao and admits her intellectual affinity to him. However, as a woman Chen seems to be sensitive to the overtone of masculine authority in the reformers’ gendered discourse on tradition and modernity. Thus, Chen inverts it and genderizes it in a way completely different from that of Liang. This can be read as Chen’s active intervention in the grand discourse of her time. Meanwhile, Chen tries to create women’s own way to codify tradition and modernity, to interpret the weakness of the nation and to create modern women’s own literary language to counteract the dominating discourse of the time.

Scholars have observed that writers in the New Cultural Movement “rejected the old autobiographical form.”⁴² My research indicates that in literary writing the embodiment of the subversive spirit of the era varies on an individual and gender basis. Modern women narrated in their self-narratives their special, if not unique, female experiences, echoing the anti-tradition and anti-Confucianism spirit of the time. Whereas some women writers adopted the vocabulary prevailing in the mainstream discourse, Chen Hengzhe to some extent tried to avoid these words. Instead, her subversion of and challenge to traditional gender roles and literary conventions is primarily conveyed through verbal and textual strategies. As the above examples suggest, she consciously dismantles the patriarchal ideology persistently and multi-dimensionally. As the earliest woman writer of modern Chinese literature, Chen was aware that women lacked their own literary language. The more they bring their writings into the mainstream discourse, the more feminine features will be sacrificed. In her autobiography, Chen consciously creates new images, subverts gendered literary conventions, rewrites the gendered genealogy and cultural tradition, re-defines the inferiority and superiority between men and women, and re-codifies the gendered tradition and modernity.

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⁴² Ng, *The Experience of Modernity*, 103.