The Construction of “New Woman” in Chen Hengzhe’s Autobiography

Tieniu Cheng
Savannah State University, Savannah, USA

This essay examines the autobiography of Chen Hengzhe (1890-1976) (see Appendix), a relatively less studied woman writer, historian, and critic in modern China. Through the study in four aspects, namely, the pursuit of modern education, simple appearance, great leaders, and the ambassadors of culture, the author’s research indicates that Chen’s construction of “new woman” has been influenced by complex historical and cultural forces such as the Chinese traditional culture, Western culture, and the iconoclastic spirit of “the New Culture Movement”. Meanwhile, Chen’s gender consciousness is also an important element. Moreover, Chen’s pioneering standing and her own experiences of studying abroad makes her take the lead in conceiving women’s leadership and their roles in global culture communications. In the late Qing and the early Republic, traditional values and norms of womanhood were severely challenged. Chen’s construction of “new woman” is her conscious effort to define a new womanhood and is an integral part of the ongoing exploration of Chinese women for modern womanhood. Through the examination of Chen’s “new woman”, this paper seeks to enrich our understanding of the complexity of modern Chinese women’s exploration of modern womanhood.

Keywords: new woman, culture and politics, modern China, womanhood, autobiography, Chen Hengzhe

Introduction

In the late Qing and the early Republic, traditional values and norms of womanhood were severely challenged. Facing the unprecedented task of constructing modern womanhood, many pioneers made great efforts to explore the features of “new woman” and Chen Hengzhe was one of them. Chen Hengzhe (1890-1976) (see Appendix), 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 female students who were sent to study in the United States by the Chinese government in 1914. She became the first female professor at Peking University in 1920. She was the first woman writer who published a vernacular short story in 1917. Chen described and commented on modern womanhood in her works such as essays, short stories, poems, and autobiography. Chen’s daughter, historian E-tu Zen Sun

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Tieniu Cheng, Ph. D., assistant professor, Department of Liberal Arts, Savannah State University.
(1993) remarks, “In the early Republican period, her (my mother) ideas of women was very orignial and full of insightful viewpoints” (p. 3). However, Chen’s ideas of modern womanhood have not been adequatetely studied. In the paper, the author chooses to explore Chen’s ideas of “new woman” through studying a relatively less studied literary text, that is, her autobiography.

Chen Hengzhe and Her Autobiography

Chen was born in a scholar-official family in Changzhou, Jiangsu Province (see Appendix). Many of her male ancestors or elders were outstanding scholars and officials. Her grandfather Chen Zhongying (see Appendix) and her father, Chen Tao (see Appendix) were magistrates and well-known scholars and poets1. Remarkably, many women in Chen’s family were well educated and talented. Her grandmother was an artist. Her mother, Zhuang Yaofu (see Appendix), was a renowned painter in Changzhou.

Chen received good education in Chinese history and literature from her parents and was introduced to the newly imported Western learning by her maternal uncle, Zhuang Sijian (see Appendix). She was sent to a medical school in Shanghai in 19042. In 1914 she passed the examination of the Tsing Hua College and was sent to study in the US on Boxer Indemnity Scholarship.

In 1915 Chen entered Vassar Collage, majoring in Western history. In 1919, she was elected to Phi Beta Kappa and received her B.A. (Bachelor of Arts) in history from Vassar College. Then she continued her graduate study at the University of Chicago. She started to write essays and literary works for Liumei xuesheng jibao (American educated Chinese students’ quarterly paper) (see Appendix) in 1915. Chen met Ren Hongjun (see Appendix) (1886-1961) and Hu Shi (see Appendix) (1891-1962), who were 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 the reform. Only Chen gave him moral supports. Later Hu Shi called her “the earliest comrade” of the new literature. In 1917, Chen’s vernacular short story, “Yiri” (One day) (see Appendix), was published in this journal and was one of the earliest vernacular short stories in modern China3.

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 National Peking University. Chen actively participated in “the New Culture Movement” and published a few vernacular poems, short stories, and essays. In post-May Fourth periods, Chen broadened her writings to social criticism and historical studies. Chen acted as the editor of Symposium on Chinese Culture, which was published by the China Council of the I. P. R (Institute of Pacific Relations) in 1931.

Chen married Ren Hongjun in 19204. After 1949, Chen lived in Shanghai and passed away in 1976.

Despite Chen’s singular achievements, her writings and thoughts have not been extensively explored in

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1 For more information about Chen’s grandfather, father, and uncles, see Biographical Dictionary of Republican China (1967), Vol. 1, p. 184.
2 Chen studied in the medical school for three years. During this time, her father arranged a betrothal for her. 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. For more details, see Chen (1935-1936), pp. 133-153; see also Boorman and Howard (1967), p. 184.
3 Lu Xun’s “Kuangren riji” (The diary of the Mad Man) (see Appendix) was published in New Youth in 1918 Chen’s “Yiri” was one year earlier than Lu Xun’s short story.
4 The couple had two daughters and one son, who also received their higher education in the United States.
mainstream of Chinese studies. In the English-language study, Chen’s literary works have been examined mainly by three scholars, namely, Michel Hockx, Janet Ng, and Jing Wang. Hockx compares Lu Xun’s “The Diary of a Madman” (see Appendix) with Chen’s narrative poem “Renjia shuowo fale chi” (People say that I am crazy) (see Appendix). Ng studies Chen’s short story “One Day”. Jing Wang’s dissertation has been the only one that examines Chen’s autobiography so far. Wang briefly examines Chen’s autobiography and makes a few insightful observations.

Chen wrote her autobiography, Autobiography of a Chinese Young Girl, in English and published it between 1935 and 1936. Chen’s autobiography narrates important experiences in her early life and highlights her struggle for modern education. It ends with her departure for the US in 1914. Closely examining the content and writing strategies, we can see that far more than a simple narrative of her early life, the text challenges traditional gender roles and gendered literary conventions. Meanwhile, Chen endeavors to construct characteristics of “new woman”.

In the period from the late Qing to the early Republic, Chinese society underwent profound changes. The old notions of womanhood were largely challenged. Some women began to seek modern womanhood, which had no precedent in Chinese history. This paper examines a relatively little studied autobiography by Chen Hengzhe. Through studying four aspects of Chen’s construction of “new woman”, namely, the pursuit of modern education, simple appearance, great leaders, and the ambassadors of culture, this paper seeks to contribute to a more complex picture of the construction of “new woman” in modern China.

Before the author proceeds with the four aspects in question, she needs to set Chen’s autobiography in the global culture landscape of the 1930s. In the foreword Chen (1935-1936) writes:

My purpose in writing this book is twofold. In the first place, so much interest in [is] being taken recently by the English-reading public in the Chinese life and Chinese culture and so many books have been written on these topics, that many of my good friends in America and Europe have expressed the wish that we Chinese might also write something about our own country and our own people, …. (p. iii)

Using horizontal reading strategy, Hockx insightfully shows a mutual affinity of the two works. Ng argues that through using the strategy of aurality, Chen challenges the gendered literary conventions and releases her writing from the limitation of the gendered ideology. Since 2010, Denise Gimpel published several essays about Chen Hengzhe. Most of them are on Chen’s historical studies. One essay, “Writing from In-Between: The Transformative Space of Chen Hengzhe’s Fiction”, examines Chen’s literary works. However, Chen’s autobiography was not examined in this essay.

In the English-language study on modern Chinese literature and culture, very few researches have been conducted on women’s autobiographies. Moreover, among them Chen’s autobiography has been largely neglected. As for the few studies on modern Chinese women’s autobiography, 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’s autobiography is not even mentioned. Janet Ng conducts an insightful and rather comprehensive study on autobiographies of the early twentieth century. However, she discusses Chen’s short story, “One Day” rather than Chen’s autobiography. 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. However, Chen Hengzhe is still 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 does not include Chen Hengzhe in her research.

Due to the limited space of about ten pages in Wang’s dissertation, many aspects and features of Chen’s autobiography have not been adequately studied.

The book itself does not provide the date of publication. The date of Chen’s foreword is September 1935. The original copy of the autobiography the author reads is collected in the East Asian library of University of Chicago. On the upper right hand corner of the front cover a stamp mark “February 28, 1936” can be seen rather clearly. This stamp mark indicates the date when the East Asian library received the book. Therefore, my estimate is that Chen’s autobiography was published between September 1935 and February 1936.
The background against which Chen wrote her autobiography was a worldwide interest in China and Chinese culture around the 1930s. Chen herself does not explain “the recent interest of the West in China”\(^9\). However, if we examine the issue against the global cultural environment of the 1930s, two books need to be mentioned. Pearl S. Buck, a renowned American writer, published her highly successful book, *The Good Earth*, in 1930\(^10\). In August 1935, Lin Yutang (1895-1976), a renowned Chinese scholar and writer, published his popular book *My Country and My People* (1935). Noticeably, Buck wrote an introduction for Lin’s book and provided important information about “the recent interest of the West in China”. She explains that due to reasons such as the World War I, the depression, the breakdown of prosperity, “certain Western persons envy the simplicity and security of China’s pattern of life and admire her arts and philosophy” (Lin, 1935, pp. viii-xi).

Chen and Buck were friends as they both taught in the School of Humanities at National Southeastern University in Nanjing in the early 1920s. Moreover, Chen wrote a book review of Buck’s *The Good Earth* in 1931. Since both Lin and Chen were European-American returned students, they were in the same intellectual circle. Lin’s book was first published in August 1935 while Chen’s book was published between September 1935 and February 1936. Considering the intellectual communications among the three writers and the closeness of the publication date of the two books, the “recent interest in China” that Buck elaborates can be regarded as the same one that Chen mentions in her autobiography.

Moreover, the intended audience of Chen’s autobiography needs to be discussed. In the foregoing quotation, Chen mentions “so much interest in [is] being taken recently by the English-reading public in the Chinese life and Chinese culture” and “Many of my good friends in American and Europe have expressed the wish…”. Meanwhile, after elaborating the purposes of writing her autobiography, Chen (1935-1936) summarizes, “These then are the chief purposes of this humble volume: to furnish China’s friends with some reading matter which could at least claim to be genuine and sincere” (p. vi). Obviously, Chen’s autobiography was partly motivated by the urge of her foreign friends. Accordingly, the intended audiences were the English-reading public in general and Chen’s foreign friends in particular.

**The Pursuit of Modern Education**

In Chen’s autobiography, one of the most important characteristics of “new woman” is the pursuit of modern education, that is, modern women should attend a modern school and ultimately travel to study abroad.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the traditional ethical teachings that restricted women’s access to education were challenged. For example, the leading reformer Liang Qichao (1873-1929) (see Appendix) (1989a) criticized the long-standing view against women’s learning, “only women who lacked talent were virtuous” (p. 39). Targeting these teachings, reformers and open-minded intellectuals advocated women’s education. Echoing the call of these intellectuals, Chen’s autobiography centers on her struggle for modern education to fulfill her academic ambition. When Chen was about ten or eleven years old, two elements entered her life and gradually shaped her destiny in the future, namely, the influence of Liang Qichao and Zhuang Sijian, her maternal uncle. Zhuang was well versed in Chinese classical studies. In addition, when he was a magistrate in

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\(^9\) To the author’s research so far, Chen did not explain the “recent interest in China” and mention the related books in her autobiography as well as in her essays.

\(^10\) She won Pulitzer Prize in 1935 and Nobel Prize in 1938.
Guangxi and Guangdong, he had personal contact with foreigners such as the French and the American and was “brought face to face with the foreign culture, which greatly impressed him and won his hearty admiration” (Chen, 1935-1936, pp. 59-61).

Zhuang told Chen some tales about the foreigners and foreign cultures. For example, a famous medical school and a hospital founded by the Americans in Canton. He also urged Chen to go to the medical school. Gradually, her uncle’s stimulating tales and suggestion shaped Chen’s vague desire to experience the unknown into one clear goal: going to a newly established modern school.

Besides the influence of her uncle, Chen notes, “one of these elements was the inspiring voices of the late Liang Chi-chao, one of China’s greatest scholars, then at the height of his popularity with intellectual China” (Chen, 1935-1936, p. 48). Through reading Liang’s journals, Chen got to know Western persons such as Joan of Arc; Western historical events such as England’s struggle for constitution and other aspects of Western culture. Moreover, in 1897, Liang wrote an essay to introduce Kang Aide, an American educated woman doctor. Liang stressed what differentiated Ms. Kang, a new woman, from ordinary Chinese women was that she went through the education system of the US and received the higher education there. In the early twentieth century, the American educated women doctors “enjoyed a celebrity-like status and were often invited to appear at graduation ceremonies of girls’ schools. To the young audiences, they symbolized an inspiring new ideal” (Ye, 2001, p. 123). Influenced by Liang and the women doctors, Chen gradually found the direction of her life, namely, to attend Western style schools and ultimately to travel to study abroad.

In order to fulfill her dream of going to school, Chen left home for Canton to attend the medical school when she was thirteen years old. However, since she was far below the age standard of the school, she was declined admission. Thus, her uncle taught her by himself. He not only introduced some Western learning to her, but also taught her Chinese calligraphy and poetry. However, Chen’s goal was to attend a modern school rather than obtaining knowledge through the tutoring in the household. Upon Chen’s request, her uncle sent her to Shanghai and Chen studied for three years in a medical school newly established by a Chinese official.

In the second half of the text, Chen repeatedly emphasizes that her goal is not just go to any modern school, but to travel abroad to study Western culture. For example, when the Revolution broke out in 1911, some girls enlisted in the army and asked Chen to join them, but Chen opposed. She explains, “For I had now focused my ambition to intellectual achievements, and my only wish was to get a chance to go abroad to study the Western life and culture at first hand” (Chen, 1935-1936, p. 53). In 1914, Chen read in newspaper that an examination would be held for girls by the Tsing Hua College and winners would be sent to study in the US on fellowship. Chen was delighted, “Suppose I should win the scholarship! Would not then all the world open before me, like the dawn after darkness” (Chen, 1935-1936, p. 181).

11 According to Weili Ye, Kang Aide was among the first cohorts of American-educated Chinese women who received their degree in Medicine. For details, see Ye (2001), pp. 119-129.

12 In Liang’s essay, there is a long conditional sentence, “If Ms. Kang had not lost her parents when she was a child and had no means of self-support; if she had not been adopted by Gertrude Howe and taken to the US; if she had not studied at the University of Michigan, she would be of no difference to the mediocre common Chinese women”. For details, see Liang Qichao, “Ji Jiangxi Kang nüshi” (the biography of Ms. Kang in Jiangxi Province), Yinbinshi heji: Wenji (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1936), Vol. 1, p. 120; reprint (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989), Vol. 1, p. 120.

13 For details, see Chen (1935-1936), p. 81. Similar description can be seen in Chen’s essay in Chinese “Wo youshi qixue de jingguo” (My childhood pursuit of education), which was collected in The Essays of Hengzhe.
From the examples, especially from the words such as “my only wish”, and “all the world open before me”, we can see the significance of studying abroad to Chen. Moreover, the significance is stressed through the depiction of her two trips setting out from Shanghai. Chen describes her feelings and thoughts when she was on a steamship sailing to the US in 1914:

I was again with the open sky and the limitless water, as I had been when I set out to seek my destiny sailing in a small steamer towards Canton many years ago. But this time, my sky was no longer so dim, nor was my sea still an uncharted expanse of water; for I was under good financial care and capable guidance, besides knowing something definitely of what I was going to encounter. (Chen, 1935-1936, p. 189)

In this paragraph, Chen mentions her departure from Shanghai to attend the medical school in Canton in 1903. If we compare the descriptions of the two departures, we can understand better the great significance of study abroad to Chen’s life and her construction of “new woman”.

The sky was so wide, the sea was so boundless, that they seemed to symbolize the future that was before me. I was free, free as the bird of the air, free as fish in the deep sea, free as the open sky and the vast expanse of water themselves. But the open sky was also an unknown heaven, and the vast expense of water an uncharted sea! (Chen, 1935-1936, p. 76)

On both departures Chen’s feelings are seemingly similar yet essentially different. The depiction of the departures is carefully constructed. The images of sky, sea, and water are used in both scenes of departures. In general, these images symbolize freedom, boundlessness, and a promising future in Chinese culture. Through using these images, Chen indicates that both trips give her a chance to explore the boundless world and fulfill her dreams. However, on her first trip the sky was an “unknown” heaven. This contrasts with “my sky was no longer so dim” on her second trip. Similarly, “the vast expense of water an uncharted sea contrasts with “nor was my sea still an uncharted expanse of water” (Chen, 1935-1936, p. 189).

The contrastive words suggest that Chen has a negative and uncertain sense for her first trip while a positive and confident sense for her second trip. We may wonder what makes such difference. The writer herself provides an explanation, “for I was under good financial care and capable guidance, besides knowing something definitely of what I was going to encounter” (Chen, 1935-1936, p. 189). Chen (1935-1936) implies that on her first trip she was not under good financial care and capable guidance, not knowing what she was going to encounter. To some extent, Chen’s explanation is at odds with some facts. Chen’s uncle was a magistrate in Canton and Chen knew that she would stay with her uncle’s family and then attend the medical school. Chen lived in her uncle’s house for one year, under the guidance of her uncle and loving care of her aunt, having no worry about financial problem. On the contrary, when she left Shanghai for the US, she almost did not know anyone in the US and almost had no idea of the American ways of living. She was supposed to be a totally stranger to the US, a country, which was unknown to her.

The different significance of the two trips and the writer’s self-explanation needs to be closely examined. First, the destinations of the two trips were different. The destination of her first trip was Canton. Even though she would attend a modern school there, it was still in China. Attending a modern school in China was only a transitional point of Chen’s pursuit of modern education. However, the destination of her second trip was the US. As the author mentioned earlier, studying in the US was an inspiring new ideal in early twentieth century; Second, in the description of her second trip, Chen expresses striking “sureness” of her adventure and future in the US.
This “sureness” might be affected by the characteristics of the genre of autobiography. Autobiography is “a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own experience” (Lejeune, 1982, p. 193). It is important to distinguish the present writing self and the past written self. According to this, when Chen was writing the autobiography, she was different from the girl who took the trip in 1914. Around 1935, Chen had already completed her higher education in the US for fifteen years and had taught at several universities in China as a professor. At this time, studying in the US was a “lived experience” rather than an “unknown” path or adventure. In other words, she had already known the outcome of the adventure, which she took about 20 years ago. This might be one of the reasons why she wrote about her second trip with such certainty.

Moreover, an autobiography is not merely a self-narrative written by a person in retrospect. As Georges Gusdorf (1980) points out, “Every autobiography is a work of art and at the same time a work of enlightenment” (p. 42). Accordingly, an author of an autobiography may think that his/her life story has exemplary significance. In the foreword, Chen states, “My early life might be taken as a kind of specimen, revealing both the heartaches and joys of a life that has struggled in that perilous current of water” (Chen, 1935-1936, p. vi). Chen’s autobiography was published in Peiping. Although the intended readers stated in the foreword were her foreign friends and Western reading public, the actual readers might include Chinese youth who were able to read in English. Like most autobiographers, Chen endeavored to use her own life story as an example to edify and encourage her readers, especially, young women who were struggling with the oppression of the patriarchal society and searching for a way of success and independence. In modern China, traveling abroad to receive Western education was regarded as the highest level of education. Through textually stressing the certainty and confidence she felt for her trip to the US, Chen aims to confirm readers that traveling to study in the US is a feasible and successful path. Moreover, as one of the early generation of American-educated women, Chen tries to show that her experience of study in the US is an indispensable factor for her success in career and for establishing her as a new woman. Therefore, the pursuit of higher education in a Western country is an important feature in the construction of “new woman”.

**Powderless, Ringless, and Decoration-less**

*Furong* (the appearance of a woman) has always been regarded as an important component of womanhood. To beautify her appearance through ways such as powdering her face and wearing pretty clothes has been regarded quite conventional for a woman. However, in her construction of “new woman” Chen highly advocates simple appearance.

The description of her dislike of make-ups and fashions can be seen throughout Chen’s autobiography. For example, Chen has a rich cousin, Wei. Almost everybody in his family dresses fashionably, especially the women. Whenever the Wei women visit Chen at the medical school, she feels terribly embarrassed:

> For with their heavy powder and strong rouge, with their small feet, and with the rich jewelry and clothing that they bedecked themselves with, they often made me feel ashamed of being the possessor of such relatives before my young companions, who were just as unreasonably intolerant as I was of this mode of life. (Chen, 1935-1936, p. 107)

“This mode of life” refers to the life style of some women who tend to over-decorate themselves. As for the

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14 For more details, see Olney (1980), p. 18.
reasons of it, the reformers argued that “the traditional ethical teachings restricted women’s access to learning and thereby consigned them to superficial and idle lives. Women thus became mere playthings preoccupied with making up their faces, binding their feet, and piercing their ears” (Judge, 2002, pp. 161-162). Meanwhile, to some feminists, the primary reason that stimulates women to be keen on fashions and wearing make-ups is to gain men’s favor and affection.

Targeting these unpleasant attributes of women and the patriarchal discourse on women’s appearance, Chen advocates simple appearance. Among the luxuriously dressed Wei women, there is an exception, namely, the mother of cousin Wei. She is the only person in the household that Chen really respects, “for she still led a simple life amidst the display of costly jewels and fashionable dresses of her offering [offspring]” (Chen, 1935-1936, p. 102). Besides this, Chen also depicts the simplicity of her own image in the medical school:

I was too serious-minded for my age, behaved rather country-like and spoke the Changchow dialect which, though akin to the Shanghai dialect, was thought to be funny by people in Shanghai. In addition, I was also a poor student, wearing shabby clothing, and paid absolutely no attention to my appearance. (Chen, 1935-1936, p. 108)

Unlike the overly decorated Wei women, Chen wears shabby clothing and pays no attention to her appearance. In contrast, Chen not only reiterates her advocacy for simplicity, but also emphasizes one attribute that Wei women lack—a serious mind and knowledge of serious affairs. Chen represents the “new woman” who has a serious mind, broad knowledge, and a simple appearance. In fact, it is the attribute that determines the subjectivity and agency of a woman and distinguishes a “new woman” from the common women in that period.

“Simple appearance” is illustrated further in Chen’s narrative of two episodes during her trip from Shanghai to Chengdu (see Appendix) in 1907. In one episode, Chen took a sedan-chair from Wanxian (see Appendix) to Chengdu and occasionally stopped to have lunch in lunch-rooms on the way. Chen (1935-1936) writes:

Every time I entered such a room, I would be followed and then surrounded by a troop of women and girls from the vicinity, and looking at my natural feet, my ringless ears, my powderless face, and decoration-less garment, they would shake their heads and whisper: “A girl-student from down-the-river” or “A foreign girl.” Some of the bolder souls would venture to come near me, and feel my hands and garment…. So she is a lady! But why in such garment and with such big feet, and not even a particle of powder on her face? (p. 130)

In this rather dramatic scene, what are highlighted are Chen’s ringless ears, powderless face, decoration-less garment, and natural feet. Noticeably, Chen creates three words with suffix “less” to stage the image of “new woman”, who forms a sharp contrast to women who were preoccupied with powdering their faces, piercing their ears, and dressing fashionably. Moreover, the three words with suffix “less”, a wise verbal strategy, not only highlights simplicity as an ideal attribute of “new woman”, but also reveals Chen’s challenge to gendered literary conventions in the depiction of women.

Another important feature of “new woman” is natural feet. Chen was taking an upstream boat on the Yangzi River from Yichang (see Appendix) to Wanxian. Since the rapids with their whirlpools were most treacherous, sometimes passengers had to leave the boat and walk on the rocky shore by the rapids while the boat was hauled through the rapids. It was rather tough for other women but not for Chen (1935-1936):

As I was natural footed, I enjoyed very much walking over the wet slippery rocky shores, and amused myself by the astonishments I caused in the natives, who began to call me “a foreign girl”, or “the girl-student from down-the-river”,

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which meant as much to the people in Szechuan at that time as “the girl comrade from Soviet Russia” would mean to a puritanical minister in America. (p. 124)

Chen’s feet were bound when she was seven. Through her persistent resistance, she finally unbound her feet15. Words such as “enjoyed very much walking” and “amused myself by the astonishments I caused” not only show Chen’s physical and psychological feelings, but also subtly convey a sense of self-satisfaction and superiority. This bespeaks that the image of the new woman is highly self-consciously constructed.

What is noteworthy is how Chen textually presents the “new woman”. She designs two dramatic scenes to stage “new woman” among traditional women. Words such as “followed by and surrounded by” and “a troop of” convey the publicity “new women” received. Similarly, words such as “bolder souls” and “venture to come near” suggest that the new woman was so unusual that she caused respect and even awe among the natives, who seemed to treat her as a different kind of human being. Through stressing the attitude of the natives to her, the presentation of the “new woman” effectively draws the attention of the local people and the intended readers. Moreover, words such as the “girl comrade from Soviet Russia” and “a puritanical minister in America” indicate that Chen consciously addresses to the intended audience of her autobiography and tries to connect the situation in Chinese society with the knowledge of the English reading public.

In the transitional period between the late Qing and the Republic, traditional notions of women’s appearance were challenged. Some women tried to explore appearance for modern women. Qiu Jin (see Appendix) (1875-1907), a feminist and martyr, once took a picture on which she dressed as a man in Western clothes and wore a man’s hat. On another photo, she wore the costume of Japanese women. Shortly after 1911, some women “adopted the dress of either Western ladies, who represented the advanced model, or men, as the dominant social category in Chinese society” (Croll, 1978, p. 74). As for the reason of the women’s behaviors, Croll (1978) observes:

In the absence of a well-developed ideology and organization there seems to have been a tendency for women to think that if they adopted the symbols of these two reference groups they would also acquire their status in society. (p. 74)

Drawing on Croll’s remarks, some early feminists attempted to acquire the advanced status of Western ladies and the dominant social status of men through wearing their clothes. This was their way to seek women’s modern appearance and to challenge traditional womanhood. Chen’s advocacy of simple appearance, especially the wisely created three words with suffix “less”, indicates her challenge to traditional womanhood. However, unlike Qiu Jin and some of Chen’s contemporary feminists who dressed as men or foreign ladies, Chen shows almost no interest in either adopting the costume of foreign ladies or attire of men to acquire the modern status. She wore simple, even occasionally shabby clothes. However, no matter how simple and shabby they were, they were still women’s clothes. Chen’s idea of simple appearance still keeps clear distinction between men and women, not blurring the gender boundary. Moreover, unlike some foreign-educated Chinese women who

15 Leading reformer Kang Youwei (1858-1927) founded the first Chinese-initiated anti-footbinding society in 1887 and Liang Qichao organized an association to abolish footbinding in 1897. Thus, the “Natural Feet Movement” quickly spread over China. The major purpose of reformers’ call for anti-footbinding was connected to the reformers’ broad agenda of the national strengthening. For Chen, her motivation of anti-footbinding was out of a girl’s personal and physical feelings and concerns rather than the idea of national strengthening and the influence of the “Natural Feet Movement”. For details about how Chen resists footbinding, see Chen (1935-1936), p. 12.
tended to wear Western style clothes, Chen seems to stick to Chinese clothes. For example, on almost all of Chen’s photos available at present, even those she took while she was in the US, she wore “Qipao” (see Appendix), the typical dress for Chinese women in the Republic period.

To Chen, foreign ladies’ clothes and men’s attire may not rightly indicate the appearance of modern Chinese women. Instead, she advocates simple, Chinese, yet feminine features. Meanwhile, Chen highly values the pursuit of modern education and learning. This is another reason why she advocates simple appearance, because Chen thinks that women’s preoccupation with making-ups and decorations is the impediment to their study and learning. Women should pay less attention to their appearance, so they can have more time, energy, and will to obtain the knowledge of culture, which is exactly the essence of modern womanhood.

**Great Leaders in China**

Besides emphasizing the pursuit of education and simple appearance, Chen regards women’s social roles as an indispensable feature of “new woman”. This feature is elaborated mainly through the description of her paternal aunt, Chen Deyi (see Appendix).

Chen Deyi grew up and educated in an official-scholar family. She was a poet, calligraphist and was also good at medicine\(^\text{16}\). In common sense, Chen Deyi was a typical cainü (talented women) (see Appendix).

However, Chen’s description of the spiritual and physical features of Chen Deyi is quite against literary conventions. “She was a strong woman of steel character, and could not weep even if her heart was broken” (Chen, 1935-1936, p. 147). “As she was an unusually tall and big woman, she impressed me with the bearing and dignity almost of a queen” (Chen, 1935-1936, p. 144). In Chinese culture, the word “steel” has rich symbolic meaning and gender connotation and is often used to depict the strong character of a man. On the contrary, “to weep” is a typical feminine feature. Words such as “unusually tall and big” are rarely used to depict an elite woman. Actually, they are often used to describe a man or a rough woman from lower social strata. As an active participant of the New Culture Movement, Chen was deeply influenced by the iconoclastic spirit of the time. She consciously uses the words conventionally used to depict a man to describe Chen Deyi. Therefore, the spiritual and physical characteristic of Chen Deyi is largely different from that of common elite women. Through this verbal strategy, Chen not only challenges the traditional literary convention and gender expectation, but also rewrites the traditional image of elite women, who are submissive, sentimental, and physically weak.

Recent scholarship notes that in the discourse of leading reformers, the learning and talent of elite women was trifling, frivolous, and feminine\(^\text{17}\). For example, Hu Ying (2001) 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. (p. 202)

Although Chen shows great admiration to Liang Qichao, her gender consciousness makes her sensitive to

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\(^\text{16}\) For details, see Chen (1935-1936), p. 143. Similar description of Chen Deyi can be seen in Chen’s essay in Chinese, “Jinian yiwei lao gumu” (In memory of an old aunt), which is collected in *The Essays of Hengzhe*.


the undertone of masculine authority in Liang’s gendered discourse on talented women. Hence, in a potentially subversive way Chen presents Chen Deyi, a talented woman whose interest in poetry is rather different from that depicted in Liang’s essay.

Chen Deyi was a poet. However, rather than interested in sentimental and feminine poems, she had great admiration for Tang poet, Du Fu. One of her favorite poems was Du Fu’s “My Thatched Roof is Ruined by the Autumn Wind”. On an excursion to the Little West Lake with Chen, she recited to Chen the famous lines of this poem: “Would that I had a spacious mansion of ten thousand rooms, And shelter all the poor scholars under heaven and make them happy!” (Chen, 1935-1936, pp. 146-147). Then she explained to Chen that this was exact the great wish of her life:

Don’t you know, Ah-hua, this has been my wish since I was married to the Chao family? I have wished all my life that I might shelter the poor scholars in our spacious mansion and let them ramble in our park. (Chen, 1935-1936, p. 147)

Obviously, she not only had great interest in Du’s poems, but also had similar ambition to that of Du. In Chinese history, Du Fu (see Appendix) was famous for his sense of social responsibility and concern for the hardships of common people. His poems almost had nothing to do with trifling emotions and feminine sense. Accordingly, Chen Deyi’s admiration for Du shows her taste in poetry and sense of social responsibility. Through this case Chen subtly challenges leading reformers’ indictment of cainü: women may not just have interest in sentimental and feminine poems and indulge in personal emotions.

Through this case, Chen indicates that women and men would be equal in character, will power, knowledge, and social ambition. However, Chen does not simply erase the gender difference and reverse the masculine/feminine roles. During the Revolution of 1911, some women enlisted in the army to fight for the Republic cause. Some even organized themselves into fighting companies with such names as “the Women’s National Army, the Women’s Suicide Squad” 18. Through entering a conventionally “masculine” sphere, women pioneers tried to serve the nation while exploring the social roles of modern women.

Some of Chen’s acquaintances joined the Women’s Dare-to-die bands or the Girls’ Northern Punitive Expedition and asked Chen to join them, saying that it was the best chance to show one’s patriotism. Although Chen supported the Republican revolution, she declined to join the army. She explains:

I had become convinced that the role of a warrior was most unfit for a woman. It would make her harsh and vulgar, and it was a wasteful and destructive role at best. For I had now focused my ambition to intellectual achievements… (Chen, 1935-1936, p. 53)

Chen criticizes the radical behavior of some women, for it violates the usual “female virtues” and turns women’s usual feminine features such as gentleness, modesty, and refined into boldness, roughness, and vulgarity. Moreover, to be a warrior is not a good social role for a woman and a way to serve the nation. As for the outcome of the women soldiers, Chen narrates, “Quite a few of these would-be soldiers found it impossible to lift a gun, not to say using it; and many of them wept like a child because of this physical weakness” (Chen, 1935-1936, p. 175). To Chen, the role of a warrior neglects the gender difference and the specific physical

18 For more details, see Croll (1978), pp. 63-64.
features of women. To the opposite of this, Chen advocates intellectual achievements. From this we can infer that in Chen’s view, to obtain knowledge and make intellectual achievements is the suitable social role for women.

From Chen Deyi’s case and Chen’s attitudes toward women warriors, we can see that on the one hand Chen challenges literary conventions and old notions of womanhood, on the other hand she holds certain traditional view about feminine virtues. To some extent, this complexity is due to the intellectual origin and family background of Chen.

Born in a scholar-official family, Chen grew up in a rich atmosphere of scholarship and culture. Chen writes in details how she was exposed to and nurtured in traditional Chinese high culture. For example, when she was a child, her parents took turns to teach her sisters and her classic Chinese and poetry. When she stayed with her uncle in Canton, he taught her the art of calligraphy and poetry (Chen, 1935-1936, p. 81). Chen also studied calligraphy with her aunt, Chen Deyi.

Noticeably, Chen (1935-1936) particularly emphasizes a female culture tradition of her family, which 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. (pp. 5-6)

The female culture of Chen’s family can be regarded as part of the elite women’s (cainü) culture prominent in the High Qing period in the Yangzi delta.

This female culture included poetry, painting, and calligraphy, which were main components of the traditional intellectual culture. Words with complimentary connotation such as “enjoy a reputation” and “leading” demonstrate Chen’s great respect for this female culture. To some extent, the deep influence of traditional Chinese culture, especially the culture of elite women, shaped Chen’s understanding of femininity and her strong intellectual tendency. Therefore, she feels the role of women warrior, which lacks the gentleness and refinement of the elite women, harsh and vulgar. Meanwhile, her intellectual tendency makes her put intellectual achievements above anything else. Therefore, Chen stresses that women would be equals of men mainly within the spiritual, cultural, and intellectual domain.

On the basis of the description of Chen Deyi’s knowledge, social ambition, spiritual and physical features, Chen (1935-1936) conceives further the leadership of Chinese women:

Even now, I could not think of her in terms of other than that of a great leader; and if she had been born forty or even thirty years later, she would have proved, with this remarkable personality and those knowledge and talent of hers, what climax a Chinese woman was capable of climbing in the matter of career and leadership. (p. 144)

From “if she had been born forty or even thirty years later” we can see that Chen refers to women of her

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19 For details, see Chen (1935-1936), pp. 35-36.
own generation, namely, “new woman”, for Chen Deyi was about forty years older than Chen. To be great leaders will be one of the social roles for “new woman”. This vision poses serious challenges to male superiority and gender division of labor in the Confucian teachings and the traditional ideological mechanism in Chinese society. For example, according to the Confucian classic, *The Book of Rites* (n.d.), “women should have no public influence or knowledge of affairs outside the home”\(^{21}\) (Croll, 1978, p. 15). Due to this, in pre-modern China women were denied the access to the civil service examination and other ways to participate in almost all of the government or local public affairs or administrations, let alone to be leaders.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, some male and female pioneers began to advocate women’s independence, rights, and the gender equality. For example, Qiu Jin started the *Chinese Women’s Journal* in 1906 and published a few articles, which called for the change of women’s dependent and secluded role as well as their participation in public affairs\(^{22}\). Shortly after the Revolution of 1911, some women began to pursue women’s rights to vote and be voted as representatives to the new National and Provincial Assemblies. Noticeably, while these pioneers were advocating the gender equality and women’s rights to participate in public affairs, Chen had already begun to conceive the leadership of Chinese women in their career and public affairs and regard this as the higher-level attribute of “new woman”. In this regard, Chen takes a lead among her contemporary intellectuals.

**The Ambassadors of Culture**

Besides women’s role as great leaders in China, Chen’s construction of “new woman” extends to the highest level: The role that Chinese women will play in international communications and interactions.

In 1914 Chen passed the examination of the Tsing Hua College and was sent to study in the US. Chen describes her experience of setting out from Shanghai with over one hundred male and female students on August 15, 1914. In fact, it is in this description that the construction of “new woman” reaches its climax.

The steamship sailed from Shanghai on August the 15th, just after a series of declaration of war had been made by one European state against another; so that by the time we were on the Pacific Ocean, the whole European world was already on fire. It was significant that just as the world was waiting to be effected by the changes to be brought about by this tremendous armed conflict, China was also preparing for a fundamental change in her national life through the sending of her young girls by the government for the first time. For these young girls were not sent abroad to make military or political contacts with the western countries, as many young men as well as special commissioners had been sent for previously; but they were asked to study the cultural side of the western nations. (Chen, 1935-1936, p. 188)

World War I (WWI) broke out on July 28, 1914 and most of the European countries got involved into it. The war lasted for about four years and caused about 300,000 casualties and enormous loss of property. Moreover, it left deep trauma on people in the world. It was only seventeen days between the outbreak of WWI and the day on which the Chinese students set off. Choosing WWI as the historical background of her narrative is by no means just for the closeness of dates of the two incidents. It can be read as one of Chen’s writing strategies.

When the Chinese students “were on the Pacific Ocean”, “the whole European world was already on fire”.

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\(^{21}\) For more details, see Croll (1978), chapter 2.

\(^{22}\) For more details, see Croll (1978), pp. 67-68.
Accordingly, there is a contrast of “peace” and “war” between the Pacific Ocean and the Europe. Following this, the text draws attention to two contrastive changes: one is the negative change that the tremendous armed conflict would bring about to the world; another is the positive change that sending young girls to study abroad would bring about in China’s national life. Noticeably, Chen makes significant distinction in terms of gender and purpose between the people sent to Western countries: previously the government sent young men to make military or political contacts with the Western countries; now the government is sending young girls to study the Western culture. From this we can possibly figure out two sets of parallel sequences: the first set, the Pacific Ocean/peace sent young girls to Western countries/study Western culture/fundamental and positive change; the second set, the Europe/war sent young men to Western countries/make military or political contacts. Obviously, the purpose of sending the young men abroad was not to study Western culture. Actually, the complicated political and military relations and conflicts among Western countries were the major reasons for WWI. Hence, the text implies that the military and political contacts made by the men could only bring negative changes such as wars.

In the two sets of sequences, we can also see a sequence of opposites, like peace/war, young women/young men, study culture/make political and military contacts. Interestingly, the pairs of opposites correspond textually to the opposition between men and women as well as politics and culture. Thus, Chen draws a distinction among the things in terms of women and culture versus men and politics, connecting positive and constructive things to women and culture while connecting negative and destructive ones to men and politics. In general, men have dominated the political domain at all times and in all lands. Through presenting the contrastive sequences, Chen subtly casts doubt on and challenges the authority and actions of men in the political domain.

Chen (1935-1936) also describes in an imaginative way the significance of sending young girls to study the Western culture and the role they will play in international communications:

From this emphasis on cultural connections, beautiful personal friendships sprang up. The result was that the seed for an intangible yet strong alliance was sown, not on the soil of the war-creating political spheres, but right within the hearts of the peoples. (p. 188)

In the two foregoing quotations, several pairs of contrastive words deserve close examination: “cultural connections” versus “military and political contacts”, “beautiful personal friendships and an intangible yet strong alliance” versus “tremendous armed conflict”, “the soil of the war-creating political spheres” versus “the hearts of the peoples”, “girl students” versus “young men and special commissioners”. These pairs of contrastive things also textually correspond to the opposition between the male and female realms as well as politics and culture. Significantly, Chen connects beautiful and positive things to culture and women while connecting destructive and negative things to politics and men. It is through the marked contrasts that Chen constructs “new woman” on the highest level. Chinese women can not only act as leaders in China, but also assume ambassadors of culture on the international stage. Through cultural communications they will build friendships and strong alliance between China and Western countries. Therefore, they will bring a fundamental change in Chinese national life and peace on a global scale. Meanwhile, through the contrasts the text forcefully reiterates the superior position of women and culture.
Chen makes a gender distinction between men and women with regard to the purpose for which they were sent abroad. It might be easier to see that her narrative is meticulously constructed if we view it against the historical background of Chinese students sent to Europe and the US from the late Qing to the early Republican period. The Qing government started sending students to the US\(^{23}\) and Europe\(^{24}\) as early as 1872, but a large number of students had not been sent abroad until the early twentieth century. In 1908 the U.S. Congress passed a bill to return a portion of the Boxer Indemnity to China as funding for Chinese students to study in the US. In August 1908 the first examination was held to select excellent students to study in the US and 47 male students were sent to the US. From 1908 to 1937, a certain number of students were sent to the US each year\(^{25}\). In fact, vast majority of the students chose science, technology, and social science as their majors rather than military and political science\(^{26}\). Since 1914 Tsing Hua College sent ten female students to the US every other year and Chen was among the first group.

While Chen was in the US, she got to know some male students. Almost none of them were studying military and political science. For example, Hu Shi, her best friend, studied Philosophy and Ren Hongjun studied Chemistry\(^{27}\). As a historian, Chen not only had good knowledge of the historical facts about Chinese students in the US, but also had personal experiences. It seems that she consciously overlooks certain historical facts so as to textually construct an imaginative opposition between the male and female students. This imaginative opposition and the textually presented superiority of women and culture demonstrate Chen’s feminist consciousness. It challenges the superiority of men in traditional Chinese society.

Noticeably, through stressing the opposition between culture and politics, Chen also criticizes politics and political sphere. Chen’s attitude toward politics seems quite unusual in the context of Chinese feminist movement from the 1910s to 1920s. Feminists such as Tang Junying began to organize women’s associations to demand women’s suffrage after 1911. As Elisabeth Croll (1978) observes, “This was seen to be a prerequisite to the entrance of women into public life, and it was the acquisition of public and political roles which constituted ‘emancipation’ at this time” (p. 74). As some feminists were making efforts to enter the political sphere, Chen showed almost no interest in it. Moreover, she even negated the politics and political sphere. To Chen, modern women can serve the nation and make contributions to international communications through the way of culture rather than politics. Several factors might account for Chen’s attitude toward politics. First, as the author mentioned earlier, Chen was deeply influenced by the culture of elite women. As Joan Judge points out, in pre-modern China female culture “had been admired as a haven independent from the heartless male intellectual world and distant from politics”\(^{28}\). Due to this, Chen tends to highly advocate culture while keeping

\(^{23}\) After the military defeats in the Second Opium War (1856-1860), in order to save the national crisis and meet the pressing need for professionals in modern military, science, and technology, the Qing government started to send about 120 boys to the US from 1872 to 1875. However, all of them were withdrawn to China in 1881 due to many reasons. Most of them had not finished their college education by then.

\(^{24}\) Most of the students sent to Europe were selected from students in several navy institutes or newly established schools.

\(^{25}\) According to historical record, the number of students varied each year.

\(^{26}\) For example, Zhu Kezhen (see Appendix) (1890-1974) recalls, “Among the seventy people of our group, around seventy percent of us majored in natural science, technology, and agriculture…. it was true not only in our group, but also true for almost all of the Chinese students sent to the US on Boxer Indemnity Fellowship” (Li, 2006, p. 245).

\(^{27}\) Ren Hongjun got his M.S. in Chemistry from Columbia University.

\(^{28}\) Joan Judge makes an observation in her study of female literacy. For details, see Judge (2002), p. 169.
away from politics. Second, this might be related to Chen’s experiences of study in the US. For Chinese students who studied in the US from the 1910s to 1920s, Hsia observes that they were attracted to the intellectual and literary currents of the time: the imagist school of poetry, the pragmatic thinking of Dewey and Russell, and the Humanism of Babbitt and More. These might strengthen Chen’s preference for intellectual and cultural aspects. After Chen returned to China, she became an important, if not the only female member in the Anglo-American returned students group led by Hu Shi. This liberal group was known for its lack of political affiliation and its interests in scholarship and criticism.

Conclusions

During the transitional period of late Qing and the Republic, traditional values and norms of womanhood were severely challenged. Chinese women were facing the unprecedented task of constructing modern womanhood. Many pioneers in their own ways made attempts to define new womanhood. This paper examines in four aspects how Chen Hengzhe constructs “new woman” in her autobiography. It might be safe to say that Chen’s “new woman” has been influenced by complex historical and cultural forces. As Ye (2001) convincingly argues, Chen and the generation of American-educated Chinese intellectuals were “systematically educated in the West yet still sufficiently rooted in the cultural heritage of China” (p. 6). Besides, the culture of elite women and the iconoclastic spirit of the New Culture Movement also greatly influenced Chen’s “new woman”.

Chen’s pioneering standing as an early American-educated woman and the first female professor at Peking University makes her has broad experiences and perspectives notably different from her contemporary women. This may account for why Chen takes the lead in conceiving women’s leadership and their roles in global cultural communications.

Chen came from an upper class gentry-official family, which provided her with the opportunity to receive good education in Chinese learning and some imported Western learning. To some extent, all these contributed to her success in winning the Boxer Indemnity scholarship to receive higher education in the US, which was largely unavailable to the majority of Chinese women at that time. Therefore, the “new woman” in Chen’s construction may not represent the “new woman” in the minds of women of different intellectual and social origins. Moreover, as Chen stresses women’s knowledge of culture rather than political involvement, her ideas about “new woman” were somewhat marginalized among the politically oriented images of “new woman” in modern China.

However, Chen’s construction of “new woman” was her conscious attempt to define a new womanhood, which was an unprecedented task for Chinese women in the early twentieth century. It is an integral part of the ongoing exploration of Chinese women for modern womanhood. Through the examination of Chen’s “new woman”, this paper seeks to enrich our understanding of the complexity of modern Chinese women’s exploration of modern womanhood.

29 For details, see Hsia (1961), p. 23.
30 For details, see Hsia (1961), p. 15.
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Appendix: Character List

cainü ๑ ๒
Chang Zhou ๑ ๒
CHEN De-yi ๑ ๒
CHEN Ding ๑ ๒
THE CONSTRUCTION OF “NEW WOMAN” IN CHEN HENGZHE’S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

CHEN Heng-zhe
CHEN Tao
CHEN Zhong-ying
Chengdu
DU Fu
Hanlin Yuan
HU Shi
“Kuangren riji’
LIANG Qichao
LIN Yintang
Liumei xuesheng jibao
Qipao
QIU Jin
REN Hong-jun
“Renjia shuowo fale chi”
Wanxian
Yichang
“Yi ri”
ZHUANG Si-jian
ZHUANG Yao-fu
ZHU ke-zhen