

HISTORIAN AND COURTESAN: Chen Yinke and the Writing of *Liu Rushi Biezhuan*

Wen-hsin Yeh

Department of History, University of California at Berkeley

Delivered as the Morrison Lecture, Australian National University, July 2003

Introduction

When considering the heritage and future of the European left, the Cambridge philosopher John Dunn notes that to inherit, ‘one must be alive’.¹ Inheritance, he suggests, ‘is not a naturally grateful category for the left’ as it would be for a feudal aristocracy. The left cannot simply hope to draw its legitimacy from its past. It needs to remake its future in order to claim that past.

When Deng Xiaoping came to power after the Gang of Four, a first task his supporters performed was a careful pronouncement on the legacies of Mao: on what seemed right and what had gone wrong, on what was to be inherited and what was not. Throughout much of its history, the Chinese Communist leadership had turned it into a fine art striking a calculated balance between a critique of the past and an assumption of that past. It has never been easy determining what to critique and what to inherit, how much to discard and how much to retain. Each of these decisions carried grave political consequences. Yet none seemed definitive in the ceaseless dialectics between the past and the present.

One trend emerged over the course of the last two decades: the past of the Party itself had become progressively depleted as a font of value and a source of knowledge. Unlike the situation facing the European left, it becomes imperative for the Chinese Communist Party to look beyond its conventions and history in order to replenish the symbolic resources that sustain the present. For the Chinese left to claim the future, in other words, it was necessary to remake the past.

Textbook simplifications notwithstanding, the pre-1949 ‘old China’ (*jiu Zhongguo*), in the context of the 1980s and 1990s, is refashioned to become not just a target for smashing or suppressing. It had been transformed instead into ‘traditional China’ (*chuantong Zhongguo*) and a depository of cultural heritage (*wenhua yichan*). There is much—from Confucius to Tang poetry, from Han tomb paintings to Dunhuang grotto manuscripts—that the new China is to rediscover and to inherit

¹ John Dunn, *The History of Political Theory and Other Essays* (Cambridge, New York & Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 219.

from an excavated past. Maoist classics such as the 1926 *Report on the Hunan Peasant Movement*, to be sure, retain their doctrinal status in institutional niches. But the ‘feudal’ is no longer fashioned to be mere antithesis and backdrop to the drama of socialist emancipation. By becoming simply the ‘past’, it is transformed into an added font of value and an expanded source of pride. Its symbolic resources, when properly mobilized, are to rescue Chinese socialism from the exhaustion of its own norms and imagination.

This new use of the past thus opens up a vision of history that is not peopled by the agents and precursors to the Communist victory in China (i.e. peasant rebels, urban workers, socialist martyrs, and cultural iconoclasts) but by a collection of their opposites. For decades since 1949, Party apparatus had employed means of erasure and suppression to reduce to oblivion unwanted parts of the past. To undo what had been done and to renegotiate the Party’s relationship to that history, much needs to be done to repair that loss of memory and to break the silences of the past.

This massive refashioning of collective memory—this re-engineering of a nation’s sense of its own history and culture—takes many forms. The project began, in the late 1970s, with a re-evaluation of eminent individuals of the recent past, or the use of commemorative gatherings as remedial funerary services for victims of the Cultural Revolution.

The use of remedial commemoration, to be sure, fell well within established Party norms. Mao Zedong had set the terms of such practice in his 1944 talk, ‘To Serve the People’,² a funerary speech that turned rites of commemoration into sorting devices that separated out class enemies from the ‘people’.³ If friends and comrades were to receive proper commemoration, it follows that traitors and enemies were to receive none. The Cultural Revolution not only purged class enemies from positions of power but also obliterated them from collective memory. Political reversals in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution thus entailed not only the return of the still living but also the commemorative resurrection of the dead.

For Deng Tuo and Wu Han, high-ranking cultural cadres and early victims of the Cultural Revolution, the road to rehabilitation began with the re-issuance of their writings in the 1980s.⁴ This was followed by the appearance of political biographies compiled by Party insiders. Other

² *Mao Zedong xuanji* (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1991), vol.3, pp.1004–1006.

³ Funerary ritual and proper grieving for the politically disfavoured could cause an official’s downfall, as Wu Han has shown in the case of Wang Shizhen grieving for the executed Yang Jisheng. Wu Han, “Jin Ping Mei de zhuzuo shidai ji qi shehui beijing,” *Du shi zha ji* (Beijing: Sanlian Shudian, 1956), pp. 8–12.

⁴ On Deng Tuo, see Timothy Cheek, *Propaganda and Culture in Mao’s China: Deng Tuo and the Intelligentsia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997). On Wu Han, see Mary Mazur, *Wu Han: A Man of His Times*, doctoral thesis, University of Chicago, 1994.

signs of the rehabilitation include the inscription of physical space in their memory and public presentations of their suppressed works. In Beijing, Wu Han's alma mater Tsinghua University named a pavilion in his honour and graced the site with a plaque bearing the calligraphy of Deng Xiaoping and Peng Zhen. In Wu's hometown Jinhua, Zhejiang, the local Communist Party produced Wu's fateful historical play, 'Hai Rui's Dismissal from Office', in the local dialect and sent the performers to Beijing in the summer of 1985 to mark the 64th anniversary of the founding of the Party. Full rehabilitation of Wu Han came, when the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Party sponsored a conference in Beijing on 'Wu Han and His Glorious Life'. Finally, the Jinhua Party secretariat brought out a volume called *Hometown Remembrances* (*Guxiang de huainian*) that commemorates all commemorations that had ever been held in Wu's honour since the late 1970s.⁵

In the 1980s the life and work of Chen Yinke, who had died in 1969 during the Cultural Revolution, re-emerged in print. Like Wu Han, Chen was a former Tsinghua historian and an intellectual luminary who had enjoyed a scholarly reputation prior to 1949. Yet unlike Wu, Chen was neither a member of the Chinese Communist Party nor a cultural cadre in the post 1949 regime. Wu had held the title of deputy mayor of Beijing and died a victim of a carefully orchestrated political plot. Chen had never held government positions. He had died, like many other intellectuals, in the general campaign unleashed against China's learned and educated. Wu's rehabilitation had remained within the bounds of calibrated sentiments endorsed by the Party. Chen's commemoration, in contrast, stemmed from non-Party sources. The publication of Chen's writings inspired admiration not only for a style of scholarship that was non-Marxist but also as it opened up a pre-socialist imaginary space of poetry and aestheticism.

The past, though dead, was not pliant. Chinese Communist Party historiography has traditionally maintained sharp distinctions between heroic martyrs versus inevitable losers, lost fights versus defeated causes. It has been resolute in turning the gaze away from sites and zones of buried cause, abandoned fights, suppressed memories, and proscribed ways of life. Historical memory, no less than visions for the future, requires diligent management in the forward-looking ideology of Chinese communism. The past, freely accessed, poses as much problem as the present or the future. The celebration of Chen Yinke, more than the rehabilitation of Wu Han, thus raises interesting questions in a new way.

⁵ Chou Dayang, "Wu Han zai women de xinzhong—yijiujiuiling nian mo Beijing 'Guxiang de huainian' shoufa shi qianqian houhou," in Su Shuangbi, ed., *Wu Han zizhuan shuxin wenji* (Beijing: Zhongguo Renshi Chubanshe, 1993), pp. 247–249.

Biographical Construction of Liu Rushi

Between 1954 and 1964, on the campus of Zhongshan University in Guangzhou, Chen Yinke devoted himself to the writing of the biography of Liu Rushi, a courtesan, a poetess, and an occasional painter of the 17th century. Chen, a founding figure of Dunhuang studies and famed for his earlier research on the political and religious history of China's Middle Ages (4th–14th centuries), was blind. He worked with an assistant who took down his words verbatim. The research, which eventually involved references to over six hundred titles in classical texts, was done by and large from memory.⁶ The book, entitled *An Ulterior Biography of Liu Rushi* (*Liu Rushi biezhuàn*), lay before the mind's eye a late Ming elite world of poetry, pleasure, elegance, and opulence amidst the ponds, streams, gardens, and pavilions of central China. There seemed to be so much identification between the historian and the biographical subject of his research, that Chen named his study the Hall of Golden Illumination (*Jinmingguan*)—an encoded reference to the study in which the courtesan composed her poetry.

Well before 1949, Chen Yinke had attained a solid reputation as China's most eminent academic historian of his generation. Part of this had to do with the eminence of his family. Much more was attributable to his educational experience and scholarly contributions.⁷

In the 1910s and 1920s Chen Yinke travelled extensively and studied for years at Harvard and Berlin. At Harvard he studied Sanskrit with Charles Lanman, who recognised Chen's exceptional talent in a letter to Harvard University President Lawrence Abbot Lowell. Lanman was the one-person Department of Indic Philology that had declared its independence from the Classics Department. He was at the same time a keen promoter of the intellectual benefit of Sanskrit training, insisting that it trained the mind much the way Greek and Latin did. Lanman worked with Indian scholars who helped him compile Sanskrit textbooks. As enterprising man, he also presided over translation projects of Sanskrit texts into English and maintained a network of connection with German orientalist.⁸

From Harvard Chen Yinke went to Berlin at the end of the war. He continued his study of Sanskrit and learned Pali with Heinrich Luders. German scholarship led the field in those days in historical

⁶ Hu Shouwei, "Liu Rushi biezhuàn du hòu," in Hu Shouwei, ed., *Liu Rushi biezhuàn yu guoxue yanjiu* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Renmin Chubanshe, 1995), p.27.

⁷ Wang Rongzu, *Chen Yinke pingzhuàn* (Jiangxi: Baihuazhou wenyi, 1992); also *Shijia Chen Yinke* (Taipei: Lianjing chubanshe, 1984). Yu Dawei, "Huainian Chen Yinke xiansheng," in *Chen Yinke xiansheng lunji* (Nankang: Academia Sinica, 1971), pp.3–8.

⁸ Harvard University Archives, HUC 8920.115, box 914, "Office of the Register of Harvard University," and UAI5.160, 1919–1922, "Lanman, Charles R."

archaeology. The excavations laid the foundation for the reconstruction of extinct Sogdian and Turkic languages in Central Asian desert. In Berlin Chen Yinke led a style of life that revolved around the libraries and museums of the former imperial capital. In addition he travelled extensively, writing poems from the tops of the Swiss Alps as well as the shores of the North Sea. Forever an avid collector, he apparently spent handsomely on large collections of books.

In 1925 he returned to Beijing to assume professorship at Tsinghua and to serve, along with Liang Qichao and Wang Guowei, as a founding member of the Research Institute for National Learning. He taught courses on Buddhist scriptures. He also lectured on the history of translations of Buddhist texts into Chinese. His work amounted to an archaeological excavation in historical linguistics. From this angle he approached the question of the role of Buddhism in the fashioning of Chinese culture and politics in the Middle Ages. He worked with texts in Manchu, Mongol, Tibetan in addition to Sanskrit and Pali. To fill gaps in standard dictionaries, he dispatched teams of research assistants to conduct interviews in Manchuria and Mongolia. Meanwhile the curators of the National Beijing Library presented their new acquisitions of rare books to him on schedule. Chen produced essays that were terse, densely packed with textual references, technically challenging, and intellectually provocative. Women and foreigners—central Asians in particular—featured prominently in his work. There was also considerable attention to materials artifacts and visual images.

This style of scholarship came to an end in the late 1930s, when the war broke out and the universities moved out of Beijing. Chen Yinke was not only deprived of his access to the Beijing libraries but also lost his personal collection of books. His wartime correspondence recorded the hardship on the road as he moved to China's southwest. One day his family of five shared a meal of a boiled egg. His wife fell ill and was unfit to travel. Chen lived apart from his family during parts of the war so as to perform his teaching duties. His reading taste changed to include essays and poetry. He told friends that when reading historical accounts of the fall of Kaifeng, the northern Song capital, to the invading Jurchens, it brought tears to his eyes. He immersed himself in the poetry of Yuan Zhen and Bai Juyi, poets who chronicled the military uprisings and social upheaval in the mid-Tang period. Other historians—Guo Moruo and Wu Han among them—turned, in 1944, to orchestrate large-scale public commemoration of the third centennial of the fall of the Ming dynasty to the Manchus.

Chen Yinke's post-1949 research continued to break new ground. The Tang studies had alerted him to the multifaceted connections linking formal poetry, fictional writings, vernacular literature

and the oral practices of storytelling. As Chen's eyesight deteriorated, he turned to the audio consumption of rhymed prose and performed narratives. The result was a close study of the elite world of female literacy and vernacular writing in the 18th century, as seen through the popular *pingtan* text *Zai sheng yuan* and the lives of its two women authors, Chen Duansheng and Liang Chusheng.⁹

Chen's magnum opus in the 1950s and 1960s was *Liu Rushi biezhuàn*, initially entitled *Qian Liu yinyuan shijian*. Before Chen turned his attention to Liu Rushi, this was a controversial woman married to a prominent and powerful man, who had herself never been the subject of a full biographical treatment. Chen gave the subject nearly a decade to his time and produced over 800,000 characters. Briefly, he showed that she was of humble origin, had a career as a high-paid courtesan, entered the household of a man twenty-some years her senior and bore him a daughter. Chen's reconstructed Liu Rushi occasionally cross-dressed in men's clothing that barely concealed her bound feet. She was a 'patriot' during the Ming–Qing transition. A mere decade into the new dynasty, she was pressured, upon the death of her spouse and patron, to take her own life in bitter protest.

This monumental record of noble deeds, elegant accomplishments, strong will, and tragic death restored Liu Rushi to full historicity. Yet Chen was also provocatively enigmatic on the subject of who she was. On the question of the courtesan's natal family Chen played up his erudition and dexterity as a philologist and textual scholar. Through daring manoeuvres in textual readings he traced her early life to the age of eight, when the future *femme fatale* was sold into a high official's household as a bonded maid. The woman who bore a name evocative of poetic images of dainty willow and aesthetic luminance turned out to have been born someone else altogether. Here the textual trail, which consistently led to the deconstruction of the received image of the courtesan, came to an abrupt end. The 'real' person, in the master's manuscript, receded into a past beyond the reach of the text. The woman in Chen's manuscript, in that sense, was a subject in a literary fiction. Yet paradoxically she became all the more the master of the narrative as she had so deliberately given herself new names and fashioned her own identity.

In the context of historical writing of the 1960s, *The Ulterior Biography of Liu Rushi* was an enigmatic text that had subverted several conventions. First, Professor Chen had taken a classical

⁹ A first draft of *Lun Zaisheng yuan* was completed in 1954. An unauthorised printing, by Youlian Chubanshe, appeared in Hong Kong in 1959. A revised draft was completed in 1964. Jiang Tianshu, p. 177. Despite Hu Qiaomu's promise and Guo Muoruo's support, Kang Sheng killed the publication plan by the Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe in 1962. See Lu Jiandong, pp. 368–373.

form of literary biography, until then reserved for moral icons and leaders, and used it to frame the life of a high-class prostitute. Secondly, he had turned the limelight on a life that was downtrodden and oppressed as was presumably in keeping with the new socialist historiography. Yet he had privileged the subject on the basis of gender rather than class. He had also selected a woman who displayed all the upperclass trappings of literacy, affluence, beauty and comfort at a time when Great Leap Forward posters celebrated women tractor drivers. Thirdly, despite Mao's 1942 'Talk' and the official injunction to harness all cultural work for the construction of socialism, Professor Chen made no pretence to make a contribution in that direction. He steadfastly maintained, instead, that this biography was no more than the idle work of an aging man looking for a way to fill his time in his failing years. The work should be accorded no greater significance, according to him, than a playful exercise carried out in the privacy of his study and home.

Three elements thus stand out in Chen Yinke's writing of the Liu biography: gender, memory, and the writing of history. Each in turn pertains to a broader set of questions concerning modern Chinese politics and culture, whether in the context of the 1960s or the more recent decades.

Gender

Women occupied a prominent place in Professor Chen's historical work.¹⁰ More than any of his fellow scholars, Chen departed from the conventional tendency to relegate women to the historical background. In his earlier work he had brought before the modern audience vivid portraits of striking figures such as Empress Wu and Imperial Concubine Yang. His reading of Tang political history had much to do with his reading of marriage alliances formed by the aristocracy. Inspired by early twentieth-century ethnography, Chen drew connections between Tang aristocratic marital practices and Central Asian tribal and communal conventions. Central Asian conventions of female kinship rights and property claims played a key role in Tang politics and society, Chen suggested, as marriage alliances were widely formed between the Han and the non-Han. This supplied the social foundation for the fashioning of the legal codes and political norms under the Tang, which in turn became the basis of subsequent dynastic codes. The dynamics of Tang history would have been inexplicable had women—and the Central Asian foreign connections that they represented—been screened out of view.

¹⁰ Cai Hongsheng, "'Song hongzhuang' song," lists nine major works by Chen Yinke between 1935 and 1964 that are focused on women. See Hu Shouwei, ed., *Liu Rushi biezhuang yu guoxue yanjiu*, pp.36–37.

Women's prominence in Chen's history did not decline with the fall of the aristocracy. The mid-Tang rebellions and social upheaval served as the backdrop for the rise of a second type of women in Chen's writings. These were the long-suffering genteel wives of impoverished literati, who gave their men a sense of home and anchor despite their own trial and tribulation during the war.¹¹

Chen's writings after 1949 marked the rise of a third type of women. They tend to be those of dubious marital standing and genealogical origin. They also enjoyed, thanks to their literacy and accomplishments, a certain public fame or notoriety. Women of this sort who went beyond bounds had surfaced, to be sure, in Chen's writings well before 1949. Chen's studies of Chang Henge and Ying Yingzhuan were fine examples along those lines.¹² In his post-1949 research Chen Yinke focused his attention even more sharply on such women. His studies of the courtesan Liu Rushi and the woman author Chen Duansheng explored, from divergent perspectives, the intersections between textual and verbal cultures as seen in the lives of these women. Like some of the most captivating fictional females of earlier centuries, Liu and Chen held unstable relationships with their men and achieved legendary stature in the oral context of their time. The ambiguity in their formal status liberated them from the bonds both of familial obligations and tribal connections. At the same time these women had attained enough proficiency to break into the literati discourse of the men around them.

Memory

We know, from the recollections of the project's research assistants, just how Chen had written the book. By the 1950s the professor had lost his ability either to read or to write. He thus had to rely upon others to look up references and to write down his sentences. Wartime dislocation had scattered his research collection. Deprived of his reference materials and dictionaries, he gave up dealing with topics requiring consultation of non-Chinese sources. To proceed with the writing of his book, he directed his assistant to track down books held in public libraries. Chen's biography of the courtesan, in more than one way, was palpably a work of memory. It not only drew upon Chen's stunning command of a large corpus of books, but also his ability to recall the text by heart. A light sleeper towards the end of his life, Chen often spent day and night composing in his head, then recording his words when the assistant arrived in the morning.¹³ There were only so many

¹¹ Chen Yinke, *Yuan Bai shijian zhenggao* (Taipei: Shijie Shuju, 1975; Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1982), pp. 88–90.

¹² Chen Yinke, *Yuan Bai shijian zhenggao*, pp. 1–44, 107–116.

¹³ Lu Jiandong, pp. 67–71.

phrases that the mind could hold for so long. The somewhat truncated quality of the text of *Liu Rushi biezhuàn* reflected the particularity of the circumstances of Chen's writing.

Memory worked on other levels as well in the writing of *Liu Rushi biezhuàn*. The very origin of the work, if the author was to be believed, had something to do with a red bean in the colour of deep maroon that had presumably fallen from a long-standing tree in front of the old home of Qian and Liu. It was a complicated tale how the bean had come to rest in Chen's palm one day after centuries of war and revolution, destruction of fortune and vicissitudes of sorts. Chen was on a quest for rare books during the war, when he was brought to the doorsteps of a book dealer, who turned out to have little to offer. The warfare and dislocation had 'reduced to ashes' much of the heritage of the centuries.¹⁴ In lieu of the books that Chen had sought, the dealer offered this bean that seemingly embodied a tangible link to that different place and distant time, when Qian and Liu sat in the midst of their yet intact garden of books and exchanged poems.

Chen's pursuit of the project afforded an opportunity to reconnect with the past in yet another sense. He had gained his first exposure to Qian Qianyi's poetry while still a youth, browsing in the fine collection of hand-copied manuscripts in his maternal uncle's private study. Liu Rushi brought his mind back to Nanjing, where his childhood home used to be, and to the mild climate and soft landscape of Jiangnan, where his parents and grandparents had been buried.¹⁵ Poets and courtesans, to be sure, were equally prominent in that tradition, along with classicists and degree-holders. It was an open issue how this culture had retained its capacity to address China's modern concerns.¹⁶

Chen Yinke punctuated his study of the courtesan with his own poetic compositions and carried out a dialogue with the literary couple three centuries earlier. He rhymed to their tunes and themes and retraced their steps. He placed himself in the historical landscape and responded to his characters' moods. The revisionism in *Liu Rushi biezhuàn* lies not only in the unalloyed praise of the courtesan, but also in the portrait of the poet as an underground resistance hero. This latter construction contrasts sharply with the then prevalent view in the PRC, which was put forward by Wu Han in the late 1940s. In that earlier essay Wu had roundly denounced Qian's political

¹⁴ Chen Yinke, *Liu Rushi biezhuàn* (Shanghai: Guji Chubanshe, 1980), vol. 1, pp. 1–3.

¹⁵ Chen Yinke, *Liu Rushi biezhuàn*, vol.1, pp.3–4.

¹⁶ Chen Yinke, "Qinghua daxue Wang Guantang xiansheng jinian bei ming," "Wang Jingan xiansheng yishu xu," *Jinmingguan congkao er bian* (Shanghai: Guji Chubanshe, 1980), pp. 218–220. See also Bian Huixin, "Chong du 'Wang Guantang xiansheng wanci bing xu'," in *Beijing daxue Zhongguo zhonggushi yanjiu zhongxin*, ed. Jinan Chen Yinke xiansheng danchen bainian xueshu lunwen ji (Beijing: Beijing Daxue Chubanshe, 1989), pp.35–44.

opportunism and his loss of integrity.¹⁷ Chen Yinke focussed, instead, not on the poet's compromises and collaborations but on the tragedy of dynastic transition. Chen showed that Ming resistance failed despite the endeavours of Qian and Liu. But more to the point, dynastic transition was lamentable because a whole culture would be destroyed following the crushing of the resistance. A decade into the new dynasty, Jiangnan's brightest and most talented youth had perished or dispersed. Their books and paintings had been burned; their towers and pavilions had been crumbled.¹⁸ It was only natural that Qian and Liu, the lead characters of the story, should follow this demise with their own deaths.¹⁹

Liu Rushi biezhuàn leads its readers ultimately to a landscape of ruins and graveyards. It was not just the picnics and the banquets of the spring days that Chen Yinke sought to invoke. It was how the brilliance of spring had given way to the bitter rain of autumn that he sought to depict. With the aid of philological work and by treating poetry as records of those ethereal moments, Chen Yinke attempted to hear the voices of silence and to fill a void that was centuries old.

The book ends with the burning of the poet's library and the suicide of the courtesan. It thus would seem an irony that in the 1990s, through the commemoration of Chen, generations of his former students were to use the text to reconstruct their own descent from a lost culture that he had presumably embodied.

The Writing of History

Throughout his life Chen dedicated himself tirelessly to his research. He had also insisted, increasingly in the post-1949 years, that his work not be taken seriously. He was widely admired as the most erudite man and the greatest classicist of China's twentieth century. Greatest, that is, in the old school, as an unreformed 'white' expert who had privileged the past over the present ('*hou gu bo jin*'), therefore a scholar who set the benchmark in the 1958 '*Hou jin bo gu*' campaign as a target to be critiqued and surpassed.²⁰

Chen Yinke's towering reputation and extensive connections in scholarly circles outside Mainland China no doubt helped to assure that his writings would receive close readings. In 1958 a hand-copied version of *Lun Zai Sheng Yuan* reached Hong Kong. This prompted the historian Yu

¹⁷ Wu Han, "'Shehui xianda' Qian Muzhai," in *Dushi zhaji* (Beijing: Sanlian Shudian, 1956), pp.342–358. Original essay completed in May 1948 at Qinghua and published in *Zhongguo jianshe* vol.6, no.5.

¹⁸ Chen Yinke, *Liu Rushi biezhuàn*, vol.1, p.177.

¹⁹ Chen Yinke, *Liu Rushi biezhuàn*, vol.1, p.340.

²⁰ Lu Jiandong, *Chen Yinke de zuihou ershi nian*, pp. 233–250.

Yingshih to publish a review essay in Hong Kong's *Rensheng zazhi* (December 1958), in which he argued that the book amounted to a coded critique of the Communist regime.²¹ Yu's essay set off a series of reactions orchestrated by the Central Propaganda Department in Beijing.²² The polemic exchanges, though couched in much politeness and erudition, transformed Chen's text into a veritable battleground of propaganda.

Meanwhile Chen Yinke had steadfastly fought off subtle pressures that would force him to change his style of work. He declined repeated invitations in the 1950s to serve as the director of the Institute of History of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. He refused to revise his pre-1949 writings to conform to the Party line. He never attended any study sessions of Marxism and Leninism nor would he take part in political study sessions.²³ Even the dating system in his work combined the old *ganzhi* and the Western calendar while ignoring all reference to the new People's Republic.

Guangdong provincial authorities, under Party Secretary Tao Zhu, nonetheless accorded Chen with proper deference and special care. The professor was supplied over-quota food rations even during the worst years of famine in the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward. One visitor reported a dinner at home with dishes of meat and fish. Party heavyweights and cultural bureaucrats paid calls from time to time. He received his supply of writing paper made to his specifications. After breaking a leg in the bathtub he received home care from three nurses. In addition there was butter, fish, chicken, eggs, fresh fruit, mushrooms, Quaker oats and cocoa powder plus Western medicine.²⁴ There were also the gifts of theatre tickets, record players, books and radios.

But none of Chen's new writings were published in China in the last two decades of his life. His interaction with students was also restricted to a select handful. His teaching activities came to an end in fall 1958 in the aftermath of the *Hou jin bo gu* campaign. Some of his best students took up the Party's attack against him. Two personal assistants left. He was accused of poisoning young minds with erroneous thoughts. The writing of *Liu Rushi biezhuang* coincided with the parting of ways and severing of connections among former fellows and associates. The monumental work that he produced was neither for an audience nor for a project. The act of writing became the very essence of living towards the end of his life.

²¹ Yu Ying-shih, "Chen Yinke 'Lun Zai Sheng Yuan' shu hou," in *Chen Yinke wannian shiwen shizheng* (Taipei: Dongda tushu, 1998), pp. 227–242. See also the editor's preface to Chen Yinke, *Lun Zai Sheng Yuan* (Hong Kong: Youlian Chubanshe, 1959).

²² Feng Yibei, *Chen Yinke wannian shiwen ji qita* (Guangzhou: Huacheng Chubanshe, 1986).

²³ Lu Jiandong, *Chen Yinke de zuihou ershi nian*, p. 387.

²⁴ Lu Jiandong, pp. 380–397.

The Commemoration of Chen Yinke

Chen's writings appeared in print in 1980. They included two books (*Liu Rushi biezhuān*, *Yuán Bāi shíjiān zhènggāo*), dozens of scholarly essays, hundreds of poems, and several chapters of a draft autobiography. It came to a seven-volume set edited by the Fudan historian Jiang Tianshu. The set was accompanied by an annotated chronological bibliography that Jiang had compiled, based on excerpts from Chen's notebooks and self-examination materials written under Red Guard pressure during the Cultural Revolution.

Editor Jiang was a former student of master Chen. His editorial preface wrote records how he had been entrusted, in one last visit during the tense time of the late 1960s, a hand-copied collection of Chen's poetry composition. These poems encode the master's private thoughts and feelings. Meanwhile Jiang maintained regular correspondence with the Chen family all the way through the bitter end. This turned him into an emissary with a privileged message to share. In contrast with the Party secretaries of Jinhua who had acted to restore Wu Han's good name in line with new Party judgment, Jiang Tianshu was to rescue from oblivion a record that had been denied print access and buried in private memories. Not a Party functionary but a witness and a survivor, Jiang delivered his message for a self-selected audience that had once shared the plight and now the memory.

It was not until 1988 that Chen's former students and associates gathered to remember his life and work at Zhongshan University. Two more symposia, also hosted by Zhongshan, took place in 1995 and 1999.²⁵ Beijing classicists attended en masse. Others came from Nanjing, Xi'an, Shanghai, Hong Kong and elsewhere. Some had studied or taken courses with the master. Others had received their instructions from teachers who did. Still others presented themselves as sons of friends or former colleagues. Chen's daughters and his former research assistants were much in view. In the opening speech of one of these gatherings the ailing Zhou Yiliang, himself in his 90s, expressed his remorse about the attack he had launched on the master in the 1960s and asked for

²⁵ The following volumes resulted from these conferences: *Jinian Chen Yinke jiaoshou guoji xueshu taolun hui mishuzu*, ed., *Jinian Chen Yinke jiaoshou guoji xueshu taolunhui wenji* (Guangzhou: Zhongshan Daxue Chubanshe, 1989); Hu Shouwei, ed., *Liu Rushi biezhuān yu guoxue yanjiu*; Hu Shouwei, ed., *Chen Yinke yu ershi shiji Zhongguo xueshu* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Renmin Chubanshe, 2000). Chen Yinke's former students at Beijing University printed a festschrift to commemorate Chen's centennial. The volume, *Jinian Chen Yinke xiansheng danchen bainian xueshu lunwen ji*, came out in 1989.

forgiveness in the next world.²⁶ Despite the presence of a handful of foreign scholars, the conference was a family affair for the private memories of an intellectual lineage.

The 1990s witnessed a renewed effort to review the historical scholarship that Chen had inspired. What he had practiced then has now come to be known as *guoxue* (national learning). The historiographical tradition connected not only backward in time but also outward to embrace a network of scholars who had long left the Chinese mainland.²⁷

One after another, Chen and a whole generation of Republican era cosmopolitan classicists — Wang Guowei, Gu Jiegang, Tang Yongtong, Feng Youlan, Chen Yuan, to name but a few—have been resurrected as grand masters (*dashi*) and venerated for their cultural ease with the modern West as well as Chinese past.²⁸ These individuals are awarded founding stature in modern Chinese intellectual history (*xueshu shi*). They have been confirmed as patriots (*aiguo zhe*) who had refused to leave their fatherland. Their works presumably point the way to a new kind of cultural work that serves the needs of modern China at the close of the 20th century.

Commemorative evaluation of Chen Yinke meanwhile stuck to the safe ground: Chen as a paragon of truth-seeking empiricism; Chen the founding figure in several areas of medieval Chinese history in his Tsinghua days; and Chen a simple ‘dialectician’ free of ideological elaboration.²⁹ His post-1949 works did not fall below the high standards that he himself had set in the pre-War years. *Liu Rushi biezhuang* was praiseworthy both for the characteristic erudition and for the presentation of the figure of a courtesan patriot. It is perhaps noteworthy that with but one or two exceptions, most Chinese commentators seemed to have refrained from the suggestion that the mature historian, in the final decades of his productivity, had in fact gone beyond the conventional bounds of disciplines and attained a new intellectual height.

²⁶ Zhou Yiliang is the author of several essays on Chen Yinke. These include “Jinian Chen Yinke xiansheng,” in symposium volume on *Jiannian Chen Yinke jiaoshou guoji xueshu taolun hui wenji* (Zhongshan Daxue Chubanshe, 1989), and “Wo suo liaojie de Chen Yinke xiansheng,” in symposium volume on *Liu Rushi biezhuang yu guoxue yanjiu* (Zhejiang Renmin Chubanshe, 1995). Reprinted in Zhou Yiliang, *Zhou Yiliang ji*, vol.5 (Liaoning Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 1997), pp. 190–221.

²⁷ For a comprehensive bibliographical treatment of the historiographical tradition that Chen had inspired, see Li Yumei, *Chen Yinke zhi shixue* (Hong Kong: Sanlun Shudian, 1997).

²⁸ There is a growing body of literature on early Republican historiography published in Chinese in recent decades. In English, see Wang Fan-sen, *Fu Ssu-nien: A Life in Chinese History and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), and Q. Edward Wang, *Inventing China Through History: The May Fourth Approach to Historiography* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001). Also, of course, Joseph Levenson, *Confucianism China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), Lawrence Schneider, *Ku Chieh-kang and China's New History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), and Arif Dirlik, *Revolution and History: Origin of Marxist Historiography in China, 1919–1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

²⁹ In addition to conference and festschrift volumes, see, for instance, Wang Yongxing, *Chen Yinke xiansheng shixue shulue gao* (Beijing: Beijing Daxue Chubanshe, 1998); Wang Yongxing, *Chen men wenxue conggao* (Nanchang:

Liu Rushi biezhuān, meanwhile, is a vast, layered, unwieldy, and complex text that has gone well beyond a tale about a woman's dynastic loyalty to the fallen Ming. Central to the text, for example, are the liaisons and romantic entanglements that had powered the courtesan's circulation in a male-dominated universe of culture and politics, and the violence and brutality that had reduced that world to ashes. In the 1950s, big-character posters had pointed to Chen's earlier work on Tang aristocrat women to characterise his scholarship as a 'chronicle of whores'. Party critics had often been unhappy with the dark mood and pessimism in Chen's post-1949 poetry, which could only be taken as a lack of enthusiasm for the benefits of the new socialist order. Readers and authors were both weary, meanwhile, of over readings of the *Liu Rushi biezhuān*—of someone pointing to the Qian Qianyi alliance with the Taiwan-based Zheng Chenggong in Liu Rushi, for instance, to accuse its author of secret sympathy for the Taiwan-based Chiang Kaishek.³⁰

Gender, memory, and the writing of history, then, continued to pose difficulties in the politics of reading of the present day. Joseph Levenson, in his work on Confucian China and its modern fate, draws the distinction between the culturally 'traditional' and the 'traditionalistic'. While the former often describes an inherited condition, the latter can only be about a deliberate choice over alternatives. It is, furthermore, a self-conscious positioning in response to non-intellectual concerns. 'To inherit', writes John Dunn, 'one must be alive'. But the past that one seeks to inherit is far from tame or given. For a forward-looking regime reaching into the past to help its chance with the future, backward-looking glances sometimes conjure up unwanted visions.

Yet it is precisely through issues of this sort that modern Chinese historians must rethink the norms of the historical profession beyond the realms of the sanctioned and institutionalised possibilities. It was in the writing of *Liu Rushi biezhuān* that twentieth-century China's grand historian, frail, nearly blind, confined to his house and isolated from all but his immediate family, re-examined the meaning of the past against the backdrop of Maoist China's fervent pursuit of modernity.

Jiangxi Wenhua Chubanshe, 1993), especially pp.1–20; and Liu Yihuan, *Guoxue dashi Chen Yinke* (Chongqing: Chongqing Chubanshe, 1996).

³⁰ Hu Shouwei, "Liu Rushi biezhuān du hou," pp.26–27.