Chen Xuezhao

# Surviving the Storm

## A Memoir

*Edited with an Introduction by*
*Jeffrey C. Kinkley*

*Translated by Ti Hua and Caroline Green*

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# Contents

# Introduction

Jeffrey C. Kinkley

CHEN Xuezhao was a favorite author in the 1920s and 1930s of young Chinese students like herself. She was not prolific, and she favored short, rhapsodic essays and lyric poems rather than the more popular genre of fiction, but the multiple reprintings of her works (by Lu Xun's presumed antagonist, the Xinyue or Crescent Publishing House, as well as by his friends at Beixin) indicate that she was quite a best-seller for a serious author. Yet, despite her much-acclaimed "antifeudal" views, Chen does not figure prominently in China's standard leftist literary histories. For one thing, she was too shy to get heavily involved in literary organization work and polemics. For all her radicalism, Chen Xuezhao had more of the traditional Chinese woman about her than Ding Ling, whom Chinese males by contrast found masculine. Also, by spending the early 1930s in Paris rather than Shanghai—in literary rather than political pursuits—Chen Xuezhao was in the wrong place at the wrong time to be canonized, despite her friendships with Lu Xun, Mao Dun, Qu Qiubai, and Zheng Zhenduo.

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Chen Xuezhao graciously allowed me to interview her when I visited Hangzhou, August 4–6, 1990. Chen Ya'nan and her husband Chen Shumiao provided utmost help in clearing up various points of information, as well as unique copies of precious family photographs for use in this edition. I also thank the Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China and the National Endowment for the Humanities for funding my 1990 trip to China. The footnotes in this book, like the introduction, reflect my judgment and not necessarily the author's.

One senses that, because of her innocently direct personality, they may have taken her to be a "little sister." This suggests another possibility: that she was overlooked because she was a *woman* essayist, in the 1920s, when nonfiction prose was thought to begin and end with Lu Xun and his male cronies (who wrote didactic rather than emotionally charged subjective essays), and in the 1930s, when the familiar essay promoted by Lin Yutang held sway. By the time Chen joined the Communist revolution in Yan'an, the age of great individualist socialist writers was gone forever in China. She did, however, achieve a special elegance of style and dignity of person that served her well when she persevered, as long as she could, in trying to be a writer in the age of Mao Zedong.

Like many a young romantic writer, Chen Xuezhao won her early following in part by creating a lively persona. Looking back on her career now, one can identify as many as four or five personas, fashioned by two completely different authorial personalities: pre-Communist and post-Communist.

When as a girl she joined China's literary ferment following the May Fourth movement, Chen Xuezhao was known as a thoughtful, melancholic young woman alienated from her male-dominated society (a *liulangzhe*, a rover and spiritual exile, as she called herself), but one who still bore dreams of love and liberation, dreams that spoke for the ideals of her generation. As with Yu Dafu and the early Shen Congwen, Chen Xuezhao's wounded soul and plaintive imagination enshrined her as a lonely nonconformist imprisoned in the big city, young and vulnerable but sensitive and humane, pitted against an outer world turned upside down. This evolved into a still more daring and exotic (but also more worldly and intellectualized) persona when Chen Xuezhao actually became an expatriot for eight years, in France, 1927–1935. Sending in essays and stories from abroad, she became the sophisticated "Chinese student over-

seas," possessed of French literary sensibilities and a heightened moral sensitivity to China's (and the soul's) social ills that was all the more incisive and authoritative now that she was no longer a sheltered young woman confined by feudal China. Like Ding Ling, she was imagined by gossip-mongers to be part of a *ménage à trois*, with her close male friends and intellectual soul-mates Ji Zhiren and Cai Boling, the Berlin-born son of China's veteran anarchist revolutionary Cai Yuanpei.*

Chen Xuezhao's third persona, as a daring Chinese incarnation of Edgar Snow, was achieved in 1940 almost overnight, although she had for a decade been publishing news dispatches in the Tianjin *Dagongbao* (*L'Impartial*) as its special European correspondent (under pen names, since she was mostly banned by the Kuomintang [KMT, or Nationalist Party] even in the 1930s). Like her fellow countryman Fan Changjiang,† Chen crossed China's great Northwest for a story; like Snow's, her quest was to see the Communist hearth at Yan'an, after entering it from the "white areas." Chen became famous all over again, as the author of a rare outsider's appreciation of the Communist movement and its high morale in contrast to the Kuomintang's. Jiang Jieshi's (Chiang Kai-shek's) agents never let her alone after that, so this persona quite naturally led into her fourth: that of committed Communist writer, remolded at Yan'an by Mao Zedong, his Yan'an talks, and his rectification campaign—and after 1945, writer with Communist Party membership, fully purged of her in-

*Cai Yuanpei (1868–1940) was chancellor of Peking University during the May Fourth movement and became the founder and first president (1928–1935) of the Academia Sinica, the fulcrum of Chinese scholarship during the Republican era.

†A journalist (1908–1970) who won fame for 1933–1935 reports in the *Dagongbao* that were later reprinted in the influential book *The Northwest Corner of China* (1936). Fan headed a branch of the New China News Agency during the war and went on to assume a position as veteran Communist journalist and news administration bureaucrat for the People's Republic.

dividualism and following the party line wherever it might lead.

Not surprisingly, Chen Xuezhao, like Ding Ling, was to be seen writing epic novels about land reform and so forth in the 1950s. This led, again quite naturally, cynics might observe, into a fifth persona—imposed from the outside—as *silenced* Communist writer. Chen Xuezhao was designated a rightist and assigned to employment far beneath her talents. Even so, she kept writing when she could, in hopes of publishing one day. But that was possible only twenty years later. Her memoirs, of which the translation that follows is the second of two volumes, broke that silence.* She began writing them in 1978, responding to the post-Mao thaw a year sooner than most other writers in China, testifying once again to her determination and grit. But best to let Chen Xuezhao tell the story of her life after 1949 in her own words. I shall simply provide background, drawing on the untranslated first volume of her memoirs, *Tianya guike* (A traveler back from the ends of the earth), selections from her early essays, my interviews with the author and her daughter in 1990, and the *Chen Xuezhao yanjiu zhuanji* (Special collected research on Chen Xuezhao), edited by Ding Maoyuan and published in 1983, when it was permissible to celebrate Chen again. By that time she had been rehabilitated and her old friendships with Lu Xun and Mao Dun rediscovered, partly because of the printing of Lu Xun's diaries.†

*This second volume was never serialized in a journal. It is entitled *Fuchen zayi* (literally, "Discursive recollections of floating and sinking") (Guangzhou: Huacheng chubanshe, 1981). The "floating and sinking" figure, a metaphor for the ups and downs in Chen's career, repeats the opening words in a calligraphic scroll presented to Chen by Mao Dun in 1980.

†Chen Xuezhao, *Tianya guike* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 1980, 1982). All but the final chapter was previously serialized in the *Xin wenxue shiliao* (Historical materials on the new literature), 1979–1980. See also Ding Maoyuan, ed., *Chen Xuezhao yanjiu zhuanji* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 1983).

Chen Xuezhao was born Chen Shuying (also Chen Shuzhang) on April 17, 1906, in the village of Chenjiadai (Chen Family Locks) outside the little Zhejiang county seat on the north side of Hangzhou Bay called Haining. (Haining town lost its county seat status after 1949 and was renamed Yanguan.) Chen's geographic origins were important in regionally conscious China. Zhejiang had long been the center of Chinese learning under the empire. Under the Chinese Republic (1912–1949), not only did the Zhejiang-Shanghai-Jiangsu region produce many of the radical scholars who conspired to overthrow the monarchy, including Cai Yuanpei and Qiu Jin, modern China's archetypal woman revolutionary, whose example Chen never forgot; Zhejiang by itself provided the political, military, and financial leaders that put China back together by force in 1926–28, under Jiang Jieshi.* As one can sense from Chen Xuezhao's memoir, the province was subjected to particularly harsh scrutiny by the new Communist regime for that reason. And yet, such was the cultural power of the lower Yangzi region in the first half of the twentieth century that the new radical generation of Chinese intellectuals and writers—the successors to Cai Yuanpei (himself a non-Communist who often mediated between the radicals and Jiang's Nanjing regime) out to overthrow Jiang Jieshi and establish communism—mostly worked out of Shanghai and were themselves, in embarrassing numbers, mutually supportive "Zhejiang compatriots," from Lu Xun on down. Chen's memoir, like other authentic accounts, allows one to sense how strong particularistic solidarity among fellow regionals—and even among those who had studied in the same foreign country—remained in the New

*Mary Backus Rankin, *Elite Activism and Political Transformation in China: Zhejiang Province, 1865–1911* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986); Rankin, *Early Chinese Revolutionaries: Radical Intellectuals in Shanghai and Chekiang, 1902–1911* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

China of Mao Zedong. Lu Xun died in 1936, but Mao Dun moved up to become minister of culture in the People's Republic, while Chen Xuezhao became party branch secretary at Zhejiang University, the flagship institution of higher education in the province. To a point, her memoir provides a thumbnail sketch of Zhejiang intellectual life in the 1950s. Yet she really did not want to take charge of Zhejiang's fractious literati. Having had her thinking "rectified" by Mao Zedong Thought, she wanted to get close to agriculture. In her relatively luxuriant province, that meant tea growing, a trade originally as exotic to her as it is to us.

The family story goes that Chen's grandfather, an economic refugee from Henan, joined the weaving trade in Zhejiang. But he also devoted himself to learned pursuits such as painting and Kunqu opera. Xuezhao's father was a schoolteacher and principal, opposed to the Manchus and old-fashioned practices such as footbinding, and progressive enough to enjoin his surviving sons to see to Xuezhao's education. He died when she was seven; her mother, to whom she was to devote many fond, meditative essays, was confined to bed not long after, so Chen Xuezhao for the rest of her early years was at the mercy of her elder brothers. She was ninth born in the family, without any sisters, and without any younger brothers. Although the elder brothers sent her to school, they also beat her. Xuezhao drew inward. She did odd things like read books at the table while taking meals, and occasionally she responded to force with physical acts of her own. There were many books of classical learning at home, by the ancient poets and historians, so that, despite the brevity of her subsequent formal learning, she did acquire a basis in classical literature. This may have improved the range of her sensibilities and affected her initial choice of genres for her own writing. But Chen, like the best of the other May Fourth writers, would wholly eschew classical figures of speech,

preferring to develop China's exciting new creativity in the vernacular.

In the years after May 4, 1919, financial pressure, her own drive, and her desire to be free of her brothers led Chen Xuezhao on a circuit of local girls' schools, first as student and then as Chinese teacher. In 1923 she graduated from the Shanghai Patriotic Girls' School. From that experience she came to know her future close friend Ji Zhiren (son of the principal), the playwright Ouyang Yuqian, and her classmate Zhang Qinqiu, who would marry Shen Zemin. Zhang Qinqiu took Chen Xuezhao to see Zemin's elder brother Shen Yanbing (the famous novelist Mao Dun), and Chen developed a lifelong friendship with Mao Dun's wife, Kong Dezhi (on which, see the memoir).

Chen was already writing amateur compositions. At the end of 1923 she sent in a contribution to a "The New Woman I Hope to Be" essay contest sponsored by the Shanghai *Shibao* (Times). It won second prize. In this, her first printed work, Chen Xuezhao argued for equality between the sexes, insisting that Chinese women, like Ibsen's Nora, must be able to stand on their own two feet economically rather than depend on men. This ideal was to guide Chen Xuezhao for the rest of her life, and not simply from abstract reasoning. In "My Mother" (1925), Chen betrays an obsessive fear of becoming an economic "parasite" within her own unhappy family.

Besides initiating her career as a spokesperson for women's liberation, Chen Xuezhao's first essay led to another longtime friendship, with the *Times* editor Ge Gongzhen, whose nephew Ge Baoquan was to become a Communist statesman noted for promoting cultural relations with the Soviet Union, and likewise a friend of Chen's. She went on to teach at women's normal schools in Anhui and Shaoxing (she was younger than most of her students), in between times living by West Lake in Hangzhou—a quiet spot for writing in those days—or with friends in

Shanghai, or with Zhang Qinqiu and her revolutionary husband. In the summer of 1925 she went to Taiyuan, Shanxi, with Sun Fuyuan's younger brother Fuxi (her sometime boyfriend), to attend one of Tao Xingzhi's Mass Education movement conferences. And she taught and audited classes briefly in Beijing, where Sun Fuyuan introduced her to her fellow provincial Lu Xun. She was already well known to Lu Xun's younger brother Zhou Jianren, an editor at the *Women's Magazine*, to which she contributed regularly.

In 1925 Chen Xuezhao was writing essays and poems on a regular basis and living off her manuscript fees. Little did her brothers know that there was an author in the family, for from the time of her first essay for the Shanghai *Times*, she had adopted the pen name Xuezhao, "Learning from [Liang] Zhaoming [editor of the *Wenxuan* anthology]." *Juanlü* (Wearying travels) (Liangxi, 1925) was her first book, a collection of essays, followed in 1927 by the similarly inspired *Cuncaoxin* (Maternal love, a title alluding to a poem by Meng Jiao) (Xinyue), and *Yanxia banlü* (Travel companion in the twilight mist) (Beixin). When her books went into reprint editions, they financed her passage to France.

Chen Xuezhao's early belles-lettristic writing still bears reading today. In broad form and sentiments, her essays evince many touchstones of classical, domestic sentiment. To quote a few titles: "Maternal Love," "My Mother," "A Rainy Night," "Life at Home," "Forget-me-nots along the Path," "After Weeping," "During Illness," "White Cloud Temple," "The Sounds of Beijing." Some of her essays, which border on the ecstatic, open or close with a poem (in the vernacular, to be sure), while others are diaries, or have a plot, narrated in the first or third person, so that they might be called fiction. "Prose poem," the genre beloved of Zhou Zuoren, is apt for many of her shorter subjective works, so full of imagery and cadence is her language. Chen's traditional themes are developed with modern, intimately subjective and melancholic sentiments, and fla-

vored with such exotic devices as English words appearing in the text in the original Roman alphabet, Christian symbolism, and references to Western philosophers. The authorial personality is that of Chen Xuezhao the free spirit, a dreamy and melancholic young girl beset by the injustices of society and pent up in a psychological and familial prison, struggling alone in the world, but never giving up her sensitivity, her idealism, or her openness to the freshness abounding in the outside world. Thus, to name a few more titles: "The Beginnings of a Life of Wandering," "The Luck of the *Piano*" (the last word is spelled out in Roman letters),* "*Take a Walk*" (a title wholly in English), "Faraway Street Lamps," "Outside the World," "Spring Dreams," "Boredom," and "My Hair" (a familiar essay about hair bobbing). In every case the style is elegant, drawing on imaginative, nonclassical botanical, onomatopoetic, and climatic tropes, set amid short, uncomplicated, typically quite rhythmical sentences in limpid vernacular. There are no classical four-character phrases, no Greco-Roman gods or goddesses, no references to the life of China's new scholar-bureaucrats. *Travel Companion in the Twilight Mist*, with its emphasis on natural scenery rather than the interplay of subjective and social themes, has been nearly repudiated by the author. She wrote it at West Lake, Hangzhou, and claims now that it was unduly influenced by the style of her friend, the younger Sun.

During the Northern Expedition and impending revolution of 1926–27, Chen Xuezhao's life was at a crossroads. She went to visit Mao Dun in Hankou, who offered her editorial work on his newspaper. Other friends asked her to work for the *Dongfang zazhi* (Eastern miscellany), or to do political work for the women's movement. Instead she returned to Shanghai, hoping to go study in France, where

*Chen began playing the piano at her old home in Zhejiang, and it remained one of her favorite avocations in Paris.

her close male friend Ji Zhiren had already landed. The white terror in Shanghai in 1927 soon sent nearly all of Chen's leftist friends packing. She might have gone to Moscow, to join Yang Zhihua, the wife of Qu Qiubai, but for the advice of Zheng Zhenduo: "You're a student of literature, not politics; the USSR is good for studying politics." So, with other friends from Sun Fuyuan's Beixin Publishing House (where she had been lodging), she fled in May 1927 to study in France—in part, ironically, to escape pressure from home to marry Sun Fuxi.

With her companions Ji Zhiren and Cai Boling, Chen Xuezhao enjoyed a comparatively idyllic life in Paris. She easily developed her vagabond persona into that of a truly exiled intellectual. She was hemmed in only by the many young Kuomintang partisans in the Chinese community in Paris. They spread rumors about her romantic life and knew enough about her political leanings to keep her from being admitted to a Catholic girls' school outside Paris, on the grounds that she was a Communist. They graduated to posting handbills denouncing her in the Chinese restaurants of Paris after Zhou Jianren's new magazine *Xin nüxing* (New female) printed a letter of hers denouncing their playboy life-styles. But Chen had as her bodyguards the stalwart and scholarly Ji and Cai—one studying music, the other physics—and all this added to the excitement. Chen took French language classes at a division of the Sorbonne and, thanks to an introduction from Ge Gongzhen, was actually able to support herself (for a few months, until her brothers succeeded in getting all payments diverted to them) by sending regular news dispatches to the *Dagongbao*. Since the KMT typically did not allow her to publish under her own name, she not only invented new ones but, she says, altered her style so as to "write like a man." It would prove to be the first major change in her style provoked by external circumstances.

A three-month trip home at the end of 1928, to reclaim

her living wages from her family, fend off their attempts to marry her, and perhaps also demonstrate her independence from Ji Zhiren, who had proposed marriage in Paris, turned out to be a particularly fruitful period for Chen as an author. She lived with Mao Dun and Kong Dezhi, often taking meals with Lu Xun and Zhou Jianren. At this time she penned *Yi Bali* (Memories of Paris) (1929), a collection of descriptive and meditative essays about her home away from home; *Ru meng* (Like a dream) (1929), a book of linked reflective essays whose tone is romantic, like her earlier ones, but also with a few references to the organization of laborers by one "Sister Qin" (as in Zhang Qinqiu); and the novel *Nanfeng de meng* (Dream of the south wind) (1929), about the lives and loves of Chinese students in France. This was, perhaps, her peak, particularly in regard to the belles-lettres that made her famous. From this time forward she would write mostly topical essays and social novels.

Chen Xuezhao's remaining six years in France were personally turbulent. She was still only twenty-three on the trip over, too timid even to leave the boat at ports of call, and too self-conscious to take Ji Zhiren's arm in public, like a Parisienne. But she remained close to Ji and Cai. The three jointly undertook translating work for Lu Xun and Zhou Jianren, notably a version of Turgenev's *Ásya* (translated from the French). Chen's interest evidently ran to Soviet items, for Lu Xun wrote her back that it was all right to send works from capitalist countries, too. The trio further acted as Lu Xun's book agents in Paris, seeking out volumes of art prints for him. And Chen continued to write news reports for the *Dagongbao* until 1931. They fired her when she asked for a raise, so she switched to writing for the Shanghai *Shenbao* "Ziyoutan" (Open forum) and the *Shenghuo zhoukan* (Life weekly). The turbulence, and the need for the raise, came from her hasty marriage shortly before to a boyfriend whom her memoirs refer to only as "H," a Chinese medical student in France. Chen Xuezhao

has consented to have him identified, in this English edition, as He Mu, a famous physician specializing in lung disease whose death in June 1990 was front-page news in the Chinese press. One gathers, from the first volume of her memoirs, that Chen initially made friends with him out of pity for his poverty and his tuberculosis. Despite differences in their temperaments, He Mu met her needs for the moment, and she supported him financially. She wrote to Lu Xun, Ge Gongzhen, Zhou Jianren, and Zhang Qinqiu, as if asking for permission and forgiveness; most of her friends responded with shocked silence. Said Zhou Enlai to Ms. Chen in 1942, marriage was the one chapter of her life she had messed up. But marriage may have been her destiny, for she retained a traditional feeling that "a woman should be married," though she evidenced an almost pathological fear of "marrying up." Chen Xuezhao subsequently had a son, but he had to be entrusted to a nursemaid safely away from his tubercular father. The boy died of an illness in 1939, in Chongqing.

Trapped in the south of France—isolated now even from her old Chinese friends in Paris, because of her husband's jealousy—Chen Xuezhao did have one adventure within her misadventure, at Clermont, where there was a university. With the encouragement of Marcel Granet of the Sorbonne, she completed a thesis on classical Chinese *ci* poetry and was awarded a doctorate at the University of Clermont in 1934, under a Professor Carcassonne.* Had she chosen, Chen might then have taken a job at the Sorbonne under Granet.

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*The thesis was published as Agnès Ho, "Le 'Tse'" (Toulouse: Imprimerie Toulousaine de l'Université de Clermont, n.d.), 54 pp. Ge Gongzhen donated the money to have the thesis printed. Earlier, Chen Xuezhao referred to herself as Agnès Cheng. The language that she spoke with Cai Boling, and still speaks today, is her own Zhejiang dialect. On Granet (1884–1940), see the "Introductory Essay" by Maurice Freedman in Marcel Granet, *The Religion of the Chinese People* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).