



Chen Hengzhe: A Life between Orthodoxies

Denise Gimpel

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This book takes as its starting point the life, activities, and writings of Chen Hengzhe (1890-1976) in order to investigate the effects of transnational experience and in particular the manner in which different, foreign and Chinese, narratives of life were interwoven into activities and attitudes as well as literary and scholarly output at a time “between orthodoxies” (Jerome Grieder) and of eclectic borrowings in search of change in most areas of national life in China.

Chen Hengzhe has been celebrated as China’s first female professor, first professor of Western history, and first person to publish a history of the West that was not a translation into Chinese. She is moreover celebrated as one of the first to write fiction and poetry in the vernacular and to have been the first to write children’s literature. In 1914 she was among the first group of women to gain a Boxer Indemnity grant to study in America. The reiteration of these many “firsts” has led to a rather stereotypical portrait of Chen Hengzhe in Chinese sources and, as a result, in most Western references to her. To date we have no critical study of her work or activities in Chinese or any other language. Chen Hengzhe’s life and textual production, however, deserve and reward closer scholarly attention. They are not only pertinent to analysis of developments in early twentieth-century China; they speak to important questions in China today.

This study, then, is not a biography of a person; it is an attempt to understand the way in which foreign influences (narratives of being, organizing, thinking, writing) seep into a person’s life and work and meld with the “home” influences (narratives of being, organizing, thinking, writing) to produce a mix that cannot be predicted by any overarching “isms” or theories.

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