

Realistic Writing, Rational Contemplation, and Desire for Enlightenment—On Chen Hengzhe's Novel Creation

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Chen Hengzhe is one of the earliest novelists at the beginning of new literature. Her novels depict the tragic real life with a serious and profound realistic tone and meditate on the emotional problems of life with the unique perspective and delicate psychology of women. Her novels, with the sincerest feelings and pure thoughts, show her desire for individual enlightenment and group enlightenment by means of fairy tales and fables.

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Chen Hengzhe, her ancestral home is Hengshan County, Hunan Province. She was born in July 1890 in Wujin, Jiangsu Province (now Wujin District, Changzhou City, Jiangsu Province). Her original name is Yan, and her courtesy name is Yi. Her pen names are Heng Zhe, Zhe, Shafei, and so on. On August 30, 1920, Chen Hengzhe was appointed by Cai Yuanpei as a professor of History Department of Peking University, becoming the first female professor of Peking University and the first female professor in the history of modern education in China. In addition to her outstanding achievements in history, she also made remarkable contributions in literature, especially in novel creation. In June 1917, Chen Hengzhe published a “documentary novel” *One Day* in the second issue of Volume 4 of *The Quarterly Report of Students Studying in the United States*. This vernacular novel was published one year earlier than Lu Xun's *Diary of a Madman*.

She was one of my earliest comrades. While we were still discussing the issue of new literature, Shafei has started to study literature in vernacular. *One Day* was the earliest work in the early stage of the discussion of the literary revolution. *Little Raindrop* was also one of the earliest works in the *New Youth* period. After 1917, Shafei also wrote many vernacular poems. If we try to recall the situation of the new literature movement in that period, when Lu Xun's first novel *Diary of a Madman* was published, and how few people were interested in vernacular literature on that day, we can understand the status of these novels of Shafei in the history of the new literature movement. (Chen, 1928, pp. 6-7)

Chen Hengzhe's novel creation was mainly concentrated in 1920s; although she regarded her writing as “a gadget outside the regular occupation” (Chen, 1928, p. 11), she described the tragic real life with a serious and profound realistic tone and meditated on the emotional problems of life with the unique perspective and delicate psychology of women. Her novels, with “the sincerity of emotion and the purity of thought” (Chen, 1928, p. 20), carry out philosophical meditation on life issues.

Realistic Writing of Sad Life

Although Chen Hengzhe did not formally join the Literary Research Association, she coincided with its

creative idea, “There is a little bit of tendency of ‘art for life’” (Mao, 1933, pp. 35-39). The description of the miserable real life and the concern for and sympathy for the insulted and damaged groups originated from Chen Hengzhe’s creative motivation to speak for the “bitter people”,

At that time, there seemed to be countless people in my heart who could not express themselves, forcing me or begging me to speak for them. They are either children, or dead people, or poor people to a very low degree, or what we regard as things without knowledge, or people who are suffering and unwilling to speak for themselves...They are my only motive for writing novels. (Chen, 1928, pp. 17-18)

“Bo’er” and “A Woman in the Wu Gorge” are true descriptions of the miserable fate of the people at the bottom of society in China and the United States, especially those women at the bottom who have been insulted and damaged. The story background of “Bo’er” takes place on the other side of the ocean. The protagonist “Bo’er” has a poor family. Her father had just died, and she was suffering from an incurable serious disease. Her mother was old and weak, and her brother and sister were very young. The whole family was in an unfortunate situation. It is like a lotus leaf fluttering in the wind and rain. The novel constructs the text with real and moving dialogue. After receiving the invitation from her aunt, “Elena” took the initiative to share the happy news with her sister Bo’er. In fact, Bo’er had already learned about this from her mother, “Mrs. Condon”. She advised her sister not to go to her aunt’s house because she was really indispensable to the family. This young sister was at a playful age, so she complained to Bo’er, “I sit from morning to night all day, and when I sleep at night, I feel pain in my knuckles” (Chen, 1920a, pp. 105-108). It is not difficult to find that although “Elena” is young and playful, she has already taken up the heavy responsibility of the family in normal times, sharing housework for her mother and sister. Her sister advised her not to go to her aunt’s house, and her heart was also suffering and struggling. Finally, family affection and sense of responsibility overcame her playful heart, and she resolutely gave up the opportunity to go out to play and mended the shabby clothes for her mother. The novel has no gorgeous words or breath-taking plots, but is full of simple and sincere emotions, “I saw half of the plot in this novel with my own eyes. Because I was moved by it, I couldn’t help saying a few words instead of the family of Bo’er” (Chen, 1920a, pp. 105-108).

“Bo’er” shows the tragic life of the people at the bottom of the city, while “A Woman in Wu Gorge” presents a sad song of poor farmers in China. The mother-in-law of the protagonist “she” was her husband’s stepmother, who beat and scolded “she” and her husband all day long. The family was destitute. In order to subsist, the couple had to flee with their young son from their home. Later, they moved to the cave on the Wu Gorge and settled down. They farmed and slept in the open air near the cave. Her husband had no choice but to steal some food and sundries from the boats berthed along the river. The novel focuses on the psychology of “she” after her husband left home.

She felt that if he left, she would be alone...She was now almost willing to be beaten and scolded by her mother-in-law, rather than live alone in the wilderness...At night, she was even more afraid. She was afraid of ghosts to kill her and wild animals to eat her son...As soon as she closed her eyes, she saw countless demons and hungry animals, which scared her out of her voice. (Heng, 1922, pp. 3-4)

Her husband never came back after he went down the mountain to steal. He has been away for five years. She guessed the reasons why he could not return. She felt extremely painful and had to raise her son alone. In addition to revealing and criticizing the dark reality that led to her tragic fate, Chen Hengzhe also focused on describing the psychological world of the characters, especially analyzing the lonely living status of human

beings. The beginning and end of the novel are echoed by the personal questions of “she”, presenting the confused and tragic life state of “she”. “She seems to remember where she used to live... But now it’s as vague as a dream” (Heng, 1922, pp. 3-4). “Is there anyone else in the world besides her and her son... Has she ever lived on the flat land? Her son can’t believe it, and she can’t believe it” (Heng, 1922, pp. 3-4). The boundary between fantasy, memory, and reality has been blurred, which is the most shocking and lamentable. The excavation and analysis of her painful and secret spiritual world further presents the tragic life fate of “she”.

As the first batch of new literature writers, Chen Hengzhe consciously guided her own novel creation with the literary concept of “for life”, and described the tragic real life with a serious and profound realism, showing the strong sense of social responsibility and historical mission of the “May 4th” scholars.

Rational Meditation on Emotional Problems

In Chen Hengzhe’s emotional novels, romantic and sentimental emotions rarely pour out. On the contrary, rational and objective intellectual factors are imprinted everywhere, and perceptual emotions are diluted by intellectual factors. On the one hand, it originates from Chen Hengzhe’s identity background as a historian, and on the other hand, it is her writing pursuit. “Sensitivity... Insight into life’s problems” (Chen, 1928, pp. 13-14). In the process of creation, Chen Hengzhe, with the unique perspective and delicate psychology of women, makes a rational discussion on the emotional problems and life problems of modern people.

In “Old Couple”, an old husband and wife complain to each other about trifles. At the beginning of the dinner, they recalled the sweet memories of their youth because of the apple cakes made by the wife, “Ana, do you remember the day more than 30 years ago when I visited you at your house and you gave me this snack?” (Chen, 1918, pp. 75-77) Complaints and reproaches are instantly transformed into sweetness and warmth. The novel describes the life of an old couple “Henry” and “Ana” in a few strokes. The daily life of “Henry” and “Ana” is a microcosm of the lives of countless old couples in the society. Troubles and happiness go hand in hand, which reflects and presents the best feelings and the happiest life of mankind. “Brother Meng” and “The Ancient Story of a Pin” are two love tragedies. In “Brother Meng”, “brother Meng” and “sister Jing” are cousins and they are playmates in childhood. In the process of getting along, they have developed a hazy and pure emotion, which is between love, family, and friendship. When they grow up, this emotion gradually sublimates into love. The formation of love tragedy is not a social factor or a personality factor, but a fate tragedy. “Brother Meng” had an accident. “He had slept in a barren mountain in Yunnan. He died” (Zhe, 1922, pp. 2-4); his death led to the end of this love. In “The Ancient Story of a Pin”, “Lucy” and “Ma Kun” fell in love at first sight, but could not stay together forever. “Lucy” married “Sike”, a good friend of “Ma Kun”, so she became “Mrs. Sike”. The love tragedy of “Lucy” and “Ma Kun” is different from the tragedy of the destiny of “brother Meng” and “sister Jing”, but a typical personality tragedy, which is caused by the weakness and hesitation of “Ma Kun”.

I’m a coward. I never dared to let my love interfere with my friendship with him for five or six years. This is a great sin for me to you and myself... At that time, although my heart was burning to the focus, my attitude was never above the temperature. (Sha, 1926, pp. 12-17)

Chen Hengzhe’s creation also involves the emerging social problems and the life problems of modern women—the conflict between marriage and family, life pursuit and personal career, “Family services cannot satisfy the wishes of a small number of women who are highly educated and rich. Even in their lives, there will

be conflicts between love and career” (Chen, 1927, pp. 60-73). In “The Question of Lois”, Lois, a woman doctor of philosophy who is successful in her studies, has great ambitions, has an extraordinary level and pursues lofty ideals, and is engaged to her mentor, the world-famous philosopher “Wade”. Wade returned from a meeting abroad, but Lois took the initiative to cancel her engagement. The root is that “Lois” has conducted a profound rational meditation on her own life planning. When communicating with Wade, she clearly pointed out that,

After you men get married, you can at most add a little financial burden, which will not harm your academic career. However, after a woman gets married, the situation will be different: the care of the family, the protection and education of the children, all of which can be done by others. (Chen, 1924a, pp. 11-136)

This is the root cause of her repentance. Chen Hengzhe, as a female scholar with similar life experience to “Lois”, gave up her teaching position because of childbirth, and her heart was filled with feelings of helplessness and contradiction. She deeply pondered and analyzed the conflict between married women and her own career. “After a woman became a mother and wife, she can never go on with her previous volunteer and career without any obstacles” (Chen, 1927, pp. 60-73). At the end of the novel, after realizing her wild ambition and desire in her youth—being a university professor for more than 10 years, becoming the director of the Philosophy Department of a famous women’s university, and becoming internationally famous for her works, she felt incomparable loneliness and melancholy. The endless loneliness came from the marriage and family she despised most and never got in her youth. The novel reveals her contradictory, lonely, melancholy, and even painful psychology at this time with the dream of “Lois” and the deep thinking of “Lois” on her own dream. “It is absolutely impossible to see this sacred secret” (Chen, 1924a, pp. 11-136). “The Question of Lois” is the earliest novel in modern literature that concerns the conflict between the dual roles of new women’s family and society (Chen, 1928, pp. 14-15). It touches on the dilemma faced by women after liberation. Therefore, it has important literary value and ideological history value, reflecting Chen Hengzhe’s keen insight and profound reflection.

When Chen Hengzhe wrote novels on the emotional problems of life, she incarnated as a philosopher, sociologist, and psychologist. She made a deep and rational thinking on various emotional problems and life problems, and deeply explored and carefully described women’s secret psychology, which attracted people’s attention.

The Childlike Expression of Enlightenment Idea

Chen Hengzhe personifies “all things without wisdom” (Chen, 1928, p. 17) in the world in the form of fairy tales and fables, with the “sincerity of emotion and purity of thought” (Chen, 1928, p. 20)—“sincere attitude” (Sheng, 1990, p. 9), coupled with wild imagination. Her childlike expression contains profound life philosophy and injects individual enlightenment thoughts into it. Fairy tales and fables inherit and transform the core concept of “animism” in myths and legends, and give rational meaning to anthropomorphic animal stories (Chen, 2014, p. 336). Chen Hengzhe’s fairy tale fable novels contain a profound enlightenment thought with a beautiful and fresh style. “Enlightenment is man’s liberation from his or her own immaturity. This state of immaturity is the state in which one is incapable of using one’s understanding without the guidance of another” (Kant, 2014, p. 71). The enlightenment concept in Chen Hengzhe’s novels contains two meaning. One is to focus on individual enlightenment, aiming at liberal ethics, and the other is to focus on group enlightenment,

paying close attention to equality ethics. The transformation of “Little Raindrop” and “West Wind” shows the individual awakening track, while the images such as Autumn Insect and Yangtze River reflect the author’s eager expectation and life ideal of awakening the people, enlightening the people’s wisdom and transforming the national character.

“Little Raindrop” shows the trajectory of the protagonist “little raindrop” who gradually understands dedication and sacrifice, and finally grows up through the process of water circulation in natural world. At the beginning, “little raindrop” was ignorant and timid, in the face of the help crying by dying “utpala”—“you have to let me suck you into my liquid tube” (Chen, 1920b, pp. 69-74); his reaction was “a big shock... unable to answer... and thought about it” (Chen, 1920b, pp. 69-74); at last, the heart of love made it brave enough to enter the liquid tube of “utpala”. At the end of the novel, “little raindrop” was no longer cowardly and homesick, but brave to devote into the water circulation in the nature. When it arrives next spring, it will go to see “utpala” together with its brother and sister. In “West Wind”, the main character “west wind” was lonely and proud at first, and did not like to go to the world below. Only “moon” was willing to go to the world below. The “moon” painstakingly with compassion and the “girl” who pursued the freedom but deeply trapped in the cage, finally moved the “west wind”, translating it from “misanthrope” into “compassion for all things”; it took “girl” to the Red Maple Valley, so that “girl” would obtain freedom.

Only then does he understand what a messenger of freedom he is and what a contributor to happiness he is... so he goes down once a year to give them a little freedom and beauty. Sometimes he meets people who are tired of the world, and he brings them to the Red Maple Valley, and makes them live as beautiful a life as the maiden. (Chen, 1924b, pp. 109-114)

At the end of the novel, “west wind”, just like “little raindrop”, has undergone a great change, reflecting the writer’s philosophy of love.

The “autumn insects” in “Autumn Insects and Butterfly” are full of compassion and moan all day long about the cruel experience of the “insects”—the slaughter of the “mantis”. “Butterfly” is ruthless and selfish. It advocates instant gratification. When it sees the cruel reality, it “closes its eyes, spreads its wings, and flies to the sky” (Heng, 1924, pp. 3-4). It only wants to “soar in all directions and feel free and happy” (Heng, 1924, pp. 3-4). Chen Hengzhe sincerely incarnates “autumn insects” and is eager to use literary works to awaken and enlighten the people—“butterflies” and promote the awakening and unity of the people—“insects”. “At least, I hope that with my unsound chanting, the insects who no come here can have a little self-respect and can unite with everyone to destroy the mantis” (Heng, 1924, pp. 3-4). “Autumn insect” finally died under the knife of “mantis” and “made the final lamentation for this uneven world” (Heng, 1924, pp. 3-4). In “Canal and the Yangtze River”, Chen Hengzhe expressed the philosophy of “creating life” of active struggle. “What she showed was the eruption of the active force of the potential life of young people in this era, and the basic force of fighting life” (Huang, 1930, p. 95). The man-made “canal” did not understand the meaning of life, was content with its own destiny, and only hoped to be a “happy slave” (Chen, 1924c, pp. 126-127). It was very puzzled about the struggle of the “Yangtze River” and thought that no matter what kind of life state was, it was the same “alive” and “struggle” had no meaning. The “Yangtze River” told the “canal” that its fate was “to be completed and destroyed by people, but no one can destroy my life” (Chen, 1924c, pp. 126-127). The “canal” was still ignorant and asked who will destroy its life, while the “Yangtze River” clearly pointed out to it that it cannot decide its destiny, but the “canal” did not care. In contrast, “Yangtze River” as a “forerunner” was

struggling to hold its own destiny in its own hands, “The struggle of life is thorough, and the life gained through struggle is beautiful” (Chen, 1924c, pp. 126-127). This shows the importance of independent personality, and reveals the struggling life concept of the “May 4th” scholars and the strong voice of pursuing independent personality. The philosophical thinking refined is dignified, profound, and exciting.

Chen Hengzhe shows her longing for individual enlightenment and public enlightenment in her beautiful and fantastical writing by comparing the changes of “little raindrop” and “west wind” before and after, and by the conflict between “autumn insect” and “butterfly”, “Yangtze River” and “canal”, based on the anthropomorphic fairy tales and fables.

Conclusion

Chen Hengzhe’s novels in the 1920s, on the basis of realistic writing, are permeated with the rational meditation on the human living state and life concept, and the deep dissection and exploration of the human spiritual world, showing the writer’s deep and strong humanistic care spirit with realistic concern, rational meditation, and the desire for enlightenment. Her novels, presenting a unique personal temperament, have left a heavy ink in the history of Chinese modern novels.

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