PREFACE

Initially, as a student of China in the 1960s, I thought of the country and its history as an intellectual and political construct. Travel to the People's Republic was impossible for US citizens. I first visited Taiwan in the summer as an undergraduate at Yale in 1962. This was followed by years of graduate language study and research in California and Taipei in the mid-60s. A year at the end of the decade—during the height of the Cultural Revolution, from 1967 to 1968—was spent writing a PhD dissertation and teaching US history at New Asia College in Kowloon, Hong Kong. For my late wife, Janice MacKinnon, and myself (we had just married), Hong Kong was a heady experience that left us determined to visit the mainland as soon as possible.

Because of Hong Kong, we accepted the political turmoil of Berkeley, California in 1969 and 1970 as somehow the global normal. A child was born there in 1969 and I accepted a teaching position in Arizona in the fall of 1971. Then suddenly an invitation arrived to tour mainland China for a month in March 1972 as a member of a delegation from the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, an anti-Vietnam War group. I was denounced in the local press in Arizona for going to "Red China." One evening at the end of the trip, our group met at midnight in the Great Hall of the People with Premier Zhou Enlai and two of the Gang of Four (Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wenyuan). China had become

a real country and a politically confusing place. China was no longer an intellectual construct.

It was after the 1972 trip that my wife and I began to research the life of Agnes Smedley (1894–1950). She was a close associate of Chen Hansheng (1897–2004), a feminist icon, and romantic revolutionary who is still recognized today in the PRC as a friend of the Chinese revolution. In early April 1976 Janice was in the Peking Hotel witnessing the first Tiananmen incident over the death of Zhou Enlai. In 1978, our entire family (grown to four) were in India on a Fulbright fellowship when we were invited to spend three weeks interviewing and researching Smedley in Beijing and Shanghai. It was at this point that we met Chen Hansheng for the first time: interviewing him about Agnes Smedley. We returned to Arizona. The following year, during the summer of 1979, another invitation arrived and the family moved more permanently this time to Beijing, where I was hired to prepare a new generation of foreign correspondents for the *People's Daily*, and my wife, Janice, worked with Xinhua News Agency. Our children were enrolled in Chinese schools. It was during these two crucial years in Beijing that the lives of our family became intertwined with that of Chen Hansheng and his family, enabling work on the biography to begin in earnest.

At our first meeting in July 1979, Chen Hansheng announced that he intended over the next two years to dictate his life story to me in English. Thereafter, I interviewed Chen on a weekly basis at his centuries-old *pingfang* single story home just east of Donghua Men in downtown Beijing. Although 82, blind, and living with his younger sister Chen Suhua (his wife Gu Shuxing had died during the Cultural Revolution), Chen was lively and energetic. He wanted his life story to be told and published by a foreigner in order, he said, to avoid

censorship and the hagiographic biographical traditions still prevalent in China. At the insistence of his family, his words were not to be recorded. This meant long dictations by Chen and careful note taking by me. At the end of each session, I read back Chen's message for the day. The resulting handwritten narrative was eventually typed up into a single document that runs a couple hundred pages. Chen's autobiographical narrative was dictated in the voice of a third person and has been preserved verbatim and in unpolished form. It is accessible as a single document on the publisher's website accompanying this book.*

Over the decades that followed, I researched Chen's life through interviews with family, friends, and protégés, and also amassed a personal collection of Chen's publications spanning a lifetime. An autobiography in Chinese was dictated by Chen and published in 1988 with the title *Sige shidai de wo* (My life over four eras). Chen's central concern in the Chinese memoir was to demonstrate that throughout his long career in China and abroad he remained a good Communist. Both the English and Chinese dictated versions of his life raised many unanswered questions about Chen's movements, associations, and actions—especially internationally—over a long career that spanned the 20th century. For example, in both memoirs Chen paid only cursory attention to the politically and intellectually important year that he spent in Moscow, 1927–1928. Similarly, Chen's memoirs overlook the period between 1934 and 1939, when he worked first in Japan and then in the Secretariat of the Institute of Pacific Relations in New York and produced some of his most important scholarship.

On return trips to Beijing in the 1980s and during a long stay in 1985 as an "expert" for the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, I met with Chen repeatedly and asked follow-up questions about people, places,

and movements in his life. At the same time I began to interview family members, protégés, and associates in a more systematic way. Gradually, a more complete picture of Chen's life began to emerge. Still, there were gaps.

In the 1990s, besides continuing to collect Chen's more obscure articles in English, Chinese, and Russian, I explored archival resources that were just becoming available. In 1996, I spent a summer sifting through the rare book and manuscript section of the Butler Library at Columbia University, which houses a massive collection of the papers and records of the Institute of Pacific Relations. The archives include boxes of Chen's correspondence in English with a variety of figures over two decades (the 1930s and 1940s). These finds were supplemented later by visits to an archive of the Institute of Pacific Relations papers at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada. At the same time (in the 1990s), on trips to Beijing, Shanghai, and elsewhere, interviews continued with Chen Hansheng's associates and protégés in China.

By the first decade of the present century, most of the research for this book was completed. During the academic year of 2005–2006, when living again in China, I was able to explore newly-created Chen Hansheng archives and library collections in Beijing and Wuxi. Chen died in 2004 at the age of 107; a surge of scholarly remembrances and commentaries on his career soon followed. Original personal papers (mostly dating from the PRC years) also surfaced at the Peking University Library. More papers have been deposited recently at the Institute of Modern History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). After Chen's death I benefited from discussions with younger family members, Chen's nephews and nieces (Chen had no children), as well as younger scholars who were taking fresh interest in Chen's work, especially the agricultural research projects of the 1930s.

Over the last three decades, at meetings in China and abroad, I made a number of scholarly presentations (mostly unpublished) on aspects of Chen's career. The drafting of a book manuscript was delayed because I became absorbed in other writing projects, especially the history of the Chinese Anti-Japanese War (1937–1945). This resulted in a series of publications: most notably a monograph (*Wuhan, 1938: War, Refugees, and the Making of Modern China* [Berkeley, 2008]) and a large collective effort led by Prof. Ezra Vogel that examined the history of the war with senior Japanese and Chinese scholars. It was not until around 2014 that, freshly retired from teaching and administrative duties, I began in earnest to draft a full narrative of Chen Hansheng's long and fascinating life. The biography is different in scope and focus from the lives Chen dictated in 1979–1981 in English and in 1985–1988 in Chinese.

Forced isolation due to Covid-19 during 2020–2022 enabled me to concentrate on little else, rewrite the first drafts of the manuscript, and prepare a final manuscript for submission and publication. Over the decades of this long incubation, I acquired many debts. I was supported in part by grants from the American Council of Learned Societies, the Committee on Scholarly Research in China, a Fulbright research grant in Beijing, and visiting scholar status at the Hopkins-Nanjing Center. In 1979–1981 and again in 1985, I served as an "expert" for the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. The Institute of Modern History of CASS helped with introductions to dozens of Chen Hansheng's colleagues and protégés. Individuals who have been especially helpful on the Chinese side include Gu Weiming, Xu Ming, Fan Shitao, Feng Miao, Yang Tianshi, Xiong Ying, Chen Suhua, Shen Zhihua, Du Song of Wuxi, and the Shanghai Soong Ching Ling Study Association. Others

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* Chen's unpolished autobiographical narrative can be found in this link: https://cup.cuhk.edu.hk/image/catalog/Chen%20Hansheng/CUHKPress_CHS_oral_narrative.pdf