

Chen Xiefen

CRISIS IN THE WOMEN'S WORLD

(1904)

A cold wind presses from every direction; I trim the lamp and sit alone. My mind is troubled—all at once, I hear something like a warning bell or a great drum. It cries out sonorously; it shakes thunderously. It comes suddenly, making my eyes dizzy and my brain reel; my hands shake and my feet grow numb. And my spirit trembles and falls unconscious.

What can it be? What can it be? It signals nothing less than a turning point of crucial import for us Chinese women. Alas! What kind of age is the present? Our nation is no more, and our race is about to perish. Our duty is to restore the more than one hundred million *li* of Han territory and to save the four hundred million of our fellow compatriots. Afterward, it lies in our compatriots' power to create a pure paradise and to enjoy mutual happiness. Yet it also lies in their power to allow a sacred race to be enslaved in one blow, and an ancient nation to be carved up by every land in one stroke. Compatriots! Compatriots! In this day—in this hour—we must purify our minds and set our thoughts on our goal. We must awaken ourselves; we must exert ourselves!

The inhabitants of China number about four hundred million all together. Men and women each constitute half of this. Our nation is held in common, our territory is held in common, our assets are held in common, our rights are held in common—and our misfortunes too are held in common. Therefore, since we women have a common responsibility, can we simply stand on the sidelines and willingly destroy this nation, lose these assets, cast aside these responsibilities, and throw away these rights? Can we allow ourselves to become slaves of a fallen nation—can we willingly become an India or a Poland? This is something that causes me great sorrow, great pain. Unashamed of my mere bit of strength, I would fill in the vast ocean or weep blood to warn my fellow compatriots—and, especially, to inform my fellow countrywomen.

In the academic world there are a hundred men who study in America, a thousand men who study in Japan. Similarly, in the journalistic world, there are no fewer than several dozen kinds of newspapers and magazines. "Alliances" and "organizations" with every sort of name increase daily. I would not presume to say that all this has reached a state of perfection; nonetheless, I also know that what these men have established in educating, in teaching the value of the military, in civilizing, and in awakening our people is still in its infancy. And when we examine efforts at reform in every nation east and west, we see that all must advance from a similar state of infancy to reach perfection.

Furthermore, when we look at the recent history of Chinese women, we might ask: what is the extent of our progress over the last few years? Five or six years ago, we didn't know what "restoration" was; the word "revolution" had never even reached our ears or dwelt in our thoughts. Indeed, we didn't know what an "association" or an "organization" was. But at the time of the Sino-Russian secret treaty of some years ago, noble-minded people in Shanghai held a protest meeting at Zhang's Garden and sent telegrams to protest the measure.¹ It was then that our fellow countrywoman Xue Jinqin initiated something never before seen in the several-thousand-year history of Chinese women. Laden with emotion, she stepped forward and spoke with flowing tears, and many were moved.² Every province heard of the events in Shanghai and emulated

1. Between 1901 and 1905, numerous political rallies and meetings in protest of foreign imperialism were held at the residence of the Shanghai merchant and newspaper entrepreneur Zhang Suhe. This location was so famous at the time that it was known simply as "Zhang's Garden." The meeting Chen refers to here was one of several gatherings in March of 1901 to oppose Russian incursions in northern China.

2. Xue Jinqin's speech was later printed in several newspapers in Shanghai.

them, sending telegrams of protest one after another—and the Russian treaty was stopped midcourse. After this, protest meetings grew more numerous by the day, and in recent years there has been constant talk of revolution. Indeed, those who had never awakened—women, who have been oppressed by their husbands for thousands of years, and who suffer along with their husbands under foreign rule—were also quickly enlightened! Was this not a result of establishing these protest meetings? But I ask myself: among Chinese women, aside from Xue Jinqin, who protested the Russian treaty, have there ever been those who have participated in the political realm?

Since our nation is held in common, how can we let men fulfill their duties to the utmost, while we women remain silent? Indeed, I ask, how can we not be ashamed—for not only have men despised us all along and not let us be equal, but even if men bestowed equality upon us, could we thus have had freedom? Men have always called themselves "honorable," yet everything beneficial has been held exclusively by them—they have not given even the least of these good things to Chinese women. Today, when our nation is already subjugated and our whole race is in peril of becoming slaves held in common by every land, these men who have called themselves "honorable" can indeed be ashamed! We women have been their slaves for several thousand years. How can we still remain blindly unaware and follow them, thereby becoming the slaves of those enslaved by foreign races? Or should we perhaps contend with them over past wrongs?

Indeed, if we are willing to follow men, as the slaves of those enslaved by foreign races, then in the future, when our whole race is enslaved, I fear that we still will not be treated even as ordinary slaves. I once looked over a certain French newspaper, which said: "China's land is of the highest quality; regrettably, the Chinese are but a base race. In the future, when we occupy this territory, we should wipe out this race and install a better one there." Alas! Have my fellow countrymen heard of this? In the future, they may be willing to become slaves like the masses of Poland or India, but I fear that even this will be impossible. Chinese men becoming slaves in this way—we women becoming slaves of those enslaved by foreign races—how can I bear to talk any further about such things? I imagine my fellow Chinese are also unwilling to hear about them—and, since they are unwilling to hear of these things, how much less willing will they be to solve them?

Now, some would protest men's former wrongs to them, saying: Since men have always called themselves "worthy," but enjoyed their rights

alone, then they should bear misfortune alone. Why should we women participate? I, however, say that this viewpoint is greatly mistaken. When men alone enjoyed rights, we could not participate, and we ceded this participation to them. And what was the reason for this? In the past, women had entirely lost their rights; they had also lost their sense of duty. Since they didn't fulfill their duties, if they had rights, those rights were bestowed on them by others—they were not rights we women ourselves had fought to obtain. And, also, if we obtained incomplete rights, then ceding them back to the givers was permissible. But today is a day when women *can* fulfill our duty! A day when we *can* obtain our complete rights! If we don't forge ahead courageously, then it really is as men say disparagingly: "Women are slavish by nature." Therefore, if we women want to struggle alongside men, then we must first struggle to fully fulfill our duty. Then women's rights will naturally become equal! But if we persist in our blindness, merely acknowledging that inequality between the sexes is something that ought not to be, and do not think of how we can equalize things, then how can we expect our constant resentful wailing to benefit us?!

Day and night, I fear our current situation; I mourn our plight. Among Chinese women there are those more educated than I, brighter than I, and more able. I hope that the educated will teach the uneducated; the enlightened will awaken the unenlightened; the capable will help the incapable. We can save ourselves from the sorrows of an exterminated race, and restore a nation that has already been lost—of any other future, I do not dare to speak; I cannot bear to speak; I am unwilling to speak! If, by chance, I even once think of it, I am heartbroken, and if I think of it again for the sake of my fellow countrywomen, then I am overwhelmed. I weep tears as I speak of what I know and dare not calculate the numbers of those who will understand and those who will not.

Translated by Jennifer Carpenter

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Chen Hengzhe



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Chen Hengzhe (1890–1976)

Chen Hengzhe, or Sophia Hung-che Zen as she was known to her friends in the United States, achieved many "firsts" in her life. She came from a scholarly Hunanese family with a long tradition of talented female painters and poets, but was the first woman in the family to receive a formal education. In 1903, at the age of thirteen, she left home to study with a progressive-minded uncle before enrolling in one of the new schools for girls in Shanghai. When she