

An Intellectual's Independent Personality – A Conversation with Chen Danqing

He Xi

Is it Chen Danqing that is regressing or is it that the times are regressing? He does not appear to be a man who likes to “move in accordance with the times”, vehemently calling for a great Renaissance, he shaved his head shorter than that of Lu Xun, and scowls coldly at a world that appears to be in full swing. Is he really a loner? Facing the allure of power and fame and the systematic shackles of the academic and artistic world, he has bluntly and boldly demanded: “We need a space for freedom of speech; we need to build up the independent personalities of intellectuals!”

As an essayist and short story novelist, Lu Xun first appears to his readers as an “instigator”. As if echoing the distant world of Lu Xun, Chen Danqing inherited from him the “whip of language,” for as he interrogates our conscience he also spurs himself. When he encounters any form of irrationality, whether in education or city construction, he speaks out with a sense of justice and does not back down. In these parts of Lu Xun’s writings, the “instigator” and the “readers” express an intense and complex relationship between themselves. In a similar way, there exists a complex relationship between Chen Danqing and his readers. On one end, there is the rupture and cultural self-awareness of the instigator; and at the other end, there is the reader who faces the dilemma and oscillation of the forces of the political system and of consumerism. This creates an interesting relation of opposites. In the trend of professional academics and the process of politicization, Chen Danqing however uses his independent actions to demonstrate the possibility of writing outside of the system: As you advance I regress. I never contemplated this intervention

He Xi: In your books *Tui Bu Ji (Regression Collection)* and *Tui Bu Ji Xubian (Regression Collection the Sequel)*, you actively intervene in public issues as a relatively individual artist. Do you believe that intervention is the responsibility of an intellectual?

Chen Danqing: No, I never consider this to be intervening. This always comes from you guys in the media; I have now been turned into a “prostitute”. Today I have to receive five customers, just like a madam, surrounded by customers. Afterwards, there are some people who have chosen me as a public intellectual, but I also feel that this is strange. China still does not have public intellectuals because public space has not yet emerged in China. What is known as public space is presupposed by freedom of speech. The public and intellectuals alike should be able to, through any appropriate means, intervene in public affairs and public discussions, however this type of space does not yet exist. China only wishes it had public intellectuals, which is why we have some people who have been mistakenly labeled as such. At any rate I am not one of them, and should not even be considered an intellectual. I have not received a complete formal education.

He Xi: Then you what you mean to say is that none of this is your personal desire?

Chen Danqing: That's correct. This has been cooked up by the media and has nothing to do with my original intention. I never thought the media would consistently and increasingly come to look for me day and night. When I first returned back to China, I thought that they would look for me on a few occasions and then that would be it, I never thought that it would be endless, especially concerning my resignation. When it came time for the publicity of the book I was at first reluctant but afterward I just went along with it. I had to cooperate. If a publishing company publishes your book, you must sell it.

He Xi: You must have heard about the situation concerning Mr. Zhang Min from the department of International Relations at Renmin University of China? When you were interviewed by a journalist from a financial and economic newspaper, you said: "Every school, every floor, and every office all have a professor or an associate professor who overtly or covertly are disgusted with their immediate supervisor". Is what's known as the "Ivory Tower" of Chinese universities really that dark?

Chen Danqing: The situation is not completely dark, nor completely clear, but situations are like that. America is like that as well. American universities are a whirlpool of power struggles, it's just that their power structures are different than in China, and maybe a bit more fair and transparent. The room for circulation is much bigger than in China. There is no impartiality in China. There is a difference between a professor that is a party member and a professor that isn't, this already is unfair. In reality, behind this, exists the problem of the distribution of political power.

He Xi: In China's situation, this is something difficult to separate.

Chen Danqing: That's right. That's why when I say that I'm speaking about the problem of education in reality I'm not speaking about education, this is a national issue. I don't understand education. My qualifications for being a teacher are very shallow.

He Xi: Education must be a tool of transmission for a country's ideology. With this in mind, if education is misleading, then that is its original sin. From the perspective of a large production of education, education cannot erase the local stigmas of the government's behaviors. Therefore, do you believe that there is a path of reconciliation? Or should all of us go and become artists and forget education?

Chen Danqing: This requires a change in political culture. In the West, even before the Renaissance, in the 13th and 14th centuries, in the Middle Ages, there were universities. The universities during this time period came out of divinity schools but through the years have transformed into today's modern concept of the university. At that time, in the West, the theocratic control was comparable to the Communist party's control over education today. We now live in a modern society and I believe we will be able to promote this same kind of transformation.

He Xi: You have already resigned from Tsinghua's Department of Art. Are you still willing to teach students if they are really skilled painters?

Chen Danqing: No. There are too many people today that want to study painting, some are genuine about their studies and others just want a degree. I cannot attend to all of them. There are so many teachers nowadays, they won't miss me.

He Xi: What is your work situation like these days after resigning?

Chen Danqing: I just resigned and got my own studio in Beijing. I still don't have any plans for work, but I will have more time on my hands.

He Xi: Where?

Chen Danqing: In Beijing.

He Xi: Will you often come to Shanghai?

Chen Danqing: My father is in Shanghai so naturally I will often come back. My home is on Shen Xia Road, which was originally Huaihai Road and Shimen Road, so when I was young I probably rode my bike past here, at Weihai Road, a thousand times.

He Xi: You cut your hair so short, is this in imitation of Lu Xun? I know you really admire Lu Xun. Wu Guanzhong also said that his hero is Lu Xun. As a painter, where does Lu Xun stand in your mind, has he had any effect on your career?

Chen Danqing: No. His hair is much longer than mine. Lu Xun is a renowned writer. I believe the two best 20th century writers in China were Lu Xun and Zhang Ailing, but actually both are artists. When they write it's like they are painting a picture. Turgenev recommended that Flaubert read *War and Peace*; after reading it Flaubert's remark was that Tolstoy was a first class painter.

He Xi: Your thinking, in my opinion, is a bit pro liberalism. In which areas are you most receptive to Lu Xun?

Chen Danqing: This word liberalism is a word that I only heard once I returned to China. I didn't know this was called liberalism because in New York this is something that is already outdated. Everyone there has something to say and all types of different voices and opinions are expressed freely. So while I was there I learned to do the same and was "corrupted". Upon returning home I realized that this was liberalism. Yet liberalism is a specialized field just like romanticism and realism because it has a set of theories. In economics and politics there is liberalism, but is there liberalism in art, this I'm not too sure of.

He Xi: When was the first time you read Lu Xun?

Chen Danqing: My father read Lu Xun and Tolstoy, so when I was young, about 13 years old or around the time one graduates from elementary school, I would just take his books and read them.

He Xi: At that time Lu Xun's image had already become completely manipulated.

Chen Danqing: Of course it was manipulated and politicized. Yet nonetheless, the main point is that his books are still his books. *The True Story of Ah Q* is still the *The True Story of Ah Q*.

He Xi: But the annotations are still the official annotations.

Chen Danqing: Then that's ok. I read the versions from the days of the Republic of China, in traditional Chinese with the characters written vertically from top to bottom. Many classmates had them in their homes and were often borrowing and lending them. At that time my father had a magazine called *Wenyi Yanjiu* (*Literature Research*), which had a review of *The True Story of Ah Q* and *Kong Yiji* inside, but at that time I didn't understand anything. I think it's very interesting, at that time I was reading Lu Xun but really didn't understand much. I should say that I thank my father for my literary foundation. Then, I had to help my father write appeals. Although I was only 13 or 14 years old, I still had to help my father file law suits. My father was labelled as a rightist and therefore it was not easy for him to fill out the paperwork for the lawsuits, so I would write down what he dictated to me. You know an appeal letter has to be written very meticulously, there can be no incorrect characters or punctuation mistakes. Thinking back, I now realize how useful it was. Today I see kids, not just 13 to 14 years old but even doctoral students, who's papers are not logically sound and are filled with writing errors. So I think that the work we do as a child is very important. I could not make writing mistakes, as soon as a mistake was made your lawsuit was finished, a writing mistake would be like committing a double crime. If you miscopied, then you would have to rewrite the whole page. Remembering back, that was a very important experience. Now, when I write an essay, I have to think it over many times before I begin. If any kind of mistake is made then it will be singled out. This is a basic requirement of my writing, which of course has been influenced by Mr. Mu Xin.

He Xi: In the past two years, the Chinese intellectual community's attention to Lu Xun has relatively weakened, while the opinion on Hu Shi has risen. What's your opinion of Hu Shi?

Chen Danqing: If you put Hu Shi's ideas in America they are really just the ABC's of a democratic culture, but of course if you put them in China 90 years ago they are a completely new way of thinking. This ideology is much newer than that of Lu Xun's. Many people criticised Lu Xun because they say he does not have his own ideology. If you want to say so, you can. What makes Lu Xun stand out is not his superior or lower position in comparison to Hu Shi, but that Hu Shi was banned for half a century. Lu Xun and his works have been pushed and propagated by the government for 50 or more years, nowadays people are tired of this, so we must allow some time to pass and for Hu Shi to reappear. Everyone wants to hear what a person who has been banned has to say. The problem is that we are not really talking about Lu Xun or Hu Shi; we are talking about an age of taboos and are facing the effects of an ideological education. It really does not have much to do with Lu Xun or Hu Shi themselves. If you really want to understand Hu Shi you really have to put him back into his original context, the new literary movement, the constitutional republic, Sino-US relations, Sino-Japanese relations, self democratization issues of the Kuomintang.....if you put him back into his original context it becomes very interesting. You will find that China experienced a period of history such as this, that an enlightened person like this existed. But if you want to discuss brilliance, temperament,

fun, and interesting, then Lu Xun is much richer than Hu Shi. But I also really like Hu Shi because he is a man of responsibility and is not like what everyone expects of a good man. He was from a rigid school of thought and really took a stance. The best book I read in 2006 was *Hu Shi Wannian Tanhua Lu* (*Recordings of the Discussions on Hu Shi's Later Years*), it was excellent. Nevertheless, he and Lu Xun are two completely different people.

He Xi: There is no simple way to say which one is above or below the other.

Chen Danqing: Correct. I think that it was interesting at that time to have both Lu Xun and Hu Shi. But now, the question is who is Lu Xun and who is Hu Shi? They do not exist. If you insist on dividing between the left and the right, between cosmopolitanism and nationalism, between pessimism and optimism, in these two camps will you be able to clearly identify the person who is leading the way? No, you will not. We have disputes between doctrines, between what we could almost call schools. However, nowadays, this type of person really does not exist.

He Xi: In critiquing and talking about Lu Xun's appearance, you said that if he would have been tall, that that would have been the end of him. Why did you say that?

Chen Danqing: Don't you think so? If Lu Xun had been 1.83 meters tall, that's just something you can't imagine.

He Xi: It just happened that he grew quite small.

Chen Danqing: That's right. If I give you a picture of Tolstoy without a beard, like me, you will discard it.

He Xi: The issue is that you have already accepted an image and therefore would reject any other image of him.

Chen Danqing: But I could also not accept him. He has the power to make us accept him. In fact, great persons are like this, once they have made their mark they are ineffaceable.

He Xi: The Lu Xun you speak of now is already unrecognizable. How do you think Lu Xun can be revived? How about putting him in his original context?

Chen Danqing: Revivification is impossible, no one can be revived. For example, the string quartet or the chamber music; in Europe there is a school called the restoration school. But, real Baroque and Renaissance music is not at all the way it is played today. At that time they had their own playing style, but you would find it difficult to say how a 500 year old melody should really be played? This is an attempt at restoration, just like Lu Xun and other parts of history, they are all the same. What we have done is to remove ideological obstacles by first washing away the ideological colors, but after washing, no one fully knows what we are left with. Like an archaeologically excavated bronze ware from the Qin dynasty, you clean it, but what was this bronze ware really like during that time period, you are not completely sure.

He Xi: Do you believe that this process of cleansing is still very important?

Chen Danqing: It's in human nature to want to know what something is like. If we are intrigued by something we will inquire about it because we psychologically want to explore it. Although we are unable to completely restore history the desire to do so is always present.

He Xi: Lu Xun is an extremely contradictory individual. He not only fiercely opposes Chinese traditional culture but at the same time also researches the classics. His personality has sides of intolerance, of suspicion, and of arbitrariness, what's your observation?

Chen Danqing: This is interesting. I'm not all that inclined towards Hu Shi, it's just because he's easier to understand, he is too consistent and too obvious. Lu Xun is full of contradictions and conflicts, while there is just not enough drama in Hu Shi's life, not enough internal drama. Actually, there is drama but when you compare him to Lu Xun's it is much more peaceful. Lu Xun most definitely has many extremes in his life, for example he has never talked about music, he can't stand Beijing opera, he hates Chinese medicine, and is not very tolerant of Chinese scholars who return from the West. While these are all his issues, this is the Lu Xun I like. Tolstoy, Sartre, Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin..... really great writers all are contradictory individuals.

He Xi: What meaning and value does Lu Xun have in contemporary China?

Chen Danqing: The most popular answer is his independent personality. When comparing the intellectuals from the 30's and 40's to the intellectuals of today, in the academic world there are many problems that have actually past. Nowadays, when you reflect on the academic framework's of the past, it was actually quite simple. Today there are many scholars who academically speaking have already exceeded them, but in terms of having a independent personality, speaking on the whole they do not compare to those of the 30's and 40's. Moreover it is even rarer to find someone with such an independent personality as Lu Xun. Right now I believe our deficiency lies here. On the whole, the independent personalities of Chinese scholars are a mute point. In the past 10 years it would have been difficult to build up this comprehensiveness. The Communist Party knows squat. They are still giving tests on communism, which is one of the things I am most against and really want to oppose. In seizing this opportunity, I want to say this one thing. They are still brainwashing people. It's extremely difficult for people of this generation to shake off this nightmare. You are still brainwashing! This is closely related to the events in '89, because after that the Communist party realized that they could not relinquish control over university students. Originally, party secretaries of all branches had been removed from universities, but after '89 there was an unprecedented strengthening up of control, up to now where all the control is in the hands of the party secretary. If this issue does not stop, then what type of universities will we have? If the party has the final word when it comes to the national ministries and the military then that is justifiable, but if what the party secretary says is the final word when it comes to universities, well then that is really moving backward.

He Xi: It is completely like the layman leading the expert.

Chen Danqing: No, it's not like this. If it were the layman then that would be a little better.

You've never met a layman party secretary, before all party secretaries at art schools were good. They were cadres sent by the government to the south during the 1950's, real ruffians, like Shandong people, who at night would go out and drink. The old art school party secretaries from the past are actually much cuter than the ones we have now, they didn't understand art, and sometime would even curse. But when it came down to it they respected you and in their hearts they had a real inferiority complex. He saw you as an artist, an actor, and although he didn't understand, he didn't interfere. There were even some party secretaries who would go out on a line to help you, especially after the reform and opening up. Today's party secretaries are experts. They are artists and actors from the same profession that want to mutually exclude each other. If you are under me then I will screw with you for a lifetime. It's very scary; the scariest thing is the bureaucratization of academics. The experts are the party's stick, the party's stick are the experts. Today, all of the tragedies of the academic world stem from this. Before I used to abhor layman who led experts, now I really wish we had the laymen back. We obey you because you are the leaders of the party, everyone can drink together, but when I paint you should leave me alone. Now, the better you paint the more you are screwed with. Those who are talented must stop thinking about promotions, you will not be promoted. The problem is that third rate talents are the ones that hold on to power.

He Xi: There are some traditional intellectuals, for example Xiong Shili, Liang Shuming, Chen Yinke, whose ideologies were relatively conservative, but adhered to principles and integrity.

Chen Danqing: These are ancient scholars. The integrity and character of ancient scholars have already completely vanished. They were not necessarily public intellectuals or independent intellectuals. Yet, they possessed a certain Chinese value, they can be killed but they can never be humiliated. This is self-worth.

He Xi: Prior to the formation of a commercial society, artists had to leech on to the political system, but after commercialization there may also be some problems. Do you think that commercialization will attack the purity of art?

Chen Danqing: This again is a misunderstanding. China has a commodities economy, what's called a market economy, but this is a false market economy. China's process of commercialization and the West's process of commercialization are different. The government should be absent from a real process of commercialization, where the process is completely given to the market, and after it is protected by the rule of law. Is ours like this? They use a few commercialized market mechanisms, but this is not commercialization. We have some people who say that commercialization will slowly change everything, but in actuality it is unchangeable. We have all experienced the disadvantages of socialism and capitalism, but we have never experienced the benefits of socialism and capitalism. One of the advantages of capitalism is freedom and one of the advantages of socialism is the promotion of equality, but now we have neither equality nor freedom. An advantage of socialism is stability, a disadvantage is that you are controlled. A disadvantage of capitalism is competition, and now we want both competition and to be controlled. Particularly those of us in the humanities, those in economics are a little better off because economics cannot be sent completely into chaos, otherwise then the country will collapse. No matter how corrupted the government is the economy has to still move forward. But the humanities have received much of the disadvantages

from both capitalism and socialism.

He Xi: Do you believe that your critique on the state of modern day China has anything to do with your experience of studying abroad?

Chen Danqing: While I was in America I didn't think about these things, it was only after I returned that I suddenly realized the value of this experience. Over there you don't find it strange if you turn on the television and you see someone criticize the president. Here if you discover something you can't say anything. I'm not an expert in this respect, just like you mentioned "liberalism", this is something I don't understand. It's just a perception based on feelings.

The 1980's: from that side looking at this side

He Xi: In 1980, after completing your master's degree in oil painting from the China Central Academy of Fine Arts you decided to remain at the school, what did these two years mean to you?

Chen Danqing: Actually it was one year. There was no particular significance attached to it, it was just like being at any kind of company for a year. Although that was still a time period of ideological liberalization, it was what we today would call "a relaxing of control". However in '83 that was not the case and things began to change. There were anti-liberalism and clean-up campaigns. At that time I was already outside of the country, so my understanding of China is not very profound. I happened to be in China just at the right time, at its most liberal time period. This is why in 2000 I could not stand it when I first returned. I found that the schools were not as free as in '80 and '81, they were so strict. In '80 and '81 they were just getting rid of much of the doctrines. Our party secretary was a layman, an old cadre from the Yan'an period who spoke freely. Our main duties were "ideology liberation", where is there party secretary who dares to speak like that today? The next day they would be fired.

He Xi: Have you ever been back since?

Chen Danqing: In the 90's I went back, and when I went back I was an individual, and just walked around. The situation inside could only be understood by a person on the inside.

He Xi: In 1982 you went the United States. We can say then that the particulars of the 1980's in China are in fact unknown to you. Are your reflections of the 1980's more like those of a bystander? Could we also say a spectator?

Chen Danqing: Right now thinking back it's quite interesting, like a spectator watching passively from the sidelines, but I feel that the level of the people then was quite low. The "fever for searching roots," "the cultural fever," all this was very shallow, but in reality they were just trying to reconnect to the May Fourth era's main ideas. The values and the material of this period was still the same. The May Fourth period was anti-feudalist, the 80's were anti-autarchy, anti-totalitarianism, the contents were the same but Zha Jianying's book suffered gravely. No one could discuss the 70's, because the Cultural Revolution was in the 70's and you couldn't talk about that. Thus, this carried over into the 80's and you could not talk about what happened then either, everyone automatically refused to discuss these topics. The viciousness of the system lies

here, it will force you into self restrain. To speak about the 80's, but not speak about the 70's and 90's, ultimately means that you cannot clearly speak about the topic of the 80's. You cannot talk about the 50's and 60's without talking about the 30's and 40's, so we are forever cut off, there is no way, we can only look at each time period independently.

He Xi: Could you talk about your relation to Mu Xin?

Chen Danqing: When met in '82, and in '83 I saw his essays and short stories in the New York Chinese newspaper, I thought they were great. That was a real intense writing period, every few days he would call me to read his work, like the essay in *Gelunbiya Dao Ying* (*Columbia Shadow*).

He Xi: What was the state of his livelihood like at that time?

Chen Danqing: When we first met it was because of painting, but at that time he had already been writing for 20 years, although basically all of his writings from before the Cultural Revolution had been destroyed. All people who go abroad can feel pretty lonely. When you're in your home country you also can feel lonely, but it's not the same, when you go out on the streets all you see are your yellow skinned country mates, but while abroad its completely different, that type of loneliness comes from all around you.

He Xi: Do you believe that at that time you were a young man who loved literary?

Chen Danqing: Even today I still probably am, but now I probably would be considered an elder who loves literature.

He Xi: Then, has your style of writing been greatly influenced by Mu Xin?

Chen Danqing: It most definitely has been influenced by him. I think I have not been influenced by anyone else more than Mu Xin, except Lu Xun. From early on I never really read contemporary Chinese literature. I only read a few people's works, such as Ah Cheng and Wan Anyi who are both friends. Once they have finished writing a piece they will send it to me to read. When Ah Cheng first started writing he would send his originals and in ten days or so they would arrive and after I would send him my response. He's four years older than me, at that time I was 31 and he 35.

He Xi: Recently Can Xue published a new book called *Can Xue Wenxueguan* (*Can Xue's Perspective on Literature*), in which many people have been criticized, including Yu Hua, Ge Fei, Wang Anyi and Ah Cheng. Are you aware of this situation?

Chen Danqing: Yes, I have read it; someone showed it to me on a website. To receive critiques from someone from the same profession as you is a good thing. I admire her, but I wouldn't dare to criticize my fellow colleagues, I'm a little more pretentious than her.

He Xi: It's just my personal opinion but Can Xue's literary perspective on one hand demonstrates her persistence but on the other hand also her narrowness.

Chen Danqing: I agree with your opinion. Her criticisms are not deep enough, but what I pay attention to is her willingness to critique. But the problem lies in that her critiques are not as good as the people's works she is critiquing. I can't read her writings, they are still Maoism's.

He Xi: Your opinion of the 1980's is not high, nor do you have an "80's complex". You once said: "the scary thing about the 80's is that you didn't know how unfortunate you were, yet still were saying Renaissance! That's like a paralyzed patient getting down from their bed and walking but thinking they are disco dancing!" In your mind were the 80's really like this?

Chen Danqing: I don't have the authority to judge whether they were a high point in time or not, I just feel that in one respect the innocence of the 80's has been lost. At that time I perhaps may have frowned upon this type of innocence, but now I feel that having a little bit of innocence is a good thing. From the 90's on all of the artists that I meet are too worldly, more and more sophisticated. Artists should be crazy asses, in the 80's they were all like this, bunches and bunches of crazies. The western artists I've met, personality wise, are all crazy asses.

He Xi: If, according to your standards, Kafka and Lake both should be considered crazy asses, then the question is that the lives of these crazies might turn out to be tragedies. Do you believe life is more important or art is more important?

Chen Danqing: This depends on what type of values you use when speaking about them. From a lay perspective it is naturally a tragic thing, but it can be also seen as source of pleasure from his point of view. It is possible that one seeks this type of tragedy, I'm not sure. I don't believe he died for the reason we think he died. I believe his death and Van Goh's death are different.

He Xi: Then you mean an artist should emulate the life of Van Goh?

Chen Danqing: No, I never said what an artist should or should not do. When it came to Kafka, it had already been taken to another level, way above that of Van Goh's. Van Goh is still a 19th century artist, while Kafka was a 20th century artist. The way he sees the world is already different.

He Xi: You already said that you cannot represent the 80's, that celebrities nor the elite can represent the 80's. If you had to replace Zha Jianying to do this, how would you describe the 80's?

Chen Danqing: First, I would not demand a retelling of the 80's, I don't think you can go and single out those ten years. Second, I would not go and retell the youth stories of us middle aged people, who are in our 40's and 50's, to everyone. I don't agree with this method. When I was young I observed the generation above me relish in talking about their youth and I was repulsed. To reminisce is fine, but why must you force me to reminisce with you? The book *Bashi Niandai Fangtan Lu (Recordings on the Discussions of the 80's)*, will probably be more meaningful to your generation, but for me, I will not go and recount the 80's. Although, if I were to go and do this, I would then require many recounts from the 70's as well. It is only in this way that I will be able to speak on the 80's. You can't make me talk about the happenings of one day,

it would be best if you allowed me to talk about what happened the day before yesterday, yesterday, and tomorrow all together. I pay great attention to the whole as well as to the reason and the result. If you don't let me talk about the reasons and the results of a certain situation, then I prefer not to speak at all.

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Chen Danqing. *Tui Bu Ji Xubian* (*Tui Bu Ji the Sequel*). Guangxi Normal University Press. May, 2007. First edition

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