中國宗教評論

Between Marx and Christ: Literature, Politics, and Faith in the Life of Chen Yingzhen

Ma Tianji

Abstract

Chen Yingzhen 陳映真 (*1937–2016*) *was a singular figure in modern Taiwanese history: a celebrated literary writer, a committed Marxist political activist, and a devout Christian thinker. This article explores how these three identities interwove throughout Chen's life and work. It begins by situating Chen's life in the historical context of post-war Taiwan – from authoritarian rule to democratization – highlighting how his Marxist convictions and Christian heritage formed his staunch Chinese national identity and opposition to both colonialism and capitalist modernity. It then examines Chen's political stance and his critiques of society and the church, showing how these critiques are reflected in his fiction's portrayal of moral struggle and social injustice. Next, it analyzes the theological underpinnings of Chen's thought: the role of Christian belief as a moral motivation in his writings, and the tensions and synergies between his eschatological faith and his revolutionary political vision. These themes are brought into focus through a close reading of his novella* Zhao Nandong*, in which political idealism, the Christian ethos of love and sacrifice, and innovative narrative form intersect. The concluding section offers a reevaluation of Chen Yingzhen's legacy, considering how his integration of Marxist and Christian worldviews – once deemed "out of season" – now illuminates broader questions of faith, social justice, and national identity in Sinophone literature.*

1. Introduction

Born into a Christian family, the Taiwanese author Chen Yingzhen once recalled in his essay "The Whip and the Lamp" a moment of lasting significance, when his father, with solemn tenderness, said to him: "My child, from now on you must always remember: First, you are a child of God; second, you are a child of China; and then, ah, you are my child."[1] Moved to tears, Chen received these words as a lifelong exhortation. For him, "God" came to mean "truth" and "love," and when joined with the notion of "China" that

Ma Tianji (tianji.ma@omfmail.com) holds a doctorate in chemistry and is a graduate of the FTH Gießen (M. Th.). Since 2019, he is a missionary of the missionary society OMF International. He also is a doctoral student at KIHO Wuppertal.

1 Chen Yingzhen, "Bianzi yu tideng" 鞭子與提燈 [The Whip and the Lamp], p. 20.

followed, these four – God, truth, love, and China – formed the essential constellation for understanding Chen Yingzhen's life and work.[2]

"I am a Chinese person born in Taiwan, […] and I am proud to be a Chinese writer."[3] With this heated protest to a Chinese state news agency's report in the 1990s, Chen declared an identity that startled many in his homeland. Chen's furious insistence on being labeled a "Chinese writer" – and not merely a writer from Taiwan – exemplified the passion and paradoxes that defined his life. A leftist literary icon who spent years in prison for subversive activities, Chen was also a lifelong Christian raised by a Protestant minister father. He championed Marxist revolution and Chinese unification with almost religious zeal, yet he derived that very zeal partially from a Christian moral vision. In the politically charged landscape of Cold War Taiwan, Chen Yingzhen was a rebel with two causes: the liberation of his people in this world, and fidelity to a transcendent Kingdom not of this world. How did Chen reconcile these commitments? How did a Marxist and Chinese nationalist also remain a man of Christian faith? And how are these intertwined allegiances reflected in his fiction and essays? This study seeks to answer such questions by examining the interwoven strands of Chen's identity – literary, political, and theological – and their manifestation in his work.

Born in 1937 in Japanese-ruled Taiwan and coming of age under Nationalist (KMT) rule, Chen lived through epochs of turmoil and transformation.[4] He emerged as a writer in the 1960s, quickly gaining renown for his penetrating short stories about the downtrodden. At the same time, he became involved in clandestine left-wing political circles. Taiwan's authoritarian government, then under martial law, viewed any Marxist or pro-PRC (People's Republic of China) sympathy as seditious. In 1968, Chen was arrested and imprisoned for seven years during the White Terror, accused of participating in an underground "Democratic Taiwan Alliance" reading group that studied Marx and Mao. Prison only hardened his convictions: Upon release in 1975 (after a general amnesty following Chiang Kai-shek's death), Chen resumed his political agitation with even greater fervor. A second arrest in 1977 ended after 36 hours due to an outcry from intellectuals, signaling that Taiwan's atmosphere was beginning to liberalize. By the 1980s, as Taiwan edged toward the end of martial law (lifted in 1987), Chen had become a leading public intellectual of the opposition – albeit a unique one, given that many dissenters in Taiwan leaned toward indigenous Taiwanese identity or liberal democracy, whereas Chen remained a Marxist and a self-proclaimed Chinese patriot.[5]

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2 Hao Yuxiang, "Yongyuan de Xuexifusi – fangwen Chen Yingzhen" 永遠的薛西弗斯—訪問陳映真 [The Eternal Sisyphus: An Interview with Chen Yingzhen].

3 Zhang Pan, "Liang an gongtong jinian Chen Yingzhen danchen 80 zhounian" 兩岸共同紀念陳映真誕辰80周年 [Cross-Strait Commemoration of Chen Yingzhen's 80th Birthday]; Zhang Fangyuan, "Dui wo er yan de Chen Yingzhen" 對我而言的陳映真 [Chen Yingzhen as I Know Him].

4 For more on Chen's life, see, e.g., Jeffrey C. Kinkley, "From Oppression to Dependency. Two Stages in the Fiction of Chen Yingzhen"; and Xu Nancun, "Back Alleys: The Creative Journey of Chen Yingzhen."

5 Cf. Zhao Gang, "Yi ge aiguozhe de 'zhishifenzi lun': yi Chen Yingzhen de yisheng shuxie wei xiansuo" 一個愛國者的 "知識分子論": 以陳映真的醫生書寫為線索 [The Idea of the Intellectual from the Perspective of a Patriot: Reading Chen Ying-Zhen's Writings on the Doctor]; Wang Jun-li, "Tianguo zhaoyao zai gongchan dadi shang – Chen Yingzhen chuangzuo zhong de zhengzhi zongjiao guan yu shijian yishi" 天國照耀在共產大地上—陳映真創作中的政治宗教觀與時間意識 (Heaven Shines on Communist Lands – Political-Religious Viewpoint and Temporality in the Works of Chen Yingzhen).

Chen's position was thus singular and, to some, perplexing. He was "forever out of season" yet impossible to ignore, as the literary scholar Wu Huai-Chen put it.[6] In an era when most Taiwanese intellectuals were either anti-communist or later pro-Taiwan independence, Chen championed a socialist vision and a "Greater China" nationalism, identifying Taiwan's destiny with that of mainland China.[7] His love of country – by which he meant China as a whole – was so intense that he eventually moved to Beijing in his final decade, dying there in 2016 and receiving the rare honor of a high-profile funeral at Babaoshan Revolutionary Cemetery (Chinese: Babaoshan geming gongmu 八寶山革命公墓). Yet, at the same time, Chen was an earnest Christian throughout his life.[8] Baptized in childhood, he grew up steeped in the Bible and hymns, and even after distancing himself from the institutional church in early adulthood, he infused his writing with Christian imagery and returned in later years to a more overt theological reflection. The central inquiry of this article is how Chen achieved what one critic called a "logical self-consistency"[9] among ideologies often seen as irreconcilable: Christian faith with its otherworldly hope, Marxist socialism with its atheistic demand for justice in the here-and-now, and Chinese nationalist patriotism with its this-worldly focus on nation. By exploring Chen's life, political critique, theological reflections, and literary works (with a focus on his acclaimed novella *Zhao Nandong* 趙南棟),[10] we will trace the threads of Marx and Christ as they are woven together in the tapestry of Chen Yingzhen's thought.[11]

2. Life and Work in Historical Context: Between White Terror and Democratization

Chen Yingzhen's life straddled critical junctures in Taiwan's 20th-century history. Born "Chen Yongshan" 陳永善 in a small town near Taipei in 1937, he experienced as a child the transition from Japanese colonial rule (which ended in 1945) to the Chinese Nationalist administration under the Kuomintang (KMT).[12] His family background set the stage for the dual influences of Christianity and Chinese patriotism: Chen's father, Chen Yanxing 陳炎興, converted to Christianity after World War II and became a Presbyterian

6 Cf. Wu Huai-Chen, "Kuaile de zuixing: Chen Yingzhen jiushu sanbuqu jiegou zhong de zui yu sheng" 快樂的罪行: 陳映真救贖三部曲結構中的罪與聖 (Happy Fault: Sin and the Sacred in Chen Ying-Zhen's Salvation Fictions), pp. 89, 93.

7 Cf. Zhao Gang, "Yi ge aiguozhe de 'zhishifenzi lun,'" pp. 29-30.

8 Chang Hsiao-Hui, "Cong Chen Yingzhen de wenxue chuangzuo yu zhengzhi zuowei toushi qi shenxue sixiang" 從陳映真的文學創作與政治作為透視其神學思想 [A Study on Chen Yingzhen's Theological Thought through His Literary and Political Expressions], pp. 123-124.

9 Wang Jun-li, "Tianguo zhaoyao zai gongchan dadi shang," p. 121.

10 Chen Yingzhen, "Zhao Nandong" 趙南棟 [Zhao Nandong].

11 Chen Kuan-Hsing has already cautioned scholars against separating Chen Yingzhen's politics, literature, and thought, noting that his literary output illuminates his political stance, while his intellectual framework clarifies the inner driving force behind his creative work: See Chen Kuan-Hsing, "'Chen Yingzhen: sixiang yu wenxue' zhuanti daoyan" "陳映真: 思想與文學" 專題導言 [Introduction to the Special Feature "Chen Yingzhen: Thought and Literature"], p. 4. See also Zhao Gang, *Chenghong de zaoxing: suizhe Chen Yingzhen chong fang Taiwan 1960 niandai* 橙紅的早星: 隨著陳映真重訪台灣1960年代 [The Orange-Red Morning Star: Revisiting Taiwan in the 1960s with Chen Yingzhen], pp. 14-20.

12 Kinkley, "From Oppression to Dependency," pp. 243-244.

minister and seminary administrator.[13] The elder Chen's faith helped the family cope with the loss of a child, and from age nine young Chen Yingzhen dutifully attended church services, prayed, and read scripture, becoming by all accounts a pious Christian youth.[14] At the same time, he was raised with a strong sense of Chinese identity – understandable in a family rejoicing at "Taiwan's restoration" to Chinese rule after 50 years of Japanese occupation. Chen's early education was in Japanese (as was typical for those of his generation, who were schoolchildren in the 1940s), but he quickly became fluent in Chinese after the war and steeped himself in Chinese literature as well as Western classics. He enrolled at Tamkang University, majoring in Foreign Literature, where he encountered not only English, French, and German literary works but also courses like "Bible as Literature," which broadened his intellectual and spiritual horizons.[15]

In the 1950s and 1960s, Taiwan was under martial law and authoritarian governance by Chiang Kai-shek's KMT regime. Opposition political activity was ruthlessly suppressed, and leftist or pro-mainland sentiments were criminalized. It was in this tense atmosphere that Chen Yingzhen embarked on a literary career – and simultaneously, a path of secret political dissent. His earliest published stories (late 1950s to early 1960s) align with a modernist trend in Taiwanese literature:[16] They often employ intricate structures, introspective narratives, and symbolism. Chen Fangming's 陳芳明 *Taiwan xin wenxueshi* 台灣新文學史 [A History of Modern Literature in Taiwan] pairs Chen with Bai Xianyong 白先勇 as leading exponents of 1960s "modernist exile literature," noting Chen's engagement with Western modernist techniques.[17] Indeed, Chen's style was far from doctrinaire: He absorbed influences from Japanese and European writers, which lent his prose a sophistication and an ambiguity not usually associated with socialist realism. Long, flowing sentences and interior monologues are characteristic of his fiction – a reflection of his Japanese-educated sensibility. This modernist literary veneer, however, co-existed with an ever-hardening core of leftist conviction. As Chen's political awareness grew, especially under the influence of readings in Marxism, anti-colonial thought, and Christian social ethics, his works increasingly grappled with themes of social inequality, oppression, and moral responsibility.[18]

By the mid-1960s, Chen had helped found an underground circle of Marxist intellectuals. This culminated in the formation of what is known as the "Minzhu Taiwan Lianmeng" 民主台灣聯盟 (Democratic Taiwan Alliance) – essentially a reading group of

13 Chang Hsiao-Hui, "Cong Chen Yingzhen de wenxue chuangzuo yu zhengzhi zuowei toushi qi shenxue sixiang," p. 123.

14 Wang Jun-li, "Tianguo zhaoyao zai gongchan dadi shang," pp. 124-126.

15 For information on Chen Yingzhen's university course schedule and academic background, please refer to Lü Yuxuan, "Kumen de xiangzheng: Chen Yingzhen zaoqi xiaoshuo (1959–1966) wenyi diangu yanjiu" 苦悶的象徵: 陳映真早期小說 (1959–1966) 文藝典故研究 [Symbols of Bitterness: A Study of Literary Allusions in Chen Yingzhen's Early Novels (1959–1966)], pp. 31-32.

16 Examples of this are the short novels *Wo de didi Kangxiong* 我的弟弟康雄 [My younger brother, Kang-Xiong], *Xiangcun de jiaoshi* 鄉村的教師 [The Village Teacher] and *Jialüeren Youda de gushi* 加略人猶大的故事 [The Story of Judas Iscariot] from the years between 1959 and 1964.

17 Chen Fangming, *Taiwan xin wenxueshi* 台灣新文學史 [A History of Modern Literature in Taiwan], pp. 389-392.

18 Wang Xiaobo, "Chen Yingzhen bingshi dalu, Wang Xiaobo tan Taiwan mei zhaogu 陳映真病逝大陸, 王曉波嘆台灣沒照顧 [Chen Ying-chen Dies of Illness in Mainland China, Wang Xiaobo Laments Taiwan's Lack of Care]," p. 79; Tu Hang, *Sentimental Republic: Chinese Intellectuals and the Maoist Past*, p. 137.

young writers and students who discussed Marxist and Chinese socialist texts. In 1968, amid the global tide of student activism and at the height of the Cultural Revolution across the strait, the KMT authorities cracked down on these left-leaning intellectuals. Chen and his comrades were betrayed by an informant, arrested and charged with subversion. At just 31 years old, Chen was sentenced to prison.[19] He would spend the next seven years (1968–1975) as a political prisoner, an experience that marked him indelibly. According to accounts of his life, Chen endured harsh conditions but also encountered veteran Communist underground members in jail, whose decades-long dedication further kindled his revolutionary fervor.[20] When he was finally released (the regime, seeking goodwill after Chiang's death, amnestied some prisoners), Chen emerged not chastened or neutralized, but more radical. His time in prison appeared to have only deepened his Marxist convictions, as though he had discovered his true political home behind bars.

Chen quickly returned to writing and political engagement. In the late 1970s, he was closely watched by the authorities; even so, in 1977 he was briefly detained again for alleged involvement in illegal political gatherings.[21] By that time, however, the winds of change were blowing. A growing Taiwanese opposition – the Dangwai movement (Chinese: Dangwai yundong 黨外運動) – was gaining momentum, and international pressure on the KMT regime to liberalize was increasing.[22] Chen's 1977 arrest provoked petitions by prominent cultural figures for his release, and the government, sensitive to public opinion, freed him in short order. This incident demonstrated Chen's rising stature as a writer-activist whose imprisonment would rally others. It also coincided with a shift in the regime's tactics – from unyielding repression to a gradual, managed loosening of control in the 1980s.

The 1980s thus saw Chen Yingzhen operating in a somewhat more open space, yet his stance diverged from many fellow oppositionists. While most of the emerging democratic movement in Taiwan focused on elections, human rights, and (in some cases) building a distinct Taiwanese identity separate from China, Chen remained a committed socialist and an advocate of Chinese unification.[23] He founded the influential *Renjian* 人間 magazine (meaning "The Human World") in 1985, just before martial law was lifted.[24] *Renjian* became a landmark publication in Taiwan's cultural history, boldly blending literature, investigative journalism, social critique, and even aesthetics of documentary photography. In his founding editorial for *Renjian*, Chen invoked an almost old-fashioned moral vocabu lary – he called on readers to regain "faith, hope, and love" (Chinese: *xin, wang, ai* 信、

19 Tu Hang, *Sentimental Republic: Chinese Intellectuals and the Maoist Past*, p. 140.

20 Lu Cheng-hui, "Jinian Chen Yingzhen (1937.11.18–2016.11.22) – lun 1960 niandai Chen Yingzhen tongzuo sixiang de xingcheng" 紀念陳映真 (1937.11.18–2016.11.22) —論1960 年代陳映真統左思想的形成 [In Memoriam Chen Yingzhen: On the Formation of His Pro-Unification Left Stance in the 1960s], p. 272.

21 Tsu Jing, "Chen Yingzhen (1938–)."

22 Murray A. Rubenstein, "Political Taiwanization and Pragmatic Diplomacy: The Eras of Chiang Ching-Guo and Lee Teng-Hui, 1971–1994," pp. 438-440.

23 Zhang Fangyuan, "Dui wo er yan de Chen Yingzhen," p. 74.

24 Lu Cheng-hui, "Jinian Chen Yingzhen (1937.11.18–2016.11.22)," pp. 256-257.

望、愛) as guiding values.[25] The phrase, drawn from 1 Corinthians 13:13, reflects Chen's conscious inflection of Christian ethos into secular social discourse. Such language was virtually unheard of in Marxist circles, yet for Chen it encapsulated the ethical foundation he deemed necessary for national rebirth.

The content of *Renjian* magazine further exemplified how Chen interwove literature, politics, and Christian humanism.[26] The magazine's reportage shone a light on those at the margins of society – the poor, the outcast, the "insulted and injured" in the classic phrase. The very first issue (1985) featured stories on Taipei's garbage scavengers scratching out a living atop trash heaps, on a community of people with dwarfism struggling against social discrimination, on mixed-race children abandoned in Taiwan after the departure of U.S. military personnel – in short, those in society who have been humiliated, harmed, and forgotten in history's corners. Also included were investigative pieces on the plight of Taiwan's Highland indigenous peoples (then called *shandiren* 山地人, or "mountain people") and a photo-essay on famine victims in Ethiopia, reflecting Chen's insistence that a true leftist must have an internationalist, Third World consciousness. When *Renjian* carried an interview with a popular Hong Kong actress (a bid to boost circulation), Chen, in an emblematic move, refused to put the glamorous star's image on the cover, opting instead for a photograph of an indigenous child.[27] The magazine, high-minded and uncommercial, struggled financially and ceased publication by the end of the decade, but it left an indelible legacy. Scholars have considered *Renjian* one of the most remarkable journals in the history of Greater China for its unabashed moral concern and social realism.[28] Its title – literally "the human world" – signaled Chen's focus on the this-worldly suffering of ordinary people, even as his Christian-inflected idealism reached beyond the mundane.

Chen Yingzhen's political outlook in this period remained steadfastly pro-communist and pro-unification. In private and public, he aligned himself with the vision of a socialist China. He lauded the Chinese Communist Party's historic mission to "liberate all of China" and even declared at one point that his life's dream would only be fulfilled when "the red flag is planted across Taiwan."[29] This stance, expressed during visits to mainland China in the 1980s and 1990s, won him an unusual audience with PRC leaders. On one visit, General Secretary Jiang Zemin met with Chen personally – an extraordinary gesture to a Taiwanese writer.[30] Yet when Chinese state media reported the meeting, calling Chen

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25 Zhang Ziwu, "Chongfan renjian – Chen Yingzhen de wutuobang, yu 4 wei *Renjian* zazhi gongzuozhe de di yi jian chashi" 重返人間—陳映真的烏托邦, 與4位《人間》雜誌工作者的第一件差事 [Returning to the Human World: Chen Yingzhen's Utopia and the First Assignment of Four Workers at *Human World* Magazine].

26 *Ibid*.

27 Gu Erde, "Likai renjian de juda shenying" 離開人間的巨大身影 [The Huge Figure Leaving the Human World].

28 Lu Cheng-hui, "Jinian Chen Yingzhen (1937.11.18–2016.11.22)," pp. 256-257.

29 Chu Yu-hsun, "Lengzhan qianxian de Taiwan wenxue: Nie Hualing, Chen Yingzhen, yu Cashen'erguo de Hawei'er" 冷戰前線的臺灣文學: 聶華苓、陳映真, 與擦身而過的哈維爾 [Taiwanese Literature on the Cold War Front: Nie Hualing, Chen Yingzhen, and the Elusive Havel]; Lu Cheng-hui, "[Di 162 qi] chuban *Chen Yingzhen quanji* de yiyi (2): chongxin sikao 197/80 niandai de Chen Yingzhen" [第162期] 出版《陳映真全集》的意義 (2): 重新思考一九七、八〇年代的陳映真 [(Issue 162) The Significance of Publishing Chen Yingzhen's *Complete Works* (2): Rethinking Chen Yingzhen in the 1970s and 1980s].

30 Taiwan Work Office of the CPC Central Committee, "Jiang Zemin huijian Taiwan 'Tonglian' fangwentuan shi de tanhua" 江澤民會見台灣 "統聯" 訪問團時的談話 [Jiang Zemin's Remarks during His Meeting with the Taiwanese "Unification League" Delegation].

a "Taiwanese writer," Chen angrily upbraided them, insisting he be described as a Chinese writer from Taiwan. Such episodes reveal Chen's almost fanatical identification with Chinese nationality. Indeed, he eventually relocated to Beijing in 2006. There, however, he found himself somewhat out of step with the times. Mainland China of the reform era was far removed from the revolutionary utopia of Chen's imagination. Prominent PRC writers who had once idolized Chen for his principled leftism now changed their tune: Wang Anyi 王安憶, for example, had admired Chen but now found his orthodox socialist views anachronistic: "I never managed to catch up with him, yet he had already been left behind by the times – a relic of the past, like a utopian ideal we've never truly seen, and yet somehow have grown weary of."[31] Encounters between Chen and younger mainland literati often ended in frustration: Chen would extol "socialist ideals" or inquire earnestly about "the condition of the workers and peasants," only to be met with bemusement or cynicism from Chinese writers tempered by the Cultural Revolution and cynical about revolutionary slogans. In one anecdote, Chen's earnest talk of environmental costs under industrialization was bluntly countered by novelist Zhang Xianliang's 張賢亮 ironic praise of pollution as a path to prosperity, leaving Chen fuming at what he saw as moral bankruptcy.[32] To many in the PRC literary establishment of the 1990s, Chen appeared as a "relic of a bygone age," a Don Quixote still brandishing the banners of class struggle and idealism while China rushed headlong into the market economy.

Yet, it would be a mistake to simply cast Chen Yingzhen as a fossilized ideologue. Throughout his life, even as his political convictions held firm, his thought continued to evolve in complexity, deeply informed by his religious background. As we shall see, Chen never ceased wrestling with the relationship between his two great sources of inspiration: Marxism and Christianity. Far from compartmentalizing them, he sought a synthesis – or at least a détente – between the "ultimate concern" of religious faith and the imperatives of political action. The scholar Wang Jun-li has observed that Chen's intellectual journey was marked by a constant "tension between God and country," a struggle to honor both the Heavenly Kingdom and the earthly motherland.[33] Remarkably, Chen himself – in his writings and personal reflections – achieved a kind of equilibrium. In Chen's worldview, the Christian ethos of sacrificial love and the Marxist vision of social revolution were not opposites but converging paths; both promised a form of salvation, one spiritual and one material, and in their union Chen saw the hope of a truly just society. Chen's life fused pursuit of the eschatological Kingdom of God, adherence to atheist Marxist class liberation, and an all-consuming Chinese nationalism into a coherent personal creed. In the following sections, we explore how this fusion manifested as a critique of both society

31 Wang Anyi, "Yingtenaxiongnai'er" 英特納雄耐爾 [Internationale], citation on p. 271. See also Yan Zhengyu, "Zui youyu de langman, yinxiang Chen Yingzhen" 最憂鬱的浪漫, 印象陳映真 [The Most Melancholic Romance: Impressions of Chen Yingzhen]; Jiang Wen, "Chen Yingzhen de zhen, shi shenme zhen" 陳映真的真, 是什麼真 [What Is the Truth (Zhen) in (the Name) Chen Yingzhen?].

32 Jian Zhushu, "[Jingxiang renjian] tiechuang guan bu zhu aiqing, Pei Shenyan yi Chen Yingzhen" [鏡相人間] 鐵窗關不住愛情, 裴深言憶陳映真 [Mirror Image of Humanity – Love Cannot Be Contained behind Bars: Pei Shenyuan Remembers Chen Yingzhen].

33 Wang Jun-li, "Tianguo zhaoyao zai gongchan dadi shang," pp. 123-126.

and church, how it shaped Chen's theological musings, and how it is dramatized in his literature.

3. Politics and Critique: Society and Church through Chen's Eyes

Chen Yingzhen's political stance was uncompromisingly leftist and deeply critical of the social order in which he lived. He viewed Taiwanese society of the mid-20th century as doubly oppressed – by a repressive KMT regime and by the structural injustices of capitalism and imperialism. As a Marxist, Chen's analysis of society centered on class oppression, colonial legacies, and the plight of the downtrodden. From his earliest fiction to his later essays, he gave voice to characters on the margins: laborers, prisoners, impoverished villagers, sick and destitute mothers. It is telling that "Chen's entire writing career began with concern for a poor mother and her ailing child at a noodle stall."[34] This refers to his 1960 short story *The Noodle Stall* (Chinese: *Miantan* 麵攤), one of his earliest published works.[35] In this story, later included in the English-language collection *Exiles at Home. Short Stories by Chen Yingzhen*,[36] a street vendor and her son suffer illness and poverty – a stark tableau of "the insulted and injured" that would echo throughout his entire oeuvre. Literature, for Chen, was a vehicle for bearing witness to suffering and for indicting the forces that caused it.[37] He inherited the spirit of Lu Xun (China's great revolutionary writer) as a moral obligation: literature must "wake up" the people and spur social conscience. Indeed, Chen often cited Lu Xun as a guiding light, even as he combined that influence with Christian humanism.[38] In the mentioned influential 1976 essay, "The Whip and the Lamp," Chen revealed the four figures who had most inspired his young idealism: Lu Xun, an anonymous patriotic schoolteacher ("Sister Lü"), Jesus, and Albert Schweitzer. Tellingly, he grouped Lu Xun and Sister Lü together as embodiments of love for the Chinese nation and people, and Jesus and Schweitzer as embodiments of a love that transcends nation – a universal compassion for humanity. These twin loves (patriotic and universal) shaped the dual focus of his critique: the liberation of his people (Chinese/Taiwanese) from oppression, and a broader concern for the least of all people, regardless of nationality.

In the realm of social critique, Chen never hesitated to target what he saw as injustice and moral decay. During the decades of Chiang Kai-shek and Chiang Ching-kuo, he denounced the White Terror's atrocities – imprisonment, torture, and execution of dissidents – of which he had intimate knowledge. His short stories like *Shanlu* 山路 ([The Mountain Road], 1983)[39] and *Zhao Nandong* (1987)[40] depict families broken by the KMT's political persecutions, offering a somber commentary on the human cost of authoritar-

34 Zhao Gang, "Lixiang de xin, yuwang de yan: chongdu Chen Yingzhen de di yi pian xiaoshuo 'Miantan'" 理想的心, 慾望的眼: 重讀陳映真的第一篇小說 "麵攤" [Torn Between Faith and Lust Re-Reading Chen Yingzhen's "The Noodle Booth"], p. 377.

35 Chen Yingzhen, "Miantan" 面攤 [The Noodle Stall].

36 Chen Yingzhen – Lucien Miller, *Exiles at Home. Stories by Ch'en Ying-Chen*.

37 Chen Fangming, *Taiwan xin wenxueshi*, pp. 523-525.

38 Wu Huai-Chen, "Kuaile de zuixing," p. 94.

39 Chen Yingzhen, "Shanlu" 山路 [The Mountain Road].

40 Chen Yingzhen, "Zhao Nandong."

ian rule. At the same time, as Taiwan underwent rapid industrialization and "economic miracle" growth in the 1970s–1980s, Chen was sharply critical of the new social ills that accompanied prosperity: corruption, consumerism, and the alienation of the wealthy middle class from their earlier ideals. In *Zhao Nandong*, for instance (to be discussed in detail later), the elder son of a revolutionary family becomes an upwardly mobile corporate executive in the boom years, only to succumb to corruption and decadent living – a narrative clearly intended as social critique. Chen's essays in the 1980s likewise lament the collective worship of "freedom, democracy, individualism, pluralism, consumption" – which practically spells "America" –, sweeping Taiwanese society, and eroding solidarity.[41] He perceived that as Taiwan democratized, many intellectuals and youth discarded socialist ideals and rushed to embrace Western-style liberal capitalism, an orientation Chen found shallow and troubling. His response was not to reject democracy *per se* – indeed, he believed in democratic rights for the people – but to argue that true freedom and democracy are unattainable without social justice and equality. In this regard, Chen can be seen as an early proponent of what later scholars term "political theology" or "liberation theology" in a Chinese context: a blending of ethical principles (often rooted in religion) with socio-political critique.

Crucially, Chen's critique was directed not only at secular society and state power but also at the religious establishment – specifically, the church. After all, Chen had personal experience of organized Christianity: He was a fervent churchgoer in his youth, only to become disillusioned in his university years. At 21, he made the fateful decision to leave the church. The reasons were twofold. First, Chen grew "dissatisfied with the overall development of the church in Taiwan."[42] The 1950s Taiwanese church, dominated by conservative theology and heavily influenced by American evangelical missionaries, often aligned itself with the KMT regime's anticommunist, apolitical stance. To a young firebrand like Chen, the church appeared complacent, focused on personal salvation and otherworldly concerns while ignoring or even abetting social injustices on earth. Second, Chen was intellectually swayed by Marxist materialism and began to "question a God that cannot be proven by reason."[43] In other words, classic doubts about faith and a critique of institutional religion's impotence in the face of suffering led him to step away.[44] Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize: Chen did not become a strident anti-religious propagandist. His position was more nuanced. He criticized what he saw as the hypocrisy or impotence of the "gentrified, institutional church" of his day, yet he continued to revere the authentic

41 Zhao Gang "Yi ge aiguozhe de 'zhishifenzi lun,'" p. 14.

42 Chang Hsiao-Hui, "Cong Chen Yingzhen de wenxue chuangzuo yu zhengzhi zuowei toushi qi shenxue sixiang," p. 123.

43 *Ibid*.

44 In an in-depth interview conducted by Kang Lai-Hsing, Chen Yingzhen clearly articulated three reasons for his estrangement from the church. First, his engagement with leftist thought led him to question certain aspects of Christian doctrine. Second, he found that the Taiwanese church lacked a sufficient level of humanistic cultivation and thus failed to meet the intellectual hunger of inquiring minds. Third, he felt a deep aversion to the church's secularization and ossified institutional structure. Chen maintained that even under Taiwan's White Terror era – when the authoritarian regime treated the church with courtesy and refrained from interfering in religious freedom – the church still bore the responsibility to speak out on pressing social issues: see Kang Lai-Hsing, "Zai shanlu kan yun – Chen Yingzhen de yangwang yu guanhuai" 在山路看雲—陳映真的仰望與關懷 [Watching the Clouds on the Mountain Road: Chen Yingzhen's Admiration and Concern], p. 15.

spirit of Christ.[45] In Chen's view, Jesus of Nazareth and others who truly lived out Christian love (like Dr. Schweitzer, famed for his medical mission in Africa) were "sharp internal critics" of the church, not its defenders. He drew a clear distinction between the church as an establishment – which in 1960s Taiwan was often elitist, aligned with power, or at least disengaged from the poor – and Christianity as a radical ethic of love and service, exemplified by figures willing to wash the feet of the lowly (as Jesus did) and to love those who have been insulted and injured.

This distinction is manifest in Chen's fiction and reportage. Notably, many of Chen's stories feature Christian symbolism or characters inspired by Christian virtue, yet few portray organized religion in a positive light. For example, in the story *Xiangcun de jiaoshi* 鄉村的教師 [The Village Teacher] (1960),[46] a character commits suicide in despair, and the narrative implicitly contrasts his unmet spiritual longings with an indifferent social environment – a setting where the church is absent or irrelevant. Conversely, in *Renjian* magazine and other writings of the 1980s, Chen frequently praised individuals whose actions embodied Christ-like sacrifice: doctors who gave up wealth to treat the poor, volunteers caring for leprosy patients, and so on. He often pointed out that many of these exemplary figures were Christians motivated by faith. Chen thus walked a fine line: He was a Marxist critical of religion's role in buttressing the status quo, yet he was also a Christian (at least culturally and ethically) critical of a world without genuine faith-based compassion.

One illuminating instance of Chen's dual critique appears in his writings on medical professionals. In 1981, speaking to a group of medical students, Chen remarked that in his experience it was "nearly impossible to find a truly altruistic doctor who was an atheist."[47] He noted that "almost all of those great Western physicians who devoted themselves to others shared the same faith"[48] – namely, Christianity. The implication was that a wellspring of spiritual conviction (what he called "the power of faith") had enabled these doctors to persevere in serving the marginalized, whereas a purely secular motivation might not suffice. Yet in the same breath, Chen posed a challenging question: What of doctors in non-Christian, Third World countries? Could not a similar spirit arise from their own cultural wellsprings? Chen believed it could. Citing examples of virtuous physicians in Chinese and Taiwanese contexts (such as Lai He 賴和, a revered Taiwanese doctor-writer who treated poor patients and resisted Japanese colonial authority), Chen argued that from their own civilizational traditions, Third World peoples can also produce doctors of virtue, whose commitment to the needy is just as unyielding.[49] In other words, he was not advocating that Christianity be the sole source of social ethics; rather, he was asserting that the essence of what he admired in Christianity – selfless love in action – could and must be translated into every cultural context. For Chinese society, that might mean find-

45 Chang Hsiao-Hui, "Cong Chen Yingzhen de wenxue chuangzuo yu zhengzhi zuowei toushi qi shenxue sixiang," p. 125.

46 Chen Yingzhen, "Xiangcun de jiaoshi" 鄉村的教師 [The Village Teacher].

47 Chen Yingzhen, "Yixue he wenxue shang de ji ge gongtong sikao" 醫學和文學上的幾個共同思考 [Several Common Considerations in Medicine and Literature], p. 10

48 *Ibid*., pp. 10-11.

49 Zhao Gang, "Yi ge aiguozhe de 'zhishifenzi lun,'" p. 31.

ing analogous moral resources in Confucian *ren* 仁 (benevolence), Buddhist compassion, or other indigenous values.

Through these views, Chen positioned himself as a trenchant social critic of both East and West. He lambasted Western capitalist modernity for its spiritual emptiness and injustice, while also rebuking Chinese and Taiwanese institutions (state and church alike) for failing to live up to their professed values. His fiction serves as a vivid canvas for these critiques. Characters in Chen's stories frequently face moral choices that pit personal gain against collective good, or material comfort against idealistic sacrifice. Those who choose the former path – chasing money, status, or superficial pleasures – are depicted in sympathetic but unflinching terms as fallen. This is not a simplistic moralism: Chen's literary skill lies in showing the psychological toll such choices take, the erosion of the soul that accompanies moral compromise. By contrast, characters who hold fast to principles (or who act out of love and righteousness, even at great cost) are portrayed with a quiet reverence, though they often meet tragic ends. We may say that in Chen's literary universe, the wages of sin (greed, betrayal, cowardice) are paid in inner emptiness and pain, whereas the fruits of faith and fidelity are seen in the enduring hope or dignity that even death cannot erase. These essentially ethical dramas reflect Chen's belief in a moral hierarchy of human choices – a hierarchy influenced by both Christian and Marxist worldviews. In the next section, we delve more deeply into the theological dimension of Chen Yingzhen's thought, to understand how Christian ideas of sin, salvation, and "ultimate concern" coexisted with his revolutionary politics.

4. Theological Influences: Faith as Motivation, and the "God–Nation" Tension

Although Chen left the institutional church at a young age, he never entirely rejected Christian faith. On the contrary, Christianity continued to inform his ethics, his imagination, and even his political language.[50] One striking admission by Chen is that when he first embraced Marxism, he did so with the ardor of a religious convert. He later reflected that discovering communism felt like "finally being able to dedicate myself to Marxism with the zeal of preaching the Gospel."[51] If the terminology sounds evangelistic, that is by design – Chen consciously regarded Marxism as a kind of "modern religion," with Marx himself as "one of the true religious leaders […] who could be affectionately compared to Jesus."[52] This almost mystical view of revolutionary ideology underscores how closely Chen linked the two realms of his conviction. Marxism provided him with an analysis of worldly injustice and a program for collective liberation; Christianity provided a moral

50 In a memorial tribute to his father, Chen Yingzhen recalls his father's words spoken at a time when the Kuomintang's political repression was making it increasingly difficult for Chen to remain in Taiwan: "In the pursuit of justice in this world, one must not forget the inherent weakness of humanity, nor lose the purity of the soul […] There is no contradiction between revolutionary practice and genuine religious faith – on the contrary, they can enrich one another. Do not abandon faith simply because you are committed to change." See Chen Yingzhen, "Fuqin" 父親 [Father], p. 145.

51 Zhao Gang, "Yi ge aiguozhe de 'zhishifenzi lun,'" p. 39

52 *Ibid.*

compass and a vision of redemptive love. Both promised a form of "salvation": one temporal and societal, the other eternal and spiritual. Rather than feeling these as contradictory, Chen sensed them as complementary. As a scholar observes, "for Chen, owing in part to his family background, Marxism had a high affinity with the 'Jesus–Schweitzer' ethos, because both harbor a longing for the other shore (*bi'an* 彼岸)."[53] Here "the other shore" refers to a transcendent ideal – in religious terms, the Kingdom of God; in political terms, the classless utopia. Chen perceived that both Christianity and communism share a forward-looking eschatology: the first envisions a heavenly kingdom of justice and peace after the end of days, while the second strives for an earthly utopia at the end of history. In Chen's mind, these two hopes could converge. He was, as the title of one study calls him, a man in whom "the Kingdom of Heaven shines upon the Communist earth."[54]

However, Chen's attempt to wed the two visions was not without struggle. The tension between "God and country" was a real and at times painful one for him. Christian theology, especially in its Protestant form, places ultimate allegiance in God and treats worldly attachments – whether to family or nation – as secondary, even idolatrous if they rival devotion to the divine. Marxism, for its part, is explicitly atheistic and often scathingly critical of religion as the "opium of the people." How did Chen navigate these clashing loyalties? The record of his writings suggests a dynamic, dialectical process. In his youthful break from the church, we see one swing of the pendulum: the Marxist side asserting itself against the religious. Chen in his twenties wanted to be rational, modern, and revolutionary, and so he consciously "questioned the God that cannot be proven" and distanced himself from church dogma.[55] Yet, he could not extinguish the flame of faith that had been lit in childhood. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, Chen was facing a profound "spiritual crisis." Taiwan's White Terror had crushed many of his socialist comrades; globally, the left was on the defensive; personally, Chen himself struggled with illness and disillusionment. In this period of darkness, friends noted that Chen "seemed to hear Jesus calling in the wilderness" – an allusion to the biblical narrative of Jesus fasting in the desert, tempted and tested.[56] Chen began to revisit the "Jesus–Schweitzer" ideal of his youth, seeking in it renewed moral strength.[57]

He was not alone in this reconsideration. The early 1980s in Taiwan saw an intriguing "return of the religious" among some intellectuals, even left-leaning ones.[58] The Presbyterian Church in Taiwan had become active in advocating human rights and democracy, giving Christianity a newly progressive image. Internationally, movements like Latin American liberation theology (which married Catholic teachings with Marxist social critique) may have also inspired Chen.[59] In any event, Chen never explicitly abandoned

53 Zhao Gang, "Yi ge aiguozhe de 'zhishifenzi lun,'" pp. 38-39.

54 Wang Jun-li, "Tianguo zhaoyao zai gongchan dadi shang."

55 Chang Hsiao-Hui, "Cong Chen Yingzhen de wenxue chuangzuo yu zhengzhi zuowei toushi qi shenxue sixiang," p. 125.

56 Zhao Gang "Yi ge aiguozhe de 'zhishifenzi lun,'" p. 26.

57 *Ibid*., p. 11.

58 *Ibid*., p. 29.

59 Chang Hsiao-Hui, "Cong Chen Yingzhen de wenxue chuangzuo yu zhengzhi zuowei toushi qi shenxue sixiang," p. 136.

Marxism – he remained a committed socialist – but he began to openly acknowledge Christianity's value and even its necessity. In a 1981 speech noted earlier, after praising Christian-inspired doctors, Chen posed a rhetorical question: Is religious faith the only source of such selfless strength? He immediately answered that it was perhaps indispensable – at least in the West, where his examples came from – since "without a power beyond the self – say, sincere religious faith – it is hard to imagine medicine once again becoming a profession 'redolent with moral fragrance.'"[60]

Yet many of his works appear to illuminate the other face of truth. The main character in *He dage* 賀大哥 [Big Brother He](1978)[61] shares notable similarities with Chen Yingzhen's own background: born into a devout Christian family, deeply involved in student political movements, and ultimately renouncing his faith upon entering university. Yet despite his loss of belief, Big Brother He still asks his mother to pray for God's forgiveness for what he did during the war. He firmly believes that the capacity for deep, unconditional love is not exclusive to Christians – atheists too, he insists, can shine with a love that springs from the depths of the human soul.[62] Must one believe in God to be compassionate, to encourage others, to lend a helping hand? The narrator's answer is clear: Even the nuns at the Catholic institution where Big Brother He volunteers recognize that he "has the heart of Christ."[63] Through this character, Chen suggests that true moral action and love for others do not depend on religious faith. He tried to balance the Christian position by exploring the idea of indigenous sources of spiritual strength for non-Western peoples, as mentioned.

Chen's writings from the 1980s onward show a man attempting to articulate a personal theology that could accommodate his patriotism and socialism. One approach he took was to search Chinese tradition for analogues to Christian concepts. For example, he was intrigued by the Chinese notion of the "sage-official" (*shidafu* 士大夫) ethos – the Confucian idea of intellectuals bearing moral responsibility for the well-being of society – and figures like Dr. Lai He, whom he regarded as a local saint of sorts.[64] Chen effectively constructed two lineages of noble ideals: One he termed the "Jesus – Schweitzer" lineage (Western, Christian-rooted altruism), and the other the "Motherland – Lai He" lineage (Eastern, patriotism-rooted altruism). Rather than pitting them against each other, he viewed them as "entangled and competing" yet ultimately aiming at the same outcome: the deliverance (*jiushu* 救贖, literally "salvation/redemption") of the people.[65] Indeed, Chen explicitly used the term "redemption" in some of his literary discussions, suggesting that he saw political liberation as a kind of this-worldly redemption, and Christian salvation as its spiritual counterpart.

60 Chen Yingzhen, "Yixue he wenxue shang de ji ge gongtong sikao," pp. 11-12.

61 Chen Yingzhen, "He dage" 賀大哥 [Big Brother He].

62 *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

64 Zhao Gang, "Yi ge aiguozhe de 'zhishifenzi lun,'" p. 40.

65 Chang Hsiao-Hui, "Cong Chen Yingzhen de wenxue chuangzuo yu zhengzhi zuowei toushi qi shenxue sixiang," pp. 139-140.

In a moving reflection written in memory of his father (who died in 1996),[66] Chen revealed how deeply he had pondered the reconciliation of his father's Christian faith with his own revolutionary faith. He noted that the Apostle Paul had admonished Christians to obey worldly authorities as ordained by God (citing Romans 13) – a doctrine his father, as a churchman, respected. Chen struggled with this teaching, for obviously he had spent his life resisting the authority of the KMT regime, something a "good Christian" was ostensibly not supposed to do. However, by the end of his father's life and his own mid-life, Chen appears to have found a personal resolution: He would "attempt, following my father's model, to balance religious creed and political conviction, and thus return to the embrace of God."[67] This poignant statement suggests that Chen, having fought the good fight for nation and justice, also yearned for the spiritual home of his youth. In fact, shortly after his father's passing, Chen suffered a major heart attack (a literal crisis of the heart), which he narrowly survived. Friends and biographers interpret this as a turning point: Chen emerged from that near-death experience with a renewed, humbled spiritual perspective. He reportedly resumed some measure of church attendance or at least private Christian devotion in his later years, even as he remained outspoken about politics.[68]

Thus, the tension between his *civitas Dei* and *civitas terrena* (to borrow Augustine's terms) never disappeared, but Chen lived it as a creative tension. One scholar observes that "through literature and history, Chen Yingzhen displayed a Chinese temperament not easily reducible to Christian doctrine, Marxism, or any Western theory, inheriting the stubborn gentry-intellectual tradition from Lu Xun to Lai Ho."[69] In other words, Chen carved out an intellectual identity that was distinctly Chinese and modern, using but also transcending imported ideas (whether from the Bible, Marxism, or liberalism). He was critical of both Western missionaries and Western Marxists when their frameworks did not fit China's realities. He cherished Christian universalism but rejected what he called "Christian cosmopolitanism" if it meant erasing the Third World's distinct voice. He revered Jesus, but also believed that the Chinese have their own sources of transcendent understanding of life that could perform a similar role to the Gospel in grounding ethics. In sum, Chen forged a "political theology" of his own: one that might be described as Messianic Marxism with Chinese characteristics.[70] In this vision, the ultimate horizon (eschaton) was a redeemed humanity – which in Christian terms is the Kingdom of God, and in Marxist terms is classless communism. The proximate task was to love, and if necessary to suffer and die, for one's fellow human beings – especially the oppressed, the least of these. Illustratively, and from my own perspective, one might say: For Chen, "greater love hath no man" than to give his life for the people, a sentiment that echoes both the Gospel of John (15:13) and Mao Zedong's dictum that to die for the people is weightier than Mount

66 Chang Hsiao-Hui, "Cong Chen Yingzhen de wenxue chuangzuo yu zhengzhi zuowei toushi qi shenxue sixiang," p. 139.

67 *Ibid.*, p. 140.

68 Lu Cheng-hui, "Jinian Chen Yingzhen (1937.11.18–2016.11.22)," p. 257.

69 Zhao Gang, "Yi ge aiguozhe de 'zhishifenzi lun,'" p. 50.

70 Wang Jun-li, "Tianguo zhaoyao zai gongchan dadi shang," p. 131.

Tai.[71] It is little wonder, then, that themes of sacrifice, guilt, and redemption loom large in Chen Yingzhen's literary creations. To illustrate how Chen artfully melded political and religious themes, we now turn to a close reading of one of his most important novellas, *Zhao Nandong*.

5. Theological Influences: Faith as Motivation, and the "God–Nation" Tension

Published in 1987, *Zhao Nandong* is often regarded as the capstone of Chen Yingzhen's fiction. It is the last in a loose trilogy of mid-length stories (the others being *He Dage* [1978] and *Shanlu* [1983]) that critics have dubbed Chen's "Redemption Trilogy."[72] These works are political on the surface – dealing with White Terror prison experiences, revolutionary nostalgia, and contemporary social changes – yet they are deeply suffused with moral and even spiritual concern. As literary scholar Wu Huai-Chen observes, all three share a common structure and logic of "sacrifice and sanctification,"[73] through which Chen exalts human nobility and constructs a hierarchy of moral character. In *Zhao Nandong*, perhaps most starkly, we see the interplay of sin and redemption, downfall and hope, painted against the backdrop of Taiwan's tumultuous mid-century history. The novella's narrative strategy is noteworthy: It is not a straightforward linear story but is divided into multiple parts, each from a different character's viewpoint, only coalescing toward the end. Tantalizingly, the final, brief section of the novella bears the title "Zhao Nandong," which is also the title of the whole work – even though Zhao Nandong (the character) is arguably not the primary protagonist for most of the tale. This structural choice signals that understanding Zhao Nandong himself – who represents the second generation, the children of the revolution – is key to the work's ultimate meaning.

The story spans from the early 1950s to the 1980s, a period in which Taiwan went from the terror of political purges to the throes of rapid economic development. It begins by recounting the ordeal of a pair of idealistic left-wing activists, Zhao Qingyun 趙慶云 and his wife Song Rongxuan 宋蓉萱, in the White Terror era. In the early 1950s, amid the KMT's mass suppression of communists and suspected sympathizers, Zhao and Song (along with their comrades) are arrested and imprisoned. On the very day of their arrest, they must part from their six-year-old son, Zhao Erping 趙爾平, leaving him effectively orphaned outside the prison gates. Song Rongxuan, it turns out, is pregnant at the time of arrest; tragically, she is subjected to such brutal torture and privation in prison that she becomes gravely ill. Defiantly, she carries her pregnancy to term, giving birth behind bars to a baby boy – Zhao Nandong – but soon after, weakened and feverish, she is executed by the authorities. Baby Nandong survives. A pair of sympathetic fellow female inmates, Xu Yueyun 許月云 and Ye Chunmei 葉春美, care for the infant during his first months of life in prison until he can be smuggled out to friends on the outside. Meanwhile, Zhao Qingyun, the father, languishes in prison for decades, assumed by all (including his sons) to

71 Mao Tse-tung, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* ('*The Little Red Book*'), p. 82.

72 Wu Huai-Chen, "Kuaile de zuixing," p. 99.

73 *Ibid.*, p. 90.

be likely dead. The two Zhao children are thus raised by family friends – an arrangement common among political prisoners' families of that era.

Despite this harrowing start, young Zhao Erping grows up with a mission in his heart: he vows to "rebuild the family" that was shattered and to honor the sacrifice of his parents. Erping is depicted as a boy of precocious maturity and self-discipline. Knowing that a stigma clings to him as the son of convicted "bandit spies" (as the KMT labeled leftists), he is painfully aware that he must conceal his family background or face discrimination at school and work. The narrative details how, as a schoolboy, Erping dared not write truthfully about his parents in essays, and how he carried an invisible burden of shame mingled with pride. Nevertheless, Erping excels in his studies through sheer determination. He essentially embodies what Chen Yingzhen often described as the "leftist patriot's love": a love not of abstract "nation-building" achievements or personal advancement, but of the humble people who suffer and who deserve a better world. Erping's every effort – studying, working, caring for his little brother – is motivated by a desire to be worthy of his parents' sacrifice.

Yet Chen's story is no hagiography. As Taiwan enters the era of economic boom (the 1970s), Zhao Erping finds himself navigating a society whose values are shifting. Despite his modest origins, Erping manages to climb the corporate ladder: He becomes a senior manager for the Taiwan branch of a multinational pharmaceutical company. By dint of talent and hard work, he attains the comfortable middle-class life that Taiwan's economic "miracle" made possible. And this is where the moral crisis begins. With success comes temptation: Erping starts to indulge in the pleasures his newfound affluence affords. Years of self-restraint give way to a kind of late-blossoming hedonism; as the narrator puts it, in the moment of Taiwan's economic take-off, when his career succeeded and he tasted the sweetness of wealth, all those decades of repression were suddenly released – and so Erping began to degenerate. He engages in embezzlement and graft at his company, siphoning money for personal gain. Flush with illicit cash, he gravitates to the world of fine dining, drinking, and sexual escapades. He haunts hostess clubs and enjoys the company of mistresses. In short, the dutiful son becomes a fallen man – not out of malice, but out of a lapse into greed and desire after a lifetime of deprivation. Chen's portrayal of Erping's fall is insightful and unsparing, suggesting both empathy (we understand why Erping might succumb) and censure (he has betrayed his youthful ideal).

This personal degeneration is paralleled by, and clearly meant to symbolize, the corruption of Taiwan's new capitalist class. Erping is a figure of one who once had light in his youth and then lost it, a common archetype in Chen's fiction, representing those postwar intellectuals who drifted away from the ideals of their generation. A passage from the novella encapsulates the hollowness that ensues. After cataloguing Erping's many sensual enjoyments, the narrator observes that whatever he laid his hands on – whether people or objects – he would inevitably and swiftly, and without intending to, lose all passion for it once it was in his possession. This line, steeped in psychological realism, illustrates how Erping's life of indulgence cannot fill the moral void in his heart. He finds that each object of desire, once obtained, turns to ash in his mouth, leaving him as restless and empty as before. Such a depiction aligns with Chen's broader moral philosophy: Pleasure and luxury,

pursued as ends, lead to spiritual desiccation. Erping, who once sought to live for others, has become a man living only for himself, and the story treats this as a quiet tragedy.

The dramatic turning point comes when news arrives that Zhao Qingyun, the long-imprisoned father, is finally to be released in the mid-1980s as political liberalization progresses. For Zhao Erping, this is a moment of profound shame and fear. He had promised himself to rebuild the family and to take care of his little brother in honor of his father's ideals. Now the father – a hero in Erping's eyes – will see what has become of those promises. Erping is terrified to face him, aware that he is no longer worthy of his father's sacrifice. On the day of Qingyun's release, Erping, with dread in his heart, dutifully goes to pick him up. He conceals his misdeeds and presents a front of filial normalcy, but internally he is wracked by guilt. Even more worrying is the matter of Zhao Nandong, the younger brother.

Zhao Nandong, who lends the story its title, is portrayed as the inverse of his elder brother. Having been born in prison and grown up effectively an orphan, Nandong lacks the formative memories of parents or a coherent moral framework. From a young age, he rebels: skipping school, failing classes, and refusing to be molded by Erping's earnest guidance. As an adolescent and young man in the freewheeling Taiwan of the 1980s, Nandong is the epitome of what Taiwanese media of that time dubbed the *xin renlei* 新人類 or "New Breed" – a youth with no interest in politics or tradition, living purely in pursuit of immediate sensory gratification. Chen's narrative describes Nandong with a mix of allure and alarm. He is astonishingly handsome, tall, and strong – a magnet for women's attention. Not only young girls, but women of all ages would find their eyes drawn to him on the street or the bus, the narrator remarks, and Nandong indeed always has a shifting entourage of girlfriends. His room is cluttered with gifts from these admirers: electric toys, a stereo, an Italian handmade guitar, imported designer clothes, silk undergarments, and expensive watches – all tokens of love lavished on him by women who hoped to please him. Nandong's hedonism, however, is portrayed as strangely innocent or at least amoral rather than actively cruel. He likes to eat, to dress stylishly, to experience anything that gratifies his senses, but he is not truly bad: He doesn't fight, doesn't scheme, doesn't steal. In fact, he is gentle – one might even say kind-hearted – except that he lives in the way he does without knowing why. This characterization evokes a certain pity: Nandong is a lost soul, a fallen man who has turned into a lump of rotten mud, addicted to cheap thrills but not acting out of malice. Chen uses him to illustrate a broader social point: The second-generation youth of Taiwan's post-martial-law era, cut off from the ideals of their forebears, were floating in a moral vacuum. Nandong eventually descends into drug abuse – in his case, the inhalation of potent glue fumes, a readily available intoxicant for disaffected youth in 1980s Taiwan. By the time of his father's release, the story reveals, Nandong has disappeared into the seedy underworld, so deeply that Erping cannot even locate him to bring him home for their father's homecoming.

Zhao Nandong's climax is poignant and symbolic. Zhao Qingyun, the patriarch, comes out of prison an old, ailing man. Having sacrificed everything for a political dream (the reunification and liberation of China), he finds a Taiwan utterly changed – "prosperous," superficially free, yet spiritually fragmented. He gradually discovers what has become of

his family: his wife long dead, his elder son morally compromised, and his younger son missing and ruined by vices. It is a bitter fulfillment of the biblical warning: "father against son, son against father." The revolutionary ideal did not transmit to the next generation; instead, it brought them brokenness. On his deathbed not long after, Zhao Qingyun wishes desperately to see Zhao Nandong, the prodigal son, one last time. But Nandong never appears while his father lives. Only after Qingyun dies does Nandong, ghost-like, show up at the hospital morgue where his father's body lies. In a heartrending scene, Nandong collapses next to his father's corpse and finally weeps – perhaps the first genuine emotional release of his life. We learn in that moment that Nandong's arms are covered with cigarette burn scars, evidence of self-harm: He has been burning himself, an expression of inner torment or a perverse attempt to feel something real. The image is harrowing: The wayward son, who never asked for the burden of his parents' martyrdom, is nonetheless seared by an inchoate guilt and pain, now mourning a father he never really knew.

Yet Chen does not leave us entirely without hope. Enter Ye Chunmei. Ye Chunmei, recall, was one of the women imprisoned with Zhao Nandong's mother who helped care for him as an infant. Throughout the story, Ye Chunmei has been a figure in the background – one of those unheralded, steadfast comrades who survive with their ideals intact. It is she who, after thirty years, recognizes Zhao Nandong as he crouches under a tree outside the morgue inhaling glue in despair. Moved by compassion and undeterred by the wreck he has become, Ye Chunmei takes home the "little guava" she had always worried about. The nickname "little guava" (*xiao bale* 小芭樂) was her affectionate term for baby Nandong in prison, a detail that, when revealed, strikes a tender chord. This final act – Ye Chunmei reaching out and reclaiming Zhao Nandong – resonates as a gesture of unconditional love and redemption. In Christian symbolism, it is almost as if a Mary-like figure has recovered a lost child. In secular terms, it is solidarity across generations: the old guard leftist extending grace to the prodigal youth.

Zhao Nandong's ending thus weaves together the story's political and spiritual threads. The political tragedy is evident: An entire generation's sacrifice (through the 1950s leftist movement) was crushed, and its ideals failed to take root in the new era. The two sons represent divergent forms of defeat – one by corruption within the system (Erping), one by escape into nihilism outside it (Nandong). The spiritual dimension, however, emerges in how these defeats are framed. Chen does not attribute the failure simply to personal weakness; he implies a larger loss of faith. Zhao Erping's failing was not only a moral one but also a loss of "hope and love" – the very *xin wang ai* 信望愛 (faith, hope, love) Chen so implored his readers to hold onto. He gave in to despair and selfishness when he lost sight of his parents' ideals. Zhao Nandong's plight, even more pathetically, stems from never having been given anything to believe in at all – he is a hollow man, a "postmodern" character who knows only the fleeting stimuli of sensation. In a critical interpretation, Wu Huai-Chen suggests that Zhao Nandong is "Chen Yingzhen's only true postmodern figure," a person devoid of the grand narratives (Christian or Marxist) that give life meaning.[74] If that is so, then Ye Chunmei's compassionate intervention at the end can be seen as the reintroduction of a narrative of meaning: She represents both the revolutionary

74 Wu Huai-Chen, "Kuaile de zuixing," p. 106.

collective memory and the enduring Christian-like *agape* that Chen held as the antidote to nihilism.

It is worth noting that *Zhao Nandong* contains virtually no explicit mention of Christianity, yet the story's structure and the tropes it employs are implicitly Christian. The pattern of fall, repentance (or its failure), and redemption is clear. Zhao Erping experiences guilt (analogous to sin) and a desire for atonement, though he lacks the courage to confess to his father before it is too late. Zhao Nandong, on the other hand, never consciously repents ("he feels no remorse at all," one character observes of him in the story's dialogue), but he is saved in a literal sense by Ye Chunmei, who rescues him from the street. This is akin to grace: unmerited salvation given even to one who has not repented. Ye Chunmei's role is sacrificial – she takes on the burden of caring for Nandong, just as years ago she risked herself to care for him as a baby. In doing so, she embodies that highest "leftist love" Chen often spoke of:[75] to love those who have been insulted and injured, who cannot even cry out, forgotten in the corners. Nandong is such a person – a victim of history's wreckage, nearly voiceless and discarded, yet still deserving of love.

From a literary standpoint, *Zhao Nandong* also showcases Chen's stylistic synthesis of Western modernist technique with Chinese narrative tradition. The shifting focalization (from Erping's perspective to others, and finally to an omniscient view of Nandong) allows the reader to see each character's inner world compassionately, without simple hero or villain designations. Chen's prose, as mentioned, is rich and winding, full of long sentences with a Japanese-inflected grace and circuitousness. Rather than employing blunt revolutionary rhetoric, the tone is reflective, elegiac, and at times steeped in self-questioning. Even in this politically charged story, the text is filled with questions and self-doubt, not dogma or propaganda; it constantly prods the reader to reflect rather than delivering sermons. Indeed, numerous unanswered questions punctuate the narrative – What could the Zhao parents have done differently? Was their sacrifice in vain? Who is responsible for the sons' fates? – inviting the reader to ponder moral responsibility in history. This openness of form and ambiguity of judgment mark Chen as a serious artist, not a polemicist. It is also what led some mainland Chinese critics, accustomed either to socialist-realist heroics or post-Mao cynicism, to find Chen's work difficult or "out of joint." But it is precisely Chen's refusal to simplify the tragedy of idealism that gives *Zhao Nandong* its enduring power.

In summary, *Zhao Nandong* operates on multiple levels. As a political allegory, it chronicles the eclipse of a revolutionary generation and issues a warning about the spiritual cost of Taiwan's capitalist transformation (embodied in Erping and Nandong). As a moral parable, it grapples with sin and redemption in a secular context, essentially asking: How does one live a good life in a fallen world? And as a subtle theological meditation, it affirms the necessity of love – that disinterested, sacrificial love exemplified by Christ – as the only force that can ultimately redeem even the most lost of souls. The intersection of Chen's political thought and Christian ethos in this story is seamless: The narrative's "Mes-

75 Lin Chunhua 林淳華, "Chen Yingzhen xiaoshuo de zuoyi shijian he *Renjian* gongzuozhe de shehui shijian" 陳映真小說的左翼實踐和《人間》工作者的社會實踐 [Chen Yingzhen's Leftist Practice in His Novels and the Social Practice of Workers in Humanity], pp. 35, 44-45.

siah" is not a divine savior but an ordinary woman moved by extraordinary compassion; the promised "liberation" is not the Marxist revolution, which failed to materialize, but the small, personal act of saving one life. Yet Chen is not abandoning his social vision; rather, he seems to suggest that without such fundamental human love, grand political visions are empty.

6. Conclusion: Chen Yingzhen's Legacy Revisited

Chen Yingzhen's life and work present a portrait of a man who stood at the crossroads of seemingly divergent traditions and forged from them a singular path. In him, the prophetic fervor of the Old Testament and the revolutionary zeal of Marxism found a meeting place.[76] He was a dissident who read both the Gospel and the Quotations of Chairman Mao, and who saw in each a call to serve the "least of these"[77] – whether labeled the poor in spirit or the proletariat. This audacious synthesis was often hard for contemporaries to fathom. During his lifetime, Chen was revered, reviled, and, perhaps most painfully, ignored in turn. In Taiwan, leftists saw him as too Christian or too "Chinese," conservatives saw him as a dangerous Marxist, and the post-martial-law mainstream found his pro-unification stance out of step with a nascent Taiwanese identity. In mainland China, party-line communists lauded his patriotism but were wary of his religiosity and his critiques of materialism, while liberal intellectuals admired his literary talent but dismissed him as an ideological dinosaur. Yet, as we reassess Chen Yingzhen in the early 21st century, his legacy shines with renewed relevance and complexity.

One aspect of that legacy is literary. Chen's stories and novellas are now firmly ensconced in the canon of modern Chinese literature. They are studied not just for their historical importance but for their artistic merit – their skilled narration, psychological depth, and humane vision. Chen's works have been compared to those of Lu Xun and Dostoevsky in their moral intensity[78] and to the Latin American "boom" writers in their blend of the political and the metaphysical.[79] He is often cited as one of the most important Taiwanese writers of the 20th century.[80] If younger generations of readers find his overt idealism "outmoded," many critics counter that this idealism is precisely what gives his fiction an enduring poignancy in a cynical age. Indeed, as globalized consumer culture continues to spread (the very trend Chen warned of), his portrayals of spiritual emptiness amid material plenty seem prescient. The alienated youth Zhao Nandong could easily be a character in any modern metropolis today – a reminder that the search for meaning is perennial.

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76 Chang Hsiao-Hui, "Cong Chen Yingzhen de wenxue chuangzuo yu zhengzhi zuowei toushi qi shenxue sixiang," p. 127.

77 Regarding the Bible, see, e.g., Mt 25:40; regarding Mao Tse-tung, see in particular Chapter 17 of *The Little Red Book*, entitled "Serving the People": Mao Tse-tung, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, pp. 81-82.

78 Zhao Gang, "Yi ge aiguozhe de 'zhishifenzi lun,'" p. 11.

79 Chen Zhengfang, "Yi 'feng' de zibai tanjiu xiandaizhuyi xiaoshuo zhi kuawenhua bijiao yanjiu" 以 "瘋" 的自白探究現代主義小說之跨文化比較研究 (The Avowal of Madness: A Cross-Cultural Comparative Study of Modernism Novels), p. 310.

80 Lu Cheng-hui, "Jinian Chen Yingzhen (1937.11.18–2016.11.22)," p. 256.

Another aspect of Chen's legacy is ideological. In recent years, there has been a renewed scholarly interest in the intersection of religion and leftist politics in the Chinese context, sometimes termed "Christian Marxism" or "liberation theology with Chinese characteristics."[81] Chen Yingzhen now emerges as a forerunner of this dialogue. Decades before academics talked about contextual theology or inculturation of Christianity in socialist contexts, Chen was living that inculturation. His writings provide a rich case study of how Christian thought can engage in a critical conversation with Marxist theory without capitulating to either secularism or sectarianism. Chen's familiarity with the Bible is evident in his use of narrative styles from the New Testament and his identification with the Old Testament prophets' urgency in bringing a wayward people back to God. At the same time, he reframed such urgency into a call to social action, effectively secularizing the prophetic mission into a revolutionary one. Current theologians and philosophers seeking common ground between faith and socialism have begun to rediscover Chen's essays and speeches for inspiration.[82] The fact that he was not a clergyman or a formal theologian, but a lay intellectual, makes his reflections accessible and sincere – they are born of lived experience rather than abstract speculation.

Perhaps the most compelling facet of Chen Yingzhen's legacy, however, lies in the ethical challenge he poses. Chen's life asks us: What does it mean to remain true to one's principles in a world of compromise? He was, in his own self-description, "not a strident patriot, yet patriotism has been my life's greatest pain and hope."[83] He understood both the necessity of loyalty to a cause and the tragedy that such loyalty can entail. His dual commitment to God and to the oppressed led him to a lifelong balancing act, one that brought suffering (imprisonment, exile from the mainstream) but also a profound sense of purpose. For those of us examining his life now, Chen's example is a reminder of the possibility of integrity amidst contradiction. He refused to cede either his faith or his reason. In an age when identity politics often demands choosing one exclusive affiliation, Chen's identity was defiantly hybrid. He said in effect: I will be fully Chinese, fully Christian, fully socialist – I will not surrender any part of my convictions. This holistic approach is exceedingly rare. It meant he was often lonely – "singing alone, besieged on all sides."[84] Yet, seen from the vantage point of history, that lonely stance appears courageous and perhaps prophetic.

As Taiwan and the Chinese mainland continue to grapple with questions of identity, social justice, and moral values, Chen's voice resonates as a challenging but enriching one. In Taiwan, where Christianity has grown and social movements (for labor rights, indig-

81 See in particular Chin Ken-Pa, *Hongxing yu shizijia: Zhongguo Gongchandang de jidutu youren* 紅星與十字架: 中國共產黨的基督徒友人 [The Red Star and the Cross: Christian Friends of the Chinese Communist Party].

82 E.g., Chang Hsiao-Hui, "Cong Chen Yingzhen de wenxue chuangzuo yu zhengzhi zuowei toushi qi shenxue sixiang."

83 Zhao Gang, "Yi ge aiguozhe de 'zhishifenzi lun,'" pp. 40-41.

84 The expression "singing alone, besieged on all sides" alludes to the Chinese idiom *si mian Chu ge* 四面楚歌 (literally "Songs of Chu on all sides"). The phrase originates from *Gaixia zhi zhan* 垓下之戰 (*The Battle of Gaixia*, 202 BCE), when Xiang Yu 項羽, the defeated general of the Chu state (Chuguo 楚國), was surrounded by the Han forces. Hearing songs from his native Chu sung by the encircling enemy, he believed that his homeland had already fallen. In despair, he sang a final lament, giving rise to the idiom, which has since come to signify utter isolation and hopelessness in the face of overwhelming adversity.

enous rights, etc.) have flourished, Chen's integration of Christian love with leftist solidarity offers a model for socially engaged faith. In mainland China, where a spiritual vacuum is often remarked upon amid rapid development, Chen's insistence on the need for belief (whether one calls it faith or ideology) strikes a chord. Notably, upon Chen's death in 2016, PRC state media gave him respectful tribute as a "patriotic writer," but intellectual circles also showed a renewed interest in his critiques of capitalism's human costs and his nuanced view of Marxism enriched by spiritual concern.[85] In the ecumenical Christian world, too, Chen is being revisited as one of the notable Christian voices in East Asia who spoke outside the church's institutional confines.[86] The "cultural Christians" (Chinese: *wenhua jidutu* 文化基督徒) in 1990s China[87] – intellectuals interested in Christianity's cultural values – could find in Chen a kindred spirit who took Jesus seriously but not dogmatically.

In reevaluating Chen Yingzhen's legacy, one must also acknowledge the limitations and critiques. Detractors have argued that Chen was blinded by his ideological attachment to the PRC, failing to see its flaws – indeed, he remained silent or evasive on issues like the Cultural Revolution's excesses or the Tiananmen Incident, which some interpret as a moral failing. Chen's at times ambiguous distancing from Mao Zedong leaves a troubling impression and raises questions about the consistency of his critical stance toward authoritarianism.[88] Others criticize what they see as a paternalistic attitude in his work – that Chen's heroes (be they revolutionaries or doctors) act on behalf of passive masses, reflecting a top-down view of enlightenment.[89] These critiques are worth considering in a balanced appraisal. Chen was a man of his era and had his blind spots. *However, even his critics often concede that his motives were selfless and his personal integrity unquestionable.* He never sought personal gain from his stances; he paid for them. Against the backdrop of a mainland China rife with cynicism and hypocrisy, his profile stands out all the more clearly: a patriot who does not use patriotism as a tool of refined self-interest, but one who, guided by an ultimate concern, upholds a leftist conviction for which he would be willing to suffer and to sacrifice his life – even for the least among us.

Ultimately, Chen Yingzhen stands as a testament to the possibility of bridging worlds: East and West, sacred and profane, tradition and revolution. In his writings, a reader can find a quote from St. Paul next to a reference to Mao, descriptions of prayer alongside depictions of street protests. Yet it all holds together through the force of Chen's conviction that truth is indivisible. If human beings are to be saved – whether in soul or society – one

85 See, e.g., Chang Hsiao-Hui, "Cong Chen Yingzhen de wenxue chuangzuo yu zhengzhi zuowei toushi qi shenxue sixiang;" Zhao Gang, "Yi ge aiguozhe de 'zhishifenzi lun.'"

86 See, e.g., Chang Hsiao-Hui, "Cong Chen Yingzhen de wenxue chuangzuo yu zhengzhi zuowei toushi qi shenxue sixiang," p. 134.

87 "Cultural Christians" designates a group of Chinese intellectuals, emerging particularly since the 1980s, who approach Christianity less as a personal faith commitment than as a cultural, ethical, and intellectual tradition. Those have explored Christian thought as a resource for moral renewal, social critique, and dialogue with modernity. In academic discourse, the term thus refers to those who engage with Christian theology, philosophy, and values primarily on the level of culture and scholarship rather than through ecclesial participation or confessional adherence: Alexander Chow, *Chinese Public Theology: Generational Shifts and Confucian Imagination in Chinese Christianity*, pp. 70-91.

88 Zhao Gang, "Yi ge aiguozhe de 'zhishifenzi lun,'" pp. 22-26.

89 *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

cannot neatly separate the strands of their existence. The political, moral, and spiritual are entwined in our lived reality, just as they were entwined in Chen's life. This integrated vision may be Chen's greatest bequest: the insistence that we consider the whole human condition. Although Chen never directly cited Reinhold Niebuhr, the American theologian's insight that "[m]an's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary"[90] resonates deeply with Chen's life and convictions. Niebuhr's Christian realism, with its emphasis on both human dignity and human fallibility, offers a fitting lens through which to understand Chen's enduring commitment to democratic ideals. To that aphorism Chen's life would also add: Because man is made in God's image, love is possible; yet because man is a sinner, love – a love that seeks justice – is absolutely necessary. Chen Yingzhen's journey – from the son of a pastor, to a prisoner of conscience, to the conscience of a generation – exemplifies that very thesis. His legacy invites us to reflect, with both hope and sobriety, on our own roles as writers, activists, believers –, or simply as human beings in search of a more just and compassionate world.

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90 Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense*, p. xi.

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