

Chinese Historical Figures: 1966 - 1976

Chen Yinke (1890-1969)

A scholar with knowledge of an encyclopedia.

Chen Yinke was born in Yining County (now Xiushui County) in Jiangxi Province. His grandfather, Chen Baozhen, was the governor of Hunan Province and a proponent of the Hundred Days' Reform during the Qing Dynasty. His father, Chen Sanli, was a notable poet also in late Qing Dynasty.

Chen was educated at home by private tutors during his childhood. He was greatly exposed to all the classical Chinese literature and history. In his youth, Chen went abroad and studied in Japan, Europe and the U.S. He traveled extensively and studied for years in Berlin, Zurich, Paris as well as at Harvard. He learnt more than 10 languages, including Mongolian, Tibetan, Manchu, Japanese, Sanskrit, English, French, German, Pali, Persian, Turkic, Tangut, Latin, and Greek. He was particularly versed in Pali and Sanskrit.

Chen returned to China in 1925 and was a professor at the National Literature Research Institute of Tsinghua School. In June of 1926, Chen, Liang Qichao, Zhao Yuanren and Wang Guowei were honored as the "Tsinghua's Great Four Tutors".

After Tsinghua School was renamed Tsinghua University in 1928, Chen became professor in the Department of History and the Department of Chinese Language and Literature. He also lectured in Peking University. After 1930, Chen also took positions as member of Council at the Academia Sinica, director at the Institute of History and Philology at the Academia Sinica, member of the National Palace Museum Council, and member of its Qing Dynasty Archive Committee.

In July of 1937 when the Sino-Japanese War broke out, Chen's father, Chen Sanli, died during a patriotic hunger strike protesting the Japanese invasion. In the autumn of 1938, Chen Yinke moved to Kunming of Yunnan Province following the relocation of the National Southwest Associated University.

In the spring of 1939, Chen was invited as Chinese Professor by Oxford University. Had he made it to Oxford, he would have been the first Chinese teaching full-time there. He, however, was forced to stay in Hong Kong due the outbreak of the World War II. He then served as a guest professor and Chair of the Chinese Literature Department at the University of Hong Kong.

After Japan occupied Hong Kong in 1941, Chen immediately quitted lecturing and stayed at home. He rejected a 400,000-Japanese-Yuan job offered by the Japanese government to set up the Eastern Literature Institute.

In the spring of 1942, he left Hong Kong to teach first at Guangxi University, then Yanching University. When some scholars in Guilin tried to butter up Chiang Kai-Shek by presenting him nine tripods (bronze vessels), he composed poems satirizing them. During that time, Chen published two monographs on Tang Dynasty, *A Draft Study of*

the Origins of Sui-Tang Institutions and A Draft Study of the Political History of Tang Dynasty.

In 1945, Chen Yinke was invited by Oxford University again and was elected as a Foreign Academician by British Royal Academy of Sciences. Chen Yinke, who was prevented by blindness from taking up his appointment in Oxford, returned and taught at Tsinghua University in 1946.

In 1948, Chen refused the teaching invitation to Taiwan and Hong Kong from Fu Sinian, Director of the Institute of History and Philology of Academia Sinica. The Academia Sinica was then relocated to Taiwan by the Komingtang (KMT) Party. Instead, Chen chose to teach at Lingnan University in Guangzhou. He published *Yuanbai Poems Study Manuscript* in 1950; taught at Sun Yat-sen University also in Guangzhou in 1952; and became Member of Chinese Academy of Social Science in 1955.

With the help from his assistants, Chen, in his later days, compiled *Hanliu Tang Collection* and *Jinming Guan Collection* as well as in his *Liu Rushi Biezhuan* (additional supplement to the biography of Liu Rushi), which consisted over 800,000 characters.

In 1953, the Historical Research of the Central Committee decided to set up three historical research institutes - the Remote Ages, the Middle Ages and the Modern Ages - in the Chinese Academy of Sciences. The committee proposed to appoint Chen as Director for the Institute of the Middle Ages. On December 1, 1953, in his letter of 'A reply to the Chinese Academy of Sciences' Chen raised two prerequisite conditions for the proposed offer, "First, allow the Middle Ages Institute be independent from Marxism and be free from political studies. Second, a written approval of the above request from either Mr. Mao (Zedong) or Mr. Liu (Shaoqi)". He added, "Mr. Mao is the uttermost authority in the government and Mr. Liu is holds highest position in the Party. I'm convinced that the authority should share my point-of-view, and, should agree with me. Without this prerequisite, it is impossible to do any academic research". In the end, he did not take the offer.

Chen refused to become a representative of the National People's Congress. Although he agreed to accept the position as Deputy Director of the Central Literature and History Research Institute, he never took office. He was Member of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and Standing Committee member of CPPCC, but Chen never attended any of their meetings. He scolded furiously his close friends, who had joined democratic parties or factions, "no integrity, disgrace". He described their behavior as "walking right into a trap".

In 1958, denigrated as "the largest white flag in Sun Yat-Sen University", Chen was prosecuted and forced to stop lecturing. He then wrote to the President of the university saying, "Firstly, I insist not to give lectures any more. Secondly, I request an immediate retirement and move out of the campus". The next year, in response to those who tried to change his mind, he simply said, "Only with a promise from either Chairman Mao or Premier Zhou for no more criticism, shall I resume lecturing".

In 1967, facing serious criticism and humiliation during the Cultural Revolution, Chen made the following statement, “First, I’ve never in my life done anything harmful to people. I’ve been a teacher for forty years and been devoting myself in teaching and writing. I’ve never engaged in administration. Second, Chen Xujing and I are not very close. Our relationship is merely that of President to Professor. I’ve lived with blindness for over twenty years and a broken leg for six years, I never visited anyone. Third, I have already confessed all my social networks to the authority of Sun Yat-Sen University”.

Chen was cruelly tortured and persecuted during the Cultural Revolution. He passed away in Guangzhou on October 7, 1969.

Throughout his life, Chen was devoted in the promotion of his sentiment toward an intellectual – “freedom in thinking and independence in spirit”.