

CHAPTER 1

ELITE ROOTS

The Chen Hansheng story began at the turn of the 20th century in the bustling commercial and manufacturing hub of Wuxi. Located strategically on the Grand Canal halfway between Suzhou and the booming treaty port city of Shanghai, Wuxi (meaning literally “no tin”) was relatively *nouveau* as Chinese cities go. It became important economically as a merchant-led city only in the late 19th century, emerging from its sleepy origins as a local market town during the 15th and 16th centuries. Wuxi had been known mostly for the distinguished scholar-gentry families from the neighboring countryside who gathered and studied at the Donglin Academy just inside the Eastern Gate of the city walls. By the early 20th century, economic development changed all that. Sleepy Wuxi suddenly was a center of the modern transformation of the most prosperous region in China, the lower Yangzi River delta region known collectively as Jiangnan.

After the Taiping rebellion of the mid-19th century, the rise of Shanghai on the Chinese coast as treaty port and business center was rapid. Connected by Shanghai to international markets, new cash crops like mulberry silkworm cocoons helped to commercialize the economy. Wuxi merchants were quick to take advantage of this radical switch from subsistence to cash crops and the reorientation of the regional economy. They were out-competing older and more famous regional hubs like Suzhou. By the time of Chen Hansheng’s birth in 1897, Wuxi

was a major processing center for silk cocoons and filature production, in addition to continuing its traditional role as regional hub for the rice and grain trade. With the completion of a railway line in 1906, including a modern station and storage facilities, Wuxi was assured of a direct, low-cost connection to Shanghai. And very soon thereafter, Wuxi became a manufacturing center for textiles in its own right. By the 1920s, the city's burgeoning population and commercial establishments spilled out quite beyond the old walled city. Wuxi became known in the Shanghai and Wuxi press as "little Shanghai."¹

The economy of Wuxi at the time of Chen Hansheng's birth in 1897 was controlled by four major merchant, proto-industrialist families. The most famous was the Rongs, whose Wuxi enterprises under Rong Desheng led to investments in Shanghai as well. By the 1920s the Rongs were the richest and most influential family of entrepreneur capitalists in all of China.² Second to the Rongs in wealth and influence were the Tangs, who ran a large silk filature and textile manufacturing empire at the time of Chen Hansheng's birth. Through his father (in fact through the marriage of his father's sister), Chen was related to the Tang group, and its leading tycoon, Tang Baoqian.³ Chen's mother was a daughter from another of the Wuxi "Big Four."⁴ Her family, the Gus, first became prosperous in the grain and soybean trade of the late 19th century, and then turned to manufacturing in the early 20th. Although there is no evidence that Chen was ever tempted to join his cousins in the Gu family enterprises and the comfortable life of an international entrepreneur, Chen Hansheng remained in touch and on friendly terms with his wealthy relatives. Over the years, the connection was useful and fortuitous.⁵

Chen inherited a scholar's gene from his grandfather and father. He would never forsake scholarly activism as a career path. Chen Hansheng liked to say that he was born into a stereotypical "poor scholar" family,

raised by a doting mother and absentee father. But the Chen family were clearly solid members of Wuxi's scholar-gentry social elite. Their family courtyard home in Wuxi had 20 rooms—modest only by comparison to the mansions of his Big Four relatives! Chen's birth home stood near the Eastern Gate of the old city wall, near the present site of the Donglin Academy. It had been built by the grandfather in the wake of the destruction of the city, including the Donglin Academy, during the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864). Chen's grandfather, Chen Zhichu, was a locally famous scholar, having passed the Confucian “third” *xiucai* degree examination with honors. Instead of entering the civil service as a local magistrate, he remained in Wuxi, where he built up a substantial reputation as an eminent Confucian scholar and teacher. Grandfather Chen supported the family as a respected tutor to the sons of the merchant and official elite of Wuxi until his death shortly before 1897. Needless to say, the grandfather expected his four sons to continue on a scholarly path and made sure that they received the best in a classical education.

In other words, Chen Hansheng's immediate family was poor relative to rich relatives, but highly respected for scholarly achievements and moral uprightness of character. For this reason, grandfather Chen had no trouble arranging the marriage of his fourth son, Chen Juexian, to the illiterate daughter of the wealthy merchant family led by Gu Zhuozhu. The marriage enhanced the social respectability of one of Wuxi's richest merchant families by providing the appropriate scholarly patina. Indeed, like his father, Chen Hansheng's father, Chen Juexian, initially pursued a scholarly path, passing the civil service exam at the *xiucai* level and then continuing to study and teach at distinguished Confucian academies in the region. But over time, Juexian became more interested in politics and caught up in the winds of change that were whirling around him.

The 1890s and the following decade were momentous times in the history of modern China. The Qing dynasty (1644–1911) was faltering, having lost a humiliating war to the Japanese in 1895, as well as a series of Opium Wars decades earlier. There was a call by young intellectuals like Chen Juexian for drastic systemic change. Briefly radical reform enjoyed the support of the Qing court during the summer of 1898, only to be crushed in a conservative *coup d'état* by the Empress Dowager later in the year. By 1903, after the Boxer Rebellion disaster resulted in foreign occupation of Beijing and Tianjin, the Empress Dowager was forced to accept the same drastic reforms in an effort to save the dynasty. In 1902, Chen Hansheng's father entered an elite military academy that had just been established in Nanjing, and soon thereafter became an officer in units of one of the New Armies that were being trained in a Western manner and armed with modern weaponry.

By 1911, Chen Juexian was a unit commander under Li Yuanhong—the general who led the divisions stationed at Wuchang that mutinied on October 1, igniting the general revolt that overthrew the dynasty by early 1912. In other words, Chen Juexian was a participant in the events that led to the establishment of a Republican government in 1912. Although young—Chen Hansheng was only 14 in 1911—he could not help but be influenced by the crisis, excited by the political activism of his father and what seemed to be the promise of the Republican revolution. In conversation 80 years later, Chen Hansheng liked to joke about the political naïveté on display during the whole period, including that of himself and his father.⁶

Today, if you visit the city of Wuxi's architecturally striking new history museum, you will see on permanent display an exhibit highlighting the lives of the city's most distinguished favorite sons. Celebrated are the lives of Wuxi capitalists who became nationally prominent (for example



Figure 1. Chen's mother.
Photo courtesy of Dr. Tong Yuqiong.

Rong Yiren, b. 1916), pioneering railroad engineers like Zhan Tianyou (1861–1918), who built the first Chinese-constructed railway, and literary figure Qian Zhongshu (1910–1998). Just as prominently displayed are exhibits about important communist revolutionaries born in Wuxi who became prominent in the People's Republic, namely Lu Dingyi (1906–1996), Zhang Wentian (1900–1976), also known as Luo Fu, Qin Bangxian (1907–1946), who is better known as Bo Gu, and of course Chen Hansheng himself.⁷ All of these figures, the communists, bourgeois writers and the capitalists alike, came from the Wuxi elite. And, as if to emphasize the point, in the case of Rong Yiren, Zhan Tianyou, Bo Gu, Lu Dingyi, and Qian Zhongshu, the city fathers have carefully restored parts of their courtyard homes in the old city as mini-museums.⁸ Sadly, as was apologetically explained to the author, the old courtyard complex that had housed Chen Hansheng's family was totally demolished by the early 1980s and proved impossible to reconstruct.

Chen Hansheng's father, Juexian, was considered by the family to be a maverick and, according to his son, disturbingly inattentive and distant as a father. He also left the family bankrupt on occasion, forcing the mother out of pride to take in sewing and other odd jobs, rather than solicit support from her family. Chen had great affection for his mother and grandmother. Yet it is clear in retrospect that Chen Juexian did pay attention to the education of his first-born son. This was a time, after the abolition of the civil service examination system in 1903, when Chinese education was undergoing drastic reforms. After being tutored at home, young Hansheng began formal schooling in 1904 at a new, progressively-minded primary school, the very best available. This meant that the small boy was rigorously trained in the Confucian classics, with the introduction during middle school years of a smattering of basic Western subjects like geography, math, and science. Until well into his 90s, Chen Hansheng loved to punctuate conversation with aphorisms from the classics and dictate original short poems of his own in a classical style that he thought appropriate to the occasion.⁹

Donglin Primary School

The Donglin Primary School was founded in 1902, with male and female branches on the site of the famous Donglin Confucian Academy (*Donglin shuyuan*) near the Eastern Gate of the old city. The academy had been the gathering place during the late Ming period (early 17th century) for a group of leading scholars who became known as the Donglin Party (*Donglin dang*). With considerable fanfare, they resigned from government in protest and petitioned the emperor in Beijing about corruption and moral turpitude among palace eunuchs—an effort seen in retrospect by historians as undermining the legitimacy of the dynasty and contributing

to its collapse a few decades later. Thereafter, during the Qing dynasty, the Donglin Academy was re-established. It was led by a famous scholar family with the surname of Gu (unrelated to the merchant prince family). The academy was razed to the ground during the anti-Confucian Taiping Rebellion of the mid-19th century, only to reemerge in name as the site for a new primary school in 1902. The school was a short walk from Chen Hansheng's home. He attended first as a day student with his mother walking him back and forth to school and then at age 10 he moved into school dormitories as a boarding student.

The curriculum was largely focused on the Confucian classics. However, English as a second language was introduced. The pedagogy was less traditional and more personally oriented than other Academies. Chen remembered being well cared for and urged to cultivate the mind and body with a sense of individual social responsibility. The head of the school, Gu Zhuoru, was a strict disciplinarian and respected scholar from the famous Gu family of Donglin leaders. He addressed the student body once a month on matters of the day and special topics, such as the need for self-cultivation and service to society. The school, well financed by local tycoons, acquired a reputation quickly as a national model.

Making a big impression on young Hansheng was not the curriculum but the visit in 1908 by the Manchu Prince Duan Fang, viceroy (*nanyang dachen*) in charge of three provinces (Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Anhui). With a retinue of over 100 men and much pageantry, Duan Fang arrived and was met at the gate by Principal Gu, instructors, and the entire student body, who lined up in two straight lines. The viceroy wore a huge red tasseled hat with a red stone button and peacock feathers attached behind. Carefully he marched down the line of students, inspecting them slowly, and at the end warmly congratulated

Principal Gu. The next day each student received a stick of precious Chinese ink, two brushes, and a pad of paper. It was an event that the 11-year-old never forgot.¹⁰

Ming De Middle School in Changsha, Hunan Province

The next year, in 1909, Hansheng's father, Juexian accepted a position in Changsha, the capital of Hunan province, as a senior military commander. This gave him the means to move his family to Changsha from Wuxi and enroll Hansheng in the Ming De Middle School. Ming De was a new school and a hotbed of anti-Qing dynasty political activism. The founder and principal was Hu Zijing (or Hu Yuanan), who raised money for the school from the progressive *nouveaux riche* and scholar gentry families of the region, not only in Hunan, but also from Wuhan, Nanjing and Shanghai as well. Hu recruited well-known public intellectuals as faculty and gave them freedom to teach as they pleased. They included revolutionary activists associated with the Tongmenghui and Sun Yat-sen, like Huang Xing and Song Jiaoren, historian Zhang Ji, and the young Nanshe poet Liu Yazi (1887–1958).¹¹

The instructor who had the greatest impact on Chen Hansheng was Fu Xiongxiang. Fu was a native Hunanese, Tongmenghui member, Nanshe poet, returned student from Japan, and fervent Han nationalist. He taught history and wore in class a false pigtail or queue under a hat (under the Qing, all males were required by law to sport a pigtail signifying loyalty to the dynasty). Fu's elegant prose and poetry became models for young boys. Chen Hansheng was flattered by the special interest Fu took in young Hansheng, inviting him to his home for long talks. Fu's lectures in class on China's modern history had a distinctly