

From Dependence to Autonomy: Constructing Female Subjectivity and Expressing Awakening in Random Notes on a Trip to Sichuan

Suqing Wei

*School of Chinese Language and Literature, Changchun University, Changchun, China
suqingmmd123@outlook.com*

Abstract. Random Notes on a Trip to Sichuan is a travelogue written by Chen Hengzhe in 1935 during her journey to Sichuan, accompanying her husband Ren Hongjun. In Notes from a Sichuan Journey, Chen employs a nuanced female perspective to document and critique the constraints faced by traditional women, thereby revealing the autonomous consciousness of awakened women while expressing a profound yearning for comprehensive female emancipation and a gender-equal social order. Based on Random Notes on a Trip to Sichuan and grounded in theories of subjectivity construction and gender order, this study systematically reviews and interprets the descriptions of women's living conditions within the text. On one hand, most women remained deeply entrenched within the patriarchal shackles of male supremacy, exhibiting a high degree of dependence on men in marriage, economic matters, and social participation. On the other hand, some young women influenced by new ideologies had begun to awaken, actively pursuing education, marital freedom, and independent personalities.

Keywords: Subjectivity Construction, Dependence and Autonomy, Random Notes on a Trip to Sichuan, Travel Literature

1. Introduction

The Republican era witnessed warlord conflicts, social upheaval, and a nation beset by internal strife and external threats. The collision of old and new ideologies spurred intellectuals to awaken national consciousness and seek paths to salvation. Many traveled abroad for study, introducing advanced Western ideas that provided the ideological and cultural foundations for the flourishing of travel literature. The May Fourth Movement's advocacy of “democracy” and “science” further propelled writers beyond the traditional lyrical framework of “landscape travelogues.” They deeply integrated travel experiences with personal reflections and social observations, revolutionising the expressive forms of travel literature. Against this backdrop, the distinguished Chinese scholar Tian Junwu has devoted extensive research to travel literature, spearheading multiple studies and authoring notable works. However, his research on travel literature has primarily focused on narrative techniques and character development. The deeper implications of the construction of women’s subjectivity and its awakening within travel literature remain underexplored.

Therefore, using feminist criticism as a theoretical perspective, this paper systematically examines the survival conditions of Republican-era women during a period of social transformation by employing Chen Hengzhe's *Random Notes on a Trip to Sichuan*. By analysing how the female characters in the text break free from traditional dependent identities to pursue independent personalities, this study aims to offer fresh perspectives for research on women's liberation and deepen our understanding of the awakening of female subjectivity during the Republican era.

2. Literature review

2.1. The concept of travel literature

Travel literature is a literary genre that reflects the experiences and life during travel. It takes natural scenery, historical sites, folk customs, and other natural or cultural landscapes as its subjects, expressing the thoughts, emotions, and aesthetic tastes of the traveller. Its core characteristics include the diversity of authorial groups and writing styles, the combination of a concern for reality and the pursuit of ideals, and the organic integration of documentary and descriptive elements. As Li Lan pointed out, modern travelogues are not only a genre for recording personal experiences but also an important field for participating in the construction of the cultural imagination of the modern nation-state.

2.2. Traditional responsibilities of women

During the Republican era, women's traditional roles remained firmly confined within the threefold, family-centred identity framework of "daughter, wife, and mother". Their core value was entirely tied to the patriarchal system; they were positioned from birth as future "virtuous wives and good mothers", with their personal will and room for development severely constrained. Although new ideas began to emerge during this era, women still faced significant barriers. As Zhang Min noted in *Women's Rights and the Writing of Modern Chinese Literature*, most Chinese women were "kept away in the depths of their boudoirs, unknown to the outside world" [1]. The large-scale establishment of girls' schools and hospitals, as well as their stepping out of their homes to engage in socialized labor, were unprecedented developments preceding the rise of modern industry.

Furthermore, traditional ideas confined them to the paradigm of "men handle external affairs while women manage the household". As a result, these women inevitably encountered resistance from traditional ideological and cultural norms. Through her exploration of these historical phenomena, Chen Hengzhe profoundly exposed the suppression of women by feudal etiquette. She also sought to speak up for these unfortunate women through her writing, embodying her own awakening to women's independent value.

2.3. Women in Sichuan: a blend of traditional and modern ideals

During the Republic of China, the social status of women in Sichuan was marked by a distinctive blend of traditional and modern influences. On the one hand, the deep-seated roots of the feudal patriarchal system persisted. Women were largely confined to the domestic sphere, adhering to the traditional roles of supporting their husbands, raising children, and managing household affairs. They typically lacked access to education, had minimal social engagement, and possessed almost no autonomy over significant matters such as marriage and career choices, thus remaining entirely dependent on male relatives.

On the other hand, the advancement of modern education and the dissemination of Western concepts of “gender equality” led to the emergence of a new generation of educated young women in urban centers like Chengdu. These women began to develop self-awareness and actively sought marital freedom, educational opportunities, and career prospects. Some had left their families to pursue education or engage in social services, while others participated in social activities as independent individuals, no longer defined solely by their marital status as “Mrs. So-and-So”.

3. The author’s feminist consciousness in *Random Notes on a Trip to Sichuan*

3.1. A critical exposure of women’s existential predicament in traditional society

In *Random Notes on a Trip to Sichuan*, Chen Hengzhe, with the keen insight of a female intellectual, turns to major social issues, opium abuse and warlord rule as critical lenses to examine the living conditions of women in traditional society. Sichuan, under the control of warlords, was beset by frequent wars, social unrest, and material scarcity, leaving women grappling with multiple pressures: disease, conflict, and food shortages.

The author notes in her travelogue that opium-addicted men squandered family fortunes and lost their labor capacity due to opium abuse. The peasant women she encountered along her journey were not only forced to farm crops to make ends meet, but also had to care for family members maimed or displaced by war. They even had to manage sudden illnesses within their households alone. When the entire economic burden of the family fell upon them, they were compelled to take on the responsibility of supporting the family.

Chen’s reflections profoundly reveal the lack of female agency in the traditional social structure: women were never granted independent rights to subsistence, yet they were always treated as the “safety net in times of crisis”.

3.2. Dependent women and emerging feminist consciousness

On her journey to Sichuan, while waiting for transportation, Chen compared the train’s delay to “a maiden in her wedding attire, waiting till her hair turns grey, yet never catching sight of her bridegroom”. This analogy, which seems like a joke about the train’s slowness, poignantly reflects the tragic life path of women in traditional society.

In traditional feudal Chinese society, a woman’s worth in life was deeply tied to marriage. Women typically saw marrying into a wealthy family or a “decent family”, where the husband was diligent in his studies as a symbol of honor. Their primary goal often centered on “becoming someone’s wife,” leading to a heavy dependence on men and a lack of autonomy to choose their own life paths.

Later, the author introduces another female figure, Mrs. Guo, to draw a sharp contrast. As one of Zhang Boling’s most outstanding disciples, Mrs. Guo broke the stereotype that women should be confined to the domestic sphere. In the travelogue, she travels alone to pursue her studies, unaccompanied by her husband. This demonstrates that some women had begun to gain autonomy over their movements, breaking free from the social norm that women required male accompaniment when traveling. The vivid contrast between these two examples illustrates the gradual transformation in women’s roles during this era.

4. Female subjectivity construction and expression

4.1. The construction of female agency in narrative

4.1.1. Initial phase: liberation from traditional constraints

In traditional Chinese society, the rigid norm of “men handling external affairs and women managing domestic affairs” was strictly observed. Women’s activities were largely centered on household chores, childbirth, and childcare, with minimal involvement in social activities.

Chen Hengzhe’s account of traveling to Sichuan to document people’s livelihoods and reflect on social issues demonstrates that, as a representative woman of her era, she stepped out of the domestic sphere and began to realize her self-worth in the public sphere. Tan had pointed out that Chen Hengzhe repeatedly emphasized the cooperative nature of the relationship between women and men, while also highlighting women’s contributions during national crises [2]. These points underscore Chen’s efforts to transcend traditional female roles: she pursued personal independence and liberation while simultaneously demonstrating a sense of responsibility to the nation and society.

4.1.2. Developmental stage: establishing independent cognitive and judgemental capacities

In *Random Notes on a Trip to Sichuan*, Chen recounts the story of meddling people attempting to help a widow. Faced with the power and oppression of a local tyrant, the widow did not resist for she was compelled to submit to the tyrant’s threats and encroachments. This “superficial harmony” was merely a facade, a strategy to bide her time and gather her strength. When the tyrant pressed her further, the widow resolved to call her servants to resist, declaring. She wrote that this is intolerable, which shows the early stirrings of female consciousness in that era, marking the beginning of women’s development of independent thought and judgment.

4.1.3. Mature stage: establishing self-worth and self-will

As her journey progressed, the modern feminist consciousness matured into a stage of “self-affirmation”. She no longer merely contemplated resisting traditional dependence; instead, she actively enacted this resistance through concrete life choices, breaking the feudal chains that dictated that “women must obey men’s decisions”. This demonstrated that modern women should not be trapped by a traditional reliance on men, emphasizing their right to make independent choices and exercise agency, as evidenced by their assertion of will in daily life.

A case in point is her leading role in selecting accommodation in Chengdu. When searching for a place to stay, she clearly stated her requirements, “a slightly larger space and a more solidly built house”. Throughout the entire process, she systematically prioritized her own preferences, entirely without relying on male judgment. She was firmly on her own needs and her family’s, free from dependence on men. This kind of descriptions focusing on small, daily details prove that women are fully capable of planning their lives based on their own decisions, embodying female self-worth and will.

4.2. The author’s enhanced self-awareness: from “observer” to discourse subject

When Chen first arrived in Chengdu, her focus was primarily on documenting the city’s natural scenery. For example, she described Chengdu’s spring as a season of thick clouds and light rain, where blossoms heavy with fruit repeatedly added brightness to the season.

As she engaged more deeply with Sichuan society, the author began to voice her own views and criticisms. She observed that women “lacked room to express themselves”, and pointed out that many “wives” in wealthy Sichuan families had once been female students. These women, who had received a modern education, “felt no shame at all in becoming concubines”.

At that time, female education was not yet a mainstream concept. In Sichuan, bound by a mix of feudal customs and utilitarianism, the traditional divide between “men handling external affairs and women managing domestic affairs” still tightly restricted women’s life paths. Women struggled to achieve economic independence and personal autonomy through legitimate employment; instead, they remained confined to domestic life and had minimal involvement in social activities. The author’s account offers a sharp critique of this phenomenon, revealing the early signs of her emerging sense of agency as a discourse subject.

5. The linguistic style and social aspirations

5.1. Linguistic style reflecting female agency

5.1.1. Narrative perspective: personalised feminine expression

In *Random Notes on a Trip to Sichuan*, the author employs a female perspective to express her feelings and describe scenery, focusing on delicate, feminine perceptions. For example, when selecting a house, she prioritized its “sturdiness”; when writing about water problems, she highlighted its “murkiness and foul smell”. She described rural Sichuan women working in plain clothes as “gentle” and “resilient”. These sensitive depictions of everyday details allow readers to perceive a feminine warmth while understanding the authenticity of the scenes being portrayed.

5.1.2. Vocabulary and sentence structure: manifestations of emotional autonomy

When confronted with social phenomena and controversies in Sichuan, she never avoided expressing her stance. She always stated her position directly and used emotionally charged words like “regrettable”, “heartbreaking”, and “unacceptable” to show her active engagement with these issues. For instance, regarding the social chaos caused by warlord rule in Sichuan, she used the word “tragic” to convey her sympathy for the people’s suffering. When discussing the opium epidemic, Chen Hengzhe expressed “suspicion” to convey her deep reflection on the harm opium brought and the moral decline people brought upon themselves.

5.2. Social aspirations implied in the text

5.2.1. Aspirations for comprehensive feminine emancipation

When Chen arrived in Chengdu, many young women sought her out, eager for advice on legitimate paths for self-development and their future aspirations. This phenomenon aptly reflected the resonance of modern women’s liberation ideology within local society.

As Geng Huanling pointed out that the modern women’s liberation movement saw the spread of ideas, including “promoting women’s education” and advocating for equality in social status between men and women gradually awakened women’s awareness of their self-worth and right to development [3]. Similarly, contemporary research *Fostering Innovation Through Empowerment: The Relationship Between Women's Empowerment and Intellectual Capital* further clarifies the key

role of education in women's empowerment from a theoretical perspective. The study notes a significant positive correlation between women's empowerment and their intellectual capital [4].

This indicates that education is not only the starting point of women's awakening but also the foundation for them to accumulate intellectual capital, achieve economic independence, and realise their social value. To promote the intellectual growth of young women, Chen Hengzhe organised "Sunday Tea Gatherings for Young Ladies" in Chengdu. These gatherings allowed young women in Sichuan to discuss their personal situations with her, helping them awaken to their self-worth while building their intellectual capital.

5.2.2. Aspirations for a gender-equal social order

In fact, Chen did not explicitly advocate for the cause of gender equality. Instead, she subtly conveyed her aspiration for equality by guiding women to "cast off dependence" and affirming the recognition of women's inherent value. This served to inspire women, making it clear that they had the right to exercise decision-making power over like marital freedom and educational autonomy.

In Zhu Hanguo's *The Evolution of Marriage Concepts in Republican China as Seen Through Divorce Litigation Cases*, it shows that during the Republican era, the number of divorce cases rose, especially those initiated by women. These women began to use legal means to challenge the traditional marital order characterised by "male dominance and female subordination", refusing to accept the notion that only men could file for divorce [5]. It shows that during this period, women's demands for gender equality shifted from a passive expectation to an active pursuit.

Furthermore, contemporary research such as the work *Re-Appraising Women-to-Women Discrimination Towards Attaining Gender Equality* further emphasises that achieving gender equality requires not only dismantling male-centred social structures but also tackling and eliminating discrimination and divisions within the female community [6]. Inter-female discrimination may arise from differences in class, educational background, or region. Chen Hengzhe took the initiative to engage with and provide guidance to Sichuan women from different backgrounds. In doing so, she fostered solidarity and mutual support among women, thereby laying the groundwork for building a truly equitable gender order.

6. Conclusion

Drawing on Chen Hengzhe's *Random Notes on a Trip to Sichuan*, this paper explores the living conditions and the awakening process of female subjectivity among women in Sichuan during the Republican era, against the backdrop of the interplay between traditional and modern ideologies. The research shows that while women in Sichuan were constrained by patriarchal hierarchies that emphasised male dominance and female subordination, they also began to develop a nascent consciousness. This thought is driven by cast-off dependency and the pursuit of autonomy and other modern concepts. Through a delicate female perspective, Chen documented and criticized the existential predicaments of women in traditional society, while also highlighting the efforts of awakened women to pursue independent identities and the right to equality. It reflects her profound aspirations for the comprehensive liberation of women and the establishment of a socially equitable gender order.

However, this paper has limitations. It focuses primarily on the single text and fails to adequately examine other literature during the Republican era. It also ignores the differences in the awakening of female subjectivity among women of different social classes. This may result in an incomplete understanding of the awakening of female subjectivity. Future research should integrate additional

materials, including Republican-era travel writings and women's personal diaries, to more comprehensively present the complex process of women's subjectivity construction during this period.

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