

China Research Seminar Series

‘Eating Sheep Shit’

**Gender, Politics and Chen Hengzhe’s Visit to
Warlord Sichuan**



Dr Xin FAN

(FAMES, University of Cambridge)

2pm, 6 Oct (Thursday), 2022 (in-person seminar)

Room 10 (old Common Room), FAMES

Abstract

From 1934 to 1935, Chen Hengzhe 陳衡哲 (1890–1976), a writer, historian, and public intellectual, published a series of essays to record her family's journey to Sichuan, an inland province that was dominated by warlord politics and known for its isolation from the outside world. In identifying with the modernising state's agendas, Chen was frustrated with the widespread opium addiction, student concubinage, and warlord atrocities in this region, and she offered her honest but well-intended criticism. Yet, to her surprise, this provoked vicious backlash from the locals. Newspaper columnists and readers joined in a concerted effort to fiercely attack Chen and to humiliate her family. In this talk, I examine this incident and place it within the gendered politics between the local and national in 1930s-China. Well-behaved women rarely make history. As the male-dominated media often adopted gender as a weapon to attack women and block them from speaking about social issues, what makes Chen a significant figure in Chinese intellectual history, as I argue in this talk, is her uncompromised character to speak. Like what she wrote in the last essay in the series, —it was in one's consciousness to stop those kids who were about to pick up 'sheep shit' from the ground and put in the mouth, — she needed to criticise when she saw something wrong, and it was her moral and social responsibility to do so.

Speaker

Dr Xin FAN (范鑫) is a historian of twentieth-century China. He is interested in Chinese intellectual history, historiography, and global history. He is the author of *World History and National Identity in China: The Twentieth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2021). He also co-edited *Reception of Greek and Roman Antiquity in East Asia* (Brill, 2018). He is currently working on a book manuscript tentatively titled *The Right to Talk about China: The Rise of Emotional Politics, 1900 to 1949*, as well as collaborating with scholars in Europe, America, and Asia on several projects on nationalism, historiography, and conceptual history. In addition, he is writing about world-historical analogies. Dr Fan is Teaching Associate in Modern Chinese History at the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Cambridge. He is also a Fellow and Director of Studies at Lucy Cavendish College.

