New Woman in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction

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EPILOGUE

Ding Ling in Yan’an:
A New Woman within the Party Structure?

Of all the radical male and female writers within the May Fourth group who represented new women in fiction, Ding Ling’s life and work present by far the most complex case of negotiations of gender position, radical politics, and narrative style. The demands of such negotiations are registered in the changes we have seen in the theme and style of her fiction before 1936, particularly the shifts in her narrative deployment of emotions, as she adjusted to literary and political restrictions while continuing her pursuit of Chinese women’s liberation as well as the establishment of her status as a serious writer. In this chapter I will examine the new development in Ding Ling’s representation of new women after her induction into the Communist community of Yan’an in order to explore not only the relationship between her literary endeavors and political allegiance but also some general issues central to the May Fourth construction of the figure of the new woman.

Before Ding Ling joined in the Communist government in Yan’an, her fiction had already exposed the problematic of the male-centered May Fourth discourses of Chinese modernity and the male formula of othering the Other for self-representation. After her initiation into the Communist Party system, she continued to produce controversial works, even as she attempted to comply with Party policies. In the 1940s she was criticized in Yan’an for her story “When I Was In Xia Village” (“Wo zai xiacun de shihou,” 1940) and “In the Hospital” (Zai yiyuan zhong,” 1940). These two stories reveal the backwardness of the masses at Communist-controlled Yan’an instead of presenting a positive picture of the peasant Other, and thus violated the edict issued by the Party to form a united front with the peasants. Ironically, in these two stories Ding Ling also made greater efforts to adopt the objective narrative style required by the Party. Ding Ling’s political mishap at Yan’an raises the question of how, if at all, a woman writer could maintain an independent identity when faced with increasingly totalitarian control of literature. To answer this question, we need to examine some of the narrative aspects of these two stories that demonstrate Ding Ling’s at-
tempts at accommodation. But first, a general survey of the sociopolitical and personal circumstances that prompted Ding Ling’s relocation to Yan’an and, as a result, brought the new changes in Ding Ling’s fiction will provide a necessary and illuminating background.

In 1948, Ding Ling’s long-time friend and Communist literary critic Feng Xuefeng attempted to explain Ding Ling’s conversion to Communism. He claimed to have detected a “crisis” in the author’s career at the precise point when she made a success with “Miss Sophia’s Diary” (295). This was because, he explained, compared to Lu Xun’s “Regret for the Past,” which “uncovers the deep sociopolitical origin of the characters’ tragedy” (295), Ding Ling’s story only portrayed a worshipper of romantic love in Sophia. Sophia “is separated from the revolutionary social forces. Sophia’s emptiness and despair prove exactly that she does not have the strength to grow with the times, though her ideals of love are also the product of the times” (294). Feng Xuefeng further pointed out three ways for Ding Ling to cope with this crisis. One was to remain isolated from the revolutionary cause and society and continue to write “playful works full of sentimentality, nihilism, and despair” (295), works that would only be weaker and inferior simulacrum of “Miss Sophia’s Diary.” Another way was to stop writing altogether. And the third way for Ding Ling, which Feng Xuefeng advocated as “the true path,” was to move from love to revolution: “Passionate pursuit of romantic love has fulfilled the need of young people liberated by the May Fourth Movement. It has inherent revolutionary significance in that it answered to the call of the time. Therefore, it is very natural, very proper [for a writer] to move [from the pursuit of love] to revolution” (295). Feng declared, “This should be a turning point for Ding Ling” (295).

Feng Xuefeng’s mapping of the three routes proved accurate for radical writers, especially women writers, of the May Fourth group. For those who had once promoted doctrines of individualism and romantic love, the option at the time was to convert to leftist radicalism, or suffer negative reception or even exclusion from the canon of modern literature, a fate well demonstrated in the cases of Feng Yuanjun and Lu Yin. Of course, the disciplinary force of revolutionary discourses was by no means limited to women writers. For instance, Lu Xun, called by some the founding father of modern Chinese literature, was attacked violently for his “pessimistic” depiction of the spiritual ailment among the Chinese masses. But compared to women writers, male writers were better equipped to defend their own “unrevolutionary” writing styles in the name of revolution because of their august position as the chief creator of modern knowledge. Furthermore, they had also constructed for themselves a positive public image against the figure of the unenlightened Chinese woman and through the invocation of an enlightenment project. Mao Dun, for example, invoked the concept of “Realism” to justify his eroticization of the female body under the rubric of raising revolutionary consciousness, claiming, “this kind of women will join revolution if their circumstances change” (“Cong Guling dao Dongjing” 13).
As a woman writer who overcame large odds against her gender, Ding Ling’s life and fiction presented a far more complex case than the straightforward teleology outlined by Feng Xuefeng. Like her fellow women writers, Ding Ling demonstrated her individual agency by appropriating discursive patterns established by radical males in order to establish her modern identity. Furthermore, her unwavering pursuit of Chinese women’s independence led her to devise new strategies to adapt to the rise of Marxism in the 1930s. In life Ding Ling chose Marxism due to both the national crisis and personal upheavals in the decade between 1930 and 1940. The radical 1930s saw the Japanese bombing of Shanghai (1931), their seizure and occupation of Manchuria (1931), and, consequently, the rise of Chinese nationalism to a new height. For May Fourth intellectuals, the promotion of national salvation had always enabled them to claim the moral superiority and political power otherwise denied them in their turbulent and changing society. The very real threat of a full-scale Sino-Japanese war also substantiated their narrative of national crisis, and thus aggrandized rather than diminished their image as the moral guardian of the nation. This can be seen in the revolutionary rhetoric and “National Defense Literature” (guofang wenxue) that they passionately endorsed in order to call on all social strata to join forces to fight against imperialist invasion. A member of the May Fourth group, Ding Ling also designated herself as participant in Chinese modernization as well as advocate of women’s rights, but she had more personal stake in leftist radicalism. Not only was her husband Hu Yepin executed by the Nationalist government in 1931, leaving behind her and their infant son, she herself was also put under house arrest by the Nationalists for three years before finally escaping to Yan’an in 1936.

Although the events in Ding Ling’s life already suggest the interplay of individual agency and sociopolitical forces, the changes in Ding Ling’s fiction reveal more clearly her attempts at self-determination, for they demonstrate her continual quest for female empowerment rather than a simplistic turning “from love to revolution,” as described by Feng Xuefeng. Generally speaking, Ding Ling’s fiction after 1931 displays increasing narrative self-effacement, as she eschewed subjective modes such as the genre of diary fiction in favor of third-person narration. However, not only did the content of her fiction expose the discriminatory treatment of women within the patriarchal Party structure, but she also sought to speak from the location of an authoritative experiencing female subject. Ding Ling was accused of clinging to bourgeois individualism and forsaking collectivism precisely because her concern for the fate of Chinese women remained the guiding force of her literary endeavors.

Ding Ling’s political misfortune at Yan’an was also attributable to her narrative construction of a new voice for the authorial self, one that had evolved from her fiction written in the early 1930s. Before moving to Yan’an, Ding Ling had attempted to solve the dilemma that women faced in works such as “Yecao,” where she proposed that women control their emo-
tions through writing in order to gain power. Her increasing indoctrination in Marxist ideology, however, alerted her to the broader social base underlying the individual’s fate. Applying the Marxist interpretation of the relationship between the individual and society, Ding Ling declared that women could not overcome emotionalism and obtain liberation on their own. In her “Sanba jie yougan” (“Thoughts on March 8,” 1942) written at Yan’an, she stated, “Women are incapable of transcending the age they live in. They are incapable of resisting all the temptations of society or all the silent oppression they suffer here in Yan’an” (“Thoughts on March 8” 319). Rather than issue a call for women’s passive submission to the Party as their savior, she encouraged them to proactively strengthen their body and mind while appointing herself spokesperson on behalf of all Chinese women: “I myself am a woman, and I therefore understand the failings of women better than others, but I also have a deeper understanding of what they suffer” (319). Predictably, her separation of women as an independent interest group and, particularly, her self-image as a representative of women fighting against any oppressive force brought her stern criticism from the Party.

Reflective of the particular milieu at Yan’an, the reception of Ding Ling’s two stories “When I Was in Xia Village” and “In the Hospital” epitomizes not only the political tension of her position but also her attempts at accommodation through narrative strategy. These two stories apparently have very little in common, except for the historical background (the Sino-Japanese war) and geographical location (Communist-controlled North-western China). Whereas “Xia Village” depicts the ordeal of a peasant girl and the “I”-narrator’s friendship with her, “In the Hospital” tells the story of a female intellectual, a trained obstetrician assigned to work in an ill-equipped hospital close to the battlefield. Moreover, while “Xia Village” employs a first-person narrator, “In the Hospital” features a narrative completely in the third-person. However, both stories centralize the theme of the entrapment or liberation of the new woman through particular configurations of women’s emotions.

In “Xia Village,” the “I”-narrator, a cultural officer of the Communist army, goes to Xia Village to convalesce. Here she meets a village girl by the name of Zhenzhen, with whom she develops a friendship. Raped and abducted by the Japanese army during a raid on the village, Zhenzhen has become a secret agent for the Communist government, collecting Japanese
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military information and passing it along to the Communists. When she comes home after one year’s absence with a sexually transmitted disease, the people in her community greet her with contempt, hostility, and pathological fascination. However, Zhenzhen emerges as a true heroine despite all the obstacles. Not only has she stoically endured the incredible sufferings at the hands of the Japanese, she is also able to overcome the confinement of familial and romantic love through the application of rational reflection. Eventually, she decides to go against her family’s wishes for her to marry her former lover, and leaves to seek a full recovery from her illness and an education. Upon hearing of Zhenzhen’s decision, the narrator comments, “I was amazed. Something new was coming out of her” (“When I Was in Hsia Village” 315).

In contrast to the forbearing peasant girl Zhenzhen, the heroine in “In the Hospital,” Lu Ping, expresses much pessimism and frustration about her thoroughly alienating working environment. In the hospital, she encounters bureaucratic and impersonal leaders, negligent staff, vulgar, conniving, or malicious colleagues, and slow-witted peasant patients. Her brief stay at the hospital would have ended in complete disaster, as she stumbles against and struggles with numerous obstacles at every turn, if not for her fortuitous conversation with a male patient in the hospital. The man, a soldier whose feet had been amputated, advises Lu Ping on strategy: “You’re too young! Don’t be impatient! Go slowly” (“Zai yiyuan zhong” 291). Miraculously, Lu Ping’s complaints reach the ears of her superiors in the Ministry of Health. She is sent away to continue her studies, as she has wished all along. The story ends with a moral, which was said to have encouraged countless young people in Yan’an at the time of the story’s publication: “People, like iron, must pass through numerous tempering fires before their real worth can be proven. A person matures amidst hardship” (291).

Both of these two stories highlight the leitmotif of the intellectual learning from the people, advocated by Mao Zedong and later more systematically articulated in his “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art” (1942). In “In the Hospital,” Lu Ping’s path to a better life is predicted by a male solider, and in “Xia Village” much emphasis is placed on the fact that the intellectual self is inspired by the peasant Other because the Other overcomes seemingly impassable obstacles to build a fulfilling life. The contrast between the emotional yet ineffectual female intellectual in “In the Hospital” and the peasant girl full of heroic forbearance in “Xia Village” also conveys the necessity of intellectuals’ re-education by the people. However, the two stories, in expressing Ding Ling’s concerns about women’s status, still detracted from the Party’s policies. Not only did Ding Ling describe women’s victimization by the Party in these two stories, as one heroine’s sexuality is exploited and the other stifled by the ignorance and indifference of Party bureaucracy, she also continued to explore the role of female emotions in women’s self-strengthening. This can be seen not only in the plots but also in the narrative forms of these two stories. Ding Ling empha-
sized the “I”-narrator’s admiration for the peasant heroine’s stoic forbearance in “Xia Village.” Moreover, in “In the Hospital” she chose the more objective third-person narrative mode to depict a character that was more similar to herself in educational background and life experiences, as if hoping to set up a more clear-cut boundary between the authorial self and the character in order to rein in her own emotions.

Precisely because of her continual advocacy of women’s independence, Ding Ling’s deliberate change to more objective narrative modes did not prevent her fiction from being classified as subversive by the Communist regime. Partly, this was also because Ding Ling potentially posed more threat to the Communist regime by making an effort to appear more objective. She was apparently abandoning the limited vision of the intellectual elite in order to expose social problems from a more objective perspective. Ding Ling was thus able to launch more powerful attack on the ignorance, prejudice, and cruelty of the peasants as well as the flaws of the Communist regime, having enhanced the credibility of her fiction by apparently answering the Maoist calls for learning from the people and abandoning bourgeois beliefs. At the same time, Ding Ling did not realize that the Communist Party placed more emphasis on the content of fiction than on its form; the Party resurrected and doggedly adhered to the Confucian concept of literature as a tool to convey a version of “Truth” as prescribed by the Party alone. Ding Ling’s change of style failed to win approval, for she actually used the objective narrative modes to espouse ideas that clashed with Party ideologies.

The reception of these two stories at Yan’an revealed the perils Ding Ling had to face when voicing different opinions to the Party. The Chinese Communist Party, in presenting itself as the only legitimate representative of the people, did not tolerate any detracting force. Under this regime, literature was expected to serve the stated goals of the main political campaigns. Even though Ding Ling deliberately distanced herself from an “individualist” position in narrative form, she defied the Party control by taking on the task of impeaching the failings of the Party and speaking for the victimized and the oppressed within the revolutionary community. Precisely because Ding Ling designated herself as guardian of women’s interests, a topic about which she claimed to have intimate knowledge, she also occupied a particularly vulnerable position. In placing women’s interests above those of the Party but particularly by asserting her individual authority over party policies, she was treated as the ringleader of an otherwise relatively silent body of women.

Ding Ling’s experience at Yan’an shows that women writers were unable to remain “liberated” within the patriarchal Communist Party structure. Nevertheless, Ding Ling’s act of speaking out on behalf of women in literature signals not only her desire for an independent voice in the face of Party strictures but also her persistent strategy of appropriating male formula for female empowerment. Just as she had appropriated narrative conventions
established by May Fourth male writers to formulate female subjectivity before her Yan’an period, in Yan’an she adopted objective narrative modes in order to express her concerns for Chinese women. Ding Ling’s “feminist” consciousness, albeit perhaps more “collectivist” than “individualist,” was always sustained by a versatile narrative ventriloquism.

Ding Ling’s Yan’an experience is typical in its illumination of the complex configuration of gender and party politics that shaped her representation of the new woman in fiction. In fact, due to its encapsulation of the unique alchemy of gender and modernity of the May Fourth period, Ding Ling’s fiction provides us both a vehicle to examine the problematic inherent in the representation of new women by radical May Fourth intellectuals and a springboard for further inquiries into the self-other relationship both within and outside of the May Fourth canon, and beyond the short period of the 1920s–1930s that is the focus of this book.

First of all, the changes in Ding Ling’s representation of new women at different phases of her writing career not only demonstrate the creation and consolidation of a modern identity through the invocation of discourses of Chinese modernity but also expose the gender politics at play in such undertakings. As I have mentioned before, male May Fourth intellectuals particularly advocated the liberation of Chinese women from the “Confucian” family and the construction of the fictional counterpart of those new women in order to promote national modernization through the creation of a modern Chinese literature. However, representation of the psychologically more complex new woman, as compared to the more “simple-minded” peasant woman, in Chinese fiction was also paradoxically one of the ways in which male writers of the era explored, negotiated, and laid claim to their own emerging identity as modern intellectuals. By expressing their own “modernist” discontent and lodging political protest against social injustice through the representation of the new woman, male intellectuals sought to demonstrate their own emotional sensitivity and humanistic inclination. Moreover, in representing the new woman they ostensibly appropriated Western narrative forms such as first-person narration in order to demolish the traditional elitist tradition. Yet their self-explanation and legitimization often betray a classical heritage that defines literature as a vessel of the universal Truth. Lu Xun, Yu Dafu, Ba Jin and Mao Dun all cited the morality of their public missions (e.g., to enlighten the masses, to promote nationalist awareness, to indict the old system, or to depict the psychological crisis of revolutionaries) to defend their literary practices. Furthermore, the narrative forms that male intellectuals adopted for the representation of new women often reveal their male-centered consciousness and “traditional” sensibilities. May Fourth male writers not only resurrected the premodern scheme of allegorizing women for both self-representation and political propaganda, but also created synthesized forms through an unself-conscious application of their own premodern cultural heritage as well as a self-conscious adaptation of techniques gained from the study of Western literatures. By turning the
male schematization of a female Other on its head for the creation of an independent female subject, Ding Ling’s literary endeavors bring into sharp focus the male exploitation of images of women for both political and personal ends, thus exposing a male-centered consciousness deeply rooted in China’s history of patriarchal rule.

By constructing new women through the appropriation of dominant discursive patterns, Ding Ling’s fiction also illustrates the way women writers within the May Fourth tradition contributed to the definitions and meanings of Chinese modernity. Women writers’ literary achievements, ranging from the broaching of previously taboo topics such as women’s sexuality to the creation of a female subject in fiction, not only made up an indispensable part of twentieth-century Chinese literature but also established the authors’ status as participants in the creation and dissemination of discourses of Chinese modernity. However, women writers had to overcome various constraints imposed by the very modern male intellectuals who had initially promoted Chinese women’s break away from tradition. A particularly revealing example was male intellectuals’ gender-targeted literary criticism of “feminine emotionalism” that prescribed for women writers the only acceptable form of modernity. Feng Yuanjun and Lu Yin, although having produced only limited amount of fiction, established a model of articulating modern consciousness through the integration of an emotional logic into the Western form of first-person narration. In comparison, Ding Ling illuminated the gendered nature of the modern form of diary fiction and its limitation of women’s liberation. Her continual efforts of espousing women’s control of emotions, though influenced by the dominant male discourses of female emotionalism, further confirmed her commitment to the pursuit of women’s interests and independence.

By displaying the complex interaction of dominant discourses and individual agency, Ding Ling’s case also provides a new way to look at the apparent compatibility between the May Fourth legacy and totalitarian politics. On the one hand, Ding Ling’s life and fiction reveal the link between cultural radicalism and political radicalism. Her case reveals that May Fourth intellectuals’ antitraditionalism not only originated from a Confucian heritage of speaking for the people and exposing the immorality of the existing political regime, but also made them more susceptible to regimes of cultural conservatism and patriarchal dominance such as the Communist Party, precisely because they inherited such a self-image as representative and advocate of the people along with premodern discursive habits. On the other hand, Ding Ling’s life and fiction also suggest that rather than follow the simplistic paradigm of resistance versus domination, we must instead assess individual agency, especially female agency, in light of the individual’s appropriation and subversion of dominant discourses through narrative maneuvering.

In this light, the study of this particular group of May Fourth fiction will also facilitate further inquiries on modern China. By combining the textual and extratextual, the literary and the political, as well as insights from
the different narrative strategies used by male and female writers, this book hopes to shed new light on the crucial significance of both the “modern woman” and “modern fiction” at an important point in Chinese history. But more importantly, it illustrates a way to obtain insights into the ideological and literary orientations of contemporary Chinese society by unraveling the mesh of interests that make up the politics of the narrative form, and thus bringing the personal into conjunction with the political, and tradition with modernity.