The Significance of Ding Ling’s Literary Works in Early-Twentieth Century China

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Ding Ling was a notable literary figure in both the May Fourth Movement and the Communist Party in China from the 1920s through to the 1940s. Her published works from early in her writing career aimed to resolve questions such as how a woman should act, feel, and behave at a time when the role of women in the family and in broader Chinese society was being debated. While her works initially contained very little, if any, political messages, and primarily explored female subjectivity among Chinese women, they later evolved into works that focused more on some of the political issues of the day. This evolution in her writing followed her publically stated belief as editor of the Communist front journal *Great Dipper* that there was a “need for literature and literary culture to respond to political crisis,” as well as a growing politicization of literary culture throughout China. One such example of this was the publication in 1948 of one of her more famous works, *The Sun Shines over the Sanggan River*, which focused on the process of land reform the Communist Party had been implementing across China in the 1940s and its’ effect on the different classes of tenants.

While Ding Ling’s writings focused on issues affecting women in China in the early to mid-twentieth century, the settings of her works and the topics explored changed depending on the context in which they were written. Her significance as a writer is not only for her role in promoting women’s rights in China through her stories, but also lies in her ability to do so in the constantly changing political climate of China during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, as well

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2 Ibid., 25.
3 Ibid., 29.
as for her role in allowing future readers of her works a glimpse of the intricate challenges that women had to face and endure as a result of the political, economic, and social events of the times.

The cession of the Shandong province in China from Germany to Japan after the conclusion of the First World War, and the continued exploitation of China by Japan through such acts as the issuing of the Twenty-One Demands, led to massive calls from the citizens of China for reform in the country. These calls culminated in massive protests that began on May 4th, 1919 and spawned what became known as the May Fourth Movement that continued for years after the initial protests took place on that day.6 Central to some of the activists within the movement, who also became known as the New Culturalists, was the issue of gender within Chinese society, and they sought to bring it from the “periphery to the center of cultural politics.”7 One of these New Culturalists was Li Dazhao, who argued in an essay published in 1919 that “[t]hough men and women have different genders, women’s position in society should be just like men’s, and women should have their own status, life goals, and legal rights.”8 Ding Ling was fifteen years old at the time of the protests in 1919, but continued to be steeped in the politics and social activism of the movement, later joining the Anarchist Party and demonstrating against the oppression of women in Chinese society.9

One of the goals of the anarcho-feminists, and the May Fourth cultural revolutionaries in general, was to allow women to “gain independence and become a woman” in Chinese society.10 However, largely male theorists had difficulty imagining what a female individual would be like once liberated from the old Confucian values, such as the expected obedience towards father, husband, and son throughout a woman’s life, given that women were “thought to be more burdened by past practice than men.”11 The general desire to explore what an independent, modern woman of

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6 Barbara N. Ramusack and Sharon Sievers, Women in Asia: Restoring Women to History (Bloomington, In: Indiana University Press, 1999), 147.
7 Ding Ling, I Myself Am A Woman, 21.
9 Ding Ling, I Myself Am A Woman, 21-2.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 23.
China would be like by the intellectual community is reflected in Ding Ling’s works of the decade. Among these works were Miss Sophia’s Diary and Mengke. The main character in Miss Sophia’s Diary, for instance, is concerned throughout the story about how a woman should act, feel, and behave, and measures her actions against what a woman supposedly ought to do.\textsuperscript{12} Mengke, although not as successful as Miss Sophia’s Diary, follows a character similar to Miss Sophia in that she is intensely aware “of her own sensibilities as she struggles to come to some sense of self” in the face of hostility by those around her.\textsuperscript{13} The characters in many of Ding Ling’s works during this time period, including Mengke and Sophia were intended by Ding Ling to address the question raised during the May Fourth movement about what a woman in China would be like in the absence of Confucianism.\textsuperscript{14} In general, her works in this period led Ding Ling to not only be hailed as the first Chinese writer who “speaks out about the dilemmas of the liberated woman in China,”\textsuperscript{15} but were also significant for focusing primarily on themes of female subjectivity and examining some very sensitive issues of the time regarding women, including “sexual repression and expression, homoeroticism, female Don Juanism, [and] sexual politics.”\textsuperscript{16}

In the 1930s, Ding Ling began composing works that moved away from the idea that men and women were different on the grounds that the sex of a person determines their character,\textsuperscript{17} and towards ideas that were charged with political meaning. Her writings during this time were influenced by her entry into the Communist Party of China after the execution of her husband, Hu Yepin, at the hands of the Nationalists in 1931.\textsuperscript{18} Additionally, there was a growing belief among left-wing writers that the new role that they should hold within a reforming China was that of “moral servitors of a culture and people in crisis.”\textsuperscript{19} Given her prominence as a literary figure for

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 26.
\textsuperscript{13} Feuerwerker, “The Changing Relationship Between Literature and Life,” 289.
\textsuperscript{14} Ding Ling, \textit{I Myself Am A Woman}, 26.
\textsuperscript{16} Ding Ling, \textit{I Myself Am A Woman}, 25.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 30.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 29.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 31.
her successes in the previous decade, her new membership in the Communist Party, and the overall increased “politicization of literature” during this decade, Ding Ling was forced to begin adapting her writing to satisfy “ideological preconceptions” that now existed within the literary profession.\textsuperscript{20} She ambitiously began combining feminism and socialism to argue that the differences in gender were superficial in the context of social revolution, as a revolution of this nature only required that “you contribute what you have, not that you do the same work.”\textsuperscript{21} This combination of feminism and socialism was extremely significant in overcoming the problem faced by Chinese Marxism up to that point in that the “central contradiction among people was determined by class, not gender.”\textsuperscript{22} Ding Ling’s solution to the problem created stories that now portrayed “footbound, aged, or sexually traumatized women or defenseless children” as heroic revolutionaries capable of meaningful, powerful acts within their society.\textsuperscript{23} It is reasonable to speculate that Ding Ling’s stories during this time helped pave the way for the future mobilization of groups within the populace other than young male revolutionaries and peasants, such as women and children, by the Chinese Communist Party.

One of her most notable works during this period was \textit{Mother}, not only for the insight that it provides on some of the different aspects of the decade, but also for the example that Yi-tsi Feuerwerker believes it sets in the new way in which Ding Ling’s literary works would be evaluated on, given that she was highly involved within the Communist Party and in the political events of the day from the 1930s onwards.\textsuperscript{24} The insight that \textit{Mother} gives contemporary readers into the decade not only includes insight into how some of the earliest academies dedicated to women in China operated, but also insight into Ding Ling’s personal life.\textsuperscript{25} The protagonist of this story, a young revolutionary woman named Yu Manzhen, also came to represent a new direction in what was

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Feuerwerker, “The Changing Relationship Between Literature and Life,” 303.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Ding, Ling. \textit{I Myself Am A Woman}, 31.
  \item \textsuperscript{22} Ding Ling, \textit{I Myself Am A Woman}, 30-1.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} Ding Ling, \textit{I Myself Am A Woman}, 31.
  \item \textsuperscript{24} Feuerwerker, “The Changing Relationship Between Literature and Life,” 303.
  \item \textsuperscript{25} Ding Ling, \textit{I Myself Am A Woman}, 32.
\end{itemize}
considered feminine in Ding Ling’s fiction. The story significantly argues that women were not oppressed merely by gender but by rules of personal etiquette and convention that bound women to ‘clichéd behavior’, and were the true cause of women’s suffering. In these ways, *Mother* is an example of Ding Ling not only adapting to the new demands being made of writers in an increasingly politicized literary culture in China, but also continuing her “demands for gender justice and change” at a time when the leadership of the Communist Party was becoming reluctant to follow through on their initial promises of women’s emancipation in the face of growing hostility from peasant men.

The 1940s were a decade in which the struggle for political control of China between the Communist Party and the Guomindang intensified, and the Communist Party backpedaled on their promises of women’s emancipation that they had guaranteed in the 1931 Jiangxu marriage regulations. Three different legal texts on marriage were published by the Party while they were based in Yan’an in 1939, 1944, and 1946, and highlight the changing political support that the women’s rights movement had from the Party leadership. In these texts, the Communist Party continued to affirm their stance on monogamy and their opposition towards ‘marriage by barter’, but placed further restrictions on the ability for women to seek a divorce from their husbands, including disallowing a divorce if a woman was married to a soldier unless he deserted or defected. The reasons for this was that the Party leadership viewed the absolute freedom for a woman to pursue a divorce from her husband as having the potential to harm poor peasant men, a large group of people the Party hoped to mobilize for their revolution. The declining importance of women’s emancipation to the Party was also related to the views held by the mostly male leadership that “efforts to emancipate women… [were] legitimate only to the extent that they could be harmonized with the class struggle being waged by poor

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26 Ibid., 33.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 30.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
exploited men,” highlighting that women’s rights only mattered as far as the political agenda was concerned.

It was in this political climate that Ding Ling was at the peak of her political power. She was not only a government cadre within the Party and one of China’s most well-known cultural leaders but she was also a prominent figure in the increasing effort being exerted by the Communist Party to control all literary expression during this time period. She used her powerful position as a notable writer and senior Party member to criticize what she considered the failures of the Communist Party leadership in their actions with regard to women’s emancipation in her essay titled *Thoughts on March 8* that was published in 1942. In it, she called “into question the party’s commitment (or ability) to change popular attitudes towards women”, and addressed the double standards that existed concerning women’s revolutionary participation. Kay Ann Johnson goes into further details about how Ding Ling viewed the Communist Party’s actions regarding women:

“…women were not encouraged to take on new roles as activists, but if they did so they were still expected to maintain traditional family obligations and roles as well. The result was that women were faced with insoluble contradictions and viewed with contempt however they acted. If women did not marry, they were ridiculed; if they did marry and had children, they were criticized for spending time with political activities instead of tending to their men and children; if they stayed at home, they were despised as 'backward'. The problem was not, as some leaders claimed, simply the shortcomings and weaknesses of the women themselves, but the male-dominated society they lived in. The Party had proclaimed lofty theories of gender equality, but failed to deal with the actual conditions and attitudes which held women in an inferior position.”

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36 Ibid., 43.
Ding Ling’s criticisms echoed complaints by other contemporary feminists who saw the Communist Party as a patriarchal organization that cared little regarding their actual treatment of women in Jiangxi and Yan’an where they were mainly based during this time. Ding Ling’s literary works during this time period also contained subtle criticisms of not only the societal pressures being placed on women in the revolutionary context, but also the direction that the Party leadership was heading towards regarding their treatment of women. In her story *When I Was in Xia Village*, a young woman is raped and abducted by the Japanese, and is convinced by Party cadres after escaping to return behind enemy lines in order to gather valuable information for the revolutionary army. Once her mission is completed, she returns to her village, and is treated with contempt by her old neighbors for failing to uphold the ‘traditional norms of chastity’ as opposed to receiving acknowledgement for her sacrifices. As Kay Ann Johnson states, Ding Ling portrays women in *When I Was in Xia Village* as “trapped by a society that despised, belittled and ignored them, even while using their services for the revolutionary cause.” She portrays the Party as failing to support women for their selfless service after exploiting them for the revolution.

Another of Ding Ling’s works during this period was *Affair in East Village*, whose plot, as outlined by Tani Barlow, emphasized “the degree to which women act as sexual commodities in the political economy of rural society.” It is important to note that this work, alongside *When I Was in Xia Village* and other stories written by Ding Ling during this period, employed rape narratives to “redefine and focus upon the question of representation of women in statist discourses.” The significance of using such narratives lies in the recommendation made by the Communist Party leadership during this time to use “rape tropes” in the composition of National Defense propaganda narratives composed by the left-wing writers involved in the Party, as it was considered “a subject appropriate to the interests

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40 Johnson, *Women, the Family, and Peasant Revolution in China*, 73.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid., 74.
43 Ibid., 73-4.
45 Ibid.
of the nation.” By using rape narratives in this way, Ding Ling not only abides by the political demands that are being made of writers during this time period, but also uses these demands to her advantage in further advancing discussion on the place that women held within Chinese society up to that point.

One of Ding Ling’s most famous literary achievements, *The Sun Shines Over the Sanggan River*, which was published in 1948 and awarded the Stalin Prize in 1951, shows her adapting to the new realities faced by activists for women’s emancipation and rights in the 1940s. Not only was the Party leadership pulling back their support for women’s emancipation in light of the resistance the Party cadres faced from peasant men, but other women, such as Cai Chang, began to argue against “‘empty talk’ of women’s emancipation” after the imposition of an economic blockade by the Guomindang in 1942. It was argued that there should instead be an emphasis on the importance of family, health, and prosperity. In *The Sun Shines Over the Sanggan River*, Ding Ling reflects these new arguments, and “does not champion individual women against the family system” but instead reflects the notion that there may be change in the future regarding sexual relations in rural China, and that such changes were not an immediate priority. The publication of this work also correlates with the Communist Party perpetuating new relationships within Chinese society. The Party had begun formalizing “the family through its policies and bureaucracies in order to take it [the family] out of the hands of the community” and opened it up for new involvement within the family unit by the Party.

While all of Ding Ling’s works during this period continued to address women’s rights within the changing political framework of the 1940s, her essay *Thoughts on March 8* had perhaps the most impact politically within China of all her published works. The complaints lodged by Ding Ling through this essay proved embarrassing to Party leaders once word of the content of her essay had reached the Guomindang. In a response to the criticisms within

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46 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
51 Ibid., 39.
the essay, the Party leadership issued a formal policy statement that argued that the emancipation of women would be achieved through women’s participation in production in February 1943.\(^{52}\)

Additionally, Mao goes a step further, and began reframing all of the major issues of Party life, including marriage and divorce reform and separatist or integrationist policies on women’s work, that were being debated as a result of Ding Ling’s criticism.\(^{53}\) He reframed them “not as flexible debatable issues of cultural politics, but as inflexible matters of correct or incorrect literary representation.”\(^{54}\) This new doctrine from Mao, which became known as the ‘Talks at Yan’an’, laid the groundwork for making literary representation a product of the political decision-making process, and would go on to play a significant role in the debate of what was politically correct among the culture produced during the Cultural Revolution years.\(^{55}\)

In spite of the dominant social expectations for women and the frequently changing political climate throughout the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, Ding Ling successfully managed both to adapt her works to the political demands of the day, and to also continue to address the issues of women’s rights in Chinese society. During the May Fourth movement that was most active in the 1920s, a time when questions were being raised about what a woman free of the burden of Confucian values would be like, Ding Ling responded with works like *Miss Sophia’s Diary*, exploring the innermost emotions of women in a way that had not been done before.\(^{56}\) In the 1930s, when there were calls for literature that was “more socially and politically engaged,”\(^{57}\) Ding Ling began framing women’s issues within a socialist context,\(^{58}\) and spoke about the way personal etiquette and the conventions demanded and enforced by Chinese society was the reason for women’s oppression.\(^{59}\) In the 1940s, a time when discussion of women’s emancipation was considered low priority when compared to mobilizing peasant men for the revolution,\(^{60}\) Ding

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\(^{52}\) Bailey, *Women and Gender in Twentieth-Century China*, 98.


\(^{54}\) Ibid.


\(^{56}\) Bailey, *Women and Gender in Twentieth-Century China*, 64-5.

\(^{57}\) Ibid., 65.


\(^{59}\) Ibid., 33.

\(^{60}\) Johnson, *Women, the Family, and Peasant Revolution in China*, 81.
Ling continued to speak out about the double standards that women were held by and their exploitation for the revolutionary cause in both her works, and in her critical essay, *Thoughts on March 8*. The impact that she had in the literary world was so significant in her lifetime that other women writers who chose not to conform to the dominant social expectations of them in early twentieth century China, such as those from Manchukuo, consciously emulated Ding Ling. Her works not only advocated women’s issues during her time, but have also allowed future readers to observe some of the different changes that China was undergoing during her lifetime, including the politicization of literature, the process and effects of land reform, and the new examination of women within both the family and Chinese society.

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61 Ibid., 74.
Bibliography


