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IN QUEST OF THE WRITER DING LING

YI-TSI MEI FEUERWERKER

On January 2, 1981, an unlikely day that I had grimly dedicated to the task of cleaning out my office for whoever would be occupying it during my leave of absence, the letter from Ding Ling arrived. The ragged beige envelope (it had been traveling by land and sea since October 4) was postmarked Peking, the undulating English letters of its address in marked contrast to the vigorous Chinese signature in the lower lefthand corner. That name now leapt at me; I tore open the envelope with unsteady hands and a beating heart. “Dear Ms. Mei Yi-tsi,” began the four-page letter, “Your letter of July moved me deeply, let me thank you.” This was my first direct contact with “my writer,” the subject who had been the focus of my life, work, and waking thoughts, or so it seemed, for the past five years. But not until then did I feel I held in my hand tangible proof that she was indeed alive.

When, as the result of a series of historical accidents, I chose the analysis of Ding Ling’s fiction as my dissertation topic, I had no idea whether she was still in the land of the living. She had been expelled from the Chinese Communist party when she was branded a rightist in 1958, presumably had been exiled somewhere for labor reform, and immediately faded away to become a nonperson. Her writings were completely banned, her name was never mentioned in public, histories of modern Chinese literature produced during the next twenty-odd years gave no indication that one of China’s most prolific and prominent women writers had ever written or had ever existed. Up to the late 1970s any writer ostracized by the party was rarely publicly heard from again; so I assumed with good reason that my scholarly investigations would be restricted mainly to Ding Ling’s completed ouevre, a group of self-contained narrative texts. But the death of Mao Zedong and the fall of the Gang of Four in 1976 ushered in a period of relative liberalization, and in the same

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month that I completed my dissertation, Ding Ling was officially rehabilitated. Indeed, the very day in June 1979 that I received my degree, the news that she had been named a member of the Chinese People’s Consultative Conference, the first clear signal that the party had completely reversed its former verdict against her, was published in the New York Times.

Such a seemingly miraculous coincidence is only one of many that has marked my relationship with my subject. Indeed in retrospect it is difficult to say whether I would have voluntarily selected to study Ding Ling if certain events had not converged. I had come to the United States to study English and then comparative literature. In my choice of profession I was, rather unimaginatively I suppose, following in the footsteps of my parents, who had studied for advanced degrees in literature in American universities, before returning to China to teach. My father died in 1945, but he had often expressed the hope that I would come to America for advanced study. So with the financial help of some of his former colleagues I found myself in America, and at the very same graduate institution my parents had attended, receiving my M.A. exactly twenty years after my mother received hers. Somewhere in the back of my mind as I continued through graduate school was the idea that to really make it in the United States, to prove that I could be a worthy scholar and could compete with members of the male academic establishment on their own ground, I would have to write on a truly “significant subject.” I never thought that that subject would be a Chinese woman writer.

Then quite by chance, I was suggested as a contributor of an article on women writers of the 1920s and 1930s for a volume on women in Chinese society. This was in fact an entirely new subject of inquiry for me, for I had not paid more than passing attention to this first generation of women writers in modern China, having accepted the prevailing critical view that they were not “good” enough for intensive literary analysis. Now as I began to look closely at them as a group, I saw more clearly the established literary tradition against which they had to struggle and their anguished search for the new self-definitions necessary if they were to write at all. It was this anguish and this search that became their primary subject matter, which at times seemed only half-processed into finished literary products. They were extraordinarily self-absorbed; to keep up with their changing lives, the lives they were struggling to bring into being, they wrote over
and over the story of their own lives. And out of this personal and limited art that nevertheless speaks to us with great immediacy, came new insights into the tragedy of women's condition and a momentous expansion of the realm of literature.

But the careers of most of these women writers of the 1920s and 1930s were extremely brief. My attention was drawn to Ding Ling because she alone actively pursued a serious literary career for more than three decades. In 1974, when a conference on modern Chinese literature was organized and the Czech scholar who was to contribute a paper on Ding Ling was providentially (from my point of view) denied an exit visa, I was called upon to replace her. The more I read of Ding Ling the more interested I became in the way her fiction continued to develop within a changing historical and ideological context. Although she had begun like the other women writers by focusing on the subjective concerns of young women, she soon moved beyond to write about their social and political world. Whereas certain critics had given up on her because she had joined the Chinese Communist party, and saw nothing but artistic decline in her postconversion writings, I felt that it was precisely this abiding political commitment, which accounted for her lifelong efforts to balance or reconcile her dual allegiance to the conscientious practice of literature on the one hand, and to the party on the other, that made her an exemplary subject for study. I decided to expand the conference paper into a dissertation on Ding Ling's fiction to examine the relationship between ideology and narrative practice.

I was confident enough in the "significance" of my subject, but not in my ability to complete the dissertation, for by the time I made the decision to do so, an interval of fifteen years taken up mainly with childrearing and part-time teaching had passed. In looking back at my struggle to return to graduate work and carry through with the work on my thesis, it is clear to me now that my mother's efforts to resume her own writing was an important supportive factor. My mother, Ida Lee Mei, belongs to the generation of women that made the breakthrough in China's transition from traditional to modern. When National Central University became coeducational in 1921, she was one in that pioneering class of eight female students. Soon after graduation she became head of a women's normal school. Then she married my father, who had been her professor at Central University, and both came to the United States—she to attend graduate school, he to teach. For one of her courses my mother wrote a series of sketches based
on a first-century B.C. Chinese text, the *Lienü zhuan* (Biographies of Eminent Women). Her professors were so impressed that they urged immediate publication. However, our family was returning to China, and my father advised her to do some revising and checking on dates first. Children—there were to be four in all—further delayed the project and then the manuscript was lost during World War II. My mother’s missed opportunity to become a published author was one of the tragic tales upon which I grew up. Then, quite unexpectedly, about forty-five years later, after my mother had returned to the United States to join her children here, a carbon copy of certain parts of the manuscript was found among the papers of a Radcliffe classmate who had helped with the typing. My mother began to revise and put the sketches into publishable form. She also began writing articles for the neighborhood page of the *Ann Arbor News*, an undertaking born of a secret resolve. Although we lived very close to each other and communicated daily, I had no inkling of her writing until I looked at the paper one Saturday morning and saw her first piece. Thus, during the last stages of my dissertation, my mother and I were engaged in parallel efforts to write. I had before me the example of ambition and determination set by a woman publishing her first book (*Chinese Womanhood*) at age eighty. Her book appeared six months before mine.

Further more, there was an absurd but, I think, sustaining fantasy that kept me at my work. It was a daydream, yet versions of it would appear in night dreams too. At a time when there seemed to be little prospect of the United States normalizing relations with China, or of my traveling to China, when my thesis had as yet no form or shape and Ding Ling was, as far as could be ascertained, either dead or never to be seen again, I began to dream of one day returning to the country I had left some thirty years ago, of finding Ding Ling somewhere (often it appeared to be a jail) and saying in a low voice, “I have written a book about you. . . .” I always stopped there because I never knew how I would finish the sentence. This absurd fantasy—groundless, shameless, impossible as it seemed at the time—is the only fantasy in my life that has ever come true.

Ding Ling began writing in the late 1920s, as a member of the May Fourth generation, the iconoclastic, breakaway generation
that initiated the era of the new Chinese literature. Except for the period when she was silenced, she continued to write for more than fifty years. Taken together, her writings provide a telescopic history of modern Chinese literature. Her personality and temperament seem to have conspired with certain accidents of history and biography to place her constantly in the center of whatever was going on. Time and again, she has been actively involved in the literary issues and controversies of the past half-century.

Ding Ling was born in 1904 into a once wealthy gentry family in Hunan, the home province of many of China's revolutionary leaders. She was named Jiang Bingzhi and later created the pen name Ding Ling. Her paternal grandfather and great-grandfather had been officials under the Manchu dynasty. Indeed, when Ding Ling was born, there was still a Manchu emperor on the throne, a reminder that the tremendous upheavals in China have taken place only within her lifetime. By the time Ding Ling's parents were married, the family had entered a period of precipitous decline, producing, as families will at such times, a generation of degenerate males who whiled away their days in gambling, opium, and keeping fancy horses. Ding Ling's father was such a man, but he suffered from ill health and died when Ding Ling was three. Her mother was the great influence on her life, a woman, Ding Ling has often said, much greater than herself. When Ding Ling's father died leaving her mother with a host of debts and two small children—one an infant son who died soon after—the young widow moved back to her hometown Changde and took the bold step of attending a normal school to prepare herself for a teaching career. She later became a pioneer educator and founder of elementary schools.

In an unfinished novel entitled Mother, Ding Ling gives an account of her mother's experiences as a student, including a moving description of how her mother "let out" her bound feet, a process almost as painful as the initial binding. She soaks them daily in cold water to speed up the process and insists on enduring the pain of running in gym class, even though she could have been excused. The unbound feet become a central image in the novel, symbolic of the mother's heroic efforts to break out of the bonds of the past. With the example provided by her mother, Ding Ling became a precocious activist. When only thirteen, she was demonstrating with other female students at the Hunan Provincial Assembly demanding equal rights for women. With her
mother's support she broke off an arranged marriage in a stormy confrontation with her uncle, the head of the family, later publishing an article denouncing her uncle and the whole social stratum to which he belonged. This was her "first taste of the power of the pen." She soon left home, an "exiled insurrectionist," for the semi-Westernized metropolis of Shanghai to try out the life of a liberated woman in the China of the 1920s.

Ding Ling's feminist concerns can be said to belong to those of the "second generation" in that the pioneering battles against the most flagrant institutionalized forms of oppression—arranged marriages, foot-binding, denial of education—had already been fought and won for the daughter by the mother. What she was to explore in her own life and early writings were the dilemmas of young women who had broken away from traditional social structures and conventional modes of behavior and had found themselves living on the fringes of society, up against the hostile world on their own.

In Shanghai, Ding Ling sporadically attended classes—she never finished high school—studied painting and Western literature, hobnobbed with anarchists, then moved to Peking with the idea of getting into the university. There she met a fledgling poet, Hu Yepin: a "rare person," she was to write some twenty years after he was killed, "with the most perfect qualities, yet a piece of completely uncut, unpolished jade." Soon they were living together, a life of almost idyllic young love, literary aspirations, and precarious poverty.

The story that established Ding Ling's name and made her the most famous—or notorious—woman writer of her time was "The Diary of Miss Sophie," published in 1928, an account of a tubercular, high-strung woman's infatuation with a young man who has the handsome "exterior of a medieval knight" but a despicable soul. It exploded, in the words of contemporary critics, like a bombshell, shattering the quiet of the literary scene. No one in Chinese literature had ever described in such frank and impassioned terms the sexual fantasies of a young woman. Because this is Ding Ling's best-known story, she has been unfortunately identified with its central character; a constant refrain in later political campaigns, when she was attacked for her sexual immorality, was that she was the "incarnation of Sophie." As the history of Marxist criticism in China has shown, fictional characters are an infinitely malleable source of damning evidence to use against a writer, since authors are "responsible" for what
their characters do. Such critically naive or politically calculated blurring of the distinction between life and literature has plagued Ding Ling throughout much of her career.

Although Ding Ling’s early stories won recognition for the unprecedented audacity and sensitivity with which she depicted the psychology of modern young women, more recent criticism has focused on the social context of the dilemmas of her characters. Although liberated in the sense that they have broken with traditional authority, they lack the economic means and social support needed for any genuine independence. They might be free of the institutionalized oppression of fathers or husbands, but they become all the more vulnerable to the pain of betrayal by lovers or by their own fluctuating emotions. Sophie uses the diary form for a relentless investigation of the self caught in this predicament; her apparent liberation from the constraints of social structures leads her to feel that she has no one to blame but herself for what she is doing or suffering. She is therefore all the more anxious to analyze and understand her own behavior. Yet as spectator and self-conscious actor in her own drama, she often catches herself playing a part, making it difficult for others to give her the true understanding that she craves, while sabotaging at the same time her own efforts to evolve an intelligible and authentic image of the self to cope with her personal crisis. By the end of the diary Sophie has become disillusioned with both herself and the diary as a means toward self-understanding. Thus the story in theme and form is a provocative inquiry into the limits of subjectivism in modern literature, and foreshadows Ding Ling’s readiness to move into a broader arena for her fictional explorations.

External events also politicized Ding Ling’s fiction. During the late 1920s both the Kuomintang government’s persecution of writers and the radicalization of literature were proceeding apace. Shanghai, where Ding Ling and Hu Yepin were living, had become the center of intellectual life because its foreign settlements and less than totally efficient police allowed a political opposition to exist with some degree of impunity. Hu Yepin joined the League of Left-Wing Writers and became increasingly active in the Chinese Communist party. While he was busy attending meetings, Ding Ling stayed at home writing stories about the conflict between love and revolution. Their first child, a son, was born in November 1930. Two months later, on January 17, 1931, Hu Yepin was arrested while attending a meeting and on February 7, along with twenty-three or twenty-four alleged Com-
munists, was executed in Longhua prison. The brutality of the summary executions aroused widespread protest within China and abroad, and the Five Martyrs—there were four other young writers among the victims—soon became one of the most powerful emblems of literary persecution in history.

Modern Chinese literary history is strewn with the dead bodies and broken lives of martyred writers. This heartbreaking fact is evidence of a belief in the power and seriousness of literature, a belief apparently shared by those who undertake the risk of writing and those in power who persecute them for doing so. This same belief led Ding Ling to commit herself even more fully to the cause for which her husband had been killed. She soon joined the Communist party and assumed the editorship of its major literary journal. Her own writings also took a sharp leftward turn. Instead of focusing on introspective and alienated young women, she expanded her subject matter to striking factory workers, awakened peasants, social injustice, and the coming socialist revolution.

On May 15, 1933, Ding Ling was arrested, or rather abducted, since it was an illegal operation, from her home in the International Settlement by government agents; she was imprisoned and presumed to have become another martyr. The main purpose of her arrest apparently was not to execute her but to persuade her to renounce the Communist party and to place her talents at the service of the Kuomintang government. She refused to cooperate, but as time went by the conditions of her detention ameliorated. Three years later, in September 1936, she managed a daring escape to the border regions in northwest China, where the Communist party then had its base. For part of the journey she disguised herself as a Manchurian soldier, which meant riding on horseback for the first time in her life, but she made it through the treacherous terrain and arrived to a heroine’s welcome. There was a banquet, and Chairman Mao Zedong composed two poems to commemorate the occasion. Two years later her children, who had been in the care of her mother, were sent to the Border Regions to join her.

When the War of Resistance against Japan broke out in 1937, Ding Ling organized and directed the Northwest Front Service Corps and spent several months with her dramatic troupe traveling through the backward mountain villages of the area, performing plays and songs to spread the message of uniting to fight Japan. One important member of the troupe was the writer Chen
Ming, twelve years her junior. Despite much criticism of their relationship, they were married in 1942.

At the time when Ding Ling arrived at the Border Regions, the Chinese Communist party did not look like much more than a bunch of stragglers who had barely escaped the encirclement campaigns of the Kuomintang and survived the Long March to reach one of the poorest and most backward areas of China. Yet it was from such an improbable base that the party carried out the most dramatic expansion of a revolutionary movement in history and established thirteen years later its government over all of China. There in Yanan the party forged the revolutionary techniques that were to carry it to power, and Mao Zedong formulated his vision of the Chinese revolution as above all a process of mass consciousness-raising. One question that was debated urgently and that directly involved Ding Ling was the role of art and literature within such an engrossing effort. Although the stories about war and revolution from her Yanan period emphasized heroic characters and positive outcomes, she did not believe that support of collective goals precluded all negative criticism. It was over this matter of whether literature should mainly underscore the “bright side” and play down the “dark side” that she came into open conflict with the party.

Ding Ling was at the time the editor of the literary page of the party’s newspaper, *The Liberation Daily*, and in that capacity she called for critical essays on society, literature, and art. She published several articles that exposed the dark side of Yanan reality. She herself contributed an essay, “Thoughts on March 8,” published on March 9, 1942, in which she wrote that although women in the liberated areas under Communist control were much better off than women elsewhere in China, the bitter contradictions of their existence remained. They were forever the objects of attention or criticism, damned if they married or didn’t, had children or didn’t, stayed home or didn’t. Divorce was usually initiated by the man; if the woman wanted it, “then there must be something even more immoral and it is entirely the woman who should be cursed.” Then the woman grew old and lost her attractiveness, never having escaped the fate of being “backward.” In traditional society she might have been considered “pitiful” or “ill-fated”; now that she was supposedly equal and had choices, if she suffered it was “her own doing,” it “served her right.”
I am a woman myself, I understand women’s shortcomings better than most, but I understand even more their suffering. They cannot be above their times, they are not ideal, they are not forged of steel. They are unable to resist society’s temptations and silent oppressions, they all have a history of blood and tears, they have all had lofty emotions (whether they have risen or fallen, are fortunate or unfortunate, still struggling alone or have joined the crowd). To say this about women comrades who have come to Yanan is not unjust. Therefore it is with a great deal of leniency that I consider those who have sunk to become female criminals. I hope that men, especially men in high positions, and women themselves will see the shortcomings of women more as based in society.

For such criticism, Ding Ling and the several writers whose essays she had published were attacked by the party and required to confess their mistakes. Mao Zedong’s famous “Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art,” given in May 1942, were in large part directed against Ding Ling and other “petty bourgeois” writers who, like her, had come to join the revolution at the Border Regions. An important turning point in the history of Chinese literature, the talks state explicitly once and for all that literature and art must be subordinate to politics and claim for the party the right to direct, control, and intervene in the literary process. Although the principles stated by Mao have been applied with varying degrees of stringency, they have remained the fundamental scripture of party policy toward literature for the past forty years.

Having been responsible, in part at least, for precipitating the confrontation and bringing down on literature and art the authoritative pronouncements of Mao Zedong, Ding Ling underwent public self-criticism, worked in the party school and in the countryside, and did not write for the next two years. In 1944 she wrote several sketches of model labor or production heroes based on uplifting real-life incidents and was congratulated by Mao for embarking on this new literary path. When the People’s Republic of China was established five years later, she was for a time one of the most prominent members of its cultural hierarchy, vice-chairperson of the Writers’ Union, editor of important literary journals, and head of the training school for writers. For the first time in her life she traveled abroad, leading delegations to the Soviet Union, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia.

In 1951 Ding Ling was awarded the Stalin Prize in literature for her novel on land reform, *The Sun Shines on the Sanggan River*. The Stalin Prize may or may not in itself be a guarantee of literary
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excellence, but this award, along with her other honors and positions, indicates that Ding Ling was then one of the most acclaimed writers in the People's Republic of China. The events of the novel take place over about twenty-one days during the early phase of radical land reform in a small village of about two hundred families in northern China. Ding Ling managed within these limits to provide in microcosm the quintessential Chinese revolutionary experience. Although land reform was an important policy that helped win over the peasantry in the Communists' war against the Kuomintang government, its main purpose was the total destruction of the traditional structure of rural economic and political power and it took place even where landlords were not the problem. Through participation in the land reform process and the activated mass struggle, the peasants' consciousness was raised; for the first time they saw that their centuries-old poverty and oppression could indeed be lifted and their world transformed into one where hope and a new beginning were suddenly possible. Whether Ding Ling's novel is historically accurate is beside the point. As a fictionalized treatment of an ideological version of the past, it is a celebration of the dream of revolution come true at this special moment of awakening for the humble individuals in small villages.

_The Sun Shines on the Sanggan River_ showed, in its sweeping vision of China in revolution, the vast distance, in both ideology and technique, that Ding Ling had traversed in her writing since her early stories about young women involved in lonely crises of love, sex, and identity. Although this literary development confers interest and complexity on Ding Ling's works, it did not assure her continuing status in a volatile revolutionary society. Her prestigious position lasted but a few years. In 1957 she was the prime target of the antirightist drive and denounced in a nationwide campaign. She was attacked for her superiority complex, for her sexual immorality, for ideological failings, for maligning the peasant masses in her fiction, and for traitorous conspiracy against the party. She was further charged with setting up literature in opposition to party leadership, by subscribing to the bourgeois view that the achieved literary work was an individual creation that could secure for its author profit and fame, a view referred to by her critics as her 'one-bookism.' The party saw it as necessary to wage the struggle against her to 'protect the socialist line in art and literature.'

Could her literary activities indeed have constituted such a
threat? The history of political campaigns against writers in the People's Republic of China—and indeed there have been waves of them since 1949—is painful to contemplate. Factional feuds, some of which can be traced back to the 1930s in Shanghai, when vituperative debate and adroit quoting out of context became the fashion, were an important continuing impetus. The campaigns were exploited as opportunities for rivals to take over literary journals and propel themselves into high positions in the cultural bureaucracy. There were of course genuine ideological uncertainties over the latitude that should be conceded to such refractory and extravagant pursuits as literature and art under conditions of scarcity. Should not only the literature that could clearly demonstrate its usefulness for the attainment of collective goals be accepted? Utilitarianism and philistine moralism, which historically have been the enemies of art everywhere, found in revolutionary China a powerful ally in fundamentalist political ideology. In Ding Ling's case this mix of motives was reinforced by the expediency of making an example of one of China's most prestigious writers.

One suspicion often voiced is that Ding Ling was a more obvious target because she was a woman. Although this may be difficult to ascertain, once the campaign was under way it followed the familiar pattern of criticizing a woman not so much for what she writes or does, but for what she is, for what is presumed to be her personal character, which then is quickly narrowed to the question of sexual conduct. Sexual conduct becomes a relevant and inflammatory issue because the double standard makes women particularly vulnerable. Ding Ling's stories were combed for her glorification of sexual immorality; they were cited as further evidence of what were claimed to be their author's own violations of the chastity code. Her specific feminist concerns were criticized as divisive and undermining of collective goals for it was held it was the reactionary class that suppressed women's liberation, not men in general.

The sessions of mass criticism against Ding Ling went on from June 6 to September 27, 1957, but apparently she was not repentant enough and in 1958 she was expelled from the party. Information about where she was or what had happened to her did not emerge until after her official rehabilitation twenty-one years later.

She was sent to a state farm for labor reform in the Great Northern Wilderness, the northeast corner of China just south of the
Heilongjiang River bordering Siberia. The first year she acquired much expertise in raising poultry while trying to adjust to the harsh climate and frontier conditions. Her situation improved somewhat when she was given the task of teaching adult literacy classes. Although there seemed little chance of publication, she did try to take up writing again. But with the onset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, her “days of fear” began. Having been labeled a rightist, she was an available target for anyone during this period of near anarchy when ideological fanaticism held sway. Her home, a thatched hut seven meters square, was raided dozens of times by groups of Red Guards; all her manuscripts, diaries, notes, scraps of paper with a single word were taken away, torn up, irretrievably lost. During “struggle-and-criticism” sessions she suffered much physical abuse. Then she was forced to perform menial labor under the “supervision of the revolutionary masses” for up to fourteen hours a day. In 1970 she was returned to Peking in shackles and put in solitary confinement in the notorious Qincheng prison where she remained for five years. Only the day after her release in 1975 did she learn that her husband, Chen Ming, had spent that same time in the same prison, one cell away. After three more years of restricted freedom in a mountain village in Shanxi, she was allowed to return to Peking.

Official rehabilitation in 1979 finally permitted Ding Ling to resume her writing career. The ban on her books was lifted; both new and old works were again available to the public. A piece about a model heroine, written in 1966 but destroyed during the Cultural Revolution and then rewritten, was published in July 1979. It was her first work to appear since 1956. To make up for lost time, she has been very prolific, writing critical essays, a sequel to her land reform novel, and reminiscences of her friends, many of whom she discovered had died during her imprisonment. In the fall of 1981 she came to the United States for the first time, spending two months at the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa and two months touring and lecturing on college campuses. Her tour included a talk at the University of Michigan and, incredibly it seems when I recall the circumstances at the time I began to write about her, a stay at my house in Ann Arbor.
She had promised me this visit, she and her husband Chen Ming, when we said good-bye in China at the end of my stay there in 1981.

I had decided that I should go to China when I unexpectedly learned, just as I was concluding my dissertation, that its subject was after all still alive. My objective was first to see her, of course, and to find out what had happened during those twenty years of silence. I wanted to check over and bring up to date my analytical study of her fiction and perhaps collect material for a full-scale biography. I applied for a grant from the Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China (which is funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities) and, as a research scholar in its National Program for Advanced Study and Research in China, went for six months. I wrote my first letter to Ding Ling when I knew that I had been accepted in the program and, to fulfill the terms of the fantasy, when I learned that my manuscript had been accepted for publication. Her answer was very, very long in forthcoming because, as she explained, she had been recuperating outside Peking from a mastectomy and, because she was enclosing a recent book about her, her letter was not sent airmail.

I had left China before the revolution to attend college in the United States and, except for a month in 1973 when I accompanied a U.S. scientific delegation, was now returning after an absence of thirty-three years. Eager as I was, I had many misgivings about the trip. How would I, an apostate outsider by now, be received by a writer who was attempting to reestablish herself in a somewhat liberalized yet still unstable political situation? I had anxieties about how I would find Ding Ling, now that I had learned about her surgery. She was seventy-seven, her problems of ill health and old age exacerbated by the hardships she had suffered in labor reform and solitary imprisonment. In spite of the cordiality of her letter, I was acutely conscious of the basic presumptuousness of my presenting myself to her at all.

I arrived in Peking to find that Ding Ling was about three thousand kilometers away in a convalescent home for party cadres on an island off the southeastern coast of China. I cannot describe the mixture of expectation and anxiety I felt as I took the seventy-two-hour train ride that passed through seven provinces. It was late March, and I was journeying from winter to spring, watching the seasons change rapidly through the train window—from the bleak, brown landscape of the north to the lush greenness of the
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semitropical south, where the rice seedlings were already tall enough to be transplanted. Ding Ling’s husband, Chen Ming, was there to meet the train, but when I saw Ding Ling, the emotional scenario I had so often envisioned for our first meeting flew out the window, in part because I had forgotten all my prepared speeches and in part because of the officious presence of the cadre from the municipal foreign office. The next day, however (and I do not know who suggested or arranged it), I was moved from my hotel for overseas Chinese visitors into a building adjacent to Ding Ling’s, and so began my “magic mountain” existence as an inmate in the convalescent home.

Mornings were always set aside by Ding Ling for her writing. Every afternoon at three o’clock, when she had had her nap and was done with her various therapies, I was to go over to talk. She said graciously that she would answer questions, but she never “authorized” a biography, constantly reiterating that an author’s personal life was much less important than the relationship between the literary works and their time. An indefatigable talker with a vivid memory, she would describe in memorable detail even the weather conditions surrounding events that had taken place when she was a child. As I listened, I was deeply moved by the sense of being involved simultaneously in two kinds of time. The experiences within her fiction that had for so long taken on a contemporary reality for me were now being placed within the context of a long personal history, distanced yet made all the more intimately true. There were moments when she seemed to relive as she talked emotions that had gone into the writing of stories forty or fifty years before. How could I possibly take in, much less set down, even a small portion of that rich, intense, and fully lived life of which I was just beginning to get a glimpse?

Our stay at the convalescent home was cut short because Ding Ling had to return to Peking for the memorial service of the writer Mao Dun. We took the train north. The city by then was resplendent with flowering trees. I interviewed writers, publishers, and critics, met other Ding Ling scholars, and scoured libraries trying to read everything she had ever written, including short pieces in ephemeral periodicals or local newspapers, pieces that she herself had long forgotten. In June I went to Shanghai to do the same things. Then toward the end of my stay, another unexpected yet perfectly timed opportunity arose.

Ding Ling decided to visit the state farms where she had spent her twelve years in exile and labor reform, and she thought I
could join her entourage of writers and editors for the trip. But because I was a foreign citizen my application for a travel permit to this closed border area was turned down. I reapplied, wrote letters, and somehow someone in the Public Security Office relented. About a week before Ding Ling and her group were to leave, I was told, in just enough time to join them, that I had been given permission to go along.

All of us were most anxious to learn something about Ding Ling's experiences while she had been in the Great Northern Wilderness, to get a visual impression of this unique place, and to talk with those who had known her and what it had been like there during the unimaginable time when the Chinese revolution was living through its darkest nightmare. For the twenty days that we traveled and lived intimately together, often in the harsh conditions of a still developing frontier area, I gained some insight into the dynamics of small-group relationships in contemporary Chinese society. But even more instructive was the opportunity to observe the charismatic personality of Ding Ling, as she greeted the people who had known her during this difficult period of her life. Those who had maltreated her were not much in evidence now that she was returning as a celebrity—there were a couple of reporters and a TV camera crew in our group. Those who had befriended her and risked persecution themselves to help her were the ones she wanted me to meet. Most of what we learned about her suffering during her years of exile was not obtained from her but from talking to her acquaintances there. This was because Ding Ling had determined—and her return visit to her place of exile was in itself an indication of that determination—to see the horrendous experience of the past twenty years in as positive a light as possible.

She views her unjust persecution by the party as a temporary, although extended, aberration. Now having acknowledged its mistakes about her and other "rightists" as well, the party can be restored at last to its authentic self, as a true carrier of the revolutionary ideal. Ding Ling's adoption of this attitude, difficult as it may be for us to sympathize with, may be psychologically necessary as a way to come to terms with what happened to her, in light of her lifelong commitment to the party, a commitment that had already, in the days of her youth, required the sacrifice of her husband. Was the martyrdom of Hu Yepin and her own subsequent pain and perilous struggle to have been for nothing? Her positive stance also has much to do with her self-image as a writer
and the writer’s vital role in Chinese society. What became evident to me in our travels was the tremendous moral authority, inconceivable in the United States, that Ding Ling the writer radiated. She was esteemed because of her status as a writer, and even more by some for what she had been through. Yet precisely due to this special moral stature, Ding Ling considers that her primary responsibility must be to continue to reaffirm the true goals and values of the existing ideological system. There may not in any case be an alternative visible on the horizon today for China, but just as important to realize is the fact that the Chinese revolution, before it went astray, is the path to which she had long ago dedicated her life.

I believe that I was taken along and granted the privilege of witnessing these deeply moving scenes of the writer going among the people, because Ding Ling thought that I could be trusted to accept and understand her decision to adopt such a positive stance. My quest for Ding Ling then has ended up contradicting the principal basis of her reputation abroad. Outside of China she has been portrayed as a literary dissident who has courageously stood for artistic independence in opposition to party control, or as a feminist whose life exemplifies what has been called the “uneasy alliance” between a feminist consciousness and a socialist revolution. Ding Ling has refused to make it easy for her Western admirers by going along with these perceptions of her. To accept them would be to contravene her abiding commitment to China’s revolution. She continues to say that she is first a member of the Communist party and only second a writer. As an example of her concern not to be used as a stick to beat the party, she had contemplated omitting from her collected works when they were republished in 1981, her essay “Thoughts on March 8.” This essay has been taken up by feminist movements in France, Japan, Iran, and Mexico, among others. It may seem ironic that she should have considered leaving out a piece for which to many she is principally known, but her concern again demonstrates, as my trip to China brought home to me, how inadequate liberal Western notions are when applied to Ding Ling’s story. They both resist easy ready-made categorizing, but her life, surely one of the most dramatic of our time, and her writings, so provocatively illustrative of the complex relation between literature and politics, continue to challenge our interpretation as well as command our attention.
NOTES

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1. Ida Lee Mei, Chinese Womanhood: A Small Gallery of Chinese Women (Taipei, Taiwan: China Academy, 1982). A second book, an autobiographical account of her work as an educator in China to be published by the same publisher, is now in press.

The following is a selected list of works by Ding Ling available in English translation:


——-. "In the Hospital." In Modern Chinese Stories and Novellas, 1919-1949, pp. 279-91.


