Introduction

Upon the advent of the May Fourth Movement in 1919, China stood at the brink of what would become a precipitous plunge into social, cultural, and political revolution. The rest of the world was changing, advancing, leaving China to grapple with the undeniable truth that it was no longer a major world power. In an effort to rationalize this seemingly sudden loss of international standing, the nation's foremost intellectuals attacked the traditional, Confucian worldview as being the origin of economic and social decay. Central to the May Fourth assault on traditionalism was the reconfiguration of gender relations in China, with particular emphasis on the changing role and "liberation" of women. Although the movement was labeled as feminist for its support of women's suffrage, education, and independence, its primary effect was to eroticize women by fixing upon heteronormative sexuality. Still, by tying the issue of women's emancipation with that of nationalist improvement, intellectuals successfully brought the oppression of the female sex to the forefront of revolutionary discussion.

“Miss Sophia’s Diary”

“Miss Sophia’s Diary” was written in 1927, while Ding Ling herself was in her twenties and grappling with the social platform presented by May Fourth advocates. Sophia is characterized within the story as being blinded by lust for a man named Ling Jishi, however, her internal conflict centers upon desiring a man with a “cheap, ordinary soul” rather than experiencing lust itself. Ding Ling treats Sophia’s erotic feelings as natural facets of the human condition—however, these feelings are not necessarily the keystone of Sophia’s identity. In the end she rejects Ling Jishi, thereby freeing herself from lust and the idea that her sexuality is what defines her. The diary form of the story in question necessarily permits only a highly subjective, first-person point of view—in this case, that of a woman. Throughout the story, Sophia is ever questioning the appropriateness of her feelings in regards to the social standards established for women. Not once does she accept an external, male-generated answer to her questions: neither traditional rules of propriety nor reformatory encouragement of sexual freedom give her peace. What the diary framework signifies is that this internal conflict is legitimate—as an autonomous being, she can rightfully reject peripheral pressures to her behavior as a woman while simultaneously acknowledging her own imperfections and insecurities. Subjective perspective, as employed in this story, therefore gives the reader the opportunity to accept Sophia as who she is—not as whom she should be.

“Net of Law”

Despite the popularity of “Miss Sophia’s Diary,” by the late 1920’s Ding Ling was embarking on a period of narrative transition. “Net of Law” is one of Ding Ling’s early proletarian stories, representing as such her departure from a feminist orientation toward a focus on “objective reality” as perceived by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The story is centered upon two couples living in the dusty, poverty-striken city of Hankou in Hubei Province. The main characters, Gu Miqian and Acui, and their neighbors Yu Aixiao and Xiao Yuzi, are immigrants from Wuxi who have fled disastrous floods in hopes of finding work. In the story, Acui miscarries her child and her husband, Gu Miqian, stays home from work to tend to her. He tells his friend Aixiao to inform their boss of the situation, but he does not, causing Gu Miqian to lose his job. Gu Miqian discovers that Aixiao’s cousin as taken his job; he becomes so enraged that he murders Xiao Yuzi, Aixiao’s wife. He runs away, leaving the innocent Acui to be arrested in his place. Over time, both men come to blame an abstract antagonist—the “wealthy oppressors” and Japanese imperialists, collectively—for their misfortunes. Although the women in “New of Law” are the ones directly victimized by male violence, their identities as oppressed women are attributed to the more general suffering of the “toiling, hopeless masses” who share in the pain of capitalistic evils. The abstract antagonist is not the only blatantly Communist device in “Net of Law”: a deus ex machina in the guise of the Japanese Invasion facilitates Gu Miqian’s class-struggle revolution. The invasion’s explosive advent allows him to forget his crime when pressed by the overwhelming evil of the Japanese. It trivializes the murder of a woman and the wrongful imprisonment of another as unfortunate but inevitable consequences of the imperialist machine, making way for the solidification of the story’s proletarian theme.

“Du Wanxiang”

In 1937, six years after becoming an official member of the CCP, Ding Ling moved to Yan’an, the capital of the Communist network. In 1942, Ding Ling boldly published “Thoughts on March 8,” in essay in which she criticized the patriarchal control by women within the Yan’an communes. The essay instigated a storm of debate within the Party that was summarily silenced by Mao Zedong’s “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Art and Literature.” When confronted by Mao’s clearly described stance on art and literature and by the veiled threat inherent therein, it is no wonder that after 1943, Ding Ling’s fiction began wholly to reflect not only a politically correct narrative but also a politically correct idea of “woman.” However, her self-correction was not enough to save her from persecution, and she was exiled by the Party from 1958 – 1984. Ding Ling’s tragic and relatively rapid fall from grace had a profound impact on her fiction, as epitomized by the story “Du Wanxiang.” Originally written in 1966, the story was published in 1979 as a sort of redemptive parallel of Ding Ling’s innermost literary motives, rejecting any literary resemblance to now-incongruous works such as “Miss Sophia’s Diary” in an effort to reconstruct her credibility as a writer. It reads as a flawless production of Party propaganda: within the story, Wanxiang is characterized as being radiantly beautiful, unfailingly virtuous, and selflessly hardworking from a very young age, toiling for her impoverished family on the arid Chinese steppes until she is enlisted in the People’s Liberation Army.

Unlike “Miss Sophia’s Diary” and “Net of Law,” “Du Wanxiang” cannot be said to have a plot; as a parable, its primary purpose is to convey a model of ideological idealism. Du Wanxiang is, in this case, representing the correct form of women’s behavior established by Maoist rhetoric. By the late 1940’s the definitions of womanhood and femininity were no longer open to debate—they became a metonym of the state ideology, fitting neatly into the role created for them within the scope of class differentiation. The popularized image of “woman” became one who is young, energetic, and determined to put the state before her family. She is defined not be her sex, but rather by her adherence to the party line and her ability to contribute to class struggle. She is Du Wanxiang.

Conclusions

My conclusion is that Ding Ling was ultimately unable to reconcile feminism with Chinese nationalism, a trait that is exemplified by the антithesis between “Du Wanxiang” and “Miss Sophia’s Diary.” The implications of this parallel between Ding Ling’s literary and political evolutions have the potential to be far reaching. One may naturally ponder as to the existence of a causal nexus between an individual’s embrace of Marxist theory and her rejection of feminism—that is, are the two schools of thought mutually exclusive? For Ding Ling, I believe that this answer was yes. My argument is substantiated by analysis of literary devices such as perspective, anthesis, and characterization in the stories “Miss Sophia’s Diary,” “Net of Law,” and “Du Wanxiang,” taking into consideration the potential influence of external pressures and biographical details on each.

Works Cited