

# Analysis of the Three Major Themes of Ding Ling's Research in American Academic Circles

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## ABSTRACT

Ding Ling's identity as a woman writer and her complex relationship with politics have always attracted the attention of American academia. From translating and introducing Ding Ling's works in the United States, this paper analyzes three major research themes in the American academies: Ding Ling's life and love writing, Ding Ling's female literature research, and "Jiefang Daily (解放日报)" & Ding Ling's literary career. Insights and prejudices coexist in Ding Ling's research in the American academic circle, which, while admiring Ding Ling's feminine literature style and revolutionary nature, also show apparent ideological bias.

**Keywords:** *Ding Ling, Women writer, Translation, The United States, Research themes.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION: OVERVIEW OF AMERICAN TRANSLATIONS OF DING LING'S WORKS

Ding Ling (1904-1986) wrote more than 300 works. As a female writer in China, she has a profound influence on the American academic world, where she was regarded as one of the most famous Chinese writers of the 20th century and the most notable figures in the cultural circle of Yan'an. The English versions of her works were primarily recorded in American literary journals and selected Chinese literature translated works.

The translation and introduction of Ding Ling's representative works in the United States are as follows: In 1974, "Straw Sandals: Chinese Short Stories, 1918-1933 (草鞋: 1918-1933 年的中国短篇小说集)", edited by Isaacs, Harold Robert, was published by the MIT Press in Cambridge, which included two of Ding Ling's works, "Miss Sophie's Diary (莎菲女士的日记)" and "A Certain Night (某夜)"; in 1984, the English version of "The Sun Shines Over The Sanggan River (太阳照在桑干河上)", translated by Yang Xianyi and his wife, hit the shelves courtesy of the Foreign Languages Press in Beijing; in 1985, "Panda Books (熊猫丛书)" published W.J.F. Jenner's translation titled "Miss Sophie's Diary and Other Stories (莎菲女士的日记和其

他故事)", a collection encompassing various works by Ding Ling, including "Miss Sophie's Diary (莎菲女士的日记)", "Shanghai in the Spring of 1930(2) (一九三〇年春上海(二))", "From Dusk to Dawn(从夜晚到天亮)", "A Certain Night (某夜)", "The Reunion(团圆)", and "When I Was in Xia Village(我在霞村的日子)"; in 1989, Rice University's Professor Tani Barlow and Gary J. Bjorge collaborated on translating Ding Ling's selected writing, resulting in the publication of "I Myself Am a Woman: Selected Writings of Ding Ling (我自己是女人)" by Beacon Press, Boston; in 2007, Tani Barlow presented "The Power of Weakness: Four Stories of the Chinese Revolution(弱点的力量: 中国革命四个故事)", published by the Feminist Press of the City University of New York, which includes three of Ding Ling's works: "New Belief(新的信念)", "Thoughts on March 8(三八节有感)", and "When I Was in Xia Village(我在霞村的日子)"; in 2011, the University of Washington Press brought forth "Documenting China: A Reader in Seminal Twentieth-century Texts(记录中国: 二十世纪经典著作阅读)", a literary textbook featuring Ding Ling's "Thoughts on March 8(三八节有感)" and Wang Shih-wei's "The Wild Lily (野百合花)" as primary documents from the Rectification Movement.

According to the American OCLC WorldCat database, as of June 2024, the most widely circulated works by Ding Ling include the 1974

edition of "Straw Sandals: Chinese Short Stories, 1918-1933(草鞋: 1918-1933 年的中国短篇小说集)", edited by Harold Robert Isaacs, held in 588 WorldCat member libraries. "The Sun Shines Over The Sanggan River" has also seen 144 versions in 5 languages since 1948, with holdings in 532 WorldCat member libraries.<sup>1</sup>

After World War II, along with the development of Sino-US relations and the profound exchange of Sino-US literature and culture, scholars in America had a different understanding of Ding's works with the transition in the cultural and historical context as its values and methodology evolved from the original western-centered theory to the perspective of cultural globalization. Objectively speaking, although specific intergenerational changes are among scholars who research Ding, such as Hsia Tsi-an, Brown George, Yi-tsi Mei Feuerwerker, Liu He, and Liu Jianmei, there is a continuous thread running through the three major themes of Ding Ling's research in American academia, i.e., Ding Ling's life and love writing, Ding Ling's female literature research, and "Jiefang Daily (解放日报)" & Ding Ling's literary career.

## 2. AMERICAN STUDIES ON DING LING'S LIFE AND HER WRITING OF LOVE

Ding Ling led a very checkered life. In American academic circles, scholars believed there was a complex relationship between Ding Ling's historical stages and her writing about love and revolution. Through the in-depth study of Ding Ling's life, American scholars noted that Ding Ling's writing breakthrough from love to revolution had shown a correlation with her historical responsibility and devotion to family and country as a modern woman. Her description of love embodied a vital pioneering significance in the history of Chinese literature for twenty centuries, and it has also evolved into an essential part of the study of Ding Ling's life in American academic circles.

The study of Ding Ling's whole life in the United States began in 1954 when Colena M Anderson published a dissertation at Claremont College in California, USA, titled "A Study of Two Modern Chinese Women Authors: Ping Hsin and Ting Ling(对两名中国现代女性作家的研究: 冰心和丁

玲)", which was the first academic work published with Ding Ling as the research priorities. Copies of this dissertation can still be found in the United States libraries of Stanford University and Claremont College. In this dissertation, Ding Ling is portrayed as a representative figure of a Chinese female writer. Ping Hsin represented the first generation of female writers born after the Literary Revolution in 1917, characterized by refined, sentimental, and poetic lives. As depicted by the author, Ding Ling was a second-generation Chinese female writer who dared to choose revolution over love. Since then, the description of love and revolution has become the keyword in studying Ding Ling's life in American academic circles.

In 1977, Gary J. Borge published his doctoral dissertation titled "Ting Ling's Early Years: Her Life and Literature Through 1942(丁玲的早期生活和文学 1942)" at the University of Wisconsin, which gives a detailed introduction to Ting Ling's childhood and later literary creation from 1906. The dissertation also provides comprehensive and accurate information about her experiences during the May Fourth Movement and the Yan'an period and the relation of her literary creation to Mao Zedong's "Talks(讲话)" at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art for American academic circles to study Ting Ling's writing process from love to revolution.

Among the academic works on Ding Ling's literature, none has left a more lasting impression than Yi-Tsi Mei Feuerwerker's "Ding Ling's Fiction: Ideology and Narrative in Modern Chinese Literature(丁玲的小说: 中国现代文学的意识形态与叙事)", published by Harvard University Press in 1982. This book sparked heated discussions in academic circles in China and the United States, and its influence continues today. Yi-Tsi Mei Feuerwerker's research reveals the connections between Ding Ling's personal life and her transformation from a writer of love stories to a revolutionary creative force. In the book's chapter on "Subjectivism and Literature(作家主体意识与文学)", she sheds light on Ding Ling's early writing days, labelling her as a "mediocre" female writer: "With A few exceptions, the thirteen stories Ding Ling wrote in 1927-1929 are about lone young women. Away from home, living unconventional lives in the amorphous semi-modern city, they appeared to share certain superficial characteristics with their author. During the first phase, Ding Ling

1. Please refer to: <http://worldcat.org/identities/>

was hardly alone in such literary introspection”.<sup>2</sup> Yi-Tsi Mei Feuerwerker unravels Ding Ling’s evolution under the umbrella of a female writer: “Yet in some important ways, Ding Ling stands apart. Being a woman is not the least of them, particularly since her critical attitude toward the image of the suffering female restrained her from the kind of sentimental indulgence found in the writings of suffering male romantic authors. In her stories, the love experience is not so much an excuse for subjective effusions but an occasion for tough moral self-questioning. Characters are, to be sure, in confrontation with the world, but they must also face up to who they are themselves...”<sup>3</sup>

Yi-Tsi Mei Feuerwerker argues that Ding Ling’s intense exploration of subjectivism in literature during this period soon led her to an exposure of its limit so that by early 1930, she was moving away from romantic concerns and toward revolutionary commitment, ready to begin the search for a broader arena for literature. Yi-Tsi Mei Feuerwerker paints a vivid picture of Ding Ling, highlighting her unique personal style and subjectivity as an outstanding writer with a strong feminist consciousness. Ding Ling emerges as a writer and a revolutionary female figure. Yi-Tsi Mei Feuerwerker’s book is strategically structured, delving into Ding Ling’s subjective consciousness, her journey to becoming a revolutionary writer, her literary creations in Yan’an, and her unwavering commitment to literature. Besides, this book also examines Ding Ling’s life, her early works’ use of the “first-person narrative,” the gradual mastery of writing techniques in later works, and dedicates considerable space to discussing Ding Ling’s transition from writing about love to the path of revolutionary literature. Through a lens of female sensitivity, she unveils the extraordinary facets of Ding Ling’s life.

### 3. DING LING’S FEMALE LITERATURE RESEARCH

With the surging wave of feminist thought, Ding Ling’s female literature research has become a crucial focus in American academic circles. In 1981, Ding Ling was invited to the United States as part of the International Writing Program at the

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2. Yi-Tsi Mei Feuerwerker: *Ding Ling’s Fiction: Ideology and Narrative in Modern Chinese Literature*, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982, p19.

3. Yi-Tsi Mei Feuerwerker: *Ding Ling’s Fiction: Ideology and Narrative in Modern Chinese Literature*, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982, p20.

University of Iowa. In 2017, the same program organized a seminar under the theme “International Women Writers,” placing Ding Ling at the forefront as a representative figure among Chinese women writers and a central topic of discussion. The seminar stamped Ding Ling with the label of a female writer, “When will it no longer be necessary to attach special weight to the word ‘woman’ and raise it specially?”-Excerpt from “Thoughts on March 8(三八节有感)”, by Ding Ling. The seminar asserted that “Chinese writer Ding Ling (IWP ’81) was an activist for women’s rights. In her short stories, she created Chinese heroines who are daring and passionate, living confused and dissatisfied with society.”<sup>4</sup> Based on her U.S. visits, Ding Ling penned Impressions of “My Visit to the United States(访美散记)”, published in 1984.

In the sixth chapter, “Twenty Years After the Yen’an Forum(延安文艺座谈会后的二十年)”, of his work “The Gate of Darkness(黑暗的闸门)”, Hsia Tsi-an delved into Ding Ling’s works, including “In the Hospital (在医院里)”, “New Belief (新的信念)”, and “When I Was in Xia Village(我在霞村的时候)”. His focus was on unravelling the distinctive and emotionally charged creative psyche of Ding Ling as a female writer. Hsia Tsi-an highlighted, “her (Ding Ling’s) best piece during this period may be the short story “In the Hospital(在医院里) (1941)” and “In her fiction, Ting Ling exhibited sympathy and tenderness against a background of harsh reality.” For Hsia Tsi-an, “New Belief(新的信念)” and “When I Was in Xia Village(我在霞村的时候)” tell stories of women who endure physical and emotional trauma, holding a special place in Ding Ling’s oeuvre as “a variation on the same theme,” but When I Was in Xia Village with greater tenderness. Praising the philosophical depth in Ding Ling’s realism, Hsia Tsi-an remarked, “Her novels offer a nuanced interpretation of life’s contradictions, horrors, and tenderness.” Commending Ding Ling’s sensitivity as a female writer, Hsia Tsi-an pointed out, “Look, a Chinese woman was raped by the Japanese; so, down with Japanese imperialism!” this was a theme repeated innumerable times by writers not only in Yen’an but also in Chungking. Ting Ling’s treatment of the theme was unique, a tribute to her genius. The story of the poor girl (or of the old woman) who was both a plaything for the Japanese and a tool of Communist cadres, though the latter used her only for patriotism’s sake, poses a serious question about

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4. Please refer to: <http://iwp50.grad.uiowa.edu/1981/06/06/ding-ling/>

the inhumanity in human life, especially under the difficult conditions of war. Ting Ling's stories may have had some propaganda value at the time they were published, but their meaning remains fresh today, long after the Japanese have been defeated."<sup>5</sup>

In recent years, Professor Tani Barlow from Rice University in the United States has emerged as a prominent figure in feminist research, particularly in her substantial contributions to exploring Ding Ling's women literature. In 1979, Barlow published a comprehensive 684-page dissertation titled "Ting Ling's Rural Feminism: an Intellectual Biography(丁玲的乡村女性主义: 知识分子传记)", delving deeply into Ding Ling's identity as a female author and the intricate patterns of her feminist thoughts. The year 1980 witnessed the publication of Barlow's article "Thoughts on March 8 and the Literary Expression of Ting Ling's Feminism(‘三八节有感’与丁玲女权主义的文学话语)", marking a significant shift in American academic circles by adopting a feminist lens to examine Ding Ling. A pivotal moment occurred in 2001 when Barlow collaborated with Gary J. Bjorge to translate Ding Ling's works into English under the title "I Myself Am a Woman: Selected Writings of Ding Ling(我自己是女人)". This compilation garnered considerable attention from American scholars specializing in women's studies, including a review by renowned feminist Susan Brownmiller in "The New York Review of Books(纽约时报书评)" and a feature in the influential women's studies journal *Signs*. Further contributing to the discourse, in 1991, as a guest lecturer, Barlow presented a 35-minute talk titled Ding Ling's "'The Diary of Miss Sophie' and the Problem of Female Self-assertion in Post-traditionalist China(丁玲<苏菲女士的日记>与后传统中国女性自信心)" at The National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar.

A standout in this narrative is Tani Barlow's book, "The Power of Weakness: Four Stories of the Chinese Revolution(柔弱的力量: 中国革命四个故事)", published in June 2017. Barlow, positioning Ding Ling as Lu Hsün's successor and "a pivotal figure in 20th-century Chinese literary history", places her alongside Lu Hsün, often hailed as the literary giant of the century. Barlow handpicks Ding Ling's "Thoughts on March 8(三八节有感)", "New Belief(新的信念)", and "When I Was in Xia Village(我在霞村的时候)" to vividly portray life in contemporary China. The book's publication garnered significant attention, with Barlow herself

5. Hsia Tsi-an: *The Gate of Darkness*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968, p250-251.

characterizing it as a tale weaving together the narratives of "two modern Chinese realist literary masters, grappling with the question of 'how to write about the revolution.'"<sup>6</sup> Rebecca E. Karl, author of "Staging the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century(登上世界: 二十世纪初的中国民族主义)", lauds the work, emphasizing its importance as "not only an excellent introduction to the history of writing about revolution but a worthwhile read for anyone interested in world literature, feminism, and politics."<sup>7</sup> With this, the landscape of Ding Ling's women's literature studies in the United States has evolved into a well-rounded and established research domain.

#### 4. "JIEFANG DAILY(解放日报)" AND DING LING'S LITERARY CAREER

Within the scope of Ding Ling's studies in the United States, Ding Ling's role as an editor in the literary section of the "Liberation Daily(解放日报)" has captured the interest of scholars. Ding Ling arrived in northern Shaanxi in November 1936, taking on various roles such as director of the "Chinese Literary Association" in the Soviet Area, deputy director of the Political Department of the Central Guard Corps, head of the Northwest War Area Service Corps, editor of the literary supplement of *Liberation Daily*, and deputy director of the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Area Literary Association. The 1940s marked a prolific period for Ding Ling, during which she published notable works like "When I Was in Xia Village(我在霞村的时候)" (published in June 1941 in Chinese Culture "中国文化"), "In the Hospital(在医院中)" (featured on November 15, 1941, in "Ku Yü(Grain Rains)(谷雨)", and "Thoughts on March 8(‘三八节’有感)" (published on March 9, 1942, in the literary section of the "Liberation Daily(解放日报)文艺栏".

On May 16, 1941, the inaugural issue of the "Liberation Daily(解放日报)" hit the stands. According to the "Encyclopaedia Britannica(大不列颠百科全书)", "In February 1942, the Yan'an Rectification Movement began, and Ding Ling served as the editor of the literary section of the

6. Tani Barlow. *The Power of Weakness: Four Stories of the Chinese Revolution*[M]. The CUNY: Feminist Press, 2007.

7. Rebecca E. Karl, author of *Staging the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*. Refer to <https://www.amazon.com/Power-Weakness-Stories-Chinese-Revolution/dp/1558615482>

“Liberation Daily(解放日报)”. Around March, this section published a series of articles, including Ding Ling’s “Thoughts on March 8(“三八节”有感)”(March 9), Ai Qing’s “Understanding Writers, Respecting Writers(了解作家, 尊重作家)”(March 11), Lo Feng’s “This Is Still the Age for Tsa-wen(还是杂文的时代)”(March 12), Wang Shih-wei’s “The Wild Lily(野百合花)”(March 13, 23), Xiao Jun’s “On Comradeship’s ‘Love’ and ‘Endurance’(论同志之“爱”与“耐”)”(April 8), etc.”

The sixth chapter, titled “Twenty Years After the Yen-an Forum(延安文艺座谈会后的二十年)” in “The Gate of Darkness(黑暗的闸门)” by Hsia Tsi-an stands out as a representative interpretation of Ding Ling’s literary career during her stint at the “Liberation Daily(解放日报)”. Hsia Tsi-an quotes Ding Ling’s October 23, 1941 article in the “Liberation Daily” titled “We Still Need Tsa-wen(我们需要杂文)”. According to Hsia Tsi-an, Ding Ling, as Lu Hsün’s successor, in “We Still Need Tsa-wen(我们需要杂文)”, “She went so far as to sneer at the ‘reflection of democratic life and great construction (民主的生活, 伟大的建设)’<sup>8</sup>,” which, as is well known, had been the main theme of Chinese Communist literature all through these years. She invoked the fearless spirit of Lu Hsün.” Hsia Tsi-an astutely observes that Ding Ling, unlike Lu Hsün, isn’t as adept in the essay genre: “‘Thoughts on March 8’, which, in very articulate form, saw no hope for women in z the so-called Liberated Areas unless men would agree to reform themselves. Poetry and fiction from Yen-an with anti-Communist undertones seldom attracted so much attention as this essay did.”<sup>9</sup> Although ‘Thoughts on March 8’ is clear and concise, it doesn’t fit the essay genre; Ding Ling isn’t skilled in this literary form.<sup>10</sup>

During Ding Ling’s tenure at “Liberation Daily(解放日报)”, a pivotal period in her life, American scholars astutely observed her role as a literary editor and her unwavering commitment to the quality of scholarly works. In 1977, Kyna Ellen Rubin, an American scholar, published a dissertation titled “Literary Problem during the War of Resistance as Viewed from Yan’an: A Study of the Literature Page of Liberation Daily - May 16, 1941, to August 31, 1942(从延安看抗战时期的文学问题: <解放日报>文艺副刊研究—1941年5月16日至1942

年8月31日)”, at the University of Vermont. Rubin’s research delved into the literature supplement of “Liberation Daily(解放日报)” from May 16, 1941, to March 27, 1947, shedding light on the literary challenges faced by Yan’an writers during this era. Kyna commended Ding Ling positively as a professional writer, emphasizing her dedicated approach to literary creation.

Kyna pointed out: “In September 1941, Ding Ling wrote an article addressing how writers should collect materials for their works. Ding Ling observed that even writers with frontline experience or those deeply immersed in life did not necessarily grasp life’s complexities. It angered her to see them pick on certain themes only and sensationalize them... Popular but misunderstood themes included Manchuria, Japanese army life, and women. A most favorite subject exemplifying the tendency towards sensationalism was women raped by the Japanese... “Kyna interpreted:” Writers, she wrote, desperately searching for subject matter, ended up choosing material on the bases of its ‘market value,’ its ability to attract a reader rather than for its potential as fine creative matter...”<sup>11</sup> Kyna’s point above about Yan’an writers choosing materials based on “market value” was relatively innovative. Though Ding Ling didn’t explicitly use the term, her disapproval of writers chasing sensationalism for commercial appeal was evident. Kyna points out:

“It angered her to see them pick on certain themes only and sensationalize them... Writers, she wrote, desperately searching for subject matter, ended up choosing material based on its market value, its ability to attract a reader rather than for its potential as fine creative matter... Popular but misunderstood themes included Manchuria, Japanese army life, and women. A most favorite subject exemplifying the tendency towards sensationalism was women raped by the Japanese... Dingling considered this writing to be on par with sensational trash from Shanghai. She felt this material was the stuff of news reports and popular novels but not of serious writing... After all, among 100,000 grains of sand, only one or two can be turned into gold.”<sup>12</sup>

8. Ding Ling, We Still Need Tsa-wen, Jiefang Daily, Oct 23, 1941.

9. Hsia Tsi-an: The Gate of Darkness, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968, p251-252.

10. Hsia Tsi-an: The Gate of Darkness, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968, p251.

11. Kyna Ellen Rubin: Literary Problem during the War of Resistance as Viewed from Yan’an: A Study of the Literature Page of Liberation Daily- May 16, 1941, to August 31, 1942, The University of Vermont, 1977, p32.

12. Kyna Ellen Rubin: Literary Problem during the War of Resistance as Viewed from Yan’an: A Study of the Literature Page of Liberation Daily- May 16, 1941, to August 31, 1942, The University of Vermont, 1977, p29-32.

Kyna summarized: “Dingling considered this writing on a par with sensational trash coming out of Shanghai. She felt this material was the stuff of news reports and popular novels, but not of serious writing....” Kyna concluded by quoting Ding Ling’s statement from Liberation Daily on September 29, 1941: “After all, among 100,000 grains of sand, only one or two can be turned into gold.”<sup>13</sup> Further exploration of Ding Ling’s editorial experience in the Liberation Daily literary section deserves continued attention from the American academic circle.

## 5. CONCLUSION

There are differing opinions within the American academic circle regarding Ding Ling’s literary achievements. Scholars led by C.T. Hsia generally criticize Ding Ling’s literary revolution, arguing that her “proletarian novel creation” serves as a megaphone for revolution and politics, harming her works’ artistic and literary qualities. In an article by Liu Zaifu and Lin Gang titled “The Political Writing of Chinese Modern Novels(中国现代小说的政治性写作)”, Ding Ling’s “The Sun Shines Over The Sanggan River (太阳照在桑干河上)” is considered a “political textbook... providing a creative tone and narrative mode for novels of the new era... employing a literary language dominated by social-political analysis and political value judgments.”<sup>14</sup> Criticism from American scholars, particularly exemplified by C. T. Hsia, is skeptical of Ding Ling’s portrayal of female subjectivity in love writing. In “A History of Modern Chinese Fiction(中国现代小说史)”, C. T. Hsia notes that in the 1930s, Ding Ling’s reputation ranked only after Mao Tun, Lao She, and Pa Chin. Yet, upon reading her works from that time, none can truly be considered outstanding. Some ordinary American readers express reservations about Ding Ling’s writing skills. For instance, a reader on the American Amazon platform criticizes Ding Ling’s work “New Belief(新的信念)”, included in W.J.F. Jenner’s translation of “Miss Sophie’s Diary and Other Stories(莎菲女士的日记和其他故事)” published in 1941 contained a narrator’s description of the

13. Kyna Ellen Rubin: Literary Problem during the War of Resistance as Viewed from Yan’an: A Study of the Literature Page of Liberation Daily- May 16, 1941 to August 31, 1942, The University of Vermont,1977,p29-32.

14. Tang Xiaobing: Reinterpretation: Popular Literature and Ideology, Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1993 edition, p 55. The Chinese original text is as follows: 政治的教科书...为新时代的小说提供一种创作基调和叙事模式.....是以社会政治分析和政治价值判断作为写作前提,以政治意识形态语言支配一切的文学语言的写作方式.

social prejudice faced by a young peasant woman who was forced into prostitution for the Japanese military but was actually spying for the Chinese guerillas... For me, all the stories lacked the eye for detail, drama, depth, sense of structure and skillfully expressed compassion of writers like Lu Xun and Shen Congwen”.<sup>15</sup>

In summary, the American academic circle’s exploration of Ding Ling exhibits a combination of insights and biases. While acknowledging Ding Ling’s contributions to feminist literature and her revolutionary spirit, scholars also reveal evident ideological tendencies.

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