

The independence and rebellion of ding ling in when i was in xia village and essa...

[Countries](#), [China](#)



Ding Ling is one of the most fascinating Chinese writers of the early 20th century, and for good reason – her revolutionary, eye-opening works allowed readers to get a glimpse of the real struggles and questions facing women in the midst of the Maoist revolution in China. Her short stories “ When I Was in Xia Village” and “ Miss Sophia’s Diary” explore the urban woman in China, telling somewhat autobiographical tales of her feelings toward Maoism, womanhood, identity and modernism. “ Miss Sophia’s Diary” allows a deeply personal look at a woman who must move to Beijing, leaving her family behind and exploring a life of potential identity but ending in a sense of malaise. “ When I Was in Xia Village,” a young Chinese woman is forced to become a prostitute for the Japanese, dealing with her won social stigmas and sense of alienation. In both works, Ding Ling reveals her central characters as being very independent people, lost souls in environments that do not quite suit them – the very specific plights of women in Chinese and Japanese culture are laid bare, as women are not allowed to be anything but servants for men.

The female perspective is thoroughly explored in a very direct manner in Ding Ling’s works, both being first-person accounts from female characters. In “ Miss Sophia’s Diary,” the tale itself is the literal diary of the title character, permitting the reader to learn the innermost thoughts of the character, making it an intimate character study of the woman in question. Conversely, “ Xia Village” is told from the perspective of a female Communist academic who comes to befriend the subject character, a former Japanese POW camp occupant named Zhenzhen (or Purity). While the story is explicitly about Purity’s struggles within her village upon her return, the

story still takes time to showcase the narrator's thoughts and feelings about her friendship with Purity.

The subjects of both stories deal with isolation from the world around them. Miss Sophia suffers from tuberculosis, and thus spends much of her time in a sanatorium; this further illustrates the 'isolated' nature of her experience from the rest of the world. She feels left out of the world around her, feeling incredibly ambivalent about whatever she may be feeling at any given moment, as the world has nothing to offer her (or women in general) that is particularly appealing. Meanwhile, in "Xia Village," Purity's reintegration into the village after leaving the Japanese camp is difficult due to her rumored past. People murmur around her about her role as a prostitute in the camp, saying, "Dirty bitch! They should have never let her come back?" (Ling 243). It is clear that the village does not want her, and does not know what to do with her now that she is 'damaged goods' (and implied that she has a venereal disease).

Both Miss Sophia and Purity explore the ups and downs of the sexual politics of China at the time. Miss Sophia's diary entries talk at great length about the main character's sexuality, which involves both men and women; she discusses several lovers and would-be paramours of both sexes, laying bare her own needs and wants as a sexual being. In "Miss Sophia's Diary," female sexuality is explicitly forbidden as a cultural expression of lust and desire: "I know very well that in this society I'm forbidden to take what I need to gratify my desires and frustrations, even when it clearly wouldn't hurt anybody" (Ling 55). Here, Ling lays bare the contradictory nature of China's oppressive sexual politics; in a fair and just world, Sophia's attitudes

would be accepted, but instead she must hide them and cause herself untold grief simply to continue existing as she does.

Purity, meanwhile, simply did what she had to do to survive in the camp, which is a major point of contention for those sexually conservative members of the village. Her refusal of the arranged marriage set out for her is responded to by simply stating, “ Who’d want a woman who’d been used by those devils?” (Ling 246). Because of her sexual proclivities, she is thought of as useless detritus. This affects Purity greatly; while she does have this sordid history, she talks about these things with a calm sense of agency – “ Only eighteen, and it doesn’t embarrass her at all” (Ling 246). The townspeople act as if “ they were proud of not having been raped,” as if Purity’s situation was something she could control, thus showing the oppressive and uncompromising nature of Xia Village’s politics (Ling 252). Through this oppressive atmosphere, Ding Ling shows just how unfair it is to be a woman in these circumstances – being forced to do things to survive, learning to become accustomed to that survival, and yet having people blame you and shame you for doing so.

The effects of these oppressions, and the inability to live their lives in peace, cause a great deal of turmoil for both Sophia and Purity. Sophia’s contradictory relationship with Ling Jishi combines both her attraction and repulsion towards him: “ Had he dared to embrace me, passionately, I'd have fallen into his arms and cried, I love you! God! I love you! I cursed him and ridiculed him secretly, even as inwardly my fists struck painfully at my heart” (Ling 71). Conversely, Purity’s one way out at first seems to be the now-acceptable marriage to the meek but nice Xia Dabao; he cares for her, but

she cannot bring herself to actually do it because of the social stigma that has been placed upon her - “ I’m unclean. I’ve got so much to be ashamed of in the past that I don’t want happiness any more” (Ling 260).

This sense of self-pity drives much of what both of these characters do by the end of the story; neither of them are able to exercise their own sexual and societal agency, because of the stifling expectations of others, and so they must leave for better climes. “ I wanted to find a way out, a way of living that’d mean something, unless I really had no choice” (Ling 251). Both women hate themselves and appreciate themselves at the same time - they seem fully fine with their choices and what they had to do, at least in a practical sense, while also loathing the effect their actions have on their social and community lives. In the end, Purity must leave the village, as she feels even more victimized there than in the camp, choosing instead to join the political revolution in order to find a new goal for herself. Sophia does the same thing, choosing to leave Beijing in order to start a new life somewhere, anywhere other than where she has been before.

In conclusion, “ Miss Sophia’s Diary” and “ When I Was in Xia Village” show Ding Ling’s dedication to showing the plight of the Chinese woman from a political and gendered perspective. Both stories tell the tales of women whose sexual and political identities are repressed by monolithic social forces, and their attempts to break free of them. Miss Sophia struggles with pressure to act more ‘ feminine,’ more demure and in denial of her own self and her sexuality; Purity in “ Xia Village” is condemned as a whore for what she did merely to survive in the Japanese camp, no one taking her seriously and treating her like damaged goods. It is because of that these women in

both stories have no choice but to simply leave and hope that they can make better lives for themselves elsewhere. Ding Ling's semi-tragic endings (in which these women must leave all they know and start over) also read as somewhat hopeful; through the immersion into new environments and new politics, these characters may be able to find a measure of peace.

Works Cited

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