Finding Their Voices: Stages of Liberation in the Works of Chinese Women Writers Since 1920

Deborah D. Buffton
University of Wisconsin-La Crosse

The period since 1920 has produced monumental change in Chinese society.[1] The political upheaval of the May Fourth demonstrations,[2] the power struggle between the Communists and Nationalists, the Sino-Japanese War, and the post-1949 attempts to create a new society have all touched Chinese life in some ways. One of the most striking changes is the way in which women's voices have begun to be heard, particularly in literature. This is very important because traditionally literacy has been a mark of official power in China; thus, when women began to write and to be accepted as writers it marked a major step on the road to their sharing power in that society. While there is still a long way to go, at least they have begun the journey. The themes of women writers provide insight into the road they have traveled so far, and where they might be headed in the future. In their writings one sees how they define their own roles, how they perceive the reality of their lives, and how they hope to resolve the tensions that inevitably occur when one lives in changing times. This paper will examine some of the changing themes of Chinese women writers since 1920.

In the 1920s and 1930s the ideas of the May Fourth Movement transformed Chinese literature. Writers called for a new society based on equality, rather than the old Confucian hierarchy. They believed quality should be extended to all social classes and both genders, and they made politics and literature their two vocations. However, the traditional link between literacy and political power meant women would have little or no part in the new literary tradition and, by extention, in the development of the new society. Since most women found it difficult, if not impossible, to receive a good education, the new society would be shaped largely by men and social reforms would be what those men perceived as meeting women's needs.

Faced with these barriers, it is not surprising that there were very few women writers in the May Fourth generation. Educational and social barriers meant that the few women who did write during the 1920s and 1930s had to be greater iconoclasts than the men who chose to write. As

Yi-tsi Feuerwerker has pointed out, they faced a triple challenge: they had to find a way to enter a profession that previously had excluded them; they had to redefine what their identity as women meant, often losing family and economic support in the process; and finally, they had to do this against the backdrop of a society that was in complete flux. At this time, many (male) revolutionary leaders believed that they simply had to end the outward manifestations of women's oppression—footbinding, arranged marriages, female slavery, and infanticide—in order to solve women's problems (143-168). It is here that the few women writers of the period became very important because they pushed recognition and understanding of women's needs beyond these perceptions. Women writers, such as Ding Ling, made clear that women faced complex social and psychological pressures that had to be addressed before women could be full and equal members of society.

Many of the women's writings during the 1920s concerned women's inner identity and were predominantly emotional and autobiographical. Some dealt explicitly with women's sexual longings, frustrations, and suicidal impulses. As Feuerwerker writes:

> It was in part out of their need to affirm their newly liberated selves that this generation of women writers became so preoccupied with personal and emotional responses to experience. Having broken so drastically with authority, both literary and social, and with the old order and values that would have regulated her life, the woman writer was suddenly on her own, with nothing to fall back on but her feelings or uncertain new relationships, which were also dependent on tenuous feelings (161-162).

Ding Ling's "Miss Sophia's Diary" (1927) is a good example (*I Myself* 49-81). Although to modern readers it appears overdone and melodramatic, in 1927 this treatment of one woman's feelings was unprecedented, radical, and exciting. One of the striking things about this work is the narrator's uncertainty about herself and her life. While she appears to be strong-willed, she is not especially self-confident. She continually questions her feelings and actions, and often condemns herself for inconsistency. She feels guilty for desiring only friendship with Weidi, who obviously loves her; she berates herself for being attracted to the handsome, but rather shallow, Ling Jishi. At times she feels resentful that her friends have abandoned her; at others she feels unworthy of their care and concern. The diary ends with her lament, "Oh, how pathetic you are Sophia!" This is not the diary of a self-confident woman who knows what she wants and seeks to achieve it. It is the work, instead, of someone who is not entirely sure what she does want or should want. It expresses the emotional turmoil of May Fourth women who not only had to conceive of a new society, but a new self identity as well. Though iconoclasts and revolutionaries, these women often revealed a great uncertainty in their writings. It is significant that many of the heroines of this fiction are physically frail. Sophia, for example, is dying of tuberculosis. This physical weakness emphasizes women's uncertainty, not only about their ability to destroy the institutional bonds that tie them down, but also about what should replace those bonds.

II

Through the 1930s and 1940s, faced with nationalistic concerns raised by Jiang Jieshi's (Chiang Kaishek's) attempt to exterminate the Communists and Japan's invasion of China, the Communist Party tried to attract May Fourth writers and control their output. At Yenan in 1942, Mao Zedong established for the first time a Party orthodoxy for writers. In essence, he called for art to serve the Party and state and narrowly defined the parameters of "acceptable" literature. Those who did not adhere strictly to Party directives got into trouble with the Party hierarchy. In consequence, many fiction writers moved from writing that expressed private feelings to that which made a revolutionary statement.[3]

Once again, Ding Ling is a good example. In the 1930s much of her writing subordinated feminist concerns to nationalistic, patriotic ones. For example, in "Affair in East Village" (1937), she focused on the tragedy of a poor family caught in the trap of a tyrannical landlord. At one point the father is imprisoned for debt and the daughter-in-law is given to the landlord for the father's release. However, the characters are not particularly well-developed as individuals, and instead seem only to be symbols: the daughter-in-law symbolizes the poor peasant as victim; the landlord symbolizes the tyrannical rich. Consequently, the action in the story becomes more important than the characters; and the family tragedy overshadows that of any individual. The reader sympathizes with the plight of the poor at the hands of the greedy rich. However, the injustice of a system that considers it a good deal to trade a daughter-in-law for a father is not particularly stressed (*I Myself* 260-279).

In "New Faith" (1939) a woman witnesses the rape and murder of her granddaughter and is then raped herself by Japanese soldiers. Rather than dying of shame (as her family would prefer), she becomes a public figure, repeating the story over and over to stir up anti-Japanese sen-

timents and recruit volunteers for the army. Thus, rape is seen not as an example of women's oppression, but as a symbol of China's *national* oppression, and the rape victim who fights back is admired as a patriot (Ding Ling, *I Myself* 280-297).[4]

Thus, Ding Ling's fiction in the 1930s tends to have a nationalistic focus. The characters' identities come not from their gender, but from their class, occupation, or patriotism (*I Myself* 32-33).[5] However, in 1942 Ding Ling crossed the line of "acceptable" writing when she published "Thoughts on March 8," an evaluation of women's role in Chinese society and in the Party. She insisted that women needed to be seen as a separate group within society, just as the proletariat; and that there were certain problems that faced women that would not go away simply with economic reform (*I Myself* 316-321). Significantly, the publication of this essay caused her to lose all positions of authority within the Party for nearly a decade. The work which brought her back into favor was the novel *The Sun Shines on the Sanggan River* (1948). While this novel does examine the problem of male/female relations, it gives greater emphasis to other things, including how class factors and ideology affect people. Moreover, she does not champion the individual woman over the family system, keeping in line with the Party's view of the family as an element in modernization (*I Myself* 41).[6] Thus, Ding Ling regained Party favor by once again subordinating feminist concerns to national ones.

Unfortunately for Ding Ling, her "restoration" lasted only until 1958, when she was purged from the Party until 1979. Ding Ling's experience helps explain the relative dearth of interesting literature between about 1942 and 1976. During that period many talented writers stopped producing because of both the necessity to adhere to Party orthodoxy and repeated purges. Those who did continue to produce tended to write politically safe literature. For example, Liu Chen's semi-autobiographical novel *The Long Flowing Stream* (1962) is very similar to the revolutionary literature of the male writers at the time. In it, a young female cadre member moves from immature vanity to wisdom with the help of an older, wiser woman who appears rough on the outside, but proves to have "a heart of gold." The main different between this novel and that of male writers of the time is that the characters are women rather than men; if the characters were switched, the point would be the same (Hsu 592-605).

Ru Zhijuan's "Lilies" tells of a female cadre member fighting for the revolution. The story touches upon the discomfort of male cadres working with women and the tendency to place women in traditionally "feminine" jobs such as nursing the wounded or collecting blankets. At the same time the narrator makes clear that she is happy to work for the revolution in any capacity. The fight to save and transform China is all she needs for personal fulfillment (Roberts and Knox 27-37).

Another example is Yu Ru's "Early Summer" (1962). At first glance, this story seems to be simply a mother's reflections upon her two children as they grow. However, its political message becomes clear when she contrasts their promising future with her own childhood. She recalls a friend who drowned herself in order to avoid an arranged marriage and then considers the free choice of her own daughter, who has a crush on the Youth League Branch Secretary (Roberts and Knox 15-26). (One wonders how free her daughter's choice would be if, instead, she were attracted to the son of a bourgeois capitalist.) One interesting aspect of this story, however, is the notable absence of any adult males. Despite the obvious constraints of Party orthodoxy on literature, this story is revolutionary in its portrayal of something other than the traditional family, which was supposed to be at the core of the revolution. The absence of adult male figures and/or a traditional family foreshadows more recent women's writing.

III

The period of the late 1960s through the death of Mao in 1976 was a nightmare for intellectuals. Sent to work in the countryside, at tasks outside their areas of expertise, and hounded by the Red Guard for ideological impurity, most writers would not or could not write freely. However, the death of Mao and the fall of the Gang of Four inaugurated a renaissance in Chinese writing, especially by women. Both the quantity and quality of women's writing has increased tremendously since 1977.

Not surprisingly, the crippling effects of the Cultural Revolution frequently appear in writing since the mid-1970s. Some writers dealt with it directly and others indirectly. Ding Ling's "Sketches from the 'Cattle Shed'" (1979) recounts her time in prison and the enforced separation from her lover, who was imprisoned in the same place. It reveals the lengths to which people go to maintain human bonds despite the state's attempts to break them up (Roberts and Knox 38-50).[7]

In other works the effects of the Cultural Revolution are evident, but not the central focus. Many stories present a picture of how official policy distorts the ideal of healthy families and a just society. Dai Qing's "Anticipation" (1979) dramatizes the plight of spouses assigned to work hundreds of miles apart. The couple in the story has spent the majority of their fifteen years of marriage apart. They did not press the issue of being

assigned to work closer to each other because they felt it inappropriate to ask their work unit organizations to deal with their own "personal problems." In the end, the husband dies before they can live together and the wife feels her whole life was wasted. Thus, Dai Qing raises the question of where one ought to draw the line between responsibility to the Party and to one's personal life (Link, *Roses and Thorns* 146-167).

Chen Rong's "At Middle Age" (1979) also explores the theme of balancing one's personal and professional lives. Lu Wenting and her husband Fu Jiajie have so many professional responsibilities that when family emergencies arise, there is almost no flexibility to deal with them (*Roses and Thorns* 261-338). The story makes two interesting points. First, ironically, during the Cultural Revolution, Jiajie lost his status and job, and therefore had much free time to care for the home and children, while Wenting pursued her professional responsibilities. But with the fall of the Gang of Four, he regained his research opportunities, and household responsibilities fell heavily upon her. Secondly, Wenting is so overworked because of the lack of qualified surgeons, stemming from two things: the Cultural Revolution meant that an entire generation of intellectuals never developed. Those who were professionally trained before the Cultural Revolution—Wenting's generation—therefore had to carry a heavier burden because younger professionals simply did not exist. This meant that surgeons like Wenting were not promoted to higher paying, less demanding jobs, since there has been no one to fill their places. In addition, many of the talented professionals, tired of living and working under such conditions, choose to leave China to find greener pastures abroad, thus increasing the load on people like Wenting and her husband. Ironically, those who are most loyal to China bear the heaviest burden.

In both "Anticipation" and "At Middle Age" the characters are so caught up in simply getting through each day, they have no time even to think about, much less enjoy life. It is not until a crisis occurs—death or illness—that they reflect on their lives. Significantly, however, in "Anticipation" the crisis comes too late to change things, and in "At Middle Age" the story leaves unanswered the question of whether things will change. In any case, both stories reflect how the system precludes the ideal of family life that it claims to support.

Some stories show the reverse side of the coin. Rather than expressing how the system distorts or perverts the ideal of family life, a number of writers portrayed the creation of alternative family groups. Zhang Jie's *The Ark* (1981) is a good example. *The Ark* portrays three women who form a family group and support each other through their trials. Each faces problems common to single/divorced women in that society and elsewhere—the social condemnation of divorce, the conflict over child custody and care, economic insecurity, harassment by male managers at work, lack of self-confidence, and tension between society's demand that women be physically attractive and the women's insistence that they are more than their outward appearances.

In this novella the author explores a theme that she reiterates elsewhere—the immorality of marriage without love. Liang Qian and Bai Fushan are separated, but do not divorce in order to save face. The author stresses the hypocrisy and emptiness of that relationship in contrast to the unofficial, but to her more moral, relationship among the three main women characters whose friendship constitutes the only solid and secure part of their lives (Zhang Jie 113-202).[8]

In denouncing loveless marriages as immoral, Zhang Jie was continuing what Ding Ling had started several decades earlier—redefining "morality." In "When I Was in Xia Village" and "New Faith" Ding Ling had questioned social views toward rape and criticized the old idea that rape was something so shameful for the victim that she should commit suicide. If the victim does not see it that way, Ding Ling asked, does society's interpretation have any meaning? Similarly, Zhang Jie questions society's idea that all marriages are moral and any relationship outside marriage is not. Zhang Jie argues forcefully that any relation based on love *is* moral with or without official sanction. Conversely, any relationship without love is immoral, despite official approval.

In addition to the distortion of the family unit, recent women writers also have concerned themselves with the ways the Cultural Revolution managed to cripple and distort individuals. In "The Right to Love" Zhang Kangkang examines how the events of the Cultural Revolution left many young people emotionally scarred and afraid to trust their feelings. The two main characters witness the destruction of their parents in the insanity of that revolution. Their mother, an opera singer, killed herself after having been accused of "spying for foreign countries." Their father, a violinist, endured prison camp and condemnation for playing Western music. On his death bed he urged his children never to study music and simply to be ordinary. Eventually, the son defies his father's wish and resumes playing the violin. The daughter has more trouble, but begins to realize that while denying that she has feelings may prevent her from being hurt, it also precludes any joy and meaning in her life (Roberts and Knox 51-81).

One of the reasons for the distortion of both individuals and family groups, according to these authors, is the differing and contradictory expectations of women, another common theme. In both Zhang Xinxin's "How Did I Miss You?" and Xu Naijian's "Because I'm Thirty and Unmarried" the heroines are confused about how they are supposed to act. Hav-

ing grown up during the Cultural Revolution, they learned that women should be serious, assertive, and more concerned with accomplishing tasks than with personal relations. However, the theory does not work when they deal with real people. In society they are expected to give some attention to fashion, make-up, and "feminine" actions. They are also faced with the double standard that thirty-year-old men can remain unmarried with no social stigma, while thirty-year-old women cannot. In this society, remaining unmarried does not appear to be an option for women. If they remain single, it will be an unfortunate event, not a free choice. In both stories the women want to be happy and believe that marriage will bring them that happiness, but do not know how to go about finding someone suitable (Roberts and Knox 92-135).[9]

In reading the works of Chinese women since about 1979, it is easy to become depressed. The problems of the characters seem so overwhelming that their lives consist merely of attempts to keep their heads above water. They are able to *exist*, but not live for a variety of reasons—fears of another government crackdown or purge ("The Right to Love"), excessive demands ("Anticipation" and "At Middle Age"), economic insecurity ("The Ark"), and uncertainty over how to live their lives and achieve happiness ("Because I'm Thirty and Unmarried" and "How Did I Miss You?"). Life becomes something to be endured rather than enjoyed. Nonetheless, some humane lives and actions still are evident. The solidarity of the three women in *The Ark* and the dignity and love of the couple in "At Middle Age" attest to the strength of the human spirit to overcome the considerable obstacles placed in its way.

IV

A review of the literature over this 70-year span suggests some continuities as well as differences. Women writers since 1920 continue to explore women's inner feelings and perceptions. While Ding Ling's "Miss Sophia's Diary" is very different in tone from Zhang Xinxin' s "How Did I Miss You?", both stories express the problem of commiting oneself to another person and each weighs the pros and cons of single life and relationships with men. Moreover, as discussed earlier, the work of both Ding Ling and Zhang Jie redefine society's definition of "morality". But there are significant differences that reflect changing political realities and changing perceptions of women's roles in society.

In the 1920s women tended to focus on their struggle to find an identity and express their emotions. Almost as if confronting their reflections in the mirror for the first time, women writers were fascinated with the idea of themselves as independent emotional beings separate from the roles society had prescribed for them. As the political events of the late 1920s and 1930s raised nationalistic concerns, and the Communist Party seemed more congenial to their interests than any other options, women produced political writings which expressed support for revolutionary social change in society and which stressed patriotic concerns over feminist ones. The emphasis on the national revolution over the specific concerns of women would continue until the death of Mao and the fall of the Gang of Four.

Over time, however, women moved from considering what problems faced Chinese society to what problems faced them as women in Chinese society. With this came the realization that not everything could be solved with the proper amount of revolutionary fervor and an acceptance of the right ideology; that some things may simply be unsolvable; that even in a socialist society, sometimes people will have unhappy lives. For example, until the 1970s, most stories suggested that women's happiness depended solely on revolutionary activity rather than personal relations. Either a female revolutionary married another revolutionary and was happy, or she stayed single and happily worked alone for the revolution. In the late 1970s, however, women began to write of characters whose happiness or unhappiness stemmed not from their relation to the revolution, but their relation, or lack of it, to other people. The revolution was not the be-all and end-all of their lives, personal fulfillment came in other ways. In one sense, this brings us full-circle back to the debate in the 1920s between the male revolutionaries who believed that eliminating outward bonds of women's oppression would solve their problems, and women like Ding Ling, who suggested that there were inner factors at work that also affected women's lives, and that sometimes it was women's own insecurity or uncertainty that held them back. Over time, then, Chinese women writers have moved to a more fully developed view of life, its problems, and opportunities. Inherent in this view is the recognition that the revolution solved some problems but created new ones, that even without the old bonds to hinder them the struggle for equality continues, and that perfection is hard to find.

NOTES

[1] The author would like to thank Professor John R. Pavia, Jr. and Professor Balance Chow for encouragement and advice.

[2] The May Fourth Movement derives its name from a major demonstration on 4 May 1919, protesting the signing of the Versailles Treaty after World War I, in which the German concessions in China were given to Japan. It sparked not simply anti-Western feelings, but also criticism of China's old values and culture, calling for the creation of a "new society."

[3] See Tani Barlow's introduction to Ding Ling, *I Myself Am a Woman* 7.

[4] This story offers an interesting contrast to Lu Xun's earlier story "The New Year's Sacrifice" (1924) in which Xianglin's wife has suffered much abuse and hardship in her life. Unlike the character in "New Faith," however, the more she repeats her story, the less sympathetic her audience becomes, considering her crazy and "unclean." Rather than being rejuvenated by this "therapy," she loses her job, her mind, and eventually her life.

[5] This is true also of other works by women writers at the time. See, for example, Ling Shuhua, "The Helpmate" (136-142).

[6] In the early 1950s the Party recognized the importance of the family in its own plans for China when it appropriated the right to recognize marriages and register families.

[7] Yang Jiang does something similar in *Six Chapters of Life in a Cadre School: Memoirs from China's Cultural Revolution*. Although this recounts time in a cadre school rather than prison, it, too, relates the difficulty of separation from her husband, who is also in the same cadre school; and its criticism, though not explicit, is certainly present.

[8] Zhang Jie also raised this issue in "Love Must Not Be Forgotten": "In a society where commercial production still exists, marriage, like most other transactions, is still a form of barter." It is a way of continuing the race. In "Love Must Not Be Forgotten" the narrator's mother urges her not to marry unless she meets the right person. Marriage *per se* is not important; the quality of the marriage matters. After her mother's death, the narrator learns through her diary of the mother's love for another man. Since both were married to other people, their love never developed beyond friendship, but it became the sustaining force in the woman's life even after the man was killed in the Cultural Revolution. In the end, the narrator concludes: "Even waiting in vain [for the right partner] is better than a loveless marriage" (Zhang 1-2, 13).

[9] In 1989 Zhang Xinxin wrote an essay entitled "How Come You Aren't Divorced Yet?" in which she analyzed the problems of marriage and divorce in contemporary China. Interestingly, her essay raises nearly all the problems that appear in the fiction mentioned above: people marrying strangers with whom they have nothing in common; a generation which had come of age in the Cultural Revolution and married immediately afterward more because of the need to settle down than out of affection for the other person; sexual ignorance among both men and women; the difficulty of caring for children and working outside the home; the inadequacy of child support; and the pressure on single women to remarry despite the stigma of having been divorced (Link, Madsen and Pickowicz 57-71).

● WORKS CITED

Below is a list of easily accessible English translations of the works cited. Chinese authors' names are romanized as they appear on each work.

Barmé, Geremie and Minford, John. Eds. *Seeds of Fire: Chinese Voices of Conscience*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1988.

Ding Ling. *I Myself Am a Woman: Selected Writings of Ding Ling*. Eds. Tani Barlow and Gary Bjorge. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989.

________. *The Sun Shines on the Sanggan River*. Trans.Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang. San Francisco: China Books, 1984.

Feuerwerker, Yi-tsi. "Women as Writers in the 1920's and 1930's." *Women in Chinese Society*. Eds. Margery Wolfe and Roxane Witke. Stanford: Stanford U P, 1975.

Hsu Kai-yu and Ting Wang. Eds. *Literature of the People's Republic of China*. Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1980.

Ling Shu-hua. "The Helpmate." *Contemporary Chinese Stories*. Eds. Chi-chen Wang. Westport: Greenwood Press. 1976.

Link, Perry. Ed. *Roses and Thorns: The Second Blooming of the Hundred Flowers in Chinese Fiction, 1979-1980*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

________. Madsen, Richard, and Pickowicz, Paul. Eds. *Unofficial China: Popular Culture and Thought in the People's Republic*. San Francisco: Westover Press, 1989.

Roberts, R. A. and Knox, Angela. Trans. *One Half of the Sky: Stories from Contemporary Women Writers of China*. New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1987.

Yang Chiang. *Six Chapters of Life in a Cadre School: Memoirs from China's Cultural Revolution*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1986.

Zhang Jie. *Love Must Not Be Forgotten*. San Francisco: China Books and Periodicals, Inc., 1986.