

Creation is a Political Action, and a Writer is a Politicised Person

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☒ Listen to *The White-Haired Girl* - Wang Erni

Enjoy listening to ‘**The White-Haired Girl**’, a song composed for a revolutionary opera of the same name from the Yan’an Forum era.

On 1 October, the People’s Republic of China celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary. Our institute’s director, Vijay Prashad, and I co-wrote an **article** looking back at these revolutionary decades. Ding Ling (1904–1986) was a writer, feminist, and one of the countless communists who contributed to the Chinese Revolution, especially in the battle of ideas. This art bulletin, originally published in *People’s Dispatch* and translated by *Capire*, looks back at her life and work on the 120th anniversary of her birth.



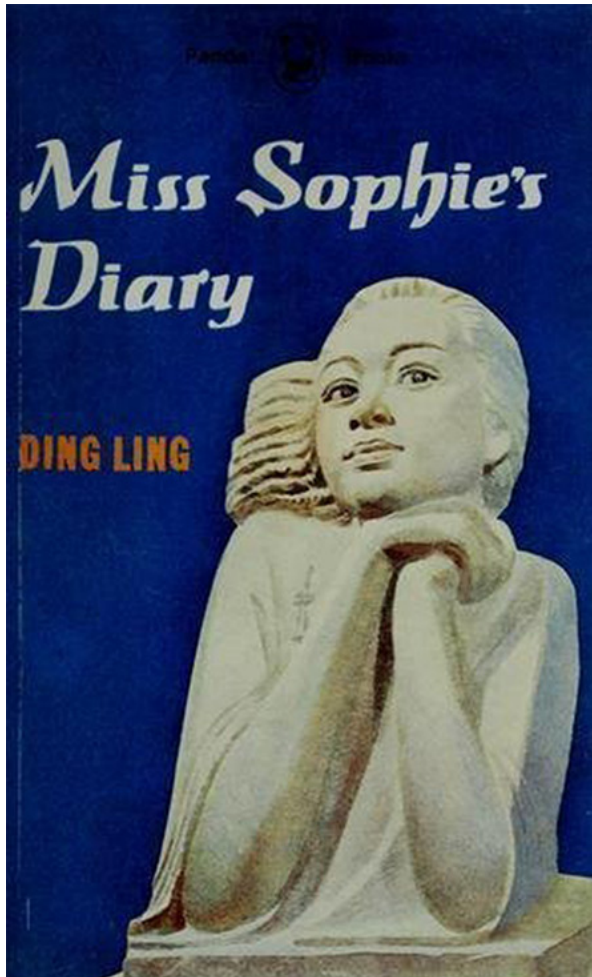
Ding Ling in 1979.

If twentieth century China was a century of revolutions, then legendary Chinese writer Ding Ling was forged out of those revolutions. On 12 October 1904, Ding Ling (pen name of Jiang Bingzhi) was born into a gentry family in Linli, in the Hunan province during the late Qing Dynasty. Her relatively prosperous background meant that she was able to attend school, and it was there that she began her politicisation. At the Hunan Second Normal School for Girls, she came into contact with the anti-imperialism and national awakening of the May Fourth Movement. Later in Shanghai, she attended a People's Girls' School run by the young Communist Party of China (CPC), which had been formed a year earlier in 1921.

In the 1920s, Ding Ling, surrounded by communist writers such as Qu Qiubai, began her literary career. She published *Miss Sophie's Diary* in 1928, one of her most celebrated works. This short story provided a provocative and rare glimpse into the internal world of a modern urban woman in China, focusing on her personal struggles, romantic affairs, and sexual desires. At the time, many writers of the New Culture Movement looked towards Western social and political frameworks to chart a path of liberation for the Chinese nation from the clutches of imperialism and economic backwardness. National liberation was also intimately intertwined with the liberation of Chinese women. Sophie, in pursuing her individual liberties, represented a break from the patriarchal and feudal family traditions of Old China, but was far from the liberated woman envisioned in socialist New China.

Each historical period demands its own kind of protagonists, and its own kind of writers. Ding Ling was a writer who continued to reinvent herself, while confronting societal challenges. Looking back at her character

Sophie two decades later, Ding Ling recognised that with the fundamental changes in the revolutionary process, ‘the spiritual world of the people had also fundamentally changed’ and characters that she was familiar with, such as Sophie, had already become outdated. It was necessary to ‘write entirely new people’. How to write these new people, and write them well was not a straightforward path.



Cover of *Miss Sophie's Diary* and the last photograph taken of Ding Ling with Hu Yepin and their newborn son, 1930.

In the early 1930s, she had become a prominent leftist writer and dove into politics, but these were dark years both politically and personally. In 1930, Hu Yepin, her husband and fellow writer, was arrested and killed in the same year that their son was born. In 1931, Ding Ling herself was arrested and detained for over two years by the Nationalists. Nevertheless, she joined the CPC and took on the task of editing the League of Left-Wing Writers' magazine. In November 1936, after the historic Long March that established a new communist base in Yan'an, Ding Ling arrived in northern Shaanxi and asked Mao Zedong directly to join the Red Army.

In January 1937, Ding Ling arrived in Yan'an, among the estimated 40,000 intellectuals who went there by 1943. Many of these intellectuals left relative urban comforts to traverse hundreds or thousands of kilometres in wind, sand, rain, and snow. Each one of these intellectuals, however, also brought their own ideas about the direction of creative work for the communist cause. Ding Ling, as the editor of the party paper, *Liberation*

Daily, was amongst a group of writers who criticised the perceived lack of artistic independence and restrictions set by the party on artistic production. Was the role of art and literature to ‘praise the bright’—to glorify the deeds of the party and the people—or to ‘expose the dark’ and point to the problems in Chinese society and the communist movement?

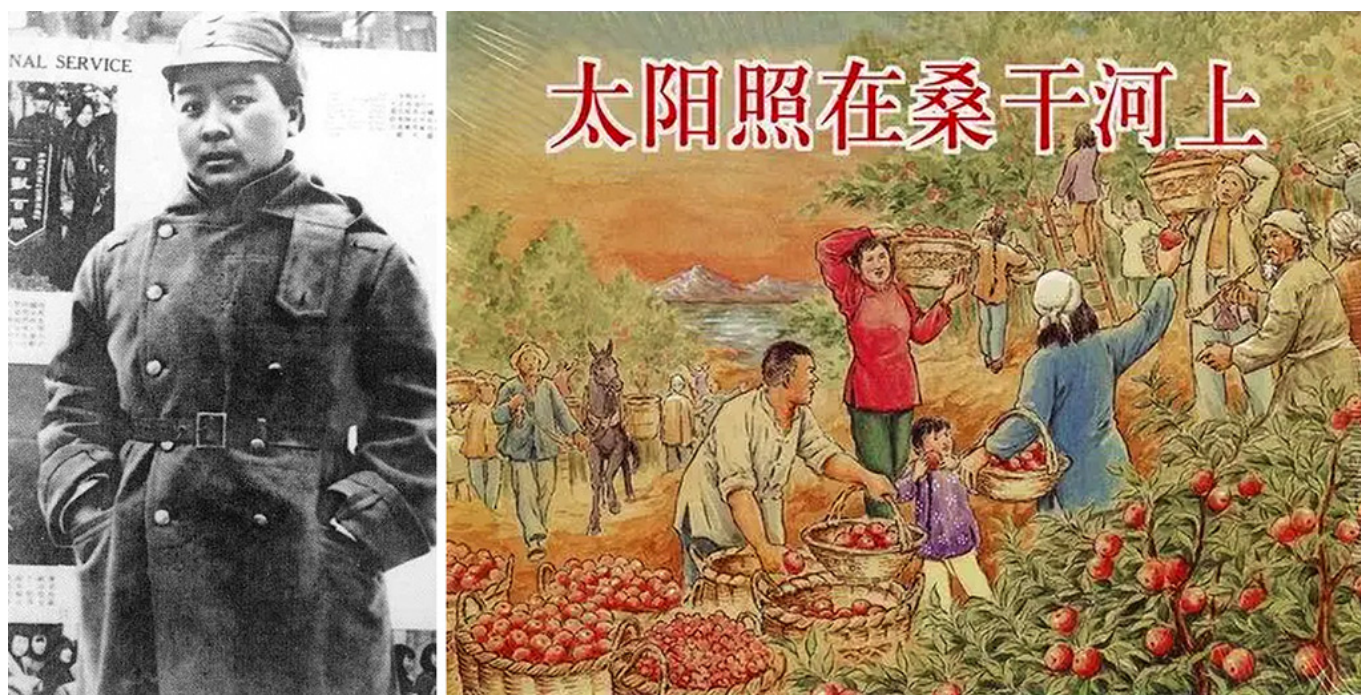


Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art, 1942.

In May 1942, the three-week **Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art** set to clarify this fundamental relationship between cultural and political work. To a crowd of over 100 of the country's top writers, artists, party leaders, and military generals, Mao laid out five artistic and literary ‘problems’ to be addressed: position, attitude, audience, work, and study. Mao argued that cultural workers should take a ‘class stand’, one that is firmly positioned alongside the people, in which artists also see themselves as workers in the struggle. For this, intellectuals need to go through their own remoulding from one class to another. Meanwhile, the form and content of cultural works also had to go through a process of reinvention.

Just as traditional forms of culture were given new revolutionary content, the ‘old bottles’ of traditional intellectuals were being transformed into ‘new’ intellectuals who served the people. Few writers embodied this process more than Ding Ling. When Ding Ling left cosmopolitan Shanghai for the dusty fields of Yan'an, she was already an established and celebrated writer. Upon arriving in Yan'an, however, she struggled to write authentic descriptions of peasant life, which she was still unfamiliar with at the time, and to overcome her own prejudices, individualism, and alienation from the people.

In her own reflections, she said, ‘I’ve thought about it a lot, but it’s really difficult to write. I can’t portray people’s ideals as too high, so high that they no longer resemble a peasant farmer. But I also can’t depict them as too low; otherwise, how could they inspire people?’ The difficulties that Ding and other writers had portraying peasants in the context of class struggle was not based on their shortcomings alone. The historical conditions had not yet created a revolutionary consciousness and the literacy levels among the people. Ding Ling’s short stories and novels are a testament to this transformative and dialectical process, and to the years of unlearning and relearning, to become intellectually and politically integrated with the masses, which in turn deepens class consciousness.



Ding Ling in Yan'an in the late 1930s and the comic book version of *The Sun Shines over the Sanggan River*.

The path traversed by Ding Ling reflects the process of popular integration that Mao identified in the talks: 'Intellectuals who want to integrate themselves with the masses, who want to serve the masses, must go through a process in which they and the masses come to know each other well.' After years of living and working with women, peasants, workers, veterans, and cadres in some of the country's most remote rural districts, she wrote her first and highly-celebrated novel about land reform, entitled *The Sun Shines over the Sanggan River* in 1948.

The founding of the PRC marked a new era in Ding Ling's life, as writer and as political cadre. Literature, and in particular, new people's literature took on a central role in the construction of the new people's state. On an international level, literary and cultural exchange became central in the strategy of 'people's diplomacy' to overcome the diplomatic and economic sanctions placed on the new communist country. In her role as the vice-president of the Chinese Writers Association, Ding Ling often received international writers on their visits, with Jorge Amado and his wife and writer Zélia Gattai amongst them.

Their first trip in 1952 convinced Amado to republish *Sun Shines* in Brazil upon their return. In her memoirs, Gattai recalls, 'From this joyful and fruitful trip, we and our comrades returned with light hearts and full of hope. We envisioned a future of peace and prosperity for China, an example of what socialism should be, moving from theories and paper to practice and reality.'

Their second visit in 1957, accompanied by Chilean poet Pablo Neruda and his wife Matilde Urrutia, occurred on the eve of the anti-rightist struggle, and Ding Ling was amongst the most well-known authors to be labelled rightist counterrevolutionaries. In his memoirs, *Navegação de cabotagem* ('Coasting'), Amado describes his exchange with Ding Ling: 'When I told her about the doubts that were crushing my heart, she replied: Do you doubt just because you see injustices or mistakes? Ding Ling did not doubt. Or did she not admit to doubting? She said to me: If I step in the mud, I clean my feet and continue onwards.'



Jorge Amado, Zélia Gattai, Pablo Neruda, and Matilde Urrutia being received by Ding Ling and other Chinese writers in Beijing, 1957.

Like many intellectuals, Ding Ling indeed suffered greatly during the tumultuous decade of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). She was sent to the countryside, cut off from her literary work and international exchanges. However, Ding Ling eventually did find her way to ‘clean her feet and continue onwards’. A year after being rehabilitated in 1979, Ding said, ‘It was hard, and I suffered, but I also gained a lot... I can’t write about generals because I don’t have that kind of experience. But I can write about peasants, about workers, about ordinary people, for I know them well’.

The tumultuous twentieth century tells many stories; it is a story of awakening and resistance, of suffering and setbacks, and of personal transformation and political commitment. It is a story of overcoming and change. Ding Ling’s life and work is a testament to all of that. As a society was being radically transformed, the changes in the relations of production required a change in consciousness, which in turn necessitated a new socialist culture. This task was tall, the transformations were many and complex, but Ding Ling continued to carry on the task of trying to produce a new literature for, by, and in the name of the people. In a speech in 1980, she said, ‘Creation itself is a political action, and a writer is a politicised person’, affirming her continued commitment as a writer and as a revolutionary till the end of her life. She passed away in Beijing in 1986 at the age of 81 years.

In Other News...



This month's Red Books Day poster by **Abhinav** (Young Socialist Artists/Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research) is inspired by *Thomas Sankara Speaks: The Burkina Faso Revolution 1983–1987*, published by Inkani Books. Earlier this month, the Young Socialist Artists, together with fine arts students from Andhra Pradesh University, co-organised the **Palestine Solidarity Art Exhibition** in India.

'We must fight imperialism, and everything connected with it', Sankara said two years before his assassination, thirty-seven years ago this month. He continued, 'From imperialism's point of view, it's more important to dominate us culturally than militarily. Cultural domination is more flexible, more effective, less costly'. It is for this reason that culture, as we have learned from China to Burkina Faso, India to Palestine, has been – and continues to be – one of the core pillars and weapons in the struggle for national liberation and

human emancipation.

Warmly,

Tings Chak
Art Director, Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research