

DING LING

THE POWER OF WEAKNESS

Stories of the Chinese Revolution

LU HSUN

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY TANI E. BARLOW

2 X 2

THE POWER OF WEAKNESS



DING LING AND
LU HSUN

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
TANI F. BARLOW



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CONTENTS



Introduction by Tani E. Barlow 1

LU HSUN

The New Year's Sacrifice 27

DING LING

New Faith 54

LU HSUN

What Happens after Nora Leaves Home? 84

DING LING

Thoughts on March 8 93

LU HSUN

Regret for the Past 101

DING LING

When I Was in Xia Village 128

INTRODUCTION



How do you write about a revolution? Predictably readers turn to memoirs for the answer. Stories about personal or catastrophic family experiences, shaped to suit the political tastes of North American readers, and novels about the forced migration of foremothers in delicate tales like *The Joy Luck Club* or other novels of Chinese wartime catastrophes convey a sense of how revolution was lived. They give retrospective assurance. Leavened with literary nostalgia, tales particularly of revolutionary violence, recalled through the ruinous hurt that teenage experience enshrines in memory, give us a sense of having been present at a traumatic event and surviving it. Perhaps readers devour memoirs and novels because they combine first-person reporting with narrative reconstruction and assurance that the revolution is definitively over. They reestablish distance while retaining the illusion of immediacy.

My question is more intimate and more practical. It haunts the work of revolutionary and counterrevolutionary writers

alike and it is more like: *How do I write about the revolution I am living?* When The Feminist Press invited me to comment on a volume of canonical revolutionary writing by twentieth-century literary figures Lu Hsun and Ding Ling, I agreed precisely because they were great revolutionary writers, bent on inventing literary techniques that could put into words the experiences they were living. Warning: these writers were not “nice” people. They were weak though sometimes strong; they were alternately cynical and gullible; sometimes they were passionate, determined, generous, sometimes spiteful, and in the case of Ding Ling who outlived Lu Hsun by fifty years, perhaps as much victimizer as victim. Ignoring their outsized personalities for the moment, I believe their literature moves away from the conventional problems of memoir, history, or film and toward a more ambiguous problem: understanding how Chinese revolutionary writers survived and navigated their times, in fits of elation and generosity or fearful disavowal, sometimes brutally, cynically, manipulatively, or punitively, and always with the sanctimony of revolutionary moralists.

Lu Hsun and Ding Ling wrote the revolution in the moment, as it unfolded. For that reason, and since the revolutionary writer is politically engaged, their fiction places a premium on change, on renovation. Consequently their fiction seems insatiable. It never stops asking, “When?” For instance, buried in the bleakest of accounts told by a priggish, young, alienated protagonist of a Lu Hsun story or the subjectivist laments of any of Ding Ling’s modern “girls,” there

is always aching disquiet and the implicit question, When will the current ugly present yield to a better future? This is a progressive form of fiction. So in it nothing is ever resolved definitively. Written ferociously in the moment, the stories and essays are propulsive and abrasive; literary works in motion, they cannot serve as still mirrors on a settled past.

So although we may have to abandon certainty about historical fact when we are reading these stories, we also gain something from the writers' ambivalence. Set ideas—free-choice marriage is modern, arranged marriage is tradition; individualism is modern, collectivism is tradition—do appear in these stories and many others that these great writers published. Yet much as the old is attacked here, the new or modern cannot be embraced because the modern, too, is profoundly unjust. Maybe, these writers suggest, what passes for modern life is not much of an improvement on the so-called tradition it seeks to displace. In other words, often so-called modern and so-called tradition merge in revolutionary fiction. What we sense more than the orderly march of time from tradition to modernity is a special urgency in the revolutionist's writing. *How is it possible to fold an immediate moment of injustice into an appropriate literary form?* Readers may be better off abandoning the effort to declare some things "traditional" and others squarely "modern."

Acknowledging the importance of writing about the revolution that you are living helps us to grasp why Lu Hsun insisted that his writing came from daily life affairs. He could not, he claimed, know truth from the outside. Not for him

was the omniscient novel written from the point of view of a god or historian, since he could not pretend to know how things really were or how they would turn out in the end. So Lu Hsun conveyed truth from the perspective of everyday experience. He might write an essay attacking an intellectual charlatan and publish it in a daily paper. Or, in despair about political events, he might rewrite an old story employing ambiguous contemporary language. A meditation about the national identity of the writer's own moustache, or a pointed political attack on his old friend Lin Yutang over the politics at stake in humorous writing, it did not matter. Over time and in his efforts to write in the moment, Lu Hsun honed a modernist literary form, the *zawen*, which are satiric, critical essays. That was not the only thing Lu Hsun invented. To write about revolution—the liberation of women, children's emancipation, diagnosing the corrupt national character, the importance of good fatherhood, extending citizenship, abolishing cruel customary practices, cultural revolution—in immediate terms, Lu Hsun found it necessary to recreate narrative forms for literary expression, too. But the *zawen* is a good example of how the exigencies of revolution propelled writers to remake literary convention.

Like Lu Hsun, Ding Ling also drew on things she saw and heard, building from the gossipy details of everyday life. But when, in 1941, Ding Ling decided to publish a critique of the Communist Party's political strategy for women's liberation, she wrote in the genre of Lu Hsun's *zawen*. In other words, what the older writer adapted to capture the revolu-

tion he was living, the younger one used to intervene in a revolutionary policy debate at a moment of war planning.

As readers we cannot blink in the face of the immediacy these writers lived. Whether under house arrest, enduring brutal political censorship, eking out a poor living as editor or translator, or living high on the hog, the darling of readers shackled to an official state literary organizations, Lu Hsun and Ding Ling found ways to write their urgently lived moments. Between them these two writers produced some of the most recognizable twentieth-century colloquial Chinese short stories ever written.

Renowned as a founder of the Chinese modernist literary canon, Lu Hsun's "New Year Sacrifice" (1924) and "Regret for the Past" (1926) collected here are stories about the suffering of women related to the reader by a third person, a repellent, internally conflicted male narrator. Ding Ling launched the tradition of women's self-narrated fiction and, later, pioneered Chinese conventions for writing socialist realist fiction. She, too, altered the Chinese language of literary expression. What we also see in Ding Ling's "New Faith" (1939) and "When I was in Xia Village" (1941) is an assertion, even a ludicrous insistence, that although the social beatings women take—commonly about sexual matters—is harsh, women survive them.

Lu Hsun (also known as Lu Xun)¹ is the pen name of Zhou Shuren, born September 25, 1881. His reputable gentry household consisted of a nationally ranked scholar, his grandfather;

a man who had achieved the primary degree in the national examinations, his father; a rural woman named Zhou Rui, his mother, who had taught herself to read; Ah Chang, Shuren's superstitious woman servant; and three younger brothers. One of the brothers, Zhou Zuoren, became a celebrated writer, particularly associated with Japanese cultural politics in Chinese intellectual circles. Another, Zhou Jianren, pioneered the study of eugenics and evolutionary theory and rose within the Communist bureaucracy before the Cultural Revolution. The third brother died in childhood. For much of his short life, Lu Hsun looked after this extended household, supporting family members and shepherding the family finances.

After an idyllic early education in the old tutorial, small school fashion, a decline in family fortunes and the death of his father led Lu Hsun to enroll in the Jiangnan Naval Academy and then to transfer to the School of Mines and Railways. There he studied science, German, and English. He also encountered Yan Fu's translation of Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics* and the reformist journal *Shiwen bao*, edited by pioneer revolutionary Liang Qiqiao. In 1902 Lu Hsun went to Japan on a government scholarship, spending seven years there before returning home with expertise in Japanese, European languages, new philosophy, and a political perspective honed by years inside the Chinese progressive community in Japan. Lu Hsun spent the first three years back home living from job to job on the strength of old school ties and, following the Revolution of 1911, writing short stories as he taught, edited, and translated to secure his

livelihood. As a returned student from abroad, he finally got a government sinecure, which allowed him access to cultural preservation circles and exposure to new trends in the visual arts. The years he spent as a nominal official of the Ministry of Education in Beijing are said to have been years of personal depression. Yet, despite this handicap, those years from 1912 to 1926 were the ones in which he produced some of his best-known literature, established himself as a college teacher, editor, translator, and cultural commentator. He assiduously cared for the woman his parents had married to him (though historians claim the marriage was never consummated), and fell in love with Xu Guangping, a former student who became Lu Hsun's life companion, secretary, and the mother of their only child.

In the explosive years between the White Terror of 1927, in which the GMD or Nationalist Party purged Communists from its cadre corps and set up murderous anti-Communist policies, and his death from tuberculosis on October 6, 1936, Lu Hsun's political stance hardened and sharpened. He lived intensely in Shanghai with close collaborators and major interlocutors—his brother Zhou Jianren and Jianren's wife Wang Yunru; writer Yu Dafu; ultra-leftist writer-activists Mao Dun, Feng Xuefeng, and Rou Shi (whom the GMD government executed along with Ding Ling's lover Hu Yepin in 1931; Communist theorists Qu Qiubai and Hu Feng.) And during his Shanghai years for the first time he supported himself and his extended family exclusively through his writing. Lu Hsun's motives for aligning himself with

the Communist movement ranged from the example of his lover Xu Guangping's activism, to the worsening political climate, to his cumulative, pessimistic view of the corrupt "modern" society of the Republican GMD government, and to a late-blooming ardor for partisanship on behalf of the truly wretched of the earth. He protected and mentored young writers. Dressed in his characteristic uniform of a long black gown and black tennis shoes, cultural revolutionary Lu Hsun engaged in political activities organized by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) apparatus. He was active at the leadership level in the League of Left Wing Writers, established in the early 1930s, and participated in the factionalizing debates that quickly polarized left-wing literary circles in Shanghai. Bitter debates led the CCP leadership to shut down the League in 1936, but not before two hostile camps had coalesced, which would, by the early forties, result in renewed hostility between the Lu Hsun Academy faction headed by Zhou Yang and the Society for Literary Resistance, which Ding Ling allegedly headed.

Ding Ling is the pen name of Jiang Bingzhi. Born a generation later than Lu Hsun, in 1904, she was the elder daughter of a remarkable woman, a widow named Yu Manzhen, whose husband had come from a large, rich, provincial family in Hunan. Like other privileged, revolutionary women, including later Communist Party theorist Xiang Jingyu, Manzhen learned mathematics, science, geography, and rights theory and thus prepared herself to teach in the new girls' schools

set up in the declining years of the old dynasty. Once her Japan-educated husband had died, Manzhen struck out on her own. She set an example of militancy in street demonstrations, in her mode of thinking, and in her disciplined insistence on women's economic self-sufficiency. Following in her mother's footsteps but against her mother's advice, Ding Ling quit formal education early and fled Changsha, Hunan, for the life of a cultural revolutionary and anarchist itinerant in Nanjing, Beijing, and Shanghai. As part of her teenage life of self-willed freedom, Ding Ling formed passionate attachments to friends, male and female, seeming, one biographer has suggested, to fall in love hastily and repeatedly. Like other cultural revolutionaries, Ding Ling was expressing in social-political action the big ideas of the so-called Chinese New Culture Movement (circa 1915) and the May Fourth movement (circa 1919). Among these were the right to love, the right to control one's body, and the belief that female cupidity and libido are positive evolutionary forces. Militant youths believed that in the act of love and by repudiating the Chinese big family "system" they could transform the rotten society that Lu Hsun was describing in groundbreaking stories like "Soap."

Like Lu Hsun, therefore, Ding Ling belonged to an aristocracy of progressive Chinese intellectuals. Her early exposure to female educational institutions, in which she spent her childhood, actually ensured that she, like Lu Hsun, belonged to this elite new intellectual class. Through the set of connections that stretched out of elite girls' schools, including her

alma mater Changsha Girls School, the Common Girls School of Shanghai and Shanghai University, where Qu Qiubai helped to found the modern discipline of sociology, through early anarchist- and Communist-organizing groups, Ding Ling could count as friends or lovers most of Lu Hsun's social circle. Communist Party Secretary, sociologist, and poet Qu Qiubai; the literary muse and modern "girl" Wang Jianhong; Marxist theorist Xiang Jingyu; proletarian writer Hu Yepin; translator Feng Da; theorist and critic Feng Xuefeng—all either knew her from childhood or had encountered the short, vivacious, emotional young woman whose personality struck some as artless and others as histrionic.

It was from among these giants of revolutionary cultural life that Ding Ling sought not only lovers but readers, too. A young dilettante, she finally settled on writing as a vocation and produced in a spurt of remarkable creativity the foundational texts of what became Chinese women's modernist writing. Diffident, female, in a world that had yet to recognize a comfortable resolution to the challenge that being a famous woman writer presented, Ding Ling, like Lu Hsun, hesitated initially. But when her partner Hu Yepin's underground Communist work led to his execution, Ding Ling, too, stepped into formal political commitment and, thus, into outlaw status. She was consequently targeted by the GMD apparatus, kidnapped, and subjected to a campaign of persuasion since all sides in the struggle during these years recognized the important influence of leading intellectual revolutionaries on the young people who consumed

their literature. Her ambivalence and the child she conceived with a lover who had betrayed her put a permanent “black mark” on Ding Ling’s revolutionary record.

After Ding Ling fled captivity she surfaced in the Red Army camp at Yan’an. The citizens of this new world were soldiers, refugees, migrant scholars from the cities, rural elites, and endless numbers of farmers: poor, poorer, and utterly impoverished. To write the revolution at the level of the everyday became her literary objective, which put her in the camp of the Maoists. Like Mao Zedong, she embraced and idealized this harsh world of rural poverty, seeking methods of representation—generic forms deemed appropriate for expressing the rural everyday as a romantic possibility. Romantic realism, the idealization of the potential of the poor to transform modern life and make it deliver on its promise to all, not just the lucky few, was Ding Ling’s solution. In the end, after disciplinary action against her decision to publish “Thoughts on March 8,” Ding Ling resurfaced, published her novel of Communist land reform and accompanied the new government to Beijing after their victory in the civil war. Not even a decade later, Ding Ling’s faction lost badly in bureaucratic infighting and so, in 1958, she was expelled from privilege into the gulag. Until the mid-1970s the once celebrated writer lived below the line of sight, victim of crudely sexist slander against her romantic life. She suffered the machinations of intransigent enemies whose capacity for vengeful politics exceeded her own and in circumstances that went from uncomfortable to dire during the Cultural