



**MATERIAL FOR STORIES: THE
EMBODYING RURAL WOMAN IN
THE FICTION OF DING LING**

MENGYAO LIU

It is no accident that analyses of the rural woman under colonialism frequently invoke embodiment in their discussions of imperial violence. A look back at the history of feminist thought reminds us that the development of “body politics,” centering issues of reproductive health and domestic violence, profoundly reshaped the direction of the women’s movement in the twentieth century in the West. But the idea of the body in the context of rural non-Western women, occupying what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak terms “a violent aporia between subject and object status,” (“Can the Subaltern Speak”, 306), foregrounds a host of other considerations, particularly concerning the extent of imperial determinations. Given Spivak’s conclusions in the essay from which that excerpt originates, that the subaltern woman cannot speak or be heard through a

logocentric colonial lens, the concern then becomes how this figure should be read. On the page, her body anchors and makes translatable societal ills through a metaphoric language: sun-beaten skin, scars old and new, bound feet etc. Just as the “body politics” turn in the rhetoric of the women’s movement was rooted in real and pressing concerns, such descriptions of the subaltern woman indeed demonstrate the ongoing struggle for her humanity. However, these two directions of corporeal reference differ in the degree to which the women in question are afforded agency in framing themselves. In the case of the subaltern woman, reading her embodiment as definitively representative of colonial victimhood or violence invariably elucidates what Anirban Das terms the “primacy of the present” (141). In other words, the subjecthood of the subaltern woman constitutes a channel through which the critical reader comprehends patriarchal and colonial domination. While this type of encounter is not without substance, it is limited by the assumption that the reader can know for certain, interpreting through a necessarily colonial lens, what her body means.

Figuring the Rural Woman in the Modern Chinese Imaginary

Taking into consideration the radical and liberatory shifts in collective subjectivity emerging out of an-

ti-colonial nationalist movements, it is evident that embodiment in literature does not inherently reify imperial hierarchies. Indeed, the genre of *Bildung* as a mechanism for effecting sociopolitical change profoundly structured popular opposition to colonial power throughout the twentieth century. In the modern Chinese imagination, however, the body has often stood for nation with a rigidity that remains bound by colonial parameters. May Fourth intellectuals, in particular, utilized metaphors of the body to convey the need for China's cultural transformation on a national scale. Their conception of China as a nation, enfeebled by tradition and resembling a man nearing his death, galvanized efforts towards modernization. Postulating along highly racialized lines, May Fourth writers devoured the work of evolutionary biologists and eugenicists as they came to terms with a sense of national humiliation, stemming from how Chinese people were viewed on the global stage. The narrative arc of a diseased body encumbered by tradition restoring itself back to health served to simultaneously individualize the stakes of imperial domination through the universality of embodiment and bind Chinese people together as parts of a whole. While this metaphor was crucial in the formation of a more coherent Chinese identity during a tremendously fragmentary period in history, the binary construction of the national body is circuit-ed throughout with the colonial hierarchies it seeks to overthrow. As Jing Tsu puts it, the "Chinese identity is

no longer premised on positivity but recast as a defect (110-11)". Defining progress as surpassing defect, it is important to explicate the purposes different bodies served in the framing of Chinese modernity.

The intersections of the national body and the gendered body cohere along precise lines in the Chinese imagination of this period in the figure of the New Woman. May Fourth intellectuals forwarded a radical agenda for women's advancement in society, influenced heavily by Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Drawing from Nora Helmer, the play's protagonist who leaves her family to discover herself outside of the confines of marriage, a number of male authors advocated for women's social autonomy outside of the family unit in their fiction and other writings. Measured according to the logic of Eurocentric colonialism, however, which assigned qualities associated with femininity to the Chinese race as a whole during this period, the empowered women in May Fourth fiction were written as more of an attempt to broadcast the strength of China as a nation rather than elevate the status of Chinese women. Two of the most notable examples of this are Lu Xun's *Regret for the Past* and Mao Dun's *Creation*, both of which narrate the intellectual renaissance of young women as they rebuke the impositions of domesticity and patriarchy. These portrayals channeled twentieth-century white feminism in their specific valorization of a cosmopolitan, independent woman that was, in Ping Zhu's

phrasing, “predicated on the same linear temporality as evolutionary theories on race and gender: Western women represented the projected future of Chinese women” (33) The protagonists of *Regret for the Past* and *Creation*, as well as a number of other women protagonists of May Fourth fictions, were made to be Chinese women insofar as they could demonstrate Ibsen’s Nora as “the projected future” in the national context. Placed against the backdrop of the lived experiences of Chinese women at the time, particularly considering those that lived outside of urban areas, the New Woman was a figment of colonial mimicry. The fixation with modernizing Chinese women in Nora’s image has been characterized as “Occidentalism” in its construction of an idealized national model. But when read in a more encompassing colonial framework, it reflects, in Maria Lugones’s terms, “the cognitive production of modernity that has understood race as gendered and gender as raced in particularly differential ways for Europeans/whites and colonized/nonwhite peoples” (“Heterosexualism” 196).

Inevitably, as Rey Chow argues, this imperative to write the modern Chinese woman into existence “thus produces as its ‘other’ an unenlightened, traditional China, which becomes associated with the metaphors of decadence, darkness, and death” (92). Indeed, May Fourth fiction exhibits a profound lack of sympathy for the figure of the rural woman, whose subjectivity

is made so peripheral in the colonial imagination that she is hardly a consideration in their groundbreaking visions of modern China. Such elusiveness makes her manifestation in Xianglin's wife, a secondary character in Lu Xun's *New Years Sacrifice*, more valuable than stories that center on a female protagonist from this period. Xianglin's wife, whose lack of a name immediately separates her from the model women in the other stories, unsettles the intellectual narrator with her superstitious inquiries about death and the afterlife. Widowed twice and reduced to begging in her village, she is written to represent everything defective about the atavism and poverty of traditional China. After her death in the story, the narrator proceeds to convince himself of his distance from the oppressive conditions that shaped her existence. Xianglin's wife as an allegorical creature in this story conveys the layered hierarchies that formed the social ecology of rural China. It is the bodily function of her death rather than her voiced existential uncertainty that permits the narrator to critically deliberate in the short story's final moments. Far from the agential New Woman, Xianglin's wife concretizes the coding of colonized women as "animals in the deep sense of 'without gender,' sexually marked as female but without the characteristics of [Western] femininity" (Chow 202). Even in contemporary analyses of this character, she is described as a ghost or a memory that propels the narrator's own affective development, all of which is rooted in her social

location extending beyond gender. The chasm between the narrator's modern subjectivity and her own renders her, in many respects, incomprehensible.

Ding Ling as Translator & The Construction of Subalternity

It is from this bifurcated understanding of female embodiment during the late Republican period as a young, modern subject or dissipating relic that Ding Ling emerged as a writer. Throughout the wavelength of her intellectual development, she intervened in larger overarching ideological attempts to decenter the notion of womanhood in national fiction. In her earlier writings, often characterized as emblematic of May Fourth feminism in their depiction of educated urban women, she in fact presents a decidedly discordant image of the modern Chinese woman compared to the New Woman trope of her male counterparts. As Tani Barlow discusses, the female protagonists of *Miss Sophia's Diary* and *Yecao* are more reminiscent of Emma Bovary in their melancholic ambivalence towards the emotional taxes of romance in the shadow of cultural imperialism. Following the Yan'an decade, Ding Ling endeavored into explicitly left-wing fiction in line with socialist demands for cultural rustication. In these National Defense narratives, she describes lives of rural women living under the patriarchal authority structures of Chinese villages and the brutality of Japanese

colonial rule. Though she wrote prolifically for Party publications, Ding Ling did not valorize rural life, especially for her female subjects. During this period, she frequently explored issues of rape and sexual violence in the Chinese village. In stories such as “Affair in East Village” and “New Faith”, she demonstrated how women who lived through trauma are physically marked as sexual or political commodities in their communities, regardless of how they understand themselves. The women, through their bodies, serve as metonymic linkages between the nation, family, and sexuality. In both of those stories, narrations of rape mobilize men to join the Communist military ranks, which ostensibly strengthens a Party that supports gender equality. However, rather than emphasizing that eventual outcome, Ding Ling illustrated the conceptual precariousness and personal cost of being narrowly interpreted as a victimized, damaged body.

Some critics have characterized Ding Ling’s approach in writing about rural women as distant and detached, as she described her own alienation from femininity in personal essays, which set her apart from the subjects in her fiction. Notably, she refers to the “weakness” of women in her oft-cited “Thoughts on March 8”, with “weakness” denoting women’s sexual desires and emotional passivity. Following Barlow’s argument that Ding Ling’s mentioning of women’s visible “weakness” actually stood as an indictment of how men’s

“weaknesses” were often obfuscated by ideological posturing, it is important to understand Ding Ling’s awareness of her power as a writer and the accountability to subaltern women as part and parcel of that role. As much time as she spent in villages as a Communist Party representative, Ding Ling crucially did not identify herself as a rural woman, in addition to making clear distinctions between female cadres and village women in her fiction. This reflects her position not as detached, but rather as a “good cosmopolitan intellectual,” in the wording of Boaventura De Sousa Santos, in the sense that she carried out the translation of subaltern women’s experiences through the “contact zone” of her writing. De Sousa Santos continues, “The work of translation becomes crucial to define, in each concrete and historical moment or context, which constellations of non-hegemonic practices carry more counter-hegemonic potential” (51). In contrast to May Fourth intellectuals that coveted Westernization, Chinese socialists upheld rustication as an anti-colonial nationalist paradigm, demonstrating a dedication to “non-hegemonic practices” in their championing of peasants and calls for a more egalitarian society. In her role as a translator of subaltern women’s experiences specifically, Ding Ling further constellated this socialist cultural nexus by introducing the patriarchal and colonially inflected structuring of village life into the conversation. The struggles of rural women, textually constituted in translation of their experiences, estab-

lished decolonization as not simply a reversion to the countryside in opposition to forces of colonial modernity, but a process of both reclamation and advancement that was subject to revision.

To understand Ding Ling as a translator of rural women both within and against the larger cultural and intellectual movement towards anti-colonial Chinese nationalism, it is important to define her relationship to the subjects of her writing. As De Sousa Santos discusses, “translation is the procedure we are left with to give meaning to the world after it lost the automatic meaning and direction that western modernity claimed to have conferred on it by planning history, society, and nature” (52). The late Republican and socialist periods during which Ding Ling was active were certainly eras that contended with the loss of “automatic meaning” assigned by colonial force. But is not enough to simply include rural women in the nationalist fiction of the period if that portrayal still followed the “direction that western modernity claimed to have conferred on it,” which is to say, characterizing the body of the colonized woman as one-dimensionally defective. In a 1954 essay about the ethics of socialist realist writing, Ding Ling further details the process of “giving meaning” to the people outside of colonially demarcated society: “You absolutely cannot ... cultivate such people to extract their stories.... [Writers] must create inside a flow of true emotion. A reciprocal motion of love between

the [rural woman] and the writer ensures accuracy and literary quality beyond formula or formalism” (qtd. in Barlow, 233). The emotional current that underpins representing rural women outside of “conferred” figurations brings to mind Sara Ahmed’s “politics that is premised on closer encounters... [which] assumes that ‘action’ and ‘activism’ cannot be separated out from other forms of work: whether that work is about the differentiation of tasks (globalisation as labour), ways of speaking (to others, with others), and even ways of being in the world” (180). In her depictions of rural women, Ding Ling works to unravel the rigidities of colonial constructions not just in providing a more accurate depiction of a multifaceted subaltern character, but also in forging a reciprocal and emotional mode of interaction between writer and subject. This perspective illuminates the extent to which translation is indeed a “procedure” rather than a singular motion away from Western modernity. The notion that Ding Ling puts forth by centering the rural woman is radical in its suggestion that the object of colonial violence could narrate herself. We should ask, then, not what the rural Chinese woman’s body conveys, but how she can be spoken about and listened to.

III. The Indeterminate Woman-in-Nationalism in New Faith

Perhaps one of the most powerful organizing ideas Chinese fiction during the late Republican and early

socialist period is that of far-reaching sociopolitical possibility. While the fiction of this period reflects upon the histories of particular bodies, they constellate into a vision of modern China that is oriented towards materializing what was once impossible. It is interesting, then, to compare Xianglin's wife and the grandmother who recounts her life under Japanese colonial occupation in *New Faith* in their figurings of the rural Chinese woman. Compared to the brevity of Xianglin's wife's interjections, the grandmother's vivid account of her life as a "comfort woman" occupies half of *New Faith*. Throughout her telling, she transforms from an enfeebled relative to an unhinged preacher to a nationalist rallying cry. Just as the embodying rural woman is multiple, so too should be our reading of her history. A particularly useful model for this sort of approach is Emma Pérez's conscious "emplotment" in writing history. In her discussion of the colonial imaginary, she notes that the discursive composition of history involves an unconscious emplotting on part of the historian, usually in accordance with dominant narratives. She then puts forth a method of countering: "I am wondering what will happen if emplotment becomes a conscious act as we write the events that become our official stories...as I create a [history] in which I can believe" (27). In a similar vein, Ding Ling scripted the rural woman both as she existed in the boundaries of her surroundings and as she could be, pushing back against the patriarchal norms that did not disappear

under socialism. Indeterminacy goes against the grain in the overarching nationalist narratives of the period in which, as Pérez notes in the context of the Mexican postcolonial nationalist movement, “women’s purpose was discursively constructed as they became symbolic representations for a nationalist cause” (33). In other words, the standard for what constitutes resistance or reinvention for the woman-in-nationalism must necessarily suit her circumstances. In this context, the indeterminacy of the grandmother underscores an identity both within and outside a singular symbolic representation of nationalism.

At the end of the story, the Women’s Association invites her to give a “speech” at their International Women’s Day celebration. Crucially, she responds, “‘Speech.’ She didn’t understand the word ‘speech’ and just grunted glumly” (*Selected Writings* 295). Her lack of understanding speaks not to ignorance, primarily, but to the fundamental impossibility of the colonial/modern language of nationalism to automatically articulate her lived experiences. Although she eventually speaks out and empowers other women with her testimony at the Women’s Day celebration, the narration’s detailing of her indeterminate oscillation between various tropes demonstrates why she would not understand her own personal history as relevant to this rally at the outset. In her introduction to the translation of this story, Barlow notes that the grandmother “does not recognize

‘woman’ as a universal, inhering, real social category. Her sense of self is richly kin defined...until the young women of the Party drop by to solicit her help at a rally, she does not think to identify herself with other women” (Barlow, ‘Introduction’ to “New Faith”, 281). As an act of translation between the lived experience of subaltern women into readable text, Ding Ling’s inclusion of the grandmother’s life before the rally indicates that the history of colonial violence is indeed “all grounded in a peopled memory” (Lugones, “Decolonial Feminism” 754). Segments of that memory certainly function within an anti-colonial nationalist narrative, but it cannot all be encapsulated in a single discursive construction of rural womanhood, particularly when the rural woman herself understands her social location as many things other than “woman” as a social category. This dynamic evinces what Lugones characterizes as “the lived tension of languaging – of moving between ways of living in language” (“Decolonial Feminism” 750-51) in the case of the subaltern woman. When the grandmother’s embodied experience is phrased in the terms of a political speech, there are aspects of her life not captured by the symbol that she becomes. Reflecting upon gatherings such as this that were held across China during this period, this story takes part in the ongoing decolonial process of complicating the representation of women under colonialism.

After the grandmother recounts her experiences to the crowd at the International Women’s Day celebration

in *New Faith*, the crowd applauds her when she calls for a “fight to the end!” (*Selected Writings* 297) against the Japanese. But such a singular response could not possibly address the inhumanity of the sexual violence enacted upon her. The grandmother, as well as other rural Chinese woman portrayed in Ding Ling’s fiction of this period, presents an unfathomable and diffuse subjectivity. While she articulates her experiences in their entirety, her listeners in the story filter them through their narrow understandings of body-as-nation, as established by the rhetoric of this period. Consequently, what follows this line of thinking is retaliation against individual bodily harm in the form of nationalist insurgency. This presents somewhat of a quandary for contemporary academic readers of Ding Ling. In reading the rural Chinese woman, we must resist the sort of demystifying determinations that reinscribe the conditions for her objectification. The reader, then, must work to displace these bodily renderings through engaging with the rural Chinese woman as “inaccessible blankness circumscribed by an interpretable text” (“Can the Subaltern Speak?”, 292). In other words, the direction of interpretive inquiry in this context must abdicate its definitive approach and instead be conducted towards blankness, inconsistency, and the sort of impenetrability that destabilizes foregone conclusions. From there, the reader may begin to unravel imperialist rigidities by starting from what is left empty.

Refusing Embodiment in *When I Was in Xia Village*

Following its publication in 1941, Ding Ling received a great deal of criticism for “*When I Was in Xia Village*” on account of its portrayal of a woman seeking social redress in the face of recalcitrant village beliefs surrounding sexual violence. The central figure of the story is a rural woman named Zhenzhen who returns to her village after having contracted a sexually transmitted disease from Japanese soldiers. While she eventually decides to join the Communist encampment at Yan’an at the end of the story, the story condemns the linking of a woman’s sexual chastity to the degree to which she contributes to the broader socialist mission. In that way, it conflicted with the model woman in the Communist imagination as either virginal or strictly maternal. The narration is precise in its framing of Zhenzhen’s equivocation in response to her ostracization. She does not waver when it comes to asserting her agency or admitting her personal history. Rather, her ambivalence stems from a refusal to affirm any of the judgments of the other villagers, shaped by their own perceptions of what a woman’s body means when marked with the violence of colonialism. In Barlow’s introduction to this story, she describes this story as examining “the conjuncture of women and literary representation – to what effect, on whose terms, under what inscription of femininity, for what eventual

political good?” (36). As mentioned before, much of Ding Ling’s fiction during this period was indeed written under the auspices of incorporating the identity of woman into the focal point of nation. But as contemporary readers, we must take into account the implications of postcolonial feminist critique, Ding Ling’s penchant towards complicating conceptions of femininity throughout her literary career, and the purposeful boundaries of the text itself.

Although Zhenzhen is the story’s central character, the events of “When I Was in Xia Village” do not unfold from her perspective. The narrator is a female cadre sent to Xia Village to observe village life in a setting outside of her post at the Political Department. She first learns of Zhenzhen through a member of the local Peasant’s Salvation Association. Before the narrator even comes into contact with Zhenzhen, her preconceptions are inundated by the gossip of the villagers, who linger upon the state of her body after living under Japanese occupation in their conversations. As the narrator purchases her breakfast, the store owner speculates, “I hear her disease has even taken her nose.” Another villager adds, “Yesterday, they told me she walks with a limp” (303). Their fixation upon visible disfigurement reflects the bodily dichotomies established by the May Fourth writers that assembled the parameters of nationalist thinking. In accordance with that paradigm, Zhenzhen’s afflicted female body stands in for

the disruptive menace of Japanese colonialism upon the Chinese nation. It is notable, then, that when the narrator finally meets Zhenzhen, she observes “no outward sign of her disease. Her complexion was ruddy. Her voice was clear” (308). Her showing no “outward sign” of course does not indicate that the villagers were incorrect in their assumptions, but instead raises the issue of distinguishing between an embodied idea and the body itself. The need for Zhenzhen to confirm her disease to the narrator underscores how an interpreter arrives at certainty through language, as opposed to observable physical delineations. Furthermore, that Zhenzhen appears to the narrator so differently from how she is described by the villagers illustrates the irreducible multiplicity of the rural woman.

It is in the narrator’s conversations with Zhenzhen that the metaphoricity of the body begins to unravel the concrete judgments of the other villagers. Although it moors the imaginations of the villagers to a site of defectiveness under colonialism, Zhenzhen’s body as text fragments those readings when she assumes the role of subject. Describing her return to the village, she remarks, “As far as the people of this village are concerned, I’m an outsider. ... Nobody treats me the way they used to. Have I changed? I’ve thought about this a great deal, and I don’t think I’ve changed at all” (308). In strikingly simple language, Zhenzhen destabilizes the foundational assumption of her representation:

that colonial violence has damaged her body so deeply that she is a different person, or more object than person. But in her statement of “I don’t think I’ve changed at all,” she alludes to how her embodied suffering does not fragment her so much as bring to the surface a collective fragmentation in the structure of feeling of the village. In her narrated embodiment, Zhenzhen translates the disruption of colonial intrusion, but also denies its immutability. She refuses to explicate in rational terms, perhaps in part because there is not yet language or consciousness within the boundaries of the village to articulate the way that she feels. While their bewilderment towards her attests to the latitude of colonial power and that it complements the norms of the patrilineal Chinese village, Zhenzhen’s imagination of herself is a pathlight that faintly illumines a possibility that is, for the most part, still obscured.

At once, the problematic of embodiment pivots from the body being read to the role of the reader, or in Spivak’s terms, “the importance of the intellectual” (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 290). Importance, in this sense, indicates that the intellectual reader is positioned in and informed by an encompassing imperial hierarchy, rather than serving as an objective conduit. In other words, we are not absolved of complicity through cognizance. Dismissing that role, in turn, enacts epistemic and material violence upon these spoken-for subjectivities. Taken together, Spivak demands that “the critic’s

institutional responsibility” (300) must involve relinquishing the authority in which imperialist representations of the subaltern traffic. In her conversation with Xia Dabao, the narrator of “When I Was in Xia Village” conveys how the institutional responsibility of ceding objective authority does not vacate critical engagement with the subaltern woman, but rather scrutinizes the systems that code her body. Given her position as a cadre visiting the village, the narrator performs the role of an intellectual critic. Xia Dabao voices his construction of Zhenzhen to her seeking confirmation, but she rightly interrogates his preconceptions. In Xia Dabao’s opinion, Zhenzhen must hate him because if he had been a wealthier man when her parents were arranging her marriage, they could have gotten married. Instead, she attempted to escape the arrangement they presented and ended up a captive of the Japanese soldiers. Following the patriarchal circuiting of traditional marriage that does not assign the bride any agency in the matter, the blame would fall on Xia Dabao. But rather than acquiesce to what is understood to be an accepted truth, the narrator resists: “‘No,’ I replied, searching my memory. ‘She has never shown me that she hates anyone.’ This was not a lie. ... ‘Why should she hate you?’” (313). By setting the terms of interpretation to privilege what Zhenzhen herself expresses, the narrator does not definitively speak for her, but also works to undermine the logic of Xia Dabao’s assumptions. In asking why she “should” hate him, the narrator is also asking why that schema should structure his thinking.

The embodying subaltern woman does not make so much as she unmakes. As the narrator's conversation with Xia Dabao establishes, acknowledging that her body is impossible to know fundamentally changes the direction of inquiry. For Xia Dabao, this is a disruptive process that results in his careening off into the forest, muttering to himself. For those complicit in the systems that discursively enclose the subaltern woman, it is difficult to come to terms with all the ways in which those metrics do not hold up to scrutiny. Addressing that concern, the ending of "When I Was in Xia Village" presents a more optimistic side to standing on unstable ground. Informing the narrator of her decision to travel to Yan'an, Zhenzhen once again speaks powerfully and simply: "I will be able to start life fresh. ... Some have called me young, inexperienced, and bad-tempered. I don't dispute it. There are some things that I just have to keep to myself" (314). Her statement is plain in its diction and does not reveal much about her plans, but that very orientation towards possibility comprises a decolonial act in and of itself. As Lugones discusses, "From the fractured locus, the movement succeeds in retaining creative ways of thinking, behaving, and relating that are antithetical to the logic of capital. Subject, relations, ground, and possibilities are continually transformed, incarnating a weave from the fractured locus that constitutes a creative, peopled recreation" (Lugones 755). In response, the narrator contemplates, "I felt that what she had said was really

worth examining. There was nothing for me to do but express approval of her plan” (315). For the narrator, as well as the intellectual reader, this politics requires a responsibility to the subaltern woman. This obligation takes the form of a dedicated confidence in what she speaks, rather than her embodiment, as being “really worth examining.” Indeed, it is not the act of reading but a process of coming-to-know without the need for a particular guarantee that characterizes this relationship.

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