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The New and the Traditional in Modern  
Chinese Literature—Reflections on  
the Short Story “When I Was in Xiacun  
Village” by Ding Ling

Chinese literature which has developed after the May 4th Movement is generally considered as new and not very closely related to the Chinese literary tradition. This is the impression one gets when reading Chinese historical studies of literature and critical works. A similar approach can be observed in the works devoted to Chinese post-May 4th literature by European and American sinologists. The approach of Chinese literary experts can, however, be explained by the fact that for them it is the new character that is important and attractive, whereas the non-Chinese sinologists uncritically adopt the Chinese point of view. And yet the non-Chinese reader is rather interested in what is specific and different in Chinese literature, thus in the relations with the home tradition because they account for the specific character of the work appreciated by the non-Chinese. The analysis of the short story *Wo zai Xiacun de shihou* 我在霞村的時候 (When I Was in Xiacun Village)<sup>1</sup> by Ding Ling is presented here as a humble contribution to the discussion on the character of Chinese prose of the XX century, its “contemporaneity”, its newness and its connections with the Chinese literary tradition.

The events related in the story take place in the following chronological order: Zhenzhen, the main character of the story, is to be married, as her parents decided, to a comparatively wealthy widower. The girl does not want to submit to her parents decision because she loves Xia Dabao, a boy of a poor background. In the meantime a troop of Japanese soldiers unexpectedly attack the village, the girl is raped and driven away by the soldiers. Then she lives as a prostitute among the Japanese yet keeping the contact with Chinese partisans and passing them important information. Once

<sup>1</sup> I am referring to the Kaiming shudian text of 1955. The short story dates from 1940. It was first published in 1941 (Feuerwerker, 188).



when seriously ill she returns to the unoccupied zone, yet due to some important reasons she is again sent over to the enemy. After a year of absence Zhenzhen comes back to Xiacun, her home village. Almost simultaneously arrives there a writer, the narrator of the story. She notices different reactions and attitudes of the villagers towards Zhenzhen's return: one of the political officials shows a full appreciation of Zhenzhen, some inhabitants show compassion whereas another group treats her as a sinful and depraved person. Now the parents insist on Zhenzhen's marrying Xia Dabao. The writer, who made friends with Zhenzhen and met Xia Dabao, also thinks this marriage a very good solution. Zhenzhen, nevertheless, definitely rejects the suggestions and pressures. She intends to leave the village where she has not been understood or accepted and to seek some other place and independent life.

The plot shows features characteristic for Ding Ling's early works where it was typical to show interest in the "conditions and emotional states of women" (Feuerwerker, 20) and the "the sensitive and suffering female" (Feuerwerker, 33). Among Ding Ling's protagonists Zhenzhen represents the most extreme case of exploitation of women and is the example of the woman who decides to overcome all the misfortunes. This feminist subject matter in Chinese literature is a new phenomenon transplanted from the West into the Chinese ground. It places Ding Ling among the Chinese writers of the XX century who achieved most in the search for a new theme and who showed the greatest courage in contradicting the conventional and traditional tastes of the contemporary readers.

The story is not told in the chronological order. The narration starts in the moment when the writer-narrator sets out on a journey to Xiacun for a holiday. Other characters gradually introduce us into the story of Zhenzhen and her experience. The narration develops along the axis from the "unknown" to the "known" and according to the rules of building up the suspense. The quiet and deserted village when the writer approaches it as well as her companion's anxiety, for she used to remember the village as noisy and full of life, signal the „unknown" and create the atmosphere of suspense. Fragments of incomprehensible conversations of the villagers, their excitement, etc. add to the general atmosphere of anxiety. The thread of cognition reaches the climax in the final statement of Zhenzhen when she discloses her views and plans.

With the development of the narration the cognition closely alternates with evaluation. At first, the writer's attitude is rather vague. The first impression makes her state that "she is satisfied with the village", *wo jue de hen manyi zhe cunzi* 我觉得很满意这村子 (Ding Ling, 416). She takes a positive opinion about Zhenzhen after Comrade Ma (Ding Ling, 421) which is shown by her reaction to the conversation in the shop. The shop-keeper and his wife speak about Zhenzhen as of "immoral woman", *quede de poniang* 缺德的婆娘 (Ding Ling, 422) and this together with similar opinions heard from a few countrywomen enrages the writer and leads her to consider her walk around the village as "not joyful", *bu yukuai* 不愉快 (Ding Ling, 423).

The writer seems to keep distance towards the village. Several times there appears



a characteristic motif of putting the notes and photos in order which Ding Ling sets in contrasts with other motifs. For instance, despite the fact the writer can hear a woman crying nearby and although she considers "making notes so uninteresting", *xie biji you shi duomo wuliao* 寫筆記又是多麼無聊 (Ding Ling, 424), yet she forces herself to follow the daily schedule in order to rest well and to arrange the notes in the proper order. The circle the narrator moves in is, as it seems, a circle of dead problems whereas interesting things and true life flow outside it. The language of the story adds to this feeling. The style of the narration is concise, even a bit terse and colourless when compared with the language of the shopkeeper, his wife and the village women who gossip about Zhenzen (DL, 422-423).

Zhenzen's final declaration which brings about revaluation—the axiological shift—is the breaking point in the axiological thread of the story. The writer appreciates the plan of marrying Zhenzen to Xia Dabao, thus keeping the side of the parents and other members of the village community. When she, however, hears Zhenzen's final decision, she realizes it is Zhenzen who is right and whose behaviour deserves a high regard.

The changes that take place in the writer's judgement can be presented, in a simplified way, by means of antonimic notions. The writer together with her surrounding forms initially a circle of "the known" and "positive". The "unknown" is represented by Xiacun village and is treated with distance and anger. In the behaviour of the villagers the writer finds features she could easily call "backward". Zhenzen's declaration is the climax point of the cognition and revaluation. Thanks to Zhenzen Xiacun village acquires a different, much more positive quality, whereas the writer appears to be a poor-spirited, conventional person.

Parallelism and antonymy which can be observed in the structure of the story clearly imply its "Chinese" character. Its didacticism and the intention to move the reader by showing him a serious social phenomenon are also indicating the Chinese origin. As a matter of fact, the author uses a paradox to suggest that just a simple country girl appears to be braver and more emancipated than the writer who as a member of the élite fighting among others for equality and freedom of women, should set the example herself. The function of the paradox here is to move the reader as deeply as possible.

If we look for the genre which is closest to the story by Ding Ling in the literary tradition, we can find *shuo* 說, or "exemplary tale". Lu Ji describes the genre as *wei ye* 燁燁 "glowing and bright", thus clear and attractive, and as *jue kuang* 譎誑 "artful and deceiving", thus deliberate and applying the literary devices which let the reader's attention and judgement be manipulated (Lu Ji 4b).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Achilles Fang interprets the mentioned fragment in a different way: "*Shuo* [discourse] is dazzling bright and extravagantly bizarre" (Fang, 12). His translation ignores the fact that in the semantic range of both *jue* and *kuang* we can find "manipulation" and "deception". I am referring here to the unpublished translation by Janusz Chmielewski.



Li Shan, the commentator of Lu Ji's *Wenfu*, sees the justification for the mentioned features of *shuo* for the said genre 'first of all aims at impressing the reader' *yi gan dong wei xian* 以感動為先 (Lu Ji, 4b). Wang Kaiyun's remark also adheres to my interpretation of the story by Ding Ling because Wang Kaiyun in his commentary to Lu Ji's definition says: "*Shuo* should change people's course of thinking, change what has been set up, and, by deceiving [the reader] should cause that he returns to the truth..." *shuo dang hui ren zhi yi, gai yi cheng zhi shi, jue kuang zhi shi fan yu zheng* [...] 說當回人之意, 改已成之事, 譎誑之使反於正 [...] (Wang Kaiyun, 329)

If we assume that Ding Ling's story theoretically fits into the criteria of *shuo*, it would be worthwhile to find out if there are any analogies between a classical example of the genre and the story. One of the best known examples of *shuo* is *Bushezhe shuo* 捕蛇者說 (The Story of the Snake-Catcher), written by Liu Zongyuan. A superficial comparison already shows some similarity in composition: in both the cases the narrator belongs to the social elite and faces some extraordinary situation. In the case of *Bushezhe shuo* it is the life of a snake-catcher which becomes the object of main interest. Impressed by the dangers which all his life the snake-catcher has to face, the narrator offers him his help. And then it appears that thanks to the dangerous job the catcher and his family manage to survive and that, in fact, he is in a better position than the local peasants who are threatened by the tax-collectors' ruthlessness and extortion. Therefore the best way to help the snake-catcher is by not helping him at all—this is the paradox which represents Liu Zongyuan's main idea. The two stories close with a similar didactic lesson.<sup>3</sup> Ding Ling writes about Zhenzhen's declaration: "[...] I had the feeling that her words were worth our reflection", *wo jue de ta de hua di que zhi de women yanjiu* 我覺得她的話的確值得我們研究 (Ding Ling, 441). And Liu Zongyuan confesses that he wrote his story "for the benefit of people who investigate the customs [and conditions of life] of people", *guan ren feng zhe de yan* 觀人風者得焉 (Liu Zongyuan 4).

The comparison with the piece by Liu Zongyuan helps to notice a hardly visible content level in the story by Ding Ling. Liu Zongyuan's didactic criticism is clearly expressed by the quotation from Confucius which says that "a cruel government is worse than a tiger" *he zheng meng yu hu* 荷政猛於虎. In Ding Ling's story, however, criticism seems to be missing—except for the one the author addresses to herself. But is it really so?

<sup>3</sup> The resemblance between these works may imply a conscious imitation. This, however, would be a hasty conclusion. *Shuo* was a popular genre in XIXth century and it was gradually transformed into a journalistic article (Golygina, 30), therefore it can be assumed that Ding Ling took over the pattern of the genre without the intention of thus expressing some definite idea.



The writer moves in the circle that was also described by such phrases as “political department” *zhengzhibu* 政治部, “propaganda division” *xuanchuanke* 宣傳科, “mass meeting speech” *qunzhong de baogao* 群眾的報告, “course lecture” *xunlianban de baogao* 訓練班的報告 and the like terms connected with the political life of the times. Doesn’t the revaluation concern also that sphere? At first reading it may seem that it does not. There are, nevertheless, some contrasts in the story which suggest something opposite. When the writer and her companion reach the village assembly hall where, according to numerous paper slips stuck on the walls, are seated many social and political organizations, it appears that inside there is “[...] silence, nobody is to be found anywhere, only several empty tables stand in a mess” (Ding Ling, 417). The silence and emptiness, ironically enough, stand in contrast with the number of slips of paper informing about the organizations seated in the building. Comrade Ma assures the writer that “in Zhenzhen’s [story] she will find a lot of [literary] ‘material’” *Zhenzhen nali ‘cailiao’ yiding hen duo* 貞貞那裏「材料」一定很多 (Ding Ling, 422). In Comrade Ma’s statement the painful human experience is presented and classified as an object and devoid of life quality. It is as if the author suggested that through the contact with her circle everything is struck by deadness.

In the first and last sentence there appears the word *jueding* 決定, “to decide”, “decision”. In the first sentence it said: “Since in the political department it was too noisy, Comrade Mo Yu decided to send me to the neighbouring village [...]” (Ding Ling, 416). In the last sentence we can read: “Indeed, as soon as I left the house [of Zhenzhen], Comrade Ma told me about the decision concerning her [...]” (Ding Ling, 441). In both the cases the decisions indicate the shadowy character of Mo Yu. We know little about him. Apart from the information included in the first sentence, a bit farther we learn that Mo Yu informed in advance Comrade Ma about the writer’s arrival asking him, as it seems, to take care of her (Ding Ling, 420). By the end of the story we also learn that Director Mo Yu (*Mo Yu zhuren* 莫俞主任) for fear of the “mopping-up operation” of the Japanese army definitely wants to evacuate the ill and the injured people (Ding Ling, 438). A rough picture of the person who is likely to be very influential in the matters concerning the region and who takes special care of the injured and the ill, emerges from all those bits of information. It can be deduced that he was the one who most probably decided about Zhenzhen’s medical treatment, but it was also he who sent ill Zhenzhen on the difficult mission among the enemies. Was he entitled to do so, was his decision justified? The author does not answer the questions, after all she does not ask them openly. And the reader, in fact, would not have the right to ask the questions had not the author indirectly call him to. For the name of Mo Yu is meaningful, it can be translated “the one who is not to be disregarded” or if *yu* 俞 is understood as the variant of *yu* 與 — “the one not to be compared”. Thus, there is no open criticism in Ding Ling’s story but there is a veiled encouragement to think over the presented events and characters and to individually fill up the empty spaces which the author leaves.



In the story we can observe a deep concern about the universal social problems which is so typical for a great many traditional essays and poetry. Ding Ling's didactic drive is at the same time accompanied by the subtle art of allusion, so characteristic for Chinese literature, which agitates reader's imagination and consequently makes him go back to the presented problems, the art that attributes the story with everlasting qualities. If we go back to the questions mentioned at the beginning of the article it seems the above analysis justifies the statement that the subject of the story, representing a new aspect in Chinese literature, functions in it only as a stimulus which activates traditional literary structures.

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