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Daughters of the May Fourth, Orphans of Revolution

By Hector Lopez

Abstract: Confucianism, an ideology that dominated Chinese society for millennia, became a stain in Chinese culture. The youth in China at the turn of the twentieth century were determined to rid their society from Confucian influence. There was only one problem; they did so by taking small steps in ridding Confucianism one piece at a time. The biggest issue, filial piety, became the toughest challenge China faced during the revolutionary period. Authors like Lu Xun and Chen Duxiu used literature to protest against filial piety, influencing many others to do the same. Women like Xiao Hong and Ding Ling also exposed the brutal nature of filial piety from a women’s perspective. They challenged the status quo on sexuality, marriage, and freedom of choice for women in China. Many of the men who wrote alongside them applauded their literary works; however, their efforts would fall short. As the Chinese Communist Party grew stronger, the roles of women in Chinese society were discarded so that the Party could appeal to the peasantry who heavily relied on family hierarchy to work their crops and manage their homes. As the May Fourth Movement set the stage for Communism, making promises of women’s reform, in time the leaders of the movement took on political roles that changed their views of women’s reform. As the Party grew, promises were broken and women’s reform became a façade in revolutionary China.

For over two millennia, Confucianism has dominated Chinese society. Since its existence, Confucian ideology has shaped many aspects of life in China. Even today, gender inequality remains a significant topic of debate due to entrenched Confucian ideologies. Although men had opportunities to better their own social standing, women had no opportunity for improvement. Women, under Confucian ideology, were at the whim of their fathers, who sold their daughters through marriage arrangements. Once married, women became the property of their husbands, forever servants to
the men in their lives. The three obediences of Confucianism for women dictates that she must obey her father first, until married. Once married, a woman was to obey her husband. If a woman’s husband dies before she does, then the woman was to obey her son. This was the role of women under a system dominated by the virtue of filial piety. This also involved a woman’s subjugation to the will of her mother-in-law when living in her husband’s home.

As the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) ended, revolution began and the people of China demanded change. Women like Xiao Hong and Ding Ling played a large role in the changes that took place following the end of the Qing dynasty. They used literature to expose the problems of the ancient ways, which had held women captive to their fathers, husbands, and brothers. Exposed to physical and sexual abuses, transgressions became a burden placed on women. Through literature, women in Chinese society had brought forth their own awakening of an ancient world that needed to move forward into modernity.

During the time of Confucian influence over China, women found themselves as second-class citizens. Some would argue further that indeed they found themselves as slaves to men in Chinese society under Confucian doctrine. “In theory and often in practice, women were supposed to remain in the inner quarters,” states Wendy Larson, author of *Women and Writing In Modern China*, “[W]omen were supposed to restrict themselves to relationships within the family and kin circle and define themselves as wives, mothers, and daughters.”¹ Women’s roles in Confucian society became more than what Larson has described – women were also slaves to their fathers, husbands, and brothers. It was a common theme for women to be sold into marriage for two reasons: 1) to lighten the burden of her family by eliminating a mouth to feed, and 2) to add another worker to the family of the woman’s groom. If for any reason things did not work out, husbands could sell their wives. This is just one example of how diminished roles that women played in traditional culture in China.

In 1915, the New Culture Movement began with a literary revolution, which brought to the surface the conditions of women under Confucian society. While male authors dominated literature, there were two women who took on powerful roles: Zhang Naiying (1911-1942), pen name Xiao Hong, and Jiang Bingzhi (1904-

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Hector Lopez

1986), pen name Ding Ling. These women remain two of the most prominent writers in Chinese history. They wrote about their experiences under ancient society as well as life during the revolution and the great changes they witnessed in China. Their literature reflects women’s identities and roles in family and society as China shifted from the rule of the Qing dynasty, to the warlords, to republican nationalism, and finally to communism. The two women came from different backgrounds, and in some cases, their stories take on different settings, yet their writings deal with many of the same issues that women faced. They used literature to present the people of China with the burdens of women with one common objective – change. However, before we look into the writings and lives of Xiao and Ding, we must first look into China’s deep history. This will provide a deeper context, and paint a brighter picture, of the lives and the dedication of both these women.

If China became a great power under Confucianism, why was change so important at the turn of the twentieth century? To answer this question, we first have to look back to the Opium Wars beginning in 1839, when the British navy took control of many of China’s major harbors. The British merchants in China began to dictate trade with the Chinese merchants by setting prices that China had to follow. This left China with very little money; making it difficult to develop the modern technology to defend itself from foreign invaders. The treaties that followed the Opium Wars granted more openings of ports to foreign powers with Britain gaining the largest advantages. Britain’s dominance stemmed from the Treaty of Nanjing, which placed Hong Kong under British control. Foreign concessions also led to foreign policy, taxes collected from foreign magistrates, and foreign troops patrolling the territory. The Chinese who lived in foreign controlled territories were uprooted without ever leaving their homeland. The lands that they had known were no longer theirs culturally or economically.

Compounding the situation even further, in 1895, the Chinese navy fought against the Japanese over control of Korea. Japan destroyed the northern Chinese navy’s best ships and took control of Shandong ports. Shandong was the home of Confucius (551-479 B.C.E.), the birthplace of the man who defined the fundamental characteristics of Chinese cultural ideology for two thousand years. After a decade of a self-imposed isolation from
western technologies, Chinese intellectuals realized at this moment that China needed to adopt Western technology to defeat foreign invasion and regain its sovereignty. The multiple defeats throughout the 19th century made this obvious. Western technology overpowered China during the Opium Wars, and it was Western technology that provided the Japanese with increased strength. In order to adopt western technology, China had to change its ideology by ridding itself of ancient ways and leap forward into modernity. The beginning of reform started with education, abolishing the civil service examination system and its Confucian curriculum in 1905 and setting up public schools.

**Lu Xun**

China began to send students to other countries to attend university and learn about Western technology. This next generation would dig China out of the grave, leap into modernity, and rebuild what once was a strong nation. In 1902, a student by the name of Zhou Shuren (1881-1936) attended university in Japan. Zhou intended to become a doctor to do his part in helping his fellow Chinese become physically healthier people. Whenever there was a break in classes, professors showed war films of the Russo-Japanese War, which began while Zhou was there, lasting from 1904 through 1905. One particular film showed a fellow Chinese man with his hand bound as Japanese soldiers stood around him, and a crowd of the condemned Chinese man’s compatriots watched. The bounded man, declared a spy, was beheaded and the crowd of Chinese people seemed to enjoy the spectacle. “The people of a weak and backward country, however strong and healthy they may be, can only serve to be made example of, or to witness such futile spectacles,” wrote Zhou, “and it doesn’t really matter how many of them die of illness.”

This was Zhou’s awakening! He realized the Chinese people did not need medical attention, but mental attention. He left university and headed for Shanghai to become a writer, taking up the pen name Lu Xun.²

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³ Zhou Shuren, more famously known by his pen name, and will further be addressed as, Lu Xun.
When arriving in Shanghai, Lu Xun began writing short stories as he attempted to launch *New Youth* magazine. The magazine did not take off as he hoped, but in 1915, Chen Duxiu (1879-1942), a dean at Beijing University, revived the magazine asking Lu Xun to write a story for its first issue. Lu Xun went to work, creating his short-story collection, *Call to Arms*, encouraging those who read it to awaken. Lu Xun introduced ancient ideologies as an “iron house without windows,” and within the walls are people who are suffocating. He posed the question – is it kindness to let them sleep so that no one suffers or screams out, awakening the few who may have a chance to survive and destroy the walls of this iron house? Lu Xun provides the answer by stating, “…if a few awake, you can’t say there is no hope of destroying the iron house.” In this essay, Lu Xun portrays Confucianism as the iron house that is suffocating the people in China and now is the time to scream out and wake up the few who can hear, with hope to destroy the very institution that is killing the people. “Lu desperately believed that something had to be done to awaken the Chinese to what he saw as the destructiveness of traditional culture.”

Lu Xun followed up *Call to Arms* with *A Madman’s Diary* in 1918.

*A Madman’s Diary* begins with a friend who calls on the narrator to look at the diary of his brother who had gone mad some time ago. The narrator, a doctor, agrees to take a look, and then the narrative shifts to the madman’s perspective. He speaks of the villagers who have taken on the form of cannibals, looking at the madman as if they were craving to take a bite of his flesh. The madman, on request of his brother and the village physician, isolates himself in his room and begins to read a history book titled, “Confucian Virtue and Morality.” The madman lacked sleep, reading “half the night until I began to see words between the lines. The whole book was filled with the two words – ‘Eat people.’” The madman came to the understanding that Confucianism consumed the people it infected, destroying the social and political structure of China. This leads to the madman questioning his own actions, or believing he too had taken part in

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3 Ibid.
cannibalistic practices. He wonders if he had eaten the flesh of his
own sister, who, under filial piety was subject to the demands of
her brother. Lu Xun finishes this story with, “Perhaps there are still
children who haven’t eaten men? Save the children…”8 In order to
save the children from being eaten or becoming cannibals, they
needed to be educated about the destructive ideals of
Confucianism. Lu Xun’s work, along with other writers like Chen
Duxiu and Hu Shih, who inspired many students and intellectuals
to take a stand against Confucianism, savagely criticized the
foreign powers that continued to chop up China into their own
spheres of influence.

Following World War I, Chinese delegates went to Paris to
participate in the Treaty of Versailles. They felt they had deserved
a right to sit at the table since they had helped the allied forces,
participating in the grunt work of building infrastructure and
digging ditches to free up military personnel to fight the battles.9
However, allied powers wanted to concede the former German
concessions in Shandong to Japan. This did not sit well with
students and intellectuals in China, who organized protests
forbidding Chinese delegates from signing the treaty. The pressure
placed on the Chinese government by protestors convinced the
deleates to walk out of the meetings without signing the treaty.
On May 4, 1919, what later became known as the May Fourth
Movement, began in China the protest and staged boycotts of
Japanese products. The May Fourth Movement also brought to the
surface a movement for women’s rights in China, and it would
largely overlap with the ongoing New Culture Movement noted
above.

Women who participated in the May Fourth Movement
were restricted to having their speeches and debates indoors only.
“At the beginning we, as female students, did not enjoy the same
freedom of movement as our male counterparts,”10 wrote Deng
Yingchao (1904-1992), who later went on to marry Zhou Enlai
(1898-1976), a founding member of the Communist Party in
China. Deng took part in the march to Tianjin (Tientsin) where
police started attacking the protestors once they took to the streets.
Men and women both stood together, protecting each other, and

8 Ibid., 16.
9 Guoqi Xu, *Strangers on the Western Front Chinese Workers in the Great War*
found a way out of the vicious encirclement of police and continued their march. These events became an inspiration to the youth of China, especially to women whose fates were determined by their fathers, brothers, and husbands. Chen Duxiu once wrote, “Emancipation means freeing oneself from the bondage of slavery and achieving a completely independent and free personality.”

He believed that in order for China to awaken from a two-thousand-year slumber, it needed reforms for all, including women. The downward trend that resulted in the demise of the Qing, and the rise of dissenting voices, would grant women an opportunity to speak on the behalf of women. Women like Jiang Bingzhi and Chang Naiying who found inspiration in the writings of Lu Xun. Coming from upper class families did not allow these two women to escape the privileges of men who still stood on the top tier of filial piety.

**Ding Ling and Xiao Hong**

Jiang Bingzhi, whose pen name is Ding Ling, was born on October 12, 1904 in Hunan to a gentry family that had been prominent figures within their region for three generations under the Qing Dynasty. When Ding was three years old, her father passed away and her mother moved her family to her own hometown of Changde. Ding’s mother enrolled in school to become a teacher. Following her education, Ding’s mother founded many elementary schools in Changde, becoming a pioneer educator following the abolition of the examination system. Just before she enlisted in school, Ding’s mother unbound her feet, a painful task. “She soaks them daily in cold water to speed up the process and insists on enduring the pain of running in gym class, even though she could have been excused.” In doing this, Ding’s mother threw away a part of Confucian ideology, and became more of an individual who no longer conformed to ancient ways.

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11 Ibid., 51.
12 Jiang Bingzhi, more famously known under her pen name, and will further be addressed as, Ding Ling.
14 Ibid., 69.
Her courage to endure the pain of unbinding her feet became the central ideal to Ding Ling’s story “Mother.”

Her mother was more than just an inspiration to Ding Ling’s writing; Ding’s mother also helped Ding escape the control of her uncle. When Ding’s mother moved her family to Changde, Confucian teachings placed both Ding Ling and her mother under the control of Ding’s uncle, who arranged for Ding’s marriage. With the help of her mother, Ding Ling broke off the arrangement leading to a “stormy confrontation with her uncle.”15 This was Ding Ling’s first taste of the power of the pen by denouncing her uncle and the “whole social spectrum to which he belonged.”16 Ding published her writing, bringing her feelings toward her uncle’s ways into the view of the public. She left home and headed to Shanghai to begin studying art and literature, continuing the education her mother started for her as a child.

Chang Naiying, whose pen name is Xiao Hong,17 was born on June 2, 1911, into a family belonging to the landlord class. She was born on the day of Duanyang, or Dragon Boat Festival, which fell on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month. “Local superstition had it that it was unlucky to be born on that day.”18 Because of superstition surrounding Xiao’s birth, the relationship with her parents suffered. Her parents gave Xiao little positive attention. Her mother constantly gave Xiao “nasty looks” and spoke to her with only “mean words.”19 Xiao’s father was no better, casting looks that made Xiao tremble whenever she crossed his path. When Xiao was nine years old, her mother passed away and Xiao’s father became worse. “He was a man who ruled with fear, with his children and his tenants.”20 There was one redeeming feature in Xiao’s childhood, her grandfather. He taught Xiao to have compassion for the people in their community, how to work a garden, the importance of education, and how to enjoy life. Xiao’s grandfather felt it important to take care of those less fortunate when holding them accountable for their contracts. In one instance, Xiao witnessed her father stripping a team of horses from tenants

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15 Ibid., 70.
16 Ibid.
17 Chang Naiying, more famously known under her pen name, and will further be addressed as, Xiao Hong.
18 Xiao Hong, *The Field of Life and Death & Tales of Hulan River*, trans. Howard Goldblatt (Boston: Cheng & Tsui, 2002), x.
19 Ibid., 165.
20 Ibid., ix.
who had not paid their rent. Xiao’s grandfather argued with his son over the incident, demanding the return of two horses to the tenants. “Two horses to us mean nothing,” said grandfather, “but to a poor man those two horses mean his very existence.” Xiao’s grandfather, even though a member of the landlord class, understood that peasants also had rights to existence and profession. These rights were not just for peasants, but also related to women, which her grandfather taught Xiao when he educated her with poetry.

Early every morning, Xiao and her grandfather would recite poems, and Xiao learned to memorize the ones she favored. In time, her grandfather taught Xiao the meanings of these poems. The poems were not only wrapped around social qualities or hierarchy, nor hard work and profit, as some poems also discussed life in general: “I left home young, I returned an old man: The speech is the same; though my hair is thin.”

Her grandfather explained the poem to Xiao, which made her feel sad thinking one day her grandfather will no longer be with her. The reality was harsh, but her grandfather had his reasons; he was preparing Xiao for the harsh life of a woman in China. Along with poems and the meanings of those poems, her grandfather also taught history to Xiao. In the storage rooms in their house, Xiao’s family had a collection of items passed down from generation to generation. Xiao found the storage room to be a place of wonder and exploration. She found old clothing, jewelry, tools, household items, and weapons. “Some of the things were falling apart, and others were infested by bugs, owing to the fact that they’d long been neglected by their owners.” Once Xiao came across these items, they began to breathe again.

Xiao’s curiosity brought the past to life. She had learned about her aunts who had left behind clothing and décor following their marriages. She learned more about her grandparents who stored away their items to make way for their son, who now took ownership of the house and land. Everything in the storage room was dusty and untouched until Xiao ventured into the room. Xiao’s grandfather shared his memories, and his knowledge about history and literature, which, later in life, would influence Xiao as an

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21 Ibid., ix.
22 Ibid., 174.
23 Ibid., 164.
adult. When Xiao became a teenager, she continued her education in an all-girls school in Harbin in the far northeast of China.

When Ding Ling took up classes in Shanghai, she did not take it seriously, only attending classes on occasion. She attempted to study art and western literature, eventually leaving school and moving to Beijing (Peking). Xiao, on the other hand, studied the works of Lu Xun, Chen Duxiu, and other literary works from authors who contributed to *New Youth* magazine and the May Fourth Movement. This was the same publication in which Ding personally participated. After two years of education, Xiao was expelled from school due to her relationship with one of the instructors. The instructor abandoned Xiao, who was pregnant, making returning home a problem she could not face. For a woman in this time, having a child out of wedlock was extremely difficult, reflecting negatively on the family, and bringing grief and social ridicule to her father.

Xiao brings this reality into her novel *The Field of Life and Death* where a naïve girl becomes pregnant by a man who abandoned her to join the local militia. “After that no man would have her,” wrote Xiao, “Her mother suffered such a terrible shame she couldn’t hold her head up in the village.”24 Xiao goes on to describe the mother’s treatment toward her daughter thereafter – by spitting on her daughter when she addressed her. When villagers found out about the young girl’s impurity, the rumors began and the family became the center of attention in a negative way. Xiao also discovered her father had arranged her marriage to the son of a warlord. To avoid ridicule from her village and father, Xiao ran away roaming the roads of China. Both Ding and Xiao began to pave their own paths, choosing their own lovers, husbands, and careers. They both also mature sexually, but portray their sexuality differently in their literature.

*Miss Sophie’s Diary* written by Ding, portrays the sexuality of a woman who lived in the city, while Xiao brings up sex in the countryside. However. Xiao only presents women as the objects of dominant men who force themselves on women. In Xiao’s account, the woman took the blame if she became pregnant while the man who raped her suffered no repercussions. Ding, on the other hand, expressed sexuality from a woman’s view and the struggle to conform to social structures. Miss Sophie struggles with

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24 Ibid., 19.
her feelings toward a man, saying, “I can’t control the surges of wild emotion, and I lie on this bed of nails of passion, which drive themselves into me whichever way I turn.” Miss Sophie is raging with emotions, expressing her lust for the man who has her captivated. She feels out of control with her feelings, but she also begins to question if she is “allowed” to feel this way. “If a woman’s as reckless as that, she’s bound to come to a bad end. Besides, I still need people’s respect.” Just like in Xiao’s tale, Ding presents the clash of women’s sexuality and the social destruction that can come from the community. If Miss Sophie gives in to her feelings and throws herself to the man she lusts for, she loses the respect of anyone who may learn of her secret.

Both Ding and Xiao had become mature women ready for marriage, in different ways, expressing the social division with sex. Being a bride in China, particularly in the countryside, was a great disadvantage for women. Filial piety is the family hierarchy established under Confucianism, where fathers sat at the head of the family and everyone had to obey the father. Sisters had to show obedience to their brothers, mothers (widowed) were obedient to their sons, wives to husbands, and daughter-in-law to mother-in-law. If a pyramid was drawn to illustrate this order of hierarchy, women were always at the bottom, especially those who were newly married. Xiao, in her childhood, witnessed the atrocity that a child bride endured when joining her new family.

In *Tales of Hulan River*, Xiao depicts the real life tragedies the child bride endured, which lead to her death. In the novel, the Hu family served as a family of obedience who set the example for the village to follow. The Hu’s became the family favored by the gods, and wealth was in their future. “Their family traditions were the best defined and the neatest.” The Hu family represented the epitome of filial piety in the village. When a child bride entered the Hu home, the entire village showed up to witness this rare opportunity. Immediately after the child bride showed up, the villagers began to talk about what they witnessed. They saw the child as “too proud and didn’t look or act much like a child bride.” The villagers expressed this sentiment because the child

26 Ibid., 24.
27 Hong, *The Field of Life and Death & Tales of Hulan River*, 188.
28 Ibid., 197.
bride ate too much food, not showing any shyness. They expected her to be more timid as a new member of the family. The villagers’ views of the child bride was a blow to the Hu family’s reputation as the perfect example of Chinese culture. Mrs. Hu used the villagers’ disapproval as an excuse to punish the child brutally and force her into the expectations of her character. “We have to be harsh with her from the outset,” stated Mrs. Hu, “I’ve never seen the likes of her.”

Mrs. Hu beat the child bride every night believing that the whip could make the child conform to cultural expectation. Eventually the beatings led to the child’s death; consequently, the villagers no longer held the family in high regard.

The death of the child bride appeared to bring no consequence to the members of the village. Xiao did not attend the burial of the child. However, when her uncle and grandfather’s cook arrived, Xiao wrote, “It was as if they’d returned from a New Year’s celebration.” Even in death, Chinese people disregarded the loss of women and children. Even in The Field of Life and Death, Xiao captures this sentiment when a woman’s newborn child dies. “The death of a child is nothing. Do you really think I’d moan and wail over that?” Children who were not old enough to work and contribute to the daily routines on the land were useless, taking up food and pulling mothers away from their duties in keeping a good home. Animals were valued more than children, and according to Mrs. Hu, more than a bride. “[S]he didn’t lay eggs, and, unlike a pig, if she lost a few pounds it wouldn’t make any difference, since she was never weighed anyways.” This was how the abuse of the child bride was justified along with her death.

Moving Forward

Once Ding Ling and Xiao Hong escaped the shackles of their fathers and possible marriage, they became homeless and struggled to look for their own way. For Ding, that road led to her first husband, Hu Yepin (1903-1931), a poet and playwright. Ding describes Hu as a “rare person with the most perfect qualities, yet a

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29 Ibid., 198.
30 Ibid., 230.
31 Ibid., 11.
32 Ibid., 219.
piece of completely uncut, unpolished jade.”

It was at this time that Ding joined the League of Left-Wing Writers, an organization Hu belonged to when they met, and both became active members in the Chinese Communist Party. Tragically, two months after the birth of their first child, the Republican Nationalist Party arrested Hu and executed him in Longhua prison. “The brutality of the summary executions aroused widespread protest within China and abroad,” becoming “one of the most powerful emblems of literary persecution in history.” Following Hu’s death, Ding took on a larger role within the Chinese Communist Party, continuing the cause her husband died for by becoming editor of the Parties’ literary journal. Ding no longer focused only on women, she expanded her writing to include peasants, social injustices, and socialist revolution.

Xiao, following her escape from an unwanted marriage, ended up living in a rundown hotel in Harbin, and eventually, cohabitating with the writer Xiao Jun (1907-1988). She used this experience to create another autobiographical novel, Market Street: A Chinese Woman in Harbin. This relationship began in the summer of 1932, and lasted until she fled to Japan in 1936 where she escaped her past but faced severe illness. Xiao Jun, at first, appears compassionate toward Xiao, showing concern over her health and her pregnancy. The couple struggled to find food, as they both were broke and without work. In time, Xiao Jun found work as a tutor and martial arts teacher, bringing in little money but allowing the couple to eat a meal or two a day.

As business picked up, and Xiao was no longer pregnant (giving the baby up for adoption), Xiao Jun became a selfish man. Xiao brought home some bread for the couple to share in a meal. While in conversation, Xiao Jun ate up most of the bread. He insists he is full and expresses, only with words, his remorse. Then he keeps eating. Xiao also implies that Xiao Jun had an affair with a young, upper class woman who appears to be “a little too familiar.” From the eating of all the food to the closeness of another woman, Xiao Jun became more and more like the men Xiao ran away from over a year ago. Xiao Jun’s transformation

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33 Feuerwerker, “In Quest of the Writer Ding Ling,” 70.
34 Ibid., 72.
36 Ibid., 117.
concluded when the story nears the end. Just two weeks before Xiao and Xiao Jun plan to leave Harbin, Xiao gets sick and stays with friends. When Xiao Jun does not visit for eight days, Xiao asks to return home. Xiao Jun replies, “You can’t go home. Once you’re home, you’ll have to start working again.” Xiao insists on going home and the only thing Xiao Jun can say is, “All right, you go home, but if you get sick again, don’t come crying to me!”

The man had fully transformed into the monster that ruled women under Confucianism. He no longer had any concern for Xiao other than to do her duty as a woman.

The role of a homemaker was one that Xiao dreaded when Xiao Jun had found the couple a permanent place to live. After working a full day, Xiao Jun returned home bringing supplies. Her first awakening to her true role in the relationship came as she cooked a meal, realizing she was no longer Xiao Jun’s equal, but his traditional wife. This proved more obvious when Xiao Jun says, “Who but a housewife would know how to cook a meal?” She spent her entire day at home, cleaning and cooking, while waiting for Xiao Jun to return from work. On some days, Xiao had to stand by while Xiao Jun came home just to eat and leave again. Xiao felt lonely, “like a disabled person – I was so lonely.”

Even though she was home all the time, Xiao managed to witness social injustice, which became another theme in her novel. On most occasions, Xiao stared out her window watching the people on the streets and seeing into her landlord’s home through their own window. She can see her landlord’s family eating a big meal while Xiao is in her home starving. The upper class had very little to do with the peasant class, or beggars as they are described in Xiao’s novel. The landlords lacked compassion for anyone they felt was beneath them, and tended to remind the peasants at every opportunity. Wang, Xiao’s landlord, had a younger sister who once talked to Xiao about a movie she had seen. It was a love story that ended with the couple getting married. Wang’s sister ends the conversation saying, “Everyone imagined how wonderful their lives together would be if the movie hadn’t stopped where it did.” This statement alone shows the disconnect between the upper class and the lower class peasants.

37 Ibid., 128.
38 Ibid., 32.
39 Ibid., 44.
40 Ibid., 45.
Wang’s sister lived in a world of fantasy, while reality, cold and harsh, surrounded them daily on the streets. Xiao’s tale ends when she fled foreign occupied Harbin to escape the risk of imprisonment by the Japanese military.

Xiao spent a majority of her career dodging the occupation of Japanese forces. When Xiao and Xiao Jun were in Harbin, they started writing about foreign occupation while protesting against collaborators. This caused some problems for the couple, which is why they left Harbin. There were rumors circulating that Japanese officers were going to arrest Xiao and Xiao Jun, so leaving Harbin was the only way to avoid a prison sentence. Xiao also mentions the terror that the Japanese brought in *The Field of Life and Death*, showing the suffering of the peasants who lost their crops and livestock to the foreigners. The soldiers harassed the local farmers every chance they had, searching their homes for whatever they can take. When it came to the young women in the village, Xiao wrote, “Those Japs are nasty! All the village girls have fled. Even the young married women. I hear the Japs kidnapped a thirteen-year-old from Wang Village. They took her in the middle of the night.”

Young women became an object of importance for Japanese soldiers, but Xiao does not explain why. She simply mentions the Japanese in passing to add to the struggles of countryside.

Ding also wrote in her stories about foreign invaders who controlled areas in China. In *When I Was in Xia Village*, Ding wrote about a girl named Purity, whose village was overtaken by Japanese soldiers. Once the Japanese gained control, they took Purity into their possession. The girl made it back to Xia Village after spending some time with the Japanese, but the welcome turned out not to be entirely pleasant. A shopkeeper in the village states, “I hear that her nose has gone completely. She was ruined by the Japanese.” He ends his newsworthy gossip by placing judgment on Liu Fusheng, Purity’s father. Filial piety and sexuality are brought forth at this time. Purity, seen as a whore, gave herself to the Japanese, catching a sexually transmitted disease (STD) in the process. Purity’s aunt, Mrs. Liu, cannot make sense of what actually happened since the only stories Mrs. Liu is hearing are rumors. “[H]ow could she keep herself clean in a place like that,”

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41. Hong, *The Field of Life and Death & Tales of Hulan River*, 62.
42. Ling, *Miss Sophie’s Diary and Other Stories*, 243.
43. Ibid., 246.
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asks Mrs. Liu. This question demonstrates the attitudes some Chinese share about Japan, a place of filth and impurities, a place for the devil. It is fair to say some Chinese hold the Japanese in disgust, but others did not. Ding wrote, “Only eighteen and it doesn’t embarrass her at all.”

It is clear that Purity holds no ill feelings about the Japanese or the men she had been involved with while she was in Japan. Purity may have been taken from her home, but she was also rescued from a marriage she did not want. She places most of the blame for her abduction on her father. If he did not attempt to marry off Purity, against her will, she would have been safe with her family, and would not have fallen into Japanese hands.

Into the Fire

When Xiao Hong left Harbin, she and Xiao Jun ended up in Shanghai where they met Lu Xun. It was with Lu Xun’s help that Xiao’s story, The Field of Life and Death, was published, making Xiao an “overnight literary sensation.” Xiao followed the success of her first novel with Market Street: A Chinese Woman in Harbin. She also continued to write many short stories for magazines until her illness worsened. Xiao left for Japan in the earlier months of 1936 to get the medical attention she needed, as well as to escape Xiao Jun, whose abuses were “becoming strained.” Xiao continued to study and write while in Japan. On October 19, 1936, Lu Xun died. Xiao returned to Shanghai earlier than she had planned to pay her last respects to Lu Xun. From there, Xiao would continue to move from town to town escaping Japanese invasion. By 1940, Xiao ended up in Hong Kong, publishing her final novel, Tales of Hulan River, in December. Xiao’s health began to worsen. She entered into a temporary hospital where she died from a respiratory condition in 1941, at the age of 30.

Ding Ling faced hardships in her life that tied to the growing popularity of her work. Agents of the Republican Nationalist Party arrested Ding in 1933. While in prison, the Nationalist Party attempted to persuade Ding to renounce her affiliation with the Communist Party and “place her talents at the

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44 Ibid., 246.
45 Hong, The Field of Life and Death & Tales of Hulan River, xi.
46 Ibid.
service of the Kuomingtang government.”47 After three years, Ding escaped prison and made her way to the Communist Parties territorial occupations in Northwest China. She arrived as a hero and Mao Zedong (1893-1976), co-founder and chairman of the Communist Party, celebrated Ding with a feast and two poems in her honor. Ding joined up with a troupe to travel the countryside and perform plays to promote the fight against the Japanese invaders. It was here that Ding met Chen Ming, who she eventually married. Ding made her way to Yenan and took up the position of editor for the Party’s newspaper, The Liberation Daily. She became the center of attention when the Party began to question art and literature in relation to their cause. “Although the stories about war and revolution from her Yenan period emphasized heroic characters and positive outcomes, she did not believe that support of collective goals precluded all negative criticism.”48 However, as the scope of the Party’s criticism widened, Ding became a target. Dings’ writings came under question by the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party.

On March 9, 1942, Ding wrote an essay titled, “Thoughts on March 8.” In her essay, Ding wrote, “[A]lthough women in the liberated areas under Communist control were much better off than women elsewhere in China, the bitter contradictions of their existence remained.”49 Ding felt that women had not become the equals the party had alluded to when they first organized. Issues of divorce were the center of Ding’s essay, showing unfairness, as men who divorced did not face persecution. Women were ostracized for initiating a divorce, assuming that “there must be something even more immoral[,] and it is entirely the woman who should be cursed.”50 When women grew old, they were “backward,” where in the old society these women were pitied. Now that they are equals, “if she suffered it was ‘her own doing,’ it ‘served her right.’”51 The Party attacked Ding for her remarks and Chinese Communist Party leader Mao Zedong directed many of his own attacks on Ding through his speech, “Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art.”

47 Feuerwerker, “In Quest of the Writer Ding Ling,” 72.
48 Ibid., 73.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
Mao opened his speech with what Party members should focus on in order to accomplish their goals. “Our aim is to ensure that revolutionary literature and art follow the correct path of development[,] and provide better help to other revolutionary work in facilitating the overthrow of our national enemy and the accomplishment of the task of national liberation.”

Mao believed that in order for the Communist Party to win the fight for liberation, artists needed to place the needs of the party first. Ding did not. He felt that literature and art were the frontlines in developing a culture for the people of China, a united front that would defeat its enemies. Revolutionary writers and artists were responsible for bringing the Party together to fight with “one heart and one mind” to overthrow their enemies.

Mao believed that basic Marxist concepts meant objective realities to class struggle, but felt that “some of our comrades turn this upside down and maintain that everything ought to start from ‘love.’” Love was not exactly what Ding wrote in her essay, but she expressed plenty of emotions. Ding Ling provided a voice that did not do the things that Mao believed Chinese artists should do in order to facilitate the party’s goals.

Ding witnessed the roles of women in marriage and the lack of equality among women within the Party. Women were still the target of criticism, especially for those who were single. “It’s even more of a sin not to be married, and single women are even more of a target for rumors and slanderous gossip.” In Yenan, women were expected to marry and bear children, to sacrifice their own careers to provide their husbands with sons. If the husband found himself unsatisfied with the conditions of his marriage, receiving a divorce became simple and no one questioned the man’s character. “For the wife to do so, she must be leading an immoral life, then of course she deserves to be cursed!”

On the surface, the Party brought an illusion of equality seen in the more famous picture of Mao and his wife He Zizhen (1910-1984), posing together while wearing the same uniform that represented

53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
the communist party. Ding concluded her essay “Thoughts on March 8” by writing, “It would be better if there were less empty theorizing and more talk about real problems, so that theory and practice are not divorced, and if each Communist Party member were more responsible for his own moral conduct.”  

It was more important to the Party to break away from hypocrisy, to practice what it preached in order for the Party to unite. Morality would bring victory and unite a China divided by the Communist Party, the Nationalist Party, and the Japanese invasion.

By 1957, Mao had Ding arrested for her critical assaults on the Party, also banning her literary works from publication. Ding spent twelve years on a farm, sentenced to manual labor following a five-year jail sentence during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, which saw the purge of individuals that the party deemed as dissenting voices. Upon Ding’s release, she was forced to retract her earlier works and her objections to the Party’s transgressions she strongly pointed out in her earlier work. Ding began to feel like Purity, the woman chastised for her actions with the Japanese. No one truly understood their work and both Ding and Purity were unfairly criticized for their roles in revolution. Purity became a spy for her country and on her return, a curse on her family name. “Even my own village treats me like an outsider: some people are friendly and some of them avoid me.” This is how Ding felt following her twelve-year rehabilitation. Her village was the Chinese Communist Party who treated Ding like an outsider, a woman who knew nothing about revolution or the Party goals regardless of her hard work in bringing together the Party members. On March 4, 1986, Ding Ling died while living in Beijing at the age of 81. Women like Ding Ling and Xiao Hong lived their lives attempting to educate the people of China through their literary works. They hoped not only to change the status quo, but also to lift women’s status into social equality. Women wanted to escape the shackles of the men who ruled them and create their own destinies. The May Fourth Movement was not only a protest to convince Chinese delegates to stop bowing down to foreign nations, it also brought women’s rights to surface, with support from many men who also led the literary culture movement. Men dominated the literary field and spoke on behalf of women during this period in China. For Ding and Xiao, it was not enough. They

57 Ibid.
58 Ling, Miss Sophie’s Diary and Other Stories, 250.
wanted to provide a narrative where women could represent their emotions, fears, and attitudes. This is something that men could not provide. Wang Xiaojue, associate professor of Chinese Literature at Rutgers, spoke of Ding in an interview saying, “She [Ding] wanted to find the female voices and female identity from a female angle. She had this fascinating idea that we as women we can talk for ourselves. We don’t need to be represented; we wanted to find our different, very unique voices.”

Ding, along with Xiao found their unique voice and spoke of all aspects of the struggles for women in their daily lives.

Disappointingly, women’s reforms would take a back seat to revolutionary needs during the revolutionary period in China. The Chinese Communist Party needed to build their membership among the peasant, “who wanted patriarchal families.” The family hierarchy was important for those who lived in rural areas because of the amount of labor required for planting and harvesting crops. Men relied on women to provide sons in order to work the fields when sons grew strong enough. Daughters also provided extra hands when it came to work around the home; however, they also provided a source of financial gain when daughters grew old enough to marry. When arrangements were made, dowries were established that included a sale price for a daughter’s hand. Marriage brought great concern, regarding divorce, for the cause of the Communist Party. “The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has not been willing to give serious and sustained support to marriage reform and gender equality because of the nature of the peasant revolution that put the party into power and remains its primary basis of support.” Party leaders felt that if they went against the peasantry, they would lose peasant support. This would cause a great loss to membership, no longer having the numbers the Party needed to win the civil war.

In order to appeal to the proletariat the Party put on a façade of equality. Women dressed in military gear standing alongside their husbands as equals in their cause. Women gained

positions of authority, as we see with Ding who became editor for the Party’s magazine. As the Party shifted from urban areas to the countryside the attitudes for reform also shifted. “[T]hese shifts led to the incorporation and increasing importance of a large rural male constituency whose aspirations strongly contradicted the progressive family reform ideas of women’s rights advocates.”

Men were the soldiers in the fight against the Japanese and the civil war against the Nationalist Party. In order to secure their memberships, women’s reform would have to wait. As intellectuals turned their views from an intellectual realm into a political one, “family reform and women’s rights seemed less important to them.” The Communist Party appealed to women’s rights advocates only through the promise of women’s reform, but the Party’s aim had geared toward promoting the revolutionary struggle.

**The Modern Woman**

Not much has changed in China since the death of Ding Ling. Some progress was made for women under the Marriage Law in 1950, which allowed women to own property. However, in 2011, the Chinese government added an amendment to the Marriage Law. It specifies, that “unless legally contested, marital property essentially belongs to the person who owns the home and whose name is on the property deed.” In China, traditional ideologies persist, and men have their names on property deeds when married. If a woman in China decides to divorce, and her name is not on the property deeds, she is not entitled to any property. Leta Hong Fincher wrote an article on the issues women face in China today, and her story starts out with a woman under a fictitious name, Wu Mei. When Wu was first married, her family helped her and her husband buy a home that was roughly a million RMB (China currency). In five years, the house nearly tripled in value, giving it a value of over $400,000 in U.S. dollars. The house was in Wu’s husband’s name, which, following the divorce, Wu’s husband

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63 Ibid., 85.
received sole ownership. The relationship was an abusive one, and Wu believes that the deed in her husband’s name added to the abuse; since her husband controlled all of the assets, the law was on his side. Wu not only lost her home, but also everything in it, including her savings. Many women face this problem in China today. The Property Law amendment denies women the rights they gained during the revolutionary period.

The workplace is another area in which women in China, once again, are having trouble challenging traditional beliefs. As China is making huge shifts from ruralization to urbanization to compete in world markets, the demand for employees in urban areas is rising. Women out of college are finding jobs easily, bringing the women in the work force to 74 percent. However, this is a skewed number because more than half of China is still rural. When you narrow the work force to solely urban areas, women’s employment rates fall to just over 60 percent, which has fallen from 77 percent in 1990. Why is the urban employment rate important? China is expecting a rising urbanization rate of over 53 percent, and believes that over 60 percent of China’s population will be urban by 2020. Back in the 1990s, China began to reorganize the national economy, which resulted in firing tens of millions of workers at state-owned enterprises. At the same time, the “Women Return to the Home” movement rose, expecting all women to quit their jobs and make their way back to the home where they would care for their men. Also in 2007, the government started a propaganda campaign based on sheng nu, meaning “leftover” women. This campaign focused on women who were over the age of 27 and single. They were pressured to marry, quit their jobs, and become traditional homemakers once again. This recent transition has brought about an attitude that dates back to Confusion times, where women were to stay home, have sons, feed the family, and perform all other duties tied to the home.

Regardless of what the party promised during the revolutionary era in China, women have yet to gain complete equality. Like Ding Ling and Xiao Hong, women in China today still find themselves at the mercy of the men in their lives, the daughters of the May Fourth, the orphans of revolution.

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65 Fincher, “Women’s Rights at Risk.”
Bibliography


Daughters of the May Fourth


Author Bio

Hector Lopez is a husband and father of four who graduated from California State University, San Bernardino in December 2014 with a Bachelor of Arts in history. During his senior year at CSUSB, Hector participated in the Summer Research Program, learning about veterans who served in the American Civil War. Following graduation, he also participated as an attributing author in *Pop Culture in Asia and Oceania*. He is currently an editorial assistant for the *Civil War Journal* and is pursuing his Master’s degree in social sciences and globalization at CSUSB. Hector plans to pursue a Ph.D. in history, continue researching veterans who served in the American Civil War, and become a college professor.