

DING Ling

Dīng Líng 丁玲

1904–1986 Short-story writer, novelist, essayist

Ding Ling was one of China's most popular and productive authors of the twentieth century. She wrote short stories, novels, essays, plays, and parables, totaling more than three hundred works. Her major works described the best and worst of Chinese society. Always popular with the reading public, Ding was both praised and vilified by government leaders during her long lifetime.

Ding Ling, the pen name of Jiang Bingzhi, was born on 12 October 1904 in Linli, Hunan Province. As author and activist, Ding always maintained a deep interest in the struggles of Chinese women. One of the country's most productive and popular authors of the twentieth century, she was the first writer to portray women liberating themselves in Chinese society. Her collection of short stories, *Miss Sophie's Diary and Other Stories*, published in 1927, featured unorthodox young women questioning the feudal attitudes of China, in particular rules governing women's behavior. Some of her short works are available under a collection titled *I Myself Am a Woman: Selected Writings of Ding Ling*.

Later, in the 1930s, she switched to novels and became one of the leaders of the new school of leftist literature. One of her best known novels (although unfinished) is *Mother*. This book is based on her mother's experiences

as a widow raising three children. Ding's mother was an educator and activist and Ding's main role model.

Ding's writings and activism often got her in trouble with the leaders of China. Shortly after joining the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1932, she was arrested by the Guomindang (Nationalist Party) government and held in detention for three years. Her husband Hu Yepin, a poet and communist activist, was killed by the Guomindang in 1931.

In 1936 she traveled to Yan'an, the headquarters of the CCP at that time. There she published the well-known essay "Thoughts on the March 8 Festival (Women's Day)," in which she examined women's situation and sharply criticized discrimination against them. This made her a target of the Communist Party's Yanan Forum on Literature and Art in 1942, part of a spirited effort by the party to bring Marxist ideas to the Chinese masses.

Even though she held senior official positions for several years after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, she was once again criticized in 1955, and her novels and essays were banned. From then until the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, she was either in jail or in labor camps. Nevertheless, she continued to write.

In 1981 Ding Ling, along with other prominent Chinese authors, were allowed to participate in the International Writing Center at the University of Iowa. For four months she wrote, lectured, and met with writers from the United States and other countries. This helped to cement her international reputation.

Thoughts on March 8

Author Ding Ling shares advice for women.

Today there are certain to be people who make fine speeches bragging about the needs to acquire political power first. I would simply mention a few things that any frontliner, whether a proletarian, a fighter in the war of resistance, or a woman, should pay attention to in his or her everyday life:

1. Don't allow yourself to fall ill. A wild life can at times appear romantic, poetic, and attractive, but in today's condition it is inappropriate. You are the best keeper of your life. There is nothing more unfortunate nowadays than to lose your health. It is closest to your heart. The only thing to do is keep a close watch on it, pay careful attention to it, and cherish it.

2. Make sure you are happy. Only when you are happy can you be youthful, active, fulfilled in your life, and steadfast in the face of all difficulties; only then will you see a future ahead of you and know how to enjoy yourself. This sort of happiness is not a life of contentment, but a life of struggle and of advance. Therefore we should all do some meaningful work each day and some reading so that each of us is in a position to give something to others . . .

3. Use your brain, and make a habit of doing so. Correct any tendency not to think and ponder, or to swim with the current. Before you say or do anything, think whether what you are saying is right, whether that is the most suitable way of dealing with the problem, whether it goes against your own principles, whether you feel you can take responsibility for it. Then you will have no cause to regret your actions later. This is what is known as acting rationally. It is the best way of avoiding the pitfalls of sweet words and honeyed phrases, of being sidetracked by petty gains, of wasting our emotions and wasting our lives.

4. Resolution in hardship, perseverance to the end. Aware, modern women should identify and cast off all their rosy illusions. Happiness is to take up the struggle in the midst of the raging storm and not to pluck the lute in the moonlight or recite poetry among the blossoms. In the absence of the greatest resolution, it is very easy to falter in midpath. Not to suffer is to become degenerate. The strength to carry on should be nurtured through the quality of "perseverance . . ."

Source: Smith, H. L., & Carroll, B. A. (2000). Women's political & social thought: An anthology. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 368.

Despite suffering from diabetes and other ailments, Ding Ling continued writing up to her death in Shanxi Province on 4 March 1986.

SHE Xiaojie

Further Reading

Feuerwerker, Y. M. (1982). *Ding Ling's fiction: Ideology and narrative in modern Chinese literature*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.