

Transformation of Diseased Women in Ding Ling's Novels—Based on the Metaphor of Disease

Yi Wu

Abstract—In Ding Ling's novels, she repeatedly adopted the diseased woman as the protagonist in order to present her own thinking of gender and social issues. By establishing a chronological reading of three protagonists, this paper will not only discuss the transformation of the metaphoric usage, but also explore socio-historical implications and gender issues in depth. To better understand both the features of Ding Ling's artistic innovation and the transition of her identity, and more importantly, to reconfiguring the position of gender issues, this paper adopts the method of analysis and have close reading of three short stories written by Ding Ling, which are *Sophia's Diary*, *Girl Amao* and *When I Was in Xia Village*, and combines the fictional stories with historical facts. In conclusion, Ding Ling's depiction of diseased women gradually developed from a private narrative and imitation of romanticism into a realistic style, revealing the struggles of peasant women who were damaged by the society, which suggested Ding Ling's deconstruction of May Fourth discourse and exploration of her leftist identity.

Index Terms—Ding Ling, diseased women, gender, class, war.

I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout literary history, metaphoric usage of disease has been adopted in both western and eastern literary works, leading to the establishment of a set of aesthetic values of disease. Among this metaphoric image, diseased women have won the favor of many writers.

One of the most famous Chinese writer, Ding Ling, was also well-known for her depiction of diseased women. From her early works, such as *Sophia's Diary* to her later works, *When I Was in Xia Village* and *In the Hospital*, Ding Ling created dozens of female characters who suffer from tuberculosis, mental disorder, venereal disease, insomnia and so on.

II. DISEASED WOMEN IN LITERARY HISTORY

Although human has been struggling against diseases for a long period, its metaphoric usage in literary works was not quite common until the Romantic Age. The aesthetic standards were established and the meanings were gradually fixed. Among all of the characters with illness, one certain group cannot be neglected, which is the diseased women.

While disease has been connected to people's body and

mind, it becomes a substitute for acting out misogynous attitudes. Physical diseases, such as tuberculosis and venereal disease, are connected to the standards of beauty and chastity via the symptoms and infection route; while mental diseases like hysteria, according to feminist critics, are associated with the oppression and stigmatization posed on women.

One outstanding example would be the female protagonist created by Gustave Flaubert in *Madam Bovary* i.e. Emma Bovary, who was consumed by her material and sexual desire thus becoming physically and mentally sick. Interestingly, even under the writing of female writers, mental diseased women and the confinement of those patients were not uncommon. Not until 20th century did literary critics begin to question the presentation of those lunatic female characters in literary history. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's rediscovery of the madwoman Bertha in *Jane Eyre* lead to a reconfiguration of women's mental state and the way that it was portrayed in literary works and in history. The figure below is the new edition of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's work *The Madwoman in the Attic*.

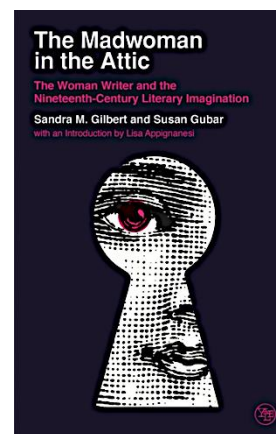


Fig. 1. Gilbert, Sandra M., and Gubar, S. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Yale University Press, 2020.

In Chinese classical works, the most typical and well-known diseased woman is believed to be Lin Daiyu from *Dream of the Red Chamber*, a beautiful, sentimental, talented, yet consumptive female character. Her paleness and fragileness, though not the origin of consumptive aesthetics, have influenced many modern Chinese writers, including Ding Ling. However, the diseased characters in Ding Ling's novels surpassed the aesthetic worship of disease in classical or romantic literature.

Under the influence of premodern Chinese literature and 19th Century European literature, Ding Ling's early depiction of diseased women featured a romanticized style. It

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Yi Wu is with School of Literature, Nankai University, Tianjin, 300071, China (e-mail:1712726@mail.nankai.edu.cn).

is commonly agreed by Chinese critics that there is a sense of intertextual coherence between some of her early descriptions in *Sophia's Diary* and *Girl Amao* and Flaubert's description of Emma Bovary. But what sets her different is that she was aiming to construct a female subject rather than situating those diseased women in the position of aesthetic object, and the metaphors of illness in her works presented a tendency in discussing gender issues of modern China.

After joining in the League of Left-Wing Writers in 1930, Ding Ling's writing style and her feminist thought both turned left. Pathologically diseased women temporarily vanished from her novels and did not appear until her wartime novel *When I Was in Xia Village* published in 1941. Such a drastic change cannot help but make one consider the transformation of these diseased female protagonists and how they are related to Ding Ling's critical thinking of social and feminist issues.

III. SOPHIA'S DIARY: A MAY FOURTH FEMALE INTELLECTUAL'S SELF REDEMPTION

Written in the winter of 1927, *Sophia's Diary* was Ding Ling's best known and most highly regarded work. It was firstly published in *The Short Story Magazine* in February 1928, and immediately attracted the attention of the literary world. The protagonist, Sophia, was a tuberculosis sufferer who stayed in Beijing during the winter for treatments and eventually decided to travel to the south, which was very similar to Ding Ling's own trace.

A. Ding Ling's Wandering Early Life

Born in a declined feudal family, Ding Ling had been suffering from great discrimination and restriction ever since she was young. Ding Ling's father passed away when she was only four years old, so her mother and her had to move in with her uncle. Living under the roof of her uncle, a local landed gentry, they were constantly regulated by the rules of the conventional patriarchal family. Although she was never given the freedom to pursue a career, the seed of rebel bloomed in her heart.

In 1921, she attended a women's college led by the founders of the Chinese Communist Party—Chen Duxiu and Li Da. A year later, she broke from the family and left her hometown to enroll in Shanghai University which was known for supporting left-wing intellectuals [1]. Thus, many of her teachers and friends were lefty activists, who devoted themselves into social activities. There, she had an early encounterment with the left-wing ideology.

In order to search for independence and development, Ding Ling wandered between metropolises including Shanghai and Nanjing before she settled in Beijing in 1924. According to her prose *The Life of a True Man* (1950), Ding Ling was in Beijing when the National Revolution (1924-1927) occurred in the south. Being far away from the centre of this revolution, Ding Ling was undergoing enormous panic and suffering. The massacre in Shanghai, 1927, was a striking event to her because many of her acquaintances were killed in the event, and their death constantly haunted her.

At the same time, her life in Beijing did not live up to her expectations. Instead of being economically sufficient, Ding Ling was struggling to survive in this city. She moved between low-cost accommodations and eventually settled in a shabby, moldy apartment. She had to live with Hu Yepin and was considered as “a lover or wife of a passionate poet” [2] by their mutual friends. The figure below was a photo of Ding Ling and Hu Yepin after they were married in Beijing.



Fig. 2. Ding Ling and Hu Yepin in Beijing, 1927 [3].

What frustrated her more was the cynical attitudes of the literati circle in Beijing. They indulged themselves into the petty bourgeoisie lifestyle, writing poems, drinking wine, organizing literature salon but did not have any concern about the current state of the National Revolution.

In the *Life of a True Man*, Ding Ling portrayed her repressive life in Beijing and expressed her disappointment to her narrow circle in Beijing. She wrote: “I hate Beijing! I hate Beijing! I hate the literati and poets in Beijing! On the surface, I was at peace, not speaking much, and was only like a lover or wife of a passionate poet, but I was in great mental anguish. Apart from novels, I couldn't find a friend. So, **I wrote novels, and they had to be filled with the contempt for society and the unbending struggle of a lonely soul**” [2]. This suggested that although Ding Ling did not suffer from any physical disease, she was under massive anxieties. She immersed into self-alienation to disconnect from the literati group in Beijing. Thus, writing became the only compensation for her loneliness and painfulness. In the spring of 1928, Ding Ling and Hu Yepin finally went to Shanghai with “a faint gleam of hope” [2].

From the life experience of Ding Ling, it can be concluded that her wandering lifestyle could not be defined as a romantic Bohemian journey rather a struggle to construct a subjective identity as a female intellectual.

B. Sophia's Self-Rescue

In other words, the portrait of Sophia corresponded to Ding Ling's life experience and the disease she suffered denoted Ding Ling's psychological symptoms—depressed, anguished yet in hope for a prop and redemption. The discovery of the creative value of disease, featured what Nietzsche described as the decadent, who philosophized out of sickness. In *Sophia's Diary*, Sophia's attempt to cure the disease was presented as the covert plot. As a TB sufferer, the windy and cold weather in Beijing would only exacerbate Sophia's condition, but Ding Ling still put her into that setting which implicated her own living condition. And Sophia's lust not only expressed a bold catharsis of female psychosexuality but also functioned in tandem with the

classic metaphoric usage of TB which referred to repressed love. After Sophia's first encounter with Ling Jishi on January first, her health condition immediately worsened, and her faith in modern medicine was lost. On the next day, she went out on a windy day and decided to move to a small, moldy, and damp room so that she could live closer to Ling Jishi. Such a suicidal behavior as well as her statement, "I don't fear death... all I want is to be happy" [4], suggested that Sophia's sole goal was neither a romantic relationship nor the satisfaction of libido, but to emphasis on the value of herself. In order to break out of the conservative environment, Ding Ling adopted these "abnormal behaviors" as a rebellion against tradition as well as capitalist modernity. In the end, Sophia not only rejected her pursuers but also decided to leave Beijing for the centre of left-wing movements which could be considered as her last attempt to cure her disease. Just as Susan Sontag pointed out in *Illness as Metaphor*, "The TB sufferer was a dropout, a wanderer in endless search of the healthy place" [5]. Sophia's moving trail, from her parents' home to a single room in Beijing, a damp room near Ling Jishi, the hospital after puking blood, Western Hills. Eventually, the south suggested a wanderer's curing journey and the awakening of a left-wing intellectual.

As a patient, Sophia was constantly aware of her disease and feared its contagiousness. She wandered between cities and people yet could not find her redemption. Just like Sophia, Ding Ling herself was a decadent wanderer searching for a cure after the massacre in 1927 and the failure of May Fourth intellectuals. Just like tuberculosis, the May Fourth value in association with the capitalist value was contagious and dangerous. Ding Ling was well aware of the limitation of May Fourth value and how committed the youth were. Thus, by creating a lost new woman like Sophia, Ding Ling was actually questioning the May Fourth value and its followers i.e. her "narrow circle in Beijing", from which can be concluded that Ding Ling's writing of Sophia went beyond an expression of female lust. What she really tried to express in *Sophia's Diary* was the anxieties of a post-May Fourth female intellectual and suggested a faint gleam of hope.

IV. GIRL AMAO: UNCONSCIOUS ILLNESS AND THE FORGOTTEN GROUP

Girl Amao was written in the summer of 1928 after Ding Ling and Hu Yepin moved back to the south. They travelled between Shanghai and Hangzhou, and made a living on writing. The photo below (Fig. 3) was taken when Ding Ling and Hu Yepin were in Hangzhou where she finished *Girl Amao*.



Fig. 3. Ding Ling and Hu Yepin in Hangzhou, 1928 [3].

The debate between Lu Xun and the Creation Society had left a large influence on the writers in the south including Ding Ling. She began to read Marxist literature and art theory works, turning into a left-wing intellectual.

Being the last story in her anthropology *In the Darkness*, it was considered as a work born on the eve of Ding Ling's final transformation into a left-wing writer, in which can be found the emergence of her class conscious. In a way, Ding Ling was trying to extricate herself from the role as a May Fourth female writer in order to establish her leftist identity. Therefore, *Girl Amao* was rather awkwardly placed in this anthropology. Unlike the other heroines, Amao was neither a modern girl nor a new woman, but a rural girl without much education. If Sophia represented the urban intellectuals whose belief in May Fourth value was destroyed by the massacre in 1927, Amao would be Ding Ling's attempt to reconstruct her belief, to include peasant women into her discussion of modernity, women's oppression, and class division.

A. The Transmission of Modernity

In *Sophia's Diary*, Ding Ling did not explain where did Sophia contract tuberculosis. Instead, her sickness was alongside at the very beginning of the story. Thus, many scholars argued that Sophia, as an urban new woman, was infected by the sickness of modernization. But in *Girl Amao*, the protagonist was not diseased at the beginning. Ding Ling had displayed the whole route of Amao's encounter with sickness.

In Ding Ling's depiction, Amao used to be healthy, strong, beautiful enough for a rural girl. More importantly, she was far away from "modernity" which only posed influence on the urban areas. The isolation of Amao's hometown prevented itself from being infected and objectified by "modernity". After Amao married to Xiao'er, she paid a visit to the downtown of Hangzhou city, which was her first contact with "modernity" such as stores, automobiles, Western-style architectures, modern girls and their fancy clothing. The image of the city view and the leisure activities of urban women not only struck Amao, but also planted vanity inside her heart.

Amao's paranoid affection for the capitalist modern world increased when her neighbour Sanjie got into the upper class through marriage, which made Amao realize the class division of people. Apart from that, her fascination for a female visitor from Shanghai also poisoned her mental health. She was obsessed with her consumptive beauty and melancholy lifestyle, even death became appealing and satisfying.

B. The Illness of the Traditional Gender Roles

Although Amao was aware of the division in social hierarchy, such a realization did not awaken her. Instead, she blamed her father and husband for their incapability of earning money and indulged herself into an infinite desire for materials, hence the beginning of her sickness. Amao became weary in mind and body and was lethargic to get out of bed, let alone to work as diligently as she used to do. When a professor of an art school offered to give Amao a job as a stechting model, Amao's husband and mother-in-law not only refused the offer, but also punished Amao for getting

involved with the outside world. They strictly refined Amao inside the family and secured her in a conventional female identity as a wife, a daughter-in-law, and a tool of offspring.

Indeed, Amao's status in the bottom class caused her illness, but what aggravated her situation was her experience as a woman. Under the oppressive, patriarchal marriage, Amao's physical illness was considered as a means to escape from her duty as a wife and a daughter-in-law which infuriated her marital family. They insulted and abused her repeatedly, but only led to exacerbating her symptoms.

C. The Systematical Unconsciousness of the Lower-Class

However, Amao was not aware of her own illness, letting alone to search for a cure like Sophia. Karatani Kojin pointed out that "illness may be seen to exist as the effect of a certain typo-logical schema, a semiological system. In this sense, illness exists in society as a system apart from each individual's consciousness of being ill" [6]. The unawareness of Amao suggested that the patriarchal hierarchy existing in both tradition and capitalist modernity had deep subliminal dominance over the people within this society, which imposed its value on women and consumed their bodies and minds. Therefore, Amao's disease was a metaphor of the whole and her death was a fatal of women's destiny.

Although Amao was, in a way, superior to her own class for being aware of the class-division, she was still unable to set herself apart from her marital family or become an independent woman because of the confine of the patriarchy system and her class status. Just as Ding Ling portrayed, all she had was nothing but "a small ray of mere thought like many other women at that time" [7]. Though radical intellectuals blamed the patriarchal joint family for thwarting individual development and perpetuating generational and gender hierarchies [8], their critics were mainly accepted in the urban areas. For women like Amao who was born out of central cities, they were not conscious of women's liberation. On the contrary, they were more likely to be fooled by urban middle class values. In *Sophia's Diary*, Ding Ling emphasized on Sophia's psychological experience as a patient and a new woman, but in *Girl Amao*, she mainly focused on the system that infected Amao, and the ending for the two protagonists were considerably different, as Sophia started a new journey for the cure while Amao committed a suicide. In a way, Ding Ling did point out the crux of left-wing liberating movements at that time: the rural women. Their encounter with modernity could not transfer into conscious eager for liberation, even though they understood where their misery came from.

V. WHEN I WAS IN XIA VILLAGE: VENEREAL DISEASE, CHASTITY AND WARTIME DISCOURSE

The diseased women temporarily vanished from Ding Ling's novels in 1930s although she continued to explore women's psychological world, the balance of love and revolution, the miserable life of underprivileged women. In *Girl Amao*, Ding Ling had already presented her thinking

towards class issues. However, the ending of this story i.e. Amao's suicide was criticized by left-wing writers for showing a sense of uncertainty. This contributed to a stronger emphasis on realism and collective in Ding Ling's writing. Instead of writing the disease of an individual woman, she began to depict problematic social phenomena, mass suffering, and other grand narratives including Anti-Japanese War.

A. Women's Participation during Anti-Japan War

Japanese invasion in the late 30s had stimulated patriotism and nationalism which placed women's liberation to a secondary position. In order to unite the country against the foreign invasion, the slogan 'women can emancipate themselves only through joining the resistance' came to typify the goals of the women's movement. After the GMD and the CCP formed their united front, they launched the Work Programme to Mobilize Women in Participating in the War of Resistance and National Construction in the attempt to organize and train women to support the front line. In other words, the emancipation of women through wartime discourse was solely a means to mobilize women rather to achieve a real liberation [9]. The Fig. 4 below was taken at a Women's Day commemorative meeting in 1938, where women were encouraged to join the frontline.

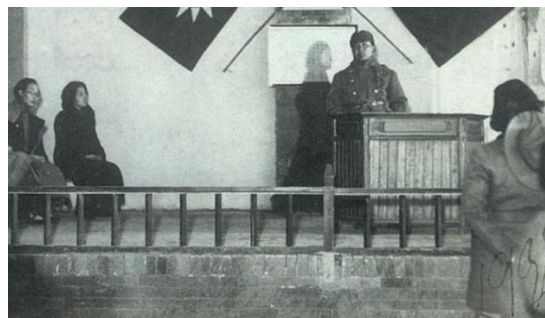


Fig. 4. Ding Ling spoke at a Women's Day commemorative meeting held by women from all walks of life in Shaanxi in Xi'an, 1938 [3].

In 1941, Ding Ling published *When I Was in Xia Village*, a story based on the source she collected in Yan'an [10]. The protagonist Zhenzhen was truly a national heroine who gathered the intelligence on Japanese army as a military prostitute i.e. a sex-spy. However, she caught a venereal disease during this "mission" and was sent back to her home village for treatment. Instead of being praised, Zhenzhen was undergoing a great discrimination and disdain among the locals. Here, Ding Ling presented Zhenzhen's disease in three folds: as a comfort woman, she was physically infected by the Japanese soldiers; as a sex-spy, she was manipulated by the nationalists; as a woman, she was stigmatized by the traditional concept of chastity. However, Zhenzhen neither cared their discrimination nor appreciated their sympathy. She had already planned to seek for treatment and a fresh life in Yan'an.

In fact, the recruitment of women into sex-related espionage by both CCP and GMD during the war time was not rare. In 1940, Wu Qun, a communist activist, had protested such an active in her article claiming that women's service should be at the very front line rather than the beds of the enemy [11]. Although these sex-spies were glorified as true national heroines officially, their health and reputation in reality were not ideal.

B. The Unite of Individual Woman

By creating a character with an authentic archetype, Ding Ling also involved herself into the public discussion of recruiting sex-spies. Unlike Sophia or Amao who were completely fictional, Zhenzhen represented the long existing group of sex-spies during the war time and her disease was not only a metaphor but also a historical phenomenon. Here, the fictitious Xia Village as a whole provided the story with an enclosed space in which feudal ethics and wartime discourse interacted with each other. Thus, Zhenzhen's health condition, especially the venereal disease which always connected to the degradation of the sexual morality, successfully exploded the myth of women's glory constructed by revolution and war, and also functioned like a blade hewing through the conservative and feudal values of chastity.

In this story, Ding Ling readopted her long-lost first-person narrator as an observer of Xia Village and Zhenzhen. The I-narrator was also a patient who came to the Xia Village in order to temporarily escape from the noise in the political department of the Jiefang Qu (liberated areas). From the I-narrator's depiction, Ding Ling displayed the superiority of Zhenzhen which separated her from the mass in Xia Village. She successfully constructed a potential sense of acceptance between "I" and Zhenzhen. Just like Sophia and Yunjie, Amao and Sanjie, individual women were united and came to an agreement in that dark era. Although *When I Was in Xia Village* was not included in the anthropology *In the Darkness*, it was in fact a continuity of exploring the way out. For women at that time, the glory of serving the nation would not bring the light as long as the alienation of women persisted.

VI. CONCLUSION

From Sophia to Amao and Zhenzhen, Ding Ling's portray of diseased women gradually ventured out of a private narrative and the metaphoric usage of disease evolved into an observation of the social phenomenon. Such a transformation was in tandem with Ding Ling's own transition from a May Fourth intellectual into a leftist. The literalised author, who projected her own torments onto Sophia, transferred into an objective witness, observing the damage imposed on the peasant women and satirizing the value system of her time, which suggested Ding Ling's concern evolved from the individual into the whole, from the urban middle class into the underprivileged. Her metaphoric usage of disease also ventured out of the romantic mode into revealing mass suffering and reinforcing the role of realistic criticism in her works. Although the protagonists' struggles were in consistence, Zhenzhen expressed a different attitude towards her future. Unlike Sophia and Amao, Zhenzhen was not in confusion; instead, she was full of passion and positivity of the liberated Yan'an. Perhaps, there also lied Ding Ling's own wish towards emancipation. Due to the length limitation, this paper did not discuss the underlying cause of Ding Ling's renouncement of the metaphoric usage of disease during 1930s, when she discovered and adopted the "revolution + love" model in most of her novels, such as

Shanghai, Spring, 1930. Also, her works after Mao Zedong's *An Address at Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art*, which initiated a new phase in the literature of liberated area, were not included. Therefore, the research on this type of figure in Ding Ling's works has yet to be further elaborated.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author finished the whole paper by herself with reading references, analyzing the text and writing the paper.

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Wu Yi was born in Hefei, Anhui on Dec. 21st, 1998. She is now making her bachelor study in the field of Chinese language and literature in Nankai University under the School of Literature in Tianjin, China.

She interned in the office of Anhui Women's Federation from July 11th, 2020 to July 24th, 2020 in Hefei, Anhui.