

# The Self and the Other:

A New Look at Women's Rights in Modern Chinese Thought

through Lu Xun and Ding Ling

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What is the role of women in modernization? Chinese revolutionaries agreed that a fundamental national problem was the relegation of women to the inner chambers of the household, where their mental and physical faculties had been stunted for centuries. The solution, broadly conceived, was to lift women out of the oppressive bindings of tradition and conscript them to the effort of national betterment. Yet this process was fraught with contradiction, because women were both the problem and the solution. Though the envisioned solution necessitated making them into independent agents of change, they were often treated as objects in the process. Many men championed “women’s liberation” under the specter of Western judgment, rushing toward visible change and condemning those who were not so quick to embody it.<sup>1</sup> Movements like these reflect a strain of nationalism that focused on closing the East West divide rather than truly embracing human rights.

Is there a formulation of early modern Chinese nationalism that centers women as actors instead of objects? If women are living evidence of the tradition from which the nation must be liberated, and if their capabilities have in fact atrophied over centuries of domestic enslavement, are they *able* to play a role in their own liberation? Questions such as these point the way to an underlying variance in the ways that thinkers perceived female potential. Lu Xun (1881-1936) and Ding Ling (1904-1986) delved into the problematics of women’s liberation. Yet they arrived at enormously different portraits of modern Chinese women, owing fundamentally to a disagreement over the degree to which one can stake hope in humanity.

Though these writers have received their fair share of global attention, I hope to shine a new light on their contributions to the historical discussion of women’s rights in China by applying

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<sup>1</sup> See Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella's sisters: a revisionist history of footbinding*. Ko explores the painful history of nationalist anti-footbinding campaigns that allowed entry into women’s private spaces to force the “criminals” to unbind their feet, a process nearly or equally as painful as the initial one.

an original framework to their articulation of the woman question. I will use a key contradistinctive structure of the *self* and *other* to elucidate the differences in their outlooks on the potential of women's liberation.

### ***False Liberation***

Though Lu Xun has been memorialized as a revolutionary, he in fact exhibited little hope for change. In his writing, China is an intrinsically corrupt civilization that is fated to self-destruct. Because the entirety of society is the perpetrator of social ill, *self* and *other* consist of an insurmountable opposition between the individual and an antagonistic society. Lu Xun's narrators are occasionally able to discern their environment's corruption, but they are paralyzed by a community that will not or cannot correct its internal injustices. Here I analyze Lu Xun's speech at Beijing Women's Normal College (1923), as well as the short stories "Regret for the Past" (1925), "The New Year's Sacrifice" (1924), and "Mending Heaven" (1922).

Lu Xun's most famous statement on gender inequality was his speech at Beijing Women's Normal College, "What Happens after Nora Walk Out," which used as a premise *A Doll's House*, a play by Henrik Ibsen about the suffocation of domesticity.<sup>2</sup> Lu Xun centers women as the most vulnerable victims of injustice in the transition to modernity. Beyond portraying the injustices of gender equality, he illustrates the insurmountability of economic barriers. Nora is typically celebrated for exiting the household, but Lu Xun sobers the audience with the assertion that her only options are to die poor or return home, due to her lack of practical skills and self-sufficiency. Thus, he asks, is there a point in inspiring notions of freedom in women and asking them to take agency before they have the means to do so? The practical question of economic means is especially meaningful given his audience: a group of privileged, educated young women whose

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<sup>2</sup> Lu Xun, *Jottings Under Lamplight* (Harvard University Press, 2017), 256.

experiences of a burgeoning modernity would inevitably differ from those of impoverished women. He shines a new light on the women's liberation movement by invoking the concern of class, urging new revolutionaries to account for the socioeconomic barriers that disproportionately chain the poor to the past.

Lu Xun further suggests that even confronting reality is useless due to the pointlessness of working for any change at all. Even if women gain economic freedom, they are still entrenched in a morally bankrupt society:

Are you no longer a puppet once you have won economic freedom? No, you are still a puppet[...]This is not something that can be remedied by a few women gaining economic rights. Nevertheless, people cannot wait quietly with empty stomachs for the arrival of an ideal world.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, it is not simply institutions that bar change—human nature fundamentally prioritizes the self over others. Lu Xun characterizes women like Nora as who take the risk of independence as “unusual” rather than laudable, reflecting an innate distrust in the capability of women to succeed, on account of the odds being so great.<sup>4</sup> This view is intrinsically sympathetic, but it leaves no way forward. In a moment of the speech that best encapsulates his cynicism, Lu Xun makes a reference to the allegory that he set forth in the preface to his “Call to Arms” story collection: a group of people are sleeping in an iron house, and they will surely suffocate. Is it better to let them die in peace, or should one wake them up to try escaping if it means they may die in agony? He warns the young female audience of Beijing Women's Normal College: “The most painful thing in life is to wake from a dream and find there is no way out.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 260-261.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 260.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 257.

Through Juansheng, narrator of “Regret for the Past,” Lu Xun criticizes the type of young revolutionary who only makes hypothetical claims disconnected from reality. Juansheng begins his life with Zijun full of theories that make for rhetorical pleasure, ranting about “the tyranny of the family, the need to break with tradition, the equality of men and women.”<sup>6</sup> Despite his lofty ideals, Juansheng becomes increasingly inconsiderate and ungrateful as they struggle to make ends meet, complaining that Zijun’s cooking and house chores interrupt his work. Moreover, he has implicitly accepted of their division of labor along gendered lines, lamenting that Zijun is overworking herself yet concluding that “no one else could do this chore.”<sup>7</sup> He even grows resentful that she fails to embody the enlightened woman of his fantasies, expecting that she should read more though she is burdened with all of the household chores.

Thus, Lu Xun reveals the difference between verbalizing modern ideals and applying them. Echoing the speech on Nora, Juansheng becomes disillusioned as corporeal practicalities weigh in: “there was the never-ending business of eating every day. All Zijun’s energies seemed to go to this. One ate to earn and earned to eat.”<sup>8</sup> Zijun is used to giving domestic care and ill-equipped to do much else, yet Juansheng resents her for failing to be an enlightened woman. Though Juansheng refers to himself as a “trapped bird,” Zijun emerges as the one who is really corporeally trapped, jockeyed between Juansheng and her male relatives.<sup>9</sup>

Lu Xun further condemns idealism and human nature in “The New Year’s Sacrifice,” which details the fall of a woman named Xianglin’s Wife. The cruel treatment of the woman by her community and the young male narrator reveals the insidious ways in which superstition facilitates self-serving interactions. Each of the characters relate to each other only transactionally,

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<sup>6</sup> Lu Xun, *Selected Works* (Foreign Language Press, 2003), 250.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

from middleman Old Mrs. Wei to the gossip-hungry villagers. Even sympathy is a finite resource. Xianglin's Wife harrowing story garners the tears of listeners, but only to the extent that it "satisfied" their indulgence, and after some time "the whole town could recite it by heart and were bored and exasperated to hear it repeated."<sup>10</sup> Xianglin's Wife seeks empathy in verbalizing her trauma, but her "recital" is taken as ghastly entertainment to be consumed.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps Lu Xun entertains the possibility that humans can be sympathetic, in that the narrator seems to feel a tinge of guilt for Xianglin's Wife, which leads him to parse the details of her misfortune. However, such an effort is still self-serving, in that he reflects only to ascertain whether he should act upon witnessing her misery. He is satisfied when he manages to parry an intrusive interaction, or when a community celebration distracts him from harrowing thoughts. "I'm not sure" is his favorite phrase, because its ambivalence allows him to disengage from others and escape the felt duty of acting upon injustice.<sup>12</sup> In this story, human interaction is invariably shaped by self preservation and benefit.

Lu Xun doubts that humans will let go of tradition, especially when it satisfies an underlying desire to be cruel. Old Mrs. Wei gossips about Xianglin's Wife's effort to escape the second marriage, explaining with relish how the woman bashed her head on a corner of the altar and bloodied herself terribly.<sup>13</sup> Despite going to such lengths, Xianglin's Wife is forever burdened by her failure to meet the unreasonable standard of chastity. A village woman says, "If you'd held out longer or knocked yourself to death outright, that would have been better[...]when you go down to the lower world, the ghosts of both men will start fighting over you."<sup>14</sup> Even women are

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>13</sup> The historical context of the Qing chastity martyr campaign, which propagated a moral expectation of widows to remain chaste, is relevant here. The chastity value system is a local reality as much as it is an imperial campaign. See Matt Sommer, *Polyandry and wife-selling in Qing dynasty China*.

<sup>14</sup> Lu Xun, *Selected Works*, 185.

complicit in a value system that presents endless opportunities to shame and ostracize one another. There is no one to help the *self* against the invariably cruel *other* that is all of society.

If Lu Xun does offer a source of hope for change, it is in the form of a superhuman force. “Mending Heaven” is a humorous rendering of the human creation folk tale, in which Lu Xun reveals nostalgia for a primordial nature undisturbed by mankind. He describes the goddess Nu-wa with childlike behavior such as “[rubbing] her eyes,” juxtaposed with glimpses of nonchalantly wondrous power: a “quickenning breeze wafted her energy over the universe.”<sup>15</sup> He describes “wisps of rock-green clouds” in the “pink sky[...]behind which winked stars,” marvelous illustrations which make the impending human destruction feel that much more egregious.<sup>16</sup> Nu-wa’s existence in the universe is intuitive and natural, unlike that of humankind, which begins to proliferate and erupt in exhausting cacophony. Creation outrunning divine intention, they grow in number as Nu-wa diminishes into exhaustion, evoking mankind’s pollution of nature as well as the sacrifice demanded of the female body in giving birth.

Lu Xun’s exploration of gender politics is evident in how the human creatures who attempt communication with Nu-wa are all evidently male. They are adorned with traditionally male symbols of power such as the beard, denuded of respect in being described by Nu-wa as “curious” and “matted by the brine like pointed poplar leaves.”<sup>17</sup> By farcically depicting the powerful, Lu Xun reveals the arbitrariness of unequal Confucian relationships. A man dressed in ornate thick robes recites “glibly: ‘Your lewd nakedness is immoral, an offence against etiquette, a breach of the rules and conduct fit for beasts!’”<sup>18</sup> The man imagines himself a steward of ethical conduct, yet, because gendered Confucian precepts mire him in self-righteousness, he fails to recognize that

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<sup>15</sup> “Old Tales” 5.

<sup>16</sup> Lu Xun, *Old Tales Retold* (Foreign Languages Press, 1972), 5.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

he is staring a cosmic being right in the face. Nu-wa is vested with the abused identities of nature and the feminine, allowing the reader to view institutionalized divinity and power anew. Perhaps it is precisely because the woman has existed on the margins of power that there may yet emerge a sensual and embodied subjectivity in the world.

Is this story of female power a deviation from Lu Xun's cynicism? Though "Mending Heaven" is no less rigorous in excavating social ills, Lu Xun makes use of a departure from reality to take up a lightheartedness that is absent or else deeply morbid in his other writings. There is tension even in this empowering rendition of the woman, in that the bounds of her potential surpass normative expectation yet are somehow still indeterminable. Women have been subjugated for as long as can be remembered, and that is why "Mending Heaven" ends with Nu-wa's death upon exhaustion. Female energy is shown to be a neglected life force from which possibility springs, yet Lu Xun abstracts it to the level of superhuman non-humanness to cohere with a reality in which women cannot actually achieve liberation.

In these ways, Lu Xun explores the barriers to women's liberation, ultimately leaving one with the sense that the challenge is too great. Are corrupt systems inevitable due to human nature, or is there a chance that redemption can come from within? Whether we maintain hope for change depends on the limits of human capability that we hold to be true.

### ***Women as Liberators***

While any text can inspire revolutionary inquiry, the answers that the author herself dares to provide are what make the text itself truly revolutionary. Ding Ling, an active member of leftist circles starting in the 1930s, recognized that that women's liberation can only be achieved through a collective movement, not an individual one. Through depictions of women who overcome social barriers and act on self-driven motivation, Ding Ling presents an antidote to pessimism regarding

the limits to what women can accomplish. Her vision of female potential involves an abnegation of the *self* in the individual sense to be replaced by the forging of a new identity along community lines—an expansion of the self—aided by the entry of a veritable *other* that is the Japanese in the 1930s. Here I analyze “Miss Sophia’s Diary” (1928), “Shanghai, Spring 1930” (1930), “New Faith” (1939), and “When I Was in Xia Village” (1941).

Ding Ling’s earlier writings reflect a strain of cynicism akin to Lu Xun’s, stemming from the lonely struggle of the individual in a society that is slow to change, though these too reflect the sense that change is underfoot. In “Miss Sophia’s Diary,” Ding Ling focuses on the struggles that come with being sexually explorative under the lasting social categorizations of gender. Sophia may have liberal views of sexuality, but she is still trapped in the web of early modern society. To even *be* sexual is to fall into that web and entangle oneself with those who retain traditional ideas. The tall, handsome Ling Jishi is frustratingly conservative, and although she recognizes that they are fundamentally incompatible, she cannot help but desire him. Her contradictory feelings infuriate her and turn the blame inward: “Don’t I offer myself to him for his pleasures the same as any whore? But what makes the whole thing so painful is that I have only myself to blame.”<sup>19</sup> The transition into liberal modernity is by no means as simple as the flipping of a switch. Human desire persists in mysterious ways, even against one’s own pride.

Sophia is resentful that she must be tormented by these polarizing feelings while Ling Jishi experiences a much more carefree version of their intimacy. Just by virtue of attracting her and having no stake in changing, he maintains the upper hand. She tries to compensate by objectifying him to deny him of personhood, as is typically done to a woman: “I subjected him to the most searching scrutiny[...]Has he any idea how I’m sizing him up?”<sup>20</sup> But pursuing Ling Jishi in fact

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<sup>19</sup> Ding Ling, *I Myself Am a Woman* (Beacon Press, 1989), 68.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

leads to a loss of selfhood. She writes obsessively: “I want unconditional surrender of his heart[...]I’m delirious. I go over and over the steps I must take to implement my scheme.”<sup>21</sup> She descends into despair upon realizing that he will never see her as an equal. Here, the emancipation promised by modernity seems illusory. Because social change, love, gender, and selfhood are intertwined, the modern individual faces challenges that one cannot overcome alone.

“New Faith” is the first of Ding Ling’s stories to explicitly frame communist revolution as a stage for women’s liberation. In the story, an old woman who undergoes Japanese atrocities processes her trauma by verbalizing it to fellow villagers. Her family is troubled at first by this apparent desire to make her shameful experiences public to all, but they soon recognize that the old woman is able to redirect her trauma into productive passion. She shows a natural skill in oratory, “watching her listeners’ faces” to adapt to their emotional responses and closing her stories by urging listeners to join the fighting, which “[makes] people smile again.”<sup>22</sup> In this way, Ding Ling naturalizes verbalization as a way of processing trauma, encouraged by a sympathetic community. Her vision here can be contrasted clearly with Lu Xun’s “The New Year’s Sacrifice,” in which Xianglin’s Wife succumbs to invariably cruel, unsympathetic villagers.

Moreover, Ding Ling shows that in scrambling social relationships, revolution creates a communal current of change that can undo the baggage of traditional propriety. The old woman’s “personal shame,” which originates from the stigma of being polluted by rape, initially prevents her from speaking of her own assault to family members, but as she continues speaking family propriety ceases to matter.<sup>23</sup> She stops viewing her sons as “obedient little kittens” and instead

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 290, 293.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 289.

encourages them to fight the Japanese, feeling her love “rekindle.”<sup>24</sup> Her relationships with her daughters-in-law “harmonize,” and the “frequent bickering that had afflicted the family before disappeared now, replaced by a new love founded on a common idea.”<sup>25</sup> By bringing the urgent matter of war into everyday conversation, the old woman normalizes difficult communication and loosens social hierarchy. Her individual trauma expands to include her family and wider community into a single, unified self.

Through the old woman’s organic development of revolutionary oratory skills, Ding Ling presents a vision in which women’s experiences and capabilities directly contribute to the common good. All of the village women accompany her to the first revolutionary rally, and though their feet are bound, they are “barely aware of their pain and fatigue.”<sup>26</sup> She is overwhelmed by the desire to “sacrifice herself for [the crowd’s] gratification,” in a way that echoes Lu Xun’s criticism of listeners’ consumption but instead resembles maternal sacrifice for the next generation.<sup>27</sup> She extends the affinity of family to the entire crowd: “I love all of you the same as I love my own sons[...]I’d die for you.”<sup>28</sup>

The old woman’s speech crescendoes passionately until she comes to “an intimate awareness of something very powerful[...] the collapse of the old, the radiance of the new, and though tears blurred her vision, it was a radiance that sprang from her own steadfast faith.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, revolution is presented as a chance to undo social divisions and unite for the common good. Ding Ling posits that women can lead the creation of community by finding an innate power to overcome the stigma of speaking out about harrowing experiences. Whereas Sophia experiences a

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 294.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 295.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 296.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 295.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 297.

loss of selfhood vying for individual power, here the loss of the private self means the start of a communal one. The old woman's growth seems contingent on the presence of the Japanese as the blamable external *other*, and thus we must ask whether Ding Ling's vision of organic activism can stand abstracted from her historical moment. Here one senses the intimate role of nationalism in women's liberation.

"When I Was in Xia Village" presents a more sobering vision in which those who speak out do earn communal hostility, but women in this story also manage to claim agency. Zhenzhen is captured by the Japanese and used as a comfort woman. Upon returning to her village, she is ostracized. Because she dares to come back to the village instead of dying, which would maintain her honor according to chastity customs, they gossip that she married one of the Japanese. Perhaps sensing the villagers' hostility, she does not seek sympathy like the women of "New Faith" or "The New Year's Sacrifice." Rather, she becomes a medium through which another woman named Agui resigns herself to sexual trauma as a fact of women's fate: "It's a real tragedy to be a woman, isn't it, Zhenzhen?" Agui says, and Zhenzhen comforts her as she cries.<sup>30</sup>

In an inversion of the chastity martyr who is celebrated for dying to protect her sexual purity, Zhenzhen is a martyr as well, in that she survives the double cruelty of the Japanese and her own community and becomes a channel through which others rationalize sexual violence. Despite receiving a marriage proposal, Zhenzhen decides to go elsewhere to study, making the narrator reflect upon the productive possibilities of forsaking traditional community.<sup>31</sup> By refusing marriage, which would only ever be a half-hearted attempt to normalize her social standing in the village, she bravely uproots herself, inspiring the narrator to imagine a "bright future" of alternative

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 307, 309.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 314.

possibilities.<sup>32</sup> Her eagerness to contribute to the war effort and nonchalance towards gossip reflect a lack of desire to preserve some untarnishable self. In opening herself to difficult conversations with Agui and the narrator, she creates a *self* that expands beyond the individual and focuses productively on the enemy *other*.

The strong, unpretentious heroines of “New Faith” and ““When I Was in Xia Village”” present a vision in which women draw upon innate capabilities to surpass the bounds of class and tradition and strengthen the nation. Taken together, they convey a momentum towards a then unwritten future. In her speech “Thoughts on March 8” (1942), Ding Ling encouraged women to maintain physical health, think critically, and persevere through hardship. Lu Xun offered insightful and troubling questions; Ding Ling offered possible answers.

In conclusion, I have shown that the thought of Lu Xun and Ding Ling differ on account of how they perceive the potential of women’s liberation, as analyzed using the key contradistinctive structure of the *self* and *other*. Both writers knew the barriers that women face, and though they seemed insurmountable, the rise of an *other* from outside of China enabled Ding Ling to present communal rallying as an opportunity. However, it was not only the rise of the *other*, but also the possibility that the *self* that could expand beyond the lone individual, that undergirded Ding Ling’s hope for women.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 315.

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