A Classic of Chinese Land Reform

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Ding Ling, *The Sun Shines over the Sanggan River*[1]

One of the wellsprings of socialist realism is to live an experience and then portray it in fiction. The convincing transformation of actual events, relationships, and action into fiction requires an author to conceptualise while remaining honest to the essence of life as lived. *The Sun Shines over the Sanggan River* by Ding Ling was written during an exceptional moment in history and from a unique vantage point. Ding Ling was sent in 1946 by the Communist Party of China as part of a land reform work team to Huailai village in north China. Already a well-established literary figure, she was deeply touched by the people she met and decided to capture their lives and the early phase of a path-breaking land reform movement in a single village in a novel.

Ding Ling writes in her preface that she shied away from abstraction and stayed close to the experiences and thoughts of the people, and yet her deft handling of the development of characters – and particularly their responses to each other – creates more than a story well told and is an authentic picture of classes and class struggle. Her work reveals the twists and turns of a revolutionary period through the halting awakening of class consciousness and confidence of the working and destitute people. Her original intention was to write a three-part novel covering the struggle for land reform, the distribution of land, and the voluntary enlistment of peasants in the army, but for a variety of reasons, the book only covered the first. It is a seamless whole as written, although if the author had written the planned sequels, more detail regarding land reform may have been provided. The afterword of the English translation of her book by a contemporary Chinese critic details her skillful delineation of classes and celebrates *The Sun Shines over the Sanggan River* as one

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[1] Original Chinese edition published in 1948. The edition used in this review is Ding Ling (1984).

of the best books on land reform and a harbinger of a new Chinese revolutionary literary tradition.

The novel unfurls through the eyes and thoughts of multiple protagonists in a village in north China already liberated but under the shadow of Japanese aggression and the continued presence of the Kuomintang in the South. Although it is the arrival of the work team in the village that launches the process of land reform, the author only tangentially and late in the novel takes their point of view and continues in the main to place herself and the novel within the milieu of the peasants. The book opens with a middle peasant seeking to hide the extent of his possessions by sending off his extra cart with his daughter-in-law to her parental home. Tongues wag and many motivations are bandied about when the cart appears in the village, where the story takes place. Throughout the book, it is small events such as these that flesh out lives and class viewpoints. The turbulence of early land reform provides a context in which the threads of individual lives are gently pulled apart, scrutinised and then woven together in a rich tapestry.

Within the overall intention to provide a carefully crafted description of the course of land reform, it is the sympathetic and humorous treatment of four intertwined motifs that raise this novel from fictionalised testimony to literature. First, deprivation scarred by dependence and fear. Second, the emergence of class consciousness and confidence. Third, in tandem, the machinations of the landlords and scammers to endure. And fourth, the political maturation of the cadre of village communists and the land reform work team.

Deprivation is captured from many angles. Some of the most moving sections of the book are individual back stories of suffering that have ground people down to a condition where gaining dignity and independence through land reform seems a pipe dream. We read of a peasant whose life unravels when his wife becomes the mistress of the landlord's son. Driven to violence, he sinks into indebtedness, going from fellowship and happiness to isolation and penury. Another tenant returns land that he received during the first round of land distribution to the landlord because the prospect of being independent is too daunting. The unquestioning servility of the older generation is contrasted with the eagerness of the young for change. Older peasants stand ready to guard land and produce for the landlords and to shield them from the impending land reform. In justification, they magnify blood ties to landlords and rich peasants that are in fact used to demean and subjugate them. Households are not painted in one colour. Ding Ling sensitively captures shades and types of oppression that different individuals face.

Camaraderie among peasants and the working people does not translate directly into class consciousness. There is confusion regarding the outcome of land reform. There are jealousies and rivalries and fear of the unknown. Within families there is uneven awareness of the potential of change and in at least one household, the wife

outstrips the husband in understanding that potential. The brother of the master schemer in the village is a poor peasant who, in his infrequent appearances in the book, provides wise comments and advice. For working people there is no time to spare for study and discussion. Meetings are poorly attended and leave little impact. A striking case is that of the women's literacy programme. Working women stop attending classes because they are burdened by work. The literacy classes become the preserve of women from well-to-do households. In retaliation the working women exclude the members of the literacy class from discussions of land reform strategy.

Each life story that Ding Ling presents draws out a different complicated reality. Her approach also varies. The critic whose review is appended to the book faults her for not fully fleshing out one of the women protagonists, but this is not a convincing critique. Ding Ling chooses her method to suit the situation. Although the first appearance of the protagonist is depicted through her own thoughts and feelings and the responses of others to her, later there is a marked shift. As the momentum of land reform speeds up, the author shifts to action in the case of this character as well as others. Entering freely into landlords' homes, the working people confidently take matters into their own hands. This is effective both in drawing out the transformation of individuals as well as the collective. Through these individual stories and the collective action that grows in strength, the gradual unfolding of class consciousness and confidence is astutely told.

Ding Ling describes the process of "settling scores" as being at the heart of releasing the energy of the peasants for land reform. To overcome their reluctance to face their oppressors, they needed to understand what had been taken from them historically and what their rights were in a new society. The scores to be settled are unpacked into incidents and processes that are tangible and are real life experiences, ranging from sliding into debt to being given the dregs of the harvest to having to perform menial labour in a household. Settling scores is larger than individuals and Ding Ling adroitly shifts the canvas from individuals to class action.

The challenges of class characterisation are most clearly brought out in the case of landlords and rich peasants. This is not a village with a single dominant landlord, in which it is easy to identify the adversary. There are grey areas that add to the confusion of the peasants. The relief of the middle peasant who expects the worst and escapes settling scores is palpable. The situation is compounded by the landlords' skullduggery and Ding Ling is particularly imaginative in describing the ploys of landlords' wives in outwitting the rising and immature confidence of the peasants. Ding Ling captures the fragility of class consciousness through scenes when the intention of a group of peasants is undone. The novel is rich in describing the ruses of landlords and schemers, which range from hiding in an orchard to trying to beat the system by having a son volunteer in the army and a daughter marry a local cadre. Rumors – such as the widespread worry that the land reform

would be undone because the Kuomintang, who were supported by the powerful United States, would eventually return – fly like swallows through the village.

It is this tangled situation that the small band of Communist cadres in the village and the visiting land reform work team have to tackle. Ding Ling does not put them on a pedestal but makes them human and real. One politically ambitious cadre cruelly rejects his lover because she is related to a rich peasant. Another finds it difficult to stop gambling. As they learn from new situations, they begin to better face their own failings. The work team goes through a similar catharsis. The leader is bookish and given to lecturing and theorising to his colleagues and to the peasants, who in meetings drift to the back of the room to sleep more comfortably. Others derive their energy from constant contact with the people but find it difficult to generalise or draw abstract conclusions from their experience. As a result, the leader is dismissive of their instincts, and they tend to follow the leader's instructions without question. Ding Ling's most admiring description is of a senior political cadre who comes from the regional centre to set the struggle back on track. He is both a respectful listener and a bold leader. He heeds everyone's opinion, analyses the situation, and helps the village take a fresh approach to land reform.

More than twenty years before Ding Ling wrote her novel, Lu Xun wrote, in the short story "My Old Home": "For actually the earth had no roads to begin with, but when many men pass one way a road is made" (Lu Xun 1981). This sentence expresses his protagonist's hope that future generations would overcome the misery and divisions of the present. *The Sun Shines over the Sanggan River* brings to life the promise of this hope. But this is true not only of the book but also of the author. Ding Ling opened up many roads in the way she lived her life and wrote her books.

Born in 1904 in Hunan, she lost her father at a young age and her major influence was her mother, who founded a school that promoted anti-obscurantist views. She moved to Shanghai for her studies and later to Beijing, She had a brush with anarchism. In 1925 she met and fell in love with the poet Hu Yepin, who was politically active in the League of Left Wing Writers and later joined the Communist Party. They lived together and a son was born in 1930. Hu Yepin was arrested and executed by the Kuomintang in 1931.

In the late 1920s, Ding Ling published several short stories and a novelette about young Chinese women, exploring issues of independence, sexuality, tradition, and modernity. She joined the League of Left Wing Writers in 1930 and the Communist Party in 1932. Her writing evolved with her politics, and her 1931 book *Flood* was cited as an early example of socialist realism. After escaping from a period of imprisonment, she joined the Communists in Yan'an in 1937. Having earlier held leading positions in the League of Left Wing writers, she was given, among other responsibilities, the task of editing the literary supplement of the Party paper *Liberation Daily*.

Ding Ling was involved in controversy early on. She was among the small group of established authors in Yan'an and actively participated in the debates around the role of the artist in a revolution, including in the pages of the *Liberation Daily*. At the Forum on Literature and Art in Yan'an in 1942, the debates came to a head and a rectification campaign among writers, shaped by Mao Zedong's Talks at the Forum, was launched. Ding Ling had continued writing short stories about women and in 1941 wrote about the difficulties and the status of women in the liberated areas. Her public statements on insufficient attention being given to women's rights were criticised. Together with other writers she was sent to the countryside to work more closely with the people (King 2013). It was this experience in a village as part of a land reform team that led to the writing of *The Sun Shines over the Sanggan River*.

Controversies persisted. In 1957, Ding Ling was labelled rightist and expelled from the Communist Party. She was imprisoned for five years during the Cultural Revolution. Released in 1975, she was fully rehabilitated, with her Communist Party membership restored in 1979. Her books were republished and her most renowned work, *The Sun Shines over the Sanggan River*, was translated into many languages. She died in Beijing in 1986.

The Sun Shines over the Sanggan River was acclaimed in China and abroad by contemporaries. Ding Ling was the first Chinese author to win a Stalin Prize, which was awarded to her novel in 1951. Within China she was recognised as a creator of the literature of a new society. Even after she was expelled from the party, the book was praised as an exemplar of socialist realism. It was only during the Cultural Revolution that it was out of print. By the 1980s, key novels written from the 1940s through the 1960s were described in China as "red classics." These were works of art that had stood the test of time and had political significance for later periods. *The Sun Shines over the Sanggan River* is grounded in historical reality, filled with insights on social and political struggle, and steeped with lessons for all those who work towards agrarian transformation. It is the quintessential "red classic."

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