

Analytical Preface

Ding Ling's *When I Was in Xia Village* is a morally ambiguous yet politically complex story on how the female body engenders the revolution while simultaneously suffering from objectification and dehumanization at the hands of the revolution. Behind the optimistic leftist ending, it strikes me that the story is less about the emancipatory promise of revolution but more about revolution's treatment of women — epitomized in Agui's lament, "How miserable it is to be a woman," (303) and her seemingly rhetorical question "It's a real tragedy to be woman, isn't it, Zhenzhen?" (307)

In my creative retelling of the story, I used multiple male subjectivities to convey the story of the violence done to Zhenzhen in a reverse temporality: in the aftermath of her venereal disease, in the midst of her work for the Party, and on the day of her first assault. I sought to enact the trauma undergirding Ding Ling's narrative by highlighting the intricate technology of violence which has done Zhenzhen injustice: the villagers' contempt of her lost chastity, the Party's use (and abuse) of her body, and tradition's shackles on her free-spiritedness.

The ambiguity of Ding Ling's story comes from the inconsistency between two contradictory portrayals of Zhenzhen as revolution's victim and as a Communist martyr. In my retelling, I bracketed — putting aside — that inconsistency by focusing instead on the indisputable trauma of violence. A significant narrative choice was to marginalize Zhenzhen's voice. This serves to highlight how much the inscription of femininity in that period was tied to the male gaze while simultaneously subverting the original story's embracing of the Party in its final moments. Through exploring the traumatic neuroses of other interiorities, this retelling makes explicit the chilling subtext of the injustices that the female body suffers — from chastity to exploitation and disposability to arranged marriage. That is what is at the heart of the story.

A Girl Called Chastity

No one understood how it haunted him. When she came back, he heard it first through the lips of Yüwa, who uttered each word with a searching scrutiny as though she wanted to see sprouts on his face. She was dissatisfied at his reaction.

She told him, with a saintly air, “Go see for yourself if you don’t believe me. The disease has taken her nose.”

That was only the start.

“Zhenzhen’s back,” everyone told him. Some had pity in their eyes. Others couldn’t restrain their excitement, weaved in the lilt of their voices and the way they curled back their lips. But, always, there was the tint of disdain in those blinking, narrowed eyes. The refrain that most often followed sought to reassure him but instead it hurt, like a gorge rising in his throat. He could only nod. If he opened his mouth, he imagined that all his intestines would gush out in a puddle on the brown earth. At the center of the pool of blood and pinkness, his molten, grey, timidly beating heart.

“Xia Dabao, you got lucky,” they would say, “good thing you didn’t marry a girl whose body has been ruined.”

“A body touched by a hundred men...”

“She’s sick, you know?”

All the bobbing heads crowding on him, like ants closing in on a corpse. Beads eagerly peering into his soul. A thousand tiny, cold legs crawling on a long march across his heart.

When she was gone, taken by the Japs—“Willingly! Shameless girl,” others declared blindly—he could think of nothing other than her eyes, like two open windows in the summer countryside. Clean like the stream that runs outside his cave, clear like the cloudless, liberating

expanse of blue behind the silhouette of the flourmill. And then, in a protracted moment, the eyes turning towards him with hate.

Let me take your place, he would plead with the eyes in his mind. It's all my fault.

Those eyes would blink, sometimes derisively, sometimes wildly, and on some chilling nights, lifelessly.

Come back, he rehearsed on his *kang* in the humid darkness on the night he heard that she had returned, I'll run away with you. I'll marry you.

In his head, a thousand echoes. Her lips moving. All the lips moving. My body. Her body. Oh, all the bodies.

Comrade Ma found it a pity. A real pity.

"Your insides are rotting away," he told the girl in the fall when wheat was harvested in the brown, golden fields. They were in the village office, sparsely accessorized, slightly dark. He delivered the diagnosis from the village doctor. A pause. He pushed the cup of tea, slightly chipped at the edge, towards her.

From across the scratched table, behind a veil of steam, a mask of stillness sank over her face. She looked down at her feet, or maybe at her naval. He saw that she was pulling at a loose thread on the edge of her shirt.

The silence pooled between them, almost viscously. He attempted to scoop it up, making it into an offering: "But, we've just received intelligence that the enemy has some important information about their next 'mopping-up campaign' and the Party needs you, Comrade Liu."

She glances up but would not meet his eye, the thread coiled tightly around her fingers. Her eyes looked blank, set adrift on the tide of his news.

“We will treat you after this,” he said, as earnestly as he could, “I promise you. On behalf of the Party.”

Why did he have to be the one to deliver the news? He cursed the Director. He tried to righteously convey his message, underlined by the urgency of the revolutionary cause and the authority of the Party. But, somehow, the exchange was too slippery. Against her uncanny calmness, the words felt futile like husks. He could almost see them sifting through her mind like sand from a clenched fist.

He waded forward nonetheless, continuing his persuasion, “No one else can be found in such short a time. The Party has put their trust in you! Only you can complete this mission for the Party and the people’s salvation.”

Some things were left unsaid. There wasn’t any other female comrade who had already slept around so often with the Jap devils. Zhenzhen’s body — though rotting and in need of treatment — was already contaminated by the Japs. Quite unlucky, really, that she first got caught in that church a year ago. It could have been anyone. His eyelid twitched — the bruises he spotted under her sleeve when they shook hands — but he brushed the thought aside. They were all serving the Party’s great cause of liberation. She had to go back. No questions about it. If she was going to die anyway, poor girl, she might as well lend her body to good use. Donate it to the highest calling. The girl maybe even enjoyed it.

He almost averted his eyes when they met hers, but he subdued the instinct. A new fervor and vibrancy now swept over her features. She was no longer remote.

She told him calmly that she would do it, pupils shining.

“Oh, good, good. Again, the Party thanks you for it.”

Liu Fusheng had only one daughter and no son. He named her Zhenzhen when she started tottering on two feet because she was precious and he wanted to cup her in his weathered hands — his innocent bundle of virtue.

He had always said yes to her. When she sneaked off to Catholic church instead of helping out in the fields, he closed one eye. When she asked to stay for an extra year in school, he hemmed and hawed, but gave in. When she refused to marry the good rice storeowner he had found for her from Xiliu Village, he —

“No, no! I would never!” she cried, eyes hot and thrusting her chin like an incensed animal ready to fight.

He pounded the *kang* with equal force.

“You have to listen to me,” he said. His voice sounded starchy to his own ear, almost cold.

He tried again: “It’s for your own good. How can you defy your parents on the matters of marriage?”

Before turning from him, she set her dewy, spirited eyes on him and opened her mouth to speak, “Watch me. I’ll become a nun right now.”

She pivoted on her heels, her long braid making an arc through the air. At her exit, the room receded on the sound of the words she hurled like a bomb.

His wife made a move to go after her but he stopped her with his hand.

“She knows there are Japs down the hill,” he said, “she’ll turn around and come back in no time.”

— he would remember that look forever. Like a conversation of an entire life, abruptly paused. Would that it ended there.