New Woman in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction

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In an apparent case of life imitating art, Ding Ling (1904–86) followed the path that the new woman had traced in fiction, progressing from girl student to woman revolutionary, and eventually joining in the Communist regime in Yan’an in 1936. Furthermore, she seemed to have thrived on that path, for she emerged as the most consistently prolific and highly regarded woman writer of the May Fourth group. In the 1930s she was unanimously praised as the woman writer who “demonstrated the highest literary skills of all women writers in the representation of the quintessential modern girl” (Qian Q. 226), and since the 1970s she has been elevated to the status of a “feminist” writer of the May Fourth period (e.g., Barlow, “Feminism and Literary technique”). Moreover, the longevity of her writing career presented a sharp contrast to the cases of the other women writers within the May Fourth group, who either gave up fiction writing after only a few productive years (e.g., Feng Yuanjun) or were forced to switch to marginalized genres such as children’s literature (e.g., Bing Xin). Not only did Ding Ling’s productive years extend into the 1980s—though with an interruption of almost twenty years from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s when she was persecuted for her alleged “antirevolutionary” political stance—but her fiction has also won much acclaim from male radical intellectuals over the years. In view of Ding Ling’s apparent camaraderie with rather than antagonism toward male intellectuals, how are we to assess her relationship to dominant male discourses of Chinese modernity?

Ding Ling’s life already presents much mystery, and her writings to some extent compound the difficulty of our inquiry, for she strove to make room for a voice of female experience that was comprehensible and significant within the canon of May Fourth literature as defined by male writers. In particular, she seemed to contribute to the male-centered discourse of “feminine emotionalism” through her own fiction and essays when faced
with the barrage of male intellectuals’ disparagement of the supposedly “sentimental” and “autobiographical” qualities of female fiction. However, a close scrutiny of the representation of new women in her fiction also reveals that rather than unquestioningly identifying with the male objectification and marginalization of women writers, she appropriated the masculine position for purposes of female empowerment through her own representation and deployment of emotions. As such, Ding Ling’s life and fiction encapsulate the unique ambiguity of a woman writer at once enfranchised by and straining to break free of dominant patriarchal discourses.

In this chapter and the next, I will examine the areas of continuity and the significant changes in Ding Ling’s fictional representation of the new woman before the turning point of 1936. These two chapters mark a climax in my inquiry in two ways. By delving into Ding Ling’s narrative construction of the new woman, I can compare her literary endeavors with those of the male authors mentioned in previous chapters and thus offering a different, if not contrastive, glimpse into the relationship of May Fourth intellectuals to Chinese modernity. More importantly, these two chapters will allow me to take stock of the gender dynamics within the May Fourth literary canon through the study of what is arguably its most complex case. I will concentrate on Ding Ling’s early works in this chapter, whereas I devote the next chapter to her later works (c. 1930–36) with deliberate changes in narrative style.

Ding Ling and the New Woman

As mentioned in the previous chapter, many influential women writers of the May Fourth era had been girl students in colleges studying under the tutelage of modern male intellectuals when the May Fourth Movement erupted. In addition to receiving classroom instruction, these women were also exposed to new literary models provided by contemporary male writers, all of which influenced them as they were preparing to venture into the new literary arena. Compared to the more explicit propaganda of critical essays, the narrative representation of the modern Chinese woman that came from the pens of male writers had a more subtle, yet profound impact on female writers’ fiction. This was because male authors not only outlined the acceptable themes and subject matter in the portrayal of Chinese women, but also established widely applied narrative forms through their fiction. Therefore, women writers had to confront not only the obvious deprecation of their literary works in male literary criticism but also the more implicit molding of their styles and perspectives by modern male intellectuals when striving for their own identity and literary recognition. A relatively late comer to the literary scene, Ding Ling was exposed to an even larger and more established collection of literary products by radical male intellectuals than the first generation of May Fourth women writers. As such, her quest for an independent, individual modern identity met with even greater difficulty. Emerging from the shadow of male intellectuals and equipped with
and confined to using the literary apparatus handed down by them, was she able to use the master’s tool to dismantle the master’s house?

Ding Ling’s appropriation of the male discourse of “feminine emotionalism” in particular demonstrates the triumphs and setbacks she experienced in her attempts at creating an independent modern identity for herself. First appearing on the literary scene in the late 1920s, she stepped right into the center of a maelstrom of political realignments and literary mutations. As a woman writer, she not only needed to adapt to the turbulent ideological transition from individualism to collectivism, but also had to deal with the increasingly obvious gender prescriptions that limited women’s literary endeavors. Ding Ling’s strategy, for the most part, was to prove that she was “different” from other women writers by trying to avert charges of “emotionalism.” Although the pessimistic tone and first-person narration in her depiction of new women made it possible for male critics to associate her fiction with similar literary efforts by Feng Yuanjun and Lu Yin, Ding Ling herself resisted such a grouping. On the one hand, she voiced her disapproval of female sentimentality in her essays, identifying it as women’s unique and self-defeating weakness. On the other, she also changed the narrative form of her fiction in order to promote women’s mastery of their emotions. Through an examination of Ding Ling’s self-conscious and gradual disassociation from “feminine” emotional writing, we will see that her change of narrative style epitomizes not only the ideological vicissitudes of the time but also the gender politics in the May Fourth representation of the new woman. Before in-depth narrative analysis of her individual works, a brief sketch of Ding Ling’s fiction written before 1936 is in order.

Ding Ling’s fiction underwent significant changes in both content and style in the course of her career. Her fiction dealing with new women before her Yan’an period (1936–49) can be roughly divided into three types according to both themes and chronology. The first type is represented by “Shafei nüshi de riji” (“Miss Sophia’s Diary,” 1928) and “Yecao” (“Yecao,” 1929), both of them discussed in this chapter, but this type also includes her first story “Mengke” (“Mengke,” 1927), “Zisha riji” (“Suicide Diary,” 1928), and “Ri” (“Day,” 1929). Stories of this type often depict the frustrations and dilemmas faced by young women living alone in the city without, however, offering any obvious resolutions to their questions or their misery. Unlike the girl students create by the first generation of May Fourth writers such as Feng Yuanjun and Lu Yin, the modern women by Ding Ling’s pen are usually female writers, teachers, revolutionaries, or urbanites with no apparent educational or occupational affiliations. Furthermore, because of their increased exposure to more complex and challenging social relationships beyond school life, Ding Ling’s new women more frankly and fervently express their discontents and desires than those depicted by Feng Yuanjun and Lu Yin. Chapter eight will examine the other two types of her fiction featuring new women. The second of these types generally delineates her-
ines who leave behind their bourgeois lifestyle, especially romantic love, to embrace Marxist ideology and devote themselves to revolutionary causes, such as “Shafei riji di’er bu” (Sophia’s Diary, Part II, 1931), and the novellas “1930 nian chun Shanghai zhiyi, zhi’er” (“Shanghai, Spring 1930, Part I and II,” 1930) and “Wei Hu” (“Wei Hu,” 1930). The third type provides a rather idealized picture of the new woman’s life after she joins the revolution. The representative work of this type, “Tianjia Village,” portrays a revolutionary woman who, after breaking away from her gentry family, mobilizes peasants in the countryside, and is eventually executed by the Nationalist government. Although less typical of Ding Ling’s pre-Yan’an fiction in terms of both setting and narrative style, “Tianjia Village” not only attracted a great deal of attention at the time of its publication, but also foreshadowed the more radical thematic and stylistic changes in Ding Ling’s works written in Yan’an, which I will discuss in the Epilogue. Through this chapter and the next chapter, I will show that rather than following the apparently linear and teleological progression of her life that some critics and biographers suggest it to be, the fiction that Ding Ling composed at different periods of her career reveals a multifaceted and sometimes even conflicted interaction of gender politics and party politics, Self and Other, and convention and innovation.

**Diary of a Lonely City Dweller: “Miss Sophia’s Diary”**

Although Ding Ling started her writing career in 1927 with the publication of her first short story “Mengke” in *Short Story Monthly*, she made her name as the woman writer who most successfully depicted “modern girls” only with the appearance of “Miss Sophia’s Diary.” An integrated textual and contextual analysis of this story will provide us with not only a useful vehicle to explore the complex gender negotiations in Ding Ling’s early fiction but also invaluable insights into her later narrative innovations under changed sociopolitical circumstances.

Described as “a bomb thrown into the silent literary arena” for its bold description of female sexual desires (Yi, “Ding Ling nüshi” 223), “Miss Sophia’s Diary” predictably stirred up male efforts at appropriation and containment. Mao Dun, for instance, categorized Sophia, the heroine of this story, as merely a type reflective of a specific set of sociopolitical conditions, identifying her as “a young woman bearing the scars of her times and crying out in rebellion, a representative of the young women emancipated by the May Fourth Movement and yet still harboring contradictory sexual desires” (“Nü zuojia Ding Ling” 253). Qian Qianwu also declared Sophia to be a typical “bourgeois woman intellectual” suffering from a kind of fin-de-siècle malaise (*shiji mo bing*) (227). A different, albeit no less reductive, interpretative approach adopted by male critics was to praise the portrayal of Sophia as a sign of Ding Ling’s exceptional literary skills as a woman writer, for she allegedly “went beyond the gentleness of women’s literature, and instead boldly delineated sexual psychology with depth and in detail” (Hu
Yunyi, qtd. in Yuan L., “Xin shiqi Ding Ling xiaoshuo” 27. Although apparently praising her artistic talent, Ding Ling’s contemporary male critics all attempted to elide the issue of female subjectivity raised by this story through the neutralization of Ding Ling’s descriptions of female sexuality. They either emphasized the social realism of such descriptions, or, praised the work as an exceptional literary achievement, thus in effect using her gender as a tool to trivialize women’s literature as a whole as merely the expression of “soft” feminine emotions instead of the “hard” representation of violent psychological conflicts that Ding Ling allegedly accomplished.

In view of the gender-inflected interpretation of “Miss Sophia’s Diary” at the time of its publication, it is all the more important for us to adopt a productive approach in our investigation of the role sexuality plays in the process of female subject formation in this story. We cannot simply regard this story as a kind of “metanarrative diary fiction” (Hyun 105) that exposes the mechanisms and failings of this genre while dismissing the cultural and political forces that shaped its narrative forms. Although this story features, as Yi-tsi Feuerwerker points out, a unique self-deconstruction by revealing that the act of writing defeats rather than supports the diarist’s attempt at forming a coherent narrative about the self (“The Changing Relationship” 49–52), to claim that “Miss Sophia’s Diary” is only an intriguing generic specimen could easily result in abstracting this story from its sociopolitical context, and risks the elision of the gender politics underlying the text. But nor can we adequately examine Sophia’s subjectivity by simply claiming her as the first “autonomous female subject of observation, thinking, and speech in the text” of modern Chinese literature (Liu S.141) without paying attention to the deep ambiguity embodied in the narrator’s expression of her own desire; for her diary mobilizes different, and even contradictory, value systems and gender roles, as well as shifting temporal and speech locations.

In contrast to the various kinds of reductive interpretations of the story mentioned above, the category of gender has consistently proven to be richly useful in the reading and rereading of this complex text that it enables. Many recent scholars have combined the insights of gender studies with psychoanalytic, historic, or linguistic approaches in their discussions of this story. Particularly significant and fruitful among those inquiries are the works by Tani E. Barlow, Rey Chow, and Lydia Liu, who have tackled the question of female sexuality in “Miss Sophia’s Diary” from different perspectives. Barlow’s foundational work alerts readers to the role of Western influence in the production of gender discourses in modern Chinese literature. She remarks on “the pollution of their [women characters’] consciousness” that has led the “merely female women [. . .] to the womanish preference for dreams over reality” in Ding Ling’s early fiction (“Feminism and Literary Technique” 92), but later argues that Ding Ling appropriated this type of disenchanted and sexualized female character from Western bourgeois culture for the construction of a narrative of Westernized and eroti-
imized Chinese womanhood (Introduction 27). However, in Ding Ling’s later works such as her unfinished novel Muqin (Mother), Barlow states, Ding Ling “restored the question of female identity to a concretely Chinese framework” (“Gender and Identity” 15) by revealing the notion of “Chinese woman” before the May Fourth period to be a product of “a system of social relationships (the guiju and lishu) without reference to a female physiology or psychology” (“Gender and Identity” 12). Although reprimanded by Rey Chow for “prescribing [for] the West’s ‘other women’ their own national and ethnic identity” and thus causing the non-Western women’s “exclusion from having a claim to the reality of their own existence” (Woman and Chinese Modernity 163), Barlow has rightly brought to our attention the role of what she calls “Western sexual universalism” (Introduction 15)—which promotes a deep (hetero)sexuality as a mandatory element of the modern person—in the formulation of the female modern Chinese subject. For Chow, the contradictions in Sophia’s sexual desire are not unintended side effects of the author’s appropriation of Western discourses but rather revealing illustrations of the problematic inherent in the representation of female subjectivity in the process of Chinese modernization, for, she argues, in this story “the psychic, ideological contradictions [...] are embedded in a Westernized Chinese woman writer’s attempt at self-representation” (Woman and Chinese Modernity 163). Turning the Freudian model of divided male libidinal investment of sensuality and affection (see chapter five) on its head, Chow lists yet another redeeming feature of this story, stating that Sophia’s desire for women, based not on degradation but identification, suggests the possibility of women’s “conjunction in femininity” and signals an “alternative aesthetic that is based on a sympathetic feminine interlocutor/spectator/reader” (169). Although concurring with Chow’s observation of the “feminine talk” promoted in “Miss Sophia’s Diary,” Lydia Liu points out that this is ironically a utopian desire that fails to be realized in the narrative because of the death of Yun, the intended female reader of Sophia’s Diary, in a loveless conventional marriage (Translingual Practice 179).

Insightful and copious as the existing discussions of Sophia’s sexuality and subjectivity have been, I argue that we must also take into account the narrative progression in the representation of Sophia’s desire, embodied in Ding Ling’s construction and deployment of two interactive triangles of desire: the first one linking Sophia, her female friend Yun, and Sophia’s rarely mentioned family, and the second involving Sophia and her two male suitors, a Chinese man by the name of Weidi and Ling Jishi, a Singaporean Chinese. In describing and arranging these two triangles in her diary, Sophia attempts at replicating a (fantasized) prior model of self-validation in a heterosexual sexual economy. However, Sophia eventually fails to create a coherent subjectivity through the writing of her diary, for she is entrapped in the Western narrative of modern, heterosexual love in which the underlying native/traditional model of female subject formation is denied its efficacy and relevance. Ultimately, by representing Sophia’s self-conscious use of di-
ary writing for the realization of a (Western-style) subjectivity, as well as by showing the strengths and weaknesses of such an undertaking, Ding Ling not only endorsed the female subject’s pursuit for autonomy and power, but also exposed the limitations of the Western model of subject formation as expressed in the form of diary fiction, thus preparing herself for the further exploration of new paths for Chinese women to follow in their quest for independence. Therefore, my semi-structuralist scrutiny of the constitution of Sophia’s subjectivity in this story will not only excavate the different layers of “traditional,” “modern,” “masculine,” and “feminine,” prototypical narrative forms that both informed and were modified in this story, but also reflect on the historical and literary parameters of Ding Ling’s narrative efforts that shaped her representation of the female Chinese subject.

In Ding Ling’s two triangular arrangements, the heterosexual triangle between Sophia and her two male suitors is foregrounded through the synchronic narration of a psychological drama in her diary-writing, while the triangle between Sophia, Yun, and Sophia’s family is placed in the past, is intriguingly “bodiless,” and maintained through a practice of letter-writing frequently invoked in the present time of Sophia’s diary composition. These two triangles play crucial roles in Sophia’s articulation and enforcement of her subject position because their interaction figures the process of her search for self-knowledge, one of the most prevalent themes produced by the May Fourth discourses of individualism. We will see that by describing Sophia’s attempts at integrating the two triangles in order to better understand herself, Ding Ling in effect brought the Western imagining of the individualist self into conjunction with the image of the more “traditional” Chinese female, and thus bringing a more native model of female self-validation to bear on the new woman’s grappling with the exigencies of the modern heterosexual model.

Ding Ling has often been praised for depicting in Sophia a liberated modern Chinese woman who “is capable of desiring women as well as men, and speaks of her body and sexuality with an openness new to the works of Chinese women writers” (L. Liu, Translingual Practice 172). However, Sophia’s diary also presents a revealing genealogy of her desire by placing her love for a woman in a golden nostalgia-filled past, antedating her tumultuous heterosexual affair of the present. Moreover, just as her desire for Ling Jishi is physical, combative, and corrosive to her own sense of self-worth, her love of Yun is emotional, reciprocal, and conducive to self-validation. As such, although the temporal progression of the two triangle apparently enables a Freudian heterosexual narrative of female “maturation”: love for one’s family, love for same-sex friend, and heterosexual love, Sophia’s struggle and eventual failure to replicate the first triangle in the second, heterosexual triangle actually destabilize this conventional narrative.

The dynamic interactions both within and between the two triangles signify the complex relationships between Sophia’s past and present, between her desire for women and for men. In the first triangle comprised of
Sophia, Yun, and Sophia’s family, Yun is described not only as a “very emotional and passionate person” (62) but also someone who “understands” and nurtures Sophia’s emotional self. Sophia recalls that in the past she often “lost [herself] in unrestrained sobs” in front of Yun (72) and Yun, faced with Sophia’s emotional distress, would “hold [her] in her arms. ‘Oh, Sophia, my Sophia,’ she’d cry. ‘Why can’t my valor rescue Sophia from so much suffering?’” (74). Yun’s role carries evident maternal overtones and Sophia admits to having often exaggerated her own “most trivial dissatisfactions to work on [Yun’s] tearful anxiety and get [Yun] to fondle [sic] [her]” (73). Yet Sophia emphasizes that Yun is not so much a doting surrogate mother who caters to her every whim as a source of understanding and validation of her subjectivity. For Yun not only provides unconditional love but also responds to and even celebrates Sophia’s psychological uniqueness without passing on any moral judgment. Within their shared emotional life, Yun also unreservedly accepts Sophia’s constant summons and her intrusion upon her own subject position. For Sophia, it is Yun’s affirmation of her emotional and psychological reality alone that makes it possible for Yun to not only substitute for but also surpass the apparitional, third vertex of the triangle: her family.

Compared to the relatively full image of Yun, Sophia’s family exists in a hazy past from which it is even harder to retrieve them. Sophia rarely mentions her family members in her diary except to complain of their blind devotion to her without any understanding of her character, but she enjoys imagining her family’s grief for her impending death: “I spend days and nights dreaming up ways I could die without regret. I imagine myself resting on a bed in a gorgeous bedroom, my sisters nearby on a bearskin rug praying for me, and my father sighing as he gazes quietly out the window” (56). In this light, Yun is a superior replacement for Sophia’s family not just because Yun alone can both sympathize with and understand her unique emotional interior, but also because Yun provides a stabilizing continuity in Sophia’s life away from her native family without destroying her fond memories of them. That is to say, Yun simultaneously re-enacts and improves on the role of nurturer in Sophia’s experience, enabling the co-existence of Sophia’s emotional ties to her family and to her same-sex friend, and thus facilitating Sophia’s own efforts of coming to terms with her rootless existence outside of home. Furthermore, the triangle of Sophia, Yun, and Sophia’s family authorizes Sophia as its agent and guiding force: she leaves her loving yet inadequate family behind to seek self-knowledge, and pursues and possesses a superior object of love in Yun, who not only re-enacts the (imagined) nurturing role of the family but also affirms Sophia’s subjectivity by accepting and reciprocating her desire.

In Sophia’s diary-writing, the second, heterosexual triangle figures more prominently. This triangle represents her attempt to recreate the prior model of reciprocal love and identification between herself and the Other, though the grounds for the existence of the previous triangle have already
shifted. Sophia claims to have started the diary because Yun insisted that she share her life with her in this way. Writing for this female object of love, Sophia records her efforts to establish more socially acceptable but equally satisfying relationships after a series of psychological ordeals that have happened before the start of the diary: Yun was “tricked by God” into marrying an indifferent husband (who happens to be the elder brother of Sophia’s male suitor Weidi), and she herself has also experienced several painful “previous liaisons” (66) at school that subjected her to cruel rejection by a female schoolmate she had admired (52–53). Therefore, she claims in her diary, she is at the time seeking someone “who’ll hold [her] and let [her] sob, someone who’ll listen to [her] cry” (67–68), namely, a duplicate of Yun who understands and embraces her emotional turmoil as an essential part of herself. However, the heterosexual triangle she chronicles in her diary defeats her efforts at transferring her affections. This is not just because her two male suitors are incapable of the same emotional sensitivity and responsiveness as Yun; authorized by different discourses, this heterosexual triangle also functions with a very different dynamic: it features bitter competition between two desiring male suitors rather than the (imagined) symbiotic existence of Sophia’s two desired objects, as is the case with the first triangle.

Sophia initially aims to establish in this triangle the same dynamics that sustained the previous triangle in order to achieve a similar sense of autonomy. She wishes to reject Weidi, a faithful but obtuse suitor, who, like her family, supplies a sense of security with his blind devotion but also limits her development in his equally steadfast refusal to see the real her. On the other hand, she wishes to pursue and possess Ling Jishi, whose air of a “medieval knight” at first implies a correspondingly “noble soul”—the kind of spiritual superiority possessed by Yun—and hence the capability of confirming her subjectivity. But not only do the inadequacies of the two male suitors upset her typecasting, but even when she apparently acquires a certain degree of power over them, she finds herself reaffirming rather than overcoming the restrictions placed on her gender. In her diary writing, we can see that she has internalized a male-centered consciousness even as she struggles to confront both the traditional Chinese gender codes and the conventions of modern heterosexual love, both of which are organized around male-centered consciousness.

To be sure, Sophia manages to gain some informal, provisional power through the manipulation of the traditional construct of femininity. Although she is presented as a “Westernized” woman from the very beginning, both in her exotic name Sophia and in her occupation of a space outside of the traditional Chinese family structure, she is fully aware of the burden placed on her by the traditional social norms governing her gender. She acknowledges that she has to yield to public views and behave with the “propriety” required of a “respectable” woman. Therefore, when she first meets Ling Jishi, her instant attraction is checked by this knowledge: “[In]
this society I’m forbidden to take what I need to gratify my desires and frustrations, even when it clearly wouldn’t hurt anybody” (55). She also often reins in her uninhibited words and behavior in front of Ling, considering them unsuitable for a decent woman and worried that they would cost her his respect. Moreover, she deliberately plays the weak female to capture Ling Jishi’s interest when she discovers that Ling is “only able to respond to [her] helplessness, [her] vulnerabilities” (71). The diary also shows that Sophia often plays on other people’s misplaced gender expectations of her to secure their attention and affection. For example, when pursued by Weidi, she encourages him to linger in order to alleviate her boredom even while internally mocking his obtuseness. Sophia is equally disingenuous in her dealings with her friends Yufang and Yunlin. In order to get closer to Ling Jishi, she pretends that she hopes to live near her female friend Yufang, whose boyfriend Yunlin is a neighbor of Ling Jishi. Later, during a sudden relapse of her tuberculosis, she deliberately asks her friends to fetch her the box where she keeps all their letters, and declares her wish to take them with her to the hospital, thus earning their gratified tears.

However, the male gaze, once internalized by Sophia, exerts insidious influence on her conception and performance of gender. This can be seen in her different requirements of her relationships with women and with men. While Sophia savors the emotional exchange between women, sometimes even displaying a masochistic delectation of the cold snubs given her by other women (52–53), she is even more in favor of physical expressions of desire between the sexes. Not only does she wish to “mark every part of his [Ling Jishi’s] body with [her] lips” (147), but she is also willing to submit to male domination solely on the strength of Ling’s “male beauty” despite the lack of an emotional tie between them: “If he wanted nothing more than sexual satisfaction, he might conceivably have seduced me with his sensuous beauty” (79). Furthermore, Sophia does not consider it necessary to withhold her emotions in her relationships with Yun, while with her male suitors, she claims that her “self-respect […] surfaces and controls [her] emotions, allowing [her] to choke back the words [‘My lord and master! Grant me one kiss’]” (75). The withholding of her emotions in heterosexual relationships not only constitutes part of her strategy of self-empowerment but also reveals the deep ambiguity that underlies her conceptualization of masculinity and femininity.

Of course, Sophia’s division of emotional and physical satisfaction as mutually exclusive experiences in her relationships reflects her recognition of the objectification of women as sexual objects by men within the heterosexual couple in a male-dominated society. For when Sophia tries to break down the psychological and emotional barrier between her and her male suitors and replicate the transparent and free exchange between herself and Yun, she always meets with bitter disappointment. Weidi misreads her diary merely as a refusal of his love and a declaration of her love for another man, a conventional interpretation according to the rules of the heterosexual
triangle. Ling Jishi, on the other hand, proves to possess a “cheap, ordinary soul” (68), and is only passionate about “the Debate Club, playing tennis matches, studying at Harvard, joining the foreign service, becoming an important statesman, or inheriting his father’s business and becoming a rubber merchant. He wants to be a capitalist [. . .] that is the extent of his ambition!” (68). In other words, neither of them is capable of the deep emotional and psychological engagement with which Yun had previously provided her. As a result, Sophia feels her subjectivity compromised and debased by their desire for her.

However, Sophia also subconsciously insists on the control of emotions as an essential component of masculinity and, furthermore, as the only path to power. As I have mentioned earlier, Sophia enthuses over a shared emotional bond between herself and Yun as the definitive factor of their relationship. Curiously, she finds Weidi’s tears and misery merely nuisances and frequently taunts him to his face for “acting like a child” (67). Although she often relents and comforts him “in a sisterly way” later (54), she nevertheless considers his crying jags futile efforts to appeal to her “feminine and weak” side (54). In contrast, she initially becomes infatuated with Ling Jishi not only because of his physical beauty but also because he can apparently absent himself and control his own desires and emotions, and thus making him a more attractive and masculine “European medieval knight.” What is most striking in her relationships with Weidi and Ling Jishi is not the contrast between familial and sexual dynamics that she plays out through them, nor is it just a matter of her fantasy of “a Chinese man with a Caucasian man’s sex appeal” (L. Liu, Translingual Practice 174), but rather her internalized self-image as a “feminine” woman whose sexuality can only be defined by the pursuit of a masculine man. Weidi annoys her not only because he is emotional, but also because by acting emotional and therefore “effeminate,” he undermines her position as the sexually desirable female and forces her into the role of a (desexualized) mother.

Not only does control of emotions signify masculinity, for Sophia the masculine separation of affection and sexual desire also generates (masculine) power. Sophia withholds her emotions not just because of her fear of the disciplinary force of gender stereotypes but also because the control of her emotions facilitates her quest for power. As I have mentioned above, Sophia often masks her emotions not only in deference to social conventions but also for the acquisition of informal power. Furthermore, her textual possession of Ling Jishi also repeats the masculine practice, suggested by Freud (see chapter five), of excluding respect and affection from erotic fantasy. Her description of Ling Jishi is curiously both emasculating and objectifying. Not only does Sophia describe his general appearance as “pale, delicate, fine,” but she also forms a fixation on his “soft, red, moist” lips. Throughout the diary Sophia transports the masculine language of desire into her daydreams of Ling Jishi, turning him into a sexual object. Revealingly, she finds herself attracted to Ling’s “tall lean body, his delicate flower-soft skin, his
soft lips and provocative eyes” (68) even as she discerns and despises his lack of sincere feelings and understanding of love. Revealingly, Sophia’s account of her pursuit of Ling Jishi by disguising herself as a demure female is paradoxically heavily invested in the masculine metaphors of battle and conquest:

It’s like planning a battle. Now I’m concentrating all my energy on strategy. I want something, but I’m not willing to go and take it. I must find a tactic that gets it offered to me voluntarily. I understand myself completely. I am a thoroughly female woman, and women concentrate everything on the man they’ve got in their sights. I want to possess him. I want unconditional surrender of his heart. I want him kneeling down in front of me, begging me to kiss him. I’m delirious. I go over and over the steps I must take to implement my scheme. (58–59)

Sophia meanders through different gender positions in this paragraph; although presenting a façade of helpless femininity to the external world, she describes this as a strategic move that promises masculine power. As such, she holds, both in life and in writing, the power to release or withhold her emotions as a weapon to gain and defend a powerful and independent subject position.

Yet, even as Sophia’s appropriation of the masculine model of emotional regulation demonstrates her resourcefulness in manipulating male-centered gender codes for self-empowerment, the freedom supposedly provided by such self-determination is simultaneously curtailed. For her self-restraint can also be seen as a result of her negation of spontaneous emotions, which have been defined as the core of her individuality in her relationship with Yun. In this light, her eventual disenchantment with Ling Jishi confirms the failure of her efforts to re-enact, through the medium of this heterosexual relationship, the dynamic of mutual response and validation shared by her and Yun. Not only this, it also renders problematic her previous advocacy of free emotional expression as the ultimate barometer of individuality and subjectivity.

Therefore, the narrative progression enacted by the two triangles, especially Sophia’s failure to successfully replicate the dynamic interaction of the earlier triangle in the later, exposes the constraint of a woman’s independence in a male-dominated society by showing the unlikelihood of her ever completely realizing her individuality within a conventional heterosexual relationship. Moreover, Ding Ling’s unique triangular arrangement also shows the contradictions and impossibilities of the Freudian model of feminine “adjustment” of progressing from homosexual to heterosexual love. But more importantly, the interaction between the two triangles reveal the risk a Chinese woman runs in seeking independence through writing in an appropriated Western form. As I will show below, Sophia’s failure to formulate a coherent subjectivity can also be attributed to her failed attempt
at grafting a more native model of female interaction and mutual validation onto the Western form of diary fiction. Prototypes for Ding Ling’s depiction of the relationship between Sophia and Yun can be found in a relatively less stern native literary tradition. Although we do not have to follow Barlow’s interpretation of Yun’s name as the “homophonic reference” (Woman 49) to the wife who dies of love for a courtesan in Six Chapters of the Floating Life (Fusheng liuji), a late-eighteenth-century Chinese memoir, it is obvious, as Matthew Sommer argues, that female homosexuality enjoyed more latitude than male homosexuality in imperial China. Premodern Chinese narratives, both in the classical and vernacular language, also describe love between different wives of the same man without causing any major moralistic or institutional censorship. Moreover, the privileged emotional bond between Sophia and Yun also draws inspiration from the Ming drama Peony Pavilion (71–72), even as Sophia consciously rejects the classical scholar-beauty romance it portrays (L. Liu, Translingual Practice 179). As such, Ding Ling’s depiction of heterosexual triangle that supersedes and in effect destroys the first triangle also enacts, in Sophia’s failed quest for a coherent and viable subjective position, the expulsion and replacement of a native form of female emotional intimacy by the Western discourse of romantic modern love. The impediment that the form of diary fiction presents to the achievement of female autonomy becomes even more distinctive if we more closely examine the effects of Ding Ling’s deployment of the conventions of diary fiction—a genre that represents what Sidonie Smith calls the “androcentric enterprise” (15) of the Western autobiographical writings—for the constitution of a female subject.

Significantly, Ding Ling had Sophia reject the native form and adopt the Western form of diary fiction in the representation of her emotions. Sophia scoffs at the “talented women” who can write insipid and artificial poems about “‘how depressed I am,’ ‘Oh, the tragic sufferings of my heart’” (73), and insists on searching out a more powerful vehicle for her untrammeled passions. But, of course, the representation of her emotions through diary writing does not lack artifice, either. From the beginning, the reader feels overwhelmed by Sophia’s obsession with the small details in her daily life as a new woman trapped alone in a Beijing hostel:

Nothing to do after the paper except sit alone by the stove and work myself into a rage. What infuriates me is the daily routine. I get a nervous headache every day as I sit listening to the other inmates yell at the attendants. Such loud, braying, coarse, monotonous voices, “Attendant, bring hot water!” or “Wash basin, attendant!” You can imagine how ugly it sounds. And there is always somebody downstairs shouting into the telephone. Yet when the noise does let up, the silence scares me to death. Particularly inside the four whitewashed walls that stare blankly back at me no matter where I sit. If I try to escape by lying on the bed, I’m crushed by the ceiling, just as oppressively white. I can’t really find a single thing
here that doesn’t disgust me: the pockmarked attendant, for example, the food that always tastes like a filthy rag, the impossibly grimy window frame, and that mirror over the washbasin. Balancing from one side you’ve got a face a foot long; tilt your head slightly to the side and suddenly it gets so flat you startle yourself. . . . (51)

As the opening of the first entry, this passage sets the tone for Sophia’s entire diary. The extremely subjective quality of Sophia’s narrative is illustrated in her subjective and emotional interpretation of the outer world: Her external world only exists in terms of its role in causing her misery. Her sight, hearing, taste, and thought are all mobilized to collaborate in an immense discontent. For her, other than the tedious ritual of warming up milk five or six times a day in order to kill time, the only distraction is to find new sources of complaint. She admits to longing for new misery to break the tiresome uneventful run of her life: “Still I’d really like a few fresh complaints and dissatisfactions. Novelty, for better or worse, always seems just out of reach” (51). The power of “Miss Sophia’s Diary” lies precisely in such vivid representation of Sophia’s subjective emotions. As a piece of diary fiction, “Miss Sophia’s Diary” simulates emotional spontaneity by masking the separateness of the protagonist and the narrator: an acting Sophia laughs and cries, while a writing Sophia recalls and improvises. Ding Ling especially capitalized on another generic requirement of diary fiction, the privileging of internal reflection, to elaborate upon the emotive effects of the story. Sophia’s emotions are allowed to play out, to rationalize, and even to anticipate her later wayward behavior.

As with the distinction between the experiencing and narrating Sophia, Ding Ling also glossed over the difference between story time (i.e., the time when events happen in the story) and discourse time (i.e., the time when the story is told) in order to reinforce Sophia’s subjectivity. A diarist always presents facts after the fact. The gap between story time and discourse time means that the presentation of past events is always informed by hindsight and determined by the situation in which the discourse is made. The diarist’s storytelling, then, is by necessity motivated by the here and now, instead of being a “factual” representation of her past. For the reader, this also suggests the possibility of the narrator’s conscious or subconscious resignification of past events, for what the reader sees is the already mediated and re-ordered life that the diarist chooses to put forth. In “Miss Sophia’s Diary,” Sophia also tells her story from the vantage point of the present, producing interpretations of past events to meet the present demands of reinforcing her own subject position. But rather than revealing the discrepancy between the discourse time and the story time in Sophia’s narration, Ding Ling again utilized the genre conventions of diary fiction by making the diarist’s psychological time into the only dominant discourse time of her impassioned narrative. In this way, she not only averted the possibility of the same incident being told from different points of view, and therefore possibly subverting Sophia’s version, but also made it possible for
Sophia to create an alternative image of herself within an alternative reality based on the imagined uniqueness and strength of her emotions. Indeed, the privileging of the diarist’s psychological time afforded Ding Ling the kind of insulation needed to optimize the affect of the story for the purpose of female subject formation.

Ding Ling thus created in Sophia a heroine adroit at manipulating both the Western discourse of individualism and the form of diary fiction to accentuate her remarkable inner strength and to avoid showing any external signs of weakness. However, the limitation of this useful function of diary fiction is clearly illustrated in the last entry of the diary. In her final encounter with Ling Jishi, Sophia admits: “The lust in his eyes scared me” (79). The story as related in the last entry shows that her purported emotional strength fails to grant her any power of action, as she discovers to her shame and horror that her body betrays her, and she lets Ling kiss her and stands “poised to toss away all [her] self-esteem and pride” (80). After the encounter, however, she uses a series of “I should have said” declarations to express regret for her temporary lapse of control. Moreover, she again marshals different narrative devices to transform her (lack of) action into meaningful emotional experience.

Sophia meticulously inventories the range of emotions she has experienced in order to construct a coherent or even masculinized self after the fact. First of all, she expresses, instead of gratification, intense loathing for both Ling Jishi and herself. Ling Jishi’s mouth, once the object of intense longing for Sophia, loses its attraction after the kiss, when Sophia ridicules Ling Jishi’s vanity about “the warmth and tenderness of his lips, their smooth delicacy” (80). Sophia thus takes up a traditionally masculine role in her appropriation of the objectifying undertone and fetishistic, fragmentary body imagery for her description of Ling Jishi. Moreover, she also highlights her will to dominate. According to her account of the event, not only did she open her eyes wide and silently chant “I’ve won” during the kiss, but she also believes that her behavior under the circumstances proves her difference from “some women” who would swoon in their lovers’ arms (80).

More importantly, this kind of reflection on her emotions enables her to evaluate not only her diary but also her life:

Rather than calling this diary a record of my life, it’s more accurate to regard it as the sum of all my tears. At least that’s the way it feels. But now it’s time to end the diary because Sophia doesn’t need it as a vent or consolation, since now she understands that nothing has any meaning whatever and that tears are only the most elegant proof of that lack. Yet on this last page of diary, I ought fervently to toast the fact that suddenly from the depth of disappointment I did achieve the satisfaction that should rightly have killed me with ecstasy. I...I...all I felt out of that satisfaction was victory. From victory came a terrible sense of sorrow and an even profounder understanding of how pathetic and ludicrous I am. And so the “beauty”
Chapter Seven

that has been the focus of my tangled dreams for months was dissolved away, revealed as nothing more than the image of a tall man’s exquisite bearing. (78–79)

This passage is a postscript to real life events even though it occupies the position of prologue in the entry itself. In other words, it chronologically comes after Sophia’s encounter with Ling Jishi, though placed at the beginning of the entry and before the description of that fateful night. That the narrator should conspicuously reverse the order of external events and internal contemplation already indicates a conscious effort of re-ordering life through writing. Furthermore, she reconstructs herself by paradoxically and deliberately dispersing herself among different speech locations. At one point the diarist refers to herself by the personal name “Sophia,” which may suggest to some the possibility that this gesture signals a schizophrenic breakdown. However, since the whole passage is set apart from the remainder of the final entry as a kind of retrospective preface, we can deduce that here she is consciously stepping back from her old self to assess what has happened before. Specifically, a contrast is deliberately set up between two consecutive sentences. In the first sentence, the diarist bitterly mocks Sophia, the infatuated woman finally kissed by the man of her fantasies, jeeringly saying, “[She] ought fervently to toast the fact that suddenly from the depth of disappointment [she] did achieve the satisfaction that should rightly have killed [her] with ecstasy” (“Shafei nüshi de riji” 61, “Miss Sophia’s Diary” 78; the English translation of the pronouns here changes the original Chinese version). In the next sentence, however, she reverts to the pronoun “I” and almost clinically records her cooling down from the fervent emotions of infatuation: “[All] I felt out of that satisfaction was victory. From victory came a terrible sense of sorrow and an even profounder understanding of how pathetic and ludicrous I am” (“Miss Sophia’s Diary” 79). The change of pronouns from third-person to first-person reveals the process of analysis and re-integration of the self. Finally, the diarist claims that she has woken up from her past “dream” and now realizes her own absurdity. By switching abruptly from internal, psychic time to external, historical time at this point of her narrative, the diarist transforms the moment of deep disillusionment into that of profound self-enlightenment.

In the end Sophia defines her diary as a folly of the past—“the most elegant expression of [. . .] meaninglessness” (78) that she has outgrown. She apparently decides to transcend even writing itself by letting her actions speak for themselves: “I’ve decided to take a train south, somewhere where no one knows me, where I can squander the remaining days of my life” (81). However, the birth of the new self still very much depends on the validation of true emotions. Revealingly, her last words are: “I feel so sorry for myself. How pathetic you are, Sophia!” (81). Furthermore, Sophia’s search for a new beginning is already doomed since, as I have mentioned before, the emotionally motivated triangle comprised of Sophia, Yun, and Sophia’s
family had already broken down even before she started the diary in an effort to recapture the experience of women’s mutual validation. Moreover, since Sophia previously intended to use her diary “to mourn Yun” and to provide a “testimonial to all the things she told me while she was alive” (73), the voluntary termination of diary writing, more than Yun’s death, forcefully confirms the destruction of the earlier model. In the end, Sophia rejects her diary, “the sum of all [her] tears” (78), just like Lin Daiyu, the heroine from the vernacular novel Dream of the Red Chamber, who on her deathbed burns all her poems written on her handkerchiefs that are said to bear her bitter tears. This final gesture of renunciation not only reaffirms the irrevocable loss of the emotional support for her subjectivity from her female Other, but also questions the efficacy of Western discourses and narrative forms in Chinese women’s quest for autonomy and liberation.

Ding Ling’s representation and deployment of emotions in “Miss Sophia’s Diary” ultimately subvert rather than support the Western discourse of individualism. This is not merely because Ding Ling’s depiction of Sophia’s complete isolation from other people and her impotent rage, though presumably providing fertile ground for the generation of her diary, demonstrates the new woman’s entrapment in the “modern” genre. More importantly, “Miss Sophia’s Diary” reveals, through the portrayal of the destruction of a more native model of female emotional bond by modern heterosexual economy, that the Western discourse of individualism privileges only one form of subjectivity: a kind of bourgeois masculine subjectivity that presents the self as “under siege from hostile Others, threatened and in danger of abjection” (Gagnier 221), a subjectivity that is affirmed, among other things, by a feminized Other positioned antagonistic to the Self. In this respect, “Miss Sophia’s Diary” also reveals the dangers of appropriation, for women writers could too easily allow the male-centric basis of the genre to impede women’s struggle for a more appropriate and enduring model of female subjectivity. Ding Ling seemed to realize the potential weakness in Sophia’s subjectivity constructed through writing. But instead of attributing Sophia’s failings to the gendered nature of the discourses that organized literary genres, she blamed it on female emotionalism. Influenced by public discourse, particularly contemporary male literary criticism of women’s emotions, Ding Ling earnestly set out to correct the lapses of her heroine.

**The Woman Writer in “Yecao”**

Ding Ling gradually moved away from the extremely subjective narrative style of “Miss Sophia’s Diary,” and juxtaposed an internal and an external vision in “Suicide Diary” (1928), “Day” (1929), and “Yecao” (1929). “Suicide Diary” adopts an external perspective that provides a frame of reference and contrasts with the diarist’s internal monologue, though the two perspectives carry equal weight in the narrative. “Day” features an omniscient narrator that depicts the heroine’s psychological development in a series of vi-
“Yecao” proves by far the most complex story of the three. Through the centralization of a woman writer’s act of writing, it illustrates the way she strives to preserve her autonomy through the control of her emotions, thus foreshadowing Ding Ling’s production of works of Revolutionary Literature and her further radicalization in the 1930s.

To be sure, “Yecao” suggests writing, rather than radical politics, as a way for the urban, female intellectual to establish an independent identity for herself. Yet, at the same time, it also implies the similarity between the functions of writing and revolution in regulating individual emotions for the empowerment of women. This can be seen in the way Ding Ling employed the trope of writing in her exploration of female subject formation. “Yecao” is Ding Ling’s earliest story in which the new heroine’s occupation is described in detail and made central to the plot. As the story begins, the title character Yecao, a twenty-four-year-old woman writer living alone in Shanghai, is having some trouble with her writing. Apparently, the heroine in her novel behaves in an inconsistent manner, and Yecao blames this lapse of good writing on the intrusion of her own memories of the past. While fretting over her lack of self-control and weakness of character, she receives a letter from a male admirer by the name of Nan Xia, in which he asks her to rendezvous with him at a park. Yecao goes to the appointed site and strikes up a stilted conversation with him, during which her thoughts constantly drift back to her writing. In spite of her preoccupation, he insists on expressing his passionate love for her, a performance that she finds pitiful and unmoving. They then go for a walk, during which Yecao briefly recalls her love affair with another man three years early, the drama of which had partly unfolded at the same park. She falters in her decision to remain aloof, momentarily wishing that Nan Xia would be physically more demonstrative. But as they emerge from the dark trail into bright lamplight, Yecao collects herself and looks at Nan Xia with cold distaste. In the end, she refuses another date, and goes home with the happy thought that she has worked out some phrases for her novel during the meeting with Nan Xia.

The most striking change in the characterization of this heroine, another new woman like Sophia, is the emphasis she places on her work, rather than on romantic or sexual relationships, in her self-definition. Yecao is no literary dilettante or amateurish “talented woman.” She takes her work seriously—so much so that she feels more passion for her novel than for her amorous admirer. Equipped with a sense of purpose and mission, Yecao chooses when and where to go, and whom to meet, and she rarely allows her social life to interfere with her work. However, even as her career provides her with increased autonomy, she finds her emotions an obstacle to her work and a threat to her sense of independence:

Today she was terribly upset because she had endowed an extremely level-headed and rational woman in her novel with unduly passionate emotions. Also, she had let a slight touch of melancholy [for
the past] slip in. This definitely was not the character she had intended to create, but it was the flaw in women that she was able to understand best. She didn’t know what would be better, to tear up the manuscript and start over, or to go on writing, but not sympathize with the woman. She couldn’t stop thinking about this perplexing problem, but gradually, she turned her thoughts to the social environment that caused women to overemphasize emotions, then to how pitiable women are. In a moment of self-examination, she began to detest herself. Could she stifle her own emotions? Even though it seemed that she needed nothing other than her writing, still there were times when, freed from external aggravation and lost in prior joys and happiness, she would think of the past—this was something so painful and so tinged with remorse that she could never bring herself to speak or think of it. She thought of the past with resentment and longing, and then, finally, with indifference. (106)

This passage epitomizes the complex relationship of the woman writer to the act of writing because it not only describes Yecao’s inability to separate her life from her literary production but also demonstrates how she overcomes the challenges in her life through writing. Ding Ling adopted an omniscient narrator stance to relate the self-reflection of the professional writer in the story, simultaneously exposing her inadequacy and establishing the narrator/author’s superiority with the deft maneuvering between the heroine’s internal and external worlds. Yecao feels that she fails to create a credible character because she loses control of her own emotions. However, the narrator adds, her emotions are not entirely self-centered; they also arise from her understanding of women’s plight in real life: “This definitely was not the character she had intended to create, but it was the flaw in women that she was able to understand best” (106). Ding Ling thus not only used the narrator to corroborate Yecao’s observation of social problems, but also implicitly designated Yecao as representative of all women, whose emotionalism, like theirs, is conditioned by “the social environment that caused women to overemphasize emotions” (106). In so doing, Ding Ling not only re-introduced and privileged the theme of women’s shared life situations and emotional experiences, as embodied by the relationship between Sophia and Yun, but also situated her representation of such experiences in a larger social context. This was to become a common practice in Ding Ling’s later fiction written in Yan’an. Nevertheless, even with the knowledge of the sociopolitical forces shaping women’s lives, at this point Ding Ling still accentuated the protagonist’s self-signification through writing rather than through any service to the Party and the people. As we can see from the above passage, although initially upset with the intrusion of personal emotions upon her creation of a character, Yecao soon finds writing a useful exercise to divert and to wash away her fixation on the past. She turns “her thoughts to the social environment,” and, finally, is able to think of the past “with indifference” (106).
Ding Ling delineated the process of Yecao’s exorcism of her troublesome and enervating emotions through an ingenious use of the omniscient narrator. Presenting a character’s psychological development from an external perspective was not a new feature in Ding Ling’s fiction at this point in her writing career. However, it was the first time Ding Ling employed an omniscient narrator to represent the interior reflections of a woman writer on herself. While “Miss Sophia’s Diary” lingers on each minute psychological change the character underwent, it is told from an internal perspective in an apparently random manner. By contrast, Yecao’s internal world is not only meticulously described from an external point of view, but also supplied with temporality and causality; her past is contrasted with her present, and the past is used as the reason to explain her present mental and emotional state. The description of the heroine’s psyche is thus transformed into the recounting of a psycho-narrative. Furthermore, this psycho-narrative in “Yecao” at the same time reveals the writing process of the heroine in order to examine the benefits and limits of writing for the purpose of self-creation and self-definition. Yecao proves to be stronger than Sophia, for she possesses not only self-respect but also the faculty of rationality: She is said to be “blessed with the ability to analyze herself” (106). And analyze herself she does, not only to improve her writing, as demonstrated in her self-criticism for allowing her melancholy to spill into her work, but also to organize her life. It is writing that enables her to detach herself from the past, to overcome uncertain emotions, and to view the past “with indifference” (106). As such, Yecao’s practice of rational self-reflection as well as her profession as a writer puts her in the unique position of proxy narrator in this story. That is, by reflecting on her own thoughts and emotions, she not only demonstrates the process of writing but also partly performs the function of the omniscient narrator.

However, even as Yecao’s rational temperament and profession of writing grant her some power over life, the story also reveals the uncertainty of such power through the description of her vulnerability when separated from her writing. As is shown in this story, she in fact substitutes writing for many other life experiences. The reader is led to wonder whether such tenuous control of emotions achieved by avoiding human company offers the most effective means of self-empowerment. “Yecao” does not give a clear answer to this question. The beginning of the story sets up a significant contrast between the small, confining room Yecao stays in and the sight of the open ground right in front of her window. While outside spring unfolds in its irrepressible glory, Yecao has “shut herself up in a small room alone, worrying over the characters in her novel. She had forgotten spring” (105). Instead, she conjures up what she cannot have in life through writing her novel, where “there was a spring day, filled with ecstatic and impassioned love, raging like fire” (105). The image of Yecao shut in her room and absorbed in her writing may invoke the figure of the male romantic genius who shuns society in order to preserve the purity of his spirit. Yet, unlike
the idealized romantic genius, Yecao cannot trust her spontaneous emotions alone but has to summon up rational self-discipline in order to produce works of art that ironically describe passionate love and uncontrolled emotions. Her name, meaning “wild grass” in Chinese, implies that she controls the wild exuberance of herself by focusing on the safer blank page under her pen, distancing herself from the joyful spring outside of her window.

Although inside her study Yecao manages to control her unruly feelings through writing, her encounter with Nan Xia at the park reveals the precariousness of her self-mastery. At first, she keeps control of the situation, as if to both avenge her humiliation in her disastrous love affair in the past and to demonstrate that writing has instilled in her masculine resolution. When Nan Xia bursts into an impassioned declaration of his hopeless love for her, also confusedly accusing her “you love only yourself and your work” (109), Yecao remains coolly detached. She pitys Nan Xia, but she still finds him not a little ridiculous. She believes that he should take charge of his own emotions and not allow them to show in front of others. In a scene that uncannily recalls Sophia’s scorn of a weeping Weidi, she silently scolds him: “Ai, you are no child!” (109). But in this story, the female protagonist does not turn to an image of masculinity, such as Ling Jishi, for self-definition, but rather depends on writing as a source of power. During their meeting she also experiences moments of emotional weakness. When they walk onto a faintly lit trail, for one moment she “wished he would let himself go so that she would once again experience that intoxicating feeling [of love]” (110). She even feels regret when Nan Xia does not act in the bold way her former lover did. Interestingly, such a lapse is to be countered first by her intense emotions of loathing and hostility towards Nan Xia, and then by thoughts of her writing: “she was preoccupied with various ways of describing a night scene” (110).

It can be seen that Yecao’s writing indeed provides a means to suppress emotional upheavals and to grant her a certain freedom to establish her career. But in her case, writing is both pivoted on and results in the repression of a part of her even as it creates a sense of control and power. The ending of the story is revealing in its ambiguity. The omniscient narrator withdraws from the territory of Yecao’s psychology, content with a cryptic external description: “On the way home she sang, apparently very happily, her newly composed, well-turned phrases” (111). The word “apparently” calls into question Yecao’s actual emotional state. She is returning to her cheerless and stuffy small room, and will conceivably meet with another emotional assault from Nan Xia in the future. She might have found an ideal resolution for the heroine in her work, but will she always be able to sublimate and rechannel her own emotions? If emotional writings of the kind done by Sophia only create confusion and despair, does a more controlled way of writing provide resolution to women’s unique predicament of “emotionalism”? If Sophia can be dismissed as “merely a woman” (Barlow, “Feminism and Literary Technique” 99), does Yecao sufficiently prove
herself “more than a woman” through her writing? Literary explorations and life circumstances prompted Ding Ling to answer the question of women’s identities in new ways yet, which I will examine in the next chapter.