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"Whichever I Want": The Relational Limits of May Fourth Individualism in *Miss Sophie's Diary* and Beyond

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Abstract

This article reconsiders the conventional account of Ding Ling's transition from May Fourth individualism to revolutionary collectivism through *Miss Sophie's Diary* (1928) and *Water* (1931), tracing a sustained inquiry into the historical conditions of agency across her changing political commitments and narrative forms. In *Miss Sophie's Diary*, Sophie's encounters with Weidi and Ling Jishi expose the sentimental obligations and bourgeois hierarchies that circumscribe romantic freedom, while her relationship with Yun reveals the prior relations of care and recognition upon which her apparent autonomy depends. The belated disclosure of the diary's origins in Yun's request further complicates the authority of its first-person voice, locating the conditions of self-expression within a history of intimate dependence. *Water* situates this problem within the agrarian organization of property and subsistence, examining how shared deprivation creates the possibility of collective resistance even as the formation of revolutionary consciousness remains incompletely represented. The movement from the retrospective discovery of individual dependence to the emergence of a collective political subject thus reveals a continuity in Ding Ling's conception of agency, whose exercise remains conditioned by historically constituted relations and whose emancipatory possibilities depend upon their transformation.

Keywords: Ding Ling, May Fourth individualism, relational subjectivity, collective agency, narrative form

1. Introduction: From Individual Freedom to Collective Agency

The emergence of the individual as a source of ethical authority transformed the woman question in New Culture and May Fourth China, as the repudiation of arranged marriage challenged the patriarchal household's power to determine a woman's future and established voluntary attachment as a condition of legitimate intimacy (Lee 95–97; Barlow 127–89). To possess the right to choose was to be recognized as a person whose life belonged, in some fundamental sense, to herself, although such recognition left intact the economic dependencies and social obligations that continued to circumscribe the exercise of her freedom. Once intimate relations required the consent of autonomous persons, moreover, the freedom of

one could no longer guarantee the response of another. May Fourth individualism thus raised a question that its emancipatory vocabulary could formulate more readily than resolve: what made individual freedom practicable in a world that no individual could determine alone?

For the New Woman, this difficulty exposed the distance between the legitimacy of independence and the historical conditions of its exercise. Lu Xun's 1923 lecture "What Happens after Nora Walks Out?" located the limits of Nora's emancipation in the economic circumstances awaiting her departure from patriarchal authority, since the freedom to leave furnished no assurance of the means necessary to remain independent (258–61). Haiyan Lee's account of the modern sentimental revolution illuminates a related transformation in intimate life, through which personal feeling acquired unprecedented ethical significance (95–97). The elevation of voluntary attachment introduced a further contingency into intimate life: a woman might choose whom she loved without securing that person's affection, just as her rejection of familial prescription could leave the material circumstances of her independence unchanged. The sovereignty affirmed in principle thus depended for its realization upon relations beyond the individual's command.

Ding Ling's *Miss Sophie's Diary* (1928) subjects this contradiction to an unusually searching examination. Sophie's determination to pursue "whichever I want" asserts the individual will as the apparent source of her future (Ding Ling, "Miss Sophie's Diary" 13), yet her attachments reveal the uncertain passage from desire to fulfillment. Weidi's devotion allows her to refuse another person's claim upon her, while her fascination with Ling Jishi confronts her with someone whose recognition she cannot command and whose desirability reflects historically constituted standards of personal worth. Her predicament exposes the limits of an emancipation that establishes the legitimacy of individual choice without transforming the social values through which desire acquires its objects. Stephen Ching-kiu Chan's account of the New Woman's ideological representation and Jin Feng's study of female self-definition illuminate the historical tensions informing this predicament (Chan 13–32; Feng 149–70), while Keru Cai's examination of looking and reading demonstrates how Sophie becomes subject to the interpretations of others (298–325). Ding Ling gives these tensions their most consequential expression through the diary's form, which gradually unsettles the apparent independence of the voice through which Sophie claims authority over herself.

The diary initially grants Sophie an interpretive privilege unavailable to its other characters, whose words and gestures reach the reader through a first-person account that appears to preserve her consciousness beyond their understanding. Weidi's unauthorized reading threatens this privilege when his declaration, "You love him," converts Sophie's contradictory feelings into a definitive judgment, provoking her insistence that the diary communicates only "a ten-thousandth part" of herself (Ding Ling, "Miss Sophie's Diary" 54). Weidi's reading exposes the vulnerability of first-person authority to interpretations its author cannot govern; the diary's subsequent disclosure of its origins extends that vulnerability to the history of the writing subject herself. Sophie recalls that Yun had repeatedly urged her to keep a diary to learn the particulars of her daily life, and that Yun's death has transformed its continuation into an act of remembrance (52–53). The writing that appeared to originate in Sophie's private decision thus acquires an antecedent history in another person's desire to receive her words. Yun's care during Sophie's illness establishes a dependence preceding the diary's opening, while the belated revelation of her request retrospectively alters the significance of earlier entries: the voice that seems to originate its own account has inherited the conditions of its expression (Liu 179).

Ding Ling's political transformation in the early 1930s has generally been understood as a movement from May Fourth individualism toward revolutionary collectivism, as her growing engagement with Marxism and Shanghai's left-wing literary movement brought individual experience into increasingly explicit relation with class. Yi-tsi Mei Feuerwerker traces this development through Ding Ling's changing treatment of social milieu and individual consciousness (52–69), while Jin Feng situates her later writing within a revolutionary understanding of female self-empowerment (171–88). Yet the familiar account of an individualist beginning superseded by a collectivist maturity obscures a difficulty already disclosed by *Miss Sophie's Diary*: the subject who claims independence exercises that claim through relations she has inherited. Ding Ling's

subsequent fiction relocates this difficulty within a social world where material circumstances give relations among persons a common historical significance.

Ding Ling's *Water* (1931) begins with peasants whom catastrophe has brought into a common predicament before they possess the means to confront it collectively. The destruction of their subsistence makes survival dependent upon the distribution of resources, while unequal access to food gives the flood a political significance extending beyond the disaster itself. Feuerwerker identifies the emergence of the peasant crowd as central to the story's revolutionary orientation (67–69), although the passage from shared suffering to collective resistance presents a problem of historical explanation as well as narrative form.

The distinction between the two works emerges most clearly in their treatment of narrative time. *Miss Sophie's Diary* presents a subject authorized to speak before retrospectively disclosing the intimate relations that have shaped her voice, whereas *Water* begins with relations imposed by material necessity and moves toward the formation of a collective capable of acting upon them. The diary reconstitutes the history of an existing "I"; *Water* follows the emergence of a political "we." Yun's care belongs to the singular history of an attachment, whereas the peasants' common deprivation makes class available as an explanation of relations extending beyond personal acquaintance, shifting the narrative problem from the dependence underlying individual self-expression to the political possibilities of a shared social position.

2. The Sovereignty of Choice: Weidi, Ling Jishi, and the Limits of Romantic Freedom

The contradictions of romantic freedom in *Miss Sophie's Diary* emerge from competing historical values through which love became intelligible in Republican China. Weidi embodies a sentimental interpretation of May Fourth individualism, in which sincere feeling confers moral authority upon the lover; Ling Jishi's aspirations reflect a bourgeois conception of personal worth organized around wealth, family standing, and cosmopolitan prestige. Both belong to a historical moment in which the repudiation of patriarchal marriage established the legitimacy of voluntary attachment, even as an expanding commercial society supplied new distinctions through which individuals evaluated themselves and others (Lee 95–97; Wong 115–17). Sophie inhabits these competing systems of value, resisting the obligations implicit in Weidi's devotion and condemning Ling's material ambitions while remaining susceptible to the assumptions that lend them authority. Her predicament reveals a contradiction within the historical achievement of romantic freedom: the legitimacy of individual choice leaves intact the social distinctions through which desire has acquired its objects.

Weidi's sentimental position emerges from the May Fourth transformation of intimate life. As Haiyan Lee argues, the elevation of free love belonged to an "enlightenment structure of feeling" that recognized the individual as the "basic and irreducible unit of moral choice and action" (95–96). Against arranged marriage, affection acquired legitimacy through sincerity, making the right to choose one's beloved an expression of personal freedom. Yet this elevation of authentic feeling also permitted the lover to regard the intensity of his suffering as grounds for another person's obligation. Weidi's devotion exposes the contradiction within a relationship lacking the formal sanctions of patriarchal marriage: although his affection is freely given, its sincerity becomes the basis upon which he seeks Sophie's sympathy and recognition.

Sophie refuses this obligation, identifying Weidi's jealousy as "selfish possessiveness" (Ding Ling, "Miss Sophie's Diary" 41) and distinguishing the legitimacy of his feelings from any authority they might confer over her. Yet Weidi experiences his suffering as a moral claim, reproducing within the language of sincere affection the obligation that romantic emancipation was intended to displace. The same presumption governs his attempt to understand Sophie. After reading her diary, he answers her question about whether he understands her with the declaration, "You love him" (54). Unable to secure her affection, he claims certainty about its meaning, extracting a settled emotional truth from writing whose first-person form records the instability of Sophie's judgments. Her attraction to Ling survives repeated reversals of opinion, while her impatience with Weidi remains complicated by remorse; the contradictions of her account therefore resist the interpretive finality he imposes upon them. Denied authority over Sophie's choice, Weidi asserts it instead over the interpretation of her consciousness.

Weidi's confidence presumes that authentic feeling can be rendered transparent to another

person, an assumption Sophie contests when she insists that the diary communicates only "a ten-thousandth part" of herself (54). Ying Ying Chien's comparison of Ding Ling's narrative with Lu Xun's "Regret for the Past" clarifies this difficulty's historical significance: where Lu Xun's female protagonist remains mediated through a male narrator, Sophie assumes authority to interpret intimate life (Chien 33–45). Yet this authority remains exposed to the judgments of others, a tension Keru Cai's account of the diary's dialogism locates within Sophie's relations with actual and anticipated readers (Cai 298–325). Weidi's interpretation reveals the unresolved vulnerability of female self-representation: the authority to articulate experience cannot secure control over the meanings another consciousness assigns to it.

Ling's bourgeois-capitalist outlook becomes explicit in his preoccupation with "family," "money," and "social position" (Ding Ling, "Miss Sophie's Diary" 62), interests that associate personal worth with material advantage and social advancement. Their influence upon Sophie, however, precedes her recognition of his ambitions. His calling card identifies him as coming "from Singapore," while her fascination with his appearance gives way to embarrassment over her "worn-out slippers" and the possibility that he will mistake her for "a girl straight up from the country" (22). Ka F. Wong's examination of the story's Nanyang dimension situates Ling within the transnational world of overseas Chinese mobility and colonial commerce, where cosmopolitan identity could function as a form of prestige (115–17). Ling's desirability is inseparable from the bourgeois-capitalist distinctions through which Sophie has learned to recognize cosmopolitan refinement as a form of personal superiority, so that her embarrassment over the slippers registers the authority of a social hierarchy already internalized before Ling has occasion to exercise it. The encounter exposes the historical formation of an attraction Sophie experiences as personal and spontaneous.

This contradiction also informs Sophie's defense of erotic freedom. Fascinated by Ling's mouth, which she imagines "like a child longing for sweets," she protests against social restrictions on desires whose satisfaction would "do nobody else any harm" (Ding Ling, "Miss Sophie's Diary" 22). Her complaint presumes an inclination whose legitimacy precedes social prohibition, yet her embarrassment before Ling reveals that social judgment already informs desire itself. His cosmopolitan prestige derives from a hierarchy Sophie reproduces in her own self-assessment, implicating her freedom to pursue him in the very standards through which she recognizes him as desirable.

As Ling's ambitions become explicit, Sophie increasingly despises the material values that had already contributed to his desirability, exposing the division between her conscious judgments and the historically acquired standards through which her attraction persists. The contradiction becomes most acute when Ling reciprocates her advances. Sophie's exclamation, "I've won! I've won!," momentarily converts romantic reciprocity into a measure of personal achievement, as though attracting a socially distinguished man could confirm the sovereignty of the woman who has chosen him; yet the revulsion that immediately follows exposes the contradiction of seeking such confirmation from a figure whose bourgeois ambitions she has already condemned (63). Recognition from Ling cannot affirm Sophie's independence without implicating her in the standards of value she rejects.

The two relationships thus expose distinct contradictions within the historical possibilities of romantic freedom. Weidi converts the sincerity of affection into a moral claim upon another person, while Ling's bourgeois-capitalist values inform the hierarchies through which desirability is constituted. Sophie can repudiate Weidi's claim without escaping the standards that render Ling desirable, revealing the distance between the legitimacy of individual choice and sovereignty over the historically constituted values informing its exercise.

Yun's friendship discloses a more fundamental dependence underlying this contradiction: whereas Sophie's romantic attachments reveal the social formation of desire, her relationship with Yun exposes the antecedent relations through which her capacity for self-determination was sustained. The inquiry thus moves from the historical constitution of individual preference to that of the subject whose independence such preferences ostensibly express.

3. Before the "I": Yun, Dependence, and the Relational History of the Self

Yun's significance extends beyond the care she

provides during Sophie's illness to her role in establishing the practice of self-expression through which Sophie claims authority over her experience. The diary's belated disclosure of its origins in Yun's desire to know Sophie retrospectively qualifies the autonomy of its first-person voice, locating its emergence within a prior relation of recognition (Liu 177–79). This dependence acquires historical significance amid the expansion of women's education and participation in urban intellectual life in Republican China, which fostered intimate associations beyond the patriarchal household (Bond 83–118). Yun Zhu situates modern sisterhood within changing conceptions of female identity in late Qing and Republican China, tracing its contribution to new forms of social existence. Such companionship afforded women recognition beyond heterosexual attachment, although marriage continued to constrain its possibilities (Zhu). Yun's unhappy marriage embodies this tension: her friendship with Sophie provides an alternative source of belonging within a social order that continues to govern her circumstances through marriage (Ding Ling, "Miss Sophie's Diary" 50).

The inequalities within their intimacy complicate any understanding of female friendship as a refuge from the possessiveness of romantic life. During illness, Sophie remembers using tears "to make Yun care for me and do just what I wanted," exploiting her distress "to make her caress me" (50). Her confession reveals how Sophie converts the vulnerability that makes Yun's assistance indispensable into a means of commanding the affection upon which she depends. Sophie's apparent mastery remains inseparable from her inability to provide for herself the relief she demands, exposing the dependence concealed within an exercise of coercive power.

This dependence exposes a fundamental contradiction in the emancipatory discourse of the May Fourth movement. Although the recognition of women as autonomous subjects challenged patriarchal authority by affirming their right to self-determination, formal autonomy did not secure the material conditions necessary for its exercise (Feng 20–39). Sophie's tuberculosis renders this contradiction tangible: Yun's care sustains the agency Sophie seeks to assert, while her attempts to command that care reveal the asymmetries of power inherent in relations of dependence. Yun's death makes the particular relation of care through which Sophie exercised her agency irrecoverable by any subsequent act of choice. Recalling their intimacy in the French park, where Yun sang *The Peony Pavilion*, Sophie imagines that, had Yun survived, she would never have "drifted to Beijing by myself to struggle against disease without relatives or love" (Ding Ling, "Miss Sophie's Diary" 50). Her present solitude bears the imprint of another woman's absence, revealing how her seemingly independent existence remains shaped by a relationship whose loss she cannot overcome. Sophie further establishes the singularity of this relationship when she imagines placing her remaining friends "on the scales against the love between me and Yun" (50), only to find the comparison inadequate.

The diary's belated account of its origin gives this history a formal expression. On March 22, Sophie discloses the circumstances under which she began writing:

I started it because Yun kept on asking me to in letters, over and over again. Although Yun has been dead for a long time now I couldn't bear to give up writing it. I suppose it must be that because of the very serious advice she gave me when she was alive I want to go on writing it for ever in her memory. (52)

The disclosure retrospectively alters the significance of Sophie's first-person authority by revealing its origins in a form of female companionship made increasingly possible by women's education and participation in Republican China's urban intellectual life (Liu 177–79; Zhu). The consciousness that has governed the reader's access to Sophie's experience now reveals the antecedent relation through which its expression acquired purpose: Yun's desire to know her preceded the diary's apparent self-sufficiency, making another woman's recognition integral to the history of its form.

Yun's request for the "trivial details" of Sophie's existence concerns precisely the material through which the diary represents consciousness (Ding Ling, "Miss Sophie's Diary" 53). Its fleeting impressions and contradictory judgments were originally intended for another person, whose interest gave Sophie's experience significance beyond its immediate expression. The emergence of the New Woman as a literary subject challenged the convention of defining feminine experience through masculine authority,

allowing women's consciousness to acquire narrative expression in its own right (Feng 149–70). Sophie's diary complicates that achievement by locating the origins of self-representation within an intimate relation of recognition. Zhu's account of sisterhood illuminates the historical circumstances that made such relationships possible, while the diary's continued existence after Yun's death preserves their formative influence within the structure of the first person (Liu 177–79).

The distinction between the persistence of attachment and the provision of care gives this formal complication its material force. Sophie continues writing in Yun's memory, sustaining the practice initiated by her request, although remembrance cannot reproduce the bodily assistance Yun once provided. The relationship survives within Sophie's consciousness while disappearing as a source of material support; her continuing illness and isolation expose the distance between representing dependence and securing the conditions through which it can be sustained.

Ding Ling's fiction around 1930 begins to alter the scale at which these contradictions become intelligible. Feuerwerker describes a movement from the intense concentration upon subjective life toward the social milieu in which characters act, a development associated with Ding Ling's growing engagement with Marxism and revolutionary politics (52–54, 60–64). Jin Feng likewise identifies the early 1930s as a distinct "revolutionary age" in Ding Ling's writing, when women's self-empowerment enters a transformed political field (171–88). This shift changes what narrative can explain. In *Miss Sophie's Diary*, social distinction becomes visible through embarrassment, cosmopolitan mobility through erotic fascination, and dependence through illness and bereavement; although historically constituted, these experiences appear chiefly through their effects upon a single consciousness. The emerging vocabulary of class offered Ding Ling a means of situating such contradictions within historically organized relations of production and social position, although the retrospective designation of Sophie as a petty-bourgeois intellectual risks obscuring the particularity through which the earlier fiction renders those contradictions intelligible (Feuerwerker 52–54). The diary's concentration upon consciousness thus registers the effects of social relations whose wider organization would become increasingly central to Ding Ling's subsequent fiction.

4. The Historical Organization of Relation: Class and Collective Agency in *Water*

Ding Ling's growing engagement with Marxism and Shanghai's left-wing literary movement brought class to the foreground of her fiction, situating individual consciousness within historically constituted social relations (Feuerwerker 52–69). In *Water*, this development raises a problem of collective agency: the peasants' common material vulnerability precedes the formation of a shared political purpose, requiring the narrative to account for the passage from dependence to political action. The story thus extends a difficulty implicit in the earlier fiction: how might the relations conditioning individual existence become the grounds of collective transformation? Published in 1931 amid catastrophic flooding, *Water* opens in a crowded household where relatives and neighbors await news of the approaching disaster. Their conversations alternate between speculation and remembered calamity, while the arrival of displaced families brings the flood's consequences into domestic life. The opening establishes a narrative perspective distinct from Sophie's diary: where her judgments organize the world around her, the villagers' fragmented exchanges distribute knowledge among speakers unable to apprehend the catastrophe in its entirety. Familiar practices of mutual assistance initially sustain the household, but the influx of refugees strains its resources, exposing the limits of care organized through personal proximity.

The historical dimensions of this vulnerability emerge in an elderly woman's recollection of an earlier disaster. "The wealthy have no fear of floods," she declares, recalling how prosperous families continued their leisure while grain prices multiplied and starving peasants died outside the estates of those who possessed food (Ding Ling, "Shui" 406). Her recollection situates the flood within a history of agrarian inequality, where the possession of grain determines the capacity to withstand an apparently indiscriminate disaster. The landlords' retention of grain amid rising prices exposes a relation between property and subsistence that catastrophe intensifies without creating, while recurring deprivation locates the vulnerability of the poor within the enduring organization of rural society. Chris Courtney's historical study of the 1931 Yangzi flood demonstrates the

importance of human settlement and environmental intervention in determining the consequences of inundation (17–55). Ding Ling's fictional recollection identifies a corresponding inequality in the distribution of resources upon which survival depends. This recollection also bears a revealing relation to Sophie's remembrance of Yun. Both women interpret the present through remembered experience, although their recollections disclose different scales of historical relation: Sophie confronts the enduring consequences of a singular attachment, whereas the elderly woman identifies an inequality reproduced across generations. The disparity between possession and need connects childhood suffering to the villagers' present vulnerability, extending the significance of personal memory beyond individual acquaintance. Yet historical recognition remains distinct from the capacity to alter the conditions it discloses, exposing the distance between an understanding of recurrent subordination and collective intervention.

The villagers' efforts to reinforce the dike establish cooperation as an existing practice of rural life, sustained by the material necessity of maintaining a shared embankment. Their complaints about recurring levies register resentment toward fiscal obligations, although the urgency of defending their homes directs their labor toward preserving an order whose authority they have begun to question. The political implications of these grievances become explicit when Li Tabi accuses the authorities of collecting the villagers' contributions while neglecting the embankment: "They collected our contributions and failed to repair the dike" (Ding Ling, "Shui" 421). His accusation situates the catastrophe within an unequal relation between fiscal obligation and administrative power, making the failure of flood protection a question of public responsibility. The episode distinguishes the articulation of particular grievances from the formation of a common political purpose, locating revolutionary possibility in the transformation of established cooperation into a means of contesting relations of property and authority.

Such a transformation becomes conceivable as displaced villagers encounter refugees from other settlements. Their common vulnerability acquires a visible presence in the gathering of hungry bodies, while the authorities' control over grain exposes the limits of relief. The crowd's movement toward town brings the distribution of subsistence into direct conflict with the needs of those displaced by the flood (Feuerwerker 67–68). The distinction between material scarcity and unequal access to provisions becomes especially pronounced when a refugee recalls that the wealthy households of Sanfuzhuang possess stores sufficient to sustain the displaced population for years. The persistence of hunger thus implicates the social organization of subsistence in a catastrophe initially experienced as an overwhelming natural force. The political significance of this recognition emerges through Li Tabi, who, challenged over his twenty years of servitude, asks, "If no one else rises up, what can I do alone? Now we are together" (Ding Ling, "Shui" 421). His response identifies isolation as a condition sustaining subordination: dependence upon others for subsistence has constrained resistance, while the gathering of displaced peasants makes concerted action newly conceivable. Yet the refugees remain uncertain about confronting established authority, continuing to rely upon local intermediaries even as their suspicions deepen. Fear of punishment persists alongside the recognition of common grievances, exposing the difficulty of converting subordination endured within separate relations of service into collective political purpose.

The crowd's final movement gives this emergent agency a figurative expression. Feuerwerker observes that the destructive energy initially associated with the flood is transferred to the peasants themselves (67–68). The metaphor reverses their relation to overwhelming force: those dispersed by catastrophe assemble into a movement capable of confronting the authorities. Yet this image of collective power compresses the historical passage from shared deprivation to revolutionary purpose, leaving the formation of political consciousness only partially represented. Feuerwerker identifies the intervention of an unidentified speaker as a principal means through which the crowd's awakening is articulated (68–69). Disputing the characterization of taking the landlords' grain as robbery, the speaker insists that the peasants seek to recover "what belongs to us" (Ding Ling, "Shui" 433). His appeal challenges the legitimacy of possession by invoking the history of agrarian production, grounding the immediate demand for subsistence in the labor through which the landlords' stores have been accumulated. The speaker's anonymity sustains the collective

character of the movement, although the concentration of political interpretation in an otherwise unidentified voice exposes the difficulty of representing how dispersed grievances acquire a common revolutionary purpose.

The contemporary reception of *Water* illuminates the stakes of this formal difficulty. Communist critics praised Ding Ling's decision to make the protagonist "not one or two persons but a large mass of people," while others questioned the insufficient mediation of the peasants' awakening through Party leadership (Feuerwerker 68–69). The disagreement concerned the historical production of revolutionary consciousness: whether common deprivation could generate political understanding through experience or required the intervention of organized political authority. Ding Ling's later reflections suggest an awareness of the difficulties attending this representation. Recalling *Water*, she acknowledged that although childhood experience had familiarized her with the consequences of flooding, her understanding of peasants' struggles against their rulers remained largely abstract, leaving their resistance dependent upon her imagination (Ding Ling, "Tan ziji de chuangzuo" 81). Her retrospective assessment clarifies the significance of the story's compressed movement from catastrophe to revolt, exposing the distance between the literary articulation of collective consciousness and the historical experience necessary to comprehend its formation.

The story consequently complicates the retrospective account of Ding Ling's development from "petty bourgeois intellectual youth" toward the "worker-peasant masses" (Feuerwerker 68), since its collective protagonist remains a historical possibility whose political formation the narrative only partially explains. *Water* nevertheless extends the problem disclosed through Yun: the dependence through which Sophie acquires the capacity to act becomes, in the later fiction, a question of whether historically organized relations of subordination might furnish the grounds of collective transformation.

5. Conclusion: The History That Freedom Requires

The conventional account of Ding Ling's passage from May Fourth individualism to revolutionary collectivism captures her changing political commitments but obscures the historical problem connecting the two works. Sophie's declaration, "whichever I want" (Ding Ling, "Miss Sophie's Diary" 13), asserts the New Woman's authority over her attachments, although her encounters with Weidi and Ling expose the competing claims of sentimental obligation and bourgeois prestige upon the exercise of romantic freedom. Yun's care and her role in initiating the diary carry this inquiry into the history of the individual herself, revealing the relations through which Sophie's apparently autonomous consciousness has acquired the conditions of its expression.

The formal movement from Sophie's diary to the dispersed voices of *Water* registers a transformation in the historical conception of agency. Where the earlier narrative retrospectively discovers the relations of care and recognition through which an apparently autonomous consciousness acquired its authority, the later confronts the difficulty of producing collective political action from a population already bound by material dependence. The agrarian relations exposed by the flood become possible objects of revolutionary transformation, extending the earlier inquiry into the conditions of individual agency toward the historical production of collective power. Yet *Water*'s uncertain representation of political awakening reveals the difficulty of converting a shared position within relations of subordination into the conscious capacity to overcome them.

"Whichever I want" consequently retains its emancipatory force, but its realization depends upon historical conditions beyond individual sovereignty. From Sophie's dependence upon Yun to the peasants' struggle over subsistence, Ding Ling traces the historical relations that enable individual agency while exposing the inequalities governing its exercise. The unfinished promise of May Fourth emancipation thus resides in the contradiction at the heart of its conception of freedom: the individual's right to determine her own life remains inseparable from the historical conditions that make such self-determination possible, and from the collective power required to transform them.

Note

All English translations from Ding Ling's "Shui" (*Water*) are my own, based on the Chinese

original.

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