Clouds of gnats hovered in Tianjin’s damp spring streets, but delicate orchids bloomed in Shuhua’s mind. She distracted herself from the port city’s depressing smokestacks with memories of the garden behind their courtyards on Gannmian Hutong. She longed for the days in Beijing when the gardener Lao Zhou let her accompany him to the weekly fair at Longfu Temple. Merchants at each of the stalls they visited greeted Lao Zhou and provided him with specially reserved food for his flowers. The farrier invited them in for tea, but Shuhua waited outside to watch horses having their hooves trimmed. With a basketful of hoof trimmings for his orchids, Lao Zhou directed her toward the butcher, where they picked up pig, sheep, and cow offal for the peonies and bamboo. A grocer had saved scraps from bean and peanut plants. Lao Zhou explained that the chrysanthemums would benefit from this vegetable nourishment. They collected chicken bones and offal for the roses and headed home at dusk with one final purchase, a pair of crickets in a dried gourd shell, for Shuhua. As the sun sank behind the Western Hills, the old gardener dumped the hoof trimmings clattering into a large ceramic jar and poured warm water over them. In three days time, the soup would be ready for Shuhua to feed the orchids. After her morning lessons, she wandered through the greenhouse. The straw curtain had been rolled up to let sunlight shine through the paper windows. She spooned the liquid into pots of lavender, pink, yellow, and light and dark green flowers.

By contrast, their house on the wide, empty street of Tianjin’s Hebei district was drained of life. Third and Fifth Mothers had made their separate departures, leaving Sixth Mother to gloat. There were no more all-night mahjong tournaments. Ruolan lived in small quarters in a building separate from the main house. She kept to herself, stitching small pieces of embroidery or softly singing Cantonese opera tunes. Neither Shuhua nor Amy mentioned their older sister Shuping when recounting their years in Tianjin, so she must have left for schooling or marriage elsewhere. When the family’s youngest
daughters returned home for summer vacation, they settled in with their mother and tried to study through the hot, humid days of July. Ling Fupeng's absences continued off and on. He had responsibilities in the seaside town of Qingdao in Shandong province where he was dispatched in late 1915, as Amy suggested in her description of his tour of duty in the once German-held city.

China had declared neutrality in World War I, but Japanese troops landed on Chinese territory and launched a successful attack on the German concession in Shandong. In January 1915, the Japanese minister to China arranged a secret meeting with Yuan Shikai. He delivered a document on thick, white paper watermarked with dreadnoughts and machine guns. The document, the infamous Twenty-One Demands, ordered China to vastly extend Japanese rights in Manchuria, Inner Mongolia, Shandong, China's southeast coast, and the Yangzi River valley. Yuan's government leaked the secret demands to the foreign press, but the West offered no assistance. After protracted negotiations, Yuan consented to a slightly modified version of the demands. This decision sparked protests, strikes, boycotts against Japanese products, and intense opposition to Yuan's leadership. Angry patriots declared May 7, 1915, the date of his acquiescence, the "Day of National Humiliation."  

In Qingdao, Ling Fupeng must have helped oversee the transfer of power and witnessed what his fellow examination candidates had feared most when they arrived in Beijing in 1895. Japanese soldiers and administrators moved their operations into the solid Bavarian buildings recently deserted by the defeated Germans. Meanwhile, Yuan Shikai's advisors suggested that the people desired a restoration of the imperial mandate, and on January 1, 1916, Yuan declared himself emperor. This move turned out to be a gross political miscalculation, and province after province declared their independence from Beijing. Yuan Shikai died in June, leaving the early ideals of the Republic in shatters, and the country slid into an era of warlord rule.

In Qingdao, Ling Fupeng's hope descended into resignation, but his daughters' lives remained relatively unaffected by the mounting tensions. The plethora of publications that began to appear in Tianjin and other port cities energized them. In addition to their schoolwork, they were exposed to many new offerings, such as accounts of Marie Curie's 1898 discovery of radium; translated works by Western writers like Zola, Goethe, Flaubert, Turgenev, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Ibsen, Wilde, and Mansfield; journal pages devoted to women's education and rights; and popular press stories full of love, scandal, and sleuthing detectives.

Early in the century, a new literature movement had begun promoting the use of baihua or vernacular language, which more closely approximated spoken Chinese than classical literary construction. Loanwords from foreign languages, as well as conventions such as punctuation marks, entered Chinese at an unprecedented rate. In 1903, Liang Qichao launched the journal *New Fiction* with a manifesto declaring that a revolution in the realm of fiction would improve national morality. Slowly increasing rates of literacy, particularly among women, provided a larger reading public. The development of the *fukanz* or literary supplement to newspapers and journals became an important outlet for literary production. Concession areas in Shanghai, but also cities like Tianjin, whose extraterritoriality provided relative freedom from the censorious eye of the Chinese government, gave rise to a lively publishing scene. In addition to the publications of "new literature" proponents, popular fiction poured forth to meet a new market demand for entertainment literature. Shuhua augmented her knowledge of the classics with these new perspectives on writing.

Shuhua and Amy graduated from high school in 1917, just as the rain started to fall. Two separate typhoons hit Tianjin that summer, and floodwaters swelled until dikes burst on each of the city's five rivers in September. Fields, streets, and buildings flooded within hours. On the first floor of their house, water lapped against chair legs and sent them fleeing upstairs. By the time it reached the top landing of the stairway, a raft with fluttering Red Cross flags floated toward their cries. An evacuation team of soldiers and fishermen helped them abandon the drowning house. Amy remembered being lifted out of a second-story window into the arms of someone standing precariously in a wide, flat boat below. An oarsman with a long punting stick pushed them between roofs and chimneys. Snakes, rats, and dogs swam through the filthy water. Cats and chickens clung to trees and the tops of walls. The broad shopping avenues had turned into canals. Boats, doors used as rafts, and bobbing heads dotted the watery thoroughfares. Swimmers dove through store windows to salvage what they could. Farmers from the surrounding areas tried to recover some of their crops. They anchored junkies over their fields. Young men stripped and jumped into the water with reaping knives. Kicking ten feet down to the bottom, they cut off as many stalks as they could before rising to the surface for air. The Ling family crowded into the small house in the German concession, which was on higher ground, until the water in the Hebei district house receded. It left in its wake a trail of sodden clothing, a layer of pungent mire across the floors, drowned mice in the cupboard, and teacups lodged in the garden. The disaster left six million homeless and starving. Refugees crowded into shanties covered with mats of braided reeds and straw.  

As the city struggled to recover, Shuhua entered a two-year "Household
Program of Study,” also at the Tianjin First Girls’ Normal School. This program, the equivalent of junior college, provided continuing classes in standard academic subjects, combined with instruction in home economics and “self-cultivation.” Amy told me that when she and Shuhua graduated from high school, many of their classmates received job offers at a local elementary school. Because Amy was too young to become a teacher, their headmistress encouraged her to attend a physical education school in Shanghai to train as a gym teacher. Already determined to study medicine, Amy rejected this suggestion. She continued her studies in science at home with a tutor. Comparing her educational trajectory with Shuhua’s, she said, “Her schooling was more regular than mine. She went straight through. I went off and on.” For both of them, events of the next few years would influence their future trajectories.

After the national humiliation of Yuan Shikai’s agreement to Japan’s Twenty-One Demands, teachers and students on college campuses in major cities fervently discussed how to save the country. Overseas students returning from Japan, the United States, and France upheld “Mr. Democracy” and “Mr. Science,” personified names for the ideas they had studied abroad. They preached everything new: new youth, new culture, new literature, new learning, and new women. The last concept, in particular, captured the imagination of female students, who debated arranged marriage versus free love, filial piety versus individualism, Confucianism versus democracy. They passed around copies of Qiu Jin’s collected poems. In 1918, when New Youth magazine ran a complete vernacular translation of Ibsen’s A Doll’s House, they rushed to bookstores to buy the issue. Its heroine Nora became as potent a representative of female defiance as Qiu Jin. The play was widely read and even produced, its climactic scene repeatedly reenacted with Nora announcing to her husband that she will leave him and their children because she has realized she is nothing more than a puppet playing a role. She declares, “I believe that first and foremost I am an individual, just as much as you are—or at least I’m going to try to be.”

After Yuan Shikai’s failed attempt at monarchical restoration, another military leader tried to reinstate the boy emperor Puyi. Rival warlords reacted by bombing the palace. A low-grade civil war, which made China even more vulnerable to foreign aggressors, continued with a renegade south battling against the entrenched power of the north. To finance these skirmishes, warlords relied heavily on loans from Japan. In secret pacts, they made an increasing number of economic and military concessions. As news of these dealings leaked out, anti-Japanese sentiment spread, especially among merchants threatened by the competition of Japanese goods in an unfair market. They forged an alliance with new culture intellectuals to organize for patriotic, anti-Japanese action.

When World War I ended on November 11, 1918, spontaneous celebration broke out in Beijing. Hopes ran high that the Paris Peace Conference would overturn the covert Sino-Japanese treaties and agreements signed during the war. Leading intellectuals optimistically extolled Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points for their insistence upon self-determination and open diplomacy. As the negotiations unfolded, the chief Japanese delegate announced that Japan had secured secret consent from Britain, France, and Italy in 1917 to retain ex-German rights in Shandong province. Furthermore, the warlord government in Beijing had signed an agreement in 1918 confirming Japan’s position in Shandong. Outraged by the possibility that the Great Powers would honor these acts of secret diplomacy, student groups, commercial organizations, labor unions, and overseas Chinese associations sent an onslaught of indignant telegrams to the Chinese delegates in Paris. They urged them to defend China’s national rights, or in the words of one telegram, ensure that “China be saved from those perils into which traitors have betrayed her.” In the final days of April 1919, the news from Paris grew disheartening. Student groups in Beijing began organizing protests.

Although the circumstances differed, the students’ collective opposition to the government’s foreign policy drew on a tradition of scholarly dissent, such as the petition of the 1895 examination candidates organized by Kang Youwei. British philosopher and social critic Bertrand Russell, who would soon give a series of lectures in China, observed the tendency of educated Chinese to become reformers or revolutionaries rather than adopt the comfortable cynicism of some of their Western counterparts. John Dewey, an American philosopher from Columbia University, had arrived in China just days before the students’ demonstration and wrote home, “To think of kids in our country from fourteen on, taking the lead in starting a big cleanup reform politics movement and shaming merchants and professional men into joining them. This is sure some country.”

When definitive news of China’s failure to regain Shandong reached Beijing, leaders called a mass meeting of students from the city’s universities and colleges. In the emotionally charged assembly hall, participants gave speeches and presented plans of action. A law school student, overwhelmed by the moment, cut open his finger with a knife and wrote “Return our Qingdao” on the wall in blood. On May 4, 1919, over three thousand students gathered in Tiananmen Square. Between impromptu speeches, they chanted slogans: “Externally, struggle for sovereignty, resist the Great Powers! Internally, throw out the traitors!” They hoisted a pair of sarcastic funeral scrolls for the government’s three most pro-Japanese officials: “The names of Cao
Rulin, Lu Zongyu, and Zhang Zongxiang will stink a thousand years; the students of Beijing mourn for them with tears.”¹⁹ When they marched from the square to the extraterritorial Legation District, the police at the gates refused to let them enter. Radical elements shouted for demonstrators to converge on the house of the traitor Cao Rulin. When the official, who had escaped to the back door into a getaway car, failed to make an appearance, rocks flew from the crowd. Cao’s house was set on fire. Another breakaway group chased down Zhang Zongxiang and beat him up. At the end of the day, thirty-two students sat in jail.¹⁰

On May 5, students in Tianjin heard about the events of the previous day. Like their peers in many major cities, they began a citywide organization modeled after the Beijing Student Union. When news spread that a student injured during his arrest in Beijing had died several days later, students nationwide rallied with increased determination. In coalition with merchants and other community groups, they drafted petitions urging the government not to ratify the Versailles treaty. They lectured in the streets, organized strikes, and launched a general boycott of all Japanese goods.

With the encouragement of their teachers, Shuhua’s class joined what came to be called the May Fourth Movement. Classmates elected Shuhua to be one of the four secretaries in their school’s newly formed student union. She remembers, “I had to write down all the plans, all the letters, or write speeches when we were going to a demonstration or to places where we knew we could get a large audience.”¹¹ The First Girls’ Normal School joined five other local girls’ schools to form the Tianjin Association of Patriotic Female Comrades. The association boasted more than six hundred members, the youngest only thirteen years old, and published a weekly journal titled Awaken the World. Xu Guangping, who would later marry Lu Xun, served as one of the editors. Sixteen-year-old Deng Yingchao, future spouse of the Communist Party Premier Zhou Enlai, led the association’s speech-writing corps.¹²

In “My Teacher and My Schoolmate,” the second to last chapter in Ancient Melodies, Shuhua describes an event that motivated her class to take to the streets. She fused this moment with her first sense of a possible career as a writer. When news of two workers killed during a strike in a Japanese-owned factory reached their school, Shuhua and her classmates also went on strike.¹³ They marched out of class and positioned themselves on local street corners, where they gave speeches about the factory incident. Later in the day, they took up the chant “Encourage the use of native goods!” and went from store to store to ask owners to close their doors for a day of protest. After they returned to school, their Chinese teacher gave them the assignment to write about their demonstration. He selected what he considered the best essay and sent it to the Tianjin Daily. The following day Shuhua saw her first piece of writing in print, but only after their teacher read it aloud in class. She recalls the moment: “I realized it was my article; my face flushed, my heart beat fast, and later tears came into my eyes. I did not dare to look at anyone.”¹⁴

Amy described standing on a chair in the middle of the street to shout boycott slogans through a megaphone. In her recollection of the protest activities, she emphasized the superior persuasiveness of female activists: “Those boys from Nankai [Middle School] didn’t know how to talk, so we girls took the protest over. We were very effective because we rang doorbells. We told people, ‘Don’t buy Japanese.’”¹⁵ After students in Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and many other cities walked out of their classrooms to demonstrate in the streets, the Beijing government took action. They dispatched police patrols in the capital to disperse the lecturing bands of students and their audiences. When the city’s prisoners could no longer accommodate all the detainees, they converted the Beijing National University Law School into a temporary prison. When the students held there exceeded one thousand, the School of Science became another makeshift prison. With many of the male students thus detained, female students took their place. They assembled at the president’s palace to denounce the use of school buildings as prisons, request the release of all students under arrest, and demand freedom of speech. Merchants and workers, particularly in Shanghai, were angered by the mass student arrests and staged strikes of their own. Finally, the three most notoriously pro-Japan officials resigned, and government authorities released the students.¹⁶ At the end of June 1919, in a largely symbolic gesture, the Chinese delegates in France refused to sign the Treaty of Versailles.

I have traveled twice on the orange double-decker trains along the Beijing-Tianjin line. Each time I failed to find the house where the sisters lived. On my first trip, I wandered lost in the streets of Tianjin. A narrow lane filled with the squawking cages of a pet market encircled the French Catholic cathedral, where Third Mother once procured yellow protection signs. Old brick buildings butted up against new tiled ones. A new shopping mall lay across the street from a wasteland of discarded rubble. Where the map indicated a major thoroughfare, I found an endless stretch of construction. People pushed their bicycles around mounds of bricks, deep ruts, and open trenches.

In spite of my disorientation, I managed to find one tourist attraction, the Memorial Hall of the Young Comrade Zhou Enlai’s Participation in the Tianjin Revolutionary Movement. The museum is housed in a two-story
stone building, previously Nankai Middle School. Zhou Enlai attended classes in this school during the same years Shuhua and Amy began their studies at the First Girls’ Normal School. He emerged as a student leader in Tianjin during the events of the May Fourth Movement.16

The city had refused to accommodate my historical desire, but here in the sepulcher-like museum, I finally felt at home. I lingered in the still, hot air of the second-floor classrooms and gazed at photographs and memorabilia covering the walls. I felt I had learned how to interpret the hopeful faces of this moment in time. I came upon the dark printing plate, hand crank, and interlocking gears of a printing press cordoned off in a corner. Zhou and his compatriots had printed the daily bulletin of the Tianjin Student Union on it.

The layout of the Memorial Hall of the Young Comrade Zhou Enlai guides its visitors through the standard narrative of the Chinese Communist Party, in which the May Fourth Movement occupies one moment in China’s revolutionary progress toward Communist victory in 1949. The story’s most iconic representation appears back in contemporary Beijing at the center of Tiananmen Square. Four main panels, carved in marble bas-relief, surround the pedestal of the Monument to the People’s Heroes. Their scenes reconstruct a linear version of history by linking together Lin Zexu’s 1840 burning of British opium stores in Guangzhou; the May Fourth student movement of 1919; the guerilla war against the Japanese during World War II; and Mao Zedong’s final 1949 victory over the Guomindang. In this trajectory, May Fourth activists became socialist revolutionaries.

When I returned to Tianjin years later, a friend who had grown up there guided me north through the former concession areas in another fruitless search for the house, close to a cemetery or red-light district, described by the sisters. He did lead me, however, to the site of the First Girls’ Normal School. The old campus forms one section of the current Tianjin Academy of Art. Next to a playing field and cracked cement basketball courts, old dormitories stand in a neglected row. On the second floor of each gray brick building, five doors open onto a long balcony. Weathered red paint coats the wooden railings and eaves, decorated with carved European heart designs and stylized Chinese potted plants. In the middle of shrub-lined paths connecting classroom buildings stands a statue of the sisters’ former schoolmate Deng Yingchao. She later married fellow Tianjin activist Zhou Enlai and became the first vice president of the Chinese Communist Party’s All-China Federation of Democratic Women. Cast in bronze, atop a square pedestal of black marble, she sits stiffly in a chair with her hands folded in her lap, overseeing this corner of the old campus. Those who did not follow this particular path of
revolution have fallen from the mainland historical record, but they all once marched together out of the gates of this campus.

The students’ urgent sense of purpose in 1919 provided a name for a larger ongoing social, cultural, and political movement. The May Fourth Movement’s leading proponents, students in their teens and twenties and professors in their thirties, came from an intellectual elite with backgrounds vastly different from China’s majority. They had received a hybridized form of education that also set them apart from previous generations of scholars, and they applied a panoply of new and borrowed ideas to their mission of saving the nation.

In Shuhua’s chapter “My Teacher and My Schoolmate,” her patriotic Chinese literature teacher, who had encouraged his students to strike and then write about the experience, grew critical of the student movement when its leaders adopted the slogan of “Down with Confucianism.” Their protest against the study of Chinese classics infuriated him. Early in the movement, he had corrected his students’ speeches, petitions to the government, and articles to newspapers, but now he lectured them against turning a blind eye on their cultural heritage. He expressed disdain for arrogant overseas students recently returned to China. “To their minds, even the moon would look more lovely in Europe or America than the one we see here. I don’t blame them if they only admire their [Western] success in the scientific world, but I cannot see what is in their minds when they praise their philosophy and literature.”

Pointing out the imperialist designs of these “civilized nations,” he argued that the roots for a modern democratic nation could also be found in the writings of Mencius. Shuhua notes the influence of her early home studies in her reaction to the debate: “I understood more of the Chinese classics than most girls in the school. I especially liked Mencius.”

When Shuhua’s writing continued to impress her teacher, he encouraged her by giving her a copy of the teachings of Zhuangzi, the famously imaginative and unconventional Daoist philosopher. Shuhua carried the book with her everywhere and forced herself to wake up at four o’clock every morning to puzzle over select passages. She remembers becoming completely caught up. “I talked less to my mother and my sister,” she writes. “My father was away, though sometimes I wished I could talk to him, because I remembered he was interested in something that was similar to what I was thinking at the time.”

After observing Shuhua’s devotion to this outmoded text, her classmate Guo Longzhen approached her to talk about it. Guo had established herself as a leader in the student movement. She was widely admired as one of the original members of the Awakening Society, which was devoted to continu-

ing student activism and intellectual debate after the summer of 1919. She and Shuhua sat on a bench in the school garden, and Guo expressed her concern about their teacher’s wavering belief in the movement and his influence on Shuhua. Shuhua convinced her to read a passage from Zhuangzi in which he sarcastically comments upon Confucius. The next day Guo encouraged the rest of their classmates to read the underlined parts of Shuhua’s book.

In “My Teacher and My Schoolmate,” Shuhua discusses a passage from Zhuangzi that she spent many mornings trying to fathom. Unlike utilitarian theories and the scientific rationality that dominated debates of the day, its lines suggest the intangibility of meaning itself: “The fish trap exists because of the fish; once you’ve gotten the fish, you can forget the trap. The rabbit snare exists because of the rabbit; once you’ve gotten the rabbit, you can forget the snare. Words exist because of meaning; once you’ve gotten the meaning, you can forget the words. Where can I find a man who has forgotten words so I can have a word with him?”

For a student talented in painting and writing, this passage challenged a belief in words or pictures as lasting or fixed. Shuhua already worried that neither could save the nation, having told her cousins, “I think painting cannot help China out of her difficulties. It is an occupation for peace time.” Yet in years to come, she would find her way as a writer, one of the neotraditionals of the Beijing School, whose reaffirmation of Chinese tradition and its validity in the modern world allowed it the same claims to universality as Western culture. Decades later, as she neared the end of her career, she would look back on her May Fourth experience and say, “There are some anthropologists who, with good intentions, have firmly grouped me with the May Fourth Movement players; this unexpected flattery surprised me, for at the time of May Fourth, I was a high school student, still infatuated with ancient paintings and poetry and anything to do with classical Chinese art.”

Young women of the Ling sisters’ generation searched for ways to cross the divide between traditional and modern expectations. May Fourth rhetoric told them to awaken to their duty to society, but the cutlets for their ambitions remained limited. They had no reliable map for how to proceed once their consciences had been stirred. In 1923, Lu Xun offered a bleak assessment of women’s options in “What Happens After Nora Leaves Home?,” an essay referring to the main character in Ibsen’s A Doll’s House. He concluded that a Chinese Nora had only three choices—to starve, to “go to the bad,” or to return home to her husband. He offered only one way for the awakened Nora to survive: “To put it bluntly, what she needs is money.”

Amy located herself differently from Shuhua within the May Fourth scene. She emerged as the practically minded sister. She wanted to study

medicine, a field of established patriotic worth, but her attraction came from a dream of becoming an independent career woman. When asked why she wanted to study medicine, she said nothing about saving the nation. Instead, she asked, “Do you know how women used to give birth?” After a dramatic pause, she answered her own question. “They had two people to help them, one to hold this hand and one to hold the other. And then she would scream her head off, yelling ‘I’m dying. This child is killing me.’ I wanted to help women. I thought there had to be a better way.” She planned to forgo marriage after completing her training in order to open a women’s clinic.

Life at school allowed female students to consider alternatives outside the family. A new Chinese term, “singlehood,” described women’s desire to resist marriage and lead a single, professional life. This idea aroused strong social criticism. Articles denouncing singlehood claimed that it could lead to same-sex love or insanity, as well as potentially harm the nation’s reproductive abilities. Yet Amy persisted in her admiration of an exemplary woman named Dr. Ding who, like Kang Aide and Shi Meiyu, had attended the University of Michigan. Dr. Ding returned to China to open a private hospital. When Amy told Shuhua about her dream, Shuhua made fun of Dr. Ding, saying she was an ugly woman with a face covered in pockmarks. She said no one would ever marry her. Amy replied, “It doesn’t matter to me. It doesn’t matter to her patients.”

The Ling family spent two summer vacations, in 1919 and 1920, at Beidaihe, a seaside town in Hebei province originally developed as a beach resort by British railroad engineers in the 1890s. At this cosmopolitan vacation destination, where both foreigners and Chinese gathered, Amy’s plans to attend medical school took shape. The Lings stayed in a house owned by one of Ling Fupeng’s friends from the Zhili political scene. The two sisters could run out the front door onto the beach, while the adults watched horse races at the neighboring track from a second-floor balcony. Amy recalled the parties her father hosted. He and his guests drank dark German beer from a wooden keg packed in a tub of melting ice on the balcony. The foreigners Amy met the first summer included a young Indian woman from a wealthy family who practiced speaking Chinese with her and an American woman who taught at Qilu Medical College on the campus of the Shandong Christian University in Jinan. Many foreign vacationers knew the American teacher because she ran a small drugstore for them in the summer at Beidaihe. Amy slipped into the store and pretended to look over the items for sale. She glanced nervously at the woman from behind shelves of aspirin, tooth powder, and sunglasses. She bought a bathing cap and ran back out to the beach. On the following day, she worked up the nerve to ask the woman if she indeed taught at Qilu as she had heard. She asked, “Do I have a chance to enter that college?” The woman asked how much English she knew, explaining that half of the classes were taught in English. Amy shrugged her shoulders, and the woman told her, “Then you have to study English.”

When the sisters’ Feng cousins, nephews of First Mother, visited Tianjin the following winter, they broached the issue of how Shuhua and Amy would continue their studies in the coming years. A train passed by the house, and Ruolan complained about living so near the station. Feng Xianguang seized the opportunity to tell her that her youngest daughters should attend university in Beijing. He urged them to leave: “Tianjin is not the place for Uncle to live in. What nonsense to have to see those warlords every day. He cannot enjoy such a life. Now they are trying to draw him into their group; it simply does harm to him.” When Ling Fupeng decided to follow his nephew’s advice, the two sisters were thrilled at the thought of returning to Beijing. In this hopeful moment, with which Ling Shuhua ends Ancient Melodies, the grit and oppressiveness of Tianjin in her memory finally lifts.

Both Mai [Amy] and I were excited when we heard Father’s decision. I remember in the evening she and I went into the garden chasing the two large dogs up and down the artificial rocks for a long time. The garden was lighted by the electric lamps; the young trees, the rocks, the flowerbeds, the Western-fashioned steps and balconies were then covered with white snow; they looked extraordinarily fascinating, which I had never noticed before.