

# Misinterpretation and Innovation: Receptions of *A Doll's House* during May Fourth Movement in China

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**Abstract** As an emancipating cultural movement, the May Fourth Movement marked a dramatic shift in Chinese national ideology and Chinese playwriting. Ibsenism, upon its introduction into China, played a leading role in the cultural renovation. The reception of Ibsenism was, to a large extent, localized and in that particular situation, politicalized to meet the requirements of Chinese intellectuals to launch a revolution in the social sphere. Thus misinterpretation of Ibsenism was inevitable. Although it failed to cover the complexity of the esthetic value of Ibsenism, it has effectively shaped the realism of Chinese play writing in the twentieth century and laid a solid foundation for the development of modernity of Chinese drama.

**Key words** Ibsenism; *A Doll's House*; misinterpretation; May Fourth Movement

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As an important part of enlightening discourse booming during the May Fourth Movement, Ibsen and his Nora have played a peculiar role in the emancipation of individuality and female roles. Its significance is most evident in the shaping of Chinese contemporary literature, especially the contemporary drama. In the 1910's, the blossoming of Ibsen's plays has effectively consolidated his peculiar place in China. The flourishing of Ibsenism was closely connected with the historical discourse during the May Fourth period, leading to ideological revolution and drama reconstruction. As a representative of knowledge-power mechanism, Ibsenism has been a favorite for Chinese intellectuals due to the common concern over social problems. Translations of Ibsen's plays from May Fourth Movement to the founding of PRC are listed in the following chart ( Song 36 ).

The ideological connotation and literary style of Ibsen's drama are rich and complex. As a great dramatist, his creation can be divided into three stages which are characterized by literary romanticism, realistic criticism and symbolism respectively. As shown in the chart, the translations and receptions of Ibsen's plays were mainly the ones with strong realistic criticism on social problems in the second stage, among which *A Doll's House* was the most prominent one.

Play	1919 – 1927	1928 – 1949
<i>A Doll's House</i>	4	5
<i>Ghosts</i>	2	1
<i>An Enemy of the People</i>	2	0
<i>Hedda Gabler</i>	1	1
<i>Master Builder</i>	2	1
<i>The Wild Duck</i>	1	2
<i>The Lady from the Sea</i>	1	2
<i>The League of Youth</i>	2	0
<i>Pillars of Society</i>	1	1
<i>Little Eyolf</i>	1	1
<i>Rosmersholm</i>	1	1
<i>When We Dead Awaken</i>	0	1
<i>Lady Inge</i>	0	1
<i>John Gabriel Borkman</i>	0	2

What made the Chinese intellectuals during the May Fourth Movement dissatisfied with the ancient Chinese plays was their attachment to traditional political ideology. They longed for a new form of play to take its place and revolutionize Chinese social and political culture. Ibsen's influence on China during that time was mainly in the social arena rather than limited in theatrical field.

## I

*A Doll's House*, since its introduction into China, has triggered various interpretations and even debates from different cultural perspectives. The most prominent critics in contemporary Chinese literary circle, Guo Moruo, Lu Xun, and Hu Shi, have provided different interpretations of the play as well as the comments on female roles in a Chinese cultural setting.

From an idealistic social perspective, Guo Moruo<sup>1</sup> pointed out a revolutionary cultural interpretation of Nora's fate after her departure from home. During studying in Japan, where the western thoughts were transferred to Asia, Guo Moruo began to read Nordic literature, including Ibsen's plays. In 1921, he read many Ibsen's plays, among which *A Doll's House* left him a deep impression and affected his later play writings. The female images depicted in his plays were rebellious in character, ready to fight against personal injustice. Later, the image of Nora of Guo Moruo has wit-

nessed the change from the one devoted to individualistic rebellion to the one fighting for social revolution. Nora written in 1942 by Guo Moruo was a classical work of this new ideological shift which was featured by his radical and revolutionary cultural interpretation of Ibsen's plays.

Guo Moruo holds that the rebellious women like Nora must combine the reform of social regulations with individual liberation. He calls for the awakening of Chinese women to leave the hypocritical husbands to march on a road of liberation. This has not only showed Guo Moruo's identification with Ibsen, but also his concern over Chinese women from a Chinese cultural perspective. In "The Key to Nora", Guo states that Ibsen has not made clear of the problem of Nora's fate after departure from home.

The politicalizing of Ibsenism is not only a result of the textual analysis of *A Doll's House*, but also a natural choice under Chinese cultural setting. Also, it is closely related to a Chinese woman, Qiu Jin<sup>2</sup>, who shares much similarity with Nora in Chinese history.

As a famous female democratic revolutionist, Qiu Jin despised feudal system since childhood. Before the age of twenty-five, she had a similar marriage of living in a doll's house. The corrupted authorities in Qing Dynasty as well as new democratic influences have strengthened her decision to leave home and devote herself to revolution, which has won much admiration of Guo Moruo. According to him, Nora in Ibsen's play is only spiritually liberated, while Qiu Jin took a more revolutionary action, which has best exemplified Guo's social and revolutionary idea. "As a pioneer, she has totally broken through the unreasonable boundary and created a new times for new Chinese women and morality."<sup>3</sup>

Not interested in traditional female make-ups, Qiu Jin liked to carry a dagger and preferred male suits and horse-riding. Guo Moruo once commented, "She knows the female revolution is only one part of the national and social revolutions and can only be realized after the latter ones are achieved, so she joined the Chinese Revolutionary League."<sup>4</sup> All of her efforts have proved her glorious spirit. She is the master of her emotion instead of the slave of it."<sup>5</sup> In 1958, in the prelude to *Historical Survey of Qiu Jin*, Guo Moruo reemphasized the significance of Qiu Jin's anti-feudal, democratic endeavors in a new historical setting and regarded it as the right choice for the future of Nora. In his eyes, women in different times should shoulder different duties. In the time of Chinese socialist construction, women enjoyed more advantageous rights, yet had to cope with many new problems. The heavy task of socialist construction required the improvement of the ability of women to make more contribution to the whole society. It is from keen realistic aspect that Guo Moruo reinterprets Nora's image and encourages Chinese women to improve themselves. The rebellious spirit of Ibsen has been successfully applied in a Chinese setting to highlight the female consciousness for social reform.

The interpretation of Guo Moruo is in accordance with the development trend of Chinese history and has been attached with important political significance. The cultural awareness of Guo Moruo is derived from his idealistic social-oriented consciousness which is characterized by the rebellious spirit of anti-feudalism, anti-hegemony, pursuit of freedom and liberation.

## II

Among Chinese scholars in the early twentieth century in their efforts of literary revolution, Hu Shi<sup>6</sup> appeals for a practical literary view which intervenes social reality and is endowed with more social function. "Literature should be written for life and should be produced for saving human beings and the world" (*Complete Works* 369). According to Hu Shi, Ibsenism is characterized by its realistic focus on life.

According to Hu Shi, freedom is closely hand in hand with responsibility. He says, "In an autonomous society or republic country, anyone who is free to choose will be responsible for his choice" (*Complete Works* 615). Although the activities of *A Doll's House* and *The Lady from the Sea* are mainly within the family, they can also be applied to the society or country. In 1918, Hu Shi put forth the notion of Ibsenian individualism, which highlights the individual rights, yet ignores its social foundation, even set it as a confrontational force against society. Two years later, Hu Shi, after reconsideration, revised the notion and called for "non-individual new life". According to him, individualism should not be egocentric and must be put into social setting. Only when the individual devotes himself to the social cause can he make social reforms. The genuine individualism embodies the responsibility towards the society.

The key concern in Ibsen's plays are on human beings and the concern shown to the social problems and familiar affairs are to depict the existential state of human beings and reveal the psychological activities in order to review the nature of life and its significance. Accordingly, in terms of realism in Ibsen, it can be approached from two aspects: the former realistically mirrors the social reality, while the latter profoundly depicts the psychological world of the individual. Hu Shi's reception of Ibsen's realism mainly focused on the former perspective. He commented, "The literature of Ibsen and his view of life are realistic in essence" (*Complete Works* 485). He mainly approaches Ibsenism from a sociological perspective and aims at social criticism. Influenced by *A Doll's House*, he wrote *Marriage* and published it in *New Youth* in 1919, which was still considered as a pioneering play of modern Chinese drama. The heroine, Tian Yamei, the first Chinese Nora, has successfully escaped from the feudal boundary and run away with her beloved. Yet Hu Shi's literary understanding of Ibsenism is too realistically-confined that it fails to cover its value on the exploration of humanity. The biased reception with the overemphasized attention on the social function of literature makes Hu Shi's reception too practical and limited.

In his *Marriage*, although Tian Yumei departs the family as Nora has done, yet, he fails to convey the truthful and vivid activities of character's psychology. The play, which has been widely criticized as being too imitative of Ibsen's style and carries limited originality and creativity, originates from his abstract imagination and is too morally-oriented.

What Hu Shi concerns most is social reform which aims at the revolt against feudal restrictions of female roles in the family and society. In his reception, Ibsenism is simplified and endowed with Chinese features, which reduces the profundity of the play and makes the characters like Nora an ideological symbol, less attractive. The

simplification of the dichotomy between female and male conflicts neglects the multiple connotations of individuality and morality portrayed in Ibsen's play.

The individualism put forth by Hu Shi marked the beginning of Chinese liberalism. As remarked in one speech, "To fight for your personal freedom is to fight for national freedom! To fight for personal dignity is to fight for national dignity! Slaves can never build a country of freedom and equality!" (*Complete Works* 663), which constitutes Hu Shi's feedback to the new coming era.

### III

Lu Xun's<sup>7</sup> reception of Ibsenism is a materialistic and practical one, negating the individual fighting in the spiritual sense. The emphasis originates from Lu Xun's individualistic concern which has become an important cultural symbol during the May Fourth Movement. As commented by Mao Dun, a famous Chinese literary figure in the early twentieth century, "Individualism has become the main goal of the new literary movement during the May Fourth Movement period. The literary criticisms and writings have been consciously or unconsciously aimed at this goal" (298). Yet, the individualism of Lu Xun includes both individualistic elements and collective consciousness, emphasizing sound and independent individual spirit and social responsibility as well. He pays attention to individual independent spiritual value and practical social base, which is the point where Lu Xun receives and interprets Ibsenism.

Long before the introduction of Ibsen in the *New Youth* in 1918 by Hu Shi, Lu Xun had mentioned Ibsen in "Cultural Perseverance" in 1908, highlighting his pursuit for truth and rejection of bourgeois mind (48). Yet, Lu Xun holds different idea. He is dubious towards the dramatic awakening and doubts whether it is durable and valuable. According to him, it will be hard to sustain any spiritual activities without the economic base.

It was long before The May Fourth Movement that Lu Xun began his introduction of and comment on Ibsen. From 1902 to 1909, Lu Xun travelled to Japan and began his seven-year search for his "individual revolution" which was featured by the reshaping of Chinese national character. In his efforts, Ibsen has played a prominent role in arousing the rebellious spirit of the Chinese people and experiencing cultural enlightenment. Before the May Fourth Movement, Lu Xun's comments on and introduction of Ibsen was not systematic and academic. What constituted an influential academic debate was his speech "What will Nora do after her Departure?" delivered at Beijing Female Normal University on December 26th, 1923. It has been widely acknowledged as a classical critical essay in interpreting *A Doll's House*, which reflected Lu Xun's deep concern over Chinese social problems. In Lu Xun's eyes, the fate of Nora after departure is open to interpretation. Ibsen has freed himself from providing any specific answer. Proceeding from the Chinese cultural setting then, Lu Xun provided his analysis of Chinese problem in analyzing Nora in his speech, "There are indeed only two ways for Nora to choose; either be degenerate or come back" ("What will Nora Do?" 159). According to Lu Xun, as far as the spiritual revolution is concerned, the departure of Nora marks a dramatic spiritual revolution. Compared with the urgent need for Chinese spiritual awakening, the heroic behavior of Nora will ef-

fectively break the fragile fantasy of the Chinese people at that time.

Yet, will the departure of Nora be effective in constructing female independence? According to Lu Xun, this is far from enough. The first important step for Nora to break away from her family is to control economic power after her awakening. In the play, except for her awakened consciousness, Nora owns nothing. It is only through economic independence that Nora can enjoy independent character and genuine freedom. According to Lu Xun, the economic power is the realistic base for Nora to gain individual independence.

#### IV

As has been mentioned, the interpretations of Chinese intellectuals of Ibsen were quite politically-oriented. The May Fourth period witnessed Ibsen only as a social reformer rather than his original identity as an artist, which, to a great extent, limits the Chinese interpretation of Ibsenism within a narrow scope and tends to simplify the artistically versatile connotation of Ibsenism to reinforce the political and cultural upheaval force which was to take place in China. In terms of esthetic exploration, there are much more to be unveiled. For example, in *A Doll's House*, several binary oppositions can be found besides the realistic criticism exclusively paid attention to. There are conflicts between law and love (Nora forges the signature out of love to save her husband, yet acts against the regulations of law); the confrontation between poetic imagination and reality (the illusionary world Nora lives in is soon broken by the harsh realistic crisis); the relation between action of making choice and consequent duty (Nora is afraid of telling her husband the truth. After forging the signature, she is willing to shoulder the responsibility all by herself instead of taking advantage of Dr. Rank's love and borrowing money from him); the interactive relation between public and private affairs (Nora fancies to be kept safe and happy in her private life, yet troubles from public affairs eventually intrude into her life and leave her no escape); the doubt of religion (in the play, Nora keeps suspicious of the role religion plays in life and wants to check its validity). . . . In a word, what has been revealed by Ibsen is far from a simple scene, rather it's a complex revelation of the comprehensive crisis the society is facing. Simplified politicalization will eventually deteriorate the esthetic value and creativity of Ibsen's plays.

Yet, this kind of misinterpretation has its positive significance. The realistic style and individualism practiced in Ibsenism has changed the poetic tradition of Chinese theatre and laid a solid foundation of Chinese theatrical realism, which has profoundly influenced the development of Chinese theatre in the twentieth century. The introduction of new element leads to a series of theatrical renovation, which covers play writing, performance, stage directing and so on. Influenced by the popularity of Ibsenism, lots of plays with strong realistic concern mushroomed, focusing on problems of female rights, marriage, love, morality, social corruption and so on, which, although limited in their literary value, marks an important step forward in the modernization of Chinese theatre during the twentieth century. It has widened the horizon limited in pure esthetic concern and endowed Chinese theatre with keen realistic concerns during the twentieth century.

Besides, the individuality highlighted in Ibsenism has effectively facilitated the individual emancipation during the May Fourth Movement, whose main contribution is the awakening of individuality. Traditionally, the Chinese individuality was dependent on the imperial hierarchy, social morality and parents. It was until the May Fourth Movement that it found its independence and self-value. Also, it is Ibsenism which provides the Chinese playwrights with the initiative and motivation to conduct theatrical innovation.

What is more important is in the main discourse shaped during the May Fourth period. The reflection on modernity portrayed in *A Doll's House* has been covered and replaced by the desire of Chinese intellectuals for modernity. *A Doll's House* has broken the illusion of a warm and kind bourgeoisie family and revealed a series of paradoxes of modernity, pondering over the questions of how to get rid of hypocrisy and how to manage the modern nuclear family. For most of the Chinese intellectuals who were still anxious of catching up with modernity, this reflection was a step too fast to catch. The desire to construct modernity has already been internalized in their literary and cultural design. That is the reason why mushroomed variations of interpretation to Nora and the plays which were not consistent with the cultural context at that time: getting rid of hypocrisy was changed into fighting against repression; running away from modern nuclear family was replaced by the betrayal of the feudal family; the loss between the old and new religious beliefs had been replaced by personal free and romantic belief; the liberation on the spiritual level had been shaped into the political revolution and reasonable design for the whole country. The misinterpretation due to specific historical context has constituted a peculiar Chinese cultural scene and has profoundly influenced the contemporary Chinese national ideology.

When the Chinese modern drama has just been shaped, romanticism prevailed with its esthetic appreciation of plays. The early Chinese play groups, Chun Liu Play Group and Jin Hua Play Group, mainly portrayed emotional setbacks and tragedies in life. Yet, the harsh reality during that time soon reminded them that romanticism did not work in easing the social upheavals and political crisis. After the May Fourth Movement, with the enlightenment of Ibsen's plays, romanticism in Chinese plays was conversed into realistic considerations. As pointed out by Hu Shi in his "Ibsenism", "The most serious error of human beings lies in his refusal to open his eyes and face the reality. . . . The merit of Ibsen is that he dares to speak honestly and record the corrupted facts in the society and reveal them to us. . . . The literature of Ibsen and his view of life are realistic" (37). Thus, the misinterpretation of Ibsenism, to a certain extent, marks the formation and maturation of modern Chinese theatrical value, which replaces the traditional idealized notion of reinforcing social morality through artistic performance with the new one with keen realistic awareness, the development of Chinese theatre coming to a new age.

### [ Notes ]

1. Guo Moruo (1892 – 1978) is a famous Chinese scholar, poet and playwright. He is a pioneer of the New Poetry of China and noted as the literary leader after Lu Xun.
2. Qiu Jin (1875 – 1907) is a famous feminist in China who is strongly rebellious against feudalism

and fights for female rights.

3. See Guo Moruo's "The Key to Nora", *Xinhua Daily*, July 19th, 1942.

4. The Chinese Revolutionary League is the first bourgeois party led by Dr. Sun Yat-Sen to overthrow Qing Dynasty.

5. See Guo Moruo's "The Key to Nora", *Xinhua Daily*, July 19th, 1942.

6. Hu Shi (1891 – 1962) is a famous Chinese scholar, poet and philosopher. He is one of the leaders of the New Cultural Movement for his innovative literary ideas during the May Fourth Movement.

7. Lu Xun (1881 – 1936) is a famous Chinese literary critic, translator and founder of the New Literature Movement. With outstanding contribution in preserving Chinese cultural heritage and translating foreign literary works into Chinese, he was noted for his progressive ideas and rebellious attack against feudal system.

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