

# IBSEN AND PEKING WOMEN'S HIGH NORMAL UNIVERSITY

Sun Jian

## I. The Juxtaposition

The title of the article may cause some misunderstanding when Ibsen's name is seen juxtaposed with an institution of higher learning – Peking Women's High Normal University, which was set up at the beginning of the 20th century when China entered a most dynamic period in her modern history.

However if we examine the historical background from either the cultural or political angle, we will not feel surprised by the juxtaposition. The establishment of the university, in retrospect, was one of the significant results of the reform which began in the late Qing Dynasty when Emperor Guangxu 光绪<sup>1</sup> and the liberal-minded intellectuals decided to bring some changes to the status quo of the nation during the Hundred Day's Reform.<sup>2</sup> Though the reform ended in failure with the execution of many radical reformers and the reform programme revoked by Empress Dowger Cixi 慈禧.<sup>3</sup> In a coup supported by the conservatives, some reform measures survived and were taken into effect. These include the establishment of the Imperial University in 1898 (it was changed into Peking University in 1912) and the abolition of the Imperial Examination in 1905. The significance of the educational reform started in the late Qing period could not be overemphasized. The reform aimed at modernizing the traditional educational system, according to the Western model, by introducing school curricula containing both modern Western subjects and Chinese classics, cultivating the students both culturally and intellectually and fostering a sense of loyalty and patriotism among young people. Timothy B. Weston, when commenting on the relationship between the founding of the Imperial University and the Chinese modernity, concludes: "But if we move the Imperial University from background to foreground, ... it becomes clear that the founding of the university in 1898 reflects an outward-opening intellectual and cognitive transformation that had already begun in China and that the epistemological basis of the May Fourth lurch toward Chinese modernity was, in important ways, anticipated at the turn of the century or earlier"(Weston 2002).

Even more significant in the reform was the setting up of the school for girls because for the first time in the long history of China, girls could sit in the classroom receiving systematic trainings as boys, a fact which totally subverted the stereotyped notion that "she is a virtuous girl who possesses no talent".<sup>4</sup>

Ibsen and Peking Women's High Normal University is connected because, for one thing, Ibsen, as is known to all, became a household name during and after the New Culture Movement and the May Four Movement in China, and he was particularly popular among young people. A Ying 阿英, a well-known Chinese critic said, "The so-called claim that 'everyone knows about him' suggests that Ibsen was really popular among the masses and exerted great impact on the Chinese society. ....Liberal-minded people all loved him madly and all newspapers and journals wrote about him. Ibsen's plays, his *Nora* in particular, played a decisive role in the movement for liberating women".<sup>5</sup> Shen Yanbin 沈雁冰, a famous Chinese novelist, also wrote, "At that time, the name of Ibsen was forever in the thought of

the young who also talked about him frequently".<sup>6</sup> For another, Ibsen's *A Doll House* was one of the first plays from the West to be translated into Chinese and it was also the most performed play in the period. The great Norwegian playwright and his play were met with great enthusiasm by the girls at Peking Women's High Normal University and as a result, they performed *Nora* (*A Doll House*) on May 5, 1923, followed by a heated debate on the issue whether drama should serve as a piece of art or a tool for political purposes. Lu Xun 鲁迅,<sup>7</sup> the great Chinese writer who was teaching at the university at that time, also appeared on the scene by delivering a very famous lecture on "What Happens after Nora Leaves Home?". Through the debate and Lu Xun's lecture, the girls at the university got to know Ibsen better and were much inspired by Nora's determination to seek freedom by stepping out into the world. The love of literature and crave for freedom brought the girls into more contact with modern Western ideas and literature due to the courses on those subjects taught on campus. They set up literary societies and even wrote creatively about their feelings in short stories and novels. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that Peking Women's High Normal University was the cradle for the first group of modern Chinese women writers. Fired with patriotism and passion for freedom, on March 18, 1926, the girls from the university, together with students and intellectuals from other universities, took to the streets and demonstrated in Tiananmen Gate protesting against the warlords and the imperial powers. The soldiers fired at the demonstrators and many students, including some girls from the university, died and the Chinese "Noras" sacrificed their lives heroically for freedom, dignity and individual rights.

## II. Peking Women's High Normal University

The birth of Peking Women's High Normal University coincided with the birth of the New Culture Movement which was followed by a more politically oriented May Fourth Movement which heralded the awakening of the Chinese intellectuals from their disillusionment with the Confucian ideas and the traditional Chinese culture. They sought to create a brand new culture by integrating modern Western standards based on democracy and science. They called for an end to Confucian ideology which dominated China for thousands of years and to the patriarchal family and social systems that suppressed individual freedoms, especially the freedom of women.

Hu Shi, 胡适<sup>8</sup> one of the pioneers of the movement, highlights the essence of the New Culture Movement in a penetrating article based on his lecture given in 1933 entitled "The Chinese Renaissance" by saying: "It was a conscious movement to promote a new literature in the living language of the people to take the place of the classical literature of old" (Hu 1933).

Together with the influx of political ideas and theories, many literary works from the West were introduced into China at that time. The period particularly witnessed the performances of many Western plays among which Ibsen's plays stood out prominently.

The vitality of the modern European theatre urged the reformers in China to investigate the defects of the traditional Chinese theatre. The revelation they made pointed to the fact that the Chinese theatre, which was operatic in form, was backward both in terms of subject matter and contents. It existed as an impediment to

the popularization of new ideas. Zhang Jian 张健, a Chinese scholar of drama, observes that the May Fourth intellectuals equated the old styled drama to the whole corrupt Chinese society and the whole feudal system. So besides attacking Chinese society and the traditional culture, they relentlessly placed the old drama under critical fire (Zhang 2006, 8). He asserted, "So the 'awakening of human beings' formed a great trend of the age and became a prominent cultural phenomenon in the May Fourth New Culture Movement" (Zhang 2006, 9).

Turning their attention to the imported Western drama, people consequently discovered that the spoken drama, a new theatrical form, could serve as a very effective way of exploring many of the social problems. As Elisabeth Eide points out, "in order to serve more pressing political and intellectual needs, the Chinese theatre world needed to change to a modern, Westernized spoken drama" (Eide 1977). That is the reason why Ibsen caught the fancy of the people immediately after he was performed in the Chinese theatre. "Ibsen's modern aesthetic principle of drama meets the need of setting up the modern Chinese aesthetic principles" (Liu 2008).

In the process of revolutionizing the traditional theatre, the Chinese reformers were not alone in their endeavour and their counterparts in Japan had set up a good example, for them in this respect, as Erika Fischer-Lichte points out:

"By the 1920s a wholly new theatrical form, the so-called Shingeki ("new drama") was established. The "Literary Society" and the "Tsukiji Little Theatre" founded by Osanai Kaoru in 1924 took the realistic theatre of Western culture as their model. In general, contemporary European dramas were produced; Ibsen and Chekhov were especially favoured. The members of the Shingeki movement believed that traditional theatre forms such as Noh and Kabuki were out-dated and sterile. They felt such forms were no longer in touch with the problems of contemporary Japanese society. By turning to realistic drama of European origin, they tried to stimulate the development of modern Japanese society by offering a model." (Fischer-Lichte 1996)

It is true that many of the earliest modern Chinese dramatists went to Japan to learn the new art and they were fascinated and inspired by the experiments conducted by the Japanese dramatists. While staying in Japan, they established a theatrical group called Chun Liu She 春柳社(Spring Willow Group)<sup>9</sup> and performed plays in the new form there. Later they went back to China with many radical ideas about the theatre reform and they were the first to put Ibsen's *Nora* on the Chinese stage in 1914.

Like the English dramatist Bernard Shaw, a self-claimed Ibsenite, Hu Shi also advocated a kind of Ibsenism in a special issue of the journal *New Youth* 《新青年》<sup>10</sup> in May 1918, calling people, especially intellectuals, to rise up and expose the evils of the society by learning from Ibsen. As Professor Wang Ning 王宁 says "We must admit that Ibsenism, to a large extent, is something borrowed and reconstructed (in the Chinese context). Its purpose is to expose the dark reality and to criticize the social and cultural customs of the feudalistic society" (Wang 2006, 195). Hu Shi was also interested in exploring the new forms and new techniques in Ibsen's plays. In view of the then situation in China, he believed that there was an urgent need to introduce modern Western plays into China. He also urged the Chinese playwrights to learn from their foreign counterparts by writing plays which would reflect the

reality and the sufferings of the people in in bai-hua 白话 (the common language). He also took the lead in applying what he had learned from Ibsen's plays, especially his *A Doll House* into practice by writing his own experimental spoken drama *The Greatest Event in Life*. 《终身大事》<sup>11</sup>

In varying degrees, Peking Women's High Normal University was considered an important fruit of the reform in education which started in the late Qing Dynasty in China. In July 1908, the Imperial Women's Normal School was set up under the orders of the government. In the following year, the construction of the school buildings was completed. The four two-story teaching buildings of baroque style occupied an area of 4300 square meters. After the founding of the Republic, the Imperial Women's Normal School was transformed into Peking Women's Normal School in May 1912. In April 1919, it was re-established as Peking Women's High Normal University, the only national university for women in China. In June 1924, it was designated as Peking National Women's Normal University and finally in 1931 it was merged into Peking Normal University. In its short history, Peking Women's High Normal University experienced the most exciting moments in modern China.

In the preface to her book *New Education and New Females*, He Linghua 何玲华 wrote: "Only in the modern period could the girls receive education in school. That's to say the modern female education, from the beginning period to its heyday, became a very important component part of the modern "new education" after going through a historical process during which it was first rejected and then admitted and finally developed with great momentum. During the outcries of the progressive intellectuals in the late Qing Dynasty for survival through self-struggle, female education focused more on the objective of "fostering female virtues" in order to train "understanding wives and loving mothers". After the Xinhai Revolution, 辛亥革命<sup>12</sup> the focus was shifted to the equal rights of men and women. The idea of equality, though interrupted during Yuan Shikai's 袁世凯 Restoration period,<sup>13</sup> gave rise to fundamental changes in the female education in China during the New Culture and the May Fourth Movements. A group of newly-educated females, who were different from the traditional women, sprang up in this period" (He 2007, 1).

It is true that the New Culture and the May Fourth Movements brought great changes to campus life at Peking Women's High Normal University. The students were lucky to study in the location close to Peking University where most of the leading figures of the New Culture Movement gathered at the invitation of Cai Yuanpei, 蔡元培<sup>14</sup> President of Peking University. Among them were Chen Duxiu, 陈独秀<sup>15</sup> serving as Dean of Letters and Li Dazhao 李大钊<sup>16</sup> as librarian. Hu Shi, Lu Xun and many others were also recruited by President Cai and they formed a brilliant group of progressive intellectuals who were determined to transform the Chinese society restricted by the traditional culture, especially Confucian ideas. Likewise, the female students benefited a great deal from many insightful lectures and courses given by those scholars. From Cai Yuanpei, a staunch supporter of the women's movement for equal rights and equal opportunities in education and career with men, they learned the principle of freedom of thought and tolerance for diverse ideas and the importance of implementing the policy of comprehensive development in morality, wisdom, health, collectivism and beauty; from Hu Shi, who was popular for the journal *New Youth*, they learned sophisticated but fascinating Western

philosophical ideas and theories of new culture and the importance of using the vernacular language (*bai hua*); from Li Dazhao, an outstanding leader of the student movement, they came into contact with many Marxist ideas about revolution and with Lu Xun, a great novelist and thinker, they understood the cause of evils of the feudalistic Chinese society and the need to transform the system which sought to enslave the individuals.

The girls, greatly illuminated by the novel ideas and thoughts of those great thinkers and scholars, put into practice many new ideas they learned and actively participated in all kinds of social activities, organising themselves into many students' bodies in accordance with Cai Yuanpei's idea of student's autonomy. Their interest in new literature inevitably resulted in the establishment of a Literature and Art Society which became home for many literature-loving students. The society organized many lectures on literature and art and Lu Xun's famous *Nora* lecture was one of the best ones delivered there. As one can imagine, the students were also active in campus theatricals by staging many well-known Western plays in the format of spoken drama.

### III. The Debate on the Performance of *Nora* (*A Doll House*)

The girls from different departments of Peking Women's High Normal University often organised amusement gatherings for different purposes. Usually the gatherings were held in order to raise fund for internship and for various kinds of social activities. People, especially students and scholars, responded to the gatherings enthusiastically, and the news about those gatherings were often reported in the local newspapers. At these gatherings, there was a big variety of programmes such as dancing, games, shows and performances of plays. The event, which aroused controversy among the critics of drama, was the performance of Ibsen's play *A Doll House* (it was often called *Nora* at that time). *Xue Deng* 学灯 (literally means "Lamp for Learning"),<sup>17</sup> the supplement to the *Newspaper for Current Affairs* in Shanghai, carried the news about the performance on April 20, 1923:

"It is said that the Department of Physics and Chemistry (of Peking Women's High Normal University) has decided to set up factories to give the students opportunities to do internship and to promote industry. As there is a shortage of funding for the purpose, the department has decided to hold a get-together during which various kinds of entertainment will be provided. In the programme, a serious drama, *Nora*, Ibsen's masterpiece describing the hypocrisies of the family, will be performed. ... It will be a grand occasion in this beautiful spring season".<sup>18</sup>

On May 5, 1923, the girls of Peking Women's High Normal University performed *Nora* at a local theatre called Xin Ming Theatre 新明剧院. All the male roles were acted by girls and they had drawn a large number of spectators among whom there were some famous scholars and literati. Despite the fact that the performance was quite amateurish and the students from the Department of Physics and Chemistry lacked drama-school techniques, the actress acting the role of *Nora* won unanimous acclaim for her understanding of the play. The only problem of the night was that many people talked during the performance and stalked out of the theatre in the Second and the Third Acts. Even some well-known men of letters took their leave in the process. Some viewers sympathetic to the students were to the

students were angered by the chaos at the performance and criticized those who left early in *The Morning News Supplement* 《晨报副刊》<sup>19</sup> after the performance, starting off a heated debate.

In a review on May 7, 1923, a critic called Ren Tuo 仁陀<sup>20</sup>, started by first of all, downgrading the traditional Chinese opera, asserting that there is no artistic value in regards to the Chinese mask play. He even considered it the grand foe of art. Instead he glorified modern Western drama by saying, “the new art China needs most now is “the art of human life”. In terms of drama, problem plays such as Ibsen’s *Nora* are most needed. I hope it will be performed every day”.

Ren Tuo’s opinion was representative in the rising moment of the New Culture Movement when many scholars cherished the view that the traditional Chinese theatre should be completely transformed to cater to the taste of the youth in the new age. And also, the idea of “the art of human life” was what the progressive intellectuals looked for and tried to popularize through the medium of the spoken drama. But the following comments were a mixture of both admiration and indignation:

He then continued, “Sure enough, on the 5th of this month, Peking Women’s High Normal University performed *Nora*. I went to see it and felt satisfied by the performance. The actresses were very faithful to the original play and I brought with me the play translated by Mr. Pen Jiaxun 潘家洵<sup>21</sup> and felt sure the performance followed the text very well to the best of my satisfaction. The girl who acted the role of Nora was the one who knew the play very well and her gestures and expressions demonstrated the best of Nora’s personality”. However he was angry at those spectators for their improper manners, “They showed impatience when they saw the First Act in which Nora was engaging in a long talk with Linde and many even left, one by one, during the Second Act. This fully shows that they were not worthy to be present at such a valuable performance. They never know that *Nora* is a famous play which aims at solving the problem of the female personalities (there is no ‘personality’ in their brain not to mention ‘female personalities’). They never know the relationship between drama and life (They never have ‘life’ in their mind)”!

The anger of this critic was understandable because traditionally the habits and the manners of the Chinese audience viewing a performance were determined by the nature of the traditional Chinese theatre. Generally, the Chinese audience in the past went to the theatre to be entertained or to spend the evening with friends. The Chinese operas were characterized by the singing, dancing and repetitive music produced by instruments such as huqin (two-stringed viola), and yueqin (a four-stringed instrument), and bells and gongs used to produce percussion. The performances, which were usually boisterous, were never affected by the noise from the audience. Western visitors visiting the Chinese theatre may feel dismayed by the spectators who don’t care much about the feeling of others by talking aloud, making comments openly and eating and drinking during the performances. This kind of public nuisance may drive the Westerners away and is incompatible with the respectful behaviour in the modern theatre.

Fang Xin 芳信,<sup>22</sup> another critic, echoed some of Ren Tuo’s thoughts by saying “The students of Peking Women’s High Normal University should be respected for their enthusiasm of adventure in staging such a difficult play. Now we should

welcome the girls from the Department of Physics and Chemistry for putting on the stage Nora---a tragedy describing the marriage of two uncompromising genders”. Then like Ren Tuo, he was dismayed by some of the inconsiderate audiences and was even more vicious than the former in his accusation, “The cursed common and banal Chinese audience! The lamentable Chinese women! While the attention of the remaining audience was totally arrested by Nora who was struggling hard with herself on the stage, ha, ha, you the gentlemen wearing the hats, and ladies and misses wearing the scarves were nowhere to be found. You left behind the rare happiness for us to enjoy. How generous of you! Pooh! You just went after stinking smell mixed with syphilis”! Though he felt interrupted, the intensity and the power of the performance impressed him greatly, “The more I see it, the more intense I become. She is talking on the stage and I am sweating in my seat. In fact, the words of Nora are equal to an article discussing some problems. People enjoy seeing it because it is like a paper-wrapped pebble thrown into the water causing people’s mind to vibrate”. He then suggested that this kind of play should be performed in a smaller theatre with those people who know how to appreciate modern drama and the price of the performance should be raised to avoid the embarrassing noise and unknowing spectators.

In his article, Lin Ruji 林如稷<sup>23</sup> agreed with Ren Tuo about the effect of the performance believing that it is necessary and important to review the performance while airing one’s own views in the discussion and debate. He made the comments after reading Ren Tuo’s review and felt lucky that some of the audience left in the middle so he could see the performance quietly by savouring the richness of meaning in the play. He also pointed to the importance of changing the watching habits of the audience. While noticing that many performances were done by the universities and Aimei Theatre during this period, he thought it a good sign to popularize the Western theatre which would cause the traditional theatre to transform itself. This would in turn change the habit of the Chinese audience when viewing a modern piece.

He Yigong 何一公,<sup>24</sup> like aforementioned critics, also contributed a long article to the Supplement by exhibiting his impression of the performance. In his view, the performance of Nora should be praised, despite some defects, because they helped introduce the new Western plays into China. This was important because the new Chinese playwrights should learn from their Western colleagues to put something good rather than false and bad on stage. He focused more on the significance and the artistic value of Ibsen’s play in the second part of his article: “Nora is indeed the best of art in social drama. For such a play, the meaning of the original script should be performed by the best actors and actresses so people can see its function and worth. So the best art cannot be explained by words. Only talents on the stage and accomplished artists can dig up the hidden meaning of the play. As for the play, Ibsen’s problem plays demonstrate human life by giving a detailed description of facts according to the specific situation. Nora is a play exposing the social evils --- the power behind the corrupt and dirty society. Nora is a person who is frustrated and could not develop her personality freely, and she wants to save herself after her awakening”.

Actually, the critics not only blamed the audience who had left the theatre early but some intellectuals who thought the aesthetic value of a play was more important

than the “art of human life” and “personalities”. The shared views and poignant remarks of the above critics were soon contradicted and held up for ridicule by the two famous writers Chen Xiying 陈西莹<sup>25</sup> and Xu Zhimo 徐志摩<sup>26</sup> who were all graduates from prestigious universities in England. On May 24, 1923, *The Morning News Supplement* carried two articles respectively written by Chen Xiying with the title “Seeing the New Play and Learning to Be Fashionable” and by Xu Zhimo entitled “What Do We See in the Theatre”? Apart from explaining why they left early, they attacked those critics who lashed out at them for quitting the performance.

Chen Xiying went to the performance with great expectation and recalled “When I heard that the girls at Peking Women’s High Normal University were courageous enough as to perform *Nora*, I was overjoyed. Here is the best material and we will see how the artists execute it. What has made me feel happy is that I have already had a set standard in my mind having seen the film adaptation of it with the famous Russian Actress Nazimova acting the main role and then the stage production in which the rising British Actress Syber Thorndike acted *Nora*.” Naturally he was disappointed when watching the performance, so he blamed the acting for being very amateurish and lacking professional skills and confessed that that was the reason why he “felt impatient” and went away “putting on his hat”. He then accused Ren Tuo and Fang Xin of their vicious attack on the people withdrawing halfway. For him, a piece of artistic work should be treated artistically because “drama is a form of art and a very sophisticated form”. “Denouncing those people who left early for not understanding the problem is equal to belittling Ibsen as a great artist”! Xu Zhimo agreed with him on the importance of having “aesthetic pleasure” when seeing a play. Then he expressed his strong opinion that, “The immortal value of Ibsen’s play (*A Doll House*) is not about his moral standard, not about his idea of emancipation, not about personality. The lasting value of *Nora* lies in its art. ‘Isms’ is only a fashion and a trend, which comes easily and disappears easily. Only the soul that the artists have created in their works will remain, just as our feelings for beauty will stay with us as long as we live. . . . . ‘Isms’ is shallow and only serves as material for artistic creation. If we only discover the moral teaching in the play, we will miss the subtlety of art.”

Chen Xiying and Xu Zhimo could well be justified for their principle of art for art’s sake and their strong argument convincingly defended the aesthetic value of Ibsen’s play. But it is also undeniably true that *Nora*’s role had really inspired women in China for achieving their emancipation in a specific historical context. The debate continued long after this event and the critics remained divided in their views over the issue of the play as a piece of pure art or an instrument for didactic and utilitarian purposes.

#### IV. Lu Xun’s Lecture and Article

As a distinguished scholar, a radical thinker and a supporter of women’s emancipation in China, Lu Xun was obviously well informed of the debate going on about the performance done by the students of Peking Women’s High Normal University.

Recruited by President Xu Shoutang 许寿棠<sup>27</sup> and teaching courses in Chinese fiction at Peking Women’s High Normal University from October 1923 to August



1926, Lu Xun enjoyed great popularity at the university and his lectures always attracted a big audience. He was respected and loved by the students for his erudition, charm, humour and the sympathy he showed for the students in their demand for freedom and independence.

At the invitation of the Literature and Art Society at the university, Lu Xun delivered a lecture with the topic "What Happens after Nora Leaves Home?" on December 26, 1923. In the lecture, Lu Xun expressed his deep concern over the fate of Nora after she left home. He cared more about the economic status of Nora rather than the artistic value of the play. He first pointed out two possible consequences for Nora's departure and then stressed the importance of women achieving economic independence and especially equality with men in the society. "But since Nora has already woken up from her dream, it is difficult for her to return to that dream state, and she is left with no choice but to leave. Yet once she leaves, at times it seems that her only options are return or ruin. .... First of all, within the family, resources should be evenly distributed among men and women. Secondly, within society, men and women should have equal power. It's a shame I don't know how to get hold of this kind of power – all I know is that struggle is necessary - and the struggle for economic power may call for even more drastic measures than the struggle for political power" (Lu 1980, 164-165).

The tragedy of Li Chao 李超, a female student who majored in Chinese at the university, shocked the nation before Lu Xun's lecture. Her death in August 1919 was regarded as a major incident at that time and it aroused public indignation inside and outside the university. The incident showed how important it was for women to obtain what Lu Xun called "economic power". Li Chao came from a wealthy family with two sisters. As there was no son in the family, Li's father decided to adopt a son from a distant relative to inherit the property according to the rules of the feudal system. After her parents died, the brother arranged a marriage for Li Chao against her will in order to seize all the property. Li Chao then escaped from the family and became a student of Peking Women's High Normal University. In a rage, her brother cut her off from all the economic support from the family. Consequently, Li Chao had to live in poverty and eventually died of tuberculosis. Li Chao died in the middle of the May Fourth Movement and fell victim to the cruel patriarchal feudal system. Her death caused a furor within society and was given wide coverage in the newspapers and her funeral was attended by a large number of people, including many famous professors and scholars who expressed their grief for her death as a young budding girl. The president of Peking University, Cai Yuanpei, expressed his grief at the funeral in an angry speech, and Hu Shi wrote a biography named *The Life of Li Chao* in great length to commemorate her and described her as "an important victim in the history of the Chinese feminist movement".<sup>28</sup>

For Lu Xun, to struggle means to make sacrifice. He cautioned the girls about the problems of the Chinese society and the possible obstacles they might encounter on the way to achieving their objectives in life. The Chinese society could not be changed easily and the new world could only be created by shedding blood. "It is a pity that change does not come easily in China - this is a place where anything from moving a table to refitting a stove will almost always end in bloodshed ..... It will take some hard lashing on the back with a giant whip [to bring about change] - China

simply is not going to move of its own accord. I believe this lashing is going to come sooner or later (whether or not it's a good thing is another matter), but China is definitely going to be hit hard. As for where this blow will come from, how it's going to come, I really cannot say with any certainty. And that concludes my talk”(Lu 1980, 167-168). Lu Xun's observation of the Chinese society was insightful. The assertion he gave at the end of the lecture was proved to be true by the bloody evidence of the March 18 Massacre in 1926.

On March 12, 1926, the Dagu Forts in Tianjin was bombarded by a Japanese warship which resulted in the death of several soldiers of the Nationalist army. The troops there fired back in self-defence and forced the warship to move away from the Tanggu harbor. However, the ambassadors representing eight imperial powers blamed China for violating the so-called the Boxer Protocol and issued an ultimatum to the Beiyang Government under Duan Qirui 段祺瑞<sup>29</sup> demanding the dismantling of all defence facilities on the Taku Forts.

Upon hearing the news, people in Beijing were enraged and the students and intellectuals took to the streets and demonstrated in Tiananmen Gate, protesting against the warlords and the imperial powers. Li Dazhao, one of the earliest communist leaders, spoke to the protesters demanding the abolition of all the unequal treaties and the expulsion of the ambassadors signing the ultimatum.

Duan Qirui was worried about the demonstration which might get out of hand and ordered the military police to disperse the protesters in front of the government headquarters. The peaceful march turned into a scene of violence and the indiscriminate shooting by the armed police killed 47 people and wounded 200 during the process.

Liu Hezhen 刘和珍<sup>30</sup> and several other female students from Peking Women's High Normal University were shot dead. The girls from the school walked in front of the protesters showing their courage and valour and the image of the new females. Liu Hezhen, the then leader of the Students' Union at the university, was immortalized by Lu Xun in his moving article “In Memory of Miss Liu Hezhen” on April 1, 1926, “True fighters dare face the sorrows of humanity, and look unflinchingly at bloodshed.....Miss Liu Hezhen, one of the more than forty young people killed, was my student. So I used to call her, and so I thought of her. But now I hesitate to call her my student, for now I should present to her my sorrow and my respect. She is no student now of the person dragging on an ignoble existence like myself. She is a Chinese woman who has died for China”(Lu 1980, 276).

Lu Xun, in another article, marked the day of massacre as the darkest day in the history of the Republic, and people all over China were shocked by the deaths of the students and joined Lu Xun in their condemnation of the wanton violence on the part of the soldiers. Duan Qirui was horrified after knowing the bloodshed and went and knelt down at the place where the students were shot dead and vowed to be a vegetarian all his life and he kept his promise.

## **VI. The Constellation of Women Writers---The Noras in China**

As the girls at Peking Women's High Normal University became more educated and enlightened, they thought it their mission to create a kind of female discourse which differed essentially from the one found in the male-dominated texts. “Writing about

oneself' became the consensus of the females writing at the time, and they committed themselves to creating new ways of expressing their thoughts by integrating their painful past experiences with newly acquired ideas on campus. The period witnessed many dynamic literary activities as the girls organized their own literary groups, wrote about themselves and published their stories in their own journals. Lu Yin 庐隐<sup>31</sup>, Feng Yuanjun 冯沅君<sup>32</sup>, Shi Pingmei 石评梅<sup>33</sup> and others formed a brilliant constellation and brought some brand new changes to the stagnant and male-centred world of literature. It is a period of busy literary creation unprecedented, as Wang Cuiyan 王翠艳 comments, "The beginning of the education of higher learning for the Chinese women not only took place with the birth of the modern female literature, but kept a close relationship with it. The majority of the first generation of the Chinese women writers formed their modern ideological, cultural and aesthetical ideas in the context of cultural discourse of the national university education for women". And "The university campus provided those women writers unique environment for fostering their independent character and for bringing up the New Women and New Literature during that specific period" (Wang 2005). Peking Women's High Normal University, regarded as the birthplace of the New Female Literature, fostered most of the talented modern women writers in the first generation who are often described as Chinese *Noras* because of the influence of Ibsen. Liu Siqian, 刘思谦 a professor at Henan University in China, examines those female writers and their works in her book *Talking about "Nora": the Psychological Evolution of the Contemporary Chinese Women Writers* by asserting that, "The image of Nora can be regarded as the prototype of the contemporary Chinese female writers. Her home leaving has demonstrated the behaviour of the whole generation and her motto that "first and foremost I am a human being, the same as you" has become the manifesto of their spiritual awakening. What's more, with regard to both the behaviour and ethos, Nora's influence well surpasses the generation of the May Fourth Movement. To some extent, the modern Chinese female writers are all 'Noras'" (Liu 1993, 16). Liu's assertion is well grounded not only because she conducted a careful investigation of those writers from the university but her mother was also one of the *Noras* during the May Fourth Movement who entered Peking Women's High Normal University and was associated with many women writers active at that time. Her running-away from the arranged marriage in order to engage herself in the great cultural movement ran parallel with the stories of many of her peers at the university.

Toril Moi, in her book *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*, says, "Nora's struggle for recognition as a human being is rightly considered an exemplary case of women's struggle for political and social rights. But Nora claims her humanity only after explicitly rejecting two other identities: namely "doll" and "wife and mother" (Moi 2006, 226).

The home leaving and homecoming are recurrent themes in the writings of the new female writers who, in one way or another, experienced the painful process of rejecting their roles as dolls before and after the marriage. They had to surmount the obstacles by going through the two doors---the doors of the house of their fathers and then their husbands. "The wandering, hesitation and going out and re-entering the two doors formed the heavily painful and sentimental psychological space of the

May Fourth women writers. Some even sacrificed their lives for the move” (Liu 1993, 16).

Zhang Ailing 张爱玲<sup>34</sup>, a well-known novelist writing in Shanghai during the Japanese occupation in the 1940s, touched on a very serious topic in an ironic tone in her essay after witnessing the dilemma of many “Noras”: “The Chinese have learned to leave home from the play *A Doll House*. And then the free but sad hand gesture has given the Chinese youth a deep impression. . . . . But where shall we go? ‘Go, let’s go upstairs!’ -----They will come down when hearing the call for dinner”(Zhang 1992, 88).

Despite the dilemma and difficulties with which they were confronted, the new female writers endeavoured to establish a kind of female consciousness by writing for themselves. It is true they were largely enlightened by the writings and instructions of men, but it is their own voice which pronounces the rise of a new and independent literary group. Again Liu Siqian says, “From being represented in the writings of men to expressing their thoughts in their own voice; from being spoken about to speaking out; from being ignorant about oneself and men to a clearer understanding of both, these changes are well registered in the development of female literature in China” (Liu 1993, 19).

The writings of those female writers, inspired by Ibsen, were regarded as an important component part of the May Fourth Movement. Their unique perspective, special style and fresh language, combined with their personal experiences as girls from patriarchal families and from the arranged marriages formed a collective female consciousness significant for the creation of New Female Literature which helped sweep away the kind of “Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies”<sup>35</sup> fiction dominant at that time. As Lu Xun said, “The introduction of Ibsen’s play and the appearance of Hu Shi’s *The Greatest Event in Life* in a special form, though not intentional, made “Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies” fiction with the marriage problem as its lifeblood fade as Nora departed” (Lu 1980, 293). It would not be an exaggeration to say that the female consciousness which was formed at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century has stayed with the female writings in China ever since.

## Conclusion

It goes without saying that Ibsen’s influence on the New Culture Movement and the May Fourth Movement was huge. And the main thrust of the ideological emancipation was strongly felt in Peking Women’s High Normal University. Ibsen’s *A Doll House* had, without doubt, greatly inspired the girls at the university and helped effectively to bring about a spiritual enlightenment of the new females. From the performance of *Nora* by the students of Peking Women’s High Normal University and the heated debate after the performance to Lu Xun’s lecture on *Nora*; from the death of Li Chao to the eventual bloodshed in the massacre in which some young and innocent girls gave up their precious life for freedom and democracy in the streets of the capital; from the spiritual enlightenment to the rise of the first group of the modern Chinese female writers, Ibsen’s presence was always and decisively felt. In this respect, it is significant to establish a connection between Ibsen and Peking Women’s High Normal University at the dawn of modernity in China.

In her famous article “Women’s Liberation in China”, Madam Song Chingling

宋庆龄<sup>36</sup>, widow of Dr. Sun Yat-sen, described the process of women's liberation in China by referring to women's awakening to the birth of the new culture and the education they received. "The pace of the Women's Liberation Movement closely followed the advance of the democratic revolution. Women's status in China was apparently raised by 1930, on the eve of the war against Japanese aggression. There were already at that time colleges and even middle schools where co-education was established. Women graduates, not a few of them, were employed as teachers, medical doctors and hospital nurses." However, as a great woman who had experienced all the important periods in modern China, she was not optimistic about the situation of women in the Chinese society: "If we ask, however, whether women's liberation movement in China has come to its end, the answer is definitely no. It is true that the landlord system has been abolished for nearly twenty years, but much of the feudal-patriarchal ideology still prevails. ... Only when the feudal-patriarchal ideology is eradicated can we expect the sexual equality fully established". Though Madam Song spoke in political terms, her words send us a warning and they remind us of the talk which takes place at the end of Ibsen's *A Doll House* when Nora refuses to believe in "miracles" and then closes the door on the possibility. Things have undergone great changes ever since the New Culture and the May Fourth Movements when China first embarked on the long journey toward modernity. And admittedly, successful economic reform has greatly modernised China and made it the centre of attention in this globalized age. But it is still early to say that the problems which the new females or the Chinese Noras faced in that dynamic period, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, have been resolved. Despite the fact that women in China have become rich nowadays, how much shall we say they have gained in terms of freedom and equal rights with men within the family and in society? On their way to achieving independence and full freedom, the Chinese women still need to struggle hard to move out of the "gate" in pursuit of the "greatest miracle"!

#### Notes:

1. Guangxu 光绪(1875–1908), Chinese Emperor of Qing who, with the help of some senior officials, initiated a series of reforms which brought about some drastic social changes. But his reform efforts failed due to the intervention of the conservative forces at the court.
2. The Hundred Days' Reform refers to the 104-day national cultural, political and educational reform movement from 11 June to 21 September 1898 in the late Qing Dynasty in China. The short-lived reform was started by Emperor Guangxu and his supporters but was suppressed by Empress Dowager Cixi and her conservative forces.
3. Empress Dowager Cixi 慈禧(1835 – 1908) was woman who had control over the emperor and effectively influenced his decisions "behind the curtain" as the Chinese saying goes. She was accused by some historians of being responsible for the fall of the Qing Dynasty. However, others thought differently.

4. A Chinese saying which became popular in the late Ming Dynasty. It reflects the deep-rooted prejudice against women long before that period.
5. The article was written by A Ying entitled "Ibsen's Works in China" published in *The Art and Literature Daily* 《文艺报》 Issue No.17, 1956. Pp 34-35.
6. The article "Talking about *Ghosts*" appeared in *The Literature Weekly* 《文学周报》 Issue No. 176. P38. Shanghai, 1925. Mao Dun 矛盾(1896–1981) was the pen name of Shen Yanbing, a famous Chinese novelist, literary critic and journalist. His most famous works are *Midnight*, a realistic novel exposing the social evils in Shanghai in the early 20th century, and *Corruption*.
7. Lu Xun 鲁迅(1881-1936) Born and bred in Shaoxing, Zhejiang, Lu Xun became the most famous novelist, literary critic and thinker in modern China. In his novels, stories and essays, he relentlessly exposed the social evils and satirised the bad habits of the nation and its people. As a radical revolutionary writer, he called on the people to rise and destroy the old culture and tradition. His writings were poignant, racy and penetrating. He advocated a new style of writing by using bai hua 白话 (the vernacular language) and became a supporter of Marxist ideology. He taught at Peking University and Peking Women's Normal University as a professor during the May Fourth Movement and was very popular among the students.
8. Hu Shih 胡适(1891-- 1962) Hu was born in Shanghai. Later he obtained a scholarship and studied agriculture at Cornell University in America. In 1912, he changed his major to philosophy and literature. He met John Dewey at Columbia University where he studied philosophy under him and also became Dewey's translator when he lectured in China during 1919-1921. He later got a position teaching philosophy in Peking University where he collaborated with Chen Duxiu, editor of the influential journal *New Youth* and quickly gained much attention and started to popularize his radical ideas in the journal which was extremely popular among the students and teachers. Hu contributed greatly to the Chinese social, cultural and language reform. He made great efforts in introducing vernacular Chinese (bai hua) during the New Culture Movement and later the May Fourth Movement as one of the acknowledged leading figures.
9. The Spring Willow Group 春柳社, first set up in Japan, was a literary society which contributed greatly to the reformation of the Chinese theatre. The members introduced many Ibsen's plays into China and they put Ibsen's *A Doll's House* on the Chinese stage as early as 1914.
10. The journal *New Youth* was started as *Youth Magazine* in Shanghai on September 15, 1915 and it was changed into *New Youth* in the second issue. It played an important role in the New Culture Movement and the May Fourth Movement by propagating radical ideas when it was moved to Beijing in 1917.

11. *The Greatest Event in Life* 《终生大事》 was a play written by Hu Shih in 1919 about a girl Tian Yamei 田亚梅 who decides to go against the arranged marriage of her parents and leaves home with her future husband.
12. The Xinhai Revolution 辛亥革命 refers to the revolution which took place in the Chinese year of Xinhai (1911). It overthrew the Qing Dynasty and established the Republic of China.
13. Refer to Yuan Shikai 袁世凯, the second president of the Republic of China who later proclaimed himself the Grand Emperor of the nation. But his rule was short-lived.
14. Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培(1868-1940) was born in Shanyin, Shaoxing. He was a famous Chinese educator and served as the President of Peking University in 1917 after he returned from abroad in 1916. During his years at Peking University, he recruited many reform-minded scholars and started to reform the educational system by putting emphasis on the principle of freedom of thought and tolerance for diverse ideas, believing that the university should be managed by professors themselves instead of by administrators.
15. Chen Duxiu 陈独秀(1879 –1942) Born in Anhui, Chen was a legendary figure in modern Chinese history. He was a leader in the anti-imperial Xinhai Revolution and the May Fourth Movement. Chen was also a co-founder of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921 serving as its first General Secretary. Chen was an educator, philosopher and politician, and he started the famous journal *New Youth* in Shanghai
16. Li Dazhao 李大钊 (1888 - 1927) Li was born in Hebei province to a peasant family. He attended high school at Tangshan Number 1 High School in 1905. In 1913 Li majored in political economy at Waseda University in Japan and returned to China in 1918. He was a leading figure in the New Culture Movement. At the invitation of Cai Yuanpei, President of Peking University, he became head of the library at the university. As a believer in the doctrines of Marxism, Li had a clear understanding of the situation in China at that time, holding the idea that the reform in China should begin in the countryside.
17. *Xue Deng* 《学灯》, the supplement to the *Newspaper for Current Affairs* in Shanghai, was one of the most influential supplements during the May Fourth movement. It was started on March 4, 1918 with the purpose of promoting education and culture and providing a place for the young and educated to express their views. Many writers and scholars contributed regularly to the supplement.
18. Refer to the news report “The Amusement Gathering of the Peking Women's High University” on Page 6 of *Xue Deng* 《学灯》 on April 20, 1923.

19. *The Morning News Supplement* 《晨报副刊》 was one of the most famous supplements during the May Fourth Movement. It was first set up in October 1921 and ended in June 1928. It did much in the way of spreading progressive ideas. The writers who were active in that period all contributed to the supplement.
20. Refer to Ren Tuo's "Thoughts on the Two-Day Performances of the Peking Women's High Normal University." *The Morning News Supplement*, May 5, 1923. No. 121. The quote is from Pages 3-4 of the newspaper. Ren Tuo was a drama critic and an essayist at that time. Apparently this is the pen name of a writer whose identity is not known.
21. Pan Jiaxun 潘家洵(1896 –1989), a well-known translator who translated 15 plays written by Ibsen and other plays by playwrights in the West. He did much to popularise Western drama in China during the May Fourth Movement.
22. Fang Xin 芳信(1902-1963) was an actor in his youth. His full name is Cai Fangxin. As a well-known translator, he translated many works by Russian writers into Chinese. See his "Thoughts on Seeing Nora" on Pages 3-4 in *The Morning News Supplement*, May 12, 1923, No. 123.
23. Lin Ruji 林如稷(1902-1976) was born in Si Chuan. He graduated from Paris University in France and taught in several universities in China. He was a famous novelist and translator. See his "More Thoughts on the Two-Day Performances of Peking Women's Normal University" on Page 3 in *The Morning News Supplement*, May 16, 1923. No. 127.
24. He Yigong 何一公(?-1926) was born in Zhe Jiang. He was a progressive student of Qin Hua University and ran the *Qin Hua Weekly* as an editor in chief. He was wounded in the March 18 Massacre and eventually died. See his article "On Nora by Peking Women's High Normal University" on Page 17 and Page 18 in *The Morning News Supplement*, May 17-18, 1923, No. 128-9.
25. Chen Xiyong 陈西滢(1896-1970) Born in Jiang Su, Chen attended middle school in England and entered Edinburgh University and London University later on. After obtaining a Ph.D. degree, he came back to China and became a professor of English at Peking University. Supported by Hu Shi, he set up the journals *Modern Review* and *Weekly* with Xu Zhimo and published many articles. He was an influential writer and literary critic. He also translated some novels by Western writers. The quote is from his article "Seeing the New Drama and Learning to be Fashionable" on Pages 1-3 in *The Morning News Supplement*, May 24, 1923 No. 135.
26. Xu Zhimo 徐志摩(1897—1931) was born in Zhe Jiang and famous for his contribution to modern Chinese poetry by writing a lot of poems which



- romanticized love and beauty. He studied in America and England and it was in his years in Cambridge that he exposed himself to poetry and ideas of the aestheticism which was in vogue at that time. See his article "What Should We See in the Theatre?" on Page 3 in *The Morning News Supplement*, May 5, 1923, No. 135.
27. Xu Shoushang 许寿裳(1883-1948) Born in Shaoxing, Zhejiang, Xu was educated in Japan and became a famous biographer and educator. He served as President of Peking Women's High Normal University from July 1922 to February 1924. Lu Xun was a good friend of his and he was killed in 1948 at Taiwan University for criticizing the educational policy of the nationalist government.
  28. See *The Life of Li Chao* 《李超传》 by Hu Shi published serially in *The Morning News Supplement* starting on December 2, 1919.
  29. Duan Qirui 段祺瑞 (1865-1936) Born in Anhui province, Duan was known as a warlord and a general in Beiyang Army. He was appointed the Provisional Chief Executive of Republic of China and ruled from November 24, 1924 to April 20, 1926. Though strong man both politically and militarily, he was deposed after the March 18 Massacre in 1926.
  30. Liu Hezhen 刘和珍 (1904-1926) Born in Nanchang, Jiangxi, she first attended Nanchang Women's Normal School and then entered Peking Women's High Normal University in 1923 majoring in English. She was president of the students' union at the university and was known as one of the leaders of the student movement in Peking. She was killed in the March 18 Massacre in 1926 at the age 22.
  31. Lu Yin 庐隐(1899 -1934), also known as Huang Ying from Fu Jian, had a miserable childhood. She worked hard as a tutor and finally had saved enough money to enter PWNU and took an active part in social activities and struggle to win rights for women. She was the first member of the literature society founded in 1921 at PWNU and wrote many short stories and novels.
  32. Feng Yuanjun 冯沅君(1900-1974), also known as Feng Shulan from Henan, was interested in traditional Chinese literature and entered the PWNU in 1917. She was an enthusiastic student who participated in many patriotic activities both in and outside the university. She survived many of her peers and wrote many stories as well as books of literary criticism.
  33. Shi Pingmei 石评梅(1902-1928), also known as Shi Lubi from Shanxi, entered PWNU in 1920 and as editor of several progressive journals in Peking such as *Women's Weekly*, the *Supplement to Peking Daily* was an activist in voicing her support for the emancipation of women. Her tragic romance with a man was legendary and in many of her stories and novels, the romantic encounter was

recorded and described. After the March 18 Massacre, she became disillusioned and death finally took her in her youth.

34. Zhang Ailing 张爱玲(1920-1995) Born in Shanghai, she spent her childhood in Beijing and Tianjin. In 1929 she came back to Shanghai and went to study at The University of Hong Kong when she grew up. She returned to Shanghai in 1942 because of war and eventually moved to America from Hong Kong in 1955. She worked as a visiting writer at several universities in the States. She was a very productive writer who wrote many novels and short stories in which she showed her delicate touch in presenting the characters in a special cultural context. She died in America in 1995.
35. “Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies” 鸳鸯蝴蝶派 refers to a form of popular fiction with stories of love affairs, tangled relationship involving young lovers who were usually poor scholars and beautiful ladies. Since this kind of fiction was usually old-fashioned and conservative, it was attacked during the May Fourth Movement by the radical reformers and writers such as Lu Xun.
36. Song Chingling 宋庆龄(1893—1981), also known as Madame Sun Yat-sen, was one of the three Song sisters. She became President of China and was the first female head of state after China was liberated in 1949. This article is reprinted from *Peking Review*, No. 6, Feb. 11, 1972, pp. 6-7.

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### Biographical note

Sun Jian, Professor and Director, Nordic Literature Research Institute, Fudan University, Shanghai, China; Member of the International Ibsen Committee.

### Summary

This article aims at exploring the great influence of Ibsen and especially his play *A Doll House* on the young Chinese girls studying at Peking Women's High Normal University established for the first time in China at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to educate girls.

In its short history, the girls at the university were exposed widely to the progressive ideas and literature from the West. Ibsen, the most popular writer at that time, inspired the girls tremendously whose performance of *A Doll House* aroused a heated debate among the well-known scholars on such important issues as women's rights, women's liberation, new culture, art and literature.

Consequently there appeared at the university first group of modern Chinese women writers who picked up their pens and wrote about themselves and about women in China, describing themselves as "Chinese Noras".

### Keywords

Ibsen, Peking Women's Normal High University, *A Doll House*, Chinese Noras