

EFFECTS OF CHINESE OPERA ON THE REPRODUCTIONS OF IBSEN'S PLAYS

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In this article my aim is to discuss the “Effects of Chinese opera on the reproductions of Ibsen’s plays”. The two theatrical performances I will take a close reading are: (1) *The House of Puppet* (玩偶之家), a Chinese adaptation of *A Doll’s House* by the National Experimental Theatre of China in 1998; and (2) *Aspirations Higher than the Sky* (心比天高), a Chinese adaptation of *Hedda Gabler* by the Hangzhou Yue opera Troupe in 2006. *The House of Puppet* demonstrates a partial transformation of *A Doll’s House* into Peking opera. Nora’s dancing of the tarantella, arguably the climax of the play, is re-imagined in terms of a semi-historical timeframe of China, in which the Norwegian doll-wife sings an excerpt from the well-known Peking opera of *The King Bids Farewell to his Concubine* (霸王別姬) to amuse her Chinese husband at a party during Chinese New Year. On the other hand, in the second performance, the entire text of *Hedda Gabler* is interestingly transformed into a Chinese opera form, and it employs an all-female cast following the Yue opera tradition. Through this adaptation, we are also reminded that female cross-dressing, which first begun in the Western Han dynasty, has a “long and consistent tradition [just as] male cross-dressing in the history of Chinese theatre.”¹ Through discussing the above two performances, I hope to illustrate the changing modes of representation, resulting in the shifts of meaning, which gradually drifted away from Ibsen’s nineteenth-century plays.

I will first explain why I chose to compare the two Chinese adaptations of *Hedda Gabler* and *A Doll’s House*. Not only are both plays about husband-wife relationships (in fact, Ibsen’s plays are mostly about married life), Mitsuya Mori further argues that the “smaller cycle of plays, which are called *nutidsdrama* in Norwegian, [begins] with *A Doll’s House* and [ends] with *Hedda Gabler*.”² There are several comparative and contrasting points between both plays, for example, each play consists of “three triangular relationships, in all of which the heroines occupy the central positions.”³ There are also numerous reverse correspondences in the two plays. One evident example is while Krogstad “unconsciously pushes Nora towards the idea of committing suicide to save Helmer’s reputation [,] Lovborg is pushed by Hedda towards performing a beautiful death for himself to satisfy her desire for domination.”⁴ Due to the parallels in the development of characters and their plot structures, several critics such as Halvdan Koht and Else Host have described the relationship between Nora and Hedda, or between the two plays, as “parody-like.”⁵

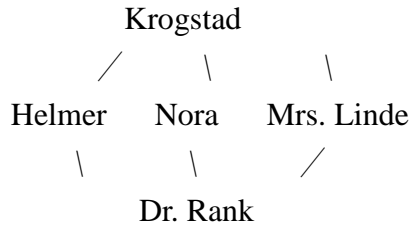
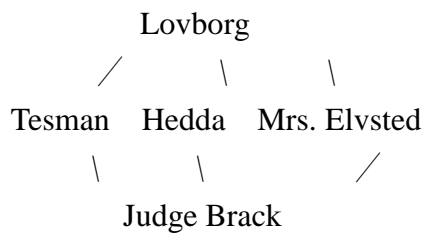
¹ Li Siu Leung, *Cross-dressing in Chinese Opera*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press 2003, p. 38.

² Mitsuya Mori, “Hedda Gabler, A Parody of *A Doll’s House*”, in: *Ibsen Studies* (Vol. 6.2 2006), p. 139, p 141.

³ Ibid, p. 144.

⁴ Ibid, p. 145.

⁵ Ibid, p. 140.

A Doll's House*Hedda Gabler*

Thematically, *A Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabler* can be interpreted as a part of Ibsen's "grand cycle" of works, and coinciding with Mori's suggestion, the cycle could be "more appealing to the public" had Henrik Ibsen (1828 - 1906) wrote the plays in the reverse order, hence signifying the "transformation from a woman shooting herself in despair to a woman freeing herself from old morals with a hope for the future."⁶ Aesthetically, the Chinese adaptations of the two plays can be viewed from the lens of the intercultural mode of theatrical performance. Richard Schechner suggests that starting from the 1970s, the "borrowing, stealing, and exchanging"⁷ of non-Western forms became a popular mode of reference within Western theatrical circles. For the West, a common purpose of such exchanges, as Patrice Pavis notes, is to "revitalize Western forms and traditions by adding or substituting extra-European forms."⁸ For instance, Wu Xiaojiang 吳曉江, director of *The House of Puppets* (1998), attempts to appropriate the symbolic mode of Chinese opera and incorporates it into the realist play of *A Doll's House*.

To adapt *A Doll's House* into the Chinese context, Wu Xiaojiang transforms the festivity of Christmas into the celebration of Lunar Chinese New Year, which is considered the most important festival for Chinese people. In terms of physical space, the symbol of the Christmas tree is subsequently replaced by the hoisting of red lanterns around the stage, which is decorated as a Chinese-style courtyard. The most drastic change in this adaptation, I believe, is the reworking of Nora's tarantella

⁶ Ibid, p. 139.

⁷ Richard Schechner, *The End of Humanism*. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications 1982, p.19.

⁸ Patrice Pavis, "Interculturalism in Contemporary *Mise En Scene*: The Image of India in *The Mahabharata*, *The Indiade*, *Twelfth Night* and *Faust*," *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture*. London: Routledge 1992, p. 201.

dance into the singing of a Peking opera excerpt from *The King Bids Farewell to his Concubine*, in which this shift is made even more radical when performed by a Norwegian doll-wife to amuse her Chinese husband.

Needless to say, Nora's dancing of the tarantella is considered a significant moment in *A Doll's House* by many literary critics. It is analyzed frequently from feminist critique and psychoanalytic approaches. For instance, Catherine Clement argues that the tarantella, a dance that originated in southern Italy, serves as a form of "hysterical catharsis, permitting women to escape temporarily from marriage and motherhood into a free, lawless world of music and uninhabited movement."⁹ Unni Langas contends that the tarantella is the "last feast before catastrophe," as Nora uses her body as a "sign for crisis that cannot be verbally represented," thus her body becomes her "ultimate language."¹⁰ In short, under this umbrella, Nora's dance signifies her first overt attempt in resisting the patriarch's control over her body.

Before looking at the reworking of the tarantella in *The House of Puppet*, it is crucial to mention the Peking opera, *Bawang Bieji* (*The King bids farewell to his Concubine*, abbreviated as *Bidding Farewell* in the following), which is subsumed under the plot of *The House of Puppet*. *Bidding Farewell* is a semi-historical opera, which is based on the well-known contest between two warriors, Xiang Yu 項羽 and Liu Bang 劉邦, who fought for dominance over the Chinese territory after the fall of the Qin dynasty 秦朝 (206 BC – 202 BC). Xiang Yu, who was a more ferocious general, was ironically losing the battle because of his arrogance and his refusal to listen to the good advice from his subordinates. In the eighth scene of the opera, Xiang Yu's soldiers hurriedly report to him that defeat is imminent. Upon hearing this depressing news, Yu Ji 虞姬, Xiang Yu's favourite concubine, offers to perform a sword dance to relieve the king's anxiety. At the end of the dance, Yu Ji cuts her throat with the sword, as she hopes that her death can motivate the king to preserve in the battle and not to surrender easily.¹¹

How is Nora in *A Doll's House* comparable to Yu Ji in *Bidding Farewell*? First and foremost, both Nora's tarantella dance and Yu Ji's sword dance represents the climax in the two theatrical works. Mei Shaowu 梅紹武, son of Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳 (1894 - 1961), who was one of the four great female impersonators in Peking opera (四大名旦), regards his father's staging of Yu Ji's suicide as the "climax of the opera, as it exemplifies and heightens a solemn and dismal atmosphere"¹² Furthermore, I presume that the director of *The House of Puppet* intends to integrate

⁹ Catherine Clement's remark is brought up by Gail Finney in the latter's discussion of the tarantella scene in *A Doll's House*. Gail Finney, "Ibsen and Feminism," ed. James McFarlane, *Cambridge Companion to Ibsen*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994, p. 98.

¹⁰ Unni Langas, "Challenging Gender Norms: Ibsen's Nora Revisited", in: *NIKK Magasin* (No.3 2005), p. 6.

¹¹ Zhongguo xiju jia xiehui 中國戲劇家協會 [The Association for Chinese Playwrights], "Bawang Bieji," 霸王別姬 [The King's Parting with his Concubine], *Mei Lanfang Yanchu Juban Xuanji* 梅蘭芳演出劇本選集 [Selected Plays Performed by Mei Lanfang]. Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe 1980, pp. 123-4.

¹² Mei Shaowu 梅紹武, "Jianzhen rouwan de Yu Ji – Yi fuqin yanchu de *Bawang Bieji*" 堅貞柔婉的虞姬 – 憶父親演出的《霸王別姬》[The chaste and gentle Yu Ji – Remembering father's performance of *The King Bids Farewell to his Concubine*], *Wo de fuqin Mei Lanfang* 我的父親梅蘭芳 [My Father, Mei Lanfang]. Hong Kong: Guang jiao jing chubanshe 1981, p. 188.

two well-known, self-sacrificing female roles in Western and Chinese literature. However, it is important to distinguish the disparate choice made by each female protagonist, resulting in different endings of the play/opera. Whereas Nora abandons her earlier contemplation of suicide and escapes from her sham marriage in the final act of the play; Yu Ji acts upon her earlier thoughts of suicide after performing the sword dance. For instance, in *The House of Puppet*, the Norwegian actress, Agnete Gullestad Haaland, sings a few lines taken from Yu Ji's role in *Bidding Farewell*. In this scene, Nora is anxious that Helmer will open the letterbox and will read Krogstad's letter, so she frantically asks him to guide her in her practice of Peking opera, which she will perform at the party. The following is my English translation of the lines sung by the Norwegian actress.

The Han soldiers have captured the lands 漢兵已略地,
 Chu's songs are heard on all four corners 四面楚歌聲.
 The king's spirit is exhausted 君王意氣盡,
 How can [your] worthless concubine live on 賤妾何聊生?¹³

What is the original excerpt like in *Bidding Farewell*? In the 1956 film adaptation of *Bidding Farewell*, the great female impersonator, Mei Lanfang, acted as Yu Ji. In the scene before Mei Lanfang performs the sword dance, he expresses "her" thoughts of committing suicide to the king, Xiang Yu. It is interesting to note that the Norwegian actress, Haaland, sang the Peking opera excerpt in exactly the same melody that Mei Lanfang had sung. After the song, Yu Ji seizes the moment to draw out Xiang Yu's sword and cuts her throat with it. Originally, this does not signify the end of the opera. After the concubine's death, the warrior-king, Xiang Yu, continues to fight heroically, and the opera only concludes with his suicide along *Wu Jiang* (River Wu, 烏江) in Act Nine. However, after Yu Ji's death, the wealthiest audience sitting in the front rows would often stand up and leave. This largely embarrassed Yang Xiaolou 楊小樓 (1878 - 1938), a famous *wusheng* (martial arts character, 武生) who starred as Xiang Yu, with Shang Xiaoyun 尚小雲 (1900 -1976) casting as Yu Ji in the première of *Chu Han Zheng* (Contests between the States of Chu and Han, 楚漢爭) in Beijing in 1918.¹⁴ *Chu Han Zheng* is the prototype in which the playwright, Qi Rushan 齊如山 (1875 - 1962) adapted the shortened version of *Bidding Farewell* for the debut performance of Mei Lanfang and Yang Xiaolou in 1922.¹⁵ Yang Xiaolou once remarked satirically, "It does not seem that the king is bidding farewell to his concubine, but it looks more like the concubine is bidding farewell to the king!"¹⁶ Taking into account of the audience's reception, Qi Rushan later eliminated the entire martial arts scene after the death of Yu Ji, which leaves the action of the heroine as the final statement of the opera. In terms of structure, this is similar to *A Doll's House*, where the final statement of the play is Nora's slamming of the door as

¹³ Wu Xiaojiang 吳曉江, *Wanou zhi Jia* 玩偶之家 [The House of Puppet]. Beijing: Weixiang yinxiang chubanshe 1998, DVD.

¹⁴ Mei Shaowu, "The chaste and gentle Yu Ji – Remembering father's performance of *The King Bids Farewell to his Concubine*," p. 188.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

she walks away from her eight years of marriage with Helmer. The following is my translation of the Peking opera excerpt that Mei Lanfang had sung in *Bidding Farewell*.

XIANG YU (*recites*). [My] concubine! The enemy is attacking us from all four sides, come quickly with me to break through from this trap.

YU JI (*recites*). Aiya, [my] King! How could I wish to get you into trouble? If you are faced with unfavourable circumstances when dispatching your troops, retreat along the eastern part of the river, and wait [for the right time] to fight back. May I use the king's precious sword, attached to your waist, to cut my throat in front of you, so that you'd not miss me!

XIANG YU (*recites*). This ... Concubine ... you mustn't commit suicide.

YU JI (*recites*). Ai! [My] king!

(*sings*). The Han soldiers have captured the lands

漢兵已略地,

Chu's songs are heard on all four corners

四面楚歌聲.

The king's spirit is exhausted 君王意氣盡,

How can [your] worthless concubine live on

賤妾何聊生?

XIANG YU (*recites*). Wah ah ah ...

(*Shouts from outside. YU JI is frightened, she tries to take the sword from XIANG YU, he refuses.*)

(*YU JI seizes the moment to draw XIANG YU's sword, and cuts her throat with it.*)¹⁷

Comparing *The House of Puppet* with *Bidding Farewell*, there are significant differences between the characterizations of Nora and Yu Ji. First of all, I need to mention that Peking opera is a multi-layered form, as the actor/actress integrates all four elements in the performance, which are singing (*chang*, 唱), reciting (*nian*, 念), displaying stylized gestures (*zuo*, 做), and exhibiting martial arts skills (*da*, 打). When Mei Lanfang performs the sword dance, he sings as he dances, in which the pitch of his singing matches harmoniously with his dance paces. However, in *The House of Puppet*, Haaland, the Norwegian actress, drastically reduces the aesthetically complex form of Peking opera, not to mention that the sword dance has completely disappeared, she also stands in a somewhat fixed position when singing. Thus, I have doubts with Richard Schechner's assumption that "any ritual can be lifted from its original setting and performed as theatre."¹⁸ I am rather more comfortable with Rustom Bharucha's counterargument that we should not neglect the socio-political background and the potential for abuse in searching for new forms or "universals". Otherwise, it will always be westerners who "[initiate] and [control] the

¹⁷ The Association for Chinese Playwrights, "The King's Parting with his Concubine," pp. 123-4.

¹⁸ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*. London: Routledge 1988, p. 152.

[intercultural] exchange.”¹⁹ As in the case of *The House of Puppet*, the subplot of *Bidding Farewell* is so much subsumed under the Western text of *A Doll's House* that the meaning of Yu Ji's sword dance is completely lost, and the production merely signifies an unequal exchange between Chinese and Western theatrical practices.

After analyzing the partial adaptation of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* into Peking opera, I will examine a full version of *Hedda Gabler* turned into Chinese opera. In the 2006 adaptation of *Hedda Gabler* by the Hangzhou Yue opera Troupe, the number of characters is reduced to four, in which all of them are given Chinese names (i.e. Hedda as Haida 海達, George Tesman as Simeng 思孟, Lovborg as Wenbo 文柏, and Judge Brack as Master Bai 白大人). This arrangement coincides with Bharucha's philosophy that it is important to rename Ibsen's character into a name that is familiar to the target audience, which serves as one of the means to make the “strange as familiar”. Bharucha's translator of *Peer Gynt*, who translated the play into Kannada, one of the official languages in India, also believes that theatre translation, which involves an “adaptation of the location and names of particular text has to be even more attentive to linguistic inventions.”²⁰ In terms of location, the new adaptation of *Hedda Gabler*, titled *Aspirations Higher than the Sky* (or abbreviated as *Aspirations* in the following) is situated in the ancient period of China, though the director had not specified the exact time frame. Towards the end of act one, Hedda tells her husband, George Tesman, of her only one passion in her life, which is the pistols left by her father, General Gabler. Assuming that pistols did not exist in ancient China as they did in nineteenth-century Europe, the director of *Aspirations* has cleverly transposed the pistols into a pair of swords. In the following, I shall compare the transformation of act one's ending in Ibsen's play to the beginning act of the Chinese opera, *Aspirations*, which describes Hedda/Haida being “dreadfully bored”²¹ and thus passes her time by playing with pistols/swords. I will especially look at the textual representations of Hedda towards the end of act one in Ibsen's play.

Textual extract of *Hedda Gabler*: Playing with pistols

HEDDA (*crossing the room*). Well, at least I have one thing left to amuse myself with.

TESMAN (*beaming*). Ah, thank heaven for that! What is it, Hedda? Uh?

HEDDA (*in the centre doorway, looking at him with veiled scorn*). My pistols, George.

TESMAN (*in fright*). Your pistols!

HEDDA (*her eyes cold*). General Gabler's pistols. (*She goes through the inner room and out to the left.*)

TESMAN (*runs to the centre doorway and calls after her*). No, for heaven's sake,

¹⁹ Rustom Bharucha, “Collision of Cultures: some Western interpretations and uses of the Indian theatre,” *Theatre and the World: Performance and the Politics of Culture*. London: Routledge 1993, p. 38.

²⁰ Rustom Bharucha, *The Poetics of Cultural Practice: Thinking Through Theatre in an Age of Globalization*. London: Athlone 2000, p. 73.

²¹ Henrik Ibsen, *Four Major Plays: Volume 1*, trans. Rolf Fjelde. London: Penguin Group 1992, p. 250.

Hedda darling – don't touch those dangerous things! For my sake, Hedda! Uh?²²

I shall then compare Ibsen's textual depictions of Hedda with the theatrical adaptation of Haida in *Aspirations* from my own translation.

Performance extract of *Aspirations*: Playing with swords

In HAIDA's dream, she dances happily with WEBBO. WEBBO retreats at the end of the interlude, leaving HAIDA reminiscing about the past nostalgically. SIMENG, holding a book, enters.

SIMENG (*disapprovingly*). Haida, why are you playing with the swords again?

HAIDA (*swinging the swords still*). Just to pass the long, endless hours.

SIMENG. Are you not thinking about someone? Your sword is only half of a pair. (*sings*). Did you give the other half to someone special? You and I are now married. Why are you stocking the old flame?

HAIDA (*sings, and walks towards SIMENG*). Simeng, the past is completely forgotten, fate has brought us in matrimony. You and I are building a life together, you should stop drudging up the past.

SIMENG (*stands up from the chair he is sitting on, sings*). Nothing pleases me better, but you must promise me one thing.

HAIDA. What is it?

SIMENG (*sings*). You are a lady, so stay away from weaponry. The bronze sword, as cold as ice, but you keep it by you day and night. Even if there is a war, there is no need for you to be armed.

HAIDA (*sings*). Why can't a lady exercise a sword? I can't go to a war like men do, but I can still practice martial arts.

SIMENG (*frowns*). People will laugh at you when you do that.

HAIDA. In three days you'll go to the court to present your thesis, but if your work remains unfinished, that will really make people laugh.

SIMENG (*retreats to the door*). Master Bai will recommend me.

HAIDA. Even with Bai's recommendation, you still need real talent and learning.

SIMENG. With you wielding your swords, I'm scared out of my wits. How can I focus on writing?

HAIDA (*laughs and rotates in a full circle, with drums beating in the background*). I'm afraid you're running out of ideas, maybe I should be writing your book!

SIMENG (*anxious, gets up from the chair*). You're a woman—

HAIDA. So what? My late father had hundreds of students, he had also taught me to read and write, and I excel in all areas of the liberal arts. Look at you and other male students, what have you accomplished? Which one of you is better than me?

SIMENG. You're bright and well-versed, but scholarship and politics are not a woman's duty.

HAIDA (*questionably*). A woman's duty is —

SIMENG. To take care of her husband and raise the children, wash and cook.

²² Ibid, p. 247.

HAIDA (walks towards SIMENG). So you want me to be a maid?
SIMENG (laughs). No, you can also take up gardening and playing music.

HAIDA (sadly). Who will appreciate my flowers? Who will understand my music?

SIMENG sighs and shakes his head. XIYA, HAIDA's cousin, enters.²³

In the Chinese opera, *Aspirations*, a new dimension of meaning is added to Haida's (Hedda's) pair of swords. Besides hinting at her masculine trait, they also serve as an emblem of love between her and her ex-lover, Wenbo (Lovborg). For instance, the opening scene of the opera depicts Haida dancing with her sword in a dream-like state, and reminiscing about her romance with her ex-lover. Another significant adjustment to Haida's characterization lies in the minimizing of Haida's responsibility towards Wenbo's death. In Trogan's dissertation on *Studies in the Literature of Suicide*, the decision to kill oneself is "hardly ever considered within the context of individual freedom" and is "approached as a pathological condition"²⁴ instead. There are, in fact, punishments in the Greek world on surviving suicides, such as "occasionally cutting off the right hand so that no future crimes could be committed."²⁵ Thus when Hedda instigates Lovborg to kill himself in the original play, it exemplifies Hedda's "grotesque quality, [and perhaps] a projection of [Ibsen's] own inner violent energy."²⁶ But in *Aspirations*, a milder Chinese version of Haida is depicted. Instead of giving the pistol to Lovborg, hinting at him to "use it now [,and] beautifully,"²⁷ there is no direct instigation of Haida urging Wenbo to commit suicide. In fact, it was Wenbo who first returns to Haida her sword, and he closes their romance by declaring, "I have my lady and you have your man." Haida then reluctantly returns Wenbo's sword to him and remarks: "Sword has no eyes. Take care."²⁸ While Lovborg in the original play shoots himself with the pistol given by Hedda, Wenbo is killed by the guards in an accident, as he created a commotion when he desperately searches for his missing manuscript. Instead of emphasizing Hedda's destructive power aimed at herself and also of other people, the Chinese opera instead depicts a strong and powerful woman who is made powerless by the confinements of the feudal Chinese society.

What about Haida's final destiny in *Aspirations*? She still kills herself in the opera, but in a much more beautiful way than that in the original play, in which Ibsen merely describes the firing of a pistol in the background. On the other hand, in the Chinese opera adaptation, a long soliloquy and a series of dance movements are inserted before Haida stabs herself with the pair of swords. It is also important

²³ My transcription and translation from the following performance. Zhi Tao 支濤, Zhan Min 展敏, *Xin Bi Tiao Gao* 心比天高 [Aspirations Higher than the Sky]. Zhejiang: Zhejiang yinxiang chubanshe 2006, DVD.

²⁴ Christopher Roland Trogan, *Freedom Turned Against Itself: Studies in the Literature of Suicide*, Ph.D. dissertation. New York: City University of New York 2009, v.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 15.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 118.

²⁷ Henrik Ibsen, *Four Major Plays: Volume 1*, p. 288.

²⁸ My transcription and translation from the following performance. Zhi Tao & Zhan Min, *Aspirations Higher than the Sky*, DVD.

to recognize Haida's awakening in the opera, which is absent from the original play. In her long soliloquy, Haida reflects on her past and sings with regret: "I played with fire and got burned, hurting myself as well as others." She further sings: "I lived for love, it broke my heart; I lived for fame, it cost my soul; I lived for self-interest, it burned me into ashes." This re-examination of her life demonstrates Bertolt Brecht's assertion of the "alienation effect" in traditional Chinese theatre. On the one hand, Ibsen follows the conventions of naturalistic drama, in which actors are required to respect the "fourth wall" and act as if the curtain had never risen. On the contrary, the "fourth wall" is absent in Chinese opera, as the genre has been so "highly conventionalized that it has never set out to create an illusion of real life for the audience."²⁹ With the onset of the "alienation effect", Haida is able to watch herself from a distance and critically judges her wrongdoings at the end of the opera.

Adhering to a major principle in Chinese opera, whereby every emotion or action of the character should be performed in an aesthetically beautiful way, Haida does not shoot herself with the pistol and then lies lifeless, stretched out on the sofa as in the ending of Ibsen's play.³⁰ On the contrary, after a long soliloquy of song and dance, Haida stabs herself with her back facing the audience, as it is perhaps not considered a graceful gesture if she commits suicide in front of the audience. At this very significant moment, the dim lights on stage turn into a red moon, in which the moon can be interpreted as the tragic fall of femininity. Haida, daughter of a well-known scholar-gentry, is only able to affirm her social status by marrying up. Unable to utilize her talent, and refusing to accept the domestic roles of cleaning, washing, taking care of her husband and children, as suggested by Simeng earlier, Haida's suicide can be interpreted as a woman's passive protest towards the rigid confinements of patriarchy.

In my article, I have attempted to examine the impacts of staging Nora and Hedda in Chinese opera. Intertextual references have been made in the past between Nora and Hedda, because both are viewed as "representatives of middle-class women, agitating for financial independence, vote, equality before law, access to education."³¹ Neither of the two, however, has been successful in advocating women's rights in *The House of Puppets* and *Aspirations Higher than the Sky*. In *The House of Puppets*, the Norwegian Nora finds the Chinese society oppressive, and her Chinese husband's way of thinking alienating. After living in China for four years, she abandons her family and returns to her home country, Norway. On the other hand, Haida, though a woman of great talent, is subsumed to a marginalized status, without any opportunity to exercise her literary and military skills. Often seen dancing with her swords on stage, Haida, who could be categorized as a "woman warrior", fails to bring about social change. This coincides with Barbara M. Kaulback's argument that "[n]one of the woman warriors on the Chinese stage are

²⁹ Huang Zuolin, *Peking Opera and Mei Lanfang: A Guide to China's Traditional Theatre and the Art of Its Great Master*. Beijing: New World Press 1981, p. 19.

³⁰ Henrik Ibsen, *Four Major Plays: Volume 1*, p. 304.

³¹ Julie Holledge & Joanne Tompkins, *Women's intercultural performance*. London: Routledge 2000, p. 21.

allowed activities that could potentially bring about social change.”³² As suggested by Joseph R. Allen, the story of the well-known Chinese heroine, Mulan, is more about a woman returning home and resuming her domestic duties at the end of the war, rather than a woman entirely overthrowing the duties of men on the warfront.³³ While Trogan views Hedda’s suicide as a “device for achieving freedom from social restrictions,”³⁴ her failure of achieving independence in the society she is living in suggests the very powerlessness of women in feudal China. Thus Nora and Hedda are as entrapped in the two theatrical performances as they are under Ibsen’s pen, and there seems to be a long way to go before the dynamics between Chinese tradition and Western modernity is ultimately resolved.

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³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Christopher Roland Trogan, *Freedom Turned Against Itself: Studies in the Literature of Suicide*, p. 5.

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Biographical Note

Miss Miriam Leung Che, LAU is an assistant lecturer from the Hong Kong Community College, Polytechnic University of Hong Kong. She obtained her Bachelor of Arts (with first class honours) in English and Comparative Literature and Master of Philosophy in English Literature from The University of Hong Kong. During her studies, she was awarded the Ellis Bell Prize in English Literature and Comparative Literature, and also a Worldwide Exchange Scholarship to fund her exchange studies at the University of California, Irvine.

With her research interest mainly in the crossovers between Western and Chinese theatre, Miriam has been invited to share her thoughts about the "History & Development of Theatre in the East & West" on a programme called "The Big Idea" on Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK). Besides, she has twice given papers at the International Ibsen Conference, which is a triennial conference, gathering scholars all over the world to discuss the works of the great Norwegian playwright, Henrik Ibsen. Her paper has also recently been published in the conference proceedings of the 12th International Ibsen Conference by Fudan University.

Miriam is currently doing her doctoral research at the Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham. Just as Shakespeare famously wrote: "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players," Miriam is an amateur actress when she is not teaching, and she has acted with the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) in the UK.

Summary

As part of a globalized phenomenon, the reproductions of Ibsen's plays on the Chinese theatrical stage increasingly focus upon the exploration and expansion of new cultural forms, as Patrice Pavis defines interculturalism as "grasping the

dialectical of exchanges of civilities between cultures”. However, how do we evaluate the effectiveness of the many “intercultural” productions that surround us today?

I attempt to answer this question by comparing two Chinese reproductions of Ibsen’s plays that employ elements of Chinese opera on varying scales. The first one is a total transformation of *Hedda Gabler* into a Hangzhou *yue* opera form, *Xin Bi Tian Gao* (*Aspirations Higher than the Sky*, 心比天高) in 2006. As part of the *yue* opera tradition, *Hedda Gabler* was staged in an all-female cast. The second one is a fragmented insertion of a Peking opera excerpt into the staging of *A Doll’s House* by the National Experimental Theatre of China in 1998. One of the highlights of the play is a Norwegian actress, who plays Nora, singing and dancing a short Peking opera excerpt, thus replacing the tarantella dance in the original play. Contextualising the multiple perspectives towards interculturalism by Patrice Pavis, Richard Schechner and Rustom Bharucha, I aim to explore how the appropriation of Chinese opera in such performances might strengthen or weaken the reciprocal flows between the source and target cultures in Pavis’s “hourglass model”, and whether the initial attempt of revitalising both Chinese and Western art forms has backfired and misproduced Bertolt Brecht’s alienation effect directed at the contemporary audience.

Keywords

Intercultural, Peking opera, Alienation Effect, Fourth Wall, Richard Schechner, Bertolt Brecht