PERFORMING THE CHINESE NORA

Male-constructed Nora figures
in Lu Xun’s “Regret for the Past” and Mao Dun’s “Creation”

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Lu Xun’s “Regret for the Past,” and Mao Dun’s “Creation” as examples of the significant role that the main character of Ibsen’s play A Doll’s House, Nora, played in male-authored twentieth-century Chinese literature. As the years progressed, Nora and her story were appropriated by writers who explored her possible fate in the Chinese context. These authors, largely members of the intellectual elite and predominantly male, constructed the Chinese Nora as a literary trope who reflected women’s newfound liberties and Chinese society’s modernisation. Judith Butler’s notions of gender performativity and Simone de Beauvoir’s analysis of female alterity will be employed to demonstrate that the writing (and thus controlling) of liberated Chinese Noras became metonymic of a process of cultural assertion on the part of the male intellectual elite. The use of male narrators and protagonists ensured female silence within fictional works, and so too inadvertently guaranteed that the narrative settings in which Chinese Noras were liberated were dominated by men. It is shown here that despite their iconoclastic calls for the reform of attitudes to gender roles and identities, the male intellectuals’ literary works betray their tendency to contain the female Other within the masculine discourses of their narratives. Thus in “Regret for the Past,” and “Creation,” Chinese Noras, while ostensibly liberated and modern, are ultimately constructed within the narrative as a female Other for the articulation of the modern male’s subjectivity.
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CONTENTS

Abstract .............................................................................................................................................................. i
Acknowledgements.................................................................................................................................................. ii
Preface.................................................................................................................................................................. 1
Chapter 1 - Introduction......................................................................................................................................... 2
  1.2 Literature Review ........................................................................................................................................... 5
    1.2.1 Ibsen in China ........................................................................................................................................ 6
    1.2.2 Gender Politics and A Doll’s House in China ......................................................................................... 8
  1.3 Methodology .................................................................................................................................................. 11
    1.3.1 Butler and Gender Performativity ........................................................................................................ 11
    1.3.2 Gender Performativity and “Policing” Nora ........................................................................................... 12
    1.3.3 Simone de Beauvoir, the Youyue Gan, and Performativity ................................................................... 14
Chapter 2 - The Male Intellectual and The New Woman ...................................................................................... 18
  2.1 The May Fourth Period .................................................................................................................................. 18
    2.1.1 Building a New China: Anti-traditionalism and the New Culture ......................................................... 20
  2.2 The May Fourth Intellectuals and the Responsibility of ‘jiuguo’ (national salvation) ............................... 21
    2.2.1 A New Role and an Identity Crisis ........................................................................................................ 22
    2.2.2 China, the West and the New Woman ................................................................................................... 25
Chapter 3 - A Doll’s House in China and the West ............................................................................................. 27
  3.1 A Doll’s House in the English-speaking World ............................................................................................ 27
  3.2 Nora, Torvald, and Performative Gender Constructions ............................................................................... 30
  3.3 A Doll’s House and Nora in China .............................................................................................................. 33
Chapter 4 - Policing the Liberated Nora ............................................................................................................. 37
  4.1 Lu Xun’s “Regret for the Past” .................................................................................................................... 37
  4.2 Narrating, Othering and Policing Nora ......................................................................................................... 38
  4.3 Policing Nora and Exposing Male Anxiety ................................................................................................ 42
Chapter 5 - Policing the Revolutionary Nora ..................................................................................................... 46
  5.1 Mao Dun’s “Creation” .................................................................................................................................. 46
  5.2 Female Political Zeal as an Expression of Male Anxiety ............................................................................ 49
  5.3 Policing the Revolutionary Nora .............................................................................................................. 51
Conclusion............................................................................................................................................................... 55
Glossary................................................................................................................................................................... 57
Bibliography............................................................................................................................................................. 58
PREFACE

Where Chinese characters feature in this work, the simplified versions have been used. Chinese words and names are transcribed using the standard Pinyin system. For those Chinese literary works which are available in well-known and established English translations, such as those in Kirk Denton’s *Modern Chinese Literary Thought*, these translations have been quoted and referred to. For other works, particularly Mao Dun’s “Creation,” the English translation is my own.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“It is no exaggeration to say that the women’s movement in the May Fourth period is nothing but ‘Noraism’ … Nora’s spirit to “be a human being,” her realisation that besides being a mother and wife she is a person, and her idea of “the responsibilities she as a person has” are all healthy, progressive thoughts, even for us today.”

- Mao Dun, 1938

Ibsen’s classic play *A Doll’s House* holds a unique position in Chinese literature of the early twentieth century. In the 1920s and 30s, Ibsen’s heroine Nora was appropriated in various forms, re-emerging in fictional and dramatic works as a means of exploring the possibilities for, and implications of, Chinese women’s liberation. In the political and historical climate of the early decades of the 20th century, the emancipation of women was believed to be a critical means of rejecting the traditional culture and modernising China. Chinese Noras, as they featured in short stories and plays of this period, were modern and enlightened women, and as such, they mimicked Nora’s infamous exit at the end of *A Doll’s House*.

This thesis examines Chinese Nora-stories written by men as metonymic of processes of male cultural assertion: the expression of male concerns and anxieties through the deployment of the modern, feminine Other. The predominantly male intellectual class adopted Nora as a literary trope; the propagation of her revolt against oppression was meant to reflect China’s modern social values. In this environment her dramatic exit was re-imagined as a means of throwing off the oppressive norms and strictures of traditional society. However, in a significant deviation from Ibsen’s play, the Chinese Nora’s fictional “enlightenment” is usually instigated and guided by a man of the educated elite. Furthermore, in many cases this intellectual male narrates the story and thus controls the gender discourse. While male intellectuals advocated the modernisation of China’s social values and gender roles, in their literature they inadvertently confined women to male-defined standards of modernity. Two such works

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examined here are Lu Xun’s “Regret for the Past” (1925)² and Mao Dun’s “Creation” (1928),³ selected because they feature women whose actions strongly allude to Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, and who are narrated by men belonging to the intellectual class.⁴ A close reading of these short stories reveals that even while male authors of this class advocated female liberation, male characters within their fiction inadvertently narrated women in ways that were predominantly concerned with the subjectivity and cultural supremacy of the male elite.⁵ Read this way, narrating voices betray the ambivalence of the intellectual classes to the potential consequences of their own iconoclasm and women’s liberation.

Judith Butler’s notions of gender performativity and Simone de Beauvoir’s views on female alterity are read in conjunction with these stories. This approach highlights the intersection of gender and power discourses within the literary interactions between Chinese Noras and the male narrator-protagonists who endeavour to modernise her. These narrator-protagonists tend to utilise female silence to construct an image of their own moral authority, betraying their desire to control gender discourses. Even under the pretence of concern for women’s liberation, the male character manoeuvres the discourse to ensure that his self-image of masculine superiority is secure. Through a close reading of the very different depictions of Nora-esque characters in “Regret for


⁴ These have not been selected to serve as paradigmatic Nora images in China, but rather for the particular insights they hold into the relationship between the male intellectual and the Chinese Nora. For a thorough overview of all *A Doll’s House* and/or Nora appropriations see Tam Kwok-kan, *Ibsen in China, 1908-1997: A Critical-Annotated Bibliography of Criticism, Translation and Performance* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2001); Shuei-may Chang, *Casting Off the Shackles of Family: Ibsen’s Nora Figure in Modern Chinese Literature, 1918-1942* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004).

⁵ Here “subjectivity” refers to Foucault’s idea of the person “tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge,” which “suggests a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to.” See Michel Foucault, “Afterward: The Subject and Power,” in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, eds. Hubert L. Dreyfus et al (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 209-226.
the Past” and “Creation,” this thesis argues that no matter the extent to which women’s liberation is realised, male characters and authors unwittingly construct “woman” also, if not primarily, for the expression of anxieties regarding the male intellectual’s social and political identity.

In an article that explores issues of gender as they intersect with nationalism, Joanne Nagel describes unique times of national crisis in which it is common for women to be allocated unusual responsibilities in aiding the struggle. These periods find women called upon for tasks that require them to break away from what might otherwise be very strict social frameworks. However, this is frequently only a temporary state: once the national struggle is concluded, women are once again firmly entrenched in male defined roles – “under the thumb of institutionalised patriarchy,” as it were.\textsuperscript{6} This is a widespread pattern observed by historians and political scientists across nations and cultures, and regardless of whether the struggle ends in victory or defeat, “women’s former prowess” is later “resented and suppressed or reinterpreted and repressed.”\textsuperscript{7}

Thus, while women are represented in these works of literature as modern and progressive, ultimate agency in modernisation and nation-building projects remains with men. In male-authored imaginings of modernity for women, female characters remain silenced and objectified for the construction of man’s modern, masculine image.

This thesis’ first two chapters introduce the historical and political context of this investigation, beginning with a review of scholarly perspectives of Ibsen’s influence in China, and the study of gender construction in both Ibsen and May Fourth literature (Section 1.2). Section 1.3 provides an overview of the theories and ideas central to this thesis. The following chapter (Chapter 2) outlines the historical context, including the May Fourth Period and the socio-political position of the elite intellectual class, the most prolific writers of Chinese Noras. In Chapter 3, Butler’s notions of gender performativity are invoked and applied to an analytical discussion of \textit{A Doll’s House} as the foundation by which gender relations in stories of Chinese Noras will be read.


Chapter 4 connects this understanding of *A Doll’s House* to Lu Xun’s “Regret for the Past,” and demonstrates how the May Fourth intellectual’s identity crisis and desire for cultural recognition is betrayed in the narrative objectification of “liberated” Noras. Chapter 5 extends this to Mao Dun’s “Creation,” in which the changing political climate led to increasingly revolutionary New Women. Through a detailed reading of this story, the narrator-protagonist’s discursive manoeuvring is highlighted to reveal how the male intellectuals maintained exegetical control over the Noras they created, and how this constituted a subliminal subversion of their own claims of modernity and freedom for women.

In investigating how gender discourses intersect with discourses of power, this thesis reveals the ways male authors wrote male characters who exercised narrative control over women in literature of this period. In doing so they undermined their own iconoclastic stance against tradition and dominant gender discourses. Women’s liberation has often been studied as part of the male-driven project of national modernisation in the May Fourth Period and beyond. However, this work explores the ambivalent relationship between male narrator-protagonists and the Noras they desired to educate in the ways of modernity, and what this reflects of the elite male intellectual’s position. Through the close investigation of these two texts, this thesis provides insight into the literary expression of the relationship between gender identities, the quest for modernisation, and power discourses.

1.2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides an overview of significant research in order to locate this thesis within the broader field of scholarship. The scholarly backgrounds to this study’s major concerns are outlined below.  

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1.2.1 \textsc{Ibsen in China}

While the influence of Ibsen’s \textit{A Doll’s House} on Chinese literature in the early twentieth century is not a new area of scholarship, works which are primarily concerned with fictional adaptations of Nora are not numerous. Two of the most comprehensive analyses of Nora’s role in modern Chinese literature are Chang Shuei-may’s \textit{Casting Off the Shackles of Family: Ibsen’s Nora Figure in Modern Chinese Literature}, and Jin Feng’s \textit{The New Woman in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction}. The former presents a thorough account of the development of Ibsen’s Nora in the early decades of the twentieth century in China, and the latter analyses the figure of the New Woman as a literary symbol of the national transitions sparked by China’s quest for modernity.\textsuperscript{9} Jin’s work takes a general approach, less interested with Nora-figures (although these do feature in her analysis) than with New Women and their literary construction. Her investigation of how New Women were constructed under the “male gaze” in the May Fourth Period provides a solid grounding for this thesis’ exploration of the relationship between the Chinese Noras and the men who wrote her. Shuei-may Chang shows a similar tendency to apply the Nora paradigm so widely as to enable “Nora” to be substituted for the term “New Woman.” Significantly, however, \textit{Casting Off the Shackles of Family} outlines the transition from the writers’ concern with individualism to the concern with the socialist collective struggle – a transition arising from the contemporary political climate. This is a valuable historical perspective on the ways in which women’s emancipation became about women leaving the oppressive family to join the collective struggle of the revolutionary cause, and is reflective of the myriad of

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\begin{itemize}
  \item Xiao-mei, \textit{Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995);
  \item Kirk A. Denton, \textit{Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893-1945} (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996);
  \item Wendy Larson, \textit{Women and Writing in Modern China} (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998);
  \item Susan Brownell and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, \textit{Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities: A Reader} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002);
  \item David Der-wei Wang, \textit{The Monster That Is History: History, Violence, and Fictional Writing in Twentieth-Century China} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004);
\end{itemize}

ways in which male-dominated discourses on modernity propagated the gender hierarchy.

In *Ibsen in China: From Ibsen to Ibsenism*, Elisabeth Eide presents one of the first works dedicated entirely to Ibsen’s popularity in China. Perhaps the most compelling observation Eide makes is that it was Ibsen’s ideas (or rather, his ideas as they were perceived by Chinese intellectuals), more so than his artistic works, which held great interest in China. These three works constitute typical “influence studies,” whose concern is largely with how Nora was appropriated rather than why or for what ends.

Lydia Liu’s important book *Translingual Practice* has made significant contributions to the field of comparative literature studies, and the study of China’s modernisation process. She explores Chinese agency in what she terms “translingual practice” – the appropriation of the foreign via complexities of domination, resistance and reinvention. There is no question of “correct” or “incorrect” adoption – “translingual practice” does not, as so much previous scholarship has done, attempt to understand the misunderstanding of Western ideas. Rather, Liu examines works of modern Chinese literature to demonstrate the radical reinvention of concepts which have their origins in the West. She is particularly critical of the universal application of categories such as “individual” – different understandings of the term individual will necessarily arise from particular historical experiences surrounding its reception. Liu calls these “traces of ‘productive distortion.’” It is precisely these “distortions” of Ibsen’s Nora in China that this thesis examines in order to understand the motivations and self-perceptions of the men who wrote her.

Comparative studies of literature are also studies of political forces and power discourses. At the prompting of Liu’s work, this thesis critiques complex power struggles deeply embedded in the psyche of the elite intellectual classes, and explores the motivations (self-conscious or otherwise) behind their adoption of ideas such as women’s emancipation. Just as Liu problematises scholarship’s essentialisation of

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notions which are “translated” across cultures, so too does this thesis examine the distinctions that emerge in how Ibsen’s Nora was conceived, narrated, and ultimately purposed in China as distinct from the West, and also in differing political climates within China.

1.2.2 GENDER POLITICS AND A DOLL’S HOUSE IN CHINA

Particular ideas about gender categories and identities central to the arguments presented in this thesis are further examined in Section 1.3 (Methodology). In short, scholarship of recent decades has shown an increased tendency to problematise gender constructs in modern Chinese literature.12

12 Luo Ting’s Feminist Literary Criticism in the West and China describes the introduction and development of Simone de Beauvoir’s feminist theories in the 1980s in China, and how they have been applied to literature of the last century or so to question the position and constructed image of women. Luo Ting 罗婷, Nüxing zhuyi wenxue piping zai xifang yu Zhongguo 女性主义文学批评在西方与中国 (Feminist literary criticism in the West and China) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2004).


However, scholarship which analyses gender roles in both Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* and the Chinese appropriations of the play is limited. He Chengzhou is one of the foremost scholars on Ibsen in China, and his works are most insightful in their balanced analysis of both Ibsen’s original plays and their transformation in China. In particular, his book *Ibsen in China* consists of a range of essays from both Ibsen and China scholars. The most relevant to this thesis is his and Chen Xuelian’s chapter entitled “Deserted Man: Fall of Masculinity in *A Doll’s House*.”13 This argues for the shift of scholarship’s focus from Nora, to Torvald and his relationship with Nora. Importantly, this is one of the few instances in which Judith Butler’s ideas of gender performativity are applied to *A Doll’s House* explicitly, and it is certainly one of a limited number in which Torvald’s masculine identity crisis is foregrounded.14 However, in a climate in which previous research has been almost exclusively interested in Nora’s plight, the emergence of such scholarship reflects the prevalence of gender studies over feminist enquiries in the last few decades.

Indeed, in the early 1990s, a number of scholars both in China and other countries began to look to the study of masculinity as a means of understanding literature and issues of modernity in Chinese history. Important contributors include Kam Louie, Song Geng and Zhong Xueping, whose works have been integral to establishing a Chinese paradigm of masculinity. In his *Theorising Chinese Masculinity*, Kam Louie outlines historical and contemporary conceptions of masculinity and their manifestation, and problematises the application of Western paradigms to Chinese gender constructs.15 Similarly, Song Geng’s *The Fragile Scholar: Power and Masculinity in Chinese Culture* introduces yin/yang theories as a means of understanding Chinese masculinity

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as unique and distinct from Western masculinity, which he defines as \textit{not} feminine.\footnote{Song Geng, \textit{The Fragile Scholar: Power and Masculinity in Chinese Culture} (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), p. 4.} Song argues that masculinity in China was conceptualised in terms of political and social power in a homosocial context, rather than in opposition to the “feminine”, a notion highly relevant to this thesis’s focus. It is a conception of masculinity that is power-based rather than sex- (or even, perhaps, gender-) based. However, in failing to address the image of the “talented scholar’s” female counterpart or partner (the \textit{cainu} 才女, or the talented girl), Song loses the opportunity to offer a picture of the wider construction of gender in a greater proportion of society. This thesis draws together these two definitions of masculinity, as characterised by a) homosocial power and b) relations with the feminine Other. In doing so, masculinity in this specific period is examined as comprehensively as possible.

Zhong Xueping’s \textit{Masculinity Besieged?} focuses on male representations of men in Chinese literature of the 1980s. It thus presents scholarship located somewhat outside of this thesis’ scope, but Zhong’s analysis of how the Chinese male intellectual’s quest for modernity relates to the changing position of men in modern China, and how this changing position of men has affected the \textit{formation} of Chinese modernity and its quest, will prove highly relevant.\footnote{Zhong Xueping, \textit{Masculinity Besieged?: Issues of Modernity and Male Subjectivity in Chinese Literature of the Late Twentieth Century} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 3.} The chapter “Towards an Understanding of Chinese Modernity” outlines the Chinese intellectuals’ quest for modernity as a Hegelian desire for “self-certainty” via recognition by the Other.\footnote{Ibid., 29.} This thesis takes Zhong’s notions that modern Chinese men are characterised by a desire to overcome marginality of self, culture and nation, and applies them to the (specifically male-driven) literary appropriations of Ibsen’s Nora.\footnote{Ibid., 37.} This will reveal that one way these men desired to “overcome marginality,” as Zhong terms it, was via the assertion of masculine dominance and (perceived) rightful authority over the feminine Other.
The notions explored in this thesis thus rest on scholarship that precedes it, with origins and intellectual roots in both China and the West. However, there are a conspicuously limited number of works which offer textual analyses of *A Doll’s House* in light of theories of gender construction, and even fewer apply these theories to Ibsen in China, with a view to formulating a better understanding of the male authorship of the Nora figure in Chinese literature. Herein lies the gap which this thesis will fill. In interweaving these strands of scholarship, some of the tensions and ambivalences of the May Fourth intellectuals’ fiction will become clear, and the complexities of studying translated or appropriated literary motifs will be illuminated.

1.3 METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the scholarly works and theories vital in the development of this thesis. These will be applied to literature in the following chapters in an attempt to reach a greater understanding of male-authored Chinese Noras in the May Fourth period.

1.3.1 BUTLER AND GENDER PERFORMATIVITY

Judith Butler’s work on socially constructed and performative gender, *Gender Trouble*, has been one of the most important developments in gender studies of the last few decades. Her notions of gender performativity draw on a poststructuralist understanding of subjectivity rooted in the ideas of Foucault, Derrida and Lacan.\(^{20}\) It is a work whose fundamental aim is to problematise – to re-evaluate common assumptions about the apparent coherency of categories of sex, gender and sexuality. Butler argues that this coherency is constructed through repetitive performances dictated by “regulatory practices.”\(^{21}\) These are socially-defined disciplinary frameworks which determine what constitutes “natural” behaviours. The performance of such seemingly natural behaviour provides the illusion of prediscursive core or essential gender attributes. However these


models of gender identity do not exist prior to their performance, but rather gender roles are created as they are performed.

Regulatory practices that govern gender also govern identity, and thus the person’s self-identifying status is maintained through socially instituted norms. The stability of concepts of sex and gender are vital to “the person” as it is understood by the self, and discontinuity or transgression results in the failure to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility which define a person’s gender identity. Consequently, a person’s perception of his/her own identity is thoroughly bound to his/her performative adherence to culturally intelligible gender norms. Butler argues that “gender is the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.” This “repeated stylisation” is performativity, the continuous act of constructing-by-enacting, and thus gender is not a state of “being” but rather, “always doing.” Indeed, it is precisely the repetition of performance that establishes the instability of the category they constitute, thereby leaving room for change and metamorphoses. However, in constructing “illusory origins of gender,” repetition enables the appearance of regulatory regimes which “keep us within a particular grid of intelligibility by governing and punishing non-normative behaviour, interpolating us back into the normative discourse.”

1.3.2 GENDER PERFORMATIVITY AND “POLICING” NORA

In her article, “Policing the Modern Woman in Republican China,” Louise Edwards explores the male intellectual class’s desire to exert discursive control over the modern woman – both her image and her reality. The image of the modernised New Woman was the invention of the intellectual class and thus an “overwhelmingly

22 Ibid., 17.
23 Ibid., 33.
24 Ibid., 25.
26 Ibid., 677.
male”construction, and it follows that discussions about her hold more relevance for understandings of this elite class of intellectual males than they do for any contemporary New Woman’s reality. The intellectuals’ adoption of the feminist cause was in response to a profound sense of intellectual and political dislocation, brought about by the abolition of the traditional cultural and political frameworks that previously guaranteed them elite status. The intellectual male’s attempts to re-establish his political position via the discussion of the emancipation and modernisation of women is further discussed in Section 2.2 “The May Fourth Intellectuals and the Responsibility of ‘jiuguo’ (national salvation).

One of Edwards’ main concerns is the “contest for control of the modern woman,” a contest motivated by the desire for social capital on the part of political and commercial forces. The intellectuals fought to maintain a hold on the discourse of the movement as a means of preserving their own cultural and political authority. This “policing,” as Edwards terms it, was enacted in the literary sphere, in critical and narrative writings about Chinese New Women, with the intention of regaining “guardianship” of her through debates about her qualities. Edwards also notes that the notion of the New Woman as a mechanism for dealing with change is a common one, found not just in China but also the histories of other nations. Partha Chatterjee comments that in India the transformations of such women became a site upon which debates on the national condition could be expressed. The commitment of reform-minded intellectuals to the strengthening of the nation led them to identify constituencies that could be educated towards this end, and thus the modern woman was just one element of the modernising discourse that made the imagining of a new, modern nation possible.

Edwards’ term “policing” requires some qualification for its application in this thesis. It is argued here that in the case of the construction of Chinese Noras, this “policing”

28 Ibid., 116.
29 Ibid.
occurred implicitly rather than explicitly. Noras are controlled on a discursive level within narratives, ultimately undermining the intellectual class’ self-professed advocacy of liberation and autonomy for women. Male guidance towards modernity in these narratives propagated a gendered hierarchy where men were dominant agents and women were silent – a gendered hierarchy the intellectuals were claiming to reform. The lengths to which narrator-protagonists go to maintain dominance in their narrative interactions with Chinese Noras betray the male intellectuals’ anxieties regarding their own positions in the new political order. The emancipated woman was a modern Other against which the modern male Self could be defined; a subaltern figure in a mode of representation (literature) dominated by the male voice. May Fourth authors anchored the subjectivity of their male narrator-protagonists on the representation of this female Other in modern Chinese literature.

This thesis applies Judith Butler’s notions of gender performativity to the modern male intellectuals’ construction of modern women as female partners in their projects of both self and national modernisation. According to Butler, the ongoing discursive practices that make up an individual’s gender identity are vulnerable to disruption and intervention, leaving gendered conceptions of Self tenuously constructed and never entirely constituted. For the male intellectuals, in order to be (or, as Butler says, being through performing) the image of the modern man, the Other against whom the intellectual can perform masculine modern behaviour must be as free and progressive as he is. It follows then, that if the modern woman is the Other against whom the intellectual’s identity as both male and modern is predicated, the coherency and stability of her performance of this role is vital. Furthermore, the maintenance of male dominance over her constitutes one way of facilitating the continued repetition of her performative behaviour.

1.3.3 Simone de Beauvoir, the Youyue Gan, and Performativity

Simone de Beauvoir’s canonical work *The Second Sex* (1949) consists of an account of women’s oppression and subjection to male domination. Most notably, de Beauvoir argues that woman has been defined throughout history not in her own right, but as an aberration of the universal, complete male. Her comment that “one is not born, but
rather becomes, a woman” according to male-defined norms has been immensely influential in contemporary feminist thought.\textsuperscript{31}

Although written decades after the Chinese literature examined here, and only becoming well known in the 1980s in China,\textsuperscript{32} de Beauvoir’s work is concerned with the various ways, places and times across history in which women have been constructed as the Other, and provides insight into the psychology of male/female hierarchies. De Beauvoir posits that woman’s relegation to a position of alterity has been a common thread throughout history. Humanity is inherently male, and man defines woman as relative to him, not as an autonomous being: “she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other.”\textsuperscript{33} The Other is understood by de Beauvoir as inherent in all human thought and necessary to a self-identification of any group as the subject, “the One.”\textsuperscript{34} As an Other against the male Self, women’s efforts at autonomy have always been acts of mere symbolism; they have been unable to grasp anything men have not been willing to give. Woman’s alterity results in her default role as receiver of her fate, while men, on the other hand hold agency over their own destiny.

In an analysis of some of the literature addressed in this thesis, Tan Yanfang invokes the notion of the male “superiority complex” (\textit{youyue gan}), and connects it to ideas expressed by Butler and de Beauvoir. As she uses it, “\textit{youyue gan}” refers to the attitude of male intellectuals to the subordinate Other, the object of their liberation project.\textsuperscript{35} While this Other was sometimes imagined by the intellectual class as the masses, the peasants or other marginalised groups, Tan highlights its application to the gender discourse. In a rather recursive manner, feelings of superiority legitimise male objectification of women, which then motivates the positioning of women in the subjugated position of a gendered hierarchy. Women’s subjugation then \textit{enables} male

\begin{enumerate}
\item Luo Ting, \textit{Nüxing zhuyi wenxue piping zai xifang yu Zhongguo}, p. 216.
\item de Beauvoir, \textit{The Second Sex}, p. 16.
\item Ibid., 18.
\item Tan Yanfang, “Touguo Juansheng de shiye shenshi xianlai liangxing guanxin de jiangou,” p. 364.
\end{enumerate}
narrators to imagine their authority as an inherent gendered characteristic, thus in turn reinforcing the male superiority complex as it expresses it. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues that “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender.” Behavioural expressions of gender are usually held to be the “results” of a gender identity. However, Butler argues that identity is in fact *constituted* by “expressions.” Here, the “expression of gender” is the expression of male superiority, but that very expression is *itself* a performative constitution of the same superiority. Thus this expression allows, proves and constructs that superiority in the mind of the male protagonist.

The implication of de Beauvoir’s aforementioned statement that one is not born a woman but becomes one is that neither womanhood nor manhood entail static conditions of being. Becoming one’s gender is an ongoing discursive process, a “constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end.” There are palpable similarities between these ideas of “becoming” a woman who is located in a position of alterity to the dominant man, and how Chinese Noras were utilised in May Fourth fiction. After all, if gender identities are not pre-discursively constructed but rely on repeated performances, then to maintain a coherent conceptualisation of the Self – including the Self’s social and political position – it is necessary to also maintain the gendered status quo. This is made possible in literature via female silence: “Regret for the Past” and “Creation” are stories dominated by the inner workings of male protagonists. Male characters contained the gendered behaviour of the modern woman through a discourse of male-guidance and superiority: despite these women alluding to all the modern independence of Ibsen’s Nora, they were first and foremost male constructions.

In writing Chinese Noras who are themselves silent and subject to male-defined standards of modernity, the male intellectual authors thus inadvertently undermined their own calls for women’s liberation. While they advocated modernisation, literature


37 Ibid., 33.
in which the “woman question” is explored reveals their anxiety and preoccupation with the stability of their masculine, dominant identity.
CHAPTER 2

THE MALE INTELLECTUAL AND THE NEW WOMAN

2.1 THE MAY FOURTH PERIOD

On May 4 1919, students in Beijing demonstrated against the Chinese government’s decision to sign the Treaty of Versailles, which handed the Chinese province of Shandong over to Japanese power. This demonstration, known as the May Fourth Incident, expressed the students’ outrage at what was seen as national betrayal, and represented the culmination of over half a century of anti-imperialist sentiments and concerns over national sovereignty.38

Nationalist sentiments had been brewing throughout China’s nineteenth century as it faced imperial threats to national sovereignty from the West and Japan, most significantly in the Opium Wars (1840-1842 and 1856-1860) and the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895). The intersection of foreign aggression with Chinese interests threatened traditional culture and increased nationalism, responses which lie at the root of May Fourth anti-traditionalism.39 However, while anti-imperialist sentiment was strong, greater attention was focused internally: it was China’s feudal tradition and perceived “backwardness” that were attacked by politically-minded individuals.40 A “rhetoric of failure” emerged out of these experiences which led simultaneously to expressions of a new desire for rejuvenation, and a relentless examination of national weaknesses which, it was supposed, led China to this period of crisis.41


41 Jing Tsu, Failure, Nationalism, and Literature, p. 8.
Later, the term “May Fourth Movement” would be applied to the years surrounding the May Fourth Incident. The period is usually defined as 1917-1921; however, delineations of the movement’s chronology are obscured by the development of the New Culture Movement, a period of changes in literary and social thought beginning as early as 1915. The New Culture Movement mobilised the elite intelligentsia in China to publish articles in literary and political magazines which advocated the introduction of new (usually Western) ideas as a means of casting off the shackles of China’s traditional feudal culture. However, many such trends were common to both the New Culture Movement and the May Fourth Movement, and the transitions in intellectual, political and social spheres in these years were so interrelated that the terms have almost become synonymous. In the field of literature, Lin Yusheng argues that the conventional dates of the May Fourth period can only be limitedly applied to the relevant literary output, as much of the iconoclastic spirit of the era still echoes in writings beyond these years. Certainly, while Lu Xun’s “Regret for the Past” was written in 1925 and Mao Dun’s “Creation” in 1928, these stories are reflective of the iconoclastic spirit of the May Fourth Period. Furthermore, the men who feature as narrator-protagonists in these works espouse ideas common in the May Fourth literature.


43 It should be noted that scholars’ takes on the temporal scope of the May Fourth Period vary greatly. Rey Chow uses the term to denote “the entire period in early twentieth-century China in which Chinese people...were eager to re-evaluate tradition...and to build a ‘new’ nation” (Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity*, p. 34). Wendy Larson takes the May Thirtieth Incident of 1925 as the beginning of the end of the May Fourth era, when Shanghai police opened fire on Chinese protestors at an anti-foreign demonstration, an event which fuelled nationalist sentiment. This period was significant, as previously romantic or realist writers were forced to make choices regarding their political stance, which placed them either in the right or left wings of the literary sphere. These later years of the May Fourth Movement will be significant in the course of this investigation, as political loyalties deeply impacted the subject of the intellectual class’s literary output, and affected the role and development of the Chinese Nora-figure in literature (Wendy Larson, “The End of “Funü Wenzue”: Women’s Literature from 1925 to 1935,” in *Gender Politics in Modern China: Writing and Feminism*, ed. Tani E. Barlow (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 58). Similarly, in earlier scholarship, Ssu-Yu Teng and John K. Fairbank take 1923 as the end of the May Fourth Period as it should be studied as a whole. The impact of Marxism-Leninism on Chinese thought after that date lends the following years to a different scholarly focus (Ssu-yu Teng and John K. Fairbank, *China’s Response to the West: A Documentary Survey 1839-1923* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), p 231).

and thought, such as emancipation from oppressive cultural norms and the adoption of Western value systems. Rather than delineating specific years, the terms “May Fourth Period” or “May Fourth literature” as they are used in this thesis will refer to the iconoclasm and tense relationship to traditional China of the intellectual classes in the early decades of China’s twentieth century.

2.1.1 Building a New China: Anti-traditionalism and the New Culture

While examining national weaknesses, Chinese intellectuals looked to the West for ways to modernise the nation and her people. Publications emerged such as New Youth, established in 1915 as Youth Magazine by Chen Duxiu, leading thinker and later cofounder of the Chinese Communist Party. These introduced readers to Western philosophies, politics, and literature in an effort to overthrow the traditional Chinese culture that its writers pronounced responsible for China’s defeats. It was argued that this traditional culture was characterised by submission to culturally entrenched hierarchies, as dictated by Confucian traditions, and that only a radical break with the past would allow China to move forward and shake off the burden of her feudal heritage. Luo Jialun, a leader of the 1919 student demonstrations, wrote the following year that the May Fourth Incident’s “glory” was in “getting China to move”, and that prior to the demonstrations, China was a nation “gasping for breath.” This impetus to “move” constituted an engagement with foreign knowledge, and with ideas such as utilitarianism, liberalism, empiricism, individualism of various forms, and the notions developed by figures such as Darwin, Nietzsche, and Freud. Such ideas were debated and propagated as the tools with which China could build a new, modern future.

45 Schwarcz, The Chinese Enlightenment, p. 3.


47 It should be noted that in his book Shanghai Modern, Leo Ou-fan Lee address the important of commercial ventures in publishing that were occurring in the 1920s and 30s, which enabled the dissemination of these ideas. See in Leo Ou-fan Lee, Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban
It was an uneasy phase, in which the tension between the tenacity of tradition and the appeal of foreign ideas was delicately negotiated, often amidst awkward contradictions. Much of the complexity of the time can be explored within the identity crisis of the self-appointed cultural authority of the day, the May Fourth intellectual.

2.2 THE MAY FOURTH INTELLECTUALS AND THE RESPONSIBILITY OF ‘JIUGUO’ (NATIONAL SALVATION)

“Most people in China ... are fettered by destructive customs and rules of propriety that destroy individual integrity. We cannot help but be anguished and try to redress this injustice. Therefore, we call on all students in China to forsake the old examination system mentality and to adopt modern scientific thought! ... We must stand on the side of the future rather than the present.”

So wrote the founders of the New Tide Society in 1919. These were members of the elite educated class whose grievances were not only with the “old examination system” itself but its mentality. This mentality was equated with oppressive tradition and was believed to have hindered China’s emergence onto the modern world stage. Imagining themselves to be in a privileged position of cultural insight, active members of societies such as New Tide were the “xianzhi xianjuewu zhe” (先知先觉悟者) - those first to know and first to be enlightened. Gradually the transition was made from this self-image at the beginning of the May Fourth movement to the image of the zhishi fenzi (知识分子), a more politicised intelligentsia of a class-conscious society. Chen Pingqi, in

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49 The New Tide Society was formed by students of Beijing University in 1919, who fervently believed in the power of China’s educated youth, and thus targeted their publication towards this audience. Their articles are characterised by an abundance of English words and explanations of foreign philosophies and traditions. See Ibid., 67-72.

50 Ibid., 10.

51 Ibid.
his book on modern intellectuals and their social roles, defines zhishi fenzi as anyone of high education and cultural knowledge, although in the 1920s the term usually signified intellectuals of an academic or political bent who made a living by sharing their superior intellectual understanding.\(^\text{52}\) Eddy U distinguishes between the zhishi jieji (知识阶级, literally “the intellectual class”), a term more common in the 1920s, and zhishifenzi, popular in the 1930s as the CCP’s main referent for educated people.\(^\text{53}\) However, the term’s usage and meaning was not consolidated until 1949 by the CCP. Prior to this time, zhishi fenzi was used almost interchangeably with other terms denoting educated classes, such as shi (士, scholars), wenren (文人, literati), and dushuren (读书人, men of letters).\(^\text{54}\) In this work the terms zhishi fenzi, or intellectual class, are used, as these are the most commonly used and the most widely recognised in current scholarship. The mission of this intellectual class was to enlighten the Chinese people to the evils of oppressive, traditional values and the necessity of emancipation and individual freedom, and so mobilise them to modernise their attitudes. The propagation of these ideas was intended to transform China into a modern nation capable of asserting her own sovereignty. With this intention, the intellectuals used publications like the above New Tide journal to propagate “modern” ideas, and in doing so attempted to construct the image of themselves as the harbingers of modern thought to China.

### 2.2.1 A NEW ROLE AND AN IDENTITY CRISIS

While zhishi fenzi as a concept did not exist prior to the politically tumultuous first decades of the twentieth century, the shi and wenren were the ancestors of the latter intellectuals. However, these figures were also state bureaucrats, closely bound to the

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\(^\text{52}\) Chen Pingqi 陈平其, Dangdai Zhongguo zhishi fenzi de shehui zuoyong yanjiu 当代中国知识分子的社会作用研究 (Studies on the social role of contemporary Chinese intellectuals), (Zhengzhou: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 2005), pp. 23-24.


\(^\text{54}\) Ibid., 974.
state’s ruling apparatus.\textsuperscript{55} The identity of these intellectual scholar-officials changed as the traditional ties between the scholar-officials and the state eroded with the abolition of the civil service examinations in 1905 and the fall of the monarchy in 1911. In this environment, the elite intellectual class faced a crisis of disempowerment. The ultimate cost of intellectual autonomy was political estrangement.\textsuperscript{56}

Consequently, there was a profound sense of political and intellectual dislocation among intellectuals in the early twentieth century, and it is in this setting that terms such as \textit{zhishi jieji} and \textit{zhishi fenzi} began to emerge. Leo Ou-fan Lee notes the distinction between the reformists of the Qing period, who were scholars and officials with little knowledge of foreign languages and relied on (largely Japanese) translations, and the “new generation of elite intellectuals,” many of whom were Western-educated.\textsuperscript{57} This “new generation” felt a need not only to modernise China but also, on an individual level, to re-conceptualise their own place and worth in society. This was largely in response to the new political climate, in which they could no longer function as interpreters of the emperor’s power and legitimacy.\textsuperscript{58} The reformation of society’s traditional framework in the early decades of the twentieth century marginalised the intellectuals, as they were no longer guaranteed political positions in the state or elite social status. They needed a new way to distinguish between the “awakened” (觉悟) intellectual elites and the ignorant masses, and they found it in their projects for social and cultural reform. The intellectuals’ marginalisation spurred them into utilising their iconoclastic stance against tradition to position themselves as leaders of modernity, thus ensuring their centrality to the political sphere as authorities on modern morality and culture.\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{55} Goldman, \textit{China’s Intellectuals and the State}, pp. 1-2.


\textsuperscript{57} Leo Ou-fan Lee, \textit{Shanghai Modern}, p. 61.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{59} Jin Feng, \textit{The New Woman in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction}, p. 22.
However, the break with tradition was never clear. Members of the intellectual elite in the May Fourth Period carried the self-conscious burden of tradition, even while expressing China’s need to be radically different from the past. In discussing the relationship between the May Fourth Period and Chinese tradition, Yu Yingshi points out that while the preoccupation with iconoclasm in the May Fourth period cannot be refuted, the “newness,” or iconoclastic elements, of May Fourth thought were actually founded on the unorthodoxy of tradition. This created a tension and ambivalence in the elite Chinese male’s position as modern cultural authority, a tension revealed in their fiction.  

As politically-minded and enlightened individuals of Chinese society, the greatest concern of the Chinese male intellectuals was the condition of the nation, and the perception of China’s impotence contributed to the male intellectuals’ crisis. In her work on Chinese male subjectivity, Zhong Xueping cites Hegel’s philosophy that “‘self-certainty’ is achieved when the self is recognised by the other; without that recognition, self-certainty cannot be achieved and desire cannot be satisfied.”  

This desire for recognition by other major players on the world stage was to become a significant part of the Chinese intellectuals’ quest for modernity. Thus in China, the search for Self constituted efforts to achieve recognition and identification (both by Self and Other) with things modern and new – the image of a modern Chinese nation-state was pivotal to China’s quest for a new, stronger identity. Zhong characterises modern male subjectivity as being thoroughly preoccupied with a male marginality complex, fuelled both by the contemporary national crisis and by their own unstable political position. The male anxiety betrayed in the protagonists’ narration of Chinese Noras in these stories reflect the contemporary intellectual climate: the obsession with the weakness of the nation, the culture, and thus China’s men. The male-directed narration and discourse

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61 Zhong Xueping, Masculinity Besieged?, p. 25.

62 Ibid., 28.
reveals a desire to overcome the marginalisation these weaknesses bring, and the contemporary search for a clear and strong modern male identity.⁶³

2.2.2 China, the West and the New Woman

China has a long history of employing literature as a political instrument.⁶⁴ In this period, both men and women used fictional and non-fictional literary works to disseminate ideas that would facilitate China’s transformation into a modern nation state, and construct an image of their own progressive modernity. Literature was one field in which the intellectuals could individually make significant contributions to the destruction of traditional culture. Furthermore, it was a platform by which the intellectuals could establish themselves as moral authorities of the new culture, thereby reasserting the political authority they had lost in the previous decades.

One of the most influential ideas and philosophies translated and imported to China in this period was women’s emancipation, depicted as intimately connected with the anti-Confucian notions of personal freedom and the primacy of the individual. The abolition of traditional feminine virtues was advocated in favour of the characteristics of a modern, New Woman. This New Woman emerged as a literary model for Chinese women to emulate, thereby playing their part in the nation-building project. In an attempt to assert their modern outlook on gender, male intellectuals wrote fiction which attacked the injustice of women’s circumstances. However, such sympathy and attacks “did not necessarily imply male willingness to give up gendered hegemony.”⁶⁵ Stephen Chan ties this image of the New Woman to the May Fourth intellectuals’ uncertainty of identity and political potency, in what he calls “formations of despair” – literary manifestations of the “unrest and bewilderment” felt by intellectuals in the face of their ambiguous roles.⁶⁶ Significantly, fictional women written and narrated by men were

⁶³ Ibid., 37.
placed on the lower rung of a hierarchy of salvation, which featured man-as-guide and woman-as-disciple: fictional depictions of their fight for freedom revealed as much about male agency and political identity, as it did about female liberty.

The model of Ibsen’s Nora served as one particular type of New Woman in China. This thesis argues that the frequent rewriting of Nora’s story by male writers in the May Fourth Period, and the ambiguous and often conflict-ridden relationship depicted between the Chinese Nora and the young male intellectual within these narratives, betrays one way women serve as an Other for the exploration of man’s masculine self-image. The identity crisis of the male intellectual in the May Fourth period was expressed in the literary sphere, and their political and social uncertainty was revealed and articulated in the uncertainty of their male intellectual protagonist’s relationship with his modern woman. Nora’s actions enabled these authors and their characters to advocate a new, modern position for women and in doing so, inadvertently express concerns regarding the man’s modern identity.
CHAPTER 3

A DOLL’S HOUSE IN CHINA AND THE WEST

A Doll’s House revolves Torvald and Nora Helmer, the husband and wife of an upper-middle class nineteenth century Norwegian family. Their relationship is presented in a critical light: Torvald belittles and patronises his wife, and she plays up to his belittlements. However, throughout the course of the play, Nora reveals to her old school friend, Mrs. Linde, that she is more intelligent and astute than Torvald apparently realises. It comes to light that she illegally borrowed money for a trip to Italy the couple took a few years prior to the play’s setting. This trip was necessary to save her husband Torvald’s life, and for years Nora has been working in secret to pay off the debt and conceal her forgery. However, soon the source of Nora’s loan – Krogstad – turns up, and as a result of his blackmail plot, her secrets are divulged. Instead of the magnanimous defence of her honour that she expects from Torvald, he is appalled and condemns her behaviour. Soon after, Krogstad withdraws his threat of blackmail, and Torvald believes that all can be well again. Nora refutes this, deciding to leave Torvald as she can no longer play her role as his doll-wife, but must learn to be her own person. She walks out, slamming the door behind her.

3.1 A DOLL’S HOUSE IN THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING WORLD

The first performance of A Doll’s House opened in Copenhagen in 1879, but reached widespread fame in the English-speaking world and greater Europe with London’s 1889 production.67 From the outset Nora was denounced by critics and the public alike for her narcissism, her hysteria, and her reprehensible morals, while Ibsen was attacked for bringing to the stage what was deemed inappropriate for public viewing.68

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68 In “Between the Acts”, an unsigned regular theatre column in Queen, 1889, it was argued that because English people “do not care to go to the play to…study matters which they would not discuss in their drawing-rooms,” A Doll’s House would soon fade into irrelevance. “Between the Acts,” Queen (15 June, 1889). Quoted in Egan, Henrik Ibsen: The Critical Heritage, p. 106.
Perhaps the most vehement reaction to *A Doll’s House* came from critics who saw in Nora’s final departure an outrageous betrayal of her “natural” role as woman, a stance which provided justification for their wholesale dismissal of the play’s artistic or social worth. 69 In an unsigned review of the Novelty Theatre production of *A Doll’s House* in the *Daily News*, it was written of Nora’s abandonment of her husband and children, that “it may be confidently asserted that no women who ever breathed would do any such thing.” Consequently, only as “a mild picture of a domestic life in Christiania” could the play hold any interest. 70 Clement Scott (1841–1904), a contemporary critic notorious for his denunciations of Ibsen’s plays, similarly appears eager to lay the blame for Nora’s final crisis at her feet as much as at her husband’s. Read this way, empathy with Nora becomes impossible and the play is rendered dissatisfying: she is a “baby wife” who “becomes absolutely inhuman,” simply as a result of her husband’s egoism and her own foolishness. 71

However, a topic of equally fervent critique was the play’s “theories.” 72 For contemporary critics and audiences, the political ideas that were allegedly dramatised in Ibsen’s plays revolved around women’s independence, education and equality. It is noteworthy that a leading contemporary American feminist, Annie Nathan Meyer, called Ibsen “A Prophet of the New Womanhood” and declared that “woman may find in the commonly styled sombre pessimist the hopeful Prophet singing of the dawn.” 73 It was not just feminists, however, who imagined Ibsen as a social prophet. In 1891 George Bernard Shaw published *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, which advocated a

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72 “We do not honestly believe that those theories as expressed in *The Doll’s House* would ever find favour with the great body of English playgoers.” Ibid.

radical individualism that he believed was embodied and promoted in Ibsen’s plays, cementing Ibsen’s reputation as ideologue for many decades to come.

However, it should also be noted that aesthetic readings of the plays were not unheard of. Indeed, William Archer (1856-1924), the translator and critic largely responsible for introducing Ibsen’s plays to the Anglophone world, was strongly opposed to considering Ibsen as a “thinker” rather than a “poet,” and asserted in a 1905 essay that Ibsen has no consistent mission or doctrine in writing his plays, but rather, that his primary concern was the depiction of character through compelling action.\(^7^4\) In the latter half of the twentieth century, Ibsen’s plays have largely been read aesthetically, and this method has been framed as “saving” Ibsen from feminism,\(^7^5\) an undertaking derived from Ibsen’s own disclaimer against “consciously working for the women’s rights movements.”\(^7^6\) In this context, \textit{A Doll’s House} has been reassessed as “beyond sexual difference”\(^7^7\), and Nora has been re-imagined “not just a woman arguing for female liberation,” but rather as an embodiment of “the comedy as well as the tragedy of modern life.”\(^7^8\) Ultimately, the idea of Ibsen as ideologue and social prophet was a limiting one – the power of his plays to incite debate could only last so long as these debates were topical and relevant. As women gained more rights in Western society and “the woman question” failed to ignite controversy as it once had, the plays’ artistry and aesthetic value gained prominence in the field of literary criticism.


\(^7^6\) Ibsen’s speech at a birthday banquet in 1898 is often quoted: “I thank you for the toast, but must disclaim the honour of having consciously worked for the women’s rights movement... True enough, it is desirable to solve the woman problem, along with all the others; but that has not been the whole purpose. My task has been the description of humanity.” Henrik Ibsen, \textit{Letters and Speeches}, trans. Evert Sprinchnorn (New York: Hill, 1964), p. 337.


\(^7^8\) Einar Haugen, \textit{Ibsen’s Drama: Author to Audience} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), p. vii.
3.2 Nora, Torvald, and Performative Gender Constructions

The last few decades of scholarship have ushered in new perspectives on what were once the spheres of feminist theory. In many fields of scholarship “feminism” has given way to “gender studies,” as scholars have sought to problematise both masculinity and femininity. In this context, Judith Butler’s notions of gender roles and identities provide a productive way of examining the means by which gender and gender roles not only come into being, but are in fact constructed and performed in a repeated, continuous manner. Such ideas have been applied to various readings of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* in recent decades, and have generated new insights into the complicated dynamic between Nora and Torvald, which resonate with how the couple’s relationship was appropriated in the Chinese context.

He Chengzhou critiques the traditionally Nora-centric literary analysis of the play in an article which asks what happens to *Torvald* after Nora leaves home.79 In his focus on modern masculinity and particularly the masculine crisis in Ibsen’s plays, He Chengzhou explores the performative nature of gender roles in *A Doll’s House*. Notions of gender performativity posit that gender identities are vulnerable to destabilisation should the boundaries of socially defined, gendered behaviour be transgressed. Butler makes use of the term “regulatory practices” to refer to socially-defined disciplinary frameworks which govern gender and notions of identity through a “matrix” of socially constructed gender norms. Ideas of “the person” are thus maintained through socially instituted normative behaviour.80 In light of these theories, Torvald’s masculine identity could be understood as constructed through his own repeated performance of that identity, alongside Nora’s cooperative performance of the feminine Other. The possibilities of gender transformation come to light in the relationship between acts of performance: in the possibility of a transgression or obstacle to repetition. For Nora, the realisation that Torvald would not sacrifice his honour for her constituted such an obstacle to her continued performance of his “doll-wife.” In the traditional patriarchal system where the husband was ruler, head and provider of the family, the role of

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80 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 17.
husband, father and even *man* is thrown into chaos when Nora defies Torvald and leaves him. He Chengzhou comments that “it proves in a different way that Helmer’s story of success is actually dependent on Nora’s sacrifices.”

Taking a similar approach, Toril Moi describes Nora and Torvald’s “theatricalisation” of themselves and each other in order to perform socially assigned gender roles of female sacrifice and male rescue. Torvald in particular is in need of constant reassurance of these identities, again demonstrating that his masculine identity is predicated on both his and Nora’s performance of their respective behaviour in the male/female binary. His self-identity as a man rests on this binary, characterised in his mind as the weak, feminine Other against his strong, masculine Self. He says to Nora: “I shouldn’t be a proper man if your feminine helplessness didn’t make you twice as attractive to me,” and “I’ve often wished that you could be threatened by some imminent danger so that I could risk everything I had – even my life itself – to save you.” Torvald’s masculine strength requires feminine weakness – and even feminine suffering – for its expression: “Whatever happens, when it comes to the point you can be quite sure that… I’m man enough to take it all on myself.” Nora is a willing participant in these performances, although more aware of their artifice than Torvald. Her performed role of his wife is undercut by her actions when she is not constrained by considerations of Torvald’s masculine identity: “Torvald has his pride – most men have – he’d be terribly hurt and humiliated if he thought he owed anything to me.” These scenes depict Nora’s conscious and willing transgression of gender boundaries, as well as her defence of her actions. In doing so, not only are these boundaries are revealed to be socially constructed, but Nora is exposed as a willing participant in their performance and construction. She says to Mrs. Linde that “saving Torvald’s life” was “almost like

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82 Moi, “First and Foremost a Human Being: Idealism, Theatre and Gender in *A Doll’s House,*” p. 257.


84 Ibid., 219.

85 Ibid., 190.

86 Ibid., 161.
being a man,“87 and while the audience is privy to Nora’s hidden awareness and agency in their family affairs, she plays up “feminine” characteristics of helpless co-dependency in her interactions with Torvald. He says to her: “Aha! So my little obstinate one’s out of her depth, and wants someone to rescue her?” to which Nora replies dutifully: “Yes, Torvald, I can’t do anything without you to help me.”88 She is aware that she has been a vital player in constructing and theatricalising both of their gendered identities: “I’ve lived by performing tricks for you, Torvald. That was how you wanted it.”89

Judith Butler argues that there is no such thing as true gender; there exists only reiterated acts that produce the effect of “natural” behaviour while constructing the norms that define it. Similarly, Ibsen’s characters understand themselves as male or female not by passively being, but by actively behaving, and actively being read as male or female by their partner.90 Since there is no essentialised gender, but rather only arbitrary relations between role acts, any disruption to the cooperative chain of repetition may lead to a crisis in the maintenance of the gender identity.91 Helmer’s masculine dominance is a constructed role which relies on both his continual repeated performance, and Nora’s performance of his counterpart – the submissive wife, the object of his power. Thus her sudden rejection of her own performance as she recognises its duplicity leaves him in crisis. The audience of Ibsen’s original play is not privy to the consequences of Nora and Torvald’s breakdown in gender identities, but this is a thread taken up in China with the male intellectuals’ adoption of Nora and her fate. This analysis of A Doll’s House provides a useful framework for examining Nora’s reappearance in Chinese literature.

Joan Templeton astutely observes that despite the varied critical receptions of A Doll’s House, they seem to have a common, fundamental purpose: to destroy Nora’s

87 Ibid., 162.
88 Ibid., 178.
89 Ibid., 226.
credibility and power as a representative of women. Nora was first condemned and dismissed, then later rejected as a feminist heroine at all, and in both of these accounts, she is rendered powerless as a tool for the women’s movement.\textsuperscript{92} On this note, it is appropriate now to look to \textit{A Doll’s House} as it travelled to China, where Ibsen was received almost unquestioningly as a social activist, and where Nora’s image was utilised as the image of a modern, enlightened woman for a modern, enlightened China.

\textbf{3.3 \textit{A Doll’s House} and Nora in China}

As Ibsen’s play travelled beyond Europe and the West to China, it was the social-activist impression of Ibsen who travelled with it. \textit{A Doll’s House} became widely known in China when a special “Ibsen” edition of \textit{New Youth} magazine in 1918 featured Hu Shi’s translation. His article \textit{Ibsenism} was also included, advocating iconoclastic ideas derived from the plays, such as individualism and female emancipation.\textsuperscript{93}

This marked the beginning of a new life for \textit{A Doll’s House}. The idea of Ibsen as a social reformist resonated with the Chinese tradition of writers as agents of social change. Just as Ibsen was, in certain periods, received in the Anglophone world as a social prophet, in China it was also believed that his plays were written with the intention of propagating strategies for social reform. In this intellectual environment, Ibsen’s Nora became one type of New Woman and a model for women’s emancipation, a project closely linked with national modernisation. Chinese twentieth century fiction and drama is riddled with female characters that are explicitly equated with Nora, and whose actions echo Nora’s dramatic departure from the patriarchal bonds of her husband’s house, an act re-imagined as symbolic of the rejection of traditional social

\textsuperscript{92} Templeton, \textit{“The Doll House Backlash: Criticism, Feminism and Ibsen,”} p. 30.

\textsuperscript{93} Hu Shi writes that in his plays Ibsen “demonstrates how the family and society have actually deteriorated to such an extent that everybody feels that there must be a reform.” In Hu Shi’s understanding, “this is Ibsenism,” a fully developed ideology endorsed in Ibsen’s plays. Hu Shi 胡适, “Yibusheng zhu yì 易卜生主義 (Ibsenism),” \textit{Xin Qingnian} 4 (1918). Reprinted in \textit{Hu Shi wen cun} 胡适文存 (Writings of Hu Shi), vol. 4. Taipei: Yuandong, 1953. Quoted in Eide, \textit{Ibsen in China}, p. 165.
codes and modes of oppression.\textsuperscript{94} Elisabeth Eide notes that mentions of Ibsen constitute a kind of “scholarly namedropping,” and that Nora becomes a “catch-word for female emancipation.”\textsuperscript{95}

However, some notable differences between Ibsen’s Nora and Chinese Noras emerged. The first work to explore the fate of Nora in the Chinese context is usually attributed to Hu Shi’s \textit{The Greatest Event in Life} (1919). This was a one-act play in which traditional superstitions collide with modern notions of freedom in marriage, concluding in the young woman’s Nora-esque abandonment of her family in order to pursue happiness with her betrothed. With this play, the tone is set for Chinese Noras, with dichotomies established that continue throughout much of China’s Ibsen-inspired literature: tradition versus modernity, oppression versus emancipation, familial duty versus individual freedom. Furthermore, while in \textit{A Doll’s House} Nora leaves her husband’s doll-house in order to “try to become [a human being],”\textsuperscript{96} Chinese Noras tended to escape the oppression of her father’s house with the purpose of making free choices in love and marriage. Thus while Ibsen’s Nora leaves Torvald to “educate herself,” declaring that this is one pursuit in which he is unable to direct her,\textsuperscript{97} Nora in Chinese fiction relied on her lover (often a young intellectual) for her own education in modern ideas. While Nora was the agent of her own enlightenment, Zhang Chuntian notes that Tian Yamei, of \textit{The Greatest Event in Life} only considers leaving her family (\textit{chuzou}; 出走) at the encouragement of her lover, Mr. Chen.\textsuperscript{98} This marked the beginning of the changes that Nora underwent in the Chinese context, and these changes propagated a relationship that was predicated on the dichotomy of saviour/saved roles. In fact, this dichotomy also echoed the intellectuals’ self-appointed authority to educate real-life Chinese women on

\textsuperscript{94} For a thorough compendium of fictional and non-fictional literary works which feature Nora and \textit{A Doll’s House}, see Kwok-kan Tam, \textit{Ibsen in China, 1908-1997: A Critical-Annotated Bibliography of Criticism, Translation and Performance} (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2001).

\textsuperscript{95} Eide, \textit{Ibsen in China}, p. 90.

\textsuperscript{96} Ibsen, \textit{A Doll’s House and Other Plays}, p. 228.

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 227.

modern attitudes. The stories examined here, “Regret for the Past” and “Creation,” similarly feature Chinese Noras who, despite being educated, are directed by their lovers. Moreover, they are not only guided by men, but silenced by them: both stories are narrated by the young intellectual male to whom the women’s modern-thinking can be attributed. The liberation of women as advocated in literature via the Nora paradigm was thus a thoroughly masculine project, a case of what Tani Barlow calls “hierarchical Othering.” The female Other’s performative adherence to coherent gender roles is vital to the male narrator-protagonist’s self-identity, and thus through his narration she is relegated to subordinate positions on the saviour/saved hierarchy.

In their work on modern Chinese women’s literature, Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua state that as a result of such male-dominated discourse, the hoped-for women’s liberation was limited to the resistance of the older generation’s patriarchal authority, often personified as a strict Confucian father. The freedom of women in this environment to find free love and choose one’s own marriage was the ultimate rejection of his value system, but marriage could still operate as a prison for women. The boundaries of women’s liberty only reached so far as free choice in marriage, and thus resulted in the tendency for Chinese women to be released from one oppressor (the father’s authority) only to step into the grasp of another (the husband’s authority).

This transference of authority was not just from the father to the husband, however, but also from the father/husband to the state. In the 1920s, there began to be a significant shift in the political views of the intellectual class from individualism to Marxist collectivism. In this increasingly tumultuous and radical political climate of the 1920s and 30s, “girl students” (nǚ xuesheng; 女学生) were gradually replaced by women who were valiant revolutionaries, created by writers loyal to a certain political cause. Even where the girl student remained, her political interests became markedly more


100 Meng Yue 孟悦 and Dai Jinhua 戴锦华, Fuchu lishi dibiao 浮出历史地表 (Emerging from the horizon of history) (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chuban she, 2004), p. 9.

101 Ibid., 10.
pronounced.¹⁰² The Nora paradigm remained prevalent in this environment, providing an archetype for women of the possibility of breaking oppressive family ties and joining a particular political movement. However, despite the apparent new radicalism of fictional women in this stage of literature, male authors continued to subjugate women under the projects of self-representation and China’s modernisation. These “liberated” revolutionary Noras were either once again contained within the (male) rule of the Party, or were used as weaker feminine complement to the revolutionary man’s political growth: they were a prop in the political *Bildungsroman* of the young male intellectual-revolutionary.¹⁰³

Chinese Noras tended to travel from one patriarchy to another – from the father’s rule to the husband’s, or from the husband’s rule to be subsumed within the (male-dominated) revolutionary cause. In all cases, Chinese Noras are ultimately a literary foil against which male anxieties can be expressed; they are constructed, narrated, and appropriated *by men, for men.*

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CHAPTER 4
POLICING THE LIBERATED NORA

4.1 LU XUN’S “REGRET FOR THE PAST”

Lu Xun’s short story “Regret for the Past” (1925) tells of the ultimately tragic love affair between Juansheng, a typical May Fourth scholar, and Zijun, a young woman who reflects the stereotype of the “girl student” (nü xuesheng). Their relationship is pedagogical in nature: Zijun is virtually silent, while the “shabby room would echo with the sound of [Juansheng’s] voice.”\(^\text{104}\) He speaks to her of Western writers and philosophers commonly invoked in the May Fourth period (Ibsen, Tagore, Shelley are specifically mentioned), and of “modern” ideas (the dictatorship of the Chinese family, anti-traditionalism, and gender equality). Seemingly in response, Zijun defies her uncle-guardian and moves in with Juansheng, in an act typical of Chinese Noras. She echoes Nora’s own speech, declaring “I belong to myself…No one else has any rights over me!”\(^\text{105}\) Through Juansheng’s highly subjective narration we observe the slow decline of his feelings for Zijun, and the disappearance of her “high-flooted philosophy, her fearless speeches.”\(^\text{106}\)

Finally, amidst talk of foreign writers, and the “courageous resolve” of Ibsen’s Nora, he admits to her that he no longer loves her. He later returns home to find her gone, and hears from a neighbour that she has left with her father. Some time afterward, an acquaintance tells Juansheng of Zijun’s death, and the story ends with his guilt giving way to the anxious desire to “forget” and “make strides towards a new life.”\(^\text{107}\)


\(^{105}\) Ibid., 255.

\(^{106}\) Ibid., 265.

\(^{107}\) Ibid., 272.
4.2 NARRATING, OTHERING AND POLICING NORA

Importantly, *Regret for the Past* begins with Nora’s iconoclastic exit, and through Juansheng’s eyes we see the couple’s subsequent poverty and the stress of their ensuing social alienation. It is significant that Lu Xun uses narration that is highly unreliable, retrospective, and male-centred to tell a story that is arguably actually Zijun’s. Juansheng’s narration of Zijun (and indeed, the male narration/authoring of women in both “Regret for the Past” and “Creation”) are here analysed to reveal the unexpressed male desire to control the gender discourse of the story. In doing so, Juansheng is able to preserve Zijun’s integral role in the construction and performance of his masculine, modern identity. When men speak for women, female behaviour becomes a performative space dominated by men; women serve as male estimations, appropriations and ultimately, tools for expressing male subjectivity. Juansheng holds the narrative power in “Regret for the Past,” and on one level, he “performs” Zijun’s gender identity for her through the narrative account of her behaviour. Zijun is thus “liberated,” but both Juansheng’s behaviour towards her in the narrative, and his retrospective narration of her, ensure that she is contained under his authorship and authority. The male protagonist’s narrative control subsumes both male and female gender behaviour under discourses of male dominance, ultimately enabling the expression of anxieties regarding the male intellectuals’ modern position through the representation of women. Just as performative gender theories were applied to *A Doll’s House*, so too are they applied to these works in the following chapters in order to highlight the connections between gender identities as they are expressed in fiction, and the identity crises that members of the intellectual elite class were experiencing in reality.

“Regret for the Past” exemplifies the way intellectuals expressed anxieties of the Self through the narrative Othering of women: the means by which the narrative constructs the woman as Other. In this period modern women and Noras are constructed in literature as tropes or symbols of the modern man’s Other; a counterpart with whom the male protagonist may perform his modern identity. In Zijun’s silence, readers must rely on Juansheng’s characterisation and narration for an account of the story’s action; it is the male voice that governs the woman’s interior. The audience of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s*
*House* holds a privileged view of Nora’s self-conscious cooperation with Torvald’s demands on her behaviour – we see her actively hiding behaviour from him which she knows does not coincide with his preference for her feminine weakness, but willingly exposing such actions to those whose gender identities do not depend on her conduct (particularly Mrs. Linde). In “Regret for the Past,” the Chinese Nora (Zijun) is narratively spoken for by Juansheng; he controls her retrospectively through the narration, managing the representation of her and thus of him also. As a consequence of Juansheng’s monopoly on narration, we can know Zijun only indirectly, while being fully aware of Juansheng’s inner workings. As Tan Yanfang notes in his article, “Examining Modern Gender Constructs through Juansheng’s Eyes; Male Subjectivity and the Female Other in ‘Regret for the Past.’” Juansheng plays the dual role of the narrator and the narrated. He directs the story both in its re-telling and its action, and this agency allows man to conceptualise woman as an Other against whom his modern Self can be performed. Literary Chinese Noras, when imagined alongside (and controlled by) a modern, masculine individual, served as a mirror through which his modernity could be reflected. Even in women’s iconoclastic acts of departure, male narrators and protagonists who acted as their guide to modernity ensured that women’s behaviour could always be rewritten into a discourse of male domination and authority. Located in a subjugated position within a relationship established as a model of modern behaviour, Zijun becomes a Chinese Nora left no room for transgression beyond the New Woman role Juansheng has set up for her. The representation of women in literature was thus commandeered by the male writers via male narrator-protagonists, for the expression of male anxieties.

Thus in “Regret for the Past,” Zijun is a mirror by which Juansheng contemplates and asserts his own subjectivity. As such, her expressions and behaviour measure his self-worth. His dismissal from work and his inability to provide for them both result in his resentment of her subsequent behaviour – her preoccupation with feeding them, her meanness with food portions. When Juansheng is dismissed, Zijun’s reaction is foregrounded: “But what pained me most was how pale the once-indomitable Zijun went.

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Lately, her nerve seemed to have been failing her.‖ However, we never hear from Zijun herself. Her experiences and expressions hold value only for their disclosure of Juansheng’s own emotional state. Stephen Ching-Kiu Chan observes that Zijun is “there to be read and recorded in justification of one’s own assertion of self-integrity”; women are represented to enable the expression of “one’s own transcendence of a painful crisis of identity.” Indeed, after he hears news of Zijun’s death, Juansheng appears to regret the loss of his self-identity that her death implies more than he does her actual passing:

“…that same old shabby room, the same old plank bed, the same old moribund locust tree and wisteria. This time, everything that had brought me happiness, love, life was now gone, replaced only by hollowness…” (emphasis added)

Significantly, Juansheng’s hope is at its zenith in response to Zijun’s aforementioned defiant assertion of her own autonomy: the words “echoed in the cathedral of [his] mind.” Furthermore, that Zijun’s statement implies the success of her education in modern thinking holds connotations in Juansheng’s mind for all Chinese women, and even all China: “I now knew Chinese women weren’t the lost cause that pessimists would have us believe, and that a glorious future would soon dawn for us all” (emphasis added). Here the importance of the representation of the modern, feminine Other for the man’s modern identity is clear, as are the implications it holds for the national identity: the modernisation of women holds a glorious future for “us all.” Man’s modern identity is inextricably linked with the modern identity of the nation, and women’s cooperation in the performance of modern behaviour will form the image of a progressive, modern China.

Hence, constructing this image requires women to perform their socially defined role as a modern, feminine Other to the intellectuals’ modern, masculine Self. As previously discussed, Judith Butler theorises that a subject’s identity is intelligible and coherent

109 Lu Xun, The Real Story of Ah-Q and Other Tales of China, p. 260.


111 Lu Xun, The Real Story of Ah-Q and Other Tales of China, p. 271.

112 Ibid., 256.
only through the repetition of stylised acts. In Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, Torvald’s masculine identity is to a large extent constructed through his dominance over a fragile, feminine wife. However, this identity is thrown into chaos when Nora asserts her right to independence, and leaves him to discover her own individuality. In Nora’s interactions with Mrs. Linde, her awareness of the mutually dependent nature of both her own and Torvald’s gendered identities is made clear. Nora sees it as partially her responsibility to maintain Torvald’s masculine self-identity, and thus hides actions from him that would suggest greater strength or astuteness on her part than he has afforded her. Torvald likes to contrast his own strength with Nora’s feminine weaknesses, and thus it would be “humiliating” for Torvald to discover that he “owed anything” to Nora for saving his life. Furthermore, such a discovery would “spoil everything between [them], and [their] lovely happy home would never be the same again.” Nora is consciously aware of the importance of maintaining their regulated gender identities. These identities are predicated on the performative response to each other; they operate within certain expectations of the corresponding role to be played by their partner.

This is the model that Nora and *A Doll’s House* provided in conveying how identities may be defined and understood via an Other, and require the Other’s cooperation in order to remain stable and coherent. In “Regret for the Past”, Juansheng’s hope for China’s “glorious future” dwindles as Zijun begins to resemble less the revolutionary new woman and more the traditional domestic wife. Her “self-worth seemed tied up exclusively with the preparation of food;” all the things of which they had spoken, everything “she had once known” seemed to have been “wiped out.” Juansheng’s self-image as a modern man of intellect is predicated on this Other with whom he can perform the appropriate behaviour, and while previously she had mirrored his modern desires, increasingly his masculinity (and modernity) is besieged by her inability to play


115 Chen and He, “Deserted Man: Fall of Masculinity in *A Doll’s House*,” p. 89.


117 Lu Xun, *The Real Story of Ah-Q and Other Tales of China*, p. 262.
the part of the modern woman. Zijun’s professed (although never truly enacted) emancipation and independence allegorises Juansheng’s/China’s rightful claim to modernity, so when she fails to ever be truly emancipated or independent, so too does it symbolise his/China’s failure.118

4.3 POLICING NORA AND EXPOSING MALE ANXIETY

In “Regret for the Past” Juansheng expresses all the turmoil of the male elite intellectuals as they strived to establish a stable image of themselves as modern men advocating modernity for women and the nation. Yet as seen in Juansheng’s retrospective guilty narration, this image of modernity was riddled with tension, as it was based on the intellectuals’ advocacy of women’s emancipation while necessarily still utilising the representation of woman as a male-controlled icon. In the political and social transformations of these decades, the intellectual class sought ways to express and overcome their anxieties about their identity and political potential. Women were represented in ways with enabled these expressions. Thus, for women in fiction, freedom from the bonds of patriarchy was not freedom at all, but merely the transference from one discourse of masculine domination to another.

As mentioned in Chapter One, one of the greatest transformations that Nora went through in her travels to the Chinese context was the circumstances in which she rebelled: what she rebelled against and what she rebelled in favour of. Zhang Chuntian describes this difference as rebelling against falsity (Ibsen’s Nora), as opposed to rebelling against oppression (Chinese Nora-figures).119 One consequence of this is that while the Nora of A Doll’s House was motivated by the quest for necessarily independent freedom, Chinese Noras most often left their father’s house for love, cohabitation or marriage to a man of her own choosing. Zijun is a typical example of this – a woman who does not discover the necessity of emancipation for herself but rather pedagogically receives it from an authoritative, modern man. This model can be read as a metonymic process of male cultural assertion: by narrating women’s


cooperation in performative gender behaviours which posed no threat to the masculine position, male protagonists were able to explore the construction of their self-image through the image of a modern-but-controllable Other.

This was one means of, as Louise Edwards terms it, “policing the modern woman.” In the intellectuals’ politically marginalised circumstances, the discourse on modern women was a form of social capital that held the power to legitimise their position. Their attempts to modernise social gender relations was a “moral education for the national benefit.” In this case, “policing” the New Woman refers to the intellectuals’ discursive manoeuvrings in writing Nora-figures and other emancipated women, with the intent of maintaining their use of her as a discursive tool for modernity. In some ways, this process enables the narrator-protagonist to overcome anxieties of his masculine, modern identity.

Significantly, this did not necessarily relate to any tangible method of “policing” women in reality, but rather constituted the representation of women in literature in ways that enabled the male expression (if not always the actual performance) of dominance. The image of the modern woman required monitoring. Edwards quotes an article entitled The Fork in the Road in the Life of the New Woman (1927), of The Ladies’ Journal, which expresses a certain anxiety about the new, unprecedented freedoms granted to women – there was potential for evil as much as good in these new liberties, potential for public benefit or selfish private gain. Freedom was not necessarily something to be obtained for its own sake; rather, much of the value of freedom depended on what it was used for. The article warns, “The choice she makes affects not just her family but society and indeed the entire nation.” This real-life concern made its way into anxieties about the image of the modern woman in literature, and the implications for her male counterpart. Hence this idea that women’s choices affect the family, society, and the nation, resonate with Juansheng’s renewed hope “that

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120 Edwards, “Policing the Modern Woman in Republican China.”

121 Ibid., 116.

a glorious future would soon dawn for us all” by means of Zijun’s enlightenment.123 The implications for the successful modern education and liberation of women on both an individual and national level, as well as the consequences for the male intellectuals’ self-conception are further explored in the following chapter’s analysis of Mao Dun’s “Creation.” This anxiety surrounding the potential risk of free modern women reflects the extent to which she was not actually a feminist icon, but rather a “trope for intellectual class anxiety.”124

This notion of “policing” the image of the modern woman closely relates to concepts of cooperatively performed gender roles. As previously explored, gender (and other) identities constructed by the continuous, cooperative performance of socially regulated behaviours are vulnerable to disruptions. These can break the chain of performance and thus throw the identity of the “performers” into chaos. Accordingly, it was essential that male intellectuals within these stories maintained discursive control over (and so, necessarily, dominated) the modern woman as a means of maintaining the stability of their own modern masculine identity, as well as the legitimacy of their cultural authority.

In an article entitled “‘Regret for the Past’ and the Collapse of the Myth of May Fourth Female Enlightenment,” Liu Xiangxiang describes the relationship between men and women within the project of “enlightenment” as holding fixed positions of saviour/saved, examiner/examined, subject/object, and enlightened/silent.125 This dichotomy is reinforced in “Regret for the Past” via a process of discursive manoeuvring and Othering, which fortifies Juansheng’s sense of cultural authority over Zijun even while supporting women’s liberation and freedom. As shown above, much of the narrative consists of Juansheng’s Othering of Zijun and his attempts to distance himself from complicity in her tragic end. Significantly, Juansheng’s reflective

123 Lu Xun, The Real Story of Ah-Q and Other Tales of China, p. 256.
125 “男性/女性在这场启蒙中构成了这样的身份定位，拯救者/被拯救者、审视者/被审视者、主体/客体、启蒙/无语。”“In the enlightenment context, male/female also constitute the following positions, respectively: saviour/saved, examiner/examined, subject/object, enlightened/silent.” Liu Xiangxiang, “Cong ‘Shangshi’ kan ‘Wusi’ nüxing qimeng shenhua de wajie,” p. 14.
monologues that open and close the story differ in narrative tone and attitude, implying that it is through the narrative Othering of Zijun that Juansheng is able to avail himself of complicity in Zijun’s tragic fate and re-establish a coherent conception of self. The story opens with Juansheng’s regretful, guilty memories, but ends with his resolutions to “move forward”. He is able to avoid his personal responsibility to Zijun by objectifying her as a signifier for women’s emancipation and national salvation, allowing him to maintain masculine domination of her as one who had already reached the desire modern state.

The intellectual’s image of himself as a moral authority and judge was in constant need of performance through literature. For this reason, the male-constructed hierarchy of salvation positioned women as the receivers of modernity and men its active agents. This ultimately gave men the voice to express women’s concerns and shape literary depictions of women’s liberation, meaning that after “freedom” was granted, women in fiction were often once again relegated to the bottom rung of yet another equally patriarchal ladder. In this process, women serve as literary symbols for the intellectuals; an object to first “save” and then “police” in order to reassert individuality, authority, and/or masculinity.

In writing this process, Lu Xun and other authors of the intellectual class were expressing their own concerns about their political and social identity, and the possibilities for overcoming these anxieties. These works simultaneously reveal an identification with the protagonist’s position and desires, and an awareness of the contradictions within his attitude to his “Nora.” Paradoxically, however, even in exposing Juansheng’s self-interested narrative Othering of Zijun, Lu Xun is complicit in the attitudes he is critiquing: Lu Xun, like Juansheng, sacrifices Zijun’s subjectivity in order to bring male behaviour to light.

CHAPTER 5

POLICING THE REVOLUTIONARY NORA

In the 1920s, the political views of the intellectual class began to shift from individualism to Marxist collectivism. The revolutionary woman, forceful and involved in political activities, replaced the girl student as the typical New Woman, and in this context the Nora paradigm was re-imagined as the revolutionary woman’s severance of family ties in order to join the revolutionary cause. However, despite the apparent new radicalism of fictional women in this stage of literature, male authors continued to write women into relationships which expressed anxiety towards their own ambivalent positions within rapidly changing political and social systems. “Woman” remained a literary device utilised for the projects of self-representation and the representation of national modernisation. This chapter will examine Mao Dun’s “Creation,” highlighting the discursive practices male intellectual narrators underwent in order to maintain their position in the male/female, Enlightener/Enlightened hierarchy in the face of increased political agency for women.

5.1 MAO DUN’S “CREATION”

Mao Dun was one of the most prolific disseminators of Western thought in the years of the May Fourth period and beyond, translating works by influential thinkers such as Anton Chekhov, Guy de Maupassant, and Nietzsche. He also was involved in editing and writing for many well-known modern literary magazines, including the prestigious Short Story Monthly. 127 Mao Dun is largely acknowledged to have been genuinely concerned with the plight of women; New Women feature heavily in his fictional works, and many of these bear remarkable resemblance to Ibsen’s Nora. 128 In Mao

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127 小说月报 (Xiaoshuo yuebao), 1910-1931. Mao Dun was editor 1920-1923. Leo Ou-fan Lee notes that Short Story Monthly is notorious in post-May Fourth scholarship as a leader in propagating “Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies” style fictions, at least until Mao Dun assumed editorship. Mao Dun “turned it overnight into a journal of New Literature.” Leo Ou-fan Lee, Shanghai Modern, p. 49.

128 Chang, Casting Off the Shackles of Family, p. 92.
Dun’s fiction there appears a strong sense of feminism (he was influential in disseminating works by such feminists as Mary Wollstonecraft, Ellen Kay and Charlotte Perkins Gillman), although his particular brand of feminism was notably tinged with socialist influences. Indeed, it has been argued that to Mao Dun, the emancipation of women is an indicator of the socialist revolution ideals. His Nora-esque New Woman represents the possibilities that revolution holds for women’s positions, and thus she does not only leave the home in protest of Confucian familial oppression, but to join the revolutionary cause. As one of the earliest May Fourth intellectuals to join the Chinese Communist Party, Mao Dun’s work thus provides an example of the development of Chinese Noras and the changing purposes for which they were employed in increasingly politicised literature. The two themes of female emancipation and political revolution are always linked in Mao Dun’s fiction and essays.

In her thorough account of the New Woman’s development in early twentieth-century Chinese literature, Jin Feng states that while Mao Dun appears sympathetic to the women’s movement in his depictions of the New Woman, for him too, women’s liberation had conceptual rather than practical appeal. In his fiction of the 1920s and 1930s, Mao Dun wrote strong-willed, sexual female revolutionaries who often overwhelm their weaker, male counterpart. The men and women in these stories strive together to find meaning amidst the chaos of social and political change, and it is often the woman who is the more politically active of the pair. The exposure of male weakness was a “painful yet liberating historical truth,” an expression of the intellectual elites’ political uncertainty. However, such anxiety about male weakness is ultimately overcome through the male narrator-protagonist’s discursive control over the woman, allowing him to position her as subject to his moral or cultural judgement. This discursive control is a product of male-dominated narration and female silence.

129 Ibid., 91.
131 Chang, Casting Off the Shackles of Family, p. 93.
132 Feng, The New Woman in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction, p. 147.
133 Ibid., 105.
“Creation” (1928) revolves around the male protagonist Junshi’s musings regarding his troubled marriage to Xianxian, a young woman he married for her potential to be moulded into his ideal woman.134 This “ideal woman” is one whose temperament and opinions coincide with his, and when he is unsuccessful in finding such a woman, he decides that since society cannot “prepare” her for him, he will “create” her himself.135 In Xianxian he finds a woman malleable and easily influenced by her environment, and during the early years of their marriage he successfully rids her of her traditional attitudes, gives her books and magazines on modern thought, and creates for himself a partner who will complement his self-image of a modern man of intellect.136 At first his opinions and behaviour direct hers, but discord emerges as the pair’s opinions begin to diverge. As Xianxian’s horizons widen, her political activism develops beyond what Junshi has imagined for her – she does not become the feminine equivalent of Junshi, but an individual in her own right, with a sense of the value of her own ideas. However, all Junshi sees is his own creative failure: Xianxian is no longer a product of his mastery, but of her own will.137 Finally, the story ends with Xianxian’s departure. While the story does not explicitly alludes to Ibsen or Nora, Xianxian’s sudden and rather ambiguous chuzou, and the gravity with which it is received by Junshi, clearly builds upon a tradition of literary Chinese Noras with whom Mao Dun could assume his audience was familiar.138

Through Junshi’s interior monologues we are hear of the memory of his father’s exhortation that he find an “ideal woman to be his life’s partner.” “Just like a traveller’s detailed itinerary, he carefully planned how to realise the dreams of his future; he must delve into every field of learning, and he must find an ideal woman to be his life partner…” Mao Dun, “Chuangzao,” p. 143.

“社会既然不提我准备好了理想的夫人，我就来创造一个!” “Since society can’t prepare my ideal woman for me, I will just create her myself!” Ibid., 146.

It is interesting to also note that Xianxian in Chinese (娴娴) holds connotations of quiet, elegance and beauty.


Other works who examine “Creation” with reference to Nora include: Feng, The New Woman in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction; Malmqvist, A Selective Guide to Chinese Literature, 1900-1949; Tam Kwok-kan, “Ibsenism and Ideological Constructions of the ‘New Woman’ in Modern Chinese
5.2 **Female Political Zeal as an Expression of Male Anxiety**

Male weakness is juxtaposed with female political fervour in “Creation” to express the male intellectuals’ anxiety regarding their political potency in the tumultuous May Fourth Period. Hilary Chung calls this kind of revolutionary woman and her relationship with a weaker male, “a representation of castration anxiety.” The male intellectuals’ control over the image of the New Woman was one source of potential cultural and political authority, and the loss of this control would be dangerous to their self-image as the saviours of the oppressed. Thus, dangerous Noras, such as Xianxian (and to an extent, Zijun), are frequently killed, punished, or labelled as evil as a means of reasserting the control of the male subject. Lu Xun’s “Regret for the Past” depicted the projection of male concerns of the nation’s fate onto women: Zijun’s modern education has repercussions for the modernity of her educator, Juansheng, and thus the nation. However, Zijun’s modern emancipation is never fully realised, and instead her regression to the role of traditional housewife has consequences for Juansheng’s self-perception as a modern man. In “Creation,” Mao Dun presents almost the opposite scenario: Xianxian’s political zeal outstrips Junshi’s, and consequently, his self-image as her moral guide is thrown into chaos. Despite these distinctions, in both these cases the male intellectual figure’s dominant position in the male/female binary is threatened. In “Regret for the Past,” Juansheng’s failure to “modernise” Zijun implies the falsity of his own modern self-image, and in “Creation,” Junshi can no longer reasonably envisage himself as uniquely enlightened and progressive in the face of Xianxian’s political activism. This is a state of masculine crisis reflective of the intellectual class’ changing political and cultural positions in the May Fourth Period and beyond. Both “Regret for the Past” and “Creation” are examples of literature in which the Chinese Nora is liberated but ultimately articulated by male voices and contained within masculine discourses, serving as a literary Other for the expression of masculine fiction.” in **Feminism/Femininity in Chinese Literature**, eds. Whitney Crothers Dilley et al (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), pp. 179-186.


140 Ibid.
concerns: “Ironically, rather than a symbol of feminism, she is a symptom of male fears about feminism.”

Much of the impact of Mao Dun’s story can be found in the contradictions of Junshi’s ideals. He desires to educate Xianxian, but is dismayed that she has been receptive to other influences. He is satisfied at her “knowing what politics are” but the thought of actual participation in political activities appals him. Xianxian herself suggests that while she and Junshi might share a common direction politically, she stands in a more advanced position than he does. She argues that since her current opinions all stem from his teachings, he should be proud of his influence on her. Here Xianxian highlights Junshi’s responsibility for her political education, drawing attention to the tension he faces: he is complicit in his current unease over his own masculine identity. Junshi stands in an awkward position. His desire to “create” an ideal modern woman was rooted in the desire to locate an image of the Self in the Other, and to construct a counterpart by which he could establish and maintain a coherent identity as a modern male. However, he cannot afford to lose discursive control over his female counterpart, as a large portion of his modern male identity is bound up in a male/female dichotomy which translates directly into a modern/traditional, enlightener/enlightened relationship. Xianxian’s aggressive political views and sexuality affronts the traditional mores that Junshi himself desires to abolish. However, for all her appeal as a political symbol, Xianxian ultimately subverts the authority of the masculine position, and challenges the established gender categories in which male intellectuals still rest securely.

Thus, literary expressions of this tension result in the relegation of women to a guided, subjugated and inferior position in the gender hierarchy established by the male

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141 Ibid.

142 “娴娴，我并不反对女子留心政治，从前我很热心劝诱你留心政治的，你现在总算是知道几分什么是政治了。但要做好实际活动——吓！主观上能力不够，客观上条件未备。”“Xianxian, I don’t at all oppose women paying attention to politics. Early on I encouraged you to do so, and now you know at least what politics is. But to take part! Subjectively speaking, you lack the ability, and objectively speaking, the conditions aren’t yet ripe.” Mao Dun 茅盾, “Chuangzao,” p. 137.

143 Ibid., 152-153.

144 Chung, “Questing the Goddess: Mao Dun and the New Woman,” p. 183.
narrator-protagonist, even while emancipation from the traditional bonds of patriarchy are advocated. This enabled the male intellectual within the narrative to overcome his masculine crisis while maintaining the image of modernity. The maintenance of discursive control over the image of the modern Chinese Nora was fundamental to the male intellectual protagonist’s self-image and the discourses surrounding his modernisation project. Literature served as an arena in which male authors could express their anxieties regarding their social and political identity, and thus in fiction, discursive control was exercised by locating women in a subject position, depicted as requiring moral and social guidance by the enlightened modern men.

5.3 POLICING THE REVOLUTIONARY NORA

Jin Feng notes that in his portrayals of women, Mao Dun often invokes traditional discourses of female virtue and applies them to a context dominated by male-driven discourses on revolution and modernisation. In doing so, he contrasts the gentle, maternal feeling of more traditional women with the revolutionary woman’s uninhibited displays of sexuality. Significantly, more male affection is attached to the traditional woman. He thus reveals the contradictions inherent in the male-guided modernisation project, socially prescribed female gender identities, and the complex relationships between “traditional” culture norms and contemporary iconoclastic ideals.

This is precisely what occurs in “Creation.” If, as Hilary Chung notes, New Women are often killed, punished, or labelled as evil in order to reassert the male subject’s control, then in “Creation” Junshi begins adopting traditional ideas about feminine virtue and applying them to Xianxian in order to maintain his position of judgement. This discursive manoeuvring enables the expression of the male intellectual’s anxiety towards the idea of a woman who is modern, liberated, and politically dominant or superior. The focus of the male-centred narration changes as Junshi begins to realise the extremity of Xianxian’s transformations. Junshi freely narrates their conversations before her “transformation,” and describes his intellectual engagement with his wife’s traditional values and morality. However, once she becomes a fully-fledged New

Woman, narration that concerns her is largely dominated by physical descriptions – her clothes, her beauty, her newly-emerged sexual nature. Our understanding of her is rendered superficial, and what characterises her as a modern woman is apparently not the political activism with which she is so involved – this takes place outside of the home and thus goes un-narrated – but her changed physical characteristics. The implication is that such political activities are minor infringements when compared to her confronting sexual behaviour. Xianxian becomes “first and foremost a truant wife,” rather than a modern, revolution-minded woman.\(^{146}\)

However, upon closer reading there is an extent to which these traditional discourses were applied to Junshi’s idea of an “ideal woman” from the outset. He tells his former classmate that he desires a “New Woman,” and yet concedes that there are some shortcomings found in all such women – that is, certain biases and preconceptions, and a tendency to be flighty and unrestrained. He finds completely traditional women intolerable, but deems it unfortunate that most New Women are “new” to the extreme.\(^{147}\) It is clear to Junshi’s classmate that this so-called “ideal woman” is really just a half-New Woman, but Junshi denies this, stating that he wants a woman “completely new,” but without the “risk” of pre-conceived ideas. Paradoxically, however, he rejects the idea of finding an already modernised foreign woman, as she lacks the heritage of thousands of years of Chinese history and traditions. Junshi’s “ideal woman” is a tangle of contradictions – modern enough to enable him to appear the quintessential educated, modern intellectual, but traditional enough not to threaten his masculine dominance.

Throughout the narrative it becomes clear that discourses of both tradition and modernity are invoked at various times and applied to Xianxian’s behaviour as standards which delineate appropriate feminine conduct. Thus, the New Woman is safely contained as an inferior Other in need of moral guidance. In passing judgement in

\(^{146}\) Ibid., 120.

\(^{147}\) “My prejudices are against their extreme minds. Indeed, most New Women have some shortcoming. For example, liberation is necessary, but they all tend towards frivolity and unrestraint… but traditional views are naturally intolerable. Unfortunately most of them are “new” to the point of nonsense.” Mao Dun 茅盾, “Chuangzao,” p. 145.
this way, Junshi is able to “police” the modern woman and maintain moral authority over her, allowing him to continue performing his identity in the gendered hierarchy of superior-Self, inferior-Other. In “Regret for the Past,” Zijun’s assumption of characteristics of the traditional wife enables Juansheng to position himself as intellectually superior and modern, and significantly, it is through Juansheng’s narration that Zijun’s failure to modernise is constructed. As in “Regret for the Past,” Junshi’s narration of Xianxian in “Creation” effectively controls the gender discourse of the story. This enables him to invoke discourses which ensure – in his own mind, at least – that Xianxian continues to perform the behaviour appropriate for his inferior, feminine Other.

In these narratives, the sense of innate superiority on the part of male protagonists, by very virtue of their being male, legitimates their control over gender discourses. Tan Yanfang identifies this superiority complex (youyue gan) in Lu Xun’s “Regret for the Past”, and argues that Juansheng’s attitude to Zijun stems from a sense of innate superiority grounded in what are perceived to be inherent gender characteristics. This assumption of masculine ascendency justifies his denigration of her attitude, as well as the ease with which he is able to place the responsibility for their failed relationship upon her shoulders. In “Creation,” Junshi shows a similar tendency. His superiority complex allows him to criticise Xianxian by utilising traditional gender discourses. Moreover, these criticisms serve to further reinforce Junshi’s feelings of supremacy. This echoes Butler’s argument that there exists no gender behind the behavioural expressions which constitute gender identities: similarly, the male youyue gan expresses and simultaneously enables the construction of men as dominant and inherently modern next to a reliant feminine Other.

However, Junshi’s masculine dominance is undermined by Xianxian’s Nora-esque exit at the final scene. The male intellectuals’ “policing” of the modern woman occurs at the level of discourse, narration and self-imagining, hinting at the fundamentally self-interested nature of the intellectual elite’s writing of the modern woman. These stories

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149 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 25.
present literary expressions of the tensions in the relationship between the male author of the intellectual class, and the image of the modern, New Woman he claimed to propagate. The above exploration exposes that the transformations occurring as a result of the redefining of gender norms and identities at this time, were doing so under the discourse of cultural modernity, and that furthermore, this discourse was itself dominated by male voices. Consequently, women’s emancipation was an idea dramatised through literature under the male gaze, ultimately subject to male concerns, fears, the youyue gan, and the construction of the male intellectual’s self-identity.


CONCLUSION

The idea of women as symbols and icons of the nation has long been an area of interest in research into nationalism and national movements. Anne McClintock notes a common theme in various national histories, in which women stand for the nation and its tradition, and men are its active agents – those who actually go into battle. Women are excluded from direct action as equal citizens, “subsumed” into “the national body politic as its boundary and metaphoric limit.” They become “symbolic bearers of the nation,” without any direct access to national agency.\textsuperscript{152} Similarly, in “Masculinity and Nationalism: Gender and Sexuality in the Making of Nations,” Joanne Nagel describes the active role of women in times of national crisis as a temporary one, usually revoked once the crisis is resolved.\textsuperscript{153} It is possible to argue that Chinese Noras in May Fourth literature constitute an example of this temporary allocation of agency to women. However, it is clear from the examination of the works above, that there are deeper issues of power and gender hierarchies at play here; female agency (even temporary) is not necessarily independent agency at all. Women are relegated to the realm of the symbolic, because nationalism and the national struggle is grounded in “masculinised memory, masculinised humiliation and masculinised hope.”\textsuperscript{154} Not only this, but the question of women’s positions constitutes a site for the debate and ultimate construction of modernisation. Times of increased nationalist sentiment often stem from anger at being colonised or subjugated under other powers, at being “emasculated”, or, as Cynthia Enloe puts it, being “turned into a ‘nation of busboys.’”\textsuperscript{155} In China’s May Fourth era, as in other nations, this “emasculation” was expressed and worked out via the idea of women’s liberation. Deniz Kandiyoti writes of female liberation in Turkey’s early twentieth century as a discourse driven by an “enlightened governing elite


\textsuperscript{153} Nagel, “Masculinity and Nationalism,” p. 253.

\textsuperscript{154} Cynthia Enloe, \textit{Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics} (London: Pandora Press, 1989), p. 44.

\textsuperscript{155} Ibid.
committed to the goals of modernisation and ‘Westernisation.’”

Similar to China’s May Fourth Period, the protagonists of the “woman question” were thus predominantly male. Kandiyoti describes the ambivalence with which increased agency in times of struggle for women was received – the coexistence of traditional social mores, and women’s activity in political pursuits led to great uncertainty, often with changes to the latter well preceding the abolition of the former.

Similarly, in the works analysed here, progressive messages are juxtaposed with the narrative control exercised by the male protagonists over women. Female emancipation becomes a literary trope over which men have commanding power. Male narrators articulate concerns about male dominance and power via their depiction of modern and progressive women. Consequently, despite the call for women’s liberation, women in literature remain symbols and icons, ultimately subjugated under male pens for the expression of male anxieties. The Nora-figure, as she was imagined in the Chinese context, was a paradoxically masculine construction, the “pedagogical subject” of modernity, rather than its ultimate goal.

This thesis’ scope is but one part of an ongoing area of scholarly investigation. In light of the re-assessments of gender constructions in literature that have occurred in the last few decades, questions addressed in this work – and many more – will continue to change the way we read past literature. There is more work to be done on Nora in China, on literary expressions of mutually dependent gender identities, and on the intricate connections between gender and power in literature. It is hoped that this work contributes valuable insight into the writing of Lu Xun and Mao Dun, and the complexities of the intellectual elite’s position in China’s May Fourth Period: in particular, the ambivalence of male intellectuals towards the women’s emancipation movement and national modernisation projects they were advocating, and how ingrained gender discourses can be unwittingly invoked as instruments of power.


## Glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Simplified</th>
<th>Traditional</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>caizi</td>
<td>才子</td>
<td>才子</td>
<td>Talented scholar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chen Duxiu</td>
<td>陈独秀</td>
<td>陈独秀</td>
<td>Proper name (1879-1942)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chuzou</td>
<td>出走</td>
<td>出走</td>
<td>Literally, “to go out.” Used to refer to the Nora’s exit at the end of <em>A Doll’s House</em>, and later, for the Chinese Noras’ imitation of this.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dushuren</td>
<td>读书人</td>
<td>读书人</td>
<td>Man of letters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jiuguo</td>
<td>救国</td>
<td>救国</td>
<td>To save the nation; national salvation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>juewu</td>
<td>觉悟</td>
<td>觉悟</td>
<td>To awaken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lu Xun</td>
<td>鲁迅</td>
<td>鲁迅</td>
<td>Proper name (1881-1936)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luo Jialun</td>
<td>罗家伦</td>
<td>罗家伦</td>
<td>Proper name (1897-1969)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mao Dun</td>
<td>茅盾</td>
<td>茅盾</td>
<td>Proper name (1896-1981)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nü xuesheng</td>
<td>女学生</td>
<td>女学生</td>
<td>Girl student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shi</td>
<td>士</td>
<td>士</td>
<td>Scholar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wen yi zai dao</td>
<td>文以载道</td>
<td>文以载道</td>
<td>“writing to convey the Way” (Confucian notion)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wenren</td>
<td>文人</td>
<td>文人</td>
<td>Literati</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xianzhi xianjuewu zhe</td>
<td>先知先觉悟者</td>
<td>先知先觉悟者</td>
<td>The “first to know and be enlightened”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>youyue gan</td>
<td>优越感</td>
<td>优越感</td>
<td>Superiority complex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zhishi fenzi</td>
<td>知识分子</td>
<td>知识分子</td>
<td>Intellectual (an educated individual)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zhishi jieji</td>
<td>知识阶级</td>
<td>知识阶级</td>
<td>The intellectual class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hu Shi</td>
<td>胡适</td>
<td>胡适</td>
<td>Proper name (1891-1962)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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