

# Ibsenism and Ideological Constructions of the "New Woman" in Modern Chinese Fiction

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## ABSTRACT

The problem of female identity-formation in China is set within the wider context of male and female Chinese identity vs. Western identity-formation. While in the traditional Chinese Confucian view the self is a "role-self" formed through the socializing process and identity is *ren-tong*, that which makes "me" the same as others, in the West self-identity is grounded precisely in the distinction of "myself" from others. Thus the impact of Ibsen and generally of Western ideas on China in the May 4<sup>th</sup> period was unsettling: intellectuals and students craved "individual self-identity," free from social and cultural repression, but there was no historical-philosophical basis for this new attitude, thus leading to confusion in the attempt to construct a new model of the Chinese woman's identity: while women writers like Bing Xin tended to model female identity on Ibsen's autonomous Nora (*Doll's House*), male writers (Lu Xun, Mao Dun) tended to subsume male and female gender identity to a prioritized "national" Chinese identity, and more specifically to see the new "national self" as something that could replace a new "female self." Understanding this history helps us to understand current Chinese/Taiwanese confusions about identity-construction.

## KEY WORDS

identity formation  
socialization process  
role-self  
communitarianism  
repression

mind-body split  
*ren-tong*  
Ibsenism  
May 4<sup>th</sup> period



Of all the different forms of cultural change in modern China, the quest for a new self-identity is perhaps the most crucial in China's transition from tradition to modernity. Identity is never considered as a psychical dimension of the self in traditional Chinese culture. However, in the West, "identity" is a psychological term, which covers both concepts of "self-sameness" and "sharing certain characteristics with other people" in the formation of selfhood (Erikson 110). Identity speaks of one's relation with one's self, as well as one's relation to others. Hence, any discussion of identity and its formation must inevitably begin with the construction of self, which is often examined in relation to subjectivity in the Western dichotomy between mind and body (Ames 157; Tam & Yip 200-201).

In cultures other than that of the West, such as the Chinese, the "self" is conceived as a psychosomatic process of socialization involving both body and mind. The culture-specificity of the concept renders it impossible for the discussion of identity to be based on a universally accepted notion of the self. Furthermore, the Chinese term for identity is "*rentong*," which means "to recognize oneself as the same as others." In the customary Chinese usage, identity always means to be identified with others, rather than to be distinguished from others as in the modern Western tradition. Added to the problem of cultural difference in the comparative study of identity is the recent debate on a new paradigm for the construction of female identity, which is often considered as "a process" (Gardiner 349) in which a woman constructs her self in relational roles with others. Yet, so far we still lack a clear definition of female identity and all attempts at finding one are variant constructions only.

The traditional Chinese notion of the self is so different from its Western counterpart that the comparative study of identity must at the same time be based on the comparative study of self. To begin with, the self, male or female, is an elusive concept in both Chinese and Western cultures. In the West, there are theorists who believe that it is a category of the mind, and there are also others who think that it is a physical entity, which can be objectified for scientific study. Other binary notions of the self include those of subject versus object, fact versus construct, structure versus process, unity versus fragmentation, consistency versus inconsistency, and stability versus instability. The self can be examined from many different vantage points, but central to the problem of identity is the conception of the self as a cultural construct. This paper will focus on modern Chinese attempts by male and female writers to construct the female self in relation to the formation of self-identity.

The traditional Chinese self is a moral self defined as "the center of relationships" in a socializing process, in which the person cultivates (or represses) himself for the purpose of perfecting his self to better serve others (Tu 231). As succinctly summed up in *Daxue* [Great learning]: "Cultivating oneself, regulating the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world," such a Confucian view reveals a strong sense of communitarianism, in which the self is repressed into a relational role-self.<sup>1</sup> In this relationship a person is not an independent individual, and he lives mainly to fulfil dutifully the various roles expected of him. Individuality is only allowed within the limits of roles. Defined in such a way, the traditional Chinese self is a product of Confucian discourse; it is part of the self-other relationship and is negated as an agent or subject.

The major legacy of Chinese modernity since the May Fourth 1919 New Culture Movement can be summarized in the emergence of a new concept of the person as an individual with a strong sense of agency, in defiance of the Confucian notion of a role-self. Thus when individualism was first introduced to China in the early twentieth century, it was received as an explosive blow to traditional Chinese culture. The introduction of the Western concepts of democracy, ac-

companying Chinese discussions of individualism, contributed directly to the disintegration of the Confucian moral system, which is based on the reciprocal ruler-subject/father-son relationships (Tu 234). Lu Xun, the foremost modern Chinese thinker, is among the early few intellectuals who introduced the revolutionary ideas of European Romanticism and Ibsenian individualism as an antidote to the collapsing Confucian moral order and brought to the attention of the Chinese the sense of the individual as an existential self and an uncompromising self exemplified in Ibsen's hero, Dr. Stockmann.

In a similar vein, Hu Shi, the American educated scholar and spokesman of the May Fourth cultural movement, introduces Ibsenism and strongly attacks the Confucian moral order as a dying institution in China in his revolutionary manifesto "Yibusheng zhuyi" [Ibsenism], published in the intellectual magazine *New Youth* in 1918. Hu Shi echoes Ibsen's revolutionary ideas in denouncing traditional Chinese institutions of law, religion, and morality which are all based on the Confucian concept of self. The individual is thus seen by Hu Shi as always repressed by culture, and he thinks that only when traditional culture is denounced will the individual be free from its repression. Zhou Zuoren, an influential thinker in early modern China, also points out in his seminal essay that what China needs is a "literature for man" [ren de wenxue], which seeks to promote individualistic concepts of freedom in "self-expression and self-responsibility" (575-76).

The leading May Fourth Chinese writers, such as Lu Xun, Guo Moruo, Tian Han and Mao Dun, often depict their young protagonists in conscious defiance of tradition and all kinds of socio-moral bonds that pose as obstacles in their journey to individual freedom. Their writings can thus be regarded not only as new constructions of the self, but also as manifestations of the young Chinese intellectuals' moral dilemma in the search for a new self-concept in transitional

China. Writings in this May Fourth period are filled with differing explorations of the transformation from the old role-self to a new identity characterized by free expressions of the self, which is represented as the "experiencing I," the subject of a new culture.

Accompanying the construction of a new male self are the experiments with a new female model which, however, is constructed on male paradigms. As the most oppressed group in traditional society, women had a very low status under the patriarchal authority of religion, family and state in traditional China. Reflecting the urgency of the need to "liberate" women, many influential journals in the 1920s were devoted to the creation of a new consciousness among Chinese women. The most famous of these were *Women's Bell* [Nuxing zong], *Womens' Magazine* (Funu zazhi), *Women's Review* (Funu pinglun) and *Womens' Life* (Funu shenghuo), in which there were articles attacking the evils of footbinding and inequality between sexes. These feminist journals were very important tools to help Chinese women to learn what was happening to their counterparts in the West, as there were many articles and translations of feminist literature, particularly the plays of Ibsen and Shaw.<sup>2</sup> In the midst of this feminist debate, Nora became a model of the new woman for the Chinese. The qualities of individualism embodied in her character represented to the newly awakened Chinese youths a new morality based on the concept of an individual self.

Bing Xin is one of the earliest Chinese women writers who attempt to construct a new model of woman by contrasting the role of the wife in two families. Representing a woman writer's view, Bing Xin's short story *Two Families* [Liangge jiating, 1919], provides an example of a woman who stays at home as an ideal model. Bing Xin is of the view that a new woman does not necessarily have to leave home to seek her individuality, and that even a housewife can be an independent, individual being. Ideologically, Bing Xin's *Two Families* can be read as a supplement to Ibsen's idea of an independent female self, and it echoes Lu Xun's warning in 1923 against excessive reliance on the act of leaving home as a means to self-realization.

In defense of his ideological position regarding women's libera-

tion, Lu Xun's story "Regret for the Past" [Shangshi, 1925] portrays the financial hardships and psychological struggles a young couple, Juansheng and Zijun, experience after they elope from their conservative families in pursuit of individual freedom in marriage and life. The story unfolds with the couple's struggle for financial independence in their new life. Ibsen is a constant source of inspiration, encouragement, and hope for the young couple. Zhijun is in a sense a Chinese portrayal of Nora, and she shares with Nora the belief in the pursuit of individual freedom. The new female as subject can be found in Zijun's own words: "I'm my own mistress. None of them has the right to interfere with my life" (116). Although Lu Xun portrays the couple's struggle as futile and doomed to failure, ideologically Lu Xun brings forth the idea of female subjectivity in his construction of a new woman.

Representing an oppositional approach to Lu Xun's construction of the female self is Mao Dun's short story "Creation" [Chuangzao, 1928]. In this interesting little piece, Mao Dun describes the life of a couple similar to Helmer and Nora. The story focuses on how its protagonist, Junshi, looks for an ideal woman as his wife, and how he decides to create a wife according to his own model. As he says, "Since society does not prepare a perfect wife for me, I will create one myself!" (17) In order to create "a perfect work of art," Junshi gives Xianxian, his newly married wife, a list of readings which include works from natural sciences, history, literature, philosophy and modern thought. Being educated on a male principle, Xianxian's thirst for knowledge grows ever greater. Under the influence of a friend, she becomes interested in feminist issues and politics. When Junshi complains: "You have become your own self, but not what I created according to my ideal. I let you read, but you have formed ideas different from mine" (13), Xianxian boldly answers in the manner of Nora's rejection of her role as a doll in her past life: "My life in the past was like an empty page only with colours splashed onto it . . . Life has been extremely trivial and I spend all my time washing clothes and cooking meals. This is what I remember clearly" (12). Finally Junshi plans to re-create his ideal model of wife by re-

educating Xianxian, but Xianxian decides to leave her husband with a determination no less strong than Nora's, and she says to Junshi, "I am one step ahead of you, and I hope that you will catch up" (34). Xianxian's statement takes on a double meaning that, first, she is spiritually more advanced and enlightened than Junshi and, second, she is actually leaving. Her statement that Junshi "will catch up" echoes what Nora says to Helmer:

NORA: You and I would both have to change so much that—oh, Torvald, I don't believe in miracles any longer.

HELMER: But I want to believe in them. Tell me. We should have to change so much that—?

NORA: That life together between us two could become a marriage. Goodbye. (104)

Although Mao Dun does not point out clearly what is lying ahead of Xianxian in her path to independence, the mention of the magazine *Women and Politics* serves to suggest that political struggle is a possible means to liberation. While Lu Xun considers economic independence as the first step to women's liberation, Mao Dun vaguely anticipates revolution as a final resolution for all other problems. The self-definition in Xianxian is thus suggested by Mao Dun to be inseparable from the search for a political "National Identity."

The theme of political revolution as the final resolution for women's liberation is further and more fully developed in Mao Dun's novel on woman, *Rainbow* [Hong, 1929], which portrays the psychological and spiritual growth of a young girl, Mei, under the influence of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, and how she, after leaving home, comes to understand that personal freedom and liberation can only be achieved through participation in the revolution. Through the portrayal of such a revolutionary figure and the process of her "awakening" in her self-development, Mao Dun projects his idea of a collective self constructed on class, rather than on gender, and under which all problems of the female self as an individual are subsumed and sup-

pressed. A passage in the novel reveals how Mei thinks about revolution in relation to the gender issues she faces:

Through participation in the stage performance, Mei achieved a deeper understanding of *A Doll's House*. Previously she highly admired Nora, but now she found her commonplace . . . On the contrary, Mrs. Linde was a true woman, for she sacrificed herself sexually twice to help other people and did not feel uneasy about it. She was a woman who could disregard her sex as female. This idea gradually became deeply rooted in Mei and affected her philosophy of life. She began to slight the idea that marriage was the "greatest event in life" for woman and she was prepared to sacrifice herself sexually for a greater cause, the general idea of which, however, was still vague to her. (43)

From this passage it is clear that Mao Dun's construction of Mei as a new woman in defiance of her own sex and in favour of a genderless self is ideologically a conscious and political act, subsuming the gender issue under the national cause of revolution.

A comparison of how the female self is constructed differently by Bing Xin, a female writer, and Lu Xun and Mao Dun, the male writers, will demonstrate what Judith Kegan Gardiner calls the process of female identity in relational roles. Bing Xin's sympathetic attitude is at once shown in her construction of an androgynous character, while Lu Xun and Mao Dun are more concerned with the construction of a "National Self" to replace the new female self. The very act of constructing a "National Self" is in effect a destruction of the individual self. Subjectivity, problematized by Jurgen Habermas and understood as the psychological and emotional state of the subject in modern literature, has been discussed by many scholars as a prominent feature of modern Chinese literature, one that can represent its demarcation from traditional literature (Lee). In the issue of identity displayed in the short stories discussed above, the female self is rep-



resented as a reflexive project. As Anthony Giddens says, "We are not what we are, but what we make of ourselves" (76).

The modern Chinese female self constructed in the writings of the 1920s appears to be amorphous and witnesses the danger of being undermined by the so-called "greater cause." The short stories by Bing Xin, Lu Xun and Mao Dun discussed in this paper express the Chinese problem of identity and specifically the male-female polarized quest for female self-identity in the May Fourth era, which "is not something that is just given, as a result of the continuities of the individual's action system, but something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual" (Giddens 76).

On the whole, the generation of May Fourth writers succeeded in liberating the self from Confucian discourse, but the lack of a cultural heritage that can sustain the ontological configurations of the self leaves the modern Chinese in much puzzlement about the new selfhood and identity, which are prone to ideological positioning, resulting in individuality being equated with selfishness, the individual self being subordinated under the collective self, and personal identity being displaced by national identity. The displacement of personal identity and the repression of self are related in such a way that both the traditional Confucian discourse and the modern revolutionary discourse have discouraged the construction of a self-identity. Instead of asking seriously: "Who am I (as a man or woman)?", the question is simply put as one of positioning—"I am a Chinese, I am a member of my clan, etc." After all, is this not a familiar device of self-identification in the Chinese tradition? Not only is the project of constructing a new female self a failure in modern China, that of constructing the male self has also encountered numerous problems. Ibsenism has exerted its impact mainly in setting the Chinese "self" free from Confucian discourse, but not from the ideological fetters of the communitarian-oriented Chinese culture.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The concept of role is central to the Confucian moral hierarchy as stated in the following: "Let the ruler be ruler, the minister minister, the father father, and the son son" (*Analects* XII, 11).

<sup>2</sup> Examples can be found in Li Zhiye's "The Woman Issues in Ibsen's Plays" [Yibusheng xiju zhong de funu wenti], which appeared in *Women's Magazine* [Funu zazhi] in December 1924, and Jin Zhonghua's "Women's Emancipation in Modern Times as Reflected in Literature" [Jinshi funu jiefang yundong zai wenxue shang de fanying], which was published in the same journal in July 1931.

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