

Decoding Literary History: Cultural Transformation and the Chinese Reception of Ibsen

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ABSTRACT

China's reception of Ibsen and his plays reflects generally the world's reception but at the same time has its own idiosyncratic developments. Nineteenth century people first related to Ibsen, the author, as social critic and political reformer. But as the moral and social issues his plays inscribe lost currency, response changed in some camps from a moral/political one to an aesthetic-formalist one concerned with art. Russian interests carried the moralist concern in its socialist-Marxist interpretation, while America' and Western Europe pursued an aesthetic-formalist interpretation, Ibsen's reception in China can roughly be divided into four periods: (1) 1907-1927, (2) 1928-1948, (3) 1949-1978, and (4) 1979-present. In the first period Chinese interpretations of Ibsen were closely associated with social movements, moral code, individualism, iconoclasm and feminism. The second period showed growing maturity with some individuals placing emphasis upon Ibsen's artistry, yet under the influence of the split between Russia and Western Europe controversy centered on whether Ibsen was an artist or social reformer. During the time of the Sino-Japanese War emphasis was placed upon Ibsen's political content. In the third period, after 1949, under the dominant influence of Russia and communism, interpretation followed socialist-Marxist ideology. In the last period, after 1979, there has been a gradual adoption of an aesthetic-formalist code of interpretation. China's reception follows the general trend of the West but has necessarily reacted according to its particular circumstances along the way. In sum, Ibsen's legacy in China has spawned a growing awareness of the importance of individuality and iconoclasm, women's emancipation, and a modern theatre.

KEY WORDS

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literary reception theory

literary communication theory

literary interpretation

modern Chinese history of ideas

modern Chinese dramatic history

Ibsen's social plays

modern dramatic criticism

modern Chinese theatre

politics and art

Ibsen's tremendous impact in the modern world can be demonstrated in the comment made by Michael Billington, a theatre critic, in the late 1970s that in the West it was impossible at that time to find a dramatist of stature and under the age of forty, who would profess to be an Ibsenite technically, but had not been influenced by Ibsen thematically (20). Of the various aspects of influence Ibsen has exerted upon modern society and culture, Martin Esslin affirms in his article, "Ibsen and Modern Drama," that Ibsen's first and most obvious impact was social and political, as Ibsen's drama is "a means to bring into the open the major social and political issues of the age" and has revolutionized the theatre, which was previously regarded as "a place of shallow amusement." As an influential intellectual figure other than a politician, Ibsen's impact is unsurpassed in that he is "the only playwright who, in his lifetime, became the centre of what almost amounted to a political party—the Ibsenites who in Germany, England, and elsewhere appear in the contemporary literature as a faction of weirdly dressed social and political reformers, advocates of socialism, women's rights, and a new sexual morality," all of which have been vividly shown in the Ibsen Club and in Shaw's *The Philanderer* (Esslin 71).

Despite the fact that Ibsen's dramatic techniques and stage innovations have been gradually overshadowed by the avant-garde experiments since the 1950s, he is still revered as the father of modern drama in that many of the newer techniques dramatists used today are developed from his drama, and that he is considered by English-speaking critics as the most important non-English-speaking playwright besides Chekhov and made a classic in the theatre of the English-speaking world. Martin Esslin even ranks Ibsen next to Shakespeare, but above Chekhov, among the three most important playwrights. He is not exaggerating when he says that Ibsen is "one of the principal creators and well-springs of the whole modern movement in drama" (71). Ibsen has become part of the modern culture, as can be evidenced in the fact that a special volume of *The Critical Heritage* is devoted to him and that today Ibsen is never absent from the course catalogues of major universities all over the world.

Yet before the critics discovered Ibsen's technical innovations in drama, he was first considered in the nineteenth century as a political pamphleteer. In his own day, Ibsen was treated more as a social agitator than as an artist. Since his middle plays—*The Pillars of Society*, *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, *An Enemy of the People*—were closely associated with the social movements of the nineteenth century, they were taken by critics in one way or another

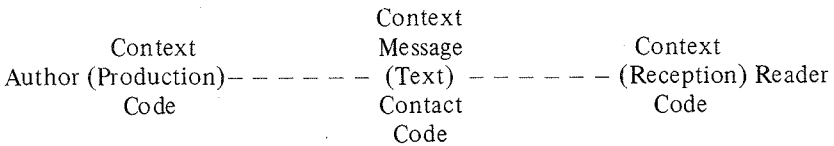
as reflections of his disputes with his enemies, and hence, for a long time, Ibsen's plays have been considered political advocacy. It is true that Ibsen became both popular and controversial in his lifetime mainly for the disputes he raised in his plays. However, as society changed and the political and social issues—such as women's rights, freedom of speech, syphilis, and water pollution—depicted in Ibsen's plays were no longer as acute as they previously were, Ibsen's ideas and themes gradually lost their explosive appeal to the audience. Thus when Salvarsan was discovered as a remedy for syphilis, Bertolt Brecht joked in 1928 that Ibsen's play *Ghosts* would no longer have any significance, meaning that a problem play can have an influence only so long as the problem exists. Brecht's observation is correct insofar as Ibsen's social influence is concerned, but why do people begin to shift their interest in Ibsen's social themes to other aspects of his drama despite the fact that the social themes were once so influential? Even more interesting is the question why there has been a revival of interest in Ibsen in the intellectual circles since the 1950s. The controversy over whether Ibsen's plays were political documents or works of art has become an important issue in the history of modern dramatic criticism.

Reception and Communication

For the literary historian, it has been a puzzle why there are such varied attitudes toward an author. Answers are different. Some critics attribute it to a change in taste, but what then is taste? Others explain the phenomenon from a sociological point of view and regard literature as a product of social change, which therefore has its ebbs and flows. Ibsen's fame has lasted longer in China and many Asian countries than in Europe. To the European critics, Ibsen belongs to the present and is mainly a dramatist, but not a social critic. But in China, Ibsen is often considered a revolutionary figure and has been greatly involved in Chinese politics in the past eighty years. Take *Peer Gynt* as an example. It seldom appears in today's Western theatre repertoire, but it was produced in Peking in 1983 as a political allegory. How and why an author can enjoy a greater fame and influence in another country than in his own? Is it purely a matter of the audience's changing response due to changes in taste caused by the progress of society? Or has it something to do with the internal structure of the plays themselves? These questions involve three things: what Ibsen's original ideas are, what his social plays tell the reader, and what cultural and social conditions cause

readers in different periods to respond differently to his plays. In other words, the answer has to be found in the intricate relationships between Ibsen as the author, his plays as texts, and the audiences as respondents.

The reception of an author, as Hans Robert Jauss puts it, can be treated as a matter of literary communication between the author, the text, and the audience, the relationship of which Roman Jakobson's Structuralist communication model provides a useful point of departure in examining the controversies in Ibsen's reception. For a communication event to take place effectively, all the six elements, "addresser," "addressee," "context," "message," "contact" and "code," which are interrelated, have to be present. In terms of drama as a form of literary communication, the addresser is the playwright, and here specifically Ibsen. The addressee is the reader or audience.¹ Contemporary developments in reception theory claim that there is never communication between the addresser and the addressee without the mediation of the text. Furthermore, the addressee is not a passive element in the process of literary communication. The limitation of Jakobson's model in the study of literary reception can be seen in its supposition that the addresser and the addressee come in direct contact. In actual fact, they may not even be of the same historical period and therefore not share the same context and code. Jakobson's model can be modified as follows, specifically for the study of literary communication and reception:



The author has his own context and code in his creation of a text, but the reader approaches the text also according to his own context and code. Here the problem of interpretation is mainly concerned with the two elements, context and code, as they are external to the text and are dependent on the reader and his actual historical and social situation. In a communication event, meaning is distinguished from significance. Defined by E. D. Hirsch, Jr. in his *Validity in Interpretation* as whatever the writer may have intended, meaning is concerned with the level of communication between the author and the reader, while significance, referring to whatever a work means to a reader, is the central task of interpretation. Interpretation

is the interaction between the reader and the text, but communication is that between the author, the text, and the reader. The text can be seen either from the author's end or from the reader's. A text may have a significance created by the reader's code, but it may not have a meaning, which refers to the intention of the author. Both textual production and reception are active processes, in the sense that the reader is also an author since in each reading he has to reconstruct the text, according to his own code and context, which may or may not be the same as the original author's, and will thus produce his own version of the text. But the reader's own version of the text may not be that of the author's. In case the reader's code does not meet the author's, communication will break down, but not interpretation, which is recreation of the text.

For the literary historian, what is important, perhaps, is not so much the validity of the different attitudes toward (or interpretations of) Ibsen, but the reason why there can be different, and sometimes even contradictory, attitudes toward the same author. Besides the reader's code and context that constitute a large part of the external cause for such changes of attitude, the structure of Ibsen's plays is accountable for the internal cause of variety in interpretation, for it is the interaction between the reader and the text that produces such a variety. As an assembly of signs, Ibsen's plays have different significance in different signification systems. Yet, as signs the plays have their own thematic and linguistic structures, which are exposed in different ways in different situations. As works of art, the foremost element in Ibsen's plays is the use of language.

Although it is hard to differentiate the literary use of language from its scientific use, or more restrictly in Tzvetan Todorov's terms, "literary and scientific discourses," it is still useful to distinguish the different uses of language and their corresponding different functions.² The literary use of language allows a higher degree of indeterminacy, which provides more freedom of interpretation. Even though the distinction between scientific and literary uses of language may not be as significant as some critics suggest, it is still meaningful to note that some texts have more elements of indeterminacy in their structure than others. On the other hand, it should also be noted that there are always determinable elements in a text, otherwise it would be impossible for readers to respond in similar ways or to share common elements in their interpretations of the same work.

Ibsen's social plays are equally successful as drama and as social criticism because the moral themes are presented in such a highly skillful way that

the situations described seem as real as actual happenings to the readers. From the point of view of the reader's interaction with the text, it is Ibsen's illusionistic skill that makes the readers identify the dramatic context of the plays with actual situations in their lives and, hence, arrive at the moralistic conclusion that Ibsen's social plays have real life events as sources or identify them with their own experience in daily life. Expressed more concretely, it is the external realistic elements, such as the use of daily dialogue, illusionistic setting, and the incorporation of social moral issues, that make the situations in the plays seem real even though the stories were made up by the playwright without any necessary correspondence between them and the real world. Traditional approaches in literary criticism, with an emphasis on *explication de texte*, grant validity only to readings that are able to bring together the minds of the author and the reader so that the reader's code and context meet those of the author's. Since no isomorphic correspondence between the author's conception and the reader's reception can be discovered in the text, the method of explication tends to go a long way around to reach the author's mind by routing through the external reference of the text as well as through the author's biography. It is in this way that nineteenth century critics tended to think of Ibsen's plays as stage reproductions of actual experiences in life.

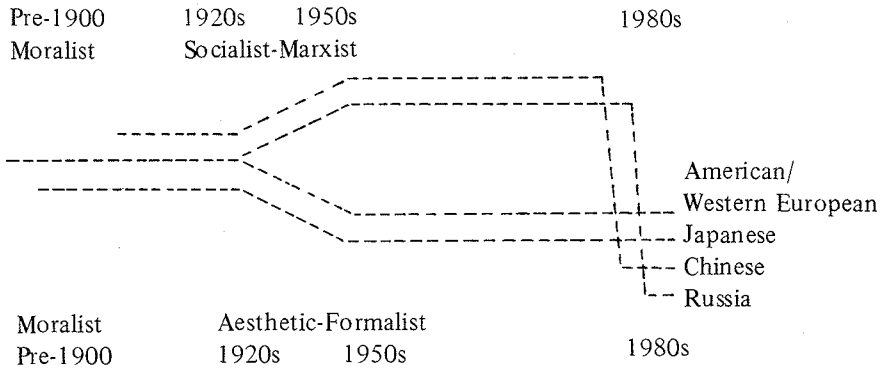
In the reception of Ibsen in both the East and the West, there have been different emphases, each of which employs the use of a different interpretive strategy. When the critics take the moral issues in Ibsen's plays as reflective of his attitude, they are taking a historico-biographical approach and are more concerned with Ibsen the person than with his plays. However, when the critics are more concerned with what is presented in the plays than with what the plays actually represent, the emphasis is on the formal aspects of the plays. In fact, the two kinds of interpretation, moralistic and socialist on the one hand and aesthetic-formalist on the other, are the result of not only a difference in reception strategies, but also a difference in levels of communication. Critics pursuing a moralist and socialist interpretation are more interested in Ibsen the person and his own political inclinations than simply in his plays, and they therefore try to put Ibsen in his own historico-cultural context, whereas critics adopting an aesthetic-formalist interpretive code tend to be more interested in the message of the plays than in Ibsen the person.

Thus in regarding Ibsen as a dramatist or as a social critic, the difference lies in the critics' own choice of strategy whether or not there is the belief

of correspondence between a dramatist's works and social reality. In terms of Jakobson's model of communication functions, a dramatist's works may or may not have a referential function, which points directly to external reality, whereas in a social critic's works, there must be a referential function aiming at the evils in society, otherwise there is no point of criticism. Whether or not Ibsen wrote his middle plays, *The Pillars of Society*, *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, *An Enemy of the People*, for the purpose of advocating social reform, they were for a long time placed in such a social context and decoded with a political code, thus making them important documents in feminism and social reform. In this way, Ibsen's middle plays were taken as representative of his political views and personal inclinations. Seldom did the critics of the nineteenth century pay serious attention to Ibsen's early and late plays, which have been categorized as Romantic and Symbolist respectively. His influence upon the art form of the modern theatre and drama was not immediately recognizable, partly due to the critics' preoccupation with the social context of Ibsen's plays and partly due to the lack of time distance necessary for an understanding of a dramatist's significance in literary history. In this period of Ibsen studies, critics tended to seek messages from Ibsen the author via his plays.

As Karl Robert Mandelkow, a theorist of reception studies, has observed, in a particular historical period only a certain aspect of the works of an author is regarded as representative of his views and art. This particular aspect will become the standard for his reception as a whole. The fluctuating reception of Ibsen in different historical periods is in effect a result of the readers' changing emphasis on the different structural elements in his works, as well as on the different kinds of plays Ibsen wrote. The history of reception of literary works can thus be objectified into a process of interaction between the reader's expectations and the works' structural elements.

A review of Ibsen's reception in different parts of the world as well as in different periods of history will surely provide illuminating insights into the question of the nature of Ibsen's plays and the elements affecting the critics' responses to them. The historical path of Ibsen's reception in various parts of the world can be represented in the following chart:



Nineteenth-century people came to know Ibsen mainly through his involvement in moral and social issues. Hence, Ibsen's middle plays were collectively labelled as "social problem plays," which is not so much a reflection of Ibsen's code as that of the critics. When by the end of the nineteenth century such social issues as women's rights and corruption in government became passe in Norway and many other European countries, Ibsen's middle plays lost their political significance because of the absence of the social context, in the sense of the above modified reception model, in which his readers used to put them. The referential function of Ibsen's plays as previously interpreted by the readers still existed, but they did not feel being attacked. In terms of the above modified model, the readers' context of interpretation is not the same as the author's. As a result, Ibsen's battle with his countrymen came to an end, and he was finally able to return to Norway after a long period of exile. In Jakobson's terms, the referential function of Ibsen's plays still existed, but the emotive and conative functions were suppressed.

Ibsen and the 20th-Century View of Literature

By the latter half of the 1920s, there was a general decline of interest in Ibsen in Western Europe and America. As in Norway some thirty years earlier, the zest for Ibsen cooled because of the change in social context, which was needed for the functioning of the moralistic code in order to arouse the interest of the readers. The referential function of Ibsen's middle plays was lost in a new context. With the passing of the social movements, the public was not as interested in Ibsen the person as it had been in the past. The critics no longer sought communication between Ibsen the author and

themselves. Thus change occurred not just in context but also in the level of communication.

Despite the decline of political zeal for Ibsen in Northern Europe toward the end of the nineteenth century, Ibsen's social influence began to spread more widely in England, the United States, and the rest of Europe as a result of the rising social movements there. William Archer, the English authority on Ibsen, employed a moralist code in his reading of Ibsen, thus making him the centre of the feminist movement in England. From the late nineteenth century to the 1920s, Ibsen was generally regarded as a moralist writer whose plays were discussions of social morals and reflections of social reality. The critics like Edmund Gosse, William Archer, James Huneker, and Bernard Shaw all treated Ibsen as a social reformer and propagated for him such ideas as iconoclasm, feminism, and individualism. Ibsen's plays were treated as true-to-life portrayals of and protests against male chauvinism, corruption in government, false morality, and hypocritical conventions. Thus much critical effort was spent on hunting the sources of Ibsen's plays. It was the nineteenth-century mimetic mode of thinking which believed in the necessary correspondence between literature and social reality that made the critics spend most of their energy finding out which real-life events were imitated in literature. Yet even some of today's critics, as J. L. Styan remarks, fail to note *A Doll's House's* "extraordinary technical achievement, because its explosive subject matter is still so obsessive that no room seems left for objective appraisal" (20).

Ideological Split and the Change of Critical Paradigm

From the 1920s onward, there began to be a split in ideology as well as in critical methodology between Western Europe and America, on the one hand, and Russia, on the other. In fact, the split did not occur so neatly dividing the reception of Ibsen in Europe and America into two geographical areas. In both the United States and West Germany, there were groups of socialists advocating a politicized interpretation of Ibsen, whereas in Russia there were also non-Marxist Ibsen critics. The dichotomy of America-Western Europe and Russia is used only for the sake of convenience in discussion. They represent only two different views in the reception of Ibsen: one is to aestheticize Ibsen, and the other to politicize him. In Western Europe and America, not only had the sociopolitical context for the interpretation of Ibsen changed, but the code had also switched from moralist to aesthetic-

formalist. The social movements of the late nineteenth century no longer existed in the early twentieth century as people's morals and attitudes changed. The social protests of the past century simply lost the objects of their attacks. Since Ibsen was still treated as a playwright of social protest, his plays lost their sensational appeal to the audience.

Only after a decade or so when the aesthetic-formalist code, arising as a result of the emergence of New Criticism, allowed the critic to approach Ibsen's plays in isolation from their historical and social context did Ibsen begin to appear to the audience in a new light. There is truth in the claim that Ibsen's dramatic art began to appeal to the drama critics only after the controversies and social movements in which Ibsen and his supporters were involved were over, but there is more truth in the fact that it was because of the change in critical mode with the adoption of a new code of interpretation that the critics were able to discover Ibsen's achievements in dramaturgy. Suffice it to name a few of the books published in the 1940s that reevaluated Ibsen from an aesthetic-formalist code: M. C. Bradbrook's *Ibsen the Norwegian: A Revaluation* (1946), Brian Westerdale Downs's *Ibsen: The Intellectual Background* (1946), John Richard Northam's *Ibsen's Dramatic Method* (1946) and *A Study of Six Plays by Ibsen* (1950), and P.F.D. Tennant's *Ibsen's Dramatic Technique* (1948), all of which reevaluated Ibsen in the light of New Criticism. It is also the distance of time that allowed the critics to have a more complete view of Ibsen. The failure of Ibsen's contemporaries to employ an aesthetic-formalist code and distinguish between fact and fiction, as P.F.D. Tennant pointed out in 1948, was due to Ibsen's "skill" in making his plays "centre around the burning moral or social problems of the day." So far as their social function is concerned, the social and moral themes are indeed the source of power in Ibsen's social plays, while therein also lies their weakness, which the perspective of time reveals to be socio-historically limited. When considered as a dramatist and artist, but not as a moralist, Ibsen's ideas do not stand the test of time as well as the characters who enunciate them and the dramatic effect of his technique, which is as fresh as ever. It is not Ibsen's social ideas, but his dramatic form that constitutes "his greatest contribution to the theatre" (Tennant 15-16). Put in another way, it was the change of critical mode, that is, the code, that enabled the critics to discover the artistic qualities of Ibsen's plays.

The shift of attention from "the burning moral or social problems" to "skill" is the greatest achievement and breakthrough of modern literary criticism. In the theory of Russian Formalism, this is the change in modern

critical mode from the study of a literary work to the study of its literariness. Historically, this is, as Hans Robert Jauss says, the change of paradigm in literary criticism from the historicist to the aesthetic. The change of emphasis is also due to the discovery of Ibsen's historical importance in the development of modern drama. This is a discovery enabled only by the distance of time. The shift of critical focus in Ibsen studies was a reflection of the general trend to place emphasis on an author's works rather than on the author. Thus the level of communication in the history of Ibsen's reception has since moved to that between the plays as texts and the critics as creative readers.

In Russia, as well as in some Eastern European countries after the Second World War, not only did the context for a socio-political interpretation of Ibsen change, but the code also shifted from the moralist to Marxist, represented by the views of such socialist-Marxist critics as Georg Plekhanov, Konstantin Derzhavin, and Klara Zetkin, who all tended to analyze Ibsen with a historico-political code, placing him in the historical context of class struggle in nineteenth-century Europe. The new social reality in the socialist countries, with Russia as a typical example, presented a new context for the reception of Ibsen. The Nora and Stockmann themes were reinterpreted as themes of class struggle. Dramatic conflicts were taken as a reflection of social contradictions.

The issue is not whether this interpretation is far-fetched, but that the new context and code gave Ibsen's plays new meanings and new social significance. In fact, the use of a socialist-Marxist code to interpret Ibsen's plays can be traced back to the early 1910s when Emma Goldman, an American anarchist-feminist critic, tried to decode Ibsen's middle plays in her essay, "The Modern Drama—A Powerful Disseminator of Radical Thought." The social movements in Europe and America before the First World War were a social condition that gave rise to the popularity of the socialist-anarchist code in interpreting literary writings. In other words, it is the co-functioning of both the new code and new context that allowed Ibsen to be continuously well received in different societies and in different ages. In today's socialist-Marxist interpretation of Ibsen, the emphasis is still placed on the message from the author to the critic. This can be seen in the Marxist reconstructing of Ibsen's production context in terms of class struggle in the nineteenth century.

Ibsen in China: Literature as Social Discourse

Although the moral and political zeal for Ibsen declined in Northern Europe from the end of the nineteenth century and in the English-speaking countries from the 1920s, the social conditions in the Far East provided a context for the referential function of Ibsen's middle plays. In both China and Japan, Ibsen has had a great impact upon the feminist movements. It was around the end of the nineteenth century that Ibsen was transmitted to Japan, mainly via England and Germany; hence, the initial Japanese reception of Ibsen was characterized by William Archer's moralist views. If translation can be taken as an index to an author's reception in a foreign country, then the formal introduction of Ibsen to China was around 1918. While the first Japanese translation of an Ibsen play, *An Enemy of the People*, appeared in 1893, the first Chinese translation of Ibsen's play, *A Doll's House*, did not appear until 1918. China started late but was more fortunate in being able to see the different views and experience of other countries. Since Ibsen was introduced to China much later than Japan and the countries in Europe and America, it was natural that the reception process was affected by Ibsen criticism all over the world, particularly first by the Japanese views of Ibsen and later by those of America and Western Europe. China's large-scale reception of Ibsen occurred around the end of the 1910s and was necessarily affected by the coexistence of the moralist and socialist-Marxist codes in European interpretations of Ibsen.

Martin Esslin's observation that "Ibsen's first and most obvious impact was social and political" can as well be applied to the situation in China. From the start, the modern Chinese theatre was a social and political theatre. Although there were no distinctively formed Ibsenite groups in China, there were dramatists, such as Hung Shen and T'ien Han, who openly professed themselves "Chinese Ibsens." Ibsen's influence in China is of two kinds: sociopolitical and artistic (both literary and theatrical). In different periods, there have been different manifestations of these two kinds of influence, which in turn mirror the readers' critical orientation more than Ibsen's message.

The history of Ibsen's reception in China can be divided roughly into four major periods: 1907-1927, 1928-1948, 1949-1978, and 1979-present. These four phases correspond to the divisions in the history of the world reception of Ibsen charted above. In the first period, Chinese interpretations of Ibsen were closely associated with social movements and were greatly

influenced by the moralist code then prevalent in Europe, particularly the views of William Archer, Bernard Shaw, Emma Goldman, and Janko Lavrin. Ibsen's social influence was first seen in the advocacy of individualism and iconoclasm in the writings of Lu Hsun and Hu Shih. The social movements in China gave the interpretation of Ibsen's plays a new political context by which the critics conveyed their messages to Chinese readers. Ibsen was hailed as a champion of individualism, uncompromising moralist, and advocate of feminism. The iconoclast elements derived from Ibsen's plays were most valued in this period as a violent weapon against the moral system deeply rooted in China's thousands of years of history. In fact, one of the major reasons for introducing Ibsen to China was that the messages derived from his plays constituted a powerful attack on the conventional moral institutions in China.

In an age of political turmoil and ethical chaos, people needed moral messages more than art. With a highly stylized form of acting and historically remote themes, traditional Chinese drama, represented by the Peking opera, was too detached from contemporary life to arouse the interest of the newly awakened intelligentsia. It was thus for such political and social reasons that Ibsen was hailed as a figure of hope and new values. Political needs were the major cause for introducing Ibsen. When Lu Hsun introduced *An Enemy of the People* to China in 1908, Ibsen's iconoclasm was valued higher than any other of his social ideas. Lu Hsun thought that iconoclasm was the only prescription that could cure the spiritual illness of China. Next came Hu Shih's account of Ibsenism, in which social criticism was treated as Ibsen's realistic attitude toward life and works of art. Hence, *When We Dead Awaken* was taken by Hu Shih as a play most representative of Ibsen's attitude and was considered as a powerful remedy for China's social diseases. Both Lu Hsun and Hu Shih put Ibsen's plays in the context of Chinese society and interpreted them accordingly, for at that time China was in much the same social condition as Norway in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

In the process of introducing Ibsen to China, Chinese dramatists were more attracted to his explosive themes than to his dramatic subtlety. Almost all the social problem plays in the early 1920s were modelled after Ibsen's middle plays, without considering the appropriateness of such an approach to the theatre. The fashion became so powerful that even well established Chinese dramatists could not resist the temptation to imitate Ibsen, which at that time was considered as an act of contempt equivalent to plagiarism.

The problem play became a new fashion and orthodoxy, and the social effects of a play were considered by many critics of primary importance to its achievements. A dramatist, by expectation, was at the same time a social educator. It has become a tradition for Chinese dramatists to write under a heavy moral burden and social responsibility.

The second period was accompanied by the gradual maturity of modern Chinese drama and literary criticism. From 1928 to 1948, Ibsen attracted the attention of more and more serious Chinese dramatists and critics, such as Hsiung Fo-hsi and Ch'en Chih-ts'e, who were trained in Western Europe and America and put more emphasis on Ibsen's dramatic innovations than on his social themes. As in Western Europe and America where critics began to lose enthusiasm in politics, Chinese dramatists gradually reflected upon the basic questions concerning Ibsen's drama when in the late 1920s many of the social movements in China were over. Unlike a political event, a literary one has "no unavoidable consequences subsisting on their own that no succeeding generation can ever escape" (Jauss 22). A literary event can have an effect in later periods only if there are readers who come after it and once again respond to it. In the case of China, it was the change in context that led to a low tide in the reception of Ibsen. Ibsen's plays lost their appeal to Chinese readers simply because in a new context they did not produce the effect they had in the past.

Reflecting the influence of the West and at the same time the split in critical mode between Western Europe and Russia, there was in China also a controversy over whether Ibsen was a social reformer or an artist and whether his popularity was due to his political themes or to his art. Some took the middle way and affirmed that it was a mixture of both. Although in the late 1920s and early 30s some critics called for a reconsideration of Ibsen from the viewpoint of art, still the general tendency was to moralize him, which, however, was supported by the pragmatic view that Ibsen's drama was useful for social reform in China. The debate over the character of Ibsen's drama not only signified a Chinese reconsideration of the nature of drama but also provided an opportunity for modern Chinese drama to develop along a more balanced path. Unfortunately, before the debate yielded any positive result, the war between China and Japan broke out and smashed the hope of developing Chinese drama along a normal path. Political considerations and the moral responsibility of saving China from disgrace and sufferings again became the first concern of writers, dramatists, as well as novelists and poets. The moralist tradition, which had a long history in Chinese literature, was

revived to the dismay of the writers and critics who favoured aesthetic considerations in literary works more than their social effects.

Ibsen and the War: Instrumental Value

As a matter of fact, the call for a "Drama of National Defence" in the latter half of the 1930s during the Sino-Japanese War had its origin in the concept that the theatre must serve a social purpose, a notion that was deeply rooted in both the traditional and modern Chinese theatre and was in turn derived from the social themes of Ibsen's middle plays. Facing the question of life and death, most Chinese dramatists chose national struggle as subject-matter, directly or indirectly, to encourage the resistance to Japan. T'ien Han's *Ah-pi-hsi-ni-ya mu-ch'in* [Abyssinian mother], Yu Ling's *Ching hao* [Alarm], Chao Shu-li's *Ta-dao han-chien* [Knock down traitors], Ma Yen-hsiang's *Sheng-huo tzu tao* [The way to life], Pai Wei's *Ch'ung ch'u Yu-ling-t'a* [Fight out of Ghost Pagoda], Chang Min's *Ku-hsiang* [Our hometown], Sung Chih-ti's *Lo hen* [The branded scar], Yang Han-sheng's *Ch'ien yeh* [The night before last], and Hsia Yen's *Sai Chin Hua, Tzu yu tzu hun* [The soul of freedom], and *Shanghai wuchen hsia* [Under the eaves of Shanghai] are good examples of this kind of drama. There were other dramatists who devoted themselves to reflecting social conditions of the time and achieved much in dramaturgy. In this respect, Ts'ao Yu was especially admired. His well-known trilogy, *Lei yu* [Thunderstorm], *Jih ch'u* [Sunrise], and *Yuan yeh* [Wilderness], has occupied an important position in the history of modern Chinese theatre. The social problem plays, such as Hung Shen's trilogy, *Wu Kui ch'iao* [Wu Kui Bridge], *Tao-mi hsiang* [Fragrant rice], and *Heilung T'an* [The Black Dragon Lake], and Ou-yang Yu-ch'ien's *T'ung chu ti san chia jen* [Three families living together], are also modelled after Ibsen in theme as well as in technique.

Chinese interest in Ibsen revived during the war years because there was need of a new dramatic form that could arouse the reader's emotional response. In a new context of oppression and invasion, the theme of *A Doll's House* already interpreted as "exploitation of women" was redefined as "exploitation of Chinese women under foreign invasion," as can be exemplified in such Chinese adaptations of the play as *Nü-hsing ti chieh-fang* [Female emancipation, 1940]. Almost all the Chinese stage productions of *A Doll's House* from 1937 to 1945 adapted it to serve a special purpose.

Ibsenism and Socialism

The year 1949 was of particular importance in contemporary Chinese history for in that year the People's Republic was founded, signifying a drastic change in the cultural life of the Chinese. The third period of Ibsen reception in China started in 1949 and ended around 1978. In these thirty years, Chinese interpretation followed closely the footsteps of Russia. Friedrich Engels's analysis of Ibsen's plays in terms of class struggle and redefinition of the majority, who were necessarily reactionary, as referring to the bourgeois class in the nineteenth-century semi-feudal Norwegian society were the two doctrines every Marxist had to follow in studying Ibsen.

Although the social and political events depicted in Ibsen's social plays did not exist in China in those thirty years, Ibsen was still revered in terms of his historic importance as a critic of the bourgeois social system and thus was taken as politically useful to the new socialist regime. To put it another way, Ibsen was still interpreted according to the nineteenth-century context in which his plays were placed but served an indirect political function in contemporary China. Take Hsiao Ch'ien's two contradictory interpretations of *Peer Gynt* as an example. In 1949 the play was interpreted as an indictment of bourgeois individualism, but in 1979 it was given a new meaning, insinuating that the "ultra-leftists" lacked individuality and were no less opportunistic than *Peer Gynt*. In 1949 Hsiao Ch'ien thought that individualism was a bad thing, but in 1979 it was considered a good thing of which the Chinese just did not have enough, demonstrated by the Cultural Revolution in which so many people blindly followed the "Gang of Four" with no sense of individuality.

In the thirty years after 1949, Ibsen also served another purpose besides being treated as a supporter of socialism. His significance to contemporary Chinese politics was magnified to its maximum in the designation of his drama as model plays on class struggle. The model function of Ibsen's social plays to Chinese dramatists in general can be compared to the eight model plays designed by Chiang Ch'ing during the Cultural Revolution. The well-made dramatic conflicts in Ibsen's plays were taken as reflections of class struggle in bourgeois society. Hence, for the Chinese Marxists every reading of Ibsen's social plays was a lesson on the evils of capitalism. For Chinese dramatists, Ibsen's plays, redefined by socialist realism, were excellent examples for them to learn how to reproduce class struggles on the stage.

During these thirty years, the Russian socialist realistic code was adopted

in China to re-interpret Ibsen. It was this change of code that allowed Ibsen to share a piece of the pie of contemporary Chinese politics. Jauss's observation of the social function of literary works in historical periods other than their own may serve as a footnote to contemporary Chinese reception of Ibsen: "The new literary work is received and judged against the background of other works of art as well as against the background of everyday experience of life" (41-42). In other words, literary works are often revitalized in different historical periods by placing them in new contexts. A literary work may have historical influence because of its potential to be reinterpreted in other historical periods. The larger the degree of ambiguity and indeterminacy in a literary work the greater is its potential for being vigorously received in different historical periods. Yet, to have the potential of being differently, or even contradictorily, interpreted does not mean disorder in interpretation. The validity of interpretation has to be tested against the structure of the work as well as against the cultural framework within which both the interpretation and the work lie.

Social Change and the Interpretive Context

The weakness of anachronistic and insinuating interpretation was demonstrated in its inability to survive the test of time. The new social and political reality in China after 1978 allows Ibsen readers to see that there are alternatives to the vulgarized doctrines of Marx and Engels in the interpretation of literature. There was in effect little literary criticism in the first thirty years of the People's Republic, government intervention in the interpretation of an author had rendered everything politicized. Yet a political commentator can never replace a literary critic, whose duty is to point out the aesthetic qualities of a work of art. The recognition of the pitfalls of using literary works to insinuate political events in China has led to the discovery of literature as an entity with relative autonomy. The new political and social environment in China since 1979 has given rise to the influx of the once-condemned "Western bourgeois literary criticism" into socialist China. Chinese critics thus have an opportunity to come into contact with contemporary Western achievements in literary studies, resulting in the gradual adoption of the aesthetic-formalist code.

The four periods in the Chinese reception of Ibsen fall into a pattern of fluctuation between the Western political camps, signifying two diametrically opposite ideologies as well as modes of literary criticism: the open-ended

system of thought in Western Europe and America versus the closed-ended in Russia. The history of Ibsen interpretation in China shows that the reception of an author in a culture other than his own involves a complex interplay of the author's own ideology, the recipient country's culture, and the influence of other countries' interpretations of the author. Cross-cultural studies have demonstrated that in reading a text from a culture other than his own, a reader is prone to bring different systems of background knowledge into the comprehension process. These systems of background knowledge that affect the reading process are variously referred to as "horizons of expectation" in the theory of reception aesthetics.

The average Chinese audiences' favouring of the social elements in Ibsen's middle plays can be seen as a result of the small distance between their horizon of expectations and Ibsen's social criticism. The form of Ibsenian drama was a completely new experience to many Chinese at the beginning of this century. Ibsen's plays are aesthetically more distant from the Chinese habits of appreciation than his social and moral themes are. It is no wonder that mainly the dramatists and drama critics, such as Hsiung Fo-hsi and Wen I-to, who were trained in the West and possessed the ability to appreciate Western art forms, viewed Ibsen as an artist. It is for the same reason that most of Ibsen's early and later plays, which often exhibit more artistic subtlety and complexity, have not been so popular in China as his middle plays. For people who have been used to seeing realistic paintings, it is difficult for them to appreciate abstract ones. To require the average Chinese audiences to appreciate Ibsen's art would demand them a great deal of re-adjustment in their horizon of expectations. It is easier for a foreign writer to have an immediate influence upon the average audiences if it demands little upon the receiving consciousness to adjust to the horizon of unknown experience.

China and Japan: Two Approaches

It is interesting and, perhaps, illuminating to note the difference in Chinese and Japanese reception of Ibsen. Besides reflecting the split between the Euro-American and Russian interpretations of Ibsen, this difference has its social and historical causes, too, in the different internal development of China and Japan. Two important historical events have helped shape the history of modern China: the 1911 Revolution which brought China into large-scale contact with the "civilized West," and the 1949 Revolution, which

withdrew China from its contacts with the "bourgeois West." Both events had far-reaching external social effects upon the reception of Ibsen. The large-scale introduction of Ibsen occurred only in 1918, seven years after the 1911 Revolution, which led to a temporary hope for democracy in China, and one year after the October Revolution in Russia.

For its instrumental value in ideological reform, Ibsenism was held up as a banner of the new morality in China. However, before Ibsenism could take hold in China, it had to fight a battle on two fronts both with the conservative Chinese tradition and ironically with its Chinese followers, who actually distorted its major ideas. The failure of the 1911 Revolution to democratize China gave rise to the experiment of Socialism. The Marxist-historicist interpretation of Ibsen, accompanied by the Chinese pursuit of a utopian ideology to revitalize the country, was in general welcomed by intellectuals. The debate over the nature of Ibsenism and Ibsen's drama in the late 1920s and early 30s, though being a temporary conscious effort of reflection over the intellectual crisis, evidenced the fact that the American and Western European influence in China was receding in the face of growing Russian power.

The rise of the Marxist-Maoist ideology as the only orthodox system of thought and interpretive code in China after 1949 immediately followed the Russian politicization of Ibsen. In terms of the Structuralist concept of communication, it was the change of the interpretive code that led to the Marxianization of Ibsenism, which had an unusual referential function in contemporary Chinese society and politics because of the corresponding change in reception context. Literature does not exist in a void, both its production and consumption have to rely on social and political conditions. No example can better exemplify this relationship than the government control of the publishing industry in today's China, which not only helps shape the interest of the reading public but also controls the circulation of Ibsen's plays and thus his influence.

In Japan, the first translation of an Ibsen play took place in 1893, twenty-five years after the Meiji Reform, which gradually democratized Japan and guaranteed more and more Western European and American influence. The twenty-five years after the Meiji reform prepared Japan to receive and respond to Ibsen more readily than did China. Hence, Ibsen would not appear so much as a shock to the Japanese as to the Chinese. When the Japanese Bluestocking Society was formed in 1911, there were already a number of Japanese women's colleges (Sato 73-74). Although at

the beginning of this century Japan was far behind in the emancipation of women and social reform in comparison to Western Europe and America, she was voluntarily moving in the direction the West had taken. The development of a capitalist economy in Japan prior to the outbreak of the 1917 Russian Revolution was an important factor that safeguarded Japan from Russian influence, though leftist writers and critics also had strong power in Japan. The rise of Japan as an Oriental power not only antagonized her relationship with China but even more sharply antagonized first czarist and then Soviet Russia. Hence, at the start Japan was resisting Russian influence in both politics and in cultural life. When Ibsen came to Japan, he came from Europe through England, Germany, and France, but not through Russia.

In the case of China, Ibsen came through the major countries that had power and influence in China. Thus in the 1920s and 30s when there was a split in Ibsen reception in the West, China and Japan took different paths leading them farther and farther apart. Today Japanese reception of Ibsen generally corresponds to that of the West. The transition from using a moralist code to using an aesthetic-formalist one in decoding Ibsen's message took place not only in the West but also in Japan. Yet, with China moving closer and closer to the West in the 1980s, Chinese critics are more inclined to the adoption of an aesthetic-formalist code in literary criticism. It is a sign of change from the critics' preoccupation with politics to that with literature. In terms of the level of literary communication, it is a change of emphasis from communication with the author to that with the text. This change in communication emphasis is significantly transformed to a shift of critical focus from a rigid mode of reducing literary criticism to an activity of reconstructing the production context and code to a dynamic one of creative interaction between the text and the critic. The recent growing influence of the epic and absurd theatre in China, however, makes one worry whether Ibsen will be given a fair reevaluation and balanced reception before he becomes obsolete on the Chinese stage, as has happened in Japan since 1970. Like in the West, Ibsen is becoming a subject of more academic than political concern in today's China.

The Continuity and Discontinuity of History

The four periods of changes in the Chinese reception of Ibsen can be viewed as a continuous or discontinuous process, depending on the critic's standpoint. The first three periods are of course interrelated as they may be

put under the general interpretive category of the "historicist-positivist," whereas the last one, influenced by the West, is under the "aesthetic-formalist" and is expressed as a reaction to the former category. Some historians of ideas, such as Michel Foucault, believe that the displacement of epistemes in history is often due to external causes and they look at history as a discontinuous process. Hans Robert Jauss distinguishes three paradigms in the history literary studies: the classical-humanist, historicist-positivist, and aesthetic-formalist. To him, each of the paradigms is a reaction to the previous one. Unlike Foucault, he sees history as a continuous process of actions and reactions.

For Marxists, however, literature does not claim a history of its own. It is a continuous process not in itself as a superstructure but in relation to the infrastructure. When viewed in relation to society, as Georg Lukacs does, literary history is a surface structure built on a large, but more basic, structure of history, society, and politics, which form an intricate, complex continuity. The emphasis on a close link between literature and society is not a patent of Marxist theory. Take the interpretation of Ibsen as an example. It is a result more of social than literary change that Ibsen's literary message is interpreted as a political one.

Modern Chinese drama is a break from traditional Chinese drama, for it is a form imported from the West. The cause of the rise of modern Chinese drama lies, however, in its social function, which traditional Chinese drama cannot serve. The social needs of China have given rise to this foreign form. As Ulrich Weisstein claims, the emergence of a new genre is often due to inspiration of "foreign models in protest against prevailing artistic theories and practices" (34). The history of Chinese drama is discontinuous when viewed in isolation, but continuous when viewed in relation to social history and as reaction against traditional drama.

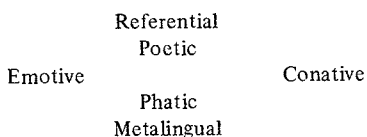
After all, Ibsen belongs to the past as well as to the present century for his influence on literature, theatre, and society can still be felt today. No matter how contradictorily Ibsen has been represented in China in the past eighty years, his threefold contribution to Chinese society and culture is recognized: the growing Chinese awareness of the importance of individuality as well as the spirit of iconoclasm, women's emancipation, and last, but not least, a modern theatre in China. Ibsen has become a classic not only in the English-speaking theatre but also in the Chinese theatre.

Notes

1. The context refers to the social and historical background wherein the communication event takes place. The message is what the author Ibsen wants to tell in his plays. In this study, the plays are mainly Ibsen's middle plays, or social problem plays. The contact is the physical channel through which the addresser communicates with the addressee. Hence, it may be the play as a text for reading or as a performance on the stage. The difference in the physical contact between reading and watching a performance will definitely affect the addressee's experience of the play. The element of contact in Chinese reception of Ibsen is rather stable since the most widely read and staged texts are those translated by P'an Chia-hsun.

The code is the socio-cultural and literary framework by which the addressee interprets the play. Codes are, as Roger Fowler defines them, "systems of literary knowledge possessed by the reader, inscribed in the literary community to which he belongs, and realized in the experience of the language of the texts" (97). Communication exists not only in the message but in the entire system; any change in the six elements will cause corresponding changes in the effects of communication.

Basing on the Structuralist model of communication, Jakobson projects six functions of language:



Jakobson points out that a verbal communication may entail more than one of these functions, but there must be a predominant one. Thus in poetry the poetic function of language dominates the other functions of the text. In scientific texts, for example, the referential function dominates. This is what I. A. Richard calls the practical use of language and what Tzvetan Todorov calls scientific discourse.

The emotive function is that which expresses the character state of the speaker; the conative function refers to language directed at the addressee, such as imperative sentences. Phatic function is the special use of language to check or prolong the working of the communication channels, such as the question: "Do you hear me?" The metalingual function of language refers to the purpose of the communication event which aims at checking whether or not the addresser and the addressee share the same code. All these different functions of language, which are beyond the considerations of grammar, have been in recent years studied by more and more philosophers, linguists, and political scientists under the name of discourse analysis.

2. For a scientist, it is improper to say something is hot or cold; he has to express an exact temperature. Thirty-five degrees Celsius is hot, but so is forty. Hence, in science the word "hot" is less exact than temperature in degrees. For a poet, however, it is non-figurative to express the idea of "hot" in degrees or in plain words. Literature is, in one sense, "thinking in images." A poet has to choose between words like "burning" and "fire," or even to express the idea in figurative language. For these two simple different functions of language use, the decoding methods are different. To decode the "hotness" of forty degrees Celsius,

the scientist just has to compare it to human body temperature in the same temperature scale. The decoding process is objectifiable and can be understood in universal terms. On the other hand, there is no way to know exactly how hot "burning" is. To an Alaskan and a Mexican, "burning" may have totally different meanings.

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