Law, Ethics and Gender: China's Quest for a Modern Selfhood as Reflected in its Adaptations of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*

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Abstract In this paper, I will discuss Chinese adaptations of *A Doll's House* as a point of departure to see how problems arise when the self and the behaviour of a person is defined in legal terms at the expense of moral motives and how men and women have different concepts of law and morality. Gender issues in the formation of selfhood and philosophical concepts of behavioural “performativity” will be examined in the context of China's experimentations in projecting new concepts of womanhood and the female self. As a context, I will also outline some of the changes in cultural values and ethical categories in China over the past century, so as to see why the individualist conception of the self has played such a paramount important role in China's quest for modernity.

Keywords Selfhood · Chinese Ibsenism · Individualism · Gender · Ethics

1 Introduction

China is a nation with a long tradition in which the law has played a secondary role in defining a person's self, while ethical relations have been playing a primary role. Put simply, the law is an extension of ethical relations in governing a person's conduct. Hence, we have the sayings, “Law, reason and human concerns” (Fa 法, li 理, qing 情) and “the law does not go beyond human concerns” (fa lu bu wai fu ren qing 法律不外乎人情). For thousands of years, China was governed by a clan-extended sociopolitical structure called dynasty, in which the state as the supreme governing body operated like a big family with relations based on authority and

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submission. Within such a dynastic structure, all members were placed in their well-defined positions in reporting to their seniors. Such a relationship is summed up in the Confucian *Analects*: “Let the ruler be a ruler, minister be a minister, father be a father, son be a son” (*Lun yu* 論語, XII, 11). For this reason, seniority is respected in traditional Chinese culture, with much emphasis on subordination of the junior.

The self is always a part in the self-other relations, that is, a person is always subjected to his relation with others. It is not an autonomous individual. In the Chinese tradition, the self is ethically defined as “the center of relationships” in the family as well as in society. It is the point of departure in a socializing process, in which the person cultivates (or represses) himself for the purpose of perfecting his self to better serve others. *The Great Learning* (Da xue 大學) states: “Their persons being cultivated, their families were regulated. Their families being regulated, their states were rightly governed. Their states being rightly governed, the whole kingdom was made tranquil and happy” (Daxue). Such a Confucian worldview reveals a strong sense of collectivism, communitarianism and disciplining activity in traditional Chinese culture, in which selfhood is repressed into a relational role-self and is never allowed the opportunity to develop into an autonomous individual. Taken as a role, the traditional Chinese selfhood is a regulated personhood. Hence, the Chinese does not have a theory of psyche or the ego. Harold H. Oliver points out in his essay “The Relational Self” that the Chinese selfhood is only part of a self-other relation and is actually a non-self. Furthermore, the concept of cultivating the self and regulate the family fully illustrates the performative function of Confucianism (Oliver 1992, pp. 37–52).

Understood in such a way, the traditional Chinese selfhood is primarily a relational role-self, expressed in familial and social relationships. In this relationship, a person is not an autonomous individual, for he has little individual identity or individuality and lives mainly to fulfil dutifully the various roles assigned to or expected of him. Individuality is only allowed within the limits of roles. Self-awareness in traditional Chinese culture is presented mainly as role-awareness, and identity crisis is seldom conceived as a problem of self-identity in the traditional Chinese consciousness.

This is an ethical, as well as a legal way, to define the traditional Chinese selfhood, in which agency is limited to the desire for fulfilling one’s roles in life. The traditional Chinese concept of self speaks of a person’s relation, not to oneself, but to others with himself as an objectified social being and not as a subject. Numerous examples can be found in Chinese history and literature to show this effect of the Confucian discourse on the construction of the Chinese selfhood. Briefly summarized, the traditional Chinese self is a relational role-self, an object-self, as well as a no-agent self, constructed merely as a product of Confucian discourse which is psychologically and politically repressive.

2 Chinese Ibsenism

The Confucian conception of a governing structure based on kinship-ethical relations was questioned towards the end of the nineteenth century when the dynastic rule which placed absolute authority in the emperor could not run the country well and failed to respond to the needs of reform when China was threatened by Japan and by the Western powers. The 1911 Revolution replaced China's dynastic rule with a modern republican political system based on democracy. However, without a new conception of the citizens as individuals who were equal regardless of class and gender, democracy was only a high sounding word and could not be practised. For thousands of years, China was dominated by Confucianism and did not have a theory or discourse of the self as an individual before the twentieth century. In the 1910s when Ibsenism was discovered by the Japanese and Western educated Chinese intellectuals, such as Lu Xun 鲁迅 and Hu Shi 胡適, it was brought back to China as an alternative to the collapsing Confucian morality of family–society–state collectivism. Individualism, which was a core value in Ibsenism, gave the newly awakened Chinese a new conception of selfhood. As a result of freeing the individual from Confucian ethical bondages, old Chinese ethical values were also replaced by modern Western ones. Ibsen's *A Doll's House* has been instrumental in bringing up a modern concept about the roles of law and morality in the formation of selfhood. In different historical periods in modern China, different interpretations of the play bring forth different notions of selfhood, women and gender in relation to social changes in class relations and nation building. *A Doll's House* is not simply a stage play, but a political index of China's social changes. It is no wonder why the play has been fascinating to the Chinese audiences since it was first performed in China in 1914.

A massive and nationwide outcry against the Confucian ethical definition of a person during the May Fourth New Culture Movement in 1919 called for a reevaluation of the Chinese tradition and a need to introduce new concepts of the self. Against this historical background, Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* was translated into Chinese and adapted into short plays. The intention for translating and performing Ibsen was obvious, as Hu Shi stated, "Ibsenism" (*New Youth* 1918) brought forth a new morality against the repressions of social, legal and religious institutions in Europe. Put in the Chinese context, Ibsenism was translated into action against Chinese moral institutions in family, marriage and religion, which were seen as sickening. The traditional Chinese self, which in the Confucian ideal originally meant selflessness in serving the family, society, state and the world, had at the end of the nineteenth century deteriorated into selfishness, slavishness, falsehood and cowardice (Hu Shi, "Ibsenism", 1918). Ibsenism is a moral-action philosophy, which many leading Chinese intellectuals believe to be of utmost relevance to China's new culture. It is still relevant to China today, as *A Doll's House* has been performed every few years till 2017, each time with a new message for personal aspirations (Tam 2000).

Ibsen states in his notes on *A Doll's House* that the play is about law, moral conscience and gender:

There are two kinds of spiritual laws, two kinds of conscience, one in men and a quite different one in women. They do not understand each other, but the woman is judged in practical life according to the man's law, as if she were not a woman but a man.

The wife in the play finds herself at last entirely at sea as to what is right and what wrong; natural feeling on the one side and belief in authority on the other leave her in utter bewilderment.

A woman cannot be herself in the society of today, which is exclusively a masculine society, with laws written by men, and with accusers and judges who judge feminine conduct from the masculine standpoint (Ibsen 1978, p. 91).

Ibsen's *A Doll's House* brings up a concept that an autonomous self is possible and necessary for a woman who declares that she is "first and foremost a human being". Brought up in the above quote are three issues that bear direct impact on the modern Chinese conception of selfhood:

- (1) A woman needs to be redefined and judged in a different way than a man is;
- (2) A woman cannot be herself in a world which is defined according to man's law;
- (3) A woman is different in conscience, that is, different in moral consideration.

The first issue concerns gender, the second concerns law, and the third concerns morality. However, all three are about the selfhood of a woman, about how a woman is defined and about how her behaviour should be judged.

3 New Definition of the Self

To demonstrate his ideas of new womanhood, Hu Shi wrote the play *The Greatest Event in Life* (Zhongshen dashi 終身大事) (*New Youth*, 1919) which was performed in YMCA in Beijing in 1923. The play takes on the plot line of a woman leaving home against the parents' arranged marriage. In this play, Hu Shi attempts to construct a new female selfhood, whose realization depends on her autonomy in life. To achieve her autonomy, she has to oppose to both her mother's and father's plans for an arranged marriage. Tian Yamei, the female protagonist, who has received modern education in Japan, is a new liberated woman. Tian Yamei would like to marry her boyfriend, Mr. Chen, whom she met during her sojourn in Japan. Facing the opposition of her mother, Tian Yamei can only invest her hope in her father, a man who is Westernized in appearance but Chinese and traditional in heart.

When Mr. Tian returns from his work and learns that his wife has consulted a fortune-teller, he is extremely upset with her, accusing her of superstition. Tian Yamei, as well as the reader, is led to think that her father is a Western-enlightened gentleman and he will support Tian Yamei's desire for freedom in marriage. An anticlimax takes place when Mr. Tian unexpectedly objects to the marriage, his excuse being that the Chens and the Tians belonged to the same family two

thousand years ago. Mr. Tian even brings out the *Confucian Analects* as his authority to support his view. The real reason underlying his objection, however, is that he fears the opposition of the clan elders. At this point, it is clear that the play brings out a strong message against the conception of clan authority in determining a young person's life, which is a practice in Confucian ethics. Totally disappointed, Tian Yamei resorts to elopement with her boyfriend, leaving a brief note to her parents: "This is the greatest event in your daughter's life. She ought to make a decision for herself and has left in Mr. Chen's car. Goodbye for now" (Hu Shi, 1919, p. 8). Hu Shi's *The Greatest Event in Life* appears to be inspired by Ibsen in that the ending in which Tian Yamei leaves her parents is obviously modelled on *A Doll's House*. By ending with a scene in which Tian Yamei declares her autonomy, the play projects a female subject whose selfhood has to be realized through an articulation of her will to confront the authority, to seek autonomy by being defiant against Confucianism. The new woman projected by Hu Shi was attacked as "unethical" in the early 1920s, and hence, it was difficult to find an actress to play the role of Nora.

The declaration of self-autonomy can also be found in a play by Tian Han 田漢. In *The Night a Tiger Was Caught* (Huo hu zhi ye 獲虎之夜, 1924), Tian Han presents a sad story about a female protagonist, Lian Gu, who fights for her freedom in marriage, which is actually a battle for autonomous selfhood. Lian Gu is in love with her cousin, Huang, who is mistakenly regarded as an idiot and has become a beggar following the death of his parents. He is looked upon as an idiot because of his eccentric behaviour, which is caused by his alienation from the people in the village. Lian Gu's father, Wei Fusheng, does not like Huang and has decided to marry his daughter off to a wealthy family with the hope of bringing some fortune to his own family. The night Lian Gu is to be sent to the wealthy family, Huang is seriously hurt by a tiger trap, which Wei Fusheng has set near the house. Motivated by her passion, as well as compassion, for Huang, Lian Gu refuses to leave the house as arranged and expresses willingness to die together with Huang. In her anguish, she openly defies her father and reveals that she has planned an elopement with Huang. The theme of *The Night a Tiger Was Caught*, like Hu Shi's *The Greatest Event in Life*, is not precisely the same as that of *A Doll's House*, but the idea of a rebellious woman yearning for an autonomous life and freedom is inspired by Ibsen. Both of the Chinese heroines seek to leave the family, though Nora succeeds and Lian Gau fails (Tam 1986a, b).

An interesting element in many of the early modern Chinese plays is that they end with the hero or heroine leaving home, after they make a speech, which articulates their affirmation of their selves by declaring autonomy (Tam 2006). This speech is the technique of discussion borrowed from Ibsen. However, in the context of modern Chinese culture, they also serve as a declaration of new selfhood, which yearns for a break from the bondage of traditional institutions in search of freedom. This declaration of autonomy, as Charles Taylor has pointed out, has to be articulated in order to become a voice. The strategy of articulation can be seen, first, in its opposition to authority and, second, in its recognition of autonomy of the self. In the context of modern Chinese culture, this is the "small self" that revolts against

the “big self” and the modern identity against tradition. This new self is characterized by an iconoclastic determination for free will (Tam 2001).

4 Emergence of the Public Sphere

The major cultural change in modern China since the May 4th 1919 Movement occurs with the emergence of a new Chinese concept of the person as an individual with an autonomous sense of subjecthood in defiance of the traditional notion of a role-self. The Confucian discourse, which is based on the emperor of a nation as a “well-established, permanent, and pivotal locus” within the traditional cosmic order, has been challenged and considered to be outdated in modern China (Schwartz, 1968, p. 283). Examples of this rebellious attitude can be found in modern Chinese literature, in which the new intellectuals are portrayed as awakened individuals struggling to live a life as an individual free from the stranglehold of socio-familial relations. The disintegration of the Confucian selfhood, based on authority and subordination, can be found vividly in the literary portrayal of the life of the awakened Chinese.

In the writings of Lu Xun’s generation, there is already the advocacy of the conception of man as an individual and as an autonomous person. Lu Xun, the pioneering modern Chinese thinker, is among the early few intellectuals who introduce the revolutionary ideas of European Romanticism and individualism as an antidote to the collapsing Confucian moral order in his seminal essays “On the Power of *Mara* Poetry” [Moluo shili shuo 摩羅詩力說, 1918] and “On Cultural Differences” [Wenhua pianzi lun 文化偏致論, 1918], and brings to the attention of the Chinese the sense of the individual as an existential self and uncompromising self, exemplified in Ibsen’s hero, Dr. Stockmann.

The leading May 4th Chinese writers, such as Lu Xun, Guo Moruo 郭沫若, Tian Han, often depict their young protagonists in conscious defiance of tradition and all kinds of socio-moral bondage that pose as obstacles in their journey to individual freedom. Of immense interest to the reader is the different resolutions offered in their works, which reveal the authors’ own ideological inclinations, social visions, as well as their moral choices. Their works can thus be regarded not only as a new discourse on the self, but also as manifestations of the young Chinese intellectuals’ moral dilemma and/or self-searching in transitional China.

Portrayed in the modern Chinese literary and journalistic writings is the self as an awakened individual, a lonely fighter who becomes increasingly aware of his or her self as an individual in relation to others in family and society. This new self is represented as the “experiencing I”, the subject of knowledge and action. Writings in the May 4th era are filled with differing explorations in the transformation from the old role-self to a new identity characterized by free expressions of the self. These writings further portray the sacrifice, sufferings and ordeals involved in the struggle for self-responsibility and self-realization in their attempts to represent the modern Chinese self in a new voice (Tam 1997).

An interesting point about the writings in the 1920s and 1930s is the various experiments in the construction of not only a new male selfhood, but also a new

model of the female selfhood. 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 extend freedom of education to Chinese women, many influential journals in the 1920s devoted special issues to the discussion of injustice done to women. In addition, more than ten magazines were specially dedicated to creating a new consciousness among Chinese women. The most famous of these were *Women's Bell* [Nüxing zong 女性鐘], *The Ladies' Magazine* (Funü zazhi 婦女雜誌), *Women's Review* (Funü pinglun 婦女評論) and *Womens' Life* (Funü shenghuo 婦女生活), in which there were articles concerning the evils of footbinding and inequality between sexes. These feminist journals were very important tools for Chinese women to learn what was happening to their counterparts in the West as there were many articles and translations on feminist literature, particularly the plays of Ibsen and Shaw.

With the changed concept of selfhood, there emerged a public sphere in which the theatre, the literary journals, newspapers, and the publishing industry all joined forces in promoting new ethical values and new cultural concepts. The terms “new female”, “new life”, “new knowledge”, “new learning” can be found in books, magazines and other forms of publication in the 1930s. The rise of left-wing thinking in the 1930s can be attributed, not only to the impact of Russian and Japanese Marxist ideology, but also to China's changes in social structure with the rise of the working class in cities, like Shanghai and Canton, where many activities in promoting the new drama took place. New ethical categories and cultural values emerged in relation of the new conception of the self.

In Shanghai as well as in other major cities in 1934 and 1935, there were performances of *A Doll's House* which placed emphasis on leaving the family to seek liberation from family and social oppression. In such a context, the Chinese performance of *A Doll's House* had shifted its focus from the quest for personal freedom to that for class liberation. Nora is an individual, and the Helmer family is a single family, not a class (Tam 1993). However, in China when many women left home, they formed a “class” of the homeless and jobless and needed to be united to fight for their cause. The performances of *A Doll's House* in the 1930s served a particular role in liberating not just one or two Chinese Noras, but a whole lot of them. Thus, we can find fictional representations of Nora in Mao Dun's 茅盾 and other writers' novels, in which the female protagonists are inspired by Nora to leave home and seek a new life by joining the working class so that they can have a job. Xie Bingying's 謝冰瑩 novel *The Autobiography of a Woman Soldier* (Yi ge nübing de zi zhuan—一個女兵的自傳) also has a Nora theme, in which a woman seeks liberation by joining the army so that she can set an example of a woman saving China. A sociocultural turn occurred in China in the 1930s that the class concept emerged as a critical category that inspired many people who sought liberation from oppressions. With this turn in cultural and social structure, Chinese Noras became personifications of class ideology, rather than individualism (Tam 1986a, 1990). A generation of Chinese Ibsenites emerged in the 1930s and they advocated for a new concept in which the liberated individuals debated on the future of their liberation—whether they should remain as individuals, or join the working class and form a

political party. Many of the intellectuals saw the inevitability of China becoming a party-state, that is, a nation ruled by a party. Hence, the concept of party-state (Dangguo 黨國) appeared in the 1930s and gained currency in the Nationalist (Guomindang) politics. The concept of the party-state had its roots in the debates over the nature of China's republic.

5 New Selfhood and New Ethical Values

The sociopolitical system in traditional China has been characterized by historians as ultra-stable (Jin and Liu 1984), and that is why the dynastic rule could last thousands of years until it became dysfunctional, usually because of the lack of succession to the throne. The stability this social and political system created in China is attributable to the ethical system which emphasized loyalty in the form of subordination to seniority, and that every member of society had to fulfil fixed roles in life. In other words, the role-selfhood played a pivotal role in supporting the political and social stability in traditional China. Chinese intellectuals at the end of the 1890s were aware that the role-selfhood no longer worked in a modern world and demanded a complete cultural revamp in China. Of all the cultural changes in modern China, the most significant is probably that of the new individualistic selfhood which destabilized the dynastic social and political system based on role and submission, making it possible for a republic to be formed in China. The new nation is no longer ruled by a dynasty, but by a party-state. With the new selfhood, a person aspires to be an individual being freed from family-based social and political bondages. Members of the new nation are supposed to enjoy equal rights in education, work and politics, regardless of their differences in class and gender. Together with the new selfhood come new ethical categories, such as individualism, gender, class, ethnicity, nationalism, equality and democracy. The new social-ethical values, however, do not replace the traditional; they just coexist in modern Chinese culture (Fig. 1).

Conflicts often arise in life because of the coexistence of two sets of social-ethical values, one traditional and Chinese; the other modern and Western. Although Ibsen's concepts of individualism and female emancipation have been accepted as discourses of universal truth by most educated people in China since the 1920s, they are, however, not fully practised in every household and in every walk of life. The need to perform *A Doll's House* with different messages in different historical periods is not only because there are infinite possibilities of interpretation in Ibsen's works, but also because different conflicts arise between traditional and modern values, between Chinese and Western values (Tam and Yip 2010). Even in the twenty-first century, conflicts between traditional Chinese and modern Western ethical values can be found, such as in a 1998 performance of *A Doll's House* (Wan'ou zhi jia) by the China Experimental Theatre (later renamed the National Theatre of China) in Beijing. This performance was a Chinese-Norwegian collaboration directed by Wu Xiaojing 吳曉江 with the lead role Nora played by Agnete Haaland, a Norwegian actress, and Helmer by the noted Chinese actor Li Jianyi 李建義.

	Traditional Social Category	Ethical Category	Modern Chinese Social Category	Ethical Category
1	Nation (race based)	Loyalty	Nation (imagined community)	Nationalism/patriotism
	Dynastic State (Clan identity)	Obedience	Party State (political machine)	Democracy
2	Society (clan based)	Service	Community (individual based)	Communitarianism
	Class (hierarchy)	Unity	Class (social stratification)	Equality
3	Clan (extended family)	Collectivism	Race (ethnicity)	Discrimination
	Family (blood based)	Role/Duty	Family (membership)	Membership
4	Self (role; social)	Subordination	Subject (individual; psychical)	Individualism
	Sex (biologically determined)	Differentiation	Gender (cultural construct)	Personality
5	Self-Other Relations	Harmony	Self-Other Relations	Difference

Fig. 1 Changes in Chinese social and ethical categories and values

This performance was conducted in two languages, Chinese and English. Because it was a bilingual performance, critical attention was directed towards the production as “intercultural theatre”.¹ As reported in the media, director Wu Xiaojiang wanted the play to reflect “troubles with inter-cultural and inter-racial relationships” (Wang Ling 1998). Agnete Haaland commented that the production showed “the complexities of a foreign woman with a Chinese man”, adding that “honesty, knowing the limits of society, and female liberation” would always be relevant to contemporary life (Quoted from Wang Ling 1998).

The performance is set in China in the 1930s. Nora, a beautiful young Norwegian woman who has married Helmer, a Chinese man who has studied in the West, is now settling down in China and struggling hard to adapt to a new culture. As well as adapting to Chinese customs, she learns the language, Chinese cooking, Chinese embroidery and even Peking opera dance (Fig. 2). Four years have passed, and Nora is still very much in love with her Chinese husband. A crisis suddenly arises in Nora's life when Krogstad appears and blackmails her. When it is revealed that she has secretly borrowed money from Krogstad, Helmer refuses to forgive Nora and accuses her of “acting recklessly” on her own, contrary to Chinese customs. Throughout the performance, there are references to Nora's attempts in adapting herself to Chinese culture, which give a strong sense about the Chinese efforts in adapting Ibsen's values for Chinese society.

It was director Wu Xiaojiang's idea to present a brand new version of *A Doll's House* to both Chinese and Western audiences at a time when China was playing an active role in international cultural exchange. A band of musicians performed traditional Chinese music and Peking Opera tunes during the performance so as to accentuate the Chinese social setting and cultural background. The performance took place in a stage designed as a traditional Chinese “courtyard house” (Fig. 3), which was meant to emphasize the Chinese setting.

Agnete Haaland spoke her dialogue in English. The Chinese cast, including Li Jianyi as Helmer, performed in Chinese, occasionally directing English phrases to

¹ Chengzhou He considers the adaptation of *A Doll's House* as an example of interculturalism in the theatre; see his article in He (2009, pp. 118–135). While this is true, it is also meaningful to read the performance in the cultural context of China's rise and its regained self-respect in recent international affairs. This reading is also supported by the textual evidence found in the dialogue quoted above.

Fig. 2 Nora and Helmer and Mrs Linde, *A Doll's House*, 1998–2006. Nora learning Chinese embroidery. Source: <http://x.youku.com/tag/lists?t=695127>

Fig. 3 Stage design of *A Doll's House*, Beijing, 1998–2006. Represented here is a traditional Chinese house. Source: <http://x.youku.com/tag/lists?t=695127>

Nora. The conflict between Nora and Helmer over Nora's forging of her father's signature to borrow money was reconfigured as a social and cultural conflict between the Norwegian wife and her Chinese husband. On the superficial level, performance is about conflict between two persons, between Westerner wife and a Chinese husband. However, at a metaphorical level, it is about the clash between Chinese and Western cultures. In the final scene when there is a confrontation between Nora and Helmer, the clash is vividly shown. Nora finally comes to an understanding that she is forever a foreigner in China, meaning that Western culture is forever Western culture and can never be integrated into Chinese culture.

The import of this bilingual and bicultural adaptation is revealed in the final confrontation between Norwegian Nora and Chinese Helmer:

Helmer (in Chinese): In China no man will sacrifice his honour for a woman.

Nora (in English): Millions of women have.

Helmer (in Chinese): This is a woman's view. If you continue to be like that, you can never understand China.

Nora (in English): The Chinese way of thinking I can hardly be with. This is not my China anymore.

Helmer (in Chinese): This is your imagined China. In actual fact, we have lived in this place for thousands of years, and for generations we have lived according to our tradition. Our ancestors told us how to continue our family line. We feel peaceful and happy. Nora, let me tell you. Even for a small family, we need to follow the tradition. Our morals are in our bones.²

When the above dialogue is compared with that in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, it can be seen that the dialogue follows the same line of argument that women have been sacrificing themselves for the protection of their husbands. However, the context is changed to that of difference between Chinese and Western cultures so as to highlight the clash in adapting Ibsen's values for practice in Chinese society. At the metaphoric level, the performance presents Nora's feminist views and Helmer's masculine dominance as a conflict between contemporary Norwegian values and Chinese tradition. The need to respect and observe China's tradition informs their final confrontation. The production presents China as a nation with pride. It promotes Helmer's view that Chinese culture needs to be respected when Western cultural values are practised in Chinese society. At the same time, the bilingual and bicultural approach to this version of Ibsen's play shows the Chinese director's ambition to promote the production for international consumption, as well as to present a new image of China to the world (Tam 1999). Indeed, the play was performed in Norway with the same cast in 2001.

The Nora presented in this play is not the Nora of Ibsen's original; nor is she like any of the Noras familiar to Chinese audiences since the 1920s. In Wu's adaptation, in which Peking opera replaces the tarantella, Nora is presented in the image of the ancient Chinese Hegemonic King's concubine, foreshadowing a marriage ending in inevitable separation (Fig. 4). The Hegemonic King, in contrast to his concubine, is a powerful image of masculinity in Peking opera as well as in Chinese history. Hence, in Wu's adaptation, gender conflicts are presented as matters of ideological difference and as products of racial and cultural tension. The dance scene in the adaptation foreshadows an inevitable ending in which a powerful masculine King is forced to bid farewell to his gentle and feminine concubine. As a result of this change, the emphasis on Nora being caught in her inner conflicts during the tarantella dance was removed from the performance.

At one level, this Nora can be interpreted as at fault when she imports her feminist concepts to China and borrows money contrary to Chinese custom. However, at a deeper level Wu's adaptation allegorizes China's sense that it has been ideologically threatened by Western values as it has opened up to the West since the 1980s (Tam 1995). The image of a white woman on the Chinese stage

² Transcription and translation mine, based on the version presented in 2006.

Fig. 4 Agnete Haaland playing Nora. The scene of Hegemonic King and his concubine is evoked in this Peking opera dance. *A Doll's House*, 1998–2006. Source: <http://x.youku.com/tag/lists?t=695127>

Fig. 5 Nora confronting Helmer, *A Doll's House*, 1998–2006. Source: <http://x.youku.com/tag/lists?t=695127>

asserting her Western values in a Chinese family, but finally kneeling down, visually reinforces racial and cultural differences and conflicts (Fig. 5). The Chinese Helmer is presented positively as a figure that takes a stand in defence of Chinese traditions and values. Nora's leaving and Helmer's near collapse in the final scene denote a deadlock situation in which neither, representing Western/feminine values and Chinese/masculine traditions, respectively, succeeds in winning the sympathy of the audiences. Both Nora and Helmer are not presented as individuals, but

stereotypes signifying generalized abstract sociocultural values. Hidden in the adaptation is a fear that Chinese masculinity is being threatened by Western feminist values. The political (un/)conscious behind this domestication of *A Doll's House* may be Wu Xiaojiang's desire to construct a non-feminist discourse of gender for the Chinese stage, when the general atmosphere in the 1990s felt feminism as a threat to the Chinese values.

6 Gender and Nation

As Rudyard Kipling says in his poem "Ballad of East and West", "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet". For thousands of years, the Chinese tradition has been in existence and development distinctly separate from the West, though remote contacts continue. It is since the middle of the nineteenth century when China was forced by the Western powers to open its doors to trade and to Western values and later for occupation of its territories and invasion by Japan that the Chinese began to question the effectiveness of China's sociopolitical system in advancing the country in terms of economy, technology and education. The importation of Western ideas and ideologies since the mid-nineteenth century was a means for China to find its way forward in the face of challenges and threats from the West and Japan.

The downfall of the Qing dynasty and the founding of the republic in 1911 led to a pressing problem of how the Chinese should define their self after the collapse of Confucianism. The identity devoid of the Confucian framework of social and ethical relations, as depicted in Lu Xun's "The True Story of Ah Q" (A Q zheng zhuan 阿Q正傳) resulted in moral confusion and hypocrisy in a people who used to rely on rigid frameworks in moral decisions. Ibsenism was introduced to China in this moral void. Dr. Stockmann's integrity in upholding truth despite attacks and isolation was praised by Lu Xun as a guiding light in Chinese people's search for a new moral identity. Nora's courage in leaving home in search for an individual selfhood, despite the coldness in a Norwegian winter night and the uncertainty in life, was admired by Hu Shi and his Peking University students. Lu Xun and Hu Shi, Dr. Stockmann and Nora, together they created a new wave of moral reconstruction for the Chinese people. The iconoclasm in Ibsen was admired by Lu Xun and Hu Shi as an antidote to the moral calamity caused by the failure of Confucianism (Tam 2001).

A Doll's House demonstrates the moral inadequacy and gender bias in Western law and in Christian faith. When it is transposed to a Chinese cultural context, the play brings up serious questions about the selfhood of a person and the rights of a woman to have an autonomous self. Leaving home, in the Chinese context in the 1910s and 1920s, is leaving behind one's family duties and departing from a moral framework of defining one's selfhood according to ethical relations. While the "small self" (the individual) was still considered subordinate to the "big self" (the collective), the new individual and autonomous selfhood advocated by Nora created a storm in China. For most young people, the "small self" had to break away from the "big self" so as to find its place in life. An excess of Ibsenism was found in

China in the 1920s and 1930s when too many women left home under the inspiration of Ibsen. Thus, Lu Xun raised the question in 1923 “what would happen to Nora after leaving home”. To join the collective after leaving home, such as workers’ union or political party, was a solution offered by many left-wing writers including Mao Dun. In 1934, there was a performance called “Nora After Leaving Home” (Chuzou hou de Nuola 出走後的娜拉) in Nanjing, in which it was advocated that women should join the workers’ union and find a job after leaving home. This performance was directed by four noted dramatists, including Hong Shen 洪深 who received education in the USA in the 1920s (Tam 1987).

Other than serving as an antidote to the sickening Confucian moral order in traditional China, the Ibsenian concept of selfhood has played a very important role in modern China to provide new guiding principles in a person’s moral and political choices. In other words, it serves the role as performative acts for a new citizenry based on individualism and agency of the self. It is therefore subversive and constructive at the same time. People’s behavior, their social and political orientation, and their judgement of other people are all expected to be regulated by this new conception of selfhood. A modern Chinese nation is possible because the party-state has succeeded in replacing the family-state. The traditional Confucian selfhood has been disrupted, morally and legally, and replaced by the new selfhood which is individualistic in its relation to the self-party-state trichotomy.

From the 1930s to 1970s, there appeared a theoretical postulation that joining the revolutionary collective was the only way to preserve oneself after leaving home. This was actually a call that originated from the concept of the party-state. Even for the 1956 performance of *A Doll’s House* in Beijing, there was the strong message that gender equality had been achieved in China because it was practiced in socialism. However, in the 1990s when China began to be opened up to the West, new interpretations of Ibsen, particularly in feminist terms, began to challenge the traditional gender concepts in China. The 1998 adaptation of *A Doll’s House* by Wu Xiaojiang can be viewed as a counter discourse to an again excessive Ibsenism. Though set in the 1930s, the performance has relevance to China in the 1990s.

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