

A Study of the Influence of a Doll's House on Chinese “Women walk out” Literature

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ABSTRACT

After Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* came to China, the story of “Nora walks out” had led Chinese writers to focus on the issue of female liberation. As a result, it promoted the emergence of “women walk out” literature in China. As Chinese “women walk out” literature is similar to it in character, plot and theme, it can be considered enlightened and influenced by *A Doll's House*. At the same time, Chinese “women walk out” literature also has unique codes since it was impacted by the traditional culture and social conditions of China which are different from those of the West.

Keywords: *A Doll's House, Ibsen, feminist literature, female liberation, left-wing literature*

1. INTRODUCTION

Originating in the 18th century, feminism had greatly developed in the 20th century, with feminist activities flourishing around the world, including in China, where feudalism has deeply rooted and women have been confined to the home as the appendages of men. In the gradual acceptance of feminism in China, Ibsen, who is an eminent playwright of Norway acts as the vital factor with his work *A Doll's House*. In 1907, Lu Xun commented on Ibsen in his two articles named on the power of Satanical school of poetry and Cultural Deflection and it was the first time that Ibsen was accepted in China [1]. Then, Spring Willow Society, a famous theater society performed *A Doll's House* in 1914. After the May Fourth Movement, *New Youth*, a magazine well-known in the New Culture Movement launched a column entitled “Ibsen”, in which many articles about Ibsen and *A Doll's House* were published. In short, Ibsen and Nora, the female character in *A Doll's House* were widely popular in the society at that time.

The reason why Ibsen was prevalent was explained by Hu Shi, who is one of the first translators of *A Doll's House*, he maintained that “creating new literature for our country needs to start from learning from Western Masterpieces”. In *A Doll's House*, Nora was originally a traditional housewife, being obedience to her husband. Whereas, after a series of events, she saw clearly the hypocrisy of her husband and the unequal marital relationship, so she finally slammed the door and

walked out. The action of walking out not only frees Nora from the her husband’s control, but also represents the consciousness of women to get rid of male bondage, so that it was considered as the the symbol of female liberation and then accepted and learned by Chinese writers, resulting in the emergence of Chinese “women walk out” literature.

The essay is going to explore the influence of *A Doll's House* on Chinese “women walk out” literature and the originality of the latter through the lens of “Influence Research” and with the method called “Comparative Creation”

2. CHINESE “WOMEN WALK OUT” LITERATURE

This chapter will define Chinese “women walk out” literature and briefly introduce why *A Doll's House* was prevailing in China at that time.

2.1 THE DEFINITION OF CHINESE “WOMEN WALK OUT” LITERATURE

The concept of “women walk out” was originated from *A Doll's House* written by Henrik Ibsen. From the May Fourth Movement, “women walk out” had become a major theme of Chinese literature. It refers to the emancipation of women from illiberal, deceitful and oppressive fathers’ or husbands’ home when women realize that female is not an appendage of male as well as has right to choose their own life. Acting as the result

of the development of feminism, this theme represents the awakening of feminine consciousness as well as precursor of women’s fight for gender equality.

2.2 A DOLL’S HOUSE AND CHINESE “WOMEN WALK OUT” LITERATURE

Before the May Fourth Movement, few literary works had mentioned “women walk out”. This is because since the Neolithic period, men have replaced women as leaders due to their superiority in working and women gradually became the men’s appendages, “walking out” was not allowed in the patriarchal society. After the May Fourth Movement, with the strong demand for reform from advocates of new literature, a wave of translation of foreign literary works had been set off in China. In 1918, the first Chinese version of A Doll’s House translated by Hu Shi and Luo Jialun was published in New Youth, bringing female liberation becoming a hot topic in the society. By conducting the keyword “Nora” from Republican Literature Database, the general acceptance of Nora at that time can be known.

Table 1 The acceptance of Nora from 1911 to 1949

Nora	books	magazines	newspapers
1911-1920	0	1326	0
1921-1930	3	7	20
1931-1940	58	47	474
1941-1949	22	9	7
1911-1949	83	1389	501

As Nora’s leave symbolize the female emancipation, it had attracted widespread attention and discussion, thus a considerable number of literature works appeared. For instance, “Shang Shi” by Lu Xun, the Sunrise by Cao Yu, “Meng Ke” by Ding Ling and New Woman by Cai Chusheng. In a word, A Doll’s House has contributed to the emergence and development of Chinese “women walk out” literature.

3. SIMILARITIES BETWEEN A DOLL’S HOUSE AND CHINESE “WOMEN WALK OUT” LITERATURE

Similarity analysis is an important step in the “Influence Research” method. In this chapter, the approach called “Comparative Creation” will be used to analyze A Doll’s House and Chinese “women walk out” literature from three aspects: character, plot and theme.

3.1 CHARACTERS: INFLUENCED BY ENLIGHTENMENT THOUGHT

The idea that women are subordinate to the family has been deeply rooted in ancient world, and walking out is clearly opposite to this traditional value, which means if women choose to break tradition, they may be influenced by anti-traditional ideas. When Ibsen wrote A Doll’s House, Norway was already under the impact of capitalism, so it is likely that Nora, who came from a middle-class family, was exposed to bourgeois ideas. Female images created by Chinese writers were also educated with Enlightenment education: Wei Ming and Chen Bailu were college students, Bi Wei, whose grandmother and father had participated in progressive activities so their spirit of resistance had impacted her. Therefore, these women were rebellious to the old feudal ethics while supporting new social thoughts, which had become an ideological root of their decision of “walking out”.

3.2 PLOT: THE DEMISE OF LOVE AND MARRIAGE

In both A Doll’s House and Chinese “women walk out” literature, there are episodes that women pursued romantic love but actually frustrated. Nora’s obedience on her husband is the proof that she was lost in love. However, in this seemingly happy marriage, Nora’s husband, Helmer, regarded her as a doll-like appendage. The same is true for Chinese female images such as Zi Jun, Wei Ming and Chen Bailu. They overrode family’s objection to lives with their lovers, while were frustrated very soon. Ibsen and Chinese writers exposed the hypocrisy of traditional marriage with episodes of love or marriages breaking up and dying, thus pointed out the fact that women were inferior to men in unequal marriage, so as to lead readers to think about love, marriage and family.

4. THEME: FEMALE LIBERATION

Female liberation acts as the main theme of both A Doll’s House and Chinese “women walk out” literature. Nora’s leave marked her breakthrough from the bondage of masculism, which is a spontaneous liberation of women. Mengke, who was a female character created by Ding Ling, disgusted at her teachers’ insulting behaviour toward a model, resisted her father’s order to be a traditional daughter-in-law, and also made money herself. The aforementioned acts are all the embodiment of female liberation as they represent women no longer being subservient to the male authority. What is more, not only did Ding Ling show this theme, but also deepened it with the tragedy of Mengke being cheated by her cousin and eventually degenerating for life. These sufferings lead readers to think why walking out cannot make female escape from

tragic fate and what should they do to acquire the real liberation.

5. THE ORIGINALITY OF CHINESE “WOMEN WALK OUT” LITERATURE

Although A Doll's House gave inspiration to Chinese writers, as there is heterogeneity between Chinese and Western culture, originality and innovations still exist in Chinese “women walk out” literature.

5.1 PATRIARCHY CLAN SYSTEM: WALKING OUT FROM FATHER'S HOUSE

When talking about “women walk out”, it is necessary to focus on where they walk out from? In A Doll's House, Nora walked out from her husband's house, while many Chinese writers had added the plot of women walking out from their fathers' houses. This addition suggests that it not only was authority of husband that prevented Chinese women from gaining freedom, but also that of father, which could be traced back to the patriarchal system in Chinese history.

Humankind had all experienced the primitive social clan tribes linked by blood relations, but for the West, marine made citizens engaged in maritime trade activities, leading to this mobile lifestyle broke through the blood clan relationship. But for China, with its continental natural environment, the small-scale peasant economy with the family as the unit, gave a reason for the existence of the blood family, and thus the patriarchal system emerged, which is deeply rooted in Chinese culture. As this system is based on blood relations and conducive to strengthening family consciousness and maintaining family unity, it brings strong sense of family to Chinese people[2]. However, because the sense of family excessively emphasizes the individual's obligation and responsibility but ignores one's right, it is regarded as a hinder of gaining liberation. That is the reason why Chinese authors believed that women needed to walk out from their fathers' homes firstly if they wanted to get freedom.

5.2 DEPENDENCE

Both Nora and Chinese women who walk out still retained dependence to a considerable degree. For Nora, asking her husband for money means she could not earn herself, that was the dependence on economy. Moreover, accepting the name like “little bird” from her husband represent she did not treat herself as a human who had the equal right like man, further proving Nora's dependence on spirit. Likewise, this dependence also happened on Chinese women. After being abandoned, Zijun agreed to return to her father's house rather than keeping fighting for freedom, More than that, Meng Ke,

Wei Ming and Chen Bailu who even sold their body for money not only were dependent on male, but also lost the most basic dignity of being a human. In that case, the phenomenon of degradation implies that Chinese women were more dependent than Western women

To explore the discrepancy of aforementioned dependency between Chinese and Western women, traditional cultural and social situation need to be taken into consideration. Western religions believe that the human spirit can exist without physical body, so they takes individual orientation. As regard to China, as influenced by patriarchal clan system and the ethical order prescribed by Confucianism, Chinese culture takes group orientation. Besides, China had experienced a longer feudal era than Western countries, thus feudal ideas have been deeply rooted and difficult to change. In addition, Ming and Qing dynasties were closed for many years, resulting in China's failure to catch up with the development of capitalism in time, coupled with the fact that the colonial aggression that China had suffered led to the slow development of capitalism. In a word, as the enlightenment ideas have not yet replaced Chinese traditional culture, female characters created by Chinese authors are more dependent than Nora.

5.3 AFTER WALKING OUT

A Doll's House ends with Nora slamming the door and walking out, which means Ibsen did not specifically tell what happened after Nora's departure. Nora's walking out may be considered as a success and comedy because she broke her husband's power and became aware of her own existence. However, with the plots happened after walking out, the fate of Chinese female images were predicted by Lu Xun in his speech: degenerated or returned or died[3]. For instance, Zi Jun who followed her father home, Chen Bailu, Meng Ke, and Wei Ming degenerated, and more importantly, all of them were dead in the end. For this reason, Chinese “women walk out” literature is prone to be a tragedy - as Lu Xun said, “tragedy is the destruction of what is valuable in life”(Lu,X.). Those women escape from home with hope and belief, while they find that these hope can not be realized in the society where feudalism still exists but capitalism is not fully developed.

Writing the story of after women's walking out and changing comedy into tragedy benefits a lot. Firstly, it makes the characters more abundant, the plots more turning and the theme deeper. Thus, the readability and literariness of the article have been improved. Secondly, tragedy makes the article more aesthetic as it describes the struggle between women and environment and fate. For instance, when Wei Ming was dying, she was still shouting that “I want to live” over and over again. Thirdly, the social significance of the article has been greatly lifted. As Aristotle said, “tragedy is used to

cultivate the emotion by arousing audiences' pity and fear"[4]. Tragedy makes

people realize that female liberation still has many obstacles as well as brings them power to overcome these problems.

5.4 THE PERSPECTIVE OF LEFT-WING

From 1840 to 1949, China had experienced land expropriation, resource plunder and even wars of aggression, so reform had become the most important duty at that time. Therefore, compared with *A Doll's House*, Chinese "women's walk out" literature was born in a more complex environment, and that is the reason why Chinese authors put forward new thinking on female liberation.

As mentioned in the previous section, *A Doll's House* turned from a comedy to a tragedy after arriving in China. One reason for this change may be that the Chinese writers were influenced by the revolutionary situation - although the Xinhai Revolution overthrew the Qing Dynasty, it had failed to save China fundamentally, as it had created a situation of warlordism and chaos. Whereas, after the May Fourth Movement, Marxism began to spread in China, the Chinese Communist Party was founded, and the Chinese Left Wing Writers' Union was established.

The Marxist view of women differs from the emancipation of individuality advocated in capitalist thought, which considers participation in working as an important prerequisite for female liberation. According to this definition, some writers, especially left-wing writers argue that woman images like Chen Bailu, Wei Ming and Meng Ke belongs to capitalism, and they have the inherent vulnerability of bourgeoisie, which is not enough to lead women to obtain real liberation. As a result, writers set tragic ending to express the viewpoint of left-wing literature: it is far less to aim at personal freedom if a woman wants to get liberation, but contributing herself to social emancipation can she acquire personal value and liberation[5]. In the left-wing film called *New Women*, there is a proletarian female image named A Ying, who has short hair and is dressed in plain clothes. There is a montage of back-and-forth shots, while Wei Ming was dancing in a fancy club, A Ying was leading female workers to sing songs of female liberation, workers were struggling to pull the boat. In addition, Wei Ming has a toy, which is depicted by herself as the "person who never falls". This human-like toy looks like A Ying, and it even holds a shovel which is the symbol of proletariat. In this sense, left-wing literature joins the pursuit of China's modernization path in the form of gender writing, not only providing a new method for female liberation, but also points out the direction for China's modernization.

6. CONCLUSION

In the society dominated by male, both Chinese and Western female have been tied to their father's or husband's family for a long time, so "walking out" means pursuing liberation and freedom. "*A Doll's House*", which is an excellent western literature had led widespread influence in China, bringing the topic of "women walk out" becoming a new literature theme. In general, these literary works are inspired and influenced by "*A Doll's House*", so they have similarities to it in characters, plots and theme. At the same time, Chinese writers also make originality based on traditional culture and social conditions, giving their works unique Chinese codes.

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