



# How Liberal Feminism in A Doll's House Positively Influenced the Emancipation of Women's Thought in China After the May Fourth Movement, 1919–1949

Su Chen<sup>(✉)</sup>

China University of Geosciences, Beijing, China  
1011181111@cugb.edu.cn

**Abstract.** In Ibsen's A Doll's House the transformation and growth of the female protagonist Nara in the play reflect the idea of liberal feminism, showing women trying to break out of their dependence on men and seeking independent personhood and economic freedom. This work was introduced to China after the May Fourth Movement in 1919, and along with the new cultural movement, the liberal feminism in the work contributed to the emergence of indigenous Chinese feminist literature, and literature and the media to some extent proliferated this idea, as women in the Republican era began to leave their families and marriages in search of economic independence and freedom of love. Society, in general, came to accept that women could have their freedom, and they were able to pursue higher education and achieve recognized independent outcomes. However, the influence was still social-class limited. Women who awakened to their sense of self were still largely confined to the framework of a patriarchal society that is invaded by capital.

**Keywords:** A Doll's House · Liberal Feminism · Chinese Feminist Literature · Patriarchal Society

## 1 Introduction

A Doll's House, as a set of critical plays, represents in part a precursor to women's emancipation within the traditional family structure. The publication of A Doll's House created an uproar and a firestorm of criticism. The subject of the play, the awakening of a woman who used to be regarded as a pet, is itself a highly controversial topic. Indeed, its changing role reflects the claims of liberal feminism. Liberal feminists believe that the subordination of women and the psychological implication of the self are restrictions on the feminine being in every way [1]. To achieve equality and freedom, this layer of shackles must first be broken. The feminism contained in A Doll's House, which was introduced to China after the May Fourth Movement, encouraged a large number of local writers to think about women's rights, and a large number of female writers produced works promoting feminism under the influence of this idea [2]. During this

period Ding Ling completed the transformation from petty-bourgeois-democratic literature to proletarian-revolutionary literature, expressing the passionate individuality of women, the spirit of liberation, and the hazy and fervent vision of the future. In contrast, Xiao Hong's extremely realistic approach to the survival of poor contemporary women inspires reflection on feminism through marginalized portrayals [3].

In the context of China at the time, the introduction of *A Doll's House* contributed in various ways to the awakening of female self-awareness. With the outbreak of the May Fourth Movement and the birth of the New Culture Movement, the ideas of freedom and democracy began to spread through society, and literature that embodied women's liberation became a direct cause of this. The general mind-set of society was also freed from the original feudal society and began to focus on the equality of people. Some women were allowed to educate themselves on this wave, and they began to seek independence like Nara, freeing themselves from their subordinate position to men. However, this push was still class-limited due to the oppression of patriarchal society and capital.

## 2 Literature Review of Liberal Feminism in the New Culture Movement

### 2.1 Liberal Feminism in *A Doll's House*

Since the European Enlightenment, when religious privilege and monarchy were greatly impacted and dismantled, the spread of liberal political organizations laid the foundation for the emergence of liberal feminism. The ideas and views of the French Enlightenment thinkers on freedom, equality, human rights, women's political rights, and the right to education prepared the ground for the emergence of liberal feminism in terms of ideas and public opinion [4]. In the 18th century, the French Revolution also gave rise to a feminist revolution in Europe, and liberal feminism was formed at this time.

The original reason for the emergence of feminism was the pursuit of equality, and liberal feminism is an individualistic form of feminist theory that focuses on women's equality through their actions and choices, emphasizing the promotion of women's right to enjoy the same legal and political power as men. Liberal feminists argue that society's belief that women are inherently inferior to men in terms of physical and intellectual ability has led to discrimination against women in academia, public discourse, and the marketplace. This is reflected in *A Doll's House*. The play was written by Henry Ibsen in 1879 and first performed in England in 1893. As liberal feminists assert, "the subordination of women is rooted in the habitual and legal restrictions that prevent women from entering, or succeeding in the so-called 'public world'", and Ibsen's character Nara in *A Doll's House* is the quintessential subordination to patriarchy [5].

"What makes a woman a woman is not so much what she is born with as what she is formed. Simone de Beauvoir argues that in a hierarchical society controlled by men, women are in the position of the "other", existing as an object characterized and interpreted by men, never an autonomous subject, without the right to choose their place in society, but merely the "other" around men. Nara has little initiative in family life, except for the fact that the decision to borrow money for her husband's medical treatment is made by herself behind her husband's back. She seems to need her husband's permission to do everything else. "I'll never do anything you don't approve of", "Everything

you do is good”, and “You arrange everything”. All this makes Nara unaware that she will become a mere tool for her husband to use to achieve his will, which she takes for granted. When Helmer found out the truth, he scolded Nara “You have buried all my life’s happiness, and my future has been cut short by you.” When Nara said she would take full responsibility for committing suicide, he even said viciously, “What good will it do me if you die? Nothing at all.” Helmer even goes so far as to deprive Nara of her rights as a mother, “The children can no longer be in your hands. I dare not give them to you again.” When Nara realized that she was no more than a ‘clay doll’ at the mercy of men, she decided to take the plunge. a “clay doll” at the mercy of a man, she decides to leave her “doll” family.” The dialogues continue as: “You have always been so kind to me. But our home has been nothing but a playroom. I have been your doll wife, just as at home I was Papa’s doll child, here the children have been my dolls. I thought it great fun when you played with me, just as they thought it great fun when I played with them. That is what our marriage is.” At this time, the strong-willed Nara, aware of herself in the face of harsh reality and the importance of her personality and spiritual independence, becomes a new type of woman with a strong demand for individual liberation and a rebellious spirit. The dramatic ending of Nara’s eventual search for independent personhood echoes the ideas of liberal feminism, and the use of ideas such as freedom, equality, and natural human rights in women. It is stated that “women are also rational beings”.

## 2.2 Feminist Literature in China, 1919–1949

Feminist literary criticism is a school of criticism that emerged in the United States, Britain, and France in the 1970s and spread in China from the mid-1980s onwards [6]. As the real world of patriarchal repression and gender discrimination has left women suffering from the anxiety of the lack of self-awareness for so long, China saw the rise of a large number of female writers after the May Fourth period, such as Ding Ling, Xie Bingying and Xiao Hong. After the May Fourth period, a large number of female writers rose to prominence, attempting to use the function of literature and They attempted to deconstruct women’s deprivation and repression through the function of literature and the myth of fiction. At the time when the translation of *A Doll's House* was being introduced into Chinese literature, Chinese left-wing writers, led by Lu Xun, played a pioneering role in spreading the awakening of women’s self-awareness [7]. Women writers in particular, from a female perspective, stripped human consciousness from feudal society and spread ideas such as democracy and peace in literature.

Ding Ling was greatly influenced by related ideas after the wave of the May Fourth Movement. Influenced by Western culture and literature, she completed *The Diary of Madam Safi* in 1928, a series about modern women with a rebellious sense of youthfulness and a passion for life, which she portrays in her bold and talented writing [8]. She portrays Safi not as a generalist who plays with the opposite sex, as she is often accused of doing, but as a romantic idealist who dares to defy conventional notions of sexuality, who is sincere in her courtship but fearful, who fantasizes but is timid in her actions. It is the first time that female eroticism and sexuality, which are considered taboo by traditional culture, are presented in such a bold and straightforward manner, which is a direct challenge to the patriarchal society and the traditional concept of sexuality; it opens up

the first narrative of female desire and sexuality and promotes a major liberation of the female gender.

Xiao Hong, as a female writer of this period, wrote extensively about the female sense of self lack, anxiety, and marginalization as it was. The liberation of the human being under the new cultural trend of May Fourth not only provided men with the opportunity to express their feelings and analyze life in society but also put an end to the long-standing silence and mute silence of the female community. Xiao Hong wrote extensively about rural women struggling to survive under the oppression of feudal rituals and marital power, using a woman's vision of observation and experience. In 1935 Xiao Hong published *The Field of Living and Dying*, which extensively depicts female fertility, sex, and the decline of illness [9]. She was aware of the oppression of women and, through the dissemination of literature, enabled women from all walks of life to break free from this brutality. Xiao Hong's unique emotional experience predisposes her to reach out to the deep cultural level of family, order, and rituals as the object of ideology and the human values and ways of thinking embodied therein in her criticism.

The characterization and plot changes in *A Doll's House* as reflecting the emancipation of women and the awakening of self-awareness. The psychological changes before and after are shown through the characters' lines, allowing for clarity of thought. With the incorporation of a liberal feminist perspective, there is a deeper understanding of the text. The historical context of the Republican period in China, combines cultural and ideological, political factors. The combination of historical and literary sources provides a better understanding of the social changes of the time. The qualitative analysis of the various social factors leads to a summary of how women are affected by this ideology and the results that society presents in the end.

### 3 Evidence and Analysis

Ibsen's *A Doll's House* focuses on the traditional roles of men and women in the mid-nineteenth century. There goes the common rule saying that "a wife cannot borrow money without her husband's consent". In the very first act, Mrs. Linden described the subordinate as well as the passive contractual position of women in a society made by patriarchal contract and even in the smallest unit of society, the family, since ancient times. Ibsen's Nora is also, at first, the default 'good mother' and 'good wife' of society, the 'little squirrel' and 'little lark' to her husband. But when the 'miracle' she expected did not happen, she chose to see the truth behind what happened, realizing that she was just a 'clay doll' in her family and she chose to get out of the house. This is in line with the earliest wave of feminism, liberal feminism, which argued that women achieve equality through their actions and choices. Liberal feminists assert that society's belief that women are inherently inferior to men in terms of physical and intellectual ability has led to discrimination against women in academia, public discourse, and the marketplace. Liberal feminists believe that "women's subordinate status is rooted in customary and legal restrictions that prevent women from entering, or succeeding in the so-called 'public world'." Nora thus breaks with the symbol of the perfect woman who exists only in the family, puts the self at the forefront of her consciousness, contemplates the meaning of her existence and seeks the freedom denied to her by patriarchal stereotypes. In the same

vein, after the May Fourth Movement, the 'New Culture Movement' was accompanied by the emergence of 'New Drama'. As a result of the importation of Western literature such as *A Doll's House* and the spread of democratic and liberal ideas, local Chinese productions also began to seek the liberation of women [10]. Fan Yi created by Cao Yu in *Thunderstorm* is also the "runaway Nora". In the depressed and dark big family, she resisted the traditional ethics like a thunderstorm, pursuing self and love. But unlike Nora, Fan Yi was not a perfect woman in her social environment. She had been weak and gloomy since she appeared. And as the relationships between the characters in the extended family are revealed one by one, the behind-the-scenes oppression of the capitalists is brought to the forefront, with prosperity instead becoming the stone that breaks the stagnant water. The eighteen years of a gloomy marriage not only eroded all of Fan Yi's youth and her impulses and beautiful dreams, but the residence of Zhou was like a dark and cruel "well" that suppressed and wore down Fan Yi's former enthusiasm and vigour, but it did not completely break down the bastion of spiritual consciousness built up by the pursuit of personal independence and emancipation, the desire for freedom, equality, and fraternity, which became even more deeply rooted in Fan Yi's heart under the strong pressure of the real world. Fan Yi inherited Nora's reflections on the constraints of tradition and grows in character as events unfold, enabling her to act against male authority. But Fan Yi was an even more monstrous figure demanding the emancipation of her personality, intelligent and beautiful, seeking freedom while longing for it, but also capricious and lonely and suffering from mental anguish. This resonated more with the bound women of the Republic, and the connotations in the work were able to spread more widely in society. Under the influence of feminism, Cao Yu's female characters are much more than that. The women Cao Yu portrayed are not only distinct and independent but also complementary, providing readers with a hologram of the tragic fate of women in the 1930s, an almost complete world of women. In terms of social status, these characters cover almost all female roles from the upper class to the lower class. Fan Yi is a bourgeois woman who belongs to the upper class of a bourgeois family; Chen Bailu, once a naive and lively young lady from a scholarly family, eventually becomes a socialite of the upper class; Zeng Siyi is an ineffective housekeeper in a modern feudal family, a typical woman in a feudal family with a unique personality; Shu Fang is a young lady trapped in a feudal family; Shu Ping is a working woman who once worked as a maid and eventually went to work as a maid; Cui Xi and Xiao Si are prostitutes in a low-class brothel consumed by darkness. Although the characters belonged to all strata of society, they all shared the same characteristics due to liberal feminism. These women were beginning to awaken to a sense of individuality and femininity, and they all had a great deal of character and a desire to develop their individuality, unwilling to be repressed and bound by the still dominant feudal rituals of the time. Subconsciously, they long for unquenchable passion, for the unrestrained, primitive spirit, for freedom, equality, and love. They are all people who live in a cage and long to break out. Similar to Nora, the 'miracle' they longed for, the false hope they had placed in the patriarchy, failed to materialize and they set out on a quest for self. As Fan Yi tugged at Zhou Ping and Jinzi wanted to go to the place made of gold with Qiu Hu, they were all looking forward to breaking the shackles with their lovers and forming a happy family. Chen Bailu and Shufang both said "want to go home" and "where-is our home". These women

are looking forward to a home full of freedom and happiness. However, their ideas were all shattered and none of them were given such a home. They were either consumed by darkness and repression or left homeless and wandering the world. The tragedies in this work, therefore, inspire women to act for equality at a time of historical change.

These literary works were widely disseminated at the time and their ideas were understood and absorbed by the public, creating a positive influence on society. The most direct impact of literature was the emergence of women writers who were able to express their thoughts on freedom and equality from a female perspective in their works (e.g. Xiao Hong, Ding Ling), who preached emancipation, and defied tradition, promoted individuality in life and pursued personal independence. At a time when China's long democratic revolution had finally achieved the triumph of social emancipation fighting for women's economic rights, the old feudal system was overthrown, the Republic of China was established, the concept of a constitution was introduced and women were not only given what Lu Xun called the two basic economic rights but also gradually gained equal rights in politics, culture, and education from the top down. In a more liberal environment created by social conditions, the reading and promotion of numerous works, and the gradual spread of education, they were able to awaken themselves, fight for themselves, and to become independent. Like "Nora", they began to realize that to be able to lead a free life, they had to first awaken to the sense of self-first. They are brave enough to break away from the "the three obedience and four virtues" and "virtuous wife and mother" that have been taught to women in China and start working in various professions such as teachers, doctors, and lawyers. If self-awakening is the prelude to the journey of self-liberation, then self-resistance is the real driving force in this journey, and it is only with the impetus of self-resistance that self-liberation can succeed. Most notably, thanks to the works of Cao Yu and others, the courageous pursuit of love and ideals by the female characters was highly contagious, as women began to fight for their freedom to marry after the overthrow of feudal society. After seeing that her husband only cares for herself, Nora believes that he has "never really loved me, you only enjoy the feeling of loving me", and that marriage is nothing more than a playful game of "clay dolls", while in the repressed Zhou family, Fan Yi also becomes "a mother who is not like a mother and a mistress who is not like a mistress". As a direct result of these tragedies, women influenced by feminist ideas after the May Fourth Movement began to oppose the arranged marriages arranged for them by their parents, pursuing free love and satisfying their spiritual thirst for freedom. In November 1919, the suicide of Ms. Zhao Wuzhen in Changsha for rebelling against feudal arranged marriages was not only a sensation in Changsha but also had a nationwide impact. In addition, some news media also expressed their approval of the pursuit of marital autonomy. The *Women's Journal* states the relationship between the two genders. Both men and women are free to marry without parental permission once they reach the age of majority. Even if the parents consider it inappropriate, they can only refuse to divide the property, they have no right to destroy it. The advice of parents and relatives is only for information, but the final choice remains the freedom of the two persons, which cannot be infringed by anyone. At the same time, they break with the stereotypical values that divorce is a shame and that women are free to choose to divorce for a better life. The Civil Law Draft of the Republic of China stipulates that "a couple who wish to divorce may do so on their own". The

divorce shall be in writing and shall be signed by two or more witnesses by then. Around 1920, the first divorce boom occurred in urban China, and in some areas, women were even more likely to be the initiators of divorce. For example, in the cities of Guangzhou, Tianjin, Beijing, and Chengdu, Tianjin had the highest number of divorcees at 85.7%, followed by Chengdu at 82.9%, Guangzhou at 77.2%, and Beijing at 66.1%. This shows that women in the Republican period had a certain degree of initiative in divorce.

However, the impact of the work and the ideas it embodies remains limited, and the work is confined to the text and the ideas of the author's period, and *A Doll's House* itself has limitations in terms of characterization. Although Ibsen was keenly aware of the trend of women's growing consciousness, he was unable to break away from the ideology of patriarchal society. While exposing the problems of society, he attempts to portray a defiant woman, Nora. Nora's apparent defiance and eventual departure are not really due to her awakening, but rather her disillusionment with Helmer's failure to play the role assigned to him by a patriarchal society, which is indicative of Nora's inability to truly define herself outside of patriarchal society. Cao Yu's plays share the same characteristics. Although the women he portrays have a desire for freedom and can be used to break with feudalism and tradition, all of his characters are still unable to escape the domination of patriarchal society and the oppression of capital, and the ultimate destination for women is still love, family and stability. Although out of the traditional home their longing is just another cage of their choosing. In addition to this, the law was not perfect and the treatment of women was improved but legal rights were not fully guaranteed, for example, men were still able to have concubines leaving marriages in an awkward situation. The offense of bigamy "shall be constituted by the performance of an appropriate ceremony. If the certificate of marriage contains the words of the formal ceremony and the names of the witnesses, the celebrant, etc., it is clear that the marriage ceremony has taken place, and the above offense is established." Some of the women at the time wanted a divorce but it still didn't happen. Under the influence of such values, feminist innovation in the Republican period was not complete, and the influence of ideas was very social-class based, with more families with capital producing 'new independent women' and the lower classes still living in the heat. This is similar to the limitations of liberal feminism, as the earliest wave of feminist thought focused on white heterosexual women of the middle class and above when it was the whole group of women who needed to fight for equality. The positive impact of *A Doll's House* is therefore worth acknowledging, but the limitations that exist suggest that Chinese feminism is still far from being developed and that the fight for equality should be more diverse.

The socio-cultural education of women in slavery also leads to women's intellectual and economic dependence and subservience to men. In her defence of Feminism, Wollstonecraft hit the nail on the head when she said: "I have read all sorts of books on education, and have patiently observed the conduct of parents and the administration of schools, and what is the conclusion? I am convinced that the neglect of the education of my fellow creatures is the great cause of the unhappy state of affairs which I lament" [11].

## 4 Conclusion

This article analyses the feminism concept that was modified during 1919–1949 in China with the illumination and Enlightenment-like movement of the May fourth. In Ibsen's *A Doll's House* the transformation and Chinese opinion leaders' awareness of the female protagonist Nara in the play promoted the idea of liberal feminism both in the field of literature and the new society with a strong trend of public discourse. This trend, together with a corresponding literary creation for the new literature or vernacular literature, formed the tide of critical thinking on feminist topics such as family, capital control and marriage. Were it not for the difference that exists between 20th century China and Western Europe, the feminism formed during the May fourth movement could have been more realistic and modernized. It is suggested that the modern history of Chinese contemporary literature study should be paying more attention to the quasi-revolutionary concept introduced from European literature. To read liberal feminism and Ibsen in the contextual relationship with Chinese traditional ideas is a worthwhile challenge in the future.

## References

1. Y. Zhang, K. Rios, Understanding Perceptions of Radical and Liberal Feminists: The Nuanced Roles of Warmth and Competence, *Sex Roles* 86(3) (2022) 143–158.
2. Wang, R. Robin R, *Reconceiving Women's Equality in China: A Critical Examination of Models of Sex Equality*, Lexington Books, 2005.
3. W. Ye, Women in the Chinese Enlightenment: Oral and Textual Histories, 2001, pp. 262–264.
4. F. Duman, The roots of modern feminism: Mary Wollstonecraft and the French revolution, *International Journal of Humanities and social sciences* 2(9) (2012) 75–89.
5. U.R. Mili, Craving for Individual Female Identity: A Comparative Study on Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream*, *Journal of Society & Change*, vol. 14, 2020.
6. D. Min, Awakening again: Travelling feminism in China in the 1980s, *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 28, no. 4. Pergamon, 2005.
7. R. Thakur, Lu Xun's Foreign Inspirations, *China Report*, 18(2–3) (1982) 55–67.
8. J. Zhang, *Feminism and Revolution: The Work and Life of Ding Ling*. The Columbia Companion to Modern Chinese Literature. Columbia University Press, 2016, pp. 152–158
9. L. Chun, Whither feminism: a note on China, *Signs: journal of women in culture and society*, 26(4) (2001) 1281–1286.
10. Y. Cao, *Thunderstorm* (1934), *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Drama*, Columbia University Press, 2010, pp. 227–352
11. B. Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the feminist imagination*, vol. 56, Cambridge University Press, 2003.



**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

