

## THE ABSENCE OF GENDER IN MAY FOURTH<sup>1</sup> NARRATIVES OF WOMAN'S EMANCIPATION: A CASE STUDY ON HU SHI'S *THE GREATEST EVENT IN LIFE*

YANG LIANFEN  
*Beijing Normal University*

Hu Shi's play *The Greatest Event in Life* (*Zhongshen Dashi*) is neither a remarkable masterpiece of modern Chinese literature, nor considered to be a sophisticated work by the playwright himself (Hu 1998, 624).<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, being modelled upon Henrik Ibsen's famous spoken drama *A Doll's House*, *The Greatest Event in Life* manifested what Hu termed Ibsenism<sup>3</sup> (Hu 1918b), which he vigorously promoted and soon became a key theme of May Fourth literature. The play's female protagonist rebels against her parents and walks away from her family home in her pursuit of free marriage. Such a plot of 'walking away' also became a common theme in May Fourth literature. Being such a typical stage work of the May Fourth period, *The Greatest Event in Life* provides an illustrative case study for considering the narratives of woman's emancipation in May Fourth literature.

- 
- 1 The concept May Fourth (or May Fourth Movement) has two aspects. First, it refers to the May Fourth Incident which occurred in May 4<sup>th</sup> 1919 as a mass protest movement, first launched by college students in Beijing and then expanded to workers and businessmen demonstrating against imperialism throughout the whole of China. In 1917 China entered World War I on the side of Allied Triple Entente with the condition that all German spheres of influence, such as Shandong, would be return to China; but the Versailles Treaty signed at the Paris Peace Conference in April 1919 awarded Japan the former German leasehold in Shandong. The failure of diplomatic protest by the Chinese government led to the mass demonstrations in China. Second, May Fourth Movement refers to the intellectual enlightenment movement (1915-1921) which is also called the May Fourth New Cultural Movement, including the May Fourth Literary Revolution or New Literature promoted by Hu Shi, Chen Duxiu, Zhou Zuoren, etc. The New Cultural Movement promoted the idea of freedom, opposed traditional Chinese ethics, and advocated humanitarianism and individualism which was learnt from the West. In this paper the concept of May Fourth refers to the latter, the New Cultural Movement.
  - 2 In the preface of *The Greatest Event in Life*, Hu Shi states that he completed the play in a day. It was written in such haste because he was called on to present a one-act play for an American university student meeting. See *Hushi wenji* (*Collection of Hu Shi's work*) vol.2: 624. Beijing: Beijing Daxue Chubanshe.
  - 3 Ibsenism, *Yibusheng zhuyi*, addresses the social problems presented in Henrik Ibsen's dramas. According to Hu Shi, the essence of Ibsenism is: 1. Realist social and artistic values; 2. Confronting reality: Disclosing issues in the family, for instance, selfishness, dependence, hypocrisy, and cowardice; critiquing corrupted civil institutions including the law, religion, and morality; 3. Representing the sharp confrontation between individuals and society, and most importantly, promoting independence and individualism. See Hu Shi (1918) *Yibusheng zhuyi* (Ibsenism). In *Xin Qingnian* (*New Youth*) No. 6 vol. 4. June 1918.

On 15 June 1918, *New Youth*<sup>4</sup> magazine devoted an entire issue to translations of Henrik Ibsen's dramas. Many of the so-called social problem plays published in this issue went on to become influential in China including Hu Shi and Luo Jialun's translation of the three-act play *Nora*.<sup>5</sup> Hu Shi also introduced this special issue with a lengthy article entitled *Ibsenism* (*Yibusheng Zhuyi*). The article is considered to be the seminal theorisation of 'Ibsenism'. In Hu's definition, Ibsenism refers to a realist literary form that intends to present social problems and promote individualism. It became a powerful literary theme explored by later May Fourth literary works. Nora Helmer, the protagonist of *A Doll's House*, also became a role model for young followers of the New Cultural Movement of China because of her act of walking away from home. At the time, Nora was considered to be an iconic figure standing for the dual liberating forces of individualism and woman's emancipation.

In March 1919, the script of Hu Shi's one act play *The Greatest Event in Life* was published in *New Youth*, issue 3, volume 6. Soon after the May Fourth Incident (4<sup>th</sup> May 1919), the play was staged by student societies around China and became a hit<sup>6</sup> (Lu 1981, 359 and Li 1979, 664). In terms of plot, *The Greatest Event in Life* is virtually a simplified and localised Chinese simulation of *A Doll's House*. The female protagonist, Tian Yamei, is 23 years old. She meets Mr. Chen while studying overseas and falls in love with him. However, their relationship is firmly opposed by Tian's parents. Tian's mother disagrees with the relationship because a fortune-teller tells her that Tian and Chen's birthdays do not match. Their marriage is therefore considered to be inauspicious. Moreover, abiding by the rules of the Tian family's shrine of ancestry, Tian's father also believes that the surnames of Tian and Chen can not be united in marriage. Having failed in several attempts to persuade her parents, Miss Tian, with her boyfriend's encouragement decides to walk away from home. At the end of the play, she leaves a note to her parents and escapes with her boyfriend in his car.

In terms of artistic value, *The Greatest Event in Life* is not particularly inspired. However, through its emulation of the plot of *A Doll's House*, it vividly presents a

- 
- 4 The journal *New Youth* (新青年) was the first magazine of New Culture Movement, published in 1915, originally edited by Chen Duxiu and later (1917-1920) edited by Hu Shi, Qian Xuantong, Li Dazhao and Zhou Zuoren, who were professors of Peking University and writers of the new vernacular literature.
  - 5 This Chinese version of *A Doll's House* was titled *Nuola* 娜拉 (*Nora*). Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* (translated by Tao Lugong) and *Little Eyolf* (translated by Wu Ruonan) were also published in this issue.
  - 6 In Hu Shi's introduction to *The Greatest Event in Life* on its first publication in *New Youth* in 1919, he states that because the female protagonist walks away from home, no actress dared to take up the role at the time. However, judging from historical materials from the period, the play was staged all around the country after 4 May 1919. An entry in Lu Xun's diary dated 19<sup>th</sup> June 1919 also demonstrates this, in which he writes, "I went to see student acted dramas with my second brother at First Stage, including *The Greatest Event in Life* written by Hu Shi..." , see *Lu Xun quanji* vol. 14 (1981): 359. Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe. Reference to the staging of *The Greatest Event in Life* after the May Fourth incident in 1919 can also be found in Li Chengzhi (1979). 'Wusi Yundong zai Shandong' in *Wusi yundong huiyi lu* (II): 664. Beijing: Zhongguo Shehuikexue Chubanshe.

common mode of narration deployed in discussing woman's emancipation during the May Fourth era. It is remarkable that *A Doll's House* remained a standard part of the Chinese theatrical repertoire for more than ten years after the May Fourth movement. In that time, countless unmarried young women walked away from the security of their families for free marriage and raised considerable public concern. At the beginning of the 1920s, the public staging of *The Greatest Event in Life* and *A Doll's House* created an instant sensation among a great many young people who were searching for freedom. The imagery of the "walking away," in consequence, struck a chord with many young people. In May Fourth literary works, the most popular themes relating to love were the passion and confusion evoked by the experience of walking away. In retrospect, Nora's symbolic significance in that era exceeded the actual scope of woman's emancipation at the time. She was a role model beloved by both young women and men during the May Fourth era. Inspired by her, many young unmarried women ran away to pursue free love; while young men ran away from arranged marriages. Fighting against arranged marriage was commonly held to be a symbol of independence at that time.

In spite of the fact that both dramas are typical narratives of woman's emancipation in modern China, Hu Shi's *The Greatest Event in Life* and Ibsen's *A Doll's House* are different in several respects. While *A Doll's House* discloses woman's status as a puppet in the family through its narration of gender relations, the main conflict in *The Greatest Event in Life* is not gender relations but the conflicts between individual and family, and between young people and their parents. While Ibsen intends to show the unbalanced power relationship between men and women, Hu Shi wants to show the repression exercised upon individuality through traditional power institutions such as religion, law, and the family. Thus, its common ground with *A Doll's House* in respect of its concern with woman's subordinate status notwithstanding, the play's main concern with individuality and young people marks it as typically representative of the characteristics of May Fourth literature.

Throughout China's enlightenment history,<sup>7</sup> the May Fourth Era was the only phase when individualism was considered to be a fundamental philosophical value. The era is therefore known as 'the age of discovery of humanity' in China.<sup>8</sup> The promotion of individualism and humanism in this period led to an unprecedented development of the women's emancipation movement, which had emerged in embryonic form in China in

---

7 The history of enlightenment in China here refers to enlightenment movements since the late Qing including the Reform Movement led by Yan Fu, Kang Youwei, and Liang Qichao in the late Qing, the May Fourth New Cultural Movement between 1915 and the beginning of 1920, the New Enlightenment Movement around 1937, and the New Enlightenment Movement in the early 1980s. The New Enlightenment Movement in the 1980s again raised the question of individuality in a restrictive environment. Its advocates were soon politically condemned as "promoting bourgeois liberalisation".

8 This is a general evaluation of the May Fourth Movement as promoting a humanistic value system that can be found in the writing of writers of the time including Zhou Zuoren, Yu Dafu, Lu Xun and Hu Shi.

the late Qing period.<sup>9</sup> However, the project of woman's emancipation was more often than not unintentionally omitted in the course of the 'liberation of the human'. Woman's emancipation was subsumed into the New Cultural Movement's narrative of 'new versus old', 'individual versus family', and 'modern versus tradition'. Concern with power relationships in gender hierarchies was therefore undermined by the narratives concerning these binary relationships. Thus when the drama *A Doll's House* travelled to China, gender conflict, which is a very crucial part of its theme, was transformed into an individualist expression used on the occasion of young (wo)man rebelling against the family.<sup>10</sup>

Ibsen's Nora devotes her whole life to her marriage. However, after taking on the duty and responsibility of love and marriage, what she gets in return is her husband's rage and denouncement. Such experience makes her understand the hypocrisy and the absolute authority of patriarchy. She realises that no matter when, no matter if she is with her father or her husband, it is her gender as a woman that decides her unchanged status and destiny in the family: that she can only be the submissive little bird to men. She comes to realise that '...our house has been nothing but a playroom. Here I have been your doll-wife, just as at home I used to be papa's doll-child.'<sup>11 12</sup> To be fair, Nora's father and husband both love her deeply. But Nora sees that such love is the love for a pet. There is no equality or respect for her humanity shown in such love. When Nora is struck by her husband's cruelty and selfishness and she decides to give up her plan of taking her own life in order to protect his reputation, her self consciousness transforms from a deeply embedded love into an affirmation of the existence of her own ego. 'That problem is beyond me. There is another to be solved first – I must try to educate myself. You are not the man to help me in that. I must set about it alone. And that is why I am leaving you.' 'I can't be satisfied with what most people say, and what is in books. I must think things out for myself, and try to get clear about them.'<sup>13 14</sup> Inclining to individualism, such lines were the most beloved quotes of the May Fourth

9 Thoughts of woman's emancipation emerged in the late Qing around the period of the late Nineteenth Century to early Twentieth Century. They began with the slogans of 'abandon footbinding' and 'promote woman's education'. The main objective was to call for Chinese women to become 'mothers of citizens' and 'female citizens'. During the May Fourth Era, the traditional emphasis on concepts of female chastity was criticised. Moreover, woman's freedom in many aspects of social life such as equality in education, open socialisation between men and women, free love and marriage, free divorce and so on, were also greatly promoted during this era.

10 A great number of May Fourth literary and stage works would centre their main conflicts in the family around the two generations of youth and their parents rather than between husband and wife.

11 Hu Shi's translation of *A Doll's House*, Act III. In *Xin Qingnian (New Youth)* no. 6 vol 4. June 1918.

12 Translator's note: this quote is found in the British playwright William Archer's 1889 translation of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* Act III. Full text. See Henrik Ibsen (Translated by William Archer). 1889. *A Doll's House*. London: Fisher Unwin. See also <http://academics.triton.edu/uc/files/dollshse.html>.

13 Translator's note: *ibid*.

14 *Ibid*.

Era. However, we should note that Nora's individualist rebellion is a self-conscious act provoked by her gender position – a position which dictates that women take the submissive role and men exercise authoritative power upon women. Such a hegemonic power relation erases the illusion of love and sparks her fury towards hierarchical patriarchy. In consequence, it provokes Nora's rebellion. The awakening of Nora's consciousness of her gender position is therefore a process mutually inclusive of the awakening of her individuality. In response to her husband's claim that woman's holiest duty is her duty towards her husband and children, Nora contends that, the holiest duty is 'my duty towards myself', 'I believe that before all else I am a human being'.

It is in the appeal 'before all else I am a human being' that *A Doll's House* had the greatest influence on May Fourth literature. However, most May Fourth literary works neglect the fact that Nora's discovery of her humanity is realised through reflection on her gender position. She says to her husband Torvald Helmer:

I believe that before all else I am a human being, just as much as you are – or at least that I should try to become one. I know that most people agree with you, Torvald, and that they say so in books. But henceforth I can't be satisfied with what most people say, and what is in books. I must think things out for myself, and try to get clear about them.<sup>15</sup>

This paragraph is specifically highlighted in Hu Shi's translation of the play for *New Youth*. The first half of the paragraph is a feminist narrative presenting Nora's self consciousness in refusing to bend to patriarchy. It is in the second half of the paragraph that she challenges traditional concepts and social norms with individualist values. Nora's walking away from her family home is therefore a feminist statement lodged by Ibsen and Nora's polemic reflects the playwright's own criticism of the authority of man. Whether Nora could obtain the capital of independence, that is, to find a job for herself in such a patriarchal society was a question waiting to be answered. It is beyond and intentionally avoided by the poetics of an idealist like Ibsen<sup>16</sup> (Lu 1981: 159). Nevertheless, in Hu Shi's interpretation of *A Doll's House*, the most crucial messages are the individualist ones<sup>17</sup> such as 'the savage in the self' and 'to make the best out of oneself'<sup>18</sup> (Hu 1918a).

Unsurprisingly, *The Greatest Event in Life* overwrites the feminist standpoint lurking behind *A Doll's House*. The major conflict which occurs in *The Greatest Event in Life* is not gender but the generation gap between young people and their parents.

---

15 Translator's note: *ibid*.

16 See Lu Xun. 1981. Nuola zou hou zenyang (What happens after Nora walks out). In *Lu Xun Quanjí* (*The complete collection of Lu Xun*) vol.1: 159. Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe.

17 Woman's problems had generally not been discussed from the perspective of gender politics in Chinese enlightenment thought since late Qing. In enlightenment statements of the time, woman's problems are rooted in other social conflicts that encapsulate gender issues, such as freedom of the individual and economic freedom. Such understanding is characteristic of both Chinese feminism and its shadow zone.

18 Hu Shi. 1918. Yibusheng zhuyi (Ibsenism). In *Xin Qingnian* (*New Youth*) no 6 vol. 4. June 1918.

Miss Tian and her boyfriend represent modern youth and their appeals for freedom. They take the side of the 'new' and therefore the 'good'. In contrast, Tian's parents try all kinds of ways to prevent the marriage because their beliefs in fortune telling and ancestral laws convince them to do so. They therefore become the villains of the play, who represents the 'old' and 'ridiculous'. The plot of Miss Tian's walking away bears resemblance to the form of *A Doll's House*. However, due to its lack of gender analysis, *The Greatest Event in Life* fails to present the zeitgeist of *resistance* and *walking away* in depth. Mr. Chen, the boyfriend who never appears on stage, becomes the mentor of Miss Tian when she is at a loss under dual threats from her parents:

Miss Tian: (raises her head, spots Maid Li) Is Mr. Chen still waiting in the car?

Maid Li: Yes. This is his letter to you, written in pencil. (takes a sheet of paper out and gives it to Miss Tian)

Miss Tian: (reading the letter) 'This is a matter only concerning the two of us. It has nothing to do with anyone else. You should decide by yourself!' (repeats the final sentence) 'You should decide by yourself!' Yes, I should decide by myself!<sup>19</sup>

By reading the hidden message in this dialogue, we can see that the most crucial conflict with which individualism is confronted in *A Doll's House* -- gender conflict -- is replaced by generational conflict, as the latter better represents the binary opposition of traditional versus modern. In Hu Shi's subtext, the parents' home that the heroine walks away from and the fiancé's home that she walks into represent two distinct cultural modes and values. The former represents traditional civil institutions, authoritarianism, and superstition. The latter, in contrast, is unconditionally represented as the home of successful individualists after returning from their battle against authoritarianism. It is evident that *The Greatest Event in Life* does not analyse ancestral laws' association with patriarchy from the perspective of gender. It represents the common interpretation of individualism during the May Fourth period -- that is, it draws equivalence between individualism and resistance against arranged marriage. It makes a generalisation that individualism is the individual's refusal of family ethics and ancestral laws. The theme of individualism is therefore simply realised in the conflicts between youth and the elderly, and between the individual and (father) family. Thus the question of woman is replaced by individual freedom, while the problem of gender is overshadowed by the problem of culture. With a close reading, we can even contend that, rather than being overshadowed, gender is overlooked by individualist narratives in *The Greatest Event in Life*. Moreover, overlooking gender is also the common ground of individualist narratives in May Fourth literature. From this perspective, the gender narrative in Lu Xun's *Regret for the Past* (*Shangshi*) is extraordinarily profound. Like Tian Yamei in *The Greatest Event in Life*, Zijun, the heroine of *Regret for the Past*, also gains the courage

---

19 This line also occurred in Hu Shi's translation of *A Doll's House*, Act III.

to walk away from her boyfriend's encouragement. However, the story of *Regret for the Past* goes against the grain of optimistic May Fourth narrations. What awaits its heroine, after she has chosen to unconditionally trust and depend on her boyfriend, is yet another patriarchal family and therefore her tragic destiny of being abandoned. At the beginning of the story, Zijun's resolute departure from her family is almost identical with that of Miss Tian in *The Greatest Event in Life*. The difference between them is that Zijun's tragic ending is disclosed in *Regret for the Past*, while Hu Shi had not time to, or was not able to visualise Tian's ending after her 'walking away'.

In conclusion, the way Hu Shi presents the concept of 'liberation' is quite common in May Fourth enlightenment discourse. The emancipation of woman and liberation of the self are given the same import in the mission of overthrowing Chinese ancestral laws and traditional morality. Articles discussing woman's status, most of which were penned by male writers, were widely publicised in mainstream media at the time<sup>20</sup> (Mei 1927). The situation of men leading the discussion of women's status is like that of the late Qing period. What differentiates the two phases is that in place of the late Qing focus on nation-state and the people of the nation, the standpoint of May Fourth shifts to raising the status of the human/individual. Thus the focus of May Fourth feminism is to encourage woman to become human, that is to say, to encourage them to achieve the freedom of individuality. In this respect, woman is no different from man. However, it is precisely because of this focus on individuality that the discussion of woman often neglects the patriarchal ideologies embedded in the organisation of the gender hierarchy. Literary works like Zhou brothers' writings, which root their debates about woman in criticism of the patriarchal subjective embedded in Chinese culture and morality were rare during May Fourth Era. Sadly, after May Fourth, such exceptional discussions about gender became even fewer.<sup>21</sup>

---

20 These articles were collected in *Zhongguo Funü Wenti Taolunji* [an anthology of discussion on China's woman question]. Mei Sheng (ed). New Culture Press, 1923.

21 The Zhou brothers both produced penetrating arguments about these issues. For example, Lu Xun wrote that the essence of woman is mother and daughter. She only has to be a wife when man forces her. ("Eryi ji: Xiao Zagan" <And that's that: some thoughts>). Zhou Zuoren also attacked male privilege with the statement that "...they suppose that man's duty is to deceive women, while women's duty is to accept such deceit and take all the blame." ("Zailun Heimu" <Revisiting the conspiracies> in *New Youth* Issue 2, Vol. 6.); "If a man and a woman start a relationship, the woman must take all the responsibility because contemporary social norms allow a man to do so [i.e. to have sexual relationships outside marriage – ed.] – it is all natural for men! However, for a woman, she will have to bear the weight of the ancient saying that 'beauty destroys the prosperity of a city and even a country' which condemns her as a femme fatale. If the woman gets tired of him and wants to leave, he can force her back by threatening to publicise their secrets. Since according to traditional ethics the husband is the foundation of wife, she will lose her reputation once she gives away her virginity and chastity." ("Tanhuji Xiajuan: Daoxue Yishu de Liangpai") (Talking about Tigers II: two schools of Daoist artists); "For people in Shanghai, women are objects for entertainment. Woman's sexual organ is [believed to be] ugly and inauspicious. For men, sex is their right of enjoyment, while for women, sex is the gift of their own humiliation and insult that they are forced to give." ("Tanlong Ji: Shanghai Qi" <Talking about Dragon: the Chi of Shanghai>)

## Bibliography

- Hu Shi. 1918a. *Nuola* Act III. In *Xin Qingnian* no.6 vol. 4 June 1918.  
——1918b. Yibusheng zhuyi [Ibsenism]. *Xin Qingnian*, no. 6, vol. 4, June 1918.  
——1998. *Hu Shi wenji* [collected works of Hu Shi] vol.2: 624. Beijing: Beijing Daxue Chubanshe  
Li Chengzhi. 1979. Wusi Yundong zai Shandong [The May Fourth Movement in Shandong]. In *Wusi yundong huiyi lu* (II): 664. Beijing: Zhongguo Shehuikexue Chubanshe.  
Lu Xun. 1981. *Lu Xun Quanji* [complete works of Lu Xun] vol. 14:359. Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe.  
——1981. Nuola Zou Hou Zenyang [What happens after Nora leaves home?]. In *Lu Xun Quanji* vol.1: 159. Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe.  
Mei Sheng. 1923. *Zhongguo funü wenti taolunji* [an anthology of discussion on China's woman question]. Shanghai:Xin Wenhua Shushe.

## Biographical note

Yang Lianfen is a professor of modern Chinese literature at Beijing Normal University. She Obtained a Ph.D in 1994 and studied at the Harvard-Yenching Institute by invitation from 2005 to 2006. Her research focuses on modern Chinese literature including ideological and cultural trends from late Qing to the present. She is currently working on ideology and woman's emancipation in modern China. Her publications include: *Feminist Narrative and Nationalism in Late Qing China* (2007); *Women and Revolution in the Literature of the 1927 Nationalist Revolution* (2007); *The Conflict of Genders and the Tide of Free-love in the May Fourth Period* (2008).

Her books include: *The Lyrical Tendency in Modern Chinese Fiction* (1996); *From Late Qing to May Fourth: The Occurrence of Modernity of Chinese Literature* (2003); *Researching Chinese Fiction* (2004); *Sun Li: A Solitary Being in Modern Chinese Revolutionary Literature* (2004); *Literary Journals and Literary Trends in 20th Century China, 1897-1949* (2006).