

A Doll's House and the Dilemma of Chinese Female Intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s

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Keywords: A Doll's House, What Happens After Nora Leaves, Lu Yin, Ding Ling, Xiao Hong

Abstract: Ibsen's *A Doll's House* was introduced to China by Chunliu Society in the 1920s, sparking a wave of domestic women going out of their homes. Later, Mr. Lu Xun gave a speech entitled *What Happens After Nora Leaves* at the Literature and Art Conference of Beijing Women's Higher Normal school on December 26, 1923, discussing the exodus caused by the play and what the result was in China at that time. The speech was delivered about four years after the May Fourth Movement. This time period is the transition period when the female students who left the impression of "A Doll's House" became female graduates who faced problems with their way out. This article not only selects representative female writers from the 1920s and 1930s in China to explore the way out for female intellectuals from their biographies and works, but also analyzes the outcome of the choices made by female intellectuals in this era through the combination of works such as "The Doll's House" and "What Happens After Nora Runs Away". It further reveals that the difficulties faced by female intellectuals in China in the 1920s and 1930s are all due to the constraints of the times and destiny.

1. Introduction

In "the May 4th Movement", China nurtured a lot of women who were determined to continue their education, helping them transition from young girls or traditional housewives to female intellectuals. The dual themes of female awakening and the paths of female intellectuals became the central focus of attention and writing for female writers during this era. The exploration of this theme was first triggered by the introduction of the foreign social problem play *A Doll's House* and, several years later, was further initiated by a speech by Mr. Lu Xun, which opened the discussion on female exodus in Chinese literature of the 1920s and 1930s. This discussion revolved around the themes in literary works. It also became a part of the personal aspirations of female intellectuals at that time. It eventually led to a collective exodus of real-life female intellectuals and the fictional female intellectual characters in novels.

This paper selects representative female writers from the 1920s and 1930s in China to explore the paths and dilemmas of female intellectuals through their life experiences and works.

2. A Doll's House and What Happens after Nora Leaves

A Doll's House (formerly known as *Nora*) is a three-act play written by Henrik Ibsen, a famous Norwegian dramatist in the second half of the 19th century. The main theme of the play is that women are independent, get out of the family, and do not be the "doll" of the family and men. Nora is the name of the heroine in the play.

Before and after "the May 4th Movement", the Chunliushe introduced the play *A Doll's House* for domestic performances, bringing the themes of female awakening and women stepping out of the family into the vision of "democracy" and "science" during the May Fourth era. From the New Culture Movement in 1917, the Ibsen Special Issue in 1918, to "the May 4th Movement" in 1919, inspired by these movements, a generation of Chinese Noras for the first time in Chinese history shouted out the slogan of stepping out of the household, being independent and autonomous, and declaring, "I am my own person, and no one has the right to interfere with my rights." [1]

There was a certain degree of direct adoption of Western discourse in China. Upon hearing the Western promotion of women's liberation, free love, and spiritual independence, they followed suit and sparked a wave of youth following. Lu Xun directly confronts the issue of modern women's liberation constructed in Western discourse through "Sadness for the Past". The sentence "I am my own" loudly pronounced by Zijun in order to achieve free love is a direct reference to Ibsen's famous play *A Doll's House*. [2]

What Happens After Nora Leaves is a speech delivered by Mr. Lu Xun on December 26, 1923, at the Literary and Art Society of Beijing Women's Normal College. It was later included in his collection of essays titled *Grave*. At that time, it had been about five to six years since the rise of China's New Culture Movement and around four years since "the May 4th Movement". Enlightened and encouraged by the new ideas, the women of the era are experiencing the transition stage from female intellectuals to female graduates facing the problem of ways out.

Nonetheless, since the liberation of the individual is ahead of the liberation of the society, and the awakening of the individual is facing the sleep of the society, Mr. Lu Xun asserted in his speech: "However, once Nora has awakened, it is not easy for her to return to her dream, so she has to leave; but after leaving, sometimes she cannot avoid falling or coming back." Whether this is a prophecy or a warning, it is meaningless for the women of that era who were still in a state of fervent demand for personal liberation and had boundless fantasies about living freely and having free love. A speech cannot curb their enthusiasm, and the only way to validate the truth is through practice. [3]

3. A Doll's House and the Ways out of Female Intellectuals in the 1920s

The New Culture Movement of 1917, the publication of the full text of *Nora* in 1918 special issue of *New Youth for Ibsen*, and "the May 4th Movement" of 1919 can be seen as a trilogy that encouraged Chinese educated women to become independent in the early 20th century.

From 1917 to 1921, these few years marked the initial stage of self-awareness among Chinese women. Why do we say it is the initial stage? Because at this time, the awakening of Chinese women was only reflected in some basic rights demands, such as the right to education, the right to not be abused, the right to free love, and the right to marital autonomy. We can attribute this kind of awakening to "human awakening" rather than "women's awakening." The rights demanded by women are simply basic rights of "human beings" and do not reflect the female identity and demands in the awakening consciousness.

This rupture erupted in the early 1920s. In 1921, Lu Yin and Ding Ling joined the China Civilization Union. In 1923, despite the opposition of her family, Lu Yin married Guo Mengliang, Ding Ling went to Shanghai University and delivered "Ke Meng", Lu Xun gave a speech *What Happens After Nora Leaves*; In 1924, Ding Ling went to Beijing and met Hu Yepin; In 1925, Lu Xun

published *Grieve over the Deceased* [4] and Lu Yin published *Seaside Friends*[5].

From this stage we can read the era of women's self-awakening, self-redemption cry. Compared to the female character "Zijun" in Lu Xun's novels, the female characters "Mengke" in Ding Ling's novels and "Lusha" in Lu Yin's novels appear to be more exploratory. Lusha's pessimistic confusion stems from the premature deaths of her four girlfriends on the path of self-liberation, which leads Lusha to lose her way in the journey of female self-awareness and liberation. On the other hand, Mengke represents either a return or a descent into corruption.

During the ten years when Nora and others were striving for independence, Lu Yin married Guo Mengliang, a married man, without hesitation, while Ding Ling fell in love with Feng Xuefeng while cohabiting with Hu Yepin. In the ten years that Nora left home for independence, Guo Mengliang died of typhoid fever, leaving the dream of Lu Yin for two years; Feng Xuefeng left Hangzhou, leaving a story of that three persons above for the world to guide. During the ten years when Nora left, Su Xuelin secretly enrolled in the Sino-French Institute of Law and Political Science in France without her parents' knowledge. However, she dropped out and returned to China after four years. Unable to successfully resist her parents' wishes, she was forced to marry Zhang Baoling. The collective exodus of fictional characters and real-life writers in this novel, during the first decade of Chinese new literary history, appears to be a dazzling and overwhelming phenomenon, but it ultimately fades away like fireworks after their brilliant display. This collective departure, with *The Days of Mrs. Shafei*[6] as a pause, remains as an unresolved issue.

Suffering in the vortex of love and self-esteem, Shafei brings the perspective of awakening and liberation back to women. Shafei, from a female perspective, examines the relationships between men and women in free love, shattering the male writers' imaginary portrayal of women and boldly expressing female demands and desires. In addition, it also announced to the male world that what they need more was not "giving" but "knowing." This is crucial, as this declaration signifies that women have moved beyond the stage of being "enlightened," "redeemed," "civilized," or "awakened" by others, and have entered a phase of self-enlightenment, self-redemption, and self-awakening.

In the first decade after the departure of the Chinese Noras, earth-shaking changes are taking place on the ground of China. This change has encouraged and constrained the awakening of the Noras. The complexity of the era's themes, the intersection of Eastern and Western ideologies, and the clash of old and new cultures all demand that women like Nora awaken. However, at the same time, female awakening is obscured behind the theme of individual awakening. The era urgently needs the awakening of people, but the need for women's awakening is not so urgent. "However, once Nora has awakened, it is not easy for her to return to her dream, so she has to leave; but after leaving, sometimes she cannot avoid falling or coming back."

In this context, time does not do a moment to stay, a more magnificent era is coming.

4. A Doll's House and the Dilemma of Women Writers in the 1930s

A Doll's House is the catalyst for a female intellectual's departure from home. However, the 1930s in China was a tumultuous era, where the theme of individual liberation from the May Fourth Movement quickly evolved into the theme of societal liberation. Over the course of a decade, some intellectuals became warriors, some became redundant, some became lost and disillusioned. From the perspective of Western society, "Doll's House" takes into account that women's fate in a patriarchal society can only be a combination of family dolls, patriarchal dolls, love dolls, and capital dolls.[7]

The second decade of China's new literary journey began with the failure of the 1917 revolution. Starting a period with "failure" as its point of departure signifies that "reflection" or "confusion" became the initial markers of this era. Such barren period provided a space for young intellectuals of the time to reflect, while also intertwining the issue of the path for female intellectuals with the fate

of the era and the nation.

In the early 1930s, Chen Hengzhe wrote the following passage in her autobiography: "I was once one of those who experienced the intense cultural and social conflicts before and after the establishment of the Republic of China, and tried to grasp my own destiny in the whirlpool. Therefore, my early life can be seen as a specimen that reveals the pain and joy of a life in the struggle of turbulent times." [8]

In this narrative, she emphasized the twists and challenges of women's awakening throughout the entire 1920s. She also pointed out that the wheels of "people's liberation, especially women's liberation, are rolling backward," and that those fundamental human rights were hard-fought achievements of their generation. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to the issue of women's awakening throughout the entire 1920s.

Her account is the same as her previous argument that the women's liberation movement in the early 1920s had fought for only "those basic human rights." Nevertheless, for the runaway female intellectuals, their awakening and their liberation appeal are more urgent.

From the life experiences of the three female writers, we can sort out a clue of the struggle and choice of female intellectuals in the 1930s: Lu Yin, who was wandering and confused between "leaving" and "returning"; Xiao Hong, who chose "leaving" and paid a brave price; and Ding Ling, who transitioned from "self-exile" to "responding to the times".

5. Reflection and Choices of Female Intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s

The hardships in Lu Yin's life mainly stemmed from the influence of her childhood family and the whims of fate. From her two marriages without hesitation, we can see her attempts to grasp her own destiny and find a way out for her "departure". However, Lu Yin's struggles and confusion in her works reveal her inner confusion regarding her own path. Apart from the character of Lusha in the 1920s, in her narratives of the 1930s, she attempted to bring women from the stage of the family to the stage of society. Unfortunately, given the limitations of her own experiences, the family still remained the destination for women in Lu Yin's writings: love above all, marriage and family, and even when she embarked on the revolutionary path, she was once again lost. The puzzle of Lu Yin's "departure" in her life lies in the fact that she left one family only to find herself in another. Faced with the turbulent currents of the era, she was not prepared to respond.

In comparison to Lu Yin, Xiao Hong and Ding Ling were both proactive Noras who took control of their own destinies. Xiao Hong's life had been marked by one question: "Besides her awakened heart, what else did she bring with her?" Lu Xun's answer to this question was, "Dreams are good; otherwise, money is important." Xiao Hong, on the other hand, spent her entire life practicing this question.[4] She was well aware that if she chose to "depart," she would have to pay the price for it throughout her life. She was constantly at the mercy of fate, yet she always held onto her own destiny. The difference between her and Lu Yin and Ding Ling is that she couldn't control her fate or men, but she could control herself.

Ding Ling, on the other hand, chose to place herself on a broader stage. Her awakening had a more universal significance because it responded to the demands of the era. Still, we all witness that in the 1930s, Ding Ling, after concluding her search in *Wei Hu*, quietly moved away from the awakening of women and returned to the theme of social awakening in the work *1930 Spring in Shanghai*. She transformed from a writer with a distinct female consciousness into a left-wing, calm, and objective realist. This also led to Ding Ling publishing articles such as *When I Was in Xia Village* and *In the Hospital* in the 1940s. Nora is awake, even though she becomes a female soldier, but the awake Nora will eventually return to the corner of femininity. In 1942, at the age of 38, Ding Ling officially married Chen Ming, who was 25 years old, amidst people's mockery and ridicule.

In contrast to the Noras of the 1920s who had just awakened and demanded to break free from the family, the Noras of the 1930s, after ten years of departure, faced even greater challenges if they did not return. This challenge once again transcended the female perspective and identity, and turned towards the demands of the era. The complete transformation of women's family roles and social status does not rely on individual awakening, but on the accumulation of several generations. If the more advanced female group that relies on economic foundation to break away from the center of pressure turns a blind eye to all discrimination and derogation, then the broader and more vulnerable female group will be even more unable to move forward, and the path of equality will become an eternal and unreachable destination[9].

In the subsequent literary history, Lin Daojing, portrayed by Yang Mo in the 1950s, completed the journey of self-transformation for female intellectuals to join the revolution and save the nation, becoming the new woman of the People's Republic of China. Such outcomes can be found in numerous literary works that trace back the process[10]. Nonetheless, looking back at *Yueya'er* by Lao She in the 1930s, the female protagonist is still hearing her classmates talk about which female graduates from prestigious universities in capital became mistresses or ended up in the unregistered prostitute. It seemed that they had never heard of a third way out, except for mistresses and prostitutes[11].

6. Conclusion

The era provided such a narrow stage for female intellectuals at that time, which resulted in the limited options available to the Noras of the 1930s after ten years of departure being extremely limited and "particularity." Besides, this "particularity", strictly speaking, is not linked to their female intellectual identity, but to their female writer identity.

This initial stage continues until their demands break away from paternal and marital authority and enter the substantive stage of women's awakening, where they confront and challenge these authorities. This rupture comes from two aspects: on one hand, the emerging women's rights clash with traditional paternal and marital authority, and on the other hand, it arises from the demands for women's liberation and the slow response of the entire era and society.

So, in the 1920s and 1930s, Chinese women took a completely different path with Ibsen's "Doll House" as the key point of enlightenment. They use their lives to pursue a way out, but it seems that they cannot get rid of the predicted ending of "either fall or return" in the speech "What happened after Nora left". This speech seems to have become the ultimate fate that enveloped female intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s, and also the final conclusion of the collective escape of female intellectuals triggered by *A Doll's House*.

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