

Women and the Search for Modernity: Rethinking Modern Chinese Drama

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Most contemporary studies of modernity are male-centered, based on writings by men and textual representations of masculinity.¹ Modernity is often read as an oedipal revolt against the tyranny of authority; the modern individual is portrayed as an autonomous male in pursuit of freedom and knowledge. The roles of women in and their active contribution to historical processes have not attracted the attention they are due. The identification of modernity with masculinity is, however, an invention of contemporary critics. In recent years feminism has developed an extensive critique of the prevailing vision of male agency and female powerlessness, arguing for a reinterpretation of the role of women in modern history. By approaching modernity through gender, we can free ourselves from the seductive power of grand narratives. Instead of taking male experience as paradigmatic, we can look at texts written primarily by or about women. Feminine phenomena, often seen as secondary or marginal, should be given central importance in the analysis of the culture of modernity.

Because the theories of Chinese modernity are mainly organized around a masculine norm and pay insufficient attention to the specificity of women's lives and experiences, it is of great significance to carry out research on women's complex and changing relationships to

¹ See Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 16.

the political, philosophical, and cultural legacies of Chinese modernity. This essay explores the relationship of women to Chinese modernity through a close reading of canonical works from modern Chinese drama. In the essay I deal with different aspects of modernity that shaped the lives of Chinese women, such as feminism, Freudianism, nationalism, and Marxism.

Admittedly, modern Chinese drama provides a rich textual field in which to track the ambiguities of the modern. But I intend neither to crystallize the underlying features of Chinese society in general nor to encapsulate its dominant ideology during the modern period. Rather, I hope to pinpoint and analyze some of the most pervasive representations of modern woman that recur in different periods, although with substantial modifications, and whose traces extend into our own time. In the end I argue that women were actually heroines of Chinese modernity.

Women and Chinese Modernity

During the nineteenth century, women in Europe struggled for their rights and made great strides in many areas, such as secondary and university education, access to medicine and other professions, rights governing the acquisition of property during marriage and the retention of it after divorce or separation, and wage levels relative to men's in the workplace. European feminism achieved its greatest strength around the turn of the twentieth century. After 1920 the vote had been granted to women in England and most countries on the Continent. Thus the so-called private sphere of women was radically implicated in modernization and processes of social change.

Western feminism had a great impact on Chinese intellectuals, who grew exceedingly dissatisfied with the Chinese patriarchal society. At the turn of the twentieth century, the underlying principles of governance in China were still the teachings of Confucius. The ideal woman was a dependent ruled by the "three obediences and four virtues." The three obediences were obedience to the father before marriage, the husband after marriage, and the son in widowhood. The four virtues were propriety in behavior, speech, demeanor, and employment. A Chinese woman was barred from inheriting property from both her parents

and her husband. The distinctive weakness of the position of Chinese women stemmed from their complete economic dependency.

The issue of women's rights was first raised by intellectuals in China at the end of the nineteenth century. According to the Kang-Liang reforms, raising the status of women was fundamental to China's modernization.² It was generally believed that their weakness represented the country's own. The humiliating defeats of the Qing empire at the hands of Western powers led intellectuals to ask what could be done to make China strong. Nationalism led them to attempt a series of reforms that included improving the position of women.

Education was regarded as critically important to women. The first girls' school was established in Shanghai in 1897. However, education was limited to urban women from a bourgeois or "respectable" family background. This was partly responsible for the "middle-class," urban nature of the initial feminist movement in China. Some Chinese women even went abroad, especially to Japan, for education. Most were influenced by the patriotic sentiments of the male student community, although they also spoke up for female equality. In women's magazines articles mainly focused on motivating their readers to participate in national liberation. A number of women, most famously Qiu Jin (1875–1909), took part in the anti-Manchu movement. So from the very beginning feminism in China was closely associated with nationalism and political revolution.

After the fall of the Manchu empire in 1911, China declared itself a republic based on parliamentary democracy, and suffragette politics rapidly accelerated. Women's organizations met on January 22, 1912, to form a coordinating council and to make public a list of objectives, such as equal rights for men and women, higher education for women, abolition of polygamy and the selling of women, freedom of choice in marriage, and reformation of family customs.³ Later the May Fourth Movement adopted these ideas and spread them throughout the country. During the May Fourth period the modern woman was

² The Kang-Liang reforms, also known as the Wuxu reforms, were a bourgeois movement at the end of the Qing dynasty. The movement proposed to modernize China peacefully but failed.

³ See Julia Kristeva, *About Chinese Women*, trans. Anita Barrows (New York: Boyars, 1986), 102.

conceived as politically aware, independent, and educated. The transformations, real or perceived, in women's status became a focus for debates about the state of the nation and its progress. New Chinese women gave the project of state building great potency.

The first wave of Chinese feminism encouraged many women to defend their rights and to identify themselves as the subjects of the new era. In the 1920s the idea of the new was pervasive: the new theater, the new art, the new culture, the new politics, the new fiction, the new spirit, and so on. Thrilled by the prospect of liberation from the tyranny of the past, women looked forward to the abolition of outmoded values and traditions through the espousal of a radical modernity. Young women left their parents for the freedom of marriage. The sound of the door slamming as Nora leaves her husband and children at the end of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* reverberated in China, though in a different mode. *New Woman* (or *Modern Woman*) became a label for the independent woman struggling against the patriarchal norms governing femininity.

In the early twentieth century, the fundamentals of Chinese society were overturned as a result of China's need for modernization and Westernization. The figure of the New Woman became a resonant symbol of emancipation; her modernity signaled not an endorsement of an existing present but a bold imagining of an alternative future. "Modernity," writes Paul de Man, "exists in the form of a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier, in the hope of reaching at last a point that could be called a true present, a point of origin that marks a new departure."⁴ In modern China the patriarchal forms of femininity were eliminated and the more heroic forms of Chinese modernity allowed to assert themselves. In contrast to modernity in the late Qing dynasty,⁵ the women's liberation movement in the early republican era was radically subversive. The rebellious spirit of women was tantamount to the image of Nora in modern Chinese drama.

⁴ Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 148. Quoted in Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 86.

⁵ See David Der-wei Wang, *Fin-de-Siècle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1849–1911* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

Nora in China's Problem Plays

At the turn of the twentieth century, Chinese literature increasingly assumed the task of reforming society and awakening people by spreading new ideas of science and democracy. Writing in 1902, Liang Qichao thought that fiction could extend readers' feelings, magnifying normal emotions and changing ideas and attitudes.⁶ The relationship between fiction and life was emphasized. Literature, it was said, would have an important bearing on nation building. As the Czech sinologist Jaroslav Průšek points out, the distinctive features of the literature produced during the May Fourth period were subjectivism and individualism, whose growth was indicative of important changes in the social structure and of the individual's emancipation from traditional views.⁷ Reforms in literature and art had sociopolitical consequences and were linked to an explicit social agenda by both practitioners and critics in modern China.

In the 1920s discussions of literature increasingly centered on realism, which won major support from writers. Cultural leaders like Hu Shi and Lu Xun, for example, called for the introduction of modern realistic drama from Europe. In contrast to traditional Chinese theater, in which operatic form and formulaic acting served primarily to entertain, modern drama, by means of spoken everyday language and ordinary characters, addressed the realistic problems of its audiences. Because of awareness of the sharp contrast, modern Chinese theater was called "spoken drama" (*huaju*).

Among well-known European playwrights, Ibsen won the greatest favor in China. Several of his problem plays were translated and staged in China. *A Doll's House* was the most frequently performed foreign play in China during the first half of the twentieth century, and there are at least nine translations of it in Chinese. Moreover, a large number of Chinese plays and stories were written with Nora as their model. Nora became a symbol of individualism and women's liberation. What

⁶ Liang Qichao, "On the Relation between Fiction and Popular Sovereignty," *New Fiction* ("Lun xiaoshuo yu qun zhi de guanxi," *Xin xiaoshuo*), November 14, 1902. See also Chow, 40.

⁷ Jaroslav Průšek, *The Lyrical and the Epic: Studies of Modern Chinese Literature*, ed. Leo Ou-fan Lee (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 1. Quoted in Chow, 92–93.

happens to her after she leaves home brought about heated discussion on university campuses and in newspapers and magazines.

When Ibsen was formally introduced in China in 1918, Hu Shi wrote an article titled “Ibsenism” (“Yibusheng zhuyi”) that had a tremendous impact on the Chinese reception of the playwright for decades. The most authoritative Chinese dictionary, *Ci hai* (lit. “the sea of the words”), soon had an entry for *Ibsenism*, defined as “fervent individualism.” Hu Shi, who had studied in the United States, was disappointed at China’s social reality on his return, attributing the nation’s backwardness and weakness to the bondage of tradition. Seeing no way to save China in the short term, he advised his followers to “save themselves,” a decree essential to the Chinese understanding of individualism at that time.

Ibsen’s work was first seen in China when the Spring Willow Society performed *A Doll’s House* in Shanghai in 1914. A number of productions of the play followed elsewhere in China. In 1935 *A Doll’s House* was staged so frequently in big Chinese cities, such as Nanjing and Shanghai, that that year is referred to as “Nora year” in modern Chinese drama. The Shanghai production in 1935 was epoch-making for its engagement of famous Chinese artists. Lan Ping played Nora. (Lan Ping was the stage name of Jiang Qing, later the wife of Mao Zedong.) In Nanjing the nationalist government prevented a performance of *A Doll’s House* by the Grinding Wind Society (Mofeng Jushe), an amateur drama group. Wang Ping, a primary-school teacher who played Nora, was dismissed by her headmaster. This incident generated a heated, widespread debate. Under the pressure of women’s organizations and some renowned individuals, the headmaster finally agreed to reinstate her. That event further inflamed the “Nora fever” in China. Nora was the progenitor of the women’s movement in modern China.

Hu Shi was also the first to translate *A Doll’s House* into Chinese, and the translation, titled *Nala*, appeared in a special Ibsen issue of *New Youth* (*Xin qingnian*, 1918), a representative journal for the New Cultural Movement in the early twentieth century. Hu Shi then wrote a play called *The Greatest Event in Life* (*Zhongshen dashi*, 1919), modeled on *A Doll’s House*. It was the first modern play in Chinese vernacular.

The Greatest Event in Life is an essay in dramatic dialogue. It is about a Chinese girl, Miss Tian, who wants to marry a man of her own choice. Disappointed by her parents’ disapproval, she decides to elope with him.

This play, which spread the idea of women's liberation, remains a great inspiration to Chinese youth who want to rebel against family patriarchy and social oppression. This play led immediately to the publication of a number of other modern plays in which a Nora figure becomes aware of her individuality and determines to win her independence.

Guo Moruo's *Zhuo Wenjun* (1924), named after its female protagonist, appeared with *Wang Zhaojun* and *Nie Ying* under the collective title *Three Rebellious Women* in 1926. The love story of Zhuo Wenjun, who lived in the second century BC, and the poet Sima Xiangru had long been a popular subject for literature and drama. By adapting it to spoken drama, Guo advocated the ideas of women's liberation and individual freedom. Zhuo Wenjun's decision to marry Sima Xiangru against her father's wishes makes her a Chinese sister of Nora.

Other "departure plays" include *A Shrew* (*Po Fu*, 1922), by Ouyang Yuqian, and *Mutiny* (*Bingbian*, 1925), by Yu Shangyuan. In most such plays the Chinese Nora leaves her father's home rather than abandon her husband and children. In the early twentieth century Chinese women struggled for the freedom to choose a marital partner instead of accepting an arranged marriage. These so-called Nora plays focus not so much on the inner conflict and psychological tension of the female protagonist as on her leaving. In addition, the first Chinese Noras are the educated daughters of the elite and are among those first exposed to Western ideas of individualism and women's rights. In *The Greatest Event in Life* Miss Tian is the daughter of a rich family, and her father is said to be a learned man of the new school. She has studied in Japan and falls in love with a Mr. Chen, also an overseas student in Japan. Early Chinese feminism was confined to small circles, but it had a great impact on society.

In China, Nala (Nora) was synonymous with women's liberation. Nora fever affected not just a few scholarly intellectuals but also generations of young people. As Mao Dun said in 1938, "The [Chinese] women's movement after the May Fourth period is nothing but 'Noraism.'"⁸ Noraism is about the reception and transformation of

⁸ Mao Dun, "On Nora," *Zhujiang Daily Supplement for Women* ("Cong Nala shuoqi," *Zhujiang ribao*), April 29, 1938, rpt. in Mao Dun, *A Collection of Essays on Literature and Art* (*Wenyi lunwen ji*) (Beijing: Foreign Literature Press, 1942), 71–73. My translation.

Nora in the Chinese context. It comprises the changing interpretations of Nora in relation to the Chinese reality.

Modern Chinese plays present women defending their rights and leaving home for the sake of independence. The endings are often optimistic. The feminist discourse in the Nora plays acquired a performative and prophetic function, shaking a patriarchal society and transforming its gender politics. The proliferation of modern plays of female emancipation was closely related to the increasing political and cultural presence of the women's movement. Feminism impressed itself on the public consciousness as a major and above all a modern political and cultural movement, a significant force for social change. Women were presented as political agents, as subjects of, rather than subject to, history.

Femininity and Hysteria in Cao Yu's Plays

Female oppression, says Rita Felski, gives birth to both feminism and hysteria (3). The figures of the feminist and the hysteric are, according to Felski, key symbols of the gender politics of modernity. A feminist is a rebel; a hysteric is a defeated rebel. Where feminism is rebellious, emancipatory, and constructive, hysteria is compliant, imprisoning, and self-destructive. "Hysteria," says Toril Moi, "is not, pace H  l  ne Cixous, the incarnation of the revolt of women forced into silence but rather a declaration of defeat, the realization that there is no other way out. Hysteria is, as Catherine Cl  ment perceives, a cry for help when defeat becomes real, when the woman sees that she is efficiently gagged and chained to her feminine role."⁹ The irrational behavior of the hysteric is both socially and psychologically determined.

Feminism in China achieved limited success only in the first decades of the twentieth century. Because modernity was largely introduced from the West, women's struggle for freedom faced a real challenge. After furnishing an idealistic portrait of women pursuing the freedom

⁹ Toril Moi, "Representation of Patriarchy: Sexuality and Epistemology in Freud's *Dora*," in *In Dora's Case: Freud—Hysteria—Feminism*, ed. Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 192. Quoted in Gail Finney, *Women in Modern Drama: Freud, Feminism, and European Theater at the Turn of the Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 8.

of marriage, modern Chinese plays began to present women who are defeated by patriarchal society and become hysterics. In his plays Cao Yu creates a group of such women, particularly Fanyi and Bailu.

Thunderstorm (*Leiyu*), Cao Yu's first play, was the first masterpiece of modern Chinese drama. It is about two families, the Zhous and the Lus, who are closely related both by blood and by employment relationship. Fanyi, the hostess of the Zhou family, is "a woman of old China, with her delicate health, her secret sorrows, her intelligence and her love of poetry and literature" (27).¹⁰ She is married to Zhou Puyuan, a handsome man who returned from his studies in Germany to take his place as the young master of a wealthy family. Fanyi's married life has been a disaster. Her romantic idea of love has been crushed by the patriarchal ideas Zhou holds despite his Western education. He demands that Fanyi obey him absolutely, as in a traditional marriage.

Fanyi, who has "a ruthless determination" within her, hates Zhou. She confides to Zhou Ping: "It's not my nature to do just as I'm told by anybody" (57). She suffered a stultifying marriage for more than fifteen years, until the arrival of Zhou Ping, Zhou Puyuan's illegitimate son by his former maid. His sympathy and understanding for Fanyi bring her great comfort. Soon they have secret meetings in the house late at night. However, Zhou Ping regrets this abnormal relationship with his stepmother and falls in love with the housemaid Sifeng, who is actually his half-sister. Fanyi cannot tolerate his betrayal and urges him not to leave her alone. Disappointed that her persuasion and threats are futile, Fanyi exposes Zhou Ping and Sifeng's incestuous relationship and in doing so causes the death of three young people. Fanyi pursues sexual equality and freedom first through her husband and then through her stepson. However, she is defeated by patriarchal ideology and driven to madness.

Fanyi's defeat is both psychological and social. It is possible to interpret her hysteria from a Freudian perspective. The nature of hysterical repression, according to Freud, is psychosexual; hysteria is the expression of secret sexual desires. This connection is nowhere clearer than in the famous case of Dora, whose hysterical symptoms Freud attributed to the repression of her desire for her father. From this point

¹⁰ For the English see Cao Yu, *Thunderstorm*, trans. Wang Tso-liang and A. C. Barnes, 2nd ed. (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1964).

of view, Fanyi's hysteria can be seen as the expression of her incestuous desire for her stepson, Zhou Ping. Aggressive in this love relationship, she is established as an erotic agent and a subject of desire. Her hysteria signals her revolt against the impossibility of her union with him.

Yet Fanyi's hysteria also represents the eruption of a desire that threatens to disrupt the structures of a phallogocentric system. The incest of stepmother and stepson is not blamed but is viewed sympathetically by the playwright, which suggests that the plot is actually an attack on the male hierarchy that rules Chinese society. The approach to incest in Cao Yu's play is based on a modern understanding of psychology and female individualism. Through the articulation of repressed truths, *Thunderstorm* challenges, undermines, and otherwise calls into question the discourse of a feudal/patriarchal order. Zhou Puyuan is satirized as an insensitive, tyrannical patriarch. The stuffy weather throughout the play symbolizes the repressiveness of patriarchy, whereas the thunderstorm symbolizes the overthrowing of the old values and social structure. In that sense, *Thunderstorm* may be compared to a "torpedo under the ark."¹¹

In *Sunrise*, published two years after *Thunderstorm*, Bailu is a different type of hysteric. If Fanyi is a victim of patriarchal sexuality, Bailu is a victim of her bourgeois desire for commodity and fun. Born into a wealthy intellectual family, Bailu had a good education at a distinguished women's school, and her family background and good looks made her a popular figure in social circles. Unfortunately, her father died without leaving her substantial property. Later she became a movie star and a dancer. Growing up during a period of rapid urban modernization, she got used to a culture of consumption.¹² Bailu explains her needs in a forceful demonstration of consumerism's domination of social life: "Don't you understand that I want to live comfortably? When I go out I'll want to go by car, and when I entertain I'll want nice things to

¹¹ In his poem "To My Friend the Revolutionary Orator" (1869), Ibsen wrote: "With pleasure I will torpedo the Ark" (*Samlede Verker* [Oslo: Norsk, 1968], 1044). Some critics compare his plays to a "torpedo under the ark" to emphasize their social effect.

¹² China experienced rapid industrialization and urbanization in the 1920s and 1930s before the Japanese invasion in 1937. Some big cities, such as Shanghai and Beijing, were permeated by a consumer culture.

wear, I'll want to have a good time, I'll want to spend lots and lots of money, surely you understand that?" (199).¹³ Bailu cannot live without commodities. Lacking the income to fulfill her desire for consumption, she becomes a prostitute. Living in a grand hotel apartment, she spends her time dancing, drinking, and playing cards. She often invites friends over, spending a lot of money to entertain them. Indeed, her expenses outrun her income, so she is always in debt. Positioned at the margins of respectable society, she embodies the structural logic of commodity aesthetics. In 1930s China women were seen as objects to be exchanged between men in a capitalist economy. The urban prostitute was the most literal embodiment of female commodification. Dependent on the support of her clients, Bailu can be seen as both a consuming subject and an object of consumption.

Bailu represents the ambivalent responses to capitalism and consumerism that permeated large Chinese cities in the 1920s and 1930s. The urban life of the upper and middle classes is a dream world, filled with seductive commodities and the promise of endless fun. Consumption changes women's conceptions about themselves and the world around them. As consumers, women become familiar with the rapidly changing fashions and lifestyles that are important parts of the felt experience of being modern. The emergence of a culture of consumption helps shape new forms of subjectivity for women. Their intimate needs, desires, and perceptions of self are mediated by public representations of commodities.

Yet women can also be corrupted by the culture of consumption. Bailu is one such degraded woman. She seeks pleasure by selling her body as a commodity and is not ashamed to do it. Instead, she thinks of it as her way to enjoy life on her own terms. But her uncontrollable desire for fashionable commodities, a comfortable life, cars, a nice apartment, and servants proves the negative power of consumption on women. In fact, Bailu is a pseudomodern woman, who had "secret dreams about lots of money and, having dressed herself up as a toy, presents herself for others to enjoy."¹⁴ In many modern writings, women are portrayed

¹³ Cao Yu, *Sunrise*, trans. A. C. Barnes (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1978).

¹⁴ Bai Bing, "Discussing the Modern Woman," *Women Monthly* ("Tantan xiandai nūzi," *Nūzi yuekan*) 1, no. 9 (1933): 14. Quoted in Louise Edwards, "Policing the Modern Woman in Republican China," *Modern China* 26 (2000): 133.

as victims of consumerism, trapped in a web of objectified images that alienate them from their true identity. By making Bailu a victim of this ideology, Cao Yu addresses moral degradation as a consequence of modernization and Westernization in Chinese society. He sings an elegy of the inevitable loss of values and of the innocence of women on the threshold of modernity.

Sunrise represents Cao Yu's nostalgia for the woman who was not affected by the consumer culture. But we need to be skeptical of a dichotomy between production and consumption that persistently devalues the latter as a passive and irrational activity. Bailu is tortured in this dichotomy as she realizes that her life is unproductive. Throughout the play her desire to be productive as a result of her education surfaces again and again. At one point, for example, she tries to save a little girl from gangsters. Unfortunately, her attempts to be useful end in failure. Then, something like Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, she realizes that women are denied any chance of doing anything meaningful.¹⁵ This despair, resulting from her confusion as a modern woman engaged in various pursuits, drives her to suicide. Thus *Sunrise* offers an exploration of the complex interrelations between femininity and modernity.

Degendering Women in the Chinese Revolutionary Drama

After the May Fourth Movement, many Chinese Noras who had run from the confines of the family began to experience the hardships of living on their own. They regretted their ignorance and returned to their peaceful homes. Later, women's emancipation was set aside when political struggles and then the Japanese invasion became immediate concerns. The modern woman came under attack by the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, or KMT) because she was perceived as posing a radical challenge to the fragile national order. In 1927 the Nationalists unleashed a white terror of unprecedented proportions during which thousands of communists and their sympathizers were killed. The KMT also used the women's question as a pretext for mass executions of "radical" women throughout the country. Over a thou-

¹⁵ For a comparative study of Bailu and *Hedda Gabler* see Chengzhou He, "Hedda and Bailu: Portraits of Two 'Bored' Women," *Comparative Drama* 35 (2002): 447-63.

sand women leaders, many of them not communists but simply active participants in the women's movement, were killed by KMT rightists. In addition, the KMT launched the New Life Movement, mixing Confucianism and Christianity, to promote traditional feminine virtues. This move changed the face of the women's liberation movement in modern China.

Having committed themselves to the far-reaching ideals of women's emancipation, many New Women found themselves subject to the violent disapproval of the authorities and those around them. In their desperation, some sought an end to their problems by putting an end to their lives. The literature of the May Fourth period is filled with the stories of suicides among young revolutionaries (see Kristeva, 109). Other New Women joined the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and strove to be continually concerned with feminist demands. But they soon began to dissociate themselves from the women's rights movement, because the CCP believed that women's problems would be solved automatically by the sociopolitical revolution.

It is worth mentioning that Mao Zedong, a leader of the CCP, strongly supported the suffragettes in the early twentieth century. In 1917 Mao helped found the Society of the New People (Xinmin Xuehui), which proposed to fight prostitution, concubinage, and the abuse of familial power. Around 1919 he published a series of articles on the condition of women in China. Openly concerned with the feminist movement, Mao saw in it a radical means of transforming society.

For the leadership of the CCP, the women's movement had to be part of the general revolutionary movement. The party maintained the role of the women's issues within the revolution. As the CCP strengthened its position in the countryside, it instituted reforms that affected the position of women positively and radically, among them the Land Reform Law and the Marriage Law. Women's changing position in social life became the subject of Chinese revolutionary literature in the 1930s. In modern Chinese plays, women are portrayed as men's comrades, capable of undertaking the same dangerous and difficult tasks. After leaving home, the Chinese Noras in these plays join the army and turn into revolutionary soldiers. A typical example is Qiu Jin, both a literary figure and a historical personality.

The Story of Qiu Jin (*Qiu Jin zhuan*), written by Xia Yan in 1936 and first published as *The Soul of Freedom* (*Ziyou hun*), premiered in Shanghai in 1937. Born to a wealthy intellectual family in 1874, Qiu Jin was educated in Japan and grew unhappy in her arranged marriage. Influenced by the ideas of social revolution and determined to devote herself to the cause of national liberation, she left her husband and two children, founded a girls' school, and started the first women's newspaper in China. Dressed as a man, Qiu Jin was admired by the prorevolutionary groups. Failing in an attempt to assassinate the governor, she was arrested and in 1907 was executed.

Xia, an admirer of Qiu Jin, came from a poor family in Zhejiang province and participated actively in the May Fourth Movement. In 1920 he went to Japan, where he read widely in Western literature in translation and became acquainted with Marxism. Expelled by the Japanese government in 1929 for procommunist activities, he returned to Shanghai, immersed himself in the theater scene, and began to write scripts. As Xia later recalled, what had made him write *The Story of Qiu Jin* was the death of a number of young revolutionary women, including the eponymous Qiu, in pursuit of national liberation.¹⁶

In act 1 Qiu Jin argues with her husband about the role of women in family and society and speaks in favor of sexual equality and family reform. Qiu Jin is concerned not just with her own life but with the fate of all women in China, whom she wishes to see "equal to men and not dependent upon men" (135). In act 2, having returned from Japan, she wants to join the revolutionary forces in overthrowing the Qing empire, telling her friends, "With a thunder and a big fire, we are going to change the whole of China" (152). In act 3 the rebellion fails. Qiu Jin does not escape, although there is time for her to do so. Instead, she willingly sacrifices herself for the revolution. "To die for our country," she declares before her execution, "is what we should do as revolutionaries. Our heads and blood will not be wasted. Our comrades will take over our will. The freedom and equality of Chinese women, national liberation, and independence will surely be realized"

¹⁶ *Collected Plays of Xia Yan* (*Xia Yan juzuo ji*), vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhongguo Xiju Chubanshe, 1984), 175. All page citations for *The Story of Qiu Jin* refer to this edition. My translation.

(170). For Qiu Jin as well as other female revolutionaries, feminism and nationalism are closely related.

In previous revolutions women were usually excluded from the political struggle. Feminist critics decried the omission of women from revolution and the masculine inflection of the discourse that typically accompanied it. In *The Awakening of Women* Frances Swiney frames the account of historical modalities in explicitly gendered terms: revolution is simultaneously stigmatized and depicted as masculine, whereas evolution is essentially feminine in form and homologous with the distinctive rhythms of the female psyche.¹⁷ It is generally assumed that political radicalism is inherently masculine.

Feminist criticism draws attention to the import of such symbolic entities and practices as language, imagery, clothing, gesture, and ritual in the maintenance and transformation of gender relations. Qiu Jin's fiery speeches, masculine attire, knife handling, and skill in riding a horse all suggest her male characteristics. Qiu Jin is degendered—or, in other words, masculinized. The masculinized female was only a harbinger of the decades-long process of masculinization in revolutionary Chinese culture. During this process consumption was condemned as bourgeois, and women's desires for commodities were repressed. The masculinization of women in the revolutionary cause reinforced the dominance of masculinity.

The expansion of revolutionary ideology in modern China nevertheless blurred public and private distinctions as women left their households and fought shoulder to shoulder with men against the Japanese invasion and in the civil war. The visibility of revolutionary women was one of the most overtly political changes to the gender hierarchy. Asserting their rights to political equality with men, women appealed to their just occupation of the public sphere. They played a central role in imaginings about the features of the modern age in China.

Conclusion

The transformations of modern women in Chinese spoken plays reflect the complex experiences of Chinese women in their search for

¹⁷ Frances Swiney, *The Awakening of Women; or, Woman's Part in Evolution* (London: Reeves, 1908). See also Felski, 164.

modernity. The Nora figures in Chinese problem plays are symbols of individualism and subjectivism. The women in Cao Yu's plays, whose education is informed by feminist ideas, become subjects of their desires for consumption and love. However, their society is not ready to accept them, which results in their hysteria and tragedy. The female fighters in revolutionary drama further deconstruct the patriarchy of gender, and their stories influenced the new development of gender politics in modern China. Women assumed vital roles in nation building and firmly believed that they could not achieve their liberation until the nation was emancipated. The adaptation of revolution as a guiding image of feminist activity brought with it intense agitation and violence. In general, the discourses of women's liberation were refashioned on the different stages of modern Chinese drama in parallel with the development of modern Chinese society.

However, many Chinese playwrights' representations of modern femininity are shaped by preoccupations with masculine fantasies; they do not correspond to women's experiences. Chinese Noras who left home faced uncertainties that male writers did not take into consideration. In addition, revolutionary women became stereotypes of political radicalism. In the works of male playwrights, women are positioned as ineffable others, outside the bounds of a masculine social and symbolic order. Chinese playwrights reshaped the dominant conceptions of women's relationship to history and progress. Modern woman became a symbol of Chinese identity. The rethinking of modern Chinese plays has come to suggest that women are heroines of Chinese modernity. If gender politics in modern Chinese plays played an important role in shaping the processes of Chinese modernization, these processes helped initiate in turn an ongoing refashioning and reimagining of gender in China.

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