

Nora and Du Liniang: A Study of the Imported Feminism and the Fettered Feminism in Traditional Chinese Theatre

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Abstract

This paper, through studying Du Liniang in *The Peony Pavilion* and Nora in *A Doll's House*, argues that the feminism in traditional Chinese theatre was in its predicament when engendered and the appropriation of the feminism as personified by Nora was very different from what as embodied by Du Liniang. Thus the imported feminism only served as a placebo but never a solution to the emancipation of Chinese women at that time. At the end of the paper, the paper explains that the reason why Nora's introduction to China was so sensational at the turn of 20th century, that is, both the wish to reinvigorate the nationhood and the rise of individualism contributes to the popularity of the Nora theme.

Key words: Nora; *A Doll's House*; Du Liniang; *The peony pavilion*; Fettered feminism; Predicament; Placebo

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INTRODUCTION

Ever since *A Doll's House* was introduced to China, it has been associated with the reconfiguring of the Chinese women in a turbulent period at the beginning of the twentieth century when the traditional womanhood has been challenged as a deterrent to China's progress. Whether Ibsen acknowledged his *A Doll's House* to be a feminist text or not, its influence upon the movement of

the Chinese women's emancipation was of unprecedented magnitude.

As theatre is an efficient medium in engaging the audience's attention in a vivid form, infiltrating them with the ideas and even spurring them to action in imitation of the performers, such an exemplary guide for action in life did Nora, the heroine in *A Doll's House* serve that many Chinese women at that time left their homes as Nora did. Nora also inspired numerous Chinese plays and novels with the imported womanhood, solidifying the Nora theme.

Actually a rereading of the canonical Chinese play *The Peony Pavilion* reveals that there is no lack of feminist tradition in the traditional Chinese theatre, which also manifests itself in a theme of home leaving in the same way that the feminism in *A Doll's House* does. So why does Nora, the incarnation of the imported feminism, has a special appeal to the Chinese women at that time? In what aspects does the feminism implicit in *A Doll's House* differentiate itself from that in *The Peony Pavilion*? In comparison with the unearthed feminist tradition, does the feminism embodied by Nora provide a feasible scenario for the emancipation of the Chinese women? In this paper, on the one hand the author intends to make a textual analysis of the feministic tradition lurking in *The Peony Pavilion* and evaluate its limit. On the other hand, a reading of *A Doll's House* from the Chinese perspective will demonstrate why the imported radical feminism, seemingly in compensation for the limit of the feminism emanating from *The Peony Pavilion*, has a phenomenally invigorating and illuminating effect despite its dissonance with the Chinese tradition.

1. FETTERED FEMINISM IN THE PEONY PAVILION AND ITS PREDICAMENT

In 1598, Tang Xianzu completed his masterpiece *The Peony Pavilion*, which tells the story of a young maiden,

who is charmed by a handsome young scholar in her dream. When she wakes up, overwhelmed with longing, she falls in lovesickness, which consumes her body irreversibly until she dies after painting a self-portrait. Heart-broken, her parents establish a shrine to consecrate her memory. However, the dead woman's desire is so strong that she returns as a ghost to the secular world three years later. Whiling roaming in the vicinity of her shrine, she comes across the scholar in her dream and joins in a passionate companionship with him. After they make a commitment to be together, she confesses that she is a ghost and implores him to exhume her body so that she may be resurrected. Immediately she comes back to life, they elope and only after he passes the imperial exam, are her resurrection and their secret marriage officially sanctioned by imperial decree. Ultimately she reconciles herself with her puritanical father.

When the play *Peony Pavilion* was read, it was clearly impressed that a rigid division of space has greatly restricted Du Liniang's mobility and fulfillment of desire. On the one hand, she is condemned to a compartmentalized geographic space, whose boundary she is forbidden to transgress. On the other hand, mainly represented as a lover of a man and a daughter of her parents, she is well circumscribed in a social space where the patriarchal order allows; she is always imagined as only sexual and usually in her relationship or non-relationship with men, as Virginia Woolf argues when she comments on the women in literature (James, 1994, p.119). Du Liniang's story, in a sense, is one in which she challenges the imposed geographic and social boundary and ultimately fulfills her desire in reality.

At the beginning, the most conspicuous is Du Liniang's imprisonment in the household where her geographic space is restricted to the boudoir and schoolroom so that a stroll into the garden is regarded as an offense to the morals. As Tutor Chen says, "When woman walks abroad, lest eyes should light upon her, at every step she should be screened from view." (p.40). That conveys the admonition that Du Liniang should be discreet about her presence in a public space where she preferably keeps invisible. In response to the stagnation in a geographic space, Du Liniang vents her feminist anger, "Even though the ospreys were shut in, they still had the freedom of the island: Why should a human being be treated worse than a bird?" The pursuit of a temporary liberty during her father's absence motivates her intrusion into a public space without supervision and this kind of encroachment foreshadows her self-exile and tribulation.

Trapped in a strictly defined geographic and social space, Du Liniang has to resort to the erotic dream, which serves the purpose of wish-fulfillment in compensation for the relentlessly unhappy reality. The erotic dream offers Du Liniang an imaginary space where she can release her unconscious desire and peregrinate freely. But the freedom

is not categorical. When she dreams, she can only dream of a scholar. Even the scholar in her dream is predestined by a transcendental will, which she dares not doubt. It seems that Du Liniang can not escape from the restraining influence of the order even when she withdraws into the imaginary realm. When she wakes up, she suffers from a sense of loss, which she fails to alleviate because her social and geographic immobility frustrates her efforts to maneuver to find her love. In response to the irretrievable loss, Du Liniang develops a symptom of melancholia: she indulges herself in mourning and constantly penalizes herself by self-reproach, thus weakening her body and soul.

The analysis of the conflict between Du Liniang's desire and the space reveals the limits and the predicament of the feminism in a hostile context.

First, the new feminism as displayed by the women's free will to seek a satisfactory marriage is constructed in the framework of patriarchy. That is to say, the paradigm of the feminism prescribes the women's respect for patriarchal values imposed on the women: the subordination to the father, husband and son (if Du Liniang has any in future) and the sanctified chastity. In the play of the prevalent parental figures—her tutor, her father, the judge in the underworld and the emperor—demand the submission of Du Liniang. Even the uncanny things in the play can be rationalized in association with the patriarchal order. Why does Du Liniang encounter her love in the dream though she has never seen him before? Why does Du Liniang reclaim her love as a ghost and then get resurrected? And why does Du Liniang, before the wedding, claim she is a virgin though she has sexual relationship with her love twice (in her dream and when she is still a ghost)? According to the patriarchal order, Du Liniang is supposed to stay in the boudoir, to which no strange man can have access. If her love in the dream were a young man she had seen before, she would not be a virtuous woman. The playwright, though he had a favorable opinion of Du Liniang's initiative, surely did not want to present her as not virtuous and preferred to leave the absurdity in the text. Since Du Liniang is stuck in the patriarchal order, she can only sacrifice her life for the moment to get the mobility of a ghost. And since a marriage between a ghost and a human being is never legitimate, Du Liniang must join her body and soul to be a mortal. Du Liniang's claim of her problematic virginity sounds ridiculous but considering that a virtuous woman does not have sex before marriage in the traditional patriarchal order, we will understand why the playwright deliberately emphasizes her innocence though her loss of virginity is evident to the audience. Therefore, the feminism implicit in the text advocates marriage predicated on the free will but is reluctant to challenge the patriarchal order that is at roots hostile to the women's free will.

Second, the heroine is haunted by the family myth though she has a feminist tendency for sexual liberty. Family is an ingrained theme in the ancient Chinese society as we can see in the large and small social domains. The empire is conceived of as a big family where the subjects are the children and the emperor is the father. The local county is likewise considered as a family with the county official as the protecting father with the highest authority within. The women are domestic creatures denied any access to social ambitions. Their main responsibility is mainly defined as “helping the husband and teaching the children”. There is little possibility that woman can live a decent independent living. Even prostitutes, the social women, are subject to the institutional hierarchy of brothel and confined to the inner space. In the play *Du Liniang*’s pursuit is never to be a professional woman but a housewife in the household of an ideal husband. This kind of family myth is actually perpetuated in ancient literature, which *Du Liniang* is versed in and that is why she can not escape from the influence of the myth of the beautiful boudoir lady marrying a young talented scholar. The moment she breaks away from her family, she is degraded from a human being to a ghost. Only by being accepted into the family again, can she reaffirm her humanity and womanhood. The close link of the woman and family is still what *Du Liniang*’s feminism can not overcome because any attempt to isolate the women from their family will jeopardize their identity from the Chinese perspective.

Last, *Du Liniang* as a feminist can not serve as a positive model the female audience can imitate. In *Shared Dreams: the Story of the Wives’ Commentary on the Peony Pavilion*, Zeitlin observes, the problem with explanations that stress only a positive, vicarious identification with the fulfillment of *Du Liniang*’s desires is that in almost every story about women’s response to the play, the result is untimely death. Why should a play, a romantic comedy at that, which celebrates the triumph of life over death and the triumph of love over social constraints, induces such a response? It is as though a dark, alternative ending repressed in the play was being compulsively acted out in the imagined lives of its readers. The recurrent cultural myths about the deaths of the readers, commentators, and actresses who come in contact with *The peony Pavilion* point to an infectious danger emanating from the play—the allure of women dying young and the exquisite pleasure and pain produced in contemplating the deaths. The ultimate proof of the affective power of the play became its ability to trigger a fatal response in women, while to be moved by the pathos these deaths evoked became the true mark of a refined sensibility (male or female) (p.130).

Why is the female audience’s response to *Du Liniang*’s pursuit of domestic happiness melancholic? Her attempt to fulfill her desire is truly desperate considering her

self-sacrifice of her mortal life. For the readers, the play should stop abruptly when she dies if this is a realistic play. Everything that happens after she dies in the play is actually a fantasy. The death and the inaccessibility to her love is the “dark and alternative ending repressed in the play”, which the readers easily recognize. Although this is a comedy in terms of its happy ending, yet it is a tragedy in terms of the desperate feminism. The female readers in *Du Liniang*’s situation fail to see a feasible, happy prospect in reality.

2. A COMPARISON OF FEMINISMS BETWEEN A DOLL’S HOUSE AND THE PEONY PAVILION

Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* is a play about a woman’s enlightenment of her subordinate role in a family, which she ultimately breaks away from. In this play as Nora tries desperately to hide the fact that she has committed forgery for her husband’s sake, it gradually occurs to her that her husband Torvald has her as something to dominate over and manipulate: He bases his pleasure on treating her as a pet. His fury at the possibility of being labeled as uxorious betrays his cowardice and his motivation of having Nora as something weaker to bully. And he places his honor above the love in sharp contrast with Nora’s sacrifice of honor for love. Shocked and disillusioned, Nora deserts her family in order to reclaim her humanity.

If we compare *A Doll’s House* with the *Peony Pavilion* in aspects of feminism, we will find:

First, quite different from *Du Liniang* in the *Peony Pavilion*, what the heroine Nora deals with is not the patriarchy but the dictatorship of the husband. The *Peony Pavilion* reflects a patriarchic order which reduces women to imprisonment and allows women no freedom to choose their own grooms. The suffocating immobility is the playwright’s biggest concern such that he imagined another supernatural world where *Du Liniang* may transcend the mundane limits. However, *Du Liniang* never has the illuminated idea of her own situation and her action is mainly motivated by her desire for an ideal partner. If *Du Liniang* is an innocent girl who yearns for her own ideal husband, Nora is a married woman who previously takes delight in her self-delusion and the imposed innocence of being a housewife and then becomes sober of her deplorable role of being no better than a prostitute. *A Doll’s House* betrays the vulnerability of the modern masculinity, whose seeming potency is predicated on the subordination and the dehumanization of women. As a matter of fact, the imposed inferiority of women is ubiquitous not only in *A Doll’s House*. Even in the *Peony Pavilion* *Du Liniang*’s father deplores over *Du Liniang*’s being a woman who can not perpetuate the family’s academic heritage. Somehow, the *Peony Pavilion*

emphasizes women's reaction to the patriarchic order that prohibits women's sexual liberty without questioning gender inequality while *A Doll's House* does women's claim for gender equality and humanity.

Second, in the *Peony Pavilion* the inveterate family myth is so omnipotent that the supposed holiness of family and marriage is never challenged. What Du Liniang desires is the marriage with her love and the establishment of her family. Though her temporary transgression of the family boundary is almost penalized with perpetual banishment, Du Liniang persistently struggles her way back into her old family since her marriage must be authorized by the patriarch of the family from which she is originated. The play ends up with her father's authorization of her marriage, taking it for granted that Du Liniang and her husband will lead a happy life ever. By contrast, Nora lacks no family of her own as we can see at the beginning of the play she exults in the family life. It is the disclosing of the essential inequality of couple relationship that shatters the mask of family bliss. The demystification of the family life, in ally with her ignorance of her victimization to the whole social superstructure including ethics, laws and religion, prompts her to plunge headlong into the feckless self-exile. There exists a big discrepancy between Du Liniang's home leaving and Nora's: The former is to pursue and perpetuate the family myth but the latter is a result of Nora's enlightened individualism against the exploitation of men over women in the marriage.

Last, Du Liniang's society denies her any social mobility or financial capability. It is impossible that she can make an independent living outside the family system. Besides her family role, what she can choose it to be either a nun (an ascetic) or a prostitute (a sexual slave). Nora at least has more choices than that: she might find a social employment like her friend Mrs. Linde or become a servant like Anne-Marie. Evidently Du Liniang would pay a higher price for her feminist behavior than Nora.

3. REASONS ON NORA'S SENSATIONAL INTRODUCTION TO CHINA AT THE TURN OF 20TH CENTURY

Since Nora is quite different from a traditional Chinese woman such as Du Liniang, why the introduction of her is sensational in a transitional period when the traditional influence was still holding the ground?

According to Hu Ying, the turn of the twentieth century is "a period of crisis—a crisis of the nation, of race and of national and racial identity" (p.4). For the new Chinese intellectuals, "the configuration of women is thus closely bound up with a viable cultural, racial and national identity" the anxiety of modernity." (p.4) It seems that the traditional woman associated with the old order is blamed for its weakening the nation and an urgent need for

reshaping the woman is put on the national agenda. Since the intellectuals, whether they were aware of a hidden tradition of Chinese feminism, are more willing to turn to western femininity for hope and inspiration, Nora, an incarnation of revolutionary womanhood, was introduced to China to meet such intellectual needs.

Kwok-Kan Tam, the guru of Ibsen studies in China, writes on the context of the introduction of Nora and the proliferation of Nora's theme in Chinese literature.

During the intellectual ferment of the May Fourth period, the emancipation of women became the most sensitive and all-embracing issue in the struggle for individual freedom. As the most oppressed group in traditional society, women in China had a low status under the authority of religion, father and husband. The suicides in 1919 of Chao Wu-Chen and Li Ch'ao, two examples of traditional women, as a result of family oppression in the form of arranged marriage and denial of education aroused a nationwide outrage among the intellectuals. Reflecting the urgency of the need to educate the Chinese women, many influential journals devoted special issues to the discussion of the limitation of the world women lived in. In addition, more than ten magazines were especially dedicated to creating a new consciousness among Chinese women. The most famous of these were the *Women's Bell*, the *Women's Magazine* and *Female Review* in which there were articles concerning the evils of foot binding and inequality between the sexes. It was in the midst of this ferment that Nora came to the knowledge of the Chinese as an image of the new woman. The qualities of individualism embodied in her character represented to the Chinese youth a new morality (p.219).

Therefore, the wish to reinvigorate the nationhood and the rise of individualism contributes to the popularity of the Nora theme. It is well worth noticing that the borrowing of Nora's feminism is really a transplanting without the consideration of the social background where Nora was created. First of all, *A Doll's House* was translated from English instead of Norwegian and there may be much more lost in translation. Second, the audience generally had no knowledge of what Norway's situation was and the reception of Nora is often combined with their own background and social concern. By consequence, what appealed to the audience is not what the text conveys about the playwright's serious reflection on the women's situation but Nora's heroism itself. The Chinese women at that time needed a model to emulate and a pioneer to offer encouragement. While the traditional feminist womanhood as typified by Du Liniang could not set a feasible example, they shifted their attention to a foreign heroine with strong determination and quick action. Once Nora is equated with the new Chinese womanhood and her alien identity is deprived, she is used as a feminist symbol to provoke the repressed women into an impetuous reaction to social inequality.

However, the social situation of the awakened women was no better than that of Du Liniang. Their breaking away from the family could only be interpreted as escapism since the social structure which was against them remained intact. While Nora may find a job, the new Chinese women still faced the same choices available to Du Liniang: to be a social outcast or retuning home. Therefore, the imported feminism of Nora can only serve as a placebo instead of a cure-all. As Kwok-Kan Tam pointed out, Lu Hsun, the revolutionary writer, already realized the economic situation in China allowed no such freedom as Nora enjoys. Although he was not optimistic about the emancipation of women in China, he thought the social reform would be inevitable as more awakened women entered the society and became sober of the relentless social reality.

Nora's feminism perceived by the Chinese women at that time in fact betrays a lack of Chinese women's ideal ego, which can elevate their self confidence and morale. But while they identified with the ideal ego, they neglected the complex, misogynist social context, which denigrated the social women as aberrant. The identification with Nora in the Chinese theatre Also the home leaving poses a threat to the stability of the family, whose sanctity was well buttressed by thousands of years' Confucian tradition and the Chinese Noras may, to a large extent, arouse the animosity of the Chinese men's instead of their sympathy. This imported feminism probably isolated women from men and prevented Chinese men and women from cooperating to launch a complete social reform that addressed their shared concern. If this complete social reform could not be realized, the Chinese feminism, in whatever form, would be a flash of light just like Du Liniang's feminism situated in a rigid feudal society. From this perspective, the imported feminism of Nora in Chinese theatre is doomed to abate as time went on but its introduction has its historical significance: After leaving homes, many Chinese women participated in the social practice and even ultimately the communist movement, which induced a revolutionary womanhood characterized by camaraderie with the Chinese men. As

China develops its modernism in the direction of the westernization, the Chinese may reconsider Nora's home leaving in its original context.

CONCLUSION

This paper analyzed the text of the Peony Pavilion in the traditional Chinese theatre and uncovered the hidden feministic tradition with its predicament by elaborating the conflict between Du Liniang's desire and the space she located in. It was also pointed out that the feminism displayed by Du Liniang has its historical limits which fetters its growth into a strong social influence in Chinese women's emancipation. This was followed by a comparison of Nora and Du Liniang in terms of feminism and contextualized the introduction and reception of Nora. It was then argued that Nora's feminism can only serve as a placebo instead of a solution to Chinese women's emancipation despite its historical significance and necessity. The introduction of Nora's feminism, somehow, is a part of the development of Chinese feminism but also an important transition from traditional womanhood to modern womanhood.

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