

Rethinking Theatrical Images of the New Woman in China's Republican Era

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Abstract: In her article "Rethinking Theatrical Images of the New Woman in China's Republican Era" Li Guo analyses the multivalent representations of the New Woman and posits that they encompass a broad array of blended feminine identities following the introduction of Western literary and cultural trends into Chinese culture. The tensions between ideological discourses about nation, gender, and politics as revealed in the plays of the republican period reveal the many underlying cultural paradigms and the processes in which dramatists Sinicized foreign models of the New Woman to appeal to their domestic audiences. Guo explores how the playwrights' gendered viewpoints contribute to divergent representation of the New Woman as a feminine subject and reconfigure Western theatrical traditions to express new ideals of women's sexual, social, and political identities.

LI GUO

Rethinking Theatrical Images of the New Woman in China's Republican Era

The conflictive image of the woman in Republican China's theater represents the shifting gendered viewpoints of early reformists, the May Fourth male pioneers and, later revolutionary women writers and performers. If the pre-revolutionist authors and actors of 新劇 (new plays) envisioned a progressive feminine subjectivity by reconfiguring Western women characters through translation, theatrical adaption, and male impersonation of Western women, such often male-centered gender constructions positioned the feminine as the colonized within the theatricality of modern China's multi-ethnic situation. During the May Fourth period, the New Woman on and off stage was identified by her interest in social reform, education for women, nation building, and politics (see, e.g., Edwards; Feng). For male intellectuals such as Shi Hu and Xun Lu, the transformation of the feminine on stage expressed their anxieties about their own social and political marginalization developed from a complex matrix of colonial and imperialist discourse (see Barlow). Theatrical delineations of the New Woman by female writers such as Wei Bai, Changying Yuan, and Xuelin Su, however, portray republican women's predicament and the *mêlée* between personal ambition and collective pursuit, between self-depreciation and revolutionary aspiration. Republican women authors' endeavors to carve out a wider space of individual and social performance redrew the discursive boundaries of gender, race, and class, and projected women's agency in a broad context of global feminist activism in the early twentieth century.

The May Fourth period witnessed the rise of "Ibsen fever" when Henrik Ibsen's plays were adapted for a Chinese audience. Ibsen's advocacy for women's independence and freedom in marriage impacted a generation of playwrights who composed works to depict women characters much akin to Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Some of the most well-known examples of Chinese adaptation of Ibsen's Nora are Shi Hu's 終身大事 (1919) (*The Main Event in Life*), Han Tian's 咖啡店之一夜 (1920) (*One Night in a Café*), Yuqian Ouyang's 回家以後 (1922) (*After Returning Home*), and Xilin Ding's 一只馬蜂 (1923) (*A Wasp*). However, in my opinion these authors' works did not offer women's inner thoughts sufficiently or probed into the social and economic reasons which contributed to the evolution of women's gender roles. In "After Nora Walks Out, What Then?" Xun Lu argues that while Ibsen's play gives people new insights into issues such as female self-consciousness and women's social emancipation, they do so without giving resolute answers to many social problems for women of the time in China. Identifying economic oppression as the major challenge for women who leave home, Lu suggests that it is only through profound struggle and drastic measures that men and women could enjoy equality. In the above mentioned play *A Wasp* by male playwright Ding, the heroine Miss Yu, a young nurse, in order to live a single life, must rely on her cleverness and even a small lie to her pressing patron to avoid an arranged marriage. The play, although ending in a moment of comic relief, does not portray Miss Yu as a liberated woman, for she is still dependent financially on her parents and would have to submit to an arranged marriage. Likewise, in Tian's *One Night in a Café*, the waitress Qiuying Bai embodies an example of modern women's tragic encounters after leaving home. At the beginning of the play, Bai flees from her family in the country, finds a small job in the city, and saves her hard-earned income in order to gain an education and then marry her lover Qianqing Li, a young man from an affluent family in her hometown. Coincidentally, one night, Li and his newly engaged fiancée visit the café where Bai works. The differences between their economic circumstances prevent Li from acknowledging his relationship with Bai. Instead, he dismisses her as "a daughter of a poor scholar from my hometown" (29). Bai's sacrifice for love and her escape from family leave her abandoned and in tears. Although the ending suggests Bai's determination to overcome her loss and to continue living, it does not provide an answer about how women, after leaving home, could achieve true independence.

The multivalent cultural figures of China's New Woman represented in these early republican period male playwrights' works indicate that gender became a crucial site of discourse where the traditional norms and Western trends of femininity meet, grapple, and implement mutual transformations. The relationship between Ibsenism and modern Chinese drama evoked broad scholarly debates about the reincarnation of Ibsen's Nora through theatrical adaptation, performance

and recreation. The aforementioned playwright Tian resorted to symbolic use of verbal and visual imageries rather than direct depiction of social issues in order to reinvent Ibsen's realist dramaturgy. In another Ibsen-inspired play *卓文君* (1923) (*Cho Wen-chun*) — Moruo Guo (郭沫若) reconfigures the Nora question by remodeling it in a romance story: Wenjun Zhuo, a young, widowed upper class woman of the Han Dynasty, disobeys her father's command and elopes with a poet, Xiangru Sima. Guo dramatizes Zhuo's elopement as the heroine's courageous decision to leave her family because of her love, a decision parallel to Nora's. In a scene in which Zhuo leaves her father's family, she answers the father's query about her filial duty: "My duties are those of a human being. To follow you blindly is not filial piety" (*Cho Wen-chun* 66). The play, along with two more of Guo's plays, *轟堂* (*Twin Flowers*) and *王昭君* (*Wang Zhaojun*) were modeled upon archetypal feminine historical figures and were collectively named *三個叛逆的女性* (1926) (*Three Rebellious Women*) (see Guo). Tian's and Guo's plays express an approach of "employing historical figures to voice the new thoughts of the twentieth century," a trend of May Fourth literary intellectuals, who, as Lu Xun puts it, "often evoke archaic sentiments in order to reflect the issues at the present" (Lu, *Fringed Literature* 159). The May Fourth male authors' remaking of Nora in the creation of a modern Chinese feminine identity articulates a desire to reform and emancipate Chinese women as part of the nation's course of social evolution. Such collective endeavors, however, brought to light the male intellectuals' conflicted stance between a desire to empower women as responsible social members and an underestimation of women's capacity to carry on nationalist action as men's equals. The May Fourth slogan of "reforming and educating women" with Western models generated another discourse of liberation and rehabilitation that subjected women to ideological representation.

In comparison with these male authors, many women playwrights during the republican period portrayed women's situations with gender-conscious perspectives. In *愛神的玩偶* (1925) (*Cupid's Puppets*) Shunqing Pu renews the Ibsen model of women leaving home by depicting a young heroine who struggles to break the shackles of her feudal family and marry the man she loves. Pu portrays the heroine's newly acquired agency through her ability to flee from the old family system and to reconstruct her own marriage based on love. This thematic presentation of women's power to reconstruct a new family and social order is also articulated in another of Pu's plays, *人間的樂園* (1927) (*Paradise on Earth*). The mythical drama is based on the Biblical story of Adam and Eve and is depicted with a potential reversal. After the couple are expelled from Paradise, Eve demonstrates her agency and leadership by encouraging Adam and working with him in building a new paradise on earth despite the atrocious environment. Pu reflects on a feminine consciousness of confronting the challenges in creating a new world. Whereas the play portrays woman as a determined and self-reliant being equal to man, the ending of the play — in addition to celebrating the triumph of humankind — suggests the annihilation of the authorial presence of god. In all, the play is an allegory of "feminist passaging toward a place of home" (Yan 46) and presents a feminist premise of humanity. As Donna J. Haraway points out, "humanity's face has been the face of man. Feminist humanity must have another shape, other gestures. Feminist figures of humanity ... must somehow both resist representation, resist literal figuration, and still erupt in powerful new tropes, new figures of speech, new turns of historical possibility" (86). Pu's play presents a plot centered on female creation or recreation of a world order, with Eve playing an active role in shaping her own and Adam's destiny.

Feminist action in the study of Chinese women writers has been measured by scholars and by critics as a valuable concept in understanding the legacy of early twentieth-century feminist activists' works and life trajectories (Yan 168-99). In the late imperial period, the cultural trend of women travelling to other countries was developed, particularly in the late Qing when cultural interaction between China and the West changed the social climate and allowed a small group of upper class women, such as ambassadors' wives or concubines, to accompany their husbands in travel (see Hu, Ying, "Re-Configuring"). From the feminist revolutionist and martyr Jin Qiu, who studied in Japan and then returned to China for women's liberation movement to the female playwright Bai, who fled an imposed marriage and travelled to Japan to obtain knowledge and freedom, women's transcultural border-crossing provide venues for their learning of new knowledge, new aspirations, and the understanding of social and cultural codes of different worlds (see Bai and He 7-8). Their transcultural experiences are characterized as a "differentiated connectivity" between various cultural

representations (Sprengrer 225). In Qiu's life this transculturality is manifested in multiple aspects from her practices of cross-dressing in Western men's suits and riding horses to supervising a women's school and advocating women's liberation in the *Chinese Women's Journal*. In Bai's work transculturality is demonstrated in her experimental adaptation of Oscar Wilde's aesthetic values in her drama, as well as in her strategic borrowing and transformation of Japanese novelist Junichiro Tanizaki's narrative techniques (see Duan 1). Likewise, Xuelin Su, who travelled to France, was much influenced by the plays by Wilde and the adaptation of aestheticism in her play *鳩那羅的眼睛* (1935) (Kunala's Eyes) that was hailed as "an oriental *Salome*" (Ding 43). Transculturality in Su's work is shown as reaching toward aesthetic universals including love, death, catharsis, and self-destruction. (See Shi, Talented Woman Xuelin Su)

The influence of Wilde's aestheticism shaped the formation of the image of the New Woman in many May Fourth theatrical works. Wilde's *Salome* was translated into Chinese in the early 1920s, with as many as six Chinese versions written, evoking interest among Chinese audiences. The aforementioned playwright Tian published one of the most well-received translations of *Salome* in 1921 in the progressive journal *少年中國* (The Young China). The influence of aestheticism and decadentism played a fundamental role in the rise of modern aestheticism in Chinese culture and literature. The theatrical adaptations of Wilde's plays by both male and female authors reveal the multiple and varied cultural paths through which Wilde's aesthetic philosophy has travelled as transformed and re-contextualized. Among the adaptations of Wilde's works, a prominent example is female playwright Su's three-act play *Kunala's Eyes*. Su, by evoking Oscar's aestheticism and decadentism, constructs a rebellious character Queen Tisyarakṣita, who, when her illicit love for Prince Kunala is turned down, plots against the Prince by forging King Ashoka's command to take out the Prince's beautiful eyes, which she desires. Whereas the theme of the play does display a unified representation of love and death, the Queen's character is not at all a flat one: scheming as she is, she is able to maintain her nobility as illustrated in the play. When the blind prince and his princess return to the palace to plead justice, she turns down the conspiring minister's suggestion of assassinating the princess, considering it a low and undignified choice. When her vicious deed is revealed to the emperor, he sentences her to death in the name of the nation. At this climactic moment, the Queen is transformed into a loquacious and even martyr-like figure who admits to her own crime, but discloses the emperor's brutality and persecution of his family and subordinates and his slaughter of innocent civilians upon conquering the neighboring country Kalinga. Her theatrical persona is by no means silent: after denouncing the emperor openly, Tisyarakṣita commits suicide in front of a statue of Mahesvara in the secluded palace garden where she had often confided her love and desire for the prince. The spirit of Mahesvara, a prominent god governing sexual desire, suggests the potentially transgressive and self-destructive power of the female protagonist.

Tisyarakṣita's persona and actions are narrated as an archetypal *femme fatale* whose love and desire dominate the story and the plot development. Her ravenous but calculating character makes her paradoxically the only potent character in the play who could threaten the patrilineal royal line: in Scene II, by using magical herbs to rescue the emperor from a fatal and mysterious disease, she makes him agree to give her the Imperial Seal for seven days and allows her to handle governmental issues temporarily. The revenge of Tisyarakṣita is later revealed as a karmic outcome of Prince Kunala's prior misdeeds: the Prince was a hunter in his previous life and had carved out the eyes of a doe and raised her in a mountain cave for meat. As a karmic retribution to the doe, in his next life the prince would have to return his own eyes to the reincarnated doe who turns out to be Tisyarakṣita. The plotline, based on a Tang Buddhist text, offers a revised narrative by depicting the feminine rebirth as the return of the maternal which brings a threatening challenge against paternal authority. Queen Tisyarakṣita represents the marginalized woman whose moral and political self-awakening has the potential of bringing about a shattering impact on the patriarchal social system. Su's recontextualization of aestheticism also lends a nascent feminine perspective to this cultural trend. By enacting a new identity as a female aesthete, Su has deployed the aesthetic style to mediate different models of femininity, for aestheticism as an *avante garde* artistic and literary form in republican China opens windows to new forms of subjectivity for women. Underneath the surface of Su's ornamental language and meticulous depiction of the characters, the conversations, and the

setting, there is possibly a political stance of endorsing strong women who are not hesitant in risking their lives in search of new freedom and new powers.

In Changying Yuan's plays women's searches for a new world result in female suicides, an extremist expression of individuality or resistance against social persecution through death. In her *孔雀東南飛* (1929) (*Peacocks Flying Southeast*), the aesthetic themes of beauty and death are married to the plotline of a Han dynasty folktale about two lovers who commit suicide because of the parents' tyrannous act of splitting their marriage. The beautiful Lanzhi was married into a family controlled by a widowed mother-in-law whose possessive love for her son Jiang drives her to torture her daughter-in-law. The mother-in-law eventually expels Lanzhi and forces her son to marry a neighbor's daughter. Meanwhile, Lanzhi, whose parents are both deceased, is forced by her elder brother to remarry, too. Yuan narrates their suicide by depicting them as a couple fleeing from the family, which stages Lanzhi and her husband as self-awakened individuals who choose self-destruction as a form of spiritual rebirth. Resonating with Su's play *Kunala's Eyes*, the oedipal motif of *Peacocks Flying Southeast* portrays the widowed mother whose disillusion with life has turned her into a predatory matriarch, also reminiscent of Tisyaraksita's character. Lanzhi's character is given more amplification than the submissive Princess in Su's play: in several scenes Lanzhi reveals a desire to resist injustice and pursue personal happiness. For example, when she is interrogated by Zhongqing about why she would agree to remarry under her brother's pressure, Lanzhi retorts to Zhongqing, for the first time, in an indignant voice, "even if I was forced to steal, to kill or to become a prostitute, what could you do to me?" (72). This fleeting moment of transgression passes when Lanzhi succumbs to Zhongqing's passionate declaration of his love for her and his determination to follow her to death. The couple drown themselves subsequently. The play ends with a tragic scene in which the mother, learning of the death of Lanzhi and Zhongqing, falls into hallucinatory reveries and hysterical outbursts of grief, suggesting the final collapse of the mother's authority. The only remaining sign of hope is in the character of Jiao's sister, Lanzhi's sister-in-law, whose presence in the original poem was minimal. In Yuan's play the sister-in-law is a candid and sympathetic person who mediates the family relationships and demonstrates signs of a budding feminine consciousness. The collapse of the mother's authority, when interpreted as a symbolic death, might provide a prerequisite for the daughter's entrance into a new social order.

Yuan admits in her preface that she was much influenced by Greek tragedy and Shakespearean drama. Citing Western aesthetic theories on tragedy, she suggests the most paramount tragedy is reflected in a human being's struggle against fate and the universe. In *Peacocks Flying Southeast*, the tragedy lies in women's inability to transcend their social and historical environments and in their desperation in personal struggles demonstrated through both the victimized heroine and her widowed and power hungry mother-in-law. Among the other plays of the early republican period, which have portrayed a wide variety of independent New Woman characters who could succeed in leaving behind the old familial system, Yuan's remake of this archetypal story perhaps drew the audiences' attention to the many marginalized women in traditional family and social institutions.

A similar motif of women finding agency through a "life-in-death" situation could be found in Pingmei Shi's short play *這是誰的罪* (1922) (*Whose Sin is This?*) which is considered by scholars and critics as an adaptation of Ibsen. A young student, Furen Wang, is engaged secretly with his girl friend Binghua Chen while both are studying in the United States. Upon Wang's return to China, he is pressed by his parents to marry his cousin Suzhen Li. Although heartbroken, Wang compromises with his parents and marries Suzhen. On their wedding day, the bride is poisoned to death and the marriage is subsequently called off. A year later, Wang finally gains his parents' consent to marry Binghua, whom he still loves. However, before their wedding, Binghua kills herself by taking poison, leaving a confession letter to Wang saying that she is actually the one who murdered Wang's previous bride. The difficulty of revealing the content of Binghua's letter in the stage performance provoked some audiences to criticize the seeming absurdity of Binghua's character as both an educated New Woman and a cold-blooded murderer. However, Shi explains her own dramatic arrangement by revealing the full text of the letter in which Binghua justifies her act by denouncing the venom of the feudal family system and pleads self-redemption through death. Importantly, Shi defends Binghua as a woman whose exclusive dedication to love drives her to the tragic path of self-destruction. The play

foregrounds a gendered identity that is beyond the nationalist discourse of reform and liberation: Binghua's self-reflection on her inability to fulfill her citizen's duty to the country is superseded by a passion for obtaining true love from Furen. Love free of familial constraints began in the May Fourth movement as "a rally point for individual freedom and family revolution" as intellectuals, guided by the slogan "love is supreme" sought to "tug everything under the sphere of love" (Lee 108). However, Shi's play also brings out a disruptive interpretation, for Binghua's unrestrained affection contradicts the May Fourth endorsement of "constancy" in love, as well as the sublime notion of love as sacralty. Shi's seemingly controversial representation of a possessive and even illicit love might be partially self-referential: Shi's first love was a married man and she chose to withdraw from the relationship (see Ke). Simultaneously, the character Binghua presents a neophyte gender subject whose individual path toward the future could not be determined by the grand narratives on nationhood and social progress.

The influence of aestheticism in modern Chinese women's drama perhaps finds its strongest articulation in Bai's three-act 1925 play *Miss Linlee*. The play stages Miss Linlee, a young female artist who studied in Japan and her triangular love relationship with a young musician Qinlan, as well as with her own sister Lilee, a successful dancer who is also in love with Qinlan. The setting of the play varies with each act including "a nameless garden in winter," "an abandoned temple-like site," and "a space of wilderness in a dream." Interspersed with dream scenes, illusions, and dramatic monologues, the play, through lavish depiction of the idealistic heroine Linlee, illustrates a feminine consciousness of the New Woman, particularly female intellectuals in diaspora. Linlee and her sister Lilee suffer a feeling of homelessness in the foreign culture and their pursuit of love and personal values is thwarted by social mores which deny women their hopes for a better future. As with other female intellectuals of the time, their pursuit of knowledge suffers from economic pressure, particularly when without hope of making a living through work gaining school scholarships becomes their only means to support themselves.

Love is Linlee's only hope in life. She confesses her infatuation with Qinlan, saying that "you are the gracious person who saved me from the void, the only person whom I have loved in the universe; forever, you will be a bleeding red rose which blossoms on my vibrating heart" (63). Linlee's passion for love, resonating with the May Fourth endorsement of un-restrained love, is most effectively delivered through the recurring metaphor of the blood, a token of love and death, which is first evoked in a melancholy feminine chorus that haunts the moon-lit setting before Linlee enters the scene. The feminine voice, announcing the arrival of the spring and urging the moon to rise and light up the path for her beloved, presents the dramatic persona of a waiting woman: "waves of blood inflame my throbbing volcanic chest; / bleeding tears blind these eyes of mine which ravish the beauty of phantoms. / Tragic fate, lamentable, tragic fate! / who will grieve on my pearl-like tears / shed so often for the sake of love!" (2-3). In the play's ornamental language aestheticism is deployed to express a feminist sexual politics: Linlee's demand for Qinlan's love and dedication reflects an idealized concept of subjectivity, a figuration of "my being" as "being with you." This initiation of the play with a desiring feminine voice "calls human entities into boundary-crossing encounters, and is evocative of a sense of one's life coming into being by joining another" (Yan 119). Sexual love, along this line, is portrayed as "the utmost beauty" in Linlee's words "the most profound and delicate beauty seems only to reside between the two sexes" (74). As these examples suggest, aestheticism became in May Fourth period an important conduit for women playwrights to explore women's sexual desire and eroticism (this is foreshadowed in late imperial erotic fiction that narrates sexuality beyond orthodox conceptions of gender propriety, e.g., Sheng's *The Golden Lotus* [金瓶梅] and Zhuren's "A Tale of An Infatuated Woman" [癡婆子傳]). The play even carries the implication of female homoeroticism in a scene when Linlee, in a moment of emotional entrancement, attempts to kiss her sister to express her love.

Sexual politics, however, is by no means the only theme that Bai portrays. In the latter part of the play, the heroine falls into an argument with Qinlan for his frivolousness in love and she decides to end their relationship and start a new life by travelling to other countries. The following two acts, both taking place in dream-like settings, portray Linlee with profound psychological depth: as the heroine awakens gradually from her personal grief, she perceives the hopeless social situation she shares with

many other educated women like herself. In her exasperation she asks her sister Lilee, "in the front is illusory darkness, / at the back is illusory darkness, / overhead, cold wind, pouring rain and flashing lightening, /at my foot, snakes, scorpions and thorny bushes that cover the whole mountain. / My sister! Where can I go? / To wander around? To beg? To do an errand? Or to become a prostitute?" (76). These inflamed rhetorical questions again reverberate with Lu's question, "after Nora leaves home, what next?" The modern woman's oppressed living conditions and marginalized social status are echoed in Act III, when Linlee, after travelling and performing on the stages of several countries, meets Qinlan and accepts death as the outcome of her pursuit of love. The ending of the play indicates that the ultimate fate of the modern feminine subject is in a fictional realm or an "otherworldly" garden of sovereignty and life (Yan 120). Yet, despite the text's indication of hopelessness, Bai endorses Linlee's struggle against the constraints of life through the later reformed Qinlan's admiring statement: "Linlee! ... For your love of me, / you challenged [life's] vicissitudes, / and roamed in the world like a lonely soul. / How assiduous your action has been! / And it is this assiduousness of your action, / that makes you accomplish your beauty" (178). Linlee's solitary journey toward agency, illusory as it might be in the end, kindles a spark of hope. The play ends on a night of tempest with the deaths of many innocent members of a troupe of travelling actors one of whom is Quinlan. In the aftermath of the disaster the stage is full of human corpses suggesting also the concomitant death of art with the artists. Bai's affinity with aestheticism and decadence unveils symbols of beauty, desire, and the bodily and symbolic dismemberment of human beings and humanity. Taken together, these intersecting themes serve as the backdrop for Bai's theatrical exploration of the New Woman's place of home in a tumultuous and polemical social and historical period.

Bai's interest in aestheticism could even be traced in her pen name Wei Bai. Her original name is Zhang Huang and she took the pen name Wei Bai after travelling to Japan to study. In a letter to her lover, poet Sao Yang, she says that the word "Wei" in her name refers to unnoticeable grass in the ground which stands for her marginalized feminine identity. The character Bai "suggests futility and emptiness ... the name Bai Wei implies boundless melancholy of women" (Bai, *Last Night* 18). This sentiment of sadness results from her personal experience: married to a man from a feudal family by her father as a gift to "bring happiness" to her husband's household, she was abused by her husband and mother-in-law. After fleeing from the family she went to Japan and fell in love with the young poet Yang, who subsequently abandoned her for another woman close to their wedding date. In her despondency, Bai, who had previously studied science, took to literature to articulate her antagonism against China's "old" social system and the powers of "modern" money (Bai, "My Initial" 7-8). And in another of her plays, *打出幽靈塔* (1928) (*Breaking Out of Ghost Pagoda*), Bai portrays the above described ideological friction between the old and the new through a family tragedy. The tyrannous feudal lord Rongsheng Hu is possessive of his adopted daughter Yuelin and wants to take her as a concubine. It turns out that Yuelin is Hu's own deserted daughter and he does not know of their relationship until Xiao, Yuelin's mother pays a visit after returning from her voyage overseas and attempts to rescue Yuelin from Hu's manipulation. When the story begins, Xiao has devoted herself to the movement of women's liberation by becoming a representative of the local Women's Association. Yuelin is in love with Hu's son Qiaoming, an awakened youth who hopes to flee the family with Yuelin and pursue a new life with her. In a tragic conflict with the young couple, Rongsheng kills his own son and captures Yuelin. In the end of the play, Rongsheng is confronted by Xiao and his own housekeeper Guiyi who expose his sinful deeds: the attempted murder of his own daughter at infancy, the forceful acquisition of a widowed neighbor's land, and the illegal profits gained through a business of selling opium. When the disgraced and vengeful Rongsheng shoots his housekeeper Guiyi and attempts to kill Xiao, Yuelin kills Rongsheng with a gun and is fatally wounded by Rongsheng at the same time. Before Yuelin's death, Xiao, who has pretended to Yuelin to be her aunt, confesses to Yuelin that she is her real mother. In a subplot, Shaomei, who is bought by Hu to become his concubine, realizes that she could not find real love in marriage and leaves Hu's house, showing a successful example of a woman escaping the shackles of the family.

The ending scene staging Yuelin's death emphasizes Bai's conjunction of death, femininity, and aestheticism. Yuelin's character represents a symbolic feminine subject who draws her ultimate power

by seeking life in death. She announces to the agitated crowd and the audience that "Determination informed me of my road ahead, / I am 'going to death,' 'going to death,' 'going to death' ... /Returned to my 'birth!' Returned to my 'birth!'/ 'Death' gives me new life! 'Death' gives me new life!" (Breaking Out 224). Yuelin's death passes along the ultimate message that only by breaking the old world order could the feminine be truly liberated. In comparison with Miss Linlee, in which death is a means of deriving the pure, intense, and most elevated form of pleasure in love, Yuelin's death portrays a feminine subject's individual sacrifice against social tyranny. The play epitomizes a situation in which life prevails against death when the feminine subject "employs internalized violence against externalized violence" (Bronfen 193). The fact that Yuelin sacrifices herself to protect her own mother Xiao also suggests a reading of Yuelin's death a form of "double violence" which "firstly produces conflict, perturbation and dynamization, and secondly, a violence that puts a forceful closure on to such disruptions, that recuperates instances of instability into stability (through the sacrifice of the feminine body)" (Bronfen 193). The focal point of the last scene is Yuelin's beautiful body, which invites speculative gazes of the audience and articulates Bai's inquiry about a woman's cultural position at the transitional historical era between the old and the new. Perhaps Bai put the heroine's dead body at the center stage to indicate that a New Woman's position in her contemporary society is equal to that of death.

In conclusion, the representation of the New Woman in the theater of the republican era encompasses a broad array of blended feminine identities which emerged with the introduction of Western literary and cultural trends into Chinese culture and literature. In the early twentieth century, pioneering male intellectuals, situated as part of a collective course of national revitalization, created China's New Woman on the stage. However, the growing tensions between ideological discourses about nation, gender, and politics also reveal the many underlying cultural paradigms which condition the processes in which dramatists, male and female, Sinicized foreign models of the New Woman to appeal to their audiences. While male authors such as Hu, Lu, Tian, and Ding reconstructed Ibsen's theatrical model to advocate women's emancipation, their viewpoints on gender and women's identity are conditioned by a self-referential stance of engaging both men and women as citizens shouldering a shared responsibility of national reform. This often male-oriented discourse of "reforming women" did not fully address women's own agency to respond to their social and historical missions. Women playwrights of the republican period — although smaller in number in comparison with their male counterparts — produced a wide array of works which appropriate and remodel Western theatrical traditions to express new ideals of women's sexual, social, and political identities, as well as to explore their predicaments of self-positioning between the new culture and the old social order. Also, women playwrights' own experiences of transcultural and border-crossing sojourns instilled their works with fresh insights and ignited their passions for expressing women's desire and sentiments from a female-oriented point of view. A central message from these women playwrights is that the effectiveness of feminist theater or any artistic exploration of the woman question can only be tested in its capacity to address particular everyday situations as related to women's artistic power in the context of today's processes of globalization.

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