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Rethinking the Blended Images of the New Woman in China's May Fourth Theater

Li Guo

Abstract:

The multivalent representations of the New Woman in China's May Fourth Theatre encompass a broad array of blended feminine identities that emerged with the introduction of Western literary and cultural trends into China. The tensions between ideological discourses about nation, gender, and politics as revealed in the plays of the May Fourth period, however, reveal the many underlying cultural paradigms that condition the processes in which indigenous dramatists, male and female, sinicized foreign models of the New Woman to appeal to their domestic audiences. This essay explores how the playwrights' gendered viewpoints contribute to divergent representation of the New Woman as a feminine subject, with a focus on a small group of May Fourth female playwrights who produced plays that reconfigure Western theatrical traditions to express new ideals of women's sexual, social, and political identities in a polemical historical era.

The conflictual image of the woman in Republican China's theatre represents the shifting gendered viewpoints of early reformists, the May Fourth male pioneers and, later, the female revolutionary writers and performers. If the pre-revolutionist authors and actors of *Xinju* (New Plays) envisioned a progressive feminine subjectivity by reconfiguring Western female characters through translation, theatrical adaptation, and male impersonation of Western women, such often male-centered gender constructions inexorably positioned the feminine as the colonized within the theatricality of Modern China's multiculturalism. During the May Fourth period, the New Woman on and off stage was increasingly identified by her interest in social reform, education for women, nation building, and politics. (Edwards, *Policing* 118) For male intellectuals such as Hu Shi and Lu Xun, both of whom participated in theatrical representation of the New Woman, 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. (Barlow, *Formations* 18) Theatrical delineations of the New Woman by female writers such as Bai Wei, Yuan Changying, and Su Xuelin, however, portray republican women's predicament and the *mêlée* between personal ambition and collective pursuit, between self-depreciation and revolutionary aspiration. Republican women authors' valiant endeavors to carve out a wider space of individual and social performance, in this regard, redrew the discursive boundaries of gender, race, and class, and projected an enlightening vision of women's agency in a broad context of global feminist activism in the early twentieth century.

The translation and dissemination of Western literature in China became a prevailing cultural phenomenon in the late 19th century. The May Fourth Movement of 1919 and the New Culture Movement in the 1920s further kindled authors' passions for writing Western-style dramas. Literary youth of the time were particularly influenced by Western dramatists, including

Oscar Wilde, Henrik Ibsen, and Eugene O'Neill. The many student drama clubs in major cities also facilitated the production and performance of this new form of modern drama. The development of modern Chinese theatre reached its zenith in the 1930s, when "spoken theater" (huaju) as a foremost artistic form was fully established and developed. Notably, this movement of modernizing Chinese drama began from major cities. In 1921, the Popular Theatre Society was founded in Shanghai; at the same time, a monthly journal *Theater* (Xiju) began publication. The May Fourth movement, guided by the slogan of creating "New Literature," paved the way for the development of modern Chinese literary realism and a shared belief among visionary intellectuals that "literature is work, and it is work that is vital to life." In the 1930s, the flourishing of China's Left-Wing theatre, is intimately associated with Japanese Left-Wing theatre in the 1920s, particularly the impact of the Tokyo Left-Wing Theatre, thanks to the shared sentiments among both countries' progressive dramatists against feudal autocracy and their common yearning for freedom. Set against this historical context, the image of China's New Woman evoked multivalent interpretations in the 1920s and 30s, revealing the social, aesthetic, and political valences of this image under specific historical situations, as well as male and female dramatists' respective gendered viewpoints.

The May Fourth period, which is the focus of this essay, witnessed the rise of "Ibsen fever," when Henrik Ibsen's plays were frequently adapted for a Chinese audience. Ibsen's advocacy for women's independence and freedom in marriage impacted a generation of playwrights who composed works that depicted female 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 Hu Shi's *The Greatest Event in Life* (Zhongshen dashi 1919), Tian Han's *One Night in a Café* (Kafeidian zhi yiye, 1920), Ouyang Yuqing's *After Returning Home* (Huijia yihou 1922), as

well as Ding Xilin's *A Wasp* (Yizhi mafeng, 1923). (He, *Chinese Noraism* 59) These male authors' depictions of the New Woman addressed the currents of the May Fourth New Culture Movement and reflected an epochal imagination of a modern femininity identity. Hu Shi's one-act play *The Greatest Event in Life* (1919) was often identified as a pioneering work addressing women's independence, and it received controversial responses from its contemporary audiences. The play, focusing on a family dispute about a daughter's marriage with her boyfriend, who recently returned to China from overseas, not only criticizes the mother's superstitious beliefs in fortunetelling, but also the father's deep-seated credence in the feudal clan system. The daughter Tian Yamei, after realizing the palpable generational gap, leaves home with her lover. In a letter she leaves her parents, she states, "Marriage is after all the greatest event in my life. I decided to make my own choice." In comparison with Ibsen's Nora, who struggles against male social and economic dominance, Yamei's fight for freedom in love is one against her overpowering family and their clan system, a representative of China's conventional social structure that allows little space for women's freedom. Although Yamei's stage character is reminiscent of Nora Helmer, representations of her on-stage presence and psychological activity are still minimal. Little evidence is given to present her transformation of mind or process of awakening. Hu's focus is less on gender relationships than on the individual's struggle against repression as it is exercised through traditional power institutions such as religion, law, and family. (Yang, *Absent Gender* 8) The absent gendered identity of the New Woman in Hu's dramatic exposé is reinforced by his ending, in which he arranges for his heroine to secretly exit the scene without openly confessing her state of mind to the audience.

A further amplified adaptation of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* can be found in Ouyang Yuqian's play *After Returning Home* (Huijia yihou, 1922). The male protagonist Lu Zhiping is

an educated intellectual who was originally married to a woman in his rural family before going to America to study. Abroad, he falls in love and ties the knot with an American wife Mary Liu. Upon his return to Shanghai, he continues to deceive both of his wives. The play, instead of portraying Zhiping's original wife Wu Zifang as a docile and old-fashioned wife, portrays her as a judicious and self-reliant woman, who, when confronted with Mary's request for her separation with Ziping, calmly claims herself as an "outsider" of their relationship. Zifang suggests divorce from her husband, knowing well that their arranged marriage could not lead to a life of happiness. Here it is the traditional wife Zifang, rather than the American wife Mary, who is presented as a Chinese counterpart of Ibsen's Nora, and even becomes the inspiration of her husband's moral awakening. While the foreign wife Mary plays the role of an intruder who triggers the crisis in Zhiping's traditional family, her role also reflects how the traditional family system has been challenged and even shattered by the influence of modernization.

Urban and rural, native and foreign tensions have been centrally reflected in Zhiping's grandmother's dream; in the dream she sees Zhiping captured by a foreign woman when returning home from the sea. The uncanny presence of the foreign woman returns in reality as Zhiping's manipulative foreign wife Mary, whose dramatic personae is set in strong contrast with the confident and composed character of Ziying. The play ends with Ziying's courageous choice of a free and independent life outside marriage, as foreshadowed by her given name "Wu Ziying," the literal meaning of which implies "Myself (shall be) a hero," suggesting the playwright's vision of seeing the spirit of the New Woman in light of women's self-reliance and everyday heroism.

These authors' works, however, did not sufficiently offer women's inner thoughts or give ample space to probe into the social and economic reasons that contributed to the evolution of

women's gender roles. In his essay "After Nora Walks Out, What Then?" prominent left-wing author Lu Xun incisively says that Ibsen's play gives people new insights into issues such as female self-consciousness and women's social emancipation, without giving resolute answers to many social problems for women of the time. Identifying economic oppression as the major challenge for women who leave home, Lu Xun suggests that it is only through profound struggle and drastic measures that men and women could enjoy equal social power. In the above mentioned play *A Wasp* by male playwright Ding Xilin, the heroine Miss Yu, a young nurse, wishes to live a single life and must rely on her cleverness and even a small lie to her pressing patron to avoid an imposed marriage arrangement. The play, though ending in a moment of comic relief, does not portray Miss Yu as a liberated woman, for she is still financially dependent on her parents and may submit to a family arranged marriage in the future. Likewise, in Leftist playwright Tian Han's *One Night in a Café* (1920), the waitress Bai Qiuying 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 carefully saves her hard-earned income in order to gain an education and then marry her lover Li Qianqing, 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 shocking differences between their economic circumstances prevent Li from acknowledging his relationship with Bai, and he dismisses her as "a daughter of a poor scholar from my hometown." Bai's sacrifice for love and her escape from family leave her only abandoned and in tears. Although the ending suggests Bai's determination to overcome her loss and to continue living, it does not provide a definitive answer about how women, after leaving home, could achieve true independence.

The multivalent cultural figures of republican China's New Woman represented in these early republican period male playwrights' works indicate that gender became a crucial discursive site 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 Han, who was dubbed "a budding Ibsen in China," resorted to symbolic use of verbal and visual imageries, rather than direct depiction of social issues, to reinvent Ibsen's realistic dramaturgy. In another Ibsen-inspired play *Zhuo Wenjun* (1924), the author Guo Moruo reconfigures the Nora question by remodeling an ancient Chinese scholar beauty romance story. The female protagonist Zhuo Wenjun, a young, widowed upper class woman of the Han Dynasty, disobeys her father's command and elopes with a talented poet, Sima Xiangru. Guo's play dramatizes Zhuo's disputed elopement as the heroine's courageous decision to leave her family for free love, a decision parallel to Nora's conscious choice. In a scene in which Wenjun leaves her father's family, she answers the father's query about her filial duty as such: "My duty as a daughter is first of all my duty of being a human being. Following the parents' order blindly is not at all true filialty." This adaptation of the archetypal image of Zhuo Wenjun transforms a renowned historical figure into an awakened modern woman who bravely denounces the social, familial, and moral norms of her society. This play along with two more of Guo's plays, *Cai Wenji* and *Wang Zhoujun*, are all modeled upon archetypal feminine historical figures and were collectively named *Three Rebellious Women* at the time of publication. Tian and Guo's endeavors eloquently expressed 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, also 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 nationalistic course 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 male authors’ plays, many women playwrights during the May Fourth period have portrayed modern women’s situations with gender-conscious perspectives. In *Cupid’s Puppets* (Aishen de wan’ou, 1928), Pu Shunqing renews the Ibsen model of women leaving home by depicting a young heroine who struggles to be free from the shackles of her feudal family and marries the man she truly loves. Here the playwright 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 free love. This thematic presentation of women’s power to reconstruct a new family and social order is also well articulated in another of Pu’s plays, *Paradise on Earth* (Renjian de leyuan). In this mythical drama based on the biblical story, the gender relationship between Adam and Eve has been depicted with a potential reversal. After God expels the couple 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. The play centrally reflects 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

mankind, even proposes the annihilation of the authorial presence of God. In all, the play is an allegory of “feminist passaging toward a homeplace” (Yan 46) and presents a feminist premise of humanity. As 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.” (Haraway, *Ecce Homo* 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 passaging, in the study of Chinese women writers, has been deployed by critics as a valuable concept in understanding the legacy of early twentieth century feminist activists’ works and life trajectories. (Yan, *Chinese Women* 168-199) In the late imperial period, the cultural trend of women travelling to other countries was developed, particularly in late Qing when intensified 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 abroad. (Hu, *Re-Configuring Nei/Wai* 72) However, the trend for progressive women intellectuals to study abroad is often characterized with a homebound gaze, with a purpose of returning to China and contributing to a collective course of national rejuvenation. From the feminist revolutionist and martyr Qiu Jin, who studied in Japan and then returned to China for women’s liberation movement, to the distinguished female playwright Bai Wei, who fled an imposed marriage and travelled to Japan to obtain knowledge and freedom, women’s transcultural border-crossing sojourns provide crucial venues for their learning of new knowledge, new aspirations, and new understandings of social and cultural codes of different worlds. Their transcultural experiences are subsequently characterized as a

“differentiated connectivity” between various cultural representations. (Sprenger, *Differentiated Origins* 225) In Qiu Jin’s life, this transculturality is manifested in multiple aspects, from her practices of crossdressing in Western men’s suits and riding horses, to supervising a women’s school and advocating women’s liberation openly in the *Chinese Women’s Journal*. In Bai Wei’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. (Duan, *Preliminary Studies* 1) Likewise, playwright Su Xuelin, who travelled to France, was much influenced by the plays by Oscar Wilde, and the adaptation of Aestheticism in her play *Kunala’s Eyes* was hailed as “an oriental *Salome*.” (Ding, *Art and Morality* 43) Transculturality in Su’s work is shown as a practice of globalizing aesthetics, and reaching toward aesthetic universals, including love, death, catharsis, and self-destruction.

The influence of Oscar 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 enormous interest among Chinese audience. The aforementioned playwright Tian Han himself published one of the most well-received translations of *Salome* in 1921 in the progressive journal *The Young China* (Shaonian zhongguo). The perpetuating influence of aestheticism and decadentism, as scholars point out, played a fundamental role in the rise of modern aestheticism in China. 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 it has been transformed and recontextualized. Among the adaptations of Wilde’s works, a prominent example is female playwright Su Xuelin’s three-act play *Kunala’s Eyes*. The play, by evoking

Oscar's aestheticism and decadentism, constructs a rebellious character Queen Tisyraksita, 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 most fervently 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 recurrently 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 ultimately 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 unremittingly discloses the Emperor's brutality and tyrannous persecution of his family and subordinates, and his slaughter of innocent civilians upon conquering the neighboring country Kalinqa. Her theatrical personae is by no means silent; after denouncing the Emperor openly, she 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.

The Queen is illustrated elaborately as an archetypal *femme fatale* whose love and desire dominate the story and the plot development. Her ravenous but calculating character paradoxically makes her 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 yield to her the Imperial Seal for seven days and allows her to handle governmental issues temporarily. The revenge of the Queen 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 live 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 in this life, who turns out to be the Queen, his step-mother. The plotline, based on a Tang Buddhist text, offers a refreshed narrative possibility by depicting the feminine rebirth as the return of the maternal, which brings a threatening challenge against paternal authority. In the context of May Fourth and New Culture movement, Queen Tisyaraksita represents the marginalized woman whose moral and political self-awakening has the potential of bringing about a shattering impact on the patriarchal social system. The playwright Su Xuelin's endeavor to recontextualize French 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 the early Republican China, opens windows to new forms of subjectivity for women. Underneath the surface of Su's highly ornamented 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 female playwright Yuan Changying's works, women's searches for a new world resulted in female suicides, an extremist expression of individuality or resistance against social persecution through death. In Yuan's play *Peacocks Flying South* (Kongque dongn'an fei), the Aestheticist 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 and poignant love for her son Jiang Zhongqing drives her to incessantly torture her daughter-in-law Lanzhi. She 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. The playwright renovates the scene of 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 South* portrays Jiao's mother as a widowed mother whose disillusion with life has turned her into a predatory matriarch, also reminiscent of the Queen Tisyaraksita's character. Lanzhi's character is given much more amplification than the submissive Princess in Su's play; in several scenes Lanzhi reveals a desire to resist injustice and pursue personal happiness. 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?" This fleeting moment of potential transgression quickly passes when Lanzhi succumbs to Zhongqing's passionate declaration of his love for her and his determination to follow her to death. The couple subsequently drown themselves in the Clear Water Pond. 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, or 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.

The playwright Yuan Changying 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 human being's struggle against fate and the universe, for in such a struggle, man has to exhaust his life and power, yet still has to accept his failure eventually. In *Peacocks Flying Southeast*, the tragedy lies in women's inability to transcend their social and historical environments, and their desperation in personal struggles, demonstrated through both the victimized heroine and her widowed, mutilating mother-in-law. Among the other plays of the May Fourth period, which have portrayed a wide variety of independent New Woman characters who could succeed in leaving behind the old familial system, Yuan's theatrical remake of this archetypal story perhaps drew the audiences' attention to the many marginalized women in the traditional family and social institutions, women who are besieged in a devouring identity crisis at the threshold of the modern era.

A similar motif of women finding agency through a "life-in-death" situation could be found in Shi Pingmei's short play "Whose Sin is This?" which is considered by critics as an Ibsenian adaptation. A young student Wang Furen is secretly engaged with his girl friend Chen Binghua while both are studying in the United States. Upon Wang's return to China, he is pressed by his parents to marry a cousin Li Suzhen. Though 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 deeply 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 bride the previous. 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, in the playwright's answer to the audiences, Shi justifies her own dramatic arrangement by revealing the full text of the letter, in which Binghua justifies her act by denouncing the remnant venom of the feudal family system, and pleads self-redemption through death. The playwright, in her own words, defends Binghua as a woman whose exclusive dedication to love drives her to the tragic path of self-destruction.

Distinctively, the play foregrounds a gendered identity that is beyond the nationalistic 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 fervent passion for obtaining true love from Furen. Free love began its career in the May Fourth movement as "a rally point for individual freedom and family revolution," as intellectuals, guided by the slogan "love is supreme" (*lian'ai zhishang*) sought to "tug everything under the sphere of love." (Lee, *Revolution* 108) However, Shi's play also brings out a disruptive interpretation, for Binghua's unrestrained affection contradicts the May Fourth endorsement of "constancy" (*zhigao*) in love, as well as the sublime notion of love as sacrality. 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 triangular relationship. Simultaneously, the character Binghua does present a neophyte gender subject whose individual path toward the future could not be fully determined by the grand narratives on nationhood and social modification.

The influence of French Aestheticism in modern Chinese women's drama perhaps finds its strongest articulation in Bai Wei's three-act play *Miss Linlee* (1925). 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. Their pursuit of love and personal values is thwarted by an engulfing social darkness that denies 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 supporting themselves through work, gaining school scholarships becomes their only means to support themselves.

Love is Linlee’s only hope in life. She fervently confesses her infatuation with Qinlan, “You are the gracious person who saved me from the void, the only person that I have loved in the universe; forever, you will be a bleeding red rose which blossoms on my vibrating heart.” (Bai, *Miss Linlee* 63) Linlee’s passion for love, resonating with the May Fourth endorsement of free 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 the heroine 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 personae of a waiting woman. The voice confesses, “Waves of blood inflame my throbbing volcanic chest; / bleeding tears blind these eyes of mine that 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!” In the play’s exceedingly ornamented 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, *Chinese Women* 119) Sexual love, along this line, has been portrayed as “the utmost beauty.” In Linlee’s words, “The most profound and delicate beauty seems only to reside between the two sexes.” (Bai, *Miss Linlee* 74) As these examples imply, Aestheticism becomes an important conduit for the women playwrights to explore women’s sexual desire and eroticism, a much constrained topic in canonical Chinese literature. The play even carries the implication of female homoeroticism in a scene when Linlee, in a moment of emotional entrancement, attempts to kiss the lips of her sister to express her love.

Sexual politics, however, is by no means the only theme that the playwright Bai Wei seeks to portray. In the latter part of the play, the heroine falls into an argument with Qinlan for his frivolousness in love; she decides to end their relationship and start a new life by travelling to other countries. The following two acts, though both taking place in dream-like settings, portray Linlee with profound psychological depth, as the aggravated heroine awakens gradually from her personal grief and perceives the truly predicating and 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?” (Bai, *Miss Linlee* 76) These inflamed rhetorical questions again

reverberate with Lu Xun'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, reencounters Qinlan, accepts death as the outcome of her pursuit of love, and finds shelter in a valley of eternal spring. The ending of the play may indicate that the ultimate fate of the modern feminine subject is in a fictional realm, or an "otherworldly" garden of sovereignty and life. (Yan, *Chinese Women* 120)

Yet, despite the text's indication of hopelessness, the author endorses Linlee's tenuous endeavors to 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) The heroine'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 Qinlan. In the aftermath of the disaster, the stage is full of human corpses, suggesting also the concomitant death of art with the artists. Bai Wei's affinity with Aestheticism and decadence, as the play evolves, unveils symbols of extreme beauty, perverse desire, and, finally, the bodily and symbolic dismemberment of human beings and humanity. Taken together, these intersecting themes serve as the backdrop for Bai Wei's theatrical exploration of the New Woman's homeplace in a tumultuous and polemical social and historical period.

The playwright's sentiment of decadent aestheticism could even be traced in her pen name Bai Wei. Her original name is Huang Zhangxiang. She took the name Bai Wei after travelling to Japan to study. In a letter to her lover poet Yang Sao, she says that the word "Wei" in her name refers to a modest, 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 pervading sentiment of sadness results from her personal experience: married to a feudal family by her father as a gift to “bring happiness” to her husband’s household, she was brutally 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 Sao, who subsequently abandoned her for another woman very close to their wedding date. In her despondency, Bai Wei, who had previously studied science, took to literature to articulate her antagonism against fate, like the disconsolate Linlee: “I cannot comprise with hypocrisy and tyranny; men’s hearts are as dark and treacherous both in the old society and new society.”

In another of Bai Wei’s plays, *Breaking Out of Ghost Pagoda* (1928), the author portrays this ideological friction between the old and the new through a family tragedy. The tyrannous feudal lord Hu Rongsheng is possessive of his adopted daughter Xiao 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 father-daughter relationship until Xiao Sen, Yuelin’s real mother, pays a visit after returning from her voyage overseas, and attempts to rescue Yuelin from Hu’s manipulation. When the story begins, Xiao Sen has devoted herself to the movement of women’s liberation, 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 Sen 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 Sen, Yuelin kills Rongsheng with a gun and is fatally wounded by Rongsheng at the same time. Before Yuelin's death, Xiao Sen, 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 determinedly 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 the playwright'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, "My determination tells me my future.... 'to die', 'to die', 'to die' and thereby returns your life! 'Death', gives me 'new life'! 'Death', gives me 'new life'! We should fight everything with death, / our 'new life'! our 'new life'! (Bai, *Ghost Pagoda* 141)" Yuelin's death passes along the ultimate message that only by breaking the old world order, by turning it upside down, 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 in this play 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, *Dead Body* 193) The fact that Yuelin sacrifices herself to protect her own mother Xiaosen also suggests a reading of Yuelin's death a form of "double-violence" which "firstly produces conflict, perturbation and dynamisation, 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, *Dead Body* 193). The focal point of the last scene on stage is Yuelin's beautiful body, which invites speculative gazes of the audience, and most eloquently articulates the playwright's speculation about the question of a woman's ultimate cultural position at the transitional historical era between the old and the new. Perhaps Bai Wei was suggesting the answer, by putting the heroine's dead body at the center stage, that a Woman's position in her contemporary society is equal to that of death.

To summarize, the representation of the New Woman in May Fourth Theatre encompasses a broad array of blended feminine identities that emerged with the introduction of Western literary and cultural trends into China. In the early twentieth century, pioneering male intellectuals, situated as part of a collective course of national revitalization, were recreating 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 that condition the processes in which indigenous dramatists, male and female, sinicized foreign models of the New Woman to appeal to their domestic audiences. While male authors such as Hu Shi, Lu Xun, Tian Han, and Ding Xilin 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. However, this often male-oriented discourse of "reforming women" did not fully address women's own agency to respond to their social and historical missions. Female playwrights of the May Fourth period, though smaller in number in comparison with their male counterparts, produced a wide array of works that appropriate and renovate 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. Whereas the current study could not fully address the lasting impact of May Fourth women's theatre on the later Leftist drama in the 1930s, a central message from these forerunning female playwrights perhaps could be derived for feminist studies in today's world of globalization: that is, the effectiveness of feminist theatre 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 cultural artistic power.

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