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# The Silent Noras: Women of the First Chinese Performance of *A Doll's House*

Liyang Xia

*This article analyzes the first fully verifiable Ibsen performance in the history of Chinese theatre—Nala (Nora) in Beijing in 1923—by a group of female students from the famous Beijing Nüzi Gaodeng Shifan Xuexiao (Peking Normal College for Women). Among scholars of Chinese theatre, this performance has often been overlooked and deemed insignificant. I argue that this performance is significant not only because it sets an example for the hundred-year Ibsen performance tradition on the Chinese stage but also because it challenged the public perception of women in theatre. This article takes issue with the dominant discourse on Ibsen's role in Chinese women's liberation, where men—the “new youth” and by and large “Ibsenites”—liberated women. It reorients the women as the pioneers of staging Ibsen in Chinese theatre. Based on first-hand archival research, I present a detailed theatre historiography of the performance while contextualizing it in the lived realities of the female students at PNCW at that time.*

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Ibsen and his play *A Doll's House* have long held an important position in China's mainstream discourse on the nation's modernization process. In this discourse, the “new youth”—by and large male

Ibsenites—take the foreground in Chinese women’s emancipation movement (Tian and Hu 2008: 82–90; Sun 2016).<sup>1</sup> And it is precisely this discourse that the state-owned media outlet—CCTV (China Central Television)—uses to illustrate the relationship between Ibsen and the *xinnüxing* (新女性 new women) of China. In 2007, CCTV aired a 12-episode documentary on the history of Chinese *huaju* (话剧 spoken drama), titled *Jubian cangsang* (剧变沧桑 The Transformations of Drama). The fifth episode, *Nala fengbao* (娜拉风暴 The Nora Storm), was dedicated to the impact of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* on the liberation of Chinese women. The opening of this episode depicts the widely-cited first performance of *A Doll’s House* in China, by an all-male troupe called Chunliu She (春柳社 Spring Willow Society). As I have argued elsewhere, there is a lack of solid evidence verifying this performance: the only images presented in this CCTV episode are a photo taken from the 1879 world premiere in Copenhagen with Betty Hennings (1850–1939) playing Nora and a blurry image of a theatre “poster” that is in fact the founding constitution of the Spring Willow Society (Xia 2018).<sup>2</sup> The series, although a documentary, appears to follow a conventional dramatic narrative featuring heroes and villains. It portrays a group of idealistic young men who, with great determination and resolve, ushered in a new era of women’s emancipation.<sup>3</sup> These men, in their practices as playwrights, theatre directors, and actors, chose to depict the sufferings of female characters to increase general awareness regarding the oppression of women. They are credited with having “successfully transformed the lives of women living in urban China” (Li 2007). No contemporary Chinese female writers are featured at length. When the documentary does focus on an actress associated with Nora, it skips several other important actresses and jumps to 1935 and Jiang Qing (江青 1914–1991)—later Madame Mao.<sup>4</sup> Her rise to fame is depicted as a consequence of her personal ambition, which was successfully engineered through duplicitous machinations, especially in her competition with another actress Wang Ying (王莹 1913–1974). The juxtaposition between male heroes and a female villain is presented as the “true story” of the women’s liberation movement in China. The problem is not that these men lacked heroism, or that Jiang Qing lacked manipulative tendencies; rather the problem is that this narrative on the one hand minimizes women’s agency in their own emancipation and, on the other, depicts a woman with power as (inherently) immoral.

The documentary has created an idealized vision of the history of *A Doll’s House* in China constructed as an uncomplicated, straightforward message about Ibsen’s impact on the Chinese women’s emancipation. It reinforces the narrative of the centrality of male

intellectuals to Chinese women's liberation history, where men—the “new youth”—liberated women. The focus of this article is to challenge this discourse and bring women back to their own stories. By looking into the first verifiable Nora performance in China, with an all-female cast from Beijing Nūzi Gaodeng Shifan Xuexiao (北京女子高等师范学校 Peking Normal College for Women [PNCW]) in 1923, my study reorients the women as the pioneers of staging Ibsen in Chinese theatre. Based on first-hand archival research, I present a detailed theatre historiography of the performance while contextualizing it in the lived realities of the female students at PNCW at that time.

School plays, as they often do, tend to be overlooked in Chinese *huaaju* history. In this particular case, the performance is mentioned in several major textbooks on Chinese spoken drama, but only in passing. Although two scholars—Seto (2015) and Sun (2016)—have conducted brief studies on this performance, neither of them provides enough detail about the performance itself or the women who performed in it. The lack of publicity and scholarly attention this performance has received poses extreme difficulty in identifying the women who were involved. The historical evidence that I have gathered so far (which has not been thoroughly analyzed until now) points to a plausible candidate for the actress who played Nora. Although the rest of the cast is undetermined, a discussion of the experiences and pursuits of the women students at the Department of Physics and Chemistry at PNCW in 1923 paints a picture of the contemporaries and classmates of those women who put on the Nora performance. They were the first generation of professional women who fought for gender equality and exercised their autonomy, not the least by choosing Ibsen to voice their concerns. The story of “men liberating women” becomes untenable when we look closely at these first Chinese “Noras,” both on stage and in real life.

### The Performance

It has been argued that Ibsen did not gain any popularity in Chinese theatre until the *aimeiju yundong* (爱美剧运动 Amateur Theatre Movement) in the 1920s (Xia 2018: 153).<sup>5</sup> Ibsen's plays were staged by many different amateur student theatre groups during this period; the first that can be verified was *Nala* (娜拉 Nora) by the women from the Department of Physics and Chemistry at PNCW, staged at Xinming Theatre (新明剧场)—an off-campus commercial theatre in Beijing—on 5 May 1923. By then, three Chinese translations of *A Doll's House* had been published,<sup>6</sup> and according to the critic Ren Tuo (仁佗), the performance was based on a translation by Pan Jiaxun (潘家洵 1896–1989)—so far China's most prolific translator of Ibsen's works—that was published in 1921 (Ren 1923).

Compared to the abundant references to the 1914 performance for which there is no supporting or conclusive evidence, the 1923 performance is much less frequently mentioned in both scholarly and popular publications. Even when the performance *is* acknowledged, it has been either deemed “a failure” and insignificant (Seto 2015: 166) or seen as a project inspired by the May Fourth men (Sun 2016: 76). By far the most thorough scholarly analyses of this performance can be found in Seto’s book (Seto 2005, 2015) and Sun’s article (Sun 2016).<sup>7</sup> Seto acknowledges that the 1923 performance is the first Chinese performance of any Ibsen play and conducts a brief investigation into the “who, where, when, what, and how” of the production. Based on the fact that “Chinese Ibsen scholars rarely mention this performance” and that “it is not recorded in some of the most representative works on the history of Chinese modern drama,” Seto comes to the conclusion that the 1923 *Nala* performance “was generally speaking a failure” and “did not mean much other than being the Chinese premiere of *A Doll’s House*” (Seto 2015: 165–166). Sun argues for a strong influence of Ibsen’s works on the women’s liberation movement at PNCW. His focus, however, is on how the women at PNCW received the new ideas from the “great thinkers and scholars,” that is, famous men in the history of Chinese women’s emancipation movement such as Lu Xun (鲁迅 1881–1936), Hu Shi (胡适 1891–1962), and Li Dazhao (李大钊 1889–1927) (Sun 2016: 76). The discourse presented in Sun’s study of the 1923 *Nala* performance is consistent with the CCTV discourse on the relationship between Ibsen and Chinese “new women.” Neither Seto nor Sun has provided a detailed analysis of the performance itself or any information about the women involved in the performance.

Based on six reviews published in *Chenbao fukan* (晨报副刊 The Morning Post Supplement) from 11 to 24 May 1923 as well as two theatre announcements and a number of other related articles published in newspapers in the 1920s, the following section is a first attempt to put together an account of this historical performance using all currently available sources. The performance reviews are by no means detailed or precise enough to provide us with a comprehensive account, but they do provide a range of diverse first-hand observations by critics with different areas of expertise and ideological viewpoints. I push back against the claim that this performance is insignificant. Instead, I argue that this first fully verifiable Ibsen performance in China *is* significant not only because it sets an example for the hundred-year Ibsen performance tradition on the Chinese stage but also because it challenged the public perception of women in theatre.

## THE MISE-EN-SCÈNE

The mise-en-scène of the 1923 *Nala*, being the premiere of Ibsen in Chinese theatre, set the standard for subsequent Ibsen performances in China. Although information on its stage setting is scarce, we can still deduce/conjecture that it was done in a realistic fashion. Two critics touched upon the props, costumes, and stage setting. He Yigong (何一公 d. 1926)—a student and drama enthusiast from Tsinghua University—remarked that the cloth backdrops were “satisfactory” but he pointed to a few “small flaws” in terms of props and costumes. For example, he stated that the mailbox was not properly installed because the audience was not able to see Krogstad’s letter lying in the mailbox. In addition, Nora and Mrs. Linde’s clothing did not reflect the season properly—they were wearing summer clothes while it is wintertime in the play. Nora wore a pair of white canvas shoes with rubber soles and Mrs. Linde wore a blue dress made of *xiabu* (夏布 linen), which was a typical look for female students in the early 20th century (“Fagui” 1922).<sup>8</sup>

Chen Xiying (陈西滢 1896–1970), professor from Peking University, described the stage in the first act as such: “A house that is half Chinese and half Western in décor. There are a few modernized Chinese style chairs. Two girls are sitting together and talking with each other. One of them faces the audience and the other has her back toward the audience” (Chen 1923b). This is most likely the scene where Nora and Mrs. Linde catch up on their lives after Mrs. Linde unexpectedly shows up at Nora’s house before Christmas. The use of a real mailbox, the modern attire, the decision to play a duologue with one character turning her back to the audience, and actors following the translated script truthfully all point to theatre of realism. The description of the costumes indicates Chinese style attire, as wearing Western-style clothing was against the official guidelines for female students’ clothing in school (Judge 2008: 117–118). According to one of the two theatre announcements, the owner of Xinming Theatre “had multiple cloth backdrops made to suit the settings of the two performances (“Shijie mingju” 1923).”<sup>9</sup> Together with the status of the Xinming Theatre, described below, this may suggest that the stage setting of this performance was more sophisticated than the standard student amateur theatre, which often took place on temporary stages on school grounds or in noncommercial theatres that were not fully equipped (Yan 2013: 130–131).

Xinming Theatre was a state-of-the-art theatre in the 1920s. An advertisement with a picture of the theatre (Fig. 1) describes it as “the most advanced and well-equipped” theatre with “bright stage, comfortable seats, and Western-style restrooms” (“Shijie minju” 1923).

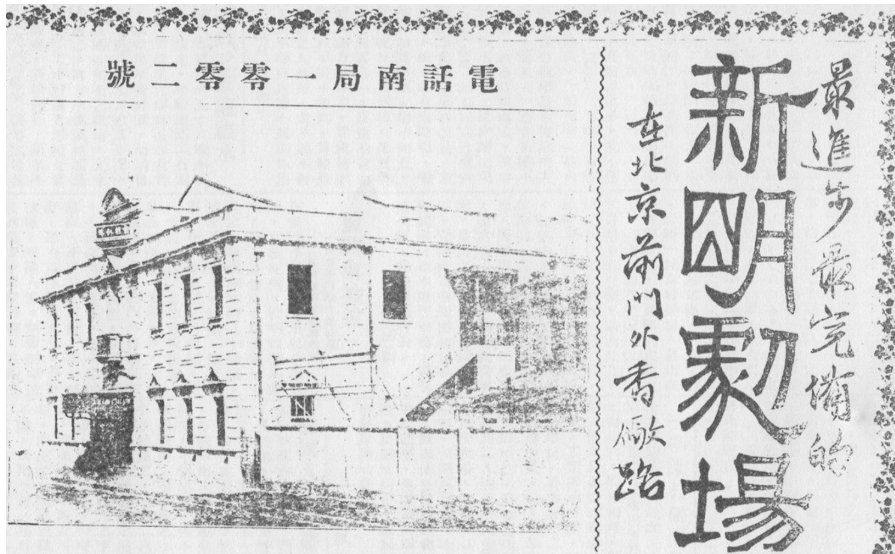


FIGURE 1. The outside appearance of Xinming Theatre. (From *Morning Post* 1 May 1923)

It was one of a few major theatres built in Beijing in the 1910s and 1920s that had a proscenium stage.

A photo from 1920 (Fig. 2) gives us a sense of what the stage looks like inside Xinming Theatre. This was a 1920 *jingju* (Beijing opera) production of *Shangyuan furen* (上元夫人 Lady Shangyuan) starring Mei Lanfang (梅兰芳). Similar to China's other modern proscenium theatres—the first being Xinwutai (新舞台 New Stage) (Fig. 3) in Shanghai—Xinming theatre was home to both new and old drama. A search in the Beijing-based newspapers in the 1920s shows that Mei, as well as other *jingju* stars, performed quite frequently at this venue. Designed for perspective scenery, the theatre used wings, borders, and backdrops. In the photograph that captured Mei's performance, the painted wings and backdrop reflect the location of the dramatic action; entrances, and exits are between the wings. The Xinming stage differs from the square shape of a traditional Chinese stage that is surrounded by audience from three sides; it also appears to have a much deeper stage than the New Stage.

Since all three acts in *A Doll's House* take place in the same living room, only one backdrop would have been used for the whole performance. A box set was unlikely; rather, the set may have used flat wings to mask the sides of the theatre.<sup>10</sup> Without visual documentation of the 1923 *Nala* performance, it is possible the domestic setting was



FIGURE 2. The stage of Xinming Theatre (1920). (Courtesy of Xu Da)

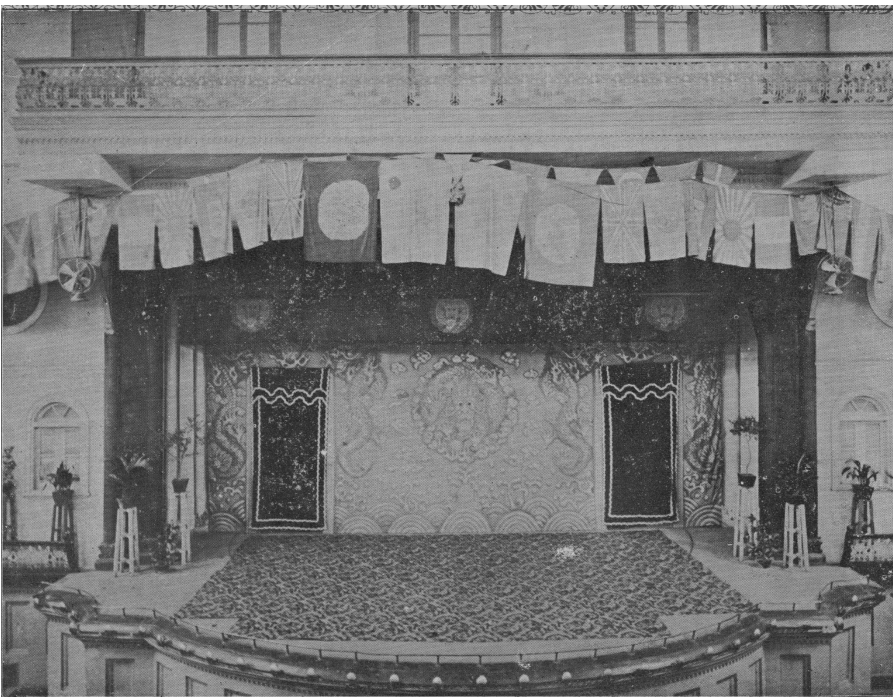


FIGURE 3. New Stage, built in Shanghai in 1908. (Courtesy of Shanghai Theatre Museum)



indicated by the backdrop and the furniture, which was “half Chinese and half Western in décor” (Chen 1923b).

#### THE ACTING/ACTORS

The critics’ views on the actors’ performance were mixed. Some gave very positive feedback while others thought the acting was too amateurish. The criticism on acting, whether harsh or favorable, all pointed to the high relevance of the performance to the incipient new drama stage.

Both Ren Tuo and Lin Ruji (林如稷 1902–1976), then a student at Université de Paris, state that the performance was “truthful to the original script,” which they claim as one of the major reasons for its success. The actress who played Nora was said to be “extremely wonderful” (*jiyou jingcai* 极有精彩) (Ren 1923), “wonderful” (*jingcai* 精彩) (Lin 1923), and “qualified” (*gouzige* 够资格) (He 1923), who “truly understood Ibsen” (*yibosheng de zhiji* 易卜生的知己) (Fangxin 1923). The critics were generally positive about her performance. This actress also played a servant girl in a melodrama the following night, as part of the two-day fundraising event. Lin and He both praised her skill in performing two very different characters without showing any trace of the other character. Fangxin (芳信) and He liked Nora’s vocal delivery and thought it was “clear” (*mingxi* 明晰) (He 1923) and “sweet” (*ke’ai* 可爱) (Fangxin 1923).<sup>11</sup> He Yigong was impressed by Nora’s ability to “use natural Chinese expressions to perform a foreign play” (He 1923).

Chen Xiying and Xu Zhimo (徐志摩 1897–1931)—poet and founder of the Xinyue she (新月社 Crescent Moon Society) and also a professor at Peking University—on the other hand, were not impressed with the performance at all. Although they did not make explicit comments on the acting, it was implied in their reviews that these amateur student actors, unlike the *xiqu* (traditional theatre) artists who received formal training, were inexperienced, and did not have the basic skill of projecting their voice. Chen mocked the actors in the new drama trend as such: “Unlike being qualified as painters, musicians, or poets, which takes tremendous training, everybody is a new drama artist nowadays. . . . It is not difficult to perform [new drama], as long as you have thick skin” (Chen 1923b). Xu echoed Chen’s view: he had “high expectation” before going to the theatre but, “to (his) surprise, (he) had to leave early” (Xu 1923b).

Fangxin and He took issue with cross-dressing in the new drama theatre, which was still prevalent until the late 1920s. They thought that the actress who played Helmer was the worst of all. Her acting was “childish and frivolous” (*zhiqu qingfu* 稚气轻浮) (He 1923); her pronunciation was “unclear” and she was “not able to perform her

role in the production” (Fangxin 1923). Fangxin attributed the failure to the actress’ “physiological limitations,” because “her voice and her movements reveal that it is a woman playing a man.” He Yigong held similar views and urged the new drama artists to adopt mixed gender cast. He quoted Vasili Eroshenko (1890–1952), an influential Russian scholar traveling in China at the time: “whether it is men imitating women or women imitating men, it is, from a real artistic perspective, just like monkeys imitating humans” (Eroshenko 1923).<sup>12</sup>

In sum, the reviews do not paint a very detailed picture for us about the performance. The cast seemed to be complete; even children appeared on the stage (Fangxin 1923). Based on the reviews, the acting was amateurish, although the actress who played Nora stood out as a talented new drama artist who appeared to be in another league compared to her fellow cast members. None of the critics mentions whether Nora performed the Tarantella rehearsal; if the performance was “true to the script” as the critics claim, then it was possible that Tarantella rehearsal was included. However, a limited budget could also mean that both the piano and costume required for Tarantella were unaffordable. Moreover, if the costumes and props indicated a (quasi) Chinese setting, then a Tarantella dance might have seemed out of place.

#### THE AUDIENCE

Audience response is discussed in five of the six reviews. According to these reviews, spectators (perhaps even the majority of the audience) left the performance before the curtain fall. Many of them left before the end of the second act. Those who stayed, however, showed great enthusiasm. This split in the audience reception is emblematic of the clash between the aesthetics of *xinju* (new drama) and *xiqu* during a transitional period in Chinese theatre.

Ren listed seven reasons why he was unhappy with the audience. For example, they shouted “*hao*” (好 bravo) during the performance; they clapped their hands, and laughed out loud when the actors were crying on stage; there was sound of doors closing every five minutes; people were chatting constantly; and people with second class tickets sat in the first class seats (Ren 1923). Such behavior was by no means uncommon among theatregoers at the time, especially among the urban *xiqu* goers who went to theatre for entertainment and pleasure (Goldman 2013: 2). In fact, the new drama movement also involved educating the audience to be quiet and respectful. For example, Chen Dabei (陈大悲 1887–1944), the main advocate for amateur theatre in China, had published an article on the debut night of his drama school—Renyi xiju zhuanmen xuexiao (人艺戏剧专门学校 People’s

Art Drama School)—teaching the audience how to behave in the (modern) theatre (Chen 1923a).

Apart from this being an illustration of the “watching behavior of the (traditional theatre) audience” (Ren 1923), which was bemoaned by many critics, there were also intellectual devotees of modern drama who left the performance because of the “amateurish” acting and a lack of “aesthetic pleasure” in the production (Chen 1923b; Xu 1923b). These intellectuals included two of the critics, Chen Xiying and Xu Zhimo, who insisted that “the lasting value of *Nora* lies in its art” and that “if we only discover the moral teaching in the play, we will miss the subtlety of art” (Ibid.). The theme of whether China’s new drama should focus on artistic values or social problems became a topic of heated debate among the critics.

A few critics described several individual cases to illustrate how the audience members received this performance. According to Fangxin, his friend Ms. H “had tears in her eyes when Nora said ‘I have thirty-one hours to live’ and feels truly sorry for Nora” (Fangxin 1923). Even though many people “left with their hats and scarfs on,” “the remaining audience members’ disturbed emotions were like kites whose strings were held in the talented actress’s hands” (Fangxin 1923). On the other hand, Chen Xiying, who was sitting within the first fifteen rows, claimed that he and several other people sitting with him had trouble hearing anything from the stage. He described two women in the audience as the following:

One woman in the audience says to another woman, “I have no idea what they are saying on the stage. I cannot hear a single word. Let’s leave.” The other woman says, “Let’s leave after the performance. It’s all the same. We have paid a lot of money for the tickets after all.” (Chen 1923b)

Indeed, Chen heard “sounds of laughing, breathing, talking, and cursing coming from all directions,” but not a word from the stage (Chen 1923b).<sup>13</sup>

The performance last for more than two hours from 10 pm till after midnight (He 1923; Fangxin 1923), which was not uncommon for school fundraising events. Not bothered by the late ending, Fangxin wrote, “What a wonderful thing it is to lose some minutes of sleep and listen to a few words of melancholy spoken with clear and sweet voices?” (Fangxin 1923).<sup>14</sup> In response to Fangxin’s review, Chen Xiying writes that, “sadly, many people were not able to hear the melancholic words from clear and sweet voices” (Chen 1923b).

Additionally, it seems that the content of *Nala* was a big reason for some spectators’ early departure. According to critic Lin Ruji, the

performance on the second night of the fundraising event saw very few people leave early and the audience were much less noisy and better behaved. This play—called *Duoqingzhi yingxiong* (多情之英雄 Romantic Hero)—was translated and adapted from Polish history by Xu Xiaotian (许啸天 1886–1946), an active drama translator and once a member of the Spring Willow Society. It portrays a woman who is passionately in love with an army general and commits suicide when political forces disrupt their romance (Xu 1911). Lin attributed the audience's better behavior to the second performance's melodramatic plot that catered to the audience's "psychological preferences" (Lin 1923). While *Nala* belonged to the theatre of ideas, it posed great challenges to the female students dealing with audience members that expected entertainment.

#### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE 1923 NALA

The significance of the 1923 *Nala* may not have been popularizing Ibsen in Chinese theatre or advancing acting techniques in *huaju*; rather, this first theatre production of *A Doll's House* on the Chinese stage continued the ideological use of Ibsen's plays among Chinese scholars—initiated by Hu Shi's "Ibsenism"—and started a century-long performance tradition of Ibsen in China. To this day, Ibsen still represents "realism" in mainstream Chinese theatre, although recently directors such as Lin Zhaohua (林兆华) and Wang Chong (王翀) have put this perception to test with their new approaches to directing Ibsen's plays.<sup>15</sup> In addition, these women's performance of a play featuring a controversial modern female character challenged the public perception of women in theatre.

In theatre, the early depictions of "new women" were embodied by male actors; Chou Hui-ling sums up the fate of women actors in the 1910s as follows:

The dominant practice of all-male casting, the harsh criticism of female artists, and the strict segregation of male and female spectators are but the tip of the iceberg of the repression of women in Chinese culture in the 1910s. The seemingly revolutionary *xinju* provided very limited room for women, though the *xinju* repertoire included a few pieces depicting the activities of women revolutionaries. (Chou 1997)

In the subsequent decade, *aimeiju* saw many women, especially female students, on stage, although mixed-gender casting was still challenging and actresses were still exposed to a high degree of voyeurism (Zhang 2015: 140). Female students that performed in *aimeiju* plays made careful choices in terms of the plays they staged, because female representations in traditional theatre—as described by Chen Dabei—were "either the chaste model women or the 'unspeakable'

demonic women” (Chen 1922). Even in new drama repertoire, the choices of female roles were very limited. The women who performed the 1923 *Nala* faced exactly this issue. According to the earlier advertisement for their fundraising event published on 20 April (“Jing nügaoshi”), they were going to perform *Nala* and one other newly written (Chinese) play. Ten days later (on 1 May), in the second announcement, the other play was changed to the Polish love tragedy. Lin’s review reveals that this change was because none of the female students wanted to play the role of a widow who is romantically involved with her adopted son (Lin 1923).

Choosing to play Nora on stage was, in Chen Xiying’s words, a “courageous” step for the female students (Chen 1923b; Xu 1923b). This is not only because they performed in public, still a new phenomenon among female students,<sup>16</sup> but also the fact they finally brought the iconic Nora to stage five long years after the play’s translation. While Hu Shi’s famous *Zhongshen dashi* (终身大事 The Main Event in Life, 1919)—a one-act play inspired by *A Doll’s House*—also has a subversive heroine Tian Yamei (田亚梅) who leaves her parents to pursue free marriage, Nora’s action at the end of the play—leaving her husband and children to seek personal development—was much more controversial.

The female students of *the amateur theatre* were nevertheless not capable of escaping objectification by the media and audience, who were more interested in seeing the female body on the stage and learning about the private lives of the actors than in the quality and content of the performances (Chou 2004; Zhang 2015). In Chou Hui-ling’s words, the actresses’ “glamorous female body and their new and exciting clothing” often took up more space in the media than photos of their performances (Chou 2004, 284). This theatrical voyeurism was “at odds with the solemnity of Modern Nationhood” that the male writers enthusiastically promoted (Chow 2003, 86). Is it possible that our first “Noras” from PNCW consciously left their names out of the theatre announcements so that the audience’s attention would be directed to the content of the performances instead of their private lives?

### The Women

Despite its significance as argued above, the 1923 *Nala* has been deemed “insignificant” in the history of Chinese theatre and therefore received little attention from scholars and popular media alike. To identify the women of this performance is difficult: the cast members’ names had not been published anywhere in the six reviews or two announcements directly associated with the performance; this perhaps

explains why previous scholars have failed to investigate the women involved in this production. However, a search through all the relevant archival materials does point to a plausible candidate for the actress who played the title role. Although the rest of the cast remains unknown, a survey of the women who studied at the Department of Physics and Chemistry at PNCW in 1923 (some of whom would have been involved in this production) suggests a high degree of their autonomy in the female emancipation movement that could challenge the dominant discourse where the May Fourth men (by and large Ibsenites) liberate the women. This survey is not meant to be a discussion of the actual cast members (if or when their identities become clear in the future); rather, it illustrates the social and political context in which this performance happened.

#### MS. WU RUYAN—A PLAUSIBLE CANDIDATE FOR NORA

*Beijing Nüzi Gaodeng Shifan Zhoukan* (北京女子高等师范周刊 PNCW Weekly)—published a photo (Fig. 4) of the students and teachers of the Department of Physics and Chemistry on 30 June 1923, less than two months after *Nala* was staged. It is likely some of them were in the *Nala* performance although it is impossible to confirm because



FIGURE 4. Photo of students and teachers at the Department of Physics and Chemistry at PNCW. (From *PNCW Weekly*, 30 June 1923)

their names were not printed with the photo. Furthermore, while list of names from the archives at the Beijing Normal University (which merged with PNCW in 1931) indicates those who could have been in the cast, the name of the first Chinese Nora on stage remains unknown.

However, a piece of the puzzle is found in a review of another *Nala* performance supposedly organized by the same department two years later, where the actress who plays Nora was referred to as a Ms. W. In this review, Lüshuang (most likely a penname), who saw the 1923 *Nala*, claimed that the actress who played Nora in the 1925 performance was the same one who played Nora in 1923 (Lüshuang 1925). If we take Ms. W as a valid clue and examine the list from Beijing Normal University's archive, we find that several names on that list start with a "w" sound.<sup>17</sup> As for which one of the Ms. Ws might have played Nora, there are no additional clues that could help us answer that question.

There was, however, a student at People's Art Drama School in Beijing and a rising star among the new drama artists named Wu Ruiyan (吴瑞燕 1904–1981). Japanese scholar Shimizu Kenichiro lists Miss Wu Ruiyan (Fig. 5) as the actress who played Nora in the 1923 performance in an appendix at the end of his doctoral thesis based solely on Lüshuang's review in 1925 (Shimizu 1994, qtd. in Seto 2015: 166). Seto questions Shimizu's conclusion based on three factors: First, Wu Ruiyan was not a student at PNCW; second, Wu played the leading role in another new drama piece just two weeks later and would not have had the energy to prepare for both performances in such a short time; and third, Wu did play Nora in 1924 in a production organized by her own school, but Lüshuang did not mention this in his review. Without "hard evidence," Seto is cautious to draw any conclusion about who played Nora in 1923.

I agree with Seto that there is no "hard evidence" to back up Shimizu's conclusion. I do, however, find several loopholes in Seto's rationale for refutation. First of all, it was not uncommon for student amateur productions to invite guests to play important roles, in some cases to draw more public attention or to improve the quality of the performance (Yan 2013: 132). Wu Ruiyan was one of the very few skilled (female) new drama actors that the public acknowledges.<sup>18</sup> Although she was a student from a different school, she worked as a teacher at the primary school affiliated with PNCW right before she enrolled into the drama school in January 1923 (Xu 1923a). It is therefore possible that Wu could have been invited to appear in a performance organized by PNCW. Second, Seto's rebuttal concerning the supposedly tight schedule prohibiting Wu's performance in two plays within two weeks could easily be disregarded if one takes a look at the list of all public



FIGURE 5. Photo of Ms. Wu Ruiyan in *Youyi Huabao* (游艺画报 Entertainment Illustrated), 26 December 1925).

performances put on by Wu's drama school between May and November 1923 (Xiang 2014: 75). The list indicates a turnover time of one or two weeks was the norm, the shortest being six days. But if the short turnover was indeed a problem, then it could explain why the actress who played Nora "forgot her lines" at the end of the play as one of the critics claims (He 1923). Third, the fact that Lüshuang did not mention Wu's 1924 Nora performance may be simply because he never saw that performance.

In addition, there are several other clues that point to the likelihood of Wu Ruiyan's involvement in the 1923 *Nala* performance. All the reviews seem to agree that the one who played Nora in that performance stood out as the most talented of the whole cast. This might point to the fact that she was a formally trained new drama actor. The 1923 performance took place at Xinming Theatre, where all of the public performances by Wu's drama school were staged, indicating a possible collaboration between PNCW and the People's Art Drama School. The director of the performance, according to one of the theatre announcements, was a "famous (new drama) director" ("Shijie



mingju” 1923). This person, though not mentioned in this particular announcement, is probably Chen Dabei—one of the founders and primary teacher at Wu’s drama school. Chen was *the* most important figure in promoting and practicing amateur theatre in China and his name was mentioned as the director for several prior performances by students from PNCW (“Tongxun” 1922; “Jing nügaoshi” 1923). Last but not least, Lüshuang’s review of the 1925 *Nala* performance quoted a certain fan of this Ms. W whose article in *The Morning Post Supplement* in 1923 used words such as “wansui” (万岁 long live) and “wuti toudi” (五体投地 throwing oneself down at someone’s feet in admiration). An archival research shows that these quotes come from an article titled “Wu ruiyan nüshi wansui!” (吴瑞燕女士万岁! Long Live Ms. Wu Ruiyan!), in which the author used the phrase “wuti toudi” to say that “the majority of Chinese should . . . bow down at the feet of (Ms. Wu’s) holy stage” (Dongzhi 1923).

All in all, Wu Ruiyan poses as a plausible candidate for the actress who played Nora in the 1923 *Nala* performance. This is by no means a conclusive statement but the best we can do based on available evidence.

#### THE LIVED REALITY OF THE FIRST CHINESE “NORAS”

In a short article published in *The Morning Post Supplement* on 4 April 1923, a critic named Su Fen described his disappointing experience at an amateur performance by students from PNCW. Su was extremely disturbed by the gender segregation in the seating arrangement at the theatre. He wrote,

To my surprise, the seating in the theatre segregated women from men. . . . I thought this was very strange. Men have been advocating loudly for women’s emancipation, but women, on the other hand, still want to imprison themselves. Men are people, so are women. Why don’t women see themselves as people? . . . . It is the women from the PNCW oppressing themselves. We men have spent countless amounts of time and energy on female liberation; why have these women belonging to the bourgeois class not awakened? . . . . I can’t help myself but cry for the women that belong to the bourgeois class. (Su 1923)

The gender dynamic reflected in Su’s article, juxtaposed by the CCTV documentary mentioned at the beginning of my article, clearly demonstrates a long-standing tendency to focus on men’s contribution to the movement of women’s emancipation in China. Yet, PNCW was an influential institution in China’s modern history as it was the first state university for women, and it taught nearly a third of the female students enrolled in Chinese tertiary education during its existence (Chen

1937). Its graduates were an important force in elementary and middle school education, and some of them became prominent writers (see next paragraph) and musicians (such as Xiao Shuxian [萧淑娴 1905–1991] and Han Quanhua [韩权华 1903–1985]) (Wang 2005; Qi 2014). Its students were the first female college students to perform in public (Lin 2009).

Recent scholarships on this institution have primarily focused on the many female writers that graduated from PNCW, such as Lu Yin (庐隐 1898–1934), Feng Yuanjun (冯沅君 1900–1974), Su Xuelin (苏雪林 1897–1999), Shi Pingmei (石评梅 1902–1928), Xu Guangping (许广平 1898–1968), and Cheng Junying (程俊英 1901–1993) (Liu 1993; He 2004; Wang 2005; Sun 2016). I will return to them in my conclusion, because their writings provide us with a window into the lived realities of the “new women” and raise questions about the leadership role of the May Fourth men in the women’s liberation movement. In this section, however, my focus is on the women scientists at PNCW.

There is little research on the women from the Department of Physics and Chemistry—only small pieces of information scattered through various sources in the archives. In the *PNCW Weekly* published on the 1 June 1924, there is a survey result of the graduating students’ job interests. Eight women are listed under the Department of Physics and Chemistry, some of whom may have been in the 1923 performance (Table 1).<sup>19</sup>

The graduation survey provides us with some information about these women’s career interests. Of the 51 students in the survey,<sup>20</sup> 18 had previous job experience (35.2%); 45 were interested in teaching subjects that were relevant to their majors in college (88.2%); 23 were also interested in taking on administrative jobs (45%). Compared to the previous phases of PNCW from 1908 (when it was founded) to 1919, the statistics shows a much higher degree of interest in pursuing jobs (He 2007: 38, 64, 96).<sup>21</sup> 3 out of the 51 women specifically wished their salary to be at least 40 yuan or 60 yuan; 2 of these 3 were from the Department of Physics and Chemistry (see Table 1). To put these numbers into context, salaries for college lecturers in 1917 ranged from 50 yuan to 120 yuan; professors could make up to 400 yuan a month and presidents made up to 600 yuan. For primary school teachers, the average salary was about 21 yuan. Manual workers made about 10 yuan a month (Yang 2015: 110).

An article in *Funü zazhi* (妇女杂志 Women Magazine) in 1924 describes women’s career choices as such:

Ten years ago, the only jobs for working women were teachers and doctors. Nowadays a small part of the men’s jobs is also open to

Table 1. Graduation survey of the students at Department of Physics and Chemistry at PNCW, published in *PNCW Weekly* on 1 June 1924.

| NAME             | PLACE OF BIRTH    | AGE | PREVIOUS JOBS | INTERESTED IN TEACHING                      | INTERESTED IN ADMIN. | NOTES                        |
|------------------|-------------------|-----|---------------|---|----------------------|------------------------------|
| 1 Li Shuhui      | Huai'an, Zhili    | 24  | N/A           | Chemistry, middle school physics, education | No                   |                              |
| 2 Li Hongmin     | Baxian, Sichuan   | 24  | N/A           | Chemistry, education, physics, mathematics  | Yes                  | Prefers to stay in Beijing   |
| 3 Lin Zhuyun     | Zizhong, Sichuan  | 23  | N/A           | Chemistry                                   | Yes                  | Salary ¥60 yuan per month    |
| 4 Zhou Zai'ai    | Hefei, Anhui      | 23  | N/A           | Physics and chemistry                       |                      | Salary minimum ¥60 per month |
| 5 Zhang Cunliang | Luojiang, Sichuan | 23  | N/A           | Chemistry, physics, mathematics, English    |                      |                              |
| 6 Lei Zhulan     | Huaining, Anhui   | 23  | N/A           | Mathematics, physics, education             | Yes                  | Prefers to stay in Beijing   |
| 7 Miu Boying     | Changsha, Hunan   | 25  | N/A           | Chemistry, physics, mathematics, Chinese    |                      |                              |
| 8 Feng Yunhe     | Lijin, Shandong   | 25  | N/A           | Chemistry, physics, mathematics, education  | Clerk                |                              |

women, such as bank clerk, railway administrator, shop keeper and accountant. . . . Women are even seen among university professors and government officials. None of these was possible ten years ago. (Selu 1924: 21)

Even so, women tended to hold lower positions and get paid less than men (Yao 2012: 25). For them, to ask for a minimum salary of 40 or 60 yuan meant that they wanted to be economically independent and have the same pay as their male colleagues. This is significant because it was at a time when most Chinese women did not work outside of home or have access to formal education. In fact, some of the women who went to PNCW still had bound feet (Cheng 2004: 335). Just as in the theatre world, where female actors faced harsh criticism and voyeuristic behaviors, highly educated women had to constantly make sacrifices to maintain their economic independence. Many schools and hospitals that hired female college graduates had rules against women employees getting married (Zhu 2013: 43).

Table 1 is my translation of the section in the graduation survey concerning the Department of Physics and Chemistry.

Biographical information for these women is scarce, except for Miu Boying (繆伯英 1899–1929) and Feng Yunhe (豐云鶴 d. 1988).<sup>22</sup> Miu was the first woman to join the Chinese Communist Party. She was enrolled into PNCW in July 1919 as the top student in her region (Changsha). In 1920, she took a break in her study at PNCW and joined the Marxist study group in Peking University, initiated by Li Dazhao (李大钊 1889–1927), CCP member and then professor of history and politics at Peking University. Miu married He Mengxiong (何孟雄 1898–1931), her fellow CCP member, and died of typhoid fever at the age of 30. Her husband was arrested and killed by the nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) fourteen months after his wife's death. Miu and He were survived by their two children, who lived in prison in Shanghai for over a year before being moved to an orphanage. It is unknown what happened to them after the Japanese invaded Shanghai in 1932. Feng was an important figure in the history of textile. She was the first woman in the history of the Ohio State University to receive a doctorate degree in chemical engineering (1931). She developed a process for making rayon fiber from bamboo, rice, and sorghum stalks in Berlin University in the 1930s. Feng returned to China in 1938 and served in the government for both the Republic and People's Republic of China.

This brief survey and the little biographical information give us a window into the reality for the first “Noras” on Chinese stage. Similar to their fellow students at PNCW, these women were active in China's political and intellectual arenas. They became the role models for

generations of women to come who also wanted to fulfill themselves outside of what was traditionally prescribed to them—the home.

### **Conclusion—Rethinking Ibsen and the “New Women”**

This study tells the story of the first Ibsen performance in China, where the women are the subjects of their own emancipation movement. It has challenged the conventional discourse on the relationship between Ibsen, May Fourth (male) luminaries, and Chinese women, where women are seen as the objects that need to be liberated. These women’s performance of *A Doll’s House* in 1923 may have been dismissed as amateurish, but what was significant about them was that these trailblazers, in the midst of their studies and real life challenges to the status quo, chose to stage a play that depicted a woman who demands equality to men.

Liu Chuanxia’s article entitled “Yanshuo Nala yu Nala yanshuo” (言说娜拉与娜拉言说 Discourse on Nora and Nora’s Discourse) dissects the problems with treating women as the “object” of their emancipation. Liu compares the male writers’ discourse on the “new women” and the female writers’ discourse on their own life. One of Liu’s many provocative findings is that the male Ibsenites created, in their writings, a dynamic in which men are the enlightened liberator and women the unenlightened (Liu 2007). Common to the male writers’ works is the portrayal of women as devoid of thought and voice, in need of liberation from the evil old system (Chow 2003; Liu 2007). The women writers, on the other hand, through giving a voice and authority to their female characters, reveal “the sexual oppression and exploitation in the heteronormative relationships in the new era”—that is to say, the “new woman,” after leaving her father’s house, once again faced traditional gender roles in the new family system, and continued to be deprived of individuality and independence in the era of supposed liberation (Liu 2007: 42–44). What is illustrated in the female writers’ works is the complex and painful existence of the “new women” who questioned their male counterparts—those subversive men who saw themselves as the victims of the old system while inheriting some of the benefits of the traditional gender order. This confrontation with the reality is one of the reasons why these women writers’ works have been “rejected by the mainstream literature and purposefully ignored in the narration of the literary history” (p. 44).

The difficulties and challenges faced by these “new women” reveal a complexity that the male-centered discourses in conventional studies of the May Fourth movement have failed to unveil. This article is only the beginning of bringing women back to the center of their own stories. Ibsen’s influence on the “new women” of China needs to be

reevaluated with a more nuanced investigation into his presence within the public speeches, theatre performances, and writings of these new women, and their appropriation of Nora as a surrogate to articulate their own experience.

## NOTES

1. When it comes to Ibsen's influence on Chinese women's emancipation movement, mainstream history books on Chinese drama tend to give the male Ibsenites such as Hu Shi 胡适, Lu Xun 鲁迅, and Ouyang Yuqian 欧阳予倩 much more attention than the women that were the actual subject of this movement. This reflects, in many ways, a top-down approach to history writing.

2. Betty Hennings (1850–1939) was a Danish actress at the Royal Danish Theatre. She performed in a number of Ibsen's plays, including Nora in *A Doll's House*, Hedvig in *The Wild Duck*, the title role in *Hedda Gabler*, and Ellida in *The Lady from the Sea*.

3. These young men were Hu Shi, Hong Shen 洪深, Ouyang Yuqian, Cao Yu 曹禺, and Xia Yan 夏衍.

4. Several women played Nora during the 1920s and 1930s. For example, Wu Ruiyan, argued in this article as a plausible candidate for the Nora role in the 1923 *Nala* performance, also played Nora in 1924. Wang Ping 王苹, a school teacher in Nanjing, played Nora in 1935 and was consequently dismissed by the school.

5. *Aimeiju* (amateur theatre)—led by Chen Dabei—was an effort to counter the problems of *wenmingxi* (文明戏 civilized drama) by advocating for nonprofit and noncommercial theatre. For a discussion on *aimeiju*, see [Wetmore 2014](#): 75–98; for a discussion on the complex phenomenon of *wenmingxi*—the form that *aimeiju* responded to, see [Liu 2013](#).

6. *Nala* (娜拉) by Luo Jialun (罗家伦) and Hu Shi ([Luo and Hu 1918](#)), *Kuilei Jiating* (傀儡家庭) by [Chen Jia \(陈赓\) \(1918\)](#), and *Nala* by [Pan Jiaxun \(潘家洵\) \(1921\)](#). All of these translations were based primarily on William Archer's (1856–1924) English translations of Ibsen's play.

7. Sun's translation of the school's name is different from the official English name as listed on the college's journal. I have used the official name, which is Peking Normal College for Women.

8. The late-Qing and early Republican authorities had strict regulations on female students' clothing. See [Guo and Tao 2017](#) and [Judge 2008](#).

9. *Nala* was one of two performances at a two-night fundraising event held by the students from the Department of Physics and Chemistry at PNCW.

10. The advertisements for Hong Shen's production of Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* the following year (1924) in Shanghai claimed that it was the first use of the box set in China. Although Hong Shen may not have heard about or seen the 1923 *Nala* performance, it being a student production, it is still unlikely that the 1923 production used a box set.

11. Chen Xiying (陈西滢) claims the review under Fangxin's name is written by Pu Boying (蒲伯英), Chen Dabei's close friend and founder of People's Art Drama School (Chen 1923c).

12. Vasili Eroshenko was a Russian poet. He traveled to China in 1921 and taught Esperanto in Peking University. He lectured in many universities in Beijing during the early 1920s. In April 1923, his speech at People's Art Drama School was published in the *Morning Post Supplement* (Eroshenko 1923). Lu Xun translated some of his works into Chinese.

13. Chen attributes the poor sound quality to two facts: that these student actors are not properly trained to project their voices far enough in a big auditorium; and that Xinming Theatre does not have good acoustics. According to him, he went back to the same theatre two days later to see a traditional opera performance, only to come to the conclusion that the acoustics in this theatre is not as good as some other theatres (Chen 1923b).

14. The contradiction between Fangxin's and Chen Xiying's experience with the sound quality could be due to their different seating positions in the auditorium.

15. Lin directed Ibsen's *The Master Builder* in 2010, a production that features long monologues and minimalistic stage setting. Wang directed *Ibsen in One Take* in 2012, using filmic tools and meshing several Ibsen plays into one. Both productions toured Norway as guest performances under the International Ibsen Festival.

16. The first time female students performed in public was in 1922, by a group of students from PNCW's Chinese Department. They performed four *huaju* plays at a three-day fun fair off campus (Zhou 1922).

17. W would be the initial sound of the actress's family name, for which there could be many candidates (Wu, Wang, Wan, Wang, Wen, etc.). In *Beijing Nüzi Gaodeng Shifan Xuesheng Zizhahui Tongxuelu* (北京女子高等师范学生自治会同学录 PNCW Student Association Name List, 1922), three names start with the sound of W: Wu Ruixia (吴瑞霞), Wang Zhuyan (王竹岩), and Wu Biyun (吴碧云).

18. In 1923 and the years afterwards, Wu Ruiyan was praised to be a pioneer and true artist in Chinese new drama. See, for example, Dongzhi 1923 and Laida 1925.

19. The performance took place in May 1923, before the summer break, which means the cast members were enrolled anywhere between fall 1919 and fall 1922.

20. The survey is missing students from several departments including the Chinese department. In this regard, the survey is incomplete.

21. The percentages of graduates from PNCW interested in pursuing jobs in the previous years are: 51.8% in 1911; 69% in 1914; 39.3% in 1916; 45.3% in 1917.

22. Feng's year of birth is said to be one of 1898, 1899, and 1900.

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