

From Social Problem Play to Socialist Problem Play:
Ibsen and Contemporary Chinese Dramaturgy

Kwok-kan Tam

Drama as a performing art is one of the most powerful means to arouse the audience's emotional response. It is the tradition of Chinese theatre to use drama to satirize current political and social events. Apart from China, there are numerous other examples to demonstrate that drama has been useful as propaganda both to a ruling party and to its opposition. In Japan, the shogunate of the Tokugawa period (1600-1868) worried that *kabuki* might lead to unrest by running counter to the social and moral order espoused by the government. In Berlin, Bertolt Brecht's (1898-1956) *The Mother* was banned from the stage for fear of the emotions it could evoke among the audience. Instead of banning drama, Chinese Marxists have used it as a weapon against opposing ideologies for many decades, considering it a powerful tool to disseminate their ideals and to educate the people.

Dissatisfied with the Aristotelian definition of drama as an imitation of life, the Chinese Marxist literary critics claim that the stage should not only be a reflection of the nature of life and society, but also provide a direction for future development. Based on Lenin's (1870-1924) doctrine that historical materialism recognizes social being as independent of the social consciousness of humanity, Chinese Marxists considered art, especially drama, a reflection of social being, at best an approximately true copy of it.¹ The theatre as a reflection of social life has the political function of pointing out to the masses the way toward which socialist construction is heading.

For nineteenth-century writers, realism was equated with mimesis. Critical realism, in the sense Georg Lukacs (1885-1971) uses, was a socially conscious practice, by which the writer described existing social conditions. Thus realism, in the sense that it was used in critical realism, was inseparable from "realistic technique," which might better be rephrased as "illusionistic technique," the purpose of which is to create an illusion on the stage by separating the audience's world, which is the only real one in the theatre, from the drama's world, which is only an illusion created by the dramatist. Realism thus was conceived broadly and philosophically as the way a writer perceived the world. If realism can be viewed as consisting of two dimensions, of which one is presentational in nature in that it presents life as it is and treats the stage as a picture of life, then the other is representational for it treats life not as what it seems in appearance, but as what it signifies.

¹ V. I. Lenin, *Collected works*, XIV, (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962), p. 323.

The distinction between the presentational and the representational is similar to what Georg Lukacs calls the "outside" and "inside" methods of realism.² The outside method, that is, the method used in critical realism, presents life from the outside and its interest is in the present rather than in the past. The past is only used to describe the present. The inside method is adopted by socialist realism and its purpose is to represent the social forces working toward the future. In terms of perspective, critical realism criticizes, while socialist realism praises. Socialist realism believes it is the laws of life, in which the nineteenth-century mind also believed, that are more representative of life than what appears to be. Critical realism is sometimes designated as external realism, referring to the surface presentation of life in a true-to-life way, whereas socialist realism is considered internal realism, aiming at the in-depth representation of life, which may or may not be presented in a true-to-life way. Both kinds of realism can be found in modern Chinese drama, as well as in the interpretation of Ibsen.

The history of Ibsen (1828-1906) interpretation in China precisely demonstrates what the German literary theorist Hans Robert Jauss believes: literary history is the history of textual production and reception. When critical realism was in fashion in China, Ibsen was considered typical of the trend; when socialist realism became orthodox, firstly through Mao Tse-tung's (1893-1976) Yenan speech on the socialist function of literature and art, Ibsen was given a new context, in which his plays were considered reflections of class struggles in Norway. As concepts in literary criticism, both critical realism and socialist realism, however different their political implications may be, are useful in identifying the relationship between literature and society. However, as a dogma for creative writing, both are prone to reduce literature to a set of formulae. The reason why Maxim Gorky could make a smooth transition from critical realism, which he had learned from the great masters of Russian literature and practised in his early writings, to socialist realism is that he did not distinguish realism as a way of perceiving the world from realism as an illusionistic technique. Nor did he differentiate concepts of literary criticism from doctrines for writing. The concepts of critical realism, grasped by the Marxist literary critics by the method of induction, if applied to literary writing, become the formulae and rules of socialist realism, with which literary writing, or textual production, is but a game of logical deduction, according to which characters and plots are arranged. That is why in contemporary China, many writers, as well as critics, believe that there is no genius of creative writing but the clever manoeuvring of formulae.

The origin of such beliefs in literary writing, or more specifically playwriting, in China, prior to the introduction of socialist realism, can be traced back to Hu Shih's (1891-1962) essay, "Ibsenism," in which realism as a literary technique is not distinguished from realism as the author's way to perceive the world. In other words, Hu Shih believed that the events described in Ibsen's plays have correspondence in the real world. Realism is not treated as a technique with the purpose of creating illusions.

²Georg Lukacs, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*. (tr.) John and Necke Mander (London: Merlin Press, 1972).

Ever since the appearance of Hu Shih's essay, realism in Ibsen has seldom been seen by the Chinese as a literary technique. Many critics believe that content cannot be separated from form. There is of course relative truth in this statement. In literary criticism, form and content are in fact inseparable. But in literary creativity, it is necessary to make a distinction. The possession of a "correct political world view" does not mean, as some contemporary Chinese Marxist literary theorists believe, that one can master the form of presentation which can interest the audience.

With the emphasis on the determinacy of content over form, it follows that the technical aspects of Ibsen's drama have too often been ignored, also indirectly as a result of placing too much emphasis on his world view. In fact, realism was regarded by many early Chinese dramatists shallowly as a reflection on stage of an event that could be found in real life. In other words, realism is a reenactment of life and is equated with actual happenings, but not with the style in which the drama is presented. In terms of acting, this kind of external realism has the advantage of breaking away from the traditional Chinese theatre, which is symbolic and impressionistic in style. The presentation of real life events, which lack direction, on stage does not allow any room for fixed roles and formulaic acting. In this sense, one of Ibsen's contributions to the Chinese theatre is the inception of a realistic stage. For many years, illusionistic acting in the fashion of Stanislavsky's style and Ibsen's realistic drama has been the main-stream in the modern Chinese theatre.

Ibsen's first and obvious impact on the Chinese stage was upon the style of acting, the use of props, and stage design; in other words, the first elements of external realistic technique. Since a slice of life does not necessarily seem credible on the stage, it is no wonder that many of the Chinese plays written in the 1920s are impossible to stage. The conflict between playwriting and production was, to a certain extent, solved when in 1934 and 1935 two spectacular presentations of *A Doll's House* took place in Shanghai. Ch'en Li-t'ing (1894-), a theatre critic, who liked to use his initials, C.L.T., as pen name, commended the performance as a breakthrough in Chinese acting style. Actors thereafter began to pay more attention to posture, tone of speech, and movements and tried to make everything on the stage as real as in daily life. Although this mimetic, or realistic, style, Ch'en said, might not be appropriate for the Chinese stage, so far as the actors do not "take everything in the basket as vegetable," then it was good progress in acting technique.³ In this way, Ibsen's social drama also served as a model for acting style. Because drama was often considered as one of the best ways to convey messages to the masses, later playwrights began to think more about the practical aspects of whether the play was possible to stage.

A less obvious but important impact Ibsen made on the Chinese playwrights was the use of stage directions as a visual suggestion to help create the atmosphere the play needs, which contributed much to the rise of drama as literature for reading pleasure in China. John Northam (1922-) points out in his book, *Ibsen's Dramatic Method*,

³C.L.T. (Ch'en Li-t'ing), "A Tentative View of Acting Techniques" (Yen-chi shih lun), *New China Daily* (Hsin-hua jih-pao), 25 June 1942, p. 4.

that stage directions are an important component of the realistic effect of Ibsen's plays. A reader, who has to exercise his imaginative faculty in reading an Ibsen play, is not as fortunate as a spectator, who, at an adequate production of the play, would receive the message from stage directions without being aware of it. With the aid of visual suggestion, which can supplement dialogue as a means of portraying complex personality and provide a sense of the atmosphere, Ibsen added to his plays unspoken information where strict realism inhibits "open statements of feeling and motive." By evoking simple, emotional responses to colour, light, and darkness, stage directions can help "steer the mind through the many situations where dialogue alone presents merely a choice between conflicting interpretations of character."⁴

In this aspect Ibsen contributed a great deal to the Chinese theatre, for in the greatest modern Chinese dramatist Ts'ao Yü's (1910-) plays, such as *Thunderstorm*, *Sunrise*, and *Peking Men*, stage directions are an essential part. For the traditional Chinese playwrights and actors as well, drama was treated as little more than a script for the stage. It was the actors' responsibility to visualize it and design the stage for production. But the idea of drama as literature, and particularly for reading pleasure, requires elaborate stage directions to help the reader get a feeling of the atmosphere.

In his essay, "Ibsen's Drama and Box Sets" (I-pu-sheng ti hsi-chü ho hsiang-hsing pu-ching), Li Ch'ang gives a detailed analysis of how Ibsen uses stage directions to create an atmosphere for his plays and to intensify their themes. *A Doll's House*, for instance, is set at Christmas, a time for family reunion, which helps create a warm and comfortable family atmosphere. Contrasted with the severe cold outside of the house, the warm atmosphere makes the audience feel that it really needs courage to leave the family. The situation awaiting Nora the squirrel is even more severe and difficult. Notwithstanding these difficulties and the uncertainty that lies ahead, Nora still leaves in order to pursue what she believes to be her own education. Ibsen thus successfully uses the setting to help present Nora's personality and thoughts and her thorough determination to fight for equality.⁵

In Ts'ao Yü, there is obvious evidence of Ibsen's influence in terms of stage directions as a technique of realism. For example, in *Sunrise*, sunlight is used at the end to indicate the bright future awaiting Fang Ta-sheng, who is a figure of hope in a hopeless society, whereas the hotel in which the prostitute Ch'en Pai-lu stays is a symbol of darkness, which is in sharp contrast to the light outside. In his other plays, such as *Peking Men*, Ts'ao Yü again gives detailed description of the stage properties, which contribute to the visual effects on stage, a technique perfected by Ibsen. In Hsia Yen's play *Under the Eaves of Shanghai*, there are long stage directions, giving full particulars of the sets in the manner of an Ibsen play. In this sense, it is also through the exemplary effects of his plays that Ibsen has exerted his influence on the Chinese stage.

As William Archer says of England, Ibsen's influence in China is also of two kinds:

⁴ John Northam, *Ibsen's Dramatic Method* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1953), p. 12.

⁵ Li Ch'ang, "Ibsen's Drama and the Box Set" (I-pu-sheng ti hsi-chü ho hsiang-hsing pu-ching), *Theatre Studies* (Hsi-chü yen-chiu), No. 4 (1979), p. 112.

one direct, and the other indirect.⁶ It is comparatively easier to point out Ibsen's direct influence in China than to define his indirect impact, which is often expressed in the form of social and philosophical ideas. The direct influence is visible to the extent that it is traceable as borrowings or imitations in some Chinese dramatists, such as T'ien Han (1899-1968), Ou-yang Yü-ch'ien (1889-1962) and Ts'ao Yü. On the other hand, the indirect influence is invisible and hard to trace. Yet, it is this kind of indirect influence that is more far reaching, especially when it merges with the cultural and social movements in China. Not more obvious is the example of socialist realism, which on the Chinese stage is integrated with Ibsenism. Since the Chinese Marxist literary critics failed to make the discrimination that the author's world view is not the same thing as his techniques, Ibsen's realism was considered to be his world view only, and not a dramatic technique. Ibsen was regarded as a realistic playwright in China mainly for the social implications of his plays, very seldom for the true-to-life presentation of his themes and even less often for the dramatic techniques, which enable his plays to be realistic. In other words, to the early Chinese Marxist literary theorists, the what's and why's were more important than the how's. In this way, Ibsen was enlisted to serve socialist realism.

Chou Yang (1908-), a leading Chinese Marxist authority, believed in the 1950s that the central and most important task of literary and artistic creation, as defined by socialist realism, was to portray new people and their new ideas and at the same time to oppose the enemies of the people and every manifestation of backwardness among the people. The party policy stressed that literary works should create positive, heroic characters because Party leaders wanted to hold them up as examples to the people and because they wanted progressive vitality to struggle against all that was reactionary and backward and obstructed the advance of society. It was a general belief among Chinese Marxists that the task of portraying positive heroes was inseparable from the task of exposing negative manifestations. Writers, moreover, must show that the backward and reactionary will be overwhelmed by the invincible, new forces.⁷

All these criteria set forth by Chou Yang can be found in Ibsen's social problem plays, if they be abstracted from their context and reinterpreted according to the doctrines of socialist realism. In *A Doll's House*, Nora and Helmer are regarded by the socialist critics as a pair of opposites in acute confrontation: the former is positive, and the latter negative. The outcome is that the negative is overwhelmed by the positive. This might not be the intention of Ibsen. Actually, throughout his life Ibsen objected many, many times to this kind of rigid, formulaic interpretation of his plays,⁸ but unfortunately this is the general attitude contemporary Chinese drama critics have toward Ibsen.

⁶ William Archer, *The Old Drama and the New* (Boston: Small, Maynard and Company, 1923), pp. 307-308.

⁷ Chou Yang, "For More and Better Literary and Artistic Creations!" in his *China's New Literature and Art* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1954), pp. 31-32.

⁸ See Michael Meyer, *Ibsen: A Biography* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1971), pp. 662, 774-775.

A careful study of the dramatic structure of *A Doll's House*, which is composed of exposition, complication, crisis, and discussion (or more correctly, as in Raymond Williams's interpretation, a confrontation of different values), will show that the socialist interpretation of the play is not convincing at all, for Nora does not overwhelm Helmer as an ending to the play. She just leaves home without knowing what will happen to her in the future. Ibsen evades the responsibility of providing the result of the confrontation by making one side of the opposing pair leave the scene. In this way, the confrontation is turned into a declaration of irreconcilable attitudes. Although Nora leaves home, the differences between Helmer and her still exist. The dramatic conflict disappears, but not the social and family conflicts between Helmer and Nora. Hence, a number of plays appeared in both China and the West as sequels to *A Doll's House* purporting to show what happens to Nora after she leaves. It is the discussion, or confrontation, scene that makes the play open-ended. The socialist critique of Ibsen's use of the discussion scene and Nora's leaving as a dramatic technique evasive of a resolution and thus indicative of Ibsen's half-hearted attitude toward social reform simply turns the dramatic structure of "exposition, complication, crisis, and discussion" into one of "exposition, complication, crisis, and resolution," a conventional structure popular with the well-made play. In this respect, the Chinese socialist interpretation of realism is thus a break from the Ibsenian problem play and signifies a return to the nineteenth-century positivist notion, from which orthodox Marxism originated, that there is resolution for every problem. In fact, one of the modernist elements in Ibsen's drama is that there is not always an answer to every question. However, it is exactly for this skeptical attitude that the Chinese Marxists and other socialist critics find fault with Ibsen.

The change in structure from ending with a discussion scene to ending with a resolution scene in Chinese socialist problem plays is a good example demonstrating what Douwe W. Fokkema says: "particular changes in the immanent development of literary structures can sometimes be explained with reference to the challenge of a new historical situation or to newly formulated demands by literary critics."⁹ The literary critics here of course include the cultural officials in China, who for a long time have supreme power over the orientation of literary and art production.

The Chinese Marxist interpretation of Ibsen's social problem drama solely as a manoeuvring of social and moral conflicts also has its origin in the nineteenth-century French dramatic theory. In his famous definition of drama as the conflict of wills, which has always been cited as doctrine by Chinese drama theorists, Ferdinand Brunetière (1849-1906) says:

Le *drame*, en général, c'est l'*action*, c'est l'imitation de la vie médiocre et douloureuse; c'est une représentation de la volonté de l'homme en conflit avec les puissances mystérieuses ou les forces naturelles qui nous limitent et nous rapetissent; c'est l'un de nous jeté tout vivant sur la scène

⁹Douwe W. Fokkema, "New Strategies in the Comparative Study of Literature and Their Application to Contemporary Chinese Literature," *New Asian Academic Bulletin*, Vol. 1 (1978), p. 5.

pour y lutter contre la fatalité, contre la loi sociale, contre un de ses semblables, contre soi-même au besoin, contre les ambitions, les intérêts, les préjugés, la sottise, la malveillance de ceux qui l'entourent. . . .¹⁰

Viewed in this way, the Chinese idea of a socialist theatre is an extension and modification of Brunetière's concept of "dramatic conflicts." From an orthodox Marxist point of view, literature is a reflection of class conflicts, which are represented by the different wills of the people involved. Although Brunetière does not make it clear whether dramatic conflicts can be equated with class struggles, the idea is extended by the Chinese Marxists. In contemporary China, critical realism is replaced by socialist realism, which requires the writer to reflect the progress in society. Any social progress, in the view of Chinese Marxists, must be a result of the resolution of conflicts. Physically or spiritually, conflicts are the basic principle upon which the world operates. Human knowledge is necessarily a reflection of the material world. Thus, Brunetière's definition of drama fits well into the Chinese Marxist ideology.

In his book, *Iconoclasts: A Book of Dramatists*, James Huneker (1860-1921) interprets Ibsen's drama in terms of Brunetière's idea of conflicts. While Ferdinand Brunetière declared that there is no tragedy without a struggle and that there cannot be genuine emotion for the spectator unless something other and greater than life is at stake, Huneker thought that this might specifically describe Ibsen's dramas and their social implications.¹¹ This definition of Ibsen's drama has been in fact adopted in most Chinese studies on Ibsen. Perhaps this explains why socialist realism, Brunetière, and Ibsen may go together and form a trinity in the modern Chinese theatre. Socialist realism has been adopted in China as an overall orthodox principle governing literary and art productions, whereas Brunetière's definition of the theatre is taken as a supplement to the overall principle, and Ibsen's drama a concretization of Brunetière's theory, serving as a model for playwriting. This trinity as the foundation of contemporary Chinese theatre and dramatic theory ruled China until recent years when signs of change began to appear. Ibsen did not write much about his dramatic theory or ideas concerning theatre. It is the critics who have theoreticized Ibsen and continue to give him new political, as well as critical, stances.

Li Chien-wu (1908?-), a noted Chinese dramatist and critic, defined the essence of socialist theatre in its reflection of social contradictions,¹² which, according to Mao Tse-tung, could be classified into two kinds in socialist China. One is contradictions between the revolutionary people and the bourgeois, which have to be resolved by violent means. In a play, this will be presented as the death of the villain. The other is contradictions among the people, the two sides of which are not diametrically

¹⁰ Ferdinand Brunetière, "L'évolution d'un genre: la tragédie," in his *Études critiques sur l'histoire de la littérature française*, VII (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1893), pp. 152-153.

¹¹ James Gibbon Huneker, "Henrik Ibsen," in his *Iconoclasts: A Book of Dramatists* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1917), p. 1.

¹² Li Chien-wu, "Dramatic Conflicts in Socialist Drama" (She-hui-chu-i hua-chü ti hsi-chü ch'ung-t'u), in his *New Horizons in Drama* (Hsi-chü hsin-t'ien) (Shanghai: Shanghai wen-i ch'u-pan she, 1980), p. 55.

opposed and can be resolved without violence, or sometimes through compromise. Li Chien-wu affirmed that tragedy is a product of feudalist or bourgeois society and that socialist society will only produce comedy. The death of the hero never occurs in a play with a socialist setting because in socialist society the hero always dominates the villain. A realistic play must reflect this new reality.¹³ In other words, the formula in socialist drama results from the effort to make drama a reflection of reality. With this understanding of realism in mind, Li Chien-wu further pointed out that socialist drama has a structure of preparation, complication, crisis, and resolution.¹⁴ There is no discussion scene such as that in *A Doll's House* simply because of the superiority of socialist society in which nothing is irresolvable.

The death of the hero or the heroine's leaving in order to avoid an irresolvable conflict is only a reflection of bourgeois social reality, in which the progressive is always suppressed by the reactionary. In most bourgeois plays, Li Chien-wu argued, the protagonists are often isolated in front of a strong power. When the playwright cannot help them overcome their difficulties by means of dramatic arrangement, they will either die or, at most, tie with the villain, at the end of the play.¹⁵ From the socialist point of view, this also explains why Ibsen only brings up the social problems in his plays but is unable to provide a "satisfactory" resolution. It is simply impossible for Nora to throw Helmer out of the house; hence, she has to leave. As a matter of course, if *A Doll's House* is not read as a play about social conflicts and their "proper solution," then there is no problem of whether Helmer or Nora should dominate in the last scene. Li Chien-wu's view of socialist drama represents the Chinese understanding of socialist realism in the 1960s. Yet in the 1980s, some Chinese critics still take it as a criterion to assess the artistic achievement of a play. For example, Wang Chin-chung's "The Tragic Beauty of *A Doll's House*" ("Wan-ou chih chia" ti pei-chü mei) emphasizes that the different kinds of conflicts in the play are the decisive elements that contribute to its artistic success.¹⁶

Contemporary Chinese dramaturgy is further exemplified in Ku Chung-i's (1904-1965) book, *The Theory and Technique of Playwriting* (Pien chü li-lun yü chi-ch'ao), published in 1981. It is one of the few Chinese books on dramatic theory. The author was a drama professor at the Shanghai Drama Academy and he himself a noted dramatist. The book was written in the early 1960s when Ku was teaching a course on dramatic theory. It is therefore typical of the Chinese view of drama, and theatre in general, in the 1960s. In a section dealing with the interrelationship between conflicts in life and conflicts in drama, Ku asserted that both are closely related and yet different. Dramatic conflicts, he said, have to reflect those in life, and conflicts in life are the basis of dramatic conflicts, which in turn are a concrete, figurative presentation

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Li Chien-wu, "Socialist Drama" (She-hui chu-i hua-chü), in his *New Horizons in Drama*, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

¹⁶ Wang Chin-chung, "The Tragic Beauty of *A Doll's House*" ("Wan-ou chih chia" ti pei-chü mei), *Chiang-su Drama* (Chiang-su hsi-chü), No. 9 (1982), pp. 16-18.

of conflicts in life after they become typicalized, generalized, and elevated.¹⁷

To give an example to explain this relationship between conflicts in life and in drama, Ku cited scenes from Ibsen's *The Pillars of Society* and *A Doll's House* to stress that many of the events and characters in these two plays originated from real life.¹⁸ Ku believed that some of Ibsen's plays were based on real persons and real events; Ibsen only developed real events into art. When Ibsen got an idea, he would try to find situations in real life to fit the plot, often by associating it with stories about his friends. Ku therefore claimed that *A Doll's House* is a dramatization of the social contradictions between a male society and the advocacy of women's emancipation.¹⁹ Although this notion of how Ibsen got the idea of women's emancipation in *A Doll's House* may be far-fetched, the point here is not to discredit Ku but to illustrate that Ibsen is regarded in contemporary China as a source of inspiration for the writing of socialist problem plays.

The exemplary function of Ibsen's plays, especially *A Doll's House*, in showing the subtlety of the dramatist's techniques can be found in the fact that Ku quoted Ibsen at length more than twenty times in his book. Besides the theoretical discussion of drama, Ku also gave many examples to illustrate the technical aspect of playwriting. In this book, the dramatic techniques used by Ibsen in his social problem plays are treated as indispensable elements for good playwriting. Taking into consideration that the book developed from a series of lectures Ku gave at one of the leading drama schools in China, it may be assumed that it has exerted a tremendous impact upon the younger generation of Chinese playwrights and directors. It goes without saying that Ibsen has therefore become one of the important pillars of contemporary Chinese theory of drama and theatre. This book is a good example of the Chinese attempt to blend socialist realism with Brunetière and Ibsen's conceptions of drama.

In Chinese Marxist dramatic theory, drama is constituted only by dramatic conflicts of great social significance, which are presented as conflicts of will or personality between the characters. Only when the conflicts of human will materialize on the stage as a series of conflicting actions will there be drama.²⁰ In another sense, drama is a personification of social conflicts. This is a Marxist view that struggles constitute the basis of the world, material or spiritual. However, Marx never said that a playwright should proceed with abstract rules and create his plays as a crossword puzzle. Furthermore, the actualization of internal conflicts into external conflicts is the reverse of modern trends in drama. Chekhov's (1860-1904) so-called plays of indirect action are dramas of internal conflicts rather than external, yet they are no less realistic than Ibsen's dramas. Apparently realism does not necessarily refer to the resemblance between a play's external action and social events.

¹⁷ Ku Chung-i, *The Theory and Technique of Playwriting* (Pien chü li-lun yü chi-ch'ao) (Peking: Chung-kuo hsi-chü ch'u-pan she, 1981), p. 100.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Ku, p. 123.

In contemporary China it has become a tradition for literary critics to look at literature as a social product. In the realm of literary criticism, critics are used to applying class analysis to a work of art and neglect, more often than not, the artistic aspect of it. They take this attitude toward Ibsen's plays and therefore concluded that they are pictures of class struggles. The overemphasis on dramatic conflicts as the essence of drama and the confusion of dramatic conflicts with social class struggles make the playwrights interpret life from a politicized perspective. Thus, when learning from Ibsen, the Chinese playwrights almost without exception focus on how the dramatic conflicts in Ibsen's social plays are arranged and developed. Once the abstract principles deduced from the social problem play are taken as truth for playwriting, it simply means that the politico-philosophical concepts, which belong to the plane of the abstract and universal and are obtained by the method of induction, are applied with the method of deduction to creative writing, which should be on the plane of the concrete and the particular. In that case, the dramatic hero is made, in Hegelian terms, the "universal-historical individual," who embodies too much social significance to be true to life and lively. That perhaps explains why Chinese audiences always complain that most contemporary plays in China are of the same structural pattern and their endings can often be deduced by the socialist logic. It is the presence of the universal plane on which all events are projected that makes drama not a picture of life, but a formula. In other words, the method of deduction affects the creative process and thus takes away from drama the qualities of life, which can only be presented as a figurative and plastic art on the stage. Hence, realism is no longer realistic in the sense of being mimetic but in the sense of being true to the formula, which represents absolute truth only to the philosophers and never to the spectator of a drama, who wants to experience something new but within his comprehension.

The introduction of socialist realism as a principle of creative writing and critical criteria appeared first as very challenging to the Chinese writers, as well as audiences, in the 1950s. A large number of plays produced in the seventeen years from 1949 to 1966, the year the Cultural Revolution started, were directly influenced by socialist realism, which was pushed to its extreme in Chiang Ch'ing's "model plays." The practice of substituting social or political struggles for dramatic conflicts was common in China during the peak of the Cultural Revolution. Chinese cultural leaders believed so deeply in the formula, which treated drama as a concretization of the logical deduction of class struggle theory, that they provided the results of their deduction as raw ideas for the playwrights to materialize on the stage. The principle of "three distinctions" was an extreme proposed under the instruction of Chiang Ch'ing, which required playwrights to celebrate especially revolutionary heroism in their works.

The downfall of the "Gang of Four" in 1976, however, brought about an opportunity for the old plays produced before the Cultural Revolution to be put on the stage again. But to the amazement of the theatre critics, especially Marxist theorists, the average audiences were no longer interested in these plays, though they were rather popular in the 1950s and 60s. The causes of the loss of interest among the spectators are of course many, but the major one is that the plays produced in those years were almost all based on a single formula of class struggle. For example,

the three most popular socialist realistic plays in the 1950s and 60s were *Raging Flames and Red Hearts* (Lieh huo hung hsin, 1958), *Taming the Dragon and the Tiger* (Hsiang lung fu hu, 1958), and *Never Never Forget* (Ch'ien-wan pu-yao wang-chi, 1963), which reflected Mao Tse-tung's famous warning in 1962 to the Chinese Communists: "Never, never forget that there is class struggle." How political and topical this play is can be figured out from the date of its composition in relation to that of Mao's directive. All three plays have the same pitfall of overpoliticizing minor affairs in daily life to reflect ideological conflicts and class struggles.

Raging Flames and Red Hearts was first conceived by its author with a true story as the basis of its plot, which tells of an army veteran who wants to build a factory for the county he lives in, but the county government is careful in its investments and does not approve the veteran's request immediately. Also under the influence of the class enemies, who hide their real intentions in front of the revolutionary people, the county officials question whether the plan to build a factory will succeed. Along the line of the struggle between the veteran and the county officials are other minor conflicts and humorous scenes. But the first version of the play was criticized by some theorists for not being able to pinpoint the major struggle in society, nor could it reflect the "spirit of the age." According to class analysis, the major conflict at that time was that between the working class and the intellectuals, who belonged to the class of petty bourgeoisie. At the suggestion of these theorists to distinguish the revolutionary spirit of the working class, the author rewrote the play, adding an educated specialist, who is a foil to the veteran. The major conflicts in the play thus result from a formulaic application of a political ideology. It is not so much a problem of whether class conflicts constitute the essence of socialist drama as one of the mechanical process of composition, which kills the creativity of the playwright.

The other two plays, *Taming the Dragon and the Tiger* and *Never Never Forget*, were also written more or less by a process of starting with a mechanical class analysis and filling out the plot with characters and events that the authors could think of. *Taming the Dragon and the Tiger* centres on two different, but not necessarily contradictory, opinions about the building of a bridge. But in order to fit the ideological requirement, the playwright made the two opinions very much at odds with each other. The positive side of course is represented by the working class, who are brave and determined in overcoming all kinds of difficulties in building the bridge. The negative side is composed of the intellectuals, who are always timid in the face of difficulties. In order to reflect the government policy and fulfill the requirement of class analysis, the intellectuals were made to be representative of bourgeois ideology. The conflict, which is originally not a political one, is thus exaggerated and raised to the level of class struggle. *Never Never Forget*, as its title connotes, is a highly politicized drama. The author tries to describe the law of class struggle through an ordinary event in a worker's family. The play depicts how a "model worker" is corrupted by bourgeois ideology in his pursuit of a materialistic life. It unfolds with the young worker, under the influence of his mother-in-law, having borrowed money from his friends to buy a piece of wool cloth. In order to return the money to his friends, the young worker has to work extra hours on the weekend by hunting wild

ducks. This is a commonplace event in China but is exaggerated to reflect the class conflict between the young worker's mother-in-law and his father, who opposes the pursuit of bourgeois materialism in life. Actually, the main body of the play is presented as a battle between the mother-in-law and the father, both of whom try to pull the young worker to his or her side.

Overpoliticizing as a prerequisite of socialist realism is a characteristic of the contemporary Chinese theatre, as well as of ordinary life in revolutionary China. Chinese Marxist theatre critics believe that revolution and socialist construction require a high Marxist political and social consciousness. The purpose of art, particularly performing arts, is to elevate the people's political awareness. When socialist realistic plays first appeared in China, they were able to arrest the audience's interest. To use drama as a means to explain political philosophy was at that time a new experience in China and had what Shklovsky calls the effect of defamiliarization upon the audience. Thus the three plays became popular among the Chinese people for a short time. But once the formula was overused and the audiences were educated to be able to figure out on their own what the ending was, there was simply nothing to interest them any more. Though art can educate people, its artistic greatness seldom lies in its social function. The artistic quality is the only thing that can make art, to which drama belongs, immortal.

The more recent development of the Chinese view of theatre can be found in T'an P'ei-sheng's book, entitled *On the Dramatic* (Lun hsi-chü hsing), published by the Peking University Press in 1981. The author is a professor of drama at the Central Drama Academy, Peking. The result of a combination of practical stage experience and many years of research, T'an's book gives a picture of theatre theories in China today. The title shows that it is possibly inspired by William Archer, a notable Ibsen critic, whose book, *Playmaking*, written in 1912, starts with an argument about what makes a play dramatic. Archer, who is generally considered an opponent of Brunetière, thought that conflicts do not constitute the essence of drama. Instead "crisis" does. For Archer, a play is a "rapidly-developing crisis in destiny or circumstance, and a dramatic scene is a crisis within a crisis, clearly furthering the ultimate event. The drama may be called the art of crises, as fiction is the art of gradual development."²¹ In the West, there was much controversy in the 1910s about the nature of drama. But, as a matter of fact, both Brunetière and Archer were correct. They were just dealing with different aspects of the same thing. A crisis may be defined as a critical moment at which the conflicts are at their greatest tension. If conflicts can be defined as the basic principle that generates the dramatic action, then crisis is a point in the whole process of the action. Archer placed more emphasis on crisis because he wanted to point out what interests the audience most: the conflict of the crisis. T'an P'ei-sheng's purpose in going back to the old argument between Archer and Brunetière is to remind Chinese playwrights as well as the audience that conflicts alone do not produce a

²¹ William Archer, *Play-making* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1944), p. 36.

good drama. T'an is a mediator between Archer and Brunetière. While he believes in Brunetière's theory that there is no drama without a conflict, he also thinks that conflicts do not necessarily produce dramatic effects. T'an's position reflects much of the general trend in Chinese dramatic theory in the post-Cultural Revolution period, which tries to break away from the doctrine of equating class struggles with dramatic conflicts. T'an is especially dissatisfied with the kind of drama which is little more than a formulaic combination of class struggles, party line struggles, and ideological struggles, with a linear plot line developed along the conflicts of two diametrically opposite sets of characters, who in turn represent different class interests.²² This kind of drama, however, was enthusiastically recommended by Ku Chung-i some two decades ago. The bankruptcy of such a doctrine in playwriting was inevitable, as audiences in a free atmosphere in recent years have shown their disinterest in the stage of socialist realism. Chinese playwrights finally discovered that something dramatic is needed in very good play.

With the purpose of repudiating formulae in playwriting, which is based on an erroneous interpretation of Brunetière's theory and Ibsen's social problem play, today's Chinese dramatists object to the practice of applying certain sociological theory to playwriting. As T'an says in his book, political doctrine or any social theory should not be used as the only criterion to judge the social significance of a play. The depth and significance in characterization can only be measured by how much truth about life and society the characters embody. According to T'an, if the characters are presented in a lively way, they must be true to life and thus possess social significance. Otherwise, as the drama critic Ch'en Kang says, they will be dead personification of dead rules.²³

To remedy the extremism of the past, Chinese drama critics suggest that a good play should start with real and lively characterization, not with the fitting of puppets into a plot. In other words, they think that the plot and characterization should come to the mind of the playwright first, then the philosophy. It is the reversal of the process the critic goes through in interpretation and evaluation. A critic may start with a philosophical-critical framework and test the work with it. Hence, it is a rational process. But the playwright would only reduce creative work to a mechanical and formulaic process should he start with a philosophical idea and make a play by fitting in what he could find in his experience. With this understanding of the difference between a critic and a writer and, more importantly, between the process of critical thinking and that of creative thinking, Chinese dramatists begin to have a new perspective of Ibsen's social problem plays.

The dramatic theorist T'an P'ei-sheng traces the origin of the confusion between the critical process and the creative process to government intervention in creative writing. As he says in his essay "Social Contradictions and Personality Conflicts" (She-

²² T'an P'ei-sheng, *On the Dramatic* (Lun hsi-chü hsing) (Peking: Pei-ching ta-hsueh ch'u-pan she, 1981), p. 58.

²³ Ch'en Kang, "Problems and Issues in the Development of Spoken Drama" (Hua-chü fa-chan chung ti chi-ko wen-t'i), *Studies on Theatre* (hsi-chü lun-ts'ung), No. 4 (1983), p. 33.

hui mao-tun yü ko-jen mao-tun), published in *Playscript* (Chü-pen) in 1981, in an attempt to make art serve politics, the Chinese government for a long time has required writers to illustrate government policy and political philosophy by means of their works. A well-known example is Ts'ao Yü's new play, *Wang Chao-chün*, which was written with the intention of revising a historical legend, which is full of implications of Chinese resentment for the northwestern minorities who invaded the Chinese interior and were thus described as barbarous. Ts'ao Yü's purpose was to illustrate a new policy of promoting friendship among the different ethnic groups in China. As a historical play, Ts'ao Yü's *Wang Chao-chün* parallels Kuo Mo-jo's *Cho Wen-chün* in that both let a political or social idea serve as the formula for playwriting.

Analyzing the relationship between drama and society, T'an proposes not to treat dramatic conflicts and social contradictions as equivalents.²⁴ He thinks that real dramatic conflicts are conflicts in personality between the different characters. If the playwright wants to dramatize social contradictions, T'an cautions, he should present them through the lively and complex conflicts in personality. According to T'an, this is the first rule for a good playwright. If particularization in plot construction, description of external events, and internal characterization are elements of foremost importance in figurative art, then a play, whether its major dramatic conflict consists of a character struggle or a social contradiction, should first possess the quality of being individualized and avoid generalization. There is simply no such thing as an abstract and generalized human being or social event. T'an further asserts that particularization in characterization is central to a play and is the basic premise for the particularization of dramatic conflicts.²⁵ T'an suggests that good playwriting should avoid the abstraction of individual events and persons into sociological principles. Drama has to present particular events and persons in life rather than political theories or policies, which are highly abstract and generalized.

The nature of contemporary Chinese theatre before the 1980s can be best summed up as a process of learning from Ibsen without understanding Ibsen. The major obstacle to a balanced Chinese view of Ibsen is that too much emphasis is put on the political effect of his plays at the expense of his art. It is true that literature has its political effect when put into a political context, but its political effect alone does not make it art. Literature is an art form because it has something more than the political and social effects it produces. For many years Chinese dramatists have been learning from Ibsen how to write social problem plays and have produced a large quantity of such plays. But the eagerness to master the principle of playwriting has produced a side effect which imposes a model and formula upon playwrights. The formula as such is composed of a social event, which is then analyzed and developed to establish two opposite sides. The characters are divided accordingly into two conflicting camps in order to illustrate the major ideological and class struggle of the age. In those

²⁴ T'an, *On the Dramatic*, p. 80.

²⁵ T'an, "Social Contradictions and Personality Conflicts" (She-hui mao-tun yü hsing-ko ch'ung-t'u), *Playscripts* (Chü-pen), No. 5 (1981). Rpt. in *Yearbook of Chinese Theatre*, 1982, (Chung-kuo hsi-chü nien-chien 1982), p. 292.

days, what made a playwright more than a politician and social theorist was that he added humour, but not necessarily art, to the play, which would otherwise become an accurate, factual political report.

This kind of playwriting actually has its origin in traditional Chinese theatre, in which the positive and negative characters are distinctively separated and contrasted by means of the highly symbolic Chinese stage conventions. The Chinese socialist realist formula in playwriting is not only a return to the eighteenth-century dramaturgy by which a play was made simple and direct with every character labelled either as a hero or as a villain, but also a violation of Ibsen's method of playwriting, which, as the eminent English theatre critic Clement Scott (1841-1904) pointed out in the *London Daily Telegraph* of February 19, 1891, was to "mystify" the plot and let the audiences decide for themselves what the motivations of the characters were.

Today many Chinese dramatists and critics begin to acquire a new perspective and are frustrated at seeing that Ibsen's lively problem plays have degenerated into a formula to illustrate some kind of ideology.²⁶ The critique of the biased interpretation of Ibsen in China in recent years is indicative of the emergence of a new trend in playwriting, which opposes rigid political control and the interpretation of social problem plays to illustrate a political philosophy. With regard to the stage conventions in contemporary China, Ibsen's social problem play and "the fourth wall" mode of presentation, together with Stanislavsky's acting style, have become the mainstream in Chinese theatre, which also affects the perspective of drama critics, who have gradually and unconsciously formed a fixed view of drama that excludes other possibilities of stage style.²⁷ For a long time before 1976 in China, the social problem play in the vein of Ibsenian drama, but modified and coloured with socialist realism, was the only form of modern drama known to audiences and critics as well.

Although the majority of contemporary Chinese plays are still affected by the presence of formulae and rules, there are signs of a breakthrough in recent years. Against the convention of the contemporary Chinese theatre, which is equivalent to the sum of socialist realism, Brunetière's theory of dramatic conflict, Ibsen's convention of dramatic structure, and Stanislavsky's style of performance, these signs of breakthrough indicate a diversification in theatre arts. New dramatic forms are being experimented with on the Chinese stage. In comparison with Ibsenian drama, these innovative plays, such as *Atom and Love* (Yüan-tzu yü ai-ch'ing) and *The Imposter [If I Were Real]* (Chia-ju wo shih chen ti), exhibit a greater degree of structural variety and flexibility than those written in the 1960s and early 70s. Contrary to the rule of "three unities" of time, place, and action, these plays have multiple scenes, which move from place to place. Breaking away from the law of structuring around a central dramatic conflict, the new playwrights are more capable of using a loose structure with little linear fluidity, producing a dreamy effect more or less like that of the Western

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

²⁷ Ch'en Kang, p. 33.

absurd plays. Increasing use of narrative elements and transition of scenes to stimulate the audience's imaginative and reasoning faculty is characteristic of these experimental productions, which show the influence of Brechtian theatre. The new plays also experiment with the use of additional characters, who may not be directly related to the central action of the drama, to show the complexity of contemporary life, which cannot be summed up as lineal relationships among just a few characters.²⁸ All these innovations indicate the direct influence of contemporary Western drama, resulting from the growing contacts between China and the West and a return to the traditional Chinese dramatic style. These new Chinese plays have been sometimes referred to as "prose drama," which has the Chinese connotation of being loose in structure and thus a reaction to the well-knit structure of Ibsenian drama.

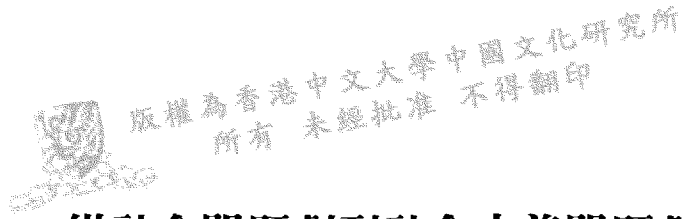
The Chinese, however, are not blaming Ibsen for the unitary and monotonous form of drama on the stage. In an article, entitled "A Traditional Misinterpretation—A Brief Note on 'Ibsenian Structure'" (I ko ch'üan-t'ung ti wu-chieh—hsiao i "I-pu-sheng shih ti chieh-kou"), the author Sun Wei reminds Chinese critics not to blame Ibsen but themselves for their own misinterpretation of him. He thinks that it is not only unfair but also a violation of historical truth to accuse Ibsen of being mechanical, for Ibsen never formularized his drama and actually wrote many different kinds of plays, which unfortunately have never been introduced to China. With such a view, Sun Wei urges Chinese dramatists to learn more about Ibsen's drama besides the problem play. The key for a successful dramatist is to endlessly explore other methods of presentation. Instead of repudiating the social problem play, Sun Wei argues, Chinese playwrights should read them again in a new light so that they may reinterpret Ibsen.²⁹

Ibsen has dominated the Chinese stage for more than seventy years since the introduction of his philosophy and dramatic technique. Chinese politics, society, and culture have changed a great deal, but Ibsen remains popular and influential. During the past thirty years his drama has merged with the political needs of China and has been interpreted with Brunetière's theory of drama and patronized by socialist realism. When the Chinese theatre, under political pressure, went to the extreme, Ibsen still enjoyed a high degree of popularity, though he is much misrepresented. Many people blame Ibsen for the political ambiguity in his plays, yet he was an artist and thus did not have to express his political preferences as clearly as a politician does. As Lu Hsün says, even if Ibsen were still living, he would not be obliged to give an answer to every question, for he was writing drama and not raising a problem with a ready-made solution.³⁰

²⁸ Li Ch'un-hsi, "Innovations in Dramatic Structure in the Past Two Years" (T'an liang nien lai hsi-chü chieh-kou hsiang-shih ti hsin t'an-so), *Heilungchiang Drama* (Heilungchiang hsi-chü), No. 2 (1981), Rpt. in *Yearbook of Chinese Theatre*, 1982, p. 295.

²⁹ Sun Wei, "A Traditional Misinterpretation—A Brief Note on 'Ibsenian Structure'" (I ko ch'üan-t'ung ti wu-chieh—hsiao i "I-pu-sheng shih ti chieh-kou"), *Foreign Theatre* (Wai-kuo hsi-chü), No. 3 (1983), pp. 97-99.

³⁰ Lu Hsün, "What Happens After Nora Leaves Home?" *Chinese Literature*, No. 9 (1973), p. 24.



從社會問題劇到社會主義問題劇

易卜生與當代中國戲劇理論

(中文摘要)



譚國根

本文論述易卜生戲劇與當代中國戲劇理論的關係，從比較文學及戲劇與政治的角度評論易卜生對中國話劇的影響。易卜生戲劇在四九年後的中國曾被視為戲劇的基本模式，因而與社會主義現實主義結為一體。其時中國話劇採納布倫退爾的戲劇衝突說，強調戲劇衝突與社會矛盾的統一性，從而對易卜生戲劇的社會意義特別重視，並引以為話劇的典範。中國戲劇家雖然並不認為易卜生是社會主義劇作家，但對其社會劇卻推崇備致。

七六年後中國大陸的政治及社會變化帶來了對易卜生的重新認識和評價。易卜生式的戲劇不再處於一尊的地位。易卜生戲劇在中國的影響，與中國社會變遷息息相關。中外文化交流與外國文學吸收諸問題，亦可從中國戲劇家對易卜生的評論窺其一二。

