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**Title: A Myth that Glorifies: Rethinking Ibsen's early reception in
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Introduction

There is a consensus among Ibsen scholars and scholars of Chinese spoken drama that the Spring Willow Society staged *A Doll's House* in Shanghai in 1914 (e.g. A Ying / Qian 1956; Ge 1982; Eide 1983; Tam 1984, 2001; He 2004, 2009; Chang 2004; Tian and Hu 2008; Tian and Song 2013). In 2014, when the National Theatre in Beijing staged *A Doll's House* to commemorate the centenary of this premiere,¹ most of the news reports and theatre advertisements cited the Spring Willow Society's prior performance.² Scholars and journalists who write about the history of *A Doll's House* in China agree in general not only that the performance took place but that it was the first performance of an Ibsen play in China.³ I myself referred to this performance in my doctoral thesis (Xia 2013). In recent years, however, doubts have emerged not only about the claim that the Spring Willow Society performed *A Doll's House*, but that the Society performed any plays by Ibsen. The following scholars have asserted that there is no concrete evidence that the performance of *A Doll's House* took place: Seto Hiroshi (2002, 2015), Huang Aihua (2001); Zhang Chuntian (2013) and Zhang Zhongliang (2006).⁴ The evidence that they cite, however, has received little attention from the scholars, journalists and practitioners who mention the performance in their studies of modern Chinese theatre; moreover, international practitioners and scholars working in global Ibsen studies continue to refer to the 1914 *Nuola* (Nora)⁵ as the first performance of Ibsen in China.⁶

The aims of this essay are to explore the consensus surrounding the 1914 performance of *Nuola* and to consider how it has contributed to misunderstandings and biases in the studies of the early reception of Ibsen in China. This consensus has shaped not only the historical account of Ibsen in China but also that of Chinese *huaju*, or spoken word drama. If *A Doll's House* was not performed in 1914, then clearly the whole subject of Ibsen's early reception in China needs to be reconsidered, including the important subjects of Chinese resistance to the assimilation of Ibsen in the 1910s and 1920s; Ibsen's supposed centrality in the history of Chinese modernity; and the role of Japan as a conduit of Western theatre culture to China.

The consensus around Spring Willow's *Nuola* performance

The fact that many Chinese titles have been used to translate *A Doll's House* increases the difficulty of researching the production history of the play.

The most common titles are *Nuola* 娜拉 and *Wan'ou Zhijia* 玩偶之家; other names include *Renxing Zhijia*⁷ 人形之家, *Wan'ou Jiating*⁸ 玩偶家庭, *Kuilei Jiating*⁹ 傀儡家庭 and *Jiao Qi*¹⁰ 娇妻. Elisabeth Eide suggests that *Yuan Ou* 怨偶 may be another title (1983, 98), but the plot of *Yuan Ou*, as described in *Xinju Kaozheng Baichu* 新剧考证百出 [Research on One Hundred New Drama Plays] (Zheng 1919), indicates that this refers to an entirely different play.¹¹

The earliest scholarly accounts of the Spring Willow Society's *Nuola* performance appear in two books: *Jindai Zhongguo yishu fazhan shi* 近代中国艺术发展史 [The History of the Development of Art in Modern China] by Yang Cunren *et al.* (1936);¹² and *Zhongguo Xiju Shi* 中国戏剧史 [The

History of Drama in China] by Xu Muyun ([1938] 2008).¹³ Both books contain incomplete lists of plays performed by the Spring Willow Society in Shanghai and include *Nuola* and *Fuhuo* (*Resurrection* by Leo Tolstoy); I have been unable to verify either performance. Neither author provides source material for their lists, or exact dates for performances. The only indication that they provide is that these two plays were performed during a time span of “less than a year” prior to the death of Lu Jingruo, Spring Willow’s lead member, in 1915 (Yang 1936 [Drama section, 11]; Xu 2008, 128). There is no evidence to suggest that either author had any first-hand experience of the performances in question.¹⁴

There are no other accounts of the Spring Willow’s *Nuola* performance in major scholarly works on the history of Chinese drama published before 1936. Judging from the list of performances in Yang’s and Xu’s books, it seems likely that these titles come from a memoir written by Ouyang Yuqian ([1933] 2014), a former member of the Spring Willow Society.¹⁵ But while *Nuola* is mentioned in Ouyang’s memoir, it is in connection with a wish that he shared with Lu Jingruo to stage the play,¹⁶ thus implying that they were not able to realize their plan (Ouyang 2014, 85).

In July 1956, during a speech given on the 50th anniversary of Ibsen’s death, Tian Han¹⁷ stated that Ibsen was introduced to China in 1913 through Spring Willow Society’s performance of *A Doll’s House* (Tian 1956, 6). He provided no source for this claim and he is not quoted in later scholarship – the year 1913 never came up again in any scholarship on Ibsen’s premiere in China. Rather it is an article by A Ying¹⁸ suggesting that the Spring Willow Society staged *A Doll’s House* in 1914 that appears in most of the

documentation I have examined. A Ying wrote this article, “Ibsen’s Works in China,”¹⁹ two months after Tian Han’s speech; in it, he notes that Lu Jingruo published an article on Ibsen in the inaugural issue of *Paiyou Zazhi* 俳優杂志 (Actors’ Magazine) (1914) “during the time when Spring Willow Society was performing *A Doll’s House*”²⁰ (A Ying / Qian 1981, 739). Yet there is no reference in this article by Lu Jingruo to an actual performance or planned performance by Spring Willow of an Ibsen play. In his brief history of Western drama that Lu provides in the six-page article,²¹ the only reference to Ibsen is that he is a “strong opponent to Shakespeare” and “master player of theatre revolution” (1914, 6). The same magazine contains six theatre reviews, three of which were about performances by the Spring Willow Society. None of these reviews mentions *A Doll’s House*, or any other play by Ibsen. A Ying’s inference that Lu wrote the article “*during the time* [italics mine] when Spring Willow Society was performing *A Doll’s House*” is not substantiated; therefore it cannot be considered evidence that the performance took place.

There was a scarcity of scholarship on Ibsen’s early reception in China until the 1980s (see, e.g., He [2013]), when scholars such as Elisabeth S. Eide (from Norway) and Tam Kwok-kan (from Hong Kong) published their comprehensive studies on the staging of Ibsen plays in China. In her essay of 1983, “Huaju Performances of Ibsen in China,” a survey of Ibsen performances in China before 1949,²² Eide points out that “it is still not proved that Ibsen was played in the early stages of the Wenmingxi”; nevertheless she concludes that “Ibsen was included in the repertoire in the Wenmingxi era.”²³ This assertion is based on her belief that “members of the Chun liu she (Spring Willow Society) must have watched performances

of his plays in Japan” (97-98). Furthermore, Eide finds it “natural to assume that it [*A Doll’s House*] was acted as mubiaoxi [improvised performance based on a synopsis instead of a detailed script] with a random cast and utilizing Japanese translations for their rough outline of the plot” (99) because there was no known Chinese translation of *A Doll’s House* at that time. She also refers to Lu Jingruo’s article of 1914, which leads her to conclude: “Since they (the Spring Willow Society) found it worthwhile to introduce him [Ibsen] it seems highly probable that they also staged him” (98). In 1997, Eide published another essay, “Henrik Ibsen and Reforms in Chinese Drama,” in which she reiterates the opinion from her 1983 essay regarding Spring Willow’s involvement in staging Ibsen’s plays.

Eide’s 1983 essay was written after a field-trip to China in February-March, 1982, where Eide interviewed scholars and practitioners about Ibsen performances. All the interviewees whom she references maintain that the Spring Willow Society staged Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* in Shanghai. Ge Yihong²⁴ and A Ying²⁵ are among these sources. Although most of Eide’s informants claim that the performance happened in 1914, one of them gives an approximate date of 1913-1914 (1983, 98); no explanation is provided for the discrepancy.

Eide does not refer to the 1936 account by Yang Cunren, even though one of her informants does mention Yang’s incomplete list of Spring Willow performances.²⁶ Instead, Eide refers to the list of plays included in Ouyang Yuqian’s essay “Memories of Spring Willow” (1984) and points out that none of the known names for *A Doll’s House* is included. For this reason, Eide speculates that the title *Yuan Ou* in Ouyang’s list might be a “more

likely candidate for the Chinese version of *A Doll's House*” although she gives no further justifications for this conclusion.²⁷

According to Ouyang, *Yuan Ou* is one of the plays in Spring Willow's repertoire that belongs to a category of plays based on Spring Willow members' "own ideas. . . with detailed outline and important dialogues, but without complete scripts" (Ouyang 1984, 40). Other categories include "purely translated plays," "plays adapted from foreign plays," and "plays adapted from foreign novels," all of which would be more likely to contain *A Doll's House*. Ouyang's list contains no reference to any translation or adaptation of *A Doll's House*, and judging from the plot of *Yuan Ou*, which is included in *Xinju Kaozheng Baichu* 新剧考证百出 [Research on One Hundred New Drama Plays] (Zheng 1919), it does not resemble Ibsen's *A Doll's House*²⁸.

Eide's 1983 essay relies heavily on her informants, with many of the listed sources being interviews. While she is not without some degree of skepticism regarding the statements made by her informants, she nevertheless argues that the Spring Willow performance is "highly probable" (1983, 98). She mentions that she spent some time in the National Library in Beijing and "received information on source-material related to performances of Ibsen" (1983, 95) in Nanjing and Shanghai, but she does not appear to have consulted any of the archives containing a repertoire list for Spring Willow.

Eide's investigation into the Ibsen performances in China fueled the propagation of the 1914 story by creating new "source material" for subsequent scholars. In 1982, Ge Yihong published his responses to Eide's

questions about Ibsen performances in China in a collection entitled “Three Letters on Foreign Drama in China,”²⁹ which were subsequently cited as the major source in Tam’s study of the 1914 performance in *Ibsen in China: Reception and Influence* (1984, 164). Ge provides brief accounts of six stage productions of Ibsen’s plays from 1914 to 1935 in one of the letters. He states that “the New Drama Society indeed performed *Kuilei Jiating* (i.e. *A Doll’s House*) in 1914 in the name of Spring Willow Theatre at an old rental theatre” and that the play “was only performed a small number of times” due to low attendance, and therefore “did not leave any great effect in China” (Ge 1982, 66). Ge made similar statements in his 1995 essay, “Ibsen: A Link between Chinese and Norwegian People.” No source is provided for his responses to Eide, but since Ge was one year old in 1914, his account cannot come from first-hand experience, and it is likely that it was based on one of the earliest and most authoritative books on the early spoken drama, Zhu Shuangyun’s *Xinju Shi* 新劇史 [History of New Drama] (1914). The latter mentions that two of Spring Willow’s 1912 performances “sold just a few seats,” but neither of these performances is said to be that of *A Doll’s House* or any other Ibsen play (Zhu 1914, 20&26).

Eide’s investigation into the reception of Ibsen in China started with her Master’s thesis in 1973, which led her to continue research into this relatively uncharted field. Subsequently, scholars such as Tam Kwok-Kan (1984, 2001), Wang Zhongxiang (2000), Shuei-may Chang (2004), He Chengzhou (2004), Wang Ning (2003, 2013) and Zhang Chuntian (2013) have all written extensively in English and Chinese about Ibsen’s reception in China. Many of them reiterate the claim that the Spring Willow Society performed *A Doll’s House* in 1914. The sources they cite are usually Ge

Yihong's "Three Letters" of 1982 and A Ying's article of 1956. These multiple references to the 1914 Spring Willow performance in scholarly works on Ibsen and *huaju* have turned it into a milestone in the history of Chinese spoken drama. Tian Benxiang and Hu Zhiyi's *Zhongguo Huaju Yishu Tongshi* 中国话剧艺术通史 [Comprehensive History of Chinese Huaju Art] (Vol.1) (2008, 83), Tian Benxiang and Song Baozhen's *Zhongguo Huaju Bainian* 中国话剧百年史述 [One Hundred Years of Chinese Huaju] (2013, 77) and Li Xiao's *Shanghai Huaju Zhi* 上海话剧志 [The History of Shanghai Huaju] (2002, 15) all mention the performance without citing sources. These scholars' works have been treated as authoritative by other scholars, theatre practitioners, and the popular media both inside and outside China, and with each iteration the conviction that this event took place has become stronger.

The case against the 1914 *Nuola* performance

In recent years, scholars in China and Japan have begun to question whether Spring Willow was responsible for the first performance of Ibsen in China. Huang Aihua from Hangzhou Normal University, who has published widely on Chinese modern drama and its relationship to Japanese modern drama, conducted an extensive investigation into the Spring Willow repertoire. Huang's research shows that there is a clear link between the Japanese *shinpa* plays—whether originally written by Japanese playwrights or translated and adapted from Western literary works—and the early Chinese spoken drama. In *Zhongguo Zaoqi Huaju Yu Riben* 中国早期话剧与日本 [Early Chinese Huaju and Japan] (2001), Huang claims that Lu Jingruo, the leading member of Spring Willow Society, failed to perform any Ibsen play

in China (2001, 118). In our email correspondence, she confirmed that her extensive research into the repertoire of Spring Willow Society provided no evidence that an Ibsen play had been performed by the company.

Huang's view echoes those of Seto Hiroshi, the author of numerous books and articles on the Japanese influence on the development of Chinese spoken drama. According to his research, which includes the study of theatre advertisements published in *Shenbao* 申报 [Shanghai News],³⁰ the Spring Willow Society "never performed *Nuola*" (2002, 86).

Huang Aihua's article "Studies on the Japanese *Shinpa* Repertoire Staged by Spring Willow Society" (2005) and her book *Early Chinese Spoken Drama and Japan* (2001), together with Seto's studies, are the most authoritative studies on the Spring Willow repertoire. In the documents they consulted, there were no references to Ibsen plays, or adaptations of Ibsen's plays, either by Spring Willow or any of the other major *wenming xi* companies.³¹

The remaining scholars who also claim that Spring Willow never staged Ibsen's *A Doll's House* refer to the memoir by Ouyang Yuqian, who states that both he and Lu Jingruo had wanted to perform Ibsen, but that their plans never came to fruition (2014, 85).³² The scholars point out that although Lu Jingruo wrote an article introducing Ibsen, neither he nor his fellow Spring Willow Society members performed his plays (Zhang 2006, 87; Zhang 2013, 16). There are four places in Ouyang's memoir where Ibsen or his works are mentioned, two of which are about staging Ibsen's plays. At one point, Ouyang writes that Spring Willow members were forced to choose plays based on box office considerations to keep the

theatre financially solvent. The bestselling shows were those like *Orchid in the Empty Valley*³³ and stories from *The Red Mansion*.³⁴ He mentions that “plays like *Resurrection*³⁵ and *Nora* were/are/would be/will be especially no good for making money” (2014, 66). Tense, as is the case here, is often not indicated by Chinese verbs, and without the contextual background it can be difficult or impossible to know whether Ouyang is speaking of something in the past, the present or the future. Thus, the wording could mean that Ouyang and Lu staged *A Doll’s House* but it proved to be bad for business; or that they never put on *A Doll’s House* because they knew it would not appeal to their audience. Scholars such as Yuan Guoxing (2000, 100) and Zhou Yunlong (2014) have interpreted Ouyang’s comment as proof that Spring Willow performed *A Doll’s House*.³⁶ However, at another point in his memoir, Ouyang writes, “Jingruo at the time was very eager to perform *Nora* and *The Wild Duck*, and I was very eager to perform *Resurrection* and *Salome*. . . . We were only thinking [about performing these plays], and sitting face to face happily chatting about them, but never fulfilled [our wishes to perform those plays]. . . . I even went crazy once and wanted to play *Hedda Gabler*. I really liked the thing with the two pistols. But it did not come to fruition either” (2014, 85). This is the evidence that Zhang Chuntian and Zhang Zhongliang point to when they deny the 1914 performance. Considering that there is no supporting evidence that Spring Willow staged either *Resurrection* or *Nora* (Seto 1988-1990, 2002, 86; Huang 2001), I conclude that it was highly unlikely that the Spring Willow Society performed Ibsen.

Some neglected sources

One probable reason why there has been no response from Chinese or non-Chinese Ibsen scholars to the position held by Seto, Huang, Zhang and Zhang is that any further investigation into a possible staging by Spring Willow Society of *A Doll's House* would require a thorough study of the repertoire of the theatre group, as well as extensive research on the repertoire of *wenming xi* in general. Studies on the repertoire of *wenming xi* groups traditionally rely on several sources:³⁷ early history books about *wenming xi* published before 1949,³⁸ newspapers and magazines that publish theatre announcements and reviews during the *wenming xi* era, memoirs by members of *wenming xi* groups, and authoritative books on the history of *wenming xi* and Chinese *huaaju* in general published after 1949. The last group lacks any verifiable evidence regarding the 1914 performance of *A Doll's House*. The second and third sources have been covered by scholars who deny the 1914 performance. My investigation into the first group of sources, particularly *Xinju Kao* 新剧考 [Studies on the New Drama] by Fan Shiqu 范石渠 (1914),³⁹ *Xinju Shi* 新剧史 [The History of New Drama] by Zhu Shuangyun 朱双云 (1914),⁴⁰ *Xinju Kaozheng Baichu* 新剧考证百出 [Research on One Hundred New Drama Plays] by Zheng Zhengqiu 郑正秋 (1919),⁴¹ and *Chuqi Zhiye Huaaju Shiliao* 初期职业话剧史料 [Historical Material about Early Professional Spoken Drama] by Zhu Shuangyun 朱双云 (1942),⁴² have not yielded any evidence of a performance of *A Doll's House* during the *wenming xi* era.

It seems clear that scholars have associated the Spring Willow Society with Ibsen's *A Doll's House* mainly because Lu Jingruo had shown great interest in this play and Ibsen's work in general. Both Lu's article of 1914 and the

references to Ibsen in Ouyang's memoir are proof of this interest, which has usually been attributed to the influence of the Japanese New Drama movement. Lu Jingruo spent some time in Japan and was a member of the cast of Shimamura Hōgetsu's production of *A Doll's House* in 1911, the famous production in which Matsui Sumako played Nora (Sato 1966; Huang 2001, 117-118; Wei 2005, 202; 2012, 66-67).⁴³ According to Wei Mingjie, Lu Jingruo participated in all the performances of Shimamura's *A Doll's House*, including rehearsals and public showings (Wei 2005, 2012). Lu's participation in the 1911 Japanese production of *A Doll's House* and his involvement with Bungei Kyokai⁴⁴ in general can explain why he and the other members of the Spring Willow Society were so enthusiastic about Ibsen's plays. However, Huang claims that Lu Jingruo "was not able to present any of the plays by Shakespeare or Ibsen that he learned from Tsubouchi Shōyō⁴⁵ after he came back to China" (2001, 118).

In summary, I agree with the comment by Eide, made 35 years later, that no proof has been found for the 1914 performance of *A Doll's House* by the Spring Willow Society. However, I would weigh the record differently, arguing that the lack of evidence makes it highly unlikely that the performance took place. Although it is true that "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence," and therefore we cannot say categorically that this performance did not happen, it is clear that the alleged event left no footprint in the history of Chinese *huaju*—no advertisement, review, debate, or image that attests to its existence.

When was Ibsen first performed in China?

What *is* the first Ibsen performance in China, if it is not Spring Willow's *A Doll's House* in 1914? Since the 1980s, a few lists of Chinese stage productions of Ibsen's plays have been published (Eide 1983, 1987, 1997; Tam 1984, 2001; He 2004), but they do not agree. Tam's list of 2001 (25 entries) is the most comprehensive, with references for most of the performances, but it is still missing a few entries from the list compiled by He in 2004 (17 entries) and Eide in her 1997 article.⁴⁶ These scholars all include the 1914 performance as the first Ibsen performance in China. Tam and He list the performance of *A Doll's House* in 1923 by Women's Normal College in Beijing as the second,⁴⁷ while Eide does not mention this performance in any of her essays.⁴⁸

According to my research, the strongest contender for the first Ibsen performance in China is the performance of *A Doll's House* given by the Women's Normal College in Beijing 北京女子高等师范学校.⁴⁹ Several reviews appeared of the performance, which took place on May 5, 1923 (e.g. Ren 1923; Chen and Xu 1923; He 1923; Fang 1923).

Remapping the early reception of Ibsen in China

Having argued that the Spring Willow performance of *A Doll's House* in 1914 is a critical myth, I will now examine some of the consequences of the myth in the work of scholars who have accepted it. My aim is to re-chart the history of the early reception of Ibsen as well as the dominant conception of the emergence of *huaju* in China, both of which have been heavily informed by an event that probably never happened. My account foregrounds the challenges involved in the assimilation of Ibsen into China during the 1910s and 1920s; suggests the need to reconsider the Japanese influence on this

assimilation process; and questions the centrality of Ibsen in the modernization of Chinese theatre.

Commercial, aesthetic and ideological challenges

A common way in which scholars describe the 1914 *Nuola* performance in China is to emphasize its “earliness”: *A Doll’s House* was staged in China “as early as in 1914” (e.g. Song 2007, 19; Zhang Lushi 2006; Sun 2016, 74). This creates a narrative in which Ibsen and the Spring Willow Society, the first and most respected professional *huaju* group, together pioneered the modernization of Chinese theatre by staging Ibsen’s plays against all the commercial, aesthetic and ideological challenges current in 1914. The alternative account suggests that Ibsen was *not* staged until 1923 precisely *because of* these challenges, in particular the prevailing aesthetic preferences of Chinese theatre audiences, which shaped the professional work of a theatre group such as the Spring Willow Society, despite its high aspirations.

Huang Aihua attributes the absence of Ibsen in Spring Willow’s repertoire to “the limitations of the circumstances” (2001, 118). She does not elaborate on these “limitations” apart from saying that it was “not Lu Jingruo’s personal fault” but rather “the tragedy of that time” (2001, 119). Similar references to unspecified limitations appear in the work of other scholars, such as Ge Yihong’s “Three Letters” (1982), Seto Hiroshi’s research on the historical phases of *wenming xi* (2006), and Zhu Shuangyun’s *Historical Material about Early Professional Spoken Drama* (1942). Zhu’s opening description of the Spring Willow Society (under the name The New Drama Fellowship) reads as follows: “The New Drama Fellowship⁵⁰ was, without a

doubt, the only drama group that does not cater to the taste of the middle and lower social classes by performing low brow comedy; . . . instead they lead the audience with their artistic spirit” (1942, 22). In *The History of the Development of Art in Modern China*, Yang Cunren claims that Spring Willow Society’s talents were incomparable among all the new drama groups and that they served as “a strong force in correcting the perils [of new drama] at the time” (1936, 11-12). However, the absence of Ibsen in Spring Willow’s documented repertoire paints a rather different picture than the official discourse on this highly acclaimed *wenming xi* group: the strong forces resisting the theatre of ideas may have affected this group just as much as “lesser” groups. Members of the Spring Willow Society were subjected to the same commercial pressures and may have chosen to steer away not only from Ibsen, but also from other playwrights whose work did not fit the aesthetic preferences of theatre goers in the 1910s.

It is possible that it was not until the succeeding theatre movement—the Amateur Theatre Movement (“爱美剧”运动)⁵¹ in the 1920s—that Ibsen appeared on the Chinese stage. According to Yang, the demise of *wenming xi* was directly related to the fact that it was produced by professional theatre groups (1936, 12-13). Relying on the theatre to make a living forced the actors to cater to the tastes of their audiences and produce work with an accessible comic sensibility. The solution to this dilemma was the establishment of a theatre completely outside commercial entertainment. Ibsen’s plays were staged by many different amateur student theater groups during this period, the first of which (that is fully documented) is the 1923 *Nuola* by Women’s Normal College in Beijing, a member of the New China Drama Association 新中华戏剧协社, established by Chen Dabai (1887-

1944) and Pu Boying (1875-1934). By then, three translations of *A Doll's House* had been published,⁵² and according to the critic Ren Tuo, the performance faithfully followed Pan Jiaxun's translation (1923).

The audience's response to the performance in 1923 reveals an added dimension to the complex reception of Ibsen in Chinese theatre because the critical question focused on whether the play's value lay in its moral teachings or in its aesthetics.⁵³ There was a heated debate in which some critics thought that the students' efforts should be applauded for promoting Western drama in China, while others felt that the subtlety of art was missing in the performance. According to some of the reviews, some spectators (perhaps even the majority of the audience) left the performance before its end. Apart from this being an illustration of the "viewing 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 and Xu 1923). These intellectuals included 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." Chen and Xu both became members of the short-lived National Theatre Movement in 1925/1926, which sought to counter the "Ibsen-based socio-critical tilt" in the development of Chinese spoken drama (Liu 2016, 19).

Liu Siyuan, in his article on the National Theatre Movement (2016), points to the attacks by leading members of the movement such as Yu Shangyuan, Wen Yiduo and Zhao Taimou on Ibsen worship in China: they felt that it "was the wrong track and led to mediocrity" (Liu 2016, 11). Instead, they

advocated a “different trajectory for *huaju* that hybridized Western and indigenous performance elements” (27). Indeed, the dominance of Ibsen in the discourse of the New Culture Movement worried even Tian Han, a self-proclaimed “budding Ibsen in China,”⁵⁴ and in his 1922 translation of *Hamlet*, he promoted Shakespeare as an antidote to the Ibsen influence (Tian 1922, 1). This rejection of Ibsen and theatrical realism, though brief, signifies yet another force that was countering the early reception of Ibsen in the 1920s, coalescing into an ideological war between “art for art’s sake” and “art for life’s sake.” Liu points out that “the factional Beijing media sphere of the warlord era . . . paradoxically gave longer-lasting voice to the students than their professors” (Liu 2016). The professors who had been educated in the United States and Britain lost this ideological war to students imbued with the aversion to traditional theatre current within the New Cultural Movement. Ibsen’s adoption by the students’ amateur theatre marks the beginning of the ideological use of his plays in Chinese theatre.

Japanese influence on the Ibsen tradition in Chinese theatre

Not only does the alternative account of Ibsen’s first performance highlight the challenges and resistance that Ibsen faced in the early years of Chinese *huaju*, it also changes our understanding of the pathway by which Ibsen was introduced into China. It has been well documented that the Japanese *shinpa* theatre had a strong influence on early Chinese spoken drama (Tam 1984; Huang 2001; Liu 2006; Seto 2015⁵⁵), and it has been accepted that Ibsen was introduced to Chinese theatre through Japan, which assimilated his plays through German and English translations (Kano 2001, Sato 1962). This would still hold true despite the absence of Ibsen in Spring Willow’s

repertoire because the earliest mentioning of Ibsen in Chinese literary and theatre circles was by Lu Xun (1908) and Lu Jingruo (1914), both educated in Japan; and the Japanese production that Lu Jingruo appeared in used Shimamura Hōgetsu's translation from the German.⁵⁶ But it is also the link between Spring Willow and Japan and its causal connection to the unverifiable 1914 performance that the authors of *A Global Doll's House* cite as an example of how actress managers (in this case Matsui Sumako) played crucial roles in the global dissemination of Ibsen in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; although Matsui did not play Nora in China, the influence of her production in Tokyo, via Lu Jingruo *et al.*, resulted in Spring Willow's performance of *A Doll's House* in Shanghai (Hollidge *et al.* 2016, 47). Thus the authors of *A Global Doll's House* have unintentionally silenced the pioneering woman who may well have been responsible for the first production of the play in China because the Japanese influence from Matsui's 1911 performance disappears when the Spring Willow's performance is replaced by a production mounted by the Amateur Theatre movement, a theatre practice directly imported from the West. In addition, the 1923 performance followed the publication of three Chinese translations based on English versions of the play—more precisely William Archer's translation—which came directly from the Norwegian text.

Ibsen's centrality in Chinese modern theatre

Does the alternative narrative of a much later Ibsen debut in Chinese theatre also destabilize Ibsen's centrality in the emergence of Chinese *huaju* and, in turn, the modernization of Chinese theatre?

He Chengzhou bestows a great deal of importance on the alleged 1914 performance in his 2009 article on Ibsen performances in China, asserting that this was “the first Chinese performance of Ibsen, and of modern Western playwrights in general” (He 2009, 118). He goes on to claim that “Ibsen has continued to be the most frequently performed foreign playwright in China,” thus stressing Ibsen’s centrality to the theatre modernization process. At the end of the article, he includes an appendix of 25 Ibsen productions presented in China (from 1914 to 2008), stating that this is an underestimation because of the loss of performance records due to wars and political turmoil, and the fact that large numbers of Ibsen performances were by amateur groups who received limited critical attention. (This could equally be said regarding the documentation of Shakespeare in China, but Li Ruru has published an equivalent list of 125 performances from the *wenming xi* era to 2001 (Li 2003, 231-240). The question here is whether Shakespeare should also be considered a major foreign influence in accounts of the modernization of Chinese theatre since his plays were adapted into multiple Chinese stage and screen genres during the twentieth century.)

If the 1914 production of *A Doll’s House* did not take place, George Bernard Shaw’s *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* becomes the first verifiable Western realist play to be staged in China. It was produced by Shanghai New Stage 上海新舞台 in October 1920 – after months of preparation and substantial financial investment.⁵⁷ Judging from the cast list, this was an all-male commercial production, advertised as “the very first staging of a Western realist play in the Chinese theatre” (Wang 1920, 1921). This claim, if true, would be an almost contemporaneous refutation of the 1914 myth

and prove that the first modern realist playwright to enter Chinese theatre was Shaw, the fervent Ibsenite.⁵⁸ This complicates the story of Ibsen's influence over the early Chinese *huaaju* theatre, not because the 1920 premiere of *Mrs. Warren's Profession* was a box office success, but rather because it was a failure due to similar commercial, aesthetic and ideological reasons analyzed above. In fact, the decision to perform Shaw's play was probably due to the introduction of Ibsen's work into Chinese literary circles, which initiated a fever for "problem plays" in Chinese theatre. Tian Han reads *Mrs. Warren's Profession* as a reaction and "answer to Ibsen's *Doll's House*" because it suggests economic independence as a solution for the new woman (Tian 1956).⁵⁹

Conclusion

This essay is the result of an investigation into the dominant narrative regarding the reception of Ibsen in China, including the problematic existence of what is commonly claimed to be the first Ibsen performance in Chinese theatre. My analysis has shown that there is no evidence to support a Spring Willow Society performance of *A Doll's House* in 1914, and that even if this performance did occur, it left no discernable footprint or impact. Instead, the first fully documentable Ibsen performance in China, supported by theatre announcements and reviews, is the 1923 performance of *A Doll's House* by the female students at Beijing Women's Normal College.

My analysis has revealed how the myth of this single performance has supported faulty discourses concerning the importance of Ibsen and the Spring Willow Society in Chinese theatre; the Japanese influence on Chinese *huaaju*; the centrality of the May Fourth Movement in China; and,

the canonical position of a Norwegian playwright in China, and, ultimately, in world theatre.

Within the internal politics of China, the Spring Willow Society performance is part of the history of the May Fourth movement, an ideological heritage that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) still fiercely protects. Ibsen is part of modern China's linear, evolutionary national history—a history that secures a “false unity of a self-same, national subject” (Duara 1995, 4). The nation's strong and often implicit ideological guideline has ensured that a politically charged figure such as Ibsen is not represented by multiple voices. The significance of this potentially mythical performance ties Ibsen scholarship to the official CCP discourse. Triggered by recent scholarly works that examine the history of Chinese *huaju* (Seto, Huang, Zhang and Zhang), this article suggests an alternative account that puts Ibsen's first appearance on the Chinese stage nine years later than previously claimed. It points to the otherwise overlooked nuances and complexity in the reception of Ibsen and questions the centrality of Ibsen and the Spring Willow Society in the history of *huaju*. In addition, this new account reduces the impact of Japan on the introduction of Ibsen to China, and contests the narrative of Chinese *huaju* history that is seen as coeval with Japanese theatre modernization.

Outside China, within the historiography of world theatre, the 1914 myth has functioned as a pillar in the story of the global dissemination of Ibsen. The exoticism that lies in an improvised Ibsen performance with an all-male cast in early twentieth-century China has made this myth popular with

international scholars. In light of the new account, a re-examination of the involvement of women in the history of Ibsen and Chinese theatre is due.

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Notes:

¹ The National Theatre in Beijing staged the performance *Wan Ou Zhi Jia* from January 14 to January 29 in 2014, starring a celebrity couple Cao Ying and Wang Ban, directed by Ren Ming.

² For example,

http://wap.chncpa.org/gywm/zxdt/mts/201608/t20160823_128600.shtml
and

http://wap.chncpa.org/gywm/zxdt/mts/201608/t20160823_128840.shtml.

(last accessed September 21, 2017).

³ For example, He Chengzhou's "Ibsen's Reception in China", 2006 (http://www.gmw.cn/01ds/2006-05/24/content_422277.htm, last accessed Sep 21, 2017); Hu Cuiran and Song Baozhen's "Ibsen and A Hundred Years of Chinese Spoken Drama", 2007

(http://www.china.com.cn/culture/zhuanti/huaju/2007-05/10/content_8231416.htm, last accessed Sep 21, 2017); Li Hongli's "The

Nora Storm", 2007

(<http://www.cctv.com/program/witness/topic/geography/C20323/20071225/102775.shtml>, last accessed Sep 21, 2017) and Shi Qin'e's "The Ibsen of the World; The Ibsen of Eternity" 2006

(http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/hqylss/2006-08/24/content_673480.htm, last accessed Sep 21, 2017).

⁴ Ying Xi (2003) and Shen Xi (2003) also argue against the popular belief in the 1914 performance. Ying Xi and Shen Xi appear to be pseudonyms. Judging from the wording, these two half-page long articles may be by the same author, possibly Zhang Zhongliang, whose three-page long essay "When Was Ibsen's Work First Performed in China?" in 2006 combined the views in these two articles from 2003.

⁵ Nuola 娜拉 is a common Chinese name for Ibsen's play *A Doll's House*.

⁶ A few scholars have mentioned the opposite opinions regarding Ibsen's first performance in China, but only briefly in passing, without giving any analysis. For example, see Zhou Yunlong (2014) and Qi (2016)

⁷ *Renxing Zhijia* was used by Lu Jingruo (1914). It is a borrowed term from the Japanese translation of *A Doll's House* – 《人形の家》.

⁸ *Wan'ou Jiating* was used by one of Elisabeth Eide's informants in her essay from 1983. I have never seen this name in the title of any translation or stage production of the play.

⁹ *Kuilei Jiating* was used by Chen Jia in his translation of the play in 1918 and by Ouyang Yuqian in his translation/adaptation in 1925.

¹⁰ *Jiao Qi (Charming Wife)* is the title of a two-page synopsis of the play by an author named Le Shui, published in the *Short Story Magazine* in 1915.

¹¹ For the plot summary, see Note 28.

¹² 《近代中国艺术发展史》The book contains five sections on different aspects of art in modern China: arts and crafts, music, paintings, drama and films – each written by a different author. The drama section is authored by Yang Cunren 杨邨人 (1901-1955).

¹³ 中国戏剧史, authored by Xu Muyun 徐慕云 (1900-1974). This book covers the history of Chinese drama over the span of over two thousand years. The section on *wenming xi* has a strikingly similar wording to Yang Cunren's writing, without crediting Yang. Xu gives a list of five plays that

Spring Willow put on in Shanghai, which are all included in Yang's list of seven plays. I have referred to a reprint of this book in 2008.

¹⁴ Yang Cunren grew up in Guangdong province and was in primary school in his hometown until 1916. He did not arrive in Shanghai until 1927. Cf. 潮汕乃至中国现代文学史一个不应回避也不能遗忘的名字——杨村人 <http://www.chaonan.gov.cn/cnNews.aspx?newsid=6017> (accessed Sep 23, 2017). Xu Muyun is from Xuzhou city, but went to Shanghai Datong University and stayed in Shanghai after graduation. It is not clear when he arrived in Shanghai. His brief biography can be found on the website of Xuzhou City's Literature and Art Association: <http://www.xzwyw.com/rencaixinxiku/2015-05-17/21.html> (accessed November 4, 2017).

¹⁵ 自我演戏以来 [Since I Started to Perform Onstage]. In this memoir, Ouyang refers to Spring Willow's time as 15 years ago, which implies that it was written in 1929/1930.

¹⁶ Lu Jingruo 陆镜若 (1885-1915) was a lead member of Spring Willow Society, who, according to his fellow member Ouyang Yuqian 欧阳予倩, was very enthusiastic about performing Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and *Wild Duck*. See Ouyang (2014).

¹⁷ 田汉 (1898-1968). Playwright. He wrote the lyrics to the Chinese national anthem.

¹⁸ 阿英 (penname of Qian Xingcun 钱杏村) (1900-1977). A Ying was an influential dramatist and literary critic who joined the Chinese Communist Party in 1926. He and Yang Cunren were two of the co-founders of the proletarian revolutionary journal *The Sun Monthly* 太阳月刊 (1928-1929).

¹⁹ 1956 was the year when Ibsen's *A Doll's House* was performed for the first time in the People's Republic of China. A Ying's article attacks the initial Ibsen advocates such as Hu Shi for promoting bourgeois values through Ibsen's works. The original article was published in the official newspaper for culture and art—Wenyi Bao—in September 1956.

²⁰ A Ying was 13 years old in 1914. He was from Anhui province and did not come to Shanghai until 1927. Therefore it is unlikely that he saw the performance in question in 1914. Furthermore, he himself does not claim to have watched the performance.

²¹ This article is dictated by Lu and transcribed by Feng Shuluan 冯叔鸾 (1883-?), another member of the Spring Willow Society.

²² Eide has another essay "Performances of Ibsen in China after 1949" published in 1987 in *Drama in the People's Republic of China*.

²³ It appears that Eide sometimes equates wenming xi repertoire with the repertoire of Spring Willow Society, using them interchangeably. Based on Seto's research, Spring Willow was only one of the many wenming xi groups in China and their repertoire was much smaller than that of some of the other wenming xi groups. (See Seto [2006])

²⁴ 葛一虹 (1913-2005). Member of the Chinese Left-Wing Dramatist Alliance (1930-1936) – and author/editor of a few books on the history of Chinese spoken drama – was the head of the Huaju Research Institute at the Chinese National Academy of Arts from 1980 to 1987. He is considered an authority on the history of Chinese *huaju*.

²⁵ A Ying's article in 1956 is quoted in Eide's 1983 essay as one of the Chinese sources that claim the first Ibsen performance in China to be Spring Willow's *A Doll's House* in 1914.

²⁶ This informant's name is Min Xiaosi 闵晓思, who wrote a short article on several early Nora performances in China that was published in Wenhui Bao (Wenhui Newspaper) in 1962.

²⁷ One possible reason for Eide's suspicion is that Yuan Ou 怨偶 contains a character (Ou 偶) that is in the most common title for *A Doll's House*: Wan Ou Zhi Jia 玩偶之家. However, while they are the same character, they mean different things. "Ou" in Yuan Ou means a married couple, while "Ou" in Wan Ou Zhi Jia means puppet or doll.

²⁸ *Yuan Ou* is a tragedy of eight acts about a young woman who commits suicide because she is forced into a marriage with a man who abuses her. For the full synopsis and plot outline, see Zheng 1919, pp.5-6.

²⁹ This is an article containing three letters as responses to questions about foreign drama in China from three scholars – including Elisabeth Eide. The original questions are not published in this article.

³⁰ See Seto (1988-1990). Shenbao was a local newspaper in Shanghai – *shen* meaning Shanghai and *bao* meaning newspaper – that ran for 77 years from 1872 to 1949. It has a long history of advertising theatre events and thus has become an important source for studying the theatre repertoire in China before 1949. See Huang (2016).

³¹ See Seto (2001, 2003) and Huang (2001).

³² See Ouyang (2014).

³³ 空谷兰. Adapted from a Japanese novel.

³⁴ 红楼梦 [Dreams of the Red Mansion]

³⁵ Novel by Leo Tolstoy (1899).

³⁶ See Zhou (2014).

³⁷ See Wang (2011).

³⁸ For example, Fan (1914), Zhu (1914), Zheng (1919), and Zhu (1942).

³⁹ This volume presents seven new drama plays – of which four appear to be part of Spring Willow Theatre's repertoire and none was adapted from Ibsen's plays.

⁴⁰ This book gives a chronological account of the new drama history from 1899 to 1914. The account ends on May 5, 1914, when the six major new drama groups (including the New Drama Society) performed together at Min Ming Society's venue (81). Apart from the author's account of the history, the book also includes biographies of new dramatists, synopses of selected plays, and a few theatre reviews. Neither Ibsen nor any of Ibsen's plays is mentioned in this book.

⁴¹ This book includes 99 Chinese new drama plays – some of which are adapted from foreign novels – and an additional 33 new drama plays from outside of China. Among the 33 foreign new drama plays, 20 are by Shakespeare and 7 are from Japan. None was by Ibsen.

⁴² This book includes a list of 302 titles of new drama plays without plot summary. There is no apparent match for *A Doll's House* in the titles.

⁴³ Huang's position on whether Lu played a role in *A Doll's House* in Japan is unclear. She confirms that Lu's name is on the cast list, but then also claims that it is unknown whether Lu played a role in *A Doll's House*. Her

research on Lu's activities in Japan seems to be based mainly on 中村忠行's 《“春柳社”逸史稿》.

⁴⁴ 文艺协会

⁴⁵ 坪内逍遥

⁴⁶ Eide claims that she has collected information on about 25 performances of Ibsen in China between 1920 and 1949, and 4 after 1949 (till 1997). I have not seen any published list of hers where all of the 29 performances are listed. 7 of those are presented in her 1983 essay: 1914 *A Doll's House* in Shanghai by Spring Willow; 1925 *A Doll's House* in Beijing by Ershiliu Jutuan; 1927/1928 *An Enemy of the People* in Tianjin by Nankai Middle School; 1928 *A Doll's House* in Tianjin by Nankai Middle School; 1935 *A Doll's House* in Nanjing with Wang Ping as Nora, in Shanghai with Lan Ping as Nora. According to her, most of these performances are not well-documented, with only rough dates and one or two of the cast members' names (Eide 1997, 199).

⁴⁷ It is mentioned in 中国话剧通史 [Comprehensive History of Chinese Huaju Art] (Tian 2008) that the first stage performance of Ibsen's plays in China is in 1923, by the Women's Normal College in Beijing (p.89). However, on page 83 in the same book, the authors claim that Spring Willow Society performed *A Doll's House* in 1914 and that the performance “did not receive enough attention”.

⁴⁸ Instead, Eide's informants refer to the performance of *A Doll's House* by a group of students from Beijing Renyi Drama Special School 北京人艺戏剧专门学校 in 1925 called Nian Liu Juxue She (Twenty-six Drama Studies Society). The year and location of this performance appear to be inconsistent in the accounts that I have read. It is possible that this group staged *A Doll's House* several times. But the most reliable source for this performance is what Tam has given in his 2001 book – a review written by Zhen Sheng on December 20, 1924, one day after the performance (Tam 2001, 198). The same date is given by Zhang Chuntian (2013, 165). According to Zhen Sheng, the play was staged in the YMCA in Beijing on December 19, 1924 (4).

⁴⁹ My view on the first Ibsen performance in China is consistent with that of Seto's in his book *A Study on the Formation of Chinese Spoken Drama*. 2015. In my research, however, I have found another possibility of the first Ibsen performance in China, which lies in Zhu Shuangyun's list of early Chinese professional *huaju* repertoire in his 1942 book, where what seems to be Ibsen's *The Pillars of Society* 社会柱石 is included (1942, 60). But since there is no information on this title in Zhu's book other than that it is one of the “modern attire plays”, it is difficult to say for sure that this was Ibsen's play. *The Pillars of Society* was first introduced to China by Hu Shi in his 1918 article “Ibsenism”, where he calls it Shehui Dongliang 社会栋梁. And yet the title in Zhu Shuangyun's list is Shehui Zhushi 社会柱石, the same as in its first Chinese translation by Zhou Shoujuan 周瘦鹃 in 1920 in the *Short Story Magazine*. Zhu's account of wenming xi history ends in 1926 (1942:55), and therefore it is likely that the staging took place sometime between 1920 and 1926. Spring Willow Society ended in 1915, so this Ibsen play would unlikely to have been in their repertoire. If this play in Zhu's list is indeed Ibsen's *Pillars of Society*, then this could well be the first Ibsen performance in China, provided it was performed before May 5, 1923. Unfortunately, I have not found any other account of this performance than the title mentioned in Zhu's book. Zhu's entire list is cited at the end of Yuan Guoxing's book (2000), with no additional information.

⁵⁰ The New Drama Fellowship is created by former Spring Willow members after they return to Shanghai from Japan. They performed under the name Spring Willow Theatre from 1914 to 1915. See note 4.

⁵¹ Chen Dabei's 陈大悲 article "Amateur Theatre" 爱美的戏剧— first published in the Beijing Morning Post in 1921 and then turned into a monograph in 1922 – introduced the concept of "amateur theatre" based on a few books by American authors such as Sheldon Cheney's *The New Movement in the Theater* (1914), Emerson Taylor's *Practical Stage Directing for Amateurs* (1916) and William Lyon Phelps's *The Twentieth Century Theater* (1920). The Amateur Theatre was meant to be a direct answer to the problems of *wenming xi* by advocating for non-profit and non-professional theater. The effect of this movement reached many cities in China and lasted for about five to six years.

⁵² *Nuola* by Luo Jialun and Hu Shi (1918), *Kuilei Jiating* by Chen Jia (1918), and *Nuola* by Pan Jiaxun (1921).

⁵³ See Sun 2016, 77-83.

⁵⁴ See Tian et al. 1920, 80-81.

⁵⁵ 中国话剧成立史研究 2015

⁵⁶ According to Kano Ayako, the first translation that Shimamura Hōgetsu did of *A Doll's House* was based on the first German stage script where Ibsen had written an alternative ending due to the request from the German producer. Even though he eventually used the original ending for his performance in 1911, the character Nora is "milder, gentler, exuding feminine sensitivity and sadness about her decision to leave her husband and children" (Kano 2001, 187-188).

⁵⁷ 民国日报 The Republican Daily, Oct 1920.

http://shtml.sta.edu.cn/zts/sjz/mgshhj/1de5a3ee_8099_4043_ae4f_c1232fa97ba5.html

⁵⁸ The first full play that Spring Willow staged was an adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in Japan. This novel, although not a realist text in a genre sense, is a realistic portrait of slavery in America. It is also noteworthy that Spring Willow's very first complete production was adapted from a text written by a woman writer.

⁵⁹ For a discussion on George Bernard Shaw and Chinese feminism, see Kay Li (2016).