

# An Exploration of the Aesthetic Value of Hu Shi's "Ibsenism" in Drama

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**Abstract:** The influence of Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen in China today is largely attributed to Hu Shi's introduction and evaluation of his works. Hu Shi wrote an article titled "Ibsenism" in Beijing on May 16, 1918, and revised it on April 26, 1919. This article was published on June 15, 1918, in the 4th volume, 6th issue of the "New Youth" magazine. Once published, it caused a significant stir in society. Consequently, a cultural transformation of "realism" emerged in China. Today, the study of Hu Shi's "Ibsenism" still holds great research value and significance. This paper aims to explore Hu Shi's "Ibsenism" to provide a strong theoretical support and practical basis for the development and construction of realism in creation and contemporary Chinese drama.

**Keywords:** Hu Shi; Ibsenism; Drama Aesthetics; Thought

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## Introduction

In the historical context of the new era, the academic community has proposed various articles on the construction of "Chinese schools," such as the "Chinese Art Education School" in the art world. Scholars are trying to break free from the limitations of Western ideologies and explore a modern Chinese school that fits China's unique national conditions in the new era. Hu Shi's publication of "Ibsenism" played a significant role as a standard-bearer in the historical context at that time, and his call for "literary reform" has important reference significance for the construction of "Chinese schools" today. Research and positioning of Hu Shi in the literary field have long been established, but current research on Hu Shi's influence on Chinese drama is still shallow, especially the impact of his article "Ibsenism" on Chinese drama, which requires further in-depth study. This paper mainly explores Hu Shi's "Ibsenism" from the following aspects.

### 1. The Nature and Ideological Basis of Hu Shi's Ibsenism (Opportunity)

Hu Shi expressed his personal views on the nature of "ism" in an article titled "More Problems, Fewer Isms" published in "Weekly Review" on August 3, 1919: All "isms" arise in response to the times. A certain society, at a certain time, influenced by certain factors, presents a certain unsatisfactory situation. Then some concerned people observe this phenomenon and come up with a certain remedy. This is the origin of "ism." When an ism first arises, it is mostly a specific claim to save the times. Later, when this claim is spread, the spreader, for convenience, uses two words to represent this specific claim, so it is called "so and so ism." A claim becomes an ism, changing from a specific plan to an abstract noun. The weakness and danger of "ism" lie here. Because there is no abstract noun in the world that can include all the specific claims of a certain person or faction. [Yuan Gang, Chen Xuexun, Yang Xian Zhe. "The Debate on Problems and Isms": A Ninety-Year Review and Reflection [J]. Learning and Practice, 2009.]

Hu Shi further elaborated on the term "ism" in later discussions with Li Dazhao and Lan Zhixian, which was an important premise for him to propose "Ibsenism." In fact, before proposing "Ibsenism," Hu Shi had already analyzed Chinese drama. In his article "The Evolutionary Concept of Literature and Drama Reform" published in the 5th volume, 4th issue of "New Youth" on September 7, 1918, Hu Shi expressed his thoughts and suggestions on Chinese drama, highlighting his in-depth study of Chinese and foreign drama. For example, he categorized the outdated elements in opera as "relics" and discussed the concept of tragedy in Chinese literature. He believed that the traditional Chinese "happy ending" was a manifestation of the lack of a "tragic" concept in China. In this article, he proposed the concept of tragedy: First, it is to acknowledge that the most intense and profound human emotions are not at the time of smiling and joy, but in the moments of sorrow, helplessness, and despair; second, it is to acknowledge that when humans witness the tragic and pitiful situations of others, they can generate a sincere sympathy, temporarily subsuming personal joys and sorrows in this sincere and noble sympathy; third, it is to acknowledge that there are tragic and heartbreaking situations in the world at all times and places, not because of heaven's cruelty or "the creation of fate," but because of social maladies that cause individuals to lose their will, degenerate in character, and fall into sin from which they cannot extricate

themselves. [Mao Jianhua. Re-evaluating the Literary Value and Aesthetic Pursuit of Hu Shi's "Trial Collection" [J]. Journal of Henan Normal University: Philosophy and Social Science Edition, 2012, 39(3):3. DOI: CNKI: SUN: HNSK.0.2012-03-045.]

However, at this time, Hu Shi's understanding of tragedy had not yet entered the realm of aesthetics, but remained at the level of sociology: tragedy aims to truly reveal the pain of life and "social maladies," to stimulate people's "sincere and noble sympathy" and deep reflection and introspection on reality. From the perspective of facing life and noble human emotions, Hu Shi's concept of tragedy was obviously inspired by Wang Guowei's "Comments on Dream of the Red Chamber," but the two concepts are different: Wang Guowei focused on the contemplation of tragic philosophy and the pursuit of a "trans-utility" aesthetic realm, while Hu Shi focused on the relationship between tragedy and real life, emphasizing its social utility, which is completely consistent with his realistic literary concept. [Xiong Haiyang. "The Great Moment" and "The Identifiable Present" [J]. Literary and Art Studies, 2024(2).]

Why did Hu Shi raise the banner of "Ibsenism" during the New Culture Movement? This is related to Ibsen's huge influence on modern drama. The key to Ibsen's "social problem plays" becoming the source of European modern drama lies in its solid foundation in modern society, showing the valuable spirit of drama facing all kinds of social problems, and its influence in promoting social change through serious discussion of the social issues raised. [He Chengzhou. A Discussion on Ibsen's "Social Problem Plays" and Their Influence on the Enlightenment of Chinese Drama [J]. Foreign Literature Studies, 1998(1):3. DOI: CNKI: SUN: WLXY.0.1998-01-010.] The reason why Norwegian writer Ibsen is well-known in China is due to Hu Shi's promotion of Ibsen.

So, how much did Hu Shi understand Ibsen? In his article "My Belief," there is such a passage: "I read the works of Ibsen, Morley, and Huxley, which taught me the importance of thinking and speaking honestly. I have read all of Ibsen's dramas and especially love 'An Enemy of the People'..." After systematically watching Ibsen's dramatic works, Hu Shi focused on Ibsen's "realistic" plays. This is closely related to the social environment in which Hu Shi was. At that time, Hu Shi, who was still studying in the United States, proposed suggestions for literary reform, and his articles were published in "New Youth," setting off a literary reform trend at that time. However, the power of newspapers and periodicals is limited, and with the rise of new drama, which was widely sought after by the public and easy to spread ideas, Hu Shi seized the role of new drama in propaganda, analyzed Ibsen's works from a political and social perspective, and hoped to solve social problems and promote political and social development. It can also be said that he studied and analyzed Ibsen's works from the outside. Hu Shi said in his study diary on July 8, 1914: "Since Ibsen, European giants have focused on social drama, also known as 'problem plays,' because each play aims to discuss the important issues of today's society."

## 2. The Ideological Connotation of Hu Shi's Ibsenism

So, what is the original meaning of Hu Shi's Ibsenism? That is, where is the root of Hu Shi's proposal of Ibsenism, which is a key issue that needs to be resolved. It is necessary and essential to trace back to the original source of Hu Shi's Ibsenism.

Hu Shi said in "My Belief" - Morley once taught me: "An ism, if sound, represents a greater advantage. To give it up for a temporary advantage that seems right but is wrong is to sacrifice the greater good for the lesser good. In an exhausted era, there is nothing more certain than to deprive noble actions and upward character." [Lin Jiangang. The Formation Process of Hu Shi's Tolerance Concept [J]. Guangdong Academic Journal, 2017(1):11.], whether Hu Shi's Ibsenism is the greater good or the lesser good he said is sound, is worth discussing. Its ideological connotation is broad. Hu Shi, who once believed in good faith that the Japanese would return the occupied Chinese territory to China after defeating Germany, and who firmly believed in pacifism and international cosmopolitanism, whether there is still a shadow of pacifism in Ibsenism, is worth discussing. If we look at the article "Ibsenism" in isolation, it is inevitably one-sided. Combining it with a series of articles by Hu Shi on drama, we can also understand Hu Shi's own view of drama (literary view), or to what extent he has absorbed and digested Ibsen and carried forward Ibsen.

In his article "More Problems, Fewer Isms," Hu Shi said, "We must understand that the primary duty of a public opinion maker is to carefully examine the actual situation of society. All theories, all 'isms,' are tools for this examination. With theories as reference materials, we can easily understand the situation under examination and easily comprehend the significance of certain circumstances. What remedies should be applied." [Ke Huaqing. Problems and Methods - An Analysis of "Problems and Isms" in the May Fourth Period [J]. Academic, 2012, 000(005):5-23. DOI:10.3969/j.issn.1002-1698.2012.05.001.] From the perspective of drama creation, Hu Shi's Ibsenism is different from Ibsen's thoughts. Ibsen's works are based on people in modern society, not social issues. Hu Shi, on the other hand, starts from social issues, conceives and creates characters, personifies social issues, and provides a "depersonalized" interpretation of social problems. The characters in Hu Shi's writings are symbolic, not artistic "people." An important characteristic of the "realism" drama concept held by the advocates of "drama reform" is the emphasis on the spirit of realism. They attach great importance to the connection between drama and real life and the era, and value the function and role of drama in spreading new culture and promoting social change. Fu Sinian pointed out that "the concept of Chinese drama is fundamentally contradictory to modern life," therefore, to "make the Chinese people fully aware, we

must rely on the power of drama; thus, the old drama must be overthrown, and new drama must be created." This idea is most thoroughly developed in Hu Shi's article "Ibsenism." Through the analysis of Ibsen's plays, he believed that "the root of life's major problems lies in the unwillingness to open one's eyes and see the true reality of the world"; the advantage of Ibsen is "only in his willingness to speak frankly, only in his ability to write out the various corrupt and sordid actual situations of society for everyone to see carefully." Therefore, "Ibsen's literature, Ibsen's view of life, is nothing but realism." It is generally believed that the core of Ibsen's thought is Ibsenism. Some scholars believe that "Ibsenism is full of humanistic spirit, a kind of Ibsenite humanism." [Ye Yuqi. Constructing a Diverse, Integrated, and Dialectically Integrated Chinese "Ibsen Studies" - An Interview with Professor Wang Zhongxiang [J]. *World Literature Review*, 2016(2):6.] It is committed to freedom and the pursuit of human nature. Ibsenism, originally a term created by Westerners, has also resonated in China. Hu Shi believed that "Ibsen best represents the essence of 19th-century European individualism." In terms of thought, Hu Shi's understanding of Ibsenism can be said to be quite accurate and close to Ibsen's own thoughts. After Ibsen's drama came to China, it has always been closely linked to one issue, namely, the liberation of women.

### 3. The Influence of Hu Shi's Ibsenism and the May Fourth New Culture Movement

After Hu Shi introduced Ibsen to China, it caused a huge response in the country, and a discussion of Ibsen arose in China. Mao Dun once reviewed in 1925: "Ibsen has a significant relationship with the new culture movement that has shaken the whole country in recent years in our country. Six or seven years ago, 'New Youth' published a special issue on Ibsen, which regarded this great Nordic literary figure as a symbol of new movements such as literary revolution, women's liberation, and resistance to traditional thought. At that time, the name Ibsen was lingering in the hearts of young people and was talked about by young people, no less than Marx and Lenin today." [Mei Qibo. The Spread of Ibsen's Drama in China in the 1930s and 1940s of the 20th Century - Starting from the "Nora Event" [J]. *Literary Theory and Criticism*, 2009(1):4. DOI:CNKI:SUN:WAVE.0.2009-01-029.] As Qian Liqun said in "Thirty Years of Modern Chinese Literature": In 1918, the sixth issue of the fourth volume of "New Youth" unprecedentedly published a "Ibsen Issue," which published three plays such as "Nora," "An Enemy of the People," etc., all of which were aimed at anti-tradition, anti-despotism, advocating freedom, and women's liberation. Its rebellious "iconoclast" temperament coincides with the spirit of the May Fourth, so the impact is very great, and many schools are competing to perform. During the climax of the May Fourth, the translation and promotion of Ibsen's works and the promotion of Ibsenism became a trend, and young people were fanatically fond of Ibsen, which was the "star chasing" of that era, and almost no newspaper or periodical did not discuss this Norwegian dramatist. "During the May Fourth period, many new literary authors also started by imitating Ibsen's 'problem novels' and 'problem plays,' turning to focus on and reflect on the creation of social reality and life." [Deng Di. Aesthetics and Drama Translation [J]. *Journal of Suzhou University: Philosophy and Social Science Edition*, 2009(6):3. DOI:CNKI:SUN:SZDX.0.2009-06-025.] [Qian Liqun, Wen Rumin, Wu Fuhui's "Thirty Years of Chinese Literature"]. This has led to a major discussion in the Chinese theoretical community about social problem plays, and the relationship between "problem plays" and "social plays," forming two major schools of thought in China that equate problem plays with social plays or that problem plays are different from social plays. In the field of dramatic theory, the view that equates Chinese problem plays with social plays is the majority, while the view that separates social problem plays from social plays is in the minority. The discussion on the relationship between Chinese problem plays and social plays is still continuing and will continue for a long time in the future. And this issue is difficult to resolve in a short period of time.

Hu Shi's introduction to Ibsen has formed a unique inheritance model for drama since the May Fourth. In terms of external form, the May Fourth problem plays have drawn on Ibsen's mid-period social plays, featuring realism, but in terms of inherent spiritual characteristics, they have a qualitative difference from social plays. They adhere to the attitude of political and social criticism, take society as the foundation, expose all kinds of social injustices such as wealth disparity and injustice, and the various social maladies and problems that arise from them, emphasize the subject's tendency, and take raising social issues and answering them as the central content of the play; timeliness and topicality are its basic characteristics. The "Westernized" May Fourth problem plays, which focus on social issues, show a moment of prosperity, but their inherent lack of artistry is doomed to be short-lived and will eventually disappear in the dust of history. [Chen Min. (2014). The Lack and Weakness of Aesthetic Creation of Dramatic Characters - A Reflection on the Tradition and Current Situation of Chinese Drama Creation. *Journal of the PLA Academy of Arts* (2), 6.]

Hu Shi used drama as a way of ideological propaganda, taking Ibsen as an opportunity to set off a cultural movement. Modern drama research believes that Hu Shi's Ibsenism is a "misreading" of Ibsen, and this misreading stems from his allegiance of "realism" to the banner of "Ibsenism." For us, what is important and decisive is not what Ibsen was originally, but what Ibsen we need and recognize in our minds! [Ding Tao. Question and Analysis - On the Various Evaluations of the Realism (or Social Problem Play) of Cao Yu's Drama [J]. *Drama: Journal of the Central Academy of Drama*, 2003(1):44. DOI:CNKI:SUN:XJZZ.0.2003-01-000.] In the subsequent evolution, Hu Shi's Ibsenism gradu-

ally evolved into the "realism" of the left-wing revolutionary literary and artistic theory, and today's realism is a continuation of this concept.

Hu Shi's interpretation and exposition of "Ibsenism" aims to advocate for individual freedom and human liberation. Strictly speaking, this is a sociological paper; broadly speaking, it is also just a literary criticism in the sense of sociology, but the "realist spirit" it advocates and promotes, which faces up to real life, exposes social darkness, and strives for individual liberation, has had an undeniable significant impact on the evolution of the May Fourth literary concept, especially the formation and establishment of the realist drama concept. [Hu Bo. *New Humanist Literary Criticism of Liang Shiqiu* [J]. *Dongyue Forum*, 2001, 22(6):4. DOI:10.3969/j.issn.1003-8353.2001.06.035.] Under Hu Shi's introduction to Ibsen, related literary and artistic works reflecting social issues have also emerged one after another. For example, "Life's Big Event" created by Hu Shi, "A Wasp" by Ding Xilin, and "Three Rebellious Women" by Guo Moruo all focus on the love between young men and women in the changing times. In the very conservative social environment at that time, it can be said that advocating the social concept of free love between men and women is very progressive and a great impact on the old social concepts. In Yang Yuqian's "Shrew" drama, it is also used to oppose and struggle against the husband's concubine behavior to attack the hypocrisy of the feudal etiquette and morality at that time, and to vigorously promote the realistic ideas of free love and women's liberation. [Xiao Lin. *An Analysis of the Influence of Ibsen on the Development of Chinese Realist Drama* [J]. *Drama Home*, 2017(16):27-27.] Under Hu Shi's guidance, realist works reflecting social reality have blossomed everywhere, and drama has played an important role in enlightening the people's wisdom during the turbulent period of the Republic of China.

However, Hu Shi's emphasis on realism in Ibsenism is inevitably one-sided. As Jiao Shangzhi said in "A History of Modern Chinese Drama Development": "We should fully estimate the role and historical merits of the pioneers of 'drama reform advocates' in promoting and establishing modern drama concepts, mainly 'realist' drama concepts; however, we must also see that their understanding and comprehension of 'realist' drama are still very superficial and superficial, and they have not touched the inherent essence and aesthetic level of 'realist' drama at all. They criticize old drama, elaborate on the relationship between drama and the era of life, and emphasize the literary value and social role of drama, mostly based on general literary concepts, and rarely argue from the ontology and characteristics of drama. Even when they talk about the 'realistic' characteristics of drama, they do not go beyond the category of literature." This has also laid the ideological foundation for the emergence of the People's Drama Society and the pure drama school later on.

#### 4. Conclusion

Hu Shi's article "Ibsenism" has greatly promoted the development of Chinese dramatic aesthetic thought and has left a strong mark in the development of Chinese drama. Its dissemination and discussion of Ibsen's dramatic thought are not only of significant reference value for the development of contemporary Chinese dramatic aesthetic thought but also have great research value for the development of the Chinese school, especially in the field of aesthetic thought in the arts.

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