

Perspectives

**Ibsen and Cosmopolitanism:
A Chinese and Cross-Cultural Perspective**
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Abstract: This essay suggests that a discussion of Henrik Ibsen and his relationship with cosmopolitanism should start with the redefinition of this controversial concept. After reconsidering cosmopolitanism, I note that Ibsen's relevance to cosmopolitanism can be broken down into three topics: his cosmopolitan ideas and diasporic experience; the cosmopolitan subject matter of his plays and the global significance of his works; and his position in world literature. I analyze his most representative play, *Peer Gynt*, from a cosmopolitan perspective and argue that Ibsen's cosmopolitan elements find particular embodiment in the different adaptations and productions of his plays in China.

Keywords: cosmopolitanism, Henrik Ibsen, diaspora, *Peer Gynt*

I. Why Should We Talk about Cosmopolitanism Today?

Although cosmopolitanism became a cutting edge theoretical and intellectual trend in Western academia in the late 1990s, it has a long history, or a sort of “prehistory,” dating from antiquity. It is worth revisiting this concept before dealing with Henrik Ibsen's relationship with it and his position in world literature and drama. As an interdisciplinary concept and critical discourse, cosmopolitanism dates back to ancient Greek philosophy, especially that of Diogenes of Sinope and other Stoics. Cosmopolitanism is primarily a political and philosophical concept with a strong ethical core. It tells us that all human beings—regardless of the ethnic groups, countries, or regions with which they are affiliated—belong to a single social community or a sort of “imaginary

community.” This notion is very close to the current theoretical discourse of globalization, according to which people live in a huge “global village” and share a fundamental set of ethical principles and rights that transcend individual nations or countries.

Literary and cultural studies scholars have long been interested in cosmopolitanism and tried to find its elements in literary works. The late Dutch comparatist and sinologist Douwe Fokkema was among the earliest comparatists in the contemporary era to deal with this topic in conjunction with comparative and world literature. In his response to globalization, he transcends the old-fashioned Eurocentric or Western-centric view of cosmopolitanism and calls for reconstructing a new cosmopolitanism in a global context. Although globalization often results in cultural homogeneity, he is more concerned with the other pole of globalization in culture: cultural plurality and diversity (Fokkema 1–17).

As a Chinese scholar of comparative and world literature, I deal with the issue of cosmopolitanism chiefly from two perspectives: a literary and critical perspective in general and a Chinese perspective in particular. I believe that world literature is closely related to cosmopolitanism since many literary works are written both for the author’s domestic readers and a broader global reading public. Ibsen’s works should be viewed as world literature since his plays are mainly written for readers and audiences across different cultures. In this essay, I first offer my own tentative theoretical (re)construction of cosmopolitanism from a global as well as Chinese perspective. I argue that cosmopolitanism can be described as having the following ten characteristics:

- (1) as something that transcends nationalist sentiment;
- (2) as a pursuit of moral justice;
- (3) as a global and universal human concern;
- (4) as a diasporic and even homeless state;
- (5) as something decentralizing, which pursues a pluralistic cultural identity;
- (6) as in the service of human happiness and unity;
- (7) as a political and religious belief;
- (8) as the realization of global governance;

- (9) as an artistic and aesthetic pursuit; and
- (10) as a critical perspective from which to evaluate literary and cultural products. (Wang Ning, “Cosmopolitanism” 167–81)

Theoretical constructions of cosmopolitanism can be conceived of differently, but they primarily depend on the idea of the nation-state. Ibsen has close relations with cosmopolitanism not only in his life experiences but also in his works, although for him the “world” chiefly refers to Europe.

II. Ibsen and Cosmopolitanism

When we discuss Ibsen and cosmopolitanism, we can do so by focusing on three topics: his cosmopolitan ideas and diasporic experience; the cosmopolitan subject matter of his plays and the global significance of his works; and his position in world literature and drama. All three topics demonstrate that Ibsen is a patriot, nationalist, and cosmopolitan. His work is more popular in the rest of the world than in his country of origin. For instance, in the China of the New Culture Movement (1919–1922), Ibsen was much better known than Shakespeare. Before I focus on this last point, however, I will elaborate on the above three factors.

Ibsen meets three of the ten characteristics of cosmopolitanism I describe above. Because he loved Norway, he was a patriot and nationalist as well as a cosmopolitan. Indeed he chiefly wrote about what happened in Norway in a critical way. Unfortunately, prior to his time abroad he was often treated unfairly by Norwegians, especially in Norwegian literary and critical circles. Because of his strong sense of individualism and commitment to avant-garde artistic experimentation, he was not well-received by his contemporary critics. This is one of the reasons he exiled himself from the country for over twenty years. It was during these twenty years that he wrote some of his best work. The broad horizon of cosmopolitanism, rather than narrow-minded nationalism, fueled his superb artistic imagination and transnational subject matter. His diasporic experience enabled him to write for a broad international reading public. He had a wide global concern for all of humankind and was interested in the

fundamental problems with which human beings are confronted. That is why he is much more widely known outside of Scandinavia, especially in China. In this article, I am particularly interested in his popularity and strong influence in China and will deal with this below.

As I have mentioned above, during China's New Culture Movement in the early twentieth century, Ibsen was even better known than Shakespeare. At the time, ordinary people and intellectuals alike might well have thought Shakespeare's works a bit far from Chinese social reality. What they needed more urgently was an intellectual and writer like Ibsen. The most progressive and influential intellectual journal at the time, *Xin Qingnian* (New Youth), published a special issue devoted to him—their only special issue on foreign literature and drama.¹ In the issue, such eminent intellectual figures as Lu Xun, Chen Duxiu, Hu Shi, and Zhou Zuoren published long articles discussing Ibsen and the significance of his works in China and the rest of the world.

World literature has a close relationship with translation (Wang, "World Literature"). According to David Damrosch, "world literature is writing that gains in translation" (281). Inherent in Ibsen's plays is a kind of translatability, or adaptability if we think of adaptation as a sort of cultural and dramatic translation, or, more precisely, a sort of intersemiotic translation. Some of his major plays have been adapted into typical indigenous Chinese dramatic forms without losing their essential spirit. The cosmopolitan elements of his work combine with typical Chinese national elements to form something new.

The second element of Ibsen's relationship with cosmopolitanism lies in the fact that he touches upon basic issues dealt with by all human beings, be they Western or Eastern. Peer Gynt, the titular character of Ibsen's play who is often viewed as very much like his author, says openly that he is a "citizen of the world" (Ibsen, *Peer* 76), which represents Ibsen's broad horizon and global concerns. Although Ibsen did not get along well with his contemporary critics, he still tried to discuss Norwegian problems and offer tentative solutions as he was both a patriot and a cosmopolitan. Like his early twentieth-century Chinese counterpart Lu Xun, who loved China so much so that he could not help but sharply criticize its evils and dark sides, Ibsen critiqued social

problems in nineteenth-century Norway. Thus Ibsen, like Lu Xun, was first and foremost a patriot. He wrote in his native language and focused on the country's vital issues. He also loved Norway so much that he could not bear the existence of its various social problems. He shone a light on its social evils and human weaknesses in an attempt to make things better, efforts that meant that he was often misunderstood and rejected by his fellow Norwegians, much like his character Dr. Stockman, who is regarded as an "enemy of the people" (Ibsen, *Enemy* 255). Ibsen places a universally recognized truth in Dr. Stockman's mouth: "[T]he strongest man in the world is the one who stands most alone" (*Enemy* 255). Over one hundred years have passed since Ibsen's death in 1906, and many of his contemporaries who were as well known or even better known than he have been forgotten by today's critics and the broad reading public. But Ibsen is still remembered in Norway and around the world. He believed that although truth is sometimes in the hands of the minority, over time it will be recognized and grasped by the majority of people. Readers and audiences might forget the details of his plays, but we always remember his and his characters' famous sayings, which have a certain cosmopolitan significance.

The third element of his cosmopolitanism is his significance in both Eastern and Western cultures. Although Ibsen came from a small nation and wrote his plays in a minor language, he succeeded in deterritorializing this small domain by travelling with his ideas and art to almost all the countries in the world. Since Ibsen was an artist, or more precisely, a dramatic artist, he expressed his ideas in an aesthetic way. In the next section, I focus on the cosmopolitan subject matter in his play *Peer Gynt*, which I argue most vividly illustrates his cosmopolitan ideas and presents the tension between cosmopolitanism and nationalism in its characterization of its hero, Peer Gynt.

III. The Cosmopolitan Theme of *Peer Gynt* and Its Tension with Nationalism

Peer Gynt is one of Ibsen's best-known plays as well as his most cosmopolitan work. It has found particular embodiment in its successful performance in China and elsewhere. People might well ask why *Peer Gynt*

has achieved such success with Chinese audiences. One of the important reasons is its unforgettable hero, Peer, who reminds Chinese audiences of another fictional character created by Lu Xun: Ah Q. When Lu Xun published his novelette *Ah Q Zheng Zhuan* [*The Real Story of Ah-Q*] in 1921, so many people strongly identified themselves with the fictional hero Ah Q that they accused Lu Xun of personally attacking them in his work. Obviously, this character is a typical Chinese peasant, who represents the weakness of the Chinese nation. Similarly, performances of *Peer Gynt* elicited strong responses from Scandinavian audiences. Peer is often viewed as representative of Ibsen as well as many Norwegians. Many people from small nations are satisfied with their peaceful and comfortable lives without adventurous travel abroad. But Peer Gynt, like Ibsen, is different. There are two choices for a man like Peer: either waste his life in a meaningless and mediocre way or vigorously pursue the career he wants. Although neither choice will allow him to avoid death, Peer prefers the latter. Indeed, Peer's romantic and adventurous experiences are the products of his desire to live out his cosmopolitan ideals. Thus when he is about to end his life he does not feel regret but is proud of himself; he firmly believes that his life has not been lived in vain. Peer's adventurous and diasporic experiences imply that Ibsen assumed his audience would see them as the bizarre lifestyle of European society. In the years when capitalism was rising and expanding its market overseas, it needed people like Peer Gynt with adventurous and aggressive spirits. Ibsen grasped the spirit of the time and achieved great success in producing a play that crosses the limits of space and time to appeal to contemporary, global audiences. Peer never hides his great aspirations and ambition. The dialogue between Peer and his mother in Act One, Scene One illustrates Peer's virtues and shortcomings: he behaves badly, brags, and likes to fight with others and tell lies, but he also has lofty ambitions and dares to say and do whatever he likes:

Aase. Are you lying now again?

Peer Gynt. Yes, just this once; so you may as well stop crying.

(*Clenches his left hand.*) See, 'twas with this pair of pincers

that I bent the blacksmith double, while my right hand was my hammer—

Aase. Oh, you brawler! You will bring me to my grave by your behaviour!

Peer Gynt. Nonsense! You're worth something better—better twenty thousand times! Little, homely, dainty mother, just believe what I am saying. All the town shall do you honour; only wait till I have done something—something really great!

Aase (*contemptuously*). You!

Peer Gynt. Who knows what lies before him!

Aase. If you ever know enough to mend your breeches when they're torn, 'tis the most that I could hope for!

Peer Gynt (*hotly*). I'll be a King, an Emperor! (Ibsen, *Peer Gynt* 10–11)

Even Peer's mother does not believe that he can achieve success. He has already failed many times, and it is impossible, in her view, for a person from such a low family background to become a "king" or "emperor." He wants to find an opportunity abroad to occupy a position as a big boss, another type of ruler. He does not merely identify himself as Norwegian but rather, like Ibsen, has more global human concerns.

Peer works hard to make his fortune. It is almost unbelievable that his success is purely the result of his own efforts. As we know, Peer suffers a great deal in middle age and almost has his eyes gouged out by a mountain demon. But he still tries to get out of the hands of the demon. After a series of illegal transactions, including selling ivory, slaves, and idols as well as what to him were various other adventurous activities, he has indeed made a big fortune in an attempt to realize his dream of becoming an "emperor" through the power of money. When he is asked if he is Norwegian, he responds:

By birth, yes; but by disposition I am a citizen of the world. For the good fortune I've enjoyed, I have to thank America; my well-stocked library I owe to Germany's advanced young

thinkers; from France I get my taste in dress, my manners, and whatever turn I have for subtleness of mind; England has taught me industry and care for my own interests; the Jews have taught me how to wait; from Italy I've caught a dash of taste for *dolce far niente*; and once, when in a sorry fix, I reached the goal of my desire by trusting to good Swedish steel. (76; emphasis in original)

The moment illustrates his cosmopolitan spirit. He has learned from different countries and can get along with people from each of them. Everywhere he stays he feels quite at home, a typical cosmopolitan statement that echoes Diogenes' assertion that he is "a citizen of the world" (Ibsen, *Peer Gynt* 76). One's position as a citizen of the world has since become a criterion used to judge whether one is a nationalist or a cosmopolitan. But Diogenes does not elaborate on how to achieve this status. It is Peer Gynt who puts into motion his ambitious desire to do so. It is also Peer Gynt who knows that if one wants to become a citizen of the world, he must try to get along with local people wherever he is and learn from them so as to develop himself in the best possible way. If we argue that Ibsen's cosmopolitan vision exists only within Western boundaries, then we should also note that Peer's illegal practice of selling idols to China transcends the West and reaches another part of the world. He should be viewed as a real cosmopolitan even though he comes from a small nation.

Peer is not satisfied with his single Norwegian national identity. Although he is a patriot even when he is abroad, he does not stick to this limited national identity. He prefers to be a citizen of the world who travels the globe and learns everything he can from other countries. He is a successful businessman and amasses a large fortune via legal and illegal means. Yet in the end he is not content with his homeless or rootless cosmopolitan state. He wants to be both a nationalist and a cosmopolitan; he wants to love his homeland as well as the entire world. He finally decides to return to Norway, where he becomes a "rooted" cosmopolitan. This is perhaps characteristic of Ibsen's own cosmopolitan view and "rooted" cosmopolitan experience.

As I observe above, Ibsen wrote some of his best plays—with cosmopolitan subject matter—during his diasporic years. But unlike homeless or rootless cosmopolitans, Ibsen never forgot that he was, first, a Norwegian writer. He continued to write about the Norwegian society he lived in and the people with whom he was familiar even when he was abroad. He eventually returned to Norway after he became well known and was treated very well before his death. This proves that the ideal cosmopolitan should love his or her homeland as well as the entire world. In this way, Ibsen could be regarded as a rooted cosmopolitan. Immediately before and long after his death, Ibsen was favorably received and highly honored by Norwegian readers and audiences. Similarly, his cosmopolitan vision enables him and his works to reach far and wide to other parts of the world and gain international significance. In the next section I will address Ibsen's reception and reputation in China as an example of his global influence.

IV. The Global Influence of Ibsen's Works: The Chinese Case

Because of different translations, interpretations, and adaptations of his work, many "Ibsens" exist (Wang, "Ibsen Metamorphosed"). In 2006, some of the major Chinese theatre troupes performed their new productions of Ibsen's major plays to commemorate the centenary of his death. Four of Ibsen's works—*The Master Builder*, *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, and *Peer Gynt*—were performed, along with a fifth play largely based on his *An Enemy of the People*. All of the plays were presented to Chinese audiences in new versions that reflected the Chinese artists' creative innovations and artistic adaptations. Or, from a perspective of intercultural and intersemiotic translation, the plays were retranslated (if we use translation in the metaphorical sense). In this situation, the directors played the role of translators, for it was through their dynamic understanding and creative translations that Ibsen appeared before the Chinese audiences more as a dramatic artist than a revolutionary advocate. These plays, after being adapted or even revised substantially by Chinese directors, once again aroused Chinese audiences' great interest and were enthusiastically received. In some of the adapted plays, the

characters were dressed in Chinese costumes and spoke Chinese. The problems the plays address are closely related to those faced in current Chinese society. When the audience watches the performances of the new productions of Ibsen's plays they feel as if the stories have happened in China. The plays have been "sinicized" and have thus produced new significance.

One may well ask: How, in such a postmodern consumerist society, when globalization has significantly influenced literary and elite cultural production, could Ibsen's plays still attract so many Chinese audiences' attention? As we know, as well as addressing global-seeming problems, Ibsen's plays are full of idealism. Furthermore, Ibsen is concerned for all human beings, not just his own fellow citizens. Since Ibsen holds that his plays are written more for reading than performing, we might well regard these dramatic texts as world literature, which certainly enables them to transcend a particular time and dramatic convention. His plays were written for both native and world readers. Additionally, Ibsen's plays remain relevant to various contemporary theoretical debates on the issues of modernity and postmodernity. This is also one of the reasons why his plays are still performed in different cultural contexts and parts of the world despite changes in critical fashion and aesthetic conventions. J. Hillis Miller, in dealing with the significance of world literature and its relationship with globalization, writes:

The new discipline of World Literature . . . might be seen as the last ditch to rescue the study of literature. It does this by implicitly claiming that studying literature from around the world is a way to understand globalization. This understanding allows one to become a citizen of the world, a cosmopolitan, not just a citizen of this or that local monolingual community. (253–54)

Ibsen's plays, written over one hundred years ago, anticipate the future. Although his dramatic works were mostly written in the nineteenth century, they are by no means out of date when we read them as literary works in today's Chinese and global context. In contemporary China, elite art like modern spoken drama has largely been on the decline be-

cause of the impact of cultural globalization. Performing new productions of Ibsen's plays has revitalized the interest of Chinese audiences in spoken drama. The popularization of this work is, to a great extent, attributable to the creative adaptations and superb dynamic direction by Chinese artists who have created a "sinicized" Ibsen in the Chinese context.

Of all of these new productions, the most unforgettable is *The Master Builder*, which was directed by Lin Zhaohua and performed for the first time by the Lin Zhaohua Studio. Lin is one of the most prominent avant-garde directors in contemporary China and always aims at dramatic experimentation and innovation. If we regard world literature as something that gains in translation, then I contend that the Chinese production of *The Master Builder* should be understood as both an interlingual and intercultural translation. In Lin's new production, the actors and actresses speak Chinese, but more importantly, they wear their Chinese costumes and do not disguise their Chinese faces. Lin wants to "sinicize" Ibsen's play in the contemporary era by inserting Chinese elements and thus making it more relatable to today's Chinese audiences. Through such creative translation and adaptation, Ibsen's play is "localized" or "sinicized" with indigenous Chinese characteristics that are more easily understood and appreciated by ordinary Chinese audiences. Although *The Master Builder* was written in the second half of the nineteenth century, it was not performed in Chinese until the beginning of the twenty-first century. Its performance immediately attracted a broad audience as if it were a contemporary Chinese play. I agree with Damrosch that world literature should "gain in translation," but I also believe that world drama should gain in translation or adaptation and even recreation as well. The successful adaptation and creative production of *The Master Builder* as well as many of his other plays in China has certainly proved Ibsen's translatability (Wang, "Ibsen Metamorphosed," 153–54).

In 2006, I delivered a speech at the Global Ibsen conference in Berlin, in which I discussed the critical and creative reception of Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* to illustrate its global and cosmopolitan significance. I argue that the play was enthusiastically received by contemporary

Chinese audiences because it deals with environmental pollution and political corruption in Norway over one hundred years ago, problems similar to the ones people are confronted with in China. The play not only anticipated the future but it also anticipated what would happen elsewhere. It is not surprising that a group of Chinese college students, facing the serious pollution of the Huai River, wanted to perform *An Enemy of the People* to warn people of the danger of environmental pollution. Their performance is thus called “The Event of *An Enemy of the People* [*Renmin gongdi shijian*].”² Ibsen’s play is used as a weapon to fight against environmental pollution and social corruption in contemporary China. Although the students’ wish to stop pollution failed due to interference from different levels of the local government, they taught the audience that effectively protecting our environment is by no means a short-term plan but a long-term strategic project that requires the involvement of more people.

Ibsen’s works raise questions rather than offer answers or solutions. He intends to leave these questions to readers and audiences, who are provided space for interpretation. This characteristic finds particular embodiment in his late plays like *The Wild Duck* and *The Master Builder*. His dramatic texts are always open for insightful readers and interpreters; through their close reading and careful study, they will offer new interpretations and even theoretical reconstructions from new perspectives. If writers want their works to be interpreted by readers of different generations and different cultural contexts, then they should not limit their works to a particular time or a particular cultural and aesthetic code. Rather, they should deal with fundamental issues that confront all human beings. Ibsen belongs among such great writers of eternal critical and interpretive value. Similarly, if writers, like Ibsen, want their works to travel far beyond the borders of their own countries, they, as well as their works, should be translated into other languages and cultural environments. In the process, their works may well become part of the target literature as well as world literature. Out of the past decades of translation and adaptation of his works, a Chinese Ibsen and some Chinese versions of his plays have emerged. Thus a playwright from a small nation became a world-renowned author and an artist of cosmo-

politan significance. In contrast, many of Ibsen's European precursors or contemporaries remain unknown outside of their own countries or cultures since they are not translated into other languages and cultures, and the themes in their works are rather narrow, focusing on domestic subject matters rather than cosmopolitan ones.

In discussing the function of translation in canonizing literary works in other languages, we cannot but think of Walter Benjamin. Benjamin, in dealing with the task of the (literary) translator, notes: "[A] translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life" (73). To Benjamin, translation does not consist simply of word for word translation. It has other functions, including helping a literary work attain international or cosmopolitan significance. According to Benjamin, translation endows a literary work with a "continued" life, or an "afterlife" (73), without which it might well remain dead or marginal in a particular literary and cultural tradition. Similarly, if we view theatrical adaptation as a sort of translation, we can say that Ibsen benefits from being translated into many languages and having his plays performed in many different cultural environments. His works have had a "continued" life and an "afterlife" because they contain cosmopolitan elements and significance.

Notes

- 1 *New Youth* published five special issues in total. Apart from the Ibsen issue, they included a special issue on the transformation of drama, one on May Labour Day, one on the problem of population, and one on Marxism.
- 2 When I watched the performance by the Graduate Students Troupe of Nanjing University in October 2014, I was delighted to see that there were more artistic characteristics than social elements. The play, which was co-directed by the German director Gerhard Dressel and the Chinese director Lü Xiaoping, was filled with certain expressionist elements. It has obviously gained in further translation and adaptation.

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