

Joachim BOITTOUT

École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS),
Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO).

From popular love stories to political activism

The making of a new social group: Xu Zhenya 徐枕亞, Wu Shuangre 吳雙熱, and
Li Dingyi 李定夷, old-styled popular novelists and journalists at *People's Rights*
Minquan bao 民權報.

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Abstract:

The beginning of the 1910s in China saw the creation of a great number of political newspapers, especially in the Shanghai area. Those newspapers mostly aimed at supporting the ideas of the Revolution and to promote them in the young Republic established on January 1st, 1912. The most radical of these newspapers, although they have not been carefully studied yet, seek to insure a civilian control of the Yuan Shikai 袁世凱 government, targeted by many articles as early as late April 1912. These articles were often written with a violent tone and not without a certain virtuosity by political thinkers whom, by doing so, found themselves starting to work as proper polemicists and political journalists, rather than old styled *literati*. Not only did they actively warn their fellow countrymen about the dangers they foresaw in Yuan Shikai's will to restore an autocratic rule. They also made a theoretical use of the space that the frontpage of these newspapers, which was usually devoted to shorter political essays, offered them.

However, in a time of growing censorship exercised by the Yuan Shikai administration, some intellectuals and journalists ventured even further. The newspaper called *People's Rights* (*Minquan bao*), alongside the *Minli bao* 民立報, was one of the most virulent dailies of the Tongmenghui 同盟會. Its leading editorial writer Dai Jitao 戴季陶 declared war on Yuan in April 1912. At the same time, he drew out the outlines of an ideal democratic system that a modern Republic should be based on. Unlike many other newspapers, the literary supplement of *Minquan bao*, far from being a mere entertainment supplement, was designed to be an active part of their intellectual strategy, in which modern political concepts, borrowed from Western ideas, were expressed in classical Chinese. A significant number of the contributions to this supplement were made by well-known popular love fictions writers. As the success of their most famous amorous episodes published on the frontpage increased along with that of the daily, classical love stories and other *miscellanea* composed in a highly sophisticated *wenyan* 文言 had to be conveyors of their progressist political thought.

There is an even more striking fact that need to be mentioned about *People's Rights*. A great number of its prominent journalist were authentic popular novelists who used the newspaper as a medium to publish their love stories. Xu Zhenya 徐枕亞, author of the bestseller *Yulihun* 玉梨魂, which happened to be the most read novel of the first years of the Republic, worked as an editor at the *Minquanbao*. Alongside Wu Shuangre 吳雙熱 and Li Dingyi 李定夷, two major writers and founding personalities of the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies movement (*Yuanyang hudiepai* 鴛鴦蝴蝶派). However, despite the coexistence of political editorials and popular love stories on the frontpage, the link between classical love stories and political activism has been somewhat ignored for decades by both Chinese and Western scholars. The negative appreciation of these novels expressed by the emblematic figures of the May Fourth Movement such as Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 and Lu Xun 魯迅 is partly responsible for the misunderstanding about the political and sociological context in which these novels were written. Their old fashioned style (ornate classical and semi-classical prose) and the problematic content of their stories (traditional Confucian morality remained praised and eventually defended) however, did not prevent them from being extensively read by the very social classes that supported the revolution: the lowbrow and middlebrow, to a certain extent, the liberal local gentry.

Hence, it is worth asking how did the active participation of these three writers to *People's Rights* shape their literary creation in a progressist way, which helped them gain a considerable popular success. It seems indeed no longer possible to ignore the political dimension of their popularity that, until present days, has been solely imputed to the sentimental afflictions they so lavishly portrayed.

Since these romantic fictions and classical style literary pieces¹ often conveyed a libertarian conception of political modernity, a fundamental connection between the literary works of the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies writers and their newspaper should be made. The examination of this link can reveal the importance of the collective work those literati were doing on a daily basis at the newspapers' headquarters in the conception of their own literary works. A precise examination of both their novels, especially Xu Zhenya's *Yulihun* 玉梨魂, and minor pieces (*xiaopin* 小品), all published in the *Minquan bao*, could shed light on the close ties between fictional works and political press of the early 1910s. However, Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies authors did also write political and even theoretical articles about progressive political values. That is why I also intend to demonstrate that these short essays or pieces, which were published on the frontpage and in the literary supplement of *Minquan bao*, should be read as the philosophical backbone of their novels. Therefore, these highly popular novels can be comprehended as rather unexpected political media. Moreover, the combination of those two types of genres can be seen arguably as the basis of the complementary identity of the writers of this group. Probably for the first time in recent history, they utilised their *literati* skills in order to achieve modern political goals and had thus become popular writers and journalists, or *literati-journalists*.

¹ The proportion of parallel prose and rhapsodies or *fu* 賦 in these works is significantly high.