

INTRODUCTION

We need, first of all, to set up a system for our study of Chinese modern popular literature, a sufficient and independent system for a thorough examination of its whole history and, based on such a study, we would be ready to integrate it into the “family” of the Chinese modern literature. The reason for doing so is twofold. First, the history of Chinese modern literature has been dominated by the discourse of elite literary historians and writers. Popular literature has been taken as a literary “reverse flow” for ongoing repudiation, or at least as a “minor form” of literature to be neglected or marginalized. It is an utter vilification if it is labeled a literary “reverse flow” and it might not be appropriate to take it as a minor kind of literature according only to an impression without substantial support. Only after we have given it a thorough investigation and careful study can we see its real status and value. As a new and necessary step, we should explore, then, in what way we can work it into the history of Chinese literature and our definition of this particular genre can then be close to accurate. Our second reason for doing so is that Chinese popular literature is different from the elite in terms of its time of emergence, its source and inheritance, its major readership and its social function and influence. If we do not see this point, the characteristic merits of popular literature will be blotted out and it would have to remain a minor genre since we would have no way of gaining a complete historical picture of Chinese literature.

Histories of Chinese modern literature have always started in 1917, the traditional milestone marking the beginning of literary modernization. As a matter of fact, Chinese popular literature started its own process of modernization a quarter-century earlier than the official marking of modern literature. Therefore popular literature found it hard to be framed appropriately with elite literature in a scientific manner.

In terms of source and inheritance, the two kinds of literature are different too. Lu Xun once commented on the origin of elite literature in a very straightforward way. He stated, “modern literature and art today emerged owing to the influence of new trends from outside. Thus they could hardly be understood well by ordinary people of the countries of a long history,

especially China.”¹ That is to say, in terms of its source, mainstream Chinese elite literature drew on the experience of the foreign trend of literature and art, especially the cream of it. The goal was to foment a literary revolution in China and, by connecting its literary rail with that of other countries, to merge Chinese literature into others, making it a big tree standing in the forest of world literatures. Mao Dun (Shen Yanbing 1893–1981) once described his goal as follows: “I would like to declare on behalf of those Chinese writers of noble aspirations: our ultimate goal is to find an appropriate position for Chinese literature among our world counterparts so as to make the contribution of Chinese literature to the development of world civilization.”²

Elite literature has its emphasis on “taking references and making innovation” whereas Chinese popular literature has the tendency of “inheriting and reforming” the models in history. Our popular literature has inherited mainly from the classical tradition such fictional types as supernatural tales, love stories, ballad scripts, historical romances, stories of demons and monsters, legends of abnormal characters, satires, brothel anecdotes and swordsmen legends. Writers of this particular genre would reform these traditional types of fiction and explore new possibilities with the development of the times.

The targeted readership of modern popular literature was but common people in the streets of this country of a long history, especially people in urban areas, who found it hard to read highbrow literature owing to their limited literacy. The aim was to entertain readers as well as admonish them against evil by vivid descriptions of social reality.³ Lu Xun argued that the major function of ballad scripts and historical romances in ancient China was “entertainment and solace.”⁴ As he commented on the novels of the Ming Dynasty as imitations of Song works, he stated,

when writers of the Song period wrote their fiction, they intended to amuse readers with their careful observation of neighborhood happenings rather than instructing them. As writers of the Ming Dynasty imitated their Song predecessors and wrote their novels of the lowest quality, they tended to instruct rather than entertain, making the secondary supersede the primary.⁵

¹ Lu Xun, “On the Fiction World.” *Complete Works of Lu Xun*. Vol. 7. Renmin Wenxue Press, 1963, 308.

² Mao Dun, *The Pass I Have Taken*. Part I. Renmin Wenxue Press, 1981, 187.

³ Lu Xun, *A Brief History of Chinese Novels: Part XII, Scripts of the Song Dynasty*. *Complete Works of Lu Xun*. Vol. 8. Renmin Wenxue Press, 1963, 90.

⁴ Lu Xun, *A Brief History of Chinese Novels: Part XX, Novels of the Ming Dynasty*. *Complete Works of Lu Xun*. Vol. 8. Renmin Wenxue Press, 1963, 159.

⁵ Lu Xun, *A Brief History of Chinese Novels: Part XXI, Imitations of the Song Novels by Writers of the Ming Dynasty*. *Complete Works of Lu Xun*. Vol. 8. Renmin Wenxue Press, 1963, 166.

He elaborated his argument in *The Historical Change of Chinese Fiction*: “The power of literature does not lie in its function of instruction. If novels become textbooks of moral instruction, they lose their nature of art.”⁶ Quoted above are observations of Lu Xun on the function and influence of popular fiction in the Song Dynasty, and modern Chinese popular literature has by and large followed this literary tradition.

There is a need to set up an independent research system in the area of Chinese popular literature since it displays an obvious difference from elite literature in terms of its time of emergence, origin and sources, targeted readership and intended functions. Research into popular literature should also be based on its innate rule of development and should target finding the successful experiences and lessons in the history of its development. Our knowledge of the healthy growth of popular literature would help us gain a better understanding of its relationship with its elite counterpart so that we can gradually arrive at a clear idea concerning its position and value in the history of modern Chinese literature. Our present *History of Modern Chinese Popular Literature* is meant to present a rough line of development of popular literature in China and, based on this outline, it intends to provide certain answers to the questions raised above. Illustrations, mainly historical photographs, are given in order to visualize those popular writers and related papers and periodicals in our readers’ minds, as they recall both perceptually and rationally the details of some sixty years of history.

We have decided to take *Legends of Shanghai Flowers* as the founding work of Chinese popular literature. Han Bangqing led popular fiction to the road of modernization without being aware of it, even though we see his spontaneity in the whole process. In a sense, we are shown that the modernization of Chinese popular literature resulted from the advancement of society and the development of literature. It was an inevitable outcome of the growth of literature and of society. As modern industry and commerce were growing more and more prosperous and as major cities were thriving and urban culture became more and more influential, national culture would inevitably change along with the change in its social environment. Thus writers would respond to the new world with their works of literature. *Legends of Shanghai Flowers* was an outstanding novel of this kind. Works written by elite writers emerged as a result of the enormous influence of the new trend of literary thought from foreign countries, whereas works by popular writers came from the innate impetus of our national literary tradition. Without the driving force of foreign literatures, Chinese popular writers would begin their journey on the road to modernization with their works all the same. History has proved it.

⁶ Lu Xun, *The Historical Change of Chinese Fiction: Part IV, Scripts of the Song Dynasty and Their Influence upon Literature. Complete Works of Lu Xun*. Vol. 8. Renmin Wenxue Press, 1963, 331.



0.1. Writers of popular fiction, many of whom were renowned figures in popular literary circles. Front row from left: Huang Baihong, Fan Yanqiao, Huang Nanding, Zheng Yimei, Cheng Xiaoqing, You Bankuang. Middle: Zhang Mianyun, Jiang Hongjiao, Ding Song, Sun Dongwu, Bao Tianxiao, Guo Lanxin, Zhao Zhiyan. Back: Zhu Qishi, Lu Dan'an, Shi Jiqun, You Cifan, Xu Bibo, Huang Zhuantao, Xie Xian'ou, Yao Sufeng.

As a matter of fact, there was an inner link between Li Boyuan's periodical and *Legends of Shanghai Flowers*. Both were similar in terms of their thematic concerns. Only their forms were different from each other. The latter was a novel whereas the former a kind of modern mass media. Periodicals began to publish fiction in installments and novels of denouncement, marking the starting point of modernization, enjoyed the largest readership among popular novels during this particular period. Then came the first wave of Chinese modern literary periodicals launched by Liang Qichao. His original intention was to force literature from a strategic height to work for political purposes. However, as he did not have a sufficient number of elite writers around him, his *New Fiction*, a newly found journal, changed its thematic focus and became the stage of a new performer, Wu Jianren, a writer of popular fiction, from its eighth issue. The most influential were novels focusing on social issues such as *Strange Events Seen in the Past Twenty Years*, a representative work of this type by Wu Jianren. Under the influence of *New Fiction*, Li Boyuan founded his literary periodical *Illustrated Novels*, which, together with a number of other journals, made its appearance in Shanghai. During the first wave, a surging tide of Chinese literary periodicals, the publication of modern popular fiction of denouncement attracted the attention of most readers at the time.

During the turbulent period from the late Qing Dynasty to the early Republic of China, further stirred up by the modern mass media, three main trends of popular fiction writing appeared. First, novels of denouncement came onto the scene from 1903, as mentioned above, and social novels of this new type focused on exposure of the incompetence of the Qing government and the decadence of the society under its rule. Second, novels with the theme of love and grievance gained in popularity. We seem to have heard the moans and groans of the young before they became determined to shake off the shackles of the old ethical code. Fu Lin, for instance, made his character roar with anger in 1906 in *A Drowned Bird's Pebbles*: “Mencius has ruined me and my love”

He dictated that the young should obey the command of their parents and the offices of a matchmaker when making a marriage decision of their own. Otherwise, they would be degraded by both their parents and other people around. Ha! He never thought that the young man and the young girl should have their own right in such decision making. How could parents and matchmaker interfere wantonly in such personal matters?

Teachings of Mencius here were said to be unreasonable and cruel. Up to 1912, when Xu Zhenya published his *Soul of the Jade Pear*, popular writers proposed to find a complete solution to all the issues of the young generation. Third, a group of novels addressing imperial palace secrets were published since, by this time, events of scrambling power and wealth within the walls of the palace had been brought to light after the Qing monarchy was overthrown in the 1911 Revolution. Secret gossip which had circulated from mouth to mouth on street corners was made public. Such stories as the mysterious death of Emperor Hongxian and the failure of Zhang Xun's effort to restore the dethroned monarch became topics of numerous novels which remained in great demand. All newspapers and magazines had great enthusiasm for novels in the style of literary sketches and exploring such dramatic themes. It is fair to say that, for twenty years before the May Fourth movement, these three literary trends dominated the realm of modern popular literature. During this period, there were also some other important events, such as the theme of “awakening,” or rather the theme of enlightenment as was advocated by *Fiction Times*, and the introduction of novels about household problems in 1916 by *Fiction Monthly*, and so forth. We shall give some discussion of all this in the book.

On the eve of the May Fourth movement, the group of writers of elite literature composed mainly of Chinese intellectuals coming back from abroad crowded in the big cities of China and began to voice their critical opinion of popular literature, starting from nitpicking the so-called fiction of inside stories. As some critics failed to differentiate “anthologies of inside stories” resulting from the solicitation of inside stories launched by newspapers from



0.2. Front cover of *A History of Chinese Fiction* by Fan Yanqiao published by Qiuye Press of Suzhou in 1927. The chapter entitled “Fictions of the Past Fifteen Years” gives an account of fictional works after the founding of the republic.

“fictions of inside stories,” they did not realize that the former was not literary. Therefore, when Zhou Zuoren and some other critics uttered their negative opinion of the fiction of inside stories, they were dealing with a group of compilers of the books of inside stories whose aim was totally different. Thus began the debate between two parties who misunderstood each other in nature. This was an unsettled quarrel and it is the right time to clarify it today.

Attack by critics of elite literature on the works of popular writers was fierce and long-lasting. The fire of criticism from *Ten-Day Literature*, later renamed *Literature*, was well focused and had a strong smell of gunpowder. In the first issue of the periodical after it was renamed, an article was published entitled “Declaration of Reform,” which made clear its intention to fight against the other party in the debate. As it wrote,

We would treat those as our foes who take literature as a pastime and who humiliate the concept of literature by corrupting our youth with evil thoughts and a cynical attitude. We would drive them out of the literary circle by whatever means. We would treat those as our foes too who keep holding traditional views of literature and art and who intend to block our way of progress or intend to go backwards. We would fight against them by whatever means.

The two points made here were certainly targeted at the writers of popular literature. Kind and reasonable criticism raised by elite critics was, of course, acceptable to popular writers, for they would benefit from it in their effort to improve their writings. However, as they were defined as “foes,” they were certainly reluctant to accept criticism in public even though they were still trying to improve their work in secret. No one wanted to puncture the arrogance of one’s opponents. So far as the viewpoints of the declaration were

concerned, they were faulty because of their refutation of the entertaining function of popular literature and their negligence of the Chinese literary tradition. Both points of view were obviously invalid. As for the writers of popular literature, they realized the gravity of the overall situation of the time. Prior to the May Fourth movement, popular literature had dominated the whole realm of Chinese literature. It might not have been an exaggeration to label popular literature then a “huge monster.” However, ever since the May Fourth movement, new literary theories from the West found their way into China as an irresistible force which was too powerful for those popular writers who were extremely vulnerable in terms of their limited awareness of modern theories of literature and art. They were also in a very passive position in the face of merciless confrontation, and some writers, such as Chen Lengxie, Yun Tieqiao and Ye Xiaofeng, decided to give up writing and turned their attention to other engagements, as they felt powerless to stay in such a trouble spot for a living. As for those who decided to stay in the literary circle come what may, they understood well that they might possibly be driven out of the circle of writers. To a professional writer of the first generation, it might not have been very important at this point to compete for leadership or for a position in the mainstream. What really mattered was the readership, the circulation of his works. Readers were of top importance since they were the people on whom one relied for a living. With a handsome readership, one would survive the confrontation with opponents from the elite camp. How could they make it? They found that they should respect the reading habit and the demands of their readers and make a vigorous effort to create writings fresh and different from those of others. They should modernize their novels with new themes on the road to nationalization. The 1920s was a key period for the emergence of modern New Literature. As they adopted the genre of brothel stories, human feelings were particularly stressed so that those old-fashioned stories were tainted with a layer of the brilliance of humanity. In this way, Bi Yihong’s *Hell on Earth* gained great popularity and fame for its writer. Owing to the hard work of those writers, novels of swordsmen found a solid foundation also during this period, and Pingjiang Buxiaosheng’s novels were very much in vogue for quite some time. Meanwhile, writers of elite literature were busy studying the genre of short stories, striving for progress in their literary production. To take the advantage, popular writers managed to put into the book market a number of novels addressing various social issues, with true-to-life photographic details of contemporary urban life. As those elite writers tried to search in their memory for details of their hometowns in order to produce local-color fiction of rural life, popular writers turned their minds to writing urban stories. Their strength was not just in writing it but also in publicizing it to common readers in big cities. In collaboration with first-generation movie makers, they also contributed to the production of early movies in

China. They followed in the footsteps of Wu Youru and his friends in running pictorial magazines and aroused great enthusiasm in China for pictorials that excelled both in pictures and in language. And then they introduced Western detective stories to Chinese readers and created a new genre with an outstanding Chinese flavor. The 1920s was a period of ten difficult years flourishing with various forms of popular literature competing for survival and for development with those writers of elite literature.

In the 1930s, as Zhang Henshui expanded his influence as a popular writer from the north to the whole of the country and as Li Shoumin (Huanzhulou Zhu) and Liu Yunruo from Tianjin stepped into the literary arena with their works, Chinese modern popular literature reached its second height. Since these three important literary figures started their career and gained fame in the north, the propitious omen of literature was said to have been moving northward. There used to be a clear-cut and fixed boundary between readers of elite and of popular literature, but, as Zhang Henshui's works became loved all over the country, his works seem to have nibbled away the territory of elite literature. By this time, China was shrouded in the terror of Japanese invasion and the atmosphere of resisting the Japanese became heavier. As the anti-Japanese national united front was proposed, the fierce attack of those critics of elite literature on popular writers was somewhat alleviated.

During the period of the Anti-Japanese War, remarkable literary works were not expected in enemy-occupied areas. However, in such perilous places, top-notch novels of swordsmen such as *The Escort Master* by Baiyu and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* by Wang Dulu were written and published. Eileen Chang's works, suiting both refined and popular tastes, were warmly received too, since readers found them fresh and new compared to other works. *The Fall of Begonia* by Qin Shou'ou was published in Shanghai, and works concerning the Anti-Japanese War by Xu Xu and Bu Naifu (Nameless) in the vast rear area were widely welcomed by both the highbrow and the lowbrow and caused a great sensation too. More importantly, during this particular period, Chinese popular writers showed great interest in the themes and skills of foreign novels, which was highly suggestive of a new and a very heartening development in the realm of popular literature. Supposing there had been no artificially created twenty-year break in the popular literary lineage from the 1940s to the 1950s, such masters as Jin Yong, Liang Yusheng and Qiong Yao might have appeared in mainland China. As popular writers in Taiwan and Hong Kong carried on the glorious tradition, the best of Chinese popular literature was found in the two regions after the 1950s.

The above is a sixty-year outline of Chinese modern popular literature, which is the basis of the present volume entitled *A History of Modern Chinese Popular Literature*. At this point, I would like to draw your attention to the following two points, since, more often than not, they tend to be largely neglected.

First, popular writers from the late 19th century to the starting point of the May Fourth movement were forerunners of the Chinese enlightenment. The process of modernization in China has an innate relationship with the advancement of enlightenment, which is not “idiotic nonsense.” We believe that the early popular novels of denouncement contained basic elements of enlightenment. As Lu Xun stated, these novels reflected the thoughts of the reform-minded early men of insight, which was a stream of writing in answer to the demands of that specific period.⁷ He held high their pursuit, and at the same time pointed out their artistic crudeness. Before Hu Shi wrote his preface to *Exposure of the Official World* in 1927, he had already read Lu Xun’s *A Brief History of the Chinese Novel* and, besides his agreement, added his own important views to the discussion. According to him, Zhou Boyuan’s power of satire can be fully observed in some chapters of his *Scholars*, but as he had to go along with the “demands of the frivolous readership,” he had no choice but to follow the writing style of the novels of denouncement, “to the detriment of his own artistic pursuit.” As he argued,

since China was defeated by various world powers, its long-standing problems in politics surfaced. As a result, people of insight gradually gave up their attitude of self-importance and began to look critically at the insufficient government, the corrupt politics and the filthy society of China. Even though novels of denouncement had the problem of being shallow, too explicit and exaggerative, they represented indeed the attitude of retrospection and self-examination of the popular writers. Their attitude was that of heralds of reformation ... When we look back at those novelists who made scathing criticisms of the evils of society in their works, we should take off our hats and bow to them with deep respect.⁸

Since Hu Shi took the attitude of retrospection reflected in works like *Exposure of the Official World* as a herald of reformation, works of this type should contain the element of enlightenment. Therefore we should take off our hats to show our respect for them, and for those forerunners who turned their attention to reformation then.

The year 1904 saw the first issue of the newspaper *Eastern Times* started by Di Baoxian (Chuqing), who soon appointed Chen Jinghan (Cold Blood) as its editor in chief. He started another periodical in 1909 called *Fiction Times*, co-edited by Chen Jinghan and Bao Tianxiao. The two publications showed a strong determination to carry out reform. When Hu Shi recalled the inspiration

⁷ Lu Xun, *A Brief History of Chinese Novels: Part xviii. Novels of Denouncement in the Late Qing Dynasty. Complete Works of Lu Xun*. Vol. 8. Renmin Wenxue Press, 1963, 239.

⁸ Hu Shi, “A Preface to *Exposure of the Official World*.” *Collected Works of Hu Shi*. Vol. 3. Huangshan Books, 1996, 393.

Eastern Times had given him, he expressed his feelings with “love” for the newspaper:

the content and the expression of *Eastern Times* were indeed different from the old practices of Shanghai press circles. It aroused people’s interests by means of many new methods ... I was then only fourteen years of age, with a strong desire to seek knowledge and with some interest in literature. Therefore I loved this newspaper at that time more than any other periodical. I resided in Shanghai for six years and I read the paper almost every day ... I made clippings of novels, sketches and poems published in the newspaper and pasted them respectively in different notebooks. If I failed to get an issue of the newspaper one day, I would feel bad about it and tried to find a way to make it up ... *Eastern Times* was indeed able to arouse the interest of youngsters in literary works ... From the very first issue, it published a piece of translation of foreign novels by either Chen Jinghan or Bao Tianxiao, and sometimes two pieces by the former at a time in vernacular Chinese, which were of outstanding quality in language among translations. From time to time Chen Jinghan might publish a short story of his own, such as cases of Sherlock Holmes in China and so on. This was the beginning for Chinese writers writing their own short stories in a new style ... *Eastern Times* demonstrated the need of major newspapers to conduct a literary supplement, and readers, generally speaking, loved it.⁹

Later, when Chen Jinghan and Bao Tianxiao collaborated to edit *Fiction Times*, they did not publish a foreword in the first issue. Instead, they chose to put in it a short story by Chen Jinghan entitled “Magic of Awakening,” which could be taken as a “Diary of a Madman” of 1909. “Awakening” to Chen Jinghan was synonymous with “reformation.” He depicted in quite a symbolic manner an awakened person with progressive thoughts who was depressed and embarrassed as he was fighting all by himself for a noble cause. Everybody laughed at him and took him for a maniac suffering from mental disorder. Although, in terms of depth and artistry, this short story was inferior to Lu Xun’s “Diary of a Madman” published in 1918, the work achieved the goal of the author, for he had intended to awaken people who were asleep with both his periodical and his short story. He played only the role of reformer while running the literary periodical. There were also outstanding novels focusing on social issues and love which demonstrated a strong sense of enlightenment, such as *A Short History of Civilization*, *The Sea of Regret* and *A Drowned Bird’s Pebbles*.

In terms of the origin of Chinese modern popular literature, even if it followed the tradition of the ancient Chinese classics, it never refused to pick up

⁹ Hu Shi, “Review of the Past Seventeen Years.” *Selected Works of Hu Shi*. Vol. 2. Huangshan Books, 1996, 284–286.