

## China and its Democratic Fiction

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**What can literature teach us about China's experience of democracy in the twentieth century? In an ambitious work, Sebastian Veg explores the links between fiction and democracy in his search for a critical reflection on the reader-citizen.**

Can fiction be a subject of study for the social sciences and political history? That is the question Sebastian Veg asks in his work – a product of his doctoral research – on the fundamental links between literature and politics. The author tries to define what he calls “democratic fictions” through an analysis of five works: the two canonical Chinese books *The True Story of Ah Q* by Lu Xun; *Teahouse* by Lao She; *René Leys* by Victor Segalen; Franz Kafka's *The Great Wall of China*; and *The Good Soul of Sezchuan* by Bertolt Brecht<sup>1</sup>.

Veg chose these works because they are linked to the question of democracy in two ways: firstly, they concern the question of political modernity and, secondly, because they develop an open notion of literature. These authors' interest in China's political developments and the scarcity of European texts dealing with the subject of political change in Europe during that period can be explained by the fact that China was seen as a kind of laboratory in which new political forms could be invented, based on representations portraying the image of an archaic, all-embracing power that was religious, administrative and local. Indeed, at the end of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911),

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<sup>1</sup> *A-Q zhengzhuan*, 1921, by Lu Xun (1881-1936); *Chaguan*, 1957, by Lao She (1898-1966), *René Leys* (completed in 1916, published posthumously in 1922) by Victor Segalen (1878-1918); *La Muraille de Chine* (collection of short stories published under this name between 1917 and 1920) by Franz Kafka (1883-1924); and *Der gute mensch von Sezuan*, 1943, by Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956).

the Chinese empire, shaken by Western invasions and internal economic, demographic and social crises, began to reform in order to survive<sup>2</sup>. The imperial court's inertia and resistance to reform – particularly constitutional reform<sup>3</sup> – led, nevertheless, to the founding of the Republic of China in 1911. The works selected by Veg are defined by the spirit of the May Fourth Movement<sup>4</sup>, which was characterised by its reflection on the world, the nation and the best way of saving China from the corruption of politicians, the rapaciousness of foreign powers and the yoke of traditional thought and culture.

### **Five “democratic fictions”**

*The True Story of Ah Q* recounts the trials of a farm worker who dreams of revolution. Ah Q, who takes pleasure in humiliating those who are weak and fears those of superior rank, strength and power, is unusual in that he convinces himself of victory when he has in fact suffered extreme insults and humiliation. Through a satirical description of the main character's flaws, Lu Xun tries to reveal the Chinese “national character” at the time. *Teahouse* is a play that recounts the fate of a Beijing teahouse owner, Wang Lifa, and his clients in 1898, during the empire; in the years following 1910, during the Warlord Era; and then around 1946, after the Second World War. The play masks an anti-imperialist attitude. It highlights the internal divisions that made Chinese people easy prey for foreign invaders in the nineteenth century and then for foreign companies in the twentieth century. In *René Leys*, Victor Segalen describes the outbreak of the revolutionary events of 1911 inside the unchanging Forbidden City, while ironically marginalising the impossible, distant revolution. The collection of five short

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<sup>2</sup> We can briefly mention the Opium Wars, imperial expansion and the “Unequal Treaties”. The reference work on these subjects is that of Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, New York/London, Norton, 1990.

<sup>3</sup> See the two articles by Xiaohong Xiao-Planes published by Mireille Delmas-Marty and Pierre-Étienne Will (dir), *La Chine et la Démocratie*, Paris, Fayard, 2007: “La première expérience démocratique en Chine (1908-1914): tradition chinoise et pratiques des élites locales” and “Constitutions et constitutionnalisme: les efforts pour bâtir un nouvel ordre politique (1908-1949)”.

<sup>4</sup> This was an anti-imperialist cultural and political student movement that condemned the Treaty of Versailles and the “Twenty-One Demands” which Japan presented to the Chinese government at the end of the First World War. The students, led by young progressive intellectuals, rose up against the yoke of tradition, the power of the mandarins and the repression of women. They were in favour of modernity and the new sciences. They demanded that modern Vernacular Chinese replace literary Chinese as the official language and the language of education. *The True Story of Ah Q* was the first work to be written in Vernacular Chinese. The 4 May 1919 refers more broadly to the period from 1915 to 1921, also known as the New Culture Movement. See Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, op. cit.

stories in *The Great Wall of China* use the Great Wall – the unfinishable imperial construction – and rising bureaucratic power to show how archaic representations are a burden on the modern State and how the myth of Chinese power has influenced modern European democracy. In *The Good Soul of Sezechuan*, Shen Te is rewarded for agreeing to provide lodging to three gods. She thus gives up prostitution in order to open a tobacco shop. However, she is forced to disguise herself as a male cousin, Shui Ta, in order to keep her shop in business after beggars' demands and unscrupulous traders threaten it. In his play, Brecht shows that it is impossible to uphold moral principles when facing levels of poverty that drive a person to dishonesty.

### **Literature and democracy**

What do we call democratic fiction? The first two chapters of the book provide the first part of the answer: a democratic fiction is first defined by the choice of democratisation as a theme. Veg endeavours to go beyond the two poles of orientalism (Edward Saïd) and national allegory (Fredric Jameson)<sup>5</sup>, which “both take all autonomy away from the production of fiction, subordinating it to a general political context rather than the author's individual political project”. He shows how the authors in question use exotic clichés so as to better subvert them, thus countering China's stereotyped cultural representations. The fictional angle enables each work to universalise its reflection on the political modernisation process. The process by which modern democracy emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century serves as a common point of reference in the five works<sup>6</sup>. Their questioning of the meaning of the modern iconoclasm – which challenges the myth of the revolution and of the mechanical accession to a new political principle –

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<sup>5</sup> Edward Saïd, *Orientalism*, New York, Vintage Books, 1978. Saïd defines orientalism as the study of and discourse on Arabs, Islam and the Middle East – originating primarily in England, France and the United States – which, denying non-European cultures a greater self-knowledge, creates an East-West divide. Fredric Jameson, *Third World literature in the era of multinational capitalism*, Social Text, 15, 1986. Jameson developed his theory of the national allegory according to which all third-world literary texts should be interpreted as national allegories: “even those which are seemingly private and invested with properly libidinal dynamic – necessarily project a political dimension in the form of a national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society”.

<sup>6</sup> Segalen puts forward the secularisation of imperial power and the disillusionment suffered by the first democratic institutions after 1911: Lu Xun states the impossibility of democratising the hierarchical system of rural China; Kafka presents “the mythical genealogy of the modern State in which the sacredness of an intangible imperial power merely conceals nationalistic discourse and the political power struggles of modernity”; Brecht describes the transformation of the rural world, marked by its religious beliefs, into proletarianised suburbs, in China and Germany alike.

ends with a disillusioned acknowledgment: the loss of the sacred aura of traditional power is not counterbalanced by individual emancipation.

Democratic fiction is also defined by the presence of a discourse on democratic rules. The next two chapters start from the hypothesis that the pragmatic use<sup>7</sup> that is particular to fiction and to power is the reason for their historical proximity. On the one hand, (literary) fiction can only function if it can succeed in convincing its readers. On the other hand, traditional power relies on “master fictions”, which endow the centre of a political order with a narrative form and demand their subjects’ adhesion to this type of narrative<sup>8</sup>.

In this central section of the book, Veg explores the duality of a fiction linked both to power and to the questioning of power. The five works he studies are democratic in the sense that they condemn the instrumentalisation of fiction: they refuse to convey a simple normativity; they shatter the reader’s belief and invite him to decide between different polyphonic discourses so as to enable him to become aware of his own receptiveness to the discourse of power<sup>9</sup>. Veg recalls that, during the May Fourth era<sup>10</sup>, the thought-provoking nature of fiction was considered a kind of tool for shaping the reader’s critical awareness. Its mini-lectures challenged the writer-prophet’s right to represent the world and established the vital role of the reader who was called upon to develop his own critical analysis. Veg associates these authors’ refusal to decree a political ideal with Claude Lefort’s analysis of legitimate power within democracy, which presupposes that an empty space already exists. Democratic power, which holds neither the principle of power nor that of its own founding, “becomes established and is maintained in the

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<sup>7</sup> Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Pourquoi la fiction?*, Paris, Seuil, coll. “Poétique”, 1999. Throughout his book, Sebastian Veg refers to his thesis supervisor’s theoretical analyses of fiction.

<sup>8</sup> Clifford Geertz, “Centers, Kings and Charisma: Reflections on the Symbolics of Power”, in Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge. Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*, New York, Basic Books, 1983.

<sup>9</sup> Lu Xun, Brecht and Kafka denounce the instrumentalisation of fiction through the mise en abyme of structural forms: Lu Xun rejects the codes of elitist literature because they conceal the continual violence used during social interactions and perpetrated in the name of these codes; Brecht is ironic about biblical discourse through the “parable” and the judgment scenes that abuse any coherent set of ethical rules; Kafka writes a pastiche of the highly normative Hasidic parables in order to remind us that the law itself cannot be applied simply, since it is open to reinterpretation.

<sup>10</sup> See Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, *op. cit.*

dissolution of the landmarks of certainty”<sup>11</sup>.

### **The readers’ freedom**

The final chapter expands on its references to Lefort’s indeterminate democracy and to Pierre Rosanvallon’s statement<sup>12</sup> on the importance of disillusionment and consubstantial aporias in the establishment of democracy. These themes emerge through the search for a democratic use of fiction that must respect the readers’ freedom, particularly by challenging the outcome and the choice of circular, fragmented – indeed, contradictory – structures<sup>13</sup>. The writers give a new political meaning to the “pragmatic force” of fiction, relying not only on the reader’s adhesion but also on his “cognitive brakes” (Jean-Marie Schaeffer) that prevent complete adhesion. The texts all present an image of the critical reader who frees himself from that tension. Veg calls on Habermas<sup>14</sup> in order to suggest the reader’s possible role as the point of departure for a kind of “civil society”, in the sense of an intersubjective democratic community. Given that reading is a private activity, “the public space that fiction can conjure up is therefore uncertain, and its links with democracy always depend on the interpretation each reader chooses to make of each text”.

This surprising work thus allows us to discover these fictional texts from a new angle. *René Leys* is seen as the novel that represents the quest for unrelinquished exoticism, which questions the specific power of fiction: the unresolved ending acts as a warning against a blind belief in history. Kafka, fascinated by the workings of archaic power, of which China was the symbol, described an infinite process of democratisation in which the emergence of a law would be an impossible end. *Ah Q* is interpreted as a questioning of the notion of revolution. The final impasse symbolises the writer’s refusal

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<sup>11</sup> Claude Lefort, “Les droits de l’homme et l’État-providence”, in *Essais sur le politique : XIXe-XXe siècles*, Paris, Seuil, 1986, republished., “Points Essais” coll., 2001, p. 30.

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Rosanvallon, *La Démocratie inachevée. Histoire de la souveraineté du peuple en France*, Paris, Gallimard, “Folio histoire” coll., 2000, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> The works express a rejection of totality. In the short story *The Great Wall of China*, for example, the account has no beginning and no end, “like pages torn out at random from a Chinese history book”. Kafka – torn between an archaic past of myths and a future which never comes and which can be nothing but catastrophic – presents a non-linear vision of political history.

<sup>14</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *L’Espace public. Archéologie de la publicité comme dimension constitutive de la société bourgeoise*, Paris, Payot, 1986, p. 30.

to give a political interpretation of a situation in which the fair and the unfair merge and cancel each other out. In Brecht, China is the symbol of a political system that governs by morality. The story's completeness is shattered in order to prevent the spectator from making a judgment based entirely on the action, favouring a confrontation between different orders of legitimacy. Lao She establishes a cyclical conception of history and enables an allegorical interpretation that conflicts with the dominant political order, thereby challenging some of the conventions of propaganda plays. He refuses the idea of democratisation as an iconoclasm that is continually pushed back, instead envisaging it as a means of returning to the democratic areas of the pre-modern world as represented by the teahouse.

Within each text we thus find a common matrix of critical reflections on the democratisation of societies and the writer's role; Veg attributes this to the diverse influences of Romanticism, Nietzsche, Stirnerian anarchism<sup>15</sup> and Marx. These texts express a conception of democratisation as a renunciation, in the sense that they all refuse to set out principles or dictate rules.

In this ambitious book, Veg tries to breathe new life into literary study by putting an end to the absorption of literature into history. He tries to tackle the question of democracy with an approach that does not only study representations. As the status and pragmatic force of fiction make them separate symbolic objects, he endeavours to study the way in which the act of writing and reading these works of fiction are part of the intellectual, social and historical sphere.

Translated from French by Susannah **Dale**

### **Further reading**

- Bertolt Brecht, *La Bonne âme du Setchouan*, Jeanne Stern (trans.), Paris, L'Arche, 1956.

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<sup>15</sup> Johann Caspar Schmidt (1806-1856), better known as Max Stirner, was a German philosopher who was renowned for his radical critique of everything that hinders individual freedom: religion, State, revolution or association. He is considered to be one of the forerunners of existentialism, nihilism and anarchism (although he always refused to be labelled an anarchist).

- Franz Kafka, *La Muraille de Chine*, trans. Alexandre Vialatte, Paris, Gallimard, coll. "Folio", 1975.
- Lao She, *La Maison de thé*, Pékin, Éditions en langues étrangères, 2002.
- Lu Xun, *La Véridique histoire d'a-Q*, Martine Vallette-Hémery (trans.), Paris, Centre de publication orientale, "Bibliothèque asiatique", 1975.
- Victor Segalen, *René Leys*, Marie Dollé and Christian Doumet (eds.), Paris, Le Livre de Poche, 1999.
- Marie-Claire Bergère, Lucien Bianco, Jürgen Domes (dir.), *La Chine au XXe siècle*, vol. 1 : D'une révolution à l'autre, 1895-1949 ; vol. 2 : De 1949 à aujourd'hui, Paris, Fayard, 1989 and 1990.
- Yves Chevrier, "Un empire distendu", in Jean-François Bayart (dir.), *La Greffe de l'État*, Paris, Karthala, 1996.
- Yves Chevrier, "Chine, "fin de règne" du lettré ? Politique et culture à l'époque de l'occidentalisation", *Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident*, n° 4, 1984, p. 81-139.
- Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Pourquoi la fiction ?*, Paris, Seuil, coll. "Poétique", 1999.
- Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, New York/London, Norton, 1990.

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