

# **The Influence of Democratic Republicanism on Gentry-Intellectuals of the Late Imperial China Reflects the Great Spirit of the 1911 Revolution**

(Paper presented at the symposium commemorating the 100th Anniversary of China's 1911 Revolution)

## **----A SUMMARY----**

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China's 1911 Revolution took place 100 years ago. The event which overthrew the monarchy system of two thousand years and established a democratic republic in China is undoubtedly a great epoch-making event in Chinese history. In spite of all kinds of errors, shortcomings, mistakes, pitfalls, zigzags, reversals, or even warlord rules in the course of the revolution, nobody can deny that the 1911 Revolution marked an entirely new page in China's modern history, and opened up a brand-new era for the Chinese nation. It was not just a change of dynasties, a replacement of one monarch by another within the same old orbit of Imperial China. Undoubtedly, the core of the spirit of China's 1911 Revolution was **democratic republicanism**. Along with the crisis of the Imperial Qing Dynasty at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century,

deepening from within and from the outside, the spreading of new trends of democratic ideas of the world, and the growing activities of anti-Qing revolutionaries in China and abroad, the impact and influence of the spirit of the 1911 Revolution got stronger by the day, and gradually formed a wide and firm mass basis among Chinese people. This was undoubtedly the necessary condition and preparation for the final victory of the 1911 Revolution.

To Chinese traditional ideas, democratic republicanism is a somewhat heretic political institution. Even by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when popular indignation against the corruption and high-hand suppression of Manchu rulers had reached the critical point of daring to replace the dynasty in power through rebellious uprising and armed struggle (such as the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom from 1851 to 1864) or trying to achieve internal reform of realizing a constitutional monarchy (such as the 1898 Reformist Movement), there was yet no clear-cut assertion for replacing the autocratic monarchy by a democratic republican system. Therefore, the proliferation and popularization of modern democratic republicanism in China and its support among Chinese people is the key to the final success of the 1911 Revolution.

The influence of democratic republicanism is particularly clear first of all among the intellectual strata, the most sensitive community of society. Of course, at the time the new intelligentsia of China was not

yet formally and massively formed. At the end of the Qing Dynasty, the main body of intelligentsia was still the gentry-scholars or a part of gentry-intellectuals in transformation. Nan She (南社, the Southern Society) in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was precisely the gathering place of many advanced elements of this strata. This paper tries to select some Southern Society members as example to indicate the great impact of the spirit of the 1911 Revolution, and to indicate the long-term influence of this Revolution to the renewal of ideas, intellectual evolution and cultural transformation in China. And concretely, the Southern Society members of the Gao family in Jinshan (金山高氏) will be used as pragmatic examples of the typical intellectual strata of that time. In doing so, we are trying to reflect this irresistible historic torrent through a drop of water.

100 years ago, Gao's family of Jinshan was a rich and prominent family in the Southern Jiangsu area. It was a typical family of upper gentry strata in social position, economic power, cultural tradition, as well as political influence at that time. The educational foundation and ideological understanding that the members of Gao's family received generation by generation were also the Confucianist tradition and ethical principles of China. But, just in this family of traditional gentry, there were over 10 Southern Society members opposing the Manchu monarchy and supporting a democratic republican system. They were:

Gao Xu (高旭, or 高天梅) and wife He Yaxi (何亚希), Gao Xu's younger brother Gao Zeng (高增), Gao Xu's uncle Gao Chui Wan (高吹万, Gao Xie, 高燮 my grandfather) and wife Gu Bao Rong (顾保琰, my grandmother), Gao Chui Wan's sons Gao Jun Jie (高君介), Gao Jun Fan (高君藩) and Gao Jun Xiang (高君湘), Gao Chui Wan's nephew Gao Jun Ping (高君平, or 高平子) and Gao Jun Ding (高君定). Among them, the most outstanding one was no other than Gao Xu.

Ever since his childhood, Gao Xu received education from learned scholars together with his uncle Gao Chui Wan (about the same age), and accumulated a stable foundation of classical learning. Gao's native place was a seaside coastal region close to the international metropolis Shanghai, accessible to current news and information from abroad. The 1894 Sino-Japanese War and the resulting unequal imperialist treaty imposed on China was a big insulting shock to 17-year-old Gao Xu. He witnessed the cruel reality of aggression from big powers and corruption and capitulationism of Manchu rulers, thus developing strong opposition to an autocratic monarchy. He was greatly stimulated by the 1898 Reformist Movement, and began to support constitutional reform as a way of national salvation. But in early 20<sup>th</sup> century he was awakened by the revolutionary writings criticizing the reformist leaders, and by numerous cases of Manchu monarchal rulers' wanton suppression against the people. He changed his position of supporting

monarchy improvement through the reformist movement, to resolutely opposing monarchical autocracy and power, and began to accept the idea of democratic republicanism. In 1903, together with his uncle Gao Chui Wan and brother Gao Zeng, Gao Xu established the Society of Awakening People in his native town and published a clearly anti-Manchu revolutionary journal – Awakening People. In the next year, when he went to study in Japan, he had the chances of contacting new thoughts and new ideas of the world, such as Rousseau's Social Contract and the United States Declaration of Independence, etc., and he maintained close friendship and communication with the revolutionaries, thus facilitating a rapid elevation of his understandings and consciousness. Gao Xu was a founding member of the Revolutionary League, established by Dr. Sun Yat Sen in 1905, and the first leader of the Revolutionary League branch in the Jiangsu Province. He was then firmly in the ranks of the revolutionaries for a democratic republic in China. He was one of the 3 co-founders of Nan She (the Southern Society), and contributed greatly to revolutionary publicity and popular mobilization for China's 1911 Revolution.

Other Southern Society members in Gao's family might have had somewhat different experiences in the process of accepting the idea of democratic republicanism and in the ways and depth of participating in the related activities, but the main factors and routes of influence were

similar, especially the above-mentioned conditions of living close to big coastal cities, with access to open information of the world that helped their open-minded free thinking. Moreover, the tradition of Gao's family emphasized its attention to culture and education. Gao Chui Wan and his elder brother Gao Wang Zhi (高望之) actively built schools to popularize mass education locally. At the same time, they included new courses of foreign languages, math and natural sciences in Gao's private family school for the children. They also arranged for their sons and daughters to enter modern schools and universities, or to study abroad in order to receive new ideas and new knowledge. Modern education and open information undoubtedly conditioned the members of this gentry intellectuals, apt to get in touch with and to accept new ideas of democracy and liberty. All Southern Society members of Gao's family opposed the Manchu rule, advocated the overthrow of the monarchy, supported the 1911 Revolution, and the establishment of a political power of democratic republicanism.

Another example is Gao Chui Wan. He was about the same age (one year younger) and studied together with Gao Xu. The two received similar traditional education and maintained a similar foundation of classical learning. In his youth, Gao Chui Wan was inclined towards radical ideas. He opposed to stereotyped writing and went to such extremes as burning such books in the family private school, which

greatly shocked his tutor. He belittled the corruptive politics of imperial examination, and refused to attend the examination in the Southern Jinagsu Province. He described this in a poem: "Imperial exam was a plague in my juvenile eyes, the scholar's gown was but dirty muck to me." He highly admired the anti-Qing revolutionary revolt of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, and disagreed to naming the Taiping fighters "Cantonese bandits". He strongly advocated to include the biography of the leader of the Kingdom Hong Xiu Quan in the formal record of history. He opposed the aggression of foreign powers, as well as the corruptive politics of the Qing monarchical court. He called for popular awakening and resurgence of the motherland. Poems and essays reflecting this political attitude of his youth were published in many progressive journals, magazines, periodicals and newspapers of those days. The main contributors and anonymous commentators of current affairs of the journal *Awakening People*, jointly established by him and Gao Xu, Gao Zen in 1903, were in fact they themselves. The Opening Foreword of the journal indicated their common understandings, it spoke out loudly that they were determined to awaken people with steadfast will and persevering sincerity. This journal strongly attacked and ruthlessly exposed the corruption and decadence of the Qing monarchical rulers, and even dared to openly criticize the Empress Dowager Cixi. In a current affairs commentary entitled *A Dress of Pearls*

*at a Cost of 250,000 Taels of Silver*, it stated: “The Empress Dowager Cixi secretly ordered official so-and-so of the Department for Inner Affairs to buy pearls in Shanghai, which were priced about 250,000 Taels of silver. According to this official, the Empress Dowager likes to wear pearl dresses in summertime. But she dislikes all those stored in the Palace wardrobes, so she decided to order a new one. Alas! The Qing government claims that there is no money for opening mines, no money for building schools, no money for laying railroads, but it does have money to buy pearls. I don’t know where these 250,000 Taels of silver come from. The blood and flesh of the Chinese people are exploited to meet the dissolute pleasures of one woman. Is this the proper act of a monarch? Alas! The glittering dress on the body of this female barbarian mirrors drops of blood of the Han people. This really breaks my heart.”

Gao Chui Wan supported the revolutionary struggle of replacing the Qing monarchy by a democratic republic. He wrote mourning poems for revolutionary martyrs, such as Qiu Jin (秋瑾) and others. He was deeply concerned about the current affairs and attacked the Qing rulers. He cherished great expectation in the 1911 Revolution, for which he wrote poems celebrating it warmly. When Yuan Shi Kai (袁世凯) tried to restore the monarchy, Gao Chui Wan went with Chen Qu Bing (陈去病) and Yao Guang (姚光, my mother's older brother) to Huang



Xing's (黄兴) house to discuss with Song Jiao Ren (宋教仁) the activities of opposing Yuan. Song was assassinated the next day, and Gao mourned him with deep sorrow in a poem: "We had just met with a hand-shake yesterday morning, I can't believe this terrible news to be true. Devils appear when truth meets with setbacks, and Phoenix suffers as the situation gets critical. His contributions benefited the whole country, no enmity should be point at him personally. This assassination bullet shook everything up, he is bound to be avenged." The poem was a full indication of Gao's high appraisal of the republican fighter and his sad indignation. Gao Chui Wan always supported the revolutionary deeds of the democratic republic, but the evolution of the current affairs often caused helplessness in his mind. So he strived to maintain the image of a civilian scholar, removed from politics and all political parties.

The above-mentioned examples may explain how the idea of democratic republicanism influenced the traditional gentry-intellectual strata in the period of drastic change in China at the end of the Qing Dynasty and the beginnings of the Republic of China, which enabled the gentry-intellectuals to accept and support the 1911 Revolution in overthrowing the Qing monarchy and establishing a democratic republic in China. This also reflects the close relationship of the Southern Society and its members with China's 1911 Revolution.