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Overinterpreting the Public Sphere

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Over-Interpreting the Public Sphere

Rudolf G. Wagner (Ed.), **Joining the Global Public: Word, Image, and City in Early Chinese Newspapers, 1870-1910** (SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture), Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008, 249 pp., \$80 (hardcover), \$29.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by

Chin-Chuan Lee

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Scholarship on the early Chinese press is underdeveloped, while attention has been given preponderantly if not exclusively to the well-deserved reformist Liang Qichao and his enlightenment projects. Chinese historiography has owed *Shen Bao*, arguably China's oldest and most influential commercial newspaper, and its peers a serious appraisal of their historical role, content, and impact. The University of Heidelberg research team, consisting of Professor Rudolf Wagner and his colleagues and former students, has done a considerable amount of work that serves to fill a part of this important void.

For those familiar with the team's work, this volume—which is a compilation of old work—does not offer new materials, add fresh insights, or even point to a new research direction. But for others, it is a convenient reference. By excavating the long-forgotten texts, this volume contributes to our understanding of the late-Qing and pre-Republican Shanghai press through an examination of the “word, image, and city” of Ernest Major's *Shen Bao* and its auxiliary illustrated publications. Its aim is more ambitious and focused: demonstrating how the early Shanghai press helped China “join the global public.” The press is thus seen as a “modernity” project.

This volume comprises five long chapters. Barbara Mittler (Chapter 1) observes that the modern Chinese press tried to “domesticate” its Western origins, to legitimize its own role, and to distinguish itself from the traditional *di bao* (court announcements) by quoting historical allusions and canonical values. This chapter is a summary version of her published book (Mittler, 2004).

In Chapter 2, Natascha Gentz performs an illuminating analysis on the social networks of China's press pioneers in Hong Kong and Shanghai, who were found to center around Wang Tao, sharing similar backgrounds and acquainted with one another. Supported by Hong Kong's merchant community, *Xunhuan Ribao* retained a reformist tone and preached Confucian ethos, whereas the British-owned *Shen Bao* was unashamedly a commercial newspaper that professed to be loyal to the Chinese emperor and actively exposed government corruption and nepotism. Gentz's chapter is a valued addition to the much-needed research on the nexus of the twin cities—forming the bridgeheads of British influence and imported Western thought—with implications so significant to the Chinese press history as to warrant far more vigorous and systematic analysis than we have witnessed.



In Chapter 3, Wagner attempts to rescue an illustrated paper, *Dianshizhai Huabao*, from obscurity and boldly establish it as a vehicle for "joining the global imaginaire." In trying to give illustrations a status equal to that of text, Wagner notes that this illustrated publication, by showing how foreigners depicted China as part of the world, expanded the horizon of vision among Chinese readers and prompted China to know itself and the rest of the world.

Along the same line, Nanny Kim in Chapter 4 examines the "curious matters" (bordering between "the amusing and the frightening") of *Dianshizhai Huabao*, and proceeds to characterize the paper as providing entertainment and emotional bondage for a city of strangers.

In the final chapter, Catherine Vance Yeh tries to elevate Shanghai's tabloids and print entertainment on courtesans and celebrities to a higher level of cultural significance. By indirectly reflecting on social ills in Shanghai's life, she argues, the entertainment press "marks an important first step in the development and diversification of China's public sphere" (p. 227).

All five chapters are reasonably well-written, thorough, and (over)attentive to detailed and thick accounts of newspaper content.

Overall, the project was inspired by Jürgen Habermas' concept of public sphere. The editor argues that "the Chinese state continued to have a loud say in the Chinese public sphere" (p. 2). He adds that public sphere is the space in which "state and society as well as different segments of society articulate their interests and opinions within culturally and historically defined rules of rationality and propriety" (p. 3). Further, he opines that the public sphere concept in late nineteenth-century Shanghai and China was marked by (a) being transnational and international; (b) being not homogeneous; and (c) including high and low ranges of discourse and articulation (p. 4). The Chinese public sphere was thus set apart from Habermas' historical account of the bourgeois public sphere in Europe that was thought to have been developed in contradistinction to the state. When the concept is so broadly and loosely defined, it is easier to confirm than to refute the theme that a vibrant public sphere had already existed in Shanghai from 1870 to 1910. By the same token, it would be a tough challenge to pinpoint virtually any kind of press discourse—including the "daily peep-show" of entertainment tabloids featuring Shanghai's celebrities—as outside or peripheral to the realm of public sphere. So inclusive is the definition that the boundaries are blurred between the more serious paper of information and the less serious tabloids. This may not be very helpful.

When Lin Yutang (1936, p. 141) wrote of the Shanghai press of the 1930s, he criticized the oldest *Shen Bao* for being "poorly edited" and the most popular *Xinwen Bao* for being "not edited at all," while referring to the tabloids contemptuously as "the mosquito press." In contrast, he praised *Dagong Bao* for its professionalism. In the eyes of the Heidelberg writers, however, all outlets coming into their orbit of analysis—including the high-brow *Shen Bao* and the low-brow tabloids—were invariably seen as powerful agents of modernity and an embodiment of public sphere in as early as the 1870s. There appears to be a conscious effort to view history through a contemporary lens; it caters to conceptual neatness rather than contextualizing the press at its historical moments. More important, how are we to reconcile various alternative or even rival interpretations, such as Lin's? With an unacknowledged postmodern

tinge, this volume seems to empower the marginal, romanticize the forgotten, and idealize the popular. I have no quarrel with their good intentions, but fear that the sweeping claims that run through the volume are hardly supported with evidence.

Methodologically, it is unclear what steps, if any, have been taken to guard against the tendency toward over-interpretation. The descriptive "trees" of press content were so dense as to overwhelm the "forest" view. But even with such meticulous details, the writers appeared to rely on many unarticulated, inferential leaps to "substantiate" their articles of faith.

For example, if we agree with Wagner when he argues that the *Dianshizhai Huabao* "linked up with the illustrated newspapers in the West," the evidence and logic seem much more dubious on his subsequent claim that this paper "integrated China into a worldwide aesthetic agenda and a global exchange on the level of the image" (p. 156). If *Dianshizhai Huabao* indeed brought China to the world of "global imaginaire," how did it happen? How was an ordinary illustrated paper in Shanghai accepted by the global public? Was the presumed "global integration" an intended act, an effect, or primarily the writer's liberal (over)interpretation?

Likewise, Yeh uses the entertainment tabloids to argue for a "wider concept of public sphere in which fun had a legitimate place" (p. 205). So far, so good, but what should the place be for fun in the public sphere? Does this conclusion represent personal opinion or a historically grounded account? Similar generalizations fill the pages of this volume. By comparison, Lee (1999) draws more tempered and cautious conclusions in "Shanghai Modern."

Despite the rich depiction of newspaper content, the broad claims are controversial. In my view, more productive than fitting Chinese press history into the grand narrative of "public sphere" would have been the development of many middle-range claims that link media texts to the larger political, economic, and cultural contexts of pre-Republican Shanghai and China. Even though Shanghai was the locus of China's modernity, it was nonetheless a semicolonial "island" surrounded by the huge ocean of China's system, population, and culture. What were the implications of the city's hybrid roles for its press ecology? Moreover, doing textual interpretation without corresponding analyses of audience profile and audience interpretation might risk giving the writers too much latitude and too little discipline. It is admittedly difficult to locate primary sources on how various reading communities decoded the newspaper texts, but secondary sources and corroborating evidence should have been examined. In the vacuum of audience analysis, the question of "public sphere" cannot be effectively addressed.

To what extent did the Shanghai press extend its influence into different corners and segments of the nation? According to Li (1998), during the late Qing and early Republican period, newspaper readers were primarily restricted to middle-upper strata, while grassroots enlightenment was largely reliant on traditional forms of culture (such as speeches and folk dramas). How was *Shen Bao* regarded by the intellectuals and the grassroots population? Did the intellectuals act as opinion leaders who mediated between the press and the masses? Instead of being assumed, these are enormous questions that beg for painstaking research.

We are vividly reminded of the work by early Chicago sociologists (Blumer, 1933) who found that new immigrants were the most avid movie goers during the Great Depression, looking for escapism from hard reality through vicariously participating in the fantasy life of rich and powerful. To what extent does this insight apply to Shanghai's gossipy entertainment tabloids? How did the serious *Shen Bao* interact with illustrated tabloids under the same ownership in terms of their readership overlap, cultural taste, financial resources, and talent pool? As such, was their readership socially stratified, by market design or otherwise? For that matter, a series of rigorous studies should be in order to account for Shanghai's press structure, content, and audience in relation to its emergence as a world city in the embedded cross-currents of Western colonialism, global capitalism, and China's quest for modernization. After all, where is the evidence that would lead us to see rational, active, and lively conversations over affairs of public consequence taking place between various social strata, conversations in which the press served as a forum, a mediator, an arbiter, or an agenda-setter? Did such conversations translate into public action?

I concur with the editor when he says that broad generalizations have a weak foundation when they are not supported by rich historical studies. This volume, as an effort "to help strengthen this base," has answered some questions but raised more. Unfortunately, the Heidelberg research group declares that it has "now run its course" (p. ix); it does not promise to offer more collective work. As a swan song, this volume pays tribute to the Heidelberg institution. Thanks and regrets to that remarkable team, with a hope that the seeds it has planted will bear more fruit. But next time, let's start with the other end of history and ask a series of middle-range questions, instead of forcing history to fit a grand theoretical straitjacket.



Chin-Chuan Lee is Chair Professor of Communication and Director of the Center for Communication Research at the City University of Hong Kong. He is also Professor Emeritus of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Minnesota. He has published extensively in the areas of international communication and political economy of the media, especially with reference to Chinese media and Sino-American media connections.

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