

Introduction

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The 1989 translation into English of Jürgen Habermas's 1962 study, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in Europe has provoked a debate among China scholars about the viability of concepts such as public sphere and civil society in China.¹ In a pathbreaking study independent of Habermas's work, Mary Backus Rankin has documented the gradual coagulation of local public spheres in Zhejiang into a regional Lower Yangtse Valley and even a national public sphere between 1860 and the end of the Qing in 1911.² She pointed to the increase of "public" activities by new elite groups only loosely connected to the state apparatus, to a growing self-awareness of these groups, and a concomitant growth in cultural articulations, ideological claims, and social links. She saw the *Shenbao* newspaper in Shanghai as an important link between them, and even as their voice. Although her focus was not on the press, she often used the *Shenbao* as a source. In another important work, William Rowe also focused on Jiangnan local elites,³ but with a more "China-centered" approach. He saw a "civil society" developing in late imperial Chinese cities independent of foreign impact. While his Hankow merchants, as Frederic Wakeman pointed out, were mostly compradors of foreign firms in Shanghai and got the news about their own city from the foreign-owned *Shenbao*⁴—also a key source for Rowe himself—the "foreign" media have no place in his argumentation.

With the Habermas discussion, these works were reset into a larger context. Habermas's focus was on the communication within the public sphere rather than the familiar social basis of its development. His sociological study could draw on a wide range of empirical studies done by historians. In Chinese studies, such historical studies are still in the first stages. Without them, broader conceptualizations have a weak foundation. The present volume is an effort to help strengthen this base.⁵

Habermas had linked the public sphere with a distinctly European enlightenment agenda of a society speaking with its own voice independent of the state and with a critical edge against manipulation by modern monopolized media. In the 1990 Preface to a new German edition of his book, he revisited some of his earlier pessimism. The developments in Central and Eastern Europe seemed to show that even after decades of a fully monopolized propaganda press and certainly without being a “population used to freedom,” people were able to use niches to craft the elements of a civil society strong enough to delegitimize a seemingly all-powerful authoritarian state.⁶ To restrict the public sphere concept to Western Europe seemed too narrow. The PRC events in 1989 called for similar reflections.⁷

Habermas followed the Scottish enlightenment in defining civil society and the public as well as the public sphere of its deliberations in contradistinction to the state.⁸ The state is the object of, but not a subject in, the debate. The state was not treated as an actor in the public sphere. The Chinese case here may serve to highlight a blind spot in this approach. Long before the first Chinese newspapers had made their appearance, the court had regularly released approved information and documents to the public. Although managed by private print shops, the resulting *Peking Gazette*, *Jingbao*, had to reproduce the entire release—and this without changes or addition of other texts. The early *Shenbao* editorials from the 1870s about the function of newspapers were quite right in saying that the *Peking Gazette* format reduced the flow of communication between high and low, between state and society, to a top-down dispensation. The flowering of Chinese-language newspapers in Shanghai since the 1870s, their distribution throughout the country, and their gradual but evident acceptance by a broad readership did not mean that the government gazette dwindled into insignificance as it did in many parts of Western Europe. The Chinese state continued to have a loud say in the Chinese public sphere. Whenever a central government had the actual strength to reduce legitimate public articulation to the state’s voice, it did so, and it has done this most effectively since 1949. In China, the government gazette as well as other government media have been and are in fact the mainstream of public articulation; the existence of a multivocal press is perceived as the hallmark of a weak government unable to unify the minds of the nation. The elimination of the state from the public sphere seems also unsupported by the European record. Roger Chartier’s work *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution* (1990) shows to what extent the French state was active not just negatively as a censor, but proactively as a publicist, historian, polemicist, editor, and journalist.⁹ In the Chinese case, things are even more complicated. Since the discovery of the newspaper as a tool of advocacy and propaganda by Liang Qichao in the last years of the nineteenth century, one generation after another of Chinese reformers and revolutionaries has followed in his footsteps. The claim that a newspaper is only the “tool of a class” such as the bourgeoisie, or of a power, such as an imperialist country, makes the notion of a free press

into the camouflage of hostile intentions and has justified the use of this “tool” for CP proletarian propaganda and the advocacy of the interests of the “suppressed” country China. The official articulations in the PRC thus claim the combined authority of the voice of the state and that of the successful revolution. The ensuing elimination, within China proper, of “imperialist” public sphere enclaves such as Shanghai has effectively blinded the country, including its leadership, to its own situation. The costs have not been negligible. The worst man-made famine of the twentieth century was that of the Great Leap Forward in 1958–1961; as Amartya Sen has observed, one of the causes was the fragmentation of the information about “problems,” so that no aggregate picture of the disaster could emerge. Another was the utterly surrealist reports in the papers about the ever more amazing breakthroughs in agricultural and industrial production.

Taking up some of the arguments made by China scholars since the early 1990s about the need to recognize the role of the state in the public sphere, I would suggest that we formalize this concept and reduce it to its functional value in a constellation not bound by a “bourgeois society.”¹⁰ In this sense, the notion “public sphere” conceptualizes 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. The existence of a public sphere is a key constituent of a social order whose members do not resort to violence in each instance when conflict occurs.

In this formalized sense, a public sphere did exist in premodern China not only in fact but also in the social imaginaire of how things could be, should be, and had been in the utopian past when sages had ruled the land. It appears in such notions as the “thoroughfare for articulation,” *yanlu* 言路, the way for open articulation to the emperor by society and lower officials of critical opinions concerning the state and its officials. It was a standard remonstrative figure of speech that this thoroughfare had to be kept open so as to prevent dynastic collapse. In the opposite top-down direction it is operative in the notion of *hua* 化, the moral ‘transformation’ and resulting spiritual unification of the people through the *acta, verba, et gesta* of the emperor and his officials. The broad acceptance on the other hand, during the late Qing and Republican periods as well as in Taiwan since 1988, of a multivocal press signals the presence at least of conflicting cultural values concerning the public sphere in the Chinese world. In this respect, the study of the initial phase of Chinese-language newspapers is far less antiquarian than it seems.

As different forces tried to fashion this sphere and their own role in it after their own aspirations, dramatic shifts occurred. The Opium War, and with it the establishment of the treaty ports, especially of Shanghai and the crown colony of Hong Kong, mark such a shift. In these exclaves, a Chinese-language press developed which offered a platform for articulation in the wider Chinese public sphere. Eventually, Shanghai also became *the* haven for the formation of nongovernmental social organizations such

as political parties, unions, or chambers of commerce. These enclaves were hybrid spaces, populated by people who would describe themselves as Chinese, and run by people who would not. Eventually, they adopted a joint identity as Shanghairen/Shanghaiander that was based on their operating in the same urban space and mode, not their ethnic, linguistic, or cultural background. In the interaction between the two groups, a new structure for the public sphere arose that drew on both traditions. The studies presented here explore this new structure.

Testing the viability and validity of the public sphere concept in late nineteenth-century Shanghai and China highlights still other aspects that have been overlooked in the European case. Three additional areas could be marked as follows.

The public sphere:

1. is not coterminous with the nation but essentially transnational and international.
2. is not homogenous, but shows marked spatial differences in the degree of openness and “civilized rationality.”
3. does not restrict articulation to a high and rational range of discourse and the segments of society able to generate it. It makes use of the entire span of forms of articulation and behavior at the disposal of different segments of society, of different “publics.”¹¹

Habermas, for one, treats the public sphere as being coterminous with a community within national borders. By any standard of volume, importance, quality, or influence, however, the overwhelming majority of Chinese public sphere articulations in any medium between 1870 and the Second World War was, and could only be, published in a foreign-run exclave on Chinese soil, Shanghai. With the ‘liberation’ of Shanghai in 1949 and the self-enclosure of China into the socialist bloc through internal measures and external boycott, the internal Chinese public sphere collapsed into a unified party articulation supervised by the Communist Party Propaganda Department. Since then, Hong Kong as well as foreign-based radio stations continued—albeit in a greatly reduced form—to play the role of Shanghai. The information and opinion provided in these exclaves, however, are—and remains down to the Internet and World Wide Web of our days—a core ingredient of the Chinese public sphere. A look back to eighteenth-century France shows the same structure. Without reference to Habermas’s work, Robert Darnton has demonstrated that nearly all the works considered important indicators and even harbingers of the French Revolution, from Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* to little porn pamphlets against Marie Antoinette, have been printed in Neuchâtel or Leiden beyond the French borders.¹² It is no accident that all the newspapers discussed in this volume, and these are indeed the most important for their genre and time, were published in either the Shanghai Foreign Settlement or

in the British crown colony of Hong Kong; and that most of the key players were either bona-fide foreigners or Chinese with strong links to and protection by the outside world.

This globalizing public sphere again is not without its particular structures. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, China has been decentered. The trajectory to be followed, today called modernization, was defined in centers far beyond its borders. Chinese knowledge about these distant centers was generally shallow, which made for an essentialist, dehistoricized, decontextualized, and utilitarian perception. The very institution of the newspaper came in this package of successful modernization as a core ingredient promising information flow in society as well as rational and effective handling of conflict. The internationality of the emerging 'modern' Chinese public sphere is thus not just a matter of its core being situated in Shanghai and, to a lesser degree, Hong Kong, its being manned by a special brand of internationalized actors, and its inclusion of foreign news as relevant for Chinese foreign relations as well as models for China's development. The very institutions of the modern public sphere such as newspapers or civic associations together with their rationales have initially been brought in from outside (and to a degree have kept this foreignness to this very day). Within the Qing territory, we might see the formation of regional elites in different regions—even their gradual merger into a cohesive network—but the locus of their communication was to an overwhelming degree Shanghai. Shanghai at the same time had the largest concentration of members of these new elites. Seen from the media and social association side, it makes little sense to speak of a Chinese public sphere during the late Qing. Shanghai was not just the place from which the media emanated; it was at the same time the locus of Chinese modernity.¹³ Media coming from Shanghai could and did bank on this prestige of the town, whether they dealt with high politics, courtesan entertainment, or proposals for social and institutional change. The modern Chinese public sphere spread from Shanghai and retained an extremely uneven density for many decades to come.¹⁴ This uneven distribution came with great differences in handling conflicts. The openness of the *Shenbao* pages for different opinions privileged a "rational" and nonviolent debate.

The enlightenment and/or propaganda agenda in studies of newspaper history has for many years led to a neglect of popular but no less influential and important forms of articulation. While this misbalance has gradually disappeared in studies of Western newspaper history—probably in reaction to the evident impact of the modern tabloids—there is little of this in Chinese studies. The emphasis has been to this day on the advocacy press, which is seen by PRC authors as the legitimate ancestor of the modern Party papers. This emphasis began with the first propagator of this type of press, Liang Qichao. In his view, there is no Chinese press to speak of before 1895 because what was there before was purely commercial and furthermore under the financial control of foreigners. As a consequence, neither

the commercial papers nor the large entertainment press has received more than cursory attention, and, if so, exclusively under a political perspective. In this reading, the early *Shenbao* can only be an instrument of reactionary imperialist interference into China's internal affairs. The standard proof is the critical attitude of Huang Xiexun, the editor of the *Shenbao* during the Hundred Days Reform in 1898, toward one of the leaders, Kang Youwei, a man now officially sanctioned as having been at the time a progressive bourgeois reformer. During harder phases of class struggle in the PRC, even the bona-fide Chinese proprietor and editor of the paper during the 1920s, Shi Liangcai, became a bourgeois reactionary.¹⁵ The illustrated paper *Dianshizhai huabao*, in its turn, is reduced to an archive of illustrations of social and political scenes depicted from an often politically questionable perspective. And the plethora of small-format tabloids of the late Qing and Republican era, *xiaobao*, is neglected to the point that, to this day, just one single article in Chinese provides some overview.¹⁶

The founding decades of Chinese-language papers before 1900 have been written out of Chinese history by Chinese writers; because these papers have been written in Chinese by Chinese, and were read by Chinese, they have not found a place in the studies on the Western presence in China either. A classical case is the figure of Ernest Major, whose role was pivotal since 1872 in making Shanghai the media and print capital of China for the next seven decades. Still, this has not earned him even a modest place in either Chinese or Western handbooks of knowledge.

Given the size and importance of the work still to do in mapping the structure of the Chinese public sphere with its historical changes, revolutions, cataclysms, and varying densities, the contributions the studies in this volume will be able to make is modest enough. They will not all of a sudden create a rich, solid, and specific basis for broad and daring new conceptualizations. What they do, however, is probe the viability of different methodological approaches in the study of this exceedingly voluminous and difficult material; map some of the core features of the newspapers in the decisive initial phase when the basic parameters were set; and open the view to the broad spectrum of public articulations in this period through the inclusion of research about the illustrated and the entertainment press. They set out to open up a rich, diverse, and fascinating record of archival and printed, textual and visual, Chinese and Western sources, most of which are introduced and presented here for the first time in any language.

The new media had to be given a place in a Chinese order of things acceptable to the implied readers so that they had the necessary cultural cachet to legitimately claim attention and secure a place on the market. This place in the social imaginaire was secured through argumentations on the highest rhetorical level, ideally in the form of editorials and prefaces, as well as through strategies of cultural packaging, which retained the thrill of the new and global while presenting it in a more or less familiar garb.

It might be argued that readers really only cared for the news, the pictures, and the gossip in the *Shenbao*, the *Dianshizhai huabao*, and the *Youxibao*, and not for these rhetorical exercises. The repeated efforts at situating these papers in the Chinese imaginaire tell another story. In the case of the *Shenbao*, editorials set out to prove that the paper was the modern technical facilitator of the old Chinese ideal of unimpeded communication between high and low, the court and the people, state and society; in the case of the *Dianshizhai huabao*, the introduction advocated a realist turn in the use of graphic arts to illustrate strange things from all over the globe; and in the case of the entertainment papers, the texts offered an indirect reflection on social ills through the depiction of the Shanghai courtesan world to fill out the new leisure space in the weekly timetable of the city's inhabitants.

The cultural packaging was no less important. The evidence again are the constant changes in the ever renewed attempt to get the better fit, whether in format, use of calendar, language levels, rhetorical devices, handling of relationships with readers, or engaging in societal affairs such as the *Shenbao's* long-standing attacks against the use of opium, the *Dianshizhai huabao's* collection of money for the victims of a flood, or the *Youxibao's* organization of the first "democratic election" in China—that of the most attractive courtesan voted on by the habitués of the Shanghai courtesan houses. These newspapers operated as individuated actors in the Chinese public sphere with all the nervousness and attention paid to their public image and acceptance as affecting their market success.

Barbara Mittler's chapter puts a strong emphasis on the analysis of the argumentative, rhetorical, and cultural strategies involved in setting up the first Chinese newspaper deserving this name. The idealizing language about the purport and role of newspapers in nineteenth-century European encyclopedias is introduced into China and recontextualized into an equally idealized picture of Chinese antiquity, but with a marked difference. While all over Europe the press was in fact subjected to a variety of constraints from censorship to market competition and financial control, the Shanghai City Council had no such institutions whatsoever. The only laws applying were the libel statutes in the law books of the different nations with consulates in Shanghai, but this was a dull instrument and it was hardly ever tried. In the Shanghai exclave existed, institutionally spoken, the freest press altogether, and this in a country where the court claimed the most exclusive monopoly in discussing state affairs. The problem the *Shenbao* had to deal with was not censorship, but gaining acceptance by Chinese readers without abandoning the thrill and promise of the new media.

Natascha Gentz Vittinghoff's prosopographic chapter of the first generation of Chinese journalists proceeds along the lines of historical sociology. It takes on the standard tropes claiming that there was a lack of interest and respect for newspapers before 1895, and that these were effusions by people of little quality who, having failed to succeed at the imperial examinations, offered

their services to foreigners to vent their frustration through slanders against Chinese scholars and officials. This study shows a first new 'modern' class in the forming, a class of intellectuals and journalists, of educated people who shared a common background of some connection with missionary or other foreign-related institutions and schools, and would link up regionally and eventually nationally independent of their place of origin in the sojourner cities of Shanghai and Hong Kong. These people have education, knowledge, and social status. They were the first to realize the new options coming with the change in the polity and the relentlessly growing global involvement of China.

Wagner and Kim deal with the first and superbly important Chinese member in the world league of illustrated papers, the *Dianshizhai huabao* (1884–1897), another product of Ernest Major's *Shenbao* company. Using a cultural studies approach, Wagner traces the origins of this paper in the context of a general and global shift toward the image as the core feature of the media, a shift in aesthetic preference toward the specific, and a valuation of common folk as potentially newsworthy items. Elements of this new visual empire are such things as lithograph forerunners of national emblems and propaganda posters. The development of a stable group of newspainters with compatible style and focus around this paper shows features similar to the journalists studied by Natascha Gentz.

Kim's study refuses to accept the selective perspective on the *Dianshizhai huabao* as an archive for a particular view of late Qing social history. It operates with the assumption that knowledge of an order of magnitude, even if no exact numbers might be available, is infinitely more than nothing; it proceeds to effectively map out a highly specific profile of this first and most successful illustrated paper, of its thematic and regional selection, implied readership, and graphic strategies. A mentalité of the implied reader emerges that is infinitely more complex and less reducible to urban rationality than studies have hitherto been willing to take into account. The study directly links the implied reader with the real historical reader. This link is not, in itself, a given. In the particular case, however, it is the market that forms the link. The implied reader of the text and illustrations must be a close relative to the real reader because only this could provide the motive for the latter to buy the *Dianshizhai huabao*. The paper's market success and duration are proof that this is what readers did.

Catherine Yeh offers a highly contextualized cultural study of the new and specialized entertainment papers developing in Shanghai after 1895 with a focus on the *Youxi bao* (Entertainment) and the *Shijie fanhua bao* (World Vanity Fair). This press started to blossom as an ironical comment on a time that saw the flourishing of the Shanghai culture of leisure against the background of the Sino-Japanese War and the efforts at, and the failure of, the reform of 1898. The new entertainment papers and their success signal that the grand concerns of the nation, which our history books tell us were the only concerns of all relevant figures at the time, had to settle into an uneasy accommodation with concerns about the best way to spend the new urban leisure

time, and with the news that the four top courtesans had agreed on a day to highlight the beginning of the fall season by donning new hats. Li Boyuan, the editor putting these seemingly light papers together, figures with his novels, some of which he serialized in his papers, as one of the fiercest social critics of the time; at the same time his papers become the media through which the Shanghai courtesan and the opera singer get on their way to become public and national stars—and this years and even decades before the first political personalities would rise to comparable levels.

Altogether, the chapters share an agenda of offering broadly based empirical research. They do not shy away from presenting falsifiable translations of their key evidence to provide the basis for an informed disagreement and show the way in which the topics under consideration were discussed and narrated. They try to avoid being hampered by fashion in either source evaluation or argument, to make the best of approaches developed in other fields of the humanities, and to arrive, in a controlled and falsifiable manner, at broader conceptualizations.

NOTES

1. Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt: Luchterhand, 1962; id., *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, translated by Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989. The French translation came at about the same time. Jürgen Habermas, *L'èspace public: archéologie de la publicité comme dimension constitutive de la société bourgeoise*, traduit de l'allemand par Marc B. de Launay, Paris: Payot, 1988. F. Wakeman, "The Civil Society and Public Sphere Debate: Western Reflections on Chinese Political Culture," *Modern China*, 19.2 (1993), pp. 108–138, and other articles in the same issue. R. Wagner, "The Role of the Foreign Community in the Chinese Public Sphere," *China Quarterly* 142 (June 1995) argues for the transnationality of the "Chinese" public sphere. Thomas Metzger, *The Western Concept of the Civil Society in the Context of Chinese History*, Hoover Essay #21, Stanford: Hoover Institution, 1998, argues that twentieth-century Chinese elites have not accepted the "bottom-up" notion of a civil society capable of order and morality without the strong guidance of the state. The theoretical discussion "Civil Society and China" was introduced to Chinese audiences in a journal edited by PRC scholars in Hong Kong. *Zhongguo shehuikexue jikan* (Hong Kong) 3 (1993), pp. 5–62.

2. Mary Backus Rankin, *Elite Activism and Political Transformation in China. Zhejiang Province, 1865–1911*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986.

3. William Rowe, *Hankow: Commerce and Society in a Chinese City*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984; id., *Hankow: Conflict and Community in a Chinese City, 1796–1895*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989.

4. F. Wakeman, "The Civil Society and Public Sphere Debate: Western Reflections on Chinese Political Culture," *Modern China*, 19.2 (1993), pp. 108–138.

5. For other studies from the Heidelberg group, see Andrea Janku, *Nur leere Reden: Politischer Diskurs und die Shanghaier Press im China des späten 19. Jahrhunderts*, Wiesbaden: Harassowitz, 2003; Natascha Vittinghoff, *Die Anfänge des Journalismus in China (1860–1911)*, Wiesbaden: Harassowitz, 2002; Barbara Mittler, *A Newspaper for China? Power, Identity, and Change in Shanghai's News Media, 1872–1912*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004. For recent studies on post-1900 developments, see also Terry Narramore, "Making the News in Shanghai. *Shenbao* and the Politics of Newspaper Journalism 1912–1937," unpubl. Ph.D. dissertation, Australian National University, 1989; Joan Judge, *Print and Politics: Shibao and the Formation of the Public Sphere in Late Qing China*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996.

6. Jürgen Habermas, preface to the 1990 German edition of his *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1990, p. 47. The Central European developments of the 1980s again are radically different from those in China. See David L. Wank, "Civil Society in Communist China? Private Business and Political Alliance, 1989," in John A. Hall, ed., *Civil Society: Theory, History, Comparison*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995, pp. 56–79.

7. David Strand, "Protest in Beijing: Civil Society and Public Sphere in China," *Problems of Communism*, May–June 1990, pp. 1–19. The development of "private" enterprise and NGOs in the PRC since the 1990 has prompted similar forays. Gordon White, *In Search of Civil Society: Market Reform and Social Change in Contemporary China*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1996; Timothy Brook and B. Michael Frolic, eds., *Civil Society in China*, Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1997.

8. The German term "Öffentlichkeit" means both—the public sphere as well as its actors, the public.

9. Roger Chartier, *Les Origines Culturelles de la Révolution Française*, Paris: Seuil, 1990. English edition 1991. This public nature was questionable not just for China, but also for Europe. Reinhart Koselleck, *Kritik und Krise: ein Beitrag zur Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt*, Freiburg: K. Alber [1959], shows the importance of the secretive Rosicrucian lodges as a forum of the public. Literary associations and private correspondence played a similar role in nineteenth-century China.

10. For a similar point with different arguments, see Philip Huang, "Public Sphere/'Civil Society' in China? The Third Realm between State and Society," *Modern China* 19.2 (April 1993), pp. 216–240. On the premodern Chinese public sphere, see R. Wagner, "The Early Chinese Newspapers and the Chinese Public Sphere," *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 1(2001), pp. 1–34.

11. Habermas hinted at some of these points in his Preface.

12. Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982.

13. Followed in importance by Hong Kong, Tianjin, and later Japan and the Huaqiao communities.

14. In many third world countries, a "dual economy" has developed that concentrated the "modern" sector in one internationally linked place. In this sense I speak of a "dual public sphere" in China.

15. See Feng Yaxiong, “*Shenbao yu Shi Liangcai*,” in: *Wenshi ziliao xuanji* #17:156–165. See also “*Dui <<Shenbao>> yu Shi Liangcai*” *yi wen buchong he dingzheng* in: *Wenshi ziliao xuanji* #23:244.

16. Zhun Junzhou, “*Shanghai xiaobao de lishi yange*” (The historical development of Shanghai tabloids), *Xinwen yanjiu ziliao* 42:163–179; 43:137–153; 44:211–220 (1988).