THE EARLY CHINESE NEWSPAPERS AND THE CHINESE PUBLIC SPHERE*

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A Foreign Policy Goal: Developing Civil Society in China?

The European Community and many of its member states have incorporated the goal of promoting the development of 'civil society' in China into their China policy guidelines.[1] By this they mean supporting more vigorous and independent articulation and organisation of society in an environment where the Party, and the State under its control, claim a monopoly by right in both fields, and have set up powerful machinery to secure this monopoly. The guidelines contain the implicit and certainly not uncontested claim that foreign nations have a stake in the development of such articulation and organisation, and that they consider this to be beneficial to the stability and predictability of this big country, both domestically and in the international environment. In terms of helping towards independent articulation. Some of these nations, such as the UK, France and Germany, have already been taking practical steps for many years by supporting radio and TV stations broadcasting in Chinese into China. These broadcasts are in no way restricted to news about these foreign countries, but often include news about China that is unavailable from official sources inside China, or opinions by Chinese living in China itself or abroad who do not find an avenue of articulation through the official media. In their day-to-day practice, these stations function as a part of the Chinese public sphere, and are recognised as such by the Chinese authorities, albeit generally as illegitimate imperialistic intrusions into the sacred Chinese national space/public sphere. In normal times, selected portions of programmes from these foreign stations might be rebroadcast by official stations in China, and, in times of crisis, as in May and June 1989, these stations (and others such as the Voice of America) might be the only ones to provide any detailed information about developments on the ground in China. When the

Chinese authorities run official news blockades in this way and jam their broadcasts, their reports are relayed through loudspeakers on the country's campuses.

The arrival of the internet has broadened the internationalisation of the Chinese public sphere. However, the golden age of Chinese internet access lasted only about three months, from October 1999 to January 2000. By then, Shanghai alone could boast over a thousand government censors employed for the single purpose of screening the few existing China/internet connections for any material that they might consider to be politically or morally out of bounds. Well in line with its general attitude towards sovereignty, the Chinese government has rigorously maintained that the Chinese public sphere is coterminous with its national space, and that any unscreened material entering the national territory is contraband or an imperialistic intrusion. While this attitude shares some features with, say, that of the German courts when they take action against foreign internet providers such as Yahoo for carrying information originating in third countries, for example on the sale of a second-hand copy of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, which is illegal in Germany, China's rigorous and largely successful defence of its national information space has no real counterpart elsewhere.

One might leave it at that and close the subject with a few remarks about the sad absence of free speech, a free press and internet access in China, and the firm expectation that, with the growth of the internet and the opening of the market that will accompany China's accession to the WTO, things will 'inevitably' change for the better. Which they might or again might not.

The worthy goal of promoting Chinese 'civil society', however, is based less on a specific analysis of the Chinese body politic than on a general assumption about the necessary and beneficial structure of a modern society that is extrapolated from that of a few Western states. This essentialising view goes hand in hand with equally essentialising views about how 'the Chinese' are, or how 'China' is. As far as China is concerned, one might argue that the Sinologists have not done their homework in providing the public, including the officials who define these foreign policy goals, with studies that they might draw upon to understand the historical and cultural specificities of the Chinese case.

Without claiming to be qualified to enlighten the public, or to be a consultant to any government agency, I would say that there appears to be a happy and serendipitous convergence between some of the problems outlined above and some of my own research in the past decade on the structure and development of the Chinese public sphere, and especially the early Chinese newspapers.[2]

Westerners and the Origin of the Commercial Vernacular Press in Asia

The *Shenbao* newspaper started publication in the International Settlement in Shanghai in 1872. It is commonly accepted that it was the most important Chinese-language newspaper, at least until about 1905, and among the most important until its closure in 1949, when its buildings and plant were taken over by the *Jiefang ribao*.

The *Shenbao* was the product of a lengthy development not within Chinese society, but in Great Britain and, more generally, in Europe. Many British newspapers such as the *London Times* had started off as tabloids put out by print shops with the purpose of making profitable use of their machines when they were idle. They were shoestring operations, and when the government discovered that their articles could have some public impact, it bought their loyalty with subsidies or closed them down with legal charges of libel, blasphemy or sedition.

Governments furthermore had their own official, daily mouthpieces in the public sphere, in the form of various government gazettes such as the *London Gazette*. When newspaper publishers began to discover, from the 1830s onwards, that there was much more of a market to be had by publishing news that was gathered independently of the government, through reporters and correspondents and eventually the wire services, they distanced themselves from the government by giving up their subsidies and began pushing hard for restrictions on the government's means of controlling them. This new freedom of the press was accompanied and justified by a dramatic heightening of claims to moral status by its practitioners, namely the journalists and editorialists, and an equally dramatic enhancement of the proclaimed usefulness of a free press for the proper functioning of government and society. By the 1860s the notion that a free press was an ideal in and of itself, and an indispensable accoutrement of social improvement had become commonplace enough to form the core of the definitions of the press as given in the great encyclopaedias of the last century.[3] The press was the instrument through which society exercised the informed supervision of the government.

The *Shenbao* was published with a small investment by four businessmen from the British Isles, and managed by Ernest Major (1841–1908), a young man in his early thirties who had quickly attained much-praised fluency in understanding, speaking, reading, and writing Chinese and had moved to Shanghai from Ningbo in 1871.[4]

The Shanghai Settlement was not anybody's colony, but a foreign settlement. The International Settlement, which united the former British and North American sectors, was run by the Municipal Council, whose then unpaid members were elected by the wealthier segment of

the Foreign Ratepayers' Association, the number of votes depending on the amount of real estate owned in the city. Describing itself as a Model Settlement because of the peaceful cohabitation of people from many different nations, races, cultures and languages, be they Yankee or Parsee, Cantonese or Scottish, Baghdadi Jew or Shanxi banker, the Settlement was fiercely proud of its own wealth and achievements, and stressed its independence from both the Qing court and the foreign consulates to the point where, for a time in the 1860s, it pursued the idea of setting itself up as a kind of Hanseatic city — against the stern opposition of certain British diplomats.

While Major made sure at the outset that the British Consulate would accept a Chinese newspaper published by himself and distributed nationally in China as a 'fair commercial enterprise' covered by the treaties, he turned to the consulate for help only in the rare cases when one of his local distributors failed to pay.[5] The consulate on the other hand was constantly irritated at his lack of concern for British interests in China, the unceremonious titles he used for the Queen and the turmoil that some *Shenbao* articles raised in popular and official circles in Shanghai and nationwide.[6] Apart from occasionally going so far as to advise Chinese officials to sue Major for libel in the Consular Court, and abruptly refusing to grant him any help in collecting payment from his inland distributors, as could have done under the Treaty of Tianjin, the British Consulate had as little power to influence or control the *Shenbao* in one way or another as the Qing court itself.[7] In short, the leeway that the *Shenbao* enjoyed in the particular niche that was the International Settlement in Shanghai was even greater than that enjoyed by British papers in London itself. The struggle for the freedom of the press bore its finest results in this far-off settlement.

Major was not the only Briton to venture into what at the time was called the 'vernacular' press. Decades earlier, in Constantinople in 1843, William Churchill had set up the first paper in Ottoman Turkish (a language he did not speak or read), the *Ceride-i Havadis* (News gazette) .[8] In 1872, the Scotsman J. R. Black, who himself did not speak or read Japanese, pioneered the *Nisshin shinjishi*, the first Japanese newspaper worthy of the name.[9] In India, especially in Bengal, vernacular papers had already been started a hundred years earlier, again by an Englishman, and by the 1860s and 1870s these papers, run by Bengali journalists, had gained a very substantial circulation and public voice.[10]

When the different conditions are compared, the Shanghai case shows a marked singularity even within these similar contexts. In the Ottoman Empire, Churchill's newspaper remained very small. In Tokyo, the Japanese government moved quickly to prevent Black's or any other newspaper from becoming an independent public

mouthpiece. It found broad support for the crackdown among Black's Japanese imitators and then competitors as well as from the British embassy where Ambassador Parkes issued a formal order banning British subjects from publishing vernacular papers in Japan.[11] In India, successive viceroys wavered between a policy of closely monitoring the vernacular papers, whose contents would be summarised by special interpreters at frequent intervals in order to gauge the public mood, declaring an outright ban on such papers, as was done in the Vernacular Press Act in March 1878, and encouraging free public expression, which came with the repeal of the Vernacular Press Act shortly thereafter. Although the Chinese government was well aware of the steps taken by the Japanese government against Black and knew from the Vernacular Press Act in India that the chances of winning British support for a ban on the *Shenbao* were good, there was little movement in this direction. The *Shenbao* had acquired the status of a relatively reliable and independent source of information. Even as a means for the Beijing court to keep tabs on its local officials, it had become an essential part of Chinese public communications, and had acquired the reputation of being independent and more reliable than most of the other available sources.

No state entity, in other words, had any real regulatory impact on the *Shenbao* in Shanghai. Major's commercial orientation prompted him to gear the paper to Chinese audiences. This, in Major's own words, effectively forestalled the advocacy of foreign interests. The agenda of 'betterment' and 'improvement' that he inherited, like many British merchants, from Scottish enlightenment ideas prompted him to adopt an editorial policy geared to promoting measures that would, in his opinion, improve the long-term prospects for China's growth and development.[12] This in turn earned the paper respect and influence among the reform-minded sections of the elite. The constraints on the paper thus came from the market, and from the core political beliefs of the editors.

The China in which this newspaper made its appearance was characterised by a public sphere over which the Qing court had managed to establish a firm hegemony that left little room for independent articulation on core issues, room that was in any case not much used. Apart from some at times highly specialised and valuable studies on individual periods, papers or problems, the field of research on the pre-modern public sphere, which began in 1936 with Lin Yutang's bold overview, *History of the Press and Public Opinion in China*, has attracted few scholars.[13] Even fewer can claim competence in tackling the broad range of sources and methods needed for an investigation of such an elusive topic, ranging as these sources do from collections of

popular ditties to government gazettes, from *qingyi* discussions among officials to records of student protests, from public proclamations and announcements to historical fantasy straight out of the imaginary, from public ritual to architecture and urban spatial arrangement.[14]

To foster debate, I shall try — even at the risk of blundering at each turn because my research in this vast field is just beginning — to outline some of the structures and historical developments in the Chinese public sphere. What is presented here in the economical rhetoric of fact and argument must be read as shorthand for hypothesis, and as the suggestion of a possibility.

One may argue that the growth of the centralised Chinese state was accompanied by an increasing tendency to thwart independent social articulation, and even to cut off growing segments of officialdom from relevant information. The beginnings of this drift are described in an early *Shenbao* editorial, which outlines the paper's own role in China.[15] It sees the process as having begun with the founding of the Hanlin Academy in the middle of the Tang dynasty. As the 'academicians' had not risen through the ranks, they owed allegiance to the emperor personally and not to the bureaucracy, and he entrusted them with military secrets which they were not allowed to discuss with, or divulge to, any other official. This institution was kept and developed during the subsequent dynasties. The non-Han dynasties such as the Mongol dynasty greatly enlarged the realm of secrecy, and the Ming and Qing who succeeded them directly continued this restrictive practice. The publication of a government gazette containing information about the emperor's ritual activity, appointments and dismissals, as well as rescripts of approved memorials was only the other side of a sternly defined and restricted vertical top-down communication between the court and society, and a total ban on horizontal communication among officials. On a more general level, efforts were made to restrict ideological diversity through the canonisation of a specific and idiosyncratic reading of the classics. As examination material, this required reading was to create a unified and homogenous mindset among officialdom. Again, the Ming and Qing continued and developed the Yuan installation of Zhu Xi's Neoconfucianism as official examination doctrine. While there certainly was no linear development, studies by Silas Wu, Beatrice Bartlett and others have shown that the Qing secret memorial system in effect locked most of the regular and Han-Chinese officials out of information and the levers of power, and left the general public largely in the dark as to the actual process and contents of policy formulation at the centre.[16]

At the same time, the ideal of an easy flow of information and opinion between high and low remained enshrined in the Chinese

political imaginaire and could be called upon to explain and justify the role of the newspaper. The *Shenbao* again was not loath to draw on this resource. Sage rule is characterised by an open 'path of speech', *yanlu*, through which open and often critical talk may reach the highest levels of the administration. A closed *yanlu* prevents the ruler from overcoming his own weaknesses and mistakes and from understanding the actual situation in the country.[17] Institutionally, this idea had been used to justify the establishment of the censorate as an office that specialised in investigating abuses of power and deviations from ritual by officials, often with the help of information provided by common folk. It had also served to lend support to the idea that anyone properly trained in the classics should be entitled to have opinions on important policy matters, and express them. While these opinions mostly took the form of the memorial and remained technically internal to officialdom until they were published in collected works or selections of memorials, they often quickly reached broad elite audiences on a national scale. The official and private histories furthermore contain several thousand instances of the articulation of political opinion coming from the margins or from outside official channels. The voice of this player in the pre-modern public sphere would be introduced as a collective statement by means of expressions such as 'those having a judgment said', *lunzhe yue*, or 'those involved in policy debates said', *yizhe yue*.[18] Not always, but as a rule, the opinions and judgments stated turned out to be justified and true. In a very large number of cases these articulations are said to have prompted or forced the highest authorities to react. The emperor would call his top officials and discuss the matter; in many cases a decision already taken would be reversed and the path suggested by these anonymous collective statements would be trodden. The availability of databases such as the twenty-five dynastic histories makes such research possible without whole lifetimes having to be spent in collecting data. The communications that come from these collective voices tend to imply often very detailed inside knowledge. They will argue about personnel and policy decisions, and even military planning. They are not in the same league as the sub-rational mutterings of the people as expressed in their songs and ditties.[19]

The numbers of reported public interventions in the policy process vary dramatically between different dynasties, with the Qing again marking a very low ebb. To make such comments in the histories possible, some record of them must have been kept in the archives of the previous dynasty. Occasionally, and for short times under revolutionary governments such as those of Wang Mang, Wu Zetian and Wang Anshi, institutions were developed to enable the articulation and collection of information on 'public opinion' ranging from popular

songs to information about government abuses or exemplary behaviour by officials. There is, however, to my knowledge no trace of any institution that calibrated the collective opinion of these *lunzhe* or *yizhe*. How the historians went about constructing these collective opinions remains to be studied. That construction and intention is involved in these statements is evident from the fact that these collective voices tend to be correct in their assessment when they are being quoted. They are thus inserted into a plot line in which they appear as a rule when they are right, and this plot line lives off the legitimacy of this type of articulation enshrined in the imaginaire.

In the Chinese political imaginaire, legitimate rule was seen as rule not by popular vote but by popular consent. Throughout the ages, this basic understanding provided legitimacy for the public articulation of opinion at different levels. Needless to say, the political centres of power developed their own strategies to deal with this legitimacy problem. These strategies ranged from the denunciation of critics as people lacking public-mindedness and only trying to push their own personal agenda to the engineering of manifestations of popular support and the claim that manifestations of popular support for people fallen out of favour were but concoctions.[20] Still, these were only ways of skirting the rather strict requirements within the imaginaire for those claiming legitimacy of rule. Their efforts contained the admission of the ongoing validity of this structure.

A third group of players in the pre-modern Chinese public sphere consisted of the private academies and associations of men of letters. While, in theory, they were supposed to prepare their students for the examinations with their canonical reading, they were institutionally independent enough to be able to develop their own ideological line and even to have an impact on the criteria for the examinations. Their claim to legitimacy was based on their familiarity with the legacies of the sages of old. The networks of their members and graduates were national in scope, and extended both into the administration and into society at large. In situations of crisis such as during the late Ming, some of these academies could become important foci of the public sphere. In the early Qing reading, it was the multivocality and independence of these academies that had brought the Ming down; as a consequence such institutions were banned.

The steps taken by the Qing court to assert hegemony over the public sphere were for the greater part designed to gain the voluntary adherence of the Confucian elite and fill the public sphere with government-approved material, from the moral maxims contained in the *Shengyu* (Sacred edict) to the gigantic official editions of classical works, and only to a much smaller degree to establish rigorous

censorship. The latter remained primarily reserved for areas directly related to Manchu-Han relations. During the late eighteenth century, under the aging Qianlong Emperor, harsh measures were often taken to discipline and punish those who spoke out. However, a comparison with, for example, France during the same period shows the latitude that Chinese men of letters and officials enjoyed, in theory as well as in fact, even during these dark decades. The *kaozheng* studies, which did so much to undermine the credibility of the inherited body of the classics and their reading, did not have to be published in Japan, Vietnam or Russia and then be surreptitiously smuggled back into China.[21] They were published and circulated in China itself.

One might argue, though, that Han Chinese men of letters made little use of this latitude. Well before the Opium War and the Taiping civil war, a man like Sun Dingchen (1819–59) was to rediscover the much-maligned late Ming academies as the greatest achievement of that dynasty and would wonder aloud about how it could have happened that Chinese men of letters had lost the will, capacity and solidarity needed to maintain the institution of public remonstrance.[22]

It would seem that, in the eyes of the court, such musings were no threat as long as they were not linked to action and anti-Manchu propaganda. The difference is directly visible once the Taiping civil war is taken into consideration. The Taiping went straight to the heart of Qing censorship when they publicly proclaimed that the Manchu, as a race, were of the devil; and they saw the Confucian literati as weaklings siding with these devils. They relied heavily on written propaganda. In this they followed the example of the Western evangelical missionaries as well as the Chinese court propagandists. While this civil war was fought on the battlefield, it was the first Chinese war to be won and lost in a globalised public sphere with the missionaries and international press playing a significant part in making the war known worldwide and discussing the merits of both sides. These discussions had a decisive influence on the position taken by the Western governments and on their willingness to side with either party.[23]

Both sides were keenly aware of these domestic and international factors. They proceeded with precipitation and determination to wipe out what they saw as the propaganda apparatus of the other side within the country. The result was a large-scale cultural destruction which left many Jiangnan academies and their libraries burning, and led to the curious fact that although the Taiping documents were printed in large numbers in China at the time, they survive today, with very few exceptions, only in copies brought out by missionaries and given to libraries outside China. Both the Qing court and the Taiping also made sustained public as well as diplomatic efforts to gain either support or

tolerance on the part of the Western powers and Western public opinion. Finally, while actively trying to push their views in the public sphere even in areas controlled by their opponents, both shared in a radical vision of the need for a completely unified public sphere in which the other side would have no room for articulation. This gives us an early precursor of the twentieth-century Chinese advocacy-and-propaganda press with its keen awareness of the public sphere as the most effective arena in which to make a bid for power. It also gives us a foretaste of the ruthless elimination of alternative voices based, to be sure, on the very same keen awareness that followed every successful bid.

What remained by way of public articulation after the civil war was the *Jingbao* as well as organs aimed at restoring a semblance of normalcy and orthodoxy. While the *Jingbao*, as Barbara Mittler has shown, certainly contained elements of interesting and even sensational news, these had to be extracted against the purpose of authors and compilers, and cannot deflect our gaze from the fact that the relationship of the *Jingbao* to actual policy-making at the centre was about equivalent to that of the *Renmin ribao* to the actual policy process in the PRC today.[24] The *Jingbao* projected a normalcy of government protocol and action that concealed an excessively secretive decision-making process.

Jingbao is the collective name for a whole set of private rescripts and reprints of the crudest technical quality, consisting of the set of government-approved public communications posted every day in front of the *liubu*, six boards, in Beijing. It is quite surprising that a class of officials with a self-appreciation based on their literary proficiency and sophistication should have tolerated such a print product. The law was that this reproduction should be complete; no other matter and no commentary were to be attached. These *Jingbao* certainly do not qualify as a newspaper. They reveal the vast gap between the situation of the country and the court, as well as the equally vast gap between the issues at stake in China's modernisation and the court's concerns. However, while frustration about this gap was poured out in private letters and indirect comments, no media were developed that would have allowed for a continuous public discussion of national concerns and the dissemination of relevant information.

The pre-modern Chinese public sphere was thus by and large peopled by officials or by men who had the educational preconditions to become officials. As this class of people circulated nationally, the public sphere was national in dimension. The loudest and most continuous voice in this public sphere, however, was that of the court. As the public perception of the legitimacy of the dynasty hinged on its capacity to unify the thinking of the land, much effort went into the public performance and regular display of this unity. While the court

allowed its officials to submit proposals for national policies, problems became public only with the Emperor's approval and when they were posted by the Board of Rites.

With the arrival of the newspaper in Shanghai, this voice of the court was not silenced. It continued its daily rattle for another forty years. The *Shenbao* made good on its promise to establish communications between high and low by publishing the *Jingbao* daily and in full. It took a long while for the court to discover the new medium for itself and adjust to the new technology. Eventually both the court and regional officials did adjust. They continued the *Jingbao* tradition in the form of the *guanbao*, or official gazettes which then became the preferred medium of the governments of the Republican period and the true ancestor of the PRC press.

Since Han Wudi's time, the court had always maintained the principle of its hegemony over the articulation of public issues even if it never managed to really assert this hegemony even among its own bureaucrats, and in fact rarely tried to do so by force. In the political philosophy shared by the elite who manned the official positions, the emperor as the emblem of the centre remained the most important source of social order and of the spiritual unity that was believed to be its basis. The efforts were thus concentrated on making the emperor live up to this high purpose, not on establishing a system of checks and balances that could survive even an inept or cruel emperor.

The critics of the Qing and the Republic eventually took the same path. The hybrid paper simultaneously claiming the legitimacy of reform and of the voice of the court was first developed by Liang Qichao when he managed to have his *Shiwubao* transformed for a few months into a Qing government gazette. After the failure of the Hundred Days Reform in 1898, he changed audience and addressed 'the people' instead of officials. The Chinese Communists most successfully continued on this path of an advocacy press. After 1949, in a radical merger of the advocacy press and the government gazette, they transformed all the media of the country into a unified and centrally controlled set of instruments of advocacy and propaganda.

To this very day, a multivocal press has been seen in China as an indicator of weak government. Whenever a government has established firm central control, it has immediately tried to impose its own hegemony over all aspects of the public sphere. The first such attempt was made by Yuan Shikai, the second by the KMT after 1928, and the third and most successful one by the Chinese Communist Party after 1949. True, Chinese-language newspapers from the very beginning soon found an eager and interested readership. However, the lack of broad and sustained opposition to state control among both readers

and newspaper professionals indicates a substantial level of elite and popular support for the role of the state in protecting the nation against its own follies of freedom. One is led to ask whether the dissidents and protesters against state control in the public sphere would subscribe to Jefferson's famous statement that he heartily rejected his opponent's views but would risk his own life to defend the latter's right to express them in public.

What then is the narrative logic into which we are to insert the *Shenbao*? Are we to say that the *Shenbao* paved the way for a broader and more independent articulation of public views decades before this concept took root among reformers like Liang Qichao? Are we to say that the rigid reduction of all media to government and party propaganda in the PRC and, for much of its history, in Taiwan has been but a temporary lapse, a return to a 'feudal tradition' that will eventually give way to a free press of the kind that we now see in Taiwan? Are we to direct our studies accordingly towards this presumed mainstream of an independent press or towards the huge volume of Beijing gazettes, *jingbao*, official gazettes, *guanbao*, and CCP and KMT Party papers and their impact? Should we then consider the independent press as being composed of irregularities and counter-currents in this mainstream?

Needless to say, studies on the pre-1949 Chinese press, my own included, have consistently focused on the independent press, and this is true even for PRC scholarship, which might have been more alert to the overwhelming continuity of the state and party press. In the studies on the development of the European press in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries we find the same overwhelming attention to the articulations and associations of society be they in the form of salons, clubs, or associations, newspapers or history books, movements or revolutions. But, apart from Chartier's *Les Origines Culturelles de la Revolution Française*, little work is known on the state as an important, even extremely important, actor in the public sphere reacting to challenges with its own papers, histories, and associations.[25] I could be underestimating the long drift towards a public sphere, where conflicts between state and society as well as within society might take an essentially non-violent form. However, in my mind there is no question that, in the cultural construction of the public sphere in East Asia, there has hitherto been a broad consensus to the effect that the state centre has the duty and the right to strive always to impose homogeneity of thought, information, and purpose with whatever means that the modern world might put at its disposal. Could it be that the 'main current', *zhuliu*, of the modern Chinese press is the government/party gazette? And would one have to say that China — with the possible

exception of Taiwan after 1988 — has not developed the internal mental and institutional structures that would supply the framework for the kind of independent and free press that initially developed outside central control in the Shanghai exclave?

To put it bluntly, the state is a key player in the public sphere. It does not just operate *via negationis* through censorship, but engages in an active advocacy of its views and interests. And this is far more the case, and can claim broader acceptance among both elite and populace in China, both pre-modern and modern, than in most West European countries.

The International Nature of the Modern Chinese Public Sphere

While it may be assumed that the public articulation, in the main, came from people residing in larger agglomerations which had government *yamen* and to which wealthier land owners had moved in increasing numbers, and that a fair share of it came from officials in Beijing, the pre-modern Chinese public sphere was not urban in character and had no urban foci. This is true even for Qing-dynasty Beijing which was quite devoid of any urban identity and structure. In Europe, the foci of both the pre-modern and the modern public sphere were in urban centres. They provided the critical mass of articulate people, dependent on and actively involved in societal and government affairs, who created the multi-interest and multi-vocal environment and, with it, the financial conditions for the development of the modern media with their overwhelmingly urban focus. These cities could claim an often patriotic identification, commitment and pride from their citizens which, in many cases, was legally buttressed by the fact that they were city states, or enjoyed a particular legal autonomy that served as a protective wand for public articulation.

In the modern Chinese case, the urban character of the public sphere was radicalised to the extreme. On the mud flats outside the small district town of Shanghai the Foreign Settlement grew within barely two decades into not just one among various Chinese urban centres, but altogether the only modern urban centre on Chinese soil. Obviously, Shanghai benefited economically from its unique geographical position which not only made it the transhipment hub linking north and south with China's richest region, Jiangnan, but also connected these three regions to the international shipping routes. But there had been many wealthy towns in Chinese history and none of them could lay claim to anything even approaching the status of a special and largely autonomous legal entity. The fact that the International Settlement was basically shielded not only against the Qing court but also against

direct interference by the foreign consulates created a situation where the very air of the city 'made its inhabitants free' in the literal sense of the mediaeval German saying '*Stadtluft macht frei*'. With Shanghai's financial wealth, the magic wand of its legal status and the huge intellectual potential of China's best educated region in its backyard, a press and publishing business was able to grow here in such a way that, for all practical purposes, the modern Chinese public sphere became coterminous with this city for the next four decades, and remained by far its most important focus until 1949. The combination of Shanghai's exclave nature, its wealth, and the attraction it had for businessman, official, tourist, and new intellectual alike made it develop into the Chinese media capital.[26]

If we borrow the modern image of the 'dual economy' that can be found in many developing countries with its divide as well as its uneasy coexistence and interaction between a modern sector that is largely controlled by foreigners and a traditional sector controlled by traditional elites, then we may speak of a dual public sphere in China from the 1870s onwards. Its traditional sector was manned by the traditional elite having its core at the court, the communications media were oral, private [in the form of letters] and/or bureaucratic [memorials], and its structure was vertical. Its modern sector was manned by a motley crowd made up of foreign businessmen and missionaries, and a growing new class of Chinese urbanites, the intellectuals and businessmen in the new sectors. Its communications media were the press, nationally distributed books and, later, radio and film. Its structure was horizontal by virtue of its distribution through the market. This modern sector was shielded against the unifying propensities of those who controlled the traditional sector by the status of the Shanghai Settlement. This status, however, also secured goods, including print products, unimpeded access to the inland market. This meant that these public sphere products circulated throughout the territory controlled by the Chinese court and other areas inhabited by readers of Chinese. Thriving on the high status of modernity and efficiency associated with goods coming in through Shanghai, the new foreign-controlled media became the pacemakers and set standards for developments within China proper without necessarily being able to create the environment that would have allowed similar development there. The consequence was that the modern sector of the public sphere continued to be dependent on Shanghai's particular exclave status. This role only ended with the 'liberation' of Shanghai and the enthronement of Beijing as the media capital with the CCP propaganda department as the supreme supervising agency that fixed the content of all media and exercised censorship over them. This merger of the political and

media capitals amounted to the merger of public articulation in the public sphere with government/party propaganda and marked, for the time being, the end of the function of the Chinese public media as organs of societal articulation.

In short with the *Shenbao* we have one of the world's most independent papers beginning to operate in a unique and foreign-controlled urban exclave within a public sphere that that elsewhere in China had become most rigidly circumscribed. As a commercial venture, the *Shenbao* was free of the purpose, burden and opprobrium attached to missionary or advocacy papers, but it also lacked the subsidies that allowed these papers to continue publishing even without sufficient market support. The *Shenbao* depended for its success on being accepted by lettered Chinese from many diverse fields who would write for it, buy it, read it and be willing to defend it even if it came to blows. However, even with its heavy dependence on the Chinese market, exclusive use of the Chinese language and many Chinese journalists and correspondents, the *Shenbao* was, as a newspaper, a foreign medium, and it remained a foreign-owned firm until 1905.

We thus have to accept that the modern Chinese public sphere had and has an important international component that is beyond the control of the Chinese centre as well as that of foreign governments and, up to 1949, was largely identical with Shanghai. (The status of the Foreign Settlements was done away with in 1943 not through Chinese effort but through the 'anti-imperialist' action of the Japanese government which was accepted by the foreign governments. The extreme concentration of media and media professionals in the city, however, secured a few more years for the city as a key centre of the Chinese public sphere.)

This important and, at times crucial, international dimension of the Chinese public sphere was not an exceptional feature of China during the last decades of the Qing but a general one. We find it continued in the presence, in China, of many of the most important Chinese and foreign-language papers that were technically under foreign management between the founding of the Republic and the end of Shanghai extraterritoriality in 1943; and we find it continued to this day when, for example, in May or June 1989 the only way for someone in Nanjing to find out what the situation was in Shanghai, Chengdu, or Beijing, was to listen to the BBC or Voice of America broadcasts. The Chinese government said as much when, during those hectic days, it would time and again use public loudspeakers to deny rumours spread by 'some people'. The loudspeakers gave no names to these 'people', but anyone with a short-wave radio knew that they the BBC and the Voice of America. In this act of rejection, these broadcasting stations outside sovereign Chinese space were officially

recognised as part of the Chinese public sphere, albeit an illegitimate and highly imperialist part of it.

The literature about the structure and development of the public sphere in Europe, since Jürgen Habermas' seminal book[27], has tacitly assumed that the public sphere of a country is coterminous with its national borders. Darnton has gone through the archives of the Neufchatel printers and publishers of the mid and late eighteenth century and shown in a detailed and documented study that almost all of the works considered to be the high-brow and low-brow precursors of the French Revolution, from the learned *Grande encyclopédie* to the pornographic *Confessions d'un curé de campagne*, were printed and published not in France, but in Neufchatel in Switzerland or in Leiden.[28] While he never explicitly took up the question of a country and its public sphere are coterminous, his book provides the best possible evidence for this view. In the European case this evidence is directly supported by large masses of anecdotal data on the lives, roles and fate of controversial figures, books and other media since the beginnings of printing to the present time, from Erasmus to Marx to Kundera, from the BBC's broadcasts to Nazi Germany to Radio Free Europe.

The Chinese example is of a much more glaring sort, but Shanghai only highlights what in fact is a common feature in the structure of any public sphere. But the nation-state or China-centred focus of much modern Chinese scholarship has for this very reason marginalised the importance of the Shanghai International Settlement and of the *Shenbao*, because they were not effectively controlled by the Manchu Qing court and therefore were not seen as qualifying as *bona fide* Chinese. Some even went through the painful exercise of elevating the slanderous and vapid papers put out under the auspices of the Shanghai Circuit Intendant (Shanghai Daotai) in the mid-1870s, in order to siphon off the *Shenbao*'s growing market and thus quietly kill off the paper, into examples of patriotic righteousness against the cultural imperialism of the *Shenbao*.[29] Once these blinkers are removed, it becomes quickly clear that the existence of the *Shenbao* signals an important feature in the modern development of the public sphere as a whole, namely its transnational and even international character, and this long before the satellite dish and the internet. It is a feature in no way restricted to China even if the role of the *Shenbao* was unusually important there because, for the first two decades of its existence — actually until Major left — it in fact was the only Chinese daily with a substantial national circulation and audience outside the government gazette, the *Jingbao*, which, since it was fully incorporated into the *Shenbao*, was increasingly read as part of the information provided by this paper.

The mechanism that unfolded with this free newspaper operating in an excessively restrictive state — which could furthermore count on the basic acceptance of these restrictions by the lettered classes — runs counter to all notions of a linear 'China-centred' development of the modern Chinese public sphere.

In short, there is a strong strain of enlightenment idealism in the Habermasian notion that the educated public learns to engage in rational public debate. This idealism is already threatened by experiences such as those of the Nazi German press or, on another plane, the hysteria of the modern media. The theoretical challenge, however, coming from the East Asian and especially the Chinese experience is of a different kind. The state in both its pre-modern and modern forms here enters the public sphere not as just one legitimate player among others, but as the legitimate player par excellence. This, needless to say, changes the entire dynamics of the public sphere concept. It challenges us to enter the fray of theoretical discussion not just as petty Sinological provincials lapping up the dispensations of the scholars dealing with the 'centre' but as critical participants in a debate whose core concepts are, more often than not, generalised from ideosyncratically regional data and, indeed, even lack the benefit of having been strengthened through comparison.

The Functions of the Shanghai Exclave in the Modern Chinese Public Sphere

The exclave character of Shanghai was a necessary condition for its viability, but not a sufficient condition for its success. This success could only come from acceptance by the targeted Chinese readership. Major was highly aware of the need to establish the cultural compatibility of his newspaper in China. I shall not dwell upon the sophisticated and diverse strategies he used to secure acceptance. These strategies ranged from the paper's format to its interaction with the readers and its insertion into a publishing empire that took it upon itself to make the best of Chinese literary tradition widely available through fine typeset and lithographed editions at moderate prices.

Since the *Shenbao* was British-owned, it easily came under suspicion of surreptitiously trying to promote British interests in China. In a very substantial number of editorials right from its inception, the *Shenbao* spoke about itself, newspapers in general and their possible role in the Chinese public sphere. The actual contents of the news and editorials alone were not enough to dispel this general suspicion, which, if it had had credence, would have been devastating for the paper's prospects. The paper countered this suspicion at a most critical time in 1875,

when there was the threat of another war between China and Great Britain. A number of high officials felt that China was now strong enough to win such a war. The paper came out against hostilities. Its stand could not but provoke questions about its loyalties. While these criticisms cannot be documented from the surviving written records, the paper reacted to them in an editorial which opened with the amazing sentence, 'This paper has been established to make a profit'.[30] This sentence must be read against the silent countertext which read that the paper was not a subsidised missionary or advocacy paper, but was dependent on acceptance by its Chinese readers. Evidently, a paper advocating British interests would not have been commercially successful among Chinese readers. The editorial did not stop here. A newspaper, it continued, sold best in times of war and conflict; the commercial interest of the paper would thus favour fanning war and conflict. But as the paper was convinced that China would lose a war with Great Britain and would be ultimately forced to pay huge compensations, and that these in turn would weaken the Chinese state, impoverish its population and slow down its modernisation, it was advocating negotiation and peace. It was doing so even though its attitude would certainly not increase sales and might even nourish suspicions about its motives. This dedication of the paper to what Major saw as China's enlightened interests in turn gave it the leeway and even the duty to openly criticise policies of the court and actions by local officials that ran counter to this goal.

In short, the paper settled in a well-defined niche in the Chinese political imaginaire, that of loyal remonstrance. In its many editorials about the purpose and functions of a newspaper, the earliest and, together with Wang Tao's editorials in the *Xunhuan ribao* in Hongkong, easily the most sophisticated theoretical reflections on the place of newspapers in Chinese political culture, the *Shenbao* boldly inserted its own agenda into the Chinese imaginaire.

The core pieces of this imaginaire in Chinese classical education, familiar to the lettered classes, contain a surprising number of statements and narratives about the functioning of an ideally ordered society. Such a society, typified by the reign of the mythical emperors of old, is characterised by the unimpeded flow of communication between high and low, *shang xia tong*. This flow ensured that the people were informed about the grand plans of the emperor and his court and were thus able to reach beyond what might otherwise be purely personal or local considerations; and it ensured that the court was informed about the life circumstances, grievances and apprehensions of the people, and was thus able to adjust state policies accordingly.

The *Shenbao* essays on newspapers contain a wealth of anecdotes from the imaginaire of the Chinese polity which show the eagerness with which these sage emperors went about collecting information on, as well as opinions and criticisms from, the people — the emphasis being on encouraging 'those below' to speak out orally or in writing, anonymously or in person. In this world, closing the paths of speech and criticism, was a sure sign of a ruthlessly despotic ruler, while the wise ruler would be eager to get advice, information and blunt criticism. Time and again editorials listed the pre-modern public media used in this flow of communications, whether these were the *bangmu*, the wooden tablets for complaints set up on the road side, or the *shanjing*, banners of praise, under which one could make public speeches recommending qualified persons for official positions. Newspapers were but a modern and more easily distributed form of these traditional institutions. One editorial nicely suggested that the sages of the West had understood the ideals of the Chinese sages and thus set up newspapers. In their essence, newspapers were a Chinese invention. This appeal to the idealised imaginaire shared by the lettered classed was designed to prove the compatibility of this Western medium with the teaching of the Chinese sages.

We see the same intellectual process at work in the diary of ambassador Guo Songtao in London, an avid reader of both the Chinese papers from Shanghai and the London Press. Pondering the question of whether newspapers had a place in China, he found a precedent in an obscure and high-brow passage of the *Zhouli* (Rites of Zhou) where, once a year, the elders and nobles were said to assemble, with the king in attendance, to deliberate on great questions of state.[31] At the same time, as both Barbara Mittler and Natascha Vittinghoff have shown, this appeal to the idealised past had a critical edge directed against a present in which these ideals were most conspicuously unfulfilled. Historically, these precedents were evoked in times when they were not followed, and many of the reformers of the past, whether Wang Mang, Wu Zetian or Wang Anshi, added legitimacy to their own rule by restoring the institutions of remonstrance of the ideal past. One should add that the newspaper's assumption that the traditional role of the remonstrator represented the public interest also contained a scathing commentary on the inability of contemporary officialdom, the natural candidate for this role, to perform its duty.

The *Shenbao* printed the *Jingbao*, the reports of its Chinese local correspondents and international news. Its editorials and readers' letters offered a platform for public discussion of important issues. In this manner it served to restore the communication between high and low

that had been progressively reduced in the preceding centuries, but was in fact the real prerequisite for China to find its way to order, wealth and power. It was as a silent and scathing commentary on the government of the day that an institution like the *Shenbao* could only live and flourish in the Shanghai Settlement beyond the reach of the Qing Court, whose offices, as it happened, counted among its most eager and nervous readers.

Here and there, the paper moved beyond the discourse of the traditional imaginaire and suggested the need for public supervision of the government's finances, or the need for the emperor to leave the Forbidden City and personally familiarise himself with the situation of the country. But otherwise, the paper remained rigidly within the discursive limits of the traditional imaginaire. While the early *Shenbao* editorials contained the clearest articulations of a modern social, political and institutional agenda for China, there was no call for democracy, no eulogy of the charms of a multi-voiced public, no suggestion of a rationality prevailing in a free and public discussion, even when the paper — sometimes within the same issue — published voices from opposite ends of the spectrum. The *Shenbao* offered its pages as the platform for the articulation and discussion of China's present and future agenda, and thus as the vital medium through which, under the prevailing circumstances, such an agenda could be formulated and discussed.

It does sound ironical that a paper with which a young Englishman was out to make a small fortune for himself should, somewhat pompously, claim such a role. But there was more than advertising hype in this claim. To put it bluntly, Chinese officials considered foreign journalists to be infinitely more credible, reliable and honest than their own countrymen. They praised Western newspapermen to the skies. The reliability of their information and their impartiality was held to be beyond question. Early Chinese diplomatic officials described newspapers in foreign countries and foreign-language newspapers in China as extremely interesting, and they could also imagine such things existing in China. It was Major's achievement to create a Chinese newspaper that could be measured by these high Western standards. Within a very short time, the fact that the *Shenbao* was under the commercial and editorial control of a foreigner became the institutional and public guarantee of its abiding by foreign rules of reliability and impartiality.

The assumption that the general public would think in the same way can be read from a curious incident. In 1874, the Shanghai Daotai decided, along with some compatriots from Xiangshan county in Guangdong, to counter the *Shenbao* with a paper of their own, the

Huibao. It collapsed after a few months even though it was proudly printed on imported Western paper, unlike the Chinese paper used by the *Shenbao*. Most decisively, the Daotai tried to publicly signal the fact that his paper was abiding by the same standards as the *Shenbao* by appointing Yung Wing (1828–1912) as editor. Yung Wing, by then an American citizen, was married to an American lady and was active in promoting friendly relations between China and Western countries.[32] For the successor paper to this first attempt, the Daotai went a step further and hired a *bona fide* foreigner as editor, a Scotsman named Gill, on the assumption that the public credibility of the paper would rise steeply as a consequence. In these cases the Daotai was concerned not so much with his journalists' lack of credibility as with his own self-perceived lack of credibility as the *de facto* editor of the newspaper. It was only after the *Shenbao* had humbly and patiently managed, through its editing and hiring policies, to elevate the overall public standing of journalists and after the Sino-Japanese war had taken the credibility of officialdom down another notch, that Liang Qichao and others were able to step in and assume the high stance of the journalist as the voice entitled to tell the nation what to do, and curse it if it did not follow his prescriptions.

Nor is the negative mirror image of the gloriously impartial and accurate Western journalist lacking. The same officials who entertained these bold thoughts on the possibility of a Chinese press suddenly switched to a completely different language register once confronted with Chinese journalists, even those working with foreign editors in China. I am fully aware of the huge trap of political incorrectness that yawns before me but there is no way to avoid it.

Guo Songtao hired a *Shenbao* journalist to join him in the embassy in London, but the very minute some rather innocuous articles appeared in the *Shenbao* about his London activities — articles that furthermore were translations from the British press — he started suspecting a dark conspiracy by his arch-enemy the vice-ambassador, and was sure that this man had bought the former *Shenbao* journalist to plant these articles in order to slander him.

Time and again we find statements in the official correspondence between the Zongli Yamen and the British Plenipotentiary as well as between the Jiangnan officials and the Shanghai consulate claiming that the Chinese working in these newspapers were a miserable lot of cunning loafers bent on venting their grievances over their own failures on other luckier and more gifted individual who had become officials. By definition, the information purveyed by these Chinese journalists was ill-intentioned slander. The otherwise utterly correct Westerners, the officials claimed, were not knowledgeable enough to understand

the dark workings of Chinese political culture and thus, duped by their Chinese employees, unwittingly helped them spread their evil slander.

This argument had a legal ring to it; it skirted round the difficult issue of going to court in Shanghai against a British subject, and constructed a case of 'Chinese against Chinese', a matter under the Daotai's direct jurisdiction. But this type of argument had been made into such a standard feature, even in personal letters by the highest Qing officials such as Zuo Zongtang, that it represented a shared prejudice. Natascha Vittinghoff has convincingly shown that the first generation of Chinese journalists did not fit this stereotype at all. Their educational levels were relatively high and their social standing very good. The type of cheaply bought journalist that appeared in the 1920s had not yet emerged in China.[33]

We see the weight of this prejudice even in the *Shenbao*'s own job offers with their extreme insistence that applicants who did not 'seek truth in facts', did not 'knowledgeably' carry out 'careful, exhaustive investigations', and were not 'honest and truthful' did not need to apply. These advertised jobs also must be read against the growing public perception of rampant corruption and dishonesty among the highest officials; in this context they become an ironic comment on the people, who in the traditional view, were the only ones qualified to think and speak about national policy.

We thus have the curious structure in which free operation in the Chinese public sphere needed an exclave beyond the control of the centre. In order to gain credibility, the persons articulating themselves in this public sphere also needed to be from such 'exclaves,' that is, foreigners, or Chinese who had made the foreignness of the rules of journalistic behaviour second nature.

The analysis of the Chinese case thus highlights certain evident lacunae in the concept of the public sphere and re-establishes the importance of other elements within this framework. In this manner, I believe, research in the field of the Chinese public sphere will not just contribute data from another 'case' to flesh out what is already known, but can substantially contribute to enriching and specifying this concept and draw attention to features overlooked in the European cases.

Afterthoughts

Research on the early Chinese newspapers is beset by problems outside of the conceptual problems already discussed. They have to do with Chinese and sinological scholarship on the subject.

Ge Gongzhen published his *Zhongguo baoxue shi* (History of the Chinese press), in 1927 under the impact of a nationalistic remembering and rewriting of recent history.[34] While it was not the only history of the Chinese press to come out during the pre-war period, it has remained by far the most influential. Ge was himself a journalist working on the *Shenbao*, and he wrote from memory and firm belief rather than on the basis of any broader source-based research. Ever since he wrote his book it has been maintained that theoretical and conceptual thinking about the role of newspapers only started with Liang Qichao.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Even the *Shanghai xinbao*, published from the same stable as the *North China Herald* since 1862, already contained hints of a programme. Its inaugural announcement stressed that it would publish 'all news concerning the military situation of the government with an emphasis on commercial news' and added that it would append more detailed reports on the Taiping as well on as the Qing court's military actions. It furthermore declared itself willing to 'publish anything a Chinese might have in terms of pressing contemporary matters, whether from hearsay or as a personal witness, so long as it was of benefit for the Chinese and for mutual understanding [among Westerners and Chinese]'. The emphasis here is clearly on news, including information carried in advertisements, and not on commentary.[35] While this was a conscious attempt to stay clear of Chinese officialdom, the double emphasis on 'benefit for the Chinese' (*you yi yu huaren*) and 'contribution to mutual understanding, (*you yi yu tonghao*) as criteria for selecting articles submitted by Chinese from outside the group of editors signals a programme. The paper was to reflect the interests of its intended Chinese readers, but would not carry inflammatory articles.

The first conflict came as early as 1866 when Li Hongzhang prodded the Tsungli Yamen to send a letter to the foreign embassies asking them to intervene against what it called 'defamatory articles', *huibang*, the publication of which, he said, was an act 'of the same kind as that of circulating anonymous [and calumnious] placards', a legal offence under the Qing code.[36] The publication of Chinese language papers, which Prince Gong, the Manchu official in charge of the newly established Foreign Affairs Office, the Zongli Yamen, called 'newspapers with Chinese characters' (*hanzi xinwenzhi*), suddenly brought this matter into the Chinese public sphere, and this changed the entire situation. 'As these newspapers are read by many Chinese merchants and commoners', he wrote, the consequence of such defamatory articles would be that 'if officials were slandered in their pages, their reputation

would deteriorate to the point where the people under their jurisdiction would all be prompted to have contempt for them'. These papers became public knowledge, and were to have a deleterious effect on the stability of public order, in which, Prince Gong surmised, the foreign powers had as much interest as the Qing court. The guilty persons, the Prince was careful to point out in a first statement of a line of argument that was to be repeated time and again over the next decades, were not the foreign owners of these papers, but the Chinese journalists. 'The Chinese are not all equally good, and there always are some persons without proper social standing [*wulai zhi tu*] who in defiance of the penalties of the law fabricate rumours and make up scandals [*zaoyan shengshi*]; these they either openly spread abroad or secretly communicate. Without carefully investigating them, British subjects then print and circulate them'. Failing to understand the cunning of their Chinese employees, who were, it was said, working for them because they had no respectable way of making a living and thus went by the general title of 'vagrants', British managers were ignorantly abetting the offence rather than actually committing it. Criticism of officials coming from such unauthorised persons outside the official channels of remonstrance was by definition slander prompted by evil motives. Legally, this approach focused the attack on the Chinese who worked in these papers, and probably provided the information. In this way it was made into a case of Chinese versus Chinese and was considered to be outside the jurisdiction of the Mixed Court in Shanghai.

Knowing the importance of the institution of newspapers in the West and being a regular reader himself, the Prince added a statement whose liberal tone is not to be found in other official documents dealing with newspapers over the following thirty years:

> As to the fair discussion of all kinds of public affairs, the Chinese side [government] is desirous to rely on it [such discussion] to understand the impartial [assessments] of public opinion, and absolutely does not want to impede it; but as to the manufacturing of slander…

In the much more elegant British embassy translation at the time, this reads even more stunningly:

> The Chinese Government far from desiring to interfere with — in reality — courts the fair and just discussion by the public, of public events… [37]

The vagrant j ournalists could not be trusted to be public-minded (gong), but they would vent their private frustrations over their failed careers on their luckier contemporaries. In principle, however, it was admitted here, for once, that public opinion had a role to play even in China. The truly legitimate field of the press was that of commercial news,

especially news about foreign trade, and within these limits even foreign-managed Chinese papers would be acceptable. This was the baseline the Chinese government tried to establish.

When the *Shenbao* entered the scene in 1872 a new chapter began. Major's Chinese language skills had been legendary for some time. He kept himself at a critical distance from British power projections and the blatant and deleterious opium trade as well as from missionary endeavour. His earlier social environment in Britain suggests a strong and critical commitment to the betterment of China with the help of adapted Western institutions. Finally, he was soundly committed to running a profitable business in whatever he did. From the very outset, the *Shenbao* introduced the editorial essay as a forum for discussion. The authors were Major himself and many of his journalists as well as the writers of letters-writers that landed on the editorial desk, , whether they agreed with the *Shenbao* owner and staff. By regularly reprinting editorial essays from Wang Tao's *Xunhuan ribao* in Hongkong, which had been founded shortly after the *Shenbao*, and by inserting a full run of the *Jingbao* with its memorials, many of which again dealt with national affairs, the *Shenbao* set itself up as the public forum in China. During these early decades it did not try to project a strong editorial line for itself. Any direct editorial line that it took always dealt with the paper itself, and was clearly marked as such. In its news section, it was quickly able to draw on a network of correspondents in all the major centres of China. This in turn helped it fuel a drive quickly to establish a national distribution network across China, and to a certain extent the Chinese-speaking world. The *Shenbao* was the first Chinese-language paper to deal at length with the particular role and function that a paper might have in the Chinese context. The *Xunhuan ribao*, of which only small segments of the early years remain, pursued a similar course. This was done through many dozens of editorial essays throughout the first decades. Some of these essays are remarkable for their historical understanding of the structure of the Chinese public sphere and its changes.

In Ge Gongzhen's depiction, however, Chinese newspapers before the advent of Liang Qichao on the scene in the late 1890s were a marginal affair. The main paper, the *Shenbao*, was foreign-owned. It was only concerned with business and had no editorial policy. Those it employed as journalists were Chinese who had flunked the imperial examinations if indeed they had ever tried their hand at them. As a consequence, the newspaper was held in the lowest possible esteem among its envisaged readership. Only with Liang Qichao's advocacy press and his 'new style' did Chinese newspaper history begin in earnest.

This story, which is a sub-story of the standard May Fourth history plot machine, became officialised through a mildly doctored edition of Ge Gongzhen's work in the PRC. By then, however, it had made its way to the West in 1933 through Britton's work, which, by and large, is a summary of it.[38] Recent studies by Ma Guangren and even Fang Hanqi have begun to distance themselves from this streamlined version under the impact of a rewriting of Shanghai history that fits the present-day aspirations of Shanghai in stressing the fruitful interaction between the West and Chinese during the late Qing rather than the evil intentions of the imperialists.[39] However, there still are hardly any studies that are actually based on an analysis of this or any other pre-1900 Chinese newspaper. The single exception is the work by Xu Zaiping, an official at the Shanghai Bureau of Cultural Affairs (Shanghai Wenhua Ju), entitled *Qingmo sishinian* Shenbao *ziliao* (Materials on the *Shenbao* for the last forty years of the Qing).[40] It certainly is not a scholarly work, but at least it is based on a thorough reading of much of the paper for these early years. Recent Western studies by Terry Narramore in Australia and Joan Judge in Santa Barbara have done much in the way of empirical newspaper research.[41] However, by focusing on the last years of the Qing and not the pre-1900 period, they have remained within Ge's chronology.

This points to the problem of the impact of internal PRC politics on the development of Chinese studies abroad. Any given line of officially streamlined argument is fleshed out with a plethora of carefully selected and edited as well as easily accessible documentation. Its main points then cascade down to the summary presentations in the histories of that segment in the relevant 'unified history' (*tongshi*), handbook articles in the encyclopaedias and finally the short definitions given in the constantly updated dictionaries such as the *Cihai*. The intended customers of these dispensations are the lettered classes in China and, to a smaller degree, the overseas Chinese, but they also have a strong impact on sinological research. To go one's own way has become easier during the last decades with many of the archives and rare holdings of libraries being more accessible. But, by the same token, it has become immensely more arduous because of the painful work necessary to go through very large amounts of unselected and unedited sources, often in unstable Chinese, supplemented by sources in many other languages, with all of this material being widely dispersed. This means much careful reading of studies of similar topics in cultures other than Chinese to enrich one's choices of thought and analysis; and it means the risk of running afoul of the shared beliefs and prejudices of much existing scholarship.

The second problem has to do with the development of Chinese studies in the West, especially in the United States, after the Vietnam War. After an attack on what was called the 'imperialist' perspective of the research of John Fairbank and his students whose focus, in studying the materials of the Tsungli Yamen and the missionary records, had been on the interaction of China with the West, an approach was suggested that would stress the internal dynamics of Chinese society in its modern transformation, with a strong emphasis on the inalienable right of the Chinese to write and control their own history. To be sure, such a China-centred emphasis, like any approach with a clear focus, has its worth, notwithstanding its ideological origins, and has proven its merits in a number of outstanding studies on the late Qing and the early Republic. At the same time, it has also often become a matter of creed and political correctness, signalled, for example, by the ritualised references in a plethora of dissertations and articles to Paul Cohen's *Discovering History in China* and by the claims heard here and there to the effect that the only legitimate course of western Chinese studies was to familiarise the West with the thinking of Chinese scholars about their culture, society and history. The gain has been that more careful attention has been paid to *bona fide* Chinese sources, especially archival sources. On the debit side, there has been a decline in ability to understand China's development in the international context and interaction as well as a fearful avoidance of topics or arguments that might be labelled imperialist, colonialist, paternalist or orientalist.

The early *Shenbao*, for example, with its British manager Ernest Major and its four foreign shareholders might have been the most important and most influential commercial newspaper at least throughout the Guangxu reign, but it certainly could not qualify as a legitimately and authentically Chinese thing within this perception. Initially this China-centred emphasis tied in well with the strongly internalist focus of Chinese writings and drew some strength from it. This focus was a matter as much of ideology as of a lack of linguistic competence and library access to sources not written in Chinese. Ironically, by the time the 'China-centred' approach had become fashionable in the West and the outside world had been increasingly written out of recent Chinese history, the dramatic changes in China's post-Cultural Revolution policies prompted a major rewriting of China's recent history in which the impact of the West suddenly, and retroactively, became stronger and was viewed in a more positive light. This rewriting has been organised by the Chinese state/party through assignments within the last two five-year plans, and has in the meantime filtered down, after another high-level intervention, in the form of such stunning innovations

as the insertion of a few lines of biography of some long-term foreign residents into the new gazetteer of what used to be the International Settlement in Shanghai.[42] While the study of the early *Shenbao*, or indeed of the Shanghai Settlement in its entirety, is thus still the object of lurking suspicion among some Western scholars, who see it as but another aspect of Fairbankian imperialist propaganda, it is suddenly attracting much interest in a China, which has officially begun to turn away from a largely internalist perspective.

Recently, a debate has begun on some of these issues. In a discussion organised by the journal *Modern China* about one of the finest studies of the internal dynamics of Chinese society during the later Qing, Rowe's work on Hankow, Fred Wakeman pointed out that the authentic Hankow merchants doing their internalist thing were, for the most part, compradors for Western firms, and would in fact get the news about happenings in their own town from Mr. Major's *Shenbao* which in its turn of course was printed in the International Settlement in Shanghai.[43] Obviously, the boundaries of this centre that is supposed to be the true and authentic China are porous, and have always been so. The Shanghai International Settlement is a case in point. Everyone there is a newcomer, a settler, a sojourner, whether he be Cantonese, Sikh, Yankee, or Scot. For the visitor from Anhui, this was the West, but a West largely populated by Chinese. For the New Yorker coming on a cruise this was China but governed by Western institutions. The Shenbao *might* have been edited by an Englishman, but many Chinese officials read their Beijing Gazette as it was printed with the *Shenbao*, with metal fonts and the high speed made possible by telegraphic transmission, instead of waiting for the clumsy wax matrix reproductions that were shipped in around two weeks later by the Baofang, its private distributors. And once they had the paper, they probably could not help having a look at the news and editorials as well.

The third problem is one of methodology. The sheer volume of some thirty or forty years of one or several daily papers, written in unpunctuated literary prose (*wenli*) and often engaged in lively controversies with other papers, Chinese or English, that appeared in Shanghai, Hongkong or elsewhere at the time, reminds the researcher that there is only one life to waste. The discussions about the literary and narrational features of historical sources over the last two decades have alerted us to the need to read sources as narrative events that come with a high degree of selectivity and packaging. This new and much more attentive reading of historical sources tests our capacity not just to extract factual information from a source but also to accurately translate it to a level of cultural precision that enables the

'receiver' to also understand these other and very interesting levels of the texts. A highly precise and contextualised methodology has yet to be developed for the handling of a daily collective product such as this, with its short shelf-life and rapid changes, one that was furthermore written by an unknown number of contributors most of whom remain anonymous. The scholar working in this field is torn by constant and hard-to-resolve conflicts between the extensive and fast reading, needed to master the huge bulk of material, and the intensive and very slow reading, needed to achieve the necessary depth and precision. The available Chinese secondary literature for the most part does not go back to the sources. It tries to come to general conclusions by pointing out the financial, institutional or personal connections of the paper in question and fleshing out the argument with a few endlessly repeated quotations such as to Huang Xiexun's *Shenbao* editorial against Kang Youwei after the latter's dismissal in 1898. As Kang Youwei is an officially recognised 'progressive personality' in the PRC dispensation, this editorial can figure as sufficient proof for the utterly reactionary character of the *Shenbao* altogether, quite apart from proving how irrelevant the paper must have been to all Chinese who counted. While this mix of secondary and primary data is certainly economical, it is shaky on both legs, and operative only under the condition that the result is predetermined by higher authority and only needs illustration with a few historical tidbits.

The researcher who leaves this well-trodden path is, however, not to be envied. Different strategies have been tried out in order to accommodate these conflicting demands. They include the selection of a representative diachronic sample; the treatment of an entire newspaper, including advertisements, as published on a single day or a few days and taken as a somehow linked and cohesive body of text; focusing on one feature such as the editorial for a given period; the treatment of a historical moment or event with the related articles from one or more papers coming in as one among many sources; or sociological approaches dealing with the journalists and editors writing these texts. While none of these approaches can claim to resolve the quality/quantity problem, each of them has yielded substantial results, and they have ended up mutually enriching each other. Unusually happy circumstances have, for a few years, brought a number of young and highly gifted scholars together in the Heidelberg Institute to work on the pre-1900 Chinese-language papers. While engaged in their own projects and using methods suited for them, their common focus on the newspapers of this period has made for gratifying synergetic benefits within a research group, Structure and Development of the Chinese

Public Sphere.[44] As this paper has benefited greatly from the discussions in this group, I wish to express my profound appreciation for the many years during which I enjoyed the privilege of its stimulus.

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* The board of the European Association of Chinese Studies decided at its meeting in Barcelona in 1996 to introduce the new feature of a presidential address. The honour and burden of this first address fell on me. The present paper is based on this address. I will begin by summing up some of my research on the structure and development of the Chinese public sphere, then outline some of the broader scholarly and institutional problems I came across in doing this work and end with some notes about my hopes concerning future developments in Chinese studies in Europe. These opinions and arguments are very much my own and not those of the EACS as a body.

1 See, for example, '*Asienkonzept der Bundesregierung*' (The Asian concept of federal government), *Aktuelle Beiträge zur Wirtschafts und Finanzpolitik* (Current contributions to economic and financial policy), Bonn: Presse- und Informationsdienst der Bundesregierung, No. 24 (20 October 1993), p. 16.

2 Rudolf G. Wagner, 'The Role of the Foreign Community in the Chinese Public Sphere,' *China Quarterly*, No. 142 (June 1995), p. 433 ff

3 Various such definitions are collected in Chapter One of Barbara A.Mittler, *A Western Medium Creating Chinese Identity? Metamorphoses of the Newspaper in Shanghai (1872–1912)* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Council on East Asian Studies, forthcoming).

4 I am preparing a biography of E. Major which will fully document, among other things, his experiences in learning Chinese as well as his own Chinese writings.

5 Major to Davenport, 4 April 1879. FO 671/88.

6 Rudolf G. Wagner, 'The *Shenbao* in crisis: the international environment and the conflict between Guo Songtao and the *Shenbao*', *Late Imperial China*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (1999), pp 107–38.

7 Wagner, 'The *Shenbao* in crisis', pp 107–38

8 Kemal H. Karpat, 'Turkey' in Robert Ward and Dankwart A. Rustow (eds), *Political Modernization in Japan and Turkey* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), p. 257 ff.

9 Albert Altman, 'Shinbunshi: the early Meiji adaptation of the Western-style newspaper' W.G. Beasley (ed.), *Modern Japan: Aspects of History, Literature and Society* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1975), pp 52–66.

10 Kalpana Bishui, 'The vernacular newspaper press of Bengal of the post-Mutiny period with particular reference to the period 1880–1892' in S.P. Sen (ed.), *The Indian Press* (Calcutta: Institute of Historical Studies, 1967), p.2.

11 'Official Paper', *The North China Herald and Supreme Court and Consular Gazette*, 9 March 1876, p. 3.

12 Documentation specific to Ernest Major on this point is weak. I am inferring the argument from his social environment in London as well as a type of betterment agenda common among British merchants in the eighteenth century, studied by David Hancock in his *Citizens of the World: London Merchants and the Integration of the British Atlantic Community, 1735–1785* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

13 Lin Yutang, *History of the Press and Public Opinion in China* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1936).

14 *Qingyi*, 'unprejudiced statements of opinion', made full use of the theoretical right of officials to comment on matters even outside their responsibility. During the late Qing they became an important instrument for the opponents of reforms to generate political support for their positions.

15 '*Lun* Zhongguo Jingbao *yi yu waiguo xinbao*' (On the difference between the Chinese *5Jingbao* and the foreign newspapers)', *Shenbao*, 18 July 1873, p. 1.

16 Beatrice S. Bartlett, *Monarchs and Ministers: The Grand Council in Mid-Ch'ing China 1723–1820* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Silas L. Wu, *Communication and Imperial Control: Evolution of the Palace Memorial System 1693–1735* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).

17 '*Lun* Zhongguo Jingbao *yi yu waiguo xinbao*', p. 1. '*Lun xinwenzhi zhi yi* (On the benefits of newspapers)' *Shenbao* August 11, 1886. For a detailed summary and analysis of these two editorials cf. Barbara Mittler, 'Domesticating an alien medium: incorporating the Western-style newspaper into the Chinese public sphere', in Rudolf Wagner (ed.), *Joining the Global Public: Text, Image, and City in Early Chinese Newspapers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Council on East Asian Studies, forthcoming).

18 For an analysis of these records and voices, see Rudolf Wagner, 'The voice of public opinion in pre-modern historical records', unpublished paper presented at the EACS conference, Barcelona, September 1996.

19 For a study of these ditties see Wolfgang Bauer, *Das Bild in der Weissage-Literatur Chinas. Prophetische Texte im politischen Leben vom Buch der Wandlungen bis Mao Tse Tung* (The image in Chinese prophecy literature: prophetical texts in political life from the *Book of Changes* to Mao Zedong) (Munich: Moos, 1973).

20 This was the case for the flood of such manifestations in favour of Wang Mang as recorded in the *Hanshu* (History of the Han Dynasty) (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1964), 99A, p. 4076.

21 Most of the books considered instrumental in undermining the authority of state and church and preparing minds for the changes to come with the French Revolution were printed in Neufchatel or Leiden, not in France. Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982).

22 Sun Dingchen, '*Lun zhi pian, yi*' (On government, 1), in Ge Shijun (ed.), *Qingchao jingshiwen xubian* (Sequel to the Qing Dynasty collection of documents on state craft) (Taipei: Wenhai, 1972), pp. 325–6. This treatise 'On government' is translated and analysed in Andrea Janku, '*Nur Leere Reden. Das Genre 'Leitartikel' in der chinesischsprachigen Tagespresse Shanghais (1884–1907) und die Revolutionierung des 'Weges der Rede*' (Only empty talk: the 'editorial' genre in Shanghai Chinese-language newspapers, 1884–1907), unpublished doctoral dissertation (Heidelberg: University of Heidelberg, 2000), pp. 183–218.

23 Rudolf Wagner, 'Operating in the Chinese public sphere: theology and technique of Taiping propaganda', in Huang Chun-chieh and Erik Zuercher (eds.), *Norms and the State in China* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993), pp. 104–38; and 'Understanding Taiping Christian China: analogy, interest and policy', in Klaus Koschorke (ed.), *Christen und Gewrze. Konfrontation und Interaktion kolonialer und indigener Christentumsvarianten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1998), pp.132–57.

24 Mittler, *A Western Medium Creating Chinese Identity?*, ch. 3.

25 Roger Chartier, *Les Origines culturelles de la Révolution française* (Paris: Seuil, 1990).

26 Wagner, 'The Role of the Foreign Community in the Chinese Public Sphere', pp. 423–43.

27 Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society) (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1990; 1st ed., 1963), with a new preface.

28 Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime.*

29 Fang Hanqi (ed.), *Zhongguo xinwen shiye tongshi* (General history of the news business in China) (Beijing: Zhongguo Renmin Daxue Chubanshe, 1992), vol. 1, p. 487.

30 '*Lun benguan zuobao benyi*' (On the basic purpose of our company coming out with a paper)', *Shenbao*, 11 October 1875

31 Wagner, 'The *Shenbao* in crisis', p.117, note 37.

32 Yung Wing, *My Life in China and America* (New York: Henry Holt, 1909). This very selective autobiography passes over this episode in silence.

33 Natascha Vittinghoff, '*Freier Fluss. Zur Kulturgeschichte des fruehen chinesischen Journalismus*' (Free flow: for a cultural history of early Chinese journalism), unpublished doctoral dissertation (Heidelberg: University of Heidelberg, 1998), ch. 5.

34 Ge Gongzhen, *Zhongguo baoxue s hi* (A history of the Chinese press), reprinted in *Minguo congshu* (Collection of works from the Republican period) (Shanghai: Shanghai Shudian, 1990, 1st ed., 1927), series 2, Vol. 49. All PRC editions apart from this one have been tampered with.

35 *Shanghai xinbao*, No. 45, 28 May 1862.

36 For the following pages see Rudolf Wagner, 'First Encounter: Securing the Status of the Chinese Language Newspapers: Legal Guarantees and Cultural Acceptance, 1868–1890,' (manuscript, 1997). Cf. Wagner, 'The Role of the Foreign Community in the Chinese Public Sphere', p. 433 ff; Mittler, *A Western Medium Creating Chinese Identity?;* Vittinghoff, '*Freier Fluss. Zur Kulturgeschichte des fruehen chinesischen Journalismus*', p. 35 ff.

37 FO 230/79, No. 59.

38 S. Roswell Britton, *The Chinese Periodical Press 1800–1912* (Taipei: Ch'eng-wen Publishing Company, 1966; 1st ed. 1933).

39 Ma Guangren, *Shanghai xinwen shi 1850–1949*) (A history of Shanghai newspapers) (Shanghai: Fudan Daxue Chubanshe, 1996).

40 Xu Zaiping, *Qingmo sishinian* Shenbao *ziliao* (Materials on the *Shenbao* for the last forty years of the Qing) (Beijing: Xinhua Chubanshe, 1988).

41 Joan E. Judge, *Print and Politics:* Shibao *and the Formation of the Public Sphere in Late Qing China, 1904–1911* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996). Terry Narramore, 'Making the News in Shanghai: *Shen Bao* and the Politics of Newspaper Journalism, 1912–1937,' unpublished doctoral dissertation (Canberra: Australian National University, 1989).

42 Zhou Taitong *et al.* (eds), *Huangpu quzhi* (Local gazetteer of Huangpu district) (Shanghai: Shanghai Shehui Kexueyuan Chubanshe, 1996), pp 1395–6 has a six-line biography of Ernest Major.

43 William T. Rowe, *Hankow: Conflict and Community in a Chinese City, 1796–1895* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1989). Frederic Wakeman, 'The civil society and public sphere debate: Western reflections on Chinese political culture', *Modern China*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (1993), pp 108–38.

44 Most of the studies by members of this research group have now been completed. See Mittler, *A Western Medium Creating Chinese Identity?*; Janku, '*Nur Leere Reden*'; Vittinghoff, '*Freier Fluss. Zur Kulturgeschichte des fruehen chinesischen Journalismus*'; Catherine V. Yeh, 'The lure of the big city: Shanghai entertainment culture 1860–1910 (forthcoming). See also the papers by members of this research group in Wagner, *Joining the Global Public*.