

Writing for the Masses after Mao:  
News-Production in Contemporary China

By

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Abstract

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Newspapers in China were once considered an essential ideological weapon in the revolutionary struggle to liberate the masses. Under Mao's leadership, all newspapers were run by the Communist Party-state for the purpose of promoting its perspectives and mobilizing the people to its projects. Since the end of the Mao era in 1978 and over some three decades of market reform since, this same Socialist-propaganda apparatus has transformed into a teeming, multi-billion dollar commercial media industry. Through an ethnographic study of everyday news-production practices at a Chinese newspaper, this dissertation explores the practical, intellectual and ethical dimensions of writing about society, for society, amidst the great material changes and ideational reorientations at play in China today.

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## Introduction

It was with some sense of historical awe that I walked into the People's Great Hall on a bright Beijing morning in 2009. Across from the old Imperial Palace and west of Tiananmen Square, it had been built in 1959 as part of a massive, ten-building construction project undertaken to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic. Since then, it was here that Communist Party of China held its five-yearly National Congress and that the state's highest governing body, the National People's Congress, met annually. Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping, Zhao Ziyang, Jiang Zemin and all the other big names in the turbulent history of modern Chinese politics, had once walked and talked and steered the course of this sprawling empire-turned-country from inside these very corridors. And now I was there, a junior newspaper journalist sent to cover the Eighth National Congress of Returned Overseas Chinese.

Media staff were being directed to the balcony seats, which overlooked the Main Auditorium's famous red carpet and red cushion rows. Some eighty other journalists and photographers had arrived and were settling in, while the conference delegates mingled and milled about below us. At nine o'clock, the auditorium was called to order, and the Party's ultra-elite Politburo Standing Committee filed into the auditorium. Everyone, including President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao, took their places behind the desks that had been set up on stage. All rose for the national anthem and as the music played, a feeling of grandeur swelled under the auditorium's bejeweled ceiling with a bright red star at its center. As the proceedings began and one speech followed another, however, I began to notice that the journalists were not being very attentive. The speakers were no lightweights – Deng Nan was the daughter of Deng Xiaoping, and the Vice-Chairman and First-Secretary of the China Association for Science and Technology; Sifang Zhaoguo was a Politburo member and the Chairman of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions; Lin Jun was the Chairman of the Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese. But the journalists did not seem impressed. Some fiddled listlessly with their mobile phones, while others folded their arms, closed their eyes and tried quite earnestly to sleep. Those who had less trouble were already unceremoniously sprawled out in their seats. The journalist next to me occupied himself with trying to take a photograph of Hu Jintao. He zoomed in and out on his camera, but try as he might the image remained small and blurry.

After an hour of speeches, a fifteen-minute intermission was announced. Almost immediately, the balcony sprang back to life. Everyone had their cameras out. Those who had come with colleagues took turns photographing one another against the backdrop of the stage and seats below. Those who had come alone made do by holding their cameras at arms length and photographing themselves. After fifteen minutes had passed, an usher came through the aisles. "The meeting is about to recommence! Please be seated! The meeting is about to recommence! Those who want to take photos can do so later!" he called. The journalists vaguely acknowledged his request. "Let's get outta here," "About time to go," "Shall we pack up?" I heard those around me say, and noticed that several were already heading for the door. By the time the speeches began again, only half the journalists remained to resume their idle pastimes. Should they not have been more on edge? These were the highest-level political leaders of a powerful and famously authoritarian state. One would have expected everyone to at least be attentive, if not

obsequious in their presence. Yet there the journalists were, slumped and gently snoring, while the President and Premier sat stiffly at attention. How could one explain this unexpected inversion?

“Sounds normal,” Kong, my colleague at the newspaper shrugged when I related the experience to her, making no change in her facial expression at all.<sup>1</sup> “Events like that you don’t really go there to do anything,” she said plainly. “There’s nothing really to do. The speeches were all written beforehand, and no one’s going to say anything they didn’t plan to, so it’s not like there’s anything to witness or investigate.” I asked her why it was still considered worth reporting such events, if everyone knew there was not really any story in them. “Because ‘News is the mouthpiece of the Party,’” she cited the official slogan ironically. “That kind of event you can report just because it’s official. It’ll only be a short piece, telling the specifics of the event, describing the scene a little and maybe quoting some officials. An article the size of a beancurd, maybe. But it’s certain to get published. Of course you could easily write it without going there in person too. The journalists who went just wanted a chance to get inside the People’s Great Hall, that’s all, take some photographs to keep as souvenirs.” I found this depiction of the state of journalism in China rather worrisome. Are journalists not concerned with bigger issues than that, like the public’s reading needs or society’s common interests?

“Sure, they’re concerned, but what can they do? Things in China are very complicated,” she tried to explain. “News is just one small part of things, and a not very important part either. It doesn’t have that big of a role to play. In the past journalists were considered very important because there were so few of them, and newspapers were supposed to be the ideological compass of the whole country. But that’s just the delusion they had in the Mao era. People don’t need to be told how to think. What journalists can do now is report on things that happen, that’s all.” I wondered how one could keep writing news, without a sense of what one was writing for. “Well, that’s how journalism in China is,” she responded matter-of-factly. “It’s not about abstract notions of ‘the media’s social role,’ that’s just something academics say. It’s about information. You don’t have to think so much. You just have to know what kind of information is usable and what isn’t. It’s like a game, where you’re endlessly collecting things and moving them around. Is that good or bad? Who knows? It is doesn’t make a difference, whichever you say. Isn’t that what’s called postmodern?” I nodded, not really knowing how to respond. It was true that the kind of disavowal of grand narratives she was describing could be called ‘postmodern.’ But the term in social science was meant to be critical, and not merely descriptive. “Anyways, that’s how things are now,” Kong ended the awkward silence amiably. “Being too radical (*pianji*) about it’s no use. Things will get better slowly. Did you take any photos?” she asked, as she turned back to the work she was doing on her computer.

### **The Newspaper without its Narrative**

This dissertation considers the prospect of living without grand narratives. It is motivated by a sense that it was in and on the narrative mode of representation that the modern projects of socialism and social science were both founded; and by my

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<sup>1</sup> All persons’ names in this dissertation are pseudonyms, except for those of public figures and published authors cited as such.

puzzlement over what it might mean for us to now have moved ‘beyond’ this moment, and to not ‘believe’ in ‘meta-narratives’ anymore. The idea – that we are no longer in the modern milieu of teleological conceptions of history and faith in the global spread of universal values – is by now a familiar one across the human and the social sciences.<sup>2</sup> Contemporary efforts to rethink political economy, cultural practices and processes of globalization in light of this new sensibility have yielded richly critical reconceptualizations of social life and discourse – as power-laden, ethnocentric, heteroglossic, contingent, networked, neo-liberal and performative – just to name a few of the now current terms. If many can agree that these are the categories which constitute the self-image of our age, however, fewer have pursued the question of what having such a self-image means for the institutions and ethics of our textual knowledge production. Inquiry into this issue is necessary because in the absence of meta-narratives, neither the function nor the value of knowledge can be taken for granted. One must ask not only how an ethical practice of knowledge production can be conceived of without a notion of the universal good towards which all knowers must progress, but also, and more fundamentally, how textual knowledge can continue to be the bearer of meaning, when reality is held to always escape the narratives that texts contain. Meaning is a relation between words that is real insofar as those relations are held to be real. When, on the other hand, we consider factors such as contingency and power to be realities unto themselves, and more real than the relations between words, how can a text still seem to us to hold meaning? How can the knowledge we produce still feel true?

Journalism in China is a site well suited to raising this question because of the teeming confusion into which the end of the Mao era has so recently thrust it. In the Maoist vision of socialist revolution and development, the truth and the ethics of news-production were clear: newspapers were the ideological propaganda apparatus by which the Communist Party of China would bring about the people’s liberation from the oppressive rule of feudalism, imperialism and capitalism. With the end of the Cultural Revolution and the beginning of China’s “opening up and reform,” this understanding of journalism ceased to apply. The Party-state retained ownership of all newspapers, but revolution was no longer its ideological goal, and although it has been almost four decades since, no compelling case seems to have been made yet for what its new ideological project should be.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, aggressive market-reform policies have led to a massive influx of commercial investment into China’s news sector, rapidly expanding and transforming it into a thriving, multi-billion dollar industry. The concurrent spread of the Internet and other information technologies has further multiplied the pace and volume of news-production, and extended its reach into people’s everyday lives.

For a journalist working in this milieu, it is unclear what the new nature of one’s practice and its product is. Amidst the economic, social and cultural upheaval that post-Mao reforms are driving in China, it feels difficult even to say what the function the news media now should be, much less what it actually is. One illustrative example of the

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<sup>2</sup> Examples of works that undertake to theorize this condition as such range widely. For example, David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990); Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Sun Yan, *The Chinese Reassessment of Socialism, 1976-1992*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Kalpana Misra, *From Post-Maoism to Post-Marxism: The Erosion of Official Ideology in Deng’s China* (New York: Routledge, 1998).



situation is this: There is evidently a growing popular sense in China that the relative idealism and naivete of the Mao era has now been replaced by widespread materialism and cynicism, resulting in rampant hypocrisy, corruption and fraud. Newspapers no longer try to cover up these issues, as they had often done in the Mao era. Instead, they now vie to report such scandals as quickly and exhaustively as possible. But does a journalist expose such events in order to push for political reform, or does she embellish these stories in order to drum up sales? Is the effect of her coverage to raise public awareness and gather critical energy around the current system's problems, or does it actually normalize and thereby serve to perpetuate bad behavior? In the absence of electoral democracy, it is unclear whether the new abundance of news about the system's failings, or what Chinese journalists call 'negative news' (*fumian xinwen*), has any meaningful effect. Perhaps it merely provides readers with a new form of entertainment, and state-owned enterprises with a new way to make money. What, in this case, should a news-producer be trying to do?

Many excellent studies of China's post-Mao media have been published in recent years, the majority of which frame the topic in terms of state-control and civic agency. These works provide provocatively contrastive views on the question of China's political liberalization and potential development towards democracy. Lee Chin-chuan and his colleagues have convincingly shown, for example, that the commercialization of China's news sector affords journalists new and unexpected opportunities to "dilute or dodge political control."<sup>4</sup> Zhao Yuezhi, on the other hand, has consistently highlighted the ways in which the market-based media system also functions as an instrument of state ideology.<sup>5</sup> With regards to the Internet, Zhou Yongming and Yang Guobin have both shown how it provides a catalyzing arena for ordinary citizens to organize against the state, while Zheng Yongnian reminds us that the state is also empowered by the Internet, and is continuously inventing new ways to regulate content and extend its control into cyberspace.<sup>6</sup> Among those studies which look specifically at journalism, many have pointed out the particular sense of ethical responsibility that seems to motivate Chinese news-producers. They show that although journalists work within state-owned organizations, many think of themselves as patriotic intellectuals whose highest obligation is to the country and its people, rather than the state. Instead of passively abiding by the existing system's rules, therefore, they consistently find innovative ways of using it to pursue their own notions of good journalism.<sup>7</sup> Investigative journalism

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<sup>4</sup> Lee Chin Chuan ed. *Power, Money and Media: Communication Patterns and Bureaucratic Control in Cultural China* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2000), p. 36.

<sup>5</sup> Zhao Yuezhi, *Media, Market, and Democracy in China: Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998) and *Communication in China: Political Economy, Power and Conflict* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Zhou Yongming, *Historicizing Online Politics: Telegraphy, The Internet, and Political Participation in China*. Stanford (CA: Stanford University Press, 2006); Yang Guobin, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Zheng Yongnian, *Technological Empowerment: The Internet, State and Society in China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008). Other works on China's media include Yu Haiqing, *Media and Cultural Transformation in China* (Routledge, 2009); Susan Shirk, *Changing Media, Changing China* (Oxford University Press, 2010); James F Scotton and William A. Hachten, *New Media for a New China* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Hugo de Burgh, *The Chinese Journalist: Mediating Information in the World's Most Populous Country* (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003). Judy Polumbaum and Xiong Lei, *China Ink: The Changing Face of Chinese Journalism* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).

(*diaocha xinwen*) especially has been highlighted as one such practice, which journalists use to hold state authorities up to their own claims, and which thus represents a potentially formidable force for political and social change.<sup>8</sup>

My dissertation builds upon this research, but shifts its focus away from the level of immediately political stakes and agendas, in order to take up the underlying question of what kind of textual knowledge practice Chinese news-production is, now that the notion of a collective ideological project has been both popularly dismissed and officially renounced. I approach the issue through an ethnography of the everyday lives of journalists, editors and executives, at a nationally distributed weekly newspaper based in Beijing and Guangzhou, pseudonymously referred to here as *The Times*. By anchoring myself amidst these news-producers' stories, encounters and explanations, and learning to understand the problem of news-production as they do, I do not seek to provide any direct answer to the question of what the political function of journalism in China now is. Rather, I endeavor to portray the sense that the news-producers themselves had of their profession and its social worth – what it was they thought they were doing, and what they thought they should and could achieve by doing it.

*The Times* was neither a politically important newspaper like the long-established *People's Daily (Renmin Ribao)*, nor a popular and commercially successful newspaper like the famous *Southern Weekend (Nanfang Zhoumo)*. It had only been in operation for a few years and in its fledgling struggle to gain a footing in the industry, faced all the difficulties that a newspaper in contemporary China can face, without any of the buffers that exceptional political status or financial backing would have afforded. Its journalists consistently felt the acute pressure that their organization was under to become profitable, and experienced in direct and concrete ways the fact that within its operational logic, commercial interests and imperatives always took priority over editorial values and writerly concerns. At one level, they were resigned to this and described it as the unavoidable condition of news-production today. In any commercial news system, they said, it was more important for a newspaper to clinch advertising contracts and stay on the right side of the government, than to worry about the quality of its writing or try to achieve some abstract social value. At the same time, however, *The Times* journalists also seemed to find a redeeming value for this crass reality in the loftier feelings about news-writing that they nursed. They called journalism 'the conscience of society,' and spoke with pride about articles they had written on cases of injustice in little-known towns, or which portrayed the intractability of China's social problems in especially moving prose. It did not seem to matter to them how many people read these articles. Simply to have written them was enough.

This sensibility about news-writing seemed to me at once both 'ahead of' and 'behind' the modern, liberal conceptions of the press with which I was familiar. Very generally speaking, the latter present newspapers as serving the important social function of efficiently transmitting current information to a large portion of the population, so as to enable them to make decisions or at least form opinions on matters that affect their

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<sup>8</sup> David Bandurski and Martin Hala ed. *Investigative Journalism in China: Eight Cases in Chinese Watchdog Journalism* (Hong Kong University Press, 2010); Tong Jingrong, *Investigative Journalism in China: Journalism, Power, and Society* (London: Continuum, 2011).

collective and individual interests.<sup>9</sup> Critics have convincingly and repeatedly shown that even if the press did at one time work this way, the growth and amalgamation of corporate and politically partisan interests in the news industry have since made private agendas far more determinative of news content than the public's information needs.<sup>10</sup> Yet in America, at least, many still cling to the idea that the news media generally functions to inform and thereby empower ordinary citizens. *The Times* journalists seemed 'ahead' of this dubious position of denial, in the sense that they maintained no old and illusory narratives about how arbitrarily news content is determined in a profit-driven media system. Yet they also seemed 'behind,' in the sense that the redeeming value they invoked, of a kind of truth which need only be written to be real, is one that denies any significance to actual social consequences. It takes writing as an end in itself, like a cabalistic ritual or an ancient art, simply ignoring the modern conviction that it is not the written text but its social effects which count. Indeed, such indifference to communicative efficacy runs counter to the very idea of the newspaper, which is distinguished from other textual media by its capacity for fast and cheap transmission to a large population of readers. This curious sensibility which one finds at *The Times* suggests a distinctive conception of news-writing that is not dependent on either a socialist or a liberal meta-narrative for its value. Perhaps among its practitioners, therefore, one might learn what living without grand narratives is like.

### **Textual Authority and the Masses: A Counter-Theory to the Liberal Press**

Anthropologists have begun to study mass media in recent decades because it is clear that these media now play formative roles in the lives of people across diverse national and cultural contexts, and that the inherited theories of media and communication, which grew primarily out of European and American experiences, are not adequate for comprehending such diverse phenomena.<sup>11</sup> Provoked by the challenge, anthropologists working in various post-colonial contexts have shown how newspapers, film, television and radio do not simply perform the same political functions under varying cultural circumstances, but rather act as unpredictable participants in many different kinds of communicative activity through which communities are continuously constituted and defined.<sup>12</sup> We have seen, for example, how these media do not neutrally facilitate but instead actively influence the way notions of modernity and nationhood come to be established in tension with traditional, gendered, religious and ethnic

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<sup>9</sup> The work which serves as a key historical reference for many news theorists is Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm, *Four Theories of the Press* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976 [1956]). A recent attempt to update the framework which Siebert et. al. provide is Clifford G. Christians, and Theodore L. Glasser, Denis McQuail, Kaarle Nordenstreng and Robert A. Whit., *Normative Theories of the Media: Journalism in Democratic Societies* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Robert W. McChesney and Ben Scott ed., *Our Unfree Press: 100 Years of Radical Media Criticism* (New York: The New Press, 2004) provides an anthology of such critiques, which have long existed but always remained marginal in America. See also Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 2002 [1988]).

<sup>11</sup> Faye D. Ginsburg, Lila abu-Lughod and Brian Larkin ed. *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). See also James Curran and Myung-Jin Park ed., *De-Westernizing Media Studies* (Routledge, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics After Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

identities.<sup>13</sup> Rather than discrete or locally self-contained systems, we have learned that mass media are often intrinsically global, in the sense that they involve networks of capital, technology and infrastructure which span the planet; and which shuttle words, images and sounds across it, creating a sense of the ‘elsewhere’ that changes the very experience of being ‘here.’<sup>14</sup> Where media technologies have been introduced for the express purpose of local, colonial or national rule, we have seen that the sheer indeterminacy of the uses to which they can be put and the sensations they can make available, lead to unintended consequences and create unanticipated connections to the rest of the world.<sup>15</sup>

Anthropologists who study journalism in particular have argued that contra the assumption that the newspaper’s universal function is to efficiently disseminate objective information, news-production ought to be seen as a context-specific practice of cultural meaning making.<sup>16</sup> In Jennifer Hasty’s work on *The Press and Political Culture in Ghana*, for example, she argues that privately-owned newspapers that emerged in the 1990s, while internationally heralded as a sign of the “African Renaissance” and late-blooming “African ‘civil society,’” actually serve in the context of local politics as a medium for cultural dynamics of personalism, patronage and chieftaincy.<sup>17</sup> She shows how the rhetoric of journalism as a liberal vocation and a site of struggle against the state does not accurately describe journalists’ practice, but does come to be used by them as a resource for positioning themselves in, and making their way through Ghanaian society.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Anagnost, Ann. *National Past-times: Narrative, Representation and Power in Modern China*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997; Mankekar, Purnima. *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics. An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood and Nation in Post-colonial India*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999; Abu-Lughod, Lila. *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004. Dru Gladney - ?

<sup>14</sup> William Mazarella, *Shoveling Smoke: Advertising and Globalization in Contemporary India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). See also Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

<sup>15</sup> Larkin, Brian. *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure and Urban Culture in Nigeria*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.

<sup>16</sup> S. Elizabeth Bird ed., *The Anthropology of News & Journalism: Global Perspectives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010). See also Barbie Zelizer, “Journalists as Interpretive Communities” in *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* Vol. 10 No. 3, 1993. See also Ulf Hannerz, *Foreign News: Exploring the World of Foreign Correspondents* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004) – one of the first anthropological studies of journalists.

<sup>17</sup> Jennifer Hasty, *The Press and Political Culture in Ghana* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 6.

<sup>18</sup> In the conclusion to her work, Hasty summarizes one of its main claims. “Both state and opposition access global forces (be it the IMF or the IFJ [International Federation of Journalists]) and strategically craft them for deployment in local struggles. Appropriation of Western liberal discourses is less a matter of emulation and more a strategy of extraversion... In Ghana emergent democratic institutions such as the private press might appropriate Western rhetoric, but they are, in practice, politically and discursively Ghanaian.” (Hasty 163-4) Hasty’s distinction between the local and the global is productive insofar as it allows her to discern the particular ways that newspapers are put to work within Ghanaian politics. As a stark, synchronic distinction, however, it does not enable her to provide a more nuanced or richer sense of the historical meaning of modernity in Ghana. Hasty’s close adherence throughout her work to the political concepts of Western liberalism, neoliberal democratization and globalization enable her to make a compelling case against any naive or intentionally militant claim that the world is progressing towards liberalism. However, it also limits her ability to make the experiences of journalists in Ghana something that provokes readers to re-think the contemporary moment in a new light. At the end of her work, the

Newspapers are thus a site where the state, opposition, power and discourse come to be related in different ways than one might expect. Another relevant example is Dominic Boyer's *Spirit and System: Media, Intellectuals and the Dialectic in Modern German Culture*. Working with former journalists of the German Democratic Republic, Boyer chooses not to focus on the narrower questions of propaganda and press control, but to treat journalists' experiences as the experiences of "intellectuals" most broadly conceived. Boyer defines intellectuals as not fundamentally different from those engaged in any other form of "epistemic activity," only more self-consciously attentive to "the formal properties and values of semiosis, [and having] a special regard for the thinglike character of 'knowledge' as a series of forms or relations that can be removed from the ongoing flow of epistemic activity and treated as distinct entities."<sup>19</sup> What is particular about the former GDR journalists, for Boyer, is their relationship to what he calls "dialectical social knowledge" or "dialecticism," a tendency to understand and encounter life in terms of the dynamic tension between inner potentiality and outward actuality. Boyer believes this knowledge to be true, in the sense that it reflects a real "phenomenological tension between a sense of the extensional powers of the self and a recognition of the efficacy of external forms and relations," a tension that has otherwise been glossed as self/world, creative/ossified, agency/structure.<sup>20</sup> Exploring the particular experiences of former GDR journalists thus attunes us to this more general truth.<sup>21</sup>

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terms we have for understanding both the journalists and ourselves remain those of the very political system she set out to critique.

<sup>19</sup> Dominic Boyer, *Spirit and System: Media, Intellectuals and the Dialectic in Modern German Culture* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), p. 43.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> Boyer approaches intellectual work and life through a series of analytical binaries, to which he then proposes a series of methodological syntheses. An intellectual's production of knowledge, for example, is framed as a subjective individual experience on the one hand, and an act of inter-subjective communication on the other. On the one hand, knowledge is influenced by the social-historical conditions under which the intellectual who produced it lived; on the other hand, it is not reducible to those conditions, and diverse arguments have been made by intellectuals who occupy ostensibly similar social-historical positions. Boyer responds to these dilemmas firstly, by integrating concepts from Marxist sociology of knowledge with the idea of "tropes" from literary and critical theory. Secondly, he structures his work so that through the course of its development, the reader is taken *both* from sociological conditions to phenomenological accounts of them, *and* from phenomenological events to sociological explanations of them. Boyer then concludes his book with a reflection on *Spirit and System* in the American academic milieu, where he finds "contemporary American humanists (like German academic mandarins of the early twentieth century) frequently transpose their own phenomenological sense of marginalization and decline to the fates of abstract entities like 'culture' and 'nation' and 'knowledge.' Regardless of nominally left- or right-wing political disposition among humanists, a negative dialectical language of pending crisis and social decline is widespread in academic culture" (276). Boyer's response to this is to warn us away from such wallowing, and suggest that we look for new ways of rediscovering our potential instead. "The real question to my mind is how to restore the possibility of amplifying positive dialecticism – the sense, ultimately, of creative human agency and possibility" (279). Boyer gives us one example of how to do this: "My own positive dialectical figure of reflexivity is an ethics of intellectual practice that does not resolve itself within the parameters of our professional labors but that, rather, self-consciously seeks to divert our energies also into extra- and contra-professionalizing activities, perhaps creative, perhaps physical, perhaps political, perhaps pedagogical, perhaps sensual, and so on." This kind of life project that Boyer envisions, he writes, "cannot be undertaken solely in the language of expertise, at professional conferences, or on the 'battlefield' of the printed page. It is undertaken in the arms your children. It is a matter of how and where you invest your productive energies. At best, the rigor of the former inspires the diversification of the latter. In this spirit, I offer nothing more than a gentle reminder of what we are capable" (280).

These studies, in sum, approach mass media as a social practice of representation that raises questions not only about what, but about *how* modernity means, what forms of freedom and constraint this entails, and what the ethical stakes and imperatives therefore are for producers of media – both journalistic and academic – today. The study of journalism in China may contribute significantly to this line of inquiry because here too newspapers have been a key site of efforts to modernize the country, but have sought to do so according to principles that run directly against those of modern, liberal press theories. Whereas these presuppose the freedom and equality of all news-reading and writing citizens, Chinese newspapers were founded on the presupposition of inequality – that is, on the idea that the few who were educated or cultivated enough to write, were also cultivated enough to be morally and intellectually superior to the many who read. This writer’s goal was not to objectively inform, but to subjectively transform her readers; and the entire social-force of the newspaper was rooted in the belief that certain writers might be particularly qualified to transform readers for the better. The story of Chinese journalism thus runs counter to the very idea of the liberal press – namely, that the principles of freedom and equality provide the foundation for a media system that enables meaningful public discourse. Instead, it suggests that the weight of a text comes from the felt possibility of moral and intellectual inequality, which alone can give a piece of writing that binding force over a reader which is the phenomenon of meaning.

A brief narration of this story is in order. Newspapers first emerged as a significant medium of communication in China during the late nineteenth century, when the various defeats of the ailing Qing dynasty (1644-1911) impressed many of the educated and governing class with an acute sense of China’s inferiority to the more powerful and advanced countries of ‘the West.’ Some responded by attempting to recreate Western institutions in China, in the hope that this would modernize the country and save it from what felt like impending collapse.<sup>22</sup> The newspaper was one such institution, most famously copied by the political reformists, Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, from European and American missionaries and merchants who had for some

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My position differs from Boyer’s in that whereas he focuses on presenting the contradiction between Spirit and System as a basically human condition, which one can encounter in any medium and domain of life, I am concerned specifically with the written and printed text – its status and role in contemporary forms of social life, and what this tells us about contemporary forms of social life. If the portrait that I paint of *The Times*’ journalists lives were to be cut up and placed into the categories of Spirit/System, agency/structure and positive/negative dialectics, it would probably seem to be an instance of what Boyer calls transposing one’s own sense of marginalization on to an abstract entity. Where Boyer sees an existential and attitude problem, however, I see a historical and textual one. Put most bluntly, I am suggesting that the contemporary situation *is* that textual knowledge has been lowered to the social status of social non-efficacy, so that precisely what we are *not* able to do is write or think our way out of it. If one were to insist on Boyer’s terms, one should say that my argument gives privileged place to the sociological and inter-subjective, rather than the phenomenological and individually experienced. What is at stake in my argument, however, is not an absolute or principled insistence on this order of rank, but the story that I have found it necessary to posit this order of rank in order to tell, namely, the story of writing about society, for the good of society, in a milieu where the grand narratives that might constitute an ethical and intellectual community are everywhere being said to have been replaced by “the market.”

<sup>22</sup> For more on this turning point, see Benjamin Schwartz, *In Search of Wealth and Power: Yen Fu and the West* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1964); Joseph Levenson, *Confucian China and its Modern Fate: A Trilogy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

time been running broadsheets from their bases in southern China.<sup>23</sup> Although the political message that Kang and Liang used their newspapers to spread was a reformist one, the medium itself was revolutionary. For in the established system of imperial government, reading and writing about affairs of the state was an exclusive office of the Emperor and his literati-officials. This is not merely to say that it was a privilege of the very few, but that literacy in state affairs was considered an art of government in itself – one which a person only became qualified to practice by undergoing a rigorous education, passing the imperial civil service exam and becoming a court official.<sup>24</sup> Writing, in other words, was considered not merely an instrument of state power, but part of its very substance. The newspaper, through its high-volume, anonymity-based dissemination of texts, spread this substance beyond the imperial court and for the first time in China's history addressed its governing power to the country's non-official readers.

By the early twentieth century, a whole range of republican and nationalist newspapers were circulating, that stridently heralded the new readers as “citizens” and expounded their right and ability as such to determine the future of their “nation.” A few decades later, the Communist Party took control of the presses, and addressing its readers as “the people,” began to run China's newspapers as the ideological instrument of their collective liberation. These determinedly modernist newspaper projects did adopt the principles of freedom and equality in the sense that they sought to politically enfranchise China's population by spreading literacy in state affairs, the medium of governing power, to all of its members. They did not, however, admit freedom and equality into their conceptions of news-writing itself. Here, they retained the assumption that the small sector of society that was qualified to write had more authority on matters than the broad masses. The implicit relationship between writer and reader was that of a teacher to her students – one who had achieved a higher understanding, guiding the minds of others who had not.

To directly apply the standards and values of liberal press theories on to this historical formation would evidently be to distort and misconstrue its significance, for a different politics of truth is at work here. Chinese news-writing was not a practice undertaken to provide fair representation and access to information across a society of free and equal individuals. It was a practice undertaken by self-appointed vanguards, claiming and trying to achieve ideological leadership of the country through their writing. Its truth did not lie in representing all viewpoints or in enabling readers to form diverse opinions. It lay in having the legitimate authority to lead readers in the right direction, or to write about society for the sake of society's good. Of course one can be very skeptical about how such lofty ideals actually played out in reality. But it was certainly in terms of these ideals that many twentieth-century Chinese news-writers thought about and strove to practice their profession. When one approaches journalism in contemporary China not through the analytics of political liberalization, but by way of this history of news-writing as a pedagogical and transformative practice, one begins to feel that the problem today is not so much *that* press control still exists, as it is that there no longer seems to be any moral or intellectual authority behind it.

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<sup>23</sup> Zhang, Xiantao. *The Origins of the Modern Chinese Press: The Influence of the Protestant Missionary Press in Late Qing China*. New York: Routledge, 2007.

<sup>24</sup> Of course the reality of the institution was not always equal to its ideal.

This is what my ethnography of news-production at *The Times* shows. It shows that while state control and censorship are still regularly encountered obstacles in contemporary China, these political interventions only constitute a condition, and not the actual *problem* of news-production. For *The Times* journalists and editors, the problem of news-production was the ethical and intellectual question of how one could continue to write for society's good in the current milieu of rapid economic development and market reform. Like many in China today, *The Times* writers denounced the Maoist ideas of propaganda and ideological leadership, and denied that any one person or group could truly represent the interests of society as a whole, or think and act on this behalf. They refused on principle to claim such a role for themselves, for what the Maoist misadventure had proven, in their account, was that claims to be serving such noble and selfless ideals always turned out to be false. Adopting this principled stance, however, put *The Times* writers in a difficult position. Because if it was not out of concern for society's interests that they produced the news, then logically speaking, it had to be out of self-interest that they did it. This was not quite the ethic that they wanted to claim for themselves either. But the practical measures their newspaper was constantly taking for the sake of commercial profit made it seem difficult to deny. The fact was that their newspaper had been created to make money, and that most of its decisions were made by the need to compete against others for it. To their knowledge, this was how almost all newspapers in China worked. Although *The Times* writers wanted to feel that their work contributed to society's good, such realities left them with little choice but to concede that regardless of their personal intentions, journalism had basically become a practice of pushing words around for profit.

*The Times* writers could, if they chose to, have narrated their new situation as a story of press liberalization. They were well versed in liberal theories of the press, and often invoked its terms. They praised Walter Lippman, and cited Siebert, Peterson and Schramm's *Four Theories of the Press*. They spoke of press freedom, of how the news media ought to serve as the public's monitor, and of China's ongoing struggle to achieve these things. Only they did not feel that these theories and struggles furnished any substantial answer the question of how to write for society. At this level, liberal press theories seemed to them to amount to the implausibly naive claim that if one simply wrote about how things 'actually' were, this 'objective' information would somehow benefit someone, and thereby constitute a socially worthwhile undertaking. It seemed obvious to *The Times* writers that such a determinedly simplistic idea was necessarily more symbolically valuable than literally true. In an industry where supposedly transparent 'facts' were produced by the opaque interplay of commercial strategies and political agendas, they saw clearly that 'freedom' and 'the public' also became words that people pushed around more for their symbolic currency than because they bore any truth or make journalism any more ethical. *The Times* writers' troubles suggest that it may not be the principles of freedom and equality that make a press system good, or enable it to generate meaningful debate, but rather the qualities that liberal press theories leave untheorized – namely, the pursuit of moral and intellectual superiority, and the authority to write for society's good.

## **Knowledge Production as the Production of Social Life**



The second approach I take to journalism in contemporary China is as a practice of knowledge production. The idea of the “anthropology of knowledge” as a meaningfully distinct subfield within the discipline has been productively debated and pursued in recent years. Anthropology has of course always been concerned with knowledge, in the sense that from our first encounters with ‘primitive’ life, the jarring contrast between their assumptions and ours has provoked us to ask how different people come to ‘know’ the radically incongruent things that they regard themselves as knowing.<sup>25</sup> Still, it has been argued that a specific focus on knowledge as distinct from say, culture, is useful today because it enables anthropology to identify the processes by which significantly more authoritative and systematically efficacious truth claims are produced, and hence to better discern the ways in which these processes work.<sup>26</sup> The understanding that knowledge is determined not only by the properties of its object, but also by factors such as ideology, power, tradition, technique and affect, has thus been brought to bear on many professions and forms of expertise.<sup>27</sup> Studies of scientific knowledge production in particular have shown that even in this supposed citadel of objectivity, there are no transparent representations of reality. The question becomes not only how scientists make knowledge claims, but also how anthropologists can claim to know what scientists do. Bruno Latour has proposed a highly formal language for describing the processes by which facts are made – in terms of “inscription devices” and “actor-networks,” rather than ideology and power.<sup>28</sup> Paul Rabinow and his colleagues have pushed the question further, by trying to show how institutional and epistemological structures work to cultivate among scientists not a nose for objectivity, so much as a “trained incapacity” to engage with ‘subjective’ seeming questions about the moral and social significance of the knowledge they produce.<sup>29</sup> The impasse Rabinow et. al. encounter in trying to engage scientists in these questions prompts them to ask, both of science and of anthropology itself, how a knowledge practice might build attentiveness to the relationship between truth and ethics *into* its processes of knowing, instead of continuously externalizing the question of the good.

Chinese journalism is an interesting case to take up in this vein, because it is a knowledge practice that has long been oriented precisely towards making claims that are true insofar as they are ethically and subjectively compelling, rather than empirically accurate or factual. It has sought explicitly to be the means of society’s collective self-cultivation, that is, to know society in a way that is good for the knowers, who are also

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<sup>25</sup> Malcolm Crick, “Anthropology of Knowledge” in *Annual Review of Anthropology* Vol. 11 (1982), pp. 287-313.

<sup>26</sup> Frederik Barth, “An Anthropology of Knowledge” in *Current Anthropology* Vol. 43 No. 1 (Feb 2002), pp. 1-18.

<sup>27</sup> For examples, see Laura Nader, “Up the Anthropologist – Perspectives Gained from Studying Up” in *Reinventing Anthropology*, edited by D. Hymes (New York: Pantheon, 1969); Douglas R. Holmes and George E. Marcus, “Cultures of Expertise and the Management of Globalization: Toward the Re-functioning of Ethnography” in *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics and Ethics as Anthropological Problems*, edited by Aihwa Ong and Stephen J. Collier (London, Blackwell, 2005).

<sup>28</sup> Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>29</sup> Paul Rabinow and Gaymon Bennett, *Designing Human Practices: An Experiment with Synthetic Biology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Paul Rabinow and Anthony Stavrianakis, *Demands of the Day: On the Logic of Anthropological Inquiry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

the object known. As discussed above, this has involved a conception of the journalist, or knowledge-producer, as someone who occupies an elite position, from which the authoritativeness of her truth claims is derived. Understood thus, as a self-consciously social and ethical knowledge-production practice, the question that Chinese journalism now confronts is this: What does the post-Mao eradication of the news-writer's elevated position mean for the knowledge that newspapers like *The Times* produce? What is this new form of knowledge, and what form of social life does its production produce?

A self-reflexive anthropology of knowledge must approach these questions with caution, for if the truth claims which others make are not simply true but the outcome of myriad opacities and agendas, the same is necessarily the case for the anthropologist. Rather than presume to delineate the form of social life that I perceive to be emerging around *The Times*, therefore, this dissertation looks at how *The Times* writers themselves described the social world they said they lived and worked in. I look at the discourse on society that they used to analyze, explain, and respond to various events at the newspaper, such as executive decisions, personnel changes and colleagues' maneuvers within the organization. I do not claim to know the general conditions of social life in China, or how these are reflected in *The Times*' news-production practice. I try only to show that the practice of news-production which *The Times* writers engaged in also produced among them a particular way of knowing and living in society. Stated briefly, this knowledge was of society as a *jianghu* – a term borrowed from Chinese martial arts lore to refer the world of human relations as one in which no values are fixed because all values are constituted by the endless interplay of personal ambitions, rivalries and alliances. Social relations, in this view, are driven by the innate desire that all people have to rise above and be recognized as superior to others. The claims people make are never taken at face value, but always understood as strategic rhetorical performances, calculated to achieve unspoken and self-interested agendas. Words are instruments of action, not bearers of meaning; for it is not what words make you think, but what words can *do* for you that matters.

I do not want to adjudicate on whether or not this is an accurate understanding of life in contemporary Chinese society. What I want to show is that it is one way understanding and engaging in social life that one encounters in contemporary China; and that alongside printed copies of the newspaper, *The Times* news-production practice also produced this form of social life. The journalists' rejection of the idea of ideological leadership underpinned a general disbelief in the possibility of any person writing or thinking about society from a standpoint that transcended her own vested interests in it. Their experience of how commercial interests directed the production of news further reinforced their sense that all representations are veiled maneuvers in an underlying struggle of personal ambitions. The post-Mao Party-state's turn to market reform, in this view, represents the official recognition that Mao's Communist Party had monopolized rhetorical power and used it to manipulate people into sacrificing themselves, when in fact everyone should be free to use all the resources they can to compete for their own interests. In contemporary society, the same logic continues, all acts of communication should properly be seen as essentially self-serving performances.

Anthropologists studying the performative dimension of language have tended in recent years to frame it as a generally overlooked form of communicative agency, and to highlight either its function in practices of ethical self-cultivation or its capacity for

subverting, and to that extent liberating the communicating subject from, discursively dominant ideologies.<sup>30</sup> By contrast to this, in the *jianghu* understanding of social life, performativity is not overlooked but widely recognized, if not taken for granted as the primary quality of all interpersonal communications. This recognition, however, neither liberated *The Times* journalists nor enabled them to engage in news-writing as an ethical communicative practice. To the contrary, it made it difficult for them to believe in even the possibility of writing for society's good. They tried to use news-writing to bring concrete improvements to people's lives – to provide useful information, or expose abuses and injustices and demand that the state attend to them. But with no available narrative of themselves as people who pursue society's interest and knowing, on the other hand, all representations to be performative, *The Times* journalists could give no stable or meaningful form to these efforts. Under the weight of this narrative impossibility, their impulse to do good with their writing was doubted, undermined and eventually dissipated. At stake in contemporary Chinese news-production is thus not only a body of knowledge, but also a way of understanding and engaging in social life. If there can be no conception of one who rises above the logic of self-interest to write for society as a whole, if all communications must be seen as self-interested maneuvers in disguise, then textual authority and meaning become socially impossible. Words can have no governing power or guiding effect over social life, which must then be lived as an indifferent stream of interpersonal struggles and arbitrary outcomes.

### China and the Anthropology of Modernity

This conundrum which one encounters at *The Times* writers is one that anthropology also faces.<sup>31</sup> Since the crisis of ethnographic authority that unsettled the discipline in the 1980s, that is, anthropology too has been troubled by the relations of hierarchy – between moderns and primitives, anthropologist and native, author and informant – implicit in its knowledge-production practice, and by what this means for the discipline's ethics.<sup>32</sup> One response has been to experiment with new forms of textual representation that are more 'multivocal' – forms that give equal standing to many voices other than the author's, so as to show how anthropological knowledge is not made of monolithic truths, but polyvalent, contingent and culturally co-produced by anthropologists and the people and situations they work with.<sup>33</sup> Another response has

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<sup>30</sup> See Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993); Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>31</sup> Several anthropologists studying journalism have pointed out that journalism is similar to anthropology. Liisa H Malkki, "News and Culture: Transitory Phenomena and the Fieldwork Tradition" in *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*, edited by Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); S. Elizabeth Bird ed. *The Anthropology of News & Journalism: Global Perspectives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

<sup>32</sup> George E. Marcus and James Clifford, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

<sup>33</sup> For example, James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1988); Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the*

been to retain the claims of authorship, but to turn anthropology's gaze away from 'primitives' and on to modern societies, practices and fields of knowledge. Inspired by Foucault, many have turned to look at the relation of knowledge and power. One branch of this work critically re-conceptualizes the institutions of modern life by understanding the practices that constitute them in terms of disciplinary techniques, biopolitics and governmentality.<sup>34</sup> Another branch foregrounds the relationship between modern knowledge and the history of Western imperialism, to show how our representations of non-Western 'others' inherently reinscribe the power inequalities upon which anthropology – along with racism, colonialism and modernity – are all to some degree based.<sup>35</sup> Not content with experimental forms of ethnography, these anthropologists find it imperative to ask how 'other' traditions can be understood without being pathologized in translation into the language of modernity.<sup>36</sup>

For a discipline thus troubled, China is an interesting site, because questions of 'modernity' and 'otherness' seem to present themselves to social science so insistently there. Scholars find many recognizably modern political, economic and social institutions that are evidently the fruit of diligent efforts to imitate and reproduce Western models. But also observe that often in the process of reproduction, some quality – which can only be categorized as an exceptionally 'Chinese characteristic' – seems to slip in and betray the spirit of the Western original.<sup>37</sup> This framework for understanding another society and culture, that is, as a distorted version of our own, is obviously inadequate. Or more precisely, knowledge generated by this framework is sustained only by the relations of power that allow us to represent the other, and the other only to be represented. Anthropology must do better, and to do so demands that we find ways of representing life in China that do not reduce it to a perverse variant of life elsewhere.

In response to this challenge, recent anthropological studies in China have developed at least two broad approaches. The first is to intentionally give primary place to Chinese traditions of knowledge, so as to show how on these distinctive epistemological and ethical grounds, forms of modern discourse and practice borrowed

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*Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Hugh Raffles, *Insectopedia* (New York, Pantheon 2010).

<sup>34</sup> For example, Aihwa Ong, *Buddha is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship and the New America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Nikolas Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Stephen J. Collier, *Post-Soviet Social: Neoliberalism, Social Modernity, Biopolitics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>35</sup> See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); Lydia Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture and Translated Modernity – China 1900-1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995). On racism, see Louis Dumont, *Essays on Individualism: Modern Ideology in Anthropological Perspective* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986).

<sup>36</sup> For example, Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

<sup>37</sup> From the 19<sup>th</sup> century missionary Arthur Smith's *Chinese Characteristics* to the post-Mao CPC's 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics,' the motif of exceptionalism seems to continuously shadow the idea of modern China. Benjamin Schwartz criticizes Mao's Communism as an imitation and betrayal of Communism. Fairbank and others have described Mao, the Chairman of the People's Republic, as China's last Emperor. Qualifiers such as Neo-Confucianism, Neo-Taoism and Neo-Traditionalism are still commonly invoked to give specificity to Chinese versions of modern institutions.

from the West become differently constituted and experienced.<sup>38</sup> The second is to see modernity itself as changing through the adaptations and adjustments that non-Western borrowers make to its institutions; and to see in contemporary China especially not merely local variations, but the innovation and emergence of new global forms.<sup>39</sup> My dissertation draws from both these approaches, in that it gives primary status to a Chinese tradition of knowledge, but with the aim of illuminating a more global contemporary condition. To do this, I draw from the work of Louis Dumont, an anthropologist of India whose critical essays although less current than those of Rabinow and Asad, point in their own way towards a possible anthropology of modernity.

Writing about the caste system in India, Dumont portrayed it as being undergirded by a “traditional” ideology that was holistic and hierarchical. His aim in doing so was not to prove the uniform dominance of this non-modern ideology in India, but rather, by depicting a system of norms and values diametrically opposed to those of modernity, to reveal the particularity of modernity’s individualistic and equalitarian ideology.<sup>40</sup> His aim, in other words, was to reframe the question of “India” for social science. Instead of a site where we repeatedly ask how such an appalling tradition of sanctioned inequality as the caste system can still persist in this modern day and age, he wanted to make “India” a site where we were confronted with the historical uniqueness of modernity’s singular regard for equality. This confrontation, in Dumont’s view, might provoke anthropology into thinking about the values that underpin modern social life, and reflecting on the adequacy of our practices to our ideals.<sup>41</sup>

I attempt to make a similar move by portraying two systems – Chinese news-writing, and the *jianghu* conception of society – as systems that have grown out of Chinese traditions of knowledge, and that are characterized by norms and values directly opposed to those of Western journalism and sociology respectively. I do not claim that all news-producers in China are subject to these systems, but construct them in an attempt to reframe the question of news-production in China. Instead of a site where we repeatedly ask how such an appalling tradition of authoritarianism can still persist, I hope to make it a site where we are confronted with the shared problem of textual authority and social life. Besides the much-discussed relationship between state and society in China, I hope to show that there is also the relationship between writer and reader that is changing; and that in many ways, journalists in China and anthropologists in America now occupy the same problematic position with regards to the question of ethics and truth. *The Times* writers, I suggest, see our common condition more clearly, firstly because the tradition of Chinese news-writing sensitizes them to the writer’s responsibility for pointing readers’

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<sup>38</sup> See Arthur Kleinman, *Social Origins of Distress and Disease: Depression, Neurasthenia, and Pain in Modern China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988); Judith Farquhar, *Knowing Practice: The Clinical Encounter of Chinese Medicine* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996); Mayfair Yang, *Gifts, Favors and Banquets: The Art of Social Relationships in China* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

<sup>39</sup> For example, Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality and Public Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>40</sup> Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*, translated by Mark Sainsbury, Louis Dumont and Basia Gulati (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). Address criticism of Dumont by Nicholas Dirks et. al.

<sup>41</sup> See Dumont, *Essays on Individualism: Modern Ideology in Anthropological Perspective* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986).

minds towards the good; and secondly, because they do not have the ideological framework of liberal press theory to fall back upon for the comforting but illusory sense that such authority is not necessary because information alone will suffice. They see that where textual authority is impossible, social life becomes a meaningless stream of interpersonal struggles; and that where this struggle prevails, not even liberal principles and theories can regulate it, for these too become props in rhetorical performances that are actually battles in disguise. In the way they live and talk about their lives, *The Times* writers show us the situation we too are in.

## Chapter Summaries

Chapter One of the dissertation looks at the everyday practice of producing news articles at *The Times*, specifically, at the journalists' heavy reliance on Internet and mobile communication technologies at every stage of the production process. Journalists surf the Internet for news leads, crawl through electronic databases for interviewees' contacts, conduct and record interviews by telephone, write articles on laptop computers, discuss them with editors over online chat programs and finally submit them by email. Contrasting these articles to those of the renowned 1930s journalist, Fan Changjiang, I suggest that whereas journalism was once a matter of translating life into text, it is now a matter of rearranging existing snippets or portions of text into article form. Because information technologies now make an overabundance of textual representations – even of the most recent breaking events – always already available, journalists today do not write so much as assemble news articles out of these given representations. Writing, in the sense of finding the right words to capture phenomenon that would otherwise pass into oblivion, creates a bridge between lived reality and textual representation. For the journalist who habitually assembles her articles, however, reality and representation are never bridged, but instead come to seem as though they exist on two separate and unrelated planes.

If contemporary journalism can thus be seen as an activity that takes place entirely within the realm of representations, I then show how the temporality of the Internet as a medium of representation influences what now counts as 'news.' Unlike printed newspapers which come out at a fixed time everyday, the Internet is a continuously, though unevenly updated news platform. The availability of this almost 'live' digital news report means that those who run printed newspapers can no longer assume that the stories they print will be new to their readers. They can no longer presuppose that simultaneity of reading which once made all their new reports 'news' reports. Lacking a clear sense of what 'news' in this post-Mao age of the Internet should be, many newspapers have taken to imitating one another. They decide what to report by looking at what other newspapers are reporting. In this way, 'news' in China comes to comprise whatever stories happen to get picked up and re-reported by a large number of newspapers – or in *The Times* journalists' parlance, whatever stories happen to get 'stirred up' (*chaozuo*) into 'news.' Although the journalists have an incisive discourse on, and many techniques for more efficiently producing, this kind of 'news,' ethnographic study suggests that the palpable hollowness of the exercise still rankles certain authorial sensibilities in them.

Chapter Two approaches *The Times* as a whole organization, to reveal the tensions created within it by its conflicting goals of being an institute for high quality news-writing on the one hand, and becoming a profitable business on the other. This is a dilemma that post-Mao commercialization of the news sector confronts many newspapers in China with. If *The Times* can be taken as a symptomatic case, I show how in its day-to-day activities as an organization, the need to pursue business interests consistently takes priority over the need to improve the quality of its journalists' writing. I also show how business executives have more authority within the organization than editorial staff do; and how this creates a situation in which journalists feel they work under bosses whose values and motivations they do not respect. As writers, *The Times* journalists are disheartened by the crass commercialism of this system. Yet even so, they feel that the process of market reform which has taken place in China over the past thirty years is so thoroughgoing and irrevocable, that whatever the cost to the pursuit of good writing, the new news system can only be accepted.

Moving in to look more closely at this commercial approach which seems to be the only way forward for news in China, I find that it is comprised of a double discourse. On the one hand, there is an official set of claims about how commercial competition ensures that good news-products are able to attract the readers and profits that their high quality merits. On the other hand, there is an unofficial, insider's account of how newspapers actually achieve commercial success by a myriad of measures that have nothing to do with the quality of their journalism. The veracity, or at least the efficacy, of the unofficial discourse was demonstrated clearly at *The Times*, whose business-minded editor-in-chief regularly sold favorable news coverage to companies that were willing to buy it, and blackmailed companies that were not with the threat of unfavorable news reports. The various attitudes of the other staff to this practice make it clear that as news-producers, it is now commercial rather than political forces that they feel most consistently pressured and directly constrained by.

I then look at how this new predominance of commerce over politics changes the meaning of several key terms in contemporary Chinese journalism, as compared to the Mao era. Censorship, for example, is no longer conceived of as a set of ideological restraints motivated by an overarching political project. Rather, it is seen as the use that people make of personal connections and administrative power, for no greater purpose than to protect their own self-interests. To take another example, the figure of the journalist under Mao was one who wrote to guide readers towards the collective good of socialist development. The figure of the journalist today, meanwhile, is one who writes for money – a lowly merchant of words, rather than a lofty leader of men. While *The Times* journalists feel acutely maligned by this popular image of their profession, it is nevertheless part of the new commercial news system that by their own definition must now be accepted.

Chapter Three takes a step back from the contemporary impasse which the first two chapters describe, to trace a genealogy of Chinese news-writing from its beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century up to the present. What this genealogy reveals is that unlike journalism in the West, Chinese news-writing has long been a self-consciously pedagogical and transformative institution. From the newsletters of the May Fourth Movement to the broadsheets of Maoist propaganda, Chinese news-writers have been held to occupy the intellectually and morally superior position of a teacher in relation to

her students; and hence to have both the authority to and the responsibility for guiding her readers' minds in the right direction. I suggest that this conception of news-writing grew out of a particular sense of textual authority which was central to China's centuries-old literary tradition; and that the overwhelming historical force of Maoism arose in part from the Party's use of mass media to bring this authority into the lives of millions of ordinary people, for the first time in Chinese history. Textual authority was converted into political power.

In the aftermath of Maoism's collapse, today's news-producers disavow the idea of ideological guidance and transformation. Examining several contemporary modes of Chinese journalism, I show that news-writers now no longer presume to have superior authority, but instead write as neutral providers of information that readers are free to do as they please with. I describe this new approach as a kind of post-Mao anti-Maoism, in the sense that journalists explicitly reject the Maoist idea of the social whole, as well as any claim to be ideologically guiding or serving it. Instead of using words to conjure such hollow illusions, they argue, the news media should use words to make practical interventions and bring about concrete benefits. This approach to journalism in some ways resembles that which one finds in Western, liberal press theory. One crucial difference, however, is that whereas liberal press theories assume the existence of a fair and equal social system that the news media should function to maintain, the post-Mao anti-Maoist outlook sees society as unfair and unequal, *and* holds that news-writing can do nothing to fundamentally transform it. Contemporary Chinese journalism is thus not a liberal institution yet, and no longer a pedagogical one either.

Chapter Four returns to the ethnographic site of *The Times*, but moves beyond the question of journalism to explore the deeper impact of this new notion of the relationship between writing and society. I look at how the journalists describe, analyze and respond to events in their social world through the lens of the *jianghu*, a term which they borrow from Chinese martial arts lore to describe a milieu in which all actions are motivated by personal ambitions, rivalries and alliances. Everything that anyone says in this world must be interpreted not as a truth claim, but as a rhetorical performance calculated to advance the speaker's own interests. I argue that this discourse is not merely an expression of cynicism or a justification for selfishness, but rather a way of understanding what social life comes to mean under conditions of commercialization and market reform. Drawing from Louis Dumont's work on anthropology as the comparative study of ideologies, I suggest that the *jianghu* understanding of society is in fact comparable to Sociology. It illuminates the structural relations that underlie every social interaction, and casts the significance of people's words and actions in this light.

I show that this sensitivity to the social, relational aspect of contemporary life attunes *The Times* staff to the sense in which the stakes of commercial success are not monetary or material. Even as the journalists pursue higher incomes and more consumer products, they do so in the awareness that what people value are not these things in-themselves but the position above others, the relation of superiority to others, which these things signify. Thus, the ethical question that commercialization confronts them with is not simply whether to be cynical or idealistic, selfish or altruistic. It is the question of how, in a society that thrives on people's fondness for the feeling of supremacy over others, to live and write in a way that does not entail converting everything into the currency of interpersonal struggle.



Finally, Chapter Five broadens the scope of the discussion still further, to look at what life becomes when one feels one must treat language as an instrument of self-interest. *The Times* describe themselves as living in a world of systemic hypocrisy, characterized by an unbridgeable gap between what people claim and how things actually are. I ask whether or not this problem could be solved by China adopting a liberal press system, as many analysts and experts on China's media have advocated. My answer focuses on three liberal press terms – objectivity, freedom of expression and the public. These are not simply adjectives that describe the way liberal systems produce news; they are terms that indicate irreducible but generative contradictions within liberal systems. Objectivity, for example, is considered a news value because news-writing is invariably subjective. Freedom is a news value because legitimate grounds for press control must always be found. The public is a news value because so many things are determined by private interests.

The way in which these terms have entered post-Mao China, however, has caused the unspoken half of each contradictory pair to fall out. Liberal press terms thus appear to, and are used by, *The Times* news-producers not as real and meaningful contradictions but as unrealistic and merely symbolic values. Rather than solving the problem, their importation only functions to reinforce the journalists' sense of a permanent discrepancy between the symbolized and the actual, between representations and lived reality. In the journalists' experience, the liberal 'solution' thus only mirrors at the philosophical level that disconnection which Internet technologies impose on them at the phenomenal one. With no escape from this contemporary condition, *The Times* writers are faced with a choice: they must either pursue success in the *jianghu* and treat words as the weapons of interpersonal struggle, or retreat from social life and try to salvage, in solitude, language's capacity for meaning. I invite the reader to consider whether this predicament is unique to *The Times*, or one that many other writers also now face.

Finally, a note on ethnographic method. The conversational exchanges represented in the ethnographic portions of this dissertation were not made from audio recordings, but reconstructed from handwritten notes and memories, to the best of my ability. As a portrait written in retrospect and after some reflection, the dissertation's characterizations of individuals are necessarily distorted by the subjective qualities of my experiences, and the sense which I have tried to make of them since.

## Chapter One: Being a Journalist

“Corrupt bloody government,” Zhang, a journalist for *The Times*, expelled an agitated mutter as he flicked a stylus pen down the touch-screen surface of his internet-enabled mobile phone, scrolling through the headlines on one of China’s major news websites. We are seated aboard the high-speed train from Beijing to Shanxi, having received a phone call earlier in the day accepting our request for an interview with the head of a large coal-mining company there. We threw some clothes in a bag, dashed to the train station and now sat catching our breath as buildings and farmlands sped backwards in the window while bodies hurtled forward, at what a blinking sign in the cabin informed us was the rate of 240 kilometers per hour.

“Pretenders to benevolence, always stealing from the very people they claim to protect,” he muttered on as he scrolled past a story about a former mayor found to have embezzled tens of millions in state funds. “You never would have heard of such behavior in the Mao era. No cadre would have dared to steal from the people. But the Party’s changed color since Deng took over,” he pointed to an article on rising real estate prices and another predicting volatility on the Shanghai stock exchange. “Now all the officials’ children get American citizenship, and then use their connections back home to run private investment companies. Their fathers sell the land and betray the country, to fatten their own wallets,” he continued, scrolling past a story on a ninety-year old man who self-immolated to protest the provincial government’s requisition of his land. “The Communist Party of China does not clamp down on organized crime, it just *is* the greatest mafia in China. It makes everyone else pay tribute to them as big boss,” he scoffed at a story about school children injected with poisonous vaccines, after a shady pharmaceutical company bribed drug control officials into issuing them a production license. Finally at the last article on the website, about a small town official who was caught with his mistress on a video camera that his slighted wife had secretly installed in their bedroom, Zhang exhaled. “This country is run now by gangsters and sluts.”

Ammunition for Zhang’s tirades streams forth without pause from his nifty little handheld device. As a wide-eyed entrant into the world of China’s news media, I quickly had it impressed upon me the extent to which the internet-enabled mobile phone is now the single most essential tool for any journalist who hopes to be at all competent at her job. Carrying this machine on her person at all times, a journalist can keep abreast of breaking events all across China regardless of where she physically is, just by glancing through a literal handful of websites. At Zhang’s newspaper, a journalist can even attend editorial meetings by way of this device. Because *The Times* has journalists stationed in cities all across China, meetings can only be held on internet chat programs that allow multiple, physically remote people to enter a shared arena of textual exchange. Every week, an online meeting is thus held where journalists and editors decide what the next issue’s stories will be. Sitting around the office beforehand, journalists habitually browse the internet, looking through news sites and micro-blogs for possible leads.

“There really are no interesting topics this week!” Kong, a Politics desk journalist at the Beijing office complained, after scrolling fruitlessly through the usual internet sites for over half an hour.

“Do a story on the possibility of the *renminbi* appreciating. Sifang will love that,” one of Kong’s colleagues said, referring to the head-editor of the Politics section, who has the deciding say on which articles make it to print. Although he is head of Politics, Sifang is of the opinion that economic rather than ideological incentives and principles now determine developments in China. This gives him a penchant for economic news stories that the journalists working under him have learnt how to adapt themselves to.

At the appointed time, everyone logged on to the internet chat program and the meeting commenced with each journalist typing his or her proposed news topic and Sifang approving, amending or rejecting them. When it comes to Kong’s turn, she posted the message,

*KONG: RMB appreciation? Rumors circulating on several news sites that the Ministry of Finance is conducting “RMB appreciation stress tests”. I can follow up the rumor, clarify what a “stress test” is, weigh opinions on appreciation.*

A response soon popped up on each networked screen,

*WANG: Good, that’s a timely issue. Use the question of RMB valuation to stress the need for more market-based policy. Mention the foreign pressure on China to do so too. Interview some European ambassadors.*

Then,

*KONG: Okay, got it.*

With that, the discussion moved on to the next journalist.

“Anyone have any contacts related to currency valuation?” Kong asked aloud when the meeting ended, as she began scrolling through the database of names, titles, phone numbers and email addresses that she keeps on her laptop computer, as a ready pool of potential interviewees.

Before such technologies were as widely used in China as they are now, a journalist wanting to conduct interviews would have had to travel to a farm to speak with a farmer and to a university to speak with a professor, say. Now that Kong can reach almost anyone she cares to interview either by email or telephone, however, she can effectively keep all her acquaintances in one light-weight, alphabetically-organized digital ‘place.’ With the additional use of a few other small machines, this wide assortment of individuals then becomes uniformly available for conversation, regardless of when, where or even if she has ever met them. Kong prefers to do interviews in person. Face-to-face conversations tend to flow more freely, she finds, and people often end up saying things that they had not intended to reveal. Often, however, Kong’s deadlines are too tight or her interviewees too busy for an in-person interview to be arranged. Kong thus conducts many interviews over her mobile telephone. Using its audio-recording function, she captures these often brief and rather formal conversations verbatim, and later transcribes them by playing the recordings back on her computer. From the transcripts, she then edits and selects quotations, and digitally inserts them into the news article that she taps out, in a different program on the same machine. Finally, when the article is complete, she clicks ‘send,’ and it instantly appears before her editor.

News-writing for journalists today is often such a process of gathering together various already-captured representations, and organizing them into the form of an article.

News leads are taken not from one's social surroundings but off the internet, where – now that many ordinary people have digital cameras and internet access and even both on one mobile telephone – first-hand reports, photographs and videos of breaking events are always almost instantly available. Computers, mobile phones, audio recorders and more computers are then used, to gather background information, conduct interviews and hold editorial meetings, all in the same sensorially remote way. The effects of these new communication technologies are difficult to determine precisely, but the striking contrast between current news articles and articles from earlier periods in China's history is suggestive. In news articles by the renowned Republican-era journalist, Fan Changjiang, for example, one finds a style of writing that now seems unfathomably ponderous and slow. His October 1934 article for *Beiping Chenbao* on the funeral of Peking University professor Liu Bannong opens:

The scene of the memorial service, is within the grand hall of Peking University's number two college, the columns of the main entrance to Peking University's number two college being cloaked in a long banner of white cloth words, on a black cloth base, which read, "Grand Memorial Service of Professor Liu Bannong," in such a way that anyone who sees it is quickly overcome with a feeling of deep mournfulness. Entering the college, lotus ponds surround, and all around are hung various elegaic couplets, as many as more than six hundred pairs, those who sent theirs afterwards already having no room left to hang them. Inside the grand hall at the main podium, an altar is set up, a pair of silver candles, wisps of smoke gracefully winding their way upwards, portraits of Mister Bannong and Ai Shenyou, hung silently over a tableau, strewn with chrysanthemums and cypress branches. All around the portraits are surrounded by all-yellow chrysanthemum wreaths, below which are complementing all-white chrysanthemum wreaths. Nearby the altar, stand more than three hundred flower wreaths, flower baskets and flower bouquets that have been sent by various parties. All along the four walls of the grand hall as well as from its ceiling beams, hung more elegies and scrolls of calligraphy. The bereaved kin, Madam Liu Zhuhui and their two daughters and one son sit at the north end of the altar, east of the mourning instruments, in black attire belted with white, with tear drenched sleeves, such that all who came to pay their respects, in passing them by and glimpsing this tragic scene, cannot but feel great sympathy.

The contrast between this and contemporary news-writing is partly accounted for by the different sociological context of Chinese journalism in the 1930s, when newspapers were still an exclusive medium of the educated elite. Apart from having a different social function, however, Fan's news-writing also seems to involve a different sense of textuality than one finds in journalism today. Fan tints the setting with sentiment as he describes it, patient and poetically, as though to dissolve himself into every curve and color that he writes. The reader is drawn into the funeral not because the article is a firsthand account, written 'there' at the grand hall like a photograph would have to have been taken, but because a realm of sense and sentiment is created *in* the writing itself. With no recording devices but paper and pen, and relatively few others around to record

things, news-writing in Fan's time was a way to grasp and give form to a historical moment that would otherwise pass into oblivion. The news article could not merely serve as one among many representations of its object. It had to contain or *be* the reality of a moment that once passed, would no longer be otherwise. Thus, a writer did not set down words about an event, but wove words together into a textual version of the event, a textual experience that would henceforth have to serve in lieu of the event itself. News-writing here is a practice of textualization, a kind of transubstantiation of lived and fleeting experiences into written and lasting realities. One imagines that for he who has written such an article, Liu Bannong's death must have been transformed through the writing process into a matter of unforgettable significance. Turning a historical event into a written experience of history must leave an indelible mark upon a writer's mind, and become a part of how she encounters the world subsequently. Indeed, the news stories Fan wrote did seem to have a formative influence upon him, for after six years of reporting on civil war, political turmoil and social unrest across the country, he joined the Communist Party in 1939. He served as head of several of the Party's major press organs, until falling victim to a political purge during the Cultural Revolution and shortly after, committing suicide.<sup>42</sup>

For a present-day journalist like Kong, meanwhile, journalism has largely become a matter not of writing reality, but of recombining existing representations of reality – of organizing and reformatting existing pieces of text into new pieces of text, editing them for clarity and then tacking one's name onto the result. Instead of sensitivity to one's surroundings and a thoughtful choice of words, what becomes obligatory in this mode of news-production is constant and active connectivity to multiple networks of information exchange. I found the continuous use of instant communication technologies jarring, but *The Times* journalists seemed well adapted. They were used to being interrupted by the intermittent chime of an incoming message popping up on their laptop or cell phone screens, and could effortlessly toggle among several programs on each device – drafting an article, reading a blog, browsing through a news website and responding to messages, all in smooth continuous rotation. Rather than inhibiting their work process, the continuous variation of stimuli created by this multi-tasking seemed to keep them attentive, to actually make them more focused and productive in short bursts between interruptions. Working in this way also seemed to accustom Kong and her colleagues to a sense of gap, or disconnect, between the realm of representations and that of lived reality. They would deftly manage multiple streams of news-related information, confidently and efficiently receiving, processing and dispatching it in the one realm, while drearily complaining of boredom and fatigue in the other. The feelings and concerns that occupied their offline selves seemed perfectly unrelated to the reports they were rearranging and trading online. News-production was thus a cognitive activity they engaged in to the precise extent that they disengaged from their embodied, experiential lives, and to connect their faces to a screen.

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<sup>42</sup> See Lan Hongwen, *Fan Changjiang: Jizhe Shengya Yanjiu (Fan Changjiang: Research on the Journalist's Career)*, (Beijing: Zhongguo Renmin Gongan Daxue Chubanshe, 2009). And Chang-Tai Hung, "Paper Bullets: Fan Changjiang and New Journalism in Wartime China" in *Modern China* Vol. 17 No. 4 (October 1991), pp. 427-468.

Recent works in media theory and social psychology have looked at how the habitual use of new information and communication technologies generates a sense of disembodiment and cognitive absorption in digital or ‘virtual’ domains.<sup>43</sup> As these studies tend to evaluate the new technologies according to old measures such as ‘social cohesion’ and ‘solidarity,’ however, they tend not to engage the issue of how our very sense of social reality is perhaps being changed. A different way into this question must therefore be found. One possibility is to understand *The Times* high-tech news-production practice through the work of Jean Baudrillard, as characteristic of a society that has become an autonomous “system of signs.”<sup>44</sup> Building on Marshall McLuhan’s notion that ‘the medium is the message,’ Baudrillard argued that mass communication technologies habituate users to a mode of reception in which variety of content actually produces indifference to all content. Rather than particular messages or news events, what the media user actually registers is the general fact that she is sending and receiving signals. It is this communicative act which, regardless of its content, constitutes her ‘social’ relation to the “mediatized” society of which she is a part. Society, Baudrillard argues, thus becomes a simple matter of maintaining this circulation of signs, in relation to which the individual signaler’s opinions and attachments to them become merely incidental.

From this perspective, journalists at *The Times* might be seen as mechanistically working to reproduce whatever signs bear economic value in a highly commercialized news system. Although Baudrillard was describing media consumption, one could argue that for journalists today, news production was itself a form of news consumption, as the sheer volume of instantly available information on the internet made news-writing always already a re-writing. High-technology communication devices enabled them to work faster, but in doing so they only alienated themselves more efficiently from the reality about which they reported. One could say that rather than experiencing current events in China as part of their intellectual and social lives, journalists reported on these events in a way that was designed to keep their intellects uninvolved. Rather than develop a keener sensitivity to trends and conditions in society, over time they would actually become *less* attuned to its pulse. Baudrillard’s description of pacified television watchers would then nicely fit them too:

So we live, sheltered by signs, in the denial of the real. A miraculous security: when we look at the images of the world, who can distinguish this brief irruption of reality from the profound pleasure of not being there? The image, the sign, the message – all these things we ‘consume’ – represent our tranquility consecrated by distance from the world, a distance more comforted by the allusion to the real (even where the allusion is violent) than compromised by it.<sup>45</sup>

Baudrillard’s work, however, was less an effort to comprehend new media practices and forms of social life, than a project of rereading existing conceptualizations

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<sup>43</sup> For example, see James E. Katz, *Magic in the Air: Mobile Communication and the Transformation of Social Life* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2006); and Rich Ling, *New Tech, New Ties: How Mobile Communication Is Reshaping Social Cohesion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008); Heather A. Horst and Daniel Miller, *The Cell Phone: An Anthropology of Communication* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2006).

<sup>44</sup> Baudrillard 1998 [1970].

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

of society. Responding to structuralist social theory on the one hand and the inability of Marxist theory to engage with questions of culture on the other, Baudrillard sought to locate social value at the level of the sign, rather than in the materially or pragmatically conceived object. Because of the emphasis this places on symbols, images and text as the units of value and exchange, the critique of mass media that Baudrillard developed on this basis seems in many ways to anticipate such phenomenon as internet-based media industries and consumer cultures. Baudrillard writes, for instance, of ‘simulacra’ as symbols that in their power to command social and economic resources, effectively take the place of the real things for which they stand. He writes of ‘hyperreality’ as the cultural world that is conjured by the circulation of such signs, which no longer have need of their referent. In these apparently widely applicable concepts, however, lies the very particular thrust of his critique.

Written amidst the felt inability of Marxist theory to explain its own impotence in France of the 1960s and 70s, Baudrillard’s notions of simulacra and of the hyperreal – as social phenomena generated by a political-economic state that compels individuals to interact in and by denying their subjective interiority – serve to articulate and support his broader thesis that “the dialectic itself...has reached the moment of deadlock.”<sup>46</sup> In the context of Marxist social theory, Baudrillard’s work thus offers a creative and illuminating innovation. For the same reason, however, his individual concepts may not be the most appropriate for trying to understand actual social phenomena.<sup>47</sup> In order to convey the idea that consumption-driven capitalism conflates social value with commercial value by positioning the subject in an integrative “system of signs”, for instance, Baudrillard critically neglects all realms of experience that exist outside of this conceptual system. For the purpose of critique, that is, he argues that these realms do not exist. His writings provide provocative images of contemporary society as the absolute state of capitalism, in which individuals become mere nodes through which commercial value circulates. But in order to paint these images in more striking colors, Baudrillard closes off the question of how those concepts are concretely related to any particular group of people’s material and experiential lives. We could easily extend Baudrillard’s critique of mass mediated capitalism to the question of journalism in China, and call it a different case of the same. To do so, however, would not be to initiate inquiry into a social and historical phenomenon, but only to pronounce our faith in the inherent value of Baudrillard’s concepts. With the significance of our field determined in advance, our ‘study’ of the field would become a mere matter of encoding its data into the conceptual language of our choice. The ‘findings’ generated by such a project would, like Baudrillard’s, be wrought at the expense of the anthropological problem itself. Still another approach must, therefore, be found.

Within the anthropological literature on writing, several works offer suggestive, though tentative claims about how different practices of representation may affect our habits of thought. Jack Goody’s essays on the study of primitive society and the cognitive effects of basic writing techniques, for example, argue that it was in part the rise of certain graphic representation techniques that led to the development of those reflective capacities which we now consider distinctively modern and rational. In spoken

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<sup>46</sup> Baudrillard 1994 [1981]:182.

<sup>47</sup> Unless one wants to remain squarely within the boundaries of existing Marxist social theory, which may also be a defensible position.

conversation, the significance of words is always overwhelmed by the contingent context of their utterance, he explains. Writing a word down, on the other hand, at once objectifies and decontextualizes it, making it possible to conceive of words as terms with stable meanings and general significance. The practice of drawing tables further encouraged the development of systematicity in thought, Goody argues, by placing terms in visibly fixed relation to one another; and by provoking cognitive responses to visual disturbances such as “the abhorrence of the empty box” in a table.<sup>48</sup> Graphic representations also make ideas available for scrutiny and critique in a way that spoken arguments do not – it becomes possible to repeatedly return to the claim “in much greater detail, in its parts as well as in its whole, backwards as well as forwards, out of context as well as in its setting.”<sup>49</sup> One can discern inadequacies in the way terms are related, for example, and the accumulation of skepticism that thus became possible contributed to the emergence of Logic and Epistemology.<sup>50</sup>

Friedrich Kittler follows this line of development further, by looking at the effect that the move from handwriting to typewriting seems to have had on philosophy in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe.<sup>51</sup> The German sense of a Spirit of world history was closely tied to the practice of handwriting, he suggests, for in that medium one could feel that it was Spirit which guided the inscribing hand, and that man was the channel of its realization.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Jack Goody. *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1977. p. 156. Goody’s book is designed primarily as a response to the sharp, binary contrast between the “primitive” and the “modern” that Levi-Strauss posits in *The Savage Mind*. Goody shows that literacy techniques factor significantly in the development of different intellectual habits and perhaps even cognitive capacities, which exist around the world in too diverse an array to be forced into only two categories. What Goody seems to overlook, however, is that Levi-Strauss’ binary distinction is not put forth as a claim about empirical facts, but rather identified as a distinction that the “moderns” habitually make *despite* its running counter to empirical facts. What Goody seems to overlook, in other words, is the move that Levi-Strauss is making to treat concepts rather than empirical facts as the proper objects of anthropological study. Precisely by showing how the primitive/modern binary works as a concept, Levi-Strauss stops us imagining that the two categories might simply describe or represent reality. He thereby threw open the question which is still ours today: If “the primitives” do not as such exist, just what is it that anthropology studies? It is likely that Goody’s findings are empirically very sound – there are undoubtedly many different communities in history, whose different intellectual and cultural lives have been shaped by their different literary practices. But the anthropological significance or meaning of this fact is no longer clear, once the primitive/modern framework is no longer held to define Humanity and its history, but has rather been shown to be merely one among many binary pairs by which people contrive to make sense of the world.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>50</sup> Against other anthropologists’ claims that traditional and scientific thought are distinguished by the latter’s skepticism towards established beliefs, Goody argues that “What seems to be the *essential* difference, however, is not so much the skeptical attitude in itself but the accumulation (or reproduction) of skepticism” that writing enables. p. 42.

<sup>51</sup> Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999 [1986]).

<sup>52</sup> Kittler quotes Carl Schmitt’s *The Buribunks: A Historico-Philosophical Meditation* (1918): “We are the letters produced by the writing hand of the world spirit and surrender ourselves consciously to this writing power. In that we recognize true freedom. In that we also see the means of putting ourselves into the position of the world spirit. The individual letters and words are only the tools of the ruses of world history. More than one recalcitrant “no” that has been thrown into the text of history feels proud of its opposition and thinks of itself as a revolutionary, even though it may only negate revolution itself. But by consciously merging with the writing of world history we comprehend its spirit, we become equal to it, and – without ceasing to be written – we yet understand ourselves as writing subjects. That is how we outrose the ruse of world history – namely, by writing it while it writes us.”



Nietzsche, by contrast, was a philosopher of the typewriter in the sense that that machine made it technologically possible for the progressively blind philosopher to produce his telegram-like aphorisms, presenting man as a mere cipher incident to the events of 'will' or power. Foucault's archaeology of knowledge and conception of man as a product of discourse then became possible on the basis of this Nietzschean, typewriter-key sense of autonomous signs, whose always possible but never necessary recombinations constitute various illusions of man. "Singular and spatialized, material and standardized, stockpiles of signs indeed undermine so-called Man with his intentions and the so-called world with its meaning." Kittler writes, "Only that [Foucault's method of] discourse analysis ignores the fact that the factual condition is no simple methodological example but is in each case a techno-historical event."<sup>53</sup>

Such claims about communication technology are highly interpretive, perhaps to a degree that borders on speculation. Yet they are tantalizing as well, for although we cannot hope to provide a definitive answer, neither can we simply stop considering the question of how the techniques by which we read, write and converse must affect the way we think and are. If man is indeed a cultural and historical creature, then he not only creates new tools but is in turn created by them, or by the habitual use of them. Reflecting on one's experience of using various communication tools, it is difficult not to suspect that, as Goody quoting George Miller suggests, "the kind of linguistic recording that people do seems... to be the very life-blood of the thought process"<sup>54</sup>; and that in becoming so adept at certain techniques of communication, we must be training our consciousnesses to work in some ways and not in others.

Bringing this less certain but more open-ended view to *The Times*, we might consider thinking about the journalists' practice as conducive to the development of a certain proficiency at switching between multiple modes of engagement, in multiple planes of reality. Since the news-production process does not involve their experiences and sentiments, the journalists learn to keep these outside of their work modes. Trying to synthesize the disparate elements through writing would only hinder the process and slow them down. The journalists thus become good at compartmentalizing, and switching back and forth between work and life instead. They learn to conceive of 'news' not as events and developments that affect them personally, but as the particular kind of information that their editors will consider news-worthy. What does affect them personally, meanwhile, they learn to deal with otherwise. The computers that they use to produce news, and the multi-tasking skills which are so well honed by this usage, only enable them to switch more effortlessly between the two. Conducting phone interviews from their living rooms and assembling articles while bored half to tears, they held life and work on parallel planes, and toggled between them just as they did between different programs on a computer.

The problem with this technologically induced form of schizophrenic efficiency (or perhaps, efficient schizophrenia) is not that journalists become thoroughly transformed into hyper-alienated minds, frozen in a static capitalist sign-system. The problem is that they grow accustomed to a sense of facts and representations existing on

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 230. Quotes Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, "the keyboard of a typewriter is not a statement; but the same series of letters, A, Z, E, R, T, listed in a typewriting manual, is the statement of the alphabetical order adopted by French typewriters..."

<sup>54</sup> Goody, p. 109.

one plane, while experience and life exist on another, totally unrelated one. Social reality seems to be made up of these two, disconnected realms. Through the remainder of this dissertation, I will endeavor to determine what the significance of such a writing practice and sense of social reality may be. For now, however, suffice it to say that in *The Times*' news-production process, the planes of representation and experience are neither fused as in Fan's writings nor conflated as in Baudrillard's, but instead made to continuously interrupt each other.

### **What Now Counts as News**

During the Mao era, the news-worthiness of an event was not a question of its recentness, but of its relevance to the People's Revolutionary struggle for Socialism.<sup>55</sup> A news article might appear months after the event in question occurred, if its political or ideological significance had become newly pertinent. Its publication might then trigger a whole string of policy changes, or set a sweeping series of mass campaigns in motion. The contrast between this scenario and the state of China's news media today is striking. Hearing commentaries like Zhang's, it is difficult to imagine how the Communist Party could once have been as ideologically persuasive as it was, or have inspired as many mass movements, of as grand a scale as it did. The fact that the Party had had near-total control over the media, whereas the Internet today makes all manner of reading material available, seems hardly an adequate explanation. The about-turn in attitude is so great that one feels a deeper, more fundamental change must have occurred. Beyond the difference in content, perhaps one factor to consider is the different temporal structure of the Internet as compared to the printed newspaper, which had functioned as the primary medium of mass communication under Mao.

Reflecting on the vital role that newspapers seem to have played in the rise of the modern nation-state, Benedict Anderson has suggested that the ritualized practice of newspaper-reading served to infuse the "empty time" of modernity with a spiritual significance derived from the sense of simultaneity it generated. Anderson writes:

We know that particular morning and evening editions will overwhelmingly be consumed between this hour and that, only on this day, not that... The significance of this mass ceremony – Hegel observed that newspapers serve modern man as a substitute for morning prayers – is paradoxical. It is performed in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull. Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion. Furthermore, this ceremony is incessantly repeated at daily or half-daily intervals through the calendar. What more vivid figure for the secular, historically clocked, imagined community can be envisioned?<sup>56</sup>

In this view, the certainty that everyone else is reading too – that one's fellow citizens are discovering the same information as oneself, at more or less the same time – conjures for the individual reader, the 'imagined community' of the modern nation-state.

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<sup>55</sup> Nunn 1966, McDougall 1984.

<sup>56</sup> Benedict Anderson 2006 [1983]: 35.

It is conceivable that the sense of temporal community conjured by the *People's Daily* could have contributed to the Party's capacity to inspire or provoke mass movements. If so, it would be difficult to find a starker contrast to this image than the Internet-mediated news industry of China today. Almost all of the several thousand newspapers now in print have online editions that they update multiple times a day. News 'portal' (*menhu*) websites have been created which compile links to articles from all of these websites, and reorganize them by topic and time. 'Micro-blog' (*weibo*) websites have also become extremely popular, and many newspapers and news 'portal' companies now have professional micro-bloggers covering events 'live' by continuously 'blogging' or posting short messages and photographs directly from the scene. Indeed, even non-professional micro-bloggers frequently function as amateur journalists, when they post descriptions and photographs of interesting events that they witnessed. Using her computer or 'smart phone' at any time and place she likes, today's Chinese news-reader thus chooses her news from a plethora of news articles, provided by an array of news-providers, working in news-cycles that range from the minutely to the monthly.<sup>57</sup>

This change in the temporality of the media affects not only the methods by which journalists produce news, but also the kind of information that newspapers can now market as 'news.' On the one hand, the post-Mao government's market reform of the news sector and relaxation of ideological control over it have oriented China's newspapers away from socialist propaganda objectives, towards commercial values such as popular interest and timeliness, or newness.<sup>58</sup> At the same time, however, the presence of the Internet as an all-seeing, almost instantaneous news report creates the sense that new information is always already old. Because new news updates are continuously made available on the Internet, printed newspapers no longer presume to be the first to inform their readers about breaking events. Rather than a community of readers waiting together to learn of the latest developments, today's newspaper producer must envision an assortment of readers who have already seen something about some new events on a micro-blog, and read some updates about others on a news 'portal.' Just what a newspaper should then provide becomes a difficult question to answer.

"Who needs printed newspapers anymore?!" Chen, head of *The Times*' marketing department veritably spat between aggressively taken drags of his cigarette. "It's all there

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<sup>57</sup> A brief introduction to the different genres of news: News can be had fastest from micro-blogs, live-update features on news websites and from 'news portal' websites. 'News portal' websites, or *menhu wangzhan* (门户网站), are websites made up entirely of links to news articles, images and videos produced by other content-providers. By selecting and organizing information from all over the internet into one manageable and convenient webpage, these websites serve as the user's 'portal' to the world wide web. Of the printed newspapers, evening newspapers, morning newspapers and daily newspapers are fastest. These are followed by weekly newspapers, which try to make up for what they lack in speed with greater comprehensiveness and depth in their news coverage. Whereas an article in a daily newspaper might cover the basic facts of an event and brief statements by eye-witnesses, for instance, an article for *The Times* would feature extensive interviews with the key figures involved in the event, and an analysis that situates it in the context of broader national developments. Slower still and even more information-rich are then articles and editorials in monthly news magazines or journals. These publications work at the level of national issues and trends, rather than isolated news events. They feature reports by journalists who have been embedded in their field for weeks or even months; and opinion pieces by academics, business leaders and other professional experts, catering to readers with a high level of specialized knowledge.

<sup>58</sup> Song 2009

on the Internet. Eye-witnesses can write about it from the scene itself – and post photographs they’ve taken with their cell-phones! Any reader can instantly find out everything there is to know. He doesn’t have to wait around for your reporter to get there, for your editors to change this phrase and that, and for your newspaper to get printed.” As the man whose job it is to improve *The Times* circulation, Chen was personally plagued by such threats to the newspaper’s sales appeal. “This is the age of the internet! If you printed newspapers try to compete on speed and information, what do you think, do you think you stand even a chance?” he addressed this disparagingly rhetorical question to a personification of his professional woes. “Selection!” he exclaimed. “That’s what a newspaper can offer now!”

Although Chen declared this as though it were a revelation, the idea is an old and commonly referenced one in China’s news industry. Precisely because it makes information so rapidly and abundantly available, the argument goes, the Internet by itself is too confusing and untrustworthy a news source for most readers. A printed newspaper can turn this to its advantage by marketing itself as an authoritative, one-stop source for only the most important and reliable news items of the day. If not as a generally authoritative newspaper, it can at least try to make a name for itself as the best provider of a particular kind of news, such as investigative journalism or financial news. The goal, so rosily described by hopeful newspaper executives, is to develop some distinctive quality or character by which to rise above the rabble of news-providers and become a leader of the news media, steering the course that other hopefuls follow.

Unfortunately for Chen, however, *The Times* was having difficulty doing this. And like most newspapers that did not lead the industry, it followed those who did. Much of the journalists’ and editors’ energies were spent finding out what other newspapers were reporting on, and then rushing to cover those stories too. This was not for shortage of new events to write about; it was a way of guessing which, out of so many of them, were likely to be of most popular interest and hence most able to attract a reader. Otherwise, it was difficult for journalists to determine which new events to count as ‘news.’ Intervention by government offices still played some part in answering the question – *The Times* was regularly prohibited from reporting on certain events, and strongly encouraged to report on others. For the most part, however, it was up to the newspaper to decide what news to provide. Free from any overarching ideological purpose on the one hand, and eager to turn a profit on the other, the newspaper aimed to provide whatever the market for news would recognize as ‘news.’ Since readers by definition did not know in advance what the ‘news’ would be, the question was effectively decided the few newspapers that had a big enough reader-base and reputation to create the sense of a general opinion. Those newspapers still struggling to establish themselves, meanwhile, could only look to these more successful competitors for clues about what they should be providing. *The Times* did what it could to make itself distinctive – featuring exclusive interviews whenever possible, for instance, composing provocative headlines and using interesting graphics. In terms of basic content, however, everyday news-production for them involved more imitation than differentiation. If other newspapers were running stories on the possibility of an RMB revaluation, then RMB revaluation was probably a good thing to write ‘news’ about.

“News these days doesn’t just happen, it has to get stirred up (炒作起来),” Feng, another journalist at *The Times*, once explained to me. “So many tragic and disastrous

things happen in China everyday that never make it into the news. But if one newspaper happens to report an event, and others happen to follow, media coverage leads to more media coverage, until that event becomes the center of great public attention.” Feng and I were on our way to a peripheral district of Beijing, to cover precisely one such event. Only it was neither a tragedy nor a disaster that had been ‘stirred up’ this time, but an event so inconsequential that it was difficult to see why everyone was taking such interest. An old man had rented a one-room apartment in a low-income neighborhood, built several bed-sized lockers inside it, and was claiming to have solved China’s affordable housing shortage. The lockers were too small and cage-like to attract tenants, and cheaper bunk-bed residence was already available next door. The mediocre innovation would have failed and passed quietly into oblivion, had one leading newspaper not happened to pick it up. “Old Man in his Seventies Builds Eight Capsule Apartments,” the headline ran. Several websites immediately republished the article. “Old Man in his Seventies Builds Eight Capsule Apartments, Just to Solve the Youth Housing Problem,” an embellished headline now read.<sup>59</sup> By week’s end, several other newspapers had written their own stories on the event, and journalists were arriving like pilgrims to interview the exhilarated old man.

Not surprisingly, the many articles that resulted were largely similar in content. Yet rather than exhausting the story’s news-value as one might expect, this proliferation of publicity seemed only to make the old man and his experiment even more news-worthy. The media buzz he had already generated came to be seen as itself a noteworthy phenomenon, suggestive of strong popular sentiment on the rising cost of housing in China. Weekly newspapers and magazines now sent reporters, and foreign news media began to pick up the story as well. Over the subsequent two weeks, the old man and his lockers were featured in almost one hundred Chinese newspapers, on Reuters newsfeed, CNN and ABC News online, in *The Wall Street Journal* and the *International Business Times*, the UK’s *Telegraph*, Spain’s *El Mundo*, *Le Figaro* in France, *The Tribune* in India and Singapore’s *Asia One*. The old man was interviewed at press conferences with hundreds in attendance, on the radio, on television talk shows and in videos broadcast on the internet. The media ‘stir’ lasted almost three weeks. But just as the old man began to get used to his new celebrity, the attention began to fade. He reworked his ‘capsule’ design in response to the criticisms he had received, churning out power-point presentations and AutoCAD renderings. He wrote an open letter to Premier Wen Jiabao arguing for the mass construction of his design, and applied for patents on them. But the moment, it seemed, was over. Whereas his every opinion had once merited many journalists’ attention, nothing he did now, it seemed, could be news. Whereas they had once clamored to capture his every word, reporters now responded coolly to the old man’s repeated invitations. Surprised at first by how much media coverage he received, he was now surprised by how quickly all the attention then vaporized.

Though he did not know it, what this old man had experienced was a run through the industry’s news cycle. During the first spate of reports, the old man’s value lay in his novelty. As the articles accumulated, the fact that so many newspapers were covering him soon made it necessary for any newspaper claiming to be an adequate source of news,

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<sup>59</sup> Yuan Yi, Qixun Laoren Jian Ba Jian Jiaonang ‘Gongyu,’ <http://bjyouth.y.net.com/article.jsp?oid=64490015>, March 28, 2010. And 2010-3-29 《北京青年报》“七旬老人建八间胶囊公寓，只为解决青年人住房” <http://house.people.com.cn/GB/11244891.html>

to cover him too. Editors at *The Times*, for example, had felt that the story was too hotly discussed for them to overlook. Although Feng had little interest in the whole affair, and even less to add to the many existing reports, there was thus no choice for him but to get in line to interview the old man. Once the coverage had snowballed to the point where the news seemed saturated with the story, however, the old man's news-value suddenly dropped. Running a story on him at this point would only reflect a newspaper's pathetically slow response time and lack of more recent news content. No matter what the old man did to improve his solution to China's affordable housing problem, therefore, his actions could henceforth only register as tedious and stale.

Among the effects of the Internet and the massive expansion of the news media it has enabled, we may have to include this fact that what now counts as 'news' tends to be whatever the news industry 'stirs up.' By creating a sense that the news is always already available, the very presence of the Internet changes what a fledgling newspaper like *The Times* can aim to provide. Its role cannot simply be to avail people of all that they might need or want to know about recent events. Readers can find all that out easily, from countless other online sources. All a newspaper can try to do now is provide a differential – better selection, more reliable sources, more exclusive interviews – anything that rival news-providers might not be able to offer. What a newspaper must now count as 'news,' in other words, does not depend on the real significance of an event, for the value of a 'news' article is no longer sought in its relation to reality. Rather, its value lies in the marginal difference between itself and all other articles, for it is to this difference that a reader's interest is thought to be drawn.<sup>60</sup> As journalists at *The Times* discipline themselves into producing stories which are similar enough to others to count as 'news' yet different enough to be seen as a novel addition, the news industry as a whole thus proceeds through cycles of 'stirred up' and cooled down events.

Studies of the news media in America have amply described the alienating effects of its commercially driven and technologically powered expansion. Before Baudrillard, an illustrious lineage of critics from Walter Lippman to Jurgen Habermas had all tried to convey the threat to human society that they perceived in the unrestrained proliferation of media content. Among them, C. Wright Mills offered an analysis of how the media trains people in "a sort of psychological illiteracy," or the inability to interpret one's own life.<sup>61</sup> Writing in the 1950s, Mills found that behind the appearance of a predominantly middle-class democracy, American society increasingly consisted of a small cabal of all-powerful decision-makers on top, and a broad base of passive and disenfranchised citizens on bottom. He argued that the media's expansion and diversification did not counter this development, and encourage democratic participation by keeping people better informed or offering them different viewpoints to compare; rather, it made people even more acquiescent by continuously presenting the world in "stereotypes" that gradually hindered their ability to interpret things in any other terms.

What mattered, according to Mills, was not the range of information available, but the resources one had for interpreting things, for transforming them into meanings. Even experiences in real life had to be interpreted to become experiences proper, rather than

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<sup>60</sup> Cf. Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978 [1964]).

<sup>61</sup> Mills, C. Wright. 1956. *The Power Elite*. New York: Oxford University Press. p. 311.

mere sensations.<sup>62</sup> Where a continuously expanding media system became people's only source of interpretive categories, the handful of stereotypes that the media provided would tend to reduce all diversity of news and life to the same, few meanings. By continuously employing the stereotype of all American citizens being free and equal individuals, for example, America's media made it difficult for people to understand their lives in any other way. Even if they did feel in some inchoate way oppressed, exploited and unfree, they did not have the terms for interpreting this as part of a broader social condition, or as resulting from the severely hierarchical structure of their society. Instead of enabling more civic engagement and critical debate, the proliferation of media content actually discouraged people from even trying to understand their social realities. As Mills wrote,

The media provide much information and news about what is happening in the world, but they do not enable the listener or the viewer truly to connect his daily life with these larger realities. They do not connect the information they provide on public issues with the troubles felt by the individual. They do not increase rational insight into tensions, either those in the individual or those of the society which are reflected in the individual. On the contrary, they distract him and obscure his chance to understand himself or his world, by fastening his attention upon artificial frenzies that are resolved within the program framework, usually by violent action or by what is called humor. In short, for the viewer they are not really resolved at all.<sup>63</sup>

In the case of contemporary China, the towering historical backdrop of Mao's "propaganda state," and its continuity into the present as a one-party government that still partially owns and regularly censors the press, can make the Internet appear to function as an agent of liberalization, if not of democracy itself.<sup>64</sup> But as Mills' writings attest, more media content does not by itself produce different meanings or alternative sources of interpretive authority. Indeed, what *The Times'* experience suggests is that the Internet's expansion of China's news media may actually hinder the development of such alternatives. The simultaneous presence of multiple temporalities first reduces the meaning of 'news' to the newness of new information; then constitutes 'news'-value as the marginal difference between one version and another. To produce this value, journalists like Kong and Feng must not try to interpret events or 'transform' them into meanings. Their job is not to provide understandings of social reality, but to keep track of what other newspapers are reporting and to report something similar.

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<sup>62</sup> "The kind of experience, in short, that might serve as a basis for resistance to mass media is not an experience of raw events, but the experience of meanings. The fleck of interpretation must be there in the experience if we are to use the word experience seriously." Ibid., p. 312.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 315. Many authors have since followed this line of critique. Riesman was a contemporary. Later followed Michael Schudson, Noam Chomsky, Todd Gittlin, Robert McChesney, Thomas de Zengotita.

<sup>64</sup> Phrase was coined by Peter Kenez to describe the USSR, in Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929*. It was applied to China by Daniel C. Lynch, *After the Propaganda State: Media, Politics and "Thought Work" in Reformed China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. For the Internet as an agent of democracy in China, see Yang Guobin. 2011. *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online*. New York: Columbia University Press.

What falls out of this self-referencing system of value is the very possibility of authority – for authority is located in the question of how a representation relates to reality, and this is precisely the question that the Internet-mediated news media renders moot. Within its operational logic, what matters is how representations relate to one another, not how any of them relate to reality. With every news-producer constantly looking to every other producer for a sense of what news to produce, a small number of events get ‘stirred up’ and come to be featured everywhere. Sometimes these are “tragic and disastrous” scandals, and sometimes they are silly trifles. Sometimes a scandal gets ‘stirred up’ to big enough proportions that the relevant parties feel compelled to address the issue.<sup>65</sup> But these are matters of chance. There is no necessary correlation between news coverage and social change. Just as quickly as a news stir begins, so does it die down; and the attention of the crowd is drawn on to the next novel event, while the last one is left utterly unresolved.<sup>66</sup>

One year after the ‘capsule apartment’ news blitz had blown over, Beijing’s affordable housing shortage remained, and the energetic old man was still working on his designs. He had just finalized plans for the fifth generation capsule, which took into consideration all the criticisms that the media had leveled at his earlier versions. Since the government was not taking up his idea for the mass construction of ‘capsule apartment’ complexes all over the country, the old man was now looking for a real estate developer who would invest the capital to realize his project. No longer able to command the media resources that he could a year before, he called a press conference in his own apartment. By a half hour past the scheduled starting time, three journalists and one photographer had shown up.

The old man shepherded the journalists into his cluttered living room, now a makeshift media center dominated by a three-by-four foot computer monitor that glowed with an old news article about him. He had rigged a spotlight over the center of the room, and set up a semi-professional video camera on a tripod in one corner. Before beginning the conference, he trained this camera on the seat he would occupy and set it to record. A smaller camcorder was hooked up to the large video camera. He positioned this so that through its viewfinder, he could see what the large video camera was recording. He checked his appearance, adjusted the cameras’ heights, and began his address.

“I would like to present my completed design for the Fifth Generation Capsule Apartment. And to announce that I am willing to donate this design for free, to any person or organization who will build and manage it as a charity,” he spoke loudly into the camera, and then turned his attention to us. “Which newspapers are you from? Oh yes, you did a photographic story on me last year. And you? I don’t remember that. Did you send me a copy? Send me a link to the online version in an email.” On his oversized computer monitor, he then presented a series of documents: the open letter he had written to Premier Wen Jiabao; an official letter certifying that his patent application for the ‘Capsule Apartment’ was being processed; video clips from his invited guest appearance

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<sup>65</sup> For examples see Zhao, 1998.

<sup>66</sup> If one were looking to identify a mechanism, one might see this as a way in which the news media achieves social efficacy. It is a mechanism that works not by rational discourse, say, but by the emotiveness and irrationality of the reading crowd gathering to a high enough pitch that the government or corporate offices involved feels pressured into responding.



on a CCTV talk show program; and the front page of a *China Daily* issue, in which a small photograph of him is set in the top left hand corner, diagonally above the main story photograph of Jiang Zemin and Barack Obama shaking hands.

“What I have invented is a scientific solution to the problem of housing,” he picked up again. “So many young people in China today are educated but unemployed. They want privacy, but they can’t afford proper homes. Capsule apartments are the sensible solution to this dilemma,” he looked at the reporters for any sign of response. “They’re not the most comfortable, but they’re cheap, and when you have no money you’re willing to put up with discomfort. Later, when these people have made enough money, then their expectations will start to go up and they can move to somewhere better. Capsule apartments are not meant to be permanent homes. They’re a bridge to help young people move on to the next stage of life,” he paused and looked expectantly at his small and stubbornly passive audience. “Any questions? Do you have any questions you want to ask me about it?”

But the journalists were inert. They were familiar with his spiel and saw nothing new in his updates. “Did he telephone you to ask you to come too?” one of them whispered to me, as the old man took to shuffling through photographs and past articles on his large computer screen, commenting on each one. “Find me some people in real estate!” he abruptly demanded. “All the developers I’ve met so far avoid the low-income housing sector because they don’t think they can profit from it. I need some one with the capital to donate. I’ve already put 280,000 yuan into perfecting the design and building the proto-types. That’s more than a retiree like me can afford.” He began to get visibly worked up, but the journalists only nodded politely.

“The problem hasn’t been solved yet!” he said to them agitatedly. “This is something I really can’t figure out. Is the news media trying to solve problems or is it just trying to create a big commotion, followed by nothing?” The journalists exchanged glances. While the old man was frustrated by the media’s cold response to his design improvements, the journalists knew perfectly well why most of their colleagues were not there. Although some were personally sympathetic towards the old man, all had many other things they were busy with. As working professionals with results to deliver, they have to be highly selective about what kind of information they attend to and when. Only the old man does not know how this system works.

“What should the news report?” he asked rhetorically, but with a trace of genuine doubt. “Results! And if results don’t come out of this, hasn’t it all been a big waste of everyone’s time? Creating news for news’ sake – wouldn’t that be totally meaningless? There was so much media attention last year. If some *results* don’t come of it, hasn’t it all been a great farce?” The journalists politely nodded.

### **Manual-Intellectual Labor**

Now that the most fundamental requirement of a news-producer is to keep up with other news-producers, the need to always be near to new information has become a primary source of journalists’ work anxiety and fatigue. *The Times* being a weekly newspaper, the pace at which its journalists worked was actually relatively slow, compared to daily newspapers and news websites. For a sense of the contrast, I worked for several months at city-level daily newspaper in Beijing, assisting the journalist who

covered its 'China Politics' beat. While the term 'China Politics' indicates a broad and complex field of knowledge, what it meant in the practice of a city-level daily was significantly less. Sang's job consisted primarily of attending government press conferences on diplomatic or military issues. Producing typically "tofu-sized" news reports on these events was not hard work in the sense of requiring deep reflection. It was hard in the sense that one had to continuously rush from one event to another, and never be too timid or embarrassed to demand of complete strangers, answers to the most baldly-phrased questions. Since he had purchased a car, Sang was able to get more quickly around the city and could attend three or even four official events a day. Like most journalists, he was paid a small base salary and had to earn the bulk of his income from the writer's fee that the newspaper paid by the printed word. Because articles were short, and not every one that he wrote would necessarily get published, it was important for Sang to cast his net wide.

As soon as Sang got to the work every morning, he would flip open his laptop computer and start two internet chat programs, check one email account and browse through two micro-blog websites. Like Kong, it was through the contacts he kept on these communication systems that he acquired much of the information he needed – which government office was holding what event, when, how to get press passes for them, and so on. Even when he already had several events scheduled for the day, Sang busied himself looking for more, to fill up the rest of the week and month ahead. Sometimes a breaking event occurred that fell within the range of 'China Politics,' in which case, Sang milked his network of contacts even harder and faster, to find out when and where he might catch the relevant interviewees, and for any inside connection that his collection of acquaintances might yield.

When he had gathered enough information for one sitting and it was time to attend the scheduled events of the day, Sang would set out in his four-wheel drive SUV. In case more useful information should come in while he is on the go, he wore his cellular phone on a strap around his neck and in his left ear kept a remote-technology earpiece that allowed him to take telephone calls without having to lift the phone to his face.<sup>67</sup> Arriving at a press conference, he registered at the media reception desk and flipped through the press packet he was handed. Then he began pacing restlessly about the back of the conference room. He had no need to listen because the press packet already contained all the information that would be covered in the official speeches. What Sang needed was to supplement these with a few direct, unscripted quotations from people with official titles. His objective at the meeting was thus to catch as many such people as he could during intermissions, on their trips to the toilet, while they are trying discretely to leave early, or in the moment of mingling that occurs immediately after an event ends. Sang was on the prowl for such an opportunity. As soon as one occurred, he muscled and elbowed his way to the front of the throng of journalists who had the same goal in mind. One fellow reporter took issue with Sang's elbow and the two briefly exchanged words of aggression. But neither really had time for the fight, as the race to the interviewee was on. They quickly they gave each other up and advanced in parallel upon their original target.

"Once you have the information in hand, writing is merely a matter of arrangement," Sang explained to me as we sped in his SUV from one press event to

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<sup>67</sup> Blue-tooth technology.

another. “It is wresting the information from people – fast! – that takes effort.” A hirsute and muscular man, Sang seemed to live and breathe in the awareness that any information he held at one moment would at the next be worthless. This made events which were leisurely and predictable for others, extremely time-sensitive and stressful for him. When a government education office organizes a high-school student exchange program with Japan, for example, the sending-off lunch for each year’s students is not typically a tense affair. But when Sang received word that such a lunch was being held, he had only hours to get to the scene, conduct some interviews and churn out an article by the evening press deadline. If he had waited till the next day, the information would still be factually true but it would no longer be news. “This is the business of one-time-use info. The journalist’s job isn’t to mull over things and come up with his own subjective opinion. It is to report the objective facts, to transmit them to the reader clearly and quickly. You have to pull the info in and turn it right back out, not sit on it,” he told me as he wove between lanes to try to go faster. “Today’s newspaper is a valuable product, tomorrow it will be used to wrap fish.”

From Sang’s perspective, journalism seemed to be less of an intellectual activity than a physical one, a marathon run by fast-moving and digitally armed information snatchers, racing to gather and rearrange words into articles. He and his colleagues often spoke about the toll that this kind of work took on them. “Journalists have the highest divorce rates!” one colleague half-jokingly informed me over lunch. “Their hours are too unpredictable. And even when they’re home, they’re there, but not really *there*. They’ve got their minds on work still. And they can’t stop touching their cell phones,” he nodded towards Sang, who scrolling through a news website while waiting for his food, unintentionally served as evidence for the claim. “Professional disease,” Sang, single, retorted without looking up. “News is by definition a fast-paced industry. You can’t schedule your own time, of course you can’t have your own life.” Apart from such costs to their own lives, the journalists also lamented a general decline in the quality of China’s news media, which they said was a consequence of its ever faster pace of production. The instant availability of information on the Internet, they said, forced news-producers to react to events more quickly, to put out reports before they had time to understand their full significance, or even to find out the whole picture. News articles became shallower and less well-written, which in turn shortened news-readers’ attention spans, and made proper intellectual engagement all but impossible. Instead of a source of insight and analysis, the news became a kind of “information fast food,” something to quickly consume and not think twice about.

Yet although they complained of its effects, none of the journalists I met would consider the question of whether the technology itself should be abandoned. Although they had only been in use for less than two decades – a mere blip in the history of a practice which some journalism textbooks trace back to Tang dynasty imperial edicts, and others trace to Shang dynasty oracle bones – Internet technologies had so thoroughly redefined the news industry that it was now considered impossible to produce news without them. Of course, this ‘impossibility’ was not of a moral or political nature. Its necessity was the *de facto* necessity of things that one must do only because everyone else is doing them too. Sang did not entangle himself in the question of why Chinese journalism had become this way, nor had he any use for imagining how it could be different. Working and living under relentless pressure as he did, it was enough for him

that this was how it was – news was fast and shallow because technology now enabled it to be so; and because technology enabled it to be so, news was now fast and shallow. Thus were recent changes translated into axiomatic principles; and everyone seemingly brought together in the pursuit of a future that no one actually thought was good. “Sometimes I think I have a disease,” Sang said, “Some kind of information addiction, like I can never get enough of it. No matter how much I read through, it’s like I can never be filled up.” “That’s what makes you a good journalist!” his colleague laughed. “When you lose that feeling is when you’d better find another line of work!”

If new technologies thus compelled journalists to compete harder for speed, they also made it possible for journalists to cooperate in unexpected ways. Indeed, the closer that news-production became to manual labor, the easier it was for journalists to divide this labor and produce articles together. This, for instance, was how *The Times* journalist Feng covered the court case of the Beijing Television Cultural Center fire. On Lunar New Year’s night of 2009, half of the spanking new Cultural Center – designed by Rem Koolhaas and heralded as an icon of Beijing’s dynamic thrust into the future – had been set ablaze by misdirected fireworks, and burnt to a blackened crisp. Two years later, legal hearings were beginning for the eleven people who had been held responsible, and *The Times* wanted to cover the trial. As soon as he was assigned the story, Feng began trawling his computer for contacts. He found out that a friend of his was friends with a magazine journalist who had been following the story since it first began. Feng contacted this journalist, Chen, over an internet chat program, and the two exchanged phone numbers.

When Feng arrived at the court house on the morning of the opening trial, he was greeted by some forty fellow journalists and no one for any of them to interview. Those who were involved in the case had already been shuttled into the courtroom through a guarded back entrance, and nobody else was being allowed past the security check. Forty journalists thus milled about the small courthouse waiting room, spilling out on to the front steps, making phone calls, chit-chatting and smoking cigarettes.<sup>68</sup> A seasoned journalist, Feng was not surprised. He took out his cellular phone and called Chen. Maybe Chen had gotten there earlier, and would have some material to share. Since he had been covering the case for longer, he might have an inside connection that could get them into the courtroom, say, or at least let them in on some lesser known details of the case. The two colleagues navigated the crowd over their cellular phones and eventually found each other.

“I don’t have anything either. I’ve been here all morning with nothing, and I doubt anything worthwhile will happen in the afternoon,” Chen said in a brisk, business-like way after they had exchanged the standard self-introductions of people who have corresponded but never met in person. Next to them stood the booth where entrance passes were issued to family members and others with reason to attend a particular hearing. Passes were not available for the CCTV fire trial, but several journalists were attempting to weasel their way in by befriending people who were there to attend a different hearing, getting an entry pass to that hearing through them and then once past security, sneaking into the CCTV fire trial hearing room. Journalists were chatting up unsuspecting family members. Some managed to get themselves included in a group of

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<sup>68</sup> Compared to 10,000 journalists in 1949 there were 550,000 by 1999.

legitimate attendees, while others, less charming or less aggressive, looked on with envy. The most driven among them did eventually get into the main courthouse building that way – but ten minutes later was caught wandering in the hall looking for the CCTV fire trial hearing room, and was promptly spat back into the pool of hapless reporters. Seeing that even this most aggressive envoy of the press had failed to gain access, Feng and Chen strolled back into the waiting room and sat down.

“I know that nothing is going to happen here. But since I’ve come all this way, I can’t just go back empty handed either,” Chen gave expression to the bind they were all in. He was a jittery young man, who shook one leg so hard while he sat that the whole row of seats and everyone in them rocked slightly along with him. “I knew they weren’t going to let anyone in, but the editor said to just try my luck,” Feng harmonized with his tone of futility, “So what else can one do.” “There’s no choice but to sit here and wait,” Chen rejoined rapidly, “I want to leave, but you can’t just accept a ‘no returns’ venture like that. Coming all the way out here is too big an investment of time and energy. Something usable will turn up sooner or later.” Feng assented amicably and they began to chat about other things – their mutual friend, past reporting adventures, shared hobbies. All around them, other journalists were relaxing into resignation as well. They chatted gaily and exchange business cards. Some reporters who followed the law beat knew each other from previous similar encounters, and took this as a serendipitous mini-reunion. Others were complete newcomers to the industry and energetically made the rounds, exchanging business cards with every journalist there, as though their bosses had told them that the best way to start becoming a journalist was to make connections with other journalists.

Eventually, as Chen predicted, something usable did happen. Nearing lunch time, two women walked out of the courthouse. Forty journalists leapt out of their seats and instantly had them surrounded. “How are you related to the accused? What is he accused of? Do you think he’s guilty? How are the court proceedings going?” Questions and voice-recorders were shoved into the faces of an aunt and a sister of the man who had driven the fireworks from Hebei into Beijing. Forty audio-recorders captured their slightly nervous responses. Journalists asked about their family background, their feelings about the charges and hopes about the verdict. When none could think of any more useful information to solicit, they let the women carry on their way. Ten minutes later, another person walked out of the courthouse and forty journalists swarmed forth again. But this turned out to be a false alarm, as the man had just come from an unrelated hearing.

“We’ve given him a scare!” one journalist giggled as the bewildered man walked away. “Wouldn’t you be scared if such a big mob of people surrounded you all of a sudden?” another responded laughingly, “I mean, look at us!” Spirits were high from the earlier breakthrough, and after a morning of mingling, everyone seemed to feel familiar enough to share a moment of light-hearted reflection on the absurdity of the whole situation. “This thronging about of journalists should be a news story in itself,” one photographer said as he showed off the photos he had just taken of the crowd descending upon an innocent man. “We’re really very graceless aren’t we,” one cried in mock dismay as she peered over shoulders at the photographs. “No choice, no choice!” her friend retorted, “To be a good journalist one has to be shameless!”

The mood was still jovial when several minutes later a lawyer involved in the case emerged from the building, and caused a minor stampede. Two speedy journalists

reached him first. He could not legally comment on a trial that was underway, but quite surprisingly decided to give them his cellular phone number. By the time he had said half the numbers, however, eight more journalists had materialized around him and were scribbling furiously. By the time he was finished, thirty more were there. “644 WHAT?” a voice cried from the outer rings of the human circle. “6447439...” someone called back while elsewhere in the circle another exchange began, “47439...” “447 WHAT?” Cries were rallied back and forth with mounting frequency, till a thick drone rose up from the dense little crowd as the slightly shell-shocked lawyer slipped away, probably regretting the decision to give out his phone number.

As the excitement subsided – the brave lawyer’s phone number now securely written down in forty different notebooks, and captured on almost as many audio-recorders – Feng and Chen began to feel they had gathered enough material to consider the trip worthwhile. Some quotations from family relations of the accused, a description of the scene, and one potential phone interview contact – this was about as much as one could hope for out of so closely guarded a news event as this. Aside from a few particularly junior reporters who decided to spend the afternoon there as well, the rest of the crowd dispersed amicably.

Instead of race against one another, it sometimes thus made more sense to journalists to pool their resources and cooperate. They were fellow toilers, after all, caught together in the same narrow straits. Each had an article to deliver, an editor to answer to for it and a by-the-word pay check to bolster before the end of the month. Helping another journalist out did not take away from one’s own performance on these fronts; and it created a potential ally for oneself on future news assignments. Short of freely exchanging written paragraphs, therefore, journalists could work very closely together to more efficiently achieve their common goal.

While such experiences could generate feelings of camaraderie and even solidarity among journalists, however, they did not seem unconnected, for Feng at least, to a disheartening sense of duplicated labor and individual redundancy. From a technical point of view, cooperation was clearly the optimal solution. Although it would make their articles more or less identical, it would nevertheless enable every journalist to fulfill her assignment and move on to the next one. Feng recognized this to be the case. “Being a journalist is like being on a factory production line,” he once told me. “One story after another, you just have to keep turning them out. That’s why you can’t take them too seriously,” he had said. “It’s more important to get the article out than try to perfect it. Honestly speaking, how many people do you think are going to read it? Whether your writing is a little better or a little worse really doesn’t matter that much.” An endless exercise of rearranging information which was disconnected from experience to begin with; an exercise that wove a web of representations which did not change society so much as run parallel to it – these conceptions of how the news sector now worked seemed to make writing an article amount to nothing but adding a few more droplets to a virtually infinite and still rapidly expanding ocean of weightless words. Pooling their informational resources was thus the smartest thing that journalists could do. Yet even though Feng recognized this, to then knowingly write a redundant ‘news’ article must still have been painful for him, as it took him until six the next morning to squeeze a simple report on the court case out of his reluctant fingers.

“Do I really have to write about this?” Feng groaned to the ceiling at four in the morning with two short paragraphs written, his voice hoarse from cigarettes and sleeplessness, and a twist of toilet paper stuffed up one nostril that had just started running. “There’s obviously nothing new to be said.” Hunched over his laptop computer, he scrolled for the fifth time through articles that his colleagues at daily newspapers had written that day, which were already on the various news websites. Every word the sister and aunt had said was already quoted in every imaginable way, and descriptions of tight security at the courthouse abounded. None of Feng’s personal contacts at CCTV had any insider scoop to let him in on. And though he had tried calling the pedestrian lawyer all afternoon, all he got out of that was a voice message repeatedly informing him that the user he was trying to reach had (unsurprisingly) turned off his cellular phone. It was evident that there being literally no new information on the matter, all Feng could be expected to do was assemble the existing data into a short and unnecessary, but basically acceptable article. He himself would have said that this was simply how journalism now worked. Yet when it came to actually writing an insignificant and disposable article, some sensibility in him seemed to revolt against the farce, making the technically straight-forward task of news-production into a long-drawn experience of authorial self-torture.

## Chapter Two: The Newspaper Enterprise

“Attendance at Thursday meetings is mandatory. Meetings begin at 9 am sharp. All late-comers will be fined fifty *yuan* for every fifteen minutes.” One Wednesday afternoon, all the journalists at *The Times* office in Beijing received this text message on their mobile telephones. It had been sent by the head of the Beijing office, Chen. The meeting to which it referred was the newspaper’s weekly review session, at which journalists and editors were meant to collectively read and critique the previous week’s issue. This peer evaluation process was supposed to help the journalists improve the quality of their news-writing. It was also meant to cultivate collegial relations and a sense of cohesion among them, as the nature of their work meant that they were seldom physically present at the office and had little occasion to interact otherwise. The journalists, however, tended not to take this meeting very seriously, often drifting in late or even skipping it altogether. This irked Chen, who at last decided to put his foot down and threaten the journalists with monetary punishment.

At nine o’clock that Thursday morning, however, when six duly intimidated journalists punctually arrived at the newspaper’s office, Chen was nowhere to be seen. “I knew it couldn’t be serious,” Hong, a journalist for the Politics section, scoffed to the others as they sat around the meeting room listlessly. “They impose a fine for arriving late, and then they don’t arrive early enough to collect it!” The small gathering laughed. “I spent thirty *yuan* on a taxi to make it here on time,” one rejoined. “I thought I was saving myself twenty – but it turns out I should have just taken the subway!” More chuckles. Complaining together this way did seem to generate a sense of cohesion among *The Times* staff, only it was as fellow sufferers of the company’s rule, rather than as united fighters for its cause. The cheerfully caustic banter continued throughout the next hour, as more colleagues arrived and the group welcomed each with boisterous demands for payment of the proverbial fifty *yuan* fine. By ten o’clock, all the journalists had arrived but there was still no sign of Chen. “We should fine *him* fifty *yuan*,” someone said wryly. “Fifty *yuan* to us *each*!” another grinned. “What are you talking about? It’s a quarter past ten now. That’s *two hundred and fifty yuan* he owes each of us!” But when Chen did eventually saunter into the office at a quarter past eleven, the half-joking clamor of threats and complaints abruptly fell silent. “Morning boss,” someone said cheekily. A cigarette dangling from his lips and eyes still puffy with sleep, Chen nodded his satisfaction. “Everyone here?” he asked casually. “Yes,” “We’ve all been waiting,” “Since nine,” several murmured in a tone of tentative accusation. But Chen, who had picked up a copy of the week’s newspaper and begun leafing through it, did not seem to notice. “Good,” he said, as he thumbed the corner of each page and appeared to mull over a few articles, “Let’s go to lunch.”

This pattern repeated itself both the next week and the week after. Journalists would arrive punctually, expecting to review the week’s newspaper, only to be stood up by their boss and taken out to an early lunch instead. From the third week on, many journalists no longer believed that the meeting would be held and so began to arrive late again. Some stopped going into the office at all. After several more weeks, Chen began to notice this and to feel that his staff were flouting his orders. He thus sent out another round of threatening text messages, which caused the entire cycle to start over.



In theory, the editorial review meeting was an important forum for the journalists to discuss and improve their writing. Getting together to critique of the structure, logic, language and style of each article was instructive not only for its author but also for all the other journalists and editors, who could learn from each case as an instance of the more general principles of good news-writing. The junior staff especially had much they could learn, and their more experienced colleagues much they could teach, about crafting articles to address different kinds of social issues, underscore different concerns and achieve different agendas. As a practice of writing, in other words, there was a pedagogical dimension to journalism – an article could always be written better, and a journalist should always learn to be better at writing. At its best, the weekly review meeting was like a classroom, where everyone was both a student and a teacher, helping one another progress in the collective project of learning to write well. While *The Times* journalists appreciated this aspect of their work and saw the potential value of regular group critiques, however, they had a difficult time taking the weekly review meeting seriously. It was evident to them that the newspaper's executive management did not consider improving the quality of their news-writing enough of a priority to run these meetings properly.

The reason for this, they said, was that *The Times* was a thoroughly profit-minded enterprise. It had been created several years ago by one of the Guangdong provincial government's state-owned enterprises, as part of the company's plan to get itself listed on the Shanghai stock exchange. The company already had several successful businesses to its name, and its executives hoped to cash in on this success by selling company shares. To prepare for this stock-market launch, the company thought it best to first add a more publicly visible product to its repertoire – something to catch peoples' eye, make the company a household name and a stock one might feel inclined to invest in. A newspaper was thought to be the perfect thing, because its frequent publication, wide circulation and attention-grabbing headlines would provide precisely the kind of public attention that the company needed to boost the value of its soon-to-be stock. *The Times* was created, its journalists said, to serve this financially strategic purpose. Its objective was to become profitable within three years, and then to serve as flagship of the company's IPO bid.

For this reason, the journalists also said, the newspaper's leaders were chosen not for their editorial capabilities but for their business savvy. The editor-in-chief, Tang, for instance, had previously been a senior manager at a more established newspaper. While he had a decent enough head for business, his talent as a newspaperman was evidently limited, so that he had been marginalized and widely thought of as a second-rate executive at a first-rate organization. This combination of strengths and weaknesses, however, suited the creators of *The Times* perfectly – good business sense and long experience in the news industry were precisely what the new venture needed, and Tang's lack of personal success at the established newspaper made it easy to entice him to venture out and start a new one. "Tang is a reject from another newspaper," the journalists told me with relished derision. "He couldn't climb up there so he came here to try his luck. People aren't normally willing to leave an established newspaper for a newly started one, you know." "There are fundamental problems with his character, that's why he was so marginalized there," they said. "He's only looking out for himself, not for his

journalists, it's very obvious. He wouldn't risk anything to take care of me, so I won't do anything for his sake either. It's every man for himself with Tang."

To incentivize Tang to work hard at making *The Times* profitable, the journalists said that the company had pegged a portion of his salary directly to the amount of advertising revenue the newspaper generated. A portion of shares were also promised to him, should the newspaper succeed and the company become publicly listed. This was the goal that motivated Tang's decisions as editor-in-chief, his journalists said. Tang appointed Chen head of the newspaper's Beijing office, for instance, not because he could lead the team editorially but because he had a wide network of connections in Beijing's automobile advertising scene. The strong growth of China's car industry in recent decades has placed its automobile manufacturers among the richest, most aggressive advertisers in China today; contracts with these companies have consequently become a primary source of many newspapers' revenue. Chen was rumored to have brought *The Times* 80 million RMB in car advertising contracts over the previous year.<sup>69</sup> This was enough to make him an important executive in Tang's eyes. With no background in editorial work, however, Chen enjoyed little authority among the journalists. "Chen's never even been a reporter," Hong said dismissively. "He's worked in advertising all his life. How could he know a thing about news-writing?"

With this man in charge of the Beijing office, it was not surprising that the weekly review meeting consistently failed to take place. With his gaze set firmly on the newspaper's business side, Chen saw little value in the exercise of collectively reading and critiquing each article. "News writing is actually a very simple thing," he told me, as though to set my mind straight on a question of some prevalent misunderstanding. "It's getting information and presenting it in a direct way, preferably a way that people find somewhat interesting – that's all." He did not see how such a straightforward activity could be very much improved by journalists making lengthy commentaries on one another's articles. "Hong doesn't get it, he thinks good *writing* is important," Chen criticized the journalist behind his back, and grimaced at this fundamental misconception. "That kind of writing is only good as some sort of personal cultivation (*xiuyang*) activity. For newspapers, a high school writing level is what's needed!"

From Chen's perspective, the function of the Thursday meetings was only a kind of corporate housekeeping. He wanted the staff to attend as a matter of company discipline, and to develop a sense of organizational unity. He considered it his responsibility to get them to attend, but not to guide them through a painstaking analysis of their own writing. "It's the newspaper's regular meeting. It's not a question of whether or not there's anything to discuss, it's just a basic requirement to attend," he told them. As their boss, meanwhile, he considered it his prerogative to attend the meeting at his own leisure and discretion. Only occasionally, therefore, would Chen decide to show up at the office on time, sit down with whoever was there and initiate some form of review. Given his opinions on news-writing, however, this exercise tended to be more aggravating than illuminating for the journalists.

"What are these lousy stories? You journalists are just following whatever's out there on the internet," Chen began perusing the new issue. "Reporters have to get out there, not just stay at home surfing the web all day. In my day, reporters didn't use the internet at all. You just get up and go to a company's office, go through their files, and

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<sup>69</sup> Which must have meant a tidy sum for himself too, the journalists averred.

there you'd find it! Five different stories you could do, one after another for the next long while," he said. "What kind of headline is this?" he complained, turning the pages more quickly now. "So overtly startling (*leiren*), as if this were an entertainment tabloid. This isn't the tenor of our newspaper. These topics aren't serious enough, they're too grassroots. Why are we're trivializing ourselves like this?" The journalists kept their heads lowered and said nothing. "Maybe it was easier to get into a company's office in the old days," someone quipped but was ignored, for Chen's mind had returned to the problem of attendance. "Whoever doesn't come to the meeting next week, we should take out their articles and put advertisements in their place," he said smugly. To everyone's relief, he then gave up on the review and decided it was time for lunch.

This too was a mandatory staff activity on Thursdays. Conversation, while collegial, was far from edifying. Chen spoke with relish about new mobile phone models, real estate prices and cheap places to sing karaoke. "You can't be a journalist if you don't drink and smoke," he grunted through the fog of his own cigarette when a new intern tried to decline his offer to refill her beer. When conversation shifted to the topic of world travel, he said, "I only like to travel in Asia. I have no interest in Europe or America. Why travel so far to see things you don't even understand, like a really old copy of the Bible or something? When I travel, I want to eat things I can't eat here, and buy things for cheaper than I buy them here. Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand – these are places worth traveling to." Hearing these comments, Hong discretely shot me a knowing look. Unimpressed both by his editorial feedback and by his personality more generally, Hong felt that Chen made everyone attend the Thursday meetings only to give him 'face,' or to perform deference to him as their boss. Hong resented having to participate in this ego-placating ritual as a blatant waste of his time. Yet he saw little point in raising the issue with *The Times* higher management, as they had made their priorities clear by appointing Chen head of the Beijing office to begin with. Instead of trying to get a proper review meeting going, therefore, Hong simply showed up at the office prepared to loiter about fruitlessly. "Work is just not a priority at this newspaper," he said blandly, "It's a newspaper that's not righteous enough, and too commercialistic."

### **The Necessity of Competition**

Yet although they regularly suffered and endlessly complained about its crass commercialism, *The Times* journalists would never claim that their newspaper could or should be run as anything other than a profit-driven enterprise. They criticized their bosses' materialistic motivations, qualifications and even personalities, but on this basic question they seemed to be fully in agreement with Chen, Tang and the executives of the state-owned parent company. "Commercial competition is necessary (*biyao de*)," Hong explained with a wizened air, when I pressed him on the evident contradiction. Whatever its drawbacks, he said, the commercial news media was better than the tightly controlled press system that had existed under Mao; for when the entire mass media was controlled by a single party, there was nothing to prevent it from becoming a mere instrument of that party's self-interests. By allowing more players to enter and compete, today's more market-based system at least made it more difficult for the Party-state to manipulate the people. This change constituted such a great improvement that all the shortcomings

which may have been created in the meantime were justified. “Of course the current system has its problems too,” Hong conceded. “But it’s necessary.”

Similar claims about China’s post-Mao media are commonly found in popular and academic publications, both English and Chinese. Analysts describe the shift from a totally state-controlled propaganda system to a more market-oriented and Internet-enhanced news industry, as bringing about a salutary diversification of news content. Charting the growing number of news-producers in China and the state’s declining ability to control their production, such works see progressive development towards a more liberal and even democratic media.<sup>70</sup> That Western analyses of China’s media should tend towards such teleological narratives is understandable, particularly since many Chinese news-producers have in recent decades come to hold Western news values and practices up as global role models. Signs of convergence between Chinese and Western media discourses make it tempting to narrate the current changes in China as a gradual progression from the Maoist model of politically repressive state-control, to the Western model of commercial competition and greater freedom of expression. To one who does not daily encounter the concrete realities of China’s current transition, this overarching description may seem adequate. But why did *The Times*’ journalists, who so directly experienced the way new commercial forces and communication technologies hindered and degraded their writing practice, yet stand by such a seemingly reductive claim? In what sense did Hong regard the profit-hungriness of his strategically appointed bosses, and their dismissive attitude toward his writing practice as “necessary”?

Critics have argued that popular support for market-oriented reforms in China reflect the dominance of a “neoliberal ideology” that the Chinese state has been promoting, through variously persuasive and violent means, since the late 1980s.<sup>71</sup> Beneath the appearance of more colorful and diverse news content, experts on China’s media suggest that the overall effect of commercialization has actually been an ideologically homogenizing and politically conservative one.<sup>72</sup> Hong’s unreflective acceptance of the news industry’s new commercial logic may then be seen as an expression of this trend. Yet to put the issue down to “ideology” and leave it at that would be to risk repeating the mistake which Clifford Geertz long ago identified, of reducing the concept of “ideology” to a meaningless catch-all phrase that brings us no closer to understanding the social phenomenon in question. In the essay “Ideology as a Cultural System,” Geertz argues that instead of dismissing “ideologies” as erroneous or falsely simplified notions, we ought to interpret them “as systems of interacting symbols, as patterns of interworking meanings” that “transform sentiment into significance and so make it socially available.”<sup>73</sup> The power that such symbols have in society derives from the degree to which they strike people as true; that is, the degree to which they serve not to conceal, but to reveal the conditions that people actually experience. Ideological symbols thus should not be taken literally, as though they were labels on jars or claims to scientific fact, but should be treated more like literary tropes. Their significance should

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<sup>70</sup> For examples, see Shirik, *Changing Media, Changing China. Fragile Superpower? And Judy Polumbaum and Xiong Lei, China Ink: The Changing Face of Chinese Journalism*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008.

<sup>71</sup> For example, Wang Hui, *China’s New World Order*.

<sup>72</sup> For example, Zhao Yuezhi and Lee Chin Chuan.

<sup>73</sup> Clifford Geertz, “Ideology as a Cultural System” in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, 1973. p. 207.

be sought, in other words, in their capacity to incorporate the complexities of a multi-faceted and contradictory social reality, into a meaningful understanding of life. The purchase of an ideological symbol, Geertz writes, comes precisely from “its capacity to grasp, formulate, and communicate social realities that elude the tempered language of science.”<sup>74</sup>

Taking Geertz’s suggestion, and Hong’s utterance as a literary trope, what the claim that “commercial competition is necessary” seems to convey is not a firm belief in the superiority of today’s market-based news system over the Maoist press, but a general recognition of the extent to which commercial forces are now essential to the very possibility of making news. Distasteful as Chen and Tang were, their work on the newspaper’s business operations was what kept the enterprise running; without them there would be no editors, journalists or review meetings to speak of. Hong’s statement seems to grasp and formulate his experience of this condition, of being both revolted by and yet dependent on men like Chen and Tang. Hong was too young to have lived through any of the Mao era. His only experience of news-production was of news-production in its commercialized contemporary mode. For him to describe this mode as “necessary” was not to say that he had systematically compared it to all the alternative political-economic models, and decided that this was the only route forward for China. It was to say that in his experience, social and historical forces had irrevocably pushed China towards market reform and towards the kind of news industry it had now. “Necessity” here refers less to the political reason than to the historical *fact* that commercial performance is now more vital to a newspaper’s survival than its editorial standards are; and that business managers and marketing men now have more executive authority than editors and journalists do.

These conditions, which Hong and his colleagues now faced as unchangeable givens, were in fact brought about through a series of government-led press sector reforms. Following Mao’s death and the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, the Party’s ideological control over the media was significantly relaxed, and commercial forces were allowed back into the news sector.<sup>75</sup> In 1979, newspapers were permitted to run advertisements for consumer goods; and in 1983, to retain and reinvest all after-tax profits, rather than turn them over to higher-level state offices. In 1985, newspapers were allowed to run their own distribution services, rather than rely on the national postal service. This meant that they could compete for readers not only on the basis of their news content, but also on their speed of delivery.<sup>76</sup> In 1988, further policy changes allowed newspapers to supplement their revenue by engaging in news-related services such as printing and photography, conducting surveys, providing market information and organizing cultural events. In 1992, this policy was extended to include non-news-related

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>75</sup> For an analysis of post-Mao media in terms of ideology, political expression and control, see Pei Minxin, *From Reform to Revolution: The Demise of Communism in China and the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

<sup>76</sup> Whereas newspapers in the mail would arrive after mid-day, *Guangzhou Daily*, for instance, promised to be at the door at dawn, in time to read over breakfast. The massive increase in subscriptions that resulted from this change inspired the newspaper to coin the work motto, “Distribution is a matter of the newspaper’s life and death” (发行关乎报社生死). In Song Shoushan, p. 118.

activities, and newspaper companies began to enter the food and beverage, hotel and real estate industries.<sup>77</sup>

The profit potentials afforded by these changes prompted the reopening of numerous pre-Communist era newspapers, as well as the creation of many new ones. The number of newspapers in business soon overflowed the administratively approved channels, as a set of government press regulations issued in 1990 suggests. Newspapers were then, and are still required to have a government-issued publishing license in order to operate. Infractions upon this rule were so prevalent, however, that it was found necessary in 1990 to re-emphasize several basic tenets: All publications with ‘internal circulation only’ type publishing licenses, and all publications without publishing licenses, are not proper news publications, and are not allowed to engage in advertising or in any other commercial activity. They are not allowed to operate as newspapers, or to advertise their services as newspapers. They are not allowed to accept payment in exchange for news coverage. Too many ‘internal-circulation’ publishing licenses have been issued, the government document goes on to say, and their number must be severely reduced. All ‘internal-circulation’ publications which are nominally owned by a government office but actually run by a private company, or which hire people who are not government staff, or which accumulate and distribute money by signing advertising contracts and getting corporate sponsorships, must therefore be shut down.<sup>78</sup>

While some efforts were made to clamp down on such illicit businesses, government policy throughout the 1990s generally encouraged the news sector’s further commercial development. In terms of news content, for instance, newspapers were no longer treated as high-level political communications that could only be written under intense Party-state scrutiny. The fiercely propagandistic approach of the Mao-era press was renounced as a misguided conception of the mass media’s function, and newspapers were now said to be ordinary consumer commodities – rather than try to brainwash readers with the Party-state’s ideology, they should try to provide news content that people can actually use and enjoy.<sup>79</sup> From the mid-’90s on, government policy no longer required that newspapers be staffed exclusively by state-appointed civil servants; ordinary citizens could now work as journalists and editors too. As news work was generally reoriented away from politics and ideology, newspapers began developing content to appeal to readers’ interests. Competition among them took the form of efforts to provide more ‘timely’ and ‘readable’ articles, more intriguing stories and more practically useful information.<sup>80</sup>

Continued growth in the number of competitors then made it increasingly important for a newspaper to find ways of distinguishing itself, or making itself stand out in the eyes of potential consumers. Marketing thus became a crucial concern for any newspaper that hoped to become successful. One articulation of the new ideal is found in the writings of Fan Yijin, former editor-in-chief of *Nanfang Daily* and chairman of Nanfang Media Group, arguably China’s most prosperous and influential news company. In a book entitled *Nanfang Strategy: The Secret of a Top Chinese Media Enterprise*, Fan

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<sup>77</sup> For a general history of China’s media, see Fang Hanqi ed., *Zhongguo Xinwen Chuanboshi (History of News Dissemination in China)* (Beijing: Zhongguo Renmin Daxue Chubanshe, 2002).

<sup>78</sup> Quoted in Song Shoushan, p. 114-115.

<sup>79</sup> Private interviews

<sup>80</sup> Song Shoushan, 2009.

argues that one of the most important things for any newspaper today is having a unique “branding philosophy”:

Your position and orientation must be precise. As one among so many different newspapers, you have to construct your brand, and plant it firmly in the intellects of readers, merchants and advertising clients... Creating a brand is not nearly as simple as using advertising instruments to make lots of noise. Mere brand visibility is not enough. A real brand strategy means emphasizing your unique, distinctive position and orientation. You must continuously distinguish yourself from the rest, not just be able to do what everyone else can do too. If you can't make it to the front of one race then avoid the crush, and move on to do something that you alone can excel at... Only with steel determination and a great spirit of innovation, can you cultivate brands with distinctive, striking characters. At Nanfang Media Group, each one of our newspapers is cast in a unique mould. Each has its own distinctive brand-philosophy, and thus can create a unique and lasting experience for its readers and advertising clients. Creativity and distinctive, individual character – only if you have this can there be any “branding” to speak of!<sup>81</sup>

This statement, made by a widely respected figure in today's news industry, reflects the degree to which newspapers now aim less at providing the truth about events, and more at creating something *different*. Whereas Maoist newspapers sought to unite all of China's people in the truth of Party propaganda, commercial logics have transformed news-production into a task of anticipating, cultivating and playing to diverse reading tastes. Newspapers that formerly “served the masses” by teaching them how they ought to be, now try to capture a market share by learning what the masses preferences are. From a strategic perspective, this transformation is so thorough that even the political authority of the Communist Party has become a marketing value, rather than a value in itself. A Party newspaper may be fully funded by the state and tasked only with spreading propaganda, but if it cannot appeal to readers' tastes, Fan warns, it simply will not be read.

Reality has already shown us that any newspaper which does not take seriously the need to enter and work within the market, or which attempts to get by using political means instead, will eventually be abandoned by their readers... It would certainly be wrong for any newspaper to ignore its imperative to have a beneficial effect on society and to provide it ideological guidance. But on the other hand, we should also look at those Party newspapers which have ignored the market, and observe how their ideological fronts have shrunk continuously. Even if one uses compulsory distribution policies to get these newspapers on the newsstands, even if one sets them squarely in front of the reader, there is no way to make him or her actually read it. Where would your ideological front come from then? Who would you be able to guide, with your ‘ideological guidelines’? If you do not take economic efficacy seriously, and do not compensate good work appropriately, then you will not be able to retain talent. Your news-gathering methods will not improve, your technical capacities will

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<sup>81</sup> Fan 2005, p. 167.

not be updated, the quality of your newspaper-making will not be raised, and readers will not foot the bill – all of this would prevent you from having a beneficial effect on society as well. So, without readers, without a market, there is no ideological front, and no guiding role to speak of. Assuming the correct guiding line is maintained, the more economically effective one is, the more real is one's beneficial effect on society.<sup>82</sup>

Rather than rest easy on their special status, Fan advises Party newspapers to more concertedly exploit the “political advantage” of their proximity to government offices, to create a more distinctive brand identity for themselves.

A Party newspaper, like any other commercial product, must cultivate its brand name... Its greatest advantage in this task is its close relationship to Party and government departments. A Party newspaper can be the first to receive the most authoritative and reliable news statements, directly from these offices. While other news media are still running speculative or inaccurate reports, Party newspapers can be the first to announce the officially authoritative version of the news, and correct all the false impressions. This is something that other news media cannot easily do. Furthermore, Party newspapers tend to be faster and deeper in comprehending policy announcements made by Party and government departments. This is another great advantage.<sup>83</sup>

When the mass media functioned exclusively as the Party-state's propaganda apparatus, Party newspapers had enjoyed a monopoly over the news sector, because government offices were the only sources of news-worthy information. In Fan's view, post-Mao reforms have by now restructured the industry to such an extent that the government's authority is no longer a guaranteed advantage. It is merely one among many flavors of news that readers may have a taste for. Like any other newspaper, Party newspapers thus have to strategically craft their product to capture readers' attention on the one hand, while carefully managing whatever other commercial businesses they may be engaged in, on the other.

Such was the state of China's news industry in the 2000s, when *The Times* was created. A child of its times, the newspaper was a profit-driven investment, and quite logically therefore, had an entrepreneur as its leader. Tang's job as editor-in-chief was to make the newspaper make a profit for its state-owned parent company. The journalists' and editors' job was to help Tang make this happen. Weekly review meetings might help improve their writing, but the only point of improving their writing was to improve the circulation and profitability of the newspaper. Whenever the organization had to choose between activities that would help raise the quality of its writing and activities that would more directly raise its revenue, therefore, it necessarily prioritized the latter.

Attempts to find a functional forum for critiquing news articles were consistently thwarted by considerations of money and time. In the Politics section, for example, the head editor, Sifang, instituted a system where every journalist wrote a one-page critique of the week's Politics articles, which were then compiled and circulated for everyone's

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 164-5.



learning benefit. On the basis of these comments, the three best articles of the week were identified and their authors awarded a small cash bonus. This system was soon found unsatisfactory, however, because journalists did not seem to take the exercise seriously enough, and tended to ‘vote’ for their friend’s articles rather than on the basis of an evenly rigorous assessment of each article. The practice was thus abandoned and Sifang now decided on the three best articles himself. He then emailed his decision to the rest of the section, along with some of his own critical comments.

This system was soon too abandoned, however, because it seemed to give Sifang too much discretionary power and to leave the journalists with no forum at all. So a third method was attempted, in which a proper face-to-face review meeting was held every week at the newspaper’s main office in Guangzhou. These sessions were recorded, transcribed and emailed to the Politics journalists based in other cities. Yet this system did not seem to work either, as the more senior journalists and editors in Guangzhou often missed the meeting because they were out on other business for the newspaper. Senior journalists often had to be out drinking tea, for instance, with minor government officials and corporate executives – people who were in the position to provide the newspaper with long term access to inside information, and with whom the journalists were thus cultivating personal relationships. Sifang himself, being one of the newspaper’s head editors, was often called away to meetings and meals that the newspaper was hosting for potential corporate investors and higher level officials whose acquaintance might somehow be of help to the business. These were people to whom the newspaper either was or was trying to become beholden; hence it was around their schedules that the journalists and editors had to work. What this meant for the review meeting was that the newest journalists and interns were often the only ones left at the office, to comment on the work of their more senior and more experienced colleagues. Unsurprisingly, in this direct inversion of the proper pedagogical roles, the senior journalists tended to dismiss their junior colleagues’ praise as naive, and criticisms as ignorant.

“This is too infuriating!” Kong proclaimed as she read through the week’s comments on her cellular phone. “Who are they to say that my interview quotes were not relevant? Let them try to write the story – they wouldn’t even be able to get an interview! They criticize as though they’re experts, when they don’t have a clue about how to even start writing an article,” she fumed. “Hah! You mean you bother to read that garbage?” Zhang practically spat. “I never even open those emails! Why do you read them, seriously? You yourself know best whether you’ve written an article well or not!”

“Nobody takes the trouble to read your article properly,” Hong explained his colleagues’ reaction to me calmly. “The comments they come up with are always more or less the same – you didn’t interview anyone close enough to the issue, you didn’t include enough juicy details, you didn’t introduce the background to the event in a clear enough way... Comments like that only irritate the writer because everyone knows it would be good to do all these things, but we can’t, most of the time for reasons that are totally beyond our control. You can’t just pick up the phone and call the person most central to an event. It takes a lot of time and luck just to hunt down his contact information. Often we’re only assigned the story two or three days before press. To work like a maniac for three straight days just to get the article out, and then hear comments like that, as though you don’t even know the very basics of news writing – it just makes you feel mistreated.”

It was this kind of frustration that Hong's statement that "competition was necessary" seemed, in its context, to express. At one level, he could blame *The Times* problems on its particular circumstances and leaders – if Tang were a more scholarly man, or if the newspaper had more resources to spare, perhaps it would take its editorial activities more seriously and conduct its review meetings properly. At a more fundamental level, however, Hong also saw *The Times* as merely one site of some far broader historical developments. Whatever ideals he had about writing, and however he disparaged his bosses for not sharing them, he saw that *The Times* leaders were only behaving like anyone else in their position now had to. "Nobody would burn money to run a newspaper anymore," Hong invoked a popular metaphor for money-losing businesses. The idea that newspapers might have such an important social function that they are worth spending money to run, he, like many others, considered an old and disproven Mao-era idea. "That approach is obsolete. Even Party papers are trying to make money," he said in the tone of one pointing to a self-evident truth.

Hong saw that market reform had made commercial performance the basis of many activities, and that for all its shortcomings, the results of this reorientation have made life in China what it is today. If it were not for these developments, Hong himself would probably not have had the chance to become a journalist; he would still be working on the farm where he had grown up. The necessity of competition is, for him, a trope less expressive of adamant political preference than of a half-relieved, half-resigned sense of the irrevocability of this broad historical change. It grasps the way editorial work is now subject to the management of bosses with no regard for writing; formulates the insecurity of the journalist's position within a commercially competitive news system; and conveys the complex and conflicting feelings aroused by the sense that all of these problems are nevertheless part of an overall improvement in the conditions of journalism, and of life in China more generally. If commercial competition was in this sense "necessary," the next section of this chapter looks at what *The Times* journalists had to do to compete.

### **Getting the Business Side Running**

In official speeches, commemorative writings and vanity publications like Fan's triumphal account of Nanfang Group's success, many news-producers depict commercial competition in the rosy terms of liberal theory. The need to compete for revenue is said to pressure each newspaper into striving to provide the best possible news-product. A virtuous cycle of journalistic and commercial success is outlined, in which high quality news coverage leads to high readership rates, which attracts greater advertising revenue, that in turn funds further improvements to the news-product. In other contexts, however, newspapermen often describe a somewhat different picture. Rarely in print, but frequently in verbal conversations and online exchanges, news-producers discuss at great length the myriad ways in which their industry's real operations deviate from the theory of market competition.

"It's not like America here," Chen explained to me in a tone of fatigue, one Sunday evening when he and several journalists from *The Times* had gotten together for dinner. It was not often that Chen fraternized the journalists outside of work, but this evening he seemed to be in a pensive, almost lonely mood, and perhaps for this reason

had called a few of them up for company. “America is a mature market,” he sighed. “Here, it’s still just a game of advertising. No one here is so established that they can rely solely on readership for their income. We don’t even have the channels for getting a newspaper on to the market to compete,” he furrowed his brow indignantly, referring to the thorny problem of newspaper distribution in China. Because the national postal service refuses to provide delivery for any newspaper that is also available by retail, newspaper companies that lack the financial resources to run their own door-to-door delivery service can only retail through newsstands. Also owned by the postal service but subcontracted out to various private companies, these newsstands charge ‘rent’ for displaying the newspaper – a fee that ranges from 20 to 300 RMB per month, Chen tells me, depending on the primacy of the newsstand’s location and prominence of position on the news rack.

“Monopolizing the distribution channels – that’s how anyone who makes money in the media makes money,” Chen said. “20 to 300 RMB, so let’s say it costs an average of 150 per newsstand per month,” he began to lay out the numbers. “Say there’s 1000 newsstands to cover in Beijing. That’s 150,000 RMB a month” – not a small sum for the fledgling newspaper which retails at 3 RMB a copy; enough to significantly restrict the number of potential readers it can offer itself to. But China is supposed to have the highest newspaper distribution rates in the world, I joked, citing a 2011 survey that put China’s per capita newspaper readership in global first place.

“Ha! Divide that number by ten!” Chen scoffed amicably. “That’ll give you the actual number. In fact, here they count the number of copies printed, not the number actually sold, so divide it by ten again! Then see if it’s still number one in the world.” The very idea made him laugh. “Take *People’s Daily*,” he joked on, “Their readership rate is effectively zero! Every office has to subscribe, but nobody ever reads it. Have you heard the joke about *People’s Daily* being the ‘newest’ newspaper in China? Even at the end of the day it’s as good as new – because no one even bothered to flip through it,” he smiled wryly. “What is *The Times* distribution?” Feng, finding his boss in an affable mood, cheekily quipped. Although the official figure was 400,000, it is widely known that a newspaper’s official distribution rate is always inflated to attract advertising clients. Because this information can so heavily influence a newspaper’s business prospects, only its very top executives are privy to the actual numbers. Chen laughed. “That I can’t tell you... But not as low as you think,” he added, knowing that rumors were circulating among the journalists about how poorly the newspaper was selling under the leadership of Tang.

“The official figure is 400,000,” Kong offered, baiting Chen to reveal more.

“Divide it by ten?” I probed jokingly, but Chen said nothing.

“Divide it by ten again?” Feng grinned. That would make 4000.

“No, no, not that low,” Kong turned the conversation away, so as not to risk offending Chen. Though they did not think he knew much about news-writing, they recognized and respected the crucial role that he played in keeping the newspaper alive by bringing in advertising revenue. Since *The Times*, as Chen said, had yet to establish a large reader base, the sale of advertising space was its main source of income.

But how do you sell ads without first having high readership rates? I continued to probe Chen. The officially trumpeted theory was that advertisers are drawn to newspapers by high readership rates; but if this were the way the industry worked,

advertising revenue would depend on the newspaper's distribution network, rather than function as a substitute for it. "Basically you rely on tricking people," Chen said, looking me in the eye. "One way is to trick people, and the other is to make friends with them," he put it in a tactfully succinct way. In the unpublished knowledge that he and his colleagues had, commercial competition did not mean newspapers striving to produce the best journalism. The conditions necessary for such a perfectly functioning system did not exist in China. Under the conditions that did exist, what commercial competition meant was men like Chen struggling to clinch the best advertising contracts.<sup>84</sup> And from the many nights he had spent treating potential clients to banquets, karaoke and female hospitality, Chen knew that this was done in a number of ways that had nothing to do with the quality of a newspaper's writing. The mechanism of selection through which commercial competition was meant to yield good journalism never even came into play. It was extra-journalistic factors, such as Chen's networking abilities, that determined the newspaper's fate. Even the celebrated Nanfang Group, *The Times* journalists told me, had to be understood this way.

"Don't just look at the most superficial level," Sifang, head editor of the Politics section once chastised me, "Nanfang's success was only possible because of its extremely particular circumstances." He and I were having dinner with Lu, a senior editor at *21<sup>st</sup> Century Business Herald*, one of the Nanfang Group's newspapers. Sifang explained that the Group's first newspaper, *Nanfang Daily*, had served as a useful publicity platform for the Guangdong provincial government in the 1980s, when as a Special Economic Zone they were pushing against the central government for bolder and faster reforms. The newspaper's utility to the provincial government secured it exceptional political and financial backing, which enabled it to conduct aggressive marketing campaigns and set up its own delivery service. These advantages all but guaranteed its commercial success, and every newspaper that the Nanfang Group subsequently created enjoyed the enormous head-start of the big investments that the company was uniquely able to afford. *Southern Weekend*, for example, had had the financial leeway to try specializing in several different genres of news before hitting on the runaway popularity of its now signature brand of investigative journalism. *The Beijing News* was then created in collaboration with *Guangming Daily*, with a host of resources and a team of outstanding staff handpicked from both news companies. *21<sup>st</sup> Century Business Herald* was Nanfang Group's most recent creation, a newspaper that focused on economic and business news. "Profitable from its very first year," Lu declared, "All from advertising revenue." The instant marketability of *21<sup>st</sup> Century*'s advertising space, he said, had been all but guaranteed by the resources that Nanfang Group had channeled to it. Not only financial investment, handpicked editorial and marketing staff, but also the all-important distribution network was given to the newspaper readymade. "For its whole first month, *21<sup>st</sup> Century* was given out free with every copy of *Southern Weekend*," Lu said. With backing like that, a little skilful marketing was enough to make ad space in *21<sup>st</sup> Century* a highly priced commodity.

Neither Lu nor Sifang meant, in telling me these things, to belittle the journalistic achievements of Nanfang Group's newspapers. Only to their understanding, it was not the excellence of their news products that had earned these newspapers' their commercial success. Rather, a complex combination of political and historical factors had given them

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<sup>84</sup> Zhao (2008) also shows that most newspapers in China survive by selling advertising space.

the unfair advantage they needed to become profitable; and this in turn afforded them the financial resources they needed to work on developing a good news product. The reality of commercial news production was thus the inverse of its theory – a good news-product did not win many dollars, many dollars were somehow won first, and then a good news-product became possible. “Nanfang’s story is impossible to duplicate,” Sifang said, and whether or not it actually created a good news-product did not immediately affect its commercial success. Even after ten years of ever more lucrative operation, for instance, Lu did not think that *21<sup>st</sup> Century* had managed to become a good newspaper yet. “So far their articles are still far too complicated,” he complained. “They throw a long string of numbers and statistics and at you, but never get down to clearly explaining what the matter is.”

“Whenever I read a *21<sup>st</sup>* article, I keep a pen and paper handy to map out the structure of the company they’re describing,” Sifang joked, implying that their articles were too convoluted to understand without this learning aid.

“News is for readers to quickly understand and get on with their lives,” Lu concurred exasperatedly. “It’s translating complex situations into articles that even a high school student can understand,” he tiredly repeated the maxim he was constantly having to repeat to the journalists and editors who worked for him. Editorial standards were an ongoing source of vexation for him, but they were not a matter of life and death for his company.

For anyone who was directly engaged in the everyday activity of news-production, it was thus all but impossible to imagine that good journalism would naturally garner its own commercial success. A hefty initial investment, strong political backing, and a good network of connections in the advertising world – these were the truly important things, without which a newspaper did not even enter the arena of competition. As editor-in-chief of the fledgling *Times*, Tang was most acutely aware of this fact. He certainly hoped that *The Times* would someday become a worthy news-provider and influential shaper of popular opinion – “The Architects of China,” as the newspaper’s last annual report had claimed. At the moment, however, Tang felt that the more pressing need by far was to increase the newspaper’s advertising revenue. To this end, as I slowly learned, he had adopted the practice of promising favorable news coverage to companies that bought advertising space in *The Times*, and threatening unfavorable coverage to companies that did not. He conducted this trade primarily through the newspaper’s economic news section, because economic news articles often focused on single companies, and this quality lent itself well to the bartering.<sup>85</sup>

As I gradually became aware of this aspect of *The Times*’ enterprise, I approached it as a dark company secret that I would have to cunningly and subtly gather information about. The first time I had dinner with the economic section’s staff, I thus prepared a long list of indirect questions and plotted various ways to bait them into letting something on. None of these ever came into use, however, for in response to my very general opening question, the head editor of the economic news section, Bing bluntly said, “Well, this is the economic news desk. Our clients are companies. Either you write good things about them to make them happy and get what you want, or you write bad things about them to

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<sup>85</sup> This was the genre of news that Chen had been referring to in his half-hearted review of the economic news section.

arm-twist them and get what you want. There's not much else to it." He looked at me blankly.

Routed by his openness about the fact, I hardly knew what to say next. As the months went by, however, I gradually came to realize that *The Times'* practice of blackmail was indeed no secret at all. In ordinary meetings and pep talks, Tang energetically coached his staff on how to do it. "Writing 'soft articles' (*ruangao*) is easy," he assured them at one meeting, using the industry's term for favorable reports that companies pay newspapers to run. "You only have to say three things. One, 'Your lot is not easy.' Two, 'You are a good guy.' Three, 'Really, a very, very good guy.' That's it!" He looked around pedantically. "Now do you get how to write a 'soft article'? That's how you should do it when you're writing to accompany (*peihe*) an ad." As for smear articles, Tang said, these work especially well on companies that are or are about to go public. Because popular opinions and expectations influence the value at which their stock will be listed, such companies will pay a premium to keep their reputation untarnished.

"Next year, we'll start our own think tank! *The Times'* China Public Listings Research Institute," Tang proclaimed in half-joking exaggeration. "To research the 2,500 publicly listed companies in China, and any others that are about to go public. First we'll dig up the dirt on them. Then we'll invite them out to dinner. They won't come? Fine! Then we'll dish out the dirt." Tang looked around the table and pointed at Meng, his most reliable economic news journalist and lackey. "Meng will be the head of the Institute," he said. "He is a good journalist. You should all be more like him. Learn about companies, dig up dirt on them, that's how the game is played. That's what will make people take you seriously." Meng blushed and nodded vigorously to demonstrate his allegiance to Tang. "When Meng walks into a company's office," Tang carried on praising him, "they know they'd better call security!"

This approach which Tang took to running *The Times* was a divisive issue among the journalists, and a favorite topic of discussion. Some journalists adamantly expressed their opposition to the practice and their resentment at being made complicit in it. "They keep wanting us to write articles that are extremely biased, to exaggerate the problems of every company, even ones that are actually doing well," one economic news section journalist complained. "They'll use anything that's available – rumors, complaints about their service. If a company makes some change to its product, they want us to say it's because the product was really terrible before. If there's a change of personnel, they want us to say it's because the company's internal affairs are a mess. They want you to continuously guess at people's intentions, and from the most vulgar point of view. That's what I really hate." An article of hers had recently been used to successfully blackmail a company. "They called us up for dinner and gave us an ad, because they're about to go public and they want to keep their image as good as possible. But I know from an inside source at the company that they were really furious about it, and they swear never to work with *The Times* again, once they're listed. Tang says the strategy right now is to get what we can (*dayige suanyige*). If we can get a million from each company, and there are 100 companies, then we'll get a hundred million," she made a hapless expression at her boss's wishful thinking. "It's like they've gone so far with this that they've totally lost their senses (*zouhuo rumo*). Look at Meng," she referred to Tang's favorite economic

news journalist. “Each article he writes gets more biased and extreme and obvious. But the worse these problems get, the better they praise him for being!”

Meng, of course, took a different view to his activities. “In news there’s no such thing as good or bad – only more or less valuable!” His eyes flared with aggression as he spoke. He objected to the idea that journalism ought to serve some lofty moral purpose by standing ‘outside’ the fray of society’s struggles and representing them from an ‘objective’ point of view. He did not believe that a disinterested position ‘outside’ of society existed. Journalists, therefore, ought to work on becoming more effective players *in* the struggle for interests, and not keep imagining that as ‘intellectuals’ they are somehow *above* it. “It has *always* been power that determines thought, and not thought that determines power,” he declared his philosophy to me. “That’s the noblest insight of Marx and Lenin, and it’s true even of Confucian thought. It was only because Confucian thought suited the interests of Han Wu Di that he destroyed all the other schools of thought and propagated Confucian thought alone,” he said, referring to the first Emperor to make Confucianism a state philosophy, around the second century BC. “Not because there was anything good about Confucianism itself. In fact, Confucius’ teachings are all about benevolence and things like that, and meanwhile Han Wu Di spent his whole life making war.”

Meng looked satisfied at the evident contradiction, which seemed to him to prove that writing and thought have only ever been instruments for the self-interested pursuit of wealth and power. From this ‘materialist’ perspective, the economic news section was certainly the newspaper’s most valuable one, for only their articles were able to provoke a material response. “The Politics section has no influence,” Meng compared the two. “Even when an article is poorly written, they still run it because they feel it doesn’t matter. The reason it doesn’t matter is that they don’t have any influence anyways. economic news articles at least have some influence, even if this is only manifest in the ads that come in. At least the fact that they can bring in ads proves that the articles we write have some effect out there, that people have to take them seriously and act in response. Politics articles can criticize whoever they want, but no one even pays any attention,” he scoffed.

Feng was a Politics journalist, but he did not have such strong opinions on whether or not the practice was morally and historically justified. His objection was that as a business strategy, Tang’s approach was likely to fail. “It’s an old technique that *Southern Metropolis* used to get big in the nineties” he said, referring, in fact, to one of the Nanfang Group’s most successful newspapers. This was one of those claims about Nanfang which were never published, but widely held within news-producing circles to be true. “Tang thinks he can do the same thing for *The Times*,” Feng continued. “But the fact is the news industry has changed. It was a wild world back in the nineties when the newspaper business was first livening up. You did whatever worked to make money, and whatever worked to make money, people would call ‘success.’ That’s what happened to *Southern Metropolis*. But things are different now. It’s a more mature industry. There are rules of the game. Using smear articles to make someone buy an ad with you might work once, but it won’t work a second time. You’re not even that formidable of a threat,” he referred to *The Times* in the second-person. “Why should they keep paying you? Partnerships have to be beneficial for both sides to last. Hitting up one company at a time is only a short-term solution, not a sustainable practice.”

Hong, also a Politics journalist, felt the problem was not *that* Tang practiced a form of blackmail, so much as the way in which he went about doing it. He was too reckless and showy, they felt, attacking companies he was too small to take on and bragging about it openly, instead of having some sense of finesse. “If a company calls security when your reporter shows up at their office, is that something to boast about?” he said caustically. “It’s one thing to do these things. Everyone has to. But it’s another thing to make it a point of pride.” “If we’re going to do it at least we should make sure we can do it properly,” another journalist complained in response. “I did an article once and found out that all we got out of it was 6000 (RMB),” he made a disgusted face at the pettiness of the sum. “Later I heard that one of the Nanfang newspapers did one on the same company and got 60,000!”

I asked Lu, the editor at *21<sup>st</sup> Century*, what he thought of how Tang ran *The Times*. Lu was, of course, well aware of the illicit trade Tang engaged in. “But *The Times* can’t go on for long like this,” he said gravely. “It’s not that they can’t go out and get money. You think our bosses don’t have to go out and get money? Of course they have to go out and get money too. Our editor-in-chief once pulled an article from press when it was already being formatted for the front page!” he offered by way of example, implying that the newspaper had struck a last-minute deal with the company that the article criticized. “But they can’t very well say so in public, can they.” This was the difference between Tang’s folly and Nanfang’s success. “You can’t go around announcing it to every little journalist at the newspaper, can you?”

But when I confronted Tang himself on the issue, I found that he did not feel he had anything to hide. “First we have to get the business side of the newspaper up and running,” he said, “Then later we can slowly work on raising the quality of our journalism.” Tang saw this order of priorities as simply the reality of the newspaper business. “The news industry’s food chain is very clear, and all of us have to face it,” he explained. “On the top are the companies,” he held one hand flat and high above his head. “In the middle are the ad agencies,” moving his hand down a notch. “And then there’s us newspapers, down at the bottom,” he placed his palm flat on the desk between us. “Selling newspapers is just like selling anything else – you have to appeal to your clients,” he referred to the companies and ad agencies. “As long as you’re in business, you have to work to please your clients. If I were selling clothes-washing powder, then I’d try to appeal to the housewives who wash clothes.”

“Why should I think of myself as an intellectual?” Tang asked me rhetorically, when I suggested that there might be a difference between newspapers and clothes-washing powder. “Does Rupert Murdoch think of himself as an intellectual?” he invoked the American news mogul whom he claimed as his role model. “I am an entrepreneur. What I do is business.” Doing business, as he often reminded his staff, involved the single goal of pleasing one’s clients and the many methods of achieving this. “Only school children rigidly stick to just one approach. Obama when he’s talking to black people says, ‘I’m black’, and when he’s talking to white people says, ‘I’m from Harvard.’ When he’s talking to Muslims he says, ‘There’s Muslims in my family too, brother.’ *That’s* what we have to be like!”

### **Censorship, Professionalism, and the Figure of the Journalist**



News-producers like Hong, who claimed that commercialization was preferable to Maoist press control, maintained their position not as an abstract theory, but in the face of the fast and dirty business dealings that constantly and palpably surrounded them. Although he valued the art of good writing, and found this inclination of his dismissed rather than encouraged by the organization he wrote for, Hong still argued that the subordination of newspapers to the commercial logic of the market was a move forward for China. Mao-era propagandists, he said, had presumed to write from a station above and superior to the rest of society – but such a position does not exist; propagandists were falsely elevated by a dysfunctional political system and from that false position, allowed to lead the whole country astray. Commercialization had its ugly side, but treating newspapers as regular commodities and subjecting news-producers to market forces was more in line with the kind of professional journalism that was practiced in functional, modern societies.

Sifang, the head editor of the Politics section, held a similar view. “Journalism doesn’t have some special ‘guiding role’ to play. It’s only because journalists have more time than other people, and the platform to blow their own trumpet a lot, that they say so,” he once said to me brightly. Sifang fashioned himself an enlightened and progressive man. He was a member of the Democratic League, one of the seven legal ‘opposition’ parties in China, and an outspoken proponent of market reform. In describing journalism this way, he was identifying himself as someone who saw through the pretense and hypocrisy of the old CPC system, which had used the idea of socialist ideology to make countless ordinary people sacrifice everything they had for the benefit of a few political leaders. Against this unconscionable past, Sifang stood for transparency, practicality and every person having an equal chance to compete for and enjoy his or her own wealth. Dismissing grandiose notions of journalism’s ‘guiding role’ and treating it as an ordinary profession was, in his opinion, a step towards this future. In meetings and day-to-day conversations, Sifang thus encouraged his journalists to think of their job as matter of providing information, not moralizing or teaching readers what to think.

“A journalist’s duty is actually very straight-forward,” he said, in his unpretentious and reassuring way, to a few who were sitting about *The Times*’ office one day. “Just figure out the chain of interests – that’s the key to every story. There’s no need to be radical. If you just neutrally map out who stands to gain and lose what, at every point along the way, the facts will speak for themselves. And no one will have any excuse to censor your article.” Sifang emphasized the ordinariness of this information processing task. It was not some lofty vocation that made journalists nobler than other people; it was just one among many kinds of work that a person could do to make a living. “The only difference between journalism and other jobs is that you don’t have to sit in an office,” Sifang went on chirpily. “You don’t just go in from 9 to 5 everyday, your work is more varied and lively. Chasing a story or hunting down an interviewee is like playing a game. You have to get into it, like a game, learn to take it as a kind of enjoyment. Only then can you do it well.”

This conception of journalistic professionalism may have had its progressive effects. But the drawback was that under current conditions in China’s news industry, it offered journalists no defense against the feeling that news-writing was becoming a mercenary and manipulative practice. Commercialization was one contributing condition;

another was the ongoing prevalence of government censorship. Unlike Maoist press control, the form of contemporary censorship that *The Times* most frequently encountered was not primarily ideological. It did not occur through a monolithic Party-state uniformly imposing its political views on all of China's newspapers. It occurred through a vast and intricate network of people, with different vested interests and varying amounts of personal clout. What had to be covered up were not politically sensitive issues of national import, but incidents that reflected poorly on, or threatened the interests of individual companies or government offices. When a journalist learnt about a malpractice at the factory of a state-owned enterprise, for example, there was no official propaganda policy to prevent the newspaper from reporting it. But the head of the enterprise might telephone a friend in the provincial government, who might telephone a friend in the provincial propaganda department. If this occurred in the province where the newspaper was based, a call to the newspaper could get the article removed. If not, the provincial propaganda department might telephone its corollary in the province where the newspaper was based, and get them to issue a censorship order. All of this would, of course, have to happen before press time. The more expedient tactic that was used whenever possible, therefore, was for the head of the enterprise to telephone the newspaper directly, and strike a deal by offering something in the editor-in-chief's interests.

"It's just one massive, rent-seeking organization!" one editor once described the government propaganda department to me. "Any little squirt from any small town government office can do his friend a favor by making a phone call, to someone who makes another phone call, and just like that, gets an entire news article removed from print!" Maoist press control, however dubiously, had always tried to justify itself in the name of revolutionary, nation-saving imperatives. Judging by *The Times* journalists' descriptions, what that project has now left behind is an information blocking apparatus that does not even try to pursue ideological values or collective goods, but merely serves as a facility that that well positioned individuals can use to serve their personal economic and political interests. The only collectively significant effect, the only national 'agenda' that this government administrative structure can be said to have, is that of maintaining an image of harmony which disguises the ruthless maneuvers that are actually going on.<sup>86</sup>

This combination of commerce and censorship was the aspect of their professional practice that most troubled Hong and Feng. Against the system of institutionalized hypocrisy, they felt that journalism ought to expose the vested interests that actually drove society and the harsh realities that this resulted in for many. "All I really want is to be able to write something true (*zhenshi*)," Feng had once said haplessly, when the three of us were out together. "News is the 'conscience of society.' It should confront us with the realities we don't normally see because we're so caught up in our own lives."<sup>87</sup> Feng preferred investigative reporting assignments over other kinds of news stories, because they gave him a chance to report injustices and abuses that were belied by official images of prosperity.

Hong too found investigative stories rewarding. "The best story I've ever written was about migrant workers being forced to go home when the financial crisis hit

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<sup>86</sup> See Misra, and Sun Yan, on the ideological vacancy created by the post-Mao government's failure to resolve the transition intellectually.

<sup>87</sup> For example, see [http://reader.cjol.com/content/2011-04/17/content\\_4343505\\_2.htm](http://reader.cjol.com/content/2011-04/17/content_4343505_2.htm), which argues that journalists are societies "eyes," and news is society's "conscience."

Guangdong,” he concurred, supporting Feng’s comment with an example from his own experience. “I rode the train with them from Guangzhou to their old home in Sichuan, standing room only tickets, for seventeen hours!” He lifted his chin in a small show of pride. The article that came out of this told poignantly of a youth from the countryside, who left home full of dreams about using hard work to change his rural boy’s fate. He worked long hours at various menial jobs, alleviating his alienation by reading novels downloaded on to his cellular phone. When the global economic downturn hit Guangdong in 2010, his monthly income fell so low that he had no choice but to return home. He was reading the biography of Li Ka-shing, the rags-to-riches Hong Kong tycoon who had also started out working sixteen-hour factory shifts. At the age when Feng was starting his first company, however, he was packed and herded on to a train headed right back to the farm that he came from. “I stayed at their home for three days,” Hong told us. “It’s so cold there in the winter that nobody bathes. They are what it really means to be poor. You have no way of imagining it, if you’ve only ever been to cities like Beijing and Guangzhou, you don’t have the slightest clue. That’s the advantage of being a reporter. You get to see for yourself what life in this country is really like.”

“It’s true, China really is not what you would think it is from living in cities and reading the newspapers,” Feng agreed. Over six years in the field, he too has experienced many heartrending and mind-boggling facets of life in China – feelings and details that never made it to print. “So many things in this country, only a journalist can know,” he sighed. Both he and Hong often remarked that every young person in China ought to spend a few years working as a reporter. One got to meet people from all along the spectrum, they said, from government officials and businessmen at the high end, to indigent peasants and criminals at the low. The job exposed one to sectors and aspects of society that an ordinary person would have no way of getting close to otherwise. The grittiness of poverty, the personal power of political leaders, the ruthless mechanisms of commerce and industry – all that constituted practical, material life in China but which did not appear in its advertising and propagandizing mass media, the journalist could discover and report. Not everything would make it past the editors and censors, but at least the journalist herself would have learnt the truth. Later in life, perhaps, she could write a book about her experiences. A few years of working as a journalist struck Hong and Feng as providing a crucial education.

“Otherwise all you learn about is how noble the Communist Party is. You know, one of my *university* classmates asked me recently what 6-4 is. A *university* classmate!” Hong complained, referring to the June 4<sup>th</sup> Tiananmen incident of 1989, perhaps the most infamously censored topic in the history of China’s post-Mao media. “Well, the media in China is different from that of other countries,” Feng reminded us ironically. “Report good news, don’t report bad news!” Hong rehearsed the stock phrase with mock gaiety. “That’s still the principle of news in China. To make everyone believe that China is the best place on earth, that all the other countries in the world exist in perpetual crisis, and that the luckiest thing that could ever happen to a person was to be born here,” he laughed coldly.

The problem with Sifang’s technical conception of professional journalism was that it offered journalists like Hong and Feng no theoretical justification for these moral sentiments that they felt. If commercialization and censorship made writing well and writing the truth into a journalist’s private commitment rather than a newspaper’s

organizational goal, Sifang's 'professionalism' removed any conceptual basis for this private commitment. If journalism was just an ordinary, technical job with no lofty status or superior moral quality to it, then there was no place in it for the journalists' sense of mission or pride about uncovering harsh social realities. If it was fundamentally a matter of neutrally delivering information in return for a decent salary, then any seemingly selfless rather than rationally self-interested sentiment would have to be deemed suspect. Any personal interest in other people's suffering, or pleasure that a journalist may get from gaining access to certain facets of social life, any feeling of superiority she may derive from knowing the truth – these would all have to be seen as naive illusions conjured by the journalist's vanity at best, and at worst, as self-aggrandizing claims consciously crafted to make their practice seem nobler than it was.

Indeed, the figure of the journalist as a spinner of words, whose whole business lay in using the news media to line her own pockets, was already one that circulated widely in popular anecdotes and jokes. Tales were told, for instance, of small town journalists who lived lavish lifestyles because the local officials and businesses that depended on them for good publicity showered them with bribes of cash and kind. In bigger cities, it was common for the organizers of press events to give a modest cash reward out to every attending journalist; and journalists were said to spend all day going from one press event to another, collecting handouts instead of reporting real news.<sup>88</sup> Some were said to make their livings by uncovering malpractices and abuses not in order to expose them, but to blackmail or extort 'mouth-sealing fees' from the guilty parties. In Shaanxi, where there were many coal mines and coal mining accidents, a small colony of journalists was said to have arisen whose full time occupation consisted of making the rounds and collecting fees from mining companies. Elsewhere, long-standing relationships were also known to exist between journalists and the companies that kept them on payroll in return for their maintaining their silence. Occasionally, such relationships were themselves exposed and reported in the news. Still other stories told of journalists who were so bent on milking every encounter for usable material that they grew oblivious to the basic demands of human decency. When earthquakes devastated Wenchuan in 2009 and Yushu in 2010, journalists were said to have flocked to the disaster scene in droves and worsened the people's plight by demanding food, water and shelter, which were already desperately scarce. Finding someone crushed under a fallen wall, a journalist instead of trying to dig him out is said to have stuck a microphone in his face and asked, "Can you tell us how you are feeling right now?"

Such stories clearly present an exaggerated and one-sided image of the contemporary Chinese journalist. Yet it was precisely in their one-sidedness that they were relished and retold. Like the necessity of competition, this image of the journalist was a trope that circulated not because it was empirically accurate, but because it formulated something people felt. It captured the sense that the commodification and commercialization of journalism emptied it of moral value, by reducing the writer to a self-interested player in the very material struggles that in writing, she was meant to rise above. If journalism was no longer the lofty task of using the mass media's broadcasting capacities for the benefit of society as a whole, then it quickly became the business of

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<sup>88</sup> At the average rate of 200 RMB per event and given that one can attend up to three events in one day, it is said that journalists can make 600 RMB a day, or 12,000 RMB a month, over and above their given salaries, just by sitting around.

mining society's problems for the purpose of individual gain. Even though Hong and Feng personally felt themselves motivated by other ideals and values, the reality of *The Times* commercial logic and the technical notion of professional journalism that Sifang taught afforded them no alternative but to recognize themselves in this lesser image. When Feng found himself in a throng of journalists lunging after the distant relative of a man under trial, for instance, or when Hong was assigned a 'soft article,' pathetic commercial self-interest presented itself to them as the undeniable substance of their practice. Although they were not and did not feel responsible for their boss's lowball directorship of *The Times*, neither could they be proud of their own writing and role in society. Whatever noble sentiments they felt personally inspired by, they could only nurse these as though they were secrets, private enclaves within the popular and undeniably accurate characterization of journalism as a mercenary occupation.

Lacking a narrative of one's social and moral worth seemed to be discouraging. "When you first start out as a journalist, you have a lot of ideals about helping people," Feng said to Hong and I. "You think you're making a great contribution by giving up other career opportunities for this one. You think you're sacrificing your own interests to help others who need it. But then you get to a village somewhere, to write about a problem they're having, and you realize that they don't want even want you there. They don't trust you, and they don't want your help. They think that exposing their story in the newspapers won't do them any good, and might even make their problems worse. They even try to rip you off over car rides and food and motels. That's when you start to realize that all your ideas about using journalism to help people are really only motivated by your own vanity. Think about it. People have been doing things their own way for so many years, and here you come along thinking you can make them do things differently. Just because you yourself think things should be a certain way, you imagine they want to make it that way too. But why should they want to? Who are you to think you know how to change the world?"

"That's just how everyone feels when they're young," Hong countered Feng's somewhat wounded tone with a tougher one. "After a while you realize that it's just a job, nothing so exceptional," he echoed Sifang's position. Rather than struggle against the narrative, both he and Feng sometimes adopted it as their own self-description. They described themselves as individuals at sea in a rapidly developing economy, who like everyone else had to look out for their own interests in order to avoid drowning. They dismissed the days of Fan Changjiang as a bygone era when journalists were privileged elites, who enjoying a high and secure social position, could afford to nurse lofty ideas about themselves and the society they wrote about. Today, journalists had to rove in packs after juicy stories or prostitute their pens to big corporations in order to earn a living. The value of their writing was not determined by what they wrote; what they wrote was dictated by conditions in the industry. "All you can hope to do is describe the conflicting interests, and try to bring out a sense of haplessness," Feng agreed.

Such considerations made many of *The Times* journalists feel that theirs was not a career to stay long in. As far as ordinary jobs went, being a journalist was neither easy nor especially lucrative. The short deadlines, high pressure and unpredictable schedule made it physically and mentally exhausting. Having to continuously churn out articles faster than they could think, made it difficult for journalists to feel they were

accumulating real knowledge or cultivating real expertise. Indeed, since it was fast information rather than insightful analysis that newspapers required, there was no use in their line of work for accumulated knowledge or expertise. This meant there was little room for individual development, and little meaning or advantage to seniority in their career. In fact, the older one got, they said, the worse at the job one became, for younger journalists with more energy could often hunt down better material, faster. Meanwhile, the opportunity cost of being a journalist was also palpably rising. Others of the same age group and educational background were moving into finance and marketing, and soon making double what their journalist friends made. More importantly perhaps, whereas journalists were jokingly but frequently derided as ‘shit-stirring’ mercenaries, these other white-collar professions were increasingly looked upon as the new elite and hope of China’s future. Faced with this daunting array of factors, numerous journalists told me, most people in their line of work tried hard to move on to a better job by the age of thirty.

Hong’s plan was to become an editor, preferably at one of the famous Nanfang Group’s newspapers. The pay would be better and the job more relaxed, as work hours were predictable and one had only to stay at the office, instead of travel all over the city or country gathering information. Recently married and hoping to some day be able to buy an apartment, this seemed the most sensible next step for him. “It’s a good job to do for a few years,” he said of being a journalist, “But it’s nothing to ruin your whole life for.” Many others he knew had already worked their ways out of the job. One had taken a marketing job at a real-estate firm. One was managing the website of a consulting company. One had joined an investment bank and was trying to raise funds. One had gone to do a doctoral degree, and was planning to segue into an academic career.

Of those who were still at *The Times*, almost everyone was planning their next moves as well. Meng was using the network of corporate contacts he had cultivated as an economic news journalist to cast about for a job in finance. Zhang was trying to start his own advertising business. Kong was interviewing for a job at a consumer lifestyle magazine, because she was tired of the Politics’ sections harried pace and, as she claimed, had “no interest in current affairs to begin with.” She later did quit *The Times*, not to join this magazine but to take an administrative job at a government office, which she got through a family connection. “It’s a great spring board for leading to other careers,” an ex-journalist whom I asked about this trend explained to me. He himself had left the news industry to work for an international corporation several years earlier, and still seemed to be celebrating the shrewdness of that decision. “Many successful people started out as journalists,” he said, as though to encourage me. “The richest man in my province started out as one! You pick up a lot of important skills on the job, like how to talk to different kinds of people, and how to write up reports quickly. But you have to get out while you’re still young. Otherwise...,” he contemplated the fate he had escaped, “Otherwise you stay and do manual labor!” He laughed.

By subordinating the task of writing about and for society to the logic of competitive commerce, the market reform of China’s news industry has made journalism a self-interested institution that even journalists themselves find it difficult to perceive the social and moral value of. If on the one hand, they feel that commercial competition is the ‘necessary’ or inevitable way forward for China’s newspapers, on the other, they also feel that it is necessary and inevitable for them to quit being news-writers. Some news-producers in China have begun to express concern that this trend poses a severe obstacle

to China's development of a robust and properly authoritative news sector. Continuously losing people as they mature, the journalistic profession seems to be unable to accumulate experience and talent. This makes it difficult for the news media to develop into a serious and influential arena of discourse, the platform for a functioning civil society. But if journalism is to be, as the progressive market-reformists say, a job just like any other, then it is difficult to see a way out of this predicament; for without any naive or self-aggrandizing ideal to constitute it as a uniquely noble profession, and furnish young workers with a sense of gratification and pride, journalism must be a job that comes to feel more difficult and less worthwhile over time.

Meanwhile at *The Times*, the Thursday review meeting continued to suffer both from the boss's neglect and from the journalists' poor attendance. Chen instituted a sign-in sheet and threatened to dock the pay of journalists who missed too many meetings. This system did not work, as people began to sign in for colleagues who had not actually shown up. A digital time-card system was then introduced, and this was at last an effective device. The journalists came in on time, scanned their cards at the office computer and dutifully idled about until lunch.

### Chapter Three: A Genealogy of Chinese News-Writing

In this atmosphere of editorial amorality where *The Times* journalists worked, the one set of values they often spoke of as potentially able to make news-production an ethical social practice was that of liberal press theory, as exemplified by America's news media. "Just look at Watergate," Hong bragged on behalf of the American press. "America's news media is good because their journalists don't look at who you are, they just report what they find, even if you're the government. That's how they're able to fulfill their function as the public's monitor. Have you ever read *The Glory and the Dream*?" he asked, referring to William Manchester's social history of America. "That and Walter Lippmann's collection of Pulitzer Prize-winning stories are the two books that have had the biggest influence on China's journalists. All of us read them when we were in school. If you want to know what Chinese journalists today are trying to achieve, you have to read those books."<sup>89</sup> The difficulty in China, Hong went on, came from the conditions it had inherited from the Mao era. "Newspapers in China aren't like newspapers elsewhere. They're the 'throat and tongue of the Party.' They're not for informing people, they're for 'brainwashing,'" he explained, using the Maoist phrases ironically. Although China's news-producers now realized that the press should inform rather than propagandize, many powerful people still had vested interests in maintaining the old system. Government offices that still had the administrative power to make newspapers write in their favor, for instance, would not voluntarily give it up. Newspaper executives, who now had a financial interest in their newspapers, would rather censor themselves than risk being penalized by those government offices. This was the kind of structural inertia that had to be overcome, Hong said, before China's news media could start to function the way a proper, liberal press should.

These claims of Hong's reflect the great popularity that Western ideas and models have gained in China's news sector since the end of the Mao era. Newspapers like *The New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* have become standard reference points for many news-producers. In addition to the titles Hong mentioned, other landmark books such as Siebert, Peterson and Schramm's *Four Theories of the Press*, and William Blundell's *The Art and Craft of Feature Writing: Based on the Wall Street Journal Guide* have also been translated and widely read. These works are commonly used as teaching materials in university journalism courses, where they are supplemented by examples taken from American newspapers and television news. The influence that such materials have had can be found anywhere one cares to look. From the layout and writing style of Chinese newspapers, to the criticisms of the state and the claims that Chinese news-producers make about how a proper press system should work – all signs seem to point towards an effort to emulate the American model of a liberal press.

Yet something in the way *The Times* staff used the language of the liberal press struck me as amiss. For example, they often spoke of "objectivity" (*keguan*) as the standard that all news-producers should strive for. In liberal press theory, objectivity is a crucial value because it ensures that the news media functions in a fair and equal way that benefits society as a whole. Because the power to publish is held in private hands and not

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<sup>89</sup> 新闻与正义：14项普利策新闻奖获奖作品全译 is a collection of Lippman's Pulitzer Prize winning stories in Chinese translation. Translated by 展江, published by 中国人民大学出版社 2009.



in public office, that is, it is deemed necessary to demand that news reports be objective, in order to prevent news companies from using their mass communication capacities only to serve their own, particularistic interests. Insisting that news-writers withhold all subjective opinions and report only 'the facts,' is a way of making the news media function as a transmitter of information that any and all individuals can benefit from, rather than as a tool that the rich or clever use to manipulate the poor or naive.

The way *The Times* staff spoke of "objectivity," however, the term seemed to refer more to a style of news-writing, than to a social functioning of the news. Journalists praised as "objective" articles that they felt were written in a detached and critical, rather than emotive or pedantic way. Editors encouraged journalists to write "objectively" because this was more professional seeming, and would give readers the sense of reading authoritative, rather than propagandistic, radical or trashy news. The term, in other words, was used to express a preference for one way of writing over another; but never did its invocation raise the question of how this way of writing related to the way the news was functioning in China. This question struck many as beyond anyone's ability to answer, and hence outside the proper domain of their concern. The political legacy of the Mao era, the economic forces of post-Mao reform and the intricacies of Chinese culture, all made it too complicated to say for sure what the news media's social impact now was. Suffice it to know, then, that the old, propaganda system was bad, and that an objective news-writing style was preferable.

By using the term "objective" in this way, *The Times* newspapermen seemed to undermine the very press values they were supposedly emulating. For the point of liberal press theory is to have a news system that represents reality and distributes information fairly, so that the benefits of mass communication accrue to society as a whole. Where the news system is for whatever reason *not* operating fairly and in the interests of the whole society, "objectivity" by itself does not constitute a liberal press value. There is nothing inherent in an "objective" representation that makes it good, in other words. It is only in relation to the way representations function socially, that "objectivity" can be a quality which gives representations a social value. Given *The Times* writers' descriptions of how China's news industry worked, and their agnostic position on what the social impact of this was, it ought not to have been possible for them to consider an objective news-writing style valuable. In taking objectivity as the hallmark of good journalism anyways, they substituted a mere appearance for the question of real effects. They settled for a standard that was symbolic of good journalism, instead of asking what actually made journalism good.

Why did evidently intelligent, critical and progressive thinkers like Hong and Sifang make this dubious substitution? How could they regularly invoke this symbol of their profession's social value, while knowing full well that it was merely symbolic? One possible explanation is that the entrenched politics and rapid commercialization of China's news sector have combined to produce a system so mismanaged and malfunctioning that those who work within it cannot but grow cynical. Where everyone from government officials to editors-in-chief seem to only use the news system to further their own interests, it may not be surprising that journalists and editors would learn to do the same; and to use liberal press terms to sustain the hoax of their profession's social worth, when in fact they were only in it for the money. But rarely are people so wholly

oriented by a single value.<sup>90</sup> There certainly are some who seem to be single-mindedly mercenary, but to project this character from one extreme end of the spectrum on to average person, is to transform people into caricatures. To describe Chinese journalism as a system of hypocrisy produced and reproduced by individuals' cynical self-interest, would be to encode Hong and Sifang into a portrait of 'Chinese journalists' in which they were unrecognizable as people.

Another possibility is that the puzzle arises from taking the journalists' talk about emulating the liberal press too much at face value, and assuming that journalism is and should be the same kind of social institution in China as it is in the West. It is only if one presumes, with the liberal model, that newspapers are a means for providing free and equal individuals with the information they need to make decisions in and about their own interests, that one sees objective reporting as a necessary value for the newspaper's social function. And it is only if one presumes this, that one sees Chinese news-producers equivocating on the question of whether or not they are fulfilling their social role. Rather than preempt our assessment of journalism in China by assuming that it is institutionally analogous, therefore, it may be prudent to first ask what kind of writing practice Chinese journalism is. What relationship between writing and social life does it presuppose? What kind of ethical and intellectual project does this make it; and subject to what measures and standards? These questions are better addressed by looking back at how Chinese newspapers came to be, than by looking across at what Western newspapers theoretically are.

A genealogy of Chinese news-writing shows that it has historically been a practice in which the pedagogical capacity of text weighs more heavily, or is considered more important, than the idea of a fairly and equally structured mode of communication. Chinese intellectuals copied the newspaper form from Europe and America in the late-19<sup>th</sup> century, in the hope that adopting this Western writing practice would help to modernize China. While Chinese news-writing was thus the site of a concerted self-modernization/Westernization project from the start, however, it also remained distinctive in its attempt to modernize the country not by empowering its ordinary people to express and pursue their own interests, but by educating and therein transforming them into properly modern subjects. It is in the historical light of Chinese news-writing as this kind of pedagogical and transformative social institution that I suggest we try to comprehend the state of journalism in China today.

## The Context of Chinese

Before attempting to trace this genealogy, it is necessary to gain some sense of the peculiar status of writing in China at the time when its first newspapers arose. It is well known that classical Chinese writing anchored a literary tradition which survived and evolved over many thousands of years. Yet contemporary scholars of classical Chinese

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<sup>90</sup> Yet not a few studies of contemporary have arrived at the conclusion that they do, and proffer cultural and historical factors as explanations for how this could be so. To explain why economic liberalization in China has not led to a bottom-up push for democracy, for instance, Guo Xiaojin argues that centuries of Confucianism have made people uniformly submissive to political power. "Coming from a Confucian political culture, the Chinese masses are a deferential people who passively acquiesce in the running of their country. They do not have a tradition of, or real desire for, self-government but are accustomed to accepting whatever leadership the political system brings to power." Guo, *State and Society*, p. 110.

must work constantly against the grain to convey their sense of the particular power of the classical Chinese text. In the distant realms of its dominance, they tell us, to write was really to act; and what was written, was real. But to convince the modern reader that this ancient form of writing once grounded not only a different way of life, but a thoroughly different reality, which has to be understood in different terms than today's reality can be, is not an easy task. In addition to the obstacles that make historical imagination challenging in general, it involves the added difficulties that arise from the fact that this particular claim to difference has been the object of numerous direct attacks, both intellectual and physical, throughout China's modernization efforts. Because China's classical writing practices were so closely entwined with the arts of imperial government, that is, efforts to transform the aged empire into a modern nation-state often took the form of attacks on its institutions of writing.

In the late-19<sup>th</sup> century, for instance, Chinese reformists and modernizers denounced the classical literature-based imperial examination system and the bureaucracy of literati-officials that it placed in power, as effectively selecting a handful of wealthy poets to rule the country ineptly, while the vast majority of the population was kept illiterate and toiling for subsistence.<sup>91</sup> Reformists rejected the Confucian texts that formed the canon of classical education as a repressively elitist ideology propped up by mysticism and superstition, which functioned only to keep the downtrodden masses subservient. Even the character-based script of classical writing, they disparaged as unnecessarily complicated and an obstacle to more effective communication. The success of these critiques, accompanied at times by violent protests and demonstrations, led to the abolishment of the imperial examination system in 1905, the elimination of the literati-officials' bureaucracy in 1912, the replacement of classical Chinese with the vernacular *baihua* as the official language of education in the 1920s, and the government-enforced simplification of the Chinese script itself in 1956.

All of these changes were justified on the basis of idea that classical writing practices and the social institutions grounded in them were repressively hierarchical and authoritarian. The sedimentation of this perspective over many decades, and the way it has been built into the self-understanding of China's quest for modernity, make it difficult today to conceive of the value that classical Chinese writing must have had in the eyes of its own historical milieu. Yet it is necessary to have some sense of this value to understand not only China's imperial past, but to the extent that the past must inherently and continuously influence the present, also the social and cultural character of contemporary Chinese writing practices as well.<sup>92</sup> And while one must, on the one hand, work against the modern language reformists' intentionally negative and delegitimizing representations of them, one must at the same time also be wary of romanticizing classical writing practices in a way that lends itself to the kinds of nationalistic and culturally chauvinistic readings that today abound.

One effort to circumvent both the modernist and culturalist reconstructions of China's past, and to excavate through a rereading of classical texts the vanished form of life and literacy that authored them, is Christopher Connery's *The Empire of the Text*.

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<sup>91</sup> For example, see Benjamin Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Service Examinations in Late Imperial China* (2000).

<sup>92</sup> On imperial China, Jaques Gernet, *Daily Life in Ancient China*. On Chinese philosophy, the works of Francois Julien and Feng Youlan.

Studying writing and imperial administration in the Han dynasty (206 BC to 220 AD), Connery suggests that text at that time was not held to be a means of communication, but rather was accorded the exclusive and elevated status of the medium of government itself. In Confucian notions of government, which the Han dynasty was first to codify into imperial orthodoxy, writing does not represent but actually *performs* the ordering of reality. “Content is not the issue [in this view]; entextualization, rather, is how government is done.”<sup>93</sup> This sense of text as having a power equivalent to cosmological efficacy, Connery argues, makes the social institution of classical Chinese writing one which cannot be understood through the communicative models of language that are normally applied to it. Communicative models assume the presence of orality as the medium of a prior, atextual kind of authority, in relation to which text is merely a secondary recording. In the case of classical Chinese, however, there is little evidence that orality was considered the source of any authority at all. “In the sources,” Connery finds, “textual culture was always the only culture; writing and civilization were coterminous.”<sup>94</sup> This ontological prioritization of text requires us to consider its social function in a somewhat different light. It does not quite make sense to call writing an ideological apparatus serving the interests of the elite, for instance, when the elite does not exist as such *except* in its relation to writing. Text here does not represent social reality; it *is* the reality out of which social life can arise. The legitimacy of the empire thus rests not the personal authority of on any socially selected group of people, but on the “textual authority” of the Confucian canon, which the governing literati-officials exist only in order to maintain. If these men are socially elite, they are elite not as masters but “as *effects* of the textual regime.”<sup>95</sup> They do not have a different source of social power which they use their writing to bolster and extend. Rather, what power they have they derive from their relation to the power of their writing.

This distinctive mode of “sociotextual” life formed the basis of China’s imperial government from the Han dynasty forward. In theory, at least, it provided for a dynamic system in which the territory-conquering military might (*wu*) of the emperor, and the territory-civilizing textual authority (*wen*) of the literati-officials, kept each other continuously in check and in motion. Emperors were beholden to the bureaucracy as practitioners of that textual authority upon which the empire rested, while bureaucrats were beholden to the emperor as the military lord and protector on whom their lives depended. Writing, in this system, was controlled by the ruling elite not because it facilitated the spread of either hegemonic or seditious ideologies – it was not held to influence the social world by communicating ideas that in turn directed people’s actions. Because the Confucian texts were held to be prior, because the written world was held to be the real cosmos out of which the social world continuously emerged, classical writing ordered the social world by emanating into it the order inscribed in the textual canon. To write was in-itself to wield this world-sculpting power. And it was over these considerably higher stakes that the imperial rulers so jealously guarded the skill. Unlike

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<sup>93</sup> Chris Connery, *The Empire of the Text: Writing and Authority in Early Imperial China*. P. 21.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 15. Reading Family Instructions for the Yan Clan by Yan Zhitui (531-591), Connery finds the idea “that spoken language itself is generated by a prior textuality... The problem with orality – ‘hearsay’ – is not merely that it constitutes a less worthy alternative culture, but that it is an inferior version of textual culture.” p. 41.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

modern dictators, Chinese emperors could not aspire to control their domains by controlling its communications media. The emperor himself, his whole bureaucracy, and conditions across the whole empire – everything was susceptible to the paramount power of text. Deviant or heterodox uses of that power introduced deviant and heterodox forces into the empire, disrupting its civil order. Against such forces, the responsibility of the literati-official was to maintain harmony in the human world – not by writing to propagandize an ideology of harmony, but just by writing, by that copying and learning and ritually enacting, that entextualization, of Confucian order in the world.

Of course, the actual operation of this system, like that of all systems, did not always live up to its ideal self-image. The history of literary and political life in imperial China is rich with questions and suggestions about what the real relationship between them was.<sup>96</sup> However believable or implausible, attractive or repellent one finds the idea of China as an ‘empire of the text’, however, it is certain that by the late-19<sup>th</sup> century, many of China’s literate elite had begun to feel that its system was not working well. And it was against this backdrop, against a sense of the waning efficacy of its classical writing practices, that China’s first newspapers emerged.

## 1. Modernist News-Writing

The late 19<sup>th</sup> century in China is well known as a period of entwined material and intellectual crises. As the Qing government gradually crumbled under the pressure of social unrest from within the empire and European and Japanese military and commercial aggression from without, the governing power hitherto held to reside in the canon of Confucian texts began to seem inefficacious. Many Chinese intellectuals who felt the need to save their country began to feel that Western ideas were evidently more effective, and to call for reform and national strengthening according to Western theories and models of social and economic development.<sup>97</sup> One change to result from this at once theoretical and political ferment was that Chinese intellectuals began to make newspapers. The form of publication – of writings on events of general interest, printed regularly on a few affordable pages – had been marginally present in China since the 1840s, when missionaries from Europe and America began to run small, Chinese-language broadsheets that combined Christian proselytizing with updates on current social issues.<sup>98</sup> By the 1870s, several commercial newspapers had also been set up by foreigners in the treaty port of Shanghai. These publications functioned as early calls for modernist reform in China, both in terms of their content and in the mode of communication that they initiated by making it their goal to inform ordinary people about social and political affairs. While missionary newspapers ran articles criticizing Confucian teachings and promoting Western education, commercial newspapers such as *Shenbao* declared

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<sup>96</sup> John K. Fairbank ed. *Chinese Thought and Institutions* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1957). Frederic Wakeman. “The Price of Autonomy: Intellectuals in Ming and Ch’ing Politics,” *Daedalus*, no. 2, Spring 1972. David Nivison and Arthur Wright eds. *Confucianism in Action* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959).

<sup>97</sup> Levenson, 1968. Benjamin Schwartz.

<sup>98</sup> Zhang 2007.

themselves in favor of all things new and against all things old, including the old practice of restricting knowledge of current affairs to government officials.<sup>99</sup>

These new and foreign-feeling writings are known to have had a considerable influence upon Chinese intellectuals of the time, not least among who was the political reformist Kang Youwei.<sup>100</sup> After China was defeated by Japan in 1895 and compelled to sign the Treaty of Shimonoseki, Kang and his famously prodigious student, Liang Qichao, turned to newspaper publishing as the means to promote the cause of national strengthening. The many newspapers that the pair helped to set up and fund lasted for varying spans of time and came to be dominated by different political leanings, but all had in common a new emphasis on and valuation of ‘the people’ (*min*).<sup>101</sup> Informed by Western theories of constitutionalism, writers for these newspapers argued that the Chinese nation belonged not to the ruling Qing family, but collectively to the Chinese people. Like the missionary and commercial newspapers before them, these publications thus called for the modern moral and political education of China’s broader population. Fueled by an added sense of national crisis, they attributed the absence of any such popular education in China to the ‘backwardness’ of its culture and its ‘perverse’ “national character”; and argued that a thoroughgoing reeducation in modernity was not merely desirable, but in fact essential for China’s survival.<sup>102</sup>

By taking newspapers up as the medium for this message, the Chinese intellectuals who wrote for these publications aimed to stop writing in the sealed-off manner of the traditional literati-official, and to reach beyond the small circle of professional politicians and scholars. Rather than appeal to an imperial bureaucracy that no longer seemed to wield real governing power, newspaper-writers wrote to China’s readers at large, for these were the people in whose hands the fate of the nation seemed to rest. Writers for *Shibao*, a newspaper that Kang and Liang helped to set up in 1904, for instance, thought of their readers as constituting a new ‘middle realm’ between the ruler and the ruled, from which sector of society the activist reformers of all nations arose. Joan Judge’s history of that newspaper shows how *Shibao* writers addressed themselves to this broad group of the non-ruling literate; and chose their biting words and arguments for the express purpose of politicizing it, of provoking it into bringing about the necessary constitutional reforms.<sup>103</sup> In the newspaper, in other words, Chinese intellectuals no longer wrote just to write, but with a fervent determination to convince and communicate – to change a great number of readers’ minds, and inspire them to join the cause of national salvation.

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<sup>99</sup> Mittler, p. 14. *Shenbao* reprinted the imperial government’s *Jingbao*, bringing into a wider circle of deliberation.

<sup>100</sup> Zhang 2007

<sup>101</sup> The Qiangxuehui study group that Kang and Liang set up ran a series of newspapers that were successively banned by the Qing government, as was the study group itself. Wangguo Gongbao, later renamed Zhongwai Jiwen, was created in 1895 and ran for 18 issues over one month. Qiangxue Bao was created in 1896 and ran for three issues over two weeks. Shiwu Bao was created in 1896, and became most influential. (Zhang 2007). *Shibao* was created in 1904, but became dominated by the Jiang-Zhe constitutionalists, rather than the Kang-Liang ‘Protect the Emperor’ faction (*baohuangpai*). (Judge).

<sup>102</sup> Joan Judge. More famous for the criticism of “national character” is Lu Xun, influenced by Arthur Smith’s *Chinese Characteristics*. But Judge’s history shows that it was already being written about before him. Lydia Liu’s *Translingual Practices* shows how this discourse of “national character” developed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>103</sup> Judge, 33.

This turn towards writing to galvanize the people continued to develop and radicalize through the early twentieth century, most famously among those intellectuals who later came to be known as the May Fourth generation. After the overthrow of the Qing dynasty in 1911 turned out to result only in its replacement by the emperor-like rule of Yuan Shikai, these intellectuals began to argue that what China needed in order to save itself was not merely a change in its political system, but the more general and radical enlightenment or spiritual awakening of its people. The greatest obstacle to achieving this, in their view, was the Chinese language and literature, in which all of its moribund culture was rooted.<sup>104</sup> “If you want to get rid of Confucianism, you cannot but get rid of the Chinese language,” wrote the reformist Qian Xuantong in an open letter to Chen Duxiu, in March 1918. “If you want to get rid of the naive, crude, rigid mentality of ordinary people, you cannot but first get rid of the Chinese language.”<sup>105</sup> Qian and others argued that the traditional requirement that all scholarly and official works be written in classical Chinese kept the educated and the ordinary people in separate universes. Instead of an instrument of education and communication, the Chinese language thus functioned as a tool of bad government and oppression. Besides disseminating Western ideas in the many newsletters and periodicals they created, these intellectuals thus also made a concerted attempt to ‘reform’ the medium of Chinese writing itself. Hu Shi and Lu Xun vocally promoted the vernacular *baihua*, and wrote their own essays, short stories and even poetry in it. The objective was to establish the legitimacy of the vernacular, a medium that they believed would make modern ideas and critical thinking accessible to the many in China who were functionally literate, but not socially or financially privileged enough to have received a formal education.<sup>106</sup>

To expand their audience faster and further, some intellectuals further supplemented their publications with lectures delivered on street corners and sometimes violent demonstrations, such as that which took place on May 4<sup>th</sup> 1919, from which the generational appellation derives. In Charles Laughlin’s study of the reportage or literary news articles that participating intellectuals wrote about these protests, Laughlin finds a new style of writing crafted less to inform readers than to push them into action. Published in radical intellectual periodicals throughout the 1920s and 30s, these stories were written in opposition to mainstream newspapers such as *Shenbao*, which reported empirical facts about the protests but said nothing of their national and historical significance. In “impressionistic meditations” that lingered on the violence and the flow of blood and tears as visceral symbols of the demonstrators’ outraged national sentiments, reportage writings sought to convey the significance of the protests as righteous eruptions of Chinese patriotism.<sup>107</sup> Individual protestors were depicted as agents or extensions of the real protagonist, the awakening collective subject that was the Chinese people. Laughlin argues that these writings ‘dramatized’ street demonstrations in the full sense of presenting them as a play that had yet to be concluded. Written from the perspective of one who was simultaneously participating in, witnessing and documenting the Chinese people’s fight to save their nation, these stories drew their readers into the “mise-en-scène

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<sup>104</sup> Vera Schwarcz, *The Chinese Enlightenment*.

<sup>105</sup> Cited in Schwarcz, p. 81. And Ramsey, p. 3.

<sup>106</sup> In 1920, vernacular became widely recognized as the national language. By 1922, it was designated the language to be used in all primary and secondary school textbooks. Hu Shi, *The Chinese Renaissance*.

<sup>107</sup> Charles Laughlin, *Chinese Reportage : The Aesthetics of Historical Experience*. P. 80.

of history,” and *became its script*. Rather than post-facto reports on disparate events, that is, they served as guiding narratives in the ongoing development of a single historical movement; one that every reader could further perform by going out and organizing similar demonstrations themselves. Thus set amidst the action, writing became an instrument of mass mobilization – communicating not only information, but the very force of historical change. In Laughlin’s words, “The moved reader is motivated by the text to act.”<sup>108</sup>

For many intellectuals in this generation, these modifications of the Chinese writing practice symbolized nothing less than China’s necessary casting off of its pre-modern self, in favor of a proper national future. Hu Shi, reflecting in 1933 on the period of literary and political protest he calls “The Chinese Renaissance,” describes it as a welcome annihilation of the past:

The Renaissance movement of the last two decades differs from all the early movements in being a fully conscious and studied movement. Its leaders know what they want, and they know what they must destroy in order to achieve what they want. They want a new language, a new literature, a new outlook on life and society, and a new scholarship. They want a new language, not only as an effective instrumentality for popular education, but also as the effective medium for the development of the literature of a new China. They want a literature that shall be written in the living tongue of a living people and shall be capable of expressing the real feelings, thoughts, inspirations, and aspirations of a growing nation. They want to instill into the people a new outlook on life which shall free them from the shackles of tradition and make them feel at home in the new world and its new civilization.<sup>109</sup>

The new writing practice that the modernizers collectively forged over the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century thus sought to cut itself off from, and leave the old form of classical Chinese writing behind. Back in the dark ages, when social order was held to originate in the mystical act of ‘entextualization,’ writing may have been seen as an efficacious governing ritual in and of itself. For the modernizers, however, only ignorance and superstition could make people believe that writing itself could ‘regulate the cosmos,’ or bring about social order by ‘radiating’ the civilizing virtues. Confucian classics, they argued, were not a source of authority but a shackle of tradition. They were not a governing force, but frivolous musings that floated about a rarified realm of abstract ideas, while real life was decided in the messy world of political and economic conflict. It was China’s age-old fetishization of such canonical texts, they argued, that was to blame for the country’s weak and backwards state of egregious inequality and needless human suffering. Because of this system of false values, China’s leaders had never worked to improve the lot of the people. While the vast majority of the population remained trapped in endless toil, the educated and governing elite did nothing of practical value, but spent their time lost in the clouds of impotent letters.

The modernizers’ writing practice was premised precisely on the rejection of this belief about how writing works. The urgency with which they published and

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<sup>108</sup> Laughlin, 75-76.

<sup>109</sup> Hu Shi, *The Chinese Renaissance*, p. 46-7.



disseminated their articles was fueled by their sense that China's future depended on people realizing that ideas have to bring about actual changes in the social and material world, in order to be considered effective. Writing, in this view, was of value insofar as it served as a tool for mobilizing people, for convincing readers to take the necessary actions to bring about the desired change. The responsibility of the writer was thus no longer only to the text, held to have its own standards and power, but to the social movement that the writer was trying to serve. Whereas the Confucian literati-officials had written with a quiet confidence in the efficacy of the text and little concern for the opinions of others, the May Fourth writers saw themselves as "permanent persuaders."<sup>110</sup> They wrote to convince as many people as they could; for they believed that only by convincing enough people to take action, could writing make any difference in the world. Classical or Confucian writing, to their minds, simply did not work, for reality was not just an effect of the text. It existed outside, in a material and social world that had to be changed by people, not words. Writing that did not in some way move a reader to action thus did not really fulfill its function as writing. The Chinese text no longer simply *was*; it was only insofar as it made readers *do*.

Yet although their turn to newspapers marked a radical change in the late-nineteenth century Chinese writers' social and political intentions, the particular power of their *writing* was not so readily transformed. Although the early newspapermen were inspired by the new idea of writing to inform and empower the ordinary people, the very medium of Chinese textuality in which they worked was saturated with the traditional sense of the educated elite's moral superiority to, and rightful authority over, the country's illiterate ordinary. As a traditional form of representation, Chinese writing was suffused with the sensibilities of China's traditional forms of power. Many histories of the period thus find that for all the intellectuals' fascination with new and Western ideas, intellectual authority for them still resided in these traditional forms.<sup>111</sup>

In her history of *Shenbao*, for example, Barbara Mittler finds that despite their strident claims to be bringing a thoroughly new mode of communication and public life to China, the early Chinese newspapers appealed to their readers not as a new style of prose, but through the old genres, narrative techniques and rhetorical devices that constitute what Mittler calls the particular quality of "Chinese literariness."<sup>112</sup> Chinese newspapers in this period, she finds, were not casually flipped through but read like books, from beginning to end. Although the content of their arguments was often novel, in terms of form and language, newspaper writers naturally drew from the literary resources that they were educated in. More than they resembled their Western counterparts, Chinese newspaper 'editorials' thus resembled such forms of classical Chinese prose as the *baguwen*, *lun*, *shuo*, *ji*, *shu* and *qingtan*. Headlines were predominantly written in *chengyu*, or poetic four-word idioms; news stories were more

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<sup>110</sup> Vera Schwarcz, *The Chinese Enlightenment*, p. 55. Schwarcz tells us that in "drafting manifestos, organizing other students in the capital, going to jail, facing prosecution, and finally mobilizing nationwide support from students, workers, and merchants... discovered their mission as permanent persuaders." She uses the term from Gramsci.

<sup>111</sup> See Benjamin Schwartz. Also Judge, who shows the various distortions of meaning that arose from the effort to contain new ideas in old words e.g. *minben*, *gong*; syncretism that equated *yao* and *shun* with America (Chapter 2).

<sup>112</sup> Barbara Mittler. *A Newspaper for China? Power, Identity and Change in Shanghai's News Media, 1872-1912*. Harvard, 2004. p. 43.

often moral tales; and opinions were always presented in the words of the sages, through citations from the Confucian classics. For a literary community that had been raised on them, these established forms and phrases provided the necessary common ground between reader and writer, upon which the authority of the author could be established. “The value of the words of the sages,” Mittler writes, “lay precisely in the fact that they were not original or individual, but traditional and communal.”<sup>113</sup> Though they badly wanted to be new, the early Chinese newspapers had to be written in this old textual medium. Thus, even editorials that criticized the old *baguwen* essay-writing style themselves reproduced its structure of argumentation; and on the day that Sun Yatsen assumed office, the editorial that *Shenbao* ran heralded a radically new China in entirely classical phrases.<sup>114</sup>

Even as the language of newspaper writing gradually loosened up, the problem of representation that it illustrated remained.<sup>115</sup> The Chinese written world had always been a province of the social and political elite. Late-19<sup>th</sup> century writers’ new enthrallment with egalitarian ideals did not by itself change this fact. Newspapers did not instantly create an arena in which every member of the population expressed his or her own opinion, and all together arrived at a common consensus. In the name of ordinary people, they functioned as arenas of learning and debate among the educated and privileged minority. This sector’s self-consciousness of being more knowledgeable, and hence also more qualified to govern than ordinary people, inherently influenced the way they wrote. Even though the early 20<sup>th</sup> century *Shibao* journalists sought specifically to give up the superior status of the literati-officials, as members of the small minority of people who were educated enough to write about China’s society, they inadvertently presumed that they had superior knowledge of and moral authority over it. When the ordinary people they actually encountered did not conform to their conception of China’s ordinary people, the *Shibao* journalists resolved the discrepancy “by constructing two mutually exclusive categories” of ordinary people, “the educable and the incorrigible.”<sup>116</sup> Judge describes this contradiction as “a product of the two forces inherent in their status as new-style intellectuals – populist reformism and enduring elitism.” While the writers’ new political ideas gave privileged place to ordinary people in principle, their inherited writing practice gave ordinary people the subordinate status of objects, rather than subjects of authorial representation. Judge argues that despite their writers’ intentions, the *Shibao* writings in many ways thus reproduced in text the division that existed in society, between the educated elite and the majority of the population. “Filtering the common people’s issues and grievances through their own lens and their own texts,” she finds, “the journalists were not creating the discourse *of* the common people but their own discourse *on* the common people.”<sup>117</sup>

This was, of course, precisely the difference that the May Fourth intellectuals tried to overcome by adopting the vernacular, and taking their writing out on to the street. But as university teachers and students in Beijing, with little or no exposure to the rural

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 58 and 118-123.

<sup>115</sup> Liang Qichao is famous for introducing a new style of writing in his newspaper publications, one that combined quality of classical prose with briskness and energy and mixed in vernacular language. Judge argues that these techniques were all present already, only Liang used them with more flair.

<sup>116</sup> Judge, p. 128.

<sup>117</sup> Judge 121.

realities in which the vast majority of China's population lived, the enlighteners' ideas were also far removed from anything that most actual people knew. And though they did not seem to realize it, this simultaneously social and ideational disparity was the very basis of their authority as authors – for to the extent that the May Fourth writers' ideas won popular influence, they won influence not as the opinions of China's actually ordinary people, but as the superior insights of China's true elite. Students and teachers were cast against imperial government officials, as the real leaders of the country. The ideas of the nation, enlightenment and freedom that they promoted mobilized people not because they were factually accurate, but because they had the symbolic force of truths revealed by a new intellectual and political elite. Thus, it was necessarily the case that there were discrepancies between the enlighteners' claims about 'the people' and most actual people. When, with the rise of Marxist terminology in Chinese intellectual and political discourse, this discrepancy took on the form of a contradiction between bourgeois liberals and the true proletariat, those who claimed to write *for* the people found they had to give way to writers who could show themselves to be *of* the people.

## 2. Maoist News-Writing

One of the most striking features of the Maoist regime in China was its use of mass media. Printing presses were nationalized and centrally run as the propaganda apparatus of the Party-state. Newspapers and books were supplemented by speeches, song, dance, theatre, opera, painted murals and banners, the signature 'big word posters,' organized study sessions, badges, pins and arm bands, and later radio and television broadcasts.<sup>118</sup> The penetrative effect of this large scale multimedia campaign is attested to by the fact that the Communist Party's political jargon, including many phrases and turns of expression coined by Mao himself, entered the everyday language of millions of ordinary people, even in the country's far flung rural areas.<sup>119</sup>

Compared to the mobilization efforts of earlier Chinese reformists, Mao's attempt had the enormous advantage of having recognized that any writing practice which was to be 'for the people,' had to be premised squarely on the fact that 'the people,' in China, were illiterate. While university students in Beijing could take to the streets shouting about the Western ideas they had read about, 80 to 90% of China's population, Mao pointed out, still had to devote its life to the manual labor of farming for subsistence.<sup>120</sup> If the ancient empire was to become a modern democratic nation, it was these agrarian masses that would have to be transformed. They would not only have to be represented differently, they would have to be made capable of representing themselves. Alongside the ideas of nation, people and democracy, the creation of a Chinese mass media – a medium that was not an arena of the elite, but by and for the common people – thus also became a potent symbol of China's necessary self-transformation. While the

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<sup>118</sup> For example, see Clark (2008).

<sup>119</sup> Alan Liu, *Communications and National Integration in Communist China* (1971). Conducted during the Cold War, this study finds "The Communist propagandists reoriented the Chinese people toward a new form of control in which national identity, political ideology and organization were more important than parochialism, the family and regional loyalty. The new form of control may be more tyrannical than the old, but it is more in conformity with modernization." p. 86.

<sup>120</sup> Mao, "On the New Democracy."

popularization or vernacularization of Chinese culture had clearly been a goal for reformers before him as well, what Mao provided was an unprecedentedly comprehensive narrative and program for this change. “In our struggle for the liberation of the Chinese people there are various battlefronts, including the twin fronts of the brush and the sword, that is, the cultural battlefront and the military battlefront,” Mao spoke at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art in 1942.<sup>121</sup> If China was finally going to free itself from the oppressive forces of feudalism and imperialism, he argued, its culture could not simply be brought to the people as it was, it had to itself be transformed into a people’s revolutionary culture. It had to be consciously honed into the ideological weapon of the revolution, just as the people’s army had to be trained to become its physical fighting force.<sup>122</sup>

This revolutionary culture is what the Party worked to develop in the rural bases that it set up from the late-1920s through to the 1940s, when it was still an embattled guerilla army. The activities that the Party organized wove the cultural tasks of reading, writing, attending and delivering lectures together with the practical tasks of communal living and guerilla warfare, to generate the sense of a coherent project of self-transformation and collective liberation. At the Jinggangshan revolutionary base area from 1927 to 1929, for example, the CPC set up schools and held rallies to teach socialist ideas, while also redistributing land and reorganizing markets according to socialist principles.<sup>123</sup> At Yanan from 1938-44, Party cadres reduced rents and taxes on land, and organized peasants into production cooperatives; while running school programs for both children and adults, that emphasized participation in both the study of Communist principles and collective production activities.<sup>124</sup> Intellectuals and students who had travelled to Yanan to join the Communist cause were given a rigorous reeducation in the hardships of rural life and in Marxist-Leninist theory, and tasked with creating a culture that was truly for the people.<sup>125</sup> Some of the programs developed include newspaper-

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<sup>121</sup> My own translation. See Bonnie McDougal for the most commonly used translation of this talk.

<sup>122</sup> This talk is mostly cited to show how Mao sought to reduce culture to a tool of revolutionary struggle, and subordinate intellectuals to the power of the Party. “Many comrades like to speak of ‘popularization,’ but what does “popularization” mean? It means that the thoughts and feelings of our writers and artists should be fused with those of the masses of workers, peasants and soldiers.” I am highlighting what this management of culture may have done for the mass movement, at the expense of intellectual values.

<sup>123</sup> Stephen C. Averill, *Revolution in the Highlands: China’s Jinggangshan Base Area* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2006). Against the hagiographic narratives about Jinggangshan that dominate Party histories, Averill is keen to emphasize the role that local conditions played in making the revolutionary base area what it was. He highlights the role of local elites in bringing radical ideas into the region before Mao; the way in which the Party’s land redistribution efforts were modeled after and constrained by local precedents and customs; the way ethnic tensions between Hakka and Han settlers affected the Party’s efforts to create alliances; and the extent to which the Party worked with, depended upon and to a certain degree resembled local bandits and brotherhoods. What these findings go to show is that contra the meta-narrative of the active Party steadily revolutionizing the passive Chinese landscape, the Communist movement was not a sweeping or coherent trend, but a heterogeneous complex – or in Averill’s words, “that great revolutions are made in a multitude of local contexts” (11). While this reminder against the illusory, if seductive, nature of meta-narratives is useful, some consideration may still be fruitfully given to the overall phenomenon of Maoism in China. The idea of the historical role of the mass mediatization of Chinese writing presented here is an effort to contribute at this level.

<sup>124</sup> Mark Selden, *The Yanan Way in Revolutionary China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971.

<sup>125</sup> Apter and Saich focus on this population and describe Yanan as “an instructional community” in which “one join[ed] the revolution as a discourse community” (27) and through a continuous process of

reading groups that read and discussed the Party's *Liberation Daily*, labor-hero campaigns that honored exemplary individuals, and travelling song-and-dance troupes which dramatized the Communist message in accessible and entertaining ways.<sup>126</sup>

All of these projects combined revolutionary reorganizations of the peasants' lives with mass campaigns for their education in revolutionary values. The effect seems to have been to make the story the Chinese people's revolutionary struggle for liberation into a story that was really unfolding – not the claim of one man, or even of one party, but the real history of China. Through the years of its telling and enactment, Mao's army grew from a band of some one thousand bedraggled men in 1927, to a Party of over four million members in 1949, when Mao became Chairman of the People's Republic of China. How real was the story? Historians have since identified many interests that motivated people apart from revolutionary conviction – peasants' desire for land, politicians' desire for power and intellectuals' desire for significance. But such accounts always have to reckon, in the end, with the selfless behavior that so many displayed, and the sense of historical destiny that so many profess to have experienced.<sup>127</sup> While there were certainly diverse interests at work then and throughout the Mao era, the story of the people's revolution was always the only medium through which those other interests could be pursued. Even after 1949, political power remained so entrenched in the narrative of revolutionary struggle that political purges such as the 1951-2 Three-Anti and Five-Anti Campaigns, the 1955 Campaign to Suppress Counterrevolutionaries, the 1957-8 Anti-Rightist Campaign, and the purges of individual Party leaders such as Chen in 1955, Peng Dehuai in 1959 and Peng Zhen in 1966 were all carried out through writings, speeches, and accusations of ideological betrayal.<sup>128</sup> “Unlike the Stalinist purges, where a knock on the door after midnight heralded doom,” historian Rebecca Karl finds, “in Maoist China, doom came through words, in newspapers and wall posters. It came in tortured interpretations of texts, that shortly before had appeared innocuous. It came in social shunning and rumors and insinuations. It came as social death.”<sup>129</sup> The Cultural Revolution which followed illustrated this only the more dramatically.<sup>130</sup>

It is difficult today to fathom how such a thoroughgoing social upheaval could have happened. One consideration that is less attended to in the literature is the impact that must have been created not just by the introduction of mass media to China, but by the mass mediatization of Chinese writing in particular. Mao's creation of a mass media in China came directly after the country's first vernacular movement, when the idea that

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“exegetical bonding.” “Even war and fighting were made to center around education” (228). The efficacy of Mao's story must have been strong for political scientists to find it necessary to borrow terms from language theories. They go quite far, calling Yanan a Republic with Mao as the philosopher-king; speaking of its “revolutionary Platonism,” calling it a simulacra, and using phenomenology. One interesting idea is that they borrow the idea of “symbolic capital” but propose a “logocentric model” against the economic model. In the logocentric model, one takes out more than one puts in. See David E. Apter and Tony Saich, *Revolutionary Discourse in Mao's Republic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

<sup>126</sup> Selden.

<sup>127</sup> For example, see Hinton, *Fanshen*.

<sup>128</sup> Frederick C. Teiwes, *Politics and Purges in China: Rectification and the Decline of Party Norms, 1950-1965* (M.E. Sharpe, 1993) looks at “rectification” as a unique approach that the CPC developed for managing its government elites.

<sup>129</sup> Rebecca Karl, *Mao Zedong and China in the Twentieth-Century World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>130</sup> For example, Roderick MacFarquhar, *Mao's Last Revolution*.

writing did not belong only to those at the top of the civilizational hierarchy but should properly be available to all common people, was still fresh and unfamiliar feeling. For several millennia and up till the most recent decades, the practice of writing in China had had the social status not of a mere instrument of communication, but of an art of imperial government – of civilization, in the sense of the ethical practice that humanizes an otherwise barbaric world. This knowledge and power which was, at least theoretically, the proper privilege only of superior and rightfully governing men, through the Maoist mass media was suddenly becoming available to sectors of society who had barely considered themselves relevant to the lofty arts of government, much less capable of it.

We who have been exposed virtually from birth to various forms of mass media find it difficult to imagine how powerful the symbolic force of the written text must have been for a Chinese peasant in the 1930s.<sup>131</sup> It may not have had the cosmological power that it did in the ancient Han, but it would certainly have exuded some of that aura of at once moral and political value upon which the ‘empire of the text’ was based. To be presented with a piece of writing directly addressed to them, to be taught to read and write themselves – this for ordinary Chinese people would not have been merely to receive a message or acquire a new skill, but to be initiated into the traditionally higher realm of existence and responsibility. Every peasant would in a sense be elevated to the status of the literati-official, that is, to the status of men whose world-historical role was to transform themselves through reading and writing, so as to become capable of governing China by the very example of their moral-political beings. In group study sessions and newspaper readings, on ‘big word posters’ and slogans painted across walls, Maoist writings would have symbolized for many ordinary people this new and dignifying sense of responsibility.

The incredible historical impact that the Maoist mass media eventually had, may in part derive from this fact that what was mass mediatized under Mao was not a particular ideology, but writing itself as the means of governing man and hence of authoring history. If this exaggerated sense of the efficacy of ‘writing’ strikes us today as grandiose, or even reminiscent of the mystical notion of ‘entextualization,’ perhaps it seemed less so to people back then because the Maoist mass media made such formidable use of the other dimensions of Chinese textuality besides its capacity for constative meaning. The modernist writers before Mao had tried to convert people to their cause by focusing specifically on this capacity. Using newspapers primarily to argue and promote their views, they set themselves the task of writing to persuade ‘the people’ as so many individual readers – the sheer scale of which task would take decades, if not centuries, particularly since most of ‘the people’ would have to be taught to read first. By using newspapers in close coordination with a host of other media ranging from wall-paintings to opera to group study sessions, meanwhile, the Maoist mass media aimed to persuade people not by argumentation but through a multi-sensory, directly affective attack. In

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<sup>131</sup> It was not all, but it must have been one factor in the encounter Edgar Snow had. When the American journalist visited Mao’s mountain encampment in the 1930s, he was moved by what he saw. He asked a 17 year old who had marched from Fujian if he liked the Red Army. “They looked at me in genuine amazement. It had evidently never occurred to either of them that anyone could not like the Red Army. ‘The Red Army has taught me to read and write,’ said Old Dog. ‘Here I have learned to operate a radio, and how to aim a rifle straight. The Red Army helps the poor.’” Edgar Snow, *Red Star over China*, p.83.

liturgical phrases to be ritually read, Maoist writing aimed to communicate less an argument than an impulse, less a statement than a force.

By this approach, Mao did indeed attempt to direct history, as in a cosmological act of definition. The conviction of the masses that something was so, he insisted, really could make it so. With the media directing the masses, and the masses transforming reality, China's history did not have to be the matter of insurmountable imperialist and capitalist forces that the modernist and nationalist reformers said it was. It had only to be differently written, in order to be written differently. "Apart from their other characteristics, the outstanding thing about China's 600 million people is that they are 'poor and blank.'" Mao wrote, "This may seem a bad thing, but in reality it is a good thing. Poverty gives rise to the desire for changes the desire for action and the desire for revolution. On a blank sheet of paper free from any mark, the freshest and most beautiful characters can be written; the freshest and most beautiful pictures can be painted."<sup>132</sup> The bygone literati-officials had hoarded the prestige and power of Chinese textuality for their own use, until its efficacy seemed utterly depleted. By giving Chinese writing to the masses, Mao would renew its symbolic and affective force, and wield its world-historical, if not cosmological, power once again. With the masses as his brush and paper, he would write his vision of China into a reality.

If the 'massification' of Chinese textuality made possible the quick and effective unleashing of a great revolutionary force for China, however, what it did for Chinese news-writing as a moral and political institution was perhaps less salutary. To make it work its revolutionary effect through the masses, Chinese news-writing had to be changed in several fundamental ways. Firstly, its ideal addressee had to be redefined. In the inadvertently elitist mode of modernist news-writing, author addressed reader as a learned individual who would thoughtfully consider the ideas presented, and independently choose what was best for China's future. In the revolutionary mode of Maoist news-writing, by contrast, author addressed reader as a member of the not necessarily educated but necessarily righteous people, whose allegiance to the Party's cause, and hence agreement with the Party's claims, were both required and assumed.

Closely related to this was a second change, namely, in the conception of the news-writer's role and responsibility. As part of a broad and totalizing propaganda program, Maoist newspapers were meant to work less as texts, which can always inspire people to go in unexpected directions, and more as flags, which guide people along the route that one intends. The news-writer's highest responsibility was not to any particular idea or theory, but to the general and ever-evolving ideological needs of socialist revolution. This subordination of newspapers to an instrument of ideological control in an overriding political project meant that the value of each piece of news-writing could be judged neither by its relation to its object (e.g. by its factual accuracy) nor by its relation to other texts (e.g. by its criticality), but only by its revolutionary effect on the masses. And this, of course, was decided by whoever was in the position of power that enabled them to speak on behalf of the revolution and its masses. The entire medium of news-writing was thus liable to be used as a medium of factional power struggle instead. Herein lay the anti-intellectualism of what was in other ways an uplifting, pedagogical

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<sup>132</sup> Mao, "Introducing a Cooperative", April 15, 1958.

project.<sup>133</sup> In the many mass campaigns that punctuated the Mao era, the truth value of a news article was determined not through interpretation or reasoning about the text, but by politics that went on behind the public, and published, scenes. This tension between the Maoist media's claims about collective liberation and the factional power struggles that actually went on behind them was not resolved before Mao's death and the end of the Cultural Revolution. The historical narrative that has since become dominant paints the period as one in which official claims and political actualities grew so far apart that even the formidable Party propaganda apparatus could no longer paper over the discrepancies. As mass campaigns repeatedly failed to deliver, and as every new failure led to a further extension of political control into public life, pure power-politics showed through as the reality that Maoist representations disguised.

Perhaps the promises that the Maoist mass media made were too grand to be realizable. Transcendent and messianic in its mode, Maoist writing did not claim merely to accurately describe reality or edify the diligent reader, but to be the means by which the masses could transform China into a utopia. Although it did not achieve this goal, it did in the process of trying, thoroughly remake – one might say, modernize – the social institution and functioning of the Chinese text. The Maoist revolution was a revolution in Chinese writing. Giving it to the masses for the first time in history both unleashed social forces of incredible magnitude, and also transformed the institution of writing from a studiously cultivated but not always practical art, into a blunt but highly effective instrument of social organization. It is as though in popularizing the text and promoting universal literacy, Mao tapped into a vein of symbolic and affective power that ran all the way back to the cosmological origins of Chinese orthography. The energy that flowed forth, he burned all at once in a brief but blazing era of idealism. The powerful mystique of writing that in ancient times felt like a cosmic force, now felt like humanity united in and by the Maoist text and striving for emancipation. But when this inspired collectivism wore off, exposing the self-interested struggles that had never stopped going on beneath, Chinese writing was left a popularized but spiritless instrument.

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<sup>133</sup> On Mao's contradictory relationship with China's intellectuals, see Timothy Cheek, *Deng Tuo*. In this biography of Deng, the first editor in chief of *People's Daily*, Cheek argues that what attracted intellectuals into the Communist government in the mid-twentieth century, was that it offered them a modern form of the traditional role of the Confucian literati-official. "For China's Deng Tuos Mao was the paternalistic sage-leader who justified their own status as mandarins" (157). It was not the new universalism of the world proletarian revolution but the old universalism of the Confucian scholar-official that inspired the Chinese Communist. Communism was necessary for the renaissance of China's age-old culture, and it was in this form that they served its cause. Thus while Deng Tuo aimed in his journalistic writings at the political education of the masses, he never considered it the goal of this education to eliminate all difference between the masses and the cultural elite such as himself. The unchanging universal within which he lived was the Confucian one of cultivation or education based hierarchy. Although his duty was to write to improve the masses, this did not necessitate becoming a member of the mass. Rather, the task could only be done by a highly cultured and educated individual, and indeed demanded his or her further self-cultivation. Until the 1960s, Cheek finds, Deng was able to live in such a 'two-track' cultural system, writing for the proletarian masses on the one hand, and enjoying his classical poetry and art collection on the other. What put an end to this Confucian intellectual lifestyle was not Maoism in the abstract, but Mao Zedong's turn against his own Party bureaucrats and towards a mode of leadership centered on the charisma of his own person. When the Cultural Revolution began, Deng Tuo wanted neither to repudiate Mao nor to give up the ethical and intellectual practice he lived by, and thus chose instead to end his own life. Rebecca Karl notes that while Mao made spectacular use of China's writers and cultural workers, he was always suspicious that they did not share his massification goal.



### 3. Contemporary News-Writing

“1978: Time begins!” A history of the post-Mao media recently published in China opens with this exclamation.<sup>134</sup> The author, a former journalist and editor himself, argues that before this time, nothing we would today recognize as ‘news’ existed in China. Newspapers did not deliver factual information about breaking events, but only abstract ideas and glorious images of socialist development. Only with the end of the Cultural Revolution and the beginning of market reform, did ‘news’ in the proper sense of the term become possible. Thus it is back to 1978 and no further that he traces the history of the China’s news media. This radical divide between the Mao era and the present was a dominant assumption among many of the news-producers I spoke to, and served as a foundation for the account of contemporary news-writing that they gave. By their description, the post-Mao news scene was comprised of three distinct moments, marked by the rise of three different genres of news – ‘evening’ and ‘city’ newspapers from the 1980s on; investigative journalism from the 1990s on; and economic newspapers since the 2000s.

What is striking about these three moments is that while each presents a different claim about what ‘news’ should be and do for society, all are conceived in direct and explicit opposition to the Maoist idea of revolutionary propaganda. Rather than enlighten, liberate or transform readers, all aim to provide information that is useful to readers as they already are. Instead of a total, world-historical revolution, all aim to bring about small but concrete improvements in people’s lives. Instead of being oriented by political or spiritual goals, all are expressly oriented by the quest for profit. As the categories through which news-producers described what ‘news’ in contemporary China was, the three genres partly constitute the ideational milieu that they felt themselves to be working in. A look into each thus sheds light on the newspapermen’s sense of what writing about and for society in today’s China is.

#### *i. Evening and City Newspapers*

The first moment is marked by the mushrooming of ‘evening newspapers’ (*wanbao*) all across China in the early 1980s. Evening newspapers had been a popular source of leisure reading in urban areas such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Kunming since the early 1900s. When the CPC state was established, these newspapers were taken over and run by the city-level governments’ propaganda offices, as lighter, local supplements to the heavier fare of the provincial and central Party newspapers. The more draconian publishing rules of the Cultural Revolution then saw all the evening newspapers closed down. But upon the early 1980’s relaxation of ideological control, several city-level propaganda offices tentatively reopened them. They met with no crackdown from the central government, and a very warm welcome from their readers. Some considered this the sign of a great turning point for China’s media. When

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<sup>134</sup> Song Shoushan. *Chuanmei Sanshi nian (Thirty Years of Media History)*. Guangzhou: Guangdong Nanfang Ribao Chubanshe, 2009.

Shanghai's *Xinmin Evening Newspaper* reopened in 1982, for instance, its reappointed editor-in-chief, Zhao Chaogou, by now a man in his seventies, announced:

Our newspaper is absolutely not only for our leader comrades to read. And it is not only for cadres specialized in one or another arena to read. We have done some stupid things in the past. We have run the 'Arts and Culture' section of the paper as a 'section for Arts and Culture cadres to read.' We ran long-winded discussions of typical problems in literature, and made it so that no one wanted to read our newspaper... We must at all times bear in mind that we make our newspaper for the broad masses to read. All reports and essays must really take them as their starting point, and not just set out from topics of personal writing interest. Reports and discussions should thus consider the common interests of the broad masses, what things can inspire widespread interest among them, and also aim to continuously increase the readability of the evening newspaper.<sup>135</sup>

As policy changes over the rest of the decade continued to encourage newspapers to commercialize, this idea that newspapers should not preach but cater to the masses' reading interests became the basis for a widespread remaking of China's newspapers as commercial enterprises. During the Cultural Revolution, it was now said, newspapers had alienated readers and lost touch with reality, by writing only to indoctrinate people in Party-political lines that were increasingly convoluted and obscure. What newspapers ought to do was precisely the opposite – they ought to take the ordinary reader as their starting point, and try to provide information that was useful, interesting or entertaining to her; information she would willingly purchase and enjoy, not lessons she would be loathe to suffer through. Only in this way could newspapers produce news that was actually of worth to the people, and generate the sales and advertising revenue they needed to be sustainable ventures, rather than sinkholes of the state's resources.

Evening newspapers were the first to realize this happy formula. Instead of politics and ideology, they ran articles about urban residents' mundane but practical concerns. They aimed to provide news at a level of significance perhaps best expressed in the idioms that were commonly used to describe it – 'clothing, food, housing and transport' (衣食住行); 'eating, drinking and making merry' (吃喝玩乐); 'false, counterfeit, fake and lousy' (假冒伪劣) consumer goods and services. The sales rates and advertising revenues that this approach earned them repeatedly left the rest of the news-sector astounded. By 1993, the sales rate of *Xinmin Evening Newspaper*, for instance, was second only to that of *People's Daily* – a considerable achievement given that *People's Daily's* rate was bolstered by all government offices having compulsory subscriptions to it. Also that year, Shandong's *Qilu Evening Newspaper* shot past industry records for ad revenue, by subcontracting its advertising business to an external agency. While the newspaper's ad revenue had been under 4 million RMB in 1992, it was able to contract the business out for 12 million in 1993. The contracting agency is said to have made double that sum from the year's business.<sup>136</sup>

In the gold rush that China's news sector was becoming, the revenue that many city-level propaganda offices raked in through their evening newspapers soon vastly

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

outstripped what provincial-level propaganda offices were able to generate with their stiff and officious dailies. From the mid-1990s on, provincial-level propaganda offices thus began to fight back for their share of the spoils, by launching their own city-specific newspapers in the various provincial capitals where evening newspapers were thriving. The legendary ‘father’ of this strategy was a man named Xi Wenju, at that time the vice-editor-in-chief of Sichuan provincial government’s *Sichuan Daily*. In the provincial capital, Chengdu, *Sichuan Daily*’s subscription rates were still far higher than that of the city government’s *Chengdu Evening Newspaper*, but its advertising revenue was less than half of this rival’s. Xi Wenju was assigned to create a city-specific newspaper in Chengdu that would help to win some of this revenue over to the provincial government’s coffers. It is said that Xi’s strategy from the outset was to imitate the evening newspapers. He launched *Huaxi City Newspaper* in 1995, and filled it with stories that either touched upon city residents’ most immediate and practical concerns, or piqued their interest with ‘stirred up’ news sensations.<sup>137</sup> By its third year, *Huaxi*’s advertising revenue was an alarming 130 million RMB, and ‘city newspapers’ (*dushi bao*) had begun to sprout up all across the rest of the country.

As a genre borne of the 1990s’ news sector, city newspapers thus had a clear and explicitly commercial purpose from the very moment of their inception. This distinguished them slightly from the evening newspapers, which having served the cause of socialist development throughout the ’50s and ’60s, remained vaguely entangled with the Party’s propaganda goals even after they reopened in ’80s. Some evening newspapers also had pre-Communist cultural and intellectual heritages that they were trying to revive and carry forward into China’s newly commercialized news sector. These complicated and sometimes conflicting agendas did not always yield the most marketable or lucrative news product. City newspapers, on the other hand, were designed and created for the singular purpose of capturing a portion of the profits that were being made on the mid-90’s consumer news market. Although they were all nominally state-owned, the relationships among them were of undisguised commercial competition. The question of how to win readers and advertising contracts away from other newspapers became the central issue around which many decisions were oriented. In their selection of news content, for example, city newspapers did not only look for stories that were practically useful and relevant to urban residents’ lives. They also sought to expand their markets by creating new areas of news interest, or new reader appetites to cater to. Sports, crime, health and celebrity news all became vibrant mainstays of today’s news media through the city newspapers’ efforts.<sup>138</sup> Sensationalism and seediness – the kind of news that was idiomatically described as ‘rape, murder, robbery and extortion’ (奸杀抢掠) – also became common fare, as it was found to be a highly effective way of grabbing people’s attention.

As more government offices created more of such newspapers, however, it soon became difficult to come up with distinctive content. By the late 1990s, Guangzhou had five comparable newspapers in operation, Chengdu had seven, Kunming nine and Xian, for a brief period, seventeen. With so many more newspapers around, there was still only so much news to report. Many responded by giving up on the search for distinctive content, and competing in other ways instead. Since their objective was not to be

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<sup>137</sup> Interview with Chen

<sup>138</sup> See Fan Yijin’s praises of *Southern Metropolis*, for example.

different for the sake of difference itself, but only so as to attract sales and advertising contracts, rival newspapers could run exactly the same articles, as long as they had other ways to compete against one another for revenue. Newspapers lifted interviews, copied stories and even bought whole pages of content from one another. Some even shared a team of staff. Meanwhile, competition moved into the arenas of price and size of newspaper, soon resulting in a massive price war. Prices dropped from 1 RMB to as low as ten cents per copy. Vendors began selling package-deals of two or three rival newspapers for the price of one. Subscriptions were promoted with free gifts worth as much, if not more than the subscription itself, such as bicycles, disinfecting cabinets and televisions. Once again, Fan Yijin's advice is symptomatic. He describes with pride how Nanfang's city newspaper steered itself off this unsustainable course of competition, by organizing real estate, automobile and IT bonanzas.

In 2002, during the National Day golden week, Nanfang Media Group's *Southern Metropolis* held the biggest car expo in the history of Guangzhou, the "Nanfang Car Expo"... This car Expo alone broadcast the brand name of the Nanfang newspapers' far and wide – allowing those newspapers to create, under the guidance of the market, close business relationships with many new clients. The activities that the Group's main and subsidiary brands organized in the run up to the Expo had a great influence on public opinion across the country, drawing forth numerous car producers and distributors, as well as Expo viewers. The Expo not only brought in a tidy sum from ticket sales, but also a huge pile of advertising revenue. But most importantly, it allowed us to strengthen and draw closer our ties to car producers and distributors. This is bound to bring us very considerable economic effects in the long run.<sup>139</sup>

From the very first moment of post-Mao production, evening and city newspapers thus thoroughly shattered the Maoist conception of 'news' as revolutionary propaganda. Although various forms of political and bureaucratic control were carried forward from the old press system, newspapers' turn from revolution to revenue fundamentally changed what the institution of news-writing was. The new conception of 'news' as information produced for consumer value on the one hand and commercial profit on the other, lay the foundation for the subsequent development of Chinese journalism.

## ii. *Southern Weekend*

Some say that *Southern Weekend* was the first newspaper to bring the glimmer of a human conscience into China's news media. The kind of investigative journalism that it popularized in the 1990s is well illustrated a run through of a few sample stories. In one famous article, the newspaper interviewed a seventeen-year old girl in Kunming who had been physically tortured by a gang of hooligans for eight consecutive hours in various public places, without anyone even trying to stop them. They burnt her legs with cigarettes, stuck toothpicks under her nails, beat her till she was unconscious and urinated on her face to revive her – all on busy streets and in crowded nightclubs, without a single civilian or police intervention. The leader of the gang, it turns out, was a man effectively

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<sup>139</sup> Fan Yijin, p. 130.

above the law because both of his parents were high-level officials in the city's police department. He was notorious for beating up strangers, demanding 'protection fees' and raping and gang raping teenage girls; but corruption in the police system meant there was no justice to be sought. The thug had, in fact, only recently been arrested and sentenced to three years' jail – only he had never been made to serve his term.<sup>140</sup> Another famous story investigated the death of a young man who had left his small-town home to find work in Changsha, but was kidnapped and killed by armed hit-men instead. The hit-men turned out to be farmers who had dreamt of becoming rich and successful in the city. After failing in several business ventures, getting injured in various forms of manual labor and laid off from various other jobs, however, they began to look for other ways to feed their families. They found that guns, though illegal, were readily available at the Myanmar border to those with the right connections, and learnt from experience that bribery could get a person out of any situation. Over time they came to see their own line of work as no different from any other business, except for its involving higher risks. They developed a sense of professional pride in their efficiency, maintained a rigorous training regime and a strict organizational ethic. Killing the young job-seeker had only been part of a new team member's initiation ritual.<sup>141</sup> Still other stories told of migrant workers whose employers had cheated them of their wages; farmers whose land had been taken from them by local officials; girls who were kidnapped and sold as brides; a county government that annually falsified its production statistics; another county government that invested in and developed a fake cigarette industry; and the list goes on.

These heartrending stories of poverty and suffering, government corruption and power abuse, brought a whole different side of China to the light of public attention. *Southern Weekend* did not invent investigative journalism, nor were they the only newspaper to engage in it. Investigative journalism had been a genre of Chinese leftist writing since the 1930s, and had gained new popularity in the 1980s through the writings of outspoken and critical Party journalists such as Liu Binyan and Su Xiaokang.<sup>142</sup> In the 1990s, Party newspapers such as *China Youth Daily* and city newspapers such as *Southern Metropolis* were also regularly running investigative reports on social problems, corruption scandals and other politically sensitive issues.<sup>143</sup> The difference was that *Southern Weekend* did it more aggressively. A creation of the Nanfang Group, it was owned and managed by the Guangdong provincial-level government, and enjoyed all the financial resources and political leeway this entailed. At a time when most newspapers' budgets were still quite modest, *Southern Weekend* could afford to fly journalists across the country at the drop of the hat and embed them there for weeks at a time, to work on in-depth investigative reports. The newspaper skirted censorship by avoiding stories in Guangdong and reporting only on issues in other provinces, whose propaganda offices had no direct control over them. While the local newspapers in these provinces were forbidden from reporting on the scandals that they uncovered, *Southern Weekend* could run damning stories with impunity from their base in Guangzhou, and quickly gained a national following by doing so.

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<sup>140</sup> “昆明在呼吁：铲除恶霸”《南方周末》1998年1月9日

<sup>141</sup> “张君案检讨：一个极端暴力集团的成长”《南方周末》2001年4月20日

<sup>142</sup> Charles Laughlin, *Chinese Reportage*. Tong Jinrong, *Investigative Reporting*.

<sup>143</sup> For example, the Sun Zhigang case as reported by *Southern Metropolis*.

Something heroic percolated out of this determinedly gritty reporting. At a time when China's development was proliferating new and appalling forms of disparity and injustice, *Southern Weekend* took the side of those fast becoming, or already become, the downtrodden. They were the voice of the weak, in a country being briskly and decisively polarized. If newspapers had for too long been the mouthpiece of the Party, *Southern Weekend* not only sang the true sufferings of the people, but also cried out the corruption, hypocrisy and chilling amorality that thoroughly pervaded government institutions. Even its slogan seemed to call the Party-state to task, by proclaiming the values that it promised but never delivered – “Attending to the Peoples’ Livelihood, Showing Love, Upholding Justice, and Standing by our Conscience.”<sup>144</sup> The figure that *Southern Weekend* thereby cut of the journalist as a moral crusader against darkness – shining the light of public attention on the gross injustices and hapless sufferings that go on in the shabby villages and desolate mountains of our ignorance – won the newspaper near cult status. The emotional pitch and sense of moral gravitas which it came to symbolize is captured in its famous 1999 News Year’s Day editorial, “There is ever a Kind of Strength that Reduces Us to Tears.”

Sunbeams shine upon your faces, and warmth stays in our hearts.

There is a kind of strength, exuded by your fingers. There is a kind of care, shining in your eyes. Times like this put us at a loss for words. We can only respond with a wishing: Let the weak have strength, let the pessimistic soldier on, let those moving forward keep going, let the fortunate be more fortunate. And we, we will keep cheering you on.

We will keep cheering you on. Because your hope is our hope, and your sufferings, our sufferings. We watch you raising your hoe, we watch you wielding your sickle, we watch beads of sweat drip like rain from your brow, and we watch your fields grow bursting with grain. We see you at a loss, we see you weeping bitterly, we see you in the torrent, we see you rebuild your home. We see you helplessly laid off, we see you clenching your jaw, we see you make your way through the storm, we see you slowly begin to smile again... We watch you, we keep cheering you on, because we are a part of you.

There is ever a kind of strength that reduces us to tears. There is ever a kind of strength that arouses our spirits. There is ever a kind of strength that drives us to search continuously, for “Justice, Love, Conscience.” This kind of strength comes from you, it comes from each and every one of you.

Because of you, we are.

Sunbeams shine upon your faces, and warmth stays in our hearts.

Why are there always tears in our eyes? Because we love so deeply. Why are our spirits always aroused? Because we love so deeply. Why is it we are continuously searching? Because we love so deeply. We love this country, and its people, who are kind, and upstanding, and who know how to care for one another.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> 关注民生，彰显爱心，维护正义，坚守良知

<sup>145</sup> “总有一种力量让我们泪流满面” 新年献词《南方周末》1999年1月1日

Many news-producers told me that it was *Southern Weekend* which first inspired them to study journalism. “We all grew up reading *Southern Weekend*,” one said. “At university, we chose to study journalism so that we could be like them.” This moment, however, is commonly recounted as one that has passed and left a different set of circumstances in its place. The 1990s are retrospectively seen as *Southern Weekend*’s golden age. Nanfang Group caught the wave at the right time – when reports on the dark underside of development were still novel and rare in China, they were uniquely able to tap into and expand the market’s demand for it. Commercial success meant salaries were relatively high at *Southern Weekend*, and many talented journalists were attracted by the unique chance to both fight for a just cause and make an above-average income doing so. Today, however, many other newspapers also feature ‘negative news’ (*fumian xinwen*) reports. Even the most ordinary city newspaper runs a steady stream of stories on corruption scandals and factory accidents as a matter of course. Anthologies of the year’s best investigative journalism articles are annually published in book form by multiple newspapers. Wrenching tales of abuse in remote areas are always available on the Internet as well.

Perhaps it is the new abundance and accessibility of such reading material that makes *Southern Weekend*’s signature news product no longer seem very valuable. “What they write isn’t news, it’s just tear-jerker story telling,” one newsman told me. “Sure, that kind of writing is moving. It appeals to young people, with all their energy and passion. But that kind of writing can only get you so far. You read a really tragic story that reflects a really terrible social problem. But what can you do about problems like that? Nothing! So you can read the story if you like, or not read it if you don’t like, it doesn’t make a difference either way. If this were an age in which poetry determined historical change, then we would all be trying to understand poetry, and *Southern Weekend* would be a highly influential newspaper. But it isn’t,” he shrugged.

Hard work to begin with, investigative reporting has become even harder for journalists who are now plagued by such nagging doubts about its very worth. The 1990s was a time of strong social commitments and clear moral positions, *Southern Weekend* staff who I spoke to recalled. Economic development was creating new forms of inequality and abuse on the one hand, and a group of educated urban residents whose sense of injustice was keenly pricked by this on the other. Many *Southern Weekend* journalists were themselves young men and women who had risen by hard work and luck out of rural and small city backgrounds. They felt that their social responsibility as newspapermen was clear – to use their newly won positions to speak out on behalf of those who were still deprived. As China’s development continued into the 2000s, however, the situation began to seem more complex than this straightforward principle could address. Business undertakings that led to exploitation and abuse, for instance, were also necessary for local economic development. The political system was rife with corrupt relations, but these were so intricately entwined with everyday administration that trying to purge them all at once would probably unleash chaos, rather than solve anyone’s problems.

Although inequality and injustice were real, in other words, the line between good and bad was not so easy to draw. Investigative journalists, with their righteousness and poetry, seemed to lack the more specialized knowledge of government administration, law and economics that was increasingly necessary for understanding how things worked

in China. The tales of suffering that they so tearfully delivered were but surface manifestations of deeper, more systemic conditions, which they were not equipped to comprehend. People who worked in government offices and corporations could at least claim that they were trying to achieve concrete improvements in difficult and complicated situations. Journalists, if pressed, would have to concede that they had no real inkling of how to solve China's problems. What could the point of all their criticizing then be? To 'stir up' a stink for profit? Or perform outrage so everyone with a grievance could enjoy a vicarious release? In this new context, the noble figure of the journalist as crusader seemed to gradually shrink into that of a wandering malcontent. "A bullied farmer here, a dead coal-miner there – the most that *Southern Weekend* can become now is recreational reading for migrant workers," one gloomily predicted.

Doubts about the value of investigative journalism have been compounded by *Southern Weekend's* lagging commercial performance. The newspaper no longer leads in sales rates or advertising revenue. Staff members say they have had trouble expanding their readership beyond the original generation of readers, who though loyal are by now in their 40s and 50s. Salaries at the newspaper have stagnated, which means that they have fallen in relation to other jobs; and the organization no longer attracts top university graduates as it used to. For several years, therefore, *Southern Weekend* has been trying to refashion itself into a more general and authoritative newspaper. The founding batch of journalists and editors, who had made the newspaper what it was in the 1990s, have almost all left. New management has shifted it away from investigative journalism towards a broader range of current affairs (*shizheng*) news, but with as yet dubious success. Many I spoke to asserted that while it was now past its prime, *Southern Weekend* had made a great and lasting contribution to China's media. Through its rise to prominence, 'negative news' for the first time became standard fare in a press sector that, even after 1978, was still heavily dominated by the rosy images of Party-state propaganda. Using journalism to critique government offices and companies became an established practice under that newspaper's pressure. But as China and its news industry developed through the 2000s, what the real value or point of such 'negative news-writing' was began to seem less certain. Both the commercial value and the energy behind it seemed to wane, and investigative journalism began to feel like a wave that had crested and passed on.

### *iii. Economic Newspapers*

The new wave of energy seems to be in economic and financial news. Newspapers and magazines with a focus on this have begun to appear in increasing numbers, and seem to have met with great success. Many say that the trend began to pick up in 2001, when the stock market was sufficiently established and China entered the WTO. It became increasingly clear around this time, that the determining force in China was no longer political or social, but economic. "China has become a country where economics decides. If you want to understand *anything* that happens here, you have to understand some economics. Otherwise you don't stand a chance," an editor for one such newspaper told me. Like many others I spoke to, he argued that journalists had to start to acquire more specialized knowledge, such as of economics, if they were going to keep up with the changes underway in China. When the post-Mao news industry was first starting



up, he said, reports about accidents and abuses were so hard to come by that such ‘society news’ (*shehui xinwen*) stories were enough to keep everyone enraptured. Today these stories were everywhere, and could only satisfy the reading needs of the less educated, lower income and old people. The young, educated and dynamic elite demanded a much higher level of specialized knowledge from their news. This was the target readership of the economic newspapers – white-collar professionals, CEOs and investors – people with enough expertise and enough assets to be interested in news about China’s economic and financial trends. Because this was a small, niche market, sales rates were not high – but advertising revenue was. As a media product specially designed for and targeted at China’s wealthy and enterprising elite, economic newspapers were able to attract lucrative advertising contracts from the producers of many high-end and luxury goods.

Set against the aging investigative journalist, the economic news reporter cut a striking figure. Those who worked for publications such as *21<sup>st</sup> Century Business Herald*, *Economic Observer*, *Caijing* and *Caixin* seemed somehow taller than the rest. The expert knowledge that they had was the science of the future. As masters of this powerful tool, they were not inclined to sensationalism and drama, but to level-headed, rational analysis. Like Sifang, the head editor of *The Times* Politics section, who had in fact worked at *21CBH* before, these newspapermen fashioned themselves according to the ethics of transparency, fair competition and professionalism. Whereas investigative journalists dug up the grizzly details of every scandal and emotionally accentuated them to rouse society’s malcontents, economic news reporters coolly delivered the facts about the trends and developments that actually mattered most in China. In this way, according to the narrative, they made concrete contributions to China’s reform – they helped to disseminate important financial information and to convey an understanding of the all-determining forces of economics beyond the closed doors of government and corporate offices, to all intelligent and enterprising readers. As the third genre of post-Mao news-writing, economic journalism thus contributed to the good of society but by different, arguably more effective, means. Its technique was as sentimentally detached as investigative journalism was impassioned. Whereas in the first two genres one wrote for society’s benefit by writing for the general interests of the ordinary people, in economic news-writing one wrote for a specialized elite and as an elite specialist.

Some say that the hype around economic and financial news is merely that – the latest marketing strategy to become fashionable in the news industry; a yarn that economic news journalists themselves spin to inflate their sense of self-importance. Others argue that the economic newspapers’ technocratic and professionalized approach to news-writing is the most promising way forward for China’s news media; that their expert knowledge enables them to handle even the kind of social issues that *Southern Weekend* did, better than *Southern Weekend* itself could. Rather than taking a tone of hysterical moral outrage, and getting themselves censored as a consequence, economic news publications such as *Caixin*, adopted a dispassionate, technical approach to social problems. This was both more constructive, and more acceptable to the propaganda offices. “When you stick to more objective analyses of the problem, it’s not all that difficult to get your article published,” a *Caixin* editor explained. “No one would be willing to take the responsibility for repressing an article like that, because the truth would be too clear and too terrible. Anyone who censored it and later got found out would be seen as anti-human. The key is to approach the issue from *their* perspective,” he

said, referring to the Party-state. Whichever claim was more accurate, many news-producers were undoubtedly impressed by the image of economic journalism as a specialized practice that put news-writers on par with bankers, lawyers, consultants and other high-value professionals; and the new genre seemed to exude all the vitality and dynamism which the older ones now lacked.

### **Post-Mao News Ethics**

These were the three categories by which *The Times* staff gave account of how journalism in China had developed since the end of the Mao era. In the daily grind of their own production process, these were also the categories that they made recourse to, to explain what they were doing and what its social value was. They described the various stories they were working on in terms of complicated structures of interests that had to be laid out the way economic newspapers did; or in terms of injustices that had to be brought to light the way *Southern Weekend* had done; or in terms of people's recreational reading interest in subjects that were novel and surprising, though of little political or economic import. Perhaps the reason *The Times* staff could be so cavalier in their use of the term "objectivity" was that, contra their discourse on liberal press theory, their *sense* of the social function and worth of news-writing came not from those Western conceptions but from their feeling for these three moments. Liberal press theory might describe what was ideal for news in China, but the history of post-Mao journalism described what was real. Each contained a concrete moral position on what the social value of news-writing in China was. Evening and city newspapers enriched ordinary people's cultural and recreational lives by supplementing the Party-state's ideological discussions with news that was interesting, entertaining or practically relevant to their everyday concerns. Investigative journalism gave a voice to society's downtrodden, and exposed abuses of power and privilege. Economic newspapers spread the gains of China's thriving economy and financial market, by equipping private individuals with the information they needed to better compete in and profit from it. *The Times* writers could conduct abstract discussions about 'journalism in China' in the language of Western news theory, but these were the certainties that furnished their sense of the concrete value of their practice.

What is most striking about the three contemporary notions is not that they are not yet liberal, but that they no longer aim to be pedagogical or transformative. The longer genealogy of Chinese news-writing shows that the idea of a free and equal system of representation has never been central to the Chinese newspaper's social value or function. From its very inception as a modern and modernizing institution, Chinese news-writing aimed not to fairly reflect society but to properly transform it. The news-writer was not held to be at the same level as her readers but above them, as one with superior insight and hence a greater responsibility for leading readers in the right direction. From this elevated position, akin to that of a teacher, the Chinese news-writer's authority as author derived. Only in the contemporary mode of news-writing has this ethic been replaced by an explicitly anti-pedagogical one. Writing to transform the reader is now called 'propaganda,' not 'news.' It is cast into the pre-history journalism, which is redefined as a writing practice that aims not to *transform* but to *inform*; to give people data they can do things with, not mould their opinions or change who they are.

Underpinning this change is a new conception of the relationship between writing and society. Writing is no longer seen as a practice that can transcend the particularism which constitutes society as divided. The modernizers had claimed to write for China's progress, but only promoted their own, elitist ideas. The Maoists had claimed to write for China's people, but only served the Party's political interests. Against these historical lessons, as though never to be fooled again, contemporary journalists reject the very possibility of writing shaping readers' minds in the interest of a collective good. In their view, writing cannot be trusted to function as anything but a tool of particular interests. Journalists can benefit society only by acknowledging this fact and selectively serving those interests, rather than trying to rise above or repress them. The addressee of contemporary news-writing is thus neither an intellectual nor a fighter for the collective cause, but simply a person who wants to make life a little better and needs certain kinds of information to do so. The journalist's responsibility is to cater to this reader's informational needs, in return for which service she receives a salary. News-writing is, as Sifang says, a job like any other; an institution of mutually beneficial exchange.

This new conception of writing is closer than the earlier ones to that which undergirds liberal press theory: writing is an instrument of particular interests, and works best when it is employed and regulated as such. The difference is that whereas liberal press theory posits a situation of equal and balanced interests to be fairly governed by the upholding of standards such as objectivity, contemporary Chinese news-writing posits an unfair, unequal and imbalanced status quo. It does not set out to provide information to anonymous and interchangeable individuals whose particular interests might all be equally served. Instead, it works consciously to further the interests of some members of society against others. City newspapers aim to serve ordinary residents' interests against those of government officials; investigative journalism aims to serve the interests of the downtrodden against those of the powerful and privileged; and economic newspapers aim to help aspiring professionals and entrepreneurs, against people who enter the market with the unfair advantage of state-backing and political connections. The social value of journalism in all three cases lies in its helping to level the playing field of China's society, by serving the interests of the disadvantaged against those of the privileged. As an ethical practice, contemporary Chinese news-writing is thus based on a subjective sense of society's inequalities and injustices, rather than on a liberal commitment to objectivity and faith in the idea of a fair and equal situation.

Treating journalism as a practical, information-distributing tool rather than a pedagogical practice has enabled China's news-writers to bring about concrete benefits. But the sense of society that this ethic of news-writing left *The Times* journalists with was a bleak one – for it was a society that they could neither, like liberals, assume to be good nor, like their predecessors, hold to be transformable through writing. All that they could hope to achieve as people who wrote about and for society, was the occasional leg up for the renewed ranks of the underdogs in an endless and unjust struggle. The next chapter considers this sense of society more closely.

## Chapter Four: The *Jianghu* Story of Society

As editor-in-chief of *The Times*, Tang enjoyed a lot of perks. When the staff went out to karaoke, Tang got to sing as many songs as he wanted. He did not have to wait his turn or ask for the microphone or even select the songs he wanted to sing himself, for his energetic underlings took care to select all his favorite songs in advance, and to pass him the microphone frequently, while boisterously clamoring for him to give them the pleasure of a performance. “There are many techniques one needs to master in the art of waiting on a leader (*lingdao*),” Meng, perhaps the most energetic underling of all, advised me. “Like you should know what food he likes to eat at which restaurant, and how to order for as many people as are there. You shouldn't let a leader have to think about such things himself. A true master can orchestrate the whole occasion according to the leader's desires, without the leader even realizing it. He can anticipate the leader's thinking and create the atmosphere he's after, so that everything that should happen happens, and everything that shouldn't happen doesn't happen.”

Meng certainly tried his best to emulate this proverbial master. At meals with Tang, he not only ordered in advance, but was also conspicuously brusque with the waiters to show how urgently he wanted Tang's every wish fulfilled. Whatever Tang said at the table, Meng seconded with illustrative examples or explanations, as though to aid the others present in comprehending Tang's superior wisdom. At karaoke, Meng aggressively manned the controls to keep Tang happily bathed in the limelight. To enhance his boss's pleasure further, he also sang the occasional song - youthful rock anthems hollered with devotion but poorly, to create comic relief and a flattering foil for Tang's more manly croonings. Once, when the Politics journalist Feng tried to sing a few of his own favorite songs, Meng seethed with displeasure for as long as he could restrain himself, then angrily grabbed the microphone and placed it back in the editor-in-chief's hands.

“Feng is so naive,” Meng commented to me afterwards. “Like a big child, not knowing how to adjust himself to different situations. He thinks he can just be himself, regardless of who else is around. Singing songs by Tang's favorite singer better than Tang can sing them – he doesn't realize these things matter. As though we really went to karaoke to sing! I envy his naiveté, you know, it reminds me of myself when I was a child. But everyone has to grow up sometime. If you just keep going like Feng does, you'll get passed over on *a lot* of opportunities,” he emphasized. “You know, I say this because I'm concerned for his future. It's for his own good that he should learn to change.” Meng concluded roundly, seeming to have convinced himself once over again that he had indeed made the right commitment to pampering Tang.

A year later, however, when Tang had been fired from his position at *The Times*, Meng's attitude was significantly different. “How is that guy anyways?” Meng asked me, as though I should know better than he. “I haven't given the time of day to that man in a long while! Remember what a mike-hog he was at karaoke? All those saccharine love songs, he thought he was such a heartthrob. If we went out to karaoke now, I'd cut each of his songs off before he could get to the end them!”<sup>146</sup> Isn't it a little cruel to turn against Tang just like that, after all those years of working together? I asked Feng, after

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<sup>146</sup> Cutting songs off is an option in karaoke.

reporting this exchange to him. “That’s just how it goes,” he said flatly. “The media is a *jianghu*, everyone is in it for their own interests. Nothing to be done about it. ‘People in the *jianghu* are not the agents of themselves’ (*ren zai jianghu, shen buyou ji*),” he invoked a popular and trite saying.

A term drawn from Chinese martial arts lore, *jianghu* refers to the human world as a world of strivings for supremacy – an ever-shifting hierarchy cruelly shaped by ambitions, rivalries and allegiances, in which one who wants to succeed is never free to do as she pleases, for she must always do as her position and interests dictate. The idea has become popular in recent years as a metaphor for contemporary China’s society, particularly as a way of describing the feeling that in today’s world, every person has to strategically pursue her own material interests; and that this involves speaking and acting however one’s self-interested strategies require one to, regardless of any moral unease or aesthetic distaste one may feel for the requisite words and actions. Through the way *The Times* journalists used the idea of *jianghu* to explain and respond to the event of Tang’s leaving the organization, this chapter looks at how they conceived of the society in which they lived. I suggest that while the *jianghu* narrative of society may appear to be merely a cynical outlook on social life or a discourse for justifying selfishness, it is actually something more like a sociology of market reform. It conceptualizes the sense of mobility, struggle and dread of falling behind which commercialization has brought to life in post-Mao China. It also furnishes analytical tools for explaining past actions and anticipating future events in the news sector. The moral question that this knowledge of their society posed to *The Times* journalists was not that of a choice between cynical and ideal outlooks – it was not a question of whether to see strategies of self-interest everywhere at work, or to ignore them and live by other values. The reality of self-interest and strategy was taken for granted. The question was how, given that one was undeniably in a *jianghu*, to write and live in a way that did not entail converting all of one’s values into the currency of its struggle.

It was near the end of the year that Tang left *The Times* and became the vice-CEO of a cigarette and wine company. Rumors circulated on the internet that it was a government ordered removal, punishment for the newspaper having crossed one too many political boundaries in its investigative reports and critical editorials. Yet another instance of the government trying to maintain its draconian control over the media, Chinese bloggers complained; yet another daring newspaperman martyred by China’s perverse political system. Inside *The Times*, however, explanations for Tang’s departure were quite different. “Nothing to do with the Propaganda Department or crossing any political boundaries,” Sifang said dismissively. “That might be something Tang is telling people to save face, to make his leaving seem more dignified than it really is.” Tang’s departure had long been anticipated, Sifang explained, because his contract with *The Times*’ parent-company was almost up and the company executives did not want to renew it.

When I learnt of this, I began to think that the company’s reasons for terminating Tang were evident from the way he ran the newspaper. He conducted himself unprofessionally at editorial meetings, delivering rambling monologues rather than discussing concrete editorial issues. He never heard his staff out before responding to them, and often responded with a patronizing chiding rather than a constructive

suggestion. None of his staff seemed to respect him very much – they talked behind his back about how incomprehensible his speeches were, and even at the meeting table, rolled their eyes in comic disparagement as soon as he was not looking. It was hardly surprising that a newspaper managed in this way was having trouble pulling up its editorial standards and readership rates. And if that measure of incompetence was not enough, there was also the fact that Tang was openly using the economic news section to blackmail companies into buying the newspaper's advertising space. Surely this was ample reason for the company executives to begin looking for another editor-in-chief.

But these were not the reasons that Sifang and his colleagues understood to be behind the change. Whereas I had assumed that the decision to hire or fire a newspaper's editor-in-chief would be based primarily on his ability to produce a good newspaper, *The Times* staff had no such expectation. Personnel changes like this were always, in their experience, a consequence of interpersonal struggles over interest (*liyi douzheng*). "A lot of things can *become* the reasons for firing someone, after the decision to fire him has already been made," they explained to me. "Like having an extra-marital affair at the workplace, or pocketing some funds here and there. It doesn't really matter that much to the company. If they wanted to keep you, they would just pretend not to know." The real reason for Tang's departure, they said, was that Big D, the CEO of the newspaper's state-owned parent company, did not want to give Tang the share of ownership that he had promised him. According to them, the newspaper had finally come out of the red that year and turned a 15 million *yuan* profit. Seeing that the business was now up and running, and that all the mechanisms were in place for it to continue running smoothly without him, the company's executives began to feel that Tang's usefulness to their venture was exhausted. Although they had promised Tang a share of ownership when the company eventually went public, they now began to see an opportunity to get out of delivering on that promise.

Tang and Big D had never had much respect for one another, *The Times* staff said, but they had hitherto been equally matched opponents – neither had been able to gain an edge over the other, in the game of power and money that they played. For although Big D had more executive power, the newspaper depended on Tang to bring in its revenue. And although Tang splurged millions of company *yuan* on lavishly wining and dining with clients, and even set up his own company and used the clients he met through the newspaper to generate business for it, still, he did in fact make a significant sum of ad money for *The Times*. Although all of his actions irritated Big D immensely, therefore, Big D had always been powerless to remove Tang. Now that the business was set up, however, Big D happily got rid of Tang.

"If I were Big D, I would have done the same," Meng, Tang's once loyal lackey, said shrewdly, soon after his former boss's departure. "I would have done the same," he repeated, "Only I would have waited another half year, because the fact is *The Time's* commercial mechanisms are not quite in place yet. Another half year and they would have been." According to him, the advertising contracts and business partnerships that Tang had set up for *The Times* were not yet robust enough to guarantee the newspapers longer term profitability. "Big D doesn't get it because he's a government official," Meng went on, referring to Big D's official status as the leader of an SOE. "He doesn't understand the business enough to realize that it would have been better to wait half a year to get rid of Tang. But then again, it doesn't make a difference either way to Big D.

Whenever the public listing happens, the profits will be his. So he'd rather have the business develop less quickly and less well, as long as that means that when the time eventually comes, there'll be one less person to share the profits with."

Unfortunately for Meng, he was not Big D. He was, or at least he had been one, of Tang's men. And if Tang had been gunning for a share of the company, Tang's men had been helping him do it because he had promised them a share of his share. Now all of their hopes were dashed. "We all scolded him," Meng recounted agitatedly, "We told him, 'Look! All of our efforts – everything has fallen through, all because of your little penis.'" He let out a bitter chuckle, and went on more reflectively, "To be honest, I always knew that Tang was not someone to follow all the way. The man is obviously talented, but he's not steady. He's too distractible, too emotional, you know, too much of a softie. Like if someone does something wrong or something that offends him, all they have to do is go crying back to him later, making themselves seem really pathetic or something, and he'll pity them and take them back again!" Meng said with comic exasperation, "How can you handle things that way when you're fighting a strategic war?"

Other members of *The Times* felt that Meng's account of events was unconvincingly self-aggrandizing, more like a face-saving tale with which to cover up his own defeat. "Meng's just upset that Tang didn't take him along," they said, referring to the company that Tang had joined. It was quite a common practice for leadership-level executives to bring a few of their favorite underlings with them when they moved on to new companies. This was thought to be quite rational, as a leader could always use a few loyal men, and furthermore, it would be difficult for those men to compete against rivals at the original company once they had lost the patronage of their leader. Given Meng's previous allegiance to Tang, for instance, it would be difficult for him to keep rising up at *The Times* now that Tang had left and rivals like Big D taken control of things. "Meng devoted himself to Tang so loyally, but in the end Tang didn't take care of him. Of course he has to say something now to make himself look like less of a fool."

While the other journalists thus objected to the position that Meng gave himself in his story, they did not object to the logic of the story itself. They too understood the causes and consequences of Tang's departure in terms of the personal agendas that various people had in the various struggles over interest that they were involved in. No one at *The Times* rationalized Tang's departure, as I had, from the perspective of the newspaper's goal of becoming a good publication and a commercially profitable enterprise. Still less did they rationalize it in terms of state control. Rather, what struck them as the real agents and stakes of the event were what each person involved stood to gain or lose by it – what each one's agenda had been, who had been allied with whom, how these factions came to clash, and what this now meant for each one's future prospects, reputation and fortune.

Talk among them was about how the new editor-in-chief was playing favorites. He had appointed a close friend of his wife's to be head-editor of the Politics section, which meant kicking Sifang out of the position. Reassigned to the Marketing department, Sifang was seething because the move signified his marginalization, and threatened his career with amounting to insignificance. Though he felt no animosity towards Sifang, Hong was not overly sympathetic either, for he considered Sifang as self-interested a player as anyone at the newspaper. "Sifang's not a bad guy, he's just the more calculative

kind,” Hong explained to me with his characteristically unsentimental astuteness. “He’s very clear about keeping his own interests first. He deals with people instrumentally, like he tries to build up support for himself within the organization. That’s why it’s always the newest, most junior journalists who receive most of his praise. He wants to be the one who brought you up, so that later you’re on his side.” Meng, on the other hand, was positively delighted by Sifang’s marginalization as the two had always been at loggerheads, each trying to turn Tang against the other. Meng claimed that it was by his request that Sifang had been moved to Marketing – though few others saw any credibility in his claim. Tang’s other former lackey, Chen, meanwhile, was too preoccupied with his own troubles to gloat over anyone else’s. Chen was feeling deeply defeated, Feng explained to me, because he had been working under Tang towards a seat on the newspaper’s Executive Committee. This would have given him a measure of control over news content, which would in turn have brought him many benefits from corporations anxious to receive good press coverage. Now Chen’s hopes were dashed, because the new editor-in-chief did not give him the same importance as Tang had. Here he was already in his mid-forties and having to start afresh, to find a new plan for getting rich.

“This gossipy stuff is what you should be writing your dissertation about,” some of the journalists told me. “That would be a dissertation about something real for a change,” they laughed. Whereas most academic reports on China’s news system were about government policies and newspapers’ official or self-proclaimed ideals, the journalists said, what really concerned and affected people in the industry was interpersonal vyings like these. Ideals of good journalism and theories of the news media’s social responsibility were all very fine and important, they said, but when push came to shove it had to be recognized that what really decided things was not theory, but the interplay of people’s ambitions, resources and capabilities.

This is what it was to conceive of society as a *jianghu*. It meant considering all claims about collective goods and common values to be mere theory, and all actual practices to be matters of interpersonal struggle. It meant believing that it was in the very nature of society that people did not pursue the good of the social whole, but strove to advance their own interests over and against others. These interests most commonly involved money and power, but could also take the form of subtler qualities such as admiration or respect. Whatever people said or did, their words and actions were likely performed for the sake of at least one of these things. The same principle also applied to all organizations, whether government, corporate or grass-roots. In the *jianghu* view, that is, all organizations were expected to make official pronouncements about pursuing shared, social goals; but since all organizations were run by people and all people were concerned with their own accretion of money and power, all organizations ended up serving as instruments in interpersonal struggles over interest instead. Even if they set out with a genuine belief in their self-proclaimed ideals, they still ended up functioning as just another resource that those who can, did use to benefit themselves over and against others.

This hermeneutic of social life is one that currently circulates widely in China, in countless fiction and non-fiction, written and told stories. *The Times* journalists alone could tell me countless tales – from places they had worked at before, or friends and family members, or situations they had written or read news articles about – of people’s lives being determined by sheer struggles over interest, rather than by any more



meaningful cause. Although these stories ranged across time and space, all of them boiled down to the same narrative elements of personal interest and resulting struggle – as though the whole range of diverse institutions that exist in society were just so many settings and props for the same essential activity. “Anywhere you find people, you’ll find struggles over interest,” the journalists said with self-certainty. “No matter what line of work you go into, you can’t escape the nature of man.”

Within a society thus conceived, *The Times*, for its journalists, was not just an organization that strove to provide good journalism, or even a business that was trying to make a profit. It was the site of a struggle that was taking place everywhere in China. It was where news coverage, advertising contracts, readership rates and revenue all served as tools and weapons in the true business of people trying to climb up and over one another in life. This was why *The Times* staff did not respond to Tang’s departure with judgments of his editorial capabilities or concern for the newspaper’s future. They did not think of themselves as members of this collective entity, bound by the shared goal of good journalism. Instead, relations among them were understood to be determined by their changing positions in the ongoing struggles over interests that took place within the organization. When Tang was leading their bid to gain ownership shares, Meng and Chen were his most loyal and obliging friends. Now that Tang had been ousted by Big D, the former underlings were no longer interested in speaking with him. And whereas Feng had been at odds with Chen for being Tang’s man – an editorially unqualified leader, and a collaborator in the dirty business of blackmail – now that that issue was moot, and the new editor-in-chief was threatening everyone’s positions by trying to install his own men in the organization, Feng and Chen suddenly discovered that they were practically neighbours and began to visit for dinner and beers.

“How is Tang? I should be asking you,” Chen responded when I asked him about his former boss over a dinner at Feng’s house. “I’d quite like to know too. It’s been a while since we’ve spoken.” He looked at his beer pensively. “People like you who come from outside have a different attitude than us. You’re more naive, because you haven’t had to struggle like we have. In China, you know, relationships between one person and another are decided by many complicated factors. What you have to say and do is not always up to you to decide.” I said that I was quite struck by how much ‘struggle over interest’ could be generated by the simple task of writing news. “Yeah, but struggles over interests are everywhere you go,” he replied, looking rather unimpressed. “You’re not going to write your dissertation about that are you, it’d be such a big waste of words (*feihua*).”

### **The Reality of Different Realities**

The question for us is how to understand this collective response which appears as such an exaggerated expression of ruthless self-interest. Was everyone at *The Times* so accustomed to calculativeness and manipulation that they no longer flinched either in describing or performing it? The very portrait of rivalry and hustling sketched thus far may call to mind certain infamous characterizations of “the Chinese” by Western writers in the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. British and American missionaries living in late-Qing China have left many a testament to the sense of scandal and incomprehension they felt towards what they perceived to be Chinese people’s selfishly materialistic

motivations, highly theatrical deceptiveness, total mistrust of one another and lack of even a *sense* of public spirit, much less the thing itself.<sup>147</sup> All of the Empire's weaknesses and sufferings seemed to the missionaries to result from the singular inability of the Chinese people to behave more like good Christians. In these and other similarly biased writings, sociologists found explanations for China's failure to modernize. Max Weber saw a "personalist" social ethic in the place of a Protestant one, preventing China from developing the impersonal associations and functions that were crucial to any modern system.<sup>148</sup> With the tide of Communism rising, sociologists such as Olga Lang and Marion Levy then elaborated the distinction into analyses of China as a society caught between the hierarchy and "particularism" of its traditional ways, and industrial modernity's demand for equality and other universalistic values.<sup>149</sup>

Such characterizations have since been amply criticized for being over-generalizing and essentialist stereotypes. They set an idealized image of Western modernity up as the endpoint of a global teleology, and then imaginatively construct "China" as the negative counter-image of that ideal. What results are Orientalist portraits that ignore both the real diversity within China, and the formative historical influence that Chinese and Western societies have had on one another.<sup>150</sup> Yet while totalizing portraits inevitably reduce the heterogeneity of reality, the alternative extreme of denying that any real difference can be identified between social life as one encounters it in China and in America, say, is just as misleading. For where one does not provisionally construct a way of thinking the *general* difference between 'their' society and 'ours,' one quickly begins to read all *particular* differences as pathological. Especially in the contemporary moment of China's post-Mao market reform and 'opening up' to global forces, it is tempting to see China as but a troubled variant of the Western model of capitalist modernity. The idea of a *jianghu*, in this view, would appear to be nothing but a perverse embrace of market society.<sup>151</sup> It would not seem to express a different understanding of social life or to be a kind of wisdom in its own right, but only to reflect so many acts of self-interest, hypocrisy and manipulation as result from China's lack of regulation, perhaps, or of transparency or professionalism. Assuming that the Chinese journalists' society is fundamentally like ours, in other words, turns easily into imagining that all their problems arise from it being not like ours enough. Through a century long detour, we then find ourselves back in the position of scandalized missionaries.

In an effort to avoid this fate, and at the risk of constructing overly general or falsely coherent stereotypes about "China," many anthropologists thus continue to argue that a distinctive social sensibility can be found there which is irreducible to Western

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<sup>147</sup> For examples, see Justus Doolittle, *Social Life of the Chinese: With Some Account of their Religious, Governmental, Educational and Business Customs and Opinions Vol.1 and 2* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishing, 1876); and Arthur Smith, *Chinese Characteristics* (New York: Flemming H Revel, 1894). For a critique of such depictions, see Lydia Liu, *Translingual Practicest*.

<sup>148</sup> Max Weber, *The Religion of China* (New York: The Free Press, 1951 [1904-5]).

<sup>149</sup> Olga Lang, *Chinese Family and Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946). Marion J. Levy, *The Family Revolution in Modern China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949).

<sup>150</sup> See Edward Said, *Orientalism*. For an important anthropological and ethnographic response to this new awareness of the global as a heterogeneous, multiply interconnected and mutually influencing milieu, see Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

<sup>151</sup> Karl Polyani, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1944).

norms. One prominent example is the studies that have been done on *guanxi*, or social relationships in China. The particularity of this kind of social relationship is that instrumental and sentimental ties are explicitly fused in them, rather than analytically or normatively held apart. Whereas many Western norms for judging kinship and friendship relations put a premium on sincerity or purity of emotional attachment, *guanxi* are valued not as mere feelings but also as effective resources for getting things done. Those who study it are eager to convey that this fusion cannot be reduced to a calculative instrumentalization of personal relations or the insincere manipulation of others, but rather comes with its own governing ethics. In Mayfair Yang's exhaustive study of *guanxixue*, or the discourses and practices of *guanxi*, for instance, Yang argues that:

In the "art" of *guanxi* three elements – ethics, tactics, and etiquette – intertwine with and merge into one another in the course of practice. That is to say, the decorum required in the conduct of *guanxixue* – deferential acts, comportment of generosity, and modest speech – is also part of its ethics and arsenal of tactics. Similarly, the tactics deployed in *guanxixue* must remain within the parameters of its ethics and are even performed in order to satisfy its ethical prerogatives. At the same time, the instrumental logic of tactics may at times overpower the logic of ethics and etiquette, pressing them into its service.

These three interacting yet distinct components of the art of *guanxi* can be understood as its ethical, instrumental, and aesthetic values. They are *guanxixue*'s internal forces. Sometimes they coexist, peacefully complementing one another; at other times they contend with or temporarily eclipse one another. Moments of eclipse or overshadowing of one force by another give rise to different "dialects" of discourse on *guanxi*. Each "dialect" seizes on one aspect of *guanxixue* in order to define it as a social phenomenon with a single nature or function.<sup>152</sup>

It is by the standards of these three functions, rather than by Western social and cultural norms, that Yang argues *guanxi* practices must be understood. In his study of *guanxi* practices among villagers in northern China, Andrew Kipnis also underscores this point:

An economism that privileges material motives in *guanxi* must be shunned. Likewise, the view that *guanxi* is a sort of dialectical operation that bridges a Cartesian divide between material and spiritual relations is inappropriate. Economic relationships are severed from neither emotional relationships nor the production of self, so there is no divide to bridge. In *guanxi*, feeling and instrumentality are a totality.<sup>153</sup>

As a consequence of this difference, many of the standards by which a Western visitor might intuitively judge *guanxi* practitioners, Kipnis finds must be suspended. Chinese villagers, for instance, often professed feelings for the sake of "*guanxi* propriety"

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<sup>152</sup> Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, *Gifts, Favors and Banquets: The Art of Social Relationships in China*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994. p. 109.

<sup>153</sup> Andrew B. Kipnis. *Producing Guanxi: Sentiment, Self, and Subculture in a North China Village*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997. p. 23.

even when this meant going against the standards of “accurate emotional representation.”<sup>154</sup> While such behavior may strike the Western observer as a form of highly instrumental hypocrisy, Kipnis argues that in the context of the villagers’ lives it ought to be understood as morally exemplary behavior. “In the West, an ethic of accurate representation entails both emotional ‘sincerity’ (accurately representing inner feelings in outward expression) and ‘honest’ speech (accurate verbal representation).”<sup>155</sup> Among the Chinese villagers, however, social interactions were governed by what Kipnis calls the “nonrepresentational ethics” of *guanxi*, which decree that a person ought to express emotions as befits the social-relational context of the expression, and not as she happens to feel at the precise moment of speaking. Because in this approach to social life, it is care for the relation that governs the individual, and not care for the individual that governs the relation, what appears to the outsider as socially pathological hypocrisy is felt by the villagers to be normatively exemplary behavior.

In Yan Yunxiang’s study of gift-giving practices in a different Chinese village, Yan finds a trio of values similar to that which Yang describes. The obligation to give and receive he found was governed by what he calls a “system of *renqing* ethics” that has “three structural dimensions: rational calculation, moral obligation, and emotional attachment. The complexity and flexibility of *renqing* in action results from the changing composition of its three structural elements. Although all three dimensions coexist in all social interactions concerned with *renqing*, actual emphasis can be placed on any one of them in a given situation.”<sup>156</sup> Yan is content to call it “contextual,” which dimension turns out to be more determining. On the whole, he found that villagers gave one another gifts “because they want to receive. For most villagers, the only way to attract incoming gifts is to give gifts to others who will return the gifts under obligations of reciprocity. Unless one decides to renounce village society, one has to be more and more involved in this cycle of giving and receiving. So the prestige of receiving provides the permanent motivation for gift giving.”<sup>157</sup>

Even cases of gift-giving that are motivated by more concrete and calculated self-interest, Yan finds, have to be understood within the particular social structure of the Chinese village. From Mauss’ landmark study on, he argues, theorists of the gift have conceived of gift-exchange as taking place among relatively equal givers and receivers, creating relations of social debt among them through the obligation to reciprocate that a gift always entails. In the village Yan studies, however, the hierarchical nature of relationships between Party cadres and ordinary villagers trumped the obligation to reciprocate. Because the village’s Party cadres controlled many of the resources that ordinary villagers depended on, that is, they were considered socially “superior” people. Receiving a villager’s gift did not oblige them to, but they could if they liked, reward the giver by becoming her patron or granting her a favor. When villagers gave, therefore, they gained neither status nor power over the cadres, but only a hope that the cadres would not discriminate against them in future allocations of resources. The gift in this context thus anchors a system of “unilateral gift-giving serving to express subordination

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid. p. 111.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>156</sup> Yan Yunxiang, *The Flow of Gifts: Reciprocity and Social Networks in a Chinese Village*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1996. p. 146.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 174.

and the respect of inferiors for their superiors.” Yan notes that although individual “inferiors” can sometimes gain rewards, the result is not an equalization of social status but a reproduction of hierarchy:

Here, the convertibility of gifts to favors/services may balance the unequal distribution of resources between some individuals but not among the entire population. Because of this, certain individuals are able to move up the ladder of the social hierarchy while the structure of the ladder remains unchanged. In this sense, while unilateral gift giving is conditioned by the existing social hierarchy, each action of unbalanced exchange also helps to reproduce the social hierarchy.<sup>158</sup>

The key challenge that Yang, Kipnis and Yan all grapple with is that of conveying a social sensibility in the terms of a social science. What is difficult to explain about *guanxi* and *renqing* is not what people do, but why. Breaking their motives down into several components helps to make the practice seem more reasonable, but it is another thing to capture the particular sensibility which makes cultivating *guanxi* feel like a decidedly *good* thing to do. Rather than a different notion of life, it comes across as a different collective compromise between individual needs and the social means of fulfilling them – an ethical social strategy, perhaps, rather than a social ethic; something one can imagine resorting to, rather than something one might embrace.

One anthropologist who has fruitfully encountered the same difficulty is Louis Dumont, in his work on the caste system of India. Granting the empirical heterogeneity of life in so populous and regionally diverse a country, Dumont found, the role that ideas and values play in social life still made an understanding of caste necessary for making sense of people’s actions.<sup>159</sup> Caste, in turn, demanded to be treated as a coherent whole, or a single value system, in order to be understood. Here arises the problem, however, for the caste system is essentially based on the twin principles of Hierarchy and Holism, values that run in direct opposition to the principles of Equality and Individualism on which modern Western society is founded. Describing the one in terms of the other thus invariably yields portraits of the caste system as abhorrent, oppressive, extreme and generally incomprehensible. To illustrate the exhaustive nature of this problem, Dumont constructs “two mutually opposed configurations” of value upon which societies can be based, one of which he calls “traditional” and the other “modern.” In traditional societies:

...as in Plato's Republic, the stress is placed on the society as a whole, as collective Man; the ideal derives from the organization of society with respect to its ends (and not with respect to individual happiness); it is above all a matter of order, of hierarchy; each particular man in his place must contribute to the global order, and justice consists in ensuring that the proportions between social functions are adapted to the whole.

In modern society, on the contrary, the Human Being is regarded as the indivisible, 'elementary' man, both a biological being and a thinking subject. Each particular man in a sense incarnates the whole of mankind. He is the measure of all things (in a full and novel sense). The kingdom of

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., p. 168-9.

<sup>159</sup> Nicholas Dirks and others have criticized Dumont’s work for its politics. But Dumont’s efforts were aimed at a different level.

ends coincides with each man's legitimate ends, and so the values are turned upside down. What is still called 'society' is the means, the life of each man is the end. Ontologically, the society no longer exists, it is no more than an irreducible datum, which must in no way thwart the demands of liberty and equality.<sup>160</sup>

Sociology, in Dumont's view, is modern society's rediscovery of its own social wholeness, which beneath its ideology of individualism and equality, has never in fact ceased to be.<sup>161</sup> In this sense, sociology provides an ideational bridge between the two – the only difference being that in an intellectual milieu dominated by the image of free and equal Individuals, knowledge of the social whole and of man's inherent social being takes the form of "a special discipline, replacing an idea that was common to all in traditional society."<sup>162</sup> Yet even sociology fails to provide the bridge that it should, Dumont argues, when it confines its theorizing to modern societies alone. For all the concepts that it derives for analyzing social relation will then be defined by the values on which social relation *in modern society alone* is based. Such concepts will, in other words, carry the normative value of the Individual within them. When as a set of analytic tools, they are then brought to India and applied, the caste system is once again reduced to pathology. The principle of Hierarchy is translated into a justification of power; religious values are reduced to nonreligious values such as social status; and caste is rendered an extreme version of class.

The crux of the matter is not that we thereby misconstrue an aspect of life in India. What is elided is the integrity, or positivity, or the wholeness of the whole which is the necessary condition for any Hierarchical conception of society to be comprehensible. The very possibility of "traditional society" is thus swept under, where by this we mean any form of social life that not only recognizes, but positively values the idea of the community as a whole; any form of life in which all values, including that of a person, are derived from this normative prioritization of the whole. In this usage, sociology does not build a bridge between modern societies and others, so much as pave over others with a steamroller made of modern concepts. For Dumont, this impasse was deeply troubling: If modern society's ideological commitment to Individualism has so thoroughly determined the categories of our thought that even our devoted 'science of society' can no longer comprehend the wholeness of a social whole, how will we ever learn to see *but* through the given ideology? Not only will we continuously misconstrue others, we will never better understand ourselves either, if the inherited categories remain so transparent to our eyes that we are unable to recognize them as such, and hence unable to see how we think and act.

It is here that Dumont saw anthropology's comparative ethic coming in to play a vital role. By privileging the foreign and relativizing the familiar, anthropology makes it possible to borrow the eyes of another, in order to see oneself more clearly. In a reversal of the sociological perspective, it can make the "main task of comparison...to account for

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<sup>160</sup> Louis Dumont. *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*. Mark Sainsbury, Louis Dumont and Basia Gulati trans. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970. p. 9-10.

<sup>161</sup> Working in the French tradition, Dumont has in mind Durkheim and Mauss particularly. See Dumont 1970, p. 11, on organic and mechanical solidarity.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

the modern type in terms of the traditional type.”<sup>163</sup> Using his conception of India as a base, Dumont thus undertook a series of studies in which he set “traditional society” up as the universal standard, against which the emergence of modern ideology could then be traced as a historical anomaly rather than the historical norm.<sup>164</sup> In these works, he picks up key categories of modern ideology such as “Economics” and “the Individual,” and looks back to the last moment at which European thought on the topic was dominated by an idea of society as an essential whole. Through readings of selected texts, he then traces the way the modern categories develop within and gradually break out of this ideational whole – freeing themselves from the religious, political and moral values that govern the whole, and eventually superseding them to become the asocial categories of modern ‘social’ thought.

This method is neither intellectual nor social history proper. It does not consistently follow the development of the authors’ ideas, or contextualize them within their milieus. Nor does it try hard to prove that the ideas traced constituted the dominant ideology of the time, or indeed that they had any social influence at all.<sup>165</sup> Unlike most histories, which are anchored in a bid to accurately represent the past, Dumont’s method is anchored in a sense of the problematic present. Rather than trying to write a factual history under the guidance of archival evidence, he attempts to construct a conceptual genealogy of the present, guided entirely by the shape of the present problem. Dumont’s use of the term “ideology” illustrates the difference well. In naming his object “modern ideology,” he does not refer to a set of ideas that can be proven to result from modern social structures or to determine the actions of people in “modern society.” He refers quite loosely to “ideas, beliefs and values,” which have the curious reality of being impossible to fully define and yet having an undeniable influence on social life. What then gives meaningful conceptual form to this empirically amorphous entity is its contrast to other “ideologies,” such as that which can be encountered in India. “Modern ideology,” in other words, does not exist insofar as all people in modern-type societies can be shown to live by it. It exists insofar as one configuration of values can be experienced as different from, and opposed to another one. This experiential difference is the truth that Dumont places where others place archival evidence; and it is for the sake of articulating this difference that he constructs his genealogy as he does.

The method thus outlined is similar to Foucault’s far more famous genealogy, but stays at the level of ideas that shape social life, rather than zooming closer in to look at discourse and practices; and consequently, finds its object in major philosophical and theoretical texts rather than in obscure technical documents. Dumont’s categories are closer to Weberian ideal-types in this sense, that they are constructed to make the otherwise elusive role of ideas and beliefs in social reality available for analytic thought.<sup>166</sup> But unlike the Protestant Ethic, Dumont’s categories are fundamentally and anthropologically comparative. The “we” whose ideology his is a genealogy of, is not a group of people who live in Europe and act in certain ways because they believe in

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<sup>163</sup> Dumont, *From Mandeville to Marx: The Genesis and Triumph of Economic Ideology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977. p. 7.

<sup>164</sup> See also Dumont’s *Essays on Individualism*.

<sup>165</sup> By shirking these disciplinary demands, Dumont seeks to avoid treating ideas as autonomous existences on the one hand, or reducing them to functional or class bases on the other. He tries, in other words, to free thought from the academic programs of idealism and materialism – a response to Marx.

<sup>166</sup> See Paul Rabinow’s chapter on Weber in *Anthropos Today*.

certain things, or experience a similar malaise about their common way of life. The “we” is a “we” who experiences one form of life as existing in marked contrast to another, and who wants to comprehend this difference with the help of texts that have significantly contributed to its emergence. In Dumont’s genealogy, an experienced relation is given form as the contrast between two ideal-types, and this contrast is made to generate the past as a series of conceptual relations across time. The method thereby creates both cultural difference and social reality as a story of categories one can read into. It constitutes a plane of textual reality in which different forms of life can be understood, by being understood in relation to each other, even though neither actually corresponds to a discretely existing social group. Dumont’s method, in other words, gives access to the meaning of contrasts and categories that are real, even though they cannot be exhaustively defined or proven to exist as such.<sup>167</sup>

Bringing these lessons from Dumont to our reading of the literature on *guanxi*, we find that we need not only approach *guanxi* empirically, as a set of practices by which particular groups of people ‘produce’ their social relations. We may also approach it genealogically, as part of a “traditional” knowledge of social being that is not analyzable by sociology so much as *comparable to it*.<sup>168</sup> Within this “traditional” knowledge, society is not a group of individuals among whom relations are secondarily produced. The essential interrelatedness of people, which sociology continuously discovers against the dominant image of self-contained individuals, is in *guanxi* practice simply taken for granted. Society itself is assumed to exist first, as a constellation of interrelated positions, each person in it then being constituted by the position that he or she occupies. To describe *guanxi* practices in sociological terms is thus not to comprehend them, but to transpose them from the realm of a Holistic sensibility into the realm of an Individualistic one, where they come to appear more significant for the individual practitioner than they are in the first. What a gift-giving villager may consider an unremarkable act of politeness, for instance, shows up as the combined outcome of her instrumental calculations, her awareness of her obligations and her genuine emotional attachments. What a villager may perform out of a general effort to be good shows up as an action executed for the sake of clearly conceived objectives, such as to social solidarity, practical utility, power or prestige.

The crucial difference between these two views is that in the first, *guanxi* is valued by society and hence valuable to people in society. In the second, *guanxi* is valuable to people, and hence valued by the society that those people make up. If a genealogical understanding of the category of *guanxi* is our goal, then it is the first view

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<sup>167</sup> Cf. Chapter One footnote on Jack Goody. Dumont’s approach constitutes a more adequate response than Goody’s to the challenge left by Levi-Strauss. Primitives and moderns do not exist as such, yet the distinction is a meaningful one. Rather than retreating to the level of empirical diversity as Goody does, Dumont moves forward to the question of how distinctions can be socially real though not representationally true. Dumont’s response broadly informs the undertaking of this dissertation as a whole.

<sup>168</sup> Mayfair Yang indicates this when she points out that in the popular coinage of the term “*guanxixue*”, appending the suffix “*xue*” puts the study of *guanxi* on equal semiotic footing as sociology (*shehuixue*), anthropology (*renleixue*) and all the other major academic disciplines or -ologies. “The satiric connotation of ‘*guanxixue*’ lies in its elevation of the art of cultivating personal relationships into a full-fledged scholarly branch of knowledge equally valid and just as necessary as any other academic specialization.” Yang, p. 8.



we must adopt. Only in this view is it apparent *why* one would abide by a sense of ‘*guanxi* propriety’ or ‘*renqing* ethics’: because one considers *guanxi* to be valued by the social whole, and because one considers one’s personal worth to come from the social whole’s valuation of oneself, therefore one feels the cultivation and maintenance of *guanxi* to be a matter of personal merit and honor. The practice may well bring other benefits, utilities and pleasures. Indeed, one may engage in the practice more for the sake of those benefits than for the sake of merit or honor. Yet the significance of these enjoyments would be limited, because one’s personal worth would still be held to come from one’s position in and valuation by the social whole.

What kind of social whole would this be? I suggest that the *jianghu* is one conception of it; and that the *jianghu* wisdom of *The Times* journalists can be comprehended as their equivalent to our sociology. In order to draw ourselves into this sensibility, it may be helpful to try reasoning from the perspective of its assumptions. For a start, we would envision our society not as a group of people pursuing their own goals and values in life, but as a hierarchical structure of social relations, out of which all personal values originate. A particular person’s goals and motivations would not then strike us as a matter of individual choice, but as determined by her position in the hierarchy. That is, we would expect her to pursue certain things not because they are good in themselves, but because they would signify or facilitate, or better yet both signify and facilitate, her climb up the social hierarchy. Just as no sociologist imagines that a person desires a designer handbag only to carry her belongings in, neither would we imagine that a person aspires to a professional position only to execute its official functions. A newspaperman, for example, would not be thought of as motivated by an inexplicable personal passion for the noble calling of news-production. Like anyone else, she would be thought of as pursuing social ascent through her various decisions and preferences.

Secondly, and as a logical corollary of this first point, we would neither assume nor be easily persuaded that any organization in society actually functions in the interest of the ‘public’ good it claims to serve. Given that no organization can improve conditions for every person in society at once, the actual effect of any organization must be to benefit some people and not others. While an organization may claim and even really try to select its beneficiaries on an impersonal, anonymous basis, as long as it is run by people, it is run by people who are themselves trying to rise in society. In actual practice, organizations will thus tend to benefit those whom its members benefit from benefiting. Knowing this to be the case, we would not trust our interests to the formal claims of any organization. Still less would we imagine some impersonal system or mechanism to be at work protecting them. Instead, it would seem evident to us that *people* decide who they use their resources to help and who they do not; and that, people, whatever else they may be to us, are also thus the means one must use to get what one wants.

This approach to social life differs subtly but significantly from an instrumentalization of personal relations. For it is not that one first decides what one wants, then casts about for the best tool to achieve it with, and finally decides to use a friend. Rather, the usefulness of people to one another is a general condition of life, or the nature of human society. It is only if one does not assume this to be the case that using a personal relation to achieve something stands out as “instrumental.” Where the Individual is foreground, that is, a person and her interests are conceived of as prior to and distinct

from her relations to others. Particularly where one believes impersonal administrative or market systems are in place to enable and regulate people's pursuit of their interests, one may feel that personal relations being outside of those systems, ought to be 'pure' or free of self-interested motivation. To think of one's friends as useful resources for climbing up in society would then seem distasteful. Here, however, it is society rather than the Individual which is foreground. And it is a characteristic of society that the relations between its positions are the means by which anything in society gets done.

The usefulness of people to one another is, in other words, a quality of the social whole that precedes the existence of all people, and determines all their particular wants and needs. Thus, when one does a favor for or receives a favor from someone, what is socially significant is not the resulting benefit to the individual, but the resulting consolidation of that social relation into an alliance. In a hierarchical social whole, that is, to help a friend is not only to help her, but to help her and not someone else; or more explicitly, it is to help her against someone else. Not to help her, on the other hand, is to help someone else against her. There are no neutral relations, in other words, only alliances and rivalries. People are either bound to try to help each other in their efforts to climb up society, or they are bound to try to keep each other down. It is worth further noting that the ultimate goal of social ascent is itself a relational position, rather than a concrete benefit. Concrete benefits may be necessary along the way, but the real purpose they serve is to help one climb up to a position above other people. In this sense, people are not only the means but also the content of one's goal. Relations to others are in one's interest, insofar as one's interest is only in one's relation to others.

This was the conception of social life that *The Times* journalists described – a life in which it was not people who used relations, but relations that used people. They did not subscribe to an idea of society as made up of Individuals freely pursuing their own values, against which the *jianghu* interpretation of things would have seemed cynical. In their understanding, living a social life meant being born into a particular position within a hierarchy of relations, and having to navigate that structure for the duration of one's days. The *jianghu* stories they told were not cynical but analytical portraits of this life. What they reveal are not particularly Chinese characteristics, but a general aspect of life in commercialized societies.

### **Life and Death in Commercialization**

One Sunday afternoon, a few of *The Times* journalists organized a gathering at Feng's apartment in Beijing. Meng arrived late, jokingly complaining about the hideously long journey he had had to make from the city center to Feng's home, which was so far out that it may as well have been in the surrounding province of Hebei. Meng was dressed sharply, in a white shirt and denim jacket, a narrow scarf round his neck, leather gloves, and skinny black jeans tucked into a pair of very pointy and well-polished lace-up leather boots. The boots were so tall and narrow that they were difficult to take off, and since there was not a chair by the door, Meng had to alternately wrestle them off each skinny leg while teetering awkwardly on the other. The journalists had not met in a couple of weeks, but everyone had heard that Meng had recently lost his i-phone, a very new one, and the latest model at that. WXL joked that the purpose of this gathering was

to comfort Meng over the terrible loss, which everyone jokingly called a “great tragedy,” for the amount of money involved.

As this was Meng’s first visit to Feng’s apartment, he began to look around and assess it. “Not bad, isn’t it? Quite spacious,” he seemed genuinely impressed. “This is the kind of place that’s suitable for human inhabitation,” he reflected, implying that his own apartment was too small for that purpose. “When I buy a place, I’m going to buy one like this,” he continued, as his gaze lighted on Feng’s sound system. “Not bad, right?” Feng beamed a little smugly, “Harman Kardon, cost over 10,000.” Meng tilted his nose in the air briefly, as a sign of acknowledgement. His own speakers were worth even more than that, he said, about 14,000, BOSE brand. But Feng was skeptical that Meng’s could be better than his custom-assembled system of individually chosen parts. He reeled off the specifications of his amplifier, with its hand-blown glass bulb, and speakers with special cones. “You wouldn’t even know how to set the system up,” he assured Meng, “The order that you plug each cable in matters. And you can’t just turn it off when you’re finished listening to music, because the wires have to cool down gradually.” Meng could see that he was not going to out-talk Feng on this front. “Uh huh, uh huh, if you say so,” he responded, “The rest of us don’t know about this stuff, so you can go on and on, but it doesn’t really make a difference to us. All I know is that I wanted a top quality sound system, and people said BOSE was the best, so that’s what I went out and got.” Meng did not manage to keep it for very long, however, as his ex-girlfriend decided to take it with her when they broke up and she moved out earlier this year. “To be honest, most of last year’s savings went into that sound system,” he said. We asked him why he did not simply demand it back from her. “Tstt, this kind of thing, one feels too embarrassed to ask for it back,” he made an expression of distaste.

It is well documented how China’s recent burst of economic development has made consumption an increasingly central part of people’s lives.<sup>169</sup> *The Times* journalists were no exception to this trend. While some had more – and more expensive – hobbies than others, all habitually described themselves as being under great pressure to keep up in today’s material world. After complaining bitterly about work, for example, they would often rationalize their staying on at a newspaper or in an industry they despised by their need to ‘stay alive’ (*huoren*), ‘fill their mouths’ (*hukou*) or ‘nourish their families’ (*yangjia*). These phrases, which refer literally to the minimum necessities for physical subsistence, were of course being used metaphorically. For younger staff, to ‘stay alive’ could mean being able to purchase a high-end cellular phone or a home-entertainment system, to pay the rent or put the down-payment on an apartment. For senior executives, these assets were taken for granted, and ‘staying alive’ might mean maintaining regular access to high class restaurants, a chauffeured car or the ability to pay for one’s child to enter a good school in China and university in America.

Where things so newly available are already referred to as necessary for ‘staying alive,’ the kind of survival in question was obviously social rather than biological. Such

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<sup>169</sup> For example, Deborah Davis. 2000. “Introduction: A Revolution in Consumption.” Pp. 1-24 in *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China*, edited by Deborah Davis. Berkeley: University of California Press; Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006; Aihwa Ong and Li Zhang ed., *Privatizing China: Socialism from Afar* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008). Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality and Public Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.

things were necessary because of what they signified, which in the context of China's rapid and uncharted economic development was above all the ability to keep pace with the progress of society. With material conditions across the country so steadily and impressively improving, to become unable to afford the new and better things that others of equal status can, is symbolically tantamount to being eliminated by historical development. For some of *The Times* newspapermen at least, social life seemed to be so defined by this notion that to retract one's material demands to anything less than that of one's peers would be to fall out of the story completely. What this meant for them was that their work never ended, for their job as newspapermen was not really to write news articles or even to clinch advertising contracts. It was to be flexible and innovative in using the resources that their positions made available to them, to climb up society's hierarchy. For anyone who wanted to succeed in this, work was not confined to the job description. It was coextensive with life. Every encounter was a potential opportunity to move up – as well as a potential fall down. One's position in an ongoing struggle is never secure. Indeed, the higher one climbs, the more humiliating could be one's fall. Although the newspaper executives could dine at high-end restaurants as frequently as they liked, therefore, they could never really enjoy their food, because the meaning of a feast was status and their status was never secure. The drama that unfolded at one of *The Times* staff dinners illustrates this condition well.

Tang had come from Guangzhou to Beijing on business – to try to clinch some advertising contracts, the journalists said. A dinner was organized, and several bottles of fine wine prepared. In a private dining room at a restaurant, more than twenty of us were seated around a big round table. The occasion was a typical example of what in native terms was called a “*fanju*” - a meal which was not simply a meal, but also a stage on which various performances would have to take place, each person playing the character that was proper to her. As boss, Tang's role was to hold court; to address the staff as the collective body of which he was head, and to motivate, pontificate, advise and chide them howsoever he saw fit. Everyone else's role, it seemed, was to agree, by vocally supporting Tang's claims or at least by silently assenting to them. Although the journalists thus occupied a position subordinate to Tang's, however, they still had considerable power to make Tang sweat, for his ability to play his role depended on their playing theirs. Meanwhile, they had grown accustomed to his verbose antics, and apparently no longer took his speeches very seriously.

“At our newspaper, we are all one team,” Tang addressed the table. “We have one ideal and one set of shared values, just like the Communist cadres did when they were engaged in revolution. Every person takes the common vision and makes it his own.” He looked around the table significantly, but most of the staff had their gazes lowered or fixed neutrally at a place on the table just beyond their plates. Their cool response provoked Tang to try turning up the heat. “We are going to be the first publicly listed newspaper that does not run its editorial and its business sides separately. Think how valuable our stocks will be! Our distribution rate is already fifteen million. That means we've already overtaken the *Economic Observer*,” he said, referring to one of China's foremost financial newspapers. “We are leaving the competition behind! And not merely be a foot, but by a yard!” This claim seemed to be going a little too far for one journalist, Yang, who when Tang said “yard,” choked on the tea he was drinking. A little tickle went quickly round the table, carried in people's eyes. Tang shot a stern glare at Yang,

but Yang had his eyes in his cup, and being in the limelight as he was, Tang had little choice but to ignore the infraction and move on.

“The quality of our news articles is still not good enough,” he began to scold the team. “The Culture section should be like Douban plus Xinlang, divided by two. Right now it’s only Douban.” Douban was a website featuring reviews and discussions of literature, cinema and music, popular among educated, self-fashioned cultural elites. Xinlang was a general news and information website, less discriminating in its selection of content, bordering on crass, and a far more profitable business. “May I ask what Xinlang represents?” Yun, a female Culture section journalist asked stiffly, with an edge of criticism in her voice. “The masses, of course!” Tang answered, “The Culture section is too old fashioned and stuffy right now. It should be about more popular things. You’re not that old yet, why do you write about such dry things? You should write about what the post-80s and post-90s generation are into. Be more trendy, less high end. It’s not all about what you are personally interested in, it’s about attracting a wider readership. You have to see the bigger picture.”

Meanwhile, without anyone else really noticing, Yang had gotten himself progressively drunker. “Manager Tang!” he abruptly exclaimed, and everyone turned in to look. “What you say is sooo *right!*” he drawled slightly, “Let me toast you! What you say is *so* right.” Tang could hardly object to this vow of support, though it seemed to be made in a dubious spirit. He nodded and continued his address. “You all have to see the bigger picture. We want to become a one billion [RMB] company! You might really like doing investigative stories,” he directed this at Feng, “But when you see the big picture, you realize that that’s not where the future lies. You have to transform yourself to keep up with the times. Feng, you haven’t made the transformation yet. Meng has made the transformation.” Feng nodded, but remained silent. “Let’s work together to make this newspaper a successful one,” Tang went on, “You have to do it for the sake of honor. We’re not a company that gives stock options to its employees, so the honor of success will be your sole motivation.”

Suddenly, the female Culture journalist, Yun, raised her cup of tea towards Tang and spoke. “Manager Tang, I toast you with this tea in lieu of wine, and now I am going to leave. Because I truly cannot stand to listen to this any longer.” Everyone was stunned. “What’s the matter?” Tang managed. “I have heard enough of this, and now I truly want to leave,” Yun threw back her tea, picked up her handbag and left the dining room. Everyone was silent except a couple of Tang’s lackeys. “Totally outrageous!” “Has she lost her mind? No sense of propriety at all.” “Doesn’t matter, she’s fired.” “Fire her! People like that we don’t need.” Their voices chimed around Tang, who looked around silently. “You!” he said suddenly, pointing straight at me, “What do you think of our newspaper?” “Uh, yes, why, it’s great! I’ve really learnt a lot here!” I tried my best to say the right thing. He seemed just slightly appeased, “Isn’t that so. She can go if she wants, we don’t need people like that.”

Yang, who seemed to have noticed Yun’s departure but not to have thought much of it, chose this moment to join the conversation again. “*So* right, Manager Tang. We should all learn from Meng. Meng can do anything! Ten thousand obstacles, and he would be able to overcome all of them! Manager Tang, what you say is *so* right.” The lackeys began to bristle. “What’s with him?” “Totally drunk. Someone send him home.” They clucked. Tang glared at Yang disapprovingly, but decided to rise above this rabble.

“*The Times* is one team,” he addressed the table as a whole again, “Anyone is free to leave. But we are definitely going to succeed, and when that happens, everyone is going to wish they’d been part of us.” “You are soooo right, Manager Tang!” the incorrigible voice came. “WILL YOU STOP IT?!” Tang finally snapped, turning purple in the face.

The editor-in-chief’s position was not, ultimately, an enviable one. As boss, he could say what he wanted and everyone else had to defer as long as they wanted their jobs. But also as boss, he was the most anxious person at the table, because it was he who most personally needed everyone else’s cooperation and for the business to succeed. I doubt he enjoyed much of the wine he drank that evening or the cigarettes he smoked almost continuously, with the success of his business still up in the air and his ‘team’ sitting silently near the brink of mutiny. Indeed, even the discretionary power he appeared to wield over them turned out to be more symbolic than real, for as I later learned, Yun was not fired after all. She had been ready to quit *The Times* for a while, and when she made her little speech, had decided that now was as good a time as ever. But Tang himself telephoned her and persuaded her to stay. He said he was happy that someone had the courage to talk back to him, and that the newspaper needed people like her. In fact, so did he. He needed this venture to work out more than anyone, for its failure would leave him a middle-aged man with no sign of success, no significance to his name. Life itself would only bear witness to his social death, at that point, and Tang was haunted by this fear. More than editorial excellence or even good business sense, everything at *The Times* was thus driven by Tang’s determination to avoid this fall, in any of the various forms it might take.

After the dinner, I shared a taxi home with Feng. I told him that the evening’s events had left me feeling totally depressed, and a little bit nauseus. A newspaper should not have to operate around one man’s personal vanity, I said. Feng said that he felt put off, but not to the point of nausea. “Isn’t this what you came here to see?” he asked blandly. “When you do investigative journalism you see lots of situations like this. You learn not to let it get to you.” He said that he respected Yun’s actions, but not so much that he would do the same, for one also had to consider one’s future. “I haven’t ‘made the transformation’ yet?” he repeated Tang’s chiding mocking. “That’s because my conscience and intelligence (*liangzhi*) are still with me!... There really are all kinds of people out there,” he sighed, referring not to human diversity in general, but more specifically to the unplumbed depths of human depravity.

The journalists’ conception of society as a *jianghu* captured this aspect of their lives. It articulated their experience of China’s economic development making it possible not only for material life to improve overall, but also and perhaps more significantly, for some people’s lives to improve faster than, and in relation to, others’. It explained the behavior of people who seemed to desire things never as ends in themselves, but always as means for acquiring more things. Contra the ideology of economic development simply creating material value, *jianghu* narratives interpret material values as signifiers of social position and personal worth. Keeping the hierarchical structure of society always in view, they thus bring the finitude of the social whole to bear on the theoretical infinitude of economic development. They reveal the sense in which market reform has introduced mobility into society’s hierarchy, and thereby pulled everyone into an endless struggle to acquire more. Failing to acquire more is not only not to climb up in society,

but actually to fall down; and falling down in society as it progresses means one is unsuited to and unworthy of the better, future world.

As an ordinary understanding of society rather than a specialized social science, this *jianghu* wisdom of the journalists' was not only a way of analyzing life, but also a way of living it. It was for them the real story of self and society in contemporary China. Rather than one of many available perspectives on their economic activities, it was the very form that economic values such as development, progress and upward mobility took in their lives. This is why they did not consider it superior, or even quite sensible to deny the *jianghu* view of things in order to be 'idealistic' rather than 'cynical.' Whether one considered it the only thing worth writing about, or so common-sensical that it was not even worth mentioning, interpersonal vying for interests was in both views the very substance of contemporary social life. This being the condition, denying the logic of the *jianghu* would be like denying sociology, to live in a delusion of one's difference and independence from others. The fact *is* that China's news industry is driven by people's thirst for money and power, and thriving under conditions of state control and corporate corruption. It was not wrong to 'accept' this reality. As long as one lived in this society, what was wrong, or rather meaningless, was to deny it and to ignore one's own position in it.

The moral question for *The Times* writers was thus not whether to acquiesce in or denounce the reality of interpersonal vying, but rather how hard to vie, or how much of oneself to put into it. Meng, at one end, embraced the struggle for supremacy and directed every aspect of his life according to its demands. Feng, on the other hand, preferred to secede rather than bend over backwards to succeed. He did perform the necessary deferences whenever the occasion required, and spoke of this as a necessary part of life. But whereas Meng worked hard at socializing with his colleagues and tried to cultivate a faction of loyal followers within the organization, Feng tended to shy away. "I don't have too many comings and goings with them," Feng said, "I just maintain a basic co-worker relationship, that's all. Co-worker relationships can actually be very minimal and plain." When Tang left *The Times*, Meng went into a state of nervous excitement for weeks, trying to anticipate the fallout and quickly establish new alliances. Feng purposely distanced himself from the affair. "It doesn't make much of a difference to us journalists who's editor-in-chief, we just write our stories all the same," he said coolly. "Meng doesn't *have* to be as calculative as he is," he responded, when I told him that Meng had told me he envied Feng's naïveté. "Everyone can choose to be as 'naive' as I. You just lose out more often, that's all."

Of course, Feng was not quite as indifferent as he fashioned himself in these sayings. He too responded to Tang's departure with a sense of alliance and rivalry, for example, by becoming abruptly closer to Chen, as mentioned earlier. Becoming closer to Chen was natural, Feng said, because they were old colleagues now, relative to the new arrivals; and they would do what they could to help each other protect their positions at *The Times*. Readers who demand logical consistency of people might feel that Feng was being somewhat hypocritical. Meng was more 'honest' about his self-interested intentions or at least represented them more nakedly, so that his words and actions were perhaps more consistent. But life is not all about being consistent, and the reason Feng equivocated was that while he could not deny the reality of his *jianghu* maneuvers, neither did he feel himself reducible to them. It was as though something of him

remained outside and felt repulsed by the *jianghu* conception of social life, and that it was this remainder speaking when he denied or downplayed his interest in it. This prevarication or performed disdain was all that Feng could do with that part of him which rebelled against the *jianghu*'s logic, because no matter how deeply he felt himself to be different from that description of social life, he had no other story of society to live.

In some ways, this predicament that Feng faced is related to the turn of post-Mao journalism from a pedagogical and transformative to a practically informative ethic. Against the historical backdrop of Maoist propaganda, post-Mao journalism declared itself opposed to trying to transform people. Spreading ideological messages persuading people to sacrifice themselves for lofty ideals like the collective good had turned out only to serve the self-interests of the Party's political factions. To truly serve the people, it was now thus said, newspapers had to stop pretending to write from a position above society's struggles, and instead try to become practical tools within it. By giving people the kind of news they wanted to read and the information they needed to pursue their own interests in life, newspapers could do some actual good for society. The benefits resulting from this reorientation have been discussed.<sup>170</sup> But another effect of insisting that writing should function only as a tool for helping people to pursue their own interests, is to make it impossible to conceive of any values existing besides those interests. Short of collective rituals, writing is the only medium in which abstract values can be objectified and commonly held to be real. In the post-Mao ethic that journalists like Feng subscribe to, however, writing is judged incapable of objectifying or carrying those values, such that self-interests and the struggles that result from them become the only objective reality. Although *The Times* writers did not fully believe in or feel themselves adequately represented by their *jianghu* stories, they had no language in which to articulate a different kind of social life. *Jianghu* was the only reality. It was the nature of human society, which one could neither assume to be inherently good nor hope to fundamentally change.

For one whose role is to write about and for society, this condition is existentially threatening, as one cannot meaningfully fulfill this role without hoping either for goodness or for change. At times, Feng seemed to be painfully aware of this intellectual, if not spiritual, entrapment. At others, he seemed to will himself unconscious of it by diving headfirst into more immediate gratifications such as shopping, feasting and singing karaoke. All the off-putting encounters he had with the ugliness and impotence of China's news industry, he could glibly put down to the inescapable logic of the *jianghu*. The question that he and his colleagues could not answer for themselves, however was this: How can one live and write meaningfully, if life and writing are nothing but a game of self-interest and the pieces to play it with? If *jianghu* wisdom provided a true understanding of reality, this was the real trap of a *jianghu* society.

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<sup>170</sup> In Chapter Three.



## Chapter Five: Language and Life

One evening after work, Hong and I went for a walk along Guangzhou's famous Pearl River. The banks of the river had been newly refurbished for the 2011 Asian Games, which the city was lavishly hosting in an effort to keep up, it was said, with Beijing's 2008 Olympics and Shanghai's 2010 World Expo. On our side of the river was a pleasingly wide and well-paved pedestrian boardwalk, brightly lit by tall streetlamps. Families and couples strolled along, while street performers danced or sang pop songs on request on makeshift stages they had set up by the water. Across the river, however, the other bank was not lit at all. I pointed out the curious contrast. "That's China for you – one way by light and one way in the dark (明一道, 暗一道)," Hong offhandedly joked.

Completely unprovoked, this comment struck me for the casual, almost instinctive way in which it posited a fundamental bipolarity about life in China. The reason Hong could so effortlessly come up with this response is that the brand of humor it drew from is one which now pervades Chinese fiction, film and internet writings. It is a kind of humor that plays on the sense that life in contemporary China is characterized by a radical discrepancy between appearances and reality, theory and practice, between what one says and what one does. More specifically, it plays on the idea that to get by in today's world it is necessary to recognize this discrepancy and shape one's life according to it. Anyone who went about her business expecting claims and actions to actually correspond would quickly be duped and ripped off. The sheer demands of practicality thus put normative pressure on people to learn the principle of non-relation, and cultivate an astuteness or expectation of it. Hong was demonstrating this astuteness by making such a joke. Its humor and cleverness, as I heard it, came from his experience in the news industry, where maturing meant coming to recognize and accept a whole array of discrepancies – the fact, for example, that while the news media theoretically serves "the public," it is actually determined by struggles over private interests; the fact that 'serving the public' often means 'stirring up' scandals to increase readership rates, whether calling readers' attention to the event really helps anyone or not; or the fact that blackmail and bribery have become the price that newspapers must pay just to stay in the news-production game. Encounters with these ironies were the everyday fare of being a journalist. It was thus a mark of experience and wisdom among them to profess that in China everyone had 'two sets,' one of official lines and one of 'unspoken rules' (*qianguize*). Official lines were bright and rosy but they had nothing to do with reality, for reality was the *jianghu* of ambitions, alliances and rivalries that played themselves out in the dark.

The sad and funny truth that Hong's joke illuminated for me was how meaning became impossible when such a fundamental disconnection between claims and actuality had to be presupposed. It is one thing to know that representation and reality do not always correspond; it is another to know that they never do. Words become voluble props that anyone might use in anyway it strikes them to, while life becomes a mute state of hypocrisy. This was indeed a sensibility that circulated at *The Times*, and it did not only affect one's attitude to work. It could seep into one's very being and dissolve the character there was. The last meeting I had with Tang seemed to me a striking illustration of this condition. A year after he had left *The Times*, he was working as the vice-

chairman of a company that sold cigarettes and alcohol to government offices for their banquets. We met for coffee.

“You study anthropology!” he said as soon as had he sat down. “You know what you should research? *Revenge*,” he looked me intently in the eye. Caught off guard by the suggestion, I did not immediately know what to say. Apparently not minding my silence, however, he immediately went on, “In the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, vengeance is exacted by the victim himself. It was considered the ethical right and responsibility of every person to defend himself, not just surrender the matter to the law or the state. That’s why Confucian thought is the *true* liberalism, the *true* anti-despotism.” Although this was a reductive distortion of the philosophy, he looked so convinced by his own argument that I could only non-committally assent.

“You know, you academics are researching all kinds of unimportant things. I think you all need someone with more genius, like me, to tell you what you should really be studying. Every night recently I’ve been staying up late reading the Bible. Matthew, Mark, Luke... And I’ve achieved the synthesis of Christianity and Confucianism,” he declared. “The only difference between them is that Confucianism doesn’t have a messiah. Everything else that Christianity has, it has too. It has a divine order (*tianli*) – only its divine order within the human world (*tianli zai renjian*), rather than outside. And it has a Bible – only its Bible is called the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. Let me ask you this, did Confucius acquire his knowledge by learning or by birth?” I replied that the orthodox answer was that he acquired his knowledge by learning.

“Wrong! Let me tell you, Confucius acquired his knowledge by birth! He only wrote that he acquired it by learning (*xueerzhizhi*) to encourage students like you! Otherwise what were they reading in Yao and Shun? If Confucius acquired his knowledge by learning then he must have read it somewhere. But before Confucius there were no Confucian writings. He couldn’t have learnt it anywhere – so he must have been born knowing! *Tianli* came into the human world through the birth of Confucius,” Tang deduced. “That’s why I accept Jesus. I believe there is a Spirit that comes down from Heaven. Only I believe that Jesus was actually the *Second* Coming. Confucius was the First.”

“You know, everything there is in Western philosophy appeared in Chinese philosophy first. Chinese philosophy teaches that there is a divine order above, which is metaphysics, and a secular order below, which are the rites (*li*). How long it took for Germany’s Hegel to figure that out!” he scoffed. “Now do you understand what I’m doing? I’m taking Chinese thought as primary, and using it to encompass Western thought (以中为体, 融摄西学). I believe that China should accept the Christian God. But we should request that Confucius and Mencius be made Saints. And that Dong Zhongshu be recognized as equivalent to Saint Augustine. You know, Shakespeare was actually a saint too. It was Heaven that wrote through him. How else do you think one man could have written all those great works?” I did not answer, but tried to look thoughtful.

“I’ve achieved a heightened state of being now,” he said, in a more reflexive tone, as though to explain how he had attained the incredible insights just presented. “It happened around... April,” he nodded significantly. “It’s incredible. Like my twenty-two years of studying have all become crystal clear, in a single flash. Nothing can stop me now. All that’s left is to spread the word. We’ll start a Church. I’ll be the Pope, and you

help me spread the gospel. Go and tell your colleagues. Have them go and tell more colleagues.” I asked him why he did not become an academic himself, and write his ideas into a book.

“I have to make money!” he cried indignantly. “My highest ambition is to do scholarship. But it’s not as though I were a woman, you know, I have to feed my family, feed my kid! And anyways,” he added, after calming back down, “I don’t deign to write. Confucius never wrote. Neither did Jesus. Neither did Socrates. Do you know why? Because their greatest fear was that their teachings would become formalized (*jiaotiao hua*). Their teachings were living, spiritual insights. If they wrote them down, they might become fixed, dead letters. Confucius said to transmit wisdom but not add creations of one’s own (述而不作). That’s how I am. You academics can do the writing. I am only here to guide you and tell you how.” Why did you leave *The Times*? I asked him pointedly.

“Why, to rest!” he snapped, as though challenging me to think there was any more complicated reason. “I can always do media again in the future. Media work is so exhausting and I’ve done it for so long, why shouldn’t I take a break and do sales for a while? Sales is so simple for someone who’s done something as complex as media work before. In media I had to work with private enterprises, liaise with the government, and hoodwink all the editors and journalists like you! Compared to that, sales is easy. I can get everything done in half a day. Then I can sit here chatting with you today, tomorrow and the next day.

Just as I began to wonder if I would indeed be sitting there discussing the new synthesis for the next three days, Tang and I were joined by an attractively made-up young woman in very high-heels and a very, very short mini-skirt. I learnt that she was the sales representative of a company that sold cordyceps (*chongcao*), a Chinese medicinal herb which had become a popular gift to present to business partners and government officials. She and Tang had arranged to meet to discuss possibilities for collaboration.

“Tang is such a *great scholar!*” she squealed, addressing him in the third person, after ordering a latte. “All this philosophy stuff you write on your blog, this whatever *Spring Autumn*, whatever First Coming, Second Coming, I don’t understand a *word* of it!” She sounded exhilarated by her lack of comprehension, but then clucked her tongue disapprovingly, “You really shouldn’t blog about that kind of stuff, you know, it’s so boring, who could possibly understand it? If you want lots of people to read your blog, you should make your blog more gossipy, you know, write about stuff that’s more titillating (*fenghuaxueyue*). That’s the kind of blog people like! Not your incomprehensible whatever philosophy whatever whatever.”

Tang’s eyes widened as he took in this young lady’s giddily delivered criticism. “Not a problem!” he cried. “Not a problem at all! Whatever you’re interested in talking about, I can talk about with you. That’s how I am. I came out today to talk with this graduate student here,” he pointed at me, “So I am talking to her about Confucian philosophy. Now I am talking with you, and you say you don’t understand, well then I will talk to you about something else! More titillating is it? Not a problem. I can talk to you about celebrity gossip. How gossipy do you want me to be? However gossipy you want me to be, that’s how gossipy I can be,” he promised. “Remember, I used to do media. People who’ve done media before all have one chronic fear. You know of what?

Of silence (*lengchang*). When I first started out, I would go home from work everyday and earnestly study celebrity gossip magazines. Because I thought, what if I meet a client who likes to talk about celebrity gossip and I can't talk about it with him? I'd lose the client. Do you like talking about star signs? I can talk to you about star signs. I'm a Taurus. That means I'm reliable and determined."

"Yes, more titillating stuff, that's what people like. I'm a Pisces, that means I'm compassionate and devoted," the young lady looked coquettishly placated, as she replied, and the conversation gradually turned towards business. She and Tang seemed eager to impress each other with how well they had grasped the art of getting government officials to consume.

"Our products all have one great strength in common," Tang said gravely. "They are all highly addictive. Wine, cigarettes and tea. All things that once you start taking, you very easily get hooked."

"Wine and cigarettes are fine for ordinary gifts," the lady countered amicably, "But if you really want to give a high end gift, that's just not enough. Even bird's nest and shark's fins don't count as high end gifts anymore. Shark's fin is what those officials use to make ordinary soups at home now. Now if you want to give a high end gift, it *has* to be *chongcao*. You know, they really do love it! All the officials are eating it. I've tried it myself, and it's really invigorating." I remarked that it must be very expensive.

"Public funds!" both of them exclaimed at once. "When officials drink, they don't have a clue what they're drinking," Tang said. "All they know is that it's bloody expensive. And that's all they care to know. Do you know what our company does? We put one sales rep in charge of each government official who buys from us. One man, whose whole job is to do whatever it takes to protect the client [from other suppliers]. All our clients are officials, and we focus all our attention on them. Whatever they do, we do. That's why I say we're more SOE than SOE's themselves are. Right now we have one hundred and fifty sales representatives. Revenue for the year is going to be five *yi*. Eventually we're going to have one thousand salesmen, and one hundred *yi* in revenue a year."

"You media people talk up such a storm," the lady said skeptically. "How many thousand sales reps, how many billion revenue, you make it sound like this great, glorious vision."

"And then as soon as we've made our money, we disappear! Ha!" Tang completed the scenario for her in a tone of wicked humor, "And don't give a shit about you! Ha! Ha!" We continued chatting till evening, then moved to a restaurant to have dinner together. Conversation wove back and forth between business and other more 'titillating' topics, such as one another's star signs, love lives and the arts of seduction.

"Men, let me tell you, are basically just one thing," between mouthfuls, Tang as the only male present spoke with absolute authority. "They're *curious*. Men are like bees. They fly to this flower, hover around it for a while, then fly on to the next. A woman who wants to keep a man has to have a lot of different cards up her sleeve, and then slowly play one at a time. That way the man will keep feeling like there's still something fresh, something more he hasn't discovered yet. If you let him nail (*gaoding*) you at the start, he'll ditch you soon after."

The young woman, who had been listening attentively, now made a troubled expression. "Well, that I know, but... everyone has to get nailed eventually, don't they!"

“No! Let’s say the man lives to a hundred. The woman should have one hundred cards up her sleeve, and on the last day of his life, she can play the last card! Women are like bamboo shoots. You have to eat them from the top to the bottom, so that they get sweeter and sweeter as you eat. Like a book in which each page makes you want to read on to the next. Not one where you quickly get to the end, and feel like that’s all there was to it.”

The lady shrugged unenthusiastically and lamented, “Whatever the case is, one thing I do know, is that it sure is hard to get a man to divorce his wife.”

“Is it?! Do you really think so? That’s only because you didn’t call my Love Hotline!” Tang’s eyebrows rose with his voice, he looked up from the food, straightened his posture, and seemed genuinely eager to offer his expertise. “I helped a girl at our newspaper make it happen. The man’s wife found out about their affair and started giving him a hard time. She was going to give him a hard time too, but I told her, now’s not the time to kick up a fuss, just lay off him for a while, and he’ll come to you of his own accord. So she left town and told him not to look her up until he’d gotten a divorce, and sure enough, after three months he went to her.”

“He’d divorced his wife?” the lady gasped with delight, as though she were affirming that the frog had really turned into a prince.

“That’s right!” Tang beamed proudly. “You see? Next time you should call my Love Hotline. You need a talented man like me to advise you. I’m someone who’s comprehended the Eastern world’s *Spring and Autumn Annals*, and the Western world’s Bible. Could there be anything I don’t know how to handle?”

“Are you Christian?” she was surprised by the mention of the Bible.

“Yes. I believe in God. But I believe that Confucius is God.” She looked puzzled, and Tang began to elaborate, “The Divine Order is not in Heaven, it’s here on earth, in Confucianism’s *li*.” But the lady looked askance, seemed to judge that this line of inquiry would not be too fruitful, and so directed the conversation elsewhere.

“Hey, let me ask you about a business deal I just did,” she interjected. “A petrol company signed a contract with us last month, ordering three boxes of *chongcao* for each petrol station they own. And then last week, they suddenly upped their order to five boxes per station. That almost cleared out our stock! I didn’t understand why they increased their order, but my colleague says that what it means is that we have to give them a kickback (*huikou*) from the money they pay us, or else they won’t order from us again. Is that really what it means?”

“But of course,” Tang replied, in the tone of a wise and kindly teacher. “This is the country of unspoken rules. Petrol stations sell all kinds of different things. You might think it odd that they would carry something as high-end as *chongcao* at a petrol station. But it’s because people can bill anything they buy there to their companies as petrol expenses. The receipt is the same, whether you buy *chongcao* or petrol. At my old job, all my rice and cooking oil and things were bought at the gas station by my driver, and billed to the company as gas.” He sighed, as though reflecting on the years that had passed since that time, “Anyways, all I want now is to do business, and not have to work as someone else’s employee anymore.”

“Don’t you own a share of your current company, as its Vice-Chairman?” the lady was familiar with this common practice.

“That’s just a trick,” Tang said darkly, and from personal experience. “That’s something a boss will promise you, to trick you into working hard for him. In the end, he won’t give you a single share. But, it’s not a problem. I know what to do. I’ll build the company up till it owns ten, twenty wine labels. Then I’ll ask the boss for just one of them. One label will be worth ten million *yuan* by then. All I need is one, and I’ll be all set! You see? Isn’t China fun (*haowan*)? That’s why Little Chua here came all the way over from America to find us. In fact, after she graduates, she’s going to move here to find a husband!” I was surprised by the statement, which had no basis in anything I had said.

“Find a husband? Then you’d better not tell them you have a PhD,” the young lady suggested to me, kindly. “Just say you have a BA, and that you don’t have any career ambitions, that you just want to lead a happy, normal life. That way people will like you.” She paused and looked at me, as though assessing my chances. “Better not to come,” she decided. “Come here and your heart will blacken. Everyday from morning till night, you’ll be thinking about how to make money.”

“Why shouldn’t she come?” Tang objected. “China’s population is so big, and half of them are men, so many to choose from. Honestly speaking, I feel sorry for the people who’ve left China. Look how good the living is here. It’s like heaven! So many good foods,” he waved his chopsticks over our meal. “So many pretty women,” he pointed them out the window on to the street, “For...” he paused, and perhaps wondered for an instant if it was too indecent to say, but ultimately decided it was not. “For so cheap!” he laughed and continued eating.

Hong’s wisecrack about China being one way by light and one way in the dark seems to me the most adequate way of explaining this conversation. Where a discrepancy between representation and reality is presupposed, speaking is not engaged in as a practice of bringing the darkness of one’s heart or mind to light. Rather, to speak is to act in an unspoken situation. One may not have any concrete end in mind, or any covertly instrumental agenda. But the logic of the *jianghu* compels one to speak so as to turn the situation to one’s general advantage. This does not mean that everything one says is directly self-interested. One might discuss at length the similarities between Christian and Confucian thought, for instance. But the style of conversation as a whole is performative. Regardless of what one is saying, one speaks to make oneself look good. Of course, what one must say to make oneself look good changes with the conversational context. The speaker who would come out well must thus continuously guess at what the right thing to say is. In conversations like this, statements do not have to logically cohere with what was said before. They need only accord with the speaker’s sense of what it would behoove her to say next. Where everyone understands this to be the way language is used, levels of nonsensicality and untruth that might otherwise be cause for serious concern do not provoke alarm. Though many statements may be absurd or blatantly false, listeners know that the speaker is only speaking, not really meaning what she says. On this basis, the whole conversation can proceed quite smoothly and even become quite entertaining.

I decided to seek a second opinion on the matter by relating the experience to Lin, a well-read man and long-time head editor of *The Times* Culture section. Hardly had I mentioned Tang, however, when Lin exclaimed, “Tang is not mentally normal. That’s the effect of China’s abnormal condition for you – it produces psychologically ill people like

that. He's a graduate of Beijing University you know, very intelligent and talented. And now he's become this way. His behavior perfectly exemplifies the definition of the psychologically ill, which is that they are unable to communicate with you, to make you understand what they mean. It's like Foucault says, people under surveillance develop psychological illness." This was a bold reading of Foucault. I asked him what the 'abnormal condition' of China's was.

"It's the result of China's half-totalitarian, half-commercial system. You come from an enlightened country, so you don't know how bad it can be. People are not psychologically normal here. It's not just Tang – his case of illness can be considered relatively mild. There're many who are even worse." I asked Lin how this condition affected China's news media. "The problem with China's media is precisely a psychological illness!" he exclaimed. "It's the failure to know the self (*ziwo renshi*). The inability to see one's place in relation to others, to see one's position in the broader universe and thereby to understand oneself. The media should be a dialogue. It should be a process of interaction, where the writer also learns what readers think, learns to understand readers and respond to them. But in China what should be a dialogue is a monologue – just the head editor of a newspaper saying whatever he feels like saying, without considering at all what anyone else thinks. He suddenly feels that the newspaper should be a 'high end (*gaoduan*) newspaper,'" Lin quoted a favorite phrase of Tang's, "And says that 'high end' means this and that and the other. Then he behaves as though from tomorrow onwards he simply will be the editor of a 'high end newspaper.' Does that seem possible to you? Is 'high end' just whatever he says it is? Obviously not. Something doesn't become a certain way, just by you saying it is that way. Editors here are too used to doing things like this. They think the media is a platform for their own opinions. Like if one of them lives in Panyu," a wealthy district of Guangzhou, "And if he feels like his neighborhood is too dirty, he makes the newspaper write article after article about Panyu's 'environmental problems.' Or if his kid is about to start school, he makes the newspaper write about the problems with Guangzhou's education system."

"That's why the news media in China is so low standard (*didang*). Really, its standards are lower than you can even imagine. Let me tell you how low they are. I once worked as head editor of both the Culture and Entertainment sections of a Party newspaper in Yunnan. The journalists there, do you know how they would write their articles? They would go to the website of *Southern Metropolis*' Culture page and copy the first four headline stories right onto their own newspaper. I said to them, Can you not do that? News has to be *discovered*. The least you could do is open five different websites and choose which articles you want to copy! *That's* how low I had to set my requirements. Everyone now talks about the Internet's so-called blow to the printed news media. Please! There was never a proper printed news media here to begin with! Maybe if it had developed for another one hundred years, till there was something like the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*, and then the Internet showed up, then there'd be some 'blow' to speak of. But the way it is now, standards are so low that the Internet can't possibly make things any worse."

"The solution? There is no solution! All-out Westernization (*quanpan xihua*)!" Lin responded to my plea for an idea of how China could get out of the bleak scenario he painted. "Listen, imagine humanity in its very original, primal state (*yuanshi zhuangtai*). That's what China was like in 1978 – as bad as things have ever been in the whole history

of mankind. Now it's still like that, only with more money around." I said that this sounded something like the May Fourth attitude to China as a society stuck in the dark ages. "Yes, a call for Enlightenment," he agreed, "You know, the May Fourth call for Science and Democracy was itself quite sad, really. Because Science and Democracy should really have been the norm to begin with. In any normal, healthy country, they would have been. Only in China do intellectuals have to beg and plea for such basic things. I have a concept for this, you know. One that I came up with myself," he said with a slight show of pride. "It's this: *China is a country without a manual (shouce)*. Everything we do, we do blindly, just going at it in any haphazard way (*luanlai*). In Japan they write manuals about how to do everything. Like raising kids, for example. They write books in which they record all the things one needs to do, all the things that can happen and how best to handle them. Every new parent consults these books, and raises their children according to these guidelines. In China, people just do whatever they feel like. You can't even imagine some of the things young mothers in the rural areas still do – even today!" Lin sighed.

"Have you ever heard of Cynicism?" he asked me, "It's a Greek philosophy. It's hard to explain, but in my opinion, that's the only way one can respond to China's condition. You can't hope to give suggestions to the Party. People who think that are the most stupid of all. Don't they get it yet? You can't even hope to make the Party angry. Don't bother trying! You have no way to influence it at all, not in any tiny way. With the Party, there's only one relationship you can have: the Party educates you. All you can hope to do is find a few things now and then that tickle your humor, and let you enjoy a few cold laughs." This was hardly an adequate understanding of Cynicism, but the general sense that Lin sought to convey was clear enough. His explanation of China's condition was only apparently more substantial than Hong's joke. Lin conceptualized the disconnection between representation and reality, which Hong only baldly stated as though it were an empirical fact. Yet Lin's conceptualization of the condition – as various forms of psychological illness produced by China's political and economic system – did not actually get him any closer to a meaningful understanding of it. The real problem, which everyone at *The Times* from Hong to Meng to Tang continuously lived and struggled with, was precisely the difficulty of understanding what this odd relation of non-relation between the representational and the real was, as a meaningful social-historical phenomenon. Though it drew in Foucault, Greek philosophy, clinical metaphors and politics, Lin's account only restated the non-relation in a more colorful, but equally dead-end way; for by portraying China in the absolute negative and as a historical anachronism, Lin cut off all relations between his account and the nature of historical reality. In this sense, his portrait of China was as performative as Tang's conversation was. It assumed the same, and reproduced the same assumption of, non-relation between the representational and the real.

I shifted the conversation back to *The Times*. Lin told me that their parent company had recently attempted to make a stock market launch but failed, and that he doubted the newspaper would see it through the coming year. He affirmed that Tang's departure was neither a political issue nor a consequence of Tang's starting a business on the side, but strictly a matter of struggles over interest. "Starting a company on the side is fine," Lin said, "It might even help attract more business to *The Times*. The leaders wouldn't mind that at all if Tang took a cut of the earnings. They just didn't want to give



him the money they'd promised him, that's all. Why didn't they? Because they didn't have to! They knew they ought to give it to him, but they *just didn't*. If they *just don't* give it, what can you do? You see? That's what this industry is like," Lin circled back to his point.

"Sure, it may have been more in their interests to keep Tang on," he continued, "But the leaders don't think that far ahead. Newspapers in China aren't even run according to a plan to make money. They aren't run according to any clear objective at all. They just get created because a few officials happen to be sitting around together, and happen to decide to start one. Maybe they lose some money but gain political resources, or maybe they make a lot of money and buy a lot of real estate. They don't have a manual, they just do whatever they feel like." In that case, news-making in China is a purely haphazard (*chuncui luanlai*) activity! I chimed in, jokingly. "Yes! Purely haphazard!" he laughed. "You should write that in your dissertation, as a new concept. You can spell it out in Roman letters, because it's a Chinese concept that can't be translated. *Chuncui luanlai*. The American readers will be so shocked to find out, they'll think, 'What? *That's* what China's media is really like?!' *Chuncui luanlai*," he said again, and laughed coldly.

### **The Liberal Solution**

Would the problem go away if China became a liberal democracy? This was the idea implied in the stark contrasts Lin painted between China and the 'enlightened countries' with their *New York Times* – an implication amplified to my ears, perhaps, because it is an idea one also encounters often in political commentaries on China. It is a claim that many American analysts implicitly make, when they assess developments in China through liberal democratic metrics; and the claim that many Chinese pundits explicitly make, when they rail against the regime with ammunition drawn from philosophers like Adam Smith, de Tocqueville, JS Mill and von Hayek. Such discussions consistently apply liberal terms like "objectivity," "freedom of expression" or acting as "the public's monitor" to China, in a way that makes China seem either like a country desperate to transform itself into the liberal utopia, or else a total basket case. Conditions in China are so wholly denigrated while liberal press ideals are so wholly praised, that one comes to feel the solution to China's problems must somehow be contained inside those glowing words. For newspapermen like those who worked at *The Times*, this sense must have been further reinforced by the books that are published in China about America and England's media – commemorative histories of their newspapers' triumphs against injustice and their journalists' heroic breakthroughs; pop biographies relishing their media moguls' entrepreneurial genius; and handbooks promising to reveal the secrets of their journalistic success. Without equipping one to say exactly how a liberal media system might work in China, or how the transformation to it could be effected, these discussions and publications nevertheless generated the feeling that there resides in Western exemplars an ideal, if sadly unattainable, way forward for China.

This was the feeling that seemed to cling to the underside of Lin's complaints, quietly, like the inner lining of a coat, which worked without being seen. If Lin only looked into the matter, however, he would soon find that "objectivity," "freedom of expression" and acting as "the public's monitor" are not simply descriptions of the way that news media in liberal democratic countries work. In discussions of the American

news media, for example, they are in fact meaningful terms precisely because news-production in America is so prevalently characterized by their opposites. It is meaningful to talk about “objectivity,” in other words, because so many news articles are subjectively biased. It is important to discuss “the public” because America’s news industry is so dominated by the private interests of large corporations. These terms, in other words, are not simply adjectives, but critical ideals – or representations of values made in and against situations that are felt to be lacking them. As specifically liberal press ideals, what they indicate are not simply the qualities of journalism in a liberal country, but rather the struggles and contradictions that endlessly arise in ongoing efforts to make journalism work as both an instrument and a site of liberal democracy.

An etymology of the term “objectivity” in American journalism conveys well the difficulties involved. “From the beginning,” writes Michael Schudson, “criticism of the ‘myth’ of objectivity has accompanied its enunciation”.<sup>171</sup> He and other historians of America’s news media tell us that news-producers first began to speak of “objectivity” as the necessary ethic of journalism around the 1930s – that is, at precisely the time they *stopped* believing that “objectivity” in journalism was possible to achieve. Up until this era it had largely been taken for granted that newspapers delivered unbiased, factual information about recent events of general interest; and that this institution enabled citizens to participate as rational and informed members of America’s democracy. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, many newspapers began to direct themselves towards the growing immigrant population in America’s cities, and to women readers, whom a nascent feminist movement was calling greater attention to. The idea of the news-reading public thus began to expand from a term that referred primarily to middleclass white men, to a category that included women, non-white races, and immigrants of diverse cultural backgrounds and economic situations. The newspapers which thrived best off this new orientation were those which, instead of presenting their news as reports of grave moral and political import, provided a lighter fare of entertaining stories capped by big headlines and illustrated with cartoons, and useful news updates for urban residents, written in simple words and sentences amenable to varying levels of English literacy.

In the new setting of a news-reading “public” that was not a rational assembly but a motley and impressionable crowd, World War I then saw the emergence of public relations and propaganda as new forms of media work. Corporations were the first to hire ‘public relations counsels’ to provide journalists with their version of events whenever something related to their company occurred. By making the journalist’s job easier, this practice tended to help companies get more, and more favorable, news coverage. Recognizing the advantage, government offices began to follow suit, creating the institutions of the White House spokesman and regular press conferences. Throughout the war, many newspapers took their stories directly from this government source. Some newspapermen also took up leading roles in government intelligence and propaganda

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<sup>171</sup> Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers*. New York: Basic Books, 1978, p. 157. Also Daniel Schiller, *Objectivity and the News*, 1981. David T. Z. Mindich, *Just the Facts: How ‘Objectivity’ Came to Define American Journalism*. New York: New York University Press, 1998. Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communication*. New York: Basic Books, 2004.

work, churning out tens of thousands of press releases favorable to the American war effort.

Through these developments, a heavy dusk fell over the erstwhile assumption that America's readers could or should be provided with news that was simply true, rather than distorted by any particular perspective or agenda. Now that it was understood to be a kind of writing that addressed itself to the "public" as a heterogeneous and yet highly manipulable mass, 'news' could no longer be seen as neutrally informative. It had evidently always to be written from a particular standpoint, and crafted to create particular effects upon the reader. Public relations men argued that since all representations were at some level biased, it was actually better to have publicists who were explicit about writing to serve particular interests, than journalists who implicitly confused their own interests with the "general" interest. It was in response to such doubts about the very validity of their enterprise – to the realization that subjective biases played an irreducible part in news-writing – that many journalists then began to speak of "objectivity" as the defining feature and professional ethic of journalism. Although impossible to achieve, they argued, it was necessary to continuously strive for. Only by this ceaseless effort could America's news system hope to work towards democracy rather than against it.<sup>172</sup>

What "objectivity" in liberal press theory thus indicates is actually the irreducible contradiction between objectivity and subjectivity. Similarly, what the term "press freedom" expresses is the ever-renewed question of what constitutes a legitimate exercise of press *control*. "Freedom" in the press is valued not absolutely but in relation to other, limiting values such as national security; the concern to avoid obscenity, discrimination and incitement to hatred; the protection of privacy and of individuals against unjust defamation; and the consideration of news-providers' own interests as well. To the extent that good journalism is held to have been achieved in liberal press systems, it is held to have achieved the right balance between the public's interest in "press freedom" on the one hand, and its interest in various other forms of societal well-being on the other.<sup>173</sup>

Of course, "the public" is itself a term that simultaneously indicates and elides a contradiction, in this case between what the category is held to include and exclude. Habermas has shown how the modern concept of "the public" arose together with the bourgeoisie in 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe, against the feudal notion of publicness as a personal attribute of the courtly nobility.<sup>174</sup> In this older understanding, the merely private concerns of ordinary subjects for their social reproduction – that is, for their own economic interests – were excluded from the realm of direct relevance to the state and its politics. As the capitalist mode of production led to the rise of national economies, however, these interests became increasingly relevant to the state. In the new constitutions which the bourgeoisie were eventually in a position to institute, therefore, "public" no longer referred to the nobility but to "private people come together as a

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<sup>172</sup> E.g. Walter Lippmann, *Liberty and the News*. New York: The Atlantic Monthly, 1919.

<sup>173</sup> E.g. Carpenter, *The Captive Press: Foreign Policy Crises and the First Amendment* surveys instances of conflict between American press and government efforts to protect national security. Robert Martin, *The Free and Open Press: The Founding of American Democratic Press Liberty, 1640-1800*. New York: New York University Press, 2001.

<sup>174</sup> Jurgen Habermas. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Thomas Burger trans. MIT Press 1991 [1962].

public,” a civil entity no longer subordinate to state authority but independent and critical of it.<sup>175</sup>

The ruling principle of the people’s sovereignty, that is, entailed that the legitimacy of all state decisions lay in their being approved of by public opinion. The political function of the new “public” was thus in accordance with rationality and equality, to freely debate all issues that concern the people’s interests, and thereby to arrive at just state policies. Habermas shows that although this “public” was universally inclusive in principle, it was in practice class-based, being restricted to those with landed property and education. But he does not find that this undermined its liberal function in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, for property and education were at that time also in principle achievable by all citizens. What does disrupt the functioning of the liberal “public” for Habermas is rather that expansion to include the masses as masses, which Schudson has also identified in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The scale of economic activities grew so large, Habermas argues, that private business organizations acquired functions and capacities at the level of state administration. At the same time, the rise of consumer mass media drew reading and writing practices that properly belonged in the private sphere, into increasingly ‘public’ domains. This intermingling leads, in his view, to a “refeudalization” of society under the auspices of a “pseudo-public” sphere. In the properly liberal “public,” privately formed and fed individuals came together in the free use of their reason. By contrast, the new kinds of group activity take place *within* the individual’s social reproduction and subject formation processes, thus determining her rationality rather than being determined by it. Once reading and writing are no longer autonomous activities but part of the capitalist production and consumption cycle, for instance, they can no longer either in practice or in principle constitute arenas of disinterested, rational debate.

Later theorists have further interrogated the way in which the category of “the public” functions in relation to liberal ideals. Foucault, for instance, points to the asymmetrical power relations that invariably undergird the deployment of distinctions such as public and private, rational and irrational. Michael Warner foregrounds the discursive constitution of multiple publics, against the notion that “the public” exists as a stable social body.<sup>176</sup> He argues that publics exist only in relation to the discourses that address them, and are instantiated only by the circulation of those discourses. As the dominant mode of participation in modern society, Warner considers discursive publics biased by a modern language ideology that constitutes the subject as a subject of rational-critical discourse. This excludes those for whom other dimensions of subjective being, such as the embodied, sensory, performative and creative-expressive, are more significant. For such communities, Warner suggests the concept of “counterpublics” – circulating communications that exist in tense and self-consciously subordinate relation to the dominant discursive publics, as the marginal but persistent possibility of their transformation.

Rather than imagine that liberal press terms simply describe the way the news media in liberal contexts works, therefore, it is more truthful to say that they index generative contradictions inherent in the idea of a liberal press. “Freedom” is the founding contradiction, insofar as it signifies liberalism’s attempt to base community life

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>176</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Zone Books, 2002. p. 123.

on the principle of every individual having a legitimate desire to act *against* community. “The public” is a notion that seeks to reconcile this radical personal freedom with values such as rationality and equality, which are necessary to make the collective self-government of the free a practical possibility. The notion of “objectivity” is then an attempt to save the entire ideational edifice from the 20<sup>th</sup> century experience of mass culture, which showed that “the public” was not at all rational, but impressionable and easily manipulated; and that those who wielded the most influence over public opinion were driven more by vested interests than by the idea of “freedom.”<sup>177</sup> If we can just ensure that the news provides “objective” information, then despite so many other factors working to the contrary, we can still believe the press system in some way helps enable citizens to make conscious and well-informed decisions about the conditions that affect them. In today’s liberal press theory, in other words, a value which is theoretically crucial for the whole system to be plausible is widely considered impossible to achieve. News practitioners and theorists have responded to this difficulty in very diverse ways.<sup>178</sup> Some defend “objectivity” as journalism’s essential ethic and call for better enforcement;<sup>179</sup> others suggest abandoning it as a hollow standard that actually hinders effective news-writing;<sup>180</sup> while still others attempt to reform and redefine it.<sup>181</sup> While the *Columbia Journalism Review* still exhorts news-producers to uphold standards of “objectivity,” the Society of Professional Journalists has opted to remove the word from its Code of Ethics.<sup>182</sup>

If this state of intellectual ferment has yet to yield a new solution to news-production, it has nevertheless generated many insightful critiques of the liberal press and of liberal politics more broadly. Encountering the contradictions inherent in “objectivity,” “freedom” and “the public” has provoked writers to consider alternative conceptions of freedom and governance, communication and subjectivity. Perhaps it would be good then, if liberalism could be brought to China. It would not provide any simple solution to the problem of representation, but it might enable people to engage rich and critical debates about it. Perhaps this intellectual ferment is a worthy end in itself. But the way that liberal press terms have been brought to China so far does not seem to lead in this direction. In the politically over-determined analyses of China’s media that academics write, in the pop-histories of America’s news media that Hong reads, and in the stark contrasts between the two that Lin draws, the unspoken half of each idea is left out and with this, all of their rich meanings vaporize. Liberal press terms cease to indicate irreducible tensions, and function instead to label particular approaches, styles or centers of

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<sup>177</sup> J. Herbert Altschull, *From Milton to McLuhan: The Ideas Behind American Journalism* (New York: Johns Hopkins University, 1990).

<sup>178</sup> Clifford G Christians, Theodore L Glasser, Denis McQuail, Kaarle Nordenstreng, and Robert A White. *Normative Theories of the Media: Journalism in Democratic Societies*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009 provides a comprehensive overview.

<sup>179</sup> E.g. Carrie Figdor, “Is Objective News Possible?” in Christopher Meyers ed. *Journalism Ethics: A Philosophical Approach*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. pp. 153-164.

<sup>180</sup> Sandra L. Borden, *Journalism as Practice: MacIntyre, Virtue Ethics and the Press*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited., 2007 suggests approaching journalism as a practice, focusing on other values such as knowledge, inquiry, discovery, originality and newness. p. 138.

<sup>181</sup> E.g. Stephen J.A. Ward, *The Invention of Journalism Ethics: The Path to Objectivity and Beyond*. Montreal and Kingston: Mc-Gill-Queen’s University Press, 2004.

<sup>182</sup> Mindich, p. 5.

journalism exemplary because superior to others. In this prescriptive, promotional form, they cease to be the tenuous achievements of Western civilization's unique and checkered past, and become instead the glowing symbols of a globally desired future. What animates them is no longer a sense of the deep contradictions that have fueled the history of the West, but a feeling that these terms represent a sort of global gold standard, a better form of life that others, like China, are still striving to know.<sup>183</sup>

For *The Times* staff, who were already convinced that they lived in a dark realm of *jianghu* struggle, which words merely floated above like so many pretty and false promises, this vacuous and unreal version of the liberal press terms fit right into the lexicon. They instantly became words to use in precisely the kind conversational or representational practice that presupposed a discrepancy between claims and actuality. They became tools and props one could do things with, rather than terms that conveyed meaning. Thus, *The Times* staff never used liberal press terms to explain what anything really meant or how anything really happened – but they did use them to pursue various agendas with. The way the journalists and editors used “objectivity” to indicate a style of reporting, rather than a functioning of the news system has already been discussed. In their discourse, the term symbolized the idea that truth naturally emerged when one did not write to propagandize or advertise. The journalists knew this was a naive idea, and thus treated it as a merely symbolic value. But precisely as such, did they find it a useful term for praising articles that seemed critical rather than sycophantic, and analytical rather than emotive. “Objectivity,” in other words, was a false claim but a useful word, a word they could use both to promote their post-Mao news ethics and to establish alliances with one another; for it was a symbol that rhetorically positioned both oneself and one's addressee on the side of progress and change, fighting for a just cause against the corrupt existing system.

The other liberal press terms functioned the same way. When an investigative news report exposed a corporate or government scandal, for instance, *The Times* journalists would surmise that an enemy of the company or government office in question must have leaked the information to the media, with the intention of destroying their rival's reputation. Although the newspaper responsible was thus understood to have been used as a weapon by one party against another in their private struggles of interest, it could nevertheless be praised as having served as “the public's monitor.” Or to take another example, when a bold newspaper runs an article in direct contravention of a government restriction order, the journalists would surmise that it was because someone at the newspaper had even higher political connections than the censors at the propaganda department did. Yet this did not stop the journalists from praising the article's publication as an instance of “press freedom.”

The version of the liberal terms that one finds both in academic analyses of China's media and in *The Times* journalists' usage, is thus one that flattens dense contradictions into flimsy and unrealistic notions. “Objectivity” here does not indicate the

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<sup>183</sup> This relates to current anthropological work on globalization, specifically, the way in which ideas, images and things become disembedded from the context of their origin and acquire new significance when they are reembedded in new cultural milieus. For example, see Aihwa Ong and Stephen Collier ed., *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics and Aesthetics as Anthropological Problems* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

irreducible subjectivity of all truth claims, but a naive notion of truth as the absence of bias. “Public” does not point to the exclusions by which any rational community must be constituted, but loosely refers to all people. And “freedom” does not connote the inescapable necessity of government, but suggests a utopian state of liberty. Such reductions in meaning are what the critical theorist Herbert Marcuse would have called a “unification of opposites.”<sup>184</sup> Though writing in the somewhat different context of Cold War America, Marcuse had discerned a similar tendency in political, popular and intellectual discourse for terms which had originally carried meaningful contradictions within them to become flattened into non-contradictory or “one-dimensional” words. Terms that bear their own opposites within them, he argued, bear within them the potential for critical thought; they bear the capacity for articulating a message that overthrows the givenness of given conditions. Marcuse explains this by way of the Platonic dialectic, in which the copula “is” carries within it an “is not,” and therein becomes an “ought to be.” In the context of Greek philosophy, the statement “Truth is universal,” for instance, expresses both the claim that Truth is *ideally* universal and the fact that Truth is *actually not* universal, for there are still among men, slaves whose lives must be subordinated to the toil for bodily subsistence, and the True life of free and independent thought is not available to them. Hence, what the statement effectively expresses is the conviction that Truth should be universal, and that the conditions which keep men in servitude should be abolished, for Truth to become in actuality what, as an idea, it is. “The categorical statement thus turns into a categorical *imperative*; it does not state a fact but the necessity to *bring about* a fact.”<sup>185</sup>

Marcuse found this critical and transformative capacity of language waning in America, where a system of politically administered capitalism was producing a consumeristic “mass culture” resistant to critique and transformation. By training people’s minds on an ever-expanding array of consumer pleasures and entertainments, Marcuse argued, this system kept people voluntarily locked in an endless back-and-forth between consumer pleasure, and the alienated work they have to do to afford it. This form of life did not forcibly repress intellectual freedom, but simply “reduce[d] the use-value of freedom; there is no reason to insist on self-determination if the administered life is the comfortable and even the ‘good’ life.”<sup>186</sup> Questioning the moral and philosophical grounds on which the system as a whole was based, or imagining that a qualitatively different and better system was possible, were not overtly prohibited by the state. Rather, they were shunned by the masses themselves, as pointless and irrelevant activities. Language, for the masses, was thus not a medium for thinking critically about the existing system but an instrument for pursuing values within it. In their usage, the internal contradictions that make words into critical, meaningful concepts get eliminated, such that:

...the concept tends to be absorbed by the word. The former has no other content than that designated by the word in the publicized and standardized usage, and the word is expected to have no other response than the publicized and standardized behavior (reaction). The word

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<sup>184</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1964. p. 49.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

becomes cliché and, as cliché, governs the speech or the writing; the communication thus precludes genuine development of meaning.”<sup>187</sup>

Marcuse argued that while on the other side of the Iron Curtain, Stalin and Mao were repressing freedom of thought by enforcing the language of Communism, in America, the same end was being achieved through a capitalistic mass culture’s “functionalization of language.”<sup>188</sup>

This language controls by reducing the linguistic forms and symbols of reflection, abstraction, development, contradiction; by substituting images for concepts. It denies or absorbs the transcendent vocabulary; it does not search for but establishes and imposes truth and falsehood. But this kind of discourse is not terroristic. It seems unwarranted to assume that the recipients believe, or are made to believe, what they are being told. The new touch of the magic-ritual language rather is that people don’t believe it, or don’t care, and yet act accordingly. One does not ‘believe’ the statement of an operational concept but it justifies itself in action – in getting the job done, in selling and buying, in refusal to listen to others, etc.<sup>189</sup>

This development deeply troubled Marcuse, because he was intellectually and spiritually committed to ideas of Truth, History and Humanity inherited from the Western philosophical tradition. He followed Plato in considering Truth the dialectical negation of the actual by the ideal; Hegel, in considering History this logical dialectic become a phenomenological process; and Marx, in considering Humanity the subject of this History, in and by which all people would become able to live True lives.<sup>190</sup> For Marcuse, “one-dimensional” discourse thus posed an existential threat to mankind. By disabling True reflection, or the mind’s transcendence of the given, it paralyzed the process of History. By paralyzing History, it prevented Humanity from becoming what it *is* – what it *ought to be*. The masses grew materially richer, Marcuse cried, but this richness, like their lives, was False. The same could well be said of *The Times* journalists’ world. It may have become materially richer, but Truth, History and Humanity – all the necessary notions for a meaningful life – were fast becoming impossible. As journalists in the *jianghu*, however, *The Times* writers were not fazed by such hang-ups. They saw clearly that liberal press terms were one-sided symbols – and they found them useful precisely as such. They found them useful not only for pursuing their own advantage, but also for promoting the anti-statist and pragmatically informative social values of their post-Mao news ethics. As symbols of the good and progressive, that is, liberal press terms were good for expressing dissatisfaction with the current state of China’s media, for criticizing the Party-state and expressing support for reform and social change. Even if they did not describe how the news media actually worked, they were useful for calling attention to any social improvement that a newspaper did manage to achieve, and for further promoting such efforts by making their significance explicit.

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>190</sup> “Logical truth becomes historical truth. The ontological tension between essence and appearance, between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ becomes historical tension, and the ‘inner negativity’ of the object world is understood as the work of the historical subject – man in his struggle with nature and society.” Ibid., p. 141.



Yet if one-dimensional liberal symbols thus enabled journalists to shine a brighter than real light on the progressive intentions and outcomes of their profession, these symbols also accentuated, by contrast, the darkness around their experience of how news-production really worked. Against the claim to “objectivity,” for instance, it was only more striking to Feng how journalists were invariably compelled to censor themselves – not only when their newspaper received a call from the propaganda office, or a sum of money from a company, but even in writing ordinary, run-of-the-mill news stories. This was because newspapers competed against one another to provide exclusive interviews and breaking stories. For this, they depended on having access to individuals who provided them with good leads, or who were themselves news-worthy interviewees. These were often government officials and higher level professionals such as lawyers and business executives, who granted interviews on account of their personal relation to someone at the newspaper. What this meant is that whatever news article came of the interview, it would have to be acceptable to the interviewee, or the relationship would be irrevocably betrayed and the precious news-resource lost. Often when Feng and I interviewed someone, the conversation would take on a life of its own, and reveal surprising facts on issues of general interest. Yet this information would often have to be left out of the article, either because it was told to us as a “privately spoken” confidence, or because when the draft was sent to the interviewee for his or her approval, all the revealing quotes were removed. Repeated experiences of this kind gave Feng a sense of being gagged behind the scenes of his own supposedly “objective” news production.

Similarly, the symbol of “the public” that newspapers were supposed to serve, cast a darker shadow on the way in which their executives single-mindedly oriented them towards the market. Experience showed *The Times* journalists that newspapers in China worked not by considering the general interests of the whole population, but by trying to create different news products that appealed to different reader-markets. “Only white collar elites have any interest in current affairs or political and economic developments,” Chen, the head of the Beijing office, had once explained to me. “Ordinary people with low income and education don’t care about anything that doesn’t immediately impact them. Why should they care about your big policies and trends that have nothing to do with their lives? Newspapers for them are just a source of leisure, something to flip through after dinner, to look at seedy crime stories and sports news while drinking their tea.” Many others had told me similar things about how China’s news market was becoming more fragmented, such that newspapers had to find different niche reader groups to cater to. Even as journalists spoke about serving “the public,” they were thus acutely aware of how newspapers did not aspire to neutrally inform or educate their readers in ‘the general interest,’ but quite the contrary, tried to identify and pander to particular social groups’ preferences and prejudices.

Finally, if “freedom” was the easiest term to deploy in criticisms of the Party-state or complaints about China’s overall condition, it was also a term that dissolved into an all but meaningless sound as soon as it was brought into any conversation about reality. “Newspapers are the *least* free!!” Tang had cried when I asked him about press freedom in China. “They have to depend on so many others to survive. They have to take shit from everybody – the corporations, the government, even the interviewees. You’re constantly having to beg someone for something!” He meant that as a business whose only assets were blank pages of publicity, the newspaper was entirely dependent for its

survival on others helping to fill those pages. It had power over no one; and had to offer itself to everyone as a service they might find useful – to companies that might want advertising space, to government departments that might want to publicize their official lines, to high-profile interviewees who might want to boost their public image, and even to ordinary interviewees who might want to get their side of the story told. In this sense, newspapers were not “free” so much as utterly caught at the nexuses of myriad different interests. “People criticize our newspaper for being controlled by their investors, but that’s just the way things go,” a senior editor at the reputable *21 CBH* said to me. “If it weren’t a mouthpiece for commercial interests, it’d be a mouthpiece for the Party-state. It’s as simple as that. There’s no such thing as so-called ‘press freedom.’ Neither in China, nor in the West.” “Americans always talk about ‘freedom’ but in actual fact they’re not really free either,” his colleague added, “There are very strict restrictions about what you can and can’t say there too. Could you print a denial of the Holocaust in the *New York Times*?”

This was what liberal press terms meant at *The Times*. They did not outline an ideal system that could replace the *jianghu* logic of society, and restore relations between representation and reality. They were just new tools to use in that same, endless struggle over interests in the dark. The journalists knew this struggle to be the very nature of human society. Having learnt the lesson of the Mao era, they knew as well as any sociologist that no values exist outside or above society’s interplay of interests such that they might regulate those interests without being influenced or corrupted by them. Just as communism was a set of principles that served to create and maintain a certain social hierarchy under Mao, so was liberalism an idea that benefited some people over others, while providing a justification for these discrepancies which it generated. The journalists attached no utopian faith to its terms. They simply saw that just as the communist language of official Party discourse was useful for extending officials’ wealth and power, the language of liberalism was useful for fighting against the officials’ monopoly and on behalf of ordinary people’s interests. Instead of furnishing a new ethic of news-writing, liberal press terms thus served as new cards in the old game of struggle. Like a second, or ‘counter’ discourse, it provided a fresh and progressive-sounding set of phrases to pit against old and Red-sounding ones.

One cannot call this instrumental approach to language wrong or bad. Marcuse would have condemned it because his attachment to a particular lineage in Western philosophy compelled him to find “one-dimensional” language practices productive of a “false” rationality. His Hegelian belief in the reality of negation, and his Marxist hope that the masses would become other than what they were, compelled Marcuse to find the functionalization of language denaturing and bad for the masses, even though it provided them with ever more of the material comforts, conveniences and pleasures that they thought they wanted. But this adherence to inherited ideas evidently backed Marcuse into the dead end position of having to be supremely undemocratic in the name of “true” democracy. Like many a Marxist intellectual, he found himself in the awkward position of self-appointed spokesperson for the masses, defining their interests over and against their own claims, and thus reproducing the logical structure of Stalin’s political dictatorship over the people of the USSR.

*The Times* writers had no interest in taking such a position. Firstly, they did not have the revolutionary goal of transforming China’s masses – quite the opposite, they

took the principled position of not trying to change their readers, and giving them with whatever information they wanted instead. Inspired by a post-Mao anti-Maoism, and drawing perhaps from traditional philosophies that did not espouse the modernist elevation of the masses, *The Times* journalists accepted with equanimity that the majority of ordinary people would always have their crass and materialistic desires. They argued that any effort to do something good for society had to begin by acknowledging, rather than deploring this fact. Through the three modes of post-Mao journalism they practiced, they themselves were trying to do precisely that. Secondly, *The Times* writers did not see consumer capitalism as being all that bad. Marcuse in 1950s America may have experienced capitalism as an obstruction to humanity's development, but for *The Times* staff, market economics came to post-Mao China with all the moral force of progress. Against the historical backdrop of widespread material scarcity, capitalism's productiveness was not easily dismissed as a "false" value. It measured real improvements to a great many people's basic living conditions. Thus while *The Times* journalists did not consider the system rational, they did consider the value it produced true. They accepted the idea, in other words, that a blatantly irrational form of social life had nevertheless turned out to be most truly productive of value. Crass commercialism, mind-numbing communication technologies, *jianghu* struggles over interests and jokes about China's bipolarity were all aspects of this life. They made words one-dimensional, but *The Times* staff knew how to use such words to do things in an irrational world.

In this sense, they were closer to Foucault's thinking than to Marcuse's. Rather than insisting on a rational expression of the whole of Humanity, History or Truth, they used words as weapons in a realm of representations conceived of as a realm of power struggle.<sup>191</sup> If the use-value of intellectual freedom had gone down in post-Mao China, they found that the use-value of one-dimensional words had gone up. This was why they cultivated that expectation of hypocrisy and absurdity which inspired Tang's conversation, Hong's joke and Lin's concepts. Their determination to always see through representations to the real interests behind them, their insistence on interpreting all events through the *jianghu*'s cruel logic, the way they disavowed any ideal that sounded too lofty or abstract, and diligently restricted their journalistic goals to limited, practical interventions – these were all exercises in cultivating that same disposition. And it was not only out of self-interest that they disciplined themselves into it. It was also because the new form of social life had brought so many concrete improvements to so many people's lives, that whatever its shortcomings – however irrational it was – it was still 'necessary.' For *The Times* writers, it was ultimately this holistic sensibility more than any individualistic consideration that made adopting an instrumental approach to language feel like the morally right thing to do. Through their stories, jokes and advice, the lessons that they were both continuously teaching me and themselves relearning were lessons in the value of one-dimensionality, the new relationship between words and life that had to be accepted because of all the concrete benefits it brought to people.

### **To Succeed or Secede**

The only problem with the new approach was that it made meaning impossible. Treating words as tools to be used in practical struggles meant renouncing the possibility

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<sup>191</sup> Foucault, *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*.

of words bearing any meaning besides struggle. This left one with nothing to write for. Even the concrete gains that might be achieved by the practical approach of post-Mao journalism, ultimately felt hollow – for what was the difference between one set of interests and another, when society was nothing but their endless struggle? And who was to say that the social improvements journalism achieved were not merely a claim that journalists made, when in fact they were only pursuing their own interests? In the absence of meaning, nothing protected an author’s authority from conversion into the logic of the *jianghu*. Despite one’s best intentions, journalism became a mercenary and manipulative writing practice, a job which the sooner one quit the better. What was a writer then to do? When Marcuse encountered what he called “the insanity” of the one-dimensional world, his faith in Humanity led him to believe it was a False and mutilated reality concealing behind it a True and rational one, which it was his responsibility as a thinker to uncover.

Under the repressive conditions in which men think and live, thought – any mode of thinking which is not confined to pragmatic orientation within the status quo – can recognize the facts and respond to the facts only by “going behind” them. Experience takes place before a curtain which conceals and, if the world is the appearance of something behind the curtain of immediate experience, then, in Hegel’s terms, it is we ourselves who are behind the curtain... This intellectual dissolution and even subversion of the given facts is the historical task of philosophy and the philosophic dimension.<sup>192</sup>

But for we who have embraced one-dimensionality – as practically efficacious and hence preferable to revolutionary pipedreams, as productive of true value albeit in an irrational world – for us, there is no philosophical curtain. Only two banks of a river, one in the dark and one in the light, a discrepancy set so starkly before us that belief and imagination falter before the attempt to bridge it. Some at *The Times* responded by trying to exploit the difference, some became nonsensically performative, some only laughed coldly. But everyone had to take a position somewhere. What exactly this decision involved was crystallized, for me, by two diametrically opposed figures.

The first was a journalist in her early twenties, who wrote for the state-run Xinhua News Agency. Miss Bao had topped her entire province in the university entrance examinations, excelled in her studies at Beijing University and been recruited by the news agency upon graduating. “I’m always eager to talk to outsiders about Xinhua because they have so many mistaken impressions of it,” she launched immediately into a speech the first time we met. “Everyone assumes it’s just there to speak for the government, but writing articles to fulfill government requests is just a only part of our work. There’s really a lot more to it. A big part of the work is writing reports for internal circulation (*neican*). This means gathering information for government offices of various levels – identifying problems, suggesting responses, later determining whether they’ve been resolved or not, and so on. These reports are never made public. They say that what Xinhua publishes is not news, that Xinhua doesn’t actually report new information but fabricates ‘news’ to convey whatever moral or message the government wants to convey. But it’s not true, Xinhua is always rushing to report new events before the Propaganda

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<sup>192</sup> Marcuse, p. 185.

Department issues a restriction order. Xinhua *hates* the Propaganda Department. Technically speaking, Xinhua and the Propaganda Department are at the same level, but the Propaganda Department oversees the entire news industry, so Xinhua has no choice but to obey. We do manage to publish a lot of negative news too though. Look at 2003, for example, that was an especially eventful year – there was the Sun Zhigang incident, SARS, the sentencing to death of Liu Yong – Xinhua wrote excellent reports on all these events. Of course a lot of bribery goes on at Xinhua too,” Miss Bao continued chirpily, as though merely noting an obvious and trivial fact, “You can imagine how common the opportunities for it are. The influence of Xinhua’s media platform is too powerful for anyone to mess with. You know that newspapers in China are not allowed to reprint one another’s articles, right? The only articles they can reprint are those from Xinhua. While a normal newspaper article only appears once, a Xinhua article can appear simultaneously in over two hundred newspapers across China. So of course everywhere you go, as soon as they find out you’re from Xinhua, they don’t treat you just like any ordinary journalist. They do everything they can to satisfy you. Any sum of ‘mouth-sealing fees’ is worth it, because negative publicity at that scale would be the end of them. And of course the journalists don’t refuse, because everyone needs a sense of achievement, and there are only two sources for this sense: society’s recognition and money. Society doesn’t give journalists much recognition, so they have to get it from money!”

I was stunned by how indifferently she rattled off these contradictory claims. “The salary of a Xinhua journalist is not high,” she went on in response to my asking, “Though it’s hard to say exactly how much it is, because there’re a lot of other forms of compensation besides cash income, like healthcare, transport expenses, travel expenses, hotel rooms exclusively reserved for you and so on. And it’s a very stable job. That’s why for good students graduating from top universities, entering the state media is a very attractive prospect. Most of them would opt to work here if they had the chance, because there’s less pressure than in the commercial media, where if you’d get fired if you couldn’t finish an article on time. The reason I chose to join Xinhua is because in China, there are two possible means to bring about change: one is from the bottom up, and the other is from the top down. Trying to change things from the bottom up means making an issue public, trying to generate enough public opinion to pressure those in charge to change things. The problem with this is that it often fails, because those in charge can claim that they have fixed the problem but as you know, what is claimed and what is actually the case in China can be very, very different. Trying to change things from the top down means collecting information and reporting a problem directly to the government board responsible for it, so that they can make the necessary change. Of course they don’t always do so – it may not be in the interests of the official in charge to fix the situation. He may not want to bother, or he may actually be benefitting from the problem. So there’s no guarantee you can achieve change this way. But I think everyone with hopes about changing the world eventually comes to realize that what you need in order to change things is not knowledge, but power. I used to think that what one needed was a complete theory, a whole system worked out in thought and then realized in practice. But now I’ve come to realize that what you really need is not quite power, but the recognition of those *with* power. Especially in China, changes happen quietly. The more publicity there is around an issue, the less likely anything’s going to be done about

it, because no one in power wants to be seen as caving in to pressure. But when on one's paying attention, then they'll act, and something will have changed before anyone even realizes it."

I found this an astute analysis, but was unclear how she thought her work as a journalist related to this pursuit of social change. She thought little of the efficacy of either the top-down or the bottom-up approach, yet did not seem troubled by any doubts about whether her own writing was therefore worthwhile or not. "If you're interested in the social function of journalism, you should read Siebert, Peterson and Schram's *Four Theories of the Press*," she suggested helpfully, as though the conversation had shifted to an entirely unrelated topic. "That and a book called *Marxist News Theory*.<sup>193</sup> I think what it says is exactly right, that the press should be the eyes, ears, throat and mouth of the people. What does that mean? It means finding out what's going on and reporting that back to the people so they can know. That's the work that journalism is doing. For Xinhua it's difficult because of all the political considerations it has to balance. Like on the one hand, it has to speak for those up top, the government, and on the other hand it has to speak for those down below, the people. 'The closer you get to the bottom level of society, the closer you'll be to the truth,' that's a quote from Fan Jingyi, the former editor-in-chief of *People's Daily* who's since retired into a headship at Xinhua. You should read his collected essays too." I said that I was worried 'negative news' might start to function as merely a sort of entertainment in China, something people read for a little vicarious release and then forgot about. "Oh yes, vicarious release is a major function of the news media too!" she nodded energetically. "It's very important for there to be an avenue for releasing pressure, especially because the growing income disparity in China is making the gap between rich and poor more and more starkly obvious, so that society is becoming more unstable. The news media is like the small steam hole in a high-pressure cooker."

To me this seemed an abrupt confession to a totally different conception of the news media than she had hitherto outlined. It made journalism an instrument of manipulative rule, rather than of social change. But Miss Bao did not seem to perceive a contradiction. I asked if she agreed with the idea that in the media one had to have two 'sets,' one official and one actual one. "I believe that in China, every person has to have two sets, not only those who work in media," she replied with the same, matter-of-fact ease. In terms of her future plans, she said she expected to spend her career at Xinhua. "I get a strong sense of social achievement from being a journalist." I could not help but wonder which 'set' this statement belonged to. "The thing I like best," she went on, "Is that you get to know a lot of things that other people don't get to know." I said that many journalists felt suffocated by this sense of knowing a truth but not being able to say it, like an open-eyed blind man, as others had described the feeling to me. "Oh well, you can always find some way of saying it later, like on the Internet or by publishing a book," she shrugged, "Like me, right now I'm collecting all the restriction orders I receive from the Propaganda Department. One day when I finally get forced out of China for some reason, I'll compile them all into a book and publish it, then I'll be instantly famous!" she laughed.

Words for Miss Bao seemed light as air. The most troubling truths and the most transparent lies both fell from her lips in the same easy prattle. One got the feeling she

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<sup>193</sup>林枫著《马克思主义新闻观－中国视角的系统阐述》新华出版社，2005。

could say anything that any situation demanded. She braved both the unreality of representation and the reality of self-interest with such confidence that she could twirl every argument and its opposite together, and never land anywhere between. She could claim the advantage of every position, and suffer the drawbacks of none. This was an ideal disposition for climbing up in the *jianghu*. I had no doubt she would be very successful in life and would probably make – or at least claim to make – great contributions to society. I only wondered if she would ever say something she really meant, or really mean something that she said.

The other figure was a retired editor from a minor Party newspaper, a man now in his early sixties, living off his pension in a small apartment in Beijing. Mr. Huang had come of age during the Cultural Revolution. His first job, which he worked from 1971 to 1979, was in the Tianjin Railroad Department, shoveling coal to feed the fire which heated water for the railroad workers to bathe in. He had signed up for this job to avoid being sent down to the countryside as an ‘educated youth,’ and now remembers the time as one in which he read hungrily, everything he could get his hands on. While the other workers spent their spare time playing cards and drinking, Mr. Huang recalls avidly studying every newspaper and book that became available. As a result of this, he has read everything that Lu Xun ever wrote, several times over. “I think I could be said to be at least half a Lu Xun expert,” he told me with a glint of pride.

Towards the late 1970s, Mr. Huang began composing his own short stories and submitting them by mail to the local newspaper. “In those days, it wasn’t just anyone who could write for a newspaper, the way it is now. Only people who had had a lot of schooling and a certain political standing were qualified.” Mr. Huang felt it was an honor to have his stories accepted, and began writing more regularly. When policy changes in the 1980s allowed non-civil servants to work at newspapers, Mr. Huang gradually moved over. Rather than officially changing his work status, however, the Railroad Department registered him as being on extended medical leave. It was tacitly accepted that he would henceforth work at the one office, while remaining employed by the other.

“Newspapers back then were very well respected,” Mr. Huang said. “Not because people respected the writing itself more or anything, but because newspapers were so powerful. With one article they could change the entire country’s impression of you. They used that power to make money. Advertising contracts, red packets... sometimes the companies would simply write their own articles and give them to the journalist, who would put his name on it and run it as a ‘Special Report.’ They never labeled them ‘Advertisements.’ Some newspapers were so brazen that they contracted out whole pages – 500,000 a year, and every issue you could fill the page with whatever you wanted. For newspaper executives, being put in charge of a particular region was equivalent to being given a piece of territory to collect rent from,” he recounted with equanimity. Like others, he considered *Southern Weekend* one of the few beacons of light to have emerged out of that darkness. “It was the work culture they managed to develop that made them good,” he explained. “When Jiang Yiping was editor-in-chief, she never spouted off her own opinions at editorial meetings. She listened to what the journalists and editors had to say, she let them work in their own ways, and when a decision had to be made, she made it. Once, one of her journalists was working on an exposé that she was only half interested in. She didn’t think he had much material to work with, but she let him keep working on it anyways. Then one day she got a phone call – the boss of the company in trouble had

used his personal connections to get in touch with an ex-classmate of hers. This ex-classmate had called her and said, 'Please, this is a really important matter, whatever you do, you have to help out.' She asked her classmate, 'Is it really true then? Okay, I'll see what I can do.' Then she phoned up the journalist and told him, 'I wasn't sure this was a worthwhile story, initially, but I've just received a phone call from the boss's friend asking me please not to publish it. So now I can confidently tell you, go ahead and write it up, we'll run it in the next issue.'" Mr. Huang concluded the story with an emphatically satisfied nod, "With an editor-in-chief like that, how could the newspaper not be great?"

One achievement of his own, which he was proud to recount, involved a Taiwanese instant noodle company whose product was widely consumed in China. The company had just begun exporting to Russia as well, but this business was abruptly terminated when Russian authorities tested the product and found that it exceeded their limit on certain chemical ingredients. Mr. Huang wanted to run the story. The head of the instant noodle company flew in from Taiwan personally to try to sweet-talk and bribe him out of it, but he would not be dissuaded. A few days later, an official from the Ministry of Commerce showed up at the newspaper office and warned them absolutely not to run the story, or whoever ran it would be fired. "The editor-in-chief was so scared, he almost pissed his pants," Mr. Huang laughed, "He said to me, 'Please, Old Huang, don't do the story, consider your own future...' But I wouldn't listen. I was already in my fifties by then, I knew I wasn't going to become a huge success or make a great fortune from my job. And I didn't have any hopes for the future except to live quietly, reading my books and taking evening strolls. So I didn't feel like I had to give up on my principles, just to hold on to the job." He distributed the article among a group of friends, who were all newspaper editors of a similar turn of mind. They all ran the story, and Mr. Huang's superiors were furious. One of them tried to fire him but found out that it could not easily be done because officially, Mr. Huang was still an employee of the Railroad Department. In the end, they allowed him to keep writing, but under a pen name.

"Wasn't I tough enough?" Mr. Huang beamed. "My boss was under pressure too, he had to deal with the matter somehow, but he didn't want to push me too hard either. He was a politician, see, back then newspapermen were also cultivated people (*wenren*). They sometimes had to do ugly things, but they knew in their conscience it was wrong, and they had a bottom line that they wouldn't stoop below. Now when people talk about the dark side of the news sector, about bribery and in-fighting and all that, they do it with a smiling face, as though it were all perfectly normal. They don't have a bottom line anymore, they can do anything that any situation requires of them. That's why the whole society is more turbulent (*fuzao*) now. And instead of stabilizing things, the media serves to magnify the turbulence even more."

Responding to this negative comparison of the present to the past, I asked if he did not think the difference was partly because commercialization compelled people to struggle harder to secure their own interests now. "No," he said thoughtfully, "It's not that there were fewer struggles over interest in the Mao years. If anything, the struggles were greater back then because everything was decided by whoever was in charge – where you went to school, where you worked, even where you lived. But you know, all the struggling and in-fighting that you've seen, I mean, that goes on in the news sector, that's just the simplest level. Just the elementary school level of struggle. What goes on in other sectors, like politics, *that* could be called university level." Captivated by his



tone of gravity, I confessed that I had trouble even imagining – what kind of person made it to the top of an institution like that? My question, however, was taken as a statement. “Yes, precisely,” he replied serenely. He did not seem to have, or to need any counterbalance to the dark portrait he painted. He said that when Hu Jintao stepped into power in the early 2000s, he like many others had thought that great changes were on the horizon. But that did not happen. “Hu is a man who has been thoroughly brainwashed by the Party,” Mr. Huang said, “He has an engineer’s education, not a literary or a historical one. Such people only ever follow the line that’s already been drawn for them. Jiang Zemin was the same, coming from a technical background. It’s pointless to hope for anything different from such people.”

Where then was one to look for hope? I sighed, and lamented how bleak everything seemed. Mr. Huang and his wife, who had sat silently with us through the whole conversation, laughed. “Don’t be influenced by him,” she said gently. But silence seemed to be his only response to my unhappiness. “Can you read classical Chinese?” he asked, after a few moments. I confessed that I was never able to make sense of it. “The way to understand it is to memorize it,” he warmed into the conversation. “Then slowly can you begin to see where the punctuation should go. You can start with *Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji)*. Do you know what Lu Xun wrote about *Shiji*? Lu Xun was an extremely critical man, you know. In his eyes, only a few Chinese works were of any value at all. But of *Shiji* he wrote, ‘The historian’s swan song, A rhythmless *Li Sao*.’ Do you know *Li Sao*? *Li Sao* is a famous poem by Qu Yuan. Do you know Qu Yuan? That’s how highly Lu Xun regarded *Shiji*. It’s a truly remarkable work. It brings history to life. Late at night when everything’s quiet, you can pick it up and a whole different world will materialize, just as though it were all happening right before your eyes.” His own eyes widened as he spoke, and the immensity of the experience he described left me awestruck. I was captivated by his sense of a world that lived inside the text, more real than the material and social world around him. All the struggles, failings and ironies that absorbed me, Mr. Huang took for granted as mere backdrop, the dross of life against which the truly worthwhile experiences of *reading* took place. Mr. Huang had always lived more in the books than in society. Although he strongly disapproved of many features and trends in the system of social life, he did not try to transform it or devote himself to improving things. Instead, he had held on to a stable, state-department job, and for the most part functioned to perpetuate the status quo by keeping an un-noteworthy Party newspaper running. Only inwardly did he flee up into the heights of humanity’s literary genius, leaving the barbarians to their ways. “The more our material world develops, the more our cultural lives degenerate,” Mr. Huang reflected mildly. “Who has time to read such things now? Even you, such a fine doctoral student, and you haven’t even read *Shiji*. There are *too* many gaps in your reading,” he winced emphatically.

Of the two, Miss Bao would certainly be considered the more socially valuable writer. Her use of language was clever and efficacious. She recognized the importance of power for social change in China, and was sensitive to its temperament and to its crafty relationship with rhetoric. With this disposition, she could climb high up society’s hierarchy, and turn the political and economic resources she would then be able to command towards achieving concrete social improvements. In sum, she had the practical and strategic relationship to language that a writer now needed not only to secure her own interests in life but also to be useful to others, to be a contributing member of society. Mr.

Huang's language, on the other hand, smelled of the old, suspect fetishization of text over the realities of practical life. Losing himself in literature he held so high, he selfishly ignored everything and everyone around him. Socially speaking, he would have to be judged passive to the point of cowardice and even self-servingly hypocritical. His whole newspaper career had been spent perpetuating a system he claimed to despise. While he maintained a cultivated disdain for contemporary life intellectually, materially, he lived contentedly off a state pension and reaped the benefits of China's economic development. Whereas Miss Bao's forthright instrumentality made her an asset to others as well as to herself in the struggles over interest that constitute social life, Mr. Huang's literary preoccupations only made him affect to read and write from a position above the game, while ignoring the fact that he too had played and done relatively well for himself in it.

Seen from the other side, however, Miss Bao's was the bankrupt approach while Mr. Huang's still retained the possibility of meaning. Holding text up above life as he did, Mr. Huang kept the relations between words intact and prior to all other considerations. Insofar as meaning is a relation between words, this alone makes a meaningful life possible. For Miss Bao, meanwhile, what mattered were the relations between words and things, what a word could do in the world. This practical efficacy itself dissolved the relations between words, making it impossible for them to mean. This was the choice that *The Times* writers faced. Either one treated words as props, and life as the ongoing interplay of interests; or one treated words as the substance of texts that were more real than anything else, and lived life as though it were a mere footnote to this. Either one engaged in the *jianghu*'s struggles and wrote to benefit both oneself and others in that society; or one sank alone to a position of social defeat and worthlessness, to write for the sake of meaning. The significant differences among people arose not from their politics, their income levels or their morals, but from where they stood between these two alternatives.

## Conclusion

The question that *The Times* confronts us with is not about the difference between China and the West, selfishness and public spirit, cynicism and hope, or liberalism and state control. It is about the difference between two approaches to language – one which makes it a practical tool for bringing about various improvements in life, the other which holds it above life as the textual medium of a higher reality. In China's modern history, language in this second form has been encountered and rejected as the instrument of oppressive tradition. The modernist and Maoist projects of mass education, mass literacy and mass media were all attempts to liberate the people's lives from the power of classical Chinese texts. In today's China, this goal has been achieved but in a different way than the liberators envisioned. Writing is no longer a domain of the governing elite or the bearer of ideas that rule over ordinary people; it has become a tool that ordinary people use to make their own lives better. But this change has not transformed China into the picture of modern, rational prosperity. China's society is still rife with hierarchy, abuse and injustice. The difference is that even writing is no longer considered capable of raising people above their particular positions and interests, and uniting them in a collective effort to solve these problems. It is no longer held to be any exception to the logic of the struggle of interests; it is no longer revered as pedagogical or transformative – writing about and for society no longer has any social force. One might say that instead of literacy changing the masses, the masses changed literacy. The only medium in which society could reason about itself has been transformed into an instrument of society's irrationality.

Journalists in China are clearly not the only ones who face this problem. The particularities of China's political system aside, the technological, commercial and ideological conditions which *The Times* writers face are those of a contemporary global milieu. Academics in America too grapple with the difficulty of meaning in today's Internet-mediated 'virtual reality,' with the hollowness of modern ideals when set against the concrete effects of capitalist commerce and with the overarching impotence of social critique. The only difference between *The Times* writers and us is that they see our common situation more clearly. Firstly, because they take a holistic view of society, they perceive the essential cruelty that commercialism injects into social relations. They see that pursuing success means struggling not merely to climb 'up' but to climb over others; and, not having come through an intellectual tradition of liberal democracy, they do not imagine formal systems of law solving the problems that thereby arise. They do not imagine a form of rationality emerging and eliminating the part that sentiment, greed or ambition play in shaping a community. The *jianghu* stories of society that they tell are, in this sense, expressions not of greater indifference but of greater sensitivity to the moral dimension of commercial culture. Secondly, because Chinese news-writing has historically been conceived of as writing to transform society for the better, *The Times* writers feel more acutely the triviality of writing that does not attempt to do so. Despite their borrowing of liberal press terms, they do not have faith in the liberal idea of the news media evenly and reliably benefiting society by neutrally distributing information. And without this assumption to make recourse to for a justification of their practice, they face their profit-mindedness, their cheap sensationalism, their complicity in censorship – in sum, the ambiguity of their own social worth – directly.

Whereas academics in America can still hold on to the vestiges of modernity's beliefs and values, *The Times* writers confront the contemporary without this ideological buffer. With them one thus plumbs the depths of the problem of contemporary life. One realizes that solutions proffered by political principles are attractive sounding but no solution to everyday questions of meaning, which exist at the level of text, that is, in the relations between words. What is at stake today is the possibility of working at this level, the possibility of textual authority, which alone keeps words from becoming mere instruments of a vaguely self-serving performativity and life from becoming nothing but an endless interplay of interests. The choice that *The Times* writers face, in other words, also faces us. If one follows Miss Bao, words can become agile weapons to deploy in the struggle of certain interests against certain others. Social change may not happen soon or systematically, there may not be a revolution to satisfy the imagination's thirst for a grand, historical change, but concrete improvements can be achieved. The future becomes cluttered with possible opportunities, with causes to promote and strategies to adopt for the benefit of both oneself and selected others. If one follows Mr. Huang, on the other hand, one gives up on writing about and for society. One fails utterly in the responsibility of the journalist to expose, inform and advocate. One produces no social value and earns no respectable place in society, for one's writing is only a form of self-cultivation or indulgence that benefits no one. Yet as the last of these modern demands and values fall away, a whole textual universe is revealed. Relations between words become real again and while as writers we sink into uselessness, an older question resurfaces: What should we read?

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