
We have long been waiting for this volume. It presents some of the work of the research group “Structure and Development of the Chinese Public Sphere” initiated by Rudolf Wagner at the University of Heidelberg in the early 1990s. The mere fact that the group existed for about a decade and has produced quite a number of publications shows the enormous energy and powerful vision that stood behind it. Another outcome of this project is also worth mentioning: The Sinological Library in Heidelberg has now a superb collection of late Qing and Republican period periodicals (mostly in microfilm format and reprint editions). Not all of the work presented here is new, but most of it has until now only been available in German (Gentz/Vittinghoff, Kim) and Chinese (Wagner’s own contribution). What we get is a genuinely new perspective on the late Qing press, based on original research that includes a close reading of the newspapers themselves, as well as extensive investigations in libraries, museums, and archives. The five authors’ viewpoints and conclusions are not without contradictions; however, all contributors agree on the pivotal role of late Qing Shanghai as the centre of Chinese modernity and a core ingredient in the transformation of the Chinese public sphere. In the late nineteenth century Shanghai, “the foreign-run exclave on Chinese soil” (p. 4), became China’s hub of communication (local, national, and international), its media capital, and the site of its encounter with Western modernity. Here all the ambiguities this modernity brought about had to be acted out. This collection sheds light on some aspects of this process.

As the editor himself starts his introduction with a reference to Jürgen Habermas’s 1962 publication The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (Engl. tr., 1989), we might assume that Wagner’s early reading of Habermas served as an inspiration for his later project. However, he goes far beyond the Habermasian framework by leaving the European enlightenment agenda behind and redefining the concept of the “public sphere” as “the space in which state and society as well as different segments of society articulate their interests and opinions within culturally and historically defined rules of rationality and propriety. The existence of a public sphere is a key constituent of a social order whose members do not resort to violence in each instance when conflict occurs” (p. 3). While this definition is still based on the state-society dichotomy, it perceives it as the two extreme ends of a large spectrum rather than as two opposing forces. The crucial innovation here is that the state itself becomes a legitimate actor in the public sphere, rather than the natural opponent of actors in a public sphere that belongs to society and excludes the state. This is a necessary adjustment, as in the case of China the state not only appears to be one among many actors in the public sphere, but rather the dominating one. Other important and hitherto neglected aspects of the structure of this newly perceived public sphere are its
transnational character, its spatial and social heterogeneity (p. 4), and also that it is best perceived in the plural. Having established this broad concept, the focus is narrowed down tremendously by moving toward the concept of a global public sphere and the ways the Shanghai press relates to it. This means that the contributions in this volume focus essentially on only one rather elite segment among the many “different segments of society” involved in the articulation of interests and opinions, to wit, those who produce and consume newspapers. Although the chapters deal with rather different topics, together they form a coherent story that ends exactly at the juncture when the elite readership of the late nineteenth-century newspapers is about to become the mass reading public of the early twentieth century.

In the background of the concept of the global public still looms Habermas’s idealizing image of rationally operating actors sharing a common value system. While this kind of normative imaginary is a valid point of departure for an empirical study, it might not be an adequate description of a historical reality that is characterized by conflictual as well as friendly encounters. One example of this idealizing view might be seen in the idea of the population of Shanghai as having “adopted a joint identity as Shanghairen/Shanghaiander that was based on their operating in the same urban space and mode, not their ethnic, linguistic, or cultural background” (p. 4). It is certainly true that in the interaction between the Chinese and foreign populations of Shanghai “a new structure for the public sphere arose that drew on both traditions” (p. 4), and many moved comfortably in both. But one wonders where all the friction that this process necessarily also included went. However, the idea of the global public is immediately compelling, as is the concept of a “dual public sphere” briefly mentioned in a footnote (p. 10). The grand framework is established, but not yet sufficiently developed, it seems, in Wagner’s short introduction. We will have to wait for his monograph on Ernest Major (1841-1908), the founder of the Shenbao 申報 (1872-1949), Shanghai’s best-known newspaper, for further elaboration.¹

For the time being, the contributions assembled here provide insights into the late-nineteenth-century Chinese world that are both valuable and very different from what we usually get. This is not about the missionary taking advantage of the success of imperialism, not about the miserable literatus turning to a career in a Western-owned publishing house as a last resort, and not about the patriotic reformer rising like a phoenix in defence of the nation. Instead they show how problematic all these categories are if they have to be applied to the much more complex actual historical record. By now we might think this is stating the obvious, but even recent publications repeat the stereotypical view first established by Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873-1929) and then reproduced by Ge Gongzhen 戈公振 (1890-1935), the author of one of the most influential histories of the Chinese press, first published in 1926, who maintained that only after the Sino-Japanese

¹ This monograph-length study is announced here as “Ernest Major: the Life and Times of a Cultural Broker” (p. 160).