

Small Words, Weighty Matters:
Gossip, Knowledge and Libel in Early Republican China, 1916-1928

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ABSTRACT

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In the years following the death of the autocratic ruler Yuan Shikai (1859-1916), the flow of gossip surrounding political leaders in China's urban spheres revealed an open, disorderly yet robust arena full of competing voices, agendas, and manipulations. My dissertation examines gossip as both a new body of public political knowledge and a means of popular participation in this politically-fragmented and transitional era. On the one hand, a wide spectrum of Chinese society engaged with this body of political knowledge, which fostered an uncontrolled playful citizenship in China's urban spaces. On the other hand, this new civic participation prompted the fledgling Republican state to curb the dissemination of information through censorship, legal avenues and political propaganda. I argue that political gossip played a constructive role in forming a participatory political culture, in developing state mechanisms to discipline popular knowledge, and in shaping legal categories of defamation. As opposed to other studies that analyze the formation of Chinese citizenship in the process of nation-building, my project contextualizes popular political participation in the Republican era within a broader shift in political culture that was increasingly shaped by the entertainment media. Lower-class information traders and a commoner audience dominated the gossip economy by actively producing and consuming narratives and opinions, without being restricted by state education and elite activism. My research thus offers a new bottom-up perspective in the study of Republican Chinese political culture.

Chapter 1 examines the commercialization of "trivial information" by focusing on the rise of a commercially driven and professionalized group of gossipmongers across varying social-

economic strata in the late 1910s and the early 1920s. The expansion of the community affected both the practice and mindset of gossipmongers in the industry. Chapter 2 shows how the entertainment interplayed with political significance in the early Republican gossip publications to involve more commoner readers in both knowledge production and consumption in this gossip economy. This unique mode challenged conventional top-down knowledge transmission and the sense of exclusivity in the field of knowledge production. Chapter 3 illuminates state efforts at developing a new censorship system and tactics of moral persuasion for re-building knowledge and establishing moral authority in the late 1910s. I show that the central government was a functional authority in the cultural realm during the period of chaotic and fragmentation. Chapter 4 turns to the relationship between the mass media and defamation law. It focuses on a 1919 case in which the Beijing government sued the *Republican Daily* for insulting the President. Although the state attempted to use the legal instrument to fix a boundary between playful and serious political discussion, the Press' commercial pursuit and insistence on autonomy gradually transformed this means of taming into a mechanism of publicity. The last chapter analyzes the politics of visibility from the perspective of political leaders who drew on the discursive power of gossip by examining Jiang Jieshi's coordinated effort to control publicity surrounding his romantic life and wedding ceremony in 1927. In this new form of official political communication, a striking tension persisted between the attempts to use the form and dissemination power of gossip as an effective technique of social influence and the unruly commercial adaptation of media narratives.

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INTRODUCTION

Wind means folksongs and education.
Folksongs move (the ruler) and education civilizes (the people).
The ruler civilizes his subjects by means of Airs (folk songs).
Subjects remonstrate against their ruler by means of Airs (folk songs).¹

The classic annotation on a stanza in the *Book of Songs* (詩經) concisely describes an ideal dialogical relationship between a ruler and his subjects as mediated by folksongs. From the viewpoint of literati in ancient China, officials transmitted the voices of the common people to the court by gathering political satires, and in turn, they edited them in the interpretative framework of orthodox Confucianism to educate the people. This Confucian vision of the feedback loop performs the function of remonstrance and education, but was hardly realized in imperial China. There was a disconnect between the state and non-literati population, and the technological disadvantage hindered the formation of efficient political communication. However, to some extent, the idea of having folk songs mediate between the state and society captures the role of gossip in modern China. In the context of intensified commercial print media and ideas of popular education, gossip in the warlord era (1916-1928) formed an integrating force that brought together government, political leaders, cultural elites, information experts and audiences from multiple social sectors. This connectedness and the instant interactions were incomparable with previous communication facilitated by the imperial bureaucratic channels and elite activities. And, the dynamics of these players were entirely different from these of the Confucian utopia.

¹ Mao Heng, Zheng Xuan, Kong Yingda, "Guan zi," [Preface to Guan Zi], *Maoshi zhengyi* [The Correct Meaning of the Mao Tradition of the Book of Poetry] Juan 1, 1.

In the decade that immediately followed the autocratic rule of Yuan Shikai (袁世凱, 1859-1916), a gossip economy emerged in Shanghai and its surrounding area. Behind-the-scenes political operations among warlords, romantic affairs between presidents and female entertainers, their leisure activities, private possessions, personal grudges and other everyday tidbits about leading political figures became popular subjects for newspapers, tabloid papers and book collections. Driven by commercial profitability, gossipy accounts of political leaders transformed from unofficial political and historical knowledge for a literati community in the imperial era to easy-to-digest cultural products of political knowledge easily available in the print marketplace. Threatened by wide-spread gossip and rumor, the nascent Republican state turned to administrative and legal instruments, such as the newly-established legal code on defamation, to discipline the political information sphere and the behaviors of political discussion. Seeing the discursive power of gossip in the mass media, the Nationalist Party and political leaders also sought to use the public's interest in the private lives of political elites for their own ends.

Gossiping about the personal behaviors of political leaders became a defining feature of the politics in the decade after Yuan's reign. In their on-going rivalry with serious journalism and literary works, publishers and editors categorized these products as market-oriented fun-seeking documentations with political importance. Written gossip about political leaders in these years served as both a body of popular political knowledge and a means of political engagement. Early Republican gossipy products helped generate a popular interest in the national politics and facilitated the airing of political voices from the non-elite population. I address and shed light on these print products in trivial news columns, tabloids and scandal books collectively as gossip referring to their surface characteristics of triviality, primary (if not exclusive) focus on private

lives and concentration on frivolity. Analytically, I take these seemingly trivial accounts as a form of knowledge and public discussion that challenged the established category of news by intentionally blurring the boundaries between the entertainment and politics.

By examining gossip regarding the leading political figures in the period from 1916 to 1928, my dissertation reveals a participatory political culture which was increasingly blended with and formed by entertainment media as well as the development of various control mechanisms formulated by the state and leaders in response to what was emerging to be an unruly political force in the early Republican China. Both sides of the story renew our understanding of Chinese Republicanism in the late 1910s and 1920s which has usually been associated with state efforts and elite activism in past scholarship.² I argue that gossip allowed non-elite people to play a role in forming public opinions, negotiating the boundary of public discussion with the state, defining the meaning of a legal category and transforming the publicity strategies of the powerful. These different aspects, as will be explored in each chapter of my dissertation, attest to the openness, tolerance and discipline of the Chinese Republican political culture.

Gossip in the Early Republic and its History

In the early Republican years, the explicit categorization and inclusion of gossip about political figures in a variety of print products reflected the increasing recognition of gossip as a source of political knowledge. In these market-driven and entertainment-centered commodities, it is increasingly difficult to make a meaningful distinction between obtaining political information

² For example, David Strand, *An Unfinished Republic: Leading by Word and Deed in Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). See more discussions in the following sections.

and gossiping about one's private life as entertainment. The first gossip column "*Xinwen xie*" (News dust, 1916-1920) in a Shanghai-based commercial daily *China Times* (時事新報), had illustrated the unsettling degree to which gossip and political news overlapped. Gossip items in the "*Xinwen xie*" column often closely corresponded with the front-page political news. In 1916, it exposed how Yuan Shikai's family stole electrical equipment from the imperial palace when the major political news criticized Yuan's restoration scheme. In 1917, the column editor created another featured sub-column titled "*fupisheng zhong zhi xianhua*" (casual talks in the royalist campaign) to supplement front-page headlines about the militarist Zhang Xun's royalist campaign. An example of this is the story of Zhang Xun persuading the young Manchu emperor to agree to his restoration scheme by offering less homework, which ridicules Zhang's lofty claims of restoring monarchism. In 1919, this column was even occasionally located on pages dedicated to domestic political news, which signaled to the dissolving boundary between them. Beyond this column, scandal books suggested political meanings for scandals even more explicitly. Editors categorized accounts about ministers' concubines and private banquets as government-related information, describing them as worthy of textbook inclusion. Moreover, the late 1920s witnessed a process of intensified politicization of gossip, as the Nationalist Party and its leader strategically turned these frivolous discussions into vehicles of political propaganda. Minute details about leaders' lives proved to be a way of presenting and reading further into the world of high politics. The emergence and popularity of gossip in print confirmed the private lives of political leaders as an integral part of the political knowledge and a legitimate topic of public discussion.

To capture the market-oriented nature of these writings, I refer to this body as popular knowledge, which relates to the capitalist structure consumed by a vaguely-delineated, non-elite yet lettered audience. As argued by Susan Phillips, gossip has the ability to transcend class, religion,

and moral boundaries to reach different social groups.³ Private details made complicated, and highbrow events made relatable to everyone's living experiences, attracted those who might have originally shown little interest in political news in large dailies. Envisioning an inclusive readership of their products, publishers and editors generally addressed readers as "ordinary educated people" (*yiban shiren*) or "ordinary young people."(*yiban qingnian*)⁴ With evidence showing that the circulation of gossip collections usually was many times wider than other types of popular publications, it is difficult to gauge exact social configuration of readers in the late 1910s and early 1920s. Arguably, due to the relatively high price of these products, most consumers were still confined within the boundaries of being middle class: modestly educated and financially comfortable.⁵

The expanding community of producers also involved a variety of information suppliers, ranging from prostitutes and detectives to journalists and novel writers, all of whom had some manner of connection to the political circles in the capital city. But many collections of scandalous stories aimed to attract lower social sectors, including the urban poor consisting of more sensational stories in coarse language.⁶ Furthermore, the fluidity of gossip allowed the spread of

³ Susan Phillips, *Transforming Talk: The Problem with Gossip in Late Medieval England* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007).

⁴ Fan Shoukang, "Heimu zhi heimu," [The scandal of scandal collections] *Xi Xiu*, no. 2 (1918): 1-3.

⁵ Past scholarship has demonstrated a growing middle-class readership of major commercial newspapers and in early Republican Shanghai. For example, Tsai Weiping's study on *Shenbao's* advertisements since the late 1910s shows the everyday life of the Chinese urban middle-class readers. Tsai's approach would shed light on the readership of tabloid of the same period whose advertisements (of cosmetics, cigars and entertainment venues) were similar to those in major commercial dailies. See Tsai Weiping, *Reading Shenbao: Nationalism, Consumerism and Individuality in China, 1919-1937* (London: Palgrave Macmilland, 2010). The gossip industry did not directly reach the working class until the late 1920s. News reports show that in 1928 workers and semi-literate readers gained information from tabloid papers and such. No. Jianbao/8526, The Nationalist Party Historical Archives.

⁶ See more discussions in Chapter 2.

information to illiterate commoners in public spaces like tea houses. We may argue that the core of this gossip community consisted of literate and economically sufficient urban residents, including students, vocational men, resourceful social players such as detectives, along with higher-ranking prostitutes, journalists, and other wealthier casual classes. This community was far more inclusive and heterogeneous than Wen-hsin Yeh's definition of the middle mercantile class in Shanghai. It did not necessarily share any imagined middle-class lifestyle.⁷

The widened engagement, the magnified political dimension, and market-orientation, distinguished gossip in the early Republican publications from literati gossip in the past. China has a long history of literati interests in accounts of political maneuvering, romantic affairs, and other strange occurrences of the political elite.⁸ In the late imperial period (roughly 1368-1911), *biji* (notebook) memoirs, unofficial histories, current-event novels, and *dibao* (capital gazetteers) issued by private press houses, all served to disseminate gossip about leading scholar-officials. The community of gossip production and consumption expanded from a restricted group of scholar-officials in the medieval period to a literati of lower status like local degree-holders.⁹

⁷ Yeh's notion of moral and material respectability of the middle class in Shanghai talks to managerial elites and white-collar salarymen. See Wen-Hsin Yeh, *Shanghai Splendor: Economic Sentiments and the Making of Modern China, 1843-1949* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007). Mao drew on the discourse of "middle society" and argues for a consensus popular imagination of middle-class culture in popular publications. Peijie Mao, "The Cultural Imaginary of 'Middle Society' in Early Republican Shanghai," *Modern China*, April 13, 2018.

<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0097700418766827>

⁸ These stories could be found in the form of tales in the ninth century, literati memoirs in the 12th century, and long-narrative romance and unofficial histories in the sixteenth century.

⁹ When commercial printing spread in the Song and Yuan times, gossip about political figures were still produced and consumed in a restricted scholar-official circle. See Paul Jakov Smith, "Impressions of the Song-Yuan-Ming Transition: The Evidence from Biji Memoirs" In Paul J. Smith and Richard Von Glahn, eds., *The Song-Yuan-Ming Transition in Chinese History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center: Distributed by Harvard University Press, 2003), 71-110. More information about the expansion of print industry and the activities of lower class literati in the late imperial period, See Robert Hegel, *Reading Illustrated Fiction in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University, 1998). Timothy Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Miu Yonghe, *Mingdai chuban shigao* [Print History of Ming] (Nanjing: Jiangsu

Alongside the development of print technology and market, literati gossip gradually increased contemporaneous significance besides their conventional role of being a medium of history or a source of reading pleasure.¹⁰ Paul Vierthaler's study of unofficial texts, about the powerful court eunuch Wei Zhongxian in the late Ming, argues for the role of this body of knowledge in constructing historical imagination.¹¹ Han Li has noted the growing political significance associated with late Ming current-event novels. But he suggests that the dichotomy between serious novels about political figures is the medium of political opinion, through which scholar-officials participated in the political debates and other gossipy novels that only emphasized entertaining.¹² Paize Keulamans recently argued that gossipy accounts, in popular histories and novels about the fall of Ming, should be seen as "news reports" that mediated the communication between a ruler and his subjects in the seventeenth century as a type of political knowledge, which the Dutch integrated into their global knowledge.¹³ However, it is not until the twentieth century that Chinese literati affirmed the political significance of gossip as they saw the value of this

renmin chubanshe, 2000). Paul August Vierthaler, "Quasi-History and Public Knowledge: A Social History of Late Ming and Early Qing Unofficial Historical Narratives" (Ph.D., Yale University, 2014). Cynthia Joanne Brokaw, *Commerce in Culture: The Sibao Book Trade in the Qing and Republican Periods* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007).

¹⁰ Literati gossip in written and print forms in Tang and Song dynasties usually served as a medium of history to express scholar's private views. Sarah Allen, *Shifting Stories: History, Gossip, and Lore in Narratives from Tang Dynasty China* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Asia Center, 2014), 70-118. Paul Jakob Smith, "Impressions of the Song-Yuan-Ming Transition: The Evidence from Biji Memoirs" In Paul J. Smith and Richard Von Glahn, eds., *The Song-Yuan-Ming Transition in Chinese History* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), 71-110.

¹¹ Paul August Vierthaler, "Quasi-History and Public Knowledge: A Social History of Late Ming and Early Qing Unofficial Historical Narratives" (PhD dissertation, Yale University, 2014).

¹² Han Li, "History, Fiction, and Public Opinion: Writings on Mao Wenlong in the Early Seventeenth Century," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, no. 1 (March 2014): 69–88.

¹³ Paize Keulemans, "Tales of an Open World: The Fall of the Ming Dynasty as Dutch Tragedy, Chinese Gossip, and Global News," *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China* 9, no. 2 (April 2015): 190–234.

information in carrying out political reform.

With a strong reformist goal to publicize popular sovereignty, the late Qing vernacular newspapers started to incorporate imperial gossip into the operation of modern news making. These easy-to-read, cheap, and compact vernacular newspapers, emerging in the last decade of the Qing Dynasty, aimed to convey ideas of popular sovereignty to readers with limited reading abilities and to further broaden public participation beyond the literati circle, although their actual influence was still confined to a fairly elite audience.¹⁴ Vernacular newspapers thus exhibited a new conceptualization of political education and entertainment via popular products unlike the late imperial view of popular literature as moral instruction.¹⁵ In the column of "capital news" of these newspapers, the emperor and empress's daily routines were juxtaposed with neighborhood gossip,

¹⁴ Literati-journalists who were devoted to vernacular newspapers included future May Fourth leading intellectuals such as Hu Shi and Chen Duxiu, as well as active scandal book editors and tabloid writers in the late 1910s including Wang Dungen and Zhang Danfu. Chen Duxiu wrote for *Anhui Suhua Bao* [Anhui Vernacular Paper]. Wang Dungen, Zhang Danfu, and Hu Shi was the chief editor of *Jingye Xunbao* [Dedication Ten-day Report] in Shanghai. They made efforts to raise racial identity, patriotic sentiments, scientific and technological knowledge. To list some representative Chinese-language studies on vernacular newspapers: Li Hsiao-t'i, *Qingmo de xiacen shehui qimeng yundong* [The Late Qing Enlightenment Movement for the lower Society] (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo, 1998). Hu Quanzhang, *Qingmo minchu baihua baokan yanjiu* [A Study on Vernacular Periodicals in the late Qing and early Republican China] (Beijing: Shehuikexue chubanshe, 2011). For more information about the spread of popular sovereignty and the confined definition of popular sovereignty within the imperial system around and after the 1898 reform, see Joan Judge, *Print and Politics: "Shibao" and the Culture of Reform in Late Qing China* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1996). Seungjoo Yoon, "Literati-journalists of the *Chinese Progress* (Shiwu bao) in discord, 1896-1989," in Rebecca E. Karl and Peter Gue Zarrow, eds., *Rethinking the 1898 Reform Period: Political and Cultural Change in Late Qing China* (Harvard Univ Asia Center, 2002), 48-76. A recent PhD dissertation also argues for the role played by official gazetteers in nurturing the public interest in political affairs in the late Qing. Emily Carr Mokros, "Communication, Empire, and Authority in the Qing Gazette" (PhD dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 2016). As reflected by the authorship and readership of these newspapers, their views of "public" or "popular" still confined with a narrow literati circle, which the vernacular newspapers took efforts to move beyond.

¹⁵ McLaren argues for a discourse of popular literature as moral instruction in the seventeenth century China. See Anne E. McLaren, "Constructing new reading publics in late Ming China," in *Printing and Book Culture in Late Imperial China*, ed. Cynthia Joanne Brokaw and Kai-wing Chow (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 152-183.

criminal incidents, and other strange events in the city. Such juxtaposition challenged the existing political and social hierarchy, sharply contrasting the rigorous taxonomy found in earlier hearsay collections that respectfully grouped and ordered entries according to the political position of the featured protagonists.¹⁶ However, vernacular newspapers continued to emphasize the allegedly apolitical function of gossipy news by delineating the line between the social and the political. In 1913, a leading vernacular newspaper, the *Group Strength Newspaper* (群強報), established the binary of political and social news: “the section on “*yaowen*” (major news) replete with reports on government operations, was meant to cultivate people’s consciousness of political participation. In contrast, the section on “*suowen*” (trivial news), included hearsay concerning miscellaneous social affairs, serving to attract more readers.”¹⁷ The paper identified the government as the exclusive arena for politics and separated entertainment from politics.

Although it bore similarity to the name “*suowen*”, the emergence of the News Dust column in 1916 marked a turning point where newspapers no longer saw “trivial” information as necessarily apolitical. Gossip about political figures in the warlord era was characterized by the ever-widening reach of information to diverse social sectors, highly commercialized production and consumption of news, and the entanglement of contemporary politics and entertainment. The flourishing of the gossip industry and its growing social influence were closely related to the particular historical setting of the warlord period.

¹⁶ Take the late Ming book *Gossip Collected from the Field in the Wanli Era* for example. The first two volumes discuss the emperors and empire-wide political events, followed by the accounts of the inner chamber of the palace, princes and regional governors, princesses, civil officials and so on. Shen Defu, *Wanli yehuobian* [Gossip Collected from the field in Wanli era] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1997).

¹⁷ “Lun bao,” [A Discussion on Newspaper] *Qun Qiang Bao*, February 28, 1913.

The Shanghai Gossip Economy in a Period of Transition and Disorder

Compared to other realms of cultural production, the commercialization of political gossip and its impact upon popular knowledge were more sensitive to political changes. The gossip industry thrived in the period between Yuan Shikai's stifling press policy, and the Nationalist installment of strict pre-publication news censorship in 1929. In this period, which is often addressed as the warlord era, the new Republic of China continued to include powerful personal and institutional elements of the old regime, particularly the political and military conflicts among various cliques that fragmented the country. Meanwhile, the introduction of western republicanism brought to China the view of politics as public matters, putting greater emphasis on equality.¹⁸ The print media rapidly developed in tandem with other forms of civic engagement that put the newly imported republicanism into practice. The circumstances of political disintegration, an open political culture, and media development conditioned the boom of China's gossip industry.

After Yuan Shikai died, the Beijing government devolved from a powerful political center to a nominal central government. Not only did the local military governors disobey Beijing, but the central government also suffered from constant power shifts amongst different military cliques. On one hand, political competition overwhelmed the pursuit of establishing social order: The Beijing government abolished tight regulations declared during the reign of Yuan to rally social support, new official institutions that aimed to establish a new order were under development and in transition.¹⁹ On the other hand, regional warlords and the power relations among them radically

¹⁸ A group of scholars in Hong Kong built up a database to study Chinese intellectual history from 1830 to 1925. They found the term "Gonghe" (Republicanism) had frequently appeared since 1905. They further argue that Chinese intellectuals laid stress on politics as public affair, public morals, patriotism and equality. Guantao Jin, Qingfe Liu, and Lap-wai Lam, "From 'Republicanism' to 'Democracy': China's Selective Adoption and Reconstruction of Modern Western Political Concepts (1840-1924)," *History of Political Thought* 26, no. 3 (2005): 468–501.

¹⁹ Continuing the late Qing reforms, this decade was crucial in the establishment of many administrative,

challenged the old political order along with the career path of the political elites. In the warlord era, diverse personalities, odd behaviors and the anti-intellectual pathways to the power of political elites also provided fodder to the burgeoning business of privacy revelation that valued the humorous and the bizarre. Minimal political control and snowballing public attention to the chaotic power struggles and political personalities grounded the rising gossip industry.

With the fall of the imperial state, the first two decades of the twentieth century were also characterized by unprecedented openness and informality. The ideas of popular sovereignty and the widespread practice of political engagement in the early Republic ousted the late Qing court-set agenda of administrative renovation and broadened literati political participation.²⁰ In the 1910s, the May Fourth intellectuals lifted the banner of western democracy and aroused nationalist sentiments in response to the nation's diplomatic and domestic frustrations. Civic engagement as a political ideal was diffused to an array of social groups through public speeches, print media, and school education programs.²¹ In practice, people participated in the boycott of the national product movement or national day ceremonies to express their patriotic sentiments.²² Workers and

educational, and judicial institutions. For information of new school system, see Tze-Ki Hon and Robert Joseph Culp, eds., *The Politics of Historical Production in Late Qing and Republican China* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2007), 19-108. Xu Xiaoqun examines the establishment of the modern court system in her book Xiaoqun Xu, *Trial of Modernity: Judicial Reform in Early Twentieth-Century China, 1901-1937* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2008).

²⁰ Rebecca E. Karl and Peter Zarrow, eds., *Rethinking the 1898 Reform Period: Political and Cultural Change in Late Qing China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

²¹ David Strand, *An Unfinished Republic: Leading by Word and Deed in Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). Robert Joseph Culp, *Articulating Citizenship: Civic Education and Student Politics in Southeastern China, 1912-1940* (Cambridge, MA: Distributed by Harvard University Press, 2007).

²² Karl Gerth, *China Made: Consumer Culture and the Creation of the Nation* (Cambridge: Distributed by Harvard University Press, 2003). Henrietta Harrison, *The Making of the Republican Citizen: Political Ceremonies and Symbols in China, 1911-1929* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

students entered the political arena and articulated their demands through public protests.²³ Most protests were organized through informal connections in an absence of order. The politicized society and its demand of public expression provided context for, and interacted with, new trends in the realm of popular cultural production.

In this robust openness, the powerful news media in Shanghai precipitated the formation of a gossip economy. The presence of many gossip publications, which disguised themselves as Shanghai-based publishing houses, attested to the market recognition of Shanghai's centrality in the gossip industry.²⁴ Shanghai was the information and cultural center of Republican China, owing to the relatively free press environment of the foreign settlements under the protection of treaty port extraterritoriality. The press, taking full advantage of its unique location at the intersection of news flow from both home and abroad with the presence of headquarters of leading Chinese and foreign wire services, flourished in this highly commercialized urban setting.²⁵ A large body of literature on the print media in Shanghai has demonstrated the industrialization of print enabled by western machinery, mature commercial writing, and increasingly professional journalism since the Christian missionaries introduced modern journalism and technology in the nineteenth century.²⁶ Various publications, including women's journal emerging in the 1910s,

²³ Fabio Lanza, *Behind the Gate: Inventing Students in Beijing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). Elizabeth J. Perry, *Challenging the Mandate of Heaven: Social Protest and State Power in China* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2002).

²⁴ Government investigation found that some popular books were published, printed, and distributed in Beijing, but pretended to be printed in Shanghai. See *Tongsu jiaoyu yanjiuhui disici baogaoshu* [The fourth working report of the Popular Education Research Society] (Beijing: Jinhua chuban gongsi, 1919), 21.

²⁵ For more information about the development of the telegraph networks and postal services in China, see Winseck, Dwayne R., and Robert M. Pike. *Communication and Empire: Media, Markets, and Globalization, 1860-1930* (Duke University Press Books, 2007), Chapter 4.

²⁶ Christopher A. Reed, *Gutenberg in Shanghai: Chinese Print Capitalism, 1876-1937* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004). Xiaoqun Xu, *Chinese Professionals and the Republican State: The Rise of Professional*

served as a device for accessing the possibility of integrating multiple social segments into larger political projects.²⁷ In particular, western-style newspapers introduced the category of “news” as the new convention of organizing information. This brought about public attention to current affairs, an epistemological shift toward factuality, and the press’s articulation of public opinion.²⁸

The entertainment publishing also benefited from the growing market, and plenty of commercial writers suggested new commercial and political directions to the news media. The business of selling pleasure grew out of an existing literati culture of play that was informing a new urban lifestyle since the late Qing.²⁹ Moreover, studies demonstrate that in this seemingly flippant world, the spirit of anti-establishment and an impudent attitude toward authority dwelled. Accordingly, Wang showcases how the late Qing literati criticized officials in the form of funny talks, while Rea argues that Republican intellectuals re-discovered the joke in the 1920s as a tool of deriding and satirizing political arenas.³⁰ The early Republican tabloid and small-scale

Associations in Shanghai, 1912-1937 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Barbara Mittler, *A Newspaper for China?: Power, Identity, and Change in Shanghai’s News Media, 1872-1912* (Cambridge, Mass: Distributed by Harvard University Press, 2004).

²⁷ Joan Judge, *Republican Lens: Gender, Visuality, and Experience in the Early Chinese Periodical Press* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015).

²⁸ Barbara Mittler, *A Newspaper for China?: Power, Identity, and Change in Shanghai’s News Media, 1872-1912* (Cambridge, Mass: Distributed by Harvard University Press, 2004); Rudolf G. Wagner, ed., *Joining the Global Public: Word, Image, and City in Early Chinese Newspapers, 1870-1910* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007). Andrea Janku, “The Uses of Genres in the Chinese Press,” in *From Woodblocks to the Internet: Chinese Publishing and Print Culture in Transition, circa 1800 to 2008*, ed. Cynthia Joanne Brokaw and Christopher A. Reed (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2010), 111-158.

²⁹ Catherine Vance Yeh, *Shanghai Love: Courtesans, Intellectuals, and Entertainment Culture, 1850-1910* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006). Andrea S. Goldman, *Opera and the City: The Politics of Culture in Beijing, 1770-1900* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2012); Joshua Goldstein, *Drama Kings: Players and Publics in the Re-Creation of Peking Opera, 1870-1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Di Wang, *The Teahouse: Small Business, Everyday Culture, and Public Politics in Chengdu, 1900-1950* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2008).

³⁰ Christopher G. Rea, *The Age of Irreverence: A New History of Laughter in China* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015); Juan Wang, *Merry Laughter and Angry Curses: The Shanghai*

publishing companies channeled energies of a wider array of social groups beyond literati and intellectuals to include journalists, novelists, prostitutes, detectives, and officials. Envisioning a larger market, they incorporated the politically newsworthy into the popular pursuit of pleasure. As a result, it opened up new possibilities of political publicity. Therefore, a close analysis of gossip in early Republican Shanghai will show how, despite a long tradition of gossiping about public figures in Chinese history, this new array of social groups took advantage of unprecedented political and institutional spaces to pursue their interests.

Publicity and the Popular Shift in China's Republicanism

The continuous scholarly interest in early Republican political culture has advanced our understanding of republicanism and political activism in different forms. Most works revealed the persistence of elite leadership in cultivating citizenry and hammering out the meanings of republicanism. Culp argues that elite activists incorporated a coherent concept of national community and political participation into middle school curriculum and extracurricular activities of self-government associations.³¹ Strand locates the civic life of the early Republic in political leaders' face-to-face public speeches while observing face-to-face communication as an indicator of people's liberation from hierarchical social orders.³² In her study of people's daily lives and political rituals, Harrison astutely observes that people heavily relied on the state, against which they protested or resisted for the inspiration and resources to formulate their actions.³³ Scholars

Tabloid Press, 1897-1911 (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2012).

³¹ Robert Joseph Culp, *Articulating Citizenship: Civic Education and Student Politics in Southeastern China, 1912-1940* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

³² David Strand, *An Unfinished Republic: Leading by Word and Deed in Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 6.

³³ Henrietta Harrison, *The Making of the Republican Citizen: Political Ceremonies and Symbols in China,*

tend to emphasize the state and the frameworks and practices of the elite in terms of Chinese Republicanism, which often envisioned the mass of ordinary people as the objects of education and transformation.

By studying the gossip production and consumption, this dissertation captures the vital role of non-elite players in pushing forward a more radical popular shift in the political culture.

Empowered by the rapidly growing gossip industry, commercial writers, publishers and even ordinary chatterers replaced intellectuals and reformists in the position of knowledge producers. For commercial reasons, editors who drew from and adapted raw materials from detectives, prostitutes or ordinary readers, willingly kept grassroots tastes and popular beliefs in their gossip publications. Consequently, clusters of fragmented yet amusing stories about national and regional political leaders linked national politics with individual everyday communication. These clusters abandoned the supercilious educational tone associated with traditionally elite genres, entrusting ordinary people's cognitive and moral capabilities, and reconfiguring power relations among the people, the elites, and the state. Through gossip about affairs, such as President Li Yuanhong's romance with opera singers, and regional warlord Zhang Zongchang's bizarre family banquet, both the educated middle class and illiterate idle talkers could exercise agency in questioning or confirming the trustworthiness of politicians and militarists attacking the truthfulness of official messages; thus influencing public opinion and even the behavior of public figures. The industry thereby significantly lowered the social and cultural barrier to enter the public discussion, promoting multi-directional, lateral communications on an everyday basis. In this fashion, Republican value and practice, such as the right of free expression and popular engagement, became more popular among commoners.

1911-1929 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

The literature on gossip has expanded its definition from a private oral activity limited among intimate groups to a new understanding of written gossip as public communication via print media. Accordingly, scholars have expanded their exploration of gossip's function from shaping social value, facilitating social bonding, forming group identity, to generating discursive power.³⁴ Tebbutt's study on the social function of gossip in the working class shows this earlier focus on communication in private spaces and intimate ties.³⁵ Earlier interest in gossipy stories as a political medium, represented by Robert Darnton, scrutinized the political messages and production of stories about the King under the old regime adhering to a strong sense of secrecy.³⁶ Shifting the focus away from a literary underground, Nicole Parsons credits print texts about the Queen's pregnancy and sexual relationships with public political effects in 18th century England.³⁷ She argues that in the negotiation between secrecy and publicity, gossip gave rise to the emergence of the public sphere.³⁸ Republican Chinese entertainment media also attached political meanings to

³⁴ Anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists and historians have explored the role of gossip in a wide variety of cultures. To list a few, Beersma, B., and Van Kleef, G. A., "How the grapevine keeps you in line: Gossip increases contributions to the group," *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 2(2011): 642– 649; Nico Besnier, *Gossip and Everyday Production of Politics*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009.

³⁵ Melanie Tebbutt, *Women's Talk?: A Social History of "Gossip" in Working Class Neighborhoods, 1880-1960*. (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 1995).

³⁶ Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982). Pursuing his previous work, Darnton's following books focus on the political and commercial ecology of the Grub-street the center of this underground literature. See Robert Darnton, *The Devil in the Holy Water or the Art of Slander from Louis XIV to Napoleon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

³⁷ Nicola Parsons, *Reading Gossip in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

³⁸ Bellany did a comprehensive state of the field before 2007. His article surveys the previous argument on the political media such as scandalous poem operating within an early modern literary underground and emerging public sphere. See Alastair Bellany, "Railing Rhymes Revisited: Libels, Scandals, and Early Stuart Politics," *History Compass* 5, no. 4 (June 1, 2007): 1136–79.

the social lives of public figures and their everyday indulgence, making these tidbits public matters and communal concern. Given the presence of players from a wider range of social and political sectors, the leading role played by entertainment media, and the coexistence of old imperial tradition and new political ideas, gossip in early Republican China manifested the dual-function of mediating between the powerful and various social sectors. It also established a new relationship between the private and the public. It changed the practices and implications of publicity by blending entertainment with politics. For instance, when an array of non-elite social actors started giving political meaning to the publicity of political leaders' private lives, the leaders themselves had a common understanding to formulate their own strategies of using privacy as a form of political publicity a decade later.

A study of the early Republican gossip industry allows us to trace the historical formation of sensationalized entertainment media as a legitimate ground for publicity. Contrary to Habermas's description about the degeneration of the public sphere, the public arena opened up by the gossip industry resonated with the irrational urban publics in Farge and Lean's cases. Habermas's German model of the public sphere defines publicity as a process of consensus formation, in which critical discussion purified opinions full of self-interests into rational public opinion, thereby influencing the exercise of power. He condemns the changing concept of publicity from this process of opinion making, to "staged and manipulative publicity" without any critical discussion.³⁹ Arguing against Habermas' emphasis on the bourgeois rational criticism, Farge's study on various rumors circulating among lower-class Parisians in the 18th century, argues for the existence of irrational and fragmented public arena where undereducated ordinary people made

³⁹ Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 208.

their own judgment.⁴⁰ Lean's examination of the trial of a revengeful 1930s murder case in China, brought historical inquiry into China's mass media era. She further raised the importance of the sentiment for public participation and demonstrated how the Confucian moral authority legitimized the public opinion, which supported violent revenge and refuted the rule of penal law.⁴¹ Accordingly, this dissertation focuses on the irrational public of an earlier period in China along with publicity as a form of political communication bolstered by commercial forces and constituted by a multitude of fragmented views.

The process of publicity involving gossip communication allowed a complex of elements including reason, emotion, desire and imagination to interplay and coexist. In the 1930s Shi Jianqiao case discussed by Lean, public emotion was legitimized by the authority of filial piety, a moral concern that appealed to the majority as a solid reason for extraordinary treatment of leniency for the female assassin. But the expanded gossip community did not forge a collective view to endorse certain moral authority. Nor did it display neutralized moral views commonly found in late Qing opera plays, as revealed by Goldman.⁴² When the entertainment media and people's political voices displayed a mutually reliant relationship, the process of making gossipy accounts became a living — and often random — the interplay of intuitive judgments and emotional charges, unlikely to result in any coherent and consensual opinion. Nonetheless, these lighthearted and disjointed acts of publicity challenged the elite and official authorities. As a result, gossip collections indiscriminately recorded a multitude of views, including anti-corruption

⁴⁰ Arlette Farge, *Dire et mal dire l'opinion publique au XVIII siècle*, trans. Chen Mingye (Shanghai: Wenhui chubanshe, 2018).

⁴¹ Eugenia Lean, *Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

⁴² Andrea S. Goldman, *Opera and the City: The Politics of Culture in Beijing, 1770-1900* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2012).

criticism, the envy for a leader's amorous experience, mockery of awkward behaviors and the pursuit of pure sensational pleasure.

The prosperous gossip industry certainly did not result in any permanent institutional manifestation and had little impact upon the formation of the democratic structure that organized public debate and political election. The commercial and cultural forces behind the gossip production did not have the capacity to retain their independence in the face of a strong political power and its patronage in the late 1920s. According to intellectuals, and the government that stressed on national identity and serious political discussion, this mixture of entertainment and politics constituted as an obstacle to the cultivation of Chinese citizenship. Intellectuals and educators warned against the danger of such market-oriented trivialization of political occurrences distorting the picture of national politics. They were also worried about the fragmented and amusing messages averting public attention from major national and political issues. The intellectual denouncement, the state's suppression of scandalous accounts, and official instructions on where to find political information, all reflected the persistent rivalry between producers of self-described serious political knowledge and those of politically-related popular knowledge. This rivalry did not change until the late 1920s when the Nationalists attempted to mend the distracting effect of gossip. They introduced more rational thinking in terms of national political interest in the public discussion of a political figure's private life.

Varied Control Mechanisms and an Early Republican State Revisited

The unprecedented political openness and vigorous engagement fueled the state's attempt to control the range and practice of public discussion. With the establishment of a new state apparatus for information regulation including the police, censorship system, and propaganda

bureau, the early Republican state surveillance became far more effective than the dual-system of imperial memorials and secret reports that gathered information for the central government of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911).⁴³ But very little research has addressed the control of information flow in the years before the rise of the Nationalist Party in 1927. Studies examining the early growth of the modern Chinese state focus on the Nationalist state's use of top-down mechanisms of information control and manipulation including propaganda and censorship regulation.⁴⁴ They demonstrate that, under the rule of the Nationalists, information control was not only a means to secure centralization but also crucial to the ideological unification of a disciplined social body.⁴⁵ Historical narratives of the growing state penetration into societies tend to skip the warlord period. The second half of my dissertation looks into information policy and strategies of the young state from 1916 to 1927 and shows that the warlord conflicts did not interrupt the disciplinary tendencies. While arguing against the earlier misconception of China merely having a nominal center during the warlord era, I also shed light on various ways that the early Republican government sought to build a Republican polity.

The central government—also known as the Beiyang government (1912-1928) because it was dominated by the militarists originated from the Beiyang Army—had to cope with many problems in their attempts to discipline unruly public discussion. The boundaries of state were vague in late imperial China because of the absence of a coherent civil society, the court's

⁴³ Silus Wu, *Communications and Imperial Control in China: Evolution of the Palace Memorial System, 1693-1735* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970). Philip Kuhn, *Soulstealers: The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

⁴⁴ John Fitzgerald, *Awakening China: Politics, Culture, and Class in the Nationalist Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University, 1996). Michel Hockx, *Questions of Style: Literary Societies and Literary Journals in Modern China 1911-1937* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

⁴⁵ Micheal Tsin, *Nation, Governance and Modernization in China Canton* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999).

limited control over local bureaucracy, and the mediating roles played by the gentry class.⁴⁶ The shape and exercise of the state authority became even more complicated in the politically fragmented early Republican period. Powerful militarists, senior officials, and the bureaucratic body of different levels under the control of various powers all competed to present themselves as a force of state authority. There was also fluidity of power because of the constant shifting of alliance among the multiple military and political cliques. This fluid situation made the central government relatively weak but at the same time more flexible and able to experiment with various techniques of governance and to wield power from different coalitions. The fledgling state also had to handle two unprecedented problems related to regulating information and knowledge production. The first one was related to the issue of the popular sovereignty that emerged from its claim to being a Republican polity. After overthrowing Yuan Shikai's notorious Monarchy Restoration plan, the new Republican central government under the leadership of Anhui clique militarist Duan Qirui denounced Yuan's stifling press policy and announced their support of the freedom of expression. The second major difficulty was the presence of extraterritoriality that legally prevented Chinese authorities from interfering in the affairs of the foreign settlements, where most publishers were registered.

⁴⁶ Many scholarly works discuss the negotiations and conflicts between the court and provincial authorities. For example, Philip A. Kuhn, *Soulstealers: The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1990). Jeffrey Snyder-Reinke, *Dry Spells: State Rainmaking and Local Governance in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2009). Kuhn's another book also reveals the court's reliance on local gentry and their militia, see Philip A. Kuhn, *Rebellion and Its Enemies in Late Imperial China; Militarization and Social Structure, 1796-1864* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1980). Philip Huang suggest a third realm between the Chinese state and society. See Philip C. C. Huang, "'Public Sphere'/'Civil Society' in China?: The Third Realm between State and Society," *Modern China* 19, no. 2 (1993): 216-40.

To re-claim its authority over public political knowledge, one measure the central government took was to collaborate with cultural elites and local book-seller associations to construct a censorship system in the name of popular education. In 1915, the central government reorganized the Popular Education Research Society, a scholarly institution, into a state apparatus to supervise the production of popular cultural products ranging from print books and theatrical performances, to public speeches. Through this organization, the state attempted to define “proper” popular knowledge by ranking all the popular works and legitimizing serious political news as the venue for citizens’ political knowledge. Given its limited sovereign power, the state relied on the prestige and expertise of educators and governed in coalition with local book sellers associations by means of moral suasion to place pressure onto publishers and writers. Different from the late imperial model of state-gentry collaboration, and more than having these elites function as mediators of state power, the central government borrowed the power from well-established cultural and social elites to legitimize its rule and expand its sovereignty into the foreign settlement. The strong efforts to institutionalize and formalize the collaboration with educators framed the elite practice directly under the state authority and organization. Although the reach of the Beiyang government was limited due to strong local forces, this strategy generated an authoritative effect that made the presence of a state visible to an unruly society.

To penetrate into the foreign settlement while conforming with the rule of law, the central government also depended on the foreign judicial system to curb unfavorable descriptions of political personalities in Shanghai-based newspapers. In Republican China, prior to the emergence of a libel law as part of the 1928 Nationalist Penal Law, the criminal category of “insults to officials” replaced the Qing criminal code’s focus on punishing those who

disseminated traitorous words about the emperor. English-language literature on the defamation laws examines the power relations reflected in the conflicts between reputation protection and freedom of expression. Most scholars have argued for the wide latitudes the defamation law gave to censors and the states.⁴⁷ But a 1919 defamation lawsuit between the Beijing government and the Shanghai *Republican Daily* over the newspaper's playful description of the President suggested a more equalized relationship between the state and media institutions, as well as the entanglement of legal and media practices. The legal dispute revealed the boundary between serious political knowledge and the playful popular knowledge allowed by the state. The press's utility of the defamation lawsuit as a source of amusement further help elucidate how the media's exploration of the publicity dimension of defamation litigation transformed the meaning and effect of a lawsuit.

The dominance of the mass media was eventually checked by a new control mechanism from within the industry invented by the rising Nationalist regime. In 1927, the merging of political party and political leader as one force behind the gossip production in the tabloid press prompted a tendency of nationalizing gossip. The Nationalist Party adjusted their propaganda methods so as to mobilize the masses in a style and language that were familiar and attractive to them. Cooperating with a leading tabloid paper and novelists, they advocated an interpretive approach to gossip: to imbue revolutionary ideology in the narrative of the party leader's love

⁴⁷ Sean Latham, *The Art of Scandal: Modernism, Libel Law, and the Roman À Clef* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). Works about non-European countries argues how the defamation laws empowered the state. Pablo Piccato, *The Tyranny of Opinion: Honor in the Construction of the Mexican Public Sphere* (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010). David Streckfuss, *Truth on Trial in Thailand: Defamation, Treason, and Lèse-Majesté* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

life as a means of party propaganda and leadership construction. This approach diminished the entertainment value of tabloid articles and changed them into a vehicle of political opinion. However, the attempts to use gossip for propaganda and the unofficial fun-seeking aspect of gossiping collided when the media-savvy couple, Jiang Jieshi and Song Meilin, took advantage of the commercial force and the diffusive effect of gossip to publicize their prominent political and social status. The coopted way of propaganda, which derived its openness and power from unofficial communications, marked the decline of the gossip industry.

These administrative, moral, and legal measures proved the presence of a central government and its attempts to intervene, in the warlord era. But the Nationalists were more astute enough to utilize and penetrate the gossip industry when they lacked the power to police it. The different policies of the Beiyang government and the Nationalist Party illustrated a shift from the official means to an unofficial one. If in the late 1910s the gossip industry could reinforce its discursive power and autonomy in the antagonist relation with the central government, the official voices against which the gossip industry defined itself sought to collaborate with and hence to rein in unofficial communications in the final years of the warlord period. The collaborative relationship between a leading political party and gossip publishers attacked the foundation of the industry. With this experience, the Nationalists later applied this successful strategy of control from within onto literary censorship in the 1930s.⁴⁸

Chapter Outline

I take a broadened interdisciplinary view in the dissertation to reveal the connectedness

⁴⁸ Michel Hockx, "In Defense of the Censor: State Authority and Literary Autonomy in China, 1930-1936," *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese* 2, no. 1(1998): 1-30.

among different agents and facets of the early Republican gossip surrounding political leaders. Chapter 1 reviews the socioeconomic aspect of gossip production before unpacking different themes of knowledge making, state censorship, defamation law and party propaganda in the four succeeding chapters. Among various types of print products, I have narrowed my focus to commercial newspaper columns, tabloid news and a new genre of *heimu* (scandal) for they manifested new characteristics of published gossip in the early twentieth century.

Chapter 1 focuses its inquiry on the practice of a commercially driven group of gossip producers, who ranged from old-style literati to under-educated opportunists. Gossip production in the early Republican period differed from late Qing news reportage in scale, content, participators, mode of sharing, and driving forces. I show that the gossip industry in the late 1910s was shifting away from a traditional system structured by literati values and reformist agendas to a more professionalized and highly market-oriented information retail business. Commercial profitability and informal interactions defined the intersection of elites and non-elite informants. The expanded community of gossipmongers differed from the past when people with different social, educational, and vocational backgrounds formed segregated information communities. The new community and commercial-driven approaches influenced the practice and identity of tabloid writers. For example, the practice of Bao Tianxiao (包天笑, 1875-1973), a contracted writer of *the Crystal*, reveals the vocational norm of a tabloid man and his ambivalent relationship with this occupation.

Chapter 2 turns to the content, editorial claims, generic style, and marketing strategies of gossip products to examine how they constituted popular political knowledge and gave agency to information consumers. The early Republican editors promoted gossip about political leaders as an entertaining and reliable form of political knowledge. The dual association with entertainment

and political significance helped construct a new link between commoners and political knowledge. Special attention is paid to the mass production mode and interactive consumption encouraged by the new genre of *heimu* writing. The blurred line between producers and consumers contributed to an unprecedentedly open and vibrant participatory culture. Popular engagement in the process of knowledge producing and consuming suggests a transformation from top-down, one-way knowledge transmission to one of multi-directional information exchange. The audience influenced knowledge production not only indirectly through “public taste,” but also as direct agents who brought in new information.

Chapter 3 argues that the central government assumed crucial functions during this period of constant shifts in power and political fragmentation. For example, it monitored public knowledge and constructed its own ability to shape knowledge by collaborating with cultural elites and key social organizations. The working reports (1916-1919) of Popular Education Research Society (the *de facto* authority over national popular education under the Ministry of Education) shed light on these government practices. The central government recognized the value of gossip as a vehicle to disseminate popular knowledge even as it constantly questioned gossip’s legitimacy as an information source. The government also sought to sanction knowledge for the masses through the practice of censorship and state-sponsored open lectures. Like its imperial predecessor, the central government insisted that it was the sole arbiter of knowledge and morality. By evaluating gossip collections, vetting publishers and writers, and institutionalizing so-called open lectures, the central government sought to penetrate the realm of knowledge production and discipline the circuits of distribution and reception of knowledge.

In Chapter 4, I turn to a 1919 case in which Duan Qirui’s (段祺瑞, 1865-1936) government sued the *Republican Daily* for insulting the President and senior officials to illustrate the

government's use of legal instruments to curb playful reports in the realm of serious political news. The direct source of the friction was an article published in the newspaper that derides the personal relations between the statesmen and their political connection to the Japanese by playfully fabricating a family lineage. The debate surrounding the nature of the article allows us to see how the state and media negotiated the shifting boundary between political discussion and entertainment. The Beijing government won its litigation, but ultimately failed to rehabilitate its reputation. The press demonstrated its leverage in constructing public opinion by turning the litigation itself into an extra layer of amusing stories. Gossip refused to be framed in legal terms and further drew on the publicity dimension of defamation litigation to make more profits. Defamation litigation in the 1920s was increasingly seen as a mechanism to manage one's publicity rather than a means to tame the mass media.

The last chapter examines the Nationalist Party and its leader's accommodation of the communication reality and the emergence of a type of authorized gossip to increase political visibility in 1927. If leaders in the early 1910s attempted to set up a positive public image in newspapers to rectify unfavorable gossip and rumors, the Nationalist Party and Jiang Jieshi (A.K.A. Chiang Kai-shek, 1887-1975) drew on the discursive power of gossip to make self-exposure into a form of organized political propaganda. Official publicity intensified the politicization of the gossip industry and changed gossip into an interpretive tool to convey state-sponsored political meanings. In particular, I investigate Jiang Jieshi's coordinated effort to control publicity surrounding his romantic life and wedding ceremony in 1927. Jiang re-modeled himself into a national embodiment of the revolutionary spirit in a fictional account, tabloid reports, and a wedding newsreel, while still allowing these media narratives to become commercialized. The publicity of the eventful Jiang-Song wedding was fraught with tensions

between propagandist political meanings, the commercial interests of cooperating entrepreneurs, and the public desire for entertainment. This persistent tension characterized the self-contradictory form of authorized gossip and doomed its short-lived fate. Closing with a discussion of the rising consciousness of political visibility among political figures in the late 1920s, the project also explains why the early Republican openness quickly became subjugated by the tightened information control and gave rise to the political celebrity in the nationalist regime.

CHAPTER ONE

Gossipmongers in the Early Republican Gossip Economy

Introduction

In the decade immediately after Yuan Shikai's reign (1912-1916), gossip about political leaders proliferated in Shanghai's commercial print media. A myriad of trivial matters concerning political elites were adapted to meet the needs of gossip columns in commercial dailies, tabloids, and novels described as "unofficial history." Gossip production in the late 1910s and early 1920s was shifting away from the late Qing system, which was structured by either reformist agendas or literati values, to a more professionalized and highly market-oriented, information-retailing business. This chapter examines the commercialization of gossip production by focusing on the connections and practices of the early Republican gossipmongers. I argue that the commercialization of gossip about political leaders greatly expanded the community of knowledge production and professionalized the practice of information collecting and processing under the organization of media institutions such as tabloids. Gossip for its commercial values became a force that integrated and mediated the interaction of people from different social sectors. The expansion of the gossip production community not only challenged the old knowledge authority established by the elite class, but also formed an open vision of public knowledge.

The chapter commences with an overview of the scope and operation of the gossip economy. It shows that the high profit and low investment of the gossip trade encouraged individuals and publishing institutions to participate in this business. The tabloid press and small-scale publishing companies were two major types of leading institutions that boosted this gossip economy and functioned as a glue to coordinate among different information traders. The

following two sections explore the community and practices of gossip producers, specifically, the informant network and hired media practitioners of a leading Shanghai tabloid *The Crystal* (晶報).

Section two foregrounds an inclusive information web of gossipmongers across varying social-economic strata. Through social and financial means, *the Crystal* integrated correspondents, old-styled literati, popular novelists, officials, grassroots private newsagents, and Japanese journalists into a loose information-sharing community. This early Republican network was characterized by a more complicated social composition and profit-driven practices, and subsequently, the marginalization of literati ethics and reformist agendas. It was significantly different from the past when people with different social, educational, and vocational backgrounds formed segregated information communities. Commercial profitability and informal interactions defined the intersection of elites and non-elite informants. The network suggested a heterogeneous community of knowledge production in the early Republican era with tolerance for disparate voices and alternative facts.

The final section takes a closer look at the practice of tabloid writer and reformist editor Bao Tianxiao (包天笑, 1875-1973) in this media institution and its network. Bao's diary records his networking activities, working load, responsibilities for the tabloid, and the numerous titles of the articles he composed in the mid-1920s. It reveals his treatment of gossip writer as an occupation despite of his ambivalent identity in the new media environment. Bao's practice revealed the influence of serious journalism upon the development of some vocational norm in the tabloid press and the impact of an expanded community onto the identity of a commercial writer. Bao's use of multiple pennames to hide his real identity in *the Crystal* also showed a reformist's hesitation to whole-heartedly embrace purely profitable writings. The commercialization of gossip for practitioners like Bao was met with reservation and required more justification.

The Gossip Economy

After 1916, Shanghai witnessed an eruption of gossip-in-print about leading military and political figures from state ministers to regional warlords. Daily commercial newspapers such as *China Times* (時事新報) experimented with different columns of tidbits about political figures. Inspired by the newspaper supplements, the tabloid press staged a comeback in 1919 with a much bolder commercial approach. Book publishers quickly followed to invest in gossip publications of various types, among which scandal collections had achieved incredible market success. Popular magazines joined later but specialized in lengthy featured reports of the private lives of political individuals. A magazine *New Moon* (新月) could freely put stories about President Li Yuanhong (黎元洪, 1864-1928) on the first page that gossiped about why he treated his concubine better than his wife, his favorite opera actress and the friction between him and another official in the opera house.¹ These texts were not produced for moral education but to motivate impulse purchases once readers opened the cover.

Gossip became more profitable business than advocating an enlightenment project, expressing literati political view, or displaying cultivated knowledge. In the late imperial period, disseminating political gossip was largely conducted in an exclusive community of like-minded literati, but in the twentieth century this practice had gradually developed into a specialized publishing industry targeting a much larger and impersonal audience. In the early Republican period, reformist vernacular newspapers as the vehicle for imperial gossip waned.² Shanghai

¹ “Li Huangpi Yishi,” [Anecdotes of Li Huangpi] *Xin Yue* no. 3 (1926): 1–2.

² Overall, some vernacular newspapers were still popular in Beijing and reached lower segments of society including prostitutes and rickshaw pullers. But threatened by with the violent intrusion of militarists, vernacular newspapers exposed very few warlord stories. Instead, they retained their focus on

publishing entrepreneurs saw the profitability of this information business and took over the market. Market popularity determined the price of information. Compared to other popular cultural products, publications focused on gossip and inside stories about political celebrities were highly priced. In 1918, a poster made by Qinghua Bookstore (清華書局) put together advertisements for a variety of popular books. Warlord stories and palace anecdotes were the most expensive among the seven titles, selling eight *jiao* per book. Romantic and martial art novels were half the price and a multi-volume collection, after a discount, only cost one *yuan* two *jiao*.³ The well-known editor and novelist Bao Tianxiao commented on the profitability of scandalous accounts when he surprisingly found that relatively higher prices did not affect market demand.⁴

Information about political figures' private affairs also had a hidden price in the "off-the-table market" as some publishers wielded this power in activities bordering on blackmail. In the late 1910s, publishers often advertised gossip-oriented books in major commercial newspapers to solicit pre-orders. Advertisements with the names of political figures and the occasional pre-publication sample prints served to test market demand while functioning as a form of blackmail. In 1917, a retired senior official received a sample collection of political scandals and discovered an "inner chamber" secret about himself and his concubine. He communicated with the book publisher and made a payment of five hundred *yuan* in exchange for the publisher withholding his

the former imperial family and Manchu royalists. Maintaining their reformist agendas, early Republican vernacular newspapers in Beijing emphasized serious political news and serialized fiction that reflected social problems.

³ No. S313-1-121, Shanghai Municipal Archives.

⁴ Bao Tianxiao. "Heimu," originally published in *Xiaoshuo huabao* (1918), in *Zhongguo chuban shiliao jindai bufen* [Sources for Chinese publishing history: modern Section] 3, ed. Song Yuanfang (Wuhan: Hubei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2004), 276.

name from the public.⁵ By removing a name, the publisher made profits beyond the sales of the book. The popular novel *Unofficial History of the Old Capital City* (春明外史) serialized from 1924 to 1928 also describes such underground trades for information blockage. The protagonist in the novel revealed that a minister paid five hundred *yuan* to buy out the copyright of a book that threatened to expose a family incest case between his concubine and his sons.⁶ In reality, a current minister had paid much more to prevent the impending disclosure of embarrassing information. Another example comes from the newspaper publisher Lin Baishi, who disclosed a minister's indulgence in gambling in the 1920s after the minister had ceased sponsorship of Lin's paper. It is said that the minister reluctantly paid Lin 20,000 *yuan* to silence him.⁷ The price of information in this underground exchange fluctuated from case to case according to the individual negotiation between the public figure and the publisher. A minister in office was willing to spend a fortune to prevent stories from destroying his political career, whereas a retired official was worth comparatively less for only for preserving his reputation as a well-behaved gentleman. Such blackmailing was one of the official reasons why the Nationalist Government in 1933 investigated all the small papers and issued a restrictive ban.⁸

Among the three types of media institutions in the industry—newspaper supplements, tabloid papers, and small-scale publishing houses specializing in short story collections—the

⁵ “Heimu xiaoshuo,” [Scandal stories] in *Zhongguo chuban shiliao jindai bufen* [Sources for Chinese publishing history: modern Section] 3, 277-278.

⁶ Zhang Hengshui, *Chunming waishi* [Unofficial history of the old capital city] (Shanghai: Shijie shuju, 1931), Chapter 5.

⁷ “Lin Baishi beisha shimo,” [The complete story of Lin Baishi's death] in Gao Baishi, *Guchunfeng lou suoji* [Trivial records from the old spring-wind studio] 2 (Taipei: Taiwan xinshengbao, 1960), 378-382.

⁸ No. J181-020-10507, Beijing Municipal Archives; No. 2-1-37, Guangdong Provincial Archives. The Nationalist regulation of tabloid press will be discussed in the Epilogue.

tabloid press confirmed its leadership in the 1920s. In 1916, *China Times* started a column for trivial news about political leaders, and, over the next 10 years, gossipy information became important for the commercial success of the newspaper.⁹ The tremendous profitability of seemingly unserious information in the supplementary columns inspired a newspaper manager to turn supplement pages into independent tabloids. Represented by the famous tri-daily tabloid *the Crystal* (晶報), which was founded in 1919, these tabloid papers became a popular press in the new age and differed from the late Qing literati tabloids that comprised literati political criticism with commercial writings.¹⁰ Confident gossip experts with stronger commercial incentives learned methods of newsgathering and news-making from major dailies and surpassed their supplement pages in the 1920s. A commemorative article in 1923 claimed that more than 100,000 readers were reading *the Crystal* and its sales volume ranked third among newspapers of all kinds.¹¹ Market success helped them achieve economic independence while many dailies had to rely on subsidies.

The low production cost and almost immediate monetary reward encouraged many small profit-driven publishing houses to join this thriving business. It was common for commercial enterprises to immediately follow the most popular forms invented or content sold in newspaper supplements and tabloids. With access to a large cache of published stories, compilers appropriated and loosely re-organize selected pieces under marketable concepts of “fun” or “secrets.” Duplication and free recycling led to the wide circulation and low cost of trivial information in the region around Shanghai. Tabloid editors’ complaints about plagiarism were powerless to stop the

⁹ Chunhua, “Shishi xinbao de xiaolaopo qiang,” [China Times' concubine tone] *Jing Bao*, May 24, 1927.

¹⁰ Catherine Yeh, *Shanghai Love: Courtesans, Intellectuals, and Entertainment Culture, 1850-1910* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006).

¹¹ “Sizhounian chuangkan jinian,” [Fourth year commemoration] *Jing Bao*. October 6, 1923.

century-long practice of copy-and-paste, which continued into the new era and drove this new print industry.¹² But, unlike the late imperial literati's pursuit of a comprehensive compilation to display their knowledge, the early republican publishers were motivated by the bigger commercial rewards of very little capital investment and labor input. Lu Yunqi (魯云奇) initiated the book project of *Panorama of scandals in China* (中国黑幕大观) when he was an ordinary clerk at the Heji Book Company (和記圖書公司). He managed to cut down the budget for information gathering by calling for public contributions, which he learned from the newspapers, and effectively raised money for the project by promoting pre-order sales for half the price. The tactic of frequent re-prints in a short period was another common practice among small companies. Rewards earned in the first round of distribution could cover the cost of re-printing. In addition, the high re-print times advertised on the cover page could demonstrate the popularity of the book. Republican intellectuals described these publishing companies as "opportunists" (滑頭書店) for their risk-avoiding and trend-following traits.¹³ Book publishers were less creative and less resourceful than tabloids but nonetheless still sensitive to market demand of the larger segments of the society. Some of them were good at vulgarizing popular content to meet the need of semi-literate gossip consumers.

Rapid development of tabloids and the proliferation of gossip books demanded a constant supply of new stories and therefore writers with access to sources were highly valued. A

¹² The practice of copying and pasting had already been common since the Ming Dynasty when literati blended entries from other *biji* works into their own. See Yue Yong, "Lun Siku quanshu zongmu zhong de biji guan," [A discussion on the view of Biji in Siku quanshu bibliography] *Xinjiangdaxue xuebao* [Journal of Xinjiang University] 6 (2013): 122-125.

¹³ "Shenghuo quanguo zongshumu bianli," [LIFE: national bibliography] in *Zhongguo xiandai chuban shiliao* [Primary Sources of Modern Chinese Publishing History], ed. Zhang Jinglu (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1955), 329.

successful writer could earn his living only by writing for gossip columns. Occasional contributions to a tabloid might be paid 20 *yuan* per month in the 1920s.¹⁴ Regular writers received a lot more. In 1925, *the Crystal* offered tabloid writer Bao Tainxiao (包天笑) a monthly salary of more than 120 *yuan* in exchange for his steady supply of written stories within 2000 characters every issue. This extra income could cover the living expenses of his family in Shanghai for two to three months.¹⁵ In mid-1920s, this amount was almost twice as high as the income of a municipal-level civil servant and five times higher than that of an ordinary editor. An ordinary editor working in a midsize publishing house earned only 20 *yuan* per month and a valuable journalist in a profitable news agency received a monthly salary of 40 *yuan*.¹⁶ The lucrative business engaged more social and cultural agents ranging from amateur players to news experts, and from elites who upheld literati lifestyles to modern-minded newspaper managers.

The growing literacy in the early Republican era and subsequent expanding urban market for popular cultural products bolstered this gossip industry. The consumption of frivolous books in the commercially prosperous lower Yangzi region could be, at latest, traced to the early sixteenth century, when a surge in the commercial publications of low quality vernacular prints indicated a broadened reading public including relatively unlearned people.¹⁷ But limited primary sources could not clearly delineate this broader audience. Extant primary materials allowed quantitative

¹⁴ “Baoyu huabao,” [Talking about newspapers in its supplements] *Fu Er Mo Si*, August 13, 1936.

¹⁵ Bao Tianxiao, *Chuanyinglou huiyilu* [Chuanyinglou reminiscence] (Beijing: Zhongguo dabaikequanshu chubanshe, 2009), 324-325.

¹⁶ Zhang Jinglu, *Zai chubanjie ershi nian* [My twenty years in the print industry] (Shanghai: Shanghai zazhigongsi, 1933), 101.

¹⁷ Cynthia Brokaw, “Reading the Best-sellers of the Nineteenth Century: Commercial Publishing in Sibao,” in *Printing and Book Culture in Late Imperial China*, eds. Cynthia Joanne Brokaw and Kai-wing Chow (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 184-189.

analysis on the size of the reading public and its growth in the modern era. Des Forges made an optimistic estimation that more than 60 percent of adult males and 10 to 30 percent of adult women in Shanghai could read novels and newspapers in the late nineteenth century. Servants, factory workers, and coolies were among the readers of popular novels.¹⁸ Based on Leo Ou-fan and Perry Link's studies, Xu Xiaoqun has estimated that, in Shanghai, the readers of vernacular texts amounted to 2 to 4 million in the 1910s and reached more than 15 percent of the city population in the early 1930s.¹⁹ That is to say, from 1916 to 1928, local readers who could read easy-to-read tabloids, political novels, and scandal collections increased and accounted for approximately 3% to 15% of the general population.

In the late 1910s, the consumers of scandal collections revealed that middle class readers including businessmen, salary men, and middle school students formed the majority of gossip publication purchasers. They were better educated, well trained, and supported by stable income to afford cultural entertainment. But by the mid-1920s at least tabloids had attracted socially diverse readers including the urban poor. Some oral performers at entertainment quarters also subscribed to tabloids to update themselves with the freshest materials.²⁰ In 1925, a popular magazine noted that "it is more often seen that a rickshaw coolie poring a sight over a scrap of newspaper while awaiting his passenger."²¹ In 1928, the nationalist senior adviser Wu Zhihui's congratulatory text addressed the role the tabloid press played in assisting semi-literate people to

¹⁸ Alexander Townsend Des Forges, *Mediasphere Shanghai: The Aesthetics of Cultural Production* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 10.

¹⁹ Xiaoqun Xu, *Chinese Professionals and the Republican State: The Rise of Professional Associations in Shanghai, 1912-1937* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 47-48.

²⁰ Ni Zhongzhi, *Zhongguo xiangsheng shi* [A history of Chinese cross-talk performance] (Wuhan: wuhan daxue chubanshe, 2015), 182.

²¹ *Chinese Recorder*, 5 (1925): 293-394.

learn as he observed that workers and patrons in small shops and teahouses all read tabloid papers.²² From the late 1910s to the late 1920s, the readership of gossip publications expanded from the urban middle class to a more inclusive community including shop staff, lowbrow comedians, and rickshaw pullers.

The industry developed in the chaotic era with minimum regulatory forces because of political decentralization and extraterritoriality. All of the aforementioned publishers registered in foreign settlements, which protected their businesses from direct intervention by the Chinese authorities. The customary rules that were used within households to limit the competition of family-centered printing industries for popular texts in the nineteenth century were no longer applicable in this new context.²³ Public criticism, the bookseller associations, and the mechanism of the market had some effect on the content, yet did little to police business operations.²⁴ The early Republican gossip economy thus was characterized by the proliferation of products, disorderly competition, and the prevalence of blackmailing. Under competitive pressures from within the industry and other news media, participants fought to uncover more fresh stories or invent new genres to sell their products. The expansion of the gossip network to integrate a wider range of society should be attributed to the market forces and commercializing efforts.

²² Nationalist Party Archives. No. Jianbao-8526. Original article: Danweng, “Wuzhilao peng xiaobao,” [Mr. Wu holding small papers] *Jing Bao*, July 12, 1928. Teahouses in Shanghai were occupied mostly by the lower society. According to travel guidebooks, two major leisure activities for ordinary citizens were going to teahouses and playing mahjong at home. For more information about the lower class activities in teahouses, see Ma Jianxing, *Lao shanghai jianwen* [Observations in the old Shanghai] (Shanghai: Guoguang shudian, 1947), 49-50.

²³ For more information about how the nineteenth century household printing industries manage copyright issues and competitions, see Cynthia Brokaw, *Commerce in Culture: The Sibao Book Trade in the Qing and Republican Periods* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 177-188.

²⁴ See more discussions in Chapter 3.

An Inclusive Information Network

The tabloid press not only provided the platform of publication but also gave institutional support to its editors and writers. On the one hand, *the Crystal* exploited the national news channels of major newspapers by hiring correspondents as part-time contributors, and used transnational channels of the Japanese news agency by exchanging information. On the other hand, it developed working relationships with the old literati circle as it continued into the Republican era, as well as with prostitutes who could easily approach political elites. Moreover, personal ties with officials brought in by chief editors and writers were also a constituent part of this extendable network. The boundary-less network revealed an enlarged and inclusive gossipmonger community.

This section from the perspective of *the Crystal*, delineates a network in which the tabloid paper served as the hub connecting different informants. It was a part of an interlinked web of information traders and suppliers, in which other players such as newspaper correspondents also served as nodes bringing together informants. The expandability and inter-linked status of information exchange were in stark contrast to the late Qing segregation of communication communities. In her examination of the rumor flow in the Yang Naiwu Case in the late 19th century, Dong Yue identified three information communities including the local community of “long-tongued women,” the elite community represented by the *Shanghai News* (申報) and its readers, and the official communications that served the judicial need. Surrounding the same case, these different communities circulated information and specific values within themselves and very seldom overlapped with one another.²⁵ The early Republican gossip network witnessed

²⁵ Madeleine Yue Dong, “Communities and Communication: A Study of the Case of Yang Naiwu, 1873-1877.” *Late Imperial China* no. 1 (1995): 79–119.

the convergence of newspapermen and local information communities. Involvement of multiple social sectors detached gossip production and circulation from the old culture of a closely-knit cultural community that shared values, language, or geographic location. Coordination of individual interests and ideas among these players by the market forces and network power replaced a membership manner in shaping the multiple conversations that crossed political, social, and cultural boundaries.

Different from an earlier model of hybridity, I argue for an integrative model to look at this merging information community. Bryna Goodman's framework of alternate identities and networks emphasized how different elements in Chinese news production coexisted and contended in the late Qing and early Republican era.²⁶ But the openness and interconnection entailed by early Republican tabloids did not reveal any inconsistencies or contentious relationships. Instead, different political and cultural identities of professional correspondents, newsagents, and people from other walks of life did not prevent them from forming complementary working relationships. Neither did their activities prove Arif Dirlik's suggestion that newcomers carved more boundaries.²⁷ Instead, boundaries between communities were dissolving, when, for example, a prostitute became a private newsagent.

The Crystal's information network provides a window into the early Republican intersection of elite and non-elite social groups in which social status, cultural prestige, and wealth played less of a role. A group of scholars in the field of Shanghai studies have explored the Republican social networks crossing boundaries in this urban society of remarkable diversity.

²⁶ Bryna Goodman, "Networks of News: Power, Language and Transnational Dimensions of the Chinese Press, 1850-1949," *China Review* 4, no. 1 (2004): 1-10.

²⁷ Arif Dirlik, "Transnationalism, the Press, and the National Imaginary in Twentieth Century China," *China Review* 4, no. 1 (2004): 11-25.

In the state-society relationship, they found that mercantile elites served as middlemen who kept many divisions of the Shanghai society together and whose wealth legitimized their power.²⁸ The gossip industry suggested the existence of a broader public space in which commercial interests dominated the mechanisms of coordination and gossip sharing prompted communication.

Since the early Republican tabloid press originated from newspaper supplement pages, it naturally relied in part on the news supply of large daily newspapers and news agencies. In the process of news filtering, professional correspondents sorted out trivial stories. They then forwarded reports of major occurrences from Beijing stations (news processing centers established by large dailies) to home newspapers while reserving the rest for the gossip press or for their own novel projects. For example, the *China Times*' Beijing station was an important gossip supplier for the tabloid press in Shanghai. The newspaper's correspondents Zhang Hengshui (張恨水, 1895-1967) and Hu Hanzhu (胡慙珠) occasionally supplied stories to Shanghai tabloid press.²⁹ Zhang was an invited writer for *the Crystal* in 1919 and his article exposed secret love affairs of capital officials' concubines.³⁰ Hu Hanzhu gathered gossip about militarists and ministers for another tabloid *the Holmes* (福爾摩斯). His pen names, "detective reports" (探子報) and "background actor," (跑龍套) reveal his self-perception as an invisible secret exposé and temporary information supplier.³¹

²⁸ Nara Dillon and Jean Chun Oi, eds., *At the Crossroads of Empires: Middlemen, Social Networks, and State-Building in Republican Shanghai* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2008).

²⁹ Zhang Henshui, *Xiezuo shengya huiyilu* [A memoir of my career as a writer] (Beijing: Zhongguowenlian chubanshe, 2005), 66.

³⁰ Zhang is better known for weaving gossip into his novels. His practice of novelizing news has been well-researched by Eileen Chow, "Serial sightings: News, Novelties and an Unofficial History of the Old Capital." In Carlos Rojas and Eileen Chow Eds. *Rethinking Chinese Popular Culture: Cannibalizations of the Canon* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

³¹ Meng Zhaochen, *Zhongguo jindai xiaobao shi* [A history of modern Chinese tabloids] (Beijing: shehui

The Crystal was also able to induce true insiders from previously privileged political knowledge circles to write for gossip columns. One such invited insider was Yuan Kewen (袁克文, 1890-1931), the second son of Yuan Shikai and a renowned master of traditional literature, calligraphy, and Kunqu opera. Starting from October 1920, he launched an anecdotal column, “*Unknown stories of the Powerful*,” (辛丙秘苑) in *the Crystal* disclosing secret stories about the Yuan family and the surrounding militarists.³² The column’s title “Xinbing” is an implicit semantic pun, referring to both the time period of Yuan Shikai’s reign and a sign of power and wealth in Daoist sayings, which commercial gossip editors would have avoided.³³ Yuan intended “to document my father’s good will and to correct the misleading hearsay” and blamed Yuan’s faults on his mental instability and other people’s manipulation.³⁴ It was a unique gossip column of the time given its use of classic language, purely personal perspective, and explicit goal of defending the Yuan family, by targeting a traditionally educated social group. But his identity and narrative style gave a strong personal tone to this featured column as a commodity for consumption. In addition to the commercial potential of the stories, the fact that Yuan Shikai’s willingly divulged family secrets served as an extraordinary selling point. The column suddenly stopped two months later because frictions erupted between Yuan and another editor over antique collecting, which reveals the role of personal relations between the writer and tabloid editors in

kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2005), 187-189.

³² “Xinbing miyuan,” [Unknown stories of the powerful] *Jing Bao*, October 15, 1920.

³³ In Chinese calendar, 1911 is the year of Xinhai and 1915 is the year of Bingchen.

³⁴ Hanyun, “Xinbing miyuan xu,” [Preface to unknown stories of the powerful] *Jing Bao*, October 24, 1920.

this commercializing the literati gossip.³⁵

The unstable supply of information from newspaper correspondents and literati contributors were not adequate to sustain the running of a tabloid. To expand the pool of sources, the tabloid also institutionally maintained connections with prostitutes both financially and with long-term business relations. The manager and editors frequently arranged working dinners to gather juicy stories, instead of relying on unsound personal ties as those between the late Qing tabloid literati and courtesans. *The Crystal* took great pride in its access to this valuable source: “(serious) newspaper materials come from the government and warlords themselves. In contrast, the best materials for us were picked up in brothels. Especially when the brothels and warlords intersect, they could make the ultimate best stories.”³⁶ Brothels stood at the crossroad of gossip flows about parliament men, high officials, and military leaders, who were popular topics of tabloid speculation. Numerous reports uncover Zhang Zongchang’s frequent visits to entertainment quarters and Cao Kun’s favorite concubines who originally came from brothels, as well as a militarist’s cruel break-up with top courtesans.³⁷

Moreover, some prostitutes dabbled in the business of private news agency to convert personal connections with political elites into political and economic benefits.³⁸ Journalist Xu

³⁵ Yuan Kewen, *Xinbing miyuan* [Unknown stories of the powerful] (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 2000), 140.

³⁶ Danweng, “you lai le,” [Coming again] *Jing Bao*, March 27, 1925

³⁷ Xingyun, “Lu shaoshuai zhi huomai,” [Burying General Lu alive] *Jing Bao*, August 27, 1925; Mengchong, “Zhang zongchang yishi,” [Anecdotes of Zhang Zongchang] *Jing Bao*, January 31, 1925; “Liu furen,” [Mrs. Liu] *Jing Bao*, January 9, 1925.

³⁸ Private information enterprises mushroomed in Beijing around the late 1910s and early 1920s to supply political news to newspapers all over the country. A news agency only required a small amount of investment, about 200 yuan, to become established. A Japanese investigatory report shows that there were at least 42 registered news agencies in Beijing by 1926. See *Nanmantetsu kabushikikaisha* [South Manchuria Railway Company] ed. *China shinbun yichiran hyu* [A table of Chinese newspapers] (Beijing,

Zhucheng (徐鑄成, 1907-1991) documented a notorious affair widely circulated among editors and journalists in the 1920s. A retired militarist who could not find a job elsewhere set up a news agency in Beijing. His lover Ms. Wen, a former prostitute, served as the chief agent who acquired stories from inside the President's Office by taking advantage of her secret sexual relationship with President Li Yuanhong. This female correspondent not only obtained inside information for sale but also secured her fiancé a position in the government, which further facilitated their information collecting.³⁹ The prosperous information industry inspired and provided opportunities to grassroots players from other walks to profit from their social capitals.

In Shanghai's colonial settings, the Japanese were also a part of this dense web of gossip supply. As early as the early 1910s, when political news was blocked by the central government, publishers alternatively gained information from Japan.⁴⁰ *The Crystal* collaborated with the Japanese for the political protection from the Japanese Consul and the trans-national information channel. The manager Yu Daxiong's acquaintance with the manager of the Japanese East News Agency (東方通訊社) was key to the paper's access to another pool of data coming from Japanese news agents.⁴¹ For instance, they were well-informed of a Japanese draft collection of

1926). Bao Tianxiao. *Chuanyinglou huiyilu* [Chuanyinglou Reminiscence] (Beijing: Zhongguo dabaikequanshu chubanshe, 2009), 518.

³⁹ "Wuren molu," [The Last Choice of a Militaryman] in Xu Zhucheng, *Baohai jiuwen* [Old stories in the sea of newspapers] (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2010), 233-38.

⁴⁰ A book company was forced to shut down for being caught selling a translated Japanese book titled *Monster-revealing Mirror: Yuan Shikai* (yuanshikai zhi zhaoyaojing) in 1914. See The Second Historical Archives of China ed. *Beiyang zhengfu dangan* [Archives of Beiyang Government] Vol. 121 (Beijing: Zhongguo dangan chubanshe, 2010), 234.

⁴¹ Bao Tianxiao. *Chuanyinglou huiyilu*, 427. Bao Tianxiao. *Chuanyinglou riji* [Chuanyinglou diary]. October 31, 1925.

secret interviews with Chinese top leaders entitled “*Ultimate secrets*” (极秘).⁴² In return, the tabloid editors fulfilled requests from the Japanese for local information.⁴³ The new propaganda policy of the Japanese foreign office pursued this collaboration with the goals of information gathering and manipulating the news in China.⁴⁴ The commercial interest of the Chinese press and political interest of the Japanese were conditions that gave rise to the two-way flow of stories.

This large network not only brought together people from multiple socioeconomic statuses, but also integrated local, national, and transnational communities. From the viewpoint of *the Crystal*, the commercial motivation facilitated its tolerance for different commercial, political, or social goals. Political and cultural identities were not the prime aspects in consideration for alliances in the gossip business; these were often seemingly irrelevant to the gossip sharing. Gossip as a medium also more or less smoothed the encounters between different cultures and practices. The casual interaction shaped flexible working relationships between these different actors. The sense of closeness and informality coming along with the tidbits exchange explained that many business connections of these gossipmongers overlapped with their social connections. But in the new context of commercialized publication, gossip providers were aware of the public and trading nature of the information exchange. They factored in more economic and political interests in their calculations of the values of the gossip in exchange. The players’ efforts to ensure commercial gains and the informality of gossip communication

⁴² Bao Tianxiao, *Chuayinglou riji*, October 27, 1925.

⁴³ Bao Tianxiao, *Chuayinglou riji*, July 4, 1925; September 18, 1925.

⁴⁴ For more information about the political agendas behind the expanding of East News Agency and the publicity policies of the Foreign Office, see Teruo Ariyama, *Jōhō haken to teikoku Nihon* [Intelligence Hegemony and Imperial Japan] 3 (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 2013), Chapter 3.

altogether brought about this peculiar status of the absence of boundaries supporting the free flow of agents and information.

The inclusion of players from outside the field of cultural production, such as prostitutes and other grassroots correspondents, brought new energy, voices, and a flexible approach into the industry. Non-literati social forces had engaged in woodblock carving and text piracy for commercial profit as early as in the eighteenth century when print commerce penetrated small towns.⁴⁵ But they were excluded from the privileged community of political knowledge production. In the early Republican period of political and social disarray, the lower-status cultural agents benefited from their close encounters with various people and the new opportunities opened by the print industry. As market-driven, entertainment-centered media institutions tended to favor extraordinary and even vulgarly attractive stories, accounts about political elites from grassroots sources became more appealing to common readers. They were often characterized by weaker education, random career choices, and the absence of occupational rules. Their ardent pursuit of individual gains without ethical restrictions made them the most daring information leakers. Their activities pushed the gossip economy to further depart from both the late imperial literati activities and the late Qing reformist reportage.

The Crystal became a leading tabloid in the industry for its capacity of weaving together these different informants, who were diverse in educational backgrounds, social experiences, identities, working modes, and even nationality. As an information hub in this open network, *the Crystal* had no power to monopolize the business or control the information flow against its competitors, but its assessment of the commercial value of stories would lead to shifts in power

⁴⁵ Cynthia Brokaw, *Commerce in Culture: the Sibao Book Trade in the Qing and Republican Periods* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

relations among informants. Nonetheless, as the major information filter, processor, and publisher, the tabloid determined the value of stories and sources for its own product. *The Crystal* apparently saw more commercial value in accounts from prostitutes than those from officials. The attitude manifested that the commercialization of political gossip for the popular market had dismantled the imperial knowledge hierarchy that valued sources from officials or literati insiders. Opposite to the late imperial unofficial histories whose legitimacy was still rooted in the authority of official sources, the early Republican preference over the unofficial placed more power in the hands of well-informed prostitutes.⁴⁶ In contrast, stories from officials and elites were no longer associated with authority, but were only one type among many that appealed to certain readers.

The loosely structured community of gossipmongers changed the social ecology of politically related information transmission and knowledge production. Communication across social classes and cultural backgrounds gave rise to a new vision of popular knowledge that tolerated disparate values and different versions of facts. In the past, both the public knowledge produced by late imperial literati in forms of popular novels and dramas and the vernacular news used by the late Qing reformists to promote popular participation, were elite-made coherent knowledge for the commoner audience with moralizing or educational purposes.⁴⁷ In the early

⁴⁶ Vierthaler through an examination of the late Ming Wei Zhongxian novels finds that authors all had a distinct preference over official works, the capital gazetteers in particular. See Paul August Vierthaler, “Quasi-History and Public Knowledge: A Social History of Late Ming and Early Qing Unofficial Historical Narratives” (PhD dissertation, Yale University, 2014).

⁴⁷ McLaren argues for the persistence of a discourse of popular literature as moral instruction in the late imperial era. See Anne E. McLaren, “Constructing new reading publics in late Ming China” in Cynthia Joanne Brokaw and Kai-wing Chow, eds., *Printing and Book Culture in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 152-183. More information about literati made popular knowledge. To list representative Chinese-language studies on vernacular newspapers: Li Hsiao-t’i, *Qingmo de xiacen shehui qimeng yundong 1901-1911* [The Late Qing Enlightenment Movement for the lower Society 1901-1911] (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo, 1998). Hu Quanzhang, *Qingmo*

Republican gossip industry, voices from informants were often mediated by publishers and editors but not eliminated. The emergence of many heterogeneous gossip collections, which carefully separated editor's personal political opinion from the compilation purposes to preserve multiple voices, evinced this openness. In *An interesting history of the Anfu clique* (安福趣史), a collection of gossipy accounts of Prime Minister's political clique published in 1920, the editorial mediation was minimized to the extent that they avoided altering the messages in original stories. Only in the preface, did the editor exhibit his resentment at this political clique, but he soon stated that: "I resort to the power of words, though I do think it useless to criticize them on paper. Instead, this collection records true stories in a playful way."⁴⁸ Notwithstanding the self-contradictory statement about the editor's attitude toward political criticism, the preface indicated that "the power of word" resonated with the public opinion that gathered in the collected stories. The collection included many accounts apparently from Duan Qirui's (段祺瑞, 1865-1936) supporters who complimented his virtue.⁴⁹ The ideas that legitimated the circulation of gossip about political figures was changing, from a past elitist tone of educating the Chinese commoners to a more liberal vision of recording popular knowledge.⁵⁰

minchu baihua baokan yanjiu [A Study on Vernacular Periodicals in the late Qing and early Republican China] (Beijing: Shehuikexue chubanshe, 2011).

⁴⁸ Hong Yinsheng, "Xu," [Preface] in *Anfu qushi* [An interesting history of the Anfu clique] (Shanghai: Hongwen tushuguan, 1920).

⁴⁹ Duan Qirui was the leader of a major military and political clique Anhui clique. He served as the Prime Minister of the Beiyang government from 1916 to 1920.

⁵⁰ Chapter 2 will discuss in more details about this body of popular knowledge by examining the content, style, its formation, and consumption.

Performing a Tabloid Writer: The Case of Bao Tianxiao

Before taking the shape of published articles, raw materials from various informants had to go through a process of selection and embellishment under the hands of editors and writers. These actors played a key role in deciding the published content and generic styles. An analysis of tabloid writers who collected and processed acquired information shows whether the commercial motivations and expanded community changed the working mode and self-identities of practitioners in this industry. Bao Tianxiao, a reform-minded editor and also a contracted writer for *the Crystal*, could represent educated and experienced gossip writers incognito. Bao's extant diary in 1925 provides the first-hand material for us to pry into his daily working status. It records him as a responsible, but not ardent tabloid writer, who sold gossip for economic benefit while still identifying himself as a reformist intellectual.

In the dense network and pressure of producing more stories, Bao's practice differed from his late Qing predecessors. The late nineteenth century gossip producers were traditionally educated literati who took on new careers as tabloid writers after the abolishment of the civil examination system.⁵¹ They made their livings in the new media enterprise by selling literati writings while remaining adherent to Confucian view of a clean politics.⁵² As a previous reformist editor who also promoted new political ideas in a vernacular newspaper, Bao hid away his political thoughts and only produced impersonal writings with a playful tone in *the Crystal*. His daily practice elucidates the required skills for this occupation, which included access to sources, the ability to network, specialized knowledge of past and current affairs, and sensibility

⁵¹ Catherine Vance Yeh, *Shanghai Love: Courtesans, Intellectuals, and Entertainment Culture, 1850-1910* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006).

⁵² Juan Wang, *Merry Laughter and Angry Curses: The Shanghai Tabloid Press, 1897-1911* (UBC Press, 2013), 46-50.

to market demand. Because of the key role played by these experienced media professionals, gossip collecting and content editing in tabloids overall was influenced by the journalistic profession. However, taking no pride to be grouped with other gossipmongers, tabloid writers like Bao marginalized themselves as the practitioners in a deviant occupation within journalism. Compared to the formation of profession and the pride stemming from the restrictive membership of journalistic associations at the same time, the lack of boundaries in the community had a somewhat negative effect on educated people's identity and on shaping occupational standards.⁵³

Bao Tianxiao was a renowned translator, a prolific butterfly novelist, and the editor of a commercial newspaper, a fiction magazine and many textbooks for the Commercial Press. His working experience typified a shift from a traditional literatus, to a reformist, and eventually to a commercial writer. Bao was a degree holder and private teacher in his early years. Influenced by constitutionalist newspapers during the late Qing reform era, Bao showed strong interest in western learnings and was devoted to reformist publications since 1900. In 1901, like many other pro-reform youth, Bao participated in publishing a vernacular newspaper in his home town after graduating from middle school. The Suzhou native started his journalistic career in Shanghai in 1906. Since then, he accumulated his experience and social connections as the editor of commercial newspapers, popular magazines, and as a popular novelist.⁵⁴ He witnessed the booming print industry in the highly-commercialized setting of Shanghai and its growing

⁵³ Xiaoqun Xu, *Chinese Professionals and the Republican State: The Rise of Professional Associations in Shanghai, 1912-1937* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 161-171.

⁵⁴ See Ming's article for more information about Bao Tianxiao's publishing activities in the late Qing and early Republican period. Ming Fengying, "A Defense of the Novelist: Bao Tianxiao's Novel and Dilemma," *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese*, no. 1 (2010): 122-133.

intimacy with popular culture, increasingly catering to commercial need. His contribution to a women's periodical in the early 1910s, according to Judge, displayed both a reformist commitment and commercial approach. As a chief editor, he explored everyday experiences for commercial purposes and led the discussion of women's suffrage, Japanese imperialism, and revolution to press his reformist agendas.⁵⁵

Bao's role as a contract writer of *the Crystal* was not well known among the public. His diaries record himself as an industrious and resourceful gossip expert unceasingly providing pieces on political figures ranging from regional militarists to ministers. In 1925, bound by a contract detailing his responsibility of providing at least 2000 characters each issue, Bao eagerly expanded his potential informants. Bao asked his journalist friends, took notes from other writers' manuscripts, talked with acquainted officials in Beijing, attended dinner with prostitutes and even solicited stories from a random individual who happened to sit next to him on the train to Beijing.⁵⁶ A contact book appended with his diary showed his nationwide connection from the capital city to Hong Kong.⁵⁷ He kept notes of the stories he heard, the purposes of keeping them and articles he completed for *the Crystal*. He edited tidbits into articles for immediate publication and saved more complicated stories for his political novel. The large number of stories and carefully-crafted working plans shows that for him gossip writing was not a mere casual activity that happened to make extra pocket money, but was a serious job requesting continuous investment of energy and time.

Bao's practice indicated the requirement of tabloid writer as an occupation. Class

⁵⁵ Joan Judge, *Republican Lens: Gender, Visuality and Experience in the Early Chinese Periodical Press* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015).

⁵⁶ "Xuzhou guike tan," [Talks of Guests from Xuzhou] *Jing Bao*, May 15, 1925.

⁵⁷ Bao Tianxiao, *Chuayinglou riji*, Appendix.

boundaries or nationalistic sentiment should never bond their active search for materials or hinder the maintenance of business connections. As one of the chief writers of *the Crystal*, Bao was also responsible to maintain connections with prostitutes and nurture good relationships with the Japanese. His diaries record his purchase of scandal collection for the Japanese Consul and his reception of the Consul's request for investigatory reports on Chinese social thoughts after different political events. It is unclear if Bao fulfilled all these requests, but he did spend three days making a detailed report on Chinese media institutions in Shanghai for the Japanese.⁵⁸ Despite occasional complaints about the tedious work, he treated these works as his obligations and completed them without showing any reluctance in the diary. The tabloid's expanding information network was the result of these writers' effortful connection building and its availability also guaranteed his productivity.

Hiding from his critics and sentiments, Bao's tabloid articles were plain, descriptive narratives with some playful tone. For *the Crystal*, Bao usually describes events straightforwardly with an ostensibly neutral political stance. One of his articles on General Feng Yuxiang (馮玉祥, 1882-1948) only describes a dish of pickle and a plate of beans that Feng treated a journalist for a private dinner.⁵⁹ His account of President Cao Kun (曹錕, 1862-1938) requesting financial aid compares the deaf ears of his relatives to a generous courtesan who offered to help, without giving concluding remarks.⁶⁰ He sometimes used playful or slightly satirical wording to add a note of levity to cater to the assumed popular taste, such as addressing Yuan Shikai's daughter-in-law as

⁵⁸ Bao Tianxiao, *Chuayinglou riji*, July 4, 1925; September 18, 1925; January 29, 30, 31, 1926; February 2, 1926.

⁵⁹ "Feng Yuxiang yishi," [Feng Yuxiang's anecdotes] *Jing Bao*, December 6, 1924.

⁶⁰ "Caosanye yu xiaoxiangshui," [Cao sanye and Xiao xiangshui] *Jing Bao*, April 27, 1925.

the “empress” in the article title.⁶¹ Such fun making certainly served as a strategy to give meanings, in this case “empress” made a mockery of Yuan’s monarchy restoration. But this slight satire as a means of humor differed from his strong critic of corruptive officials and sentimental portrayal of a militarist’s love affair with a courtesan in his novel *Remnants of fragrance* (留芳記) published in the same year.⁶² This rhetorical style was the norm in *the Crystal*, which still diverged from the late Qing choice of political criticism from their own political standing in the literati tabloids.⁶³

The tabloid’s preference of documentation rather than critics paralleled the journalistic turn away from editorials to news in the 1910s. Mittler has noted the increasing professional conduct of news making in the Shanghai press in the 1910s, marked with the adaptation of objective reporting and the emergence of journalist textbooks. The objectivity in the early Republican period did not mean professional ethics that emphasized truth verification but the epistemological turn that separated facts from opinions.⁶⁴ The close ties between the major dailies and tabloid press, as well as the writer’s working experience in major dailies resulted in the influence of journalistic narrative upon gossip production. Given the new commercial setting where the sales became major aspect of evaluation, this documentary approach worked perfectly for the heterogeneous market and diversified readership. Amusing fact-based narratives appealed to more audience regardless of their political beliefs and cultural values.

These journalistic ways of information processing did not fully justify Bao’s role as a

⁶¹ Bao Tianxiao, *Chuayinglou riji*, January 14, 1926.

⁶² Bao Tianxiao, *Liu fang ji* [Remnants of fragrance] (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1925).

⁶³ Wang Juan argues that the late Qing tabloid literati shifted their focus away from entertainment quarter and started to attacked officials and elite reformers after the hundred-day reform. Juan Wang, *Merry Laughter and Angry Curses: The Shanghai Tabloid Press, 1897-1911* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2012).

⁶⁴ Barbara Mittler, *A Newspaper for China?: Power, Identity, and Change in Shanghai’s News Media, 1872-1912* (Cambridge, Mass: Distributed by Harvard University Press, 2004), 96-101.

tabloid writer. Previously as a reformist publisher and progressive novelists, Bao remained unwilling to entangle his reputation with a motley crew of gossipmongers. He intentionally kept his activities for *the Crystal* under wraps by using multiple pen-names to conceal his real identity. He felt ashamed about this experience and never mentioned it in his autobiography.⁶⁵ For Bao, there was a difference between the job of a gossip processor and that of a serious journalist. Similarly, in 1920, his colleague and the chief editor of *the Crystal*, Zhang Danfu (張丹斧, 1868-1937) analogized himself to the role of clown characters in a drama in contrast to serious journalists playing a role of main characters.⁶⁶ Zhang's analogy revealed their self-perception of being a deviant position within the larger field of journalism. Like Bao, Zhang was also experiencing the transformation from a reformist vernacular newspaperman to a commercial tabloid editor. Their degrading self-perception reflected their doubt of the cultural and political value of this occupation, aside the economic gain. Bao saw the job as a ghost-occupation that haunted their public roles as editor, journalist, and writer.

Bao represented a type of media professional who were concurrently journalists, editors, novelists, and sometimes publishers. The shifting roles on one person resembled Rea and Volland's notion of "cultural entrepreneurs." By "cultural entrepreneur," I am quoting Rea and Volland's term with which they emphasize a new entrepreneurial turn to culture adopted by transformative cultural agents who took on fluid careers such as newspapermen, novelists, and

⁶⁵ Perry Link, *Chinese Middlebrow Fiction: From the Ch'ing and Early Republican Eras* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1984), 241-254.

⁶⁶ Danweng, "buque de xiewen he buque de yanlun," [Unverified Amusing News and Unverified Opinions] *Jing Bao*, September 6, 1920.

businessmen.⁶⁷ In the mid-1920s, experts like Bao benefited from his good relationships with different publishers, which provided platforms for him to transfer information capital and literary talents into monetary rewards and cultural reputation. His job as a tabloid writer not only gave him extra income, but was also a powerful advertising medium to promote his popular novels.⁶⁸ Although the late Qing reformists' responsibility of educating the public and guiding the nation lost their ground amid the increasingly commercialized gossip realm, Bao's embrace of commercialization compromised with a concern about his public image as a reformist. Bao's case was valuable for understanding the inconsistency between practice and the self-identity and the complexity of the self-perception of such occupational shifters. Vacillations, ambivalence, and hybridity characterized the practice of media professionals at the beginning of the commercial shift in Chinese cultural production.

Conclusion

The early Republican Shanghai witnessed a commercial turn of gossip production. The flourishing gossip economy, boosted by market-driven, entertainment-centered tabloid press and its earnest following of small publishers, legitimized and prioritized the market value of gossipy accounts about political leaders. The pursuit of profits stimulated the growing demand for fresh and attractive stories, which contributed to the significant expansion of the community of gossip production.

⁶⁷ Christopher Rea and Nicolai Volland, eds., *The Business of Culture: Cultural Entrepreneurs in China and Southeast Asia, 1900-65* (Vancouver, CA: UBC Press, 2014).

⁶⁸ Bao wrote at least three soft advertisements for his new novel in summer 1925 under different pen names to promote it as the best and most appealing unofficial history of the late Qing and the early Republican period. Jiongjiong, "Du liufang ji," [Reading Remnants of fragrance] *Jing Bao*, September 3, 1925; Hongyan, "Du liufangji zalu," [Reading notes from the Remnants of fragrance] *Jing Bao*, July 3, 1925; Baofeng, "Liufangji ji," [A record of Remnants of fragrance] *Jing Bao*, June 24, 1925.

The early Republican network of gossipmongers encompassed remarkably diverse social groups. One characteristic was the active role played by non-elite players in transmitting and making facts about political leaders. The other major characteristic was the integration of people who belonged to separated information communities. This enlarged and inclusive community replaced the enclosed literati circle of the late Qing and challenged the hierarchical relationship between the elite and popular sources. Meanwhile, the practices of gossip production also revealed the complexities of commercialization. Literati gossip writing encountered the tabloid gossip column and many reformist writers benefited economically from this gossip industry, but felt shameful for wearing a mask.

Nonetheless, the overall retreat from conventional political expression and reformist enlightenment marked the emergence of an open attitude toward popular political knowledge. The comprehensive collections and fact-based narratives of gossipy news allowed readers to digest received stories and assess their political leaders on their own terms. The change led to a radical reconceptualization of the agency of the general populace in making and consuming knowledge with political meanings, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWO

A New Body of Popular Political Knowledge

Introduction

On February 26, 1923, a commercial newspaper in Shanghai published an open letter by a policeman in Tianjin to President Li Yuanhong (黎元洪, 1864-1928), complaining about the President's invitation to a famous opera singer from Tianjin to perform for him. In the letter, the policeman indicated that as the nation was still in chaos and that many people were suffering, President Li should not indulge himself with singing girls. He questioned the president, "There are plenty of famous opera actresses in the capital city. Why do you like this particular girl in Tianjin?" Towards the end of the letter, the policeman suggested that the president never invite performers again to curb the rumors about his fondness for opera singers.¹ This letter illuminates at least two points. First, gossip and rumors about the recurrent association of Li with female entertainers influenced the public assessment of the political leader. Second, a lowly constable could directly communicate with the office about the president's behavior in his private life. As shown by the letter, the gossip industry in the 1910s and 1920s contributed to the formation of a new association between the people and high politics. On the one hand, the entertainment-centered gossip, with its political significance, engaged commoners in political discussion in a playful and informal way. On the other hand, people's enthusiasm for more information about the personal lives of political elites and their active contribution to the story-gathering process stimulated the growth of the

¹ "Dafan le cutan," [Flopping over the vinegar jar] *Republican Daily*, February 26, 1923. Although in general, *Republican Daily* was the Nationalist Party's mouthpiece, the *Shanghai Republican Daily* should be considered as a commercial newspaper, for it lost all financial support from Guangzhou and was completely market-dependent. See more discussion of the newspaper in Chapter 4.

gossip business. This chapter argues for this mutually reliant and productive relationship between the entertainment media and a participatory culture of political discussion.

The engagement of gossip producers and consumers in the political discussion was an integral part of the broadened political sphere of participation in the first decade of the Republican era. The idea of popular sovereignty had been put into practice and was no longer confined to the literati or intellectual communities. Harrison saw political culture as the mechanism by which politics interacted with everyday life. She pointed out that in the 1910s, Chinese people participated in the process of creating nationalism and republicanism rather than having a developed ideology imposed upon them.² Harrison's examples of national ceremonies and the new Republican customs that symbolized equality were not the only means by which to engage in national politics. Civic life developed in activities such as public speeches, national product movements, and street protests.³

Unlike political engagement in most of the above cases organized or restricted by the state and elites, creating and consuming trivial amusements animated the popular participation outside the nationalist framework of the state and elite activism. I contend that political gossip in commercialized forms, more effectively than political propaganda and formal civic education, constituted the public knowledge of state affairs. An examination of the gossip products and the

² Henrietta Harrison, *The Making of the Republican Citizen: Political Ceremonies and Symbols in China, 1911-1929* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

³ To list a few works on the civic engagement, David Strand, *Rickshaw Beijing: City People and Politics in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). Karl Gerth, *China Made: Consumer Culture and the Creation of the Nation* (Cambridge: Distributed by Harvard University Press, 2003). Elizabeth Perry, "Popular Protest in Shanghai, 1919-1927: Social Networks, Collective Identities, and Political Parties," in Nara Dillon and Jean Chun Oi, eds., *At the Crossroads of Empires: Middlemen, Social Networks, and State-Building in Republican Shanghai* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2008).

way how they addressed readers allows us to understand how gossip formed a body of popular political knowledge and means of political participation. I bring attention to a short-lived genre of gossip publication called *heimu* (黑幕 scandal; literally, “black curtain”) that emerged and flourished in the late 1910s. The *heimu* writings’ involving gathering methods and suspending narrative technique gave more agency to readers by turning them into story suppliers and content reproducers. In the intermingling process of knowledge production and consumption, consumers influenced knowledge production not only through shaping “public taste” indirectly, but also as direct agents who brought new information. The blurred line between producers and consumers contributed to an unprecedentedly open political discussion and vibrant participatory political culture.

This chapter begins with an overview of a dual emphasis on entertainment and political significance in gossip columns, tabloid declarations and editorial prefaces to collection. Entertainment value in those market-oriented representations dismantled seriousness and systematic argument but brought about popular interests in politically-related information. Tabloid and book editors continuously legitimized their cultural products and define gossip as a body of popular political knowledge as opposed to serious political news and textbook knowledge. The following sections closely examine the stylistic and generic particularities of the *heimu* genre. Its adaptation of an inclusive production mode effectively advertised book projects and invited readers into the gathering process as contributors. Writers, publishers and advertisers also developed an interactive narrative technique, like missing information, to stimulate readers’ curious inspection of the texts and further exchange with other sources for piecing together a full story. Advertisements and prefaces to these collections revealed a different conceptualization of authorship and readership from other popular products of the time.

Similar to many other studies in Chinese literary history, my analysis centers on the expected activities of “notional readers,” since it is difficult to prove how readers exactly engaged with these texts.⁴ Nonetheless, the expectation and design of *heimu* products still pointed to the rise of an engaging political culture among urban, non-elite readers. The primary motivation was not nationalist consciousness. Instead, the entertainment-centered texts affected people's attitudes and reactions to politics. We see a playful citizenry characterized by wild enthusiasm driven by the pursuit of pleasure, contempt for any authority, minimal interest in developing any official expressional channel and greater agency of commoners.

Interplay of Amusement and Political Importance

To explain how tidbits of gossip reached a wider audience as a body of popular political knowledge, we must first make an overview of the entertainment value and political aspects of gossip products. Fully dependent on the market, the gossip press manifested its tremendous intervening power by remodeling political leaders into consumable personalities as entertainment for commercial profitability, anchoring them in triviality. This entertainment-based approach to trivial matters resulted in a fragmented reading experience with serendipitous encounters for the readers and a casual tone of the accounts. Meanwhile, the categorization of political gossip in newspaper supplements, the declarations of tabloid editors and supportive preface written for collections, all emphasized the political significance of gossip products. Comparing gossip with serious news and textbooks, editors identified gossip as more reliable and accessible political information.

⁴ In the field of Chinese book history, many scholars study the reading practices conceptualized and structured by publishers, authors, and editors. McLaren and Brokaw term this subject as “notional readers” or “notional reading practices”. See Cynthia Joanne Brokaw and Kai-wing Chow, eds., *Printing and Book Culture in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

This section covers the gossip columns of supplement pages, tabloid articles, and books from 1916 to 1925. Information from story content, titles, advertisements, preface and editorial words tell how trivial accounts about political leaders were presented, categorized, defined and packaged together. I argue that the accentuation of political meanings did not alter the entertainment value in the texts. Rather, the dual emphasis on political significance and entertainment ensured greater market success, defied the elite supervision of knowledge making and created a link between ordinary people and the knowledge about the high politics.

The commercial and political meanings associated with the early Republican products differed from literati leisure pursuits and political criticism in an earlier period. In the late Qing, the concept of play was central to the business interests and lifestyles of men who ran Shanghai's tabloids in the market economy. As argued by Catherine Yeh, salaried men of letters adopted a playful attitude to transform themes in the literati culture into consumable subjects.⁵ Playful portrayals of official's eccentric habits and funny anecdotes about political celebrities also became the medium to express critiques of the government.⁶ As the early Republican market expanded to include middle- and lower-class urban residents, popular demand for more vulgar and straightforward fun gradually overwrote the more refined literati leisure pursuits and affected the social perceptions of political personalities in the print media. The expanding community of gossip producers also opened up the knowledge to multiple values and political beliefs which replaced the literati political values. A new element of journalistic documentation emerged in the

⁵ Catherine Yeh, *Shanghai Love: Courtesans, Intellectuals, and Entertainment Culture, 1850-1910* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006).

⁶ Christopher Rea, *The Age of Irreverence: A New History of Laughter in China*, 23-24; Juan Wang, *Merry Laughter and Angry Curses: The Shanghai Tabloid Press, 1897-1911* (UBC Press, 2013), Chapter 2.

gossip press. Instead of a conversation between the literati and the government, newspapers and tabloid papers framed gossip either as a piece of news and some collection saw gossip as the political voices of ordinary people. In the early Republican era, gossip's political significance rested on the people's right to know and participation.

Gossip columns and story collections exposed amusing personalities of high-class people, their embarrassing moments, secret affairs with entertainers and inappropriate or bizarre activities to ordinary readers. For example, it was said that politicians in Duan Qirui's political clique dug a secret tunnel underneath the brothels in the Eight Great Hutongs (the red-light district in the capital city) to escape arrest.⁷ Depicted as ignorant, Duan's favorite subordinate Xu Shuzheng (徐樹錚, 1880-1925) was unfamiliar with the renowned Cantonese dish paper-wrapped-chicken and he swallowed the chicken with the paper still on it.⁸ Tidbits were prized for lifting the veil on hidden authenticity and for allowing a peep into the foibles of the rich and famous. Perry Link explains the popularity of these accounts among commoners from the perspective of psychological effect. He suggested that some stories provide comfort to readers by telling that the powerful also lack virtue or happiness.⁹ Reading pleasure was derived from the gap between their public projection as heroic men and their daily indecent behaviors.

The choice of book titles and acts of intensive advertising, moreover, reflected a liberal attitude of assuming names of political figures as entertaining news. In the past, titles of anecdotal collection only featured the reign names, such as *Hearsay from the unofficial realm in the reign of*

⁷ Hong Yinsheng ed., *Anfu qushi* [An interesting history of the Anfu clique] (Shanghai: Hongwen tushuguan, 1920), 26.

⁸ "Xu Shuzheng yu zhibaoji," [Xu Shuzheng and paper-wrapped chicken] *Jing Bao*, May 6, 1926.

⁹ Perry Link, *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies: Popular Fiction in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Cities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

Wanli (萬曆野獲篇), or the author's studio name, for example, *Notebook from the Yong Hut* (庸庵筆記). As late as in 1914, titles of gossip collections still often included the period name, such as *Unofficial History of the Republic* (民國野史). However from the late 1910s, titles such as *A Secret history of Duan Qirui* (段祺瑞秘史) and *Anecdotes of Li Yuanhong* (黎元洪軼事) appeared on the market. Book titles stated to highlight the name of the specific political leader to make the content attractively transparent. Advertisements in the 1920s also promoted gossip collections by listing the names of key figures involved. The early Republican marketing practice magnified the entertainment dimension and transformed the social implications of these political personalities.

It is increasingly difficult to make meaningful distinctions between political information and entertainment in these market-driven and entertainment-centered products. These everyday details conceptualized one's understanding of the rise and fall of a political force. Stories such as how prostitutes covered up for political elites spread information about the fall of Duan Qirui's political clique from the center of power. Some used Duan Qirui's hobby of playing the game of *go* to explain why an official obtained a promotion.¹⁰ Private details trivialized interpretations of political occurrences and made originally complicated events relatable to everyone's living experiences.

The meaning of triviality changed from insignificance to politics to the small scale of the matters. Commercial newspapers were the first to treat trivial matters as a supplementary and recycled form of political news. In 1916, one of the four major commercial newspapers in Shanghai, the *China Times* (時事新報), initiated a new column carrying the heading of "News

¹⁰ Xuannan liyin, *Minguo guanchang xianxing ji* [Republican officialdom unmasked] (Shanghai: Zhongguo diyi shuju, 1922), 1.

Dust” (新聞屑) to recycle less-serious information regarding the private lives or secret operations of political leaders that had been left out by front pages. The column included President Li Yuanhong’s patronage of a famous actor, the rivalry between two warlords over the affection of a courtesan, or conflicts between Yuan Shikai’s sons competing for the heritage. The word “dust” precisely captured both the triviality of these accounts and the procedure of gossip production. The “News Dust” column was placed on the page of “Collected talks in supplement” (報餘叢談), alongside a daily serial novel and later, a scandal column. Despite its function as light reading, it was included in a major commercial paper that had already become a major site for political expression and debate. The placement reflected the fact that the *China Times* elevated the position of so-called trivial information and deemed it legitimate, newsworthy information. During the chaos of the Zhang Xun (張勳, 1854-1923) Restoration Incident in the summer of 1917, a Qing royalist warlord’s campaigned to restore monarchism, the column fed readers with behind-the-scenes stories on a daily base such as the young Manchu emperor was persuaded to support the restoration solely for the benefit of no more schoolwork.¹¹ Keeping pace with headline news in the front pages, the gossip column repeatedly echoed a strong anti-monarchist message, serving the political interest of the force behind the newspaper.¹² Divergent from the vernacular newspaper’s categorization of imperial gossip as social news, the News Dust column was located at the intersection of political news and trivial matters.

The leading tabloid the *Crystal* also defined its articles as news but more explicitly articulated amusement and news reportage as the two key ingredients. From 1920 to 1925, their

¹¹ *Shi Shi Xin Bao*, July 8, 1917.

¹² Liang Qichao and his new Progressive Party were the sponsor of *the China Times*.

explanatory emphasis had shifted from amusement to documentation. In 1920, when the chief editor Zhang Danfu (張丹斧) raised a new category of *xiewen* 諧聞 (amusing news) in contrast to serious news, he intended to highlight the entertainment centered approach so as to justify misinformation contained in their articles. He did not confine this category within the practice of tabloid press but broadly referred to gossip columns in major commercial dailies, entertainment periodicals and rumors included by gossip collections entitled with “interesting history”. He gave some examples of types of titles that would fall into this category, such as “someone hid himself behind his concubine’s toilet,” or “some others bought a theater costume to entertain himself”. According to Zhang, *xiewen* was a special genre of news characterized by a distinct entertainment value reserved for unverified and incomplete information. In this notion, “news” assigned a meaning of the contemporary relevance and newsworthiness while amusement defined one technique of news production that journalists adopted. He described all *xiewen* reporters, including many renowned journalists working for large newspapers, as content embellishers and distributors who played up the frivolity of their stories instead of fact-checking the details.¹³ But the priority given to amusement at the expense of veracity seemed to contradict the attribute of news, which usually offered information more reliably and with more authority than any other form of communication.

The tension between entertainment and news was solved five years later when the paper imputed a political meaning to the act of documenting gossip. *The Crystal* declared itself to be devoted to uncovering what the newspapers “disdain, dare not or do not have space to publish”

¹³ Danweng, “buque de xiewen he buque de yanlun,” [Unverified amusing news and unverified opinions] *Jing Bao*, September 6, 1920.

and the paper had published articles “possessing both entertaining and documentary traits”.¹⁴ The tabloid stated that they searched for and published facts that were concealed, manipulated or marginalized by major newspapers and the unscrupulous politicians behind them. The statement confirmed Zhang Danfu’s mixture of amusement and news but further stressed the political impartiality and honesty vis-à-vis the news reportage polluted by partisan and mainstream commercial dailies. This stance painted its commitment to documentation of an anti-partisanship tint against the backdrop of the social distrust of political news from official channels in the warlord era.

The political factionalism gave rise of partisan newspapers in the information sphere since the beginning years of the Republic. Political parties, cliques and regional warlords competed to invest in newspapers and news agencies to rally public support. In a Japanese intelligence report about major newspapers and their political sponsors, only two newspapers out of 16 were marked as “neutral”.¹⁵ This newspaper environment was the result of both the continuation of late Qing modes of news production, which viewed newspapers as a vehicle to advocate political ideas, as well as the increasing awareness of the importance of publicity among political figures. In 1923, the Shanghai Journalist Association encouraged journalists to arouse public sentiment by expressing their political views. Newspapers had yet to differentiate between facts and opinions.¹⁶ The penetration of partisan politics was not a secret to the reading public. In the preface to a contemporary edition of the novel *Unofficial History of the Capital City*, the writer recalled the

¹⁴ "Jing Bao yinian zhi huigu," [Jing Bao's Year in Review] *Jing Bao*, March 3, 1925.

¹⁵ Japanese Foreign Office Archives. No.1.3.1 32. The China Times was under the control of Liang Qichao’s group of constitutionalists, *Public Voice Daily* was the mouth of Duan Qirui’s clique and *Republican Daily* served the interests of the Nationalist Party.

¹⁶ Xiaoqun Xu, *Chinese Professionals and the Republican State: The Rise of Professional Associations in Shanghai, 1912-1937* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 172.

1920s as a period “when disreputable deeds of the political leaders had already spread widely in society, and yet news reports did not speak a single word.”¹⁷ There were economic and social reasons why the tabloid stayed away from partisan politics.¹⁸ Unlike most major newspapers, which had to live on subsidies, the market success of the Shanghai tabloid press guaranteed its financial independence. As discussed in the previous chapter, the gossip industry involved diverse players, including a large portion of non-elite contributors, and remained much more tolerant with different voices. Like Western journalistic departure from partisanship, to maximize readership constituted a key reason why they adopted a generalist market strategy.¹⁹ The commercial motivations shaped their aims of appealing to a broad audience as possible rather than constructing any coherent public opinion. Moreover, the declared uncovering of facts and voices buried by the powerful also served as a market tactic in their competition with serious newspapers.

The Crystal's distinction between serious newspapers as the mouthpiece of officialdom and itself as an unofficial representative of the buried truth established the public nature and the political significance of its own product. The associations and comparison between gossip and serious political news revealed that serious journalistic genres not only influenced tabloid narrative styles but also their understanding of gossip. But the changing role of supplementary political news in the “News Dust” in 1916 to the independent voice of tabloid gossip in 1920, however, was indicative of the diminishing serious journalism's representation of public opinion. The emphasis

¹⁷ Zuo Xiaohong. “Shi yeshi,” [This unofficial history] In *Chunming waishi* [Unofficial history of the capital city] (Beijing: Zhongguoxinwen Chubanshe, 1985), 1.

¹⁸ Diaries and memoirs all record that some small papers received financial aid from the Nationalist Party and Fengtian political clique during the Northern Expedition period, 1926-1927. The political penetration in to the tabloid world will be discussed more in Chapter 5.

¹⁹ Richard L. Kaplan, *Politics and the American Press: The Rise of Objectivity, 1865-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

on “documentation” by the tabloids gave meanings to facts and voices buried by mainstream newspapers and powerful political leaders. From the perspective of social stratification, *the Crystal* foregrounded voices from an inclusive society and an expansion of the Republican participation beyond political elites.

The tabloid’s dual emphasis on entertainment and documentation of hidden facts indicated a tendency towards a new conceptualization of popular political knowledge. Its constant pursuit of hilarity undermined the alleged greatness of high-class people, making them more appealing and approachable for the ordinary readers of different literacy levels, especially those who found serious news difficult or boring to follow. The implicit and explicit claims of the political significance of such accounts further legitimized the spread of gossip as a popular form of political communication. *Heimu* writings illustrate particularly well how this new knowledge conceptually challenged a top-down version of political knowledge made for the public and gave more agency to commoners in the process of production and consumption.

***Heimu* as a Frame of Political Gossip**

The effect of expanding gossip circuits in the early Republic was not limited to the emergence of low-class news experts and expansion of the audience, but also reflected to vision of ordinary non-professional people as the embodiment of political knowledge. In the following sections, I analyze *heimu* (黑幕) books as a communication medium that affected political engagement in a society where the idea of citizenship was yet to be fixed. By ways of selecting, styling and framing, different genres furnished new and recycled stories with various features and interpretations.²⁰ I argue that *heimu* as a genre of gossip publication combined political criticism

²⁰ Scholars in the field of print culture have argued for the importance of genre as a specific analytical

and entertainment consumption which fueled readers' enthusiasm of making assessment of their leaders.

"*Heimu*" was one of the most successful printing genres in the late 1910s that featured social and political gossip. The term "*heimu*" literally refers to the black stage curtain that masks backstage operations. It is a metaphor for previously hidden and disreputable conduct. Previous scholarship commonly translates *heimu* into scandal, since the meaning of *heimu* in the early republican context did not differ so much from our understanding of scandal elsewhere in terms of the discursive power to discredit its subjects and the publicity nature. But *heimu* as a generic category and writing practice differentiated from the notion of scandals as mediated public event defined in historical and political science scholarship.²¹ As the organization of stories in a *heimu* book usually resembled other gossip collections, the fragmented topics and figures prevented public attention from focusing on a single character or event. Therefore, *heimu* stories could not be developed into any event with sequential structure or to generate large impact. Many studies on political scandals in modern societies emphasize the public demand for a punishment to the behaviors in question to be a key element to define a scandal.²² The early Republican *heimu* stories, however, did not aim to elicit public response to rule on political misbehaviors. Instead, the story producers called for information sharing while employing narrative techniques to add on an aura of secrecy to increase sales. Toward this end, *heimu* writers' handling of the relationship between

category instead of a too broad category such as the print media. See Lisa Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2014).

²¹ John Thompson, *Political Scandal: Power and Visibility in the Media Age* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000). William A. Cohen, *Sex Scandal: The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).

²² Nancy E. Marion, *The Politics of Disgrace: The Role of Political Scandal in American Politics* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2010), 12-14.

secrecy and publicity differed from scandal reporter's endeavor to fully uncover the secrets. More recently, Nicola Parsons's work on British secret history distinguished scandals from gossip by defining scandal as a definition mechanism that associates negative meanings onto certain affairs and gossip as a participatory discourse.²³ This demarcation does not apply to the early Republican *heimu* products, as they exhibited a desire to control moral values but nonetheless remained open to different stories and interpretations.

The period from 1916 to 1920 were the heyday of *heimu* genre: the term appeared everywhere - as titles for the column, fictions, and collections, as well as in the keywords for other book advertisements. In Oct. 1916, a supplementary column in the *China Times* applied the concept of *heimu* to feature the disclosure of behind-the-scene deeds. A surge in sales encouraged the column to produce bi-weekly monographic compilations of published stories and to make a radical move towards exposure of political secrets the next year.²⁴ Seeing such tremendous commercial success, many other publishing houses immediately followed and developed varied print products ranging from short story collections to coherent novel-styled long narratives. In 1918, a massive edition of *Panorama of scandals in China* (中國黑幕大觀) was published. Scandals in officialdom comprised the first and most eye-catching section and were prominently featured on the cover page as a selling point. The popular literary magazine *Saturday* also favored *heimu* fictions during these days - a sub-genre of *heimu* writing, which takes the form of literary narrative yet aligns itself closely with the news release. These fictions used fictitious names of the protagonists but, as claimed by authors, were based on the real private activities of political figures.

²³ Nicola Parsons, *Reading Gossip in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

²⁴ According to the newspaper's announcement. The sale of the newspaper increased several thousand copies thanks to the *heimu* stories. *Shi Shi Xin Bao*, August 7, 1917, 1.

Contemporaneous writers and editors such as Zhou Zuoren, addressed all these forms collectively as “*heimu* casual readings” (黑幕閒書).²⁵

Here, I treat *heimu* columns, short stories in *heimu* collections, and *heimu* fictions as sub-forms of this same media for popular political communication. Earlier studies adopting the conventional literature taxonomy singled out *heimu* fiction and analyze it as another genre of popular fiction, paralleled with sensational butterfly fictions of the beauty-scholar theme.²⁶ This view prevents us from seeing the the *heimu* writings as a dynamic and changeable practice in the continuum ranging from news making to novel writing. As will be shown in the below, the operation of *heimu* columns inspired the gathering measures of *heimu* collections. Fiction writers also inscribed the practice of news reporting and news reading into their narratives. These works shared the same subject matter and marketing strategies. Only by placing them together do we see how this genre functioned to open up new communication channels for exchanging political knowledge. For introducing this genre, I use the highest selling and most monumental collection, *Panorama of Scandals in China*, as an example to explain why I consider *heimu* writings as a genre of gossip publication.

The genre’s narrative interests in sexualized aspects of political individuals is indicative of its gossipy nature. The political section of *Panorama of Scandals in China* consists of two types of stories: they are either about domestic matters of leading political figures, or private behaviors

²⁵ Zhongmi, “Lun *heimu*,” [A discussion on *heimu* stories] *Mei Zhou Ping Lun* no. 4 (1919).

²⁶ In earlier examinations of *heimu* writings, the primary focus has been placed on *heimu xiaoshuo* (scandal fiction) on the one hand and criticized for its low artistic values on the other hand. See Lu Xun *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilue* [A brief history of Chinese fiction] (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 1990). Perry Link, *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies: Popular Fiction in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Cities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981). Fan Boqun, “*Heimu zhengda, heimu xiaoshuo, jiehei yundong*,” [Gathering *heimu* stories, *heimu* fictions and muckraking movement] in *Wen Xue Ping Lun* no. 2 (2005): 57-64.

in relation to the abuse of political power. The stories by themselves did not differ from other gossipy accounts, such as the one about General Duan's bribery with beauty and the way a minister's wife pleased the president's relatives. Collections were filled with stories like president's illicit relationship with a minister's wife, minister's bedchamber stories, love affairs between warlords and prostitutes, and so on. Take for example the first page in the political section of *Panorama of scandals in China*. The first story tells how a militarist and Yuan's political follower shamelessly ordered four-legged pants especially for sex games. An appended illustration depicts an official trying on the pants with two concubines standing nearby. The second story recounts how Duan used to bribe Manchu princes with his concubine. The narratives sensationalized and vulgarized insignificant private sexual behaviors in their attempts to appeal to non-elite readers. This is the reason why Zhou Zuoren sharply rebuked the genre as a miscellaneous combination of "irrelevant trivial matters and amorous stories."

Compared to the late Qing usage of the term *heimu* in newspapers, the genre had narrowed and trivialized the notion of *heimu* from exposure of political corruptions to the corruptive lifestyles. The term of *heimu* had already appeared in serious political news to expose bureaucratic corruption and abuses of political power in the late Qing.²⁷ A cartoon illustration in the *Anhui vernacular newspaper* (安徽白話報) in 1909 depicts journalists unveiling official corruption behind the construction of national railway. In the picture, vernacular newspapers use their pens to raise the curtain that concealed the officials' embezzlement of the funds for public transportation infrastructure (figure 1). The uncovering of government corruption aimed at shaping public debates and influencing political process. But the *heimu* collection defined political scandal as

²⁷ Around the same time, novels such as Li Boyuan's *Guanchang xianxingji* [Officialdom Unmasked] also reveals government corruption. The early Republican genre was developed from this late Qing "unmasking" literature.

follows: “Once one person obtained an official position, all his relatives share the rank and honor. They travel in high carts drawn by four horses, wear luxurious clothes, entertain with elaborate feasts, own beautiful concubines and surround themselves with servants. They satisfy their desires by ruthlessly exploiting ordinary people. These are government scandals.”²⁸

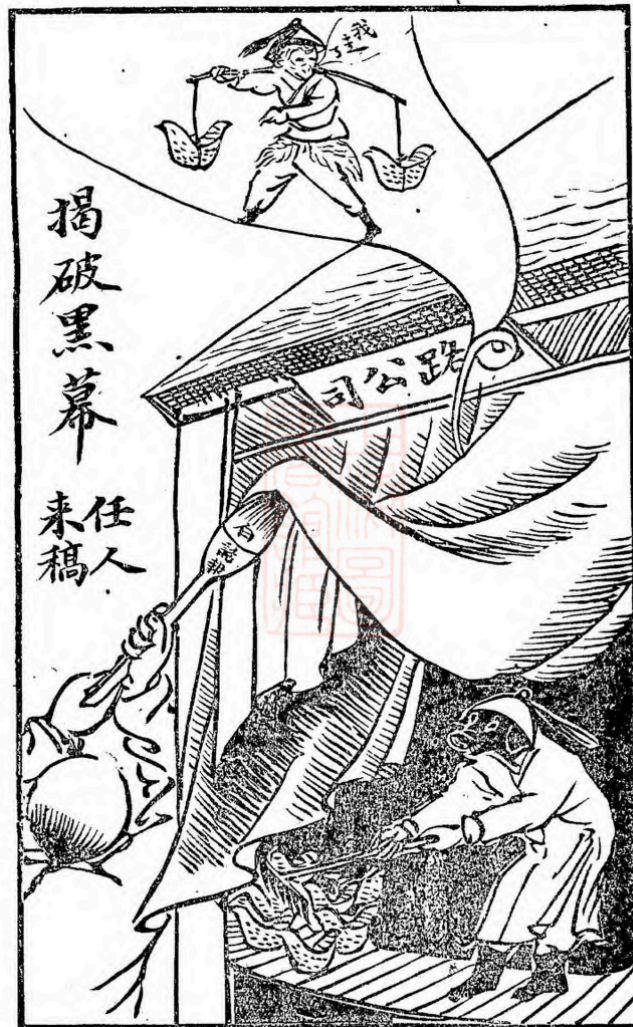


Figure 1. The caption reads: disclose the inside story. Cartoon provided by Renren. (Anhui Bai Hua Bao 1909, No. 2, 1.)

²⁸ Liu Dahuo, “Zhongguo heimu daguan xu,” [preface to *Panorama of scandals in China*] in *Zhongguo wenxueshi ziliao quanbian* [The complete compendium of research sources for Chinese literature history] Volume of Modern China (Beijing: Zhishi banquan chubanshe, 2010), 84-85.

The different editorial goals and consequently different scope of readership explain this change. Unlike the late Qing efforts at publicizing reformist agendas, *heimu* as a genre of gossip publications was born out of the pursuit of maximum commercial interests. Book editors envisioned a larger body of intended readers including educated gentlemen, innocent teenagers, and poor people.²⁹ Satisfying the social craving for “inside” sensational stories, the popularity of *heimu* books was indeed unprecedented. The huge sales even surprised book producers. Intellectuals complained that there were three or four advertisements of different *heimu* publications every day in newspapers in 1919.³⁰ *Panorama of Scandals in China* had been reprinted six times in three years and was sold even in the remote province of Yunnan.³¹ Middle-school students particularly favored pocket-sized *heimu* collections for the convenience to read covertly in class hidden behind a textbook.³²

In catering to a noticeable diverse readership, the *heimu* collection framed the consumption of gossip in terms of political complaints and moral indictments but did not shape the critiques into a particular political direction. Take for example *Panorama of scandals in China*. The prefaces and letters from educators, novelists and local governors all over the nation constituted a large collection by themselves in the beginning pages to explain the editorial purposes of the book. Some

²⁹ Wang Dungen. “Xu yi,” [Preface one] In Lu Binsheng ed., *Zhongguo heimu daguan* [*Panorama of scandals in China*] (Shanghai: Zhongguo tushu jicheng gongsi, 1918).

³⁰ Song Yunbin, “heimu shu,” [heimu books] *Xin Qing Nian* 6, no. 1 (1919): 85.

³¹ The cover page of the collection provides information of local distributors. The book stores selling this collection ranged from northeastern provinces to remote provinces such as Shanxi and Guizhou. See *Zhongguo heimu daguan*, 581.

³² Miaoran, “Xin zazhi he heimu xiaoshuo,” [New magazines and heimu stories] in *Xin Fu Lv* no. 6 (1920): 31.

prefaces attributed anti-corruption message to the collections. Editors criticized the exercise of political power for personal interests and reprehended the unrestricted personal desires of the statesmen that transgressed the moral codes.³³ Others blamed the deceitful ideas of freedom and equality advocated by the May Fourth intellectuals for deteriorating moral decadency. A few supporters read it as plain facts simply to equip the readers with more knowledge about social and political realities.³⁴

Notwithstanding the multiple and sometimes conflicting interpretations in the prefaces, *heimu* writings facilitated the spread of political messages to less-educated and unserious readers: commoners had the right to monitor and judge contemporaneous political leaders. For readers who probably skipped the prefaces and flipped directly to the accounts of illicit affairs and bedroom farces, it was the term “*heimu*” in the book title or advertisements that drew their initial attention. The subject matter presupposed public disapproval. It declared the right to uncover concealed facts in high places and to investigate the behavior of current power holders. By centrally featuring trivial matters, the genre affirmed the overlap of the pursue of entertainment and political knowledge. It announced that a playful motivation would never disqualify a commoner from making his judgment about the high class. The genre thus was able to involve a new social group who had little interest in serious political news.

***Heimu* as a Driver of Public Involvement**

I look at the *heimu* not only as textual narratives but also as a force that developed upon the genre’s inherent tension between unveiling and concealing to activate readers’ role as

³³ “Xu,” [Preface] in *Zhongguo heimu daguan*.

³⁴ “Xu,” [Preface] in *Zhongguo heimu daguan*.

knowledge producers, truth investigators and information disseminators. The *heimu* genre's distinctive marketing strategies and a set of narrative techniques generated a force that stimulated readers' participation. Publishers' calls for public contributions placed less emphasis on the single author but claimed to collect voices from low society. The semblance of secrecy that fuzzified identifying details also turned readers into detectives and stimulated more public discussion. The genre engendered multi-way conversations among readers, writers and editors. Des Forges draws on Benedict Anderson's notion of the "imagined community" to suggest a model of shared understanding to analyze the relationship between authors, readers, media and genres in the late Qing and republican Shanghai. Des Forges established his model on an examination of the reader's engagement with media text by imagining the urban modernity.³⁵ The *heimu* publications manifested a relationship between readers, printed texts and media players including editors and advertisers, in the real world engagement. It is the pleasure rather than any patriotic sentiment or specific moral claims that drove the popular participation in political discussion. This informal discussion, as not fully institutionalized, granted the common readers sufficient freedom to develop political opinions on their own terms.

From its inception, this genre directly connected the public to knowledge production. When the *China Times* called for public contributions to its *heimu* column in 1916, readers' letters exposing ugly secrets poured in.³⁶ In May 1917, the column ambitiously renewed its concentration on political scandals in Beijing. In its attempt to replicate the previous successful intelligence gathering mode, the column printed an announcement welcoming information classified into 16

³⁵ Alexander Townsend Des Forges, *Mediasphere Shanghai : The Aesthetics of Cultural Production* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007).

³⁶ *Shi Shi Xin Bao*, July 15, 1917, 1.

categories, including: officials, political parties, politicians, the inner palace, Qing royalists, the monarch, actors, prostitutes, etc.³⁷ Other small cultural entrepreneurs also followed the columnist way of compiling collections. Sources of their books comprised of public contributions and invited composition from anonymous writers.³⁸ As for book publishers and sellers, this gathering method was both useful as an attention-getting device and an effective, yet cheap way to collect many stories.

Furthermore, announcements calling for public contribution attest to an unprecedented openness of expressing opinions and a new way of engaging the public in discussions about political figures. Inviting every reader to participate as a contributor, they distinguished a body of collectively-made knowledge from the prepared knowledge for public. This production mode involved a different public from the late Ming case of *haoshizhe* (idlers who liked to gossip and meddle) as collectors of tales about contemporary events or the recent past. According to McLaren's investigation, literati publishers sometimes compiled materials collected by *haoshizhe* into a vernacular book in the sixteenth century. These earlier idlers were a group of village schoolteachers, village pedants and ally scholars.³⁹ The enlarged authorship in this late imperial case reveals the expanding membership of the elite due to the commercialization of culture. But the knowledge of state politics still moved from the privileged literati producers to the non-elite

³⁷ “Benbao zhengqiu beijing heimu,” [We call for heimu stories of Beijing] *Shi Shi Xin Bao*, May 1, 1917. The new plan was abortive and the heimu column was removed in 1918 under the pressure of open criticism from the central government.

³⁸ “Heimu xiaoshuo” [heimu stories], in Song Yuanfang ed. *Zhongguo chuban shiliao jindaibufen* [Sources for Chinese publishing history: modern section] 3 (Wuhan: Hubei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2004), 277-278.

³⁹ Anne E. McLaren, “Constructing New Reading Publics in late Ming China,” in Cynthia Joanne Brokaw and Kai-wing Chow, eds., *Printing and Book Culture in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 163-167.

populace in the form of popular novels, current-event dramas and vernacular newspapers.⁴⁰ The general public was never permitted to engage in the production, nor did they have any means to do so. The early Republican call for public contributions was not merely a continuation of conventional practice. The meaning of the public had transformed. In principle, the gossiping public now contained all Chinese citizens regardless of class, gender, profession or educational background. Anyone literate who overheard whispers about a militarist's proclivities from a prostitute or saw a governor's car passing by could share his knowledge by participating in the book-making process.

The newspaper and popular magazine editor Wang Dungen (王鈍根, 1888-1951) saw *heimu* collections as a cluster of voices from those who were suppressed and jeopardized by the deteriorating political surroundings. In his preface to *Panorama of Scandals in China*, Wang defines the genre as a peculiar way of communication that facilitates the powerless to express their grievance. He asserted, "Stories were told by those who suffered from despicable and deceitful conduct, yet were unable to achieve justice. Lettermen took them down and preserved them. *Heimu* stories are those notes taken."⁴¹ Certainly, publishers and editors did not merely play the role of a recorder and loudspeaker, as they still held the power for selecting, rephrasing, organizing and framing the gathered stories. Nonetheless, Wang expected a turn in the routes of transmission away from one-way communication from a few journalist-writers to the commoners. Wang further

⁴⁰ In addition to the previous example of *haoshizhe*, the late imperial novels and current-event dramas all conveyed political knowledge to ordinary people. See Wu Jen-shu, "Mingqing zhiji jiangnan shishiju de fazhan ji qi suo fanying de shehui xintai," [The development of drama on current events and the social mentality in Ming-Qing Transitional Period] *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo jikan* 31(1999): 1-48. Paul August Vierthaler, "Quasi-History and Public Knowledge: A Social History of Late Ming and Early Qing Unofficial Historical Narratives" (Dissertation, Yale University, 2014).

⁴¹ Wang Dungen. "Xu yi," [Preface one] in *Zhongguo heimu daguan*.

promoted the stories gleaned from below as a legitimate source of knowledge for ordinary people.⁴² Wang held that stories about disgraceful statesmen in the recent decade of political instability have filled the gap left by serious newspapers to expand ordinary people's knowledge about high politics. In particular, he highly praised the collection as an good extra-curricular textbook to impart supplemental knowledge for the young generation.⁴³ In Wang's vision, the *heimu* collection was knowledge both from and for the populace.

The *heimu* writings challenged the existing power relations in political knowledge production by recognizing the radical conversion of conventional receivers into active producers. Readers' engagement was not rare in the realm of cultural production in Shanghai, as shown by the popularity of reader-completed narratives in the 1910s and 1920s. Butterfly fiction writers sometimes organized a compositional circle to finish a book project collectively. They started a narrative and then solicited contributions from readers to continue it.⁴⁴ The *heimu* collective production was significant for it brought the practice into the realm of political knowledge. Statesmen were publicly listed as one of the topics that the ordinary readers could compose a story on. Publishers and editors now permitted and encouraged the multi-directional flow, placing themselves onto converging and exchanging nodes in a less hierarchical information network. The agency of the general readers as information processors and narrators began to be counted as one real parameter, rather than as the concept of a perceived public taste that influences the editor's choice.

⁴² Wang worked as an editor at the *Shanghai News* starting in the late Qing. He also edited popular magazines such as *Saturday*.

⁴³ Wang Dungen, "Xu yi," [Preface one] in *Zhongguo heimu daguan*.

⁴⁴ Haiyan Lee, "All the Feelings That Are Fit to Print: The Community of Sentiment and the Literary Public Sphere in China, 1900-1918," *Modern China* 27, no. 3 (2001): 291-327.

To hook the readers, the genre also adopted some narrative technique to added an aura of mystery onto the portrayal of real-life individuals and events. Publishers were selling both the hidden information and the pleasure of decoding, which led to more interactive and productive reading experiences. Book producers played with omitted vital information to increase the tension between veiling and unveiling in advertisements and book contents. In 1919, a new book titled, “*Record of Old Crab Walking Sideways*” (老蟹橫行記) was advertised as having documented the secret relationship between leading political figures and prostitutes. The advertisement substituted the first names with blanks in order to arouse the curiosity of the potential book purchasers.⁴⁵ Stories in *Panorama of scandals in China* also depicted contemporaneous figures in a transparent disguise that enabled readers to decode. Editors removed first names of characters but provided sufficient information including the surnames and their official titles. The introduction page stated that names were obscured in order to give the protagonists an opportunity to turn over a new leaf, as the editorial goal was to disclose the events, rather than attack any individual.⁴⁶ Although the forewords advised the readers not to conjecture the exact persons, the specified guidance authenticated the contents and ironically suggested readers to identify the texts’ real-life referents.

⁴⁵ Xiong, “Wo zhi huashi tan,” [My Views on Prostitute Affairs] *Jing Bao*, December 9, 1919.

⁴⁶ Wang Dungen, “Xu yi,” [Preface one] in *Zhongguo heimu daguan*.

昨宵心事。猝難降。小鹿心頭。兀自撞結。婢無端尋破綻。啓衾道。有臥痕。雙。殘尾。則題抱存。注。意。亞。男。走。筆。八。字。鈴。以。葫。蘆。小。印。朱。文。曰。梁。粵。秀。印。殆。園。中。曖。昧。之。作。歸。寓。後。詢。諸。知。者。謂。亞。男。固。梁。口。女。公。子。名。並。勸。某。焚。燬。以。絕。其。迹。焉。

●某參謀夫人(亞)

袁世凱時代。參謀次長某君之夫人。長身玉立。好作西裝。貌雖不美。而雅善修飾。交際社會中。頗負盛名。嘗以維持某小學校事。謁袁世凱。袁慨付三萬金。京師相傳。袁總統之倚畀某夫人。非尋常所可幾及。袁死。某夫人又謹事黎總統。黎於某夫人。雖不若袁



之密切。然總統府中常見某夫人踪跡。蓋黎總統之東西兩上房太太。非某夫人不歡矣。說者謂某參謀長之所以得占重要位置者。半出夫人之力云。

●唐太太

唐太太者。前國會議員唐口口之夫人也。黎氏就任總統後。唐以太太之力。得近顯要。唐太太能昭事總統府之東上房太太。先求為義女。東上房太太不允。唐太太乃跪抱其膝。強呼乾娘。東上房太太無可如何。始笑頷之。自是唐太太日侍左右。獻殷勤。旋勸東上房太太率隊往歐。西上房太太然之。御駕親征。西上房之陳設。盡被搗毀。西上房太太手攜首飾匣。逃至總統辦公室。首如

政界之黑幕

三

Figure 2. One page in the political section of *Panorama of scandals in China* (Lu Binsheng ed. *Zhongguo heimu daguan*, 3)

This tension-building mechanism also helped to transform a plain piece of gossip into an enticing plot. *Beijing's Secrets* (北京之秘密) was a typical *heimu* fiction published in the end of 1916.⁴⁷ The fiction was a loose collection of stories told by the narrator, a butterfly whose physical form disguised his furtive glance into the lives of prominent people in Beijing. This surrealist and fictional narrator did not provide an interpretative framework that links stories or suggest their

⁴⁷ Dieye. *Beijing zhi mimi* [Secrets in Beijing] (Shanghai: Dasheng Tushuju, 1916).

significance, but only canopied real-life contents, including ministers' domestic secrets and the under-the-table operations of political clubs, as it toured the city. In one chapter, the butterfly oversaw a newsagent uncovering a secret. A politically ambitious minister reportedly utilized the famous Peking opera singer Mei Lanfang as a sexual allure to approach Yuan Shikai's elder son. The story came from a news piece about Liang Shiyi (梁士詒, 1869-1933), the minister of communication in Yuan Shikai's government, in the *China Times*'s "News Dust" Column.⁴⁸ The author blanked out the name that had been conspicuously printed in the original news article but added abundant information regarding his career path, political clique, residential district, hobbies of gambling and obsession with prostitutes. Simply concealing the names instead of using fictitious ones conveyed a stronger sense of reliability and confidentiality. By giving more referential information, the author invoked more gossip to add favor to the original story.

This case of transplantation from news pieces suggests that the omission of information was not a tactic employed to circumvent state prosecution, but to nurture a dialogical reading practice premised on the existence of common knowledge. The success of the *heimu* genre attested to the wide circulation of political information and readers' familiarity of principle figures. Only when readers were equipped with the basic knowledge of contemporary political affairs were they capable of construing the narrative's references and relocating it in relation to other occurrences. Given its collective production mode, many *heimu* collections reiterated gossip already in circulation but adapted them in a different narrative device. The *heimu* writers presumed the readers to know as much as the authors to fill intentional gaps in the narrative. The innuendos invited readers to fill the blanks and thereby created the pleasure of solving a riddle and re-

⁴⁸ *Beijing zhi mimi*, 118-121. "Mei Lanfang yu dizhi," [Mei Lanfang and the Monarchism] *Shi Shi Xin Bao*, June 15, 1916.

affirming themselves as insiders.

The deliberate information withholding would also stage the psychological setting against solo reading and instead suggested the readers to either resort to other relevant text or to other people in order to piece together the puzzle. The large pool of gossip formed a referential structure of the political knowledge to help identify political individuals and contextualize these identifications within a broad picture of contemporary national politics. Other gossip collections also explicated the cross-referentiality of gossip. In the preface to *An Interesting History of the Anfu Clique*, the editor reminds readers of the abundance of gossip collections elsewhere to be used as references.⁴⁹ When readers agreed with someone else's interpretation or disputed their identification, they were involved in exchanging information and opinions of political figures with others. The butterfly narrator in *Beijing's Secrets* explicitly encouraged readers to read and share the secret stories while socializing with people: "Once these mysteries are elucidated, they should suffice to facilitate conversations by the drinking table."⁵⁰ The work therefore placed its readers in private and public gathering spaces to communicate with other idle chatterers, and linked the printed text to oral channel to encourage multi-directional gossip exchange.

Much evidence shows that the active discussions and exchange occurring on oral sites extended the gossiping community to include illiterate people. Teahouses and theaters in the republican urban settings served as the site that linked the print stories with lowbrow performances and idle chatters. In 1920, a writer ridiculed the ignorance of an old countryman who heard people gossiping about the decline of the Anfu clique in the teahouse, but misunderstood Anfu as some

⁴⁹ Hong Yinsheng, "Xu," [Preface] in *Anfu qushi* [An interesting history of the Anfu clique] (Shanghai: Hongwen tushuguan, 1920).

⁵⁰ Dieye, *Beijing zhi mimi*. 118.

inauspicious signs.⁵¹ The article revealed the active discussion of political affairs among teahouse patrons and the reception of stories in different lights when gossip reached the grass-roots who cared less about high politics.

Readers' engagement with different texts and one another resulted in various versions of the hidden "truth" depending on their speculations. That is to say, the dialogical practice not only performed the act of uncovering but would also produce more facts and meanings by fixing the contents on different suspicious figures. When people discussed suspicious characters with surroundings, these new facts dispersed. The readers became producers and disseminators of derivatives of *heimu* stories.

The public production and interactive consumption showed changing political attitudes and behaviors. The marketing strategies and narrative techniques stimulated readers to process received stories, communicate with others for missing pieces of information and contribute their own versions. Here, we see how gossip consumption contributed to the unruly participation in disseminating, digesting and reproducing political knowledge through active public exchange.

Conclusion

The commercialization of gossip about political leaders in the early Republican print media bridged the visible few and the commoners. The dual emphasis on entertainment and political significance led to the continuous and recurrent exposure of trivial aspects from the lives of political figures. Coordinated by the free market and flowing nature of gossip, the press and their socially diverse readers were inseparably connected and cooperated in producing this new body of popular political knowledge.

⁵¹ Han Qiu, "Anfu," *Jing Bao*, August 24, 1920.

The fluid boundary between the gossip production and consumption requires a revision of prevalent understanding of knowledge making. The gossip economy not only engaged a group of information experts and traders across varying social-economic strata but also retained an open network that invited the audience from the general public to contribute. The growing agency of a common audience inevitably amounted to a change in power dynamics of knowledge production and information control. Non-elite players in the gossip economy challenged conventional top-down knowledge transmission and the exclusive production mode. The conventional top-down and one-way knowledge transmission was transformed into a multi-directional information exchange and the sense of exclusivity in the field of knowledge production was challenged. In fact, transformations of communication that have been attributed to the rise of internet today can be traced back to the early Republican era.

The implication of the gossip economy for the Chinese citizenship was significant. These new forms of engaging in both knowledge production and consumption transformed passive audiences to active speakers, disseminators, and reactors. They influenced the knowledge production, not only indirectly through “public taste” but also as direct agents, who contribute new information and turn the print media into a platform that allowed different narratives and opinions. They crafted an alternative citizenship that view politics in the lens of play. This popular engagement was propelled more by the commercial interests and the need of pleasure, rather than political commitment or any sense of patriotism. Disrespecting the political authority of any government prevented any further intention of utilizing or constructing official channels for political communication. Such unruly citizenship stood in the way of state civic education. The enormous popularity, the lowbrow taste, wild political implications and threatening power of involvement eventually made this new genre a target for intellectual criticism and state suppression.

CHAPTER THREE

The Presence of a Central Government

Introduction

The production and consumption of political scandals and gossip in the late 1910s undermined the dominance of the elite in the realm of cultural production and state authority over knowledge production. Frivolous and derogatory discussions about presidents, ministers and provincial governors bedeviled the politically powerful and impaired the political authority of the central government. Duan Qirui once bitterly complained to foreign envoys that “Chinese people are good at fabricating stories.”¹ The state's attitude towards gossip and rumors about political elites was changing. In late imperial China when emperors controlled a network of royal secret agents, information from unofficial channels was a crucial part of the state surveillance networks. Special commissioners or secret police forces used to gather political rumors as supplementary intelligence to extend the knowledge of the emperor.² But in the early Republican era, as the media landscape expanded, public discussion about highly ranked officials threatened the Chinese state's information control and its century-long authority over knowledge and morality.

This chapter inquires into the Beijing government's strategies to curb the dissemination of unfavorable information under the framework of the state-led popular education. Previous scholarship on the Chinese press in the treaty port environment usually regards the development

¹ Xiamen University Library ed., *Qian riben moci yanjiusuo qingbao ziliao* [Intelligence Reports from Suetsugu Research Institute] 1 (Guilin: Guangxi shifan chubanshe, 1997), 155.

² Shih-shan Henry Tsai, *The Eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), Chapter 5.

before the ascent of the Nationalist state in 1927 as a stage of print capitalism largely unregulated by the government.³ However, this chapter finds that these state efforts included installing a new censorship system to screen popular cultural products, directing communicating with the writers by means of open letter and nationalizing the practice of open lectures to disseminate state-sanctioned knowledge. As explained in the first section, at the core of this dual-pronged solution was the institutionalization of a collaboration between the state and intellectuals, the Popular Education Research Society (通俗教育研究會 or PERS), to serve as the national center of popular education in the late 1910s.

The Beijing government's effort at popular education and combating the stream of gossip and rumor reveals the function of a central government with limited coercive power. After 1916 when power fell to an assortment of militarists, bureaucratic bodies, and local gentry, the ongoing military competitions and faction struggles vying for dominance had already rendered the state power in a rather fluid status and weakened its control in the cultural realm. Recent research has illuminated the disciplinary power of the early Republican state by concentrating on local government agencies such as the police, the local court and the training workshops.⁴ These studies presume the deficiencies of Beiyang as a nominal central government.⁵ By organizing cultural elites, screening public knowledge, communicating with independent writers and

³ Christopher Reed summarized the observations of many scholars including Mittler, Hockx, Gimpel and his own. See Cynthia Joanne Brokaw and Christopher A. Reed, eds., *From Woodblocks to the Internet: Chinese Publishing and Print Culture in Transition, circa 1800 to 2008* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2010), 23.

⁴ David Strand, *Rickshaw Beijing: City People and Politics in the 1920s* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993). Janet Chen, *Guilty of Indigence. 1900-1952* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012). Xiaoqun Xu, *Trial of Modernity: Judicial Reform in Early Twentieth-Century China, 1901-1937* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

⁵ The Beiyang government was internationally recognized as the legitimate central government of Republican China from 1912 to 1928. Because it was in place of the capital city Beijing, it was called Beijing government by people of the time.

institutionalizing open lectures, however, the PERS insisted on the presence of the central government, rather than individual warlords or any regional powers, as the only state authority over the realm of moral guidance and knowledge production. The attempted regulation revealed the persistence of a centralized cultural view in the early Republic.

The operation of the PERS demonstrates how the central government used cultural elites and social forces to rebuild its own moral and knowledge authority. By organizing the PERS, the central government formalized and institutionalized state cooperation with cultural and social elites and thus changed the late imperial nexus pattern of state-society cooperation in local societies.⁶ The state authorization rose to an overarching position to structure and systemize its cooperation with cultural and social elites. The first section of this chapter looks into the nature and organization of the PERS to demonstrate the state authority and administrative framework that contained the cultural elites in addition to its reliance on the expertise of independent intellectuals to formulate policy and censor popular products. The rest of the chapter explores how the state through the PERS defined popular knowledge for the public, constructed its suasive force to interfere in knowledge making and diffusion, and instructed citizens on how to participate in political discussion. The PERS acknowledged the diffusing effect achieved by unofficial narratives but rejected gossip as a legitimate source of public political knowledge. It set up the censoring criteria of factuality and morality as the resolution to the ramifications of the industry's pursuit of entertainment value in the realm of cultural production. The practice of moral persuasion and open lectures aimed at establishing a nationalist basis for political participation.

⁶ Prasenjit Duara, *Culture, Power, and the State : Rural North China, 1900-1942* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1988).

Facing the reality of being a weaker and less resourceful power in the face of commerce and unleashed social forces, the central government also asserted its moral and knowledge authority by expanding its ruling base. I do not mean it relied on the prestige and power of cultural elites, which was a continued practice since the late imperial era, but the state acknowledged citizens' moral agency and compromised to popular political engagement. Middle and lower ranked popular novelists together with the cultural and social elites became constitutive elements of the multiple sources of legitimacy that the state experimented with in its transition from an absolute imperial state to a republican one.

The Popular Education Research Society

Situated in the epistemological shift in the late 19th century and early 20th century, official attention to published political gossip was tied to a new emphasis on popular education. The Qing authoritative hierarchy of knowledge relegated literati small talk the lowest rank: “oral literature” under “anthology.”⁷ The late imperial state cared very little about popular knowledge except when it needed useful techniques from popular religion, for instance, to pray for rain.⁸ The late 1910s and early 1920s brought increased scholarly and state interest in popular knowledge. The incipient Republican state started to conceptualize knowledge as either popular

⁷ Andrew Plaks argues that the biased rank of these genres is more a specifically Qing phenomenon. In the late Ming, they were an integral part of serious literary heritage. See Andrew H. Plaks, “Full-Length Hsiao-Shuo and the Western Novel: A Generic Reappraisal,” in *China and West: Comparative Literature Studies*, William Tay, ed. (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1978), 168.

⁸ For example, local governments sought out techniques from popular religion to pray for rain. See Jeffrey Snyder-Reinke. *Dry Spells: State Rainmaking and Local Governance in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009). The late Ming regulation over commercial book market subjugated literati practices of promoting personal fame and their vulgar strategy rather than supervising the influence on popular mentalities. See Suyoung Son, “*Writing for Print: Zhang Chao and Literati-Publishing in Seventeenth-Century China.*” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Chicago, 2010), Chapter 4.

or scholarly, and saw the former as crucial to cultivating a national identity and modern citizenship.⁹ Prepared by the late Qing idea of popular education with the socially inclusive concept of citizenship, the Republican government institutionalized and led popular education.¹⁰ The founding of the divisions of Social Education under the educational departments in central and local governments in Republican China marked a new phase in the development of education outside the school curriculum. Public libraries and lecture halls were erected in cities and towns.¹¹ The study of folklore as a field of scholarly learning and as a means of connecting to the people gained prominence among New Culture intellectuals from 1918 to 1926.¹² The shared goal of knowledge popularization and citizen education brought the two together under the PERS to promote officially sanctioned popular knowledge.

In need of assistance from educational experts, in 1915 the Ministry of Education re-established the Popular Education Research Society as a state apparatus to oversee popular cultural products and occasionally to assist in intelligence gathering as part of policy-making. The organization set up its headquarters in the capital city and nationwide. Three sections in the organization instructed practices of publishing, performing and lecturing, each section directly

⁹ “Jiaoyu buzhang fuyuan shu zhici,” [The speech by the Minister of Education Mr. Fu Yuanshu] in *Tongsu jiaoyu yanjiuhui disanci gongzuo baogao* [The third working report of the Popular Education Research Society]. Special Document, 1.

¹⁰ In the late Qing, early reformist activists firstly spread the concept of popular education with the ideology of all-embracing national community. Learning from Japan and German, reformers engaged in activities such as organizing private lectures for the public. Late Qing reformists also had started practices of social education such as organizing private open lecture to disseminate western knowledge including political ideas to the public. Some of the leading activists entered the Republican government and became officials in the division of social education.

¹¹ In many cases, the state and social elite cooperated in establishing libraries for popular readings. See Zhuang Yu, “Cangan Beijing tushuguan jilue,” [A sketchy record of the visit to Beijing Library] in *Jiaoyu zazhi*, no. 4 (1914): 101-104.

¹² Jie Gao, “Promoting ‘Low Culture’: The Origins of the Modern Chinese Folklore Movement,” *Canadian Journal of History* no. 1 (2015): 3–29.

reporting to the Ministry of Education (MOE). The section of *xiaoshuo* (small talk) inspected the content and language of short stories, novels, travel guides, magazines and supplementary pages of commercial dailies.¹³ The drama section supervised stage scripts, movies and phonograph records. The lecture section took care of lecturer training programs and lecture contents. Although the stated objective of PERS was to improve people's intelligence, personality, and morality, an investigation of popular cultural products performed the dual function of information overseeing and fact gathering as a reference for policy-making. Before the government launched nationwide social surveys in the 1920s, the PERS kept the central government apprised of current social tendencies and people's concerns.¹⁴ The Ministry of Domestic Affairs at times requested assistance from the PERS in collecting and reporting on popular literature.¹⁵ The PERS showed the government vision of the society as a site of information rather than legitimate knowledge producers.

The PERS presented another model of censoring power that differed from both the Qing's reliance on the bureaucratic system to supervise the publishing world and social communications and what Michel Hockx calls the literary autonomy under state authority in 1930s.¹⁶ The early Republican government lost supervisory control of the local administrative

¹³ *Tongs jiaoyu yanjiuhui diiici gongzuo baogao* [The First Working Report of the Research Association of Popular Education] (Beijing: Jinghua chuban gongsi, 1916), 9-10. The section's coverage shows the meaning of *xiaoshuo* in the early Republican context was different from the western genre of novel. See Andrew H. Plaks, "Full-Length Hsiao-Shuo and the Western Novel: A Generic Reappraisal," in *China and West: Comparative Literature Studies*. ed. William Tray et al (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1980).

¹⁴ More information about the social survey movement in the 1920s and 1930s, see Tong Lam, *A Passion for Facts: Social Surveys and the Construction of the Chinese Nation-State, 1900-1949* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

¹⁵ *Tongs jiaoyu yanjiuhui disanci gongzuo baogao* [The third working report of the Popular Education Research Association] (Beijing: Jinghua chuban gongsi, 1918), Conference Minutes, 22-24.

¹⁶ Timothy Brook, "Censorship in Eighteenth-Century China: A View from the Book Trade," *Canadian*

branches. It was also powerless to penetrate the print industry so as to regulate it from within. An examination of the composition and operation of the PERS reveals the ambition and actions of the incipient central government to use non-state actors to build a professional and centralized censorship system.

The Society members consisted of educators from educational institutions in Beijing, officials from the Department of Social Education and Beijing municipal education bureau, and policemen. Unlike imperial scholar-officials who were limited to the bureaucracy, scholar members were financially and intellectually independent. The MOE had no right to nominate anyone. But its firm rejection of Peking University's perfunctory recommendation of a proctor in 1917 shows that the ministry held the possession of pedagogical knowledge as a key nomination criterion.¹⁷ The Society eventually gathered prestigious scholars in Beijing like Lu Xun. It was a wise choice for the short-staffed and financially constrained central government.¹⁸ By drawing upon cultural elites who were familiar with educational and cultural practices, the government inexpensively solved its staffing problem. The use of scholars and educators not only contributed to the decision-making process but also made their social networks available, smoothing the implementation of decisions in places that administrative hands were unable to reach.

Journal of History vol. 23, no. 2 (1988): 177-96; Philip Kuhn, *Soulstealers: The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992); Michel Hockx, "In Defense of the Censor: State Authority and Literary Autonomy in China, 1930-1936." *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese*, no. 2(1): 1-30.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Document 1, 7.

¹⁸ In the late 1910s, the Duan Qirui government spent more than 40% of its annual budget on military expenses and just 1% on education. In 1918, the annual allotment to the PERS was 12,712,392 yuan. *Beiyang zhengfu dang'an* 90, 37. Timothy Weston briefly discussed the fiscal difficulty of the government and its low investment on education, see Timothy Weston, *The Power of Position: Beijing University, Intellectuals, and Chinese Political Culture, 1898-1929* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 217.

The PERS showcased a model of culture governance, based on the collaboration of leading New Cultural intellectuals, late Qing reformist officials and the state power that reconstructed the social and political steering of practices in the area of low cultural production. Unlike in an ordinary bureaucratic organ, cultural more than political capital determined the power relations among these members from academia and officialdom. The internal meetings provided a platform for negotiations among different reformative agendas and practical concerns. The head of social education department in the central government, Gao Buying (高步瀛), had been a renowned popular educational activist in the late Qing and a moderate reformist compared to New Cultural intellectuals. Gao did not dominate internal procedures despite being a senior official. For example, in the discussion of the *heimu* writings, other members voted against his view of treating them as benign practices continued from the late Qing political novels.¹⁹ Nonetheless, the organization was an extension of the government organs in which the MOE had a say in the basic principles and offered administrative support. If elite participation was indicative of social forces' entanglement in statecraft, official authorization backed the operation of the Society and conferred executive power upon intellectual ideas. Political authority backed the transfer of power between cultural and political forces and institutionalized their mutual dependence. The ambivalence at the junction of officials and independent scholars makes the PERS more flexible than other administrative offices in handling issues concerning the print and entertainment industry while safely remaining under state control. The PERS with its multiple sources of legitimacy possessed the power to monitor and interfere in the flow of discourses and narratives from above.

¹⁹ *Tongsu jiaoyu yanjiuhui disanci baogaoshu*, conference minutes, 22-24.

Delimiting Good Popular Knowledge

By imposing censorship to weed out transgressive works, the PERS made stories about political affairs and political figures a crucial component of Republican public knowledge. As stated in the PERS internal censorship guideline: “As for works regarding political affairs, those containing wrong themes or unverified statements should all be ranked to the lowest. They should be circumscribed in distribution or completely prohibited.” The rationale is that it is improper to assess political leaders who are still in office and that their vilification might cause political danger.²⁰ But both the Society and the central government publicly supported political discussion. In 1916, Duan’s government declared its support for freedom of expression and terminated Yuan Shikai’s notoriously strict political regulation and violent administrative interference.²¹ To keep the balance between the protection of press freedom and information regulation, the guideline became rather elastic. In a review of *A Record of Three Kingdom Ghosts Reviving*, a critic wrote that “the author should write in vague and equivocal terms about these contemporary figures so as to allow readers to perceive the connotations.”²² The note implies the boundary of public criticism set by the PERS: translucent criticism of political figures was acceptable. The public discussion of statesmen, intellectual’s support for political participation and the central government’s identification with Republicanism all contributed to the unprecedented tolerance of public discussion of political figures.

²⁰ *Tongsu jiaoyu yanjiuhui diyici gongzuo baogao* [The First Working Report of the Research Association of Popular Education] (Beijing: Jinghua yinshuju, 1916), 40.

²¹ The Second National Historical Archives ed., *Zhonghua minguo shi dangan ziliao huibian* [A collection of archival sources of Republican Chinese history] 3. Culture (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji cubanshe, 1994), 315.

²² *Tongsu jiaoyu yanjiuhui disici gongzuo baogao* [The Fourth Working Report of the Research Association of Popular Education] (Beijing: Jinghua chuban gongsi, 1919), 40.

In 1917, the Ministry of Education also acknowledged anecdotal collections as a legitimate form of popular knowledge and a useful educational vehicle. At the annual conference of PERS, Minister of Education Fu Zengxiang (傅增湘, 1872-1949) said that “anecdotal stories in and out of the court in the late Qing” pique people’s interests because they were plausible. Fu expressed that vulgar content that could be harmful to the youth should be subject to censorship.²³ He requested the PERS to learn the skills of topic selection and delivery method that draw favorable attention from these works so as to produce healthier and competitive readings. While affirming the value of the form, the minister discredited socially constructed knowledge about recent history and national politics for its inaccuracy and vulgarity. In the same speech, he set the guidelines for the PERS: to raise nationalist and scientific consciousness and to purify social customs by eliminating obscene and absurd content. The government made national identity, scientific attitude and moral propriety as the premises of the PERS’s censoring procedures. An examination of the organization’s annual evaluations of popular publications shows how these values set the boundary between improper and officially sanctioned knowledge.

The 1918 PERS working report includes a complete list of reviewed titles. Books with titles like *Secret History*, *Secret Record*, or *Hearsay*, tell stories about late Qing and early Republican political figures. The PERS ranked them according to their factual, moral and ideological propriety. Evaluations reveal an intention to tame the “unofficial” by keeping innocent small talk while directing the twin emphases on factuality and morality at the industry’s bottomless pursuit of entertainment. Whereas facticity pointed against the absence of any fact verification mechanism, morality aimed to stop the excessive indulgence in sensual pleasure. The

²³ “Jiaoyu buzhang fuyuan shu zhici,” [The speech by the Minister of Education Mr. Fu Yuanshu], in *Tongsu jiaoyu yanjiuhui disanci gongzuo baogao* [The third working report of the Popular Education Research Society]. Special Document, 1.

three ranks defined an official view of proper political knowledge for ordinary citizens and ensured a top-down approach to knowledge popularization.

A selected model of the first class works is *A reliable record of hearsay stories about the Empress Dowager Cixi* (慈禧傳信錄). The author Fei Xingjian's (費行簡, 1871-1954) academic training and appointment as university faculty explain his scholarly approach. In the preface, Fei categorizes his book as a hearsay-based miscellaneous record and criticizes other gossip publications for their attention to everyday minutiae.²⁴ *A Reliable Record* weaves secret power struggles behind major political events of the late Qing with entertaining gossip such as how an alcoholic imperial concubine sold her embroideries to trade in wines.²⁵ For the author, "hearsay" is not only fun; it is a way to disseminate knowledge about the political twists and turns in the recent past. To present an organized historical narrative, Fei grouped short stories into 17 chapters and three chronological parts in contrast to other "miscellaneous story collections." Each part begins with a short criticism of Cixi's shortsightedness, moral depravity or despotism. The strict chronological order and editorial evaluation of political figures resonated with the features of traditional historical scholarship.

The work was praised for the facticity of the court stories and the author's just criticism.

The PERS comment reads:

When the Qing dynasty collapsed, some court secrets were heard by outsiders. Editors gathered miscellaneous stories but could barely make a book. The author of this book is Wang Xiangqi's disciple. Wang was a well-informed scholar. His scholarly delivery of knowledge and morality do not conform to the reading habits of most of our nationals. Moreover, to collect stories from hearsay and then declare them to be trustworthy could not easily win his assent. However, this book proves the facticity of stories and makes impartial judgments. It seriously bestow its praise and censure, and

²⁴ Fei Xingjian, "Preface," in *Cixi chuanxin lu* [A reliable record of hearsay stories about the Empress Dowager Cixi] (Taipei: Guangwen bookstore, 1980). Reprint.

²⁵ Fei Xingjian, *Cixi chuanxin lu*.

mindfully select reliable materials. Therefore it qualifies a good unofficial history.²⁶ By comparing Fei's work to his teacher's scholarly knowledge, the reviewer treated edited hearsay about palace secrets as a vernacular version of serious historical narratives for a broad national audience. The sources of the stories, as claimed in the author's preface, were a Manchu prince and the author's literati friends. In the opinion of the PERS, scholarly knowledge and official sources were reliable materials. This picture of late Qing court life and evaluation of political figures, in addition, conveys a pro-Republican political message.

Second-ranked works about political heads in the 1918 list were either disorganized or inaccurate. Frequent criticisms were "incorrect categorization," "overly modified," and "not fully trustworthy." For example, *Late Qing hearsay* (清季野聞), a documentation of the author's experiences in the late Qing officialdom, received compliments for its factuality and originality. But the reviewer considered it as worthless because it glorifies the author's political achievements without providing any moral or intellectual guidance.²⁷ The Society criticized another compilation of secret stories of warlords around Yuan Shikai, *Secrets behind the Xinhua Gate* (新華秘記) for its unverified and partial information drawn from rumors. The reviewer also noted that "a few fact-based statements can be read as unofficial history."²⁸ A lack of moral guidance or accuracy would reduce the work's value and rank in popular education.

Heimu collections, however, received the lowest grade and went onto the list for a proposed ban for transgressing the PERS' moral lines. The PERS censured the ambitious *Panorama of Scandals in China* for inventing stories, exposing people's shameful secrets, using

²⁶ *Tongsu jiaoyu yanjiuhui disici gongzuo baogao*. Beijing, 1918. Report I, 9.

²⁷ *Tongsu jiaoyu yanjiuhui disici gongzuo baogao*, 40.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

vulgar language and inserting amatory descriptions. The second volume was dismissed as “nonsense talkers” and “evil-deed advisor.”²⁹ Another banned work was the novel *A Record of Three Kingdom Ghosts Reviving* (三國還魂記) which depicts contemporaneous political figures as reincarnations of Three Kingdoms-era militarists. The PERS banned the novel for its ridiculous premise and defamation of political leaders’ origins.³⁰

As revealed by the evaluation criteria, the PERS’ principle of factuality had two dimensions. First, the factuality promoted scientific rationale to modernize popular knowledge and through which to raise people’s intelligence. The popular writings embellished stories with fictional, exaggerated or supernatural elements, such as popular themes of spirit travel and reincarnations. The PERS dismissed imaginary narratives and irrational explanations as superstitious and absurd. By narrowing the room for imagination, elaboration and exaggeration, the PERS pushed this body of public knowledge towards the May Fourth advocacy of scientific method and realistic writing. This evaluation and requirement reflected the treatment of science as a universal method of knowledge production in the late 1910s. As argued by Tong Lam, the advocacy of a new paradigm of knowledge was driven by political urgency to civilize Chinese culture.³¹ The PERS unconditionally saw surrealistic stories as backward popular knowledge.

Second, the emphasis on information verification manifested a view of factuality. Unofficial sources catered to the public distrust of official depictions of political figures and

²⁹ *Tongsu jiaoyu yanjiuhui disici gongzuo baogao*, 42-43.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 40; Conference Minutes, 8, 17-18.

³¹ Tong Lam’s study of the National Studies in Republican China argues for the use of a unitary scientific approach in the field of humanity in the 1920s. He argues that iconoclastic Chinese intellectuals embraced the epistemological shift with the awareness of their nation’s deficiencies and never truly negotiated on epistemological grounds. Tong Lam, *A Passion for Facts: Social Surveys and the Construction of the Chinese Nation-State, 1900-1949* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 38-45, 95-103.

provided alternative truths. To counteract a willful understanding of truth, the PERS problematized unofficial information sources. The Society's evaluations of *A Record* and *Late Qing Hearsay* recognized and promoted scholarly knowledge and sources from bureaucrats as the location for truth. The PERS kept imposing the authority of the traditional official historical knowledge production onto the Republican construction of popular knowledge: in the imperial system of historical writing. State documents and gazetteers were the only trustworthy sources with the legitimacy to frame popular textual production.³² The preference for official sources and elite knowledge was not simply due to a scholarly writing tradition but an attempt to control the destabilization associated with unofficial sources. The PERS perceived the danger of the power that had been granted to the society by means of public contribution. Conference minutes show that censors problematized the collecting method and the publisher-editor's machinations. The section head suspected the editor or harboring some unknown agenda by involving people outside the editorial board.³³ Underlying the insistence on official source was an intention to recentralize popular knowledge production and undermine the social powers.

Compared to the principle of factuality, the PERS' moral censure was more straightforwardly directed to obscenity and privacy invasion. The ethical values expressed in the official criticism of market-oriented popular products remained unchanged if compared to the ideas in the imperial moral guidebooks. Ostensibly, moral censure of the exposure of dirty

³² For more information about how the late imperial popular narratives of political figures prioritized the official sources, see Paul August Vierthaler, "Quasi-History and Public Knowledge: A Social History of Late Ming and Early Qing Unofficial Historical Narratives" (PhD Diss., Yale University, 2014). For more information about how modern China continued the late imperial practice of official historical writing, see Yue Dong, "How to Remember the Qing Dynasty: The Case of Meng Sen," in *The Politics of Historical Production in Late Qing and Republican China* ed. Tze-ki Hon and Robert Culp (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 271-80.

³³ *Tongsu jiaoyu yanjiuhui disici gongzuo baogao*. Conference Minutes, 22-24.

secrets in *heimu* publications reiterated the Confucian principle of “covering up other’s faults” (隱惡). Comments invoked Wang Yangming’s (王陽明, 1472-1529) saying that “all acts that attack other’s weakness and expose people’s shameful secrets in order to demonstrate one’s integrity could not be praised as criticism with goodwill.”³⁴ Another charge of the genre for “instructing thieves and prostitutes” was very common in the traditional moral ledgers.

However, the ideology behind the attempt to restore the moral order changed. The late imperial scholar-official and social elites bound moral practice to social status. In the 17th century, scholars used status advancement to aid moral instruction but in the 18th, instructions suggested humbly following the moral codes associated with one’s status to reestablish a stable social system.³⁵ In the 20th century, the correlation between the moral practice and the social hierarchy was replaced by a new link between the moral code and Chinese citizenship. The PERS moral critic conformed to the May Fourth discourse of a problematic Chinese national character. In 1918, Zhou Zuoren (周作人) found the root of the popularity of scandalous accounts in the sordid Chinese national character. “[T]hese so-called realistic works are even worse than fictional ones for they have unmasked Chinese people’s bad disposition to talk about others’ inner chamber secrets. They like talking filthy and maliciously gossiping. This is a decadent national character.”³⁶ Starting with Lu Xun’s iconoclastic portrayal of Chinese national

³⁴ Wang Yangming. “Jiaotiao shi tongchang zhusheng,” in *Wang Yangming quanji* [Complete Collection of Wang Yangming’s work] 26, ed. Wu Guang et al (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2011).

³⁵ Cynthia Brokaw has demonstrated how scholar-officials and local elites in the seventeenth century and the eighteenth century constructed the moral knowledge and instructed commoner how to behave in accordance to their (desired) social status. See Cynthia Joanne Brokaw, *The Ledgers of Merit and Demerit: Social Change and Moral Order in Late Imperial China* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991).

³⁶ Zhong Mi, “Lun heimu,” [A discussion of *heimu*] *Meizhou pinglun*, no. 4 (1919). in *Zhou Zuoren jiwaiwen* [Zhou Zuoren’s articles not included by his anthology], ed. Chen Zishan, (Haikou: Hainan guoji xinwen chuban zhongxin, 1995), 285-287. This article was also republished in the *New Youth* and soon

character in the fictional Ah Q, this discourse became a weapon brandished against the deficiencies in the Chinese character as part of the intellectual endeavor to enlightening the public.³⁷ During the New Culture era (the mid 1910s and 1920s), intellectuals believed that the nation might be saved by improving the national character.³⁸ In his criticism of *heimu* products, Zhou did not treat immoral behaviors as individual wrongs but as the manifestation of the illness of the entire national community. To argue against writers' claim of exposing the dark realities to heal social and political diseases -- a claim that ostensibly adhered to the discourse of national character -- Zhou elucidates that true reformist works should discuss the relationship between the decadent Chinese society and the wrongdoings of Chinese nationals.³⁹ He spoke of public morality that served to construct the national consciousness.

An open letter from the PERS to the *heimu* writers in 1918 articulated the nationalist ideology as the new significance of the moral instruction. After denouncing the immorality of the ideology, the letter cited two drawbacks of the unconstrained production of these works. The overexposure of scandals would unleash people's evil nature and destroy their faith in human goodness. In addition, "prevailing scandals would mislead foreigners to an impression of Chinese nation as despicable and they would think of us inferior to other civilized race."⁴⁰ This is

noticed by the local government. No. D2-0-825-162. Beijing Municipal Archives.

³⁷ Lydia Liu unpacks Lu Xun's deployment of Arthur Smith's concept of Chinese characteristics into his depiction and analysis of a fictional protagonist Ah Q. See Lydia He Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity--China, 1900-1937* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1995).

³⁸ Paul B. Foster, *Ah Q Archaeology: Lu Xun, Ah Q, Ah Q Progeny and the National Character Discourse in Twentieth Century China* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), 52-58.

³⁹ Zhong Mi, "Lun heimu," in Zishan Chen, ed., *Zhou Zuoren jiwaiwen*, 287.

⁴⁰ "Jiaoyubu tongshu jiaoyu yanjiuhui quangao xiaoshuojia wuzai bian heimu yilei xiaoshuohangao" [A letter from the Popular Education Research Society under the Ministry of Education to persuade novelist from writing scandal fictions], in *Dongfang zazhi* [Eastern Miscellany], 15. no. 9 (1918): 172.

why the PERS stopped the production and distribution of the genre: to maintain domestic moral order and to spread a positive international image of the Chinese nation. The Society exercised moral guidance in light of citizens' patriotic awareness. The letter asked them to conceptualize the momentary phenomena they depicted collectively as vital components of the national picture. The rest of their national identity and responsibilities of protecting the national interest revealed a shifting of moral instruction from individual behavior to collective consciousness.

The official act of gathering, screening and evaluating imposed intellectual dominance in shaping knowledge and claimed state authority over popular knowledge production. The PERS looked askance at wild stories, incorrect organizations, untraceable sources, boundless exposure of ugly gossip, and ways of political discussion. Works that passed the censor fell into the new category of officially approved popular knowledge of high politics. State-sanctioned knowledge valued popular entertainment but demanded a rigorous approach to verification, to guiding moral behaviors, and ideally to distill some Republican messages. However, the PERS compromised its own standards with popular tastes and commercial interests of publishers. Its permission to circulation of middle-ranked works revealed a room for negotiation between entertainment value and scholarly accuracy, between popular practice and official rules.

Regulation in Actions: Tactics of Persuasion and Moral Authority

The PERS attempted to interfere with production and distribution by rewarding the good and prohibiting the bad. Every year the PERS would compliment the one or two best books in popular magazines and newspapers. The annual best book award set a standard for worthwhile knowledge, publicized the evaluation criteria, and protected the publisher's copyright.⁴¹

⁴¹ "Gongbu lianghao xiaoshuo yan," [Proposal for Publishing the List of Good Novels] *Tongs jiaoyu*

Meanwhile, the MOE and PERS imposed prohibition through local booksellers' associations (書業公會) in a language of moral persuasion. In actuality, the book award was not even an important event in the print industry. But prohibition of problematic products was in effect. To check the *heimu* writings, the PERS sent an open letter to all the writers in Shanghai. The letter demonstrated both its disciplinary force and discursive influence on the intellectual debates surrounding the genre. Through the letter, the moral authority of the Republican central government, renewed and empowered by the nationalist discourse, mobilized supportive intellectuals and placed the gossip industry under pressure.

Official surveillance of print products relied on self-reports and book samples submitted by major publishing houses.⁴² A small police force available along with a limited monthly budget of 1000 yuan could not conduct labor-intensive and time-consuming investigations even in Beijing.⁴³ In 1917, most of the 380 publications that the PERS reviewed were requested from publishers by administrative orders and a few from direct purchase from bookstores. In the Shanghai, foreign concessions that the Chinese orders could not penetrate and the completion of the gathering process owed much to the support of the Shanghai Booksellers' Association (SBA). The SBA was an important intermediary agent between Beijing and Shanghai book publishers.⁴⁴ It promptly delivered administrative orders to individual publishers and organized

yanjiuhui diyici gongzuo baogao.

⁴² "Tongsu jiaoyu yanjiuhui tongsu zhangcheng," [Regulation of the Popular Education Research Society] in *Tongs jiaoyu yanjiuhui diyici gongzuo baogao*.

⁴³ *Tongs jiaoyu yanjiuhui disici gongzuo baogao*, Conference Minutes 51, 10-12.

⁴⁴ As an organization of bookstores and book publishers, the booksellers' association worked as the supreme authority to settle down disputes among its members. In the absence of a copyright law, most of the disputes it handled were copyright issues. For more information, see Fei-Hsien Wang, "Creating New Order in the Knowledge Economy: The Curious Journey of Copyright in China, 1868–1937" (Ph.D diss., University of Chicago, 2012).

them to contribute reference books when the PERS needed them. Some publishers also showed a willingness to cooperate. The Shanghai Chinese Bookstore (上海中華圖書館) took the initiative in submitting the titles of more than 30 works upon hearing that the PERS was gathering the popular literary magazine *Saturday*.⁴⁵ This self-report system connecting the state with the press via social organizations extended the reach of administrative force while limiting access to information. It came as no surprise that the SBA urged major publishers to censor their own lists and underscored the necessity of scrutiny before mailing copies to Beijing to avoid trouble.⁴⁶ Many small publishers and other opportunistic publishers stayed off the SBA list and thus avoided official contact. They could not form a network of informants that was loyal to the state. This porous surveillance network was vulnerable to manipulation by social forces. The publishers had space to negotiate with the state to protect their business interests.

The SBA mediated the PERS' intervention in publication distribution in Shanghai. A list of prohibited book titles was regularly sent to the local Book Dealer's Association which would then instruct newspapers not to advertise and booksellers not to sell any banned book. Backed by administrative orders, the PERS adopted a rhetoric of moral persuasion and displayed its kind consideration of the commercial interests of bookstores to smooth its communication with local associations. It repeatedly declared its goals of "persuading the society to purify the social custom and protecting commercial activities."⁴⁷ "Persuade," (勸導) the most frequently word used, signifies an intentionally lowered position of the PERS that allowed it to rally the widest

⁴⁵ Zhang Shewo. "shenme jiaozuo libailiu pai," [What's Saturday School?] originally published in *Zuixiao [the Smallest]* 13, in *Wenxueshi ziliao quanbian* [A complete collection of primary sources for history of Chinese literature: the modern period](Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2010), 172.

⁴⁶ "Tongsu jiaoyu zhi yian," [A Proposal on Popular Education] *Shi Shi Xin Bao*, Mar 30, 1916, 3.

⁴⁷ *Tongsu jiaoyu yanjiuhui disanci gongzuo baogao*, Documents II, 1.

support from publishers and book dealers. One official letter stated that: “We hope that you forward the instruction with the list of prohibited books to all the booksellers as soon as possible so as to avoid any loss of commercial profits due to the ban.”⁴⁸

The implementation of the new censorship system showed a regulatory body combining the government, cultural elites, and social organizations. During the first two decades of the 20th century, native place associations and merchant associations assumed quasi-governmental functions to fill the void left by the state in areas such as local militia, public fire control and charity activities. They formed the dominant forces in both decision-making and policy implementation.⁴⁹ As in other cases, by mediating between the state and local publishers, the SBA legitimized its leadership in the publishing industry and elevated its status to the officially sanctioned representative of Shanghai publishers. But the SBA’s role assisted in enforcing the decision of the PERS.

With the *heimu* writings, the PERS tried an unusual measure: an open letter to all writers. This popular genre swept Shanghai in the late 1910s that scandal became the most effective way to publicize gossip collections but the SBA was unable to forward a message to opportunistic publishers who had never joined the association. The PERS resorted to private connections with foreigners in search of an administrative coalition with the foreign authorities to eliminate all *heimu* publications. The Jiangsu branch of the Society proposed an open letter and persuaded headquarters that attempts to ban would build public interest in the prohibited works. In 1918,

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ There are many works exploring the cooperation between state and local elites in the late Qing and early Republican China. Among these are Philip Kuhn, *Rebellion and Its Enemies in Late Imperial China; Militarization and Social Structure, 1796-1864* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970) and Bryna Goodman, *Native Place, City, and Nation: Regional Networks and Identities in Shanghai, 1853-1937* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995).

the PERS published an open letter in *Eastern Miscellany* (東方雜誌). On the one hand, the letter expressed its moral concern over the descriptions of “licentious,” “violent” and “deceptive” deeds with an eye to the interests of Chinese society and national prestige. On the other hand, the letter showed a friendly attitude towards the writers by reminding them of their reputation and appealing to their sense of social responsibility.

The letter brought attention to the presence of the state’s claim to moral authority. Some wording and the tone of the letter, such as the expression of concern for the moral decadence and the phrase “rectifying the people’s heart and improving customs,” were reminiscent of a Qing emperor’s edict on customs reform and moral rectification. But the early Republican central government lacked comparable compelling moral voices. Especially in the high Qing, the state was hegemonic to instruct the practice of moral reform. Imperial pronouncements could denounce moral problems including slander. Local magistrates toured their districts to investigate social behavior and launched campaigns for commoners’ moral transformation.⁵⁰ The constant presence of the state at the local level not only reminded people of state-sanctioned values but more importantly routinized its civilizing mission in bureaucratic practice. As the late imperial officials were also expected to be models of rectitude, the bureaucratic body both symbolized and exerted the state’s unquestionable moral authority.⁵¹ Unfortunately, in the first decade of the Republic, the central government was losing its control over its bureaucratic machines below the provincial level. Besides its weakness in executive force to penetrate local societies, it lost its moral stature when questions about the moral sincerity and personal character of its ministers

⁵⁰ Janet Theiss. *Disgraceful Matters: The Politics of Chastity in Eighteenth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 40.

⁵¹ See more in Hutters, Theodore, and Roy Bin Wong ed., *Culture & State in Chinese History: Conventions, Accommodations, and Critiques* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1997).

and senior officials undermined its legitimacy. The state had to contest with social dissents and regional governors in many realms.

Against this backdrop, collaborations like PERS represented the central government and it claimed to be an arbiter of moral order. The letter clarifies the official nature of the organization. It stated that the society's policies were formulated and carried out by the Ministry of Education and Domestic Affairs. In case of issuing publication bans, it strictly followed the administrative procedures to obtain the permit from the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Domestic Affairs. The *Eastern Miscellany* also explicated the nature of the Society as a government organ in the title "from the Popular Education Research Society under the Ministry of Education."⁵² The early Republican state's use of the cultural prestige and discursive power of a seemingly intellectual Society shows that even in a time of political fragmentation and uncertainty, the state still concerned the restoration of moral authority as its imperial exemplar.

By constructing a softened suasive force, the PERS presented a renewed moral authority premised on the emergence of the state moral rule, intellectual concerns of public good and the autonomy of the writers' society. The nationalist discourse placed a new emphasis on the moral agency of writers and publishers. The letter began by saying that "rather than counting on state prohibition, we should rely on citizens' self-consciousness." It ended by reiterating the link between self-consciousness and national obligation:

Dear writers, you are all Chinese citizens and you all have children. Please follow the dictates of your conscience. How could you bear with these works? We worried about it and respectfully ask all the writers to protect your individual reputation while preserving the value of our national literature...

⁵² "Jiaoyubu tongshu jiaoyu yanjiuhui quangao xiaoshuojia wuzai bian heimou yilei xiaoshuohangao," [A letter from the Popular Education Research Society under the Ministry of Education to persuade novelist from writing scandal fictions] *Dongfang zazhi* 15, no. 9 (1918): 172.

In contrast to the traditional view of self-cultivation, the PERS regarded every writer and publisher as a citizen equally responsible for maintaining the nation's moral order. By respecting popular engagement and citizen capacities, the state could borrow social power, especially from within the gossip industry, to ensure the docility of society and to enhance the government's disciplinary power. As the source of this disciplinary power came from several actors, this moral authority connected the state, cultural elites and lower-class writers in temporary cooperation.

The letter placed publishers under pressure. The genre creator the *China Times* was the first to respond. On November 7, 1918, it announced on its front page the termination of the *heimu* column. The newspaper affirmed the official criticism at the obscenity and privacy invasion of this genre while defending itself as follows:

The *heimu* stories were realistic narratives that we created with the aim of reforming the society. In the past two years, it received compliments from various social sectors. The name of genre was thereby well established. Recently, various small opportunist-publishers produced a great amount of *heimu* books. We calculated the number of book advertisements and found that more than a hundred types were available on the market. These imitators seemingly followed us but their book contents revealed them as either obscene publications or privacy invaders. Everyone sees the evilness... They went against our initial goals, which we never expected...⁵³

In this explanation of why good intentions had bad consequences, the editor blamed readers for using a good reformist tool for moral transgression. The end of the column demonstrated the newspaper's social responsibility. The *China Times'* defense of its reputation showed the strong impact of the letter and the disciplinary force of official moral suasion.

The letter fomented public discussion of the morality of the genre. In the ensuing years, intellectuals, popular magazines and tabloids published articles in support of PERS. Every writer and journalist who participated in the discussion added to the weight of state's presence and

⁵³ Selectively quoted from "Benbao caiche heimu lan tonggao," [Announcement of our termination of the *heimu* column] *Shi Shi Xin Bao*, November 7, 1918, 1.

legitimized its moral authority. Besides Zhou Zuoren's trenchant criticism, women's magazines despised these works as worthless for the education of young citizens.⁵⁴ Even the *Crystal* joined them by tracing the origin of this genre to amorous fictions echoing with the PERS' accusation of obscenity.⁵⁵ Public criticism confirmed Stephen Mackinnon's observation that government censorship was acceptable to the reading public and that intellectuals and writers were concerned with the means by which censorship was imposed.⁵⁶ Besieged by the state, cultural elites, social reformers and even some gossip producers, *heimu* publications and its unique way of gathering information waned in the early 1920s.⁵⁷ The official view of the genre as decadent and harmful had been repeatedly noted in intellectual works and government documents from the warlord era to the Nationalist period.⁵⁸

Instruction on Good Citizenship

The state's tolerance of public political discussion was accompanied by the extension of citizenship education to places like teahouses and temples and to the illiterate population. If the open letter publicized the citizens' obligation to middle- and low-ranking writers, the national

⁵⁴ Miaoran, "Xinzazhi he heimushu," [New Magazine and Scandal Fictions] in *Xin funv* 3, no.6 (1920): 31.

⁵⁵ Jizhe, "Liuxing de shu," [Popular Books] *Jing Bao*, November 24, 1919.

⁵⁶ Michel Hockx, *Questions of Style: Literary Societies and Literary Journals in Modern China, 1911-1937* (Brill, 2003), 225.

⁵⁷ Generic writing survived under other titles. As shown in advertisements in 1926, some book publisher continued to sell similar products but furtively changed the descriptions from "scandal" to "secrets." But the prosperous days were over.

⁵⁸ The nationalist government's regulation of popular reading materials enacted in 1937 particularly exemplified the *heimu* publications as corrupt and decadent works. "Guomindang zhongzhahui mishuchu chaosong minzhong duwu gaijin fangan an," [Proposal for improving popular reading materials sent by the secretary of the Central Executive Committee of the Nationalist Party] in The Second National Historical Archives ed. *Zhonghua minguo dang'an ziliao huibian* [Collection of archives of Republican China] (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1999), 60.

lecture for popular education (公立通俗教育講演) delivered officially sanctioned political knowledge in language that the commoners could understand. A model lecture on civic participation, which were reviewed by the PERS and delivered to urban commoners, allows us to take a glance of the government efforts at instructing people's reception of political information to counteract the playful way of political participation in the late 1910s. The model lecture announced serious political news on newspapers to be the right venue for political knowledge and demanded citizens to discuss political affairs for the national interest. The institutionalization of open lectures declared the central government's ambition of dominating the popular education but its instruction on political knowledge revealed its incapacity to establish itself as the knowledge authority.

After cleaning up the mess of the 1911 revolution, the central government nationalized and routinized the practice of open lecture that were initiated by social reformers in the late Qing to mint new citizens.⁵⁹ The state erected national lecture halls for popular education in cities and wealthy towns of most provinces.⁶⁰ Local educational bureaus supervised the training of lecturers and daily management of lecture events including lecture hours and the content. All lecture notes were subject to investigation of the PERS since its establishment. The lecture

⁵⁹ Experiences were brought into the government by late Qing intellectual practitioners who experimented with open lectures to teach necessary knowledge about political affairs, social morality and national responsibility. The social education department head Gao Buying himself experimented with public lectures as early as 1912 by founding a public lecture office named "moulding national groups into one unity." The name straightly expressed an urge to construct unified nationalistic consciousness among Chinese people. The state cast a suspicious eye on its activities and required every lecture to be registered with the police office beforehand. Policemen were also sent to inspect the lecture content and the number of the audience.

⁶⁰ "Jiaoyubu xingzheng jiyao, 1916-1918," [Administrative Records of the Ministry of Education, 1916-1918] in *The Second National Historical Archives*. ed. *Beiyang zhengfu dang'an* [Archives of Beiyang Government] 90 (zhongguo dang'an chubanshe, 2010), 622. The system survived into the Nationalist era but the focus shifted from cities to rural side by the time of 1930.

section of the PERS compiled and distributed collections of model lectures alongside reference books to local lecture halls. The review system guaranteed the official knowledge and the language of delivery to be examined, filtered and bestowed by the authority. Open lectures met a rapid expanding audience. Many open lectures held in large temple markets and teahouses attracted socially diverse visitors.⁶¹

As an integral part of must-have knowledge of a Chinese citizen, those on contemporary politics, law and citizen obligations were among the most frequent lecture topics. One modal lecture titled “Citizens should pay respect to state affairs.” (國民要留心國事) taught audiences where to find and how to process political information. The lecture speaks:

Nation and citizens are very closely associated. Citizens should pay attention to all political affairs, small or big, for state affairs concern people’s vital interest. Since we have the rights to petition the parliament, we can not renounce our rights. If the government had misconducts, we can petition the parliament to exercise our supervisory rights. If the government policy is beneficial to the public, we must give unanimous approval of it so that the government could advance its plan without hesitation. This is the national obligation that nobody should discharge. Paying attention to state affairs prepares us for fulfilling this duty.

The government is not capable to announce everything. So there exist newspapers to deliver important information. Newspapers inform us of what government did. Regularly, newspapers report what was heard and inevitably publish false information. Therefore, when a big event occurred, we should verify the information before taking actions. Haste decisions and actions do not help but obstruct political operations. They would even connive at the government’s destructive acts...Be more prudent when you examine the consequences of the happenings. Our opposition to good policies or support of harmful polices would result in real damage and we Chinese would be sneered at by foreigners. Therefore, we must investigate the facts and then evaluate its consequences. Do not take precipitate actions and bungle the chance of solving problems.⁶²

⁶¹ According to a 1921 social survey conducted by an American scholar, the average attendance reached 500 people a day in Beijing and included merchants, laborers, street idlers, and former Manchu officials. The audience composition must vary in Shanghai open lectures but it might be equally large and socially diverse. Sidney Gamble, *Peking: A Social Survey* (Leiden: Global Oriental, 2011), 150. For general information about open lecture in Shanghai temple market, see *Shanghai Gazetteer*, the Republican era <http://www.shtong.gov.cn/node2/node2245/node82368/node82378/node82430/userobject1ai111907.html> (accessed on July.9. 2017).

⁶² The Popular Education Research Society ed. *Tongsu jiaoyu jianggao xuanlu* [Selected collection of popular education lecture notes] 2 (Beijing: The Popular Education Society, 1916), 54.

The first paragraph articulates the state's advocacy of political discussion and endorsement of people's right to know. The lecture maintains that citizen obligations rather than casual pleasure should be one's motivation of acquiring political knowledge. People in the gossip community were bound together by curiosity, shared pleasure and knowledge about individual behaviors. In contrast, the national membership and the concept of the national interest worked to provoke a different feeling of insiders whose real-life interest was closed bond with the government operations and those political figures. The lecture's emphasis on the citizen obligation and rights to petition conveyed the basic concept of active participation and direct democracy that were taught in the middle school.⁶³ By using a plain language, open lectures extended the formal citizen education to a broader and under-educated public.

The lecture ruled out story collections, novelist narratives and orally transmitted hearsay as the source of proper knowledge about state affairs, and acknowledged the role newspapers played in making government information available to the general public. The PERS recommended newspapers as the most crucial disseminator of information on political affairs but called into question the accountability of newspaper reports. Its repetitive reminders of cautious reading and rational analysis acquiesced the agencies of ordinary readers but leaving it unmentioned as where to find secure evidence to verify the information. The lecture thus frankly admits the government's impotence of informing and publicizing official programs and policies.

The early Republican government was caught in an awkward situation between its promotion of a state-centered cultural view and its administrative limitation. In the 1910s, the central government continued the practice of on-board posting to publicize recent polices and

⁶³ Robert Culp, *Articulating Citizenship: Civic Education and Student Politics in Southeastern China, 1912-1940* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, Harvard University Press, 2007).

regulations but its low update frequency and use of classical Chinese language limited the circulation of the information. Officials were aware that the inadequate official channels of publicity impeded the public communication. The Beijing municipal Police Office who were so desperately fretting about the flying rumors proposed for establishing a government newspaper in 1921.⁶⁴ But the ideal of a powerful platform of official political news was never realized. As late as in 1925, the Mayor of Beijing was still complaining about the lost function of public communication and urging to adopt vernacular language in official notices for the convenience of less educated commoners.⁶⁵ Indeed, open lectures tried to fill the void by making official announcements of newly enacted laws and government policies to a wider audience including illiterate social groups. Lectures could also react quickly to unfavorable rumors than publishing an official reprehension to political scandals. In 1918, some large open lecture events added a section of “dementi.” (關謠)⁶⁶ National lecture halls usually allocate space for a newspaper browsing room where shelved major dailies that had been carefully selected. Even still, the coverage of the lectures and the amount of information to be annunciated were far from meeting the needs. Its inability to control information publicity forced the state to continuously problematize yet rely on political news in newspapers.

Conclusion

Flowing information about political leaders tested the limits of the state and expedited the

⁶⁴ The Second National Historical Archives ed. *Zhonghua mingushi dangan ziliao huibian* [The Collection of Archival Sources for Republican Chinese History] 3. Culture, 320-321.

⁶⁵ “Guanting gaoshi yao gaiyong baihua,” [Official Notices Should be Changed to Vernacular Forms]” in *Nong Min*, no. 9 (1925): 2.

⁶⁶ Beijing Municipal Archives. No. J004-001-00177.

official opening of the public political discussion to the bottom level of the society. If in the late imperial China public criticism of the political leaders and the state was seen as rebellious, the early republican authority publicly addressed the fact-checking, moral and nationalist aspect of the discussion. The evaluations, the letter and the lecture all attested to the official allowance of monitored and circumscribed political discussion. The PERS carved out a category of state-sanctioned popular knowledge that favored scholarly and scientific approaches, emphasized information accuracy and moral decency with citizen obligations and sponsored the top-down transmission route. In the late 1910s, the disciplinary efforts went all the way into knowledge production, distribution and reception.

The practices of censorship and national open lecture did rejuvenate the state knowledge authority and made a visible presence of a central government in the field of cultural production and citizenship cultivation. The central government leveraged its resources to claim authority over information in the late 1910s. Although a state-controlled national communication that Liang Qichao (梁啟超, 1873-1929) aspired to was still a fantasy for the early republican state, the government was able to ally with professional educators to lay an official hand on popular cultural products and modes of knowledge production. The central government's institutionalization of its collaboration with cultural elites showed its intention to dominate the monitor of popular knowledge. It does not say that the official approval and guidance mattered much for the gossip society but the presence of the central government was important for the formation and consolidation of state authority in the chaotic era. More than having these elites function as mediators of state power, the central government borrowed the power from well-established cultural and social elites to legitimize its rule and expand its sovereignty into the foreign settlement.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Failed Defamation Charge

Introduction

While relying on its censorship apparatus to police information, the state resorted to defamation law under the condition that administrative order could not reach the troublesome newspaper in the treaty-port cities under the jurisdiction of foreign settlers.¹ In the Republican era, the law of defamation (妨害名譽) acknowledged people's rights to reputation and provided a new legal instrument to protect individuals, social groups and institutions. Among cases brought by political figures and institutions, the most famous was the 1919 case filed by the Beijing government against the *Republican Daily* (民國日報) in Shanghai Mixed Court for insulting the president and senior officials.² This is the only time in Chinese history when the central government used defamation litigation to control the print media. By examining the 1919 case, this chapter takes up the question of the nature and extent of state control of political discussion, and explores the relationship between legal and media practice.

The defamation claim stemmed from a satirical article “Explanation of a lineage chart of the Anfu clique” (安福世系表之說明) published on Sept 15, 1919 in the political news column of Shanghai's *Republican Daily*. The article depicted the internal power relations of the central

¹ As for newspapers outside the foreign settlements, political leaders tended to directly spoke to police office or the Department of Domestics for administrative actions to close down the publishing house. In 1917, Feng Guozhang requested the Department of Domestics to punish *Central Daily* in Beijing for spreading rumors about his political ambitions. See *Beiyang zhengfu dang'an* 124, 144-164.

² “Yu laoxiang daguansi,” [Having a legal dispute with one from the same native-place] *Chen Bao*, October 2, 1923.

government as a five-generation family tree. It described the political relation between Prime Minister Duan Qirui (段祺瑞, 1865-1936) and President Xu Shichang (徐世昌, 1855-1939) as that of a father and an illegitimate child. This news article crossed the line of what the state considered acceptable. If the central government's soft measure of self-report censorship and moral persuasion reflected its tolerance of gossip, it was more determined to set a boundary between the lighthearted and serious political discussion. The 1919 case was a contest between the state that wielded legal force and commercial media institutions that insisted on their autonomy.

The power relations between the state and the print media as well as the relations between the media and legal practice formed two inter-related themes that structure this chapter. The first two sections discuss the source of the friction and Chinese defamation laws since the late Qing to explain why the central state resorted to the rule of law and to the insult law. I argue that the ban on insulting officials enabled the Republican government to assert its political authority by using the language of reputational rights. The third section, the core of this chapter, examines the clash of visions of the information order in court and in the news coverage after the trial. The insult law, the discourse of freedom of expression, the commercial pursuit of entertainment defined the nature of the problematic article as insult, as political criticism and as entertainment. The *Republican Daily's* contemptuous descriptions of these statesmen after the trial and some other magazines' interest in litigation as amusing stories rendered the court's verdict powerless. The chapter concludes by mentioning the growing power of the print media and the tabloid's strategic use of defamation litigation in the 1920s. The print media's arguments informed judicial practices as in the late Qing Yang Naiwu Case or in the 1930s Shi Jianqiao

case.³ In the early Republican defamation cases, the press was unable to intervene the judicial procedures but the coverage of defamation suits, especially the tabloid's use of the court system as a publicity ploy, distorted the popular perception of defamation. Eventually, political institutions and figures no longer turned to the insult law for justice, marking the failure of the insult law as an instrument of media control.

Setting the Limits by the Rule of Law

This article containing the family tree came to the notice of Beijing for its straddling of entertainment and serious political discussion. The state's intransigent reaction to this news article, even though the publication was protected by extraterritoriality, showed its determination to set limits on acceptable engagement. The state's attempt to make the modern notion of reputational rights a keystone in the construction of the boundary of political discussion reflect both the state's alignment with modern governance and the changing power relationship between the state and the society.

The article about the family tree made a caustic criticism on the government's pro-Japanese policy and the off-the-table connections of these leading figures. The Japanese occupy the uppermost ancestral position while major political figures dominating the Beijing government are marked as father, sons and grandsons. The family tree recognizes the Prime Minister Duan Qirui as the father and real power holder of the government, President Xu Shichang as his illegitimate son because Duan had engineered the Congress election in which the

³ William Alford, "Of Arsenic and old Laws: looking anew at Criminal Justice in Late Imperial China." *California Law Review* 72, no. 6 (1984): 1180-256; Eugenia Lean, *Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

president was elected. Duan's honest subordinate and the power broker Xu Shuzheng is central in the third generation (figure 3).⁴

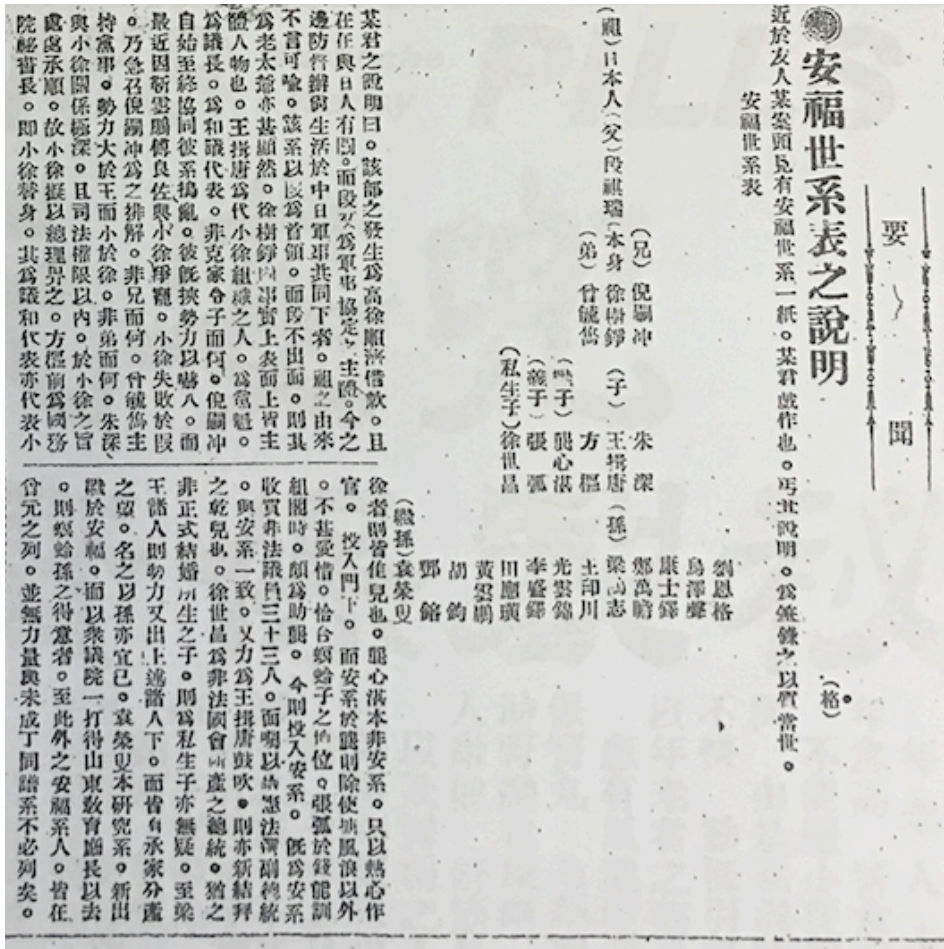


Figure 3. The family tree in the political news column of *Republican Daily*. (“Anfu shixibiao zhi shuoming,” [The explanation of a lineage chart of the Anfu Clique] *Min Guo Ri Bao*, September 15, 1919, 3.)

The article showed the influence of the gossip culture on serious journalism in the late 1910s. The news article begins by stating that the chart was “made by someone as a joke.” The statement reflects a jocular attitude seemingly unsuitable for the column of major political news.

⁴ “Anfu shixibiao zhi shuoming,” [The explanation of a lineage chart of the Anfu Clique] *Min Guo Ri Bao*, September 15, 1919, 3.

In addition, the author used the offensive word “*sishengzi*” (私生子 illegitimate child) to liken what it saw as an unlawful presidency to a sex scandal. The epithet questioned the legitimacy of the Presidency.⁵ The author here integrated a political criticism with a lowbrow phrase to embellish a well-known political message. This rhetorical style, which destabilized the political authority of these statesmen, was more commonly applied in popular novels in tabloids. For example, a novel “X ray” (愛克斯光) serialized in *the Crystal* described national affairs as a sordid affair between a father-in-law and a daughter-in-law.⁶ Acknowledging the distinction between serious political news and unverified stories about political figures, state-led popular education programs promoted newspapers as a legitimate source of political knowledge. The article’s placement in the category of major political news was a threat to the realm of state-approved knowledge and therefore struck a nerve.

Furthermore, the newspaper’s partisan stance and national influence aroused the government’s suspicions. The Shanghai *Republican Daily* managing in the Shanghai international settlement was a local branch of the Nationalist Party paper. The party’s propaganda committee developed and controlled a nationwide news reporting system. Local *Republican Dailies*, operating as separate entities, announced party programs under orders from Guangzhou. Unlike other branches that were subsidized by the Canton government, the *Republican Daily* in Shanghai, however, was self-supporting and thus sensitive to market demands. Its market-

⁵ After James Scott, cultural historians usually see filthy words as political weapons used by the powerless to attack the powerful. See James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987). Tim Harris, *The Politics of the Excluded, 1500-1850* (Basingstoke New York: Palgrave, 2001).

⁶ *Jing bao*, September 21, 1919. Quoted from Hong Yu, *Jindai Shanghai xiaobao yu shimin wenhua yanjiu* [Modern Shanghai tabloids and urban culture] (Shanghai: Shanghai shiji chuban jituan, 2007), 118. The fiction exposed the tabloid to civil penalty of of thirty yuan for violating the anti-obscenity law in the foreign settlement but the Chinese government never took any action against it.

oriented perspective obliged the editors to compromise with the party's propagandist requests. Their tone was rarely strident and partisan pieces were usually scattered among news items of general interest. The chief editor Ye Chucang (葉楚傖, 1887-1946) retained or revised party documents that seemed excessive in their criticism of imperialism. He also supported Zhejiang's military governor in defiance of the Nationalist Party's antimilitarism. The paper's major concession to the party reorganization was the inclusion of a margin surrounding each page of newsprint that set out party policies and principles.⁷ A 1918 Japanese intelligence report shows that the *Republican Daily* in Shanghai was either short of correspondents or unable to afford the purchase of first-hand information from news agencies.⁸ But the newspaper developed its strength in political satire to compensate for its weakness in news reportage. It rapidly became the only party newspaper distributed nationwide that had a measure of influence outside of party circles.⁹

Two factors underpinned Beijing's turn to the insult law. The Republican government recognized that the modern state and mass communication demanded new restrictions on political dissent. When announcing the end of Yuan Shikai's press policy, the new central government declared: "As the Republican Constitution protects freedom of expression, the government now implements new policy following the popular will. It is not appropriate to

⁷ John Fitzgerald, *Awakening China: Politics, Culture, and Class in the Nationalist Revolution* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 222-223.

⁸ Documents of the East Asia News Agency, No. 1.3.1 32, Japan Foreign Office Archives.

⁹ In a poll conducted at Beijing University in December 1923, the paper ranked second overall in popularity behind the Beijing *Morning Post* (Chen Bao) and the first among female respondents. At the same time, it was among the five major newspapers from Shanghai exhibited in the reading room of middle schools in Jiangsu Province. See Xu Zhucheng, *Baohai jiuwen* [The old stories in the sea of newspapers] (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2010), 27-28.

restrict press freedom. If the press acts illegally, it will be punished by law.”¹⁰ As shown in the declaration, the central government’s vision of sovereignty changed from a court-centered to a people-based authority. As the rising consciousness of nationalism and public opinion empowered news media, the imperial practice of literary inquisition and Yuan’s suppression policy both lost their legitimacy. Instead, the new government enacted Newspaper Regulation in 1918 which ostensibly protected republicanism, individual privacy and public order.¹¹ With this press law, the central government sought to authorize political discussion by drawing a line between legitimate and illegitimate coverage. The law did not govern the press strictly in the area under the government’s direct jurisdiction. In 1921, the Beijing police office was still complaining about its weak control over the media while the number of newspapers grew and the political discussion became increasingly rancorous.¹²

In practical terms, filing a lawsuit was Beijing’s last resort after a failed request for administrative collaboration with the foreign authorities in the international settlement. Shortly before the lawsuit, the Beijing government requested assistance from the Shanghai Municipal Council (the authority of the foreign settlement in Shanghai) to punish newspapers for violating the 1918 newspaper regulation. On September 25, 1919, the negotiator of Jiangsu Province proceeded to the Municipal Council with an order from the Department of Domestic Affairs in

¹⁰ Nanjing The Second Historical Archives ed. *Zhonghua minguo shi dangan ziliao huibian* [A collection of archival sources of Republican Chinese history] 4. Culture (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji cubanshe, 1994), 315.

¹¹ Regional warlords also had discretion to make provincial press regulations. For more state regulation of press during the warlord period. Ma Guangren, *Zhongguo xinwen fazhishi* [History of the press law in China] (Shanghai: Shanghai shehuikexueyuan chubanshe, 2007), 122-125.

¹² “Jingshi jingchating niding jianshao jingshi baoguan banfa zhi neiwubu han,” [To the Department of Domestic: A proposal of decreasing newspapers in the capital city by Beijing Municipal Police Office] *Zhonghua minguo shi dangan ziliao huibian* [A collection of archival sources of Republican Chinese history] 3. Culture (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji cubanshe, 1994), 320-321.

Beijing.¹³ He forwarded a list of nearly 20 titles published in the *China Times*, each with specific clauses in the Newspaper Regulation that these articles had violated. Unfortunately, the Council was unresponsive and the newspaper continued its business.¹⁴ The Council's decision not to cooperate left the Mixed Court the only option with the Beijing government.

The 1919 litigation displayed the Chinese state's strategic use of foreign legal authority and experts to discipline the production of political knowledge. The Mixed Court, ruling legal disputes among foreign and Chinese citizens according to laws of their own countries as justified by the extraterritorial rights, embodied the unequal relationship between China and the treaty powers. Previous studies on Chinese legal reform often examined the Mixed Court as a constant source of friction between the Chinese authorities and foreign powers when the Chinese claimed jurisdiction over foreign settlement.¹⁵ Even the government representative in this lawsuit, the British-born Italian lawyer Mr. G.D. Musso, was a legal advisor who had been recommended and strongly supported by the Western powers since 1916.¹⁶ But this time, the Chinese state, assuming the role of victim, depended on the legal institution, judicial procedure and personnel coming along with treaty powers to exercise its rule under Chinese law. Moreover, by going through judicial proceedings and making legal statements, the Beijing government presented itself as a practitioner of modern governance. It conformed to the international legal norm, protected both national and individual interests, and fulfilled its obligation to guide Chinese

¹³ Negotiator was a formal position under the Foreign Office to deal with foreign-settlement-related affairs.

¹⁴ *Beiyang zhengfu dang'an* 127, 582-591.

¹⁵ See Pär Cassel. "Excavating Extraterritoriality: The "Judicial Sub-Prefect" as a Prototype for the Mixed Court in Shanghai." *Late Imperial China* 24, no. 2 (2003): 156-82; Tahiri Lee, "Law and Local Autonomy at the International Mixed Court of Shanghai." (Ph.D dissertation, Yale University, 1990).

¹⁶ No. 03-01-012-04-001, Diplomatic Archives at the Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica.

citizens.

State Dignity in the Chinese Insult Laws

To show its concern over the case and its impartiality, the Shanghai Mixed Court appointed British Deputy Consul Mr. Grant Jones as Assessor to adjudicate the dispute with the experienced Chinese Judge Mr. Yu Diansun (俞奠蓀).¹⁷ Despite the leading role of foreign jurists, the dispute was ruled in accordance with the *Republican China Provisional Criminal Law* (中华民国暂行新刑律). On October 2, 1919, Musso on behalf of the Beijing government, filed suit against Shanghai *Republican Daily* of having printed and published “statements holding in contempt and ridicule H.E. the President of the Republic of China and other officers of the Government.”¹⁸ Musso’s initial articulation of his legal claim invoked the concept of “libel” to plead false imputation. The defendant’s American attorney Paul Myron Linebarger immediately objected by pointing out the nonexistence of this category in Chinese law.¹⁹ The legal framework of this suit rested on the Article 155 on insults to officials. Article 155 provides that “anyone who insults a public official performing duties or insult his public duties shall be imprisoned up to three years or punished with a fine up to 300 yuan.”

The Republican state proclaimed a new legal regime over defamation to restrict the press. Although the legal prohibition on insults to officials remained unchanged from the *Draft New*

¹⁷ In the system of the Mixed Court, an assessor was legally appointed to observe the proceedings and had the right to object proposed verdict by the Judge. In Chinese-related cases, the Judge was usually a Chinese magistrate and the Assessor was a foreign officer who in fact had a larger power in deciding the verdict.

¹⁸ *The North China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette*, October 4, 1919, 42.

¹⁹ “Mango ribas being zhi jieguo,” [The result of the lawsuit against Republican Daily] *Shen Bao*, October 4, 1919, 10.

Qing Code (大清新刑律草案), the legal interpretation and the context of implementing the law changed. Before turning to the trial, an examination of the historical transformation of the legal category of “insult” in terms of interpretations, punishments and rationales since its emergence in the new Qing Code would help us understand the state-society relationship underlying Chinese defamation laws. I argue that the crime of insulting Republican officials mingled the western discourse of reputational rights with imperial emphasis on political authority. Facing the surge of democratic ideas in the late 1910s, the prohibition on insults gave the Republican state a new means of limiting political criticism while legitimizing state power.

The legal concept of defamation (妨害名譽) was introduced to China in the early twentieth century as integral to the Western ideas of individual liberty and equality. Constitutionalist and revolutionary periodicals had introduced human rights to reputation, life and property since the 1890s by translating Rousseau’s theory, the American Declaration of Independence and renowned Japanese philosophical texts.²⁰ They hold the concept of innate rights for cultivating modern citizenry as well as for attacking Manchu conservatives.²¹ The famous 1903 libel dispute between a revolutionary newspaper and the Qing court further disseminated sedition, reputation and the freedom of press as legal concepts, in striking contrast with the Qing court’s language of literary inquisition.²² These early experiences and practices set

²⁰ Many Chinese scholars have examined the early dissemination of the concepts of human rights in the 1890s and 1900s. See Du Jiangang, *Zhongguo jinbainian renquan sixiang* [Ideas of human rights in the recent hundred years in China] (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2004). Feng Jiangfeng, *Qingmo minchu renquan sixiang de zhaoshi yu shanbian* (1840-1912) [The commencement and evolution of the idea of human rights in modern China, 1840-1912] (Beijing: Shehuikexue wenxian chubanshe, 2011).

²¹ Marina Svensson, *Debating Human Rights in China: A Conceptual and Political History* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

²² “The Supao Sedition Trial,” *North China Daily News*, Dec 4,5, 1903. Quoted from Wang Min, “*Su bao an de shenxun yu panjue*,” [The trial and verdict of *Su bao* Case] *Shi Lin*, no. 6 (2005): 51-65.

the agenda for legal reformists to incorporate criminal defamation provisions into the *Draft New Qing Code*. But the introduction of the legal category of insult in the late Qing presupposed the political hierarchy that allowed for prosecution of publications and publishers.

China's incorporation of defamation law was part and parcel of Asian legal modernization. The Draft Code's choice of insult laws, instead of other models of defamation laws in the West and in neighboring countries, gave courts more discretion to draw a line between defamation and criticism in favor to the plaintiff to curb criticism. Many countries had already been using defamation laws in the early twentieth century to restrict the constitutional protection of freedom of expression, in response to the emergence of public spaces. Britain and France had enacted slander and libel laws centuries earlier to discourage false news or tales.²³ In Asia, Thailand issued a royal edict on defamation through falsely spoken or written words in 1900.²⁴ But the late Qing China followed Japan whose 1875 Defamation Statute (讒謗律) placed all kinds of defamation under a set of insult laws to protect reputation disregarding the truth of words.²⁵ Since insult only concerned the potential effect of public allegation without placing any emphasis on the intention or the truth, in principle, it was able to criminalize any threatening discourse. Moreover, removing the aspect of truth defense, judicial deliberations could obviate further intensification of the public discussion of the statements and supporting evidence. These qualities of the insult law fit the need of the Qing state to constrain public discussion of politics.

²³ Kaplan M. Lindsay, *The Culture of Slander in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Emily Butterworth, *Poisoned Words: Slander and Satire in Early Modern France* (Leeds, U.K.: Legenda, 2006).

²⁴ David Streckfuss, *Truth on Trial in Thailand: Defamation, Treason, and Lèse-Majesté* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

²⁵ Yamaha bunko ed., Zhuge Wending trans. *Nihon masu komyonikeshon shi* [A history of Japanese mass communication] (Guilin: Guangxi shifandaxue chubanshe, 2007), 23.

The Draft Code argues for the distinctive anti-authority nature of defamation of court and government officials. Modelled upon the Japanese Defamation Statute, the draft of the New Qing Criminal Code identified three types of insult to justify heavier punishments: Defiance of the Royal Family, Insults to Officials, and Insults to Commoners.²⁶ But unlike the Japanese law which placed all three infractions under a single category of defamation, the late Qing code couched them in different legal terms. Defiance of the imperial family, including injury to the imperial dignity still denotes sedition as in the Qing code, though the punishment is mitigated. Insults to public officials constitute “obstruction to the service of process” under Article 155 and therefore result a punishment of one degree higher than general insults. Only insults to commoners were defined as defamation.²⁷ Still, provincial draft reviewer in the Qing legislative body was reluctant to take reputation as a legally protected individual right. In their opinion, defamation was a minor civil wrong that should be punished by moral reprehension.²⁸ As the outcome of the negotiation between the traditional ideology that the society should be self-regulating and the reformist effort to follow Western conceptual framework, the statute commission finally agreed to mitigate the severity by decreasing the maximum punishment to imprisonment of one year or a fine of 100 yuan.²⁹ The Qing officials’ contempt for towards

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ According to Section 31, Article 340, Political Studies Society ed. *Daqing fagui daquan* [Law corpus of the Great Qing] (Taipei: Kao Zheng Chubanshe, 1972), 2072. Originally published in 1909 by Zhengxue she.

²⁸ Gao Hancheng ed. *Daqing xin xinglv lifa ziliao huibian* [Collection of the Legislative documents of the New Qing Code] (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2013), 572.

²⁹ This view of defamation as a civil wrong continued into the nationalist era. As late as in 1932, provincial court in Zhejiang consulted the Supreme Court if a wrongful report in the newspaper should be criminalized. The local court tended to solve the dispute by asking the publisher to simply make a rectification. See Nanjing Library ed. *Guomin zhengfu sifayuan gongbao* [Gazetteer of the Department of Justice of the Nationalist Government] (Nanjing: Nanjingdaxue chubanshe, 2011) 19. No. 24 (1932).

reputational right contrasted with the Japanese prosecutors who used the concept of defamation to suppress political criticism.³⁰ The separation of criminal defamation from political crimes reflected the inconsistencies in late Qing jurisprudence. In the past, both moral codes and laws sought to inculcate the virtues of respect for authority and obedience to superiors. But the western defamation laws rested on the idea of equitable reputational rights. To categorize and explain insult to different targets separately helped to incorporate people's rights without challenging imperial sovereignty.

The insult laws in the new code did not take effect under the Qing. The *Great Qing Publication Law* (大清印刷物專律) enacted in 1906 showed that the concept of insult meddled with traditional treason. The introduction of insult did not stretch the late Qing boundaries of public discussion of the court and officials. While the draft code remained vague about “Defiance of the imperial family,” the publication law described the act of defaming the emperor, members of the royal family and the government into “misleading the society and inciting rebel,” which revealed the century-long sensitivity to potentially dangerous subversion of authority.³¹ Punishment was up to ten years of imprisonment or a penalty of five thousand yuan. Adjudicated cases showed that many newspapers had been banned for “discussing politics,” “spreading rumors” or “defaming the court” since 1906. *The Sacred Capital Vernacular Newspaper* (神京白話報) that featured court news was forced to close in 1908.³² In 1909, *Citizen Gazetteer* (國民

³⁰ Mark D. West, *Secrets, Sex, and Spectacle: The Rules of Scandal in Japan and the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 74.

³¹ Section 4, Article 4, *Daqing yinshuawu zhuanlv* [The Great Qing publication law] in Zhang Jinglu ed. *Zhongguo jindai chuban shiliao chubian* [Primary sources for modern Chinese press history] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1955), 316.

³² Fang Hanqi, ed. *Zhongguo xinwen shiye biannianshi* [A Chronicle of Chinese Journalism] 1 (Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 2000), 527.

公報) was penalized for reporting on the palace chamber.³³ It was nonetheless more liberal than in the high Qing, when people who uttered traitorous words about the emperor or misrepresented political affairs were accused of sedition, one of the ten abominations, and sentenced to death.³⁴ The reduction of punishment attested to the court's tolerance of political criticism under the dual pressure of political newspapers and the abolition of cruel punishment under the new policy reform.³⁵

It is not until the overthrow of the Qing court that the Chinese state redefined the legal understanding of defamation. The Republican Provisional Law (1912) abolished provisions on imperial privileges but retained stipulations of reputation injuries to public officials and to private citizens. The Supreme Court explained the nature of insults to officials from the standpoint of reputational rights by comparing it to that of insults to commoners. In 1912, the Beijing local court fined a newspaper fifty yuan for making defamatory allegations about the Office of Opium Prohibition.³⁶ The fine was nine times higher than the outcome of another defamation dispute between a newspaper and a commercial theatre three years later.³⁷ To justify heavier penalties for denigration of officials and offices, from 1914 to 1916, the Supreme Court

³³ *Shen Bao*, November 24, 1909.

³⁴ The Qing penal code give the most severe punishment on the political criticism. Based on the Ming code, it further added on the crime of "falsely discussing political affairs" into sedition. For more information about Qing's censorship and punishment for rebellious ideas, See Brook, Timothy. "Censorship in Eighteenth-Century China: A View from the Book Trade," *Canadian Journal of History* 23.2 (1988): 177-96. Kent Guy. *The Emperor's Four Treasures: Scholars and the State in the Late Ch'ien-lung Era*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University, 1987).

³⁵ In 1908, the court enacted another law *Daqing baolv* (The Great Qing Newspaper Ordinance) to impose tighter restrictions on political news. But the press severely opposed the new law and forced the court to revise it.

³⁶ Fang Hanqi, *Zhongguo xinwen shiye biannianshi* 1, 583.

³⁷ *Beiyang zhengfu dangan* 17, 1-15.

interpreted the crime of insult to officials into an offense to both the state dignity and individual reputation of the officials.³⁸ The court drew on the discourse of equality to accentuate the officials' innate rights to reputation as every citizen while expressing sympathy for the state's dignitary interests on the ground that government officials represented state power. Drawing on reputational interest, the court explanation reimagined the state and the people as legally comparable entities and articulated the reason to protect state authority in the Republican sociopolitical order that legitimized popular sovereignty. As a result, the severity of insults to officials increased over what it had been in the new Qing Code.

The idea of state dignity was still closely related to state authority rather than to "legitimate public interest" a term commonly used today to protect government officials.³⁹ In judicial practice, lawyers could impose stately dignity as the central asset of authority to suggest a discretionary increase of punishment. In the 1919 trial, Musso suggested a more precise and contextualized interpretation of the offense and the public harm caused by the defamatory claim. The Beijing government's attorney raised four considerations in the complaint: the high status of the victim, the method of insulting, time and place, and the low status of the accused.⁴⁰ The first and last considerations emphasized the different statuses of the state and the society and injected political hierarchy into his concern for state reputation.

From the late Qing to the early Republican era, legal authority increasingly emphasized the protection of fame and reduced the political feature of the criminal defamation. Although the

³⁸ Guo Wei ed., *Daliyuan panjueli quanshu* [A complete collection of the precedents] (Beijing: Zhongguo zhengfa daxue chubanshe, 2013), 417.

³⁹ Kyu Ho Youm, "Liberalizing British defamation law: a case of importing the First Amendment?" *Communication Law & Policy*, no. 13 (2008): 424.

⁴⁰ "Minguo ribao bei kong zhi jieguo," *Shen Bao*, October 4, 1919, 10.

insult provision seemed to be the only legal weapon available for the early Republican government to curtail political criticism after abolishing the crimes of treason and defiance to the court, the new defamation regime gave the state a legitimate means to address the issue of state authority in reaction to transgressive discourses.

The Debates: Lines between Insult, Criticism and Play

The judicial procedures in a foreign court provided a site for the state and media institution to negotiate boundaries. The conversation between the government and the Shanghai press went on two tracks. Two legal standings, government reputation and the liberty of criticizing the powerful in the name of public good, structured the court debate and reports on the trial by major commercial newspapers. In addition, if we view the legal practice as one force vis-a-vis other social powers, we observe the contestation on another level -- between the state's attempt to curtail political discussion with legal rationales and the press' unruly and sometimes even vengeful obsession with treating to political news as entertainment. Interactions between the spheres of law and cultural production revealed more than a mutual oppositional relationship between the judicial and other social powers in Bourdieu's theory.⁴¹ Other than resisting the legal rule by declaring the constitutionally protected right to expression and their autonomy in knowledge production, the print media derived benefit from defamation litigation by using litigation to locate amusing news. One publisher used the public attention drawn to the defamation suit to resell the family tree article. The 1919 case and its aftermath opened a lasting dialogue between visions of a Republican information order. The Chinese state won the lawsuit

⁴¹ Pierre Bourdieu. "The Force of Law: Toward a Sociology of the Juridical Field," *The Hastings Law Journal* 38, no. 5 (1987): 805-853.

but failed to check the press.

Previous studies have demonstrated the influence of print media on the legal practice and court decisions. Alford's study of the Yang Naiwu case demonstrates the influence of news media by appealing to public opinion upon formal criminal justice process since the late Qing period.⁴² Asen describes two ways in which the print media engaged in legal practices in the early Republican period: some publications provided the arena for legal professionals to claim their competing knowledge authorities and to coordinate different practices in the judicial procedures; some were merely sensational news coverage.⁴³ Lean's Shi Jianqiao case offers another example of how the Republican media sensation authorized Confucian morality and powerfully influenced the court decision.⁴⁴ But none of these cases could reveal such complicated interactive and enmeshed relationships between legal and media practice in defamation litigation. The media was deeply involved in defamation litigation as the key actors; it not only combatted the insult law in and out of the court but also strategically merged the process of litigation with that of publicity to increase fame or generate profit. In addition to rational discussion of scientific and legal knowledge, emotional support for old morality, this case demonstrates that the playful discussion, regardless of how baseless it appeared to be, could empower political criticism and defy the value of reputation and state authority.

The primary issue between the lawyers was whether the article was a serious defamation or mere public criticism. In the trial, the government's attorney fired his first volley at the

⁴² William Alford, "Of Arsenic and Old Laws: Looking Anew at Criminal Justice in Late Imperial China." *California Law Review* 72, no. 6 (1984): 1180-256.

⁴³ Daniel Asen, *Death in Beijing: Murder and Forensic Science in Republican China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 131-135.

⁴⁴ Eugenia Lean, *Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

defamatory language, especially the term “*sishengzi*” in the article. Fully aware of the sensitivity of defamation to milieu in which it occurred, Musso was well prepared to substantiate his argument based on Chinese legal knowledge to avoid pitfalls brought by the information gap between the Western and Chinese cultures.⁴⁵ He cited Chinese customary law, which legitimized the murder of one’s own illegitimate child, to demonstrate the extremely low social status of such children in Chinese society. As he stated, using these epithets was a scurrilous attack on the President.⁴⁶ To protect the dignity of the state in a more substantial way, Musso inserted the consequence of the injuries to the government reputation into domestic political fragmentation. He reasoned that the public vilification altered citizens’ impression of government officials which led to public contempt for state authority. He contended that the contempt is detrimental to Beijing’s political negotiations with the Canton government and thus would hinder the peaceful reunification of the country.⁴⁷ By linking reputation interest to the pragmatic political interest of the nation, Musso called for the press’s responsibility to protect government reputation to bolster national unification.

Predictably, the defendant’s attorney Linebarger countered with the defense of good intention and fair criticism.⁴⁸ To invalidate the defamation charge, the lawyer and the newspaper

⁴⁵ Musso’s careful examination of the implications of illegitimate child placed a big contrast with the embarrassing performance of legal experts in the previous *Su bao* case. In 1903, the defendant Zhang Bingling taking advantage of his knowledge in Chinese learning explained to the foreign Judge that the word “*xiaochou*” (entertainer) he used to refer to the Manchu prince merely means small kid in classical Chinese. See Can Fei, *1903 nian Shanghai Subao an yu qingmo sifa zhuanxing* [1903: Shanghai *Su bao* case and the judicial transformations in the late Qing] (Beijing: Falv chubanshe, 2014), 41-42.

⁴⁶ *Xin Wen Bao*, October 4, 1919, 3.

⁴⁷ “*Minguo ribao bei kong zhi jieguo*,” *Shen Bao*, October 4, 1919, 10.

⁴⁸ Mr. Paul Myron Linebarger performed as a Judge and lawyer in the U.S before coming to China. He had working experience in the U.S. supreme Court and later became an adviser to the Nationalist government.

chief editor repeatedly addressed the benign motivation of the newspaper to improve Chinese governance and to advance peace. To make a viable counter-argument on Chinese legal terms, Linebarger cited the Republican Constitution, whose protection of the rights to expression would liberate newspapers from the rule of the insult law.⁴⁹ The defense seized on the conflicts between the constitutional rights of political criticism in a Republican nation and an insult law that sought to set limits on public discussion. It framed the case as a dispute between the government interest and the will and the rights of the public.

The Mixed Court's verdict balanced reputational rights with freedom of expression but neither party was satisfied. The judge voided the defendant's points and found the newspaper guilty of insulting the government officials. The court fined the newspaper manager and the chief editor 100 yuan each under the Provisional Law. Although the verdict showed that the press freedom had yielded to the defamation law, Musso's demand for a heavier punishment was rejected. Even worse for the government, the adjudication in favor of reputational rights did not impair the autonomy of the Shanghai press. *Republican Daily* won the support of almost all other commercial newspapers in Shanghai who amplified the defendant voice for their collective interests. The case outraged the Shanghai news media who took a firm stand against the guideline of political discussion laid out by the insult law.

Immediately after the trial, the *Republican Daily*, the *Shanghai News* and the *China Times* formed a defensive alliance and extended the debate to the public realm. From the standpoint of press freedom, they projecting themselves as the righteous, reasonable and law-abiding victims of the state's arbitrary insult law. Immediately after the trial, a report on the

⁴⁹ Duan Qirui's government abolished the 1913 constitution drafted during Yuan's reign and organized a new Constitution Drafting committee in January 1919. By the time of the *Republican Daily* case, the constitution (A.K.A the 1919 Anfu Constitution) had not been passed by the Congress.

judicial proceedings and the court debate appeared in the local news. The report offered a detailed summary of the defense statements and a translated official report of the case from the English-language *Shanghai Gazette* (英文滬報) in its entirety.⁵⁰ The newspapers' statement reiterated the defensive claims on the rights to political criticism, press freedom and good intention while only hinting at the government's attorney's accusation of "serious injuries" to reputation in two short lines.⁵¹ As stated in the report, Duan Qirui's government took political criticism as personal insult and the foreign judge buttressed the government's repressive press policy. Moreover, the *Republican Daily* openly derided the President on December 5. It jeeringly likened the President's clothing in a state ritual of worshipping Confucius to Yuan Shikai's monarchical garb to imply that the new government acted no differently from Yuan who silenced public criticism.⁵² The collective action exhibited the news media's determination to denounce the state's violation of press autonomy and, moreover, compellingly rewrote a public record of the case from its point of view.

The Shanghai press had already seen defamation lawsuits as providing the space to produce competing interpretations of who had attacked whom and expressed their concerns about the blurry line between insult and criticism. As early as 1915, someone foresaw the clash between criticism and insult and pointed out potential misuse of the insult law in a parody

⁵⁰ Among all the newspapers in Shanghai, only *Xin Wen Bao* displayed its unbiased attitude and gave slightly more space to the complainant's reasoning.

⁵¹ "Minguo ribao bei kong zhi jieguo," [The result of the lawsuit against Republican Daily] *Shen Bao*, October 4, 1919, 10. "Beijing zhengfu konggao benbao ji," [A record of Beijing government suing us] *Min Guo Ri Bao*, October 4, 1919, 10. "Minguo ribao bei kong zhi jieguo," [The result of the lawsuit against Republican Daily] *Shi Shi Xin Bao*, October 4, 1919, 10.

⁵² "Xu Shichang si kong ji," [A record of Xu Shichang worshipping Confucius] *Min Guo Ri Bao*, October 5, 1919, 6.

published in *Shanghai News*. Presupposing the ancient philosophers of the warring states period living in the modern time, the author fabricated a defamation suit brought by Mozi against Mencius to the court. In the complaint, Mozi cited Mencius out of context to evince that Mencius was despicable for molesting unmarried girls. He also alleged that Mencius had insulted him by portraying him as someone who disrespected his father and master.⁵³

The parody raised two questions. First, the insult law would become a tool of defamation especially when one maliciously misinterprets publicized words. Like Mozi in this fictional account, a plaintiff would harbor impure motives of filing an insult suit to attack an enemy rather than to protect one's reputation. Second, Mozi's allegation of being insulted addresses the worry about confusion between criticism and insult. Since the defamation law disregarded intention and factuality of claims, whether a statement was criminal or not depended on the judgment of the jurists and the feelings of the plaintiff. The legal boundary between criticism and insult could be manipulated. As the conflicts between the legal discourse of insult and the media practice of criticism culminated in the 1919 lawsuit, the press turned veiled resistance to an open challenge to the defamation regime. The press declared that the state's abuse of defamation law was silencing the media rather than exacting justice. They hence rejected the balance between reputational rights and expression right meted out by the courts.

In addition to the conflict between insult and criticism, the trial provoked another clash between law and play. In response to Musso's legal reading of "illegitimate child," the newspaper chief editor Ye claimed that the article was simply a political critique using

⁵³ "Xi nikong Kongmeng cheng," [A playful complaint against Mencius] *Shen Bao*, September 15, 1915, 14.

deliberately hyperbolic language.⁵⁴ Seeing the use of offensive language merely a way to entertain readers, Ye suggested the irrelevance of the legal definition of insult in the realm of such writing. The media's reaction to the defamation case also demonstrated its placement of entertainment above legal discourses. *Chinese Christian Advocate* (興華), a Christian magazine, when reporting on this defamation case, skipped the exchanges in the legal debate yet described detail the structure of the family tree. The editor considered the fact that powerful people charged the newspaper to save face as “the amusing part of this litigation.” Its commercial interest in the most attractive parts of the story buried legal principles on the value of reputation and deflected public attention to the family tree. The article used the lawsuit to facilitate locate the most appealing materials for sale and reduced the defamation litigation to some inflammatory details that made the story interesting. In this case, entertainment legitimized insult.

The *Republican Daily's* and the magazine's coverage of the lawsuit showed different rationales for circulating the information and hence two distinctive ways of engaging the public. If the major dailies' advocacy of press freedom was structured by and legitimized the legal principles and rationale, the entertainment press treated the lawsuit no more than it would another piece of juicy material from which to extract entertaining facts. Although the practice of reselling the defamatory article also declared their support of *Republican Daily*, publications like *Reviving China* generated laughter without drawing the attention of the state.

Post-trial narratives about the president and prime minister captured the hostilities and playful jabs. One month after the trial, *Republican Daily* hurled another epithet – Anfu fish -- at Duan's political clique and humiliated Xu Shuzheng by directly calling him a pig's brain.⁵⁵ The

⁵⁴ “Beijing zhengfu konggao benbao ji,” *Min Guo Ri Bao*, October 4, 1919, 10.

⁵⁵ “Anfu yu daomei shidai,” [Anfu fishes' unfortunate time] *Min Guo Ri Bao*, November 15, 1919, 3.

clear contempt for government in the political news crossed the legal boundary of political criticism. Other writers followed. A serialized political novel *A new dream in the capital city* (京華新夢) incorporated Anfu people's manipulations of the Congress and their visits to prostitutes into the narrative. In the chapter "Catching Anfu fish in the peace lake" (太平湖一釣安福魚), the novelist describes politicians in the Anfu clique as members of the fish club and calls their leader Duan Qirui "General Clam."⁵⁶ The invention and spread of "Anfu fish" in other political satires announced the failure of the rule of law.

The 1919 case showed that, as early as the first decade of the republican period, the central government had started to use defamation law to constrain media practices. But this attempt to define legitimate and illegitimate political knowledge backfired. Unlike in other countries where prosecutions for defamation greatly influenced the social definition of scandal, the ruling in the 1919 insult case did not persuade the public that the article was insulting.⁵⁷ The popular desire to be entertained together with the elitist discourse of constitutional spirit claimed for their own authority over the production of political knowledge.

Defamation for Strategic Publicity

The 1919 lawsuit became a media event. The urban print media questioned judicial practice, constituting the public record of events, and made information into a commodity. The *Republican Daily's* dispute with the state displayed its higher status and contributed to its rising

⁵⁶ Gao Zhiyan, "Jijnghua xinmeng" [A new dream in the capital city] *Xiao Shuo Xin Bao* no. 9 (1919): 10.

⁵⁷ For example, Mark West discussed how formal legal institution influence what is scandal in Japan and the U.S. See Mark D. West, *Secrets, Sex, and Spectacle: The Rules of Scandal in Japan and the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

fame.⁵⁸ Probably since then, the gossip industry had realized that defamation suits were a convenient way to attract attention. More gossip sellers drew on the non-legal dimension of defamation litigations for the high visibility associated with the disputes in the 1920s. Publicity affected the meaning and function of defamation litigation which then became a mechanism of publicity.

In the 1919 case, both the Shanghai press and the central government came to understand the publicity consequences of defamation litigation. The state realized that the intense media coverage of the lawsuit only spread the defamatory statements. Musso sued the *China Times* for republishing the troublesome article and once again defaming the central government. The suit, dismissed by the Mixed Court, was an attempt to intimidate the Shanghai press. In response, the *China Times* posted a translation of Anton Chekhov's "The Scandalmonger" to make gentle fun of the government's stupidity. In this story, a middle school teacher, afraid that someone was spreading rumors about his relationship with a maid, decides to explain himself in advance, inadvertently spreading the rumor that he had hoped to prevent.⁵⁹ The newspaper implicitly likened the protagonist to the Beijing government. Chekhov's novel, read in the context of the 1919 case, hinted that the government had done more to publicize the "scandal" than anyone else.

The tabloid press turned defamation litigation into a moneymaker in the 1920s. A guilty verdict usually resulted in a smaller material cost which could be offset by the increase in sales.

⁵⁸ Scholars studying the European public nature of justice have included the display of social status into function of the publicity of justice. This argument also applied in the 1919 case. For example, Daniel Lord Smail, *The Consumption of Justice: Emotions, Publicity, and Legal Culture in Marseille, 1264-1423* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2013).

⁵⁹ Anton Chekov, "Mai feibang de," [The scandal monger] Bing trans. *Shi Shi Xin Bao*, October 14, 1919, 3.

In 1926, a German doctor sued *the Crystal* for an article about the doctor's attempt to improve Kang Youwei's sexual prowess. As the Christian magazine reported on the 1919 case, the tabloid discussed the case because it was salacious. It only incurred a fine of one yuan and some time commitment but the tabloid benefited a great deal from 1000 more copies sold thanks to this dispute.⁶⁰ The doctor also benefited for the publicity of the defamation raised his fame in the medical market. The defamation litigation became both the supplier of scandalous accounts and a sales gimmick.

Media coverage spread the idea of reputation right but also discouraged political authorities or citizens from filing defamation charges in the 1920s. By the late 1920s, plaintiffs in defamation cases had included celebrities, politicians, businessmen, and doctors.⁶¹ Some medium-size publishing houses even created permanent position to handle defamation disputes.⁶² But the role of defamation law in restraining political criticism declined. Political figures avoided using the defamation law to attack the press. In 1923, instead of filing an insult case with the Mixed Court, Li Yuanhong accused a man who had distributed defamatory pamphlets in the international settlement of intending to injure his life and property.⁶³

If we place the 1919 case in the context of modern Chinese legal reform from the late Qing insult law to the 1928 nationalist libel law, the failure of the early Republican state contributed to the emergence of a new defamation category and more strictly defined freedom of

⁶⁰ Bao Tianxiao, "Ji Shanghai Jing bao," [A Record of Shanghai Jing bao] in *Chuanyiinglou huiyi lu*, 443-449.

⁶¹ Some cases that appealed to the supreme court could be found in *Beiyang zhengfu dangan* 17, 429-463.

⁶² Zhang Jinglu, *Zai chubanjie ershi nian* [Twenty years in the publishing industry] (Shanghai: Zazhi gongsi, 1933), 107.

⁶³ "Yu laoxiang daguansi," [Having a legal dispute with his fellow townsman] *Chen Bao*, October 2, 1923.

expression under the Nationalist government (1928-1949). The Penal Law of Republican China (1928) added a new category of libel which criminalized only maliciously false allegations and allowed truth defense if the defamatory claim concerns the public interest.⁶⁴ The seemingly more liberal attitudes came with more conditions: it was legal to express an opinion with benign intention only for “self-defense, duty reports of government officials, issues that allow public criticism, reports on conferences, court debates or public gatherings.”⁶⁵ The deliberate ambiguity of public criticism gave more discretion to the Nationalist authority.

The 1928 libel law acknowledged the change in the function of defamation law. The fact-finding aspect of libel trials shifted the focus of court debate from effect assessment to content examination. Defamation trials became a process of verifying and publicizing official truth as ruled by the court. The government was then able to use libel litigation involved government officials to refute political rumors, even if the court decision could not change the media practice. But it is another story in the 1930. Before the nationalist party grew stronger enough to regulate the gossip industry, the party and the political leader in 1927 explored into publicity in multiple forms, which is the theme of the final chapter.

⁶⁴ Article 326, He Qinhua ed. *Zhonghua Minguo Xinglv* [The Penal Law of Republican China] (Beijing: Fangzheng chubanshe. 2006), 80.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

CHAPTER FIVE

Romance and Revolution under Jiang Jieshi

Introduction

Jiang Jieshi (蔣介石, better known as Chang Kai-shek, 1887-1975) made frequent appearances in the print media as the promising new national leader after the Northern Expedition (1925-1927). The expedition was a military campaign against regional warlords and a political campaign against warlordism. The propaganda department, Jiang and collaborative media made his private life into official propaganda, tabloid articles, novels and a movie. These products calculated the proportion of entertainment and nationalist ideology, designed the character, and chose the media platform. Jiang's revelation of elements of his personal life became a hallmark of Nationalist leadership construction in the late 1920s.

I distinguish this political visibility in a form of authorized gossip from commercially driven cultural products and official propaganda. I highlight the role of authority and a control mechanism that used the dissemination power of gossip. These party-made products showcased a different relationship between romance and politics from what Lynn Hunt saw from the French revolutionary family romance. If in the French revolution the images of private relations facilitated the construction of revolutionary political authority, in the accounts of Jiang's personal life and love stories the revolutionary authority defined private relations.¹ Subjugating romance to ideological values, both fictional and real-life accounts of Jiang's love story assimilated personal and national interests to make Jiang personify the nation and revolutionary spirit. I address it as a process of nationalizing the private — the result of the nationalist adjustment of

¹ Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

propaganda to a political culture in which people engaged with political discussion by means of gossiping. The purpose of the party and its leader was to convey revolutionary messages to a politically engaged but ideologically disengaged populace. The emergence of authorized party-made gossip demands us to re-examine the nature of gossip production and of the political propaganda in the late 1920s.

Firstly, the collision between the official and unofficial greatly impugned the independency of the industry and its legitimacy of being an open and unofficial realm of political engagement. The strategic deployment of popular cultural forms for political propaganda was both the consequence of the popular engagement brought by the gossip industry and of political agencies playing in the transformation of gossip production in the late 1920s. The penetration of the political party into Shanghai's tabloid press brought about a significant change. Shifting away from its claimed political impartiality, the gossip published by leading tabloids in 1927 adopted an interpretive approach that explained or commented on the leader's private behaviors from political angles and become a political message carrier.

Secondly, tensions between the political and commercial interests call for an analysis of the Jiang's publicity of his wedding and marriage life as a fluid and complex cultural practice at the intersection of party propaganda, self-disclosure, public political discussion, entertainment and even consumerism. The propagandist blending of their political agendas with public interest in this rising leader's private life remained controlled in the producing process. But when Jiang decide to publicize his wedding ceremony with the involvement of a commercial film studio, the insertion of ideological messages conflicted and compromised with entertaining, fragmented ways of making meaning. This model of political propaganda as a dialectical process in which

multiple voices collide more commonly appears after mid-1980s in China.²

Primarily from the perspective of the Nationalist Party and Jiang Jieshi, this chapter explores strategic deployment of popular romance fiction, tabloid articles, and commercial newsreel as vehicles of nationalist revolutionary messages in 1927. The first section provides a glimpse of the growing consciousness of publicity among political leaders from Qing to early Republic. By situating the Nationalist approach into a longer history of self-revelation, I suggest the Nationalists' ideological insertion and the extent of disclosure were different from those of earlier political players like Li Yuanhong's construction of his individual leading style. Section two discusses the gossip industry given Nationalist interference in the late 1920s. *The Crystal* offered an official interpretation of Jiang's controversial private behavior. I show that the strong presence of the party not only changed the power dynamics behind gossip production but also transformed gossip from fact-based narratives to politicized explanations. The chapter brings attention to Jiang's revelations about his new marriage in 1927. The coordinated effort to describe a romantic relationship in revolutionary language and the couple's use of commercial media at their wedding make the event an interesting site of investigation. With the union of commercial film studios and the press, media portrayals of Jiang's courtship of and marriage to Song Meiling (1898-2003) incorporated the nationalist discourse in a party-made love story, his justification of social reform, and the spectacularity of upper class social life. Mobilizing both print and film media, the media-savvy couple imprinted Jiang's image of a new national leader in popular consciousness. In this era, political authority through strategically mediated self-

² Xiaomei Chen, *Staging Chinese Revolution : Theater, Film, and the Afterlives of Propaganda* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

exposure was rejuvenated in a commercialized way and created new visual pleasure for Chinese urbanites.

Towards a New Culture of Self-disclosure

The Nationalist Party and Jiang Jieshi's flexible sense of and instrumental approach to privacy should be situated in the popular perception of a political figure's privacy and the changing practice of political publicity. In the imperial time, emotional attachments between husband and wife were considered private. While gentry men openly wrote about their courtesans, they did not write about intimacy with wives and only rarely about their concubines.³ The early Republican focus on the wives, concubines and family relations of political figures redefined the relationship between the private and the public. By the mid-1920s, the mediated culture of lighthearted political engagement had demonstrated the capacity of printed gossip to expand visibility. Bao Tianxiao once expressed his opinion on the practice of trivializing contemporary political figures in popular narratives.⁴ In his political novel *Remains of the fragrance* (留芳記), a member of the political elite bragged about being written into a novel: "The author wrote me into his novel too... On that day, he visited me in Nanjing and mentioned about a planned closure of the novel at the twentieth chapter. I responded, Why? We feel fortunate to be written into a book as long as the descriptions are not too embarrassing."⁵ Bao saw the publicity of personal lives as an effective way to acknowledge one's position and to extend one's social influence, not

³ Bonnie S. McDougall and Anders Hansson, ed., *Chinese Concepts of Privacy* (Leiden Netherlands; Boston: Brill, 2002).

⁴ Flower is a late Qing top-selling political novel about the travel and life experience of a Qing diplomat with his concubine, known for its seamless weaving of contemporaneous events into the narrative.

⁵ Bao Tianxiao, *Liu fang ji* [Remains of fragrance] (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1925), 52.

as an invasion of privacy. The flourishing gossip industry both owed itself and contributed to a new receptivity to the disclosure of political figures' personal lives.

Compared to Li Yuanhong's restricted sharing of his domestic life, Jiang's strategic projection of his marriage showed his deeper comprehension of the political significance of gossip and the social impact of personal information. In the post-nationalist era, according to Merkel-Hess's study on Feng Yuxiang's wife's use of intimacy in the 1930s and the 1950s, family and conjugal relations as a political resource empowered elite women.⁶ The different media environments, political cultures and political agendas led to differences in self-disclosure among political players.

Self-disclosure as a means of self-defense and public image construction is not a new phenomenon. In the early eighteenth century, Emperor Yongzheng (雍正帝, 1678-1735) launched a nationwide campaign to defend his succession against rumors that accused him of having usurped the throne by murdering his father and brothers. The emperor ordered the compilation and dissemination of *Records of great righteousness resolving confusion* (大义覺迷錄) which revealed many palace secrets. The court ordered every official from the capital to county offices to reveal the contents to the public.⁷ But the emperor's self-disclosure was soon recognized by his successor as extremely inappropriate. Emperor Qianlong (乾隆帝, 1711-1799) prohibited the circulation and prohibited the people from discussing the life of an emperor.⁸ Since then, the state banned the discussion of any palace stories outside the forbidden city.

⁶ Kate Merkel-Hess, "A New Women and Her Warlord: Li Dequan, Feng Yuxiang, and the Politics of Intimacy in Twentieth-Century China," *Frontiers of History in China*, No. 3 (2016): 431-457.

⁷ For more information of this case, see Jonathan D. Spence, *Treason by the Book* (New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 2002).

⁸ *Ibid.*

Although the court gazette (京報) transmitted information about the daily activities of the emperor to the gentry, it was limited to describing imperial gifts and celebrations to depict a beneficent ruler.⁹ This distance between the rulers and their subjects sustained the imperial political hierarchy and the mysterious greatness of the emperor.

In the 1910s, the gossip industry encouraged the consensual disclosure of a leader's personal life as an intimate form of political self-presentation. President Li Yuanhong laid bare some aspects of his self and personal life to construct a positive image of commoner president.¹⁰ In 1919, a news report described what he wore and ate: "When he met me for the interview, Li was wearing a common military uniform as if he never forgot his origins. His kind and humble manner was just like an everyman... He did not celebrate birthday. Nor did he eat birthday noodles. He only had a regular meal prepared. The daily food expense for the whole family does not exceed one Yuan."¹¹ His appearance articulated both his political identity and his military self-discipline. The simple birthday meal demonstrated how he shunned material comfort despite his elevated political status.

Li's exposure of his daily life was a reaction to gossip that associated him with the pleasure quarters and caricatured his self-indulgence. The above newspaper report depicted a former president who rejected the impersonal aloofness and greatness that were associated with a monarch. Li thus gained the capacity to appear before the national audience as someone who was

⁹ Mittler briefly discussed the depiction of the material wealth and daily activities of the emperor in the court gazette in the nineteenth century. See Barbara Mittler, *A Newspaper for China? : Power, Identity, and Change in Shanghai's News Media, 1872-1912* (Cambridge, Mass: Distributed by Harvard University Press, 2004), 194.

¹⁰ Li was on the position of President from 1916 to 1917 and from 1922 to 1923.

¹¹ "Li Yuanhong zhi pingmin shenghuo," [Li Yuanhong lives a commoner's life], *Shi Shi Xin Bao*, November 18, 1919, 3.

just like them. Li's ways of appealing to audience was rare in the warlord era but it is reflected mentality of a political leader who surrendered his privacy. Instead of showing one's acceptance of the mandate of heaven as the Yongzheng Emperor had, twentieth-century political leaders galvanized support by demonstrating their moral rectitude and style of presidency. Their legitimacy rested on popular sovereignty. Li understood the effect of his behaviors on the public assessment of his character.

While Li's exposure of his daily details kept the public attention away from his family, the Nationalists talked about their intimate relationships. *A Complete History of Jiang Jieshi* (蔣介石全史) showed Jiang's willingness to submit parts of his personal life to public scrutiny. The author says: "Mr. Jiang also keeps a diary. Even the war did not interrupt this habit. All the records were very exhibit-able. We can see how perfectly honest and openhearted man he is!"¹² The Nationalists were eager to prove that the new political leader had nothing to conceal behind the people, in sharp contrast to figures in the warlord era who had always been associated with behind-the-scene operations. Also, the Nationalists more carefully strategized the media visibility of these personal factors for political purposes. Ray Huang contends that after 1927 Jiang kept diaries that he intended to publish.¹³ Archival documents reveal Jiang's plan to publish five diaries and his correspondence. In one diary, *The Record of Love* (愛記), Jiang expressed his love for Song Meiling and made it consistent with his earlier declaration of love and his wedding in

¹² Simingxiaoyaoke, *Jiang Jieshi quanji* [A complete history of Jiang Jieshi] (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1927), 46-47. The author's pen name "Siming Rambler" hinted his close relations, possibly kinship, with Jiang and therefore guaranteed the reliability of this account. Siming is the alias of Jiang's native place.

¹³ Huang Renyu, *Cong dalishi de jiaodu du Jiang Jieshi riji* [Reading Jiang Jieshi diary from the perspective of grand historical narrative] (Beijing: jiuzhou chubanshe, 2008).

1927.¹⁴ Family and marriage became important in promoting national leadership.

Jiang's resort to the private realm happened amid the political rivalries and power-shuffling within the Nationalist party. He wanted to refute public speculations of his political intrigue, to correct the narrative of his marriage, and to develop a national consciousness. He also wanted his leadership to be remembered after he stepped down. When Sun's death created a power vacuum, the party was split between its left and right wings. After the Canton Coup, twin nationalist governments appeared in the south: the left-leaning Wuhan government led by Wang Jingwei that collaborated with the communists, and Jiang's conservative faction that purged them. The northeastern warlord Zhang Zuolin was the major political and military threat. After careful calculation, in August 1927, Jiang resigned from his official positions to reunify the government and the party. Despite his resignation, Jiang remained in the public eye.

Jiang's personal story was also a part of the party's organized leadership building and ideological propaganda. Under the first united front (1923-1927) between the Nationalists and the Communists, the Nationalists adopted mass propaganda to reach the urban and rural working classes.¹⁵ The party's propagandists used public excitement to introduce revolutionary romances about Jiang Jieshi's love story. The acceptance of privacy disclosure, the robust presence of the gossip media, Jiang's situation and the nationalist need for propaganda during the Northern Expedition all gave rise to this distinctive type of official gossip in the late 1920s. The Ministry of Education of the Beiyang government never expected the Nationalists to produce educational readings with the techniques learned from unofficial histories.

¹⁴ No. 002-060200-00016-003, Folder of Jiang Zhongzheng, Academia Historica, Taiwan.

¹⁵ John Fitzgerald, *Awakening China: Politics, Culture, and Class in the Nationalist Revolution* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), 95-102.

Changing the Nature of Gossip Production

The military success of the Northern Expedition flamed media enthusiasm for the campaign and its leader, which smoothed the party's entrance into the gossip industry. Ten boxes of books from Shanghai sold out in only three days in Wuhan. Publishers and booksellers who strategized marketing along the route of the military campaign from Guangzhou to the North became wealthy.¹⁶ To better serve the need of wartime propaganda, the Nationalist Party partnered with Shanghai's tabloid press. After failing to create a revolutionary tabloid to attack regional warlords, the Nationalist Party cooperated with *The Crystal* in 1926.¹⁷ The tabloid hoped to create enthusiasm for Jiang by publishing a series of articles on his military expertise and filial piety.¹⁸

The Nationalists transformed the political and commercial dynamics of the Shanghai gossip industry. Increasing political machinations intensified the politicization of gossip. Pressed by powerful political forces, leading tabloids turned from entertainment and documentary work to political endorsement and criticism. Meanwhile, rectification notices appeared in the tabloid papers to combat rumors. *The Crystal* claimed to practice serious journalism and professional fact checking. The change happened in 1926. In 1929, *Diamondine* (金剛鑽) expressed fears of

¹⁶ Zhang Jinglu, *Zai chubanjie ershi nian*, 126-127.

¹⁷ The Nationalist tabloid failed to market the paper. *The Crystal's* chief editor was then reportedly to be advised to align with Jiang by Feng Shuluan, a regular contributor of the tabloid who also worked for the Guangzhou government. See Zhuomin, "Beifa sheng zhong zhi beifa bao," [The northern expedition tabloid during the northern expedition] *Fu Er Mo Si*, August 12, 1926, 1. Tanzibao, "Jingbao yu Jiang Jieshi," [The Crystal and Chang Kai-shek] *Fu Er Mo Si*, September 12, 1926.

¹⁸ To list a few, Xingyun, "Jiang Jieshi chunxiao ji," [A Record of Jiang Jieshi's filial piety], *Jing Bao*, September 6, 1926; Guanxin, "Jiang Jieshi zhi qi," [Chang Kai-shek's wife] *Jing Bao*, September 9, 1926.

losing their political independence: “Now people used tabloid for political propaganda. I guess this is the doomsday of the tabloid papers.”¹⁹ The changing approach to gossip attracted serious newspapers to join as gossip commentators, which dragged the industry away from its tradition of entertainment and political neutrality.

The public discussion of Jiang Jieshi’s love life and familial relations in the summer of 1927 embodied this change. Gossiping about the leader’s private life became a contest of interpretations mixed with political propaganda and criticism. It was rumored that Jiang abandoned his spouses and was intriguing with the Song family, a clan with incomparable wealth, political fame and foreign connections. To stop the press from badgering him about his marriage, Jiang Jieshi announced that he had already divorced his wife, Lady Mao, and sent away two concubines because of his fierce opposition to arranged marriages and concubinage.²⁰ This explanation did not stop the press from criticizing him and questioning his intentions. *The Crystal* and *The Holmes*, the two most powerful tabloids in Shanghai, took opposing positions.

The Crystal tried to reconcile the conflicts between Jiang’s marriage and his image as a modern national leader. To support Jiang, the tabloid published a lengthy article which indirectly quoted Jiang’s claim to have abandoned wife-concubine marriage and to respect the lifestyle chosen by his wife and concubines. The article began by clarifying that his marriage to Lady Mao had been arranged. Although she gave birth to Jiang’s eldest son, the long-time departure after Jiang devoted himself to the revolution drained away their emotional attachments. The article also went into details of the divorce. Jiang had discussed it with the lineage head and

¹⁹ “Zhitan fengyue,” [Only to talk about amorous affairs] *Jin Gang Zuan*, March 3, 1929.

²⁰ “Jiang founen furen chuyang,” [Jiang denies that his wife traveled abroad] in *Fu Er Mo Si*, September 14, 1927.

Mao's brother and generously allowed her to stay with the Jiang family for the sake of their son. According to the article, Jiang's relationship with his concubine Lady Yao ceased after Yao converted to Buddhism. Jiang kindly supported Chen, his other concubine, when she went to study in the U.S. The article describes the divorce as a way of setting women free from social restrictions and mentoring them. After explaining the status of Jiang's former spouses, the article concludes that "Jiang is now seeking for a virtuous wife to alleviate the increasing burden he had shouldered alone in the nationalist revolution." The sentence compares Jiang to Sun Yat-sun on the point that their devotion to revolution was compatible with their personal loves.²¹

This narrative synthesized Jiang's private life, Jiang's personal statement of his marital status and the propagandistic description of a revolutionary romantic relation. Juicy details evince the virtuous and lofty political concerns of the national leader. To justify Jiang's divorce, the article fits his behaviors into the anti-Confucian discourse of marriage based on love and women's emancipation. The divorce thus carried significant social meaning. The article then pictures a supportive revolutionary-minded wife who would share Jiang's political responsibility. According to this interpretation, Jiang's choice for a new wife was a result of his commitment to the national revolution. The comparison to his predecessor elevated Jiang to the status of a revolutionary leader. This article attributed social and political meanings to gossip to support official statement.

Combating *The Crystal* as its major commercial rivalry, *The Holmes* discredited the authoritative explanations. It kept selling vivid and racy stories about his formal and informal, past and present conjugal ties to tempt popular interest. The paper introduced Lady Chen as Ms.

²¹ "Jiang furen zhi guoqu xianzai ji weilai," [The past, current and future Mrs. Jiang] *Jing Bao*, September 24, 1927.

Jiang, his favorite concubine in Guangdong, and questioned Jiang's intention to secretly send her to the U.S.²² Another article constructed a timeline of Jiang's love affairs to show that his relationship with Song had started six years before his divorce. It implied his culpability for abandoning his spouses and leaving unmentioned the real reason for the divorce. The tabloid claimed to have found a secret marriage agreement between Jiang and Lady Song:

Due to their divergence in political opinions, Song Ziwen (aka T.V. Soong) stood against Jiang during the crisis of Jiang-Wang split and therefore was discontented with Jiang's relationship with his younger sister. It was not until Jiang resigned from his position that Song Ziwen adopted a milder attitude toward their espousal. Ms. Song found it a right timing and proposed three essential preconditions to Jiang: 1. dissolve original family; 2. Never be the commander-in-chief of the nationalist army; 3. live abroad. Although Jiang accepted all these conditions, Song Ziwen still remained in doubt. Song suspected that if Chang could discard his family for his sister, it is possible that in the future Chang could also abandon his sister for someone else. Ms. Song therefore added one more condition to secure her financial rights in this conjugal relation and attempted to persuade her brother that Chang would not be able to pursue other women with his purse strings held by her. Thanks to Ms A's attempts to grease the wheel, Song then approved.²³

The article more moralized and politicized his marital choice. It used the secret agreement to describe the Jiang-Song union as a trade. Jiang would retire from politics to have a blessed conjugal relationship with Ms. Song. He also surrendered his financial freedom to ensure Song's position as his only spouse. The article mocked Jiang's deal with the Songs in exchange for the support from China's wealthiest and most prestigious family. If the *Crystal* was an advocate, the *Holmes* was a social and political critic.

Articles on both sides featured explanations and opinions instead of fact-based narratives.

²² Zhesheng, "Jiang furren liumei zhenxiang," [The truth about Ms. Jiang's travel to America] *Fu Er Mo Si*, August 13, 1927.

²³ Weiweng, "Jiang Jieshi jiang furi jiehun," [Jiang Jieshi will get married in Japan] *Fu Er Mo Si*, September 27, 1927.

Both tabloids elevated the political significance of Jiang's private behaviors by linking it to political goals. The political alliance transformed *Jing Bao*'s prior value since gossip served as the vehicle of political indoctrination. The issue of credibility became a concern. In July 1927, *the Crystal* declared that wrongful reports stained the professional integrity of journalists. The tabloid reprimanded rumors as the conspiracy of evil intentions to besmirch others, more severe wrongdoings than simply disseminating misinformation.²⁴ The same paper, which had announced itself to be the playground for any untrue and incomplete reports, seven years later placed factuality far before entertainment.

The contestation over the political meanings of the marriage not only bombarded the audience with competing interpretations but also fueled more speculations about the power relations underneath private connections. People used their knowledge of national affairs to dissect the marriage. There were rumors that Jiang was under control of the Green Gang who had forced Song Ziwen into the marriage.²⁵ Some believed that Jiang Jieshi's union with Song Meilin was nothing more than a customary arranged marriage for her family to benefit from Jiang's military and political assets.²⁶ Public critics drew attention to the nexus of economic interests and political calculations.

The nationalist penetration into the tabloid world and the later join of serious journalism in gossip production had profound consequences. On the one hand, political and social meanings loaded onto a leader's martial and amorous affairs weakened the playful tone in narratives. In the

²⁴ Tianma, "Zaoyao yu cuowu" [Rumors and errors] *Jing Bao*, June 21, 1927.

²⁵ Green Gang was a secret society and criminal organization in Shanghai. Zhang Zige, *Chenfeng de jiyi: zai songmeilin shenbian de rizi* [Memory in the dust: my days with Ms. Song Meilin] (Beijing: Tuanjie chubanshe, 2003), 28-36.

²⁶ Tianliu, "Nanju mimi: yueluan qian dangzheng zhi bianhua," [The change of party politics before the Canton Coup] *Da Gong Bao*, December 23, 1927, 2.

late 1910s and early 1920s, gossip columnists familiarized their readers with politics by publishing trivia as about topics such as Li Yuanhong and opera singers. A different mechanism of the gossip industry engaged readers in political discussion in the late 1920s. While some gossip columnists were still profiteers, the interaction among political interests turned gossip into a medium of political critique. After the Northern Expedition, official and unofficial voices competed with and influenced each other. Public concerns over political issues mounted. Gossip constituted the evidence for argument construction rather than a commodity of fun.

On the other hand, gossip brought trivial affairs outside of entertainment. Many news items titled “miscellaneous record,” (雜記) “leftover news,” (余聞) or “secret curtain” (密幕) frequently appeared in pages of serious news. A Tianjin-based commercial newspaper, *Dagong Bao* editorialized on the divorce and exposed the correspondence between Jiang and his relatives.²⁷ It condemned him for discarding old companions and bullying disadvantaged women.²⁸ The fact that major newspaper dabbled in gossip realm further pushed gossip production towards serious political discussion and legitimized entertainment in political news.

Defining a Revolutionary Couple

Under these conditions, Jiang modeled his relation with Song after an ideal of revolutionary love and emphasized their partnership in advancing China’s nationalist revolution. The theme of a revolutionary couple had already been a part of the party’s construction of Jiang’s leadership before Jiang’s wedding statements. In both the fictional and factual accounts of

²⁷ “Jiang Jieshi banli lihun zhi yihan,” [One of the letters regarding Jiang’s divorce] *Da Gong Bao*, October 9, 1927, 6.

²⁸ “Nanzheng zaji(8),” [Miscellaneous record of the political affairs in the South(8)] *Da Gong Bao*, October 15, 1927, 2.

Jiang's love story, the revolutionary propaganda subjugated a romantic relationship and tightly bonded personal desires with national salvation. The Nationalist disclosure of the personal lives differed from the process of intimidation that scholars of contemporary political communication have theorized to address the transfer of value from the private sphere to the public sphere.²⁹ In contrary, Jiang and his collaborators sought to transplant the ideas of nationalism, anti-warlordism, and pro-revolution into what had been private information and imagery. The nationalists' new political authority determined the idealized image of a couple.

Jiang published two statements about his wedding in the *Shanghai News*. In the first statement, published four days before the ceremony, Jiang claimed that the nation and the people were his top priority and shaped his personal life. To fulfil his "personal wish in the military years," he announced to scrimp on his wedding in order to save the money for a sanitarium for disabled soldiers. Jiang also urged his friends and guests to donate to the sanitarium instead of sending wedding gifts. The statement set off by using a familiar discourse of self-sacrifice for the revolution and ended with a calling for public support for soldiers.³⁰ *The Crystal* interpreted this charitable deed from a more personal perspective. It juxtaposed a panegyric of his generous donation to help the wounded and the disabled with a detailed description of the wedding ceremony (figure 4). The writer exalted Jiang's humanitarianism and linked his caring for the soldiers to his devotion to country and family.³¹ Unlike Jiang's portrayal, the tabloid emphasized private and the public aspects of the national leader.

²⁹ James Stanyer, *Intimate Politics: Publicity, Privacy and the Personal Lives of Politicians in Media Saturated Democracies* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2013), 9-11.

³⁰ Jiang Jieshi, "Qishi," [Announcement] *Shen Bao*, November 27, 1927.

³¹ Danweng, "Feibing yuan," [Sanitarium for wounded soldiers] *Jing Bao*, December 3, 1927.



Figure 4. The article about Jiang's generous donation to the construction of a sanitarium for wounded soldiers was placed next to the report on Jiang-Song wedding ceremony. (*Jing Bao*, December 3, 1927)

Jiang's wedding-day statement explicated the relationship between his marriage and revolution. It was both a display of his love for Song and a speech on the importance of happy families for revolutionaries and Chinese society. He formally introduced her as his soulmate and spoke about their commitment to the nationalist revolution as the basis of their union:

Today is the most honorable and happiest day in my life. I am marrying Ms. Song Meiling whom I respect and love mostly. When passive thoughts sometimes occurred to my mind, my fellow revolutionists asked when I could truly concentrate on the revolution... Eventually, I can give a good answer today: I am assured that after marrying Ms. Song Meiling my revolutionary career will definitely progress well. From now on, I can keep my mind on my responsibility for the revolution. I studied philosophy and social problems and deeply believe that without happy marriage people could not live meaningfully. Without happy and peaceful families in the society, the nation would by no means have improved. Revolutionaries who pay little attention to social reforms do not comprehend the real meaning of revolution and thus do not make a complete revolution. Families are the foundation of the society. Family reform should be the first step of the social reform. Ms. Song and I used to discuss Chinese revolution and we agreed on this point. I sincerely wish that our marriage will bring a little change to the old society and

contribute to the building of a new one. We do not only celebrate our own happy marriage but also wish to advance Chinese social reform. I will make a great deal of efforts till our dream comes true. Therefore, our wedding today also builds up the foundation for our revolutionary courses. Upon the first time when I met Ms. Song, I thought of her as my ideal life companion and Ms. Song also expressed that she would not marry anyone else. Our sacred union is incomparable to ordinary cases....³²

The statement iterates the linkage between the couple from two dimensions: the emotional attachment between two individuals goes in tandem with their consensual view and practice of social reform and national revolution. The view of family as a miniature version of the nation dates from the early Republic.³³ The leader's marriage serves a public model of family reform, guides social reform and thus national progress. Many books and magazines published this wedding statement and praised it as "the most valuable article in the Chinese marriage history."

The image of a revolutionary couple and public interest in a personal event were not Jiang's invention. They had already appeared in story about Jiang's revolutionary and love experience, *The Romance of Jiang Jieshi* (蔣介石演義). The story was published by the Nationalist Bookstore (國民書店) in April 1927, as a popular novel combining entertainment and propaganda. It was one among many revolutionary novellas produced by the nationalists from 1925 to 1927.³⁴ Through a biographical account of how Jiang grew from an anti-Manchu adolescent to a Nationalist hero and successor of Sun Yat-sen, the novel tells the history of the nationalist revolution from the anti-Manchu uprisings to the Northern Expedition. It engraved

³² Jiang Jieshi, "Women de jinri," [Today for us] *Shen Bao*, December 1, 1927, 14.

³³ Robert Culp gives a concise discussion of Early Republican discourse of family and nation, see Robert Culp, *Articulating Citizenship: Civic Education and Student Politics in Southeastern China, 1912-1940* (Cambridge, MA: Distributed by Harvard University Press), 131-132.

³⁴ The novel editor Tao Fengzi produced at least two popular novels about the northern expedition in 1927. The other one is *Guomin Gemingjun Beifa Yanyi* (The Romance of the Nationalist Army in the northern expedition).

pro-revolutionary ideas including nationalism, anti-warlordism and political activism into a character-driven narrative. The concluding chapter about a meeting of martyrs killed in an anti-Manchu insurrection reveals the intention to legitimize Jiang's singular leadership during the party's split between left and right. The chapter lends voice to these revolutionary spirits who elected Jiang for his literary and military talent to ritualize the intergenerational transmission of national revolutionary leadership.

Jiang's discussion of the public interest and his personal life resembled the interlacement of romance and revolution in the novel. *The Romance of Jiang Jieshi* dedicates much space to the love between Jiang Jieshi and Zhang Qianhong. Zhang was to be a maid in the household of a local governor. She followed Jiang's advice to enter the school established by the national heroine Qiu Jin (秋瑾, 1875-1907). A conversation in Chapter 21 describes the connection between Zhang's affection for Jiang and her goal of rescuing the nation:

Qiu Jin said to her student: "I heard from Huanqin that you and Jieshi love each other. Jieshi is a promising man. I'm so glad that you admire him. No one could compel other people against their own will. I am happy to know that you will be faithful to him till the end. But with only one body, how can you devote yourself to both the nation and this man? If you sacrificed yourself to the nation, what could I give him when he want you back?"

Upon hearing these words, Qianhong turned her head to hide her blushing face. After a while, she replied: "You do have a point here, my dear teacher. But you don't know much about us. I am the only person who deserves his appreciation and he is the only one deserving mine. The love between us is not like normal romantic passion that aims at lifetime companion. Therefore, I have to go for my own destination and only by doing so I will not disappoint him. I do not want to disobey my teacher but your view of love was too boring and narrow like a countryman. You should know that my devotion to the nation merges with my love for him. Because he is the soul of the nation!"³⁵

Qiu Jin's question comes from a common view of the conflict between patriotic commitment and love. From the famous constitutionalist Liang Qichao to May Fourth intellectuals, intellectuals

³⁵ Tao Fengzi ed., *Jiang Jieshi yanyi* [The Romance of Jiang Jieshi] (Shanghai and Guangzhou: Guomin shudian, 1927), chapter 21.

all rang the alarm of the immersive harm love story would cause – to encourage lewd desires and weaken one’s love for the nation.³⁶ Many novels illustrated this tension. What Haiyan Lee calls “the Confucian structure of love” in butterfly novels subordinates romantic love to national loyalty and uses sufferings from sacrificing the precious love to authenticate the hero’s patriotic passion.³⁷ *The Romance* found another compelling way to convey nationalist consciousness. It undermines this tension by making nationalist sentiment the core of romantic love. When Zhang sees Jiang as an epitome of the nationalist spirit, she merges her personal yearnings with revolutionary devotion. Unlike Qiu Jin, the older generation of revolutionaries who sacrificed their personal desires for the nation, Zhang conceives a new revolutionary ideal in which personal and national goals converge.

This model of revolutionary couple became available to nationalist tabloids and Jiang Jieshi himself to frame his relationship with Song. The novel had already build the connection between reality and this fictionalized depiction of Jiang. In-chapter commentaries such as “this depiction is very close to facts,” “Jiang is truly a hero” lend the novel a sense of authority and gave an impression of Jiang as the true embodiment of the “soul of the nation” and the cause of revolution.³⁸ Jiang’s wedding statements authenticated the novel’s message. The novel, tabloid explanations and Jiang’s personal statement forged a coherent narrative under the collectively planned theme of national consciousness. The political party and the male leader had transformed intimate relationships into a legitimate political domain to generate political capital.

³⁶ Cathrine Yeh, *The Chinese Political Novel: Migration of a World Genre* (Cambridge, Massachusetts ; London: Harvard University Asia Center, 2015), 135-141.

³⁷ Haiyan Lee, *Revolution of the Heart: A Genealogy of Love in China, 1900-1950* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2010), 87-92.

³⁸ Tao Fengzi, ed., *Jiang Jieshi yanyi*, 110.

Controlled Visibility and the Object of Consumerism

Jiang turned his wedding into a media event and inserted political messages into commercial and entertainment culture. The Jiang-Song couple, the mass media and manufacturers who took advantage of the event to promote high-end commodities all made the Jiang-Song wedding into an event. The ceremony was overtly political and commercial at the same time. It therefore linked political propaganda, popular culture and consumerism in a new way. This analysis of Jiang's wedding shows the tension between propagandist appropriation and commercialization. The tension suggests a relationship between entertainment and politics that was unprecedented in the public discussion of the private lives of political figures in the warlord era. A private event as a political performance created visual entertainment and was strategically used as a political resource. Commercial players stripped the visual representations of their political meanings but reinforced Jiang's leadership in the language of consumerism.

Combining national rituals and a private event, the semi-public ceremony as new form of publicity extended the political ideas and imagery of the leader. Visual symbols of national revolution and speeches addressing Jiang's statement resembled the national ceremonial vocabulary in the early Republic to deliver political messages.³⁹ Sun Yat-sun's portrait was hung in the ceremonial hall, draped with the national and party flags.⁴⁰ During the ritual of oath, the priest's words repeated the point that they were united for both individual and national happiness:

³⁹ Scholarship on the political culture in modern Asia have discussed the discursive powers in the national political ceremonies to create collectivities, nationalism and to educate citizenry. See Henrietta Harrison, *The Making of the Republican Citizen: Political Ceremonies and Symbols in China, 1911-1929* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). Takashi Fujitani, *Splendid Monarchy: Power and Pageantry in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

⁴⁰ "Jiang Jieshi xinhun hunli chuanwen," [Jiang's new marriage and hearsay about the wedding ceremony] *Jingjin huabao*, December 4, 1927.

“May the god bless them to build a happy family as a good foundation of the Chinese society. May the god give them courage to sacrifice for the nation and to endeavor to establish a new China.”⁴¹ Newspapers circulated the signs and meanings. The *Shanghai News* gave more than half a newspaper page for the guests’ congratulation letters, the preface to the marriage license, words of the priest and the witness speeches in their entirety.⁴²

Jiang brought this political performance to a full display and generated excitement by making a commercial newsreel of the ceremony. Unlike other propaganda documentaries, the Jiang-Song wedding movie was a part of Jiang’s political agenda and a commodity that catered to the public enthusiasm for the visual and material dimension of the ceremony. The movie, newspaper reports and advertisements about the event turned the political performance into objects of urban consumerism and restyled it with its material spectacularity. They generated larger social impact at the expense of Jiang’s full control.

In the 1920s, political leaders used visual entertainment as a means of political propaganda. They favored documentary film for its capability of enacting powerful rhetoric in factual representations.⁴³ Unlike printing, filmmaking still allowed control by a small group of experts for its pre-requested possession of equipment, the mastery of the camera language and considerable financial investment. Sun Yat-sen and other regional warlords had experimented with the motion pictures and newsreels since 1921, under the influence of the Soviet and World

⁴¹ *Shen Bao*, December 2, 1927, 13.

⁴² “Jiang Jieshi Song Meiling Zuori Jiehun Shengkuang,” [The Spectacular Occasion of the Jiang-Song Wedding Ceremony Yesterday] *Shen Bao*. December 2, 1927, 13.

⁴³ In 1919, the Commercial Press started to make documentary films about Chinese landscapes and activities to convey a nationalist message to the audience against the influence of Western movies. In 1925, a lot of newsreels reporting the May Thirties emerged to mobilize anti-imperialist protests. See, Gao Weijin, *Zhongguo xinwen jiludianyingshi* [A history of Chinese newsreel and documentary films] (Beijing: Shijie tushu chubangongsi, 2013), 8-17.

War I propaganda films.⁴⁴ Regional warlords participated in making documentary films about themselves. Among these films were “Wu Peifu” (1924), “Feng Yuxiang” (1924) and “Sun Chuanfang” (1925). Contemporary analysts have grouped them into a sub-genre of strong man films characterized by the militarist and propagandist narratives.⁴⁵ In May 1927, the party propaganda committee made its own film, *A record of Jiang Jieshi's Northern Expedition* (蔣介石北伐記) to appeal to urban middle class.⁴⁶

The strong man films reflected and participated in the creation of the self-revelatory culture at the permeable boundary of fiction and reality in the 1920s. Unlike a playwright and storyteller who could compose a story without obtaining any sanction of the target person, political figures took back the power of fact-making.⁴⁷ Depictions of private behaviors and daily routines were an integral part of the cinematic representation of strong men. The first reel of *A Record of Feng Yuxiang's work in the Northern Expedition* (馮玉祥北伐工作記) idealized the commander-in-chief's parenting skills through a collage of quotidian events. The camera lingers on how the general dined with his men in the open air and how he tended to an ill soldier like a father. These representations are comparable to the image of President Li Yuanhong eating a bowl of noodles.

⁴⁴ The famous cinematographer and earnest revolutionary Li Minwei followed Sun Yat-sen, making film footage of Sun's political activities to propagandize the northern expedition. More information about early propaganda films, see Fang Fang, *Zhongguo jilupian fazhanshi* [The history of Chinese documentary films] (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 2003), 44-47.

⁴⁵ The notion of strongman films was raised by a Chinese television program “Dianyingyan kan zhongguo,” (Looking at China through the Lenz of Cinema) episode 2 in 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iBvEkHt_XdU (accessed in December 1st, 2016).

⁴⁶ Shan Wanli. *Zhongguo jilu dianying shi* [A history of Chinese documentaries] (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 2005).

⁴⁷ For example, Feng Yuxiang's approach is to manufacture facts in his own play script instead of representing through reenactment of prior events, a staple of documentary representation more common in the earlier years.

But filming a real person in a real place conferred authenticity and motion pictures were popular with the middle class. Because of this controlled political presence, compelling factual representation and entertaining form, political leaders were interested in making films.

The Jiang-Song movie centered on the groom and the bride, their families and the guests. The only comparable example of a publicized wedding came from Japan. The Japanese government had ceremonial events such as the Imperial Wedding (1900) to spread symbols of modern monarchism.⁴⁸ The royal wedding of the Crown Prince Hiroshito in 1924 was an event that reinforced a picture of a rejuvenated monarchy.⁴⁹ Photos and reports on the royal wedding in Chinese news media showed a crowd outside the palace. It is unknown if Hiroshito's wedding inspired Jiang but the extensive media coverage showed how to use a wedding for propaganda.

Moreover, Jiang bravely embraced the commercial producing and distributing tactics different from those of dominant strong man films. The film *Feng Yuxiang* fused Feng's interest in filmmaking and the expertise of the motion picture department in the Northwestern Army. It is a 20-reel sequence written by and featuring Feng himself.⁵⁰ Feng's high level of control and limited exhibition of the private aspect of his military work gave the film a strong personal hue and political meaning. The problem lay in the chasm between the ambition for cinema propaganda and the limited circulation within his army. The strong man films were simply not competitive with commercial films.

The involvement of a commercial film studio with a market strategy broadened the

⁴⁸ Takashi Fujitani, *Splendid Monarchy: Power and Pageantry in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 116-121.

⁴⁹ Sandra Wilson, "Enthroning Hirohito: Culture and Nation in 1920s Japan," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 37, no. 2 (2011): 289-323.

⁵⁰ Cai Chusheng, "Xibeijun dianyingtan" [A Talk on the Northwestern Army's filmmaking practice] *Shen Bao*, July 4, 1928, 21.

diffusion of the film effect. The Jiang-Song couple invited renowned film studios in Shanghai to screen the product of Star Film Company (明星公司) in a public theatre. Only two days after the wedding, an advertisement in the front page of *Shen Bao* invited readers to enjoy the movie *Jiang-Song wedding ceremony* (蔣宋結婚盛會).⁵¹ Proud to be the only company that was permitted to set up the lighting equipment at the wedding, the Star Film Company claimed to have the most complete and the best quality footage. The company released the two-reel movie on December 4 in the Central Theater (中央大戲院) the leading theater for China-made films of the time in Shanghai. It is likely that the couple chose the partnership with Star after full consideration. As the industry leader in the 1920s, Star balanced profiteering with a propensity for moralizing. It was particularly adept at incorporating the May Fourth spirit of social reform into butterfly narratives and appealing to female audiences.⁵² This expertise perfectly served Jiang's need to disseminate his points on revolution and social reform and his anticipation of a broaden spectatorship. Given the political implications and the couple's conscious exhibition of themselves, the movie was still a piece of subtle propaganda.

The Star Film Company marketed the wedding movie as entertainment. Seeking more profit, the company promoted a bound-sale of the wedding newsreel with an action movie, *Ma Yongzhen* (馬永貞) about an underground gang leader. The first advertisement obfuscates the bonding by briefly introducing *Ma Yongzhen* in the last sentence. But from the second day on, the film company changed promotion priority. The new advertisement reserves only one short final line for Jiang-Song couple and introduced the wedding movie as a lead-in to *Ma*

⁵¹ *Shen Bao*, December 3, 1927, 1.

⁵² For more discussion about the company's strategies, ideology compromise and contributions to early Chinese cinema, see Yingjin Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2004), 23-30.

Yongzhen.⁵³ It is unknown whether the alteration was made due to the movie's unexpected unpopularity, expiration of some agreement with Jiang or their plan to use the wedding to sell the other film. For whichever reason, the company never considered compromising its commercial interest. The politician's wedding movie and the underground fight club movie targeted the same urban middle-class audience who sought sensation, novelty, and western kind of fun.

To market the movie, the newspaper advertisement underscored the private aspects and the spectacularity of the event. It quotes Jiang's statement that those days were the happiest of his life. Drawing upon private relations instead of politics, the advertisement accentuates the brother-in-law relationship between Jiang and Sun Yat-sen. The spectacularity of the event was another feature in promotion. The advertisement emphasized "the Song House" and "Majestic Hotel," the most sumptuous wedding venue in Shanghai. "Hundreds of the important persons of the party-state attending the wedding," inviting a closer look at the couple.

The wedding publicity drew on the tradition of public enthusiasm for the lifestyle and sociability of the political elites. Before the movie was released, portraits of the venue, decorations, guests, clothing and etiquette had already been divulged. *The Young Companion Pictorial* (良友畫報) showed photos of the bride and groom, the guests and the automobiles (figure 5).⁵⁴ A news report combined information about the wedding preparation with the details of the wedding gown.⁵⁵ It named the new Madam Jiang as a fashion icon. Compared to simple introduction of guests, gifts and rituals in weddings of the warlord families in earlier gossip

⁵³ *Shen Bao*, December 4, 1927.

⁵⁴ "Jiang-Song jiehun," [Jiang-Song getting married] *Liangyou huabao* [Young Companion Pictorial] 21(1927): 4.

⁵⁵ "Zhongmei yinyuan xiaozhi," [A Small Record of Jiang-Song Marriage] *Shen Bao*, December 1, 1927, 17.

books, representations of the Jiang-Song wedding were much more informative as the couple invited journalists, photographers and filmmakers to record the event.⁵⁶ Local businesses enterprises used the ceremony to encourage material consumption.



Figure 5. Photographs of the wedding ceremony selectively published in *Liangyou* (“Jiang-Song jiehun,” [Jiang and Song getting married] *Liangyou huabao*, no. 21(1927): 4.)

⁵⁶ For example, in *The Amorous History of Republican China* published in 1914, depictions of the wedding ceremonies of Yuan Shikai’s son and of Liang Qichao’s daughter introduce the venue, the guests, the gifts, and the etiquette, underscoring the interesting incorporation of foreign elements. See Xiuzhu xiangren ed. *Minguo yanshi* [The amorous history of Republican China], in Zhang Yan and Sun Yanjing ed. *Minguo shiliao congkan* [Historical resources of Republican China] 869 (Zhengzhou: Daxiang chubanshe, 2009), 265-269.

When popular cultural producers and business minds all participated in the construction of a media event, political prominence was translated into a brand of material and social life, commercial promotion and urban entertainment. The audience received the multi-mediated representations of the couple, and a fragmented experience of their wedding. Inevitably, the political messages of Jiang's contribution to national revolution were less evident and sometimes were buried under all these layers of mediation which themselves created new attractions. The intensity of the event fits Tom Gunning's description of "attractions" as it "solicit[s] spectator attention, incites visual curiosity and supplies pleasure through a exciting spectacle."⁵⁷ "Cinema of attraction" underscores authenticity and vivid realism rather than rational understanding.⁵⁸ The fragmentation of images and facts interrupted the circulation of strong opinions or complete narratives. Sensorial affect also hindered logical reasoning. While the sense of amazement decreased the political meanings that infused the wedding rites, the entertaining representation and promotions also deflected attention from political and moral criticism of Jiang's marriage issues. Even *The Holmes*, Jiang's most ardent critic, was distracted enough to report on the design of the wedding invitations, the fashion sense of the new Madam Jiang and the gifts she bought for the family.⁵⁹ The Shanghai media during the wedding week was so chasing information about the wedding and the couple that their Northern counterparts accused them of having being bought by the Nationalists. Only a few newspapers in Beijing and Tianjin still expressed sympathy for the dispatched concubines and criticized Jiang's wedding statement that

⁵⁷ Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions," in Thomas Elsaesser and Adam Barker ed., *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative* (London: BFI, 1990), 58.

⁵⁸ Bill Nichols, *Speaking Truths with Film: Evidence, Ethics, Politics in Documentary* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016), 17-18.

⁵⁹ "Jiang Song jiehun yu xitie," [Jiang-Song wedding and the invitation letter] *Fu Er Mo Si*, November 30, 1927.

associated his marriage with his revolutionary career.⁶⁰

Commercial involvement generated an affect of de-politicization but did not submerge all the political messages. As shown in the movie advertisement, the promoter hinted at a connection between Jiang and Sun. The advertisement praised Jiang by ascribing historical significance to their relationship. Although the emphasis was on the private side, the linkage between the private relationship and the history of the nation had already explicated Jiang as Sun's the rightful heir. From the perspective of the film producer, more important the central character, the more interested people would be in his personal life. Hence, the theme of national revolution still managed to permeate the wedding. Even if the political meanings attached to the wedding ceremony were refracted, the seemingly apolitical sociability represented in pictures and texts still invested the imagery of the newly married couple with political and cultural prestige.

Jiang took advantage of the commercial force and the new media form of entertainment to maximize his visibility and his social influence. The fragmented information and pleasure appealed to commoners. Even though the movie itself was not shown outside of cities, the advertisements together with other reports reached a much wider audience in the nationwide news distribution network. Visibility on such a scale eventually turned a private event into a major historical event in the popular memory. The new couple's smart turn toward commercialization and the participation of commercial forces made this process different from the customary understanding of propaganda as a top-down and monolithic practice. The multi-mediated presence of Jiang and Song crossing into the political, cultural and commercial spheres enabled multiple perspectives and disparate interpretations. Later, to solve this problem, the

⁶⁰ "Huabei yulunjie duiyu jiangsong hunshi gongping zhi yiban," [A glance at public critics of Jiang-Song wedding from the press in the north] *Beiyang huabao*, no. 147 (1927): 2.

standardized narrative in the official propaganda identified Jiang's marriage as an important episode in the Northern Expedition.⁶¹

This publicity illustrated a different dynamic between the commercial and the political as a political figure gained a say in the disclosure of his private life. The political leader and the mass media formed a mutually dependent relationship. This cooperation squeezed the autonomy of the media content producer. Commercial players had to work on apolitical aspects of the narratives and add-on commodities to generate profit. Even if the political meanings attached to the wedding ceremony were refracted, the seemingly apolitical sociability represented in pictures and texts still invested the imagery of the newly married couple with political and cultural prestige. The two forces, which seemingly went in opposite directions and disabled each other, were in fact entangled, reinforcing Jiang's leadership in the public mind.

Conclusion

The nationalist construction of the party leadership in the late 1920s was characterized by the utility of the public interest in the leader's personal life. Unlike purely commercial products, gossip novels and articles that were tailored to the need of the party exerted tremendous efforts in explaining the reasons behind the facts and inserting ideological messages into private scenarios. This political penetration formed a control mechanism from within the industry effectively changed the nature of gossip production and reduced its entertainment aspect.

In 1927, Jiang's disclosure of his relationship with Song Meiling conformed to the theme of national revolution and formed a coherent part of the party propaganda. The media-savvy couple wielded commercial force to maximize the visibility of the wedding ceremony by diluting

⁶¹ No. 718-69, the Second National Historical Archives.

its political meanings. As their marriage became a significant episode in the history of the Northern Expedition, these attractive aspects including Jiang's passionate love, the label of modern upper class lifestyle, and spectacularity of their social life addressed by commercial advertisements all transformed into their political and cultural capitals. The publicity of Jiang's love life demonstrated the permeability of the boundary between propaganda and entertainment.

The reactions from the lower society to Jiang's public display of his affection were quite opposite to the party propaganda. The *New York Times* journalist Harlett Abend recalled that people gossiped about the Jiang-Song couple in the bazaars in 1928 and a popular saying was circulating: "If (Song) Meiling were at the bottom of the Yangtze, then China would suffer less" (美玲沉長江中國少遭殃).⁶² But the saying revealed that the association between Jiang's marriage life and the national interests was very well received.

This attempt to nationalize gossip to tame social engagement in political discussion lasted only 1927 to 1928. Upon the establishment of the Nationalist government in Nanjing, the party introduced a pre-publishing news censorship system in 1929 and more strictly regulated the tabloids press in 1933. With the growing power of the Chinese state, the gossip industry shrank.

⁶² Hallett Abend, *My Life in China, 1926-1941* (New York: Harcourt, Brance and Company, 1943), 117. Online archive accessible at: <https://archive.org/details/mylifeinchina192007622mbp>.

EPILOGUE

Nationalist Regulations and the Gossip Business in the 1930s

The previous chapters have discussed gossip in print media from the late 1910s to late 1920s, and its involvement in commercial, political, legal, and cultural issues. This robust and light-minded engagement existed owing to the loose state regulation and the dissemination of the powerful discourse of popular sovereignty. The changing political dynamics and party practice since the late 1920s led to a new research question that this dissertation attempts to answer: How did a once prosperous gossip industry influence the political and social practices in the post-warlord era and what happened to the industry then?

Many tabloid papers survived the new era, but the publishers were unable to ignore the decline of gossip industry as early as 1929. An article in the *Holmes* notes that:

Years ago, the best-sellers used to be anecdotal accounts for popular readings, martial art, and detective fictions. Scandal books flourished at this time. Various publishing houses competed with each other to launch secret stories. These vulgar and sensational works appealed to the most ordinary readers. Currently, new learnings are the most popular publications. Young people nationwide enjoy discussing the new culture. Some books target political topics, while others usually belong to the romance genre. Readers were eager to follow intellectuals such as Zhou Zuoren, Yu Dafu and Guo Moruo.¹

Although the marginalization of gossip publications, along with the rise of intellectual literature in the Shanghai market, could not be attributed to only one factor, government control was a major cause. Under the pressure of news censorship, tabloid papers had to praise the new nationalist revolution for leading them into a new era and to publicize the frugality of the Nationalist leaders. Some tabloids reported scandals of ministers but seldom wrote anything

¹ Wengai, "Xinjiu chubanjie zhi jingzheng," [The competition between the new and the old print industry] *Fu Er Mo Si*, April 26, 1929.

negative against top leaders like Jiang and Wang. Moreover, the formalization of bureaucratic regulation in the Nationalist Government made it increasingly difficult for informants to collect materials for gossip publications. The installation of tightened control served the party state's goal of building a coherent body of nationalist-minded citizens under the leadership of a highly centralized party-state. The press had to find other solutions in the new political environment to make better use of gossip materials for either profits or implicit political expressions.

Stringent Censorship and Controversial Laws

A direct consequence of the flourishing warlord-era gossip industry was the tightened control of Nationalists over the information sphere. At the establishment of a new Nationalist Government in 1928, the new party-state supported the dominance of the Nationalist Party in regulating the press. The party states penetration into urban playgrounds was unprecedented. Besides popular libraries, lecture halls, and newspaper reading rooms, the Ministry of Education also established official teahouses and amusement parks where live performances were designed for popular education and political mobilization.² A series of administrative regulations and a more comprehensive censorship system placed the media products and journalist operations under strict and constant state surveillance. Publishers were required to register with the local government 15 days prior to the release of their first issue. In particular, they had to be honest while reporting if the content was concerned with the Party or political affairs. With reference to those who planned

² According to the statistical data, the government invested the most in Sichuan Province where official teahouses mounted to 1386 in 1930. Di Wang introduced the political propaganda in these teahouses in his book. See Di Wang, *The Teahouse: Small Business, Everyday Culture, and Public Politics in Chengdu, 1900-1950* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2008).

to discuss the Party and other politically sensitive issues, registration with a provincial government was required, which was then reported immediately to the Central Propaganda Department of the Party.³

The party placed the tabloid press under stricter control. In 1933, the Propaganda Department of the Party Central Executive Committee, which took charge of the regulations of all publications and news agencies, ordered provincial governments to examine all the tabloids and to prohibit the spread of misinformation or blackmail.⁴ In essence, it was a large campaign against false information and immoral narratives, laying out the principle of factuality and morality, similar to the guideline of the PERS in the late 1910s. According to the new regulation provision, misinformation included absurd opinions and erotic descriptions, which were deemed harmful to the society's mental being. Moreover, the 1933 campaign extended regulatory efforts onto misconducts in tabloid management, such as unjustifiable funding and blackmailing. The new request of reporting on budget and financial sources aimed to prevent sponsorship coming from other political forces, especially the communists.⁵

In addition, the strong call for the abolishment of extraterritoriality backed Nationalist stretch into the center of print industry. In 1927, the Mixed Court was transformed into Shanghai Temporary Court of the Foreign Settlement, officially under the Jiangsu Provincial Court.⁶

³ “Guomинzhengfu chubanfa,” [The Press Law of the Nationalist Government] in *Zhongguo chubanshiliao jindai bufen* [Sources for Chinese publishing history: modern Section] ed. Song Yuanfang (Wuhan: Hubei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2004), 570

⁴ No. Hui 4.3/111.15, the Nationalist Party Historical Archives.

⁵ “Qudi buliang xiaobao ling,” [Prohibition on bad tabloids] No. 2-1-37, Guangdong Provincial Archives; No. J181-020-10507, Beijing Municipal Archives.

⁶ The abolishment of extraterritoriality took place step by step. It is not until 1930 that the former Mixed Court completely conformed to the Nationalist court system.

Thereafter, the Police Office in the Shanghai foreign settlements also helped in the prohibition of publications denigrating the government and political leaders. In 1929, a book titled *Can not be seen* (kanbude), published by an unknown bookstore, captured the government's attention. The book ventures into the personal grudge between General Bai Chongxi and Jiang Jieshi to explain the hidden reasons behind Bai's reluctant resignation.⁷ Jiangsu Provincial Government asked the Shanghai Municipal Council for assistance to have all the volumes of the said book confiscated. In the letter, the Nationalist government almost instructed the SMC to prohibit sales the book, since it was "falsely defaming the leaders of the Nationalist Government and the Party." The Municipal Police Office acted accordingly and investigated by the publishing company, although eventually failed to trace the publisher.⁸ This case demonstrates that the Nationalist Government developed an effective working relationship with the foreign authorities more successfully than its predecessor. Besides the Nationalist presence of a stronger government, their common anti-Communist interests should also be counted on the basis of such cooperation on the press censorship.

Jiang Jieshi also swiftly changed his attitude towards the exposure of his and Song Meilin's private life, which announced the termination of the previous publicity policy that appealed to the popular taste. Jiang himself turned another side of his public face to the press immediately after he regained the power in January 1928. In an interview, he expressed his concern of too much media coverage of his "familial affairs." He told the journalist not to produce news from his private acts, such as "stories like the arrive of Madam Jiang to the capital city or Jiang Jieshi saw a doctor are

⁷ The Second National Historical Archives, ed., *Zhonghua mingushi dangan ziliao huibian* 5. Politics (Nanjing: Jiangsu Guji Chubanshe, 1999), 698.

⁸ No. Q179-1-15, Shanghai Municipal Council Archives.

all my familial affairs, not newsworthy at all.”⁹ Compared to several months ago, when he invited the media to publicize their wedding ceremony, the newly-wed leader’s denouncement of reportage on his familial affairs not being newsworthy sounds contradictory. But the publicity function of gossip was no longer valuable for constructing his public role as a powerful national leader when he returned to the political center.

In the following years, the Nationalist authority drew a more stringent line between the public and the private. In the 1935 revision of the press law, the Nationalist government added one provision to protect one’s individual and familial privacy from being publicized. Article 21 specifies that there should be no publication of private information about one’s family life.¹⁰ Chinese press questioned and resisted the new revision nationwide. In their appeals, Journalist Associations contended that the new rule was overly generalized and inapplicable. Guangdong Journalist Association argued that “if any private behavior affected social order, the society should document and criticize the act with benign intentions.” Shanghai Journalist Association further claimed that “for a news publisher, it is difficult to differentiate the private from the public. Many reports could be caught in the middle of the public and the private. Moreover, in many cases, individual cases affected the entire social morality”. Furthermore, the letter stated that “the provision provided local officials opportunity to use the discretion in defining whatever with private information to punish the news publisher.”¹¹

The press was indeed turning to the defamation clauses stated in the 1928 Nationalist Penal Law to argue against the new press law. Article 326, regarding a new category of libel,

⁹ “Jiang Jieshi zhi xinwen guan,” [Jiang Jieshi’s view of news] *Jing Bao*, Jan 22, 1928.

¹⁰ No. 0011421110032a, 0011421110033x, Academia Historica.

¹¹ No. 001142111001139a, Academia Historica.

criminalized only maliciously false allegations and allowed truth defense if the defamatory claim was concerned with the public interest.¹² Expressing an opinion with benign intention was only legal for “self-defense, duty reports of government officials, issues that allow public criticism, reports on conferences, court debates or public gatherings.”¹³ The press interpreted the clauses in a liberal light, which gave them a certain degree of freedom to expose and criticize public-related deeds. However, the deliberate ambiguity gave more discretion to the Nationalist authority to decide what qualifies as “public interest” and what constitutes a proper “public criticism.” The state wanted more say in the scale of the public, and thereby place limitations on public discussion.

Ironically, in contrast to the stringent line between the public and the private, the changing approaches regarding officials’ privacy in the Nationalist internal regulations revealed the official acknowledgement of the public dimension of an official’s private realm. As another significant effect of the circulation of gossipy information on the ensuing government, regulations upon the personal lives of officials was growing stricter. The government from central to local levels kept an ever closer eye upon private behaviors of formal government position holders. In 1933, the party central committee promulgated new regulations, which would restrict government officials from holding a lavish private banquet.¹⁴ One year later, the New Life Movement, which took the shape of century-old Confucian terms while serving the new purpose of political mass mobility, more strictly requested officials to abstain from gambling, concubinage, and visiting prostitutes. Since 1935, provincial governments deemed an official’s private behaviors as one out of three

¹² He Qinhua ed., *Zhonghua Minguo Xinglv* [The Penal Law of Republican China] (Beijing: Fangzheng chubanshe, 2006), 80.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ “Gechu gongwu renyuan hunsang shouyan langfei zanxing guicheng,” in *Zhonghua minguoshi dangan ziliao huibian* 5. Culture, ed. the Second National Historical Archives (Nanjing: Jiangsu Guji Chubanshe, 1999), 440.

categories of assets to evaluate one's work performance.¹⁵ The new regime's increased focus on private morality was a politically-motivated restoration of the traditional view of state officials as a moral example for society. Scholars have argued that, by dictating everyday personal behaviors, the Nationalist state tried to transform Chinese body and morality.¹⁶ The New Life Movement starting in the early 1930s, in particular, accentuated that building a disciplined social body certainly requested a renewed bureaucracy body in accordance to serving as a public model. Moreover, the regulation was also a response to the extensive media exposure of political figures' lives, since the mid-1910s, which had already intertwined moral with political integrity. Consequently, these new regulations affirmed and further amplified the public dimension of an official's private behaviors, and affirmed that a public official's morality played a part in the public judgment of the trustworthiness of the government.

The New Commercial Turn

The late 1920s witnessed a new tendency: that gossip about political leaders shifted away from its dual emphasis on entertainment and political meaning, while the rise of a new class of celebrities and film stars also drew new public attention. These twists and turns in the production of gossip were the results of the interaction between the less-open political environment, business interests, new mass media development, and the changing social composition of the consumers.

¹⁵ *Shanghaishi zhengfu gongbao* [Shanghai municipal gazetteer] no. 162 (1935): 38-39. "Dangzhengjun jiguan gongsi shenghuo xingwei fudao banfa," [Instructions on the public and private behaviors of officials in the party, government and the military], No. 1-1-291, 1939, the Second National Historical Archives.

¹⁶ To list a few, Federica Ferlanti, "The New Life Movement in Jiangxi Province, 1934–1938," *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no. 5 (September 2010): 961–1000; Arif Dirlik, "The Ideological Foundations of the New Life Movement: A Study in Counterrevolution," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 34, no. 4 (August 1975): 945–80.

Entrepreneurs were fully aware of the commercial value of gossipy information about political leaders and used gossip more often in advertisements. As already shown in the media event of the Jiang-Song wedding, business people commodified the everyday material dimension of the eye-catching political figures' private lives and promoted their products as an essential component of high-quality urban lifestyle. Subsequently, fashion companies indeed used the images of Song Meilin in the glamorous wedding gown to show the association of an upper-class identity with their clothes. Noticing public interest in the daily tidbits of political figures, other companies without any immediate connections with these national leaders also started to explore similar means of promotion. In July 1928, the Singapore-based international medical company, *Yongantang* (永安堂, the hall of forever peace), made use of this public attention for political leaders to advertise their product: Tiger Balm ointment. In the center on the second page (the advertising space) of the *Shi Bao* (時報), the company posted a news article titled, "The weather in Beiping and major political figures." It describes the health conditions of General Yan Xishan, Feng Yuxiang and Jiang Jieshi from the time they entered the former capital city. After speculating the reasons behind Jiang catching a cold there, the article naturally introduces Tiger Balm as the best medicine to cure the disease.¹⁷ Unlike the entrepreneurs who used the image of a leader for the high-class characteristic, Yongantang's story about lives of these big guns merely intends to capture readers' attention towards the medical product through the relation between these significant bodies of the nation.

In the 1930s, a new class of celebrities and film stars dominated tabloid reports, replacing political figures. It was the result of political censorship, the emergence of this more glamorous

¹⁷ *Shi Bao*, July 19, 1928, 2.

class of celebrity, and the popularity of pictorial publications of the time. Even in the late 1920s, leading tabloids, including the seemingly riotous ones, did not dare to discuss anything negative about the top leaders. Articles about Jiang Jieshi were either boring stories, like him losing his hat or a flattery piece to extol his willpower and altruism. As tabloid papers persisted to expose scandals of some ministers and local rules, these reports did not attract as many readers as the amorous affairs of film stars. Both pictorial publications and conventional tabloids seized chance on the images and private lives of these new stars. In this period, for example, the most eventful gossip no longer surrounded political elites, but film stars. People widely discussed the complicated love life of a popular actress Ruan Lingyu (阮玲玉, 1910-1935), who was posthumously remembered as the greatest star of the Chinese silent film era.¹⁸ As a result, the rumors and gossip lead the actress to suicide, which became the front page news of both serious and tabloid press. Similarly, the mixture of propagandist messages and loquacious stories gave rise to the political celebrity gossip that constructed Ruan's star image combining her on-screen image of suffering Chinese women with the off-screen tales of a miserable movie actress.¹⁹

Meanwhile, the warlord stories continuously appeared in newspaper columns, books and films. Preferring to brush the stories in a nostalgic hue, writers usually reduced the political implications. Many gossip collections also removed critical opinions and mockery. For example, in Zheng Yimei's (鄭逸梅, 1895-1992) collection, he brings together stories about Yuan Shikai's

¹⁸ Mette Hjort, "Ruan Lingyu: Reflections on an Individual Performance Style," in *Chinese Film Stars*, ed. Yingjin Zhang (London: Routledge Press, 2010), 32-49.

¹⁹ There are quite a few studies on gossip about Ruan and its relations to the issues of morality and stardom. Michael Chang, "The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Movie Actresses and Public Discourse in Shanghai," in *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922-1943*, ed. Yingjin Zhang (Stanford University Press, 1999), 128-159; Sabrina Qiong Yu, "Vulnerable Chinese stars: from Xizi to film workers," in *A Companion to Chinese Cinema*, ed. Yingjin Zhang (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 218-238.

poetry talent, Song Jiaoren's kindness towards his servants, Li Yuanhong's delightful moments with his pets, and so on.²⁰ Owing to this, the public attention and criticism of Yuan's restoration of monarchism, Song's amorous experience in Japan, and Li's visits to the entertainment quarters faded away. The writer rediscovered personal aspects of these famous figures, detaching them from the political context of the warlord era and previous public opinion that contributed to the portrayals back in the day.

Another notable change is the gendered shift from male public political figures to female ones.²¹ One example is the cinematic adaptation of the romance between General Cai E (蔡鏗, 1882-1916) and the courtesan Xiaofengxian (小鳳仙, 1900-1954). Unlike the version produced in the 1910s, in which Cai took advantage of Xiaofengxian to escape from Yuan's house arrest, the new version centers on the character of Xiaofengxian and her clever reactions to Cai's secret escaping plan. In the movie, Xiaofengxian discovers Cai's plan by overhearing the conversation between two subordinates and then pretends to be his lover to finally facilitate and implement the escape. Moreover, in an attempt to create a happy ending to compensate for the heroine's self-sacrifice, the movie concludes with the heroine coming across a subordinate in the battlefield, and consequently with them falling in love.²² The romanticized adaptation of the original narrative about Cai's courage and wisdom now placed the heroine in the spotlight, catering to the growing female audience. A large number of women's magazines and cosmetic product advertisements had

²⁰ Zheng Yimei, *Chashu xiangwen lu* [A record of cooked tea with warm scents] (Shanghai: yixin shushe, 1931).

²¹ Lean also notes the growing anxieties over women issues in the 1930s. Eugenia Lean, *Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

²² "Zuijin gongying zhi guochan xinpian juben neimu zhi zongfenxi," [A general examination of the play script and other unknown facts of the recent domestic film] *Kaimaila*, no. 3 (1932): 8–13.

already attested to the increasing female consumers in the 1930s. The new urban woman now constituted a large part of print product readers and spectators in theatres. Accordingly, the changes in consumption behaviors and interests had an impact on market-oriented media products.

Similarly, tabloid papers also reported on the wives of political leaders more than a decade ago. People like Song Meilin, and Feng Yuxiang's second wife Li Dequan (李德全, 1896-1972), opened another window to gossip about the marital lives of political leaders. It wasn't just a politically safe strategy played by the press; news about celebrated female figures attracted more female readers, whose interest the tabloids captured through their clothes, diet, daily activities, and relationships with parents-in-law. Moreover, Kate Merkel-Hess' study on Li Dequan demonstrated the consciousness of these female figures to make a gendered political narrative by displaying their private lives. She argues that Li interwove the private intimacies of love, marriage and family life into her public image, which became her political capital in the early PRC period.²³ Although Jiang himself no longer invited the press into his private events, his strategy in the late 1920s inspired others and continued to interact with both the official and unofficial narratives to cultivate public support.

The early Republican gossip industry's legacy was visible during and post the Nationalist decade. In fact, both the press and the government agreed upon the presumption of the private behavior having a public dimension, even though the conflicting concerns of privacy, moral rule, and rights of public criticism led to an understanding of privacy for the public riddled with inconsistencies and paradoxes. Elements such as nostalgia, the visible trend of de-politicization,

²³ Kate Merkel-Hess, "A New Woman and Her Warlord: Li Dequan, Feng Yuxiang, and the Politics of Intimacy in Twentieth-Century China," *Frontiers of History in China* 11, no. 3 (2016): 431–57.

and the spotlight on female celebrities, could all be found in contemporary Chinese media products and social communications of high politics under strict state surveillance. The persistence of frivolous products in various media forms, from different historical periods, require more inquiry into their multifaceted functions and values of different political and commercial contexts.

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