

## THE TRAVELLING OBJECTIVITY NORM: Examining the case of the first Chinese journalism handbook

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*This study investigates the significance of Xu Baohuang's 1919 textbook Xin wen xue on the articulation of an objectivity norm in the early Republican-era in China. It addresses issues raised by cross-cultural or comparative analysis of journalistic norms. It also considers the need to maintain awareness of differences in the political and journalistic field in Republican-era China. Following Michael Schudson's 1981 essay "The Objectivity Norm in American Journalism," our analysis focuses on the articulation of the objectivity norm and looks for unique aspects of norm formation arising out of the Chinese context. As such, we see Xu's role as more than importing an American norm into China. Rather he codifies and legitimizes a norm that has a distinct relationship to local issues and media practice. We argue that while Xu's text articulates what can only be considered a nascent ideal, and not a fully matured objectivity norm, his work nevertheless codifies a new sense of news, and also a journalistic commitment to the cultivation of healthy public opinion.*

**KEYWORDS** China; Journalism; News; Norm; Objectivity; Xu Baohuang

### **Introduction**

How journalistic norms travel across time, cultures, and political systems, has emerged as an important topic in media and communication studies. Comparative research into media systems (Veltmer 2012) as well as socio-historical research into media norms (Schudson and Anderson 2009), has challenged our sense of how norms develop and function. Scholars have opened up a comparative question of how to account for the objectivity norm in other cultures (Schudson 2001; Chalaby 1996). This essay forms a contribution to this area of research, focusing specifically on the objectivity norm and its construction in the early years of Republican China (1911-1949).

A commonly held version of the history of objectivity in China sees it as an imported norm (see Mittler 2004, 96-97). Li Liangrong suggests that "Objective reporting"—a journalistic adherence to facts and an attempt to separate facts from value—arrived in China from the West at the end of the nineteenth century" (Li 1994, 225). Despite extensive investigation into the historical development of objectivity over the last 30 years (see Maras 2013, 22-57), including the significance of early handbooks (Stensaas 1986; Mirando 1993, 2001; Beasley and Mirando 2005; Vos 2012), the implications of Li's observation, and of the broader importation theory, has yet to be fully teased out. For example, how should we make sense of Li's claim above against Richard Streckfuss's argument that in the U.S. "journalists did not begin to use the word 'objective' to describe their work until the 1920s" (1990, 973)?

Objectivity in China is often linked to the principle of “seeking truth from facts”—the latter constructed not solely in terms of classical historiography, but according to regimes of socialist truth (Latham 2000, 641). According to Li, since its introduction the concept has gone through periods of popularity and decline (1994, 225). At the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century concepts of objectivity and factuality were central to a re-evaluation of the nature of a newspaper, of news, and editorial, in China (Li 1985, 48). They became “keywords in Chinese newspaper discussions” (Mittler 2004, 97). In China, it is commonly held that the “objectivity” concept was first introduced by Xu Baohuang, considered the first person to lecture on journalism in a Chinese university (Fang 1994), and also author of the first Chinese-language text on journalism, published in 1919.[FN1] Around the time of publication of the text, Xu served as the vice-director and first instructor of the Peking University News Study Society (*Beijing da xue xin wen yan jiu hui*), formed on Oct 14, 1918, and renamed as the Peking University Institute of Journalism in Feb 10, 1919 (Fang 1994).[FN2] The Institute of Journalism attracted dozens of students, including Mao Zedong. The first manuscript of Xu’s text was written as lectures delivered to students of the Society, and which were published in the *Peking University Daily* [*Beijing da xue ri kan* 1918] within days afterwards.

Xu, according to records obtained from the University of Michigan in the U.S., studied there from 1914 (another record from the University suggests 1913) and graduated with Bachelor of Arts from the School of Literature, Science and Arts in 1916. [FN3] The year after his graduation from the University of Michigan, Xu was appointed as secretary to the Chancellor of Peking University, during which time he lectured on reporting, convened the News Study Society in its different manifestations, and edited the *Beijing University Daily* (Weston 2004, 165). From 1920 Xu worked at other universities, including the Republican (*Minguo*) University in Beijing and the Beijing Civilian (*Pingmin*) University (Fang 1994). By virtue of his studies in the U.S., his position at Peking University (which allowed him access to both a teaching role and the means of publication), and his intellectual affinities with the May Fourth movement and broader political commentary, we suggest Xu has a unique place in the field of Chinese journalism.

Our thesis in relation to Xu’s work is that while his handbook promotes a concept of journalism that is recognizable as a form of objectivity, it only forms the basis of a norm in development. Further, his concept of news and promotion of healthy public opinion point to some unique points of adaptation within the Chinese press/political field of that time. We suggest that Xu’s articulation of the objectivity norm has a strong political aim, and that the articulation of the concept in China is affected by this aim. In relation to Xu’s role in relation to the development of an objectivity norm in China, we argue that Xu has a key legitimatizing and codifying function in relation to the practice of news. While practical in focus, Xu’s contribution is integral to understanding the norm more than a slogan or ideal, but as something accomplished in and through practice.

### **Articulating the Objectivity Norm**

Any study into how norms travel must consider significant issues to do with articulation, or the actual expression of the norm. There are three aspects to the problem.

The first can be described as terminological. It has to do with the fact that while it is flagged as a major feature of U.S. journalism through the 1800s and 1900s, the actual use of the term “objectivity” is sparse. The earliest handbook that uses the actual term dates back to 1911 (Mirando 1993, 20), with usage becoming more regular in the 1920s (Streckfuss 1990, 974). This has not deterred scholars from tracing the origins of objectivity back to at least the 1830s (Schiller 1979; Mindich 1998), with objectivity situated in relation to a cluster of concepts and practices we associate with the norm today (neutrality, fairness, impartiality, factuality, detachment, non-partisanship, balance). For some scholars this has become a point of historical debate (see Knowlton 2005, 4). Stephen J. A. Ward advocates an even longer historical time frame (back to the seventeenth century English press), and a move away from a Schudsonian focus on the ideal of objectivity as encountered in the 1920s (2004).

The issue of articulation has a direct bearing on when and where the norm arises, and the form it takes. Michael Schudson—whose work is privileged in here because of its focus on issues of norms and articulation—crystallizes the link between articulation and the terminology issue when he remarks: “at the turn of the century and even as late as the 1920s, ‘objectivity’ was not a term journalists or critics of journalism used” (1978, 120). At stake is a “category-error if we confuse contemporary views of objectivity with the fact-mindedness of the 1890s” (1978, 71).

In the context of the present essay this terminological issue is compounded by translation. The standard translation of objectivity is 客观, comprised of *ke*, or “customer; visitor; guest,” and *guan*, “to look at; to watch; to observe; to behold.” In Xu’s 1919 text, *Xin wen xue* (Xu 1930a), 客观 is not used.

The second aspect of the problem is organizational and sociological. For Schudson, a norm is a moral prescription of social behavior (2001, 251). As such it is a regulative ideal that sets down cultural expectations around social behaviors. Here we are dealing with the point at which a statement regarding a value such as objectivity can be considered a norm. Schudson identifies four ways that the presence of a norm can be identified:

- a) Through expressed allegiance to the norm in speeches and textbooks.
- b) Ethnographic observations of journalists at work.
- c) Content analysis that measure the degree of impersonality and non-partisanship in news stories.
- d) Resistance displayed by adherents when the norm is challenged or criticized. (Schudson 2001, 149-150)

Schudson goes further, however, in asking the question why does a norm exist? Or, more specifically, what encourages the articulation of norms? He suggests four conditions based around ritual solidarity, enculturation and socialization, and social control in large institutions. Schudson thus goes beyond a terminological issue to ask why objectivity is spoken of or expressed

at particular times. The focus here is on “rhetorical formalization” and codification (2001, 152). Clearly, textbooks and handbooks play a key role in what has been called the “articulation of occupational norms” (Vos 2012, 445).

A third aspect of articulation has to do with cultural context, and the way norms vary across different media systems and regions. Schudson refers to this issue as “the comparative question”. His example is European journalism and specifically why it “did not initially develop the norm of objectivity and, when later they came to accept it, did so with less fervor than Americans” (2001, 166). Our engagement with the Chinese situation draws on Katrin Voltmer’s insight that ideas such as press freedom and objectivity do not have a fixed meaning outside time and space (2012, 233). The comparative question permeates this research, but we are mindful that a comparative approach “may still engender a Western-centric mode of analysis” (Zhao 2012, 144).

### Field Issues

Related to this concern over a Western-centric mode of analysis, significant “field issues” (Benson 2010, 616) exist in applying conceptual frameworks developed to study objectivity in the U.S. to early Republican-era China.

Some field issues can be addressed through knowledge of general context. Any study of this period in Chinese history should be mindful of an over-arching “*ti yong*” or “substance/application” attitude, a controversial feature of the Chinese domestic educational and political field at that time (see Weston 2004, 29, 32). A legacy of the self-strengthening movement, this construct allowed Western techniques to be drawn on as a means of strengthening an essence seen as more distinctively Chinese (Cua 2002, 163; Mittler 2004, 52).

Other field issues, however, demand a more careful, comparative mapping. For example, while democracy and science operate as important principles for the development of the objectivity norm in the U.S. (Schudson 1978), and also during the May Fourth era (1915-1921) in China (Gu 2001), many of the factors that are assumed as part of the apparatus supporting the objectivity norm in the U.S. are not in place in the same way in the Chinese case, and sometimes emerge after the first expressions of the ideal. In this section we tease out some instances of this.

Organizationally, in the U.S., objectivity was often promoted as a reporter’s ethic (Schudson 1978, 77-87). Schudson points out that through their contact with the objectivity norm “journalists had become their own interpretive community” (2001, 165). While it can be argued that Xu’s work forms a nascent attempt at building up an interpretive community [FN4], there were obstacles to objectivity as a professional reporter’s norm in China. The 1920s and 1930s form the key period of professionalization in China (MacKinnon 1997, 7). While the rise of the penny press in the U.S. is linked to the valuing of the reporting of news over editorial and opinion (Schudson 1978, 14), editorials and political commentary remained an important part of Chinese newspapers at the time (Qi 1981, 193). Before 1920, only a few outlets hired reporters. Newspapers like the *Shen bao* (Zhou 2006) and *Zi lin*

*hu bao* (Li 1985) had recruited reporters since the 1880s to gather news. Slowly, an increased number of news articles came to be written by reporters (Li 1985, 14). Nevertheless, Timothy B. Weston makes the general observation that up to 1920, “Chinese newspapers generally only had editors. They did not practice news-gathering ...” (2006a: 23).

In accounts of objectivity in the U.S. technology and aesthetics represent important factors of development. The telegraph and daguerreotype presented new ways of experiencing the world, bolstered by realism and the social sciences. In the U.S. context, news agencies or wire services are argued to be central to the formation of politically neutral formats for news (see Schudson 1978, 4-5). Such agencies were not dominant in vernacular Chinese until at least the 1930s (Nash 1931, 448). Nevertheless, after the introduction of the telegraph in 1881 in China, and despite restrictions placed on the telegraph by the Qing court for the purposes of political control, the telegraph opened up new channels of information, bypassing the court sponsored *Jing bao* and allowing papers to venture into other areas of news (Zhou 2006).

From the 1840s the U.S. was enthralled with the world of facts as an expression of a “democratic market society” (Schudson 1978, 122). In China, this epistemological formation was not aligned with economic and political conditions in the same way. A passion for facts in the U.S. during the progressive era (1890-1920), and in China in the 1920s-1930s, was linked to social reform. However, in China, facts were linked to social surveys conducted for the purposes of population control by the Nation-state rather than the democratic market society (Lam 2011). Indeed, Tong Lam shows how Chinese developments were a reaction to a critical view in U.S. social science to do with China’s “factual deficiencies” (2011, 27).

While realism and philosophical empiricism held sway in the U.S. in the mid to late 1800s, arguably a more dominant influence in China in the late Qing dynasty and early Republican-era were Spring and Autumn traditions of historiography which promoted virtues of impartiality (Ng and Wang 2005, 3; Li 1994, 226), and favored a more objective “representational style” (Ng and Wang 2005, 28; Lam 2011, 45; Mittler 2004, 78). The concept of the “mandate of heaven” invokes a “correlative” world-view in which history, politics and nature are intricately fused: “the ruler and the human political realm intimately followed and interacted with the cosmic order” (2005, 7). Guided by precepts of classical historiography, historian-scribes detailed words, deeds and events, and developed concepts of source and evidence, paying special attention to “interrelations between the phenomena of both the human and natural spheres” (2005, 19). However, it has been argued that this historiography leaned towards the rise and fall of dynasties rather than provide facts on the livelihood of people (Li, cited in Lam 2011, 42).

The objectivity norm in the U.S. is closely linked to the need to mediate the requirements of business and commerce, and move beyond partisanship (see Baldasty 1992). Stephen R. MacKinnon argues that “Commercialization in the 1920s and 1930s in China took a similar form to commercialization in the U.S. in the late nineteenth century” (1997, 9), but again this post-dates Xu’s work.

It is not our goal to provide a complete overview of the journalistic field in early Republican-era China, or trace every variation from the U.S. case. Nor is

our intention to ignore similarities. In broad terms, while the timelines differ, the rise of news in the U.S. and China is aligned with an attempt to situate journalism beyond the reach of party political interests, and disciplined commercialism is seen as a means to independence. That stated, commenting on the early teens in China, Weston notes that newspapers were still highly partisan (2006b: 5).

It is, however, important to note one other significant development which relates to a shift in the place of journalistic writing in Chinese intellectual culture. While changes to Chinese journalism in the late Qing period were profound, MacKinnon argues that “the emergence of an independent popular press in China’s coastal cities in the early 1900s was ... possibly as revolutionary in its consequences as the French press on the events of 1789” (1997, 4). Journalism scholars need to remain attentive to significant movements in the journalistic and intellectual fields in early twentieth century China. Weston refers to “an explosion of journalistic writing” centered at Peking University in the late 1910s, closely aligned to new culture politics (Weston 2004, 165). This, for Weston, points to a new sense of journalism as a field of power (2004, 205).

### **Analyzing Xu Baohuang’s *Xin Wen Xue: A New Sense of News***

We turn now to analyzing Xu Baohuang’s handbook, *Xin wen xue gang yao* [*Key Principles of Journalism*], which incorporates the 1919 edition of *Xin wen xue*. Our premise is that Xu’s book forms a complex response to the state of news and of politics in Republican China. While Xu’s book does not refer to “objectivity” (*ke guan*) explicitly, we contend that he defines a nascent ideal that forms the basis of a norm in development. Furthermore, we argue that through his promotion of healthy public opinion and concept of news Xu’s articulation of the objectivity norm has a strong political aim. In relation to Xu’s role in relation to the development of an objectivity norm in China, we argue that Xu has a key legitimatizing and codifying function in relation to the practice of news. While practical in focus, Xu’s contribution is integral to understanding the norm as something accomplished or operationalized through practice. As such, we contend that it is inadequate to characterize Xu’s work as bringing an “account of American-style journalism to China” (Narramore 2003, 182). His legitimizing or codifying role goes further than this, and speaks to local issues and media practice.

Whereas up to now Xu’s work has been decoded through a trope of “importation”, our comparative focus on articulation leads us to question the importation frame and the way it implies a fully pre-existing, transcendent, or completely articulated norm. Granted there is a strong view of Xu’s handbook that “most of the ideas discussed in the book [were]... based on American textbooks” (Hao and Xu 1997, 36). Xu himself stated that “much of what the book says is taken from Western books” (Xu 1930b: 161; see also Xu 1930a ; Volz and Lee 2009, 720). Nevertheless, we suggest that there is some distinctive work of codification done by Xu, related to the unique aspects of the journalistic and political field he was working in.

Appreciating Xu’s contribution to the legitimatization and codification of a concept of news practice, it is necessary to appreciate the state of journalistic

discourse at the time Xu was writing, especially tensions around thinking about *xin wen* 新闻, or news.

While in the U.S. it is conventional to argue that the objectivity norm elaborates on a pre-existing discourse of news, it is difficult to argue this in the same way in China. The most important reason for this is that the term “*xin wen*” was highly fluid in meaning. As a result, we contend that Xu’s work articulates a new concept of news in the Chinese context *alongside* an objectivity norm. This is different from in the U.S., where, on Schudson’s reading, the ideal of objectivity builds on a strong focus on news dating from the penny press in the 1830s (see Schudson 1978). This Schudsonian view is disputed (see Schiller 1981; Ward 2004) but the idea that a tradition of news pre-dates a formalization of an ideal or ideology of objectivity is supported by the relatively late articulation of objectivity in journalism handbooks. In Xu’s case, he “reverse engineers” the U.S. situation by articulating values aligned with objectivity as a bedrock of news. In doing so, he builds on the efforts of figures such as Liang Qichao, for example, who saw accurate and fast reporting as an important journalistic criteria, but still yet to be institutionalized in China (Liang 1962, 46).

Turning to the term, “*xin wen*”, Xu was not the only person deploying this term in the late 1800s and early 1900s. *Shen bao*, in the “Announcement by our company” in its inaugural issue, 30 April 1872, explained that as a “*xin wen*” paper it sought to cover the politics of the nation, change in customs, diplomatic affairs, business transactions, and “all that is unheard of which surprise, startle, and delight” (1). “*Xin wen*”, like many other terms in modern Chinese, has a classical origin, but also takes on a modern meaning as a result of adaptation from Japanese (Nathan 1977, 3). Xu explains in chapter 2 of the book his use of the term: “The noun *xin wen zhi* is Newspaper in English, and ‘*xin wen*’ in Japanese. Our countrymen also call it ‘*bao zhi*’, ‘*bao zhang*’ and ‘*xin wen*’ in short” (Xu 1930a: 5). It can be traced back to at least the late Ming dynasty in the 1620s in short stories in the vernacular language written by Feng Menglong (McLaren 1998, 275). In its classical sense, the term refers to “what people are talking about that is new” (Anne McLaren, personal communication, 11 July 2013), meaning recent scandals and gossip recounted as anecdotes. This link to popular rather than official discourse remains in a famous usage from 1915 from Huang Yuansheng—whom Terry Narramore argues made “fleeting proposals for an objective journalism” (2003, 182).**[FN5]** “What I refer to as *xin wen* from now will not all necessarily be court announcements or national issues. Happenings to ordinary folk and what is talked about in the streets will all be considered news. This is breaking the mode in daily newspapers” (Huang Y. 1968a, 128). This “folk-sy” sense of the term is sometimes lost in the general association of news with the formal needs of a modern citizenry.

In the history of news in China, declarations of truth and factual reporting sometimes lack normative force on the actual practice of journalism. For example, the principle of “truth” in news reporting was announced in the inaugural edition of *Shen bao* (30 April 1872, 1). It points to a value on facts, as contrast to fiction. In practice, however, many news reports published in *Shen bao* around that time would include content considered fictional by Western standards and ridiculed by “Western-language” newspapers in China (Mittler 2004, 100). In its defense, *Shen bao* argued that at least half of the

Chinese population enjoyed and believed in those stories (*Shen bao* 25 December 1874). By 1912 ghosts and similar stories are categorized as entertainments not news (Mittler 2004, 95). When Xu's handbook was published in 1919, science and democracy were finding favor with Chinese students and intellectuals during the New Culture Movement (1917-23). Xu's codification of news works against this backdrop, as an attempt to prescribe a normative definition of news. Xu highlighted "facts" as the first element in his definition of news: "news is recent facts attended to by the majority of readers" (1930a: 5). Xu reiterates time and again that news is equivalent to facts. "News is recent facts attended to by the majority of readers. So the first criterion is being factual" (1930a: 5). Xu places a strong emphasis on the need to distinguish news from fabrication and manipulated events: "News is facts. The principle that news has to be factual is clear and needs no explanation. Any information that is penned out of nothing or fabricated behind closed doors is not news" (1930a: 13).

The critique of faking and fabrication can be traced to Western sources (see Harrington and Frankenberg 1912, xv; Shuman 1894, 65). In the U.S., objectivity in the early 1900s was aligned with an informational approach to facts, as a reaction to the excesses of sensationalism and yellow journalism (Schudson 1978, 106-107). Distinguishing journalism from fiction and fakery, Xu states:

If it is not facts, then it is not news. If it is published, then it is fake. It cannot be called news because it is published. Reporters often encounter difficulty in gathering news. Even if they strive to get the facts, often not all what they get are facts. This is true. It is alright to say that it is not easy to get real news, but it is not alright to call non-facts as news. (1930a: 15)

Xu's work is central to considering news as a basis for a journalism of facts, part of a nascent objectivity norm.

Xu's emphasis on factuality needs to be seen in the context of a key problem identified by Barbara Mittler: that of a lack of a clear separation of opinion and news (2004, 97). In this context, we argue that Xu's work is an important response to the problem of how to make news in a Chinese tradition in which facts were blurred with opinions, rumor, and fiction. To achieve a separation between fact and other knowledge practices less dependent on evidence and verification, Xu discusses methods of news gathering that ensures the correctness of facts: "When the editor learns of this report [of a fire], he could send a reporter to the location to investigate if there is such an event..." (1930a: 42). "The result of the investigation sometimes confirms that it is a rumor, merely a saying that is passed around, or just something intentionally faked without any basis of facts. Therefore news organizations must not publish rumors in newspapers before evidences are found. If the rumor relates to the reputation of someone or some organization, extra care should be exercised" (1930a: 42-43).

With his focus plainly on practice, Xu explicitly promoted the separation of fact from opinion. He stressed that reporters and editors must not inject their opinions into their news pieces:



Reporters need to judge the truthfulness of information that is passed around, and editors need to write on the basis of facts with caution. ...If editors have opinion on a piece of news, they could express it in the editorial, or add footnotes at the end of the news story. They should not put their opinion into the news to confuse the reader. (1930a: 14-15)

He returns to the same point of separation of fact and opinion in chapter 9 in relation to a newspaper's editorial pages, again stressing that the opinion in the editorial must be based on facts (1930a: 116).

A separation of fact from opinion was problematic around the turn of the twentieth century in China, and only slowly did an awareness of separation of fact from opinion start to emerge (1985, 48). News articles in the early decades of the *Shen bao* made little distinction between the subjective and the objective (Mittler 2004, 94). Analyzing the text of news reports, Li (1985, 48) found that opinion was incorporated into around 80 per cent of news reports in the *Qing yi bao* from 1898 to 1901. Historical events played a part of the valuing of opinion and the subjective. The year 1895 was a turning point in Chinese journalism, when hundreds of political commentary newspapers were started and widely circulated (Li 1985, 30; Lai 1989, 67). It came as the educated strata responded to China's defeat by Japan in the Sino-Japanese war to demand higher popular participation in politics (Nathan 1977, 2). While prominent figures such as Liang Qichao recognized a separation of objective reporting and subjective commentary, he considered writing subjective commentary as the journalist's "higher, moral duty in 'guiding the people'" (Narramore 2003, 179).

Nevertheless, there was a rising interest in the objective approach. The sources for an ideal of objective, factual news in the Republican-era China are diverse. When Chinese scholar Di Chuqing started *Shi bao* in 1904, values approaching an "objectivity norm" were also written into the prospectus of the newspaper:

Art.1. Our comments will be impartial....

Art. 7. Our news will be accurate....

Art. 8. Our news will be truthful or direct....

Art. 9. Our news will be impersonal or impartial.... (Lin 1936, 105)

But these declarations do not stand as articulations of a norm accepted across an entire industry. Xu moved closer towards this by explicitly linking these ideals to news gathering and news editing. Mittler suggests that the first efforts to teach journalism in China helped to create a more distinct boundary between the terms of "factuality" and "fictionality", and a "new awareness of 'what's news'" (2004, 96). Narramore (2003, 179) noted the appearance of a "rigid system" of professional journalism, one which emphasized fact reporting appeared in China in the 1920s. But neither critic fully captures the significance of Xu's codification of concepts of news and reporting as precepts for practice.

Narramore (2003, 178) interprets the movement toward professional ideals of objective journalism in the Republican-era as an escape from the danger of politics at the time. However, this reading seems to preclude an idea of political engagement through the practice of news reporting,

exemplified in Xu's texts. Within an uncertain separation of fact and opinion Xu's text provides the basis for a strong, socially committed separation of fact and opinion within the discipline of reporting. The value is positioned against the influence by political parties and other forces. Xu is concerned that "[n]ewspapers of political parties for the political goal of the moment often create a big rumor about the leader of the opposing party, publish it in the newspaper to confuse the right and wrong of the time, but glamourize it as 'news policy'" (1930a: 83).

Xu's impact on the practice of objective journalism needs careful consideration. He was not alone in referring to *xin wen*, and Xu's textbook was but one of a series of writing efforts made by Xu to spread his ideas on journalism. Xu's preeminence is, however, recognized in the writing of Chinese critics. As Huang Tianpeng notes: "Journalists were considered trivial literary writers ten, twenty years ago, and newspapers were considered reading material for killing time. The gentleman...took on the task of reforming journalism. Now our countrymen realize the value of journalism, and that journalism is a noble occupation. The change in culture of the news occupation is the result of the gentleman's efforts" (Huang T. 1930, 3). "Most of the people who work in newspapers were students of [Xu Baohuang] .... Most of the people who talked about the study of news afterwards followed the gentleman's ideas" (Huang T. 1930, 1-2). Other scholars have confirmed a significant legacy: "By the time of Xu's death in 1930, journalism had changed from a source of sensationalism into a highly respected profession with a clear mission as Xu's students began to dominate the profession" (Hao and Xu 1997, 36). Xu himself, in a 1919 preface to *Xin wen xue kan quan ji* [Journalism Magazine Collection], noted changes in journalistic practice along the direction towards his ideal: "Since the establishment of the News Study Society at the Peking University in the 7<sup>th</sup> year of the Republic, our countrymen have started paying attention to this study. In recent years, the various reforms in news work, such as the emphasis on news gathering, improvements to news editing, and progress in printing, are not unrelated to what were championed by the Society then" (Xu 1930c: 208).

### **Cultivating 'healthy public opinion'**

In the preceding section we sought to analyze Xu's work in terms of a new sense of news. In this section, we turn to the way he aligns the role of the newspaper with a work of cultivating healthy public opinion. It is clear that Xu did not take "objectivity" in news as an end in itself, but saw it as a force of social change. His work, while being an intervention into the very state of journalism, was intended as a contribution to the survival and modernization of the nation. In the handbook, he stated the first role of newspapers is to provide news. But in discussing this role, he talked about the implication of imparting facts to the formation of public opinion (1930a: 6). Two of the six roles of newspapers promoted by Xu are to represent, and create, public opinion (Xu 1930a: 7-8). In Xu's view, the basis of healthy public opinion is correct and detailed facts. Healthy public opinion is not possible if it is not based on facts: "The editor of newspapers should observe the opinions of the majority of nationals on various major issues, and...to speak for those who

wish to speak but who are not good at speech, and to speak for those who are afraid to speak out. If the newspaper only represents one person or one party, then it is merely the paper of an agency, but cannot represent public opinion" (1930a: 7). These considerations are a far cry from Western constructs of objectivity as a view from no-where.

The political dimension of representing public opinion is not lost on Xu. He criticized the government for not placing any importance on public opinion: "Newspapers are closed down from time to time. As a result, they often dare not represent public opinion to the fullest in order to preserve their own existence" (1930a: 8). Xu further suggested newspapers should create public opinion and identified three ways of doing so: "First, publish genuine news, to serve as the basis for readers' judgment ....Second, interview experts or outstanding people, to publish their speech....for reference by nationals....Third, publish incisive editorials, to arouse proper public opinion...." (1930a: 9). In this regard, Xu's championing of journalism in China does not entirely fit Narramore's (2003) or Li's (1985) interpretation that professionalization was an escape from politics. Rather, we see Xu's ideal as a positive albeit indirect engagement in the political sphere through the fulfillment of professional norms and responsibilities.

Xu explicitly links his objectivity norm to the task of "representing public opinion" and then "creation of public opinion". On the latter he states: "First, publish genuine news, to serve as the basis for readers' judgment" (1930a: 9). He elaborates: "After facts are published, readers will take their position. To include the reporter's opinion in the news piece easily confuses those simple readers, who then take opinion as fact and lose their freedom in taking a position" (1930a: 15).

Like the U.S. journalist and political philosopher Walter Lippmann, Xu sees facts as central to an informed public. In the work of both men, the public needs facts in order to tackle questions that they may not fully understand, or are not well-prepared to tackle. Lippmann and Xu share an interest in the state of public opinion, although their focus diverges somewhat. Lippmann's focus is on freeing the blockades around public opinion (1920, 11). For Lippmann the crisis in western democracy was a crisis in journalism because news reporting was the bedrock of public information. 'News is the chief source of the opinion by which government now proceeds' (1920, 12). Lippmann turned to objectivity to rescue reporting from sophistry and propaganda. In Xu's case, the dysfunctional state of government in the Warlord period places a different frame around his work, for it was the Warlord government in Shandong that acted against press freedom and the public opinion, by capitulating to the Treaty of Versailles and especially Japanese interests in Shandong. Xu sees government as part of the problem in that it suppresses the voice of the people along with newspapers (1930a: 8). Xu's emphasis is not so much on removing blockages but cultivating "healthy public opinion".

Healthy public opinion is based on correct and detailed facts. Healthy public opinion is not possible if it is not based on facts.... Therefore newspapers should try hard to provide news. They should not pass off non-news as news because of coercion, financial inducement or personal relationships. Nor should they forfeit important news because

of some relationships, to deprive society of the basis of studying and establishing opinion. (1930a: 6).

The promotion of healthy public opinion frames the objectivity norm in a distinctive way. Xu sought a foundational concept of news that would educate the people, arouse public opinion, and act on current affairs in a timely manner. This concept works within and alongside a journalistic tradition of political commentary in China. As Weston notes, “The intellectuals of the 1920s believed not only in objective news reporting but in educating society about science, democracy, modern cultural values and social norms” (2006a: 11). As has been noted of journalism in the late Qing period, “Pioneers like Liang Qichao, Sun Yatsen, and Zhang Taiyan founded a tradition of Chinese press that prides itself on political commentaries” (Gan 1994, 39). It was the political commentary magazines, more than newspapers, that played the major part in the early Republican years (Lai 1989, 149). After the First World War, they launched fundamental debates about politics and society ranging from the family system, to marriage and superstition (Ge 1955, 185).

While the objectivity norm typically differentiates news from editorial, it is worth noting that Xu’s text pays attention to both sides. Xu’s focus on healthy public opinion leads to a strong view about the ethics of editorial. (We should note that Mittler argues there was “no such thing as ‘the editorial’ in early Western-style Chinese newspapers” (2004, 84).) In the chapter on newspaper editorial, Xu made it plain that editorial writers “should harbor no secret interest in mind, have a patriotic heart and a fair temperament. ... They should always take the benefit of the nation and welfare of the people as the goal” (1930a: 119).

## Conclusion

Responding to comparative research into media systems and historical research into media norms, this essay has sought to explore the significance of Xu Baohuang’s 1919 text *Xin wen xue* on the articulation of an objectivity norm in the early Republican-era in China.

Our argument has been that while Xu’s text articulates what can only be considered a nascent ideal and not a fully matured objectivity norm, his work contributes to the development of concepts of news reporting in China. His primary achievement being, we have argued, a new sense of news. The fact that his work does not articulate a fully matured norm is not in itself unusual. The situation relating to Xu’s handbook bears similarities to that identified by Tim Vos in the U.S.: “Early journalism education did not produce a coherent legitimating discourse about ‘objective’ journalism” (Vos 2011, 442). Vos flags the importance of handbooks to the development of objectivity, suggesting that “the key issue is the authority that journalism education held in crafting occupational norms out of occupational practices” (2011, 438). However, in Xu’s case, Xu does not see his work as crafting occupational norms out of occupational practices. Rather, his task is to cultivate occupational practices according to particular norms.

Xu’s handbook has an ambiguous standing against the criteria set out by Schudson used to identify the presence of an objectivity norm (Schudson

2001, 149-150). Xu's handbook is relevant to Schudson's first criterion: "Through expressed allegiance to the norm in speeches and textbooks". Nevertheless, while Xu was a prolific writer and speaker, his 1919 text and speeches of the time made no explicit mention of "objectivity". Yet the use of a cluster of terms in the book was clearly guided by a normative ideal close to it: fact, correctness, no exaggeration, impartiality, and separation of fact and opinion are all important themes. Arguably, it is only much later that the ideal articulated by Xu, or indeed Xu's work, became widely adopted as a norm. Hence, it is difficult to say that Xu is codifying a group norm. It falls short of what Schudson would describe as "a fully formulated occupational ideal, part of a professional project or mission" a "moral code" binding a group (2001, 163).

However, it is in this space of the hinge between an ideal and a practice that we argue Xu's contribution lies. At the end of the nineteenth century, and into the twentieth, concepts of objectivity and factuality became keywords in Chinese newspaper discussions. In this context, Xu's work gives rise to an expectation that precepts linked to objectivity may indeed have a hold on journalistic practice and shape the definition of news. In other words, Xu's text allows the reader to imagine the possibility of a norm. That Xu's work fell short of a fully matured norm is illustrated in the gap between ideals and reality experienced by Chinese reporters in the mid- and late 1920s, when 'in spite of the rapid institutionalization of journalism as a scholarly discipline and field of knowledge, the practice of commercial journalism remained distant from the ideals expressed by journalism intellectuals situated within academic settings' (Weston 2006a: 31). Nevertheless, Xu's writing and efforts across a number of groups and institutions certainly influenced concepts of news in the period, as evidenced in the testimony of commentators like Huang Tianpeng.

While Xu's text draws on Western handbooks (a debt Xu acknowledges) we argue that Xu's approach was shaped by the journalistic and political field of his time in a way that goes beyond any simple notion of importation. Although on the surface Xu's text promotes qualities typical of the objectivity norm, elements such as fact-orientation and the separation of news and editorial take on a different emphasis in Xu's text because of the focus on healthy public opinion. We have argued that Xu's articulation of the objectivity norm has a strong political aim. His concept of news, and promotion of healthy public opinion, point to unique points of adaptation within the Chinese context. Xu deploys the objectivity idea as a way to introduce a strong concept of news into China, part of a project to strengthen the nation. In doing so, Xu grafts a nascent objectivity norm onto pre-existing traditions of press-political interaction, especially around political commentary, as well as pre-existing traditions of historiography and public information.

## Notes

**FN1.** According to the original preface (Xu 1930b), the content of the book was first published as a series of articles in the September, October, and November issues of the *Oriental (Dong fang)* magazine in 1918 under the title *An Outline of Journalism (Xin wen xue da yi)*. A revised version was published as articles in *Peking University Daily (Beijing daxue rikan)* in autumn 1918. The third version was published in the sixth, seventh and eighth issues of *New China (xin zhong)* in summer 1919. The first book form of the content was published by Peking University Press (Xu, P. 1981, 135) in December 1919, and reprinted in 1930, 1932, 1937 and 1994 (Hao and Xu 1997, 36). The 1919 text bears the title *Xin wen xue*, which could be translated as “Journalism”, while the 1930 edition, which includes other lectures by Xu, are titled *Xin wen xue gang yao*, translatable as *Key Principles of Journalism*. Huang Tianpeng says in the preface dated 1930 to that edition of Xu’s book: he thinks naming the book *Key Principles of Journalism (Xin wen xue gang yao)* is the most appropriate. This seems to suggest that he chose the new title for the 1930 edition. The version consulted by the author of this paper is a 1989 reprint of the 1930 edition. Our access to Xu’s 1919 work is through the 1930 edition in a 1989 reprint. We have been unable to consult the original 1919 edition of Xu’s work. We have found no suggestion that the content of Xu’s text has been changed. Translations of Xu’s texts in the following are by Joyce Y. M. Nip.

**FN2.** In recognition of the significance of the organization, Peking University, in collaboration with some scholars, revived it as the Institute of Journalism, Peking University on April 15, 2008.

**FN3.** Xu’s transcript shows his major studies to be in the area of Politics, Economics and Sociology, with some credits in Mathematics, German, English and Rhetoric. Journalism is not named as an area of study.

**FN4.** There were earlier efforts in this respect. In 1912, the All-Nation Newspaper Progress Association held a special meeting in Shanghai, and passed a resolution to start a newspaper school (Xu P. 1981, 134).

**FN5.** Huang Yuansheng, also called Huang Yuanyong, is a well-known journalist of the Republican era. He is credited as one of the early proponents of objective journalism, and indeed referred to objectivity or *ke guan* directly. However, he is more a journalism practitioner than theoretician and his ideas about journalism were not developed or articulated in formal essays or a handbook (Song 2012). As chief editor of the *Yong Yan* newspaper launched by Liang Qichao, he wrote in 1914 of his aspirations about the newspaper. “From now on, I shall make effort to change its subjective attitude to objective. I will, of course, expound positions about the political situation, current affairs and all other things based on my beliefs. But I will not consider my position as the only one, and will not reject other positions because of one position. When I hold a position and select elements from other positions, the resulting position based on judgment of the synthesis of facts is more valuable than an empty argument expounded on the ground of ideals. If the synthesis of facts does not enable me to make a judgment when I write, I will not rush to take a position but would rather only put forth the facts as reference material for

myself and society than publish an impetuous position over which I shall repent in later days” (Huang Y. 1968b, 103).

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