

Print and Politics: "Shibao" and the Culture of Reform in Late Qing China. By Joan Judge. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1996. 298 pp.

Shibao (The Eastern Times) was the leading political press at the beginning of the twentieth century in China. Many considered it as the mouthpiece of the Jiangsu-Zhejiang faction which constituted one of the major forces of the late Qing political and cultural scene. However, despite its importance, it has not received enough attention until Joan Judge's book. For a long time, historians have been aiming to reveal historical development by contextualizing main textual sources, such as newspapers. "Public Sphere," a prevailing concept in the European historical field, has proved its usefulness in this respect. Joan Judge's work is the first book to study "history from the middle" via the analysis of a political press in Chinese historiography. (p. 3) However, the result is not entirely satisfactory.

This is a story about the expansion of a new middle realm in late Qing China, but told in a way solely based on the Shibao journalists' subjective accounts. Objective analyses, of either the journalists' social position in the overall transforming social structure of late Qing, or a cross-examination of the journalists' claims against the greater historical context, is puzzlingly lacking. This critique, therefore, focuses on answering the question: why it is not enough to "tell the story of the formation, expansion, and meaning of this emerging [middle realm],"(p. 1) by merely emphasizing "the language the journalists used, the cultural constructs they deployed to structure their arguments, and the sources of authority they appealed to in advancing their

claims for reform” (p. 2) in the late Qing Chinese context ?

The book needs to have a social structural analysis to determine the extent to which journalists commanded social leadership, so as to evaluate their role in the formation of the new middle realm in late Qing. According to the author, the journalists cast themselves as members of the middle level of society and they saw their role as one of negotiating between the dynasty above and the common people below. (pp. 33-34) Traditionally, this role of mediation was in the hands of official-gentry backed up by dynastic support. Did the existing social system in late Qing endorse the journalists' claim when they made this statement ? Did they command the necessary social prestige and established networks of communication to reach out to both sides, especially in view of the fact that most of the journalists were only salaried men with little substantial power ?

The author answers these questions by pointing out the leading status of Shibao in the Shanghai press industry and the newspaper's close association with the powerful Jiang-Zhe constitutionalists. Doubtless, Shibao was the leading newspaper and attracted the largest readership in the Shanghai press in the early 1900s'. Nevertheless, the circulation was limited: 17,000 maximum, compared to the vast numbers of the Chinese population. The innovative ideas the journalists propagated might be embraced by a proportion of the general public, but this did not automatically make them social leaders entitled to participate in public policy-making. Men of publicity could be trend setters, but not yet leaders of a society before they accumulated enough political authority.

The connection of the Shibao journalists with the Jiang-Zhe constitutional leaders is unclear, even though the newspaper building, Xilou, served as the site of their association. There was a certain degree of overlap between Shibao journalists and members of Xilou club, but a lack of evidence to show that the journalists expanded their influence through the power networks the latter

controlled. The author fails to draw this distinction clearly and presents a confusing categorical depiction of the Shibao journalist group. While her namelist of the journalists (in appendix A) includes prominent Xilou club members like Zhang Jian and Li Pingshu, the Shibao editorials the author quotes were all done by the regular staff. While a couple of the regular journalists, like Di Baoxian and Bao Tianxiao, were personnel of the organizations founded by the constitutional leaders, the author shows few direct links between the ideas on the newspaper pages and the actions of these organizations. Evidence of divergence between them seems to be more profuse. (These include the disagreement between Zhang Jian and the journalists in terms of their attitudes toward the royal house's concession to shorten the constitutional preparation from nine years to six; or, the journalists' abortive advocacy of the railway and mines associations as the reformist base of operation.) Can we classify the eminent constitutionalists like Zhang Jian as Shibao journalists only because they probably contributed articles to the newspaper on an occasional basis? Could it be possible that the journalists did not participate in the social movements in the name of the newspaper, but as individuals?

Without clearly defining the journalists' social position, the author believes that the journalists' approach to forge a new citizenry "reveals their willingness to relinquish the inherited literati role of proxy for the people, by offering the [common people] the means to reinvent themselves." They "forsook the Confucian noble man's practice of holding knowledge in trust and acting on the common people's behalf.....they devoted themselves to informing, educating, and politicizing their compatriots in order to forge a more autonomous Chinese citizenry."(p. 101) I do not question the journalists' sincerity when they advocated their ideal of citizenry. But, to my eyes, this is a choice by default. After all, unlike the then dominant social groups

(gentry-merchant, traditional official-gentry, new military men, and new businessmen), the journalists, although members of a new intelligentsia, did not have sources of force to engage in political contest, other than mobilizing the people. As the author points out, these journalists were a new lineage of cultural elite. But they were not distinguished from traditional literati by their new ideas, outlook, and urban life-style alone. It was also by their limited possession of communication networks and sources of power. An inquiry into their relationship with other social groups and their increasingly marginalized social status, can illuminate the social alienation the new intelligentsia suffered and give us insight into the actual operation of the late Qing new middle realm.

This book, though we can understand the author's intention to let the evidence speak for itself, cites paragraph after paragraph of direct quotation from Shibao editorial columns, with neither sign of investigation into each one's immediate context, nor cross-examination of its greater historical context. For one thing, the editorial column, more often than not, was tied to daily current affairs in such subtle ways that a contextual examination revealing the moves behind the scenes is essential. Especially, because of the newspaper's allegedly close ties to the powerful Jiang-Zhe constitutionalists. Furthermore, a cross-examination between the journalists' claims and the greater historical development is vital to evaluate the actual operation of the late Qing middle realm. In the following are some of my suggestions in this respect. Hopefully, they are constructive to the study of the issue of "public sphere" in the Chinese history.

Judge discusses at length the journalists' prescription of the content of the new morality and citizen spirit requisite for China to enter upon a new era. More than a descriptive account of what the journalists prescribed, readers would like to know on what basis the journalists (new intelligentsia) assumed that they could arbitrarily set the moral tenor of the age without reference to

any empirical assessment of social realities. What can this typically idealistic, or, more accurately, unrealistic outlook of the new intelligentsia tell us about the limitations of their effort to wedge open a new middle realm, and vice versa? To what extent did the new intelligentsia actually break away from the old gentry in terms of intellectual orientation and traditional moral patterns of judgment? How did the new intelligentsia maintain their faith in the face of the social alienation which was increasingly imposed upon them? This level of research is vital to unravel the negative factors on the part of the new intellectual, which eventually led to the failure of a Chinese public sphere.

Social mores can never take shape as the result of wishful human prescriptions alone. They are the creation of a constant push and pull among interest groups. New ideas or concepts were introduced into Chinese society through their adoption by cultural elite in public debates. However, this is only the first ring in the social value reproduction process. Whether a concept can be transformed into an ideology imprinted on people's behavior, depends on not just the cultural elite's interpretation and dissemination of an idea, but also various other social groups' applications according to their interests and social positions. The meaning of a concept, consequently, transformed along with the process. Therefore, even though Shibao was generally considered as a mouthpiece of the Jiang-Zhe constitutionalists, and even though many of the journalists took part in the constitutional movement, we need to probe into the social elite's different appropriations of what the journalists had advocated in the political press, so that the journalists' contribution to catalyzing the middle realm into a site of social dynamism can be determined. Not everything that appeared in Shibao editorials was reasonable to and accepted by the social elite. This was very clear in the Shibao's leading journalist Chen Leng's ephemeral advocacy of the foreign principle "no taxation without representation" in forcing the government to concede. (pp. 115-116) On the

other hand, why could it be generally accepted that the journalists' interpretation that the anti-imperialist social movements in the 1900s were the prologue of the later constitutional movement, despite the latter being domestic in nature? The journalists were the primary engineers forging the necessary conceptual link between the two movements, which lent weight to the social elite's constitutional cause.

The journalists believed that anti-imperialist movements in the 1900s (the Chinese people's struggle over railway construction, mine exploitation, and foreign-goods boycotts) had nurtured the growth of civic organizations in constructing power networks and sophisticating the necessary political skills. One Shibao journalist even claimed that, "taking the two incidents [of the Jiangsu-Zhejiang Railway dispute and the Chenwan case] as examples, it is clear that our people today possess the qualities of constitutional citizens." (p. 114) The Shibao journalists, and many other intellectuals, interpreted the movements with an optimistic outlook, but, as shown in history, later on they found themselves being pushed toward another greater disappointment. Hence, a cross-examination of the journalists' observations and the historical nature of these 1900s' anti-imperialist movements, becomes necessary.

To make writing and reading more interesting, we might raise the question: how far apart were these anti-imperialist movements in nature from the anti-Christian movements inflaming the whole of China in the previous decades? Similarly, both types of movements took place in the middle realm of society. Both involved region- and nation-wide power networks in each level of society. Both thrived on ingrained hatred against foreign encroachment. Doubtless, there were obvious differences between these two types of movement in terms of overall state-societal relationships, intermediate groups, networks of participation, and patterns of political strategy and mobilization. But we need to remember they were consecutive events. The shifts in these

contrasted aspects are tell-tale points in the upsurge of social dynamism in the middle realm. In the case of the intermediate groups, for example, we might want to ask: what was the underlying significance in the excessive favoritism of the new intellectuals to the anti-imperialist movements of the 1900s? Was it possible that their favorable account in fact was a reflection on their political strategies of participation? To what extent did the function of a political press facilitate the 1900s anti-imperialist movements, which the anti-Christian movements were devoid of? What can this tell us about the characteristic and functional difference between the official-gentry and new intelligentsia? A comparative study of these two consecutive movements can give us an understanding of the transformative late Qing middle realm, by which one can highlight the novelty that emerged in the 1900s with a historical sense.

Print and Politics presents an over-optimistic and reductive portrait of the formation of the late Qing middle realm. Without a social structural inquiry, and relying solely on the journalists' subjective accounts, it is not surprising that the author concludes that "in China it was the organs of publicity that served as the impetus for the creation of the institutional infrastructure that constitutes a civil society." (p. 12)

Li-Min Liou
UCLA History Department