Rudolf G. Wagner, editor. *Joining the Global Public: Word, Image, and City in Early Chinese Newspapers, 1870–1910*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007. ix, 249+ pp. Hardcover $25.95, ISBN-13: 978-0-7914-7117-3.

The last three decades of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century, the time frame chosen for this book, was for China a time of unprecedented humiliation by foreign powers and a weak central goverment in the aftermath of two Opium Wars. Nonetheless, that time span also meant, in many respects, a new chance for China and the Chinese. The present book focuses on one of these new challenges in Chinese history, that of the development of the news media, a chapter of Chinese history that has been badly neglected by China scholars.

Rudolf G. Wagner points out in his preface that the essays collected in this volume are the fruits of the research group Structure and Development of the Chinese Public Sphere, established in Heidelberg in 1993. The questions discussed by the members were, as can be concluded from Wagner's introduction, much inspired by Jürgen Habermas's study on the transformation of the public sphere in Europe. According to Habermas, in late seventeenth-century England, early eighteenth-century France, and finally late nineteenth-century Germany, a segment of society, Bürgerliche Gesellschaft (civil society), established the platform for a rational-critical discussion, largely independent from the state. The spirit of *Bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit* (civil public sphere) declined, according to Habermas, in the course of the twentieth century, due to the impact of both the transformation of the state toward the modern welfare state and the impact of the modern mass media.

Although the original German version of Habermas' study was published in 1962, it was more than twenty years later, after the publication of its English translation in 1989, that the value of his pioneering work, especially for the young discipline of media studies, became internationally acknowledged.[1] Whereas Habermas had at his disposal a wide range of previous studies by historians, Wagner emphasizes, much has still to be done in the Chinese field before any broader conceptualizations could be dared. Thus, the studies collected in the present volume should be understood as an effort to strengthen this base.

In what follows, I will first summarize the main contents of each of the five essays. Then, some of the results of these studies will be reconsidered in the context of the title *Joining the Global Public*. Moreover, the question will be raised whether and to what degree the conceptualization proposed by Habermas for the development in Europe proves to be valid for the Chinese case.

In chapter 1, Barbara Mittler traces the process that newspapers underwent, from the initial stage in which they were wholly imported from outside to a stage in which they were accepted by Chinese readers as really "Chinese" media (pp. 13–45). Her study concentrates on the argumentative, rhetorical, and cultural strategies that the new media gradually adapted and integrated into the world of the Chinese readership. Drawing primarily on editorials published in the *Shenbao*, but adducing also evidence from several other newspapers, she shows how the newspaper as a medium was doubtlessly imported by foreigners and was, thus, a foreign medium. But instead of trying to deny these foreign roots the authors of these editorials arrived at what Mittler calls a "semantic remake." "A semantic remake," Mittler explains, "was necessary to integrate the alien medium into Chinese structures of the public sphere" (p. 30). This process, which Mittler designates as a form of "domestication," was achieved by incorporating into the very concept of the editorial traditional Chinese literary forms such as the "eight-legged-essay" (*baguwen*), whose mastery was a precondition for any candidate seeking a successful career as an imperial official.[2]

Natascha Gentz, whose focus is laid on the makers of the first newspapers and magazines in China (chapter 2), decided in favor of a sociohistorical approach (pp. 47–104).[3] The papers she chose for her analysis were the Shanghai *Shenbao*, the Hong Kong *Xunhuan Ribao*, the *Huibao*, and the *Xinbao*. Whereas the *Shenbao* and the *Xunhuan Ribao* were the two most important and influential newspapers in Chinese of their time, the other two were less known and only semi-official. In her approach, she challenges a widespread claim that before 1895 there was little interest and respect for newspapers among the Chinese public by showing that there was, indeed, considerable interest in the newspaper business, and she likewise challenges the claim that the first Chinese journalists were frustrated literati who had failed to pass the imperial examinations. Instead, she is able to show that in the cities of Shanghai and Hong Kong, a whole new class took shape—educated people who were, in one way or another, affiliated to either missionary or other foreign-related institutions and who developed a kind of common identity.

Chapters 3 and 4 are devoted to the role of the printed image in early Chinese newspapers. Rudolf G. Wagner and Nancy Kim both concentrate on the Shanghai illustrated newspaper *Dianshizhai huabao*, both introduced to Shanghai by the businessman Ernest Major. Wagner in his contribution coins the term of the beginnings of a "global imaginaire" (pp. 105–173). The *Dianshizhai huabao*, Wagner argues, became China's chance to join a world community in which the image rather than the spoken word became the central medium of information and where the illustrated papers "knew of each other, and they would reprint each other's illustrations and quote each other's articles as a way to improve and authenticate their international coverage" (p. 106). That this exchange worked out for both sides is vividly demonstrated by Wagner, who gives examples both

for cases in which newspainters of the *Dianshizhai huabao* made use of images in Western illustrated newspapers (e.g., Wu Youru who copied the image of Zeng Jize, the Chinese ambassador in London and Paris) and for cases of Western illustrated newspaper makers who were interested in illustrated reports in the *Dianshizhai huabao* and incorporated them into their own issues. From these examples, Wagner deduces what he calls a "general and global shift toward the image," to which the *Dianshizhai huabao* linked up with the illustrated newspapers in the West and thus "integrated China into a worldwide aesthetic agenda and a global exchange on the level of the image" (p. 156).

Nancy Kim approaches the *Dianshizhai huabao* from a quite different angle. Rather than emphasizing the foreign factor in bringing about the new picture medium, her major interest lies in the literary precursors of the *Dianshizhai huabao* (pp. 175–200). Taking all picture-reports of the magazine in a representative sample as the basis of her analysis, Kim sketches a histogram that reveals that among the ten groups of topics into which she divided her "sample," the group she describes as "picture-reports on the curious and strange" (*zhiguai*) form, by far, the largest group with 29 percent. These stories can be traced back, according to Kim, to the style of collections of stories on the supernatural, such as the famous Qing collection *Liaozhai zhiyi*. It was not the *hard* news that interested the readers of the *Dianshizhai huabao* the most; it was, instead, the curious (*zhiguai*). Thus, Kim concludes, the new medium offered something that accommodated traditional forms of entertainment for a readership of a certain literary level. This is what Kim meant by giving her essay the title "new wine in old bottles" or, as she puts it more precisely at the end of her article: "Rather than 'new wine in old bottles,' the magazine could be described as offering its readers wine that pretended to be new in bottles that pretended to be old" (pp. 195f.).

Catherine Yeh (chapter 5) finally puts her focus on the beginning of a hitherto neglected genre of newspapers, called the *xiaobao*, "tabloids," or, literally, "small papers." As she shows, the *xiaobao*, too, had their share in the development of a public sphere in China and especially in Shanghai. The function of these papers may be summarized as serving primarily the market of entertainment that quickly expanded during the 1870s and especially after 1895 (pp. 200–233). Shanghai was then, as Yeh points out, the only metropolitan city in China. Its citizens became more and more accustomed to a culture of leisure. They enjoyed forms of leisure that foreigners had established in Shanghai, such as horse races or the Italian circus, while still keeping to traditional Chinese leisures, such as visiting teahouses, parks, or pleasure precincts. Print entertainment was then a major medium through which Chinese and Western customs of life and knowledge about things Chinese and Western were exchanged.[4] Shanghai became, as Yeh puts it, a "big playground" (*youxichang*). One of the newspapers imbued with this new culture of leisure was the *Youxian bao*, established in 1897. These papers focus on the actual scene in Shanghai and thus enabled readers to take part in

the cultural life of Shanghai by simply reading these papers. The most important among these early entertainment papers was the *Youxi bao*, initiated by Li Boyuan under the influence of papers circulating in Paris and Edo/Japan. Papers of this type soon found a mass market in Shanghai. In his editorials, Li Boyuan shows a certain ambiguity towards the topic "leisure." On the one hand, he seems to love Shanghai with all its glittering beauties, and on the other hand, he wants to open his readers' eyes for something beyond the surface. It seems, Yeh concludes, as if Li wanted to continue a Chinese literary tradition in which the description of such extreme luxury serves as a subtle warning that such a way of life is dangerous and will certainly lead into decay.

Well equipped with the brainwork done by the authors of the above summarized five essays, we may now dare to take one step further and ask how the results of these studies fit with Habermas's theories on the development and decline of the "public sphere" in Europe. Can the Habermas theory be applied to the Chinese case? Three points are considered here as important for further discussion.

(1) According to Habermas, the members of a civil society gradually fell victim to a new kind of media that offered a well-consumable mixture of "info-tainment" and entertainment. The decline of the former "public sphere," which was closely linked with a critical and rational public opinion, attested by Habermas was thus the outcome of a long-term evolutionary process.

In the Chinese case considered here, we have a very small time frame within which not only several genres of media which may be subsumed under the categories "info-tainment" and pure "entertainment" have been imported from outside but likewise the manner of discussing topics in the form of editorials. Moreover, as Wagner admits in his introduction, "the overwhelming majority of Chinese public sphere articulations was, and could only be, published in a foreign-run exlave on Chinese soil, Shanghai" (p. 4). Thus, in my view, the rather hybrid situation of the Chinese case makes it rather problematic to draw conclusions based on the Habermas thesis.

(2) In the conception of Habermas, the members of the "civil society" were a small, well-educated, and well-informed segment of society, the segment that was able to participate in a kind of cultural network and contributed to a "public opinion." Because of his decision to neglect the larger and less well-educated members of society, Habermas had already been harshly criticized with regard to the European case. Rudolf Wagner, in his introduction, also seems to contest Habermas's conception of the term "public sphere." He suggests "formaliz[ing] this concept and reduc[ing] it to its functional value, in a constellation not bound by a 'bourgeois society'" (p. 3) and argues that only in this formalized sense did a public sphere exist in premodern China. Furthermore, "In this sense, the notion 'public sphere' conceptualizes the space in which state and society as well as different segments of society articulate their interests and opinions within culturally and historically

defined rules of rationality and propriety" (p. 3). However, if we accept such an enlarged definition of "public" as the one proposed by Wagner and, consequently, regard the readership of all three kinds of imported print media as one common "public," we are no longer able to distinguish between a critical-reflective readership that is able to select informative from non-informative news (in the terms of Habermas: "kulturräsonierendes Publikum") and mere consumers of entertaining mass media (Habermas's "kulturkonsumierendes Publikum").

(3) As the title *Joining the Global Public* indicates, the very conception of a "public" as it is envisaged in this book is even larger than merely a nonsegmented society within the borders of a nation. By the end of the nineteenth century, both the makers of news media and the interested readers of these media in China, and especially in Shanghai, were able to get in touch with a "public"—no matter how this public was segmented then—in Europe and America. Examples for how an exchange betweeen the makers of illustrated newspapers mutually benefitted from an exchange of these illustrations, as shown by Wagner, have been shown above. Examples of historical events in the West or descriptions of important Western buildings have been offered by Nancy Kim. However, there seem to be no examples of, for example, letters to the editor, in which the participants of a globalized public platform would, indeed come into close contact with each other. Thus, the idea that "the Chinese" or at least a small elite in a limited area of China, namely primarily in Shanghai and Hong Kong, would have been enabled to join a "global public" in the last decades of the nineteenth century, as it is indicated by the title, is misleading, since it is not sufficiently supported by evidence in the book under review.

Overall, however, this book is filled with stimulating ideas, considerations, and descriptions one has read about never before. Thus, this collection of essays is highly recommended, not only to those who do research on the early history of the news media in China but also to anyone interested in the complex transformation process that China underwent on its way toward modernity.

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NOTES

1. Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1962); translated into English as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

2. The different forms by which the editorialists gradually used the new form as a platform to demonstrate their literary talent and their classical education are further elaborated by Mittler in her book *A Newspaper for China? Power, Identity, and Change in Shanghai's News Media, 1872–1912* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), esp. chapter 1, "An Alien Medium Domesticated: Transformation of the New(s)paper in China," pp. 43–117.

3. A more thorough research on the history of journalism in China has been made by Gentz in her book:*Die Anfänge des Journalismus in China (1860–1911)* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002).

4. For more on Shanghai's entertainment culture, see also Catherine Vance Yeh, *Shanghai Love: Courtesans, Intellectuals, and Entertainment Culture, 1850–1910* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006).