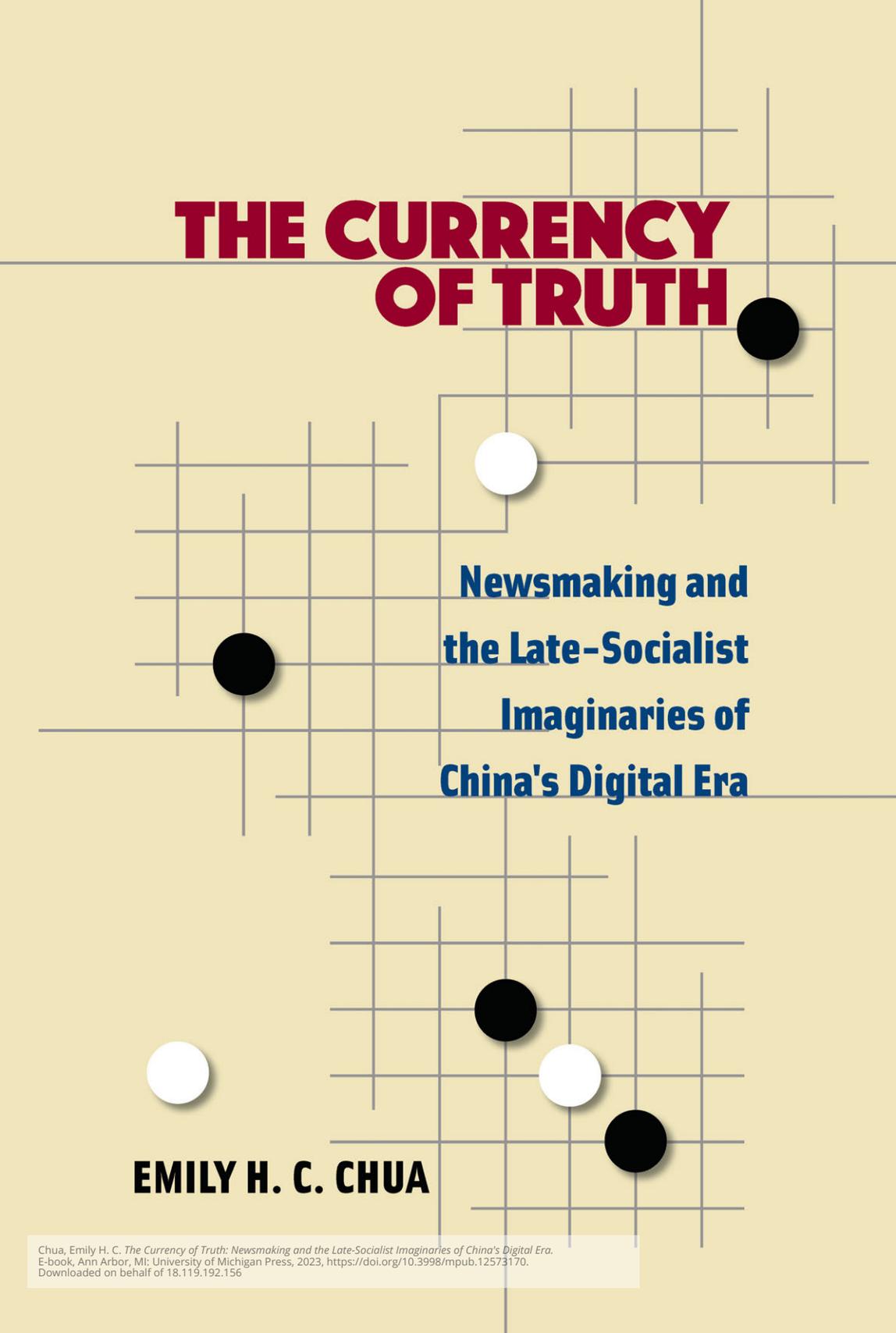


# THE CURRENCY OF TRUTH



**Newsmaking and  
the Late-Socialist  
Imaginariness of  
China's Digital Era**

**EMILY H. C. CHUA**

## The Currency of Truth

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# The Currency of Truth

NEWSMAKING AND THE LATE-SOCIALIST  
IMAGINARIES OF CHINA'S DIGITAL ERA

**Emily H. C. Chua**

University of Michigan Press  
Ann Arbor

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# Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Preface	ix
CHAPTER 1. Introduction	I
CHAPTER 2. A Contested Medium	28
CHAPTER 3. From Propaganda to Publicness	46
CHAPTER 4. An Ethic of Efficacy	70
CHAPTER 5. News as Currency	96
CHAPTER 6. The Newsmakers' <i>Jianghu</i>	117
Epilogue	144
Notes	151
Bibliography	157
Index	173

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## *Preface*

Ten years into the rule of China's unflinchingly authoritarian president Xi Jinping, five years into an acrimonious US-China trade war, and four years into a world-changing global pandemic caused by a novel coronavirus first discovered in Wuhan, geopolitical relations between China and many other countries—particularly those of the proverbial West—are tense. China's political, economic, cultural, ideological, environmental, diplomatic, security-related, and space-related affairs all seem to be matters of smoldering international contention that are constantly threatening to boil over into open conflict.

One issue around which these simmering tensions are consistently though indirectly manifest is the news. Under Xi's presidency, the ruling Chinese Communist Party has tightened its controls over the press and become more forceful in its measures to silence those who would write critically about its governance, whether these be local or foreign, or professional or citizen, journalists. International media outlets have responded to this and other top-down aspects of Xi's rule by more frequently reprising the image that was first painted in the Mao era of China's news media as a mass communication machine that works formidably and relentlessly to mold the minds of its citizens and keep their outlooks and opinions tightly aligned with the Party's agendas.

Closer to the ground, of course, the realities of China's sprawling, heterogeneous, and unevenly regulated news industry necessarily become more complex. Rather than a monolithic entity whose workers are uniformly focused on advancing the Party's objectives, China's news sector at this level presents itself as an industry where many more heterogeneously positioned and motivated actors are engaged in the pursuit of many more concrete and local objectives. Journalists, editors, newspaper managers, advertising execu-

tives, company bosses, and low- and high-ranking local and central Party officials strive to achieve a diverse array of personal, professional, political, and financial goals. They draw, in the process, on their formal roles and informal relationships, on their access to private information and their claims to public attention—engaging one another in various forms of alliance and rivalry, collaboration and betrayal. These activities inform and shape the truth-claims that circulate in the news, but are not themselves reported.

This book seeks to deepen our appreciation of the complexities and contradictions that characterize China's contemporary news media by bringing its readers into the lives and worlds of journalists, editors, and executives at one newspaper—a Beijing- and Guangzhou-based weekly that I call *The Times*. In a media industry saturated with self-interested pursuits, my ethnography explores the practices and experiences of journalists who aspire to write news articles that will benefit and empower their readers. I look at how *The Times'* journalists nurtured and pursued this ideal in and through the shifting networks of relations that their own lives were embedded in and with which their sense of their present identities and future prospects were entangled, to ask what the endeavor to be a good and worthy newsmaker comes to look like in such a contemporary milieu.

In constructing a counterimage to the portrait of China's news media as a tightly controlled and internally coherent mass-messaging system, the aim of this book is not only to offer a different perspective on news in China but also to propose the more general argument that the contemporary institution of news can no longer be analyzed as though it were governed by the modernist social and political imaginary of a collectively reasoning public. In an age of briskly evolving communication technologies, changing media business models, and production and consumption practices that draw an ever-wider range of actors into their networks, I argue that the imaginaries now shaping the news are far more various and disparate than the notion of a public—whether in its socialist, liberal, authoritarian, or democratic variants—allows for. Rather than treating the news in any contemporary context as an extension of the political and ideological systems that are associated with it, it is necessary to ask how the news' truth-claims are being shaped by the culturally particular ideas and sensibilities that orient its producers, distributors, and consumers to their worlds. At a time of intensifying geopolitical tensions, the hope of this book is thus to contribute to more thoughtful and nuanced ways of engaging with news both in China and beyond.

## CHAPTER I

### *Introduction*

As a journalist for the Politics desk of a Beijing- and Guangzhou-based newspaper called *The Times*, Zheng Wen<sup>1</sup> often feels doubtful about the value of his work. *The Times* is a weekly current affairs and business and financial newspaper with a website, a mobile app, and a print edition that runs an official circulation of over four hundred thousand. Started in the mid-2000s by a Guangdong provincial state-owned enterprise, the newspaper is targeted at China's growing pool of "societal elites" (*shehui jingying*) or "white-collar" (*bailing*) professionals and entrepreneurs. Its mission, according to the newspaper's official self-description, is to provide this influential segment of society with timely and accurate information that will aid them as they drive China's socioeconomic progress and development. With offices in Guangzhou, Beijing, and Shanghai, *The Times* generates sizable annual revenues for its parent company, which plans to become a publicly listed media conglomerate. Yet, despite the newspaper's large ostensible following and considerable commercial success, Zheng Wen does not feel that his work as a journalist has the kind of impact that he wants it to have. He aspires, as he has told me, to produce news articles that provide *The Times'* readers with insights into current affairs that are "useful" (*youyong*) and "valuable" (*youdian jiazhi*). His hope is that such a news service will empower this stratum of China's society to become a more effective counterbalance to what he sees as the overweening dominance of the country's Communist Party government. Yet the reporting work that Zheng Wen mostly finds himself doing hardly achieves anything like this. Reflecting on the subject over tea at his apartment, one muggy afternoon in 2014, he told me:

Being a journalist, you sometimes really feel incapacitated (*wunai*). Nobody approves of what you do. The [Party] leaders (*lingdao*)<sup>2</sup> are always suspicious

of you because they think that you're out to make trouble for them. And news readers don't trust you, because they think that you only say what the leaders want you to. Why should readers trust you, really? They know that you write news for your own sake and not out of concern for them. This is your rice bowl, after all. You may not be happy about the leaders' demands, but you're still going to write as you're told to because you cannot afford not to.

The close involvement of Party officials and the top-down control that Zheng Wen's comments allude to are well-known features of the news media in China, where the ruling Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) large and powerful Publicity Department (*xuanchuanbu*)<sup>3</sup> systematically stipulates what the country's newspapers can and cannot report. This arrangement dates back to the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, when the newly established CCP government, with its charismatic chairman Mao Zedong at its helm, brought the nation's printing presses under its control and designated them the political and ideological mouthpiece, or "throat and tongue of the Party." While China's post-Mao marketization policies later broadened the range of topics that newspapers were permitted to cover and created more room for newsmakers to circumvent and even "push back" (Hassid 2016; Repnikova 2017) against the Party's press restrictions, the conditions that journalists work under today remain highly restrictive. Although there are now a large number of entirely market-oriented non-Party newspapers, all news outlets are to some degree still governed by "the Party principle," which demands that they accept the Party's guiding ideology as their own; publicize the Party's programs, policies, and directives; and abide by the Party's organizational principles and press commands (Y. Zhao 1998, 19). Compared to his predecessors, China's current president, Xi Jinping, has enforced this principle with renewed vigor. He has emphasized that the media should serve as "propaganda fronts" of the Party (Associated Press 2016); created new administrative offices whose mandate is to tighten the censorship of online news and social media (Repnikova 2018; Brady 2017); and overseen a dramatic reduction in the press sector's scope for critical and investigative reporting (Tong 2019; K. Li and Sparks 2018). Under such politically constrained conditions, it is not surprising that Zheng Wen's journalistic aspirations were more often frustrated than not.

Yet, besides disgruntlement over the news' Party-controlled command structure, Zheng Wen's reflections on the state of his practice also expressed

something subtler. His invocation of imagined news readers who neither trusted nor approved of his reporting work cast China's news media as purveyors of texts that failed to persuade or even engage the publics they addressed. Against the backdrop of our prior conversations, his reference to the journalist's "rice bowl" seemed to imply that many newsmakers treated their work merely as a means to make a living and were less concerned to engage their readers than to meet their bosses' demands. Zheng Wen's mention of Party leaders who were leery of journalists making trouble for them suggested that China's officials were similarly oriented primarily by their own interests, and were more focused on using the news media to protect their own political careers than to advance the Party's values and vision. China's news media from this angle collectively appear to be an institution that is dominated by the Party but does not work simply to propagate the Party's views. The frameworks that are conventionally used to analyze news in China, as elsewhere, see the news as an institution that works to shape the outlooks and opinions of the people or publics who read it. In the portrait that Zheng Wen's comments paint, however, the news seems like a medium of texts whose readers know better than to take at face value, and whose producers and regulators are less interested in shaping public opinion than in using their positions in the industry to do various things for themselves.

This book is an ethnographic exploration of newsmaking in China that looks not only at how Communist Party politics constrain and shape the news, but also at the novel conceptions and sensibilities that are emerging in this digitally mediated late-socialist context around the more fundamental question of what the contemporary institution of news is becoming. Although the CCP government continues to describe the news sector in Maoist terms as its political and ideological mouthpiece, scholars have shown that the media industry's evolving commercial and technological conditions have changed the way that newsmakers and newspapers in China work. Newsmakers' professional ideals are shaped not only by Party doctrines but also by Western news theories and models, as well as by ideas that derive from contemporary reprises of China's Confucian intellectual traditions (Polumbaum and Xiong 2008; Nyiri 2017; de Burgh 2003a; Simons, Nolan, and Wright 2017; Pan and Lu 2003). The marketization and the digitalization of the post-Mao press sector have created opportunities for newsmakers to pursue these ideals, while also drawing them into new kinds of relationships with business-minded executives (C.-C. Lee, He, and Huang 2006; C. Huang

2000), hard-bargaining advertising clients (Pan 2000), and traffic-watching web editors (Guo 2020). Far from simply functioning as the Party's trusty and reliable mouthpieces, these various news industry actors pursue a range of different goals and objectives—some of which involve creatively circumventing Party press orders (Hassid and Repnikova 2016; Svensson 2012; Tong 2007), while others consist in selectively and strategically collaborating with local and central Party officials (Repnikova 2017; Tong 2010).

While many discussions of China's news media have focused on how the truth-claims that it generates shape and inform public discourse and opinion, this book sets out with a different question. It asks how newsmakers in contemporary China think about the texts they produce—how they understand these texts to work, or what they think the news' articles can and should do; and how they therefore endeavor to conduct themselves in their practice. My ethnography finds that *The Times'* journalists commonly regarded their news articles as texts that worked less to influence the opinion of any public than to mediate the myriad agreements and transactions that the news industry's numerous players were constantly brokering with one another. A journalist, for instance, might write a news article that met an editor's demands in order to earn the editor's favor and cultivate a relationship that might benefit the journalist's career later on. A managing executive of a newspaper might have an article written and published in praise of a local Party official to demonstrate allegiance to the official, who might later reciprocate by providing the newspaper (or the executive) with some form of political protection. News articles in *The Times'* milieu were texts that could be made and used by industry players to foster and shape the relationships that connected them.

I draw on these findings to develop the argument that news articles in contemporary China are often regarded and engaged with as texts that work not as a form of mass communication so much as a kind of *currency*—that is, as texts that are produced and circulated less for their impact on any public than for the private transactions and relationships that their circulation can engender. These are texts whose truth-claims are shaped not only by the propaganda agendas of the ruling CCP but also by the efforts of the many other actors who are involved in producing and publishing them, to gainfully manage and navigate their connections with one another. They are texts that present their readers with certain reports on reality while in the meantime creating new arrangements and relationships, or realities, that their reports do not cover. News, in this contemporary construction, is a medium

of truth-claims that are always doing more particular things for more particular actors than they let on.

Social studies of news in contexts across the world are interested in how contemporary newsmaking practices are transforming the institution of news—drawing it away from its normatively imagined role as the public’s provider of truthful and important information, and seeding new notions and sensibilities about its value and veracity. In places as diverse as the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Venezuela, and India, the competitive logic and pace of online news is found to be producing young cohorts of newsmakers whose professional identities are grounded more in the new notions of speed and interactivity than in the older journalistic principles of objectivity and balance (Usher 2014; Boyer 2013; Peterson 2015; Boczkowski 2010; Nadler 2016). The computer programs and metrics that news companies now use to measure and optimize their online traffic place journalists in the service of virtual publics represented by “clicks” and “views” rather than readers and opinions (Boczkowski and Mitchelstein 2013; Boczkowski 2004). News agencies, aggregators, and social media platforms meanwhile operate as powerful “digital intermediaries” (Nielsen and Ganter 2017) that play a decisive role in determining which stories gain attention and which stories do not (Gursel 2012; Munger 2019). These developments are changing what news readers expect and accept from professional journalists (Waisbord 2018; Carlson 2018), as well as what professional journalists expect and demand of themselves (Anderson 2013; Broersma and Peters 2013; Deuze 2007).

Faced with these multiple and far-reaching transformations, media scholars have called for studies that move beyond lamenting the news’ failure to perform its “rightful” public function, to engage, as Matt Carlson puts it, in “a more fundamental rethinking of what news *is*” (2017, 3). My exploration of the news’ currency responds to this call by describing a world where professionally published news reports are not held to create a “public” whose members come together to pursue the common good, but instead are understood to extend the particular and often particularistic relationships and interests that connect people in their private and personal realms. I explore *The Times*’ newsmakers’ experiences of working in such a milieu to think about the new kinds of social and political imaginaries that contemporary news practices are contributing to create, and about what the endeavor to be a good and worthy newsmaker in these emergent circumstances is coming to consist in.

### THE TIMES

There are, broadly speaking, two kinds of newspapers in China. The minority are party-state organs, such as *People's Daily* and Xinhua News Agency, which are directly funded and managed by high-level Party and government offices, while the majority are commercialized news companies that are registered under and at least partly owned by a (lower level) Party or government organization, but run as for-profit enterprises.<sup>4</sup> *The Times* belongs to the latter category and, like many such newspapers, fashions itself as a provider of “mainstream” (*zhuliu*) news—a term that serves as shorthand for news that is informative, authoritative, and in line with the overarching goals of the CCP government, without being reducible to mere propaganda. The newspaper's headquarters in Guangzhou occupies a whole floor of a downtown office tower and houses a team of close to one hundred staff members. *The Times'* glossy full-color annual reports describe it as an “architect of China” that provides the country's “elite” (*jingying*) and “influential” (*you yingxiangli*) stratum of entrepreneurs and professionals with knowledge and insights that will shape their outlooks and decisions. Behind this official description of the newspaper's collective vision and purpose, however, *The Times* is run by a team of newsmakers who are known by one another to be motivated in their work by very different interests and goals.

At the top of *The Times'* organizational structure is the general manager (*zong jingli*) of the state-owned enterprise that owns the newspaper. When I began my fieldwork in 2010, this position was held by a man in his early fifties whom everyone addressed as Manager Tang (*tang zong*). A career bureaucrat who had risen to his position through the ranks of various Party offices, Manager Tang was regarded as an official (*guan*) and, as such, a leader whose main objective was to have the newspaper abide by the regulations and fulfill the directives that the Party authorities issued. While Manager Tang was keen to have *The Times* become a commercially profitable enterprise, his primary concern was to ensure that it did so while staying in line with the Party's political and administrative orders.

Second in command to Manager Tang was *The Times'* editor-in-chief (*zong bianji*), a man in his early forties named Huang Tao, whom the newspaper's staff members addressed as Chief Huang (*huang zong*). While Manager Tang was formally and in principle *The Times'* highest leader, it was in practice Chief Huang who managed the newspaper's day-to-day operations and who had the most direct say in how the organization worked. Chief Huang

was known to have been headhunted and poached by Manager Tang from another Guangzhou newspaper, not for his editorial expertise but for his reputed flair for “pulling in advertising revenue” (*la guanggao*). It was said that Chief Huang’s employment contract pegged a portion of his annual salary to the amount of advertising revenue that the newspaper generated, and that he would be given a sizable bonus if he succeeded in bringing the newspaper to profitability. Indeed, Chief Huang consistently presented himself to his staff members as “an entrepreneur” (*qiye jia*) who was at *The Times* “to do business” (*zuo shengyi*). While Manager Tang’s role was to grow the newspaper in a politically cautious manner that stayed in line with all official regulations, Chief Huang’s role was to focus on the newspaper’s commercial performance and to boldly drive up its revenue.

Below the manager and the chief were *The Times*’ two deputy editors-in-chief (*fuzong bianji*). The first was a man in his late thirties named Lin Youpeng and addressed as Chief Lin. He was described by the staff as a literati-type figure (*wenren*) who disliked Chief Huang’s vulgarly commercialistic approach to running the newspaper and who was only biding his time until a more attractive job opportunity came along. The second was a woman in her midforties named Guo Aiguo, who was known to be actively cultivating relationships (*guanxi*) with Party officials at the Guangdong provincial Publicity Department—partly, it was said, to secure political patrons for the newspaper and partly because she believed these connections would help her advance in her own career.

Together, these four leaders oversaw the operations of *The Times*’ seven news desks—Politics, Economics, Culture, World News, Opinion, Real Estate, and Automobile—as well as various supporting departments that included Marketing, Operations, Layout, Accounting, and Human Resources. Each of the seven news desks comprised a team of journalists and editors, led by a head editor (*zhubian*) who reported directly to Chief Huang. Each of the supporting departments had a staff of three to eight members, led by a department head (*zhuren*), who worked mainly with Chief Lin and Chief Guo.

Alongside the formal positions and roles that this clearly delineated organizational structure assigned to each staff member, however, *The Times*’ journalists, editors, heads, and chiefs were also variously connected to one another by informal personal relationships that ranged from alliance, mutual respect, and collegiality to mutual disparagement, rivalry, and hostility. These relational dynamics played a significant role in shaping the way the newspaper operated. Its editorial, commercial, and organizational deci-

sions were almost always the product of an amalgam of factors that included both the formal positions and responsibilities of the newspaper's staff members and the informal arrangements and relationships they maintained.

The account of *The Times* that I offer draws on twelve months of continuous fieldwork that I conducted as an intern reporter for *The Times*' Politics desk, working out of its offices in Guangzhou and Beijing in 2010; and on follow-up interviews and visits to the newspaper in 2011, 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2018. I was first introduced to *The Times* by a person who was friends with a senior journalist at the newspaper and who knew that I was interested in writing an ethnography of a Chinese newspaper. Whereas most of the studies of journalism in China that I had read were based on shorter research visits to multiple news organizations, my objective was to immerse myself as deeply as I could within a single newspaper to see what alternate perspectives might be afforded by a more sustained and embedded engagement with a fixed group of newsmakers. The senior journalist introduced me to the head editor of *The Times*' Politics desk, a man named Chen Ming. I explained my research interests, and Chen Ming, who was curious to see what a fully bilingual US university-based graduate student might be able to contribute to his section, allowed me to join the paper as an unofficial and unpaid intern.

I found that my commitment to working at the newspaper (rather than merely observing its workings) had the advantageous effect of prompting many of my new colleagues to try to help me cut through the official-speak that surrounded it and understand how the newspaper “actually” (*shiji shang*) worked. While I made it clear that my objective was to produce a work of academic research on journalism in China and not to build a career in Chinese journalism, my colleagues insisted that the only way for me to understand the object of my study was to learn about what their work processes actually involved. Treating me as a regular intern, they therefore offered me practical advice and insights drawn from their own experiences on how to best handle the work of being a journalist—how to satisfy one's editor's demands and abide by the Publicity Department's press orders, even when one did not agree with them, for instance; how to put together a publishable news article even when one had not managed to gather much material; and how to more generally pace oneself in one's practice in order not to burn out. This mode of interaction enabled me to gain a far more nuanced view of the journalistic profession in China than I would have gotten had I relied only on the kind of formal interviews I had conducted during my preliminary research period, which tended to yield mostly general reflections

on the state of journalism in China and conjectures on how it compared to newsmaking in the United States.

I worked most closely with three journalists at the Politics desk—Zheng Wen, Liang Yong, and Fan Xiaofei, all of whom had been at *The Times* for one to two years when I joined and spent a great deal of time together outside the workplace, as friends as well as coworkers. The three journalists framed themselves as newsmakers who—in contrast to many of their bosses and colleagues—wanted to use their positions at the newspaper not only to advance their own interests but also to produce something of value and benefit to news readers. Whereas many news industry players were entirely focused on creating and pursuing various business and career opportunities for themselves, the journalists said that their goal as newsmakers was to “say some true words” (*shuo dian zhenhua*) and “do some real work” (*zuo dian zhenshi*). They wanted not only to market *The Times* as an authoritative and impactful newspaper, but also to produce, and provide its targeted readers with, the informative and insightful news reports that it promised.

In my capacity as an intern, I followed the journalists on their beats—to visit news scenes and gather information, conduct interviews, attend press conferences, and network with government and industry figures. I often worked alongside the journalists while they drafted their news articles, assisting them by doing tasks such as transcribing interviews, gathering background information from online sources, and summarizing “the foreign media’s” (*waimei*) perspectives on the issues they were writing about. I was part of the Politics section’s online chat group and attended their regular online and in-person meetings. Beyond *The Times*’ Politics desk, I also conducted interviews and engaged in informal conversations with journalists and editors from the newspaper’s other units, particularly its Economics, Culture, and World News desks, its sales and marketing department, and its executive-level leaders. I attended countless staff meetings, meals, and karaoke singing sessions, where I was immersed in the newsmakers’ world of intermingled personal and professional relationships. To garner a sense of the broader news industry in which *The Times* was situated, I also conducted interviews with journalists and editors from a range of other newspapers and news websites in Guangzhou and Beijing.

My interactions with my interlocuters and the access they granted me to their lives were shaped partly by the ethnic and cultural identity markers that I carry as a Chinese Singaporean—markers that led many to regard me as someone who was foreign to China’s political context but familiar with

their social and cultural norms. While my interlocutors were always informed of my position and objectives as a foreign researcher, this sense of cultural commonality brought an air of openness and candidness to our interactions. Being a junior colleague close in age to *The Times'* Politics journalists also allowed me to form social relationships with them that went beyond the workplace. I shared apartments with Zheng Wen for varying periods of time in Beijing, and stayed at Liang Yong's family home while working and later visiting the journalists in Guangzhou. I was brought into the personal realms of the journalists' lives, forming friendships with their spouses, parents, and, later, with their own young children. Whereas many studies of news engage with newsmakers only on the subjects and in the spaces of their professional expertise, the friendships I formed with the Politics journalists enabled me to become attuned to the numerous ways in which their outlooks and actions as professional newsmakers were embedded in and connected to their broader social lives and worlds.<sup>5</sup> The perspective that I offer in this book emerges from the understanding that I gained of the journalists' efforts not only to produce good and worthy news articles, but also to be good and worthy people in China's briskly changing social milieu.

#### THE CULTURAL MEANING OF THE MEDIUM

While many discussions of news are premised on a liberal conception of the press as a guardian and pillar of democracy, and an institution whose function is to enable the members of a public to exercise their rights as citizens, anthropological studies of journalism have shown that newsmaking is thought of as different things in different contexts. While all journalists "report the news," the diverse environments in which they do so constitute news reporting as different kinds of practices. Newsmaking can be a practice of serving politicians (Hasty 2005; Roudakova 2008), voicing the grievances of the people (Samet 2019; Jusonyte 2015), shaping international opinion and foreign policy (Bishara 2013; Nyiri 2017), or creating engaging digital experiences (Usher 2014; Anderson 2013).

Rather than setting out with a preconceived understanding of what the news' rightful function is, I follow anthropologists in approaching news as a discursive institution whose character and significance are constituted differently in different contexts. Literary and social theorist Michael Warner

has argued that a discursive institution is shaped not only by the contents of its texts but also by the ideas and sensibilities that its writers and readers have about the nature of the texts themselves—or, in Warner’s terms, by the “cultural meaning” (1992, xi) of the medium. In *The Letters of the Republic*, Warner traces the emergence of the liberal notion of the press as the site of a democratic public sphere to the culturally particular conceptions of printed (as opposed to handwritten) texts that became dominant in eighteenth-century America. He shows how printed books, letters, pamphlets, and newspapers came to be regarded and engaged with as texts that were “impersonal by definition” (38)—or that people could only properly participate in by suspending the social and economic relationships and interests that concerned them in their personal lives, and entering into a mode of reasoning that was “categorically differentiated from [their] personal modes of sociability” (39). Among the literate and politically engaged strata of society, printed texts were construed as documents that demanded to be engaged with from a standpoint of “rational and disinterested concern for the public good” (42). It was on the grounds of these culturally constituted “assumptions about texts, speakers, addressees, and ‘the public’” (xi), Warner finds, that the notion of a political public sphere existing in the printed mass media gained purchase.

The idea of the printed public sphere went on to define discourses and theories of news throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It anchored the notion of rational discourse that Jürgen Habermas (1989) famously theorized as a function of “the public sphere,” as well as the image and sense of modernity that political philosopher Charles Taylor has referred to as “the modern social imaginary” (2003, 8). The printed public sphere was valorized and vaunted as one of the distinguishing features of a culturally, morally, and politically modern—rather than feudal or imperial—society and nation. It was figured as the institution that made a modern nation (and a nation modern) by creating, as Taylor writes, “a common space in which the members of society are deemed to meet through a variety of media . . . to discuss matters of common interest; and thus to be able to form a common mind about these” (83). Newspapers were said to provide societies with the knowledge they needed to understand their shared conditions and exercise their collective will. In the discourses that became dominant particularly in the United States, newspapers were further constructed as publications that should work in a politically neutral rather than partisan manner, to provide

“balanced” and “objective” representations of reality that would enable news readers to form their own views and positions on the matters that concerned them (Mindich 1998; Altschull 1990).<sup>6</sup>

These normative conceptions of news have been critiqued as impractically idealistic (Lippmann 1993), ideologically and politically conservative (Herman and Chomsky 1988), unequally classed and gendered (Fraser 1992), and particular to a culturally and historically narrow Western context (Hallin and Mancini 2004, 2012; Curran and Park 2000). Yet they continued for many years to be the frameworks through which newsmaking practices both in and outside the proverbial West were analyzed and evaluated.<sup>7</sup> Only more recently has the analytical value of these hegemonic frameworks begun to be more widely questioned. New media technologies and practices in the West have destabilized the business models on which many established news companies relied and by which their journalist’s professional news reporting practices were funded. Contemporary journalists and editors adapting to the news’ digitalization while also trying to make a living in online environments crowded with bloggers, vloggers, tweeters, and feeds often find themselves operating less as guardians of truth and democracy than as fast-fingered processers and packagers of already circulating information (Boyer 2013). Finding the inherited norms and standards of the journalistic profession no longer applicable to their everyday work practices, many newsmakers and scholars now argue that it is imperative for us to move away from old theories and models and develop new conceptions of the character and role of professional journalism (B. Zelizer 2017; Deuze 2005; Waisbord 2013; B. Zelizer, Boczkowski, and Anderson 2021).

My exploration of *The Times*’ journalists’ construction and use of news as currency contributes to this endeavor by looking at how news in this context becomes a medium of texts that are addressed and circulated to an impersonal public, but at the same time also used to work on the relations and interests that concern people in their private negotiations with one another, or in their personal modes of sociability. Whereas many discussions of China’s news media center on its failure to function as force for democracy, I set out to ask what the news’ texts mean to the individuals who produce and circulate them—what these individuals think “news” can and should do for people, what normative ideas and distinctions they invest in the medium, and what ethical and professional principles and standards they therefore hold themselves to. I argue that such an anthropological approach not only is essential for any attempt to grasp the complexities and contradictions that

characterize China's news media, but also has the potential to contribute alternative frameworks to the "unitary model of journalism" (B. Zelizer 2009, 1) that has long been enshrined in Western conceptions of the modern public—but which now seems increasingly distant from reality.

While the newsmaking practices I examine in this book are shaped by the parameters and affordances of specific online and mobile communication tools, I do not attempt to isolate the effects of these digital technologies or to develop a theory of how the digitalization of news in China has changed it.<sup>8</sup> Rather, I follow media scholars such as Pablo Boczkowski (2004) and Shaohua Guo (2020) in understanding that the affordances of digital communication tools are shaped by complexes of coevolving social, cultural, political, and technological factors. I detail *The Times'* newsmakers' use of online and mobile technologies in their intricate entanglement with the Party-imposed constraints, profit-driven business models, and cultural and professional sensibilities and ideals that together shaped their practice. I set out to understand the cultural meaning of the medium that *The Times'* journalists worked with and to show how their newsmaking practices were informed by and informative of a different mode of sociality than that which the modern social imaginary offers.

## CHINA'S LATE-SOCIALIST NEWS SECTOR

To inquire into the cultural construction and meaning of news in today's China, it is necessary, as Chinese media scholar Bingchun Meng has argued, to develop a "historical sensitivity" (2018, 1) to the news sector's socialist and late-socialist context and transformation. While the Party's official discourse on China's news media frames it as an institution that has, since the founding of the People's Republic, dutifully served as its disciplined and unified propaganda and communication apparatus, this history has in fact been one of continuous and often violent contestation over what the news' rightful role should be, and how its production and distribution should be organized and governed. As in other socialist contexts such as the USSR (Yurchak 2005; Roudakova 2017; Wolfe 2005) and GDR (Boyer 2005), the high level of formal control that the Party maintained over the news and other media did not result in the extinction of all dissenting outlooks and ambitions, so much as drive them to take indirect and veiled forms. Despite the Party's claim to define and control the institution, a fundamental characteristic of

the news media in China has been the informal coexistence of multiple conflicting positions on how the institution should function. To grasp the significance of this historical fact for China's contemporary news sector, it is useful to consider the conditions that developed, in particular, around and after the Tiananmen Square demonstrations of 1989.

The Tiananmen Square protests were the culmination of many months of popular discussion and debates questioning and criticizing the Party's positions and policies. Among the numerous issues that were raised was the Party's right to control the press.<sup>9</sup> The Party's position at the time was that the role of the press in a socialist nation was to serve the people by functioning as the mouthpiece of the only organization that represented them—namely, the Party itself. Against this argument, many academics, students, and journalists, citing various social and economic problems that had developed under the Party's rule, argued that because the interests of the Party were liable to diverge from the interests of the people, the role of the news media in a socialist nation should, in fact, be to express and uphold the will of the people *against* the will of the Party. Due in part to the interfactional battles being fought within the Party's top leadership at the time, this and other debates were permitted in highly public forums and escalated into ever bolder denunciations of the Party's legitimacy (Goldman 1994). When the protests that gathered at Tiananmen Square began to take on the tenor of an open and outright rejection of the Party's right to rule, however, the rival Party factions closed ranks and, with Deng Xiaoping at their helm, oversaw the violent military repression of the civilian demonstrations.

In the wake of this political crisis, the Party's post-Tiananmen leadership chose not to engage with the theoretical and ideological questions that had surfaced but to reassert the Party's orthodox definition of the press as its own political mouthpiece, and tighten its political control over the news sector (Y. Zhao 1998). At the same time, the Party leadership also adopted measures to accelerate the news sector's marketization (*shichang-hua*). While newspapers were required to adhere to the Party line on all political and ideological matters, they were in all other areas encouraged to experiment with new ways of improving their consumer appeal and increasing their commercial revenues.

The Party's objective was to transform China's news sector into a more economically productive institution that was more attractive and engaging to popular audiences—without in the process allowing it to become a source of challenges or threats to the Party's rule (Y. Zhao 1998; Wu 2000; He 2000).

Scholars have described the mode of media governance that emerged through these efforts as one that rests on less overtly coercive measures and more hegemonic forms of rule (Y. Zhao 2008; Meng 2018). The post-Tiananmen Party did not have unilateral control over the press, but asserted its influence through the relations of constant “negotiation” (C. Huang 2007a, 405), “bargaining and reciprocity” (Xiaoling Zhang 2011, 192) that it maintained with non-Party stakeholders, such as journalists, editors, news executives, and advertisers. With the rise of online and mobile media technologies, this cast of non-Party actors then expanded to include owners, managers, and marketing executives for online news portals and social media platforms, web editors, celebrity bloggers, and netizens (Guo 2020; Repnikova and Fang 2018; Han 2018). Rather than attempting to control these numerous individuals by diktat, the Party has used a wide and constantly evolving array of regulations, incentivizes, punishments, and rewards to keep their various interests and endeavors aligned with the Party’s agendas.

Yuezhi Zhao (2008) argues that the Party’s use of this governance strategy has turned China’s ostensibly socialist news media into an institution that enacts and promotes the cultural and economic logics of neoliberal capitalism.<sup>10</sup> As the Party pursues a program of market-driven growth and development, news companies operating as profit-seeking enterprises pander to the consumer appetites of China’s moneymaking urbanites, neglecting the informational needs of the country’s poor and rural populations. The financial interests that news company executives, employees, and business partners have in their newspaper’s operations, meanwhile, make them reluctant to run afoul of the Party and eager to accede to the authorities’ propaganda and censorship demands. Zhao argues that the news media thus work to promote a mode of development that is based not on socialist principles and values, but on a combination of entrepreneurial competition and political obedience to the Party. Comparing the news media in China to other authoritarian states, Daniela Stockmann (Stockmann 2013; also Stockmann and Gallagher 2011) also finds that the media’s marketization has increased the resilience of the Communist party state by improving the perceived credibility of its propagandizing news outlets, and creating a medium through which Party authorities are able to identify, address, and attempt to shape popular concerns and sensibilities.

Studies that look into the everyday practices and experiences of China’s newsmakers, meanwhile, highlight the diversity, contingency, and flexibility of the arrangements and relationships they maintain with other players

in the industry, including Party authorities. While newsmakers readily comply with Party orders in some areas, they also actively work in other ways to circumvent official press directives and publish news stories that challenge the Party's self-serving discourses on reality (Hassid 2016; Bandurski and Hala 2010; Tong 2011, 2015). Party officials, for their part, use the newsmakers who operate under their jurisdiction on some occasions to promote the Party line, but in other instances to advance their own political careers or gain an upper hand in their intrabureaucratic struggles against one another (Tong 2010; Y. Zhao 2000b). Maria Repnikova, highlighting the way that critical and investigative journalists strategically interpret and navigate the press policies that central Party officials are continuously implementing and updating, describes the relationship between them as one of "guarded improvisation" (2017, 10). The news sector in today's China is evidently thus a far more internally diverse and complex arena of interactions than the official definition of the press as a Party mouthpiece would imply.

The argument I develop in this book is that the Party's post-Tiananmen media strategy has not only complicated China's news industry, but also precipitated a transformation in the cultural meaning of the news media. Whereas news in the Mao era was constituted as a medium of collective progress and development that would unite the people of China in their nation's advancement, news in today's China is widely regarded and engaged with as a medium of diverse, particular, and often particularistic pursuits. News articles are not seen as texts that have the capacity to turn their writers and readers into the rational and disinterested members of a unified public, but as texts that are crafted and circulated by numerous differently positioned and motivated actors in their pursuits of disparate ends and goods.

I argue that *The Times'* journalists' engagement with this medium offers a perspective on contemporary news that contrasts illuminatingly with that which prevails in late-liberal contexts such as the United States and Europe. While newsmakers in China deliberated and fought over what the news' rightful role should be, newsmaking in the West was for much of the twentieth century engaged with through relatively hegemonic liberal press theories (Altschull 1995; Herman and Chomsky 1988; Schudson 1978; Nerone 1995) that are only now becoming more widely questioned. The tendency in this latter context is for contemporary news practices to be framed as practices that undermine and erode the news' previously established position and role. Current discourses on the "declining standards" (Carlson 2020,

375) of professional journalism, on the propensity of digital news practices to work against democracy (Sunstein 2017, 2007, 2001), and on the dawning of a “post-truth” news era are reflective of this outlook.

In comparison, while *The Times*’ journalists also grappled with low professional standards, undemocratic politics, and a dubious relationship to truth, they did not see the news as an increasingly malfunctioning institution but as a dynamic terrain of constantly evolving opportunities and constraints. They thought of themselves as individuals who needed to accurately understand and successfully navigate this terrain, in order to be effective in pursuing the various personal and professional goals they aspired to. Rather than seeing this approach to their work as a corrosion or corruption of the journalistic profession, they considered it an essential *virtue* of the good and worthy contemporary journalist to be able to use the networks of interests and agendas that their news assignments placed them in, in ways that were gainful and advantageous to themselves.

My ethnography of *The Times* thus explores the novel ideas and ideals that are emerging among newsmakers in late-socialist China to develop an outlook on contemporary news that is an alternative to what is emerging in late-liberal contexts. I approach news and journalism in China not only through questions of democracy and control but also in relation to the new modes of sociality and identity that are being formed in China’s digitally mediated communicational worlds (Guo 2020; X. Wang 2016; Yuan 2021), the common sense of moral disorientation that many scholars identify as an emergent feature of everyday life (Steinmüller and Brandtstädter 2016; Ci 1994; X. Liu 2002, 2009; H. Lee 2014; Ci 2014; Y. Yan 2009, 2021), and the novel strategies and techniques of self-making that are emerging in and through these circumstances (Rofel 2007; Kleinman 2011; Chu 2010; Osburg 2013; L. Zhang 2020; Hoffman 2010; L. Zhang and Ong 2008).

The remaining sections of this introduction present three key ideas that the book develops: first, my conceptualization of the business model that *The Times* is run on as one that revolves around the marketing and sale of what I describe as their news platform’s “publicness”; second, the book’s main theoretical contention that news in contemporary China can be usefully analyzed as a medium of texts that work less as means of mass communication than like a kind of currency; and finally, the idea that I develop through my exploration of the news’ currency, of a “postpublic” social imaginary that today’s newsmakers both posit and contribute to actualizing.

## PLATFORMS OF PUBLICNESS

One of the first things I was struck by when I began working at *The Times* was the particular business model the newspaper was run on. *The Times'* parent company is a provincial-level, state-owned media conglomerate, or “media group” (*meiti jituan*) that, when I began my fieldwork in 2010, had plans of becoming a publicly listed company. In the one interview that I managed to secure with the general manager of the media group, Manager Tang, he told me that the group had created *The Times* to serve as its flagship publication and lead its bid to launch an initial public offering. The media group’s other titles were relatively niche journals and periodicals that were known only to small and specialized audiences. The group’s executive board members felt that a newspaper would appeal to a larger audience and help to make the group more widely recognized. When *The Times* became “a name that was familiar to every household,” as Manager Tang put it, the media group would be more highly regarded and its shares would be more highly valued when it listed.

I learned from some of *The Times'* other staff members that the newspaper had been started with an initial investment of some CNY 80 million and the goal of becoming profitable within three years. Under the business plan that was adopted, the newspaper’s revenue was for an initial period of an indeterminate duration to come mainly from “advertising”—which, in China’s context, does not refer only to the paid publication of clearly demarcated messages promoting a company’s products or services, but also to the production and sale of what in industry parlance are called “soft articles” (*ruangao*) and “black articles” (*heigao*). Soft articles portray a particular company or “client” (*kehu*) in a distinctly favorable light, which newspapers will offer to publish in exchange for cash. Black articles are articles that portray a company in a distinctly unfavorable manner, which newspapers will threaten to publish unless the company pays them not to. Though technically illegal, both practices became prevalent in China during the 1990s and have remained more or less normalized since. *The Times'* strategy, as its journalists explained to me, was to become a “high-end” (*gaoduan*) newspaper that catered to China’s white-collared professionals and entrepreneurs, while making money from the sale of its soft and black services to companies that wanted to reach this stratum of wealthy and influential readers.

Over the months I spent at *The Times*, I found that its staff were divided over the issue of its soft- and black-article trade into two loosely opposed

camps. In the one camp were the editor-in-chief, Chief Huang, and the journalists and editors of the Economics desk, who accepted and even embraced the work of soft- and black-article writing as a key component of the news business in China and an important practice for newsmakers to excel in. Under Chief Huang's direction, the Economics journalists wrote the articles and negotiated the contracts that brought in the bulk of *The Times'* revenue. In the other camp were the journalists and editors of the newspaper's Politics desk, along with some of their colleagues from the Culture and World News desks. These journalists saw soft and black articles as a vulgar form of journalism that they were not willing to engage in and consistently repelled Chief Huang's attempts to draw them into it.

What the members of both camps had in common, however, was a shared understanding that the soft- and black-article trade was a vital source of revenue for the newspaper that its continued operation depended on. Although the Politics journalists refused to engage in the actual writing of soft and black articles, they did see the practice as a necessary means of keeping their newspaper running and indirectly worked to support it. The journalists supported the business by producing news articles that helped to construct *The Times* as a news platform (*xinwen pingtai*) that China's entrepreneurs and professionals might be drawn to. As a relatively young newspaper, *The Times* did not have a large and regular following that it could use to attract soft- and black-article clients. Instead of actual reader numbers, *The Times* used its status as a newspaper that catered to China's professionals and entrepreneurs to persuade its targeted companies that its soft and black articles were *liable* to catch these readers' attention. This claim is plausible in an age of online and mobile news, where a digital news platform need not have a large and regular following for one of its articles to suddenly "go viral" and be sent circulating through the media networks of a particular type of news reader. *The Times'* business model was designed to capitalize on this possibility, and the role of its Politics journalists was to produce news articles that bolstered its claims of potential readership by covering news items and topics that China's entrepreneurs and professionals were known to be interested in.

I analyze *The Times'* newsmaking practice as one that aimed less to garner the attention of a certain public than to generate what I follow Michael Warner (2002) in describing as a certain kind of *publicness*. Warner points out that media texts constitute their publics not by actually garnering the attention of a particular group of readers, but simply by *addressing* themselves to a

public and thereby creating the *possibility* of their garnering this public's attention. I look at how *The Times'* journalists produced and published many news articles that in their own opinion were unlikely to be read by many actual news readers but which nevertheless served to create this possibility—or to generate this sense of their news platform's publicness on which its survival as a business depended.

While many discussions focus on how the media's digitalization is driving newsmakers to compete harder for online readers' attention by proffering consumer-friendly forms of "infotainment," my exploration of *The Times'* news practice suggests that we should also be attentive to the emergence of new business models that *sidestep* the need for an actual audience by monetizing the very possibility of an online news article being read.

My engagement with the Politics journalists' views on their practice further suggests that in these contemporary circumstances, the relationship between the professional journalist and the news' imagined publics needs to be rethought. Journalists have conventionally been described, measured, and evaluated according to the kind of impact they aim to have on their publics and by their degree of commitment to this cause. A good political journalist, for instance, is thought of as one who constantly strives to keep the public accurately and adequately informed. Bad, unprofessional, and corrupt journalists, on the other hand, are said to be ones who care only to boost their own salaries and careers, and who will willingly deceive or misinform their readers to achieve this. Drawing on the Politics journalists' approach to their work, however, I argue that contemporary journalists do not approach their publics in a fixed and consistent manner, but rather engage with their audiences in a range of dissimilar, inconstant, and even contradictory ways. The Politics journalists on some occasions strove to write news stories that were informative and useful enough to interest *The Times'* targeted readers—but recognized that their newspaper's business model made it necessary for them to also produce many news articles that were more likely to be ignored. Their practice on some assignments thus consisted in striving to inform and empower an imagined news public and on other assignments consisted in using their news platform's publicness to sustain the newspaper itself. I argue that a framework for thinking about professional journalism in the digital era must take account of the fact that journalists' objectives with respect to readers can vary within the scope of their practice. In the case of *The Times*, a consistent feature of the newsmakers'

practice was their understanding of the news articles they produced as texts that worked like a kind of currency.

## NEWS AS CURRENCY

Classical sociologists of money, such as Simmel and Marx, were captivated by what they saw as money's capacity to convert qualitatively incommensurable values into quantified and exchangeable sums (Maurer 2006). The expansion of modern money as they saw it would give rise to a world where the logics of economic exchange would override and eventually dissolve all socially and culturally constituted relationships, to create a system of perfectly rationalized interaction. Just as the modern public sphere would operate as an arena of impersonal discursive exchange, so would the modern market function as an arena of impersonal economic transactions. Letters in the one instance and numbers in the other would create new domains of rational communication and commerce that would replace the arbitrary social and cultural institutions that had traditionally bound people.

Against the claims of this modernist vision, recent works in the anthropology and sociology of money have pointed out that although money is measured in objective, numerical denominations, it continues to be used by people interacting in socially and culturally constituted and subjectively meaningful situations (Hart 2000; Bandelj, Wherry, and Zelizer 2017b; Guyer 2004). The distinctive characteristic of modern money, current scholars argue, is not its capacity to replace all personal ties and attachments with the impersonal logic of "the market," but its capacity to both circulate in abstract markets of economic value and mediate concrete exchanges between particularly related persons. Money, as Keith Hart puts it, is "always both personal and impersonal" (2007, 16). Its capacity to circulate in impersonal economic markets makes it something that people can use to work in and on their personal, social, and cultural worlds.

News articles at *The Times*, I found, were commonly thought of and engaged with in an analogous manner. *The Times'* newsmaking environment was one where Party officials had the authority to censor negative statements about the Party and order positive statements to be published, and where commercial enterprises could pay to have favorable or unfavorable reports about them printed or withheld. News articles in this context

were treated as texts whose capacity to circulate among an abstract and impersonal public of readers made them useful for mediating private transactions between particularly related actors. Rather than creating a space of rational discourse that stood apart from the socially and culturally constituted relationships that connected people, the news' texts were used precisely to work in and on these networks of relations. Articles were written and published about companies and their products, for instance, to foster connections with those companies' executives. Stories were written about Party offices and their policies to build up relationships with those offices' officials.

The objectives of the newsmakers who engaged in this work were, importantly, not always or only self-serving. An editor who commissioned a soft or black article, for instance, might do so as a means of securing the revenue that the newspaper needed to hire more qualified journalists. A journalist who wrote an article in praise of a Party policy might do so in order to secure a measure of support from local officials that would allow the newspaper to publish more boundary-pushing investigative exposés. To use the news' currency, in other words, was not necessarily to work in a narrowly self-interested or self-serving manner. It was, rather, to recognize the value that a specific news article would have to specific commercial or political actors in the news sector, and to use this knowledge in a way that would enable one to advance one's personal and professional goals and pursuits.

This concept of news as currency offers a different way of thinking about newsmakers' instrumental uses of their medium than other studies have proposed. Many such studies frame the instrumental use of journalists' news-writing capacities as a contravention and betrayal of their professional obligation to work for the information and benefit of their audiences. Working in post-Soviet Russia, for instance, Natalia Roudakova (2017) finds that the prevalent practice of selling news coverage for cash has transformed the journalistic profession into a form of "prostitution." After the collapse of the Soviet state, the rapid and unregulated privatization of Russia's news sector turned its newspapers into businesses that survived on campaign funds from politicians, who paid them to publish blatantly biased and even false reports. This transformation has led to what Roudakova describes as "a full-blown deprofessionalization of journalism as an occupation" (2017, 100)—turning the journalist's job from one that was defined by "the virtues of truth-telling" (2017, 40) into one that consists in blatantly peddling lies.

Scholars working in the United States, meanwhile, have not seen a "full-

blown” collapse of the profession but similarly find the instrumental approaches that many journalists are now compelled to adopt threatening their ability to provide their readers with truthful and informative news. As news companies are increasingly expected to return dividends to financial investors (Almiron 2010), news articles come to be seen as a means of generating the profits that newspapers need to satisfy their shareholders. Journalists are pressured to be more pragmatic and cost-saving (Anderson 2013), less careful (Boyer 2013) and less scrupulous (Henry 2007) in the crafting of their reports. The rise of “native advertising” (Carlson 2015) and the influence of “post-truth” politicians partial to “alternative facts” (Boyd-Barrett 2019) further blur the line between truth-claims and falsehoods—prompting scholars to call for a comprehensive rethinking of the news’ relation to truth, the grounds of its authority (Carlson 2017, 2018; B. Zelizer 2017; Michailidou and Trenz 2021), and the ethics that can and should govern it (Ward 2015; Christians 2019; Borden 2007).

The concept of news as currency recognizes the instrumental uses that many newsmakers now make of their medium—but instead of framing this as something that goes fundamentally against the proper principles of the journalistic profession, frames it as a characteristic of contemporary news that can be used for a range of varyingly proper and improper pursuits. The currency of news can be used by some actors in some instances to advance an endeavor to produce impactful and informative news, and by other actors in other instances to line their own pockets or advance their own careers. Rather than framing the good professional journalist as someone who always and only writes for the information and benefit of readers, and casting all other uses of news as unprofessional and corrupt, the concept of news as currency offers a new way of thinking about what good journalism and bad journalism consist in. The distinction in this framework does not hinge on *whether* one uses one’s newsmaking capacities to achieve ends other than the public’s information, but *what* other ends one uses them to achieve and how one goes about doing so. In a time of digital media networks that are saturated with political, commercial, and personal pursuits, where the texts that newsmakers produce and publish are unavoidably involved in the advancement of some objectives and interests over others, this framework may enable us to better grasp the kinds of moral and professional distinctions and decisions that contemporary journalists make.

My ethnography looks, on the one hand, at how *The Times’* Politics journalists strove to use the news’ currency in a constructive and responsible

manner, to help their newspaper become the informative and impactful news provider they hoped it could be. It also explores, on the other hand, the limits, frustrations, and unresolvable forms of self-doubt that the journalists' endeavors confronted them with by looking at how the irreducible opacity of their currency-like medium led them to question the very validity of their journalistic ideals. In the process, I find that the journalists' practice both presumed and contributed to the construction of a different kind of imagined community than that of a modern public.

#### AFTER PUBLICS

Cultural constructions of news, as Warner and Taylor point out, presume and engender culturally particular imaginaries of the social and political milieus in which the news' texts circulate. In Dominic Boyer's ethnography of contemporary news, *The Life Informatic: Newsmaking in the Digital Era*, he engages with journalists in Germany and the United States to find the news practices of "the digital era" coevolving with "late liberal political imaginaries" (2013, 135) that figure the human individual as an autonomous, self-defining, and even self-creating subject. In these Western contexts, digital news practices that center on and cater to the individual news user's personal feelings and preferences are undergirded by a neoliberal ethos that is "ruthlessly autological, seeking to suppress interindividual relatedness and reciprocal obligation under the pursuit and satisfaction of individual wills and desires" (134). Boyer finds the political imaginary of the liberal public as a space of collective discourse and reason being progressively elided by visions of the digital contemporary as a cosmos of ontologically unrelated and thoroughly self-directing individuals.

Working in China's late-socialist context, the social imaginary I encountered among *The Times*' newsmakers was, in contrast, not one of autonomous individual agents but one of dense and fluid interpersonal relationships that played a highly determinative role in shaping the lives, identities, and futures of the people they connected. The newsmakers described this milieu as a *jianghu*—a classical Chinese term that literally translates as "rivers and lakes." Popularized in Chinese martial arts lore, the term is widely used to describe industries and sectors that are in theory governed by the formal laws and regulations of the state, but in practice turn on the informal personal relationships that the actors in these

domains form with one another. Far from being autonomous agents, individuals in the *jianghu* are defined by their relationships to others and conduct themselves in ways that are determined by these connections. As the popular saying goes, “A person in the *jianghu* does not direct their own actions” (*renzai jianghu, shenbuyouji*). Such persons do not act according to their own individual will but to navigate and survive in the fluidly shifting networks of relations in which they swim.

I argue that *The Times*’ newsmakers’ *jianghu* imaginary offers a useful counterimage of contemporary news to that which has formed in the late-liberal West. Whereas the latter foregrounds the discursive and communicational freedoms of the digital news era, the *jianghu* imaginary foregrounds the asymmetrical power relations, licit and illicit financial arrangements, personal alliances and rivalries, and culturally particular values and aspirations that, perhaps particularly in the digital era, shape the way that news works. Rather than the image of a unified public dissipating into a cosmos of independent and autonomous individuals, the *jianghu* imaginary shows us a contemporary world dense with relationships that bind and define particular individuals in particular ways. It asks us to think about contemporary news as texts that flow through these particular and particularistic networks, working in and on them in ways that do not presume or engender a public.

With respect to news and media politics in China, I suggest that the notion of the news sector as *jianghu* offers a critical framework for analyzing the developments that are taking place in the era of Xi Jinping’s rule. Under Xi the Party has tightened its control over the media and compelled China’s newspapers to produce more propagandistic content, not only in praise of the Party but also in adulation of Xi himself—harking back to Mao’s cult of personality (Esarey 2021; Shirk 2018; S. Zhao 2016). Professional and citizen journalists who are outspokenly critical of the Party have been intimidated, arrested, and detained.<sup>11</sup> In an atmosphere of increasingly strained geopolitical and diplomatic relations, nationalistic sentiments and discourses have meanwhile become a more prominent feature of the mainstream media,<sup>12</sup> while foreign journalists working for news outlets including the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* have been variously barred from reporting and expelled from the country.

While these developments evoke an image of China’s news media working as a highly organized and tightly controlled machine to keep the minds of the masses aligned with the agendas of the Party, to adopt such a view would be to settle for a greatly oversimplified vision of how news in China

works. Approaching China's news sector as a *jianghu*, in contrast, draws our attention to the intricate networks of interests and relations through which the Party's press and propaganda directives must operate. It prompts us to think about how the media trends that we see must be orchestrated through a vast number of negotiations and agreements among a myriad of industry players, all oriented by their own objectives and aspirations. We can ask how the Party's political agendas are being woven into the networks of personal relations that China's newsmakers, businesspeople, and Party officials are embedded in; and how these entanglements are reshaping the imaginaries that undergird social and political life. Rather than falling back on Cold War frameworks of freedom and control, my ethnography of *The Times* thus explores China's news media as the site of an emergent and evolving contemporary world.

#### ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Chapter 2 furnishes the historical backdrop for my exploration of *The Times'* news practices by providing an account of the culturally and politically particular factors that have shaped the institution of news in China, from the early decades of its modern nationhood through the turn of the twenty-first century, when *The Times* was established. The narrative that I trace shows how the newspaper before the Mao era was already constructed as a textual medium that China's intellectual and political vanguard would use to lead the nation and its people in their collective struggle for progress; and how the CCP's use of the institution in the Mao era and the post-Mao era then led to the news' cultural transformation. I look at how Party policies and practices reconstituted the news media as a medium of texts that a multitude of differently interested actors would use to pursue their disparate and particular, though often entangled, objectives. It was in this distinctly late-socialist context that *The Times'* newsmakers operated.

Chapters 3 and 4 explore *The Times'* Politics journalists' day-to-day news reporting processes, to ask what the endeavor to produce more informative and impactful news articles in their particular circumstances consisted in. Chapter 3 follows the journalists on an assignment to produce what they referred to as Party-promoting "propaganda articles" (*xuanchuan gao*) that the newspaper needed to publish to construct its image as a newspaper for elite professionals and entrepreneurs. I engage with the journalists' understanding of the newspaper as a business that runs not on the marketing and

sale of its news, but on the marketing and sale of its publicness, and show how this business involved the journalists producing many news articles that they expected most news readers to ignore. Chapter 4 examines some of the reportorial dispositions and habits that the Politics journalists cultivated that to an uninitiated observer might seem unprofessional and even unethical. I argue that these dispositions are the elements of a novel newsmaking ethic that is centered not on the value of truthfulness but on the value of efficacy—that is, on the journalists’ ability to use their news assignments to sustain and support their newsmaking practice. Connecting my findings to scholarly discussions of the “post-truth” news era in the United States, I show how the Politics journalists’ ethic of efficacy enabled them to stay morally and professionally oriented to their journalistic ideals in a newsmaking environment that was relentlessly hostile to such aspirations.

In Chapter 5 I turn to the broader question of what the institution of contemporary news is becoming in China and develop the book’s main argument—that the medium can usefully be analyzed as a kind of currency. Like a currency, news articles are texts whose public circulability makes them available for use in private transactions, and whose public circulation is thus inextricably entangled with the interplay of countless particular relationships and endeavors. While Chapters 3 and 4 look at how *The Times’* journalists strove to make this medium work toward their goal of producing more informative and impactful news, in this chapter I attend to those moments of their practice that drove them to question the validity of their ideals and doubt the value of their efforts.

Through the unexpected firing of *The Times’* editor-in-chief, Huang Tao, Chapter 6 then explores the wider *jianghu* that the newsmakers understood themselves to be in. This was the realm of fluidly shifting relationships through which the news’ currency flowed and in which the newsmakers’ identities, lives, and futures were also immersed. I look at how the notion of the *jianghu* is premised on a different conception of the self than the notion of a modern public presupposes, and consider the critical perspective that this alternate framework offers us for thinking about China’s news media in the era of Xi Jinping’s rule.

Finally, the book’s brief epilogue returns to my engagement with Zheng Wen, and to the question of what it means to be a good and worthy newsmaker in an age of digitally mediated networks that bring truth-claims, money interests, political agendas, and personal relationships together in densely entangled communicational flows that shape and inform our worlds.

## CHAPTER 2

### *A Contested Medium*

In the CCP's preferred representation, China's news sector is both a commercially dynamic information industry and a politically and ideologically unified and loyal publicist of the Party's guiding policies and views. In many critical discourses on news and journalism in China, a similar image is often evoked—only less as a commendable mark of the Party's effective thought leadership, than as a disturbing sign of its determination to mold and manipulate public opinion. From ideologically opposite standpoints, both the Party and its critics thus contribute to the same impression that the news media in China have always functioned as a consistent and compliant propagator of the Party's views.

A look into the history of news in China, however, shows that the institution has hardly been as stable or monolithic as this portrait suggests. From its late nineteenth-century beginnings through the Mao era and into the present, the news media in China have in fact been a subject and site of continuous and at times violent contestation. This chapter furnishes a sense of the complex historical backdrop against which the practices and perspectives of *The Times'* newsmakers must be understood, by tracing a broad narrative of the key moments through which the institution of news in China has evolved.

I look at how the newspaper in China was first constructed as a political instrument for mobilizing the masses by the nationalist intellectuals and activists of the late-Qing empire. Mao's Communist Party in its struggle against Japan and the Kuomintang adopted this political conception of the press and added a Marxist-Leninist dimension to it by constructing the press as the propaganda weapon of the people's revolutionary vanguard. With the CCP's triumph and founding of the People's Republic in 1949, however, the Party-run press ceased to work simply as a propagator of the Party line and

began to evolve into an instrument of more varied purposes. From the 1950s through the end of the Cultural Revolution, these purposes were primarily political—newspapers were used by different individuals and factions within the Party to promote their particular views on national issues and policies and advance their own political positions against those of their rivals. After the Mao era, in the period of marketization and reform that followed, the uses of news then grew more diverse as individuals of many stripes entered the news industry to pursue a wide array of commercial opportunities, journalistic ideals, and personal career goals. The subsequent rise of the internet and the ever-expanding range of digital and mobile communication possibilities it affords have pushed this diversification even further.

The chapter shows how China's news sector, rather than a dutiful executor of the Party's political will, is more accurately understood as an industry whose broad parameters are set by the Party's agendas and policies, but whose concrete operations are determined by the ideas, interests, and interactions of a far more heterogeneous range of actors. The news media is an arena of public communications in and through which journalists, editors, news executives, businesspeople, and local and central Party officials are constantly negotiating the political, commercial, and technological factors they encounter, variously collaborating, colluding with, and competing against one another to pursue a myriad of disparate yet entangled objectives.

#### BEFORE THE MAO ERA:

#### A MEDIUM FOR MODERNIZING THE NATION

Although the Maoist approach to the press was modeled on that of the Soviet Union, it also had important cultural forerunners in the newspapers and periodicals that were published by the reformist and revolutionary intellectuals of China's late-Qing empire.<sup>1</sup> The Qing empire by the mid-nineteenth century had suffered a succession of commercial and military defeats by foreign powers that fueled the sense among its intellectual classes of a deepening cultural and political crisis (L. H. Liu 2006). Many came to the view that China's age-old imperial political culture had caused it to languish and fall behind the more "youthful" and "energetic" nations of the West, and that China could only hope to survive by transforming itself, on their model, into a modern nation-state with an informed, engaged, and politically active citizenry (Levenson 1958; Schwartz 1964). Several of the

patriotic reformists and revolutionaries who emerged at this time saw the mass-printed and distributed newspaper, which had played a vital role in the rise of the republican nations of the West, as the necessary institution for bringing this transformation about.

One individual whose belief in the newspaper's transformative potential led him to found numerous influential newspapers was the renowned "scholar-journalist" Liang Qichao (Levenson 1953). Liang saw the newspaper as a medium that could be used to awaken and convert the ignorant and apathetic subjects of the ailing Qing empire into an active and forward-looking "citizenry" (*guomin*) (Judge 1996, 88). Drawing on Western discourses and exemplars, he framed the newspaper as a conveyor of texts that were written by citizens and for citizens, enabling them to inform and edify one another and come together in the formation and assertion of their "public opinion" (*yulun*). Against the backdrop of China's imperial political tradition, Liang and other late-Qing newsmakers constructed the newspaper as an instrument for creating a new and modern Chinese nation. Liang described the newspapers that he founded as the "factional organs (*dang-bao*)" of a rising political movement and as "protopolitical opposition parties" (Judge 1996, 25). Alongside their newspaper-publishing activities, these "parties" also strove to advance their vision of a new China by organizing civic associations and events to promote their nationalist movement.<sup>2</sup>

The newspaper thus constructed was, unsurprisingly, an object of intense suspicion to the late-Qing authorities, who attempted to stem the rising tide of anti-imperial sentiments in China by imposing a welter of repressive press laws, driving key figures such as Liang into exile. Under the Republican (1912–27) and KMT (1927–37) governments that followed the fall of the Qing empire, many newspapers continued to operate as the factional organs of various political entities—including the newly formed CCP (Reed 2018)—and continued to be the targets of even more intense and brutal government suppression (Ting 1974).

A less politicized and more commercial conception of the press briefly emerged during this same period in and around the partially colonized port city of Shanghai (Reed 2004). The newspapers of this region mainly published commercial information and eye-catching stories on topics of popular interest to make money from copy sales and advertising. They consciously steered away from political subjects and stayed within the reportorial boundaries that were drawn by their government patrons and advertising clients. A number of journalists and news scholars, inspired in part by the rise of this

industry, began to theorize the newspaper as a publication that should be commercially rather than politically funded and run by professional news writers rather than political activists (Maras and Nip 2015; Volz and Lee 2009a). Drawing on American news and journalism theories, these writers envisioned a news media that engaged and empowered China's citizens not by converting them to the cause of one or another political movement, but by equipping them to understand and discuss the problems that China was facing in a neutral and nonpartisan manner. They framed the newspaper as an institution that should provide society's members with objective information that enabled them to arrive at their own opinions on its affairs.

Although this group of newsmakers and scholars were relatively small in number, they exerted a significant influence on Chinese journalism in the 1920s and 1930s, particularly through the university-level journalism schools and programs that they founded in Shanghai and Beijing, and the work that these programs' graduates went on to do.<sup>3</sup> Their conception of the news' ideal function would later be taken up and championed by journalists and writers in the 1980s. In the 1940s, however, as the war against Japan and the battles between the KMT and CCP intensified, China's newspapers were overwhelmingly drawn into the political, ideological, and military battle for the nation. It was in this strife-torn environment that the Maoist construction of the press was forged.

#### THE MAO-ERA PRESS:

#### A WEAPON OF POLITICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL STRUGGLE

The Maoist construction of the press, which would go on to shape the meaning and practice of news in China for decades to come, was formulated in the years when the CCP was still a small guerrilla army, fighting from remote mountain basecamps against far larger and militarily superior Japanese and KMT forces.<sup>4</sup> Like the late-Qing nationalists before him, Mao also saw the newspaper as a textual medium for China's political vanguard to use to awaken and mobilize its people to transform and save their country. In the Marxist-Leninist language that Mao adopted, newspapers were the ideological instrument for the Communist Party to use to raise the people's revolutionary consciousness and lead them in their struggle to overthrow China's capitalist and imperialist class enemies (F. T. C. Yu 1964; Schurmann 1966). A crucial difference between the Maoist and the late-Qing constructions of the

press lay in “the people” to whom the newspaper was effectively addressed. Whereas the late-Qing newsmakers had written and distributed their newspapers to a literate urban “people” that, in practice, comprised a relatively small and elite stratum of China’s society, the Maoist press addressed itself also to the country’s vast and illiterate rural masses. Whereas the late-Qing newsmakers had tended to treat their newspapers as the instruments of an elite-led form of cultural and political enlightenment, the Maoist press was defined as the medium of a dialectical, or two-way practice of communication between the common masses and their representatives in the Party.

This conception of the press was formulated in conjunction with the “mass line” policy that Mao began to develop in the 1930s, under which all programs and actions undertaken by the Party needed to be arrived at through the study and interpretation of the objective experiences, views, and demands of the masses (Averill 2006; Selden 1971; Young 1980). Newspapers were, on the one hand, to serve as the Party’s means to disseminate its guiding views and positions “down” to the masses; and on the other, to reflect the conditions and grievances of the masses back “up” to the Party (Cheek 1997, 87).<sup>5</sup> The Maoist press was thus to enable the Party to both lead and be led by the masses, in a process that would culminate in the people’s collective self-liberation.

Although it would go on to become a much more top-down institution, with a much more ambivalent relationship to the interests and opinions of the masses, the Maoist press in these early years was seen by many Chinese writers and intellectuals as a medium that they could use to uplift and empower the nation’s people (Apter and Saich 1994; Laughlin 2002; Cheek 1997). The press in its Maoist construction would unite the masses and their vanguard in a relationship of mutual study and learning that would deliver the people of China to a peaceful, prosperous, and modern future. Although it demanded strict and exclusive adherence to the Party’s decisions and commands, this conception of the news’ role appealed to many intellectuals’ humanistic and patriotic sensibilities, and desire to play a part in the cultural and political construction of a new China. Many joined the Party to work as its propagandists and serve as textual mediators between the Party and the people. When the CCP’s victory over the KMT in 1949 swept the party to power as the sole governing authority of the newly founded People’s Republic, however, the way that its newspapers were run and used began to change.

*News in the People's Republic*

One of the first tasks of the newly formed CCP government was to scale the Party's ideological and organizational apparatus up to the national level. Newspapers in the People's Republic were to function as communication channels for transmitting the central Party leaders' positions and policies out to the nation's provinces and counties, and relaying the conditions and experiences of the local masses and ground level (*jiceng*) cadres back up to the central Party (A. P. L. Liu 1971; Schurmann 1966). The administrative structure of the press sector mirrored that of the Party bureaucracy itself, with central, provincial, and local Party offices running newspapers at their respective administrative levels. All privately owned newspapers were closed and all printing presses requisitioned for the Party's use.<sup>6</sup> Now that the Communist Party had won control of China, its newspapers were to serve as the Party's instrument for leading the nation and its people to their promised socialist future.

As the work of building a new China began, however, conflicts began to emerge between the bureaucratic Party apparatus and its charismatic leader, Mao, over the direction that the nation and its people should be led in. While the Party bureaucrats favored a technically planned and rationally managed form of economic and industrial development, Mao's vision was for the Party to harness the masses' revolutionary fervor to leap over the material obstacles that stood between them and their socialist destiny (Lieberthal 2011). Rather than serving as the mass communication apparatus of a unified party-state, the press soon became one of the institutions through which these brewing conflicts were waged. It became a communication channel that the two competing factions within the Party sought to use to mobilize popular opinions and sentiments behind their conflicting and competing positions.

The first intra-Party conflict to be fought through the press occurred in the mid-1950s, when Mao was eager to harness the wave of popular enthusiasm that had emerged with the new nation's founding to drive through a rapid industrialization plan. The Party apparatus was opposed to this idea. In its capacity as the Party's mouthpiece, *People's Daily* published an article expounding the need to "oppose impetuosity and adventurism" and set targets that were in accord with China's objective conditions (quoted in Cheek 1997, 172). Provoked by this and other signs of his increasing marginalization

within the Party, Mao began to advocate the famous Hundred Flowers policy, which invited intellectuals and writers to publicly criticize the Party's bureaucratism (MacFarquhar 1974). Still controlled by the Party apparatus, however, *People's Daily* adopted a lukewarm approach to reporting on Mao's efforts and even published an article arguing against the Hundred Flowers policy. Although Mao immediately criticized this article, *People's Daily* did not report either on his response to it or on his efforts to further promote and expand the campaign. Blocked from conveying his views to the masses, Mao became openly irate and hostile to the newspaper and its editor-in-chief, Deng Tuo. Mao exerted the weight of his status as the Party's charismatic helmsman to personally remove Deng from his editorship, and overrode the objections of the Party bureaucrats to have the Hundred Flowers movement scaled up to a major Party rectification campaign.

A second round of battle then followed in the early 1960s, when the rapid industrialization program known as the Great Leap Forward ended in a range of devastating industrial and agricultural setbacks (Dikötter 2010; MacFarquhar 1983). Mao, staking his position on the indomitable power of the masses' revolutionary passion, maintained that the "leap" had foundered on a lack of proper indoctrination and called for further ideological struggle and mass mobilization campaigns. The Party bureaucrats, in contrast, argued that what was needed were more rational production methods and better technical expertise. Mao's refusal to allow any criticism of the Great Leap policies at the Party's inner councils eliminated the possibility of the conflict being resolved internally (Goldman 1981; Teiwes 1979). The need to maintain a unified Party front, meanwhile, prevented the Party bureaucrats from disputing Mao's position in public. Constrained on either side, the Party bureaucrats moved to use the press as an indirect means to advance their position.

The Party bureaucrats encouraged a number of "liberal" intellectuals with whom their views overlapped (including the disposed editor-in-chief of *People's Daily*, Deng Tuo), to air their criticisms of the Party's policies. These essays were published in key Party organs, such as *People's Daily*, *Liberation Daily*, and *Guangming Daily*, and reprinted by smaller newspapers across the country. Through apparently academic excursions on an array of historical, philosophical, and literary issues, the essays criticized not only the defectiveness and repressiveness of the Party's policies, but also the vanity and intemperance of Mao himself. They called for a more moderate and flexible mode of governance, and for greater cultural and even political pluralism; in

some cases, going as far as to advocate the establishment of political opposition parties. Registering the attack on his position, Mao and his allies enlisted a group of “radical” intellectuals to counter these affronts. The radicals wrote essays criticizing the liberals’ arguments for deviating from the Party’s Marxist-Leninist ideology, and called for campaigns to engage the masses in an ideological struggle against the bourgeois superstructure that the liberals represented. Mao again asserted his personal influence to see to it that these essays were also published in the Party press.

Through the 1950s and 1960s, what had initially been constructed as an ideological instrument of the people’s struggle against their common capitalist and imperialist enemies thus evolved into a medium that two competing factions within the Party sought to use against one another. Instead of promulgating a single guiding line, the Party press presented its readers with multiple, conflicting arguments that each claimed to be authoritative expressions of the Party’s true principles. The news media became, in the words of historian Merle Goldman, an arena where “debates within the elite, which in most authoritarian societies go on in private . . . were conducted in the open behind a veil of symbols, nuances, and analogies” (1981, 13). Newspapers were no longer only the instruments of the people’s Party-led struggle for a socialist future, but also “surrogate weapons of political struggle” (1981, 13) between the Party’s rival factions. This use of the news as a medium of intraparty struggles became even more pronounced during the Cultural Revolution.

Launched by Mao and his coterie of radical leftists in 1966, the Cultural Revolution was a party rectification campaign that spiraled into an all-out battle between the Maoists and the Party bureaucrats. The Maoists took control of the press and all other media and cultural institutions and used them to promote and direct political purges, mass criticism movements and ideological struggle campaigns against all who they framed as enemies of the people’s revolutionary cause (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006; Clark 2008).<sup>7</sup> The leaders of the Party’s bureaucratic faction—along with many other officials, trained experts, intellectuals, and teachers—were removed and denounced as “capitalist roaders.” Many newspapers and publishing houses were closed down. As the witch hunts and struggle sessions wore on, however, the ideological claims that were mounted to justify them grew increasingly convoluted, obscure, and alienating to those who were called on to wage them (Mittler 2012).

By the late-1970s, when the death of Mao precipitated the downfall of the radical faction and brought the Cultural Revolution to a close, a distinct

sense of disillusionment with the Party-run press prevailed. The Party had framed its newspapers as the heralds of truth that it would use to lead the people of China in their march to a socialist utopia. Instead, its wayward officials had used its newspapers as weapons of mass manipulation in their political struggles against one another—and in the process, led China’s people into internecine battles that were utterly antithetical to their welfare. The next generation of central Party leaders who emerged in the aftermath of this drawn-out debacle needed to substantially reform, if not reinvent, the Party-run press to restore its lost legitimacy.

### POST-MAO RECONSTRUCTIONS

With the remnants of the Maoist faction being severely set back and discredited by the Cultural Revolution’s end, the bureaucratic leaders helmed by Deng Xiaoping readily commandeered the post-Mao Party’s top positions. The new Party leaders were eager to steer the country toward a more rationally organized and administratively managed mode of development (Goldman 1995). In line with this vision, they dropped the Party’s definition of the press as an instrument of class struggle and recast the news sector as an industry whose function was not to instigate ideological mass campaigns but to support China’s socialist construction by promoting its economic and cultural modernization, fostering a “stable and unified” society, and offering more commercial news services in areas such as business information and entertainment (Y. Zhao 1998). Whereas the Mao-era press had been funded entirely by the party state, the post-Mao news sector was to be progressively marketized (*shichanghua*) and transformed into an economically productive information and communication industry. Policies were amended to permit and encourage newspapers to work on improving their consumer appeal and increasing their commercial revenues (Stockmann 2013; C.-C. Lee 1990a). Newspapers were urged, for instance, to reject the “false, exaggerated and hollow” mode of news-writing that predominated in the Cultural Revolution and work on producing news stories that were “truthful,” “timely,” and “lively” (Y. Zhao 1998). Aside from the key Party organs, most were allowed to reduce their coverage of the Party’s political and ideological pronouncements and give greater prominence to topics that were closer to people’s everyday lives. While private ownership was still forbidden, advertising, which had been outlawed during the Mao era, was

now relegalized, and newspapers were permitted to retain and reinvest their earnings (Xuejun Yu 1991).

These policy changes were effective at breathing new life into the news sector. Many newspapers that had been closed during the Cultural Revolution were persuaded to reopen, and many Party and government offices that had not run newspapers before were incentivized to start new ones.<sup>8</sup> The same changes, however, also had the effect of making the news media available for popular critiques and contestations of the Party's political authority. As newspapers, particularly in the briskly developing provincial capitals, became popular and profitable publications, they ceased to be dependent on the Party to cover their operating costs and became correspondingly less inclined to see themselves as its duty-bound propagandists (Polumbaum 1990). Journalists and editors who were drawn to write for these market-facing newspapers questioned the old Party dictate that news should "serve politics" and argued that China's newspapers needed instead to become "more reader-oriented . . . than leader-oriented" (Greenberg and Lau 1990, 23). Rather than striving to advance the Party's propaganda objectives, these newsmakers regarded it as their role to give voice to the concerns and sufferings of China's ordinary people. Many began to actively circumvent the reportorial constraints that the Party's press authorities tried to place on them, for instance, by rushing their articles to press before any censorship orders could be received or crafting their reports to fall just inside the Party's boundaries of acceptability (Hsiao and Yang 1990).<sup>9</sup>

Alongside this commercially fueled emboldening of the press, the 1980s also saw a groundswell of popular discontent emerge around issues such as the country's rapidly rising inflation, rampant bureaucratic corruption, and increasing income inequality (Solinger 1989). In the thickening atmosphere of critique and dissent, a growing number of newsmakers began to go beyond objecting to specific Party policies on the press to raise the more fundamental question of whether the news media in China should be subject to the Party's rule at all (Cheek 1990; C.-C. Lee 1990b). Newsmakers argued that while the Party claimed to be the representative of the people, the interests of the people were not always the same as the Party's; and when the Party veered off track, as it had during the Cultural Revolution, the Party-controlled press became a tool that worked against the people's well-being. Newsmakers argued that, rather than being treated as the Party's tool for guiding the minds of the people, the news media should instead be redefined as the people's tool for monitoring the actions of the Party.

Some drew on Marxian terms and motifs to argue that as China's economic conditions changed, its news system should also be correspondingly transformed, and that with the actualization of a truly socialist system in China, the press would cease to be controlled by the Party and instead become an extension of the people's sovereign will (Starck and Xu 1988). Others drew on the American journalism textbooks and theories that had recently become accessible and, citing the American-influenced Chinese journalists of the 1920s and 1930s as exemplars, argued that the news' proper function was not to propagate a particular ideological outlook, but to provide the public with "neutral" and "objective" information (L. Li 1994). Many called for the institution of a press law that would give journalists and citizens the right to publicly express their views, even when these views diverged from or were critical of the Party's positions.

Again, it was the internal struggle between the Party's competing factions that allowed these public discussions to unfold (Goldman 1995; Cheng and White 1991; Hood 1994; Dittmer 1994). Although Deng and his allies dominated the central Party's top echelons, the members of the Maoist old guard had not given up on the prospect of regaining control and rolling back their rivals' reforms. To rally the force of popular opinion against the Maoists' agendas, the reformist Party leaders chose not to clamp down on the public discussions that were percolating but instead permit and even encourage them to go further. Essays by high-level editors were published in prominent Party newspapers, denouncing the idea that the role of the news media in a socialist country was to serve as its ruling party's propaganda apparatus; and arguing that for the press in China to truly serve the people, it needed to be at least partly independent of the Party's command. The Party's own premier, Zhao Ziyang, endorsed this view by stating at the 1987 National Party Congress that China's press should not be a subservient mouthpiece of the Party but should instead contribute to raising the level of "political transparency" in China, ensuring that the Party was "supervised by public opinion," and providing people with the information they needed to "participate in the discussion of important issues" (Y. Zhao 1998, 37–38). The central Party leadership even authorized the drafting of a press law.

Encouraged by these developments, many newsmakers chose to join in the demonstrations that began in 1989 at Beijing's Tiananmen Square (Goldman 1994). Calling for greater journalistic freedom and independence, they marched with slogans and banners that beseeched the Party authorities not to "force [them] to lie" but to allow them to "speak the truth" (Hsiao and

Yang 1990). Many newspapers ran exuberant reports accompanied by full-color photographs of the rallies and crowds that gathered (Tan 1990). From an institution that had formerly functioned as the exclusive mouthpiece of the ruling Communist Party, the news now seemed to be transformed into a medium of popular dissent and protest against the Party.

As the public demonstrations continued to expand and intensify, however, the Party's position on them changed. Closing ranks, the Party leadership determined that the protests threatened to destabilize China's political order and send the nation back into a state of disarray akin to that of the Cultural Revolution. Under Deng's command, the Party moved to avert this outcome by sending the People's Liberation Army in to quash the unlawful rebellion. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of peaceful civilian protesters were violently dispersed, arrested, or killed. The protests were denounced as a "counterrevolutionary" attempt to overthrow the Communist state and replace it with a "Western-dependent bourgeois republic" (Lim 2014, 24). Martial law was imposed, and all who were found to have been significantly involved in the protests were summarily apprehended and punished.

Within the Party apparatus, those who were deemed to have acquiesced in the protests and thus to have played a part in fomenting the political crisis were removed from their positions. This included Zhao Ziyang, as well as many press and propaganda officials of various levels. A new cohort of more conservative Party officials were appointed, who declared that calls for greater journalistic freedom and independence were manifestations of a dangerous slide toward "bourgeois liberalization," which needed to be forcefully combated. They reasserted the dictum that "the Party is the exclusive representative of the people's interests. . . . Therefore, the Party's mouthpiece is naturally the mouthpiece of the people" (Li Ruihuan, quoted in Polumbaum 1994, 118). The duty of China's newsmakers, they asserted, was to produce positive propaganda for the Party, provide correct direction to the public, and bolster the masses' confidence in the socialist system. The drafting of a press law was suspended. Newspapers that had supported or been sympathetic to the demonstrations were forced by the newly seated authorities to close. Hundreds of journalists and editors were investigated for their involvement in the protests, and those found guilty were variously suspended or fired from their jobs, and in some cases imprisoned (Xiaogang Zhang 1993).

Scholars of China's post-Mao transformation have suggested that if the Communist Party had been able to put forth a renewed political ideology in the 1990s that encompassed the popular concerns that had surfaced and

presented a compelling way forward for the country's socialist modernization mission, it might have succeeded in converting the critical energy and popular engagement of the early post-Mao era into a new source of moral-political authority and won a new mandate for its rule (Ci 1994). Instead the Party responded to the critiques that had emerged by clamping down on all channels of public expression and forcefully reasserting the old orthodoxy of the news sector being nothing more than the Party's political and ideological mouthpiece. Media scholar Yuezhi Zhao, describing the impact of the Party's post-Tiananmen reaction, writes that China's news sector, "after a decade of intense debate and struggle, seemed to have returned to its starting point of a decade earlier" (1998, 46).

One effect that the intervening events did have, however, was to deepen the Party leadership's determination to prevent the press from ever again becoming a medium of such popular political protests and mobilizations. The marketization policies of the 1980s had worked to revive the post-Mao news sector but in the process had allowed voices that were not effectively governed by or aligned with the hierarchical command structure of the Party apparatus to capture and use the media to discuss, debate, and critique the Party's principles and policies. By the end of the Tiananmen debacle, the Party leadership was determined to ensure that China's market-facing newspapers would henceforth leave all questions of politics and ideology to the Party's propaganda authorities and channel their energies into engaging news readers in the nonpolitical aspects of their lives.

#### AFTER TIANANMEN: AN ARENA OF DISPARATE ENDEAVORS

The Party's post-Tiananmen press policies were designed, on the one hand, to strengthen the Party's administrative controls over the news sector, so as to ensure that all news reports stayed within its approved political boundaries; and, on the other hand, to accelerate the industry's marketization and drive newspapers to become more commercially innovative, dynamic, and profitable.

The Party moved to increase its administrative control over the news sector by implementing laws and regulations to control the registration, licensing, and operation of newspapers (Polumbaum 1994). The Party's direction of the press during the Mao era had largely been achieved through informal means that rested on the ideological education and socialization of its jour-

nalists and on their volitional responsiveness to the Party's ad hoc directives.<sup>10</sup> In the post-Tiananmen era, the Party introduced formal standards and processes that newspapers and newsmakers were legally required to abide by. A ministry-level government agency devoted to the full-time supervision of the news sector was created whose duties included implementing tighter requirements for the authorization of new publications and opening of local bureaus; regularly reviewing the state of every newspaper's politics, finances, and management; and periodically consolidating the news industry through appropriate mergers and closures (Y. Zhao 1998). A formal system was also established for examining and accrediting individuals to work as journalists and editors, and issuing and revoking the "journalist licenses" that were made requisite for employment.

At the same time, other measures were taken to encourage newspapers to work on becoming more commercially profitable or, in the Party's terms, to "push newspapers to the market" (Liang Heng, cited in Y. Zhao 1998, 50–51). Leading officials publicly argued that because the Party was no longer a "revolutionary party" but now the "ruling party" of China, its press apparatus should shift from inciting ideological mass movements to producing content that supported the country's peaceful and stable economic and cultural construction (Brady 2008, 47). Newspapers should now think of themselves as informational "commodities" and focus on becoming appealing and useful to consumers. Regulations in areas that did not pertain to political news were loosened, and state subsidies to all but a few major Party organs were withdrawn (Chan 1993; Y. Xu 1994). Newspapers were permitted to adopt business management practices, such as open recruitment, contractual employment, and performance-based salary systems. Besides working to improve their consumer appeal and sell their advertising space, newspapers were also encouraged to create other channels of revenue for themselves by starting subsidiary businesses and joint ventures with private capital in non-news-related industries, which soon ran the gamut from information consultancy and public relations to meatpacking and real estate.

One journalistic development of this period that many newsmakers and scholars in China still recount with a sense of achievement and pride is the rise of investigative news reporting, as epitomized by the hard-hitting exposés that were published by the Guangzhou-based weekly *Southern Weekend*. Party orthodoxy notwithstanding, journalists and editors at this and other such newspapers continued to believe that China's news media should serve as the people's monitor over the Party and work to raise the country's level of

transparency and accountability (de Burgh 2003b; Tong and Sparks 2009; Y. Zhao 2000b). These newsmakers creatively circumvented Party restrictions to continue producing and publishing critical and investigative news stories on cases of local government corruption, ineptitude, and abuse. Through their gumption and tenacity, combined with the genre's strong consumer appeal, investigative news stories became a staple feature of China's post-Tiananmen mediascape.

Outside of this highly esteemed and celebrated journalistic genre, however, many of the other newsmaking practices that emerged and became normalized during this time were more ethically, professionally, and legally dubious. Many metropolitan papers (*dushibao*), or city-level tabloids, began to compete for readers by publishing sensationalized, often vulgar, and sometimes false stories of sex, crime, and scandal (C. Huang 2000, 2001). The advertising services that they offered commonly went beyond the publishing of clearly demarcated promotional content, to include paid news, sponsored columns, and the leasing out of entire pages to companies to edit and manage for themselves. Journalists working at such papers were often required not only to write news but also to solicit and secure such "advertising" contracts (Pan 2000).<sup>11</sup> It was a common practice for newspapers to appraise and pay their journalists not for the quality of their news reporting, but by the amount of advertising revenue they "pulled in." Some newspapers were said to have journalists on staff who had no reporting duties but focused entirely on networking with business owners and executives to sell the newspaper's services. Besides receiving commissions for the advertising contracts they brokered, journalists made money from practices like collecting "red packets" from companies that wanted positive news coverage (D. Xu 2016) and extracting "mouth-sealing fees" from companies that did not want their problems and scandals reported.

Popular discourses soon emerged decrying the moral crisis in the news industry and lamenting the decline of the journalistic profession. Rather than cracking down on the industry's problematic commercial practices, however, the Party continued to focus on its economic growth, and to urge newspapers to work harder at "conquering the market" (Y. Zhao 2000a, 17). In the second half of the 1990s, the press authorities began pushing newspapers to merge into large multiplatform media conglomerates (*meiti jituan*) (C. Huang 2007b). The objective was to bring multiple consumer-oriented newspapers together into a single organization with a Party organ paper at its head, in order to create more streamlined chains of command,

while also enabling cost-saving economies of scale (C.-C. Lee, He, and Huang 2006). The restructuring of the industry into a smaller number of larger companies enabled the Party to allow more private investment capital to enter the news sector. Media groups were permitted to have private minority owners and to turn their noneditorial arms into separate companies that could be publicly listed.

Many who worked in the industry took the Party's stance as a sign of how little concerned it now was with the news' public and societal role, and how much it now wanted newspapers to "concentrate on getting rich" (Xu Yu 1994, 24). Although the Party firmly maintained its official definition of the press as its political and ideological mouthpiece, it now seemed "to demand only overt compliance" (C.-C. Lee, He, and Huang 2006, 584) with this notion. As long as a newspaper paid lip service to the Party's rule, whether or not it truly took the Party's objectives as its own seemed "to be of secondary importance" (C.-C. Lee, He, and Huang 2006, 584).<sup>12</sup> Zhongdan Pan's (2000) ethnographic study of newspapers in the 1990s found journalists and editors working in ways that were "improvised . . . microsituational, opportunistic, short-sighted, and ideologically localized" (69). He describes their newsmaking practices as being characterized by financial uncertainty, the absence of a guiding ideology, and a lack of clarity about the Party's press policies.

China's Party-controlled press sector by the turn of the twenty-first century was thus a more internally diverse and less coherent institution than the idea of a Party mouthpiece suggests. Rather than providing the Chinese public with a consistent source of Party-authored truths, the news sector was host to an eclectic array of particular journalistic, financial, and commercial endeavors. Kevin Latham, writing about the news sector in Guangzhou in the 1990s, describes it as an arena where "a proliferation of truths [are] drawn from diverse sources of legitimation, including Party rhetoric, government policy, suspicion of either of those, notions of external uncensored objectivity or personal experiences" (2000, 648). People were versed not only in the Party's official conception of the press but also in Western news theories, market-centered discourses on news, news theories that drew on the ideals of the Republican era, and news theories that invoked China's Confucian culture and tradition.<sup>13</sup> In the news sector, according to Latham, these multiple "regimes of truth, authentication and legitimation discursively coexist . . . despite their incompatibilities," and people "readily slip between [different] legitimations of truth" (648). Far from a propagator of the Party's political views, this was an industry where disparately motivated journalists, editors,

news executives, and businesspeople strategically navigated the Party's political boundaries to pursue their own particular interests and goals. It was to this context that the technologies and affordances of online and mobile news were then introduced.

## ONLINE EDITIONS

The rise of the internet from the mid-1990s on created new spaces of public communication in China that, by virtue of the networked technologies that they ran on, were vastly more difficult for central authorities to control and regulate. Scholars of digital media in China have emphasized that the Party did not seek to achieve unilateral control over Chinese cyberspace but instead pursued an approach of continuous “negotiation” (C. Huang 2007a, 405; Peter, Chen, and Carrasco 2016) and “bargaining and reciprocity” (Xiaoling Zhang 2011, 192).<sup>14</sup> New arenas of digital discourse emerged around themes that included civic and environmental activism, law and legal reforms, alternative youth subcultures, and popular nationalism (Lagerkvist 2010; Yuan 2021; G. Yang 2009; Tai 2006; Esarey and Xiao 2008, 2011; Zhou 2006; Zheng 2007; Han 2018). The range of critical positions and views that were exchanged in these spaces gave them the makings of a “contentious public sphere” (Lei 2018). The Party authorities did not shut down these arenas of discourse completely but instead engaged with their participants in ways that ranged from censorship and penalization to mutual accommodation and appropriation (H. Yu 2009). While the Party certainly retained its prerogative to declare certain topics off limits and decide when a conversation had gone too far, it nevertheless allowed the internet to become a more diverse and dynamic space of discourse than China's citizens had ever before had access to.

For newsmakers, this arena of discourse furnished a rich new source of leads and materials (Hassid and Repnikova 2016), allowed for new forms of communication and community to emerge among journalists (Repnikova 2013; Svensson 2012), and afforded them new ways to get their news stories circulated to audiences (Guo 2020; H. Yu 2011; Gao and Martin-Kratzer 2011). At the same time, however, the rise of the internet and the shift toward online news also confronted newsmakers with new kinds of challenges.

These challenges were rooted in the news' relocation from a world of printed newspapers to a world of digital connections and platforms where

new information, attention, and money flows were constantly being created and channeled. This process began in the early 2000s, when emerging online portals such as Sina, Netease, and Sohu began to establish their positions as key commanders and distributors of online attention (Guo 2020). Whereas many printed newspapers had been slow to move online, these portal sites were quick to develop news aggregator services that reproduced the printed newspapers' articles and to fashion themselves as one-stop gateways to the most interesting news stories of the moment. They also built up large and lively blogospheres populated by celebrity bloggers and citizen journalists, whose eyewitness accounts of breaking events were often considered more truthful and accurate than official news reports—and certainly garnered more attention.

By the time that the printed newspapers started looking into building their own websites and running their own online news businesses, the well-established dominance of the web portals as the go-to purveyors of online information made it difficult for the newspapers to break in. Newspapers were still subject to the Party authorities' regulations and commands. The Party's Publicity Department was indeed keeping up well with the technological advances of the internet era and using its tools to develop more effective systems of surveillance, censorship and control (Roberts 2018; Han 2018; Brady 2008). Yet for those who were up to the challenge, the internet's dynamic terrain of fast-moving information flows and inexhaustible user attention was teeming with new possibilities. Commercially motivated actors were drawn to it as a place to invent new ways of using news to make money. For those whose objectives were more journalistic than commercial, the new businesses that could be established online offered the prospect of better resources and platforms for newsmaking. The rise of the internet thus added a new dimension to China's news industry—one that was intensely competitive and subject to myriad political, commercial, and technological constraints, but also one that if effectively harnessed could yield new journalistic and commercial opportunities. It was in this context that *The Times* was created.

## CHAPTER 3

### *From Propaganda to Publicness*

It is a gray afternoon in Beijing, early March 2010. I am riding the subway north toward the Olympic Green station with Zheng Wen, Liang Yong, and Fan Xiaofei, three journalists with *The Times'* Politics desk. The journalists have been recently posted to Beijing from the newspaper's headquarters in Guangzhou and are on assignment to cover one of the Communist Party officialdom's grandest events of the year—the annual convention of the National People's Congress and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. Also known as the *lianghui*, or “two meetings,” the event will bring hundreds of Party officials and congress and conference delegates from across the country together for ten days of meetings on China's national issues and developments. In keeping with previous years, the meetings are likely to be a highly ceremonious and largely ceremonial affair. Delegates and officials will extol the virtues of the Party's leadership, enumerate its recent achievements, and lay out its new policy plans. The convention promises to be a well-orchestrated celebration of the Party's beneficent and rightful rule.

The journalists are not enthusiastic about having to cover the event. They regard themselves as journalists “with some news ideals” who are not content to use their news-writing capacities merely to praise and promote the Party. Zheng Wen is a squat man in his late twenties who grew up in a small town in Guangdong as the eldest of three children in a family that had sometimes struggled to make ends meet. He earned his bachelor's degree in Chinese language and literature from a respectable Guangzhou university and worked as a writer for a state-run periodical before becoming a journalist for *The Times*. Liang Yong is in his early thirties and is of a more athletic build, with an easygoing, almost playful disposition. He grew up in Guangzhou to a family of more comfortable means—a fact that is reflected in the

hobbies that he cultivates, which include cycling, photography, and travel. He holds a diploma in journalism and before joining *The Times* was a journalist and photographer for a more established Guangzhou city daily. Fan Xiaofei, a woman in her early twenties, is from a wealthy family and has a master's degree in journalism from a university in the United Kingdom.

In the conversations we have had about their journalistic goals and aspirations, all three have told me that their purpose in writing for *The Times* is to produce news articles that will empower China's professionals and entrepreneurs to become a more effective counterbalance to the Party's excessive influence. Zheng Wen and Liang Yong were first inspired to become journalists by the bold exposés that the renowned investigative newspaper *Southern Weekend* had become famous for in the 1990s. Fan Xiaofei sees reporting on China's current affairs as a "more meaningful" form of work than other jobs because it involves the endeavor to change the status quo rather than merely reproduce it. All three feel that the lack of public access to timely and accurate information in China keeps its sectors and industries "shrouded in darkness" (*heian*) and woefully mismanaged by cliques of political and commercial powerholders whose vested interests in the system give them no incentive to improve anything. Against the perpetuation of this opacity and its abuses, the journalists say that their goal is to provide China's entrepreneurs and professionals with information that equips them to "rise up" (*qilai*) and become more significant and formidable shapers of China's economic and social development.

These personally nurtured aspirations notwithstanding, *The Times'* editor-in-chief, Huang Tao, has assigned the Politics journalists to produce a special feature on the *lianghui* because he sees the event as a twofold opportunity—a chance, on the one hand, to demonstrate the newspaper's allegiance to the Party and, on the other hand, to "construct its image" (*daozhao xingxiang*) as a "high-end news platform" (*gaoduan xinwen pingtai*). Publishing articles in praise of the Party is a useful way to foster good relations with local officials, who may otherwise find issues with the paper's operations and deploy administrative or legal measures against them. A special feature on the *lianghui* will serve this function—but even more importantly, will help to construct *The Times* as a platform that covers the kind of high-level political and economic events that China's "elite" (*jingying*) or "high-end people" (*gaoduan renqun*) are interested in.

The Politics section's head editor, Chen Ming, has explained to me that *The Times* needs to construct itself as a platform of this kind because this is

the image that it uses to attract advertising clients. *The Times* markets itself to its clients as a newspaper that China's wealthy and educated entrepreneurs and white-collar professionals might follow, and that companies who want to engage this segment of the population should therefore consider working with. Covering high-level Party events like the *lianghui* is important—indeed, essential—for supporting this claim. “Running a special feature on the *lianghui* helps to create the sense that *The Times* is a serious news platform that covers China's mainstream (*zhuliu*) news topics,” Chen Ming explained. “It's such a major event that any newspaper claiming to be a platform of this kind cannot afford not to cover it.”

Although this is not the kind of news that Zheng Wen and his colleagues aspire to produce, they seem to accept that their circumstances make it imperative that they do so. “Events like this can only be written up as propaganda articles (*xuanchuan gao*),” Zheng Wen tells me above the steady whir of the subway train. “But it can't be helped (*mei banfa*). They have to be written.” As the train speeds us closer to the assignment site, *The Times*' Politics journalists prepare to start work on news articles that in their estimation will do nothing more than sing the Party's praises.

## JOURNALISTIC AND COMMERCIAL STRATEGIES

To an observer enculturated in the idea that news should be objective, balanced, and politically independent, the practice of writing news articles that praise the ruling political authorities would be considered an unacceptable betrayal of the journalist's professional ethic. Scholars working with newsmakers in China, however, have shown how the moral-political and professional conceptions they are guided by have been formed in relation to their politically particular circumstances.<sup>1</sup> The need to “do the Party's propaganda work” is regarded, in China's context, as an unavoidable condition of participation in the news industry. The opportunity to produce informative reports on publicly important affairs is, meanwhile, recognized as something that only arises occasionally and only for newspapers with the ample financial resources, adequate political backing, and extensive networks that it takes to produce such reports. Many journalists in China thus think of their profession as a practice not simply of public truth-speaking, but of strategically navigating the demands of various Party authorities to build up their news-making capacities (Pan 2000; Pan and Lu 2003; Tong 2009; Repnikova 2017).

For a newspaper to publish an article that praises and promotes the Party is, in this context, not necessarily a sign of its newsmakers' moral and professional failing, but may instead be a matter of their strategically complying with the Party's demands in order to be able to produce more informative and impactful news in the future.

What was striking about *The Times'* reporting on the *lianghui*, however, is that it was not done under orders from any Party office but undertaken entirely by the initiative of the newspaper's editor-in-chief. Chief Huang saw the production of a special feature on the *lianghui*, on the one hand, as a good way to put the newspaper in the good books of Guangdong's provincial level Party officials and, on the other hand, as a crucial means of constructing the particular image that the newspaper needed to sell to its advertising clients. Through an ethnography that follows the Politics journalists through the process of producing their reports on the *lianghui*, this chapter considers the novel image-centered business model that *The Times* was run on and how this model shaped its journalists' conceptions of their professional practice.

Whereas many discussions of journalism set out from a generic conception of the profession as one that provides news readers with varyingly informative and entertaining news, *The Times'* journalists had a more particular conception of their practice—one specific to the newspaper's business model. *The Times'* model had emerged in the early 2000s, when China's newspapers were in the process of moving online, and was designed to exploit the new configurations of information, attention, opportunity, and risk that this shift gave rise to. The move toward digital news is known to drive news companies to compete harder for attention by proffering more consumer-friendly forms of infotainment. Developed in response to the particular features of China's late-socialist media world, however, *The Times'* business model responded to the overabundance of online content and the elusiveness of online attention in a different way.<sup>2</sup> Rather than trying to attract actual readers, the newspaper's strategy was to build up and monetize the sheer possibility of its articles being read. Its strategy was to construct itself as a platform that was liable to garner the attention of a certain kind of news public—or that had a certain kind of *publicness*—and to sell advertisers on the possibilities that might arise therefrom. I suggest that the journalists' understanding of their newspaper as a platform of publicness reflects changing business strategies and practices that are remaking the journalistic profession, and provides an illuminating perspective for thinking about what contemporary newsmaking is.

COVERING THE *LIANGHUI**Day One: Gaining Access*

The People's Great Hall, where the *lianghui* is underway, lies near the center of Beijing, just south of the Imperial Palace and west of Tiananmen Square. The reason that the journalists and I are heading north toward the Olympic Stadium is because they have not been granted permission to access the meetings' main venue. Press passes to the *lianghui* are issued on a selective basis, primarily to politically important and established news platforms, such as the central and provincial Party organs. *The Times'* executives have tried to get around the problem by arranging for their journalists to be included in the official press team of the Guangdong Congress delegation, but due to their insufficient personal connections, or *guanxi*,<sup>3</sup> within the Guangdong government, these negotiations did not bear fruit. Left to find their own ways to gather material for their news articles, the journalists have spent the past several days calling and messaging all the contacts they can think of who might be able to help them out. A contact of Liang Yong's has told him that the Guangdong delegation will be meeting this afternoon at the National Convention Center, near the Olympic Stadium. Since this is the only lead that they have, the journalists are headed there to see if they can find anyone to interview.

We arrive at the Olympic Green station and after walking for what seems like miles along a wide and rather empty road, finally arrive at the National Convention Center compound. Even from a distance the building looks suspiciously uncrowded. The meeting is supposed to start at three o'clock and it is already two-thirty, but there are hardly any people around. Liang Yong telephones the person who gave him the lead, but she does not take his call. He sits down on a curb and lights a cigarette, thinking aloud about what our next step should be. Happily, his informant soon phones him back. She had misspoken—the meeting was not being held at the National Convention Center (*guojia huiyi zhongxin*) but at the *International Convention Center* (*guoji huiyi zhongxin*), several kilometers away. As we scramble to find a taxi, I am struck by the pettiness of the practical hurdles that the journalists have to overcome to produce their “propaganda articles.” When one looks at the pro-Party news articles that are published so copiously in China's newspapers, one assumes that the journalists who wrote them were spoon-fed the information they needed. But instead of being provided with the relevant

material, *The Times'* journalists have been barred from the event they are trying to cover and left to scour their own networks for any lead they can find.

On the taxi ride from the one convention center to the other, Liang Yong and Zheng Wen jestingly despair of the paradoxical situation they are in, of having to hunt down material for an article that they know will be of no informational worth. "Honestly, even if we do catch some delegates who are willing to talk, they aren't going to say anything meaningful. They aren't going to tell us anything that we don't already know or say anything that isn't already in their official briefs," Liang Yong says. Zheng Wen good-humoredly seconds Liang Yong's prediction:

If you ask them questions about other issues or even just probe a little on the issues in their briefs, they won't know how to answer you. They'll tell you that your question is "too complicated" to be answered in a few minutes. Some delegates are a bit better, of course. They might try a bit harder to give you a decent answer. But they usually don't have much time. Those who do have the time to talk to you are the ones who don't really know anything!

I begin to think that the journalists see their assignment as one that requires them to produce news articles that do not contain any actual news. I ask if the editor-in-chief had thought about how uninformative their interviews were likely to be when he assigned them to report on the meetings. Liang Yong seems amused by the naivete of my question and replies with good-humored disparagement, "Bosses aren't concerned about such problems. Chief Huang wants us to cover the *lianghui* because he feels that this is the kind of event that a high-end newspaper like ours should cover. It doesn't matter to him whether there's anything new to say about it. It's only us journalists who worry about that."

The journalists tell me that the editor-in-chief is concerned almost exclusively with the newspaper's business operations (*shangwu*), and not with the quality of the informational service (*yewu*) that it offers. Like their head editor, Chen Ming, the Politics journalists say that publishing articles on events like the *lianghui* is important for *The Times'* business because these are the news items that the high-end readers whom the newspaper targets are interested in. As a relatively young newspaper, *The Times* does not have a large following that can attract advertisers. The editor-in-chief's strategy is to use its news coverage to persuade potential advertising clients that it is a newspaper that China's professionals and entrepreneurs might read, and thus a

newspaper they should advertise in. The fact that reports on the *lianghui* are unlikely to reveal anything new may frustrate the journalists, but it is not a problem for their boss.

Our taxi pulls up at the International Convention Center and we can immediately tell that this is our venue because police cars and officers with German shepherds are guarding the gates and only allowing vehicles with special permits to enter. We stand and watch as black Audis with darkened windows are inspected and permitted to pass. “Should we see if anyone will let us ride through in their cars?” Liang Yong suggests, somewhat weakly. “No point,” Xiaofei declares. “Even if you get through the gate, they’ll ask for your press pass at the door and turn you away there.” The journalists survey the scene in silence till they are satisfied that they will not be able to conduct any interviews, and decide to head home to continue trawling their networks.

In the evening, the journalists meet in the Politics section’s online chat group to discuss their progress (or lack thereof) with Chen Ming. The journalists complain that the meeting’s security measures are making it impossible for them to get anywhere near the delegates. Chen Ming reminds them that it is their job to keep trying. His message reads: “Security is always tightest on the first day. Can’t be helped. This is just what being a journalist and trying to nab interviews is all about. Keep at it and things will start to loosen up.” Chen Ming reminds the journalists to focus their interviews particularly on topics relating to Guangdong’s economic development, as this is what the editor-in-chief wants the special report on the *lianghui* to center on. Later in the night, Zheng Wen learns from a contact at another newspaper that the Guangdong delegates are staying at the Capital Hotel, not far from the People’s Great Hall. The three journalists and I agree to meet there in the morning.

### *Day Two: Gathering Material*

I arrive at the Capital Hotel and find Xiaofei in the lobby looking frustrated. She tells me that the Guangdong delegates are indeed staying here and in fact holding several press conferences in the hotel’s meeting rooms. But with neither a press pass nor personal contacts in the delegation, she has not been able to find out which rooms these conferences are being held in. “It’s as though we were thieves trying to steal something, rather than journalists trying to write news,” she says in a vexed tone. Liang Yong arrives next and says sunnily that a friend of a friend of his has a list of over twenty Guangdong delegates’ names and phone numbers, and that he is in the process of

getting in touch with this person. When Zheng Wen shows up, he tells us that he's found the phone number of a delegate who is a dean of research at the Guangdong Academy of Sciences, specializing in low-carbon energy alternatives. He seems hopeful that this lead will bear fruit. He dials the number, but nobody answers. "Probably in a meeting right now. I'll try again later," he says, undeterred.

I am impressed by the resourcefulness and verve that the journalists are able to bring to the task of producing news articles that will do little more than rehearse the Party's official discourse. All three have in other conversations told me that they hope to reveal "some truths" (*zhenxiang*) about China's social and economic conditions and developments, and provide their readers with genuinely "interesting" (*youqu*) and "useful" (*youyong*) information. They have professed a penchant for investigative news stories that expose the realities that Party officials, corporations, and other "vested interest holders" (*jide liyi zhe*) try to hide, and distinguished themselves from journalists who write for Xinhua News Agency and other Party organs by their principled refusal to "speak for the Party" (*wei dang shuohua*). Given how critical they are of the Party's exploitation of the news media, I find it surprising how proactive and diligent Zheng Wen and his colleagues are on this assignment.

I make a comment to this effect, and Zheng Wen responds matter-of-factly, "Can't be helped. Journalists need to be like this. You need to get the material—make the phone calls, go to the scene, and catch the people you need to interview—whether you feel like it or not. This is a basic requirement of the job. You may not succeed in getting the material that you want, but you cannot not try." I begin to appreciate that although the journalists themselves see little value in the propaganda articles they have been assigned to write, they nevertheless consider it a part of their professional duty to produce them. The basic requirement of the journalist's job, as Zheng Wen put it, is to produce the news articles that one's newspaper is counting on one to produce. His elaboration of this point makes it seem only logical: newspapers need to publish certain kinds of articles to stay in business, and journalists need their newspapers to stay in business so that they can continue working as journalists. Journalists who want to keep pursuing their practice should therefore produce the articles that their newspaper needs to publish to survive. "Imagine a newspaper whose journalists only wrote the stories that they felt like writing. How long do you think it would last?" Zheng Wen asks me. Although he and his colleagues do not prefer to write propaganda

articles, they see their completion of this assignment as the practically necessary and thus professionally responsible thing for them to do.

Liang Yong soon spots an acquaintance of his across the lobby—a photo-journalist for a newspaper that has managed to get its reporters into the Guangdong delegation’s official press team and who thus receives on his phone a live stream of updates on where the delegates are holding press conferences. He tells us he is headed to one that is about to begin at a VIP guestroom on the fifth floor and asks if we want to go with him. We jump at the chance. In the guestroom, a crowd of journalists are pointing audio recorders, cameras, and smartphones at a seated delegate who turns out to be the general manager of a major Guangzhou-based car company. The journalists fire questions at him that he answers in a brisk and efficient manner. Zheng Wen asks for his views on Guangdong’s overall economic progress over the past year, and he responds with a string of positive statements. After forty-five minutes, an assistant announces the press session closed and ushers us out of the room.

“Not bad,” Liang Yong says as we head back to the lobby. “Mostly useless,” Zheng Wen counters. He says for my benefit that while the daily newspapers will certainly be running articles on the session, *The Times*, being a weekly newspaper, needs to publish articles of a more “in-depth” (*shendu*) nature. Weekly newspapers are meant to offer better-researched reports and more insightful analyses than the daily newspapers provide. Chief Huang is constantly criticizing the journalists’ articles for being too daily-paper-like (*ribaohua*) and admonishing them to make their articles befitting of the in-depth and “specialized” (*zhuan*) kind of news platform that *The Times* is trying to be. Zheng Wen and Liang Yong will perhaps be able to draw a few quotations from the car company GM, but they will need more material than this to produce a “usable” (*nengyongde*) news report. Zheng Wen tries the phone number of the Guangdong Academy research dean again. The dean answers this time and agrees to an interview at the hotel the next morning.

### *Day Three: Delivering the Work*

Xiaofei has told Liang Yong that a contact of hers has helped her get in touch with four congress delegates working in the legal field, who are willing to answer some interview questions over email. She thinks that she will be able to gather enough material from this for a “round-table type” (*yuanzhuo xing*)

article on the state of China's judicial reforms and decides not to join us at the Capital Hotel. Zheng Wen, Liang Yong, and I proceed with the plan and meet the research dean in his hotel room. Zheng Wen begins by asking him questions about Guangdong's economic development and its transition from a labor- to capital-intensive industrial model. The dean, as predicted, draws each question back to his research on how Guangdong is moving toward a lower-carbon economy. Recognizing that he is not going to talk about anything else, Zheng Wen changes tack and settles into a conversation on the provincial government's energy policies. When it is clear that the dean has said everything that he is going to say, we take our leave. On our way out, Liang Yong asks, as though in passing, whether the dean happens to know the room number of a fellow delegate, a director at the Guangdong Development and Reform Commission (DRC), whom Liang Yong lies and says we have an appointment to meet. The dean, seeming not to give it much thought, looks up the number in a folder and tells us.

As we find our way to the director's hotel room, I express my amusement at how the research dean, as predicted, really did stick to his official brief and refuse to answer questions on anything else. While the journalists had previously spoken rather disdainfully about this behavior, however, they now took a more neutral stance. They said that the delegates could not really be blamed because in China's Party-ruled "system" (*tizhi*) people in an official position who were not careful about what they said in public risked jeopardizing their career. Zheng Wen added that, put together with some quotations from the car company GM, the research dean's statements on Guangdong's energy policies would actually be quite usable. The journalists seemed to have shifted gears from the disparaging attitude they had expressed before starting work on their assignment. Now that they were into the process, they were more concerned about getting what they needed to produce the articles they were assigned to produce.

We locate the room of the Guangdong DRC director, knock, and find him in. When he realizes we are journalists, he looks unenthusiastic but resigned and agrees to a short interview. This is an energizing turn of events because a provincial DRC director is a relatively high-level official. A news article that features some interview quotations from him will be worth a lot more in the eyes of the bosses than one that does not. Zheng Wen and Liang Yong eagerly present their questions on Guangdong's economic policies and progress—but the director looks less and less impressed. "Yes, but what do you want to know? What is the specific issue that you want to write about?"

he asks. The journalists stumble over their words as they try to formulate a sharper question. In the string of phrases that Liang Yong offers, he mentions Hong Kong's "unique commercial environment." The director interrupts him: "What do you mean by 'unique'? You need to be very specific if you are going to ask such a question. Exactly what aspect of Hong Kong's economy are you referring to?" Liang Yong tries to clarify, but the director is not convinced. "No, no, one cannot make comparisons like that. You have to be very careful what you write on this issue," he says, shaking his head in refusal of their approach.

Zheng Wen tries to steer the interview in a different direction by asking a general question about the government's Pearl River Delta development plan. "That topic? That topic was already fully publicized (*xuanchuan*) last year—are you still trying to write news about that?" the director asks, almost mockingly. Liang Yong then attempts to salvage the exchange by explaining that journalists tend to ask the same question at different times and to different people, in order to see what varying perspectives they may have. "No, no, I don't have any different views from what has already been covered in the media," the director says and, as though for the record, rehearses a few generic policy statements on the Pearl River plan. "Let's leave it at that. There's nothing new to say on this topic," he concludes and shows us the door.

Cast out into the hallway, the journalists seem a little unsettled by how poorly the interview went. They had managed against the odds to gain an exclusive interview with a director at the Guangdong DRC. But instead of asking him tough and incisive questions about Guangdong's economic development, they had been shown how superficial their understanding of the topic was. "It's hard to be fully prepared for an interview when you don't know who you're going to be interviewing," Liang Yong offers by way of an explanation. I mention that I found the DRC director rather rude and unhelpful. Liang Yong disagrees: "This guy was pretty decent! Many others wouldn't have bothered to talk to us at all."

If the journalists had earlier lamented that the material they would gather on the *lianghui* was unlikely to be new or interesting, they now seem glad just to have material to work with. They consider sticking around to see if they can wrangle more interviews but decide that it makes more sense for them to head home to start drafting their reports. "With interviews, it's obviously the more the better. But you also need to leave yourself enough time to write your article. Whether the article has one interview more or one interview less ultimately isn't important. What's important is that you deliver the

work on time (*jishi jiaochai*)," Zheng Wen says. While he and Liang Yong might be personally inclined to persist in the journalistic endeavor to uncover more interesting and useful facts, their sense of professional duty leads them to make do with what material they have.

Two days afterward, *The Times*' newest issue is published with a four-page feature on the *lianghui*. Xiaofei has delivered the round-table report on China's judicial reforms that she promised. Liang Yong has used the interview with the Guangdong DRC director, supplemented with information that he took off the organization's website, to produce an article entitled "The Pearl River Delta Development Plan: Taking Reform in a New Direction." Zheng Wen has used statements from the low-carbon energy research dean and the car company GM, also supplemented with information off the internet, to produce a piece entitled "Guangdong Strikes Out on a Path of Reform." All three articles, as well as the others that make up the four-page special, are positive accounts of the forms of progress that the Communist Party's policies have resulted in and of the great advances that will continue to arise from its governance.

I am sitting with Zheng Wen at *The Times*' office in Beijing, flipping through a freshly printed copy of the paper. I wonder how he and the others feel about the fact that the news articles they have written are not going to equip China's entrepreneurs and professionals to contest the Party and, if anything, are liable to leave them more enamored of the Party's all-capable leadership. I ask Zheng Wen if he worries about this. Looking at the pages spread before him, he replies casually and without lifting his gaze, "Articles like this nobody will bother to read. Readers take one glance and can tell that there isn't any news here. They'll skip directly over it. Articles like this are for clients and officials to see—not for news readers."

#### "OUR PLATFORM IS OUR RESOURCE"

While many discussions of news in China highlight the political and commercial logics that combine to compel newsmakers to produce pro-Party articles, few studies have followed journalists through the process of producing such texts.<sup>4</sup> Accompanying Zheng Wen and his colleagues on their assignment to cover the *lianghui*, I was struck by two apparent paradoxes. First, although the journalists spoke disparagingly about propaganda articles, they did not approach the assignment as a politically requisite compro-

mise of their proper journalistic practice, but rather applied themselves to the task with energy, resourcefulness, and diligence. Rather than working to complete their reports in a passive or begrudging manner, the journalists tirelessly tapped their personal networks for leads, cunningly weaseled their way into interviews, humbly entertained their interviewees' uncourteous airs, and were careful to leave themselves enough time to craft their reports. Second, for all the energy they put into the articles, the journalists were certain that almost no one would bother to read them. These counterintuitive facts seem to go against both the journalists' specific representation of themselves as journalists who aim to inform and empower their readers, and the more general conception of the professional journalist as someone who writes articles for an audience to read. These findings raise the question of what the Politics journalists understood their newsmaking practice to consist in.

The journalists' explanations of their conduct revolved around the idea that *The Times* needed them to cover the *lianghui* to support the newspaper's commercial operations. *The Times*' survival as a business, by their account, hinged on its publishing articles on topics that China's high-end news readers were interested in, in order to present itself as a platform that such readers might pay attention to. Over the course of my fieldwork at the newspaper, I came to understand how this business model worked. I learned that when *The Times* was created in the mid-2000s, the news industry was already too saturated for a new paper to become profitable through conventional advertising. Conventional advertising, where companies pay to publish clearly demarcated content promoting their products or services, requires the newspaper have a large following whose attention it can sell to advertisers. For a start-up newspaper to attract a large readership in China's overcrowded digital mediascape, however, is a costly venture that is likely to fail. Rather than "burn money" (*shaoqian*) to amass an audience, *The Times*' strategy was to generate revenue through a more innovative form of "advertising" that consisted in the production and sale of what were referred to as "soft" (*ruan*) and "black" (*hei*) articles.

Soft articles, as I mentioned in Chapter 1, portrayed a company in a favorable light and were published in exchange for cash. A black article unfavorably portrayed a company that was then threatened with its publication unless the company paid *The Times* to withhold it. Rather than trying to build up a large readership, *The Times*' commercial strategy was to build up its trade in soft and black articles. The plan was to burnish its image as a

newspaper that catered to China's white-collared professionals and entrepreneurs and market the newspaper's soft and black articles to companies that were eager to impress this group of readers.

One staff member, in explaining *The Times'* business to me, put it this way: "As a newspaper, our platform is our resource." Like many other newspapers, he explained, *The Times* had neither a ready source of breaking information that it could use to attract news readers nor a ready source of news readers that it could use to attract advertising. The only thing that it could sell was its sheer capacity, as a media site or platform, to garner attention. The newspaper's strategy was thus to fashion itself as a platform that served a certain audience and to use the possibility of its capturing this audience's attention to sell soft and black articles.

The clients that *The Times* worked with were mainly small to medium-sized enterprises with significant operations or customer bases in Guangzhou. The newspaper's marketing staff would work through the personal networks or connections they maintained with these companies' owners and executives to negotiate deals. They preferred to broker soft article deals, as these were considered win-win arrangements that benefited both the newspaper and its clients. The price that *The Times* charged for soft articles was not considered high, and many companies were happy to pay for the chance to promote themselves in a newspaper that seemed to cover important current affairs while also staying safely aligned with the Party's key positions and policies. While soft articles were negotiated before they were written, black articles were first written and then used to initiate a negotiation. They were written either when a company refused to engage in a soft article deal or when one of the newspaper's journalists happened to acquire information that a company would not want to have publicized. Whether it was a soft or black article deal that the staff were working to secure, the exact size of the newspaper's readership weighed less in their negotiations than the idea of *The Times* as a newspaper that pitched itself to the right audience and in the right way.

One way to think about this business model, which the Politics journalists' practice was built on, is through the question of how media publics are constituted. Writing about the formation of publics in and through the circulation of texts, literary and social theorist Michael Warner points out that publics are not materially defined groups of people but attentional communities that exist "by virtue of being addressed" (2002, 67). Publics, Warner writes, "are virtual entities, not voluntary associations" (88). They are not

groups of gathered individuals, but “imaginary” and “in principle open-ended” (73) entities that exist wherever a text invites an individual to pay attention to it. Publicly circulating texts such as books and news articles, in other words, create their publics not by garnering the attention of every possible reader but by *addressing* themselves to *any* reader who may choose to attend to them.

In Christopher Kelty’s ethnography of computer programmers and internet enthusiasts who produce open-source software, he calls for the internet to be seen as “a heterogeneous and diverse, though singular, infrastructure of technologies and uses” (2008, 4) that determine how digital texts are able to circulate and, thus, how digital publics are able to constitute themselves. Kelty shows how the internet’s physical configurations, data transmission standards and protocols, and evolving array of user applications are continuously creating particular rules for the sending and receiving of information, which, in turn, create the particular routes along which online texts are liable and likely to travel. The internet, in this perspective, can be said to materialize the virtuality of the media’s publics. By constituting a contingent and evolving configuration of routes through which digital texts (such as online news articles) may address themselves to readers, internet technologies give material form to the fact that a news article’s public is never a predetermined group but an always open-ended entity that will come into existence wherever the article is (clicked on and) read. An online news article once published on a newspaper’s website might be republished on any number of others, linked to through news portals, suggested by feeds, delivered by search engines, and posted and reposted through various social media platforms. The online news world is thus a mediascape in which it becomes technically and practically apparent how a news article can create a public simply by asking for its attention.

Tracing the cultural evolution of the internet in China, Shaohua Guo highlights the wide array of individual and institutional actors—from journalists, web editors, and advertising executives to internet companies and netizens—whose interactions determine which issues do and do not garner online attention, describing this as a “network of visibility” (2020, 10) in which all players are embedded. Developed within this network, *The Times*’ business model capitalized on the digitally materialized virtuality of its platform’s public by not attempting to attract and retain a large following of actual readers, but instead investing in its platform’s address.<sup>5</sup> By publishing news articles on topics that China’s professionals and entrepreneurs were

known to be interested in, its strategy was to construct itself as a newspaper that was clearly and credibly addressed to this type of news reader and whose articles were thus liable to be attended to by them. One could say that rather than trying to garner the attention of a particular public, the newspaper's objective was to construct itself as a media platform with the *potential* to garner this public's attention, or as a platform with this particular kind of *publicness*. The function of the Politics journalists' articles on the *lianghui* was to generate this potential, or publicness, without which the newspaper's soft- and black-article trade could not flourish. Although few actual news readers were likely to read them, the journalists' propaganda articles, by soliciting the attention of China's high-end news readers, would generate the high-end publicness that the newspaper needed to keep itself in business.

While *The Times'* Politics journalists aspired to write news articles that informed and empowered their targeted public, they did not attempt to achieve this on every assignment. Recognizing that their newspaper was a business that survived on its platform's publicness, the journalists used many of their assignments not to inform or even engage news readers but only to gainfully address them. The journalists regarded this as a necessary means of sustaining their practice so that they would be able to write news articles that did actually engage and empower their readers, as and when such opportunities arose. While social studies of news often assume that journalists approach their audiences and assignments in a fixed and consistent manner, *The Times'* journalists treated their public at times as an audience whose interests they wrote to serve, and at other times as an audience whose addressability they used to sustain themselves.

### THREE POST-MAO NEWS MODELS

Normative discourses on professional journalism have conventionally drawn a dividing line between the newspaper's business considerations and strategies, on the one hand, and the properly journalistic principles and values that its newsmakers should uphold, on the other. A newspaper's need to make profits, in this view, should not impinge on its journalists' practice of their profession—much less become the basis by which their practice is defined. The perspective I encountered among *The Times'* journalists and editors, however, was different. Rather than thinking of the newspaper in theoretical terms as an organization whose journalistic objectives and com-

mercial machinations should be held apart, the newsmakers tended to take a historical view of the news business in China and emphasize the ways in which the two aspects of the newspaper were entangled.

Against the backdrop of the Mao era, when all newspapers were state-funded entities that existed only to execute the Party's orders, *The Times'* newsmakers saw the commercial newspapers of the post-Mao era as enterprises that were created to make newsmaking and moneymaking work together. These enterprises had experimented with and created different ways of doing business that involved and allowed for the production of different kinds of news. *The Times'* newsmakers indeed considered China's post-Mao news sector to have evolved through three distinct periods, marked by the dominance of three different news-business models.

The first was that of the evening papers (*wanbao*), which in the early years of the reform era were the only newspapers permitted to play to the popular consumer desires of China's "ordinary people" (*laobaixing*), and for this reason were able to run highly profitable businesses through the sale of their advertising space. The second model was that of the metropolitan papers (*dushibao*), which had to compete much harder for readership and did so by proffering bolder and more sensationalized news, while also boosting their revenues by producing and selling soft and black articles. The third model—of which *The Times* was a product—was that of the high-end news platforms that broke away from the market for mass-appeal news to target a wealthier and more elite stratum of readers, and sell both conventional advertising space and soft and black articles to companies that wanted to reach this particular demographic. To better appreciate the journalists' sense of what their newsmaking practice consisted in, it is helpful to consider each of these models more closely.

### *The Late 1970s to Early 1990s: Evening Papers*

When the Mao era ended and Deng's program of market reform began, the only newspapers in print were a handful of state-funded Party organs whose function was to promulgate the Party's official positions and policies. Looking to revive this nearly moribund press sector, the Party leadership under Deng made two key decisions: to relegalize newspaper advertising and reopen the country's evening papers. Evening papers were the newspapers that the municipal Party offices of China's major cities had owned and operated in the 1950s as the "softer" local supplements to the central and provin-

cial Party organs. The radical political campaigns of the Cultural Revolution had forced these newspapers to close. Now that the post-Mao Party wanted to reanimate the country's press sector, the evening papers presented themselves as a suitable place to start (Song 2009). Press policies were thus amended to permit the evening papers to reopen and encourage them to publish less dryly political and more popularly appealing news fare than the central and provincial Party organs offered.

According to *The Times'* journalists, the unique license that the evening papers had to publish news with more consumer appeal instantly translated into large and regular reader followings. City residents, long deprived of any content other than the Party's political and ideological excursions, waited in long lines at newsstands and snapped up every issue as soon as it was released. With China's consumer goods industry briskly expanding, meanwhile, a growing number of companies were looking for ways to promote their products.<sup>6</sup> The unique access that the evening papers had to their publics' attention made their advertising space a highly coveted commodity. Even as they increased their slots and raised their fees, their advertising services continued to be oversubscribed, with companies sometimes waiting for months to have their advertisements published.

"The evening papers had a monopoly on the market," Zheng Wen put it, referring without distinction to the market for news and the market for advertising. "They didn't have to go out looking for companies to buy their ad space; the companies came to them. All they had to do was write news that was a little more interesting and readable than what the Party organs published. That's very easy to do." In Zheng Wen's opinion, journalists in these early post-Mao years had an easier job than he and his colleagues did—they only needed to produce news articles that appealed to their targeted readers, while the advertising revenue flowed in by itself. In the 1990s, however, news business became more complicated.

### *The 1990s: Metropolitan Papers*

The metropolitan papers arose through the jealous efforts of the provincial Party organs to gain access to the highly profitable and briskly growing consumer news and advertising industry that the municipal Party offices' evening papers were so lucratively servicing (C. Huang 2001, 2000). The provincial Party organs had lobbied the central Party leadership for permission to produce more consumer-friendly news throughout the 1980s, but met with

little success. The central leadership wanted the provincial papers to continue to function mainly as the Party's official political and ideological mouthpieces. In the 1990s, with production costs rising and state funding to the press sector being progressively withdrawn, the provincial organs began to assert that their lack of commercial popularity would soon make it impossible for them to survive. The central leadership responded by permitting the provincial organs to create consumer-friendly spin-offs, or "offspring papers" (*zibao*), to "go out and make money" (*chuqu zhuanqian*) for their unpopular and unprofitable "parents" (*fumu*).

Created with this mission in mind, the metropolitan papers set out to win readers' attention by proffering edgier, more entertaining, and more eye-grabbing news stories. They pitched themselves to their city's urban masses, whom they characterized as readers with "two lows and one high" (*liangdi yigao*)—a low level of education, a low level of income, and a relatively high age. The metropolitan papers appealed to these readers' appetites for practical information on local issues, such as public transport changes and fluctuations in the price of various food items; investigative news reports that exposed various forms of suffering and injustice; and sensationalized stories of accidents, crime, sex, and violence.

These tactics drew both readers and advertisers away from the evening papers, whose news fare now seemed conservative and old fashioned in comparison. The very success of the metropolitan papers' strategy, however, soon became the source of their problems. A growing number of Party and government offices endeavored to create cash cows for themselves by creating similar newspapers. By the late-1990s, China's major cities had anywhere from three to seven metropolitan newspapers, all covering the same issues and events (Y. Zhao 2008). With the concurrent rise of the internet and shift toward online news, newspapers developed the practice of lifting content from their competitors' websites and republishing it as their own. Faced with such high levels of competition and homogenization, the metropolitan papers struggled to differentiate themselves from their rivals, in the eyes of both their targeted news readers and their targeted advertising clients.

It was in this news environment that the trade in soft and black articles became prevalent. The practice of publishing soft news and unmarked advertorials was not new, as it had gone on to a limited degree since the first years of the news sector's marketization. With the metropolitan papers, however, selling soft news and threatening companies with black articles became a mainstay of the news business. In the intensely competitive and burgeoning

consumer industry of the 1990s, many companies were willing to pay for coverage that might give them an edge over their competitors. In developing this arm of their operations, the metropolitan papers made it normal for newspapers to earn a significant portion, if not most, of their revenue from the marketing of the possibility that their articles might garner public attention; or in other words, from the monetization of their platform's publicness. In *The Times'* journalists' understanding of their industry, many of the newspapers that blossomed into multibusiness media conglomerates had made their "first pot of gold" (*diyitongjin*) through this trade.

### *The 2000s: High-End News Platforms*

By the turn of the twenty-first century, the mass-appeal news market seemed saturated and news audiences were moving online, where an abundance of non-news content vied for their attention. It no longer seemed possible for a newspaper to enter the industry without "burning" a massive amount of capital to attract an audience, which could easily be lost again. According to *The Times'* journalists, the breakthrough that created a new wave of opportunity in the industry came when a few savvy news executives decided to abandon the tabloid-style news products that dominated the scene, and instead cater to the news-reading interests of China's wealthier and more educated elites. These executives realized that with most newspapers competing for the attention of the ordinary urban masses, companies specializing in luxury products, such as designer watches, jewelry, and vacation villas, faced a shortage of appropriately targeted media platforms to advertise on. A newspaper that catered to the wealthier strata of society could become profitable by filling this gap in the market. The shift to online news made this strategy all the more viable by making it feasible for a newspaper based in any major city to reach high-end news readers across the country.

The newspaper of this kind that *The Times'* founders set out to emulate was a Guangzhou-based financial newspaper that I will refer to as *The Herald*. *The Herald* was created and owned by one of Guangdong's largest media conglomerates, with its key personnel having been handpicked from across the conglomerate's several well-established publications. The newspaper touted itself as one that was set to become "the Bloomberg of China." With the media conglomerate's ample financial resources and well-established networks behind it, it had quickly succeeded in constructing itself as an "influential" (*you yingxiangli*) news platform and become a profitable enterprise.

I had the opportunity to speak with one of *The Herald's* founding editors at a dinner that Chen Ming, the head editor of *The Times'* Politics section, organized with a few journalists from both newspapers. Chen Ming and the editor for *The Herald*, Yang, were formerly colleagues at a third newspaper in Guangzhou and had remained close acquaintances. Having learned that I was a foreign researcher studying news and journalism in China, Yang seemed eager to dispel any roseate illusions about *The Herald* that I might be under. "People think that we chose to create a financial newspaper for some bigger political reason, but that wasn't at all the case," he told me. He said that *The Herald's* founding executives had seen a "gap" (*quekou*) in the market for a high-end news platform and decided to capitalize on it. "That's what the real motivation for starting the newspaper was. All the other things that you hear are just stories that [the founding executives] made up afterward."

Yang emphasized that while the financial news topics that *The Herald* covered set it apart from the city's metropolitan papers, *The Herald* was similar to those newspapers in deriving a significant part of its revenue from its trade in soft and black articles. "We do the same things that all the other newspapers do," he put it. "Just last week, the editor-in-chief pulled a story from press at the last minute because the company [that it concerned] made an offer." Compared to the metropolitan papers, Yang said, *The Herald* was, in fact, able to command higher rates for its soft and black articles. Although its readership was not nearly as large, its specialization in business and financial news led many companies to believe that its news articles were liable to be read and taken seriously by the business and financial elites whose opinions they were most concerned about. Companies that were preparing to launch initial public offerings were particularly willing to pay *The Herald* not to publish content that might tarnish their reputation among this group of news readers, as this might result in their shares listing at a lower price.

As for the regular news articles that *The Herald* published, Yang lamented that the quality of reporting was not nearly as high as it should be. Few of *The Herald's* journalists had backgrounds in finance or economics, and many struggled to fully understand the issues they were assigned to cover. Yang complained that journalism school graduates in China received no training in macroeconomics, while graduates with degrees in business, economics, and finance had no interest in becoming journalists. The salaries and opportunities for career development that the news industry offered were far less attractive than those that such graduates would find elsewhere. And even the individuals who did become journalists, Yang said, were quite likely to

leave the profession after a few years because there were so few pathways to upward mobility within it. As a consequence of these structural circumstances, *The Herald* suffered from a constant lack of talent (*rencai*). Journalists came into the newspaper underqualified and inexperienced and left before Yang could help them raise their standards.

“After all these years, the quality of our news articles is still far too low,” Yang said. “News writing, even in financial news, is actually very simple. All that one needs to do is arrange the information one has in a clear and logical way, so that a reader can immediately understand it. But the way that our articles are written, even I need to read them two or three times over to make sense of them. I keep trying to get my journalists to write in a clearer and more straightforward manner, but they just can’t seem to do it.”

As a newspaper that was modeled on *The Herald* but with a smaller capital investment and fewer industry connections behind it, *The Times* was understood by its journalists to be in a similar situation, only with less resources. While Zheng Wen and his colleagues wanted to be able to inform and empower China’s entrepreneurs and professionals, they knew that they too lacked the expertise and experience that such work required. They needed more connections, a deeper knowledge of China’s current affairs, and—as their interview with the Guangdong DRC director reflected—better skills. They needed time to acquire these capabilities, and in the meantime, needed their newspaper to stay afloat.

The newsmaking practice that *The Times’* Politics journalists were engaged in consisted in striving to produce news articles that China’s educated and influential news readers would find useful, while in the meantime working to sustain the newspaper that enabled them to pursue this objective by producing the news stories that it needed to generate the publicness that it sold. Writing articles on events like the *lianghui* was part of the work that the journalists did to support *The Times’* business so that the newspaper could provide them with the means to work toward producing the informative and impactful news that it claimed to offer. It was for this reason that the journalists did not see their production of propaganda articles as a betrayal of their professional ideals but as a part of their professional duties.

## PROPAGANDA IN AN AGE OF PUBLICNESS

When *The Times’* special feature on the *lianghui* was published and it was time for the Politics journalists to move on to the next week’s assignments,

Chen Ming, the section's head editor, posted the following message to its chat group:

Honestly, forcing everyone to do reports on the *lianghui* was something that was only done because it really could not be avoided. Even though we all knew that there would hardly be any new information to get out of the meetings, not to mention any compelling story or breaking event to cover, still, it really could not be avoided. Besides, reporting on the *lianghui* was a good opportunity to make new contacts. Journalists at weekly newspapers tend to lack the kind of sensitivity and the kind of skill that it takes to go out to the site of an event and get hold of newsworthy materials. Going out to cover the *lianghui* was like an uncostly yet highly effective way of getting rapid training in this. So I hope that everyone can be understanding. It's not that we aren't doing "hard" news. It's more that "you can chop wood faster if you sharpen your axe once in a while." If you haven't built up the contacts, if you haven't honed your skills, then even when an excellent news lead is placed before you, you won't necessarily be capable of doing a good story. We've done a tally and it shows that altogether we managed to interview some thirty congress members and conference delegates. For colleagues who had no press passes, no access either to the venue or to the program, to accomplish this must really have taken a lot.

Sensitive to the fact that the journalists did not like to think that their work served only to praise and promote the Party, Chen Ming attempted to shore up their morale by highlighting the ways in which the *lianghui* assignment had enabled them to hone their skills. Zheng Wen, with whom I was sitting when Chen Ming's message appeared on his screen, dismissed Chen Ming's comments as an attempt to make the assignment seem like a more valuable experience than it was. "Chen is saying all this to make us feel like it was very worthwhile. He's the head editor, so he has to say things like this. But the reality is that it just could not be avoided," Zheng Wen said. Between the political brownie points that *The Times* might score with local Party officials and the newspaper's commercial need to present itself as a high-end news platform, the *lianghui* was simply an event that it could not afford to ignore.

Had I encountered *The Times'* feature on the *lianghui* without any knowledge of how it had been produced, I might simply have taken it as evidence of the Party's abiding ability to make China's newspapers praise its achievements. Following the Politics journalists through their reporting process,

however, complicates this outlook by showing how they engaged the assignment as one whose primary purpose was to support their newspaper's business. In a digital news era when newspapers can no longer expect to secure a large and regular readership, *The Times* was a newspaper whose articles were produced less to mold the public's mind than to construct a sellable sense of its own platform's publicness.

Over the months that I worked at *The Times'* Politics section, I accompanied Zheng Wen, Liang Yong, and Xiaofei on numerous assignments that required they write articles lauding the Party's policies and programs. These included a set of news reports for a commemorative issue on the thirtieth anniversary of Shenzhen's Special Economic Zone, a monthlong column on the Shanghai Expo, and a series of special inserts on the "low-carbon lifestyles" that the Guangzhou city government was trying to promote (for which the Guangdong Academy research dean was again interviewed). The journalists referred to all of these news stories as "propaganda articles"—but the term in their usage did not flag these articles as texts that would make China's news readers more supportive of the Party, so much as articles that bolstered *The Times'* image and that most readers would ignore.

Indeed, the journalists sometimes referred to the propaganda articles they were working on as soft articles that their newspaper was publishing for a particular Party or government office. The slippage between the two terms is telling. It suggested that just as a soft article praising a company might serve mainly to broker a private transaction between the newspaper and the company's executives, so might a propaganda article in praise of the Party work mainly to foster a private exchange between the newspaper and the relevant officials. News articles in *The Times'* milieu could be published with gainful outcomes for the newspaper, its political patrons, and its commercial clients—without having much effect on, or even garnering much attention from, the publics they ostensibly addressed. The next chapter looks at the newsmaking ethic that the Politics journalists developed for themselves as journalists "with some ideals" in such contemporary circumstances.

## CHAPTER 4

### *An Ethic of Efficacy*

When I first learned from the Politics journalists about *The Times*' trade in soft and black articles, my instinct was to treat it as a sort of scandalous company secret that the newspaper's other staff members were bound to either deny or refuse to discuss with me. Knowing that the business was run mainly through the newspaper's Economics desk, I decided to try approaching its head editor, Gao Jin, to see what he might let on. When I hesitantly broached the subject, I was surprised by his forthright response. "We are the Economics desk," he said matter-of-factly. "Our clients are the companies. We either write good things about them that make them happy and willing to work with us, or write bad things about them that leave them no choice *but* to work with us. That's really all there is to it." Rather than treating it as something to hide, Gao Jin seemed to see the production of soft and black articles as a perfectly reasonable practice to engage in.

At a meeting of *The Times*' Beijing bureau that I attended several weeks later, the editor-in-chief, Huang Tao, further demonstrated how far off my initial reading of the situation was by animatedly lecturing the journalists on how vital the newspaper's soft- and black-article business was to its commercial survival, and exhorting them to be more proactive in producing these articles. "Writing soft articles is actually very easy," he exclaimed, encouragingly. "Whoever you are writing about, you only have to say three things. One, that the problem they are trying to address is a challenging one. Two, that they are very good people. Three, that they are *really* very good people—and that's it!" As for black articles, Chief Huang urged the journalists not to hold back for fear of offending people but to boldly go after any information that could be used against them. He pointed to a young Economics journalist named Qian Hao who had a reputation within the newspaper for being a particularly aggressive and prolific writer of black articles, and lauded him as a

role model that everyone should emulate. “Qian is a good journalist!” Chief Huang asserted. “When Qian walks into a company’s office, they know they had better call security! You should all try to be more like him! Learn about companies. Dig up the dirt on them. That’s how the game is played. It’s the only way to make people take you seriously.” To underscore his point, Chief Huang half-seriously proposed creating a special office within *The Times* that was entirely devoted to producing black-news reports:

Next year, we’ll start our own think tank! *The Times*’ China Public Listings Research Institute. To research the 2,500 publicly listed companies in China and any others that are about to go public. First, we’ll dig up the dirt on them. Then we’ll invite them out to dinner. If they won’t come? Very well! Then we’ll dish out the dirt. Qian will be the head of the institute! He can get the job done (*gaoding*)!

As it became clearer to me how unabashed Chief Huang and the Economics journalists were about their soft and black newsmaking, I began to refigure *The Times* in my mind as a newspaper with two contrastive types of journalists. I saw the Politics journalists as the “good” newsmakers who held themselves above their industry’s underhanded business practices and strove to abide by the proper principles and standards of their profession. I saw the editor-in-chief and the Economics journalists, in contrast, as the “bad” newsmakers who had no compunctions about misrepresenting reality and abusing their newsmaking capacities to make money. I found my new understanding of the newspaper’s organizational circumstances affirmed by the critical and even disparaging remarks that the Politics journalists often made about Chief Huang and “his people” (*tade ren*) at the Economics desk, as well as by the studied distance that the journalists of either side maintained toward one another, both in and outside the workplace.

When I shared my new sense of the situation with Liang Yong, however, he rejected its simple moralism. “Honestly, anyone in Chief Huang’s position would have to do the same thing,” he said. Although Liang Yong found Chief Huang’s brash and aggressive attitude distasteful, he argued that it was Chief Huang’s job to make their newspaper commercially viable and that trading in soft and black articles was one of the only ways for a relatively young newspaper like *The Times* to survive. Liang Yong pointed out that it was the Economics journalists’ soft and black articles that paid the Politics journalists’ salaries. He told me that the Economics journalists’ salaries were significantly

higher than those of the Politics journalists and that, although he was on the losing end of it, this was a fair and reasonable arrangement. “After all, the Economics journalists are the ones who make money for the newspaper. If they weren’t doing their work, we wouldn’t be doing ours,” he said.

This chapter explores the normative concepts and distinctions that *The Times’* Politics journalists applied in and to their everyday practice, asking what newsmaking ethic they were guided by. The journalistic profession is widely regarded as one that demands a high level of moral commitment to what Natalia Roudakova describes as “the virtues of truth-telling,” which comprise “a concern with accuracy, willingness to stand by one’s words, sincerity, seriousness, reflexivity, and courage” (Roudakova 2017, 40). This construction of the ideal journalist often serves as the yardstick by which the newsmaking practices of actual journalists are measured. In discussions of journalism in China, for instance, this framework has been used, on the one hand, to commend the “courageous” undertakings of investigative newsmakers who risk political recriminations to expose wrongdoings and injustices and, on the other hand, to condemn journalists motivated by money and other forms of self-interest as “unprofessional” and “corrupt.”<sup>1</sup> Rather than falling into either category, however, I found that *The Times’* Politics journalists were governed in their practice by an ethic not of truthfulness, but of *efficacy*. I argue that the journalists’ efficacy can be analyzed as a “post-truth” news ethic that is emerging in contemporary China.

I follow anthropologists in understanding ethics not as a set of principles or rules to obey, but as a practice of cultivating qualities and dispositions that are held to be characteristic of the good and virtuous subject (Laidlaw 2013; Mahmood 2005; Faubion 2011; Lambek 2010). The ethic of truthfulness that is traditionally associated with the journalistic profession is grounded in what media scholar Silvio Waisbord refers to as “the conventions of the scientific paradigm” (Waisbord 2018, 1871), which posit a form of knowledge that is “objective,” free of all ideologically and practically interested interventions. The virtues of truth-telling that Roudakova identifies are characteristic of good, professional journalists whose understanding of their practice is grounded in this paradigm.

*The Times’* journalists, as the previous chapter has shown, had a different understanding of their practice. They did not think of the newspaper as a provider of objective truths but as an enterprise whose newsmaking capacities were intricately entangled with its commercial strategies and interests. Anthropologists have explored the popular sensibilities that are emerging in

contemporary China that see public discourses as truth-claims that derive their validity less from their objective factuality than from the social, economic, and political resources invested in them (Steinmüller 2013; Steinmüller and Brandtstädter 2016; Latham 2016). Working in the context of this notion, *The Times'* journalists thought of their news-writing practice as one of many conjointly discursive and commercial enterprises being pursued in China's media sector—each of which they presumed to be shaped by its own motives and rationales. In this milieu—where different actors had different reasons for producing the differing accounts or “editions” (*banben*) of reality that they did—the Politics journalists did not think that the good and worthy journalist could simply be one who sincerely and courageously stood by one's views. With multiple truth-speakers constantly competing for information, audiences, and advertising revenue, good journalists also needed to be able to acquire the resources that needed to be acquired and manage the interests that needed to be managed for their particular newsmaking project to survive.

I use the term “efficacy” to describe the quality or virtue that the Politics journalists took to be the mark of a good and worthy journalist in these circumstances—that is, the ability to handle one's news assignments in a way that effectively achieved the ends and outcomes that needed to be achieved in order for one's newsmaking project to continue. I examine three reportorial skills that the Politics journalists cultivated to make themselves more efficacious newsmakers. These are, first, the ability to identify “doable” (*keyi zuo de*) news items, topics that are likely to result in publishable articles; second, the ability to approach the news reporting process “as a game”; and, third, the ability to bend the rules of the news reporting process to make one's assignments easier to complete. The journalists did not see these skills as merely a convenient way to get by, but as tactically important and therefore normatively *good* qualities for contemporary journalists to cultivate.

I analyze the journalists' ethic of efficacy as a post-truth news ethic—not in the sense of an “ethic” that makes no distinction between true facts and false claims, but in the sense of an ethic that it is not premised on the idea that news can consist in a socially and practically unadulterated form of truth. The ethic of efficacy is grounded in an understanding of the contemporary news era as one in which the truth-claims that get made are inextricably entangled with the lives of those who make them; and in the idea that good and virtuous newsmakers must therefore be guided not only by a notion of truthfulness but also by a commitment to the practical manage-

ment of their own positions and interests. The Politics journalists' ethic of efficacy, crucially, did not lead them to consider all instrumental uses of news to be equally justified. I return toward the end of chapter to *The Times'* soft- and black-article trade to consider the normative distinctions and limits that the journalists' ethic led them to draw and to look at the moral and professional disagreements and tensions this engendered between them and their colleagues.

#### AN EYE FOR DOABLE NEWS ITEMS

While the Politics desk was occasionally ordered by the editor-in-chief to report on a specific event like the *lianghui*, it was on most weeks expected to come up with its own list of news items to cover. To manage this task, the section's head editor, Chen Ming, held an online meeting on the first day of the weekly news cycle, at which each journalist was required to propose three to four news items to work on. Chen Ming would discuss the journalists' proposals with them and decide which story to assign each journalist to do. These weekly discussions served both as a decision-making process and as form of on-the-job training, in the sense that Chen Ming regularly used the occasion to give advice on how to select news items to propose. The criterion that Chen Ming most consistently considered, and encouraged the journalists to develop a sense of, was how "doable" a news item was. Through the numerous weekly meetings that I attended, I found that the qualities that made a news item more doable included the following:

1. The journalist having ready access to the relevant interviewees
2. The item being one that could be written about in a "readable" (*keduxing qiang*) and "storylike" (*gushixing qiang*) manner
3. The item being one that a high-end news platform like *The Times* would be widely expected to cover

Conversely, the traits that made a news item less doable included these:

1. The journalist who was proposing it having no means to reach the relevant interviewees
2. The item being "uninteresting" (*wuqu*), "outmoded and untrendy" (*tubulaji*), or "hackneyed and predictable" (*laoshengchangtan*)

3. The item being difficult to write about in an interesting manner, such that the resulting news article would likely be too “static” (*jingtai*) or too much like a “saliva war” (*koushuizhan*) among pundits
4. The item being too technical or complex for the journalists themselves to understand
5. The item being “too grassroots” (*tai caogen*) for a high-end news platform to cover, or too much like a news item that might appear in a metropolitan paper
6. The item being relevant only to a city or province where *The Times* was not distributed and did not have advertising clients
7. The item being one that the Party’s central or local Publicity Departments had ordered, or were likely to soon order, newspapers not to report

Doability, as this list suggests, was a measure of how likely a news item was to result in an article that *The Times* could publish to promote itself to its targeted readers and advertising clients, without running up against any Party-created obstacles. The criterion by which Chen Ming decided what news items the Politics journalists should work on, and which he encouraged the journalists to internalize, was not what it would be best for *The Times’* readers to read about, but what it would be most advantageous to the newspaper itself to publish.

Social studies of news have long examined the ways that journalists’ reporting decisions are shaped by their news companies’ strategic, political, and commercial considerations. Early ethnographies of newsmaking conducted in the United States and United Kingdom between the 1950s and 1980s showed that the professional ideologies and newsroom routines journalists were enculturated in (Gans 1979; Tuchman 1978) aligned with their organization’s interests in growing their audiences (Epstein 1973; Hamilton 2003), ensuring their access to a regular and reliable flow of information (Fishman 1980), and maintaining good relationships with government agencies and offices (Sigal 1973; Schlesinger 1978; Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston 2008). Discovering how journalists’ reporting decisions were influenced by these interests raised questions about the news’ claim to provide readers with nothing other than objective representations of publicly important affairs. It showed that there were discrepancies between the principles and standards that journalists were in theory supposed to uphold and the logics and considerations that governed their conduct in practice.

More recent ethnographies of newsmaking commonly find these tensions amplified. The shift from print to online and mobile platforms has replaced daily and weekly news cycles with a 24/7 “news cyclone” (Klinenberg 2005, 56) of constantly “refreshed” offerings. The need to compete for audience attention or vie for news user “clicks” in this arena of overabundant digital information drives news organizations to prioritize freshness and consumer appeal over quality, importance, and accuracy (Anderson 2013; Henry 2007; McChesney and Pickard 2011). The latter values are replaced in many journalists’ work processes by commercially motivated production principles, such as “immediacy, interactivity and participation” (Usher 2014, 8; Nadler 2016). The practical circumstances that many journalists now work under thus shape their reporting processes in ways that go against their sense of the proper principles and standards of their profession.

Against this backdrop, what was striking about the way that Chen Ming and the Politics journalists strove to identify practically doable news items is that they did not see this as a necessary though regrettable compromise of the journalist’s professional ethic, but as an important and therefore normatively *good* quality for them to cultivate. In Chen Ming’s day-to-day interactions with the journalists, he often spoke about how crucial it was for them to make the most constructive use of the limited resources they had. Any reporting work that did not result in a “usable” news article was a waste both of the newspaper’s scarce resources and of the journalists’ time and energy. To be a responsible and professional journalist, in this view, was to ensure that one’s reporting assignments always resulted in articles that the newspaper could gainfully publish.

Chen Ming sometimes framed the selection of doable news items as a moral obligation that the Politics journalists owed to *The Times*’ other staff members, particularly those who worked to make money for the newspaper. When it was announced at the end of one financial year that *The Times*’ Marketing Department had achieved its revenue targets, for example, Chen Ming used the fact to shame the Politics journalists into taking their articles’ doability more seriously. “If we don’t cut down the number of instances where our articles can’t be published, we’ll really be doing an injustice to the efforts of our Marketing department colleagues,” Chen Ming wrote to the Politics section’s chat group. As though concerned that this appeal to the journalists’ sense of duty might not be persuasive enough, Chen Ming also took the opportunity to remind them that the number of articles they pub-

lished had a direct impact on their own salaries. Like many journalists in China, *The Times'* journalists were paid a fixed monthly wage that was relatively low and a floating sum of "article fees" (*gaofei*) that was pegged to the number and length of the articles that they published. "Any week that a journalist spends working on an article that for some reason doesn't come out, is a cost to the journalist as well. We want to avoid this happening," Chen Ming told them.

When Chen Ming spoke about the ideal principles and standards of professional journalism, meanwhile, it was often to persuade the journalists not to be too zealously dedicated to these ideals but to put them in their proper perspective. "Every journalist wants to write fiercely impactful news articles (*menggao*), but the opportunity to write one is something that can only be hoped for and not something that can be demanded (*keyu bukeqiu*)," he told them. To insist on trying to actualize one's ideals on every assignment one was given was not to be a good journalist but to be naive and egoistic. Speaking as a former journalist himself and in the voice of a mentor more than a boss, Chen Ming advised the Politics journalists not to be blinkered by their own ideas of how things should be, but to recognize and respond to the "actual circumstances" (*xianshi tiaojian*) they were working in.

A comment that Chen Ming posted to the Politics section's chat group one week, in praise of an article that Fan Xiaofei had written, captured Chen Ming's position well:

Xiaofei's article had no particularly deep or special value (*yiyi*), but it was perfectly satisfactory (*zhonggui zhongju*) and flowed well. In reality, a journalist cannot possibly write a breakthrough article every week. The difference between a professional and an amateur is that the professional can maintain a steady and constant level of performance. Not every article will be very good but every article will meet a minimum standard. Conversely, the amateur may write one or two excellent pieces but they are not able to maintain a minimum standard over a longer period of time, or cover different kinds of news items in a basically clear and logical manner.

Under the circumstances they were working in, Chen Ming maintained, a good journalist was not one who insisted on trying to provide the public with new information, but one who consistently provided their newspaper with basically clear and reasonably readable news articles to publish.

While the Politics journalists did not share Chen Ming's views on every aspect of their practice, I found that they were on this point relatively aligned with his position. This was reflected, for instance, in the process by which they identified news items to propose to him. In the hour or two before each weekly meeting, the journalists would browse through various news websites, asking themselves which items Chen Ming was most likely to "let pass" (*guo*) or approve of. When I pushed them on whether this was the best way for them to work on informing and empowering China's professionals and entrepreneurs, they argued that they could only pursue this goal in the ways that their circumstances allowed for. Xiaofei, in one such exchange, tried to give me a better grasp of the situation by telling me about the inexperienced fresh-graduate interns who sometimes passed through the Politics section:

Interns are always proposing news stories that they won't be able to write. Like stories that would require them to interview people whom they have absolutely no way to access. When they propose these items at the meetings, they think that they're being very principled and righteous (*henyou zhengyi*). They think that the rest of us have given up on our news ideals. But once they've been assigned to a story, they turn out not to have any idea how to gather the material they would need for it. And in the end, they don't write anything at all!

Whereas I had suggested that the journalists' practice of selecting only doable news items to cover might run against their professed newsmaking goals, experience had taught Xiaofei and her colleagues that their practical circumstances made it imperative for them to work in this manner. The journalists recognized that to stay afloat *The Times* needed them to write publishable news articles and that it was not easy to consistently produce these articles. Being able to quickly and accurately identify doable news items to work on made the journalists better at contributing to the continued existence of their newspaper—without which they would have no means to pursue, much less achieve, their journalistic ideals and goals. Before moving on to examine two other reportorial skills that the journalists cultivated, I first discuss their approach as one that was guided by a journalistic ethic of efficacy and that can be engaged with as an example of a post-truth newsmaking practice.

## A POST-TRUTH NEWS ETHIC

Anthropologists of contemporary China note that the brisk pace of socio-economic and cultural change casts people into novel arrangements and situations that require them to construct new forms of ethical conduct (Oxford 2010; Stafford 2013; Kuan 2015; J. Xu 2017). Rather than seeing *The Times'* journalists as unprofessional newsmakers, we may instead approach them from this angle as journalists who were looking for a new way to constitute themselves as good and worthy individuals in China's complex and evolving news world. Recognizing that newspapers in this milieu were commercially driven ventures that needed to be profitable, the journalists saw that it was incumbent on them to effectively and efficiently turn their assignments into articles that their newspaper could gainfully publish. In order for them to continue pursuing their journalistic ideals, that is, it was necessary for them to consistently supply their newspaper with articles that might be less than ideal but would nevertheless serve their purpose. More practically and immediately important than the question of what China's public needed to know was the question of how best the journalists could achieve this. It was for this reason that the journalists strove to cultivate the virtue of efficacy over that of truthfulness.

Discussions of contemporary news—particularly in the United States, but also in other contexts—have been concerned by the waning of the ethic of truthfulness in the news sector and the advent of what is described as a “post-truth” news era, in which news is no longer engaged with as a medium of objective and authoritative truths, but is instead generated as a maelstrom of messages that appeal to people's widely divergent emotional and ideological sensibilities and convictions. Media scholars striving to bring analytical clarity to the issue have argued that what is occurring is not the news' moral collapse or descent into depravity, but rather, the waning of the particular political and epistemological ideologies that dominated news practices in the twentieth century, and the rise of new norms and practices that are premised on a more heterogeneous array of ideas and values.<sup>2</sup>

Twentieth century news practices in the United States, as Silvio Waisbord (2018) points out, were grounded in the scientific paradigm of ideologically neutral and empirically objective truths. News was governed by the hegemonic construction of the nation's established newspapers as trustworthy providers of politically neutral, commercially disinterested, and objectively

true information. Cultural shifts that include the emergence of the internet's "networked structure" of communications have since led to the erosion of this construction, and to the rise of numerous "counter-epistemic communities" that vie against traditional newsmakers "for public attention, legitimacy, and power" (Waisbord 2018, 1870). In the resulting media milieu, Waisbord argues, conflicting truth-claims are produced and circulated by actors with diverse motivations that include "mobilizing publics, making money, increasing membership and winning elections" (1871). While journalists themselves may continue to believe that their own reporting work serves a higher and more legitimate purpose, many of the environments that they work in now see their practice as just another one of the many disparately motivated truth-claiming enterprises that are out there.

What the post-truth era confronts today's journalists with, Waisbord and others thus argue, is not the end of all fact and reason so much as the need to recognize their own embeddedness in a world of politically, commercially, and ideologically particular discursive endeavors. Contra to inherited theories that define journalism as a purely disinterested representational practice, journalists today can no longer imagine that they "stand above the fray" (2018, 1875) of their society's conflicts and contestations. In an era that recognizes itself as one of multiple and competing truth-telling practices, scholars and practitioners of news argue that today's journalists must redefine their profession in ways that enable them to "recover a sense of their own agency" (Crech and Roessner 2019, 275) and work to advance the particular discursive projects that they find value in (Carlson 2018).

The ethic of efficacy that *The Times'* Politics journalists sought to uphold is significant in this connection as an example of what such an approach might entail. The Politics journalists understood themselves to be working in a world of competing discursive projects that were each supported and funded by their own host of political and commercial endeavors. Like all of these projects, the newspaper needed to advance the political and commercial agendas that were invested in it to survive. While news articles could on some occasions be a means to impact and empower news readers, they needed to work more consistently as a means of advancing these extrajournalistic agendas. Good and worthy professional journalists in these circumstances were not those who strove always and only to embody the virtues of truth-telling, or who concerned themselves only with the informational value of their news reports, but rather those who grasped the multiple interests that were at stake in each news assignment and advanced these interests

in an effective and situationally optimal manner. The following sections delve further into the journalists' post-truth news practice by examining two more reportorial skills that they cultivated.

#### TAKING THE REPORTING PROCESS AS A GAME

Once it was decided what news item each journalist would work on, the next step was to begin gathering background information and contacting people to interview. It was at this stage that the journalists, however experienced, were liable to run into practical obstacles. The journalists would sometimes find themselves several days into an assignment without having managed to secure any interviews. When they grew anxious about not being able to gather enough material for their articles, Chen Ming's advice to them was never to double down on the task but always to "relax" and take the reporting process "as a game." When Xiaofei wrote in frustration to the Politics chat group one week that none of the people she contacted were responding to her requests for an interview, for instance, Chen Ming posted in response:

Don't take it as a source of pressure. Just think of yourself as playing a game and see what level you can play to. If you keep focusing on the outcome that you want to achieve, when you encounter an obstacle, you'll probably feel like giving up. But if you don't concern yourself so much about the result and just take it as a challenge, you'll feel more inclined to be creative and find a way around the problem.

Rather than worry about the outcome, Chen Ming encouraged the journalists to focus on the reporting process and enjoy the gamelike challenge of trying to hunt down the people they wanted to speak to. Indeed, Chen Ming frequently portrayed the journalist's job as one that consisted mainly in doing the legwork of hunting down people to interview and advised the journalists to focus less on crafting fine prose than on honing their interview-nabbing skills. Chen Ming spoke highly of the ability to wrest interviews from hard-to-reach individuals, such as famous CEOs and high-level Party leaders. Journalists who were adept at wrangling statements from such prominent figures were, according to Chen Ming, of great value to their newspapers, not because these statements necessarily carried any new or

important information but because interview quotations from a prominent person always made a news article “more attractive” (*geng xiyinren*)

Chen Ming liked to regale the Politics journalists with stories of the clever ways in which he had gone about doing this work when he was younger. He told them, for instance, that he was once assigned to cover the high-profile Boao Forum in Hainan but was not granted access to the convention room where the event was being held. Betting that the forum delegates would eventually need to relieve themselves, Chen Ming stationed himself in the men’s restroom. Sure enough, one of the first people to walk into the ambush was the famous real estate tycoon Pan Shiyi. Not only did Pan answer interview questions, he “took pity” (*kelian*) on Chen Ming and invited him to visit his private yacht, where Chen Ming got to rub shoulders with several other “big shots” (*datou*). The moral of the story was that the Politics journalists needed to spend less time worrying about how their articles would turn out and more time just “going out there and trying [their] luck” (*chuqu pengpeng yunqi*).

Chen Ming also encouraged the journalists to use their reporting assignments to make connections with people who might be useful contacts later on—people likely to be worth interviewing or able to connect the journalists to other, more significant figures. Chen Ming referred to these contacts as “resources” (*ziyuan*) and urged the journalists to take the work of “accumulating resources” (*jilei ziyuan*) as one of their most important tasks. “If with one assignment you get to know ten people, in a year, you’ll get to know a few hundred,” he told them. To accelerate their resource accumulation, Chen Ming reminded the journalists to always share their own contacts with other journalists. “Give someone a resource and you’ll definitely get another one back in return. Keep going like this and one resource can turn into  $n$  [i.e., an unknown and theoretically unlimited number of] resources. Otherwise, it will always be only one resource,” he said.

Indeed, Chen Ming placed such an emphasis on the hunting down of interviewees and accumulating of contacts that he sometimes seemed to hold these aspects of the journalist’s reporting process to be more important than the resulting news articles. In one post to the Politics chat group, Chen Ming described the journalists’ news assignments as essentially a means to this end:

Really, one of the only perks of being a journalist is that you can use your assignments to go out and meet people. If you write an article and don’t meet

anyone in the process, that article basically has no value (*yiyi*). Of course, if you just find some information that you can arrange into a news report, you'll be able to deliver your work (*jiaohuo*). But it is only by meeting and interviewing people that you can accumulate resources for yourself.

Chen Ming's comment implied that whereas the articles that the journalists wrote would be published and soon forgotten, the personal connections they could forge through their assignments would be of more lasting value. It was only by building up a wide network of useful connections that the journalists could hope to move beyond the humdrum work of meeting their newspaper's need for publishable news articles and attempt to pursue their own news ideals. The journalists, Chen Ming argued, should thus worry less about how their news reports would turn out and focus more on using their news reporting assignments to expand their own personal networks.

Journalists in many other places around the world have also found their everyday work practices becoming increasingly game-like, directing their professional energies away from the question of their news articles' public import and impact, toward the technical intricacies and demands of the newsmaking process itself (Klinenberg 2005; Boyer 2013; Deuze 2007). In many cases, this shift has come about as the digital media technologies that journalists now use require them to develop new kinds of expertise and mastery in the monitoring and management of fast-moving information flows. Many news scholars and practitioners are concerned that journalists' increasing absorption in managing digital data flows leaves them with less bandwidth to craft quality news reports or even conduct basic fact-checks (Coddington 2019; Singer 2003; Ursell 2001). By contributing to the production of substandard and even false news reports, the gamification of the newsmaking process is felt to be one of the contemporary trends that is undermining the news' authority, or eroding the journalist's "right to be listened to" (Carlson 2017).

Working in China's late-socialist context, *The Times'* journalists were not so concerned about the news' loss of authority. In fact, they tended to associate this concern with the self-aggrandizing ideology and rhetoric of the Communist Party press organs. According to the Politics journalists, it was only those who wrote for Party organs like *People's Daily* and Xinhua News Agency who imagined that their job was to provide China's news readers with the "right" view of reality. These journalists could believe this not only because they subscribed to the Party's ideology, but also because their news

companies' ample funding and special political status meant that they never had to worry about the practical things that other journalists did. Xinhua journalists did not need to think about their organization's commercial viability, for instance, or about what its advertising clients valued or how they could get their hands on the material that they needed for their articles. As one of *The Times'* journalists put it to me:

Xinhua journalists don't know what it's like to go out and gather material because everything they need is given to them. They can always interview anyone they want to—who would refuse? Xinhua has internal channels that go all the way up to the General Secretary. Journalists for Xinhua don't just represent their news agency, they represent the whole Party apparatus. If someone with this status asks to talk to you, would you dare to say no?

Because they were sheltered from all commercial pressures and treated with deferential compliance by everyone that they interviewed, Xinhua journalists could believe that their job was to help people understand reality. Zheng Wen, mockingly invoking the Chinese name of the former Soviet newspaper *Pravda*, said that such journalists could imagine that they worked for a “truth paper” (*zhenli bao*).<sup>3</sup> As journalists who did not work for a Party press organ and whose views were not distorted by such exceptional working conditions, meanwhile, Zheng Wen and his colleagues framed themselves as journalists who had a more accurate grasp of reality and a more down-to-earth approach to their work. This approach set out from their understanding that news was not where people looked for an understanding of reality, but in fact played a much more limited and even trivial role.<sup>4</sup> As Zheng Wen put it:

China's ordinary folk don't depend on newspapers to find out what they need to know. On the issues that really affect them, they have many sources of information. They understand these issues better than any journalist does! Of course, they would. These are matters that directly affect their lives. They certainly don't need us journalists to tell them what to think.

Rather than thinking of the news as a gravely important source of public knowledge, Zheng Wen argued that all that a journalist could provide their readers with was an occasionally interesting read. In his words:

News can only offer readers some details (*xijie*) and perspectives (*shijiao*) that they might find interesting. It cannot tell them how to understand reality.

Journalists don't have a better understanding of reality than anyone else. What we can do that readers cannot is go out and interview the people who are directly involved [in news events]. We can talk to them and find out some interesting or amusing details (*youqu de xijie*) that readers wouldn't otherwise get to know about.

Recognizing this, the Politics journalists strove not to get too hung up on how each of their articles would turn out, but to follow Chen Ming's advice and take each assignment as a game of capturing interesting interview quotations and accumulating useful contacts. A message that Chen Ming posted to the Politics chat group captured well the unpretentious attitude that the head editor and his journalists sought to maintain:

Remember that journalism is just an ordinary job. It's a job of finding and presenting information that readers might find worthwhile to read. Journalists don't have some lofty "societal role" (*shehui juese*) to play. The only difference between your job and others is that you don't have to sit in an office from nine to five every day. You get to go out and run around.

Rather than worrying about the news' imagined authority, the journalists strove to become better at "running around" collecting quotations and contacts that were of value to their newsmaking enterprise. Good contemporary journalists, in their view, were not those burdened by an inflated conception of the news' societal role, but those who were effective at using news assignments to build up resources that would help them sustain their practice.

#### KNOWING WHAT CORNERS TO CUT

A third reportorial habit that the Politics journalists cultivated—in this case, without direct instruction from Chen Ming—was that of making recourse to interview techniques that were of a lower standard or even professionally problematic. The journalists did not use these questionable techniques as their preferred mode of operation, but did maintain a principled willingness to fall back on such devices whenever the obstacles they encountered made it expedient for them to do so. One such device was telephone and email interviews. Phone and email interviews were acceptable for daily newspapers, but at weekly newspapers were considered a distinctly substandard expedient because they seldom yielded in-depth material. People whom one

interviewed in person were liable to be drawn into the conversation and end up sharing facts and views that they had not initially planned to. Those whom one spoke to on the phone or communicated with through email, in contrast, tended to adhere to their organization's official positions. Whereas in-person interviews had the potential to evolve into long and open-ended discussions, telephone and email interviews were generally short and trite exchanges.

Zheng Wen, being a diligent journalist, always set out to interview people in person. As soon as he received an assignment from Chen Ming, he would set to work contacting prospective interviewees and trying to meet them. It was important to start this process early, he told me, to maximize the window of time that he had and the chances of his interviewees having an opening in their schedule. Zheng Wen took pride in his ability to meet influential people, such as lawyers, businesspeople, government researchers, and Party officials, and engage them in conversations that led them to divulge things that they had not intended to. These interviewees would sometimes call him afterward and ask him kindly not to include what they had told him in his news reports. In order to preserve the relationship, Zheng Wen generally accommodated these requests but usually found a way to include the information that he had uncovered in an indirect and anonymized manner. Yet, proud as he was of this work, when circumstances did not make an in-person interview seem feasible, Zheng Wen was quick to shift gears and settle for a phone or email interview.

Indeed, when the interviewees that Zheng Wen contacted would only communicate over the phone or email, he often took cheer in the time and energy this would save him. Phone and email interviews, he said, were a far "more efficient" (*xiaolü bijiaogao*) way for a journalist to complete their assignments. Rather than spend hours traveling around the city, he could stay home and gather all the material for his articles within a few short minutes. One week, when none of the six people that he contacted were willing to meet him in person, Zheng Wen jokingly boasted that he had completed his assignment using only his smartphone and without changing out of his pajamas. He cheerfully told me that when an interviewee claimed to be too busy to answer his questions over the phone, he would ask if he could "refer to their online material." If they said yes, he would take this as license to quote statements they had made on social media platforms as though these statements were made to him in an interview. "That's my favorite response," Zheng Wen laughed. "When people tell me that they don't have time to talk

and that I can just use what I find online, I know that I'll be done with my assignment in no time!"

Liang Yong, who was also present, chimed in at this point to jest about the sleights of hand that he liked to use:

I once interviewed an old acquaintance who was a manager an electricity company about some issues in the energy sector. All I did was mention the topic and he started talking for twenty minutes straight. He just went on from one point to the next. When he was finished, he told me to go back through [the audio recording] and insert my questions wherever I wanted. That's why it's always easiest to interview people you're familiar with. Sometimes, when I'm interviewing someone that I'm *really* familiar with, I just tell them what I want them to say, so that I can quote them as having said it!

From the standpoint of an ethic of truthfulness, fabricating statements and misrepresenting the conditions under which one's quotations are gathered are infractions against the standards of the profession.<sup>5</sup> Rather than holding themselves to a fixed distinction between good and bad interview practices, however, the Politics journalists shifted readily between them, depending on what their circumstances made feasible.

The justification that Liang Yong and Zheng Wen presented to me was that while these expedients caused little harm to news readers, they made their own job more manageable. They argued that the long hours, high stress, and middling pay in journalism made it a job that one could feel inclined to quit. Bending the rules reduced the hours the journalists spent gathering material and helped them feel less anxious about completing their reports. While it made little difference to news readers how an article's quotations were sourced, these adjustments made the journalists' job easier to stick with. As a negative counterexample, Zheng Wen told me that journalists who were too scrupulous about maintaining a certain reportorial standard often ended up leaving the news industry:

They get very upset when things don't go the way they hoped, and when they can't do the interviews they planned to. They aren't able to let it slide (*kankai*), so they expend (*xiaohao*) a lot of energy being upset. Journalists like this aren't able to persist (*jianchi*) [in the job] for very long. It's often the case. The more idealistic they are, the more likely they will decide to quit. Reality doesn't live up to their standards, and they cannot accept it. They feel that they would

rather do something that has nothing to do with news at all. Public relations, marketing—it doesn't matter what, as long as it isn't journalism.

A scrupulous journalist who left the news industry in frustration was worth less to the cause of good journalism than one who sometimes cut corners but was thereby able to persevere in their profession. Zheng Wen and Liang Yong saw the substandard techniques that they resorted to as sensible measures to take to avoid breaking down or burning out.

Rather than focusing only on what the news should do for its readers, the Politics journalists also took account of what the news needed to do for them so that they could carry on in this line of work. Journalists, like other working people, wanted a job that was not only meaningful but also manageable in its demands and reasonable in its remuneration. If some journalistic infractions were inconsequential for news readers but made the job more sustainable, the trade-off was, in this perspective, a good one. "To a reader it doesn't really matter, but for the journalist it matters a lot, because this is our rice bowl," Liang Yong reasoned. "Journalists also need to eat."

The ethic of truthfulness that the normative news theories of the twentieth century were centered around focused on service to readers. The news' role was to provide the public with truthful understandings of reality, and the journalists' duty was to embody the virtues that would drive them to achieve this. The commercial, political, and ideological investments that keep a newspaper running and that demand their own returns were left out of this normative picture. The Politics journalists' practice, in contrast, set out, first, from the idea that a newspaper needs to meet the practical demands of its various stakeholders in order to remain in operation. Second, from the belief that today's readers do not depend on the news for an understanding of reality—but do value the interesting and potentially useful facts and insights that journalists can dig up. The qualities that the Politics journalists valued in their everyday practice enabled them to work constructively under these actual circumstances. Having an eye for doable news items, taking the reporting process as a game, and knowing how to cut corners with their interviews were skills that enabled the journalists to make optimal use of their assignments to both sustain their newsmaking practice and produce more content that readers might value.

The Politics journalists' ethic of efficacy did not cast them in the role of "heroic truth-seeker[s]" (Boyer 2013, 1) fighting on the side of the public's knowledge and interests, against all forms of corruption and injustice. It was

a post-truth news ethic in the sense that it did not ground the journalistic practice in an abstract conception of the news' rightful role, but figured journalists as actors who also needed to use the news in concrete and instrumental ways to support themselves. Yet this is not to say that the journalists' ethic of efficacy gave them license to engage in all manner of instrumental conduct. What it provided them with, as I found, was a means of drawing distinctions within the actual circumstances they were in, between forms of instrumental conduct that they deemed normatively acceptable and those that they did not. I return in the next section to the subject of *The Times'* soft- and black-article trade to understand the normative stance that the Politics journalists took toward it, and consider the moral and professional tensions that this created with their coworkers.

#### DRAWING A BOTTOM LINE

While Liang Yong did not see it as morally or professionally wrong for the editor-in-chief and Economics desk journalists to produce soft and black articles, I noticed that he and the other Politics journalists did take issue with the specific way in which their colleagues went about the practice. While the Politics journalists recognized that these articles had a part to play in *The Times'* operations, they felt that their colleagues pursued it in a brazen manner that failed to serve the newspaper's best interests. Instead of treating the trade as a means to the end of the newspaper's survival, Chief Huang seemed to invert the equation and treat the newspaper as a means to make money from soft and black articles. The lack of proportion and measure in his approach, in the Politics journalists' opinion, led him to conduct the trade in a way that was detrimental to the newspaper's prospects. Liang Yong described the approach as one that prioritized short-term financial gains over long-term partnerships:

The metropolitan paper that Chief Huang came from used its soft- and black-news business to become very profitable in the late 1990s. He thinks he can do the same thing for *The Times*. But what he doesn't realize is that the industry has matured. There are certain norms now that need to be abided by. When you write a soft or black article these days, you need to make it a deal that is beneficial to both sides [i.e., both to the newspaper and to the company in question]. You need to create a lasting relationship with your client.

Give them a reason to want to keep working with you, so that you'll continue to have revenue coming in. The way that Chief Huang is going around threatening companies into paying him isn't a workable approach. It might work on a company once, but it won't work on them a second time. Unless it is a crucial moment for the company [such as when the company is preparing for an IPO], its executives won't be inclined to work with you again.

The point of running a trade in soft and black articles, as Liang Yong understood it, was to help *The Times* become a commercially sustainable enterprise by creating business relationships that would translate into future opportunities and revenue channels. Black articles were an acceptable way to initiate these relationships—in the business world, as Liang Yong put it, companies “must spar to become acquainted” (*buda buxiangshi*). But the process had to be handled in a respectful manner. Chief Huang was so focused on making fast cash that he failed to attend to the interests of his targeted clients and consequently made enemies of them rather than partners. A journalist from the Economics desk named Yingying, whom Liang Yong was friends with, shared this dissatisfaction. Yingying was willing to write soft and black articles to support *The Times* but took issue with the thuggish way in which Chief Huang made her do it. In a conversation with Liang Yong and me, she told us:

The thing I don't like is how exaggerated Chief Huang keeps pressuring us to be. He wants us to magnify the problems of every company—even the companies that are actually doing quite well. He tells us to use anything that's available—rumors, online complaints about their service. If a company makes some change to its product, he wants us to say it's because the product was really terrible before. If there's a change of personnel, he wants us to say that it's because the company's internal affairs are a mess. He wants us to continuously guess at people's intentions from the meanest point of view. The companies [that we write about in this way] get really infuriated by this. But Chief Huang doesn't care. He says that our strategy right now is to “nail one company at a time” (*dayige suanyige*). He says that if we can get a million [CNY] from each company that we nail and nail one hundred companies, then we'll have one hundred million in revenue [rolling her eyes].

While Yingying was not averse to writing articles with a positive or negative slant, Chief Huang's utter disregard for the facts went too far. He behaved

and wanted his journalists to behave as though their only purpose was to make as much money as fast as they could, with no other objectives or responsibilities to consider.

Chen Ming, the head editor of the Politics desk—whose long years in the industry and experience working at two other newspapers made him aware of how endemic and unavoidable the practice of peddling black articles was—was also critical of Chief Huang’s immoderate approach to it. Chief Huang’s intent focus on turning a quick profit, in Chen Ming’s view, drove him to be brash and impudent in an area of the business where he ought, as editor-in-chief, to show tact and restraint. In Chen Ming’s words:

It’s one thing to do these things. Everyone has to do it. But it’s another thing to make it a point of pride. Chief Huang praises Qian Hao for being “formidable” (*meng*). He tells everyone that when Qian shows up at a company’s office, they immediately call security. Isn’t this something to be embarrassed about? But Chief Huang brags about it as though it were something to be proud of! He keeps praising Qian and elevating him above everyone else. This is making Qian bolder and bolder, to the point where he seems to have lost all sense of perspective (*zouhuo rumo*).

What Chief Huang’s critics objected to was not that he made *The Times* produce black articles, but how focused he was on using them to generate immediate cash returns. The Politics journalists, with their ethic of efficacy, saw soft and black articles as a means to sustain their long-term endeavor to inform and empower *The Times*’ targeted readers. They thus regarded it as a practice that should be conducted with due regard for clients and due respect for the facts. The problem with Chief Huang was that he reversed the proper means-ends relationship and encouraged journalists to behave as though the newspaper’s only purpose was to produce black articles for profit.

On the one occasion where I had the opportunity to ask the editor-in-chief directly about his approach to running *The Times*, he explained by telling me about the news industry’s “food chain” (*shiwu lian*). “The news industry’s food chain is very clear, and all of us have to face it. On the top are the companies, in the middle are the advertising agencies, and then there are us newspapers, down at the bottom,” he said, placing his hand at three points in the air to mark the three descending tiers of an invisible hierarchy. “Selling newspapers is just like selling anything else—you have to appeal to your clients,” he said, referring back up from the newspaper’s position at the bot-

tom to the advertising agencies and companies above it. “As long as you are in business, you have to work to please your clients. If I were selling laundry detergent, I would try to appeal to the housewives who wash clothes.”

Without asking him directly about black articles, I tried to push him on what principles he considered it his duty to uphold as a newsmaker and an intellectual (*zhishi fenzi*). “Why should I think of myself as an intellectual? Does Rupert Murdoch think of himself as an intellectual? I am an entrepreneur. What I do is business,” he replied with a nonchalant air. When I pressed him on the standards of truthfulness *The Times* should maintain, he dismissed the question as wrongheaded. “Only schoolchildren rigidly stick to just one set of statements (*yitao*),” he said. “Just look at Obama. When he’s talking to black people says, ‘I’m black,’ and when he’s talking to white people says, ‘I’m from Harvard.’ When he’s talking to Muslims he says, ‘There are Muslims in my family too, brother.’ That’s what we have to be like!” Figuring himself as a businessman whose words and actions were entirely determined by the forces and logics of his industry, Chief Huang maintained that he had no choice but to produce whatever statements the newspaper’s situation required.

As for Chief Huang’s favored Economics journalist, Qian Hao, I found that he had his own perspective on the soft and black articles he was writing. Rather than seeing them as a regrettable but necessary expedient, he spoke with pride about the deals his articles had brokered, the large sums of revenue that he had helped *The Times* earn and how trusted and esteemed he was by Chief Huang. Aware that his colleagues at the Politics desk were critical of how aggressively he pursued black article deals, Qian Hao defended his approach. “In news, there’s no such thing as good and bad—only more or less valuable!” he once declared over tea at his apartment. Arguing that all moral distinctions were illusory guises for particular interests and agendas, he substantiated this claim with a litany of (rather debatable) philosophical and historical references:

It has always been power that determines thought, and not thought that determines power. That’s the noblest insight of Marx and Lenin, and it’s true even of Confucian thought. It was only because Confucian thought suited the interests of Han Wu Di<sup>6</sup> that he destroyed all the other schools of thought and propagated Confucian thought alone, not because there was anything good about Confucianism itself. In fact, while Confucius’s teachings are all about benevolence and things like that, Han Wu Di spent his whole life making war.

Qian Hao's point, as I understood it, was that discursive institutions such as the news should not be thought of as a means to achieve any general or collective good, because those who were in the position to control and shape the truth-claims that these institutions circulated invariably did so to advance their own interests. Just as Han Wu Di had used China's imperial institutions of learning to expand his political empire, so did the Communist Party use the present-day news media to promote its own political rule—and so did everyone else in the news sector use it to advance their own respective agendas. The manager of the state-owned media group that created *The Times* was using it to promote his bureaucratic career, while the editor-in-chief was using it to grow his personal wealth and boost his standing in the media industry. As a journalist who recognized these realities, Qian Hao was determined to use his position to his own greatest profit—to pad his salary and climb the ladder of his boss's favor. He asserted that any sensible journalist would use their position in the same way.

When I suggested that the Politics journalists were trying not only to secure their own interests but also to make *The Times* a newspaper that was of value to its readers, Qian Hao responded with a mix of disparagement and indignation. Whatever aspirations they thought they were pursuing, he argued, their labors did not actually do anything for anyone:

The Politics section's articles have no influence (*yingxiangli*) whatsoever! Look, even when an article is poorly written, they go ahead and publish it anyways. That's because they know that it doesn't really matter. Whether or not anyone reads their articles doesn't change a thing. The Economics section's articles at least have some impact. This impact may only be reflected in the advertising revenue that we generate, but at least the fact that people will pay us to publish or not publish our articles shows that our articles have some effect. It shows that people feel the need to take our articles seriously and do something about them. No one feels that way about the Politics section's articles.

Dismissing the Politics journalists' professed ideals as illusory notions, Qian Hao judged the value of their work by its immediate and observable effects on *The Times'* business. By this measure, it was the Economics journalists who were at least able to achieve some concrete impact. In the perspective that Qian Hao maintained—where there were only concrete and immediate

goods to achieve, and no distant and abstract goals to work toward—he was the more effective and worthier newsmaker.

One could denounce the approaches that Chief Huang and Qian Hao took to their work as unprofessional and even immoral. When I had first learned of *The Times'* soft- and black-article trade, I indeed drew a line between those on the staff who were rightly determined to uphold the proper principles of their profession and those who were dismally willing to abuse their newsmaking capacities for money. What I came to appreciate through my time at *The Times*, however, was how its Politics journalists did not regard themselves or their colleagues in such categorical terms. Rather than seeing their newspaper as an organization that existed to provide news readers with the truth, the journalists saw it as an enterprise entangled with non-journalistic investments and interests, and as an organization whose staff members were oriented to these entanglements in different ways that led them to approach their work with different senses of degree and measure. While the Politics journalists' ideas about how good newsmakers should conduct themselves differed from their colleagues', they did not consider it their place to denounce their colleagues' approach—it was, after all, the soft and black articles that kept their newspaper in operation.

Rather than confronting the editor-in-chief on their moral and professional differences, the Politics journalists maintained a sort of passive disapproval and distance from their boss's schemes and ventures. Their stance was well illustrated at another one of the newspaper's all-staff meetings, where the editor-in-chief again urged the journalists to put their reportorial skills in the service of the newspaper's soft- and black-article trade. Chief Huang addressed his comments directly to Liang Yong and Zheng Wen:

I know that you both like investigative news. But you have to see the bigger picture. We are trying to become a one-billion-yuan company. You may really enjoy doing investigative stories, but when you see the bigger picture, you'll realize that this isn't where the future lies. You have to transform yourself (*zhuanxing*) to keep up with the times. Qian Hao has made the transformation. You all need to make the transformation too.

Put on the spot, Liang Yong and Zheng Wen kept quiet and stared vacantly at the space in front of them. Over dinner that evening, however, without their boss around, the journalists mocked Chief Huang's crass representation of their profession. "I haven't made the transformation yet? That's because I

still have my good senses (*liangzhi*)," Liang Yong said disdainfully. "A person needs to have a bottom line (*dixian*). What Chief Huang wants us to do is beyond where I draw mine." Zheng Wen, in an equally disparaging tone, seconded his position: "Why should I have to transform myself? Only monkeys need to transform [i.e., evolve into humans]. I am a person. I have no need to transform any further."

Talking back to their editor-in-chief behind his back, the journalists did not cut a valiant or heroic figure. An ungenerous reading of their practice might describe them as newsmakers who claimed to disapprove of their colleagues' conduct while reaping the benefits of this bad behavior, or as individuals who professed to be pursuing a journalistic ideal while acquiescing in its betrayal. But in a newsmaking milieu where the journalists' endeavor to inform and empower their readers was inextricably entangled with the self-interested agendas of various bosses, colleagues, and clients, the ethic of efficacy that Liang Yong and Zheng Wen subscribed to provided them with a framework for drawing principled distinctions and setting professional bottom lines that they would not allow themselves to cross. The Politics journalists' ethic of efficacy enabled them to steer a course of principled action in a post-truth news era, when journalists can no longer fall back on cultural constructions of the news as a medium of objective and disinterested truths, but must come to terms with the way that their own truth-claims are shaped by the interplay of numerous private investments and negotiations. It enabled them to work strategically and constructively with a range of differently interested actors without being co-opted by these actors' agendas, and to remain oriented to their newsmaking ideals in a milieu that hardly seemed to appreciate their efforts—thus offering an example of what a post-truth news practice may demand.

## CHAPTER 5

### *News as Currency*

One objective that motivates many of the individuals who work in China's news sector, as elsewhere, is to make money. Discussions of journalism in China have sometimes placed great emphasis on this fact and framed it as the reason for the institution's tendency to passively reproduce the Party line. One study, for instance, describes the "outright majority of all Chinese news workers" as "workaday reporters . . . who see their work as not a calling but merely a source of income" (Hassid 2016, 9). "Concerned primarily with making money," the author of this study writes, "such reporters encourage a culture of corruption and complaisance in the press that arguably does more to keep the Chinese media supine than the enduring legacy of heavy press censorship" (Hassid 2016, 9).

Rather than imposing judgments about money-driven as opposed to vocation-driven newsmakers and about supine as opposed to upright media systems, I draw in this chapter on my engagements with *The Times'* newsmakers to develop the argument that the political and commercial dimensions of China's news sector are not merely shaped by its journalists' drive to make money, but more significantly have the effect of making news articles work *like a kind of* money. I develop this analogy by drawing on recent works in the anthropology and sociology of money that look at how money is used not simply to buy and sell things, but as a means of working in and on the networks of interpersonal relationships that constitute people's social and cultural worlds. These studies point out that monetary transactions are socially and culturally meaningful exchanges that infuse the dollars transacted with qualitative forms of value that are not reducible to the quantitative sums inscribed on them. In a similar way, I show how *The Times'* news articles were made and used in transactions and relationships that gave them a value that was not reflected in the reports that they carried. News

articles, in other words, held a kind of value for their makers that was distinct from the kind of value they presented to their readers.

I argue that this currency-like quality of *The Times'* news articles gave the medium a different kind of opacity than that which is created by political censorship and control. Where the news media work as a politically controlled institution, realities can be systematically misrepresented and news audiences misinformed in a consistent and coherent manner. Where news articles work like a kind of currency, in contrast, they are made and used to achieve diverse objectives within particular transactions and relationships—and consequently misinform their audiences in a vast array of disparate and often unintended manners. News in these circumstances can come to seem like a medium of texts that do less to serve their ostensible publics than to mediate the private negotiations and relationships of those who are involved in producing them. I suggest that more than the conditions of political censorship and control that *The Times'* journalists worked under, it was this aspect of the news media that most prompted them to question the worth of their practice and doubt the value of their ideals.

## NEWS AND MONEY

News and money may seem at first to make awkward analogues. News articles are qualitatively distinct pieces of prose with specific and noninterchangeable meanings. Money, on the other hand, is a quantitative measure of the singularly economic form of value that otherwise disparate objects have in common. In the classical social theories of money, most famously represented by Karl Marx and Georg Simmel, money was construed as an objective and objectifying representational medium that had the power to bring qualitatively incommensurable things into relations of quantitative equivalence and rationally self-interested exchange (Maurer 2006). By showing that everything could be priced, money was held to draw people and things out of their socially and culturally constituted worlds, into the asocial arena of purely economic relations known as “the market.” Here it was said to institute a form of impersonal economic reason that threatened to corrode and eventually replace the culturally meaningful and diverse social worlds that people had hitherto inhabited.

More recent sociologists and anthropologists, however, have argued that the asocial logic that money imposes is only one side of the proverbial coin.

Viviana Zelizer, studying the way that people “ earmark ” their money for distinct and noninterchangeable uses, finds that not all dollars are, in practice, the same—people create and use different parcels of money in different ways that are shaped by their socially and culturally constituted notions of appropriateness and desirability. Rather than being a solvent of all personal ties, Zelizer argues that money, in fact, works as “ a socially created currency, subject to particular networks of social relations ” (V. A. Zelizer 1994, 19). Indeed, Zelizer and others find that money is often used specifically to work *on* these networks of relations. People engage in and budget for specific expenditures (such as a friend’s wedding or a child’s college fund) and make specific gifts and donations (to a bereaved relative or a religious organization, say), as a means to “ create, maintain, negotiate and sometimes dissolve ” (Bandelj, Wherry, and Zelizer 2017a, 6) the social and cultural ties that bind them. Rather than replacing all interpersonal relations with a purely economic logic, money is used by people precisely to engage in the “ relational work ” (Bandelj 2016; V. A. Zelizer 2012) of making and shaping their interpersonal networks. Working with villagers in Southern China, Julie Chu (2010) indeed finds that money is used to mediate relationships not only between people but also with gods and ancestors.

Surveying the debates that are waged over the productive and destructive effects that money can have, Keith Hart calls for money to be analyzed as an institution that “ is always both personal and impersonal ” (2007, 16). On the one hand, he points out, money is as “ an instrument detached from the person who uses it ” (12)—a dollar bill, to wit, bears no relation to its temporary holder. As an objectification of this autonomous and fungible form of value, money allows for the construction of an abstract arena of exchange where all persons and things can, in principle, meet and be transacted. It allows for the construction of this institution—the market—and for a host of discourses and infrastructures to be built on the grounds of this notion. At the same time, however, money’s capacity to create and circulate in abstract arenas of impersonal exchange also makes it an object of value within people’s concrete and personal lives. Money is something that people living in specific contexts and circumstances use to buy and sell particular things, create particular relations of credit and debt, and participate in these relations in particular ways. These transactions are enabled by but not reducible to money’s impersonality, for the motivations and rationalities that shape them are determined by the transacting individuals’ personal perceptions and desires.

What this means is that contra the classical theories, money does not

function as an objective measure of the economic value of all things, but rather, works in ways that are irreducibly situational, contingent, and opaque. Rather than creating a world of transparent and legible costs, utilities, and profits, money works, as Jane Guyer writes, “in local spaces and moments of time, where multiple currencies, changing relationships, and many margins at play generate advantages to be created or lost” (2017, 45–46). It is engaged with by actors who do not have perfect information on the markets they are in, but draw on a “repertoire” (Guyer 2004) of context-specific strategies to negotiate, hedge, and harness the uncertainties of the situations that they find themselves in to achieve their subjectively desired outcomes. Bill Maurer, in line with this argument, calls for an anthropology of money that moves beyond the “semiotic” question of what money does and does not represent, to explore the diverse ways in which it is used in practice—or as Maurer puts it, to explore “money’s pragmatics” (2006, 16). He cites Robert Foster’s (1999) observation that “‘money is always representationally flawed’” (Maurer 2006, 30). The numerical value of a sum of money never tells the whole story of how that sum of money works in the networks of social relations where it is deployed, or what it does for the people who use it. The impersonal form of value that is objectified and made legible on the face of a dollar bill enables it to function as a medium of exchange, but never reflects the value that that dollar has in the lives and worlds of the people who transact in it.

It is in this sense that *The Times*’ news articles can be compared to a kind of currency. News articles are texts whose culturally constructed status as “news” allows them to circulate in the media’s impersonal arena of exchange. The impersonality of this arena, in theory, constitutes news writers and readers as members of a public who engage with one another as such. In *The Times*’ context, however, the news article’s capacity for public circulation made it a text that could also be used to engender private transactions within the individual’s personal network of relations. News articles could be written and published as a means to create relationships with particular actors, through transactions that were shaped by these actors’ subjective perceptions and desires. We have seen, for instance, how *The Times*’ newsmakers produced soft and black articles about companies to initiate negotiations and create business relationships with these companies’ executives. We have also seen how the newsmakers produced and published propaganda articles to create amicable relationships with Party officials, who might feel reciprocally inclined to help them later on. News articles, in these practices, worked

as texts whose public circulability gave them a perceived value to company executives and Party officials, who could therefore be drawn into private negotiations and agreements with *The Times'* newsmakers. Like a kind of currency, news articles were used by individuals interacting in local spaces and moments of time, where multiple factors at play created diverse advantages and liabilities to exploit and manage, mediating exchanges among actors with a repertoire of strategies for making optimal use of these opaque and uncertain situations.

The ethic of efficacy that the Politics journalists strove to uphold can be thought of as the newsmaking ethic that they devised for working with this currency-like medium. It was an ethic that centered not on the criterion of truthfulness, but on the question of how effectively the journalists could use their news-writing assignments to advance their newsmaking project—or, in other words, on the journalists' ability to use the news' currency in ways that were practically and strategically advantageous to their own newsmaking endeavors. The journalists' ethic of efficacy was grounded in their recognition that news articles in their context were always being used to engender transactions among actors that were not disclosed to the public—and that it was not feasible or meaningful in such circumstances for them to maintain that news should always be made to represent reality as truthfully as possible. Rather than being rigidly determined to only produce truthful and informative news reports, the Politics journalists strove to be newsmakers who could use the news' currency to accumulate resources and build up their capacity to produce more informative and impactful articles as and when such opportunities arose.

Although this did not happen as often as they would have preferred, the journalists were occasionally able to write stories that revealed new facts about socially important issues. When Fan Xiaofei once managed to conduct an exclusive interview with a high-profile internet company executive who told her how difficult it was to navigate China's regulatory environment, for instance, she was able to publish an article that offered an insider's account of some of the industry's unofficial and normally unreported norms and practices. When a healthcare worker that Liang Yong interviewed told him about his hospital's role in China's organ donation and transplant system, Liang Yong was able to publish an article that offered concrete details on a socially and morally controversial topic about which there is little publicly available information. Both of these articles were quickly picked up and featured by online news portals, where they received many "views," which the

journalists took as a mark of their having made a significant impact. Such instances noticeably boosted the journalists' morale and affirmed their sense of their newsmaking practice as a worthy endeavor. These achievements, however, were the exception rather than the norm.

In this chapter, I attend to those moments in the journalists' practice that made them feel less sanguine about their work. These are moments where the news' currency-like character seemed mostly to enable individuals in the news sector to broker transactions and foster relationships that were personally beneficial. News, from this angle, seemed to do more for newsmakers than for the public it supposedly existed to serve. Indeed, it seemed to be the public that served as the enabling premise or excuse for the production and circulation of texts whose primary function was to provide the news sector's various players with a means of gainfully dealing with (and against) one another. I look at how these moments of the Politics journalists' news practice prompted them to doubt the validity of their approach to their work—that is, to wonder if it was meaningful for them to try to make *The Times* a newspaper that informed and empowered its readers, or if they should instead focus on using their newsmaking capacities to benefit themselves. While the ambivalence that the Politics journalists felt toward their practice emerged in circumstances unique to China, I suggest that a grasp of the news' capacity to work like currency may be useful for thinking about the challenges and doubts that journalists in other contemporary contexts are grappling with as well.

#### DELIVERING THE WORK

One aspect of the Politics journalists' practice about which they expressed consternation was the relentless demand to deliver publishable news articles. Although *The Times*' weekly news cycle is longer than that of a daily newspaper, it comes with the same demand that newsmakers face everywhere—a “news hole” that needs to be filled before press time regardless of whether the journalists have any new information to fill it with.<sup>1</sup> The *Times* journalists often discussed this aspect of their practice in terms of a personal need to produce news articles that they could use to satisfy their bosses. At *The Times*, as in many organizations in China, the employees' prospects—salaries, bonuses, and career advancement—were largely determined by their bosses' personal disposition toward them. Monthly salaries, for

instance, consisted of a low fixed wage combined with “article fees” (*gaofei*) calculated according to the number and length of the news articles they published. Their base pay and fee rate were determined by their rank—increasing in significant steps from the rank of junior, to intermediate, to senior reporter. Although the promotion process was officially governed by a set of formal metrics and standards, all decisions in practice hinged on the personal opinion of the section’s head editor and on his or her negotiations with the editor-in-chief, Huang Tao. In addition to monthly salaries, the journalists received quarterly bonuses that were in theory calculated according to objective assessments of their performance but, in reality, were again determined entirely by their bosses’ personal discretion. Added up over a year, the income differential between a journalist who enjoyed the boss’s favor and one who did not was thus significant, amounting to tens of thousands of yuan.

The impact that a boss’s approval could have on a journalist’s career (and indeed, life in general) was vividly illustrated in the person of Qian Hao, the Economics journalist who assiduously produced the black articles that Chief Huang wanted and who was rewarded with copious praise, generous bonuses, and brisk promotion to the rank of senior reporter. It was known by the staff that Chief Huang brought Qian Hao with him to meetings with clients and on business junkets that “required” them to consume travel, hotel, restaurant, massage, and even sexual services on the newspaper’s tab.<sup>2</sup> Chief Huang also appointed Qian Hao to ad hoc administrative tasks that made him privy to confidential information about the newspaper’s operations, and gave other journalists the sense that Qian Hao had the capacity to influence the editor-in-chief’s decisions. Qian Hao’s personal relationship with Chief Huang thus gave him informal power and elevated status within the organization. Many of the other journalists believed that the patron-client relationship between Qian Hao and Chief Huang would likely extend beyond *The Times*. When high-level executives in China leave one company to join or start another, it is common for them to “bring” (*dai*) some of “their people” (*tamen de ren*) with them. Many of *The Times*’ journalists assumed that Qian Hao’s relationship with Chief Huang would be his ticket to a position at another company, which might or might not be in the news sector.

*The Times*’ organizational culture thus made its journalists keenly conscious of how their actions would impact their relationships with their bosses in ways that might shape their future. In their day-to-day conversations, it was common for the journalists to describe their actions as under-

taken entirely for the purpose of staying in their bosses' good books. On assignments that they were not interested in or not optimistic about completing, for instance, they might say that they were going through the motions of putting an article together just "for the boss to see" (*gei laoban kan*). They spoke of updating their head editors on how their assignments were progressing just to "let the boss know" (*rang laoban zhidao*) that they were working, and of attending company events and meetings as something that they did only "to show the boss [their] face" (*lougelian*).

Although Chen Ming, in his capacity as the Politics section's head editor, strove to be more impartial and less personalistic than some his colleagues, the Politics journalists still understood their salaries and prospects at the newspaper to hinge primarily on his approval. This sometimes led their newsmaking practice to seem like a kind of arbitrage that consisted in taking words from other people and turning them into texts that the journalists could gainfully pass on to Chen Ming. This aspect of the journalists' practice was surfaced on a story I assisted Zheng Wen with, about an ongoing drought in China's southwestern region that was increasing the price of grain in Beijing. Chen Ming had instructed Zheng Wen to visit Beijing's wholesale markets to get a sense of how grain prices were changing, and to interview agricultural development experts on the implications for China's agricultural policies. Zheng Wen and I began with a trip to a wholesale grain market on the outskirts of the city. I assumed that we would spend a few hours interviewing different vendors to get a broad sense of how their businesses were affected. After speaking for less than ten minutes with the first vendor that we came across, however, Zheng Wen was prepared to leave. I asked in surprise if we should not speak to a few more vendors to triangulate our findings. Zheng Wen conceded that since we had traveled such a long way to get to the market, we might as well gather a bit more material. But after speaking with two more grain sellers for no more than five minutes each, he declared that we definitely had "enough material" (*gou cailiao*) to work with and should head somewhere for lunch.

Our next step was to interview an agricultural development researcher at the State Council Development Research Centre, with whom Zheng Wen had managed to secure an in-person meeting. I expected him to use this relatively rare opportunity to interrogate the government researcher and press him to do more than rehearse the Party's official line. Part way through the interview, however, I realized that Zheng Wen was not following up on the researcher's answers, but simply going down the list of inter-

view questions he had come prepared with. When we left the researcher's office, I asked what he thought of the researcher's position on China's agricultural development program and was again surprised to hear him confess that he did not remember much of what the researcher had said. Zheng Wen said that he had been so focused on getting *some* response from the researcher to each of the points he needed to cover, that he had not paid much attention to what the responses were. He said somewhat sheepishly that he would have to go back to listen to the recording. "Honestly, when you've been a journalist for some time and you know how news articles are written, it's difficult not to get slack (*fanlan*). It's a job, after all," he said, as though to excuse his conduct.

Zheng Wen's comments implied that when journalists "got slack" and approached reporting as a mere job, they ceased to use their assignments to advance any broader newsmaking endeavor and instead focused only on meeting their immediate boss's demands. The journalist's practice in this instance becomes little more than a matter of collecting quotations from others that can be assembled into articles the journalist can trade for their boss's approval and for the benefits this approval entails. What troubled the Politics journalists about this, I found, was the discrepancy it revealed between the figure of the journalist as someone who strove to improve the lives of other people and the figure of the journalist as someone who used other people's words to their own benefit. While the journalists wanted their profession to exist in the first mold, they were conscious of how it more often existed in the second.

I found this concern expressed in the half-joking anecdotes and caricatures of the Chinese journalist that Zheng Wen and his colleagues sometimes exchanged. The journalists told stories, for instance, of reporters who flocked to disaster scenes to get a good scoop and, encountering people trapped in buildings or crushed under rubble, did not offer them help but instead shoved audio recorders in their faces and asked questions like "How are you feeling right now?" and "Aren't you very thirsty?" Journalists were described in these tales as cold-hearted mercenaries who perversely "delighted in" (*huanxi*) disasters of all kinds (indeed, the bigger the better) as great opportunities to write lengthy news articles that their bosses were sure to be pleased by. Getting in the way of the relief work and ignoring the burden that their presence placed on the locals' already overstrained food, water, and shelter supplies, journalists were said to gleefully set up camp at any disaster site to milk it for articles.

Such grotesque portraits of the professional newsmaker reflected the Politics journalists' concern that for all the aspirations and ideals that they dressed it in, the newsmaker's trade was at base a matter of taking material from others and turning it into articles that newsmakers could use to benefit themselves. Rather than providing the public with information, news articles worked as a kind of currency that journalists—through a kind of textual arbitrage—could mint from the material they gathered and use to earn their bosses' favor, or foster gainful relationships within their organization. Rather than being especially devoted to the well-being of others, the journalist was accustomed to treating others as a source of raw material and thus especially indifferent to their suffering. The troubling notion that the journalists thus encountered in their tendency to “get slack” was the prospect of the news being a medium of texts that appeared to circulate for the benefit of its readers, but was in fact generated through the unceasing efforts of China's professional newsmakers to advantage themselves.

#### FRIED NEWS

Another aspect of their practice that sometimes dismayed the Politics journalists was *The Times'* tendency to look at what rival newspapers were covering and assign its journalists to produce reports on the same news items. This trend has been observed in many news sectors around the world. Working in Argentina, Pablo Boczkowski (2010) finds that newsmakers feel pressured to constantly “monitor” and “imitate” their rivals' news coverage or risk losing readership. As journalists find themselves continuously “calibrat[ing] their actions vis-à-vis the competition,” their practice becomes, as one of Boczkowski's interlocutors puts it, an “exercise that stops having the reader as referent and begins to have the other media as referent” instead (61–62). Boczkowski argues that such imitation leads to an increasing “homogenization” in the news media, creating a condition where news readers have access to a greater number of news platforms but a more limited range of news content. The concern that he and many others share is that this trend toward more superficially varied but in effect homogenous informational content is detrimental to the news' democratic function.<sup>3</sup>

Working in China's context, *The Times'* journalists were struck less by how the trend toward imitation was related to the issue of democracy than by how it made the news media work in a comparable way to a stock

exchange. The journalists referred to the practice of covering items that other news outlets were already covering as “frying up” (*chao qilai*) news.<sup>4</sup> The term “frying up”—often translated into English as creating “hype” or “hyping” something—is widely used in popular Chinese discourse to refer to actions that drive up the price of a tradable stock or commodity. A company’s stock is said to be fried up, for instance, when its price is inflated by positive publicity that fuels bullish sentiments and attracts speculative investors. A common topic of conversation among financially savvy urbanites is what stocks and commodities China’s traders are currently frying and which fried-up price bubbles are likely to burst—with the traded assets ranging from bonds and shares to currencies and real estate to consumables like tea, mushrooms, star anise, and garlic.

In describing the practice of imitation as one of frying news, *The Times*’ journalists analogized newspapers to market speculators who were looking to profit from the upward-trending price of a stock. When newspapers publish reports on a particular topic, the perceived news value of that topic can be driven up—attracting other newspapers to try to buy in while the market is hot, or produce and publish their own reports on the topic while its news value is still increasing. The topic itself—like the material properties of a garlic head to a trader of garlic futures—is a matter of indifference to the newsmaker, whose attention is focused exclusively on reading the patterns in the other newsmakers’ behavior and timing publication to profit by these patterns. Like the journalists’ anecdotes on disaster reporting, this comparison also figured the professional newsmaker as someone who instead of being especially concerned about events in society, was adept at filtering out these events’ significance and handling them strictly as tradable material.

I myself had the chance to participate in the frying up of a news item when Chen Ming assigned me to a story that other newspapers were already covering: a retired engineer who claimed to have solved China’s urban housing shortage by building low-cost “capsule apartments” (*jiaonang gongyu*). The seventy-eight-year-old Beijinger had rented a one-room apartment on the city’s outskirts and, using a combination of metal grills and wooden planks, built eight individually enclosed bed-spaces in it. He was calling for such “apartments” to be built at scale, as a form of affordable housing for the tens of thousands of rural migrants who struggled to find safe and habitable residences in China’s major cities. The old man’s cage-like “apartments” were clearly not a feasible solution to the problem—but a reputable Beijing newspaper had picked the story up and spun it as a

novel instance of an elderly citizen taking it upon himself to help solve one of the nation's most pressing socioeconomic problems. Several news portal sites republished the article under variously embellished headlines, and several other newspapers then produced and published their own reports on the old man's "invention," which they now described as an issue that was garnering many netizens' attention.

It was at this point that Chen Ming suggested I write an article on the topic for *The Times*. With so many other newspapers reporting the story, it would be good for *The Times* to cover it too, to demonstrate the newspaper's "timeliness" (*shixiaoxing*) and "mainstream character" (*zhuliuxing*). The item was doable for a novice like me because it was a human-interest story that one did not need any specialized knowledge to write about. Chen Ming did not tell me to take any particular angle, but emphasized that the article should be readable and done in time for the next week's issue. While an article on the capsule apartments in the next issue would show that *The Times* kept abreast of the latest trends, the same article published the week after would have the opposite effect, making the newspaper seem like it was two steps behind the rest of the media and incapable of keeping up. Past the next issue's deadline, Chen Ming warned, my article would not be publishable.

I spent my next two days visiting the capsule apartments and interviewing their inventor, alongside reporters and cameramen from a slew of other news outlets. Chen Ming was pleased with the article I wrote and praised me on the Politics chat group. Out of curiosity, I continued to follow the old man's project even though my assignment was done. Articles on the innovative old man appeared over the next few days, not only in dozens of Chinese newspapers but also on Reuters, CNN and ABC News online, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *International Business Times*, the UK's *Telegraph*, Spain's *El Mundo*, *Le Figaro* in France, *The Tribune* in India, and Singapore's *Asia One* news site. Tencent, one of China's largest internet and media companies, organized a press event around the old man and his invention at an office building in Beijing's high-tech district. The event was attended by over a hundred people and live-tweeted on one of Tencent's online platforms. After a week or so, however, the media's attention began to wane and the number of journalists coming by to interview the old man dwindled. He began emailing those of us who had covered his capsule apartments to inform us of his latest improvements. He attached PowerPoint decks and AutoCAD files detailing his modifications. He also applied for patents on his capsule designs and wrote an open letter to the Communist Party's top leaders calling for the

mass construction of his apartments. But there seemed to be nothing he could do to bring the media's attention back.

When I shared these developments with Liang Yong, he responded with an unsurprised air:

A lot of news stories are fried up these days. You often see news items that aren't of much actual news value getting a lot of newspapers reporting on them. It starts with one newspaper finding a news item that has some novelty to it and publishing an article. Then other journalists see [the article] and feel like it's an item that they can do too. When a number of news outlets have run stories on it, other newspapers that wouldn't normally cover such topics also decide to follow. They see the news item as one that netizens are interested in, and this itself makes it something to report on. In the meantime, so many other terrible things are happening in China every day that don't get reported at all.

Liang Yong's comments expressed a sense of resignation—newsmakers were now so focused on following one another that the news had an arbitrary relationship to reality. I was struck both by the idea of this arbitrariness being a common condition of the journalists' practice and by the idea of news frying being a significant contributor to the problem of selective coverage.

In many discussions of China's news media, the fact that many terrible things do not get reported is attributed to Party censorship and control. The news media is framed as an institution that decides whether or not to inform the public about events depending on the political interests of the Party. In Liang Yong's portrayal, however, the news is not such a coherent institution. Which facts get publicized is a question of which news stories happen to become the subject of a trend that it is in the interests of newspapers to follow. This in turn is the upshot of an amalgam of factors that include the competitive marketing strategies of each newspaper, editors' perceptions of audience interest, judgments of feasibility, timing decisions, and efforts to gainfully position one's own platform against another. Rather than present the public with news reports that conform to carefully considered criteria, the news media in this view is an acephalous institution. Like a stock market whose price fluctuations are the cumulative effect of many speculators' disparate and contingent decisions, the news media operates in a blind and unreasoning manner, not to achieve a particular effect on the public but through the contingent actions and interactions of countless privately interested (and mutually monitoring) actors.

The last of the capsule apartment inventor's self-organized "press conferences" I attended, more than a year after I had first interviewed him for *The Times*, was held at his own apartment. Apart from me, only two other, clearly young and junior, journalists attended. Presenting his newest capsule design on a widescreen monitor that he had set up in his cramped living room, the old man expressed his frustration at the media's loss of interest in his project: "You journalists should be helping me to publicize (*xuanchuan*) my invention! I'm doing this to solve a problem and the problem hasn't been solved yet. Isn't the news supposed to help society solve its problem? If you journalists aren't interested in doing that, then what is it you are doing?" He all but yelled at us. Seated on his couch, uncomfortably close to the man and the oversized monitor, the other journalists and I said nothing in response. We sat through the rest of his slides, had no questions at the end of his presentation, and took our leave as politely as we could.

On our way out, I asked the others if they were planning to write a story on how the old man's project had progressed. Both said they were not, because they knew that their editors would not be interested. "Even if you write [the article], you won't be able to get it out (*chubuliao*)," one of them said, meaning that the article would not be published. The other, agreeing, said that he had only come to the event because he felt bad for the old man, who had emailed and telephoned him several times to invite him. The old man, who assumed that journalism's purpose was to "help society solve its problems," could not understand why the media were not following his project through to fruition, but even these unseasoned journalists understood that the project's news value was never a function of the project itself. The capsule apartments were an ineffective and trivial pseudoinvention that the news media had fried up, and its bubble had long since burst. No one could get an article on the topic published at this point. While others might think that some kind of normative reasoning drove the news media's coverage, the professional newsmaker understood that it was largely determined by news outlets' need to continuously position themselves in relation to one another.

#### A CONSORTIUM OF DEALERS

Perhaps the most discouraging moments of the Politics journalists' practice were those that arose from the approach that *The Times'* own executive-level editors or bosses seemed to take. Rather than treating the organization as a corps of like-minded newsmakers with a shared journalistic mission, the

newspaper's editor-in-chief, two deputy editors-in-chief, and various other high-level managers had a common tendency to both describe and engage with its staff members as a loose consortium of individuals who were temporarily brought together by their each having a particular interest in using the newspaper to achieve something for themselves. The most consistent and energetic exponent of this view was the editor-in-chief himself. Chief Huang made it clear to the staff that it was his personal mission to make the newspaper a commercial success because his "reputation" (*mingsheng*) and "stature" (*diwei*) in the media industry were staked on it. He often tried to persuade the journalists that their interests and ambitions were pegged to the same outcome. At one meeting, he told the Politics journalists:

I know you all want to write breakthrough news stories and become famous reporters. I want to support you in that. When our revenues go up, I'll be able to give you more resources. You can have more time to delve deeper into your stories. You can travel to news sites and stay there for two weeks or even a month if you like. You can write all the in-depth articles that you want. And your article fees will be higher too. But to get there, we first need to pull up our revenue.

Chief Huang's comments addressed the Politics journalists not as individuals who aspired to benefit others, but as individuals who were also using the newspaper as a means to pursue fame and fortune, only in a different way than he was. The lofty-seeming ideals of information and empowerment that the Politics journalists preferred to think they were motivated by were, in the editor-in-chief's framing, only another variant of the same basic desire for recognition and status. Chief Huang argued that the journalists' desires would, like his, be well served by the newspaper's commercial success. He cast himself as someone they should work with to achieve this win-win outcome.

An animated and excitable man in general, Chief Huang was liable to become particularly excited when discussing his newspaper's business prospects. The statements he made in such heightened moments of performativity were sometimes more evocative than logical. "We are trying to become a publicly listed newspaper! Think how valuable our stock will be!" he raved at the journalists at one meeting. "Of course, *The Times* does not have a policy of issuing shares to its staff members, so you will have to pursue the goal as a matter of honor (*rongyu*). Do this for the sake of your honor. Each one of you

is like an enterprise (*qiye*) that opened the day that you joined *The Times*. Do you know that? You need to write articles that people will look at and say, ‘Wow, you’ve struck it rich!’”

While the precise meaning of the metaphors that Chief Huang used were not always obvious, his performances did make it clear to the Politics journalists that the editor-in-chief of their newspaper did not see it as an organization whose main objective was to produce good journalism. He was glad to have them pursue this objective if they wanted to, insofar as it might contribute to *The Times*’ commercial success—but he did not regard it as an inherently worthy endeavor. In the view of the editor-in-chief, the Politics journalists’ newsmaking goals were their own preoccupation. Rather than a practice that served the public or that improved society, the journalists’ endeavor to produce impactful news articles was merely a personal pursuit that their own sense of gratification and self-worth was for some reason invested in—which the editor-in-chief did not share, but was happy to have them go after while he pursued his own path to renown.

*The Times*’ two deputy editors-in-chief were not as inclined to effusive speeches and did not interact with the Politics journalists as frequently as Chief Huang did. Yet even as relatively marginal figures in the journalists’ work lives, the two bosses also contributed to a sense of the newspaper as a site of individual pathways and pursuits. One of the overt ways in which they did so was by assigning the journalists to write news articles in order to foster connections with people outside the newspaper. One deputy editor-in-chief, a lady in her midforties named Guo Aiguo, regularly assigned the Politics journalists to write “propaganda articles” that praised and promoted the Guangdong provincial Party’s policies and programs. This was understood by the newspaper’s staff members to be, at one level, a means of earning support for *The Times* from local Party officials, who might provide the newspaper with various forms of assistance or protection later on and, at another level, to be part of Guo Aiguo’s endeavor to foster her own connections with officials in the Guangdong provincial Publicity Department. When Guo Aiguo eventually left *The Times* for a job with the provincial Publicity Department, she was uniformly understood to have created this pathway for herself using these connections. Guo Aiguo had used her capacity as deputy editor-in-chief to have her journalists produce news articles that showed her personal commitment to certain local officials, who reciprocated by offering her a better-paying and more secure job within the Party bureaucracy.

The other deputy editor-in-chief, a man in his midthirties named Lin Youpeng, was described by the Politics journalists as a “literati-type person” (*wenren*) who had been drawn to journalism in his idealistic youth but later grew disillusioned. He was said to now treat the news industry merely as a means to make a living, performing his editorial duties in the most perfunctory possible manner and spending most of his time in his office drinking tea, writing poetry, and playing Go on the internet. On the rare occasions when Lin Youpeng did engage with the Politics journalists, it was to assign them to write stories as favors to his friends and acquaintances. When he later left *The Times* for a job as the head of public relations at a real estate company, the journalists similarly understood this to be a career advance that he had secured for himself through the personal connections that he had used his position at the newspaper to build.

While the Politics journalists preferred to think of themselves as newsmakers who were oriented to their work by their journalistic goals and ideals, the example set by their own executive-level editors made it difficult for them not to wonder if this was a mistaken view. While the journalists used their news assignments to build up their newsmaking capacities and make themselves better at producing impactful news, their bosses were focused on publishing articles that expanded their own relational networks. While the journalists’ efforts were premised on the idea that news could engage and empower its readers, their bosses showed that it was much more a kind of currency that an individual could use in transactions and relationships that were of value to themselves. The journalists had to wonder if there was in fact a greater moral or professional merit to their stance, or if its only real effect was to cost them opportunities that others were busily seizing.

This undercurrent of ambivalence in the journalists’ practice crystallized in their discussions of investigative news. Investigative news reporting has a long and renowned history in China (Tong 2011; Laughlin 2002) and is lauded in both popular and official discourse as a righteous practice of bringing the injustices and abuses suffered by ordinary people into the light of public knowledge. The Politics journalists in their more energized moments identified as adherents of this view. They described themselves as having been captivated by and drawn to the journalistic profession in their youth through the bold exposés that the celebrated investigative newspaper *Southern Weekend* produced in the 1990s. Reflecting on their years in the profession, Liang Yong and Zheng Wen would recount the investigative stories that they had worked on as the most rewarding experiences they had had,

and the news stories they were proudest to have written. In their less sanguine moods, however, the journalists would take a starkly contrastive position. Rather than speak of investigative news reporting as inherently good and meaningful, they would assess its costs and benefits and find it not worthwhile.

Zheng Wen, on one such occasion, spoke of how little the investigative news stories he had written had advanced his career. “Investigative stories are easy to write because there’s always a story to tell. But it’s difficult to accumulate resources [i.e., personal contacts]. You mostly travel around and interview people that you’re never going to see again,” he said. After having spent his first two years at *The Times* writing mostly investigative news stories, Zheng Wen realized that he needed to move on to a beat that was more “specialized” (*zhuanye*) and less “grassroots” (*caogen*). It was only by accumulating knowledge and building up a network of contacts in a more specialized field that he could hope to move up from being a generic and easily replaceable front-line reporter to being a journalist who was “of greater value” (*jiazhi bijiao gao*) to his newspaper and who could therefore demand better remuneration. Zheng Wen and his fiancé were aiming to buy an apartment and start a family in Guangzhou.<sup>5</sup> This aspiration made him more concerned about his job security and earning potential than he had been in his younger days. Zheng Wen told me that he was taking his posting to *The Times*’ Beijing bureau as an opportunity to develop himself into a specialist in legal and judicial news. To this end, he was making it a point to write more stories on China’s judicial reforms that would give him occasion to meet more lawyers and researchers working in law and jurisprudence. Getting to know more lawyers, Zheng Wen added, would also improve his chances of getting a job in the legal field, should he decide to leave the news sector.

Liang Yong, on a separate occasion, described a similar sense of needing to move on from the practice of investigative news reporting:

The main advantage of being a journalist is that you can constantly meet new people and build up a wider network of connections (*renmai*) than other people can. But when you do investigative stories, you expose people’s wrongdoings and offend them. You make enemies rather than friends. When you’re young, you don’t think about this. You feel that your own ideals are the truest and you don’t care about anything else. But as you get older, you realize that you might not be right. Everyone has their reasons for doing what they do. What makes your opinion any righter than theirs? You realize that instead of

fighting for your so-called ideals, you should be starting to do something for yourself. Settling down, having children. Doing things that make your parents happy. Why run around offending people? Are you really helping anyone by doing this? You're only creating disadvantages for yourself. You start to think: doing this kind of news, is it worth it?

If the journalists in their youthful moments were guided by the feeling that telling investigative stories was a worthy thing to do, their more wizened selves realized that there came a time to grow up and behave more like their bosses—to think about what their journalism did for them, to consider the friends and enemies they could make and write articles that translated into personal advantage.

In line with this sentiment, the journalists sometimes launched cynical readings of the investigative stories they encountered in the news. An article exposing employee abuse at a company, for instance, must have been leaked to the press by the company's rivals, or was published because attempts to negotiate a soft-article deal with the company had fallen through. An article revealing the corrupt conduct of a Party official was a sign of Party infighting, or a case of the press being used to legitimate the official's elimination by political rivals. Viewed from this standpoint, investigative journalism was news that appeared to present public truths while actually facilitating the maneuvers of privately interested actors. Indeed, even the celebrated *Southern Weekend* was recast by the journalists as a newspaper that selected its targets strategically with an eye to its own political and commercial agendas. Through such discourses of disillusionment, the Politics journalists painted China's news sector as one in which there was no one who was not focused on using news articles to get something for themselves.

#### A MEDIUM OF OPACITY

In the Politics journalists' perspective, the news media in China were not institutions that misinformed readers by telling them only what the Party wanted them to hear, so much as purveyors of texts that did different things for different actors that were neither reducible to nor reflected in the truth-claims they presented. News articles were texts whose public circulability made them objects of value within the private networks of relations that the news sector's various players were embedded in. These players thus produced

and used the news to engender transactions and outcomes that the public had no way of knowing about. What troubled the Politics journalists was not the idea that their medium led its readers to see things in one particular way or another, so much as the idea that it rested on and in fact worked by reproducing its readers' ignorance. It presented the public with certain truth-claims while doing other things—or producing other truths—that it did not reveal.

This sense surfaced in a conversation with some of *The Times'* newsmakers about the newspaper's circulation numbers. Circulation numbers in China are a closely guarded company secret. Every newspaper brandishes an official circulation that is known to be inflated for marketing purposes, while its actual figures are known only to the newspaper's topmost executives.<sup>6</sup> As willing as the Politics journalists were to help me find out what *The Times'* actual circulation was, they were just as much in the dark as I was. One evening, I found myself in a position to raise the issue with the head of *The Times'* Marketing Department, Li Hai, to see what he might reveal.

Li Hai, in an unusually amicable mood, had invited Liang Yong, Xiaofei, and me to his home for an after-work dinner. Over drinks and appetizers, I tried to broach the subject of *The Times'* circulation numbers by telling him about a survey I had recently come across that put China's per capita newspaper readership at the highest in the world. When Li Hai heard this, he almost choked on his beer. Chortling, he said:

Whatever number you see, divide it by ten. That will give you something closer to the actual figure. In fact, you need to realize that these statistics usually refer to the number of copies that are printed, not the number that are actually sold. So you should probably divide by ten again. Then see if China is still number one. You foreigners need to understand the way that China's newspapers work. Official numbers are one thing, and reality is another. Take *People's Daily*. Their official circulation rate is some huge number, but their actual readership is effectively zero! Why? Because every government office is required to subscribe, but nobody ever reads it. Let me ask you a riddle. What is the newest newspaper in China? *People's Daily*—even at the end of the day, its copies are as good as new, because no one has even flipped through them.

Knowing that I was interested *The Times'* circulation, Liang Yong seized the moment to ask Li Hai what it was. "That I can't tell you," Li Hai replied in a soberer tone, "but it's not as low as you think." Xiaofei tried to goad him by

saying, “The official number is four hundred thousand.” I jokingly suggested dividing this number by ten. Li Hai shook his head but said nothing. “Divide by ten again?” Liang Yong cracked. That would put *The Times*’ circulation rate at a measly four thousand. “No, no, not that low,” Xiaofei interjected to avoid offending Li Hai and promptly steered the conversation in a different direction.

What struck me about this exchange was the journalists’ shared understanding that although the newspaper figured itself as a provider of truthful information, there were truths about its operations that even its own staff members could not be told. The news sector, as they understood it, was not a universal provider of truths but an industry of players who strove to deal gainfully in truth-claims—crafting and circulating them as coin for achieving their own desired outcomes. While one was a Party organ and the other a commercial enterprise, *People’s Daily* and *The Times* were the same in this regard—they presented their publics with information to do things that their publics were not informed of.

The question that the Politics journalists grappled with was not whether to see their work as a calling or a source of income, or whether to make China’s news media more erect or supine, but what they could reasonably hope to do in and through such an institution. Was it feasible to try to make the news’ currency work in a way that contributed to a greater cause, or was the medium so corrupted by people’s efforts to navigate and manage their relationships with one another that anyone who did not focus on using it in this manner would only disadvantage themselves?

Approaching the journalists’ practice from this perspective helps us to think beyond the inherited construction of news as an institution that either informs or disinforms, empowers or disempowers its public, to see it as a medium of publicly circulating texts that a multitude of disparately motivated and diversely related actors make and use to pursue more particular and particularistic objectives. Seeing news as a kind of currency, in other words, may better enable us to explore the complexities of the contemporary journalist’s position as a would-be provider of true and impactful information who is confronted not with a choice between corruption and professionalism, but with the question of what the real possibilities and limits of their medium are.

## CHAPTER 6

### *The Newsmakers' Jianghu*

One day, just after the end of the spring festival that marks the start of a new year in China, *The Times'* newsmakers were informed that its editor-in-chief, Huang Tao, had been asked by the newspaper's parent company to resign. The state-owned media conglomerate to which the newspaper belonged announced that Chief Huang had been found to be mismanaging company funds and engaging in extramarital affairs with not one but two of the newspaper's female staff members. An executive editor from another Guangzhou-based newspaper had been hired to replace him and would assume his duties with immediate effect.

This leadership change occurred some months after I had completed the greater part of my fieldwork at *The Times* and some weeks before I arrived back in Guangzhou on a follow-up fieldwork visit. I found my old colleagues in a state of unsettlement, eager to discuss the factors that had led to Chief Huang's sudden removal and the ramifications that it would have for the newspaper and for themselves. The impression I had gathered from the anonymized social media posts that began appearing days after Chief Huang's firing was that the decision had been made by Guangdong Party officials to punish *The Times* for regularly publishing investigative news stories that pushed against the Party's political boundaries. These discussions framed the incident as another instance of the Party's Publicity Department trying to maintain its control over China's news media, and another case of a bold newsmaker being plowed under by China's unbending press and political system (*tizhi*).

The explanations circulating among *The Times'* newsmakers, however, were different. "Nothing to do with the Publicity Department," Chen Ming, the head editor of the Politics desk said dismissively when I told him what I had read. "Old Huang might be telling people that to save face and make his

leaving seem more dignified than it actually was. There weren't any political factors. He left because of some conflicts with the leaders higher up." Hearing this, I began to think of all the reasons that the media conglomerate's managers might be dissatisfied with Huang Tao's work. I thought about his brazen, almost reckless approach to running the newspaper's soft-and-black-article trade and about his obvious lack of interest in improving the quality of its actual news reporting. I imagined that the higher-up leaders might be looking to replace him with someone who would run the newspaper in a more consistent and professional manner. As I continued to pursue the reasons for the (former) editor-in-chief's removal, however, I came to see that this was not the kind of conflict that Chen Ming was referring to.

The story that I pieced together from conversations with various staff members was that the media conglomerate's executives had terminated Huang Tao to get out of having to give him the portion of the company shares they had promised him. When the executives first recruited Huang Tao to be *The Times'* founding editor-in-chief, they had enticed him to the position by promising that when the newspaper became a commercial success and the media conglomerate went public, he would be rewarded with a portion of shares. The promise was not written into Huang Tao's contract because it was not technically legal for a state-owned enterprise to reward its employees with shares; but it was part of the understanding between Huang Tao and the media conglomerate's executives and it was on this understanding that Huang Tao had spent his past several years working to make *The Times* into a commercially profitable business. Now that the newspaper and its parent company were nearing their goal and beginning to prepare for an initial public offering, however, the media conglomerate's executives decided that they had gotten their use out of Huang Tao and were well positioned to remove him from the equation.

According to Chen Ming, the relationship between Huang Tao and the media conglomerate's general manager, Manager Tang, had always been an uneasy one. Huang Tao's flamboyant style and penchant for lavishly wining and dining ostensible business partners on the newspaper's tab offended the Party bureaucrat's staid and more conservative sensibilities. Manager Tang disliked the way that Huang Tao flaunted his position and squandered the company's finances. So long as Manager Tang was relying on Chief Huang to get *The Times* up and running, however, he tolerated the latter's antics and even turned a blind eye when Chief Huang started his own consulting company and began using the newspaper's resources to secure clients. Now that

the media conglomerate was interested in eliminating Huang Tao, however, his inappropriate conduct provided Manager Tang with convenient grounds for his dismissal.

The company that Huang Tao started was now said to put him in a conflict of interest with *The Times*. It was also “discovered” that despite being married and having a young child, Huang Tao was carrying on extramarital affairs with female employees. Facts that had hitherto been known but ignored were suddenly presented as problems that necessitated Huang Tao’s termination. As Chen Ming, in explaining the matter to me, put it, “A lot of things can *become* the reason for firing someone once the decision to fire them has been made, like having an extramarital affair at the workplace or pocketing some company funds here and there. Such things don’t really matter to the company. If they wanted to keep you, they would just pretend not to know.”

Although I was by then well acquainted with the fact that *The Times*’ operations were in many ways shaped by the backroom dealings of its key personnel, the idea that the newspaper’s editor-in-chief could be simply eliminated at his boss’s whim was still one that I found difficult to fathom. When I expressed my incredulity, however, the response that I got from multiple parties was that there was really nothing to be surprised about. “You’re surprised because you’re a foreigner, but this is just what the news sector’s *jianghu* is like,” Zheng Wen put it. “It’s said to be producing news but it’s actually all a struggle over interests (*liyi douzheng*).”

The term *jianghu*, which literally translates as “rivers and lakes,” is a popular trope in contemporary Chinese discourse. It has roots in Chinese martial arts literature, where it refers to the world of shifting allegiances and animosities that martial arts heroes (*xiake*) move in, whose complex relational configurations determine their identities and fates. Applied to contemporary society, the term is commonly used to describe the realm of interpersonal alliances and rivalries that are known to pervade China’s business and professional worlds, and to have a great degree of influence on the trajectories of the individuals who participate in them. For *The Times*’ journalists to refer to the news sector as a *jianghu* was to describe it as a realm of fluidly shifting relationships whose inconstant currents shaped the positions and prospects of all those whose livelihoods ran through it.

Through the event of the editor-in-chief’s unexpected dismissal, this last chapter of the book looks beyond *The Times*’ journalists’ day-to-day news-making practices to the broader *jianghu* that they felt themselves to be in.

This was the realm of relational networks in which the news' currency worked and that shaped not only the journalists' sense of their own professions and careers, but also their understanding of the broader social world that the contemporary institution of news exists in—the world that the news is shaped by and in turn contributes to shaping. I approach the *jianghu* vision of reality as a contrastive alternative to that which the philosopher Charles Taylor (2003, 38) has identified as the “modern social imaginary.” Taylor defines a social imaginary as the common, though often unspoken, ways in which people “imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (2003, 23). This is the understanding that people share of the moral and metaphysical order that we inhabit, or in other words, our “grasp of our whole predicament” (25) against which background our actions and interactions make sense to us.

The distinctively *modern* social imaginary, as Taylor delineates it, is a vision of our social existence that is rooted in the seventeenth-century European theories of natural law. It sees human beings as ontologically autonomous and equal individuals, who form political societies “for the (mutual) benefit of individuals and the defense of their rights” (4) as such. It is on these grounds that the idea of the state as an entity with the authority to compel a society's members to abide by its laws is founded; as well as the idea of the public, as the entity that is formed when a society's members meet “to discuss matters of common interest . . . [in order] to be able to form a common mind about these” (83) and act on their common will. The role of the press in the context of this imaginary is to enable a society's members to come together as a unified polity, by engaging one another in a space of common discourse and knowledge to arrive at a shared understanding of their world. It is on these grounds that the normative theories and principles of professional journalism that became dominant in the modern West are founded.

In the social imaginary of the *jianghu*, on the other hand, a person is not an ontologically autonomous individual but a relationally constituted being, who is defined by the particular ties maintained with particular others. These actors are not governed in their discourse and conduct by the rules of an institution that will transform them into a unified public or whole, but rather, abide by the particular ethical and practical imperatives that arise from the many different relationships that connect them. I explore *The*

*Times'* journalists' *jianghu* imaginary through their various responses to the editor-in-chief's removal—the narratives that they used to explain it, the ways in which they felt their own positions and prospects were affected, and the efforts they made to resituate themselves within the newspaper's changed relational environment. I argue that the newsmaker's *jianghu* is an example of a *postpublic* imaginary that is emerging in today's China that does not hold the media to be capable of bringing a society's members into a common space of knowledge but, rather, sees the media's truth-claims as statements that circulate through a vast and dense web of irreducibly particular interests and connections, doing different things for the different actors that use them.

This *postpublic* imaginary, I suggest, offers an important perspective for thinking about media developments that have taken place in China under Xi Jinping's rule, including the increasingly draconian censorship policies that have been implemented and the intensified propaganda campaigns that are being carried out across various media platforms. Rather than assuming that these measures enable the Party to mold and control China's public opinion, approaching them through the notion of the news sector's *jianghu* prompts us to think about how these measures must be routed through intricate networks of particular interests and relations, and how they may impact the arrangements and negotiations that take place in these networks more than they shape the opinions of the news' ostensible audiences.

#### A CONTEMPORARY *JIANGHU*

Derived from the canonical Taoist text, *Zhuangzi*, and reinterpreted through various forms of martial arts lore, the term *jianghu* is often used in contemporary China to refer to realms of activity that take place beyond the rule of the party state's formal laws and regulations. From its characterization in the highly popularized fourteenth-century literary classic *The Water Margin*, a tale of brotherhood, trust, and honor among a band of outlaws, the term is widely associated with an ethic of interpersonal allegiance in which the reciprocal obligations between mutually sworn brothers become the highest moral imperative, overriding all official mandates and laws of the state. This motif is commonly taken up and woven into business and work settings, where it describes (and inadvertently provides a degree of cultural sanction

or legitimacy to) the influence that people's interpersonal relationships have on their actions, which often lead them to act in ways that go beyond or even against the scope of their official mandates and roles.<sup>1</sup>

In this contemporary usage, the term *jianghu* denotes a realm in which people's informal interpersonal relationships—figured in the cultural idiom of *guanxi* and *renqing*<sup>2</sup>—play a greater role in determining their business and work decisions than the legal and professional standards that they are formally obligated to uphold. John Osburg (2013), in his study of China's "new rich" entrepreneurs, has shown how the "elite networks" of interpersonal relations that are formed among businesspeople, Party officials, and organized crime bosses lead them into ventures and arrangements that traverse the boundaries between legal enterprise and illegal racketeering, and between government work and gangsterism. While the resulting practices if analyzed "from an ideal of Western bureaucracy and morality" (85) would necessarily be read as unlawful and immoral acts of corruption, Osburg points out that these practices are grounded in cultural conceptions and sensibilities that do not correspond to the division between the public and private domains that the Western model presupposes.

Rather than being governed by institutions that hold their private desires and public responsibilities apart, the new rich in China are embedded in networks where individual financial interests, government policy objectives, Party image, personal reputations, and sundry other material and immaterial goods run together in intricately intermingled flows—and where, as one of Osburg's informants put it, "Relationships are the law" (76). This is not, as Osburg emphasizes, a utopian milieu. For although the *jianghu* is often described in a rhetoric of mutual reciprocity and trust, the interpersonal relationships that actually constitute it are "held together by shifting bonds of morality, desire, and interest" that make them "highly fragile and contingent" (80). People whose lives are immersed in the rivers and lakes of China's contemporary business sector are, to extend the metaphor, constantly subject to its uncertain currents or to the rule of relationships that "are constantly threatened by venality, narrow personal interests, and deception" (80).

Approaching the notion of *jianghu* from a literary studies perspective, Petrus Liu (2011) argues that its vision of social existence does not merely differ from the ideal of a Western (or Weberian) bureaucracy, but is more fundamentally premised on a different social ontology than that which undergirds much of Western political thought. Classical European political theories, from Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau to Smith, Hegel, and Marx,

posit the existence of a people who in the absence of an overarching authority or power “would destroy themselves through the pursuit of individual gain” (5). The state is conceived of as the institution that solves this problem by imposing a political order that allows for peace, reason, and prosperity. Individuals are thence constituted as political subjects whose duty is to conduct themselves in accordance with this functioning of the state.

In contrast to this state-centered narrative, Liu argues, the *jianghu* discourse that is deployed in Chinese martial arts literature describes a world of “stateless subjects” (1) to develop a “model of non-statist political responsibility” (5). This is a world in which people are governed not by the laws of the state but by moral imperatives that grow out of their relationships to one another, and that derive their normative force from what Liu refers to as “the constitutive sociality of the self” (6). Rather than posit a world of unrelated and self-contained individuals, who are only brought together in and by their common subjection to the state, the *jianghu* discourse figures the human subject as one who is “constituted by and dependent on its responsibilities to other human beings” (6). Persons in the *jianghu* do what their relationships with others obligate them to do because it is only in and by these relationships that a person exists.

Liu finds the notion of the relationally constituted self that anchors the vision of the *jianghu* most clearly reflected in the writings of the famed martial arts novelist Jin Yong. In Liu’s reading, Jin Yong

consistently emphasizes that a person’s identity is never decided or authored by that person; rather, a subject is produced in and by a field of norms that exceed the self. To be a socially viable being means to consign oneself to the social norms that constitute one’s existence—norms which do not originate with an individual personhood and may indeed threaten and imperil one’s livability. The point is not a masochistic call to accept and surrender oneself to an oppressive external power that encroaches on one’s livelihood; rather, the point is to take stock of the limits of social autonomy and to recognize that there is no “I” that is not in some way constituted by unwelcome constraints, norms, and regulations. (115)

The form of self that Liu identifies bears resemblances to the “sociocentric” (Shweder and Bourne 1984, 285), “dividual” (Strathern 1988; Marriott 1974), and “relational” (Robbins 2015, 2007) selves that anthropologists studying cultural variations in the construction of personhood have identified and

similarly contrasted to the figure of the Western individual (Spiro 1993). This is a self that exists not as an independent and autonomous actor but as a “composite site of the relationships that produce them” (Hess 2006); one that is “thoroughly embedded, and inextricably engaged, in relationships with particular places and particular others” (Smith 2012, 54) and whose actions are thus structured and scripted by these relationships.

Writing in the 1940s, the Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong argued that this relational form of personhood anchored the “basic structure” of Chinese society, which consisted in “a differential mode of association”—a “pattern . . . composed of distinctive networks spreading out from each individual’s personal connections” (Fei 1992, 71). It was through and around these networks that people’s senses of social and moral obligation were formed. Fei argued that whereas Western societies comprised organizations (rather than networks) and were governed by an impersonal form of morality that was based on the relationship between the organization and the individual, Chinese society had for centuries been a world where people’s lives were immersed in and governed by “webs woven out of countless personal relationships” (78).

What is distinctive about the *jianghu* imaginary that has emerged in today’s China, I suggest, is first, that it sees the interpersonal relationships that constitute and constrain people as being densely entangled with the formal roles and powers that their professional positions invest in them. Second, it sees these relationships, roles, and powers being constantly mobilized by people as a means of pursuing the aspirational ideas that they have about the kind of social, economic, and cultural figures they want to become. These particular features of the contemporary *jianghu* imaginary are an outgrowth of the way that China’s post-Mao marketization processes have drawn together people’s formal organizational roles, informal relationships, and endeavors to construct new lives and identities for themselves.

Mayfair Yang (1994) has shown how people in the Mao era used their personal relationships, or *guanxi*, to work around the Party’s rigidly bureaucratic administrative systems, in order, for instance, to secure better food, clothing, or housing allotments. In the era of marketization or “reform and opening” (*gaige kaifang*) that followed, the use of *guanxi* expanded beyond the acquisition of such concrete things. The “rush” (Bartlett 2020) of China’s society into a new world of money, business, and consumerism seemed to lift the limits on what a person might legitimately desire and pursue. Growing industries, rising fortunes, and changing cultural and moral values

confronted people with the need to construct new lifestyles and identities, to remake themselves for a world of new pleasures, goals, and ideals to achieve (X. Liu 2002; L. Zhang 2010; Kleinman 2011). Guanxi networks in this changed and changing milieu became things that people cultivated and used less for the specific goods they might bring than for their more abstract and open-ended capacity to lead “into further wealth and opportunities” (M.M.-h. Yang 1994, 159). The strategic fostering and management of one’s personal relationships thus became inseparable from the work of equipping and positioning oneself to inhabit the emerging socioeconomic world as the kind of figure one wanted to be.

It is from this angle that one can see how *The Times* was not only the official flagship publication of a provincial state-owned enterprise, but also an organization whose staff members were constantly using the resources and powers that came with their positions to forge their own pathways forward. The organizational, editorial, and journalistic decisions that got made at a newspaper of this kind were invariably entangled with the personal ambitions and interpersonal maneuverings of its leaders. For journalists who understood themselves to be working in the news sector’s *jianghu*, it was not surprising but in fact quite expectable that the editor-in-chief might be fired neither for his unprofessional management of the enterprise nor for the illegal moneymaking practices that he had its staff members engaged in, but because the general manager of the state-owned enterprise that owned the newspaper saw an opportunity to boost his own career by cutting the editor-in-chief out of the profit-sharing deal they had agreed on.

For the journalists, Huang Tao’s departure and replacement was a significant event because it changed the relational terrain of the newspaper and thus required them to reassess their own positions and prospects within the organization. All of the journalists had to varying degrees engaged with *The Times* under Huang Tao’s leadership as a network of relations that might aide them in forging their own lives and futures. They had fostered plans and invested in strategies whose outcomes hinged on Huang Tao’s occupying the position at the newspaper that he did. The unexpected elimination of this key actor threw these plans and strategies up in the air. In the next sections, I examine the impact that Huang Tao’s departure had on five individuals: Qian Hao, the Economics journalist; Chen Ming, the head editor of the Politics desk; and Liang Yong, Zheng Wen, and Fan Xiaofei, the three Politics journalists with whom I worked closest. I look at how these newsmakers imagined and inhabited the news sector’s *jianghu* as a world of relationships,

arrangements and maneuvers that shaped the paths that their lives would take and that took place, as Petrus Liu writes, “beyond the purview of the nation-state and without recourse to its guarantees” (2011, 6). Exploring China’s news sector through the journalists’ *jianghu* imaginary allows us to think about contemporary news not as an institution that either succeeds or fails in its public functions, but as a world of texts that people are constantly producing and using to make themselves into the selves they aspire to be.

*Qian Hao, the Economics Journalist*

Perhaps the person most affected, and certainly the person most eager to talk about how Huang Tao’s departure affected him, was the Economics journalist Qian Hao. Qian Hao, as discussed in Chapter 4, had worked hard under Huang Tao to make himself one of the boss’s “people.” Besides writing black articles, a large part of this effort had consisted in playing the part of the editor-in-chief’s eager and trusty assistant at the business-related banquets and KTV sessions that he regularly hosted. These were part of the “ritualized leisure” (Osburg 2013, 38) activities that newsmakers, business-people, and Party officials regularly engage in to cultivate relationships that might lead to future collaborations. While I was never invited to join any such evenings with *The Times*’ clients, I did get to attend many that were organized for the newspaper’s own staff members, where I was able to watch Qian Hao in action.

Qian Hao would always arrive at the designated restaurant ahead of Chief Huang and go through the menu to order the appropriate type and number of dishes for the occasion, so that the editor-in-chief would not have to do this himself. When Chief Huang arrived, Qian Hao would leap out of his seat with exaggerated eagerness and anxiously ensure that his boss was comfortably settled before seating himself again. If Chief Huang at any point in the meal wanted something, such as a beverage or a napkin, Qian Hao would immediately summon a waiter or waitress over and communicate the demand in an intentionally brusque manner to show how urgently he wanted it fulfilled. In a conversation that we had, Qian Hao described his ability to conduct himself in this manner as an essential skill for all employees or subordinates to have:

To properly wait on (*cihou*) a leader, there are many techniques that one needs to master. You need to know what food he likes to eat, at which restau-

rant, and how to order for as many people as are there. You shouldn't let the leader have to trouble himself about these things. A true master can orchestrate the whole occasion according to his leader's desires, without the leader even realizing it. He can anticipate the leader's thinking and create the appropriate atmosphere, so that everything that should happen happens and everything that shouldn't happen doesn't.

Besides waiting on Chief Huang at meals, Qian Hao also took it as part of his work to please and pamper his leader during the KTV sessions that frequently followed. Rather than let the staff members who were present take turns singing songs that they liked, Qian Hao would assiduously man the audio equipment controls to ensure that Chief Huang had the mic for as many songs as he wanted. To provide a flattering contrast to Chief Huang's renditions, which were mostly of popular Cantonese love ballads, Qian Hao would intermittently sing heavier rock songs, poorly but with emotion, as though to cast himself in the role of Chief Huang's oafish and comical sidekick. At one KTV session, Liang Yong had the audacity to sing three Jacky Cheung songs in a row. I watched Qian Hao seethe with displeasure for as long as he could restrain himself before angrily grabbing the microphone and placing it back in the hands of the editor-in-chief. At the end of the evening, when both Chief Huang and Liang Yong had left, Qian Hao expressed his incredulosity at Liang Yong's behavior:

Liang Yong is too naive!—like a big child who doesn't know how to adjust his behavior according to the situation. He thinks he can just be himself, regardless of who is around, singing songs by Chief Huang's favorite singer better than Chief Huang can sing them. He doesn't realize these things matter, as though we all really went to KTV to sing! I envy his naivete, you know. It reminds me of myself when I was a kid. But everyone has to grow up sometime. If you carry on like he does, there's a lot of opportunities you'll miss out on, because the leaders will always pass over you and not put you up for them.

In Qian Hao's approach to *The Times*, there was a lot more at stake in the journalist's job than journalism. The newspaper was not merely a producer of news but also a producer of positions and careers; a hierarchically structured organization that employees could climb by making themselves personally trusted and favored by their bosses. Like so many other organizations, the newspaper offered greater wealth, status, and opportunities for

further advancement to those at its higher than lower rungs. The journalist's job, as Qian Hao approached it, was a means to move toward these goods through the relationship he could foster with Chief Huang.

Given the extent to which Qian Hao's conduct of himself and sense of his own position and prospects at *The Times* were grounded in the relationship he had been cultivating with Chief Huang, the latter's sudden removal had a considerable personal impact. It pulled out from under Qian Hao's feet the rug of upward mobility that he had been diligently treading. From an ambitious young man on the make who was trusted by his superiors and given increasingly important (and remunerative) roles within his organization, the event cast Qian Hao back in the position of just another news reporter, with no particular status or trajectory toward becoming anything else.

I met up with Qian Hao several weeks after Huang Tao's resignation, at a restaurant of his choosing that specialized in Sichuan pepper-spiced rabbit heads. Qian Hao's disposition toward his former boss was totally changed. "How is that guy anyways?" he asked me when we were seated, as though I should know better than he. I expressed my surprise that, given their close relationship, they were not still in touch. Qian Hao scoffed:

I haven't given a thought to that guy in ages! Remember what a mic-hog he was at KTV? All those saccharine love songs—he thought he was such a heart-throb. If we went out to KTV now, I'd cut each of his songs off before he could get to the end of them! To be honest, I always knew that he was not someone to follow all the way. The man is obviously talented, but he isn't steady. He's too distractible, too emotional, you know.

Over our meal, we discussed the reasons behind Huang Tao's departure. In Qian Hao's account, Huang Tao and his inner circle of trusted collaborators within the newspaper (which included Qian Hao himself) had been working to increase its profitability for the shares that Huang Tao expected to receive when the media group launched its IPO, and that he had promised to share with them. The move by Manager Tang to renege on his agreement and use Huang Tao's foibles as an excuse to eliminate him had flushed all of their efforts down the drain. I asked Qian Hao if it was wrong of Manager Tang to betray Huang Tao, after the latter had made good on his end of the deal by getting *The Times'* business up and running. Although Qian Hao himself was an indirect victim of this betrayal, he did not take a moral position against it.

Picking the meat off the small rabbit skulls that sat soaking in a bowl of chili oil between us, Qian Hao said matter-of-factly:

If I were Manager Tang, I would have done the same. I would have done the same, only I would have waited another half a year, because the fact is that *The Times'* commercial mechanisms are not *quite* in place yet. Another half a year and they would have been. Manager Tang doesn't get that because he's an official. He doesn't understand the business enough to realize that it would have been better to wait another half a year to get rid of Huang. But then again, it doesn't make a difference either way to Manager Tang. Whenever the public listing happens, he will benefit. He's willing to have the business develop less quickly and less well if it means there'll be one less person he has to share his gains with at the end.

It occurred to me as Qian Hao spoke that while I had been reflecting on Huang Tao's firing from a moral and sentimental angle, Qian Hao was already strategically constructing a new position for himself within *The Times'* changed relational network. Although Huang Tao's firing was a blow to Qian Hao, Qian Hao was not going to let himself be sunk by his boss's failure, or go down as someone who had also been outmaneuvered and discarded by *The Times'* higher-ups. Instead, he was cutting his connections to the boss who had failed him and looking for a new way to move forward.

Qian Hao was already in negotiations with Huang Tao's replacement—the incoming editor-in-chief, a man named Zhao Xin—over what his position and role at the newspaper would now be. Qian Hao claimed that Zhao Xin was eager to win his allegiance because Zhao Xin knew that the newspaper's staff had come to regard Qian Hao as an authority and would take their cue from his lead. If Qian Hao did not persuade everyone to accept Zhao Xin as the new chief, Zhao Xin would have no way to make the newspaper meet its commercial targets. In Qian Hao's account, at least, some of the influence that he had built up under Huang Tao would thus carry over into the new dispensation. Qian Hao said that he was tentatively cooperating with Zhao Xin to bring the newspaper's other staff members in line, but his willingness to perform this role was entirely contingent on what Zhao Xin would offer him in return.

I knew from others that Huang Tao had since taken a position as the deputy general manager of a company that sold alcohol and cigarettes, and that it was common practice for bosses to bring a few of their trusted people along

with them when they moved from one company to another. Curious about what Qian Hao's options were, I asked him if Huang Tao had offered him a position at the alcohol and cigarette company. Qian Hao had considered the option but did not find it attractive:

Why the hell would I want to go there? The pay would have been 160,000 per year. I'm already making 140,000 to 150,000 now. Why should I take such a big risk for only an extra 10,000? Peddling cigarettes? Forget it. If it were a media company, I might think about it. That was actually a plan that we had. Around September last year, Huang was already thinking about leaving *The Times* to start a media company in Beijing. If that was the deal, I would go. But if it's not a media job, then this is as far as I'm willing to follow him.

Qian Hao evidently needed to be strategic in the moves that he made. The question that Huang Tao's departure presented him was not whether he was fond of his former boss or felt betrayed by his superiors, but what path he should now create for himself to move forward. If Huang Tao had been able to offer him a more promising arrangement, Qian Hao might still be fashioning himself as Huang Tao's loyal and trusted aide. Under the circumstances, however, Qian Hao considered it better to stay put and see what he could make of his position at *The Times*. As our meal progressed and eased into a more relaxed tenor, Qian Hao let on some of the disappointment and sense of uncertainty he was feeling:

Seriously, though, I may leave *The Times* soon. A man turning almost thirty can't stay on in the media like this. For a woman it's fine, but it's not enough for a man. I might get into venture capital. If Huang manages to get a cigarette distribution license, that would be something. It's a government-awarded license and very difficult to get, you know, but once you have it there's all kinds of things you can do. I might consider joining him then. . . . That Huang really was too much (*ye zhenshi de*). Having affairs with female employees is always frowned upon at state-owned enterprises. One can easily be fired for it. We're all criticizing Huang now. We're saying that all of our plans founded on his little pecker!

The idea of himself as a mere journalist at age thirty was not one that Qian Hao wanted to accept. He felt that a man of his circumstances—educated, urbane, and capable—needed to have made more of himself by then, needed to at least

be on the road to greater wealth and status, if not already there. *The Times* under Huang Tao had been a place where Qian Hao was on the right track, a place where he was positioned within a relational network that would allow him to become the wealthier and more respected kind of person that he wanted to be. Now that *The Times* was no longer the site of these relations, Qian Hao needed to create a new way to become that person. Whether he liked what had happened and how unjust it all seemed were beside the point. Qian Hao's actions were determined by his need to navigate the *jianghu* he was in, in such a way as to keep himself moving in the direction he felt he should be heading.

*Chen Ming, the Head Editor of the Politics Desk*

Another person whose life was significantly derailed by Huang Tao's departure from *The Times* was the head editor of its Politics section, Chen Ming. For Chen Ming, the disruption was not an effect of Huang Tao's removal so much as an indirect consequence of his replacement. The incoming editor-in-chief, Zhao Xin, had his own coterie whom he wanted to install at the newspaper, among which was a close friend of his wife, to whom he gave Chen Ming's position. Chen Ming was reassigned to be the head of the newspaper's Marketing Department.

Although this new role was a secure position that came with a comfortable salary, Chen Ming saw it as a change that threatened to bring his career to a dead end. As someone who had over the past ten years worked at several different news outlets in Guangzhou and gradually climbed up the ranks from journalist to editor to head editor, Chen Ming regarded himself as someone who had achieved a certain degree of recognition and influence in Guangzhou's journalistic circles. This was the identity that he maintained in his social life, at regular gatherings with journalist and editor friends, and that he drew on when he mentored the Politics journalists at work. Although Chen Ming had been Huang Tao's subordinate, the stature that Chen Ming had enjoyed as a respected and connected figure on the journalists' scene had given him a measure of weight against the editor-in-chief. It had constituted Chen Ming as a figure of authority for the Politics journalists, and thus as a sort of leader in his own right. Huang Tao had tacitly acknowledged Chen Ming's position, and had always worked through him to direct and manage the Politics desk's journalists. Chen Ming's redeployment to the Marketing Department threw all of these relationships, along with the status and identity that he had constructed for himself, to the wind.

I learned about his reassignment from Zheng Wen and Liang Yong before I had had an opportunity to speak with Chen Ming himself. The two journalists framed the event as a heavy blow to Chen Ming's effort to build his position within the newspaper. Although he conducted himself in a more moderate and reasonable manner than Huang Tao or Qian Hao, the journalists said, Chen Ming too was keenly attuned to the power relations and struggles that configured *The Times* and had always been conscious to protect his position within the organization. The effort that Chen Ming had always put into mentoring the Politics journalists, they told me, was partly motivated by his objective of cultivating the Politics section as a support base for himself. In Zheng Wen's words:

Chen Ming is not a bad guy, he's just got a very clear focus on his own advantage. His interactions with others are actually quite self-interested. He wants to make you someone who will stand by him. That's why you'll notice that it's always the newest, most junior journalists who receive most of his praise. He wants to be the one who brought you up, so that later you'll be on his side.

Chen Ming's conduct as their head editor, according to the journalists, had been shaped by his endeavor to construct relationships with them that would work to his advantage in the event of any conflict within the newspaper. What Chen Ming had not counted on, however, was *The Times'* relational terrain being scrambled by a new figure at the top who neither needed anything from him nor owed him any obligations, and thus could comfortably dispose of him.

When I finally managed to meet up with Chen Ming, he maintained his characteristically level and collected demeanor, but was clearly discontent with and discouraged by his new situation. We arranged to meet at *The Times'* office and have lunch together nearby. Whenever I had gone to meet Chen Ming at the office before, I always found him at his desk on main office floor, next to a floor-to-ceiling window and with a commanding view of the rows of desks where the journalists and editors worked. This time, because the newspaper's Marketing Department was located in a more obscure part of the building that I was unlikely to be familiar with, Chen Ming had me phone him from the lift lobby and came out to meet me there.

Chen Ming offered to show me around his new department. We walked past the entrance of the main office floor, down a long hallway, and around

some corners. The Marketing Department, I found when we got there, was a medium-sized room with no windows and only six desks, occupied by four very young-looking staff. It was difficult not to notice the contrast. As we stepped out of the room and back into the hallway, I tried to bring a positive tone to our meeting by expressing my interest and excitement about the new chapter that Chen Ming was beginning. He responded simply but firmly, "I'm close to being edged out of the game (*kuai meidehun le*)."

At lunch, Chen Ming was not inclined to speak about what had transpired, and I did not want to push him on the subject. We talked about unrelated things—Guangzhou's air pollution and socioeconomic inequality, China-US relations, my graduate school program and research. As our meal was drawing to a close, I tried to shift the conversation toward his future plans by again expressing enthusiasm for the work that the Marketing Department did and suggesting that he might find it interesting and perhaps be good at it. "No, I don't find marketing work very interesting," he said frankly. "It isn't out of choice that I'm doing it. Anyway, who cares what I do? I'm already forty. Just another twenty years and that's it for me."

Although he did not expand this remark, Chen Ming evidently regarded his reassignment as an event that took him off the life path that he had been constructing. Through the dealings and maneuvers of other actors in the news sector's *jianghu* that had nothing to do with him, the relationships that he defined himself by had been rearranged—sweeping him off the path through Guangzhou's news world that he had sought to create. To delve into the details of these events or complain of their injustice was pointless, as there was no governing body that regulated such interpersonal affairs. His crushed sense of self and utter lack of enthusiasm for the work that stood before him notwithstanding, the only thing for Chen Ming to do was adapt.

I followed his social media posts over the subsequent weeks and months and garnered the sense that he was trying, but not quite managing, to turn the Marketing Department into a new source of personal influence and stature, to reconstruct himself as a capable and significant figure in this new domain. A post on his microblog one week read, "Other newspapers' marketing departments are so huge compared to ours. I'm racking my brains trying to come up with a strategy. I only have five or six people here—I need more! Anyone from the editorial side want to come over?" Downplaying the difference between marketing and editorial work, Chen Ming cast himself as a general trying to build up a new army to follow him into his next conquest.

In another post, he wrote, "I have one year to make something big hap-

pen here; otherwise I'll just be idling (*haozhe*).” To be reduced to idling was not an acceptable fate.<sup>3</sup> He had always disparaged those who approached their jobs in this way. For all their differences, Chen Ming was in fact quite similar to Qian Hao in feeling that a man as educated and capable as himself should be on his way to achieving something significant. Although Chen Ming had maintained a very different relationship to Huang Tao than Qian Hao had, Huang Tao's removal and replacement similarly unsettled the relational position that Chen Ming had constructed for himself at *The Times*, in which his sense of his present worth and future prospects were grounded. It cast both men into new relational territory, where they needed to create new ways to make themselves into the persons they wanted to be.

*The Politics Journalists: Zheng Wen, Liang Yong, and Fan Xiaofei*

When Huang Tao's departure from *The Times* was announced, the Politics journalists' first response was to maintain that they would not be affected. Their line was that as ordinary journalists who did not harbor any greater personal or financial ambitions, they were not involved in the struggles that went on at their newspaper and would go about their reporting work in the same way, whoever its editor-in-chief happened to be. In taking this line, the journalists underscored the distinction that they had always maintained between themselves, on the one hand, and Chief Huang and his people, on the other. If Chief Huang's management of the newspaper had sometimes caused them to doubt their approach to their practice, his sudden downfall now seemed to vindicate the Politics journalists' position by showing that it did not pay to approach one's newsmaking in the rapacious way that he did, and that it was better to be guided, as they were, by some actual journalistic ideals.

Yet despite the claims of continuity they asserted, I found over the following weeks that the journalists were also prompted by Huang Tao's replacement to reassess their own prospects and consider making new arrangements for their futures. The question of concern for them was what kind of newspaper *The Times* would become in the hands of Zhao Xin. Only a few weeks in to the new leader's reign, there were already worrying signs about his competency. The journalists said that Zhao Xin was behaving like an “air-dropped” (*kongjiang*) leader who had no grasp of the conditions on the ground and that he was failing to win the support of the newspaper's incumbent staff. At the first all-staff meeting that Zhao Xin hosted in Beijing, he

allegedly declared that what *The Times* most urgently needed was people with more talent and higher “quality” (*suzhi*)<sup>4</sup>—wittingly or unwittingly implying that the newspaper’s existing staff members were untalented and low-quality individuals.

This incident left the Politics journalists feeling that their newspaper was now in the hands of a leader who would not be very good at managing it, which in turn made them feel less motivated to work. From regularly writing four to eight articles a month under Chief Huang, they told me, they were now writing only two to three pieces a month. They began to recall the days of Chief Huang’s editorship in a favorable, almost nostalgic light. For all his faults, they said, Chief Huang was at least an editor-in-chief with a vision for the newspaper and even a few journalistic ideals. Although he was too focused on business and revenue, he had had a charismatic quality that enabled him to draw the staff members together and make them feel like they were working toward a goal.

The Politics journalists began to find signs of *The Times*’ decline in many places. One was in the conduct of its weekly staff meetings. Under Chief Huang, the meetings were treated as an annoying but obligatory exercise. Although the Politics journalists did not always wake up in time to get to the office for the meeting, they did feel a responsibility to try—failing which they would at least come up with some excuse for their absence. Under Zhao Xin they did not even bother to make an appearance—and were dismayed to find that nobody seemed to notice. Zheng Wen told us that he had gone to the office one day and bumped into someone from Human Resources:

When I walked in, I ran into Ting from HR. He said, “Hey, you’re here! We hadn’t seen you for so long, we thought you’d disappeared.” I thought to myself, if I had disappeared, shouldn’t you have tried to find me? What kind of newspaper thinks that its journalist has vanished and just sits there doing and asking nothing, and then is surprised when he shows up again!

Fan Xiaofei and Liang Yong had comparable stories. Xiaofei had attended the meeting one week and tried to swipe her identity card through a card reader to register her attendance, only to find that the machine was broken. Liang Yong had telephoned the office on the morning of one meeting to say that he would not be able to make it and was told that it was okay because they had already gone ahead and marked him present.

I asked the journalists if *The Times* would fold if things went on like this. “It won’t fold because it’s a state-owned enterprise. But it will very likely be downsized within the next two years,” Zheng Wen predicted. Xiaofei expanded on this prediction: “They’ll reduce the number of pages and cut the staff down to ten editors who produce all the content they need without so much as leaving the office. Just taking articles from other newspaper’s websites and arranging them on the page with advertisements.” Several newspapers around this time were beginning to downsize due to declining advertising revenues caused by competition from online and mobile platforms.<sup>5</sup> In the journalists’ forecasts, *The Times* was likely to become a woefully unrespectable newspaper that generated revenue for its owners without producing anything of value to news readers. This was a far cry from the kind of newspaper that any of the three aspired to work for. The journalists had joined *The Times* to be newsmakers who strove to inform and empower China’s entrepreneurs and professionals. They could accept that this was a long and uphill endeavor that involved many compromises and more instances of failure than success. What they could not stand was to work only to advance the private agendas of various news industry players, with no intention or hope of producing something that readers might find interesting or useful. Under its new editor-in-chief, *The Times* looked liable to become the kind of newspaper that would turn them into these kinds of newsmakers.

For this reason, the three journalists were all beginning to consider their options for leaving. Although their formal positions at the newspaper were unchanged, the removal of its editor-in-chief had changed the informal relationships that ruled it and were turning it into a different kind of newspaper. Through no actions of their own and despite their efforts to steer clear of its struggles, the shifting relations of the news sector’s *jianghu* were making the journalists’ newspaper into a place where they could no longer be the kinds of newsmakers they wanted to be. Liang Yong and Zheng Wen both spoke about former bosses and colleagues who were editors at other newspapers in Guangzhou and were inviting them to move over. Xiaofei said her father was pressuring her to take one of the less taxing and better-paying civil service jobs that he could use his connections to get her. If *The Times* was no longer a newspaper that the journalists could work at to become the progressive and ideal-driven newsmakers they aspired to be, then it was necessary for them to construct new pathways forward.

## A POSTPUBLIC INSTITUTION

The ramifications of Huang Tao's departure for these five newsmakers show clearly that China's news sector not only comprises formal organizations with various organizational goals—newspapers with commercial targets, businesses with advertising objectives, and Party offices with propaganda agendas—but is also entangled in webs of personal relationships that play a decisive role in determining what happens to the people within them. For the newsmakers, the meaning and value of being at *The Times* were not only a function of their formal positions and roles but also a matter of the informal networks of relationships that their positions allowed them to foster, in which their personal aspirations, identities, and futures were invested. Although *The Times* was owned by a state-owned enterprise, its newsmakers thus inhabited it as a scene of “stateless subjects” whose objectives and actions were shaped less by the common obligations entailed by their shared relationship to the organization than by the particular imperatives that arose from their relationships with one another.

Situating *The Times'* journalists in the context of this *jianghu* makes it clearer how the elements of their practice—their conception of news as currency and the ethic of efficacy that guided their newsmaking process—are not simply deviations from the principles and standards of professional journalism that prevail in the West, but are premised on a different vision of the social world in which contemporary news exists. This is a world of relationally rather than autonomously constituted identities and objectives, and fluidly interpersonal rather than formally organized arrangements and endeavors.

Grounded in this *jianghu* imaginary, *The Times'* journalists' conception of contemporary news indeed stands in contrast both to the liberal Western model of the press and to the socialist model that the Communist Party tries to enforce in China. From opposite ideological corners, liberal and socialist models of news are both premised on the modernist vision of a polity consisting of individual citizens who come together in a common space of discourse and knowledge to exercise their individual and collective agency (Boyer 2013; Buck-Morss 2000). The socialist elaboration of this imaginary foregrounds and privileges the greater whole of which each individual is a part, while its liberal counterpart places greater emphasis on every member's irreducible individuality. The socialist view anchors the Communist Party's conception of the news media as an institution that the vanguard party-

state should control and use to lead the rest of society's members in the actualization of their collective will, while the liberal view is that the news media should function independently of the state, as an institution that a society's members run by and for themselves. In both constructions, however, the news turns unorganized individual citizens into a political whole—a people or public that can act in conjunction with the state to pursue their mutual benefit and common future. When the Communist Party expounds on the importance of keeping China's news media aligned with its guiding political and ideological principles, and when its liberal detractors criticize this as an inversion of the news' rightful role, both are drawing on this same idea of what the news can and should do.

News in the newsmakers' *jianghu*, in contrast, is not held to have this transformative power. The world is not populated by freely acting individual citizens but by actors whose present circumstances, future prospects, and very sense of self are immersed in the particular networks that connect them. Newsmakers, business executives, and Party officials conduct themselves with an eye to these networks—for whether the goal is to become a renowned journalist, a wealthy businessperson, or a high-level Party bureaucrat, it is these relationships that one must successfully manage and navigate to get there. As the conduit for publicly circulating truth-claims that are generated by these actors' private endeavors to steer a path through the shifting *jianghu* they are in, “news” is not a medium of texts that can bring a society's members into a shared space of knowledge or constitute them as a political public. It is, rather, a medium of texts that elaborate and extend a society's web of particular and particularistic relationships. Whereas news in the modern social imaginary has the capacity to bring an unlimited number of otherwise unrelated individuals into a single space of deliberation, or to transform the many into one, news in the *jianghu* imaginary is a medium of texts whose uses and effects are as heterogeneous and inconstant as the newsmakers' world itself.

I managed to meet with Huang Tao only once after his resignation, at a coffeehouse in downtown Guangzhou. He was a few months into his new job as the deputy general manager of a company that sold alcohol and cigarettes for use as “gifts” in corporate business negotiations. I found him in an animated mood, eager to tell me about the sections of Confucius' *Analects* that he had been rereading and the profound insights that he had gleaned this time round. I went along with this topic of conversation for a while before finding an appropriate opening to ask him why he had left *The Times*.

“To rest!” he declared, looking at me as though he were daring me think otherwise:

I can always do media again in the future. Media work is so exhausting and I've done it for so long, why shouldn't I take a break and do sales for a while? Sales is simple for someone who's done something as complex as media work before. In media I had to work with private enterprises, liaise with officials, and hoodwink all the editors and journalists like you! Compared to that, sales is easy. I can get a whole week's work done in half a day, and then come here to chat with you today, tomorrow, and the day after.

I remembered that Huang Tao had told me that newsmakers needed to craft different statements to suit different situations, and understood this to be what he was doing. After chatting for a while more, we were joined at the coffeehouse by a young lady in makeup, high heels, and a very short mini-skirt, who turned out to be a sales representative for a company that sold caterpillar fungus (*chongcao*). Caterpillar fungus is a highly valued Chinese medicinal product that has become popular as a gift in the business world. Huang Tao and the sales representative had become acquainted online and arranged to meet here to discuss the possibilities for a collaboration between their two companies.

This being their first in-person meeting, the potential business partners began by making small chat. The sales representative flattered Huang Tao's ego by saying that she had been studying his social media posts, which were all about history and philosophy, and that they had all gone way over her head. “You are such a *great scholar*,” she cooed, before adding with faux petulance, “but you really shouldn't post that kind of stuff, you know. Hardly anyone can understand it. If you want lots of followers, you should write about things that are more titillating (*fenghuaxueyue*). That's what people like, not your incomprehensible philosophy stuff.” Huang Tao's eyes widened as he took in the young lady's flirtatious mock criticism. He answered promptly and energetically:

Not a problem! Not a problem at all! Whatever you're interested in talking about, I can talk about with you. That's how I am. I came out today to talk with this graduate student here [pointing at me], so I am talking to her about Confucian philosophy. Now I am talking with you, and you say you don't understand, well then, I will talk to you about something else! More titillat-

ing is it? Not a problem. I can talk to you about celebrity gossip. How gossipy do you want me to be? However gossipy you want me to be, that's how gossipy I can be. Remember, I used to do media. People who have done media before all have one chronic fear. Do you know of what? Of silence (*lengchang*). When I first started out, I would go home from work every day and earnestly study celebrity gossip magazines. Because I thought, what if I meet a client who likes to talk about celebrity gossip and I can't talk about it with him? I would lose that client. Do you like talking about star signs? I can talk to you about star signs. I'm a Taurus. That means I'm reliable and determined.

The sales representative smiled and said with satisfaction, "Yes, more titillating stuff, that's what people like. I'm a Pisces. That means I'm compassionate and devoted." As the conversation moved toward business, Huang Tao and the sales representative traded statements on the ins and outs of China's gift industry. The sales representative talked about the increasing popularity of caterpillar fungus. "Alcohol and cigarettes are fine for ordinary gifts," she said, "but if you're talking about high-end gifts, they really don't cut it. Even bird's nests and shark's fins don't count as high-end gifts anymore. Shark's fin is what people use to make ordinary soups at home now. If you want to give a high-end gift these days, it really has to be caterpillar fungus." Huang Tao in riposte talked up his company's extensive network of sales representatives and the vast business prospects that lay on its horizon. "Right now, we have 150 sales representatives," he said. "Revenue for the year is going to be five hundred million. Eventually we are going to have one thousand salesmen and ten billion in revenue a year."

As I listened to them talk, I was struck by how seamlessly Huang Tao had moved from the news industry to the gift industry and how he was effectively constructing his new role as one that allowed him to be the same kind of up-and-coming businessperson as he had fashioned himself at *The Times*. News articles and corporate gifts are in theory contrastive commodities, the first being produced for public consumption and the second for use in private negotiations. Huang Tao made the difference between them seem negligible. Both industries were made up of relationships to be fostered, sculpted, and harnessed for the opportunities they might open up. Both, in other words, were *jianghu* where people who wanted to move themselves in a certain direction needed to say and do what their particular circumstances made it strategic for them to say and do.

Normative and theoretical frameworks that are grounded in an idea of

the press as the convener and servant of a “public” see the news as a medium of texts that can bring a society’s individual members out of the relational networks that connect them in their “personal modes of sociability” into an “impersonal” space of discourse that is governed by a “rational and disinterested concern for the public good” (Warner 1992, 39, 38, 42). The *jianghu* perspective, in contrast, sees news articles as texts whose production and circulation are inextricably entwined with the personal relationships, prospects, and strategies of those who produce and circulate them. Journalists in the first perspective may, pace Hassid (2016), be either dutifully dedicated to their vocation or corruptly focused on making money for themselves. Journalists in the *jianghu*, on the other hand, never work only in one or the other of these modes, for they are always working through their positions and roles at their newspapers to create pathways through its relational terrain that will take them in the directions they want to be headed.

In the next and final section of this chapter, I reflect on how *The Times*’ journalists’ *jianghu* imaginary offers a critical perspective for analyzing trends and developments in the news sector under Xi Jinping’s rule, and may also be a useful angle for thinking about news in other contemporary contexts as well.

#### RETHINKING NEWS IN THE XI JINPING ERA

Under Xi Jinping’s rule, Party direction and control of the news have been markedly strengthened. More propagandistic content gets produced not only by the Party organs but by the commercialized newspapers as well, much of it lauding not only the work of the Party but the great and unparalleled leadership of Xi himself (Esarey 2021; Shirk 2018; S. Zhao 2016). Extending its reach beyond news, the Party has pursued an aggressive multipronged program to regulate China’s social media sphere (Han 2018), develop digitally powered propaganda tools (Chen and Zhao 2021), and turn Chinese cyberspace into a realm of communication that works to enhance rather than detract from its discursive, ideological, and political domination (Creemers 2017; Roberts 2018). At the same time, geopolitical tensions between China and the West have intensified, and nationalistic sentiments in both news and social media have grown stronger (Han 2021; Gorman 2017).

Western news outlets observing these developments have tended to fall back on the Cold War image of an all-powerful Communist Party unilater-

ally deciding what the Chinese masses are told and led to think and feel. What the *jianghu* imaginary helps to highlight in this context is the fact that China's news sector is not a single organization with a unified chain of command, but a vast and dense network of far more diverse and particular actors and relationships. This is a world of newsmakers, businesspeople, and Party officials who do not only do what their formal organizations would have them do, but whose conduct is also shaped by considerations that arise from the particular situations and arrangements that they find themselves in. If the Xi era has seen more propagandistic and nationalistic news content being produced and circulated, this is not the result of a simple Party decree but can be thought of as an outcome of such content having become a currency of worth within the news sector's own networks.

Party interventions have, in other words, worked in combination with the commercial and technological factors that shape China's news industry to create a condition where many industry players find it both strategically useful and morally reasonable for them to produce and publish pro-establishment news reports as a means to steer a course through the news sector's *jianghu*. Many of these industry players may not think of the news articles they publish as texts that have much impact on or that even garner much attention from the audiences they address. Scholars of China's contemporary media have shown that audiences do not take the truth-claims they are presented with at face value, but filter them through various lenses of skepticism, cynicism, and irony (C. Wang and Huang 2021; Latham 2016). People in the news industry are aware of this but not necessarily impeded by it, for the value that a news article has for them is not necessarily pegged to its public impact. Much of the nationalistic and propagandistic news content that now circulates may, in other words, do more to mediate the interactions of various newsmakers, executives, and officials than to mold the minds of China's masses. The increasing prevalence of such content should not be taken as indicative of a corresponding shift in public opinion, but analyzed in connection to the complex and shifting webs of relations that make up the news sector's *jianghu*.

Beyond China, the notion of the news sector as a *jianghu* may be a useful tool for thinking about how the truth-claims that get circulated as news are shaped by objectives and imperatives that arise from the webs of relationships that connect people in other contexts as well. As social media and partisan politics make the news' entanglement in various communicational and organizational networks ever more apparent in the United States (Carl-

son 2020; Boczkowski and Papacharissi 2018), for example, media scholars have underscored the need to move away from the idea that news can somehow stand above and disinterestedly represent the world around it. These scholars call for studies that “put journalism back into the world” (B. Zelizer, Boczkowski, and Anderson 2021, 1) by attending to the multiple ways in which journalists’ work processes are entwined with the workings of other social, cultural, and political institutions. The notion of the news sector as a *jianghu* draws out these entanglements by looking at the particular networks of relations that newsmakers are embedded in and asking how their decisions and actions are shaped by their efforts to navigate these networks.

News practices today are much changed since the age of the printed public sphere. To insist on approaching contemporary news through ideals and imaginaries that no longer inform it is to obscure rather than sharpen our grasp of reality. Reflecting on the task of the human sciences in the contemporary world, the anthropologist Anna Tsing argues that as “the dreams of modernization and progress that offered a vision of stability in the twentieth century” dissipate, scholarly inquiry must rise to “the imaginative challenge of living without those handrails, which once made us think we knew, collectively, where we were going” (2015, 2). The notion of the news sector as a *jianghu* and of news as a currency that circulates within it point us away from the conceptual handrails that we inherit for making sense of news and journalism, toward a bolder rethinking of what these contemporary institutions are becoming. There is a pressing need for us to explore the new forms of connection and community that today’s newsmakers and users are creating, and the new forms of value and validity that the news’ truth-claims have in these domains, in order to better understand the parameters and potentialities of the postpublic imaginaries that are already shaping our worlds.

## Epilogue

In the years following Huang Tao's removal and the rearrangement of relations that it triggered at *The Times*, I continued to keep in touch with the newsmakers and learn of the different paths they took. After a year or two in sales, Huang Tao did indeed return to the media industry, taking a position as the editor in chief of an internet television website. He then left this position to start a website of his own that offered information and resources to education sector entrepreneurs and professionals. I did not meet him again, but in the speeches and interviews of his that I read online, I found him continuing to use his distinctive rhetorical flair to talk up the growth prospects and opportunities that seemed to abound in whichever sector he happened to be in. Qian Hao, the Economics journalist who had formerly made himself one of Huang Tao's most assiduous assistants, left *The Times* soon after Huang Tao did to join a news company in Chongqing, where he was rumored to have done very well for himself. Chen Ming, who had been replaced as the Politics section's head editor and moved to the Marketing Department, tried for a couple of years to make a mark in his new position before leaving the newspaper. The Politics journalists believed that he had moved to Beijing but were unsure what he was doing there, as he had deliberately cut off all communication with them, telling them that until he had made something of himself, he would rather keep his distance.

As for Zheng Wen, Liang Yong, and Fan Xiaofei, they too left *The Times* in succession. Xiaofei took a civil service job that she described as boring and effortless but allowed her to leave work at five o'clock every day and draw a decent and stable income. Liang Yong bounced around a number of news outlets where former colleagues and bosses found positions for him, before eventually settling as an editor at a monthly news magazine where, he said, his workload was a fraction of what it had been at *The Times*. The two former

colleagues remained close friends and whenever I visited had new hobbies and acquisitions to report, such as a car, a home entertainment system, a mountain bike, and a pet cat. Zheng Wen, with whom I kept in closest contact, moved to a weekly news magazine that allowed him to write longer-form news stories. He continued to work on building up his expertise and expanding his network of connections, to fashion himself as a journalist who specialized in covering China's legal and judicial reforms. He also began dabbling in stocks and started a website about Chinese tea as a side business with some friends.

Compared to when I first met them, all three former Politics journalists now seemed to have their energies and aspirations less invested in their professional occupations and more channeled into personal pursuits. The unsettling effect that Huang Tao's removal had had on their positions in the news sector's *jianghu* seemed to have damped their drive to pursue their newsmaking ideals and left them more inclined to work, as Liang Yong had put it, on "doing something for themselves." While Liang Yong and Zheng Wen continued to work as newsmakers, they now described themselves as being less naively intent on producing informative and empowering news and more focused on earning a salary and improving their own lives and lifestyles.

Approximately a year after taking over Huang Tao's position, *The Times'* new editor in chief, Zhao Xin, quit as well. I was told that he not managed to establish enough rapport with staff members to effectively lead them and had left the newspaper in frustration. He was replaced by a third editor in chief, brought over from yet another Guangzhou-based news outlet. Meanwhile, the general manager of the state-owned media conglomerate that owns *The Times*, Manager Tang, who had both hired and later fired Huang Tao, was himself reassigned and replaced by another Party bureaucrat who was said to be more business savvy. Amid the sharp decline in advertising revenue that China's print media industry was then facing, the newspaper's new leaders reduced the size of its print run, cut its pages by more than a quarter, closed its Culture, World News, and Opinion desks, and let go a considerable number of staff members. These changes finally turned *The Times* into a profitable company. The state-owned media conglomerate then launched its much-awaited IPO—though none of the staff members were given any shares (as far as I was told).

Two years after leaving *The Times*, Zheng Wen rejoined the newspaper under its third editor in chief, at the invitation of a colleague who had been there since

the days of Huang Tao and who had since risen to become deputy editor in chief. Zheng Wen was hired back to be the head editor of the newspaper's Politics desk, the position that used to belong to Chen Ming. As China's newspapers shifted away from their printed editions and websites to their newly developed mobile phone apps, Zheng Wen's role came to revolve around getting his section's journalists to write news articles that were optimized for app-based consumption and thinking up new ways to increase the number of downloads and the amount of online traffic that the app generated.

Over the months and years that followed, Zheng Wen and his fiancé got married, bought an apartment in Guangzhou, and had two children. Achieving these life milestones made Zheng Wen feel more firmly grounded in the city and also more inclined to hold on to his job at *The Times* for the financial security it provided. "People who have started a family don't leave their jobs (*tiaochao*) very readily," he told me. Although he was occasionally approached by other news companies, he never found their propositions more attractive than his existing setup. "The room for maneuver that they have may be even less than ours," he said, referring to the scope that these other news outlets might have for publishing critical news reports. "And besides, I'm doing quite well here," he added.

As the Party authorities under Xi Jinping's rule tightened their control over the news media and as the scope for critical news reporting grew more restricted across the industry, Zheng Wen stayed put at *The Times* and gradually climbed its ranks. He became more involved in higher-level administrative work, such as the planning of the newspaper's annual budget and designing of its business strategies, and participated in discussions with executive-level staff about what side ventures *The Times* could get into and how it could transform itself into a more profitable business. He and his colleagues spent hours talking about turning *The Times* into an asset management company of which the newspaper would become a subsidiary, buying buildings and becoming a "landlord" (*fangdong*) that rents space to start-ups, or leveraging the newspaper's established reputation in financial news publishing to set up an online stock-trading platform and make money from transaction fees.

Zheng Wen told me that he appreciated the macro-level (*hongguan*) view of the news company that his higher position in the organization afforded him. "It's good to be able to get closer to the decision-making level (*juece ceng*)," he said. "You appreciate even more what a newspaper's survival depends on—which is money. Newspapers depend on their operations

teams going out and finding ways to make money.” In line with his new appreciation of how the newspaper operated, Zheng Wen was trying to more actively go to banquets with potential business partners and get used to the kind of entertaining that he had formerly stayed away from. In his capacity as the head editor of the Politics section, he regularly reminded his journalists of the part that they had to play in supporting *The Times*’ business, urging them to produce articles that strengthened the newspaper’s image as a platform for white-collar professionals and entrepreneurs. It was now he who pulled the journalists’ articles from press when the newspaper received a call from a business client or Party patron, and he who annually sent the Politics journalists to report on the *lianghui* with instructions on what themes to write their propaganda articles around.

One could describe Zheng Wen as having traded the journalistic ideals of his youth for the greater wealth and status that his bosses had always pursued, and argue that he had in effect become a mere cog in China’s commercially corrupt and politically supine news industry. In my view, however, Zheng Wen continued to embody a different understanding of contemporary news than the concept of an either supine or upright news system allows for. Rather than thinking that news can either serve its publics with important information or be abused by newsmakers to make money, Zheng Wen sees the news as a realm of truth-claims that are inseparably entangled with and shaped by the interests, agendas, and relationships of the myriad actors involved in producing and circulating them. He sees how news works not only as a means of communication but also as a kind of currency in the news industry—that is, as a medium of texts that people in the industry use to build up and navigate their own social and material worlds. Zheng Wen strives to use this currency in a way that looks toward the emergence of a more publicly informative news media in the future, while in the meantime being productive and sustainable for his newspaper and its newsmakers.

Putting it differently, one could say that Zheng Wen strives to work in a way that is attentive both to the news’ potential for public communication and to the value that its public circulability imbues it with in private networks of relations. Even as Zheng Wen became more involved in *The Times*’ business strategizing, he continued to apply himself to the work of planning the Politics section’s news coverage and editing every article that its journalists submitted. Besides reminding the journalists of their obligations to *The Times*’ business model, he also continuously instructed, goaded, and implored them to work on improving their news-gathering skills and raising

their news-writing standards. When I asked him on my return visits how things were going, he would often speak most animatedly about his vexation over the quality of its journalists' work. He told me in one such exchange:

The standards of the journalists we have now are so poor that it's hard to believe. Last week I found a mistake in an article and showed it to the journalist who wrote it. She said, "Oh right, I went back through the article before submitting it, but not very closely." Can you imagine, she had already gone back through the article and still there were mistakes! I really feel that journalists now aren't as good as they were in our time. Even though I'm really reluctant to say that because that's what Chen Ming always used to say about us, still I feel that it must be said.

Despite the frustrating, thankless, and often futile-seeming nature of the task, Zheng Wen continued to try to improve the quality of *The Times'* news product and bring the newspaper closer to providing the informative and important news coverage that it claimed to offer. Few of his colleagues had stuck to this endeavor. Many of those who were at *The Times* under Huang Tao had since left, and many who joined later hardly lasted a year. As Zheng Wen put it:

The best writers are the ones who flee the fastest. They have no loyalty to the enterprise. They leave because they are capable and perceptive, and they see that this industry has little to offer them, so they move on to look for something better. Very few people want to stay. Who would be so naive (*tianzhen*) these days as to want to stay and seriously and diligently write news? It used to be that people would job-hop from one news outlet to another, but now they hop directly out of the industry.

Though there are many other sectors where an individual with Zheng Wen's qualifications could find higher salaries, better career development prospects, and fewer political constraints and frustrations, he chose to remain at *The Times* and continue—stubbornly, doggedly, and some would say, foolishly—trying to make its news reporting better. "People ask me why I'm still working on content," he told me. "After so many years, they expect me to have moved on to management or strategy. Few people in the industry at my age are still editing articles. But I do it because although it's been so many years, we still haven't figured out how to make our articles good yet!"

Even as he climbed up the newspaper's hierarchy and became more invested in its business operations, Zheng Wen thus remained oriented to the goal of producing more informative and impactful news. He had not given up on this journalistic ideal. Rather, he was learning to navigate the *jianghu* of relations and interests that his newsmaking practice was embedded in in a way that supported the practical ends that were important to him, while also enabling him to keep moving toward this ideal that he still believed in. While others had allowed the practical pressures and relational intrigues of the *jianghu* to “transform” them, Zheng Wen continued to hold his “bottom line” and steer a course that stayed true to the idea of the news' capacity to engage and empower its readers.

This is no mean feat in an age of digitalized and commercialized communication networks where truth-claims, money interests, power relations, identities, careers, and futures flow in mutual entanglements that shape the individual's life but are beyond any individual's control. It is important to me to see Zheng Wen from this angle because it helps to show that contemporary news is a medium of texts that has expanded and evolved far beyond the notions of truth and publics that we imaginarily fence it in. The news' textual flows are not statements of fact generated in and by an arena of impersonal interaction, but communicational threads and currents with which the interests and relationships that concern people in their personal modes of sociability are entangled. The news' texts are a medium in and through which people work both to communicate to prospective audiences and to navigate the networks of relations that they themselves are embedded in.

While it is daunting to think of a world where news is not governed by the principles of public reason and discourse that our conceptions of modernity have been grounded in, it is important to discern the new notions and forms of ethical practice that newsmakers today are forging in “the ruins” (Tsing 2015) of this imaginary—that is, to explore and engage with their novel conceptions and sensibilities about what the contemporary institution consists in and how good and worthy newsmakers should now conduct themselves. The absence of such engagement foments cynical outlooks that paint news sectors as sites of systematic deception and untrammelled moral corruption—oversimplified and inflammatory images, particularly infelicitous at a time of deepening political divides and mounting political tensions. Through its inquiry into the lives and worlds of *The Times'* newsmakers, the aim of this book has been to contribute to more richly informed and careful approaches to contemporary news as a culturally complex and continuously evolving institution.



# Notes

## Chapter 1

1. To protect the identities of the individuals and organizations I worked with, the title of the newspaper and names of all staff members are pseudonyms.

2. The term *lingdao*, or “leader,” was used by Zheng Wen in the first instance to refer to Party officials and in the second instance to refer to a journalist’s bosses or higher-ups within the newspaper. *Lingdao* is broadly used in China to refer to anyone in a position of power or who has command over others in their organization, whether this be a bureaucratic, military, corporate, or even domestic unit. For a discussion of the *lingdao* as a figure in China, see Steinmüller 2015.

3. The CCP’s *xuanchuanbu* was formerly referred to in English as its “Propaganda Department.” The organization’s English name was officially changed in 1998 (Brady 2008, 30 n. 6). On the role and operations of the CCP’s Publicity Department, see Brady 2008, H. Liu 2020, and Shambaugh 2007. For recent accounts of China’s news media that focus on its propaganda function, see Hearn-Branaman 2015 and Lüqiu 2018.

4. For an overview of the administrative and commercial landscape of China’s news industry, see Stockmann 2013. On changed commercial conditions under Xi, see Li and Sparks 2018.

5. My ethnography takes up the advice of Dominic Boyer (2008), who argues that anthropologists of expertise should not work only at their interlocuters’ formal workplaces but also “go home with them” (43), or engage them in their broader social lives and worlds.

6. Two of the most influential formulations of this notion are Lippmann 1995 and Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm 1956.

7. Chengju Huang (2003), Chin-Chuan Lee (2000), and Bingchun Meng (2018) discuss the continuing application and inapplicability of Western news scholars’ press models and typologies to China. Sahana Udupa (2015) discusses the problematic projection of Habermasian ideals onto the news sector in contemporary India.

8. For studies that take up this question, see Chase and Mulvenon 2002, Esarey and Xiao 2011, Lagerkvist 2010, and Sullivan 2014.

9. The essays collected in C.-C. Lee 1990b offer detailed accounts of the press sector's involvement in the events at Tiananmen, written in their immediate aftermath.

10. Zhao draws on the work of Aihwa Ong (2006) to describe this as an instance of “neoliberalism as exception.”

11. See the 2022 Reporters Without Borders report, *The Great Leap Backwards of Journalism in China*.

12. On popular nationalism in China's digital media era, see Jiang (2012) and Schneider (2018).

## Chapter 2

1. A number of Chinese scholars argue that “newspapers” (*baozhi*) in China date back to the Tang dynasty, when the imperial administration began to have its edicts copied and transmitted to regional outposts across the empire (Ding 2002). Many others, however, see the modern Chinese newspaper as a nineteenth-century emergence that was heavily influenced by the English- and Chinese-language broadsheets that were run by British and American missionaries and traders in China's southern coastal cities (Britton 1966; Cohen 1974; Volz and Lee 2009b; Xiantao Zhang 2007). On Chinese newspapers in the Qing era, see Mittler 2004 and Mokros 2021.

2. On the civic associations and events that were organized by Liang and his fellow newsmakers, see Judge 1996, 181–97.

3. For detailed accounts of news and journalism in China's Republican era, see MacKinnon 1997, Narramore 2003, L. S. Wang 1994, and Weston 2006.

4. Reed (2018) makes the case that the Party's printing and publishing apparatus was crucial to its early formation and survival.

5. Cheek describes the function of the news media under Mao's mass line policy as that of “propagating the Party's policies, gathering information about the grass roots for the leadership, serving as a forum for individual grievances, and supervising the bureaucracy by exposing wrongdoing” (1997, 87). He quotes Party journalist Deng Tuo, who would later become editor-in-chief of *People's Daily*, on the need for the Party's newspapers to both propagate the Party's policies and “represent the needs of the broad masses, reflect and pass on the real conditions and experience of the broad masses' struggle” (1997, 87).

6. A small number of privately owned and independent newspapers were initially allowed to remain in operation, but were later deemed unacceptable. The last of these were co-opted into the Party system by 1952 (Y. Zhao 1998, 16).

7. Reflecting on the way that the Party leaders' political enemies were eliminated through public criticisms, Rebecca Karl observes that rather than through physical arrests or disappearances as in the USSR, “in Maoist China, doom came through words, in newspapers and wall posters. It came in tortured interpretations of texts, that shortly before had appeared innocuous. It came in social shunning and rumours and insinuations. It came as social death” (2010, 97).

8. The number of officially licensed newspapers in China grew from 280 in 1979 to 1,050 in 1984, and 2,322 in 1988 (Stockmann 2013, 56).

9. This practice is commonly referred to by Chinese newsmakers in a table tennis metaphor, as “hitting edge balls” (*chabianqiu*). According to Hsiao and Yang (1990), the technique is attributed to Qin Benli, former editor-in-chief of *World Economic Herald*.

10. Hassid (2008) argues that the Party continues to exploit the vagueness in its press regulations, to govern through “uncertainty.”

11. Writing with reference to Tuchman’s (1978) observation that the journalist’s job requires them to weave a “web of facticity,” Pan argues that journalists in China are required to weave a “web of subsidies” (2000, 83).

12. Yuezhi Zhao similarly writes that “the Party has more or less given up its mission of political indoctrination to simply concentrate on the management of its own publicity” (2008, 34).

13. Hao and Xu (1997) trace the diverse and often contradictory theories that were brought into China’s journalism school programs, which, they argue, had no model and were put together “by default rather than by design” (46).

14. Chengju Huang describes the relationship between Party and non-Party media actors as a “bargaining process during which each party of the game has to more or less consider other players’ interests and possible reaction before making its own decision” (2007a, 405). The Party, Huang emphasizes, is not seen in this arena as the highest moral or political authority, but as the player with the most “bargaining power” (2007a, 405) or the most resources for demanding that its terms be met.

### Chapter 3

1. For discussions of how Chinese journalists’ moral and professional ideas compare to the normative principles of Western journalism, see de Burgh 2003a, Hassid 2016, C.-C. Lee 2005, Polumbaum and Xiong 2008, Simons, Nolan, and Wright 2017, and Y. Zhao 2012.

2. For discussions of how China’s distinct political and cultural circumstances constitute its digital worlds in ways that differ from Western theories and models, see Guo 2020, Han 2018, and X. Wang 2016.

3. On *guanxi*, see Kipnis 1997, Osburg 2013, and M.M.-h. Yang 1994. I discuss the role of *guanxi* in China’s news sector further in Chapter 6.

4. For recent exceptions, see K. Li and Sparks 2018 and D. Wang and Sparks 2020.

5. For a discussion of the “readerless” quality of journalism in China, see Chua 2019.

6. On the 1980s and 1990s consumer revolution, see Davis 2000 and Farquhar 2002. On the advertising industry, see J. Wang 2010.

## Chapter 4

1. For examples, see C.-C. Lee 2005 and Hassid 2016. Studies of journalistic professionalism in China that challenge and complicate this binary include Pan and Lu 2003, Repnikova 2017, and Simons, Nolan, and Wright 2017. For a discussion of the broader concept and history “professionalism” in China, see Hoffman 2010.
2. Anthropologists have called for ethnographies to engage with “post-truth” practices as new forms of knowledge and discourse (Graan, Hodges, and Stalcup 2020; Mair 2017; Sacco 2017). This book is at one level an attempt to do so.
3. The Chinese translation of *Pravda*, the Russian newspaper that was formerly the official organ of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.
4. For an analysis of Chinese news audiences’ “cynical” ways of reading news, see Latham 2016.
5. For discussions of this issue in the US context, see Henry 2007 and McChesney and Pickard 2011.
6. The first emperor to make Confucianism a state philosophy, around the second century BC.

## Chapter 5

1. On news production pressures in US contexts, see Deuze 2007 and Klinenberg 2005. For discussions of the professional lapses that arise from these production pressures, see Henry 2007 and McChesney and Pickard 2011.
2. For a discussion of the role of these consumption practices in China’s business culture, see Osburg 2013.
3. For further discussions of this potential threat to democracy, see Gans 2003, Rosenstiel 2005, and Schudson 2003.
4. For a discussion of the term “frying” in relation to financial news reporting in China, see J. Wang 2017.
5. On middle-class aspirations and consumption practices in urban China, see Rofel 2007, L. Zhang 2010, and L. Zhang and Ong 2008.
6. Xin Liu (2009) writes about such performative uses of numbers as a practice that constitutes China’s contemporary reality as a “mirage.”

## Chapter 6

1. Apart from the realm of business and commerce, anthropologists have also found the *jianghu* motif being taken up by people in a variety of other domains and ways. For examples, see Boretz 2011, H.-Y. Huang 2018, and Pia 2017.
2. On *guanxi* and *renqing*, see Bell 2000, Kipnis 1997, and M. M.-h. Yang 1994, 2002.
3. Bartlett (2020) discusses idling as a motif that is invoked by former heroin addicts in China who, similarly to Chen Ming, feel that their opportunity to make something of themselves has passed.

4. On *suzhi*, see Kipnis 2006 and H. Yan 2008.
5. On the sharp contraction of printed newspaper advertising and its impact on China's newspapers, see W. Liu 2018, D. Wang and Sparks 2020, and H. Wang and Sparks 2019.



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## Index

- advertising: conventional, 58; in metropolitan papers (*dushibao*), 42; “native,” 23; post-Mao era, 36–37, 62
- advertising revenue, 18, 63, 73, 93; decline in, 136, 145; payment for bringing in, 7, 42, 93. *See also* soft and black article trade
- aggregator services, 45
- “alternative facts,” 23
- attentional communities, 59–60
- black articles. *See* soft and black article trade
- Boczkowski, Pablo, 13, 105
- Boyer, Dominic, 24, 151n5
- business models, 12, 13, 41; and possibility of audience, 19–20, 49, 51–52, 59–61, 65; post-Mao, 61–67; of *The Times*, 17–20, 49, 58–61, 109–10, 147
- Carlson, Matt, 5
- caterpillar fungus (*chongcao*), 139, 140
- censorship, 2, 15, 21–22, 108; circumvention of, 2, 4, 16, 37, 41–42; under Xi Jinping, 121
- Chinese Communist Party (CCP): formation of, 30; intra-Party conflict, 14, 16, 33–36; leaders (*lingdao*), 1–2, 151n2; and marketization, 14–15; “mass line” policy, 32, 152n5; newspaper as political instrument for, 2–3, 14, 28, 31–36, 43, 64; and online news, 44–45; Publicity Department (*xuanchuanbu*), 2, 7–8, 45, 75, 117, 151n3; and Tiananmen Square protests, 14, 38–40; Xi Jinping era, 2, 25, 121, 141–43, 146. *See also* Mao era; post-Mao era
- Chu, Julie, 98
- “citizenry” (*guomin*), 30
- commercialized news companies, 6, 28, 36, 62, 116, 141
- Confucian thought, 3, 43, 92, 138
- consumer-friendly news, 20, 49, 63–64
- consumer goods industry, 63, 64–65
- corruption: of journalistic profession, 17, 20, 23, 72, 96, 116, 141, 147, 149; journalists’ fight against, 88–89; of Party officials, 114, 122
- Cultural Revolution, 29, 35–36, 37, 39; closing of newspapers during, 33, 35, 63
- currency, news as, 4, 12, 17, 21–24, 99; articles as arbitrage, 103–5; consortium of dealers, 109–14; constructive and responsible uses of, 23–24; and ethic of efficacy, 100–101; “frying up” (*chao qilai*) news, 105–9; mediation of private negotiations, 21–22, 97–98, 101; opacity to audience, 114–16; propaganda, 142; stock exchange comparison, 105–6, 108. *See also* money; relationships
- declining standards, 5, 16–17, 22–23, 42, 79
- Deng Tuo, 34, 152n5
- Deng Xiaoping, 14, 36, 38–39, 62–63
- “doable” (*keyi zuo de*) news, 73, 74–78, 107
- efficacy, ethic of: and “good” newsmakers, 27, 72–73, 76, 85, 94; and interviews, 86–87; and news as currency, 100–101; as post-truth news ethic, 73, 78; and soft and black article trade, 70, 74

- ethics: anthropological views of, 73; and pace of change in China, 79; “post-truth,” 17, 23, 27, 72, 78–81, 88–89, 95; of truthfulness, 72, 79, 87–88
- evening papers (*wanbao*), 62–63, 64
- Fei Xiaotong, 124
- Foster, Robert, 99
- “frying up” (*chao qilai*) news, 105–9
- gamification of newsmaking, 73, 81–85
- Goldman, Merle, 35
- Great Leap Forward, 34
- Guangming Daily*, 34
- guanxi* relationships, 7, 50, 124–25
- Guo Shaohua, 13, 60
- Guyer, Jane, 99
- Habermas, Jürgen, 11
- Hart, Keith, 21, 98
- Hassid, Jonathan, 96, 141
- high-end readers (societal elites), 47–48, 51–52, 58, 61–62, 65–67; *jingying* as term for, 1, 47. *See also* professionals and entrepreneurs
- Hundred Flowers policy, 34
- “idling,” 134, 154n3
- imaginaries: culturally particular, 24; imagined news readers, 2–3, 5, 20; late liberal, 24; modern social imaginary, 11, 13, 120, 137–38; postpublic, 121
- imitation, 105–9
- “in-depth” (*shendu*) reporting, 54, 85–86, 110, 145
- individuals, liberal model of, 137–38
- initial public offerings (IPOs), 18, 66, 90, 118, 128, 145
- internet, 23–24, 29, 44–45, 64; digitalization of news, 3, 12–13, 20; as “network of visibility,” 60; in Xi Jinping era, 141. *See also* online news
- investigative news reporting, 41–42, 47, 53, 112–14
- jianghu*, in martial arts literature, 24, 119, 121–23; and personhood, 123–24
- jianghu* imaginary, 24–26, 119–20; applied to contexts beyond China, 142–43; contemporary, 121–36; in contrast to liberal and socialist models, 137–38; identity formation in, 131–34; from literary studies perspective, 122–23; “stateless subjects,” 123, 137; in Xi Jinping era, 141–43. *See also* personal/private transactions; relationships
- Jin Yong, 123
- “journalist licenses,” 41
- Kelty, Christopher, 60
- Kuomintang (KMT), 28, 30–32
- late-socialist context, 3, 13–17, 26, 49, 83
- leaders (*lingdao*), 1–2, 151n2
- lianghui* (National People’s Congress and Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference), 46–50, 67; reporting on, 50–57
- Liang Qichao, 30
- liberal models of news media, 11, 137–38; late-liberal contexts, 16–17, 24–25
- Liberation Daily*, 34
- Liu, Petrus, 122–23, 126
- “mainstream” (*zhuliu*) news, 6, 48, 107
- Mao era, 2, 16, 28, 33–35, 152n7; administrative structure of press, 33; journalism as weapon of political and ideological struggle, 31–36; personal networks (*guanxi*), 124–25
- Mao Zedong, 2, 25, 28; criticisms of in press, 33–35; death of, 35; Great Leap Forward, 34; Hundred Flowers policy, 34
- marketization policies: and *jianghu* imaginary, 124; post-Mao era, 2, 3, 14, 29, 36, 40; post-Tiananmen era, 41–43
- martial arts literature, 24, 119, 121–24
- Marx, Karl, 21, 97
- Marxist-Leninist thought, 28, 31
- “mass line” policy, 32, 152n5
- Maurer, Bill, 99
- media group (*meiti jituan*), 18, 42–43, 93, 128
- Meng Bingchun, 13
- metropolitan papers (*dushibao*), 42, 62, 63–65
- mobile phone apps, 146
- modernization, news media as medium for, 29–31
- modern public, 13, 21, 24, 27

- modern social imaginary, 11, 13, 120, 137–38
- money: anthropology and sociology of, 96–99; and news, 97–101; social and cultural meanings of, 21, 96–98. *See also* currency, news as
- nationalistic discourses: late-Qing era, 28–32; in Xi era, 25, 141–42
- National People's Congress and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. *See lianghui*
- “native advertising,” 23
- neoliberal ethos, 15, 24
- “news cyclone,” 76
- objectivity, 5, 31, 43, 72–73, 75, 79–80; in American journalism theory, 12, 38; critiques of, 142–43; public lack of access to accurate information, 47; “scientific paradigm,” conventions of, 73, 79–80
- officials, 6; cautiousness of, 55–56; and intra-Party conflict, 14, 16, 33–36; “ritualized leisure” activities, 126; self-interest of, 1, 3
- “offspring papers” (*zibao*), 64
- online news, 5, 44–45, 60, 65–67; “clicks” and “views,” 5, 60, 76, 100–101; “refreshed” offerings, 76; shift toward, 13, 49, 64, 76. *See also* digitalization; internet
- opacity, news as medium of, 4–5, 114–16
- Osburg, John, 122
- Pan Zhongdan, 43
- People's Daily*, 6, 82, 115, 116, 152n5; and Mao-era intra-Party conflict, 33–34
- personal connections/networks, 112; lack of, 50, 54–59, 113; value of, 83, 99, 102, 125
- personal modes of sociability, 11, 12, 141, 149
- personal/private transactions, 7–9, 12, 17, 69, 136–38; in authoritarian societies, 35; and goal of meaningful news for public, 97, 136, 147; lack of public knowledge about, 114–15; and news as currency, 21–22, 97–100; newsmaking as site of, 4–5, 21–22, 27, 97–100, 108, 114–15; Western model of, 122. *See also jianghu* imaginary; relationships
- personhood, 123–24
- platforms: high-end, 47–48, 51–52, 58, 62, 65–67; of publicness, 18–21; as resource, 57–61
- post-Mao era, 36–41; marketization policies, 2, 3, 29; press law proposal, 38–39; three business models, 61–67
- postpublic imaginaries, 17, 121, 137–41
- post-truth era, 79–80; normative stances of journalists toward black articles, 89–95
- post-truth ethics, 17, 23, 27, 72, 78–81, 88–89, 95
- Pravda*, 83
- press passes, 50, 52, 68
- printed public sphere, 10–11, 143
- professionals and entrepreneurs, 1, 6, 15, 19, 122; late-Qing era, 32. *See also* high-end readers (societal elites)
- propaganda, 13, 15, 48; in an age of publicness, 67–69; as currency, 142; digital, 141; ignored by readers, 69; by journalists at *The Times*, 48, 50, 53–54, 57, 61, 67, 69, 99–100, 111; news media as site of, 2, 4, 13, 26, 39–40; as weapon of people's revolutionary vanguard, 28–29
- public: alternatives to, 25; changing conceptions of, 5; as impersonal, 11–12, 21–22, 97, 141; as means for private negotiations, 101; and modernity, 13, 21, 24, 27; critique of, 13, 16, 25, 36, 120
- Publicity Department (*xuanchuanbu*), 2, 7–8, 45, 75, 117, 151n3
- publicness, 17, 67; platforms of, 18–21, 49; propaganda in age of, 67–69
- “public opinion” (*yulun*), 3, 28, 30, 38, 121, 142
- publics: alternatives to, 25; changing conceptions of, 5; imagined, 3, 19–20, 59–60; as impersonal, 11–12, 21–22, 97, 141; as means for private negotiations, 101; and modernity, 13, 21, 24, 27; unified, 13, 16, 25, 36, 120; virtual, 5, 59–60
- public sphere: “contentious,” 44; democratic, 10–11, 105; printed, 10–11, 143
- Qing empire, late, 28–32
- rationality, discourse of, 11, 16, 21–22, 141
- “red packets,” 42

- relationships: *guanxi*, 7, 50, 124–25; money used to negotiate, 98; negotiation of as virtue, 17, 73, 79–80, 88; new kinds of, 3–4; news used to negotiate, 4, 99, 112; “stateless subjects,” 123, 137. *See also* currency, news as; jianghu imaginary; personal/private transactions
- Repnikova, Maria, 16
- Roudakova, Natalia, 22, 72
- Russia, post-Soviet, 22. *See also* Soviet Union
- Union
- salaries, 76–77, 101–2
- Shanghai, 30–31
- Simmel, Georg, 21, 97
- social imaginaries, 120
- socialist contexts, 13, 33, 137–38; late-socialist context, 3, 13–17, 26, 49, 83
- socialist models of news media, 137–38
- soft and black article trade, 18–19, 21–22, 58–59, 66, 70–71, 99–100; and efficacy, 70, 74; and metropolitan papers, 64–65; normative stances of journalists toward, 89–95
- Southern Weekend*, 41, 47, 112, 114
- Soviet Union, 29. *See also* Russia, post-Soviet
- “stateless subjects,” 123, 137
- state-owned enterprises: and IPOs, 136, 145; multibusiness media conglomerates, 1, 18, 42, 65, 117–19, 145; and shareholding, 118
- Stockmann, Daniela, 15
- stock market analogy, 105–6, 108
- Taylor, Charles, 11, 24, 120
- Tencent, 107
- Tiananmen Square demonstrations of 1989, 14, 38–40
- truth-claims: news as medium of, 4–5, 23; multiple and conflicting, 73, 80; and opacity, 3–5, 115, 142
- truth-telling: post-truth ethics, 17, 23, 27, 72, 78–81, 88–89, 95; virtues of, 22, 72, 79–80
- Tsing, Anna, 143
- United States: cultural meaning of newspapers in, 11–12, 79–80; digital news practices, 24, 142–43; ethnographies of news-making in, 75; instrumental approaches to news, 22–23; journalism theories, 31, 38
- “usable” (*nengyongde*) news, 54
- Waisbord, Silvio, 73, 79–80
- Warner, Michael, 10–11, 19, 24, 59–60, 141
- The Water Margin* (literary classic), 121
- weekly news cycle, 74–75
- weekly newspapers, and “in-depth” reporting, 54, 85–86, 110, 145
- Xi Jinping era, 2, 25, 121, 146; rethinking news in, 141–43
- Xinhua News Agency, 6, 53, 82–83
- Yang, Mayfair, 124
- Zelizer, Viviana, 98
- Zhao Yuezhi, 15, 40
- Zhao Ziyang, 38, 39
- Zhuangzi* (Taoist text), 121