Introduction

Alternative Publications, Spaces and Publics: Revisiting the Public Sphere in 20th- and 21st-century China

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Abstract

Reviewing the extant literature on China's public sphere from the perspective of 20th-century history and social science, this introductory essay argues for the continued relevance of studying the publications and public practices associated with knowledge communities. By steering away from normative definitions and by envisaging publicness as a process, a connection can be explored between social discourses and political practices in China. Discursive communities, based on shared identity or sociability, may appear marginal, but at key moments they can play a unique role in modifying the dynamics of political events.

Keywords: public sphere; civil society; publicness; press; publications; media; China

China's 20th-century history is sometimes seen as a series of failed attempts to institutionalize civil society and consolidate a public sphere conducive to meaningful political debate. For this reason, some scholars reject the notion of the public sphere, viewing it as a Western category too far removed from Chinese reality, in which the boundaries between state and society are often blurred. The "search" for an always elusive civil society is sometimes singled out as a product of the illusions of 1989, the year in which the Berlin Wall fell, the Chinese democracy movement was crushed, and Jürgen Habermas's *Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere* was first published in English and drew the attention of China scholars. Furthermore, after 1989, Habermas's narrative of the formation of an autonomous public through rational-critical discussions based on the bracketing of social status, was criticized as logocentric, gender-biased and socially exclusive.[1] Yet, in China, despite the vulnerability or lack of autonomy

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1 See, e.g., Calhoun 1992.

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of civil society groups, political and social debates never ceased. While the press enjoyed substantive freedoms only very intermittently or in limited geographical areas, publications continued, whether in offshore, semi-official or, more recently, virtual spaces. This paradox raises the question of how to heuristically envisage the connection between the history and sociology of the press and publications and China's specific political culture over the last century.

Three strands dominated the discussion of public spheres in early modern China. Much attention was devoted in the 1980s and 1990s to the question of the existence of a public sphere and civil society in late-imperial China. It focused mainly on the growing role of the local gentry in the post-Taiping decades (under the arrangement of "official oversight, gentry management" *guan du shen ban* 官督绅办), suggesting the early existence of a "third realm" between state and society, a space for activities that were not organized directly by the state but could be described as *gong* 公, or for the common good.[2] On a more precise analytical level, this discussion pertained to the issue of civil society rather than to that of the public sphere.[3] A second strand of literature focused on the role of foreign concessions, in particular Shanghai and, to a lesser degree, Hong Kong, in establishing a modern press and media.[4] Within the framework of such enclaves, the argument was made that the form of publicness expressed in the modern press could fruitfully connect to endogenous practices and representations.[5] For the new class of journalists and publicists, the press (and most emblematically Liang Qichao's 梁启超 *Shibao* 时报) was a political tool which enabled them to articulate modern political projects, connect public opinion with the notion of people's rights, and open up a "middle realm" of discussion and debate.[6] A third strand of inquiry in social and cultural history probed the pre-modern spaces of public discussion and representation where social norms were questioned, like teahouses,[7] or occasionally upended, like opera playhouses,[8] noting that such public spaces were often repressed and foreclosed in the name of modernization and enlightenment.[9]

Chinese scholarship has often insisted on the absence of autonomy in the forms of publicness that appeared in early modern China, not only because of their lack of institutional protection but also because newspapers and public discourse were immediately understood and used as tools of political mobilization.[10] These scholars argue that the "liberal" understanding of the public sphere was therefore marginalized and subordinated to political agendas.[11] In view of the difficulty

2 Rankin 1986; Rowe 1989; Huang 1993.
3 "It is not helpful to collapse discourse or politics [the public sphere] into social organization [civil society] as though neither culture nor the wills of actors mattered." Calhoun 1993, 269.
4 Wagner 2001; 2008.
5 Mittler 2004; for earlier articulations, see Rankin 1982; Wakeman 1998.
6 Judge 1996.
7 Wang 2008.
8 Goldman 2012.
9 Shao, Qin 1998.
10 Xu, Jilin 2011.
11 Zhang 2003.

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of establishing the boundaries of a "collective public" in early modern China, it can be preferable to study the connection between public discourses produced by intellectuals and the formation of public opinion.[12] Nonetheless, certain publications institutionalized spaces for critical discourse,[13] so that it can be argued that, eventually, "Whereas the development of the public in Europe was premised on the existence of civil society (Habermas wrote of the public sphere *of* civil society), in China it was the organs of publicity that served as the impetus for the creation of the institutional infrastructure that constitutes a civil society."[14]

Beyond these canonical approaches, many of the critical objections to Habermas's initial conceptualization have found productive empirical echoes in studies of modern and contemporary China. Highbrow or serious literati publications were hardly the only or even the most significant form of public discourse available. Emotions and public sentiments, as narrated in middlebrow fiction or the tabloid press, played a central role in the crystallization of public opinion and in political mobilizations.[15] Women's journals were instrumental in challenging gender and moral norms and opening up a "space of their own."[16] Commercial and entertainment journals more generally shaped intellectual and political norms in Republican society.[17] Print entrepreneurs and their diasporic connections were crucial in sustaining cultural production before 1949.[18] Studies of the book as a material and cultural object redefine the modalities of knowledge production.[19] The recent trend towards history of knowledge production and history of disciplines,[20] while taking a different angle, in a way returns to investigating Habermas's notion of communicative rationality as a means to reach agreement on significant issues.

In view of these evolutions, is the notion of a public sphere still productive? Early conceptions of the public sphere and publicness have been usefully questioned and broadened, leading to new interest in subaltern discourse (hidden transcripts),[21] in poetic or emotional discourses previously dismissed as insufficiently rational,[22] and in the gendered construction of the distinction between public and private.[23] Habermas's teleology, according to which an increase in social inclusiveness leads to a decrease in rationality, has been persuasively challenged.[24] Nonetheless, as we have argued previously, the notion of the public sphere

12 Tang 2012.
13 Lee, Leo Ou-fan 2001.
14 Judge 1996, 11–12.
15 Lee, Haiyan 2001; Lean 2007.
16 Judge 2015; Hockx, Judge and Mittler 2018.
17 Lin and Tsai 2014.
18 Rea and Volland 2014.
19 Reed 2004; 2010; Culp 2019.
20 Dolezelova-Velingerova and Wagner 2014; Lam 2011; Dirlik, with Li and Yan 2012; Culp, U and Yeh 2016.
21 Scott 1990.
22 Warner 2005.
23 Fraser 1995.
24 Calhoun 2012.

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remains to some extent irreplaceable in its ability to connect three strands of scholarship: history and sociology of the press and media, public opinion, and participative democracy.[25] The productivity of the notion has been further enhanced by its ability to illuminate contexts well beyond those originally envisaged by historians of the European Enlightenment. Historians of Soviet societies have discussed the existence of an "everyday sphere" governed by "informal norms," situated between the "official public sphere" governed by institutions of state repression, and the private or intimate sphere.[26] Historians of the PRC have in turn productively appropriated the notion to study the control of the media[27] as well as the underground reading or print culture.[28]

Social scientists studying modern and contemporary China, having duly noted the lack of autonomy of China's civil society, which remains dominated by patron–client links to the state,[29] are nonetheless at pains to point out the agency of Chinese society and its ability to create material or virtual spaces for political negotiation.[30] The presence of a set of widely circulated public narratives or frames about past and current affairs shared by a group is a powerful resource that gives people a sense of who they are, shapes their political preferences and mobilizes them to take collective action.[31] National public opinion is constituted but also contested via various social institutions themselves, whereas the civil society framework focuses on identifying formative conditions such as the organizational independence and resource capacity of associational groups vis-à-vis the party-state.[32] The public sphere stresses the importance of the constitutive processes of published texts and public debates which give meanings and affects to individuals' participatory practices in everyday life and during momentous events.[33] Unlike civil society organizations, which are assumed to be institutionalized and can be readily mobilized for collective action, the public sphere is not an "entity"; rather, it is a contested, interactive and social process that gives rise to an alternative aggregation of views and sentiments among its multiple agents.

Despite the tight social control of the Mao era and the use of mass organizations to crowd out the space for autonomous organizations and private corporations, alternative views often existed at the grassroots or among "plebeian publics."[34] In fact, the continuous political struggles at the Party's centre and the associated dialectic of *shou* 收 and *fang* 放 over time and across the urban and rural areas have permitted agents to adapt. Bureaucrats, women, workers and peasants sporadically appropriated the rhetoric of the socialist economy or

25 Veg forthcoming.
26 Rittersporn, Wolf and Behrends 2003, 46.
27 Volland 2003.
28 Song 2007; Shao, Jiang 2015.
29 See, e.g., Strand 1990; Gu 1993; Frolic 1997.
30 Yang, Guobin 2009; Liu, Qing, and McCormick 2011; Lei 2017.
31 Edy 2006; Polletta 2006; Cheng, Chung and Cheng 2021.
32 Huang 1993; White, Gordon 1994.
33 Ding 1994; Calhoun 1994.
34 Breaugh 2013.

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the Cultural Revolution to create a communicative space or to inflect state discourse to serve their personal or collective ends.[35] During the reform era, marketization, diversified media producers and the increased vitality and visibility of public debates were seen as a resurgence of the public sphere in China.[36] While scholars eagerly debated whether the early 1980s constituted the formation of a "nascent civil society" in post-Mao China, it was a social reality that salons had re-emerged in universities, progressive political ideas such as freedom and openness were widely circulated, and numerous intellectuals acted as voices of reason and passion to mediate alternative views that spread beyond urban elites in the spring of 1989.[37]

Moving beyond the lens of civil society institutionalization also enables us to map the change and continuity in China's virtual and grassroots public spaces. Increased social media use in the 2000s has not only fostered public debate and problem articulation but has also regulated state behaviour on an event-by-event basis. A prominent example was the abolition of the custody and repatriation system after the public outcry following the death of Sun Zhigang 孙志刚 in 2003. The transnational mobilization and the rise of relief voluntarism after the Sichuan earthquake even provoked many to refer to 2008 as China's "NGO year zero." However, 2008 also marked the beginning of an intensified crackdown on public intellectuals and an upsurge of discourse on social instability and national revival.[38] These dramatic changes in state–society relations could not be merely attributed to the organizational weakness of civil society groups across the country. Instead, they denoted the state's reaction to the boundary-crossing public space in which certain public sentiments were circulated and social grievances were articulated while others were suppressed or kept latent.[39]

Since 2012, although the party-state has made use of digital information technologies to practise mass surveillance and social control as well as applying the law to regulate media and public opinion, it has also been partially constrained by the norms and practices in the virtual space. Rather than merely censoring sensitive messages related to mass incidents or silencing the advocacy of outspoken opinion leaders, the authorities have had to cultivate "positive energy" (*zheng nengliang* 正能量), to construct a discourse of a harmonious society or a national revival in order to prevail over rival discourses and respond to critical events.[40] Over time, the authorities have become not merely regulators but also players in the public sphere, which they have appropriated as a tool. This new ecology has given grassroots intellectuals and activists on the mainland and from offshore Hong Kong[41] the space to periodically expose social injustices,

35 White, Lynne T. III 1989; Yang, Mayfair Mei-hui 1999; Ho 2011.
36 Strand 1990; Gold 1990.
37 Calhoun 1994.
38 Teets 2009; Rosen 2009.
39 Lei 2017.
40 Repnikova and Fang 2019; Liu, Hailong 2019.
41 Hung and Ip 2012.

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introduce progressive ideas and network with disenfranchised populations amid the intensification of social control.[42] In short, the mere existence of a public sphere does not predetermine the outcome of participatory discourse. The indeterminacy of public debate is further compounded by the malleable nature of public opinion and the state capacity for co-optation. That is why we argue that one must move beyond normative debates over the nature of the public sphere and focus more on its empirical manifestations in terms of issue framing and meaning-making.

The present collection of papers grew out of the view that normative questions as to whether activities conducted in China's social space can be seen as sufficiently autonomous from state influence to qualify as "civil society" have often overshadowed empirical material. Despite radical changes in institutional settings, which range from the Qing empire to the Republican state, the socialist state under Mao, colonial Hong Kong and post-reform contemporary China, we see strong continuities in the status of public texts and public discourse in modern and contemporary China. Lacking an institutional framework that guaranteed the freedom of expression and publication, the public sphere undoubtedly came under continuous pressure and constraint throughout the 20th and 21st century. Technical changes facilitating production and dissemination were met equally with increasingly sophisticated means of control and interference by the state. Print capitalism, when it existed (Republican era, Hong Kong, contemporary China), provided increased incentives for public-making but remained susceptible to state interference.

Nonetheless, the production, dissemination and reception of textual material continued to take place, often through non-institutional networks and in what can be termed alternative public spaces – be they reading groups, student associations, teahouses or film clubs – where critical evaluation of arguments could temporarily take precedence over social or political hierarchies. These spaces could be extraterritorial (foreign concessions in the Republican era), transnational (Tokyo during the late Qing, the British colony of Hong Kong), local (during various times of weak central control, such as in western China during the Sino-Japanese war), underground (Cultural Revolution reading groups), or virtual (in the present time). They relied on small-circulation publications (student or literary journals, or *tongren zazhi* 同仁杂志, a term derived from the Japanese word *dōjinshi* 同人誌), supported neither by a well-developed commercial model nor by a strong political party, and often affiliated with small discussion groups or associations. Despite their precarious status, some of these publications became very influential, for example, the Tokyo *Minbao* 民报, which circulated within China despite being banned by the imperial authorities. While perhaps not quite "counter-publics" in Warner's sense, loose networks of readers formed around a shared vocabulary, cultural references and community

42 Yang, Guobin, and Calhoun 2007; Xu, Yi, and Chan 2018; Veg 2019.

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publications.[43] They existed among Chinese students studying abroad (*liuxue-sheng* 留学生) in late-Qing Tokyo, among May Fourth activists, among liberals who took refuge in western China during the Sino-Japanese war, among the sent-down youth (*zhiqing* 知青) during the Cultural Revolution and among exiled writers in Hong Kong in the 1960s.

These publications raise certain questions that continue to be of interest. How did discussions of intellectual and political issues become public and filter through society in political contexts that offered them no protection? How did discourses circulate between different levels or scales of public spheres, for example from unofficial to official publications, or from extraterritorial to national or local settings (or vice-versa)? How did the formation of public opinion vary in different institutional contexts? The boundary between public and private domains is always subject to contention, and the ideal of "rational-critical" discourse is continually challenged. In many cases, it appears that publicness, as a dimension of social interaction and practice, may not be so much a tool for something else (debating politics), but rather a goal in itself. Challenged sometimes by the state, sometimes by the market, publicness is the desired outcome of discursive (sometimes contentious) strategies by individuals or groups. It can be a discursive space for "staging conflicts" (Nancy Fraser), to contend for "standing and recognition" (Craig Calhoun), to perform "hidden transcripts" (James Scott), or to use emotions or shared social norms to mobilize counter-publics of readers.[44]

The present collection of papers tries to address these issues, using a broad chronological and methodological perspective, by examining the nature of public discourse in contexts that have not yet received wide attention. Each essay is articulated around an alternative space – whether textual or physical – in which a discursive community is constituted. In late-Qing and early Republican Chengdu, discussed in Sebastian Veg's article, local publishing practices and a community of local journalists and print entrepreneurs played a central role in mobilizing the Sichuanese public to gradually develop into a civic community. In the context of the Mao era, Nicolai Volland argues that the rise of Red Guard newspapers – generally considered examples of militant partisan discourse rather than rational-critical discussion – unleashed a cacophony of radical publics, which could no longer be contained, and contested state discourse, thus opening an unexpected space for politics. Colonial Hong Kong, by contrast, represented a counter-public sphere to examine and debate Chinese politics and the future of the nation, as Edmund Cheng argues in his article. Yet, at the same time, the localization of participatory practices in this offshore enclave also foreshadowed the rise of an indigenously bred and internationally imagined counter-public that would recurringly contest any form of grand narrative at the edge of empires.

43 Warner 2002, 424.
44 Fraser 1995, 308; Calhoun 2012, 8; Scott 1990, 1–16.

In contemporary China, it is often difficult to discern a meaningful space for public discussion owing to the ubiquitous censorship of media and online expression. However, some degree of public discourse can be sustained on the basis of a shared understanding of what constitutes the public realm. Contemporary gatherings on a square in Tianjin, studied by Isabelle Thireau, highlight the intricate boundaries between public speech and private communication. The public domain functions as an intermediate space in which social reality can be collectively confirmed, and thus made meaningful. However, in order for this confirmation to take place, certain issues must be pushed back into the private area. Ya-Wen Lei focuses on a virtual community of scientific experts drawn into a human gene editing controversy which played out over the internet and the media as a "public opinion incident," both in China and internationally, despite the state's desire to censor public discussion of the issue. Many experts converged with the state in seeking to avoid public scrutiny of research with complex ethical implications, while some were eager to exploit the media limelight. Ultimately, it was the transnational dimension of the scientific community that changed the discursive dynamics and led to greater public engagement with ethical issues.

While the cases envisaged in this special section suggest that an autonomous civil society is not a prerequisite for public discourse, it is true that many of the spaces of public discourse they examine are underpinned by a shared social world or organization: the Chengdu teahouse, Red Guard groups, Hong Kong student groups or reading circles, Tianjin exercise groups, or an online community of professional scientists.[45] Local identities (Sichuan, Hong Kong, Tianjin) as well as professional ethics (Hong Kong, scientific experts) represent particularly significant factors in constituting alternative spheres. As Isabelle Thireau notes, publicness is the framework upon which actions and words acquire their intelligibility; it derives from shared meanings and is therefore closely connected to individuals' public identities as members of a geographical or professional community.

The exercise group in Tianjin is arguably the least formalized public group, with the lowest entry barrier (it is open to anyone who plays by the rules of the square), while the Red Guard groups, although not exactly formalized, were strongly bounded by ideological vetting, and ultimately dependent on state recognition, as shown by their eventual collapse. In between, the nascent modernist publications in Republican Chengdu, the peripheral public sphere in colonial Hong Kong and the transnational scientific community within contemporary China and beyond can be seen as semi-formalized in the sense that professional ethics, intellectual capacity or social status constituted implicit criteria restricting participation in these knowledge communities. These semi-formalized communities were not directly (Chengdu, Hong Kong) or exclusively (transnational scientists) reliant on state recognition, but nor did they seek to position themselves as counter-spheres directly contesting the state's authority.

45 Our thanks to a reviewer who effectively teased out and formulated this argument.

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Nonetheless, on some level, alternative publications and publics usually contest and reformulate hegemonic or alternative narratives on both ideational and organizational levels. From this perspective, alternative publications are a form of agency, and public discourse expresses their agency, in a way that is both constrained and transgressive. In consonance with discursive institutionalism, we argue that China's public spheres have been sustained by a set of permissive and productive conditions.[46] Permissive conditions are the necessary prerequisites that loosen constraints on agency or increase the causal power of contingency in a specific temporal frame. The consent of the authority in sanctioning grassroots initiatives or cracks in the ruling coalition are typical permissive conditions that allow alternative publications to emerge. The Red Guard press would not have defied bureaucratic controls without referencing Chairman Mao's mass line ideology and exploring the central–local bureaucratic fragmentation during the early stages of the Cultural Revolution. Productive conditions, on the other hand, produce disequilibrium at critical junctures, increasing the power of contingency in a specific temporal frame.[47] In our case studies, the geopolitical ambiguity of Hong Kong originally structured the nationalist, anti-communist disposition of exiled intellectuals. However, their indifference to conflicts in local society was challenged by the next generation whose new articulations of citizenship made the local public sphere truly "alternative" in its critique of nationalist discourse. Similarly, the rise of print capitalism and the establishment of transnational student networks in Chengdu led to a change in the notion of publicness, which evolved from a traditional understanding of *yanlu* 言路 to the formation of public opinion, then to a space for personal emancipation and to a catalyst for political activism, thereby making the critical events of the 1911 Xinhai Revolution and the 1919 New Culture movement possible.

Although spatial or organizational boundedness undoubtedly restricted the reach of alternative publications and publics rather than establishing inward-oriented counter-spheres, they usually remained dedicated to an outward-looking dynamic of making discourse public. As a result, the structure of public communication in 20th-century China was not as rigid and hierarchical as is sometimes assumed: it was pyramid-like yet multifaceted and contentious. It was pyramid-like in the sense that official or hegemonic discourses often dominated the mainstream press and enjoyed wider circulation and public attention. However, the decentralized Republican era and fragmented Communist authoritarianism also created opportunities and leeway for multifaceted public communication in which the dominant discourses were appropriated or contested by hidden messages or alternative views. Certainly, the hidden messages inevitably demanded more effort and interpretation by the audience, which may reinforce the power of the authority and limit the impact of dissent. However, the

46 Soifer 2012, 1572; Schmidt 2008.
47 Soifer 2012.

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boundaries of marginality were made porous by the external connections of the local knowledge communities with national and transnational networks.

On the one hand, the intellectual vectors were sometimes able to capture the authority of state power for nuanced resistance. Some critical voices in modern and contemporary China were once prominent figures within the regime, including the sponsors of Chengdu's reformist magazines and Hong Kong's intellectuals in exile. On the other hand, the alternative publications they funded or edited always provided venues for discourse contestation and the rallying of public opinion, through which official narratives were appropriated, issues of public concern were debated, and the boundaries between private and public were contested. The presence of alternative public discourse often does not prompt immediate events, but it may induce evolutionary institutional change by affording legitimacy to the articulation of ideas and by influencing others at a given place and time.

Beyond the binary constructions of the oppressor and the oppressed, acts of defiance from the subaltern often have a higher chance to be seen – and at times, to be listened to – than the repeatedly circulated mainstream discourses, especially when the dissenting voices proactively search for a site of contention to display their commonality with the wider publics rather than their differences between groups.[48] For instance, Chengdu's cultural journals were inspired by and further stimulated the channels of dissent in Japan and South-East Asia, whereas Hong Kong's public affairs magazines targeted the competing political forces in China and Taiwan as well as diasporic Chinese communities. With the growth of digital information technology, the national and transnational scientific communities are now connected by a common set of professional codes but also divided by a varied degree of political pressure. In this light, the relationships between spatial and institutional marginality and forms of dissemination and resistance are not linear but dynamic. Discourses produced on the geographical or institutional margins may support communities of dissent and resistance, but over time they may also open up new political possibilities and constitute new communities or even hegemonies. By considering the public sphere as an ongoing, dynamic process of public-making through the implication of alternative spaces, publications and publics, this collection of papers therefore hopes to open further perspectives and spaces through which to understand the connection between social discourses and political practices in China.

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48 Hooks 1990.

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Conflicts of interest

None.

Biographical notes

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摘要: 采纳20世纪历史和社会科学的视角，这篇导论回顾了中国公共领域的文献，指出研究出版物和知识群体的公共层面，具有恒久意义。通过摒弃规范性定义，并设想公共性为一个过程，我们探索了中国的社会话语与政治实践之间的联系。基于共同身份或社会交往的话语群体，尽管显得微不足道，但在关键时刻，他们却可以发挥独特作用，改变政治事件的动态。

关键词: 公共领域; 公民社会; 公共性; 报刊; 出版业; 媒体; 中国

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