

Merry Laughter and Angry Curses

The Shanghai Tabloid Press, 1897-1911

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Acknowledgments

Numerous individuals and institutions have helped me, over many long years, to complete the research and writing that went into this book. I am deeply indebted to all of them.

Professors Harold Kahn of Stanford University and Timothy Brook of the University of British Columbia played key roles in this project. Professor Kahn arranged for the East Asian Library of the Hoover Institution at Stanford University to acquire microfilms of Shanghai tabloid newspapers, which greatly facilitated my research. His patience, encouragement, and sharp criticism sustained me throughout my graduate work, and he continued to give me generous support whenever I sought it, even after he had retired and I had moved on to a teaching career.

Despite his busy academic life, Professor Brook always found time to provide advice and assistance. He has been an invaluable critic of my work, as well as a source of understanding and encouragement during difficult moments.

Many other scholars have made this book possible. In particular, several people from the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences facilitated my research in that city during the 1999-2000 academic year. Chen Meng Xiong, from the Academy's Institute of Literature, arranged, and accompanied me to, interviews with several tabloid writers of the Republican era and informed me about relevant source materials. Cheng Zai and Li Tiangang, from the Institute of History, also provided assistance, the former by giving me access to a tabloid newspaper in the institute's archive and the latter by providing me with materials about Shanghai.

The Institute of Modern History at Academia Sinica provided an inspiring scholarly environment as I revised my manuscript in Taipei in 2008 and 2009. Huang Ko-wu, Chen Yung-fa, Chang Ning, Peter Zarrow, Wu Jen-shu, and Han Seunghyun helped in numerous ways, some answering queries when I needed their expertise, others providing relevant materials. Wang Fan-sen, from the Institute of History and Philology at the Academia, brought an important source to my attention.

My gratitude extends to Emily Andrew, senior editor at UBC Press, for guiding this book to publication. Without her faith in this work and her critical eye, it would have been much more difficult to see the light at the end of the tunnel. In addition, I thank Megan Brand at UBC Press for guiding the manuscript through to final production. I am also grateful to three anonymous reviewers and a board member at the Press whose criticisms and suggestions helped make this a much better book.

I am indebted to my partner, Peter Lichtenstein, for his generous editing, enduring support, and encouragement.

My growth as a historian and author would have been impossible without assistance from various institutions. Stanford University provided funding for my doctoral research and dissertation. The Shanghai Academy of Social Science hosted my research. The Institute of Modern History at Academia Sinica granted me a postdoctoral research fellowship. Purdue University provided generous leave time and grant support for completion of this book.

I also wish to thank the journals *Late Imperial China* (The Johns Hopkins University Press) and *Twentieth-Century China* (Maney Publishing) for allowing me to use previously published material in this book.

I gratefully acknowledge the libraries that I utilized extensively, including the Shanghai Municipal Library, the Nanjing Municipal Library, the East Asian Collection of the Hoover Institution, the University of Chicago Library, and the Guo Tingyi Library of the Institute of Modern History at Academia Sinica.

Finally, I thank the Association for Asian Studies for assistance in the production of this book with a First Book Subvention.

Merry Laughter and Angry Curses

Introduction

Late Qing China witnessed a revolution in print journalism. Modern newspapers and magazines written for Chinese audiences first appeared in the 1850s and 1860s in Hong Kong and in treaty port cities such as Guangzhou and Shanghai. Foreign missionaries and entrepreneurs owned and published most of these publications, but the so-called Hundred Days' Reform movement between 1895 and 1898 saw a sudden surge in the publication of Chinese-owned reform newspapers and magazines throughout the country. Emperor Guangxu initiated this development when he encouraged Chinese to publish their own periodicals in order to better communicate with and educate the public. The new reform publications were a crucial part of the Hundred Days' Reform and helped change the public's perception of and relationship to the new, modern media.

Prior to the mid-1890s, the urban literate public saw newspapers as alien and unimportant. When *Shenbao*, a foreign-owned newspaper catering to Chinese readers, appeared in Shanghai in the early 1870s, few knew what it was. Many thought it had no educational value, while others feared that it would distract young students from their studies.¹ Even in 1893, when *Xinwenbao*, a foreign-owned Shanghai daily, began publication, many considered it an insignificant "sideline" business.² The Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95 changed people's attitudes, however: eagerly awaiting news from the front every day, they began to take newspapers seriously. The Hundred Days' Reform movement that created the publishing frenzy further stimulated popular enthusiasm for newspapers.

During the last fifteen years of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), periodical publications – newspapers and magazines – became the preeminent medium of public communication. Reading affordably priced newspapers became a daily practice for the ever-growing reading public, a public that consisted mainly of urban readers as well as some wealthier, well-connected rural readers. Joan Judge shows how Shanghai newspapers expanded from a few hundred copies per issue in the mid-1890s to production runs that served hundreds of thousands of readers.³ Leo Ou-fan Lee and Andrew J. Nathan

estimate that about a hundred notable periodicals were published at any one time in the last decade of the Qing, with a national circulation of 300,000 copies.⁴ Peter G. Zarrow puts regular readership of the Chinese press in the last years of the Qing at two to four million.⁵

Large increases in both the number of periodicals and their circulation made up only one side of this late Qing revolution in print journalism. The fluid political, social, and intellectual environment also shaped how late Qing readers related to periodicals. Readers used newspapers not only to get the daily news but also as a gateway to the larger world of knowledge that would help them gain advantage in those rapidly changing times. In the summer of 1898, government examinations began requiring essays on government policy (*celun*). Examiners prepared questions about current affairs as reported in newspapers, and examinees wrote their essays based on these same sources.⁶ Officials, literati, and aspiring students all relied on newspapers for timely information and new knowledge.

More significantly, as newspapers and magazines became increasingly bold, the reading public became much more knowledgeable about national political and intellectual debates previously hidden from them. They could now, more or less openly, express their opinions and sentiments through the media. Periodicals thus became a major instrument of change, ushering late Qing China into an age in which previously unspeakable and unprintable ideas could be expressed and circulated.

In the last two decades of the Qing, Shanghai became the publishing centre of China, with significantly more periodicals than anywhere else in the country. Although mainstream “serious” periodicals such as the Shanghai papers *Shibao* and *Shenbao* stood at the forefront of late Qing political, social, and cultural changes,⁷ the city’s tabloid press was also a vital part of the revolution in print journalism and played a unique role in shaping late Qing public opinion and sentiments.

The Tabloid Press

The Shanghai tabloid press included both newspapers and magazines. They were tabloid in nature because they aimed primarily to entertain. The Chinese refer to tabloid newspapers as *xiaobao*, meaning “little” or “minor” papers, to distinguish them from *dabao*, meaning “big” or “important” papers.⁸ The former had a reputation for frivolity, whereas the latter were considered serious and weighty. China’s first modern tabloid newspaper appeared in Shanghai on 24 June 1897. It had a fitting name: *Fun* (*Youxibao*) (Figure 1). Its publisher, editor, and writer was Li Boyuan (1867-1906), a talented thirty-year-old literatus.



Figure 1 Sample issue of *Fun* (*Youxibao*), 22 May 1899.

Fun was an instant success. Based on Li Boyuan's own estimates, its circulation in its first three months equalled, if not surpassed, those of the major Shanghai papers.⁹ *Fun*'s success opened the floodgates: four more tabloids appeared within six months and five in 1898 and 1899. *Fun* and *Anecdotes* (*Caifengbao*), which began publication in 1898, attracted the most readers.

The early tabloids, published between 1897 and 1900, focused almost entirely on pleasure and amusement. They contained no important national or international news or much information about the modern world. Li Boyuan structured the content of each issue of *Fun* according to a fixed formula: one

headline piece followed by eight short pieces. The headline piece, usually shorter than two or three hundred words, could be an essay, a rhapsody, a poem, or a letter from a reader or contributor. The short pieces were usually anecdotes, mostly about Shanghai's pleasure and entertainment society. A poetry section featuring the work of readers and tabloid writers often followed the eight short pieces. *Fun* sponsored both popularity contests for courtesans and erudite literary games, held poetry competitions, and reported on the best pleasure venues in the city. The headline pieces and the poetry were typically well written and sophisticated. The content and format of other tabloids resembled those of *Fun*.

It was no accident that the late Qing tabloid industry flourished first in Shanghai and then became a predominantly Shanghai phenomenon. By the 1890s, Shanghai had become the most important commercial, financial, industrial, and cultural metropolis in China, as well as its largest international port city. Its population grew from between 800,000 and 900,000 in 1895 to 1,289,353 by 1910.¹⁰ Foreign concessions proliferated, not only because of international trade but also because of an influx of Chinese migrants, many from nearby Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces.

Migrants flocked to Shanghai to take advantage of the war-free and cosmopolitan environment and the city's vibrant consumption and entertainment milieu. Most migrants were literati, merchants, and landlords. Some were well-off and could afford a life of leisure; others came to find jobs. Entrepreneurs and investors sought to take advantage of economic opportunities; others were fleeing legal or political problems. All found in Shanghai a source of luxury and entertainment, and many patronized the city's brothels, teahouses, restaurants, and theatres. Courtesan culture thrived and became a mainstay of Shanghai's pleasure industry.

Shanghai also had a robust reading market, given its large, literate population and, by the turn of the century, its preponderance of literati and the well-to-do. In 1903, more than 3,000 literati worked in Shanghai's cultural and educational institutions, including presses and publishing houses, schools, libraries, and museums; by 1909, this number had risen to 4,000.¹¹ Yuan Jin provides a sense of the 1890s Shanghai reading public: of every hundred residents, sixty had a rudimentary level of literacy and between five and ten were literati of some sort; ten to thirty percent of women could read, and about one to two percent could write poetry.¹² S.A. Smith estimates that 300,000 people in Shanghai were reading newspapers in the early years of the twentieth century.¹³

According to Catherine Yeh, by the mid-1880s, the reading market had grown large enough to support the publication of independent entertainment

periodicals, such as *Dianshizhai Pictorial* (*Dianshizhai huabao*) and guide-books to the courtesan world.¹⁴ No newspaper then in Shanghai made entertainment its primary focus, however. No paper covered prostitution, although hundreds of brothels were concentrated in the International Settlement alone.¹⁵ No paper provided information about the city's teahouses, although the largest of them served over a thousand guests at one time and held daily performances such as *shuoshu*, which combined storytelling and singing. The tabloids filled this vacuum.

The emergence of the tabloids relied as much on Shanghai's stimulating publishing environment as on the reading market. Li Boyuan came to Shanghai from his hometown in Changzhou in 1896, looking for work. While living in Changzhou, he read Shanghai newspapers regularly and was part of a local social network of literati with connections to literati in the capital Beijing and elsewhere. Fully aware of recent developments in China's newspaper industry, Li decided to enter the business. Possibly helped by an acquaintance, J.D. Clark, publisher of the English newspaper *Shanghai Mercury*, he began publishing a daily, *Guidance* (*Zhinanbao*), on 6 June 1896. A Chinese subsidiary of the *Shanghai Mercury*, *Guidance* was similar in format and content to other conventional Shanghai papers such as *Shenbao*. In the first issue, Li echoed the rhetoric of the time: "Western nations have newspapers because they are concerned that people are not informed. Reporting to the ruler and informing the people are essential to the power and prosperity of a nation. Now that we have newspapers in our country, what more can people like us hope to achieve in our careers than repaying the ruler's benevolence and communicating with both the ruler and the people?"¹⁶

Sales of *Guidance* were disappointing. Although it was one of the earlier papers in what would become a publishing frenzy, it was not distinctive enough to compete with the better-known and more established papers. It lasted just over a year, after which Li embarked on a new publication, *Fun*. There he found his niche, opining that similar Western tabloid newspapers had inspired him both to publish the paper and to name it *Fun*.¹⁷

Mainstream newspapers served as incubators for tabloid journalists. Many began their careers there, and once they knew the business well, they became entrepreneurial tabloid publishers and writers. This was not a difficult proposition. Compared with Shanghai's mainstream papers, the tabloids required far less start-up and operating capital. They mostly used commercial printing services instead of investing in expensive printing equipment. The tabloid press never made illustrations and pictures a significant feature or selling point, even though stone-based lithography print technology in Shanghai, available since 1876, had lowered the unit production cost of graphic images.¹⁸

They also saved on newswire services by not reporting any national or international news.

Many tabloid journalists cut costs by renting small rooms from established newspapers or by locating their offices in their homes. Li Boyuan produced *Fun* in his home. His family lived upstairs, while the business was located in a downstairs office with a room for the printing machines. Labour costs were minimal because the production of a daily tabloid required only one or two writers, who also served as editors. In the first eighteen months of *Fun*, Li was the sole writer and editor and managed the business by himself. Later, he hired Ouyang Juyuan to assist him with writing and with managing the business. It was not until the fourth year of operation that Li finally hired a manager to handle such jobs as proofreading, printing, distribution, and advertising. Indeed, a tabloid could be started with only two or three hundred *yuan*.¹⁹

Although production costs were minimal, revenues were potentially huge, which explains why so many tabloids entered the market. Profits came from both sales and advertising. The price of an issue was the same for all the tabloids, five *wen* in the beginning, rising to seven *wen* and eventually reaching eleven *wen* in subsequent years. If a paper sold four thousand copies, a day's revenue would have been twenty-eight *yuan*, a significant amount.²⁰ Advertising income provided a hefty addition to sales revenue. In the first three months of *Fun*, advertisements increased from one or two per issue to enough to fill two full pages. A year later, *Fun* had four pages of ads each day, and soon thereafter reached six pages. Its actual content occupied around two pages. In his second year of operation, Li Boyuan invested in a new printing machine and began using better-quality imported paper. *Fun* must have been sufficiently profitable by then to enable him to make these investments.

Other tabloids were just as aggressive in expanding their advertising. Most popular papers quickly reached the same ratio of content to ads as *Fun*, between 1:2 and 1:3. We do not know the exact advertising rates or the income derived from advertising, but we can surmise that tabloid rates were comparable to those charged by the mainstream papers because both had similar types of advertisements and comparable circulations. According to Yao Gonghe, four major categories of ads appeared in Shanghai's mainstream papers: theatrical performances, pharmaceutical products, books, and miscellaneous merchandise. Those papers received significant revenues from ads, and it is safe to say that the same was true of the tabloids.²¹

This early phase of tabloid growth was linked directly to political developments. In 1898, Empress Dowager Cixi cracked down on the 1895-98 reform

movement and placed the reform-minded Emperor Guangxu under house arrest. On 29 January 1901, however, she reversed her earlier position and issued the *Xinzheng* (New Policy) edict, ushering in a decade of reforms. The deadly anti-foreign Boxer Uprising (1899-1900), which forced her to flee the capital and which cost China an indemnity of 450 million taels of silver (plus thirty-nine years of accumulated interest), had made Cixi realize that China needed reforms after all. In a last attempt to hold on to power, she issued over thirty edicts from 1901 to 1905, which promoted major reforms in government administration, economic development, education, law, and the military. In both depth and breadth, the reforms went well beyond those of the aborted 1898 initiatives of Emperor Guangxu.

Tabloid writers responded immediately to these developments by starting a second wave of tabloids. The first was *Allegories* (*Yuyanbao*), which appeared less than two months after Empress Dowager Cixi's 1901 edict. Ten days later came *Grove of Laughter* (*Xiaolinbao*), followed a few weeks later by Li Boyuan's *Splendid World* (*Shijie fanhuabao*) (Figures 2 and 3). In 1901 and 1902, a total of eleven new tabloids entered the market.

Writers shrewdly detected commercial possibilities in the new political environment. The 1901 edict provided them for the first time with free rein to criticize officials, mock the elite, and scandalize readers. Since 1898, writers had already been criticizing Qing officials, albeit carefully, as well as touching on political issues. In 1901 they became audaciously political and overtly anti-establishment, in a style that was both witty and satirical. This was a genuine watershed in tabloid publishing: politics was now of equal or greater importance than news about Shanghai's pleasure quarters, and the two jostled for space. As a result, the distinction between serious reform and entertainment periodicals became blurred, mainly because both types



Figure 2 Sample issue of *Splendid World* (*Shijie fanhuabao*), 16 February 1905.

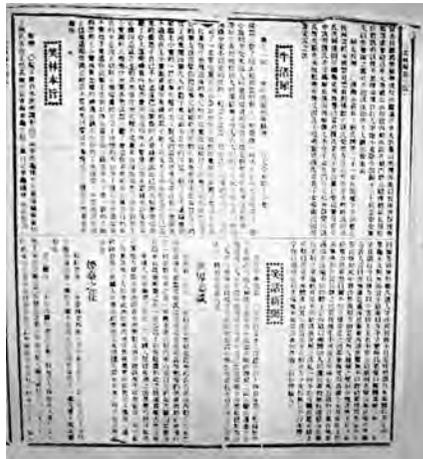


Figure 3 Sample issue of Grove of Laughter (Xiaolinbao), 2 July 1907.

published entertaining fiction about reform. This distinction sharpened again after 1910.²²

In 1901, in addition to publishing short pieces about politics, the tabloid newspapers began serializing fiction that dealt with contemporary political, intellectual, and social issues. There was tremendous commercial potential in this kind of literature, but the small format of tabloid newspapers could not accommodate longer literary works. The tabloid magazine was the answer.

Once again, Li Boyuan was the trailblazer, founding the bimonthly literary magazine *Illustrated Fiction* (*Xiuxiang xiaoshuo*) in May 1903 (Figure 4). Financed by the Shanghai Commercial Press, Li served as editor-in-chief and used the magazine as a venue for publishing many of his own novels. After seventy-two issues, the magazine closed when Li died in April 1906. That November, another tabloid writer, Wu Jianren (1866-1910), began coediting a new fiction magazine, *All-Story Monthly* (*Yueyue xiaoshuo*), which filled the vacuum left by the demise of *Illustrated Fiction*. *All-Story Monthly* had twenty-four issues, ending in January 1909. Compared with the tabloid newspapers, these magazines were oriented more toward literature and paid less



Figure 4 Sample cover pages of *Illustrated Fiction* (*Xiuxiang xiaoshuo*).
 Source: Wei Shaochang, ed., *Li Boyuan yanjiu ziliao* [Li Boyuan research material] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1980), 17.

attention to courtesans, theatres, and other such pleasures. Yet they were essentially extensions of the tabloid newspapers – the same people produced them, they focused entirely on entertainment, and they employed the same satirical style in dealing with political content.

The permissive Shanghai political environment had much to do with the tabloids' success. Since the Qing government had little jurisdiction over Shanghai's foreign concessions, where almost all of Shanghai's presses were located, the city enjoyed a degree of journalistic freedom that did not exist elsewhere. The government tolerated periodicals so long as they did not call for its overthrow. This did not prevent the state from keeping a watchful eye over the press and from subtly pressuring its editors, a fact of which Li Boyuan and others were keenly aware.²³ Nevertheless, even though the Qing government enacted laws in 1906 regulating the print industry and introduced new press laws in 1908 censoring newspapers and journals, the central and local authorities had insufficient resources to enforce these laws. Tabloids hardly caught the authorities' attention, mainly because, in the eyes of the establishment, they were insignificant.

In the late Qing and Republican eras, forty-six tabloids were published in Shanghai.²⁴ In the late Qing era, some tabloids ran for as long as thirteen years, whereas others lasted only a month. At any given time between 1900 and 1910, roughly ten tabloids were published daily in Shanghai. On the eve of the 1911 Revolution, however, the tabloid press disappeared almost entirely from Shanghai and reappeared as a significant presence only in the early 1920s.

There are several possible explanations for this disappearance. First, two of the most important tabloid personalities, Li Boyuan and Wu Jianren (Figures 5 and 6), had passed away by 1910. Second, the tabloids' reckless pursuit



Figure 5 Portrait of Li Boyuan.
 Source: Wei Shaochang, ed., *Li Boyuan yanjiu ziliao* [Li Boyuan research material] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1980).

禧 新 賀 恭



歲二十四人跣吳年未丁緒光

Figure 6 Portrait of Wu Jianren. Source: Wei Shaochang, ed., *Wu Jianren yanjiu ziliao* [Wu Jianren research materials] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1980), 3.

of profits cut into quality, damaging their reputations. In the earlier years, they were indeed risqué, but they still maintained an aura of propriety. In the years leading up to 1911, they became overtly obscene and their stories were often apocryphal. As a result, they had many run-ins with the International Settlement authorities, who, motivated by Western religious moral precepts, often banned the papers and fined and jailed the editors. Finally, the tabloid press may have lost its initial freshness and readers may have become bored with satirical attacks on officials who by then had already been totally discredited. In a broad sense, the tabloids had exhausted their usefulness and novelty, and they lost their niche in the periodical market.

The Tabloid Community

The tabloid community consisted of the publishers, writers, editors, and contributors who produced the tabloids, as well as the tabloids' consumers – its regular readers and subscribers. Included among the consumers were occasional and casual readers of tabloid newspapers, magazines, and literature, along with audiences of dramas adapted from such literature. To be sure, the ideas, criticisms, and viewpoints expressed in the tabloid press spread beyond the tabloid community, as many other people heard their stories, jokes, and opinions in teahouses, brothels, workplaces, and homes.

Members of the tabloid community belonged mainly to the low and middle ranks of the literati. I define these literati to include all those who had received a substantial traditional education, regardless of whether they had earned a degree. They were a subset of the late Qing educated ruling class, a product of the government examination system. I exclude from my definition the elite literati who already occupied positions of power and influence in Qing officialdom, or who held other positions of political and intellectual prestige. Also excluded are those who were mainly educated in new-style schools with Western curricula.

The low- and middle-ranked literati were therefore sub-elites who were outside the normal circles of power. As a social group, they faced certain challenges in the late Qing. Their responses to the dramatic political changes stemmed from shared interests and outlooks. The tabloid community coalesced around its tabloid press and the literature published by tabloid writers in other presses. Thus, the voices of this community were specifically those of the low- and middle-ranked literati.

Editors, Writers, and Contributors

The publishers, writers, and editors of the tabloid press, often playing multiple roles simultaneously, formed the active core of the tabloid community. Besides

Li Boyuan and Wu Jianren, those rising to prominence in tabloid circles included Sun Yusheng, Ouyang Juyuan, Gao Taichi, Zhou Bingyuan, Zou Tao, and Shen Xizhi. Except for Ouyang Juyuan, who was younger, and Zou Tao, who was a bit older, all belonged to the last generation of literati born in the 1860s and 1870s who grew up in the 1880s and 1890s. Many, including Li, Sun, Gao, Ouyang, and Zou, had a *xiucaai* degree, while others, such as Wu Jianren, had no degree at all. Many tried, but failed, to pass the provincial government examination for the *juren* degree. I call them “tabloid literati.” Caught up in China’s rapid transition, they were born too late to have earned prime civil positions in officialdom, but, unlike their younger contemporaries, they were born too early to have had access to a formal Western-style education. Determined to earn a living and a reputation, these early pioneers broke with traditional literati career patterns and transformed themselves into modern professional writers.

Li Boyuan was born in Shandong Province into a literati-official family with ancestral roots in Changzhou, Jiangsu Province. At sixteen, he completed his study of *The Four Books* and *The Five Classics*, the canon of a Confucian education. Under the guidance of his tutors, he then ventured into textual criticism. As a well-rounded literatus, Li excelled in the “eight-legged essay” required for Qing exams: poetry (*shi*), rhapsody (*fu*), verse (*ci*), prose, calligraphy, painting, and seal carving.²⁵ He was knowledgeable in phonology, epigraphy, and textual criticism, as well as in the study of enunciation in verse singing. He demonstrated all of these skills throughout his career, along with a flair for writing novels and folksong verses such as *tanci*, which “orthodox” educators regarded as “low and frivolous.”²⁶

At the age of twenty, Li Boyuan returned to Changzhou, sat for the county-level government examination, won first place, and received the *xiucaai* degree. In Nanjing two years later, he failed the provincial-level examination for the *juren* degree. It is not clear whether he retook the exam, but we know he never received that degree.

In Changzhou, where, as in many other towns in the Jiangnan region, literati of various ranks were concentrated, Li distinguished himself in literati circles. He was very quick of mind, sharp in word, and unrestrained in personal style. Many anecdotes about his literary brazenness circulated around town. Once, at a drinking party, a member of the Hanlin Academy composed an impromptu poem in which he made a mistake in the thirteenth rhyme, and Li pointed out this mistake right away. Everyone at the party was awestruck and expressed admiration for his knowledge of rhyme patterns in poetry.²⁷

In the eyes of the townspeople, however, Li Boyuan was not a traditional literatus, certainly not in appearance. He was slightly built and effeminate.

Although it was still unusual at the time to see young people in town wearing glasses, Li wore a pair of hawksbill tortoiseshell glasses to correct for near-sightedness. He eschewed some traditional gestures of respect toward his elders, failing, for instance, to remove his eyeglasses when encountering older literati, as was the custom at the time. He also tried to learn English from a foreign missionary living in town, which was rare among the literati.

When Li Boyuan was born, Wu Jianren was just about to mark his first birthday. Wu was born in Beijing to a prominent literati-official family with ancestral roots in Foshan, Guangdong Province, where he grew up. The family's prestige had peaked at the time that his great-grandfather, an academic in the Imperial Academy, held various prominent official positions in many parts of the country. At the age of seven, Wu began his formal studies at home, with private tutors. At twelve, he entered the prominent Foshan Academy (*Foshan shuyuan*), where Liang Qichao, a famous intellectual and reformer, had also been educated. In 1882, when Wu was sixteen, his father died while serving as a low-ranked official in Zhejiang Province. A year later, Wu Jianren, like Li Boyuan, had to leave home for Shanghai to earn a living.

Through his hometown connections, he found a job as an office clerk at the Jiangnan Arsenal, the official enterprise established by Li Hongzhang and Zeng Guofan, leading late Qing statesmen, in their efforts to modernize China's military. At first he worked as a scribe, copying office documents; later, he drew blueprints of machinery. In his spare time, Wu composed poetry and other texts in classical styles, developing his skills as a writer. At the age of twenty-five, he began publishing short literary pieces in Shanghai newspapers to supplement his income. At thirty-one, in 1897, just after Li Boyuan started *Fun*, Wu left the Jiangnan Arsenal to become a full-time editor and writer for one of Shanghai's early tabloids. He worked for five different tabloids during the next five years.

Sun Yusheng and Gao Taichi were, respectively, five and three years older than Wu Jianren. As with several other tabloid literati, they worked first as editors and writers for Shanghai's mainstream newspapers. After a brief stint with *Shenbao*, Sun became chief editor of *Xinwenbao* in 1896, a job he held until 1904. While still working for *Xinwenbao*, he became publisher, editor, and writer for *Anecdotes* in the summer of 1898 and for *Grove of Laughter* in 1901. Gao joined *Shenbao* as a writer at the age of twenty-six and later became its chief editor. He then became chief editor of *Zilin hubao*, the Chinese version of Shanghai's English newspaper, the *North China Daily News*. In November 1897, Gao founded the tabloid *Pastime (Xiaoxianbao)*, a supplement to *Zilin hubao*.

Surrounding this core of tabloid editors and writers were dozens of contributors who wrote for the tabloid press. They came from diverse social and intellectual backgrounds yet shared a love of literature and displayed similar attitudes toward reform. Among the well-known literati who wrote for *Fun* were Qiu Fengjia, a *jinshi* degree holder and educator; Pan Feisheng and Qiu Shuyuan, editors of various newspapers in Hong Kong and Singapore, respectively; Li Genyuan, who later joined the United Allegiance Society (*Tongmenghui*) in Japan; Xi Xifan, a rich Shanghai comprador; and Pang Shubo, who worked briefly for *Fun* and came to Shanghai from Suzhou with Ouyang Juyuan in 1898, when both were twenty years old.

Contributors to *Illustrated Fiction* and *All-Story Monthly* were just as diverse. For example, bestselling author Liu E first serialized his *Travels of Lao Can* (*Laocan youji*) in *Illustrated Fiction*; he made his living as a medical doctor, merchant, comprador, and official. Lian Mengqing, a journalist and friend of Liu E, also had his novel serialized in the same magazine. Bao Tianxiao often translated novels and published stories in *All-Story Monthly* while working as editor and writer for the mainstream newspaper *Shibao* and several other magazines. Zhou Guisheng, who co-edited *All-Story Monthly* along with Wu Jianren, had received a formal new-style education and was among the first in China to translate English literature into Chinese. Wu was responsible for Chinese works in the journal, while Zhou was in charge of translated literature.

Some tabloid magazine contributors did not write for the tabloid newspapers. Bao Tianxiao was one of those. He had a low opinion of these papers, regarding them as mere entertainment with little concern for political matters, and he worked only for major papers such as *Shibao*.²⁸ Zhou Guisheng, however, did publish his translated works in the tabloid papers.

Readers and Circulation

In the early years, tabloid readership consisted mainly of refined literati and merchants. Even Wang Kangnian, a *jinshi* degree holder who published China's early reform papers, was asked by many of his sophisticated friends outside Shanghai to purchase *Fun* for them.²⁹ Li Boyuan described the readership of *Fun* in the early years as made up of literati, merchants, and people from the world of entertainment, such as courtesans and opera performers.³⁰ In his novella *A Shanghai Swan's Tracks in the Snow* (*Haitian hongxueji*), Li gives a further sense of *Fun's* readers. They included owners of small and middle-sized businesses; accountants and managers; scholars and professionals such as journalists; employees of foreign businesses and banks; and leisured gentry and sojourners from the provinces. Courtesans did not constitute a

large readership because most were illiterate,³¹ but, as Catherine Yeh notes, their patrons tended to be tabloid readers.³²

After 1900, the tabloids gradually expanded their readership by devoting a larger proportion of their pages to more diverse topics. At the same time, their style displayed less literary flair and refinement. Not surprisingly, reading tabloids became a common pastime for urban Shanghai residents as the habit of reading newspapers took root in the everyday lives of the literate public. Tabloid readership expanded to include people of middling literary abilities such as young students, small merchants, and shop clerks. For the most part, the readership was male, as the tabloids' content reflected male perspectives and catered to male pleasures and concerns.

The tabloids' content also reveals that they catered to a readership of low- and middle-ranked urban literati. Articles about the fairness and efficiency of government examinations and about the training of literati appeared frequently. Interactive literary activities, such as exchanging poetry about courtesans and prostitutes, with whom readers admitted involvement, also strongly points to this readership: high-ranked literati would never have openly admitted such a thing. All tabloids serialized works of fiction, on which newspaper sales depended; literati were enthusiastic readers of fiction.³³

Although it is impossible to cite exact sales estimates, there does exist fragmentary evidence of the tabloids' popularity. Many tabloid literati confirmed Li Boyuan's claims that *Fun* sold well. In fact, Li was so confident of *Fun*'s popularity that in 1899, within two years of its initial appearance, he decided to reprint all the previous issues as a book. About a month and a half after *Splendid World*'s debut, Sun Baoxuan, a literatus from a prominent family of officials, wrote in his diary that the paper sold quite widely.³⁴ *Grove of Laughter* also sold very well; its editor reported that a man came to the office one day to buy sixty copies of the previous day's issue to mail out of town.³⁵

Some scholars have also noted the popularity of tabloids. Naito Konan claims that as early as 1899 *Fun* had surpassed *Shenbao* in terms of daily print production.³⁶ Tarumoto Teruo observes that by the early 1900s, most successful tabloids sold as well as *Shenbao*.³⁷ Various estimates suggest that at its peak *Fun* sold between seven thousand and ten thousand copies per run.³⁸ This is a significant number, considering that it was not until 1901 that the major paper *Xinwenbao* reached a circulation of a little over ten thousand, surpassing *Shenbao*.³⁹ Still, daily production fluctuated greatly because most readers in the late Qing bought newspapers and magazines from vendors, not through subscription. The papers sold best when they offered something special, such as popular "flower elections" and hot novels. It is also worth

noting that the actual tabloid readership was larger than the number of copies in circulation as purchasers would share their copies with others. Joan Judge estimates that, on average, each newspaper copy had about fifteen readers.⁴⁰

Although the primary market for tabloids was in the Shanghai and Jiangnan areas, distribution was nationwide.⁴¹ By 1904, *Fun* had about seventeen distributors in various cities. By the end of 1902, *Splendid World's* distribution network extended to twenty-three large cities, including Beijing, Tianjin, Nanjing, Anqing, Hankou, Suzhou, Hangzhou, and Guangzhou, as well as to other more remote places throughout the country. Likewise, by April 1901, *Grove of Laughter* had a national distribution network of twenty-two cities and locales.

Unlike the newspapers, the tabloid magazines from the outset targeted a broader readership of various overlapping social groups, including literati, officials, reformers, students of new-style schools, entrepreneurs, merchants, and women.⁴² One literatus-merchant said that his only hobby was reading fiction, and he praised *All-Story Monthly* for publishing more Chinese than translated fiction and for appealing to a diverse readership by offering more than ten genres of fiction.⁴³ One family recounts how three generations, including the grandmother and children, were engrossed in each issue of *Illustrated Fiction*.⁴⁴ Gu Jiegang, a distinguished historian, recalls reading *Illustrated Fiction* as a student in Suzhou in the late Qing.⁴⁵ Another scholar reported that *Illustrated Fiction* had a mass (*dazhong*) readership in urban centres.⁴⁶ Although reaching a mass market may have been this periodical's intent, people of rudimentary literacy did not constitute a significant part of its audience. Its early issues tried to appeal to women and readers with less-developed literary skills by using popular forms of storytelling such as tanci and local ballads, but these forms disappeared within a year.

Both *Illustrated Fiction* and *All-Story Monthly* had essentially the same readership, most of whom belonged to the rank-and-file literati. According to Xu Nianci, who lived in Shanghai at the time, 90 percent of those who purchased novels in 1908 were literati.⁴⁷ Since the rank-and-file literati were the most numerous of the literati, it is likely that they read serialized fiction in these two major journals.

Although no sales data are available for these two magazines, it is safe to assume that they had to sell at least enough to sustain their operations. In the 1910s, it usually took a minimum of three thousand copies for publishers to cover the costs of publishing books and magazines.⁴⁸ Since there was little inflation over the years, the two magazines must have sold at least that many copies per issue. As with the newspapers, the magazines' readership was probably wider than sales and subscriptions would indicate. Although the

tabloids (which hereafter refers exclusively to tabloid newspapers) gained a large readership in the Jiangnan region, the magazines reached even more readers and had a larger distribution network.

Besides those in Shanghai, *Illustrated Fiction* had a network of eighty-seven distributors in cities and towns throughout China as well as in Tokyo, Yokohama, and Singapore. These distributors included bookstores, drugstores, and even a few government-funded institutions such as schools and military hospitals. Similarly, within one year of its debut, *All-Story Monthly* expanded its distributors to seventy-seven in forty-two cities and towns, including Tokyo. It also inserted mail order forms in many issues, offering discounts for orders of either six or twelve months.

The works of tabloid literati also reached audiences through books and other periodicals besides the tabloid press. Li Boyuan's novella *China Today* (*Zhongguo xianzaiji*) was initially serialized in *Shibao*. Wu Jianren's novel *Strange Events Eyewitnessed in the Last Twenty Years* (*Ershinian mudu zhi guaixianzhuang*) was first published in Liang Qichao's *New Fiction* (*Xinxiaoshuo*). Some of their bestselling novels were reprinted as books many times over. Shanghai publishers reprinted Li Boyuan's *Officialdom Unmasked* (*Guanchang xianxingji*) many times, and his death in 1906 led to a dispute among publishers over the copyright. The Beijing newspaper *Patriotic Daily* (*Aiguobao*) serialized the novel, with added commentaries, at the turn of the century.⁴⁹ China's first new-style drama troupe, established in 1907, adapted it as a comedy, which it staged in Shanghai, Beijing, and Tianjin in 1908.⁵⁰

Combining all the readers of newspapers, magazines, and books with the audiences of theatrical performances, the tabloid literati commanded a significant nationwide readership. Moreover, in contrast to the mainstream press, the tabloid press readership was more socially diverse and included people with both high and low literary abilities. To be sure, there was considerable overlap between readers of tabloids and readers of the major Shanghai papers; the literati, in particular, read both. Although papers such as *Shenbao* attracted a national audience of high-ranked literati, including government officials, tabloids were more popular among rank-and-file literati and had a more regional readership. Some reform papers, such as *Shibao*, also featured a "gossip column," containing news items that were "infectiously interesting, and usually true, but not quite fit for publication in the newspaper proper."⁵¹ As a result, the paper may have succeeded in capturing some of the tabloids' readership. Nevertheless, urban residents of low literary abilities, if they read newspapers at all, would have been more likely to read the playful tabloids than the formal mainstream papers. Moreover, the tabloids were effective in communicating with an audience that otherwise had no interest

in national politics. By making politics entertaining, they helped inform people who would not have sought this information elsewhere.

The Crisis of the Literati

The tabloid community was more than a social entity; as a producer of meanings, it was also a cultural entity. Reading and writing were interactive social, communal, and dialogic processes that produced and interpreted texts, and that shared and influenced thoughts and emotions. Writers wrote to satisfy readers' tastes, while readers formed opinions and consciousness by interpreting those texts. The meanings constructed by members of the tabloid community depended largely on their positions in the broader social relations of power.

Members of the tabloid community as a whole came from diverse social and economic backgrounds and possessed a range of values, politics, and dispositions. Yet most of them, as rank-and-file literati, had similar social backgrounds and similar interests and experiences. What they shared were exclusion from the ranks of power and anxiety over the systemic changes taking place in society. The reforms most particularly affecting the literati occurred in the educational and imperial examination systems, through which they earned privilege and ruling-class status. These reforms affected the entire literati class, to be sure, but the low- and middle-ranked literati suffered disproportionately compared with the elite literati, who were generally able to preserve their power and prestige.

In 1901, new-style schools began to replace the traditional tutorial system that for over a millennium had prepared literati for imperial examinations. This institutional change reduced the literati's position in the power structures of learning. They gradually lost employment opportunities as teachers, and their education was devalued. In 1905, by imperial proclamation, Empress Dowager Cixi ended the thirteen-hundred-year-old imperial examination system. This institution had not only supplied the Chinese bureaucracy with highly educated literati-officials but had also produced educated local elites who helped the state maintain social order and Confucian orthodoxy.

The phasing out of traditional education and shutting down of the imperial examination system set adrift an entire class of low- and middle-ranked literati, who found it impossible to anchor their social and political worth in traditional ways. Many felt that their educations had become useless and saw their social and economic status deteriorate sharply. Others, such as the tabloid literati, seized new opportunities in the print market and succeeded socially and economically. At the same time, they were anxious and uncertain about the future of the nation, their families, and themselves.

The members of the tabloid community shared these experiences, and the similar positions they held in the social hierarchy led them to assume similar political outlooks. The rank-and-file literati had their own reasons to be cynical, resentful, and even defiant. On the one hand, they resented the Qing state and its officials, and blamed them for their own declining position in society, for the internal crises afflicting China, and for China's declining position in the world. On the other hand, they resented the political and intellectual elites who took advantage of new opportunities brought about by reforms to increase their wealth and prestige.

The tabloid press both reflected and moulded these new political outlooks. It shaped new political identities for community members who aimed to salvage, if not enhance, the power and influence they were losing. At the heart of this political outlook lay a strong anti-establishment and populist disposition.

Themes and Plan of This Book

An examination of the tabloid press and community is significant because it tells us a great deal about an important yet quite neglected social stratum of Chinese society in the late Qing: the low- and middle-ranked literati. Historians of this period know much about the political and intellectual elites because information about them is so readily available. There have been numerous studies, for example, of Liang Qichao, Kang Youwei, Zhang Zhidong, and Zhang Binglin. Historians know little, however, about the low- and middle-ranked literati, who remain an amorphous group in this period although the latter made up the majority of the well-educated population.⁵²

The thoughts, sentiments, and discourses of the tabloid community took the form of what I call "aesthetic populism." This populism consisted of ideas and rhetorical styles that appealed to "the people" and that opposed various segments of the political and intellectual establishment whom the tabloid community believed failed to serve the interests of the common people. Members of the tabloid community criticized the Qing government and officials, opposed the revolutionaries, and challenged the views of elite reformers who had become the new political aristocrats. This populism played an active role in shaping public sentiment and perception in the final years of the Qing.

This populism was aesthetic because it manifested itself in a particular kind of entertainment literature with distinctive ways of seeing, representing, and interpreting the Chinese state and society. It was expressed through literary tastes rather than street demonstrations. The chief characteristic of this aesthetic was "merry laughter and angry curses" (*xixiao numa*), a phrase that

tabloid writers themselves used to describe their satirical representational style of literature.

Recent scholarship defines populism as an antagonistic relationship between an oligarchic class and a subordinate class.⁵³ The former is an amalgamation of political, economic, and cultural elites. The latter is a heterogeneous coalition of people, coming from anywhere in the social hierarchy, who have a variety of unmet grievances and who feel disenfranchised and resentful of their circumstances. Their frustrations move them to discredit the oligarchic class and to charge it with corruption and malfeasance. These feelings arise in the first place because certain social changes threaten their livelihoods and security, depriving them “of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice.”⁵⁴ Moreover, normal institutional channels are unable to resolve these problems. A “populist rupture” then takes place when the aggrieved coalition crystallizes and sets in motion oppositional actions.⁵⁵

Populism thus involves what Francisco Panizza calls an “aggregation of discontents” that seeks to change the prevailing political discourse and to construct a new popular identity. To accomplish this, populism requires leadership to articulate the demands and frustrations of the aggrieved coalition. This leadership may be intellectual, political, or some combination of both, and it may or may not actually include members of the aggrieved coalition. The relationship between the leadership and the aggrieved coalition is, to a large degree, educational because people may at first be unable to identify explicitly what it is they lack. The role of the leadership, then, is “to awaken a dormant identity.”⁵⁶ Reading is one way for people to awaken, for it gives them the chance “to formulate the unformulated.”⁵⁷

This conceptualization of populism describes well the situation in late Qing China. Growing animosity existed in the tabloid community toward the political and intellectual elites. The former coalesced into a disenfranchised group of people who felt increasingly resentful of the establishment. The resulting antagonism took the form of outright opposition, “passive” grudges, and appropriation of the ideas and discourses of the powerful and privileged.

The tabloid literati – publishers, editors, and writers – played a leadership role in developing aesthetic populism. Through their published works, they altered the discourse of the times, gave voice to festering discontents and resentments, and helped steer the identities of the anxious and aggrieved tabloid community. The tabloid literati certainly did not belong to the establishment yet they were themselves elites in a sense, belonging to China’s ruling class. They were able to speak out publicly and shape public opinion through their writings; some of them enjoyed literary reputations as bestselling

authors. Nevertheless, they had neither the political power of officials nor the intellectual prestige of, say, Liang Qichao, a leading intellectual and reformer.

Speaking in the name of “the people” became fashionable in the late Qing. Both elites and non-elites adopted the Enlightenment ideal of the will of the people as a basis for the legitimacy of the state. They all promoted, in varying degrees, populist ideas supporting the rights and power of the people. Liang Qichao was a leading advocate of popular sovereignty in a constitutional Chinese state. Despite their support of the people, however, members of the political and intellectual establishment never placed themselves among the people. They spoke to them, led them, and regarded themselves as their representatives – but they were not *of* them. Tabloid literati, in contrast, saw themselves as belonging to the powerless people. They saw themselves as educators of, and spokespersons for, the people. Yet they also saw themselves as having no political or intellectual clout, and complained that nobody wanted to listen to them.

In an age before modern electronic media, the tabloid newspapers and magazines were instrumental in assembling, in one forum, the voices of the rank-and-file literati, and consequently in creating a subversive culture. In doing so, they sparked something unprecedented: sustained popular participation in national politics took root among the rank and file. The tabloid press helped shape a public consciousness that delegitimized Qing rule, preparing the ground for the public to accept, and even welcome, the collapse of the dynasty. It also articulated unique versions of those rapidly developing Chinese twins, nationalism and modernity.

I base my analysis on five of the most popular tabloid newspapers (*Allegories*, *Anecdotes*, *Fun*, *Grove of Laughter*, and *Splendid World*) and two tabloid magazines (*Illustrated Fiction* and *All-Story Monthly*). My source materials also include novels, essays, and short pieces written by tabloid writers and published as books or in other periodicals. I examine six dimensions of the late Qing Shanghai tabloid press and community, devoting one chapter to each.

Chapter 1 shows how amusement and entertainment became the leitmotifs of the tabloid press and united writers and readers in a tabloid community. The chapter also points out how this seemingly benign culture both revealed the weakening of the Qing state’s control of society and nurtured an attitude of defiance toward the state.

Chapter 2 shows how tabloid writers and readers constructed a critical discourse that vilified Qing officialdom. For over a decade, anti-Qing condemnation appeared daily in the press and countless works of fiction depicted

corrupt, inept rulers and officials. The chapter analyzes how this critical discourse eroded the symbolic power of the state and became a cultural foundation of the 1911 Revolution that brought down the Qing Dynasty.

Chapter 3 describes the nature of nationalism as a discourse, a sentiment, and a movement in the tabloid community. It shows that nationalist sentiments were anti-imperialist but not anti-foreign, and analyzes the populist attitudes of tabloid writers involved in nationalist movements. It also shows how the writers simultaneously appropriated and challenged Liang Qichao's discourse on citizenship.

Chapter 4 investigates how the tabloid community responded to the challenge of Western political ideas and ethical values, which were gaining legitimacy in China. It shows that the community shifted in its attitude toward reform. Whereas many members heartily embraced reform in the early years, in later years they expressed doubts and worries about it. Unlike intellectual elites, especially those who had received a Western-style education and who were much more likely to adopt Western views on politics and ethics, they believed in fundamental Chinese ethics and wanted only moderate reforms.

Chapter 5 explores how the tabloid community questioned the changing political and social power structures that accompanied the shifting structures of knowledge. It shows how members attacked both so-called reformers who worked within the system for economic and political gain, and revolutionaries who were interested only in acquiring power.

Chapter 6 illustrates how market forces played a major role in developing tabloid populism and aesthetics. It begins with an analysis of the late Qing literary market, examining the relationship between the tabloid press and the rise of fiction, as well as between reader and writer. The chapter then explains how these market forces nurtured populism and shaped tabloid aesthetics.

The Conclusion of this book highlights the process in which the tabloid press and community emerged and thrived. It also summarizes two major findings. First, the press and community developed a distinctive aesthetic populism in the late Qing. Second, the rank-and-file literati in the community played a leading role in this development. The forces that united the rank-and-file literati and enabled them to create aesthetic populism are identified, and the historical significance of tabloid culture as a subversive force that contributed to the 1911 Revolution is discussed.

To understand this late Qing tabloid phenomenon, we begin in the next chapter with an inquiry into how the tabloid community first came into being, and what bound members of the community together.

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Wang, Juan, 1960-

Merry laughter and angry curses [electronic resource] : the Shanghai tabloid press, 1897-1911 / Juan Wang.

(Contemporary Chinese studies, 1206-9523) Includes bibliographical references and index.

Electronic monograph issued in multiple formats. Also issued in print format.

ISBN 978-0-7748-2340-1 (PDF); ISBN 978-0-7748-2339-5 (EPUB)

1. Tabloid newspapers – China – Shanghai – History. 2. Tabloid newspapers – Social aspects – China – Shanghai –History. I. Title. II. Series: Contemporary Chinese studies (Online).

PN5364.W352012

079'.5113209041

C2012-903634-X

Canada

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada (through the Canada Book Fund), the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

Financial support from the Association for Asian Studies is also greatly appreciated.

UBC Press

The University of British Columbia

2029 West Mall

Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2

www.ubcpress.ca