

PRINT and POLITICS

'Shibao' and
the Culture of Reform
in Late Qing China

JOAN JUDGE

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STUDIES OF THE EAST ASIAN INSTITUTE,
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

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*For my father,
mentor and friend*

Acknowledgments

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Contents

Introduction: The Significance of the New Middle Realm	I
PART I THE FORMATION OF THE NEW MIDDLE REALM	
1. The Power of Print in the Late Qing: The Rise of the Political Press	17
2. The <i>Shibao</i> Journalists: Political and Cultural Brokers in the New Middle Realm	32
3. Theorizing the Middle Realm: Classical and Contemporary Sources of Authority	54
PART II NEW-STYLE NOBLE MEN: THE PUBLICISTS AND "THE PEOPLE"	
Prologue	79
4. From Subjects to Citizens	83
5. Forging a New Citizenry	100
6. The Common People's Cause	120

PART III "RUFFIANS IN SCHOLARS' ROBES":
THE PUBLICISTS VERSUS THE POWER HOLDERS

Prologue	143
7. <i>Minquan</i> and <i>Guanquan</i> : Popular Power Versus Official Power	146
8. The Institutionalization of the Middle Realm	161
9. The Reformists' Base of Operations	181
Conclusion: The Fate of the Middle Realm	198
<i>Appendix A: Biographical Index of Journalists and a Word on Pseudonyms</i>	207
<i>Appendix B: Background to the Late Qing Popular Uprisings</i>	213
<i>Glossary</i>	223
<i>Notes</i>	231
<i>Works Cited</i>	269
<i>Index</i>	291

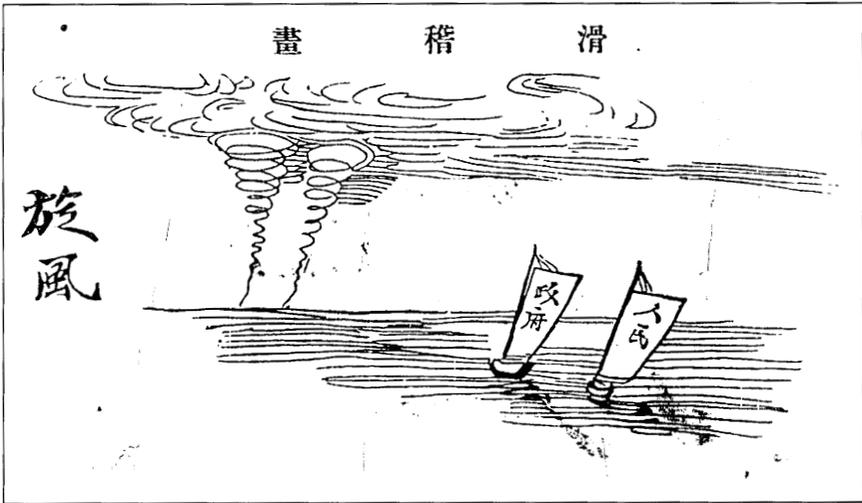
Print and Politics

Introduction: The Significance of the New Middle Realm

In April 1904 three men held a series of secret meetings in the foreign quarters of Shanghai. One of them, Liang Qichao, was a fugitive from the Qing government with a price of 100,000 taels on his head. Another, Di Baoxian, had played an instrumental role in organizing an uprising against the dynasty in 1900.¹ When they met that spring, their purpose was not to plan the overthrow of the imperial regime or to subvert the existing system of authority, however. It was to advance political opposition through other means—the creation of a daily newspaper.

Liang, Di, and the other journalists who would work for the newly founded daily, *Shibao*, thus drew an explicit link between print and politics: adopting a new form of print mediation—the political press—they promoted a new mode of politics—constitutional reform. Casting themselves as members of the “middle level of society” (*zhongdeng shehui*), they saw their role as one of negotiating between the dynasty “above” and the common people “below.” From this intermediate ground they struggled—as both publicists and activists—to shift the locus of authority downward and channel the abilities of the people upward. This intermediate ground, including both the metaphoric space that their journalistic writings occupied and the actual sphere of their social and political initiatives, constitutes the late Qing middle realm.²

Focusing on the new-style press—the preeminent institution and primary text of the middle realm—this book tells the story of the formation, expansion, and meaning of this emerging space. *Shibao*, the most influen-



"Cyclone," *Shibao*, August 5, 1907. The government and the people sailing toward inevitable conflict.

tial reform organ of its day, serves as both subject and document. An entry point into late Qing society, the newspaper is also used as a matrix for the various discourses and practices that took place within the society, revealing the way new cultural meanings were negotiated and age-old political practices transformed. This examination of *Shibao* thus enables us to develop a more nuanced understanding of the early twentieth century in China, a period that has often been overdetermined by tropes of dynastic decline, the teleology of the 1911 Revolution, or the notion of a transitional era. Taking the final years of Qing rule as a distinct historical moment allows us to reproblematicize the social, political, and cultural configurations of this era and opens up avenues for rethinking what followed later in the century.

The late Qing middle realm was the product of a complex interaction between discourse, practice, and culture; between printed texts, their political and institutional contexts, and the cultural assumptions that informed both. In analyzing the intentions of the new-style publicists who struggled to reform late Qing society, therefore, this book also examines the political, social, and cultural circumstances that often impinged on, redirected, or directly influenced those intentions. Reading *Shibao's* essays as both political texts and cultural artifacts, it focuses on the language the journalists used, the cultural constructs they deployed to structure their arguments, and the sources of authority they appealed to in advancing their claims for reform.

This inquiry into culture and politics in late Qing China has been in-

spired by the new cultural history and, in particular, by historical studies of print culture. Most exemplary of this field is the work of Roger Chartier, who attempts to “rethink the relation traditionally postulated between the social realm . . . and the representations that are supposed to reflect it or distort it” in an effort to construct “a new articulation between ‘cultural structures’ and ‘social structures.’” Specifically, Chartier analyzes how “the increased circulation of printed texts transformed forms of sociability, authorized new ideas, [and] modified relationships with authority” in old regime societies.³ Michael Warner, although not a cultural historian, adopts a similar approach in his book on the “cultural meaning of printedness” in eighteenth-century America. Examining the reciprocal determination between a medium and its politics, he seeks both to explicate societal change and to make a hermeneutic attempt to account for culture.⁴

While in recent years many scholars of European and American culture have turned their attention to the press in order to analyze “history from the middle,” this is the first study of late Qing China to do so.⁵ Employing a cultural historical methodology to examine China’s early political press, it raises different questions and seeks different insights from those of previous scholarship on this period.⁶ Whereas the political narratives on the late Qing have been largely structured by the events of 1911, this book does not recite a “prologue to the revolution.” It concludes in 1911 not because of the revolution itself but because the circumstances that surrounded that event indirectly brought an end to the most innovative and influential phase in *Shibao*’s history. The purpose of this examination of the early *Shibao*, therefore, is not exclusively to analyze where the incidents of the last Qing decade led. Rather, it is to examine how these events were culturally constituted in the pages of the newspaper and how these representations in turn generated new political and social meanings that perhaps contributed to, but ultimately transcended, the revolution.

This cultural historical approach also differs from intellectual narratives on late imperial China by deemphasizing the role of “great figures” in history. While some of the more prolific writers, influential thinkers, and visionary activists in the late Qing populate this book, it is not their story. Instead, it is the history of the integration of their ideas into the broader social discourse by a group of new-style publicists. Brokers between the realm of high ideas and the sphere of practical political concerns, between the circle of high politics and the world of local politics, between the promise of Western learning and the time-worn truths of Confucian culture, these journalists inhabited, theorized, and attempted to activate the late Qing middle realm. As a new class of cultural entrepreneurs and political activists, they operated in various modes—editorialist, women’s instructor, translator, and fiction writer—in an effort to disseminate their new vision for China.

This exploration of the middle realm also builds on recent work that complicates the dichotomies that once held a privileged position in the lit-

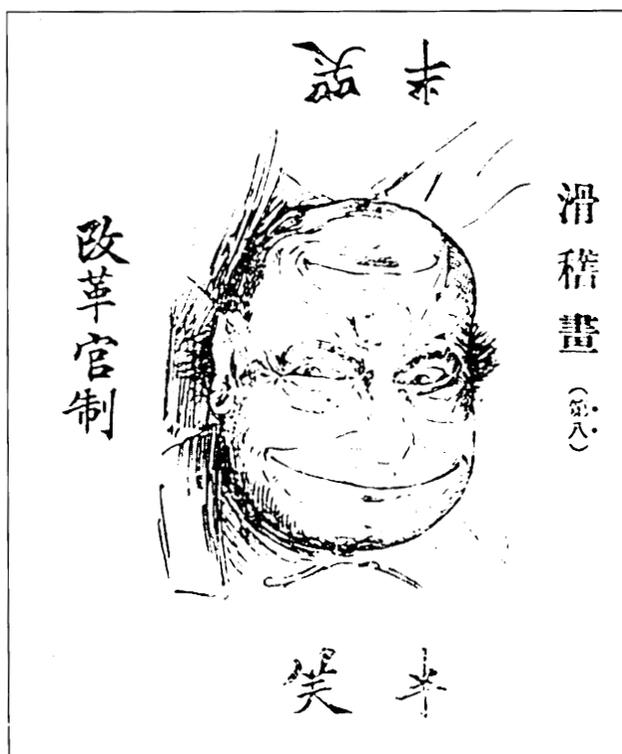
erature on the late Qing: tradition/modernity, Western impact/indigenous response, reform/revolution.⁷ Its method of excavation reveals a site where the classical Chinese ethos merges with foreign ideas, creating a synthesis driven by new political aspirations that are neither uniformly reformist nor exclusively revolutionary. As the *Shibao* journalists infused the Confucian tradition with new elements and transformed foreign ideas to conform to familiar cultural constructs, tensions and disjunctions arose and new social and political possibilities unfolded. It was this process of interaction that defined the content of the late Qing middle realm and gave rise to China's unique historical trajectory in the early twentieth century.

The Middle Realm and the Press

The press, a key site of this interaction, played a multivalenced role in the late Qing middle realm. A means of reproducing cultural values and encouraging social integration, it was first and foremost a political tool. A number of historians and theorists of the press, both Western and Chinese, have emphasized the importance of the link between press and politics and particularly between press and revolution, publicist and revolutionary militant.⁸ The historical record is rife with references to this connection. The leading Bolshevik agitator, V. I. Lenin, argued that a newspaper was both substance and symbol of the revolutionary cause. The French Revolutionary journalist Jacques-Pierre Brissot claimed that "without newspapers, the American revolution would never have succeeded." And Liang Qichao, China's foremost theorist of the late Qing press, declared in 1912 that "the establishment of the Republic of China was the result of a revolution of ink, not a revolution of blood."⁹

While print journalism served a political function in many nations, this role was particularly consequential in late Qing China, which had neither a system of political parties nor a representative national assembly. Independent of the dynasty and accessible to the reading public, the political press provided one of the few forums where reformists could advance their political agenda. Opening a field of mediation between the different spheres of late Qing society, the new journals made it possible for reform publicists to challenge imperial authority and express popular grievances, encourage debate over government policies, and educate their compatriots about the urgent need to reform the structure of dynastic power.

The *Shibao* journalists' principal political task from the time the newspaper was founded in 1904 was to fragment and disperse centralized imperial authority through constitutional reform. While the Qing government had already committed itself to administrative reform in its announcement of the New Policies (Xinzheng) on January 29, 1901, it was not until September 1, 1906, that it published an edict mandating the gradual implementation of a system of constitutional rule. From this time on the journalists' primary mission became one of exposing the disjuncture



"The reform of the official system," *Shibao*, April 9, 1907. The double face of the November 6, 1906, Resolution on the Reform of the Official System (Guanzhi gaige), which initially brought joy but ultimately produced frustration.

between the court's promise of constitutional reform and the reality of imperial politics. Two related issues became increasingly contested in their writings: the centralization of dynastic power and the representation of popular power.

Conflicts between the publicists and officialdom over these two issues escalated during the last years of Qing rule. When the dynasty published its long-awaited Resolution on the Reform of the Official System (Guanzhi gaige) on November 6, 1906, the *Shibao* journalists realized that the government was merely using the facade of constitutionalism to centralize its financial and military power.¹⁰ This centralizing agenda was further manifest in the dynasty's measures to control all regional railways, the issue that became the focus of the 1907 Suzhou-Hangzhou-Ningbo Railway dispute. When the court unilaterally decided to borrow money from Britain to complete construction of the railway, the journalists accused it of selling out China's national rights. Criticizing the government's flagrant abuse of