

A Newspaper for China? Power, Identity, and Change in Shanghai's News Media, 1872–1912. By Barbara Mittler. Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2004. xvi + 504 pp. Illustrations, tables, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$60.00. ISBN: 0-674-01217-8.

Reviewed by Christopher A. Reed

Scholarship covering the history and impact of China's print media has burst into view in the past decade or so. Most of these works, as Barbara Mittler points out in her outstanding new study of *Shenbao* and other newspapers, have focused on the media as "context" for political, economic, and social activities. Mittler's book, conversely, one of the first to emerge in English from the Shanghai-newspaper seminar organized by Rudolf Wagner at Germany's Heidelberg University, focuses on "text rather than context." In doing so, the book taps into ever-broadening streams of literary scholarship on media, textuality, and reading, suggesting that this book has great potential for interdisciplinary "crossover" appeal.

Shenbao (its full name *Shenjiang xinbao* is sometimes translated as "[Shanghai] Morning Post"), the Chinese-language newspaper that is at the center of this study, first appeared in Shanghai's Anglo-American International Concession in 1872 in the thirtieth year of the treaty port's opening to Western imperialists. Founded by Ernest Major (1841–1908), an English merchant, it remained a Western-owned enterprise until 1908, says Mittler. First printed every other day, it went on to become Shanghai's most successful Chinese-language daily paper, surviving until just before the Communist takeover in 1949. Extraterritoriality was vital to its operation.

Mittler discusses the paper's Western origins briefly to suggest what had to happen for this newspaper to become an indigenous publication. Her main objective is to show that *Shenbao* prospered by becoming a Chinese newspaper or, more precisely, a newspaper for China. Mittler's research involved reading a vast range of issues of the newspaper (approximately 10 percent of those published during the period from 1872 to 1912, including an entire year's worth at every five-year interval, followed by strategic perusal of particular topics in the intervening years; she read selectively from 1900 to 1925 on still other topics as a way of checking her conclusions about the earlier years). In

fact, in the course of showing us concretely how *Shenbao* became a Chinese newspaper, Mittler also teaches us how the Chinese reading of *Shenbao* during her forty-year period might have changed. This is where the industry and originality underlying Mittler's scholarship shines through. By the end of the book, she has challenged and, in many cases, empirically overturned some of our most cherished generalizations about the content and style of early Western-style media in China. As a result, the conclusions of dozens of scholars will have to be reexamined and our understanding of even the basics (periodization, for instance) amended.

The book's central question is spelled out in the extended introduction: just how influential was China's modern press in general and *Shenbao* in particular? In spite of the foreign origins of *Shenbao*, it quickly acquired vocal Chinese supporters and detractors; the existence of both attested to its appeal and helped to create a Chinese version of the public sphere. In addition to editors and journalists, the Chinese court, foreign governments, and China's own citizens advocated for and against treaty-port newspapers like *Shenbao*. The result, according to Mittler, was a tendency on everyone's (including scholars') part to ascribe a degree of influence to the newspapers that turns out to be difficult to demonstrate historically. Nonetheless, the issue of their influence underlies each of the six substantive chapters into which the book is divided. The first three inquire into the creation of the treaty-port Chinese-language newspaper by examining the transformation of an alien medium, the role of intellectual authority within that medium, and the effect of *Shenbao* on the official gazettes of the court and then of its officials. The final three chapters redirect the discussion toward the newspaper's impact (or lack of it) on the (constructed) female reader, the multiple personalities of the Shanghai Chinese as reflected in the paper, and, lastly, the relation between *Shenbao* and Chinese nationalism.

Mittler excels in her discussion of how the early *Shenbao* appealed to the Chinese through its "literariness." Indeed, at the beginning the newspaper was produced not as a broadsheet that the public read selectively but as a form of book read from start to finish. In keeping with this effort to mask the news as literature, *Shenbao*, like traditional Chinese books, had no punctuation (at least until 1904). In other ways, including the fact that it reprinted the Qing-dynasty court gazette, *Shenbao* sought to establish itself within the ancient stream of Chinese literary and administrative communication, an act of

masquerade that made enormous sense to those seeking to sell the news to a circumscribed audience. Apart from packaging devices of these sorts, internal elements, such as the editorial, also imitated Chinese literary genres (even the civil-service examination's notorious *baguwen* [eight-legged essay]) and advocated change by citing Chinese classical antecedents. In this way, from the start, *Shenbao* was able to prepare its readership for many elements previously regarded by historians as belonging to the *fin-de-siècle* (such as bicycles, birth control, parliaments, and even objectivity as a journalistic ideal). Over time, the Chinese journalists at *Shenbao* redirected an old style of discourse to new readers via their innovative medium. Even the prose style they invoked was not new but represented, rather, a reinvention of old forms; when Liang Qichao, long famed as the father of Chinese journalism, thanks in part to his putatively unique writing style, began to issue his own newspaper, the *Shiwubao*, in 1904, Mittler says, he did not invent a style so much as perfect one that had been foreshadowed by *Shenbao*.

In a book of this scope, ambition, and complexity, some analytical strategies will raise questions, particularly among business historians. Readers of this journal may already feel they know, for instance, that despite *Shenbao*'s having been founded by the Englishman Major, it was largely run by its Chinese employees. Mittler tells us that Major left Shanghai in 1889 but not what happened to his interest in the paper between then and his death in 1908. And although one may know from other sources that the newspaper was eventually sold to Chinese investors, business historians and others are likely to ask how, if at all, this foreign ownership influenced the paper's editorials, one of Mittler's main sources. Second, in a book that covers so much from the period designated in the subtitle (1872–1912), Chapter Six, which discusses manifestations of nationalism ranging from the Boxer Rebellion (1900) to the May 30th Movement (1925), seems out of place. But if this chapter, which concludes that newspapers, especially the *Shenbao*, “did not foment anti-imperialist sentiments or instigate antiforeign actions” (p. 402), does belong in this book, it certainly is an appropriate point at which to identify the new Chinese owners and the editorial writers, at least for the benefit of historians who want to know about the politics of elite treaty-port Chinese, for instance, both individually and collectively. Finally, with respect to the book's own formatting—although the publisher

should be applauded for preparing the text with footnotes rather than endnotes, for including Chinese characters in the text rather than in a glossary, and for printing twenty-nine illustrations, the skimpy five-page index to a book of this weight and certain influence among the multiple audiences to which it will appeal is inexcusable. Related to this question of scholarly utility, the decision to use the short form for citations (without full titles or dates of publication) weakens their value in supporting the author's argument.

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