
The First Casualty: Truth, Lies and Commercial Opportunism in Chinese Newspapers during the First Sino-Japanese War

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The First Sino-Japanese War during 1894 and 1895 was a dramatic moment in world events. Not only did it catch the attention of the West but, for as long as it lasted, it became a central focus of readers of newspapers in China in both English and Chinese. The Chinese public was extremely eager to read any news that could be gathered about the war, and newspaper proprietors grasped this opportunity to promote their businesses, competing to provide the latest information using wartime reporting practices already established in Britain and the United States. This paper explores the competition between two commercial Chinese language newspapers, *Shenbao* and *Xinwenbao*, in order to elucidate the relationships between patriotism, profit and readership during the First Sino-Japanese War. By comparing and contrasting how news of the war was reported in both publications, and how it was received by the public, we learn something of how these newspapers operated in gathering and publishing reports of tremendous national events, and gain insight into how commercial interests and readers' reactions to news events influenced editorial policy.

War Reporting in the West and in China in the Second Half of the Nineteenth century

In 1853, war erupted in the Crimean peninsula. The conflict lasted for more than two years, and for many people in Britain, it was seen as a symbolic test of the spirit of British forces and a physical projection of British imperial ambitions; but it also functioned as a very real test of Britain's true military strength on the battlefield. Of course, news was in high demand at home, and thanks to the new technologies of railway and telegraph this was delivered with unprecedented speed and immediacy, though this development was not much appreciated by the British Government at that time.¹

In London, *The Times* and *London Daily News* both managed to place their 'Own Special Correspondent' with troops on the front line. Written in the style of war diaries, reports carried vivid and detailed descriptions about battlefield victories and defeats. But there was also an appetite for journalists' reflections on the war and in particular their observations

¹Trevor Royle, *War Report: The War Correspondent's View of Battle from the Crimea to the Falklands* (Guildford, 1987), pp. 18–19.

on the conditions endured by the British soldiers.² William Howard Russell (1820–1907), a journalist for *The Times*, acclaimed in his day and later acknowledged as the first of a long line of celebrated British war correspondents, broke new ground for readers with his rapid dispatches from the front. Indeed, what reader wouldn't be moved when reading the following?

October 25 . . . At 11.10 our Light Cavalry Brigade rushed to the front . . . The whole brigade scarcely made one effective regiment, according to the numbers of continental armies; and yet it was more than we could spare. . . At 11.35, not a British soldier, except the dead and dying, was left in front of these bloody Muscovite guns . . . 4PM. In our cavalry fight to-day we had 13 officers killed or missing, 156 men killed or missing, total 169; 21 officers wounded, 197 men wounded, total 218; total killed, wounded, and missing 387. Horses killed or missing, 394; horses wounded, 126; total 520.³

Russell's report on 'The Operations of the Siege' was followed with more information relating to the medical care of wounded soldiers. As the war progressed, ever larger amounts of war-related material were rushed into print; from news to poem and novels, Britain seemed suddenly flooded with war literature.⁴ Working closely with the railways, W.H. Smith managed a large volume of distribution of newspapers and journals in the mid-nineteenth century. The company applied a strict rule on Sunday rest, but this was suspended during the Crimean War as so many people wanted to read the latest lists of dead and wounded.⁵ The public was caught up in war fever – not only were there massive commercial interests associated with the war, but the soldiers' families at home were eager to know about the latest developments. News from the front became a valuable commodity. The material provided by Russell and other correspondents was not sufficient to satisfy readers' demands for information, so *The Times* also accepted and published news from private letters sent by soldiers and others at the front lines.⁶

The mid-nineteenth century may seem a rather early period to exemplify wartime news reporting, but all the conditions are there to make it highly suitable for historical study. There are a number of reasons why this period is so rich in resources for scholars. First, journalism had become quite established as a profession by that time. Second, larger, more modern types of wars were taking place in what was a flourishing period for nationalist ideas and movements and also a time of conflict between established and emerging powers – so there is plenty of material. Third, the invention of the telegraph brought journalism into a new age of near-instant information, shrinking the world in terms of time and distance. Finally, there was a genuinely global interest in wartime news, which in turn created compelling financial and political incentives for media owners, commercial trading interests, and governments to meet the demand. The establishment in the period of international news agencies such as Havas and Reuters was the result of this new phenomenon.

²Philip Knightley, *First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-maker from the Crimea to Iraq* (Baltimore, Maryland, 2004), p. 6; Greg McLaughlin, *The War Correspondent* (London, 2002), pp. 49–51.

³'The Operations of the Siege. (From Our Special Correspondent),' *The Times*, 14 November 1854, p. 7.

⁴Stefanie Markovits, 'Rushing into Print: "Participatory Journalism" during the Crimean War,' *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 50, No. 4 (Summer, 2008), pp. 559–586.

⁵Charles Wilson, *First with the News: The History of W.H. Smith, 1792–1972* (London, 1985), p. 146.

⁶Stefanie Markovits, *Ibid.*

Likewise in China the existence of the telegraph changed the way Chinese newspapers operated, just as it had in Europe, though the Chinese transformation occurred several decades later. An explosion in the demand for war news occurred in China during the Sino-French War of 1883–1884 which was focused on southern China. After debates that had lasted more than two decades, and just before the outbreak of the war, domestic telegraph lines had finally been set up beyond Fujian and in the southern part of China, complementing pre-existing lines further north. Other new links had also just come into service, such as the line between Tianjin and Shanghai constructed in 1881.⁷ During the Sino-French War, the ‘instant’ nature of communication made possible by the telegraph added significantly to the degree of competition between rival titles in reporting the latest war news. From a news-gathering perspective, the impact on newspapers of the availability of the telegraph was very large. But the cost of transmitting news by telegraph placed a new and onerous financial burden on newspaper publishers. For example, the transmission of just seventy characters cost more than ten silver *Taels* – the equivalent of the revenue from half a month of five columns of advertisements.⁸ As newspapers came to rely on the telegraph to transmit up-to-the-minute information, expenses increased; and publishers had to find ways to increase their circulations to offset this substantial cost.

On the outbreak of the Sino-French War, *Shenbao* 申報, launched in 1872, was already the most well-established commercial newspaper in Shanghai, and circulated broadly in China.⁹ It sent correspondents to Canton, Hong Kong, Fujian, and Taiwan to get first-hand news, and some reports were dispatched via telegraph to Shanghai. At the same time, *Hubao* 滬報 (the name was later changed to *Zilin hubao* 字林滬報), a new daily newspaper launched in May 1882 under the wing of the English language *North China Herald and North China Daily News*, was in a strong position to compete with *Shenbao*.¹⁰ *Hubao* shared good facilities with the *North China Daily News*, both for news sent by telegraph from distant lands, and for information from foreign sources.¹¹ Although *Shenbao* and *Hubao* were Chinese language newspapers and run on a day-to-day basis by Chinese managers, they were both owned by British proprietors. To compete with the well-resourced *Hubao*, *Shenbao* had to extend its news resources by translating news from newspapers in Hong Kong, interviewing serving

⁷Erik Baark, *Lightning Wires: the Telegraph and China's Technological Modernization, 1860–1890* (Westport, Conn., 1997), pp. 163–166; Sun Li 孫藜, *Wanqing dianbao ji qi chuanbo guannian 1860–1911 晚清電報及其傳播觀念 1860–1911* [Telegraphy and Ideas of Communications in the Late Qing, 1860–1911] (Shanghai: Shanghai Shudian, 2007), p. 53.

⁸Sun Li, *Wanqing dianbao ji qi chuanbo guannian*, p. 96.

⁹Barbara Mittler, *A Newspaper for China? Power, Identity, and Change in Shanghai's News Media, 1872–1912* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004). For a broader debate on Chinese newspapers with the public sphere in the late nineteenth century see *Joining the global public: Word, image and city in early Chinese newspapers, 1870–1910*, (ed.) Rudolf Wagner, (Albany, 2007).

¹⁰‘Summary of News,’ *North China Herald*, 19 May 1882. The predecessor of *Hubao/Zilin Hubao* was *Shanghai xinbao* 上海新報. They were both off-shoots of the *North China Herald* and *North China Daily News*. Lin Yutang, *A History of the Press and Public Opinion in China* (Illinois, 1936), pp. 81 and 87.

¹¹Ma Guangren 馬光仁, *Shanghai dangdai xinwenshi* 上海當代新聞史 [A Contemporary History of Journalism in Shanghai] (Shanghai, Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2001), pp. 87–89; for the short history of *Hubao*, see Roswell S. Britton, *The Chinese Periodical Press, 1800–1912* (Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, 1933, repr. Taipei, Chengwen chubanshe, 1976), pp. 51, 55 and 74.

naval personnel, incorporating reports from news agencies, and soliciting information from private correspondents.¹²

To respond to public demand, *Shenbao* also printed extra editions from time to time to report the latest war news.¹³ In this rivalry, *Shenbao* proved to be the victor. Despite a good start and high expectations, *Hubao* was not well managed from a commercial perspective, and it did not capitalise on its resource-rich position. By the time its celebrity editor Cai Erkang 蔡爾康 (1851–1921) left in 1891,¹⁴ it was in decline, and when war broke out with Japan in 1894, *Shenbao* would find its major competitor was no longer *Hubao*, but *Xinwenbao* 新聞報, a newspaper established just a year before. There was significant public interest in the war with Japan, while the intervening years had enabled correspondents and editors to gain more experience in the use of the telegraph, setting up the period of the Sino-Japanese War for an intense journalistic and commercial battle between rival publishers.

Battle-ready and Eager for the Fight

Despite the passing of more than 20 years since the Meiji Restoration in 1868, by the closing decade of the nineteenth century neither China nor the West had a clear picture of the revolutionary impact of the Japanese reforms. With the hindsight afforded to historians, the outbreak of the First Sino-Japanese War in 1894 was not a surprise; but for those at the time caught up in things as they unfolded, the sequence of events, carefully planned and orchestrated by Japan, came as a shock. At the beginning of the War, Japan was not expected to win.

Her [Japan's] victories were the more conspicuous, because so unexpected; none of the grave writers who had formed western opinion of the Far East had ever given a thought to the military power of Japan; all serious consideration was given to China.¹⁵

Western countries, the Qing Court, and the Chinese people had all failed to understand that Japan was now essentially reborn, that it had embraced Western technology over the previous two and a half decades while creating a modern war machine. Thanks to its compactness, as well as a deep, shared sense of “brotherhood throughout all classes” and loyalty to the Emperor, Japan was able to demonstrate to the outer world its prowess in “the most concrete form of patriotism”.¹⁶

In China, defeats in the Opium Wars of 1842 and 1860 had resulted in the launch of the Self-Strengthening Movement in 1862. During this period, much effort had gone

¹²Chen Yushen 陳玉申, *Wanqing baoyeshi* 晚清報業史 [The History of Journalism in the Late Qing] (Jinan, Shandong huabao chubanshe, 2002), p. 48.

¹³Fang Hanqi 方漢奇, *Zhongguo jindai baoyeshi* 中國近代報刊史 [The History of Modern Chinese Newspapers] (Shanxi, Taiyuan: Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 1981), pp. 52–53.

¹⁴Ge Gongzhen 戈公振, *Zhongguo baoxueshi* 中國報學史 [The History of Chinese Newspapers] (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1935), p. 65. See also “Xinwenbao chuangan jingguo ji qi gaikuang” 《新聞報》創辦經過及其概況 [The Establishment of Xinwenbao and its Survey], *Dang'an yu shixue* 檔案與史學 [Archives and History], Issue 5, 2002, pp. 3–8.

¹⁵Vladimir (pseudonym for Zenone Volpicelli), *The China-Japan War Compiled from Japanese, Chinese, and Foreign Sources* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1896), p. 2.

¹⁶Jukichi Inouye, *Japan-China War: The Naval Battle of Haiyang* (Yokohama, Kelly & Walsh, Limited, 1896), Preface, II.

into modernising its military forces, including the creation of shipyards, arsenals, and the equipping of modern armies. However, these military developments did not receive consistent or unilateral support from the Qing Court. On the contrary, from 1885 until the war with Japan, large parts of the budget earmarked for improving the Beiyang Army, the Beiyang Fleet and the Nanyang Fleet were appropriated for the purposes of repairing and constructing Emperor Dowager Cixi's palaces and retreats.¹⁷

The majority of Chinese government officials did not have a perspective that was any more informed than the Imperial court. On the eve of the War, Viceroy Li Hongzhang 李鴻章 (1823–1901), the official who had been in charge of much of the programme of military modernisation for at least twenty years prior to the war, believed China had at least enough strength to defend itself, if indeed it was not in a much more advantageous situation.¹⁸ Robert Hart, 1835–1911, the long term Inspector General of the Chinese Maritime Customs Service, shared the same optimistic view at the beginning of the war. He wrote:

If the war lasts long enough we must win: Chinese grit, physique and numbers will beat Japanese dash, drill and leadership – the Japs are at their best now, but we'll improve every day!¹⁹

On the one hand, newspaper commentators were still deeply concerned by the weakness of China since the Opium Wars; on the other, sharing Hart's sentiment, they had developed a sense of optimism about China's potential for development, borne of a sense that things were starting to change. These feelings were largely shared by the populace, who were also witnessing the introduction of railways, telegraph, and steamships on the east coast and Yangtze River. For the majority of readers of Chinese newspapers such as *Shenbao*, *Shibao* 時報 in Tianjin, *Hubao*, and Wang Tao's 王韜 (1826–97) *Xunhuan ribao* 循環日報, or other politically-oriented newspapers, the programme of the Self-Strengthening Movement was a familiar topic, often discussed within their preferred journal's editorial pages.²⁰ Readers were told that a process of military modernisation had been conducted in both north and south since 1862, and that military modernisation must have made impact on China.²¹ In short, the 'public opinion' (*yulun* 輿論) represented in newspapers prior to the war was that China would win.²² The conflict with Japan seemed to present itself as a great opportunity for

¹⁷Ji Pingzi 季平子, *Cong yapian zhanzheng dao jiawu zhanzheng* 從鴉片戰爭到甲午戰爭 [From the Opium Wars to the Jiawu War] (Taipei, Yunlong chuban, 2001), pp. 541–545. Robert Hart to James Duncan Campbell, letter no. 947: 'The Admiralty has had big sums paid to it yearly the last ten years and ought to have a balance of 36,000,000 taels, and lo! It has not a penny, having allowed the Emp. Dowager to draw on it for the many whims she has been indulging in!' *The I.G. in Peking: Letters of Robert Hart Chinese Maritime Customs, 1868–1907*, (ed.) John King Fairbank, Katherine Frost Bruner, Elizabeth MacLeod Matheson, (Cambridge Mass., 1975), Vol. ii, p. 991.

¹⁸Ji Pingzi, *Cong yapian zhanzheng dao jiawu zhanzheng*, p. 648.

¹⁹Hart to James Duncan Campbell, letter 938, 5th August 1894, *The I.G. in Peking*, Vol. ii, pp. 980–981.

²⁰Chen Yushen, *Wanqing baoyeshi*, p. 45. Tang Haijiang 唐海江, *Qingmo zhenglun baokan yu minzhong dongyuan – yizhong zhengzhi wenhua de shijiao* 清末政論報刊與民眾動員—一種政治文化的視角 [Political Newspapers and Journals of the Late Qing and Popular Mobilization: A Political Culture Perspective] (Beijing: Qinghua daxue chubanshe, 2007), p. 43.

²¹'Xingri pian (醒日篇) [On to Wake the Japanese],' *Shenbao*, 3 August 1894; 'Xiren lun huabing keyong (西人論華兵可用) [The Westerners Think Chinese Troops are Ready],' *Shenbao*, 12 August 1894.

²²Gong Shuduo 龔書鐸, 'Jiawu zhanzheng qijian de shehui yulun (甲午戰爭期間的社會輿論) [The Public Opinion in Society during the Jiawu War],' *Beijing shifan daxue xuebao* 北京師範大學學報 [Journal of Beijing Normal University], no 5 (1994), pp. 1–9. Timothy Richard, *Forty-five Years in China* (New York, Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1916), p. 230.

China to wash away feelings of shame and humiliation that had persisted since the Opium Wars.²³

With its government and people full of righteous emotion and convinced that it had a duty to protect Korea, a long-time tributary state of China, there was no escaping war with Japan, despite the lack of proper planning. This viewpoint was supported across the print media. For example, in an editorial written in July 1894, entitled 'On Why China Cannot Avoid Engaging in War with Japan over the Korean Matter' (*Lun Zhongguo wei Chaoxian shi bu ke bu yu Riben yizhan* 論中國為朝鮮事不可不與日本一戰)²⁴ the editor of *Shenbao* argued China should grasp the opportunity to assert its authority and sovereignty over Korea. So long as the Qing court and the country's important statesmen decided to focus their attention and devote their energy to prepare for the war, the impact of Chinese troops on the Japanese army would be like "hot water melting snow". China would be victorious, and the Japanese would be very busy collecting their dead and tending to their wounded. In another editorial entitled 'On Preparation for the War' (*Chou zhan yi* 籌戰議), *Shenbao* asserted that China had a responsibility to protect Korea, and it had to do so unreservedly, with or without Japanese military provocation. Chinese troops should march straight into Korea, and engage in a life or death battle with Japan.²⁵

Some victories during the Sino-French War ten years previous were recalled in print and this added to the Chinese air of self-confidence. Some readers dared to hope that with the efforts undertaken under the banner of the Self-Strengthening movement over the previous ten years, China's military strength had significantly improved. For example, two months into the Sino-Japanese War, a *Xinwenbao* editorial told its readers that the victories in the battles between China and France had been more or less equally shared; but since then China had invested significant resources in its navy, both north and south. The editorial went on to remind people that Chinese naval forces had just held a big review in Tianjin attended by Viceroy Li Hongzhang. Warships from the Beiyang (North Sea) and Nanyang (South Sea) fleets met up to conduct the exercise; representatives from some Western navies also attended, and they all praised the demonstration.²⁶ From these editorials we can sense that Chinese society was confident that their country would triumph in a war with Japan, and *Shenbao* and *Xinwenbao* took care to position themselves for the coming hostilities.

Most Chinese-language newspapers in the second half of the nineteenth century were owned by foreigners, particularly missionaries. Foreign ownership was particularly prevalent in Shanghai, Canton and Hong Kong.²⁷ The situation only started to change after the end of the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895, when groups of Chinese intellectuals, shocked by China's defeat, started to set up their own newspapers to promote their new ideas for

²³For the concept of shame and humiliation associated with Chinese nationalism, see Weipin Tsai, *Reading Shenbao: Nationalism, Consumerism and Individuality in China 1919–37* (Basingstoke, 2009), pp. 109–120; Peter Zarrow, 'Historical Trauma: Anti-Manchuism and Memories of Atrocity in Late Qing China,' *History & Memory*, Volume 16, Number 2 (Fall/Winter 2004), pp. 67–107.

²⁴'Lun Zhongguo wei Chaoxian shi bu ke bu yu Riben yizhan (論中國為朝鮮事不可不與日本一戰) [On Why China Cannot Avoid Engaging in War with Japan over the Korean Matter],' *Shenbao*, 21 July 1894.

²⁵'Chou zhan yi (籌戰議) [On Preparation for the War],' *Shenbao*, 27 July 1894.

²⁶'Xu zhong wo bingzhi butonglun (續中倭兵制不同論) [On Chinese and Japanese Military Systems being Different – Continued],' *Xinwenbao*, 27 September 1894.

²⁷Xiantao Zhang, *The Origins of the Modern Chinese Press: The Influence of the Protestant Missionary Press in Late Qing China* (Abingdon, 2007), pp. 30–45.

China.²⁸ *Shenbao* and *Xinwenbao* had a particular background. Unlike competing missionary owned Chinese language newspapers, both titles were owned by foreign-dominated business interests, and each had a very strong commercial sense. The foreign owners of the *North China Daily News*' Chinese language title, *Hubao*, hired Chinese editors to run the newspapers, write editorials, and produce literary sections to attract a local readership.²⁹ The foreign owners of *Shenbao* and *Xinwenbao* did the same.

While the early history of *Shenbao* has been extensively studied, the history of *Xinwenbao* has been much less explored in academic work.³⁰ *Xinwenbao* was founded through a collaboration between the American textile merchant A.W. Danforth, the British journalist F. F. Ferris (who had also been involved with *Hubao*), and the Chinese merchant Zhang Shuhe 張叔和 (1850–1919).³¹ *Hubao*'s Cai Erkang was headhunted to become the overall editor.³² By this time, he wished to leave *Hubao* anyway, as he had tired of clashes with colleagues. Although Cai Erkang left after six months for *Wanguo gongbao* 萬國公報 (A Review of the Times) to work with Timothy Richard (李提摩太, 1845–1919), according to his memoirs on his involvement with *Xinwenbao*, he put a lot of thought into setting up the new business. *Xinwenbao* had fairly modest beginnings: besides Cai as editor, it had nine journalists, F. F. Ferris working on translation, and another three people poached from *Hubao* to do typesetting and proofreading.³³

To compete with *Shenbao*, *Xinwenbao* adopted a similar typesetting style and page layout. The names of both newspapers were placed horizontally, on the top of the first page and above the large editorial. On the left hand side of the editorial was a space, running through to the following page, devoted to major headlines. The headlines presented in this space were always short and punchy, four to six characters, and the source of the information was included: telegraph, translation, correspondent of the newspaper, important foreign sources, or information from travellers, soldiers and merchants. In addition to political news, *Xinwenbao* had a large amount of space across different pages given over to advertisements, as well as sections devoted to commerce and literature, in order to target *Shenbao*'s readers and win them over.

In order to get hold of as much nationwide news in as short a time as possible, those involved in the launch of *Xinwenbao* wrote to their contacts around the country. One of

²⁸Lin Yutang, *A History of the Press and Public Opinion in China*, p. 94. See also Tang Haijiang *Qingmo zhengluan baokan yu minzhong dongyuan*, pp. 45–49.

²⁹Ma Guangren, *Shanghai dangdai xinwenshi*, pp. 87–90. Barbara Mittler argues the editorial style of *Shenbao* is the most critical reason that this foreign owned newspaper became popular in Chinese society. Barbara Mittler, 'Domesticating an alien medium: Incorporating the Western-style newspaper into the Chinese public sphere,' *Joining the Global Public*, pp. 29–30.

³⁰There are two main reasons that *Shenbao* has attracted more attention: first, it was the longest-running Chinese daily newspaper in the modern period; second, it was the largest in terms of sales, and had a good reputation. The complete daily output of *Shenbao* was reprinted in 1987, which has made it more accessible to scholars. A digital version is now also available.

³¹'Xinwenbao gaikuang (新聞報概況) [The general situation of *Xinwenbao*], *Xinwenbaoguan gaikuang (新聞報館概況)* [The general situation of *Xinwenbao* house/or press?] (Shanghai, Xinwenbaoguan, 1931), p.2.

³²Hu Daojing 胡道靜, 'Xinwen baozhi sishinian shi, 1893–1933 (新聞報紙四十年史, 1893–1933) [The Forty Year History of *Xinwenbao*, 1893–1933], *Baoxue zazhi 報學雜誌* [The Journal for Newspapers], Vol.1, Issue 2 1948, pp. 9–11. Shifen 世芬, 'Xinwenbao (新聞報),' *Zhongwai yuekan 中外月刊* [China and the West Monthly], Vol.1, Issue 3, 1936, pp. 82–86.

³³Cai Erkang, 'Chuangxing xinwenbao ji (創興新聞報記) [The Record of the Establishment of *Xinwenbao*?]' This is Cai's drafted memoirs, written on his personal essay practice paper. Shanghai Municipal Archives, Q430-1-173.

their key instructions was that reports should be delivered by the express service provided by private letter *hongs* (信局), which was the established mail system for ordinary people in the late Qing period.³⁴ To make sure *Xinwenbao* would get off to a good start, Cai deliberately choose 17 February 1892, the first day of the Chinese New Year, to launch the first issue, when both *Shenbao* and *Hubao* had a three-day break, and people were hungry for news. To lure readers, *Xinwenbao* was given away free, and delivered to major government buildings, large households of local gentry and merchants, and popular teahouses and restaurants. By the fourth day, when the giveaways ended and it was offered for regular sale, Cai claimed that *Xinwenbao* already had more than a thousand subscribers (though his memoirs are not necessarily supported by the circulation data that still exists).

In addition to the distribution arrangements mentioned above, *Xinwenbao* also worked closely with the private letter *hongs* to ensure dissemination, and it had plans for distribution beyond Shanghai. After Cai left the company, Ferris continued to work with the private letter *hongs*. Ferris had two large batches of newspapers sent to Nanxiang riverside (north west of Shanghai) by 12 midnight, and had them carried by foot paddle boat to Suzhou, arriving by noon. After the consignment arrived in Suzhou, the batches of papers were split into copies for locals and copies for sending on farther up river to other major towns along the Yangtze. This guaranteed early arrival, and a big commercial advantage over *Shenbao*.³⁵ After the First Sino-Japanese War started, although Cai had already left *Xinwenbao*, the model he had set up was kept running.

Shenbao had experience of war reporting from the Sino-French War, and it took the task of providing news of the upcoming war very seriously, seeking not only to secure its status as the most successful commercial daily newspaper at that time, but also to extend its market. *Xinwenbao* on the other hand sought to use this opportunity to expand its market and establish itself as a serious rival. As we shall see, right from the outbreak of hostilities, both titles adopted similar tactics of focusing heavily on any good news from the front, while quietly burying true but unwelcome information about the real progress of the war.

The War for Readership

During the American Civil War (1861–1865), the war between newspapers had been similarly fierce, as there was ‘serious money’ in selling news.³⁶ Wilbur F. Storey, then editor of the *Chicago Times*, ordered his reporter at the front to “Telegraph fully all news you can get, and when there is no news, send rumors”.³⁷ With this sort of attitude, added to the urgency of getting stories to press, news sent through the telegraph was in general not carefully checked for factual accuracy. In addition, editors during the American Civil War were not impartial; on the contrary, this was a war of robust opinions. In China, as the events of 1894 and 1895

³⁴Cai Erkang, *Ibid.* In fact before the establishment of the Chinese Post Office in 1896, both *Shenbao* and *Xinwenbao* worked closely with the private letter *hongs* to deliver their publications outside Shanghai, using water routes on both coasts and inland rivers.

³⁵Hu Daojing, *Ibid.*

³⁶Andrew S. Coopersmith, *Fighting Words: An Illustrated History of Newspaper Accounts of the Civil War* (New York, 2004), p. xvi.

³⁷Philip Knightley, *First Casualty*, p. 23.

unfolded, there was a similar hunger for information, and people were happy to pay for any available news about the war between China and Japan. However, while there were divided views and emotions across America about the rights and wrongs of the American Civil War, there was only one feeling amongst Chinese readers: a desire for a Chinese victory. This emotion had a strong impact on the way both *Shenbao* and *Xinwenbao* reported wartime news. With each requiring a large volume of news to publish daily, the challenge they faced was how to manage readers' expectation while attempting to report accurately on the development of the war.

On 23 September 1894, about two months into the war but less than two months away from celebrations for the Empress Dowager Cixi's 60th birthday, *Shenbao*, published confirmed news of a Chinese victory in sea battles on the Yellow Sea near the mouth of the Yalu River.³⁸ On most occasions since the war started, *Shenbao* had delivered positive news to its readers, and tried to bury painful truth in long texts with punchy and positive headlines. However, this battle was very critical as the Yalu River marked the border between Korea and China. To lose this defensive line would mean the war would be carried onto Chinese soil. China lost the battle, but its people were not told.

In its usual cheerful headline style, this report was entitled 'A Detailed Description of the Battle of Yalu River, a Confirmed Victory over the [Japanese] Dwarves' (Xiangshu Yalujiang shengwo quexin 詳述鴨綠江勝倭確信). The battle occurred on 17 September, and *Shenbao*'s information was based on a telegram from a foreigner in Tianjin. The report provided details on the movements of the two fleets during the battle from 11 am to 5 pm, and it described the tactics used by the Chinese Beiyang fleet commanded by admiral Ding Richang 丁日昌 (1823–1882). The report stated that against strong winds at sea, the Japanese fleets moved faster, though the Chinese sailors were very brave. It gave information about the damage to warships and casualties on both sides, but towards the end it wrote that the warship that carried the Japanese admiral was badly damaged, and that he might have even been killed. *Shenbao* confidently pointed out that this telegram completely contradicted the story from the Japanese side. Indeed, *Shenbao* scoffed at the Japanese version of the battle, and concluded the Japanese fleet was heavily damaged and had no chance of returning to the fight.

Three days later, *Shenbao* continued to publish news about the Battle of Yalu River. Fresh information came from a letter written by a 'friend' of *Shenbao*. This individual had been specifically sent to Tianjin by the newspaper to gather war information. The report, entitled 'Supplementary War News' (Zhanshi yuwen 戰事餘聞), gave a vivid description of the battle, even though Tianjin was a long way from the Yalu River.³⁹

On 18th this month, our navy and the dwarves had a battle on the Yalu River and its outer sea. It lasted from noon till 5 in the evening, and the battle was a forest of guns and a hail of bullets sending flesh and blood flying. By the time the fighting stopped, thick smoke covered the whole ocean. Three dwarfships were smashed and sunk by our navy, and another three were damaged.

³⁸Xiangshu Yalujiang shengwo quexin (詳述鴨綠江勝倭確信) [A detailed Description of the Battle of Yalu River, a Confirmed Victory over the (Japanese) Dwarves], *Shenbao*, 23 September 1894.

³⁹Zhanshi yuwen (戰事餘聞) [Remaining War News], *Shenbao*, 27 September 1894.

Our two ships, the Zhiyuan (致遠) and Jinyuan (靖遠) were also damaged. The number of dead dwarves was countless, though our troops weren't completely unscathed either.

On the same day, *Shenbao* had carried more news to reinforce China's 'victory'. Under the heading 'The Dwarves Avoided Mentioning Their Defeat' (Wonu huibai 倭奴諱敗) *Shenbao* wrote that it was well-known that China had defeated Japan at the Battle of the Yalu River the Yalu River, despite Japanese claims that they had scored a big victory and that no ship of theirs was damaged. The Japanese were like children who were still wet behind their ears, and did not have a sense of shame.⁴⁰

In this period, *Xinwenbao* adopted a more reserved approach. In general, it didn't brag to the same degree, and appeared to want to present more balanced reports to its readers. It told its readers about China's terrible defeat in the Battle of Pyongyang, soon after the Battle of the Yalu River.⁴¹ On the other hand it still reported a Chinese 'victory' at the Battle of the Yalu River. For example, in a report entitled 'Follow-up Correspondence from a Friend in Tianjin of a Confirmed Victory' (Zailu Jin you handi shengwo queyin 再錄津友函遞勝倭確音),⁴² *Xinwenbao* said that although it had been continuing to report on the Yalu River battle over the previous few days, correspondence received from Tianjin had reinforced the correctness of this information. It said when the Chinese navy saw the Japanese ships coming, the eight Chinese ships arranged themselves in the shape of the word 'eight' 八, and the Chinese admiral was on the front ship. Unlike the Chinese arrangement, the Japanese ships formed a straight line, and when each ship passed the Chinese vessels, it fired once.

The Chinese fought back, and soon the Japanese changed their tactics. They formed a circle to surround the Chinese navy, attacking from all directions. The Jiyuan (濟遠) was attacked and damaged in more than two hundred places, with the largest hole being about three inches (三寸). Constantin von Hannecken (a German military consultant fighting with the Chinese navy) bravely waved the military flag and encouraged the Chinese sailors not to give up, but to fight on. After three hours the ocean was covered with smoke. Although the Chinese ships were damaged they were still repairable, unlike some Japanese ones, which were sunk.

So went the *Xinwenbao* report. But what of the 'truth'? Even today, the outcome of the battle is somewhat unclear: currently available sources cannot give firm figures for the losses among the ships engaged. We do know that both Japan and China lost warships and sustained damage to their fleets during the battle, though the contemporary verdict is that China suffered the more serious losses.⁴³ What is really striking though, is the detailed descriptions the two newspapers provided for their readers. Both *Shenbao* and *Xinwenbao* commonly employed a traditional, semi-vernacular writing style, with vivid storylines, but without any punctuation. This style, quite different to that of normal journalistic reporting, made heavy use of extravagant, lush descriptions and slow, highly detailed narratives of the

⁴⁰ 'Wonu huibai (倭奴諱敗) [The Dwarves Avoided Mentioning Their Defeat],' *Shenbao*, 27 September 1894.

⁴¹ 'Xiangshu Pingrang baihao (詳述平壤敗耗)[Detailed Description on the Pyongyang Defeat],' *Xinwenbao*, 28 September 1894.

⁴² 'Zailu Jin you handi shengwo queyin (再錄津友函遞勝倭確音) [Follow-up Correspondence from a Friend in Tianjin of a Confirmed Victory],' *Xinwenbao*, 28 September 1894.

⁴³ S.C.M. Paine. 2005. *The Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895: Perception, Power, and Primacy* (New York, 2005), pp. 179-180.

course of battles, reflected the literary taste of many readers during that time: Mandarin Duck and Butterfly (*yuanyang hudie pai* 鴛鴦蝴蝶派) literature.⁴⁴ Indeed, the reports of battles over those few months since the start of the war can be read, in both newspapers, as a piece of serialised literature.

In this regard, these ‘reports’ on the First Sino-Japanese War share similarities in style with the vivid, highly detailed tales of war in Homer’s *Iliad*, or the structure and style of Luo Guanzhong’s *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義) written during the Ming Dynasty in the form of ‘*zhanghui xiaoshuo*’ (章回小說). The word *zhanghui* means chapter, and while each chapter was a self-contained entity with its own title, cliffhangers were used as literary devices to keep readers engaged.

Alexander Pope’s comment on his translation of Homer’s *Iliad* (1715) is equally applicable to the ‘literature’ we read in newspaper reports of battle scenes of the First Sino-Japanese War. Pope said:

Nothing is so surprising as the descriptions of Homer’s battles, which take up no less than half the *Iliad*, and are supplied with so vast a variety of incidents that no one bears a likeness to another; such different kinds of deaths, that no two heroes are wounded in the same manner; and such a profusion of noble ideas, that every battle rises above the last in greatness, horror and confusion.⁴⁵

What war reporter, writing in 1894 and 1895, would have been able to have such close access to troops on the battle field as to witness how individual soldiers died, each in a unique way, or recall how two heroes came to be wounded in different manners? The reports on the Battle of the Yalu River are really exercises in poetic fiction, a tendency that can also be seen in *Xinwenbao*’s report from May 1895 entitled ‘The Real Account of the Yashan War Affair’ (Yashan zhanshi jishi 牙山戰事紀實):

Deputy Captain Shen Shouchang 沈壽昌 (1865–94) was hit by a bullet directly through his head from the ‘ship of dwarves’. Shen died straight away, but his blood and brains were spattered on the clothes of the soldiers who were next to him.⁴⁶

Just as Pope observed that Homer’s descriptions of heroic deaths were replete with gory details which gave readers a great deal of satisfaction, *Xinwenbao*’s ‘reports’ of battles were equally intended to produce an emotional effect on the reader. Moses Finley, a historian of ancient Greece, emphasises that the kind of epic the *Iliad* represents is not history, but ‘myth’:

It was narrative, detailed and precise, with minute descriptions of fighting and sailing and feasting and burials and sacrifices, all very real and very vivid; it may even contain, buried away, some kernels of historical fact – but it was not history. Like all myth, it was timeless.⁴⁷

⁴⁴Mandarin Duck and Butterfly literature was popular during the late Qing and early Republican period. The themes of this style of literature were broad, but many of them were about romance, legend, and martial arts. They were not seen as serious literature but were intended to be very entertaining and easy to read. See Perry Link, *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies: Popular Fiction in Early Twentieth Century Chinese Cities* (Berkeley, 1981).

⁴⁵Trevor Royle, *War Report*, p. 11.

⁴⁶‘Yashan zhanshi jishi (牙山戰事紀實) [The Real Account of the Yashan War Affair],’ *Xinwenbao*, 21 May 1895.

⁴⁷M. I. Finley, ‘Myth, Memory, and History,’ *History and Theory*, 4:3 (1965), pp. 281–302.

Finley's point about the *Iliad* and the kind of narrative employed not only has strong resonance with the fourteenth century Chinese novels such as *Three Kingdoms* and *Water Margin* 水滸傳, but also the war reports under discussion in this paper. Indeed, the narrative descriptions we read display a literary sensibility of exactly the kind that is found in these classical novels. If we disregard the references to the technology of modern warfare (guns and so forth) there would be little to stop us treating many of the passages they contain as interchangeable.

As the Chinese New Year approached, *Shenbao* and *Xinwenbao* felt even more obliged to bring good news to their readers. Around the end of January 1895, on the eve of Chinese New Year, the war was approaching Weihaiwei 威海衛 and Yantai 烟台, and Japan continued to push its front line forward. The fall of Weihaiwei was potentially more serious than the fall of Port Arthur, because much of the Chinese fleet and many troops were stationed at Weihaiwei.⁴⁸ Moreover, Weihaiwei was close to Shanghai, and to major treaty ports such as Tianjin, Qingdao and Yantai.

On the fourth day of the Chinese New Year, *Shenbao* and *Xinwenbao* ran their first editions of the year. To mark the occasion, *Shenbao* reproduced a large woodblock print (see Figure 1).⁴⁹

At the top left hand corner of the print, a warrior god descends from heaven in a glorious cloud, accompanied by flags and other heavenly beings. In the main body of the picture well-dressed people are emerging joyfully from their tidy, nicely arranged households. Lanterns are neatly hung in the corridors, making a good contrast to the cherry trees blossoming in the garden. Children and adults are placing firecrackers and people are celebrating the New Year with laughter and greetings.

To accompany such a celebratory image on its front page, *Shenbao* brought several pieces of good news about the war to its readers. One of them was entitled 'Military Information from Liao-Shen' (Liaoshen junqing 遼瀋軍情):

Among the noise of firecrackers, the households look much brighter against/supported by cherry blossoms . . . suddenly there was a letter, carried in its feet by a swallow, which was written very neatly, and which brought details of military developments in Fengtian [Shenyang].⁵⁰

The report continued that a 'friend' was specially sent to Yingkou in the Liaodong Peninsula to collect the war-related information dispatched in this letter. It described the terrible conditions the Japanese troops were experiencing during the severe cold weather in northeast China. Their hands and feet suffered from frostbite, and some of them who couldn't stand the pain had even hanged themselves in the forest. Those who survived had been looting, raping, and burning the villages.

Next to this item was another piece of encouraging information about how Japanese forces had secretly tried to land on Longxudao 龍鬚島 (Dragon Whiskers Island), near Yantai. The report provided an exciting story about how the Chinese troops held out until midnight

⁴⁸Vladimir, *The China-Japan War Compiled from Japanese, Chinese, and Foreign Sources*, p. 270.

⁴⁹*Shenbao* 29 January 1895. *Shenbao* stated that the first issue of the New Year would be published on the fourth day of the New Year: see 'Cinian xiaodu 辭年小牘 (A Little Note for New Year Break),' *Shenbao*, 23 January 1895. However, the current *Shenbao* on-line database mistakenly joins the issue of 19 January 1895 (the first issue of 1895 on the fourth day of Guangxu year 21) with the issue of 23 January 1895.

⁵⁰'Liaoshen junqing (遼瀋軍情) [Military Information from Liao-Shen],' *Shenbao*, 29 January 1895.



Figure 1. New Year woodblock, *Shenbao*, 29 January 1895.

to drive off the Japanese invasion attempt. Many Japanese were injured and left. After the Japanese reorganised, they attacked a different location on the island with large warships, and this time they landed successfully. Without sufficient support, Chinese troops were forced to withdraw from Rongcheng County. Residents in the area were upset and confused, until the noise of firecrackers took them by surprise; they soon found out that American troops had arrived to protect local people and businesses. At this point, people from all nations [in Yantai treaty port and the nearby areas] let off more firecrackers to celebrate.⁵¹

That same day, *Xinwenbao* also felt a duty towards its readers to provide cheerful information for the New Year. Even without a fancy woodblock print, *Xinwenbao* managed to provide a substantial article to greet its readers, entitled 'Delighted to Learn Our Troops Won the

⁵¹'Wojian kuibian (倭艦窺邊) [Dwarf Ships Peeped at the Margins of the Territory],' *Shenbao*, 29 January 1895.

Battle of Weihai at the New Year' (Xiwen wojun Weihai yuandan huoshengshi 喜聞我軍威海元旦獲勝事).⁵² In this article, the atmosphere of the Chinese New Year celebration was meshed together with the joy over the 'victory' of the Battle of Weihai. The celebratory style of writing and the tone of excitement adopted were intended to express the happiness of the whole nation. On the one hand the article described how sneaky the Japanese 'dwarves' were, and asserted that this was how they had managed to win some battles in the last few months; on the other hand *Xinwenbao* encouraged its readers by insisting that the Chinese forces had five special tactics at their disposal to deal with the Japanese and wouldn't make the same mistakes as before by falling for Japanese tricks. *Xinwenbao* asserted that the victory of China was just like the light of sun and moon returning to earth once again, and the editor proudly stated that he had carefully chosen the luckiest day of the year to deliver this piece of good news to its readers. The article added that hopefully this good news would bring even more pleasure and good fortune to readers for the rest of the year, and went on to describe in detail the Battle of Weihai which had taken place during the Chinese New Year holiday, describing the good weather during the battle, and the high spirits of the Chinese troops.

It would not be fair to think that either *Shenbao* or *Xinwenbao* made no effort to convey the real military picture over the previous few months: in fact, the main developments were generally featured. Yet on most days, an unwelcome truth would be published amongst many other pieces of false information. This practice allowed readers to choose to read what would please them, rather than what they might need to know or needed to be confronted with. The need to grow circulation during the Sino-Japanese War meant that both *Shenbao* and *Xinwenbao* were caught between patriotic feeling, commercial imperatives, and professional principles. Nevertheless, as the war progressed, both newspapers needed to find ways explain to their readers why more and more Chinese ships were being lost, and why the Japanese were advancing towards and even landing on Chinese territory.

In the Newspapers' Defence

Although both *Shenbao* and *Xinwenbao* sought to maintain and build circulation during the conflict through consistently bringing 'good news' to their readers, often by mythologising their reports, they remained aware of the need to maintain journalistic standards. Both attempted to bolster their reputations for professionalism by commenting on the quality of war news that they and their competitors produced.

During the Sino-French War, when explaining why it had published incorrect information, *Shenbao* had blamed the resources available to it at the time. In an article entitled 'On the Difficulty of Really Knowing Military Information' (Lun junbao buyi zhuozhi 論軍報不易灼知), it justified errors by insisting that it was very hard to get hold of reliable news in wartime because of long distances, the secretive nature of military information, and the consequent preponderance of unsubstantiated rumour. In such a situation, *Shenbao* insisted it had no choice but to utilise all available information presented to it via all sorts

⁵²Xiwen wojun Weihai yuandan huoshengshi (喜聞我軍威海元旦獲勝事) [Delighted to learn our troops won the battle of Weihai at the New Year], *Xinwenbao*, 1 February 1895.

of channels: telegraph, western business contacts, Chinese government, private letters of Chinese businessmen, translations from foreign newspapers in Hong Kong, even information from the French themselves. Even when there was doubt about a piece of information, *Shenbao* would publish whatever information came into its possession. *Shenbao* added that war could develop and change very fast, and that it was difficult to adequately confirm news reported from any source.⁵³ In short, the unpredictable nature of war, long distances, and confusing and unreliable information sources were the reasons why *Shenbao* had provided wrong news to its readers.

Ten years later both *Shenbao* and *Xinwenbao* blamed similar factors for their mistakes in reporting the war with Japan. For example at the end of November 1894, *Xinwenbao* published a long editorial to discuss the great difficulty of getting correct military information during the wartime, and pointed out many reasons why reports from the sources mentioned above might turn out to be false.⁵⁴ *Xinwenbao* particularly blamed western newspapers in China as responsible for spreading false information, sometimes unwittingly, because they had much more access to information disseminated by telegraph. It claimed that, knowing Chinese newspapers relied heavily on information printed in western-language newspapers, the Japanese were using the telegraph to release false information to western news agencies to create confusion.

Indeed, although *Shenbao* and *Xinwenbao* were competing with each other, they also found a common enemy: foreign language commercial newspapers in China, or more precisely the *North China Herald* and *North China Daily News*. *Shenbao* supported *Xinwenbao's* view above, and protested that foreign newspapers should not be used by Japanese to spread false information and rumours. For example, in November 1894, *Shenbao* noted that some Chinese readers had started to get anxious after reading news about Japanese victories in north east China in foreign language newspapers. It reported that some Chinese people were transferring their anger away from the Japanese and towards the foreign language newspapers.⁵⁵

Did foreign-language newspapers really help Japan in spreading false information to confuse the Chinese people? The reality is more complicated than the accusations made by *Shenbao* and *Xinwenbao*. Apart from the combatants, Japan, Korea, and China, the war was closely watched by many other countries. With so many political and commercial interests associated with the leading western powers in East Asia at that time, readers and governments in Britain, France, Russia, Germany and the United States were observing the war closely. In addition, this war was marked by the first engagements of the latest modern

⁵³'Lun junbao buyi zhuozhi (論軍報不易灼知) [On the Difficulty of Really Knowing Military Information],' *Shenbao*, 10 April 1884.

⁵⁴'Lun junbao qushi zhinan (論軍報確實之難) [On the Difficulty in Getting Accurate Military Information],' *Xinwenbao*, 30 November 1894. See also 'Yu ke tan lianri benbao suoyi woren dianxin (與客談連日本報所譯倭人電信) [On the Dwarfs' Telegrams Translated by This Newspaper Continuously for Days]' *Shenbao*, 20 September 1894; *Shenbao* also blamed the Chinese government for keeping information secret, see 'Lun Zhongguo zhihuan zaihu qi (論中國之患在乎欺) [China's Main Problem is its Tendency to Deceive]' *Shenbao*, 10 November 1894.

⁵⁵'Xingjun yi renxin wei shengfu shuo (行軍以人心為勝負說) [People's Hearts Decide Victory or Defeat in Military Action],' *Shenbao*, 27 November 1894.

warships, many of them made in Germany or Britain, which ensured that naval and military experts were paying very close attention.⁵⁶

This complex situation made the position of the foreign language press rather interesting. If we take the *North China Daily News*, the most popular Shanghai English daily at the time, as an example we see that it encountered precisely the same issues of partisanship versus “accuracy” that troubled *Shenbao* and *Xinwenbao*. In her book, *The Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895*, S. C. M. Paine explores how the culture of the *North China Daily News* (NCDN hereafter) determined the way its staff reported wartime news. She also investigates the role this newspaper played in events through its interaction with other players during the war, including foreign business interests in China and across Asia, Chinese language readers, other newspapers, the Chinese government, the Japanese government, and the British government.

Right at the beginning of the military conflict, telegraphic communication in Beijing was interrupted by flooding.⁵⁷ As the war developed, the telegraph cable between China and Korea was damaged, and remained unusable for most of the war, as did the line from China to Japan. The few telegrams that were occasionally able to be sent via these channels took much longer than was customary. Only a very few correspondents were allowed to get to the front lines, with strict controls on what they were allowed to report when they got there.⁵⁸ With both telegraph and travel restricted, information from these correspondents took a long time – sometimes weeks – to arrive at headquarters back in Shanghai, and even then the picture might be either wrong (due to correspondents’ limited access at the front) or out of date.

Just like *Xinwenbao* and *Shenbao*, the NCDN had to amplify this information using irregular sources who had some access to the war zone, including Customs employees, soldiers, and diplomats, whose perception of what was going on was often limited or even wrong. However, there was also some truth to *Xinwenbao* and *Shenbao*’s allegations, because the Japanese government did actually feed newspapers a lot of information, sometimes accurate, sometimes deliberately false, and the NCDN was aware of this. Despite China’s endemic problems, the NCDN long remained loyal to its homeland, and on the whole it tended to prefer sources from the Chinese side.⁵⁹ Reports from various sources about Japan’s victories soon began to arrive in China, the NCDN eventually started to report Japanese victories in battles as soon as they were confirmed. By doing so, it inevitably offended the Chinese public, but at the same time this afforded both *Shenbao* and *Xinwenbao* an opportunity to assert their status as Chinese newspapers for Chinese people, conveniently ignoring the fact that both were the creations of foreign investors.

Unlike the NCDN’s hot-headed attitude toward wartime news, newspapers in Britain could afford to be more objective towards interpretation of events. For example, the London-based *Pall Mall Gazette* marked both Japan and China as “splendid liars”, noting that much

⁵⁶Jukichi Inouye, *Japan-China War*, p.1.

⁵⁷‘Critical situation in Korea,’ *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 23 July 1894.

⁵⁸S. C. M. Paine, *The Sino-Japanese War*, p. 188.

⁵⁹S. C. M. Paine, *The Sino-Japanese War*, pp. 159–195; see also Ji Pingzi, *Cong yapien zhanzheng dao jiawu zhanzheng*, pp. 673–688.

false information was deliberately spread by both parties.⁶⁰ *The Pall Mall Gazette* reflected on the matter of news authenticity in a rather satirical tone:

From the East comes a perfect Babel of rumours. We should really have to suspend all comment upon China and Japan and their quarrel until we have appointed a Royal Commission to inquire into the facts . . . First we hear of a Japanese victory at sea, and then of a repulse of the Japanese forces by land, culminating in a loss of 2,000 men; and now we are assured, officially, that the Chinese have been routed at Asan, and, unofficially, that three of their war vessels have been captured . . . if you cannot win a battle on land or sea, you can win it on paper, and let the West know it. But if the West be wise and wary, these fables will not be swallowed with undue haste.⁶¹

Conclusion

In Japan, images from the war with China were made into woodblock prints and sold cheaply to the public. In these colourful scenes, remarkably tall and dashing Japanese generals and soldiers were portrayed acting professionally in war operations, wearing smart and modern uniforms that made a great contrast to the hapless, defeated Chinese troops in old-fashioned dress.⁶² Comparison with similar woodblock prints made on the Chinese side is instructive. For example a short series entitled *Pictorial of the Destruction of the Japanese Dwarfs* (Jiaowo huabao 剿倭畫報) was sold in Shanghai, and its creators claimed that what was printed was an authentic representation of current news reports.⁶³ These images were less well made in quality, but what is notable is the content: while the Chinese troops still appeared in traditional Qing military dress, they win battles through adopting ancient Chinese military tactics, such as an unexpected midnight attack spearheaded by an armoured herd of bulls.⁶⁴ The Chinese woodblock images reflect strong beliefs and expectations among the Chinese public, and these sentiments are precisely what we see reflected in the competition between *Shenbao* and *Xinwenbao*.

Despite their consistent empathy with their readers and their unreserved nationalism throughout the First Sino-Japanese War, both *Shenbao* and *Xinwenbao* started to report on peace negotiations as soon as Viceroy Li Hongzhang departed for Japan in the spring 1895. At this point, the tenor of editorial comment immediately began to shift. Many articles took

⁶⁰'The Chino-Japanese War,' *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 29 September 1894.

⁶¹'Oh, East is East and West is West,' *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 6 August 6, 1894; see also C. M. Paine, *The Sino-Japanese War*, p. 160.

⁶²Shumpei Okamoto, *Impressions of the Front: Woodcuts of the Sino-Japanese War, 1894–95* (Pennsylvania, 1983); see also 'Throwing Off Asia II: Woodblock Prints of the Sino-Japanese War (1894–95)', MIT Visualising Cultures: http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/throwing_off_asia_02/ (Accessed 22 February 2013).

⁶³*Jiaowo huabao* 剿倭畫報 [*The Pictorial of Destroying the Japanese Dwarfs*], produced by Zhanbisheng zhai 戰必勝齋 [The Studio of Inevitable Victory], Shanghai, 1894 (?). Collection of the British Museum. It is worth pointing out, the most successfully sold Chinese literature associated with this war was *Zhongdong zhanji benmo* 中東戰紀本末 [The Whole Course of the First Sino-Japanese War], jointly compiled by Cai Erkang and Young John Allen (林樂知 1836–1907) and published by the Society for the Diffusion of Christian and General Knowledge Among the Chinese in 1896. As this publication was extremely popular, it was soon printed by other un-authorised and un-known publishers. The American Ambassador at that time, on behalf of the named Society made a formal complaint to the Shanghai local authority, and the latter put a notice in *Shenbao* to prohibit such 'illegal' activity. See 'Gaoshi zhaodeng (告示照登) [Notice],' *Shenbao*, 9 February 1897.

⁶⁴The horns of bulls were tied with both sharp swords and lanterns, and they were set running in front of well-organised Chinese soldiers.

on the task of examining the reasons for China's defeat, and why the Self-Strengthening Movement had failed. They also argued it was the time for China to face reality, and 'strengthen' itself properly once again.⁶⁵ Readers were told about how people in Taiwan were resisting the Japanese. The focus of war reporting shifted, but the patriotic discourse did not die off.

A product of the hybrid nature of the newspaper business in China in the second half of the nineteenth century, when newspapers produced in the Chinese language were still owned by foreign proprietors, the commercialisation of wartime news and its impact on reporting can first be observed in a simple form during the Sino-French War. A decade later, competition for readers through partisan, patriotic presentation of news events reached a far higher level of sophistication in the First Sino-Japanese War, which proved to be a far more dramatic event for China with an even higher demand for information from the reading public. As one foreign resident in China at that time observed:

'If we may liken the effect of the Japan-Chinese War on China to a severe electric shock, we may also speak of the Native Press as a telegraphic system conveying an electric current of new ideas throughout the length and breadth of the land.'⁶⁶

So what was the result of this fierce commercial battle? The facts would appear to support a clear win for the upstart *Xinwenbao*. In 1893, *Xinwenbao's* daily circulation on average was only 300. By 1894, its daily sale had reached 3,000 copies on average, and 12,000 in 1900, all told a 3,000 per cent increase⁶⁷. Circulation data is not available for *Shenbao* during the period but in 1912 it was selling 7,000 copies daily.⁶⁸ Although these figures appear low, it has been suggested that each copy was read by a hundred people in the late 1880s and at least nine people in the early twentieth century. Once one copy was read in one locale, it was often re-sold in the afternoon, or passed on to the village folk, or sent on to family members in other places.⁶⁹ *Xinwenbao's* success was not just the result of its tactics during the Sino-Japanese War, but it certainly used this opportunity well to compete with the other Chinese language daily newspapers, *Shenbao* and *Hubao*. As for the long-established *Shenbao*, competition spurred it to great efforts in reporting the Sino-Japanese War in a bid to hold on to its position as market leader.

Even though *Xinwenbao* and *Shenbao* were controlled respectively by American and British owners at that time, they both adopted an editorial position strongly supporting Chinese nationalism in order to sell their newspapers. Yet just like British and United States newspapers during the Crimean War and the American Civil War, both *Xinwenbao*

⁶⁵'Zonglun zhongwo dashi' (縱論中倭大勢) [A High Level View of the General Situation with China and Japan], *Xinwenbao*, 10 April 1895.

⁶⁶Ernest Box, 'Native Newspapers,' *North China Herald*, 17 October 1898.

⁶⁷Cai Erkang's claim that *Xinwenbao* had more than 1,000 subscriptions soon after launch was noted above. If true, the figure of 300 copies might reflect the figure after the initial excitement of the launch subsided. For *Xinwenbao's* circulation see the figures and table provided by *Xinwenbao* and published in *Xinwenbaguan gaikuang*, *Ibid.* (please refer to footnote 31).

⁶⁸Ma Guangren, *Shanghai dangdai xinwenshi*, p. 549.

⁶⁹'A well to-do-merchant will go a considerable distance to get a reading of a friend's *Hupao* or *Shenpao* [Shenbao], and the friend will sell the paper in the afternoon of the day of its publication to newsmen who sent it into the country.' 'The March of the Mongols,' *North China Herald*, 1 March 1889; See also Weipin Tsai, *Reading Shenbao*, pp. 161–162.

and *Shenbao* were forced to rush into print by commercial imperatives. They were driven not just by patriotism, but also by the profit motive. The use of the telegraph provided faster transmission of information, while a lack of trust over the quality and motives of telegraph sources added a more murky quality to military information. Chinese newspapers had become peers of those in Britain and United States: commercial ventures producing content tailored to suit their readers' tastes and viewpoints.

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