The Historical Origins of the Nationalization of the Newspaper Industry in Modern China: A Case Study of the Shanghai Newspaper Industry, 1937–1953*

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Abstract

This paper explores the reasons behind the relative success of the CCP’s direct control over the news media in the early 1950s. Despite its importance in understanding the rise of despotism during the Mao era, the nationalization of the newspapers has not been fully studied. Building upon the recent studies emphasizing the adaptive nature of the CCP, this study analyzes the ownership transformation of the Shanghai newspapers from the 1930s to the early 1950s by going beyond the 1949 divide. I argue that the CCP’s relative success in

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nationalizing the Shanghai newspaper industry can be attributed to the incremental changes from the Sino-Japanese War to the early 1950s in the context of the war, postwar, and socialist revolution periods. In particular, the weakening of the Shanghai capitalists’ influence over the Shanghai newspapers during the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) was critical in the accelerated expansion of the state power during the war, postwar, and early PRC periods.

1. Introduction

The Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) control over the media in contemporary China remains relatively tight, despite the commercialization of the news media as a part of the media reform undertaken in the context of China’s transition to a market economy in the post-Mao era.¹ Censorship is often at the center of controversies over media control,² but the fundamental reason for the CCP’s effective control over the media can be attributed to the state’s continuing direct control over the media since the early 1950s. The CCP, after coming into power in 1949, managed to nationalize newspapers by late 1952; as a result, privately owned newspapers, which flourished during the Republican era (1911–1949), disappeared in China.³ Since then, the CCP has continued to have unprecedented control over the media. In this sense, the nationalization of the newspaper industry in the early 1950s is an important process in understanding the historical origins of the CCP’s media control in the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

This article explores the reasons behind the relative success of the CCP’s direct control over the news media in the early 1950s by tracing the historical origins of the nationalization of the Shanghai newspaper industry in the pre-1949 period. Despite its importance in understanding the rise of despotism during the Mao era, the nationalization of the newspapers has not been fully studied. A recent study on the issue by Zhang Jishun revealed the adaptive nature of the nationalization process in the broader context of the recent scholarship on the 1950s,⁴ which pays attention to the adaptive nature and the limits of the CCP’s power and revises the general perception of the 1950s as a golden age.⁵ Zhang further explained that the conflicting goals of realizing the “New Democracy (新民主主義 xin minzhu zhuyi)” and establishing an anticapitalist media industry through coercive mass campaigns made the nationalization process complex and conflicted.⁶ Zhang’s work as well as other