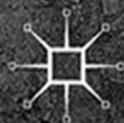


Citizen
Publications
in China Before
the Internet

SHAO JIANG



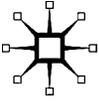
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Shao Jiang

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CITIZEN PUBLICATIONS IN CHINA BEFORE THE INTERNET
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Overview

Citizen Publications in China before the Internet presents the first panoramic study of *minkan* (民刊, citizen publications) in the People's Republic of China from the 1950s until the 1980s. By examining these unofficial magazines as having social, political, and historical functions, the book attempts to recover the thoughts and practices obliterated by state power. This recent history of citizen publications, when scrutinized against the backdrop of a much older history of Chinese print culture and its renaissance, also contributes to the reclamation of a lost past of resistance. It is an exercise in remembering the marginalizations and exclusions of official history. The book makes an effort to reconstruct the narrative of modern Chinese history by analyzing the coming into being of a civil society that is independent of both the state elite and the new apolitical bourgeoisie in mainland China.

Minkan in this text has multiple connotations: as unofficial magazines, as civic expression, and as a way of resistance. The media of *minkan* take up various formats: public squares, posters, walls, book series, and so on. By researching the lifespan of a *minkan*, I attempt to make transparent both the idea and the concrete dynamics of its practice. Drawing on the theories of civil society and the public sphere, this study explores the creative practice of *minkan* as a revival of the concept of 'moveable words' (活字) in the Chinese print tradition.

Preface

It was in the late 1970s as a primary pupil in Hohhot, the capital of Inner Mongolia, that I first had access to unofficial publications. We were bored with the limited selection of the available works of literature and types of entertainment in the official media. These consisted of only eight *geming yanbanxi* (革命样板戏, Revolutionary Beijing Operas) and a few films every year. The *shouchaoben* (手抄本, hand-copied volumes) that attracted teenagers and youngsters in my city seldom covered sensitive political issues. Reflecting back on those hand-copied volumes, I would not have found the stories in them inspiring if I could have had a fuller choice of reading materials. Even so, they were less stereotypical and didactic than the short stories in the official media. In the summer of 1978, I saw mimeographed copies of publications such as the 1976 *Tiananmen Square Selected Poems*, *Zhou Enlai in 1935 Zunyi Conference*, and *Hongdu Nühuang* (a gossip story about Mrs. Mao); most of these had been published by the insider clique that opposed the Gang of Four and Mao's hard line and supported the Chinese Communist Party veterans who had been dismissed from their office.

While attending secondary school in Hohhot, I read big-character posters about "miserable stories" such as the persecution of the Mongols since 1979 and began to have serious doubts about the sources and arguments of the official media. Meanwhile, I had also become aware of the sharp narrative divisions between the unofficial and official media. All this prompted me to ask questions such as who wrote these articles and why, and which versions might be closer to the truth.

While studying at Beijing University from 1985 to 1989, I had more opportunities to read unofficial publications and Chinese overseas magazines published in Hong Kong and in the United States. I received them from the foreign students on the campus or from the professors who had traveled abroad and passed them on to fellow students. I also

pseudonymously contributed a few articles about student movements. When I became a student activist and began to co-organize weekly independent seminars termed the “Grass Lawn Salon,” I came to know the editors and producers of unofficial magazines, who also happened to be some of the most popular speakers.

Due to my involvement in the 1989 Pro-Democracy Movement, I met people from different generations and different areas who were actively involved with the unofficial magazines. I was imprisoned soon after the Beijing Massacre, but after my release in 1991, I regularly contacted them and later got to know new underground publishers when I worked in Guangzhou. Here it was more possible for me to meet publishers from Hong Kong; I regularly received their magazines and circulated them to activists in other cities within China. Meanwhile, I reported on human rights violations and sent some articles written by other participants in underground publications to overseas Chinese magazines. During that period, between 1991 and 1997, I was continually harassed, put under house arrest, or detained, until I escaped from mainland China in March 1997.

When I moved to London in 2003, I began collecting materials pertaining to unofficial magazines, from my networks and from online sources. My study benefited greatly from the encouragement given by those involved with underground magazines, from different generations, both inside and outside China. During this research, I have accumulated numerous debts of generosity from people who have supported me in many ways. I thank the friends who provided the contacts and made the arrangements that allowed me to conduct interviews with the people active in underground magazines. I did not know some of these potential interviewees until I was introduced to them by my friends. I deeply regret that I cannot name those who helped me to communicate, passed on my questions to the participants of underground publications, and sent valuable materials to me. Without such help and communication, it is impossible to complete research of this kind. In addition, I am much obliged to the participants in the unofficial magazines who contributed to the research (please see the appendices for the list of people I interviewed).

I am very grateful to my supervisory team—including Prof. John Keane, Dr. Mark Harrison, Dr. Stefan Szczelkun, Prof. Debra Kelly, and Dr. Gerda Wielander—for their consistent and invaluable instructions. Many thanks go also to the late Prof. Fang Lizhi for recommending this PhD research to me. I would like to thank the organizers of the Chinese Democracy and Civil Society Conference for the Chinese

Diaspora Communities for inviting me to many inspiring discussions and conferences; this helped me to better define my chosen topic and stimulated me to do further research. Deep thanks to my parents in China, for their steadfastness and perseverance in the face of illness. I am also grateful to my wife, Xiaohong, for being the first reader of every section, for her invaluable suggestions, and for her love and support throughout the years.

Finally, I remain indebted to the innumerable people who have contributed to the resistance in China and Tibet: their passion, drive, dedication, and persistence encourage my work and give me the strength to continue.

CHAPTER 1

Minkan as a Way of Resistance

Wildfire never quite consumes grass,
They are tall once more in the spring wind.

—Bai Juyi¹

General Introduction

Under Communist rule in mainland China, there has been a reemergence of independent societies or resistance, in spite of institutional repression. The unofficial magazines provide a narrative of how the civil society began from the underground publications and expanded into other forms of resistance (such as underground labor trade unions and family churches) and other activities defending human rights (such as petitions, protests, and strikes).

The term *minkan* in this book has multiple connotations. First of all, it can simply be understood as “citizen magazines” or “unofficial magazines”. Literally, *minkan* consists of two Chinese characters: *min* (民, people, citizens) and *kan* (刊, magazine, publication, print). It refers to those print publications with autonomous organizational and editorial policies, whose production and distribution are independent of any authorities. *Minkan* participants and readers make a cash donation toward the cost of publication in almost all cases. Under the Communist regime, *minkan* endeavored not only to make available to the public sensitive news otherwise controlled by the party, but also to give alternative comments and independent criticism. *Minkan* in my research refers to those publications that existed outside of the party-state institutions. The specificities of *minkan* are clearly different from that of the official publications.

The term *minkan* first appeared in the 1910s to describe nonstate publications.² *Minkan* not controlled by the ruling party and state had

not existed from 1949 to 1956, until several independent student magazines reappeared in 1957. *Minkan* were a popular phenomenon, later used during the Democracy Wall period from 1978 to 1981 and afterward. This book researches the unofficial or citizen magazines since 1949, but it will also pay some attention to the historical emergence of the magazine genre and unofficial publications before 1949 in Chinese print history.

Minkan could be a “social barometer of political and social interaction.”³ In addition, it has a rather hybrid format as a genre. I have identified the following common characteristics of *minkan*:

1. An “open text,”⁴ that is, a collection of miscellaneous texts or images that encourage the reader not only to understand but also to “overstand” what is written (this “overstanding” means that readers can interpret more and explore further than the content of the text itself, especially under strict censorship)⁵
2. Aiming to influence public views
3. Attempting to publish at regular intervals until being shut down⁶
4. Commenting on events rather than simply reporting
5. Reproduction in multiple copies
6. A mode of organization under conditions of restricted freedom of association
7. A publication within the relatively closed network of a student or a prodemocracy movement

Based on these descriptions, the term *minkan* can be expanded to incorporate various formats of civic expression in the Chinese context, for instance, the format of the *minkan* for my research period sometimes manifests itself in the form of a wall fully pasted with big-character posters (wall posters). From 1949 to 1989, many *minkan* republished parts of their content as big-character posters, and so *minkan* became the source of wall posters to an extent. Equally, the articles in the *minkan* are regarded as building a continuous brick or stone construction in the space of public expression. Some magazines are directly named *The Democracy Wall* or *Democracy Brick* or are an actual *Anthology of Big Character Posters*.⁷ Striking articles and sensitive news first appeared in *minkan* and were then turned into big-character posters.

In its broadest sense, *minkan* can be understood as a method of civil resistance. In the totalitarian Chinese system, public space has been effectively destroyed or turned into an official propaganda space by