

# On the social role of newspaper practitioners in the period of the Republic of China

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**Abstract :** *In the field of social development, free journalists in the Republic of China have three social roles: journalists, liberals and nationalists. The "literati on politics" of the free newspaper is based on the professional concept of journalism, the pursuit of liberal values, and the purpose of enriching the country and strengthening the country, reflecting the blending of the three roles. But the pursuit of "public opinion to save the country". Therefore, there are deep contradictions and conflicts among the three roles. They can not get rid of the basic problems perplexing modern intellectuals, nor can they really implement the concept of professional newspapers and periodicals. Moreover, the social reality of the Republic of China essentially restricts the realization of these roles and makes their ideal role pursuit disillusioned.*

**Key words:** *The Republic of China; Free newspaper; social role*

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## I. Introduction

A free journalist is a journalist who can observe and witness social development with independent status and thought, taking the liberal journalism theory as the professional criterion. In modern China, the real free newspaper appeared in the early years of the Republic of China. Although they had no unified organization and program, their common beliefs and pursuit echoed each other and formed an influential group of free newspaper. The free newspaper group of the Republic of China is a new professional group in modern times. It has distinctive characteristics in the complex newspaper team of the Republic of China and has played an important and unique role in the development of modern society. The complex transformation of modern society resulted in a variety of roles of free journalists. They tried their best to play and realize these roles, which left a strong mark in the social development of the Republic of China. However, there are not only blending and interaction between roles and between roles and reality, but also opposition and conflict, which makes the free newspaper fall into deep contradictions and confusion, and finally become a passer-by in history.

## II. The social role of free newspaper

### 2.1 Non party and non private professional newspaper

In the field of social development, free journalists in the Republic of China have three social roles: journalists, liberals and nationalists. "Literati theory" of free newspaper "Politics" is based on the professional concept of journalism, appeals to the value of liberalism, and aims to enrich and strengthen the country, reflecting the blending of the three roles. But the pursuit of "public opinion to save the country". Therefore, there are deep contradictions and conflicts among the three roles. They can not get rid of the basic problems perplexing modern intellectuals, nor can they really implement professional newspapers and periodicals. And the social reality of the Republic of China essentially restricts the realization of these roles, making their ideal role pursuit disillusioned.

### 2.2 Democratic and reformed Liberals

The basic principle of liberalism, "freedom of speech and publication", constitutes the theoretical cornerstone of journalistic professionalism. Only when the newspaper has the professional character of publicity and independence required by liberalism, can it ensure that the newspaper really has publicity and independence and become a "social public instrument" to truly convey public opinion. Therefore, the free newspaper must first be a liberal. It was under the influence of western liberalism that the liberal journalists of the Republic of China accepted the thought of journalistic professionalism. In the Republic of China society in transition to a modern society, as a liberal, in addition to transcending the party and independent professional demands, the free newspaper also has its own clear liberal political and cultural demands, and always tries to lead the dark and decadent real politics to the road of constitutional democracy and free tolerance.

### **III. "Literati on politics" -- the blending of roles**

"Literati on politics" is a consistent tradition of Chinese literati. In the 1870s, Wang Tao and other modern newspaper pioneers spoke freely about current politics and participated in state affairs by running newspapers, forming a modern "literati on politics". In modern times, the "literati on politics" essentially means that journalists engage in current affairs comments by reporting news, and take the newspaper as a tool to enlighten people's thoughts and a sharp tool to achieve political goals. It is the embodiment of the tradition of intellectuals' political participation in the special historical environment in modern times. The free press of the Republic of China inherited the tradition of "literati on politics" and gave new connotation, realizing the blending and interaction of three social roles.

The "literati on politics" of the free newspaper in the Republic of China is based on the professional concept. Although they all aspire to "serve the country by speech", free journalists in the Republic of China have formed a systematic concept of professional journalism, which is different from the previous generation of journalists. The free press in the Republic of China generally recognized the status of the newspaper as the organ of social public opinion, and no longer regarded the newspaper as an extension of political means. Different from the "literati's politics" in the late Qing Dynasty, which emphasized speech and despised news, and was in danger of becoming a tool for party debate, the free journalists of the Republic of China attached great importance to news while paying attention to speech, and believed that "the life of newspapers lies first in news" [7]. Even in the field of newspaper speech, what the people of the freedom newspaper of the Republic of China advocated was the diversity of opinions presented in the newspaper, and they had their own professional criterion, that is, putting the social and public interests first, which was in sharp contrast to the one-sided opinions of political newspapers in the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China and taking the interests of political parties as the starting point.

The "literati on politics" of the free newspaper in the Republic of China takes liberalism as its appeal. While giving the "literati on politics" professional standards, he spared no effort to publicize his liberal ideas in order to make the greatest speech responsibility for social development. The ideal newspaper of the free newspaper in the Republic of China should not only report the news more comprehensively and objectively and reflect the social reality, but also be rich in the spirit of being responsible for the country and society, actively express their own opinions and views and lead the national public opinion. During the war of liberation, the space of liberalism became narrower and narrower, and the free newspaper developed the "literati on politics" to the extreme, waved the flag and shouted for liberalism, and became the backbone of the "Third Road".

The "literati on politics" of the free newspaper in the Republic of China is supported by nationalism. The purpose of "literati on politics" of the free newspaper in the Republic of China is to promote national independence and national prosperity. Shao Piaoping affirmed the purpose of running the newspaper in the publication of the Beijing News: "the government must obey the orders of the legitimate public opinion" and "we must start with political education and build an unshakable foundation". The free press of the Republic of China insisted on "literati discussing politics", and even did not hesitate to go to jail and sacrifice their lives, which is fundamentally due to their patriotism and their ambition to become a rich and powerful country.

The standardization of professional ideas enables free journalists to follow the internal laws of the news industry itself, and promotes the development of private newspapers. Free journalists have a solid platform to realize their pursuit, and their social value is displayed through the newspapers they rely on. The free and democratic political system is not only regarded by free journalists as the institutional guarantee to realize the professionalization of journalism, but also the magic weapon to realize the ambition of rich and powerful countries. The appeal of liberalism not only maintained the professionalism of the free newspaper, but also supported and expanded the public space of the Republic of China and expanded the public opinion power of the free newspaper. In the special environment of the Republic of China, the criticism of current politics and the attack on autocracy take great risks, even at the expense of life. The belief of nationalism provides the most powerful spiritual pillar and is the driving force for the free newspaper to adhere to professional pursuit and freedom in the dangerous social environment. The integration and mutual promotion of the three social roles have improved the public opinion influence and social status of the free newspaper, achieved the wonderful social existence of the free newspaper, and also made the "literati on politics" a unique landscape in the history of the development of journalism.

### **IV. "Saving the country by public opinion" -- the conflict between roles**

The free press of the Republic of China has been trying to compromise a newspaper road in line with Chinese conditions in the traditional political newspaper responsibility of "serving the country with articles" and the western professional ideal of "independence". However, in the rapidly changing political hurricane and the disaster prone national destiny, the pressure and constraints of the environment, their own limitations and confusion always make the free newspaper people make a difficult and painful choice between ideal and reality, which is destined to have a deep spear shield and conflict between these roles.

This conflict is first manifested in the contradiction between liberalism and nationalism, that is, the conflict between the roles of "liberals", "journalists" and "nationalists". Facing the national crisis, darkness and backwardness of modern China, no responsible intellectual can give up the pursuit of national independence and social progress. Chinese liberals have insisted from the beginning that if individual value and freedom are not the way of national prosperity, or are not subject to the prosperity of the nation and the country, it will lack the basic premise of significance and value. Therefore, Chinese liberals have inevitably been in the tension between instrumental rationality and value rationality since their birth. The professional role of the free newspaper in the Republic of China has increased the complexity and profundity of this contradiction. At the beginning of running the newspaper, free journalists have closely linked the freedom of press and expression with the goals of "independence" and "prosperity and strength" of the country. Although they have always tried to truly implement the concept of professional journalism, when they must face the reality and the future destiny of the country, Their practice of newspaper professionalism is deeply trapped in the confusion and conflict between value rationality and instrumental rationality.

Huang Yuansheng was the first batch of practitioners of professional journalism thought. While deeply exposing the corruption of Yuan Shikai's autocracy, he also had great illusions about Yuan Shikai, offered advice for Yuan Shikai, and even suggested that the law should be used to interfere with the "rebel" newspapers. During the Anti Japanese War, Zhang Jiluan consciously safeguarded the "state centered theory" and Chiang Kai Shek's authority, and even changed his understanding of the nature of newspapers. "Today's newspapers should no longer be private speech organs with liberal color, but public propaganda organs strictly controlled by the government". Do they have no basic ability to recognize the essence of autocratic rule? Huang Yuansheng deeply analyzed the reality of China after the revolution of 1911, and believed that after the revolution, "the general old cannibals were not used, but the general new cannibals were exchanged", "the erosion of bureaucrats was the same, and the local poison was the same". However, he also believed that "every revolution often takes a hundred years off, or hundreds of years off", worried that "if it can't even rest, it will resume the revolution". At that time, no one in China could clean up the mess except Yuan Shikai. The reason why they placed their country's future on autocratic strongmen such as Yuan Shikai and Chiang Kai Shek, that is, when autocracy and democracy When there is a serious confrontation between authority and freedom and they need to make a choice, they actually let democracy and freedom succumb to autocracy and authority, because in their view, the autocracy of Yuan Shikai and Chiang Kai Shek may be beneficial to the development of the country and the prosperity of the country and the strength of the people.

The role conflict of free newspaper also shows the contradiction between political demands and professional ideas, that is, the conflict between the roles of "nationalist", "liberal" and "journalist". The most prominent feature of journalistic professionalism is to establish the belief of news objectivity and strive to report news facts objectively and accurately from an independent position. However, the characteristics of the times formed by the intersection of special national conditions and historical traditions make it impossible for the free newspaper people of the Republic of China to be a detached bystander. Under the perspective of nationalism, running newspapers is given a mission to save the national crisis. The strong political demands in the news practice of free journalists in the Republic of China were far away from the professional concept of liberal journalism, which led to their deviation from the role of professional journalists. This deviation is highlighted in the heavy responsibility they now give newspapers. Words such as "promoting society" and "enlightening the people" can be found in the publications of almost all newspapers founded and operated by free journalists. Their newspaper activities first focus on the ideological enlightenment of spreading new ideas and new culture and the supervision of public opinion to criticize the current disadvantages and freely discuss government affairs. As the most basic function of journalism, the function of reporting news and transmitting information is the last. This deviation is also reflected in the increasing centralization of political speech in professional newspapers and periodicals. In the middle and late 1940s, the contradiction between liberalism and totalitarianism rose rapidly, and the free newspaper showed the orientation of political liberalism. Wang Yunsheng openly displayed the banner of political liberalism in *Ta Kung Pao*. Cheng Shei clearly supported the "Third Road" in the world daily. Chen Mingde and Deng Jixing even joined the pseudo "National Assembly" and the Legislative Yuan in an attempt to influence and transform the national government from the inside. The free journalists in this period have become political figures to a great extent. Observation, a pure political commentary magazine founded by Chu Anping, was brilliant at the last moment. It was not only the masterpiece of liberalism in China, but also a complete deviation from the liberal concept of professional journalism. This collective deviation is the brand of the times on the free newspaper group of the Republic of China in the transitional society of modern China.

## **V. The contradiction between ideal role and reality**

There are deep contradictions and conflicts among the three roles of non independent free journalists, and there is an irreconcilable gap between these three roles and social reality, which determines that the pursuit

of ideal roles by free journalists in the Republic of China can only be an impossible fantasy.

The first is the contradiction between the pursuit of "press freedom" of free journalists and news control. "Social public instrument" is the common understanding of the free newspaper people of the Republic of China on the function of newspapers, and "freedom of the press and independence of speech" is the most basic guarantee to realize this function. "Freedom of speech is the skin of the press. If this problem cannot be solved, there will be no opportunity for the development of newspapers!" [14] (p359) however, this most basic goal and requirement can not be achieved in the Republic of China society called "democracy, but in fact autocracy". Under the guise of "law", Yuan Shikai ruthlessly and bloody suppressed and suppressed all newspapers and periodicals criticizing the perverse actions of the Beiyang government. The press control during Chiang Kai Shek's rule was more confusing. On the one hand, it made a hypocritical attitude of liberalism and formally preserved the most basic conditions for the existence of freedom of speech; On the other hand, it has gradually established a news control system with "control" as the core, which actually stifles the space for free journalists to pursue their professional ideals. The pursuit of "economic independence" of free journalists also had sharp contradictions with the fragile economic foundation and abnormal market order in the period of the Republic of China.

The efforts and achievements of the free press in the Republic of China on this point are much higher than their predecessors. However, this independence is still fragile and in danger of collapse at any time. First of all, the underdevelopment of social economy makes the development of private newspapers lack a solid foundation. During the period of the Republic of China, although the capitalist economy had a great development, the foundation was still very weak. The basic newspaper equipment and raw materials such as machinery and paper could not be produced by themselves and needed to rely on foreign imports. Based on this overall weak social and economic foundation, naturally, a developed newspaper economy cannot be formed. Secondly, the imperfect market economic system seriously puzzles the operation and development of the newspaper industry. In addition to the 1930s when the economic order was relatively stable, the prices of raw materials such as foreign exchange and paper changed frequently, threatening the stable development of the newspaper industry. The unfair competition between government-run newspapers and popular commercial newspapers also makes free journalists tired of coping, and they have to adopt some unscrupulous short-term business methods.

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