

Analysis of Song Dynasty Tabloids from the Perspective of Media Studies

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Abstract: In the study of Chinese journalism history, Song Dynasty tabloids have always held an important position. Beyond conventional research perspectives, this paper departs from the media principles of French scholar Régis Debray, focusing on the specific media presentation of tabloids and their censorship logic.

Keywords: Song Dynasty tabloids, media studies, technology, political power

1. Introduction

The term “Mediology” first appeared in the work “Le Pouvoir intellectuel en France” by French scholar Régis Debray in 1979. According to his series of interpretations, media is “a set of means of symbolic transmission and circulation under specific technological and social conditions.” [1] The subsequent study of Mediology aims to examine the social function and historical role of media as cultural practices: “We must know: how is it transmitted, disseminated, circulated, spread, and propagated? On what carriers? What changes and reformations occur in transmitters and receivers? Through what medium? What routes, networks, connections, convergences, exits, etc.?” [2] In short, the purpose of Mediology is to examine the relationship between the high social functions (religious, political, ideological, and attitudinal) and technological structures in information transmission and to contemplate how media carry information. [3]

It can be seen that, unlike the micro-effects and utilitarian logic of traditional administrative communication studies, Debray points out that Mediology is more concerned with how people’s application of media forms a social atmosphere, operational mechanism, ideological infiltration, as well as the historical logic of contention, conflict, and recurrence. [4] Professor Chen Weixing summarizes it as follows: The focus of Mediology is to discover the interactive structure between technology and culture, examining how a social structure and (trans-social) social relationships interact with the technological structure of information transmission in a general sense. With the gradual role of media and technological tools in recording the mutual influence of events and people, they gradually play an important role as collective memory and social archives, guaranteeing the material carriers and symbolic means of each era’s social existence.

The object of analysis in this paper is the Song Dynasty tabloids, which hold significant importance in the history of Chinese journalism. Building upon the existing rich research foundation, this paper attempts to re-examine the time of the Song Dynasty tabloids through the lens of Mediology, analyzing the cultural transmission within the Song Dynasty society and beyond in a broader manner. It especially emphasizes the role played by human organization and technological innovation in ensuring the cultural transmission capacity, thereby interpreting and elucidating the historical, social, and cultural effects generated by tabloids.

2. The Specific Presentation of Tabloids as Media

Debray criticized the conceptual confusion in Marshall McLuhan’s “The Medium is the Message,” which conflated the concepts of medium, channel, code, and support, asserting that there is no information without media. He pointed out that media actually represent many different facts, which are not contradictory to each other but often overlap without confusion.

Suppose we are visiting a corner of a museum where a Song Dynasty “tabloid” artifact distributed on small sheets of paper is displayed in a showcase. From Debray’s perspective, this tabloid is referred to as “information.” Then, through which overlapping intermediate media does intangible things become tangible, transferable, and finally touchable entities in people’s hands?

Firstly, there is the “textual form” of vertical Chinese characters. Chinese characters are based on pictograms and mainly composed of phonograms, forming an ideographic writing system. Throughout history, only Chinese culture has remained uninterrupted, and only Chinese characters have continuously evolved from ancient times. The writing of characters is a powerful logical machine, at least for that time, which had a significant impact on the entire literati group, including their possessions, behaviors, abilities, and perhaps various dreams about their future careers.

Secondly, there is Mandarin Chinese as one of the natural languages. As Debray said, “The attributes of a language are natural to us, but not necessarily to the language itself: they are the result of political and even military struggles (a language can be considered a dialect that has undergone cannon baptism [5]).” Similarly, for a newspaper, whether it’s a tabloid in Chinese, the first daily newspaper in England, “The Daily News,” in English, or “Le Monde” in French, the expression of the same thing will not be the same in each language; each language has its inherent mechanisms.

Then, tabloids were printed or handwritten by the operators using woodblock printing or manual copying, and then distributed for readers to peruse. During the circulation of tabloids, both handwritten and printed forms coexisted. Historical records document both handwritten aspects such as “immediate transcription” and “with small sheets of paper, distributing newspapers far and wide,” as well as printed aspects like “distribution in the streets, publication by bookstores, dissemination far and wide,” and records of authorities apprehending “those who make and sell seditious woodcuts.”⁶ Correspondingly, the circulation of tabloids that could meet their needs increased. With the rapid development of the printing industry, it became inevitable for some tabloids to be duplicated through printing methods. However, due to certain economic conditions, the printing industry at that time had not yet reached the level of popularization in society. Moreover, as tabloids were constantly operating illegally, only a part of the “bookstore families” who had access to printing methods could clandestinely duplicate them. This led to a situation where both handwritten and printed tabloids coexisted for a time. Whether it’s handwritten or printed, it cannot be separated from the development of papermaking: originating from the Han Dynasty, papermaking underwent changes during the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, and by the time of the Tang Dynasty, the quality of paper had significantly improved.

In addition to papermaking technology, one cannot overlook China’s great invention: woodblock printing, as the precursor to movable type printing, occupies a unique and important position in the history of printing in China. The prevailing academic consensus is that woodblock printing emerged no later than the Tang Dynasty and flourished during the Song and Yuan Dynasties. The carving knives used for engraving had a profound impact on the form of Chinese characters, resulting in a typeface that was bold and easy to read, known today as Song typeface. The birth of Song typeface was driven by the needs of printing. During the prosperous Song Dynasty of woodblock printing, most engraving plates were made of wood. Based on the grain of the wood, the engraving was generally done horizontally, aligning the horizontal lines of the characters with the wood grain, making them sturdy. However, the vertical lines of the characters intersected with the wood grain, making them prone to breakage. Therefore, the vertical lines of the characters were thicker, while the horizontal lines were thinner. Even though the horizontal lines were relatively sturdy, they were prone to wear at the endpoints, resulting in thicker endpoints. The material of the carrier determines the style of presentation. What’s more interesting is that the font we still use today on computers is “Song typeface,” demonstrating the continuity of culture formed by the similarity in the technical performance of media carriers across different times and spaces. This small “medium” also dictates certain content.

Tabloid operators engage in a series of investigative reporting actions, which are almost identical to the entire news production and distribution process we talk about today. This is closely related to the basic situation and characteristics of tabloids.

(1) Content: The content of the tabloid mainly consists of political information regarding the appointment, promotion, dismissal of officials, imperial decrees and edicts, as well as official memorials and reports on current political affairs. However, unlike government gazettes, most of the information published in tabloids consists of “court affairs” that the government has not made public (whether permitted or not). The sources of information are often the same as those from the Court of Imperial Entreaty but are often contrary to “official documents.” For example, during the invasion of the Northern Jin Dynasty into the Song Dynasty, because the compromising surrender faction was dominant in the court, there was no mention of the resistance of some officials and civilians in the north in the official documents. However, tabloids extensively reported on it, indicating significant news value. But because it ran counter to the intentions of the authorities, it was considered “baseless rumors,” “misleading,” and harmful to “national dignity and public opinion.” There are many historical records of prohibitions on tabloids in various dynasties in the “Collected Statutes of the Song Dynasty, Criminal Law II.” Furthermore, the sources of information for tabloids could also be “gathered from hearsay in the market,” not limited to within the palace walls. Rumors and hearsay were also included in their interviews, indicating the broad scope. However, precisely because of this, coupled with the fact that publishers did not strictly verify or cross-check, the news in tabloids could be true or false, making it difficult to be completely accurate. The lack of rationalism at that time may be linked to today’s journalistic ethics.

(2) Editing: The operators of tabloids were officials from the Court of Imperial Entreaty, envoys (referring to officials temporarily stationed in the capital from various military and prefectural administrations to receive and dispatch written documents), lower-ranking officials working in provincial government offices, as well as “bookstore families” and individuals whom the authorities accused of being “undesirable elements” or “villains” who “make a living by investigating and reporting such matters.” This indicates that some tabloid operators had become professionalized. Firstly, collusion between officials from the Court of Imperial Entreaty and those who made a living by operating tabloids allowed the latter to control the dissemination conditions through the application of postal services, thus being able to utilize the transmission organizational system of the Court of Imperial Entreaty to spread information quickly to various places. Secondly, to obtain timely political dynamics from the court, tabloid operators organized a team of reporters and even used special means to insert insiders into the court. Such an intermediary—human organization—possessed both economic and social aspects.

(3) Distribution and Dissemination: Tabloids have a broad distribution and dissemination range, with readership including officials from provincial temples, monasteries, and government offices, as well as local officials and literati scattered throughout various routes, counties, and prefectures. Moreover, tabloids spread rapidly without the repeated scrutiny of government gazettes such as “waiting for approval for months or even years,” allowing for relatively free editing and printing. Therefore, they had strong timeliness in information dissemination, and could even achieve “before the imperial decree is withdrawn, it has already been disseminated.” Tabloids concentrated a great deal of political enthusiasm.

The unique combination of various media is concealed in what is called a “spiritually authorized object” — the tabloid (“authorized” may sound somewhat ironic, considering tabloids have always been operated illegally). For this newspaper, some

owners possess one end of its materiality (i.e., organizational materials: paper, printing, format), while others possess one end of its sociality (i.e., material organization: language, concepts, publishers). Through these different forms of media, all the information carried by this tabloid is able to communicate between the minds of certain literati and officials in the Song Dynasty, and it is also able to be transmitted between the people of the Song Dynasty and us today — serving as both exhibition artifacts and a part of cultural accumulation.

3. Cat and Mouse Game

Regarding the “struggle, conflict, and repetition,” in Debray’s extensive historical review of book and newspaper censorship in modern French history since the printing era, it receives perfect confirmation. Starting from the principles of mediaology, he believes that the degree of control over information channels is directly proportional to the influence of those channels. He argues that with the evolution of the logic of the information industry from technical control to market control, the “economic logic of production shatters the political logic of inspection. This is an eternal truth.” Furthermore, history after the French Revolution proves that there is always a logic of mutual pursuit between media information production and administrative power regulation.

Whether it is “power paying homage to authority” or the cat-and-mouse game of “media crossing through the net,” we can find numerous historical records throughout world history. Now let’s continue to focus on the Song Dynasty. As mentioned earlier, the tabloid, as the earliest privately operated newspaper in Chinese journalism history, marked the end of the monopoly of official gazettes and also represented the true prototype of ancient Chinese newspapers. While its dissemination scope was vast, tabloids have always operated illegally.

Debray reminds us that no political power values coincidences; they all harbor an eternal fantasy. In order to preserve this “eternity,” when faced with the sudden emergence of a medium (which typically represents discourse full of threats and surprises), the first thing the will of power does is to try to control and regulate the channel and signal, and the best way is to eliminate it in its infancy, bringing the unexpected back into norms. [6] As expressed by the Song Dynasty scholar Zhou Linzhi in his essay “On Prohibiting Tabloids”: “When Your Majesty issues decrees and commands with swift and resolute actions, there are always rumors spread by petty people that confuse and mislead the public. Like the previous rumors about the reappointment of old officials, spreading false information everywhere, nobody knows where it originated. Upon investigation, these are all rumors spread by tabloids. Tabloids, emanating from the Court of Imperial Entreaty, are propagated by those clerks. When there are doubts about certain affairs in recent years, unknown both internally and externally, these clerks would eagerly disseminate them far and wide, calling them tabloids. When someone is dismissed or transferred today, often falsehoods are presented as truths, and non-events are portrayed as real. But when courtiers hear about it, they say, ‘There’s already a tabloid!’ When officials in the provinces and prefectures hear about it, they say, ‘The tabloid has arrived!’ But when verified later, these rumors may or may not be true. If they are true, then the matter is no longer confidential; if they are not true, then how can trust be established? Although seemingly insignificant, this can be detrimental to governance and must not be overlooked. Your humble servant desires that Your Majesty issue strict orders to the relevant authorities, strictly establish penalties and rewards, and enforce prohibition with severity.” [7] The Emperor approved it. Both domestically and internationally, political authoritarianism is always entangled with the exponential growth of knowledge.

Let’s first take a look at the tactics of political power.

As an integral part of newspaper management, the punitive mechanism can intuitively reflect the degree of control by the ruling class over news dissemination. [8] Generally speaking, the Song Dynasty advocated the rule of law, and under the active promotion of the highest authority, it became an exemplar of “governing the country according to law” in ancient China. Therefore, the basic principle of the newspaper’s punitive mechanism is based on statutory offenses, and related punitive judgments “must all be supported by references to laws, decrees, regulations, and official forms.” Specifically, the punitive system can be roughly divided into two categories: administrative penalties and criminal penalties.

(1) Administrative penalties: Power has its system, and the monarch relies on officials to govern the country. As the national information dissemination institution, the Court of Imperial Entreaty naturally became a key regulatory area, and the officials of the Court of Imperial Entreaty were both conveyors of various official information and editors of gazettes. Much of the internal information unfavorable to the rulers was leaked by them intentionally or unintentionally. Rulers tailored various administrative penalties for these individuals, such as “direct punishment,” “corporal punishment,” and “cancellation of promotion qualifications.” In addition to targeting the officials of the Court of Imperial Entreaty, there was also a category of officials—the supervisors responsible for overseeing the daily work of the officials of the Court of Imperial Entreaty—within its scope.

(2) Criminal penalties: Among the “five punishments” of flogging, beating, exile, penal servitude, and death in the Song Dynasty, the latter four were mainly applicable to newspaper penalties. For example, as recorded in Song Xie Shenfu’s “Qingyuan Lawsuit Class”: “Those who listen to, investigate, or transmit leaks of confidential state affairs, if dismissed from office, shall be exiled 2,500 li, and the main escorting official shall be demoted by one rank and exiled for 1,000 li. Those who do not cause serious harm shall be sentenced to penal servitude for three years, without consideration of their status.” Another example is from the 31st year of Emperor Gaozong’s reign during the Shaoxing era, in order to strengthen confidentiality and prevent officials from leaking information for tabloids, Huang Zushun, a censor, proposed in the rectification of the Communication Department: “Those who enter the department without cause shall be exiled 3,000 li. Those who leak serious confidential information shall be sentenced to death.” The Emperor approved this proposal.

In addition to the two main punishments mentioned above, the government, during trials, either applied similar legal provisions to convict offenders or made timely adjustments. For areas not covered or not sufficiently detailed in the existing laws, the authorities would issue supplementary decrees and modifications as needed. When a sufficient number of scattered decrees accumulated, they would be compiled and revised into a formal legal code by specialized legislative bodies.

The government also limited the development of newspapers by punishing their readers. It was stipulated that officials would take action against readers of newspapers, with orders for constant vigilance issued by the prefectural government in Lin'an and reports made to the Imperial Censorate. Officials could not bear the consequences of circulating newspapers, which led to a certain degree of impact on the newspaper market. This perhaps echoes what Debray said, that censorship is sometimes indirect—primarily focusing on the means of circulation. After careful consideration, the authorities were more concerned about controlling the movement of others' thoughts through circulation, rather than constantly monitoring officials who might leak information.

However, the government's use of severe punishment and harsh laws to control newspapers did not yield ideal results. Not only did irregularities frequently occur among the officials of the Palace Memorial Archiving Institute, but the newspaper market also continued to thrive. The reasons for this include the following: drawing lessons from history, Song Dynasty rulers, in order to prevent the military from gaining power, adhered to the governance policy of "promoting culture and education while restraining military affairs," favoring intellectuals, and vigorously promoting cultural education, thereby cultivating a large group of literati and scholar-officials. At the same time, with the rapid development of the commodity economy and the acceleration of urbanization, the size of the urban population continued to grow. Both of these factors contributed to a strong demand for news information. Additionally, the Song Dynasty rule was not entirely stable, with internal factional struggles and peasant uprisings, as well as long-term confrontations with the Liao, Jin, and Western Xia dynasties. The tumultuous social environment not only generated a large amount of news information but also further stimulated people's desire for news. In such circumstances, the stricter the government's control over official gazettes, the less valuable news information they could provide, leading to an increasing number of people turning to newspapers. Faced with the temptation of substantial profits, lower-ranking officials represented by the Palace Memorial Archiving Institute and some members of the public were willing to take risks to listen for and circulate news, distribute newspapers, etc.

Before the advent of printing, the stagnation of distribution and publishing methods favored political control over sources, as can be seen by examining the manuscript period of medieval Europe. However, such times have passed—printing has led to an expansion of knowledge, and the costs of state censorship have gradually risen. Technological realities have frustrated political orders, and technological progress has compressed the latent period between repression and eventual abandonment based on commercial logic (please note that this last sentence may not necessarily apply to ancient China, where market economy and capitalism were not fully developed). There is a clear relationship of reciprocal dependence between political power and knowledge power—Debray describes it in his 1980 work "Transmitter": "When one declines, the other rises, and vice versa," and this cycle repeats itself. However, what remains unclear is who is chasing whom in the cat-and-mouse game between the media and political power, as the old Chinese saying goes, "The path ahead is always steeper, the evil is always stronger," which is always in flux and varies in different historical contexts.

4. Conclusion

Finally, Debray's media theory points out that media is not only a technical system and a cultural system but also a historical structure. These three systems intertwine, just as the convenience provided by Song Dynasty technologies, represented by woodblock printing, provided a channel for the liberation of people's beliefs, and newspapers reflected a certain degree of freedom of speech among Song Dynasty citizens. As is well known, the level of material and spiritual civilization reached during the Northern and Southern Song Dynasties was unprecedented in the entire feudal social history of China. The perspective of media studies provides a new path for historical materialism. Further research into journalism history using this perspective may yield fruitful results.

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