

tion of that type of mind which confidently and courageously says: "I Will." In the midst of our national disasters and sufferings, in the face of repeated defeats and humiliations, in the knowledge of our cultural

stagnation and social disorganization, dare we say "We Will be a mightier race, a loftier nation"? The hopefulness of China may be measured by the amount of iron and blood that we possess when we say: "We Will."

An Appraisal Of Chinese Newspapers*

By CHEN CHIN-JEN (陳欽仁)

WHEN the editor of *The Nankai Weekly* asked me to write a few words on modern journalism, it was with much reluctance that I consented; for journalism, though made a special branch of college education only about a quarter of a century ago, has so broad a scope that a cursory discussion could hardly do justice to its multifarious aspects. Yet at the same time I am glad to avail myself of this opportunity to acquaint our students with certain fundamental notions or principles which will enable them to judge correctly the merits and defects of the newspapers they are reading everyday.

Modern society has become so complex in its organization and activities that many things which nowadays are well-nigh regarded as absolute necessities were either not dreamed of or little appreciated by our forefathers. Of these things the newspaper is one. In the present world newspapers are as much a necessity as the telephone or the electric light. The paramount importance of these necessities would at once be obvious if we could imagine a world having no newspaper, no telephone and no electric light. We do not fully appreciate their indispensability until we are deprived of their services. And the newspaper, I think, is the most important of them all. A world without newspapers is simply unthinkable; the inconvenience would be more keenly felt than if we have no telephone or electric light, and the effects would be much more far-reaching. No wonder, then, that more than one hundred years ago Thomas Jefferson declared that he would live in a country without laws but with newspapers rather than in one with laws but without newspapers. Indeed I firmly believe that to deprive the modern world of its newspapers would make true democracy virtually impossible and undermine the foundations of industry and commerce, to say nothing of the other benefits and pleasures that would thereby be lost to mankind.

As the limited space does not permit me to treat of journalism in foreign countries, I think it will be well to confine the discussion to Chinese journalism. During the last ten years Chinese newspapers have undoubtedly shown considerable improvement; yet, when tested by the highest standards of modern journalism they are still far behind the newspapers of other countries. The contents of a newspaper can be classified under three heads: editorial,

news and advertisements. Let us then briefly examine these three phases of Chinese newspapers.

The editorial of a daily newspaper, although comparatively it occupies very little space, is of such importance that without it the duty of a journalist can at best be performed but imperfectly. The object of a newspaper is not only to inform its readers of the everyday occurrences of the world, but also to guide and represent public opinion by interpreting these occurrences and showing their significance. An editorial writer, therefore, must of necessity be a man of liberal education, inasmuch as the facts he deals with are most varied in nature and involve problems that concern not merely his own country but often the whole world.

In the writing of editorials Chinese newspapers have made much progress in recent years. While a decade ago only two or three papers could be found that showed a reasonable degree of common sense and real understanding in discussing the questions of the day, now most of the important dailies have editorials of which they certainly need not be ashamed. These papers, however, are too few in number. Many of our newspapers are still wasting their editorial columns everyday by indulging in meaningless, childish prattle which only serves to show the ignorance of their editorial writers.

One of the most important functions of a "newspaper," as the word itself clearly indicates, is to supply the public with news. The gathering of news, however, as well as the editing of it, is by no means an easy task. It requires special training and knowledge, the lack of which is no doubt responsible for the imperfections of our newspapers. Chinese newspapers, on the whole, are pretty well supplied with telegraphic news, depending as they do mainly upon the service of both Chinese and foreign news agencies and partly upon the special dispatches of their own correspondents.

Their common weakness, so far as the gathering of news is concerned, lies in the fact that the importance of local news is not sufficiently understood. Whatever local news they print consists of only a few meagre items; very few indeed are the newspapers that make a systematic effort to cover all the sources from which news might be gathered. The scoring of a "beat" or "scoop"—that is, to publish a news ahead of rival newspapers—is something unknown to them; little do they realize that, other things being equal, what does the most to enhance a newspaper's position and prove its superiority is its ability to get news

*This article was originally written for the English Supplement of the *Nankai Weekly*, the circulation of which is mainly limited to the students of the University. It is published concurrently in *The Critic*, as the problem here discussed is one that ought to be of interest to the public in general and to newspaper publishers and editors in particular.
—Editor.

which other papers cannot get. Such beats or scoops will so surely (though perhaps imperceptibly) influence the public that the newspaper which scores them will in the end find its subscription list enlarged.

With regard to the editing of news Chinese dailies are equally inefficient. Frankly speaking there is really very little "editing" in the strict sense of the word. In Chinese newspapers we often find two or three versions of the same news printed side by side. Although they are sent in by different news agencies or reporters, the story is told in almost exactly identical terms. Under these circumstances the editor could easily select the report that gives the most detailed account, or, if necessary, combine the several reports into one by linking up the different details and avoiding all unnecessary repetition. The present practice of publishing all reports on the same story without discrimination is sheer waste of valuable space, which might profitably be used for the publication of other news.

Another defect is the inability to differentiate between what has news' value and what has not. Much of the local news in Chinese newspapers and a large portion of their special correspondence from other parts of the country are nothing but scandals described in lurid and obscene language and calculated to appeal to the baser instincts of the public. In this connection should also be mentioned the so-called "jokes," which are often so outspokenly immodest that many a time in the past years I was on the point of writing to the editors of several newspapers to ask them if they would deem it proper for their own children to read such indecent rubbish.

Still another defect of many Chinese newspapers is their inability to write good headlines. The editors are often so careless that after hastily glancing over the manuscript they write a headline which is far different from what is said in the story itself. Recently, for instance, it was reported in one of the newspapers in Tientsin that a certain famous actor would appear at the Nanking Theatre in Shanghai. The headline, however, said that he was going to perform in Nanking, the Chinese capital. This, of course, is a clear case of "putting Mr. Chang's hat on Mr. Li's head," (張冠李戴) as the Chinese saying goes. Amusing errors of this kind can be found almost everyday. Then, too, headlines in Chinese newspapers are sometimes too vague or indefinite. Instead of bringing out the central point of the story they often consist of general statements which can convey no clear idea to the readers. All this is bad enough, but it is not yet the worst.

The worst thing about Chinese dailies is the practice of making editorial comment in the headlines. Many of them are entirely ignorant of that golden rule of modern journalism that the editorial page is the only place where the editor is allowed to express his own opinion, be it praise or condemnation, approval or disapproval. Neither personal prejudice nor patriotic fervor, no matter how commendable the latter may be, should tempt us to swerve from this rule; for a newspaper whose headlines are adulterated with editorial comment looks like a mere propaganda sheet; and when this comment is incorporated

into the news itself, as is sometimes done by reporters and correspondents, all the news loses its trustworthiness. "News is nothing more than the truthful presentation of facts, and the public, having been supplied with the facts, should be left to form its own opinion as it sees fit.

Just a few words ought to suffice for the discussion of advertisements. In the first place, it seems to me that the advertisements in Chinese newspapers are not properly printed. The type is oftentimes not clear and the arrangement too is not artistic, thereby spoiling the appearance of the newspaper and lessening the attractive power of the advertisements. Secondly, little or no judgment is shown in the acceptance or rejection of paid publicity. In fact I doubt if any advertisement has ever been rejected. Nowadays one can freely ruin another's reputation or boost some worthless article of merchandise by inserting an advertisement in the newspapers if he is able to pay for the space. Many of the newspapers never stop to find out whether it is reliable or unreliable. This is particularly true in the case of advertisements of patent medicines, from which the newspapers must derive a considerable part of their income. When one reads these advertisements he simply cannot help being overjoyed at the wonderful development of the medical science, for there seems to be no disease under the sun that cannot be cured in some miraculous manner. Yet on second thought this joy is at once turned into depressing uneasiness: in spite of himself he begins to suspect that he is suffering from all the symptoms therein described!

From what has been said above it is obvious that Chinese newspapers are in urgent need of improvement. I do not mean to say that our newspapers can in the near future rival the leading foreign journals in point of circulation and revenue. That, of course, is impossible, in view of the fact that journalism cannot progress independently of the other phases of national life such as education, industry and commerce. The defects that have just been enumerated are rather technical points that can be easily rectified. Easy as it is, I am afraid Chinese newspaper publishers will continue to ignore it. Most of them do not have the slightest inkling of the all-important truth that journalism is both a science and an art; they apparently believe that anyone who knows how to read and write can be a successful journalist. Such a belief, let it be said, is about as well grounded as the notion that anyone who knows how to fire a gun can be a good soldier. Unless, therefore, this erroneous notion is got rid of, Chinese journalism will find it most difficult, if not impossible, to surmount the obstacles besetting its road of progress.