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Contemporary Chinese Journalism: An Interview with Judy Polumbaum

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By Timothy Weston
I've just finished reading *China Ink: The Changing Face of Chinese Journalism* by Judy Polumbaum with Xiong Lei. Given the plentiful recent discussion of the Chinese media and censorship during the lead up to the 2008 Olympic games, this book makes for fascinating and very timely reading. It consists of a short introduction by Judy Polumbaum, Professor of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Iowa, and the transcripts of interviews that she and Xiong Lei, who has worked as a reporter in Beijing for twenty-five years, conducted from late 2005 until late 2006 with journalists currently working in the Chinese capital.

The twenty young journalists whose words appear in this volume work for a wide variety of newspapers, magazines, television and radio stations in Beijing (the volume says little about the Internet, a key site of journalistic activity in China today, for as Polumbaum notes in her Introduction, that subject deserves a book unto itself). The journalists presented in *China Ink* are a very dedicated group—animated by a desire to serve society, to convey truth to readers, and to uphold professional standards for themselves and others who work in the same field. They speak quite freely about both the frustrations and joys of their work. Most of them touch on the topics of censorship of and propaganda in the Chinese media. The picture they cumulatively paint on those subjects is complicated and nuanced, though virtually every one who talks about censorship states clearly that it happens and that it is a bad thing. Xiong Lei is preparing a slightly modified Chinese version of the book, which will be identical to the English edition save for the removal of background information that appears in the English edition but is not be necessary for Chinese readers; what this suggests is that public discussion of censorship as a phenomenon in China is not off limits. It is off limits to talk about some subjects in the press, in other words, but not to talk about the fact of censorship itself. That, to me, is a hopeful sign, and evidence of just how much things are changing in the journalistic realm in China today.

Polumbaum and Xiong’s interviewees provide a vivid series of snapshots that enable us to gain a feeling for the fast pace of that change even if it is difficult to draw any really firm conclusions about the way the media work in China today from this book. *China Ink*’s great virtue is that it offers rich and interesting primary material that, to the best of my knowledge, cannot be found anywhere else, at least in English. The book’s readers are treated to a range of authentic voices from people who are engaged in journalistic work in China and are invited to draw their own conclusions based on the different accounts presented. I, for one, came away with several unmistakable impressions: First, many Chinese journalists are bright and feisty people who are pushing hard to expand what can be discussed in the media. Second, the Chinese media is segmented into many different worlds, each of which needs to be studied in its own right. Third, the Chinese media is becoming commercialized very rapidly, which is leading to new opportunities, new frustrations, and new pressures on journalists. Fourth, the field of contemporary Chinese journalism is very exciting and well worth studying. Fifth, reading accounts from Chinese journalists is useful for thinking about the strengths and weaknesses, relatively speaking, of journalism in the United States (or elsewhere).

What follows is my interview with Judy Polumbaum.
**Timothy Weston:** What motivated you to do this book? Is there anything else like it in the fields of journalism or communications?

**Judy Polumbaum:** The book arose from my conversations with my Chinese colleague, journalist Xiong Lei, who had recently retired from her job at Xinhua News Agency. Both of us have long been following changes in Mainland Chinese journalism—she as a practitioner and participant, I as a journalism teacher, scholar and observer. We both had been encountering interesting young journalists and, as we thought about the new generation of practitioners, wanted to assess the state of the field from the perspective of people who not only were in the thick of things right now, but would be shaping journalism for some time into the future.

Of course every author has to say his or her book is the only one like it! In this case I believe the claim is true—I know of no other book that really turns a microscope on individuals’ experiences in Chinese journalism. The format I emulated was that of Studs Terkel, the great Chicago oral historian. He specializes in documenting the lives and ideas of ordinary individuals in all walks of life, through their own words. I have tried to do that with *China Ink*.

**TW:** Who is your Chinese co-editor? In your view, what motivated her to do this book?

**JP:** Friendships resulting from my early time in China as the country was beginning to open up to the outside world have endured over decades, and Xiong Lei is one of those friends of long duration. China’s college entrance exams resumed in 1977, and graduate student exams in 1978, and she was among the latter—in the first entering class of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences postgraduate school. I worked with the second graduate cohort, entering in 1979, but got to know that brilliant first group very well since they overlapped and we shared many classes and activities. Xiong Lei went on to become an accomplished reporter and editor for Xinhua’s English-language feature service, *China Features*, and developed special expertise in science, medical and environmental reporting. She comes from revolutionary Communist stock and is a feisty, idealistic woman who is both fiercely committed to China’s progress and highly critical of what she sees as affronts to social justice and equity. I think she was motivated to join me in interviewing young journalists because, like me, she saw a great deal of ferment in the field and wanted to know more about the thinking of younger generations. As I say in my introduction, she started calling me a “slave-driver” because every time I arrived in Beijing I’d insist on setting up a slew of additional interviews—but, as I also note, she found the sessions truly engrossing. It was eye-opening to me to see a native I thought knew everything about Chinese journalism come to the same realization I did—that there was a lot we didn’t know, and both of us were learning new things.

**TW:** China Ink consists of a short introduction outlining some key themes and the transcripts of medium-length interviews you and Xiong Lei conducted with twenty journalists working in contemporary Beijing. Why focus in depth in one place rather than sampling from many different environments in China?

**JP:** This is totally a function of our own time and travel constraints; Xiong Lei of course lives in Beijing, and I was spending the most time there on a variety of other projects.

**TW:** If you had focused on another city, would the book have looked substantially different? Would the content of the interviews have been significantly different?

**JP:** Of course this is impossible to say—but surely we would have encountered a wide range of other experiences and stories. As I say in the introduction, we do not claim to be presenting a representative sample of Chinese journalists. Of course there certainly must be regional variations as well as local idiosyncrasies in the practice, management and interpretation of journalism. We do, however, think the young journalists we spoke with have much to tell us about the direction in which their field is headed. And journalism emanating from Beijing, especially in national media, tends to set trends and agendas nationally.

**TW:** I was struck by the numerous references to “professionalism” made by many of your interviewees. Did so many of them speak to this issue specifically because you asked them about it?
JP: Not at all—we asked very broad questions, and the term “professionalism” was one many of them came up with again and again. In the foreword to the book, Aryeh Neier singles out this concept as a key to progress in Chinese journalism, and he did so entirely without prompting on the basis of what emerged from the interviews.

TW: In any case, why does that concept—professionalism—have so much salience for the journalists you interviewed? It seems to be a matter of great pride to them, would you agree?

JP: Professionalism actually is a pretty complex concept and in many ways a multi-edged sword; it can be wielded as a noble sword in the cause of genuine social progress, but it also can serve as a shield for an occupational group wishing to promote and preserve its own interests. The concept has been much studied in Western contexts as part of a fascinating sub-field of sociology—the sociology of work and occupations; and there is a great deal written, from both normative and critical perspectives, on adaptation of the concept in journalism. I tend toward the critical perspective; on the other hand, in China at this particular time, I think claims to professionalism in journalism serve an important strategic role in advancing progressive, enterprising reporting about key social issues.

TW: Do you think the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has done enough to protect foreign journalists’ professional rights in Beijing during the Olympics?

JP: The IOC has leverage, but the Chinese are still the hosts and have final determination on what actually happens. I think it’s important to recognize that different constituencies in China look at matters of freedom of expression and free flow of information in different ways, and often are working at cross-purposes. My impression is that the people managing the nitty-gritty of media operations for the organizing committee, BOCOG, for the most part are very much in favor of openness and want to be facilitators for the foreign media during the Games—and more broadly, that prevailing sentiments among the Chinese press corps itself also are resistant to bureaucratic and political management. However, these people have to deal on a day-to-day basis with government officials, propaganda functionaries, public security people, and many other agencies, groups and interests. Western observers tend to tar and feather “Chinese” across the board about policies or activities we dislike, without acknowledging the efforts aimed at improvement coming from within the system itself. My book in part attempts to show how journalists working doggedly within the system are part of such efforts to improve both journalism and society.

TW: What different interpretations of professionalism do you see the Chinese journalists representing? What are some of the key ideas or codes of conduct associated with “professional” behavior for the people you interviewed?

JP: Some of the basic ideas should sound familiar to Western journalists—above all, basing reports on facts and being fair. The subtext, I think, is that in contrast to propaganda, whose objective is pushing predetermined conclusions, reporting is a foray into the unknown. Propaganda is an exercise in confirmation. Journalism is exploration, whose results should be a surprise to the journalists themselves. This is a very simplistic rendering—but of course people can read the book for the details!

TW: Would American journalists stress the same basic ideas and standards if asked about their professionalism?

JP: I think U.S. journalists and Chinese journalists share many basic news values—from accuracy and timeliness to consequence and human interest. But Chinese journalists do add a dimension that I think is missing here. U.S. journalists are trained and socialized to be dispassionate in order to avoid “bias.” Chinese journalists emphasize empathy and compassion; those who report on marginalized people, for instance, freely admit to feeling outrage, sympathy, and admiration, and so forth about the topics of their reporting. In contrast to assertions of detachment, which can be a way to escape making moral or human judgments, I find this emotional dimension refreshing and, indeed, perhaps preferable!

TW: Approximately how many people are employed in the journalism industry in Beijing today? How would you break that down?
JP: I don’t have such statistics—but I have heard numbers like half a million nationwide, and I would suspect the numbers are a lot greater than that.

TW: Is working as a journalist considered a middle class career in Beijing today? How much do journalists earn? I’m sure there is a considerable range, right?

JP: Absolutely, it’s a middle-class occupation—but other than a small number of celebrity journalists, mostly TV anchors and hosts, it is not a hugely lucrative occupation. Many of the journalists we interviewed mentioned the huge gaps between what they earn as reporters and editors and what they might earn in the business world. Money clearly is not what drives these people. However, journalists do have writing and communication skills as well as social contacts that enable them to take on moonlighting jobs; and in addition, many write books which if successful bring them additional income. In addition, as many of our interviewees mention, they get to travel around the country at their employers’ expense on reporting assignments! So while they are not rich, they are not economically suffering.

TW: Does China have celebrity journalists as we do in the United States?

JP: Indeed, as mentioned above, mainly TV personalities.

TW: How would you summarize what your interviewees say about the issues of censorship and propaganda in the Chinese media today? How will Chinese journalists think about the IOC’s ability to protect freedom of the press in Beijing during the Olympics?

JP: I just returned from a week in Beijing, where 23 of my students from The University of Iowa are working as media volunteers. I think Chinese journalists are pretty psyched about the Olympics and feel the atmosphere is quite good—if anything, I would say they are hopeful. All those covering the Games have strong advocates in the staff of the Media Operations department, from bottom to top—many of them journalists themselves on loan from news organizations, who are trying very hard to create an accessible environment for both domestic and foreign journalists. None of us are privy to the dealings between BOCOG (and the Beijing government) and the IOC, nor to the negotiations among the various BOCOG and city departments, but I’m sure there have been many back-channel discussions resulting in both accommodation and resistance to the desire for freedom of information—a desire that both Chinese and foreign media practitioners share.

TW: I was trying to figure out how to place your interviewees on an ideological spectrum – left being very close to the Chinese Communist Party and right being rather aggressively independent of it. Can they be plotted that way? Does that kind of spectrum work as a way of talking about the Chinese journalism field today?

JP: I don’t think so. Those labels have become so confused—we have the ”old left,” the Chinese Communists who think their Party has lost its way, and the ”new left,” with its progressive critiques of the Party, and the neoliberalists, for whom things are going merrily down the capitalist road, and the Communist Party mainstream, which certainly pursues an agenda that is more capitalist (at best with a social welfare cast) than socialist, and so forth. One of the purposes of this book is to get away from labels or generalizations and present individuals who are trying to work within this complex confluence of ideological tendencies and document their real-world results.

TW: Do you see the Olympics as a moment when Chinese and Western journalists might join together in a way that could help defuse the tension caused by the intense Chinese and American nationalisms, especially vis-à-vis one another, stoked by the Games? On the other hand, could the media do damage to the way we see one another as countries?

JP: Both Western and Chinese media wax and wane friendly and frigid toward each other, but I think the Olympics is a place where, for the most part, they will get along and develop a sense of occupational solidarity. That said, one of my students who’s working in the Main Press Centre told me about a German TV cameraman violently shoving a Chinese photographer who was blocking his line of site at a press conference. This may be medium-specific rather than national arrogance, though, with
TV typically asserting primacy-of-place. (An MPC manager, who happens to be an American, took the German guy aside and warned him that any repeat performances would be cause for lifting his credentials.)

**TW:** Will the IOC’s inability to guarantee a completely free media environment in Beijing during the Games become a major subject of protest for foreign reporters in China?

**JP:** I suspect foreign reporters will be pretty busy covering the Games, both as sporting events and as the context for any other news that arises. In advance of the Games, however, with the impetus of Amnesty International and other human rights organizations, they have less activity to cover and thus are expending more airtime, web space and ink on even fairly insignificant information obstacles. The blocking of websites that’s the subject of a page one story in *The New York Times*, for instance, is not worth much attention. Not only is it an old story, but even with some sites or categories blocked on the web, abundant information is still available. And while the web might be useful for quickie background information, no self-respecting journalist should be relying on what Google can pull up on Tibet or Tiananmen in any case.

**TW:** Many of your interviewees talked about journalism as a passion, as a career that makes them feel quite free and intellectually alive. Can you say more about the degree to which the passion conveyed by your interviewees is typical for most Chinese journalists?

**JP:** Again, this group does not speak for all Chinese journalists; but it’s clear that individuals who see stories they think are important to fruition find great reward in that.

**TW:** Many also talked about how journalism can be a grinding career, especially at the early stage. Can you comment on that?

**JP:** They talk about pressures of time and space, exhaustion, and the limitations of their own skills and knowledge as much as, if not more than, bureaucratic and political constraints.

**TW:** Would you call any of the people you interviewed “public intellectuals”? Would any of them use that term for themselves? Out of the twenty of them, how many of them have already written books or hope one day to write a book? Have any of them had great commercial success through their books? If so, which people, and for which books?

**JP:** The book authors in the group have had good response but not blockbuster success—Wang Jun with what is now two books on the history of Beijing’s urban development, Jin Yongquan with his books on mask-dancers, Three Gorges displacement and photography, Xiang Fei with her memoir, and a few others. They certainly see themselves as intellectuals, and they certainly wish to be of service to the public, but I don’t think they’d feel comfortable with the term “public intellectual.” That implies a kind of special status that most of them wouldn’t want. Some of them like earning public accolades, but others are exceedingly modest about their achievements. Like many of the best journalists here, the best ones in China don’t see themselves as the story—rather, they see themselves as instruments to convey important stories about others.

**TW:** What other English-language book(s) would you recommend readers interested in China Ink read? I mean books with a strong China focus especially.

**JP:** I admire some of the recent books by some of the most sensitive Western journalists who’ve spent time in China—such as Peter Hessler’s *Oracle Bones* (as well as his earlier *River Town*) and John Pomfret’s *Chinese Lessons*. I found Oliver August’s *Inside the Red Mansion* fascinating as well as quite revealing of the challenges foreigners face in trying to learn about China. The edited collections by Chin-chuan Lee, a friend and mentor of mine, are all terrific; and the wonderful Chinese-Canadian scholar Zhao Yuezhi’s new book *Communication in China* is a must for academics—and an important representation of “new leftist” views, although its density and highly theorized nature make it very difficult for general readers (her earlier *Media, Market and Democracy in China* is far more accessible, though dated).
TW: Did you ever practice journalism in China? Elsewhere?

JP: First the elsewhere—as an undergraduate at McGill University in Montreal, I did some writing for the *McGill Daily* that got me interested in becoming a journalist, so I went on for a master’s at Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. I subsequently worked at the *Rutland Herald* in Rutland, Vermont and at the paper’s Burlington, VT bureau for a couple of years—and that time as a rookie reporter was hugely important in shaping my ideas about journalism’s importance to community knowledge. I later worked for local papers in California and Oregon, and I continue to freelance for newspapers and magazines. I call myself an unrepentant newspaper reporter. In between my stateside jobs, working as a “foreign expert” in China in the late 1970s and early 1980s, I taught journalism for two years at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences postgraduate school, spent two summers with Xinhua News Agency’s English-language service as a so-called “polisher,” and joined the staff of the then-new national English-language paper *China Daily*, where I worked alongside the original staff of feisty old rightists and fresh young recruits. Although I did get to write a lot of arts features for *China Daily*, my work for these Chinese publications was not exactly “practicing” journalism—rather, it was trying to help Chinese journalists turn what had been useless crass propaganda aimed at foreigners into something resembling real news reporting that might actually be of interest to foreign readers.