

Emily Chua, **The Currency of Truth: Newsmaking and the Late-Socialist Imaginaries of China's Digital Era**, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2023, 186 pp., \$24.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by

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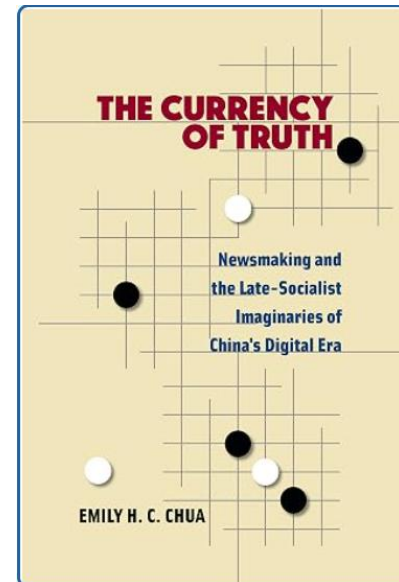
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The Currency of Truth: Newsmaking and the Late-Socialist Imaginaries of China's Digital Era by Emily Chua challenges prevailing models of journalism institutions and questions the modernist social and political ideal of a collectively reasoning public that they claim to serve. By examining the everyday practices and dynamics of news production in a weekly newspaper based in Guangzhou in South China—capturing the ambitions, strategies, compromises, and frustrations of journalists, editors, managers, and executives—this book presents a compelling account of how a young media organization with limited resources survives within a restrictive political environment in the late-socialist context.

The book sheds light on the business model of local Chinese journalism amid media digitization, as changing production and consumption practices bring more actors into the field. While the state-controlled system has produced its own hierarchies—with official institutions such as Xinhua at the top—other outlets struggle to remain financially viable. This specific news outlet keeps itself afloat with content that either praises or exposes corporate activities, taking in advertising revenues through various tactics. It demonstrates alignment with the government by publishing political stories such as Beijing's "Two Conferences," though they offer little appeal to readers. These formal stories generate a sense of the platform's publicness, on which its survival as a business depends. The author argues that this substantiates Warner's (2002) point that "media texts constitute their publics not by garnering attention of a particular group of readers" (p. 19), but by simply creating a possibility of doing so when addressing them. In this view, the public exist only in relation to the discourses that address them and are instantiated solely by the circulation of those discourses.

The author navigates various schools of thought, from the press theories of Habermas (1989), Lippmann (2017), and Schudson (1978) to current scholarly development in China studies, to dissect the journalism practices she observed and participated in as an intern. The book successfully embeds these practices in the cultural and socioeconomic context of post-Tiananmen China, placing them in a different model of news as currency. It sets a framework for readers to view news institutions not as holding a powerful role to mold the public's mind but as text-producing mediators or brokers among the various players and an intricate network of relationships in society.

The book's scholarly contribution goes beyond the study of Chinese journalism and media systems. As a dissertation-based book, it builds a solid groundwork in providing historical context in chapter 2, covering the Mao and post-Mao eras and the political, ideological, and cultural factors that shape news



institutions. Making a shift, the author connects her analysis with the contemporary debate over the decline of the power of the “fourth estate” in Western democracies and the “post-truth” era in U.S. media, noting that the truth claims of established news institutions as commercially disinterested entities—the 20th-century “hegemonic construction” (p. 79) of journalistic neutrality and objectivity—are hardly viable. For readers who are aware of the decline of the news industry in the United States, this book poignantly illustrates that these standards are shaped by specific cultural and political contexts, rather than being universally applicable.

The strength of the ethnographic work is demonstrated throughout the book, as the author brings us in and out of the newsroom, remarkably in the narratives on day-to-day news reporting activities in chapters 3 and 4. One of the questions driving her fieldwork was what newsmaking ethic the reporters she worked with were guided by. Among the different news departments, she discovers that an ethic of efficacy, instead of truth, dominates the everyday work of producing publishable stories to meet deadlines, as reporters get used to taking shortcuts, slacking off, or chasing a hot news topic. The author also skillfully depicts socializing and entertainment events like karaoke parties, personal chats over lunch, and various characters and scenes of organizational management, leading to a climatic event: internal shock at its moment of shared crisis.

News as currency is discussed in-depth in chapter 5, as the author points out news articles can function like a currency of worth to be produced and circulated within the news sector’s own network in China’s current society. News professionals can also be driven by the desire to make money. The author captures their coping strategies and frictions as individuals who have culture-specific personal goals and career paths, which are sometimes derailed, in the heterogenous and unevenly regulated media industry in China. Although the author’s position as a bilingual foreigner limited direct access to micro-level censorship, the book effectively illuminates how little control news editors and managers have over their publications. The staff’s careers were also at the mercy of the business maneuvers of the state-controlled conglomerate owning the newspaper. In one scenario, the author probed the head of the Marketing Department at a home dinner over beer with two other colleagues, when she found that the real circulation numbers were hidden from most of them while fake ones were regularly published.

To help readers grasp the complexity of newsmaking in China, which is neither guided by the pursuit of truth nor rooted in deception and corruption, the author proposes a framework of the news industry as “jianghu” in chapter 6. In this view of society—drawn from Chinese martial arts lore—social values are never fixed; they arise from shifting personal ambitions, rivalries, and alliances. People strive for status and recognition, and their claims are treated not as truth statements but as strategic rhetorical performances aimed at hidden, self-interested goals. While this perspective strongly recognizes performativity as central to everyday communication, it does not enable journalists to engage in newswriting as an ethical communicative practice or believe that they can serve the public good. The author argues that this “jianghu” framework is comparable to sociology because both help illuminate the underlying structural relations shaping interactions and reframe how we interpret what people say and do.

The analysis focuses on a profession in tension: While some journalists remain dedicated to uncovering facts and benefiting the readers, others grapple with disillusionment and question the value of

their work. Management's cynicism toward the motives of investigative reporters, coupled with a relentless emphasis on the commercial bottom line, offers a nuanced understanding of why practicality supersedes truth, and why idealism often falters. Therefore, readers witness the eventual departure of more staff from both the newsroom and the industry at large, as noted in the epilogue, where the author provides a follow-up to the fieldwork.

As a part of the series "China Understandings Today," this book is suitable for scholars and students of journalism, media studies, Asian studies, and anthropology. By integrating ethnographic depth with post-modernist theoretical sophistication, the book manages to capture the complexity and contradictions in China's newspaper industry, informing the readers that its media system is neither a monolithic entity nor purely ideological. In the context of growing geopolitical tensions between China and the United States, it contributes to the literature on news institution operations, media ethics, global journalism studies, and the Chinese media system.

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