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Information Media, Social Imagination, and Public Society during the Ming and Qing Dynasties

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Abstract  The flourishing development of media during the Ming and Qing eras affected the building of new methods of interpersonal interactions between an individual and society as well as between the people themselves. By virtue of media like *Dibao* (court liaison reports), drama or novels, interpersonal interactions could reach beyond space and object restrictions. These media could thus rapidly spread particular or individual news to the general public, making those who were absent from the scene feel as if they were “experiencing” it, and at the same time allowing them to “participate in” social affairs beyond their knowledge. In this way, mass media surpassed the individual living sphere, ultimately forming a “public sphere.” Under the influence of these media, each individual could join this “public sphere” and be connected with the imagined “general public.” That is to say, mass media created an “imagined society.” In addition to a personal limited “real world,” there was an immense “fictitious world” for everyone to take part in and experience. Accordingly, interactions between people developed into interactions between each individual and the abstract society, which could cut across space limitations, and establish an immense “public society.”

Keywords  *Dibao*, novels, drama, media, information media, public society

Introduction

Jin Yaoji said in *Cong chuantong dao xiandai* (From tradition to modernity) that: Ancient China, in some respects, was just a culture and not a nation. That is not to say that people at that time did not have the concept of a
“country,” but that the people of China simply had no form of fully interacting, as goes the saying: “One digs a well to drink and ploughs the fields to eat, what has the power of the emperor got to do with me?” This shows that with the majority of the people, the “government” maintained a very weak relationship…. Traditional China, due to difficulties in transport, was often as Du Fu described “A mountain lies between us and tomorrow, with affairs of the world hectic on both sides.” It was because of many natural barriers that numerous solitary “mini societies” appeared all over China. If one then adds the differences in language across the whole population, these results even more in a breakdown of the “system of communication,” meaning that instead of one coherent society, one is left with an “immobilized” and “unassimilated” society, with the whole country much like “loose grains of sand in a dish.” China was therefore broken up to the level of independent communities, each with their own value systems and nothing that we might call a nation even existed…. However, in the past hundred years, especially in the past several decades, due to the spread of education, newspapers, television and the gradual emergence of the internet, the majority of Chinese people have already joined the “great web of communication,” and through this communication web the whole country has become a “semi-mobilized society.” 1 Jin Yaoji’s thesis that from the Qin-Han period onwards “China saw no great changes for two thousand years” would thus mean that China before the Opium War was a stagnated, traditional and unchanging society that cut-offs in the exchange of information caused an unassimilated and heterogeneous society; in other words a “traditional society” in which individual communities had no means of vertical, or bottom to top communication, thus becoming “loose grains of sand in a dish.” It was therefore, this lack of means of vertical communication that resulted in ordinary people feeling that “the power of the emperor has nothing to do with me.” Needless to say the term “stagnant” is not necessarily appropriate and we also need to consider whether or not the term “traditional society” really is, as Jin Yaoji claims, a series of unconnected communities with no or very few ways of communicating on a vertical or horizontal level. Was there indeed no such thing as a feeling of a greater national society? Did traditional China really lack a country wide “web of communication?” Did nationwide mass communication really only come about with the invention of the newspaper, television and internet?

There is no doubt that in the Ming-Qing (1368–1911) era, communication between the various regions of China lagged a long way behind the present day, however, to say that communication and the flow of information was stifled and that most people were trapped in their own little world and kept busy with daily trivia, would be overstepping the mark. In fact, from the middle of the Ming