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MEDIATED BRIDGES: THE NANYANG CHINESE NEWSPAPERS AND THE MAKING OF CHINA'S TRANSNATIONAL PUBLIC SPHERE (1881-1942)

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the pivotal role of Chinese-language newspapers in colonial Southeast Asia (Nanyang) in facilitating the emergence of a transnational public sphere from 1881 to 1942. It moves beyond the Eurocentric model of Jürgen Habermas to investigate how these diasporic media created a unique discursive space that transcended territorial borders, serving both the identity formation of overseas Chinese communities and the socio-political dynamics of modern China.

This research employs a historical case study approach, focusing on in-depth analysis of representative publications such as *Nanyang Siang Pau*. Through a combined methodology of archival research and systematic content analysis of editorials, news coverage, and feature articles, the study examines the operational models, content strategies, and socio-political contexts of these newspapers. This dual methodology allows for both a detailed textual analysis and a broader understanding of the institutional and colonial constraints within which they operated.

Findings reveal that these newspapers constructed a diasporic public sphere shaped by Chinese nationalism, local identity, and colonial constraints. They played vital roles in disseminating information, shaping China's modern image, mediating overseas opinion, and advancing China's revolutionary modernization.

The study contributes to media history and transnational communication theory by highlighting the agency of non-Western diasporic media. It offers a historical lens to understand the dynamics of contemporary global public spaces and underscores the interconnectedness of media, diaspora, and modernity in China's international history.

Keywords: Public Sphere, Transnational Communication, Chinese Diaspora, Media History, Nanyang Newspapers



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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

Since the mid-19th century, China's forced integration into the Western-dominated global system prompted not only dramatic political and economic transformations but also a fundamental reconfiguration of its communicative landscape. Traditional scholarship on China's early international communication has largely been constrained by state-centric and West-centric paradigms, overlooking the agency of non-state actors and transnational networks. This study turns to the Nanyang (Southeast Asia) Chinese press—a vibrant yet understudied domain—to explore how diasporic media facilitated the emergence of a transnational public sphere that transcended territorial and imperial boundaries.

Driven by the colonial economy, large-scale emigration originated from the coastal provinces of Fujian and Guangdong. At the end of the 19th century, the population of overseas Chinese exceeded four million (Zhuang, 1997), forming a highly organized diaspora. Crucially, Chinese-language newspapers flourished unprecedentedly in this region: from the founding of Singapore's *Lat Pau* (1881) to 1930s, over 60 Chinese newspapers emerged in Nanyang (Cui, 2002), representing the highest density and influence globally among overseas Chinese communities. These publications in colonial Southeast Asia served as crucial nodes in an extensive network linking the Chinese diaspora to homeland politics and global currents. They created a unique discursive space that mediated between Chinese nationalism, local identity formation, and colonial constraints, thereby playing a pivotal role in shaping modern China's transnational engagement.

1.2 Literature Review and Theoretical Perspectives

Existing studies on the history of the Singapore Chinese press, such as Chen Mong Hock's *The Early Chinese Newspapers of Singapore, 1881-1912* (1967) and Wong Hong Teng's *Collected Essays on the History of Singapore Chinese Newspapers* (1987), have laid a solid foundational corpus of historical materials for the field, systematically documenting the evolution of the press, the activities of its founders, and content categorizations. However, the analytical perspective of these pioneering works primarily focuses on the local community, failing to adequately situate the newspapers within broader transnational communication networks. Cui Guiqiang's (1993) research advanced this discourse by examining into the interactions between the press and the Singaporean Chinese community, yet the analysis of the dynamic mediating role these newspapers played in connecting Mainland China with Nanyang (Southeast Asia) still requires further depth.

Meanwhile, authoritative general histories, such as the *History of Chinese Journalism and Communication* (2000) edited by Fang Hanqi, provide an indispensable framework for understanding the overall landscape of Chinese journalism. However, their conceptualization of "international communication" primarily follows a state-centric paradigm, focusing on official external propaganda, thereby largely overlooking the



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significant role of non-state actors such as overseas Chinese newspapers. Mainstream definitions of international communication (e.g., Gilboa, 1998) have traditionally emphasized state-level media diplomacy, an approach that inadvertently marginalizes pre-existing diasporic networks from the pre-colonial era. Although valuable recent scholarly calls for de-Westernized perspectives exist (Sun, 2002), case studies on these historical, alternative communication practices still require more academic attention.

To address the research gaps identified above, this paper introduces an integrated theoretical perspective of the transnational public sphere to reframe the understanding of the Nanyang Chinese press. This perspective draws upon and synthesizes three key theoretical traditions:

- **Transnationalism Theory:** Building on Vertovec (2009), this study examines Nanyang newspapers as key nodes, investigating how they fostered and sustained a deterritorialized social field through which information, ideas, and identities flowed across geographical boundaries.
- **Imagined Communities Theory:** Extending Anderson (1983), it explores how the Nanyang press, through shared Chinese linguistic symbols, sustained a cultural Chinese national identity beyond territorial borders, thereby participating in constructing a transnational imagination of a "Cultural China."
- **Public Sphere Theory:** Inspired by Habermas (1962), it adapts his concept of the public sphere to analyze the diasporic discursive space constructed by the Nanyang press. This space did not exist within a single nation-state but served as a public platform for rational-critical debate and political deliberation for the overseas Chinese, operating within the complex tensions of colonial power, ancestral homeland politics, and global discourse.

Previous research frameworks often interpreted early Chinese international communication through a binary "center-periphery" logic. However, the diaspora were not passive cultural transmitters but active interpretive mediators—their commentaries on major events like the First Sino-Japanese War profoundly influenced reform discourse within China itself. This bidirectional flow challenges traditional unidirectional models of communication, calling for more polycentric explanatory frameworks in global Chinese communication history.

Based on this theoretical background, this study defines its core question as follows: How did Nanyang Chinese newspapers, between 1881 and 1942, participate in and shape a transnational public sphere connecting China and the world? What were their specific operational logics, functional roles, and historical limitations? To answer these questions precisely, the study defines its temporal scope from the founding of Lat Pau in 1881 to the outbreak of the Pacific War in 1942, which largely halted the Nanyang Chinese press; its geographical scope focuses on Singapore, Malaya, the Dutch East Indies, and the Philippines—the four regions with the highest concentration of Chinese population and Chinese-language newspapers; and its object of study is limited to newspapers founded by Chinese, published primarily in Chinese, and targeting local Chinese communities, ensuring the internal consistency of the research subject.



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1.3 Methodology and Sources

This research employs a historical case study approach combined with systematic content analysis.

Archival Research: Extensive examination of newspaper collections from repositories including the National Library Board Singapore, National University of Singapore and Sun Yat-sen Library of Guangdong Province.

Content Analysis: Systematic study of editorials, news reports, and feature articles during critical historical junctures (e.g., the 1898 Reform Movement, 1911 Revolution, 1937 War of Resistance) to identify discourse strategies and stance construction.

Case Studies: In-depth focus on representative publications such as Nanyang Siang Pau to illustrate processes of glocalization and transnational network formation.

This dual methodology enables both detailed textual analysis and broader understanding of the institutional and colonial constraints within which these newspapers operated, providing comprehensive insights into their role in facilitating a transnational public sphere.

2. THE EMERGENCE OF A TRANSNATIONAL PUBLIC SPHERE: HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT, 1881-1942

This section traces the historical evolution of the Nanyang Chinese-language press, framing its development not merely as institutional growth but as the formative process of a transnational public sphere. From commercial beginnings to political awakening and eventual maturation, these newspapers constructed a dynamic discursive space that mediated between Chinese nationalism, emerging local identities, and the constraints of colonial governance.

2.1 Foundational Stage (1881-1898): Commercial Bridges and the Architecture of a Public Space

The inception of the modern Nanyang Chinese press was marked by the establishment of Singapore's Lat Pau in 1881. During this period, newspapers primarily functioned as commercial information hubs, laying the foundational architecture for a public sphere centered on the economic life of the diaspora. Their content—dominated by shipping schedules, commodity prices, and remittance notices—catered to the practical needs of a mercantile community. The editorial stance, epitomized by Lat Pau's declaration to "facilitate commerce and illuminate current affairs," was deliberately apolitical, ensuring survival under colonial oversight by avoiding sensitive topics. This commercial orientation, while politically restrained, established the essential information networks and reading publics that would later enable more politically charged discourse, creating the initial infrastructure for transnational communication.

2.2 Politicization and Nationalist Mobilization (1898-1911): Forging a Diasporic Political Arena

The period between 1898 and 1911 witnessed the dramatic politicization of the Nanyang public sphere, transforming it into a vibrant arena for debating China's future.



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The intellectual shockwaves from China—the defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894) and the failure of the Hundred Days' Reform (1898)—galvanized political activism overseas. The Nanyang press became the central battleground for two opposing visions: the Reformists, advocating for a constitutional monarchy through organs like Thien Nan Shin Pao and Union Times, and the Revolutionaries, championing republicanism through platforms such as Thoe Lam Jit Poh and Chong Shing Yit Pao.

Through open deliberation on political systems, means of change, and the role of the diaspora, these newspapers facilitated a transnational political discourse that was no longer confined to China's geographical borders. This discourse was performative; it did not merely report on politics but actively constructed a diasporic nationalist consciousness. The substantial financial contributions from Nanyang Chinese to the 1911 Revolution stand as tangible evidence of this public sphere's real-world political efficacy, demonstrating how print capitalism enabled both imagined solidarity and material action.

2.3 Maturation and Localization (1912-1942): A Glocalized Public Sphere under Colonial Duress

Following the establishment of the Republic of China, the Nanyang Chinese press entered a phase of maturation characterized by professionalization, diversification, and glocalization. Newspapers evolved into complex media institutions that negotiated a dual identity: sustaining China-oriented nationalism while increasingly addressing local community interests and colonial realities.

The rise of commercial giants like Nanyang Siang Pau (1923) signified a shift towards professional journalism and economic specialization. Simultaneously, the diversification of publications—from tabloids like Singapore Hua Pao to literary supplements promoting "Malayan Literature"—broadened the scope of the public sphere to encompass cultural, educational, and social issues relevant to local life.

The zenith of this period was the press's role in the Anti-Japanese Resistance Movement. Publications like Sin Chew Daily and Nanyang Siang Pau became nerve centers for nationalist mobilization, publishing war dispatches, coordinating relief funds, and orchestrating boycotts. This era confirmed the newspaper's role as the core of a glocalized public sphere—a space that could simultaneously orchestrate transnational support for China's salvation and articulate the diaspora's evolving local identity within the complex socio-political landscape of colonial Southeast Asia.

3. CASE STUDY: NANYANG SIANG PAU AS A NODE IN THE TRANSNATIONAL PUBLIC SPHERE

The founding of Nanyang Siang Pau by Singaporean entrepreneur Tan Kah Kee on September 6, 1923, provides a compelling case study of how a diasporic Chinese newspaper actively constructed and sustained a transnational public sphere. Its operational strategies, content choices, and navigational tactics between colonial governance and homeland politics vividly illustrate the dynamics of this unique discursive space, perfectly embodying and allowing us to refine the three key theoretical traditions.



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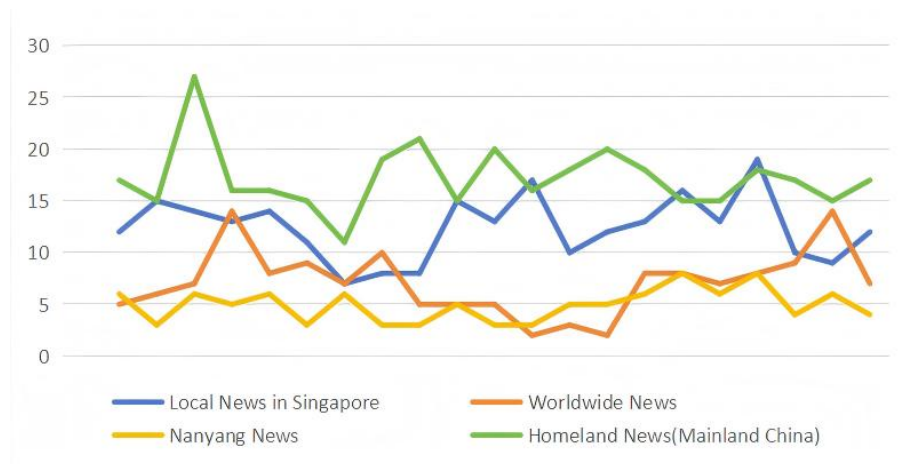
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3.1 Materializing a Transnational Social Field and Imagined Community

From its inception, Nanyang Siang Pau served as a critical node in a deterritorialized social field (Vertovec, 2009). While founded to serve Tan's rubber business—evident in its extensive coverage of the rubber market—it quickly transcended this commercial origin. Its content curation actively fostered an imagined community (Anderson, 1983) among the diasporic Chinese in Southeast Asia, who predominantly originated from Guangdong and Fujian. The newspaper dedicated entire sections to "Guangdong News" and "Fujian News," creating a localized connection to the ancestral homeland that accounted for the demographic reality of the diaspora. This was not merely symbolic; the news from these provinces was detailed and voluminous.

Figure 1

Regional News Coverage during the Inaugural Month (September 6–29, 1923)



A quantitative analysis of its content reveals that domestic Chinese news (including Guangdong and Fujian news) often rivaled or even surpassed the combined space dedicated to world news and local Singaporean affairs. This editorial choice powerfully prioritized a shared cultural nationhood over territorial proximity, binding its readers to a "Cultural China" through the daily ritual of consuming news about national military, political, and economic affairs. In contrast, local Singapore news was predominantly filled with community announcements and social matters, constructing a hierarchy of news value that consistently centered the homeland. The consistent use of the Republican calendar, instead of the colonial or local chronology, further reinforced this symbolic alignment with China's political temporality, creating what Shu-mei Shih would term a Sinophone space (Shin, 2001)—a linguistic-cultural realm transcending political boundaries.

3.2 Operating a Diasporic Public Sphere: Agency, Conflict, and Adaptation

Nanyang Siang Pau functioned as a vibrant diasporic public sphere, a space for deliberation that mediated between colonial power, homeland politics, and global discourse. This role was not without conflict. Its early, vigorous political commentary on Chinese affairs, sourced through dedicated wires and submissions from China, led to a three-month suspension by British authorities who accused it of violating "neutrality." This early confrontation starkly highlights the constant negotiation required within the



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colonial context and exemplifies how diasporic media often operated as counterpublics under constrained conditions (Fraser, 1990).

In a strategic adaptation following its 1924 relaunch, the newspaper demonstrated remarkable agency. It renamed the "Domestic Important News" section to "Homeland Important News" and repositioned it after local Singapore news. This was a subtle but significant spatial concession to colonial pressure, visually downplaying direct political engagement while semantically and substantively maintaining its transnational focus on the "homeland." This move reflects the complex navigation required to sustain a public sphere under external political constraints.

The newspaper's agency was further evidenced by its exceptional speed in reporting Chinese national crises. It established efficient news-gathering channels, including dedicated wires and Reuters, enabling it to report the Mukden Incident on September 21, 1931, and the Marco Polo Bridge Incident on July 9, 1937—often faster than newspapers within China, such as the Putian Daily. It strategically utilized "extra" editions on non-publication days, like Sundays, to break major news, demonstrating a commitment to creating a real-time transnational information circuit that challenged conventional center-periphery models of news flow and empowered the diaspora with timely knowledge.

3.3 Constructing a Sinophone Counterpublic and Mobilizing Action

Beyond information dissemination, Nanyang Siang Pau crafted a powerful Sinophone counterpublic (Shih, 2001)—a discursive arena for articulating oppositional identities and mobilizing collective action against imperialism. Its coverage of the Japanese invasion was explicitly positioned and emotionally charged, employing distinct discourse strategies (Fairclough, 1995). Critical news was permanently placed on the most prominent pages (2-3) and set entirely in boldface type, creating a consistent visual urgency and psychological impact that distinguished it from all other content.

Its reporting was meticulously multi-dimensional. It covered not only frontline battles but also patriotic movements in Chinese cities like Shanghai and Guangzhou, as well as the activities of overseas Chinese and students, thereby constructing a comprehensive narrative of national peril and unified resistance. This discourse was often more assertive and less censored than that of domestic papers, a freedom afforded by the different political environment in colonial Singapore. A comparative analysis reveals this stark contrast: the paper's vehement headline "29th Army Vows to Perish with Lugou Bridge!" constructed a narrative of heroic resistance, while the Putian Daily's more conciliatory "Lugou Bridge Incident Peacefully Resolved" aimed to stabilize domestic opinion. This demonstrates the paper's role in fostering a more radical diasporic nationalism.

This mediated public sphere directly facilitated transnational mobilization. By consistently framing national crises and showcasing diasporic solidarity, the paper galvanized its readers. It translated the discursive "we" of the imagined community into concrete action, actively championing and reporting on the massive fundraising efforts led by Tan Kah Kee. It published donation records, organized relief funds, and promoted boycotts of Japanese goods, channeling immense financial contributions and moral support from the Nanyang Chinese to China. As historian Yong Ching Fatt notes, these efforts were crucial, with the Nanyang Chinese contributing the bulk of overseas funds



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during the War of Resistance (Yong, 1995). This affirms the tangible political impact of this diasporic public sphere, moving beyond discourse to enable tangible "connected action" across borders.

4. DATA AND ANALYTICAL METHODS: A SYSTEMATIC CONTENT ANALYSIS OF WAR REPORTING OF NANYANG SIANG PAU

To move beyond theoretical assertion and provide empirical substantiation for the role of Nanyang Siang Pau in constructing a transnational public sphere, this case study employs a systematic content analysis of its reporting during the initial, critical phase of the Second Sino-Japanese War. This methodological approach allows for a quantitative and qualitative examination of the newspaper's discursive strategies, bridging the macro-level historical narrative with micro-level textual evidence.

4.1 Data Selection and Coding Scheme

The study focuses on the period from July to September 1937, encompassing the Marco Polo Bridge Incident (July 7) and the ensuing full-scale war mobilization. A sample was taken from 12 randomly selected issues during the period spanning from the Marco Polo Bridge Incident (July 9, 1937) to September 18. This yielded 203 relevant items—including news reports, editorials, and donation announcements—which were then subjected to discourse analysis. A structured coding scheme was developed to systematically categorize content across four key dimensions.

Basic Information: Article genre and page location.

Content and Framing: Core issues (e.g., frontline warfare, overseas Chinese rescue efforts) and the primary interpretative frame (e.g., national survival, righteous resistance, overseas Chinese responsibility).

Identity Construction: Use of first-person pronouns and the primary collective identity invoked (e.g., member of the Chinese nation, responsible national citizen).

Transnationality and Mobilization: Geographical frame of reference, explicit calls to action (e.g., donations, boycotts), and strategies for navigating the colonial context (e.g., strategic evasion).

4.2 Analytical Procedure and Key Findings

The coded data were analyzed using a combination of descriptive statistics and cross-tabulation to identify significant patterns and relationships, yielding the following key findings.

Discursive Division of Labor: A clear division of labor was observed across article genres. While straight news reporting was predominantly framed in a neutral, informational tone (70.4%), editorials and donation announcements were overwhelmingly dedicated to mobilizing readers through the "Overseas Chinese Responsibility" frame (45.5% and 93.3%, respectively). This indicates a sophisticated apparatus where news provided the factual basis for action, while other genres explicitly drove mobilization.

The Framing-Action Nexus: The link between discursive framing and concrete



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mobilization was stark. Articles employing the "Overseas Chinese Responsibility" frame were 11.5 times more likely to contain an explicit call to action (85.7%) compared to those using a neutral frame (4.13%). This finding powerfully demonstrates that the newspaper's public sphere was not merely for deliberation but was fundamentally oriented toward generating tangible, transnational support.

Transnational Imagination and Identity: The newspaper's spatial imagination was overwhelmingly centered on China (73.89% of articles), powerfully anchoring the diaspora's attention to the ancestral homeland. The identities most frequently invoked were "member of the Chinese nation" (14.77%) and "responsible national citizen" (29%), reinforcing a sense of duty that transcended geographical distance.

Negotiating Colonial Constraints: Evidence of a "negotiated public sphere" was found in the newspaper's adaptation to colonial pressure. Over time, the use of "strategic evasion"—such as referring to Japan as "the enemy" or "a certain country"—increased significantly, from 4.3% in July to 18.2% in September. This demonstrates a pragmatic awareness of its operating constraints and a strategic effort to maintain its mobilizing function under colonial censorship.

4.3 Theoretical Implications and Conclusion

The data lead to three core conclusions that refine our understanding of the diasporic public sphere. First, Nanyang Siang Pau facilitated a practically-oriented public sphere, where discourse was intrinsically linked to material action, as proven by the strong correlation between specific frames and calls for donations. Second, it operated as a strategically negotiated public sphere, skillfully balancing nationalist fervor with the pragmatic necessities of survival in a colonial context. Finally, its consistent centering of China in its geographic framework while organizing action locally in Southeast Asia, challenges traditional core-periphery models and exemplifies a form of "subaltern globalization" from below.

This systematic analysis provides robust empirical support for the claim that Nanyang Siang Pau was not a passive node but an active architect of a transnational discursive space—one that performed the crucial work of imagining community, legitimizing action, and navigating power structures to support China's war effort.

5. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS: RETHINKING EARLY GLOBAL PUBLIC SPHERES

The historical trajectory of the Nanyang press necessitates a rethinking of conventional communication and public sphere theories, offering a non-Western, diasporic model of transnational discourse.

5.1 A Diasporic Counterpublic

The Nanyang Chinese press constituted what can be theorized as a diasporic counterpublic. It was a parallel discursive arena where members of a subordinated social group—a diaspora under colonial rule—invented and circulated counter-discourses to shape their collective identity. While Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" provides a foundational concept, the Nanyang case requires an expansion beyond the national container. Readers across Southeast Asia imagined solidarity with a cultural



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China defined by shared symbols and historical memories rather than territorial citizenship. This community was performatively constructed through daily reading rituals, public recitations at clan associations, and collective fundraising campaigns—constituting what Shu-mei Shih terms a "sinophone space." Critically, this space accommodated ideological pluralism (Reformist, Revolutionary, localist) within a broader framework of cultural affinity, challenging the homogeneity often assumed in national imagination.

5.2 Subaltern Globalization and Transculturation

The networks facilitated by the Nanyang press demonstrate a form of "subaltern globalization"—a polycentric global system emerging from the Global South. These networks of print media, remittance flows, and pilgrimage circuits operated parallel to Western imperialism, exhibiting a "modernity from below." This is evident in their vernacular innovation (e.g., pidgin Chinese-Malay journalism), flexible adaptation (using colonial infrastructure for anti-colonial or nationalist purposes), and transnational solidarity (e.g., pan-Asian coverage of Indian independence movements).

Furthermore, the press was a prime site of transculturation. It dynamically hybridized Chinese narratives with local and Western forms. Publications adopted Linotype technology while expanding Chinese character sets; they reported British parliamentary debates using Confucian bureaucratic terminology; and they reframed Western political concepts like the social contract through a Mencian lens. This substantive intercivilizational dialogue, mediated by diasporic actors decades before contemporary globalization theories, fundamentally challenges Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis and highlights the agency of non-Western actors in shaping global modernity.

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