

Knowledge among Nanyang Chinese and the Role of Newspapers 报纸与南洋华侨：围绕着“知识”的问题

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Introduction

This short paper considers the key issue of how knowledge of “homeland” and identity were shared and transmitted in the early-to-mid twentieth century among Nanyang Chinese (南洋華僑) in British Malaya and Singapore. This will be done by reviewing several advertisement articles and the tone of early publications of the Chinese newspaper, *Sin Chew Jit Poh* (星洲日報), published in Singapore.

For the past three to four years, I have been examining funeral announcement articles, *fugao* (訃告), which were inserted in *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, for the purpose of analyzing kinship relationships in Chinese-Malaysian society. Funeral announcement articles are anthropologically interesting materials to investigate in detail, since most of them appeared with rich information concerning the social relationships between the deceased person and their relatives, friends, and larger society. Most funeral announcement articles were published with fixed sets of information concerning the deceased person, such as the exact time of death, the cause of death, the place of origin in China, the name of the chief mourner, occupations of the chief mourner and other bereaved, company's names and positions, and names and kinship terms of the relatives, along with their places of domicile. In the case of any of the bereaved holding honorable occupations, such as medical doctor, lawyer, or accountant, occupational titles were also written. Furthermore, even academic degrees were shown. By analyzing such articles, we can catch a glimpse of Chinese-Malaysians' social networks.

In the process of collecting data for the study, I found that significant differences existed among earlier and present versions of *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, with respect to the manner of inserting advertisements, the way of composing articles, and the respective tones of the newspaper. On this basis, I believed it would be interesting to compare the differences between now and then. Therefore, the issue this paper addresses is part of my larger project concerning Chinese-Malaysians' identities. This discussion will be supplemented by another paper, dealing with historicity and social changes, which will be published in the near future, so as to understand Nanyang Chinese holistically.

In this paper, I would like to describe how the knowledge about “homeland” and emotional attachment toward mainland China was created among Nanyang Chinese by the desires and efforts of a business leader.

Nanyang Chinese Homeland and Aw Boon Haw

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Chinese who had migrated to southeast Asia, in the period from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, mostly originated from the southern provinces of China, such as Guangdong and Fujian.



Fig 1: Map of Homeland of Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia.

In the case of overseas Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia, the major dialect groups of the Chinese population are Hokkien (Fujian), Canton (Guangdong), Hakka (Kejia), Teochew (Chaozhou), and Hainan (Hainan).

According to the *Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas*, Fujian is second to Guangdong, its natives estimated, in 1955, to constitute a little over 30 per cent of all overseas Chinese in southeast Asia (3.7 million out of 12 million). The distribution of the Fujianese diaspora further distinguishes it from Guangdong: whereas the vast majority of Chinese in America came from Guangdong, Fujian sent most of its sons and daughters to southeast Asia.

In 1955, Fujianese in Indonesia and Malaya were 50 and 40 per cent respectively of the Chinese populations of those countries, while in the Philippines their proportion was as much as 82 per cent. Between 1986-90, they were said to be 55 per cent of all Chinese in Indonesia, 37 per cent of all Chinese in Malaysia, 42 per cent of all Chinese in Singapore, and no less than 90 per cent of all Chinese in the Philippines.

Although most Chinese abroad frequently take 'Fujianese' to denote Hokkien Chinese, the province is in fact home to other varieties of regional speech: eastern and northern Min dialects apart, it harbors settlements of Hakka speakers. Yongding (永定) is predominantly Hakka speaking (*Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas*, 1999: 31). Many Chinese originating from Yongding had ventured abroad, taking ships at Shantou or Xiamen for ports down south in Nanyang or, in a smaller number of cases, travelling overland, by way of the southwestern Chinese provinces of Guaxi and Yunnan, to Vietnam and Myanmar (Burma). Among the

best-known overseas Chinese of Yongding-origin was Aw Boon Haw (胡文虎).

According to the website based databank for overseas Chinese, Aw Boon Haw was a Fujian Hakka born, in 1882, to the owner of a Chinese herbal medicine shop, Aw Chu Kin, in Rangoon, Burma. In his early years, Aw Boon Haw was sent back to his home village, Yonding, for four years. After coming back to Rangoon, he studied traditional medicine in China, Thailand, and Japan, and then, along with his younger brother, Boon Par (文豹), took over the medicine shop from their father, Eng Aun Tong (永安堂). Until the 1920s, Aw and his brother expanded their business to much of southeast Asia, including Thailand, Dutch Indonesia, British Malaya, and Singapore.

Aw made a fortune with Tiger Balm, an ointment which became a very famous name in the Chinese world. Relocating to Singapore with Boon Paw, in 1926, Aw firmly established Eng Aun Tong's Tiger brand. Later it became known as Haw Par Corporation. He also expanded his business into newspaper publishing and banking. In 1929, Aw Boon Haw published the Chinese daily newspaper, *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, in Singapore, and he aimed to increase its sales in the region by printing advertisement articles.



Fig 2: Advertisement of Eng Aun Tong, printed in the *Sin Chew Jit Poh* for January 15th, 1950.

Aw Boon Haw also published other Chinese newspaper in several cities in southern China, such as Fuzhou, Xiamen, Shantou, Hong Kong, and cities in southeast Asia such as Rangoon, Bangkok, and Penang (in which a remarkable Chinese population existed). This was often called the 'star network' of newspapers (see Figure 3 below), because every newspaper was characterized, in some manner, by a "star" (e.g. *Sin Chew Jit Poh*'s 'sin' (星) means star). In 1950, Aw Boon Haw established Chung Khiaw Bank (崇僑銀行) in Singapore. The bank was operated by Aw Boon Par's son-in-law, Lee Chee Shan (李志城).



Fig 3: Map of the places where Aw Boon Haw published Chinese newspapers.

Newspaper Publishing as a Noble Obligation

Traditionally, Chinese newspapers (僑報) have been considered to be one of the most important social institutions, equal to clan associations (僑團) and ethnic schools (僑校), for the maintenance and promotion of Chinese culture among overseas Chinese communities. Also, newspapers were considered to be a powerful medium to promote increasing knowledge among people and to compensate for a lack of education among them (Liu 2002). Of the pages of the first issue of *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, we can identify several complimentary articles that praised *Sin Chew Jit Poh* as “a star newspaper” (報界明星), “the light of the press” (言論之光), “educates people” (保育國民), “leads society” (社會南針), and so on (see Figure 4 below).

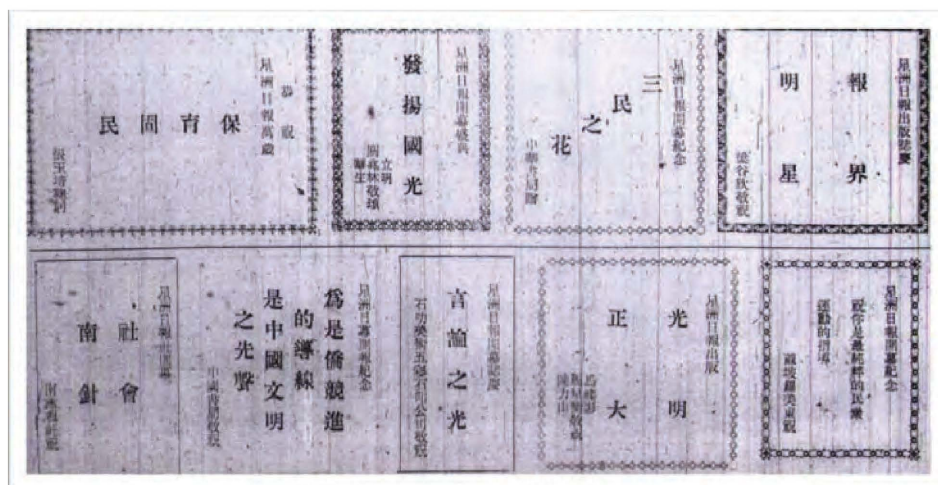


Fig 4: Complimentary Messages in the *Sin Chew Jit Poh* of January 15th, 1929.

There, we can see people's extremely high expectations for *Sin Chew Jit Poh*. At the same time, the newspaper's tone itself was very educational. For example, on the first page of the first issue, there was an article that argued for a better position for Nanyang Chinese in mainland China. Here, we can note their strong orientation toward mainland China, and feelings of belongingness to China. In contrast, such feelings are not expressed toward their current home, whether that was British Malaya or Singapore.

This tendency was also verified by the composition of the paper from the first issue of *Sin Chew Jit Poh*. The first pages were filled with news of mainland China, and news of their home villages (Fujian and Guangdong) followed from pages 10-15. After that, from page 15, local news, such as what was happening in Singapore, British Malaya, Dutch East India, Burma, Thailand, and the Philippines, then appeared.

By reviewing the first issue of the paper in this way, we can see that in its early stages, *Sin Chew Jit Poh* was supposed to be a newspaper that conveyed information to its readers concerning mainland China, even though it was published in Singapore. Furthermore, it was expected to improve patriotic knowledge of China and 'Chinese-ness' among Nanyang Chinese. This was prompted by the political leanings and preferences of Aw Boon Haw, who had supported the Chinese Nationalist Party, *Guomindang*, in the early Republic of China. In fact, the flag calligraphy of the *Sin Chew Jit Poh* was written by Chiang Kai-shek (蔣中正).



Fig 5: The first page of the first issue of *Sin Chew Jit Poh*.

Conclusion

In this brief paper, I have given an overview of how the knowledge of Nanyang Chinese of China and Chinese identity was oriented by newspapers. I have done this by reviewing *Sin*

Chew Jit Poh. For a tycoon such as Aw Boon Haw, publishing a Chinese newspaper for overseas Chinese communities was a kind of philanthropic business, carried out to educate working class people; however, it was also a part of his expanding business empire at the same time. For Aw Boon Haw, the owner of the famous Eng Aun Tong's, Tiger Brand Company, *Sin Chew Jit Poh* was a useful place in which to promote his medical products.

Even though located in a distant place physically, early Nanyang Chinese could immediately obtain much needed information about their imagined homeland, China, and their place of ancestry, by reading newspapers. Newspapers were thus a powerful source connecting Nanyang Chinese and mainland China emotionally in the early twentieth century. This patriotic, emotional attachment between mainland China and Nanyang Chinese was changed into localized identities gradually. This changing identity and 'Chinese-ness' will be discussed in another paper.

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