

The Impact of Lat Pau on the Evolution of Overseas Chinese Identity in Singapore during the 1911 Revolution(1911–1912)

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Abstract: *As the first Chinese-language newspaper in Southeast Asia, Lat Pau has exerted a great influence on the overseas Chinese community in Singapore and all-over Southeast Asia since its inception. Chinese living far away from their hometown still care about their home and country in Singapore. Chinese people's identification with China has always changed with the political environment, social environment and personal situation of Chinese people. The position and content of Chinese newspapers also have an important impact on Chinese people's identification with China. At the historical juncture of the 1911 Revolution, the Chinese broke away from their long-standing political identity as "subjects of the Qing Dynasty", and their identity towards China also changed. Lat Pau greatly promoted the evolution of Chinese identity towards China in Singapore in the process.*

Keywords: *Lat Pau; Singapore; Overseas Chinese; Identification with China*

1. Introduction

The Xinhai Revolution transformed China's political landscape that had endured for over two millennia, while also fundamentally altering the identities and livelihoods of its people. During this period, the evolution of Singaporean Chinese identification with China was inextricably linked to the profound influence of Lat Pau within their community. This paper examines the representative Chinese-language newspaper Lat Pau to address the question: How did Lat Pau shape the transformation of Singaporean Chinese identification with China after the Xinhai Revolution

Existing scholarship on "Singaporean Chinese identification with China" has yielded substantial achievements. [1]Wang Gungwu conducted detailed analyses of historical developments and diverse identity formations within the Malayan Chinese community, while Yen Ching-hwang provided an in-depth exploration of identity transitions through the lens of overseas mobilization during the Xinhai Revolution and social life in Malaya. [2]However, research examining post-revolutionary Singaporean Chinese identity through the perspective of Lat Pau remains insufficient. Building upon previous studies, this paper employs documentary analysis and case study methods to extract and analyze primary materials from Lat Pau, aiming to elucidate how this newspaper influenced the evolution of Singaporean Chinese identification with China following the Xinhai Revolution.

2. The Formation of Singapore's Chinese Community and the Founding Context of Lat Pau

Lat Pau was established in 1881 during a period of vigorous development within Singapore's Chinese community. By the mid-to-late 19th century, Singapore had emerged as a pivotal economic and trade hub in the Far East, attracting a significant influx of Chinese migrants who gradually formed a cohesive Chinese society in the region. With rising literacy rates and rapid population growth among the Chinese community, demands for Chinese-language newspapers intensified. Against this backdrop, Lat Pau emerged as a vital new platform for communication and exchange within the Chinese population.

The settlement of Chinese in Singapore dates to the 14th century, but it was after Singapore's establishment as a free port in 1819 that larger waves of Chinese migrants arrived to engage in commercial and productive activities. As more Chinese congregated in Singapore, the Chinese community gradually took shape. During this period, China under the Qing government remained mired in backwardness, anchored in a small-scale agrarian economy, while British colonial Singapore flourished as a thriving commercial center. Many Chinese in Singapore pursued business ventures, and the demands of this commercial growth spurred the need for a newspaper industry. [3]In 1881, the

Chinese merchant Xue Youli founded Lat Pau in Singapore, marking the birth of Southeast Asia's first Chinese-language newspaper.

3. The Evolution of Lat Pau and Shifts in Its Political Stance

At its inception, Lat Pau prioritized sustaining and cultivating the patriotic sentiments of Singapore's Chinese community over commercial gains. The newspaper initially focused on promoting traditional Chinese culture and moral values, frequently publishing Confucian teachings such as: "The essence of governance lies in winning the people's hearts... this depends on the ruler's policies as the standard, for schemes cannot secure loyalty, nor can punishments compel obedience..." Such texts subtly shaped the values of Singaporean Chinese. However, Lat Pau faced challenges in its early years. Its daily circulation stood at around 50 copies in 1881, rising to over 350 by 1883, and reaching 450 copies daily by 1894—a testament to its rapid growth. As readership expanded, Lat Pau's influence extended across Singapore and Southeast Asia, amplifying its role in shaping the political consciousness and identity of Chinese communities.

Prior to the success of the Xinhai Revolution, Lat Pau maintained a conservative, pro-Qing editorial stance. This was evident in its use of the imperial reign year "Year of Xuantong, Great Qing" on its masthead even after the revolution began, as well as its labeling of revolutionaries as "rebel factions" and revolutionary news as "chaotic reports from the homeland." However, one month after the revolution's outbreak in 1911, as revolutionary forces triumphed nationwide, and the Qing dynasty's collapse became inevitable, overseas Chinese communities—including Singapore's—closely monitored these shifts. Lat Pau abandoned the Qing imperial dating system in favor of the republican-era "Year of Xinhai" designation and realigned its editorial rhetoric to reflect revolutionary sympathies, signaling a conscious shift in political allegiance during China's transition from monarchy to republic. In a November 1911 editorial, it acknowledged the revolution's inevitability: "Should a republican government take root, the old regime will become obsolete and decay. History will never condemn today's abandonment of the Qing and revival of Han sovereignty..." This marked a stark departure from its earlier anti-revolutionary stance, reflecting not only the newspaper's pragmatism but also the Singaporean Chinese community's deep emotional ties to China and their acute awareness of its socio-political currents.

The transformation of Lat Pau's political alignment mirrored the broader evolution of Singaporean Chinese identity—caught between loyalty to ancestral traditions and adaptation to the realities of their adopted homeland.

4. The Role of Lat Pau in Shaping Post-Revolution Singaporean Chinese Identification with China

Since its founding, Lat Pau had been deeply intertwined with the lives of Singaporean Chinese, whose identity formation was profoundly influenced by the newspaper's values. Following the success of the Xinhai Revolution, Lat Pau not only revised its political stance but also played a pivotal role in reshaping Singaporean Chinese identification with China across multiple dimensions.

First, the newspaper strengthened intra-ethnic solidarity among Singaporean Chinese in a multiethnic colonial society. By fostering a shared discourse rooted in Chinese traditions and communal interests, Lat Pau reinforced a collective ethnic identity that transcended regional and dialectal divisions. Second, it amplified cultural identification with China through persistent dissemination of traditional Chinese thought, literature, and Confucian ethics. This cultural stewardship helped overseas Chinese communities preserve their heritage while negotiating their place in a foreign land. Finally, during the revolution, Lat Pau unified the Chinese diaspora by extensively reporting on domestic conflicts and revolutionary developments. These narratives cultivated a sense of ethno-national belonging, bridging geographical distances and reinforcing Singaporean Chinese emotional and political ties to their ancestral homeland.

Through these mechanisms, Lat Pau emerged as both a mirror and a catalyst for the evolving identity of Singaporean Chinese—mediating between their diasporic realities and enduring connections to China.

4.1. Uniting the Chinese Community and Strengthening Intra-Ethnic Identity

Ethnic groups, as defined by Max Weber, are "human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities in physical appearance, customs, or memories of migration and colonization. [4]This belief is vital for the propagation of communal solidarity beyond kinship ties." While sharing historical roots with the concept of "nation," ethnic groups lack the inherent political

dimension of nationhood, deriving identity instead from primordial emotional bonds. For Singaporean Chinese, ethnic identity encompassed their collective self-awareness and emotional allegiance to their shared cultural lineage.

By the early 20th century, Singapore's Chinese population numbered approximately 200,000, constituting 80% of the island's residents. This diverse community included merchants and laborers from Penang, Malacca[5], and the nearby Dutch-controlled Riau Islands; Hokkien merchants from southern Fujian's Zhangzhou-Quanzhou region; and waves of post-Opium War migrants from southern China. Despite their shared heritage, internal divisions plagued the community. Differences in dialect, regional origins, and economic interests frequently sparked violent clashes. For instance, in November 1906, a deadly brawl erupted between Hokkien and Teochew Chinese over communal disputes, highlighting the fragility of intra-ethnic cohesion.

In this fractious environment, *Lat Pau* emerged as a unifying force. The newspaper repeatedly editorialized against internal strife, urging: "As descendants of China, stranded in foreign lands, we ought to respect and care for one another. Why let trivial disputes divide us? Ignorant folk quarrel over minor disagreements, forming factions and breeding hatred. If fellow exiles devour each other, how can we blame outsiders for exploiting our disunity?" To model harmony, *Lat Pau* highlighted instances of cross-regional cooperation, such as the 1900 collective protest by Hokkien, Teochew, and Hakka tailors in Singapore, who successfully united to demand fair wages from employers.

By fostering narratives of shared destiny and mutual aid, *Lat Pau* cultivated a pan-Chinese consciousness that transcended parochial loyalties. This editorial strategy not only preserved ethnic solidarity but also enabled the Chinese community to thrive within Singapore's multicultural colonial society.

4.2. Preserving and Promoting Chinese Culture to Foster Cultural Identification with the Homeland

Cultural identity refers to the recognition of shared cultural elements among individuals or groups, manifested through the use of common cultural symbols, adherence to shared cultural values, and the upholding of collective modes of thinking and behavioral norms. Culture serves as the soul of a nation, and a nation's cohesion and centripetal force largely stem from its people's identification with their cultural heritage. Chinese culture, as the spiritual bond that unites the Chinese nation, has been naturally transmitted through mass media like *Lat Pau*, an early overseas Chinese newspaper. The national spirit, virtues, and values embedded in Chinese culture were disseminated and preserved through *Lat Pau*, enabling overseas Chinese communities in Singapore to maintain emotional ties to their ancestral homeland despite geographical displacement.

Lat Pau committed itself to preserving and promoting Chinese culture in Singapore, particularly emphasizing traditional moral education. Its editor-in-chief, Ye Jiyun, a scholar deeply rooted in Chinese classical traditions, infused the newspaper with his passion for traditional culture during his decades-long tenure. The publication regularly featured editorials grounded in Confucian doctrines and Chinese ethical principles, such as "On Educating the Younger Generation", which discussed parenting values; "On Honesty as the Foundation of Human Conduct", which underscored integrity; and "On Prudence in Friendship", which guided social ethics (Zhi Jingru, *The Emergence of Chinese-Language Newspapers in Southeast Asia: A Case Study of Singapore's Lat Pau*, *Today's Media*, 2012, p. 32). *Lat Pau* also collaborated with Qing Dynasty-backed literary societies like the Huixian Society and Tunan Society publishing monthly examination papers to encourage scholarly engagement with Confucian classics.

Furthermore, the newspaper boasted a cohort of culturally astute editors and writers, including Ye Jiyun and Li Tiemin, who produced literary works rich in national character—poetry, plays, and novels—that became vital channels for Singaporean Chinese to absorb cultural knowledge and refine their cultural literacy.

Through these efforts, *Lat Pau* ensured that Chinese culture took root in a foreign land, reconnecting overseas Chinese with their ancestral heritage and reinforcing their cultural identity. Under its influence, the Chinese community in Singapore resisted assimilation in a multiethnic society, preserving distinctive Chinese traits such as diligence, resilience, self-reliance, unity, and patriotism. These qualities became hallmarks of Singaporean Chinese, showcasing the enduring power of cultural identity nurtured by media like *Lat Pau*.

4.3. *Emphasizing Chinese National Unity and Strengthening Ethno-National Belonging*

Benedict Anderson's concept of nations as "imagined communities" links the rise of nationalism to print capitalism and mass literacy. In this framework, *Lat Pau* functioned as a critical instrument in constructing national identity. During the late 19th century, most overseas Chinese in Singapore labored as colonial underclass, enduring systemic discrimination exacerbated by the Qing government's failure to protect its diaspora. This systemic marginalization galvanized ethno-national consciousness among Singaporean Chinese, with *Lat Pau* playing a pivotal mediating role.

Singaporean Chinese mobilized multi-front resistance against colonial oppression, catalyzing collective ethno-national awareness. In the rickshaw industry, dominated by Chinese workers, colonial authorities routinely exploited drivers through arbitrary arrests and extortion. In 1897, rickshaw pullers organized a landmark strike—a rare show of solidarity against systemic abuse. Similarly, British efforts to suppress Chinese-language education (viewed as incompatible with colonial "civilizing" policies) met fierce resistance. Despite operating hundreds of traditional academies and modern schools that nurtured anti-colonial intellectuals, the community faced intensified crackdowns in the early 20th century, spurring organized protests for educational rights.

The opium trade, accounting for 49% of Singapore's revenue between 1898 and 1906, further united Chinese activists. Anti-opium campaigns culminated in 1907 with colonial authorities reluctantly establishing an Opium Inquiry Committee under public pressure. *Lat Pau* amplified these struggles, transforming fragmented grassroots efforts into coordinated movements through its reporting and editorials. Though often suppressed, these campaigns instilled a unprecedented sense of collective purpose, reinforcing the necessity of unified action for national dignity.

Simultaneously, China's deepening crises under imperialist aggression shaped Singaporean Chinese identity. As foreign powers carved up the Qing Empire, *Lat Pau*'s coverage of events like the Boxer Protocol (1901) stoked diasporic nationalism. The newspaper dissected China's existential threats, framing revolution as imperative for national survival. It introduced Western nationalist theories and analyzed China's subjugation, declaring: "Only through awakening the national spirit can we resist partition and reclaim sovereignty."

Revolutionary ideas spread rapidly through Singapore's Chinese press, reaching a crescendo post-1901. *Lat Pau* educated readers on nationalist principles, linking their struggles in colonial Singapore to China's liberation. This discourse crystallized a "concept of nationhood" among the diaspora, intensifying as Western aggression worsened.

5. Conclusion

Lat Pau's historical role as an ethno-cultural mediator during the Xinhai Revolution demonstrates how diasporic media function as both identity anchors and political catalysts. Its ability to reconcile ethnic solidarity with emerging ethno-national consciousness offers critical insights into the fluidity of transnational identity formation. Looking forward, four interrelated research trajectories warrant deeper exploration to bridge historical legacies with contemporary dynamics of overseas Chinese communities.

First, the transition from print media to digital platforms necessitates re-examining identity mediation mechanisms in the age of algorithmic personalization. Emerging platforms like TikTok and Huaren Toutiao have created decentralized, interactive spaces where diasporic users curate hybrid identities through cross-border content sharing and e-commerce engagement. The "scenarized storytelling" observed in overseas Chinese vloggers—blending localized daily life with nostalgic cultural symbols—parallels *Lat Pau*'s dual role as community chronicler and cultural translator, yet operates through fragmented, algorithm-driven visibility. Future studies could employ computational methods to map how AI-recommended content shapes ethno-national narratives among Z-generation diaspora, whose mobile-first media habits differ fundamentally from early 20th-century newspaper readerships.

Second, the concept of "virtual transnationalism" requires theoretical refinement. While *Lat Pau* facilitated imagined communities across geographical divides, contemporary platforms enable real-time, multi-directional interactions that dissolve physical-psychological boundaries. The rise of "cultural intermediaries" among TikTok influencers—such as cross-border families documenting cultural hybridization or migrant entrepreneurs bridging Sino-foreign markets—echoes historical media's role in negotiating identity tensions, yet introduces commercialized performativity and platform-dependent authenticity. Comparative analysis across media epochs could reveal how technological affordances

reshape diaspora-state-society triangulation.

Third, interdisciplinary methodologies must be prioritized to capture identity's multidimensionality. Psychological frameworks like Marcia's identity status model could quantify attachment shifts between ancestral heritage and hostland integration, while sociological lens on "platformed belonging" may decode how algorithmically curated content reinforces or fractures collective consciousness. The case of Huaren Toutiao's "Culinary Prosperity" initiative—leveraging 500 million views to revive diasporic gastronomic heritage—exemplifies how media-business synergies now drive cultural preservation, demanding political economy analyses beyond traditional media studies.

Lastly, historical-comparative perspectives should contextualize Lat Pau's legacy within broader Southeast Asian Sinophone media ecosystems. While Lat Pau's nationalist discourse resonated with Singaporean Chinese, Malaysia's Kwong Wah Yit Poh and Indonesia's pre-independence Chinese press navigated distinct colonial-imposed identity constraints. A cross-regional study could illuminate how varying hostland policies and generational shifts (e.g., post-70s new migrants vs. Peranakan communities) mediate media's role in sustaining Chineseness. Furthermore, examining Lat Pau's successors like Lianhe Zaobao—which strategically balances Singaporean civic identity with cultural Chineseness—may inform policies addressing contemporary tensions between diaspora loyalty and geopolitical sensitivities.[6]

By embracing these directions, scholars can advance a dynamic framework that honors historical media's transformative power while addressing digital-era challenges—from algorithmic bias in cultural representation to reconciling commercialized nationalism with authentic belonging. As 21st-century diaspora navigate polyphonic identities across virtual and physical worlds, Lat Pau's legacy reminds us that media remain both mirrors of collective memory and architects of future imaginaries.

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