

Flows of Ideas and the Imaginations of a Transnational Asia: China, Japan and Nanyang in 1908 and Beyond

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Since the 1980s, an increasing number of scholars have examined patterns and impact of intra-Asian dynamisms in the historical and contemporary transformations of both Asia and the world. New paradigms have shaped our understanding of global history from an Asian perspective, which is not only firmly grounded in local data and indigenous experiences but also informed by the region's long-standing interactions with the outside world. Most of these studies, however, tend to focus on intra-Asian interactions in the economic and social arenas; there is a need to pay greater attentions to the flows of ideas across different socio-political domains of modern Asia and how these flows have contributed to the imaginations of a Transnational Asia defined by its interconnectivity within the region.

This paper is a case study on multi-faceted interactions between China, Japan and Southeast Asia in the beginning of the 20th century. It focuses on the first Chinese-language magazine about the *Nanyang* (Southeast Asia) which was published Tokyo in 1908 by a group of Chinese intellectuals, *Nanyang qundao shangye yanjiu hui zazhi* (“*Magazine of the Nanyang Archipelago Commercial Study Association*”). Widely distributed in China and Southeast Asia, it stressed the role of the Nanyang, and paid particular attention to the part that could be played by Overseas Chinese in China's development, especially on the commercial front. The concept embodied by this journal represented, in embryonic form, modern China's new view of the Nanyang and transnational Asia. Taking this journal as a case analysis, this essay examines modern China's imagining and construction of the Nanyang in the early twentieth century and the view of Asia that it embodied. It also explores the ways in which this process was influenced by Japan's political and economic development and its diplomacy, and through it the fluidity of and reciprocal linkages with the modern concept of Asia against a changing historical landscape. Late-Qing intellectuals' imagining of Asia was largely produced by the Sino-Japanese or Sino-Western binary, but this magazine and the authors associated with it transcended this binary and constructed their imagining of Asia chiefly on multi-faceted and fluid grounds, re-examining regional relationships in Asia.

This paper concludes with a brief discussion of flows of ideas across Asia in the 1950s (Indonesian adaptations of China's “remarkable development experience”) and the first decade of the 21st century (Chinese officials' emulations of the “Singapore model”). These examples from different geographical domains and historical periods demonstrate the importance of approaching global history and intra-Asian dynamisms from the perspective of flows of ideas and people, which form a key foundation of an emerging Transnational Asia.