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The Ups and Downs of the Chinese Press in the US

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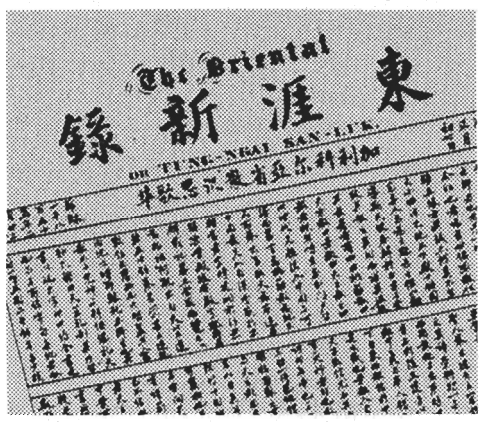
Many scholars date the beginning of the modern Chinese press from the publication of the first issue of Rev. William Milne's *Chinese Monthly Magazine* in Malacca on Aug. 5, 1815. This magazine used Western journalistic concepts and may be considered the first modern journalistic endeavor in the Chinese language.

Three decades later news of the discovery of gold became a magnet attracting thousands to California. San Francisco became the main port of entry.

The first Chinese language newspaper in the US.

In April 1854 the weekly ***Golden Hills' News*** began publishing with Chinese help. According to Howard, the publisher, the aim was "to relieve the pressure of religious ignorance, settle and explain our laws, assist the Chinese to provide [for] their wants and soften, dignify and improve their general character." This pioneer newspaper lasted only a few months before it was supplanted in 1855 by the ***Oriental*** or ***Tung-Ngai San-Luk,*** another weekly, founded by a Presbyterian minister, the Rev. William Speer.



The ***Oriental*** was intended to serve two audiences. A Chinese-language section was published for Chinese readers while an English section explained China and the Chinese to the non-Chinese community. At the end of 1856, Ze Too Yune, a missionary-educated Chinese, also launched what apparently was the first Chinese-language daily in the world, the ***Chinese Daily News,*** in Sacramento. These two newspapers failed after about two years, probably because the small Chinese community had a high illiteracy rate. Also, newspapers were still a novel concept to most Chinese.

The Chinese journalistic field was inactive for two decades, but in 1868, when the transcontinental railroad was well on its way toward completion, the US signed the Burlingame Treaty with China to open the door for much-needed labor for development of the West, especially California. Immigration increased and San Francisco became the major center for Chinese in America. As the community grew, there were renewed efforts to establish Chinese newspapers.

By this time, Chinese-language newspapers had been established in Hong Kong and some Chinese treaty ports. The decades from 1870 through the 1880s saw the rise and fall of a number of Chinese newspapers, now mostly Chinese-owned, in San Francisco. Some of these were ***San Francisco China News*** (weekly founded in 1874); ***Oriental*** or ***Wah Kee*** (weekly founded in 1875); ***San Francisco Chinese Newspaper*** or ***Tong Fan San Po*** (weekly founded in 1876); ***The Chinese Record*** (bilingual semi-monthly founded by Prof. Augustus Layres in 1876 to defend Chinese against the anti-Chinese movement); ***The Weekly Occidental*** (founded in 1881; changed to ***Daily Occidental*** in 1900); ***American and Chinese Commercial Newspaper*** or ***Sui Kee*** (weekly founded in 1883); ***The San Francisco Chinese Daily Evening News*** (founded in 1884). Many of these publications had only an ephemeral existence, but one, ***Oriental,*** in spite of numerous changes to its Chinese name indicating changes in management, published for almost three decades.

By the 1880s Chinese newspapers also began to appear in Chinese communities outside of San Francisco. In Honolulu, there was ***Hawaiian Chinese News*** (weekly founded in 1883); ***Wah Ha Bo*** (weekly founded in 1893); and ***Lai Kee Bo*** (weekly founded in 1895). In New York, Wong Ching Foo founded the weekly ***Chinese American*** in 1883 and then founded the semi-monthly ***Chinese American*** in Chicago in 1893 and the weekly ***Chinese News*** in 1896. In Boston there was the ***Chinese Monthly News,*** founded in 1891.

However, conditions for Chinese newspapers were favorable only in Hawaii since there were already more than 15,000 Chinese in the islands and more than 5,000 in Honolulu by the mid-1880s. Honolulu, therefore, quickly became a second center of Chinese journalism.

On the East Coast, the New York Chinese population was less than 1,000 in 1880, with most of them laundrymen living in scattered locations. By 1890, it had only increased to 3,000, while in Massachusetts and Illinois the Chinese populations were even less, at about 1,000 each. Despite zealous efforts, Chinese journalism did not take permanent roots in these areas.

The political environment in North America and Hawaii allowed the press relative freedom to express a diversity of views. However, Chinese newspapers during the 19th century were not strongly political. This situation began changing in the 1880s when the Chinese community in America was beset on all sides by the anti-Chinese movement. Chinese labor was banned from the US in 1882. Soon afterward both Canada and the Hawaiian Kingdom also restricted their immigration. Violence against Chinese flared up in many parts of the West. A small middle class influenced by Western republican ideology began to emerge in the community. They looked toward the building of a strong China and establishment of a government that could both act on their behalf and protect their interests in North America.

In 1898, Ng Poon Chew, a former Prebyterian minister, started the weekly ***Wa Mi San Po*** in Los Angeles. Two years later he and several fellow Christians raised sufficient capital to move to San Francisco and established the daily ***Chung Sai Yat Po.*** This newspaper supported the Chinese fight for civil rights in America and reform of the imperial system in China.

Ng Poon Chew

In 1898 in China, the reform party led by Kang Youwei issued numerous edicts in Emperor Guangxu's name to make fundamental changes in China's traditional system. But after a hundred days, the empress dowager led the ultra-conservatives in a coup d'état and imprisoned the emperor. Many reformers were captured and executed, or were banished to the frontiers. Others, including Kang Youwei, fled abroad in fear for their lives.

In 1899, Kang reached Victoria, BC, where he founded the China Reform Association, later known as the Chinese Constitutionalist Party (CCP), to voice support for the imprisoned young emperor and to work toward a constitutional government in China. The overwhelming majority of the Chinese abroad were sympathetic with Kang's ideals, and chapters of the association spread rapidly. The

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Reform Association thus became the first modern Chinese political party in North America.

The Reform Party recognized the importance of the press to advance its cause. After establishing a party chapter in San Francisco in 1899, Reform Party members converted the ***Mon Hing Bo*** weekly, founded in 1892, to a party organ. In 1899 the name was changed to ***Chinese World.*** The newspaper soon began daily publication and it remained a major voice in the San Francisco Chinese community for the next 70 years. Party organs were also started in Honolulu (1900), Vancouver (1903), and New York City (1904) to serve as part of the first political Chinese newspaper network. It was during this period that Vancouver and New York City joined San Francisco to become the third and fourth centers of Chinese journalism in the western hemisphere.

The reformers' feverish activities stimulated members of the Chee Kung Tong (CKT, also known as the Triad Society or Chinese Freemasons, a farflung South China secret society dedicated to overthrowing the Manchu Dynasty and restoring Han-Chinese rule to China) to establish newspapers in San Francisco (1903), Vancouver (1907), Honolulu (1912), and eventually in New York City (1913) and Toronto (1927).

By the 1900s, the Sun Yat-sen–led Revolutionary Party, which also advocated the overthrow of the Manchu emperor, began to compete earnestly with the CCP for the support of overseas Chinese. Like the CCP and the CKT, the Revolutionary Party and its successors, the Chinese Nationalist Party or Kuomintang (KMT) understood the importance of political propaganda. In 1903, party adherents began using Honolulu's ***Hawaiian Chinese News*** to advance their cause. Later, when the publishers showed a lack of enthusiasm, the revolutionaries established their own organ, ***Chee You Sun Po*** (***Liberty News***).

On the mainland, revolutionaries established a San Francisco weekly, ***The Youth,*** in 1909. In 1910 it changed to daily publication as ***Young China.*** In subsequent years, the Revolutionary Party and its successor, the Kuomintang, established the largest party newspaper network in North America with additional organs in Victoria, BC (1905), New York City (1915), Toronto (1916), Vancouver (1921) and Seattle (1921).

The early 1900s thus ushered in a new phase of Chinese journalism with China politics dominating the press. Chinese communities in the US and Canada became political arenas with the reformers on one side and the revolutionaries and their sympathizers on the other. It was not unusual for newspapers of differing ideologies to engage each other in editorial wars of words. Sometimes these extended for months and were spiced with frequent use of vitriolic prose.

After the 1911 Revolution, the political struggle continued with the main protagonists being the KMT and the CCP. However, the latter was now joined by the CKT, the revolutinaries' former ally, who had broken with Sun Yat-sen after establishment of the Republic. After the Kuomintang established the Nanking government in 1927, however, popular support for its two major rivals declined. The readership of their newspapers dwindled and one by one they closed their doors. For a time the CCP's ***The Chinese World*** of San Francisco, under the dynamic leadership of Dai Ming Lee, enjoyed a brief renaissance after World War II. However, after a financially disastrous move to establish a New York edition in 1957 and Lee's subsequent death in 1961, the paper went downhill and in 1969 ceased publication. By 1978 the remaining CCP organ, the ***New China Press*** of Honolulu, also closed its doors. A similar fate befell CKT newspapers in various cities. By 1980 the only Che Kung Tong voice was Vancouver's ***Chinese Times.***

As for the KMT, an internal struggle broke out in the party after its ascent to power in China in 1927. The KMT purged communists from party ranks. The "left" and "right" factions of the party established rival regimes in Hankow and Nanking, respectively. In overseas Chinese communities this schism manifested itself in the establishment of two party headquarters and two rival papers, representing a "left" and a "right" faction. In San Francisco the ***Kuo Min Yat Po*** (founded in 1927) became the "left" faction rival to the ***Young China,*** which supported the Chiang Kai-shek–dominated Nanking government. In New York, the "right" faction started a short-lived rival to the existing *Mun Hey Daily.* More successful rival newspapers were established in Honolulu and Vancouver. A new party organ was established in Chicago.

This intra-party strife continued until the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937, when all factions presented an outward façade of unity. During the war, the Kuomintang papers enjoyed what was probably the apex of their influence on Chinese American public opinion.

After V-J Day, as corruption and inflation in China became general knowledge among the Chinese abroad, there was widespread disenchantment with the KMT regime. Soon afterward the KMT was defeated by the Chinese Communists in the civil war and retreated to Taiwan. Greater opportunities for Chinese in Canadian and American society led to more participation in local and national politics. Thus, the influence of China politics waned. One by one, the papers closed their doors. By the mid-1980s only Honolulu's ***United Chinese Press,*** Toronto's ***Shing Wah*** and San Francisco's ***Young China*** were left. Even these were just pale shadows of their former selves wth very low circulations.

On the other end of the political spectrum the left-wing press in America dates to the beginning of the century, with socialist and anarchist publications circulated to a limited circle. it was only after the communists and their sympathizers were expelled from the Kuomintang after 1927 that the Marxist left established San Francisco's ***Chinese Vanguard.*** This newspaper subsequently moved to Philadelphia, settled down in New York City in 1930, and published as a weekly until 1938.

In 1940, supporters of the left, buttressed by the powerful New York Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance, established their first daily paper in New York City, the ***China Daily News.*** This newspaper supported the communist-led revolution in China, and in the 1940s enjoyed a wide circulation. However, during and after the Korean War it was harassed by the US government and by hoodlums hired by the Kuomintang. In 1955 its publisher, Eugene Moy, was convicted for alleged violation of the Trading with the Enemy Act. The atmosphere of fear generated by the anti-Communist hysteria of the McCarthy era caused a precipitous drop in the newspaper's circulation; it became a semi-weekly publication in 1963. However, in 1977, when US-China relations improved, the paper resumed daily publication.

On the West Coast, the ***China Weekly*** was established in SF in 1949. This paper, which supported the Communist Revolution, became a causalty of the Korean War when Chinese troops joined the fighting on the side of North Korea and the Chinatown printing company refused to continue printing the newspaper. It was not until 1969 that supporters of the People's Republic of China were able to establish another weekly, ***Chinese Voice.*** However, this paper strained its financial resources when it changed to daily publication. Internal dissension soon led to its demise in 1972. It was succeeded by the weekly ***San Francisco Journal*** which in 1983 became daily, but ceased publication on Nov. 15, 1986.

It should be noted that unlike the KMT party press, the left-wing newspapers are not officially designated as party organs. There are also a number of other non-party "independent" newspapers of liberal or conservative bent. The first such successful daily was the previously mentioned ***Chung Sai Yat Po.*** For many decades this newspaper spoke for the interests of San Francisco Chinatown businessmen and enjoyed wide circulation in the western US and Mexico before it ceased publication in 1951. Another influential newspaper is San Francisco's ***Chinese Times,*** the official voice of the Chinese American Citizens Alliance. It was founded in 1924 and, particularly under the management of Walter U. Lum, expressed the concerns of American citizens of Chinese extraction, especially with respect to their political and civil rights. In the eastern US, a similar role was played by the ***New York Journal of Commerce,*** representing liberal elements in the community opposed to corruption in the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association. Founded in 1928, one of its most notable accomplishments was the support it gave to New York laundrymen to fight discriminatory legislation during the early 1930s. The newspaper was sold in 1944 and became a KMT party organ, the ***Chinese Journal.***

During the postwar era New York became the center for the so-called independents, with the greatest number of such newspapers in North America in the 1980s: namely, the ***United Journal, China Tribune, China Post, Peimei News,*** and ***Sino Daily Express.*** While these newspapers claim no official connection to any political party, they do present the political views of specific interest groups that may be so closely allied to political parties that it is difficult to detect the difference.