Transnationalism, the Press, and the National Imaginary in Twentieth Century China

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Abstract
This article undertakes two tasks. First is a critical examination of the currently fashionable concept of transnationalism. The discussion takes up two prominent senses of transnationalism — crossing national boundaries and different nationalities coming together at the same location — and suggests that closer attention to concrete historical circumstances and consequences is necessary if transnationalism is to be more than a cliché. Analysis needs to distinguish transient encounters from more lasting transnational phenomena and “contact zones.” Secondly, the article takes up the idea of transnationalism within the historiography of China. It suggests that while the term may be novel, the idea is not entirely new within this historiographical context (as in most Third World historiographical contexts). Current usage needs to be mindful of historiographical precedents, and needs to clearly delineate the realm of the transnational in relationship to kindred concepts such as internationalism or imperialism. The article concludes with a brief
discussion of the necessity to critical usage of cognizance of the relationship between the transnational and the place-based.

I undertake two tasks below. First is to offer a brief discussion of “transnationalism” as a concept. The term appears these days as a keyword of cultural and political studies, and yet in its very fashionableness, may be destined for the incoherence and rapid obsolescence that seems to be the fate of many concepts in these times of conceptual inflation. Secondly, I offer a few thoughts on what the concept may have to offer in the study of twentieth-century China, with particular emphasis on the issue of the press taken up in this volume.

I suggest below that while “transnational” carries a multiplicity of meanings, which permits its variegated use, its most important (and radical) sense is that which raises questions concerning political and cultural identity — of individuals, ideologies, corporations, or the Chinese press in the twentieth century. To speak of a “transnational press” is to raise fundamental questions about the relationship of the press to the imagination of identity, in particular national identity: questions that have received much attention since the 1980s due in large measure to the influence of Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, with the relationship it established between national consciousness and “print capitalism” in classical nationalism in Europe.¹ On the other hand, it is important to remember that the study of culture and ideology in modern China (and the “Third World” in general) has been “transnational” all along, even if the popularity of the term is of relatively recent vintage, and so the use of the term in that particular context may be less radical in consequence than its use in contexts that presupposed autonomous development without reference to an outside, which long has been the dominant (and misleading) assumption in studies of Euro/American modernity.

It is also necessary for much the same reason to sort out connotations of terms such as international, multinational and transnational to get at a relatively concrete sense of the “transnational,” as well as some appreciation of what it has to offer that is not offered by its kindred terminology. Since the demise of revolutionary socialism in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), there has been a shift in scholarship from themes of revolution to themes of urban, bourgeois, modernity, and from the nativist cultural inclinations of revolutionary ideology to the “cosmopolitanism” of an urban bourgeoisie residing in the so-called Treaty