

## ***From Provincializing Tianxia to Constructing National Imperialism: The Place of Nanyang in Imaginaries of a New World Order in Late Qing***

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article examines the transformation of China's global positioning from the late-Qing dynasty through a "Global South" perspective, focusing on its evolving relationship with the Nanyang (South Seas) region. It challenges dominant narratives of China's modern history as a linear transition from Tianxia (All Under Heaven) to the nation-state, revealing instead a shift from "Provincializing Tianxia" to "Constructing National Imperialism." The study critically engages with intellectual discourses from key figures such as Wei Yuan, Liang Qichao, Yang Yunshi, and Yi Benxi, illustrating how early-Qing thinkers sought to integrate Nanyang into a strategic anti-colonial alliance, while later reformists and revolutionaries conceptualized it as China's "natural colony." By analyzing these shifting imaginaries, this article highlights the paradoxical coexistence of anti-colonialism and imperial aspirations in modern Chinese thought, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of China's role in Global history.

**KEY WORDS:** *utopianism, youth, intellectual trends, literary history, early modern China*

### Introduction

"Global South Studies" have garnered considerable attention in recent years. While interpretations of the term vary among scholars, there is a shared understanding that "Global South" serves as geographical and cultural concept encompassing regions historically and contemporaneously marginalized by colonialism, as well as an imperial dominance originating from the "Global North." This framework emphasizes "Global South as a method" as critical approach to empoweromg marginalized regions by addressing social, political, and epistemic inequities, thereby offering a reconceptualization of global history through an alternative spatial lens (Levander and Mignolo 2011; Schneider 2017).

At first glance, Global South Studies may appear indistinguishable from postcolonial studies, as both fields critique forms of centrism by examining historical and contemporary global power imbalances, advocating for marginalized voices. However, the defining characteristic of Global South Studies lies in its critique of postcolonial binary frameworks, categorizing the world into "West" and "East"

(Cheak and Hau 2022). Instead, Global South Studies reframe this division into “North” and “South,” offering a fresh perspective for analyzing global political, economic, and cultural dynamics persisting since the colonial era. Crucially, this shift facilitates a reassessment of established assumptions, such as China’s role and position within the global order. In very least, this approach allows for a renewed examination of China’s position within the Asian region.

Previously, within a framework of Anti-Western centrism, China was unequivocally considered the “Oriental Other,” peripheral to a West-dominated world, a “weak” entity colonized, invaded, and exploited by the West. However, if we adopt a fresh spatial perspective (South vs. North) by which to scrutinize global order since the 19th century, China’s position in the world appears nuanced, invoking the question as to “whether China belongs to Global North or Global South,” which becomes a debatable topic among scholars (Rojas and Rofel 2022). I suggest these debates are essentially an attempt to reposition China in the world. In discussing this question, scholars go beyond examination of intricate relationships between China (the “East”) and the “West,” focusing on China’s interaction with its neighboring regions as “the North.” This article aims to raise a discussion on how people in the late-Qing dynasty redefined China’s global position. Specifically, this text focuses on exploring how people in the late-Qing dynasty perceived, imagined, and reconstructed China’s relationship with the so-called “South Seas (*Nanyang* 南洋)” region in the new world order brought about by Western imperialism and colonialism.

This article examines China’s imaginaries of world order, as they have profound impact on intellectual and cultural trajectories of modern China—particularly its influence on the development of “Modern Chinese Literature (*Zhongguo xiandai wenxue* 中國現代文學).” This literary tradition is deeply intertwined with the nation’s efforts to establish itself as a modern nation-state within a reconfigured global hierarchy. As Jing Tsu (2005) observes, the construction of modern Chinese national identity and the emergence of modern Chinese literature were rooted in a profound sense of “humiliation,” stemming from perceived failures in competing with the West and Japan. Within this framework, modern Chinese literature is inseparable from the broader nationalist pursuit of resisting Western imperialism.

Until recently, some scholars have challenged the narrative that portrays China solely as the “victim” in modern history. They argue that Chinese history should be examined through a different lens, moving beyond the China-centered framework of “anti-Western imperialism” and “national

humiliation.” Shih Shu-mei, for instance, employs the “Global South” approach to examine the internal hierarchies within the Third World since the 1960s. She observes that even after China was compelled by Western powers to abandon its “Sinocentrism” post-twentieth-century, an unequal relationship persists between China and newly established nation-states in Southeast Asia (or *Nanyang* from the view of the Modern Chinese) within the marginalized “East” or “Asia” following World War II (Shih, 2016: 146).

More importantly, Shih further integrates this reevaluation of the unequal relationship between China and *Nanyang* into her “Sinophone” theory, serving to “interrupt” traditional approaches to the study of “Modern Chinese Literature.” Specifically, Shih argues that recognizing the presence of not only “China – West relations” but also “China – *Nanyang* relations” within the worldview of modern Chinese intellectuals reveals that “Sinophone voices from *Nanyang*” constitute a crucial element in many classical works of Modern Chinese literature (Shih 2010:474).

Shih illustrates her argument by examining how *Nanyang* is represented in the works of Zhang Ailing (張愛玲, 1920-1995) and Ding Ling (丁玲, 1904-1986), two of the most significant female writers in modern Chinese literature. In their novels, the *Nanyang* emerges as an exotic “Other,” often depicted as a space of “less moral” desires and sexuality. These narratives frequently reveal racial prejudice against both the indigenous peoples of *Nanyang* and the “Chinese diasporic communities (*Huaqiao* 華僑)” who have long resided there. Shih contends that past scholarship has largely overlooked this denigrating treatment of *Nanyang* in modern Chinese literature because scholars have been preoccupied with “discourses of failure, wounding, and victimization.” This obscures China’s enduring “imperial unconscious” towards the *Nanyang*. This “imperial unconscious,” Shih argues, stems from “historical legacy” inherited from the Ming and Qing dynasties—particularly a history of Chinese settler colonialism in the *Nanyang* following Zheng He’s (鄭和 1371-1433) voyages. Consequently, Shih interprets the treatment of the *Nanyang* in the works of writers like Ding Ling and Zhang Ailing as manifestations of a “colonizing mentality” (Shih 2010: 474-482).

This article acknowledges that Shih’s Sinophone theory, as a framework rooted in critically reflecting on various power dynamics, rightly and perceptively highlights the importance of addressing unequal, “center-periphery” historical relationships between China and *Nanyang* when discussing modern Chinese literature—or, more broadly, modern Chinese culture and intellectual history. However, this article also aims to point out that any discussion of the historical relationship between China and *Nanyang* and its influence on Modern Chinese people must be grounded in specific historical contexts. In this regard, Shih’s analysis tends to overly

simplify the relationship by conflating colonialism and imperialism, overlooking the more complex discourses and imaginations that late Qing intellectuals had about *Nanyang*. Consequently, her interpretation misses the fact that representations of *Nanyang* in Modern Chinese literature are not solely rooted in racialized prejudice or discrimination. For example, novels like *Little Po's Birthday* (*Xiaopo de Shengri* 小坡的生日) written by Laoshe (老舍, 1899-1966) offer a narrative of Chinese collaboration with other non-white ethnic groups in *Nanyang* to resist Western colonialism, presenting a more nuanced engagement with the region (Bernards 2015:59-70).

In summary, this article argues that if we are to follow Shih's approach in utilizing Sinophone theory to explore how "Modern Chinese Literature"—or, more broadly, "Modern Chinese Intellectualism and Culture"—inherit the so-called "imperial historical legacy," we must first clarify the complex historical perspectives that late-Qing intellectuals held regarding the *Nanyang*. To this end, this article examines the imaginaries and discourses on *Nanyang* articulated by four key figures: Wei Yuan (魏源, 1794–1857), Liang Qichao (梁啟超, 1873–1927), Yang Yunshi (楊雲史, 1875–1941), and Yi Benxi (易本義, 1887–1911). It argues that in late-Qing China, imaginaries of *Nanyang* underwent a transition I describe as "from provincializing 'all under the heaven (*Tianxia* 天下)' to constructing 'National Imperialism (*Minzu Diguo Zhuyi* 民族帝國主義)'. Although this article does not directly engage with the study of "Modern Chinese Literature," imaginaries and discourses on *Nanyang* by these four thinkers had a profound and lasting influence on subsequent generations. As such, this study tries to set a new historical context for reassessing the "*Nanyang* elements" within modern Chinese literary history in a bid for a nuanced intellectual and cultural history of modern China.

### Provincializing Tianxia: Against Western Colonialism by Chinese Imperialism

The Opium War of 1840 marked a turning-point moment in modern Chinese history. Britain's naval victory over the self-proclaimed "invincible" central empire represented the first major challenge by Western colonialism to China's traditional imperial order, compelling China to confront (or at least begin to understand) a new world order constructed by Western powers. For elite Chinese intellectuals, defeat in the Opium War created an acute sense of crisis driving them to seek ways to counter Western threat. It was against this historical backdrop that scholar-official Wei Yuan

completed his monumental work *Illustrated Treatise on the Sea Kingdoms* (*Haiguo Tuzhi* 海國圖志) in 1843, a text whose influence extends beyond China's borders into Japan.

Scholarly discussions of Wei Yuan's *Illustrated Treatise on the Sea Kingdoms* have long centered on his famous dictum of "learning superior barbarian" techniques to defend against the barbarians (*shiyi changji yi zhiyi* 師夷長技以制夷).<sup>1</sup> This work has typically been interpreted as marking the beginning of China's engagement with "Western learning" (*xi xue* 西學) and its departure from Sinocentric consciousness. According to this prevalent view, the publishing of *Illustrated Treatise on the Sea Kingdoms* represents a Chinese attempt to abandon any illusion of being a universal "Celestial Empire" (*Tianchao shangguo* 天朝上國) in favor of learning from a more advanced West. However, this linear narrative of modern Chinese history oversimplifies Wei Yuan's complex vision of a new world order, as well as his strategic thinking. More importantly, it overlooks a crucial historical reality. Even in the face of unprecedented Western threat, the Chinese consciousness of a "Celestial Empire"<sup>1</sup> proved remarkably resilient to Western impact.

A case in point emerged in the 1870s when Guo Songtao (郭嵩焘, 1818-1891), a senior Qing official, was dispatched to Britain on a diplomatic mission. His deputy, Liu Xihong (劉錫鴻, ?-1891), documented his observations and experiences in *The Private Diary of Diplomatic Mission to Britain* (*Yingyao Siji* 英軺私記).<sup>2</sup> Chinese scholars have long dismissed this diary, viewing Liu as an anti-modernization conservative whose writing contradicted the prevailing historical narrative of Westernization and progress. In particular, scholars often cite Liu's recorded conversation with a "Persian seignior" (*Bosi Fanwang* 波斯藩王) in England as evidence of his blind adherence to Confucianism and obstinate rejection of modern techniques. However, I argue that this conversation merits a different interpretation. Its true significance lies in Liu's confident assertion that the Qing Empire could swiftly restore its "imperial prestige (*guowei* 國威)" that once "awed the four barbarians (*weizhen siyi* 威震四夷)." Through this assertion, Liu encourages the Persian seignior to believe Persia, too, could revive its imperial glory through dedicated effort (Liu 1986: 140-142). This exchange between a Qing

1 I use the term "Chinese imperialism" to describe this consciousness, distinguishing it from Western imperialism or Western colonialism.

2 The term *yao* (軺) in Chinese originally referred to a lightweight, far-ranging ancient Chinese carriage, later becoming a metonym for diplomatic missions. Hence my translation of 英軺私記 as *Private Diary of Diplomatic Mission to Britain*.

official and a Persian envoy in London, discussing their shared predicament under Western hegemony, reveals a poignant moment of mutual understanding between two declining empires.

Liu's experience demonstrates Chinese intellectuals retaining their imperial mentality well into the half-century following the Opium War. Defeat in the Opium War served as a "wake-up call" for Wei Yuan's generation of intellectuals, forcing them to acknowledge China's position in a world where powerful empires like Britain existed in the distant "West." Their response was more nuanced than a simple abandonment of traditional worldviews. Although this new global awareness drove them to acquire Western military technology in preparation for future challenges, their pursuit of "learning from the West" did not entail abandoning their "imperial mentality" as subjects of the "Celestial Empire." Rather, my analysis of Wei's work suggests that while Chinese intellectuals acknowledged they were non-central, they continued to envision China as a powerful and influential "regional empire" within Asia.

More specifically, Wei Yuan and his contemporaries in the late-Qing period did not wholly discard the "consciousness of Celestial Empire" following their defeat by Western powers. Instead, they transformed or "provincialized" the "ideology of *Tianxia*," which had previously been conceived as a "universal value" applicable worldwide until the rise of Western colonial empires. By "Provincializing *Tianxia*," I refer to Chinese intellectuals' strategic retreat from attempting to incorporate Western empires within the scope of *Tianxia*, no longer willing them under the rule of the "Celestial Empire."

In other words, while the Opium War led Chinese intellectuals to acknowledge China was not the center of "world,"<sup>3</sup> they persisted in viewing China as a powerful "regional empire" within Asia. With this understanding, a re-examination of *Illustrated Treatise on the Sea Kingdoms* reveals that the text goes beyond merely advocating for "learning from the West." Rather, Wei Yuan proposes establishing a regional alliance with neighboring countries, especially those located in *Nanyang*, to collectively resist Western colonialism.

When we reassess Wei Yuan's *Illustrated Treatise on the Sea Kingdoms* through this lens, we find that the text transcends a mere call for the Qing dynasty to acquire Western technology. Wei Yuan recognizes that addressing Western maritime

3 Wei Yuan used the word "earth (Diqiu 地球)" to refer to "world" in his work.

challenges requires more than simply strengthening China's naval capabilities to enhance internal security. Guided by his persistent imperial consciousness, he astutely perceives that the fundamental threat to China's security lay not only in direct challenges such as opium imports or the British naval presence in nearby waters, but also in the disintegration of China's tributary system. The threat, in essence, was twofold: the disruption of the China-centered traditional maritime order in Asia by a new Western-imposed order, and the British Empire's challenge to China's status as the preeminent "empire in Asia." Consequently, in redrawing the map of the world in his *Illustrated Treatise on the Sea Kingdoms*, Wei Yuan devoted particular attention to strategic considerations regarding *Nanyang*, which he viewed as the core region of the traditional tribute network, rather than focusing primarily on Western technological advances.

Against the backdrop of Western powers' extensive eastward expansion, Wei identified *Nanyang* as a crucial arena of Sino-Western competition with profound strategic implications. He articulated this view in his *Brief Introduction of the Southeast Seas* (*Xu Dongnanyang* 敘東南洋), arguing that "understanding the *Nanyang* is the key to comprehending the Western countries." In this preface to the fifth volume five of *Illustrated Treatise on the Sea Kingdoms*, Wei observed that historical records documented abundant tributes from the countries located in *Nanyang* to China throughout periods of both unity and division pre-Qing dynasty. However, he noted that such records had become increasingly scarce in recent times, as Western powers (primarily the Netherlands, Britain, Spain, France, and Portugal) had transformed "all the strategic locations in *Nanyang* into Western settlements." (Wei 1852b: 2).

In *A Brief Introduction of the Southeast Seas*, Wei Yuan characterized the longstanding relationship between China and *Nanyang* as a "hierarchical tribute relationship," with China occupying the central (superior) position and *Nanyang* in a subordinate (inferior) role. He drew a sharp distinction between this hierarchical arrangement and a Western model of domination in *Nanyang*, where Western powers "fought for the shore, occupied the islands, built cities and ports, and stationed troops for defense" (Wei 1852b: 2). Although Wei Yuan did not explicitly use the terms "imperialism" or "colonization," his narrative effectively constructs a dichotomy between what we might call "Chinese imperialism" and "Western colonialism." His portrayal of the China-centered tribute system can be interpreted as a manifestation of Chinese imperialism, while his emphasis on Western military and political

aggression in *Nanyang* captures the essential features of early Western colonial expansion. These include the use of military force to secure colonial territories and the establishment of colonial institutions to maintain control. Wei Yuan elaborated on this contrast through detailed descriptions of various regions in *Nanyang*, further illuminating his conceptual distinction between Chinese and Western modes of imperial control.

I argue that Wei's work should be understood as his strategic imagination of Sino-*Nanyang* relations rather than an objective record of *Nanyang*. In his discussion of the history of China and *Nanyang*, Wei Yuan's primary aim was to reconstruct China-*Nanyang* relations as a "political, military, and trade alliance" through his selective interpretation of historical materials. He imbued this alliance with inherent moral legitimacy. While acknowledging China's position as the supreme authority, he emphasized the alliance's purpose was to establish mutually beneficial relationships promoting internal stability within each member state. This vision stood in stark contrast to Western colonialism in *Nanyang*, as Wei saw fundamentally unequal relationships between rulers and ruled, threatening regional stability. Wei Yuan identified two primary dimensions of Western threat to traditional tribute states: political-military and commercial.

In analyzing the political-military dimension, Wei Yuan focused particularly on the "coastal countries." These consist of the inner ring of states along China's southern periphery, including today's Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. His assessment of these countries' strategic value reflected a pragmatic calculus. While Western control of these territories could pose direct military threats to China due to their geographical proximity, maintaining strong tributary relationships with these states could transform them into vital "southern screens of defense" (*pingfan* 屏藩) against the expansion of Western colonial empires. Wei specifically highlighted Vietnam's critical role in China's maritime defense, noting its successful military resistance against superior Western forces as a model for Chinese strategy (Wei 1852c: 18). This utilitarian view of *Nanyang* as a strategic buffer persisted among late Qing intellectuals. For instance, when Wang Tao (王韜, 1828-1897) traveled through Singapore *en route* to England in 1867, he reflected, "If we could dispatch an envoy to these lands, demonstrate our benevolence (...) and inspire their willing allegiance and service, would this not constitute a maritime defensive screen for our empire? (Wang 1982: 67)".

Nevertheless, what distinguishes Wei Yuan's imagination of *Nanyang* is not

merely his utilitarian conception of it as China's "southern screen of defense," but his sophisticated understanding of the tribute system as a "reciprocal system." To justify the necessity of maintaining this system, Wei Yuan carefully articulated China's significant role and responsibilities in maintaining Asia's political order and security, while emphasizing the importance of mutual cooperation among tribute states in safeguarding regional stability. His discussion of Siam illustrates this perspective:

*The eastern region of Siam (Thailand), the Malay Peninsula, extends for thousands of miles into the sea. Malacca is a major entrepot for sea vessels, but it has recently fallen under the control of the British and other barbarians. They even moved the city of Malacca to Johor and renamed it Singapore. We (Chinese) urged Siam to send troops to recover Malacca and Johor, and with the aid of the Annamese and their armored boats, the English barbarians were worried about their internal security. (Wei 1852a: 5)*

This passage offers several significant insights into Wei Yuan's strategic thinking. First, he reconceptualized the traditional "distinction between Hua and the barbarians" (*Huayi zhi bian* 華夷之辯) by incorporating Siam and Annam, which were formerly categorized as "barbarians," into the tribute system under the influence of "Hua." In his framework, these states now belonged to the "Hua" sphere of influence and could unite with China against England, which he deliberately designated as "barbarian." Moreover, Wei Yuan characterized England's activities in the Malay Peninsula and Malacca as aggressive incursions into Thailand's legitimate sphere of influence. Consequently, he argued that China and Annam bore a responsibility to assist Thailand in reclaiming its territory, framing this obligation within the mutual commitments of the tribute system. Through this narrative construction, Wei Yuan portrayed the Chinese Empire's tribute system as fundamentally beneficial to its member states, in stark contrast to Western powers' activities that threatened territorial integrity and security of Southeast Asian nations. This rhetorical strategy sought to legitimize the China-centered tributary system in *Nanyang* by emphasizing mutual benefits rather hierarchies.

As Leonard astutely observes, Wei Yuan further justifies the maintenance of the traditional tribute system through the lens of intra-Asian trade and commercial development. He viewed trade as a vital link between China and *Nanyang*, one that Western intervention had severely disrupted. In Wei Yuan's analysis, pre-Western Asian trade was characterized by rec-

iprocity and mutual benefit, with China's tribute trade system fostering a relatively free and open commercial environment. In contrast, Western powers employed their naval supremacy to dismantle these traditional Asian trade networks, transforming formerly equitable commercial relationships into exploitative ones, as exemplified by the Opium Trade (Leonard 1984: 148-149).

In conclusion, In his *Illustrated Treatise on the Sea Kingdoms*, Wei Yuan sought to revitalize a China-centered traditional tribute system in *Nanyang* as a counterbalance to Western military and commercial power. While his position as an imperial official inevitably informed his imperial mentality and sense of superiority, Wei Yuan nonetheless demonstrates a clear understanding of a power differential between China and the West. He contrasts Western governance in *Nanyang*, which he saw as threatening the interests and security of both countries in *Nanyang* and China, with China's approach of fostering reciprocal benefits in military, political, cultural, and commercial spheres without resorting to naval coercion.

Consequently, it would be reductive to dismiss the Chinese intellectuals' vision of "restoring the traditional Asian tribute order" during Wei Yuan's era as mere "conservatism" or "rejection of modernity." Instead, having recognized the expansionist nature of early Western colonialism, they sought to reintegrate *Nanyang* into China's regional network by reimagining it as a strategic bulwark, aiming to ensure stability, security, and prosperity for both China and states in *Nanyang*. Thus, Wei Yuan's *Illustrated Treatise on the Sea Kingdoms* constructs a narrative that frames Chinese imperialism as a mechanism for fostering mutual benefit while resisting the aggressive nature of Western colonialism.

### Constructing National Imperialism: Imaging *Nanyang* as Natural Colony

The development of modern Chinese history witnesses Wei Yuan's strategic vision of cooperation with states in *Nanyang* and his concept of "provincializing *Tianxia*" remaining unrealized. Western colonial influence in *Nanyang* continued to expand, with encroachment on China's sovereignty, political autonomy, military capability, and cultural sphere intensifying progressively. In the aftermath of China's defeat in the 1895 First Sino-Japanese War, a new generation of intellectuals including Yan Fu (嚴復, 1854-1921), Liang Qichao, Kang Youwei (康有為, 1858-1927), and

Liu Shipei (劉師培, 1884-1919) began to fundamentally reassess China's position, particularly regarding the decline of the tribute system and the ascendancy of Western colonialism. These issues had preoccupied Wei Yuan. Unlike their predecessors who maintained faith in establishing a Chinese Empire-centered Asian order, these late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century intellectuals began to question the viability of Chinese imperial hegemony. The humiliation of the Sino-Japanese War arguably cemented China's image as a "victim," leading many historians to identify this period as the moment when Chinese intellectuals abandoned their "imperial fantasy" in favor of constructing a "nation-state" and promoting nationalism to resist Western colonial empires (Jin and Liu 2009:226-251; Zarrow 2012).

Generally, the global impact of Western colonialism throughout the 19th century, coupled with the rise of anti-colonial movements among emerging nation-states in the early 20th century, has shaped a historiographical tendency to conflate "colonialism" with "empire" and to position the "nation-state" in opposition to the colonialism. This framework has led to the widespread acceptance of a narrative that charts modern Chinese history as a transition from "Celestial Empire" to "Nation-State." Yet this narrative is complicated by Liang Qichao's early writings *On the General Tread of National Competition* (*Lun Minzu Jingzheng Zhi Dashi* 論民族競爭之大勢) which frequently employed the seemingly paradoxical concept of "national imperialism" (*Minzu diguo zhuyi* 民族帝國主義). Liang argued that achieving the status of a strong nation-state required first establishing a powerful imperial colonial empire, noting that Western nations had achieved their power through imperialist policies and overseas expansion (Liang 1994a:10-34). Following this logic of national imperialism, many intellectuals, including Liang, advocated for the colonization of *Nanyang* as a means of acquiring overseas territories to counter Western countries. These discussions reveal how the emphasis on "sovereignty" and "territory" in constructing nationalism and the nation-state simultaneously fueled Chinese aspirations for territorial expansion.

While Wei Yuan perceptively understood the aggressive and expansionist nature of early Western colonialism, he never explicitly employed the term "colonialism" in his work. However, by the 1890s, this term began to appear with increasing frequency in Chinese intellectual discourse (Pan 2013). This shift reflected a growing tendency among Chinese intellectuals of the late 19th and early 20th centuries to view colonialism as a positive force for national development and global influence.

Paradoxically, they came to believe that achieving a truly “decolonized” nation-state required the capacity to colonize others. Thus, by the turn of the century, “colonialism” had not only become a frequent topic in Chinese intellectual discourse but had acquired distinctly positive connotations.

Shih Shu-mei (2010: 475-478) posits that an “imperial unconscious” reveals historical continuity in the thought of modern Chinese people, arguing that Liang Qichao’s concept of “national imperialism” (exemplified by his advocacy for colonizing *Nanyang*) stems directly from China’s “imperial legacy.” I offer, however, an alternative interpretation. I argue that Liang’s idea of “national imperialism” marked not a continuation but a fundamental rupture with traditional Chinese imperial thought. Specifically, Liang’s ideas emerged from his critique of “Chinese imperialism” and the “Chinese imperial mindset,” embracing Western colonial practices that Wei Yuan had explicitly repudiated. This represents not an inheritance of traditional imperial thinking, but rather its radical transformation.

The divergence between Liang Qichao and Wei Yuan’s perspectives on “Chinese imperialism” and “Western Colonialism” becomes evident through comparative analysis. In 1904, Liang Qichao published a scathing critique of the tribute system that Wei Yuan had sought to preserve. In *The Great Navigator of Our Homeland, Zheng He* (*Zuguo Dahanghai jia Zhenghe* 祖國大航海家鄭和), Liang praised Zheng He’s seven maritime expeditions as achievements comparable to those of Columbus, while condemning the foreign policies of the Ming Dynasty and its successors. He argued that despite having exceptional navigators like Zheng He, China’s rulers merely sought “meaningless reputations for their own amusement by cherishing people from afar and warmly welcoming envoys from all nations” (Liang 1994d:11).

In essence, Liang Qichao fundamentally reinterpreted the tribute system that Wei Yuan had valorized for its strategic significance, dismissing it as merely an instrument for satisfying monarchical vanity that neither served China’s national interests nor addressed its pressing challenges. Moreover, Liang reversed Wei Yuan’s moral condemnation of Western colonial expansionism. He argued that China’s current predicament of “long subordination to others” stemmed precisely from its lack of this “expansionist” spirit, suggesting that even the emergence of exceptional figures like Zheng He throughout Chinese history could not compensate for this fundamental deficiency of Chinese spirit (Liang 1994d: 11-12).

Liang Qichao further articulated his understanding of national imperialism, Western colonialism, and Chinese imperialism in *The Joint Biography of Zhang Bowang and Ban Dingyuan* (*Zhang Bowang Ban dingyuan hezhuan* 張博望班定遠合傳). In this account of two Han Dynasty figures who expanded imperial frontiers, Liang drew explicit parallels between them and British colonial agents, arguing that Zhang and Ban not only matched but surpassed their British counterparts, embodying what he termed “the ideal model of our national imperialism” (Liang 1994b: 9-13).

This text reveals Liang’s systematic attempt to synthesize state expansionism, imperialism, and colonialism into a coherent ideological framework. Departing from Wei Yuan’s advocacy for preserving the Chinese Empire’s tribute trade system, Liang dismisses its practical utility for China’s present circumstances. He draws a critical distinction between traditional tributary states and modern colonies, arguing that the former contributed little to China’s developmental imperatives and struggle for survival (Liang 1994b:15-16). Instead, Liang advocated emulating Western imperial and colonial expansion, remarkably recasting it as a manifestation of civilizational advancement (Liang 1994b:1).

The contrasting perspectives of Liang Qichao and Wei Yuan on Western colonialism reflect not merely their individual ideological differences, but broader shifts in Chinese intellectual discourse across different historical periods. Wei Yuan’s strategic vision, shaped by his position as a government official, led him to simultaneously advocate “learning superior barbarian” techniques to defend against the barbarians” while emphasizing political stability and trade reciprocity within Asia. However, as Benjamin Schwartz (1964) notes, by Liang Qichao’s era, the priorities of the Chinese had fundamentally shifted toward “the pursuit of wealth and power for China itself (*xunqiu fuqiang* 尋求富強).” Schwartz traces this transformation to the aftermath of the 1895 Sino-Japanese War, when Yan Fu introduced Social Darwinist theories through a series of influential articles.

Influenced by these theories introduced by Yan Fu, Liang Qichao argued that competition constitutes a fundamental principle of human society, warning China’s failure to progress may lead to “national and ethnic extinction (*wangguo miezhong* 亡國滅種).” Consequently, China’s paramount task became the “struggle for existence (*zheng zicun* 爭自存).” Within this framework, Liang contended that the Chinese “new citizen” must cultivate an “enterprising and adventurous spirit” matching that of Westerners. His synthesis of this adventurous ethos with Social Darwinist principles of “survival of the fittest” led him to a striking theory: the assertion that evolutionist law naturally sanctioned “the rule of civilized

nations over barbarous nations” (Liang 1994b:1).

Significantly, Liang Qichao radically reframed external expansion from the immoral behavior that Wei Yuan had condemned into a “moral” imperative sanctioned by natural law. While Liang shared Wei Yuan’s basic observation about Western colonial expansion’s nature in appropriating land and resources from colonized peoples, their responses diverged fundamentally. Where Wei Yuan had advocated for the traditional tribute system’s mutual benefits over Western colonialism, Liang Qichao, guided by Social Darwinist principles, explicitly endorsed external expansion and colonization. Indeed, Liang argued that such colonial expansion were the primary driver of Western empires’ current wealth and power.

Having embraced colonial expansion as both necessary and legitimate, Liang Qichao confronted a crucial question: how could China overcome Western domination and achieve parity with or even supremacy over Western nations in a world where colonial expansion, driven by an “enterprising and adventurous spirit,” had become the key to global power? Despite his significant ideological departures from Wei Yuan, Liang similarly identified *Nanyang* as the answer to China’s predicament. If the path to “wealth and power” required external expansion (particularly maritime expansion), then *Nanyang*, with its geographical proximity and historical connections to China, presented the logical starting point for Chinese colonial ambitions. This thinking culminated in Liang’s 1904 work *Biographies of China’s Eight Great Colonial Heroes* (*Zhongguo Zhimin Bada Weiren Zhuan* 中國殖民八大偉人傳), where he emphatically declared that “Whether from the standpoint of geography or history, *Nanyang* is the natural colony of our people” (Liang 1994c:5).

While Wei Yuan legitimized the tribute system through historical analysis of Sino-*Nanyang* relations, Liang Qichao constructed a parallel narrative by chronicling the colonial exploits of eight “Great Heroes” in *Nanyang*, whom he portrayed as equals to European colonizers. Rather than providing objective historical documentation, Liang’s account served a clear rhetorical purpose. Firstly, by highlighting these “Great Heroes,” he sought to bolster Chinese national confidence—demonstrating that the disparities between Chinese and Western people was not insurmountable and that China retained the potential to match Western achievements. Secondly, he deployed these “historical facts” to support his claim that “*Nanyang* [has] natural colonies of our people.” This argued that China’s historical colonial presence in *Nanyang* legitimized current and future Chinese colonial aspirations in the region as a means of competing with Western powers.

Although Liang Qichao never explicitly defined “colonization,” his criteria for selecting “colonial heroes” revealed his understanding of the concept. His “pantheon” included diverse figures—military leaders in exile, rebellious outlaws, and secret society chiefs who established small military kingdoms. Despite their varied backgrounds, these figures shared key characteristics: they all achieved territorial leadership in *Nanyang* and demonstrated willingness to employ violence to protect interests the *Nanyang* Chinese community, whether against indigenous peoples or Western colonizers. A telling example is his account of “Ye Lai, pioneer of the British Straits Settlements colonization.” Liang described how Ye led Chinese settlers in conflicts with local “barbarians” and British forces to defend “territorial sovereignty.” However, lacking Qing government support, Ye ultimately had to surrender “territorial sovereignty” while retaining mere “land ownership,” submitting to British colonial authority through annual taxation (Liang 1994c: 3). Notably, none of these would-be colonizers succeeded in establishing lasting colonial control that persisted into the late Qing period.

Fundamentally, Liang Qichao conceptualized colonialism as the forceful establishment of political power through military conquest, viewing it as the wellspring of Western power. This marked a stark contrast with Wei Yuan’s vision half a century earlier of a tribute system predicated on mutual benefit and peaceful coexistence. By Liang’s era, Chinese intellectuals openly championed military-backed colonial expansion, celebrating “heroes” who forcibly subjugated indigenous populations. Their reimagining of *Nanyang* had become deeply inflected by Western colonial discourse and racial hierarchies—paradoxically, even as China itself remained subject to imperial aggression.

In the early twentieth century, Liang was not the only intellectual proposing that China could colonize *Nanyang* in a Western Manner. As Prasenjit Duara (1997) notes, three distinct political factions—the Qing government, the reformers and the revolutionaries—sought support in *Nanyang* during the late Qing period. Beyond Liang Qichao’s reformist vision, both Yang Yunshi of the Qing government and Yi Benxi of the revolutionary developed their own colonial imaginaries for *Nanyang*.

During his tenure as secretary at the Chinese consulate in Singapore in 1907, Yang Yunshi composed several Classical-Style Chinese poems chronicling his *Nanyang* experiences. His most significant work, completed in 1910, was a lengthy poem titled *Lament of the South Seas* (*Ai Nanming* 哀南溟), which, along with its

extensive preface, articulated his vision of Chinese colonial aspirations in *Nanyang*. In the preface, Yang echoed Liang Qichao's narrative of "great heroes" who had "dominated the Nanyang region" throughout four centuries. Significantly, he referenced the same historical figures as Liang had, including Liang Daoming (梁道明), Lin Daoqian (林道乾), Luo Fangbo (羅芳伯), and Ye Lai (葉來). All of these individuals appeared in Liang's *Biographies of China's Eight Great Colonial Heroes*. Following this recounting of Chinese dominion over *Nanyang*, Yang's tone underwent a marked shift from exuberance to lamentation:

*For four hundred years, there have been great heroes who ruled the Nanyang region. Our people have dominated and claimed power, and we have had many overseas hegemonies. At that time, China was at its peak, and the barbarians were trembling. If we could subdue them, our descendants would be like lords of foreign lands. However, today, the British have control over fifty thousand square miles, and the Dutch have control over seven hundred and thirty thousand square miles. The islands of Nanyang could have been a part of China. However, the authorities were blind to the situation, lacking far-sightedness and sitting idly by as they missed opportunities. This led to the Chinese warlords with nowhere to turn and no retreat, either falling into the hands of the British and Dutch or being invaded by the locals. (Yang, 2003: 67).*

In this passage, Yang Yunshi parallels Liang Qichao's historical interpretation. He maintains that throughout history, China had produced numerous heroes who undertook colonial ventures in *Nanyang*. However, he criticized the Qing government's indifference to these pioneers, leaving them without official support. In his view, the government's myopic focus on maintaining a superficial tribute system that merely secured nominal submission from "barbarians" to the Central Empire squandered opportunities to consolidate territories once governed by overseas Chinese under formal Chinese sovereignty. This failure, he argued, ultimately led to the loss of Chinese influence in *Nanyang* to Western colonial powers.

While Yang Yunshi's alignment with Liang Qichao's colonial narrative might seem natural given their shared experience of governmental service, more striking was its influence on Yi Benxi (Also known as *Xihuang zhengyin* 羲皇正胤), a committed revolutionary. In his 1910 article *A Short History of the South Seas Chinese (Nanyang Huaqiao Shilüe* 南洋華僑史略), published in *Minbao* (民報), Yi directly incorporated Liang's *Biographies of China's Eight Great Colonial Heroes*. Though Yi similarly celebrated the historical legacy of Chinese colonial heroes in *Nanyang*, he offered a more explicit definition of "colonization," characterizing these

figures as colonizers specifically because they had “claimed thrones” (Chengwang 稱王), “conquered barbarians” (Zhengfu manqiu 征服蠻酋), and “opened up land” (*Kaipi tudi* 開闢土地) through military force (Xi 1910b: 10).

Yi Benxi, who championed the cause to “expel the Manchus and restore Han rule (*Quchu dalu huifu zhonghua* 驅除韃虜恢復中華),” developed a distinctive colonial narrative that diverged from both Liang Qichao and Yang Yunshi. While Liang and Yang criticized Chinese dynasties for their passive policy of “Cherishing Men from Afar” and failure to support colonial ventures, Yi located the suppression of Chinese colonial expansion specifically in the Qing dynasty’s maritime ban policy, which he argued aimed to eliminate Han people who had fled overseas following the Ming collapse (Xi 1910a: 32-35).

Yi emphasized that *Ming Taizu* (明太祖) and *Ming Chengzu* (明成祖) had actively pursued territorial expansion and colonization in *Nanyang*. He highlighted how they dispatched Zheng He to “capture barbarian kings, subjugate over thirty countries, establish imperial authority, protect merchants and travelers, and spread their renowned reputation overseas.” Consequently, Yi celebrated *Ming Taizu* and *Ming Chengzu* as “the most glorious heroes in the history of Chinese colonization.” He further argued that later “great heroes” succeeded in establishing colonies in *Nanyang* largely due to the prestige that the Ming dynasty had established for Han people in the region (Xi 1910a: 18-25).

This interpretation stands in contrast to Liang Qichao’s dismissal of *Ming Taizu* and *Ming Chengzu*’s achievements as mere “bubble reputation” derived from the tribute system and Zheng He’s voyages. Where Yi Benxi emphasized Zheng He’s military subjugation of *Nanyang* peoples, Liang downplayed this aspect. These divergent historical narratives served distinct ideological purposes. Liang advocated cultivating a new “spirit of adventure and exploration,” while Yi argued that Han people would naturally reclaim their colonial legacy upon overthrowing Qing rule.

Despite their varying historical interpretations, Liang Qichao, Yang Yunshi, and Yi Benxi shared a fundamental understanding of “colonialism” as inherently militaristic, predicated on the use of force for territorial expansion and, when necessary, confrontation with both indigenous peoples and Western powers. This conception of colonialism as essentially violent marked a significant departure from Wei Yuan, who remained less influenced by Western colonial ideology.

## Conclusion

Scholars widely acknowledge that China's encounter with the West in the early nineteenth century precipitated a fundamental reimagining of its position in the world order. The traditional Chinese worldview, known as the "ideology of 'all under heaven'" (*Tianxia Guan* 天下觀), which positioned China as the privileged "Middle Kingdom," gradually gave way to a new understanding as Western powers forced China into an "international treaty system." This transformation is often characterized as a linear progression "from *Tianxia* to a modern worldview" (從天下觀到世界觀), and "from empire to nation-state" (從帝國到民族國家) (Luo 2008). However, by adopting a "Global South" perspective to examine late Qing discourse on the relationship between "North" China and the "South" *Nanyang* region, this article reveals a more complex, bifurcated historical process.

Through close analysis of texts ranging from Wei Yuan's *Illustrated Treatise on the Sea Kingdoms* to Liang Qichao's discourse on "Colonizing *Nanyang*," this study demonstrates that late-Qing history encompasses more than a simple transition "from *Tianxia* to the world" or "from empire to nation-state." Neither can it be reduced to what Shih Shu-mei characterizes as a mere continuation of "imperial mentality." Rather, it reveals a distinct trajectory "from Provincializing *Tianxia* to Constructing National Imperialism." This complex historical moment saw unprecedented interactions between the Chinese empire, Western colonizers, and *Nanyang*, generating sophisticated intellectual engagements with concepts of *Tianxia*, imperialism, colonialism, and the nation-state.

In the aftermath of the Opium War, leading intellectuals including Wei Yuan, Liang Qichao, Yang Yunshi, and Yi Benxi all identify *Nanyang* as crucial to China's future, though they conceptualize its importance differently. While Wei Yuan develops a theory of "anti-colonial imperialism," Liang Qichao advocates for "national imperialism." These varying perspectives offer valuable insights for reassessing Western colonial expansion in the nineteenth century. Although modern Chinese history is primarily narrated through the lens of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism, the persistent imagination of dominating *Nanyang* reveals a more complex dimension of China's response to Western colonialism. This study's employment of a "Global South" perspective thus provides new analytical tools for understanding both China's modern transformation and the broader dynamics of nineteenth-century colonial encounters.

Most importantly, whether it was Wei Yuan's vision of collaborating with the Nanyang to jointly resist Western colonialism or Liang Qichao's colonial attitude toward the Nanyang, both had a lasting impact on the subsequent literary and intellectual production in modern China.

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